

Two seconds after Doctor Gary Bendigo pulled in to his parking space outside the Hertzberg-Davis Forensic Science Center and cut the engine, a bird shat on the windscreen. He looked at the thin white splatter, heard the unmistakable woodwind cooing of mourning doves in the trees above, and instead of recognising it as the omen it was, he bitterly counted back the hours since he'd washed the now-soiled vehicle.

It was nine. He sighed. Half the reason he'd washed the car in the first place was because, only a week earlier, he'd been blindsided in this very location. Arriving at his parking space outside the lab, McDonald's cappuccino in the cup holder, tie undone, hanging around his neck, a young male reporter with waxed eyebrows and a painted-on suit had ambushed him about the backlog, cameraman hovering behind him. Bendigo had watched footage of the stunt on *Dateline*. He'd noticed, alongside the nation, that the neighbour's kid had traced *WASH ME!* in the dust on his back window.

None of it looked good.

Doctor Gary Bendigo: can't find the time to tie his tie.

Or make his own coffee.

Or wash his car.

Or get through more than five hundred untested rape kits for the Los Angeles Police Department.

He'd hoped he could easily change America's perception about one of those things. The birds thought otherwise.

There were no suited reporters in the parking lot today. And, strangely, there had been no security guard manning the open boom gate, though Bendigo had seen an officer on duty the past three Sundays when he had

pulled in to work. Another omen he ignored. Beyond the fences, State University Drive was quiet and the freeway was dark. For three weeks, seven days a week, Bendigo had been clocking in before the morning mist in Los Angeles's University Hills district had cleared, and clocking out to walk the lonely stretch to his car under the glare of orange sodium lamps. He was growing accustomed to spotting the occasional racoon or possum, other night-time creatures braving the open plains of concrete.

He swiped his entry through one of the large glass doors and walked across the airy foyer, glancing out of habit at the big Cal State crest over the reception desk, a happy yellow sun wedged beneath insignias for the sheriff's and police departments. The door to the wing of the building that housed the Trace Evidence Unit gave him trouble, as usual, requiring him to swipe his access card three times before the little red light went green and an approving bleep sounded. He flipped on lights as he walked down the hall, his shoes squeaking on the linoleum. Fluorescent tubes blinked on over sprawling sterile evidence collection rooms.

He flipped more lights, illuminating a computer lab, a file room, and then a plaque on the wall advised that he had passed into the Forensic Biology and DNA section of the building. Bendigo went right to the break room and turned on the coffee machine, scanned the noticeboard above the sugar, sweetener and tea canisters for anything new. Since yesterday there had appeared a sign-up sheet for a staff Christmas barbecue, divided by unit. Three people had already put their names in the 'Salads/Sides' column. Bendigo looked at his watch and sighed again. It was mid-October. Only scientists planned a salad three months in advance.

Mug in hand, he was still thinking about the distant-future salad neurotics when he turned into Lab 21 and stopped at the sight of people standing there in the dimness. It took a moment for him to put it all together, for his mind to begin screaming. Because what he was seeing wasn't unusual, in

a sense. There were plenty of guns in the lab. Guns moved in and out of Bendigo's section by the dozen every week. But the particular gun he was looking at now, held by a man wearing a denim jacket, wasn't tagged.

And it was pointed directly at Bendigo's face.

That was unusual.

A woman was holding another untagged gun, this one pointed at a security guard who was curled on the floor with his arms bound behind his back.

It wasn't the guns, or the blood, or the zip-tied wrists that terrorised Bendigo. It was their assembly. Their unique composition. Bendigo felt his stomach plunge. The man in the jacket, whom Bendigo didn't recognise, moved the pistol's aim from Bendigo's face for an instant to gesture to his coffee mug.

'Good idea,' the guy said. 'We'll need some more of that.'

They told him to get on his knees. Bendigo just stood there like an idiot, the coffee mug still clutched in his fist, wondering how the hell a person does that. How they stop being, say, a regular guy in his mid-sixties who's just arrived at work, en route to the inevitable slog through his email inbox, and becomes – what? A hostage? The couple looked as if they'd stepped into the lab straight from a leisurely morning dog walk. She was wearing skinny jeans and had gathered her yellow-blond hair into a messy bun, and he was sporting thick-rimmed black spectacles, the square, Clark Kent kind that young men wore these days with their fades and their manicured beards. There were no catsuits, no balaclavas, no bomb vests. Bendigo jolted when the man snapped at him.

'Get the *fuck* down!'

