

Return or Die

by Julia Harris

Winner: Body in the Library category

Scarlet Stiletto Awards 2025

Return or Die

The problem isn't the body. It's my heels, my lack of muscle, and the fact that mobile library vans aren't made for murder.

I'm wearing the cherry-red circle skirt with book shadow prints today. Good for twirling, not for hauling corpses. I hike the hem and curse my whole ensemble: clunky kitten heels, sticky bow blouse, and a little pearl hair clip that's stabbing me behind the ear. It's less librarian-chic, more vintage homicide cosplay at this point.

Jake is heavier than I expected. No matter how hard I heave, I can't move him more than a ruler-length at a time. The only glow is from my phone light, and the servo half a kilometre down the main road; out here, streetlights are a luxury. Somewhere in the dark, a fruit bat screeches, and a dog barks two streets over. Saying I'm moving as slow as a turtle is an understatement – and when you are dealing with a dead body, slow is a problem. A real problem.

Another heave, the seam of my cardigan stretches as my hands wedge under his armpits; just as the returns-bin handle hooks my flared skirt. I'm cursing; I really should have changed before this

whole thing; murder isn't kind to vintage rayon. I tug my skirt free with a hiss.

One more haul. I'm ignoring his flopping limbs and the weird angle of his neck. I *had* to kill him. That doesn't mean I actually like the body disposal job. I definitely don't. Dumping him onto the plastic sheet I've laid out beside the returns bin. I clamp my lips together as I bunch-up his hoodie to hide his slack jaw. Then I wrap him up tight, like a doner kebab. With extra sauce.

That's something no one tells you: just how much blood smears. It doesn't pool neatly like in the crime shows. It clings. Gets in under your fingernails, no matter how hard you scrub. And the smell – God! It's like rusted paperclips soaking in a cup of *cat* wee.

Ducking under the low ceiling of the van, I shove hard until Jake's body teeters on the rim of the returns bin. The night air smells of dust and gum leaves. Somewhere down the street, a magpie warbles. It's so close it startles me.

I brace myself and make one final push. A loud click cracks through the van as the springs shift, the platform dipping under Jake's weight. He lands with a dull *thunk*, too soft for a body really. The air in the van curdles. I gag. Then the metal flap swings shut ... and catches on his arm. I'm crouching to free it when three sharp raps ring out on the library van door. I snap upright, heart slamming into my chest. No time. No way to hide Jake. Or the plastic sheet. So, I'll just have to hide something else – Me!

The part of me that's a serial killer. Shouldn't be too hard. I've been doing it for years now anyway.

The door squeaks as a man climbs aboard my Library Van.

Linden – of course it is. No one else would dare ignore the library van opening hours.

I smooth down the front of my cardigan, pale green, pearl buttons. My good one, saved for special occasions – like murder. I know it's silly but I like to look my stylish 1950s-inspired self at all times, especially when facing the police.

Country Detective Maddox Linden. His parents must have really hated him. Sounds like an overpriced aftershave or a smug private school boy. He looks like someone has ironed him flat and forgotten to fill him back up. Pale, crisp shirt. His bottom lip chewed raw. Eyes that flick too fast for my liking.

I paste on a smile and step sideways, blocking the bin.

'Morning. You're early today.' His gaze slides past me into the van.

'Got a call about a missing kid. Jake Nicholls? Have you seen him?'

'Can't say I know the name.'

He doesn't buy it. They never do. But it's the degree of disbelief that counts. He's a cop though, he's gotta be able to smell the metallic Cologne de blood all around us. The van reeks of it. Linden's eyes move faster now. Shelf to shelf, corner to corner. They flick across the compact mirror and red lipstick I keep on my desk.

'You wear that '50s get-up every day?'

Smoothing the pleats on my skirt, I pause. No point giving him my full speech about my need for creative expression and class in a bland world.

'Yes. It's my thing.'

He scans the van, clocking the returns bin behind me. I try to hide the twitch in my jaw as he pushes past me. Silence thickens. He stares at the bin. At the flap. Jake's arm propping it up.

Pulling out his phone, Linden's long and low sigh punctuates the air as he turns slightly away from me.

'You need to send forensics down here. There's a body in the library. Yes. *The Library Van*.'

I eye him as he turns towards me.

