

THE RIGHT WRONG THING

Also by Ellen Kirschman

Fiction: Dot Meyerhoff Series

Burying Ben

Nonfiction:

Counseling Cops: What Clinicians Need to Know
(with Mark Kamena and Joel Fay, 2014)

I Love a Cop: What Police Families Need to Know
(first edition 1997, revised edition 2007)

I Love a Fire Fighter: What The Family Needs to Know (2004)

THE RIGHT WRONG THING

A Dot Meyerhoff Mystery

ELLEN KIRSCHMAN

 **Oceanview Publishing**
Longboat Key, Florida

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FIRST EDITION

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ISBN: 978-1-60809-154-6

Published in the United States of America by Oceanview Publishing
Longboat Key, Florida

www.oceanviewpub.com

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

*To the men and women of law enforcement
Thank you for your service*

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I was a police psychologist long before I started writing mysteries. Police work is a tough calling. I have counseled cops who feel guilty for something they've done and cops who feel guilty for something they didn't do. I'm indebted to every one of them for sharing their stories and inspiring me to write.

I am grateful to have so many friends, cops, and colleagues to cheer me on. Special thanks go to Sheriff's Deputy Harriet Fox, police psychologists Phil Trompetter, Joel Fay, and Mark Kamena, my colleagues at the Psychological Services Section of the International Association of Chiefs of Police, and the dedicated staff at the First Responder Support Network (FRSN). FRSN is truly a haven for first responders with post-traumatic stress injuries.

My agent, Cynthia Zigmund of Second City Publishing, has been a calm and reassuring presence. Without her keen eye and writerly guidance, this book would still be looking for a home. Pat and Bob Gussin of Oceanview Publishing have welcomed me with enthusiasm. I know I am in good hands. My husband, Steve Johnson, reads my work and manages my life. Without him, there would be no laughter, no laundry, and no lunch.

THE RIGHT WRONG THING

PROLOGUE

Randy Alderson Spelling looks more like a girl than a woman. So tiny she's nearly lost in the cushions of my office couch. Her legs jut out over the floor until she scoots forward and places her feet squarely on the ground, leaving a foot of space behind her. She waits for me to start, all the while pulling on her fingers, cracking each tiny knuckle. I'm the last hurdle between her and the job she covets—police officer for the Kenilworth Police Department. She's aced the entire gamut of challenges: a background check that combed over all twenty-four years of her life; a medical examination; tests of reading, writing, and judgment; officer interviews; agility tests; and an interview with Acting Chief Jay Pence. Now she's down to me, the department psychologist. I'm looking into the nooks and crannies of her emotional stability now that she's received a conditional offer of employment from Pence; conditional, that is, upon my finding her free of any psychological conditions that would prevent her from fulfilling the role of police officer.

Pence wants this woman on the force. He's made that clear with his slightly overreaching and out-of-character enthusiasm. The truth is, women officers haven't done well at KPD. None of the four women who were hired before my time worked out. One got pregnant and never returned from maternity leave. Another woman's husband was promoted and the family moved to New York. A third decided to go to law school, and the fourth was flushed out of the field-training program after she totaled a police car. Pence needs women on the force. KPD is the only department in the county with no female officers, something the

female-majority city council finds unacceptable. And since he's in contention for the chief's job, making nice with the city council is not just preferable, it's a necessity.

All of which is his problem, not mine. My job is to make sure this candidate has what it takes, psychologically, to be a cop, and given the results of her psych tests, she seems to fill the bill. All she needs now is to complete my interview and she's on her way to the police academy. At this point, it would be rare for her or any applicant to flunk the interview process, but it happens. The person and the paper avatar are sometimes not the same, which is why state law requires me to do interviews and not just rely on the results of the candidate's written tests.

When Randy showed up a week ago to take the battery of tests I administer, she had long silky hair. Today her hair is cut into a short spiky cap, pixie style with little points and wisps. No fuss, no muss, nothing for a bad guy to grab. I take this new hairstyle as an expression of her confidence that I'm going to give her a green light. And, as far as I can see, she's probably right. She seems like an excellent candidate. Psychologically stable, good impulse control, no problems with anger, not excessively vulnerable to stress or substance abuse, extraverted, and optimistic. Born into a law enforcement family, she was a star athlete in high school, completed college with a 3.0 and recently married her high school sweetheart who is a sheriff's deputy.

