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Double Homicide

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It wasn't that Dorothy was nosy. She was going through the backpack because it stank. Five days' worth of rotted food leaked from brown lunch bags – a microbe's dream. After carefully extracting the olfactory offense with her fingertips, she saw something at the bottom, partially buried beneath crumpled papers and textbooks. Just the merest wink of metal, but it spoke to her with malevolence.

Her heart slammed against her chest.

Gingerly, she pushed away the junk on top until the object was completely exposed – a Smith & Wesson revolver, an old one. Taking it out of the knapsack, she examined the weapon. Nicked, scarred, rust around the muzzle. Poorly maintained. Six blank chambers, but that was meager comfort.

Her face registered shock, then the rage set in.

'Spencer!' Her normally deep voice had turned shrill. 'Spencer, get your sorry ass in here right now!'

Her screaming was futile. Spencer was down the block, shooting b-balls in the Y with the gang: Rashid, Armando, Cory, Juwoine, and Richie. The fifteen-year-old had no idea that his mother was home, let alone that she (a) was in his

room, (b) was going through his personal belongings, and (c) had discovered a gun in his book bag. She heard the stairs creak under heavy footsteps. It was her elder son, Marcus. He stood at the doorway to the room like a sentry – hands across his chest, legs spread apart.

'What's going on, Ma?'

Dorothy whirled around and shoved the empty gun in his face. 'What do you know about this?'

Marcus grimaced and took a step backward. 'What are you *doing*?'

'I found this in your brother's backpack!'

'Why are you going through Spencer's backpack?'

'That is not the point!' Dorothy spit out furiously. 'I am his mother and I am your mother and I don't need a reason to go through your backpack or his!'

'Yes, you do,' Marcus countered. 'Our backpacks are personal. There are privacy issues—'

'Well, right now, I don't give a good goddamn about privacy!' Dorothy screamed. 'What do you know about this?'

'Nothing!' Marcus screamed back. 'Nothing at all, okay?'

'No, it's not okay! I find a revolver in your brother's backpack and that's *not* okay, okay?'

'Okay.'

'Damn right okay.' Dorothy's chest was sore and tight, and she gasped for each intake of breath. It was hot and sticky and smelly. The heating in the building was erratic and unreliable, the temperature vacillating between Saharan scorcher and arctic freeze. Unceremoniously, she plunked herself down on Spencer's bed and tried to regain composure. The mattress sagged under her weight. She had a too thick layer of fat, to

be sure, but it did cover a body of strong, steely muscle.

The tiny room was closing in on her: twin beds pressed so close together a nightstand couldn't fit between them. The closet was open and overflowing with T-shirts, sweat-pants, shorts, socks, shoes, books, CDs, videos, and sports equipment. The blinds hadn't been dusted in a month. The boys had a hamper, but dirty clothing was strewn over what little floor space existed. The area was littered with papers, candy wrappers, empty bags and boxes. Why couldn't the boys keep the place at least minimally clean?

Marcus sat next to her and put his arm around her shoulders. 'Are you all right?'

'No, I am not all right!' She knew she was snapping at the wrong person. She was overworked, worn-out, and disillusioned. She dragged her hands over her face. Rubbed her eyes. Forced herself to soften her voice. 'You don't know anything about this?'

'No.'

'Good Lord,' Dorothy said. 'What next?'

Marcus looked away. 'He's going through a rough period—'

'This is more than a rough period!' She clutched the firearm. 'This is illegal and potentially lethal!'

'I know, Ma. It isn't good.' The twenty-one-year-old regarded his mother's face. 'But if you're going to handle it, you can't be hysterical.'

'I'm not hysterical, goddammit. I'm . . . I'm maternal! With maternal concerns!' Again, she snapped, 'Where'd he get this?'

'I have no idea.'

'I suppose I could run it through the system.'

'That's a little extreme, don't you think?'

Dorothy was silent.

'Why don't you talk to him first?' Marcus looked at his mother. 'Talk, Ma. Not scream. Talk.' A pause. 'Or even better, I'll talk—'

'You are not his mother! This is not your job!'

Marcus threw up his hands. 'Fine. Have it your way. You always do.'

Dorothy bolted up, crossing her arms over her chest. 'Just what does that mean?'

'It's self-explanatory.' Marcus kicked his backpack over, then brought it up to his arms by hooking a shoe under a strap and flipping it upward. He rummaged through the contents and took out a book. 'In case you didn't already know, I've got a game tonight plus two hundred pages left in European History. Not to mention I'm doing the morning shift at the library after five-thirty a.m. practice tomorrow. Do you mind?'

'Don't you *sass* me.'

'I'm not sassing anyone, I'm trying to get my work done. Jesus, you're not the only one with obligations.' Marcus got to his feet, then plopped down onto his own bed, nearly breaking the sagging springs. 'Close the door on the way out.'

