

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 soppressata, 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.

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, showing 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 apologise 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 co-signing 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 shovelled 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, TD. 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 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 unbaptised, 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 misdemeanour 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.

'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 cancelled. 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 OK?'

'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 colourful 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.'

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-blonde 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 neighbourhood. 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 neighbours, 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 neighbourhood? 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.

‘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 OK 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 calibre 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?’

‘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, fibres, 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, blonde, 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.’