

with
BLACK MASK

MARCH/APRIL 2025

ELLERY QUEEN

MYSTERY MAGAZINE

— The World's Leading Mystery Magazine —

***Pushing Up
Daisies***

FEATURING

**David Dean • Andrew Klavan
Lori Rader-Day • Marilyn Todd**

— Including —
STRANGER THAN FICTION
— riveting true crime!

ON SALE UNTIL 4/8

\$9.99

03



0 22025 08599 2

TheMysteryPlace.com

THE WOMAN FROM *ROLLING STONE*

by Lori Rader-Day

They were expecting Demi Walters from *Rolling Stone* any minute, and until she showed, Shawn couldn't relax. His attention darted between the glass front doors of the gallery and the details in the room: lighting that chiseled dramatic shadows through the room and across faces, passed hors d'oeuvres from the chef d' moment. The right tone, the right people. His fingers tapped at his thighs, a frantic tempo out of beat with everything in the room, including the soundtrack.

The right music, of course.

Nova Tyler's otherworldly voice rose to a high trill, angels singing over an abandoned abbey, then swung to a howl—a woodland creature with its leg caught in a trap. Nova's tracks were playing at the perfect volume. The song braided itself in and around the cacophony of voices, sometimes disappearing beneath the noise only to re-exert itself, surprising as a car alarm.

Nova's music made Shawn think of terrible stories he'd always assumed weren't true. Of ancient rites, maybe, that ended in bloodshed. And other history, including his own.

Bloodshed of a different type.

Shawn could admit that Nova Tyler was the kind of taste one had to acquire. He just needed these people to acquire it, tonight.

Chicago author Lori Rader-Day is the Edgar-nominated and Agatha, Anthony, and Mary Higgins Clark award-winning author of *The Death of Us*, *Death at Greenway*, *The Lucky One*, *Under a Dark Sky*, and others. Her next novel, *Wreck Your Heart* (Minotaur/SMPG, 2026), features a country singer, and this story too revolves around a musician. †

Around him, everyone who was *anyone* in the taste-making business were arranging themselves casually in case they were captured in the background of a photo that landed in next month's issue of *Spin*.

But across the room, the doorway stood empty.

The song overhead ended abruptly, and before the crowd could rush in to fill the void, a pair of champagne flutes clinked together, a strange melody.

All the industry people in the room raised their chins, one ear higher than the other, collectively recognizing the tone—G sharp.

Even the catering waitress, several years too old for the job and awkward in a bow tie and a cummerbund made for a man's straight waist, paused and tilted her head at the glasses'

tune. She held an empty silver tray in one hand, her fingernails painted dark, chipped. Her graying ponytail hung, slack, over her shoulder.

"You're watching the door, Cutler."

Shawn turned to find Les Jenkins at his elbow. Jenkins led the merchandising team for the label, which made no sense. He was the human equivalent of the color Shawn had learned from one of those home-improvement shows Kayla always used to watch. *Greige*. Not really a color, but its absence.

At the thought of Kayla, Shawn looked around to see if he could catch the waitress's eye. He'd been holding off, waiting for the woman from *Rolling Stone*, but what the hell. It wasn't champagne. It was the illusion of champagne, pink and sparkling, just enough bubbles to rise prettily in glasses for social media.

"So?" Shawn said. "I'm watching the door. What about it?"

Jenkins had chosen something stronger than the sparkling nonsense for himself, a thin dark line in a short glass that sloshed a bit as he gestured. "Were you hoping all this would smoke her out?" Jenkins said.

Shawn scanned the room again for the woman from *Rolling Stone* and for any signs of listening pleasure among his guests. If not for the free champagne, he thought, how many of these people would already be making their excuses?

"All this?" Shawn said. "You mean a release party thirty years in the making? We're making Nova a legend. She'll be as famous as she always deserved to be."

"But you hoped, right?" Jenkins said. The dark line of his drink was thinner. "That she might show up?"

Thirty years ago, Nova Tyler had put down a few stunning tracks, found the industry not to her liking—and walked away. Simply slipped into

the ether. Would a world premiere of Nova Tyler's life's work draw her out after all this time?