We go through the usual questions about why she wants to be a cop, and I get the usual answers—to make a difference in her community and to help people.

"And your family? How do they feel about you being a police officer?"

"They're all in law enforcement, except my mom. She worries about me, of course. But growing up with my brothers, she knows I can take care of myself."

"Tough being the little sister?" I ask.

"A little."

I take her candor as a sign that she isn't afraid to admit to

some weakness which suggests that she might be willing to get help if she ever needs it and—being a cop—it’s fairly certain that she will. Sometime, somewhere, she’ll run into something or someone that will give her nightmares. The sooner she talks about it, the better off she’ll be.

“You know what they say, good things come in little packages, so does poison.” She smiles and then winces when she realizes that I’m as short as she is, and I’m not laughing. “What I mean is I gave it back as good as they gave it, which is why I know I can handle a bad guy. Not that I’d be aggressive, hit somebody for no reason or anything like that.” I let her trip over her own words for another minute to see where this leads and when she stops digging herself into a hole I move to my next question.

“Your husband is a deputy sheriff. How does he feel about you becoming a cop?”

She looks to the ceiling, gathering her thoughts, careful to take this question more seriously. She’s worried that I’ve taken offense at her spontaneous little joke. To the contrary, I’m finding her rather delightful, although I can’t show it.

“We talked about it for a long time. He knows it’s what I’ve wanted to do forever. I mean, my father and brothers are all in law enforcement. How could I not be? What we agreed was that we wouldn’t work in the same department, that we’d try to work similar shifts so we could see each other more, and that we wouldn’t bring work home. Think that makes sense, Doc?”

I’m tempted to dig deeper, probe the concern behind her question. Police marriages are complicated—too many variables. It works well for some and for others it’s double trouble, two overly stressed people living life in a fishbowl.

Anyhow, this isn’t therapy, this is a pre-employment screening interview, and I have strict guidelines to follow. Any conversation beyond the purpose of determining her stability is strictly off limits.

“I think we’ll be okay. I know we will. Rich and I have known each other since high school. We read each other like

books. I helped him study when he was going through the academy: I made flash cards, tested him on his ten codes. I even let him put me in handcuffs.” A pink flush brightens her face. Some association between handcuffs and sex or domestic abuse. She shifts a little further forward. “Now he can help me. We’re a team.”

Mark and I were a team once. We studied together, wrote together, taught together, and practiced together. The only thing he did without me was fall in love with his psychology intern. And then he divorced me, married her, and had the child he never wanted us to have together. I shake my head to loosen the clutch of old memories.

“We’re just about through. Do you have any questions for me?”

“Did I pass?”

“I’ll have my report in forty-eight hours. As you know, I have no decision-making authority—all I do is recommend, thumbs up or thumbs down. The final decision belongs to Acting Chief Pence.” Her shoulders sag a little at yet another impediment. “But you’ll be relieved to know that I’m going to give you a thumbs up. Congratulations.”

“Really?”

“Yes, really.”

She closes her fist, pumps her arm in the air and whispers “yes” dragging the esses out in a long hiss. I imagine she’d rather jump up and shout, but given the formality of the situation she shows admirable restraint and an appropriate reading of the social context.

I stand. She stands. We shake hands. “You have no idea how much this means to me. I’ve wanted this all my life. Being a cop is my dream come true.” She shakes my hand again. “Thanks, Doctor,” she says, “I promise. You won’t be sorry.”

CHAPTER ONE

“The trouble with women in policing is men.” Jacqueline Reagon says this without a trace of animus in her voice. “I’ve had to compete with men at every rank right up to chief. Men only have to be as good as each other. I’ve had to be better.” The men on the city council look uncomfortable. The women are beaming. “If you select me as chief, I can assure you that the Kenilworth Police Department will be a place where competent women can succeed without hindrance or harassment. I’ve moved two organizations from cowboy cultures to community policing by rewarding interpersonal skills and problem solving, as much, if not more, than acts of physical prowess or daring, which, until I became chief, were the only activities that counted.” She speaks in a low, slow monotone, letting the impact of her words settle over the room. Even sitting down, she is taller than Jay Pence. And certainly less handsome. I wince at my own sexism, how easy it is to judge a woman on her looks, not her competence.

