

THE BEAST

FAYE KELLERMAN

The logo for William Morrow, featuring a stylized, cursive lowercase 'wm'.

WILLIAM MORROW

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CHAPTER ONE

I T WAS THE stuff of nightmares, starting with the slow walk down the courtroom aisle: as if his stall tactics had the power to stop the inevitable. Seven hours of testimony, but it wasn't the length of time that was horrific. When practicing the piano, Gabe had done marathon sessions twice as long as that. But he had always used his music to zone out, and that was impossible to do when being grilled on the witness stand. It had required concentrating on things he was trying so hard to forget: how *that* day had started out so normal and within minutes had turned into something almost deadly.

By four in the afternoon, the trial had finally recessed and the prosecution was essentially done, although Gabe knew the lawyers would have more questions on redirect. He walked out of the courtroom with his foster mother, Rina Decker, on one side and his foster dad, the lieutenant, on the other. They guided him into a waiting car. Sergeant Marge Dunn was behind the wheel.

She maneuvered the silent group through the streets of the San Fernando Valley—a suburb of L.A.—until they reached the driveway of the Decker house. Once inside, Gabe collapsed on the living room couch, took off his glasses, and closed his eyes.

Rina took off her tam, liberating a sheet of black, shoulder-length hair, and regarded the boy. He was nearly bald—courtesy of an indie film he had starred in—and his complexion was pale and pasty. Little red bumps covered his forehead.

She said, “I’m going to change and get dinner ready.” At the sound of her voice, Gabe opened his eyes. “You must be starving.”

“Actually I feel queasy.” He rubbed his green orbs and put his specs back on. “Once I start eating, I’m sure I’ll be okay.”

Decker and Marge came in a moment later, chatting about business. The lieutenant loosened his tie, and then took a seat next to the boy. The poor kid was constantly jockeying back and forth between the teen and adult worlds. For the last year, his foster son had been at Juilliard, finishing almost two years in one. Decker threw his arm around the kid’s shoulder and kissed the top of his peach fuzz head. Gabe wasn’t totally bald, but what was growing in was blondish.

Gabe asked, “How’d I do?”

“Phenomenal,” Decker said. “I wish every witness I had was half as good as you.”

Marge sat opposite the boys. “You were a dream for the prosecution: completely credible, plainspoken, and damn cute.” When Gabe smiled, she said, “Plus being a movie star doesn’t hurt.”

“Oh jeez. It was barely above a student film on a shoestring budget. It’ll never go anywhere.”

Decker smiled. “You never know.”

“Believe me, I know. Did I ever tell you about my breakdown scene? I’m running down this long hallway of the sanitarium buck naked with my hair flying in back as attendants in white coats try to catch me. When they catch me, they start to shave my head and I’m screaming, ‘Not my hair, not my hair.’ I haven’t seen the movie, so I’ll have to take the director’s word that it was a great scene.”

“You haven’t watched your own movie?” Marge asked.

“No. Too embarrassed. Not at me being naked, but I’m pretty sure I’m a dreadful actor.”

Marge smiled, stood up, and picked a piece of pillowed wool off of

her beige sweater. “Well, gentlemen, I’ve got to go back to the station house. I left a pile of paperwork on my desk.”

“Not to mention everything that I dropped in your lap,” Decker said. “Thanks for picking up the slack.”

Rina walked in. She had donned a long-sleeved black T-shirt, a jean skirt, and slippers. “You’re not staying for dinner, Marge?”

“Can’t. Too much work to do.”

Decker looked at his watch. “I’ll come join you in about an hour if you’re still around. I’ll bring you a care package from tonight’s dinner.”

“In that case, I’ll make sure I’m around.” Marge waved and left.

Decker said to his wife, “You need any help?”

“I’m fine. It’s been a long day and a little quiet is okay with me.” She disappeared into the kitchen.

Gabe said, “I should shower. I smell pretty bad. I was sweating a lot.”

“Normal.”

“I suppose this is only a warm-up for tomorrow. Defense is going to have a field day with me.”

“You’ll be fine. Just stick to who you are and tell the truth.”

“That I’m the son of a hit man?”

“Gabe—”

“I mean who are we kidding? You know they’re gonna bring him up.”

