

Hollywood was at its worst in early morning. The gray light hit in all the wrong places, deepening the cracks in the facades and making the black, fossilized stains of chewing gum dotting the sidewalk stand out like leeches. Dawn made Hollywood into an after-hours club at closing time—the party over, the revelers departed or collapsed where they stood, the magic gone.

As the first pale hues spread across the desert sky, a coyote ventured down from Griffith Park. The wildfires that had torn through the hills that summer had scattered the rabbits and scrawny deer she depended on for food, and the coyote had been reduced to competing with raccoons over the contents of trash bins. But she wasn't strong enough to fight them—had already lost an eye—so now she was across Los Feliz and passing Pink Elephant Liquors, suddenly alive to the scent of meat, picking up speed, down Western Avenue and then left onto the boulevard, faster, until her instincts took over fully and sent her streaking along the sidewalk toward her claim.

A block east, Dustin Sparks—whom *Fangoria* magazine had once called the “Godfather of Gore”—stared in amazement at the human-shaped thing lying at his feet. Back in '87, he'd worked on a movie about a gym that had been built over an old prison graveyard.

When the local power plant melted down, the radiation cloud woke up the corpses, which broke through the gym's floor and began attacking the members. An aerobics instructor had tried hiding in the sauna, but the murderous dead had jammed the door and cranked the heat up all the way, roasting her in her spandex suit. It was a stupid idea—no way a sauna could get that hot—but he'd been happy to build the dummy of the burned woman. It hadn't been a tough job, technically speaking; he'd begun with a wire frame, wrapped it in foam, then covered the whole thing in strips of latex. Over the barbecue paint job, Sparks had finished with a coat of glossy sealant, which left it all with a wet, organic look.

What lay in front of him now so closely resembled that long-ago prop that, at first, he thought his brain must have finally started to misfire. It was only a matter of time, he knew, considering how many years he'd spent frying it. His arm began throbbing again—invisible, hot bands of iron cinching into his flesh. He gripped the limb, trying to massage the scrambled nerves back into dormancy, and glanced up at the sound of someone approaching.

But it wasn't a person. A coyote—eyes wide, tongue lolling—flashed across the cement and clamped its jaws onto the leg of the Halloween dummy. Sparks stumbled back, but the animal didn't seem to notice him.

*At least I know I'm not seeing things,* he thought. *Coyotes don't eat hallucinations.*

As Sparks watched, the coyote whipped its head from side to side until it separated a fist-sized chunk from the thigh, then lifted its nose skyward and snapped it down. It lunged forward again, burying its snout into the wound it had made, and repeated the process, trembling with what Sparks could only suppose was primal ecstasy.

The thing on the ground wasn't a dummy. It was too real—the way it lay, the proportions, the viscera, the detail. The smell, which was of roasted meat, not of rubber and paint. Sparks understood these things, but dimly.

*Coyotes don't eat hallucinations, he thought again, but they also don't eat Halloween props.*

The animal licked its chops and looked around. It noticed Sparks, lowered its head, and growled. Sparks backed away, stepping off the sidewalk and turning his ankle in the gutter. The pain was bright and urgent, but there was enough adrenaline kicking into his system to keep his attention on the ragged predator. Holding his palms out in a placating gesture, he shuffled in the direction of his apartment. He realized he was staring into the coyote's eyes and dropped his gaze. *You aren't supposed to look in their eyes, right? Or are you? Do they respect you more if you do?* He couldn't remember, just kept moving.

The coyote waited until Sparks was halfway down the block before returning to its meal. Sparks broke into a limping run, casting anxious glances over his shoulder until he turned onto his street.



The arrival of lights and siren scared off the coyote, and the responding officers, both veterans, had gaped thunderstruck at the remains for a full minute before radioing detectives and blocking off the scene. Paramedics arrived, even though the body was unquestionably that—a body—along with a truck from Fire Station 82, which was just down the street. They were soon joined by more police units and parking enforcement officers, and together, they extended and reinforced the barricade, which now stretched from Western to Harvard. The resulting snarl of traffic pressed against the surge of rush hour commuters filing onto the nearby 101 on-ramp. Like a clog in an artery, the crime scene caused other vital systems to fail. Los Feliz, Sunset, and even Santa Monica Boulevard began to slow. Franklin was at a dead stop in both directions, and Hollywood was a sea of stopped cars from La Brea to Hillhurst.

The corpse lay at the base of a pagoda in Thailand Plaza, a restaurant-market complex west of Little Armenia. The pagoda was tiled in mirrored glass and housed the statue of a deity. The serene, gilded god sat on a throne under an elaborate canopy. It was a local

landmark and a sacred site for Thai immigrants, who decorated it daily with garlands of fresh flowers. A rickety table at the foot of the pagoda allowed devotees to leave offerings—mostly food and incense. And at some point in the dark, early morning hours, someone had violently upturned the table and dumped the body of the murdered man.

By the time Tully Jarsdel arrived, he had to navigate between vans from KTLA, FOX, and ABC7. Word of the homicide had reached local anchors, and anyone enjoying the morning news with a cup of coffee would get a rare treat to start their day.

