

A LOMAX AND BIGGS MYSTERY

#1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

MARSHALL KARP



THE RABBIT FACTORY

PART ONE

KILLING RAMBO

CHAPTER 1

EDDIE ELKINS AMBLED down Fantasy Avenue. A light breeze penetrated his costume, and he felt relatively cool inside the furry white rabbit suit.

Of course, these were the balmy days of April. July and August would be unbearable, but for Eddie, it would be a small price to pay.

Six weeks ago he had lied, cheated, and bribed his way into the best job in the world. And now, he was Rambo. Rambunctious Rabbit, the most famous character Dean Lamaar ever created. The acknowledged superstar at Lamaar's Familyland.

Eddie waved at the kids as he wandered through the sprawling theme park. Occasionally some wiseass teenager would give him the finger, but for the most part kids loved him.

And Eddie loved kids. In fact, he loved them so much that he was mandated by Megan's Law to register with the Los Angeles police, so they could notify people in his community that he had moved into their neighborhood.

But he hadn't registered. Not this time. He had complied with the law when he lived in Boston. But the Irish bastard across the street keyed Eddie's car, slashed his tires, and put dog shit in

his mailbox. Eddie tried to explain that there's a big difference between high-risk offenders who are violent and regular guys like Eddie, who would never hurt anyone, but the guy wouldn't listen.

Then one day Eddie made the mistake of saying hello to the man's ten-year-old son. That night two bullets came flying through his bedroom window.

Eddie moved to Rhode Island and registered with the Woonsocket police. Life was better there. Nobody wanted to kill him, but nobody wanted to hire him either. Not for the kind of jobs Eddie wanted. He finally got work as a clerk in a paintball supply store, where he had plenty of time to think about his life.

He was born Edward Warren Ellison in Trenton, New Jersey, majored in English Lit at Rutgers, was never any good at sports and was never really comfortable with women, although he had had sex with four of them. People said he looked like Buddy Holly, or at least what Buddy would have looked like at age thirty-six, if not for that plane crash. Eddie even wore the black horn-rimmed glasses to heighten the effect.

He tried real hard to break his pattern with the kids, especially after the first conviction. He had a smart therapist, but stopping wasn't as easy as the shrinks make it sound. He didn't want to hurt the children, but fondling wasn't hurting. After three months in Rhode Island, he decided it would be easier to find a better job in a big city. Especially if he didn't register.

He moved to Los Angeles. Getting a new name and new identity cards were easier than he thought. Other men like him had done it and there was the New Beginnings Network on the Web. His closest confidant, whom he e-mailed almost every day, was Vandy333.

Vandy was divorced with two kids of his own and had been a school principal in Tennessee for twelve years. "Changing my identity made all the difference," Vandy had told him.

So Eddie Ellison became Eddie Elkins. He found a nice clean

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place to live and set up his new persona just the way New Beginnings instructed him. Finally came his big break. They told him about Caleo.

Anthony Caleo was a scumbag, but he was a great guy to know. He worked in Human Resources at Familyland. His job was to verify the résumés of people applying for jobs. Caleo didn't care about New Beginnings. He only cared about what was in it for Caleo. He charged Eddie six thousand bucks.

For that he cleared Eddie's bogus résumé and prepped him on how to handle the one-on-one interview with Marjorie MacBride. And that's how Eddie landed the job of his dreams.

His first day at work he reported to the Wardrobe Department. One of the Dressers, a chatty little Mexican woman whose name tag said Provi, helped him into the furry white Rambunctious Rabbit costume, with its distinctive red, white, and blue denim overalls. Provi was prattling on, but Elkins's mind and heart were racing too loud and fast for him to hear.

He couldn't believe it. He was Rambunctious Fucking Rabbit. More recognizable than The President of the United States. Maybe even The Pope. Children would literally flock to him. How many guys did he know who would trade their left nut for this gig?

"Elkins?"

He looked up, as Provi's thick-toothed black comb raked over his hairy white rabbit arms. The speaker, standing ten feet away, was Danny DeVito tall with an Arnold Schwarzenegger chest. His face and close-cropped gray hair had the wear and tear of a fifty-year-old. But the body, in black nylon warm-up pants and a tight black tank top, had the muscle tone of a college wrestler.

"I'm Dante, your Character Coach," he said. "Let's see what kind of a rabbit you are. Don't put the head on yet. Just let me see you walk over here."

Provi gave the suit one final fluff and stood back. Elkins inhaled, took one bold step forward and immediately hooked the

front edge of one giant rabbit's foot to the back of the other. Gravity took over and down he went, floppy ears over cottontail, onto the rubber-matted floor. Provi let out a loud *aye-aye-aye*.

"That's why you don't put the head on yet," Dante said, helping him up. "Don't want you to break it."

"But it's okay if I break my own head? Why didn't you warn me?"

"You learn faster this way," Dante said. "What size shoes do you wear?"

"Ten and a half."

"Well now you're wearing size twenty-four rabbit's feet and eighteen pounds of fur. Why don't you try it again?" Dante said, stepping to the other side of the room.

Elkins hobbled his way toward Dante and made it to the other side without falling. "How's that?" he asked.

"Fantastic," Dante said, "if you were one of Jerry's Kids. You gotta be animated. Bouncy, springy," Dante said, bouncing and springing across the room. "Don't worry. By the time I'm finished you'll be dancing around the park like Adolf Nureyev."

It took ten hours. "Tomorrow I'll show you how to find your way around every inch of this park," Dante said. "Then we'll go over the rules for handling kids. There's a right way and a wrong way, and you gotta be real careful. Don't scare 'em, don't drop 'em and don't touch 'em in any wrong places."

They worked with dolls. Eddie had no problem not touching them in any wrong places. On the last day of training, Dante introduced him to a squat, moon-faced woman with a thick mane of bottled blonde hair, a dozen tiny gold earrings on each side of her head, and eyes that convinced Eddie there was nothing going on between the earrings. "This is Noreen Stubiak," he said. "She'll be your Keeper."

Caleo had prepared him for this, but Eddie played dumb. "My what?"

"Every character gets a Keeper. They follow you around the

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park. Somebody messes with you, bam, she's right there to help."

Eddie smiled at her. "So you're going to protect me," he said. "You got a gun?" Noreen made a snorting sound that Eddie took for a laugh.

"Don't give her no ideas," Dante said. "She's got a walkie-talkie. Anybody starts up with you, she calls Security to bail you out."

Eddie knew the truth. Noreen was a spy. He hated the idea of having a watchdog follow him around, but it didn't take long to figure out that Noreen was the best possible Keeper he could have. She was a highly unmotivated, twice-divorced piece of flotsam from the Total Loser's Section of Trailer Park City, and Stubiak, Eddie decided, was Polish for 'dumb as shit.' But she had one redeeming quality. It didn't take much to get her to look the other way.

Every few days Eddie would give her a little gift. A Faith Hill CD. A bag of scrunchies for her mop of revolting yellow hair. Or a bottle of her favorite perfume, Eau de Wal-Mart. Maybe she knew what he was up to; maybe she didn't. Either way, she never said a word.

The weeks that followed were the happiest of his life. Four times a day Eddie, dressed as Rambunctious Rabbit, would hop on the Easy Street Trolley and head for Tyke Town. That's where the younger kids were. Just this afternoon, he had spotted the boy. Asian. Stunning. Six years old, maybe seven. The perfect age. A little shy, but not afraid.

Eddie had waved at him. The kid waved back. Eddie followed up with a little hippety-hoppety dance, and the kid smiled. Then he walked over, purposely almost tripping over his two giant rabbit's feet. The kid laughed.

Eddie stretched out his white-gloved paws and Mom helped her son jump into the eager arms of Rambunctious Rabbit. Eddie slid one hand between the boy's legs and the other behind his head. He touched his rabbit nose to the kid's nose and got

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another laugh from the boy and a happy shriek from the mother.

The father scrambled for his camera. "Can we get the statue in the background?" he said, in surprisingly perfect English.

Eddie snuggled the tiny genitals in his palm and walked toward the thirty-foot bronze likeness of the late Dean Lamaar. Dad took a picture. Then another. Take your time, Eddie thought, re-cupping his hand so that his thumb rested in the crack of the sweet little butt.

This, he thought, as cold, clammy sweat trickled from every pore, is even better than the school bus driving days. Good pay, good benefits, and parents who lift up their kids and hand them to me crotch first.

At that moment, Eddie had less than an hour to live.

He spent another twenty minutes in Tyke Town, then he and Noreen headed for the tunnel that led to The Rabbit Hole, the vast underground world hidden beneath Familyland's 866 acres. Above ground was fantasy. Below ground was the hard reality of hundreds of miles of electric cable, sewage lines, refrigeration pipes, and of course, scores of locker rooms, cafeterias, toilet facilities, and rest areas for the 6,200 employees who made the fantasy happen.

There was still another half hour till quitting time, and Eddie needed a smoke. As soon as they got through the tunnel, Eddie pulled off the rabbit head. "I got something to do before I change," he said. "See you tomorrow."

"Goodnight Eddie," Noreen said. "Thanks again for the video."

Eddie had picked up an old Brad Pitt movie at a flea market for two bucks. "My pleasure," he said. "I know how much you like him."

The entire Rabbit Hole was a No Smoking Zone, but Eddie knew a spot where he could light up out of view of the security cameras. He wound his way through a maze of ductwork, plopped down on the cool tile floor, and set the giant Rambo

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head down next to him. He lit a Marlboro Light, inhaled deeply, leaned back against a water pipe, and exhaled the smoke from his lungs with a long, slow breath.

It was his last.

The rope came from nowhere, cutting deep into his neck. He tried to scream, but nothing came out. He tried to inhale, but nothing came in.

Thirty-seven seconds later, Eddie Elkins, a.k.a. Edward Ellison, sex offender, child molester, and convicted pedophile, had his last conscious thought.

God, I was so happy. Why now?

He knew better than to ask, *why me?*

CHAPTER 2

I WISH I still smoked. Some occasions just seem to go better when I inhale deadly toxins. Occasions such as opening Joanie's monthly letter. But I gave up tobacco seven years ago, so I had to resort to other self-inflicted pain. Exercise.

I did forty-five minutes on the bike, managed 114 sit-ups, then hit the shower, slowly edging the hot water from invigorating to excruciating. I switched to cold just before my back started to blister.

I was out of coffee, but there was half a pot of Juan Valdez's finest still on the counter from yesterday. I poured a cup and nuked it. It tasted like Juan's donkey's finest, but at seven in the morning, I'll take my caffeine any way I can get it.

I poured myself a bowl of Cheerios. Andre heard me chewing and showed up before I swallowed my first mouthful. "We're giving out numbers this morning," I told him. "I'm One. You're Two. Wait your turn."

Andre does not grasp the finer points of math, but he got my gist and sprawled out on the floor, waiting patiently for his number to be called.

I propped the envelope against the cereal box. On the front was my name in Joanie's girly-girl handwriting. Plus the number six. Only she didn't write the number. There were just hash marks. Like an inmate counting days.

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I sat there staring at the envelope and spooning up my Cheerios. Andre remained a polite two feet away, both eyes riveted on the spoon. “Explain something to me,” I said to him. “How come the Cheerios commercials always show happy Moms with perky breasts, Dads who seem to be on the right career path, and teenage kids with no substance abuse problems? What about real families like us? A middle-aged widower and his Cheerios-loving dog?”

Andre shifted positions and started licking his dick. “You keep doing that at the breakfast table,” I told him, “and we’ll never wind up on television.”

I always put in too much milk, so I grabbed another fistful of cereal, to establish a better oats-to-milk ratio in the bowl. I still wasn’t ready to open the letter, so I read the box and was delighted to find that Cheerios may reduce my cholesterol if I make them part of my heart-healthy diet. I decided not to order a Cheerios T-shirt for only \$4.99 and wondered why they had to print “Limit 4 T-shirts per household.” Are there actually households that need more than four? And if so, why would General Mills deprive them?

I left an inch of milk and about two dozen floaters in the bowl and set it down on the floor next to Andre. He stopped gratifying himself sexually and immediately dove into the heart-healthier choice.

I waited for him to finish so I could pick up the bowl, otherwise Rosa, my cleaning lady, would find it on the floor and have to go to church to ask God to forgive me for feeding the dog out of my dead wife’s good dishes.

