

Burying Ben

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Ellen Kirschman

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Dedication

This book is dedicated to my colleagues at the International Association of Chiefs of Police – psychological services section, the American Psychological Association – public safety section, the Society for Police and Criminal Psychology, and the West Coast Post Trauma Retreat. Through hard work and compassion, you make a big difference in the lives of those who are sworn to protect and serve the rest of us.

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Storytelling is how cops learn to be cops. Their experiences, funny and tragic alike, inspired me to write this book. I hope they will forgive me for stealing their stories and lifting their personalities.

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Prologue

Suicide. It's the one thing therapists dread the most.

We try to prepare. We make our clients promise to call us before they kill themselves, even though they know, and we know, there's not a chance in hell we'll be by the phone waiting for their call. Patients may be depressed, but they're not stupid. We get them to sign contracts, useless documents designed to cover our asses. And they do, just to shut us up. I'm not questioning the solace that comes from covering one's ass. Or the wisdom. The therapist who can show her dead client's family, lawyers and the newspapers that she made her client promise not to kill himself without contacting her first and has a piece of paper to prove it is a lot better off than I am this morning.

Ben Gomez is dead. Last night he checked into a motel in the Sierra foothills, got into bed fully dressed with his badge pinned to his shirt, pulled a blanket over his head to contain the mess and shot himself in the head with his duty weapon.

I imagine him squirming under the covers, tugging at his clothes as they catch under him. How long did he lie there? What was he thinking about? Who was he thinking about? Was he debating against putting the cold metal gun under his chin? Or did he do it instantly?

And then what? Noise? Color? Flashes of light?

I liked Ben Gomez. He and I had something in common. It brought us together when we first met and held us in a fragile balance, as if tethered by a fraying rope. It was the recognition that we both had an uncommon sensibility the others around us didn't have. We were outsiders, displaced persons trying hard to fit in without losing too much of our souls. It wasn't much of a bond. And it didn't hold.

"Dot? Are you still there?" Chief Baxter's voice echoes through my bedroom. The telephone in my hands seems miles away, as though I am looking at it through the wrong end of a pair of binoculars. I put the phone

up to my ear. I have no idea how long the chief has been waiting for me to respond.

“Sorry to have to tell you this over the phone.” The words leave his mouth reluctantly, I can almost hear little ripping sounds. It is not his style to apologize. “I need you to come in to the station before the troops get the news. I’m going to wait until the 6:00 a.m. shift change to make the announcement.” He doesn’t wait for me to reply. I’m the department shrink. It’s my job to be there in a crisis, whenever and wherever

Even if the crisis is my fault.

Chapter One

It is a day of firsts. My first day on the job and my first dead body. Chief Baxter wants me to see it. His whole face is concentrated with the effort to make his point, as though he were explaining blood spatter analysis or the biomechanics of tasers. He is wearing gold cufflinks shaped like barbells. Short and barrel chested, he looks like a well-dressed fireplug. I can imagine him as a street cop, pugnacious and badge heavy.

“Don’t sit around your office and wait for cops to come to you. That’s why I’m giving you a car and a scanner. Get out in the field.”

He speaks in short staccato bursts as though he is transmitting over the radio, dropping any unessential words. A slight spray of saliva leaves shiny droplets on his desktop. He walks around the desk and stands close to me. I smell his pine-scented aftershave and mouthwash.

“This is why I have credibility. I make it my business to suit up and get out on the street once a month. I stay in shape. And I always carry.” He opens his jacket and shows me his shoulder holster. He is wearing a custom fitted dress shirt that shows off the inverted triangle made by his broad shoulders and narrow waist. “Street cops are the lifeblood of this organization. The street is where I started. I’ve never forgotten that and I don’t want anyone else to.”

He leans against the edge of his desk, his arms folded over his chest. “I have a rookie on scene at a suicide. Ben Gomez. He’s been having trouble. Talk to his field training officer. See what you can do to help him. I’ve met the kid. Not my best hire, but I think he’s salvageable.” He lifts his index finger. “I’m putting a lot of faith in you, Dot. I’ve had a lot of trouble in my organization since I took over as chief. Some days I feel like Typhoid Mary. I’ve got four officers on stress leave and three on admin leave under investigation. No telling when any of them will come back to work. I have a small organization—seventy five officers. I can’t afford to lose this rookie, too. It’s bad for morale plus my overtime budget is off the charts.”

