

# Corpse in the Kitchen

Author: D.J. Reid

The dead guy lying face up in a pool of blood on my kitchen linoleum sure brought the high desert chill into the room. Guess I could be thankful for three things. One, I didn't know the guy. Two, it was late afternoon, not midnight. Things always seem worse at night. And, three, I'm not prone to panic. I wouldn't be much of a cop if I were.

I backed out the swinging kitchen door, set the auto parts bag I was carrying on the coffee table, and punched 911 on the phone next to the sofa. A female dispatcher answered.

"Angie? Danny Sullivan here."

She did a good job of keeping the excitement out of her voice, told me not to touch anything (as if I was planning to) and to sit tight until a crime team got there.

I could almost do that.

I'd left the dead guy staring at the ceiling, hoping he'd be gone when I got back. Like in the movies. He was still there, so I propped the door open, squatted in the doorway, and took inventory. Professional curiosity. The guy was about my size and age, which meant six feet, slender, and thirty-three, give or take a couple of years.

Had somebody mistook him for me? The thought came and went. I hadn't worked any sensitive cases, hadn't made any real enemies that I knew of.

Besides, he'd been different from me in other ways. I'm your average Anglo, a Chicago transplant still new to Santa Fe after six months; the deceased might have been Hispanic, though more likely Native American. Something about the cheekbones and the set of his eyes. I was getting so I could tell the difference. Looked as though he'd recently started growing a mustache. A bruised left cheekbone and scuffed knuckles on both hands also said he's been in a fight.

As for clothes: basic polo shirt over khakis. Pretty much what I wore when I was in civvies, though I wouldn't be wearing them with navy socks like this guy. And if my big toe stuck out of one, I'd have thrown the pair away before I got murdered in them. Where were his shoes? Why wasn't he wearing a coat? Santa Fe wasn't the Windy City, but December is still pretty chilly. The biggest question of all: What the hell was he doing in my kitchen?

Getting to the back door would have risked stepping in the pool of blood seeping out of whatever hole, or holes, the victim had in his back. I stayed put and peered to check whether the flimsy snap-lock on my back door was locked. It wasn't, but I'd probably left it that way. I didn't remember. This was a quiet neighborhood, or used to be.

When the squad car pulled up, I was standing on the front porch not smoking, but exhaling fog in the cold air. Pretending, like kids do. Purple shadows were creeping across the golden Sangre de Christos mountains. Pretty. I'd given up smoking when I moved here. It seemed a shame to pollute the clean high-dessert air.

Officer Jack Benally strode up my sidewalk, finger-combing his black hair. Navajo, about my age. First few weeks I'd been on the force, he pulled duty to show me the ropes. We'd run several cases together since then.

"Hey, Danny. Can't take a day off?"

"What can I say, I'm a workaholic. How come my murdered guy doesn't rate a homicide detective?"

"The big boys are detecting among the tourists. You're stuck with me."

"S'pose I can make do."

I led him through the living room to the kitchen doorway. He stood looking in at the corpse awhile before he spoke. "Know who he is?"

"No clue."

"Looks Navajo."

"That a 'takes one to know one' comment?"

"Partly." He grinned and pointed to the guy's hand. "That ring is Navajo silver and turquoise work."

"Maybe he just liked jewelry."

Benally grunted.

Footsteps on the porch signaled the arrival of the lab boys and the coroner, a squinty bald guy in a too-long overcoat. Fred Something. Couldn't remember his last name. Benally and I got out of the way and sat on my sofa.

"Any idea why he's in your kitchen, Danny?"

"Looking for good home cooking?"

"Ain't gonna find it here."

I didn't take offence. My idea of haute cuisine was microwave burritos.

The coroner came out, said what we already knew, and handed Benally the guy's wallet.

"Any idea what kind of bullet killed him, doc?" I asked.

He looked at Benally. "Danny's one of us."

Fred Something squinted at me. "Nope."

“Guess that’ll have to wait for the lab, huh?”

“Nope.”

I cocked my head to one side and raised an eyebrow.

“Guy was stabbed.” He turned and walked out the door. Nice exit line.

So much for my big-city assumptions. In Chicago it seemed like it was always a gun.

Benally pulled out the victim’s ID and gave me an I-told-you-so smirk. “Navajo last name: Lapahie.” He handed me the driver’s license. “Lived over in Shiprock.”

Northwest corner of the state. I knew that much. “Long way from home.”

Benally nodded. “Especially with no shoes.”

