

# Tex Miller Is Dead

Kelly Elizabeth Huston



Watermount Publishing

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To the man who has carried so many of my rocks for  
over twenty-five years. Thank you for helping me make my  
writing fantasy a reality.



# Chapter One

TEX MILLER WAS DEAD. Okay, not quite dead, but he was about to be, and I alone would be responsible for it. No, this wasn't my first attempt, but it would be the last.

The airport-wide announcement that played on repeat chimed in again:

*Welcome to Charlotte-Douglas International Airport. For your safety...*

The time and place were not by chance. I knew what I was doing, but if I had any hope of success this time, this is how it had to go down, in broad daylight, public, with my escape a hundred yards away and thirty-five thousand feet skyward. Plus, there'd be free cocktails; first-class still had *some* perks.

The March sky gleamed brilliant blue, and the sun's harsh reflections bounced off the shiny silver of fuselages and wings parked in neat diagonals. The severity of the glare flooding the concourse compelled me to wear sunglasses. Weepy eyes will do that. Sure, there were other reasons a woman might don dark glasses indoors. *Let people wonder*, I thought. I knew the real reason. The telltale sting of tears made me wince, but I sucked back any sadness. The joyful squeal of a toddler cut through the busy airport's white noise as he pounded the window glass, yanking me back to the task at hand.

There would be questions, of course.

“Why?” His dying voice rasped more air than sound.

“Yes, Tex. That will be first and foremost, I’m sure.” I rolled my eyes at his banal question. For over twenty years, I’d endured the man—his bravado, his boisterous snark, and now?

“No, Callie, I’m asking. Why? Why are you doing this?” His words came louder now. Was this some show of force? One last desperate grasp at clemency?

“You know why.”

“Wasn’t I good to you, Cal? Didn’t I provide for you? Make first-class possible?” How completely Tex-like to take on sweet sincerity in these last moments. It’s why his fans adored him, the *Commander of hearts. Please.*

“You did, Tex. You did all that and more, but let’s give credit where it’s due. We had a good run. But I need more. Decades of lonely days and nights, it’s no way to live. And frankly, I don’t want to share anymore.” I cringed at all the melodrama, only to have him double down in B-movie-like agony.

Tex wheezed a listless, death-rattle gasp. The truth was, if I could have taken him in my arms, I would have. I’d hold him, kiss him, ease his suffering. Then again, if I could do those things, we wouldn’t be in this predicament now. There’d be no reason to kill him, would there? Even in his last breaths, Tex was beautiful, rugged in a way that made most women swoon, and with enough swagger to turn men’s heads too. And the critics would no doubt wonder why the fan-favorite got taken out at the top of his game. Yes, there would be questions. Hell, there might very well be wailing in the streets.

“I love you, Callie.”

I stopped typing. “Nope. That’s not helping, and it won’t change anything.”

“I know, but it’s true. It’s always been you, and I needed you to hear me say it,” Tex coughed.

The giggle rose out of me. A subtle shoulder shake at first, but then it bubbled up stronger until I couldn't contain it. The inappropriate guffaw echoed in the cavernous airport corridor. Heads turned. I composed myself; now was not the time to draw attention. Sure, I was the only one who could see him, hear him, but that didn't make me crazy. He was my muse, for God's sake. Still, people judge, so best I keep him on the down-low.

"I've made you laugh thousands of times over the years. I thought I knew all of them. The fake, the genuine, that *snort* when it sneaks up on you. But that one's new." He grimaced in what looked like pain. It wouldn't be long now.

"I guess it's hearing those words from your lips. I've imagined them more times than you ever made me laugh. They don't feel the way I thought they would, but it's how I know it's the end."

"Wait, Cal. Maybe not. Maybe it could be a beginning."

"Don't be silly, Tex. Declarations of love come at the end. You know that. It's how the story arc goes."

