

A LOMAX AND BIGGS MYSTERY



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MARSHALL KARP



FLIPPING OUT

CHAPTER ONE

THERE WERE five detectives at our Sunday debriefing.

That's what we call them—debriefings, because no cop is dumb enough to tell his wife or girlfriend that he'd rather spend his day off hanging out with his buddies than taking her to the mall to pick out curtain fabric.

We were on Reggie Drabyak's fishing boat, so technically this was an LAPD naval debriefing.

It started at dawn when Reggie, who works vice, and Charlie Knoll from burglary set sail to spend the day in the hot sun trying to catch the same stuff I'd rather pick up at an air-conditioned supermarket for eight bucks a pound.

They docked in the Marina at beer-thirty, and my partner Terry Biggs and I joined them. An hour later, Tony Dominguez, who works gangs, showed up with a five-foot hero from Santoro's.

He unwrapped it, and I took in the intoxicating aroma of sopresatta, Genoa salami, provolone, and a half dozen other processed animal products that make men's hearts beat faster, burn through the night, and occasionally seize up.

Tony cut the hoagie into five pieces. "Here Biggs, you get a foot," he said, handing the first one to Terry. "Enjoy it, because when the cards are dealt, you sure as hell won't be getting a hand."

Ultimately that's what these debriefings are all about—the poker.

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Terry played recklessly, raising when more cautious players would call, and calling when saner players would fold. By the end of the night he was ahead, but Tony still had a shot at a comeback. The stakes were doubled for the last deal, and no matter how much Terry raised, Tony stayed with him.

On the final raise, it was just the two of them, and Tony peeled back his hole card and took another look.

Terry picked up an empty beer bottle, held it close to his face, and talked into it, using the soft, mellow whisper of a professional golf announcer. “We’re on the eighteenth green here at Augusta. Dominguez, who hasn’t played well all day, is taking one more desperate look at his down card. This is the biggest pot of the night, folks—over fifty bucks—and from where I’m sitting, this one belongs to Terry Biggs.”

“You’re bluffing,” Tony said.

“Dominguez looks rattled,” Terry said into the Heineken microphone. “This game of high-low takes balls of steel, and Biggs has two that we know of. Maybe more. With an ace, three, four, five showing, he could have declared low and easily gone home with half the pot. But he went for the high *and* the low, the whole enchilada. Sadly, for Dominguez, the only enchilada he’ll be getting tonight is the cold one left in the fridge by his lovely wife, Marisol.”

“You know even less about women than you do about poker,” Tony said. “Marisol hasn’t cooked in ten years, and about the only cold thing she’s got waiting for me tonight is her shoulder.”

“Oooh,” Terry groaned. “A big sigh of disappointment from the crowd here at Augusta, as they find out that their Latin hero is as unlucky at love as he is at cards.”

“Come on, Tony, make up your mind,” Charlie Knoll said. “I’ve got burglars to catch.”

“And Lomax and I have homicides to solve,” Terry said. “And Drabyak has prostitutes to frisk and pimps to shake down. If you fold, you can still go home with your last few bucks and what’s

left of your dignity.”

Dominguez had two pair showing. Jacks and deuces. The third deuce had already popped up and was in Reggie Drabyak’s discarded hand. There was only one card in the deck that would win the game for my trash-talking partner, and Tony Dominguez shoved his last remaining chips into the pot to see if Terry actually had it.

“Call.”

Terry put his thumb under his hole card. “And the green jacket at this year’s thrilling Masters tournament here in Augusta, Georgia, goes to. . .” He flipped over the deuce of spades. “Detective Terry Biggs, LAPD Homicide. The crowd goes wild, and his caddy, Detective Mike Lomax, is the first to run out onto the green and congratulate him.”

“Your caddy?” Tony said, shoving his losing hand to the middle of the table. “Is that what you call him now that the two of you are shacking up together?”

“Let me apologize to the audience for that display of poor sportsmanship,” Terry said, still broadcasting into his beer bottle. “That remark was highly inappropriate and totally inaccurate. Mike Lomax and Terry Biggs are not caddy shacking. Mike and the future Mrs. Lomax are waiting for their new house to be renovated. They’re living with Terry and Marilyn Biggs on a temporary basis.”

“First of all,” I said, “Diana is not the future Mrs. anything. She’s Miz Trantanella, and this little experiment of buying a house and cosigning a mortgage is the first of many steps we are taking before we even talk about getting married. Second of all, from what Marilyn tells me, she’s also living with you on a temporary basis.”

Terry shoveled the pile of chips toward him. “And when I return from the poker wars with this handsome haul, she’ll stick around yet another night.”

“Reg, you need help battening down the hatches?” Charlie

said.

“No, I’m gonna sleep on the boat,” Drabyak said. “Jo is working a wedding tonight, so she won’t be home till late. She took my truck, so I’ll go home in the morning and switch vehicles.”