I handed back the license.

After the lab techs and body baggers finished, Benally and I went into the kitchen. The techs had kindly left most of the blood for me to clean up.

“So.” I scratched my unshaven chin in what I hoped was a sage sort of way. “The guy goes through all the backyards in the neighborhood till he finds my unlocked door. Then he steps inside, springs a leak in his back, and lies down dead on my kitchen linoleum.”

“Sure, I buy that. Who wouldn’t?”

“Oh yeah, I forgot it was your guys who sold us Manhattan for twenty-four bucks and some beads.”

“Not my clan.”

“Okay, okay. Let’s think about this.” I circled the blood stain. “The guy looked like he’d been in a fight. But not here. The kitchen is just the way I left it.”

“Too bad he didn’t bother washing your dishes.” Benally smirked.

I ignored that.

“He wasn’t wearing shoes or a coat. I know this isn’t Chicago but it’s what, forty degrees out?”

Benally dipped his head once. “Means he didn’t come far.”

“So if he wasn’t stabbed here, he was leaking blood all the way. Want to demonstrate some of those famous Navajo tracking skills?”

We stepped around the blood, and I followed Benally out my back door and down a couple of wooden steps. Sure enough, there were rust-colored drops on the treads and the sidewalk

leading to the alley.  
“Watch and learn, paleface.”

The blood spots on the back sidewalk weren't as bright as Hansel and Gretel's white pebbles but clear enough. Even I could see that my visitor had come through the gate in the chain-link fence that separated the yard from the dirt-track alley. The dirt made the drops harder to see. I went left and Benally went right a few paces, peering at the packed earth.

“Found one.” Benally pointed near his right foot. “There's another. Looks like they go this way.”

We followed the trail. Actually Benally followed it and I followed him. At the end of the alley, the drops veered toward the service entrance of a corner store. The door was ajar, a dark smear on the door handle.

Benally raised his eyebrows and lowered his voice. “What is this place?”

“Convenience store. Sandwiches, cigarettes, lottery tickets.”

“Hard to stab yourself in the back making a sandwich.”

He motioned me to wait and headed around to the front. Of course, I waited. Maybe twenty seconds. Then I pushed open the door. Slowly, with one index finger. I didn't really expect a knife-wielding killer to jump out, but there was no point being careless.

The door opened into a fluorescent-lit kitchen-slash-storeroom. A stainless-steel mixing bowl sat upside down on the linoleum floor. Chopped lettuce lay scattered nearby, along with a broken plate, a couple of heavy coffee mugs that hadn't broken, some flatware — and a bloody knife.

Benally walked in from the front of the store. He wasn't surprised that I was already inside. “Nobody in the store but it's open for business. Money in the cash register. Everything looks okay.” He surveyed the mess. “Not okay in here.”

I pointed to the knife.

Benally sighed and reached for his shoulder mike. “I'll call the lab guys back.”

While he called in, I mostly stood still and looked around. Except for the chaos at my feet, the kitchen was clean and well kept. Wire-mesh shelves held supplies. A padlocked walk-in freezer took up most of one wall. A bloody handprint on the freezer door caught my eye.

I'd been in the store several times to buy this and that. Owner seemed like a nice guy. Older man. Kept a neat place. He'd told me the store had been a butcher shop years back before he bought it. Asked if I was a hunter. Offered to store meat for me in the old walk-in freezer because he didn't need that much room for his deli supplies. Said he rented freezer space to several deer hunters. Seemed surprised when I told him I wasn't a hunter.

The only thing out of place in the back room was an Army-surplus cot squeezed into one corner. Not exactly standard kitchen equipment. Come to think of it, probably a health-code violation. A leather jacket hung on a nearby hook. Next to the cot stood a pair of worn boots.

Benally finished calling in.

I gestured to the cot and clothing. "What was the dead guy's name again?"

Benally pulled out the wallet. "Lapahie. Robert M. Lapahie."

I knew that name sounded familiar earlier. "Lapahie is the name of the guy who runs this store."

"Same guy?"

"Not the dead man. This Lapahie is older. Probably early sixties."

"Father and son?" Benally drew his lips into a grimace. "Looks like someone's been living here."

"I recall Lapahie saying he lived in some valley or other. Don't remember if he mentioned a son."

"Could just as easily be the old man himself. A falling out with his wife and he's camping out here till she cools down."

I shook my head. "Widower, I think."

