

THOMAS GIFFORD

Writing as
DANA CLARINS

*The Woman
Who Knew Too Much*



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About the Book

A mysterious note leads a struggling actress to a strange murder investigation.

After two decades of striving, Celia is tired of waiting for her big acting break, and finds consolation only in a specific narcotic: mystery novels. After an afternoon binge at the sprawling Strand bookstore, she emerges with a baker's dozen of second-hand thrillers. Inside one of the novels she finds a real-life mystery that will prove to be the greatest she's ever read.

She discovers a slip of paper listing nine bullet points, starting "in re the murder of the Director." Who is the Director, why would someone want him dead, and what on earth does Dan Rather have to do with it? As Celia dives into the puzzle, she finds herself locked in a life-or-death struggle with a gang of international conspirators. These evil men would scare her to death if she weren't a veteran of New York's toughest battlefield: the audition room.

Review Quote:

"One of the most robust and intelligent thriller writers of the past two decades." - *Publishers Weekly*

About the Author

Thomas Gifford (1937-2000) was a bestselling author of thriller novels. Born in Dubuque, Iowa, he moved to Minnesota after graduating from Harvard. After eight years as a traveling textbook salesman, he wrote *Benchwarmer Bob* (1974), a biography of Minnesota Vikings defensive end Bob Lurtsema. *The Wind Chill Factor* (1975), a novel about dark dealings among ex-Nazis, introduced John Cooper, a character Gifford would revisit in *The First Sacrifice* (1994). *The Wind Chill Factor* was one of several books Gifford set in and around Minneapolis.

Gifford won an Edgar Award nomination for *The Cavanaugh Quest* (1976). *The Glendower Legacy* (1978), a story about an academic who discovers that George Washington may have been a British spy, was adapted for the film *Dirty Tricks* (1981), starring Elliott Gould. In the 1980s Gifford wrote suspense novels under the pen names Thomas Maxwell and Dana Clarins. In 1996 he moved back to Dubuque to renovate his childhood home. He died of cancer in 2000.

The Woman Who Knew Too Much

Thomas Gifford



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for Tom

BEFORE

THE DIRECTOR WHEEZED SOFTLY. He was enjoying his lunch.

As usual he lunched alone, in his office, listening to opera. He lunched alone because he looked upon eating as a bodily function, most enjoyable when partaken of in privacy. Opera because he had always listened to opera, grown up on opera. His father had been a well-known tenor in his day, at least in provincial circles. Today, feeling rather passionate, if not actually lustful—he never felt lustful, not since his misfortune—he was absorbing the sounds of the great recording of *Carmen* with Rise Stevens. He hummed along as he carved at his veal chop, lathered with a sauce of tomatoes, green peppers, oregano, and capers, and occasionally directed the orchestra with his knife and fork.

Halfway through the chop he paused, patted his thick, naturally pursed lips with a sauce-flecked napkin. He was out of breath, like a jogger, though he had certainly never jogged. Eating had come to wind him like sex once had. Since his unfortunate accident he didn't move around as he once had, and far less exertion winded him far more quickly. Of course, he had grown unconscionably plump. Well, fat. Fattish. Three hundred and eleven pounds as of this morning. He'd put on a hundred pounds in two years. Where, he wondered, would it end?

Well, what could you expect, really? A man had to indulge at least one of his senses. Two, counting the opera. Perhaps things weren't so barren after all. And what would he rather have done than followed a morning of extraordinarily absorbing plotting, on an almost mathematical schematic, with a fine lunch? Alone? He couldn't imagine.

He listened thoughtfully for several minutes, tiny black eyes prowling ceaselessly deep in the puffy, purple-bagged sockets. His eyes were the only part of him that got much exercise anymore. His eyes and his mouth. A man in his life, he supposed, did play many parts, and for the moment he felt a little like he suspected God must feel. Seeing all, committed only to the propagation of belief in Himself.

