

*As the Bullets Drop*



*A short story by*  
*Kathy Holmes*

# **As The Bullets Drop**

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**Dedication**

To my father

**As the Bullets Drop**

I counted the bullets as they dropped onto the floor and bounced onto the bed: 1-2-3-4-5. Where was the sixth bullet? Had it already been fired or was it still in the gun? Would his bumbling cause him to fire the gun by mistake? If it was a mistake. For in that moment I began to fear that my mother had been right all along--this man was not to be trusted.

This is the story of how I, Debra Hunt, found myself in a remote cabin in the California Sierras without a car and a cell phone that couldn't get a signal while bullets were falling all around me.

I was meeting my father, Mr. Bill French, for the first time at my ripe old age of thirty. And what my mother had told me about him was enough to scare the crap out of me—especially with bullets falling all around me. I had started to believe his side of the story, but I was second-guessing myself and wondering, for a moment, if my mother was right—I was naïve and too trusting.

Just when I was asking myself, “What the hell do I do now?” his wife, Charlotte, called from the

kitchen, “The potion is ready,” or was that, “The pomegranate soup is ready?” Either way, it sounded strange to me, and I had to come up with an escape plan, in case I needed one.

My father retrieved his bullets without incident, and I headed for the kitchen. Passing by the front door, I saw a key rack with a key marked “spare car key.” I exhaled with relief, thinking that if I had to, I could make a getaway in his car.

Before we sat down at the kitchen table, I excused myself, “Oh, sorry, I forgot to wash up,” and headed for the hall bathroom. But first, I dashed into the guest bedroom and retrieved my cell phone, hoping to test it just in case. Maybe it would work, and he only wanted me to think it didn’t.

“Come on, come on, come on,” I said, impatiently waiting for the phone to power on. “Searching, searching, searching” for a signal. Yeah, yeah, yeah.

“Hurry up in there, the soup’s getting cold,” I heard my father say, although I wondered if Pomegranate soup was supposed to be served cold. And then I heard his voice so close I wanted to scream as he opened the unlocked bathroom door, “I told you it’s impossible to get a signal from here.”

I jumped out of my skin and mumbled something about “Hoping to check my messages” to which he replied, “You can check your messages from our land phone.”

“Okay, thanks,” I said. “I’ll do that after dinner.”

The sky had grown dark, and it was eerily quiet outside. The only sound I heard was the three of us slurping on our soup. The Pomegranate soup was lukewarm but tasty, especially topped off with raisins, a specialty in this part of the country. So intent on my soup, I was startled when I heard the distant howling of a coyote or a wolf. I glanced up to see their reaction, but both were enjoying a loaf of sourdough bread and hadn't noticed. Perhaps it was just part of life up here.

But a loud banging on the door was so noticeable that all three of us jumped out of our seats.

My father grabbed a small revolver I hadn't seen hidden in the drawer next to him, and he cautiously approached the door. Grabbing a gun just to answer your front door while eating dinner seemed a bit extreme.

He peeked through the window pane to the right of the front door and cocked his gun, opened the door slowly, and I heard a thump, thump! By this time, Charlotte and I ran toward the door and saw what looked like a woman wearing a red hooded jacket face down in the doorway.

"Is she dead?" Charlotte asked as calmly as if she were asking if the bread was done.

"I don't know, but either way, I don't want her in our house," my dad bellowed.

"Well, whoever it is, you can't just shove her back outside, close the door and leave her there," I

surprised myself by saying because that's exactly what it looked like he was trying to do.

"Who is it?" was my next question. The two of them looked at each other, so I leaned down to see for myself. She looked dead to me--there was blood gushing from a gash on her forehead like one of those wax figures in the Chamber of Horrors in the Hollywood Wax Museum.

"Don't touch the body," my father yelled, thereby saving me from getting my fingerprints on a dead body. I pulled my hand back and leaned down closer and let out a primal scream, with both Charlotte and my dad leaping so high in the air, I thought they would literally go through the roof.

"That's my mother. And she's dead. What have you done to my mother?"

"That's not your mother."

"Yes, it is. I'd know that nose anywhere." My mother was actually proud that her nose looked like Barbra Streisand's.

My dad leaned down again, and shook his head. "That is not your mother, Debra. Believe me, I may not have seen her in thirty years, but I know that is not your mother."

"Look, I know my mother when I see her. And she looks like she's dead. And she's on your doorstep. Now what's going on?" I insisted on getting answers.

"I think we'd better call the police and sort this out." My dad stood up, and reached for the phone.

In a state of shock, all I could say was, “No kidding.”

