

New Fiction from Jane Snyder: “Mandy Schott”

☒ They sent us home from school early because of the snow, just hard little flakes at first.

I didn't look in the garage for Dave's car because it was the time when he'd be at work. I went into the room he shares with my mother, took a five from the pile of change and bills on his dresser. When he said my name, I turned, smiled a dopey smile, took my hand out of my back pocket.

He watched as I put the five back. I told him I'd been looking for his miniature handcuffs tie tack.

Dave's a detective, wears suits. The cuffs on his tie tack work. When I was little and got bored in restaurants, he'd let me play with them. I'd snap them shut and he'd look down, say, “I see Seth has apprehended a napkin.”

He unpinned it from his tie. “Here you go.”

I jumped when he reached his hand out, said I was sorry.

“How 'bout that.” He sat on the edge of their bed looking at me. “Not the first time you did it.”

I wished it would turn out to be the way it usually does with Dave. Nothing.

I guess I'm not cut out to be a hardened criminal, I'd say.

Nope, Dave would agree. Amateur night.

“I won't do it again.”

“I hope not.” He leaned back, as if intending to lie all the way down, take a little nap before dinner.

I took a step toward the door. "If that's all..."

He sprawled back, looked bored. "I'm good."

I stayed.

He pulled himself up. "Is there something I can do for you, Seth?"

"I'm sorry."

"So you said."

I couldn't think what to say. "You're an awesome stepdad."

The way he looked at me then was scarier than when he caught me.

In my room I googled what you should do if your kid steals.

Talk to them about how they've lost your trust and what they'll need to do to get it back, serve cheaper food to recoup the financial loss, take them to jail and have the police lock them in a cell so they know what it feels like, post a video of them wearing a sign that says Thief.

I didn't go when my mother called me for dinner.

Dave knocked on my door the way I'd told him to.

"I'm not hungry."

I got up when he opened the door because I didn't want him to see me lying on my stomach, my butt in the air.

He waited for me so I had to walk in front of him.

We watched the snow from the dining room.

My mother said it made her cold, looking at it.

They're predicting 12 to 14 inches, Dave said. The big dump,

he called it.

A major transaction, I agreed.

My mother asked what was wrong.

Dave stood, said he was going to shovel. When he walked by me he reached over and tousled my hair. "Seth can fill you in."

He was the one who was mad. Why couldn't he tell her?

He was still in the hall, putting on his boots, when I said what I'd done.

"Why would you even do something like that?"

"I don't know." I thought of his hand on my head, my hair lifted from one place,

dropped to another.

"Oh, honey. You hurt his feelings."

He gives you anything you want, was what I thought she'd say.

"Am I supposed to be grateful?"

"Yes," she said. "Tell him you're sorry."

"I already did."

"Mean it."

Dave had taken my dog Bonnie with him, was showing her a good time, throwing one of her toys for her, still making quick work of the driveway.

He didn't look like someone you could hurt.

I started on the sidewalk away from him. Where I cleared was messy, not clean the way Dave did it.

He doesn't usually have me shovel, tells me to stay inside,

keep warm, he needs the exercise.

"You're putting too much pressure on your back," he said. He'd finished the driveway, was working down the sidewalk toward me. "Bend your knees when you lift."

After we went inside I stayed in the laundry room with Bonnie as long as I could, rubbing her down. She's a beagle, short-haired, can't shake the snow off the way a longhaired dog can. When I walked by the kitchen Dave told me to bring him the money I'd taken. "If you have it. If you don't we'll work something out."

I had it. Also two hundred dollars of Christmas money and eighty dollars left from my report card money in November.

I scuttled to my room to get the money, thirty dollars.

He put it in his pocket without looking at it.

"I'm sorry."

"Go to bed now."

School had already been cancelled for tomorrow, Friday. I was hoping he'd want to watch a movie with me.

It was 8:30, an hour before my school night bedtime. I felt sorry for myself, lying alone in the dark. Dave's mean, I told myself. My real father wouldn't be this way.