He hadn't hoped. He had speculated. It wasn't the same thing.

The legal team had done their damndest to track her down, no lead too small and unlikely, no relative or old acquaintance too distant. But every trail led back to the same dead end. No one had seen her. No one who would admit to it, anyway.

The woman's entire existence had been reduced to a police file and a handful of songs. But what did it matter if she was out there somewhere or her bones were turning to dust on some forest floor or under a vacant lot? Nova Tyler could still be a triumph. He could make her one.

"I'm saving all my hopes for the music's reception," Shawn said, this time scouring the room for the waitress. Could he not get a drink at his own party? "For the press. Did you catch that piece on our girl on NPR yesterday?"

"The mystery alone will move some units," Jenkins said.

Shawn couldn't tell if Jenkins was agreeing with him or ignoring him. "National Public Radio, Jenkins," Shawn said. "When's the last time one of our artists landed that kind of coverage, living or dead?"

"Did you hire a sleuth?" Jenkins said. He slurred and missed the word by a few yards. "Sleuth," he tried again. "Detective. You must have."

Now Shawn glanced around for signs of Jenkins's wife. Kayla had poured *him* into a cab a time or two at functions like this. At the door, a few coats were being gathered.

And where was Demi? He'd have to tap the side of a glass soon, make some remarks. If he could get his hands *on* a glass.

"We did our due diligence," Shawn said tersely. "The rightful heirs are well compensated."

Shawn remembered, then, his first meeting with the family, years back now. Nova's mother had had a dark freckle under her right eye, nearly the shape of a heart. A beauty mark, they would have called it in the 1940s, one of the many physical traits she had passed down to Nova, where the freckle was perfect, a punctuation mark on Nova's raw beauty. That image would hold now, just as she had been. Forever young, forever desirable.

Okay, he had *hoped*. He could admit that to himself.

If Nova had shown her face here tonight, they could have exploded the myth, booked the morning TV circuit, watched the charts. They could have made more music, gone on tour, sold some shirts.

On the mother, the beauty mark swam in the dark, sleepless hollow under her eye. She'd lost whatever elusive something that Nova had, if she'd ever had it. But the mother was tough—and uncompromising on terms. She wouldn't even negotiate with him, wouldn't tango.

He'd had to wait until she'd died to approach the family again. There was a brother. Dim bulb, but far more interested in profits.

Nova's voice rose through the speakers to a keening wail, and Shawn took another reading of the room. Was anyone getting it?

The first time he'd heard Nova, maybe he hadn't gotten it either. It was Kayla who'd brought Nova's music into their house, where it had become part of the soundtrack of their lives. They'd fought to it, made love to it. Well, fought to it, mostly, in the end.

There—

Across the room, the waitress in the ill-fitting cummerbund had

returned from the black hole she'd fallen into. But her tray was still empty. Zero drinks.

She stood still in the swirl of the room, tray aloft, chin dipped to her chest. Was she talking to herself?

Was she . . . *listening*?

Shawn dared to think that if the waitress heard something in the music worth pausing to listen to, the others might too. He cast around the room for signs of life. They weren't listening. They were blah-blahing, only listening to the sound of their own chatter and laughter. Drinking his profit margin. The door opened, but only to let a few of his guests out.

He felt a flare of impatience to get out of here too. What was he doing? What was the point?

The room was overstuffed with hack music journalists and social-media influencers waiting to be told if they liked the music or not. The rest of the guest list was made up of the bottom-feeders from all the rival labels—and his own—who hoped his gamble would send him tumbling. Room fillers who would angle for his job if the world wasn't ready for Nova Tyler.

The song ended. The crowd didn't register it, except at the center of the room, the waitress came back to life. The ponytail slipped from her shoulder as she ducked expertly out of range of the event photographer's camera and swept off with her tray.

Shawn pinned his hopes on her. Maybe she would bring drinks. Maybe she *had* heard something she liked.

Shawn used to say to his talent, to up-and-coming producers, to A&R reps, to anyone who would listen to him, that if one person was moved by the music they put out, they had done their jobs. One person, listening and *hearing*. Really hearing.

