

Mercy

Chapter 1

Monday, May 29

Detective Carmen Palma stood in the thin shade of a honey locust on a little shag of lawn near the front steps of the Houston Police Department's administration building. She wore tortoiseshell sunglasses to cut the glare from the hundreds of windshields and thousands of chrome strips on the cars in the parking lots across the street. To her left, within rock throwing distance of the police station, a backwater loop of Buffalo Bayou wound under the maze of ramps and overpasses of the Gulf Freeway, and the shadow side of the downtown skyscrapers rose against the ten o'clock sun like a massive glass escarpment stretching south beyond the expressways. Ragged ranks of fat, moisture laden Gulf clouds drifted to the northwest, but within a few hours they would give way to a hot, ink blue sky. It was the last week in May, and the temperature had already hit the low nineties seven days out of the last fourteen. An unusually wet and mild winter had given Houston's lush, semitropical landscape a head start on summer, and the city looked and felt like a greenhouse with the humidity, like the temperature, settled into the torturous nineties.

She had been in the crime lab in the next building checking the results of an ejector marks comparison test run on a single cartridge found

at the scene of a contract killing. She had been hoping they would match the ejector marks on similar cartridges fired from an AMT .45 automatic long slide which she already had tied to another hit. They hadn't.

She was just learning this disappointing news when Birley had called from their office across the drive in the homicide division to say they had to make a scene in west Houston. He was on his way to the motor pool to check out a car and would pick her up in front of the administration building as soon as he could get around there. Palma thanked the firearms examiner, grabbed her Styrofoam cup of coffee, slipped the strap of her purse over her right shoulder, and returned down the stark hallways to the front of the building. Outside, the swampy, tepid air and the gritty traffic pounding by on the nearby expressway turned her stomach against the coffee. She tossed it on the asphalt and carried the empty cup in her left hand, absently punching holes in the rim with her thumbnail as she thought about the circumstances of the second hit and made her way around the corner of the administration building.

At five-foot-ten Carmen Palma was taller than average for a Hispanic woman. High-hipped, and a little more buxom than she wanted to be, she worked out regularly to keep her stomach and hips trim, and, she always hoped, to take a little off her bust. It never happened. Her black hair was kept at shoulder length and blunt-cut, long enough to dress up when she wasn't playing cop yet short enough to be out of her way when she clasped it behind her neck at crime scenes. She never wore lipstick, or much makeup of any kind, a privilege that nature accorded certain types of olive skinned women whose pigmentation was a lively variety of tint and shade. Her eyebrows were jet and needed no grooming, not even periodic plucking to keep them shaped. She paid cursory attention to liner around her eyes which, as her mother had demonstrated when she was a child by holding a hand-sized chip of wood beside her face in a speckled mirror, were the same color as the sienna heartwood of mesquite.

The morning had started off wrong, even before the bad news from the crime lab, from the moment she had walked into her kitchen half asleep and ripped the previous day's date off the calendar. She had stood there staring at the new number and the note scrawled beneath it, surprised, offended, resentful, angry with herself. Then she had turned

away and started making coffee. She made it too strong. She ruined a pair of panty hose while she was dressing upstairs, and then she dropped and lost the tiny back off an earring. Later, in the kitchen again, she sipped the strong coffee and stared out the window to the bricked courtyard and resolved once more to take it in her stride, as she did most things, having learned from her father that a long stride would get you what you wanted more quickly than a short temper. Still, her thoughts kept coming back to it, even crowding in on the negative results of the ejector comparisons which had just destroyed her last hope for making a guy who had had such a string of good luck that he could have qualified as an actuarial wonder.

By the time Birley pulled up to the curb, Palma had begun to perspire. After eight years as a detective, four of those in homicide, she had learned her lessons about the practical limits of stylish clothes and police work. In the first place the salary she pulled down wouldn't support the kinds of wardrobes she saw on the leggy career women uptown, and even if it did, the circumstances of the job simply made them impractical. Even the most serviceable and businesslike designer clothes just didn't cut it in the environment where Palma encountered most of her clients.

