

Dead by Midnight

A Novel

By

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First Edition March 2021

Cover art by Bavarart

Prologue

Soft murmurs of air, a calm westerly breeze, blew over the Hills of Los Feliz, originating from the never-ending expanse of the Pacific Ocean, doing little to ease the balmy atmosphere felt by the inhabitants of the region. Of course, any true Angeleno would be acclimated to such a climate. Dry hot summers, akin to the far away Mediterranean, sharing the seasonal calendar with humid, rainy, winters. However, to those who do not call the City of Angel's their home would best describe such an environment as, to put it plainly, utterly comfortable. The low hanging orb that is the Pacific sun cast a baleful orange glow over the Los Angeles Plateau.

This did, unsurprisingly, pathetically little to ease the endless stream of traffic coursing throughout the bustling metropolis. Complete with sirens belonging to anxious

motorists. Worried about being two seconds late to their evening programming of choice. Transforming concrete mosaic boulevards and highways into a cacophony of rude beeps and piercing sharp wails. Soft white and red lights forming rivers of automobile congestion that the slow sinking of the Sun did nothing to relieve.

Los Feliz was no different despite it being host to one of the most affluent, gated, neighborhoods in the entire metropolitan area. The Los Feliz Hills, which sat North of Los Feliz Boulevard, nestled below hillock spanning Griffith Park, provided a landscape dotted with multi-million dollar homes. Each trundle of overpriced real estate carefully wrapped in white brick-topped walls. Doing not much more than serving to create an island chain of wealth. Accessible from concrete channels unto wrought iron gates. Their steely forms barring way for those not desired by the islands inhabitants. Truly different, a world apart, from what the common people of Los Angeles would probably never know unless captured on a silver screen. Balconies, galleries, and expansive pools formed

contrast to the quaint, older, squat homes owned by the middle classes of Los Feliz.

Nevertheless, like any city of such size there are two worlds, alternating with the tick of the clock, which when one recedes to sleep the other awake. One of Sun dazzled brilliance of the cityscape in all of its harsh concrete and asphalt colors suddenly replaced by its twin's dull moonlit glow. Yielding to a world of shadow sprinkled by millions of illuminating embers. Streetlights.

This change much like the flipping of a coin. For in a matter of moments as the Sun descended below Pacific waves forming the grand blue horizon to the West of the city, and the Moon revealing its celestial nudity to the world. Day became night.

The dark sloping walls of the Transverse Mountain Range providing a geographic fence reigning in Mankind's seemingly unchecked urban sprawl. Buttressed by the million strong trunks of the Angeles State Forest. Hemming in the city's population from spilling over into the Mojave landscape

beyond. A possibly futile attempt as every year more and more land is given away to the development of Human habitation.

The coming of darkness signaled the beginning of nightlife for Los Angeles taking over. Los Feliz mirrored this as cars trundled along Deodar tree-lined boulevards. Throwing the light belonging to many a pair of headlamps against the Gothic architecture of the Shakespeare Bridge. It's white crenelations carrying the pavement labeled by many street signs as Franklin Avenue over the ravine that divides the Franklin Hills area of Los Feliz.

The village of Los Feliz itself was a hub of activity. Such proximity to numerous bars and restaurants naturally attracting all manner of an urbanite from the surrounding locales. Streetwalkers stalked along the side streets to stand sentry at the mouth of gloomy alleyways. Forming lecherous deals with equally morally flexible clientele. The class and nature of which being irrelevant during the dead of night.

Meanwhile, the streams of pedestrians on both sides of the village streets carried all manner of an individual back and

forth. Paired or otherwise as seen by couples walking hand in hand home; or, perhaps to a nice hot meal being served at one of the many plethora of dining establishments lining Hillhurst Avenue. Too young party goers like roving packs of howling, chattering, coyotes creeping along in a riotous invasion of bars. On the hunt for many a stiff drink after a day of class or work. All were swept along by the endless tides of humanity.

A lone Los Angeles Police Department squad car slowly prowled, like a stalking wolf, along the avenue. Searching for malcontents to apprehend. Not that they'd be able to put a dent into the nefarious activities happening behind the neon lights and stone-faced walls of the village establishments.

One such place, name emblazoned on a red neon sign proudly displaying *Good Luck's*, rested on one of many bustling corners along Hillhurst Avenue. Beyond the neon sign and stylized windowpanes, a person would find themselves surrounded by kitschy Asian decor. Red lanterns hanged from the ceiling to cast soft light over the patrons dining therein. The

mood contrasted with the sharper yet somber lighting of the bar.

Patrons spoke loudly in conversation. Smiling, laughing, while occasionally every now and then someone could be caught swaying to the tune of the music. Emanating from a jukebox decorated in Mandarin calligraphy. A statue of Buddha in all of his round, joyous, golden glory greeting any guest that would go to press the numbered keys which dictated the musical track to be queued.

Wait staff, mostly young Asian women, expertly maneuvered between the throngs of customers to deliver delicious entrees or exotically themed beverages. Examples of which dotted the environment. A red and blue swirled drink, smelling of rum, was set down before a young lady at the bar. Another of orange coloration, bearing hints of tequila subsumed by pleasant citrus smells, was set at a neighboring table.

The chorus of voices and the smiling jokes of the bartenders entertaining their various guests filled the gallery of

the bar. People milling in and out, creating a trickling current of humanity outside of its open doors and along the nearby sidewalks. Merging with the crowds streaming into and out of neighboring bars all along Hillhurst Avenue.

To merely walk along the concrete sidewalks was to weave between currents of people. Your nostrils frequently assaulted by the smell of cigarette and marijuana smoke typically presaged with the sudden flicker of a small flame. As if to signal when another man or woman lit up the end of his or her chosen respiratory indulgence. Each one mixing with the smells of food and the exhaust of passing cars to create a miasma of distinctively twenty-first century urban atmosphere. It was intoxicating, the swirling mix of life at night. Honest or with vice the lamplight glow of street-lighting which lit the environment of Los Feliz carried on with as much vigor as it had during the day.

However, for all their similarities the night carried on with rules of its own. A young man, surrounded by friends, walked along Hillhurst Avenue and into the Good Luck's.

Trailed by trickling mists from friends bearing vape pens in their wake. Only evaporating from view as they entered the welcoming doors.

Immediately, they are whisked away by a smiling hostess dressed in a bright purple kimono edged with golden thread, black hair pinned up, and dark eyes beaming with life. Moving them to a table near the jukebox where the infectiously festive quintet of young men and women slid onto their seats. Dim red light from an overhead lantern stratifying their smiling faces and bodies in its ruby rays. The group composed of three males all of whom appeared to be approximately the same age, alongside two females of a similar disposition. Bore the accoutrements heralding themselves as University students. Both women dressed in leggings pigmented in colorful mosaics. Their torsos wrapped in the gentle warmth of hoodies bearing the acronym 'U.C.L.A.' one of the males wore a similar hoodie, another a sports jacket, while the third possessed a rubber bracelet bearing the acronym emblazoned on his compatriots clothing. Compounded, as it were, by virtue of

their whirlwind conversation. Coursework, future employment, and upcoming sporting events drifted in and out of conversation just as easily as patrons coming and going from the restaurant itself did.

The fastidious arrival of the quintets designated waitress temporarily damming the nebulous conversation being had. Swiftly, orders for beer and mixed cocktails of various color, flavor, and texture were proclaimed in rapid succession. All while flourishing their driver's licenses to confirm themselves being of legal drinking age. The waitress keeping her characteristic smile in place as she took each license, scrutinized them briefly, then handed them back to their proper owner. Her frame soon withdrawing from the table to have the nearest bartender take their drinking orders from paper to reality in a skilled flurry of mixing, ingredient adding, and pouring various textured liquids.

The atmosphere of this quaint outing could best be surmised as joyous for the casual observer of the quintet huddled around their window side table before the Mandarin

decorated jukebox. Each smile revealing rows of white teeth.

Youthful flesh devoid of time's ravages being their visage.

Prospective futures for them all yet to be realized.

Possibly budding careers all around; from a doctor saving lives, to a lawyer quizzing an offender of their actions on a particular date, or perhaps a teacher working late to help a child on their latest assignment; which, needless to say one could not look on this occasion with melancholy.

Of course, in hindsight the problem with happiness is that it is often unappreciated until but a memory. What with the groups, festive outlooks only brought upward yet another octave by the return of the fastidious waitress. Her small frame bearing a saucer displaying their beverages of choice. Beers in pint glasses with their amber bodies contrasted between the glow of the lamp above the table and that of the polished dark wooden table before them. The three beer drinkers, all male, would sweep them up after being placed by the waitress after politely meeting eyes. Taking their first tasteful sips of the amber liquid. Feeling the fermented texture, tasting the flavor,

and bite of its alcohol content upon their nostrils. For the women, their beverages were all unique, as if each were personalized to the tee in reflection of their own unique taste.

First, a cocktail glass bearing olives impaled by a wooden toothpick lance and filled with a pale pink liquid. Complimenting odors of limejuice, pomegranate, orange liqueur, and vodka. All shaken together amply to waft up into her slightly flaring nostrils. Raising the thin neck of the glass to her supple lips in order to partake of the beverage. Not placing it down with satisfaction until her tongue danced with the cool, chilled, citrus. Concurrently, to her right the next compatriot seated received a much larger, flat-topped, margarita glass filled nearly to the brim with a greenish, almost viscous looking, liquid. The thick texture of crushed ice, lime juice, orange liqueur mixed with tequila providing a much smoother experience than the first young woman's drink as she raised her glass in turn. Taking some of the slurry like beverage into her mouth. Washing her taste buds with the gentle warming sensation of cascading tequila. All of these actions typically

accompanied by one or more snapshot pictures taken from a member's cellphone. All save one whom instead seemed to partake in a near ritualistic checking of their phone before it was withdrawn back into his trouser pocket.

The waitress once more withdrawing, but this time parting with a much more lengthy list, the resulting orders of their entrees. Vagabond kitchen smells drifting through the air, strengthened even, by passing staff bearing dishes destined for other tables causing more than one of the quintet's stomachs to rumble in anticipation. Pangs of want for the creations of the kitchen's laboring chefs striking the walls of their stomachs with each passing minute. All the while crowds in the bar came and went as time marched onward in step with the passage of the Moon.

Luckily, for the cheery group of college students their food would soon appear. Preceded by the aroma of hot noodles, rice, steamed vegetables, and chicken glazed in succulent sauces. The food on their plates never stood a chance. Soon diminishing not long after each dish was settled down in front

of it's recipient, already awaiting with utensils at hand. The conversation quickly becoming interspersed by the devouring of meals and a second round of drinks. One by one, their plates ended up neatly stacked at the edge of the table. Joined by the empty glasses of their quintet's beverages not long after. The bill suffered much of the same fate, arriving and returning from the table, the only remaining evidence of these young men and women having been at the bar being the generous tip left on the table for the soon to be equally beaming waitress.

The five walked from the Bar with even more twinkling excitement and life than when they had entered. Renewed by the consumption going on within them. Walking in two ranks, the front pair being a man and a woman, with the remaining trio following close behind. The group moving down the street and Northwards away from Hollywood Boulevard. Up Hillhurst Avenue they strode until suddenly and almost in unison bore right. Moving across a parking lot as they made to cut across the back alleys to Rosalia Road. The alleys had largely emptied by this time of night. The Moon hung high in

dominance as a beacon of sickly pale light. Six shadows moving across the asphalt to merge with the gloom of the buildings.

One of the five, a blonde haired, handsome young man with green eyes stopped suddenly and checked his pockets. Muttering a near silent swear he raised a hand in goodbye. Exclaiming, rather quickly to the other four that he had forgotten his wallet back at the restaurant. Perhaps reasoning it had fallen out of his hoodie pocket and onto the floor when one of the females questioned him. After all, it was easily missed, if no one was looking or paying attention what with all the talking and laughing among them. All for not as both the blonde haired young man and the other three in particular hurriedly remarking about not seeing or hearing the phone fall to the ground.

Turning around, his compatriots shouted their goodbyes in rapid succession. Their forms receding behind a building as they took a right-hand turn to reach Rosalia. None of them would even hear the muffled scream of their blonde

haired friend. His sudden yell of surprise, turned to help, dying in his throat. The splattering of bloody viscera onto the pavement and the gurgling moans of life being snuffed out going unheard amid the bustling sprawl of Los Angeles' nightlife.

Chapter I

The metallic roar of a 428 Super Cobra Jet engine pierced the smothering silence stretching for miles across Interstate 10. Otherwise known as The Christopher Columbus Transcontinental Highway. The growling roar of the engine heading west away from the Arizona-California border. The coming of this metal beast presaged by the rapidly growing brilliance of headlights. Spawning numerous unique shadows with their glaring beams of white light. The trailing silhouette of a 1969 Ford Mustang following immediately after could have blended in perfectly with the surrounding darkness of night. Had it not been for the lights on the car of course. For it bore a plain black paint job, chrome rims of standard design, and tinted windows of questionable legality. The driver riding inside nothing but a mirage to any onlooker who, presumably

needing a lesson in futility thought they could penetrate the blackness of those tinted windows. Let alone make out any fine detail from the abyssal darkness of the automobiles cabin interior.

The 69' Mustang growled on as it passed the latest mile marker staked next to the shoulder of the road. It's driver casting a purely ceremonial look behind him as the marker came and went. He was alone. There was no car in front of or behind him. Not for several miles at least. Traffic at the dead of night in the desert stretching between the more populous areas of Southern California and Phoenix, Arizona, tended to be practically non-existent. Save for the odd freight truck making their scheduled haul.

Silence often was not permanent. The chirp of a cell phone rang throughout the cabin interior of the car. The coiling wire of the car's charger feeding power from a cigarette lighter, an increasingly antiquated feature nowadays, ending in the USB port of a small gray flip phone.

Wheels throwing up protesting squelches as the metal bulk of the vehicle slowed and swerved gracefully to the shoulder of the highway. Head glancing side to side after having pulled over onto the side of the road the driver, cast in shadow, lifted the small gray device from its resting nook in the car console. Seeing the glow of the tiny blue L.E.D. screen on the front displaying an incoming call in black digital numerals. Flipping the phone open in one quick motion the driver held it to his right ear.

All the while, the driver kept his eyes trained on the rear view mirror while the nameless speaker on the other end of the connection spoke to him. The conversation quickly, if not anti-climatically, boiling down to a single phrase from the driver, 'Yes, ma'am.'

Snapping the phone shut and placing it back in the center console the driver thrust his car door open. Stepping out, black dress shoes giving a satisfying crunch on the dusty asphalt, his exit from the vehicle was with practiced precision.

His form swallowed by the blackness by virtue of the clothes he wore. Black trousers, dress shirt, and jacket.

Leaving the door open, for there was no one else around, the driver moved to the trunk of his vehicle. Pulling out a plain silver key its teeth soon dove into the trunk's lock. Twist of the wrist. *Click*. Trunk easing open on well-greased springs to reveal several neatly folded suits and uniforms stowed in clear vacuum-sealed packages. A briefcase dominated the center of the trunk. A briefcase that The Driver-in-Black opened with the quick flip of twin brass clips. Revealing a row of identification cards, passports, licenses, documents, and stacks of money in various currencies. A P22 Walther pistol with an attendant magazine were Velcro attached above toward the bottom of the briefcase.

Taking the briefcase, revealing a brown leather satchel bag squarely behind it, The Driver-in-Black placed it on the lip of the trunk and aside. The Driver-in-Black reached a little deeper into the trunk until his slender hands grasped the handle

straps of the heavier satchel bag. Pulling the bag to the fore of the trunk.

Zippering open the satchel bag revealed to the black-clad man's eyes an absolute multitude of chemicals, syringes, powders, bandages, and surgical instruments. Checking the contents delicately with a singular hand The Driver-in-Black closed the satchel bag and returned it to its centerline, rearward, position in the trunk.

The briefcase did not rejoin the satchel bag in the depths of the trunk, however, and remained sitting on the lip of the hatch. A fair-skinned hand sliding along the row of identification cards. Pausing, about two-thirds of the way down the row, and with thumb and index finger plucking a plastic badge. Pulling it, along with a plain black wallet from a row laying across from the identification cards on the other side of the briefcase, the driver slotted the card into clear lamination that would allow, by opening the wallet, one to view the freshly credential. Eyes roving across the smooth surface of the wallet to the fold opposite revealed a golden

shield. Its smooth glossy surface under a perched eagle with wings swept outwards ready to take flight. Gold lettering rising from the surface of the shield ran across its width and around the blind personification of Justice. Reading: *Federal Bureau of Investigation, Department of Justice.*

Closing the wallet and badge with a snap. The Driver-in-Black tucked it into the inner pocket of his black suit jacket. Closing the briefcase and depositing back into its proper, dominating, position in the center of the trunk a pair of fair hands reach up. Grasping the waxen metal of the trunk it was guided downwards to close with a soft click. Light footsteps maneuvering the black-clad man back into his vehicle as he once more resume this nocturnal voyage. The engine letting out a deep guttural growl as it was reinvigorated by a sudden injection of gasoline. Speeding off into the dark night solely lit by the sickly glow of the Moon hung high above.

Throwing up a trail of rapidly dissipating exhaust as the 69' Mustang continued its journey with renewed purpose westwards. No longer was it a relaxing cruise through the cool

desert night. No, the vehicle journeyed along with unannounced intent as it's driver pushed toward the speed limit and beyond. Seemingly, without much care as the miles ran on by and the growing glow of civilization began to dim the stars above. Growing fainter and fainter as the Los Angeles skyline, still masked by the San Jacinto Mountains whose jagged bulk reared up like a titan's saw, grew ever nearer by every passing minute tick-toking from The Driver-in-Black's dull gunmetal gray wristwatch.

The Driver-in-Black rode in silence, until, having descended into the Coachella Valley, he lifted a hand and flicked a slim silver switch protruding from a small black box mounted on the driver's side sun visor. Adjusting an adjacent knob causing a low, whispering, sound to emanate from the box. These whispered joined by a series of numbers from a red tint L.E.D. screen. The box's displayed digits counting down in meters, rapidly, the 69' Mustang moving closer to whatever awaited it as those numeral tics spiraled down toward zero. The black box, however, would not let the vehicle's driver continue

without warning. For as the automobile moved down Interstate 10 the dull whisper rose into a single high pitch beep. Followed by the red L.E.D. screen beginning to flash a small red light to the side of the rapidly zeroing digits. The Driver-in-Black tapped the brakes in quick succession. Slowing to just below the speed limit. Rounding an upcoming sharp curve of the Interstate's snaking path the driver peered to the right-hand shoulder and saw the waiting California Highway Patrol cruiser. Returning his gaze to the fore, The Driver-in-Black coolly continued on.

Passing the Law Enforcement vehicle the 69' Mustang continued down the Interstate. Only gradually increasing his speed as he passed the thousand-meter mark, for now, the numbers ticked upwards until they would pick up the next radar bounce back signaling another patrol cruiser. Which, a thousand meters being the effective range of most Police cruiser scanners when trying to pick up anything of Sedan sized, or in this case a 1969 Ford Mustang.

The Driver-in-Black would recreate this exact scenario

several more times, as he zipped along Interstate 10. Passing an increasing amount of green signage. Their rectangular frames displaying white lettering signaling exit ramps for various destinations. Palm Springs, Whitewater, Cabazon, Beaumont, Calimesa, and Redlands. The 69' Mustang pressed on. Skirting San Bernardino via Bloomington and Ontario before rounding the Chino Hills through Pomona.

Casting his eyes upwards at the road signs The Driver-in-Black only reacted to one. Los Angeles. Peering to his left his eyes saw the Los Angeles skyline properly silhouetted before him. Yet, Los Angeles was a large city and there were a dozens of ways to enter the city's confines.

Alhambra came and went, as did Chinatown while the 69' Mustang got off Interstate 10 to take Highway 101 North-West in the direction of Little Armenia and Los Feliz. Repeating much of his prior journey until, at the right moment, he depressed the handle of his turn indicator. The soft orange blinking predicting the motion of the vehicle by a few seconds as it glided down onto an exit ramp.

Pulling off the Highway The Driver-in-Black maneuvered the Mustang down the streets of Los Feliz. Growling past pedestrians flashing in and out of still lit business. Prowling along the streets saddled with entertainment venues like a rumbling predator. Eventually, slowing into a gentle turn off onto a small parking lot ill illuminated by a neon sign. Reading in gaudy bright green letters *Le Sage*.

A simple placard proclaiming vacancies were available was mounted next to the front doors of the hotel. A hotel, which, as The Driver-in-Black looked in his rear-view mirror at the front of the building, could best be described as a small hole in the wall for an establishment. Especially, when compared to the upscale, glamorous, tone-deaf postmodernist accommodations rampant throughout twenty-first century America.

Killing the engine with the turn of a key. The Driver-in-Black stepped out of his sleek automobile as he raised sunglasses to his face. Once more with measured steps, he opened the trunk. Pulling the briefcase, the brown leather

satchel bag, and a black custom-tailored three-piece suit. Then retracing his steps too manually lock the driver side door before turning and glancing about the parking lot. Quiet, a car passed behind him, as well as one could get anyways. The air was thicker, feeling less clear to his senses; polluted and cramped was a sensation that assaulted his senses.

Complimented by the scraping of litter paper detritus churned up by a slight breeze weaving its way through the city blocks. The Driver-in-Black lifted a foot.

Striding towards the welcoming glass doors of the establishment the black-clad driver looked left and right slowly. Sweeping his vision about the premises in a smooth, calculated, vigilant fashion. Everything seemed to register to him. Noting the other cars in the lot, the smells, atmosphere, and sounds from the city around him. As his senses took in the menagerie of stimuli about him. His measured stride coming to a stop just before the doors of the hotel. There the driver, and only for a hair's breadth of a minute, sat down his briefcase. Just enough time to swing open the door with a smooth

flourish. Scooping the briefcase handle back into his grasp he moved inside to the foyer. Cool air blown from the building's central air conditioner gently caress his skin.

'Hello, Sir.' said a short, rotund, African-American woman. Hair done up in braids and with each braid bundled together in a voluminous ponytail which hung down over her left shoulder. The frills of her loose-fitting black dress rustling back and forth with every small movement. A small brass plate on the polished black granite desk separating the woman from the black-clad man who now stood in the foyer read *Concierge* in white engraved script. Her pink lips wound in a small polite smile as she looked at the sharp dressed man now standing before her. Black jacket, dress shirt, trousers, shoes, and all.

'Good Evening, Miss,' replied The Driver-in-Black politely as he walked up to her with a few calculated steps. His words were eloquent and perfectly enunciated without a trace of a noticeable accent, 'I would like a room, please.' The woman's brown eyes peered down at her computer screen in response. Scrolling along whatever information displayed for a

moment before glancing back up at the man in black attire,
'Regular or Deluxe?'

'Regular, please,' replied The Driver-in-Black with the utmost polite tone of voice. Pulling the same wallet from earlier out of his jacket pocket. Flipping it open, he slid it across the desk to the concierge, who looked at the shield and badge upon it with ever so slightly widening eyes, and began to type with renewed vigor. Punching in the name on the identification card beside the badge into her computer system. The well-dressed man in front of her waiting patiently as he nonchalantly began to look around.

Casting his eyes about the foyer, sunglasses rotating with his vision, as if taking in his surroundings for the first time. Plain brown couches, artificial plants, a small breakfast area with wooden chairs drawn up over the tables. Eyes eventually coming to look down at the desk to see a distorted blurry image of himself looking up at himself in return. Fair skin, short black hair, and rectangular-shaped features. All glimpsed via the reflection of a glossy granite top of the

concierge desk. Eyes, unusually masked by enclosing sunglasses formed empty black voids wrapped in silver wire frame.

'Here you go, Sir – ' said the Concierge as she handed back the wallet, which The Driver-in-Black took quickly, before continuing, '- and how many nights?'

'Two. If possible,' stated The Driver-in-Black as he began pulling out a roll of Dollar bills from a dress pant pocket. 'That'll be one-hundred eighty-nine dollars and thirty-three cents,' replied the Concierge.

The Driver-in-Black nodded his head and pulled a couple hundred-denomination bills from the roll. Sliding them across the granite counter-top to be swept up by the Concierge's hands. The sound of a sliding till and the chink of coins on the counter signaled the returning exchange of cash, which, the Driver took with equal speed. The change disappearing into the same pocket with the roll of dollar bills.

The jingle of keys and a return smile from The Driver-in-Black in exchange, as he received a pair of metal

keys into his outstretched palm concluded the transaction as successful.

The Concierge pointing to the stairs to the right of the well-dressed man in front of her and said, 'Second floor, Room 3.'

The Driver-in-Black replied with a sincere, 'Thank you,' as he picked up his belongings and made his way towards the stairs.

'Wish other men were as polite as you,' remarked the Concierge abruptly. The Driver-in-Black remained silent for a moment, face holding that emotionless freeze, until a smile returned to his face and merely replied, 'Have a good night, ma'am.'

The weight of his belongings firmly in his grasp the black-clad driver quickly maneuvered to the stairs further along in the foyer. Ascending the stairs with measured steps, he made his way along to the small hallway at the top of the stairs. The carpet well used but appearing to be clean under the soles of his shoes. His steps rendered mute by the soft texture of the carpet fabric.

Making his way to the end of the hall, he slid the key into the awaiting slot, turned, and with one satisfying click later advanced into the room. Revealing a room like many others in the establishment. Uniform contents becoming clear as silent footsteps brought him squarely into the tiny living room.

Indeed, first few steps into the quaint room revealed a chic, *Art Deco*, style uniformly present throughout the space. A small closet reachable through two sliding mirror doors was immediately to the left from the front door. Followed by a small bathroom featuring a white porcelain toilet and finished with marble counter-tops. To the right, across the bathroom, a small living space opened anchored in the center by a low, stained black, wooden coffee table topped with a glass finish. A matching black sofa bearing plump pillows sat up against the pale lavender-gray walls. Slightly further, by a mere two steps and hugging the small dividing wall that stuck out from the right perimeter of the room to terminate in the middle of the space, was a black stained wooden desk featuring a modern stainless steel frame with black leather cushions for a chair.

Moving beyond the aperture would reveal a Queen sized bed flanked by nightstands with landline phones sitting upon them. The nightstands were of the same matching plain stained black wood design as the desk and coffee table. The bed itself bore white sheets, a gray comforter with matching pillows, and a pair of overhead brass reading lamps. Directly across from which lay a dresser topped with a thirty-nine-inch flat-screen television.

The Driver-in-Black, however, paid no heed to anything but the bed. Instead of inspecting the objects in the room further, the black-clad man opted to move directly toward the bed. Swinging his briefcase onto its surface to earn a gentle rustle of disturbed comforter fabric. A slender fair finger resulted in bronze clasps flipping open with two satisfying snaps; while, concurrently, also laying the sealed suit on the bed next to it. The gentle movement of his fingers expressing utmost care as he unzipped the fabric case to reveal the contents therein. Which would be a three-piece black suit of identical cut and make to the one he is currently wearing.

The Driver-in-Black did not change; rather, the raven-haired man would begin to lay out the articles of clothing, badge, and pistol strapped to the back of the suitcase along with the few magazines of ammunition. As if he were literally assembling a persona like one would when piecing together a puzzle. All the while speaking lines of dialogue; questions, and answers; to the emptiness around him. Questions pertaining to his profession, the Federal Bureau of Investigation, and the murder that had happened earlier tonight. Ending each rote of this little mental script with an immediate return to the beginning. 'My name is Agent John Locke. Federal Bureau of Investigations. Homicide.'

Chapter II

Decomposition was a distasteful affair. Devoid of all serenity seen when loved ones watch one of their own's eyes turn to silver glass. A final gaze from the newly departed. No, such last minutes of familial love would be entirely absent in the narrow alley smothered in the profuse stench of human fermentation. Rancid like a pile of abandoned fish in the mid-day Sun permeated the air. The source of which being a single corpse currently suffering the initial stages of fly colonization.

The lifeless form being mere hours old and already frozen in the solid grip of *rigor mortis*. This nauseating state of affairs made worse from loosening bowels, which oft follows the newly departed. Rank was the smell of stale iron that wafted from half-baked puddles of black-crimson. Mixing into a biological soup of bodily fluids breaking down.

The body, still fresh despite the gradually worsening state was still cooling, and had been discovered behind a dumpster. The hapless discoverer of this decrepit finding being one of Los Angeles many roving homeless. The vagabond in question bore a striking similarity to the state of the alleyway where he made his gruesome finding. Possessing an equally grimy ill kept beard. Or, at least what a tangled, greasy, matted together lattice of fibers sprouting from his mottled face could be called. A glance upwards mirrored much of the bottom with brown hair receding almost halfway to the back of the vagabond's skull. Dirty skin releasing a bodily odor not entirely different to the rotting corpse sprawled out nearby. Unsettling, familiar aromas that gave an inexplicable urge to Lysol ones immediate surroundings as soon as humanly possible. Or, perhaps in a more practical method of simply removing oneself from the vagabond's vicinity.

This still living twin of filth gesticulated to the corpse, pointing to the dumpster, and speaking through yellow stained, tartar caked, teeth at a transcribing officer gird in the livery of

the Los Angeles Police Department. The officer's partner doing a sincere effort in enduring the dual stench rendering the air in and around the alleyway toxic to the senses.

Their figures casting long shadows against the strengthening rays of an ascendant Sun. Flickering blue-red lights of Police cruisers blockading both mouths of the alley providing a surprise light-show to the emerging denizens of Los Feliz just now rousing to begin another lively day.

Yellow-black police tape drawn across the entrances to the alleyway marked the boundary of the grisly scene. Dwarfed by the large black letters displaying, 'VISTA,' which normally would radiate a brilliant green, sitting above the canopy of the cinema to the left of the alley mouth. Normally, a sight of avid movie goers looking for a smaller, cozy, old school cinematic experience; Now, stood in contrast to a new, surreal, kind of horror.

The corpse having been gently, slowly, moved out from behind the dumpster with extreme care by the team of Forensic personnel. Scurrying as they were along the length and width

of the grisly corridor. Scouring the scene of this horrendous crime for any and all clues. For it indeed was terrible a visage to perceive. Dried crimson splattered across the dumpster, pavement, and spotted the closest adjacent structures lining said back lane more real than any Hollywood C.G.I. could hope to achieve. The force and suddenness of these vital sprays, like a perverse fountain of youth, having been splashed quite liberally across all nearby surfaces in a mockery of a painter's brush strokes.

The body itself, unlike the progressively scoured environment, provided a whole other matter for the Forensic personnel systematically moving about the scene. Throat of the young man had been quite literally torn open. Trachea and esophagus laid in fleshy clumps across back alley pavement. Discarded like some old ratty newspaper. Chest cavity pulverized in what looked like to be an internal explosion of organs and bone. Pointed ribs broken apart like a split apple. Exposing the young man's remaining innards, or what one

could guess them to be, for they too had been brutally savaged into near imperceptibility.

Was that the heart? The fleshy red-pink clump that could have passed for a well-used dog toy. Gnarled as if a household pet had liberally chewed before spatting back out. Intestines looking like a slimy batch of school cafeteria noodles overflowing out of a torso bowl. The list went on with the horrific damages wrought on the young man's form. Lacerations and what one could surmise to be as gnawing on the man's limbs.

Another squad car pulled up, followed by a third unmarked vehicle, with another pair of officers moving to form a perimeter on the opposite side of the alley. Ordering pedestrians to keep moving and in particular a well-dressed man to move his vehicle forward. Creating a tighter barrier to the slowly growing horde of eager residents looking to peer at what latest tragedy had occurred in Los Angeles. The flash of cameras belonging to the absolute dregs of society snapping images for their ill researched opinion pieces and with any luck

these ghastly images of the corpse being covered by a white cloth would make the front page, if only for a day.

A third car pulled itself into view at the mouth of the alley. A black Cadillac ATS Coupe, convertible, coming to a fast stop. Passenger doors flung open as a trio of individuals exited. Urgency in their steps as they hastily crossed into the mouth of the alley, bending under the yellow-black police tape, with no questions asked by the uniformed officers vigilantly eyeing the perimeter.

The central newcomer, and driver, an older Caucasian male who wore his badge on a metal chain about his neck. He, like his compatriots whom had exited the vehicle as well wore civilian fatigues. The Caucasian male was clothed in black slacks, white dress shirt behind a black tie, and complete with a khaki coat totally, at odds with what would be recommended due to the average temperatures Los Angeles saw. Blue bags sagged under his eyes, skin wrinkles creased horizontally along his forehead, betrayed his fatigue to the external world. His age easily guessed as being somewhere in the mid-fifties.

To the right of the central figure was an African-American man, short graying hair sheathed his scalp, but his disposition appeared at least a decade younger than his central counterpart did. Badge fastened via clip to a plain brown leather belt. Just opposite from his nine-millimeter service pistol. He too wore a white dress shirt, a black tie also at his neck, but sported khaki slacks to his counterparts black pants. The slightly younger darker man, perhaps more in tune with the climate surrounding him, went without a coat.

The third man, wearing a dark blue pinstripe single-breasted business casual suit, was the youngest of the trio by a considerable margin. Body strong with a face still smooth and unblemished by the march of time. Olive skin giving a blended tone to that of his older colleagues.

The trio came upon the heart of the grisly matter smeared across the alleyway with careful movements. Avoiding yellow placards laid there by Forensic field technicians denoting some evidence or noteworthy article with planned footfalls.

At the sight of the body, up close in all ghastly detail, the youngest of the trio cupped his mouth to fight back a hot flush surging up from his stomach.

'You alright there bud?'' spoke the older African-American man. Peering with a half squint to look at his younger colleague. The older Caucasian man paid no heed to his compatriot's distress and just made for a man whose face was half hidden by the rim of a bowler hat. Tweed jacket wrapped around his slender frame, sharing a similar oddity in fashion compared to what would probably be more suitable for wear in Southern California, from which protruded two light olive skinned hands manipulating pen and paper.

The man in the bowler hat looked up abruptly at the methodically approaching newcomer, revealing dark eyes with short cut black hair, and spoke, 'Ah! Detective Kirkwood, however do you manage to suffer that heavy coat in this climate I will always wonder.'

'Says the man in a tweed coat,' replied Kirkwood with a smirk.

'Jacket.'

Kirkwood shrugged the correction off. Scanning the gore strewn scenery, 'So whatta' you got?' Earning a sigh from the man in the tweed jacket, 'Multiple lacerations, bite marks on the limbs, the chest cavity is well,' the medical examiner pausing as if to exaggerate the point, 'open to put it bluntly. Either, the internal organs mostly pulverized by blunt force impacts or done so after the ribs had been splayed out. Too early to tell on that. It was, however, the destruction of his throat that killed the poor lad.' The man pointed with the end of his pencil at the corpse's throat where the trachea and esophagus should have been.

'Splayed?' echoed Kirkwood with a slight frown.

The tweed-garbed man under the bowler hat made a quick splitting motion with his hands, 'Yes, splayed – you know spread open?'

Kirkwood quickly shook a hand, gesturing it was more of a rhetorical question. Following this up with a second, more focused question, 'Know what could have done that?' While a

hand reached into a breast pocket to fetch a small notepad. Removing a small black pen from a polyester fabric loop he began to jot down notes in a horrifically cramped scrawl of vaguely passed for letters in a tongue one may presume to be some form of English.

'I don't know. A dog maybe?'

Kirkwood paused and looked at the tweed-clad man with raised eyebrows. 'So, your guess is that a dog, somehow, tore a man's throat practically out of his body, discarded it on the other side of the alleyway, and made his chest look like a grenade went off inside?'

'Not practically, did, wha-.'

'Shit, so we looking for some mad Kujo?' came the abrupt, rough, voice of Kirkwood's slightly younger partner. The man in the tweed jacket sighed once more. Seemingly, more annoyed at the interruption than the actual remark itself. Kirkwood looked up with mild annoyance. While behind them, their much younger compatriot still struggled to not add more biological matter to the pavement. Reducing himself to dry

heaving every time he spared a glance at the corpse. Not that overwhelming aroma of rot did much to assist him in this internal battle.

'Charles, please,' remarked Kirkwood. Ignoring the plight of the younger man behind him.

The African-American man, Charles, frowned at his partner while replying, 'What? Frank, doc' says it could have been some rabid dog. Now, I do not know any dog that can fucking do that; nor, would just leave everything more or less, well here.' Gesturing with his hands at the pieces of gore around the body. Kirkwood did not reply to that but simply turned back to the corpse and it's pulped, open, bone fragment covered torso. 'Nothing was taken, right examiner?' continued Charles while swinging his head around to look at the tweed clothed man.

'Charles has a point. My remark of it being a dog was silly and unlikely. This is clearly a sadistic killing.' stated the Examiner before them.

A gurgling sound followed by throaty attempts at remaining in control sounded behind the two standing men and the crouched Examiner. Interrupting their examination of the corpse. All three looked back to see the younger man raise a hand as if to silently signal he was all right. The placement of his other hand in front of his mouth told otherwise.

'James, go talk to the witness and see what the uniforms got taken down. Before you lose your breakfast all over the fucking crime scene, please,' said Charles while shaking his head ever so slightly. The younger man, James, nodded and hurried back down to the entrance of the alleyway to consult with the duo of uniformed cops questioning the homeless man with the raggedy beard. Charles looked at Frank and then the Examiner while thumbing back in the direction of James, 'Ever had to deal with that with any of your lab assistants?'

The Examiner shook his head, ' 'fraid not.'

'You lucky bastard.'

'Can we get back to the homicide?' interjected Frank.

Charles splayed his hands in mock exasperation, 'What's the

rush? The boys already dead!' Charles put his hands in his pockets quickly, 'but fine, fine, take it away doc!'

The Medical Examiner cleared his throat, 'The young man before you,' the Examiner reached into a trouser pocket to remove a wallet and flipped it open, 'James F. Dawson, twenty years old, from Los Feliz. Was first struck in the throat. The removal of his trachea and esophagus along with the resulting blood loss from the catastrophic destruction of his jugular being what killed him. Probably, died in a matter of moments. He may not even know before it was too late,' the Examiner pointed with the nib of his pen at the dried blood streaked across segments of the theater walls, 'The spray on the walls and floor is from that lethal blow.' Pen returning to circle around the pooled crimson-black matter around the corpse, 'The pool around the body is from the destruction and splaying of the rib cage. Which, by my estimation occurred shortly after the man became deceased. Likely, and I do hope, after Dawson's brain functions ceased.'

