

# THOMAS GIFFORD

*Writing as*  
**DANA CLARINS**

*Woman in the  
Window*



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Looking for more suspense?

# About the Book

**A woman's life is upended after she witnesses the aftermath of a deadly crime.**

Natalie should have gone home after the party. One of New York's hottest literary agents, she was celebrating her latest coup - next year's mega-thriller, sold at auction for \$1.5 million. As the industry bows at her feet, Natalie can't help but think of her boss, Jay, a handsome dynamo who has been in love with her since her first day on the job. When the party ends, Natalie retreats to the office to clear her head. Lost in thought, she steps to the window - and sees something that strikes fear into her heart.

A man in a trench coat scurries down the sidewalk, stops in front of a construction site, and hurls a pistol over the wall. Natalie doesn't realize the significance of this until the man sees her watching. They make eye contact, and Natalie knows her life will never be the same - now that a killer knows her face.

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.

# Woman In The Window

Thomas Gifford



BASTEI ENTERTAINMENT 

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Bastei Entertainment is an imprint of Bastei Lübbe AG

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Germany

For the original edition:

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Project management: Lori Herber

Cover adaptation: Christin Wilhelm, [www.grafic4u.de](http://www.grafic4u.de)

Cover design by Michael Vrana

E-book production: Jouve Germany GmbH & Co. KG

ISBN 978-3-95859-299-5

[www.luebbe.de](http://www.luebbe.de)

[www.bastei-entertainment.com](http://www.bastei-entertainment.com)

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entirely coincidental.

*For George*



# Chapter One

THE PARTY WAS IN full swing. Advance copies of *Publishers Weekly* had been messenger delivered to the Danmeier Agency shortly after lunch, and the remainder of the afternoon had been devoted to a celebration. Natalie Rader, the cause of all the revelry, sighed happily. Looking around the office, she couldn't avoid the picture of herself, half a page with an absurdly fulsome cutline calling her "the hottest, newest, prettiest Superagent." But there was no doubt that the long piece detailing the auction she had conducted several weeks before was good both for the agency and for herself. Increasingly, it seemed to her, the style and customs of Hollywood were seeping in and discoloring the publishing industry—but at moments like this her distaste for the phenomenon was kept carefully at bay. Enlightened self-interest, healthy ambition, all that: she wished she didn't enjoy the spotlight quite so much, but then she was only human, and at least she admitted the truth to herself.

Her secretary, Lisa, brought her a styrofoam cup of champagne and gave her a proud hug. Donnie, the messenger boy and mailroom attendant, beamed at her and lifted his own cup in a toast. She leaned back on a couch in the reception area and basked.

The article in *PW* was accurate, thank God, and the publishers involved in the auction of this first novel had all told the interviewer the truth. The mega-thriller by the academic in Marblehead, Massachusetts, had indeed brought a \$1.5 million advance for the hardback and softcover rights, and Natalie had indeed orchestrated the auction masterfully, assuring the agency a \$225,000

commission. She'd been with Danmeier for twelve years, a full-fledged agent for ten, and she knew what was going on. Natalie understood the psychological dynamics of things like auctions. Mastering the elements of the game was almost as important as the property itself. Almost. But she was too smart an agent, and too good an agent, not to know that in the end the book was everything.

From where she sat quietly on the couch, with the secretaries and the two other agents and a couple of lucky strays who happened to be in the office at the right time chatting and sipping and kidding her about the ego trip, she could see through two doorways to her own office, her desk. There in a green florists vase sat two dozen red roses. The little white card read: *Congrats, Tiger. Tony.*

Jay Danmeier came toward her, smiling, looming over her as he inevitably did. He was a large man, well over six feet and two hundred pounds, incredibly well tailored by a bespoke firm in Savile Row. He had hired Natalie away from Simon & Schuster when she was a beginning editorial assistant only two years out of Northwestern. He'd said later that he'd recognized a born deal maker in her, had said it mainly to tease her because it was the fascination of working with writers that had interested her, not the deal making.

