

A MAN IN HEAT

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This book is dedicated to the men and women who carry a badge and a gun in the service of others. Being a police officer is a life changing experience, not to be forgotten, nor for the faint of heart. Police officers are authorized to carry deadly weapons. They have a duty to protect the lives and property of others. The decision to use deadly force is irreversible and timeless. Few other professions have such demands or responsibilities. Becoming a cop is a choice... being a cop is a privilege.

Among the privileged are my daughter, Lorie Taylor, Detective III, Domestic Violence Coordinator, LAPD; her husband, Miles Taylor, Police Sergeant II, Command Pilot, Assistant Watch Commander, Air Support Division, LAPD; and my son, Steven Barnes, Veterans Administration, Small Arms & Tactics Trainer, Facilities Security Operations.

Novels by Dallas Barnes

See the Woman

Badge of Honor

Yesterday is Dead

Deadly Justice

City of Passion

Freedom Dance

Intimate Strangers

A Man in Heat

Naked Justice

(Due out in 2020)

IN APPRECIATION

I HAVE BEEN FORTUNATE TO PEN SEVEN PUBLISHED NOVELS. Combined, the word count is approximately 665,000. Writing that many words without making mistakes or serious grammatical error is highly improbable. Even with digital help and user-friendly programs that make us look smarter than we really are, to get it right, a writer needs help. Help in the instance of *A Man in Heat* came from a longtime associate, friend and editor, Jean Jenkins. Jean edits writers, but she really represents those who read, ensuring and enhancing the hoped-for bond between authors and those picking up the book.

Jean somehow finds light between words. She uses this light to illuminate meaning, emotion and thought, giving every word, sentence, paragraph and chapter the life the writer intended. She changes words, cuts them away, or adds them with such dexterity, even the writer may not notice, but readers will. An editor must have a big heart, big enough to love every character, light every chapter, understand every word while finding a path from the beginning, to the middle, to the end. Jean has done all this without showing her touch. She sought no credit, no limelight, no reward, other than knowing not only did she make it plausible, she made it possible.

From this writer's heart to yours, Jean, thank you. April and Jake think you did a good job too.

A MAN IN HEAT

DALLAS BARNES



COPWORLD PRESS

ASHLAND, OREGON

Las Vegas
Local Weather Forecast

Friday

Clear

Forecast High: 112

Overnight Low: 86

Humidity: 18%

PROLOGUE

Life's a Gamble

ON THE TABLE IN FRONT OF THE BARE-CHESTED thirty-four-year old was an open bottle of Jack Daniels, a silver and gold LAPD sergeant's badge, and a fully loaded blue steel Glock, 40 caliber automatic pistol. Jake Prescott carried the gun for twelve years, policing the streets of Los Angeles, but now all that was over. Life was over. The darkness had begun as he sped to the scene of yet another robbery call.

The drugged robber's intent was to fire a warning shot after entering the bank. His hand was trembling, his ski-mask blurred his vision, and the errant shot he fired found a young pregnant woman standing in front of a teller's window.

She fell hard grabbing for the bloody wound on her head.

Prescott and his partner were six blocks away when the call came out. "Shots fired. Robbery in progress at the bank. Sixth and Wilshire."

Three minutes later, gun in hand, Jake pushed through the glass doors into the bank. A circle of shocked customers had gathered around the woman lying on the polished floor. Weapon poised, Jake moved cautiously to them. "He's gone," an elderly woman sobbed pointing a bony finger at a back door. "He shot her and ran out."

Jake moved closer. A jolt of shock froze him, stealing his breath as he recognized the pregnant woman lying awkward and motionless on the floor. His wife. "No," Jake gasped falling to his knees to gather the lifeless form into his arms. Her hair was matted with blood, eyes

open and fixed. “Shannon! Shannon!” Jake cried. There was no answer. “Call an ambulance,” Jake screamed in desperation at those crowding around him.

The arriving paramedics made valiant effort with the lifeless form they gathered from the floor of the bank. Their efforts continued in the ambulance. Jake held his wife’s hand as the paramedic worked over her. He muttered ceaseless prayers during what seemed an endless ride filled with the whelp of the electronic siren. At the hospital the disciplined efforts continued with Jake ordered to wait outside the ER with his partner and a growing crush of cops. Finally, a surgeon and an obstetrician emerged. The crowd of sober faces held a collective breath. It was not good news, both mother and child, only in its second trimester, were lost.