The Examiner, pulling on white gloves to cover his hands pulled from a rear trouser pocket, rummaged around the interior of the young man's open torso. Speaking, as his white gloves became stained with the decomposing matter of the dead man's innards, 'Nothing seems to be removed, just damaged severely if not totally destroyed,' glove pulling up a limp arm, 'The bite marks and lacerations on the body occurred last.' The Examiner stood up slowly, pulled off his white gloves, finishing his dictation with, 'I will know for sure when I get the body back to the morgue. There, I can conduct a more accurate examination of the deceased.'

'Any estimation on when he died?' questioned Charles.

'Oh, more than likely between 8 P.M. and 9 P.M. last night,' replied the Examiner, 'I can give you a precise time once my official autopsy is concluded.'

Newly minted Detective, James Marshall, the youngest of the trio that had arrived not fifteen minutes ago with the other two investigators, jogged back up to his peers. Face contorting with clear effort to not look directly at the body and

said, 'Witness says he did not see the homicide occur, but found the body behind the dumpster while rummaging for food at about seven this morning.'

Kirkwood checked his wristwatch and spoke, as if to no one in particular, 'It's nearly quarter to eight right now. How the hell did no one see anything or find the body before then?' Hand sweeping out at the street in front of the Vista Theater, 'This is a busy part of town.'

Charles pointed at both ends of the alley, 'No lights in the alley, only one old street lamp on each end on the corner. Odds are at night this alley is pretty damn dark. No one passing by may have been able to see anything going on, and certainly not a body crammed behind a dumpster.'

'Why put the body behind a dumpster and leave all of this evidence around?' said Marshall. Edges of suspicion as to the motives of the murder bleeding into his voice.

'Why do spiders spin webs?' stated Frank. No one replied to that comment; but Frank looked around, 'More than likely the perpetrator wanted us to find the body. This location

was picked so he would not be interrupted. Likely, so he could cover his tracks properly.' Frank stepped around the body carefully while looking around the alleyway.

'No one found any evidence not belonging to our victim, correct?' continued Frank with a furrowed brow, his speech this time directed at the standing examiner beside him.

The Examiner keeping his gaze at the body lying before his feet shrugged when he answered, 'No, I will have to check the bite marks for saliva in my lab, but nothing around the alley or on the victim's person that was obvious to me,' adding with a glance about the alleyway still being methodically combed by forensic technicians, 'Not even a hair so far and we've combed this whole alley twice already.'

Charles looked at Frank with concern, 'you know what this means right? We're dealing with a pro.'

Frank matched his partner's concerned look, 'Premeditated? This was all planned from the start. Our killer lied in wait.' Frank moved to the opposite side of the dumpster

and knelt down. Latching onto the unspoken train of thought put forth by Charles.

'Lights from the street lamps wouldn't have reached over here, it would have been darkest, and our victim passing by would not have even noticed the killer crouching just a few feet away.'

The Examiner interrupted the investigative procession via waving over a couple of emergency medical technicians whom shuffled to the side. A body bag held between them. The examiner stating, 'It's time to remove the body to the coroner's lab so I can conduct an autopsy,' looking back at the trio the Examiner frowned as he comprehended the theory suddenly taken up by the two older detectives and added, 'I'll begin running tests immediately. However, I must say, that I would hate to be the one to tell this boy's parents what happened here.' Silently moving past the detectives as the body was carefully placed in a body bag. Leaving the trio of detectives in the alley among the roving forensic personnel finishing their evidence gathering.

'A professional?' asked Marshall, 'Like a hitman or some shit? You must be kidding me.' Frank slapped his pen against his notepad in rhythm with his thoughts. Abruptly, Frank turned to walk back towards the car. Charles looked at Marshall for a solid thirty seconds while chuckling to himself before following his older partner. Marshall held out his hands in exclamation, 'What?'

The trio of detectives moved back under the police tape. Their course suddenly blockaded, under assault, from the circling sharks of news reporters. Flashing cameras and the aggressive thrusting of mics upon their person reminded them all that this was Los Angeles and no story was off limits. This was America and nothing was crossing a line in terms of getting a story published. The chaos of the frantic journalism frenzy distracting everyone from the solemn, intently staring, man in a black suit leaning on an old muscle car watching from across the street. Everyone oblivious, except for the younger detective, who for but a singular second of lucidity locked his gaze at the coolly loitering man wearing a black three-piece

suit. Locking eye to reflective lens. Until his body, operating on subconscious thought lowered itself onto the backseat.

Slamming their car doors shut, saying nothing to the journalists desperate for the latest 'scoop', all three sat in silence. Marshall in the back with Charles in the passenger seat, leaving Frank to drive. Frank looked at Charles with a look of exhaustion despite it still being early morning. The dark bags under his eyes increasing in weight the more the Sun rose in the easterly sky.

'What do you make of the whole thing?' asked Frank to both men as he keyed the ignition. Fingers wrapped around the gearbox handle. Pulling the handle downward the vehicle began to crawl forward. Slowly pulling away from the alleyway and down into the progressively traffic choked streets of Los Feliz.

Both Charles and Marshall glanced at Frank and began to speak at the same time. Pausing to glance at each other before Marshall gestures for Charles, his senior, to go first. Charles returned his eyes forward, 'I think we got ourselves a

Grade A psycho on the loose. One who knows what they're doing, which, is the worst if you ask me,' hands raised as he finished speaking to emphasis the singular apprehension Charles gave, flicking his head back to Marshall, 'What about you?'

Marshall cleared his throat, 'I think we have a gang killing.'

Charles pursed his lips, 'Last time I checked all the hard gangs were South and East of Los Feliz.' Frank smirked which drew more words from Charles, 'Now, look, Marshall could very well be right. That was no dog or wild animal. Unless we got Mountain Lions prowling the streets of Los Angeles, which, all the shit I've seen wouldn't surprise me.'

Marshall frowned in the backseat with even Frank raising an eyebrow, commenting dryly, 'Just give me a heads up when you're throwing in the towel chief.'

Charles gave a low chuckle, 'What is it, twenty-seven years this June? Shit, might as well stick to it for a few more years, am I right?'

Marshall shook his head in the back seat while Frank grinned, 'Yeah well, that's if something doesn't kill ya first.'

Charles scoffed, 'been shot and stabbed, so have you, and I'm still breathing.'

The older men glanced back at Marshall. The unspoken coordination of the two older men serving to ease the newly minted detective behind them. Only passed his examinations for the title of Detective. Fresh from the patrol division. Some might call this behavior a bit paternalistic for Marshall who was a veteran of walking the beat. Patrolling Los Angeles streets just like both men did many years prior. Yet, they could see it, Marshall feared failure. Something that both of the older men, at differing points in their lives, could relate too.

Silence descended into the cabin of the ATS Coupe as it pulled onto the Highway, U.S. 101 Southbound. The vehicle's course following the concrete veins of the Los Angeles to the Southeast. Out of Los Feliz and towards their next destination, which would hopefully shed more clues as to the demise of James Dawson.

* * *

An ATS Coupe glided above the pavement. Held aloft by the constant cyclical sprinting of its tires. Slowing as building bearing distinctive signage spawned into view as the car rounded the corner of Marengo Street and Mission Avenue. There, to the right, was a small sign mounted on a concrete pillar that read: *County of Los Angeles Medical Examiner-Coroner.*

The drive to the Medical Examiner-Coroner office from Los Feliz was a trip that any GPS service would state taking approximately twenty-five minutes. But given Los Angeles daytime traffic that was always a pipe dream. The U.S.-101 Southbound even technically after rush hour was still packed with cars moving through the middle of the vast urban sprawl. Granted, it was at least not the bumper-to-bumper nightmare reality of a couple hours prior. The infamous Los Angeles rush hour.

Honking and beeps of traffic surrounding the ATS Coupe as the vehicle traveled along the avenue proved

intermittent but never gone. Yet, inside the vehicle, silence still reigned. Frank looked back at Marshall quickly, able to see the young man in his rear view mirror, and spoke, killing the silence in the vehicle, 'So what did the homeless guy say?'

Causing Marshall to quickly reach into his front pocket and pull out a small black notepad identical to Frank's. Both standard Department issue. Flipping the small notepad open Marshall flicked through a couple of pages with his thumb and index finger. Stopping on the third page the young detective cleared his throat,

'Our homeless friend is named Chase Anthony, no I.D., officers were taking him down to the station to try and confirm his identity. But Chase did say he spotted the body around oh-seven-hundred hours and immediately called the police using his iPhone. Chase, however, did not see the murderer or anyone thought suspect.'

'How does a homeless guy have an iPhone?' retorted Charles with a look of incredulity. Suddenly pointing a finger at Frank while leaning over, 'And don't you say it's cause

of some Obama program. We all know that free cellphone giving to the homeless is bullshit!' Frank just chuckled to himself and replied, 'Marshall?' Urging the younger detective to continue.

'Well, supposedly, our reporter hasn't been homeless for long. Lost his job a couple months back and hasn't been able to find work since. But, that's all we got from him, seemed like a bit of a tweaker' if you ask me.'

'How much you wanna bet that phone was stolen and that, 'I'm newly homeless story is a load of bull?'" came Charles, as if on cue, condescension.

Frank let out his breath slowly before speaking, 'You're very pessimistic. At least the guy reported the body.'

Charles smirked, 'Yeah, twenty plus year's on this job will do that to you. Like I've said we've seen a lot of shit, Frank, and lemme' tell you.' Charles turned to look at James and Frank with a serious expression on his face, 'Something has to be seriously wrong with you if after all those years you're still all sunshine and rainbows.' Silence. Even Marshall

remained unsure of what to do. Frank shook his head with a wry smile. Charles smirking in response while Marshall, seeing that it was but a playful jab from an old friend averted his eyes to avoid showing either men his wide grin.

Chapter III

The crime scene was a progressively evolving flurry of activity. Quietly observed by a well-dressed man in a three-piece black suit. Leaning on an old muscle car appearing to have freshly rolled off the assembly line. Paint glossy under recently applied coats of wax. Wheels shimmering in the brightening sunlight. Blinding any direct onlooker unlucky to have their view scorched by the fierce reflective rays. Hands in pockets, relaxed, watching from across the street, on the far side of where Rosalia Road joined West Sunset Boulevard.

Somberly dressed, all in black, the relaxing Driver-In-Black tilted his shades to track a trio of newcomers. Following the uniformed reinforcements who quickly joined their brethren in securing a perimeter about the mouth of the alley. *Detectives*. Looking back at the black unmarked Cadillac

ATS Coupe the Driver-In-Black gazed upon the vehicle with slight admiration. *Not exactly, my style but someone has done well.* Thinking disturbed by the movements in the alley and beyond. The press was already swarming like a locust plague. The deceased to them like a fresh crop awaiting to be devoured.

'Journalists...,' said the Driver-In-Black with distaste. Not even bothering to finish his sentence.

Glancing at his gunmetal gray to watch the hands ticked on. Glancing up with a sudden commotion as the trio finally reemerged from the alley. Their initial investigation of the scene no doubt concluded. Reflective lenses displayed the surging mob of pundits. Practically piling onto the trio of law enforcement members as they sortied back towards the ATS Coupe. The vehicle slowly peeling away from the curb in front of the back alley. The crime scene itself slowly being vacated by Los Angeles Police Department forensic analysts as the morning drew on and any remaining clues, if any, were compiled for a no doubt interesting report. The morning Sun

ascending higher and higher into the morning sky like the swinging hand of a watch.

'How does a pale get like you, yourself, avoid getting sunburnt is beyond me.' A thick, guttural, but not quite Dutch accent met the Driver-In-Black's eardrums. Materializing is out of thin air behind the stellar specimen of American muscle cars. The suddenness was in turn met by a slight turn of the head to a man resting nonchalantly against the brick face of the building. Cast in the shadow of a storefront overhang.

The black-clad owner of the vehicle turned slowly, 'Kai, I see you're as —'

'Stealthy? Sneaky? I know. We've been accomplices in the same business for only the past three years. What do you call yourself now? Michael? Mikey? It's not *William* of all names is it?' *William*. Kai said the word with sour distaste.

The harsh accent with its snarky tone companion belonged to a lanky framed man sporting very short black hair cut into a tight fade. Clean-shaven. Bearing old circular wire frame spectacles that bridged a long hooked nose. Bookish

features completed by a blue three-piece suit, balanced by a black vest, which gird his spindle figure. However, that was not all. For along the centerline of his chest a black and blue striped tie hung loosely. Fabric held in place by the man's only non-clothe decoration. A clasp wrought the shape of a double-headed eagle sat just a few inches below his collar. Its metal anchor reinforced by the cinched buttons of a dark blue wool jacket. This suppressed blue palette complimenting brown beady eyes, which positively beamed with inner energy.

'Locke. John Locke. For this job at least.' replied the Driver-In-Black.

'How original, do you do witty humor when taking off those shades too?' chuckled Kai as he took a couple of small steps to stay directly out of the sunlight.

'Now, is it just John? Or, is it short for Jonathan, I can never keep track.' The sarcasm oozing from Kai's voice was complimented by a half-cocked grin.

John's reply came off totally the opposite. Matter-of-fact, 'You always think you're funny.' Kai lifted his

shoulders in mock surprise, 'Always fancied me a bit of a comedian really.'

'Why are you here? Did she-,' The Driver-in-Black was not allowed to finish his sentence as Kai abruptly raised a hand to stop him.

'She, being *her*, in particular. Does not send me, of all people, to supervise. Especially, one that *she* deems competent in the task given.' Kai turned to face half away from John to bring his visage into the profile. 'I am here due to the gravity of that poor wretch's impact on this city and our operations therein.' Kai pointed across the street with his left hand at the stretcher bearing the corpse covered in a thick white blanket. So that none of the horrors under it be exposed to the whirling parade of camera flashes. Causing John to follow Kai's finger before looking back at its owner with an inquisitive expression. 'Was he one of ours?' said the Driver-In-Black.

'Oh, no, actually. That poor bastard is a nobody. It is how he died that causes our superior to be uneasy. For this is not the first person to end up in such a state I'm afraid. While

you were off gallivanting in Arizona, we had to cover up and dispose of some unsavory looking corpses. Some of our own associates no less, all of whom apparently suffered an – identical death.'

'So, she is worried that this might be someone –.'

'Behind the curtain? Yes.' Interjected Kai quickly as he placed his raised hand back into the empty pocket of his blue slacks.

'Well that explains the concern for her calling me on the way back,' replied the Driver-In-Black.

'Yes. Yes, it does. We cannot have some psychopath out there murdering people and potentially bringing it back to us. That is where you come in.' Smiling as he spoke those last six words.

'Bad for business?' The Driver-In-Black retorted with folded arms.

'Very.' Kai raised his eyebrows as he turned around to face his black-clad, muscle car driving, raven-haired counterpart.

'You're certain all the bodies of murdered associates look like that kid over there?' This inquiry supplemented by a sidelong nod-of-the-head towards the crime scene.

'Affirmative,' said Kai with pursed lips.

The Driver-In-Black frowned as he made to cross the street. Rising from his leaning position quickly. Kai's words drifting over to his ears as he began to cross the road.

'A little late to drop in there? They are about to take off with the body back to what I assume to be the location of the coroner's office. Am I right? Special. Agent. John. Locke.'

Kai's drawn out, extended, speech purely to rub in the fact that he was right. Even if it was something, largely inconsequential it seemed. For if, the persona that is John Locke was going to insert itself into the crime scene in the hopes of getting information from actual legitimate officers. Then that moment passed not ten minutes ago.

'Yes. But I want to examine the alley.' replied the Driver-In-Black with his tone kept purposely flat, as if to deny Kai the luxury of earning some more emotionally charged

response to his needling commentary, all the while continuing to march across the street. Only glancing back across the street behind him once he had made it to the other side. Field of view just catching the frame of his vehicle on the corners of his vision. Kai, however, had seemingly vanished from under the overhang.

Walking up to the yellow police tape forming the boundary perimeter of the crime scene the Driver-In-Black, John Locke, made to move under with a simple movement of his left arm. Swinging it over his head as he ducked slightly, passing under it, and earning a shout for his advance.

'Hey!' The cry coming from the mouth of a nearby uniformed police officer whom rapidly approached. The flash of a badge and the officer practically skidded to a halt. Looking down at the badge flashed before him in momentary confusion before reaching out take it in his hand's quickly.

'Special Agent. *Locke*. We weren't informed that the F.B.I. was going to arrive?' The police officer's statement was expected.

As such, the reply given to him by 'Locke' was spoken with smooth enunciation that only practiced confidence could provide. 'It was a decision made last minute by my superiors. I am here to inspect the crime scene.'

'You're late there chief. They got the body loaded up and ready to head off to the coroner's,' responded the officer with a thumb to plain burgundy van. The interior no doubt remodeled to chill the corpse. Slowing down if not stalling the ravages of previously unchecked decay.

'Then may I have a look around the alley?'

The police officer handed the badge back, 'Go right ahead. Forensics went through the alley with a fine-toothed comb though.'

The Driver-in-Black smiled, 'Sometimes a fresh pair of eyes helps.'

The officer simply moved his head in a 'sure, whatever you say,' motion as he walked back to the waiting squad cars. Leaving the newly arrived Special Agent free rein to wander about the alleyway.

Picking up his feet the darkly girded newcomer crossed the threshold into the alley proper. Strong odors wafting forth to penetrate the senses. *The first sensation, and worst, is the smell.* Internal musings aside The Driver-in-Black paused as the stench of iron, which hung in the air, struck him with full force. Risen, from dried splatters of blood, which lay flicked about the alleyway. The intensity, viscosity, and odorous power growing around near where the young man had met his end.

Crouching down onto his haunches. A pair of reflective lenses examined where the body had been found. Crammed behind a dirty commercial dumpster. There of course were the obvious signs. Signs that the intelligence behind the pair of reflective lenses began to piece together.

Blood had dripped and pooling around the ground behind, under, and on the dumpster. Interesting, the trail of blood from where the actual murder had occurred is plain to see. Meaning, the killer had at least attempted to hide the body, but only in a manner that would guarantee his or her escape

from the scene before anyone would notice. A touch for the theatrics I see. What I find intriguing is the fact that this had occurred in a relatively busy section of town. Doing such an act, let alone staging the location of the body, was by itself an achievement. A touch unbelievable that no one had stumbled across the act while in progress.

Taking out his flip phone, The Driver-In-Black snapped a series of photos. Walking about the dumpster and being sure to take carefully taken shots of the individual blood spatters. Earning more than one odd, possibly even curious, look cast by straggling forensic technicians as they finished packing up their equipment.

Glancing about the alleyway itself there were few places to hide. *Sure, it would have been dark, but still one would think to notice someone if they were standing up in the alley.* The Driver-In-Black abruptly shifted. Gears in his mind turning. Turning his back to the dumpster, he slowly backed up to one side. The far side where the trail of blood traced itself back to the center of the alley and the true location of Dawson's

moment of death. Peering around the corner of the dumpster the reflective lenses traced their gaze along the length of the alleyway.

'He wouldn't have seen me.' mused The Driver-in-Black absent-mindedly. *This had to be the place the killer struck. Then again?* Sunglasses peered up to look along the rooftops. *The killer could have jumped down.* But that would have been a bold move even for a professional despite offering near total silence until the killer struck the pavement reasoned The Driver-in-Black with a half frown. *Either could technically be probable, though the latter is unlikely. Unless, you're not* –. Dashing the thought to the sidelines the black-clad man calling himself John Locke quickly burst into a walk.

Walking out of the alleyway with hurried steps. Crossing the street back to his awaiting vehicle. Gripping the driver-side door and swinging himself into the cabin. The roar of an engine flared to life as The Driver-in-Black gave one last glance at the

alley and its depopulating expanse. Engine roaring to life as a key summoned the automobile to live yet again.

A 1969 Mustang blazed down the street seconds later. Heading in the direction of the Los Angeles Coroner's office. Leaving the grim morning scenery of Rosalia Avenue in the view of its rear-view mirror.

Chapter IV

The Los Angeles County Department of Medical Examiner-Coroner was often the penultimate destination for the bodies of the recently deceased. The reason as to why a corpse would end up on the cold stainless steel tables located deep in the bowels of the Department's office could be absolutely bewildering in variety. Drug overdose, drive-by shooting, car accident, all but the first few from a laundry list of scenarios. Drug overdose, drive-by shooting, car accident, all but the first few from a laundry list of scenarios; Any death from suspicious circumstance, should the individual perish within the confines of Los Angeles County, inevitably resulted

in a cadaver being deposited before the scrutinizing eyes of the Department's examiners.

Los Angeles, however, due to its size provided a steady stream of bodies to be delivered and retrieved from this particular locale. In the words of a former Examiner-Coroner, 'It was common to have up to fifty bodies waiting to be processed and the backlog was, 'nuts,' with toxicology often taking up to six months to complete.' Despite the fact the annual budget for the Department exceeding twenty-eight million dollars.

The location itself was comfortably placed several hundred feet back, away from the choked streets, and wreathed by black iron fencing. The structure itself was a squat, roughly rectangular, two-story redbrick and concrete building. Situated within the Boyle Height's neighborhood of East Los Angeles. Concrete facings showing reliefs in the Art Deco style of the 1920s. A homage to the building's age and the history of the city it served.

Waiting in the parking lot of the Examiner-Coroner's

office a Cadillac ATS Coupe sat quietly. Body spaced evenly between a pair of stark white lines demarcating individual parking spaces. Engine off, fans blowing, three occupants broke into quick movement.

Three of the ATS Coupe's four doors opened to release its occupants onto the lot's pavement, which, despite the occasional passing vehicle was entirely devoid of foot traffic. The atmosphere was silent and foreboding even in the California Sun.

The trio made for the steps of the building. As unwilling or no longer wishing to forestall the upcoming work ahead of them. For the somber atmosphere of the place spoke volumes of what this old redbrick building contained. A threshold, a midway point, between the living and the final destination for the dead.

'This place always gives me the heebie-jeebies,' said Marshall as he followed his two older compatriots up to the doors of the building.

'Why?' replied Frank, 'Don't like being surrounded by our newly departed?'

'I'm just saying I've seen The Walking Dead, ya know? In addition, too being surrounded by a bunch of dead people? Not exactly the best mental images come to mind,' answered Marshall as Charles swung open one of the doors. Allowing all three to file in one after the other. Switching his leading position for that of the rear as he shut the door behind them while also replying to Marshall, 'You picked the wrong profession if you hate dead things there buddy.'

Stepping into the foyer they were met by a middle-aged receptionist with her brown hair done up in a bun to the back of her head. A pencil sticking through and held in place by her hair. She glanced up above golden-wire framed spectacles at the trio of men now standing before her. Her perfume assaulting their senses like a S.W.A.T. team wielding a battering ram. 'Can I help you, gentlemen?' Her voice has a slight rasp to it. Frank could pick up the tiniest hint of cigarette smoke piercing her liberally applied artificial fragrance.

'We're investigating the Los Feliz case. Should have rolled in a few minutes ago,' replied Frank as he fished out his badge and deposited it on the counter. The receptionist took the badge and examined it. 'Detective Kirkwood. I was informed by the Examiner you'd be following the body over to witness the examination. You may wait here if you wish until the body is examined?'

'I'd prefer to witness the examination,' replied Kirkwood quickly. Causing the receptionist to frown, 'That may take some time? We could always send over a report to your precinct?'

Behind Kirkwood, Charles mumbled something about waiting months if that was the case, the receptionist just sighed with an exhalation of breath. Kirkwood smiled, 'I appreciate that. But this an urgent matter.'

The receptionist shifted in her seat as she handed back the badge. 'Down the hall, take the elevator to the first sub-level. Second door on the left. The Examiner should be just starting.'

'Thank you, mam',' politely responded Frank as he nodded for Charles and James to follow him down the hall towards the elevators.

* * *

The jolt of the elevator doors opening signaled the arrival of Charles, Frank, and James onto the sub-level. Doors sliding open, stepping out one-by-one, a chilling sensation touched their exposed flesh. The air was noticeably cooler than up above. As what could be expected for a place such as this.

Artificial air circulation and temperature controls throughout the sub-level kept the place a few degrees below regular room temperature. Whilst rooms lining the hall, housing both positive and negative cold chambers, would seem like walking into a large refrigerator. All attempts in slowing the decomposition of a corpse. The occasional specimen carefully covered by a white cloth seen being wheeled up and down the hallway as staff processed various bodies, endlessly.

Naturally, this cold environment suffused with the specter of death gave unsettling, hair on the back of the neck rising, vibe. Frank led the trio out of the elevator. Walking past a lab assistant wheeling yet another body on a gurney. But this one was fully encased in a white cloth body bag destined for a loading dock. Thence, where it would be sent to a funeral home to be dressed and prepared for what Frank silently hoped to be a well-attended funeral. Frank mused as the gurney trundled by, *we may all die alone, but who wouldn't want a well-attended send off to the hereafter.*

Moving to the second door on the left Frank reached out a fair hand despite the Los Angeles heat, feeling its cool metal exterior, and pushed the barrier aside to reveal a team of white smock and blue scrub garbed individuals. A trio of lab assistants conducting measurements, readying instruments, or scrawling notes in a script universally illegible to anyone whom was not in the medical-forensic profession.

In the epicenter stood the same Examiner that had been at the crime scene. Though gone was the tweed jacket.

Replaced by a white smock, medical coat, and matching pair of white gloves. His hair and mouth covered by cloth covers while a pair of optics rested above the bridge of his nose.

Glancing up at the new arrivals with distorted eyes from the optics the Examiner spoke, partially muffled by a cloth mask, 'I trust the traffic was not too troublesome?' Marshall snorted at that remark while Charles in a curious switch from his *laissez-faire* demeanor shoved his hands in his pockets as he approached the corpse and began to survey it intently. Evidently, conducting his own mental examination of what was once James F. Dawson, twenty years old of Los Feliz, lying nude on a cold examination table before them. The late young man's lifeless body turning as the Examiner lifted the corpse just high enough to insert a small thin cylindrical instrument into something in the corpse's posterior.

'It w-,' Frank made to respond before Charles abruptly cut him off, still intently looking at the body, his tone low and somber, 'Terrible. As usual.' *Well someone wants to get to work*, thought Frank while simply tossing a quick glance at his

partner. His eyes bore only the slightest hint for mild annoyance within their glassy surface. Nodding to the examiner Frank signaled for the man to speak. The Examiner's dark eyes looked down as he removed the instrument and lowered the corpse back down to its previously flat position. Peering at what was now clearly seen as a rectal thermometer. 'As I thought, young man expired well before Midnight, approximately around eight-thirty.' A lab assistant removed what was once a liver from the open, devastated, torso and plopped it down on a scale with a loud slap of flesh. Marshall winced. Charles in turn gave a quick glare towards the younger man while mouthing something along the lines of, 'Don't you dare.'

Frank snaked a hand into a coat pocket and pulled out his notepad, sliding its attendant pen free from its tiny belt loop then aimed the nib. Pointing to the bite marks, 'Anything on these?' For the bite marks, of which there were several, appeared to sink deep down into the muscle of the arms, shoulder, and thighs of the victim.

A dull clack of metal on metal as the Examiner placed the rectal thermometer on a silver tray. Reaching down with both hands free he tilted the corpse up so that the right shoulder was off the table. 'The bite mark is mostly synonymous with that of the human jaw in terms of size, shape, and number of teeth.' Eyes darting over to a woman putting a swab under a microscope, 'However, Charlotte are you examining that swab of this bite mark?' The Examiner inquired towards the young, mid-twenties, lab assistance also decked out in smock, gloves, and facemask. Peering through the aforementioned microscope. Her response, full of unease, coming a few seconds later, 'Yes, Sir. I am not seeing any traces of saliva.'

'Very peculiar.' The Examiner mused.

'Peculiar like interesting; or, we talking abnormal peculiar?' Voiced Marshall. Charles peered at the proffered bite mark while Frank wrote down the comments.

The Examiner looked at Marshal, 'Abnormal? Certainly, I've never seen bite marks this deep, or in general, devoid of salivary DNA.'

Charles placed his hands on the examination table and lowered his head in frustration, 'So we ain't got shit, Doc.'

'To be blunt, that seems to be the case so far, but I've only started, so hopefully in this mess some clue awaits.'

'I appreciate you giving this priority,' said Frank quickly as he closed his notepad while nodding in thanks.

The Examiner merely nodded to Frank, his response coming with traces of weary acceptance, 'We're always behind here, Detective Underwood. However, the city seems to not care in what order our perpetual backlog is fulfilled.'

Earning a pause from Frank as he tilted his head to process the comment. Yet, no response was forthcoming and the detective switched his gaze abruptly to Charles, 'Come on, it is time to notify the parents. I'll have the precinct pull up the address and phone numbers on the way over.'

Charles pushed himself off the examination table and frowned, 'I always hate this part.'

Frank led Charles and James out of the examination room, back towards the elevators, where after the short trip up

they once more walked down the hallway in the direction of the front doors. Passing by the receptionist who gave them a soft smile that only Marshall returned. Reaching for the doorknob it suddenly turned, allowing the door to swish open, revealing a fair-skinned man with black hair dressed in a matching black three-piece suit.

'After you,' said the raven-haired man as he stepped aside, free arm raised to beckon them out, his tone polite while his eyes were shielded by silver wire framed sunglasses.

Frank stepped out quickly giving thanks followed by Charles and finally James as they made for their vehicle. The raven-haired man watching them go for a moment before disappearing into the Examiner-Coroner's building.

* * *

Ask any member of the Los Angeles Police Department to make a list of what the hardest part of their job could be. In addition, they will come back to you with giving the news to parents that their child is dead would be ranked at or close to number one. The grief, feelings of regret, anger, and loss

striking you all at once. Detective Franklin Kirkwood stood before the Dawson family home on Los Adornos Way, Griffith Observatory in clear view to the North. Sitting on the hilly ridges cradling the Northern boundary of Los Feliz. He could see the bewildered faces of the late James Dawson's parents turn to abject shock as they answered the door. Vindicating the thought train inside the detective's own skull. 'Are you Mister and Missus Dawson?'

The man spoke, 'Yes. I am Clarke and this my wife Marianne. Who are you?'

'I am Detective Franklin Kirkwood of the Los Angeles Police Department's Homicide Division.' Turning to indicate the two other men behind him Kirkwood continued the introductions, 'Behind me are Detectives Charles Graham and James Marshall.'

Cascading auditory and visual emotions bathed the couple as Frank lowered his head after revealing their son's demise. To the rapid wails of Missus Dawson as her knees buckled. Mister Dawson barely catching his distraught wife

only to ease her onto him. Piercing sobs contrasted with the immense sadness in the Father's own eyes. Tears building under his eyes as they one by one dripped down his cheeks as the full comprehension of what had transpired struck him in its own unique way. The cries of a mother losing her only son burrowed into Frank's conscious. Matched by the somber tears of loss by the Father's thousand-yard stare.

It never does get any easier, thought Frank as he pursed his lips. His tone low, soft, and sincere that it had been a homicide and that they would be able to see the body soon.

'How? How did it happen?' said Mister Dawson before his words could be slowly overwhelmed by the mounting sadness he could barely keep contained.

'Perhaps we should go inside,' countered Frank. Both of the Dawsons nodding at this as they turned to let the officers inside their home. Entering a welcoming foyer decorated with family photos. Shuffling the detectives into their adjoining living room where the parents remained standing. Politely offering the officers the couch, which was graciously accepted.

Frank resumed with the answer the Mister Dawson needed, 'James Dawson was murdered by an unknown assailant next to the Vista Theater at Rosalia Road and Hillhurst Avenue. Do you have any idea what he could have been doing down there?'

'No, I-I mean he's always out late with his friends.' replied the Mister Dawson as he took his eyes off Frank to think amid the swell of tumultuous horror thrashing inside the poor man.

'Was there anyone you know that would have wanted to kill your son?' pressed Frank through squinted eyes. Voice ever so delicate to show his true sincerity and respect for their loss. He himself could only imagine the pain they felt. The gaping sorrow that dug out their family's heart. Leaving a forever-festering wound of regret and anguish. Frank could only look on and be thankful that it was not his family dealing with such a tragedy. His thoughts flashing to his young daughter Beatrice, and to his wife Claire.

'No.' The Father's voice, disturbed by the phlegm forming in his mouth as this unstoppable tidal wave of emotion

finally washed over him. The only visual cue being the tears now openly streaming down his face.

'Do you have these friends information?' Frank knew not to press for too much. The Father, overcome to the point of being rendered mute, simply nodded his head as he moved slowly. Helping his devastated wife regain her balance as she withdrew back into a small recliner opposite the couch. Behind her to the left, a bedroom door down a short hall open to reveal all the trappings of a young man's lifelong bedroom. A trophy attributed to a younger James Dawson playing Basketball in Elementary School sat in a small glass case on a mantle. Next to a barely visible record player. On top of which sat several vinyl records, a Bob Dylan track leaning onto the wall behind it.

The Father, Clarke, returned alone a few minutes later. Face gaunt and aged a lifetime before the detective's eyes. Reaching out to hand Frank a folded up note that the latter took. Unfolding to gaze down at the list therein. Names and numbers. 'Those ar – were James close friends. Practically

inseparable. I can only think that he would be down ther – was with them.' Mister Dawson looked down at Frank declaring, more for his own need than anything else, 'He was a good kid.'

Frank could not look at Clarke Dawson when he agreed, 'I know.'

Lowering his chin to his breast as he stood up, looking at the floor, he asked, full of respect, 'Mind if we poke around his belongings. See if anything stands out to us, maybe?'

Both parents looked at each other. No doubt still processing the horrible circumstance of their now forever changed lives. Where the father failed to answer the mother managed. Rising shakily to her feet, she beckoned the detectives to follow. 'James' bedroom is this way.'

Dawson's mother, Marianne, turned away and moved down the short hallway leading directly into the room spied by Frank earlier. Pushing open the door fully she stepped in, allowing each of the detectives to pass, revealing a large room fitting for a home on Los Adornos Way.

Frank turned to Marianne, sympathy in his eyes, 'We'll be quick.' Marianne could only nod.

Detectives Graham and Marshall were already plucking their way around the room. Frank followed suit. Making his way along. Casting his eyes once more across the record player until sick irony froze him in place. There on the vinyl player, a record sat, proclaiming in bold yellow font the irony that held him so. *Featuring: The Times They Are A-Changin'*.

'He liked old fashioned records. My son,' said Marianne from beside the doorway. Frank could only turn to her and politely smile in acknowledgment. *She needed to say it. Like he is still here. In this room.*

To the right, peering at a collage of pictures beside the late James Dawson's bed, Marshall turned to Marianne, 'Avid traveler? Your son was friends with all these people?'

Marianne moved like a ghost up to the youngest detective. Looking at the pictures with fresh tears welling under her eyes. 'Not all of them. These four here he was. The ones off to the side were those on the same tour of an ancient

Inuit site in Newfoundland. He always loved archaeology, and his friends loved to camp and hike. So...'

Marshall pursed his lips, 'So it all worked for them.'

Marianne nodded in silent agreement. Marshall pointed to a couple of the pictures from that same Newfoundland trip, 'Was he also a collector as well?'

Marianne followed Marshall's finger to a pair of photos showing Dawson standing next to a woman of comparable age holding a necklace bearing a bone white pendant, faces held in exaggerated wonder at this apparent finding.

'No, aside from the odd sea shell or rock James never took anything from a site he visited. He called it unethical.'

Marshall dropped his hand at Marianne's response.

'Right, yes.'

Detective Graham's voice came up behind them all.

'Say, was your son looking to work at a company called Neu-Lyfe? Some biomedical company.' Everyone turned to see him pick up a small white business card from the small oak desk shoved into one corner of the room.

Marianne frowned, 'No, not that I'm aware of.'

'Mine if we hang onto this then?'

'Um, no, go ahead.'

Charles nodded in thanks as he placed the card into his back pocket. Frank, moving through a small bookcase and checking under the bed moved to the door. 'I think we're all done. Thank you Missus Dawson. If there is any further questions we will give you a call.'

Marianne could only nod.

* * *

The narrow shrub lined walkway leading back to an ATS Coupe parked at the curb. Charles stood before the passenger door, his face serious and resolute, while Marshall was on the opposite side leaning on the roof of the vehicle with arms crossed.

Coming around the vehicle, without word, Frank moved for the driver's side door. Marshall did the same until suddenly stopping as quickly as he began. As if struck by epiphany, 'What if this isn't the killer's first time?'

Charles turned around slowly, arms still folded, with his brow furrowing to a whole other level of serious. Frank froze and looked sidelong at Marshall. Face incredulous on what his younger compatriot was saying. Marshall shifted his stance to address them both, 'Look, maybe this was not the first kill. Something about the scene, it felt too precise-.'

Charles interjected quickly, 'Precise! You saw the body. That shit was as precise as Helen Keller with a shotgun!'

Frank remained silent as Marshall cleared his throat to continue. Frank lifted a finger. Marshall looked at him with an expression now matching Charles own face. Soft spoken and with even pacing between his words he said, 'You might be right, I got the same feeling, think about it for a moment. The timing, positioning of the body, lack of witnesses and outside of any street or private business surveillance camera. It is like we said before. The perpetrator chose that location.'

'Except the body looked like someone took a damn chainsaw to it,' exclaimed Charles, slapping the back of his hand into his other palm. Frank glanced at Charles. His partner,

instead offering another colorful statement simply widened his eyes, and answered himself, 'Shit, the M.O.' *The modus operandi, the particular methodology of the killer, it now made much more sense. The sheer brutality of the attack disguised the true planning that went in to carry out such a horrific assault without being seen or heard next to a relatively busy thoroughfare.* This thought striking all three in unison.

'Come on. Let's go.' said Frank, quickly sliding into his vehicle. Charles and Marshall followed, clambering in after Frank.