A pickup growled into the alley and the motor cut off. A thickset man with salt-and-pepper hair barreled through the open service door and stopped short. I recognized the storeowner.

He saw me, saw Benally, and then registered the mess on the floor.

"Where's Bobby?"

Benally threw me a glance. I introduced him.

"Mr. Lapahie, this is Officer Jack Benally."

The older man nodded.

"You remember me? Danny Sullivan, from down the block."

"Sure. Police officer, too." He was having a hard time looking away from the debris on the floor.

I followed as Benally eased Lapahie around the mess and into the retail area to ask him some questions. "Is Bobby your son?"

"Yes."

"Was he staying here?"

Lapahie sighed. "Bobby had some trouble in Shiprock, came over here awhile."

“What sort of trouble?”

“Gambling. I didn’t know how bad it was. That was blood, wasn’t it?” He wanted to ask if it was his son’s blood but was afraid of the answer. Maybe he’d already guessed the answer.

“Bobby owed a man money he couldn’t pay. Said the man was out to get him.”

Benally took out his notepad. “Know the man’s name?”

Lapahie thought about it. “Johnson. Yeah, Lester Johnson, my son told me.” His eyes moved from Benally to me. “What happened? Where’s my Bobby? Officer Sullivan?”

I sensed that Benally wanted more time before he delivered the bad news. So I asked Lapahie how long he’d been away from the store.

“I needed some supplies from Albuquerque, so I left about ten this morning. I knew it was going to be a slow day. Bobby could handle any customers while I was gone.”

I looked at my watch. It was nearly six. Dusk was gathering.

“You tell your son where I lived?”

“Sure, Officer Sullivan. I even showed him. I told him, ‘You have any trouble, like this Johnson guy shows up or something, you go to Officer Sullivan for help.’” Nice to be wanted. A lot of folks didn’t want a cop living too close.

The bell on the front door jangled followed by the clump of boots. Lab boys again, only Fred Something wasn’t with them this time. Benally asked Lapahie to wait in the front part of the store.

Lapahie shuffled past the two lab techs, who were pulling on latex gloves. “I’ll put up the ‘Closed’ sign.”

Benally, standing in the backroom doorway, asked the techs to wait a couple of minutes before getting started. They grumbled, slipped their gloves off, and pocketed them as they moseyed toward the magazine rack.

Benally turned back to the kitchen-slash-storeroom.

I turned with him. “Think he’s already guessed about his son?”

Benally shrugged, looking in the doorway. “Here’s what I think. Looks like the son fought someone and got knifed in the process.” He gestured to a magnetic knife rack over the counter. “Kitchen’s full of weapons of convenience.”

I picked up the ball. “So this ‘someone’ — let’s say it was Lester Johnson — comes over from Shiprock. He wants to intimidate Bobby, shake him down. They come in here just in case any customers might walk in. Johnson gets rough and Bobby resists. They struggle. Johnson grabs a knife and stabs Bobby in the back as he’s trying to get away. Bobby stumbles down the alley to my place, collapses on my kitchen floor, and dies.”

“I could see it that way.” Benally was nodding. “Bobby gave as good as he got. After Johnson stabs him, then panics and leaves.”

“Bobby was strong. Strong enough to get down the alley to my house after he was stabbed.”

“So?”

“So, what if Bobby Lapahie was strong enough to subdue Johnson.”

“After he was hurt? How do you figure that?”

“Hear me out. If Johnson had been in control, he wouldn’t have let Bobby get away. What if Bobby knocked Johnson out and then came looking for me, just like his dad told him to do?”

“Except you were out and he was in no condition to wait.”

I nodded. “He was spent. He’d lost too much blood.”

Benally picked up the theme. “Meanwhile, Johnson wakes up, doesn’t see Bobby anywhere. Okay, so, no panic. He just gets up and leaves.”

“Without helping himself to the cash in the till?”

Benally thought about that. The register hadn’t been touched. He’d checked.

“Where you think Johnson went?”

“I don’t think he went anywhere.”

He followed my eyes to the bloody handprint on the freezer.

“I think Lapahie’s son put his killer on ice. Literally.”

Benally’s mouth set in a thin line. “I’ll get the key from Lapahie.”

Together we unlocked the padlock and eased back the heavy door. A gust of frigid air escaped and the interior light blinked on. There in the white chill, stretched out between shelves neatly stacked with paper-wrapped venison, was the man we presumed to be Lester Johnson. He was frozen stiff. No pun intended.

Publication Date: June 30th 2008