



LEGACY — OF — LIES

Lexa M. Mack

LEGACY OF LIES

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First Edition published February 2022

SECOND EDITION August 2024

Published by Indies United Publishing House, LLC

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ISBN: 978-1-64456-747-0 [Paperback]

ISBN: 978-1-64456-748-7 [Kindle]

ISBN: 978-1-64456-749-4 [ePub]

Library of Congress Control Number: 2024913949



INDIES UNITED PUBLISHING HOUSE, LLC

P.O. BOX 3071

QUINCY, IL 62305-3071

www.indiesunited.net

For Kitty, thanks for 50 years of faith and encouragement.

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LEGACY OF LIES

SFUndertheRug.com Series
Book One

Lexa M. Mack



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PROLOGUE

Friday, July 2

Detective Bobby Burns' car crested the hill near Alamo Square, gliding past the Victorian homes known as the "painted ladies" on his right. In the next block a police cruiser with lights flashing was parked against traffic on the left.

Traffic Guy had staked a claim to the curb in front of the bank of condos and after Bobby parked behind the black-and-white, he was directed up the stairs to the young officer standing at the bottom of another flight of stairs that led to two mirror-image condo doors, one ajar.

"Officer Regan, I understand you were first on scene."

"Yes, sir. We got a call from that guy over there that the woman in the condo was injured or sick and lying on the floor inside. I forced open the door and found the body."

"Nobody has been inside since then?"

"No, sir."

Bobby extracted a card of nicotine gum from his jacket pocket and punched a piece through the foil. "Okay, I'll go in and take a look. I assume Crime Scene and the coroner are on their way."

Again, "Yes, sir." From the look on the young officer's face, Bobby thought this might be Regan's first body. Always a milestone.

Before checking out the scene he went to speak with the distraught man sitting on the steps to the street. "I'm Detective Burns. You're the person who discovered the body?"

The man popped to his feet like a jack-in-the-box. "Yes, I came to check on Grace and saw her in there. I called the police right away. I already told everything to the officer."

"Yes, I just wanted to ask you a couple of questions. First, can you confirm your name?"

"My name is Doug, Doug Willis. I can't really tell you much. I just came to see if she was all right ... and she wasn't."

"Are you a friend of the victim?"

"Victim? You mean somebody did this?"

"We don't really know what happened here. But you came to check on her because you know her, right?"

"Yes, she's a good friend; we were in college together. We work in the same office. She didn't come to work today and when I called there was no answer. I

tried several times and then when she didn't show up by lunchtime, I came over here to see what was going on. We were supposed to have lunch, like we always do on Friday. We were going to try out that new Asian fusion place on Clement..."

Bobby put his hand on the man's shoulder, mostly to stop the flood of words. "So, you came and knocked on the door and when nobody answered what did you do?"

Doug turned toward the building. "I climbed up on that stair railing to see if she was in there, and I saw her on the floor."

"Did you recognize her?"

"No, I couldn't see very well; the lights were off and I just assumed it was her."

"All right, then what did you do?"

"I called you, the police I mean. The officer over there came in a few minutes and he forced the door. We thought maybe she was just hurt and we didn't know who else would have a key."

The Crime Scene van pulled up on the street. "The officer has your contact information. You can leave. We will be in touch soon. You'll need to come to the station and sign a statement."

"Can't I wait until you find out what happened? It seems wrong to just leave her alone here."

"I know, but you aren't leaving her alone and we need to be able to do our job." Bobby paused. "We'll take good care of her. There's nothing you can do now."

"I guess I could go back to the office, but what would I tell everyone?" The man hesitated for a moment. "Maybe I'll just go home."

Doug glanced up toward the condo door once more and then, stuffing his hands in his pockets, he walked down the steps to Fulton Street.

Bobby pulled disposable gloves from his pocket and slipped them on as he ascended the stairs. The door on the right stood ajar and he carefully pushed it open. The unit was what realtors would call a one-plus bedroom: a step and a half up from a studio and a real bargain at half a million dollars in a city that favored the rich over the hardworking.

Standing in the door he surveyed the tidy living room, the tiny kitchen, and at the back, the bedroom. Small, but still better than his place.

A woman's body lay on the floor adjacent to the kitchen area.

It took just two minutes to complete a walk through the unit. Bed was made, clothes hung up. Two wine glasses and an unopened bottle of white wine sat on the coffee table. Condensation had pooled at the base of the bottle.

He paused at the row of framed pictures arranged on a bookshelf. A tingle of recognition ran down his spine, but then, these were familiar scenes: a group of laughing friends around a table, two smiling skiers posed at the top of a run, a family photo from a happier time. Maybe he had just done this kind of walk-through too many times.