'No, she's here. Calm as anything. Hasn't said anything yet.' I don't plan to, except for the obvious. I found Jake shoved in there just the way he is now when I opened the van. End of. There's no way he can prove otherwise. I may have forgotten to lock the van door, but I *know* murder. That's one thing I don't stuff up.

But there is something I want to ask him ... something I want to desperately check in my files.

Has Detective Linden returned his books on time? Because if *he* hasn't...

Well. We'll cross that shelf when we come to it.

I close the ledger and smooth my skirt, the hem brushing just below my knees. Pink cotton, *Jane Austen* print, full circle. A favourite from my vintage collection. Matching cardigan. Black ballet flats. Red nails and lipstick. The lace gloves folded on my desk make it official. I'm straight out of a 1950s homemaker magazine. But that's just my happy cover.

I wasn't always like this, but it's just so wrong when people don't return my books. Not that long ago, I welcomed the library van patrons, parked by the netball courts, and made boring chit-chat about the weather. Watched the dust curl in through the door while they chose their books. Offered bookmarks. Shared homemade blueberry muffins. Sometimes, I even meant it all. Occasionally, I even enjoyed it with a side of freshly brewed tea. I'll admit it. I even forgave late returns.

Now? Now, my left breast aches all the time, and there's something thick and grainy there under the skin. Like soggy, lumpy tapioca. I should get it checked but that would mean going back to him. Another trip to the male doctor who doesn't listen to me isn't high on my to do list. Besides, the last time I tried to tell Dom – Dr Dom – if I'm being generous, he just told me I've hit *that age*. Just peri. Peri-menopausal. As if prefixing it makes it less unbearable.

'It's to be expected. Dense breast tissues. Hot flushes. Disturbed sleep. Brain fog. Moodiness. And dressing like a leftover from 1954.'

That was his last dig. He even asked if I was heading to a fancy-dress party nobody told him about. I ignored him. My skirts have swing, and my heels click. That's not a costume, that's armour.

Unstable is what he really meant.

He's always just so matter of fact. Doctor always-tanned, *saviour* of distant nations. More likely taking advantage of whatever poor country makes him look better on his socials. He couldn't stop grinning at me last time like he was off on safari with a stethoscope.

'Next stop, Burundi. You should see the gratitude in their eyes.'

I'm sure they're dazzled. Just like I'm sure he almost didn't hear me when I asked again about the lump. He waved me off, then told me to drink soy milk.

I'm anaphylactic to soy.

But he didn't blink. Didn't apologise. Just moved on to the next patient with his humanitarian halo and spotless lab coat. I could've killed him right then. Except for one thing. He returns his books on time. Always has. That's the thing about this library van life. The ones I *really* want to kill... They're too neat, too punctual, too... careful. It's the careless ones I end up burying.

People think libraries are quiet. But my van hums with memory. Books *whisper* to me when I'm alone. They lean out, tugging at my sleeve, reminding me of the stains they've endured, the pages

torn, the bent corners, the juice-box fingerprints that never quite wiped away.

I protect them. Like family. Because they *are* my family now.

Hardcovers don't lie. Dust jackets don't cheat. *Paper remembers*. So, when someone violates one of my book-babies; dog-ears it, draws a moustache on the heroine, or doesn't return it at all? That's worse than murder in my book. And leaves only one thing left to be done.

Good old *Murder*. I'm not a savage though. I have rules, simple ones really. *Return on time. Handle with care. Respect the story.*

Break those? Let's just say you won't get a second due date.

It's been a week, and the van's finally been cleared after forensics took swabs, dusted prints and muttered things into radios. They found what you'd expect: blood, DNA, fingerprints: mine, mostly. All over the steering wheel, the cupboards, the bin lid, the shelves. I mean, I *live* here. I breathe the Dewey Decimal System. And of course my prints are everywhere. That's the point.

This morning, I'm parked beside the park playground. The sliding door's wide open, letting in eucalyptus haze and the shrill calls of toddlers. The playgroup kids and their parents are all queued and waiting for their time to board. Prams. Drink bottles. Muddy knees. Sticky fingers. Parents making chatty guilt-sounds about trying to find the time to read to their kids, while their toddlers gaze up at

the pop-up cardboard castle beside the picture book display. If they could reach it, it would be crumpled beyond all recognition, which is why it's perched on a shelf high above them. I'm not looking forward to all of their little smearing fingers on my book spines.

