

TERMINAL

A Lomax and Biggs Mystery

Marshall Karp

PROLOGUE

AMATEUR HOUR

ONE

THE PRIUS IDLED in total silence. The hybrid was so damn quiet that even when it was barreling down the road a pedestrian could barely hear it coming.

Which, of course, was part of the plan.

Bruce Bower angled the driver's seat so he could lean back and look through the moon roof. Not much moon to be looked at—just a sliver of white that did little to light the quiet suburban LA street. That too was part of the plan.

He stared heavenward and thought about his life—the fifty-one years that had gone by and the four to six weeks Dr. Spang said he had left. He smiled.

“What’s so funny?” Claire asked.

He adjusted the seat so he could see her face in the faint glow that came through the windshield. Thirty-one years since he fell in love with her, and she was still beautiful, still sexy, still everything he ever desired.

“I was just thinking how I spent my entire career dispensing brilliant tax advice,” Bruce said, “and now your entire financial future rests on where some dog decides to take a crap.”

“Dogs are creatures of habit,” Claire said. “Last night was a fluke. Tonight he’ll get it right.”

It all hinged on a five-year-old yellow Lab named Maverick.

Bruce and Claire had done three test runs. Every night

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between ten and eleven, Wade Yancy would open the front door of his house at 476 Comstock Avenue, and Maverick would come bounding out, a flashing blue LED safety light hooked to his collar.

Three out of three times the dog headed for the opposite side of the street, stopped at the bend in the road, and did his business directly in front of somebody else's four-million-dollar home.

Yancy would follow with a glass of wine in one hand and a pooper-scooper bag in the other. He'd crouch down to pick up the shit, because that's the kind of thoughtful neighbor Wade Yancy was. But half-drunk and with his back to the oncoming traffic, he was an accident waiting to happen.

All Bruce had to do was put the car in gear, come around the blind turn doing forty, and the deadly silent Prius would do the rest.

Last night was supposed to be the night, but the dog never crossed the street. Maverick had opted to take a quick piss up against a tree on Yancy's property and went back into the house for the night.

That might be the kind of setback a professional killer could deal with, but not Claire. As soon as Yancy closed his front door, she started to cry. Bruce did his best to comfort her, but in the end, he cried along with her.

They went home, drank wine, made love, and did the only thing they could do. They pushed the murder off another day. Again, not much of a setback for a professional, but Bruce didn't have that many days left.

It was now twenty-four hours and fifteen minutes since the aborted attempt, and Bruce reached for the pack of Luckies sitting on the dashboard.

"Do you think that's such a good idea?" Claire said.

"I thought it was," he said, picking up the cigarettes, "but judging by the verbal topspin you put on the words *good* and *idea*, you think it's anything but."

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“Very perceptive. I’ve got Nicorette gum in my purse. You want some?”

“Nicorette is for people who are trying to quit smoking. I’ll quit for good soon enough. Until then, I have Dr. Spang’s blessings to smoke like a Chevy Vega. I am no longer a gum chewer, Claire. I’m a Stage IV smoker.”

“You’re also a Stage IV asshole,” Claire said. “Do you really think I’m trying to stop you from smoking? I’m only afraid that if you light up, somebody could see us sitting here.”

“Oh,” he said, putting the cigarettes back on the dash.

She reached into her purse and pulled out a square of Nicorette. “Chew this. You can smoke all you want when the cops get here.”

“This reminds me of our third date,” he said, chomping down on the mint-flavored wad of nicotine-infused rubber and resting a hand on her thigh.

She covered his hand with hers and kissed his cheek. “Don’t get too horny, lover boy, because there are things I could do in the front seat of a car when I was twenty that I can’t do now.”

“I’m not talking about the sex,” he said. “Third date was the first time you started bossing the shit out of me, and you haven’t stopped since.”

“Have I told you lately that you’re an asshole?” she said, punching him gently on the shoulder.

“Stage IV,” he said. He was about to return the kiss when she sat up straight.

“The door’s opening,” she said.

They watched as the flashing blue light loped across the street and headed for the curve in the road.

“Good doggie,” Bruce said.

The light stopped moving, and the dog circled, looking for the perfect piece of Holmby Hills real estate to leave his mark.

“Poop is now in progress,” Claire said in a mock robotic voice.

Bruce had one hand on the steering wheel, the other on the

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gearshift. "Get your cell phone ready," he said.

Claire removed the phone from her purse, never taking her eyes off the flashing blue light that was the only insurance policy her dying husband had.