He extends his hand to me. “It’s one thing to study us and write books about us. It’s another thing to hit the streets with us. You come highly

recommended by Mark Edison. That says a lot. Most men don't have much good to say about their former wives."

He laughs a little too loudly. I wonder if he has an ex and, if he does, what she was like.

"So, welcome aboard. I know this is a tall order, but Dr. Edison said you're the one for the job. Don't disappoint me or him. Now, get in your car and get out in the field." He opens the door to his office and shows me out.

As the new department psychologist, I am in no position to protest or to tell him that I'm scared to death because I've never seen a dead body before. Not even my father's. What if I embarrass myself, faint or, God forbid, get sick to my stomach? I wonder how he expects me to suit up. Maybe I should put wheels on my couch and tow it behind my car?

The radio traffic on my scanner crackles briskly, drowning out my thumping heart. Listening to it is a guilty pleasure, like eavesdropping. This is the best of two possible worlds, close to the action but at a safe remove—the unobserved observer listening to the breathlessness of the chase, the escalating octaves that betray fear, the barked commands, the unnatural calm of the dispatcher, and the final "Code 4" signaling that the short reign of terror has given way to hours of report writing and investigation.

I drive under a cool green canopy of old oaks. Light filters through the leaves dappling the street. Fifty years ago this old northern California neighborhood was considered the ultimate in affordable, architect-designed family houses. Now the current selling prices are beyond my reach and the reach of any Kenilworth cop, fire fighter or schoolteacher. Neighbors are congregating in small worried clusters on the sidewalk in front of a uniquely shabby one story home. They watch as I park my car. I take ten slow deep breaths and step to the sidewalk. Spindly trees flank the walk that leads to the front door. The grass on either side of the cracked concrete path is brown and freckled with splotches of hard, dry dirt. The front door is open. I grit my teeth and walk in.

The air inside smells of cooked cabbage, dirty clothes and cigarette smoke. The walls are painted the color of bruised and decaying greens. I look down a long hall, dark as a tunnel. I hear voices to my front and my side, and I see movement through an arched doorway. I continue down the

hall, my shoes tapping on the bare wood floor. An elderly man lies sprawled on the living room floor, wearing corduroy pants, bedroom slippers, and a gray cardigan, like the one my father wore every day of his waning life. The memory swoops in on me. How he used to button it, so that one side hung lower than the other and stuff the pockets with odds and ends until they were stretched and shapeless, driving my mother to distraction.

I force myself to look at the man on the floor. One end of a frayed rope is tied around his neck, the other end dangles from a wood ceiling beam. A dining chair lies on its side. Decaying floral drapes are pulled shut across a large window, sagging at the top where the drapery hooks have come loose. The only light in the room comes from a slide projector that sits on a coffee table playing an endless loop of family photos across a home movie screen. The slides move forward through a spent life. There is a vintage wedding portrait of two young, slim people. She wears a suit and a pillbox hat and holds a bouquet. He is in an Army uniform. Then there are baby pictures, children opening Christmas presents, a birthday party, a graduation, a teenage couple in prom clothes, a studio portrait of an older couple, and more wedding photos of a smiling young woman in a bridal gown.

The room smells musty and singed. Ben Gomez stares down at the body as photos play across his face. His face is flushed and there are beads of sweat on his upper lip. He has a thin face and body with dark, almost black hair and thick eyebrows. One eyebrow is split in two by a shiny ribbon of white scar, as though one side of his face is in perpetual surprise.

He senses my presence and looks up. His eyes are soft and black with thick eyelashes that a woman would die for. His slender face is smooth and unblemished with high cheekbones and a sharp nose. He seems barely old enough to have graduated from high school. Behind him stands an older officer, a lit cigar in his downturned mouth, fat jowls melting beneath his mustache. His gray hair is gelled into small spikes as though defying the downward pull that age and gravity have imposed on his corpulent body. He is watching the younger officer the way a scientist monitors the movements of a laboratory rat.

"C'mon Safeway," he says. "Staring at this guy won't bring him back to life. Get a move on it so we can go out and help the living."

