

**A Conversation with Alex Kava,
Author of ONE FALSE MOVE**

Q: After four series psychological thrillers featuring Special Agent Maggie O'Dell, ONE FALSE MOVE is a stand-alone thriller. Why did you decide to go that route?

AK: People seem surprised when I tell them that I never intended to write a series, but if you look at my first novel, *"A Perfect Evil,"* you'll find that Maggie O'Dell isn't even introduced until Chapter Seven. Since then I've been pleasantly amazed that Maggie has made an impact on readers all over the world, and they need not worry, Maggie will be back.

However, I have so many more ideas to explore and stories to tell that don't necessarily fit into a series. ONE FALSE MOVE is one of those. It's also a psychological thriller employing some of the same techniques I use in my Maggie O'Dell series: short chapters that leave the reader hanging, an inside look at what makes a criminal mind tick, and some of the behind-the-scenes of the crime scene investigation. But with this novel I really wanted to push readers to the edge and hopefully get them to feel a part of the manhunt, to experience and perhaps question just what human nature is capable of when forced to survive, when there's nothing to lose.

Q: Female psychological thriller writers often must combat the stereotype that they are writing "romantic suspense." Why do you think that image prevails? How would you state your case to a reviewer who labeled you a writer of that genre?

AK: I sometimes wonder if perhaps it's a little uncomfortable for people to believe that women writers can and do write about some of the hard-hitting and gruesome things that our male counterparts have been including in their novels for years. Reviewers, unfamiliar with my style, seem surprised to discover such detailed autopsy scenes or disturbing crime scenes within my novels, and yet my details aren't quite as graphic as some of the male writers of this genre. In fact, there's a radio reviewer in Denver I've had to win over (I won't mention his name), who now after finally reading and enjoying my novels – jokingly and fondly – tells his listeners whenever he interviews me that, "Folks, she doesn't write like a girl." And believe it or not, it's actually a compliment.

To those who are looking for romance in my novels, they will probably be disappointed. I'm more concerned with good and evil and what drives some to do horrendous evil acts when most of us will never come close to crossing that line. However despite the lack of romance in my novels, I do focus a good deal on relationships between my characters. I'm interested in the dynamics that bring people together as well as the conflicts that drive wedges. Also I explore how various events can transform those relationships. In ONE FALSE MOVE Melanie Starks' childhood bond with her brother Jared Barnett is what pushes her to support him even though it goes beyond her better judgment. However, at some point she's going to have to make a choice between that bond with her brother and the one with her son.

A crisis can bring out the true character of a person, especially when that person is forced to make choices. Those are the sort of relationship elements readers will find in my books. Those are some of the elements that fascinate and intrigue me and oftentimes add to the level of psychological suspense.

Q: Forensic details can be quite gruesome. How do you decide where to draw the line so you don't turn off readers?

AK: That's a tough question, and quite honestly it's something that I do struggle with each time. I still get squeamish when I sit down to lunch with law enforcement officers and they bring out their Poloraids. Recently, I had lunch with a deputy county prosecutor and an Omaha police detective who were talking about a crime scene in which the body of thirteen-year-old girl was found. It was in a heavily wooded area. Her body had been discarded for days in the middle of the July heat. I had a difficult time eating my chicken salad as they continued to discuss the volume of maggots on and in her body.

I'd like to believe that I still have some sort of gross-out barometer that I can tap into but I know that's constantly being challenged and the boundaries increased. Most of what I include I do think is necessary for the case. Perhaps it tells something about the murder or contributes to the evidence. Horrendous murder cases can and are shocking in their details. I don't think it's gratuitous to use shocking details if they, in fact, are a part of the crime and add to the evidence. In my research, I read and discover much more gruesome details in real-life cases than I ever would include in my novels.

Q: Just as your debut novel, *A Perfect Evil*, was partially based on a real-life story, ONE FALSE MOVE was inspired by an incident that happened to you personally. Tell us about that.