Did he still believe that? He hadn't said it in a while. In years. Longer.

One person wasn't enough, though. That was the truth. In *music*. In sales. In life, maybe, one person could be enough—

A tray of drinks appeared within reach, held by another waiter, another cummerbund. Shawn grabbed at one and threw back half, and grabbed another before the tray was empty or across the room again. Screw it. The woman from *Rolling Stone* wasn't coming.

She would have gotten it. Demi Walters would have *heard* Nova's music, her voice, and she would have recognized it, like the cry of her own child down the hall, like the sound of your own suffering, normally swallowed.

Maybe it was him. Maybe he was wrong about Nova. He'd been wrong before.

He sank the second glass. Terrible, sweet stuff, like the crap Kayla used to buy.

Maybe he was the one going through the motions, not hearing, no longer truly in the room, even when he was in the room. He'd been accused of *that* before.

He laughed, and saw Jenkins squint in his direction.

And maybe he had only chased the deal for Nova's music because he couldn't let her mother's refusal stand. Because he couldn't lose. What would losing look like?

Like giving up. Like being given up on.

He *had* been hoping, he realized. But not in the way Jenkins thought. He glanced toward the empty doorway.

A new song started up, one of Nova's own favorites, the brother had said. The song was too long for radio, sad and reaching, high to low and back again. Impossible to predict, to love, to sing along with, to hum. No one had liked it for the single. He'd lost that argument. Nova had written

it for her mother, as a matter of fact, and he loved it. More than that, he *got* it. It was about mistakes, about ignorance in decisions of the heart, about love, wasted.

He *got* it, okay? Why hadn't Mother Tyler been able to trust him that someday, in a room like this one, people would listen to and appreciate Nova, finally?

Shawn gazed over the room, forgetting to look for the woman from *Rolling Stone*. The mother, now buried. The other family, the brother and his pie-faced wife, not willing to travel from the boonies, from their small lives.

But Nova—

The tiny flame he'd been harboring within himself that Nova might show tonight flickered unsteadily and threatened to gutter out.

No artist in the world wouldn't show up to see their name come, finally, to glory. He had worked with the worst of them: the tiniest little dicks, the most quarrelsome nutjobs, the most ungrateful shits the industry ever produced. The ones who believed that commerce had no place in the act of creation—or wanted everyone to believe they thought so. But every one of them had attended their release party. Every single one had drunk the champagne, or had it drunk to them, glasses raised, and speeches made. Not one could resist the clarion call of celebration, of adoration or worship—or whatever they took from the bright, brief glare of attention. Even if it was contempt. They had to see for themselves.

But Nova—

Nova's voice rose above the racket again, as if in protest, high and ethereal, like a song from another dimension.

She was too good for this world, Shawn thought. Too good for this room, certainly. This room, the doorway empty. She hadn't come.

Nova Tyler was really dead.

He felt the loss, deep and personal, like the heavy beat in his gut he used to feel at the shows of his youth when he stood too close to the stage speaker. There was a volume of music that erased melody and ceased to be sound, that skipped the ears entirely and seeped, instead, through muscle, tissue, and sinew as something physical, all vibration and pulsing electricity. A funeral dirge pounding from inside the bones.

Shawn tugged at the neck of his shirt. The room was too hot. Or the wine had gone to his head. Or—

He was thinking of Nova's mother, holding out in silence. He had stared at that woman's beauty mark the whole time he'd made his pitch, avoiding her eyes. If he hadn't truly understood her then, he did now. To go ahead with the release of her daughter's music while she was still missing would have been nothing less than a white flag of surrender.

Signing away every chance, every hope.

He'd signed the divorce papers at the kitchen island with the counter Kayla had wanted, pristine white stone they would have only stained and ruined, given the time. Page after page that represented his sins and omissions. When he finished, his arms were numb where they had leaned against the sharp edge of the worktop.

The doorway remained empty.

She was never going to come, he thought.

The catering waitress was there, suddenly, catching his wrist as it fell and taking the champagne flute from him just before the dregs splashed toward Les Jenkins.

Shawn relinquished the glass gratefully, and the waitress gave him a slow wink, long eyelashes grazing at her cheek.