The dog finished and scampered off to piss in the bushes, leaving the pile of shit for his multimillionaire owner to deal with.

"Mr. Yancy has had a few," Claire said.

"More than a few," Bruce said as he watched his prey stumble off the curb and weave his way across the street.

As soon as Yancy squatted down, Bruce put the car in gear and hit the gas.

"Be careful you don't hit the dog," Claire warned.

"The dog doesn't deserve to die," Bruce said as the Prius accelerated from zero to forty in 5.3 seconds. "Yancy does."

They had done their research. Thirty was the speed limit on Comstock, but a pedestrian who might survive being hit at thirty would be roadkill at forty.

The headlights were out, but Bruce had no trouble honing in on the two-hundred-fifty-pound target. And then, as if God had decided that Claire and Bruce Bower had waited for closure long enough, Yancy stood up, and the front bumper of the Prius struck him at knee level, pummeling bones, blood vessels, and tissue.

As soon as he heard the thud, Bruce hit the brakes, but the laws of kinetic energy were still in control. The forward motion continued, and the hood of the car connected with Yancy's pelvis, and his body went airborne, landing on a lawn sixty feet away.

Bruce turned on the headlights before the Prius even came to a stop.

"Oh my God," he screamed. "Claire, I hit somebody, I hit somebody."

They had decided that scripting a story wasn't enough. Acting it out and living it in real time would make the lies much more believable.

Claire immediately went into character and dialed 911.

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Bruce sat behind the wheel, dazed, numb. “I never saw him,” he said. “He came out of nowhere.”

“See if he’s okay,” Claire yelled. She turned to her phone. “My name is Claire Bower. We just hit someone with our car. I don’t know—just a minute. Bruce, where the hell are we?”

“Comstock Avenue,” he yelled. “Somewhere between Beverly Glen and Sunset, but closer to Beverly Glen. It wasn’t my fault. He came out of nowhere.”

Bruce threw the car door open and ran toward the body yelling, “I’m sorry. I’m sorry. I never saw you.” He was immersed in the part now, and by the time the paramedics arrived, he was confident that his blood pressure would be through the roof.

The dog was on all fours, whimpering, nuzzling Yancy’s face, trying to get a response.

Bruce knelt down in the grass next to the body. “I’m sorry,” he said, first to the broken, bloodied man on the ground, and then again to the dog.

“The police will be here in three minutes,” Claire yelled, getting out of the car and walking toward him. “Is he okay? Please tell me he’s okay.”

“I don’t know,” Bruce yelled back. “Hold on.” He pulled his cell phone from his pocket and turned on the flashlight. Yancy’s eyes were glazed over, locked in the thousand-yard stare.

Bruce made the official pronouncement. “He’s dead.”

“Are you sure?” Claire said, real tears streaming down her cheeks. “Maybe he’s still breathing.”

She dropped to her knees and pressed an ear to the dead man’s chest.

A wet, gurgling moan erupted from Yancy’s throat. Claire bolted backwards and screamed.

Yancy struggled to speak. “Call...nine...one...one,” he implored.

She didn’t have to. She could already hear the sirens in the distance.

TWO

“I CAN PRACTICALLY hear the wheels turning inside that head of yours,” Claire said. “What are you thinking about?”

“I was just doing the math,” Bruce said.

They were sitting on the back step of LAFD Rescue Ambulance 71. The paramedics had taken their vitals, determined they were well enough to be detained at the scene, and had run down the road to join the cops and firefighters congregating around Wade Yancy.

Despite the fact that no one could possibly hear her, Claire whispered. “The math? Honey, there’s fifty thousand in the bank in the Caymans, and by this time tomorrow, there’ll be another four fifty. Even I can figure that out.”

“Not that math,” Bruce said. “I’m trying to calculate what it’s costing the city of Los Angeles to respond to the accident. LAPD sent four patrol units and a T car; LAFD has two engines, an ALS and a BLS rescue ambulance; there’s a team from SID taking pictures, the ME just arrived, plus the DOT has a crew detouring traffic at both ends of Comstock Avenue—all for one simple Vehicle versus Ped.”

“For God’s sake, Bruce,” she said in a harsh whisper. “Lose the cop lingo, or somebody will hear you and figure out that you researched every inch of this investigation a week before the accident happened.”

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He shook his head. “This is why I love you. I was sitting here quietly, but you had to know what I was thinking. I tell you, and I get yelled at.”

“I just don’t want you to screw it up.”

