

**A LOMAX AND BIGGS MYSTERY**



*#1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR*

# MARSHALL KARP



# CUT, PASTE, KILL

## CHAPTER ONE

**SHE SCRAPED THE** salmon croquettes from her dinner plate into the cats' bowl.

Dizzy, the overweight tiger-striped tabby, took one lady-like nibble of the reheated, three-day-old fish, and walked off. Wayne, the black-and-white longhair, was curled up nose to tail in his favorite spot on the window seat. He didn't even pretend to be interested.

"At least try it," she said. "It's got omega-3. It's good for you."

Wayne yawned, the cat equivalent of giving her the finger.

"I know," she said. "If it's so damn healthy, how come I didn't eat it?"

She poured herself a cup of chai, stirred in five packets of Equal, added a splash of nonfat milk, and took a satisfying sip. Coffee gave her the jitters—definitely a handicap when you've got a pair of razor-sharp scissors in your hand. But the black tea had just enough caffeine to give her the kick she needed to work on her scrapbooks long into the night.

She opened a kitchen cabinet and pulled out a three-quart Tupperware storage bowl. Wayne bolted up.

"I figured this would get your testosterone going," she said, laughing.

The lid was opaque, but the kiwi-colored bowl was transparent enough to see what was inside.

## CUT, PASTE, KILL

Ping-Pong balls.

Three weeks ago there were twenty. Each one carefully numbered with a fine-point Sharpie.

Numbers six and fifteen had already been pulled.

That left eighteen Ping-Pong balls. Eighteen possible victims.

She swirled the bowl around, and four cat ears went on point as the balls skittered softly against the sides.

“Lotto time,” she announced, as if the two smartest cats in Los Angeles needed any further explanation.

Then she shook the bowl vigorously. The little white celluloid spheres ricocheted against the polycarbonate container like a rattlesnake attacking a roll of bubble wrap.

Dizzy and Wayne were at her feet, swiping at her skirt, yowling for her to make her next move.

“Not so catatonic anymore, are we?” she said, trotting out the same old joke the kitties never seemed to get tired of hearing.

She pried off the top of the Tupperware and flung the contents against the kitchen wall.

The cats went batshit.

Dizzy waddled under the kitchen table in hot pursuit of a trio of balls. Wayne headed the other way, pounced on number 14, and sent it scooting under the stove.

Lotto night was traditionally a fish night, and since she had tossed the salmon, she decided to treat herself to some dessert. Ben & Jerry’s Phish Food ice cream. She took a pint from the freezer and put it in the microwave for thirty seconds to get it nice and soft.

As soon as the timer dinged, she grabbed a spoon and began digging into the carton of creamy chocolate that was laced with caramel swirls, gooey marshmallows, and little fudge fish.

She sat down at the table, just as both cats, chasing the same ball, collided head-on.

It was a total hoot, and she only wished she could tape it and post it on YouTube. Look everybody . . . here are my two cats

helping me pick a murder victim. I call it *Feline Felons*.

It took three minutes before Wayne nosed one ball into a corner and sank his teeth into it.

“We have a winner,” she called out to the invisible crowd.

Wayne knew the drill. He hopped up on her lap, unclenched his teeth, and loudly demanded his reward.

“Number eleven,” she said, examining the ball.

She lifted the cat from her lap, went back to the cabinet, and removed a Ziploc bag filled with leaves and stems.

“Game, set, match,” she said to Dizzy, who was still too busy chasing Ping-Pong balls to know that the contest was over. “*Nepeta cataria* for everyone.”

She opened the bag, grabbed a small fistful of catnip, and sprinkled it on the kitchen floor. Both cats dove in.

She put on a clean pair of white cotton gloves, went to the bedroom, opened her closet, and twisted the dial on the four-hundred-and-seventy-pound AMSEC safe that protected her precious scrapbooks from fire, water, and nosy Parkers.

Each scrapbook was sealed in its own numbered manila envelope. She felt giddy as she removed number eleven from the safe’s plush velour interior. Although she had crafted every page of every scrapbook to perfection, she didn’t know which book was in which envelope.

That was the whole idea. Random selection. Each scrapbook went into an identical envelope, then the envelopes were shuffled and numbered.

Dizzy and Wayne chose the winner.

Or in this case, the loser.

She closed the four-inch-thick steel door, yanked the handle and listened as the dead bar clanked into the belly of the safe. She twirled the chrome-plated dial and carried the Lotto-winning envelope to the kitchen.

Sitting down at the table, she scraped up the dregs of the ice cream and sucked the spoon dry. “Would you like to see who

## CUT, PASTE, KILL

you picked?” she asked.

But Dizzy and Wayne were too busy licking themselves, licking each other, and rolling around in the intoxicating weed.

She laughed as she tore open the manila envelope. “Stoners,” she said.

## CHAPTER TWO

**“SO, MIKE, HOW’S** it going?” my father asked, tears streaming down his face. Granted, he was chopping onions, but still, there’s something unnerving about watching a grown man cry.

And Big Jim Lomax is a man full grown. Six-foot-four, which is easy enough to verify, and three hundred pounds, which isn’t. He’s been claiming that same perfect bowling score weight since the Clinton administration, but I’m betting his scale simply ran out of numbers.

“It’s going pretty good,” I responded. “Terry and I just wrapped up that gangbanger homicide, and we—”

“I don’t mean cop stuff. I’m your father, not Internal Affairs. I meant how’s your life going?”

“Diana and I have been in the new house for six months. We finally got the painting done, and—”

“Mike, I’ve seen the house. I’ve been there fifty times.”

“And two of those times you were actually invited.”

He ignored the dig. “Okay, so you and Diana feel good about the house,” he said. “How do you feel about everything else?”

Considering the fact that I’m a detective, you would think I’d have picked up on the obvious. When Big Jim asks how it’s going, he’s worse than Internal Affairs. “It” means my relationship with Diana.

I sidestepped the question. “The message you left on my an-

swering machine said ‘lunch at one.’ It’s 1:15, and we haven’t been fed yet.”

“Great artistry takes time,” he said, giving the last onion a final chop. He put the knife down, wiped his eyes with a dish towel, and cleared his nasal passages with a loud wet snort.

“Very appetizing,” I said. “You’re lucky I work for LAPD and not the Board of Health.”

He turned his attention to a bowl that was heaped with raw chopped meat. “So,” he said in that tone of voice that lets you know he’s tired of waiting for an answer, “how’s it going?”

I deflected the question a second time. “And the rest of your message said there would be an announcement of major proportion. The only thing I’ve seen of major proportion is a pile of ground round the size of a bowling ball. Do you really need that much red meat for six people?”

“Hey, these aren’t dinky-ass McDonald’s burgers. These are Big Jim’s Famous Cajun Cows on a Bun. The recipe calls for one pound per person.”

“I hate to put a crimp in your artistry, but Diana and I can’t handle your version of spicy,” I said.

“What’s wrong with it?”

“The last time I ate one of your burgers it burned the hair right off my chest. From the inside. Hold the Cajun on ours.”

“Your loss,” he said, digging into the bowl and scooping out a mound of beef. He plopped it into a smaller bowl.

“And hold the cow. We’ll each have a dinky-ass burger.”

“Hold the Cajun, hold the cow, what next, Mike? Hold the bun?”

“The bun is fine,” I said, “but I’d be eternally grateful if you’d hold the transparent questions about my love life.”

“*Moi?*” The three-hundred-pound cherub grinned. “Transparent? I was trying to be subtle, but that never works with you. So here’s the question in five words. How’s it going with Diana?”

“And here’s the answer in five words: none of your business.”

“That’s four words.”

“Do you really need the fifth word? Here’s a hint. It starts with an F.”

“You guys have a great relationship. I’m just curious if you have any plans to, like, maybe permanentize it?”

“Yeah. We’re reading *Permanentizing for Dummies*. I’ll keep you posted.”

He started working the onions into the beef. “Diana isn’t getting any younger, you know,” he said. “Her biological clock is spinning like a windmill in a hurricane. And, for the record, so is mine. Your son needs a grandfather who can teach him to play ball, fly a plane, and take apart an engine. Or would you rather he just visit me when I’m in the nursing home, crapping in my diapers and drooling in my oatmeal?”

“I don’t have a son,” I said.

