

SHUNNING SARAH

ALSO BY JULIE KRAMER

Killing Kate
Silencing Sam
Missing Mark
Stalking Susan

SHUNNING SARAH

A N O V E L

JULIE KRAMER

EMILY BESTLER BOOKS

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For my mom—Ruth (Spartz) Kramer—a fan of the Amish

SHUNNING SARAH

PROLOGUE

The missing face unnerved me. No eyes, nose, or mouth lent personality to the cloth doll clutched by the little Amish girl.

My own Raggedy Ann exuded charm while this toy sported a plain dress and an empty facade. It was spooky, even.

I felt sorry for my playmate, but could express no true condolences because we didn't share the same language. Instead, I set four cups and saucers on a tree stump for a makeshift tea party.

Our fathers were inside the barn arguing about the price of an old crosscut saw. Mine didn't want to sell the saw because my great-grandparents had used it to build the house where we now lived. While the dusty tool hadn't been used in two generations, the saw told a cherished story from our family history.

The other man had immediate, practical plans for the device. The visit ended badly when it became apparent that no deal was forthcoming and the saw would remain behind. Though his beard and wide-brimmed hat masked his expression, he walked like an angry man. Untying the horse, he commanded his daughter to join him. She hurried over, absently leaving her plaything behind.

As I stood to return the doll, my eyes fell to a basket of crayons on the ground. A good deed came to mind. Round black eyes. A red triangle nose. Smiley mouth with center lip. Had there been more time, I would have added red striped leggings.

I rushed the doll over to the other girl and handed it up to her in the black buggy. The fresh face greeted her like a new friend, but instead of a smile of gratitude, her eyes grew wide with dismay.

I watched the pair ride out of our farm yard, never to return.

The next day, when I walked to the gravel road to check the mailbox, something caught my eye. The head of the doll rested among the weeds, the cloth body nowhere near.

I didn't tell anyone what I saw, not even my parents.

That night, as I tried to sleep, the image haunted me. But somehow, by morning, I had pushed the incident from my mind and didn't think about it for twenty-five years.

CHAPTER 1

What do you smell, Bowser?”
Josh Kueppers, wearing a neon orange stocking hat and carrying a shotgun, chased after his dog.

“Maybe bear?”

His voice sounded hopeful as he dreamed of returning home with such a trophy. He’d watched the news the night before and seen reports of a black bear sighting in southeastern Minnesota. So while unusual, his goal wasn’t impossible. At least, that’s what he told himself during the pursuit.

The school bus had dropped the ten-year-old off outside his family’s farmhouse. As he dumped the mail on the kitchen table, he found a note from his mother that said she’d been called to work an evening nursing shift.

She instructed him to bike over to an older friend’s place down the road, spend the night, and go to school with him the next morning. Josh smiled at the prospect of fun.

But his mother’s absence also presented another opportunity. For a hunt. So he threw on his camouflage jacket and was out the door.

Josh and Bowser, a tan mixed breed, ran through a lightly snow-covered farm field. The corn had been harvested, but not yet plowed under. An early cold spell had hit just as the calendar

touched October. He stumbled a couple of times before reaching a line of trees growing in a depression in the ground.

His dog bayed, just like a real hunting hound.

Josh's eyes grew wide.

He held the gun steady, finger on trigger, as he glanced around to see what had attracted the animal's attention. He didn't want to be ambushed, although theirs did seem to be the only tracks, so he figured they were safe. He looked upward hoping to face off with a raccoon in the branches . . . but they were empty. No masked opponents.

He didn't have enough experience to realize that broad daylight was less conducive to hunting wildlife than dawn or dusk. Bowser barked some more and Josh noticed a hole in the earth that looked curious. He hoped for a bear den. He moved closer, his eyes cautiously scanning back and forth for trouble, when the ground beneath him collapsed.

Josh tumbled downward amid a cascade of dirt and snow. Gradually, through a reassuring gap of sunshine, he became aware of his dog still above, sounding an agitated alarm that he feared would go unheard by anyone else.

Something smelled awful, and as his eyes adjusted to the blackness he realized he was not alone in the bottom of the pit. Fumbling for his gun, he aimed the weapon toward the sky and pulled the trigger in a calculated call for help.

Nothing happened.

Then he realized the safety was on, and tried again.

Almost immediately, he wished he hadn't.

Instead of alerting someone of his whereabouts, the shot caused an avalanche of dirt that buried both Josh and the grisly secret beside him.