But it wasn't as if she hadn't tried. During her first year in homicide she had ruined half a dozen of her nicer dresses because she had been determined to dress a little more attractively than was practical, at least occasionally, and had worn them on days when she just "felt" she wouldn't catch a dirty scene. She had been wrong. The final delusion that this might be possible had passed on a sweltering August afternoon in the far East End when she and Jack Mane, her partner at the time, had been called out to investigate the suspicious disappearance of a neighborhood prostitute. On that afternoon Mane had decided to be uncharacteristically egalitarian and "let" her crawl under the floor of a deteriorating pier and beam house to confirm their suspicions about the source of a distinctly putrescent odor. She kissed the price of the dress goodbye and went in. One lady encountering the bad end of another, neither of them dressed right for the occasion.

The next day had been her day off and she spent most of it in a fabric shop. Poring over the pattern catalogs, she selected a dozen or more classic styles of shirtwaist dresses and skirts and blouses. Then she turned

to the fabrics. She methodically studied scores of fabrics before settling on Egyptian cotton as being both utilitarian and stylishly adaptable. She bought partial bolts in every conceivable shade and texture and took it all to a seamstress in the barrio where her mother still lived. Now she had a closetful of dresses that neither sacrificed her femininity nor caused her too much grief if she ruined them at a scene.

Birley had the air conditioner cranked up on high as Palma got in the passenger side and slid her purse off her shoulder.

"So what did Chuck have to say?" he asked, pulling out of the drive, and heading for the freeway. He had already shed his suit coat, which was thrown over the back of the seat, and had loosened his tie.

"It's no good," she said. "Apparently it'd been caught under the rear tire of the guy's car. The asphalt screwed it up. No match."

"You've gotta be joking. Nothing?"

Palma shook her head. She liked working with Birley, though a lot of younger detectives might have chafed at the older man's professional lassitude.

"What's happened?" Palma asked, closing the overloaded ashtray under the dash so the air conditioner wouldn't whip the ashes. "I thought Cushing and Leeland were first out."

"They are. But they caught something Cush wants us to look at. Said he thought we'd want to see it."

Palma looked at him. "That's it?"

Birley grinned. "It'll be interesting, whatever it is. Cush thinks this is a very nifty thing, getting us out there."

"Out where?"

"A good address. Just south of the Villages, off Voss."

Palma took a foil packet from her purse, tore it open and took out a small disposable towelette, and proceeded to wipe the ash-dusted dash. When she had first started riding with Birley he had just quit smoking and hated riding in a car that had been used by a smoker on the previous shift. He would bitch and grumble and empty the ashtrays and wipe the dash with wet paper towels he would bring from the men's room to the garage just in case. For a while he compulsively cleaned every car they rode in. Gradually, after he got his nicotine dependency under control, he stopped

the sanitation exercise and eventually even quit worrying about dumping the ashtrays. Palma could let it slide too, everything but the dash.

After she finished, she took a tortoiseshell hair clasp from her purse, pulled back her hair, and clasped it behind her neck.

"Hot?" Birley asked, not waiting for an answer. "Every year it gets to the blistering point a little bit earlier in the year. I used to think it was my imagination or my age."

"You don't anymore?" They were passing through the Highway 45 interchange, and she wished she were going straight on to Galveston for the day.

"Not since they discovered this greenhouse effect," Birley said. "Fluorocarbons. You know, when Sally's mom died she left us that little cabin up on the Trinity. Last time I was up there the water level had dropped five feet. Big shock. And then I got to thinking about fluorocarbons. I'm convinced my family's a major contributor to this global heat-up. Can you imagine how much hair spray and antiperspirant Sally and those four girls have used during the last twenty-five years?" He laughed. "Jesus! By the time I retire up there on the lake that cabin's going to overlook nothing but a stinking brown sandbar."

John Birley was an old dog, not in age but in homicide experience, and he had been Palma's partner for a little over two years. He was fifty-four, just over six feet tall, and beginning to get hefty. He had a pleasant broad face with a small round nose and lifeless brown hair that was thinning but refusing to gray. The lines at the corners of his eyes had already been there for a few years when Palma met him. He had spent much of his career holding down two jobs in order to put his daughters through college, and at times he seemed older than his years. He was seven months shy of a thirty-year retirement.

But the pension hadn't come soon enough. During the last year Birley had burned out. He knew it. Everyone knew it. He had become a detective of the bare minimum. He put in his hours and went home, and his desk cubicle in the homicide division cubbyhole he shared with Palma was decorated with the gaudy, hairy tufts of fly-fishing lures he stuck into the fabric of the walls, his own creations which he studied and revised in his patient search for perfect balance, style, and color. He still did his job,

and his work was as thorough as always, but his curiosity was worn out. The veteran detectives recognized Birley's problem and accepted it. He had been a good man for a long time, and no one was going to call his hand because he lost his enthusiasm so close to retirement. It happened.