“Probably. And if they do, your lawyer will object, because Christopher Donatti is irrelevant.”

“He’s a criminal.”

“He is, but you aren’t.”

“He runs whorehouses.”

“Whorehouses are legal in Nevada.”

“He cut up Dylan Lashay and turned him into a mass of jelly.”

“Now you’re speculating.” Decker looked at the boy. “Okay. I’m the defense and cross direct, okay.” He cleared his throat and tried to act like a lawyer. “Have you ever participated in anything criminal? And be careful what you answer.”

Gabe thought a moment. "I smoked weed."

"Ever take pills?"

"Prescription medication."

"Such as."

"Paxil, Xanax, Zoloft, Prozac . . . a cornucopia of pharmaceuticals. My doctors rotate around to see what's affective. And the answer to that is—nothing."

"It is sufficient to just list the medications, Gabriel."

"I *know*."

"Are you anxious now?"

"I'm very anxious."

"Good answer," Decker said. "Who wouldn't be anxious during this process? The prosecution has presented you today as a gifted teen that has gone through a very traumatic experience. On cross, defense will try to trip you up. They'll ask you about your dad, they'll ask you about me. Always pause before you answer to give the prosecution time to object. And whatever you do, don't speculate. On redirect, the lawyers will make sure that the jury knows that you are *not* your father's son."

Gabe said, "I don't really care about myself. I'm worried about Yasmine. It kills me to picture her being hammered at by some jerk lawyer."

"She's sixteen, sheltered, an A student, and physically, she's small and delicate. She'll probably cry. Everyone will go lightly on her. What they'll do is ask her to repeat verbatim what Dylan and the others said to her and argue about the meaning of their statements. I'm sure the defense will say something like they were just kidding around. Bad taste, but no serious intent."

"Dylan was going to rape her."

"He might have even killed her if you didn't step in." Decker paused. "It could be she won't make it to the witness-box. After your testimony, they may try again for a plea bargain."

"Dylan's physically messed up. Why didn't they plea bargain in the first place?"

"The Lashays wouldn't agree to jail time. We offered them a

prison hospital, but the parents wouldn't take it, claiming the prison hospital doesn't have the wherewithal to care for Dylan in his current state."

"Surely someone can wipe his drool," Gabe muttered. "I hope he dies a terrible death."

"He probably will," Decker said. "In the meantime, he's living a terrible life."

RIDING WITH THE windows down, Decker enjoyed the air after being locked away in a stuffy and tense courtroom. He wasn't anticipating anything more than a mountain of paperwork to deal with, but then his cell went off just as he was parking in the station house's lot. Bluetooth told him Marge Dunn was on the line. "Yo, Sergeant, I'm right outside."

"Stay there. I'm coming down."

The phone disconnected. A few minutes later, she came out of the building and jogged over to the car. Sliding onto the passenger seat, she closed the door. The night was cool, and she wrapped her hands in the sleeves of her knitted hoodie. She gave him the address, which was fifteen minutes away. There was a tense look on her face. "We have an issue."

"Yeah, I ascertained that."

"Do you remember an eccentric millionaire named Hobart Penny?"

"Some kind of engineer-inventor. Made his money in aerospace I want to say?"

"That was Howard Hughes. But you're not too far off. He holds about fifty different patents for high-heat polymers including glues and plastics used in aerospace. The consensus on the Internet says he's worth around a half-billion dollars."

"Sizable chunk of change."

"Exactly. And like Hughes, he became a recluse. He's now either eighty-eight or eighty-nine, depending on what site you're at. Did you know he lived in our district?"

“Lived?”

“Or maybe it’s still the present tense, but I don’t think so. He rents an apartment in the Glencove district and has resided there for the past twenty-five years.”

“I had no idea.”

“Neither did most of the people in the area. We got a call about a half hour ago from a unit adjacent to his. Something stinks inside Penny’s apartment.”

“That’s not good.”

“Not good but not unusual, considering his age. Okay. So he’s been dead for a couple of days. We can deal with that. But here’s the problem. The complainant has been hearing strange sounds coming from his apartment.”

“Like?”

“Clicking, scratching, and an unmistakable roaring.”

“Roaring? As in a *lion* roaring?”