Lieutenant Gavin met him at the perimeter, briefed him on what little they knew, and told him his partner was already on scene. “Been here a half hour already.”

“Sorry,” said Jarsdel. “Traffic from my direction was—”

Gavin waved him away. Jarsdel signed the perimeter log and stepped under the tape. He didn’t need to ask where the body was. Against a backdrop of dingy sidewalk and the sun-faded peach walls of Thailand Plaza, the privacy tent was a stark white anomaly of clean, ordered lines, as conspicuous as an alien craft. Jarsdel headed toward it and the body inside, his heart rate kicking up. It was always that way with him—like those dreams where you’re helplessly drawn toward a door you don’t want to open.

He stopped, distracted by the sound of shouting. An argument had broken out in front of the barricade where Serrano met Hollywood Boulevard. A man with a camera had tried to duck under the tape, and a patrol officer was threatening him with arrest. Jarsdel recognized the cop as Will Haarmann. He’d recently transferred from Valley Bureau, where he’d been picked as the face of a *Los Angeles* magazine article titled “Yes, We Have the Hottest Cops in America.” Jarsdel wouldn’t have known about the piece or about Haarmann, except for some anonymous station comedian who’d cut it out and left it on his desk. It’d been accompanied by a Post-it reading *Tough break—maybe next time!*

Jarsdel watched, fascinated, as the man became more combative.

He shouted something to Haarmann about rights of the press, then stepped forward, lifting his camera to take a picture of the officer. Haarmann put his hand out to stop him, and the civilian swatted it aside. The cop went on autopilot then, quickly spinning the man around and bracing him against the squad car. The camera, which looked expensive, sailed a few feet and smashed into the curb with the sound of a champagne glass breaking. Within seconds, the citizen was shoved into the back seat of the car, his loud protests snuffed by the door closing behind him.

Jarsdel thought Haarmann had made a mistake. He hadn't used excessive force, but anyone with a phone could've caught the whole thing, and petty shit like that could antagonize potential witnesses. He made a mental note to avoid working with Haarmann on any sensitive assignments, then reluctantly crossed the last dozen yards to the tent.

The first thing he noticed was the smell. It wasn't the sour-sweet uppercut of putrefaction, nor was it the sickening copper of congealing blood. The smell emanating from the tent was so unusual under the circumstances that Jarsdel thought for a moment his mind was playing tricks on him.

He hadn't yet had breakfast, and the unmistakable odor of cooked meat gave his stomach a twinge. He pushed open the tent flaps and stepped inside.



It didn't look like any body he'd seen before, and in his five years on the force, Jarsdel had lost count of how many times he'd looked upon death.

The corpse was naked. Even its hair was gone, with only a few patches of ash to mark where it had once been. Heat had contorted the body so that it was more or less in a fetal position, what pathologists called the "pugilistic attitude"—elbows flexed, knees bent toward the chest, genitals tucked between the thighs. Patrol had radioed that they'd chased off a coyote, but to Jarsdel, it looked more like a shark had been at work. The right leg was ravaged.

Though the body lay on its side, the head was twisted upward, giving the investigators a clear view of the face, something Jarsdel found at once horrifying yet irresistible to look upon.

The lips had been cooked to nearly nothing, stretching back to expose a set of yellowed teeth, and gave the impression that the man was grinning up at them. The eyes were gone, either having popped in the heat or dried up like raisins and disappeared into the ocular cavities.

Jarsdel wanted to bend down so he could touch it and saw that Ipgreve, the medical examiner, had been smart enough to bring a gardener's pad to cushion his knees.

"Can I borrow that a sec?"

"Sure," said the ME, straightening up.

Jarsdel knelt and ran a gloved hand lightly along the cadaver's thigh. "Still warm. Like a cooked turkey."

"Yup."

"Evenly, though. No charring. Like it was baked slow in an oven."

Jarsdel wiped a sleeve across his forehead. It was getting hot inside the privacy tent, due in no small part to the hundred-fifty-pound slab of cooked human they were sharing the cramped space with. He shook his head as if to clear it. "What are we even looking at here?"

"It gets weirder," Ipgreve said. "Check out his fingers."

Jarsdel did. The hands were curled into fists, but the fingernails he could see were badly damaged—split or melted, others missing entirely. He could tell by their odd cant that a few of the fingers were broken. The victim had tried desperately to claw and beat his way out of whatever had held him prisoner.

The ME squatted beside Jarsdel. "And c'mere. Take a closer look at his face. See?"

Jarsdel had been trying his best not to—thought he might be seeing those gaping black eye sockets and that lipless, grinning mouth in his dreams. Steeling himself, he forced his attention to where Ipgreve was pointing. The burns had turned most of the

cadaver's flesh a deep chestnut brown, but the skin on the forehead was splotchy with bruising.

"What do you make of it?" Jarsdel asked. "Knocked unconscious before...before whatever happened to him?"

"No, I don't think so. I'll show you why." Ipgreve lifted the cadaver's head. "If he'd been struck from the front, then we'd also likely have contrecoup bruising on the back or sides of his head, where he fell. But thanks to all the hair being burned off, we can see it's clean. No bruises." Ipgreve gently lowered the head back down. Using a pen, he indicated the discolorations. "We've got several major blows—at least four, probably five. We might even have a skull fracture with this one here. I think these injuries were sustained as he struggled to escape. Either that, or..."