His gaze drifted to the broad bullet-and-bomb-proof laminated window, to the vast green lawn stretching away from the bunker like the world's largest putting green. It amused him to know that it was heavily mined in case of trouble. All around him, the thick, civilized forests of New Jersey; across the Hudson, the upper reaches of the city shining in the spring sun.

A brown Chevrolet sedan nosed up the long curve of driveway and disappeared into the parking lot. The cars these people used were so nondescript as to be virtual advertisements. Nobody bought such cars: they were issued. He worked on his veal chop for a few moments longer, sipped his wine, and the two men from the brown car were shown in by his secretary. The Director nodded but did not rise.

Mason and Friborg. They might have been robots for all the charm and wit they exhibited. In a way they were machines, of course, chosen for their lack of charm, wit, or imagination. The profiles indicated they were highly disciplined, obedient, and violent when unleashed. One wore a blue suit, one wore gray, and the Director wondered what the material might be called. They sat down while he slid a final morsel of veal through the puddle of sauce and popped it into his mouth in a quick movement like an old coin bank swallowing a penny.

Chewing carefully, the Director looked at them. He smacked his lips and lit a Pall Mall with a match from a restaurant called Nanni's, where they knew him. He poured coffee from a wicker-jacketed vacuum jar. He didn't offer

them coffee because he couldn't stand hearing them say no, thank you, sir, like a couple of dolls. He stirred a packet of Sweet 'n' Low into the steaming coffee.

"Someone is trying to kill me," he said. He stared into his cup while he blew across the surface, then sipped. When he looked up, he seemed surprised to find them still there. "That's all." He shrugged. "Excuse me, I'm a very busy man so ..."

"Do we know who, sir?"

"If I knew, wouldn't I have you dissuade them, urge them to mend their ways, stick a claymore in their lunch pails?"

"How do you know someone's trying to kill you, sir?"

"Take my word for it."

"Excuse me, sir, but that's not much to go on—"

"Friborg, no one ever said it would be easy."

"I'm Mason, sir—"

"Mason, Friborg, whatever."

"What would you like us to do, sir?" Friborg was always confused by these little discussions with the Director.

"That's your business," the Director said. "I'm just trying to keep you in the picture. It seems the least I could do."

"But, sir—"

"Do as you wish. But as you may know, my premature death would have consequences for us all ..." He may have smiled. He wasn't even sure himself.

"We certainly want to avoid that, sir."

"I daresay." The Director nodded, his chins wobbling slightly. "Well, I am very busy. Thank you so much for coming."

Mason and Friborg stood up.

The Director picked up a square gray envelope from beside his coffee cup.

"You will undoubtedly be seeing the General shortly. Might I entrust this to you?"

“Of course, sir.” Mason took it, looked at it as if he thought it might be lethal. The Director definitely did smile at that thought: Mason could not possibly imagine how lethal.

“What is it, sir?”

“Friborg,” the Director said, swiveling to look back out the window at the birds hopping around the feeder, innocent as eggs. “It is a floppy disk.”

“Mason,” the man in the gray suit said softly, as if his name didn’t really matter.

Once he was alone, the Director telephoned his wife. He liked keeping an eye on her these days. All things considered, it seemed a good idea.

While he listened to the ringing telephone, he reflected smugly on the General. They were rivals of a kind, competitors. The dear old General believed that Mason and Friborg worked for him. In fact, one of them worked for the Director. And the Director knew damn well which was which.

The telephone was still ringing. Where the devil was she, anyway?

Charlie Cunningham lay in the sex-soiled sheets by Bill Blass and peered wearily around the entirety of his studio apartment. A Boston fern had turned brown and brittle from inattention. A wandering Jew was at death’s door. Clothing hung from doorknobs and chairbacks, and there were stacks of books on the table and the floor as well as on the crowded, overflowing bookcases. He had to get rid of the books he didn’t need or had read. Had to. A trip to the Strand was in order. He made a resolution and then caught sight of the open bathroom door, of the incredible mess she’d made within. He clamped his eyes shut. He smelled her perfume and sweat and sex on the pillow and realized that, yes, she had her points, he hadn’t tired of

that. What was driving him nuts was the rest of her. *Really* nuts.

