

Murderers' Island – First 10 Pages

Chapter 1

There are many reasons for screams: triumph, glee, a warning, fear. But the screams resonating in Frank Dugan's head came from terror, from someone dying. He'd heard them several times that day and once again as he entered his boss's office at the San Diego Police Department. His summons concerned a peculiar thing a man whispered as he lay dying. Frank Dugan took dying declarations seriously, especially when they included his name.

Dom Petrillo, the weathered homicide captain at the San Diego Police Department, sat at his desk staring at a report. Frank noted his pained expression and anticipated bad news as he approached.

"Yesterday morning at around ten, the dying man whispered to an EMS technician, 'Detective Frank Dugan should know,'" Petrillo said and looked up at Frank. "Then he died."

"I heard."

Frank pushed his hair off his forehead, gnawed on his lower lip, and waited for his superior to get to the point.

"I need you to drive to Huntington Beach to investigate the incident that's left this jewelry store owner dead. I don't know why your name would've come up in a robbery ninety miles away, but I intend to find out."

Petrillo slid a paper across his desk to his detective.

"We don't have jurisdiction in Orange County, but we can make inquiries about cases involving our officers. Here's the info you'll need."

"Today?" Frank asked, as he picked up the paper and studied its contents.

"While it's hot. Now saddle up," Petrillo said and pointed to the door.

Frank had requested the day off to celebrate his anniversary with his wife and wasn't happy about the disruption of his plans, but he knew well that murder is never respectful of special occasions. And he knew something else. The murdered jewelry store owner named on the paper had been the very same man who'd sold him the engagement ring he'd placed on Amy's finger more than six years ago when he'd asked her to marry him.

An hour later, Frank's black Bronco roared north through Irvine on the 405 at 10:40 AM. If all went well in Orange County he could be back home by afternoon, where he and Amy could happily seize the rest of the day.

Maybe the screams had channeled to him from the dying jeweler. If that were true, it might identify the source of the screams. Maybe put them to rest. But why was he hearing them now? The man in Huntington Beach had died twenty-four hours ago.

* * *

Amy Dugan stood at her curbside mailbox watching the slow passing car and saw something unsettling about the driver's sinister smile, like he knew something about her, something private. She locked stares with his dead-black eyes and felt a chill, as if she were being examined by a shark.

The black sedan idling past her home would hardly pique any curiosity, but the flinty gazes of the four strangers never left Amy as the car crept past. It triggered in her a primal fear and her eyes followed the car as it turned left at the end of the block. Her skin felt clammy and she could feel her pulse throbbing in her eyes, making them dilate with each pump of her heart. Amy turned from the road and looked over to her neighbor, Barbara Chalmers, working in the yard next door.

"I suppose you thought having two children would stop men from looking," Barbara said as she rose with effort from her flower garden.

"Looks from my husband are all I want," Amy said, retrieving the mail from her box.

Barbara leaned on the rail fence separating their lawns.

"My nephew's a lucky man," Barbara said. "Got the best looking gal in San Diego County."

"You're pretty hot yourself."

"Used to be. Not so much at fifty-five."

"Youth is overrated. We don't know things like you do. I'm surprised some good-looking man hasn't hooked up with a catch like you."

Barbara waved off the comment like it was a pesky gnat.

"I see Emily, but where's the little guy?" Barbara asked, angling her head toward Amy's rancher.

Amy looked at her house and shook an admonishing finger at a blonde girl perched in the bay window pressing a camera button.

"Alex might still be in napping. Have to get him up or he won't sleep tonight for the sitter."

"Going partying?"

"Anniversary dinner," Amy said. "Six years today."

"My goodness, I had forgotten that. Congratulations, dear. What's six years? Wood? China?"

"I'm pretty sure it's candy, but I hope Frank thinks it's a good steak and cabernet."

"I've got a beautiful potted amaryllis out back I'll bring over later to celebrate the occasion."

"You don't have to give us anything, Barbara."

"Sure I do," Barbara said. "You're family, about the only folks I have now."

"Frank has made you his second mom."

"My sister died far too young."

"Love you, Barb," Amy said, waved goodbye, and strode to her house.

