THE PORTLAND MURDERS

PLAY ME ONCE

COMING 1/26/2027
preorders 12/15

A Psychological Thriller · by **M.M. DESCH**

"Invisibility kept her safe. Being loved made her a target."



Grace MacKenzie learned to go quiet as a girl, and she has kept the practice for decades. Not broken quiet. Strategic quiet. The kind that keeps the most important things hidden and whole. Living in drought-stricken Durango, Colorado, she buried her grief, her desires, and her identity behind a life she'd tailored to someone else's pattern. Then Kate Nichols walked into her life. Sharp, magnetic, tender. And Grace, fifty now, opened the door she'd spent decades locking.

It was the most dangerous thing she ever did.

When Grace finds a dead reporter's business card hidden in Kate's belongings, the mask begins to crack. Not hers, but Kate's. A reporter is dead. Grace's Nebraska farm sale is being sabotaged. Her farm manager has fled. Someone with a key has been inside her office. Every thread leads back to the woman sleeping beside her.

Grace knows exactly how to fold herself back into silence. She's done it a thousand times. Now she faces a choice she never imagined: retreat into the shadows that always kept her safe. Or she can stop folding.

The quiet ones don't stay quiet forever.

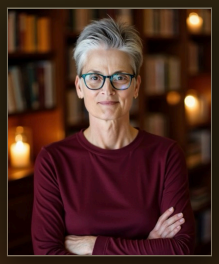
For fans of Freida McFadden (The Boyfriend), Jeneva Rose (The Perfect Marriage), and Isha Raya (You'll Never Forget Me).

PLAY ME ONCE

by M.M. Desch

Fiction / Psychological Thriller
The Portland Murders, Book 2
January 26, 2027 · Otherwise Occupied Press
Trade paperback and ebook · ~320 pages
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



MM Desch brings over three decades as a practicing psychiatrist to The Portland Murders, her psychological-thriller universe. Her debut, TANGLED DARKNESS (Rowan Prose Publishing), was shortlisted for the Chanticleer Clue Awards and named a Readers' Favorite finalist; the novellas IF I GO QUIET and LETHAL LOYALTY carry the universe forward. PLAY ME ONCE is her second full-length novel. She and her wife live in Portland, Oregon.

marydesch.com
mary@marydesch.com
Amazon: M.M. Desch
Mary Desch, Writer
m.m.desch
TikTok: @mm.desch
@mm-desch.bsky.social
Goodreads: M.M. Desch
YouTube: @MMDesch

Cover reveal coming November 2026. · Start the story early: LETHAL LOYALTY, the prequel novella introducing Kate Nichols, is available now on Amazon — free in Kindle Unlimited. · Advance reader copies: marydesch.com/arc

PLAY ME ONCE

PRESS KIT

M.M. Desch · The Portland Murders, Book Two
Otherwise Occupied Press · On sale January 26, 2027

For Immediate Release

Contact: Rachael Phillips, publicist
Email: rachaelphillipspublishing@gmail.com

THE PORTLAND MURDERS SERIES CONTINUES

***Play Me Once* will be published by Otherwise Occupied Press on January 26, 2027**

PORTLAND, Ore., October 31, 2026

M.M. Desch's Portland Murders series returns with *Play Me Once*, the second full-length novel after the award-shortlisted *Tangled Darkness* (2025). Two novellas bridge the novels: *If I Go Quiet*, which picks up after *Tangled Darkness*, and *Lethal Loyalty*, the prequel that first introduced Kate Nichols, now one of *Play Me Once*'s three narrators.

Play Me Once is the story of a self-erasing woman searching for her voice amid a storm of manipulation. Told by Grace MacKenzie, Kate Nichols, and Detective Aaron Davis, it follows Grace as she learns that trusting the wrong person could cost her everything. Will she find her voice before it's too late?

> "The novel succeeds as both a murder mystery and a study of how manipulation thrives on the stories people are desperate to believe."
> *— The Prairies Book Review*

M.M. Desch is a former psychiatrist in Portland, Oregon, who practiced for many years before turning to fiction. She is a member of the LGBTQ+ community, and her protagonists are queer women in middle age — a readership the genre has been slow to serve.

# # #

For more information, to receive a review copy, or to arrange an interview with M.M. Desch, contact her publicist Rachael Phillips at rachaelphillipspublishing@gmail.com.