Almost two years it had been. He'd gotten excited just looking at her, surrounded by idiot literary types celebrating the publication of some ex-Mafia moll's memoirs. The raven hair with the widow's peak, the almost translucent paleness of her skin, the heavy breasts that bounced and swung like fruit on the vine when she walked across the Algonquin suite and introduced herself.

"You're tall and fair and kind of messy looking," she said, smiled appraisingly. "Intellectual looking, like you should be thinking about the philosophies of Descartes and Malthus. But you're not, though, are you?" He shook his head. She smiled at the party, surveying it, smiled and waved to the guest of honor who'd told all and was now said to fear for her life—the odd auto accident on the FDR, the gas explosion, the stray intruder. As she smiled, not looking at him, she said: "You actually have a shockingly dirty mind. Or would have if I were shockable. But since I'm not, let me tell you what you're thinking about. My breasts, for two things. And my ass for another. You're sort of innocent, you can't help it. You're thinking about some very nasty things you'd like to do to me." She turned the full wattage of the smile on his flabbergasted face. "Have I got that about right?" He nodded, feeling the blush spread. "Okay," she said. "Deal. No time like the present. Let's get out of here." He followed her round, swaying hips like a man on the road to salvation.

That's how it had started, like nothing he'd ever heard of before. Even now, sick as he was of her ego and her roughriding personality and ambition and impatience and greed and irritation and contempt, tired as he was of having her leave all the endless notes and instructions for him, all the orders and countermanding orders ... sick and tired as he was of all that, he had to admit that watching her slowly pull her panties down and come to him in a

cloud of heat was better than anything else. Anything. But he was going to have to get used to getting along without it. Wasn't he? It was a perfect example of a folie à deux, a mutual sexual obsession that seemed to feed her while it consumed him...

He crawled out of bed, knocked over a stack of books and yanked them back up, stuck them by the door for delivery to the Strand, checked for any instructions she might have left, and tottered into the shower. He shaved, ate cornflakes dry since he no longer remembered to perform such simple tasks as buying milk, drank a cup of instant coffee made with hot tap water, and put on his blue blazer, fresh chinos, and blue button-down shirt. He grabbed the stack of books, dropped them into a Strand sack, left the building and began walking. He stopped to make the quick sale at the bookstore, then headed up toward midtown. It was a little past noon.

She'd begun their affair with a plan that she hadn't revealed to him until they'd been lovers for a month, by which time he was addicted to her eagerness to perform even his most outrageous fantasies. The plan had a certain appeal. She was a novelist with access to some highly secret information. He wrote non-fiction. She'd read a couple of his books. Not many people had. He was flattered. He'd have jumped off the Chrysler Building for her. In the end what he'd had to do made the Chrysler Building brain dive look like a day at the beach. Working together, they had written a book. Which had turned life into a new kind of horror show.

He caught sight of his reflection in the window of Saks on Fifth Avenue. He was surprised that none of his problems really showed in the outer man. It was his apartment that reflected what was going on inside, his version of the Dorian Gray thing. Christ ...

He waited for the light among the crowd of people gawking at St. Pat's and Atlas at Rockefeller Center.

Scanning their faces, he supposed not one of them would have believed his story.

He'd been a boring, timid member of the literary fringe ... and now was a terrified avenging angel, righter of wrongs, kinked-out sex maniac, pussy-whipped punching bag, and would-be murderer. It had been a fairly lurid two years. His mother thought he was writing a book about Yogi Berra. He sighed and crossed Fifth Avenue.

He checked his watch again. He walked past the huge planters full of spring blooms and stood looking down at the yellow awnings in the outdoor cafe beneath the sculpture of Mercury. Was it Mercury? Who the hell cared. He lit a Camel and coughed. Shit. I'm an insult to spring, he mused. He felt the pack of cigarettes for the outline of the small piece of pasteboard inside the cellophane.