Nine days later, after Jake buried his wife and unborn daughter, a thirty-seven-year old crackhead, with a blue lightning bolt tattooed on his neck, ran a red light in downtown Los Angeles. He carried a gun. The officers found a ski mask in the trunk of his car. Pictures were soon matched with surveillance images from the bank’s cameras.

The call came early on a Thursday evening, Jake was still on leave. Detectives from the LAPD’s Wilshire Division had a suspect in custody. They wanted Jake to know they had the man, and the weapon, that killed his wife. “His name’s Milford Lyons. He’s a fit. We got the gun and mask.”

“I want to see him,” Jake announced as his heart raced. The detective hesitated.

“I need to see this man,” Jake pleaded sensing the wariness.

“Okay.” The detective relented. “Come on in.”

Jake drove into the heart of nighttime Los Angeles from his condo in the valley. Two detectives were waiting.

“Jake, I’m Phil Carson,” said a muscular, broad shouldered man. His tie was loose, shirt unbuttoned. The shadow of his beard spoke of a long day. “This is my partner Dave Hicks. You know what we’ve got to do?” He reached for Jake’s waistline. They were taking no chances. Jake lifted his jacket to cooperate. Carson reached around and lifted the 40 caliber Glock from Jake’s belt holster and handed it to his partner. Jake

nodded his understanding. Satisfied, the two detectives led Jake across the cluttered but quiet detective squad room with its rows of idle computer screens to the door of a windowless interrogation room.

“He’s handcuffed to a chair,” Carson announced with a cautionary look at Jake as they reached the door. “No touching. We’re running tape.”

Jake again nodded in sober agreement. Detective Carson opened the door. Jake stepped inside. Carson closed the door.

Milford Lyons was asleep with his head on folded arms at the small wooden table in the room. Jake could smell the man. Pungent sweat and dirty clothing. Crack addicts weren’t known for high grooming standards. Jake kicked hard at a leg of the table.

“Wake up!”

Lyons stirred and raised his head. He looked older than his thirty-seven years. His unkempt hair was thin, and his bloodshot eyes rimmed with purple circles. His cheeks were peppered with small scabs and pimples.

“Who are you?” he rasped past a dry throat. Lyons licked chapped lips, and stared at Jake who sat down across from him.

“I’m her husband.”

“Whose husband?”

“Shannon Prescott was my wife. You shot her in the bank.”

Biting at a dirty fingernail Lyons shook his head before answering. “I already told them other detectives. I wasn’t in no bank. That car belonged to a friend.”

“You married?” Jake questioned.

“Was. Once.”

“Kids?”

“Yeah, I got kids. So, what? You a social worker or some shit?”

“I’ll never have any kids.”

Lyons wiped at his nose with the back of a hand and sniffed. He straightened in his chair. His defiance was growing. “Don’t blame me if your dick don’t work.”

“My wife was pregnant,” Jake said holding an angry stare on Lyons. He moved slowly, sliding his hands from the table.

Lyons noticed the move. He leaned into the table. “Is this the part where you kick my ass? You touch me and I sue. Got that? I got a good

attorney and I already told him I didn't shoot nobody. I didn't shoot your goddamned wife. I didn't even see no pregnant woman."

Silence hung in the quiet room for a second. Lyons' nervous eyes roamed the room avoiding Jake's penetrating look.

"Thought you said you weren't in the bank?"

Lyons angered at his errant admission. "Fuck you and your fucking wife," he snarled. "Go adopt a kid. I want my fucking lawyer. I got rights."

Jake ran a hand slowly down his leg reaching for a snub-nose thirty-eight revolver concealed in an ankle holster. His hand came up with the gun.

"Oh, God, fucking please, man!" Lyons mouthed, pushing back in his chair, raising an open hand as he stared into the barrel of the gun leveled at his face. "Don't, please?"

Jake hesitated for a second, grimaced and pulled the trigger.

The two detectives were sitting at a desk just outside the interrogation room when six rapid shots shattered the quiet. They scrambled to their feet and charged the door. Lyons' high pitched scream came from inside.

The interrogation room door burst open. The two shocked detectives grabbed at Jake and awkwardly wrested the gun from his hand.

"He shot me!" Lyons screamed.