Feeling my palms start to sizzle, I lean over and switch on my little fan. Another couple of minutes and the hot flush will have me pulling off my cardigan too. Sitting down at my desk, I turn to a clean page in my ledger. I'm old-school with my records; writing down every book borrowed and returned with my black pen. I don't *do* digital. The council keeps pushing their barcode scanner system, but I don't trust it. Paper doesn't glitch or get autocorrected.

One-by-one, the kids clamber aboard. I hand out sparkly bookmarks and gently pry novels out of the hands of enthusiastic toddlers. A four-year-old with sticky fingers pulls down *The Very Noisy Bear*. I fix him with a look.

'No licking.' He blinks and nods solemnly.

That's when I see him. *Detective Linden*. Standing just outside the van, one hand resting on the doorframe, the other holding a book. A return, of course.

He looks better than he should. Pressed shirt, rested face. Like he hasn't spent the past week digging through the guts of my van. He nods as his words roll towards me.

'Busy morning.'

I eye him, deliberately finishing an entry in my record book before answering.

'It always is. Preschoolers are very punctual with returns. Pity the same can't be said for everyone.'

His smile flickers as he scans my handwritten notes.

'You always log everything by hand like that?'

I resist the urge to roll my eyes. As a regular library user, Detective Linden knows full well how I keep records - he's here often enough. Instead, I wave my hand over the open page like a tv gameshow host as I answer.

'Paper *remembers*.'

He steps up into the van. Too casual. Too tall. The space in the van seems to shrink. The bookshelves stiffen, like they know what's coming. He gives me that smarmy little grin of his as he speaks.

'Do you recall what time your van was locked up last Thursday night?'

Picking up a book, I flap it near my face, trying to get another wisp of air.

'No idea. But I do recall the exact title that was borrowed by Mrs Edwina Bailey last Thursday at 4 pm. *Ten Little Fingers and Ten Little Toes...*'

I claw at my cardigan trying to pull it off my shoulders as fire-heat sweeps up and over me. Freeing my arms, I sigh in relief before continuing.

‘... It came back this morning with yellow *Play-Doh* mashed between the pages.’ He squints at me.

‘That annoys you, does it? People doing *things* to the books?’

I don’t answer. Just flick a glance at the playgroup mum dangling her latte over the Grug display. He reads my face and drops his return book onto my desk. *The Lake Between Us*. I log it into the record ... slow and precise.

When I look up, his eyebrows are already arching. Beneath the desk, my leg starts to shake. I break eye contact and glance towards the line of waiting kids and parents. When I look back again, he’s watching me, waiting for something. I don’t blink.

He breaks first. Reaches sideways, grabs a book like it was his idea. *Crime and Punishment* – How appropriate.

Squishing my face into neutral-mode, I note the title, date and time. I do not comment or make a face. I simply hand him a due date slip for the new book with my fakest of fake smiles. He doesn’t utter another word as he jumps down the van stairs, leaving the surge of playgroup kids to flood in like a tide.

Later, after I’ve slid the van door shut and everything is quiet, I log the detective’s return. My hem brushes the top of my *Mary Janes*, black with a small buckle, as I sit behind the desk. Vintage, not replica. My clothes have survived longer than most marriages in this town.

That’s when I see them: Tiny ticks in the margins. Not notes ... symbols ... a pattern emerges. A secret code? The word *Meet*,

underlined in red. *Friday* circled beside it. Then a small sketch. A tree. No, two trees. Side-by-side. Entwined. With basically no space between them. My skull buzzes, like static under the scalp. Zapping and itching. Maddox Linden defiled one of my book-babies.

This means war. I don’t sleep that night. Instead, I stay in the van. The books don’t like to be alone after a violation like that. They murmur to me as I slide the door closed and spin the lock. Their spines tighten. Their covers sigh. I whisper back, *I know. I saw it too*. I hang my cardigan on the hook beside my desk. Pink gingham. I wore it the day my dog-eared copy of *Anne of Green Gables* first went missing. I’ve never forgotten that borrower. Your first kill is always the most memorable they say.