Chapter V

The receptionist at the Coroner-Examiner's office looked up at the fair-skinned man dressed all in black now standing before her. 'Can I help you?' she queried. The man in black just slid a badge across. The receptionist took it and looked up at the man before her. Her eyes matching the obscure darkness of the man's sunglasses. Looking askance at the badge, 'Who's next? The C.I.A.?'

'Pardon?' said the man before her in a confused tone. She just handed the badge back, 'May I ask what you are here for Agent Locke?'

'Here to see the Medical-Examiner over a case.'

'Seems everyone wants to see the Examiner over a case today. One moment, please.' The receptionist picked up the receiver of a gray desk phone and dialed a short extension with swift stabs of her fingers. The other line picked up after two rings.

'Yes, Doctor? The F.B.I. is here to see you over a case, I am not sure, but probably recent, and shall I have him wait?' The receptionist looked down as she listened to the examiner on the other line. Scratching the back of her head with a free hand. She put down the receiver quickly and stood up, 'The Examiner will see you in his office. Down the hall, through the double doors on the left, last room.'

'Thank you.' said the man in black as he began to walk down the hall. Maneuvering through the double doors prominently situated halfway down the hall opposite the elevators. Walking briskly to the last office that displayed a name etched into a golden plate: Chyron, M.D., Examiner-Coroner.

Opening the door to the office with a gentle turn of the

doorknob revealed an empty room. Not empty of things but of people. A pair of leather armchairs sat before a dark-brown stained oak desk; while opposite the Examiner's seat lay empty. Looking at the office and its Spartan furnishings. The most elaborate articles being only a stack of papers on the desk's smooth surface, an old looking tapestry displaying a centaur shooting a bow, and a collection of rocks adorning some shelves mounted on the Southern wall.

'Have a seat, *Agent Locke*.'

The Driver-in-Black wheeled around on his heels quickly, sunglass lens coming to rest on the frame of an older, olive skinned man, with short black hair and dark eyes. 'Kheiron. Name change?' Earning a dark smirk from the Examiner.

'What can I say? I never was very original with cover names.' The Driver-in-Black or *Agent Locke* as he was going by moved aside and took the closer of the two armchairs before the desk. While the Examiner, or rather *Kheiron*, closed the door behind him. Moving with surprising grace towards his

own chair opposite of the raven-haired 'Agent Locke'.

'So what brings you here, *Agent*, I trust this is about business?' asked Kheiron.

Business, a generic term that any passerby who could hear into the office would not even bother to find odd or even askance at. You know very well that I do not make visits otherwise. Shoving the thought aside, The Driver-in-Black responded with one word, '*Yeah.*'

Kheiron sat back in his chair and exhaled slowly. 'What can I do for you, Mister Korvinus?'

'The body in the alley today,' responded The Driver-in-Black politely.

Kheiron immediately pulled open a desk drawer and fetched out a small manila file. Sliding said manila file to the man now said to be a 'Mister Korvinus,' by Kheiron. It had the name and address of the victim along with a Driver's License picture. 'Managed to pull that just now. I have yet to finish the autopsy so I do not have much else to go on from the corpse.'

'This homicide may be linked to a number of our

mutual associate's deaths,' continued The Driver-in-Black.

Kheiron threaded his fingers as he rested his hands on his stomach. Leaning back in his chair as he pursed his lips in thought. 'I could see why.'

'Any information you have from the s-.'

A small baggy slid across the desk. In it was a single bloody tooth. 'Found that embedded in one of the victim's bite wounds. How much you want to bet that tooth does not match anyone in government databases.'

John picked up the baggy and examined the tooth. Blood spattered, possessing pink fleshy chunks all along the roots. It was a canine tooth, but abnormally long and pointed, 'I take it this was no animal.'

'Depends what you would call an animal Mister Korvinus. You, me, whatever killed that young man in the back alley of a movie theater.'

The Driver-in-Black looked at Kheiron with a serious expression, 'you know what this means if it...' Locke trailed off as Kheiron matched his serious expression.

The medical examiner leaned forward and spoke softly, 'I am well aware of what not playing by the rules can mean. For all of us.'

The Driver-in-Black abruptly tucked the baggy into the inside of his coat jacket. 'Do the L.A.P.D. know anything?'

Kheiron just shook his head slowly from side to side. 'Good,' stated The Driver-in-Black as he stood up and began to walk out of the office. However, not before hearing Kheiron speak quickly as he turned his back on the examiner, 'Best hurry up, Mister. Korvinus.' The man known variably as 'Agent Locke, Korvinus, Driver-In-Black', did not spare a reply or show a pause in his gait as he strode from the office and the building itself.

* * *

The throaty roar of the Super Cobra Jet engine sounded down busy streets as a 69' Mustang Mach 1 sped away from the Los Angeles Medical Examiner-Coroner's building back towards Los Feliz. For the pedestrian or motorist idling the roar of its engine would presage the arrival of the vehicle by several

seconds. Moving through the bustling metropolis with its constant traffic. Throngs of pedestrians forming great bipedal herds moving in surges across hundreds of crosswalks.

Airliners rising and descending from the clouds as Los Angeles International Airport seldom ever ceased operations. The air traffic above the Los Angeles plateau just as congested as the city's vital ground arterials.

Speeding along the pavement of the US 101 highway, passing cars by weaving gracefully through the daytime traffic, with rumbling of its tires as the powerful muscle car careened around one eighteen wheeler after another.

The Driver-In-Black held up the tooth before setting down in his console. As if checking to see if the tooth remained as it was. The exit for Los Feliz came and went. The Driver, F.B.I. Agent John Locke, Mister. Korvinus, had another destination in mind. It was time to look at the prior victims of this nameless, illusive, killer.

Continuing along the 101 as it arced abruptly North-West towards the Santa Monica Mountains. In the

direction of the communities named Calabasas and Thousand Oaks. The infinite azure expanse of the Pacific Ocean angling before him as the wheels of the Mustang followed the curvature of the highway's path. Only slowly switching to come up to his left flank as the 101 began to follow the California coastline in a parallel fashion. The Santa Monica Mountains rearing up to his right and foreground. Their bald, treeless, brown faces rising above the Los Angeles plateau to form a maze of ridgelines and terraced neighborhoods boasting the homes of the rich and well to do in Los Angeles. Offering a quieter lifestyle than the rush and glitz of Beverly Hills.

However, as the muscle car roared its way along the highway and those elevated homes drew closer, one could easily see that they lacked nothing in regards to glamour. Post-Modern luxury homes boasting all the latest architectural fads such as asymmetric floor plans, stainless steel appliances, black granite counter tops, finished with heavy usage of glass to the point of entire walls being devoid of any other material. Creating a futuristic, brutal, almost architecture-as-fashion,

statement to the world. Clashing with the rustic Colonial Revivalist architecture of neighboring mansions that appeared to have been ripped directly from paintings depicting old Spanish Colonial structures. No doubt their interiors being as opulent as their exterior pools and gardens.

The steel stallion paid no heed as the throttle opened up, velocity quickening, by its black-clad rider. Zipped into the mountains before slowing to turn sharply left onto a narrow yet still paved road. The city of Calabasas, greater Los Angeles, and the terraced mansions from seconds prior being left behind to the South as the automobile climbed the elevation along the narrow mountainside road. The blazing Sun at first progressively and then permanently obscured by a thick canopy of trees as the road wound its way into a secluded region of those bald, brown grass girded, serpentine mountains. So secluded as to have untarnished forestry masking the roads existence from the rays of a blistering fire on high.

Angling around a gentle left-hand curve in the road. Intermittent breaks in the tree's lining the road allowed the

sapphire expanse of the Pacific Ocean to stretch out beyond the beaches of Malibu below unto the horizon. Whereby, the endless gentle waves of deep blue vanished beyond the curvature of the Earth. A sapphire backdrop sporadically touched with the white of sails. Belonging to boating enthusiasts in a flock of seabirds speckling a vast pond.

Another turn and once again with a rush of foliage this brief oceanic vista was shrouded by a kaleidoscope of greens and browns. Trees thick as any hedge preventing The Driver-in-Black's eyes from piercing beyond.

The road wound on until abruptly turning right in trajectory, which upon gracefully making such a turn revealed a large, spacious, three-story mansion that caught the sunlight on tall glass windows inset within white stonewalls. An ornate black bar fence betwixt white stone pillars marked the threshold of this illustrious property. Palm trees and hedges lay beyond. While just barely perceptible from the road one could make out expansive gardens to the rear of the mansion. Its forward facing structure arranged around a centralized double

door below a large black iron light fixture hanging from a thick chain. Short marble steps led up to the door with balconies flanking either side. These balconies were in turn beside neat rows of large, tall, windows evenly spaced to allow natural light to enter all three floors.

Pulling up to, the perimeter of the iron fence the muscle car was blocked by a similarly stylized gate. Black iron with vertical bars ending in barbed points. Two Gothic A's wreathed in iron wrought flowers, one on each side of the gate, stood out with a gold finish. The Driver-in-Black rolled down his car window and leaned his head out. Showing his visage to the small, top quality, security cameras mounted on stone pillars flanking the gates. Their mechanical eyes conducting a ceaseless vigil.

The gates yawned open on well-maintained hinges. Silently allowing the vehicle to throttle forward onto the property. As the vehicle moved onward, slowly following the driveway, the Driver-In-Black would see expansive garages off to his right and down a short dip in a side road. Connected to

the bottom floor of the mansion by a colonnade. The elevation dipping behind the mansion to reveal that the mansion actually had a sub-level below the front entrance. Pearly blue water from pools could just barely be seen in the back, surrounded by the gardens, while further beyond dense tree cover partially obscured several much smaller buildings located at the edge of the grounds.

Pulling up before the double doors the engine of the vehicle died. Cut silent by the quick turn of a key. Reaching into his console to fetch the small baggy bearing the tooth before stepping out onto the pavement. The black-clad driver moved up the short steps and was about to knock on the door when it flung open abruptly. Followed by voice chock-full of sarcasm. 'Agent Locke. How can I be of service to the Federal Bureau of Investigations on this fine day?'

The Driver-in-Black said nothing in response as he looked at the grinning face of Kai once more. 'I need to see the bodies,' replied the black-clad driver without a hint of his counterpart's sarcastic humor.

'You're no fun, you know that?' said Kai as he stepped to the side and in an overdone manner made a sweeping bow.

Entering the mansion's large foyer, to glance upwards was to see a brilliant silver chandelier hanging overhead, with a grand staircase directly before The Driver-in-Black. Both sets of stairs rearing up with carved flowers etched into their mahogany banisters. To the left was a gallery lined with paintings and several doors leading to other rooms. To the right was a set of black wooden double doors.

Kai flicked a hand to signal The Driver-in-Black to follow and moved to the gallery on the left. The two men moved down the gallery, past various paintings from different eras, each one easily worth a small fortune. The names of the artists scrawled underneath in eloquent cursive script. There was one in the Romanticist style, a Cubism piece, followed by a medievalist oil painting which itself hung adjacent to another of the classicism style depicting the murder of Julius Caesar.

Moving to a door situated between paintings by Caspar

David Friedrich and Eugène Delacroix. The Driver-in-Black looked to his left at a painting of a man standing on some rocky precipice, his back turned to the driver, gazing out above a landscape of thick fog. The power of the piece gave The Driver-in-Black a moment's pause as he too held a moment of silent reflection.

'Coming, John?'

Kai's voice brought him back to reality as he nodded to his compatriot before following him through the now open door. Into a narrow, short, hallway of dull gray metal walls leading to a single elevator. A small suite halfway down revealed an overweight, Hispanic man, watching a couple dozen-security camera feeds. The man spared The Driver-in-Black and Kai no heed as they marched past him to the elevator. Kai pressed the down arrow and when the doors slid open smoothly, they both stepped on. None of the floor buttons was marked. Nevertheless, Kai seemed to know which one was which as he thumbed the second button down the column of unmarked floors into a dull yellow glow. The doors

slid closed as the elevator began its descent down into the sub-levels. Opening approximately five seconds later to reveal a hallway with stainless steel walls. Evenly spaced with full floor to ceiling length clear glass doors.

Following Kai down the hall, The Driver-in-Black could see to the left and right teams of workers laboring. To the left, a mint was printing and cutting money followed by teams of laborers counting and organizing the freshly printed currency; to the right several workers in white hazmat suits were mixing liquids and materials together; the very next window held individuals organizing, unpacking, and repacking various firearms. Every view from the glass doors showed one potentially illicit racket after the other until they reached the end of the hallway and Kai opened the door smoothly.

Entering a room with air chilled and uncomfortable. Impressive given the expanse of the room itself. Various medical equipment and machinery lined the room's perimeter. Kai led his dark garbed opposite to a steel door and slid it open on small rollers. Revealing a much smaller yet far colder

storage room lined with uniform plain metal handles. Giving the appearance of the room being lined with steel cabinet drawers. Kai walked over to the closest row and opened three drawers. Revealing three corpses resting on plain steel slabs. Preserved by the cold temperatures of the room. 'These unfortunate souls had been stationed south of the border, embedded in the local police department there.'

The first corpse was a middle-aged man whose throat appeared to have been ripped out in addition to receiving over a dozen stab wounds across his torso. Gray eyes glassy and lifeless. The second had the similar destruction of the throat but with the addition of a crushed chest cavity. The third, however, caught John's eyes by virtue of it being a perfect copy of the young James Dawson's mutilated corpse found in that back alley next to the Vista Theater.

'These may prove useful.' Kai's suggestion came with the sound of papers being pulled from a second, smaller, drawer. Extending an arm out to hand the papers off to The Driver-in-Black. The latter took and opened them up to see that

they were copies of the autopsy reports from the three bodies displayed before them. Along with, as The Driver-in-Black would see as he checked through the names, the fresh autopsy report of the late James Dawson. The names and information gathered just far about each of the victims had been compiled into these neatly folded papers. Complete with color-scanned pictures of each of the victims pulled from miscellaneous identification cards. The Driver-in-Black pulled out the tooth and handed it to Kai, 'What do you make of that?'

Kai took it and furrowed his brow. 'Looks like some animal tooth. Maybe a dog?'

'A dog doesn't mutilate a person and then leave,' replied Kai's black-clad counterpart. Kai himself silent and merely shrugged, 'my guess is that we have a good ole' fashion professional sending a message.' The Driver-in-Black raised an eyebrow, Kai splayed his hands, 'or, it is a psycho. But I'll leave you with this,' pulling out a small plastic container, jingling the contents which produced a rattling sound, then placing it next to the third corpse before sauntering off out of

the cold storage room. Leaving The Driver-in-Black with the trio of bodies, the reports, and the plastic container.

Immediately, The Driver-in-Black went to work, flipping through the report pages and scanning his eyes over the details written therein. *The killer had experimented before escalating to this level of brutality.* Thoughts mirrored the growing devastation that each corpse possessed. Looking up at the first corpse The Driver-in-Black examined it slowly. *Probably the first death, not as brutal, and methodology not as developed or precise.* Locke looked at the torn out throat of the middle-aged man that was the first victim. It was more jagged and not clean of a tear. *Possibly a more frantic move?* Sure enough as he flicked through the pages, the middle-aged man was the first chronological victim found. An officer positioned with a dockyard owner who moved various goods meant to go unreported on behalf of his boss. Found in a small apartment building by associates of the same boss The Driver-in-Black also worked for. The second, another male, but younger. Most likely in his late twenties. This one was an associate embedded

to work on gunrunning. Shifting to the third was the youngest of them all, a woman in her mid-twenties and displaying the most carnage.

The Driver-in-Black looked at her file and the notes scrawled throughout the margins. She was an infiltrated agent into the local Mexican police department's financial crimes division, totally opposite of the men before her in that her job was at least white collar. However, the only thing that linked them all was the fact that they all were associates of the same group of people that gave him jobs. The real masters of Los Angeles in the Driver's point of view. *But why James Dawson? What caused a sudden switch to some kid in an alley?*

The answer seemingly almost fell out of his grasp. A thin, fourth, report, labeled in thin-stenciled handwriting simply read: *Dawson: NL Candidate*. The Driver-in-Black pinched the corner of the document between thumb and index finger. As if holding an ancient manuscript too precious to be handled without utmost care. Delicately, pulling one corner away as he flipped open the plain manila cover. There, details

about Dawson's biology had been scribbled in thin blockish handwriting. *Neu-Lyfe? One of our biomedical front companies?*

The answer smacked to the fore of his brain. 'Crafty bastard,'

You were using our own network of associates to find your targets. Following our own spider web from victim to victim. Still, why Dawson?

Picking up the papers once more and thumbing to the Dawson report, faxed over by Kheiron as while he was in transit, alas to see that the boy had no abnormalities of any nature. Closing the drawers one by one in solemn reflection. *Dawson had not fought or at least managed to hurt his killer in such a manner. Otherwise, why would this be here? On all of them no less.* Holding up the tooth to his eyes. Rolling it around in the clear plastic baggy. The bloodstains and pink giblets of tissue clinging to the yellow-white enamel body of the tooth gave the impression it had been pulled or wrenched out in an abrupt manner. Possibly in a brief and ultimately

futile attempt by the victims to resist? No. A tooth a victim would be the most absurd notion. *This had been placed there as a calling card.*

Then again, another, more sinister thought struck his mind. The Driver-in-Black readied to leave abruptly, pushing the bodies back into their stainless steel refrigeration containers, and tucking the reports under his arm as he moved for the door. Leaving the way he came in.

The 69' Ford Mustang throttled away from the mansion and back down the windy road in the direction of Los Angeles. A renewed sense of purpose guiding its passage. While the shimmering skyscrapers of the Los Angeles down town rose high into the sky.

Interlude

Cynthia Summers

The morning Sun peaked through the edges of the black reversed hourglass curtains. Casting thin rays of light that advanced along the off-white walls of the room. A queen-sized bed decked with aquamarine pillows and comforter occupied by a lone figure. Wrapped up in the comforter and blankets like a human burrito with long strands of lush hair, possessing a deep mahogany hue, spread out over the pillows much like the rays of sunlight creeping into the room. The blare of an alarm clock signaled the groggy, sluggish, movements of the figure soon betrayed by her slender frame as female. A soft round

shoulder rotated as a slender arm lazily flopped onto the alarm clock. Smashing the silence button as the hand belonging to the opposite arm rubbed granules of sleep away from a pair of almond shaped eyes. Sitting up slowly she arced her back in a nice long stretch. Crackling rolling down her spine sent sensations of relief and fresh energy all along her body while blinking her eyes as her mind awoke.

Flinging the bed comforter and sheet to the side, she swung her legs from the bed into some neat fuzzy salmon colored slippers. Rising from the bed in a white tank top and blue-white pinstripe shorts, she meandered to the adjacent bathroom. Where the sound of a shower and scraping of a toothbrush could be heard. Beneath, on the floor below, the sound of plates clattering signaled another individual's presence in the building.

The sound of falling water from the bathroom shower continued for several minutes before being replaced by the more silent sounds of a person drying off. The bathroom door

opened to release a small cloud of steam as the young female moved back into her bedroom.

Passing by a desk strewn with pens, papers, and stacks of expensive textbooks ranging from Biology to Neurology. A simple white painted wooden shelf was full of pictures showing five happy faces in a variety of locations and poses. Pictures of a trip Disney World during 2016 to laughing smiles holding their acceptance letters to the University of California right after. One of those smiling and laughing faces in those picture frames was James Dawson.

A wet towel fell to the floor while drawers rattled open on their rails. Requiring a little more jingle than normally required of a drawer due to worn tracks from what appeared to be aged furnishings. The occupant of the bedroom dressed in proper attire. Blue jeans and a light green oxford shirt disguising her undergarments. Topped off with a white hairband completing the ensemble.

A slender hand moved delicately to open a day planner. The name *Cynthia Summer* scrawled in wide fluid handwriting.

Revealing more of that gentle script that matched the grace of the female form. Checking the day's schedule before stuffing a menagerie of objects into a gray Swiss brand backpack she left the room. Her footfalls bringing her down to the main floor were another young woman was doing dishes while the TV played. The morning weather forecast switching to a developing story of a body found in Los Feliz near the Vista Theater. Cynthia and the other woman froze. The latter being yet another face present in those picture frames resting on the former's shelf upstairs.

The other woman dropped the dishes as the journalist spoke into a microphone about the brutality of the homicide and that the police were exploring all possible avenues of what occurred. However, no clear picture of the body could be seen as it was being loaded up into a van. A trio of men, presumably detectives, leaving the scene while another man that was previously not in the frame of the news cameras. Walked into the background heading towards the alley. Shades, which masked his eyes and wore a black three-piece suit. Sharp

features, raven black hair and pale skin. Moving into the scene and flashing a badge to a uniformed officer near yellow police tape. The journalist turned to see the newcomer but too late. The individual was already beyond the police line. Abruptly, with words about watching the incident's developments, the feed switched back to the news anchor beginning the traffic update segment of the program.

Cynthia looked at the other woman, 'Liz you don't think?' I mean what were the odds. Thoughts raced through her head. James had gone back down that alley. They all had walked through it last night. Before splitting up to head back to their different college apartments or in James case back home in Los Feliz. Something did not sit right with Cynthia, a pang in her gut, a sudden overbearing weight easing itself onto her shoulders. Pulling out her phone, she typed a quick message to James Dawson's phone. The other woman, Liz, put down the dishes with a quick crash and went over to her flat mate. Rapidly speaking in a reassuring tone, 'I am sure that is not

him. There is always many people out at night. Could have been anyone. Go to class, if I hear anything, I'll let you know.'

Cynthia did not give a verbal reply. Only looking at Liz with soft, concerned, brown eyes nestled in a lightly freckled face now contorted with gut wrenching premonition that bad news was indeed on the horizon. Nodding her head slowly at Liz, she tucked her iPhone back into a front pocket as she shouldered her backpack, grabbed a protein shake from the fridge, and left the apartment. Stepping out into the warm Los Angeles morning heading across Hilgard Avenue towards the Mildred E. Mathias Botanical Garden across the street.

The Botanical Garden were a seven and a half acre garden, outdoor classroom, and host to a research facility located right on the grounds of the University of California, Los Angeles. Open to the public and possessing several short trails to view the exotic plant life transplanted from all around the world. Cynthia breathed in the freshness of the air as she walked along the dirt path between the plants and trees casting deep reservoirs of shadow across the earth. It was a pleasant

intoxication of the senses as she took in the smells and sights of the varied plant life. Flowers of myriad hues. Deep violets merging with lush reds sharing the manicured ground with squat shrubs and rare ferns. Taking in the intermittent rays of the Sun coming and going with the gentle swaying of tree boughs. The crunch and crackle of her sneakers on the dirt being the only sound coaxing up towards her ears as Cynthia wound along the trail in a westerly direction towards the U.C.L.A. campus that lay just beyond. Thence, across the threshold that is Tiverton Avenue. Forming the opposite boundary separating the gardens from the campus proper.

However, despite the ease that this environment should normally convey to Cynthia, as she walked to her classes, she could not shake the darkening thoughts nestling in the rear of her conscious. Cynthia worried for her friend, for James whose mere name brought loving warmth throughout Cynthia's being, and just as she trod in a shadowed trail so too did her mind walk equally dark paths.

A branch snapped to her left. Cynthia froze and looked to her left abruptly. The hair on her neck standing on end while goosebumps rose upon her previously smooth flesh. A squirrel bolted across her path. She let out her breath slowly as the small rodent dashed across the first path with bounding leaps. Shaking her head back and forth at the absurdity of the momentary fright which had grasped her form Cynthia resumed walking through the last thirty yards of trail and out onto Tiverton Avenue. Moving across the pavement, past a parking lot labeled 'E', onward to the David Geffen School of Medicine where Cynthia's classes for the day would be held.

Chapter VI

The Northeast Community Police Station, located at 3353 San Fernando Road on the edge of the Atwater Neighborhood sat right across the Los Angeles River from Los Feliz. A lone ATS Coupe pulled onto the premises. Navigating into an empty parking space before the precinct building. Followed by three of its four cabin doors swishing open.

Stepping out of the vehicle, moving with a fast, purposeful, pace. Frank, Charles, and Marshall moved into the

building. 'So what exactly is the plan here, Frank?' Charles spoke while looking sidelong at his partner. 'We look for missing persons or homicides that have similarities with those of Dawson?'

'Yep,' nodded Frank without sparing either men a look.

'L.A. has over two-hundred homicides a year. That could take a while,' chipped in Marshall from behind the older duo leading the way.

Charles glanced back as they wound their way to their desks, 'We'll narrow it down by bodies found with damage to their throat and chest.' Sitting down Charles began to furiously type on his keyboard.

Moving to their seats Frank and Marshall joined Charles in this endeavor. Searching for similar cases that would fit the hunch now eating away at the men. All the while the clock ticked by as they delved into dozens of homicide cases from the past decade. Thumbing through cases were excessive force was used on a victim's chest and throat. Yet, they were either solved or ended up with the M.O., becoming radically

different once they shifted through the exhaustive documentation such cases could possess.

Glancing up at the hands of a clock mounted above the doorway leading out of the homicide unit, its hands signaled three o'clock in the afternoon, Frank sighed. Habitually checking his wristwatch despite knowing what time it was anyways. The older man stood up with the creak of aging limbs, 'We're not finding shit. This could very well be the killer's first time, or he's new to the area.'

Charles abruptly leaned forward in his chair, his eyes scanning along the contents of a manila case file, then turning rapidly to Frank and said, 'Not quite, Frank. Take a look at this.' Charles handed over a file dating from around the same time Dawson was murdered, but last year.

Frank took the open file in both hands and ran his eyes along the information therein. Over photographs and autopsy reports. Location and possible evidence. *A missing person's report from San Diego. Trio of university students went missing one after the other over the course of three days. Bodies found*

within a cistern in Tijuana months later. Gashes on their throats and severe mutilation to their torsos consistent to that of Dawson's. This all felt too similar. The only difference was the absence of a deliberate effort to hide the bodies. 'So instead of hiding the bodies the perpetrator is now leaving them out in the open. Why?' mused Frank.

'He's getting bolder. Wants the media coverage maybe?' replied Marshall with a shrug of his shoulders.

Charles shot back, 'What makes you think it's a, he?'

'Overpower Dawson that quickly? Consistent with a male perpetrator,' replied Marshall quickly.

Charles grinned and gave Marshall a pat on the back before speaking, 'So the suspect picks Dawson, which matches the M.O. of targeting university students, overpowers him and leaves his body in the alley knowing someone will eventually find it. But not before making a clean getaway. This begs a need for recognition to me.'

Frank, flipped through the San Diego-Tijuana file some more, 'But does he kill in threes? He knew that alley offered a

prime kill spot and no doubt waited until Dawson or someone was alone. If the perpetrator truly targets university students and sticks to the San Diego-Tijuana kill count then odds are the suspect is already stalking his next victim.'

Charles grimaced at the thought and said, 'Then we gotta' find out who Dawson was with that night. If that file is accurate it means the perp' hunts via social connections between his victims. At least two others who were with Dawson are in the cross-hairs.'

Frank pulled out the note given to him by Mister Dawson earlier and leaned over his desk to begin running the names and numbers. 'I got four names. Two males and two females. Two apartment addresses with what looks like the guys and gals living separate but in their respective gender pairs as roommates. All living on or near U.C.L.A. The bodies found in that cistern in Tijuana were two females and one male.'

Charles grabbed the note from Frank's hand. 'Alright, Marshall and I will look into Cynthia Summers and Elizabeth

Wallington.' Writing down the address on a scrap piece of paper Charles signaled for Marshall to follow. Leaving Frank to head over to the address of Dawson's male friends. A process Frank started by picking up his desk phone to notify the U.C.L.A. Police Department of his arrival and the situation at hand.

Within minutes, Frank exited the precinct after Charles and Marshall were clambering into an old brown Ford Crown Victoria further down the row of vehicles, which the former's ATS Coupe sat. Swinging down into the driver's seat Frank ran what could transpire through his mind. *All right Franklin we got two possible outcomes. The suspect keeps to his established M.O. Going after two females or possibly changing to target Dawson's male acquaintances. Three total or one male and two females. Either way at least now I got a clue of where to go, you bastard.*

* * *

Frank moved onto Hyperion Avenue, which bridged the Los Angeles River cutting off Atwater and Los Feliz from each

other. The old Crown Victoria holding Charles and Marshall followed close behind. Both vehicles traversed the grid-laid streets of Los Angeles Northern boroughs. Moving through the unending flow of traffic, which permeated the city daily.

Traffic choked Los Angeles almost constantly as millions of Americans commuted to and from work, cargo trucks hauled, and the stream of people coming and going throughout the metropolis never truly ceased. The stream of cars and S.U.V.s formed trickling rivers of aluminum, steel, and rubber corralled by concrete sound walls and medians. Each street, avenue, boulevard, and highway a two way current of transit.

Gripping the steering wheel of his Cadillac ATS Coupe, Frank, eased his automobile through gaps in traffic. The duo of police vehicles making their way gradually South-west as Hyperion Avenue met the larger arterial known as Sunset Boulevard. Peeling right the pair of vehicles kept close as they sped North-West to merge onto Santa Monica Boulevard and thence have a straight shot to Westwood Village and the nearby U.C.L.A. campus.

Franks mind whirred, much like the traffic about him, ceaselessly. Consciousness focused between driving and who the next target would be. *If the pattern holds true then he will try to target one of the girls. Possibly one of them on their way to or from classes? But U.C.L.A. is a huge campus? Surely, it would be a lot harder to assault someone in the same fashion of Dawson without someone noticing.* Flicking his eyes up at the rear-view mirror Charles' Crown Victoria suddenly lurched to the right in the direction of Hilgard Avenue. Snapping Frank out of his mental monologue, as he comprehended that he was nearing his own destination.

Pulling out the piece of paper where Frank had scrawled the address of Dawson's two male friends; Carlos Rodriguez and Anthony Perrot. Both living together as roommates at the nearby Hitch Suites. Hitch Suites being an on-campus housing center. That in it of itself, if the killer was truly as clever as Frank thought he is, should rule them out as the likely next targets. But Frank had to be sure. Then again, an emergent thought, which troubled Frank by no small

insignificance, Dawson's friends, *could be anywhere*.

Therefore, his call before leaving, the Los Angeles Police Department needed the U.C.L.A. campus police to help cover ground.

* * *

The University of California, Los Angeles possessed its very own law enforcement agency. The campus police being its own self-contained fully functional department made up of sixty-four sworn and forty-six unsworn members. Backed up by eighty Community Service Officers, twenty-one emergency medical technicians and a modern station with a complete inventory of squad cars, ambulance, and suite of facilities needed for a law enforcement agency to function optimally.

Rotating the steering wheel the ATS Coupe pulled in front of Hitch Suites. Swinging the car door open Frank rapidly exited his vehicle. The Detective met immediately by a pair of uniformed U.C.L.A. Police officers.

'Detective,' said one of the officers. A blond haired male with tan skin and muscled body denoting many hours at

the gym. Flanked by a more slender, but no less capable, partner of Latino descent. Handing Frank a sheet of paper with print outs of the student's identification pictures. Putting names to faces.

'Officers,' replied Frank over a couple firm handshakes.

'We've talked to some other residents and conducted a walk around of the apartment belonging to Anthony Perrot and his roommate, Carlos Rodriguez, with nothing out of the ordinary.'

'That's because our perpetrator is patient. He'll wait for dark, and pick a place where no one has a clear line of sight, with preferably little to no security cameras,' responded Frank whilst checking his wristwatch. It was already evening. They were running out of time before the Sun would begin its quick descent. Frank looked about the apartments. Speaking as he did so to the officers, 'Any suspicious persons of late?'

The officers just looked at each other with the Latino officer speaking, 'Like we said, nothing beyond the norm.'

Semester is just kicking off. No doubt there will be plenty of parties come dark.' The name Lecano etched into his rectangular brass metal nameplate pinned just above his left breast pocket.

'Yeah, that's what I'm afraid of,' muttered Frank as he grabbed his phone from the Coupe and dialed Charles number. *The perpetrator is definitely going to wait until dark to make any move.*

* * *

The Ford Crown Victoria pulled right with a low rumble of rubber rolling over asphalt. Turning onto Hilgard Avenue heading Northeast. To the left the Mildred E. Mathias Botanical Garden sprawled as an island of greenery amid the concrete jungle of Los Angeles. Moreover, on the right rows of upper middle-class looking apartments. Most built in the post-modern style with each unit looking more akin to affluent beach houses along Malibu than what one would guess being homes for University students.

Marshall, the youngest of the three detectives investigating the murder of James Dawson, sat in the passenger seat of the Crown Victoria while Charles drove. Gazing at the row of apartments Marshall could not help but unleash a scoffing remark, 'Between tuition and these; no wonder graduates end up a quarter million in debt.'

Charles shrugged, 'Hey, if you don't want to be neck deep in debt pick a profession that doesn't require a fancy piece of paper.'

Marshall looked like he was about to reply but wisely bit his tongue. *Okay, boomer, maybe if the cost of an education was not twice as expensive as what it was twenty-five years ago? Debt would not be such a social issue.* Marshall blinked as he mentally chalked it up to another instance of the 'Generation Gap.' Opinions and stances changing with each respective generation. Marshall averted his gaze and opened the passenger side door as soon as Charles pulled the Crown Victoria over to the curb. The vehicle parallel parked with smooth precision.

Charles exited after his younger compatriot, joining him on the sidewalk, pulling Frank's note out while asking, 'This eight-seven-three Hilgard?'

'Sure seems so,' replied Marshall while pointing to a series of three digit numbers signaling the individual apartment units. Arrows under the three-digit serial indicated if a particular unit is front or side entry. Marshall tapped his older colleague on the shoulder quickly and pointed, 'Hey, eight-seven-three right here in the front.' Moved moved quickly towards the front door.

Charles called after him, 'Hey now, come on you remember your training. Anything look out of the ordinary here?' This gave Marshall pause as he scanned with his brown eyes roving over the front of the apartment. *Everything looked normal?* Charles in turn looked along the side of the building. Slowly moving over to Marshall standing nearer to the front door of the apartment. 'Always in a rush, man, just like Frank, I tell ya,' chuckled Charles as he moved past the younger man to knock on the door. Marshall remained where he stood on the

threshold between the sidewalk and the concrete slab path leading to the front door of the apartment.

The sound of tumblers turning presaged the door whipping open with a sudden creek of protesting hinges against the motion. Revealing a bespectacled young woman of average height with blonde hair tucked up into a tight, long, ponytail. Her fair skin tinged with a soft red hue about the bridge of her nose and ridges of her full cheeks. *Someone's been hitting that California Sun*, thought Charles. The woman looked at Charles, glancing beyond at Marshall, with a puzzled, possibly even anxious, look about her face. Fumbling her initial words with a stutter, 'H-Hi? Can I help you?' The woman's eyes after several seconds settling onto Charles wizened visage. Ignoring Marshall behind him who gave her a friendly smile and wave. The older man moved a hand into his coat pocket and pulled out his police badge. Holding it steady for her to examine it and stated, 'Los Angeles Police Department. Homi-.' Charles stopped abruptly as the young woman's eyes rolled back.

'Oh shit!' Charles sprung forward quickly to grab her. Nearly missing as he cradled her limp form awkwardly.

'Marshall! Marshall, help me!'

Marshall, who had been casually scanning the outside of the apartment. Lazily looking periodically up and down the street with his hands stuffed in his pant pockets. Looking for anything out of the ordinary suddenly jerked his head to the front door of unit eight hundred and seventy-three. His youthful legs following his sudden focus as they sprung across the concrete pathway in a few strides, his face contorted in confusion on why Charles had suddenly called out, eyes widening at the sight of the woman limp in Charles arms. 'What the hell happened Charles?' said Marshall aghast.

'What do you mean, 'what the hell happened,' the girl fainted! Shit. Come on!' Charles began to drag the limp woman back into the apartment. Marshall held a hand to his face in anxiety as he looked up and down the street with rapidly darting pupils. 'Don't just stand there gawk eyed! Grab her feet!' Charles voice snapped Marshall out of perplexity.

Grasping the young woman by the ankles, Charles and Marshall, shuffled back into the apartment and laid the woman on a soft black leather couch in the living room. Charles sat delicately right across from her on a wooden, brown stained, coffee table strewn with cosmopolitan magazines. Picking one up quickly he began to fan the woman and nudge her shoulder softly. Trying to rouse the young woman from the sudden case of unconsciousness that grasped her.

Marshall closed the front door behind them, scooped up his partners dropped badge, and handed it back to Charles before standing off to the side. Muttering something about how bad this would look if anyone saw. His utterances drawing Charles gaze back to him, 'Marshall! Water, quickly, come on you've dealt with worse working patrol.' The young detective did not need a second command. Moving quickly to the kitchen to fetch a glass of water. Hands up to physically show his fluster or in annoyance of opening several cupboards to fine cups. Returning to the living having procured a white plastic cup filled with water from the refrigerator dispenser in the

kitchen. Charles carefully took the cup and held it ready for the woman as her began to move.

The young woman before them fluttered her eyes as she came too. Feeling the gentle air fanned on her face she turned to look at Charles and Marshall. The former quickly speaking, 'You fainted Miss. You are on your couch and we got you some water. Are you alright?' The young woman propped herself up slowly onto one arm. Slowly rising with pivoting motion to a sitting position. Legs swinging from the couch to touch the carpet now underfoot. She took the water, looked at them both, and said, 'L.A.P.D.?'

Charles nodded, 'Yes, Mam', I was about to ask if you had a moment to answer some questions when you fainted. My partner and I, then, well...,' silently ending his explanation with an open palm indicating the couch the woman now sat upon.

Taking a sip of the water and cleared her throat, holding a hand closed into a loose fist before her mouth as she did so, with her voice soft and delicate like a dandelion in a Summer's breeze, 'I assume you wanted to ask me questions? About

James? It was he, that body in the alley, wasn't it? My roommate, Cynthia, saw it on news this morning.' Tears welled in her eyes.