The detectives twisted Jake's arms and sent him crashing to the floor.

"You stupid sonofabitch," Detective Carson growled. "He wasn't worth it."

Jake's arms were pulled behind his back and steel handcuffs snapped on. Face against the gritty floor he looked at Lyons' tattered sneakers. A pool of urine gathered around his left foot as it ran down a leg.

"Am I bleeding?" Lyons demanded patting his face and head as Jake was pulled to his feet. "I can't hear a fucking thing." An acid cloud of gun smoke hung in the windowless room. The wall behind Lyons was pocked with six bullet holes.

Holding Jake by the shoulders, Carson studied the shot pattern on the wall. The jagged holes formed a ragged silhouette of the man. "You didn't wanna kill him, did you?"

Jake didn't answer.

“I’ll sue you, you sonofabitch.” Lyons threatened as he pointed with a hand, the other was still handcuffed to his chair. “I’ll sue all you pricks.”

The “Vengeance Incident” as the assembled LAPD Trial Board labeled the shooting by Sergeant Jacob Prescott, Serial # 25523 took place nine weeks later. In a city sick of murder and mayhem the Los Angeles District Attorney made only passive objections to the Board’s finding of Temporary Insanity. Review of the video and audio of the incident clearly showed there was no physical contact between officer and arrestee. Lyons suffered no physical harm. No criminal charges would be filed. Lyons’ personal injury suit was filed.

None of this would stop the bonfire of gossip that flashed through the rank and file of the LAPD’s nearly ten thousand officers. The debate had two faces. Jake Prescott was either a pussy who wanted to kill his wife’s murderer, but didn’t have the balls to do it, or he was a hero who made the crackhead bastard piss his pants by painting his silhouette on the wall with a thirty-eight.

The shooting’s reality had even another angry face. Detective Sergeant Carson was suspended for thirty days without pay and reassigned to patrol for violating departmental procedures to protect the safety of an arrestee. Carson with twenty-eight years on the job, said, “Screw it,” and resigned.

His junior partner, Detective Hicks, was also suspended for thirty days without pay and reassigned to Property Division. Hicks took out a loan from the department’s credit union to make a house payment and buy groceries for his handicapped wife and four kids. If Sergeant Jake Prescott had any friends left on the department they knew it was wise to stay away from the leper, and they did.

The local media joined in speculation. Was it criminal intent or criminal harassment? Either was certain to cost the city millions. Looking for answers where there were none, training and leadership became the issue. The shock wave was to first sweep over the chief of police and then the mayor’s office. Heads would roll.

The quickly assembled Trial Board’s jury consisting of a Deputy

Chief, an area commander, a captain, two sergeants and a police-woman, all who wanted autonomy, took just forty-seven minutes to reach a finding. Jake was guilty of the police conduct catch all: CUBO. "Conduct Unbecoming an Officer," as well as intent to commit great bodily harm, coupled with obstruction of justice and the unwarranted discharge of a fire arm off duty. The board's decision was to terminate. Sergeant Jacob Prescott, serial# 25523, already on administrative leave without pay, was notified first by telephone, followed by certified mail. His police career was over.

Fame is fleeting, especially in the City of the Angels, and Jake's notoriety among the rank and file of the LAPD, as well as the local media, yielded to the police shooting death of an eighteen-year-old USC student shot nine times after reaching into a pocket for an iPhone at the scene of a noisy sorority party.

Alone, forgotten, Jake's ex-cop world grew even smaller as he sank into a growing sea of regret, sorrow and depression. His wife, unborn daughter and career were dead. Then he found the answer. The gun that failed to save his wife and unborn child, the gun Shannon bought him as a gift upon his graduation from the Police Academy, could, he decided, put an end to the pain.

He'd wanted to kill the man who murdered his wife and unborn daughter, but found, even plotting and finding the chance, that murdering an unarmed man in face-to-face cold blood, was easier imagined than done. Had he hesitated killing Lyons because of his own cowardice or because of his belief in justice? Truth was, he'd shot and killed his career while wounding, not the asshole killer, but the careers of two other cops. The only choice remaining, the only justice for what he had done demanded he kill himself. Now it was time.

Deciding to fire a bullet into your head and actually doing it, like shooting a handcuffed man, took considerable courage. After sitting at the dining room table, for three long hours, gun in hand, Jake found he needed to dull the reality of his choice. The bottle of Jack Daniels helped. He drank heavily. Now he was ready.