“Or it could be some other big cat. The complainant had gathered up some of his fellow apartment dwellers along with the building’s manager, whose name is George Paxton. I talked to the manager, told him I was sending some people down to get everyone out of the apartment building—as in immediately.”

“God yes! We need a total evacuation of the structure.”

“If you want the apartment buildings adjacent to be evacuated for good measure, I’ll radio for more units.”

“Yeah, go ahead. Better to be safe, right. You’ve called animal control?”

“Of course. I’ve requested people with experience working with big cats. That might take awhile.”

Decker shook his head. “This is crazy.”

“It’s a first for me.”

Silence.

Decker said, “How did you end up with the call?”

“Someone in-house transferred the call to homicide. Not a bad decision, considering we’ve got an old recluse, a rotten smell, and a roaring animal. I’d say the chance for finding a dead body is very high.”

THE AREA WAS largely residential: a mix of apartments, condos, and single-family homes, but there was a small strip mall of businesses located across the street from the address. The black night mixed with floodlights and with blinking lights from the bars on the cruisers. Several ambulances had been called and were standing by, just in case. After double parking, Decker and Marge got out, flashed their badges, and were allowed entry into the activity. About fifty yards up was a huddle of animal control agents in tan uniforms. He and Marge fast walked over to the circle and displayed their badges. At that specific moment, something bestial let out a ferocious bellow. Decker jumped back. The roar was especially eerie because it was a foggy and moonless night. He held up his hands in a helpless gesture. “What the hey?”

A sandy-haired, muscular man in his thirties stuck out his hand, first to Marge, then to Decker. Introductions were made all around—three men and a woman roughly ranging in age from midtwenties to midforties. “Ryan Wilner.”

Decker said, “I thought it was going to take a while for you guys to get here.”

“Me and Hathaway were in GLAZA, teaching a seminar on big cats. Zoo is a straight shot to here if there’s no traffic.”

Hathaway was tall and bald. His first name was Paul. He said, “We’re usually the big cat guys, but we do everything.”

Marge said, “How often do you deal with wild animals?”

“Wild animals all the time—raccoons, skunks, possum . . . even bears coming in from Angeles Crest. Exotics are another bag of tricks. We deal with a big cat maybe once a year, mostly lions or tigers, but I’ve done jaguars and leopards. Couple times I’ve been asked to help out with wolf-hybrid packs that had turned on their owner.”

Wilner said, “I just did a chimp about a month ago.”

“Lots of reptiles.” The woman who spoke had close-cropped blond hair and gray eyes and stood about six feet. Her name tag said ANDREA JULLIUS. “Local poisonous snakes like California rattlers or sidewinders. But like Ryan said, we get the exotics. Just recently,

me and Jake pulled out a Gaboon viper and a monitor lizard from a trailer in Saugus.”

Jake was Jake Richey. He was in his twenties with yellow hair. He looked like a surfer dude. “I’ve done lots of snake captures, but that was my first Gaboon viper.”

Andrea said, “You wouldn’t believe the things people keep as pets, including crocs and alligators.”

“What about that grizzly about a year ago?” Hathaway said. “That was a trick.”

Wilner said, “And how about that female Asian elephant two years ago? In the same month, we captured a runaway male bison that was the family pet until it went into puberty and nearly took down the entire house.”

But Decker was concentrating on the problem at hand. “How on earth do you get a big cat into Los Angeles?”

“Mail order. You acquire some land and a license and say you’re going to set up a breeding program or a for-profit zoo or circus.”

“That is crazy!” Marge said.

“Not as crazy as the people who keep them as pets,” Andrea Julius said.

Wilner said, “People are delusional; always think that they have magical powers over the beast. Inevitably a wild animal lives up to its name. That’s where we come in. If everything works out well, the animal winds up in a sanctuary. It’s no fun putting down an animal that isn’t doing anything wrong except living out its DNA.”

Another fierce roar pierced the miasma. Decker and Marge exchanged glances. She said, “That animal sounds pissed.”

“It’s very pissed,” Wilner said. “We’re going over our next step.”

“Which is?” Decker said.

“Drill some peepholes and see what we’re dealing with.”

“My bet’s on a Bengal female tiger,” Hathaway said.

“I agree,” Wilner said. “A male lion would be five times as loud. When the area is cleared out, we’ll put on some protective gear and drill some holes. Once we see what we’re working with, we figure out how to tranquilize it and get it out of here before we have a major problem.”