Charles shifted on his impromptu seat, taking out a pen and paper from his left pant pocket, speaking with his voice devoid of its usual abrasiveness. Instead, replaced by a comforting softness. Marshall's eyes brows shifting upwards ever so slightly at this tonal shift. 'Why don't we start with your name? If Cynthia's the roommate then you must be Elizabeth Wallington, correct?' She, Elizabeth, nodded in the affirmative. Charles continued, 'Do you know where Cynthia is?'

His question caused Elizabeth's mouth to gap as her jaw dropped in terror at the realization of Dawson's death, murder, hit her full force; and, possibly what could come next now that Cynthia's name bore mention too. A hand drifting over it as she mouthed, 'oh my god.' Charles interjected quickly, 'We don't believe that she is in any kind of danger. I just want to know if you know where we could have campus police find her so they can keep an eye on her and make sure that she is alright.'

'Wh-why? Why, would Cynthia? Is she in danger? Everyone loves her! Who would want to hurt her?' Elizabeth shed the first of what would be many fresh tears to run down red hued cheeks. The saltiness of their moisture causing a slight tingling sensation with that of her sun-kissed skin.

Charles grimaced, 'We don't know who would want to hurt her, you, or anybody. But we have reason to believe whoever murdered James Dawson may also be targeting those he was close to.'

Upon hearing her friends name again, Elizabeth broke down. Each mention a heavy punch to her gut. Cradling her face in both hands as cheeks went from a soft reddish tint to a brilliantly dark puffy pink. Salty streams of grief erupting from her eyes too drip down off the edges of her jawline. Blotching her shirt and jean shorts.

Behind Charles, Marshall quickly grabbed some tissues he had spotted on a nearby shelf and placed them next to Elizabeth. Seating the small turquoise tissue box beside the increasingly distraught Elizabeth. The latter pulling the tissues

from their turquoise box without a verbal acknowledgment. Merely a nod of thanks was all the young woman managed to convey to the quick thinking detective. Dabbing wet cheeks, Elizabeth cast a set of blue eyes out the window facing the Botanical Garden across the street.

Charles looked down at the notepad he held loosely and resumed speaking in his newfound gentile tone, 'You seemed to expect that James Dawson was the victim this morning?'

Elizabeth did not look at them, 'I had a feeling after I saw the news. We, all of us, walked through there but James – said he forgot something and had to go back. That was the last time Cynthia or I saw him.'

'Cynthia was with you the whole time after everyone parted ways last night?'

'Yes, we headed back to our apartment, after saying bye to our other two mutual friends.'

'And that would be Anthony Perrot and Carlos Rodriguez?'

'Yes. They live on the opposite side of campus.'

'What did Dawson forget that he had to go back and get?' Charles pressed on with his questions, attempting to jog Elizabeth's memory, while scrawling all of her answers on his note pad. Block like print brutally marching across the lines of the page with each stroke of the pen.

Elizabeth put down the water on the coffee table, to Charles left, and rubbed her temples in thought. 'Uh, his wallet? I think. I don't know. But I'm sure that was it.'

Marshall spoke from behind Charles at Elizabeth, 'You mention James Dawson going back? Did he make any mention of where he may have left it?'

Closing her eyes, for a moment in recollection, she spoke, 'I believe he said something about it probably having been left behind at the restaurant, Good Luck's, in Los Feliz.' Charles pursed his lips in acknowledgment as he recorded the reply.

'Mm, good sushi.' Marshall sudden, outburst of a remark, which if going by his facial expression and single hand raised, was a horribly timed attempt at alleviating Elizabeth's

emotional turmoil. Granted, it was at least a sincere attempt at focusing Elizabeth's mind away from the fact her friend was dead and towards answering Charles' questions; however, a bit crudely done in this situation as Marshall soon realized. The mistake precluded by the drop of his hand. Eyes looking at his older colleague with annoyed expectation.

Charles, sighing, looked side long at Marshall for a second, which was all that was required to get the point across. Charles eyes conveyed the full suffocating weight of annoyance towards his younger counterpart. Elizabeth dabbed glistening cheeks, she in turn, trying to process the awkward outburst from the younger detective.

Charles turned back to Elizabeth and gave a small, apologetic, smile. 'You were saying something about Good Luck's? In Los Feliz?' Charles threw the gentile tone of his voice away as he turned slightly in the direction of Detective Marshall. 'Hey, Marshall, why don't you call Good Luck's and see if they have any camera footage that we can request?'

The younger detective smiled at Charles and Elizabeth, 'Of course.' Pulling out a black iPhone in a matching case, department issue, the younger man left out the front door. Already beginning to search for Good Luck's phone number through a simple google search. However, the true purpose of this was to give Charles the quiet he needed to finish questioning Miss Wallington.

Elizabeth grunted in an effort to clear phlegm from her throat. Holding a closed fist to her mouth, she began speaking. Swiftly the fist dropped away as she crossed her arms so that they lay on her reclined torso. The soft, meek, notes of her voice slowly rising with progressive confidence in speaking to the older detective before her. 'James, he – he seemed fine the entire time we were out that night.' Stumbling at first her words began to solidify behind a strengthening tone, the elaboration that is Elizabeth's answer continued on, 'We were at the mouth of the alley. Next to the Vista Theater,' raising a hand to add physical emphasis to the auditory picture being painted for Charles.

Her older male opposite scribbling all the while, quite furiously, across the notepad as she spoke. The older detective obsessively taking every word and detail in. Only interjecting to prompt more details such as, 'And do you recall what time it was when he went back to the restaurant?'

Elizabeth frowned as she looked down at her legs as if she could not recall when James Dawson had turned back to head to the restaurant. Throwing her sun-kissed face into her palms there was only awkward silence as the young woman before Charles struggled to fight through the tumult of emotion.

'Miss?' Charles started again, lowering his posture in an attempt to make himself seem smaller. More inviting to speak too and less imposing perhaps? Whether, her words was the sign of the desired outcome or not; Elizabeth straightened her back abruptly and responded, 'I don't know exactly. Must have been after eight? Maybe around eight-thirty?'

Looking back up at Elizabeth after scribbling another line of notes. His face back to its polite, calm, expression and

said, 'Not a late night was it.' More of a statement than a question. Elizabeth simply nodded and wiped her nose with some more Kleenex. 'Now...is there anyone you can think of that would want to hurt James Dawson?'

Elizabeth shook her head quickly with words coming forth just as fast. Her face betraying surprise that someone could make the notion of such a question needing to be asked, 'James was liked by everyone he met. Fellow students, professors, everyone.'

Charles abruptly shifted his angle with yet another question, 'Was he acting strange?'

'Last night?' said Elizabeth, brow furrowing at the thought.

'Yes.'

'No, he seemed happy, more than usual actually. James was quite talkative about school and future job prospects. Kept checking his phone like he was concerned about the time though.'

'Any idea why?'

'James never really specified. Only that he no longer felt pressure towards the future and everything would be becoming a dream come true. None of us really questioned it. He'd always been quite private about such things.'

'Thank you, Miss Wallington. Mind if we contact you if we have any more questions?'

'Yes, of course, anything to help,' said Elizabeth with a deep waxing sadness permeating through every syllable. Coating her speech, much like the sobs of Missus Dawson, in fresh layers of misery.

Charles stood up slowly. Tucking his pen and notepad back into the left pocket of his black slacks. Making to leave the apartment Charles was about to step away until suddenly he turned around with a half-hand raised, 'I'm sorry, where exactly, did you say we could find Cynthia again?'

Elizabeth blinked for a moment and then stood up. Moving to the apartment's refrigerator located in the kitchen she came back with a small piece of paper. Detailing times and subject names. Cynthia's class schedule. 'She sticks to that

religiously. Should be getting out of classes any minute now I would think. She seldom stays late.'

Charles smiled and took the paper being held out to him while saying, 'We'll catch whoever did this Miss Wallington.' Turning away, he left apartment with a gentle opening and shutting of the front door. Looking to his right was Detective Marshall standing near the doorway. The younger detective, still holding his phone, looked at his older counterpart, 'Good Luck's is pulling the footage and will send it back to the station for processing.'

'Good w-.' A phone rang. The ringing coming from Charles right pant pocket. Pulling out a phone that looked identical to Detective Marshall's he answered it with the swipe of a thumb, 'Talk to me Frank.'

Chapter VII

The Sun was just beginning its dip below the horizon as the black 69' Ford Mustang Super Cobra Jet pulled up to a plain gray metal chain link fence. Stretching along the perimeter of the vast dockyards, which constituted the Port of Los Angeles. A plain black and white sign tied to the fence by thin metal wire read: *Authorized Personnel Only*.

Dubbed *America's Port*, in no small part due to its expansive size, for occupying forty-three miles of coastline covering seven and a half thousand acres of land all along San Pedro Bay. Needless to say that the numerous quays, wharves, waterways, and vast storage lots were never totally devoid of activity. Even when the vast majority of companies and port authority employees were leaving for the night there would be

the rare odd activity going on somewhere along this maze of warehouses and cargo containers.

Killing the engine The Driver-in-Black stepped out of the vehicle. His eyes still masked by silver wire frame sunglasses. Running a hand through his raven-black hair, he walked towards the fence as it opened on an electronic sensor. The gate sliding past with a slight creek of its metal rollers. The black suit clad driver stepped past the threshold without pause. A light above a warehouse door a few yards to his right flickered to life as it picked up that something was moving through its integrated sensor's range. Pausing in place to thrust both hands into the pockets of his black dress pants when suddenly the warehouse door to his right opened on rusty, moaning, hinges. Revealing a trio of black silhouettes coming swiftly towards the driver.

Two clad in leather jackets, white safety helmets, and jeans looked every bit the part of a stereotypical dockhand walked behind the pale skinned, sunglasses wearing, newcomer. The third man, who stood apart from the first two,

moved in wide semicircle towards The Driver-in-Black's front. A heavily accented voice, gruff and weathered, spoke with no small hint of curiosity, 'Mister Korvinus. What may I ask is the pleasure of your visit to us humble dock folk?' Stepping from dimming natural light to the harshly artificial aura projected by the warehouse fixture was a man whose face matched the worn nature of its owner's voice.

'Mister O'Malley,' said The Driver-in-Black politely. 'There's been a series of murders that have been brought to my attention.' The Driver-in-Black finished in a curt, but polite, tone. The weather faced man brought himself into profile with a half turn on his heels, tucking his own hands into pockets, offering a clear view of his own garb from head to toe. Brown leather dress shoes, gray slacks, a matching button up shirt under a brown suede jacket topped off by a black cattleman hat.

The Driver-in-Black continued, 'A few associates and no-.'

Mister O'Malley cut him off mid-sentence sharply, 'Do you know where you are-right now lad?' The suede jacket wearing man's heavy accent, from Dublin by the sounds of it, grew hoarser with every word.

The Driver-in-Black remained passive and offered no immediate response. The older man, an Irishman now of no doubt, continued speaking, 'This is Los Angeles. People get murdered every week lad. So unless you drove twenty kilometers from L.A. proper to tell me a statistical norm? Or, perhaps, you got somethin' else to throw at me.'

The Driver-in-Black, Mister Korvinus as these people knew him by, pulled out a small plastic baggy from his pocket. Holding it up into the light for it to be seen clearly. The ivory white tooth resting therein.

The Irishman seemed not at all amused, 'Is this a fucking joke?' Mister O'Malley squaring up to the black clad man before him. His pearly blue eyes burrowing down along the straight ridge of his nose into The Driver-in-Black's abyssal sunglasses, 'Some of your blokes get murdered and you come

here for what. Thinking one of my lads are the culprit. Heh? Is that it?' Mister O'Malley's wrinkled face released a soft chuckle at the prospect.

The Driver-in-Black sighed and straightened his back, taking off his sunglasses, his own voice contrasting with his body language of slight frustration in that his voice still it carried the air of a polite discussion. Evidently, the respect was simply cordial between the two and nothing more as the black-clad driver answered, 'The tooth was found at the sight of a murder in Los Feliz. A young man. This tooth definitely raises suspicions as to who it belonged to and given its shape does point a finger at your wolves.'

'In other words that discarded trinket for evidence is all you got. Find one dog tooth and we are the culprits is that it. Thought with those peculiar eyes of yours you would see better.' The younger black-clad man remained silent. Mister O'Malley, in a sudden motion, clapped his hands together, and said with exaggerated sarcasm, 'Fine. I have an alibi. All of my

lads were at the Wolf's Den celebrating one of our own's birthday.'

'The biker club off Interstate 5?'

'The very one, how'd you know?' Chuckled the older man as he moved to turn away back to the warehouse.

'The name James Dawson mean anything to you?'

The older man froze and turned back towards The Driver-in-Black with a puzzled look. 'Come again?' The Driver-in-Black tucked the tooth back into the pocket whence it came while stepping a couple paces closer to the Irishman. Boring his eyes into his aged counterparts. 'James Dawson. U.C.L.A. student. Latest victim and were I found this little trinket.'

'My people don't kill kids, isn't that more up your compatriots' alley?' Despite this jab for a rebuttal, there was a flicker of something in the old man's eyes. The black-clad driver not once took his eyes off the older man as the conversation appeared to ebb. Until the latter turned once more to The Driver-in-Black and cleared his throat. 'The name I don't

recognize. However, there was this youngster at the Den a few weeks ago. Loitering about all suspicious like.'

'Did he have blonde hair, green eyes perhaps?'

'No. This boy had brown eyes and hair to match, lanky fella, wore a polo and shorts. Real tourist looking type.'

'Did he –.'

'Are you a fucking copper now lad? Like I said, he loitered about, and left after some time. Didn't talk to anyone and made no fuss.'

'What time?'

The Irishman blinked, 'Afternoon, more to the evening I'd reckon, but I can't recall exactly. We were there all day.'

'And did-.'

'No, we're done here.'

Turning away and taking long strides the older man's withdrawal back towards the warehouse signaled the end to the conversation. O'Malley's two lackeys falling in line behind him as they slinked back into the warehouse. Leaving The Driver-in-Black alone under the orange glow of the outside

lights. The Sun sinking below the Pacific before him to the West. Breathing deeply he turned around slowly and walked across the threshold once more. The gate closing behind him with a second round of squeaking metal rollers.

Shades looking up as he sauntered back over and laying his arms on the sleek car frame. Gazing at the towering skyscrapers of the Los Angeles Downtown wreathed in a orange haze. Illuminated by the fever glow of a billion fireflies that are the city lights spawning with every passing minute. The Moon hung low above the San Gabriel Mountains. Those ridges, along with the Santa Ana and Monica mountain ranges formed a proverbial fence, which apparently failed to contain the urban sprawl spreading across the landscape of Southern California.

Vanishing back into the cab of the sports car the scenery was supplemented by its freshly awoken engine roaring back to life. A rhythmic thrum to precede a squawk of tires as the sleek silhouette of a 69' Mustang flew down the

roadways in the direction of the city proper. The
Driver-in-Black at the helm.

* * *

The Wolf's Den was very much what one might expect of an old biker club with its glory days firmly in the past. The outer wooden siding of the establishment was weathered and aged. Its false front facade illuminated by old metal lamps, which blazed glaring light at the black painted lettering declaring the establishment's name. A purple neon sign blazed, 'Open,' out into the growing darkness of the night. The sound of rubber on gravel being the only reply to this neon welcome as a 69' Mustang pulled into the largely empty lot before the doors. It's only company being an old rusty Toyota Camry and a Ford pickup that had seen better days. A quartet of Harley Davidson's stood idle on their rests off to the side of the building.

The swing of a car door and the crunch of shoes disturbed the grit of the unpaved lot. All too loud in this forlorn relic of Americana. Yet, there was no response aside from the

growing orchestra of crickets emanating from adjacent fields. The owner of these disturbing shoes glanced about the world around him cautiously. Adjusting his coat and running pale fingers through raven-hair. Twin mirrored lenses masking his eyes. The black-clad owner of an equally vintage, but by contradistinction, well-kept article of America's past now parked before the seedy diner walked forwards. Well-paced steps carried him to the doors and with a firm tug of the wooden handle the entrance drifted open. The Driver-in-Black entered the establishment calling itself the Wolf's Den.

The name of the business matched the interior atmosphere. Dim lighting and the air musky. Cigarette smoke fumed around the pool tables manned by four tattooed, denim clad, bearded men. Opposite of these men stretched several empty booths reserved for those pulling of the highway to grab a bite to eat. The walls decked out in deer head mounts, a stuffed owl hanging from the ceiling, and an old Winchester rifle hung on pegs behind the diner counter. A den of wolves indeed.

A sharp voice lanced the suited man's ears like a hot iron. 'Can I help you, sir?'

The Driver-in-Black turned his head slightly to the left to see a short young woman in a plaid frock. Her lustrous long caramel colored locks catching whatever light managed to permeate such a drab place within their tightly wound coils. She was plain faced, late teens, a tad on the lanky side but gave a small smile tinged with wary interest. No doubt, he looked nothing like the usual clientele that swung into these parts.

Pulling out a plain black leather wallet the dark-haired man flicked it open. Revealing a F.B.I. Badge and identification card. Shock took over her face as the youthful waitress took an involuntary step back. The wallet clacked closed as it vanished back into the Driver's suit jacket. 'Special Agent Locke, I would like to speak with the owner of this establishment, are they present?'

The woman looked about nervously, no doubt her mind still comprehending the sudden appearance of a Federal Agent waltzing into her place of employment; while, the men at the

pool tables paused and looked away from their game of billiards to observe the scene unfolding. However, the waitress would be saved by a sudden gruffness verbally emanating from behind the counter, 'Right here.'

The Driver-in-Black, 'Agent Locke' to these people, looked up from the young lady before him to see an older man drying his hands on an old dish towel. The sleeves of the owner's plaid shirt were rolled up to the elbows. Top button unclasped. Gray hair slicked back and cut to mid-length around the ears joined by a long, stringy, beard, which grew from his face in a long bush. Covering the front of his throat in facial hair as he gazed at the newcomer with the same wariness exhibited by the young waitress. The owner matched the man who introduced himself as Agent Locke in height. But exceeding in weight for the older man boasted a formidable beer gut no doubt accumulated over years of hard drinking. The lines on his face gave him a worn and leathery appearance not totally dissimilar to the upholstery of the motorcycles sitting outside.

The Driver-In-Black, introduced as Agent Locke, nodded to the waitress and spoke, 'Excuse me Miss.' Before moving over to the counter. There, he spoke to the owner in reply, 'I would like to ask some questions pertaining to a patron that was present here yesterday.'

The owner flung the towel up onto his right shoulder, leaned on the counter with the palm of his rough hands, and said, 'Oh? And who would that be?' The owner's tone had shifted considerably to the point where no remote politeness touched his response. Eyes peering with half-squinted hostility towards the man before him.

Evidently, law enforcement was not looked too kindly in these parts. Musings aside The Driver-in-Black as his own tone remained civil, professional even, 'A young man, brown hair and eyes, wore a polo shirt and shorts, would look like someone just passing through that stopped to grab a bite. *Touristy.'*

The owner looked up in faux thought, 'Can't say I remember someone like that being present yesterday.'

'He'd look out of place.'

'Out of place? Look, *Agent*, we get a variety of passerby that roll on through here. You're going to have to be more specific than that.'

'Would have been in the late afternoon, evening even, possibly seeming to loiter about.'

The owner let out a quick chuckle and hung his head. Moving it from side to side with a small laugh. 'You're a persistent devil, just like O'Malley said you would be.'

So O'Malley had tipped off the owner that I was coming, thought The Driver-in-Black while gazing from behind the abyss of his silver wire sunglasses.

'Sir, the-,' started The Driver-in-Black once more.

The owner held up a hand, 'Yes, yes, I know theres been a killing, yada-yada. Let's cut the bullshit shall we. I know you're not real law enforcement, okay? I know who you are. Quite. Well.' The men at the pool table began to move over, then suddenly stopped in their tracks as the owner held up a leathery palm to them and said, 'It's alright Randy, Jakob, I

got this. Go back to your game...' not once taking his eyes off the man before him. The owner let his arm drop back to the counter before straightening himself. Voice lowering with the terminus of his response, '...So what? You Camorra involved or some shit?'

'Does it make a difference?' replied The Driver-in-Black apathetically.

'Not a lick. Come on, we'll talk in the back.' The owner motioned for him to follow and led him through the kitchen to a cramped back office room. Moving around a small brown faux-wood desk the owner of the Wolf's Den pulled out a couple shot glasses from a drawer and a bottle of Scottish Whiskey.

'O'Malley prefers that Irish shit but I'm a Scotsman through and through if you ask me,' proclaimed the owner with a grin as he poured a generous amount in each. Handing one to his guest he sat down in a small worn cushioned swivel chair. Taking a moment before continuing on his exposition, 'O'Malley didn't say much. Just that a guy with black hair and

suit driving an old Mustang would be coming by. Asking about a series of murders going on down in the city. That about sum it up, *Mister Korvinus?*'

'Just about.' replied The Driver-in-Black. *Even knew his name too. Guess the show out there was a charade to dispel unease from those trigger-happy clientele.* Shelving that thought The Driver-in-Black moved to the cushioned seat opposite the owner with the latter quickly adding, 'Have a seat.'

'Thanks, but I'd rather stand,' responded The Driver-in-Black as he slyly flicked his eyes around the cramped office and the door.

Remaining upright, The Driver-in-Black pulled out the tooth, still in its plastic baggy, and set it down on the desk. 'Showed this to O'Malley. The only thing pulled off the body of the latest victim that can pass as evidence of who the killer might be. Anyone you know teething lately?'

Teething. That drew a brief cackle from the owner. 'None of our folk are new to the change. None of us hunt people anyways, which, this is what is sure looks like. Right?'

'I thought as much.'

'But, now that I think about it, there was a shifty fellow that stopped by yesterday. I work the kitchen so I didn't see a whole lot. Just whenever I looked out, for a couple hours at least, in the evening, there was a customer that I guess you could say wore a polo shirt. Nothing really stuck out beyond that it wasn't the type of person you'd expect to see seated in a biker bar.' Downing the whiskey the owner sighed at the strength of the alcohol stinging his gullet on the way down.

'What about your help out front?'

'Who? Janette?'

'Yeah.'

'She didn't serve the guy. Carla, my other help, did. Seemed to be rather chatty together, guess she thought the guy was good looking?' The owner shrugged at his own statement.

The Driver-in-Black placed his own shot of whiskey down on the table as he took in the information. That was when a thought struck him. Speaking with a curious tone, 'How old is Carla?'

'What? Why is that pertinent?'

'Humor me.'

The owner raised his eyebrows, 'Okay, Carla's what, nineteen or twenty? I can't remember exactly these days.

Memory ain't as good as it once was.'

'Any cameras here?'

'No. If I did this conversation would be a whole lot quicker now wouldn't it?'

Gaze lowering to the shot glass once more The Driver-in-Black abruptly turned as if to leave. But paused before he could even get started with a single step and said, 'Thank you for your time. I just need Carla's address and I'll be on my way.'

'She's not in any sort of trouble is she?' questioned the owner as his face turned serious. Brow furrowing and an ever so slight frown twisting the ends of his lips downward.

The Driver-in-Black, Korvinus, looked down at the owner with a plain expression on his face, 'No, just want to ask her some questions about our out of place passerby.'

The owner nervously thumped his fingers onto his desk for a moment. 'Fine, I have it here somewhere,' as he opened a couple drawers. Shifting through papers before pulling out a single leaf that had Carla's contact information and address on it. Quickly reaching out the owner handed the paper to The Driver-in-Black, 'Should still be accurate.'

Raising the piece of paper The Driver-in-Black nodded in thanks. Tucking it into an inner jacket pocket as he finally exited the cramped office. Passing through the empty kitchen and Janette busily mopping the tile floor. Only looking up at him for a brief moment before resuming her task. Stepping out into the lobby The Driver-in-Black glanced to his left at the clack of billiard balls and the murmured conversation of the four men silhouetted under the overhead table lighting. The Driver-in-Black left without a word.

* * *

Carla's apartment was a quiet flat on the Western outskirts of Encino. About a twenty minute, drive from the Wolf's Den. The Driver-in-Black pulled his vehicle into a

parallel parking space before the tenement building. Stepping out onto the curb and looking about the dark street. The failing, flickering, glow of street lamps barely able to keep the shadows at bay on either side of the street. A small breeze carrying the rattle of refuse on the wind. Discarded plastic grocery bags scraping along the sidewalk past the black-clad driver now moving around to the trunk of his car. Fitting the key into the lock and giving it a satisfying twist. The trunk sprung open smoothly. Reaching in he pulled out some black leather gloves followed by a brown briefcase with brass clasps. Swinging them open, he drew a P22 Walther pistol from its Velcro binding on the lid of the brief case.

Checking the magazine before ramming it back home and pulling the slide back. The Driver-in-Black grabbed a black leather holster and snapped it to his belt. Sliding the pistol home into the holster while also reaching into the brief case and pulling out the bottom. A false bottom. There, in neat rows were magazines loaded for immediate use. Reaching for a magazine with rounds bearing a polished silver appearance

than the brass coloring of the bullets currently loaded into his side arm. He slotted the magazine into a series of tactical pouches that he snapped onto his belt. Just small enough to not appear obvious under the clothes of the driver's suit jacket.

Closing the briefcase and the trunk The Driver-in-Black looked about his surroundings one more time before going on the move. Moving to the front of the building with measured steps, gazing about the building's windows for any observers, which there were none. The buildings dull red bricks and green painted entrance way but a preface to the interior hallway.

A hallway in dire need of repainting. Corners were chipped and what once probably white paint now bore a yellowish hue. The stairs themselves were equally worse for wear as The Driver-in-Black pulled out the slip of paper given to him by the owner of the Wolf's Den. *Unit 14*. Glancing at the doors and eventually coming to rest on a plain plastic slate that detailed what units were on which floor. Quickly scanning the plastic slate nailed to the wall The Driver-in-Black read that

unit fourteen was on the third floor. Craning his neck up he began to ascend the stairs in a steady fashion.

Coming to a rest at the top of the platform, sparing a brief glance at the plaque bearing a black number three, The Driver-in-Black moved down the hall quietly. Looking left to right and stopping quickly at the second door marked in plain black plastic numerals, which read: 14. Clearing his throat, Korvinus wrapped his knuckles on the door. Silence. Raising his wrist into view The Driver-in-Black checked his wristwatch after wrapping on the door again. Silence. *Perhaps no one was home?* Brushing this thought aside, The Driver-in-Black put a gloved hand onto the doorknob. Turning it gently, his eyebrows raised ever so slightly, as he heard the small click of the tumblers turn. The door swung open slowly as he gave a gentle push.

Once the door was sufficiently ajar, The Driver-in-Black stepped across the threshold delicately. Peering about the apartment able to be seen from the entrance with measured scans of tracking eyes. The interior walls

matched those of the outside hallway. Except, the apartment's interior walls were at least partially covered up by paintings, framed photograph pictures, and shelves bearing various knickknacks.

The main living space was arranged in a large square floor plan. A branching hallway that led to presumably the bathroom and bedroom off to the left. Four tall arched windows, one lazily open allowing a shallow but pleasant cool draft to circulate, and all devoid of drapes occupied significant parts of the living room wall. Their tall symmetrical forms rising to the front and to the right of the apartment's unannounced guest. Stepping softly on the plain hardwood floor, the occasional rug laid down on top and around what appeared to be an aging sofa. A reclining chair to The Driver-in-Black's immediate right sat off in a corner. Both pieces of furniture angled to face an old Panasonic television set resting on a wooden IKEA entertainment center. Rows of D.V.D.s rested on small cube shaped shelves to the left and right of the television. Moving further from the entrance,

closing the door slowly behind him, The Driver-in-Black moved along into the apartment living room proper. A small rectangular dinner table topped with a small vase of flowers sat off near the windows. The place mats still in place with a pair of plates resting upon them. A few morsels of food still sat on the plates. Silverware rested, as if forgotten, on top of said plates. *Someone forgot to do the dishes.* Glancing around, the apartment was silent, with a pair of sunglasses coming to rest on the hallway. There on the floor was a haphazardly discarded pair of jeans, followed by socks, and a pink shirt. Forming a trail leading off to what appeared to be the bedroom at the end of the hallway.

Pulling out his side arm The Driver-in-Black slowly began to move down the hallway. However, a set of doors to the left were shut. Opening the first slowly revealed a row of coats and blankets. Closing the hallway closet, silently, The Driver-in-Black continued down the hallway. Peering around the corner into the open bedroom. Emptiness. The bedroom was vacant. Still checking the corners of the room as he entered

slowly revealed the full contents of the space. A bed, unmade, with the comforter half hanging off. A discarded condom wrapper on the floor. While the bedroom closet doors were fully open to reveal a messy wardrobe.

Buzz. Something from the bathroom buzzed briefly. The Driver-in-Black turned around gracefully, raising his pistol, while thumbing the safety off. Approaching the bathroom door in short, silent, measured steps. Listening intently for the sound to occur again. There it was, not even a second later, a sharp buzzing. Enveloping the handle in the blackness of his glove, he prepared himself. Slowly letting out a deep breath he flung open the door and with pistol raised stormed into the bathroom.

The source of the buzzing struck like a hammer. There, laying in the bathtub, were four limbs sticking out of dark crimson liquid. Connected to a torso partially submerged in the viscous liquid. A delicate, soft, face rested lazily. Staring towards the door. As if to give a macabre greeting only surpassed by the textured red, which had once flowed from a

grotesque gash, ripped across the front of the young woman's throat. Her almond shaped, perfectly hazel eyes drawn by the finest painter, glinted with the finest clarity of fresh cooled glass setting an empty vision towards the man in black now standing before them.

Kneeling down The Driver-in-Black cast his shielded eyes in a roving vigil over the bloody scenery before him. Noting the trajectories of the blood sprays as he traced them back from their original point of eruption via the broken fountainhead that was the woman's throat. It was undeniable that she had died quickly from blood loss. Unexpectedly, it seemed. As there was no sign of a struggle, minimal spillage of water before the tub, which The Driver-in-Black was careful not to disturb as he knelt close. His eyes moved over to the deceased girl's neck. Specifically, the grisly grin cut across her throat. It was deep, the instrument which brought Carla's demise having bit through muscle and tissue, but not particularly straight. Possibly, having been done quickly and in a hurry. As if, the killer had some need for urgency. The word

spilled from Driver-in-Black's lips in synchronicity with thought. The narrowness of the wound, how close the separation of the skin followed a linear pattern of the blood streams suggested a thin, bladed, instrument. *A knife, probably no more than a few inches long, just enough to cut through her main arteries with one strong, swift, lacerating motion. She died in minutes, unable to call for help, unable to fight back.* Yes, he could see it, the act, or at least his running theorem, playing out within the limitless confines of his imagination.

Raising his side arm, he checked behind himself instinctively. The Driver-in-Black looked back at the hallway for a long minute before returning his attention back to the young woman's corpse. The timeline of events here was off; he could see it in the grisly environment of the bathroom, as he looked back at the peacefully languid form of Carla. *This was not like Dawson, and not premeditated. This was a killing done of pure panic.* Shifting on his haunches The Driver-in-Black scanned the bathroom. The trashcan was empty, newly emptied

by Carla, or to hide evidence. Both weighed equally in The Driver-in-Black's mind.

Rising from his haunches, The Driver-in-Black moved out of the bathroom. His side arm raised and ready as he moved gracefully around the corner of the doorframe into the hall. Moving into the bedroom again The Driver-in-Black began to open drawers slowly. Still listening for any signs of the killer's possible return all the while. *After all, didn't murderers often return to the scene of the crime?* Shuffling around careful as not to disturb anything on the floor he was befuddled by the sheer lack of any pervading evidence. *The condom wrapper.* The Driver-in-Black whipped around and maneuvered along the bed. Spotting the gleaming foil packet on the ground. Empty. The packet, torn asunder, and the rubber it contained seemed nowhere to be found.

Grimacing, The Driver-in-Black left the bedroom with measured, soft, steps. As he moved, side arm still raised at the hip, down the hallway back towards the living room, biting his lip he mentally played the scene in his mind. *The killer was*

indeed here. It had to be the man that had been chatting up Carla during her last shift. They hit it off, come back here for some fun, then realizing a potential loose end he kills her. But what makes her a loose end? What did Carla possibly uncover that would warrant her death?

Stepping into the living room a shadow shifted, a breeze struck his face, and hinges creaked. Spinning to his left, raising his pistol, The Driver-in-Black sighted down the barrel. Nothing. Rushing over to the windowsill, he swore a silhouette vanished into the shadows of the next building. *Dammit.* Stepping away to give chase something dark caught his eye. Black scuff marks on the sill. *So you're a climber, eh?*

'Korvinus?'

The sound of his name caused The Driver-in-Black's eyebrows to raise as he slowly turned around.

Chapter VIII

'Talk to me Frank.' Charles short, serious, tone of voice emanated from the earpiece of his phone. Detective Frank Kirkwood scanned his surroundings. Speaking calmly into the phone receiver while his eyes roved the dormitory landscape. Each word measured and consummate. 'Charles, they aren't here, I got campus P.D. searching high and low for Rodriguez and Parrot. But I don't like the feeling of this.'

Charles was quiet for a second before his voice came over the earpiece once more. 'Look, campus and the surrounding apartments where students are housed will be busy. If our guy is half as smart as we think he is then he'll wait till the vic' is alone.'

'Lot of places to hide here Charles.'

'Look, this whole case reeks to me from the get go. But if he keeps true to the Tijuana murders he'll try to strike tonight or tomorrow. '

'Yeah, well, either way we need to find Dawson's friends before they end up shredded in an alleyway or buried in a cistern somewhere.'

Another pause as he heard a car door opening and closing over the phone. No doubt, Charles and their younger compatriot climbing into the former's Crown Victoria. Frank let out a small sigh. How he missed that being the staple cruiser for Law Enforcement.

'Dawson didn't have a phone on him, did he?' said Charles.

Frank paused and looked at his phone in physical confusion over the sudden question. *No, no phone was found on Dawson's body. Why would he ask that?* Frank put the phone back to his ear and spoke, puzzled, into the receiver,

'that's a no, Charles, why? Did you speak with Cynthia and Elizabeth?'

* * *

Charles listened to his long time partner's puzzled reply with a light bite of the lip. *The poor bastard had gone back to the restaurant for his wallet, but he died with it, timeline could be possible but just doesn't feel right.* Charles reaffirmed his grip on his phone and gave a low grunt as he cleared the phlegm from his gullet. Speaking into the receiver again but with an edge of trepidation, 'Just a hunch, Frank. I spoke to Elizabeth, Cynthia should be getting out of class soon.' turning to the youngest of the detectives he spoke quickly in a hushed tone with his mouth away from the receiver, 'Did Good Luck's mention anything about a phone?'

'No?' replied Detective Marshall with a slight furrow of black eyebrows.

Charles resumed speaking, 'Elizabeth said James went back to Good Luck's to get his wallet. But James Dawson had his wallet on em' when he died. Now, we can discuss him

making it back there or not, but I have a hunch he wasn't headed back to the restaurant at all.'

Silence. Just the sounds of vehicular traffic thrumming periodically in the distance. A slight grunt on the end of the line as Charles' pensive compatriot reflected upon the delivered theory. Deep down, Charles felt there was more to this case, this gruesome puzzle, something in the killer's method that was missing. Something that could allow the detectives to predict the murderer's next move. Finally, the voice of Frank sprung from the phone,

'A hunch you say, well, that is all we got currently. I don't feel like any of this is random, Charles. Dawson's murder was planned out and methodical. One thing we do know is, more than likely, the killer will target one of Dawson's close friends. But I gotta' ask, Charles, why the hunch on the phone?'

'Because it doesn't sit right, Frank! Kid out with friends? What youngster nowadays doesn't have his cell phone on him at all times? Miss Wallington stated nothing appeared out of the ordinary except for one thing,' Charles swiped his

index finger upwards as if lecturing an invisible pupil, 'once we get the others back at the station then we can confirm that, but Miss Wallington also mentioned Dawson had been checking his phone periodically throughout the night.' Beside him Marshall cocked his head while Frank spoke the expression on the youthful detective's face, 'You coulda' led with that first.'

Charles' mouth curled in what he himself would call, 'a shit eating grin,' and continued, 'I'll stay here with some campus police to keep an eye on Wallington. Once Rodriguez, Perrot, and Summers are rounded up we'll take all four down the station to cross reference their stories. In the meantime James'll head back to the station to look deeper into the San Diego-Tijuana case and run a trace on Dawson's phone.' Frank on the other line just gave a quick, 'Roger,' as the connection went dead.

Next to Charles, Marshall frowned, and held up his hand. Charles keys flinging into Marshall's outstretched palm. The younger detective swung open the passenger car door. Charles, simultaneously opened the driver side door. Swinging

his legs once more, back onto the gray sun faded asphalt. The thrum of the Crown Victoria's engine provided a brief uptick to the auditory hum of Los Angeles ever present, unceasing, vehicular congestion. Charles maneuvered himself over to the sidewalk as Marshall moved into the driver seat. Closing the driver door the younger man gave a nod and with the switching of gears and depression of the gas pedal gave fresh breath to the combustion engine of the older man's automobile. Charles watched his younger colleague peel away from the curb. Off into the night wreathed cityscape of Los Angeles.

* * *

'Roger,' said Frank as he killed the connection with the delicate press of his thumb. As he did so, the sounds of several voices began to be carried along the walkway leading from the dormitory buildings to campus. Growing from absolute imperceptibility to a gradually decipherable verbiage passing for Human speech. Looking up towards the oncoming orchestra of Human voices, between two buildings of University dwellings, there the concrete of a walking pathway

diminished from sight. There, emerging over the miniature terrestrial horizon of the slope where first one, then multiple, human heads. Dipping up and down ever so slightly with their lazily swaying gaits.

Frank immediately picked Carlos Rodriguez and Anthony Perrot out of the university students enraptured in conversation. Both young men had a slight olive complexion and dark eyes. But whereas Rodriguez's hair was black his compatriot's bore a light brown hue. The former standing just a few inches shorter than the latter but of otherwise identical, athletic, build.