"What?"

The ME made a face. "Might've done it on purpose—tried to knock himself out. Had to've hurt like hell, going out that way."

"Then that's your finding? He was baked alive?"

"You know it's too early for me to say conclusively, but considering the nature and extent of the perimortem trauma, I'd put it at the top of my list." Ipgreve shook his head, marveling at the thing in front of them. "Can't wait to get this guy on my table."

"I admire your enthusiasm."

"You have any idea just how odd this is?" Ipgreve went on. "Yes, it was an oven, but not an ordinary oven. Something big enough to hold a man, but with no element or open flame. The heat was immense but indirect. Not even a rack, else we'd have grill marks on the body. Rules out anything you'd have in a restaurant, even an industrial baking facility. And it's gonna play hell on your timeline. Won't see any of the usual determining factors, like putrefaction or rigor, and obviously, he won't cool like a normal body." As he spoke, Ipgreve inserted a probe below the sternum. He removed it, then fed a thermometer into the hole. The digital readout blinked.

"I'd say our fella here was exposed to temperatures in excess of

four hundred fifty degrees. While it won't be any help with time of death, a liver spike'll at least give you an idea of when he got here."

The thermometer beeped, and Jarsdel leaned closer for a better look.

"138.3," said Ipgreve, writing down the temperature. "What'd it get down to last night? Upper fifties? So..." He made some calculations.

Jarsdel knew whatever Ipgreve came up with would be very rough. Time of death using body temperature was usually calculated by an algorithm based on Newton's law of cooling, and ideally incorporated two measurements taken hours apart. The fact that this body was outside, in an unstable temperature, further complicated the estimate.

"What time's it? Almost nine? Then he hasn't been here more than about three hours, give or take." Ipgreve concluded. "If it were much longer, he'd be at more like 120, maybe 110. Air temp has only risen to 66 degrees, which is still on the chilly side, and you also gotta figure the sidewalk would've acted as an effective cooling agent. But the body's still warm. This guy's bigger, of course, but what you said about it being like a turkey wasn't far off. Just imagine taking your bird out of the oven on Thanksgiving and putting it on the patio. Won't stay hot for long."

That wasn't good news. Jarsdel had checked: Thai Pavilion, the restaurant located above the market in Thailand Plaza, closed at midnight, with the last employees leaving around one thirty. That meant that not only would no one at the restaurant have seen anything, but foot traffic would've been practically nonexistent when the body had been dumped that morning.

Ipgreve was right—calculating a timeline would be next to impossible. There was no telling how long the body had been kept in its original location before being moved. They'd have to link it with a name before they'd be able to reconstruct the victim's final hours, and getting an ID was going to be tough. They couldn't exactly put a picture of him on television, and considering the damage to the hands, fingerprints would likely be useless. Forensic dentistry



could confirm a victim's identity, but it didn't do any good unless you already had someone in mind. Their best bet was to coordinate with Missing Persons, then arrange for DNA matching once a likely subject emerged.

Jarsdel found his gaze drifting back to the body. He tried to imagine who the man had been and how he'd come to deserve—according to someone's peculiar logic—this particularly gruesome end.

“Gonna go look for my partner.” Jarsdel stepped outside. The fresh air felt good. So did being away from that grinning thing in the tent.

He spotted Morales on the other side of the pagoda, conferring with an FSD tech. The man was his partner but also his superior, a fifteen-year veteran with the LAPD—six of those in homicide. He was squat, dark-skinned, with a broad face and almond eyes. His coarse black hair was swept back into a stiff, unmoving helmet with what Jarsdel supposed must have been handfuls of styling gel. When he walked—which he avoided doing as much as possible—he did so stiffly, like a retired athlete who'd amassed a catalogue of injuries.

Morales saw Jarsdel approaching. “Hey, Prof.”

Jarsdel smiled without humor. “Morales.”

“You know Carl? He's doing our sketch.”

Jarsdel shook hands with the FSD tech, who went back to drawing on a tablet with a stylus. The tablet was a recent innovation. Crime scene sketches had always been done by hand, maybe with the aid of a compass to get the scale right. But technicians with the Forensic Science Division used software like ScenePD or Crime Zone, allowing them to create crisp and accurate diagrams of even the most complex scenes in a matter of minutes. And while all officers were trained in sketching a crime scene, the FSD's work was usually more impressive to a jury. Its members were considered impartial specialists, with no particular stake in the direction an investigation went. That made it harder for defense attorneys to cast them as bad guys out to get their clients.

Jarsdel moved closer and looked over Carl's shoulder as he drew. "I know we've got lots of reference pictures, but I want as much detail on the altar as you can get."

Morales looked dubious. "This pagoda thing? You think it's important?"

"I think it's the most startling aspect of the case."

"Startling, huh? Shit, Professor. You oughta take a look at the body, you want startling."

"I already have."

"But this is what gets your attention."

"The body was posed right in front of it. I doubt that was arbitrary."

