

The Lottery Ticket, First 20 pages of a novel excerpt

by Tom Maremaa

Behind every great fortune is a crime.

- Balzac

Bad things can happen to good people, OK? I'm cool with that, although I'm not cool with what happened to Mom and Dad. I never figured anybody would do anything to get somebody else's lottery ticket. Call me stupid, call me naive, whatever; but it never occurred to me, not in my wildest dreams.

I'm Luke Cherry, the second to the last of the Cherry clan. Mom and Dad had five of us: Maggie Junior, followed by Ted, then Catherine, then me, and finally my younger sister Heidi. You could say this story is about the women in the family, about the matriarchy that rules the pack, yet it's as much about Dad as the rest of the family. It's also about Silicon Valley where I live and work.

It all started on a Sunday while I was at a football game. My team, the 49ers, were losing badly in the fourth quarter, so I headed out of Candlestick early and luckily, without too much effort, found my vehicle sitting in one of the back rows in the north parking lot, exactly where I had left it. (A couple of times, at different games, when the stadium emptied and everybody headed for the lots at the same time, I had wandered around aimlessly looking for my beast, lost in a maze, without bearings, as fans, happy or sad, crazy or indifferent, depending on the outcome of the game, blew off steam and revved up their engines like NASCAR drivers do before the start of a big race.)

In the hot autumn air, I gasped and coughed, as smoke and dust, thick as black clouds, swirled upward, little baby twisters,

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making it difficult to breathe. When I climbed into the front seat of my beast, a dilapidated VW bug I had bought secondhand from a college student, I got the motor to turn over with the first twist of my key. For this game, which was doomed before it even began, I was glad to get out early and leave the crowds behind. I hated to see the 49ers work so hard to beat themselves.

Traffic was sputtering down Highway 101 toward Palo Alto, bumper to bumper in stretches, as other fans who had the same idea that I did hit the road. My bug, like me, coughed and belched in the slow lane, as if to say, "Luke, I need a tune up. Take care of me, OK?" Eventually, traffic began to smooth out and I shifted into fourth gear, picking up a modicum of speed. By the time I turned off 101 onto University Avenue about twenty or thirty minutes later, heading logically, not physically, west toward downtown, an eerie feeling came over me.

Something had gone really wrong. In the morning at breakfast, I had spilled hot coffee all over my jeans, burning my crotch and the palm of my right hand to a crisp. I had bobbed the cup like the 49er receivers would bobble the ball later that afternoon, dropping passes that looked, from my seat in the back row on the twenty-yard line, easy to catch. The bug I was trying to chase down in some gnarly Perl code still eluded me, despite my having burned the midnight programmer's oil. Like the 49ers offense, confused and in disarray, I had no viable strategy to fix it.

The day was hot and windy; everything dry to the bone. It felt like that day in October back when a monster firestorm burnt through the Oakland-Berkeley hills, wildly out of control, and impossible to put out. It was hard to breathe. I coughed and choked on the bad air, as I pulled off University and drove down Middlefield before getting to Mom and Dad's house on a side street in the south part of Palo Alto.

Dad's car was gone from the driveway. Maybe he had some errands to run; Mom was always making lists of things for him to do as a way of keeping him busy in retirement, and as I suspected, out of the house long enough for her to have some peace of mind and

time away from the Old Man. (She had her city council meetings to prepare for, as well as her solo trips to Stanford Shopping Center when Nordstrom's or Bloomie's had their semi-annual sales. [She was a petite woman and Bloomie's had a section, downstairs, just for her, I figured, because when she returned home, those big brown bags were filled to the top with dresses and shoe boxes and the latest makeup kits.]) I parked in the driveway, got out and looked around. The front curtains were pulled together, closed tight, which was certainly unusual on a bright sunny day like this. I figured they had both gone somewhere, visiting friends after Sunday church, or perhaps taking a drive out to Rancho Skywood for brunch at Bill's with Lisa and Michael Phillips.

"Anybody *home*?" I shouted a couple of times, pounding on the front door. But there was no answer. Again, a kind of eerie silence. I let myself in with the key that Dad had given me. "Just in case there's an emergency, Son," he had said. My older brother and each of my three sisters, except for Heidi, also had keys.

