

A Bear Collector's Mystery

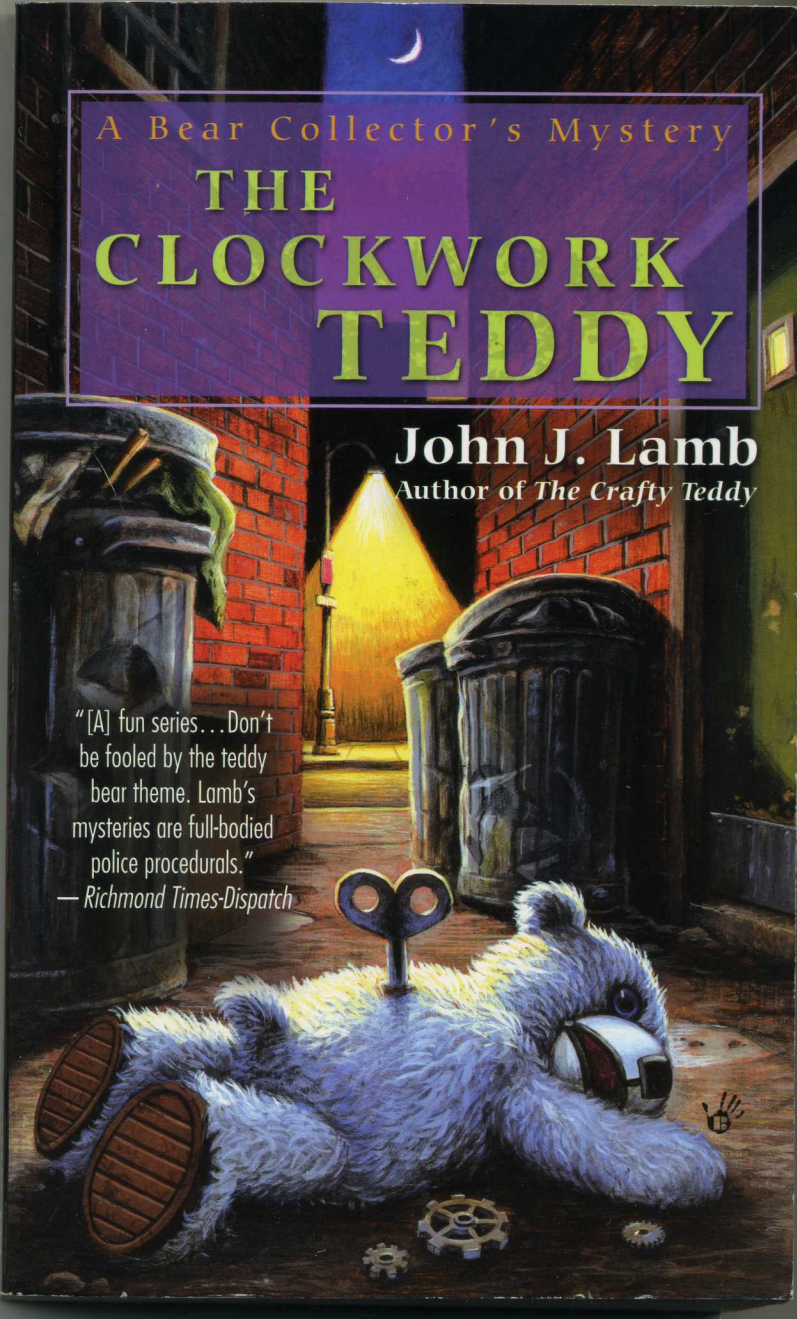
# THE CLOCKWORK TEDDY

**John J. Lamb**

Author of *The Crafty Teddy*

"[A] fun series... Don't be fooled by the teddy bear theme. Lamb's mysteries are full-bodied police procedurals."

—*Richmond Times-Dispatch*



you're a terrible liar when it comes to fibbing to me. Oh, and also because you always get me the best birthday presents."

"Well, I hate to disappoint you, but I'm *not* going to Penny's booth, because I've already got your present."

"Oh, really?"

"Yes, and I'm certain you're going to love the latest season of *South Park* on DVD."

"Brad honey, you've done more insanely dangerous things than I want to remember, but even *you* wouldn't take that sort of risk."

"I know, so at least allow me to pretend that you don't know where I'm going. I'll be back in a little while."

Cane in hand, I slowly limped up the sidewalk toward the city hall, where all seven of the exhibitor's aisles intersected like the spokes of an old wagon wheel. It was still about ten minutes from the formal opening of the show, yet the collectors were already beginning to hover around their favorite artists' tables, hoping to discover that one special bear before someone else did. Not that there weren't hundreds of amazing stuffed animals made by popular artists, which guaranteed that no one would go home unhappy. On our aisle alone, there was a stellar assemblage of bear makers, including the award-winning Donna Griffin, Karen DiNicola from Australia, and Rosalie Frischmann, who'd made the sweet teddy bear wearing an old-fashioned sailor suit that sat on one of our shelves back home.

Working my way through the growing crowd, I spotted a middle-aged couple closely inspecting one of Mac Pohlen's mohair creations. These weren't your garden-variety bear collectors, however. Susan and Terry Quinlan owned and operated the finest teddy bear museum in the United States and they were obviously looking to add to their fabled collection. Located in Santa Barbara, the museum had opened after we'd moved to Virginia, but we'd heard about what an amazing place it was and regretted that we couldn't fit in a trip down the coast to see it. Bear artists dream of having

their work on display at the museum, and I felt a tiny spark of excitement at the idea of the Quinlans discovering Ash's creations. That is, if they weren't scared away from our table by my bears.