I cough to announce myself, and the big officer comes to life. Two long steps and he's in front of me, his eyes drilling into mine. "No reporters. This is a crime scene. If you need information, talk to the PIO." He shoves a bent business card at me.

"I'm Dr. Dot Meyerhoff, the new department psychologist. Sorry you didn't know I was coming." He looks at me, taking in my green jacket and navy slacks, my glasses, my salt and pepper hair, sorting out details, looking for what doesn't fit his prescribed image of how a psychologist should look.

"I thought you'd be a man," he says, stepping back. "Come in if you want." He gestures toward the body with the top of his head. "Not much you can do for the old guy, he's dead as a door nail. Did himself, probably three days ago. Neighbors called it in, saw the newspapers piling up. Been hanging so long the rope broke. Not much to see. Knock yourself out." He sticks the cigar back in his mouth.

"And you are?"

"Eddie Rimbauer. I'm the kid's FTO, field training officer. I'll be in the kitchen if you need me. Stinks in here."

Ben's eyes are fixed on the body that lays like a discarded cornhusk doll. His lips are clamped together. He looks as though he might cry. Crying on scene is forbidden. One tear would be enough to earn him a jacket as weak, sentimental and undependable in an emergency.

"How're you doing?" I ask.

"My FTO thinks this is funny," he says, gesturing toward the kitchen. "Said the man was too cheap to buy himself a movie ticket." He looks around the room, walks to the projector and switches it off. I can hear laughter from the kitchen. Ben jerks his head toward the sound and then back to me. "Who are you again?"

"I'm the department psychologist, Doctor Dot Meyerhoff."

Ben sticks his hand out and retracts it. "Please to meet you, M'am. Sorry about the gloves." He smiles briefly. In the dim light his teeth are luminous. "I didn't know the department had a psychologist."

"It's my first day on the job."

We stare at each other for a moment. He's not sizing me up as much as looking awkward. The usual rules of etiquette don't seem to apply when there's a dead body in the room.

"What about you," I ask, "do you think this is funny?"

He frowns, his dark brows knitting together. "No way. What's funny about a lonely old man killing himself? Where was his family? Where are all those people in the pictures he was watching?"

He moves from the projector to the window to a table piled with books. He stoops to look at the titles. "History, biography. He read a lot. Must have been way smart. Why didn't he call someone for help before he hung himself?"

He continues through the room touching things lightly, as though trying to sense the dead man through the tips of his latex-gloved fingers. This is not ordinary cop behavior. Most rookies would be looking for evidence of something amiss, showing little interest in the dead man except for his profile as a potential crime victim. They would be taking an inventory of cash and checkbooks and looking for evidence of crimes beyond the bleak reality in front of them – intruders, robbers, murder made to look like suicide, clues left by predatory hired help or greedy children impatient to get their hands on their father's money.

Eddie bangs on the door frame with his baton. "Hey Doc, I need you in the kitchen. I'm having a little group therapy."

He motions me down the hall and I follow. Ben gives me a little nice-to-meet-you wave. Two firefighters are leaning against a counter that is piled high with used food containers and unwashed dishes. The place reeks with neglect.

"So Doc, these heartless S.O.B.s are telling me they could pick this house up for a song. Needs a good cleaning and a little remodeling, that's all." He flicks his fingers against a worn metal cabinet, "Guess you know all fire fighters have contractors' licenses and plenty of time off." He winks. "These guys didn't have to show up on this call. They're only here to check out the real estate."

He looks at me. "You okay? You look a little green around the gills."

"I'm fine."

"How's Mr. Safeway doing in there? That's my nickname for him. He used to work produce. Knows how to handle a cantaloupe, but he's over his head as a cop. Hey Gomez," he yells. "Don't forget to put in your report if this guy was a Q or an A."

Ben appears in the doorway, holding his clipboard to his chest like a shield. His looks worried. "Sorry, Sir. What do you mean?"

"Do I have to tell you everything?" Eddie rolls his eyes. "Q is when the tongue sticks out at an angle. A is when it sticks out straight." He uses his cigar to demonstrate.

"I don't know."

"Well go back and look."

As soon as Ben leaves the room, Eddie and the firefighters burst out laughing.

"You are so bad, man," one of the fire fighters says. It sounds like a compliment. I walk back into the living room. Ben is kneeling next to the dead man's head, looking at his face.