Shoving his phone in a pocket Frank moved to the sidewalk in front of his vehicle. Taking up a prominent position to be seen by the oncoming students. In truth, the pair of officers before Frank are what caught the roving congregation of University student's attention. Youthful faces, unblemished by the harsh affections of time, swiveled to rest upon the trio of law enforcement officers' silhouettes.

Illuminated by the glaring electric glow of the University walkway lamps.

The students eyed the officers as Frank stepped to the fore, 'Carlos Rodriguez? Anthony Perrot?' inquired Frank as he looked at both men. There was slight shifting of glances as the two moved to the fore. Frank moved forward, coming under the direct light of the nearest lamp, and his aged face now bare for all of the students to see. The small contingent of Perrot's and Rodriguez's academic peers stepping away as Frank approached. Apprehension's firm grip wound around each individual tight like a constricting Boa. The expanding rift between the two youth that Detective Kirkwood had singled out grew into full segregation by the time Frank stopped his forward advance. Placing himself a meter away from the two men as they looked back at the older man warily.

Frank's voice, however, contrasted with the demeanor of the University students by his formality. The Detective's speech conveying the serious nature of his proposition as he said, 'I would like to ask both of you some questions in regards

to James Dawson. If you could both come with me I'd be much obliged.' Perrot and Rodriguez exchanged glances.

* * *

The ride back from the police station itself was uneventful as Detective Marshall maneuvered the Crown Victoria between the only partially congested lanes of traffic crisscrossing Los Angeles. A concrete web allowing for a myriad of trajectories across the stone and metal jungle that has long replaced the once verdant, wild, grassland the current metropolis now resided upon. However, hardly in recent memory, despite repeated and near continuous infrastructure spending, has Los Angeles vital asphalt circulatory system ever been without congestion.

The subtle clicking of a turn indicator. Barely audible among the thrum of tire on pavement could be heard as Marshall drove the vehicle over to to the desired exit. Guiding the automobile onto San Fernando Road and with a sharp left hand turn crossed the threshold into the parking lot of the North East Community Police Station.

Killing the engine. Marshall locked the car and made his way inside the station. Passing by several patrol officers readying up to start their nighttime shift. Offering only small nods of their heads as a form of greeting. A greeting which was returned by a sarcastic reply from Marshall, 'Mornin' guys.' Earning at least one chuckle at the jest.

Moving back into the same office space from earlier today that housed his desk. Itself at the end of a small row also comprising of his older colleagues bureaus. The younger detective took his seat with a faint protest of his chair. 'I hate this chair,' muttered Marshall as he began running Dawson's information through several databases. Along with those of his friends and parents. Every single one of which came up clean. At most, Perrot had a pair of parking tickets this year, while Wallington had a speeding ticket from two years prior in an entirely different county; which, of course was paid. 'I'll be damned you guys are actually all cleaner than a whistle,' mumbled Marshall while picking up his phone. Dialing Dawson's phone carrier and after briefly speaking with a

representative, who verified that it was actually the Los Angeles Police Department calling, a trace was put on the victim's phone.

Leaning back in his chair, eyes rolling at the metallic squeal issued, he thumbed through the Tijuana file some more. Looking at each of the gruesome pictures and the notes therein. The report itself was dry and without much substance. No one had been confirmed as the perpetrator and any suspect brought in soon was unable to be linked to the homicides. Despite the efforts of the search carried out between the San Diego Police Department and their Mexican counterparts across the border. *Could be Cartel related? Drug usage was always higher among University populations. Could have got on someone's bad side, maybe?* Marshall set down the file and sighed. Rubbing his face with his hands in exasperation. Looking at his computer the report of the phone trace popped into existence. Arriving with the low ping of a notification bell.

Mousing over and manipulating the monitor to put the trace map of Dawson's cell phone activity in the middle of his

screen. The information complete with time stamps of previous call locations throughout Los Angeles County. Using the computer mouse to manipulate the dimensions of the map nothing stood out right away as particularly odd. Calls originating from Dawson's parents' home on Los Adornos Way easily amounted to half of the registry supplied by Dawson's phone carrier. The rest were a motley assortment of calls and message logs to one of Dawson's close friends or to the odd medical appointment. Marshall scrolled past a phone call from Dawson's dentist reminding him of an upcoming teeth cleaning; which, Dawson would never make. However, as to the current whereabouts of Dawson's phone there remained no sign. The last recordings by cell towers was during the day. Well before the young man's untimely demise. *So maybe you switched off your phone, but why?* Marshall rubbed his temples as he continued to think about a myriad situations as to why Dawson's phone would not have more recent logs or positioning data from cellphone towers. *Then again it could have died.* Mulling this latest conjecture over with pursed

lips Marshall rotating in his chair slowly several degrees. Mind wandering deeper in thought until a slight vibration rumbled without warning. Extricating a slim smartphone from his left pant pocket his eyes scanned the screen quickly. An alert to call home. Marshall cleared his throat before unlocking the phone with thumb swipe. A rapid sequence of taps on the screen followed then the low tone of a number dialing. Raising the phone up to his ear the Marshall ran a free hand over his short hair and scalp while simultaneously leaning back as far as the protesting chair would allow.

Closing his eyes while phone completed its third ring. The jumble of the call being picked up shuttered to life. The call ungracefully answered. A small, delicate, croak for a voice came over the airwaves to Marshall's ear. 'Hello?'

'Hey, Ma.'

'You working late tonight? Dinner's getting cold and you didn't call when you usually do.'

'Yeah...,' Marshall let out a small sigh, resting chin upon chest, '...Just working on a new case that came in today.'

'Oh! Is it the one on the news this morning? How dreadful, what is this city coming too; it's those damn De-'
Sensing the coming tangent the young man quickly cut her off softly, 'I know, Ma, I know.'

'So should I put your plate in the fridge til' you get home? Its meatloaf, your favorite.' Marshall let out a small smile to match the slight increase in vocal pitch, 'Ha, yeah, seems to be that way Ma. I'll try to be quiet when I get home.'

Another sound came over the office space. The sound of footsteps. Steadily approaching towards him. Marshall craned his neck around just in time to see Detective Kirkwood leading a duo of young men into the Homicide Units' office. Turning back to face forward Marshall spoke quickly, 'Well I gotta' go, Ma, I love you, good bye.' Ending the call with a quick depress of his thumb the slim device vanished back into his left pocket.

'Taken five there, bud?' came Frank's voice as he and the two trailing youth passed. Kirkwood indicating with a simple outstretched hand gesture for the duo to take a couple

seats opposite the older detective's desk. Marshall's reply was equally sarcastic, 'Just taking my mandated union break.'

Earning a small chuckle from his older colleague.

Yawning, Marshall leaned back with hands clasped behind his head, the protests of his chair ignored yet again. He felt his body dragging and rocked forward to stand. Speaking to Frank, 'Imma' make a coffee, Frank, you want some?'

Marshall's older comrade looked up at his younger colleague and checked his phone's clock, 'Pretty late there for a coffee? I'll have to pass, but thanks for the offer!'

'No prob' chief.'

Marshall looked at the two young men that Kirkwood had brought in, Anthony and Carlos, and asked them the same question. Both nodded their head from side to side while offering small punitive 'thank you's'. Marshall raised his eyebrows and hands, 'Well, looks like there is more for me,' whilst grinning. Spinning on his heel Marshall moved out of the office into a side room adjacent to the main hallway of the building.

Interlude
Cynthia Summer

II

To say Cynthia Summer's day passed in abject norm was to belie external foci. Apprehensive emotions rolled throughout the young woman's internal faculties in a constant flux. To all who would witness the day's passage for Cynthia Summer's and that of her character could only surmise that she was a studious individual. Utterly dedicated to academia. The only interruption to this demeanor being a telemarketer. Ringtone erupting to blare awkwardly amid the pews of tiered seating of the lecture hall. Spindly fingers quickly fumbling the phone out of her pocket, killing the sound swiftly, and depositing the now shut off cellular with a casual disaffected toss back into the yawning maw of her backpack.

The brunette woman would have arrived to class early to boot. But not absurdly so. Punctuality, complimented by how Cynthia orchestrated her note taking. Organizing information with a precise color-coded system which one at first glance could mistake to be strands of programming code given substance via pen and paper. Each word and character precisely measured and formed. Each stroke of the pen bearing the simple efficiency of a woman entirely focused on transcription of verbal dictation carried aloft by the elevated speech of successive professors.

To those around the young madam Summers every flip of her notebook pages, and every raise of the hand, could see a complete contrast to those around her. What with so many of her peers seeming to be in various stages of sleep deprivation; or, suffering the long term effects of a substance induced stupor. Possibly even both! Given the alarming occurrence of at least two dozen sunglasses straddling the nasal bridges of America's up and coming youth.

The day continued unabated. In sync with the arcing trajectory of the Sun. Tirelessly crossing over the expansive locale that comprised the University of California's Los Angeles campus. The hours marching on as Cynthia Summer moved from lecture hall to class too laboratory and back again. All primarily taking place within the imposing eighty-eight thousand square feet of modernist architecture known as Geffen Hall. Its tall red brick facades periodically interrupted by tall and wide glass windows. Allowing natural sunlight to illuminate much of the building's interior without need of artificial lighting.

The droning of the educators as half a dozen topics were discussed throughout the day proved ineffective in diminishing the young brunette's enthusiastic absorption of the material presented to her mind. The only break in these trials of the mind's eye being the necessary allotment of time to voraciously, haphazardly, and with total abandon to those who may gawk at the rapidity for those few contents which once comprised Cynthia's lunch vanishing down her gullet. One

unstoppable bite at a time until all that was left were a small collection of breadcrumbs and the naked core of an apple. Its exposed innards quickly browning in the air-conditioned atmosphere of the building due to the sudden, merciless, removal of the fruit's flesh. Remnants of this act being unceremoniously dumped into a plain black refuse bin nearby a couple of moments later.

The second half of the day began as a simple continuation of the first. Save for a live presentation on the proper removal of debris from an open wound courtesy of the Reagan Medical Center. The medical center being located a short walk to the West from Geffen Hall. But throughout it all Cynthia was plagued by unsettling emotions. Her mind whirring throughout the hours of lecture and study. Despite her resolute outward appearance as a student of arduous study.

Cynthia's consciousness repeatedly found itself focused on that of her longtime friend, James Dawson, and the disturbing homicide heard on the news this morning. *What if it was James? What if it was him! What if we had gone back with*

him?! Would he still be alive? These thoughts in all possible myriad of combinations and scenarios raced through the young brunettes mind like formula racers around a track. Blazing along the neural pathways of Cynthia's mind in a growing web of regret and apprehension.

This growing sense of wrong never letting up despite the constant checking of her phone. Checking for her initial message written between shaking hands that simply read, **James, once you get this, please respond. We need to talk.** *We need to talk.* Those four words had each taken minutes to write. Even as she sat waiting for the first class to begin. Deleting and rewriting the message a dozen times before finally pressing send.

Yet, she could only gaze at the message and the lack of a response while hours ticked on by. Cynthia's youthful mind recollecting in ever heightening state of paranoia. Replaying the events of the morning again and again within her delicate skull. A recent memory from less than twelve hours previous, of standing in her bathroom, and unable to move for many

minutes as she held a device in her left hand. That little slim white device, its small window bearing two thin black lines, a result that caused her to nearly fold over in shock. Cynthia Summer's was pregnant.

Borne of a drunken coupling but a few weeks prior. A soft fair-skinned hand instinctively went to her lower abdomen. Though she could not physically feel it at the time, Cynthia knew it was there, closing both eyes slowly, in a way solely of the young woman's own understanding. She could now sense the new life within. It brought a small calmness for those precious existential moments. As the Sun descended in the sky and darkness enveloped the expansive campus grounds.

Cynthia opened both eyes, checking the time on her phone she, and frowned. The calmness, replaced once more, by stalking dread. It was getting late and she was due to return home. No doubt, Elizabeth was anticipating her return home. *Probably already heavily invested in some dish to have for dinner,* mused Cynthia. The thought bringing a happy curl to

the pair of soft, plush even, vermilion lips. Drawn upon a soothingly symmetrical looking visage like a painter's portrait.

* * *

As the Sun fell below the immense expanse of the Pacific Ocean to the West. Cynthia was making her way through the Botanical Gardens once more. Retracing her initial route taken this very morning. The rubber soles of shoes crunching on the errant leaves strewn across the gently coasting pathways of the botanical reserve. In the distance, the ever present hum of vehicular traffic, intermixed with the sounds and sirens of the metropolis beyond, surrounded this small isle of nature which Cynthia now trod.

By contrast, the Botanical Garden was silent, dark, and if it not for the small luminescence of a phone screen Cynthia would have been cast in total blackness. The trees and foliage of the garden, blocking many surrounding lights emanating from civilization stretching beyond the green isle Cynthia's feet now crossed. Wreathed in a small corner of Los Angeles not forever polluted by the unceasing glow of an electrified world.

No, all she had was the gentle swaying of trees. The small rustle of shrubbery in the gently shifting air. Their elegant forms given the likeness for a thousand fingers subtly swaying with the passage of a soft brushing breeze filtered between undulating tree boughs. The myriad colors, hues, of flowery plants given over to a black monochrome shade. The air shifted again. Giving any of the young woman's supple flesh exposed to the night air a lover's caress. Belying that Cynthia was in fact alone amid oscillating silhouettes.

Suddenly, a chime broke the nearer silence of the Botanical Gardens. A small glow of light from Cynthia's phone flickering with the sudden pop-up of a message. Displaying a name, she yearned to see. Wasting no time in pressing her thumb onto the unlock button. Followed by a couple swipes from a slender finger and she was scanning the brief message in the young man's regular, formal, prose that Cynthia herself had long grown accustomed too.

Cynthia, I am so sorry for the late response, where are you now? I think we do need to have a talk.

Pausing in her stride, coming to a standstill, brunette hair swaying slightly amid gentle bellows of nighttime air. A pair of thumbs rhythmically typed a response. Her mouth forming the words as she formulated the text on her screen, *I am walking home. Maybe you can come over?* Cynthia's mouth finished mouthing the words at the same time as she hit send. A minute later, the chime sounded again.

I can meet you on the way home perhaps? I am on campus.

Cynthia shifted weight on her feet. Putting it all on her right leg as she mulled over a response. Her typing was slower and more methodical now. The initial sense of urgency gone out like a snuffed candle flame.

Sure thing! I'm walking through the Botanical Garden right now. Want me to wait for you?

Cynthia straightened her back as she looked about herself. Her own stillness suddenly bringing forth the fact that she was alone. Surrounded by darkness. Unease creeping all of a sudden towards in its slow embrace. The low chirp of a

message received snapped her eyes back to the illumination of the phone screen.

On my way.

Cynthia smiled as for but a moment her mind moved to youthful optimism. She had so much to say to him! What she could say? What if they wanted to make themselves an official couple? A free hand dropped to her womb.

Regret like a gunshot. Lancing through every fiber of her being. *What if he rejects me? What if he doesn't want to keep it? What if I was just a fun night for him? No, no, no, no, James would never do that to me. He cares for me, I know it; Oh God! Why am I like this!*

Shaking her head of those thoughts Cynthia looked forward down the dark path. A snapping twig, crackling leaves unleashing a cackling chorus, and the scuffing of Cynthia's own shoes as she snapped her head around. Looking back the way she had come. Once more the path wound back into the darkness in the direction of campus. Nothing. Just asphalt leading back into the dim gloom flanked by a wreathed black

veil. Cynthia let out a slow, long, breath. Blowing the carbon dioxide from her lungs as she closed her eyes for a second to relax her nerves. *I hate the fucking dark. Least I know nothing is under my bed anymore.* The reminiscing thought of childhood raised the corner of her lips ever so slightly.

Vibrations shook Cynthia. Her right hand buzzing by a sudden incoming call. A flurry of movement and emotion surged forth as with one swipe she moved fine brunette strands away from her ear. Bringing the phone to her mouth quickly she spoke rapidly, 'James, I'

'Cynthia?'

Cynthia stopped with fluster overtaking her. The voice that came from the phone being feminine and definitely not the soothing voice she longed. 'Elizabeth?' she replied, desperately clearing her voice to hide the reddening embarrassment bubbling beneath the surface of her freshly moistened brow.

'What were you saying about James? Cyn', you need to come home. It's about the news this morning. The police where here and they are looki-.' Cynthia moved the phone away from

her ear quickly as another twig snapped behind her. Looking back in the direction of campus, she saw a pair of small bright circles coming down the path at walking pace. She felt unnerved. After all Cynthia had heard the gossip of drug deals going down at night between students. Something she never wanted to find out the veracity of.

Cynthia resumed walking, gait quickening, with a modicum of speed taking hold in the young woman's transit along the path. It was irrational. She just did not want whoever was behind her to catch up. To even see her. The illogical fear of ominous threats in the dark taking hold of Cynthia's psyche. Raising the phone back to her ear, she continued speaking in a rushed tone, 'Sorry, Liz, what was that?'

No reply, a monotone tune, the connection was dead. Cynthia's brow furrowed and she looked behind her. The lights had picked up pace and were coming up rapidly upon her. Their bobbing strobes indicating the owners of said flashlights had matched her quick pace. Cynthia was about to run when a male voice called out into the night.

'Campus Police!'

Cynthia stopped in her tracks and slowly turned around. The lights lowering as two shapes coalesced from the gloom into distinct silhouettes. A pair of middle aged men in the uniform of the U.C.L.A. Police Department coming to a pause before her.

'Miss, botanical facilities are closed at this hour, what are you doing here?'

'I was walking home. I always come through the gardens?' replied Cynthia.

The second officer whispered something to his compatriot. The other, leading officer seemed to squint and cast his flashlight over Cynthia again, 'Are you Cynthia Summer?'

Cynthia squinted her eyes as the blinding light struck her pupils. Raising a hand up to shield her pupils she responded, 'Uh, yes?'

The flashlight lowered just enough to be out of her eyes and the officer turned aside, 'Mam' do you have any identification?'

Flustered Cynthia mumbled off an affirmation as she pulled out a small wallet and withdrew the Driver's License held in its folds. Handing it to the officer that was speaking to her. It was at this time, as the leading officer looked at the license with the help of his flashlight's beam, that the second officer spoke, 'You must live in the apartments off Hilgard? Can I ask why you started picking up the pace? Seemed like you were trying to get away from us.'

'Yeah, I live right on Hilgard across from the Gardens, that – that is why I come through here.' She shuffled her feet, 'I got a phone call from my roommate. My boyfriend was supposed to be meet me on the way home. So – so I was rushing to meet him.'

The second officer replied quickly, 'Yeah, okay,' His tone politely professional, 'and who is your boyfriend? Does he live with you?'

'No, he lives with his parents, his name is James Dawson. He's also a student.'

At the mention of Dawson's name, the officer examining her license lifted his eyes to look at his partner. Both men exchanged glances with each other.

Chapter IX

'O'Malley,' said The Driver-in-Black as he looked at the trio of men standing in the doorway of the late Carla's apartment. The older man still wore same outfit from before. When O'Malley met The Driver-in-Black at the docks earlier in the day. That being brown leather dress shoes, gray slacks, and a matching button up shirt under a brown suede jacket. However, the black cattleman's hat was missing, so almost the same outfit. Revealing above those pearly blue eyes there existed two deep recesses within his grayed hairline. A sharp display of male pattern baldness. Like an exaggerated version of the widow's peak adorning The Driver-in-Black's own scalp.

O'Malley took two, slow paces, into the apartment and demanded, 'John, what are you doing here? Where is Carla?' It was at that moment O'Malley seemed to notice the gun in The

Driver-in-Black's hand. O'Malley locked eyes with the younger man, 'What did you do?' An edge of malevolence sliding into the older man's tone.

The Driver-in-Black remained silent. Merely dropping the pistol to his side and speaking with a hint of sincerity, like someone offering condolences at a funeral, 'Check the bathroom. Found her like that.' O'Malley's eyes widened and he motioned for his compatriots to come in as he made for the bathroom. The two brutes behind O'Malley merely took the older man's place in front of The Driver-in-Black. Blocking the doorway. A pair of Colt 1911 pistols coming into view. Resting lazily before the two men's abdomens. Both never taking their eyes off The Driver-in-Black as the dark clad man flicked his eyes from them to the hallway O'Malley had vanished down.

The Driver-in-Black could feel the seconds ticking by one tense moment at a time. Until O'Malley emerged from the hallway, a handkerchief over his mouth and nose, eyes full of sad remorse. The older man paused, looking at the ground, the brilliance of his pearly blue eyes seeming to have dimmed from

witnessing the grotesqueness of what had befallen this quiet abode.

'Do you know what happened?' said O'Malley quietly. Slowly removing the handkerchief from his lips.

The black clad man before him spoke lowly, 'No. I can only surmise that her murder is connected to the one this morning.'

'That fucking college kid from Los Feliz?' spat O'Malley sharply, 'What? You gone straight and narrow now John? Joined the freaking police?'

The Driver-in-Black remained silent as O'Malley shuffled his feet. Sparing glances back down the hallway as he picked up his gaze to look at his compatriots and then at The Driver-in-Black with a serious glare, 'Still haven't answered my question on why you're here though.'

The Driver-in-Black spoke without doubt, 'I believed I had a lead-', O'Malley cut him off abruptly, 'a lead! Look, I heard from my people you went to the Wolf's Den, I know the

questions you asked and I'm telling you. Carla had nothing to do with that boy's death this morning!

'They're connected.' stated The Driver-in-Black with confidence. O'Malley shot his gaze over to his two comrades and pointed a thumb at their black clad counterpart, 'What?' Shooting his eyes back at The Driver-in-Black, 'Blimey, did ya not hear ah-fucking word I said?' The Dublin accent taking over in correlation to the older man's frustration.

'Marcus,' said The Driver-in-Black with dead weighted seriousness. The older man paused as if about to begin another tirade. Instead, releasing a deep exhale while holding up his hands in exasperation. Dropping them to his hips in conjunction with a shrug of shoulders.

'Please enlighten me. Mister Detective,' scoffed O'Malley.

The Driver-in-Black looked at all three men before beginning, 'Dawson, the university kid, was murdered and the only shred of evidence found being a canine tooth. Not quite

right shape to belong to a human and too large for that of a dog, which initially led me to you for questions, Marcus.'

'So why does the Camorra give two shits if one of my kind kills a college kid. There are those who don't play by the Covenant's rules you know.'

'I'm aware, Marcus, but that is not why I'm involved.'

O'Malley's eyes widened in understanding and he said, 'Ah, there it is. Whoever killed that frat boy knocked off one of your own? Explains why they sent you to track down whoever done it. Interesting.'

'A few associates of the Camorra have since been killed, yes, in the exact same fashion as that 'frat boy',' spoke The Driver-in-Black with gently raised eyebrows.

O'Malley scratched his chin and looked to the side in thought, 'so why Carla, why after one of my people, either your killer is a genuine psycho or incredibly stupid. To kill Camorra associates and a member of Clan Eire within the same week!'

'Carla's death was out of urgency, a loose end; her fatal injuries are consistent with a messy but quick assault.' Raising

a finger, stepping aside, and pointed to the scuffmarks on the windowsill. The black clad man continued, 'When I arrived the door was unlocked. The killer had garnered an intimate repertoire with Carla; after all why climb through the window on an apartment located on the third floor?'

Marcus pursed his lips as he muttered, 'He didn't want to be seen coming back.'

'Exactly.' Moving now to point down the hallway, The Driver-in-Black continued, 'So the killer leaves via the front door during the night. Any witnesses wouldn't find this abnormal. But, only to absolve him of the murder by seeming to depart before Carla's demise. He then climbs up to the third floor. Utilizing the fire escape to do so quickly. The killer then murders Carla in her bathtub before slipping back down the fire escape.'

'Okay, okay John, that theory makes sense, but why leave the door unlocked at all?' replied O'Malley, puzzled.

'A quick escape if needed? An alternate route?' said John flatly.

'Well I guess it is good you're not the police then,' remarked O'Malley as he moved both hands to rest on his hips. The Driver-in-Black did not give a reply to that comment. The older man spared a glance down the hallway and said with finality, 'Carla was one of our own. We'll make sure she has a proper funeral. Then I'm gonna find who did this and do what he did to her but ten times wo-,'

The Driver-in-Black interjected quickly, 'Too much heat and the killer could go to ground. I need him moving about to catch him.'

O'Malley shot a hand up, 'and what are we supposed to do. Do you know what kind of message that puts out? Someone kill kin of Clan Eire and there are no repercussions?'

'Three days,' said The Driver-in-Black.

O'Malley cocked an eyebrow to the point of making his receding hairline appear grossly uneven, 'Three! d-.'

'Give me three days to find the killer and then I'll deliver them to you personally for justice.'

O'Malley rubbed his forehead, turning to stand perpendicular to his somber dressed counterpart, facing the rows of D.V.D.s on the shelves as his mind thought about this sudden proposition. Rough fingers, gnarled knuckles, slowly moving down the leathery complexion of O'Malley's weather beaten face to the gray stubble on his chin. Finally, when the older man spoke, words slow and weary leaving his lips, 'Fine John, three days, then the Clan is tearing through every block in Los Angeles till we find the fucker who did this. You got me?'

'Yeah, I got you,' The Driver-in-Black said with a small nod.

O'Malley moved his hands back to his hips as he turned away and nodded to his two men. Both tucking their pistols away and heading for the door. The Driver-in-Black holstered his own firearm as he watched the trio leave. Suddenly, O'Malley stopped in his tracks before the threshold of the doorway. Turning back to the darkly girded man opposite, 'I just want to be clear with you, John, this isn't about justice.

This is revenge. Don't believe for a second that there is anything just for men like us. You and I, we're not good men; otherwise we wouldn't have become who we are today.'

O'Malley left The Driver-in-Black alone as the old man passed through the entrance, back into the hallway, and turned out of view. The sound of their fading footsteps down the staircase. Leaving The Driver-in-Black's only audible companion being the faint buzzing of flies prancing across Carla's decaying body.

* * *

Looking up from the asphalt as The Driver-in-Black neared his car there he spotted a man. Leaning up on the back of his vehicle. Facing away from The Driver-in-Black, hands in pockets, idly looking along the stretch of road leading North-South through the residential neighborhood. The skyscrapers of Downtown Los Angeles blanketed by a dark haze in the distance.

'Furries aren't helping?' voiced the leaning man.

'Kai.' The Driver-In-Black's reply was more a dull acknowledgment than a query on why the lanky, pale, Belgian man was suddenly leaning up against the hood of his car.

'Color me surprised that they would deny themselves being complicit,' responded Kai with such sharp, utter, sarcasm. One might wonder if he could cut diamonds with a syllable.

The Driver-In-Black stopped next to the driver side door and looked at Kai sidelong. No attempt made in hiding the annoyance ebbing from his body language. 'They are as much in the dark as we are,' replied Kai's equally pale opposite.

Adjusting his shades resting on the bridge of his nose The Driver-In-Black opened the driver side door and paused. 'You've popped up twice in one day, Kai, Is someone lighting a fire under your ass?'

The Belgian accent bearing man flung himself off the hood of the car. Weight moving off the hood so fast the car shifted on its suspension. Maneuvering around to face the midnight gird owner of such a finely classic automobile.

Slamming the driver's side door shut with a firm shove. Kai beamed at his dark counterpart with an emergent, seething, frustration, '*She*. Wants. The. Matter. Resolved. Quickly. Especially, if our gallivanting homicide enthusiast is now deciding to pop-off anyone he pleases.' Kai's even tone positively radiant with crude infliction. The Driver-in-Black was silent and Kai shrugged, 'Had my own little chat with O'Malley before you came out of the building, John.' Kai raised his eyes brows at The Driver-in-Black and grinned, 'Going to take a lot of bleach and plastic wrap to clean up that mess.' The Belgian's opposite did not spare a comment. Merely muttering something about Kai constantly showing up throughout the day and now night. Causing Kai to cup his left ear, 'I'm sorry what was that? Coulda' swore you said something?'

'Her highness is certainly being quite impatient,' shot back The Driver-In-Black.

Kai turned his head slightly to the right as he squeezed his palm on the door. The metal complaining with squeals under the stress of what must truly be an iron grip. Hands flung

off the door. Held up in mock exclamation while Kai said, 'let's just say the matter is now of special interest to our employer. She wants you to see the Maestro.'

'You're joking, Kai, his price is one I cannot p-'

'It's already been paid for by our benevolent benefactor, *Her Highness*, Mister Korvinus,' Kai spoke while clasping his hands together in mock prayer, 'Blessed be her name.' Looking at The Driver-in-Black with his beady brown pinpricks for eyes in full contempt. Evidently, there was no true companionship or friendship between them.

A quick sigh and The Driver-in-Black reopened the door quickly, uttering a single word as he got in the vehicle, just loud enough for his blue suited opposite to hear as a simple, 'Fine.'

Putting the key into the ignition The Driver-in-Black shot his head to the right. Face full of puzzled irritation at the sound of the passenger door opening and closing. 'What are you doing,' demanded The Driver-in-Black. Each word

delivered with a sharp increase of octaves pitched in absolute annoyance.

Kai spoke back with a scowl, 'What does it look like! I'm coming with you.'

The Driver-in-Black clenched his jaw for a solid minute. Biting down the urge of saying something that no doubt would start a new flurry of insults and backhand comments between the two. Forcing a peeved smile The Driver-in-Black put the car into drive. Accelerating down the access road in the direction of Los Angeles proper.

* * *

The 69' Mustang Super Cobra Jet's sleek, polished, frame glided down Broadway. The multi-story buildings lining both sides of the street were ablaze. Brilliant displays of a thousand neon lights. Crowds ebbed and flowed, like the tides that cast themselves along the shores of Long Beach, as the vintage example of American muscle moved down the boulevard gracefully.

Kai sat idly in the passenger seat with an arm hanging lazily out the window. The ride to Broadway had been entirely silent, until now, as the distinct Belgian accent assaulted the quiet of the vehicle's interior. Ruining whatever somber contrast they had to the boisterous city around them. 'Do you always ride in silence? Must be a bit dull, no?' Kai moved to thumb the radio to life. The Driver-in-Black remained silent and just spared him a momentary flick of ocular daggers hidden under his shades. Ignoring the sounds of the lanky man next to him scrolling between stations with a low murmur of radio frequencies. 'Ah, here we go,' Kai pulled his hand away to leave the radio on a station broadcasting *Beast of Burden* by The Rolling Stones. *Irony*, thought The Driver-in-Black from behind his shades.

'By the way,' Kai continuing his apparent monologue with a raised finger, 'has anyone ever told you that riding with shades on at night is incredibly dangerous? Could kill someone.' A snicker accompanying such a faux warning. 'Not that it looks like anyone I see would be much of a loss for

society,' mused the Belgian man as he looked at the throngs of passerby's at restaurants, bars, or simply going about other night life proclivities.

The Driver-in-Black peered to their right at the illuminated marquee of their destination. The Orpheum, each letter blazing like a golden Sun in the night. The 69' Mustang pulled into a parallel parking spot before its ornate doors. Killing the engine both men got out of the vehicle. Both looking about the theater entrance with swift gazes. Kai blatantly admiring the Beaux Art Facade. The Orpheum was an old establishment. Nestled between spring and Hill Street to the North-West and Southeast. Bound by Eighth and Ninth Street to the Northeast and South-West respectively. The theater's front doors faced a popular stretch of Broadway's Southern half. Evidenced by the rather upscale rows of shops and eateries lining this particular stretch of the boulevard.

Stepping onto the sidewalk, The Driver-in-Black glanced to his left, gazing at the mouth of an alley next to a certain 'Broadway Bar.' He began walking towards it. Kai

falling in beside him smoothly. The silent footfalls of The Driver-in-Black black shoes complimented by the dull tread of Kai's steps as they rounded the bar. Delving into the alley.

Passing by a homeless man covered in newspapers without a second thought. Only coming to a momentary pause as a scurry of rats sprinted from under one dumpster to another. 'This city is really going to shit,' said Kai matter-of-fact. The duo resumed their sauntering pace. Heading towards the rear of the bar. Turning right they saw the back end of The Orpheum.

A dim alley light cast a pitiful cone of light on a service door duly marked with, "*Employees Only*", in drab red paint. A few paces behind that tucked into a small alcove of masonry was another door. Devoid of yellow artificial illumination. It was squat, almost square but not quite, and appearing to be made of dull black iron. As if it were some type sort of old fashion service door. Long since abandoned for the more modern directly adjacent.

Coming to a stop in front of iron door The Driver-in-Black lowered his shades an inch with a pinch of

index finger and thumb. Casting his eyes on the door to reveal a single symbol hidden away amid the matte noir exterior. An hourglass glyph nestled into the middle of the portal before them.

'What do you see? Is this the right door?' inquired Kai as he looked about the back alley to the left and right. The Driver-in-Black shifted his gaze at his impromptu partner with an amused expression. Causing Kai to bicker back, 'What, don't give me that look, I've never been to the Orpheum before.'

The Driver-in-Black moved forward and rapped his knuckles on the door. Stepping back into position on Kai's left as they both waited for some kind of response from the gloomy iron door before them.

Silence. Save for the distant laughter of pedestrians and the throaty hum of automobile engines. Seeping from the bustling avenue on the other side of the building to the back alley. Kai began to speak, 'Maybe, we aren't ex-.'

The iron door suddenly opened. Revealing a stocky, well-built man, bearing heavy facial tattoos that gave his face

the impression of a Mexican sugar skull. Gird in a plain black suit, not entirely dissimilar to The Driver-in-Black's, save for the cut being straight instead of the former's tapered style. Bright emerald eyes gleaming in the somber light. Staring at the two men standing before this dark gate separating alley and theater.

'Mister Korvinus. Mister Erasmus. We have been expecting you.' The tattooed man's speech bore a distinctive Castilian accent of peninsular Spain. Something The Driver-in-Black curiously noted as he regarded the man from behind his mirrored sunglasses.

The Driver-in-Black remained silent; while his compatriot, Kai Erasmus, simply frowned at the heavily tattooed man before them knowing his name. Certainly, Kai's expression portrayed his inner monologue. Would he not have recalled meeting such a unique individual before? Nevertheless, neither The Driver-in-Black nor the porter with the skull faced tattoo across his visage inquired on the matter

until Kai spoke up, 'Our employer sent for us to see the Maestro on a delicate matter of some import.'

The skull-faced man shifted his gaze directly to Kai as he replied politely, 'My own *'employer'* is aware of this appointment,' Employer, said with a know-it-all tone, giving the subtle indication that the context was merely a substitute for the word *Master*. Only used, as a way of sounding more contemporary, to the uninitiated to the world this trio existed within. This subtle inflection caused a wry frown to deepen on Kai's face. Complete with an ever so slight furrowing of the brow.

Kai's black clad colleague, The Driver-in-Black, merely resumed a passive and professional air about himself as he spoke, 'Is he available?'

The skull faced man turned aside with his left arm raised behind him in welcome, 'The Maestro is always available for his appointments. Please.'

The Driver-In-Black moved forward and passed over the threshold with the falling motion of his left foot. Stepping

beyond just past the skull faced man to look at the hallway before him. It was narrow. Dim lighting supplied by bulbs resting in the fluted brass petals of evenly placed chandeliers. Yet, casting his eyes beyond into the hallways there was no reference of an exit able to be seen from where the Driver-In-Black was standing. Just an endless road of red carpet.

Kai made to follow but halted, a pale rough palm just inches from his chest, the skull faced owner of which politely lowered his head momentarily, 'I apologize Mister Erasmus. But only one of you may pass this threshold.'

Kai's face adopted the contortions of displeasure at this refusal of entrance. Expression rapidly shifting as if he was going to argue with the inked gatekeeper. When the voice of his colleague stemmed the upcoming protest, 'It's alright, Kai, just wait here.'

The tattooed man swung the door close via a simple iron handle. Leaving Kai standing outside. The last image The Driver-in-Black glimpsed being his pale compatriot shoving

both hands inside his pant pockets in barely contained frustration.

The skull-faced man cast his green gemstone eyes at the black suited man before him. 'Please, Mister Korvinus, follow me.' The grim visage porter began to move down the hall without looking back to see if his guest were following. Not that he need too. The Driver-in-Black easily falling into pace beside the porter.

Moving side by side with the skull faced man respectively just ever so slightly ahead. The two made their way down the hallway at a relaxed pace. The hallway seeming to stretch along endlessly. Even as they moved along the corridor. This mindless visualization causing The Driver-in-Black to look back after several minutes. The iron door having grown faint behind them. Generating a buzz of thoughts whirring within his consciousness on just how this could be so. It certainly made no geographical sense. By rights, this hallway was longer than the actual theater!

'Ah, here we are,' said the skull faced man with a straightening of his black suit jacket.

Whipping his head back around The Driver-in-Black faced forward once more. Having not realized he had walked into an intersection! Something that the voice inside his head swore was not there but a moment prior.

Ahead of them, the hallway continued onward into the gloomy distance. To the right was a hallway stretching on into the distance. Much like the one, he was in. Save for the rows of double doors lining each side of the corridor intersecting with his own path. To the left there was a similar expanse of double doors of exact same fashion. Every set of doors looked the exact same. Their brown pediment appearance under carved wooden frontons of the *sans base* style.

'Ninth door on the right,' stated the emerald eyed tattoo marked man beside The Driver-in-Black as he held out an arm indicating for him to turn left.

The Driver-In-Black looked at the skull-faced doorman with caution, 'You're not coming?' Those emerald eyes,

which sat within twin black ink voids, merely gave a blank look in response. The owner of those twinkling gems, wreathed in tattooed darkness, simply reiterated with added insistence, 'Ninth door, on the right, Mister Korvinus.'

The Driver-in-Black pursed his lips and turned away from the skeletal visage next to him. Moving slowly, with measured steps, down the hallway as indicated. The soft red carpet under his feet conveyed an atmosphere of foreign uncertainty with every step. One by one. Doors passed by, fingers extending with each one, counting as he went.

Stopping before the ninth door The Driver-in-Black, silhouetted by the dim light, looked back the way he had tread. Emptiness. The macabre doorman was gone. No one in the hall but him. The theater's atmosphere now bore a suffocating silence. Compressing down upon the raven-haired man standing in the soft gloom.

