

GWENNA McALLIS

SUPERNATURAL SUSPENSE AUTHOR



THE COMPOUND BY GWENNA McALLIS

A missing father. A lifetime of secrets. An ancient evil.

Twenty-one-year-old Daniel Wester graduated from college two months ago. He has a bachelor's degree in history, a pile of student loan debt, and no job prospects in sight.

When his dad mysteriously vanishes from inside their locked home, Daniel finds an old wooden box covered in strange symbols, a creepy collection of books about demonology, instructions to find an aunt he's never met, and driving directions that lead him halfway across the United States to a threatening iron security fence in the middle of nowhere.

Daniel makes the journey there with his lifelong best friend, Lena, a recent nursing school graduate. On the other side of the fence, they discover a secret colony of demon hunters- a community his father abandoned decades ago, they tell him, though Dad never once mentioned this place to him.

Daniel's reality is flipped upside down as he, Lena, and the members of this mysterious off-the-grid community team up to find his father- and battle the demon they believe took him.



PURCHASING DETAILS

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AUTHOR BIO


Gwenna McAllis grew up in the Deep South where she spent her free time as a kid reading and writing stories about the paranormal. Her love for writing eventually led her to the University of South Alabama, where she majored in English with a concentration in creative writing. Today, she writes supernatural suspense novels to make use of her otherwise useless B.A. in English. She resides in Huntsville, Alabama with her husband, two young children, and an aging rescued pup.


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GWENNA McALLIS

S U P E R N A T U R A L S U S P E N S E A U T H O R

AUDIENCE DEMOGRAPHICS

- 18-29 (or anyone who enjoys new adult (NA) fiction)
- Mostly female
- Fans of TV shows like Supernatural, Buffy the Vampire Slayer, and Grimm
- Nonreligious

Q & A

Where are you from? Where do you live now?

I was born and raised in a small town in Alabama, went to college at the University of South Alabama in Mobile to study creative writing, then moved out of state after getting married. My husband and I moved to Huntsville in 2016, and we've been there since.

How long have you been writing?

I've been writing my own stories as far back as I can remember, probably from about age seven or eight. I submitted several of my creations to the Reading Rainbow Young Writers and Illustrators Contest in the 1990s. Before we had a computer, I turned my stories into actual books made from cardstock, printer paper, a hole punch, and yarn. Then, in the early 2000s, I'd type up my stories and email them to my best friend. I eventually started writing fanfiction and posting that on Fanfiction.net as well. As a teen and young adult, I wrote screenplays and obnoxiously tried to recruit everyone I knew to act them out on camera with me. That didn't go too well, so I began focusing more seriously on novels. I started and gave up on several projects, then I decided to give NaNoWriMo a try for the first time in 2013. That's when I completed the very first draft of The Compound.

Who are some of your favorite authors?

Currently, I'm obsessed with Grady Hendrix, T. Kingfisher, and Tracy Deonn. Mysterious, supernatural stories have always been my favorite, both to write and read. As a young kid, I devoured Kathryn Tucker Windham's Jeffrey series (collections of local Southern ghost legends). Much to my fundamentalist evangelical mother's chagrin, I checked those books out repeatedly from our local library, along with tomes from writers such as R.L. Stine, V.C. Andrews, Dean Koontz, and Stephen King. As an English major, I also developed a special fondness for Edgar Allan Poe, Jane Austen, the Brontë sisters, Daphne du Marier, and Shirley Jackson.

Do you have any advice for aspiring writers?

READ. Find the genre that most excites you and read everything you can find within it. When it comes to the actual writing, just write. Try not to overthink it all during a first draft, just get those basic ideas out of your head and get it finished. It'll take several more drafts before the fine-tuning starts, but you can't improve anything that hasn't been written in the first place. And don't forget the value of beta readers and critique partners!