Tony and I helped clean up while Charlie counted the chips. “And the big wiener of the evening is Biggs,” he said. “Sixty-two bucks.”

“So then the big whiner of the night must be Touchdown,” Terry said. “Nice game, T. D. Better luck next time.”

Dominguez gave him a one-finger salute.

“I sense anger issues,” Terry said. “You really need to see that expensive shrink of yours more often.”

Tony Dominguez had grown up poor and fatherless on the predominantly Mexican streets of East LA. His mother, Luz, spent her whole life cleaning other people’s houses. When Tony was ten, she started working for Ford Jameson, psychiatrist to the rich and famous. Jameson took to Tony from the get-go, and provided the positive male role model that had long been missing. The good doctor had been generous, buying Tony a used car when he needed wheels, helping him through college, and always available for therapy sessions at a hundred percent off his outrageous hourly rate.

“Hey, baby,” Tony said, “if anyone needs his head examined, it’s you.”

“I’ve only got sixty-two dollars,” Terry said, waving his winnings at Tony. “I don’t think I could afford your guy.”

“Do any of you fellas want to spend the night on the boat with me?” Reggie said. “Biggs has Lomax, and I’m feeling kind of jealous.”

“If I can’t have Mike, I don’t want any of you,” Charlie said.

“Why don’t you stay here by yourself, Reg?” Terry said. “Your luck is bound to change, and you just may get the first good hand you’ve had all night.”

That got a big laugh. We helped Reggie clean up, and by ten

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fifteen, Charlie, Tony, Terry, and I were on the dock, heading for our cars.

Five cops. Drinking beer, playing cards, busting balls. I'll never forget that Sunday night. It was the happiest time the five of us would ever spend together again.

CHAPTER TWO

I READ DANTE'S *Inferno* when I was in college. From what I can remember, there are nine circles of hell. The first one is for the unbaptized, who weren't really sinners but wound up in limbo because they didn't accept Jesus. From a cop perspective, I think of it as the misdemeanor circle.

As you move your way along the ladder of sin, you go deeper and deeper into hell. The eighth circle is for those who knowingly commit evil deeds. That includes panderers, false prophets, sowers of discord, and the way I see it, building contractors who take your money, don't do the work, and never return your phone calls.

So there's a spot reserved in the eighth circle of hell for Hal Hooper.

He's the reason Diana and I are currently homeless. We'd been living together for over a year. Sometimes her place, sometimes mine. A few months ago we bought a house together. A fixer-upper. We hired Hooper to fix it up.

We were supposed to move in by the end of August, but by September first, the house was still missing half a roof, a working bathroom, and several other amenities. Hooper gave us a bunch of lame excuses and swore it would be livable in another month. He didn't say finished. Just livable.

We had each given up our rentals, our furniture was in storage,

and we couldn't afford thirty nights in a hotel. In desperation, we moved in with Big Jim. I told Diana it would be a big mistake to try to live with my father, but she's a glass-half-full person. "It's only a month," she said. "How bad could it be?"

It didn't take long to find out.

I had braced Diana for the meddling. I warned her that he would pry into every corner of our personal lives and drop less-than-subtle hints about the joys of getting married and bearing children. But I never mentioned the peeing.

The first night, Diana and I went upstairs to our bedroom and Jim took the dogs out for one last pee. They stood in the yard, he yelled, "Business," and the four of them relieved themselves under our window. Three dogs and Jim.

When I called him on it the next morning, he said, "So I took a piss. For God's sake, Mike, it's dark out."

But darkness does not cover up industrial-strength farting or Big Jim's orgasmic groans of relief. You want to take the romance out of your evening? Get a three-hundred-pound teamster to empty his bladder under your bedroom window every night.

Even Jim's wife, Angel, who is usually pretty successful at reining him in, couldn't stop him from putting his nose in our business or his foot in his mouth. After five days and a variety of personal-boundary violations, the topper came when Jim, ever helpful, took our laundry from the dryer, folded it, and left it in our room. That Friday night at dinner, he suggested that Angel buy "one of those sexy black thongs like Diana wears."

Angel smacked the back of his fat head, Diana covered her eyes, and I grabbed the phone. By Saturday morning Diana and I were packed and headed to Sherman Oaks to move in with Terry, Marilyn, and the girls.

It was my first day commuting to work from the Valley, and we were creeping along the 101 at twenty miles an hour.

The ribbon of taillights in front of us went bright red, and Terry rolled the car to a stop. "So far, so good," he said.

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“We’re going to be late for Kilcullen’s Monday morning briefing, so you can’t be talking about the traffic. You must be bragging about the fact that we’ve managed to live under the same roof for forty-eight hours without any bloodshed.”

“Hey, I know it’s only been one weekend, but you’ve got to admit that bunking with us is more fun than living with Big Jim.”