My small fan is hardly a match for the hot air trapped in the metal shell of the van but it’s better than nothing. I’m sticky behind my knees, under my arms and down my back. It’s not the best situation but I don’t have time to let it worry me; I’ve got work to do.

I lift the cushion on the driver’s seat and pull out my private record book. Not the official one they swabbed and bagged last week. This one’s just for me. A full record, copied out in pencil and marked with my own shorthand. It tracks everything: titles, borrowers, returns, infractions. Three warnings, max. After that, well – everyone knows the rules. This is my real catalogue, the one

that shows who deserves to keep borrowing, and who doesn't deserve to keep breathing.

I start with *Crime and Punishment*, then track backwards. Every title Linden's touched over the past year. *The Lake Between Us*. *Still Tied to Shore*. *Smoke Signals*.

Some are clean. Most aren't. Small dots – underlines – phrases circled. Once, an actual kiss mark in faded lipstick. Tiny hearts crowned with more hearts. I squint as the marks pulse like a bruise under the page.

And always the initials: J.A.

Over and over.

I get to work. Build a chart. Title. Date. Return date. Margin notes. Pattern. Code. My fingers cramp. My eyes itch. There's a buzzing in my teeth as if a mild electric fence is sitting behind my lips.

I track genres, settings, metaphors. I line them up and draw connections. I add sticky notes and use highlighters. There's a rhythm to it all. Books borrowed a week apart. Always returned before the due date.

My scalp feels tight. Dry patches on my elbows flake every time I move. It feels like I'm literally decaying while I catalogue it all. Linden has been using library books, my book-babies, to pass messages to someone. Not just once, repeatedly. More than that, the margin marks are breadcrumb love trails smuggled in secret past the town.

He didn't whisper them to her over the phone. He *used* my books. He defaced them. Like the story within didn't matter and the author was dead. And all on my watch. I feel sick. A whole chart's worth of one-sided hidden dialogue, laced between the printed lines. Annotated in my books. My babies. They trusted me to keep them safe.

It's an affair. It has to be. But with whom? Who is J.A.? The mayor, Jane Andrews? Or Jenny Allen, the older lady who runs the craft store here in town? I shake my head and flex my legs. Whoever J.A. is, she's got to be a library member to get Linden's messages. I'll find her. I have to. My book-babies are counting on me.

The next morning, I park outside the school. Thursdays once a fortnight is library day for the local Christian primary school. I hand out moving 3D bookmarks and remind kids not to lick the books, even if they have an ice cream on the cover. One little *darling* sneezes on my special copy of Roald Dahl's *Matilda* and I dive for the tissue box as I see snot drip from the tip of his nose.

Books returned.

Books borrowed.

My ledger fills and I smile as my book-babies come home. Tick. Slip. Stamp. Order. That should soothe me. But instead, I feel the fire under my skin. A restlessness in my knees. My scalp tingles ... my palms burn ... my shirt clings ... I'm flinching again as I realise

I forgot to bring an extra shirt. The smell of the classroom clings to the kids; sweaty hats, juice stains, glue sticks, and squashed bananas.

I need air. Fresh air. Now.

My petticoat's clinging to my thighs. I curse the synthetic blend and vow to find better fabric next time I visit the op shop. Struggling upwards from my desk, I make my way through the throng of primary kids, step down the van's stairs, and gulp in the fresh air.

That's when I spot them. Across the road, outside the church.

Detective Linden and Jodie-Ann: the pastor's wife.

He's too close and leaning in. His body turned towards her in that way men do when they're trying not to be noticed. I squint, and watch as her hand lifts, flutters like a nervous bird, then lands on his sleeve. A squeeze. It's quick, but it's there. A familiarity that a country police detective and pastor's wife shouldn't share.

They cap things off by parting with a glance that's held too long.

I know longing when I see it. I'm a romance reader.

Heading back up the van steps, I open my ledger and adjust the spine before working through the remaining borrowers. Flipping to the back page, I file her name beside his.

J.A. Jodie-Ann. Pastor. Married. Pretending.

They've both been writing in my books. Using my catalogue to orchestrate their private sin. Scribbling across someone else's sentences like it doesn't matter. Like paper forgets. But it doesn't – and neither do I.

J.A.: Not the councillor, or the craft-store lady.