Another howl echoed through the dripping fog. It was engulfing, as if being swallowed alive. Decker spoke to Marge. “We should assign some agents to the apartment doorway, just in case our friend feels like busting loose.”

“One step ahead of you. It’s already done,” Wilner said. “I got one with a tranquilizing gun, one with a hunting gun. We aren’t taking any chances.” He turned to Agent Andrea Jullius. “What’s going on with the equipment from the zoo?”

“Twenty more minutes.”

Wilner tossed keys to Hathaway. “You wanna go get the protective gear?”

“Sure,” Hathaway said.

“Do you have a vest for me?” Decker said. “I want to take a look through the peepholes. Homicide was called because the apartment was rented to an old man.”

“Our policy is no civilians,” Wilner told him. “And what are the chances that the old man inside is still alive?”

Decker said, “This is my community, and I feel responsible for everything that goes on here. I want to see the layout of the apartment so I know what I’m dealing with.”

“It’s gonna be grisly.”

“I’ve done grisly before. Once I saw a dead guy being gnawed on by a wild mountain lion. It bothered me, but that’s okay. When things stop bothering me, I’ll know it’s time to quit.”

CHAPTER TWO

WITH HIS PILLOW vibrating underneath his head, Gabe awoke with a start. It was eleven in the evening and he'd been out for an hour, falling asleep with his glasses on, his book landing on the floor. He groped around and pulled out the cell. "Hello?"

"How was it?" Her voice was a whisper.

Instantly Gabe was up and alert. He and Yasmine weren't supposed to be talking to each other, especially once the trial started, which was perfectly fine with Yasmine's mother. Sohala Nourmand was the typical Persian Jewish mama who wanted her daughter to date solely within the tribe. Not only was Gabe the wrong ethnicity, he was also the wrong religion. So over the past year, Sohala had forbidden contact between them. He and Yasmine hadn't exchanged phone calls, IMs, e-mails, texts, or Facebook posts. He knew that Sohala had checked Yasmine's electronics on a regular basis.

But nothing was foolproof. They had kept in touch the old-fashioned way—snail mail. When Yasmine first wrote to him by hand, he couldn't answer her back, a source of frustration. Finally,

she got a POB. It was strange, writing real letters instead of e-mails, but after a while he really enjoyed the personality that came through her handwriting. His stamp output was one of his main expenses.

He hadn't heard her voice in almost a year. It was simply thrilling. He sat up, curling his knees to his chest. "Where are you?"

"In bed with the covers pulled over my head. I borrowed my friend's phone to call you. How was it today?"

"Really tiring."

"What'd they ask you?"

"It was Nurit Luke—the state's lawyer. She just led me through *that* day."

"Was it horrible?"

"It was . . . it took up a lot of time, but at least she was on our side. Tomorrow I have the cross with Dylan's lawyers. That'll probably be horrible, especially because of my background."

"I'm so sorry." There was a catch in Yasmine's voice. "Gabriel, I miss you so much."

"I miss you, too, cuckoo bird." He felt his eyes water. "We'll get through this. The good news is you don't have to worry about Dylan. The guy is major league messed up physically. You don't ever have to be afraid again."

"I hope you're right." But her voice was cracked.

"When you see him, you'll know I'm right. It breaks my heart to hear you so anxious."

"I'm okay." But she wasn't.

"The lieutenant thinks that there's even a chance for a plea bargain. If that's the case, you won't even have to testify."

"That would be fantastic!" A long pause. "Too much to hope for."

"One step at a time, Yasmine. It's the only way to stay sane. How are you otherwise?"

"Most of the time, it's like I'm on autopilot. Just kinda numb."

"Are you talking to anyone?"

"You mean like a therapist? I already went down that road. It didn't work. It's better for me to just throw myself into school work." A pause. "So afterward . . . like you're going back to New York?"

“Probably. Why? What do you need?”

“Nothing.”

“What’s on your mind? Tell me.”

“I was just hoping that you could wait until *I’m* done testifying before you go back. But that’s just being selfish.”

“I don’t have to do anything specific. I’m caught up, and my next performance is six weeks from now. If you need me, I’m here. End of story.”