Morales grunted and studied the pagoda more closely. The head that sprouted from the golden statue's neck featured four faces. "What do you think, Buddha? You an integral part of this investigation?"

Jarsdel glanced up from the tablet. "That's not Buddha. He's Phra Phrom, the Thai representation of Brahma."

"Who cares?"

"It's not a minor distinction. Brahma's a Hindu god, much older than the Buddha. Different cosmology and way of worship. If leaving the body here has any significance, it lies in the killer's understanding of who this god is."

"So what, like, people used to sacrifice to this guy?"

Jarsdel frowned. "No, not at all. That's what's so strange. Brahma's the god of creation, a force of good, of benevolence. He's never associated with harm or destruction."

"So maybe it's just a coincidence the body being here, and your theory's bullshit."

"Possible."

"Besides, I thought your specialty was dead white guys."

"My bachelor's was in political science. Had to take classes in cultural literacy." Morales rolled his eyes, but Jarsdel pretended he didn't notice. "It was a deeply cynical and profane thing to do, dumping the body here."

“Not to mention killing the guy in the first place, though, right?”

Jarsdel looked around. “How are we doing on surveillance cameras?”

Morales pointed to the Thai market, which would normally be open by now. “Just one, but it’s trained at an angle on the door. Wouldn’ta captured anything near the altar. Might be able to get something off a traffic camera, but it’s a real long shot. Closest one is three blocks east, so unless the body was strapped to the roof of the car on its way over here, I don’t know what we’d be looking for.”

Carl, the FSD tech, turned his tablet so Jarsdel could get another look at it. “What do you think?” He rotated the image and zoomed in and out on various points of interest. He’d rendered the image without the privacy tent, of course, and had placed the body exactly as it lay at the foot of the altar.

Jarsdel nodded his approval. “Good. Send it to me.”

Another FSD man approached the detectives. “I think we’re done. Got a few cigarette butts, a flattened Coke can, some chewing gum. Scene’s pretty clean. The pagoda’s covered with prints, but it’s a public street. Anyone could’ve left them. I’m ready to release the scene if you are.”

Ipgreve emerged from the tent, peeling off his gloves. “We gotta get him indoors,” he said. “You almost done?”

Morales turned to Jarsdel. “Well, Prof? We good here?”

“Why are you asking me?”

“Want you to take lead for now.”

“Why?”

Morales paused, studying his partner. “Chain of command, rookie. Sounds like you got some specialized knowledge to offer on this case. Put some of that schooling to work.” Morales gave him a saccharine smile. “Look on the bright side. When we find the asshole, you can be the one to make the report to the LT. Maybe even get another chevron on your jacket.”

Jarsdel knew the inverse of the statement was equally true: that if they didn’t find the asshole, he’d be the one having to justify their

investigative strategy to Lieutenant Gavin. And Gavin didn't like him any more than Morales did.

A news copter had joined them, beating the air overhead and forcing those on the ground to shout to be heard. Jarsdel looked from his partner to the mass of people pressed against the barricade, then past them, to the crush of traffic struggling up Western. A street vendor was taking advantage of the captive potential customers, moving up and down the rows of cars with bags of cotton candy. Haarmann's prisoner was bucking back and forth in the patrol car. Seeing Jarsdel looking at him, the man stopped, shouted something, and stuck out his tongue. It was a child's gesture and felt strange and ugly coming from a grown man.

"You home, Professor?" asked Morales.

Jarsdel gave a slight nod, looking once more at the statue of Brahma, likely the only witness to the identity of the murderer. He'd sat the night in vigil, in quiet contemplation, tranquil as a frozen lake even while confronted with the astounding savagery visited upon one of his children. Jarsdel felt a sudden sense of shame on behalf of his species, who'd been given so much and repaid it all with blood and steel.

*But look, he thought at the statue. I care. I'm here, and I'll make it right. Just give us a little longer to push back the darkness.*

They watched as the ME slipped paper bags over the corpse's hands, preserving any potential physical evidence, and secured them at the wrists with rubber bands. "I'll try to raise his prints back at the lab, but don't hold your breath. He's pretty badly burned."

"You're tellin' me," said Morales. "Smells just like carnitas. I'll never be able to eat that shit again, goddamn it." He shook his head. "Just a week from my pension, and I get a case like this."

Ipgreve looked surprised. "You're pulling the pin? I thought you were sticking till mandatory retirement."

"It's a joke, man. You know, every cop movie ever."

"Oh. I get it."

"Can you get to him today?" Jarsdel asked, nodding at the body.

"Oh, for sure," said the ME. "I'll have to move some guys around, but I wanna hear what this one's gotta say." Ipgreve waved away a fat blowfly, which flew neatly into the John Doe's left eye socket.

A thought occurred to Jarsdel—at this time yesterday, whoever that was lying there had been up and walking around, alive, thinking about his lunch or his job or his girlfriend. Now he had a bluebottle dancing around in his skull.

Morales grimaced and bent to massage his leg.

"Knees again, huh?" said Ipgreve. "Pressure change with the

weather, probably. Those can be a bitch. You want something for that?"

"No. Thanks."

"Sure? Just because all my patients are dead doesn't mean I'm not a real doctor. I can write you a scrip."

