

MARY FLODIN

Two wounded souls, hunted by monsters, bound by destiny...

A love forged through passion for a sacred land



"a fast-paced eco-thriller full of action and intrigue"—Anna Citrino, author

INCIDENT AT COUGAR CREEK

READER REVIEWS

"Incident at Cougar Creek is a masterfully woven eco-thriller that fuses mystery, romance, and mythology against the haunting beauty of California's central coast. Mary Flodin's prose pulses with authenticity, from vivid environmental detail to her nuanced portrayal of trauma and resilience. Both a gripping page-turner and a profound call for empathy toward people and planet. Highly recommended,"

The International Review of Books.

"I'm a Licensed Professional Counselor, specializing in PTSD. In Incident at Cougar Creek, I found that the author accurately and sensitively portrays characters who are dealing with unresolved PTSD resulting from the trauma of military combat and rape. This eco-thriller has plenty of page turning, entertaining, edge-of-your-seat twists and surprises, but also reveals the urgent need for conservation of wild California's fragile central coast ecosystem, and elevates serious concerns about missing and murdered Indigenous people. A timely and meaningful read."

Rachel Pfotenhauer MA, LPC

"Incident at Cougar Creek is an intricately plotted, deeply engaging murder mystery and love story that will compel the reader's attention from the story's beginning right to its very end. The story is set in California's central coast, with excursions to both Southern California and San Francisco. As a former Santa Cruz County Supervisor who represented that county's North Coast for twenty years, I can testify to how profoundly and powerfully the mystery and majesty of this under-appreciated part of the California coastline has been made into an essential element of the gripping trajectory of Flodin's story."

Gary A. Patton, Santa Cruz County Supervisor (1975-1995)

"Mary Flodin's new book, Incident at Cougar Creek, is a fast-paced cli-fi-eco thriller full of action and intrigue that made me want to keep turning the page. Incident at Cougar Creek delivers an exciting narrative full of twists, turns, and tense chase scenes threaded through with a profound and satisfying love story, along with vivid setting elements and factual details that reveal the challenges of protecting the natural world."

Anna Citrino, author of *Stories We Didn't Tell*

INCIDENT AT COUGAR CREEK

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Published by Paper Angel Press
paperangelpress.com

SPECIAL EDITION

PROLOGUE

APRIL 10, 2018

SAN DIEGO COUNTY, CALIFORNIA

SINCE CHILDHOOD, twenty-year-old Delfina Cuera had known the secret trails from their home at the Ma Tar Awa Viejas Trailer Park, on the outskirts of San Diego, up to the ancient Kumeyaay ceremonial site on Viejas Mountain.

This April evening, mother and daughter performed their sunset prayers and rituals in peace and solitude, as they had so many times before.

Twilight faded the bright blue Southern California sky to pale indigo. Far below to the west, the lights of San Diego twinkled awake.

★ ★ ★

Just as the last glint of sunlight vanished over the horizon, hot, dry, Santana winds rushed fiercely across the mountain. Like sinister, angry giants bringing mayhem from another realm, the Santanas boomed across the land, causing the very air to tremble and crack. Venomous wind demons kicked and hurled everything in their path, forcing the spirits of earth to shake and flee in terror before them.

Incident at Cougar Creek

The Satanás!

Enraged wind whipped Delfina's hair across her face. She protected her eyes with a raised hand, squinting to see better.

In the dim moonlight, Delfina perceived something strange happening to her mother. Ramona's body was weirdly changing.

Frozen in horror, Delfina watched Ramona shape shift—subtly at first, then all at once. The transformation was so radical, so grotesque, that Delfina could not doubt what she saw, although her mind would not make sense of it.

Delfina felt a rising irritation from deep inside her own body—an itching in her very bone marrow. Inflammation boiled through her blood and flesh. She needed to burst out of her skin, as if it no longer fit. A terrible pain gripped her. All her bones felt like they were breaking. Fur sprouted from her skin. She fell to the ground. Her hands and feet turned into large paws with sharp claws.