“I haven’t screwed anything up yet—probably because I did all that research. And just a reminder—you’re the one crashing the party here. You’re not supposed to even know what I’m doing, much less be a part of it. It’s totally against their rules.”

“*Their* rules? What about Thou Shalt Not Kill? They have no problem if you break that rule. What are they going to do if they find out I was with you—ask me for their money back?”

Bruce shrugged. “I don’t know what they’ll do, but whatever it is, that’ll be the new guy’s problem.”

“What new guy?”

“You’re young, you’re beautiful, you’ll have a nice little nest egg—trust me, there’s going to be a new guy.”

“I don’t think so, Bruce. Thirty-one years of living on the edge with a wild and crazy high-flying accountant is all the excitement I can handle in one lifetime.”

He laughed. “Oh yeah—that’s me—the Evel Knievel of CPAs.”

“That cop is coming back,” Claire said. “Try to act like you’re in shock.”

“I am in shock,” Bruce said. “I can’t believe I earned a half-million dollars for a couple of hours work.”

Officer Matt McCormick had stepped out of the circle surrounding Wade Yancy and was walking up the road to the ambulance.

“How are you folks holding up?” he said gently. He was only three years on the job, but he had a natural gift for bringing calm to the chaos of a sudden and violent traffic accident.

Claire smiled. “Thank you, Officer McCormick. We’re doing better.”

“Mr. Bower,” McCormick said, “the paramedic told me your

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BP was high, but that's normal in situations like this. I'd like you to take me through the accident, but if you don't feel well, the ambulance can take you to UCLA Med."

"I'm okay for now," Bruce said. "But EMS has been here awhile, and he's still lying there, so I guess he's..."

"Yes sir, I'm sorry to tell you that the victim has expired. If it's any consolation, the coroner is pretty sure he never suffered. He died on impact."

"On impact," Bruce repeated. "I guess that's some kind of a blessing."

"Does he have a family?" Claire asked.

"A wife and two teenage daughters."

"I heard screaming," Claire said.

"That was one of the girls. She's in shock. They took her back to the house. One of the paramedics is with her now." He took out a pad. "Mr. Bower, why don't you tell me what happened."

"We were home and decided to drive out to Century City for some ice cream," Bruce said. "We always cut across Comstock from Sunset to Beverly Glen—it's faster. So I know the road. I wasn't speeding. And I didn't have anything to drink. You can test me."

"That's okay, sir," McCormick said. "I can tell."

"We're driving on Comstock, and out of the corner of my eye I see this flashing blue light on the other side of the street. Even so, I didn't look away. Then all of a sudden this man just stands up—he's right in front of the car, but his back is to me. I never saw him. He never saw me."

"He probably never heard you either," McCormick said. "The NHTSA is trying to get laws passed to make these hybrids noisier, but it's too late for Mr. Yancy."

"Is that his name?" Claire asked.

"Yes ma'am. Wade Yancy, forty-seven years old," McCormick said. "Finish your story, Mr. Bower. You say he just stood up in front of you?"

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“I don’t understand,” Bruce said. “Where did he come from?”

“The way we pieced it together, it looks like he was squatting on the roadway picking up after his dog and stood up just as you came around the curve. There was an empty wineglass on the shoulder at the point of impact. He must have set it down when he was cleaning up after the dog. I have no doubt that the tox report will show he was drinking.”

Bruce shook his head. “What happens next?” he asked.

“I’ll write up a report stating that the primary collision factor was the pedestrian, probably impaired, in the roadway, and if it hadn’t been for him, there would not have been a collision. A traffic detective will be out here shortly, and if he signs off on it, which I’m confident he will, you’re free to go. Your car is damaged, but one of the uniforms checked it out. It’ll get you home. Are you okay to drive?”

“I’m fine,” Bruce said.

“He’s fine,” Claire said. “But I’m driving.”

“Good call, Mrs. Bower,” McCormick said, giving her a big smile. “Anything else I can do for you while we’re waiting for the detective?”

“Just one question,” she said. “How do you do it?”

“Do what, ma’am?”

“You must see tragedies like this every day. How do you manage to stay so positive, so upbeat?”

“I don’t have a choice. When I get to a scene, people are hurting—physically, emotionally, psychologically. I’m not there to add more pain to the mix. My job is to sort things out and bring comfort wherever I can.”

“Well, you have. I only hope you don’t go home after work and cry yourself to sleep.”

“Don’t worry about that, Mrs. Bower. The one thing you learn on this job is to enjoy life as much you can, because you never know what’s going to sneak up on you and pull the plug on the whole deal.”