CHAPTER 2

Two nurses had called in sick with the flu, so the emergency room was already understaffed when a semitruck smashed a minivan on the highway outside Rochester. Even though Michelle Kueppers was scheduled to be off for the rest of the week, and even though she normally worked days, she answered the hospital's call for extra hands like a good trouper.

She tried phoning her son, Josh, at home during her break, but heard ring after ring. He was probably on his way to the neighbor's. She'd catch him there during supper.

But her shift turned into one during which she saved a life instead of eating or calling her son. The whole floor cheered her like in one of those breathless medical dramas where attractive people in scrubs muscle a cart and IV down the hall in a race with death.

Popular television plotlines aside, directly saving a life was not an everyday occurrence on the job for Michelle. Mostly, she prided herself on her skill for assessing patients to avoid such crises. Staying ahead of trouble was considered smart nursing.

But every once in a while a patient codes, signaling cardiac

arrest. That night, lights flashed. Alarms sounded. And suddenly Michelle was kneeling on a hospital bed for better leverage while pounding the victim's chest and cracking some of his ribs to restart his broken-down heart.

She was sore and sweaty, but looked forward to celebrating a job well done with Josh the next day.

CHAPTER 3

The woman's cloudy eyes freaked Josh out. Her head was crooked, and parts of her face had black splotches. She reminded him of a zombie from a movie he'd seen once at a friend's house. But the creatures in the film were billed as living dead or walking dead. He had no doubt this woman was dead dead. And would never walk again.

Because she could not shut her eyes, he shut his. Every time he opened them a crack, she was still there—staring back. The rest of her body remained wrapped in a colorful blanket. Terrified, he stayed on his side of the pit, breathing fast and cringing.

“Bowser!” He cried for his dog, but no answer.

Josh hoped his pet had gone for help. He pulled his stocking cap over his tear-streaked face. That improved the view, but did nothing for the smell. Hours passed and he began to wonder how much time would slip by before he resembled the lifeless woman trapped beside him.

His fingernails hurt from clawing his way free of the dirt. He wished the landslide had buried his companion. Though some of her body had been covered, her head had been spared. Josh thought about kicking soil over her face so he wouldn't have to look at her. But that seemed wrong.

He pushed his cap back so he could see better to dig, and minutes later he found the shotgun. He was afraid to pull the trigger

again, but just clutching the weapon was like holding a security blanket.

Josh sensed the sun going down. By nightfall, he wouldn't be able to see the dead woman. But maybe knowing she was in her corner was better than imagining her coming at him in the dark.

By now, his body was shivering and his teeth chattering. Rubbing his hands over his arms didn't help. He decided the corpse didn't need her blanket anymore, and creepy as the idea was, huddling under it might bring him warmth. He was sure he'd feel safer. He stood, grabbed one end of the bedding, and with a few jerks, tore the cover, dirt and all, from her body.

The back of her head hit the ground, then her body rolled onto its side, and landed facing Josh. And even though the light in the pit was dim, he could tell the woman was naked, and still staring at him. Horrified, Josh crawled under the blanket and pulled it over his head to escape the mortifying view.

CHAPTER 4

Josh's mother got home just after midnight. She smiled, pleased to see the mail on the table—even though it was mostly junk and bills. Her son was becoming responsible in his father's absence.

Brian Kueppers was overseas, on active duty with his national guard troop, and wouldn't be home for about six months. He'd been gone about a week. Eight days to be exact. Every morning she said the new number out loud as she brushed her teeth. Sometimes, if the mirror was steamed up, she traced it with her finger.

Brian's absence was hitting his young son hard. At ten years old, this was the first season Josh could legally hunt. He'd even received a special slug shotgun on his birthday. Now there was no dad to take him scouting for deer or pheasants.

Even before the actual deployment, Brian was off training with his military unit, so they had little family time. Once, Michelle caught him lecturing their son on acting like a man while he was away. She stayed out of the conversation to avoid a fight. She'd prefer Josh remain a little boy.

Later that night, when she'd brought up not putting so much pressure on Josh, Brian scowled. She'd backed down quickly, not wanting to provoke him. He left the house for a few hours that night, as was their protocol when he became angry. But when

he returned, he was calm and gentle. And when they said their goodbyes Michelle felt that she would miss him and that when he came back they would have a fresh beginning. All three of them.

Brian had developed a temper over the last couple of years. Sometimes he blamed Michelle. Sometimes Josh. She had struggled with doubt concerning their future, but their last months together had been much better. Yet she realized this separation was a crucial test for their marriage. She wanted them both to pass.