But he'd been right, after all. She was a born angle finder and negotiator, and whether or not she particularly enjoyed it was irrelevant. As the years passed, she did come to enjoy it, as part of the process of handling someone with literary ability. It was that sort of insight and predictive judgment that had made Danmeier himself one of the very best: he could read people; he had understood Natalie better than she had understood herself. Success had fed his reputation over the years until it finally matched his physical size. At fifty, Jay Danmeier let no one doubt that he was just coming into his prime. But Natalie was used to him, used to the tension that sometimes curled

out of his ego like the spirals of smoke from his two-dollar cigars.

Looking down at her, he smiled his crocodile smile, sighted down the length of the immensely long cigar, and said, "Well, my darling girl, you've set yourself a hell of a dangerous precedent. What do you do for an encore? In a month this'll be old, old news."

"Sit down, Jay. You don't have to impress me from on high. I'm already impressed."

He shrugged and sat beside her, slipping a heavy arm around her shoulders.

"And you know perfectly well I don't look at this business as a competition," she continued. "The encore doesn't worry me. I'm getting just as big a kick out of the Linehan book—"

"Christ, Nat. Always the idealist!" He made a face and tapped his ash into a tiny Sardi's ashtray. "He's just another drunken Irishman. A psycho mick good for a thousand copies, tops, and not a hope for a reprint sale. Listen to me, it'll be a miracle if you can get him fifteen hundred up front. I know, I know. ..." He held up his hand and growled like the MGM lion. "*Ars gratia artis.*"

"Linehan can write."

"Sure. Just be careful. He's got that look on him that scares me to death." He squeezed her shoulder and smiled. "But, lady, you did a hell of a job on this one."

"This is where I say, 'I owe it all to you, Jay,' and you say, 'That's not altogether untrue, Natalie,' and we chuckle up our sleeves." She watched him reflexively shoot his cuffs, inspect his sleeve for a speck of dust, and she smiled at how transparent he was in spite of all the ego. Or because of it.

"Consider it said, then," he observed judiciously. "But you keep up these big capers and you'll make me jealous—"

"You've gotten all the punch lines for far too long. It's finally my turn."

Jay leaned over and kissed her cheek, got up, and headed back to his office. Impulsively he looked back, saw that she was still watching him. He winked with self-satisfaction and disappeared around the corner. Natalie took a few calls but mainly chatted with the gang, nibbled at snacks from the deli downstairs, and reflected on Danmeier in the corner of her mind.

He hadn't been kidding about feeling jealous. Maybe he thought he was, but she knew there was more than a grain of truth to his remark. He'd always dominated the agents who worked for him. It was part of his plan. But somehow Natalie had cracked the careful mosaic he'd constructed, almost from her arrival in the office. Danmeier's reaction to her had been complex from the start—ambivalent, comprised equally of pride in her growth and accomplishments and concern that she might steal some of his limelight. She had never held it against him: it was just the way he was, and she not only understood him, she could handle him. She had, however, wondered what in the possibility of her success he feared!—that was a mystery.

Knowing that he was a man who seldom improvised, a man who thought out his strategies far in advance, she had been surprised recently at some of the risks he'd taken with her, putting himself on the line. Not long ago, he had taken to noticing her again, as he periodically did, citing this time some "appealing, fresh vulnerability" he'd never seen before. She had been amused and he had made a pass at her. No other way to put it.

Caught off guard, she had let him take her determinedly yet gently in his arms and kiss her, had felt his hand on the silk of her blouse, stroking her nipple—it had not been unpleasant, she had not resented it, but she had not been particularly aroused by it either. They had known each other for such a long time: it wasn't an unnatural thing for him to have done. She wasn't challenged, insulted, or

driven to perceive it as sexual harassment. It was just Jay and he'd kissed her and touched her. She had let him and thought about it later.