The little girl in the window snapped more photos as her mother approached the front door. Amy made funny faces at her and gyrated like a rock dancer gone wild. The girl laughed and bared most of her milk teeth, then disappeared from the window.

Amy entered the house and dropped the mail on a hall table. She scurried to the giggling five-year-old, and scooped her up in her arms.

“Why, Emily Ann Dugan, why are you being so rambunctious?” Amy said. “And where’s your brother?”

“Alex’s watching TV in the den,” Emily said.

Amy let Emily slide gently to the floor and took her hand.

“Let’s just go see what Alex’s watching,” Amy said and tugged her daughter down a long hallway.

In the den, Alex, age three, sat on the floor cross-legged, a foot from a TV screen blaring cartoons.

“Let’s get a shot of the three of us to show daddy,” Amy said, taking the camera from Emily.

Amy fiddled with the camera for a moment, and then sat on the sofa. Alex and Emily took positions on either side of their mom and leaned into her.

“All right, everyone, say ‘Hi, Daddy,’” Amy said as she held the camera at arm’s length in front of them.

The trio giggled and said the greeting that made them smile and Amy clicked the picture.

“Alex’s cartoons are too loud,” Emily said.

Amy rose from the sofa and handed the camera to Emily.

“You two stay here and watch TV while I get ready to go shopping for a new dress,” Amy said. “Mommy and daddy are going out tonight.”

Emily stuffed the camera between the sofa cushions and picked up the TV remote.

“Why?” Emily asked.

“Because it’s our anniversary.”

“Anna...bersury...What’s that?”

“It’s the birthday of when mommy and daddy got married.”

“I like birthdays,” Alex said and looked at his mother. “You get cake and toys.”

“Is Jill going to come over and watch us?” Emily asked.

“Yes, she is.”

“I like Jill,” Emily said. “She plays hide and seek with us.”

“I bet that’s fun. Do you hide in good places?”

“I do, but Alex always goes under the kitchen sink. Jill always finds him.”

“Yeah, the sink’s not as good as in the pantry,” Amy said.

“Nope, ’cause Jill takes a long time to find me.”

Emily pointed the remote at the TV and changed the channel to a kid’s movie.”

“Hey,” Alex said. “I want cartoons.”

“Play nice, you two,” Amy said and slipped out of the den and headed for the master bedroom.

The dresser in the bedroom featured something Amy hadn’t noticed before. A small envelope leaned against a framed photograph of a young man in a dress blue, U.S. Marine uniform standing with Amy in a white wedding dress. She picked up the envelope, pulled out a white card, and read its brief message.

Happy Anniversary to my best friend.

Six years and still mad about you.

Love always,

Frank

Amy smiled and began removing her gardening clothes.

* * *

The warm shower felt good on Amy’s skin as she luxuriated in the cascading water and lathered in its flow. She rinsed and squeezed the water from her short blonde hair with her palms and scrubbed her back with a long-handle brush. As she turned to rinse, a dark form loomed beyond the translucent plastic curtain.

It was too tall to be a child.

The brush slipped from her shaking hand and clattered on the tile.

Chapter 2

A masculine voice spoke from inside the bathroom.

“Need a towel, pretty lady?”

Amy gathered the shower curtain around her nakedness and peeked around its edge. A burly young man ogled her and extended a towel in her direction hanging by his finger. His dark eyes surveyed her body from head to knees.

“What do you want?” she said, trembling.

“Turn off the water and we’ll talk. No one’s gonna hurt you.”

Amy snatched the towel from his hand and spread the curtain to shield herself as much as possible.

“I’ll be outside,” the man said and stepped out of the bathroom and closed the door.

The children. Where are my children? I need a weapon. There is no weapon. The window’s too small and too high to climb out. My kids are in the house at the mercy of strangers. She cursed the situation for being the one time she’d neglected to take her phone with her. She had to locate Emily and Alex. That was first.

Amy tightened the towel wrapped around her, angry that she’d left her clothes and a robe in the bedroom. She eased open the bathroom door and peeked into the hall. No one was in sight. Low sounds from the TV filtered in from the family room. That was a good sign.