Within a few minutes he was going to do something that would save his life, if everything worked out the way it was supposed to, which of course it wouldn't since nothing ever did. But you had to try to cover yourself. Come up with your own horror show and then make it work for you. Oh, boy.

If she knew, she'd kill him.

At thirty-four, Jesse Lefferts wanted two things. He wanted to get married and he wanted to be made a senior editor at Pegasus House. Since he'd been afraid to go on a date since his Big Herpes Scare of '84, it looked like his career was the way to go. He sat beneath the fluttering fringe of the yellow umbrella, drinking a tall glass of something that wore a paper hat. The waitress was dark and silky and her inseam must have gone 36. He idly wondered if she might be a carrier. You couldn't be too careful, which was a problem, period.

This lunch represented his best hope for the senior editorship. Even in the messy wake of the not-so-funny-after-all first novel about the snake—which had not only not sold, but subsequently been proven to be plagiarized—he

figured he still had one more chance. Acquisitions, that was the name of the game under the new management at Pegasus. Bring in a hot book with lots of PR and TV news angles and you were golden. Well, this was his chance, and he liked the feel of the deal. All cloak-and-daggerish. Make a hell of a *Publishers Weekly* piece once it hit the lists. Sort of Deep Throatish. All he had to do was get his hands on the goddamn manuscript.

Boy, who'd have thought Charlie Cunningham would be the guy? That bothered Lefferts because he'd never thought of Charlie as absolutely the most serious guy around, but then, he'd known Charlie for years, back to the days when Charlie was always trying to scrounge review copies out of him at Scribners. Now Charlie had come to him with his plum out of loyalty, in remembrance of those days when they'd cruised chicks on the Upper East Side and always gone home alone. The good old days. You'd think the kind of guy who'd come along with a property like this would be dynamite with the ladies. He wondered if Charlie ever got laid ... which got him to thinking about the faded mossy ruins of his own sex life, which prompted him to order another drink with a hat. Ah, there was Charlie now.

Charlie didn't mess around with well-dressed drinks. A martini straight up, no twists, no hat, nothing. He looked awfully tired, like the pressure was getting to him. Gray around the eyes. They drank, and then they ate huge sandwiches and talked about those Yankees, those Mets, and when Lefferts switched to women, Charlie hadn't seemed all that interested. Had he lost the will to live?

"You know why we're outside?"

"Nice day?" Lefferts ventured.

"It's harder for them to bug us out here. Too much noise, traffic, everybody babbling. These people are very bad people, Jess. Bugging is the single nicest thing they do to people. Get it, Jess? This is serious."

“Works for me,” Jess said bravely.

“Yeah, well, good for you. Scares the shit out of me. Now, I’m gonna give you a Camel—”

“No, really, if it’s all the same to you. I’ve been off the hard stuff six weeks, Charlie, don’t tempt me—”

“You’re gonna take the pack, get a cigarette out, and you’re gonna slip a claim check out from inside the wrapper. Try not to make a big deal out of it.”

The exchange was accomplished.

“Now light up, Jess.”

“Aw, please, Charlie—”

“Light the fuck up.” He stuck a lighter into Lefferts’s face.

Lefferts lit up, inhaled. A broad smile spread across his boyish face. “Oh, it’s wonderful, just wonderful.”

“Go back to your office. About four o’clock send one of your messengers to the Port Authority luggage claim. Have him claim a briefcase with the check. Inside that briefcase is the manuscript. You will discover that the briefcase is locked. Leave it locked. Scout’s honor.”

“Come on!”

“Scout’s fucking honor, Jess!”

“Okay, okay—”

“Say it.”

“Scout’s honor.”

“Keep the briefcase in your office. Don’t make a big thing out of it. Ignore it. The key will arrive later.”

“I don’t like this—”

Charlie Cunningham said: “I don’t care.” He stood up. “Thanks for lunch, Jess. Let’s hope we live to do it again sometime.” He left, wending his way among the white tables with the yellow umbrellas.

Although he didn’t like the way things were going all of a sudden, Lefferts decided to have coffee and smoke, smoke, smoke that cigarette.