“Thank you, Chief Reagon,” the mayor says. “Now we’ll have a chance to hear from Acting Chief Pence about his plans for hiring women.” The mayor smiles warmly at everyone as though hosting a party. He owns an insurance agency and, like the other men on the council, his service to the city is motivated by his business interests. The newly elected councilwomen are a different matter. They mean business and are determined to move Kenilworth out of its coddled, self-congratulatory existence into the real world, half of whom are women.

Jay Pence walks to the front of the room as the streetlights

come on, lighting the windows behind the council members' seats. We've been in special session for more than two hours putting these final two candidates through their paces. It's taken months to winnow down the list of applicants to replace former Chief Bob Baxter, the perfect narcissist cum sociopath who's off somewhere in the Middle East making tons of money providing executive security to Arab oil magnates, unmoved by the lives he wrecked, or nearly wrecked, including mine.

Jay Pence coughs and smiles. His teeth are unnaturally white and even. "I've done a great deal to rectify the embarrassment caused by my predecessor, especially in the area of bringing women into the department. I'm proud, very proud, of the fact that I hired Officer Randy Alderson Spelling. She is, as I predicted, literally sailing through field training and is almost finished with probation."

I went to Randy's badge-pinning ceremony. Rich, her husband, was all thumbs trying to pin her badge on straight and she was all smiles. Same for field training: nothing but smiles and high marks from her trainers. "I love this job so much I'd do it for free," she said, when she finished training. And then she disappeared into the night. Rookies always get the dog watch, 10:00 p.m. to 6:00 a.m. A younger psychologist might be willing and able to ride along in the middle of the night just to stay in touch with the troops, but I need my sleep.

"I admire Chief Reagon's persistence and know her reputation for changing organizational culture." Pence turns and smiles in Reagon's direction. "I am happy to say that I have encountered no resistance bringing Officer Spelling on board at Kenilworth PD. The police association was very supportive, as they are for my candidacy." There is a smattering of applause from a group of officers in the audience.

"Bringing women into law enforcement is a priority for me. I wrote a paper on the topic for my class at the FBI National Academy. You can read it if you want; it's a good antidote for insomnia." He laughs again. "It is also the subject of my thesis for my

masters in public administration, when and if things slow down enough for me to complete it.”

Jacqueline Reagon bends to her microphone. “Pardon my interrupting, but if I may, I’d like to ask Acting Chief Pence why he thinks women make good police officers?” Her question, so simple and unexpected, seems to throw Pence off. His hand moves to his silky, perfectly combed, prematurely white hair, as if to ruffle it, and then drops to his side. I prefer shaggy men, like Frank—the way his gray hair curls at the base of his neck when he needs a haircut, the brushy feel of his beard on my face. I feel a rising flush, perimenopause or flashes of desire—it’s hard to tell anymore.

“Women are good with children. They have good communication skills. They have a natural affinity for caretaking that is very helpful with domestic violence victims.”

Chief Reagon rises from her seat. She is plain as a nun in her navy suit and white nylon shell. The only jewelry she wears is a silver watch. “I congratulate Chief Pence for trying to do the right thing, although, in my opinion, hiring one woman doesn’t come close to what this department requires. And, in fact, it puts a great deal of pressure on that particular woman. It’s critical to have a deep understanding of the contributions women can make to law enforcement. Without it, we risk exploiting a social trend for our own means.” Jay Pence’s cheeks are tinged with red. Despite her diplomatic use of the editorial “we,” Chief Reagon is looking directly at him.

“As Chief Pence said, women have excellent communication skills. Police work involves physical aggression only ten percent of the time.” She shifts her body toward the council. “Women are more likely to defuse an explosive situation by talking someone down and less likely to act aggressively when they are challenged. This is not to say women cannot or will not respond aggressively when needed. They will go to the mat to protect their safety, or the safety of others. Whereas male officers are more likely to respond aggressively because of their egos or their need to exercise control.”

Pence is still standing, but all eyes are on Chief Reagon.

“Women are also at an advantage in undercover work, because they are unexpected. And research suggests they may be more stress resistant because they will seek help in a timely fashion and are less prone to alcoholism.”

She sits down and then immediately stands back up.