Did the man leave?

She inched along the hall toward the den where she’d left the children. When she reached the opening to the master bedroom, the burly man was standing inside, inches from the doorframe. Behind him were three young men. Amy noted that they all wore dark green mechanic’s coveralls.

“In here,” burly said and directed her by a firm grip on her upper arm with a latex-gloved hand.

“Where are my children?” Amy asked.

“They’ll be fine,” burly said and pushed Amy into a low boudoir chair. “Do you know why we’re here?”

“I can’t imagine,” Amy said, closing the space between her thighs. “If it’s for money, you’ve come to the wrong place. We’re just getting by on one income and with two kids to feed and ...”

Amy stopped, realizing her nerves had her rambling.

“How about all that jewelry your husband owns?”

“Jewelry? He has a wedding ring and a Timex watch.”

“C’mon, lady. Don’t you be bullshittin’ ole Ernie. What about the jewelry store chain? Owns about eight of ‘em, I figure.”

Amy studied the men and noted their characteristics like the police wife she was. Frank would want to know everything about this crew. The heavy-set leader seemed to be about 30, 6-foot-2, and 200 pounds-plus. Besides his demon-dark eyes, he had a surly mouth, bushy eyebrows and long stringy red hair that extended past his shoulders, a bad dye job at best.

“Sir, you have the wrong people. My husband works for the city and makes enough to keep us off welfare, but that’s about it,” Amy said, folding her arms against the towel on her breasts to steady her quivering.

“This house is right nice.”

“And comes with a 30-year mortgage. We pay by the month to live here. Want to see our bank statements?”

“Naw, I wanna see them jewels,” Ernie said and leaned to within an inch of Amy’s face.

Amy recoiled from his foul breath and turned her face to the side.

“Check the jewelry box,” Amy said, pressing into the chair back. “You’ll see what I have. Costume jewelry, that’s what. Now where are my children? I need to see my children. *Now.*”

Ernie pulled Amy to her feet and shoved her toward the bed.

“Let’s check out that jewelry box. Then we go see them kids.”

“Where are they?” The black man asked, his long raven hair pulled back into a ponytail.

Amy made a mental picture of his trimmed beard.

“They’re in the den watching television,” Amy said. “Please don’t hurt them.”

“Ahh, they’re in your nice little family room watchin’ the television,” Ernie said. “They’ll be just fine. Trust me, ole Ernie don’t wanna hurt nobody. Now about that jewelry box ...?”

Amy pointed to the dresser and sat on the bed. Ernie strode to the small chest and stirred through its scant contents. He glared at Amy and slammed the top down so hard the mirror behind the dresser banged against the wall.

“I’m through foolin’ with you, lady,” Ernie said and nodded at the black man. “Direct traffic, Dwayne.”

“Scott, take the front of the house,” Dwayne said. “Mitch, you watch the kids.”

A pale skinny man, with tattoos of teardrops below one of his eyes, left the bedroom and turned left in the hallway. The second man, a long-haired, latter-day hippie with a bandana tied around forehead, stayed back and leered at Amy.

“Hey, boss, any chance she drops that towel?” the hippie said.

“Mitch, you get your ass in there with them kids,” Ernie said.

Mitch frowned, ambled outside, and closed the bedroom door. Ernie turned his attention back to Amy.

“We have good information that you’re the owners of Duggan’s Fine Jewelry stores that are all over southern California,” Ernie said. “You even have a store on Rodeo Drive. Now don’t you be tellin’ me *that* one sells costume jewelry.”

“Our name is Dugan, D-U-G-A-N, not Duggan with two Gs,” Amy said. “Our names aren’t even pronounced the same. The Duggans are billionaires. My God, I wish. This is Coronado Estates, not Bel Air.”

Dwayne grabbed a purse on the vanity bench and pulled out a wallet and handed it to Ernie, who flipped through the credit cards and stopped at a driver’s license.

“Looks like we got it wrong boys,” Ernie said and chucked the wallet across the room.

“Dwayne, check and make sure Mitch is takin’ good care of them kids.”

