

## The Cutout

### 1.

Violet McCune dragged herself into my therapy office almost three months ago covered in angry bruises. I'd been listening to her sob her guts out for almost an hour. Fifty minutes to be exact. It was the same old story, but with a nasty twist: an ex-husband who arrived in the middle of the night, broke down the door, and beat the woman senseless because he'd heard from his buddies down at the station that she'd started dating again. And, oh yeah, he was a member of the LAPD.

I stupidly advised her to file a police report and get a restraining order. What I couldn't get her to even consider was what I then believed was by far her best option, going to a temporary woman's shelter with her children.

"He'll find me. He always finds me." She dropped the shelter's business card in my wastebasket and left without paying for the session. I'd offered to see her again for free, but she'd refused to make a follow-up appointment. "You don't get it, do you?" she said on her way out. "He's an LA cop. He can do anything to me he wants."

Now Violet was dead. She'd been shot in the face last night in a convenience store parking lot not three blocks from my office in Playa Del Rey. A snarling and barely disguised male voice greeted me on my answering machine first thing the next morning.

"Hey, do shrinks watch the news? You probably read the *LA Times*, right? Have you noticed that bad things seem to be happening to mouthy women in your neighborhood? Well, guess what, you nosy bitch. You're up next."

"No, I don't think so," I said out loud to the voice on the machine. "You can go to hell." The little red light on the answering device was still beeping, showing that there were two other unanswered calls. I deleted the robocall from a carpet cleaning company, and decided to ignore the request for an initial consultation from a nasal-sounding woman named Marge who'd gotten my name from the online Yellow Pages. *Sorry, Marge Whoever-You-Are. Not going to happen.* I yanked the plug from the wall socket and shoved the annoying gizmo into my briefcase.

It was at that moment that I discovered I wasn't as committed to my psychotherapy practice as I thought I was, nor was I emotionally attached to my cozy apartment on the beach. There were very few things left in LA worth dying for.

I had no way of knowing whether or not there was any written record, other than my own hastily scribbled session notes, to prove that Violet McCune had visited me at all. Had she entered my office number on her cell phone or written our meeting down in her day planner? Maybe. It seemed likely that she'd mentioned this visit to her ex-husband, possibly in a moment of rage. I wouldn't have put it past her to have repeated verbatim everything I'd said about a man who would beat his ex-wife to a pulp. Just to throw a little gasoline on the fire, she'd also probably told him whatever I'd suggested she do for her own and her children's protection, enraging him further.

I'll never get why victims feel the need to taunt their abusers, people they already know possess a huge capacity for violence. Talk about Freud's "death wish" theory. It's the equivalent of the soon-to-be dead girl in every bad horror movie confronting the serial murderer and telling him that she knows everything he's done and that she's about to tell the police. Is that supposed to stop him in his tracks, or just make him want to kill her sooner? My professional intuition told me that our one and only session, and the threat of disappearing with the kids, might have been the last thing Violet McCune ever said to her enraged ex-

husband before he pulled the trigger. It was something I'd be obsessing about for a very long time.

Since I didn't take insurance, hadn't been paid by Violet for the session, and rarely took notes, preferring to keep everything in my head, I thought it was unlikely that I'd be subpoenaed to testify. It was still a nagging possibility that all therapists have to consider in cases such as this. Despite our oaths of confidentiality, we could still be dragged into court and harangued by the local DA.

Violet's ex-husband might be a murderer, but he was still an LAPD cop, and therefore not a complete idiot. Not only was he facing a murder rap; the custody of his children was involved. This often becomes a powerful motivation for violence toward anyone who stands between a man and his children, one that sometimes overrides the threat of incarceration or even the death penalty.

I'd observed over the years that things often turn out badly for murder witnesses and for those unfortunate enough to be called upon to present hearsay evidence against truly determined criminals. Any doubts I may have had about the extent of Officer Bruce McCune's intentions toward me had been erased by the sheer brutality of the crime committed against his former wife. The threatening phone

message in my office was just the icing on the cake. The report of Violet's murder in the paper might have still allowed for some doubt in my mind concerning the identity of her killer, but that subsequent phone message removed it. I was sure that it would only be a matter of time before Bruce McCune realized the same thing, and understood how rash it had been, given all the current voice identification technology, to leave such an incriminating verbal calling card.

By the next evening I'd broken several leases, referred out twenty clients, rented a storage unit, and prepared to head north with my dog Winston and a hefty cashier's check from my bank made out to Dr. I. Raye Collier. The "I" stands for Imogene, but everybody calls me Raye, or Dr. Collier if they're my patients. Sometimes I wonder just what my parents could possibly have been thinking forty years ago by naming a defenseless child Imogene. I'd ask them, but they've both been gone since I was in my early twenties.

My ten years in practice as a clinical psychologist had given me plenty of insight into the mind of a man, especially a cop, who'd shoot the mother of his children in the face and threaten her shrink. Actually, it didn't take much more than common sense to appreciate that the safest place to be at the moment was somewhere far away, and the sooner the

better. I loaded up my Camry with a month's worth of wardrobe essentials, my trusty cosmetics bag, and a huge sack of Winston's favorite dry food. Soon he and I were heading up the coast. I'd planned on seeing my patients right through the summer, but now it looked as though, along with every other therapist in America these days, I'd be taking a long vacation in August after all.

Both of my older sisters were married and living in the small town of Bennisford, a quaint throwback to the 1950's deep in the farm valley of Western Washington. It's where we'd been born and eventually grown up. I'd never been what you might call close with my sisters, partially because of the difference in our ages, but we talked on the phone occasionally and sent Christmas cards. They couldn't very well throw their baby sister to the wolves in her time of need, could they? I sincerely hoped not. Robert Frost had written that, "Home is where, if you have to go there, they have to take you in." I was hoping that he knew what he was talking about.

I planned to find my own place as soon as possible, but what I needed at the moment was a day or two to catch my breath and feel relatively safe. Besides, my motto has always been, "When in doubt, go

north.” Have you noticed that nothing good ever happens on the south side of anywhere?