Jodie-Ann. The pastor's wife. Of course! *Of course* it's her!

Bingo. I've got him.

The entire back of my neck prickles. Not from heat this time, but from clarity. I sit upright; the air pinched in my chest. The detective is *with* the pastor's wife. And worse, he's writing about it in my book-babies! In ink! In their margins!

That won't go down well with the congregation or the rest of the town, will it?

But it is in my ledger. I put a big tick next to their names.

Just like everything else.

He came again on Friday after closing. The van was parked behind the nursing home. My working day was over, the books all re-shelved, the ledger closed. I'm eating a slightly stale ginger biscuit and picking at a flake of dry skin on my thumb when I hear someone on the van stairs. He doesn't knock. Just opens the door and steps inside.

Linden. *Again*. This detective is really starting to annoy me. His voice booms in the small space of the van.

'Evening'.

But the word sounds wrong, feels wrong, in his mouth. His hand is already on his belt. The cuffs hanging there like punctuation.

‘Sylvie Southcombe, you’re under arrest on the suspicion of the murder of Jake Nicholls’. Warmth pulses up from my chest to my neck, right before my ears start to ring. I resist snarling as I sling my question at him.

‘Based on what?’

He’s gloating. ‘Blood in the ledger.’

My mouth runs dry and I have to clear my throat before gesturing to the book on my desk. I keep my voice steady.

‘Not this one. This one’s new.’

He looks almost sorry for me as he answers.

‘I know. Forensics bagged the original records last week. You missed a spot, dried blood deep in the spine. Forensics say it’s Jake’s.’

He shrugs like it’s nothing. ‘Like you said the other day. *Paper remembers.*’

I stare at him. The warmth that started behind my ears is now raging down the inside of my arms.

He’s using my words. *My words.*

I smirk. ‘Doesn’t mean Jake’s death had anything to do with me. Paper cuts happen.’

‘Some books bite.’

But I can’t hold back the snarl. ‘You’ve got nothing.’

He doesn’t answer, as he unhooks his handcuffs and takes a step closer to me. My voice comes out rasped and high, like the edge of torn paper.

‘Don’t.’

I reach behind the seat to pull out the annotated copy of *Every Last Secret* into view. No rush. No panic. I focus on keeping my voice calm. ‘I’ve got it all here.’

He growls. ‘You’re bluffing.’

My fingers rest on the tabs, steady as stone.

‘Want me to read them aloud? The lipstick marks. The meeting spots circled in biro. I’ve got them filed. Alphabetised.’

Our glares lock. I don’t blink. Instead, I tap the pile beside me. I’m talking faster now.

‘Kiss-stained dates. Coded meetups. Little love-hearts. And of course, those initials: J.A.’

His voice is low and threatening as he answers. ‘You don’t know what you’re talking about.’

I step closer to him. My vision shimmers as I choose my words for maximum impact.

‘Jodie-Ann. The Pastor’s wife.’

Shock creeps over his face. Bingo. So, I *am* right. I push more. He’s already doing the maths: small towns run on gossip, and one whisper from me will have it rolling through the bakery, the servo and the op-shop before sunset. His badge won’t survive the week. His marriage won’t survive the day. And once the church hears about it, neither will his soul.

He knows he can’t win this fight. I continue with my prattling.

‘Not to mention the fingerprints you left in the margins of my books. I’ll start with Every Last Secret. Fitting, don’t you think?’

Linden lunges. Fast. But my skin is so slick with sweat, I dodge his grasp. His shoulder clips the shelf behind him, sending books raining down. *Homecoming. Girl Falling. Anomaly.*

My hands twitch, desperate to catch them.

He hits the floor with a grunt.

And I don’t move.

Not until I’ve picked up my favourite hardback, *The Encyclopaedic Dictionary of Serial Killers*, 1200 pages of sharp-cornered justice. I slide the old brass letter opener from its hiding place in the book’s hollowed spine. Long. Thin. Sharpened to a mean point. A gift from the librarian who taught me that overdue revenge still counts.

Linden is on his back now, one arm twisted awkwardly beneath him. I step over him slowly, one foot either side. In one hand, the book. In the other, the blade. I hold the heavy hardcover above his face. Not touching. Just hovering. Close enough to see his eyes widen. He’s panting. I’m not.