Michelle had a hard time falling asleep after her shift because the dog kept barking outside. Once she even got up to check for signs of trouble, but the yard was empty except for Bowser.

The telephone woke her the next morning. On the other end of the line was the school attendance office.

“Hello, Mrs. Kueppers. Just calling to confirm your son’s absence. Is Josh sick today?”

“What do you mean? Josh isn’t home, he’s in class.”

But the professional voice on the other end insisted Josh was not present. “If he’s playing hooky, he will be disciplined.”

That put his mom in a panic. “I need to call you back.”

She scrambled out of bed and rushed down the hall. Josh’s bed hadn’t been slept in, but his backpack lay on top of the covers. Downstairs, his coat hung in the closet. She dashed out the front door, calling his name wildly. The dog was barking and chasing after her. She looked in the shed. Josh’s bike was parked inside. She ran to the barn, the garage, and two other outbuildings. By this time she was screaming for her son.

She knew that kids in the country were vulnerable to perils ranging from rusty nails and grain bins to strange cars along open roads. Not a mother in Minnesota didn’t know that Jacob Wetterling was still missing more than two decades after being kidnapped while biking home from a convenience store with friends.

She rushed back in the house and grabbed the phone. First

she misdialed and got a wrong number. Finally, she reached the grocery store where the neighbor who had agreed to watch Josh worked.

“Did Josh go to school?”

The other mother seemed puzzled. “We didn’t see Josh last night. He never showed up. We thought your shift must be tonight.”

Michelle slumped against the wall as the strength left her legs. She slid to the floor in a crouch.

“Are you there? Michelle, are you there?”

“Josh is missing.”

She said the last word softly. Because “missing” is such an urgent word. And saying it with a lack of urgency makes it less likely to be true.

Her friend couldn’t understand her. “What did you just say?”

Michelle breathed deep and spoke fast. “Josh is gone. I need to call the police.” Then she hung up, dialed 911, and forced herself to pretend she was on duty at the hospital, calmly discussing a patient’s prognosis and not the fate of her only child.

“Fillmore County Sheriff’s Office,” the voice said. “What is your emergency?”

“My son is missing. He didn’t go to school and appears to have been gone all night.”

“How old is the child?”

“Ten.”

“Do you think he might have run away?”

“No.” Her attempt to stay professional failed. “I know something bad has happened to him. Please find him. Now.”

She told them when she had seen him last, what he was wearing, and answered all their other questions.

“No, he doesn’t have a cell phone. He’s only ten.”

“No, he hasn’t been upset about anything.”

The dispatcher on the other end persisted. “Have there been any recent changes in his life? A divorce, perhaps?”

“No, nothing like that.” Michelle paused for a few seconds.

“His father left for Afghanistan a week ago. But Josh understands that he’s coming back.”

Then she remembered one other thing worth checking and opened the door to a back hallway closet. Josh’s coat, bike, and backpack were all in their usual places. But his gun was gone.

She almost dropped the phone as heartbreaking theories flooded her mind, but she briefed the dispatcher about the missing weapon and was assured that someone from law enforcement was on their way.

“Please locate a recent picture of your son.”

Michelle glanced at the kitchen clock. She hadn’t seen Josh in more than twenty-four hours.

CHAPTER 5

The house was full of photographs of Josh. School. Sports. Holidays. Some clipped under refrigerator magnets. Others mounted in frames hanging on the entry wall. Several buttons pinned to a kitchen bulletin board featured Josh wearing basketball, baseball, and soccer uniforms, holding each matching ball. Michelle also had a stack of scrapbooks starring the blond, freckled boy. She grabbed a current school picture and stuck it in the front door in case the cops got there before she got back.

The dog kept barking and getting in her way while she tried to concentrate on where best to search for her missing son. And suddenly Michelle realized she'd been stupid all morning.

"Come on, Bowser. Where is he? Where's Josh?"

The dog let out a howl and started running toward the farm fields, eager for her to follow.

"Good boy. Take me to him."

She vowed that if Josh had run off, she would hug and not yell. "Just let him be safe," she prayed. She said "safe" louder than the other words. Because "safe" is such a comforting word. And saying it with a ring of confidence made it more likely to be true.

Soon, she noticed a trail of footsteps on the ground—mostly beast, but definitely some boy feet had passed this way, too. She was relieved the dog stuck to the path of tracks in the snow.

The last signs of her son.

CHAPTER 6

Josh woke cold, scared, and hungry. He had been dreaming of breakfast when he realized he was still trapped in the pit. The thought of another day underground with a dead body was unbearable.

