

R O B E R T K.
TANENBAUM

**IRRESISTIBLE
IMPULSE**



A DUTTON BOOK

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*To the ones I love,
Patti, Rachael, Roger, and Billy T.*

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ONE

In the early hours of the 5,742nd year since the creation of the universe, Dr. Mark Davidoff, M.D., stood in the crowded, marvelous, immense nave of Temple Emmanu-El on Fifth Avenue, and belted out "*Ain Kelohanu*" in a lusty voice, and thought that so far the universe was working out fairly well. He was young (young-ish), healthy, and rich, an internist like his father and grandfather before him, possessing all his hair, a Jaguar Van den Plas, a ten-room condo on Central Park West, a wife and two blossoming Davidoff-ettes. Around him standing and singing were his people, in whom he was well pleased, the upper crust of Jewish New York, a group as prosperous and secure as any Jews had been since collapse of the caliphate of Cordova.

The song and the service ended. Davidoff crowded out with the rest, for the temple was packed for Rosh Hashonah, the beginning of the High Holy Days, when it was appropriate for Jews of Davidoff's degree of religiosity to seek solidarity and, it might also have been, exculpation for countless Sundays of Chinese food, countless Sabbaths at the office or on the links.

He knew many of the people milling around the cloakroom, and there was considerable hand shaking, and "good-Yonteff"-ing, before Davidoff, enclosed in camel-hair coat and cashmere muffler, was able to leave the synagogue and emerge out into the

bright, crisp day. He was about to walk down the avenue, to where he would stand a better chance of finding a cab home, when he heard his name called and saw the very last person of his acquaintance he would have expected to see standing in front of Temple Emmanu-El on Rosh Hashonah.

Vincent Fiske Robinson stood out in that particular throng like a Hasid in Killarney. He was tall and slim with a face both sculptured and sensual, set with sky blue eyes and decked with fine blond hair worn swept back from a widow's peak. Mark Davidoff had blue eyes and blond hair too, but not, of course, *that* kind of blue eyes and blond hair. Davidoff moved through the crowd and held out his hand. Robinson's hand in his felt hot and damp.

"Vince. Long time no see," said Davidoff with an uncertain smile. "What are you doing here?"

"I came to see you, man. I called your apartment, and your wife told me I'd find you here."

"Yeah, I didn't figure you were thinking about conversion . . ." Davidoff began in a bantering tone, and then stopped, automatically checking out the other man with a diagnostician's eye. Robinson seemed flushed and overheated despite the chilly air. He looked as if he had dressed in the dark—he was wearing grubby jeans, a worn blue button-down shirt, and sneakers, over which he had thrown a lined Burberry. "You okay, Vince?" Davidoff asked.

"Yeah. No, actually, I'm in a bit of a mess. Actually, a gigantic mess. The thing is, could you do a consult for me? It would really help me out."

"A consult? Vince, it's Rosh Hashonah. Can't it wait?"

"Actually, no, it can't," said Robinson. "It's personal. My nurse, one of my nurses, actually, she's my girlfriend . . . she's in my apartment, very sick, very, very, sick . . . I was . . . could you, you know, take a look at her?"

"Vince, what is this? You have an emergency, call 911, get her into a hospital . . ."

"No, actually, I don't think that would be appropriate in this case. That's why I came here."

Davidoff was about to refuse when he registered the desperation in Robinson's eyes.

"Please, Mark. I really need your help."

This was new and, Davidoff could not help feeling with a little thrill of self-satisfaction, not a mien that Vincent Fiske Robinson had ever adopted with Mark Davidoff when the two of them had been at Harvard Medical School together. For a brief period the two students had shared a group house in Cambridge, during which Robinson had given Davidoff numerous unspoken lessons about the difference between New York Jewish aristocracy and *Aristocracy*. There was no actual anti-Semitism, of course, not that you could put your finger on, only a humorous, casual condescension. That Davidoff studied hard and got top grades, while Robinson did not seem to study at all, but eventually received the same degree, and got a good internship, too, was also the subject of considerable comment on Robinson's part, charming comment, for Robinson was certainly the most charming man in Davidoff's experience. Even when he had pissed you off, and made you feel like, for example, a grubby Jewish grind, it was hard to remain angry with him. Unaccountably, on this cold New York street corner, an image from a dozen years past flashed across Dr. Davidoff's mind: spring in Cambridge, a Friday, the Friday before the dreaded human physio exam, himself surrounded by books and notes, glancing up from his desk as Robinson pranced by, swinging a lacrosse racket, a white sweater draped around his neck, and a pale laughing girl with a blond pageboy haircut draped on his arm. Somehow, the current situation, Robinson begging Davidoff to help him out of a mess, balanced out that long-ago scene on some cosmic and inarticulable scorecard.