My friend Carl would say I got off easy. When we talked about stealing, Carl said you won't believe what you can get away with. I'd said if Dave catches me it's the end of the world as we know it.

Bonnie stayed downstairs because Dave was eating. I could hear the microwave ding, got up and opened my door a crack, heard Dave telling my mom I'd just been feeling my oats, whatever that meant. "Kids do stupid stuff sometimes. Don't worry about

it.”

When they came up Bonnie jumped into bed with me, settled on my chest.

I woke at the usual time the next morning, couldn't get back to sleep.

Dave was at the stove, asked how I wanted my eggs, said he'd appreciate it if he could take me and Bonnie over to his folks today. Give his dad a hand with the shoveling, keep them company. He asked politely, like I had a choice.

I shoveled our snow after I ate. It was easier today.

“Looks good,” Dave said, when he and my mom came out.

He could have said sucking up to him didn't change anything.

I don't mind going to my grandparents, Dave's parents. They're nice and they stuff Bonnie and me like Strasbourg geese, Dave says. I shoveled with my grandpa in the morning, was in the kitchen doing homework, drinking Coke, and eating the muddy buddies my grandma makes for me, when she called me to come quick, my dad was on TV.

She meant Dave. My real father is in California, I think.

Dave and the chief of police, looking serious, were standing behind a woman named Mandy Schott. “Help me,” she cried. “Help me find my baby.”

The TV station showed a picture of the baby, Ciara, fourteen months old, in a fancy red dress, sitting on Santa's lap.

“Precious,” my grandma said. “See how she's looking around like she just doesn't know what to think.”

Mandy said she'd taken Ciara to the mall, had finished shopping, was walking across the parking lot to her car, carrying Ciara because she was fussy. “It was past time for

her nap." She smiled sadly. She'd opened her car door, Mandy said, leaned in to put Ciara in her car seat, when a man, a big Black man, pulled her back, ripped a screaming Ciara from her arms and tossed her, Ciara, like a sack of potatoes, into his SUV, also black, and took off.

Mandy was wearing one of the orange T-shirts Trucktown passed out at the fair this year. I could have gotten one but they weren't great and I didn't want to stand in line.

She was large and the shirt was too small.

She cried. "Please help me."

The chief said they'd welcome any information from the public.

Dave's the head detective and the other detectives hang out in his office. "How big is that big Black man?" one of them would ask.

As big as Quinton Lamar Spain, someone would say, bigger, and they'd laugh.

"I'll bet it was her," I said. "Mandy."

My grandma got mad. "How can you say that? Her own mother hurting that sweet little girl."

My grandpa winked at me. "Seth, do you think we should tell your grandma what your dad does for a living?"

"Surely you don't think she's lying?"

"A Black man with a white baby would attract attention."

"You're terrible," my grandma said. "Just terrible."

"Yes, dear," my grandfather said, fake meek. My grandma laughed when we did, said she was ashamed of herself.

Dave came to get me early.

My grandpa gave me a twenty for shoveling. I felt funny, because of what I'd done, tried to hand it back. Dave said I'd probably already eaten my pay in cookies, "but you can take it, Seth."

That was nice of you, he said, when we were outside with Bonnie.

We walked home. Dave said he'd be sitting on a hard chair all night working on hemorrhoid development, needed a break. I imagined him talking to his parents about me stealing. "I hate it," he'd say, "but we have to face facts. Let me know if anything goes missing."

"Are you going to tell Grandma and Grandpa what I did?"

He looked surprised. "Of course not."

I wondered if I'd hurt his feelings again. "I'm sorry."

"That was my line."

Bonnie stopped to take a whiz. I bent down to pet her.

"You get any closer she'll splash your face. Give the little lady her privacy and stand up and listen to me."

That's why he'd come home early, he said, to talk. He hadn't handled it right, should have put a stop to it as soon as he knew I was stealing. "I was wrong to trick you."

