

The story behind die for me

I'd just finished watching the movie *Timeline* based on the book by Michael Crichton. (The book is *so* much better than the movie, by the way, but the movie does have Gerard Butler who is so darn pretty to watch.) I thought to myself, 'It would be cool to travel to the past . . . until I needed a loo. Then, not so much.' I like my twenty-first-century gadgets and conveniences, thank you very much.

I started thinking then, about someone obsessed with the past, perhaps a person who lives for battle re-enactments or maybe even collects medieval stuff.

I then recalled a fascinating experience I'd had years before while traveling in Germany with my husband. We were in the medieval walled city of Rothenburg – a lovely place to visit. It's a city that time kind of forgot. Importantly to *Die For Me*, Rothenburg contains the Criminal Museum – a collection of instruments of punishment. The husband wanted to go. I said, 'No way! That's too disturbing!' I wasn't writing thrillers then, you see. My husband wheedled and I finally agreed. I found the museum much less macabre than I expected. Eighty percent of the exhibits were of the ordinary civic type of punishment – shrew's fiddles, scold's bridles, etc. But they did have a collection of torture instruments, including a Chair of Inquisition. That's the piece that stuck in my head – an iron chair covered with nails. I never forgot it and when it came time to write this book, the memories of the museum rushed in and screamed '*Use me!*'

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So I did.

Incidentally, *Die For Me* and the two following books – *Scream For Me* and *Kill For Me* – tell the story of the Vartanian family. It was never intended to be a trilogy. *Die For Me* was supposed to be a stand-alone book, but at the end I had this unplanned, unexpected, and unexplained mystery on my hands. A true cliffhanger. I was supposed to write David Hunter's story next, but found I had to find out what happened to the Vartanians. So I put David's story aside to focus on Daniel and Susannah. I'm so glad I did!

Where are the die for me characters now?

- Vito is now Lieutenant Ciccotelli of the Philadelphia homicide department. He continues in his mission to stand for the dead, but comes home every night to the family that is his heart. He still rides his motorcycle and still sings at family events. He has become reasonably proficient in French as he and Sophie go back to France every summer to visit the professors and friends she left behind there.
- Dr Sophie Johannsen-Ciccotelli still teaches at university level, but is now considered one of the foremost experts in forensic archeology in the world. She is also called upon for her skills with ground-penetrating radar, taking her team all over the world to search for buried survivors after disasters and to uncover victims buried in unmarked graves. Her highest priority, though, is her family: Vito and their two children – Anna, now 4 years old, and Michael who is almost 2 years old. She no longer works for Ted Albright’s museum but occasionally drops by with her children. Ted is sometimes able to convince her to reprise one of her now ‘classic’ roles – Joan of Arc or the Viking warrior.
- Michael Ciccotelli (Vito’s dad) is, in his own words, still alive and kickin’. He has good days and bad days, but always finds time and energy to play with his grandchildren – building castles and playing siege remain some of their favorite games.
- Dom Ciccotelli is a uniformed police officer with Philly PD. He

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wants to be a homicide detective someday, like his uncle Vito. Dom is a very good man who cares for his family.

- Nick Lawrence, Vito's partner in *Die For Me*, has made a career change and now works for the FBI. He is currently stationed in Seattle. More to come on Nick 😊.

Fun Facts about die for me

- The scene where Sophie builds a castle with Michael and Vito's nephews was a gift to my editor at the time, a woman I consider a very dear friend. Her father, a professor of medieval history at a Texas university, died suddenly as I was starting this book. In his eulogy, it was mentioned that he used to build castles out of blocks with his daughters when they were small. I wanted to honor his memory.
- The meeting of Vito and Sophie was originally going to occur much later in the book – and this had me worried. I always knew that Vito was a homicide cop and that Sophie was a multi-lingual archeologist (recall, she was based on Daniel Jackson of Stargate), but I didn't have Vito seeking out an expert in medieval history until he'd determined that torture devices had been used. I decided to move on and hopefully solve the problem of having them meet sooner as I wrote. I had Vito standing on that field, looking down into one grave and wondering how many more there would be. I contacted Danny Agan, the retired lieutenant of the Atlanta homicide department who started out as a resource, but who has become a friend over the years. I asked what he'd do in that circumstance – would he just start digging or what? I didn't tell him anything about the characters and he did not know that Sophie was an archeologist, so I was simply stunned when he said: 'I'd call the university and ask an archeologist to come do a scan of the ground with GPR – ground-penetrating radar.' *Wow.* He gave me the answer

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to my problem without even knowing it. It is *so cool* when things work out like this!