DURING

Chapter One

CELIA BLANDINGS STOOD IN the musty smelling wings and waited for Billy Blumenthal to finish chatting with the author of *Misconceptions*, a new thriller about a woman who was supposed to be pregnant but wasn't. She had read the Xeroxed script over the weekend and knew it needed work. But with work, there just might be a commercial hit about to emerge. Billy had personally called her, as well as her agent, asking her to come in and read with Deborah Macadam, the movie star who was playing the pregnant lady who wasn't. Celia would play Macadam's sister, a perky, funny, sexy lady who gets knocked off in the middle of the first act but returns mysteriously halfway through the second act. If she got the part.

She had known Debbie Macadam off and on for nearly twenty years, from University of Minnesota days where they'd worked under Doc Whiting on the Showboat. They had even roomed together for six months in a stucco earthquake trap in the hills above the Chateau Marmont and Sunset Boulevard, back before Debbie had gotten her big break in the Michael Caine picture. Now Debbie caught sight of her and came running over to give her a hug. She was wearing white housepainters' overalls and a tee shirt under the bib top. Debbie was a nice girl, and God knew she was built for the part. Her breasts looked bigger than ever, like someone about to start nursing triplets. "The dairy," Debbie had always referred to them, as if they were the family business. In a way, Celia guessed, they were.

"My God," Debbie sighed, "I hope you get this. I'd get to kill you!"

"But I'd get to come back from the dead and scare your pants off—"

“Happens all the time,” she laughed.

“But what brings you to work in this dump?” The off-off Broadway theatre was tucked away, three flights up in a rundown Chelsea office building. The dust in the wings had dust of its own.

“Shows everyone how committed I am to my art.” She bit a thumbnail, chipping the last of the polish onto her lower lip. “And, you know, the producing thing ...”

“The producing thing?”

“Universal’s producing. They own the screen rights. If it works, I get the pitch. It’s worth it, believe me, for a marginal movie star with big tits and iffy legs.” She batted the long lashes that lay like grillwork over enormous brown eyes.

“Who is also not getting any younger,” Celia added.

“Aha! That’s where you’re wrong. Three years ago I was thirty-four and you were thirty-four. How old are you now?”

“Thirty-gulp-seven.”

“Right. But I am thirty-one! Read it in Liz Smith’s column yesterday in the *News*. That’s what happens when you have William Morris in your corner. You’ve signed a pact with the Devil, but suddenly you’re getting younger. Soon I’ll be a college girl again, then going to the orthodontist in knee socks, then diapers—I recommend it, dear.”

The stage manager brought them hot coffee, and they were suddenly chatting easily about the old Hollywood days, the marriage that each had buried in the past, the way things were going now. Celia said: “Sometimes I think about this acting thing and I really do have doubts.”

“Oh, it’s not much,” Debbie said. “But it’s what we do, my darling. It’s too late for me, I’m in it. Not complaining, mind you, but it ain’t gonna last forever. You could still get out, though. You could do something else.”

“I can?”

“Linda Thurston,” Debbie whispered enigmatically.

“Good Lord! You remember that?”

“Are you kidding? If I had a Linda Thurston, I’d be gone. Eat all the pasta I wanted, the hell with it. It’d be me and Linda all the way—”

“I doubt that—”

“Take my word for it.”

Then Billy Blumenthal was crying her name, kissing her cheek. “Celia, Celia, last time I saw you, you were engulfed—I mean positively dwarfed—in a fur parka in the snow at the Anchorage airport! And here you are, springy and wearing—da-dum—a skirt! Have I ever seen you in a skirt? Indeed, have I ever set my peepers on those toothsome stems?” She hadn’t set her own peepers on Billy since the Alaska Rep three years ago, and he hadn’t changed.

“Peepers? Toothsome stems? Ick.” Debbie Macadam made a face.

“Your chest, darling, and Celia’s legs, the makings of a master race! Come, come, Celia, meet our author, Mr. Levy. Have you had time to glance through this, dear girl? Good, wonderful. Morris, I want you to meet Celia Blandings who’s ready and willing to expire in act one ...”