She was his age, solid, pretty, and had a twitch of a smile that had seen some things. The cummerbund, the tie. It was a show, and she was in on the joke. He was the punchline.

Her lips were moving. Was she asking him something?

No, she was only singing along to the song under her breath.

Les Jenkins was saying something to him, but Shawn was caught somewhere between his empty hand and the waitress as she moved away. He had meant to ask her—

Shawn recognized the loss of the glass's weight in his hand. He felt very strange, half in this world, half in another. Was it the music? The booze? He'd hardly had any, distracted, waiting for the woman from *Rolling Stone* to arrive. He had needed a clear head to—

He didn't know.

Jenkins leaned closer, his hot breath on Shawn's neck.

"I said, it's too bad she *didn't* show," Jenkins said loudly. "I guess that's that, then. Hell of a party, at least."

Shawn's mouth was dry. It was too loud crowded in the gallery, too loud. But overhead, Nova's voice clung to the rafters, dripped from the walls.

"We'll bust through the gates on the curiosity alone," Jenkins said. "The streaming, the downloads. Fast, before somebody writes a slasher review or a pile-on starts on social media."

Shawn felt as though he had somehow slipped into the wrong room. He was somewhere else, sitting across from Nova's mother on a sunken couch—

"No *tour*, of course," Jenkins said, sadly. "But if *Rolling Stone* comes through, *that* might turn things around—is she here?"

Shawn stared at Jenkins for a moment without comprehension—

who? Who did he mean? Then he spun on his heel, teetering into the highboy table at his elbow. Glasses knocked together, and everyone around them reared back.

"Hey, whoa," Jenkins said, his tone suddenly winking and amused, reacting for the attention that had turned their way. "Who'll give the speeches, Cutler, if you're half in the bag?"

Shawn pushed him away and scraped the room. He was totally sober.

Demi Walters stood at the entrance, peering around the room. Near her, on a tall table, an empty silver tray had been dumped precariously. It had never carried drinks, never held canapés or napkins, or even empty glasses.

"The waitress," Shawn said. "Where's that waitress who was just here?"

Jenkins swirled the dribble left at the bottom of his glass. "Everything okay, Shawn? At home? I heard a few things around the office, but I didn't want to *assume*."

The waitress. How had she been able to sing along with Nova's song? That unsingable song?

And when she'd winked at him—

Her lashes had touched lightly at her cheek, at a dark freckle.

"They would have—"

"What's that?" Jenkins said, glancing at his watch.

They would have called it a beauty mark in the 1940s, Shawn had almost said aloud. Nearly the shape of a heart.

His hope rose in him, a bubble in a glass, as he imagined racing across the room and through the door, to the street, panting. The photos they would all take. The videos. The noise it would all make.

He had hoped for noise. Noise sold units. Units sold shows, tickets. Tickets unloaded merch—

A new song started up on the sound system. The single, as sweet and palatable as Nova would ever be. It was mournful, though. A song for a movie's end credits, for a conclusion. For the scene where the hero got what he most wanted.

Shawn's head buzzed.

He could never tell anyone. They would call it a stunt, or worse. He had made his gamble, and Nova had made hers.

Only one person might have believed him, if he hadn't already squandered her trust.

Across the room, Demi Walters still stood in her jacket at the threshold of the room, frowning. A bad sign? Or listening with her entire self, as the waitress had—as *Nova*, Nova, honest to God, had. Smiling at him.

Before the last notes of the single died out, Shawn would have to get another glass and a knife or spoon to tap against it to call for everyone's attention, to let the ringing note die out and say . . . what? That if one person truly listened and *heard*, as long as it was the right person . . .

That wink.

Maybe he would tell them and risk the fallout. Risk being a fool.

But he was a fool already. Maybe he would duck out of the speeches entirely and call Kayla. She would want to know. He wanted to tell her. With everything in him, he wanted to be near her again, to play the album for her and watch for her amazement or whatever she would spare him now.