It was time for Dorothy to reevaluate. She remembered to keep her voice down. 'So what do you think I should do? Just let it go? I'm not going to just let it go, Marcus.'

He put down his book. 'No, I don't think you should let it go. But a little objectivity might help. Pretend he's one of your suspects, Ma. You always brag that you got the soft touch in the department. Use it.'

'Marcus, *why* is Spencer carrying a gun?'

He forced himself to look straight at his mother's eyes. Big brown eyes. Big woman; her no-nonsense cropped kinky hair made her face loom larger. Prominent cheekbones. Lips compressed into a pout. She was a half inch shy of six feet, with big heavy bones, yet she had long and graceful fingers. A beautiful woman who'd earned the right to be respected. 'I know you're worried, but it's probably no big deal. It's a rough world out there. Maybe it makes him feel secure.' He focused in on Dorothy's eyes. 'Doesn't it make *you* feel secure?'

'For me, it's standard equipment, Marcus, not boasting rights. And we're not talking about a cigarette or even marijuana. Guns are killing machines. That's what they do. They kill people. A young boy like that has no business carrying a weapon no matter how threatened he feels. If something's wrong, he should talk to me.'

She eyed her elder son. 'Has he said anything to you?'

'About what?'

'About what's troubling him so bad he feels the need to pack iron.'

Marcus bit his lower lip. 'Nothing specific. Look, if you want, I'll go by the Y and walk him home. But he's going to be pretty pissed that you went through his things.'

'I wouldn't have done it except his book bag was stinking up the place.'

'Yeah, the room does smell like a big fart.' He laughed and shook his head. 'Mama, why don't you go out, catch a quick dinner with Aunt Martha before the game? Or maybe do some Christmas shopping.'

'I don't feel like spending money, and I don't feel like hearing about Martha's GERD.'

'She's just spouting off 'cause you don't say nothing.'

'I talk.'

'You grunt.'

Which was just what she was about to do. She checked it, forced herself calm. 'I'll go get your brother. This is an issue between the two of us, and I have to deal with him. You just concentrate on your studies, okay?'

'Is this going to be loud?'

'It may get . . . emphatic.'

Marcus kissed her cheek and got up from the bed. He threw his heavy down jacket over his shoulder and tucked his textbook under his arm. 'I think I'd be better off at the library. You comin' tonight?'

'Do I ever miss your games?' She stroked his face. 'You need money for dinner?'

'Nah, I still got pocket change from last month's stipend. Wait.' He let his jacket fall to the floor and handed his mother his book. 'I've got coupons.' He sorted through his wallet and took out four slips of paper. Kept one and gave the rest to his mother. 'They were giving these out at practice yesterday.'

Dorothy looked at the scrips: Each was worth up to five dollars of free food. 'Who gave these to you?'

'Local sponsors. They give them away to everyone at the doors. God forbid the NCAA should think we're getting a freebie.' He shook his head. 'Man, a crummy coupon is the least they could do for exploiting us. Last week's game was a sellout. Because of Julius, of course. He's the star. We're just the sideshow – his own personal valets. Asshole!'

'Don't swear.'

'Yeah, yeah.'

Dorothy felt a pang of maternal defensiveness. 'That boy couldn't do nothing without the rest of you feeding him perfect shots.'

'Yeah, you try and tell the hog that b-ball is a team sport. If me or anyone else says anything to Coach, Julius gets mad and next thing I know I'm out on my ass. And there're like three hundred homies waiting in the wings, thinking that Boston Ferris is their ticket to the NBA. Not that it's bad to dream . . .' He sighed. 'Shit, I dream.'

Tenderness welled inside her breast. Dorothy said, 'There are dreams, Marcus, and there are pipe dreams. Like I always tell you, a good sports agent with a Harvard law degree can make lots of money without killing his back and knees and being a washout at thirty.'

'Yeah, yeah.'

'You're not listening.'

'I'm listening, it's just . . .' The young man scratched his head. 'I don't know, Ma. I fall for it the same as everyone else. I've got the dream. But I also know reality. I'm trying to live in both worlds, but I just can't keep going at this pace. Something's gonna give.'

Dorothy threw her arms around her son. 'I know you love the game, Marcus. I love the game, too. And I would never be the one to want to spoil your dream, but I just want what's best.'

'I know you do, Ma. And I also know the Ivy law schools just love the big black boys with good test scores and the high GPAs. I know I'd be a jerk to blow this kind of opportunity.

Still, you think about things.' His eyes became distant and unfocused. 'It's all right. When the time comes, I'll do the right thing.'

Dorothy kissed her son's cheek. 'You always do.'

'Yes, that's true.' He paused. 'Good old reliable Marcus.'

'Stop that!' Dorothy frowned. 'You've been given gifts from the good Lord. Don't be an ingrate.'

'Absolutely.' Marcus slipped on the jacket and tossed his backpack over his shoulder. 'I know where I come from. I know where you came from, Mama. I know how hard you work. I don't take anything for granted.'