Mom was hanging like a rag doll from the rafters with a coil of silver duct tape wrapped tightly around her neck. The shock of seeing her like that, hanging there from the rafters, with duct tape wrapped around her neck, her body blue and limp and her eyes wide open, bulging like big purple plums, is something I don't think I'll ever forget. The look on her face was one of surprise and pure disbelief, as if to say, "How could this happen to *me*?" I stopped dead in my tracks, unable to move one step forward, and then, in what seemed like an eternity, my body recoiled. I fell back to the threshold of the front door. She was dangling, her body spinning a little in one direction and then another. Below her, to the right, was a cane chair, which had been pushed aside."

"Hey, hey, Mom killed herself, she did. Live with it, man. *Wait a minute.* No, she didn't, she did, no," I began babbling in fits and spurts to myself as if I were reading spaghetti code, and then screaming at the top of my lungs, "No way, man! Can't be!" I choked on my words, barely able to swallow, and immediately felt sick to my

stomach. I was about to hurl my lunch, not a very cool thing to do for a geek.

Running to her body, I jumped on the chair and tried to pull her down from this crossbeam below the rafters that spanned the ceiling from one end of the living room to the other. I tried a couple of times, vaulting my body upward in a thrust of energy, but still could not get to the top where the duct tape had been twirled around the crossbeam and then around her neck and upper throat. Time was ticking away, perhaps there was still a chance she was alive, *I could save her*. I could resuscitate her; get her breathing again if I could simply bring her down. (The duct tape was strong as steel, I figured.) Reaching into my pocket I yanked out my Swiss army knife, fumbled to find the biggest blade, then flicked it open and leapt again. This time I had some luck and was able to take a whack at the tape above her head; with a few jumps in the air she fell to the floor landing right on top of me with a huge thud. I felt as if she had crushed my ribcage; I was gasping for air, unable to breathe at all. We would both be goners at this rate. A few moments after that, I was able to catch my breath. There was still a chance, however slight, that she was alive. When I unwrapped the tape from her neck and started to perform mouth-to-mouth resuscitation fast as I could, hoping against hope that I could get her breathing again, I began to feel a burst of adrenaline rushing through my veins; my eyeballs pop, my hair spike. She was a powerful woman, stronger than any woman I had ever met or known, and she would come through this, erasing my doubts. But it did not happen. I stomped on her chest, tried every trick in the book to get her breathing again. But, no, it did not happen. No. *She was gone*.

I stood there in the living room, speechless, the front door wide open, gusts of hot September wind wafting through the frame, lots of bad, polluted air, wondering where was Dad. In an instant, I was on the phone calling 911. Amazingly enough, seven minutes later the emergency rescue crews had arrived and were all over her, trying the same thing I had tried. They attached electric shocks to her heart and breathing machines to her mouth, but nothing

happened. They loaded her onto a stretcher and took her to the hospital. I jumped in my car and followed behind the ambulance, as it wove through traffic on its way to Stanford Medical, across El Camino and up Welch road to the emergency entrance, sirens blaring, cars stopping ahead of us, traffic frozen in almost every intersection. In the back of my mind, I harbored a dim hope that Mom was still alive, or somehow, could be revived by the medics. But it did not happen, even after she was rushed into Emergency and a team of doctors tried every technique in the book to bring her miraculously back to life. Nothing worked and sadly enough, she was pronounced dead thirty minutes later, even though she was probably stone dead when I found her. Afterward, the emergency doctor looked at me suspiciously, *as if I had something to do with her death*. He began asking a lot of questions: when had I found her, what had I done, how long was I in the house before calling 911 emergency. I fumbled some of the answers like the 49ers fumbled the ball on the goal line, and tripped over my own words. I had trouble explaining myself. The doctor began jotting down notes on his handheld computer, tapping on the display with his pen and giving me a mean, skeptical look each time he looked up and our eyes happened to meet and connect. Meanwhile, her body was taken away and I kept thinking of Dad and how I would break the news to the rest of the Cherry family.

Back at the house I found the police prowling around. Two squad cars marked Palo Alto police had pulled up, and a couple of plainclothesmen were inside, poking around the living room with abandon as if they owned the place. My neighbor, Ashok, an Indian software engineer from Bangalore, was with them, yakking away in his high-pitched, shrill British accent. What were they talking about? Standing on the front lawn, also, were Dr. Wong, Mom and Dad's other neighbor next door. He had brought out his entire family, wife, son and daughter, to witness the spectacle. I stood on the threshold, dumbfounded, distraught by the chain of events. What right did the cops have coming to the house? *Who called them?*

"I did," said Ashok, reading my mind. "Sorry but I'm standing in my yard when I hear the ambulance coming and I'm seeing your mother being taken away on a stretcher. This is all too much to believe. What is happening here, I am asking to myself. In India, we call the police when there is an accident, so I'm sorry, please forgive, but that is what I did, Mr. Cherry."

