

October 1958—When Otis Millett’s estranged wife, Dixie Logan aka The Dallas Firecracker, as she was known on the Texas striptease circuit, is murdered it spurs a manhunt that pairs Kristin and Otis with Lt. Carl Lynch, a straight-arrow homicide detective with the Fort Worth PD.

This blending of by-the-book and fly-by-the-seat-of-your-pants investigative styles brings Kristin way too close to a ruthless cop-killing gang of bank robbers and their boss, a dreamy maniac who lives with his mother and hears voices.

The question that endangers Kristin’s life and leads to a chase from Fort Worth to New Mexico is where did Dixie hide the bank heist loot?

Hold on tight—once again bad men learn too late they should have taken Baby Shark seriously.

**Baby Shark’s**

## **Jugglers at the Border**

**Robert Fate**

*“It was no surprise to me she was still a knockout, and I’ll tell you what. If she hadn’t run into some hard luck she would’ve been a contest winner right up to the old folks’ home. That’s how good my Dixie looked on that table.”*

*Otis Millett, PI, Fort Worth, Texas*

# 1

## October 1958

I WAS ON THE FLOOR OF AN OLD FARMHOUSE, trussed up like a lamb roast, and attached to a rusty iron bedstead by a length of cotton rope. I could see, hear, speak, and smell, but otherwise I was out of commission.

Buddy Symore, the guy who'd tied me up, must've roped calves somewhere in his murky past. Not because he looked or smelled like a cowpoke, but because he was as quick and efficient as a calf roper.

A while ago, as he shoved me ahead of him across the front porch and into the old slanted frame farmhouse, he'd told Jasper, "I got some sash cord in the trunk."

Jasper, a wiry little welterweight in his early thirties who ran with Buddy, had a wife and some children waiting for him at home, but he liked being with Buddy more. I'd been following and watching the two of them for the past few days.

When we were inside the small house, Buddy prodded me with his .38 Smith, keeping me moving past the room that had an old sofa, a fold-up table, and some straight-back chairs. He pushed me down the narrow hall to a small, stale-smelling back room that held only a cheap iron bed frame and rusty springs. The only light struggled through one smutty window.

"Don't even think about givin' me any shit," he said, as he shoved me along.

I stopped in the middle of the grimy space and kept my mouth shut, since his pistol was leveled at my midsection. Given the opportunity, I could've taken that pistol away from him and made him eat it. But he played it right, keeping his distance, not exposing the weapon like some lead-pitching cowboy film star.

I was five seven. He wasn't much taller, but he probably weighed one-sixty. That thirty-pound difference didn't make me want to wrestle him. I'd wait for my chance.

He said, "I tumbled to you yesterday when I was fillin' up over at Third and Bradley. I knew it was a matter of time. Who're you?"

"Name's Kristin Van Dijk."

"What's your game?"

"I'm a private investigator."

"You ain't very good at it."

"Sure, rub it in," I said.

I'd parked a good distance down the road and was making my way to where I'd seen his car turn off through some trees when he took me by surprise. What was the matter with me? He was a sneaky second-story man for chrissake; his rap sheet was almost exclusively breaking and entering.

He was smart about frisking me, too. I'd turned the tables on more than a few guys who thought frisking was a good opportunity to feel me up. Broken wrists and dislocated shoulders were the common thread in those adventures.

But Buddy was a gentleman. He didn't rough me up, either. He jerked me around, pushed me some, and threatened me with his pistol, but he didn't hit me like some guys

would've.

"You even old enough to drink legal?" he asked.

"I'm twenty-three, if it's any of your business."

"You don't look it. Who you workin' for?"

"A girlfriend of yours thinks you're cheating on her," I invented on the spot, since a tall tale in some situations is better than silence.

He looked kind of cute the way he cocked his head.

"You got hired to spy on me?"

*Nibble, nibble.*

"You're a bad cowboy, Buddy."

"Which girlfriend?"

*Hooked.*

"Mmmm," I said.