For her part, Palma was exactly where she had always wanted to be. Her father had been one of the first Hispanic detectives in homicide and would have retired in harness if a traffic accident hadn't claimed him first. Now, at thirty-three, she was one of only four female detectives in a division of seventy-five officers, and of the four females she was the only Hispanic. She had had to deal with her share of wiseasses over the years, but luckily John Birley wasn't one of them. He was oblivious to racial prejudices—a rarity in the Southwest—and having grown up as an only boy with four sisters and then gone on to become the father of four daughters, he didn't have a chauvinistic bone in his body. And he harbored no illusions about women, good or bad.

Palma already had worked with Birley long enough to have grown to like and respect him before he started coasting on the job, so she didn't feel any resentment that he wasn't as aggressive as he might have been. As a matter of fact, his gradual disengagement over the past year had unexpectedly worked to her advantage. As Birley's enthusiasm flagged, Palma increasingly took on the responsibility of determining the style of their investigations as Birley tranquilly went along. She had acquired invaluable experience in case management that she might not have gotten if her partner had always insisted on being the "big boy" of the team, continually asserting his leadership right by virtue of his age, seniority, and sex.

But Birley wasn't always quiet. He had had a lot of experience, and from time to time he had something to say. And when he did, Palma listened. The fact was—and it had taken her a while to realize it—John Birley, while seeming to be not entirely attentive to his business, had managed to carefully guide her development, and as a result he had given her the best training any younger homicide detective could ever have hoped to receive from an older partner. It was in large part thanks to Birley's taking her under his wing that Palma had developed so quickly into one of the division's hottest and most watched detectives with a

reputation for grabbing a case and not letting go "till the devil goes blind," as Birley liked to say.

Palma had settled back and watched the traffic on the freeway, her thoughts beginning to wander as soon as Birley had started talking. She listened to him with one side of her brain while the other tracked over scenes from her recent past that had been shoving their way to the front of her consciousness all morning. They were the last things she wanted to think about, but she had tried too hard, and now they were the only things she could think about.

By the time they passed Greenway Plaza she was suddenly aware that Birley had stopped talking and was glancing at her out of the corner of his eye. Finally he said, "Any questions?"

"What?" She looked at him.

"I mean, about what I've been saying. The lake going down, the black bass not biting, the bad problem with mosquitoes up on the Trinity . . ."

She grinned. "Okay, sorry."

"You miffed about the screwed-up shell casing?"

Palma shook her head. The fact was, she was "miffed" because she was miffed, a response she knew Birley wouldn't think much of as a reasonable explanation. She would have preferred not to talk about it, but Birley was sitting over there waiting for her to get it off her chest.

"Every morning," she said, looking out across the city, looking at the traffic, flicking something imaginary off her dress, "I go into the kitchen, go over to the calendar, and tear off the previous day's date. Always do that, first thing. And I don't even look at it because I'm gone all day, and at night I don't care. But I do it. And then I make coffee. Anyway, today when I did that I was surprised to see that I'd written—in big green letters: "Divorce final . . . six months." She rolled her eyes. "For some perverse reason I'd marked it like a damn anniversary. Don't even remember doing it. I can't imagine why . . ." She fiddled with the clasp in her hair again. "I went through the entire calendar to see if I'd done any more of that kind of crap."

Birley turned his head slowly and looked at her as if he were peering over the top of reading glasses.

"I hadn't," she said.

Birley had been through the whole ordeal with her, the disintegrating marriage, the affair, the lightning divorce. Palma had buried herself with work trying to get away from it, and Birley had watched her, been there when she needed something solid to touch to steady her balance. He hadn't been a father to her, but he had been damn close to it, and she would never forget it.

"Why'd that put you off?" Birley asked, switching lanes without looking back. Palma had already checked her outside mirror. When they traveled in the same car Birley always drove, but Palma always watched the traffic. It was defensive driving by remote control.

"I don't know," she said. "That's why I'm 'miffed'." Birley was the only person she had ever heard use that word, which reminded her of the 1940s.

Birley laughed. "Well, hell," he said, and Palma knew they had reached that point where even his lifetime of experience with ten women wouldn't help him understand.