"You related to this family?" one of the detectives looked up at me.

"Yes. I'm the son."

"You found the victim?"

"She's *my mother*."

"We're sorry for your loss. Your neighbors called and the front door was wide open, so we walked in to investigate the crime scene."

"Crime scene? What are you talking about? Found her hanging from the rafters when I came back from the 49ers game. She must've committed suicide."

"Anyone else live in the house?"

"My dad."

"And where is he, your dad?"

"Dunno. Usually goes for a walk by himself after church."

"Isn't it rather *late* for a walk now? I mean, church services end by *noon*, don't they?"

"Well, he might've gone for a drive, or something."

"By himself?"

"Well, sometimes he heads over to Fremont to bring food to Afghan refugees and their families. Dad is a very generous man."

"So you think that's where he is?"

"Could be. You'll have to ask him."

"We will. You can count on it."

"And where were you, Mr. Cherry?"

"*Where was I?* At the 49ers game. I left early because the team was losing and I wanted to get back and check in on Mom. She's been in a lot of pain the last couple of weeks."

"What kind of pain?"

“She's been suffering from an aggressive form of melanoma. Skin cancer. And she's gone through chemo and radiation to deal with cancer in her breasts.”

“Enough pain to kill herself?”

“No way of knowing that. All I know is that she kept asking for her sons and daughters to come see her and look after her a bit while she was undergoing treatment. I'm the only one who did.”

“She have any enemies? Owe anybody—money?”

“Why? Does it look like she was murdered?”

“We'll ask the questions, Mr. Cherry.”

“Far as I know, she was loved in the community, a member of the local city council, an activist for the homeless and the environment. This is getting all too much to deal with. I'm still looking for Dad. Can we take this up another time?”

“We'll need a DNA sample, Mr. Cherry.”

“What for? You don't think I had anything to do with Mom's death, do you?”

“We'll be in touch.”

A woman, who identified herself as a crime scene investigator came up to me, smiled a happy face and swabbed my throat. I had coughed up the DNA against my better judgment and without any knowledge of my rights.

“Hey, go easy!” I shouted at the detectives. “You have to tear up the house like this? Dad still lives here.”

The detectives glanced over their shoulders, then turned back and proceeded methodically to collect samples from the floor, from the duct tape, from every nook and cranny in the living room.

I stepped away and walked slowly out of the house into the front yard, where other neighbors had gathered, in spite of the yellow-and-black police tape that was wrapped around the big redwood tree and the front bushes, designating this as an area under investigation. They were all there, Mom and Dad's circle of friends, lined up on the street, peering over the bushes and behind the trees, whispering and chattering among themselves, folks who voted for Mom's election to a seat on the City Council, folks who

talked sports and politics and the state of silicon valley over the backyard fence with Dad. What were they thinking now? *A crime scene, Mom taken away in an ambulance.* Ashok had spread the word: Mrs. Cherry was dead, an apparent suicide. Dr. Wong, their neighbor on Southside, came over to me to express his condolences: "Sorry to hear what happen," he said. "Truly sorry. Wife and I miss your mother. She a good woman."

"Well, we don't really know what happened," chimed in Ashok. "Police are investigating, aren't they? Perhaps they'll find some clues to her death."

"Hope so."

"Was she dead when you found her?" said Ashok.

"Not sure," I said. "Thought I could resuscitate her. Tried everything I could when I jumped up and cut her down from the rafter."

"She was hanging there? Seems very strange, a woman of such prominence, so well-liked in the community."

"Not in good health. Look, I've got to find Dad. And call my brother and my three sisters."

"Of course, of course, we understand," said Ashok. "Let us know if we can help."

DAD HAD LOST his cellphone the week before and seemed perfectly content, even happy without it, he had told me. It was almost six o'clock and still, despite the hour, nowhere to be found, I was thinking. Where the hell was he? I knew that he and Mom sometimes went their separate ways on Sunday afternoon, he disappearing to the other side of the Bay to bring food to his Afghan refugee friends, meet with his Afghan buddy Masood, and take a break from her, while she would be catching up on emails and preparing the agenda for Monday's City Council meetings. That week I had asked Dad if he wanted to join me at the 49ers game at Candlestick but he had gracefully declined. "I hate to see them lose,

you know?" he had told me the Friday before. "Besides, I've got some business to take care of on Sunday."

