

ROBERT MAX



NO FORCED ENTRY

Be Careful Who You Let In

A Novel

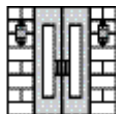
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For Mack, Sid, Howard, and Janet... all of whom, in what seems like a previous life, made this book possible in the most profound ways.

In my present life it is for Lynn, Benny, and Dreamy... in my heart every day.

PROLOGUE

This feels like a fairly safe neighborhood, Dana Bennett thought at 2:15 p.m. as she walked into the food store near the corner of Queens Boulevard and Continental Avenue in the heart of Forest Hills. She'd shopped there before, even though she didn't live in that part of New York City. She was in a carefree mood that pleasant, sunny Sunday afternoon in April, so the idea that she'd never have a chance to eat the food she was about to buy never entered her mind.

She lovingly selected the ingredients for a savory pot roast while ignoring the attention of several men near the register. She paid with cash, crossed the boulevard carrying a reusable grocery sack in each hand, and began the two-block walk to the apartment she visited at least once a month, never looking behind her. Walking slowly despite the weight of the bundles, she found herself enjoying the delightfully perfumed warmth of spring while being careful not to turn an ankle on the cracked and uneven

sidewalk, obscured here and there by a pastel carpet of fallen cherry blossoms. She wore indigo jeans, a powder blue T-shirt, and beige canvas shoes with a woven wedge-heel just high enough to transform an exquisite figure into an irresistible one. The small purse, also beige, she'd hung from her shoulder bumped her right hip in counterpoint to the rhythm of her stroll.

Lulled by the peaceful, non-threatening character of the quiet residential block, she casually absorbed her surroundings—the bloom-strewn string of cars parked along the curb to her left and the freshly-cut fragrant green lawns separating six-story red brick apartment buildings set back from the street. A handful of elderly residents, seated on benches in the shade of graceful elms that made the congested neighborhood feel like a park, smiled hello as she passed. She noticed those mundane afternoon things, but her thoughts were more focused on the next few satisfying hours, as her husband was out of town for the weekend.

She turned right at the second corner, crossed another one-way tree-shrouded street, and headed for the path that led to a well-kept but aging building with brass-trimmed glass entrance doors. One of the inner doors that led to the lobby, fitted with a key-lock that could be buzzed open by any tenant answering the intercom on the wall to the right, was held aside by a hinged doorstep with a rubber foot. With the groceries growing heavier by the minute, she hurried across the terrazzo floor and summoned the elevator at the far end of the lobby. When it arrived, she checked the convex security mirror in the corner at the car's ceiling, as she did in any elevator so equipped, entered knowing there was no one unseen within, and managed to press the button for the fourth floor without putting down the bags. As the door slid closed, she felt a touch of claustrophobia and waited anxiously, trapped by the close graffiti-resistant walls. The whole car shuddered before stopping its ascent, triggering a wave of

queasiness that turned her stomach, only to be exacerbated by the momentary sensation of weightlessness. The door opened and she rushed out, short of breath. She turned left and rang the bell for the apartment situated in the corner of the battleship gray fluorescent-lit hall.

“Hello, Sweetheart. Are you all right? Let me help you,” said the man expecting her. He took the bags from her hands and stepped back into the cozy apartment, holding the door open with his shoe.

She followed him inside, turned left at the first archway, and entered the tiny kitchen, immediately making room for the provisions between the porcelain sink and chrome toaster-oven on the white Formica countertop. She noticed the damp paper towel hanging on a rack perpendicular to the wall as she moved a bare-bones cell phone, plugged into its charger, out of the way.

“It’s always so wonderful to see you,” he said, hugging her. Then he held her shoulders at arm’s length. “You look a little pale. Let me get you something to drink.” He pulled a plain juice glass from cupboards that had been painted gloss white more than a few times. Then he opened the old refrigerator, grabbed a bottle of ginger ale, and filled the glass for her, topping it off as the foaming head settled. “I’m so glad you’re here.” He watched her drink and said, “Does your husband know how lucky he is?”

“I don’t know. Men have a way of taking the women they love for granted.”

“Not this one.”

“I brought your favorite meal,” she said, putting down the glass before unpacking the bags. She noticed the sunlight streaming through the canary yellow lace curtains and began to feel better. “How have you been?”

“To tell you the truth, I’ve been better. There was a little more excitement around here on Friday than I cared for. I’ll tell you

one thing. The neighborhood isn't what it used to be."

"That doesn't sound good. What happened?"