I nodded. “Bunking with the Taliban would be more fun than living with Big Jim.”

We were fifteen minutes late getting to the station, but as it turned out, Kilcullen’s meeting was canceled. Just as we pulled into the parking lot, about twenty cops, some in plainclothes, some in uniform, came pouring out of the station and began jumping into their cars.

We saw Wendy Burns, and Terry honked at her.

Wendy is our direct supervisor, the Detective III who assigns cases to the homicide teams. She’s a total pro, smart, reasonable, and a great buffer to have between us and our less-than-reasonable boss, Lieutenant Brendan Kilcullen.

“You guys just caught a big one,” she said as Terry and I got out of the car. “Follow me.”

“What’s going on?” I said.

“Reggie Drabyak’s wife was shot.”

“Jesus, is she okay?”

“She’s dead.”

CHAPTER THREE

REGGIE DRABYAK IS not the most dynamic cop on the force. Average height, slightly more than average weight, slightly less than average personality. In two years, when he retires and hangs a “gone fishing” sign on his door, that’s exactly what he’ll be doing. Fishing. For him, police work is just a way to pay for his boat and his bait.

Jo Drabyak, on the other hand, was chatty, funny, and bubbly—a total charmer. Five years ago, after a series of colorful but unsuccessful career choices, she became an event planner. Weddings, bar mitzvahs, and because it’s LA, parties of every imaginable stripe for the Weird and Famous.

Jo grew up in Summit, New Jersey, and dropped out of high school to become a modern dancer. She had the desire and the drive, but not the knees. She moved to Los Angeles to conquer Hollywood and wound up as a production assistant on *The Price Is Right*. That’s where she met Petty Officer First Class Reggie Drabyak. Reggie was in the audience with a bunch of other sailors. He got the call to *come on down* and won himself a washer-dryer.

Jo’s job was to ship the prizes to the winners. Reggie didn’t have much use for major appliances on an aircraft carrier, so he said, “Have dinner with me, and you can ship my Maytag to your house.”

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A year later, Reggie quit the navy, joined LAPD, and offered Jo the chance to spend the rest of her life washing and drying his laundry with hers. From what I could tell, it was a damn good life. Until today.

“I guess you knew Jo Drabyak a lot better than I did,” Terry said as we followed the caravan of cop cars west on Sunset.

“I like Reggie,” I said, “but I was never a big fan of sitting in the hot sun all day hoping to catch my dinner. So, when I first met him, I didn’t hang out with him much. Then my wife met his wife at a cop picnic, and they really hit it off. Joanie and Jo went to yoga classes together, they’d have lunch, go shopping—they really got close. Eventually, we wound up doing a lot of couples stuff together. When Joanie was dying, people would call or send cards, but only two cop wives were there in the flesh. Your wife was one of them. The other was Jo.”

The Drabyaks lived on Alta Vista in a mission-style white stucco house with a red tiled roof. It would probably go for a million plus, which is modest by LA standards, but completely out of range for the average cop and his wife. Luckily, they bought it fifteen years ago when a two-income couple could still afford a down payment and a mortgage.

Terry pulled in behind Wendy’s car. She had a street map in one hand and was already delegating detectives to spread out and canvass a six-block radius. “The lieutenant’s waiting for you in the garage,” she said.

Jo was lying on the floor a few feet from Reggie’s pickup. Her legs were at a right angle to her torso. One arm was extended to the left, the other was pinned beneath her. Her left cheek was resting on the oil-stained concrete. Reggie had said she was working a wedding last night, and her clothes seemed to bear him out. She had on a flowery summer dress and sensible tan shoes with low heels. Her honey-blond hair fanned out across her back and shoulders, but one of the fan blades was missing.

I knelt down beside her. “I’m not sure, but it looks like a hunk

of her hair has been chopped off. Can't really tell because of the blood."

"Bullet to the back of the head," Terry said. "Looks more like an execution than a random homicide."

"Don't jump to conclusions," Kilcullen said.

"I always jump to conclusions," Terry said. "It's just that you're not usually on the scene to watch me do my job wrong."

"I'm here for the same reason my boss is here. And his boss. A cop's wife was murdered in cold blood in her own home. Whatever else you're doing, shelve it. This case goes to the top of the pile."

"We both knew the victim," I said. "Is there any conflict with us handling this?"

"We all knew the victim," Kilcullen said, his voice kicking up a notch. "She's one of our own. She was killed in our jurisdiction. It's ours to solve, and you two are going to solve it."

"Right," Terry said. "And if you yell louder, maybe we'll solve it faster."

"Sorry," Kilcullen said, more to Jo than to Terry. He bent down and took a closer look. "They cut her hair. It's like a violation on top of a violation." He smacked his fist into the palm of his hand and stood up. "CSU should be here any minute. I've got half the station combing the neighborhood. You guys get the fun job. Interview Reggie."