So Davidoff smiled and said, "Sure, Vince, I'll have a look at her. Let's go."

Robinson lived on the East Side, of course, a duplex in an old brownstone in the Sixties off Madison. They walked there in silence.

"Shit, Vince!" he cried when he saw the woman in Robinson's

bed, and felt sick himself. She was a lovely woman, or had been. Pale hair framed a fine-boned face, with a wide, inviting mouth. Davidoff found himself thinking once again, just for an instant, of the laughing girl in the Cambridge hallway. He cleared his throat to gain control of his voice, and said, "When?"

"This morning. She was, um, like that, nine, nine-thirty."

"'Like that'? You mean *dead*, Vince. That's the term we docs use for a person in this condition. How long was she sick?"

"A day, a day and a half. She was fine Friday. We went out for dinner, came back here, went to bed, and mooched around Saturday morning. We were going to go out biking in the afternoon, and she said she wasn't up for it; she said she felt feverish, headachey. I thought, flu. Saturday night she started spiking a fever. One-oh-three, one-oh-four. I couldn't bring it down. I gave her a shot of penicillin Sunday morning. Sunday afternoon she was sick but coherent. We joked, you know, we're playing doctor. Jesus, Mark, she's twenty-eight! Never been sick a day. I figured, viral pneumonia, liquids, bed rest, antibiotics to keep the secondaries down. Sunday night I went to bed in the guest room, and I came in to see how she was, seven, eight this morning, and she was in coma. I panicked, and . . ." He made a helpless gesture.

"Okay, so let me understand this: you wake up, find your girlfriend dead, and your first thought was to come get *me* for a *consultation*, I think you said? Right. We've consulted. She's dead. I agree. So, what's going on here, Vince?"

"It's . . . I need a certificate, Mark," said Robinson. He was looking off into the distance, his eyes shying from both the dead woman and the other man. "I want you to declare her."

"You want me to *declare* . . . ?" Davidoff felt the first stirrings of anger. "Ah, Vince, correct me if I'm wrong, but didn't Harvard give you one of those nice posters with the Latin? I got mine framed. Why the hell don't *you* write out the goddamn certificate?"

Robinson gave him a brief look, in which Davidoff read both despair and shame, and then turned his face away again. "I'm

involved with her, Mark, you know? And, well, I've been giving her things."

"Things? What kind of things?"

"Oh, megavitamin shots, diet stuff, stuff to help her sleep. She was a troubled person."

Davidoff took a deep breath and bit off what he was about to say. He went over to the bed and examined the dead woman's arms and thighs.

"This is a junkie, Mark," said Davidoff, his voice now quaking with rage. "What the fuck are you trying to get me into?"

"She's *not*, she *wasn't* a junkie! I told you, she was a troubled girl. I was trying to help." He turned to face Davidoff, and he seemed a different person from the elegant figure Davidoff had envied for a dozen or more years. He was literally wringing his hands, and his eyes were wet and red rimmed. "She has a family, Mark, you know? A mom and dad? I just . . . I want her to go out decently. I loved her. Mark, I'm begging you . . . do you want me to go down on my knees?"

Davidoff believed that he would have. He felt a wave of loathing, and an intense desire to get out of this apartment, away from this man, and, what was worse, he felt a tincture of self-loathing too, because some part of him was enjoying the sight of Vincent Fiske Robinson brought low.

They stood that way in silence for what seemed a long time. At last Davidoff let out his breath in a huff and said, "Okay, shit, give me the thing and I'll sign it. I presume you have one."

"Yeah. God, Mark, I can't tell you how much I appreciate this."

"Viral pneumonia, huh?" said Davidoff as he cast his eye down the single-sheet form that Robinson handed him. "Why not?" He signed his name and dated the death certificate in the spaces provided.

"Well, Vince," he said, handing over the paper. "I wish I could say it was nice seeing you, but . . ."