What's happening to me?

She screamed.

But the sound that rose from her throat was not human. It was the howl of a wild animal.

She heard her mother's voice in her head, shouting, "Delfina, run! Hunters have found us. Follow me. Run!"

The young puma leapt twenty feet straight up the cliff face and clawed her way across crumbling rock. She struggled to keep up with her mother as the two of them ran for their lives through the night.

The hot dry Santana wind threw gritty rock dust in her eyes. She blinked frantically. Her mother wordlessly instructed her to memorize the landmarks, to remember her way in the dark through this ever-dwindling corridor of mountain wilderness.

I must keep my vision clear.

They fled toward the reservoir along a mountain ridge trail that Delfina had never traveled before.

The farther into the wilderness the cougars ran, the harder the devil wind blew, sending waves of pressure rippling over their fur, as if an enormous invisible monster were trying to push them back, prevent them from reaching their destiny.

A loud crack sizzled through the air overhead. Like cupped hands slapping both sides of her head, pressure smashed into Delfina's eardrums with a violent burst. The world went silent, but the young puma kept running.

The Santana winds blew harder, faster, hotter. She squinted against swirling sand, dodging sharp thorns of barrel cactus, cartwheeling tumbleweeds, and crashing limbs of scrub oak trees.

A loud whistling squeal rang in her ears. Then the fierce crack of another rifle shot racked the night, followed by men's laughter.

The zing of a bullet buzzed Delfina's head like an angry yellow jacket, ricocheting off a rock just inches from where she stood at the edge of a cliff. A spark flew off the granite, igniting drought-dry chaparral. Within seconds, the devil winds had whipped fire all around her.

The sound of her mother's voice screamed inside her head.

"Delfina! Jump!"

Delfina leapt off the cliff into a canyon river gorge a hundred feet below.

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**SIX YEARS LATER, APRIL 14, 2023
SANTA LUCIA COUNTY, CALIFORNIA**

FIVE HUNDRED MILES NORTH of San Diego, under an ancient stand of coastal oaks, California Fish and Wildlife Officer Colin Dawson knelt over the dying mountain lion.

Wavering streams of light and dark filtered through the dense oak canopy, throwing ghostly patterns across the ground. Mangled shadows insinuated their fingers over the big, beautiful puma, its fur the color of California's golden hills.

The cougar thrashed, gushing blood.

Colin leaned in closer to assess the wound and determine whether he could do anything to save the animal.

He watched, horrified, as the fur on the cat's head grew long, black, and shiny. The puma's ears lost their fur altogether, rounded, and moved down to the sides of the head. The wildcat's face changed shape, like a plastic mask being pulled and remolded before his eyes, until she became human. Paws transformed into human hands and feet, and breasts swelled on the cat's now furless chest.

Incident at Cougar Creek

Colin's brows pulled together. His jaw clenched. His heart roared like a firestorm in his ears.

The cat, still writhing and bleeding, had morphed into a naked woman.

Colin stared at the dying woman's face. From deep in her journey through the dark forest of death, she looked back at him, into his soul. Her green eyes pierced him through and through, as if she had known him forever, as if they were kin.

He trembled, mind whirling.

She spasmed, a single tear ran down her cheek, and her eyes became glassy.

Has she stopped breathing?

Suddenly she gasped, then took a noisy rattling breath. The rattling stopped. Silence. For a moment, the earth seemed to cease spinning; the constant chatter of creation paused. Colin felt for a pulse. Nothing. She was gone. A wave of deep sadness overwhelmed him.

His forehead throbbed.

Incredibly enough, this was not the most horrible thing he'd ever seen. But too weird.

Am I losing my mind? Did I just have a break with reality?

Proximity to violent death, the smell of all that blood—those are PTSD triggers. I must have hallucinated.

He squinted at the corpse. *But the cougar had seemed so real.*

No. No. She definitely was never a mountain lion. You imagined it, Colin.

He checked his smartwatch—Thursday, April 14, 2023. 3:56 p.m. Pacific Daylight.