"I'm fine."

Several more flies joined the cadaver as it was zipped into the body bag. Coroner's assistants began taking apart the privacy tent, and the John Doe was lifted onto a stretcher. As it was loaded into the back of a van bound for the LA morgue, the crowd gathered at the police barricade fell briefly silent.

Jarsdel checked his notes. "I want to talk to the caller, the special effects guy. Dustin Sparks."

"It's your show, man. Do what you think is best," said Morales.

"You wouldn't start there?"

"I'm following your lead, Prof."

Jarsdel sighed. "He's got an apartment on Winona. That's only a couple blocks away. Be easier to walk it in this traffic." He regretted the words as soon as they were out. "Sorry, I mean, we can—"

"You wanna walk, we can walk," Morales said.

The two men signed out at the crime scene log and headed east, brushing off a reporter from KCAL9 who'd camped out on the Harvard side of the barricade. They walked in silence, passing a junior market, an Armenian bakery, and a florist with a *going out of business* sign in the window.

Finally, Jarsdel spoke up. "Look, I want to be partners on this. You want me to take lead, that's fine, but it's important we work together. If you have better ideas than I do, I hope you'll share them with me."

Morales feigned puzzlement. "You mean it's possible I might have a better idea than you? Even without a PhD? That doesn't seem like—how'd you put it?—a *minor distinction*."

The walk was already taking its toll. Morales had developed a limp, and patches of sweat dampened his dress shirt.

"Hey," said Jarsdel. "I was reading the new book about the Bell

Gardens Butcher. I didn't know it was your idea to use low-angle sun photography to find the burial sites. That was clever."

"I have my moments."

"You know, that's one of the ways they find Roman walls. Or where they used to be, I mean. The earth is so compacted in those areas that even though the stones may be gone now, you can see the impressions they made. Take a picture in the morning and compare it to one taken at dusk, and they just pop out of the landscape."

Morales didn't respond. They turned on Winona and soon located the apartment building, a shabby, three-story box painted a fecal shade of tan. A metalwork sign bolted to the facade identified the complex as the Winona Chalet. There was no buzzer or directory, just a locked iron gate protecting the meager courtyard from trespassers. Jarsdel referred again to his notes, found Sparks's number, and dialed it on his cell. The voice that answered was wary.

"Yeah, who's this?"

"Mr. Sparks, this is Detective Jarsdel, LAPD. We're hoping you wouldn't mind coming downstairs and answering a few questions."

"If you're another reporter, I'm going to be supremely pissed off."

"No, sir, not reporters. My partner and I are here at the gate. We'd like to talk to you if we can."

Sparks hesitated. "Fine, whatever," he said and hung up.

Jarsdel and Morales waited only about a minute, but the strained silence made it seem longer. Morales had wrapped his stubby fingers around one of the gate's rods, taking some of the pressure off his legs, and was staring fixedly at the building's double glass doors. Jarsdel considered whether it might be time to request a transfer to a different partner, then dismissed the idea. Few other things would be more harmful to his career, especially considering a mere eleven months had passed since he'd been promoted to the Detective Bureau. If he complained he couldn't get along with Morales, he'd be branded a whiner, and no one would want to work with him.

The man who emerged from the building didn't look at all the way Jarsdel imagined he would. According to the 911 operator, Dustin

Sparks had been out for a jog when he'd come across the body, but this man was sallow and heavysset, wearing a faded Iron Maiden T-shirt, black cargo shorts, and unlaced combat boots. A greasy comb-over of dyed-black hair was doing its best to cover his bald crown.

"I need to see some ID," Sparks said as he approached.

Jarsdel and Morales held out their badges. Sparks scrutinized them. "Not sure I'm buying it. How do I know what those things are supposed to look like?"

Morales drew his jacket aside, letting Sparks see his .45 Kimber Classic. That seemed to convince him.

"I take it you've been having problems with the press," said Jarsdel.

"Uh, yeah, that's one way to put it. I don't know how you guys run your investigations or whatever, but now I've got reporters calling me every five seconds."

"I'm very sorry about that. High-profile cases like this tend to spring leaks. That's why it's so important for us to get to you before anyone else does and to advise you not to discuss what you saw with the media."

"Free country, though, right? 'Specially if they're paying."

"That's up to you, yes. But there may be aspects about what you witnessed that could help us catch the perpetrator. If we can withhold that information from the public, we'd have something we could use to identify a suspect."

"You keep calling me a witness," said Sparks, dragging his fingers through his hair. "But it's not like I actually saw anything happen. I probably wasn't even the first person to see the body—just unlucky enough to be the one to call it in to you guys."

"Mr. Sparks, would you mind if we continued this conversation in your apartment?"

"Why? We're fine here."

Jarsdel glanced at Morales, who looked amused, and turned back to Sparks. "It's kind of an awkward way to conduct an interview—you on one side of the gate, us on the other."



"I told you, there's nothing to interview about. I saw the body, I called you guys."

Jarsdel produced his notepad. "You mentioned to the 911 operator that you work as a special effects technician and that's how you were able to determine the body wasn't just some sort of Halloween dummy, is that right?"