“Law enforcement is and will remain a male-dominated profession for years to come. If women are to become a meaningful statistical presence in law enforcement, rather than tokens, special consideration must be paid to their recruitment and retention, including maternity policies, of which I can find none in the general orders. If Kenilworth is ready—and I think it is judging from the support on the council—then there is no better way to recruit women to the work force than to have a woman as top cop showing, in a highly visible manner, that women have a future in the Kenilworth Police Department and a leader who has walked in their shoes.”

A week later, an announcement appears in the newspaper and on the bulletin board outside the briefing room. “Kenilworth Police welcomes its first ever female police chief. Her tenure to begin the first week of October.” The following day, the chief’s secretary removes a handmade sign pinned to the new chief’s office door. Someone has blown up the announcement of her appointment. Written across it in large red letters is the message “Welcome C-U-N-T.”

Within a week, Jay Pence is back in his old captain’s office. I can smell fresh paint as soon as I turn the corner. Jay and his wife have apparently come in over the weekend and redecorated. I wonder if his new decorating theme is masking a grand sulk. On the other hand, he has suffered a huge disappointment and public humiliation. So what if he pours his feelings into a can of paint? He deserves to comfort himself however he can.

Pence looks up from his desk and sees me standing in the

doorway. “Looks good, doesn’t it? The wife helped me. She’s got the touch. What can I do for you?”

“How are you doing?”

“Great.”

He doesn’t ask me in. I put my briefcase on the floor. “Mind if I sit?”

“Help yourself.”

“I know you had your sights set on being chief. You’ve worked really hard for the position.”

“The council made its decision. I can live with it. If I can’t, I can always apply to be chief somewhere else. I’ve worked for Kenilworth PD my whole career. Always planned to retire from here. But if the atmosphere changes, I’ll reconsider my options.”

“Have you had a chance to talk to Chief Reagon?”

“She’s quite a lady. Very gracious. Wants us to work as a team. I need to give it a little time. In the meanwhile, I’ll do my job like I always do.” He stands up. “I appreciate your concern. People have been dropping by all day. My voice mail and in-box are filled. I didn’t realize I had so much support.” This isn’t surprising to me. The police association publicly endorsed him and campaigned hard for his selection. Better the devil you know than the one you don’t.

“Thanks for dropping by.” He extends his hand and for the first time since I’ve been here, he smiles. “Don’t worry about me, Doc. I’m good to go.” And before bending his head to his paperwork, he winks at me—a big, theatrical wink that crinkles up his left cheek and pulls at the side of his mouth.

Frank turns over and nuzzles the back of my neck. Outside my window the afternoon light has turned dusky and dark. October in California is usually warm and bright. But this year—courtesy of climate change—we’ve had an early winter. Damp and unseasonably cold. I light the candle that I keep next to my bed.

“Nice appetizer; what’s in store for dinner?” he asks, stretching

over me, reaching for his glass of wine on the bed stand. “How come you’re on my side of the bed?” he asks.

When did it get to be his side? We’ve grown close in the past year, but not close enough for him to lay claim to half my bed. At our age, Frank thinks we don’t have time to waste. There’s some truth to that. These days I look better dressed than naked and certainly more appealing from the front than the rear. There’s a new bouquet of broken capillaries on my left calf and in the dim light, my upper arms are starting to look like driftwood. Frank challenges me wrinkle for wrinkle, shows me his liver spots and says he’s going to get drunk and have them tattooed together with a Celtic chain. I don’t find this funny.

On the other hand, Frank has filled the hole in my heart left by my ex-husband, Mark. I hardly think about him or his child bride Melinda and their baby Milo anymore. I feel only a hollow victory that he has surrendered his license as a psychologist after being charged with healthcare fraud. Never pays to have your unlicensed wife do your pre-employment evaluations, then sign and bill for them as though they were your own. I hear via the grapevine that Melinda is still beseeching the Psychology Examining Committee to let her sit for her license. Until her case is resolved, she’s a stay-at-home mom.

Frank strokes my arms with a lascivious touch and yanks me back into the present.

“I’m hungry,” he says. “Food, woman.”

“I was hoping to tire you out so you wouldn’t want to eat.”

“I’ve worked up an appetite. I have to keep my strength up for the likes of you, you know.”

“That’s not all you need to keep up,” I say.