He turned away for a moment, the mere thought of what he was about to recount weakening his knees. He steadied himself by holding the edge of the counter until he was ready to speak. But before he could utter a word, they both heard the doorbell. "It's probably my neighbor. I'll get it."

Dana Bennett finished neatly arranging the groceries and looked through the archway into the living room. Every inch of wall space not occupied by shelves crammed with books was covered with beautiful original paintings arranged like a mosaic right to the ceiling. One of the things she loved most about her visits was the artwork and literature that made the small apartment a pleasant and uniquely interesting haven. She noticed the elaborate collapsible wooden easel set up in the center of the room and made a mental note to ask if he'd finished another painting or was about to start one. Then she heard Maxwell talking to another man.

"What are you doing here? Nobody said you were coming."

"I'm here for the painting. Where is it?"

"I can't give it to you now. You'll have to come back another time."

"I can't do that. Where is it?"

"You don't understand. I can't give it to you today."

"No, *you* don't understand. Give me the damn painting right now."

"All right. Calm down. Take it easy. I'll get it for you. It's under the bed."

"Don't bother. I'll get it myself."

Then Dana saw the man for whom she'd come to cook dinner backing into his own living room.

"What are you doing? I said I'll get it for you. What else do

you want?”

“The cell phone we gave you. I’ll get that, too. I know where to look.”

The first muffled shot hit the artist in the chest. He collapsed in the middle of the room near the empty easel. The man who’d fired once came into view as he approached his victim. Dana saw him point a large silver handgun with a black silencer toward the floor. She flinched as a spit of flame left the gun and the second bullet slammed into the fallen man’s head, dislodging a hearing aid.

She tried to scream, but there was no air in her lungs. She ran from the kitchen, but the man wearing a long black leather coat saw her and reacted quickly, blocking her way before she could reach the front door. She turned and ran for the bedroom, panicked and flailing. Then it felt like she’d been cut in half. She landed face-first on the worn carpet, her chin skidding across the threshold. Barely able to move, she turned her head to the right as slowly as she dared, just in time to see the man standing over her. From the odd angle, the long coat made him seem ten feet tall.

She saw him looking down at her before he squatted near her face for a close-up. Talking to himself, she heard him say, “Wow. What a waste.”

Dana Bennett watched him stand, back away a few feet, and aim the gun at her head. Utterly helpless, she knew what she’d witnessed, she knew she was next, she knew there was nothing she could do to continue living, and she knew she’d never again have the chance to tell her husband that she loved him.

1

The feeling you get in the pit of your stomach when red lights appear in your mirrors is a difficult one to describe, isn't it?

One uniformed officer in an enormous white SUV with massive push-bars on the front bumper and intensely bright alternating flashers in the grill pulled up behind me. I saw him look in the direction of his computer console; a display usually mounted near the center of the dashboard, and surmised he was probably running my new plates. Two minutes later he stepped out. I kept my hands high on the wheel so they would be in plain sight. My window was already down. When he was beside my car, standing slightly behind my door, leaning forward to look in at me, I said, "Hello, Officer."

"Can I see your license, registration, and evidence of insurance, please?"

"Those things are in my wallet. Is it all right if I reach for it?"

"Yes."

“Have I done something wrong?” I asked, digging into my back pocket.

He didn’t answer.

I extricated the requested documents and handed them over. My driver’s license was a temporary certificate, as I hadn’t received the laminated photo version yet. Surrendering my New York license at the DMV when I’d registered the Porsche had stirred mixed feelings. On one hand, I’d been born in New York, learned to drive in New York, and had gotten my first car in New York, all of which may sound a little adolescent or shallow, but that’s still a big deal to a red-blooded American male. Speaking of adolescent and shallow, I’d had my first piece of ass in that car, too, but that’s a different story. On the other hand, giving up my New York license made my relocation and the start of my new life in California official and complete.

I glanced up at the Pine County Deputy as he scrutinized my papers in the sunshine. His name tag read M. Johnson. He was about thirty, maybe five or six years younger than yours truly, and tall enough to make me feel like I was sitting on the ground. He wore a dark green baseball cap with a seven-pointed gold star embroidered above the visor, which was pulled low on his forehead above a mean-looking pair of wraparound sunglasses. His uniform was particularly crisp, much more so than the sloppy cops I’d dealt with in New York City. I could see the outline of Kevlar body armor beneath his tan uniform shirt.

“Are you having a problem here, Mr. Bennett?”

“No, Sir. There’s no problem.”