Then I saw someone else I recognized: Lauren Vandembosch, a native San Franciscan and one of the influential bear artists who'd helped foster the teddy bear renaissance back in the early 1980s. Pick up any teddy bear encyclopedia—believe it or not, there are such books, and we actually own a couple—and the odds are good that you'll find listings and photos of Lauren's Barbeary Coast Bears, a collection of stuffed animals dressed in authentic Gold Rush-era costumes. Ash and I used to see Lauren regularly at the West Coast bear shows and we owned Black Beart, one of her creations, who wore a black frock coat and was modeled after the celebrated California stagecoach robber.

It was the first time I'd seen Lauren since we'd left California and, unlike me, the years hadn't changed her. With her pink, smooth complexion, athletic figure, and curly brunette hair, she didn't look her age, which had to be at least mid-fifties. As a matter of fact, she didn't look much older than her picture in one of our teddy bear books, published fifteen years ago; it made me wonder if she had a *Dorian Gray*-esque portrait hidden in her attic. As I walked past, a sudden gust of warm wind blew her foam-backed "Barbeary Bears" poster from its wooden easel. It fell to the sidewalk in front of me, badly bending one of the upper corners, and by the time she came rushing around from the other side of the table, I'd already picked up the ruined sign.

Handing it to her, I said, "Don't you just hate it when that happens? We had a nice poster like that and someone knocked it off its stand at the Niagara show. Eighty-five bucks right down the drain."

Her jaw tightened when she saw how badly the poster was damaged. Leaning it against the table, she said, "Damn

sembled, and would fit into a large suitcase. I bought the bear and told her I'd come back for it at the end of the day. As I limped toward our table, I was pleased to have found the perfect gift—and also curious what the TSA X-ray operator would make of it when he scanned our luggage.

Two women were leaving our booth as I approached, one of them hugging a paper bag containing one of Ash's most recent creations, Rhea Red Velvet Cake, a bear made from scarlet plush fur and wearing a fabric cake-wedge costume. Meanwhile, Ash was restocking our table with fresh bears, which meant there'd been lots of customers. I was also pleased to see that she'd apparently received my earlier psychic distress signals and had removed Mc-Bear-ett from the table. Hopefully, that had happened before the Quinlans were in the neighborhood. I still had high hopes that one of Ash's bears would end up in their museum.

"That was mostly a big waste of time," I said as I lowered myself onto one of our wood-and-canvas folding chairs.

"How do you mean?"

"Lauren declined to press charges."

"Why, for heaven's sake?"

"It's your basic can of worms. Her son has been accused of stealing from his former employer and Bronsey was hired to recover the Four-Ninety-Six stuff." I used the California penal code section for Receiving Stolen Property. "Fortunately, it's none of my business."

"Thank you, God," Ash said mock-reverently as she gazed skyward.

"And thank *you* for putting Mc-Bear-ett under the table."

"I didn't. He was the very first bear we sold this morning."

"You're kidding."

"No, and you'll never guess who bought it."

"Someone with very bad eyesight?"

"No, the Quinlans. They're delightful people and Steve

Mc-Bear-ett is going to be in the Teddy Bear Museum.” Ash’s eyes were bright with joy. “Honey, I’m so proud of you.”

“I don’t understand. I saw them shortly after I left our table and they didn’t look insane.”

“Of course they aren’t. I really wish you’d realize that you’re getting to be an accomplished bear artist. Susan said that she’d never seen anything like Mc-Bear-ett.”

“That isn’t necessarily a compliment. Besides, why buy Mc-Bear-ett when they could have had one of your Confection Collection bears?”

“That’s the other piece of great news.” Ash was grinning from ear to ear. “They bought Becky Birthday Cake, and she’ll be in the museum, too!”

## Three

Not only were two of our bears selected for the Quinlan Museum, the Plaza was packed with fur fanatics and it was our most successful sales day ever. We sold all but one of the pieces we'd brought from Ash's Confection Collection, most of her more realistic-looking big cat soft sculptures, and a cop's girlfriend even bought Jon and Ponch, a pair of plush bears I'd dressed in California Highway Patrol motorcycle officer uniforms. The day flew by and before we knew it, it was five o'clock and time to start packing up.

Although we'd been busy since morning, the adrenaline of the day kept both of us from feeling tired. This was a good thing, since we had a dinner date with my old partner Gregg Mauel and his wife, Susie. We drove to our motel in Novato, took showers, and changed clothes, and then headed south on the 101 Freeway toward Sausalito. We were distressed to see how much new development had taken place along the freeway corridor since we'd moved away and were also taken aback by how oppressively brown and parched the hills looked. Even the clusters of eucalyptus trees dotting

## Afterword

I'm sad to report that there is no annual teddy bear show in Sonoma's lovely and historic Plaza. If there was, my wife and I might be induced to return to California to attend it. But like Brad and Ashleigh, we'd only go back to the Golden State for a brief visit. We have a blissful life here in the Shenandoah Valley.

As in the past, I've mixed some genuine folks up with my fictional characters. Donna Griffin, Mac Pohlen, Karen DiNicola, and Rosalie Frischmann are all real teddy bear artists and Joyce and I are honored to have their creations on display in our home. Susan and Terry Quinlan are also real, as is their incredible teddy bear museum in Santa Barbara, California. If you want to find out more about the museum, please visit [www.quinlanmuseum.com](http://www.quinlanmuseum.com). On a technological note, both the Japanese scientist and his remarkable humanlike androids that I obliquely referred to in Chapter 13 are authentic, too. Dr. Hiroshi Ishiguro is the director of Osaka University's Intelligent Robotics Laboratory and one of the world's foremost pioneers in this field.

Finally, I want to thank all my readers who've either sent me photos of their teddy bears or brought their furry treasures to my book signings. I'm humbled that you'd share such a joyful part of your life with me.