

“Ma’am,” she said, “you can’t be here.”

The woman turned from the car, holding out a crying little girl in her hands like Rafiki holding Simba in front of a fawning kingdom, if the kingdom was a gas station comprised of two bewildered cops and a dead guy. The child wore a bright blue Elmo T-shirt and nothing else.

“She has to pee,” the woman shouted.

“The bathroom is locked,” said Michelle. “Ma’am, this—this is a crime scene.”

With the dangling child still wailing, the woman scanned her surroundings. For the first time she noticed that it was, indeed, a crime scene. She saw the bullet strikes on the building. She glanced over her shoulder toward Niket, who somehow stumbled over the tape while trying to turn away from her gaze. But in actuality, the woman was looking past him, sizing up the access into and out of the station.

Through a patient study of the scene, she absorbed her surroundings. Then, finally, carefully, she looked at Satkunananthan. She noted the wet stain on his pants. She sized up the blood spatters on the gas pump.

Neither the child's crying nor her other children shouting from inside the van seemed to faze the woman. She was seeing . . . *what?* wondered Michelle.

"Ma'am?" Michelle said, to no response. Then more forcefully, "*Ma'am?*"

The pregnant woman's attention snapped back to the present. "She has to pee," is all she said, with a now-eerie calm.

Michelle had no idea how to respond. "Um . . . yes . . . I'm pretty sure the bathroom's locked. And, um"—hitching a thumb toward Sas-mal's body—"I think he has the key."

The woman processed that. The child's crying suddenly stopped. The silence was surprising. Then, still held aloft in her mother's hands, the child started to pee.

Michelle watched as the jet stream splattered all over the blacktop in front of her. Just when she thought the child had finished, a more powerful secondary surge shot out from between her spindly legs. To avoid getting peed on, Michelle had to backpedal.

"This is a crime scene!" she said angrily.

The pregnant woman said nothing. The child peed like a racehorse. She was the Secretariat of urination. Finally, the stream trickled to a drip.

Michelle said, "I could arrest you for contaminating a crime scene."

"In that case, you'd have to arrest yourself first," replied the woman. She abruptly turned her back on Patrol Officer Wu to put the child back into the car.

"Excuse me?" Michelle said.

"This isn't a crime scene," said the woman, "it's a joke."

"*Excuse* me?" Michelle repeated, this time with a cracked squeal that she immediately regretted.

Seemingly without oxygen in her lungs, the remarkably pregnant woman said, "You should have parked your squad car blocking one of the entrances. That would have prevented your tire treads from con-

taminating any potential evidence all around you. Once you realized the victim was dead, you shouldn't have stepped anywhere within a fifteen-foot diameter of the body until your detectives arrived. You're not wearing shoe covers, so your soles might have deposited minute traces of particles from anywhere you had stepped tonight and/or lint from inside your patrol car around this entire area, which means any potential particles and/or lint and/or residue left by the killer and/or the killer's automobile is now contaminated. I don't see a notebook or a pen in your hand, which would indicate you haven't been taking notes. As first on the scene, you should have been. But I guess I could forgive that, since you have your cell phone out taking pictures of the blood spatters on the pump before they trickle any further or dry up, because you know that could help inform the calculation of the bullet's trajectories and/or time of death—oh, wait, your cell phone is in your pocket, so you *haven't* been doing that, either! Now it'll be harder to identify the exact direction the shots were fired from and more accurately calculate the time of death.”

Michelle blinked as she took this in. “Who the hell are you, lady?” Michelle wanted to kick this woman's ass, pregnant or not. The two things that prevented her from doing so were professional decorum and the fact that the stubby incubator was totally right.

Before getting into her car, the woman said, “Oh, and one last thing, you also let a foreign vehicle drive across your crime scene and then didn't stop a small child from taking a massive—and I really do mean impressively massive—piss all over the potential path the killer's car took to enter the station. The acid in the urine will affect the analysis of those tire marks from where the killer drove away.”

Michelle looked around. “What tire marks?” She looked down around her feet and saw only some smudges. Had she stepped all over the tire marks?

She heard the van's automatic car door close and looked up. “Wait!” After two tries at stretching the straps over her belly, the woman

finally fastened her seat belt. The disdain in her eyes softened slightly. The woman lowered the window. “Let me give you a freebie,” she said. “From the angle of the bullet strikes, the shooter had likely stepped out of his car when the shots were fired.”

The woman rolled up the window and, without a second look, backed into a sharp K-turn. She blew past Niket and out the wrong way through the entrance, hanging a right into traffic before the light changed, driving west down Route 571.

Michelle and Niket locked eyes.

“What the hell was that?” she asked.

Niket shrugged his shoulders.