"We work together, Jay," she had said a day later over drinks in the ornate, terribly grand bar at the Palace, "and we work together well. And we're friends. So let's not run the risk of ruining it all with a quick little affair, okay?"

"What if I was hoping for more of a long run?"

"Jay, let's not play games. We're better than that."

He had stared into his perfect Manhattan, gray shaggy head bowed, chiseled features overlaid with the fleshiness of success and the floridness of his age and drinking habits, and had pursed his lips thoughtfully. "You know what Oscar Wilde said, of course."

She'd laughed. "Maybe you should refresh my memory."

"There is only one difference between a lifelong passion and an infatuation. The infatuation lasts longer." He had sipped the Manhattan. "What do you think of that, dear lady?"

"I think you're wondering if you should agree with my assessment of the situation or not. Do you think you're suddenly infatuated with old everyday Natalie? For one thing, it's a little late in coming, isn't it?"

"Oh, no. I remember quite clearly the day I fell in love with you, Nat." He had looked up at her, for a moment seeming almost shy. "I'm only twelve years late in telling you. ..."

She had felt the start of tears. "Much as I hate to say it, that's a very lovely thing to hear. And," she had pulled herself together, "it's also not fair. No more lovely remarks. Promise me."

He had put his hand over hers and nodded. "All right. For the moment, anyway. But, goddamn it, Nat, I can't answer now for what might happen later." He had smiled gruffly, removed his hand from hers, and finished his drink.

His promise was still intact, more or less. But occasionally she had caught him staring at her in the office or while they met with a client or publisher over lunch at the Four Seasons, and she'd recognized that look in his eye. Once she had accused him, only half-facetiously, of harboring a lovely thought or two.

"Nat," he had replied, "in the nicest possibly way, may I suggest that you shove it?" They had laughed. But there it lay between them, confined for the moment to his eyes. Sometimes she wondered what he saw when he looked at her that way. It was odd, maybe part of being a woman, or reflecting the times in which she lived: she should have known what signals she was sending, but she didn't—and that was that. They were both stuck with the membrane of tension stretched between them. There was something ... *something* that kept her from tearing it once and for all. She was at that turning point in her life when the sexual arrogance of youth was gone. You never knew how many more chances there might be, and Jay wasn't easy to ignore or forget. And he cared about her.

At six o'clock the secretaries left. The suite of offices was empty. Except for Jay. He poked his head through the doorway of her office and harrumphed.

"You're sounding awfully officious in your old age," she said, taking off her reading glasses and looking up from the fine print of a contract. "Positively Dickensian."

"Old age," he repeated. "My God, you have an unfailing ability to inflict a flesh wound in passing when I least expect it. Charming."

"Well, you know what Wodehouse used to say. When he was past ninety?"

"I'm not going to find this terribly amusing—"

"Of course you will. He said, 'As long as you're going to get old ... you might as well get as old as you can.' "

He couldn't help laughing. "Look, come with me to "21" for dinner. Eight-thirty. I'll fight off all my impulses and not say one lovely thing. We can continue today's celebration. Innocent as the newborn. Come on, Nat." He had a regular nightly table, all part of the Danmeier style.

"Thanks, but no thanks, Jay. I'm utterly bushed. And I feel like I've got a cold coming on—"

"Bullshit. That's what Hemingway used to say."

"Really, I'm sorry, Jay. Another time. The fact is, I got caught out in the rain last night."

"Well, now I'm pissed off. Beware the consequences, my sweet."

"I'll bear up under the pressure."

"Don't I know it." He pulled on his trench coat. "Good night and don't forget to lock up." He went away whistling. She heard the door close in the reception room and breathed a deep sigh of relief. *Jay, you're such a bastard.* And she smiled at the thought. Smiled at his easy persistence. Could he convince her he was serious? And should she give him the chance?