"Rule number one," I said. "The husband is always the primary. . ."

"I know," Kilcullen said. "But I know Reggie, and he didn't kill her. Let's just hope he's got a solid alibi."

"He's going to want in on the investigation," Terry said.

"Well, you know the answer to that one. No fucking way. You need manpower, you let me know. Anyone but Reggie." He took one more look at the dead woman at our feet. "I don't get it," he said. "A nice girl like Jo. I can't imagine she had any enemies."

Terry shrugged. "She must've had one."

CHAPTER FOUR

REGGIE WAS SITTING on the sofa in the living room. He was dressed for work—tan pants, pale yellow short-sleeve shirt, green tie with thin blue stripes. He had showered and shaved since I saw him last night, and his face, forever tan from a life on the water, was probably a melanoma waiting to happen. But for the moment, it gave off a healthy glow. Only his eyes were a window to the shock and the grief.

He stood up when Terry and I walked in. “Oh man, am I glad to see you guys. I’m crawling the walls here. What’s going on? What do you know?”

“Reg, we’re all torn up about this,” I said. “We’re gonna solve it, but we’re just getting started. First, we need to sit down and talk.” I put my hand on his shoulder and tried to ease him back toward the sofa, but he didn’t budge.

“Mike, I don’t want to sit and talk. I want to be part of the investigation.”

“Reg, you know the rules. . .”

“Fuck the rules,” he said. “I worked robbery-homicide at Central. I know what I’m doing.”

“Reg, that was years ago, and you transferred out after six months.”

“This is different. This is my wife.”

Like a lot of cops, when Reggie made detective, he thought he

could do the most good working homicide. But catching murderers doesn't bring back the victims, and Reggie has always had a passion to help people find the road to recovery. So he switched to vice, where he can help addicts kick the habit and prostitutes get off the street. Before he joined the navy he was raised as a Jehovah's Witness. While other kids were out playing ball, Reggie and his parents were knocking on doors trying to save souls. He gave up the religion years ago, but he never shook the need to point others toward the light.

"Reg," Terry said, "I can't tell you how sorry I am. We're going to catch this guy, but we're losing time here. The best way you can help right now is to let us ask you some questions."

Reggie lowered himself back onto the sofa and buried his head in his hands. "I know the drill," he said, looking back up at us. "Get to it. Ask."

"Let's start with the usual," I said. "Did Jo have any enemies?"

He shook his head. "Mike, you knew her. Everyone loved her."

"Dig deeper. What about crazy neighbors, old grudges, any of her exes, any of yours?"

"Mike, I've been digging deep for the past two hours. There's nobody. If I could've thought of somebody, I'd already be at their house."

"Did you hear anything or notice anything out of the ordinary in the past few days?" Terry said. "Anyone new hanging around the neighborhood? Weird phone calls? E-mails? Any flare-ups at work?"

"Nothing. She was happy. Busy, but happy. That was her. That was Jo."

A uniform came into the living room. "Excuse me, Detectives," she said. "Detective Burns said to tell you that the medical liaison is here."

"Thanks," I said. "Tell her Detective Drabyak will be right out."

"I don't need a doctor," Reggie said.

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“It’s standard procedure, Reg. Cop in trauma. Just talk to the doc. We’ll have someone drive you to the station, and we’ll pick up the interview there.”

“I spent the night on the boat,” he said.

“I know,” I said. I didn’t know it for sure, but I knew that’s what he’d say.

“I should have come home.” His eyes were starting to tear up. “I should have come home. This wouldn’t have happened.”

“Reggie, before you go,” I said. “We need your okay to do a permissive search of the house.” I handed him the paperwork and a pen.

“Do it,” he said, signing the form. “Rip the place apart. I don’t give a shit. Just find out who did this.”

“And we’ll need to secure your gun.”

He grunted out a laugh. “I don’t know why you need it now. I don’t know who to shoot yet.” He reached down to his ankle, took his piece out of the holster, and handed it to me.

“Thanks. We’ll talk back at the station,” I said.

“The first thing we talk about is making me part of the investigation.”

I looked at Terry. He had told Kilcullen that Reggie would want to help us catch Jo’s killer. I also remember Kilcullen’s answer. No way. Only he said it in three words.

“Did you hear me?” Reggie said. “I want in.”

“We understand,” Terry said. “But it’s not our call. We’ll ask Kilcullen. He’s pretty reasonable. Let’s see what he says.”

CHAPTER FIVE

KILCULLEN DELIVERED THE manpower we needed. At least a dozen uniformed officers plus detectives from every desk at the Hollywood Station canvassed the area and questioned everyone they could find within a six-block radius of the crime scene.

“Most people are at work,” Kilcullen told them. “Which means you keep going back and knocking on doors till you speak to every single person who might have seen or heard anything last night.”

