

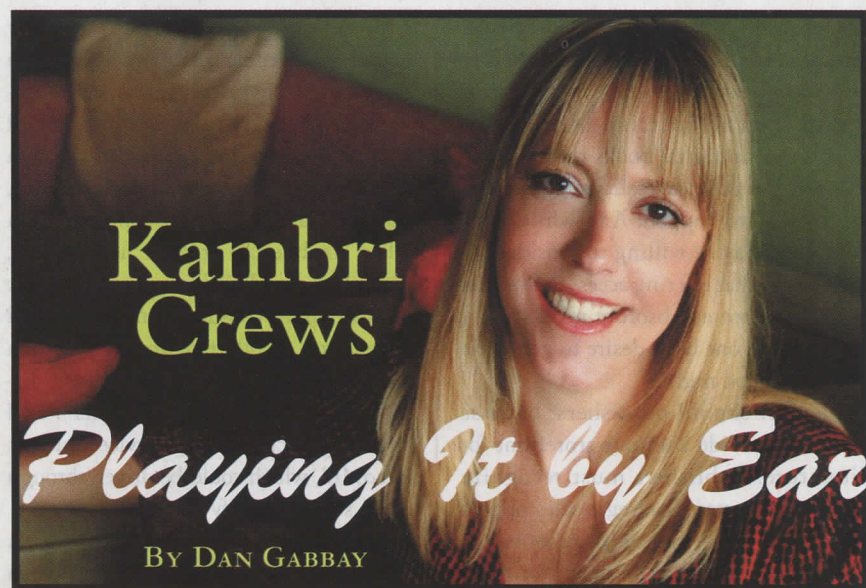
Author Profile

Poised, intelligent, and with a quick wit, Kambri Crews comes across as a woman comfortable in her own skin. So comfortable, it's easy to forget that her father, a man she loves, is serving a 20-year sentence in a Texas maximum-security prison for attempted murder, stabbing and nearly decapitating his girlfriend—and that Kambri helped put him there.

Her harrowing memoir, *Burn Down the Ground* (Villard), to be released in February, opens with the adult Kambri figuring out how to smuggle a pack of Juicy Fruit gum to her father in prison. But it's what she figured out—and witnessed—growing up, as the hearing daughter of two deaf parents in a deeply dysfunctional family, that informs her extraordinary story.

Kambri's rage and rebellion, her hopes and fears, all play a part in her memories as they veer from moments of pure happiness to scenes of searing violence. Her dad, she says, was "handsome, funny, a great storyteller, and very, very smart." But how to reconcile that with the man who was also vicious and who, as she testified in court to his pattern of abuse, once put a knife to her mother's throat? The answer, of course, is that you don't. What Kambri *has* done is face the truth with an unflinching eye.

She spent much of her childhood in a tin shack in the Texas scrublands, where she "learned there was no use in crying; my parents couldn't hear me, anyway." As a child of deaf parents, she explains, "You grow up



fast. You're answering the phone, paying the bills, dealing with bill collectors. You want to be in charge of things... and you're really great at multitasking."

It is precisely those traits and skills that Kambri has drawn upon to build a successful career in New York as a producer and comedic storyteller. Though there may be no use in crying, she has discovered that there is plenty of value in laughing. It puts life, and all the pain that comes with it, into perspective, she says. Describing a recent visit to her father: "It was picture day at the prison. I wore stripes."

Comedic storytelling, the sharing of her stories on stage, is how Kambri fleshed out the book. Her husband, actor and comedian Christian Finnegan spurred her on. "He turned me into a kind of party trick. Christian doesn't like to talk about himself, so when people asked him what was going on with him, he would always divert attention to me. So I'd tell these stories about my life and their eyes would just bug out. Time and again my husband said, 'You have to write a book.'"

Not that it was easy. Writing the memoir put Kambri into her own little prison cell. "I'm a friendly person. I like hanging out with people. But I closed myself in a room from Friday night to Monday morning, kept the door shut 24/7. After it was over I felt like I had post partum depres-

sion, that's the only way I can describe it. I'd given birth to 'this thing.'"

"This thing" is a remarkable odyssey of scorched earth, collateral damage, and survival. "I hope," Kambri says, "that I've raised some deeper questions about what forgiveness is."

Kambri has learned much more from her father than how to smuggle chewing gum into prison. He taught her, for example, that if you want to grow a garden in the Texas woods, the first thing you have to do is burn down the ground—clear away the past to grow something new. It's something Kambri has become very adept at: starting over.

But what's next? She's in talks to star in a one-woman show on stage. She travels to schools to talk to kids about making the right choices, taking a special interest in children with parents in prison. And then there's her father. He's 65 now and soon he'll be up for parole. Kambri struggles with the question of whether he deserves it. But she wants to be a part of his rehabilitation and sees that as the subject of her next book. (She's also been in touch with the girlfriend.)

So, yes, there will definitely be a next act. "I'm getting that itch right now," Kambri says. "I'm ready to burn down the ground again." ■

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