About the Book

***Play Me Once* is a queer thriller starring the middle-aged protagonist the genre keeps forgetting to write.**

Grace MacKenzie learned to go quiet as a girl, and she has kept the practice ever since. Not broken quiet. Strategic quiet. The kind that keeps the most important things hidden and whole. Living in drought-stricken Durango, Colorado, she buried her grief, her desires, and her identity behind a life she'd tailored to someone else's pattern. Then Kate Nichols walked into her life. Sharp, magnetic, tender. And Grace, fifty now, opened the door she'd spent decades locking.

It was the most dangerous thing she ever did.

When Grace finds a dead reporter's business card hidden in Kate's belongings, the mask begins to crack. Not hers, but Kate's. Grace's Nebraska farm sale is being sabotaged. Her farm manager has fled. Someone with a key has been inside her office. Every thread leads back to the woman sleeping beside her.

Grace knows exactly how to fold herself back into silence. She's done it a thousand times. Now she faces a choice she never imagined: retreat into the shadows that always kept her safe, or stop folding.

Key Selling Points

- **Manipulation, written by a psychiatrist.** M.M. Desch practiced psychiatry for many years before writing fiction. *Play Me Once* treats manipulation the way a clinician sees it: not a twist, but a slow process that works because it offers people the story they most want to believe.
- **A sapphic thriller with a fifty-year-old heroine.** Grace MacKenzie opens the door she spent decades locking exactly when she has the most to lose. Twenty years of strategic silence are what make her dangerous once she stops.
- **A standalone entry into a connected series.** *Play Me Once* reads on its own, set in Durango rather than Portland, and extends the world of the award-shortlisted *Tangled Darkness*.
- **Dynamic Dual POV narrative.** Grace and Kate both get the chance to tell their side of the story.
- **Iconic Colorado imagery.** The droughts and dramatic landscapes of Colorado make the place a character in its own right, bringing beauty and death in equal measure.

Excerpts

Grace MacKenzie, from Chapter Two

Kate's conference badge lay half under the hotel stationery on the desk, dropped in the scramble. She reached for it, thinking she would run it downstairs. But as her fingers brushed the nylon strap, she stopped.

Beneath the plastic badge holder, half hidden, lay the corner of a business card.

She held still. The better version of herself, the version that trusted, would pick up the lanyard and ignore the card. But that version was nowhere close.

The lanyard came up in her hand. The card came with it, sliding across the polished wood of the desk. Not flipping it. Just holding it by the corner, her whole body quiet except for the blood in her ears.

Don't look. If you look, you make it real.

She flipped it.

> DEREK WILSON | Investigative Reporter | Durango Times

And at the bottom, in sharp handwriting:

> *7:30p. The Jug. X, DW*

Kate Nichols, from Chapter Three

Kate Nichols counted the exits before she counted the donors. Three doors. One stairwell behind the buffet. Seventeen potential investors arranged beneath tasteful lighting and a promise about water.

. . .

She moved through the crowd like someone who belonged in every room she entered, nodding at familiar faces, offering murmured greetings tuned to each recipient's importance. The silk blouse in steel gray. The subtle pearl earrings. Nothing loud. Nothing accidental.

"Mrs. Ainsworth. You look wonderful."

The older woman turned, the silk scarf at her throat shifting like something expensive and alive. "Katherine, dear. Tell me the truth; should I be worried about my investment?"

"Only if you don't make one."

Mrs. Ainsworth laughed. Kate moved on. The smile already folding itself away.

Publication Details

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Paperback	ISBN 979-8-9910136-4-2 · 5.25″ × 8″ · 324 pages · $19.99
Distribution	Ebook through Kindle Direct Publishing, exclusive to Kindle Unlimited. Paperback through IngramSpark, available wide.

About the Author

M.M. Desch writes The Portland Murders, a series of psychological thrillers set in Oregon and the American West. She practiced psychiatry for many years before turning to fiction, and the clinical training shapes the work: her novels are less interested in who did it than in how an ordinary person comes to believe a lie, and what it costs her to stop.

Her first novel, *Tangled Darkness*, was shortlisted for the 2023 Chanticleer Clue Awards and named a Readers' Favorite finalist. *Play Me Once* is her second novel, with two novellas, *If I Go Quiet* and *Lethal Loyalty*, bridging the series. She publishes under her own imprint, Otherwise Occupied Press.

Her appetite for suspense started in childhood with *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine* and turned into something closer to devotion in college, by way of detective fiction. She is an active member of Sisters in Crime and Willamette Writers. At marydesch.com she keeps a working archive on the clinical side of the craft — manipulation, unreliable narrators, and the real cases that shaped her villains.

Mary lives in Portland, Oregon, where she hikes, works her way through the food carts, follows the WNBA, and walks a spirited mini schnauzer with her wife.

