

# The Crime Cafe with Leanne Kale Sparks

Presented By:



**Debbie:** Hi everyone. Our guest today had a short career in law before turning to writing a series of thrillers featuring FBI agent Kendall Beck. Her books are set in the Rocky Mountains of Colorado, which is a really cool place. I love that. She currently resides in Texas with her husband and two dogs - a German shepherd named Zoe and her Corgi named Wynn. It's my pleasure to welcome today Leanne Kale Sparks. Hi, Leanne.

**Leanne:** Hi.

**Debbie:** I'm so glad you could be with us today.

**Leanne:** Me too. This is exciting.

**Debbie:** Excellent. Wonderful. I, too, had a career in law before I started writing full-time.

**Leanne:** I think there's a lot of us.

**Debbie:** I think there are quite a few of us who left the profession in a kind of "we gotta do something else" feeling. You were fortunate in making yours a short career though, as you've described it. How long were you practicing law, and what kind of law did you practice?

**Leanne:** Well, I did a little bit of everything in that short amount of time. I did a little bit of family law and ...

**Debbie:** Oh, God!

**Leanne:** I did a little bit of estates, but that was short-term. Mostly, it was criminal defense.

**Debbie:** Ah. I'm telling you, family law right there will turn you off to the idea of doing more.

**Leanne:** It's the most dangerous profession. Everybody thinks it's the criminal lawyers that get it. It's family law.

**Debbie:** Not at all, because at least the clients understand you're dealing with a certain type of system. People going through divorce, acrimonious ones just go temporarily insane. That's my theory. It's temporary insanity.

**Leanne:** And you're taking away kids and money, two of the things that people value the most. In criminal defense, most of your clients, they know they're guilty. They have probably been in the system before, and so they know what's going on.

**Debbie:** Their expectations are well managed right from the start. Oh my. What inspired you to write the Kendall Beck series?

**Leanne:** I lived in Maryland at the time, and I had a friend who had retired from the FBI, and he used to be the person that was in charge of the criminal part of the FBI, the investigations. I had gone online and looked, and there was this really interesting department or group within it, a unit, and they did Crimes Against Children. And so I talked to this guy and I'm like, Hey, can you get me in to see them or talk to them, or have somebody just answer some questions? He pulled some strings and I was able to meet up with some actual agents that work in the unit.

It was a while ago and it just always stuck with me, and I thought, I need to have a character. [\*The Wrong Woman\*](#) started out as a short story just to see if I could actually write a crime thriller, and get all of the red herrings. The first versions of this, it was just like this person died and then we investigated, and yay, I figured it out, so I had to learn a lot about red herrings and things like that, so it kind of evolved. But I really did want Kendall to be involved in the Crimes Against Children, because I really think it's important now. My books don't focus on that. I don't talk about any of the icky, really icky. I don't go in depth with any of it, but it's there and it's an important part. I loved the idea of Kendall and the more I got to write her and everything, the more she kind of just really blossomed and became the sarcastic FBI agent that she is.

**Debbie:** Cool. So it's more about her being an FBI agent than necessarily the children angle.

**Leanne:** Yes. Well, it's usually a backstory. I say that in Book One, it's a backstory. It's like a subplot about her finding this girl and figuring out what's happened to her, and how that kind of all evolves, and it crossed paths with the murder of her best friend. And so we get this kind of unofficial partnership between Kendall Beck, who's the FBI agent, and then the homicide detective in Denver, Adam Taylor. They start working together

to figure out who killed her best friend, Gwen. Then in Book Two, it is all about the kids and they're trying to find a missing child.

**Debbie:** Okay. So you've got two books so far out?

**Leanne:** There's two books in the series, yes.

**Debbie:** Excellent. And how many books do you plan to write? Do you have a plan for the series in terms of the number of books and where you want to go with it?

**Leanne:** When I started out, it was four, so when I get to that point, then I'll reconsider and see if people are still interested in hearing from Kendall and seeing what her and Adam can get up to, then I'll definitely keep writing it as long as people want to read it. But I did have a four-book series planned out, and a lot of that is because there's not a cliffhanger, but there's a dangler in one of the books that I finally take care of at the end.