“That’s my point, Mike. You should. It’s time.”

“Has it escaped you that Diana and I aren’t even married?”

“Your mother and I weren’t married either, and I got her pregnant.”

“Once again, I fail to live up to your legacy.”

The kitchen door opened, and Angel came in. Jim married her a few years after my mother died. My mom was a movie stunt-woman, tall and athletic, with red hair, fair skin, and classic Irish features. Angel is tiny, and her features are classic South of the Border: black hair, dark eyes, and caramel skin.

She walked up to Jim, her head barely reaching his chest. “Are you going to come outside and grill the hamburgers, or are you going to stay in here and grill your son?”

“You’re way off base,” he said. “We’re just having a pleasant father-son chat.”

She smiled at me. “He was sticking his nose into your personal life again, wasn’t he, Mike?”

“Again? You mean still. And it wasn’t just his nose. He was digging with all fours like a prairie dog with an obsessive-com-



pulsive disorder.”

She wagged a finger at him. “If we had more time I’d give you the lecture on personal boundaries again, but Marilyn and Terry are here and we’re all hungry.”

“Terry’s here?” Jim said. “Good. At least I’ll have someone to talk to who actually likes me.”

The truth is, everyone likes my father. It’s his style that can drive people a little nuts. His goal is to make people happy. The problem is Big Jim Lomax never bothers to ask *what* would make you happy. He decides for you. If he sees an old lady standing on a corner, he’ll stop traffic and carry her across the street. It doesn’t matter if she’s screaming, “Put me down, you overgrown idiot. I was waiting for a bus.”

He’s all heart and no tact. I love him, but since I’m the one whose life he most enjoys trying to fix, I spend a lot of time trying to keep him at bay.

Jim, Angel, and I carried the food out to the backyard. It was late spring, so the place smelled of bougainvilleas and diesel fuel.

The flowers change with the seasons. The oil smell is year-round.

Jim is a trucker. He started out working for the movie studios as a driver. Early on, he realized that the people who rented out the cars and trucks to the film crews made more money than the people who drove them. Today he owns more than fifty equipment trucks, star trailers, and limos. At any given time, a lot of them are scattered over his four-acre spread in Riverside.

I put the food on the table, said hello to Terry and Marilyn, then headed over to Diana.

She looked spectacular—blond, tan, and at forty-three, totally hot. When my wife, Joanie, died I couldn’t imagine ever loving another woman. I was wrong. I wanted to spend the rest of my life with Diana Trantabella. I was about to put my arm around her when my cell phone rang.

MARSHALL KARP

There are only four people who would call my cell on a Sunday. Three of them were here. That left Brendan Kilcullen, my boss.

I answered. "It's a beautiful Sunday afternoon, Lieutenant. I'd have thought you'd be out on the golf course."

"I was," he said. "Until the watch commander called. That's the thing about homicide, Lomax. It hunts you down, even when you're about to birdie the seventh hole. A woman was stabbed to death at The Afton Gardens Hotel. I need you and your partner on the case now. Do you know where he is?"

"Yes sir. Detective Biggs is ten feet away, contemplating suicide."

"I'm not in the mood for comedy," Kilcullen said. "Tell him to put his gun down, and—"

"It's not a gun," I said. "It's a cholesterol bomb. Should I tell him to cancel his lunch plans?"

"Lunch, dinner, Christmas, Easter. You two don't eat till you solve it. From what the watch commander tells me, this one is high profile."

"They're all high profile, boss. In Hollywood, even the murder victims are celebrities. What's the dead woman's claim to fame? Big screen, small screen, or straight-to-DVD?"

"None of the above. She's more of an O. J. Simpson type."

"She's a sports star?"

"No," Kilcullen said. "She killed someone last year and got away with it."

## CHAPTER THREE

“**LUNCH WILL HAVE** to wait,” I said. “That was Kilcullen. Terry and I have a date with a hot chick, and she’s getting colder by the minute.”

The three women took it in stride. Marilyn and Diana, because they’re used to having their plans sandbagged by a homicide call, and Angel, because living with Big Jim is like training for the Who-Knows-What-The-Hell-Will-Happen-Next Olympics.

“We can go to Riverside Plaza,” Angel said. “Chico’s has some cute new summer tops.”

“I’m game,” Marilyn said.

“What about those of us who already have all the cute new summer tops we need?” Big Jim asked. “What am I supposed to do with six pounds of raw meat?”

“Knowing you, it won’t go to waste,” I said. “But Terry and I will take one car and be back as soon as we can for dinner and our womenfolk.”

“And your father’s big surprise,” Diana said, putting her arm around as much of Jim’s size XXXXX-L back as she could.

Jim softened. “At least somebody cares about my feelings. The problem with—”

Terry was already in the car, with the Kojak light flashing. He hit the siren and cut Jim off.

“Can’t hear you, Dad. Gotta run.” I jumped in the car.

“What have we got?” Terry asked as we peeled out.

“Woman stabbed to death at The Afton Gardens Hotel.”

“That’s the little hotel a few blocks from our office,” Terry said.

“Yeah, it would have been incredibly convenient if we were at work, instead of an hour away, about to eat lunch.”

“Forty minutes with lights and sirens,” Terry said. “As for lunch, open these.” He handed me a large bag of sour-cream-and-cheddar potato chips.

I flipped the bag over to look at the nutritional chart. “Wow, only a hundred and sixty calories and ten grams of yummy fat per ounce.”

“Hey, I knew we were going to go hungry, so I grabbed it off the table. It was the healthiest snack he had.”

“One three-hundred-pound Lomax is enough,” I said, rolling down the window and flipping the bag onto the highway. “You can order room service when we get to the hotel.”

“I don’t think I can afford it. The Afton Gardens is pretty la-di-freaking-dah,” he said. “We’ve had to send a couple of units out there for the occasional Drunk and Disorderly, but it’s not the kind of hotel where you get a homicide.”

“Kilcullen said we’re dealing with a high-profile victim.”

“That narrows it down to everyone in show business,” he said. “Including Oprah’s hairdresser.”

“According to Kilcullen this woman’s not in the biz.”

“How else do you get to be high profile in LA?”

“She killed someone.”

“Well, there’s your motive,” he said. “Who did she kill?”

“He didn’t give me any details. You know Kilcullen. He just wants you to think this is the biggest case you ever caught.”

“I’m hoping it’ll be the fastest. Those burgers your father was whipping up looked like a meal and a half.”

“The burgers weren’t all he was whipping. Before you and Marilyn got there he was on my case about his new favorite

subject.”

“Ah yes . . . dropping little hints about grandkids?”

“He’s done with hints. He brought out the big guns. He made it clear that Diana’s biological clock is running out of juice, and that the bus that’s taking him to the nursing home is double-parked outside.”

“Knowing your father the way I do, I’d say that borders on subtlety,” Terry said. “So what’s this big announcement he’s going to lay on us? Marilyn thinks he’s going to retire.”

“Fat chance. Big Jim has been renting and driving film trucks for forty years. It’s the cushiest job in the world. He drives to a location, sits around doing nothing all day, then when the crew wraps, he drives back. If he retired, he would still sit around doing nothing; only he wouldn’t get paid for it.”

“So what do you think this big announcement is?”

“I don’t know, but if I’m lucky, there’s one thing he can say that would make me deliriously happy.”

“What’s that?”

“ ‘Great news, everybody—I’ve decided to take a vow of silence.’ “

## CHAPTER FOUR

**CRIME SCENES ARE** like football games. A lot of the people only show up for the tailgate party.

Terry and I got to The Afton Gardens Hotel, pumped up for the game. But the rest of the crowd—the media, the paparazzi, and the gawkers of every stripe—were there for the festivities.

Cop cars, CSU vans, and a morgue transport wagon were parked at cockeyed angles on both sides of the street, but there was a clear pathway that led right to the front canopy of the hotel. Terry took it.

“Good thing we’re the lead detectives,” he said, “or we’d never find parking.”

There were dozens of people milling around on the business side of the yellow tape, but one guy stood out—a tall, young uniformed cop who smiled and waved like a game show hostess when we pulled up.

“Oh, look,” Terry said. “It’s Bobby Boy Scout. How much do you want to bet he’s the first responder, and today is the day he lost his homicide virginity?”