Find M.M. Desch

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Books

- ***Play Me Once*** — The Portland Murders, novel (Otherwise Occupied Press, January 2027)
- ***Lethal Loyalty*** — The Portland Murders, novella (2026)
- ***If I Go Quiet*** — The Portland Murders, novella (January 2026)
- ***Tangled Darkness*** — The Portland Murders, novel (Rowan Prose Publishing, July 2025)

Selected Essays and Articles

- "When I First Met Shakespeare" — *Her Stories*, Story Circle Network, June 30, 2025
- "I've Seen So Much" — *Her Stories*, Story Circle Network, April 2, 2025
- "The Books That Made Me a Writer" — Archeolibrarian, August 6, 2025

Interviews

- "Speaking of Inclusion" with Katie Allen — podcast, May 12, 2026
- "Conversations with Calvin Schwartz: We the Species" — podcast, February 4, 2026
- "Queer Words" with Wayne Goodman — podcast, July 15, 2025
- "Lesbian Book Club" with Lauren Hogue and Haylie Peacock — podcast, July 8, 2025
- "News in Depth," KBOO Radio — July 14, 2025

Selected Coverage

- "Tangled Darkness" — *Lesbian Book Club*, July 22, 2025. A full episode in which hosts Lauren Hogue and Haylie Peacock discuss the novel.

Author Appearances

- KXRW Northwest Book Fair — Fort Vancouver Artillery Barracks, July 19, 2025
- Book launch with Kathleen Rhodes — Annie Bloom's Books, Portland, July 24, 2025
- In conversation with Kathleen Rhodes — Bold Coffee and Books, August 15, 2025

Current and upcoming events, including launch-week appearances, are listed at marydesch.com/events.

Praise for Play Me Once

> "A deliciously twisty thriller of love, lies, and murder."
> — *The Prairies Book Review*

> "The novel succeeds as both a murder mystery and a study of how manipulation thrives on the stories people are desperate to believe."
> — *The Prairies Book Review*

> "*Play Me Once* is a gripping psychological thriller about intimacy, perception, and the risks we take when we allow ourselves to be truly seen. . . . Suspenseful, psychologically astute, and impossible to put down."
> — Shavaun Scott, author of *The Minds of Mass Killers*, *Night Bird*, and more

> "I thoroughly enjoyed this lyrical account of grief, love, and treachery. You will too!"
> — Kaye George, national best-selling and Agatha-nominated mystery author

> "A fast-paced game of cat and mouse between two complex women — one gambling on millions, the other on her heart — both adept at hiding their true selves."
> — Pamela Statz, author of *Thorn City*

> "Revealing just enough to make you question whom — and what — you can trust. . . . An absorbing, twist-filled thriller that stayed with me after the final page."
> — Parker Garrett, author of *Adverse Events*

> "Readers, be prepared to stay up all night. . . . M.M. Desch skillfully shapes this mystery so that the tension never lets up."
> — Dian Greenwood, author of *About the Carleton Sisters*

> "The deep psychological probe and powerful characters in *Play Me Once* results in a winner that should be in any mystery library collection."
> — D. Donovan, senior reviewer, Midwest Book Review

> "It slowly turns into a psychological thriller as the author subtly drops clues, like breadcrumbs, leaving a trail that enticed me to keep reading."
> — Donna Stevenson, Readers' Favorite

Interview Questions

1. *Why do you think it's important for middle-aged women to be protagonists and heroines?*

Because we are everywhere in real life and almost nowhere at the center of the story. Women in midlife run households, businesses, clinics and city offices. Many are caring for parents and children at the same time. They carry decades of history, and history is what a thriller runs on. Yet in this genre, a woman over forty is too often the mother, the neighbor or the body.

I wanted to write the heroine the genre keeps forgetting. A woman of fifty isn't starting from zero. She has habits, losses, property, secrets, and a long list of things she has decided not to look at. That makes her more interesting to put under pressure, not less.

2. *How do you think the age of the protagonist impacts her story? How would it be different if she were younger, or older?*

In Play Me Once, Grace's age is the plot, not the backdrop. She learned to go quiet as a girl and has had decades to perfect it. By fifty, silence isn't a mood for her. It's a skill, and a very good one. She is a widow with grief she has never fully faced and a life she tailored to someone else's pattern. That history is exactly what makes her valuable to the wrong person.

If Grace were twenty-five, letting Kate in would be a first-love story with a bad ending. At fifty, it's the reversal of a lifetime of self-protection, and she has far more to lose: money, reputation, and the version of herself she spent years building. If she were older still, I think the story would turn toward legacy and what she leaves behind. Fifty interested me because it's late enough for the walls to be thick, and early enough that tearing them down could still change everything.