“What are you playing?”

“A Schubert four-hand piece with a guy I know from Germany and a sonata by a contemporary composer named Jettley who lectures part-time at Juilliard. I’m also doing Beethoven’s fourteenth sonata—Moonlight.”

“Oh . . . that’s not so bad. Even I can play that . . . not like you of course.”

Gabe smiled. “The first two movements are all emotion and finesse. The third movement’s a little trickier. You can hear it on YouTube. Glen Gould. If you want to see the fingering, look at Valentina Lisitsa.”

“Okay. I’ll do that right after we hang up.”

“If you want, sure. The point is I can practice in Los Angeles as easily as in New York. If you need me, I’m here for you.”

“I just thought that maybe we could see each other after it was over.”

“I’m in.” Gabe’s heart started thumping. “Tell me when and where.”

“It can’t be until after I’m done testifying. Can you wait that long?”

“I’d do anything for you. Like I said, when and where?”

“I was thinking about next Sunday. I’ve already told my mom that I’m going to the library to study. I don’t think she fully believes me, but maybe by the time she finds out, you’ll be back in New York.”

“Perfect. Where should I pick you up?”

“You don’t have to pick me up, Gabe. I drive now, remember.”

“Yeah, that’s right.” A pause. “Wow. Where did the year go? So Sunday is great. Where do you want to meet?”

“Somewhere private.” Yasmine’s voice started to crack again. “It’s been so long and I’ve been so miserable. And I’m sure after they shred me to bits, I’ll be even more miserable. No one except you can understand. I just want a couple of hours to be alone with you, Gabriel.”

“I feel the same way, Yasmini. You know how much I love you.”

“Do you still?”

“One hundred percent.”

“It’s just we’re so far apart and I never get to talk to you. And I’m sure you have a zillion girls around you all the time, now that you’re a movie star.”

“You’re joking, right?” No response. Gabe said, “Yasmine, I’m bald, broken out, and I lost the weight that I gained because I’ve been so nervous. I look like Supergeek. I’ve got nothing in my life except a piano. I work all the time. I haven’t had a moment to be bad, even if I had wanted to. I *pine* for you like a pathetic old dog. Just tell me where you want to meet and I’ll be there.”

She didn’t speak for a long time, so long that Gabe thought she had disconnected. “Hello?”

“I’m still here.” Another pause. “There’s a motel not far from my school.” She gave him the name and the street. “Can you do something with that?”

His heart was beating so fast, he felt faint. “Yeah, definitely.” A long pause. “Are you sure? I don’t want to get you in serious trouble.”

“So what if my mom found out. What could she do? Ground me again?”

“She’d ship you off to Israel.”

“She can’t keep us apart forever. Let me worry about my mom. You take care of the arrangements, okay?”

Gabe’s mouth was dry. “Okay.”

“And bring something to eat. I’ll meet you there at three, so I might be a little hungry. And be outside in the parking lot, so I don’t have to go up to the desk or anything. That would be real embarrassing.”

“I’ll be outside in the parking lot at three with food, waiting for you. Be on time—for a change.”

“I swear I will.” Then Yasmine said, “You know what happens when we get together, Gabe. It’s like instant chemistry.”

“I know. I can’t help it.”

“I can’t, either.” A pause. “I’m not saying yes or anything, but you should bring something . . . just in case. You know what I mean?”

“Yeah.” His voice was hoarse and his heart was galloping in his chest. “I know exactly what you mean.”

“WE’VE GOT A Bengal female.” Wilner stepped aside and allowed Decker to look through the peephole. The space had been demolished—overturned furniture streaked with blood and feces. There were deep, clawed grooves on walls and floors. Flies buzzed everywhere. A wretched odor of a decayed carcass wafted through the hallway.

The animal, however, was magnificent, even as it paced amid the wreckage. Her fur gleamed amber and black, and she had reflective gold eyes, massive sharp claws, and ivory-colored fangs. Decker had never seen a tiger that close, nor had he actually heard an animal’s roar at such a high decibel level. It sent shock waves coursing through his body. He stood aside from the viewing spot and gave Marge a chance to see. She peered inside and then backed away with a single shake of her head. “She’s dragging a chain around.”

“I noticed,” Decker said. “It’s attached to a collar around her neck.”