I was embarrassed.

"Shouldn't you be telling me it's wrong to steal and it doesn't matter if I'm sorry, all matters is if I steal again?"

He looked at me the way he did yesterday afternoon. I don't know why I didn't take what he was offering, let things go back to the way they were.

"I think you knew that all along, Seth."

Bonnie finished, kicked a little snow over the yellow spot. Good girl, I told her, though it was snowing again, covering everything up.

“Yes sir.” Dave doesn’t like being called sir. I told him I was sorry again.

“I got that part.”

We went a block without saying anything.

When we were in our yard he stuck a foot in front of me, an old trick of his I never see coming, caught me when I lost my balance, lowered me to the ground, said I was a dirty bird but he’d take care of that, rubbed my face with snow. Cold, but the new snow was soft, didn’t hurt the way the dirt-cruusted old snow would. I grabbed his arms, donkey kicked. He slid backwards, letting me get to my feet.

Bonnie barked, ran in circles around us. We were hiding behind trees, throwing snowballs, yelling ‘you’re going down,’ at each other, when my mother came home from work, told Dave, smiling, he was getting me too wound up, what she used to say when I was little.

“Not my fault, Honey Gal. I wanted to build a snowman.” Then he went back to work.

Because of the extra day off, maybe, the weekend seemed long. Dave came home late Saturday night after I was in bed, went to bed himself. I heard his phone ring as it was getting light.

Before he left he came into my room to take Bonnie out, told me to go back to sleep.

He came home Sunday smelling of dirt and pine. My mom and I were eating supper and he looked at the spaghetti on our plates, said it was too slippery for him, trying to joke. I’m too tired to swallow, he said, when my mom offered to make him whatever he wanted. She helped him to bed, but he was up

before I was Monday morning, frying bacon.

"I made plenty," he said, loading my plate.

During Biology, I turned on my phone, wanted to know if they'd found Ciara. Dave was on again, getting out of his car. Mandy Schott was in the passenger's seat.

"You're going to jail, Piggly Wiggly Woman," Carl said, looking over my shoulder.

Dave spoke into the camera, before he walked around to open the door for her, said Ms. Schott was cooperating with the police investigation, needed a break.

They didn't look like a couple on a date because Dave is too old, forty-seven.

My mother is thirty-six. I'd thought Mandy Schott was her age or a little older, but on TV they said she was nineteen.

I recognized the restaurant. Dave takes us there.

He'd put his hand on what was probably the small of Mandy's back when they were walking across the parking lot but he's that way with all women. Stands up when they come into a room, opens doors, helps them with their coats.

Mandy would like the way Dave looks at you when you talk, interested.

He'd have a salad because he likes the bleu cheese dressing there. But the soup is good too, he'd tell Mandy. The Firehouse chili, maybe. He wanted the Reuben with homemade potato chips but the Monte Cristo is also excellent.

They'd have the sugar cream pie, a second cup of coffee. Or, if Mandy wasn't used to drinking coffee, Dave would tell her to have another Coke.

At the counter where you paid they had candy like Twin Bings

and Malty Meltys, stuff you don't see much, and he'd take his time helping her figure out what she wanted. After they left the restaurant, when they were in his car, he'd asked her to tell him, please, where Ciara was, and then he and Mandy Schott drove around the lake long enough for her to eat her Charleston Chews before he took her to the police station.

My mother asked him if he'd put the lunch in his expense report. He said no, he didn't need to buy Mandy lunch for her to tell him what he needed to know. "I just felt sorry for her."

My mother said Dave was the one she felt sorry for. All that work and nothing to show for it but a dead child.

"You're not making sense," I told him. A nice meal wouldn't make up for prison.

"You're right. I hope I didn't make things worse for her."

You couldn't, my mother said. "Her life can't get any worse."