We got out of the car, and the cop walked toward us smartly. “Detectives?” he said, taking a pad from his back pocket.

Terry nodded. “Mike Lomax and Terry Biggs. What have we got, Officer?”

“Officer Hector DeJean, sir. Just a second, sir.” He turned to a

cluster of blue uniforms who were working crowd control. “Yo, Tara, the detectives are here.”

A female cop sauntered over. “Officer Tara Cibelli,” she said. “Me and Hector, we were first on the scene.”

“We’ve been here over an hour,” DeJean said, “so we’ve already done a lot of legwork.”

“Sorry we were late,” Terry said. “My partner and I were under the misconception that Sunday was a day of rest. Just curious, Officer Legwork, is this your first homicide?”

“In real life, yes,” DeJean said, “but I’ve fantasized about it hundreds of times.”

“None of my business,” Terry said, “but having done this a while I’d suggest you find a healthier fantasy. Like world peace, or winning the lottery, or getting naked with the starting lineup of your favorite women’s basketball team. Tell us what you’ve got.”

“Okay,” he said, looking down at his notes. “The dead woman is Eleanor Crump.”

“Eleanor Bellingham-Crump,” Cibelli said.

DeJean looked at her. “Do we really need her middle name?”

“There’s a hyphen,” Cibelli said. “Bellingham-Crump is her last name.”

DeJean turned back to us and twirled his finger in the air, like his partner was way too focused on the small stuff. “Fine,” he said. “So there’s a random hyphen in her name. Eleanor *Bellingham-Crump*. She’s a British citizen. Her husband, Edward, is a diplomat with the British Embassy here in LA.” He looked back at Cibelli. “Have I got it right so far?”

“It’s the British Consulate,” she said, “but no big deal. We have the address.”

DeJean handed her the pad. “Here, you do it.”

Cibelli took it, but she didn’t look at it. “They live in Brentwood,” she said. “They went to mass this morning at St. Mary of the Angels Anglican Church. After services he went off to

play golf, and she and three women friends came to the hotel dining room for lunch. They ordered a round of cocktails, at which point the victim left the table and went to the ladies room. Drinks arrived, but Mrs. Bellingham-Crump didn't come back, so after ten minutes one of the friends checked on her. She was dead on the floor, stabbed."

"Good background, officers," I said. "Was she robbed or raped?"

DeJean jumped backed in, "No, sir," he said. "She left her purse at the table with the other women, and she's still wearing a whole bunch of expensive-looking jewelry, so I'd eliminate robbery. And there's no sign of sexual assault. It looks more like Murder One to me. According to the other women, coming to this hotel is kind of a regular Sunday ritual with them, so the killer must've known she'd be here. That's why I'm going with Murder One."

"Let me guess," Terry said. "You're studying for the Detective's Exam."

DeJean stood tall again and beamed. "Day and night, sir."

"Well, study the part where it tells you not to draw conclusions in the first five minutes."

DeJean's shoulders slumped. His partner just stood there looking bored.

"Officer Cibelli," Terry said. "I'm guessing you're not nearly as excited about catching a homicide as your partner here."

"Not unless the department is paying me extra," she said. "But I'm happy for Hector. This is a dream come true for him."

"I think we're all happy for Hector," Terry said. "Has the victim's husband been notified yet?"

"No, sir," Hector said, perking up again. "Do you want us to do it?"

"Definitely not," Terry said. "We like to see the look on the husband's face when we tell him his wife has been murdered."

"Smart," Hector said. "Get the husband's reaction firsthand."



## CUT, PASTE, KILL

Do you think he did it?"

Terry shook his head. "My partner and I just got here. According to the Detectives Manual we can't jump to conclusions till we've been on the scene a good solid twenty minutes."

"Well, it would be a bummer if the husband did do it," Cibelli said.

"And why's that, Officer?" Terry asked.

"He's a foreign diplomat working on American soil," she said. "So even if you found him standing over the body with the murder weapon in his hand and blood on his clothes, you still couldn't arrest him. The guy's got total diplomatic immunity."

"Good observation," Terry said. "Are you studying for the Detective's Exam, too?"

She frowned. "Not remotely."

"You should," Terry said. "I like the way you think."

## CHAPTER FIVE

**THE LOBBY OF** The Afton Gardens was elegant, understated, and completely devoid of Southern California glitz. More like nineteenth-century London, than twenty-first-century Hollywood.

Officer Cibelli was happy to be released, but DeJean insisted on escorting us to the crime scene.

“Move it, move it,” he announced, parting the sea of busy criminalists, bored cops, and nervous hotel employees. “Lead detectives coming through.” An aging bellman didn’t move fast enough, and DeJean almost bowled him over.

“They’d get out of the way faster if you had the band play ‘Hail to the Chief,’ “ Terry said.

“That’s the dining room over there,” DeJean said, pointing. “The victim is in the ladies room. This way.” He turned left.

“This guy’s like a bloodhound,” Terry said. “I never would’ve seen that sign that said RESTROOMS.”

Twenty feet later, we arrived at the yellow tape. “The scene of the crime,” DeJean said triumphantly.

“Thanks,” Terry said. “Finding the body is the second toughest part of our job.”

“Do you mind if I hang around and watch?”

“Knock yourself out, kid,” Terry said. “Maybe when we’re done you can help us find our car.”

Terry and I put on rubber gloves and shoe protectors and went

in. I have limited ladies room experience, but it was obvious that this one had class. For starters, the toilets were discreetly out of sight. There was a row of four rosewood doors that I imagine were there to conceal the unsightly plumbing fixtures from female guests who only used the facility to brush their hair, fix their makeup, or do a line of coke.

To the right of the entrance was a marble countertop with three sinks. Above it, stretched across the entire wall, was a mirror. Below it, stretched across the plush green carpeting, was Eleanor Bellingham-Crump.

Even in death, she appeared to fit the profile of the clientele at The Afton Gardens. About forty-five, medium brown shoulder-length hair, a classic houndstooth jacket, matching skirt, and tasteful leather shoes. The only thing that set her apart from the other patrons was the pair of scissors protruding from her ribs.

Kneeling beside the body, snapping pictures, was Jessica Keating. “Hey guys, I was hoping you’d catch this case,” she said. “How’s your weekend going so far?”

“Unfortunately we caught the case just as we were about to sit down to eat,” I said, squatting down next to her. “So we’re both a little cranky.”

“I had a leg of lamb in the oven,” she said. “I guess all three of us got screwed out of Sunday lunch.”

“Four of us,” Terry said, dropping down to one knee. “She looks kind of dead.”

“Good observation,” she said. “I’ll have to remember that for my report.”

Terry leaned in to get a closer look at the scissors. “Hmmm, any idea what might have caused it?”

“At her age, any one of life’s little disappointments could have done her in,” Jessica said, “but I’m going to go with splenic hemorrhage caused by a pair of razor-sharp scissors entering her body at the left costovertebral angle.”

“I love it when you talk dirty,” Terry said. “Dumb it down for

me.”

“Somebody stuck the scissors under her last rib, rammed it up into her spleen and twisted the sucker real hard.”

“Sounds lethal,” Terry said.

“It’s like putting a hamster in a blender. She bled to death in seconds.”

“How come there’s not a lot of blood?” I asked.

“It’s all on the inside,” Jessica said. “Clean, quick, effective. It’s the same technique used by the Marines, the Green Berets, and the Navy SEALs.”

“You think our killer has a background in the military?”

“Either that, or he has Internet access,” she said. “Mike, these days if you want to know how to kill somebody, ask Google.”

“I want to know who killed her,” I said. “Can I Google that?”

“No, but I’ve got something that might help,” Jessica said, standing up. She pointed to the sinks.

I had been at floor level since I walked into the room. Terry and I both stood up. There, on the marble countertop, was a leather-bound book, about twelve by ten.

“A photo album,” I said.

“A scrapbook,” Jessica said.

“I collect crime scene souvenirs,” I said. “Can I go through it?”

“Not yet,” she said. “We’re still tagging and bagging it, but I looked at a few of the pages. It’s all about Mrs. Bellingham-Crump.”

I stood over it and looked down. The cover was black, with three words embossed in gold at the center.

JUSTICE FOR BRANDON.

“Who’s Brandon?” I asked.