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His cell phone rang. He checked the caller ID and smiled. “Speaking of fun, it’s my fiancé. Excuse me.”

“The kid’s right,” Bruce said as soon as the cop was out of earshot. “You never know what’s going to sneak up on you and pull the plug on the whole deal.” He paused and smiled. “Like a Stage IV asshole in a Prius.”

PART ONE

DIAGNOSIS

CHAPTER 1

I DID A quick head count as soon as I walked into the waiting room. Eight people waiting for the doctor. I walked to the receptionist's desk and printed my name on the sign-in sheet. There were spaces for *Time of Appointment* and *Time of Arrival*. I left them blank.

The glass window slid open, and Nadine smiled up at me. She had blue eyes, silver hair, and a deep whiskey-coated voice. No matter how sick you were when you walked into Dr. Heller's office, Nadine immediately made you feel better.

"Hello, handsome," she said. "And how are you today?"

"Fashionably late."

She looked at her watch. "Honey, an hour and twenty minutes ain't fashionable—even in LA."

"I was stuck at a crime scene. I called and left a message with somebody—I didn't catch her name."

"I know. Somebody, whose name is Helen, told me you were out fighting crime, and you'd get here when you got here." She leaned close to the window and whispered. "I think you just didn't want to come back here for that prostate exam."

"Doug gave me a complete physical last week. Head to toe."

"Minus one part," she said, wiggling a finger in the air.

"Not my fault. He stepped out of the office, I got a call from my lieutenant, and I had to race back to the station. I'm sorry

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I couldn't stick around for Doug to come back, grease up, and work me like a sock puppet."

She let loose with a lung-butter laugh that sounded like the Roto-Rooter man was unclogging her pipes. People in the waiting room looked up, half smiles on their faces, hoping to be let in on the fun.

"Nadine, serious question," I said. "How long a wait do I have?"

She put a finger to her lips. I shut up. She picked up a phone. "Brenda, I reserved a table for one—Detective Lomax. Yes, he just strolled in. Come and get him."

She waved me through the door to the inner sanctum, and I didn't look back, but I'm sure all eight of the people in the waiting room were thinking, *Who the hell is he?*

Brenda, Doug Heller's senior nurse, met me on the other side. "Hey, Mike, you bolted out of here in a big hurry last week," she said.

"It's all part of the glamour of being a cop. This way I get to live in dread of a prostate exam yet a second time."

She led me into an exam room, took my BP and my pulse, and handed me a gown. "Suit up," she said. "Dr. Heller will be right in."

I stripped down, hung up my clothes, set my gun on the counter next to a container of cotton balls, and put on a pale blue, one-size-fits-nobody hospital gown with the wide slit down the back.

There was a knock on the door, and Doug Heller walked in.

"Oh, hi," I said, struggling to tie the gown in the back. "I was just trying on prom dresses. Do you have anything in a pink taffeta?"

Doug and I have been friends for twenty years, so we start every session with the usual *how's your family* stuff, or at the very least, some guy banter.

Not this time. "So, Mike," he said, skipping the foreplay, "how are you feeling?"

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“Fine.”

“Fine is not a medical term. You tired? Run down?”

“Overworked. Does that count?”

“Hop on the table.”

I did as told, and he put his fingers on my neck and started pressing. “How about dizzy spells? Shortness of breath?”

“None of the above. What’s going on?”

“I got your blood results from last week, and your white blood count is a little off. That’s why I called you back.”

“I thought it was because I bailed on the prostate exam.”

“You’re forty-three years old. I could have easily let it slide till your next physical,” he said. “But this can’t wait.”

“What is it?”

“Probably nothing, but I’m going to take some more blood and run it through the lab again. Lie down.”

I stretched out, and he began poking my belly.

“What do you mean my white blood count is a little off?” I said.

“Out of range. Nothing to worry about, but it’s worth looking at again.”

“What if I get the same bad numbers on the next blood test?” I said. “Do you have a guess what it could be?”

“Mike, I don’t guess,” he said, still stabbing his finger into my gut. “If you want guesswork, go to the Internet and Google the word *health*. You’ll have millions of choices. Don’t make yourself crazy. If the blood work doesn’t change, I’ll run a few tests. And the best news is they’re free—all paid for by the Los Angeles Police Department. Have you used any steroids recently?”

“Jesus, Doug.”

“Your lymph nodes are good, but your spleen is enlarged. Sit up, and I’ll send Brenda back to draw some blood.”