I was in such a state of shock and highly suspicious of anything this man did. Charlotte seemed more trustworthy, although if she were in cahoots with my father, how could I trust her? She offered me a glass of brandy, and I eagerly accepted it and sat down, waiting for the police to arrive. If he had really called the police. What if he were faking it? What if I were his next victim? I was starting to panic even more, but then felt my body relax from the warmth of the brandy.

What if Charlotte had put something in my drink to knock me out? Then what? Dispose of my body? Bury me alive? Had she poisoned me? My imagination knew no bounds. I had to get out of here. But how? I had no car, and I no longer saw the spare key on the key rack. And, even if I had a means of escape, it was all futile anyway. When I tried to stand up, my legs protested, and I collapsed back into the leather chair.

I must have dozed off in the chair, but I didn't know for how long. All I knew was that I was startled awake by the sound of men's voices at the front door. When I was able to open my eyes and focus, I noticed that there were two police officers standing in the doorway. The taller, slimmer one with the balding blond hair approached me and said, “I

understand you know the victim.” Somehow he made it sound like some sort of accusation.

I jumped up out of my seat.

“Sit back down, please, miss.”

“That woman is my mother. And he killed her.”

I pointed to my father.

My father started protesting, “She is not your mother, and I didn’t kill anybody.”

The second police officer, shorter with dark hair and a bushy mustache, stepped in, “Now, now, let’s just remain calm and get to the bottom of this.” He turned to me and asked, “Now, what is your relationship to Mr. French here?”

“Well, I’ve been told, by my mother,” and I pointed to the dead body, “that he’s my father.”

The blond officer stepped in and directed his question to my father, “Is this woman your daughter?”

My father looked at me and said, “I have every reason to believe she is, but this is the first time we have met.”

The officers looked at each other as if trying to determine what their next move should be. A knock sounded on the door and the dark-haired officer headed for it, opened the door and let in two men in white coats with what looked like a hospital bed on wheels.

I jumped up again before anybody could stop me, “Where are you taking my mother?”

The blond officer grabbed me by the wrist, “Look, miss, let us perform our jobs. Just relax. We

need to run an ID check on this woman, and then we'll get to the bottom of this," and he placed his business card in my hand. Lt. Brett Andrews it read.

He turned toward the door, and then faced the three of us still sitting in the living room, "Uh, don't leave town--any of you. We'll be back for further questioning once we get an official identification of the body."

Oh great. So now I was stuck here. Well, at least, the police seemed legitimate, and they knew I was here. So if I suddenly disappeared, they'd know where to look. I should be safe for now.

Charlotte offered to warm up the dinner that had been interrupted, but I declined. I headed for the guest room, shut the door and locked it. I tried my cell phone again, but still no service. I guess my father was right about that part--too remote for cell phone service.

I could use their land phone—after all, they had offered, and there was an extension in the guest room. If I could just get over onto the other side of the bed. My legs felt heavy and my head felt light. The room was starting to turn sideways. No matter how hard I tried I couldn't right myself, reach for the phone. The shock must have worn off, and I was feeling the full force of realizing that my mother was dead.

I awoke to pure, white silence. The kind of

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silence that is only accomplished by a deep, winter snowfall. My tongue felt thick, but I was able to slide out of the bed near the window and see the white stuff blanketing the entire mountainside. Noticing the pink princess phone on that side of the bed, I remembered I had started to call home when I zonked out. Then it hit me--the reason for having collapsed last night. My mother was dead, and it appeared to have been murder. I listened carefully for any sign of life in the house and heard none. Now was the time.

I stealthily reached over to the phone extension and lifted it off the cradle, listening for a dial tone. There wasn't one. Forgetting my resolve to be mouse-like quiet so as not to disturb anyone, I clicked on the receiver over and over again, trying to force a dial tone.

There was a light knock on the bedroom door. I hopped back under the covers and said, "Come in." It was Charlotte, offering a cup of coffee, which I accepted. "How are you doing this morning, Debra? We looked in on you last night, and you were dead to the world." I didn't like how easily she said "dead."

I heard my father roaring out in the hallway, "Charlotte, the phone lines are still down." And then he stuck his head in the doorway, "Oh, there you are. Charlotte, the phone lines are still down, and the roads haven't been cleared yet."

Roads? Was he leaving town, even though we were clearly told not to?

“Debra, as soon as you’re up and had some breakfast, I think we need to talk. There’s something I think I should tell you.”

According to the police, my father told me, the dead woman’s name was Jeanie Brown, born fifty years ago in Denver, Colorado. She moved to Los Angeles when she was eighteen, right after her mother left her father. She got an office job at the same company where my birth mother, also named Jeanie, worked full-time while she was pregnant with me. She became close friends with my mother, studied her, copied how she dressed, talked, walked, and even matched her handwriting down to every last dotted i and crossed t.