Dwayne left the bedroom and closed the door. Ernie stared at Amy and grinned, then stepped to the door and locked it. Amy shot to her feet, her jaw and fists clenched.

“Now, now. ma’am. No need to get yaself all riled up. Ole Ernie don’t wanna hurt nobody, but I am a shade disappointed they’s no jewels like we figured. So I’m thinkin’ maybe Mrs. D-U-G-A-N can provide somethin’ to trade off my loss.”

Amy knew there were no guns in the house. Frank wouldn’t allow them around curious children unless he was there. But, sick with fear, she had to arm herself with something. Amy was certain her life depended on it. She rolled across the bed to the nightstand and snatched the

brass candlestick lamp, yanking the cord from the outlet. She stood across the bed brandishing the lamp, trying to tamp down an unquenchable fear.

Ernie strolled around the bed and approached Amy. With each step he fondled the hilt of a large knife sheathed on his belt.

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Dwayne entered the den and stood near Mitch, who sat on the sofa playing with an automatic knife. He glared at Emily who rose from the floor and tugged Alex to his feet, gripping his hand. Alex frowned at his sister and protested, but Emily placed a finger against her lips to silence him. She held out the remote control to Dwayne, her tiny hand shaking.

“You want to watch TV with us? You can pick.”

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When Ernie got close Amy swung the lamp in a downward arc, but Ernie wrenched it from her hand and tossed it on the floor. She vaulted onto the bed to get clear of him, but he grabbed her ankle and pulled her back. Her towel fell away and she found herself naked and sprawled on the comforter.

“My husband’s a cop,” Amy screamed. “A detective. A former Marine. He’ll kill you if you hurt us.”

Ernie fell on top of Amy and pinned her arms.

“I like a woman with spice, especially blondes with blue eyes and cute little noses.”

Screams came from the hall. The horrific screams of children.

Amy summoned the strength to power Ernie off her enough to bolt toward the hall. Before she could unlock the door, Ernie had cupped his beefy hand under her chin and ripped her to the floor.

More screams. Not as loud this time.

Her eyes blurred with tears.

Amy from flat on her back stretched her arms for the door, hysterical, blubbering.

“Alex ... Emily ... Mommy can’t get to you ...”

Ernie slapped Amy in the face so hard she lost consciousness.

Ernie picked up Amy’s limp body and threw her on the bed like she was a side of beef. He placed his knife on the bed and peeled off his clothes.

Voices from the hall filtered into the bedroom as Ernie prepared himself for some personal enjoyment.

“You done in there?” Dwayne asked outside the door.

“In a few minutes,” Ernie said. “Keep an eye on out front.”

Ernie got on the bed and hovered over Amy. He parted her legs and noticed that she was coming to, twitching. He'd heard tales of hunters who'd neglected to make sure that a deer was dead. Hunters who got their asses impaled by a thrashing rack of sharp antlers.

Ernie picked up his knife and made sure his quarry would never harm him.

Chapter 3

Judd Kemp arrived at the location of the disturbance and burst from his unmarked car. He was the highest-ranking and most seasoned detective in the San Diego Police Department, but when he heard the 9-1-1 request for assistance, the address sent an icy chill down his spine. The emergency was at 710 Rosita Lane, the home of his young detective partner, Frank Dugan.

Police and medical service vehicles lined the street and neighbors huddled in worried groups as the Dugan property was taped off as a crime scene. Two officers directed over-interested gawkers to remain across the street, well away from the work of the investigators and EMS personnel.

"Has the ME arrived, sergeant?" Judd asked one of the army of uniforms spread out over the grounds.

"Inside, detective," the officer said, pointing with a shaking hand. "With the lieutenant."

"Lieutenant Graham?"

"Yes, sir. He was first on the scene."

Judd noted the quavering voice and the reddened eyes of the young officer.

"You know who called it in?"

"Next door neighbor. Woman over there next to the fence."

Judd took a good look at the bereaved woman, staring dazed at the ground with sad red eyes. Her left elbow on her knee supported her forehead, her right hand crushed a handkerchief. He turned back to the sergeant.

"Any word from Detective Dugan?"

"He's on his way back from Huntington Beach. He was called twenty minutes ago."