So they all gathered around a card table under a single dangling light bulb and began reading Celia’s sides. The laughs were there, not quite actor-proof maybe, but close. Levy read some stage directions and Billy cocked a head, eyes closed, listening to rhythms and speech patterns. He’d want just the right contrasts. The physical ones were all in place: dark, active, lean Celia would play just fine off busty, swaggering, fair Debbie. And they read and read and read. The problems were with structure rather than dialogue, which made Levy’s problems sizable but not impossible. There was something worth fixing.

Celia’s mind wandered off, the lines already sticking in her head. Incredible—Debbie was thirty-one now instead of thirty-seven. What did it all mean? Maybe it wasn’t much of a life, maybe Debbie really had given it some thought. But

remembering Linda Thurston! How had she managed that? Debbie had never seemed to be paying any attention, and suddenly a decade later, in a dreary dusty theatre, she trots out Linda Thurston. Clearly, miracles would never cease.

Celia's agent, Joel Goldman, was waiting for her, consulting his blade-thin gold watch, when she arrived at the Gotham Bar and Grill on East Twelfth. It was a huge, lofty, understated room, grays and beiges and mauves, with tapestry banquettes and flowers. It was across the street from Fairchild Publications, just down the street from Malcolm Forbes's magazine empire, at eye level with the opera hangout Asti's. Wholesale antique dealers nestled like clubs nearby, and the movie theatre in the middle of the block showed classics. It was pure New York. And it was only a five-minute walk from her apartment at the top end of Greenwich Village.

Joel had already ordered a gin gimlet on ice for her, and she took a greedy drink. "How did it go?" he asked.

"Okay. Fine, I guess. I don't know. It always goes fine, you just don't get the job. I'm gonna need another one of these."

Joel beckoned a waiter and pointed to her glass. "Well, Billy was certainly determined to have you in. I think it looks very good, frankly." He ordered a bowl of mussels for them to share.

She felt like complaining, and carried it on through the mussels, interrupting herself only once, long enough to order a Jerry's Enormous, medium well.

"The point is, Joel, I'm thirty-seven and she's only thirty-one, and three years ago we were both thirty-four. The point is, it's just not working, Joel..."

Joel sipped his Perrier and shook his head. He looked like a grown-up New Yorker in his blue pinstripe suit, Turnbull & Asser shirt, and fresh, trim haircut. He had a better manicurist than she did. He lived on West End with a

belt designer called Bruno in what he insisted was an asexual relationship. He was neat and conscientious, and in a general kind of way, the perfect example of a man who had his shit together. He was probably her age, but in his company she always felt like an unappreciative, petulant, jam-spotted child.

“The point, Celia, let me remind you, is that it does work. *You* work. Right now there’s a Masha you could pick off just like that—”

“Where?”

“Pittsburgh.”

“Ha!”

“There’s a Medea in Seattle,” he said patiently.

“One Medea in this lifetime was enough, thank you.”

“You’re in a mood, Celia. I can’t talk to you.” He prized one last mussel open and did away with it. “Look, you’re an actress of power, presence, style, even wit when properly motivated. There’s a *Design for Living* in Denver you could do wonders with—just don’t pout. Bruno arose this morning in what looks like a long-term pout, all because of some buckles that cut through the leather or something. I am a man with a load of troubles, Celia, try not to add to them.”

“Well, I do love you when you do your Clifton Webb impression.”

He nodded. “My mother was frightened by *Laura* while she was carrying me. I understand your frustrations. At least I think I do, but you must understand that I have gifted clients who never work—”

“I know, I know. I’m a wretch, I don’t know when I’m well off. However, as I slither up on forty, I’m sick of running around to regional theatres. I’m sick of wintering at the Guthrie, and I’m tired of summering at the Alley in Houston and having to change clothes half a dozen times a day. Sweaty in Houston. I’ve done my number in Louisville, Cincinnati, the Arena, ACT, Alaska ... I’m done with all the funny little apartments and the mouse droppings somebody