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different: Katz smiled and said, 'Hey, Loretta, what's up?'

Then his face grew serious, and the big, copper-wire mustache drooped. 'Oh . . . Yeah, sure . . . Where? . . . You're kidding.'

He hung up. 'Guess what, Big D?'

Darrel chomped on his burger, swallowed. 'Serial killer.'

'Half correct,' said Katz. 'Just a killer. Blunt-force homicide on Canyon.'

Canyon Road was very high-rent, just east of the Plaza in the Historic District, a narrow, leafy, quiet, *pretty* place lined with gated compounds and galleries and expensive cafes. The hub of Santa Fe's art scene.

Darrel's pulse rate quickened from forty to fifty. 'Private residence, right? Not a gallery at this hour.'

'Oh, a gallery, amigo,' said Katz, standing and sliding into the ratty gray coat. 'Very much a gallery. The d.b.'s Larry Olafson.'

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cooking in the back room. Katz had cracked up, his big red mustache rising and falling. This month, another team was handling narcotics.

Katz studied the number on the pager and said, 'Dispatch.' A bit more fumbling in another pocket and he produced his little blue cell phone.

Another meal cut short. Two Moons ate fast as Katz called in. He'd ordered as close to normal as possible at this loony bin: a mushroom burger with chipotle-spiced home fries and sliced tomatoes. Specifying no sprouts, but they'd stuck a tumbleweed of the stuff on his plate anyway. Darrel hated it; it reminded him of cattle fodder. Or something picked out of a comb. Just looking at it made him want to spit. He removed it and wrapped it in a napkin, whereupon Katz immediately grabbed it and snarfed it down.

If it were up to Katz, they'd be here every night. Darrel conceded that the food was consistently good, but atmosphere was another issue. With its snaky walkway embedded with pebbles and shards of mirror glass, antiwar petitions tacked to the Technicolor walls of the tiny entry, and cell-like rooms full of mismatched thrift shop furniture and incense fumes, Karma was what his gunnery sergeant father used to call 'hippie-dippie left-wing lunacy crap.'

Somewhere along the way, his father had changed, but Darrel's army-brat upbringing stuck with him. Give him a burger and plain old fries in politically neutral surroundings.

Katz reached dispatch. The office had been moved out of Santa Fe PD to the county building on Highway 14. Police, fire, city, county, everything integrated, and most of the dispatchers were no longer familiar voices. But this time was

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At least the weirdos who ran Cafe Karma kept the dive warm. Downright hot. A big and tall kind of guy to begin with, Darrel was drowning in clothing, sweating in his black wool shirt and black tie, black corduroy sports coat, and heavy black gabardine slacks tailored in Germany and inherited from his father. His quilted black ski jacket was draped over a horribly hand-painted chair, but he kept the sports coat on to conceal the department-issue .45 in its X-harnessed, cowhide shoulder holster. No problem hiding his unauthorized boot gun, a nickel-plated .22. It nuzzled his calf, snug in his left, custom-stitched, elephant-hide Tony Lama.

Katz had on what he'd worn every night since the weather had turned: a fuzzy brown and white plaid Pendleton shirt over a white cotton turtleneck, faded blue jeans, black and white high-top sneakers. Over his chair was that ratty gray wool overcoat. Pure New *Yawk*. How could he keep his feet warm in those Keds?

Two Moons sipped coffee and ate his dinner as Katz finally freed the now-silent pager. Over by the pastry case, the multipierced Goth waitress who'd served them stood gazing into space. She'd taken their order with vacant eyes, then had proceeded to the coffee machines, where the detectives watched her spend six straight minutes foaming Katz's Green Tea Chai Latte. Six and a half, to be precise: the detectives had timed her.

Staring into the foam, like it held some kind of big cosmic secret.

Darrel and Katz had exchanged knowing glances, then Two Moons had muttered under his breath about what was really

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Darrel Two Moons and Steve Katz were having a late dinner at Cafe Karma when the call came in. The restaurant was Katz's choice. Again. Two Moons watched his partner put aside his Eden-Yield Organic Lamb Plus Eclectic Veggie Burrito with great reluctance and fiddle in his pocket for his chirping pager.

It was just after ten-thirty p.m. Probably another south side domestic violence. For five weeks running, Darrel and Katz had worked the four p.m. to two a.m. Special Investigations shift. Their calls had consisted of feuding spouses, gang assaults, various and sundry alcohol-related issues, all taking place below St Michael's – the Mason-Dixon Line that split Santa Fe and was more than an arbitrary map squiggle.

It was three weeks before Christmas, and the first few days of December had signaled an easy winter, with day-time temperatures in the forties. But four days ago, the weather had taken a drop: fifteen degrees Fahrenheit at night. The snow that had fallen during this serious drought year remained white and fluffy. The air was cold and biting. Their shift was one big freezer burn.