"He know anything?"

"Dispatch told him there was an emergency at his home."

"When he arrives, don't let him inside," Judd said.

"He's a black belt in karate, detective."

"I don't care if you need ten unies to subdue him. He *does not* get into that house. Understood?"

"Yes, sir."

The detective went to the front door, glanced at the "The Dugans" nameplate, and entered the rancher. Nothing in the foyer and living room looked out of place. The adjoining dining room

was as neat as TV ads he'd seen for home renovation. Candles and the fresh flowers on the dining table betrayed nothing; chairs perfectly arranged around the table. He heard voices in the hall and followed the sound.

Lieutenant Mike Graham appeared from the hall bathroom and intercepted Judd.

"How'd they get in?" Judd asked.

"Jimmied the back door."

"No one heard that?"

Graham walked down the hall and stood in the bedroom doorway. Judd followed.

"Recent water in the shower. She might not have heard anything," Graham said.

Judd peered around Graham into the bedroom.

"You sure you want to see what's in here?" Graham said.

"I have to," Judd said and pushed past the big man.

Everything in that room defied the peaceful setting of the quiet neighborhood and orderly front yard, the kids' bikes tucked near the garage. The space teemed with crime scene technicians performing their forensic work. The medical examiner directed the photographing of Amy Dugan's body, lying naked on a bed splattered with blood. A pillow under her head was matted with red, her blond hair bloody and tousled in every direction. Her mouth was agape as if in a silent scream and her eyes were frozen wide open. Her athletic torso had been slashed so badly Judd had to avert his gaze.

Judd lowered his chin to his chest and shut his eyes. He clutched the door jamb to steady himself. A minute passed before he reopened his eyes and panned the rest of the room where a crime scene investigation team in disposable blue jumpsuits and booties scoured the carpet, walls, and furniture for evidence. A man with a dusting machine and brush spread granular aluminum flake dust on all non-porous surfaces and objects. A photographer followed him and snapped photos where he was directed, and a third CSI made notations on a pad as they progressed around the room.

Doctor James Shakura backed away from the bed and turned his attention to Detective Kemp.

"I'd like to move her before Frank gets here," the ME said.

"Can you close her eyes?" Judd said.

Shakura nodded at a woman near the headboard who gently drew down Amy's lids.

"The den is next," the ME said, moving toward the door.

"The kids?" Judd asked.

Shakura glanced at him for a moment and brushed past and into the hall.

Judd Kemp followed Shakura toward the den, abruptly stopped and pivoted back toward the front of the house. He had a feeling. It was a sense that struck detectives often. A premonition. Not always good.

When Judd looked out the large window in the front room the uniforms were still out on the lawn and driveway in dark blue clusters, some still searching, but many smoking and sipping. Neighbors shuffled to the crime scene tape and gawked with anxious faces. Judd searched for the

lady who'd been at the fence next door, but she was gone. A moment later, the manifestation of Judd's gut feeling appeared. It was a black Bronco.

Frank Dugan leapt from the car and let it drift into the curb as he dashed for the house. Judd bolted for the door and crashed through it to outside. Two uniformed officers intercepted Frank in the driveway, but he shook them off like they were annoying flies. The young detective barged through a second wave of men and spun his way in Judd's direction like an angry fullback. Judd extended his hands, to cushion Frank's momentum.

"Frank, listen to me," Judd said as Frank rammed him against the front door. "You can't go in there."

Judd, the larger man, grasped Frank's jacket at the collar.

"Get out of my way, Judd," Frank said, his blue eyes wide and piercing. "I want to see my family."

"You do not need to see what's in there," Judd said.

"Who are you to tell me what to see in my home? You going to pull rank on me, lieutenant?"

"Please, Frank. I'm begging you as a friend."

"Get out of my way."

Judd released his grip and moved aside. Frank shot into the house. Moments later everyone outside turned toward the screams coming from the house. A man's agonized voice wailed like a wounded animal.

"Aw, my God, my God! Why ... why ... why?"

Men and woman near the house bowed their heads and closed their eyes in helplessness. Judd knew that all those nearby would go home that night and gather their loved ones close.

All save one.