She noticed that my mother received love letters from my father through the office mail because her mother didn’t approve of their relationship. Her mother let my mother stay with her, but she had to pay room and board. If it wasn’t for the baby, she would have just thrown my mother out. My mother and father had planned to get married once he returned from military duty, and only found out she was pregnant with me after he had left.

That made it easy for this woman to confiscate the letters and write her own version, eventually breaking up with my father, sending him away forever. Then she was able to convince my heartbroken mother, feeling abandoned by my father, to give the

baby to her. The details were all a little hazy to me. It was a little too much to take in all at once. Somewhere in the back of my mind I wondered where my real mother was now. But the bigger question in the forefront of my mind was, "How did this woman end up murdered on my father's doorstep?"

I also thought that was awfully fast work for such a detailed police report, and I made note that I hadn't actually heard this from the police but from my father. And how did he get this report with the phone lines down and the roads blocked?

"In case you're wondering," my father intruded on my thoughts as if he were reading them, "The police are making this case a top priority. In fact, they rode a special police snowmobile just to deliver this report early this morning while you were still asleep. They said they tried to call us, but discovered our phones were down."

Hmmm... that seemed to answer that--a little too neatly.

"So, what's the next step?" I asked my father. "When will the police be back?"

"They're not coming back." Was it my imagination or did he look a little too gleeful about that. I had to find a way to get out of here. Enough was enough, and I was sick of feeling suspicious and like a prisoner.

"Maybe the phone line is back up. I'll try calling," I said as I stood up and headed for the wall phone in the kitchen.

“No need to do that,” my father interrupted. “As soon as the roads clear, they want us to come downtown to make a statement.”

Stuck in my father’s house for two days now, I’d had plenty of time to think about the unanswered questions. If the dead woman, the woman I had known as my mother, had, indeed, kidnapped me--because how else could I think of it now--why had she needed to concoct a story about my father? If she passed herself off as my mother, then why not pass my step dad off as my father? But now that she was dead, I’d probably never find out the answers.

I could track down my step father, but he and my mother had divorced years ago, and I hadn’t kept in touch with him, although I kept his last name. But now I wondered how much he knew and if I were willing to track him down.

Bundling up, I snuck outside with my cell phone in my pocket, just in case. I wandered around the property for what seemed like miles because of the enormous effort I had to extend walking knee-deep in snow. I turned on the cell and got a signal. I called the number listed on the detective’s business card, but was sent to his voicemail. I began to tell him everything I knew but halfway through my message, I lost the signal. Oh well, I’d have to hope that I had given him enough information.

Maybe I was still numb, but shouldn’t I be dev-

astated? I was more curious than anything, and I wanted answers to my questions--maybe the feelings would come later.

And, then the phone lines were working, and the police arrived to escort me downtown for questioning. Me and only me. Was I a suspect?

“I told you, I thought she was my mother.” How many times would I have to repeat myself?

“So, why did you kill her?” The detective asked as calmly as if he was asking why I’d ordered the apple pie.

“Kill her? Are you crazy? I was in shock more than anyone else.” What was wrong with these people? This town?

“Are you saying you think your father might have killed her?”

“I don’t know who killed her. All I can say is that they just didn’t seem as surprised as I was.”

We had been going over the same questions in a small ten by ten foot room with no windows, although they probably had those one-way mirrors like you saw in the movies where the cops were on the other side watching my every twitch.

“You don’t seem to be grieving for your mother. That seems suspicious to me.” Lt. Brett Andrews excused himself, and gave me a stern look as if to say, don’t even think about leaving. Like where was I going to go?

How could I argue with him? I didn’t seem to

feel anything--just confusion and a pain gnawing somewhere in the pit of my stomach. Oh, maybe that was hunger. I hadn't eaten for hours, and turned down their offer of stale doughnuts with the disgusting thick black coffee.

Not knowing how to defend myself, I didn't really want to turn their suspicions to my father and Charlotte either. Despite everything my mother had said about him, my father was a warm, caring man. No, I didn't want to throw him to the wolves just to clear myself.

I was feeling weary enough to drop on the floor when the door abruptly opened and Lt. Brett returned. This time I noticed he wasn't wearing a wedding ring. The first reaction to him had been validated by the two hours I had been spending with him, even if he did have me in the hot seat.

"Miss Hunt, we've found your step father, Matthew Hunt, hiding out in the fishing shack you told us about. After we ask him a few questions alone, we'd like for you to join us. Please wait right here. Sure I can't get you a doughnut. More coffee?"