Gazing at the door a pale hand reached out for one of the brass doorknobs. Grasping the knob. Feeling the cool temperature of the metal. Its smooth texture. Twisted with a

turn of the wrist. Tumblers clicking in their own miniature melody as the pervading silence of the hallway could turn a pen drop into a cascading clatter of percussion.

The door swung open on greased hinges and as soon as both shoes stepped through a powerful surge of auditory beauty washed over him. The surging blare of a mighty Wurlitzer organ. Strong dirge notes, permeated by a gentler choir, declared themselves to The Driver-in-Black. Peering backwards as the door shut behind him. Seemingly, of its own accord.

Returning his gaze to the new environment before him The Driver-in-Black looked about. Seemingly lost and bewildered at the same time as a whole theater revealed itself to him. The Orpheum Theater to be exact, with its vaulted ceiling, adorned by beautiful sculptures worked into the very architecture. A thirty feet deep and fifty feet wide stage with perfectly polished wooden flooring dominated the room to The Driver-in-Black's right. Stepping forward from the doors the raven-haired man looked left and right. There were no other

doors. Impossible, in the hallway there were doors every eight feet! Yet, in this space, there were enough comfortable seating space for two thousand people. Complete with a wide balcony slung across two might pillars.

Looking for the source of the organ The Driver-in-Black spotted the Wurlitzer's white console. The keys rising and falling in an elaborate dance beneath the attendant musicians nimble fingers. These fluttering digits connected instrument and man. The man in question, dressed in a simple gray suit, seemed unaware of the newcomer now regarding him. Coat tails hanging behind him on the bench. Their bronze buttons keeping them connected to the hem of the man's coat. Back turned, The Driver-in-Black approached slowly, coming to a stop halfway towards the seated man who began to sway with the rising and falling tune of his auditory waterfall of music. Short gray-white wavy hair denoted the musicians apparent age. The Driver-in-Black stood and looked about. Had he gone through the wrong door perhaps?

'Mister Korvinus, you seem puzzled?' A deep voice echoed about the chamber as the dirge died. Turning with a creak of the bench the musician now faced The Driver-in-Black. Sky blue eyes resting in a wizened, gentle, face. Age lines on his face somehow irrelevant to the vigor that beamed from every inch of the older man atmosphere. His straight nose sitting in the middle of a perfectly proportional face. Light olive skin appearing ever so brighter in the lighting of the enveloping theater space.

'Maestro?' queried The Driver-in-Black.

The older man before him now stood, hands splayed outward, with a smile on his lips and responded, 'In the flesh.' Meandering towards the much younger black-clad before him the Maestro maneuvered to stand off to The Driver-in-Black side. Facing away from the stage the Maestro asked a query of his own, 'Rumor has it there is a serial killer on the loose?' The interest in the topic bore the slightest edge of unsettling intrigue in the older man's tonal inflection.

'You mean just 'killer'. There has only been one victim.'
replied The Driver-in-Black quickly. The Maestro
opened and closed his mouth hastily before responding equally
as fast, 'Right, yes.' Clearing his throat, 'But, you are here, for
my help because?'

'I need to see.' The statement coming forth
matter-of-fact.

The Maestro flicked his eyes upwards to the ceiling in
thought before returning them to his younger opposite, 'seeing,
hmm, I'm a musician Mister Korvinus not an optometrist.'

'I need to use the orchestra,' replied The
Driver-in-Black with determination, 'I know what it does and
you know full well why I am here.'

The Maestro's response was swift. 'Do you? Do you
know what it does? Time's orchestra is not one merely for the
faint of heart to hear.' Holding up a finger to his right ear,
'Quite frankly to hear fate's melody is enough to drive many a
man mad.'

The Driver-in-Black remained undeterred. 'You mention serial killer. You've seen already that there will be another murder? I need to know where.'

The older man rested a hand on a nearby pillar. Turning his head slowly to gaze at the Organ. Such a mighty auditory instrument and spoke towards the Wurlitzer as if in longing. 'Tis' the ironic twist of a conductor such as I.' Lowering his hand the older man pulled out a conductors wand, 'To orchestrate the melodious courses of trickling sands. But, unable to stop the incoming tide fate it invariably brings. To vividly see the washing away of our memories one crashing wave at a time.'

As The Driver-in-Black listened, somehow drawn to the words of the older man before him, he noticed the gentle flicking of the wand. A tremor of the hand? No, even now the Maestro still conducted a soft, gentle, tune that only a sage could hear. The Driver-in-Black spoke warily, 'Maestro?'

The Maestro ran his tongue over his teeth in calm reflection of the younger man's continued determination for

this request. Not bothering to acknowledge the concern entering his darkly gird opposite's voice. 'You are aware of the risks then?'

The Driver-in-Black blinked as the Maestro quickly revolved his attention back to the younger man before him. Just fast enough for The Driver-in-Black to see the glassy mists of age that had overtaken the Maestro's mind recede. Like the vanishing of breath on crystal glass. Squashing the worry from a moment prior The Driver-in-Black pressed on wards. Saying, 'I have one piece of evidence but no outstanding connections. I'm running out of time before there is another body found in an alley. What makes you think the killer will strike again?'

'They already have.'

'Then I need to see.'

'Oh? Right. Quite the productive maniac on the loose.'

'They also left what I believe to be an attempt at misdirection. But it could also be a calling card.' The added statements producing a perked eyebrow upon the older man's face.

'Calling card,' mused The Maestro, 'well, now that is certainly unsettling isn't it?' The wizened man finished with a shudder. Turning to the stage, empty, as if no orchestra had ever been there, that the older man began to slowly walk towards. Then, several paces in the Maestro turned sharply to the trailing Driver-in-Black and said, 'Bear in mind that what you see may have, how could I put this delicately, unforeseen consequences.' The Maestro once more holding up a cautionary finger.

'Unforeseen consequences,' replied The Driver-in-Black accompanied with a slow nod of the head. Conveying his own acceptance of the risks. Yet, his resolve did not waver.

The Maestro continued speaking with a cautionary tone, idly moving down the narrow, straight, walkway between the rows of empty audience seating 'Many do not like what they see. Music, at its core, speaks to the very soul,' a fist from the older man raised quickly to rest on The Driver-in-Black's heart, 'but what music chooses one to see isn't necessarily provided

with context. That, Mister Korvinus, is for you to reveal on your own.'

The Driver-in-Black nodded while the Maestro shifted his stance. Turning aside to reveal a simple wooden chair on the stage directly behind him. *Strange, one had not been there before.* Brushing this thought aside, The Driver-in-Black once more turned his attention to the Maestro whom once again spoke with the sudden gusto of a conductor. Ready to address an invisible audience.

'Now then! Have a seat my midnight crow!' This command bellowing out over the empty seating.

Moving to take the seat, leaning his back up against the chair's backrest, the bare unadorned piece of furniture gave small squeaks in vain protest. The raven-haired man looking at The Maestro intently as the older man took the conductor's podium. Lined up with the median of the stage at the terminus of the walkway between the two massed rows of audience chairs. Betwixt those ranks of seats and the stage.

Swish. The Maestro brought his wand in a wide flourish. Smoothly moving from a C-shape down into a slowing, thin, S-form. His arms beginning a slow dance. Gradually increasing as the fluid movements became intermingled with fierce slashes. Savagely elegant cuts and subtle needle stabs. The older man's aged form being overtaken by an invisible force of energy that could only be contained by continuous movement.

The Driver-in-Black gazed about himself to the left and right. There was nothing. Just an awkward silence. The Maestro continuing his flowing movements.

'Now for the crescendo!' The older man's words were harsh and The Driver-in-Black's eyes snapped back to conductor. *But there was no sou-*. A faint chorus of notes trickled into the periphery of his senses. A low whistle of strings! Progressively increasing in volume! A monophonic song suddenly accompanied by the boisterous sharp crashing of invisible brass instruments. The Driver-in-Black tried to look, to see where the music was coming from, but he could not! He could not pull his gaze from the older man. The conductor of

an invisible, enrapturing, orchestra. Music slowly encroaching, whirling, surrounding him as the ephemeral musicians playing their ghostly instruments. Notes dancing around them both. Vivid duo of string and brass joined subtly by the wistful serenade of winds singing their first stanza. Resonating brass notes from triumphant trumpets raising the timbre of the auditory chorus swirling around The Driver-in-Black's consciousness. Finally, given over by the longing, almost sad, notes of woodwind flutes and metal clarinets. Raucous serendipity of melody brought forth flashing imagery like lightning bolts! Blasting across his mind. Images of gaseous clouds lanced by comets all amid starlit expanses of pure nothingness.

The Driver-in-Black's eyes flicked sharply back and forth. Images flashing in his mind were narrowing until he looked about himself suddenly. Jerking back to strike a brick wall! However, he did not fall. No creek of a chair or impact onto the ground. No, his suited form met solid brick with a dull thud. Legs nearly buckling as he grasped with his hands at the

rough vertical surface behind him. Steadying himself against the brick wall in a few knee jerk movements. Eyes traversing the scenery before him he finally comprehended his surroundings. He was standing in an alley. However, not just any alley, no, this was the alley next to the Vista Theater. Yet, different. There were no police tape. No signs of a devastated young man's form on the cool nighttime concrete. None of the bloodstains or pooling puddles of crimson vitality. All of these being curiously absent.

Pushing himself off the brick face The Driver-in-Black peered about the alley. Pupils scanning left to right. The world at night seemed surprisingly clear close up. As if, his eyes could capture every detail in perfect clarity. However, as his eyes moved further down to the mouths of the alley. Into the street beyond the environment became smothered gray haze. Not quite opaque but as if gazing through a grimy pair of spectacles. Mottled with vague forms passing in the distances. Sound itself bore a muffled volume. For an automobile passing by the Vista Theater came and went without any auditory

indication of it doing so. Upon taking a step revealed that, even his footfalls were silent. *Interesting*. He moved on the soles of his shoes in a dragging motion. A movement that should have given off a scuffing screech only yielded more silence.

Flicking his eyes up to gaze at the sky a wave of nausea flowed up from his stomach. The sky was a myriad of impossible colors. Swirling with moving tendrils of black and white monochrome. Twisting and maneuvering around where stars should be. The latter, shining with incandescent brilliance, contrasted with a jet-black moon hanging low in the night sky. Too low, as if one were to peer through an astronomer's scope at a magnification of Earth's celestial partner. Further, *ad nauseum*, the sky shone with blinding bronze luster. He had to lower his eyes quickly. Nearly falling sideways back into the brick face. Forcing the Driver-in-Black to prop himself up while resting his other hand on a knee so that he could better resist the urge to vomit.

Closing his eyes for a minute and taking a deep breath. He fought down the sickness. Taking several tense moments in

order to return to a normal sense of feeling. Only then did he straighten his posture.

Standing tall once more, The Driver-in-Black opened his eyes slowly. Avoiding any urge to look up at the sky any further. Instead, The Driver-in-Black began to move down the alleyway. His silent footfalls giving no indication to his transit along the paved gap between the theater and the next building. Going about fifty paces, mostly to the terminus of the alley where the silhouettes of cars began to materialize in the gloom of the haze before him, The Driver-in-Black heard the faint tune of musical notes in the distance. A breezing melody sweeping by him and in its wake could be heard whispers.

The unintelligible wisps of human speech drifting to The Driver-in-Black's ears came from behind. Causing him to turn around quickly. In addition, there, at the other mouth of the alley, two figures emerged from the gray whispering haze. Their silhouetted forms slowly coalescing into two distinct forms. Solidifying from the gloomy murk that are the twin mouths of the alley.

Their forms were almost identical in height. However, whereas one wore a black hoodie and jeans the other wore a leather jacket and denim of a darker gray. The blue and white sneakers of the black hoodie wearing figure contrasted with the above-ankle black boots belonging to the other. The shapes of their silhouettes either slender or perhaps even athletic. One could not quite tell given the nature of their garb.

Whispering voices gradually increasing in volume until they too were their own identifiable duet among the audibly created environment around him. Except the tone of the environment around The Driver-in-Black was a swirling, raucous, chaos of tunes. Mixing and separating from one another like notes without end. The pitching blares of vehicle horns screeching their siren song matched by the distant throaty hum of combustion engines. However, this duet held a tone of dark somberness. As if their whispers were hushed laments. Gossiping a macabre aura around themselves as the duet drew ever closer to him, the latter straightening up against the wall, whose muscles were tense with apprehension. The

bundled cords of muscle in his body ready to spring into action. As his skull rotated to follow the trajectory of the mysterious duet and their harmoniously insidious voices. Eyes tracking their gait as they moved past him. Making for the opposite entrance to the alley, the one The Driver-in-Black himself had been going down when the duet before him emerged from those posterior mists. His body eased as the two figures moved past him. Seemingly, unaware of his presence.

The Driver-in-Black fell in behind the duo, stepping ever so lightly on the ashen gray pavement, his gait meandering cautiously a dozen paces behind. As if unsure that if getting to close was possible, and if it were, what would occur? *Best not try to find out.* Tugging that thought of caution to the back of his mind The Driver-in-Black glanced about himself for a moment before tracking his eyes back onto the duet progressing before him. Their visages shrouded in haze and ill defined. Despite the occasional head turn. No distinguishing characteristics stood out. Only making out vague features through the gloomy shrouds of their silhouetted

faces. As if the world around him were defying all logic. As if the universe was now devoted to not letting him see the duets faces. Adding to the mysterious somber tunes of whispers by creating a layer of disturbing uncertainty as to who these individuals are.

Even as John squinted his eyes and closed the distance by a few more strides. The duet before him remained visually unknown except for their respective garb. Their clothing providing the only defining characteristics that declared the notion of them being two distinct individuals. For even their whispering gossip were of such harmony, similarity of voice, that that in it of itself made it impossible to tell who was saying what. Despite stalking just several paces behind the shrouded pair before him!

Suddenly the duet stopped. The pair of harmonic voices cut short by a momentary discordant flurry of hushed silence. Enveloping their malevolent vocal tune. The figure on the left turned, what The Driver-in-Black could only surmise, a haze shrouded face to the left and up. Angling up to look diagonal at

the lip of the Vista Theater's roof. The gaze of the other figure followed a few second after. Nearly stopped in their tracks to see what its fellow were peering at. The Driver-in-Black's eyes followed last in mild bewilderment. Pupils gauging above at the ledge. Trying hard to not look beyond at the psychedelic inducing sickness of the sky, and with only growing intrigue did revelation from on high be perceived. *Perhaps the killer did leap from the rooftop onto our latest victim.* Sub consciousness lancing the thought through The Driver-in-Black's mind in quick agreement! However, what materialized there to confirm such a self-reinforcing suspicion?

Nothing. All that met his eyes was a hazy gray fog coiling around the ledge of the rooftop. No leering villain, kneeling on the lip of brickwork and shingles, ready to pounce on an unsuspecting passerby. Perked interest abruptly replaced by a deep frown. The duet before The Driver-in-Black returned their own, shrouded, faces forward and continued with renewed vigor. A quickened pace allowing both figures to pull away from The Driver-in-Black momentarily till he launched his

own legs forwards. One in front of the other in rapid succession to catch up. Reestablishing the stalking pace several steps behind the duet once more.

The atmosphere was different; he could feel it, for no malevolent tune came from the pair. An eerie quiet smothered the oxygen from the air as the background melodies of the environment permeating the world around him seemed to dim. Shifting to a more, heavyweight, somber feeling.

Longer strides striking the gray asphalt after a couple minutes brought all three to the mouth of one side of the alley. Where the alley yawned into a rectangular car lot. There, further along, three figures spawned into view. One, waving a hazy gray arm with a chorus of happy sing song calls dancing along the air towards the malevolent duo. The Driver-in-Black lurking behind. He squinted, a lone face escaping the anonymity to shine with picture clear clarity upon the face of James Dawson. The dead man smiling warmly at the duet. A duet whom continued onward. Toward the new trio waiting on the other side of the car lot. Shoes coming to a scuffled stop as

The Driver-in-Black eyes latched onto the face of James Dawson.

A string of thought swimming into the black-clad, lurking, man's mind. *You knew your killer. A Judas among friends. Perhaps both or one? I need more. Why would your friends kill you? How are they connected to the murder of my employer's associates? What where you involved with that was worth killing you ov-*

The environment shifted around The Driver-in-Black abruptly. Alleyway seeming to elongate and stretch in dimensions. Ground shifting, sliding under his shoes, until The Driver-in-Black wound up back where he started. In the middle of the alley. While the quintet of figures, including James Dawson, shrank into the distance until all were fully submerged in ephemeral gloom. The sensation of this crawling environment sent a lurch in The Driver-in-Black's stomach and he resisted the urge to violently vomit until the ethereal, malleable, alley around him settled once more to a dull, nearly forgotten, stillness. Like so many other back alleys. Narrow

grimy capillaries in the concrete that work monstrosity, which is Los Angeles; that this audible experience sought to mimic.

Craning his neck to look around The Driver-in-Black's eyes latched onto a hunched figure scuttling along the concrete. Shuffling and bowed. Incoherent, out of tune pitches for a voice reverberated from the gray cast figure as it entered the alley. The aura around the being carried a brownish murk of dirt and squalor.

Stepping to face the slowly scuffling, bent, depressing wretch meekly approaching. Squaring his shoulders, he began to move slowly towards the figure. There was a subtle clarity masked by what appeared to be a hood, which slowly grew more to form, as The Driver-in-Black approached. *Okay, well, this is interesting,* came a floating thought as the distance diminished between him and the squalid newcomer. The wretches' hood growing from a grainy monochrome. To a well-defined and color splotched, blue with yellow, lettering spelling out 'U.C.L.A.' across the front.

The squalid form was indeed a man, and as The Driver-in-Black drew within a couple feet the hood flicked back to reveal the identity of the wretch as none other than the homeless man whom had discovered Dawson's corpse. Hood almost completely falling off the back of the man's dirt streaked face; eyes widened, and mouth agape. Unleashing a shrill shriek. The homeless man stumbled back, nearly falling over, desperate in his abrupt scramble to get away.

The Driver-in-Black's brow furrowed as he made to give chase. That was when he saw that the man was not looking terrified at him. But past him. Pausing, muscles taunt, he turned on his heels in one smooth motion. There, in the alley, a thrashing display of barbarous brutality. A deep dirge of breaking and snapping bones, gushing fluid, and gurgling death whispers wrapping around The Driver-in-Black's being in smothering suffocation. Fighting the languid embrace of witnessing Dawson's death first hand. The hunched figure leering above the corpse. Gleefully, ripping and tearing in an orchestra of snapping strings while wet winds carrying over the

air to The Driver-in-Black's ears. Rammed home by the splattering chorus of bloody gristle onto the mourning colored asphalt.

The hazy, ill defined, but suitably strong figure grotesquely ruining Dawson's body stopped. As if suddenly aware of The Driver-in-Black's presence. He froze. Eyes burrowing into the back of the murderous silhouette before him. The looming slaughterer turned slowly. Hardly, given the gloomy haze, could The Driver-in-Black make out irises the color of red-hot coal. Sparing a glance behind him revealed that the vagabond was gone! A jolt of the skull. Shooting his vision back The Driver-in-Black's eyebrows rose in shocking surprise as the silhouette began to close the distance rapidly towards him. His right hand instinctively going to his side. A feeling of intense pressure clamping down on his shoulder.

* * *

Heavy eyelids slowly parted with small, infrequent, strained muscular contractions. Grogginess met by numerous harsh lights. Vision twisting and churning. Until perception

settled on a figure standing nearby. Clarity, slowly washing over The Driver-in-Black's lingering haze laced eyesight. Sweeping away the unsettling motions of returning from that ethereal dreamscape.

Stomach buckling The Driver-in-Black lurched forward, a strong arm shooting out to hold him back, fighting back the urge to empty his gut onto the finely wood paneled stage. A familiar voice soothed his mind. As the person standing adjacent, holding him straight up, spoke, 'Now, now, I just had this stage waxed.'

Groggy moans slowly replaced by a rapidly fading panting The Driver-in-Black straightened his back. Gently resting on the backrest of the chair he remain seated upon. The Maestro took his arm away and adjusted his cuff. Squaring up the buttons and soothing out any ruffles from the sudden need to prevent John from losing his stomach all over the stage.

'Now, I trust what you saw gave the answers you sought?' said The Maestro with a raised eyebrow.

The Driver-in-Black's voice came off as strained, 'You mean, you mean you didn't see, what I saw?'

'What you see with the music of our time is purely unique to the beholder,' replied The Maestro.

Placing his hands on his knees as strength slowly flowed back into his limbs from the psychological ordeal. The dark driver rose slowly, 'That is pretty ambiguous of an answer.'

'Answers given are not always what one wants.' Speaking with with quick affirmation to the midnight clad man still recovering from his experience.

'But what I saw. Happened?'

'What we all see happened. To face the music is to accept multiple answers to one question. It is up to you, my wayward Raven friend, to decide what you do with these answers.'

'But, what I saw, everything moved too quickly? I wa-.'

The Maestro held up a hand to silence him, 'It is naive and incorrect to assume time is linear.' The Maestro paced in a

wide arc before standing squarely before The Driver-in-Black, arms raised as if addressing an audience, 'Look outside when you leave here. Really, truly, look. Millions of people willingly embrace the simplicity of our world being linear. A straight line. Beginning to end. Ever trundling down an infinite hill like wheels on a cart. Never quite knowing where we are going. That unknown replaced by the comfort and security in knowing that said cart's wheels will keep on turning. Bringing us inexorably from one act in our lives to the next.' Each word more drawn out than the last as the Maestro turned away from The Driver-in-Black to look out upon the rows of empty seats. Arms and voice still raised to an invisible audience. The Maestro's head swiveled to glance back at his puzzled counterpart with a long smile, 'After all, what is life but a show?'

Straightening his back The Driver-in-Black spoke with mulled over words, 'Show metaphors or not people are being murdered, Maestro, what I saw leads me to believe something that seems rather farfetched.'

The Maestro dropped his arms save for a finger, half raised, pointed at the macabre driver. Looking down at the stage the older man gracefully paced in another wide arc while wording his reply with even, neat, precise beats like a metronome. 'Metaphors or not the fact remains that what you saw did occur. Nevertheless, my point remains. What you see may not occur in chronological order by your understanding. Time tells a story and while I cannot speak to what you see, I can tell you to not overlook any detail.'

Releasing a defeated sigh The Driver-in-Black came to the inevitable conclusion of his questions to the older man. He was not getting anywhere and if The Maestro was telling the truth, he could not directly assist him anymore; however, at least another piece of the puzzle was sliding into place. The information of what he had seen causing a new firestorm of thoughts in his mind. *There is something significant about that pair in the alley, and more importantly, I now have an eyewitness to the murder. I need to find that vagrant.*

Stepping forward and off the stage the midnight clad driver turned to The Maestro, 'Thank you, for the assistance.'

The Maestro shrugged, 'No thank you is necessary, your employer paid quite handsomely for my services, and I do hope you apprehend Los Angeles' latest homicidal maniac.'

Nodding in a silent acknowledgment before turning away and making for the door. Feeling the knob in his grip as he twisted and opened the door. The Driver-in-Black preparing to move down the hallway, yet he could not help but cast a sidelong look back. The Maestro was gone, as was the chair, and the mighty organ of The Orpheum shrouded in a curtain that had not been there before. Blinking in a panderers gaze more than wonderment. A gloved hand closed the door as he shrugged off the strange happenings of this place. Silence, permeated by withdrawing footsteps away from that most peculiar theater.

'Trust your visit was enlightening,' came a sudden voice immediately to his right. Causing the latter to practically jump

in an involuntary reflex reaction. Arms drawing up in defense and ready to engage a surprise assailant!

The doorman, faced tattooed into a La Catrina visage, was leaning up against the wall. Pushing himself off to beckon his guest to follow with polite words, 'Beg your pardon, sir, and this way please.' The black tattooed lips of the doorman parting between words to reveal porcelain perfect teeth utterly contrasting with the man's macabre get-up.

Following the doorman back the way they had come the two arrived at another vault like door. The very same as the one before. Drawing close to the door the sound of locks disengaging echoed down the hallway. The vault door opening to reveal the alley touched with the very first glowing embers of morning light.

Stepping out into the alley The Driver-in-Black blinked twice in confusion since entering The Orpheum. For what he saw, looking up at the slowly brightening sky, were the first rays of a morning Sun. *That couldn't be right.* Flicking his eyes

down to look at his watch. Sure enough the watch read sixteen to eight in the morning.

The Doorman's voice echoed behind him with the sound of door mechanics engaging, 'Have a good morning, Mister Korvinus.' The steel door shut with a soft thud. It was daybreak.

Movement to his left and The Driver-in-Black looked up to see Kai standing in the shadows. The latter not attempting to disguise their annoyance, 'Supposed to be a talk not a slumber party.' What a snarky tone, unceremoniously shrugged off. The former already walking back towards the classic example of American muscle cars sitting silently in front of the theater. Only speaking as he passed Kai, 'I got some answers and even more questions, also needing answers.'

Such a response rapidly causing Kai's face to crinkle in confusion, 'More questions? What more questions? What did you see? What did The Maestro say?' said the Belgian man as he followed at a quick trot to catch up.

The Driver-in-Black spared a quick glance as he moved to the driver side of his 69' Super Cobra. Pausing, he leaned forward, to rest his arms on the roof of the automobile. Speaking with a hint of uncertainty, 'The homeless man being interviewed by the police at the crime scene lied. He saw the killer and not just the body.'

'Ah, well, you track down our wayward squatter. I have to report back,' said Kai with a Northward flick of the wrist.

'So you *are* watching me?' mused The Driver-in-Black.

'Not really, more just trying not to be on our employer's bad side if it seems like there is a lack of progress.'

'I figured as much.' The jab registered with a frown as he opened his car door and started the car. A knock on the windowpane glass drew an annoyed breath from the driver. Rolling down the passenger window so that could Kai lean down he turned to see what manner the Belgian man would retort.

'Well, just like you, I need to eat. Best keep our jobs, eh? Anyways I have to bounce Johnny. Be seeing you soon.'

Kai tapped the roof of the car before starting down the street, sticking to the shadows, vanishing down another back alley.

'Johnny' inhaled deeply as he raised the passenger window, shifted the vehicle into drive, pulling out of the parking spot and down the road. Exhaling into a yawn, he felt the weariness of the day slowly grip his body. The Driver-in-Black revved the engine with a twitch of the foot; fully intent to rest before embarking on his next journey in tracking down a certain eyewitness.

Chapter X

'Quite the in-depth conversation you must be having,' questioned Detective Franklin Kirkwood with a small smile. All the while never taking his eyes off the youthful face of Carlos Rodriguez. The young man clicked his phone shut as he finished typing a text message and replied hurriedly, 'Right. Sorry, um, Sir.' A slight creep of nervous edge bleeding into the young man's voice.

Detective Kirkwood smiled as she spoke with courtesy, 'It's alright lad. Just from now on can you put your phone on silent. We need to go over a few things and then I'm sure you can both be dropped back off.'

Both of the youthful collegians nodded in agreement. Briefly pulling out their phones and shutting them down before returning their attention to Frank. The older man seated directly

across from them pulled open a drawer and produced two notepads. Placing one before Carlos and Anthony, joined by a pair of black pens, the older man spoke with the same polite tone, 'I need you both to recount, as best each of you can, in chronological order what happened last night. Feel free to use the notepads to jot important moments down.' The notepads slid smoothly across the desk, pens on top of them, as the detective finished with a small smile.

'About James,' queried Anthony with extreme puzzlement. Carlos glanced from Anthony to Frank with equal confusion crawling over his features. From weak chin to hooked nose and across both their soft cheeks. Frank glanced at both before straightening in his chair, 'Why – Yes, James was found dead this morning.' The older man leaned forward, resting his elbows onto the dark faux wood of his desk, clasping his hands and continued speaking, 'we know that you two were with him last night before his death. We would like to confirm your whereabouts.'

Both young men fell silent, as if unsure to speak, until after a long minute Anthony broke the silence. Starting, by taking up the pen and pad. 'We,' Anthony indicated Carlos and himself with butt end of the pen he took, 'were with James last night, as was Elizabeth Wallington and Cynthia Summers. Met up to have dinner at around six.'

'Two of our other close friends,' interrupted Carlos while nodding his head as he looked at Anthony, to Frank, and back.

Frank continued giving his small polite smile while replying, 'So it's safe to say all five of you were together?' Reaching once more into the bowels of his desk to retrieve a larger notepad and pen. Removing the cap the aged detective began to scrawl across the pad in what was either minuscule shorthand or quite possibly some form of ancient Babylonian cuneiform. The characters scrunched and chalk full of abbreviations that could have easily been passed off as some old archaic tongue found in the exhibits of The Smithsonian.

Anthony spoke again, once more, whilst Carlos appeared to be in the middle of jotting down his own recollections from the night before. 'Yes, Sir, we hung out to celebrate the new semester. And what our plans were going to be after university. We were always unsure of James' future since he often flip flopped between various majors. But he seemed excited?'

Carlos once again, as if establishing some bizarre theme, perked up after the lead given by Anthony, 'Yeah, he was like a totally different person. Talkative. But never really specific on what he was happy about.'

'No one asked him?' replied Frank with one eye slightly squinted in this seemingly glaring lack of context by supposedly close friends on the nature of Dawson's sudden exuberance mere hours prior to his demise. Silence immediate response as both young Men remained blank faced at the detective's remark. As if this was some unforeseen response to their obviously vague, uncertain even, statements.

Frank pressed forward, 'did Dawson say anything at all in reference why this apparent change in behavior?' Silence pressed into the room yet again until the detective shoved it once more out of the vicinity with a singular, 'Well?'

Anthony made a show of writing a few things down, 'Nothing particular just that he was excited to graduate and –.' The phone on Frank's desk rang. The detective quickly excused himself in front of the two men as he picked up the phone and answered. Uttering affirmatives to whomever was on the other line. Finishing the call by saying, 'Yeah, I got a guy outside of their apartment. Bring her to him. Thank you so much, yep, bye.' The phone placed once more back on its rest as the brief call ended.

So, Cynthia Summers was apparently on her way to meet her beau. Kinda' hard given the fact that her 'boyfriend' is cooling on a metal slab at the moment. This just doesn't add up. Well. Go figure the odds of this Miss Summers going to meet a dead boy at this time of night?

Franks internal monologue at speed-of-thought generated the precursors for his next set of inquiries, 'So you all went out, hung out as you say, and then what?'

'We went to Good Luck's,' replied Anthony with unusual confidence.

'Good Luck's.' replied Frank flatly. Pursing his lips as he made note of that with a few quick scribbles. 'Must have been there pretty late?'

'Yeah, we were there, what?' Anthony looked at Carlos who blinked, shifting in his chair before speaking in turn.

'Weren't there long, maybe a little over a half hour tops, around seven-ish?'

'Yeah, it was after dark and James had to go back to the restaurant shortly after, about eight you'd say?' said Anthony as he turned to his friend whom nodded in agreement.

Frank scrawled these details on his notepad, 'so eight o'clock is right around when you both saw Dawson last?'

Both young men nodded in agreement.

'Then what? You guys just parted ways like that?'

Anthony shrugged, 'Eh well-'

'I want you to tell me what happened next.'

Frank was looking directly at a startled Carlos. 'Me?'

The word practically fumbled out of Carlos mouth.

'Yeah, you, Anthony over here has been the one answering all the questions first. I want to hear from you,' Frank raised his pen and pointed to both of them, 'on what exactly happened afterwards.'

Carlos gave Anthony a startled look, the latter shrugged, 'well we headed back to our apartments with the girls.'

'Cynthia and Elizabeth?'

'Yes sir.'

'Go on.'

'They went off to their apartment on Hilgard while Anthony and I went back to our place and crashed.'

'About when did the four of you split up?'

'Uh, must have been closer to nine or so? We didn't hang out after or anything.' said Carlos with a punitive increase in confidence.

'So, from the looks of things none of you four, you two before me and the ladies, would have seen anything at all after parting ways with the victim.'

The mention of victim and Anthony's eyes went down to his feet. Clearly perturbed at the mention of his friend being called a victim. Carlos cleared his throat as he nodded in affirmative. The small measure of confidence that had been creeping into his voice seconds earlier now growing in strength, 'Yes, we pretty much parted ways upon reaching Hilgard.'

'I assume you guys drove or took a cab?'

'We took Cynthia's car,' replied Anthony. Frank held up a finger to Anthony, 'Carlos, did you guys take Cynthia's car?'

'I, yes, yes sir we did.'

'You're sure both Miss Wallington and Summers will corroborate this story?'

'Yessir.'

'I assume she dropped you off?'

'No, we walked through the Botanical Gardens.' said Carlos.

'Alright,' said Frank with a sigh. Standing up the older detective closed his notebook. Sliding it back into his desk alongside its pen companion. Both young men placed their own notepads onto the surface of the desk. Carlos eyes widening ever so slightly as he quickly inquired, 'So, we're free to go?'

Anthony in turn grasped the armrests as if he was about to launch himself bodily out of the chair like a rocket on a launch pad.

'Just sit tight for a moment,' Franks reply, casually raised hand, and emotionally neutral expression arrested Anthony's potential velocity. Carlos slouched in his own seat as Frank moved down to the entrance of the Homicide Division's office space. Down the hall, the approaching form of Detective Marshall rapidly approached a steaming cup of coffee firmly in his grasp.

'Any luck, chief?' said Marshall with a casual sip of his fuming coffee. Earning a quick swallow followed by an urgently gentle blow onto the cup as his mouth lit with fiery protest over the near scalding liquid washing over his taste buds.

Frank however crossed his arms. Turning his head subtly in an indicative motion toward the two young men seated before his desk. 'There is something off about those two. More Carlos than Anthony.'

'Why's that chief?'

'Carlos seems especially nervous. Anxious even.'

'I wouldn't call being picked up by police for questioning exactly a relaxing activity. Especially, given a longtime friend was found mauled to death behind a dumpster,' replied Marshall with raised eyebrows. Lifting the warm, but no longer steaming, cup of coffee up to his lips. Taking a second swig of coffee without the previous motion of urgent blowing and exasperation of a tongue scalding.

Frank sighed in mild frustration. Ready to turn on his heel when Marshall spoke up, quickly, despite the mild sting his tongue just endured. 'Heard anything from Charles?'

'What?' replied Frank with confusion flowing into his words.

Marshall shifted his eyes around awkwardly, 'Shouldn't we check on him? Remember he's watching the apartment on Hilgard?'

Frank put a hand over his eyes momentarily in exasperation for having to be reminded about this. *I'm getting to old for this shit.* 'Oh, right, yeah, mind giving him a ring for me?'

Marshall lowered his mug, 'Yeah, sure thing. So what ya' gonna' do with those two then?' Indicating the two young men still sitting in Frank's office. The older detective seeming to mull over a response with gentle shifting of his head from side to side. 'You're probably right. I guess I gotta' cut em' loose.'

'Yeah, and get some sleep too.'

'I'll sleep after we pick up Charles.'

* * *

Watch this'll just be me standing here like a damn creep on the street all night. Detective Charles Graham leaned up against a street lamp as he scanned the environment around him. Decades on the job and a core lesson he internalized early on was to never be caught at ease. A calm breeze wafted between the softly rustling leaves of the small trees lining the road. Their brown trunks spaced out at regular intervals on both sides of the road. Forward and to his left, Charles would see the dark masses of the Botanical Gardens, forming an impressive shroud of darkness, which very nearly blocked out much of the campus lights beyond. Like bright stars shining through the blackness of the void.

Looking up at the apartments lining Hilgard, Charles could see a slowly growing lack of light shining within those abodes, as more and more inhabitants turned in for the night; or, and quite probable, were elsewhere celebrating the start of the semester. Indeed, as if on cue. A spurious crash of voices

echoed behind Charles. Giving the older man a brief pause as he tilted his body just enough to see behind him. Down the block near the intersection, a small meandering group of what were presumably university students crossed east to west. Some holding brown paper bags, others smoking traditional cigarettes while others puffed on vape pens, mixing tobacco smoke with the flavorful sweetness of gray fog bellowing from the mouth and noses of the more modern products used by their peers.

The traveling column of students vanished behind the mass of apartments reaching down Hilgard. Charles tilted himself back forward toward Miss Wallington's apartment and squinted. Kicking off the street lamp, he took several rapid steps forward. *I know I'm old but I swear I saw; God dammit Charles you slow ass old bag of bones.*

Silencing the nagging voice in the back of Charles mind the Detective rested his right hand on the familiar, comforting, grip of his side arm. Flipping the top of the holster open, fingers coiling around the grip, ready to draw. Ahead, on the

opposing side of the apartment rented by Miss Wallington and her currently absentee roommate, Cynthia Summers, a quick shift of shadow had caught the corner of Charles vision. *Better have been the wind. I ain't getting bit by some fucking rat I'll tell you what. Jumped by a God's damned raccoon Frank would never let that go.*

Reaching the opposite alleyway that lay on the left hand side of the two young ladies apartment should one be facing their front door. Charles heard a rustle amid the garbage cans. Stepping ever so lightly. Charles moved into the alleyway proper. *All right, just come on out.*

The darkness of the alleyway and then the back alley it connected too, running behind and between the apartment buildings lining Hilgard and that of the parallel street Malcolm Avenue, was not entirely pitch black. The street lamps of Hilgard, coupled with the dimmed lights emanating from the edges of pulled shades or drawn curtains, provided a blending contrast. Illuminating pavement and refusing to give way to a

hazy gloom thence. Blotches of radiance in the smothering opaqueness of back street darkness.

Charles shifted to the wall of the apartment building next to Cynthia and Elizabeth's unit. Allowing himself to peer around the corner. Gazing upon piles of discarded detritus that he soon, cautiously, passed. Except perversely the garbage cans were silent now. The sound of scraping footfalls sounded to his right in the back-alley. Charles slid his service pistol smoothly from its holster. Feeling the familiar weight and security that the 9mm Beretta 92FS provided. Thumbing off the safety Charles peered around the corner into the back-alley proper. Looking behind and before him quickly. Two steps to the left and he was firmly in the back-alley. Weapon raised by his right hand, held close to his torso, the detective's eyes strained to pierce the gloomy shadows hugging most of the world around him.