That caused his brow to furrow. He was a nice-looking guy; thirty-five, maybe, with gorgeous green eyes and lashes some girlie-girls would've gone a round with The Cincinnati Cobra to have.

"Who?" he asked.

He had three girlfriends I knew about. One was married.

"That's private, Buddy. But you probably know who anyway."

He stared at me. It must've been like a pinball machine inside his head.

"I'll give you a hint," I said.

"Yeah?"

"She's not married."

Steel balls ricocheted around as he ground his molars.

*Men.*

Buddy and his partner were sitting on close to twenty thousand bucks worth of stolen Grande Baroque Sterling Silverware, and he was worried about which of his girlfriends was tired of being in a harem.

When Jasper showed up with the cord, Buddy said, "Git on the floor."

"Come on, Buddy. It's filthy down there," I said.

He reached out in a quick move, got me by my shoulder, and pushed me to the floor.

"I ain't playin'. Take off them boots and stretch out face down."

I did as I was told, but said, "Look, I'll tell you which girl and you let me go. Okay?"

"What girl's she talkin' about?" Jasper wanted to know.

"Gimme the cord," Buddy said.

Buddy stuck his pistol in his belt, dropped to one knee, tied my arms behind my back, folded my legs up, and attached my ankles to my wrists. He did it damn fast and was indifferent about the process. It felt like business as usual as he pulled my limbs to where he wanted them.

Of course he discovered my ankle holster and filched my .32. He'd already taken my .38.

"Two heaters. What am I? Public Enemy Number One?"

He jerked me up by the back of my jacket collar and dragged me the six feet or so across the dirty floor to the old bedstead.

“Can’t we work out a deal? I won’t follow you anymore.” I struggled to look over my shoulder and catch his eye.

“You’re learnin’ a lesson here.”

He threaded a section of sash cord through the bed frame, around the cord that held my arms and legs, and then knotted it in an exotic tangle. Where did he learn to do that? He damn sure hadn’t been a Boy Scout.

When he finished, I was tethered to the ancient iron clunker.

I said, “It hurts, Buddy. Let me apologize and go home. Come on. Be a good guy about this.”

He bent down, put his face close to mine, and spoke in a nicotine-laced whisper. “Don’t make a sound. You hear me? Keep your trap shut, girlie investigator. Trust me, you don’t want me comin’ back here and slappin’ you around. You understand?”

I nodded yes.

As he stepped around me, he kicked one of my boots out of his way. “I know which one,” he said.

“She knows our hideout,” Jasper said. “What’re we gonna do with her?”

“Only one of them gals got the greenbacks to hire a P.I.,” Buddy announced as they walked out, leaving me tied up on the floor at the foot of a rusty old bed frame.

Jasper was getting hot. “Forget your women for half a damn minute. Pay attention to what I’m sayin’ here.”

“I wish we had a telephone in this shit hole,” Buddy said.

The balance of their conversation was lost in the echoing clatter of them walking down the hall.

Later.

Four quick gunshots from down the hall.

My heart rate picked up. I glanced over at the dirty window. The sun had set.

*Damn.*

I’d dozed off.

One more shot. Same pistol. Heavy caliber.

I listened for voices, doors slamming, anything that would’ve helped make sense of it.

Music. Low volume radio: “You Send Me.”

I listened harder and after a moment heard something else. Footsteps.

The screen door slammed.

I strained to hear more.

Nothing but Sam Cooke.

Okay.

I’d figured out earlier what to do while it was still light. But I couldn’t do it then without making noise, and noise would’ve brought Buddy back to see me.

After the shooting, I figured Buddy and Jasper were out of the picture, and the shooter had left the premises. So, noise was no longer an issue.

How long that would be true was guesswork.

At best, I figured I had a few minutes.

I lurched forward and almost got to my knees before the cord tightened and jerked

me back. I had lost any useful feeling in my arms and legs. My body felt like the numb face a dentist causes.