*Flight 515 to JFK, New York. This is the final boarding call for flight 515 to JFK, New York.*

"That's my ride. Thanks, Tex. I mean it. And I am sorry it had to end this way. Goodbye." I gave the slightest pause before hitting send, initiating the next phase of my assassination plot, almost sure it was the right thing to do. *Almost*. To compete with the man was a losing battle. Tex Miller demanded all my time, all my space, all my air. But I had other stories to tell. At least, I hoped I did.

Laptop closed, I slipped it into my leather carry-on and wobbled a moment getting out of one of the airport's signature rocking chairs. Steadied, I slung the strap over my shoulder and dashed for my getaway gate.

"Just in time, ma'am," the gate agent remarked as I scanned my airline phone app to board the plane. Hurrying down the gangway, I chanced a look back. What did I think I'd see? Police? A hoard of screaming, angry fans? No one followed. With one step onto

the plane, relief washed over me. I gave a polite nod to the flight attendant in her tidy blue uniform and ducked into my bulkhead window seat.

“Killer?” the woman asked with inquisitive eyes.

“What?” I jolted from my short-lived respite.

“Cocktail?” she asked again.

With a furtive glance around, I leaned toward her. “Uh, it’s eight in the morning.”

She shrugged. “I thought I recognized the look.”

“Whiskey. Neat.” A quiet blurt. *That’s for you, Tex*, I thought. “Coffee, too, please. Black.”

“You got it.” As she navigated the tight quarters to pour my drink, the phone, still in my hand, vibrated. Given the email I’d just sent, the name on the screen drew no surprise.

“I’m on the plane. Can’t talk,” I answered.

“You can’t do this, Callie. You just can’t.” Laney Li half-shouted and Laney *never* shouted.

“It’s done. Tex Miller is dead.” I ended the call and powered down the device. Handing me my whiskey, the sky waitress’s wide eyes caught mine. “You didn’t hear that. And I’ll take another one of these as soon as you can make it happen.” I emptied that glass, another first-class perk, in one fiery gulp.



As soon as the plane touched down, I booted up my phone, and it pinged with an immediate text message, the Around Town Car Company letting me know my scheduled ride would wait for me at baggage claim. I had no doubt. My man Bernard was on the job, after all. Bernard was my driver. Well, not mine alone, but since I’ve been making trips to New York, Bernard has been my man. I was so beholden to Bernard that in the twenty-some years



we've worked together, there have only been three instances when I found him unavailable to drive me: his daughter Maisie's high school graduation, her college graduation, and her wedding day. On all three occasions, I changed my travel plans. No, I wouldn't say my life revolved around Maisie's schedule, but you could.

Whenever I fly to New York City to meet with my literary agent Laney and my Watermount Publishing editor, Celeste, I fly into JFK. Bernard always waits for me with his shock of white hair under a black cap, atop a black suit, holding a placard with C. AUSTIN written in neat block lettering. I've made this trip nearly every month for twenty-two years, but this is what we always do. When we first met, he was still a ginger, and I was a brunette in my mid-twenties, and by our third introduction, I began greeting him with a daughterly peck on his pleasingly pudgy cheek. Twenty-two years in, this custom has stuck as well. I couldn't say for sure, but I imagine I'm as old today as he was the day of our first meeting, or close to it. But, with a little help, my shoulder-length wave is still brunette.

From atop the escalator, I used my vantage point to scout out Bernard, but to no avail. The crowd, made of every make and model, buzzed below, harried and huge, but no black suit, no black cap. Pulling out my phone again, I stepped off the moving staircase and out of the fray to check messages. Three new voicemails, all from Laney. Those I ignored. I also received yet another confirmation text from the car company. The repeated contact was unusual compared to my visits over the years, but I assumed Around Town had implemented some new policy after a nervous traveler insisted on frequent updates.