So sad. This woman appears to be about my mom's age.

Leaves rustled behind him. He froze. Icy tingles along his spine awakened Colin's military combat instincts.

Her killer could still be nearby.

Colin looked over his shoulder.

Just a blue jay.

Shaking off spiderwebs of fear, keeping senses alert, he opened the voice memo app on his watch. He noted the time of death, then resumed his examination of the body, recording his observations, careful not to touch the woman.

"The arrow is lodged deep in her chest, probably all the way through. Not a clean entry. The flesh is ripped to shreds. I observed blood pumping out along the shaft like a gusher as she died. Massive blood loss. The arrow

must have penetrated her heart. What caused those spasms, as if she were having a seizure?"

Colin examined the projectile, lightly touching it with his gloved hand. "This is no ordinary arrow. Looks like one of those hundred-dollar-a-pop jobs, engineered for a high-tech sniper crossbow."

His adrenaline spiked. "The kill shot must have come from close by—no more than a hundred meters, maybe as close as fifty, half a football field away."

His fingers wrapped around the grip of the Glock in his holster. Turning his head, he checked his six. Held his breath. Listened.

Silence.

Colin took a deep breath, and continued recording his observations. "Calluses, scratches, cuts, and dried blood on her hands and feet. Debris under her nails. These scratches and cuts don't look like defensive wounds. More like what you'd get if you were scrambling on your hands and bare feet over rough ground." He switched off the voice recording.

"You poor woman," he spoke out loud to the lifeless body. The trees seemed to lean in, listening. "How did you hurt your hands and feet like that?" Even in death, her presence emanated grace, nobility. "Who are you? Who did this to you? Why?"

Glancing around the clearing under the oaks, Colin scanned for signs that she may have been killed elsewhere, had crawled, or been dragged here, to die.

Chiaroscuro highlights and shadows heightened the shocking bright green of tall understory grasses, sprouting hallelujahs of rebirth and regeneration through the dense brown mélange of leaf litter.

The sound of nearby Cougar Creek meandering downhill soothed Colin's nerves.

On hands and knees, the wildlife warden moved his head side to side, up and down, until he caught sight of a blood trail beginning about ten feet from the body.

He stood and planted a marker where the trail began.

Tapping his voice app, he noted, "The forensic team will have to confirm, but it appears to me the victim was running, being chased. I've placed a flag where the arrow hit her. She dragged herself farther until she collapsed, then died there, where I found her. This looks to me like a typical hunting scenario. Except the prey was human."

A wave of vertigo surged through him.

Incident at Cougar Creek

He fell to his knees, his hand coming down hard on spikey fallen oak leaves.

A metal object pushed against his palm. Colin plucked it out of the leaves, drawing it close to his face to examine.

Jewelry? He turned the object around, studying it closer. *No. This is a broken piece from one of those telemetry collars the Puma Research Project uses.*

Colin's forehead wrinkled. He spoke again to the woman growing cold in the brittle leaves. "Did someone capture you, put a tracking collar on you?"

A stream of bright crimson ran down his wrist into his palm.

What? Is this her blood or mine? Wait. When did I take my gloves off? Did I cut myself on this broken collar when I fell? Crap. I've compromised evidence with blood from my cut.

He untied the kerchief from his neck, used it to wipe the blood off his wrist and hand, then wrapped it around his wound. With his smartphone, he photographed the object his hand had landed on, making sure to get a clear shot of the string of numbers engraved into the metal. Then he rummaged an evidence bag out of his knapsack, secured the metal-and-plastic piece in the bag, and labeled it. He placed an evidence marker where he'd found the object.

Spidey-senses keyed up, tingling down his back, Colin remained hyper alert. He couldn't shake the feeling of being watched. A predator could at this moment be sneaking up behind him, drawing a bow to take a shot.

Using the radio on his vest, he contacted dispatch for backup. From the Fish and Wildlife repeater, the dispatcher would ping all appropriate agencies, starting with the Sheriff's Homicide Division.