3. *In this book, LGBTQ+ characters can be both protagonists and villains. Do you believe that all representation must be positive to be "good representation"?*

I'm a member of the LGBTQ+ community, and I want to see myself and my community on the page. But I don't think good representation means every queer character has to be good. It means queer characters get to be whole people: brave, funny, flawed, and sometimes dangerous, for reasons that have nothing to do with who they love.

The genre has a long history of making queerness the reason a character is unstable or violent, while the straight characters stay well-adjusted. That's the stereotype I push back on. In my books, a character's sexuality is one part of who she is, never the explanation for what she does. So one queer woman can be the heroine of the story, and another can be the most dangerous person in it. When a community is only allowed to be saints, that's just another way of not being seen.

4. *You refer to Grace's defense mechanism as "going silent." What does this mean to you, socially or psychologically?*

Psychologically, going silent is a defense. It often starts in childhood, when speaking up didn't feel safe, and it keeps running long after the danger has passed. Grace's silence isn't broken. It's strategic. It keeps the most important parts of her hidden and whole. That's the paradox: the

habit that protected her is the same one that isolates her, and isolation is exactly what a manipulator looks for.

Socially, silence is how a lot of harm keeps running. In my practice I learned that people rarely lie about who they are. They just go quiet about the parts that would change how you see them. That's true of individuals, families and institutions. Every book in this series has someone who knows something and won't say it. In Play Me Once, the question is whether Grace can stop folding herself back into that quiet before it costs her everything.

5. *Despite being set in Portland, Durango, Colorado, is a place very important to this book. Can you explain the importance of that place to the series?*

Durango brings the pressure underneath the story: a small mountain town in a long drought, where water is money and money is power. Carrying its pipeline into a Portland conference hall puts a great deal of money and ambition in one room. Kate Nichols first appeared in Durango in my novella “Lethal Loyalty,” so the town and its water were already part of the series when Grace's story began.

6. *How did your career as a psychiatrist inform this book?*

It informed everything. I worked in psychiatric hospitals, addiction treatment centers and outpatient clinics, sitting across from people in the worst moments of their lives. What I learned is that the most convincing stories are often the ones people tell themselves. Early in my career, a patient described his marriage in vivid detail, and I believed every word. Weeks later his wife called, and her account was so different I thought she had the wrong therapist. He wasn't lying to me. He was lying to himself.

That's how I build characters. I ask what each one needs to believe to get through the next day. Grace needs to believe that silence keeps her safe. Kate understands exactly what other people need to believe, and uses it. I wanted the manipulation in Play Me Once to work the way it does in real life: slowly, reasonably, with no ominous music.

7. *Manipulation is a key theme of this book. Do you think that manipulation is misunderstood by the general public? What would you want people to know?*

Yes, I think it's widely misunderstood. We picture manipulation as something theatrical: a villain twirling a mustache, someone obviously lying. In real life it's quiet and slow, and it usually sounds reasonable. A manipulator doesn't create your need. They find it, and then they make themselves the only way to meet it. It works because it offers you the story you most want to believe, and the person being worked on is usually the last to know.

The word "gaslighting" also gets used so loosely now that it has lost its edge. Real gaslighting leaves a person unable to tell whether they're the unreliable one, which is why so many people can't name what happened to them. What I'd want people to know is this: if something feels off, that prickle at the back of your neck isn't paranoia. Pay attention to it. And notice whether the other person treats your experience as a question worth exploring, or as a problem to be managed.

8. *How do you recommend readers approach the Portland Murders series? Do you have a preferred order?*

Every book is written to stand on its own, so readers can start anywhere. For those who like to read in order, there are two good paths.

The series begins in Portland with “Tangled Darkness,” which introduces psychiatrist Leslie Schoen and Detective Aaron Davis. The novella “If I Go Quiet” follows Leslie after that book. For readers starting with “Play Me Once,” I'd suggest the novella “Lethal Loyalty” first. It's set in Durango, it introduces Kate Nichols, and Play Me Once picks up in the days after it ends. “Lethal Loyalty” is free and you can download it on my website, so it's an easy way in. Detective Davis is the thread that ties the two paths together.

9. *What do you see as the throughline that connects the Portland Murders to each other?*

The deeper throughline is silence. Every book in The Portland Murders has someone who knows something and won't say it, and each one opens up a different institution, whether a clinic, a wellness retreat or a city government, to show what's rotting under the surface. The people trying to find the truth carry damage of their own. Portland is home base. It's where the series started, where Detective Aaron Davis works, and where I live. The stories reach out from there, but they keep coming back.