Michelle heard a gunshot.

The noise seemed to come from the direction the dog was headed. Her heart pounded as she moved faster, uncertain what she would find.

A few minutes later, she grabbed Bowser's collar and pulled him back before either of them slid down the hole where the tracks ended.

So while the dog woofed their arrival, she dropped to her knees hysterically screaming "Josh!" "Hello!" and "Are you down there?"

It wasn't until her throat grew sore and she grew quiet that she could hear his small voice.

CHAPTER 7

My name is Riley Spartz and I'm a television reporter in Minneapolis—one of the most competitive news markets in the country.

The tip about the trapped boy came from my mother.

She was always calling with local gossip she hoped might qualify as news in a bid to get me on the phone for a long chat. I almost ignored her call because most of the time her ideas were more of a nuisance than they were news.

But not this time. This time she had something good. “A kid the next county over fell in a sinkhole.”

A phone call to the Fillmore County Sheriff's Office confirmed they were trying to rescue a young boy, but provided few other details.

I was supposed to be reporting about why so many Minnesotans—Walter Mondale, Hubert Humphrey, Eugene McCarthy, Harold Stassen, Tim Pawlenty, and Michele Bachmann—have run for the White House. That idea came from my new boss during the morning news huddle. Even though I thought the assignment lacked originality (every four years the station seems to broadcast a version of it) I had volunteered for the story to try to get off to a good start with him on his second day as news director.

There was still a risk, though, that I could work my butt off

and he might still think my story sucked. A career in news had taught me that bosses never think their ideas suck, just the execution of them. But I had enough confidence in my reporting skills to take the chance. I was supposed to be picking the brains of political analysts from various universities when my mother called about the trapped child.

News value has to be high these days to merit Channel 3 sending a crew more than a hundred miles. Media is in a recession melt-down and cost of coverage is a real factor on what events make the news. I had to sell my boss on a game change. That happens all day long in the news world; better stories come along and push others out of the lineup. But he balked over me hitting the road.

“I’m not convinced yours is the better story.” Bryce Griffin was overseeing the redesign of his news director’s office—making it his own turf. “By the time we get there, the news could be over.”

That was a risk for any story. Talk like his made me miss my first news director. He ran the station under the Child Struck Directive—meaning anytime anyone hears a report of a “child struck,” they run. “I don’t care if you’re interviewing the governor,” he used to say. “Drop the mic and race to the kid.”

“We have a child in jeopardy, Bryce, and if we wait, he’ll be someone else’s lead story. Don’t you remember that little girl who got trapped in that well in Texas?”

Bryce didn’t react. And I realized he was probably no older than “Baby Jessica” herself when the live video coverage of the well that almost became her tomb mesmerized a nation for fifty-eight hours and made CNN a household name.

I tried a more recent example. “Don’t you remember the Chilean miners?”

That example got his attention. Every news manager in the business knew that covering that particular life-and-death story was sixty-nine days of ratings gold.

“Do we have this alone?” he asked.

At least he appreciated the value of an exclusive. “A local

source tipped me. And the sheriff gave no indication that any other media had been in touch.”

Bryce chewed on his lower lip before nodding affirmatively. “Bring me back some news.”

He held his hand up for a high five and even though the gesture seemed cheesy, I obliged. Mostly because no one else could see us and roll their eyes.

Previous news director Noreen Banks had insisted on keeping a close eye on all that happened in the newsroom, so she had her office walls replaced with glass. With such a transparent policy, we could observe her as well, but that often proved demoralizing as we watched her intimidate our colleagues over perceived news-judgment lapses.

Bryce’s first act as boss was to order the office walls boarded up. Clearly he preferred to keep those kind of conversations private. And having been verbally beaten down numerous times in Noreen’s fishbowl, I saw some benefit to this change.

While her departure was most cruel and unfair, Bryce had nothing to do with her being gunned down on the job. So I was willing to give him a chance to repair our battered morale following the recent shooting spree by a wacko pissed over our news coverage.

Bryce was much younger than me. He’d come with a hotshot, whiz-kid reputation for turning around a foundering TV station out west. The network had snatched him up to perform the same magic with us.

I suspected more changes were coming to Channel 3, but I figured he couldn’t be any worse a boss than Noreen. Of course, I’d only worked for him a couple of days. I hoped Bryce would take things slow and get to know the market—and us—before unveiling grand ideas while we were still emotionally walking wounded. But I also knew—and so did he—that the average tenure of a television news director was about eighteen months.

So he was up against a deadline of his own.