I brushed off the momentary concern and set my sights on claiming my luggage, a roller bag I didn't care to hassle with on the plane. A growing jumble of suitcases chugged around the serpentine beltway as more bags skidded down the slide extended from the ceiling. Eyes on my bag, I waited patiently amid the scurry

of more eager patrons, realizing just how *unhurried* I was to get to my destination. Laney's stern face popped into my mind, and my stomach tightened at the angry image. Laney wasn't only my agent; she was my best friend, my only friend. She'd come around once the initial shock subsided. Wouldn't she? Celeste would be a different story. Distracted by my wandering thoughts, I snapped to when I realized my bag had gone by and hurried to chase it past the carousel's next curve.

With my suitcase retrieved, I again looked around for my man Bernard. In twenty-two years, he'd never been late.

"Aw, what's the matter, Cal? Feeling abandoned? Left behind?"

I nearly tripped over my own feet, spinning to see Tex, his tall, muscular frame in a casual lean against a backlit car rental advertisement. "Dammit, Tex," I growled through a clenched jaw.

"As I live and breathe." He filled his would-be lungs while giving his limbs a broad stretch, like a man reborn. His crooked grin tended to catch my breath and did it again. "But imagine how *I* feel? You left me gasping my last breaths on page 437, Calliope Jones. Talk about abandonment issues. Dare I ask what happens on page 438?"

My fleeting concern for Bernard rebounded and escalated to full-blown worry. I headed to the exit, leaving my problematic protagonist in my wake, very much *not* dead.

## Chapter Two

OUTSIDE THE TERMINAL DOORS, a damp chill met me. Tightening my scarf, I stepped toward a familiar car with its Around Town logo in the back window. When the driver's side opened, a man who was most definitely *not* Bernard exited the vehicle. I stopped short and looked up and down the loading zone in search of another black town car. To my relief, Tex had gone *poof* again.

"Ms. Austin." It was a statement, not a question. The man hurrying around the front of the vehicle to greet me knew who I was.

"Yes?"

"Good morning." The tall stranger dressed in a black suit, but no black cap, opened the rear passenger door.

I stood my ground. "I'm sorry. Bernard is my driver. Bernard is always my driver. I schedule my vis—never mind, but Bernard is my driver."

"Oh, not this morning, ma'am. I'm to take you to Watermount Publishing." The man gestured to the back seat.

"There must be some mistake." Realizing I stared at him a moment too long, I fumbled for my phone to show the man proof. "See, Around Town texted my confirmation. Twice."

The driver nodded. "Yes, I—we—*they* texted to confirm your ride, but with me." His chiseled jaw, with a near-black day-old

beard, clenched before he steadied himself with an emphatic, “Bernard is unavailable today.”

“Well, that’s not possible. Bernard wouldn’t cancel on me, not without letting me know, anyway. In twenty—”

“Twenty-two years,” the man interrupted. “Yes, ma’am, I know. Bernard told me. Let’s get in the car where it’s warm. I can explain.” His granite features softened; a polite smile flickered as he reached for my luggage.

I took a tentative step in the direction of that warmth as a cold wind gusted down the airport roadway. Again, I stopped, cautiously standing an arm’s length from the chauffeur. “How did you know it was me?”

“Pardon?”

“When I came out, you said my name. Not in question, just my name, like you knew it was me. I could have been anyone.”

“Bernard let me know what to look for. There was no question when I saw you exit the terminal, Ms. Austin.”

“Really? What did he say that made me so—easy to spot? How did he describe me?” I stood closer now and had to tilt my head a fraction to meet his midnight-blue eyes.

He bowed his head an inch and cleared his throat. “Uh, tall. He said you were tall.” Something new flashed in his look, a brief devious grin I thought I’d seen before, and it said he didn’t plan to share any more than he had already.

“Ah. Lucky for you, there’s such a notorious dearth of tall women coming and going from JFK’s terminal eight.” I eyed the man askance with my own quick smirk and ducked into the car, pleased with my efforts at a little harmless flirting with a man likely ten years too young. Too young for me, anyway.