It would take at least an hour for the Santa Lucia County Sheriff's team to get all the way up here to the Cougar Creek Coast Ranch, ten miles north of Playa Azul. Meanwhile, Colin was at high risk, a vulnerable target. More so than usual. Cal Fish and Wildlife, with budget cuts and unfilled vacancies, was spread too thin. As the sole wildlife warden in charge of patrolling the entire northern half of this county, with its miles of coastline and thousands of acres of coastal and mountainous parks, Colin was often alone in isolated areas without any backup. But finding a dead woman with a high-tech sniper arrow through her heart made today feel even more dangerous than usual.

Nevertheless, he stood his ground, methodically taking photos of the body, close-ups of the arrow, the wound, the victim's hands and feet, and blood on the leaves where he presumed the arrow first struck the victim. On his phone's Notes app, he registered photo log notes.

The forensic team would take more professional and thorough photographs later, but Colin knew it was important to capture as much evidence as he could in these first minutes proximate to the victim's time of death, while the crime scene was still pristine.

When he got back to the road and his truck, he would radio the Sheriff's Homicide Division directly and talk them in. This location was one of those places where GPS didn't work very well. It wouldn't be easy for the Sheriff's team to find.

Colin dug a roll of caution tape out of his pack and cordoned off a perimeter around the body.

He started to leave, then hesitated. Returning to the woman, he knelt and whispered, "I'm sorry this happened to you."

Gently, he closed her eyes.

Finally he stood, brushed the leaves off his pants knees, and hurried to get out from under the oppressive oaks. Inside his skull, his footfalls on the earth reverberated like an echo chamber, as if someone were prowling around in his brain. His boot nicked a wild chanterelle hidden in the leaf litter, the musty odor triggering memories of time served in Afghanistan. He glanced over his shoulder. Black silhouettes of gnarled trees loomed over the body like ghouls.

When he stepped out of the shaded grove onto the ranch road where his truck was parked, oblique rays of late afternoon sunlight pierced his eyes. He blinked up at the sky, took a deep breath of fresh coastal air, and gazed down the mountain to the shimmering sea.

A whale spouted, then another—tiny white umbrellas of spray erupting out of glassy ocean far below. California grays were passing the Central Coast on their annual migration from Baja to Alaska. The explosive crash of distant breakers rumbled like bombs blasting through a tunnel inside his head.

He rubbed his forehead, fighting down another wave of dizziness and nausea. A cold gust off the ocean cut through him like an ice knife. Memories washed over him.

Thundering bursts of gunfire roll through the tunnel. It is March 11, 2012. Panjwai, Afghanistan. Shitstorm. Clusterfuck. Slaughter.

Incident at Cougar Creek

Me and my squad find the house that intel had ID'd as sheltering terrorist insurgents. We kick the door down. Musty odor of old prayer rugs, cumin and baharat, smoke choking the air, blood, burnt flesh, terror. Our mission: clean the site—eliminate the threat; bayonet all bodies, even if they already appear to be dead; leave nothing alive.

A young woman lies no longer breathing on a mat in a dark corner of the room, the veil fallen away from her face, glazed eyes open, a forever silent baby cradled in each arm.

Oh, God! You're from another culture, but you could be my sister. Both of us are part of one human family, all genetically related. Sapiens? What a misnomer. Nothing wise about this. All slaughtered. Absolute destruction of what was once beautiful and good. What have we done?

The scene spins around him. He rises out of his body, looks down from a great height, through the smoke of war, at the dead woman and babies on a blood-soaked prayer rug.

Everything he thought he knew about war falls away. He gazes down at his small self below, the bayonet in his hand aimed to stab the lifeless woman and babies. In a blinding realization, he sees the truth: I am nothing but a tool forged to wreak chaos, in the hands of a gruesome monster whose malignant reach extends across oceans and continents!



A red-tailed hawk flushed out of the treetops, circling overhead with a haunting cry.

Snap out of it, Colin. That was ten years ago. You survived. You didn't kill the girl and those babies. It wasn't your fault. Move on. Breathe.