"I think he was joking," I say. He sinks back into his heels and curses under his breath.

"I hope I never get calloused like him."

"I hope you don't either."

"Truth is, I've never seen a dead body before. Except on television. We were supposed to watch an autopsy in the academy, but the trip got cancelled." He looks toward the kitchen. "Don't tell him that. He makes a joke out of everything I do or say."

I kneel next to him. The body smells like moldy straw. Ben smells like sweat.

"I promise not to tell if you won't. It's my first body too."

Ben looks at me astonished that someone my age, close to being a corpse myself, could have managed to avoid seeing one in the flesh.

"He told me to get used to them. Told me a story about washing someone's brains down the bathtub drain before the family got home." He shakes his head. "I don't know."

"Don't know what?" I ask.

“Hey, Gomez,” Eddie calls from the kitchen. “What’s taking you so long? You’re not going to eat your gun are you?”

Ben raises his eyebrows and shakes his head just enough for me to see.

Eddie walks into the room. “It would be curtains for the Doc, losing a copper when she’s just getting started.” He turns to me. “Seen enough, Doc? Let’s leave the rookie alone so he can finish his report. I want to go home today, not next week.”

He takes my elbow, helps me to my feet, and moves me toward the door. His hand clamps firmly to the back of my arm. I flash back to an anti-war demonstration, the cops in riot gear, their faces hidden behind plastic shields, herding the crowd off the street, pushing us to move faster, prodding us with their batons. When we are outside, I shake him loose and pull away.

“Anything wrong?”

I want to say that I hate bullies. I don’t appreciate being manhandled and I don’t think humiliation is an appropriate training device. What I say instead is “Ben looks a little shook up.”

“He’d better get over it. This is nothing compared to what he’s gonna see. No blood, no maggots, no puke, just a little lividity. Anyhow, the guy was probably a miserable son-of-a-bitch wife beater who ran his family off and deserved to die alone.” He looks at his watch. “See you later, Doc,” he says. “Thanks for dropping by.”

I get in my car and turn on the air conditioning. I did it. Passed my first test, looked at the body and didn’t lose my cookies. My face is burning, and little rivulets of sweat are dripping down my back and under my arms. A red flush crawls up my neck and across my cheeks. They come more frequently now, these stress-induced hot flashes, heralding a premature perimenopausal hell.

My doctor tells me to stay calm. My mother tells me to find another man. She thinks that I’ll have plenty of opportunities on this new job. So much for her wish to see me safely coupled again. Thus far the men I have met today are pushy, hardly old enough to date, obese and sadistic or dead. I’m not interested in meeting men. I wanted the one I had, but Mark didn’t want me. He wanted space and, as it turned out, his new psych assistant,

the lovely Melinda with smooth skin and a tiny waist. Then he wanted a divorce.

A horn blast startles me. Two men in black suits jump from the coroners' van and wheel a gurney into the house. The street is strangely quiet despite the number of vehicles and people moving about. The only noise is the engine on the medic van. It runs steadily, the broken heart of a failed enterprise.

I wake up before dawn, once again. The sheets are damp and my hair is soaked. The sky is the color of tarnished silver. Mornings were the time Mark and I had to ourselves. We would lie in bed talking, sometimes making love, and then linger over coffee and the newspaper, debating politics. I can fill my evenings with books, TV, and movies, but the mornings are like great, unfurnished rooms, empty and echoing. I can't bear the morning talk shows or the idea of driving through the dark to a gym to stare at myself in the mirror next to a slew of hard-bodied gym rats. Twenty years of merging my life with Mark's, and now I have to reinvent myself at 48, figure out what do with my time, what I want to eat, when I want to sleep, who I want to sleep with. I don't want to wind up like that old man I saw yesterday, dying alone with only old photos for companions.

I go downstairs to make coffee. The clock on the coffee maker reads 4:45. The aroma and steady drip of coffee are soothing. I couldn't have been the only one in the room who was picturing herself in that old man's place. I wonder how long it will take Ben Gomez to undergo a moral inversion, learn to blame victims for their own misery. I try to picture him as a grizzled, old veteran and, just to be fair, I try to imagine Eddie as a tender-hearted rookie.