He pushes me out from under the covers toward the shower and leans against the headboard. Candlelight blurs the lines on his face, and I can see the resemblance between the shaggy, bearded, silver-haired man in my bed and the young Navy lieutenant J.G.—tall, thin, black-haired, and clean-shaven—who hangs in a gold frame on the wall over the desk in his office. I turn on the

water and wait for it to get hot. Frank has promised to install an instant hot something-or-other so I don't waste water. Hot showers are my vice, along with popcorn and red wine.

My phone rings before the water gets hot. Frank whacks me on the rear and steps past me into the shower stall, singing under his breath. It is Raylene, chief communications supervisor at KPD. She comes right to the point with no hello and no apology for calling me on a Saturday. "We have an officer down. It's a cluster. We're going to need you at University hospital, Code 3. Hold on." I can hear talking in the background. The dispatchers' normally calm voices sound high pitched and strained. Bad things aren't supposed to happen in upscale suburbs like Kenilworth where every other house is owned by a lawyer, a doctor, or a university professor. Bad things belong on the other side of the freeway in East Kenilworth, home to a working-class population of Hispanics and Pacific Islanders. People like that are known to get drunk and belligerent, while people like us—white and educated—commit our crimes behind closed doors or in our offices. Raylene comes back on the phone.

"Is anyone hurt?" I ask.

"Wish I could tell you. They're stepping all over each other on the radio. All I know is someone's on the way to the hospital. Let's hope it's the bad guy." She disconnects without another word.

I start pulling on clothes as Frank comes out of the shower, dripping and smiling. "I have to go." I mean it as an apology, but it comes out like an announcement.

The look on his face is part disappointment, part irritation.

"A cop's been hurt. I don't know any details or when I'll be back."

He shakes his head and bends to give me a quick kiss. "You wait. Someday one of my clients is going to have an emergency in the middle of the night, and I'll have to leave you naked, cold, and hungry."

"Will it be a burned-out light bulb or a busted pipe?"

“Something like that.” He smiles. “You Ph.D. types aren’t very handy, you know.” He gives me a hug. “Should I wait for you? Not good to come home to a cold bed.”

My chest tightens. I don’t want him to stay here alone. Not that I don’t trust him, I do. It just feels too soon—like we’re living together in two different houses.

“Don’t wait,” I say. “I could be gone a long time.”

CHAPTER TWO

There are two police cars on the edge of the hospital parking lot, parked driver's door to driver's door—the officers watching each other's back, wary of a nosy supervisor or worse, a bad guy looking to assassinate an inattentive cop. I drive past and wave. They look up, eyes wide, as though they are doing something wrong. This is the look I always get from the cops, even after a year. It's as though they think I keep a mini-cam in my bra sending a minute-by-minute feed to the chief's office.

A fire engine and a medic van are parked at odd angles in front of the entrance to the hospital emergency room. I park in the visitors' lot and walk down a long sidewalk to the door. Everything is quiet except for the fall leaves crunching underfoot. The big glass doors slide open as I approach. I step through onto a sound stage flooded with light and moving people. This is a teaching hospital; the medical personnel hardly look old enough to have graduated high school. They move quickly and quietly, dressed in pajama-like clothes and Day-Glo rubber clogs. If it weren't for the stethoscopes and name tags, I would be hard pressed to tell the patients from the personnel.

A harried-looking receptionist asks for my identification and then directs me to a private waiting room for cops only. Cops and ER staff are part of the same team and accord each other professional courtesies. Romantic liaisons between ER nurses and cops are common—after all, who else is up in the middle of the night? And who better to understand the pace and pressure of working a high-stress job. I walk down a short hall and through a door marked “private.” The room is jammed with

cops, most in uniform, some in street clothes. There is a low hum in the room that stops momentarily when I open the door. For a second, all eyes are on me and then they drop.

“We thought you were the ER doctor. We’re waiting for him.” Manny Ochoa steps out from behind the open door. He’s wearing jeans and a police department t-shirt. I’m not supposed to have favorites, but I do, and Manny is it. He stood up for me, believed in me, almost lost his job because of me, after his fellow rookie, Ben Gomez, committed suicide, and everyone, myself included, blamed me for his death. Manny’s matured into a confident, skillful officer, and I feel a special bond with him that I don’t feel with the others. He owes me nothing. I owe him, but in his quiet way, I get the sense he’s still keeping his eye on me.

“What’s going on? Who’s hurt?” I ask.

“Tom Rutgers. We don’t how badly. We’re waiting for the ER doc to tell us.”

“What happened?”