Jessica gingerly opened the book. As soon as I saw the newspaper clipping on the first page I remembered who Brandon was.

Brandon Cooper. Ten years old. About nine months ago, he was crossing in front of a school bus when a car mowed him

## CUT, PASTE, KILL

down. He was killed instantly. The driver claimed she never saw the flashing yellow lights, or the red STOP sign extending from the left side of the bright orange bus. Or the four-foot boy.

The cops agreed that she couldn't see. She was blind drunk.

A jury would have put her away for a long time, but she never went to trial. No charges were filed. Eleanor Bellingham-Crump was protected by her husband's diplomatic immunity.

But it didn't keep someone from murdering her.

## CHAPTER SIX

**IT DIDN'T TAKE** long to figure out that the only thing Terry and I could do in the ladies room was get in the way of the CSI team. So we left Jessica to commune with the dead, while we interrogated the living.

Our trusty guide dog Officer DeJean led us to the dining room. It had none of the old-world gravity of the wood and leather lobby. It was all chrome, glass, and sunlight—quite cheerful, although the three women seated at a window table looked anything but.

Terry and I introduced ourselves. Olivia Kind was the same age as the victim. Glynnis Campbell and Billie Trent were in their thirties. All three were smartly dressed, expensively bejeweled, and unquestionably shit-faced.

I turned to DeJean. “I thought you said they were on their first round of drinks.”

He panicked. “They were.” He turned to them. “Ladies, didn’t I tell you, no more alcohol till the detectives interviewed you?”

“We must not have heard you,” Olivia said.

“Or it was the fifty bucks we gave the bartender,” Glynnis giggled. She was the prettiest of the three by far. Even in LA, where hot babes are a commodity, Glynnis would stand out.

“For fuck’s sake, we were traumatized,” Billie said. “We’re having lunch with our friend, and she gets herself shanked in the

crapper. Damn straight we're going to drink."

Billie was not pretty. Or damn straight. She was butch. Close-cropped black hair, and a black pantsuit. "I'm sorry for your loss," I said, "but alcohol makes you a less-than-reliable witness."

"We didn't witness shit," Billie said. "Eleanor went to the can. Ten minutes later Olivia goes in looking for her, and she comes out screaming 'Eleanor was stabbed.' I ran in, Glynnis called 911, end of story."

"Let's see if we can get a little more beginning of story," Terry said. "What's your relationship with the victim?"

"Casual acquaintance," Billie said.

"A minute ago you said she was your friend. Pick one."

"This is LA, Detective—it's all the same thing."

Terry turned to Olivia. "And how about you?"

"Definitely one of her dearest friends," she said. "I'm also her decorator. My husband and I were in church with Eleanor and her husband, Edward. Then the men went off to play golf and talk business at the club, and she and I came here with Glynnis and Billie."

"What kind of business?"

"Surely you've heard of my husband, William Kind. He's a distributor."

"Of what?"

She looked at him like he had pointed at the moon and asked, what's that big round yellow thing. "Movies," she said. "What else do people in Hollywood distribute?"

"And what business does a movie distributor have with a British diplomat?"

"Edward Bellingham-Crump is the British consul-general here in LA," she said. "Let's just say he can open doors that might otherwise be closed to me and my husband."

"What kind of doors?" I asked.

"Foreign distribution rights. Plus, Hollywood people adore the

Brits, so Eleanor and Edward were the perfect couple to invite to a dinner party. He's very charming, very droll, and she was . . ." Olivia groped for a compliment.

"Memorable," Billie said. "I remember the time she fell face-down in her vichyssoise."

"Oh, Billie," Glynnis said. "That's terrible. The poor woman just died."

Terry turned to Glynnis. "How about you? What's your relationship with the victim?"

"Friend," she said. "Also her personal fashion consultant."

"And is your husband in business with Mr. Bellingham-Crump?" I said.

"Why don't you ask me," Billie said, "seeing as I'm her husband." She let out an inebriated laugh. "Do you guys really expect to find the killer? You can't even spot a pair of lesbians."

"You completely threw me off with your girlish charm," Terry said.

"Hey, pal, you want to see girlish charm?" Billie said. "Sit down and watch me kick your ass in arm wrestling."

"I doubt it," Terry said. "It's hard to arm wrestle when you're in handcuffs. And if you're still hot to kick my ass, we can do it at the station."

Billie sat fuming. She opened her mouth and let out a loud burp. Glynnis winced, but said nothing.

I stepped in. "Olivia," I said, "you discovered the body."

"Yes. I'll never forget it for as long—"

"And you saw the book," I said.

Olivia gasped. It was a little on the theatrical side. I wondered if she was putting it on.

"I saw it, but I didn't touch it," she said. "I watch *CSI*. I know better than to get my personal fingerprints on it."

"What book?" Glynnis asked.

"It was in the bathroom," Olivia said.

"It said *Justice for Brandon* on the cover," I said.



## CUT, PASTE, KILL

Glynnis opened her mouth, and then thought better of it.

“You recognize the name?” I said.

She shrugged. “I’m not sure. Wasn’t that the name of the little boy who ran out in front of her car?”

Terry exploded. “Ran out?” he said. “She was driving drunk.”

Glynnis gnawed at her pretty little lower lip. Billie sat in tortured silence, bubbling over with hate for the cop who had gotten tough with her girlfriend.

Olivia tried to help us see things in a better light. “But that was all behind her,” she said. “Eleanor didn’t drink and drive anymore. They revoked her license.”

“And which one of you sober ladies was the designated driver to take her home after lunch?” Terry asked.

Nobody answered.

We interviewed them for another ten minutes. None of the three saw anything suspicious. And as far as I could tell, none of them really gave a shit about the late Mrs. Bellingham-Crump. Their relationship with her was based on the fact that she brought money, influence, and the cachet of British society to the table. They were sauced, but I doubted if they’d be any more helpful sober.

We gave them each our cards and told DeJean to take their car keys and drive them home.

“Pisses me off,” Terry said. “A woman gets drunk, kills a kid, and those harpies cheer her up by getting her drunk again. And by the way, I could arm wrestle that butch bitch to the ground left-handed.”

We checked in with Detective Chris High. Chris is a Brit who left Manchester for LA because we have more sun, more surf, and more homicides. He runs the Hollywood Apprehension Team. When a detective gets a warrant, the HAT Squad makes the arrest. Today they were helping us out by canvassing the hotel staff, the guests, and the parking lot attendants.

“Nobody saw bloody anything,” he said. “Two of the bloody

security cameras in the lobby don't work, and the third one just shows people coming and going. We'll go through it, but I don't expect to see anyone wearing a sign that says Killer. And of course, there's no video surveillance in the ladies loo."

"We're going to break the news to the victim's husband," I said. "He's the British consul-general. Do we call him your lordship or something like that?"

High laughed. "He's not the bloody ambassador. He's just some wanker with a cushy job. But knowing his type, I can tell you he's going to throw you lads off your game."

"How so?"

"When you tell him his Mrs. is dead, you'll be watching for his reaction," High said.

"Homicide 101," I said. "If he had a hand in it, he's been rehearsing his reaction. Terry and I are pretty good at telling the difference between genuine grief and an I-can't-believe-she's-really-dead soap opera performance."

"That's the thing," High said. "This man may not react. He's a Brit and a lifelong diplomat. He's learned to control his emotions. Stiff upper lip and all that. So just because the poor bloke doesn't start bawling when you tell him his wife is dead doesn't bloody mean he killed her."

"Good advice," Terry said. "But it also doesn't bloody mean he didn't."

## CHAPTER SEVEN

**THE BELLAGIO COUNTRY** Club was just what we expected: a vast expanse of plush green fairways and rich white people.

The woman at the front desk looked at our badges, nodded, and quietly informed us that she would get the manager.

Half a minute later, the manager, a good-looking young man wearing a blue blazer, white golf shirt, and Nantucket reds stepped out of the office.

“Graham Jaenicke,” he said. “How may I be of service?”

Jaenicke is polite for a living, so he acted as if he were delighted to have two LAPD homicide detectives drop by the club on a Sunday afternoon. I let him know how he could be of service.

“I’ll be right back,” he said.

“Very congenial fellow,” Terry said. “And I loved the duds. He was a vision in red, white, and blue. I didn’t know whether to shake his hand or salute.”