Was it an assisted suicide? I began asking myself, as I dialed up my older brother Ted. Was Mom's condition terminal? Was Dad trying to help her ease the pain? I knew she had complained on several occasions that the medicines she was taking, these heavy-duty painkillers, were not effective. What were they hiding, the two of them, from the rest of the family?

Around six-thirty, maybe a little after that, the cops left the house (only to reappear an hour later) and the crowds on the street began to disperse. I was standing on the front lawn, all brown and burnt from the dry heat of September, still wondering where my Dad was. No answer at Ted's, so I left a message on my brother's answering machine; probably, still in his office at the software company, working away late into night, neglecting the needs of his family, as a lot of us do in the valley, crunching numbers and spitting out sexy financial reports in order to charm the bozos sitting on his board of directors. Ted had this same monomaniacal focus as Dad. Both were inventors, dreamers, visionaries, although Ted was definitely more managerial in style and approach than Dad. He knew how to make money while Dad was the classic garage tinkerer, always trying to come up with a better mousetrap, his latest creation being a programmable skateboard for perfect balance and maneuvering on bumpy streets. For the moment, the cops had avoided looking in the garage, where Dad lived most of the time, even in retirement, devoting countless playful and sometimes productive hours to his many inventions, but I suspected they would come back in a day or two if they were pursuing the case beyond what it looked like initially: a suicide. I knew Dad kept a lot of rolls of duct tape in the garage on his workbench and used it to wrap up pieces of material, as a kind of universal glue. The cops would want to know what the duct tape was doing in the living room of the house.

Maggie Junior, my older sister, the spitting image of Mom, same sharp nose, angular face, hollowed cheeks, beautifully coiffed

hair, a small yet powerful woman, was not home either. Her husband had answered the phone and said that she was out jogging at twilight in the wildlife area beyond the Stanford hills on the other side of Highway 280. "Isn't that dangerous?" I asked. "I mean, there were a couple of mountain lion sightings up there recently I read about in the papers. Didn't you?"

"You know her better than I do," he said. "Maggie's a brave woman."

"Like her Mom," I couldn't resist saying. "You want me to tell her you called? Is it bad news?"

"Yes. It's bad news."

"Well, I want to know, too."

"Mom's dead."

"What happened?"

I recounted the events of the day and asked if he had any idea where Dad was. The Old Man still had not returned home. "And I'm worried about him."

"I would be too," said Maggie Junior's husband. "You think he got into some kind of trouble?"

"Who knows."

YOUNG HEIDI, MY baby sister, was driving home from a rock concert at Shoreline Amphitheater with her boyfriend of the week when I called. At least I'd got through to her cell but she was obviously not paying much attention, preferring to tell me about Josh, her new boyfriend, before I'd had a chance to get in a word edgewise.

"He's like really cool, you know? He has his own band," she told me excitedly, as if I really gave a hoot about her new boyfriend and his band right now with the devastating image of Mom hanging from the rafters, her face blue as the summer sky, her mouth wrapped shut with silver duct tape fixed in my head. (Her body had crashed to the floor and landed on me and then tumbled over on one side after I had cut her down. Her head had a couple of huge bruises

and cuts, splattering blood in all directions.) The cellphone went dead all of a sudden, spitting a lot of weird noise and static into my ear. Probably everybody at the rock concert with a cellphone had tried to make a call, jamming the circuits at precisely the same time.

I tried calling Heidi again. And after a few rings, got through, although it was her boyfriend who picked up the phone.

"Can I talk to Heidi?"

"Who is it?"

"Luke. Her brother."

"Let me see if she wants to talk to you."

"Tell her it's an emergency."

"What kind of an emergency?"

"Hey, this isn't some kind of joke."

"I was just asking, dude."

"I'm her brother and I want to talk to her."

"Don't get pushy, man. Just trying to screen her calls."

"OK. You've screened the call. Now get her to the phone. I need to talk to her."

"What is it, Luke? Why are you calling me?"

"You sitting down?"

"No. I'm not. Hey, stop taking off my clothes. I need to talk to my brother."

"Heidi, I have bad news for you. Mom's dead."

"That's not bad. She had cancer, didn't she?"

"That's not what killed her. Are you crazy? Listen. Can you come over to the house now?"

"Right now? I'm kind of busy, you know, with my boyfriend."