Having deposited my suitcase in the trunk, the driver situated himself behind the wheel, texting while he did it. Back to his steely expression, he spoke into the rearview, “Shall we?”

“No.” Hoping for another peek at his grin, I offered him mine. “You said you would explain.” Worry reflected at me when he gave an anxious glance at his watch. “We have time,” I assured him. “Plenty of time.” But now I couldn’t be certain something wasn’t amiss.

“Bernard called out sick this morning.” My substitute spoke over his shoulder. “And with rain coming, there could be back-ups. I don’t want you to be late, ma’am.”

“Okay, call me Callie, please.” My Bernard-worry rebounded for the third time. “And I don’t mean to be rude. Truly, I don’t, but that doesn’t sound like Bernard. Not at all. And your name is?” The burgeoning angst in the car belonged to me now. And all the ill-advised flirtation ceased.

“Sorry. Andrew, ma’—Callie. People call me Drew.”

“Drew? Where the *hell* is Bernard?”

Drew unbuckled and rotated in his seat to look at me. His well-mannered smile had faded, and dread flooded his narrowed eyes. The crease between his dark brow indicated something dire, and the conflict to share or not waged in his stare. I couldn’t quite place what I recognized in his kind face as I awaited his answer, but a familiarity tugged at the back of my mind while my concern skyrocketed.

“M-miss Austin. Callie. Bernard suffered a heart attack early this morning. He—”

The words *heart* and *attack* crashed into my chest. “Where is he? Take me there, please.”

“But—”

“Now, Drew,” I barked, then tried to calm my tone. “I don’t care where. Just get me there, please.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Drew buckled his seat belt.

“Thank you.” I dialed Laney, but the call went straight to voicemail. “Laney. Change in plans. Bernard is—sick. I’ll text details when I know more. Handle the meeting, reschedule the

meeting. Whichever. I'll be in touch." I ended the call with a trembling thumb. "Where are we going, Drew?"

"He's at Bellevue. On 1st Ave."

"Is that good? Is that a good place to be? For him, I mean?" I struggled for a deep breath.

"Well, it's—yes, it's good. Are you alright?" We spoke to each other's rearview mirror reflections.

Twinges of guilt for my silly attempts at banter moments earlier snaked my insides. "No, Drew, I'm not alright. I'll be alright when I know Bernard is alright." With that, Drew gunned the gas to speed through a yellow light as we exited the access road to the Van Wyck Expressway.



The dreary cold mixed with the pang of fear was all too familiar. I grew up an only child of wonderful parents in upstate New York. No, I didn't begin life a southern belle. The community was small, close-knit, and rather poor, but a great place where children ran free dawn to dusk in summer, schools performed well-above average, and parents volunteered with soccer leagues and scouts. It wasn't until I moved from the small town that I realized how much we had—and how much we didn't.

My world turned upside-down when my long-distance runner dad dropped dead of a heart attack at thirty-seven. I was twelve. Mom did her best after that shock, eventually marrying a man named Gerry after we moved to Buffalo to be nearer to family. Gerry was never my father. Nothing untoward happened, no neglect or abuse. But I had grown fiercely independent by high school, and my focus zeroed in on my schoolwork and escaping the gray skies and dirty snow mounds on the edge of Lake Erie to any greener, sunnier locale anywhere. The wet chill on the way to

Bellevue served as a reminder of some of what I wanted to escape all those years ago.



The stop-and-go traffic said we had a long trip from Queens to Manhattan. I blamed the two shots of whiskey for the headache creeping up the back of my neck into the base of my skull. Eyes closed, I rested my head, hoping the rhythmic thud of street seams would lull me into a catnap, but my concern for Bernard wouldn't allow me to relax while my ricocheting nerves and pounding heart told me I should have foregone that third cup of coffee on the plane.

I opened my eyes to find Drew staring back in the rearview mirror. His gaze quickly shifted to the road while his ears betrayed him, turning pink. I shut my eyes again.