Jaenicke returned with the news. “Mr. Bellingham-Crump’s foursome should be at the fourteenth hole,” he said. “We have a strict no cell phones policy, so I’ll send a golf cart out to bring him back.”

Ten minutes later Bellingham-Crump arrived. He was in his late forties, six feet tall, with graying hair, a trim athletic body, and a firm handshake. He wore green golf slacks and a white shirt with the club logo on it.

In addition to their strict no cell phone policy, the club also had a no-shabbily-dressed-cops-interrogating-our-members-in-public policy.

Nantucket Red shepherded us into his office. “Why don’t you conduct your business in here, Detectives?” he said. “You’ll be far more comfortable.”

“And far less embarrassing,” Terry muttered to me as we entered the office and closed the door.

Cops don’t make country club calls unless they’ve got something really rotten to tell you. Bellingham-Crump stood stone-faced, waiting for us to lay it on him.

“Sir,” I said, “I have some bad news about your wife.”

His eyebrows arched. It wasn’t exactly anger, but he definitely seemed peeved. “She doesn’t have access to a car,” he said. “What trouble can Eleanor possibly have gotten herself into this time?”

“She’s been murdered,” I said. “Stabbed to death at The Afton Gardens Hotel. I’m very sorry for your loss.”

Not all stereotypes are true, but in this case Chris High had gotten it right. Edward Bellingham-Crump barely blinked. “Are you sure it’s her?” he asked.

“Yes, sir.”

He removed his glasses, pinched the bridge of his nose, and slowly massaged the area below his brow. We stood quietly as he let it sink in. After a minute he wiped his eyes and put his glasses back on. “Do you know who did it?” he asked.

“Not yet, sir,” I said. “We’re hoping you can help us with that.”

We gave him the details, leaving out the part about the scrapbook.

“I work for the British government,” he said. “Do you think killing my wife could have been politically motivated?”

“Was your wife political?” I asked.

He shook his head. “No. Any attack against my government would more likely be aimed at me. Although Eleanor did have

. . .” He stopped. More likely out of embarrassment than some code of international diplomacy.

“Sir, please say whatever comes to mind. It can only help us.”

“Yes, of course. My wife had some personal problems. She was recently the victim of some very bad press.”

I wanted to remind him that mowing down a fourth grader in your Jag tends to get the media’s knickers in a twist, but I decided to be more—I don’t know—diplomatic.

“Yes, we heard,” I said. “Have you been in touch with Brandon Cooper’s family since the accident?”

“I made a condolence call the day it happened, but they refused to meet with me. Naturally, I paid the funeral expenses.”

“Did they sue you?” Terry asked.

“No,” he said. “I think the Coopers were advised by their attorneys that it would be fruitless to sue someone with diplomatic immunity. They agreed to accept a personal settlement from me in exchange for dropping all future litigation.”

“How much did you give them?” Terry asked.

“I’d rather not disclose the amount. Suffice to say it was not enough to compensate for the loss of their child.”

Terry, the father of three, didn’t respond. He just drilled a silent stare into Bellingham-Crump.

“Detectives, my wife was not a monster,” Bellingham-Crump said, “and I assure you that Her Majesty’s government dealt with the incident most sternly. They also generously paid for Eleanor to go to a top-notch rehabilitation facility here in California.”

“They may want a refund,” Terry said. “She ordered a double vodka tonic at lunch.”

“She abstained from alcohol during the week,” Bellingham-Crump said. “She wasn’t particularly enamored of Olivia Kind or the other two women, but she knew they wouldn’t divulge her secret. None of those cackling hens are poster girls for the Temperance Union. I knew, of course, but I turned a blind eye.”

“What time did you last see her?” I asked.

I made it sound like it was just a casual fact-check, but Bellingham-Crump is a pro who knows when a question is dead serious. He needed a tight alibi. He didn’t waste a word providing one.

“Eleanor and I went to Mass at ten. I said-good-bye to her at the church at eleven-thirty. She drove to The Afton Gardens with Mrs. Kind. I drove to the club with her husband, Bill, and changed. I had a twelve forty-three tee time. I can provide any number of witnesses.”

“Were there any threats on your wife’s life after Brandon Cooper’s death?” I asked.

“For obvious reasons, Detective Lomax, our home address is kept confidential, but after the accident, a number of letters were sent to me at the Consulate. The usual outcry—people demanding justice and telling us to go home.”

“Did you consider going back to England?”

“Did *I* consider it? I thought it best to leave LA. My government agreed. But Eleanor was against it. She felt that she had already ravaged one family, and she begged me not to let the accident destroy my career. In reality, it already had. Having a wife who drinks too much is a major liability when you’re angling for an ambassadorship. But Eleanor rang up her father. He’s an earl, and I’m certain he pulled some strings, because when the dust settled, I was told I could stay, but the issue would be revisited in six months.”

“These letters that you got,” Terry said. “Did you show them to your wife?”

“To what end?” he said. “They were vile, ugly rants, filled with obscenities. One person sent a box of dog feces.” He paused, then lowered his voice. “Eleanor already hated herself. Why would I want to expose her to any further hatred?”

“It could help us find your wife’s killer if you exposed them to us,” I said.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I disposed of it. All of it.”

*Getting rid of evidence. How convenient.* “Why didn’t you just file it away for future reference?” I said.

“Shall I have filed the box of dog shit as well?” he said. “As far as I’m concerned, Detective, it was all dog shit.”

“Were any of the letters signed?”

He shook his head. “I doubt if any of the senders were traceable.”

“We’ll never know,” Terry said.

“Tell us what you remember,” I said. “Any little detail could help.”

He closed his eyes. “Most were typed. Many of them poorly worded. One was in pencil in a child’s composition notebook. All rather rudimentary, except for one card—it was handcrafted. On the outside was a picture of a child’s classroom. On the blackboard in red letters it said, *Human Blood Is Heavy*. Inside, it said something like *The Person Who Sheds That Blood Can Not Run Away*. I hope that helps,” he said.

“It would have helped if you hadn’t gotten rid of it,” Terry said.

I could see Edward’s veneer crack just a little. This man was not used to being reprimanded—at least not by a couple of street cops.

“Detective Biggs,” he said, “hate mail is something I’ve dealt with my entire career—every diplomat does. There are people out there who resent the special privileges and immunities we enjoy. What they don’t appreciate is that American diplomats around the world are afforded the same courtesy. It’s the essence of international relationships that a host country is expected to tolerate the actions of another nation’s emissary living in your midst.”

“With all due respect,” Terry said, “I think most Americans wouldn’t give a rat’s ass if you ignored a thousand parking tickets, but run down one of our kids, and our accommodating attitude goes sour in a big hurry.”

“I make no excuses for my wife’s actions, and I can assure you there were consequences, but answer this: is the international law that protects me and my family any different from the unwritten law that protects your rich, your famous, and their miscreant offspring? I find it fascinating, sir, that Americans are more forgiving toward a coked-up film star than they are of an otherwise decent family woman, who had an admittedly tragic lapse of judgment. This interview is over. I would like to see my wife and make arrangements to bring her home to England—something I should have done months ago.”

“She’s at the morgue,” I said. “You can identify her, but I’m afraid this is a criminal investigation, and the body won’t be released for several days.”

“Gentlemen,” he said, raising his voice, “if I choose, I can assure you that I have enough leverage to have her in London before the Queen has her first cup of tea tomorrow morning.” He took a deep breath and modulated his voice from angry husband to professional diplomat. “That said, I don’t want to hinder your investigation, so for now I’ll acquiesce to your rules.”

“Thank you, sir,” I said. “Again, our condolences. I’m sorry for your loss. We’ll do everything in our power to find your wife’s killer.”

I extended my hand. He softened and shook it, less firmly this time.

Terry, too, reached out his hand. Bellingham-Crump graciously accepted the gesture. Terry looked like an understanding mortician, about to say, “I’m so sorry for your loss.”

But instead he said, “Was your wife having an affair?”

It was a totally unexpected kick in the balls, and the cracks in Bellingham-Crump’s diplomatic armor were on the verge of becoming steaming fissures. He probably would have liked to beat Terry’s head in with a nine iron. But he maintained his composure.