EXCERPT FROM *THE COMPOUND*

*June 2002
Crofton, Tennessee*

A torrential rain trapped Daniel Wester indoors late one June afternoon. Boredom found the ten-year-old boy quickly and beckoned him into rebellion. Though he knew the rule, Daniel dared to amuse himself by sneaking into his father's forbidden bedroom.

He would be in big trouble if he got caught. No doubt about that. But his father was in the kitchen, all the way on the opposite end of their double-wide trailer, completely engrossed in the task of trying his hand at a homemade meatloaf. This seemed like the perfect opportunity to take the risk.

The door to Pete Wester's bedroom stood slightly ajar and provided enough space for Daniel's small frame to slip inside without him ever actually touching the door itself. That somehow made what he was doing seem less criminal. He wriggled carefully through the entrance and peered around at his forbidden surroundings, trying to decide where to explore first.

Few furnishings occupied the small bedroom. A quilted queen-sized bed, a single nightstand, and an old four-drawer dresser with a mirror. The largest piece, the dresser, caught Daniel's attention.

He tiptoed across the carpeted floor toward it, then hesitated.

He glanced back over his shoulder nervously and listened for the recognizable cadence of his father's approaching footsteps. But he heard only raindrops smacking against the metal roof.

His adventure continued. The old dresser had a sweet, woodsy smell, kind of like pine needles. It reminded Daniel of the long walks he and his dad took so often through the woods that encircled their home. His eyes glided gleefully across the top of the piece, from the plastic comb and hairbrush set to some spare nickels and dimes to a bottle of cologne. Honey-gold liquid filled half of the glass bottle marked Stetson Original.

Daniel removed the cap and sniffed the nozzle. It smelled like Dad. Very carefully, he picked up the bottle and gave the back of his neck a single spritz, just the way he had seen people do it on TV. He set the bottle back where he had found it.

His fingers found the brass knob on the top drawer. He slid it open. Feeling the sting of guilt, he peeked over his shoulder a second time, but the coast remained clear. The thrill of his little caper overwhelmed his guilty conscience, and he refocused his vision on the contents of the drawer.

Socks. Mostly black, but a few tan and white ones. Daniel boldly reached inside and moved the socks around, just to make sure the drawer held nothing more interesting. It did not. He moved on to the second drawer and did the same. Nothing but underwear. The third drawer held only white cotton undershirts, and the fourth contained the baggy t-shirts and lounge pants his dad wore around the house on the weekends.

Dissatisfied, Daniel crept over to the nightstand. The small bedside table held a lamp, a shiny silver alarm clock that currently read four-thirty, a faded leather King James Version Bible, and a framed four-by-six photograph of his mother.

Pictures of Helen Wester were rare; this was one of only three in their home. He had never known her. She died when he was a baby. Each time he came across her photographed face, he had to stop and admire her, for it was the only way he could ever be with her. He stared at the photo, momentarily mesmerized by

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her radiant image. Her auburn hair glowed. Her hazel eyes shimmered as they gazed back at him. He could easily see himself in her. Though he shared his father's coloring- fair skin, blue eyes, and thick, black-brown hair- he had inherited his mother's bone structure. He had her rounded chin. Her dimples. Her nose.

He finally tore his gaze away from the picture and jerked open the nightstand's single drawer. Nothing too exciting in here either. Just a roll of Tums, a pair of glasses, and a few copies of Reader's Digest. He extracted the glasses and tried them on, but they made everything blurry and gave him a headache. He put them back and closed the drawer. Where next?

The closet.

It almost called out to him. He stole across the room to the closet door and gingerly pulled it open. He cringed, expecting the door hinges to squeak loudly and give him away, but they did not make a sound. A single light bulb dangled from the ceiling. To turn it on, you had to tug a metal chain attached to the base of the fixture, but Daniel was tall enough to do that now. The bulb glowed to life as he clicked it on. A steel rod held his father's clothes. Lots of plaid. Flannel. Wrangler jeans. A couple of nice button-downs and khaki slacks that he wore to church. He had a special hanger for ties, even though he only owned five different ones, three of which Daniel had given him for Father's Days past at the suggestion of his babysitter, Miss Priscilla. He also had a special hanger for belts, Daniel observed. Who knew grown-ups had so many kinds of hangers?