‘Here’s the thing. Do you really think Jake was the first ... sloppy one?’

His pupils shrink. I can see it. He knows I’m not bluffing now. I crouch beside his head, real close, and lower the tip of the opener until it rests on the vinyl floor right beside his ear.

‘He wasn’t. He was just the first one you know about.’

He tries to sit up. I push the book lower onto his face, crushing his nose flat and cutting off his oxygen. He tries to toss his head from side to side but the pressure from the book pins his face beneath it. His hands flinch. I stay steady. He moans as he struggles to take a breath but I just murmur back at him.

‘Go ahead. Arrest me. Drag me into court. Try explaining to a judge how the detective sleeping with the pastor’s wife ended up flat on his back in a mobile library van, pinned down by a weak middle-aged librarian.’

Silence. The smell of his sweat mixes with mine, flooding through the van’s stale air. His breath snags. I hold the book a moment longer, then shift it downward to sit on his chest. His face flushes crimson as he coughs and gasps for air. He thrashes like a one-man act on the vinyl floor stage.

And that’s when I raise my foot, *heel first*, and press the sharp point of my right *Mary Jane* court shoe down onto the cover; right over his heart.

He falls still at the threat. His eyes lock onto mine as I speak.

‘This copy is out of print. Just like your career will be if you try to cross me.’

He calls out again, struggling under the weight of my heel. I pull one of my lace gloves off my desk, stuffing it into his mouth, pushing down even harder on the book. He’s got crazy eyes now.

I make my voice low.

‘Don’t push me. I don’t want to have to cut up your library card.’

After what seems like an eternity, he lifts his hand in surrender. Giving him a shove, I step off, blade still in hand. Linden gasps as he pulls my glove out of his mouth before throwing it across the van. Straightening his shirt, he re-clips the cuffs at his hip like we’ve just finished acting a scene on stage.

I slam the overdue slip for *Crime and Punishment* into his hand as I speak. ‘Four days late. Ironic.’

He crumples it without a word.

I tilt my head and lower my voice one last time.

‘Tell anyone, and I start reading aloud from *Every Last Secret*. It’s annotated and indexed like the rest. I’ve even highlighted the kiss marks for you.’

There’s a long pause as we size each other up. Then he gives me a single, silent nod, before stepping down from the van. This time, he leaves the door open. Just like I planned.

I’ve repacked everything. My book-babies are wrapped in tissue, while my flared skirt collection fits perfectly into the chest behind the passenger seat. I’ve bought five more vintage pairs of *Mary Janes*, all black, shiny and ready, their buckles glinting like promises. The new town has wider roads and fewer potholes. I feel at home immediately.

First day on the new route, a small boy climbs into the van clutching *The Magic Pudding*. Four days overdue. ‘Sorry, Miss Sylvie. We went to Queensland and forgot to return it.’

I look at him. Mud on his knees. A cowlick that refuses to behave. Hopeful eyes. I take the book gently, my fingers smoothing over the plastic that protects the beautiful cover. The boy sniffs, waiting for me to say something. Time to play the helpful librarian, I guess.

‘Did you enjoy it?’

Stopping to itch the side of his nose, he nods as he speaks. ‘I like how the pudding could talk.’

I nod my approval before answering. ‘Well, that’s what happens when you read properly.’

I straighten the bow at the neckline of my blouse. I always dress properly, too. The old ways matter. Story and style — they both deserve care.

Picking up my new logbook I take a moment to admire it. Laminated cover, colour-coded tabs. Clean pages just waiting to be filled. Bending down to write, I focus on my neat strokes.

Not in red. Just pencil. For now.

Somewhere behind me, a shelf creaks.

Paper always remembers. And so, do I.

Julia Harris

The Melbourne Athenaeum Body-in-the-Library Library Award (\$1250) went to **Julia Harris**

(Castlemaine, VIC) for 'Return or Die'. Julia is a journalist, author, and mum. She holds a Master of Arts in Writing and Literature and is completing a PhD in Young Adult Realism. Her work has been published in the *TEXT* journal, and she was awarded a 2025 Varuna Roderick Centre Fellowship. Through her imprint, Happy Harris Publishing, Julia has released four young adult novels which explore love, loss, courage, fear, and belonging.