She relished being alone. It had not been that way following the divorce, but she'd worked her way through the worst of it and now solitude was okay. Time to herself, no longer afraid to be alone because then she might start thinking about Tony and louse up everything ... Solitude was fine if there wasn't too much of it.

Smiling to herself, proud of herself, she poured the last of a bottle of champagne. It was flat and warmish and she didn't mind at all. She had gotten through the psychological firestorm, which was how she thought of the crack-up of her marriage, and now, today, she was back on track, feeling good about herself, calm, whole, able to be alone. Back to being Tiger.

She wandered through the empty rooms. The agency occupied most of one floor in an old, handsomely decorated office building in midtown, six stories with a common

street-level lobby and a rickety elevator, self-operated. A design studio, two sets of lawyers, a trade commission from an eastern European satellite—and the Danmeier Agency. It was the kind of building that constituted its own neighborhood, was only a couple of steps from landmark status, and operated on the honor system. Old Tim, the doorman, had once been knocked down nine times in a single round; when he came to, he had a vaguely English accent and longed to be a doorman. He came with the building and there was always the chance that he might actually be on duty. His hours were erratic at best and no one had the nerve to upbraid him. Lobby security never seemed a crucial issue.

Natalie loved the comfortable jumble of rooms, the framed dust jackets, the stacks of manuscripts, the sagging, overburdened bookcases on tatty oriental carpets. Home away from home, that was what the agency meant to her, and that was fine, the way it had to be for her now. Work was your life, life was your work. You worked, you coped, and if there was the time and the opportunity ... then, maybe, you could love. But work was what you could count on. It made sense. You could—what was the jargon of the day? Validate? Sure, you could validate your life with your work. When you asked people to define themselves, what did they say? They told you what they did for a living. Well, she was an agent, she worked, she coped. Whee.

Turning off lights one by one, she giggled. The champagne was getting to her. A wee bit. She didn't drink much, that was the problem. ... Giggle.

Back at her desk, the contract lounging in a puddle of soft light, she drained the last bit from the bottle into her cup. The roses were beautiful, still dewy from the florists spray, darkly red, like blood in Italian vampire movies. So sweet of Tony. But she didn't want to start thinking about Tony. That was where the wild things hid, danced, grinned



inately at her. Tony was a memory, had damn well better stay that way. Memory Lane.

She dictated a brief letter into her machine.

“Dear Mr. Linehan. It gives me a great deal of pleasure to tell you that the contracts from Hewitt and Sons have arrived and I am reviewing them. You will have them to sign in a few days; a check for twenty-five hundred dollars will follow shortly. ...”

Tomorrow she'd tell Jay. She'd beaten his estimate on the advance but she hadn't wanted to rub it in today. It would be fun tomorrow, though.

The beautiful part was that it truly did give her more pleasure than the coup that had her spread all over *PW*. You had to keep things in perspective, treasure your integrity. Damn straight. It was what made you an individual, right?

She toasted her integrity. Her individuality.

Which was when she should have packed it in and gone home. Instead, she got up and went to the window.

She never understood what had beckoned her to the window.

# Chapter Two

BEYOND THE TALL THIRD-FLOOR windows the New York cityscape had darkened to a December evening, then blossomed into the glitter and sparkle that was the city's trademark. Below her the crowds had begun thinning along Madison Avenue. The light changed at Fifty-third and the headlights began moving again, poking through the thin, slanting winter rain. Across the avenue, the flow of pedestrians leaving work, going to assignments over cocktails in corner bistros, catching a bite to eat before heading across town toward the theater district, straggling home after a wearying day—across the avenue the flow of New Yorkers moved past the endless upward thrust of new, grimly skeletal construction that punctuated each block. Men stopped even in the rain to peer through the peepholes cut into the wooden fencing, staring at the quiet earthmovers, watching the arcs, pink and orange, of the helmeted welders up among the girders.

