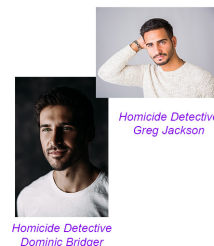


Last Resort
Mystery written by Penny Pisláan
Mystery quilt designed by Cynthia McNutt Scollard

2024 Murder and Mayhem Murder
Mystery Quilt BOM,
Last Resort



Chapter 1 — Autumn Maze

When his phone rang at 4:00 in the morning, Homicide Detective Dominic Bridger was tempted to ignore it. Having been assigned the temporary position of commander of the Homicide Division of the Woodland Park Police Department, he knew he didn't have that luxury. With a deep sigh, he felt around on the nightstand until he found his phone.

He swiped his finger across the screen. "Hello?" he mumbled.

"Hey, Commander," said a familiar voice. "Sorry to wake you up but we have a situation here."

Sitting up, Dominic swung his legs over the side of the bed and shoved his hand through his hair. "It's okay, Brooks. What's up?"

"It's a bad one," he admitted. "Four dead."

"Accident?"

"No, sir." He paused. "Execution."

Dominic sucked in a sharp breath. "Text me the address. I'll be there as soon as I can."

"Yes, sir."

He hung up with Officer Brooks and called his partner, Homicide Detective Greg Jackson.

"I knew I should have turned my phone off," Greg muttered when he

answered. "I'm not on call."

"You are now," Dominic told him. "I'm going to text you an address. Meet me there."

"What's going on?"

"Execution."

"Doesn't anyone play nice anymore?"

"Apparently not."

"All right. I'll be there."

The address was near the outskirts of town. As Dominic pulled into the yard and shut off his truck, he felt a chill run through him. He didn't often get spooked these days, but every now and then a crime scene would give him the feeling that someone had just walked over his grave, as his grandmother would say. This was one of those crime scenes and he hadn't even seen it yet.

The house and outbuildings looked like they hadn't had any work done on them in years, if ever. The front window to the house was broken and cardboard had been taped to the inside of the glass that hung down in jagged shards from the bent aluminum frame. A busted wooden screen door squeaked eerily as it swayed back and forth in the breeze. Behind and to the left of the house was a barn with the doors open wide. The pitch-dark interior gave no indication of what might lie within.

Dominic grabbed a flashlight out of

the glovebox then opened the door to his truck and climbed out. He reached back in and pulled a couple of gloves out of the box he kept under the seat and shoved them into his pocket. Now that he had a better view, he could see two patrol cars parked on the right side of the house. He pulled out his phone and called Brooks.

"I'm here," he said when Brooks answered. "Which way did you walk?"

"I'm inside. I'll be right there."

Brooks came around the side of the house, from the kitchen door, Dominic assumed, and met him near his truck.

"What have we got?" Dominic asked.

"Like I said on the phone," Brooks said. "An execution. Four adults. There's a baby, too, but they didn't hurt him. We found him lying on the bed beside a young woman, who is deceased, by the way."

"Who called it in?"

Brooks shrugged. "An anonymous tip."

"Have you called the crime scene crew and Child Protective Services?"

"Yes, sir. Crime scene is on their way, CPS said they'll be here in a few hours."

Dominic's brows snapped together. "A few hours? How old is this baby?"

"I don't have any kids. I wouldn't even know. I'm guessing a few months. He looks pretty young and he's starting to get upset so he might be hungry."

Dominic didn't have any kids, either, so he wasn't going to be of any help there. A few hours for someone from CPS to show up was not acceptable. "Call them again," he said. "Tell them they've got fifteen minutes to get out here before I start going over their heads."

"Yes, sir."

Flipping on his flashlight, he followed Officer Liam Brooks into the darkened house while Brooks placed the call. As Brooks had said, there were four DB's inside, two in the front bedroom, one on the sofa, and one in a back bedroom. From what he could see, each victim had a single gunshot wound to the head. Killed in their sleep, most likely. A home invasion robbery, perhaps. They wouldn't know for sure until after the crime scene crew had a chance to finish their investigation.

The baby was in the back bedroom, lying beside a woman face down on the bed, chewing on his fist. He was wrapped in a pair of blue pajamas and a blue and green blanket. He appeared to be gearing up for a good cry.

"Pick him up," Brooks suggested.

Dominic looked at him as though he had just lost his mind. The last time he had been around a baby was sixteen years ago when his little sister, Sophie, was born. He was in college at the time so he hadn't spent much time around her. He tried to remember his dad's instructions whenever he picked her up – which mostly consisted of support her neck and don't drop her. If he absolutely had to, he supposed he could do that.

He was reaching for the baby when Greg entered the room.

"What are you doing?" Greg said.

Dominic looked back over his shoulder. "Did you just walk wherever you wanted to?"

"No, of course not. Porter showed me which way he and Brooks came in. Give me a little credit." He frowned at the baby. "What are you doing?" he repeated.