“So no prostate exam?”

“Almost forgot. Like I said, I wouldn’t have called you back

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for it, but now that you're here and dressed for the occasion, let's get it done."

He reached over to the counter, took a latex glove out of a dispenser, and popped the cap off a tube of KY jelly.

"I hate this," I said, getting on my knees and lowering my shoulders to the table.

"It's not exactly April in Paris for me either, sweetheart."

My ass was up in the air when I heard the first gunshot. Instinct kicked in, and I jumped off the table.

"Holy shit," Doug said. "Was that a gunshot?"

"Yes, get down on the floor and stay there. If you've got a cell in your pocket, call 911."

I dove for the counter and had my hand on my Glock when the second shot rang out. Shotgun blast. And judging from the sound, the shooter was close by, but not in the next room. Doug's office was one of dozens in the San Vicente Medical Arts Building. I had no idea which one the shots came from.

I opened the exam room door and peered out. Patients and nurses alike were screaming and running toward the waiting room. "LAPD," I yelled. "Get back to your rooms. They're safer. Do it. Now. Now."

A third blast rang out. I could tell by the spacing that it was a pump-action shotgun. My Glock in front of me, and my bare ass hanging out behind me, I ran through the waiting room and headed toward the sound.

CHAPTER 2

I STEPPED INTO the communal hall. There were six other doctors' offices on that floor, and the door to every one of them was open. People were stampeding in my direction. Four-alarm panic. Whatever they were trying to get away from, I headed toward.

I can think of five other times in my career when I've had to run into a terrified crowd with my gun drawn. Three of those times I was in uniform, and twice in plain clothes with my badge on a chain around my neck. People were always relieved to see me, and the looks on their faces said it all. *Thank God—here comes the cavalry.*

Not this time. This time the reactions were more like, *oh shit—crazy man with a gun.* People either froze in their tracks, screamed, or both. Clearly, I'd have been a much more welcome sight if I had been wearing pants.

"LAPD. Get out, get out," I yelled, hoping that none of them were brave enough to try to tackle me.

I advanced down the hallway, barely looking at faces, just scanning the crowd for a weapon.

And then I saw him step through the center door at the far end of the corridor—white, middle-aged, balding, rimless glasses—hardly menacing, except for the Mossberg Pump-Action shotgun in his right hand.

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“LAPD. Drop the gun,” I bellowed.

He looked at me, dazed.

“LAPD,” I shouted even louder. “Drop the gun. Now.”

The gunman spooked, darted back into the office, and slammed the door behind him. I kicked it open, rolling to the floor as I came through the doorway.

Patients were huddled in corners, looking for protection behind fashionable teak side chairs that wouldn't protect them from a stiff kick, much less a 12-gauge shotgun blast.

“LAPD,” I announced, jumping to my feet and looking in every direction.

A big beefy man closest to the door was acting as a human shield, his arms and body covering the woman beneath him. “In there,” he said in a loud whisper, pointing toward an inside door.

I edged against the wall. All my training said, *wait for backup*. But my instincts said, *no time*. I dropped to a crouch and dove into the room.

The shooter was behind a desk in front of a window, the shotgun in his hand. But he wasn't pointing it at me. The barrel was tucked under his chin, and his right hand was extended all the way, his thumb on the trigger.

“Don't come any closer,” he said.

I stopped cold. I'd had suicide prevention training, but I hadn't put it to use in years. Not only was I rusty, but I'm pretty sure the instructor never covered what to do if there's a dead man in a blood-soaked white coat lying on the floor only a few feet from the man whose life I was now obligated to save.

“I'm not moving,” I said as slowly and calmly as I could. Meanwhile, my brain was racing back to the course material. *Introduce yourself. Give plenty of reassurance.*

“My name is Detective Mike Lomax,” I said. “I'm with LAPD. I'm here to help.”

“Too late, Mike.”

“At least let's talk about it. What's your name?”

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“Calvin Bernstein.”

“Do you mind if I call you by your first name?” I asked.

“Cal. Call me Cal. Where the hell are your clothes?”

“Funny thing about that, Cal,” I said. “I was at my doctor’s office down the hall when—”

“I had no choice,” he said. “I had to do it.”

“Well that’s definitely something we should sit down and talk about.”

I could hear the sirens now. The building had been full of people. I could only imagine how many calls 911 logged since the first shot was fired. Cal heard them too.