"Thanks a million, buddy," said Vince, the famous perfect smile appearing for the first time that afternoon. "Look, I'll call you, we'll have lunch."

Davidoff said nothing, nor did he offer to shake hands. Outside the apartment, in the fresh, cold air again, he took several deep breaths. Vince Robinson had never called him for lunch before, although they had been working in the same city for at least a decade. He doubted Robinson would call him now, and found that he was glad of it. He would have been even gladder had he observed the expression on Robinson's face as he walked out.

There were only four people who were allowed to interrupt, by a phone call, a bureau meeting of the Homicide Bureau of the New York District Attorney's office: the district attorney himself, John X. Keegan; the bureau chief's wife; a detective lieutenant named Clay Fulton; and the chief medical examiner of the City of New York.

"Excuse me, guys, I got to take this," said Karp, the bureau chief, to the twenty or so people assembled in his office as he lifted the phone and punched the flasher.

"Butch? Murray Selig," said the voice.

"What's up, Murray? I'm in a meeting," said Karp.

"Yeah, sorry, but I thought you should hear about this one personally."

Karp turned to a fresh page on his yellow pad and poised his pen over it. "Okay, shoot."

"The dead woman is a nurse, Evelyn Longren, twenty-eight, cause of death, viral pneumonia. All right, that's the first thing. Pneumonia, they call it the old man's friend; it takes the debilitated, the elderly, and babies. We don't expect to see a twenty-eight-year-old woman die from it. Next, the attending physician was Mark Davidoff, who, let me tell you, has a rep as one hell of an internist. His dad is Abe Davidoff, head of internal medicine at Columbia P. and S., for years. Next, we have the death took place in a private residence, not a hospital. And finally, the date of death was this past September 21. Davidoff signed the death certificate on September 21. Interesting, no?"

"No. Murray, I'm not following you. What's so special about the day?"

“What’s so . . . ? Oy vey, what a Jew! Schlemiel! It was Rosh Hashonah. So I’m asking myself, Why is a Jew, one of the biggest internists in the city, attending a woman with viral pneumonia in a private house on Rosh Hashonah? Believe me, Mark Davidoff don’t make house calls.”

“She was a friend. He was doing a favor.”

“Uh-uh, Butch. If it was a friend, and she was developing complications, he would’ve had her in a hospital before you could turn around. And he would have seen the complications in time. This is a young, healthy woman. There are no contributing factors on the certificate either—no fibrosis, no asthma, no staph.”

“So he made a mistake. I know you think doctors are perfect, Murray—”

“Mistake? Butch, listen, if you saw Larry Bird pass to the other team six times in one game, what would you say? He made a mistake? No, you’d say something was fishy. The Mark Davidoffs of this world do not lose young, healthy viral pneumonia patients in private houses.”

“So what happened, Murray?”

“Hey, you’re the investigator. I’m just passing it on. But I’d like to cut that lady up.”

“I bet. Okay, Murray, thanks for the tip. I’ll look into it and let you know.”

Karp hung up and turned back to his meeting, focusing his gaze on a nervous young man standing at the foot of the long table whose head was occupied by Karp himself.

“Okay, Gerry,” said Karp, “take it from the witnesses again.”

Gerald Nolan, the young man, resumed his explanation of the evidence in a homicide case called *People v. Morella*, one of the thousand or so ordinary killings that ran through the New York County D.A.’s homicide bureau in the course of an ordinary year. This particular one was: felon gets out of prison, finds his wife shackled up with another man, kills both. That was the People’s story. The defendant Morella’s was different, hence the forthcoming trial. The purpose of the exercise, and of the withering criticism that Karp and his senior assistant D.A.’s would shortly apply to the young man’s case, was to bring home to the people

in the room, and the criminal justice system, and to the city at large, that murder was never ordinary, that it retained its unique status among crimes.

Watching the young man do his spiel, Karp reflected, not for the first time, on the peculiar historicism of the scene. Fourteen years ago, more or less, the infant Karp had been standing down at the end of this very table, presenting his first homicide case to a group of men (men only then, of course) who were accounted the best criminal prosecutors in the nation, and the current D.A., Jack Keegan, had been sitting in the chair, the actual chair, that Karp now occupied as head of the Homicide Bureau. One of Keegan's first acts on assuming the position on a gubernatorial appointment had been to track down the chair and the table. The office was the same old bureau office too, a much better office than Karp had occupied the last time he had run the Homicide Bureau. Keegan wanted to send a message too about the unique status of homicide and that a new day had dawned at the D.A.'s, or rather a reprise of the old days, when the legendary Francis P. Garrahy had reigned as district attorney.