Andre finished his Cheerios and went back to his dick. I put the bowl in the sink, went back to the bedroom, and plopped down on the big stuffed chair. I used Joanie’s best cake knife to open the envelope. *Dios mio*; pray for me, Rosa.

Dearest Mike,

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Are these letters driving you crazy? Tough shit. I've never been dying before, and I'm trying to figure this out as I go along. It serves you right for marrying a firstborn, perfectionist, Gemini control freak.

Assuming you're following my orders and reading these on schedule (if you don't I'll come back and haunt you) it's been six months. Hopefully Rosa is still coming, or by now there are 180 pairs of dirty socks and underwear piled up on the bedroom floor.

I wrote the first five letters when I was between chemo sessions. Today I'm vomiting between paragraphs, so bear with me.

I'm sad for you. The hardest part of this whole ordeal is not that I'm dying (although believe me that sucks big time). It's trying to imagine you without me.

How can I not be there every morning when you roll over all shaggy, scruffy, and if I'm lucky, horny. How can I not be there on Sunday nights at Gino's to split a sausage and pineapple pizza and a bottle of dago red? How can I not be with you? How can you be—how can you exist—without me?

I don't know how many more letters I've got left in me, but I'll write #7 tomorrow. Just to whet your appetite, I promise to reveal the biggest secret I ever kept from you. No cheating. You can't open it for another month.

Michael, my sweet lover, I know these messages from your dear departed wife must be like getting greeting cards from the Surreal Section of the Hallmark store. But I can't stop writing. I've accepted the fact that I can't hold onto my own life. I just can't let go of being part of yours.

I will love you for eternity. Give Big Jim and Andre big wet kisses for me.

Joanie

I closed my eyes and let it soak in. Then I read the letter again.

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I was about to read it for the third time when the annoying little voice that lives rent-free inside my head told me to put the letter away now.

I try not to argue with the voice. I extricated myself from the sagging green chair as gracefully as one can extricate 180 pounds from anything.

I walked over to Joanie's dressing table, and picked up the double-sided silver picture frame she gave me for our first anniversary. On the left side of the frame was our wedding picture with her handwritten inscription below. "*To my darling Mike, We've only just begun. Love, Joanie*"

On the opposite side was the identical picture, but through the miracle of Photoshop, Joanie had digitally aged us fifty years. My hair was silver and thinning, but at least she gave me hair. I was thirty pounds heavier, and my face was lined with crags and crevices.

Joanie was even harder on herself, thickening out her middle, bluing her beautiful strawberry blonde hair, and adding liberal amounts of wrinkles and liver spots to her glowing skin. But she didn't change her eyes. There were crow's feet on the outside, but inside they were still the color I told her was Cavu Blue. My father flies a Piper Warrior on the weekends, and CAVU is pilot talk for a sky that has 'Ceiling And Visibility Unlimited.' To me nothing is bluer.

"I resent the fact that you think I can't function without Rosa cleaning up after me," I said to the left side of the frame. "For your information, I was recently honored by *Good Housekeeping* as one of the only men on the planet who has actually mastered the art of picking up his own dirty socks and underwear. And you thought I couldn't live without you."

Andre paddled in. Andre, just for the record, is a six-year-old black Standard French Poodle. Not the kind of dog you'd expect to be living with a cop. But this dog has instincts like Sherlock Holmes and better communication skills than a kennel full of

movie Lassies.

He cocked his big curly head and gave me his most serious man-to-man look, which I clearly understood to say, "Hey, Lomax, I heard you talking, and now I see that it's just you and the picture of your dead wife. I'm starting to worry about you, pal."

I half-put the frame back down on the dressing table, then pulled it back to my lips, pressed my face to the glass, and set it back down. Andre, realizing that this was a private moment and that there was nothing edible in it for him, toddled off back to the living room.

The phone rang. It was my partner, Terry Biggs.

"Hey, Mike, we got a live one." A 'live one' was Terry's standard lame joke for a homicide victim.

"Ask me if the vic was a man or a woman," he said. Terry is a wannabe stand-up comic, but he's never sure he's going to get the straight line, so he helps you serve it up to him. I was in no mood to resist.

"Okay, Terry, who bought it? A man or a woman?"

"A rabbit," he answered, hoping to get a bigger reaction from me than I was capable of giving. "Actually a guy in a Rambo Rabbit suit. It happened out at Lamaar's Familyland."

"Familyland?" I said. "Is no place sacred?"

"I guess the scumbags are branching out. More work for you and me," Terry said. "I'll pick you up in fifteen."

I hung up. The letter was still in my other hand. There was a wooden box on top of Joanie's dressing table. I had found it gift wrapped at the bottom of my shirt drawer a few days after the funeral.

A brass plaque on top was engraved *Mike and Joan... till death us do part*. That's where I found the letters. I put Number Six back in the box. There were still three more to be opened.

I picked up my gun and my shield and had one more go at the picture. "This is not easy reading, Joanie," I said. "Don't be surprised if I come home tonight and flush all these love letters

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from the grave down the toilet.”

“Don’t be an asshole,” said the annoying little voice inside my head who hasn’t paid a day’s rent in forty-two years.

CHAPTER 3

A HORN HONKED and my partner pulled up in his 2002 silver Lexus ES 250. “Hey, kids,” he yelled out the window. “We’re going to Familyland! Yayyyy!”

That’s Terry, the Fun Homicide Cop.

I got into the Lexus ES 250, which I love to remind Terry is actually a Toyota Camry with a wood-paneled dash and a few other non-essentials to jack up the price. “Good morning, Detective,” I said. “Are you looking for the guy who slapped a Lexus logo on the front of your Camry?”

“Nice way to talk to the man who brought you breakfast.” There was a container of Starbucks in the cup holder plus a bag of Krispy Kremes on the floor. “Today’s the 18th,” he said, pulling away from the curb.

“Yeah, I saw that,” I said, sipping the coffee and trying hard to ignore the aroma of fried dough and sugar wafting up from the waxy bag of carbs at my feet. “It made Page One of today’s paper.”

Terry was one of three people who knew about Joanie’s letters. “It’s that time of the month,” he said. “You get mail?”

“Yeah,” I said. “She’s having a great time. I don’t get the sense she’s coming back.”

Terry was there for me when Joanie was dying. Not intruding. Not giving advice. Just there. A lifeline. He knows when to keep

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quiet, and this was one of those times. Carbs, be damned, I decided, and unbagged a glazed donut as we headed for the 405 South.

Terry Biggs is the best partner I ever worked with. For starters, he's not very L.A. He's one hundred percent Da Bronx. From the time he was a kid, he knew he was going to become a cop. But in the late seventies when he was ready to apply, the city of New York was in financial hell, and the NYPD had a hiring freeze. Los Angeles, on the other hand, had money, criminals, and jobs. Terry switched coasts and joined LAPD.

Terry is tall, dark, and ugly. Don't get me wrong. I love him. We've been friends and partners for seven years. But he'd be the first to back up my description. Six-foot-three, a mop of greasy black hair and a face that's kind of muley, but more pock marked than a real mule. The man is butt ugly.

Until he speaks. And his voice, soft and sweet as honey, warms you. He's funny, charming, loving, and before you know it, you're thinking what a beautiful guy. Women are particularly vulnerable to his special brand of ugliness. Terry Biggs had never had a problem getting girls.

Keeping them was a different story. He'd had three marriages go south. But number four was the charm. Marilyn. She's with LAPD Rescue. They met on the job.

About ten years ago, Terry stops at the Ralph's on Robertson. He's just parked his car when two guys with guns come tear-assing out of the market carrying a sack, which later turns out to contain \$18,000 in cash and food stamps.

Terry pulls his service revolver and yells the standard, "Police, drop your guns, etcetera, etcetera." Now Terry is off duty, so he's wearing plaid shorts and a New York Yankees T-shirt. Apparently, this is not an intimidating outfit, and the robbers keep running. They jump into a moving car, and in two seconds flat, the car is barreling down on Terry.

He dives out of the way, but a fender catches his foot in mid-

air and breaks his ankle. He still manages to get off three shots and blows out two of their tires. The car plows into one of those metal dividers where they collect the shopping carts. The driver gets a face full of air bag. One of the gunmen pulls his own trigger on impact and shoots himself in the leg. And before the last guy can figure out where the door handle is on their stolen car, Terry limps over and is singing “You Have the Right to Remain Silent.”

The headline in the paper the next day says, *One of L.A.’s Finest Bags Three of L.A.’s Dumbest*. But there was a second part to the story that got even more coverage. Lots more.

A few minutes after Terry nails the bad guys, about a dozen black and whites converge on the scene, followed by LAPD Rescue. The cops are screaming, “Officer down! Officer down!” which lets the Rescue Squad know to bypass the dirtbag who is bleeding to death and take care of that cop over there with the Camel dangling from his mouth.

The ambulance screeches to a stop, the driver’s side door flies open and out jumps Marilyn Cavanaugh. Marilyn has green eyes, curly red hair, and a big Irish smile. Sounds pretty good on paper, but she’s what they politely refer to in the Personal Ads as full-figured. She’s a hefty lass, Marilyn is, weighing in at about fourteen stone. But she’s also a top-notch paramedic, and no one ever complains that their Angel of Mercy is too chunky. Certainly not Terry.

Big as she is, Marilyn is lightning on her feet. Wham, bam, she takes Terry’s vitals and quickie-splints his ankle. Then together with her co-pilot, Marty Delaney, she hoists Terry onto a gurney and wheels him into the back of the bus. Marty hops in with the patient. Marilyn slams the rear doors, jumps in the cab, and flips on the siren. Terry, who has been operating on pure adrenaline, knows he’s finally headed for a fistful of Advil, a six-pack of beer, and at least a week’s paid leave. He closes his eyes and thanks God for another mission accomplished. Marilyn, feeling

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all the pressure of being responsible for an Officer Down, peels out, hell bent for Cedars-Sinai.

And that's when the A-M-B-U and the L-A-N-C-E part company. The back doors fly open, and the gurney catapults out onto the macadam, where it rolls about thirty feet until it runs head on into a Soccer Mom parking a minivan. The cops, who are still on the scene, scramble to help Terry, who now has a concussion to go along with his broken ankle. When they realize this is not particularly life threatening, they all have a huge laugh. But the camera crew from News Channel 4 has the biggest laugh of all. They had been shooting the departing ambulance for the evening news when the doors burst open. The video ran incessantly for three nights.

About sixty seconds later, a totally humiliated Marilyn returns for her Officer Down Twice. And that's how they met.

After that, she visited him every day, first in the hospital, then at home, offering to do whatever she could to make him happy. One night, it seemed that the thing that would make Terry the most happy was a roll in the sack. No problem for Marilyn. Rarely does a nice Irish girl get the opportunity to have sex with a man and actually diminish her Catholic guilt.

One thing, as they say, led to another, and despite the fact that Marilyn had seven-year-old twin daughters, and a third, age five, Terry signed on for the whole package. And that's how a guy from The Bronx winds up living in Sherman Oaks with a wife and three teenage Valley girls.

We plugged along the 405. "No sense using lights and sirens," Terry said. "With all this traffic, we'd wind up causing an accident. Besides, the guy we're going to see is already dead, so what's the hurry? You been to Familyland?"

"A bunch of times. You know Joanie," I said. "She was a kid at heart." What I didn't say was how much she wanted kids. We both wanted them. We spent three years and thousands of dollars trying to make one. It was our fertility doc who actually discov-

ered the ovarian cancer. Congratulations, Mrs. Lomax. You're not going to have a baby, and you're going to die.

"I always thought of Lazaar as a rip-off of Disney," Terry said. "But that's sort of like saying Pepsi is a rip-off of Coke. There may be truth in it, but it's still an eight hundred-pound gorilla on its own."

He was right. Lazaar, like Disney, had started out as a small animation house. Rambunctious Rabbit, Slaphappy Puppy, McGreedy the Moose, and a shitload of terminally jolly characters had captured the public's heart and transformed the little cartoon studio into a global entertainment company.

Today Lazaar made movies and TV shows, owned music and toy companies, operated hotels and a cruise line, licensed cartoon characters, and was traded on the New York Stock Exchange. Familyland was just one small piece of the corporate pie.