He smiled faintly. “Ah, American diplomacy,” he said. “It



## CUT, PASTE, KILL

flourishes in every corner. To my knowledge, Detective, Eleanor was not, nor has she ever been involved with another man. But if you find out otherwise, please be so generous as to let me know.”

And with that, Edward Bellingham-Crump took his leave.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

**CINDY AND TED** Cooper lived on Homewood Road, a friendly, tree-lined street, in Brentwood.

As soon as Terry and I got out of the car we caught the sounds of kids splashing in backyard pools, and the smells of Sunday barbecues. It felt so welcoming, so safe, that it was hard to imagine the horror that had taken place on this very spot a few months before.

The house was simple, two stories with an attached garage. We had to dodge the spray from the automatic lawn sprinklers as we went up the paved walk. Before we could ring the bell, a man opened the door. He was in his late thirties, well tanned, with sandy hair and serious brown eyes.

“I’m Ted Cooper,” he said. “My wife and I were expecting you.”

We showed him our badges, which he barely looked at. Then he escorted us into the living room and introduced us to his wife, Cindy.

“You’re here about Mrs. Bellingham-Crump, aren’t you?” she said.

“What about her?” I asked.

The husband jumped in. “Give us a break, will you, Detective. A diplomat’s wife is murdered at a bar. How long do you think it takes to hit the Internet? We’ve already gotten five phone calls

telling us the news. And since nobody wanted her dead more than we did, we figured LAPD would show up.”

“We’re deeply sorry for the loss of your son,” I said, “but I hope you understand that you’re connected to the murder victim—”

He interrupted. “Connected? I guess that’s a polite way to describe our relationship with the drunken bitch who ran down our son.”

He grabbed a picture frame from the mantel and shoved it toward my face. “This is Brandon. This is how we’re connected to Eleanor Bellingham-Crump. Our only son was your murder victim’s last victim.”

I took the picture from him. It was a young boy with sandy hair and brown eyes, the ten-year-old version of Ted Cooper. The boy was wearing a Little League uniform, and the camera had caught him with both arms thrust in the air, savoring a sweet moment of victory. I passed it to Terry, who looked at it for half a minute, then set it gently back on the mantel.

“Our condolences on your loss,” Terry said. “My partner and I are obligated to ask you a few questions, but we can come back another time.”

“Let’s just get it over with,” he said. “Have a seat.”

We all sat down.

“Are Cindy and I suspects?” he asked.

“No, sir, but I have to ask where you were today at noon.”

“We were on the Santa Monica pier collecting signatures and donations for our Justice for Brandon Fund.”

“What kind of justice are you looking for?” I asked.

“Not Texas justice, if that’s what you’re getting at. Right after Brandon was killed, the Brits offered us a cash settlement of fifty thousand dollars. Can you believe that? Fifty thousand, for the life of a beautiful, talented, young boy. We contacted a law firm to see if we could sue for more. They were very nice, but they told us we were pissing up a rope. So we took the money and

started a campaign to change the law that gives drunks like Mrs. Bellingham-Crump diplomatic immunity when they mow down innocent children.”

“Which law firm did you retain?” I asked.

“Karen Winters,” Cooper said. “She’s not exactly a law firm. It’s just her and a paralegal, but at least we didn’t have to shell out a big retainer fee. Karen believed in our cause and she’s helped us set up a not-for-profit corporation. She hasn’t taken a penny, and she and her assistant have put in hours and hours.”

“Karen is totally behind us,” Cindy Cooper added. “A lot of people are. They believe in Justice for Brandon.”

“Do you think any of your supporters might prefer revenge over justice?” I asked.

“I’ll bet a lot of them would,” Cooper said.

“Anyone in particular that you might be able to single out?”

He gave me a smile that was loaded with contempt. “We have a petition with five thousand names, an e-mail database of thousands more, and there are two dozen fourth graders at Brentwood Elementary who are still grieving for my son. I’ll give you the list. Take your pick.”

## CHAPTER NINE

**BY THE TIME** we got back to Big Jim's place, it was dark and drizzling.

"It's about time," Big Jim said. "I've got three women here who are practically starving to death."

"Well, that sure trumps us," Terry said. "All we had was one woman who bled to death."

"Hey, just because your murder victim had a bad day, doesn't mean she gets to ruin it for everyone else," Jim said.

"You're right, Dad," I said. "And I promise that nobody else will get to ruin our evening except you."

Jim smiled. "Thank you, son. I'll do my best."

Dinner was obscene.

"That is a lot of meat," Marilyn said when Jim brought the platter of burgers to the table. "Where'd you get the recipe? *The Joy of Coronary Disease*?"

We dug in. As hungry as we were, there was still enough left over to feed a homeless shelter.

After dinner Angel brought out coffee and a plate of cookies, and then we all turned our attention to the guy who was waiting to be the center of attention.

"I think we're ready, Dad," I said. "What's your big surprise?"

"My what? Oh yes, my surprise. I almost forgot." He beamed. "Ladies and gentlemen, Big Jim Lomax is happy to announce

that he is going into the movie business.”

“Dad, you’ve been in the movie business for forty years.”

“As a trucker,” he said. “But now I’m going to be a screenwriter. I sold an idea to a movie producer.”

“That’s fantastic,” Diana said. “Who bought it?”

“Norman Untermyer.”

“I never heard of him,” Marilyn said.

“I have,” I said.

“Cool,” Diana said. “What has he done?”

“He pulled my wisdom teeth,” I said. “Norman Untermyer is a dentist.”

“Well, he’s branching out,” Jim said. “You can’t get rich pulling teeth. He’s got some money, and he’s planning to make a movie. My movie.”

“How much did he give you?” I asked.

“No actual cash,” Big Jim said. “But as of now all my cleanings are free. Once I write the script, we’ll talk real money.”

“At the risk of being obvious,” I said, “what do you know about writing a script?”

“That’s the whole point,” Jim said. “I don’t have to know how to write a script. I’m the concept guy. I have the plot, the story, the characters. All I need is someone who’s good at . . . you know, word shit.”

“Oh, I get it,” I said. “All you need is someone to do all the work.”

“No. I just need somebody to help me write some dialogue. Ninety percent of a movie is the big idea, and I’ve already got that.”

“So what’s it about?” Terry asked.

“Okay,” Jim said. “It’s about a couple of ex-cops who become—are you ready for this—they become long-haul truckers.”

I laughed out loud. “You’re writing a movie about Teamsters?”

“No, not Teamsters, Mike. They don’t join the Teamsters

union. They just travel across the country, delivering shit by truck.”

“Like what?”

“Like it doesn’t matter *what* they deliver. That’s just the setup. The real story is that they’re driving this big-ass semi all around the country and because they’re ex-cops they can’t stop solving crimes wherever they go.”

“It sounds like it could be fun,” Diana said. “Ex-cops who, become truckers and solve lots of crimes. I like it.”

“Ah, the voice of reason,” Jim said. “Thank you, Diana.”

“What’s the movie called?”

Jim smiled. “*Semi Justice*.”

I almost spit out my coffee. “*Semi Justice*? Isn’t that like *Half Justice*?”

“Don’t be stupid,” Jim said. “A semi is a truck. It basically means Trucker Justice. Jeez, Mike, it’s not that complicated. Terry, what do you think?”

“I like it,” he said. “Ex-cops riding around in a big rig, solving crimes wherever they go—it’s kind of like *The Lone Ranger* and *Tonto* in an eighteen-wheeler.”

“Exactly,” Jim said pounding his palm on the table. “And do you think the guy who came up with *The Lone Ranger* and *Tonto* sold it right away? He probably had to pitch the idea to guys like Mike, who’d be saying ‘a masked man and an Indian, riding around, solving crimes and leaving silver bullets—who would want to watch that?’ It takes vision to see how a good idea can pay out. I got vision. Dr. Untermeyer has got vision. And so do you, Terry. You want to help me write it? I know the trucking business inside and out. You know cop things, and you’re funny. We team up; we can’t miss. What do you say?”

“I never wrote a movie script,” Terry said, “but once you’ve got the story, how hard can it be? Hell, I’ll give it a shot.”

“How much money do you think you guys can make?” Marilyn asked.

MARSHALL KARP

“Millions,” Jim said. “With sequels and video games and action figures and all the rest of that movie merchandise, the sky’s the limit. And even though it’s my idea, we split it fifty-fifty.”