"Trying to figure out how to keep this baby from crying until CPS gets here." He glanced at Brooks. "Did you tell

them they have fifteen minutes?"

"Yeah."

"And?"

"They said they can't get here that quick. It'll be forty-five minutes to an hour."

"All right," Dominic said. "I warned them. I'm going over their heads."

"Move," Greg said, nudging Dominic aside. "You make the call, I'll get the baby."

"Do you know what you're doing?"

"Yes," he said, putting on a pair of gloves, then sliding his hands into the proper position to lift the unhappy infant up against his chest. "Oh, man," he groaned. "He's wet."

Dominic and Brooks both took a step back.

"You guys are pathetic," Greg muttered. "See if you can find a diaper."

"The crime scene guys haven't been here yet," Brooks pointed out.

"Then put on some gloves and see what you can find."

Taking the gloves out of his pocket, Dominic handed them to Brooks. Brooks' frowned. "Why me?"

"Just do it," Dominic told him.

"Fine." Brooks pulled on the gloves and started opening drawers until he found a stash in the second drawer under a table with a pad on top. Grabbing one, he tossed it to Dominic.

"And the baby wipes in that package right there," Greg said tilting his chin toward the drawer full of diapers. "Open the back door of your cruiser. I can't change him in here."

"Why my car?" Brooks demanded at the same time Dominic said, incredulously, "You know how to hold babies and change their diapers?"

"Because my seats are leather." To Dominic, he explained, "When I was in

my early teens and my cousins were little, I used to babysit them for spending money. You have younger brothers and a sister, how come you don't know?"

"I wasn't around them much when they were babies."

Greg shook his head and took the baby outside. Dominic followed along with the diaper and baby wipes in hand. He moved ahead to open the cruiser's back door.

"I need a blanket."

"What for?" Dominic asked.

"To lay the baby on. You really don't know anything about babies, do you?"

"I just told you I didn't."

"What are you going to do when you marry the lovely Miss Underwood and have children? I'm sure she's going to expect you to help out."

Dominic met "the lovely Miss Underwood," as Greg liked to call Molly Underwood, when he and Greg investigated the death of her sister along with four others, including the son of Congressman Furness. He became close to her against his better judgment but now that the trial was over and the killer had been imprisoned, there was nothing to stop them from seeing each other. As he kept pointing out to Greg, they were not even close to the marriage stage.

"I'm not discussing Molly with you."

"Whatever."

It was hard to be rude to Greg when he rarely took offense to anything.

"All right," Greg said. "Give me your jacket."

"What?"

"To lay the baby on. Don't you pay attention to anything I say?"

"Not unless it's absolutely necessary. I'm not giving you my jacket."

"Then go inside and look for a

blanket.”

With a long, drawn-out sigh, Dominic went back into the house and had Brooks look for a blanket since he was still wearing the gloves. He came back outside a few minutes later holding a blanket.

Greg quickly changed the baby’s diaper, which made him only slightly happier. He was vigorously chewing on his fist between whimpers. “We’re going to need to check the refrigerator to see if there’s any bottles in there for him.”

“You know we’re contaminating the crime scene,” Dominic pointed out.

“I don’t think it’s enough to make a difference,” said Greg. “I’m pretty sure the killer was not standing inside the refrigerator when he shot everyone. Besides, we can’t let the baby starve, not even to preserve the integrity of the scene.”

Dominic had Brooks check the refrigerator for a bottle. There weren’t any in the refrigerator in the kitchen, but they found a mini-fridge in the room where they had found the baby and there were a few bottles inside. Since neither Dominic nor Brooks knew how to feed a baby, Greg took over that chore, as well.

“Crime scene’s here,” Porter called out from the front of the house.

One of the responders had three children of her own including a three-month-old baby, and she was more than willing to take the baby for them. Dominic was relieved to have Greg hand over the baby.

“What about the barn?” Dominic asked.

“We looked through it when we first got here,” Porter told him. “It looks like it was used for storage.”

“You didn’t see anyone hiding inside?”

“No.”

“Did you do a thorough search?”

“As thorough as we could without climbing up on top of boxes, furniture, and old rusty farming equipment.”

“Do you have the names of the victims?”

“Not yet,” said Porter.

“I didn’t see any houses close by as I drove up.”

“Not coming from the south, which is probably the way you came,” Porter pointed out. “There’s a house to the north a couple of miles up the road.”

“Have you talked to them yet?”

Porter shook his head. “Haven’t gotten a chance.”

“Okay. We’ll do it.” He started to walk away, then noticed that Greg wasn’t following him. He turned back toward his partner who was standing in the yard, staring at the front of the house. “What’s wrong?” he asked.

Greg glanced back at him. “I have a feeling this is going to be a complicated case.”

Dominic had the same feeling. Complicated or not, it was their job to do their best to solve it, find the murder or murderers, and bring them to justice. “Let’s go.”