Maybe, Jake hoped, even prayed, he would be with Shannon and their unborn child wherever death took him, but the thought of there being only darkness crept in and frightened even his drunken senses.

Angry at his lack of courage, feeling like a coward facing something his dead wife had already experienced, he cursed and grabbed the gun from the table. The dull blue metal felt cool in his sweaty hand. Jake pulled the slide back, charging the chamber. Now, as he had done a thousand times in mandated LAPD monthly pistol qualifications, all he needed to do was apply trigger pressure and it would be over. He wouldn't even hear the shot. Hand shaking, sweat forming on his brow, Jake pressed the blunt cool barrel of the pistol against his right forehead. His heart raced. Blood pounded in his ears. He was close to being physically ill. Carefully, he slid a finger onto the ribbed trigger.

His hand trembled. He drew in a breath, steadied himself, held it, and began the squeeze. The doorbell chimed. Jake jumped as if the gun had fired. In cold sweat-filled fear he eased his finger away from the trigger. Gasping, he carefully put the cocked gun down. The doorbell chimed again, sounding so normal in a room filled with shadows and death. He pushed up from the table. His knees shook.

There were two of them. A plain woman wearing little makeup and a knee length drab dress. A purse dangled from her elbow. A younger woman stood at her side. Although she too wore little makeup she was attractive. Naked to the waist Jake suddenly felt self-conscious. A bead of sweat slid from under his chin and gained momentum as it traced toward his chest. His mouth was dry. He wanted to speak but could find no words.

The two women stared in silence for an awkward moment, standing still as if cardboard cut outs. Jake wasn't sure where the words came from. Speaking hadn't even entered his mind. "I was just going to kill myself," he said in a matter-of-fact tone.

The young woman sucked in an audible breath raising a hand to her chest. Her older companion was more reactive. She pushed a folded tract at Jake. "God loves you, no matter what you've done."

Jake reached out and took the tract. As if that small act released them, the two women turned and disappeared into the evening shadows. Jake closed the door and returned to the table. Standing, ignoring the badge, whiskey, and gun, Jake studied the tract in his hand. Bold print, across a neon-filled nighttime image of the Las Vegas

Strip warned, *Your Life Isn't Las Vegas, Don't Gamble with It!* Mormons or Jehovah Witness he decided. Whoever they were, they thought they were spreading the word of God. Instead they'd brought him a painful remembrance of a weekend in Las Vegas shared with Shannon seven months before her death.

Jake sighed, closing his eyes, remembering their late-night passion in a suite at the Mandalay Bay. Maybe—hell, no maybe about it—he was certain that was when Shannon conceived. The bittersweet memory first brought a smile and then a choked painful sob from deep inside. Opening his eyes, Jake focused on the words again. Thought began to take form. Life was a gamble, one huge fucking roll of the dice. There was neither rhyme nor reason to anything. Everything was mere chance and he'd just got a second one.

Fuck being dead. Jake tossed the tract. Life in Los Angeles was over. Screw the City of the Angels. Maybe there could be a new life in Las Vegas. Where no one knew him. No one would care. It was worth a shot. Hell, that place was all chance! Jake headed for a bedroom. Where the hell did Shannon keep the luggage?



SAND & GOLD

WINTER HAD STAYED LATE. A jet stream snaked further south than usual bringing with it a blast of frigid air that turned the Midwest into a blinding blizzard of white. The storm drifted east, and as far south as Memphis snow buried cars and splintered ice-laden trees. The nation shivered as the storm rolled over the frozen Plains and into the crowded east. Cities struggled with clogged streets, frozen homeless, downed power lines and dwindling budgets. Winter was grinding the nation to a standstill.

Not so for the city crowded into the southwestern corner of Nevada. There, two hundred and eighty miles northeast of Los Angeles, nestled in a basin of ragged sunbaked mountains, basking in warm desert air was Las Vegas. While the rituals of winter slowed the pace of life across most of the nation, in Las Vegas it was a time of bounty and endless energy.

The smell of palm oil and perfume filled the air as a relentless stream of gamblers, fun seekers, conventioners, and sun worshippers, poured into the Mecca of chance. They came seeking refuge, migrating like teeming water-starved African herds in search of relief. Bound by destiny, the losers, the soon-to-be-married, the young, the old, the famous, and infamous, all poured into sin city, filling more than 130,000 hotel rooms. They would leave in their wake forty-eight million dollars, plus change, every day.