No dishes in the sink, but when he lifted the lid of the garbage can the top item was the black plastic remains of a microwave container. No doubt the single fork was already in the dishwasher.

He flipped on the kitchen overhead light and squatted beside the body.

She lay on her back, her head turned at a sharp angle, and her hair swept across her face. A pool of congealed blood spread out beneath her head.

He carefully pushed back the swath of hair before his breath caught in his throat. Looking closer he reassured himself that this was not the woman he knew. Not her style, not her surroundings—not her. Still, he felt shaken.

The Crime Scene crew had entered the room with their equipment and air of efficiency. The condo felt even smaller than before. He left the crew to their work, pausing once more at the door to look back at the body.

Bobby stopped at the bottom of the steps and lit the cigarette he had bummed off one of the Crime Scene techs.

He'd done everything he could. Now they would wait for someone from the coroner's office to arrive.

At first look it could have been an accident, except that people who have accidents rarely get rid of their laptops and phones and turn off all the lights. He'd noted that her purse remained, and it didn't appear that anyone had ransacked the place, but still, who didn't have a phone or a laptop around? They'd check her car if she had one, and her office, but something felt off here.

A blue and white SUV marked SAN FRANCISCO MEDICAL EXAMINER pulled up behind the Crime Scene van double-parked on the street and Traffic Guy placed an orange cone behind it as Dr. Kirschman climbed out. She was a looker and single. He'd thought about asking her out a couple of times but there was just something strange about a woman who spent her day cheerfully dissecting bodies.

“Good morning, Detective Burns. How are you?” she chirped as she breezed past him up the stairs. Just weird.

He knew that she and Crime Scene would be checking not just the body, but the life of the person that lay there. Doors and drawers would be opened, calendars would be checked. They would keep an eye out for drugs and scraps of paper; whatever would help them know the woman a little better. Dr. Emma Kirschman and the SFPD were thorough and took their time.

The shadow Bobby stood in grew chill and he moved out to the sunny sidewalk keeping an eye out for the tech with the cigarettes. The nicotine patch beneath his shirt itched and he scratched it distractedly. At the bottom of the long street the dome of San Francisco City Hall loomed. Just weeks before it had glowed with rainbow lights and teemed with Pride Day parade participants. Today it had returned to its stately gray self.

A loud horn blast and the screech of tires drew his attention just as an older woman darted across the street in his direction.

Nice, jaywalking right in front of the police. She was oblivious to everything but her target, which appeared to be him.

“Are you the officer in charge here?” She squinted at him through spiky eyelashes framed by thick glasses. She was nicely dressed and tiny. She tilted her head back to peer up at him.

“Yes, ma’am, I guess I am. Can I help you?” He figured she was annoyed by the all the disturbance in her lovely neighborhood.

“Yes, I want you to do something about people lurking around on my landing and unscrewing my porch light.”

To Bobby this complaint ranked right up there with littering and people who didn’t pick up their dog’s droppings.

“Well, ma’am, I’m sorry that someone has been lurking around your house but we are here to investigate a possible crime.”

She waved her hand at him dismissively. “I can see that, but you people didn’t send anybody out when I called so I have to talk to you when I can.”

The argument was valid; they probably hadn’t responded to her complaints with what she would call due consideration, and here he was, a police officer, just standing around doing nothing.

“I’ll tell you what, I have a few minutes. Why don’t you give me your complaint and I will pass it on to the appropriate department?”

The shock of being taken seriously registered on her wrinkled but impeccably made-up visage before she grinned up at him. “You’ll take down notes and everything?”

“Yes, ma’am.” He pulled the black leather notebook and pen from his inside coat pocket.

Before he could change his mind a claw-like, beringed hand latched onto his lower arm and pulled him toward the street. He stopped for a moment and turned to one of the policemen who’d been observing their encounter. “Joe, I’ll be across the street for a minute. Let me know when Dr. Kirschman is done.”

He and the woman darted across the street and up the long flight of stairs to her building. It was a remodeled Victorian perched on this steeply sloped street. As a result, the lower floor was one apartment and reaching the main floor required a significant climb. He was glad he didn’t have to haul groceries up these steps.

“My apartment is here on the right, and Mr. Schlosser is on the left.” She said no more about her neighbor but her tone was dismissive. Bobby figured they were not friends. “Last Wednesday night someone lurked out here on my landing for quite some time, and they unscrewed the porch light so nobody could see them.”

“Did they knock or try to get into your apartment or were they trying to reach the upstairs tenants?”