"*God*, Cal, you should take something for that headache. You never could handle the dark liquor."

"What was that?" I snapped, bolting forward, twisting to see Drew's face.

"Excuse me, ma'—Miss Austin?" Drew flinched at my harsh tone. "I—didn't say anything."

I sat back; fingers massaged my temples. The headache made its way above my ears, and my creation's poorly-timed pop-in didn't help matters.

"Come on, Cal, you didn't think I'd go down that easy, did you? *Please*," Tex scoffed. "And now this bombshell?"

"Stop. Stop talking," I hissed a whisper.

"Miss Austin? Are you—? Should I pull over?"

"Not you, Drew. Sorry. Just get me to Bellevue. Thanks." Hands clasped in my lap, I glanced at the passenger seat to my left.

“Hey, babe. Seriously.” Tex shook his head with a laugh. “Don’t act surprised and snag yourself some painkillers from your satchel there.” He pointed to the messenger bag at my feet. “Bernie keeps a fancy cooler of water bottles up front. I’m sure the new guy’s got one too. Surely, he’ll toss you a water so you can down some vitamin I.”

I pulled my bag to my lap to rummage for the travel-sized bottle of ibuprofen and I poured four pills into my palm. Drew handed me a bottle over his shoulder without me asking for it.

“See? There ya go. Take a breath. You know I’m here to help you.” Tex wore his serious face.

“That’s *new*,” I groused at the dashing adventurer next to me as I grabbed the drink. “Since when?”

“Yes, it is.” Drew sat straighter. “I, uh, Around Town bought a new brand. If you prefer the other, I’ll be sure to have it stocked before your next ride.”

“Oh, no. Drew. I don’t care. That’s not necessary.” I washed back the handful of pills with a silent reprimand for engaging with my phantom friend when we were around others.

“Okay. Also, I’m sorry to do this, but in all the chaos this morning, to get to you on-time, I didn’t get fueled up like I should have. I’m gonna need to make a quick stop. To be safe.”

“*Jeez*, new guys—am I right?” Tex complained with an exaggerated eye roll, then sipped from the lowball glass of whiskey he now held.

“No worries, Drew. It happens.”

“And would you like me to deposit your suitcase at your hotel? I’m happy to handle that for you.” My man Bernard had clearly trained the new recruit.

“Let him take it, Cal. You know how you hate to hassle with a bag.”



“That won’t be necessary, Drew. I’ll keep it with me.” I shot a subtle sneer in Tex’s direction. We pulled into a fuel station, and my driver exited the car to fill up.

“You’re being particularly stubborn today, aren’t you, Ms. Jones?” Tex cocked his head of dark curls and swirled his drink.

“I’m stubborn? And what the hell? Why are you wearing a tuxedo?” I jeered at his sudden costume change.

“Why, *in-deed*? You know how this works, Cal. I don’t dress m’self.”

“You have to stay quiet now. Better yet, go away. Bernard is—don’t make trouble, please.” The driver’s door opened and Drew slid in behind the wheel. I looked back at Tex, but he’d vanished. “Thank goodness,” I muttered.

“Just a few gallons. I apologize for that.” We sped into the dark of the Midtown Tunnel. “And I wish you would reconsider letting me keep your bag, so you won’t have to worry about it throughout the day.”

“You’re right, Drew. Thank you. Please excuse my erratic behavior. The day’s been—trying.” We shared another brief eye-lock in the rearview.

The town car swerved into the U-shaped driveway of the hospital’s main entrance, and I opened the door before we came to a complete stop. I slammed it and bolted toward the revolving entryway of Bellevue but staggered to a halt when my brain caught up to my feet. Hurrying back, I tapped on the front passenger window; it opened. “Thank you, Drew. Sorry to mess with your day. I’ll make it right with your boss. Promise.” I gave a weak wave as I spun back into a gallop in search of news of Bernard. If the chauffeur spoke to me, I didn’t hear a word he said.