Terry recapped the highlights of his last two trips to Familyland with Marilyn and the girls. He made sure to give me some tips on how to get 'back-doored,' which is theme park jargon for entering a ride or attraction without waiting on line. Apparently, his ability to buck the long lines and get the VIP treatment at Familyland had made him even more lovable in the eyes of the four women who already adored him.

We don't like to talk about a case before we get to the scene, so Terry segued into the upcoming college hunt for the twins, who were juniors in high school. He never once mentioned how expensive it would be, which if you know Terry is just like him. He was just a button-popping proud Dad, who wanted the best for his girls. We were discussing the merits of applying for early admission when he pulled onto the off ramp. The arrow on the sign for the main entrance to Familyland pointed right. Terry turned left.

"They said don't go to the front gate," he told me. "We're going to the admin building on Happy Landings Boulevard. They

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want to keep this investigation low profile, so try not to look like a cop.”

That’s the nice thing about Terry. Sometimes he lobs out a straight line for me to take. “Okay,” I said. “I’ll leave the donuts in the car.”

Terry gave a little chuckle, which from him is a rave. I, in turn, bowed to thank him for the set-up line. Sometimes homicide can be a lot of fun.

CHAPTER 4

UNTIL DEAN LAMAAR showed up with his world-famous rabbit and a bottomless checkbook in 1970, the little town of Costa Luna, California was exactly that. A little town. But after he gobbled up most of the town in one gulp, Lamaar wanted to make sure his investment would be protected by a real police force and not some Podunk constabulary.

Everybody agreed that the local cops could handle the small stuff, like Drunk and Disorderlies. But the supremely paranoid Mr. Lamaar was particularly jittery about a race riot breaking out on the carousel. The big stuff, he insisted, required big guns. And that meant LAPD.

Meetings were held. Palms were greased, backs were scratched, and eventually codes were rewritten. I've heard that the legalese goes on for 150 pages. The short version is that Lamaar's Familyland is technically outside of LAPD's jurisdiction. Unless the shit hits the fan. Defining 'the shit' takes up most of the 150 pages.

Over the years we had handled a few rape cases and the occasional "I-was-ahead-of-you-in-line-Mother-Fucker" stabbing. This was our first homicide in the Happy Little Kingdom.

We pulled up to the Dexter Duck Administration Building. Catchy name. So radically different from Donald or Daffy Duck. I hoped the murderer was as unoriginal as the guy who created

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Dexter.

There were a bunch of black and whites discreetly parked at odd angles, plus an EMS bus and the Medical Examiner's wagon. Most of the vehicles still had their lights flashing. That ought to keep it low profile.

A ruddy-faced local cop with a beer belly that any man could be proud of, sized up the Lexus/Camry from twenty feet away.

"Budweiser blimp at eleven o'clock," Biggs informed me.

The blimp was about fifty, wearing a Smokey hat and tan summer-weights that fit well despite his enormous girth. He lifted a finger to indicate he'd seen us, but had something more important to do first. He pulled a wrinkled red bandana out of his back pocket and honked into it hard. Then he moseyed on over. "Morning, Detectives," he said, downright friendlier than I'd expected.

I was prepared for an Archie Bunker voice to go with the Bunker-like physique. But he talked in a high-pitched squeak, and 'detectives' came out 'detectifth.' It wasn't the hissy, sibilant S that helps you spot a gay guy across a crowded room. It was more of a good old-fashioned childhood speech impediment that never went away. No wonder he became a cop. In a small red-neck town like Costa Luna, a fat guy with a bad lisp needs to carry a gun.

I scanned the gold-and-black nameplate on the flap of his left breast pocket. "Good morning, Sheriff Davis," I said.

"It's not Davis; it's Daves," It came out 'Davthe.' "Marlon Daves. Like more than one Dave." He winked. "Welcome to Familyland, the unluckiest place in the world."

"How so, Sheriff?" Terry asked.

"Fella was wearing two rabbit's feet, and he still got iced." We all had a Big Hearty Cop Laugh over that.

"Lucky that Dean Lamaar is dead," Daves said. "He'd be all tore up if he knew someone kilt his star attraction."

I'm so used to cynical, wiseass L.A. cops that it took me a beat

to realize that the statement was heartfelt. Terry and I agreed with Daves that it was excellent fortune for Mr. Lamaar to be dead at this point in his career. Daves went on. "I met with him a couple of times y'know," he said with obvious pride. "We have monthly meetings with their security people. Sometimes the old man would stop by and say hello. He'd ask me how the mis-sus was. Give me free passes for the kids. Things like that." He paused, waiting for our reaction.

Police work is all about respect. It's the key to our psyche. Did you ever get pulled over for speeding and try to talk your way out of a ticket? If you whine, make lame excuses, or tell the cop how important you are, it only pisses him off. If you apologize, show remorse, and promise it won't happen again sir, you have half a chance of getting off with a warning.

Terry and I both gave the Sheriff an appreciative nod to let him know how impressed we were that he had spent quality time with Dean Lamaar.

"Anything going on around here we should know about?" Terry asked. "Problems in the company that might get one of their characters murdered?"

"What makes you think it's about the company?" Daves said, his tinny voice piercing the air. "Could be that the guy in the bunny suit had an enemy. Maybe he owed somebody money or he had his dick in the wrong place."

"Possible," Terry said, "but I figured you'd know more about the company than the rabbit's dick."

"Sure I know about the company. Bought their stock. It was headed south for a while, till Nakamachi bought them out and brought in Ike Rose to run the place. Sharp guy. Stock's been going up. Dean Lamaar died about three years ago, so the place isn't as homey as it used to be. But hell, it's a business, not a home. My opinion—there's no problems in the company that would cause a murder. If it was my investigation, I'd find out who that bunny rabbit was humping. Of course, I'm just a coun-

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try boy. You're the ones who do this every day."

"Marlon," Terry said, crossing over to first-name familiarity, "any more country boys as smart as you, and us city boys would be out of a job."

The fat man smiled and his chest puffed out a little. You could practically hear Aretha Franklin singing R-E-S-P-E-C-T. Terry asked where the DOA was.

"They got these tunnels under the park. They call it The Rabbit Hole. Employees only. Your vic is down there."

"We appreciate your help, Sheriff," Terry said.

"One more thing," Daves said. "There's a woman waiting for you in the Duck Building. Amy, the gal with the big boobs. She just showed up from Lamaar headquarters in Burbank. Told me to stand out here and keep everybody away. This company don't like publicity, and she's in charge of Corporate Miscommunications. She's gonna do her best to get you fellas to keep this investigation under wraps. Just thought you should know up front."

Marlon was no country bumpkin. His theory about the rabbit's dick was iffy at best, but he was a smart enough cop who apparently paid attention. We thanked him for the heads-up and turned toward the Dexter Duck Building and the gal with the big boobth.

CHAPTER 5

DEXTER DUCK WAS your basic low-rise, earthquake-resistant Southern California office building. No real architectural point of view, which surprised me. Shouldn't it have been covered with feathers, or at least shaped like a duck?

We walked through two sets of glass doors. A receptionist sat dead center about twenty feet in. The first hint that this office building was different from your average insurance company was the fact that the walls were covered with oversized color glossies of cartoon characters.

Before we could even cross to the receptionist's desk, I heard the rapid click-clack of heels on the marble floor, and a woman hurried over to us. She was thirty-fiveish, brunette, white-bread pretty, no wedding ring. The photo ID card on a chain around her neck had come to rest on her left breast, which I sized up to be a 38C or D, which is a popular size among men. The tag simply said 'Amy,' but I stared at it long enough to read the Gettysburg Address.

Biggs and I flashed Amy our Big City Cop credentials, and she introduced herself. "I'm Amy Cheever, Corporate Communications."

Terry pulled out his pad. "How do you spell that, ma'am?" he asked.

"Cheever," she said. "Like John Cheever, the writer."

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“Thank you, ma’am,” Terry said. “And how does he spell it?”

Her brown eyes crackled, but she kept her cool and proceeded to spell Cheever. She took a beat, then added, “And Amy is spelled A-M-Y.” This girl didn’t take no sass. Not even from the Big City Cops.

We had been forewarned by Daves. Amy was the enemy. Our job was to gather as much information as possible. Her job was to keep it from us. Terry had opted to play Nasty Cop. “How long you work here at Familyland?” he said. He already knew the answer.

“I don’t work here,” she said. “I told you I’m with Corporate. I work out of Lamaar Studios in Burbank. Press relations for Familyland is one of my responsibilities. I got here as soon as I heard the news.”

“Thanks for coming, but we’re not press,” Terry said.

Amy handed me an official-looking folder. “This is Eddie Elkins’s personnel file. He’s the man who was killed. He’s a new employee, been with us a few months. There’s a sister in Baltimore to notify in case of emergency.”

“I think this qualifies,” Nasty Cop said. “Did you call her?”

“Several times. No answer. No machine.”

“Just as well,” Terry said. “We’ll call her.”

She took a deep breath and let it out slowly. I know a little about body language, and her breathing told me that she was about to say something she knew we wouldn’t like.

“It’s important that we keep this crime from being blown out of proportion in the press,” she said. “It would be good if we could keep it out of the press entirely.”

Thank you, Sheriff Daves. Underneath those 38s, Amy Cheever’s corporate heart was definitely in the right place. Let’s all sweep it under the rug.

“We can’t control the press,” I said with a Friendly Cop smile.

“I understand,” she said. “That’s my job. I went to business school. They taught me how to handle the harsh realities of a

bad situation.”

“Did they teach you how to handle the harsh reality of a homicide?” It was Biggs. He seemed to really enjoy sparring with her.

“Listen,” she said, without a hint of Cop Respect in her tone. “Half of our business is aimed at children under twelve. If Mr. Elkins had been a third-grade teacher, and he were murdered in a gay bar, I’m sure the police would cooperate in trying to protect the children from the details. All I’m asking is that you treat this case with the same discretion. We really do care about the children.”

Terry and I both nodded to communicate that we understood, but that was all the commitment we would give her.

“Thank you very much,” she said. I wondered how she’d spin this conversation to her boss. Something like, ‘I spoke to LAPD, sir. They promised to take a vow of silence.’

Terry spoke. “If it’s not too much trouble, ma’am, we’d like to see the dead body now.”

“Your forensic people are on the scene. I’ll take you there.”

Our forensic people? On the scene? Everybody loves cop-speak.

Amy did an about-face and headed for the elevator. Terry threw me one of those quick Man Looks to let me know that Amy Cheever also had a fabulous ass.

I threw him back the Man Look that says, “What am I, Mr. Magoo?” We fell in behind her. I had the distinct sense that she was enjoying the fact that we were enjoying her ass.

All in all, I thought we were off to a pretty good start.

CHAPTER 6

TERRY AND I stepped to the back of the elevator. Amy stood in front. I inhaled deeply to get a better take on her perfume. This was not official police work. In fact it wasn't work at all. She smelled fantastic. Not your typical office fragrance. More bedroom than boardroom.

There were no buttons to push. Just a panel with a series of locks, each one marked with the corresponding floor. I gawked at Amy as she inserted a chrome key into the fourth lock from the top. The light next to it went from red to green. Then before the doors could close, one more passenger jumped aboard. Surprise, surprise, it was the little voice that lives inside my head.

"And what do we have here?" it said. "Is this Detective Lomax fantasizing about a principal in a homicide case? How quickly one forgets the letter from one's wife, who is lying in the ground these six short months."

I've accepted the fact that I can't hold onto my own life. I just can't let go of being part of yours.

I thanked the voice for stopping by and looked away from Amy's seductive butt and down at my loafers. I also began to breathe through my mouth, but the scent of Amy still hung in the air. I took one last gawk to see if I could make out a panty line. Nothing visible. Civilians have no idea what goes on inside a cop's head when he's working the job.

The elevator took us four floors down. D Level. The doors opened, and we got our first look at The Rabbit Hole. It was hardly a hole. It was wide and spacious and well lit. It reminded me of the American Airlines terminal at LAX.

We hopped on a golf cart and headed down a corridor that was not quite as wide as the Ventura Freeway. Amy was our driver and tour guide.

“On your right is the employee cafeteria. We serve over twelve thousand meals a day. Up ahead is our laundry facility. How many pounds of laundry would you guess we handle on a daily basis?”

“We’re cops, ma’am,” Terry said. “We can’t guess without clues.”

“Fifty-two tons,” she said, with a hint of self-congratulation that one doesn’t usually associate with getting laundry dirty. “And believe it or not, that generates over one hundred pounds of dryer lint every day.”