There was a fruitful result to my tumbling over, though. I'd scraped the old iron bed across the floor a few inches. That success nudged my plan out of the theory column.

It took more struggling, rolling, and falling to drag the rattling bed frame enough to allow me to reach the closest boot. There was a commando blade sheathed in each of my boots, blades I kept sharper than scalpels, blades that would cut through the sash cord that bound me.

I felt like a circus contortionist working behind my back. Added to that, my hands were tingling with pain from poor blood circulation.

After some cautious unfeeling attempts, I cut through the cords and moaned as my limbs sprung out from my body.

I massaged as fast as I could to get past the pain and regenerate some normal sensation in my arms and legs. I felt sure the towing of the bed frame and the cutting of the sash cord had taken no more than five or six minutes. But I was hurrying to get my limbs in working condition, because I had reasons to believe the shooter was due to return soon.

## 2

WITH A BLADE IN MY FIST, I made my way down the dark narrow hall.

Midway, I heard a car pull up and saw headlights sweep across the front of the house.

This was what I thought was going to happen. The shooter had left his car down the road just as I had, but he'd been better about sneaking up to the house.

He and I wanted the same thing, but our methods were very different.

My leg muscles felt stiff as I picked up my speed. I was heading for the front room where I had seen the table and chairs, where the Everly Brothers were singing.

Unless the shooter had taken them, I suspected my pistols were in that room. The problem was, I only suspected that's where they might be.

When I heard the car door slam, I played it safe and ducked into the room across the hall. I stood so I could gaze through the space on the hinge side of the open door.

I was sorry to see Jasper on the floor near the table. He wouldn't have been dead in a puddle of blood if he'd stayed home with the sweet wife and kiddies.

*Damn it.*

I saw my pistols.

They were on the card table right next to the radio and an open pack of Pall Malls.

That's where Buddy put them after tying me up. I should've trusted my hunch and gone into that room. This wasn't turning out to be my most stellar day.

No more hesitation. In the future I was going to move instantly on intuition.

Heavy footsteps on the front porch.

The man who entered the house let the screen door slam behind him. That was either to fool me, or he felt confident the noise would fall on deaf ears.

His stride was long. With a few steps, he was entering the dimly lit room across the hall. A big, muscular guy, one-ninety plus was my guess. Maybe thirty, but no older. Heavy work shoes, blue jeans, and a tucked-in khaki work shirt. He wore his shirt and pants tight.

He moved with purpose, snatched the radio, threw it against the wall, and walked out of sight. He'd left my pistols where they were.

Without the radio the sounds he made seemed amplified.

He was shifting something around, making scraping sounds.

When he appeared again, he had a stack of four silverware chests in his arms. Entering the hall, coming at me that way, I could see that the murdering thief wore a stubby revolver in a swivel holster on his right side.

He turned and strode down the hall, pushed open the screen door, and clomped across the porch.

I moved at once, quiet as a shadow, traversing the hall while he was busy loading the silver into his car. I checked the tall, narrow front window. It had what looked like a bedspread as drapes.

I went to the table, jammed my .32 revolver into my back pocket, racked one into the chamber of my .38 automatic and left it cocked.

I stepped around where Buddy had bought the farm near the old sofa. He was face down with an arm stretched out doing the freestyle. There were two nasty holes in the center of his back and a chunk of his head was missing. Flies were busy in the blood and brain matter.

There were going to be some lonely girls in Fort Worth.

Across from the sofa, the rest of the silverware chests were stacked against the wall. A bed sheet that had covered them was thrown aside.

My mouth went a little dry when I heard the heavyweight enter the house and march up the hall. The screen door finally slammed as he rounded the corner and came in where I was standing with a Colt .38 in my fist.

He was well into the small room before my presence registered. He was maybe ten feet from me when he met my gaze and stopped.

He had the cold, unfeeling eyes of a pit viper.

He reached for his pistol, but I straightened my arm, keeping my weapon steady and aimed at his heart. He froze with his fingers inches from his pistol butt.