“I’m sorry,” he said, starting to sob. “I’m really sorry. I think you should leave now, Mike. You don’t want to see this.”

“Don’t do it, Cal.” I said. “We can work this out.”

“Tell Janice I love her.”

“I have a better idea, Cal. Why don’t you pick up the phone on the desk, call Janice, and tell her yourself. I’m sure she’d much rather hear it from you.”

“You’re right. She would.”

And then he pulled the trigger. Blood, bone and gray matter pelted the walls and the window behind him.

Nothing in my training prepared me for this. I’d only known Calvin Bernstein for the last two minutes of his life, but I took the loss personally. I stood there, stunned, shaking my head in disbelief. “Aww, Cal,” I said. “I thought we were getting somewhere. I thought you were going to call Janice.”

Cal didn’t answer. If he could have, I’m sure it would have been something like, *It’s not like I didn’t warn you, Mike. I told you to leave. I told you that you don’t want to see this.*

Whatever remained of Calvin Bernstein from the neck down had toppled to the floor. He was side by side with his victim, who was sprawled faceup on the rug, his frantic eyes staring blankly at the ceiling. I knelt down to get a closer look.

“Jesus,” I said.

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I knew him. His name was Kristian Kraus, and he was by far the best-known, most beloved fertility doctor in all of Los Angeles. Couples who desperately wanted to have a baby lined up at his door in the hopes that he could help them conceive one of Kristian's miracles.

Five years ago, my wife Joanie and I were one of those desperate couples. We tried every trick in the fertility handbook—stimulating ovulation, collecting sperm, screwing on a schedule. It cost a fortune, but nothing took.

And then, one day, about a year after we started, Dr. Kraus delivered the one thing we never expected—the news that Joanie had ovarian cancer.

Two years later, she died.

A voice came from behind me. It was young, female, and very shaky. "LAPD," she said. "Don't turn around. Just put the gun down nice and easy."

I didn't argue. I lowered my Glock to the floor. "I'm on the job, Officer," I said, not daring to turn around. "Detective Mike Lomax, Hollywood Division, Homicide Unit."

"I don't care who you are. Just stand up real slow, and put your hands in the air where I can see them."

I stood up. My hospital gown with the impossible-to-close slit down the back was embarrassing enough, but when I raised my arms high above my head, the gown hiked up, and the already immodest opening parted like the Red Sea.

I couldn't help myself. I started laughing.

"You think this is funny?" she said.

I looked down at the two bloody corpses on the floor. "Officer, from where I'm standing, nothing is funny, but I'll bet from your point of view, this little tableau has got to be a fucking laugh riot."

CHAPTER 3

AND THEN, A familiar voice. “Don’t shoot him, Officer. He’s one of the good guys.”

“Are you sure?” the cop asked. “You can’t see his face.”

“Are you kidding?” the voice drawled. “I’d recognize that asshole anywhere. He’s my partner.”

“Officer,” I said, “if Detective Biggs has finished making a bad situation worse, can I put my hands down and lower my skirt? I’d like to show a little respect for the dead.”

“Trust me,” Biggs said. “The living will be even more grateful.”

I dropped my arms and turned around. The cop was young, blond, and pretty—not an easy trifecta for a woman trying to get ahead in a male-dominated department. But to her credit, she was the one holding the gun on me.

“Detective Lomax,” she said, holstering her weapon. “I’m sorry. I’ve never seen anything like this. You had a gun. There were two dead bodies. I just—”

“You did fine. What’s your name, Officer?”

“Barclay, sir. Dawn Barclay.”

“This building is about to be inundated with cops, Barclay. Before they come running and gunning, get on the radio and tell them the situation is contained.”

“Yes, sir.”

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“And tell them nobody leaves. Get IDs and hold everyone who hasn’t already bolted until we find out what happened here.”

“Yes, sir,” she said and backed out of the office.

“So,” Biggs said, “apart from the body count, how’d that prostate exam go for you?”

“I managed to get out of it again. Meanwhile, you were parked in front of the building. I figured you’d come running when the first shot was fired. Where the hell were you, anyway?”

“Victoria’s Secret, shopping for peignoirs.”

Terry Biggs wants to be a stand-up comic after he retires from the force. So he’s always on. The problem is, he doesn’t know when to turn it off.

“For God’s sake, Terry, look at this mess. Lighten up on the jokes, will you?”

“I’m not kidding. You said you’d be about thirty minutes. Next week is my anniversary, so I drove over to the mall. I was trying to decide between a lace camisole and a satin baby doll when I heard ‘shots fired’ over the radio. At least give me some credit—I got here in time to save your sorry ass. Not to change the subject, but is that your gun on the floor?”