Terry and I searched the house. It was neat, tasteful, and completely devoid of leads. At 11:00 a.m. we went back to the garage and were surprised to find Jessica Keating wrapping up her preliminary investigation. For my money, Jess is the best crime scene investigator in LA County. I just hadn’t expected to see her till October.

“I thought you still had another month of maternity leave before you came back,” I said.

“Breast-feeding and poopy diapers are highly overrated,” Jess said. “Besides, Dan works at home, and we were starting to get on each other’s nerves. So I bought a breast pump, left enough milk in the fridge to feed a village, and asked if I could come back to work early.” She looked down at Jo Drabyak and shook her head. “I know it sounds unhealthy coming from someone who just brought a life into the world, but believe it or not, I

missed this.”

“Glad you did,” I said. “What’s the cause of death?”

“You didn’t really need me to figure that out,” Keating said. “She died from a good old-fashioned case of HILP: high-impact lead poisoning. A single bullet to the back of her head. Small hole, no exit wound, probably a .22, but there’s no brass on the floor.”

“So ballistics will be next to impossible,” Terry said.

Jess shrugged. “You know the odds as well as I do. A small caliber like a .22 tends to just ping around your skull making a mess of everything in there, including itself. The slug is usually hard to trace.”

“Any sign of sexual assault?” I said.

“None. It looks like the killer came to kill. He must have waited till she got out of the car, got behind her, and put a bullet in her brain.”

“He?” I said.

“Sorry. That’s my pronoun of choice for all assholes who commit murder. But it could easily have been a she. Women aren’t traditionally shooters, but the wound indicates a small, ladylike gun.”

“What about her hair?” I said.

“Bravo,” Jessica said. “A man who actually can tell when a woman gets her hair cut. If I wanted Dan to notice I’d have to come home looking like Sinéad O’Connor. Someone chopped off a big hank of her hair. Unless she had a really bad hair day at the beauty salon, my guess is whoever killed her decided to take home a souvenir.”

“So what do we have here?” I said. “A vendetta?”

“I’m not a profiler,” she said. “I just sift through the physical evidence and try to find something that can help. But this doesn’t look like a robbery, a crime of opportunity, or a random shooting.”

“Time of death?”

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“Around midnight—give or take.”

“Give or take how much?” I said. “Her husband has an alibi for part of last night, but not for all of it.”

“She probably was shot between eleven last night and one o’clock this morning. Does that help?”

“It helps us,” I said. “It won’t help him. You got anything else?”

“Nothing yet,” she said. “The garage is covered with prints. We’ll be dusting for a week. And we’re going over the grounds looking for footprints, fibers, or any sign of someone who might have laid in wait outside, then followed her in when she opened the garage door.”

“Excuse me again, Detectives.” It was the same cop who let us know when the medical liaison showed up. She was young, blond, with how-can-I-help written all over her face.

“Yes, Officer,” I said.

“Julie Horner, sir. I thought you’d want to know. There’s a flower delivery.”

Terry rolled his eyes. “Is this your first homicide, Officer Horner?”

“Yes, sir.”

“The detectives are usually too busy looking for the killer to handle flower deliveries,” he said. “Maybe you can sign for them and either put them in the house or reroute them to the funeral home.”

“These don’t look like condolence flowers, sir,” she said. “They’re roses, and they’re addressed to Mrs. Drabyak.”

CHAPTER SIX

THE GUY DRIVING the flower van was tall and blond, with a chiseled jaw, and a pair of arms that looked like they lifted more than floral arrangements.

“Soap star wannabe,” Terry said, as we walked toward him.

As we got closer, I could see that the face didn’t quite live up to the physique. Thin lips, eyes set close together, sharp nose. Not a problem if he could do Shakespeare or deliver posies.

“This is so cool,” he said. “With the yellow crime scene tape and everything, it looks like you’re shooting a movie, except there’s no cameras.”

“We can’t afford cameras,” Terry said. “We spent all our money on yellow tape. Let’s see your ID.”

“John G. Evans,” he said, not reaching for his wallet.

“ID,” Terry repeated.

“John G. Evans,” he said, flashing a mouthful of expensive teeth. “I’m just delivering flowers. Is my name going to be in the police report or something?”

“If you don’t show me your ID,” Terry said, “your ass is going to be in a squad car or something.”

He dug into his back pocket, removed his license from his wallet, and handed it to Terry.

“Well, it’s got your picture, John G.,” Terry said. “But the state of California seems to think your name is Evan Goldfried.”

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“I’m an actor. John G. Evans is my. . .”

“I’m a detective. Way ahead of you,” Terry said. “Who sent the flowers?”

He shrugged. “There’s probably a card in the box.”

I opened it. There were two dozen long-stemmed red roses and a single white card. *Dear Jo, Thank you for last night. Everything was perfect, except me. You were right. I did have about six drinks too many. Sorry if I put a damper on an otherwise fantastic evening. Roger.*

The *O* in Roger’s name had a smiley face drawn in it. I showed the card to Terry. “Who’s Roger?” he asked.