"Stick that hand over your head," I advised him as if I had his best interests at heart.

He kept his hand where it was, his eyes on me. It was so silent I heard the floor squeak when he settled his weight on both feet.

I could see the remnants of the fights he'd had in alleys and bars, the collection of scars on his rugged face that had healed themselves. No fancy plastic surgeons. I'd known thugs like him, criminals who thought it was their right to murder, rape, and steal.

They were always stubborn bastards who'd left home when they'd finally gained the strength to turn the tables and beat their drunken fathers senseless. He didn't take orders from anyone. If he got a sliver of a chance, he'd murder me and piss on my corpse.

"You need encouragement?" I asked him.

He neither answered my question nor moved an iota.

He grimaced and blinked his eyes, however, when I shot him high in his right shoulder.

A through shot, it carried blood splatter onto the wall near the door and caused his arm to droop to his side, taking his hand away from his pistol.

My ears rang from the crack of the gunfire, but I still heard him say, "You don't know who you're fuckin' with, you stupid whore."

"Pull that .44 with two fingers," I said. "Throw it in the corner."

He spat at me.

His spittle didn't reach me, but he'd confirmed he was a hard case. Next he'd try to rush me.

I shot him in the knee to spoil that strategy.

As he collapsed, he knocked down the flimsy table and pulled his pistol with his left hand.

I shot him again, high in his chest, and missed with another shot as I stepped back and to the side.

The burst of flame from his pistol told me he'd fired at me. I even felt the energy of the blast, but my ringing ears weren't registering sound.

I don't know where that lead went, but the next bullet, if the hammer hadn't fallen on a spent casing, would've hit me dead center. A killing shot.

My next two slugs ventilated his heart, bringing to a halt his evil ways. As he slumped over, his heavy pistol fell from his hand, hit the floor, and slid over to stop near my feet. His final act of defiance.

I took a deep breath, exhaled, and gave my head a little shake. My hearing wasn't ready to come back yet.

If the big guy'd taken the time to reload his six-shooter, I'd be dead.

It's the little things sometimes.

He'd made a mistake, that's true, but his work on the boys he'd killed earlier displayed some ability. He'd entered without making a sound and brought them down without a hassle.

He was good at close combat.

Maybe I was, too.

The low wattage light in the room came from a bedside lamp on the little table at the end of the sofa. I stepped over Buddy, switched it off, and reloaded while my eyes adjusted to the dark.

Then I moved across the hall to the room where I'd hidden behind the door. There were no curtains on the front window in there.

My eardrums still ached, but my hearing was coming back as I took a look around the edge of the dirty glass to see if someone was outside waiting to send me to hell.

Buddy's Plymouth was off to the side. The late-model Chevy parked in front with its trunk lid up was the car to watch. I didn't see anyone around, but I waited until I felt comfortable about leaving the house to retrieve my own car.

The walk down the dirt road was cool and pleasant. I thought of my grandma's farm and tranquil summer evenings and wished I were barefoot. It was overcast, but the moon must've been full beyond the haze to cause the sky's dull glow. The mild breeze smelled of rain. No bugs or animals; they'd long ago hunkered down. Here and there across the silent farmland, single points of light pierced the darkness. Many miles away, along the thin southwestern horizon, lightning danced.

I drove to the house and loaded all the heavy flatware chests into my trunk. I opened one of them to look at the silver. Too ornate for my taste, but no one could argue with the value.

I phoned my partner to let him know we'd recovered the stolen silver. He said, "That'll make the insurance pricks happy. Where are you?"  
"At a café." I told him the address. "You need to drive out here."  
"Was there trouble?"  
"I'll give you a half-hour head start and then I'm calling Lynch."  
"Carl Lynch?"  
"Yeah. There was some shooting."  
I heard him sigh.  
"Of course there was. Hell's billy goats, Missy. Can't you just follow a couple of two-bit burglars around town without startin' a war?"  
"It got out of hand, Otis. I'll tell you about it when you get here."  
"You okay?"  
"No, I'm not okay. My new blouse is ruined from being dragged across a dirty floor with me in it."  
"Uh huh. Well, tell 'em to put on a fresh pot of java at that café. I'll see you in a minute."