The woman rolled her eyes at him. “No, this door in the middle is locked and leads up to the upstairs apartment. You ring the bell for them and they have to come down to let you in. Nobody knocked for Mr. Schlosser or me and nobody rang the bell for upstairs. They just stood out here for about half an hour and then they left. They didn’t even have the decency to screw the light bulb back in.”

“What did they do out here for half an hour?”

“Young man, I cannot see through doors and there is no window here, just the peephole. I could see that someone came up here, I could see that the light went out, and I could hear them clomp down the stairs when they left.”

Bobby surveyed the street and noted that he could clearly see Dr. Kirschman kneeling next to the body in the apartment across the street. The drapes were fully open and the lights had been turned on to help their investigation. At night, with the lights on, there would have been a clear view.

“What did you do, Mrs. uh. . . I don’t think you gave me your name.”

“Natalie Woodstock, my name is Natalie Woodstock, and I called you, well not you, but I called the police. They just asked me if anyone was trying to get in and if it was an emergency and then told me someone would drive by.” She clamped her lips shut disapprovingly, “But nobody ever came by and he left after a while.”

“Are you sure it was a man? Has the person been back or has this ever happened before?”

Mrs. Woodstock hesitated for the first time. “No, I guess I don’t know for sure it was a man, but I know I thought it was a man. It felt like a man. It never happened before, but I am going to get me a gun. I already asked my grandson to go to the gun store with me.”

The idea of an armed Mrs. Woodstock the next time someone came up the stairs was not comforting.

“Is the porch light working now? Did you touch the bulb?”

“Yes, I had to drag a step-stool out here to reach it.”

Bobby wrote down Mrs. Woodstock’s story. “I am going to have an officer come over here and fingerprint the light fixture and bulb. I’m afraid they will have to take your fingerprints, as well. Do you know the woman who lived in that condo directly across the street?”

“I didn’t know her. I knew of her; she never closed her drapes, so I probably knew more about her than I should have.”

“Well, then, once I have a better idea what happened there, I may come back to talk to you.”

The woman seemed delighted at the prospect and he left her soothed by his attentions and with the sound advice that getting a good security system was probably a better investment than a gun, no matter what a good deal her grandson had promised her.

As he left her door, he saw that Dr. Kirschman had packed up her bag and was descending the stairs, ready to speak with him. The dead wagon had added to the caravan parked on the street and two attendants waited at the bottom of the stairs to remove the corpse.

CHAPTER ONE

April 15

Grace's name suited her perfectly. She was blessed in so many ways: loving parents, a good education, a good job, a suitable (if sometimes disappointing) boyfriend, a dream condo in San Francisco. What was there to be unhappy about? Until recently, she hadn't been. Then her friend and co-worker, Doug Willis, found his birth father on Heritage.com. Sometime in their early friendship she had told Doug that she was adopted, and though Doug was raised by his mother, he did not know his father. Tenuous though that bond was, they had discussed it many times.

Since Grace was a little girl her parents had always told her she was adopted: specially chosen, their one and only child.

She'd lived in the right neighborhood, took the best vacations, hung out with the right crowd. All of this was something to be grateful for, right?

Then Doug had shown up at work one day, wearing a Cheshire Cat grin and dropping unobtrusive hints about the results of his DNA test from Heritage. At first, she had been happy for him. He was a good friend and he was bubbling over with the excitement of having found his dad.

In the past they had talked about him being raised by a single mom and not having a father figure in his life. About halfway through the second bottle of wine he would tear up a bit about Cub Scout outings and fishing trips he'd missed out on. If she felt especially tipsy, she might chime in about wishing she knew about her real parents, although the comment was more a camaraderie thing than any actual curiosity on her part.

Doug's mom had not been much help in his search. She'd never told him who his father was, just that she and he had not been a good match, and she'd decided to have Doug on her own. He hadn't pressed her for information. It seemed ungrateful to insist on details; it was like telling his mom that she wasn't enough. The latest attempt had ended in tears, for both of them.

Then, one day, over lattes, he had confided to Grace that he had sent a saliva sample to Heritage, just to see if anything popped up. Grace was completely supportive. Poor Doug. It wasn't like he'd had doting adoptive parents like hers.

There was nothing really wrong with Doug's mom. From what Grace could tell, she'd been a pretty good parent, and Doug had not really missed out on anything, except maybe all those imaginary paternal bonding experiences that one

sees in television commercials for high-end cars and Disney cruises. Still, it was better to know where you came from, wasn't it?

A few weeks later, he'd gotten the word. There was a real flesh- and-blood father out there. There was some excitement for a few days around waiting for email responses, then an incredible high over a planned dinner meeting, and just before the big night, a tearful, wine-soaked fear-fest at Grace's condo, most of which Grace couldn't remember, which was probably not a bad thing.