Across the room, the woman from *Rolling Stone* waved to him. He'd nearly forgotten her, but now she pointed a finger up to the ceiling, toward the music that had somehow risen, lifted above the din. And smiled. ●

© 2025 by Lori Rader-Day

their player's severe allergy, found the EpiPen in his bag and immediately administered a dosage. Tragically, despite their quick action, he was unable to recover from anaphylaxis and died. And Franz Schlup? His bit of teasing in downing half the bottle laced with laxative explained his prolonged stay in a bathroom stall.

At first incredulous, the detectives peppered me with repeated questions, and after hours of sitting alone in a nondescript office, my version of events was apparently verified. It was Lieutenant King who showed me to the door. "You're free to go, Perry. I hope the rest of your tournament is less eventful."

With a wave worthy of Celine Dion on her farewell tour, I winked and said, "Oh, but what a disappointment that would be!"

Before leaving the tennis grounds for the day, I made a final sweep of the locker room and was relieved to see that Franz Schlup had finally righted his ship and left the toilets. I presumed the "usual boy" would return tomorrow and deal with the aftermath, whereas I would gratefully commence my traditional duties in Stadium Court, section 14, rows A through P.

Strolling to my Prius in the farthest employee parking lot, I spied two people in one of the golf carts used to transport players around the expansive grounds—a monstrous Data Chill Open decal affixed to its hood. Drawing closer, I was surprised to see Miles Sandersen behind the wheel. More surprisingly, he and the woman, Leska, I presumed, were recreating the iconic scene from *Lady and the Tramp*—sans the spaghetti.

Striding up to them in my stealthy Keds, I snapped a few action photos before they became aware of my presence. As much as I thought the notion of a social-media personality idiotic, I was compelled to become one. At least long enough to post a pic or two to Off-court Confidential. ● © 2025 by Rob Osler

ELLERY QUEEN'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE Vol. 165, Nos. 3 & 4, Whole Nos. 1,002 & 1,003) March/April 2025. ISSN 0013-6328, USPS 523-610. Dell GST# R123054108. Double issues published bimonthly by Penny Publications, LLC, 6 Prowitt Street, Norwalk, CT 06855. One-year subscription \$59.94 in U.S. and possessions, in all other countries \$74.94 (GST included in Canada), payable in advance in U.S. funds. Subscription orders and mail regarding subscriptions should be sent to Ellery Queen, 6 Prowitt St., Norwalk, CT 06855, or call 800-220-7443. Editorial Offices, 6 Prowitt St., Norwalk, CT 06855. Executive Office, 6 Prowitt St., Norwalk, CT 06855-1220. Periodical postage paid at Norwalk, CT and additional mailing offices. Canadian postage paid at Montreal, Quebec, Canada Post International Publications Mail Product Sales Agreement No. 40012460. ©2025 Penny Publications, LLC. All rights reserved. Protection secured under the Universal Copyright Convention and the Pan American Copyright convention. **ELLERY QUEEN'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE®** is the registered trademark of Ellery Queen. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine, 6 Prowitt St., Norwalk, CT 06855. In Canada return to: Penny Publications, LLC, 570 Route 106 N., Loudon, NH 03307. Printed in the U.S.A.

**JANET HUTCHINGS
JACKIE SHERBOW**

Editors

KEVIN WHEELER

Editorial Assistant

PORTER C. MCKINNON

Vice President,
Design & Production

CARLY IWANICKI

Art Director

ABIGAIL BROWNING

V.P. Digital Publishing and
Internet Sales & Marketing

SUZANNE LEMKE

Senior Typesetting Manager

KEVIN DORIS

Senior Typesetting Manager

CHRISTINE BEGLEY

Vice President, Editorial &
Product Development

BRUCE W. SHERBOW

Senior Vice President,
Sales, Marketing, & I.T.

SANDY MARLOWE

Subscriber Services
203-866-6688 Option #2

PETER KANTER

Publisher

ELLERY QUEEN

Editor-in-Chief 1941-1982

ELEANOR SULLIVAN

Editor-in-Chief 1982-1991

JANET HUTCHINGS

Editor-in-Chief 1991-2024

ADVERTISING SALES DEPARTMENT

printadvertising@dellmagazines.com
(Display and Classified Advertising)