“Is there a reason you’ve stopped at this particular location?”

“Actually, there is.” I knew he’d ask something like that. “I’m new to the area and I’ve discovered that this spot resembles a painting my uncle painted many years ago. I’m just looking around.” I knew he’d heard his fair share of strange stories on

the side of the road, but I would have bet anything he hadn't heard that one. I plucked my iPhone from the passenger seat, recalled the photo I'd snapped of the painting on Monday night, and handed it to him.

He held it beside my head in the shadow of the Porsche's roof so it would be out of the noonday sun. He viewed it perfunctorily before returning it to me. "Do you have any other plans here, Mr. Bennett?"

"Not really."

"I've seen you parked here several times this week at sunset. You're not looking for trouble, are you, Robert?"

"No. I'm not."

"You're not casing that house, are you?"

"No, Sir."

"You're not stalking someone there, are you?"

"No. I'm not. I told you why I stopped. That painting has been in my family for years. I moved here from New York a week ago. I noticed the similarity on my way home from my new job in Placerville and I'm curious about the coincidence."

He stared at me, not knowing what to make of my explanation. I suppose the whole thing did sound pretty odd.

"Wait here. Stay in your car," he said, before returning to his vehicle with my papers.

I watched him in the mirror. He got behind the wheel again, took off his shades, spoke into his radio and waited, watching me watching him. As the minutes passed, the trepidations I'd had earlier about embarking on this questionable quest for who knows what returned to haunt me. To be completely honest, I'm not really sure what I was hoping to find in the white house that was situated in a small clearing across the river, but the more I'd thought about it, the more I thought it would turn out badly, this time lucky if I didn't get arrested for trespassing, or shot. Still I'd

kept going. It was a beautiful day for a spring drive in the mountains. I had a full tank of premium and nothing to do on the first Saturday after a week at my new job. In a way, it was just one of those things. You know you shouldn't do it. You know it's probably pointless. You know you could be courting disaster. But you do it anyway. And now, here I was.

I expected him to approach my car once more after speaking again into his radio, but instead he just sat there watching me through the windshield. I could see the contemplation on his face and knew that the cynical law enforcement mentality dictating his next move found it difficult, if not impossible, to believe me. Then I had the sense that he began to write something down, although I couldn't see his hands.

As the minutes ground by, I became acutely aware of the thin cold sweat that had erupted under my collar. Then, in the mirror, I saw him step out again. He adjusted his equipment belt, apparently making sure his gun was where it was supposed to be, and returned to my door.

"You look like a pretty smart guy, Mr. Bennett," he said, returning my papers. "Does the phrase 'a word to the wise is sufficient' mean anything to you?"

I looked up at him, but couldn't see his eyes because the shades were back in position. I nodded.

"Good. Listen to me very carefully. I know who you are. I know what you drive. And I know where you live. Do you understand what I'm saying to you, Robert?"

If I were truly stupid I would have said something like: *Are you threatening me?* Admittedly, I've put my foot in my mouth a few times over the years, but I was determined to not let this be yet another such memorable moment. I nodded again.

"I didn't hear you?"

Suddenly it felt as if I'd joined the army. "I understand."

“Good. Have a nice day, Mr. Bennett.”

He made it halfway back to his vehicle before stopping short, pivoting, and returning to my door. “Would you mind showing me that photo again, Mr. Bennett?”

I reached over, picked up my phone, recalled the picture, and handed it to him.

He took off his sunglasses and studied it carefully this time, comparing the painting to the scene across the river.

I watched his hard brown eyes for a glimmer of recognition. Knowing that police officers, like artists, are trained observers, often seeing telling details ordinary people may not notice, I found myself hoping for some validation.

After giving it ample consideration, the deputy’s shrug doused my mounting excitement like a cold shower. “Personally, I think you’re making more out of this than necessary,” he said. “I see a white house next to a river, but there are more differences here than similarities. I think you’re just wasting your time.”

Really? Was the connection luring me here all in my mind?

He returned my phone, strode back to his SUV, climbed in, and drove away.

This encounter with the police wasn’t nearly as frustrating as my last. “I’m sorry, Mr. Bennett,” the detective had said in New York as the investigation lost steam. “We’re doing everything we can, but unfortunately we don’t have much to go on.” That’s what they’d said until they started looking at me—for the second time.

I’d been married in my old life to a girl I was absolutely crazy about, head over heels madly in love and all that happy horseshit, until she was murdered, one of two people shot to death in what New York’s Finest called a double homicide. Of course, the cops