The morning after the big meet-up Grace had been intensely curious about what had happened, but Doug had played it cagey. First, he told her he couldn't tell her anything at the office, all the while making like he was bursting with things to tell. Then Doug insisted that going to lunch wouldn't provide adequate time to tell her everything. Finally, he'd offered to cook for her at his apartment and he would reveal all. "Just break the date with Dick-head, he won't care." Grace's boyfriend, Kevin, was not Doug's favorite person.

If Kevin was surprised at having her change their plans, his response of "Sure babe, no problem, give me a call later in the week. Gotta go," didn't betray any hurt feelings.

Grace went to Doug's firmly determined to have no more than two glasses of wine. She wanted to be able to remember what was said. She brought the wine herself as she had experience with Doug's inability to choose good wine, suspecting that his criteria had more to do with price than quality.

Doug left the office early and went to great effort to reproduce the lavish dinner he'd shared with his dad the evening before. Grace doubted whether she would have wanted to eat the meal of duck breast on a bed of braised escarole accompanied by a parsnip purée and followed by Mexican chocolate lava cakes and crème anglaise on two successive nights if she were Doug. But it was a lovely dinner and paired nicely with the sparkling wine from the Napa Valley.

"Okay, Doug, no fooling now. I am stuffed with incredible food and a little tipsy, so there is nothing you can tell me that will be too much. What happened with your dad?"

"Okay, okay. The dinner was great. Kent, or Dad, was fine. Nice guy, successful, friendly, if a little surprised to have a grown son at this point in his life."

"So, why the big buildup? I was expecting some big deal with all the secrecy."

"Well, the surprise was that Kent brought his partner, Corey."

"Corey?"

"Yes, his partner, Corey. My dad is gay, and that's why he and Mom didn't work it out all those years ago."

Grace took a moment to stare at Doug, open-mouthed, and to reach out and grab the bottle to pour another glass of bubbly.

"Gay? Really? Wow..." It was difficult to decide what to say. "OMG, are you kidding?" didn't seem quite right. Neither did "How lovely for you." She decided to wait and see what came next from Doug.

"I know," he laughed. "What do you say to that? Problem is, the longer they

talked about being together so long, about their fabulous life in the Castro for the past twenty-five years, and about their wonderful trips around the world, the more I wondered if I hadn't been raised by the wrong parent."

"You don't mean that."

"No, not really, but I couldn't help but wonder how things would have been if I'd been born twenty years later, when gay parents were more common."

The conversation wandered around and about and back again, resolving nothing, but also raising doubts in Grace's heretofore incurious mind. What really was the story about her being put up for adoption? Was she abused, abandoned, left in a basket on the church steps? Funny that she had never pursued the question. She didn't even know if her parents knew the whole story. She could ask them, she supposed, but couldn't imagine sitting in their sunny kitchen in Menlo Park and throwing the question out there over hot chocolate. Maybe she could bring it up at Easter dinner with her mother's two brothers, their families, and Dad's parents at the table. She thought not, though she imagined for a moment the stunned silence that would follow the enquiry. Did everyone know all the details except her? It made her uncomfortable even thinking about it, and Grace was not a person who liked discomfort.

At the end of the evening Grace decided that discretion was advised and left her car at Doug's, taking an Uber the few blocks to her condo on Fulton Street.

That discussion triggered Grace, for the first time, to wonder who her "real" parents were, and what the other possibilities for her life had been. Who had given her up, and why, and where were they now? She couldn't imagine a better life than she'd had, but why had her own family not wanted her?

She knew that there were adoption registries where birth parents and the children they gave up could connect if both parties consented. But, how awful would it be to register and discover that your birth parents had not come looking for you?

The next day she bought the Heritage kit. She'd find out if any relatives were lingering out there, hoping to connect with her, without really putting her self-esteem on the line. After all, nobody would know she'd even done it and if there wasn't anyone, she could just forget the whole thing. She didn't even have to send for the kit in the mail; she had seen them on the shelf at the local drugstore, between the in-home pregnancy tests and food allergy kits.

Buying the DNA sample kit and spitting in the little vial was a no-brainer. The hard part was waiting for the results. The website had promised results in four to six weeks and Heritage sent regular updates by email informing her of the progress: "We've received your sample, we've logged in your sample, we are beginning work on your sample." but who really cared? Just give me the darned results, she thought.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lexa M. Mack is an avid mystery reader and writer who lives with her husband, a very fat cat, five chickens, and forty thousand honeybees in the Sierras near South Lake Tahoe. She spends her days blogging about the surprises of retirement and dreaming up creative ways to murder people.