“Rutgers and Randy Spelling were doing a welfare check on some homeless guys fighting down by the creek. There’s an embankment. Rutgers went down first because some guy was laying on the ground, looked like he was unconscious. Spelling held the perimeter. All of a sudden this guy’s up and on Rutgers with some kind of a sword, caught him in the neck and the arm. Rutgers yelled for help and—I don’t exactly know what happened—but somebody said Rutgers said Spelling froze. He kept yelling for her. She finally got on the radio and called for help then ran down the hill. But by this time, the wacko’s friends are jumping in, trying to grab Rutgers’ gun. Spelling jumped on the pile, but somebody pulled her off and then she disappeared. Rutgers doesn’t know what happened next.”

The door to the waiting room opens, and the ER doc steps in. He’s a tall, muscular man in green scrubs with a surgical mask pulled up over his forehead on top of dusty gray hair. All eyes are on him, appraising, measuring. He has the stature of a man cops can respect. Everyone falls quiet. The doctor gives a broad smile.

“Okay, guys. Sit down. Officer Rutgers is going to be fine. He’s one lucky guy. The cut to his neck missed the vital arteries and caught muscle that I sewed up with an eye to his future. He’s a good-looking dude and now he’s going to be even more of a magnet for the ladies who are all going to want to know how he got such a beautiful scar.”

“He’s already fighting the women off, Doc,” somebody says from the back.

“He’s going to have to fight harder now.” The doctor grins, supremely confident, enjoying the high-level locker room banter. “I’m going to keep him overnight, just to be sure. All the rest of his wounds are superficial and don’t require suturing. There are no internal injuries. He’s got a broken finger.”

“The middle one, I bet,” someone shouts.

“Which I splinted. Other than that, I think he’s good to go. He’s in good shape to start with, that always helps. A couple of you can see him; not all of you. He’s in Room six. Don’t stay long. He’s tired, as you can imagine, and we gave him some pain meds, so he’s going to get real sleepy in about twenty minutes. Any questions?”

“Yes,” I say. “What about Officer Spelling?”

I can hear a low rumble behind me.

The doctor shakes his head. “If there was another officer who was injured, I haven’t seen him.”

“Her,” I say.

He raises his eyebrows. “I don’t know what to say. Check with the receptionist. The medic van only brought in one officer.”

* * *

We file out of the waiting room, heading in different directions. Out in the cool night a small group of officers have stopped to talk at the edge of the parking lot under a bower of old oak trees, their voices rising in the quiet.

“Anyone seen the chief?”

“Where’s Spelling?”

“Whoa. Don’t go there.” There is laughter and more comments I can’t hear for the laughing. “The chief should pick on someone her own size.”

“There is no one her own size. The broad is an Amazon.” More laughter. In the weak yellow light from the streetlamps I can see Jay Pence’s silky silver hair. The champion of women is laughing it up like one of the boys.

I turn back to the hospital. I don’t want to walk by them to get to my car, hear them go silent until I pass, and then start in again, maybe talking about me, maybe not. It’s eight-thirty. I feel a stab of regret that I didn’t tell Frank to wait for me. I’m not looking forward to walking into a quiet, dark house. I think about calling him at his house, driving over, and spending the night. But I’d have to stop home first for a change of clothes and my pills. The last thing I want is a menopausal pregnancy. I walk back into the glare of the hospital. Truth is, the closer I get to Frank, the more I push him away. And the more I push him away, the more I want him closer.

Room 6 is near the emergency room, some kind of temporary holding for overnight patients. Two officers pass me on the way out, so engaged in conversation they don’t notice me standing by the door. I push it open. The room is dark, except for the neon blinking of a gaggle of machines. A young blond woman is sitting next to the bed, stroking Rutgers’ arm. He appears to be asleep. She turns when she hears the door move. Despite her tear-swollen eyes, she is pretty.

“You bitch, get out of here. You almost got him killed.”

“Excuse me. I’m Dr. Dot Meyerhoff, the department psychologist.”

She clasps her hands to her mouth. “I am so sorry. I thought you were Randy Spelling.”

I could take this as a compliment. Randy Spelling is at least twenty-five years my junior, and while we’re both about five feet

tall, with short hair, hers is brown with blond streaks and mine is salt and pepper, with an emphasis on the salt.

“How’s he doing?” I approach the bed. Rutgers is sleeping deeply.