I had to hand it to her. She acted like this was just another day at the office. Let’s see, what’s on the agenda today? Staff meeting, write a press release, dash over to Familyland, drive cops to dead body, then lunch. The gal in charge of Corporate Miscommunications. Calm and composed on the outside, but I’d bet that deep down she was scared shitless.

The cart stopped to let a zebra cross in front of us. Not a man in a zebra suit. A real zebra, like you see on the savannah. The handler, or whatever you call those guys who pull exotic animals around underground tunnels, waved at us. Amy said, “Hi, Harold,” and for a second I was impressed that she knew him by name. Then I saw the name tag on his shirt. Can’t fool this detective.

The cart took off again. Like I told Terry, I had been to Familyland. This was better. It was like being backstage at the circus. Actually it was more like being in the circus. Everyone was in costume. We passed a group of three young women who must

have been on a coffee break. One of them looked like Dolley Madison and had to stand about five feet back from the others to make clearance for her hoop skirt. The second was in a tiger suit, with the head resting on the ground nearby. The third was some sort of a Martian drinking a Fresca.

“You think maybe our killer was wearing a costume to help him blend in?” Terry asked, practically reading my mind.

“I was just wondering the same thing,” I said.

“But it would have to be something simple,” Terry said. “I can’t imagine being able to kill somebody if you’re dressed up like a six-foot duck.”

The golf cart hummed along, and I sat back and enjoyed the show. It was difficult to think of this place as a business. Or a murder scene. This was the underbelly of one of the greatest entertainment institutions in the world. The part the public never gets to see; hardly even knows about. I couldn’t help but think how much Joanie would have loved this special secret world down here.

We drove past hundreds of people, most of whom seemed to be in a hurry to get to God-knows-where. Just like an airport. Except in the airport, you don’t see that many people dressed in sequins, sparkles, and spangles. Well, maybe San Francisco Airport.

We turned off the Ventura Freeway onto a narrow passageway, a cul-de-sac about fifty feet deep. At the far end was a cluster of people inside a perimeter of yellow plastic tape. Amy stopped the cart, and Terry jumped off. “What the hell is this?” he said, grabbing the tape.

It should have said, *Crime Scene. Do Not Cross*. Instead it said *This Area Closed For Renovations. Sorry For The Inconvenience*. Terry was furious. “Are we investigating a homicide, or an inconvenience?”

“We need to keep a low profile,” Amy said. “We can’t have employees gawking at a big yellow police banner that says *Mur-*

der Committed Here.”

“You *need* to keep it low profile?” Terry barked. “Are you aware that it’s against the law to remove the Crime Scene tape?”

“We didn’t remove it. We just added our own tape and extended the perimeter. The whole world doesn’t have to know there was a murder here.”

“Well, LAPD just might want the whole world to know,” Terry said, loud enough for a good chunk of the world to hear him, “just in case one of them happened to be a witness. Did you ever think of that?”

“Gentlemen, can I help?” a voice called out.

The people behind the tape stopped working to see what the yelling was about. One by one they lost interest and went back to what they were doing. Except for the guy who offered to help. He headed toward us.

He was a light-skinned African-American, big and well-built, his head shaved smooth and buffed to a soft glow. His eyes locked on me and Terry, slicing and dicing us as he approached. He stopped a foot away and stood eyeball to eyeball with me, which made him six-foot-one. But he had at least twenty pounds on me, about nineteen and a half of which were muscle.

His face, his bearing, his look, everything about him, said Cop. Everything but his clothes, which said Handsomely Paid Executive. I was right on both counts.

“Gentlemen,” he said, “I’m Brian Curry, Head of Security at Familyland.”

CHAPTER 7

COP-TO-COP introductions at the scene of a homicide don't usually call for hearty handshakes, but Curry extended his hand, so I shook it. Terry hung about six feet back, folded his arms across his chest and nodded at him.

"I'm glad you're here," Curry said. That surprised me. Private cops are never glad to see city cops show up on their turf. "This is a terrible day for us. Whatever I can do to help you solve this crime quickly..." he cleared his throat, "and quietly, just say the word."

He walked over to Terry and extended his hand again, this time with a business card in it. "If it's really critical, I'll take down the little barrier we put up to discourage people from rubbernecking. However..."

Terry took the card. "Let's just leave it for now."

"Hey, guys... Lomax... Biggs... over here."

Another voice from the business side of the Crime Scene tape. This time it was the unmistakable twang of Jessica Keating. Nobody in all of LAPD sounds quite like Jessica. She's from Chicago where they apparently teach their young to run every word through their nasal passages before actually speaking it. She could really mutilate the name Lomax, but I was thrilled to hear her. There are a couple of hard-ass, self-absorbed, this-is-my-job-not-yours LAPD Crime Scene Investigators. Jessica

Keating is not one of them.

Jess is an amalgam of visual counterpoints. She's Janet Reno tall, with curly blonde Shirley Temple hair. Her face has wonderful hints of Audrey Hepburn. Creamy white skin, unblemished by a single ray of California sunshine, tapering off into an elegant slender neck. At the other end are two oversized Bozo the Clown feet.

She's Midwestern friendly with a glorious smile and a big goofy laugh. Homicide cases are inherently depressing, but if anyone can brighten up a murder scene, it's Jessica. I always tell her she's the Ghoul of my Dreams. The only time I ever saw her cry was in a high school gymnasium in Van Nuys. Every cop has a breaking point. For Jessica it was four dead kids and a gym teacher sprawled across a painted hardwood floor.

Terry and I gave her a big "Hey, Jess" and walked over with Curry and Amy close behind. Jess was on one knee, fiddling with the DOA, who was still inside his bunny suit. His size 42 rabbit head, an open pack of Marlboro Lights, and a red translucent plastic Bic lighter were on the floor nearby.

Terry and I hadn't crossed paths with Jessica for about a week, so she had a little catching up to do. "Nice going on the Marlar case," she said.

"Couldn't have done it without you, Keating," I said. It was true. She had determined that the murder weapon was a rock-hard rawhide bone that had been the chew toy of the victim's dog, a massive golden retriever named Rudy. The dog hadn't done it, but apparently the victim's husband had. Jessica had put us on the path to success when she picked up a single drool-covered Rudy hair from the victim's skull.

"What do we have?" I asked, getting down to the business at hand.

She smiled real perky and put on her instructor face, as if she were now going to teach us a simple, basic life skill, like how to stuff a turkey. "Cause of death, strangulation. This is a No

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Smoking facility. Looks like the vic snuck back here to cop a cigarette. Someone came up from behind him, wrapped a rope around his neck, and strangled him.”

“You sure the killer came from behind?” Biggs said.

“Not a hundred percent, but if he attacked from the front, there’d be signs of a struggle. I’m thinking the killer snuck through these pipes and got behind Elkins while he was lighting up. Elkins never knew what hit him. Once the rope was around his neck, he was probably unconscious in thirty seconds, dead in sixty. A maintenance guy found him this morning, but I’d put the time of death between 3 and 5 p.m. yesterday.”

“There’s a million people down here,” Terry said. “It took that long for someone to discover the body?”

“This is a blind alley, a dead-end junction for ducts and pipes. No security cameras. No reason for people to be here.”

Amy was hovering at our side listening to every word. “So there wouldn’t be any witnesses,” she said, with a smug look at Terry.

Terry ignored her and turned to Curry. “Come to think of it, Brian, there is something you can do. Explain the concept of obstruction of justice to your people.” He turned back to Jessica. “You sure the murder weapon was a rope?”

“You tell me. Let’s call this Exhibit One.” She used a tongue depressor to hold up a kid’s jump rope. It was flecked with dried blood, and when I leaned closer I could see little shriveled bits and shreds of Eddie Elkins’s neck hanging off it. The handles at each end of the rope were plastic cartoon characters. Gerbils, maybe. Or hamsters. Definitely some kind of fun vermin for little kids.

“It’s the Wacky Pack Rat jump rope,” Brian said. “We sell it here in the park.”

“We’ll need surveillance tapes from the gift shops,” I said, “and the names of anyone who put that jump rope on their credit card in the past thirty days.” I turned back to Jessica. “Anything

else?”

“The killer cut an ear off the rabbit head; took it as a souvenir. Then there’s this. We found it in the victim’s right paw... hand... whatever.”

With two gloved fingers, she held up a little book, two inches long, an inch and a half wide. It was forty or fifty pages thick. “It’s an old-fashioned flipbook,” she said. “Y’know, the picture is slightly different on each page. When you flip the pages, the picture looks like it’s moving. Take a look.”

There was a drawing of a closed hand on the cover page. She placed her thumb on the front edge and began flipping. As the pages flew by, the picture animated, and the middle digit of the hand popped up, giving us the finger.

“Definitely not available at a Lamaar gift shop,” Curry said.

Biggs began writing in his notebook. Homicide cops are supposed to write in pads. You see it on all the TV shows. So nobody paid attention. But I knew he wasn’t taking notes. He was quietly communicating with me. I leaned left so I could see the pad. He wrote *TTT???* I responded with a shrug. Terry closed the pad. He wasn’t about to pursue his theory in public.

“Brian,” I said, “we’ll need to talk to the people Elkins worked with.”

“Can do,” he said. “Each character is assigned a Keeper. Someone to tag along, so they never walk through the park solo. I’ve checked the roster, and Elkins’s Keeper is Noreen Stubiak. We can track her down for you. Also, a lot of the characters work in teams for the Character Breakfast Events, so I’m sure there are a number of people who knew him. Plus there’s the men’s dressing room. I’ll get you a list of all the guys who had lockers near his.”

“I have a problem with that.” It was Amy.

“You got a problem with what?” I was real close to becoming Bad Cop.

“I know this will sound heartless,” she said, “but we were for-

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tunate that Mr. Elkins was murdered in this out-of-the-way area. The maintenance man who found him has agreed not to discuss it publicly. Then there were another fourteen employees who were attracted to the commotion before we were able to close off the area. They too have agreed not to discuss the incident publicly.”

“You seem to have an abundance of agreeable employees,” I said.

“It’s not against the law to encourage our people to protect the company’s privacy. Why broadcast the murder by talking to every employee who knows him? I thought we were trying to keep this out of the press.”

“You’re the one trying to keep this out of the press.” I said. “We’re the ones trying to solve it. That means talking to everybody Elkins worked with.”

Brian shook his head slowly. “This is premeditated, isn’t it? Somebody had it in for this guy and hunted him down. Maybe another employee.”

“Looks planned out to me,” Terry said. “Nobody stumbled on this guy, rolled him for his wallet, and took the time to draw a flipbook. This is a crime of passion. Someone was really pissed off at this guy.”

“A crime of passion,” Amy said. “That sounds like you should be interviewing people Elkins knew personally. Maybe a girlfriend, a jealous husband, something like that.”

“What are you talking about, Amy?” Curry said. “Since when do jealous husbands leave flipbooks? I’m afraid whoever did this was pissed off, but not at Elkins. I think the killer is pissed at Lamaar, so he murders Rambunctious Rabbit. That flipbook really bothers me. I think it’s a message to the company.”

“And what message is that?” Amy said, pursing her lips and squinching up her pretty little White Anglo Saxon-Protestant face.

“‘Fuck you.’ What else do you think this means?” He gave her

the finger and her face turned to Red Anglo-Saxon Protestant. “I think there could be some maniac roaming around the park right now, planning to kill off our characters.”

Amy glared at him. She wanted us looking for jealous husbands, not scouring the park for homicidal maniacs.

“Suppose Brian is right,” I said. “Can you think of anyone who is angry enough at the company that they would randomly kill one of your employees?”

“Rambo is not a random employee. He’s the living, breathing symbol of the company. And while I would never say this on the record, as long as Brian opened this can of worms, with six thousand people working for us, yes, it is possible that one of them is angry or crazy enough to kill another employee.”

“I’d say a lot of our employees are that crazy,” Brian said. “Sometimes I get the feeling this place is the Post Office with costumes.”

“Jesus, Brian!” Amy threw her hands up at him, then turned back to me. “That comment was off the record too.”

Brian Curry was clearly unhinged by the thought that it might be Open Season on Dexter Duck. “I’m sorry, Amy. But this is unnerving. What if somebody deliberately killed this man because he was wearing the Rambo suit? What if this is a series of... of...”