She had watched the Lossin Chemical building, directly across from her window, rise slowly from the deep square excavation pit, foot by foot, taking its shape—more glass and steel, more boring sameness. As she was glancing vaguely at the construction site, her mind elsewhere—at rest, relaxed—she became aware of a curious movement at the corner of her vision. Erratic. Darting.

Suddenly, unexpectedly, like a cry of fire in a crowded room, there he was. And he was all wrong, didn't fit.

He was running. A belted trench coat. A cloth cap pulled low against the rain. He darted among the shining black umbrellas. A bus bore down, he dashed in front of it, across the street, rain-slick with reflected lights reaching toward

him on the wet pavement. A taxi braked, skidded, honked; he was momentarily lost among the umbrellas and the scaffolding arched above the sidewalk. It was New York: he didn't even cause a head to turn.

But from the window where she stood he was caught in a framework. Natalie continued looking, picking him out again, now entirely alone against the wooden fence blocking off the construction site behind him. She was struck by the peculiar feeling that she was the only person in the world watching him: it was just the two of them, the situation almost embarrassing in its intimacy—she was watching him in some private act, but she couldn't look away.

What the hell was he doing?

She gasped, leaned forward: he had taken out a gun. Quite clearly she saw it, was certain, a gun, a pistol or a revolver or an automatic; she didn't know one kind of handgun from another, but it was a gun. He had pulled it from his trench-coat pocket, stood looking at it as if posed, like Jean-Louis Trintignant in that indelible moment in *The Conformist*, as if he didn't quite recognize it and was undecided. ... Then in a sweeping motion, his arm held stiffly, he lofted the gun up and over the poster-covered wooden fence.

She squinted into the night. Rain blew across the window.

But, no, it had been a gun. She was sure. ...

The man stood frozen, looking around as if he expected to be caught in the act, set upon by burly cops and dragged off with nightsticks tattooing his skull. His lace was shaded beneath the bill of the cap. The trench coat—she was registering it all—looked like one of the five-hundred-dollar Burberry's with the tan-wool button-in lining. Maybe ... But she couldn't imagine she'd been wrong about the gun. ... A gun? My God.

It was a New York moment. Strange. Weird.

Utterly objective, yet desperately personal.

Natalie Rader was in her office. A man with a gun was standing below in the street. He had thrown the gun over a fence, into a construction site. An anecdote. Something to tell her friends.

Until the man looked up.

What did he see, she wondered later, a random design of lighted windows in the building across the street? One with a woman silhouetted by the desk lamp behind her ... a woman staring down at him.

He didn't move. Returned her stare. Their faces in shadow. A man and a woman sharing the unexpected, naked moment. The sinister moment that seemed to stretch out forever.

Crazy. She felt as if there was an unmistakable eye contact. An invisible, taut connection stretched between them, cutting through the wind and rain.

And she was very frightened.

She stumbled back from the window, still watching him, feeling for the desk lamp. Knocking the empty champagne bottle off the desk, she heard its thud on the carpet as she hit the switch on the base of the lamp, plunging the room into blackness. She was out of breath, back at the window, standing to one side peering down.

He watched as if he could see her afterimage in the darkened pane of glass. *He knows, he's seen me and he knows I've seen him. Oh, Christ ...*

Slowly he pushed his hands into the pockets of his trench coat. He glanced to either side. No one paid him the slightest attention. He looked back at the window. She cringed, as if she were naked before him, even in the dark window.

Then he moved across the street toward her.

She watched him coming, saw him pass from view beneath the overhanging ledge outside her window.

Had he gone off down the street?

Or was he coming into her building?

Natalie backed away from the window. Her hands were shaking and her breath was catching in her chest, coming hard. She felt the fine sweat breaking out, the loss of strength in her legs, the pressure in her chest, the giddiness that meant her brain wasn't getting enough oxygen.