It was a simple matter: she was furious that she could still be so affected by an unexpected reminder of her ex-husband. Brian DeWitt James III had been—still was—a criminal defense lawyer, which should have told her something about him from the beginning. They had met at a trial where she had testified about a minor aspect of the case he was defending, and Brian had dazzled her and the jury with his quickness, confidence . . . and sincerity. His client, who was as guilty as Judas, was acquitted. Palma, on the other hand, was nailed. He pursued her relentlessly with unabashed adoration. He was gorgeous, with beautiful eyes and teeth, a personal style of dressing and caring for his body that let you know he was squeaky clean without being fussy. He could think on his feet, which made him a superb trial lawyer and a formidable opponent in the other kind of courtship as well. He was quick to flatter, quick to read your thoughts (though not always correctly), quick to defend himself if he believed (as he often did) that he wasn't winning you over, and, unfortunately, he was quick in bed.

The latter attribute didn't even faze her. She couldn't resist him. The relationship had been fast and hot and thrilling, and there had been no

time to think it over and no desire to slow things down. But she had to be honest about it, she wasn't thinking anyway. She was feeling, and if there had been warning signs she hadn't seen them because her libido had run amok, scattering reason before it. She had married him after four months of heavy breathing.

Any sidewalk philosopher could have told her what would happen next, but Palma didn't even see it coming. It was an old story; she could have read about it in the hundreds of "relationship" or "self-help" or "women's" magazines and books in the pop psychology sections of the bookstores. Women never failed to be caught flat-footed and incredulous about this phenomenon of the Janus-faced new husband. It was like marrying Chang and Chen, the second of the two remaining invisible while you were dating the first, and then mercurially springing to life the morning after your wedding night while the one you had dated proceeded to disappear. The next night you made love to a man you'd never met.

The adoration was gone. Before their marriage Brian had joyfully embarrassed her with flowers (yes, he really had, and yes, she had loved every petal), and gifts (he had impeccable taste, knew what looked good on her, and didn't hesitate to buy it), and surprises (he liked to meet her at the end of her last shift before the weekend with two tickets to Cancun or Acapulco).

But after the wedding, he had undergone a change that had almost given her whiplash. Flowers? Only for funerals, and then she had to order them. Gifts? If she wanted something she was perfectly free to buy it. Surprises? His caseload was heavy. It would have to wait, maybe next month (she hadn't seen a beach since).

Before their marriage he spent every moment he could get away from his job with her; after their marriage he suddenly had obligations he seemed never to have had before. He played on the law firm's tennis team which competed every Saturday morning and practiced three afternoons a week. They couldn't have lunches together because he played handball with a group of guys who put him on to clients. It was essential to his career to be attentive to these "players." Sundays he was too tired to do anything but lie on the sofa in front of the television set and watch whatever kind of ball game was in season.

He never helped with anything that happened in the kitchen—he only got as far as the dining room in that part of the house. He didn't know how to turn on the washing machine, or even get his dirty clothes from the bedroom to the laundry room. He never went to the cleaners or shopped for so much as a box of cereal, but he knew where the liquor store was and would stop by on his way home. His indifference to such day-to-day practicalities changed only when he was inconvenienced by an interruption in his routine. Then he could be spitefully impatient—with her.

He was still quick in bed, only now he didn't even pretend to post-coital tenderness or even a mild concern for her own satisfactions in such matters. After he had spent himself, he rolled over and passed out like a narcoleptic.

After the first six months she could no longer ignore the fact that this was the way things were going to be. She spent another six months trying to get him to "communicate" (he didn't believe he wasn't) and another six months paralyzed by the realization that the marriage wasn't going to work. When she caught him in an affair with another lawyer at his firm, a young woman whose ambitions brooked no moral impediments, Palma kicked him out of the house they recently had purchased in West University Place and which Brian had long coveted as an appropriate status symbol. And she made damn sure she got it in the settlement. She wanted it not because of what it meant to her, but because of what it meant to him. It was his idea of the sort of place a man like him ought to live, and it was her idea of getting even to take it away from him. She never regretted it.

She had endured the marriage for eighteen months, had been divorced for six, and was still angry with herself for her astounding lack of good judgment. And in those moments when she was being brutally honest with herself, she was more than a little mortified by having played the part of the stereotypical gullible female.