“Okay,” Marilyn said. “But only on one condition. Until we see some actual money, the girls and I get free dental work.”

“I don’t know,” Jim said. “Do the girls need braces?”

“No, that’s all done and paid for,” Marilyn said. “I’m just talking about cleanings and normal stuff.”

“Deal,” Jim said. “With Terry’s cop credentials, Norman would be crazy not to do it. I’ll call him first thing in the morning.”

He reached across the table and shook Marilyn’s hand. Then he shook Terry’s. “You got a damn good agent there, Detective,” Jim said.

“And she can cook,” Terry said. “This could be fun. I’m psyched.”

“I think it’s exciting,” Diana said.

“We all think it’s exciting,” Angel said.

“Except Mike,” Jim said. “I think Mike thinks that the whole thing is dumb.”

“No, not at all,” I said. “I just think it’s Semi Dumb.”



## CHAPTER TEN

**TERRY AND I** showed up at the crime lab at seven o'clock Monday morning. Jessica Keating must have been there for hours, because the *Justice for Brandon* scrapbook had been disassembled, photographed, and Jess had spread big blowups of the pages everywhere.

"There are way too many clues here for me," Terry said. "This looks like a scene from *The Da Vinci Code on Steroids*."

"It's a lot less confusing when all we have to go on is a tire track and a pubic hair," I said. "I don't even know where to start."

"Dr. Keating, at your service," Jess said. "Let's start from the beginning. How much do you know about scrapbooking?"

"A little less than I know about brain surgery," Terry said. "I'm vaguely aware that some people do it, and I know I'm not one of them."

"That's what I figured," she said. "I, on the other hand, am a third-generation Midwestern scrapper. I even have a merit badge in scrapbooking."

"I thought LAPD only gave merit badges in crime solving and cookie sales," Terry said.

Jess kept going. "For a lot of people scrapbooking is more than a hobby. It's an obsession. They can labor over a single page for days . . . even weeks."

“Just to cut and paste a couple of pictures?” Terry said.

“That’s what you do for a photo album. Scrapbooking is an art. It’s all about telling a story or preserving a memory through creative design. Look at how this is crafted,” she said. “The early pages have photomontages of Brandon Cooper’s life—birthday parties, Little League, family outings—they paint the picture of a happy, healthy child.”

“Stop right there,” I said. “Where did the killer get all these personal pictures of Brandon?”

“His mother posted them online,” Jess said. “She belongs to a social networking site that’s kind of like Facebook for proud parents. It gives them a public place to share their kids’ achievements. The killer just pulled shots of Brandon off the Web site. It makes the front section of the scrapbook all the more poignant. Now, here’s where it starts to get ugly.”

She pointed to the blowups from the middle section. “Notice how the color palette goes from warm to harsh. Even the font changes to one that is angrier. That’s not the work of an amateur. That’s rather elegant design.”

“Write that down, Mike,” Terry said. “We’re looking for someone elegant.”

I studied one of the pages. The background was a collage of newspaper clippings about Brandon’s death. Overlaying that was a mosaic of pictures that illustrated the horror of the event—bottles of booze, skid marks, a school bus, police cars, emergency medical units, a chalk outline in the road, and in case all that was too subtle for you, a Photoshopped Jaguar emblem that dripped blood.

Jess continued to walk us through the book. “These next few pages track the public’s outrage when it was announced that Mrs. Bellingham-Crump would not be charged. And finally the scrapbooker begins to make overt threats. This one is particularly inventive.”

The page had the feel of a Rockwell painting. It was a school

nurse's office, with a prominent sign that said *Make Sure Your Child Gets His Immunity Shots*. But some of the words had been changed, so it now read, *Make Sure Your Diplomat's Wife Gets Her Immunity Shots*. Next to it was a picture of Eleanor Bellingham-Crump with a skull and crossbones superimposed over her face.

"You really know a lot about this crap," Terry said. "So you think whoever made this one is pretty good at it."

"Better than good," Jessica said. "The M's and P's are beautiful."

"What about the other twenty-four letters?" Terry asked.

"M's and P's," Jessica repeated. "Memorabilia and photographs. A lot of people include the usual predictable souvenirs—matchbooks, airline tickets, concert stubs—but the real artists are much more original. This is very creative and extremely well crafted. Whoever did this has been scrapbooking for years. She's probably got a cropping case the size of a Honda."

"Sounds like Martha Stewart on a rampage," Terry said. "I knew they should never have let her out of the slammer."

"We appreciate the education on the fine art of scrapbooking," I said. "But what about that forensics thing LAPD pays you to do?"

"Unfortunately, forensics is where I come up short," she said. "There are no prints, and the scrapbook itself is the kind you can easily buy online or in any scrapbooking store in America."

"There's more than one scrapbooking store?" Terry said.

"Oh, honey, you have no idea. Scrapbooking is a multi-billion-dollar industry. In the Midwest it's practically a way of life. My grandma scrapbooked, my mom scrapbooks, and defying all California stereotypes, I still scrapbook, although these days mine are mostly digital."

"Grandma, Mom, and you," I said. "Any of the men in your family do this?"

"Grandpa had a collection of license plates and beer bottles, my dad has electric trains, and my husband belongs to a fantasy

football league. It's pretty much a chick thing."

"So you think our killer is a woman?"

"I have no physical evidence to support it," she said. "And while most scrapbooks are done by women, most violent pre-meditated murders are not."

"So we don't have much," I said.

"There's one thing I can give you," she said. "Our scrapper has cats. Even with the page protectors, I found traces of cat hair from two separate cats on at least half a dozen pages."

"Unfortunately, cat hair isn't like DNA or fingerprints," I said. "We don't have a database that can lead us to a suspect."

"Maybe we could round up all the suspicious-looking cats and question them," Terry said.

"This scrapbook took a lot of work," I said. "But it also took a lot of passion. Somebody put their heart and soul into this. Somebody who really wanted justice for Brandon."

"Ted and Cindy Cooper come to mind," Terry said.

"That's what I'm thinking," I said. "They could have put together the scrapbook, then hired someone to do the killing on a Sunday morning, when they'd have plenty of witnesses to vouch for their whereabouts. We should subpoena their bank records."

"Ted Cooper seemed too smart to leave a paper trail on their personal account," Terry said. "He's more likely to dip into the Justice for Brandon Fund. Funneling money out of a not-for-profit is harder to spot."

"Especially if the lawyer who is handling the finances is just as dedicated to the cause as he is," I said. "Let's go pay a visit to Ms. Winters."

"But first let's stop at one of those cool scrapbook stores," Terry said.

I looked at him. "What for?"

He clutched both hands to his heart. "This case has become so fascinating, I suddenly have an urge to preserve all these precious memories."

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

**KAREN WINTERS LEGAL** Services was in a strip mall on South Figueroa, tucked between a dry cleaner and a pet supply store.

“It may be a storefront law firm,” Terry said, “but you can tell she caters to an upscale clientele. No neon.”

I opened the door and an electronic chime announced our arrival. The man at the front desk stood up and welcomed us like we were the prize patrol from Publisher’s Clearing House. “Good morning, gentlemen. How can I help you?”

He was trim, about medium height, with Matt Damon boyish good looks that made it hard to tell which side of thirty-five he was on. He was wearing the traditional uniform of the storefront lawyer: shirt with the sleeves rolled up, tie loosened at the neck, and jeans. He was so eager to help I hated to break the news to him.

“Detectives Mike Lomax and Terry Biggs,” I said. “LAPD Homicide.”

He shrugged, but kept on smiling. “Which one of our illustrious clients brings you here?”

“We’d rather discuss that with Ms. Winters,” I said. “Is she in?”

“She’s on the phone. I’m Cody Wade, her paralegal, but I also make a mean cup of coffee. If we ever strike it rich, the first thing we’re buying is a cappuccino machine like the big law

firms. Can I get you gentlemen anything?"

"No, thanks," I said. "How long do you think she'll be on the phone?"

"Minutes. I'll slip her a note and let her know you're waiting." He headed toward a glassed-in office in the rear.

"Friendliest damn lawyer I ever met," Terry said.

"He's just a paralegal," I said. "They don't go sour till they pass the Bar."

"Look at this," Terry said.