“Character assassinations?” Terry chimed in.

Amy’s face went red again, but Terry kept going before she could say anything. “How many people have access to this tunnel system?”

“About six thousand,” Brian answered. “All our people are costumed. Not just the characters, but everyone. We don’t even call them employees. They’re cast members. Ride operators, restaurant staff, everyone dresses up in theme wardrobe that’s appropriate to where they work. They come down here to change in and out of costume. Plus there are facilities for them down here. Food services, training classrooms, and of course,

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bathrooms. Cast members are not allowed to use the same restrooms as the public.”

“Why not?” I asked.

“It sort of spoils the magic to see McGreedy the Moose taking a piss in the men’s room.”

“You have a security system to keep non-employees out of these tunnels?” Terry asked.

It was not a complicated question. Yes or no? But Curry clasped his hands and took five seconds to formulate an answer. Terry and I call it the Fudge Pause or the Waffle Beat. We were about to get a version of the truth.

“Think of the park as a giant ship,” Curry began. Metaphors are handy when you’re telling half-truths. They’re nice and muddy. “Now on a ship, the engine room, the radio room, and the other critical areas are all under tight security.” He paused, either to make sure we understood or to invent some more bullshit. “But they don’t monitor every passageway or every stateroom. It’s the same thing here. There are so many corridors and doors that connect us to the buildings up top, that we can’t possibly watch them all.”

“So anyone who buys a ticket can just stroll down here?” Terry asked.

“It’s not that easy,” Curry said, defending the Mother Ship. “We’ve got visual security at all the main entrances that connect with public thoroughfares. My guards are well trained. They can tell the difference between a cast member and a curious tourist.”

“But the killer could have been another cast member,” Terry said. “Or he could’ve been anybody who got past the guards dressed as Donald Duck.”

“Dexter Duck,” Amy said, correcting him. Terry acknowledged her with his best “don’t-mistake-me-for-someone-who-gives-a-shit” smile.

Curry nodded his head. “The security system was originally designed to keep out nosy parkers, not homicidal maniacs. But

after 9/11 we issued every employee an ID card. They have to swipe it to get into this area.”

“And how hard would it be for somebody who doesn’t work here to steal somebody’s ID card?” Terry asked.

“This is a theme park, not Fort Knox. Somebody who was really determined could sneak down here. But believe me, it’s going to change.”

My cell phone rang, which totally surprised me. “You guys get cell reception down here?”

“We get better reception down here than they get at Spago,” Curry said. “A lot of our cast members are aspiring actors. They’d bitch if we didn’t have air conditioning, but they’d quit if we didn’t have cell service.”

I answered my phone. It was Big Jim, my father.

“Hey, Mike,” came the booming voice. “How’s my boy?” I could picture his fifty-six-inch barrel chest swelling up and his cobalt blue eyes twinkling the way they always did whenever he called me his boy.

“I’m fine, Jim,” I said. I never call him Dad when I’m trying to impress others during a homicide investigation. “But I’m busy here.”

“I’ll make it quick. Angel wants to know if you want chicken or fish tonight.”

“What is this?” I said, walking out of the group’s earshot. “A family dinner or a wedding reception? Tell Angel I’ll have whatever she serves.”

“Fine,” he said. “Then I’ll definitely see you tonight at 7:30.”

“Oh, I get it. This isn’t about menu options. This is your way of making sure I haven’t forgotten and that I’ll actually show up tonight.”

“You’re way off base,” he said, which confirmed that I was totally on base. “You’d make a lousy detective. See you tonight.” He hung up, just in case I thought about changing my mind about dinner.

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He didn't have to worry. I definitely wanted to see my father as soon as possible. He used to be a driver for Lazaar Studios.

CHAPTER 8

I FLIPPED MY cell shut and flagged Terry to come over. I wanted to pursue his TTT theory.

TTT stands for Tony the Tiger, who is on every box of Frosted Flakes, which is Terry's favorite cereal, which sounds like serial, which is a word we don't like to blurt out when we're investigating a homicide, so Terry came up with the code.

"We've only got one dead body, plus an MO we've never seen before," I said. "You think this could be a serial killer?"

"I wouldn't rule it out. Start with the flipbook. If you're pissed at Elkins, just kill him and be done with it. Why go to the trouble of creating a fifty-page going-away gift? It's a signature, so we recognize him the next time."

He held up Elkins's personnel folder. "The vic lived in West Hollywood. Not exactly a gated community. Why not kill him there? Why go to the trouble of getting past Lamaar security? Even if it's Mickey Mouse security, they still have guards and cameras. Killing Elkins down here, while he's dressed in a Lamaar costume, feels like maybe the killer is out to hurt the company."

"You think Elkins is dead because he just happened to be the guy in the rabbit suit?"

"I like it better than Amy's jealous husband theory." He laughed. "Shit man, if I was crazy enough to strangle someone

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who was banging my wife, I might cut something off the bastard. But it wouldn't be his bunny ears. Curry's got the right idea. This is way too slick to be a one-shot deal just to kill Elkins. Maybe somebody has a hard-on for the company."

"I think you could be right, but as long as we're here, let's find out if anybody had a hard-on for Elkins."

Easier said than done. We spent three hours talking to people who supposedly knew Elkins. Apparently nobody knew him that well. In deference to Amy's Corporate Paranoia, we just told the rank and file that he had been killed. We left out the fact that he died on the job, in uniform.

Our best shot was Elkins's Keeper, Noreen Stubiak. Curry explained that the Keepers were hired to follow the characters around. "Just in case," he said, without actually explaining in case of what. "They're not authorized to do anything but call Security if a character needs help. I had to fire one of them a few weeks ago because he used pepper spray on a bunch of teenage punks who were harassing Officer Jelly Belly."

"If I were you," Terry said to Curry, "I'd issue Officer Jelly Belly a .357 Magnum. Teach those little bastards not to dick around with cartoon cops."

"Don't tempt me," Curry said, laughing. "At the risk of prejudicing your investigation, I have to warn you that the Character Keepers are not trained security people. They're just whistle blowers who are paid burger-flipper wages. Don't expect much from Noreen."

Understatement. Noreen had the IQ of a pipe wrench and none of the personality. Her first question was, "What do you mean, he's dead?" Terry explained the concept to her and proceeded to ask a series of questions using one- and two-syllable words. After five minutes, he got as much as he could from her, which was practically nothing.

"He was a good person. He always treated me like a lady. I'm gonna miss him," Noreen said, as she left teary-eyed.

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Terry hadn't written a single word in his note pad during the entire interview with Noreen. He tore out the blank page and handed it to me. "Here, file this under Clueless."

Nobody else seemed particularly broken up over Elkins's death. "He seemed like a nice guy but he kept to himself" was the prevailing response.

At noon Curry invited us to break bread in the executive dining room. We took a Pasadena. Terry and I wanted to thrash out our first impressions over a more private, less executive lunch, without having to resort to code. Amy and Curry gave us their home phone numbers, cell phones, beepers, pagers, and mothers' maiden names, and made us promise to keep in touch. We left the park with Elkins's personnel file and very little insight into whodunit.

CHAPTER 9

WHEN WE GOT back to the parking lot, Sheriff Daves was still standing guard. “Sheriff,” I said, “don’t you have deputies who can take over for you?”

“The way I figure,” Daves said, “Lamaar is the biggest taxpayer in the county. They got a homicide. Even if I can’t do much, it’s smarter for me to hang out here than chase skateboarders off of Mrs. DeFrancis’s driveway.”

“Well, we’re glad you’re still here, Sheriff,” I said. “You’ve had a lot of contact with Lamaar Security. What’s your take on Brian Curry?”

“Smart,” he said. “Corporate type, but not a candy ass. Man of his word. Got some real integrity, far as I can tell. But he’s totally out of his league to solve a homicide. They’d have been much better off with the last guy.”

“What last guy?” I said.

“This Texas cop. From Dallas or Houston, I forget which. He had one of them double names like Billy Bob. Only his was real weird. Ben Don. Ben Don Marvin. He was Head of Security till six months ago. Then he got canned. Brian Curry filled his boots.”

“Why did he get sacked?” Terry asked.

“Marvin ran a little operation where he was stealing stuff and selling it. Not valuable stuff, but shit that collectors will pay a

bundle for.”

“Like what?”

“Like costumes.”

Sometimes I play Dumb Cop to pump more information out of people. In this case, I felt like Dumb Cop. “I don’t get it,” I said. “The Head of Security is probably pulling down 125 big ones plus stock options and other goodies, and he’s stealing what—rabbit suits?”

Daves shook his head. “People pay good money for those sweatshirts and hats and shit with the characters’ pictures on it. Imagine what they’d pay if they could get their hands on an actual costume that Rambo Rabbit wore. Thousands. I’m not kidding, thousands of American dollars.”

“Un-freaking-believable,” Terry said.

“And not just costumes. It was all sorts of gewgaws and what-nots. Like if the characters marched in a parade waving flags, them flags would just vanish into thin air. Sometimes, even pieces of floats would disappear. Shit like that.”

“How did this Ben Don guy get caught?” I asked.

“He didn’t really get caught. Somebody high up in the organization was on eBay one day and saw that a woman in Kansas was selling a pair of shoes that she claims was worn by an actual Lammaar character. So the executive, he bids on it, and he buys it. Sure enough, it’s the real deal. That’s when the shit hit the fan. They audited the books and realized they were replacing a ton of items that had gone missing. They couldn’t pin it on Marvin, but they knew it was too big an operation to be going down without him. So they canned him.”

“Do you think he did it?” I asked.

“Oh, yeah,” Daves said, without missing a beat. “Ben Don was smart. As scams go, I’d say it was pretty clever. Plus it didn’t really hurt nobody.”

“Thanks, you’ve been a big help, Marlon,” I said.

“One more thing before we go,” Terry said. “You’re thinking

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that Elkins was killed by someone who knew him. But is it possible Ben Don was so angry at getting fired that he decided to come back and get even with the company?”

Daves didn't ponder this one either. “Nope,” he said. “Black-marketing the costumes was your basic victimless crime. Marvin made a bundle, got caught, and was shipped out, hush-hush. Never prosecuted. Why would he come back and commit Murder One? It doesn't add up.”

“You think anyone else would want to hurt the company?”

“Nobody I know. Most folks love Lamaar. If somebody has a beef with the company, they ain't gonna come around and kill Rambo. I'm sticking with my original theory. Find out who this Elkins guy was fucking and follow the rabbit droppings.”

CHAPTER 10

FIVE MINUTES LATER we were back on the 405, doing eighty. “We did real good, partner,” Terry said. “The Sheriff told us to keep our eye on the rabbit shit, and Amy Cheever wants us to keep the murder out of the press for the sake of the children. For the sake of her corporate ass is what she means. Which by the way I couldn’t help notice that you were noticing. You interested?”

“First, I’m not about to date a principal in a homicide investigation, and second, I thought we had an agreement. No meddling in my social life.”

“I wasn’t meddling in your social life. I was trying to help you get one.”

“I’m having dinner with my father tonight. You can help me with a good Teamster joke.”

“Okay, how do you know if a Teamster is dead?”

“The Danish falls out of his hand. I need a *new* joke.”

“I got a new fat joke.”

“He doesn’t think of himself as fat,” I said. “He’s big. His name is Big Jim, not Fat Jim. And he’s a Teamster. I need Teamster jokes.”

“It’s too bad he’s not a proctologist. I got a great proctology joke.”

“Gosh, when I was a kid, I always wished my Dad were an

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astronaut or a quarterback. I never thought about wishing for a proctologist.”

He thought for a few seconds. “Alright, here’s my best shot. How come Teamsters don’t have anal sex?”

“I give up.”

“They’re too lazy to get off their fat asses and bend over.”

I actually laughed. “Not bad,” I said, “but it’s got the word fat in it. Plus with that anal reference, it’s got overtones of proctology. Don’t quit your day job, Detective Biggs. Speaking of your day job...”

“You want my take on all this?” he said. “It’s not about Elkins. Don’t be surprised if another lovable cartoon character gets whacked. Curry thinks so too. I guarantee you he’s going to beef up security and keep a tight watch on those critters. He won’t be letting them prance around the park with idiots like Noreen Stubiak.”