On the floor of the closet, his father's shoes lined up neatly, like toy soldiers at attention. Six different pairs of them, all dull blacks and browns and kind of smelly. Behind the shoes, Daniel glimpsed several stacks of dusty old books. They seemed a little misplaced, but he didn't think anything else about it. He didn't even bother reading the titles. He liked to read well enough, but these books all looked long and boring and probably didn't have any pictures.

He glanced up at the top of the closet, where a shelf held an assortment of items. Some ratty shoe boxes, more big books, extra folded blankets and quilts, and, poking out from beneath the bottom quilt, a wooden box.

A really interesting wooden box.

Daniel wanted to get it down. The fact that it was partially hidden beneath the quilts intrigued him. He had to know what was inside it.

At first, he thought it would be out of reach, but when he stood on his toes and stretched up as far as he could, he brushed the rough wood grain with his fingertips. He grasped one of the corners and slid it forward an inch or two. As he attempted to move it around, he realized it was much heavier than he had imagined. He almost dropped it when he finally pulled it out from under the blankets. But he maneuvered it slowly, cautiously, until he held it at last within his hands.

The rectangular box, probably over a foot wide, definitely over a foot long, and several inches deep, looked ancient. In several places, the dark chocolate wood had been scratched or chipped. The fancy metalwork on the corners had rusted. Carved into the sides and top of the box were several round, complicated designs with weird-looking stars and overlapping triangles and maze-like twists and loops winding across them.

He plopped down cross-legged on the closet floor and leveled the box across his thighs. Not wasting any time, he opened it.

Or tried to.

The large rust-corroded metal clasp on the front would not open until a key had been inserted into the lock.

Daniel's excitement deflated. There was no key.

He tried to think. Had he seen an old-timey key in any of the drawers he had just nosed through? No. He would have certainly noticed something like that. He looked down at the lock once more. Maybe he could pry it open. People did that kind of thing on TV all the time. If he could find some kind of-
"Daniel."

At the sound of his father's stern voice, Daniel felt his heart drop into his abdomen.

Using his peripheral vision, he discerned his father's figure standing to his left. He couldn't bring himself to turn and look up at the man.

"What do you think you're doing?"

That tone. Daniel winced at the quiet yet subtly harsh tone of his dad's voice. He didn't hear that voice often; he was normally a well-behaved kid. He didn't usually do things like this. What had gotten into him? He knew the rule. No going in Dad's bedroom alone. He knew it wasn't okay to go through other people's things without asking, but that's what he had done. And all for what? He hadn't even been able to open this stupid box.

"Daniel, what are you doing with that box?"

There would be consequences for this. He couldn't even remember the last time he had gotten in trouble or what kind of punishment he had received. Maybe a time-out? Daniel was ten now, and ten seemed too old for time-outs. What kind of new, age-appropriate consequence would Dad enforce? He might take away his bike. Ground him from TV for a week. Or even-

"Answer me, son."

Daniel gulped. "I-I'm sorry, Dad, I just- I just got bored and..." Thought I'd go through your private belongings. He realized how stupid his plan had been. "I don't know." He didn't even try to think up a lie; he had never been any good at lying. "I don't know. I'm sorry."

"Did you open that box?"

For the first time, Daniel looked at his father. With his wide eyes and unusually pale complexion, Pete Wester appeared more terrified than angry.

"Did you open it?"

"No, sir. It was locked," Daniel said, dumbly admitting that he had tried.

He heard his father release a sigh. Something like relief swept over his features. He rubbed his forehead and looked down at the box. "Give it to me."