This public presentation of homicide cases had been part of the tradition then, and Karp was trying to reestablish it in all its brutal splendor. He looked down the row of faces to see how they were reacting to the young man's presentation. Doubtful but still polite expressions adorned most of the faces. A rather more various bunch of faces nowadays, of course. When Karp had started in the late sixties, the bureau had been staffed with the gentlemen who had started in the Depression, when a steady job at the D.A. had been among the best places a young Jewish or Irish lawyer out of Fordham or N.Y.U. could find. Under Tom Dewey and Garrahy they had faced down and broken Murder Incorporated, and challenged the Mob, when the Mob ran New York. These old bulls had all left when Garrahy died, left or been driven off by his successor, the exiguous and unlamented Sanford Bloom. Karp thought that this Nolan kid was lucky not to have been up there back then; by this time the old bulls would have been hooting and throwing balled-up papers at him.

Karp still had a couple of people on his staff who remembered

the golden age. Ray Guma, sitting just to his left, was one of them; Roland Hrcany, Karp's deputy bureau chief, sitting half-way down the table, was another. Most of the other A.D.A.'s were young, eager, bright, and, in Karp's opinion, almost completely unprepared to try homicide cases. Training had not been a big priority of the previous management; for that matter, neither had homicide trials. This was changing, but slowly, painfully, and in the nature of things, it was these people who were going to bear most of the pain. Fortunately, Karp had a willing sadist in Roland, whose current twitchings, subvocalized profanities, and nostril flarings informed Karp that the bomb was about to go off.

Roland Hrcany brought his massive knuckles down on the table twice, like the crack of doom. Hrcany had the physique and mien of a television wrestler, with white-blond hair worn long to the collar and a face like a slab of raw steak. Nolan froze in mid-sentence.

"Ah, Gerry," said Roland, "this Mrs. Rodriguez, the neighbor, seems to be your chief witness. In fact, she's your only decent witness, am I right?"

"There's Fuentes," offered Nolan.

"Oh, *fuck* Fuentes!" snarled Roland. "Fuentes is the vic's sister. Morella used to beat the shit out of the wife before he went upstate. Fuentes'd say he was Hitler. No witness. So, you going to trial with Rodriguez, Gerry? Is that what you're telling us? With no gun? Where's the fucking gun, Jerry?"

"He had a gun," said Nolan. "We had a witness who saw him with it . . ." He started leafing frantically through his papers, seeking the name of the witness who had seen the D. with a gun.

"Hey, he had a gun? Nolan, *I* had a gun once too. Maybe *I* killed Carmen Morella and what's-his-face, the boyfriend, Claudio Bona," said Roland. "Anyway, what's Ms. Rodriguez's story? Did she get along with Carmen okay? Did she ever fuck Claudio? Did she ever fuck Morella? What about her kids? They selling any dope up there on East 119th Street?"

Guma said, "Yo, and I hear old Claudio was pretty tight with the Colombians." Everyone looked at him. Guma had a reputation as a man from whom organized crime in the City held no

secrets. Nolan's face was blotched red where it was not cheese-like.

"I . . . um, there was no evidence of drug, um, involvement," he stammered.

"No evidence?" said Roland. "Did you check? Did you check with Narco? With Organized Crime? No, you didn't. You don't know shit about Mrs. Rodriguez either, just her statement. You know what you got? You're on your knees saying, 'Believe the Rodriguez woman and not the D.'s witness, the cousin, Morella's cousin, who says he wasn't anywhere near the place when the shooting went down.' "

"There's the forensics. He was there."

Roland hooted. "The forensics! My sweet white ass, the forensics! Schmuck! It was his *apartment* before he went upstate. The vic was his *wife*! *Of course* there're fucking prints and fibers. There's going to be his prints and fiber on her *snatch*! No, look: let me tell you what you did, sonny. You didn't build a case with your own hands. You just bought what the cops dragged in, and what the cops did was they caught this case, a couple uptown spics get whacked, no biggie, they check out the husband did time, got a violent sheet on him, and case closed. Well, fuck them, that's their *job*. *Your* job, which you didn't do, was to construct a case that would stand the test of no reasonable doubt. What we got instead is something any little pisher in Legal Aid with two weeks' experience could drive a tank through."