A rustle above him, the strain of metal as something clambered among the fire escapes, Charles snapped his arm up. Eyes following to scan the fire escape above him. The fire

escape ladder was raised and the metal staircase above him peculiarly empty. *What the fuck is going on?!* The only sound back to just simple air. Pushed by a gentle nighttime breeze. Occasionally, wafting through the concrete warrens of the urban landscape encroaching everywhere around Charles. Lowering his side arm and looking about himself in personal embarrassment over his clear anxiety. Charles could only smirk and mutter to himself, 'I'm going senile.'

Beep. The chirping vibrations of his department issued phone going off in his pocket gave urgency to the detective's movements. Cramming a free hand into his pocket. Charles hoisted the smart phone out of his pocket and read the screen. *Incoming call from the U.C.L.A. Police Department? Probably found our missing lady.*

The clang of metal above jolted Charles vision upwards. A sudden burst of motion at the back corner of his eyesight. 'Gah!' Charles gasped as the air was knocked from his lungs. His back protesting. Spine cracking. A sudden unstoppable pressure struck him on both shoulder blades.

Detective Graham pitched forward awkwardly onto his face. The side of his skull smashing into the hard pavement with meaty clunk. Vision swimming, metal skittering as his service pistol clattered away, a leering brute silhouetted in murk was the last thing Charles saw as the blackness of the alleyway swallowed his senses.

Interlude

Elizabeth Wallington

The day had not passed well for Elizabeth following her interview with the Los Angeles Police Department. What was a constant stream of barely constrained emotions during her questioning conducted by Detective Graham this very afternoon grew to be a torrential downpour of stomach bruising wailing. The detectives' departure opening the floodgates of young Elizabeth's eyes. Staining youthful skin with the smell and granular texture of tears. Forming clear rivulets of sorrow down what was once a pair of pleasant, rosy, cheeks. James Dawson, one of Elizabeth's lifelong friends since she was a little girl; memories of their childhood with him jeering at her adolescent proclamation to be the queen of Glen Alla Park; is dead. Murdered. The news that morning, what she had told

Cynthia her dearest friend, propelled Elizabeth to double over. Collapsing to a pathetic sob sprawled across the kitchen floor. No longer even trying to hold any semblance of control. Her attempts at stalling her tears via tissues failed. Giving in to the gut twisting self-loathing for existence that can only throttle those whom experienced such a close loss. Twin cascades dripped from reddening cheeks onto her exposed arms and floor.

Elizabeth's mind wandered as she sat there. Slowly rocking back as her knees rolled. Body weight hitting the white wooden cabinets behind her as she forced herself into a new weeping position. Psyche drifting off into the recesses of shelved memory. Days she and the others, Cynthia and Carlos and Anthony, had all spent together. The laughter and joy of playing games in the basement of her parent's home in Marina Del Ray. The way James would purposely lose at Mario Kart just so she could win. The times James and her would have challenges on who could go back and forth on the monkey bars at Glen Alla. How they would all ride their long gone bicycles

down the streets of the local neighborhood playing cops and robbers. The time she and Anthony had put a baseball through a neighbor's window but Carlos and James willingly took the blame. All those years, recollections of half a lifetime, were all that she had now. The joyous grin of a young man aiming for the stars. Forever to no longer grace the life she lived.

Twinkling eyes that would join hers in looking out at the vast expanse of the night sky on back trails during their spontaneous hiking adventures during high school. Glossy and lifeless in death. Probably only at staring at some cold lab ceiling.

Waiting to be spending eternity gazing at nothing but the interior of a coffin.

Elizabeth hung her head low as she wheezed a gut-wrenching shriek of lament for the loss only a lifelong companion could deliver. What was she to tell Cynthia? Carlos? Anthony? Did they know? One could only fathom their reactions. So Elizabeth sat, heaving heavy sobs, under the stark white light of a kitchen fixture.

Minutes ticked by and the Sun began to descend. Denoting the march of the ticking clock. Unabated in its passage. Minutes becoming hours with each tick of the hands. Natural light of an uncaring outside world slowly reducing to a stark nothingness. Like the hollow formed in Elizabeth's heart. The cold artificiality of human street lighting providing the only external reminder of life going on around her. A life indifferent to the anguish Elizabeth felt. As she lay collapsed against the cabinetry and floor of her kitchen.

Neck rotating to the right and upwards, head heavy, she glanced at the clock resting on a simple nail protruding from the off-white walls of the kitchen. *Cynthia should be home soon.* Another pang of anguish struck her with all the force of a ruthlessly swift hammer. Yet, she fought it. Wobbly arms and legs as Elizabeth leveraged herself to stand. Fingers wiping away the wetness upon her face. Grunting a sickly phlegm full cough to dispel the gunk, which had coalesced in her throat.

Moving from the kitchen to the living room, retracing her short migration from hours earlier, Elizabeth scooped up

discarded tissues. Shoveling them into the white metal trashcan located in the kitchen. Running a hand through her blonde hair, she plucked the pair of glasses, that which in her grief been discarded onto the floor, and raised them to her face. Returning them to their rightful place on the bridge of her nose.

Elizabeth Wallington's tight frame moved up the stairs to the bedrooms. Hers being right across from Cynthia's. Entering her room, she paused. Eyes latching onto the numerous pictures hanging on her wall. Pictures of everyone at birthday parties, graduation celebrations, and hanging out at various points throughout their lives. An awkward result of five youths crowding an old Kodiak phone lens for an impromptu picture. Proudly and prominently displayed at the center of this year's-in-the-making-collage.

Pulling herself forward, practically having to will her own body to move, Elizabeth pried her eyes off the pictures and moved to her phone. Resting on her desk, right next to the mandatory semester reading given by the school, sat an old Android smart phone. Whisking it off the surface of the desk,

thumbing through her contacts with practiced precision, Elizabeth put the phone to her right ear. The sound of ringing echoing back to her as she waited for the recipient of this call to answer.

The sound of the call being picked up was met by the sound of a rushed, all too familiar, voice, 'James, I'

'Cynthia?' said Elizabeth before she could stop herself. Confused at Cynthia calling her James. *Did she not even check the number?*

The voice of her friend grew flustered, 'Elizabeth?'

Does she already know? Elizabeth cleared her throat before speaking, 'What were you saying about James? Cyn, you need to come home right away. It's about the news this morning. The police were here and they're looking for you, Cyn, James is dead. I don't know what else to tell you right now but you need to come home right away. Please.' No reply. 'Hello?' A crash outside of her window caused Elizabeth to drop her phone abruptly. The phone clattering away across the carpeted floor with a quick series of dull thuds. 'Fuck!' shouted

Elizabeth as she stumbled on after it. Picking it up she swore under her breath. The call had been ended by either her hand when she jolted or the impact of the phone on the surface of the carpet. Scowling, Elizabeth stood up, and moved to her window. Mumbling, 'Bet its those fucking cats again.'

Elizabeth's brow furrowing, pinkish cheeks drawing taunt, nose crinkling she spotted nothing but empty pavement, closed garbage bins, and the dark metal stairs of the fire escape. *Can't see shit.* Elizabeth reached up, flicked the locks on the window open, and hefted the pane up. Letting the cool air wash over her as she stuck her head out. Craning her neck around with a more clear view of the entire back alley until it vanished behind the gentle curvature of the neighboring apartments backyard fences. Still nothing as she looked left to right and then right under her, right to-. *What the fuck!* There, right below the fire escape, was the prone form of the Los Angeles Police Department Detective that had questioned her earlier. The polite one? Karl or something? A dark shape shifted near the body from the shadows bathing the first floor

wall of her apartment. Elizabeth froze in terror. Eyes widening as the dark mass coalesced into a hulking humanoid form. Elizabeth gasped, left hand clamping over her mouth, too late. Her eyes locked with those of something profane that vice grips grasped her heart. The dark shape rocketed upwards. Grasping the end of the fire escape and catapulting itself upwards. Elizabeth screamed.

Reeling, bashing the back of her skull on the bottom of her window frame, Elizabeth sprawled onto her back. Gasping, panting, terrified sweat forming on her brow as she frantically used her elbows to back up from the open window. A dark figure emerged into view on the opposite side. Leering yellow-green eyes boring into her very mind. Hairs standing on Elizabeth's neck. Cold moisture running down its slender flesh. Utterly at odds with a rapidly expanding warm sensation erupting from her loins as her gaping visage met the shrouded darkness beyond the window. The young woman backed up as rapidly as she could. Fight or flight taking over her body. Pure instinct, adrenaline, dumped into her bloodstream. Retreat

picking up speed until her elbows met empty air. Elizabeth yelled as she went feet overhead backwards down the staircase. Rolling down the steps end over end until her body slammed against the door and wall below. Elizabeth tasted blood; she had bit her tongue on the way down, and moved frantically in a bruising scramble of limbs to rise. Battered from the tumult she jinked away from the stairs and toward the door.

Latching onto it like a newfound savior. Glass broke upstairs. Elizabeth turned; face still aimed at the stairs, as she frantically tried to pull at the door. It was locked. Heavy footfalls from above coming closer to the platform at the top of the staircase. Panicky hands desperately jumbled with the locks until Elizabeth's instincts told her that the figure was at the stairs. The presence behind was getting closer, she could feel it, an internal voice screamed for Elizabeth to hide. Her eyes latched onto the old Nokia cell phone resting in its station on the counter. She dashed for it.

Prying it from the charge port it was resting on and began to dial 911. The stairs creaked slowly and all blood

drained from her face. She moved rapidly to the pantry and slid in, gently closing the door just as the footfalls were halfway down the stairs, the faint voice of the operator came through the earpiece.

Elizabeth backed into the pantry but dared not answer the operator on the other line attempting to speak with her. The footfalls came down to her floor. She gripped a hand onto her mouth. Clamping any squeals from escaping. Whoever, whatever it was, now seemed to be searching for her. Foot falls moving around the living room. Into the kitchen, Elizabeth stiffened, believing even the slightest physical movement would give her hiding away. *Its o.k., It'll be o.k., the police are coming.* The sounds of whoever was in her apartment receded back up the stairs frantically as sirens blared in the distance. Elizabeth relaxed, realizing she had not even been breathing, and raised the phone to her mouth. Whispering softly, 'Hello?'

The door to the pantry ripped open! Door torn from its hinges by sheer force. Elizabeth barely had to scream at the top of her lungs an iron grip grasped her body by the scruff of her

shirt and sent her careening out of the pantry. Smashing face first onto the top of the counter. Shattering dishes, breaking her nose in a fountain of jettisoning crimson. Knocking the coffee maker onto the ground in a violent crash of debris, she tried to move away. A ferocious grip latched onto her. Elizabeth grabbed the counter top in attempted defiance. But it was futile as she was torn from the counter-top and by the thigh and back of the neck she was flung. However, it did not let go. Sending her face first into the refrigerator. Crunch. Her jaw cracked and vertebrae popped out of place as she was withdrawn and crashed into the stainless steel exterior of the refrigerator. Blood bubbled and dripped from her broken mouth as she let out pathetic mulling pleas. All for not, for her attacker threw her bodily like a rag-doll. Flying backwards only for the back of her delicate head to crash into the plasma screen television mounted on the entertainment center before the sofa. Demolishing its screen Elizabeth's vision, already muddled and rimmed with black, went red as she felt her brain rattle. Feeling

it bounce from the back of her skull forward by the sheer force of the impact.

Elizabeth could only let out a weak moan, the last breathe to leave her lips, as the young woman with sun kissed cheeks rolled onto her front. Iron grip on the back of her skull. Lancing pain from this latest injury intensified by the pressure of her assailants grip. She was hoisted, head drawn back, and then plunged down brutally. Eyes swelling, probably for the best, as she could not see the rapidly approaching surface of the entertainment zone meet the front of her skull. One crunch, Elizabeth flailed her arms and legs in resistance; second crunch, her arms went limp; third crunch and her body could only jerk in pathetic death spasms. The iron grip released her.

A sound came from the front door. The doorknob slowly turning.

Chapter XI

The near rhythmic growl of a 428 CJ engine came to a swift silence. The swing of a car door opening and closing. Followed by the rapid, measured, gait of a sharp dressed man crossing the small asphalt parking lot. Heading towards welcoming front door before him. The jingling bell announcing his arrival under a neon glare.

The Concierge, the same African-American woman from the night before, nodded with a small polite nod for greeting. The well-dressed black-clad man gave a polite smile and nod in return. Swiftly moving to the bottom of the stairs. Suddenly, The Driver-in-Black turned around on his heel. Swinging about he moved with a slight urgency to his gait. Posting up just across from the Concierge who blinked at the sudden movement.

'Can I help you, Sir?' she queried with a small smile while hopping off the stool she had been seated at.

'You know they should really give you a chair,' said The Driver-in-Black in black with a polite tone.

'Sir?' said the Concierge awkwardly.

'Your stool. You should really have a chair. Must be tiresome to hold a good posture your entire shift.' His explanation without the slightest change in tone.

The Concierge's eyes swiveled to the side, back at her stool, with the slightest rotation of her neck. 'Oh.' She turned back to the black-clad man in the nice looking suit. 'I suppose they should. Is there something I can help you with in particular?' A small crack ruining her voice as she replied.

The Driver-in-Black not once took his gaze off her. Crossing his arms on the counter-top to seem more relaxed, he changed the topic abruptly, 'How much for another night?'

The Concierge lightly bit her lip as she typed a few keys onto her computer station keyboard. 'Can extend your stay for another thirty dollars a night from here on out?'

'That's a pretty good deal,' he said quickly. The Concierge smiled to reveal pearly white teeth. However, no verbal reply on her part was forthcoming as The Driver-in-Black pulled three twenty-dollar bills from his small wallet. Placing them on the counter, 'I'll take another two nights, please.'

The Concierge scooped up the bills and after a flurry of typing accompanied by the occasional click of a computer mouse and replied, 'Would you like a receipt?'

'No, thank you.'

'Yes-.' She started, but when her eyes swiveled up to regard her guest it was just empty air. The Driver-in-Black was gone. Leaving her to look about the room in puzzlement for a minute before going back on her stool slowly.

* * *

The *Le Sage* could be best described as uniformly *chic*. Its style contrasting modern hotel designs by an elegance firmly rooted in that of 1920's *Art Deco*. Room number 3, located on the second floor, was no exception to the rule. Yet,

its interior as The Driver-in-Black once more pushed open the door was much more subdued in elegance. From its small, rather bland, bathroom. To the mute colors of the room's small sleeping space and living area. The only noticeable difference this mute style were the brass lamps and modern stainless steel appliances; which, unless one was really particular to interior decoration may have been about as noticeable as a single goose in a flock of geese.

Swiftly sitting down on the undisturbed comforter The Driver-in-Black whipped out his plain black flip phone. A nimble thumb opened the device. Revealing by 2019 standards a rather archaic looking, rectangular, vertically centered, screen and nine-key dialing pad. Dialing a sequence of digits by rote memory the phone was lifted to The Driver-in-Black's ear. The harsh rattle of a dialing tone resonating through the well-dressed man's eardrum. Breathing deeply as he straightened his back. Feeling the crackle of stiff vertebrae. Letting out a soft exhale of carbon dioxide. Continuing with a rolling of his shoulders as the tone sounded once more.

Click.

A melodious voice akin to soft flitting doves amid a moonlit grove oozed from the receiver. Soft, but hiding a lethal edge. Hidden razor beneath a lacquered honey pacing for feminine speech. Coaxing itself into The Driver-in-Black's mind.

'John, I do hope there is a corpse at your feet?'

'No, Mam!'

'How disappointing. I had hoped The Maestro's aid would have greatly expedited this matter.'

'Madame. May I ask the connection between the murders of Camorra associates and a University student?'

There was a distinct pause as silence befell the conversation almost as abrupt as communication had begun. The Driver-in-Black looked at his feet, idly tapping his black Italian leather shoes together, almost bored.

'The connection is none of your present concern John. The elimination of the hostile party is.' The tone of the

woman's voice sharpened just a touch like the prickling bite of a new razor.

'Yes, Mam!'

'I trust you have more to report?'

'That I do. The Maestro's aid was helpful, along with the evidence obtained by Kheiron, I request permission to be granted a Clause Seven Authorization.'

'And what would warrant such extraordinary discretion Mister Korvinus?'

The Driver-in-Black paused for a moment, 'I believe the killer to be of extraordinary origin, of course.' *Extraordinary, Clause Seven Authorization, code words for someone operating in their underworld needing to be eliminated through any means necessary.*

A moment's pause before the woman continued speaking with a more spaced out tempo between words, 'A Clause Seven Authorization will be granted for this abnormal predicament.'

'Thank you, Mam!'

Click. The woman on the other end of the line terminated the connection. Leaving The Driver-in-Black in silence. Only the muffled movements of his body to disturb the silence as he swung himself fully onto the bed. Shutting the phone with a small clack, he again stowed the device back within an inner coat pocket. Lowering his hands slowly beside him The Driver-in-Black closed his eyes and drifted off into the pitch-blackness of slumber.

* * *

The low buzz of a gyrating phone disturbed The Driver-in-Black from his slumber with as much effectiveness as a bashing gong or a crashing of brass. Rising to a seated position, swinging his legs off the bed, The Driver-in-Black moved into the living space of the hotel room and pulled out the relatively archaic phone. A small screen lit with a sequence of digits for the offending phone number creating the small vibrating ruckus now held firmly in his grip.

Answering the phone smoothly The Driver-in-Black made a show of stepping into the bathroom and dabbing his face with water and a towel.

'Mister Korvinus, I need you and your antique of a motor vehicle down to Hilgard Avenue next to the University of California right away.'

The urgency in Kai's voice was telling that he was bearing witness to something important. But important was relative and The Driver-in-Black didn't like the idea of being dragged across Los Angeles on every random sense of urgency. However, he needed to have results and a corpse soon. Frowning, The Driver-in-Black spoke calmly, 'Of course.'

* * *

The rhythmic thrum of an automobile engine signaled the departure of a sleek black 1969 Mustang Mach 1 Super Cobra Jet from the parking lot before the *Le Sage* hotel in the early hours of the morning. The City of Los Angeles still cast in the orange haze of morning with the lancing rays of the Sun penetrating the atmospheric flesh of the Earth like the warming

spears of some fiery god. None could escape the relentless reach of such celestial brilliance, striking the body of the black Mustang, ricocheting off the metal body of the vehicle in blazing white glare. Heralding its passage like a dazzling black comet along the rumbling asphalt.

Navigating the concrete jungle of Los Angeles provided its own unique challenge. Moving along the rough, calcified, pavement that are the arteries of Los Angeles' transit system. Which, even in the newly lit sky of a rising Sun, was already becoming congested by the legions of Californians conducting their daily commutes into the urban conglomeration of the Los Angeles plateau. *Le Sage* itself was not even very far from Hilgard Avenue geographically speaking. However, as the amount of automobiles to the fore and rear of the Mustang began to increase exponentially, the speed of its passage declined just as precipitously. The atherosclerosis afflicting the city's transitory system almost an endemic reminder to The Driver-in-Black of the situation pervading the great metropolis rearing up around him. Rolling down the window The

Driver-in-Black casually rested an arm on the windowsill of his car door. Casting lazy eyes around to track the increasing life permeating from the city streets to the opening of shops beginning their business day. The idle blow of a trash bag catching his wandering eyes as it flitted along a vacant portion of a sidewalk. A subtle reminder of the city's overall health drawing a small frown from the black-clad man behind the wheel.

The clicking of a turn indicator and the 69' Mustang pulled onto the lower end of Hilgard Avenue. Quickly coming to a stop next to the curb The Driver-in-Black looked at the wall of police squad cars cutting access through Hilgard before one of the apartment buildings. An ambulance, lights flashing but siren off, sat central with emergency medical technicians entering and leaving one of the housing units.

Pushing the gear stick of the Mustang into Park The Driver-in-Black made to exit the vehicle. However, before he could a pair of arms rested on the still open window. A pale faced man in a blue button up coat crouching down to lean on

the windowsill while saying in mock tone, 'About time you showed up.' The mocking man however kept his eyes aimed down at the activity before one of the domiciles. His Belgian accent however was a dead giveaway.

'Good Morning to you too, Kai.'

'Yeah, yeah, whatever.' Kai looked a bit on edge about the whole ordeal despite his face being cast in shadow by the stature of the apartment buildings just to The Driver-in-Black right.

'You seem unsettled,' responded The Driver-in-Black, rather casually, as he swung his gaze along the mingling figures of emergency medical technicians and uniformed police officers. Roving back and forth like ants over a kicked mound.

'Yeah, well, our little homicidal maniac on the loose struck again, Korvinus, and far earlier than I could have suspected.'

'The killer has already achieved quite the body count already Kai.'

'Three associates and now a pair of University twats.

Tell me you've any idea on the connection?'

'I have a lead.'

'Well, don't be so conservative about it, spill.'

'There was a direct witness to the murder of James Dawson. Saw the whole thing.'

'You're shitting me?'

The Driver-in-Black glanced at Kai. Visually stating, *do I look like I am joking*. Kai, tongue-in-cheek for a moment as he rose up to full height and looked around casually before saying, 'Well, best get in there.'

'What makes you think this is the same killer?' asked The Driver-in-Black suddenly in a flat tone. The inquiry, despite being delivered rather apathetically, seemed to strike Kai like a backhand. The older looking man ran a hand across his jawline in thought before replying. His words coming off almost as flat, however with a tad bit of annoyance creeping into his tone, as Kai explained, 'I did some digging of my own.'

Apparently three bodies found in a cistern in Tijuana match the methods of our little maniac.'

'Methods?'

'The way a k —,' Kai paused as he looked at The Driver-in-Black quickly and saw, around those pitch black shades, a face of pure annoyance to Kai's in progress explanation. Kai simply resumed speaking after averting his gaze, 'Right, of course you know what that is, the bodies were all beaten to a barely recognizable pulp in the exact manner as our latest series of unfortunate individuals.'

'And? Where did you find this information, Kai?'

'I used our employer's connection into the Los Angeles Police Department databases. Be amazed at what one can find in there.' Kai raised his eyebrows in excitement at those last words.

'Good work.' *The behind the scenes powers which ran Los Angeles had their fingers in many institutions. The Los Angeles Police being an obvious member.*

'Thank y-.'

The car door opened abruptly. Kai stepping back quickly to avoid being struck. Hands raised in mock surprise to the sudden aggressive movement. Stepping aside Kai watched The Driver-in-Black began moving towards the barricade of police vehicles. The man with the Belgian grumbling under his breath. Something about his colleague always having attitude. Watching the black-clad driver walk away with long, yet almost casual, strides.

The Driver-in-Black moved briskly. His gait possessing a certain saunter that balanced the relative rigidity of his inexorable approach to the scene. A scene that became even more apparent so his mental faculties the closer he drew. The air hung heavy.

Approaching the perimeter barrier of police cars. He could see various forensic technicians, not only coming and going from an apartment building, but also milling around the adjacent alleyway. *Multiple fatalities?*

Nearing a gap between the bumpers of two squad cars, an authoritative voice assailed the advance of the black-clad

man. 'Halt!' A slight scuffle of rubber on asphalt signaled the halt of The Driver-in-Black's advance. Lifting his gaze to view a uniformed police officer coming around one of the squad cars. One of the officer's hands raised. Acronym for Los Angeles Police Department stitched onto the dark fibers of his Kevlar vest in white thread.

Glancing around from behind his dark shades while the officer pulled up before him, hand still raised, 'Sir, I can't let you pass unless I see some identification.'

Diving a hand into his inner coat pocket The Driver-in-Black fished out a small black leather bi-fold. Flicking it open to reveal a Federal Bureau of Investigation badge and shield. Complete with a matching identification card. Speaking with practiced calm The Driver-in-Black introduced himself as, 'Agent Locke.'

The police officer took the badge gingerly and looked over it with a well-trained eye. The Driver-in-Black already glancing over every inch of the officer's person. From metal

nametag to rank insignia. *Wilkinson, Corporal, Patrol Division.*

'We weren't aware the F.B.I was coming?' said the officer as he looked back up at the black-clad man before him. *Given the presence of the ambulance, emergency medical technicians, and a Los Angeles Police Department forensic unit. One could easily surmise that there was just a body, or bodies perhaps, nearby.*

Again, with practiced calm The Driver-in-Black's response flowed from his lips, 'I am here to investigate if the incident has any connection with the Dawson murder.'

Officer Wilkinson frowned. Deep brown eyes under equally dark brows given renewed scrutiny. 'The Dawson homicide? That case is under Detective Kirkwood, Agent; I'm going to have to call your handler.'

'His handler is right here!' A voice that was all too recently familiar. Just without the typical associated accent. The Driver-in-Black glanced behind him to see, through his

wide wire shades, the form of Kai crossing the remaining minute distance between himself and the officer.

'You're his handler?' Officer Wilkinson pursed his lips with a raised eyebrow.

'Yes,' replied Kai as he revealed his own matching bi-fold with identification making him out to be a member of the F.B.I. as well. 'Special Agent Richards,' Kai indicated to himself.

The officer glanced at it, 'I'm going to have too-,'

'You're going to have to let us in there.' Kai's interruption was more firm this time.

Wilkinson paused and squinted at Kai. Clearly not used to Federal agents rolling up onto a crime scene in such an *ad hoc* manner. Kai continued with a growing impatience creeping into his voice, 'We're here pursuing a match between the Dawson homicide and an older case pertaining to three deceased United States Nationals found down in Tijuana. Bodies that matched the wounds suffered by Dawson and quite possibly the one in there. Quite unsurprising at this point our

trio of fallen associates all were attached to the same case at the time.'

Pointing to the apartment building, which hummed with police department activity, 'We have reason to believe that they are connected. Now, if you would please, time is wasting.' Kai stepped past a now flustered Wilkinson while tucking away his bi-fold. However, not before 'Agent Locke' reached forward to smoothly pluck his own badge back from the Officer Wilkinson's hand.

The officer could only shrug, moving back to the other side of the squad cars, while speaking into his radio mic. No doubt informing his superiors that two Federal agents had arrived unannounced onto the scene. Their passage onto the sidewalk and lawn remained unassailable for a second time, however.

The Driver-in-Black raised his eyebrows just a tad in what could quite possibly be genuine surprise. 'You doing field work?' muttered The Driver-in-Black as he pulled up squarely beside Kai.

Kai to his credit gave a good show of being casual as a he smiled to a young forensic technician walking on by with a camera. Tilting his head ever so little to mutter back at 'Agent Locke' in a quick flurry of words, 'Listen, *Agent*, the more bodies that drop the less patient our superiors get. You have a lead. I found a possible connection. It isn't entirely reasonable for me to tag along right now.'

The door of the apartment building hung open. A noticeable crack in its frame. Some great force had applied pressure from the inside recently. The Driver-in-Black stopped and turned to his supposed 'handler', 'You check the alleyway, I'll check inside, tell me what you find.'

'Like it'll help if I keep it to myself?' quipped Kai before sauntering off into the adjacent alleyway. Leaving The Driver-in-Black, now also known as Agent Locke, at the entrance to the apartment. Running a hand through his raven black hair before pressing forward. Stepping beyond into the apartment itself.

The apartment upon initial entry was alight with both conversation and movement. Forensic technicians took pictures, a few uniformed officers jotting down notes, while moving to the right of a staircase leading to the second floor a half circle of three Men stood over a blood stained mess. Presumably were a body had once been.

The Driver-in-Black immediately recognized Kheiron as one of the individuals in the half-circle examining the bloodstains. *The other two I presume must be detectives. The older one, best guess, being the aforementioned Detective Kirkwood. Bodies been already moved. Kai wasn't as fast as I'd hoped, this is just clean up and story time now, dammit.*

Stepping forward The Driver-in-Black made it not more than a couple strides before Kheiron perked up and met eyes to sunglasses. The Coroner-Examiner's dark irises narrowing. Meeting the pitch-blackness of The Driver-in-Black own silver wire sunglasses. Whatever recognition there was between the two was not superficially apparent as the contact broke barely a second later. Yet, a second was more than enough to lure the

vision of the two detectives. Both shifting their gazes over to the form of the newly arrived Driver-in-Black.

'And who might you be?' said the younger dark olive skinned detective. The Driver-in-Black resumed moving forward and stopped to add himself to the semi-circle casually. Extending a hand to the younger detective who shook it politely, all the while speaking, 'Agent Locke, F.B.I., seeing if there is any connection with what occurred here, the Dawson homicide, and the bodies found in Tijuana.'

The still youthful detective spoke formally while introducing himself in turn. His older compatriot doing the same with an equally brief handshake. *Detectives Kirkwood and Marshall. Sounds like a real Crockett and Tubbs if you asked me.*

The Driver-in-Black, 'Agent Locke', nodded to everyone, 'Well, what do we have?' *A bit tacky of a thing to say. I admit.*

Kheiron, well to the actual detectives it was 'Doctor Chyron,' stood and indicated the various pools of crimson

splatter. 'The unfortunate Miss Wallington was found last night by her roommate, Cynthia Summers, and a pair of uniformed officers that in turn, found her in the Gardens across the way.' Pointing towards the Botanical Gardens maintained by the University across from Hilgard.

'And what was the roommate doing there after dark?' asked The Driver-in-Black. *Be a bit of a twist if the roommate was involved? Might as well look for the nearest butler.*

The younger detective, Marshall, turned his head to the sombre-clad Agent Locke and replied smoothly, 'She was supposedly going to meet her boyfriend, James Dawson,' letting out a short sigh, 'she was unaware of his death at the time.'

A most curious delay. Sure, the victim's name had not yet been released. Out of respect for the deceased's family no doubt. But, Dawson's death was broadcasting across all Los Angeles news networks, all day. 'The girlfriend of the first victim was out alone at night and very unaware about her significant others murder?' The Driver-in-Black pressed

further. Perhaps his own finding of such astounding aloofness perplexing.

The younger detective again delivered the answer, 'From what we learned from the campus police who found Miss Summers she spoke with her roommate before leaving and felt assured it couldn't have been him in the alley. She also was supposedly responding to text messages from Dawson.'

'So it's safe to assume that whoever was sending those messages was likely the perpetrator?' remarked Agent Locke with a touch surprise in his voice.

'Yes,' Marshall's reply resolute.

'Damn.' Placing his hands on his hips. More to play the part than any feeling of perplexed frustration at this stonewall of events. *Events, which did hold some clues to be sure. Therefore, the killer definitely has Dawson's phone. Likely knows all of his close contacts and most probably mid-way to planning their third kill. Three in Tijuana. Three in Los Angeles.*

'Yeah.' Marshall shoved his hands in his pockets.
Embracing the feeling let out by The Driver-in-Black.

Raising his left hand, index finger extending, The Driver-in-Black scanned the room, voice mirroring his sly wonder, 'Say, wasn't there a homeless man that was questioned the other day?' Wandering eyes coming to rest on the trio before him once more, 'Wouldn't happen to remember who that was off the top of your head by chance?'

The question catching the Marshall momentarily off guard, brow freshly furrowed. Kirkwood on the other hand drew up his chin by an inch. No doubt trying to predict were this line of questioning could be headed. Marshall's words coming off with traces of surprised apprehension. Clearly mind racing to see if there was some link to all this that he would have missed, 'Uh, yeah, Chase Anthony. Resident of Skid Row. Was according to his own statement up in Los Feliz collecting bottles for redemption.'

'Got an address?'

Marshall pulled out his notepad and after copying the address down from one sheet to another he tore the page away. Handing it quickly to The Driver-in-Black. Who took it with a polite nod of thanks.

Abruptly changing the topic with a polite smile, 'So what could be the motive for the murder of Miss Wallington?'

Now it was the turn of the older detective who tilted his head when looking at The Driver-in-Black, as if still coming to terms with why the F.B.I was present, to give an answer, 'I believe that Miss Wallington wasn't the original target. Given the timeline of events, it is likely that the roommate, Cynthia Summers as we've mentioned, was the intended victim. However, the combination of our colleague's presence, on top of Cynthia being escorted by a pair of Officers from the Campus police, we can only assume that Miss Wallington is a victim by circumstantial choice.'

'So why kill at all then?' Marshall interjected accompanied by shoulder length raised hands, 'That is the part I am still having trouble with. If Cynthia was the intended

victim, why assault a Detective and then conduct a violent act such as this with the original victim so close? Under police escort to boot? Seems irrational and brash for a serial killer whom so far has shown to be adept at remaining undetected.'

Kirkwood rested his chin on the palm of his hand in contemplation. Stroking his chin the wizened detective pondered out loud, 'This strikes me as overtly opportunistic behavior. Not the premeditated ambush that occurred with Dawson.'

'A deviance from the last killing, yes, but we lack the sufficient detail from the Tijuana killings to know for certain that this is exactly out of character,' commented Chyron. Whom only now spoke.

Except for the three corpses in that cooler back at the mansion showing an evolving methodology of how the victims are killed. But you knew that already, didn't you 'Doctor Chyron'. Squashing this latest mental tirade to the back of his mind. The Driver-in-Black looked at the blood spatter with a chin to chest. Squinting to focus his eyes on the bits of gristle

and brain matter sitting within some of the red blotches. *Like a wild animal on the loose. Aren't you?*

'How did the victim die? Specifically,' asked 'Agent Locke' to the 'Doctor Chyron' with a small exhale. Chyron following the raven-haired man's eyes down to the peculiar blotches displaying the intermixed gristle.

'She was flung at great force.' Pointing to the counter-top, were the various contents on top had been scattered nearby or laid still in ruin, thence drawing an invisible line back to the blotched floor. 'First onto the counter and then here. What followed, what I can only imagine, being a series of repeated impacts of her skull onto the furniture here,' the Coroner-Examiner's index finger indicated the areas of broken furniture and how various pieces had collapsed downwards, 'These impacts causing massive cranial injury that quickly resulted in immediate fatal brain trauma via hemorrhage.' Chyron lowered his finger as he rose to stand.

'That's a different method of murder as well,' mused Marshall. Earning a slight glance by Detective Kirkwood at

that remark. His eyes conveying a look of solemn agreement on this observation done by the younger detective. This statement, however, led to a more nefarious thought entering the mind of 'Agent Locke.'

A murder done out of necessity then. The thought swam in the black-clad man's skull as he slowly turned away to gaze at the counter-top. Looking at all the little yellow evidence markers placed around points of interest.

'Excuse me,' said The Driver-in-Black.

Kirkwood shot out a line with subtle under the radar puzzlement, 'Don't you want to hear how it all happened from beginning to end, Agent Locke?'

'I'll read the report. I would like to retrace things myself if you please.'

The other detective nodded with eyebrows raised, 'Go for it.'

The Driver-in-Black moved off without another word. Casting his gaze over the counter-top and into the destroyed entrance to the pantry. Carefully stepping along to not disturb a

single evidence marker. Raising a hand to the twisted, broken, hinges. Not quite touching them. Roving his gloved palm over a mere quarter inch from the door frames surface. Eyes roving down to the floor of the pantry and there he saw, next to one of those yellow placards, a fallen wireless house phone. Narrative of what occurred already forming in his mind The Driver-in-Black turned back to the front door. *Wallington hid in here for a short while. The mistake, which killed her. Door torn clean off? What could do that? Something large, something strong. Threw her bodily along the counter-top. Swept her from there too the spot where her life ended. It was quick, brutal, and most definitely not painless.*

Moving along, again careful to not disturb the evidence marked by yellow placards, the faux F.B.I. Agent meandered until his eyes rested on the stairwell. The bottom platform and steps showed signs of disturbed carpet fibers. A small dent in the left wall were something small and round struck just hard enough to push in the outer layers. *A heel mark.* Kneeling

down slowly, casting eyes up the steps, the image of a tumbling body flashed into his mind.

You were here. Weren't you Elizabeth. Rising from his haunches, The Driver-in-Black moved away from the front door for a forensic technician to dust the handle for fingerprints. Revealing a whole set of relatively fresh prints before carefully extracting them with a special, clear, adhesive material. The Driver-in-Black looked to his left up the stairs to the second floor, casting with a second glance at the figures of the detectives, still conversing something with Doctor Chyron, he began to ascend.

Reaching the top of the platform in but a handful of strides The Driver-in-Black glanced left and right. A pair of technicians were examining one room in particular, the one on the right. The pictures on the wall stated quite quickly that this was the bedroom belonging to the latest victim. For the most part the pictures are as one might expect. Family photos, selfies taken with friends and group photos, high school graduation picture. The Driver-in-Black stopped and slowly picked up a

heavy metal picture frame. His eyes gazing from behind dark shades at the smiling, dolled up, face of a young woman who had perished just hours prior. A woman he had never met. A woman that her parents would never take pictures with again.

'Sir?' Came a gentle voice from behind.

The Driver-in-Black blinked. Turning while still holding the picture to notice a small framed woman standing behind him. Camera hung by a plain blue lanyard slung around a slender neck. Large brown eyes looking rather puzzled at the man before her. The first thing The Driver-in-Black noticed of course was her fair face. Thin yet healthy, high cheekbones, dashed with a sprinkling of freckles about the bridge of her straight nose. Pretty by many standards.

'I- uh.' The Driver-in-Black sat the frame down while he fumbled his response.

The fair technician did not give him pause, 'Sir, please don't disturb the scene.'

'Scene? Right, yes, the woman who resided here that died downstairs?' quickly replied The Driver-in-Black.

Her voice, pleasant so far, crept with growing concern, 'Sir, who are you? You're not from Detective Kirkwood's team?' The petite woman's face transforming to express the confusion edged into her latest string of words.

Frowning shortly before elevating his voice slightly to appear more apologetic for what no doubt seemed to be a sudden intrusion into the woman's work. 'Right, my apologies, I am Special Agent John Locke, F.B.I., I was just trying to piece together this whole nightmare in my head. Got a bit careless as you saw.'

The woman blinked in her own cognitive debate over this answer. For a moment, her jaw rolled from side to side. Appearing to mull over his every word. Eventually, with a submissive pointing, coming around to indicate the open window. Her voice solidifying with what 'Agent Locke' believed to be acceptance of his lie, 'The window was open to the fire escapes that run down the side of the apartment units on this street. Scuff marks and disturbed dust around the frame indicate one or two people passed through.' Stepping over to

the sill, she indicated with her fingers at the relatively fresh marks on the windowsill.