"Mom's dead. I found her hanging from the living ceiling rafters, strangled with a wad of duct tape wrapped her neck, dangling there, blue in the face, her arms and legs like a rag doll, and the cops have just left the house after a neighbor called and sent them over here to investigate, asking a lot of questions and writing it all down in little notepads, and the whole neighborhood has appeared out of the woodwork to gawk over the proceedings and pretty soon the TV news crews will start arriving when the story

breaks that your mother, a prominent member of the Palo Alto City Council, was found dead in her own house on this Sunday afternoon, and you're telling me that you're busy. Well, so what?"

"OK, OK, I'm coming. Already."

"Swell."

"Mind if I bring my boyfriend?"

THE DUCT TAPE, with its sticky residue, was still on my hands and fingers and all over my clothes. Hard as I tried, I couldn't wash it all off. Dad used it all the time in wrapping together the pipes and wires and objects he assembled for his inventions. He had rolls and rolls of the stuff in the garage, but to my knowledge I never found any of the stuff in the house. Why would Mom toss the tape up to the rafters, wrap it around her neck and kick out the chair from underneath her and hang there, twirling in the air, spinning like top until she stopped breathing? It didn't register. I couldn't see it or fathom why, unless she and Dad had some kind of pact. Her cancer, both breast and melanoma, was not terminal and although she was in pain, it seemed to be under control and that was that. A case of assisted suicide, illegal in the state of California, legal elsewhere, like in Canada, with Dad having an airtight alibi, which, even given the benefit of the doubt, he did not, as far as I could tell, and the Cherry family was skating on thin ice, my head a chocolate-and-vanilla swirl of half-finished thoughts and confused metaphors. The day had left a sick, bitter taste in my mouth.

"But I can't see Dad doing it," I had told Heidi on the phone. "He wouldn't have the balls for it."

"You never know," she had replied rather coyly.

"So you think it was some kind of pact? A murder-suicide pact, that kind of thing?"

Heidi fell silent. "Well . . ."

"Well, what?"

"I'm not saying," she said.

"You and everybody else."

SO ABOUT TEN minutes later Heidi arrived at the house with her boyfriend in tow, looking as if she had stepped out of an MTV music video, her black leather jacket loaded with sequins and silver studs, her blonde hair now colored green, all frizzy and unkempt, her face covered with gobs of strange makeup that had caked on her forehead and cheeks. She was like a Halloween version of Marilyn Monroe or Madonna, with those puffy red lips and spiked hair, chewing a big wad of gum that rolled over the tip of her tongue and almost spat in my face, one hand stuck firmly on her hip, perched like a bird, looking at once bored and a bit contemptuous of it all.

But she was my sister, my baby sister, and I loved her more than anyone else in the family. As the bottom half of the Cherry family, often neglected and overshadowed by my older brother Ted and my two older sisters Maggie Junior and Catherine the Great, as we called her, Heidi and I had a deeply powerful bond between us. Her boyfriend could pick it up immediately when he stepped in the house and she and I melted at the sight of each other. Her boyfriend turned and began sniffing around the house like a bloodhound.

The cops had cordoned off the living room where the body had hung from the rafters. "Where's my Dad?" She looked at me with a mean glance, as if it was my fault, as if I hadn't done enough to save Mom, as if Dad was firmly to blame for it all. The battles lines were being drawn: two brothers for Dad and three sisters against, boys against the girls as we had grown up. It was going to be one of those confrontations.

"TED, IT'S ME."

"Who?"

"Your brother Luke."

"Oh, yeah. My brother . . ."

"You awake? What's going on?"

"Awake I am. You just caught me at a bad time. Call back, OK?
Later."

"No. I need to talk to you now."

"Now?"

"Yes. Now. How hard is that for you to grok?"

"I can grok it."

"You sure?"

"Of course, I'm sure. When have I not been sure?"

"Listen. Shut up and listen."

"Let me guess," said Ted, his voice becoming rudely sarcastic.
"Your landlady, the nasty bitch, threw you out on the street because you're behind. And now you want me to bail you out. Hey, I'm not your banker. Do I look like a bank? Am I your local ATM? Where does it say that brothers always have to bail out brothers? Where? Show me the book."

"Mom's dead and Dad hasn't shown up at the house. The cops were here investigating. They think she was murdered."

"You jerking me around, or what? Playing on my sympathies to get me to cough up the money to pay your landlady? I'm offended."

"You can be offended all you like, but you better get your sorry ass over to the house pronto before the cop