I know my partner. He sees innocent people get zipped into body bags every day, and his way of coping with the injustice of it all is to deflect his emotions with humor. But sooner or later it gets to him. I watched his jaw tighten and his eyes burn holes in the windshield. He smacked his hand down hard on the steering wheel.

“Damn,” he said. “What a shitty reason to die. Just because you dressed up like Donald Fucking Duck.”

He meant Dexter Fucking Duck, but I let it go.

CHAPTER 11

WE HAD ONE more stop to make before we could head for the office. We still hadn't solved last week's murder mystery, so we took the 405 to LAX to interview a JAL flight attendant.

Kiro Hakai was built like a Japanese jockey. I've never been totally comfortable around tiny men, and the fact that he had shaved his head and his eyebrows made him extra creepy. He was also screamingly effeminate.

We had proof that Hakai had been at Bottoms Up, a gay bar on Sunset, the previous Thursday night. We also had reason to believe that he had been in a stall in the men's room at the very moment that Alan C. Trachtenberg, a dentist from Sherman Oaks, wound up with a six-inch ice pick between his third and fourth ribs.

Unfortunately, Hakai didn't remember being at said club on said night and swore he had spent that evening at the Galleria 12-Plex with a friend. We had no doubt that the friend would back him up. They always do.

When we held up the grainy black-and-white photo of him, dated and time-stamped by the surveillance camera at the front door of the bar, Mr. Hakai remarked that there was a slight resemblance, but then don't all Japanese men look alike. Only the ones who shave their eyebrows, I thought.

I know when to throw in the towel with a hostile interviewee,

but Terry wouldn't quit. "What movie did you and your buddy see that night?"

"Pearl Harbor," he said, with a smirk. An hour later the hairless little bastard was on a 777 bound for Tokyo.

We had already asked Trachtenberg's widow what her husband was doing in a gay bar. She swore up and down that the man was straighter than Warren Beatty. There aren't too many reasons why heterosexual men find themselves surrounded by the other team, so I asked her the next obvious question. Did the good doctor use recreational drugs? This time she did not swear up, down, left, or right. She started crying.

Our pint-sized flight attendant friend probably thought he screwed us by not cooperating. But his reluctance to talk said a lot. Truly innocent bystanders are quite vocal when it's a crime of passion. They clam up when drugs are involved. Usually, on the grounds that it might tend to incriminate them.

A drug-deal-gone-sour seemed like a worthwhile avenue to pursue, so I called my old buddy Irv Ziffer in Narcotics. Ziff the Sniff they call him, because he's probably caught more drug pushers than the entire K-9 Corps at Schiphol Airport in Amsterdam. Ziff knew the bar in question and asked me if the stabbing had occurred last Thursday night. Bingo. I asked how he knew.

Apparently he keeps flow charts of when stuff hits the streets and when the supply dries up. That Thursday was a buyer's market after a ten-day product shortage. But the sellers are particularly paranoid after a long drought, plus there was a full moon that night. "In a volatile business environment," Ziff said, "shit happens." He's quite the philosopher.

He also knew who was dealing at the clubs in that area, and it was clear to me that our Homicide team could use a little help from Narcotics. In the spirit of interdepartmental cooperation, we asked, and Ziff said sure. I felt that much closer to finding the guy who left three kids fatherless and hundreds of Valley residents without adequate dental care.

CHAPTER 12

IT WAS 4:45 by the time we got to the precinct. I plopped down on my pea green vinyl chair and rolled it up to the cigarette-scorched, coffee-ringed slab of laminated pine that the City refers to as Detective Lomax's office.

My messages were stacked in a neat little pile. Four of the nine were from my boss, Lieutenant Brendan Kilcullen, a ruddy-faced Irishman who believes in The Good Lord and Bill W. The latter had shown him the twelve steps to getting sober twenty-three years ago, which is how Lt. Kilcullen came to believe in the former.

He was on the phone when I knocked, but he waved me in. His office is a photo gallery, so there's always plenty to look at while you wait. The desk top is reserved for family pictures, and there are lots of them. Brendan Kilcullen is a good Catholic who procreates the way the Pope told him.

The walls are divided into sections. On the left side are the Kilcullen Career Highlight photos. Promotions, awards ceremonies, and other dress uniform occasions. The period from Academy graduation to getting his Lieutenant's bar spanned eighteen years and about forty pounds.

The center section features a dozen or more pictures of Kilcullen With People of Consequence. The coolest by far is Kilcullen with his arm around Jack Nicholson. It was taken at a Lakers

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game, and they appear to be the best of friends, which I know for a fact they're not. I doubt if Kilcullen had met the actor before or after that single click of the shutter. The picture I had long ago voted Most Pathetic is an eight-by-ten glossy of Kilcullen and Walter Mondale.

The right side is dedicated to bowling. Kilcullen is a league bowler who averages 180. There are a number of shots of a victorious Kilcullen holding up a trophy with his pinmates, none of whom is Jack Nicholson.

About ninety seconds later I heard Kilcullen say, "I love you too, Sweet Pea." He hung up the phone and smiled at me. "That was the Mayor."

"I'm glad you and Mayor Sweet Pea are on such good terms." I dropped his four messages on the desk. "What can I do for you, Loo?"

"Catch this rabbit killer, and catch him fast. A lot of people in important places are rooting for us."

"Did the real Mayor call you?" I asked.

"No. The real Governor did."

He wasn't smiling. He wasn't kidding.

"Did he call out the National Guard to protect the rest of the animals?"

"No, but I suspect he called a couple of publishers. Don't look for this rabbit shit to be on Page One of tomorrow's *Times*. Or Page Forty-One for that matter."

No press. It sounded like Amy Cheever had been busy.

"I'm doling out your case load to the other boys and girls in the squad."

I told him we'd already recruited Ziff the Sniff to help us out on the Trachtenberg stabbing. "Good," he said. Then Terry knocked.

"Gentlemen, I got a riddle for you. What's white and fluffy and likes to bugger little boys? Give up? It's Rambunctious Rabbit, also known as Eddie Elkins, also known as Edward Ellison, con-

victed sex offender.”

He threw a computer printout on Kilcullen’s desk. “We ran his prints. He’s been a busy little pervert.”

Kilcullen stood up. “Jesus, Lord, how in Christ’s name does a goddamn pedophile get a job hugging and fondling kids all day?”

“He must’ve interviewed really, really good,” Terry said.

Kilcullen, the father of six, ignored the crack. “What do you got so far?”

“We got dick,” I said. “Murder weapon and a sicko calling card. Terry was thinking it could be a serial killer stepping up to the plate.”

“Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, that is exactly what they’re shitting bricks about. They’re afraid some bozo is going to start picking off their cartoon characters one at a time. Biggs, I was just telling your partner, this one is on you boys. In fact, if you have anything else to do, like eat, sleep, or wipe your ass, cancel it.”

Brick shitting and ass wiping. Kilcullen was usually good for at least three scatological references.

“Yes, sir,” Biggs said, answering for both of us.

“Good, because I got the goddamn Governor of California crawling up my butt,” he said, completing the trinity of rectal references.

“Now that we’ve made Elkins for a sex offender,” I said, “I’m leaning back to our original instinct. It’s just as likely this is a vendetta against Elkins as a crime against the company. It could be some father whose kid got manhandled by Elkins, and now he’s getting revenge.”

“I agree,” Kilcullen said. “If some bastard violated one of my kids, I’d cut his dick off and shove it up his...” The phone rang and interrupted yet another trip down Hershey Highway. Kilcullen grabbed the phone. “Hold on,” he said, putting his hand over the mouthpiece.

He turned to us and stared hard. His Irish eyes were definitely

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not smiling. "Solve it," he said. "Fast."

We didn't stick around to hear if the person on the other end of the phone was the Governor, Sweet Pea, or the King of Siam.

We walked to the coffee room. It was 6 p.m. and the stuff in the pot was like mud, so we each only had half a cup. Terry added half a cup of sugar to his. "I still think we got the makings of a serial killer," he said, "but let's run a check on all his victims and see if any were in the vicinity of Familyland yesterday."

"Maybe we should track down some of the victims themselves," I said. "Remember that case in Jersey? Thirty-year-old guy murders a priest who molested him back when he was an altar boy?"

"When do we tell Amy and Brian that the dead guy inside the rabbit suit was a wolf in sheep's clothing?"

"Let's wait till tomorrow. First let's toss Elkins's apartment," I said. "Is Muller around? We'll need him." Muller was our resident computer guru. When you visit a pedophile's apartment, you head straight for the PC.

"Gone for the day. I saw him split about five," Terry said.

"Good. If he were still around I'd feel obligated to search Elkins's place tonight. Now I can get out of here and not be late for dinner with Big Jim."

"That reminds me," Terry said. "How can you spot a Teamster's kid in the schoolyard?"

I took a sip of mud and shrugged.

"He's the one sitting on the side of the sandbox watching all the other kids play."

I dumped the rest of my coffee in the sink. "Like I said, Detective Biggs, don't quit your day job."

CHAPTER 13

TERRY DROVE ME home and we beat out a game plan for the next day. Pick up Muller, search Elkins's apartment, meet with Brian and Amy, get a list of people who had a grudge against the Lamaar Company.

He said good night, pulled out, and headed toward the Valley. He was probably thinking about Marilyn and the kids before his car was out of my sight.

I live in a sweet little house on Selma just on the edge of Laurel Canyon. It's a rental. A white saltbox with blue shutters. More New England than L.A. Joanie found it. We were going to live there a few years, have a baby, then buy a real house. *We had it all planned, didn't we, Joanie?*

It took me fifteen minutes to shower, change clothes, skim the mail and check my messages. For fourteen of those minutes Andre got to take care of Official Poodle Business in the back yard. Then he joined me in the kitchen, where we popped the tops on a couple of cans. Bud Light for me, Alpo for him. We male-bonded for five minutes, while the cold beer and the chunky beef with gravy washed away some of the cares of the day.

There was a message on the machine from Big Jim. A pilot friend of his might join us for dinner and could I pick up a bottle of wine. Jim flies his Piper on weekends, and he has a habit of striking up instant friendships with the other part-time pilots.

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There was a bottle of Murphy-Goode Sauvignon Blanc in the fridge that Joanie never got around to opening. I figured with a name like Murphy-Goode, what could be bad? I grabbed the bottle, turned on the Animal Planet channel for Andre, and told him not to wait up for me.

Big Jim lives in Riverside, less than an hour from my place if the 10 is moving. It's close enough so he can commute to the studio every day, but far enough from 90210 that he can afford to own a four-acre spread.

He needs the space. He owns over fifty cars and trucks which he rents to film crews. Jim is a card-carrying member of the Teamsters Union who spent his entire career working for the TV and movie studios as a Transportation Captain. He's driven everything from eighteen-wheelers hauling film equipment to super-stretch limos hauling the world's biggest assholes. If it has wheels and an engine, Big Jim can get it for you, and he can deliver it wherever you want. Assuming, of course, he can fit into it. The man wears shirts marked XXXXX-L.

He's built like an offensive lineman. Six-foot-four, three hundred pounds, some of which are a direct consequence of too many idle hours around the catering trucks, but a lot of Big Jim is solid muscle. Let me put it this way: If he walked into a biker bar wearing silver slippers and a ball gown, nobody would fuck with him.

On the outside he looks like the poster boy for the World Wrestling Federation. Inside, he's three hundred pounds of marshmallow. He's an avowed Oprah-holic. Loves her. Tapes every show. When Oprah flew to AIDS-infested Africa to bring Christmas to fifty thousand kids, Jim asked me to watch the tape with him. He cried openly while he watched. That's who he is. All my grown life I've heard guys complain about fathers who weren't there, didn't hug them, kiss them, or say 'I love you.' Not me. I'm blessed. Jim Lomax is the most loving, adoring Dad a kid could grow up with. If I'm screwed up, it definitely was not his fault.

My mother was equally fantastic and even more colorful. When Big Jim first met Tess Delehanty, she had just fallen off a horse. She had to fall off three more times before the director felt he had it on film. She was one of the top stuntwomen of her day and worked in over two hundred movies, five of them with John Wayne. Every now and then, Joanie and I would be watching an old video, and some woman would fall down a flight of stairs, jump off a bridge, or get hit by a truck, and I'd smile and proudly say, "That's my Mom."