I'd looked at my phone again on the way home from school, saw the cadaver dog, Dagwood. I know him. His handler, Sergeant Mays, brings him to the Super Bowl Party we have at our house every year. The first time he came, when I was seven, I'd asked Dave if he could live with us after he retired from police work. "Did you see how much he liked me? He can sleep in my bed. I'll take good care of him."

"I know you would," he'd said, "but he's young, won't retire for a long time. Anyway, Ken Mays, and his wife, and his kids, are crazy for him. They'll want to keep him."

He brought Bonnie home the next weekend. Eight weeks old and, like Dagwood, a beagle.

On TV Dagwood was excited, jumping high as he could on his short legs. When he sat down, which is how he signals he's found something, the police moved around him to block the

cameras so you couldn't see what it was.

The next time I saw him, Sergeant Mays was kneeling in front of him, giving him a treat, smiling and making over him, so Daggie Dog would know he'd done something good. If Sergeant Mays were to cry Dagwood would think he'd disappointed him.

Dave said the cops could see the outline of Ciara's body under the mud as soon as Dagwood headed there.

I thought Mandy hadn't made the grave deep because she didn't want to let Ciara go. I know it sounded stupid, but Dave said he thought so too. "She loves that little girl."

"Is that what you talked about at lunch?"

"No. We talked about high school and all the fun she had getting high with her stoner friends, shitting on toilet seats in the girls' room, banging the lids down on top to smear it, skipping class to go shoplifting at Dilliard's, spray painting gym lockers with the N-word, harassing the Korean shop owners on Townes Street, trashing the teachers' cars."

"Really?"

"Best years of her life."

My mom sighed. She felt sorry for Mandy too.

Dave said it was going to storm. "I'm glad we found Ciara when we did. Dag can work through snow but they're expecting eight inches tonight and we might not have been able to find the landmarks Mandy gave us."

I wondered how Mandy was doing. She'd be on suicide watch, I knew, because Dave had told me that's what they do at the jail for at least the first 24 hours, if someone's charged with a high profile crime. One of the jail officers would check on her every fifteen minutes, maybe sit in front of her cell talking to her, trying to keep her spirits up.

I asked Dave if blunt force trauma, which was listed on the arrest warrant as the probable cause of death, would hurt, or if Ciara would have passed out right away.

"Passed out," he said. "At her age, the skull isn't fully developed, so she couldn't take much, but her injuries occurred over time and she'd have periods of consciousness when she hurt." He stood, knelt by my chair, held my right foot, still in my shoe, prodded it. "Tight in the box."

"They feel okay."

"They won't for long." He said he'd take me to the Nike store Saturday.

"You just bought him those."

"When his little tootsies are sore he can't concentrate on his school work."

Once my mother had said when she was in foster care it was a treat to go to Walmart for school clothes, instead of Goodwill.

"I hope you realize how lucky you are," she said tonight.

"What's for dessert?"

Dave laughed, my mother too. But nobody likes a smart aleck, she said.

"I like this one." I didn't hear anything sour in Dave's voice. "I like him a lot."

"You shouldn't swear in front of him. If he copies you he'll get in trouble at school."

"Seth's too smart for that."

He'd said shit, I remembered. Maddy spread shit, wanting someone to sit in it.

It started snowing for real after dinner. Dave said we might as well wait till morning before we shoveled. "You want to watch Justice League?"

Dave fell asleep on the couch as soon as he'd finished his lemon drizzle cake, his head back, his mouth open.

"He's tired, poor sweetie," my mother said, spreading the afghan over him, though we were warm, before she sat down on Dave's other side.

I slumped against him. Bonnie got in my lap and I scratched her head the way she likes. There's a velvet pillow on the couch I used to pat when I was little. Bonnie's coat is better. Soft, thick, sweet.

Dave snored a little, singsong.

I saw I was holding onto Dave's hand, the way I did before I was allowed to cross the street by myself.

He woke, kissed the side of my mother's face, looked down at my hand, smiled before he went back to sleep.