I smiled but said, "No, thanks, I'll be fine." I let my mind fantasize about what it would be like to get to know Lt. Brett any further. But Fresno? Did he have to live in Fresno? Well, maybe I could move to Fresno, get to know my father better and Lt. Brett. Suddenly, Fresno wasn't looking so bad. But, of course, I had to clear my name of murder first.

My fantasy was interrupted when I heard my father's blustery voice through the closed door. Another officer opened the door as he came in, "Don't worry, Debra, my lawyer is on the way. Don't say another word."

I was touched that my father cared about me.

"I don't think I'm going to need a lawyer, dad." Now where had "dad" come from? I hoped he didn't mind.

He smiled at me, "Dad, huh? I kinda like the sound of that. You know, Charlotte and I never had any kids. Might take some getting used to, but, yeah, I think I might like being a dad."

Our father/daughter reunion was cut short as Lt. Brett and a detective I hadn't met before came in with a guard and my step father in custody in handcuffs.

He looked a little more disheveled than I remembered. Of course ten years had passed, but he looked so much older and unkempt. Maybe it had to do with his unshaven beard and red, swollen eyes that looked as if he hadn't slept in days. Probably hadn't if he had known anything about the murder of his ex-wife. But was it a look of grief or of guilt?

The unknown detective handed a folder to Lt. Brett, mumbled something to him, and then led the guard and Matthew out of the room. He never even looked at me, and all I could do was stare.

Lt. Brett, my father, and I all sat around the small oval table as Lt. Brett explained what was in

Matthew's signed confession and affidavit. According to the report, my step dad knew his ex-wife was up to no good. When she knew that I was going to find my father, she panicked and went to Matthew, asking for his help to throw me off track and, if necessary, physically keep me from my father. When he looked at her like she was crazy, she then asked if he would help her kill my father. When he refused, she threatened to turn him in for embezzling some money from his employer, which she had held over his head for some time. He was sick of being blackmailed, so he followed her to my father's house, and when she got out of her car, he shot her and, because he used a silencer, he fled undetected. The gunshot didn't kill her immediately, and as she dragged her wounded body up to the front door, she died on the spot.

Lt. Brett paused to get our reaction and to refill our water glasses. "Is everybody okay?" He looked me in the eyes, and I imagined he was asking so much more.

"What I want to know," I paused, desperately trying to keep Lt. Brett's eyes on me, "Why did she even tell me about my father? Why not let me think Matthew was my dad? Wouldn't that have made her life easier?"

"Mr. Hunt mentioned something about that, too." Lt. Brett searched through the report, and then continued, "Here it is. Apparently, he didn't come on the scene as quickly as she would have liked. She

already had you in her care, and she had to make up some story about the father being killed in Vietnam. That story was already established when she met and married your step dad.”

“Do you know anything about my birth mother?” My stomach clenched as I asked the question, unsure of what I would hear.

“No, sorry. Mr. Hunt didn’t know any more than what we had discovered.” As if in relief, my stomach relaxed, not feeling quite ready to face anything more right now.

The room got silent then, and we all retreated into our private musings. Lt. Brett cleared his throat, and asked if I was going to be at my father’s house if he had any more questions.

I didn’t know what to say, but my father spoke up, “Yes, yes, she’ll be staying with us for awhile.” He reached over and squeezed my hand. There was so much to think about, but, for now, that would do. Besides, I did want Lt. Brett to be able to reach me.

Over a celebratory dinner at one of my father’s favorite steakhouses, Charlotte, my dad and I were all in good cheer, drinking good wine and enjoying a fine meal, in spite of the recent events. Or perhaps because of the unusual circumstances of our first meeting, the three of us had bonded. And then my father dropped the bomb, “Well, Debra, I think our next move is to go look for your mother--your real mother.”

Charlotte looked a bit uneasy after that, and I tried to reassure her by telling both of them that this was something I needed to do on my own and thanked my father for his kind offer of assistance. He wouldn't hear of it. He insisted on helping. Charlotte noticed my uneasiness on her account and, ever the lady, smiled and patted me on the hand with her own reassurance, "It'll be fine, Debra. We need to find your mother. After all, we're a family now, and we're all in this together."

The End

I hope you enjoyed this short story inspired by my nonfiction book, *Myths of the Fatherless*.

**Other Short Stories by Kathy Holmes:**

[\*Viva Las Vegas\*](#) (from *A Shaker of Margaritas: Hot Flash Mommas*, Mozark Press Publishers.)

[\*Cougars in Cabo\*](#) (from *A Shaker of Margaritas: Cougars on the Prowl*, Mozark Press Publishers.)

**Novels by Kathy Holmes:**

[\*Real Women Wear Red\*](#)

[\*The Tom Jones Club\*](#)

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