Jim and Tess got engaged two months after they met. A week later they broke up, and for the next three years they were on-again-off-again. They were so well matched that I never could figure out why their courtship was so stormy. But family legend has it that Mom had trouble letting go of an old boyfriend. I could understand how that would piss Big Jim off. They finally got married on a ranch in the Napa Valley. Mom was three months pregnant at the time with me.

After I was born my mother stopped taking the high-paying, high-risk Hollywood stunt jobs. Instead, she opted to help Jim with the driving and do the occasional job as a film extra. But she never lost her stunt skills, and at an age when most kids are learning their ABCs, Tess was teaching me how to fall down the porch steps, crash my bike, take a fake punch, and do a roll and tuck without getting hurt. I thought she was the coolest Mom in the neighborhood. My kid brother Frankie, on the other hand, was totally embarrassed having a truck-driver father and a daredevil mother. He wanted Ozzie and Harriet. Mom and Dad didn't even come close.

During her heyday my mother broke seventeen bones, got three concussions, lost four teeth, and punctured a lung. She took it all in stride. No fear. Always relying on her God-given talent, a vigilant stunt coordinator, and the occasional air bag. When she died of congestive heart failure five years ago, she went just the way she always said she would. Peacefully, in her sleep.

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Big Jim, of course, was a mess. Some people drink to deal with death. Some eat. Jim shut down. One of the most outgoing guys on the planet just went into hibernation. He asked Chico, one of his drivers, to take charge of renting out the vehicles, and then notified the studios that he personally was not available. After four months he started driving long hauls, which got him out of the house, but kept him isolated for weeks on end.

Thank God for Oprah. One of her shows was about widowhood. A grief counselor suggested that the surviving spouse return to a place where they had the happiest times of their marriage. Then she gave a list of spiritual exercises to help them accept the death of their husbands or wives.

If I had suggested it, my father would have blown me off. But I didn't suggest it. Oprah did. So he went to the spot where he and my Mom had spent some of the happiest moments of their lives.

The Hillview Country Inn is a hundred-year-old estate in the Napa Valley, just off Highway 29 between Napa and Yountville. Mom and Dad went there on their honeymoon and about twenty more times after that. Except for the color TVs in every room, central air conditioning, and the annual price increases, time has pretty much stood still at The Hillview. The Old English Rose Garden looks just like it did when they saw it together for the first time. Entering the parlor, where you start your morning with a two-thousand-calorie country breakfast, is like stepping into the nineteenth century.

Dad has told me every detail of his journey back to The Hillview, and every year on the anniversary of my mother's death he tells me the story again. When he first drove up to the property his chest clenched so hard he was sure he'd have to be taken to the ICU instead of his room. The owners, Victor and Gerri Gomperts, greeted him the same way they had greeted him every time since his honeymoon—with a pot of tea, a basket of scones, and a gargantuan side of clotted cream and jam. They gave him their best suite and their deepest sympathies. For a

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while he just sat there on the big white iron bed, staring out the window, wondering if this was such a good idea. Finally he undressed and got into this big, Spanish-tiled shower built for two.

And every time he tells the story, he says these exact words: “Son, there’s nothing sadder than a two-person shower, a two-person bed, and a two-person room, when one person is gone forever.”

I wasn’t there, but I’ve heard him tell it enough times to be able to picture what happened next. The big man slowly sank to the shower floor and let the water beat on him for twenty minutes while he wept for the piece of him that was missing. Oprah, he thought, you were wrong.

That night, he was sitting in the parlor when Angel came over and extended her condolences. Angel Cruz is at least twenty years younger than Jim, with wide dark eyes, creamy caramel skin and that lustrous black hair that so many Mexican women are blessed with. She had been a fixture at The Hillview for years. By day she waited on tables; at night she served espresso and after-dinner drinks to the few guests who actually hung around after dinner. She had always taken excellent care of my parents, and my Mom adored her.

“Face it, Jim, she’s your fantasy girl,” my mother used to say. “Beautiful, exotic, and she waits on you hand and foot. Next time we go up to The Hillview we should bring her back home with us.”

“I don’t need a fantasy girl,” Jim would answer. “I need a feisty old woman who can jump off a burning building but is totally dependent on me to light the barbecue.”

“Feisty old women die,” my Mom would tell him. “When I do, take my advice and go back for this one.”

They used to joke about it, but somehow that night it seemed to make perfect sense. Jim offered Angel a job as his housekeeper. Much to his surprise she said, *Gracias*, but no.

He called me the next morning, totally wounded. “Can you

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believe it? I offered her more money than she makes at the hotel, plus free room and board, and she said no.”

“So hire somebody else,” I said. “L.A. is knee-deep in housekeepers. There’s got to be at least one out there who could tolerate working for you.”

“No dice,” he said. “This is the one your mother thought would make a good housekeeper. I’m going back next weekend and offer her the job again.”

Angel said no again. Now Jim was pissed. He drove back to L.A. and bitched and moaned to Joanie and me over fried chicken and beer. “I offered her an extra hundred a week, her own car, a TV in her room, a VCR, whatever she needs, and she still turns me down. I give up.”

“Give it one more shot,” Joanie said. “Try offering her dinner.”

Jim and Angel started dating. Six months later, he asked her if she’d like to leave The Hillview and move in with him.

Permanently. This time she said, I do.

CHAPTER 14

IT WAS 8 P.M. when I pulled into El Rancho Lomax. Only thirty minutes late. Not bad for a cop. Angel's spring flowers were starting to bloom and the Mexican-style decorative lights along the pathways heralded their arrival.

The house itself started out in the 1930s as a rambling, single-story California Hacienda. It was, I am told, semi-tasteful for its day. But over the years, it expanded without any architectural rhyme or reason. The original white stucco exterior has been joined by an eclectic combination of red brick, bluestone, clapboards, and oak beams. In the ultimate insult, my parents, who were far more pragmatic than artistic, covered several of the add-on sections with vulgar vinyl siding from Sears. There are also four undistinguished, industrial-strength outbuildings on the property, whose sole function is to house vehicles, not people. Buckingham Palace it's not, but every time I pull into the driveway, that big old eyesore feels like home to me.

There was a car in the driveway that I didn't recognize. A black Jeep Cherokee. I figured it must belong to the pilot, and right now he's waiting for his wine to arrive. I've met more than my share of Jim's fly-boy friends, usually colorful war veterans who can regale you for hours with the gory details of every bombing mission they ever flew. Boy, was I not in the mood for that.

Angel opened the front door. "Mike," she said, singing my

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name, her eyes radiating joy like she was genuinely happy just to hear me ring the bell. “You’re looking well.”

“And you look like a Latin movie star ready for her close-up. Perfect hair, perfect makeup.” She gave me a big, stepmotherly hug and kiss. “And you smell fantastic,” I said. “I hope my father knows what a lucky man he is.”

“I tell him ten times a day, but it couldn’t hurt if you remind him.”

Skunkie was right behind Angel, patiently waiting for me to notice him. The Skunk is a photogenic mutt with shaggy hair that’s black and white and about forty shades of gray. In a world full of yapping, high-strung, Type-A dogs, Skunkie is the low-maintenance exception. He’s loving, mellow, and zero trouble, which is why he’s the only dog allowed to live in the house. The other three have to be content with the kennel out back.

Skunkie sat at my feet, his tail sweeping the floor as I bent down to say hello. He tilted his head quizzically, which I decided was his way of asking about Joanie. He hadn’t seen her since she got sick over a year ago, so I’m pretty sure he was concerned. He’s that kind of dog. No pedigree, but extremely sensitive.

I handed Angel the bottle of wine and followed her into the living room. Big Jim was already out of his oversized brown La-Z-Boy and bounding over so he could crush me to death in his loving arms.

“Detective Lomax, I’m so pleased you could make it,” he belated after I came out of the bear hug. “I want you to meet one of my fellow pilots. This is Diana Trantanella. Diana’s one of those misguided pilots who still flies a high wing. A Cessna 172. I’m trying to get her to switch to a real airplane.”

I had hardly noticed her sitting in the corner of the sofa when I entered the room. She stood up, and I could immediately see there was a lot to notice. This was definitely not some ancient bombardier here to share war stories. Diana had the clean, wholesome look of a high school cheerleader who had made a graceful

transition into her early forties. Her hair was that curious shade of California dirty blonde which I'm never sure is real or store-bought, but which works for me, no matter what its origins. She was wearing a casual summery dress, that salmony, pinkish color that blondes always look great in. She had what my mother used to call a 'lovely figure,' which meant that she'd never make the centerfold of *Playboy*, but any man who spent the night with her would surely thank the Almighty for His generosity.

She extended her right hand, which had, of all things, a Rambunctious Rabbit watch on the wrist. Small weird world. I'd have to tell Biggs. There appeared to be no jewelry on her left hand, emphasis on the ring finger. "Big Jim has told me so much about you. It's a pleasure to finally meet you," she said, shaking my hand. I quickly made a few more mental notes. Five-foot-six. Pretty blue eyes. Sexy voice. Drop dead smile. I was really pissed.

Pilot, schmilot, this was a goddamn fix-up. Granted, at first sight, she looked to be a nine and a half on a scale of one to ten, but that didn't change the fact that my well-meaning father had ambushed me with an unwanted dinner date. There are worse fates, I know, but I was not prepared to make an evening of it with this woman. Not this evening.

I shook her hand grudgingly, giving only about five percent of the enthusiasm that she gave when she shook mine. I then muttered that I had brought wine and excused myself to go to the little boys' room.

In addition to all her other attributes, Diana apparently also has excellent antennae. She caught my I'm-not-interested vibe and turned on a dime. By the time I got back from the bathroom, she had gone from happy-to-meet-me to politely chatting with Angel in the kitchen. Jim and I had our drinks in the living room and quietly watched the Dodgers get their asses kicked by the Mets.

Dinner was a little more sociable. Four people sitting around

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a table tend to make small talk. We tried. Jim asked what I was working on these days. In deference to Amy Cheever and the Governor of California, I decided it wouldn't be wise to bring up the Lazaar murder with Diana in the room. So I mentioned the dentist who got stabbed at the Bottoms Up.

Diana literally dropped her fork. "Oh, my God. Alan Trachtenberg?"

"You knew him?" I asked.

"Not well, but I work with his wife, Jan. We're nurses at Valley General. She's in Maternity; I'm in Pediatrics. Have you caught whoever killed him?"

"Not yet." I said. "But a lot of things say it could be drug-related."

"That doesn't shock me. Alan had a real problem. Jan and I have talked about it many times. I'm sure she told you."

"Not right away," I said. "But we're aware of it now."

"This chicken is delicious, Angel," Diana said. "And I can't get over how fluffy this rice is." My connection to the Trachtenberg case had briefly opened the door to a real dialogue. Diana was now shutting the door.

"Thank you, Diana," Angel said. "It's just regular rice from the box."

"My rice usually cooks up into one big sticky lump," Diana said.

I caught the look on my father's face. The women are now talking about rice. I hope you're happy.

I decided to make an effort. "So, Diana, how long have you been flying?"

"A year and a half. I took it up after my husband died. It helped a lot with the grieving process." She smiled, "Plus it gets me four thousand feet closer to God." She let the smile dissolve into a look of concern and compassion. "I understand your wife died recently. I'm sorry for your loss."

"Thanks, and I'm sorry for yours." *Now I understood Jim's*

logic. Recent widower meets recent widow. A match made in Teamster Heaven.

“Have you ever considered taking up flying?” she asked.

“About ten years ago my brother Frankie and I took a few lessons,” I said. “It just didn’t do it for us.”

“Speaking of Frankie,” our father said, “what do you hear from him?”

“Not much. It’s been over a week,” I said. “But you know Frankie, the telephone is not his favorite way to communicate.”

“Unless he’s putting his money down on a basketball team,” Jim said. I could tell he regretted it as soon as it left his mouth. He tried lamely to recover. “He’s a good kid,” he told Diana. “Runs a health club in Beverly Hills.” Jim turned back to me. “If you hear from him, tell him to call his aging father.”

The main course was over, and we all heaped mucho praise on Angel. I helped clear the table. “I made flan for dessert,” she announced.

“I’ll have to take a rain check,” Diana said. “I’m on an early morning shift this week.”

We all expressed our regrets as Diana threw a white cardigan sweater over her shoulders and picked up her purse. “Thank you for a lovely evening,” she said. “Mike, the Sauvignon Blanc was particularly excellent.”