“He must be the dude who sent the flowers,” John G. said.

“Where do we find him? Do you have any paperwork with his name and address?”

“I’m just the delivery guy. Call Peg at the shop,” he said, pointing to the phone number on the side of the van.

I dialed. The shop was Freem’s Flowers. The owner, Peg Freem, was efficient, cooperative, and not the slightest bit curious about why I was trying to track down Roger.

“He came in as soon as I opened,” she said. “He was about five foot eight, late fifties, curly gray hair, wearing a nice suit, no tie, gold band on the third finger of his left hand.”

“I appreciate the description,” I said. “But what I really need is his last name and his address.”

“I never saw him before, and he paid cash.”

“Not what I wanted to hear,” I said, “but it makes sense. A guy with a wedding ring, sending flowers to someone else’s wife—”

She interrupted. “But I told him I needed his cell in case there were any problems.”

“Well, Ms. Freem, I guess you could say there’s a problem.”

She gave me Roger’s number.

CHAPTER SEVEN

TERRY AND I figured if Roger shot Jo last night, he probably wouldn't have sent flowers in the morning, along with a mea culpa for getting drunk. So we sent a backup team to track him down and question him.

The two of us drove back to the station and sat down with Reggie.

"I spent the night on the boat," he said. "You guys left at ten or so. Jo called me around eleven. She was on her way home from the wedding."

"Did she say if anything happened?" I asked.

"Like what?"

"Like people at weddings get drunk. Did she have an argument? A fight over the bill? Anything out of the ordinary?"

"No. She said it was real good. The bride was happy. Her mother was happy. It was a wedding. Everybody had a good time."

"Who's Roger?" I said.

He shrugged.

"Some guy named Roger sent Jo flowers this morning. He apologized for his bad behavior last night."

"Never heard of him," Reggie said. "But I sure as hell would like to meet him as soon as I get my gun back."

"Jo didn't mention anything about it when she called?"

"No, that shit happens all the time. She's a good-looking wom-

an. . .” He stopped, put his hand over his eyes, and turned away. “Give me a minute.”

I see it a lot. That excruciating moment when someone realizes that the present tense no longer applies.

Reggie took out a handkerchief and blew his nose. “I’m okay,” he lied. “Jo was beautiful. She’d orchestrate these big parties, guys would get shit-faced, and sometimes make a pass. Pretty harmless. Usually she would tell them her old man was a cop, and that would be the end of it. She wouldn’t tell me, because she said I’d just get all bent out of shape. I mean, who wants to hear that some guy is grabbing his wife’s ass?”

“Was that phone call the last time you spoke to her?”

“Yeah. I drove home from the boat around six thirty this morning. Jo had borrowed my pickup last night. I parked her Tercel in the driveway, took a quick look through the garage window, and I could see my truck. I walked to the front door, grabbed the paper, and went upstairs. The bed was made, so I figured she was out jogging. I took a shower, got dressed, but she still wasn’t home, so I left her a note on the kitchen table and went to the garage to get my truck. That’s when I found her. She was cold. Dead a long time. I called 911, then I called Kilcullen direct.”

“Let’s talk about who might have it in for you—did you bust anyone who could be that pissed?”

He shook his head. “Come on—they’re low-level sex peddlers. They get busted, they do a little time, they go back on the street again. It goes with the turf.”

“What about johns?” Terry said.

“You passed the detective exam,” Reggie said. “Cops don’t arrest johns.”

“I know. But I wonder if maybe you nailed one you shouldn’t have, and caused him a problem.”

“Who knows? Some of these guys are pretty twisted. Just ask the hookers. Maybe we could go over my case file. Something might jump out at me. You think I was the target?”

“We’re gonna look at everything,” I said.

“Maybe you’re right,” he said. “There was no robbery. It’s not a crime of opportunity. They’re laying for me, but it’s dark out, Jo comes home in my truck, and they shoot her by mistake.”

“Reg, the lights go on in the garage when you open the door. Jo got out of the truck and the killer came up behind her. She was wearing a dress. They didn’t shoot her by mistake.”

“What if they came to shoot me, but I was too fat and lazy to get off the boat, so they killed her instead?”

I doubted it. The fact that the killer cut off a lock of Jo’s hair made me pretty sure she was the intended victim, but that was one of the crime scene details I wasn’t about to share with my primary suspect.

“You may be right, Reggie,” I said. “So just in case you are the target, Kilcullen assigned someone to keep an eye on you.”

“Bullshit. If I need protection, why did Kilcullen take my gun? He’s not assigning someone to protect me. He knows I have other guns at home. He’s just tailing me to make sure I don’t go out and use them.”

“So he’s protecting you from yourself,” Terry said. “This is your time to say good-bye to your wife, to grieve for her, not to go vigilante on us.”