- I knew what GPR was already – I’d seen it on an episode of Tony Robinson’s *Time Team* and socked it away in my mind for future reference. But I didn’t know exactly how it worked and my Internet searches didn’t give me a feel for how to describe its use the way I wanted to, so I dug deep for courage and cold-called a firm that did GPR scans professionally. (I hate to cold-call. I always get nervous and tongue-tied.) They were very nice! They told me that they do everything from scanning for buried pipes and cables for upcoming construction to scanning for unmarked graves. The oldest grave they’d scanned was a Native American burial mound, more than 2500 years old.
- This was the book of the cold-call. I didn’t know much about video game design, so I cold-called a professor from the Art Institute of Ft. Lauderdale. He talked to me for hours and I was so fascinated by the subject material (the geek in me preened) that I had to force myself to stop researching and get back to the book. I also cold-called a rehab center for users of prosthetic devices. They trained new amputees and helped existing users of prosthetic devices maintain their hardware and stay up to date with the latest technology. The woman who answered my call gave me so much information that became integral parts of the story – including the lotion used by Simon (which was formulated specially for him, not uncommon in the industry) and the existence of the computerized knee, which became the thing that brought Simon to Philly to begin with (he wanted to participate in the trial of the new device).
- The tattoo on Warren Keyes’s arm was also a bit of a fun surprise. I had him tattooed with the Oscar statue because he was an actor. I had no idea that Oscar was a knight, gripping a sword – in exactly the way Simon had placed the sword in Warren’s hands – or perhaps I only knew this detail in my subconscious. The moment that I enlarged the Oscar pic on my computer and saw the sword in his hands was a spine tingling moment. Again, very cool how that worked together!

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- As I mentioned, *Die For Me* was never intended to be a trilogy. Daniel Vartanian was only in the outline as a walk-on/walk-off character. Originally, he wasn't intended to have a huge role, nor did he have a sister who appeared to hate him. He didn't have a sister at all. But when he walked onto that porch, looking for his parents, something happened. He took on life – and a backstory. All of the sudden he was calling his sister. I said, 'He has a sister? How interesting! Why did she hate him?' I kept writing to find out! And at the end, Daniel was holding this envelope full of pictures and I had to know why! That was fun ☺.
- Judge Arthur Vartanian wasn't supposed to be a bad man, in his own right. He was supposed to be an innocent victim. That change came about because of Yuri Chertov and set up the next two books.
- Yuri Chertov, the Russian man who worked in the library, also just appeared. He was washing windows in my mind. I loved the scene between him and Sophie. I loved his character, how his hands had been broken to punish him for his quest for freedom. But about two-thirds of the way through the book I froze. 'Wait,' I thought. 'This doesn't make sense. Why would Simon's father, who was looking for his son, talk to the one man in the library who did not speak English?' I stopped writing for two days, simply frozen. I mentioned it to my husband who said with a shrug, 'Take him out. Or make him speak English. You're the writer. You can do what you want.' Silly man. I can't do what I want. That man was in my head. I couldn't lose him from the story. He was important to me. He was so brave. He was real. So I thought, 'Hm. If it doesn't make sense, what would make it make sense?' The answer came swiftly after that. It only made sense if he was playing a role, if he didn't want to know where Simon was, if he only wanted his wife to believe he was looking. And that would only be true if a) he knew Simon was already dead or b) he knew Simon had been alive the whole time. Voilà ☺. One of my favorite of all my book twists!
- Barbara Mulrine, the librarian, was modeled on the real Barbara

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Mulrine, the school librarian in the high school in which I taught. Barbara was thrilled to be in my book! It was her, right down to her no-nonsense talk and her cardigan sweater.

- The dialog when Sophie tells Vito, 'I'm fluent in ten languages, three of them deader than the body you just came from,' was based on a conversation I had with the amazing Sherrilyn Kenyon, author of the *Dark Hunter* series. Sherry has a doctorate in history and, like Sophie, is fluent in several languages, some of them deader than . . . I have no recollection of what she said next! I can only hear Sophie saying it now. Sherrilyn also gave me the background on burial effigies, that the reason we see so few medieval effigies with the male holding the sword down the center of his body was that this indicated a soldier who'd died in battle. Since most of the battles in those days were during the Crusades, located in far-away Turkey, the bodies were not usually returned to be buried in England. My husband, also a history teacher, chimed into our conversation at this point, stating that the remains would be so putrid and bloated that they'd often explode in transit, leaking out of the makeshift coffins. He and Sherry had quite a good time discussing this. My husband taught middle school history, which explains quite a bit.
- Sophie's dressing up as characters in the museum was also unplanned – and based on my own husband's teaching techniques. He'd often wear costumes to class as part of his lesson. One of his most often used costumes was the Friar, complete with a bald skull cap ringed with a fringe of fake hair. He wore this getup when he taught Martin Luther's nailing of *The Ninety-Five Theses* to the wall in Worms and was known to lead his class on 'crusades' through the school, selling indulgences. One day I came into his classroom to find him wearing a black wig and holding a rubber snake to his throat. His students will never forget Cleopatra, LOL.
- I did a lot of research into the medieval codes of law, reading a great deal from the translation of original sources I found on Fordham University's website. I'm not certain the texts exist on

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their site any longer. They weren't there – or weren't where I'd originally found them, at least – when I went back to check for details. Really fascinating reading though.

- *Die For Me* was the book I wrote shortly after meeting my very good friend, Sonie Lasker, who at the time was a brown belt and just starting to win karate titles at the state and national level. I began to study karate and do my general workouts with her and during breaks she'd help me choreograph my fight scenes. Using karate staffs, we acted out the scene at the end of *Die For Me* where Sophie was dueling with Simon.