"Yeah."

Jarsdel made a note. "And you were out taking a jog?"

"Yeah. So?"

Jarsdel made another note, this time deliberately writing for longer than the answer seemed to deserve. "About what time did you leave your apartment this morning?"

Sparks shifted from foot to foot. "Uh, I don't know. I don't usually check the clock before I go out to exercise."

"So you exercise regularly?"

"Sometimes."

"How many days a week you go jogging?"

"I don't know. Three or four."

"Always around the same time?"

"Usually just after I wake up."

"Good, so what time do you wake up?"

"I don't know. Different times, depending on the day."

Jarsdel watched him closely. The man's affect was flat; he stared straight ahead at the detectives, unblinking, and didn't use his hands or arms while he spoke. His answers, too, had no life in them, no animation in the eyes as the memories were recalled.

"On days you don't exercise, what time do you wake up?"

"I have no idea. Eight. Probably eight."

"But the 911 call came in at just after six, so today, you'd have had to leave pretty early, correct?"

Sparks shrugged, and Jarsdel made more notes.

"Describe your route."

"My route?"

"Your jogging route."

“My jogging route,” Sparks repeated, as if the words were strange and new.

“In other words, did you come upon the body along the first or second half of your route?”

“On my way back.”

“In your call, you mentioned a coyote. Was it already there, or—”

“No, it showed up right then, right as I was standing there.”

“And about how long had you been out before you saw the body?”

“I don’t know. Ten, fifteen minutes.”

Jarsdel paused, fixing Sparks with a look of weary skepticism. He had no reason to single out that particular answer for scrutiny; his aim was to give the man a long, uncomfortable gap he’d be compelled to fill with more words. Words were bindings, sure as a set of irons, but ones provided by the subjects themselves. Jarsdel sometimes even imagined them springing from the speakers’ mouths and wrapping around their bodies. The point was to get as many words said as possible. Truth or lies didn’t matter—just get them said and get the story locked down. The more words, the tighter and more numerous the bonds.

Sparks was uneasy. “What? I mean I’m not totally sure about the time. It was early.”

“Did you approach the body from the east or west?”

“I’m not good with those kinds of things.”

“Did you see the body while going toward Thailand Plaza from the direction of Winona or coming the other way, from Western Avenue?”

“Oh. From Western.”

“From the north or south side of the street?”

“I just told you, I’m not—”

“Did you see the body from across the street, then go over to take a closer look, or were you already on the same side of the street the body was on?”

“Oh. Same side of the street.”

“North side,” murmured Jarsdel, making another note. “And what were you wearing at the time?”

“Wearing? Why do you care?”

“In case we get a witness who identifies you as having been standing near the body, we want to be able to rule you out as a suspect.”

“Okay, I was wearing this, what I’m wearing now.”

“You go jogging in combat boots?”

“I...uh...changed my shoes.”

“But the rest is exactly what you had on?”

“Yeah.”

“You didn’t take a shower when you got home?”

“No, man, it’s like I said—I been trying to keep away from reporters all morning. Haven’t had two seconds to myself.”

Jarsdel made more notes.

“Are we almost done?” asked Sparks.

“Almost. Out of curiosity, have I seen any movies you’ve worked on?”

Sparks sighed. “I don’t know, have you?”

“I meant can you name a few for me?”

“All the stuff I do these days is straight to streaming. Nothing you’ve heard of. Promise.”

Jarsdel smiled. “Okay. Let’s get back to your route. I’m still confused—you leave here, then what? Take me through it.”

Sparks turned to Morales. “Christ, I thought you guys just wanted to ask a couple questions. How much longer’s this gonna take?”

Morales didn’t answer, and Jarsdel jumped back in. “Where do you usually go?”

“I don’t know, man. I just go. I don’t think about it. Why is this important?”

“You don’t remember which way you went this morning? How about when you came out this gate? Did you make a right or a left?”

“A right.”

“A right. And when you got to Hollywood Boulevard—a right or a left?”

“Another right.”

“Another right,” Jarsdel repeated. “And for how long? When did you turn off?”

“I don’t know.”

“Because otherwise, you would’ve seen the body much sooner. You would’ve run into it on the first half of your run, not on the second half, right?”

“I guess.”

“So?”

“So *what*, man?”

“What was your next move? Where did you go so you didn’t see the body until you were heading back? Side streets? Help me out.”

“You’re twisting my words around.”

Jarsdel creased his brow. “I’m sorry. How am I doing that?”

“Look, I’m not a thousand percent positive exactly when I saw the body, okay? Maybe I saw it on the first half and then called it in on my way back.”

“You saw a dead body and decided to finish your jog before calling it in?”

“Maybe. I don’t know.”

Morales spoke for the first time. “It’s not what my partner would call ‘a minor distinction.’”

“Jesus.” Sparks rubbed his face with both hands, shaking his head.

Jarsdel leaned closer and spoke in a low, almost soothing voice. “Is it maybe possible you weren’t out jogging?”

Sparks continued shaking his head, then, shoulders slumped, stopped to look up at his apartment building. Jarsdel was pretty sure he was hoping he could somehow teleport back inside or wind back the clock to before he’d decided to venture out that morning.