Six hundred and fourteen of the city's visitors would marry before the weekend was over. Sixty-eight wedding chapels provided a variety of ceremony options ranging from bonding in wedlock by "Elvis," on the North Strip, "King's Nuptials", a Drive-thru Toot & Tie quickie, allowing bride and groom to remain in their car, or a \$200,000 black tie event at the MGM's Mansion. Timely divorce was likewise available, but the Chamber of Commerce, quoting privacy issues, refused to release any competitive numbers. In Vegas marriage and divorce was just another game of chance.

An endless stream of cars, Jaguars, Mercedes and Rolls Royces mixed with Toyotas, Chevys and SUVs crowded the six lanes of the glitzy Strip, bringing Dorothy and her friends to the Emerald city. Volcanic fountains, towering glass monoliths, and the electronic hum of slot machines mixed with the metallic clink of falling coins. Tanned bodies, expertly shaped, tucked and sucked, adorned the towering video screens of the Strip. Las Vegas was the place to see and to be seen. In Las Vegas, "Sex and the City" was a reality. It was warm, rich, and sensual. Babylon in the desert.

Chance leveled the playing field and created the ultimate band of brothers. Chance didn't care who you were. Anyone who played could win.

In this gold-lined oasis of concrete, glass and illusion, the powerful chamber of commerce, with its billion-dollar clout, held a short lease on reality. The local network affiliates were filled with casual banter and happy talk. Local news focused on casino shows, casino stars, casino executives, casino construction, and the weather, especially in areas of the country where it was bad.

The Las Vegas press promoted the city's many charity events but there was seldom mention of trouble in paradise.

Manny Lopez, a grounds man, at the towering Desert Sun Resort & Casino on Flamingo Road, was about to change things.



FEET OF SAND

ALTHOUGH MANNY LOPEZ LOOKED OLDER, he was only thirty-four. Life under a harsh sun had added years. Raised in a small Mexican village a hundred miles south of Tijuana, Manny had entered the United States illegally four times. Three times he had been caught and deported.

Manny was among the shadow population of Las Vegas. An uncounted undocumented army of caretakers, gardeners, maids, waiters, groundsmen and busboys, who lived not off government regulated minimum wage, but on tips, gratuities, and part-time cash wages without benefits. One of a crew of thirty-six, averaging sixty hours a week, Manny had worked at the sprawling Desert Sun Casino Golf course as a greens man for eight months. He was paid \$345 dollars a week, before taxes, although he had no social security card and was an illegal immigrant. Manny sent most of his money home to a wife and five children in Mexico.

Manny Lopez was a “trap man”. His job was to care for the sand traps on holes one through six on the sprawling 246 acres of manicured green the Desert Sun Resort golf course covered. The course had a total of fifteen traps.

The traps varied in size and location on the fairways and greens, but all were carpeted with fine, white-bleached sand that was the

envy of any beach. Manny's task was to keep the sand clean, smooth, litter free and raked so it was pleasing to the eye.

The golf course was always crowded at first light, so Manny's work-day began at 3:00 AM. An army of caretakers took to the greens nightly in a seldom seen convoy of motorized mowers, vacuums and golf carts armed with rakes, clippers, insecticides, fertilizers and grass dyes.

Manny liked the nights. Moisture waffled up from the greens and, unlike the daytime highs that often climbed above one hundred degrees, the nights were cool in comparison. The greens seemed even cooler. This night—a good one—Manny was on the fifth hole. Holes three and four had both yielded coins. He'd found three quarters and five nickels with his fine rake.

The rich seldom stooped to pick up coins but this much would feed Manny's family for an entire day in Mexico. As a result, he was being even more diligent on the fifth hole, hoping he'd find more. The sand trap was a mess and Manny guessed someone had run a golf cart through it. He dragged his wide-toothed rake over the trap to contour the sand, which was dotted with heavy footprints and depressions.

So much damage cost him time. Manny's rake snagged something. He pulled harder. It felt heavy, wooden. He reset his rake and came at the hidden object from a different angle. The rake snagged again. Manny cursed in Spanish. A jagged night shadow hung over the trap from a nearby palm backlit by a towering lamp. Manny tossed the rake aside and moved to the area of the snag. More time lost. He knelt to dig with his hands in the fine sand. He found a cool, soft object. The sand yielded.