Lieutenant Carl Lynch was a square-jawed veteran of the Fort Worth Police Department's Homicide Division, a down-to-earth guy who seemed indifferent to the praise he received for his exemplary arrest record. He was all business in a good sort of way.

I'd been grilled by him after an "incident" a year or so ago. I'd gone home and to bed after a shooting and reported it the next morning. We went a few rounds over that one. He was tough and candid and as persistent as a poison ivy rash, but fair.

Otis told me, "If you commit murder in his jurisdiction and expect to get away with it... what's that city where they tango?"

"Buenos Aires?"

"Yeah, that might be far enough to run, but no guarantee."

The arrival of a parade of police vehicles was exciting for the patrons of the café and nearby businesses that were still open at that hour. A crowd gathered.

Otis and I paid for our coffee and met Lynch and his entourage in the parking lot. I filled in more detail than I'd provided over the phone and unlocked my trunk. The police oversaw the transfer of the silver to a police vehicle. My Olds 88 visibly elevated as the weight was removed.

The lieutenant wasn't anxious to sign a receipt for the chests of silverware. Stolen property wasn't his bailiwick. But in the end he agreed to do so.

"Thanks, Carl," Otis said. "You know them insurance sharpies. If we don't have all our i's dotted, they'll try to wiggle out of what they owe us."

"Okay," Lynch said, and looked at me. "You're leading the way out to this farmhouse?"

"Yes, sir, I am."

We left my car at the café, and I rode over with Otis.

"He wears boots and a Stetson, but he's not really a Texan, is he?" I said.

"Carl? Naw. He's a transplant. Stationed here for a while during the war and came back after. Said he'd had all the snow and ice he wanted in one lifetime."

That made sense with the wide vowels he used. He also had those arms-length manners that made Northerners seem distant. With Lynch it was always Miss Van Dijk.

"When do you think he'll ever loosen up with me?"

"Never, would be my guess," Otis said.

"That soon, huh?"

"With guys like Carl, it's respect, not affection."

When we arrived at Buddy's hideout, everyone waited outside while I walked Lieutenant Lynch and his chunky right-hand guy, Sergeant Burley, through the house. We used flashlights. There was electricity, but no light bulbs anywhere besides the front room.

Burley took notes as I told Lynch from beginning to end what had happened. They asked for clarification now and again, and I left nothing out.

The bad guy's pistol caused a stir; a magnum .44 wasn't that common. The big slugs had made a mess of the boys on the floor.

"It was like a cannon," I said, remembering how my ears rang.

"I saw a man killed on the other side of a steel boxcar with one of those," Lynch said. "The slugs went through both sides."

"Be a good one for stopping a car," I said.

Lynch didn't comment, but Burley said, without looking at me, "You've come to accept chaos."

That was an odd thing for a Texas cop to say. Was he referring to my *sangfroid*? I was uncertain.

The comment did, however, make me picture Burley at home with his feet up sipping brandy and listening to Shostakovich.

*The mind was its own place, wasn't it?*

The lieutenant was curious about something. He paused there in the little living room, where the three of us listened to buzzing flies and watched our step around the corpses and blood.

The sergeant and I waited without complaint, though the odors in the room were wretched and growing worse.

Finally, Lynch said, "Did you ever consider just hiding and waiting for the killer to leave? Calling me? Allowing the police to do their job?"

"No," I said. "I came for the silver and he was leaving with it."

For a long moment, the lieutenant gazed at me, his face frozen. Then to his sergeant, he said, "Call the men, Claude. It's all yours."

A bit later, I was standing out front with Otis and the lieutenant. It was a parking lot with the two cars that were already there, Otis' car, and three police vehicles: two prowl cars and a meat wagon, all with their headlights glaring.