Colin inhaled the clean ocean air deeper, deeper, counting to ten, holding his breath while the flashback cleared, then exhaling and breathing in again, focusing on the sea shining far below.

Don't let the past drag you down. Keep going forward. Be in the Now.

*He implemented the antianxiety protocol he'd been taught at the military hospital in Kandahar. Bending forward, hands on knees, he forced ten yogic *breaths of fire* through his nostrils, with eyes and mouth wide open, tongue stuck out like a Māori warrior. He straightened his back and scrubbed his face and head with his hands, palmed his eyes, drummed his fingertips between his collar bones to calm his amygdala and release serotonin, punched his chest and gut, and karate chopped down his legs and across his shoulders. He rolled his head to loosen his*

tight neck muscles, squeezed his shoulder blades together hard, did a few squats, then he gave himself a good wet dog shake, throwing off lingering guilt and shame.

Finally, he stepped into his truck, gulped down half the water in his water bottle, and unlocked his rifle from the rack behind his seat. Sitting with the truck doors locked, windows up, and his rifle across his knees, he radioed the Sheriff's office.

He connected with Homicide Division Lieutenant Carlos Rosa, en route with a SWAT team, detectives, deputies, and a forensic squad.

Sitting in his truck, scanning his surroundings for any activity, Colin talked the convoy up the Coast Highway from the town of Playa Azul, onto an unmarked turn north of the abandoned cement plant, then along a dirt road to the locked gate leading to the truck road that wound up the mountain to the crime scene.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mary Flodin's debut novel, *Fruit of the Devil*, published in 2019, was a finalist for the PEN/Bellwether Prize for Socially Engaged Fiction and the Pacific Northwest Writers' Competition. Her newest cli-fi romantasy, *Incident at Cougar Creek*, came to her in visions while hiking nearly daily in the Santa Cruz mountains during the covid pandemic. Imaginary characters and even a real live puma appeared to her and asked her to tell their story.

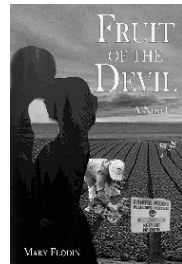
Before settling into the writer's life, Mary taught k-12 environmental education, English language arts and literature, social studies, digital media, and art in California public schools. A native Californian, she lives on an urban micro permaculture farm on the Monterey Bay coast with her husband—a retired NASA climate scientist—and their dogs, koi, feral cat, chickens, 1,000 hummingbirds, and gopher herd. Learn more about Mary at <https://shorturl.at/NTdAi> and <https://linktr.ee/maryfloiam>.

ALSO BY THE AUTHOR

FRUIT OF THE DEVIL

Mary Flodin

Ms. Aurora Bourne would do anything to protect her students from harm ... even if that means going up against the most powerful corporation on the planet.



Available from Paper Angel Press in
hardcover, trade paperback, and digital editions
paperangelpress.com

Some predators wear fur. Others wear a badge. When beasts walk as humans, love is the rarest survival skill of all.

In one of the most sensitive biodiversity hotspots in North America, Central California's rugged and beautiful Cougar Creek Coast Ranch National Monument, a brutal murder and a supernatural secret bring together Fish and Wildlife Officer Colin Dawson—an Army Ranger veteran struggling with PTSD—and Kumeyaay Native Delfina Cuera.

Will Colin and Delfina be able to rise above their personal wounds and learn to trust one another in time to stop the monster who killed Delfina's mother?

At the intersection of eco-thriller and romantasy, *Incident at Cougar Creek* posits the fantastical question: Can mutations in epigenetic DNA activated by the recent wave of climate havoc-induced pandemics turn humans into shape shifters?

"Incident at Cougar Creek is a masterfully woven eco-thriller that fuses mystery, romance, and mythology against the haunting beauty of California's central coast. Mary Flodin's prose pulses with authenticity, from vivid environmental detail to her nuanced portrayal of trauma and resilience. Both a gripping page-turner and a profound call for empathy toward people and planet. Highly recommended,"

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