And more of the same, with Guma joining in, and a couple of the more confident of the group picking like vultures on the bones of the case. Nolan grew paler and quieter; he stopped making objections, and scribbled notes, nodding like a mechanical toy. Karp ended his misery by suggesting that he needed some more time to prepare, and after that the meeting dissolved. Everyone filed out with unusual rapidity, as if fleeing one afflicted with a purulent disease. Nolan was silently gathering up his papers when Karp said, "Gerry, the reason why we do this is that we figure it's better you get it here than in court, in front of a judge."

Nolan looked up, his lips tight, his chest heaving with sup-

pressed rage. "I got twenty-eight convictions," he said. "I don't like being treated like a kid out of law school."

Karp had heard this before. "It doesn't matter what you did in Felony, Gerry. This is the Show, the majors. It doesn't matter you could hit the Triple-A fastballs. Homicide is different, which is the point of all this."

"Morella did it."

"I'm sure," said Karp. "But like I've said, more than once, it's irrelevant that he did it. The only question is, Do you have a case of the quality necessary to convict? And you don't. So get one and come back with it."

Nolan gave him a bleak look, stuck his file folders under his arm, and walked out.

Karp was sure that Nolan would be back, and with a better case too, because Karp had picked him as being the kind of skinny Irishman who never gives up. Nolan was an athlete. He had been a J.V. quarterback at Fordham, although someone as small as Nolan should never have gone anywhere near a football field. In fact, all the people Karp hired were athletes of one kind or another. It was a tradition. Roland was a wrestler and running back. Guma was a shortstop who, before he got fat, had been offered a tryout with the Yankees. Karp himself was a high-school All-American and a PAC-10 star before an injury to his knee ended his career. The other twenty-two attorneys on Karp's staff included enough football and basketball and baseball players to field complete teams, and good teams, in each of those sports. The three women on the staff included a UConn power forward, a sprinter, and an AAU champion diver. The one wheelchair guy played basketball. A jock sort of place, the Homicide Bureau; Karp believed, on some evidence, that no one who did not have the murderously competitive instincts of a serious athlete could handle the rigors of homicide prosecution, or the sort of coaching delivered by people like Roland Hrcany. The sports credential impressed the cops too, which didn't hurt.

The phone rang. Karp picked up, listened for a moment, said, "I'll be by in a minute," and hung up. He stood, and from long

habit tested his left knee before he allowed it to take weight. It would undoubtedly hold, being made of stainless steel and other stuff he did not particularly want to think about. Karp was six feet five, with long legs and very long arms, and the ends of which were wide, spider-fingered hands. His face was wide too, and bony, with high cheekbones and a nose lumpy from more than one break. He still had his hair at thirty-seven, and he kept it shorter than was fashionable then, at the start of the eighties. The two surprising features were the mouth, which was mobile and sensual, and the eyes, which had a nearly oriental cast and which were gray with gold flecks: hard eyes to meet in a stare, hard eyes to lie into. Karp walked out of his office, told his secretary where he was going, and (a daily masochism) took the stairs two flights up to the eighth floor, where the D.A. had his office.

The man behind the D.A.'s desk was an older version of the sort of man Karp was, although of the Irish rather than the Jewish model. Jack Keegan's skin was bright pink rather than sallow like Karp's, and his hair was thinner and silver. The eyes were blue, but they had the same expression: bullshit me, laddie, at your extreme peril.

Without preamble, when Karp walked into his office, Jack Keegan roared, "Rohbling, Rohbling, Rohbling, bless his tiny evil heart!"

Karp came in and sat in a leather chair across from his boss's desk. The furniture was as close a match as possible to the decrepit City-issued suites favored by the late Garrahy, and as far as possible in style from the slick modern stuff with which the awful Bloom had surrounded himself. "What now?" Karp asked.

"Ah, nothing, I just wanted to blow steam at someone," said Keegan. "Political crap. I just received a call from our esteemed Manhattan borough president, a credit to his race, as we used to say, who informed me that he would take it very much amiss if we agreed to a change of venue."

"And you informed him . . ."

"I informed him, politely, that we had just nailed the little shit and his lawyer had not yet asked for one, but if he did there was no way we would go for it; nor was there a conceivable reason