"*Madre de Dios!*" Manny cried as he pulled a pasty hand and wrist up out of the fine sand.

Painted acrylic nails told Manny it was a woman. The curled fingers were stiff. Manny scrambled away like a crab. The rigid hand stood like a monument in the center of the trap. Manny stumbled to his feet, crossed himself and ran.

At 4:50 AM the temperature was still 87 degrees and, in the second story bedroom of her condo on San Rafael Drive, thirty-two-year-

old Las Vegas police detective April Winters was sleeping in the nude. The electronic warble of her cell phone stirred her from her sleep. Having seen too many accidental selfies, April pulled a sheet over her breasts and reached for the cell phone. "Hello."

"Collect obscene call from Dick. Will you accept the full-length charge?" a man's voice asked.

"Fuck off, Frank," April said falling back in the pillows.

"Is that an invitation?"

"I tape my calls, asshole." April rubbed an eye. "Would you like a digital file sent to that cheerleader you married?"

"She knows you still have the hots for me."

"You didn't call me to make conversation, Frank. You know I won't loan you money, sex with you was always disappointing, and, no, I haven't told anyone you like wearing panty hose."

"You sleeping in the nude, April?"

April adjusted the sheet closer to her neck. "Frank, what the fuck do you want?"

"Pull on your panties, sweetheart. We've got one."

April sat up. The sheet fell into her lap. "Where?"

"Desert Sun Resort. Fifth hole," he answered. "Burke said he'd meet you at the scene."

"Employee, golfer?" April swung bare feet to the carpet.

"Call came in at zero-four-twelve. Security officer from the club said a grounds man found a body. I dispatched Lincoln-twenty-six. He called at zero-four-eighteen confirming what appeared to be a human hand protruding from the sand trap. Burke was notified at zero-four-twenty."

"Jesus," April breathed.

"He hasn't been notified yet." The caller chuckled.

"Tell Burke I'm on my way."

"You always were quick, April."

April hung up and headed for the bathroom. She searched along a wall in the darkness and switched on a light. Her eyes went immediately to the full mirror covering the wall behind the sunken bathtub. She studied her nudity, drawing in her stomach. The conversation with Frank, her ex-husband, had made her aware of her body. Sub-

conscious fear after losing a mate to a younger woman, she decided. April's eyes ran over the reflection in the mirror. Tanned, lean, breasts still firm, not sagging, stomach flat, with a little effort, hips narrow, legs firm and shapely.

An attractive nude, with short dark hair and green eyes, what she really saw in the mirror was a divorced, lonely woman working in the male dominated, macho world of cops. Being a cop in any environment was challenging for a woman. In Las Vegas that was compounded by a skin market promoting the pervasive attitude that all things female were a commodity. Vegas was a lucrative market that generated more income and respect for a 36B than an MBA.

Las Vegas' Clark County was an island surrounded by counties with legalized prostitution and brothels with names and reputations known around the world. The only reason prostitution remained illegal in Vegas was because legalizing it would hurt the economy. Vegas wasn't called Sin City for nothing, yet behind its veil of illuminated tits and ass, regular women lived and worked. Some even carried guns.

April twisted the water on. She ran water over her hands and splashed some onto her face to erase the sleep. She made a deliberate effort to mold her worry into anger but failed. She had put career first, married late and badly. Her eleven-month, stormy marriage to Lieutenant Frank Daggett was over, but it remained the source of stories and rumors among the rank and file of Metro Las Vegas PD. Frank Daggett, married twice before, was a handsome, mustached man with a quick wit and an easy smile.

He'd been an exciting date, an experienced lover, but a lousy husband. Everyone had said their marriage wouldn't last. They were right. Now Frank Daggett had another notch on his dick and April Winters was divorced. Frank already had a new wife, a blonde bimbo, cop groupie from the Spa at the Bellagio. April was alone. Life was a bitch.

Pulling on her denims she made a decision. The thought had been with her for several months but for the first time she allowed it to settle firmly in her mind. She was going to resign. Screw Frank Daggett. Screw the Las Vegas Police Department, screw them all. She was more than Daggett's ex-wife, but that's all she would ever be in

Las Vegas. She'd solve this murder and resign. Screw being a cop. There had to be a better life.