The fear was building in her, she could taste it, like a drain in her belly backing up, sickening her, robbing her of strength and will. Son of a bitch. She hated it, fought it with a string of dirty words, trying to shock herself out of it and bring her back to reality. But the man was real—*sure, sure, Tiger, but you're acting like a nut case. ...*

*But what's so crazy about watching some guy throw a gun away and seeing him watch you, come toward you when you're alone in an empty office and he knows where you are and you're scared? That's crazy?*

*Just go lock the door.* The damn door was always locked during business hours, requiring a buzz and an identification. But not today. Not with the deliveries for the party and the people dropping in to share the moment with her.

*If you're so afraid, Nat, just go call Lew ... call Tony ... call Jay ... someone will come and get you—*

"I will not call anybody," she said aloud. "I won't do it!"

She began muttering to herself as she went to the closet and took out her own trench coat, wrapped her muffler around her throat, grabbed her briefcase. "Don't forget the Linehan contract," she whispered to herself, "and the first six chapters of the Crawford manuscript ... and your umbrella."

She dug around in her briefcase for the ancient Valium bottle, a souvenir from the worst days with Tony. "Irrational terror-stricken woman," she said to herself. There were a couple inches of dead champagne in a cup on the reception

desk. She gulped it down, made a face, and then stood still, willing herself to breathe slowly, deeply.

She was reaching for the doorknob when she heard the first footsteps in the hallway.

Tentative steps. Someone had come up the stairs. Past old Tim's deserted post. No swoosh of elevator doors. Someone was waiting at the top of the stairs, probably looking around, trying to get his bearings. The footsteps started again, coming down the hall toward her, slowly, stopping as if to look at lettering on doors, moving on. She bit a knuckle.

He stopped again, outside her office.

Realizing what she'd forgotten, she took three quick steps to the door and pushed the button in the knob, which engaged the lock. It made what she knew was a soft click, though it sounded like a vault slamming shut.

She swallowed hard, waiting, knowing they were separated only by a door, knowing he must have heard the lock.

He laughed.

It was a slow, soft laugh. Derisive. Contemptuous. A rolling chuckle, someone laughing at the helplessness of a child. Finally he stopped. What was he doing now? She sagged back against the wall, steadied herself with a hand on a tabletop. Why didn't he do something?

Finally he did. He moved on, back up the hallway. At last, she couldn't hear him anymore. Was he waiting? Or had he gone down the stairs as he had come up?

She wished she smoked, wished there were anything she could do while she waited. She practiced swallowing and breathing and telling herself that she was the victim of an overactive imagination. Didn't convince herself of the latter. She hadn't imagined that laugh.

Ten minutes.

Fifteen minutes.

*Christ, I'm a captive in my own office. Held at bay by a man who probably isn't there.*

She gritted her teeth and opened the door into the hallway.

Empty. Long and brightly lit, polished wooden doors, ancient tiles, beige walls. A few smudged puddles of rain. Footprints.

She pulled the door shut behind her. *If he's waiting in the stairwell for me, she thought, I'll never have time to get the door unlocked. Tiger.*

She punched the elevator call button.

When the door slid open a man wearing a trench coat stood inside.

She screamed, rooted to the spot.

"Natalie, for chrissakes, are you all right?"

He was a graphic designer from a studio two floors up.

"Oh, Teddy ... sure, sure, I'm fine. I was just surprised. Thinking about something else—"

"You sure you're okay? You look like you've seen—"

"No, really, Teddy, I'm perfectly all right. Tired. Long day. I don't know." She shrugged and smiled, getting in beside him. They descended together.

"Say, I saw your picture in *PW* today." He whistled, his Adam's apple bobbing. His glasses were sliding down his long nose. "Wow. Next stop *Penthouse*, right?" They laughed.

Slippery sidewalks. Teddy walked her to the curb and waited while she waved for a taxi. He asked her again if she was really okay and she looked up out of the cab window. *Sure, Teddy, tiptop.* In fact she was already feeling the slightly numbing effect of the champagne.