He set his coffee on the steel benchtop, hitched his trousers and kneeled. When the woman came around him and gripped his chubby wrist, slid the zip-tie around it, Bendigo got a whump of adrenaline in his belly. The zipping sound of the ties set Bendigo's teeth on edge. This was real. The young security guard on the floor looked to be unconscious. There was a big gash on his forehead, blood drying on his heavily stubbled jaw. He was snoring in that thick, vulnerable way Bendigo had seen once when he was a kid and his buddy got knocked out cold by a fly ball at the local park.

Bendigo's throat was suddenly dry as chalk.

'We don't keep cash here,' he rasped. 'This is a research and testing facility for—'

'We know, Gary. We know,' the woman said. The sound of his name in her mouth ratcheted up the fear. Bendigo trembled as she took off his watch and set it on the table beside his coffee. She reached into his pockets, took his phone and wallet. Bendigo thought of dead bodies, the way their possessions were taken off like that and set down in a neat row on hard surfaces. Waiting for bagging and tagging.

'Who are you people?'

'I'm Elsie Delaney, and this is Ryan,' the woman said. 'You'll understand everything that's going on soon. I'm gonna help you get up now. I want you to go over there beside Ibrahim, and si—'

'No. Don't do that,' Ryan cut in. 'Don't sit them next to each other. Put him there.'

'Oh, right.' Elsie nodded. 'I just thought they might want to be near each

other. For support.'

'They're fine,' Ryan said. 'We're fine. Go make the coffee. Take it nice and easy.'

Bendigo stood shakily and let Elsie help him hobble to the side of the room, ten feet away from the security guard, Ibrahim. Every word the couple said was echoing in Bendigo's brain, as if they were talking in a tunnel. Sounds bouncing out and then rippling back into him. He kept picking over the interruption. The sharpness. *No. Don't do that.* Ryan was in charge here. Elsie was new at this. Maybe they were both new at this. He didn't know which he preferred – inexperienced hostage-takers or experienced ones. A droplet of sweat ran down Bendigo's jaw.

Elsie went and made the coffee. One cup for her. One for Ryan. They sat steaming, untouched, on a nearby table.

'Listen,' Bendigo began. 'I'm not—'

'No talking.' Ryan was setting up a laptop on the steel bench, beside Bendigo's coffee and watch. 'That's the rule. You sit tight. You shut up. You speak only when you're spoken to.'

Bendigo shut up. He worked the zip-ties between his wrists, feeling useless and embarrassed and guilty somehow, like a kid plonked down in the naughty corner. There was one tie around each of his wrists and a third between them, linking them together. That was good. It gave him space to manoeuvre his shoulders, turn his arms; didn't require the tightness that a single band around both wrists would. They'd thought about some things, these two. Other things they were working out as they went.

They drank the coffee. Two sips each, eyes locked over the rims of their cups, mouths downturned, as if they were forcing down poison. Telling themselves, each other, wordlessly, that they were fine.

Then Elsie went to one of three huge duffel bags on the floor and started unpacking objects – shiny black U-shaped bike locks that she hung off her arm like enormous bracelets. She walked away with six of them, disappearing through the double doors by which Bendigo had entered. Out of another duffel bag, Ryan was heaping electronic equipment on the benchtop – more laptops and a tangle of cables, two iPhones and huge battery packs. Bendigo heard a groan, looked over and saw that the young security guard was waking, dragging his head on the linoleum, trying to sit up. He flopped back down. Ryan had followed Bendigo's gaze and shrugged a shoulder, unsmiling.

'We don't want to get violent, but we will if we have to,' he said. His eyes bore into Bendigo's. 'You see that, right?'

'Yes,' Bendigo said.

'Just do what you're told and you'll be fine.'

'What is this all about?' Bendigo asked.

Ryan looked away, didn't answer. He sipped from a water bottle he'd taken from the second duffel bag. Bendigo spied the corner of a box of food poking out of the zippered flap.

Rations. This was a long-term engagement. The way Ryan sipped delicately at the water and screwed the lid back on carefully filled Bendigo with foreboding. They were conserving their water in a building filled with

sinks.

Elsie returned, gathered up more bike locks then dashed away. Ryan tapped and poked at the laptop, pulled up a bunch of grey windows divided into boxes. They looked like CCTV feeds.

When Elsie returned, there was a tight pause, the couple watching each other, their faces grim. Elsie took a deep breath and exhaled hard.

'Are you still all right to do it?' Ryan asked.

'I think so.'

'It has to be the mother,' Ryan said. 'People get on board with it right away when it's the mother.'

'I know. I know. I remember.'

Ryan took up one of the phones. He pointed it at Elsie, and Bendigo saw the white light next to the camera flick on.