AK: In March 2001, I rented a cabin at Platte River State Park, just outside of Omaha, Nebraska. It used to be one of my favorite writing retreats, especially in early spring when the park is still deserted. This was one of those times. My two dogs and I were the only occupants in the thirteen cabins that surround Lake Owen. One evening I heard a helicopter flying low over the park, which is very unusual. Within minutes I discovered that it was a police helicopter and that a bank had been robbed in Lincoln, Nebraska which about thirty miles from the park. The two robbers had gotten away after a high-speed chase. Then they shot a farm couple and stole their pickup. The park ended up being in the middle of the manhunt. I ended up being in the middle of the manhunt. It's one thing to write about such things. It's entirely another to find yourself in the right in the middle.

Q: ONE FALSE MOVE is set in Nebraska, where you were born and raised. What qualities do you find are unique to the region? How do they factor into your fiction?

AK: I love using Nebraska as a setting because so many people have such a misconception of the state and it gives me an opportunity to share what it's really like. For instance, one major misconception is the terrain. Everyone seems to think Nebraska is flat pastures and cornfields. In reality the eastern part – around the Omaha metropolitan area – is lush river valley with lots of trees and hills. The far western part is the Sandhills which are the foothills of the Rocky Mountains. I love to describe the rolling Sandhills as though you're looking down on the brown backs of buffalo.

In *ONE FALSE MOVE* the unpredictable Nebraska weather plays a vital role. It's just after Labor Day with one last outburst of hot, humid and stormy weather. Severe thunderstorms and the risk of possible tornadoes hinder the initial response and investigation. Another factor that adds to the story is the small towns that stretch along the highways. Sometimes you have to drive for miles before you come across one. The people are genuine and friendly and perhaps naïve to the violence that occurs in other parts of the country. That naivety plays yet another important role in the novel.

Q: Critics and fans alike have found your heroine, Special Agent Maggie O'Dell, very appealing. In *ONE FALSE MOVE*, the central female figure, Melanie Starks, is a con artist with a speckled past. What was the experience of writing such a flawed character?

AK: Most of my characters are flawed. Even Maggie O'Dell. But yes, Melanie Starks was a challenge. I try to create my characters from bits and pieces of people I've met, but there comes a limit. We're always told that good writers should write what they know, but I won't even pretend to know what goes on in the minds of criminals. That requires lots and lots of research. Same goes for a character like Melanie. Only the research may include going to certain places and observing people, starting up conversations with someone you ordinarily wouldn't talk to and then listening.

Melanie Starks was a challenge because her instincts, her actions or inactions go against almost every instinct I would have. But then that's what I hope readers will find that makes Melanie so interesting. Just when you think you have her figured out, you don't

Q: What advice would you give to writers striving to get their work published?

AK: I'd certainly not recommend they quit their jobs like I did. Now of course, it's kind of fun to tell people that my roof was literally caving in on me, but it certainly wasn't at the time.

Actually there are three things that I always recommend:

#1 -- Be persistent. Unfortunately in this business, persistence is almost as important as perfecting your craft -- at least in the beginning when you're trying to get published.

#2 -- Don't take rejection personally. View any comments, including the negative ones, as professional feedback.

#3 -- Do your research on literary agents and how to get published. What surprises me is how many writers will put years of their lives into writing their novels but then randomly send them out to one or two agents or publishers.

Q: Who are the major influences on your writing, and why?

AK: I'd love to believe that my novels might contain some of the precision and detail of Patricia Cornwell, along with the break-neck pacing of Jeffery Deaver, and just a dab of Lisa Scottoline's dry sense-of-humor.

However, I think the writer and book I'm most inspired by is my all-time favorite – Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*. When it comes right down to it, good fiction must get the reader to like and care about the characters, which Lee does an amazing job – not only with Scout Finch but even with someone like Boo Radley. That's what I try to remember, despite what plot twists and turns and how many accurate details I include. The most important thing to me is creating flesh and blood characters who stay with the reader long after the book has been read.

Q: Can you give us a preview of your next novel? Is Maggie O'Dell coming back?

AK: Maggie will be back and so will Father Michael Keller from “*A Perfect Evil*.” For years now readers have been asking if and when I would “take care of Fr. Keller.” For years I’ve told them that sometimes the bad guys just get away. And although readers have persisted, I told myself that I would never do it unless I came up with the perfect storyline. Well, I think I’ve finally figured it out. “*A Necessary Evil*,” tentatively scheduled for publication February 2006, will reunite Father Keller and Maggie O’Dell.

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