“Did you even bother asking Kilcullen if I could work on the case?”

“For the record, we asked,” Terry said. “The three of us agree.”

Reggie slumped in his chair. His tie was hanging loosely around his neck. There were dark sweat circles under the sleeves of his yellow shirt. “Who lost the coin toss?” he said.

“What do you mean?” Terry said.

“My wife was murdered. I’m an automatic suspect. Somebody’s got to ask the nasty questions. I was just wondering which one of you drew the short straw. I’ll tell you what—I’ll spare you the embarrassment.”

He stood up and looked down at the vacant chair. “So, Reggie,

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who were you banging?”

He sat back down and answered. “Nobody, detective. I loved my wife.”

Back on his feet again. “How about Jo—all those guys hitting on her—you think she ever got involved?”

He sat down and shook his head. “No. Never.”

He got up one last time. “So there were no marital problems?”

This time he didn’t bother sitting down. He just stood there and stared at me and Terry. “Just the one problem,” he said. “She snored, but I wouldn’t say it was loud enough to shoot her. So stop wasting time and find out who the fuck did.”

He walked out the door. The interview was over.

CHAPTER EIGHT

AS A KID growing up in Manchester, England, Detective Chris High had two passions. Football and surfing. Manchester has two football teams but no oceans, so at seventeen Chris moved to LA, bought himself a board, and became an all-American surfer.

It was, as the Beach Boys say, fun, fun, fun. Until he broke his neck. After nine months in a halo brace and a year in therapy, he decided that becoming a cop would be a safer bet than being a surfer dude.

Chris runs the Hollywood Apprehension Team. When a detective gets a warrant, the HAT squad does the legwork and makes the arrest. Today they were called in to canvass the area where Jo Drabyak was murdered.

At six o'clock Kilcullen pulled a dozen detectives into the break room to kick around different perspectives on the case. Chris High led off with a No Progress Report.

“Nobody bloody saw anything,” he said. “One bloke walking his dog heard a garage door at 23:15 hours, which is when the victim was expected home, but he didn’t see anything, so he can’t be sure if it was her.”

“Is that all you came up with?” Kilcullen said.

“We’ve only tracked down half the neighbors. We’ll be sweeping the area again at 19:00 hours. But so far, nothing. Whoever

did this was a bloody pro.”

“What about this guy who sent the roses?” Kilcullen said.

Terry and I had sent Detectives Pat Sutula and Andy Langer to interview the guy who sent the flowers. They’re known around the squad room as Penn and Teller. She does all the talking. Langer is stony silent.

“His name is Roger Levinson,” Sutula said. “He’s an accountant in Burbank. His daughter got married last night. Mrs. Drab- yak planned the wedding. Levinson got drunk, came on to her, then tried to make nice with two dozen roses. He has an alibi for the time of death.”

“Which is when?” Kilcullen asked.

“Keating gave us a two-hour spread this morning,” I said. “I just spoke to her, and she’s narrowed it down to somewhere between ten forty-five and eleven thirty last night. We might be able to narrow it down even more. According to Reggie, his wife called him at 11:00 p.m. She was in the car on her way home.”

“Where was he when she called?” Kilcullen asked.

“His boat on the marina. It was cell to cell.”

“Verify his location with cell tower records. If we can prove that he took the call on his boat at eleven that would eliminate him as a suspect.”

“Isn’t he already eliminated?” Tony Dominguez said. “Does anybody here actually think Reggie murdered his wife?”

“Nobody thinks he did it,” Kilcullen said. “But *I was alone on the boat* is not an alibi, and the DA will crucify us if we cut him loose based on the nice-guy-we-work-with defense. I need cell records to back up his story.”

“Can we talk motive?” Charlie Knoll said. “I knew this woman. I can’t think of any reason why somebody would want to kill her. Does anyone think this might be a vendetta against Reggie?”

Hands went up, including mine and Terry’s.

“We’re working two paths,” Kilcullen said. “We’re digging into Jo Drab- yak’s life, and we’re also looking at Reggie’s cas-

es.” He turned to Detective Burns. “Wendy, your hand wasn’t up. You don’t think this is about Reggie?”

“I wouldn’t rule it out. You never know who might have it in for a cop,” Wendy said, “but the killer brought a pair of scissors and cut off a piece of Jo’s hair. To me, that says it’s about her, and it’s personal.”

“A boyfriend?” Kilcullen said.

Wendy smiled. “Most men don’t sneak up and shoot women in the back of the head. A pissed-off boyfriend would want to confront her face to face and say, ‘You see what you made me do, you bitch?’”

“Which brings us back around to her business,” Kilcullen said. “We can look into every event she ever planned, but I can’t imagine killing somebody over a wedding reception gone wrong.”

“What about that house renovating business she’s involved in?” Wendy said.