“Okay, I guess.”

“And you? How are you doing?”

The blinking lights turn her tears to alternating streaks of pink and green. “When they called me, I thought he was dead. I’ve never been so scared in my life. I can’t stop shaking. He’s alive, but I can’t stop thinking that he could have been killed.” Both hands cover her face, little ragged pieces of tissues cling to her fingers.

“That’s why I’m here. I’ll be talking to Tom and to you about what’s happened, how it may affect you in the future and what you can do about it.” I take a business card out of my pocket and put it on the bedside table. “I’ll be in touch.” This is something I learned from Ben—it’s on me to pursue an injured officer, not wait for the officer to call me. “First things first, Mrs. Rutgers—Tom needs to rest and recover from his physical wounds.”

She looks at me and dabs at her eyes. I see in the dim light that they are bright blue. “We’re not married. I’m his girlfriend. My name is MaryAnne Forester.” She extends her hand. “You’re the lady who wrote the book about police families, right?” I nod. “I read it, but I skipped the scary parts. I didn’t think we’d need them.”

It’s almost nine o’clock. I haven’t gone to the bathroom since I got to the hospital, which must be a record for me. These days, I never pass a restroom that I don’t need. I open the door. There is a pair of booted feet in the last stall. For a moment I think I’ve walked into the men’s room by mistake until I hear someone crying.

“Randy, is that you?” I call through the door. The toilet flushes.

“It’s Dr. Meyerhoff.”

“I’m okay.”

“Are you hurt? Do you need a doctor?”

“No.”

She’s still in the stall by the time I exit mine and wash my hands.

“Randy, please come out. I’ll wait for you.”

“I’m fine, really. I just want to be alone.” She flushes a second time.

“You can’t lock yourself in the bathroom forever. People are looking for you.” She makes no response. “If you’re worried about Tom, I just saw him. He’s going to be fine. He’s got a cut on the neck, a broken finger, and some bruises. They’re keeping him overnight only as a precaution and they’re going to release him tomorrow. He’s okay. Really.”

The door to her stall swings open. She’s in full uniform, her tiny frame made more boyish by the chest-flattening effect of the bulletproof vest she’s wearing under her shirt. She looks worse than Tom Rutgers’ girlfriend. Her swollen eyes are red-rimmed and crusty.

“From what I heard, you’ve had a rough night.”

“What else did you hear?” She has her back to me now, dabbing at her eyes with a wet paper towel, watching me in the mirror at the same time. “Did they tell you I froze, that I got bounced on my butt? Did they tell you Rutgers told me to pull my gun and I didn’t?”

“You don’t have to defend yourself to me. I’m not going to second guess any of your decisions.”

“I should have used my Taser.”

“With a pile of people rolling on the ground, wouldn’t you have risked hitting Tom?” She pitches the wadded-up towel into the trash can with perfect aim. “I’m not trying to make you feel better. Your memory of what happened and Tom’s memory of what happened won’t be the same. Memory degrades under extreme stress. Give yourself forty-eight hours to settle down before you start judging yourself. Get some sleep.”

“I let everyone down.” She bends over the sink. The tap water runs over her hair and her neck, mixing with her tears. When she stands up, tears and water drip on the floor and streak down her uniform.

“I was so close.”

“Close to Tom?”

“No, close to finishing probation.” She mops at her hair with a towel and then separates the strands with her fingers, pulling spikes of hair into a cap. “Now they can fire me and they don’t need a reason. Although being a coward is a pretty good reason.”

“You are getting way ahead of yourself. Let’s talk this over in my office. My private office on Catalan Court, not my office at the PD.”

“Do I have to?” She wets a fresh towel, folds it carefully into a small square, and holds it over her eyes, one at a time.

“Sorry, department policy. You and Tom are both required to see me following a critical incident.”

She turns around. “How do I look?”

“Fine. Where are you going?”

“Back to work. I have a report to write.” She hoists her heavy leather belt around her tiny waist and throws her shoulders back. “After I hand in my report I’m going 10/8, back in service.”

“Randy. That’s crazy. You’ve just been through a very dangerous incident. You should go home.” She opens the door to the hallway.

“Everyone’s mad at me. They’ll be even madder if they have to write all the paper and then stay overtime to backfill my beat.”

The door closes behind her, and I listen to her footsteps as she walks down the hall.