Wilner said, “She probably broke it off from her mooring. We’ll saw it off when she’s out.” The animal agent was looking over his carefully devised schedule. He had a checklist of supplies, and an animal gurney along with a steel enclosure had been placed outside the apartment’s front door. Wilner had also acquired the key to the service elevator, since the passenger one was too narrow for the cage.

“This is the plan.” He was still reading off his list. “Jake’ll get a clean shot off. After she’s tranquilized, we’ll bust in and take her out on a gurney, load her into the pen, and take her down in our truck.” Wilner looked up. “After Jake fires the shot, no one moves a muscle until I give the all-clear signal.” He demonstrated the sign to his fellow officers: a hand in the air swooping down.

Decker asked, “What if the tiger busts out before she’s tranquilized?”

“We’ve got big game guns, Lieutenant. As much as I hate putting an animal down, we know where our priorities are.”

“I want to stick around,” Decker said. “This is my community.”

“Me, too,” Marge said. When Wilner looked skeptical, she said, “Cross my heart I won’t get in your way.”

Paul Hathaway threw them a pair of protective vests. “Stay way down the hallway behind the barriers we erected. If something goes wrong, we’ll take care of it. Don’t try to help out.”

“That’s a Roger Wilco with me,” Marge said.

Jake Richey was looking through the hole. “Ideally, we could enlarge this area so I could see and aim through the same hole. But I’m worried if I make the hole too big, she can get a purchase and stick a claw through.” He was still assessing the situation. “How about I drill right about . . . here?” He marked a spot eye level with the first hole but about two inches to the left. “Just big enough so I can stick the bore through it. I think that’ll work.”

Wilner handed Richey the drill. As soon as the noise came on, the animal began to scratch furiously at the door. When it bellowed, Decker’s heart took a jump. The sound enveloped him in a 360-degree cage of anger and muscle.

Richey was unperturbed. A minute later, he stopped and placed the bore through the new aperture. “I think I’m okay. Let’s give it a whirl.”

Hathaway ordered Decker and Marge behind the makeshift barrier. The protection wasn’t much more than wood beams temporarily nailed across the hallway. Decker took out his gun, and Marge did the same. She gave him a smile, but she was nervous. That made

two of them. The scene suddenly became devoid of human voice, the aural vacuum disturbed only by the fierce grunts and clawing that came from behind a wall.

Richey lifted the gun and positioned the tip of the bore inside the hole. Then he peered inside the sight hole with his left eye. If he was tense, there was nothing about him on the exterior that registered anxiety.

Waiting.

The seconds ticking by.

Waiting again.

More time.

Richey squeezed the trigger and then immediately took several giant steps backward. Amid a pop, a howl, and a roar, the animal crashed against a wall. The building shook on its foundation, a quick jolt underfoot as a razor-sharp claw suddenly splintered through the upper section of the door. Wilner kept his hand in the air, indicating that no one should move as the tiger mauled the door in a feral rage.

It was one of the longest thirty seconds of Decker's life.

Eventually the ferocious howls dwindled to halfhearted growling, then mewling until the claw fell back into the apartment and all was quiet inside. Wilner nodded to Richey, who looked inside. "She's down."

Wilner gave the signal, and like horses out of the gates, the control officers went to work. Within a matter of minutes, the front door was down, the agents were in, and the tiger was loaded onto the gurney. The poor girl was sacked out, her mouth agape with her tongue hanging out. As if the animal didn't weigh enough already, a steel collar encircled her neck, and that was attached to six feet of chain.

Using brut muscle strength and extreme caution, they transferred her from the gurney into the enclosure, which lifted up on pneumatic wheels. Before they shut the steel door, Wilner gave her another shot of dope. "A quiet ride is always a happy ride."

"Did you see a body inside?" Decker asked.

Wilner shrugged. "I didn't see anything like that, but I wasn't searching for one. That's your bailiwick. Wear a mask. It stinks inside."

The service elevator doors opened, and the tiger along with her keepers were gone.

They had left the door to the apartment wide open. The hot air inside the hallway had become foul . . . gag inducing. Decker's heart was still racing as he and Marge emerged from behind the barrier.

"Quite a show." He put his gun back in his shoulder harness. "Now our real work begins."