“I don’t wanna talk anymore.”

“Listen,” said Jarsdel in the same coaxing tone. “We’re homicide detectives. Long as your morning errands didn’t include killing someone, it’s of no interest to us whatsoever.”

“This is none of my business anymore,” said Sparks. “I did my part.”

“I’ll tell you something,” Morales said. “You’d be doing a good thing, helping us find out who did this. I honestly don’t care what you got going on. What is it? Girls? Narcotics?” Sparks flinched a little, and Morales pressed on. “Okay, so let’s say you got a habit. You’re out on a buy, you see something. Why you’re there doesn’t matter. What matters is you’re there, and you can help us. Obviously you care, or you wouldn’t have called it in. That gives you some major points with me. That other shit? Forget it. Let’s talk about what you saw.”

Jarsdel gave the last little push. “There’s no way you’re gonna get in trouble talking to us. We’re after people who commit murder. You talk to us, and you become one of the good guys.”

Sparks nodded, his eyes focused on a spot somewhere between the two detectives. “I got problems. Got cut rigging this chainsaw effect a few years ago...” He let them see his right forearm, where a network of pink scars dimpled the pale flesh. “A fucking chainsaw. Guys were supposed to take the teeth out of it, right? Stupid, so goddamned stupid. So now I’m addicted to Oxy.” He shrugged. “If I don’t take ’em, I can’t use the arm at all. Gotta use the arm to work, you know? That’s my situation. Anyway, I’m in real bad pain early this morning. Wakes me up, covered in sweat. I call my guy, and he meets me over by the Metro station.”

Jarsdel scribbled furiously. “Corner of Hollywood and Western?”  
“That’s the one.”

“And what time are you talking about here?”

“I’d say about five, maybe quarter after.”

Jarsdel and Morales exchanged a look. That fit with their timeline.

“You don’t believe me?” asked Sparks.

“No, that’s not it at all,” said Jarsdel. “What’d you see?”

“I’m headed back toward the apartment, and this van pulls up ’bout a hundred feet away. Tires screeching and everything. Scared the hell out of me—thought they gotta either be cops or some dudes after my Oxy, so I duck into a doorway to hide. But I don’t hear any shouting or even talking or anything, and then there’s this racket,

like they're moving something, so I peek out to take a look. I see a guy jump back into the van and take off."

"Would you be able to identify him?"

"No way. Split second."

"Was he white? Black?"

"White, I think." He added, before Jarsdel could ask, "Wearing dark clothes. Didn't get a good look at his face, but he was a young guy. You could tell by the way he moved."

"Any facial hair?"

"I'm telling you I barely saw him."

"He drive away in your direction?"

"No. Pulled a U-turn."

"Can you describe the van?"

"Either white or cream-colored, I couldn't tell."

"Any idea on the make or the year?"

"I don't know a whole lot about cars, but I can tell you it was a Dodge Ram. Had the chrome ram's head thing on the hood."

"Anything else? Dents or scrapes? Maybe a cracked window?"

"Not that I saw."

"Just a plain white van? No logos or anything?"

"Nope."

"What about a license plate? You get any of it?"

"No."

Jarsdel put away his notepad. "Why'd you wait so long to report it?"

"I don't know," said Sparks. "Guess I didn't want to get busted for the whole Oxy thing. Told myself I'd call if no one else did. Then it's getting up to six o'clock, and I still don't hear any sirens. Couldn't believe it. Dead guy right in the middle of the sidewalk. And then I'm thinking about that coyote and all the damage it's doing, and I figured I should let you guys know." He shook his head at the memory. "I'll never forget that shit. I mean, I've got a strong stomach, but whatever those guys did to him..." His eyes widened in alarm. "Hey, wait a second. What if someone comes after me now I talked to you?"

“You don’t have to worry about that,” said Jarsdel. “Your identity will be kept confidential.”

“Confidential? What about all those reporters?”

“All anyone knows is you’re the one who called it in. Everything you’ve just said stays between us.”

Despite Jarsdel’s assurances, Sparks grew pale. He leaned on the gate with both hands. “I’m so fucking stupid. So stupid. I’m a dead man.”

“Mr. Sparks,” said Morales. “You’re completely safe, okay? We’ve never had any of our witnesses harassed in any way.”

Jarsdel knew that wasn’t true, but he also saw the necessity of calming Sparks down. They might want to talk to him again, maybe even subpoena him. “You have my word,” said Jarsdel. “Your name will be kept out of it.”

Sparks wasn’t mollified. “Can I go?”

“Yes, sir. And thank you.” He handed Sparks his card. “If you think of anything else, no matter how small, please get in touch. You’ve been a huge help.”

Sparks waved his hand as if clearing away a foul smell, then slouched back into the building.

“Okay, Prof,” said Morales. “What’s next?”

“That was good, right?” said Jarsdel. “I mean, the way we played off each other. It felt pretty natural.”

“Uh-huh.” Morales’s lips twitched. “What’s next?”

“I guess maybe have the red-light camera on Wilton checked for any traffic infractions this morning between four and seven. Follow up on anything resembling a van.”

“What if he didn’t run the light? Then what?”