Driving through the maze of glitter that was Las Vegas at night to the Desert Sun Resort, Detective Sergeant Tom Burke found himself humming along with Credence Clearwater's *Bad Moon Rising*. He turned off the radio, reminding himself it was death that had him driving to the scene. Murder, any murder, deserved the unspoken cop reverence. It was role playing every homicide detective knew and practiced. Like a surgeon donning gloves, cops had to put on a personal macho persona to keep the world they worked in from touching them. Burke's call out had come a half hour earlier. All Lieutenant Daggett could tell him was a woman had been found dead on a golf course. Officers were standing by.

Murder wasn't unusual in Las Vegas, but somehow the fabled Strip had once seemed immune to it. The Mandalay massacre had changed all that. Las Vegas was brought to its knees when the unimaginable act of shooting violence by one man claimed the lives of fifty-eight others. In the days to follow the world held a collective breath, waiting, watching. Somehow in the bloody aftermath, the city of passion, pushed aside fear and panic, and became a city of compassion.

Tom Burke, like nearly every other cop in Las Vegas, was called out the night of the massacre. They were to see things and do things not done before and much like combatants returning from a bloody war, there was now a collective turning away. All were changed by it. None would ever forget, but few wanted to remember or talk about it. Burke transferred into the Violent Crimes Unit several months after the shooting. He silently pledged he would find every son-of-a-bitch that ever committed a murder on his watch.

Burke had come to Las Vegas fourteen years earlier with coveted LAPD training and experience, "Had to get the wife out of the smog," he told everyone. "Migraines." Back then, waspy, budding Las Vegas, some two-hundred-plus miles from LA, provided an opportune refuge for a highly trained cop. Las Vegas PD, desperate for street ready cops, welcomed him with open arms, and Tom Burke knew he had found a home. A combination of duty, hard work and persistence

had made him a detective sergeant. He slowed for a red light, pushing aside the haunting thoughts, returning his attention to the call out. His personal credo had become, "There are no small murders, just small detectives." He was determined not to be a small detective.

When April Winters arrived at the Desert Sun Resort, she spotted patrol cars clustered in the parking lot beneath a cone of light from an overhead lamp. The first hint of dawn was gathering in the eastern sky, but overhead stars still punctured the darkness. April glanced up as she climbed from her BMW. The cool air, the smell of the lush golf course and the quiet of the pre-dawn morning made it difficult to believe murder was nearby. April headed onto the course.

The trap on the fifth hole was near the green and surrounded with a mix of curious grounds men, hotel employees, security officers and khaki-clad Vegas patrol officers. Detective Tom Burke moved around the trap, shooting digital flash pictures. The bursts of light, reaching out into the darkness like bolts of silent lightning, guided April across the rolling grass to the crime scene.

"Jesus," she whispered as she reached the edge of the wide trap. In the center of it stood a pasty, lifeless, curled hand reaching up out of the sand.

"We think it's a woman," a uniformed sergeant said with a glance toward April.

Burke paused with his camera work and walked around the sand trap to where April stood. "Coroner's on his way."

"You sure there's a body attached to that?" April stared at the hand in the growing light.

"No," Burke admitted. Although he hadn't thought of that.

"Who would bury a body in a sand trap?" April asked. "How deep can it be?"

"This trap's about twenty inches deep," a chubby, bearded man, standing nearby, answered.

"He's the head grounds man," Burke added. "One of his people found her...or it."

"Is the man still here?" April aimed the question at the head groundsman.

"Think so," he answered as his eyes surveyed her figure.

“What’s his name?” April pressed. There was a dead woman in the sand trap and this bastard was looking for chilled nipples.

The man shrugged. “He’s a wetback. I don’t know his name. They come, they go.”

The Mexicans standing in the circle around the sand trap did not react.

“This one stays,” April warned. “Or you do. Understood?”

“Okay, but could you hurry? I’ve got to have this cleaned up by daylight.”

“Coroner’s here,” a uniformed officer in the circle announced.

The group around the sand trap turned to look into the waning darkness.

Two silhouettes, one wielding a flashlight, approached, pulling a low-wheeled gurney. A wheel squeaked in the darkness as it rolled over the short grass.