**Debbie:** Okay. So you have kind of a plan in terms of story arc for the four books.

**Leanne:** For the four books, yeah.

**Debbie:** Have you considered writing another series at any point?

**Leanne:** I have actually. I've started writing another series in the meantime. I guess, why not?

**Debbie:** Why not? Yes.

**Leanne:** There's still daylight. I can write another series, and it, of course, is also based in Colorado. It's a fictitious town in the mountains, so it's a small town, and of course you know how small towns are. They're apparently magnets for murders. So I'm working on that, so I think that is cool. She's a lot of fun too. She's not like Kendall, but I can't not write a sarcastic character, so she's got a little bit of sarcasm in her too, but she's a little bit more quirky in different ways than Kendall is.

**Debbie:** Well, I love sarcasm. It's great, great stuff in a protagonist.

**Leanne:** It's my second language.

**Debbie:** Awesome! Does the environment play a significant part in your stories, because you're sitting in this fabulous natural setting, the Rockies?

**Leanne:** I grew up in Colorado, so I've always loved it. I moved away when I got married. I was younger - in my twenties - and haven't lived back there since, so this is kind of my touchstone, plus it gets me to go back there for writing retreats and stuff like that, so it's really important to me. I really do love the setting. There's so much to do. I set Kendall Beck in Denver, and I did that because of what she does. There are two major interstates that go through Denver, and so a lot of trafficking can happen that way, so I thought that that was a really good place that I could do some things there. It's big enough that I could get away with faking things a little bit and playing around with them but yeah, it's definitely ... I love the mountains. There's a reason they call it Colorful Colorado. It's gorgeous and so I'm still learning to pull it in more as a character. Book One, it was more about the characters, developing the characters and stuff. In Book Two, I think I pull in the scenery and the setting more, and trying to make that more its own character, a hard thing to do.

**Debbie:** And your idea for a mystery or whatever set in a small Colorado town in the mountains, I can easily picture that because my brother lived in a very small town on Peak to Peak Highway. I don't know if you are familiar.

**Leanne:** Oh, wow.

**Debbie:** Yeah. It was a tiny little place. He used to talk about mountain lions appearing in front of his house or whatever. It was like, what??

**Leanne:** Yeah. I grew up in Colorado Springs, and it's a big city now, but even now you can still get wildlife. When I was growing up, there were a lot of times where you would see wildlife and stuff, especially when you got outside of the city, if you lived outside of the city a little bit. So it's a lot of fun.

**Debbie:** Oh wow! Yeah. It's a cool place. I really love Colorado. How much research do you do when writing your books, and what kind?

**Leanne:** I do a lot. A lot of it is, unless it's something specific, I usually try to do Google searches, or I have a bunch of reference books that I use. I go to

conferences. My favorite one is Writers' Police Academy because you get just so much information from there on real-life law enforcement and crime scenes and all sorts of things. I usually start with a Google search, and see what I can find from there. I have got a bunch of Facebook groups that I'm involved with, that you can ask a doctor or ask a law enforcement agent and if they don't know, they know how to get the information. Sometimes I reach out directly to someone that I know.

I do have a couple of law enforcement agents in Colorado that I can contact for Colorado law specific things. Sometimes you're like, hey, how would you do this? Would it be like this? And they're like, no, we would never do that or something like that. So, I think a lot of research, I'm a plotter. I'm a big plotter, so I tend to do a lot of research while I'm plotting out the book, and not as much when I'm writing it. I mean, there's still the odd time where you're like, oh, I want to put this in and you get up and you look for it or you ask somebody. But most of it's done upfront. I think in law enforcement, there's so many people now with the ... everybody's into true crime and thrillers are just huge, and the CSI and everything.

People are very knowledgeable. Readers are really knowledgeable about things that happen in law enforcement and DNA and stuff, and so they will call you out on it if you don't have it pretty much correct. I'm not writing a textbook about police procedures and investigations, so there are some times that you have to skirt the line of - well, for the story, I have to do this for the story, and just hope that people will go along for the ride.

**Debbie:** Yeah. You're allowed a certain amount of artistic license there.

**Leanne:** Yeah.

**Debbie:** I think people expect it.

**Leanne:** Yeah.

**Debbie:** How would you describe your writing to someone who has never read your work?

**Leanne:** I really love dialogue. I love banter between characters, so I tend to have a lot of dialogue in it. I love really creating characters that stick with you, that you feel like you can go out and have a cup of coffee with or you want to hang out with, so I love the character part of the stories. And of course, I'm always into crime and stuff, but it's really trying to figure out how to make these relationships and these characters work together and so you can carry that on throughout.

**Debbie:** And the thriller aspect of your writing. What kinds of thrillers are you writing? How would you describe them?