“Yeah.”

“Don’t bend over. I’ll get it.” He reached down, picked up the Glock, and smelled it. “You didn’t fire your weapon,” he said.

“No. The man on the left is Calvin Bernstein. At least that’s what he told me just before he gave himself a Mossberg Pump-Action facelift. But first he unloaded three rounds into the other guy. Him I know. His name is Kristian Kraus. He was Joanie’s doctor.”

“Holy shit. He was Joanie’s oncologist?”

“No. He’s a fertility specialist. He tried to help us get pregnant, but in the end, all he managed to do was be the one to deliver the bad news.”

“Fertility doc,” Terry said, handing me my gun. “Doesn’t seem like the kind of profession that gets you peppered with a

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12-gauge. You think it was personal?”

“I don’t know. The last thing he said to me before he killed himself was ‘Tell Janice I love her.’”

“Then let’s go find Janice,” Terry said.

“I have a better idea,” I said. “Why don’t you walk over to Heller’s office and find my clothes?”

“Me? I’m a goddamn detective. Send a uniform. Tell Barclay to go get your stuff.”

“Terry, there is no way in hell that I’m asking a hot blond cop to bring me back my pants and underwear,” I said. “You get them.”

“I can’t believe it,” he said. “It took less than ten minutes for me to go from fondling Victoria’s gauzy thongs to retrieving Mike Lomax’s ragtag skivvies.”

He started to leave, stopped, and turned around. “Y’know, as long as you’re dressed for it,” he said, grinning, “are you sure you don’t want to toddle on across the hall and get that pesky prostate exam over and done with?”

“Thanks, but I’ll pass,” I said. “And if you see a guy wearing a white coat and a latex glove with a glob full of K-Y jelly on one finger, tell him to—oh, hell, you’ll think of something—you’re the comedian.”

CHAPTER 4

JESSICA KEATING KNELT over the body of Kristian Kraus and shook her head. “Three shotgun blasts to the chest. Talk about overkill.”

“Don’t judge our shooter too harshly,” Terry said. “It’s still early in the investigation, but I think we’ve established that Mr. Bernstein was not exactly a professional.”

Officer Barclay returned. “Nobody else was hurt,” she reported, “although I’m sure several of the people I interviewed will be upping their Xanax intake for the next few days. Security cameras have the shooter’s Volvo pulling into the parking lot at 1:14 p.m. He sat behind the wheel for eighteen minutes, finally got out, removed a four-foot-long canvas case from the trunk, and entered the building. Three minutes later, all hell broke loose.”

“Any witnesses?” Terry asked.

“A long list, most of whom described a crazy man with a gun running down the hall half-naked, but the doctor’s receptionist had a face-to-face with the shooter. Her name’s Michele Melvin. She’s waiting for you at the front desk.”

I knew Michele. She’d worked for Kraus when Joanie was a patient, and despite the fact that she’d met thousands of infertile couples since then, she recognized me immediately.

“Detective Lomax,” she said, offering me her hand. “I’m so sorry about your wife.”

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“You knew?”

“Dr. Kraus told me. He was very upset.”

I nodded. My pants and my dignity had been restored, but I was still shaky after first staring down the barrel of a Mossberg, and then watching helplessly as Cal Bernstein blew his brains out. Bringing up my dead wife didn't help calm me down. “Can you tell us what happened?” I said.

“The man—the one who shot Dr. Kraus—came in. He was walking fast. He gets to my window and says, ‘I'm meeting my wife, but I desperately need a bathroom before I sign in.’ He's squirming all around like you do when you have to pee real bad, so I buzzed him in.”

She closed her eyes and put her hand to her forehead. Cops see it all the time—an eyewitness reliving a moment of sheer horror that would stay with her for the rest of her life. We waited.

“And then I heard him yell Dr. Kraus's name,” she said, opening her eyes. “Only it was more of a question, like he wanted to make sure he was talking to the right person. Then I heard the first shot, and I went on automatic pilot.”

She looked at me and Terry to make sure we understood. We did, but we let her elaborate.

“I grew up in East LA. You hear gunfire; you take cover. You try to run, and you could wind up running into a bullet. I dove under the desk and prayed until I heard someone say, ‘LAPD. Drop the gun.’ That was you, wasn't it?”

I nodded.

She smiled. “You're the answer to my prayers.”