“Some of those cameras are also equipped with radar. Woulda got him if he was speeding.”

“Not bad,” said Morales. “But it won’t work.”

“Why not?”

“Disconnected.” He smiled at Jarsdel’s confusion. “You don’t keep up with local politics much, do you? Traffic cameras being phased

out. Cost more to run than they bring in. They'll hang on to the carpool and HOV cameras, but that red-light shit? Just decoration before somebody takes 'em down."

"Are you sure? I talked to a West Hollywood sheriff's deputy a couple weeks ago, and he said—"

"Yeah, that's WeHo. WeHo's not in our jurisdiction. I'm talking about the contract between LAPD and the camera company, and that expired six weeks ago. They still got a few operational in Santa Monica and Beverly Hills and WeHo, but who cares? Doesn't do us any good."

Jarsdel considered for a moment. "What about Caltrans cameras? You know, the ones where you can watch the live feeds to see how backed up the freeways are?"

But Morales was already shaking his head. "They don't record anything, just give real-time info on traffic conditions and accidents."

Jarsdel felt himself growing frustrated. "Okay, any time you want to put an idea out there, feel free."

Morales shrugged. "What can we do? Nothing to canvass—just a bunch of businesses, and they were all closed. We got a witness, but all he can tell us is he saw a van with maybe a white dude in it. We won't know anything new till Ipgreve gets back to us on the autopsy. You oughta chill out, Professor." Morales turned and began heading back down Winona.

Jarsdel caught up with him easily. "I really wish you'd stop calling me that."

"You do, huh?"

"Yes, I do."

"Not up to me, man. S'what everybody calls you. Even Gavin."

Jarsdel hadn't known that, and the news stung. If even his commanding officer didn't take him seriously, probably no one else did either. He considered defending himself to Morales, pointing out that he'd gone through the same academy, had the same training, endured the same grueling years of patrol duty before passing the detective's exam—that who he'd been before getting his badge didn't matter and said nothing about his worth as a police officer.



But even in his head, it sounded ridiculous. Of course it mattered, especially to those who'd given over their lives—and, with guys like Morales, literally their limbs—to the force. Jarsdel knew that the more he insisted he be accepted, the more he'd sound like a poseur, a dilettante. The best thing to do was work hard and close cases.

*And that's exactly why Morales wants you to take lead on this, he thought. Because it's a loser, and he knows it.*

Jarsdel hoped that wasn't true, but even if it was, he also had a feeling that the case's very strangeness might be the key to its own unraveling. He saw his investigations as huge, tangled knots of fiber. Most other cops he knew used the jigsaw puzzle analogy, working at accumulating evidence piece by piece until a picture emerged. But for Jarsdel, it was the opposite. He wasn't interested in collecting but in eliminating, tugging here and there until he found the golden thread, the one that—when painstakingly teased from the rest—could unwind everything. Jarsdel believed this approach produced the cleanest results, freeing the investigator from the sway of preconceptions and biases, the dizzying noise that could obscure clear thinking as sure as if it had presence and weight.

They turned right onto Hollywood, following Sparks's earlier route, and made their way back toward the police barricade. Traffic cops were doing their best to funnel cars onto side streets, but the 1920s-era grids couldn't accommodate the onslaught of twenty-first-century traffic. Jarsdel's head began to ache from the miasma of car exhaust, the din of braying horns, and the ever-present, ear-rattling pulse of the news helicopters.

There was no stillness in the city. It was a constant, churning stew of action and reaction, as if the people's drives and passions were in a way linked to the volatile, unquiet land itself. The land that, carried along the scar of the San Andreas fault, moved inexorably northward up the continental plate, its passage marked by cataclysmic bursts of seismic energy. There was no changing its violent destiny. It was already shaped and mapped out by the tremendous forces at work below the surface. Los Angeles would one day become an

Alaskan suburb, appearing off the coast of Anchorage in about seventy-five million years. Not that long, geologically speaking.

But none of that mattered to Jarsdel. He understood impermanence, understood it better than most people ever could, holding in his mind the histories of entire civilizations from Mesopotamia to Byzantium—was an expert, so to speak, on the triumph of entropy, corruption, and rot. He also believed impermanence was a psychological trap, a facile excuse not to care. And he also knew that, despite the insistence of cynics and doomsayers, things were getting better. Jarsdel had nearly the whole of recorded human history to draw on and could prove that somehow, incredibly and despite impermanence, the consciousness of his species was evolving. As the gross world was buffeted and rent by whim or disaster, a collective inner world of love and compassion was growing. Its architecture was incomplete, but it was being sustained and augmented moment by moment, year by year. Victories could not be measured by mere physical structures. Even the most vaunted—the Acropolis, Chichen Itza—would one day be worn down to little more than sand castles. No, victories could only be measured by the human heart, whose capacity was boundless. The poor, tortured body that had mobilized hundreds and gridlocked thousands more represented a last gasp, a recidivist spasm in an old and dying way of life.

As he ducked into his car, he caught another glimpse of Brahma and smiled. There was some stillness in the city after all. *I'm here to make it right*, he thought, repeating his promise. *To be among those who renew the world.*