**Leanne:** Mostly, I do murder mysteries. Those are probably my favorite things to write about murder, and then kidnapping secondary. So the great part about it is that you try and find something new that doesn't cross the line into something that's just too gross, that's just too far, so it's really kind of a fun job that we have, just trying to figure out where that line is and pushing up against it. It's interesting to go and see. There's so much interesting information out there with real crimes. I think that most of the crime that is committed is way stranger than anything we could write and people don't believe it.

I was watching this thing today while I was sitting there and I was just flabbergasted. I was like, how do people do this? It's kind of fun to delve into the minds of killers or something, and I think for readers it's the same way, because we would never in a million years think about why would somebody do that? Why? What drives somebody to be that cruel? Like, for instance, serial killers who have a plan and have a reason and things like that, and what drives that person, because it's not anything that we would ever consider doing. So you really want to get into the mind and see what it's like. I do like writing from the killer's point of view a lot. I've had a few people say that I do that really well, which is kind of scary but also cool. Couple of times they're just like, yeah, you write that a little too well.

**Debbie:** Oh my gosh. Well, that's interesting. An interesting thought. Yeah, I have had those moments where I thought, do I really show this to somebody? Do they really want to see this? I don't know, man. What authors have most inspired your writing?

**Leanne:** Harlan Coben is one of my favorites, and I think I read him and thought, well, he kind of has sarcastic and funny characters. They have funny lines. And so when you're thinking of a thriller, you're thinking oh, it's all serious and stuff, but I learned there that it's okay to have those funny moments, the humor because you have to, because especially the darker that you're going to get, you have to have those moments where even the reader can have a release valve on the tension and the suspense. I really like him for that. I love Karin Slaughter for psychological thrillers. I love Loreth Anne White, and she's just amazing. I love her work. So those are probably my favorites right there.

**Debbie:** And you have a protagonist who works with a local police officer, correct?

**Leanne:** Yes.

**Debbie:** So that's the FBI and local police working together. Do they have contention in their relationship, or do they tend to get along well?

**Leanne:** I made Kendall very strong. She's very strong. She doesn't really fit the mold of most women. She's in this business where she sees horrible things that happen every day, so she's very strong, she's independent. I like that about her. She doesn't take anything from anyone, and she gets in fights all the time with people so she's always kind of one step away from getting fired, so she's that kind. Adam, he's very good at what he does. He's very empathetic, so he's kind of on the opposite side. In the beginning, they do, and especially in Book Two, they really do, because it is his niece that goes missing. And so she's like, this is my job. This is what I do so you back off, and he can't, because it's his niece and he's in law enforcement. So that book, they really have a lot of contention.

But yeah, in the first book too, they get along well. They become friends, but there's also this crossing of lines that they each are like, back off. You're in my area and this is my area and the other one's like, no, I know what I'm doing. I thought I needed to do that. I hope I didn't overplay it because I don't think that's how it really is. I think they do work together a lot, especially in the Crimes Against Children unit, they work closely with local law enforcement because they know what's going on in the communities better than the FBI. They have their confidential informants and things, and they're just in the community more so you have to have



that working relationship, that good working relationship. But you have to create tension and you don't always want it to be about the crime. I think that that's a good way to kind of create some tension, but they also have a lot of humor between them. They're both very sarcastic.

I sometimes go overboard with the law enforcement humor because I did do criminal prosecution or criminal defense work. You kind of get to know what ... you have jokes that you say that you would never say outside the office, or to anybody outside of law enforcement or in that world. But I do like it. I think it really kind of shows, and it's true. That's their release valve. So I try to be true to that without going overboard.

**Debbie:** Exactly. Yeah. There's a lot of that kind of gallows humor.

**Leanne:** Yes, definitely.

**Debbie:** In police work, in lawyering, in emergency services, things of that nature. All those things. Probably medicine.

**Leanne:** Yeah, I would think so.

**Debbie:** Yeah, I would think so. What advice would you give to anyone who's interested in pursuing a writing career?

**Leanne:** Try to write a book. Sit down and try and write it, because it seems really easy when you're sitting there and you're like, well, it's like a movie in my head but it's hard when you get to the point where I don't know where to go from here. So if you can get through those humps and actually get through it, I would do that. It has to be something that you love to do, because you don't write a book and then it becomes a bestseller. It's just not the way it works. Especially now with all the indie and self-publishing, there's a ton of stuff on the market, so you really have to work. And if you're going to go indie, you better be able to do a lot of the work yourself, because you're doing your whole business, which is why I like traditional publishing. Even though you still have to do a lot yourself, there are some things that they take on and so that's helpful.