Daniel moved so fast, he didn't even remember standing up. He seemed to have teleported from the closet floor to his father's side, arms extending the mysterious wooden box toward the man. He lowered his head in shame as the weight of the object transferred from his hands to those of his father.

"Go to your room and stay there until supper time."

Daniel did as he was told. He sat on his bed for nearly an hour, imagining all sorts of dreadful punishments he might be forced to endure. But at five-thirty, when his father called him to the supper table, nothing happened. He acted like Daniel had spent the entire day minding his own business, playing quietly in his room. The incident was never discussed.

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Days passed. Then weeks. Dad never once mentioned what had happened, and Daniel surely didn't bring it up. But he thought about the box all the time.

At night, as he tried to fall asleep, he pictured the strange designs carved into the box's surface. He visualized Dad's pallid complexion and the alarm in his eyes. He could still hear the fear in the man's voice as his question echoed in his thoughts: Did you open that box?

The third Saturday of July, Dad decided to build a compost bin.

Daniel rode shotgun as they drove into town. They grabbed sausage biscuits and extra-greasy hashbrown rounds at the Hardee's drive-thru on the way to Benson's Hardware for materials. Daniel liked Benson's. At first. He liked the woodsy smell of the lumber section. But as usual, Dad lingered far too long there, comparing prices of every single thing, and Daniel got bored.

That's when the idea came to him.

When they returned home, Dad went outside and immediately got to work. Daniel heard him hammering away in the yard, focused on his project.

This was it. This was his chance. He had plenty of time to dash into Dad's bedroom and get another peek inside his closet at the wooden box.

Just like that afternoon three weeks ago, he crept into the room, opened the closet door, and clicked on the light. He peered up at the shelf, craning his neck.

Shoe boxes. Books. Blankets.

The box was gone.

The mysterious wooden box became something of a legend. In August, when he returned to school and started fifth grade, Daniel told his best friend, Lena Dillon, about his discovery, and it turned into a recurrent topic of their conversations. They relished the invention of all sorts of theories- some more ridiculous than others- about the box and what it held.

The box held Daniel's real birth certificate and adoption papers and various other things that proved the two of them were actually twins separated at birth. (Although with Lena's white-blonde hair and nearly translucent porcelain skin, they couldn't possibly be related.)

The box contained a disguise kit that Dad sometimes dressed up in and roamed around town wearing. He could be anyone. The mayor. The gangly bow-tie wearing guy that bagged groceries at Piggly Wiggly. Even Mrs. Driscoll, the dreadful, shriveled old schoolteacher who once made a kid write sentences on the board for burping in class. They'd never seen Dad and Mrs. Driscoll in the same room...

That one was a classic.

In truth, Daniel liked to believe that the box stored his mother's old things. Her diary, personal mementos, items like that. As pleasant as that idea was, he thought the box had a more dangerous feel to it.

That's why the theory that made the most sense was the gun theory. The wooden box most likely held a gun and bullets. Daniel's father kept no weapons in sight, but that didn't rule out the possibility of him owning one. They lived in rural Tennessee. Pretty much everyone had one. If his father did own a gun, he

definitely would have kept it wisely hidden away and locked up. That would also explain why he had been more upset over the prospect of Daniel opening the box than him merely finding it, as well as why it had vanished when he had gone looking for it a second time. His father had been forced to find a new hiding spot, because he knew his nosy kid would snoop again. He didn't want Daniel to accidentally shoot himself or anyone else.

Still, there was that lingering dream that the box held something way cooler.

A few times, when Lena had come over to the Westers' place to hang out, she and Daniel had set out to look for the box together, but something had always thwarted their mission. His father called them into the living room for snacks, or he suggested they go outside and get some fresh air. Or the door to his bedroom would simply be locked. Dad was always a step ahead of them.

Finally, they gave up.

They grew up and forgot about the box.

Until the day Daniel found the key.

(end of excerpt)