I smiled. Mr. Big Shot Wine Connoisseur.

“Mike, do me a favor,” Big Jim said. “Let me know if those automatic floodlights over the truck garage went on. They’ve been giving me trouble lately. And as long as you’re going out, you may as well walk Diana to her car.”

“Oooh, a police escort,” Diana said, and once again I caught a glimpse of the bouncy cheerleader from days gone by. “How exciting.”

She kissed Jim and Angel goodnight. I clucked to Skunkie, and the three of us walked to her car. The sky was peppered with stars. The moon was a few nights away from being full,

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and Diana Trantanella looked extremely desirable in the heavenly blue-white glow of night. Under different circumstances, it could have been a hell of a moment. I took her hand.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “I’m usually better company. I really do apologize.”

“I’m sorry too. I didn’t mean to sandbag you,” she said, squeezing my hand ever so slightly. “I didn’t even know you were coming. Big Jim told me ten minutes before you got here.”

I shook my head. “There’s nothing worse than a well-meaning parent.”

“What do you expect from a jerk who flies a Piper?” She smiled. Her mouth looked very kissable in the moonlight. But I had been a total asshole this evening. I know the rules. I was in no way entitled to a good-night kiss.

And then she kissed me. She leaned forward and gently pressed her lips to my cheek. It was just a kindhearted little peck to let me know that she accepted my apology, but her lips were soft and full and warm, and I felt a tingle run from my brain to the pit of my stomach.

“Night, Mike,” she said, and she got into the Jeep and drove off.

Skunkie was parked at my feet, and I crouched down to scratch him behind the ears. “What do you think, boy?” I asked him. “Interesting woman.”

He didn’t answer. He just rolled over on his back so I could scratch his belly. Hey, we’ve all got an agenda.

CHAPTER 15

WHEN I GOT back into the house Big Jim had finished eating his flan and was already working on Diana's.

I sat back down at the table, picked up a spoon and toyed with my dessert. "The outdoor floodlights seem to have come on just fine," I said, drilling a hole in him with my best pissed-off stare.

"I'm not surprised. They've been working well for years," he said, inhaling the rest of his second bowl of custard. "I didn't send you out there to check on the lights. Did you apologize to her for behaving like an asshole?"

"Me? What I should have done is apologize for *you* behaving like an asshole. What the hell were you thinking? Since when do I need you to mastermind my playdates?"

"It's six months today, isn't it? I loved Joanie like a daughter, but it's time to move on with your goddamn life," he said.

"Look who's talking. When Mom died you spent the first six months holed up in this house."

"That was different. Your mother and I were married almost forty years. I needed more time." He eyeballed my dessert. "You gonna eat that?"

I shoved the bowl his way.

"So," he said, digging into the caramelized gooey brown sugar topping, "now that the ice is broken, are you gonna call Diana?"

"No," I answered loudly. "I am not calling her."

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“Don’t be an idiot,” he said. “I have all her phone numbers. Work, home, cell. She’s not doing anything Saturday night. I checked.”

“You asked her if she... Jesus F. Christ!” I tried to count to ten. I got to three and exploded. I started furiously tapping my fingers on the tabletop as if it were a computer keyboard. “*Dear Abby,*” I said, typing. “*I am a forty-two-year-old widower. It’s only been six months since my wife died, and in my heart I don’t feel ready to start dating. My problem is that my meddling father won’t mind his own business. He invited a recently widowed woman over to dinner in a pitiful attempt to jumpstart a relationship for me. I love my father, and I really don’t want to hurt his feelings, but how do I tell the fat, nosy bastard to back the hell off? Signed, Pissed-Off Police Officer in L.A.*”

Jim swept aside the dessert bowls in front of him so he could create his own imaginary computer. He began to type. In real life, he can barely hunt and peck using two fingers. But now he raised both hands and let all ten fingers fly across the phantom keyboard with all the passion of Billy Joel in concert. “*Dear Pissed-Off Police Officer,*” he said, spitting out each word. “*First of all, I’ll bet your father has more brains in his left butt cheek than you do in your entire head. Do you think he wants you to be miserable? No, he’s looking after your happiness. Don’t be a schmuck. Do what he says. He’s never been wrong. And he never will be. Love and kisses, Abby.*”

I stomped into the kitchen. Angel was making coffee. “I hear much yelling,” she said, setting a creamer and a sugar bowl on a gleaming silver tray.

“I’m sorry, Angel, but your husband is driving me crazy.”

“In my family, yelling is another way to say *te amo*. I am making Irish coffee. That will make you both feel better.”

“I’m driving,” I said. “I’ll have the coffee. Hold the Irish.”

I helped her carry the tray into the dining room. Big Jim had finished my flan, his third. “Do you believe this guy, Angel?” he

said, angling for spousal support. “He won’t ask Diana out on a date.”

She set a cup of aromatic, steaming black coffee in front of him and added a hefty shot of Bushmills. “Maybe he should invite Diana to move in with him and become his housekeeper. It worked for you.”

Jim’s face flushed. I burst out laughing. It’s always a joy for me when someone nails the big guy, and Angel was getting to be almost as good at it as my mother. Finally, Big Jim let loose. “Fuck you both,” he erupted, and then all three hundred pounds of him shook and whooped with laughter. “Just what we need around here. A drop-dead gorgeous Mexican wiseass.”

Angel poured me some coffee, but it didn’t smell half as comforting as Big Jim’s. So I put my two fingers very close together and said, “*un poquito, por favor.*” She added a tiny splash of the whiskey, and I inhaled deeply. The heady blend of rich, dark French Roast and smoky Irish spirits wafted up my nostrils and into my brain. Without even taking a sip, I felt that warm calming buzz. I inhaled a second noseful.

Angel sat down with us and shared her flan with Big Jim. He had long ago converted her to his Oprah religion, and she recounted some of the highlights of that afternoon’s show. It was all about aging gracefully and accepting where you are in your life right now. “So many women, they resent growing old,” she said. “They can only think about the wrinkles, the sagging breasts, the menopause. But what they forget is that now we have so much more wisdom, we have life experience, we are in touch with our inner spirit. Getting older can be a joy.” She stopped abruptly. “I’m sorry, Mike. This is not good talk for you.”

She had suddenly thought of Joanie, who would never see menopause or wrinkles or experience the joy of growing old with grace. “No, please, it’s fine.” I said.

Angel’s eyes welled up, and a tear trickled slowly down her cheek, leaving a visible streak across her perfect makeup. “It’s

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my bedtime,” she said, quickly blotting her face with a dinner napkin and standing up. “You two macho men can stay up and yell at each other all night. It won’t keep me awake.”

I stood up, and she hugged me. Not a perfunctory goodnight squeeze, but the compassionate, consoling embrace reserved for loved ones in pain. “I miss her too,” she whispered.

Then she put her arms around Jim’s neck and kissed him gently, and I could see him melt. I wondered what my mother would think about Jim and Angel. Was she joking when she used to say “next time we go up to The Hillview we should bring her back home with us,” or did she have a vision?

Angel left the room. Skunkie curled up at the foot of Jim’s chair. I tuned in to the rhythm of his breathing as he drifted into Happy Doggie Slumberland.

“Can we drop the Diana thing?” I said. “I’m working on a homicide, and I need your help.”

He bowed his head. “I live to serve.”

I took him through the Elkins murder. The jump rope, the flip-book, the missing ear, every detail. He didn’t utter a single word until I got to the part about Rambunctious Rabbit being a convicted pedophile. “When you find the killer,” he said, “somebody should pin a medal on him.”

When I finished, he simply said, “How can I help?”

“All my cop training tells me to follow the pedophile path. Somewhere in Elkins’s past is a person whom he hurt so bad that they had to kill him.”

“That’s what your cop training tells you. What do your instincts say?”

“Something is rotten at Lamaar. Terry was there ahead of me,” I said, giving credit where credit was due. “He says if you want to kill the guy who molested your child, why not go to his house? But whoever killed Elkins took the trouble to get through Lamaar’s security and killed him on Lamaar property while Elkins was dressed up as Lamaar’s signature character.”

“Sounds like Terry’s right. The killer’s got a grudge against Lamaar.”

“It feels like a real possibility, and if that’s the case, then the bodies will start piling up. Victim Number Two, Number Three, Number Four,” I said, counting them off on my fingers. “I’ve seen it before. Then it won’t stop.”

“Did you see what you just did?” Jim asked.

“No, what’d I do?”

“You counted the victims off on your fingers,” he said.

“So?”

“Show me Victim Number Four again.”

I held up four fingers.

“Now show me Victim Number One.”

I held up my index finger.

“Now show me Victim Number One, but use a different finger.”

It took a few seconds for me to process what he was getting at. Then I slowly closed my index finger and held up a different finger. The middle one. “Damn,” I said. “The finger in the flipbook. It doesn’t mean ‘fuck you.’”

“Sure it does,” he said. “But I think it also means ‘Victim Number One.’”

“Big Jim Lomax, you’re one goddamn smart Teamster,” I said.

“I guess the three years I spent working on the set of *Murder She Wrote* finally paid off.”

“So Terry nailed it from the get-go,” I said. “Somebody is out to kill off the Lamaar characters, one at a time.”

“That would be my take on it.”

“Terry and I are going to have to learn a lot more about this company if we’re ever going to figure this out.”

“There’s a couple of real good books on Lamaar,” Jim said. “You could just turn to the last chapter and find out who the killer is.” He sipped his coffee. “Or you could just ask your dear old Dad to help.”

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“I already asked for your help,” I said. “What do you want me to do, beg?”

“Hell, no.” He grinned, and I knew what was coming next. “I just want you to go out with Diana.”

“You realize you’re blackmailing an officer of the law,” I said.

“Arrest me,” he said.

If there’s one thing I learned growing up, it’s that Teamsters know all the studio dirt. They’re the first ones on the job in the morning and the last ones to punch out at night. It’s a long day, but there’s a big chunk in the middle where they don’t have much to do except sit on their asses near the catering truck and soak up the gossip. They’re like flies on the wall. He had me and he knew it.

“Give me her phone number,” I said. “I’ll ask her out.” He passed me a folded piece of paper, which he already had palmed in his hand.

I took a sip of my Irish coffee. It felt good. I took two more sips, then I put it down. I like alcohol, but I drink more like a schoolmarm than a homicide detective. I know a lot of cops who can’t sip. They pound. Their shift ends and they deadhead for some cop-friendly bar so they can drink the demons away. A few of the more desperate ones can’t always wait till the end of their shift.

Lt. Kilcullen, who sponsors six recovering alcoholics in the department, is always on the lookout for number seven. Any cop who doesn’t show up on time for duty on a Monday morning is immediately on the suspect list. Be a no-show two Mondays in a month, and he’ll interrogate you till you’re ready to confess to kidnapping the Lindbergh baby.

I’m lucky. I don’t get shit-faced. Some guys get that little glow on, then kick it into high gear. I stop at the little glow. It drives my two-fisted friends crazy. I’ve only been drunk twice since I got out of college. The night my mother died, and exactly six months ago today.

MARSHALL KARP

I tell people I'm a beer man, but the truth is I'm an alcohol slut. I'll drink almost anything. Joanie taught me the pleasures of red wine; I love a good Cognac, especially when somebody else is buying; and while I would never walk into a pub and order an Irish coffee, when your family tree branches all the way to County Cork, there's no better beverage for a father and son to bond over.

And now we were ready to bond over a homicide. But first I had to lay out the ground rules. "You're a veritable Font of Industry Insider Information," I said. "I have no doubt that you can help with my investigation."

"But?" he said. "I can hear a 'but' at the end of that sentence."

"But, it's late. I want to get home by midnight."

"And you think I'm just gonna sit here and talk your ear off?"

"I just want the straight 4-1-1. None of the usual colorful details."

"I see," he said. He played hurt. The wounded giant.

"Please, Dad. Just this once, give me the short version."

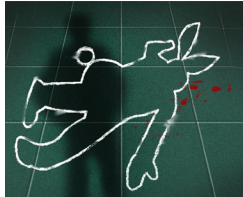
"Fine," he said. "I'll bet Danny Eeg killed Elkins."

I pulled out my pad and pen. "I didn't expect an actual name. Who is Danny Eeg?"

"That's the long version," he said with a little victory shrug. "Want to hear it?"

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Thank you for supporting my life of crime.

— Marshall Karp