The rumble of thunder was still in the distance, but working its way to us. The homicide investigators and technicians hustled in and out of the house in high gear. Soon rain would make their simplest activity difficult—out in the boonies muddy roads turned treacherous and lightning searched for targets.

Smart folks took cover when it stormed in Texas.

Otis squinted at the approaching storm. "Here goes our Indian summer."

"This is it?" Lynch asked. "It's over now?"

"'Fraid so," Otis told him.

Lynch glanced at me before continuing to Otis, "Your partner can sure get herself into some pickles. The felon she had the duel with, Alex Kocher, is...was...wanted from Houston to El Paso. He's what they're calling a sociopath these days. A killer without a conscience."

"A sick dog," Otis confirmed.

Lynch stared at me for a moment.

I stared back.

"What was your take on those guys in there?"

"What did I think of them?" I asked, not revealing my surprise.

Otis, though, gave him a look, and Lynch said, "Aside from trained officers... hell, better than some, she pays attention. She's the only civilian I know who can come out of something like this with a calm explanation of what the hell happened." He shrugged. "She was the last to see them alive."

"Killed one of 'em," Otis commented, pride unmistakable in his tone.

Lynch frowned.

"Watch out, Missy. He'll be offerin' up a job next."

Lynch pressed his thin lips together and cleared his throat.

He was much less bulky, but almost as tall as Otis. My neck was getting tired from standing so close to them. I backed away a step or two, and said, "Well, even though Buddy Symore tied me up and ruined my new top, he and his little partner weren't bad men. Buddy didn't know what to do with me, but he wasn't going to kill me."

"No?" Lynch said.

"No. He was a burglar...a halfway decent burglar, although he didn't have a clue what to do with the silver once he got it. If he'd spent ten percent of the time he wasted on chasing skirt to learning about how to move what he stole, he'd've been down in Matamoros this evening chugging a cold one."

"Uh huh," Lynch said.

He was a good audience.

"He left a trail Otis and I were able to follow because he went to hock shops."

"You talked to hock shops?"

Otis said, "And a fence or two. What would you've done?"

"Same thing."

"You think all the Millett Agency does is catch cheaters, don't cha?"

Lynch was embarrassed. "I owe you an apology for not knowing better, Otis. I'm not sure what I thought. Somehow I didn't see you doing police work, that's all. I mean I knew you had in the past, but..."

"It's a mistake plenty of folks make, putting a limit on what private gumshoes do. A pilot I know used to talk about staying under the radar. That's what we do, Carl. We're like your undercover guys. We keep our yaps shut, sneak around."

I said, "Buddy left such an easy trail that's probably how Alex Kocher got on him, too."

Lynch was relieved to get back on track. "What made you think Buddy wouldn't've killed you?"

"There was no meanness in him," I said. "If he hadn't gotten murdered, he would've let me go. He was just teaching me a lesson. And his pal was harmless. Jasper's single flaw besides being an outlaw was he adored Buddy."

"What about Alex Kocher?" Lynch said.

"Stone cold. Dangerous. An animal looking for someone to put him down. I wouldn't've wanted one minute of that vicious guy's life. You implied he murdered without caring. Well, I have no remorse about sending him on his way. Killing him was the right thing to do for Buddy and Jasper and a list of other reasons we both know."

"It was self-defense, though. You tried to get him under control."

That was true. But Lynch needed confirmation that the killing had been legal.

"I did. Yes."

No one spoke for a long moment, and then Otis said, "Let's go, Missy. Get ahead of this weather."

Lynch said, "Good night, Otis." And to me, he said, "I think we have everything we need for now, Miss Van Dijk. You may have your weapon back tomorrow afternoon. If there's anything else we need to know, we'll get clear on it then."

I nodded.

"Thanks," he said.

"For what?"

"For calling tonight instead of tomorrow morning." And I'll be damned if he didn't smile.

I smiled, too, and it was as if a page had turned.

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