I think I would say that you really have to ... I remember when I decided I wanted to write and didn't want to do law anymore, and I would stay up until two or three in the morning writing the story. It was just burning in

me. I will never publish that story. It's awful. But I had to write it. I had to write it, and I think that's what you have to have, and it is hard to maintain that, because especially when it does start to become a business. If you're going to make it a business, fine. If you just want to be a writer, then write. And if you don't want to ever publish, do that, because that's when you still have fun writing. It's when it becomes a business and you have contracts and you have deadlines that you have to meet, that you really have to want to get that story out.

It really has to be burning in you to get out, because to get through those humps - I hate to say writer's block - but those walls that you hit up against and you're like, I don't know. I don't know where to go, and I can't think of anything. You sit there and you're like, what are words? I don't even, I can't even come up with anything to actually say, and so it can be very frustrating. It's lonely. You better want to be alone, because you don't write with people. We go to writers' retreats and that's nice. You get that camaraderie. But most writers are kind of like, oh, yeah, let's go, let's hang out, and we're together for about five hours and we're like, okay, get away from me. I'm done being social, and I want to go in my room and sit and just be alone.

So, you have your communities and you have your friends. It's very important to have writer friends that you can talk to, because nobody understands this business. I mean, you get into it. My husband is still trying to figure it out. I'll be talking about stuff, and he's just like, well, just do this or do that. And I'm like, just let me talk. He doesn't get it, but you need that. You need that support system. But it is a very solitary existence when you're writing, because you're in your head. You're in your head the whole time.

**Debbie:** That's so true. That is absolutely true. We make it look much easier than it is, and that is kind of a problem in a sense. People need to know that there's a lot of work involved in creating a book, creating fiction or nonfiction. There's a whole lot of work.

**Leanne:** I think it's also a lot of trying to figure out your writing style, your writing process. For me, that's been kind of the hardest part because I always thought I need to do it one way and just keep doing it, and that's the way I always do it. And so I finally figured out that's not how I write. So

sometimes I'm writing all over whiteboards. Sometimes I'm using sticky notes. Sometimes I have legal pads, tons and tons and tons of legal pads. And then the area that I'm sitting in. Sometimes I want to sit here. So for this book, I'm doing it all at the kitchen table, which drives my husband crazy, because then I have sticky notes all over the place and we can't use the kitchen table till I'm done. That's also part of it too, and it's realizing when it's okay to not be like everybody else and figure it out. So I think that's pretty important too.

**Debbie:** Yeah. Yeah. Is there anything else you'd like to add before we finish up?

**Leanne:** Well, I have a big giveaway that we're doing. I'm going to give away a signed copy of *The Wrong Woman* and an FBI mug, and of course, coffee that Kendall loves, and some other little goodies. So if you want to go to my socials on Facebook, my author page, TikTok or Instagram, and follow me and let me know, and we'll get you registered. Really, I think what I'd love for people to do is everybody loves the big names. I mentioned I love Harlan Coben, I love Karin Slaughter. I challenge readers to find somebody that they have never heard of. Find a book that sounds interesting from an author that you don't know and give it a try because you might find your next favorite. You may not. You may decide that that's not the writing style that you like. That's where I think it is because there are a lot of us that can't pump a lot of money into marketing and things, and so we're trying to get our name out there as much as we can with social media and stuff, but there's a lot of us authors out there.

**Debbie:** There sure are.

**Leanne:** And if you just go in with the big names, I think you're missing out on some stories that really would blow your mind. So that's my challenge. Find an author and read them and then let them know.

**Debbie:** Yes. Boy, you've nailed it. I think that is so true. Part of what I want to do here is to shine a spotlight on people that you might not have otherwise heard of, so I'm really glad you said that. That is a great point. Thank you.

**Leanne:** You're welcome.

**Debbie:** Thank you again for being here today. I really appreciate your time.

**Leanne:** Thank you for having me. I really enjoyed it.

**Debbie:** It was a pleasure. Oh, thank you. It was my pleasure, believe me. On that note, I just want to remind everyone to please either like our YouTube channel or leave a review for the podcast. It would be greatly appreciated. You can also access my novels in chapter by chapter form, as well as bonus episodes and more when you support the podcast on Patreon. Check out our Patreon page today. I even have a weekly newsletter - no, I'm sorry - a monthly newsletter that I'm working up and have been doing for the last few months. So check that out as well. Until next time, when our guest will be Faye Snowden, I just want to say take care and happy reading.