“What about it?” Tony Dominguez said.

“We should look into it,” Wendy said. “Construction breeds a lot more crime than party planning.”

“Are you suggesting that the women in this real estate venture are into something crooked?” Tony said.

“No,” Wendy said. “I’m saying it’s just another part of Jo Drabyak’s life that we should be looking into.”

“Thank you for clarifying, Detective,” Tony said, “because my wife is part of that group, and whatever else you might say about her, she’s not involved in anything shady.”

“I didn’t realize Jo was one of the Flippers,” Kilcullen said.

“She was,” Tony said. “Charlie’s wife, mine, Terry’s. Us guys, we play poker and lose money to each other. Our wives get together and make a nice little profit.”

“Excuse me, but I am completely flummoxed,” Chris High said. “Will somebody clue me in. What’s a flipper?”

“The LA Flippers,” Charlie said. “It’s a group of five—”

“I know,” Chris said. “They play basketball.”

“That’s the Clippers,” Charlie said. “A bunch of our wives have a business together. They call themselves the LA Flippers. You know my mother-in-law, Nora Bannister?”

High gave him a dubious look.

“For God’s sakes, Chris. Nora Bannister. She’s the queen of the murder mystery writers.”

“I didn’t realize you Yanks had a queen,” High said. “I thought that’s why you left England in the first place—to get away from all that monarchy rot.”

“Are you telling me you never heard of Nora Bannister?” Charlie said. “She’s like a cherished American writer.”

“So she’s more like Shakespeare than the Queen.”

“You’re yanking my chain, right?”

High wagged his finger. “Yes, Charles, I know who Nora Bannister is. I’m just not a big fan of the drivel she writes.”

“To each his own, Detective High and Mighty,” Charlie said. “Anyway, five years ago, Nora helped set up my wife, Julia, and Tony’s wife, Marisol, in a house-flipping business. They bought a run-down house in a good neighborhood, hired a contractor, renovated the shit out of it, then flipped it for a profit.”

“Hence, the name,” High said. “The LA Flippers.”

“But here’s the twist,” Charlie said. “While the construction was going on, Nora wrote a book about a murder that takes place in that house. You might think it’s drivel, but the first week *Murder at 2424 Horseshoe Canyon Road* came out, it went straight to the bestseller list. That’s when the Flippers put the house on the market.”

“I’m guessing it sold rather quickly,” High said.

“Quickly? There was a bidding frenzy over it. Five buyers wanted to live in the house that’s on the cover. It sold for a shit-load more than they’d hoped to get.”

“Whatever your mother-in-law lacks in literary talent, she more than makes up for in business acumen,” High said. “That is bloody brilliant.”

“It’s so brilliant that she decided to write a bunch of them. So now she has *The House to Die For* series. A new book and a new house to flip every year. This time around Nora opened it up to a few of her friends. Terry’s wife, Marilyn, and Jo Drabyak are the two newest partners.”

“Actually, Marilyn and Jo are more like investors with opinions,” Tony said. “My wife does most of the day-to-day work.”

“And she gets a salary,” Charlie said.

“She earns it. Wendy makes it sound like our wives are involved in something crooked.”

“That’s not what I meant,” Wendy said. “We all know that there are some real sketchy characters in the contracting business. They cut corners, they bribe inspectors, they hire illegal immigrants. . .”

“They cash your check, don’t show up to do the work, so I wind up moving in with my partner,” I said.

“Here’s my point,” Wendy said. “Some accountant hits on Jo Drabyak, she tells him to buzz off, and he sends her flowers. What if the same thing happens on the construction site with some illegal whose wife is still in Mexico? Maybe he doesn’t send roses. Maybe he follows her home and kills her.”

“So now you’re saying some horny Mexican killed her?” Tony smiled and shook his head. “Hey, as long as you’re projecting what the Mexicans would do, would you care to hear a point of view from a genuine Mexican?”

“Go ahead,” Kilcullen said.

“Jo was in charge of publicity for the project,” he said. “She didn’t interact with the workers. Even if she had, she was a total sweetheart who got along with everyone. My wife, on the other hand, is a hot-blooded Latina with a short fuse. She’s the line boss. She screams at the crew all day. She insults their mothers.”

He smiled. We knew where this was headed.

“What I’m saying is, if those workers took a poll on who to shoot, Marisol would win unanimously.”

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Nobody argued the point. We all knew Marisol well enough to realize he was right. We spent the next half hour tossing around theories. Since we all came from different disciplines, we all had different ideas of who might want to murder a cop's wife. Gangs. Organized crime. Rappers. I'm sure if we spitballed long enough, O. J. would have come up as a suspect.

By seven thirty Terry and I were back on the 101, inching our way toward the Valley.

"Long day," I said.

"It's not over," Terry said. "We have to look into this house-flipping business. Which means when we get home, I'm gonna have to interrogate my wife."

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