The curious were moved away from the sand trap by the uniformed officers as the two coroner’s deputies began their task. Burke and April watched as the men knelt in the sand and dug with gloved hands. It didn’t take long to find the hand was attached to an arm and the arm to a torso.

“She’s nude,” an older, balding deputy declared as he brushed dry sand away from an exposed breast. Burke moved closer and took a picture.

“And she’s a blonde,” the other deputy added, pushing sand away from the now uncovered head. The body was on its back.

April watched soberly as the man brushed more and more fine sand from around the girl’s head. The blonde hair was long and matted with the deeper, damp sand.

“Late twenties, early thirties I’d guess,” the deputy speculated, brushing sand from the girl’s face. Her nostrils were clogged with sand. It caked partially open eyes and lips. “No sign of trauma,” he added.

“Good looking girl,” Tom Burke suggested as the two men brushed sand from the upper chest and lower torso. Only the legs from the knees down remained covered.

April was aware of her femininity as she looked at the dead girl’s icy gray nudity then glanced at the ring of male faces around the sand

trap. A chill made her shudder as she drew in a breath. The girl in the trap looked capable of brushing the sand from her face and standing, April thought. She considered saying that, but instead said, "Why bury her here? They had to know she'd be found."

"Maybe that was the idea," Burke speculated.

The two coroner's deputies paused with their digging. The older deputy picked up a long shanked metal thermometer he had laid on the edge of the sand trap.

"Sixty-six degrees environmental," he said looking at the needle on the face of the instrument.

April made a note of the reading.

The man pulled off a glove and ran his fingers along the body's rib cage. Reaching the bottom of the girl's ribs, his fingers probed the soft flesh. Finding a spot that satisfied his experienced touch, the man punched the pointed end of the long chromed shank through the girl's flesh, pushing it deep into her liver. April winced as the thermometer's penetration made an audible pop. It wasn't that she hadn't seen the procedure before, but most murder victims were older and masculine. This one was close to her age, and a woman.

April needed relief. She looked to the distant horizon. A rosy hue was growing along the rim of the distant mountains to the east over Lake Mead. When it was full light, she decided, she'd search the crime scene. Everything Burke did seemed half-assed. Jesus, Vegas was waking up, ordering Starbucks, dropping another coin, while some girl lay buried in a sand trap.

"I'd bet on rape," Burke said at April's ear.

Every crime in Burke's opinion was sexually motivated. April suspected the fact he worked with her had a significant impact on how often he talked about sexual motivations. Although in the three years they'd worked together Burke had never made a pass at her. April attributed that to his lack of aggression and a dominating wife who would likely castrate him if she thought he cheated. April had seen too many of Burke's longing looks and ignored too many of his suggestive remarks to know he wasn't interested. He was, yet somehow it wasn't reassuring, did nothing to reinforce April's flagging femininity.

It wasn't that Tom Burke was an unattractive man. At six-feet he

carried his thirty-six years with poise. He was conscious of the way he dressed and his style suggested more stockbroker than cop, but there was something missing.

April's feminine intuition warned her Tom Burke wasn't the man he claimed to be, but then she felt that way about most men. Tom Burke just happened to be the one she worked with.

"What do you think?" Burke pressed. He was standing close. The scent of his cologne and minted breath were heavy.

"Think of what?" April asked.

"Rape? Look at her. Young, attractive. I'll bet one of these beaner grounds men drug her out here in the dark and tried for a hole in one."

April looked at Burke soberly. "Just because they're Mexicans doesn't mean they're stupid."

Burke wasn't finished with his innuendo yet. He glanced at the part in April's blouse; a hint of cleavage was visible in the half-light of dawn. "You don't undress a body like that and not react."

"You speaking from experience?"

"I'm speaking as a man who appreciates an attractive woman."

"Liver temperature is eighty degrees," the coroner's deputy said. He pulled the pointed shank from the girl's torso as April turned.

The puncture wound didn't bleed. April jotted the information into a small notebook. The difference between the environmental temperature and the victim's liver temperature would be instrumental in approximating the time of death.

Burke and April watched as the coroner's deputies grasped the nude under each arm and lifted. The semi-rigid body easily came up out of the sand as they pulled.

"My God." Tom Burke grimaced.

April Winters gasped.

The two deputies released their hold on the body and stared. The girl's shapely legs ended at the ankle where bloody stumps were caked with dried blood and white sand. Both missing feet had been severed above the ankle.