“Did you know the man who shot him?” Terry asked.

“Never saw him before, but we get new patients all the time. It's the nature of the practice.”

“His name is Calvin Bernstein. See if he's in your records.”

She hesitated.

“What's the matter?” Terry said.

“Dr. Kraus is big on patient confidentiality, but I guess I'm

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allowed to break the HIPAA laws if my boss gets gunned down.”

She searched her computer. “We’ve got six Bernsteins—no Calvins.”

“Try Janice Bernstein,” I said.

She went back to the computer. “Sorry. And nobody named Bernstein had an appointment today.”

“Can you think of any reason anybody would want to kill Dr. Kraus?” I asked.

“No. You knew him, Mike. He dedicated his life to trying to give couples the one thing they wanted most in life.” She pointed to a wall in the waiting room that was covered from floor to ceiling with baby pictures. “And even when they didn’t conceive, he still gave them hope. People loved him.”

“Somebody didn’t,” Terry said. “What can you tell us about his personal life?”

“Married, two kids in college.”

“I’m looking for something a little more personal.”

“You mean did he screw around? My last job, the doc had an affair. You can’t keep that on the down low from the woman who answers your phone and opens your mail. But not Dr. Kraus. He was a good man.”

“I’m sure he was,” Terry said, “and we’re very sorry for your loss.”

She looked away. “Stupid, stupid, stupid,” she said, pounding her desk with the flat of her fist. “I should never have buzzed him in.”

“Michele,” I said, “he came here to shoot Dr. Kraus. If you got in his way, he’d have shot you too.”

She nodded. She knew I was right. It’s just another one of those things you learn growing up on the streets of East LA.

CHAPTER 5

“YOU READY TO go?” Terry asked when we’d finished talking to Michele.

“Almost,” I said. “I’ve just got to make a quick stop at Doug Heller’s office.”

“Good idea. He probably can tell us a few things about the victim. I’ll go with you, partner.”

“Nice try,” I said, “but I can handle this on my own... partner.”

Terry shrugged and headed for the car, and I walked back down the same hallway I raced through an hour ago. Doug’s waiting room was empty, but Nadine was still at the front desk.

She looked up at me, the radiant smile gone, her face drawn in pain. “Mike,” she said, “I wasn’t sure you’d come back. Dr. Heller is in his office.”

Doug was sitting at his desk. When it comes to death, especially something as violent and senseless as the murder of Kristian Kraus, doctors are no different from the rest of us. Doug was shaken to the core.

I sat down across from him. “Was he a friend?” I asked.

“More of a colleague, but one I liked. Hell, everybody liked him. Most docs deal with pain and suffering. If we’re any good, we can make you feel better. Kris helped people make babies.”

“Can you think of any reason why anyone would want to kill him?” I asked for the second time in the space of a few minutes.

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He shook his head. "I've been sitting here trying to come up with an answer, and the only thing I can come up with is that maybe the killer got the wrong doctor."

"He asked for Dr. Kraus by name before he shot him."

"Why, Mike, why?"

"I don't know, but I'm going to find out. I've got a long day ahead of me. I'm going to ask for a rain check on that prostate exam."

He smiled. "No problem," he said. "Especially now that I realize it's not your prostate that's going to kill you. You're more likely to die in a shootout at your doctor's office."

"Thanks." I stood up.

"Not so fast," he said. "I still want Brenda to draw some blood before you go."

"You mind telling me why?"

"I will, but as your primary physician, there's something I have to say first. Next time you hear gunshots, don't go running towards them."

"Sorry, Doc, but that's my job."

"And that, Detective Lomax, is exactly why I'm running these blood tests. Now if you don't tell me how to do my job, I won't tell you how to do yours."

Ten minutes later, I was back in the car with Terry.

It was unseasonably warm for the middle of October, and I had made the mistake of not wearing my jacket.

"What's going on?" he said, pointing to the telltale Band-Aid taped over the vein in my left arm.

"I don't want to talk about it," I said. "With anybody. So don't say anything to Diana about driving me to Doug's office."

"You never told her you were going back for a follow-up?"

"No."

"Why?"

"Because she'd start worrying, and there's nothing to worry about."

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“Well, you better tell her soon, because it’s going to be all over the news that LAPD Detective Mike Lomax was in the doctor’s office with his ass hanging out when the shooting went down.”

He was right. I had to talk to Diana. But first Terry and I had to break the news to two women that they were now widows.

Don't stop now.

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Thank you for supporting my life of crime.

— Marshall Karp