There was a table against the wall filled with Justice for Brandon paraphernalia—signs, pamphlets, pins, donation envelopes, and a clipboard with a petition attached.

Cody bounced back into the room. "Karen will be out in a few minutes. Are you sure I can't get you some coffee, water, anything?"

"No, we're good, thanks," Terry said. "I see you're one of the collection points for Justice for Brandon."

"Global headquarters actually," Cody said. "We're big supporters of Mr. and Mrs. Cooper. It's a good cause."

"I've been meaning to donate," Terry said, "but I'm on a cop's salary, so I can't afford much."

"Hey, no . . . we don't ask for much," Cody said. "We have a few big donors and a lot of little ones."

"I guess you're right," Terry said. "A buck here, a buck there, it all adds up."

"It does, and every donor is a voice added to our cause. The louder we get, the better we'll be heard."

Terry reached into his pocket and took out a five-dollar bill. "Here," he said. "Keep up the good work."

Cody grabbed a pin from the basket on the table, and handed it to Terry. "Thank you, thank you. Would you like to sign our petition?"

"Not really," Terry said.

"Fair enough. Can I have your name and address for our da-

tabase?”

“I’d rather just be anonymous,” Terry said, “but I bet you get a lot of people who say that.”

“On the contrary,” Cody said. “Most people are proud of the affiliation.”

“So,” Terry said, slipping the pin in his pocket, “where do all these Justice for Brandon donations go?”

“The goal is to raise enough money to lobby Congress for a Brandon’s Law—one that will prevent anyone guilty of a capital crime from hiding behind diplomatic immunity.”

“Well, that woman who ran down little Brandon won’t be hiding behind diplomatic immunity anymore,” Terry said. “So I guess part of the mission is accomplished.”

“Oh, no, no, no,” Cody said. “That was totally messed up. Whoever killed her definitely didn’t help our cause.”

“But now that she’s dead,” Terry said, “do you agree that Brandon got justice?”

“I think you’ve got the wrong impression of what we do,” Cody said. “Justice and revenge are not the same thing. You know what Gandhi said: an eye for an eye would make the whole world blind.”

“So you don’t think Brandon’s parents will be happy that somebody killed the woman who ran down their son.”

“I know the Coopers,” Cody said. “That woman’s murder won’t change their mission. They’re trying to fix the system. Let me check on Karen for you.”

He headed back to the boss’s office.

“That was some real nifty police work, Detective Biggs,” I said. “Did you think he was going to come right out and say, thanks for the donation? It’s really going to help us offset our hit man expenses.”

“It was fun trying,” Terry said. “And all it cost was five bucks.”

A few minutes later Karen Winters came out of her office. She was fifty, with short blond hair, no-nonsense makeup, simple

black slacks, and a gray sweater—more Macy’s than Saks.

“We’re investigating the murder of Eleanor Bellingham-Crump,” I said.

She frowned. “Yes, the Coopers told me you questioned them.”

“We don’t mean to open up wounds,” I said, “but somebody murdered the woman who killed their son. We had to talk to them.”

“They have a solid alibi for the time of the murder. Why are you here?”

“We have a few questions about the Justice for Brandon Fund.”

“Like what?”

“Like where does the money go?”

“Oh, you know, the usual. Filing fees, research, mailings to Congress, and of course, the occasional contract killing.” She pointed a finger at Terry. “How dare you walk in here and ask my paralegal if he thinks our clients could be guilty of homicide. That’s a cross between entrapment and sheer stupidity. You want to see our books? Get a subpoena. But I suggest you save your energy. The Brandon Fund is all being spent to help change the law.”

“I’ve got to ask the tough questions, Counselor,” Terry said. “It’s the first thing they teach us in cop school.”

“And I don’t have to answer them. That’s the first thing they teach us in law school.”

“Ms. Winters, it’s clear that Mrs. Bellingham-Crump was responsible for Brandon’s death,” I said. “Can you at least answer this—why did you advise the Coopers not to sue?”

“Sadly, I advise a lot of my clients not to sue. I know the system, and it’s stacked against the little guy. That’s why a lot of law firms don’t take on deserving cases. It’s not about who’s right or wrong. It’s about who can afford to fight to the finish. I don’t want to watch my clients go bankrupt trying to fight City Hall, or in the case of the Coopers, Her Majesty’s government.”

“Do you think the Coopers regret not suing?” I asked.



## CUT, PASTE, KILL

“Now you’re beating around the same bush I told you was off limits,” she said. “The Coopers were not involved in the murder of Eleanor Bellingham-Crump. I have two strict policies here at my little law firm. Always leave the toilet seat down in the coed bathroom and don’t murder anybody, even if they took the life of your only child.”

Terry nodded in agreement. “An eye for an eye would make the whole world blind. Gandhi.”

“I’m impressed, Detective,” she said.

“That’s the second thing they teach us in cop school.”

## CHAPTER TWELVE

“**THE MAN IS** a triple threat,” I said once Terry and I were back in the car. “He solves crimes, he writes screenplays, he quotes Gandhi.”

“Did I say Gandhi? I meant Hulk Hogan.”

“It doesn’t matter,” I said. “That woman would have thought you were an idiot no matter what you said.”

“It was all part of my master plan to give her a false sense of superiority, so she’d let her guard down.”

I flashed my badge at him. “Hi, I’m Detective Biggs from Homicide. So, Mr. Paralegal, here’s five bucks. Do you think your clients are ruthless murderers?”

“Hey, I took a shot,” Terry said. “She was still wrong to call it entrapment.”

“Yeah, but she might have hit the nail on the head when she called it sheer stupidity.”

“Even so,” Terry said, “I still think we should subpoena the Justice for Brandon records. I wouldn’t put it past Ted Cooper to use some of the money to get some blood along with the justice.”

“The Coopers are crusaders, not avengers. Besides, if they used the Justice for Brandon money, Winters would know about it.”

“Right,” Terry said. “And she’d probably hide behind attorney-client privilege. Maybe you noticed—she likes throwing the

rules in cops' faces."

My cell phone pinged. I flipped it open. It was a text message from Diana. I tapped out an answer and sent it.

"Care to share?" Terry said.

"Diana asked me to try to come home early. She has a surprise for me."

"That's never good. When Marilyn says she's got a surprise, she's either bought something we don't need, or she's got a new hair style that she knows I'm gonna hate."

This time, my cell phone rang.

"Uh-oh—now she's calling," Terry said. "Whatever you texted back, your girlfriend's not happy about it."

It wasn't my girlfriend. It was my boss.

"I need you and your partner at the station," he said.

"Sounds like you have a problem," I said.

"I never have problems. I only have opportunities, and I've got a doozy for you and Biggs," Kilcullen said. "Remember Gareth Church, the SAC from the FBI?"

"Sure. Terry and I worked the Familyland case with him."

"He's on his way over. He wants to talk to you. Get your asses back here. Now."

He hung up.

"The boss wants us back in the office. Gareth Church is coming over."

"I'll bet this has something to do with the diplomat's wife," Terry said. "Damn! You know how I feel about the FBI. The only thing they're good for is preventing the unauthorized reproduction, distribution, and exhibition of DVDs and videotapes."

"Come on, Gareth Church is a pretty straight shooter."

"He's a Federalé. They're all a little bent."

"At least he's not as crazy as Kilcullen," I said.

"You mean he didn't get pissed at his bowling ball, take it to the firing range, and blast it to smithereens? If you're gonna set the bar that low, then, sure—nobody's as crazy as Kilcullen."

MARSHALL KARP

Church was waiting for us in Kilcullen's office. He gave us each a quick handshake and about five seconds of long-time-no-see foreplay.

"I'll cut right to the chase," he said. "You guys just caught the murder of Eleanor Bellingham-Crump."

"Emphasis on *just caught*," I said. "We don't have much to go on yet."

"Well, I've got something that will either help or screw you up," Church said.

Terry threw me a look. He was betting on screw it up.

"Lay it on us," I said.

"We're pretty sure that Bellingham-Crump was the victim of a serial killer," Church said. "As far as we can tell, she was number three in a series."

Don't stop now.  
The best is yet to come.  
Buy the rest at amazon.com

<http://tinyurl.com/Karp-CutPasteKill>



Thank you for supporting my life of crime.

— Marshall Karp