Interesting. Leaning down, slightly, to view the street below. There, a scene of equal interest to the one on the first floor of this apartment building was playing out. At least half a dozen persons were moving about the street taking pictures, marking placards, and there conversing with an forensic technician holding some papers was Kai.

Returning his gaze to the petite woman, 'Agent Locke' smiled, 'Thank you, mam!'. Turning swiftly he made a brisk retreat from the room. Making for the stairs. When something from the opposing room caught the peripherals of his vision. A picture frame. Holding a photograph bearing the likeness of two individuals. One, the deceased male found in the alley yesterday, and the other being the presumed owner of this particular bedroom. *I wonder.* The simple two-word thought gripped the man calling himself Agent Locke like iron-clad manacles. Dragging him into the room, which he did without resistance, allowing for closer inspection of the space. The

gloom of the room did not faze him despite having his sunglasses still donned. His feet taking a few more paces into the room where he saw numerous photographs of the owner, the late James Dawson, and what could only be presumed as other close friends from this woman's life. However, there was something, the way Dawson and the owner of this bedroom where in their photos. A connection of some kind. Lowering his head to look at some of the pictures, he saw a most peculiar thing. An ivory necklace, small, but bearing a pendant carved in the likeness of a rearing wolf wreathed in feather. Truly detailed artisanship even from the point of view of a photograph. Nevertheless, there was something off about one of these pictures. Everyone of note in this little menagerie was present in almost all of them. James Dawson, full of life as ever; Elizabeth Wallington grinning between the jeering looks of two boys; Cynthia Summers standing on top of a mound holding the necklace. Then there was three people off to the side, almost out of focus, one was also holding something that seemed like a necklace. These three appeared to be roughly the

same age as everyone else. A gloved hand reached and tugged. Pulling the photograph free from its frame. Slowly turning it over there was a label scrawled in elegantly legible handwriting:

Newfoundland, June 2018.

Anthony Perrot, Carlos Rodriguez, Cynthia Summers,

Elizabeth Wallington, James Dawson

Folding the picture into quarters before tucking it firmly into a coat pocket, he glanced about the room. Straightening his neck, he moved along. Vigilantly winding his way about the space. Passing the made bed and open closet. A bathroom could be viewed from where he was now standing and there, sitting on the counter, was a slim white device. A pregnancy tester. *So. Perhaps the latest victim wasn't the intended target, and some-*

'Sir?'

The voice of the petite woman tore apart his mental reality building yet again. Bringing 'Agent Locke,' back to reality once more. Turning around casually he smiled and

spoke, 'Lost in my train of thought. Trying to make sure all the bases are covered,' a hand reached up to tap the side of his skull, 'But I must be going. I apologize once again for disturbing your work.' The Driver-in-Black maneuvered quickly around the woman's small frame. Leaving her with a raised finger as she turned to speak. Only to notice that her quarry was fast retreating down the stairs before she could get a word out. Leaving through the half-open front door and down to the mouth of the alley were there emerged Kai.

'Find anything?' said The Driver-in-Black to his colleague. Kai pointed a thumb back into the alley, 'Found a Detective Charles Graham comatose in the alley during the night. Was apparently surveying the apartment. Someone knocked him out cold, blow to the back of the head, and currently at Ronald Reagan Medical Center.'

Moving over to the edge of the scene, before the police cars, the duo came to one of the ambulances. Pulling open, the doors there sat a gurney bearing a bagged body. Stepping up into the ambulance The Driver-in-Black unzipped the body bag

without pause. Displaying the grotesque form of the late Elizabeth Wallington to the air.

Kai looked away in disgust, not in sympathy.

The Driver-in-Black smirked at this reflex as visually examined the skull and face. *Not a lot of options on who can manhandle a human being like what happened to you, right? But I have my guesses now? Something from the underground best left unsaid has decided to make Los Angeles its new hunting ground. What's this?* Reaching down The Driver-in-Black plucked a long hair fiber from shirt of the late Miss Wallington. *Sloppy now are we. Definitely a kill out of necessity. She saw you, didn't she, saw you attack that Detective and you just couldn't have your cover blown. So you silenced her.* Raising the fiber to his nostrils, he inhaled sharply. Kai practically gagged. *Amarok.*

'Come on.' Tucking the fiber into his coat pocket The Driver-in-Black began meandering back towards the 69' Ford Mustang parked down the street. Their forms cast in the slowly retreating shadows of morning.

Kai held his hands in thought as he finally continued speaking, 'But what I want to know is why?' Finishing with the curling the digits of his left hand, the hand closest to 'Agent Locke,' so that only a pointing index finger remained. As if to visually aim the conjecture at his companion.

'Why? The girl is dead. The officer must have just got in the way and dealt with in such a manner to least likely draw unwanted attention. Could be just another Los Angeles vagrant or drunk University student.' The Driver-in-Black's response clipped and pointed.

Kai, tongue-in-cheek for a second before suddenly stopping in a scuff of rubber on asphalt. Turning partially to his black-clad compatriot who in turn halted with a sidelong gaze. 'Yeah, but still I must ask, why? So what the killer was in the alley, for some reason, gets seen – caught – whatever, by the cop who buys nothing but a concussion? Then what? The girl living there sees that and the killer chases after her to make sure there was no witnesses. Why didn't the killer just hop back outside and finish off the cop?'

'You're seriously strung up on why that blundering detective didn't get his brains plastered all along the alley?'

'I'm just saying the timing must have been – close. Cynthia Summer and those campus cops must have been literally within the door for wha-.'

'An Amarak,' *probably more fearsome than their European lycanthrope brethren in my opinion.*

Kai blinked, 'For an Amarak of all things, to spare our little lawman?'

Kai's opposite bit his lower lip in thought. Putting all that he had witnessed and heard into a story of his own mind's eye. The cop in the alley, the dead girl, the room, 'because neither were the original target. Means there is two more left to kill.'

Kai's eyes narrowed, 'Then who? The roommate?'

The Driver-in-Black nodded as he pulled the photograph from his pocket. Handing it to Kai before starting again. Leaving Kai for a second to process the picture and his notion before having to briskly jog up to rejoin him. Wheeling

around to face his compatriot who was already opening his driver side door, Kai spoke calmly, 'It's the roommate isn't it. Revenge killing, Eh?'

The Driver-in-Black paused for a moment. Kai grinned sheepishly at his lucky guess. 'Yes.' The fresh nonchalant tone of The Driver-in-Black's speech caused Kai to straighten his back. The latter spreading his arms wide as if taken aback by the one word answer.

'Just yes?'

'Yes.'

'Okay,' Kai squinted, 'I'm going to need a little more than just a, 'yes'.'

The Driver-in-Black paused, glancing upwards with the slightest upward tilt of his face, to look at Kai directly. Kai shifted on his feet, licking his lips, speaking more impatiently, 'Our employer is going to want an update on this little investigation of yours. She'll want more than a single word and I don't get,' Kai jabbed a thumb back in the direction of the

crime scene just down the road, 'why you're giving a damn about being glum now.'

'The killer was after the roommate who I believe was involved with 'frat boy' romantically. That picture was taken at an Inuit burial site. Those necklaces came from that site. Do those three off to the side look familiar?'

Kai held the picture closer to his face. Partially unsure in his response, 'Well, I'll be, the three bodies from the cistern.'

The Driver-in-Black nodded in the affirmative.

'So happy go lucky group of university students go on a trip, find an ancient burial site, desecrate it by taking icons from said site, and now an Amarak is knocking them off one by one?'

'Sounds about right.'

'So what the killer was waiting in an alley but got walked up on by a cop and the dead girl just happened to see, is that it. Literally the whole story?' Kai tilted his head to the side in exasperation.

'Sure seems like it.'

'It's against the rules for those of us on the other side to retaliate in such a manner, John. You know what this means if word gets out?'

The Driver-in-Black inhaled deeply, 'Perhaps many don't care for the rules?'

Kai began to raise a finger. Like he was going to reprimand his opposite when The Driver-in-Black swiftly got into his vehicle. Closing the driver side door shut unceremoniously as the engine with fresh gasoline injected vitality thrummed to life. Peeling away from the curb in a tight U-turn, roaring with reborn life only a steel steed could enunciate. Speeding back down Hilgard Avenue. Leaving Kai standing in the shade of those apartment buildings lining the street.

* * *

The City of Angels never slept. Like an insomniac devoid of all order, barely holding onto its own sanity. Once beyond the nauseous thrumming chaos of an awakening Los Angeles. The city never lulled itself to a slower thrumming

beat of Human life. It merely kept pulsating with the millions of souls that thread its brick and concrete mass, that drive down its web of roads and work tediously, day in and day out, amid squat buildings or post-modern skyscrapers pointed upwards like raised blades in defiance to natural order. Perhaps those swords of concrete and glass speak to the heavens about the stubborn perseverance of Man. Rising ever further even as the rubber tires of a 1969 Mustang rumbled along sun bleached gray asphalt. Tearing Southeast in the direction of a particularly infamous section of Los Angeles. Passing through gentrified and upper class boroughs. Passing along Broadway and skirting just south of the Financial District. Thence rolling through mid-morning tiger stripes of sunlight threading through the skyscrapers of Downtown Los Angeles that rose a scant few city blocks to the West.

Rough tread, the grip of the muscle cars tires, coming to a rest alongside a garbage smothered curb. A sidewalk, like much of Los Angeles' streets, ran alongside parallel East to West. Bisected by perpendicular streets, which also supposedly

were cradled by pedestrian walkways. At least, in theory, as The Driver-in-Black stepped out of his vehicle and gazed around from behind his pitch black sunglasses at the throngs of ragged jean and blotched shirt wearing denizens of this particular Los Angeles neighborhood. Many of whom eyed him warily, up and down, like packs of hyenas spotting potential prey. For the black suit wearing man with glossy shoes and sleek shades now standing before them created affronting contrast. Contrast to the environment encapsulating a particular representation for twenty-first century American urbanity. To put it frankly on visuals alone he represented everything they were not.

The close of a car door, the click of an alarm, and the smooth scuff of shoe soles on hard concrete signaled the purposeful movement of The Driver-in-Black down the street. Such a well-dressed interloper stood out remarkably sharp amid the squalor of the scenery around him. Littered streets, the scampering of rats in the daytime, feces that did not belong to any wild animal or critter sporadically dotting grimy

alleyways and sidewalks. In addition to the pungent unwashed smell that hung heavy in the air. As if all the filth splattered along the surfaces of this neighborhood clung to your clothes, your flesh, infecting your lungs with every breath.

The Driver-in-Black walked with seemingly little regard for all of this. The only recognition coming from careful side stepping of hunched or sprawled homeless; or, the ever so ripe masses of human excrement haphazardly strewn across the pavement like some bizarre modernist splat painting.

Indeed, one could not help but bear pity for the vagabonds overrunning entire blocks of this neighborhood. Overrunning entire boroughs of the wider city. Instead, the pair of dark sunglasses with their mirrored lenses merely cast momentary, apathetic, casual glances in the direction of nearby societal dredges. Looking upon without external sympathy as the tents rounded the corner of the block he slowly tread down. The same was true on the opposite side of the street. A line of tents in such a chaotically strewn arrangement surrounded by the detritus of human existence. Only matched by the motley

nature of their inhabitants. No sympathy, no pause, very much a microcosm of twenty-first century urban America.

Turning a sharp corner into a dim alleyway; which, somehow retained moisture along the cracked pavement. Creating an extra layer of wet grime caked onto almost every surface. The precision of each step conducted by The Driver-in-Black's gait moved him ever further down the gloom of the alley. Following the wall until it peeled away into a sharp corner, The Driver-in-Black cautiously rounding it. Hand casually dropping to his loaded side arm as he rounded the corner. Passing a pair of huddled men, faces largely hidden by hoods, with only the sound of lit pipes. The tang smell of piss mixed with the noxious burning plastic odor of crack cocaine. Wafting from those very same-lit pipes owned by the duo of men huddling on their haunches. One of many squalid lifestyles belonging to those whom called these rundown streets home. Totally unaware at the black shadow passing them by.

Another right hand turn and there stood a pair of men, African American, in musty brown and black hoodies above well-worn denim jeans. Both looked up at the well-dressed man that now approached before them. The one on the left, in the musty brown hoodie, looked at his partner who was squinting at the man that approached them, a hand disappearing into the central pocket stitched across the bottom of his hoodie. The gleam of a silver polished gun hammer caught the Sun just right. The man in the black hoodie peered from leering eyes and raised a hand at his partner to stand at ease. Speaking cautiously, 'Is that you, John?'

'Sure is, Dom,' replied The Driver-in-Black casually.

Good to be remembered.

'Wrong side of the tracks aren't ya?'

Understatement of the year. 'I don't know what you mean Dom?'

'Don't get much of you Camorra types down here in the skids,' explained Dom. Reaching up to scratch the black peach fuzz beneath his chin.

The Driver-in-Black before Dom shoved his hands into his pockets as he rolled his shoulders in casual ease. Matching Dom's own relaxed familiarity while speaking his own jest stricken reply, 'You don't say?' Something, which earned a grin from the man known as Dom. Unfortunately, the latter seemed to spare no more time for preserving the relaxed atmosphere.

'So, you got an appointment?' Dom's inquiry in time with his hand dropping down to his side. Away from that polished silver piece hidden within his clothes. Brown eyes refocusing to a serious stare.

The Driver-in-Black, 'John', as he was also known by Dom, shifted on his feet and raised his shoulders in a half-shrug, 'Does anybody?'

Dom rolled his eyes around in thought, 'Hmpf, turned into quite the funny man lately haven't you, John. But fair point there John, fair point, come on in.' Turning on his heels Dom moved to a paint chipped brown door and with a closed fist thumped it thrice. Clanging metal answered by the rotating of a lock. Heralding the door's swing to its open position.

Revealing a tall, muscular, swarthy-skinned man with equally musty denim jeans. Sans the hoodie, which was replaced by a stain blotched white tank top resting on his torso instead. The swarthy man stepped aside after a moment, eyeing 'John' up and down, while Dom waved him in. The Driver-in-Black did not spare a glance as he moved forward rapidly, crossing into the building, and coming to set eyes upon rows of workers neatly packing a rocky white material. Carrying trays of said substance. Working on various tables stacked with a bewildering menagerie of flasks, tubes, and bubbling ingredients. Boxes of baking soda dotted the entire operation while some were currently being poured in conjunction with another white powdery substance to mix in deep trays.

'You want some?' asked Dom as he pointed at a fresh tray of the rocky white substance. The Driver-in-Black smiled and gave a polite, 'No, thank you.'

Dom just shrugged with hands splayed, 'Aight, its good shit though, just sayin'.'

Dom continued to lead his well-dressed guest down the center aisle between the rows of workers and through a set of dull stainless steel doors. Revealing a room where fresh trays were having their contents broken up and parceled into various different assortments of packaging not entirely different from how retail processing facilities worked. The two men's pace did not abate as the duo moved to pass through a much smaller door. Where they were met by a quintet of individuals. Four seated about the large room, two on each side, while the fifth sat behind an old, beaten, black stained oak desk.

'Dom? I was not aware I had an appointment today,' questioned the man seated behind the desk. His face was rough, pocked, colored a light shade of olive, with a strong brow holding up two bushy black shrubs of hair. Across his scalp charcoal black hair sprouted in loose curls. A goatee with more than a few gray hairs crested the top of his chin in a downward taper. The man's garb was at odds to the other men around him. His clothes were not well worn, holed, or stained from years of use. Indeed, he wore a brown frock coat cut to style from the

1920's. A matching fedora hung from a peg behind him. Khaki pants could be seen that terminated over brown leather shoes of Italian make. Embodying more from a Mario Puzo novel than a SoCal drug lord.

As for the man's companions in the room. They wore an eclectic mix of clothing similar to Dom's own garb. Dirty jackets and hoodies, stained or holed denim pants, and various assortment of sneakers. *The capos to the boss's regime.*

The Driver-in-Black from behind the polarized voids of sunglasses took all of this in as he scanned his eyes across the room. Noticing the minutiae of each individual therein. The way a black jacket wearing man favored his right leg while standing, suggesting possible injury or discomfort, while another man bore a nice watch. *Authentic. How did he come upon that I wonder? A gift of loyalty or service rendered by the man behind the desk? However, more importantly. If push came to shove, in what order and how, would be the most optimal way to kill them all.* These details and planning fed into

the neural pathways of The Driver-in-Black naturally like a predator's instinct to hunt.

Dom cleared his throat, 'Sorry, Sir, But its J-.'

'John Korvinus from the Camorra. I can see that Dom. You're excused.' The man behind the desk spoke with dismissive impatience. Dom clamped his mouth shut and nodded in respect before turning around. Hurrying out of the room a bit faster than what could be called a normal walking pace.

The Driver-in-Black turned slightly to watch Dom exit the room before returning his gaze to the man behind the desk, 'Hugo.'

Causing the man behind the desk to lean back in his chair and slide open a drawer. The Driver-in-Black could not help his left hand twitch towards his side arm at his belt holster. Only relaxing when Hugo from behind the desk revealed a cigar. Snipping off the end with practiced precision using a polished steel cigar cutter. The duel guillotine blades of the Straight Cut quickly exposing both ends. The retrieval of a

match from an inner coat pocket followed, which was lit with equally practiced skill off the edge of the desk. A feat for sure, given the smooth appearance of the desks stained surface. One end was swiftly clamped in place by Hugo's teeth while with a smooth motion the opposing end was brought to a smolder. Hugo flicked the match in his hand. Snuffing it out with a flick of the wrist. Hugo's pocked cheeks shrunk into his face once, twice, as precursors to the gentle exhale of cigar smoke.

'What do I owe the pleasure from Her Majesty's *Crow*?'

John lifted his head up slightly, speaking clearly, 'I need to question a Chase Anthony.'

'Who?' said Hugo with squinted eyes.

'Chase Anthony.'

Hugo leaned forward, smoke idly twirling in front of his face, slightly disturbed by his words, 'And, I assume I meant to know this Chase?'

'He's a homeless man. Brown hair receding to the base of his skull. Witnessed a murder the other day up in Los Feliz.'

Hugo scoffed, 'And I know every homeless man in Los Angeles?!'

'He is from down here in The Skids. Thought it safe to ask you, Hugo, if the name rang any bells. Since you run these streets, do you not?' The edges of The Driver-in-Black's mouth rose into a half smirk. The four men to the sides of the room stiffened at this comment. Hugo quickly waved a hand to his four compatriots standing aside to settle and said, 'Well? Ring any bells lads?'

A moment of silence befell the room until one of the men on the right, nearest to The Driver-in-Black; spoke up slowly, 'Yeah. He was a dealer for us a few years back. Until he started to take an extra cut for himself. Some of the boys and I roughed him up real good. Stays a bit east of here in the tenement camp behind Tokihama Food Processing. Just past South San Pedros Street.'

Hugo took another puff of his cigar as he slowly leaned back in his chair with a small creak. 'Well, John, there you have it.'

Eyeing the man who spoke up, but otherwise making no indication as to where he was looking from behind his sunglasses, saying, 'He used to deal drugs. Anything else I should know?'

The man shrugged, 'Didn't know the guy that well, chief.'

The Driver-in-Black nodded, 'Wouldn't happen to be of an *abnormal* persuasion, would he?'

The man who had spoken up seemed to differ to Hugo in clear confusion. The Driver-in-Black's eyes clandestinely rotating to look back at the cigar puffing Hugo.

Letting smoke bellow from his nose as he replied with an equally casual tone of voice to 'John', 'Nothing that Her Majesty wouldn't know, now wouldn't she? Given the tight leash she keeps on many of *us*.' Hugo's gaze sharpened ever so slightly.

Nodding slowly The Driver-in-Black received the subtle information hidden in Hugo's answer. 'Thank you, Hugo.' Before casually turning away to leave.

'No problem, Mister *Crow*.' Hugo's words only met
'John's' back as he receded from the building.

Chapter XII

Situated in the Westwood neighborhood of Los Angeles, five hundred and twenty beds, covering an impressive one million and fifty thousand square feet. The Ronald Reagan Medical Center provided one of the most premier hospitals in the United States of America. Consistently, ranked the best on the West Coast. A magnet for the most talented healthcare workers in the nation, of which you can depend upon a sizable influx of fresh talent, filled its departments every year.

Attracting graduates of the most esteemed medical schools from all fifty states, and at least a dozen nations abroad.

Needless to say, along with all the other medical facilities in the Los Angeles Metropolitan Area that had to service millions of people, the hospital never slept. Around the clock, in multiple shifts, the legions of doctors, nurses, and

clerks worked tirelessly to maintain the functionality and quality of service such an institution provides.

Across its expansive parking lots wrapping around much of the complex. A lone Cadillac ATS Coupe crawled slowly into an empty parking space near the emergency department entrance. Detectives Kirkwood and Marshall stepped out of the vehicle. Feet on the warming black asphalt gradually being heated by the rising California Sun. The latter turned to speak to his much older compatriot, 'You sure he is ready for this? Hes only been awake for like a half hour?'

Detective Kirkwood, lines deepening on his face, just offered a glance to his colleague and said, 'He'd want this done sooner rather than later.' A bleep of a car fob and Detective Kirkwood began walking to the doors with Marshall briskly striding up beside him. The two lawmen entered the hospital without a word until they approached the awaiting registrar on duty. Marshall offered the middle aged woman behind the desk a small smile as Frank spoke with a hint of gravity to his words, 'Detective's Kirkwood and Marshall here to see a

patient.' The gravity, the weight, embedded in Frank's tone belied the emotions he felt to the observant Marshall. *Old man blames himself for his partner getting jumped.*

The registrar, a woman with curly blond hair on top of a heavy set body, looked at them both from behind spectacle lenses, her small upturned nose crinkling as she lifted her double chin up to bring both men into focus. 'Patient's name? And imma' need to see some I.D., Sir?'

Kirkwood nodded and slid his wallet across, open, to display his badge and driver's license while replying, 'Charles Graham, Detective Graham of the Los Angeles Police Department, would have arrived earlier this morning with a head injury.' The registrar glanced at it and consulted her desktop computer for a minute. Sliding the wallet back, she spoke with a raised finger to her right, gesticulating to the two men the path they needed to take, 'Down the hall, room 413.'

Scooping his wallet off the desk Frank offered a slight smile of appreciation given the circumstance, 'Thank you, Miss.'

Marshall could only offer small glances to the older detective now walking slightly ahead of him. A sense of determination in Frank's steps caused Marshall to quicken his own pace. The younger man could only imagine what his older colleague was going through. *Frank and Charles have been partners for well over twenty-five years. Been shot at, stabbed, bruised and battered. A bond of brotherhood sealed in blood and sweat. He shouldn't blame himself for what happened. Charles knew the potential risk of putting himself out there alone.*

Room 413. A simple light green plaque read in white numerals. Uniform in color and type too many others on this floor. Nevertheless, those little white numerals caused apprehension in Marshall. So he could only watch, as Frank pause at the threshold as if now suddenly unsure. The older man idly peering into the room like it was a portal to an alternate reality.

Franks shouldered sagged. Seeing the outline of Detective Graham hooked up to various machinery felt like a

surreal experience. Like a lab rat going through some mockery of a science experiment. *Shouldn't have let you run that stake out by yourself Charles. We're getting to old. Not as quick as we used to be. You got lucky this time but how much luck do you have? One day for you or I it'll come up dry. What then? Six feet of dirt over a casket surrounded by lamenting family members? Cause that is how it can play out one day, Charles.* Frank's thoughts were rammed to the back of his skull by a sharp, yet all too familiar voice, lancing from the room with all the speed of a hurled javelin.

'Ya' know I can see the both of ya?' The still figure groaned with more than one whispered swear escaping his lips. Charles shifted to prop himself up on the plush white pillows positioned behind him. Body noticeably stiff and lethargic. Years of aging caught up with Charles for both of his companion detectives to see.

Frank now entered sluggishly. As if being spotted red-handed was his secret queue to cross into the room. Marshall followed on after. Coming up beside Frank as both

men looked down at the wounded face of Detective Charles Graham.

'How you holding pal,' said Frank with a look and smile only an old friend could make. Charles scoffed, 'You mean aside from getting jumped in some back alley like some teen punk?' A moment of awkward silence passing between the three. Charles grinned abruptly, chuckling laughter escaping his lips, while Frank looked down as he too broke into his own small chuckle. Marshall turned his head to avoid showing off his own sheepish grin.

Frank took a few minutes to regain his composure completely before speaking in a much more relaxed tone, 'Glad you're sense of humor remains is as intact as ever.'

'Oh, ya know me Frank, gonna take more than a knock to the head to keep me down.' Another round of chuckling laughter swam between them as Charles continued, 'Shit, what is it, twenty-five? Twenty-six? Quarter of a century we been doin' this gig together and I'm the one that still gets beat up.'

When's it gonna be your turn!' Charles gave a playful pointing finger at his longtime friend and colleague.

Frank grin went wide at the comment. However, his eyes averted, unable to look at Charles directly in the eye as he recalled other close calls which could have saw either of them buried in fresh dirt. *Maybe next time it will be me? The big one even.* Frank did not let his voice betray the inner monologue however, 'Yeah, well, that time down in Santa Monica in 03!'

'Oh, it was a prick to the shoulder Frank.'

'Calling getting stabbed in the shoulder with a butterfly knife a prick,' replied Frank in mock exasperation. Marshall beside him could not help release his own grin. He had read that particular case before. Frank and Charles had busted a small drug ring operating out of an affluent Santa Monican residents home. There was some resistance from some of the more hardcore criminals that had been in the home with Frank earning stitches courtesy of an all too close encounter that day.

Charles laughed while fiddling with the intravenous tube feeding his body nutrients. His own reply coming off with

slight discomfort as he pushed himself up a few inches using his elbows. Frank quietly assisting by lifting Charles pillow up to remain at the back of his head. 'So what happened after I was out? Did you guys catch the bastard or what?'

'No one told you about what happened since you got attacked?' Franks remark matched his uncertain facial expression.

Charles leaned back, gazing at his longtime partner, and said, 'Chief came down to see me. Didn't say anything about the case. Guess I'll take that as a sign of no good news?'

Frank's mood darkened, eyes peering down at the floor, Marshall was what reprieved his older colleague from giving the unpleasant confirmation to Graham's suspicion. 'No.' Marshall wet his lips as he built up the courage to look the older man in the eyes and say, 'Pair of campus police found Cynthia Summers in the botanical gardens across from her apartment. They found Elizabeth in her apartment shortly before finding you out cold in the alley.'

Charles brow furrowed and his mouth went closed and opened once, twice, before words finally materialized, 'Is she-,'

'She's dead Charles.'

Charles stared at the younger detective blankly. As if, the young man's response had yet to register. But both Frank and Marshall could see the turmoil of rage and self-proscribed guilt building up inside. Pressing against the cracking dam holding everything in check. A dam, which could not hold back the boiling floodwaters. Erupting through the crumbling masonry of his psyche with all the crashing clatter of a table as Charles struck the stand next to him that bore an empty breakfast tray. Spilling the crumbs of his consumed meal onto the floor. Knocking the tray to ground with a skittering shriek. Table following over stricken by the blow. The older man's eyes watered in despair.

Frank had seen this before, all too well, in other officers and detectives. The tsunami of emotion for not being able to save someone. *What if I was faster? Smarter? Stronger?* Frank placed a hand on his partner's shoulder. Charles could only

shake his head slightly. As if he was battling the flood within, trying in desperation, to contain its surging waters washing over his mind and gut.

Frank spoke, slowly, 'We actually would also like to know if you saw anything.'

Charles turned lethargically to his fellow Detective. The emotions on his face, in his eyes, appearing to be an even mix of surprise and guilt at the question. Tremors of guilt slid into the syllables of his remorseful reply, 'No, no Frank I didn't see anything. I had heard something in the alley behind Cynthia and Elizabeth's apartment. I knew I should not have gone down there alone at night, I just had to see, but my gut kept telling me there was someone back there. Then I looked up, I felt a pressure on my body,' reflexively, Charles raised a hand up to touch the back of his head. Feeling the medical bandage which ringed his scalp as he finished, 'and then blackness.' Charles finishing his recounting by holding his chin between thumb and index finger. As if in deep contemplation or uncertainty, that he was missing something. Searching, vainly, through his

memory for more information to give. Doubt, freshly surfaced, covered his face. His hands moving to sooth his face and temples from the mounting headache that not even painkillers could totally soothe.

Frank shook his colleague's shoulder lightly, 'It's alright. We'll catch him.' Marshall also chiming in rapidly, 'Yeah, shit, the Feds are in on this too.'

'What?' Charles glanced between the two men standing beside his bed. Marshall continued, 'Yeah, apparently there may actually be a connection between the bodies found down in Tijuana and our recent vic's.'

'Tijuana?' Charles looked confused for a moment. The pain of his injury coming in like a lance as he gasped for air and sank back into his pillow. Yet, with the pain came recollection as he continued speaking, 'Those bodies found in a cistern down there?'

'Yeah, apparently, there are matches in the perpetrator's methodology, between that case and our two victim's bodies when they were found.'

As Marshall finished up Frank raised a finger, 'See if you can contact the Feds about that case. It never was closed, right?'

Marshall shook his head, 'Never closed. No one ever found the perpetrator or any evidence pointing to a suspect,' taking out his phone the younger detective looked at both men, 'I'll call up the local field office and see what they got.' The younger man leaving the room quickly with his fingers dancing across the screen of his device.

Frank returned his gaze to Charles. Met by comment now leaving the latter's lips, 'Someone's eager.' *We all are, Charles, we all are.*

'Yeah, well between you and me I can't wait to catch this son-of-a-bitch,' said Frank.

'Ha! Preaching to the choir there chief. Well, I should be out of here in no time.'

Frank pointed to the back of his own skull, 'You sure? You know with a concussion you shouldn't be out doing field work. The Chief, the real chief, won't allow it.'

'Yeah, just a good knock to the rocker. We all got a few screws loose. Just some more than others now!' Both aged men managed to share a moment of laughter given the circumstances. Both knowing the department higher ups would not let Charles out in the field until his injury healed.

* * *

Walking through the doors to leave the Emergency Department of the Ronald Reagan Medical Center Detective Kirkwood stopped to close his eyes. Air escaping in a long sigh. Warmth of the Sun on his skin. The faint sound of footfalls came up alongside him and peeked from one eye at the form of Detective Marshall.

Frank cracked a quip, 'Any word from our Federal overlords?'

Marshall took it in stride, 'Everything is pretty much in the files we looked at yesterday.' Trailing off as he stuffed his phone back into his inner jacket pocket.

Frank opened his other eye and looked at Marshall, 'I sense an 'except' is incoming.' Marshall tilted his head in silent

agreement, '*Except*, they also found canine hair fibers on the bodies accompanied by a tooth.'

'There it is,' said Frank with his own smirk coming into being while stepping forward. Bringing himself back to his car and swinging into the driver's seat.

Marshall joining him a half a second later as Frank keyed the ignition to life and pulled out of the hospital parking lot. Stuffing his phone back into his pocket Marshall continued, 'I've requested everything the Feds have be sent over to precinct. Should be there by the time we get back. Mostly just personal effects recovered from the bodies.'

'At this point I'll take anything.'

Pulling back out onto the street the two detectives made their way through the mid-day traffic to their assigned police station located on San Fernando Road. The thrum of Los Angeles' unending automobile traffic acting as a chaotic backdrop to the other sounds of the city. Sirens of passing emergency vehicles, the beeps of construction machinery at

various work sites, and the shrill roar of aircraft coming and going from Los Angeles International Airport.

'So how's the kids doing?' said Marshall as he rolled down the window. Hanging his right arm out lazily.

Frank raised his eyebrows as he breathed deeply. The sudden change to a personal topic earning a softer, welcoming, pitch from his voice. 'Beatrice has a clarinet recital next week that she, in her words, is 'beyond excited for'.'

'What about Junior? He still doing Baseball?'

'Yeah, got a real batting arm on em' too. Hoping to make Varsity this year.'

'No shit?' Marshall looked over at Frank, 'knew the kid got drive, good for him!' A momentary bout of calm silence until Marshall spoke again, 'bringing the fam' to the Headquarter cook out at the end of the month?' The younger detectives questions more or less to try to alleviate the situation they faced. *Two deaths. A detective in the hospital. No leads. Can't really get worse now can it?*

Frank seemed to mull over the thought, 'Well that is the plan. But that is if the wifes up for it.'

'Claire loved the one last year right?'

At the mention of his wife Frank nodded smiled deeply, 'Yeah, but shes been working long hours.'

'Those nursing hours can be a drag,' affirmed Marshall as he looked out the window. Gazing at the vibrant city life around them. A collage of blues and oranges illustrating the atmosphere encapsulating the metropolis. A blue dome holding an orange haze brushing over a landscape built of brick and mortar. Man-made mountains rising up from the Earth. Soaring artifices of Human ingenuity that is downtown Los Angeles in the Southern horizon, grappling with the heavens above. Twin orbs rotated along to take in the opposing elevated geography ringing the Los Angeles plateau. To beautiful villas set upon such rolling vistas for hills wreathing the teeming heart of Southern California. Marshall could not help but look out upon it all. He was young, yet had just made Detective not three months ago, his whole life ahead of him. One unique piece of a

global matte painting bearing uncountable unique details. Frank switched on the radio, but Marshall kept his eyes firmly on the living painting around him. Soaking it all in to the tune of Phil Collins *Feel it in the Air Tonight*, drifting over the radio waves. *We'll find you. Wherever you are.* The confidence borne within the inner voice of his consciousness gave him renewed energy as he felt himself breathe in and out slowly. The multitudes of Humanity passing by, faster or slower, as the ATS Coupe moved from thoroughfare to street. A surreal tranquility that his mind lost itse-.

'Marshall? James?'

The raised voice of Detective Kirkwood snapped the young Detective back to reality. Blurting out the words, 'Yes? What?'

'I was trying to ask you about your mother. What'd ya' zone out on me or somethin',' mused Frank with a knowing look.

He knew the answer, and Marshall's response was more for conversational continuity than anything else, 'Yes, sorry.

Shes doing well all things considered. Getting impatient if I keep missing dinners.'

'Ha! Well she should have known that when you signed on with the department.'

'Yeah, ha-ha.'

* * *

The ATS Couple lurched slightly as wheels brought the passenger carriage to a halt in a uniformly marked parking space. Both men exiting the vehicle as they moved to enter the building. The dialogue between them not yet resurrected until both men arrived in front of a plain green door. Possessing a narrow vertically oriented Plexiglas window.

'You ready?' said Frank as he turned to Marshall next to him. The latter smiled while giving his reply, 'Born ready chief.'

Frank gave a small scoffing chuckle, 'Well, let's hope Miss Summers shares your sentiment.' Opening the door as Marshall walking in first. Introducing himself smoothly while

Frank followed suite moments after. Both swiftly making for a pair of plain stainless steel chairs as they did so.

Across from them, on the other side of a sterile dull gray metal table, sat a young woman whose eyes bore the trademark pink puffy appearance indicative for heavy and recent bawling. Eyes, that both men saw and could only purse their lips when seen, bore crippling woe. Frank and Marshall, both, knew the reasoning for the woman's current emotional affair. Dejection, two-fold, stripping away the glow a lady of such youthful countenance should possess with an absolutely solar radiance. Instead, as Marshall and Frank would note passively, silently, Cynthia appeared like that which bore the essence of one's own core being had been gutted from her bosom. Torn, invisibly so, by the macabre hands of an unknown fiend. Robbing the young Cynthia Summers of two friends, a lover, and the father of an unborn child. Frank, sparing a momentary glance at his equally silent colleague, could not help but note the relaxed hand resting on a yet to show stomach. He thought of his wife, his daughter, his son.

However, he had been informed of the truth shortly after arriving at the scene of the second homicide. When medical staff were evaluating Miss Summers. She would have spoken of her own volition then and there. She is pregnant.

'James was the Father, wasn't he?' said Frank in his most comforting tone that could be mustered. Marshall straightened his back as the mood of the room bore the oppressive weight of recent events. Cynthia's eyes blinked rapidly for a couple seconds. A slender hand rising to whisk away a trailing tear, her voice bore all the sorrowful passion that Frank had heard in many a widow. Married or not the state of sadness, which the young woman before him dwelt, transcended the social construct that is marriage.

'Y-.Yes, he was. Is.' Cynthia was struggling. Even with a simple one-word answer.

'I. *We*,' indicating both Marshall and himself, 'cannot imagine the grief that you undoubtedly feel right now. Is there anything we can get you? Some water perhaps or something to eat?'

'No, thank you.'

'Perhaps another time for questioning? If you are too
ti-.'

'No.' Cynthia held up a hand quickly, apologetically,
'Sorry. I would rather this done sooner than later.'

Both men nodded simultaneously to Cynthia's response. Marshall pulled out a small notepad and pen so that details of import could be recorded. His speech matching the sincerity of Franks tone, 'So, am I correct that a pair of campus police officers found you walking down a trail in the Mildred E. Mathias Botanical Gardens just after dark?' Marshall could have given the specifics of the time but in an effort to appear as less interrogative as possible, the young man had opted for language that is more informal. All to maintain the air of empathy for the distraught woman sitting before both detectives.

Of course, Frank knew and allowed himself hidden approval for the newly minted detective's tact. *The exact time would be in the campus police report. Good job kid.*

Cynthia nodded her head slowly, 'Yes.'

'May I ask what you were doing there at such a time?'

'I was heading home from school. Like I said to the campus officers, I was on the way to my apartment.' The second half of her explanation hurried by rising emotion. As if her words did not form expeditiously then she would be held more accountable than what she already felt for the death of Elizabeth. Such a false notion struck a terribly strained, abused, chord inside Cynthia. Unleashing itself as a fresh sortie of tears coursed down her supple, gentle, cheeks. Until they were violently dashed aside, smothered, by the soaking fibers from a cotton-polyester sleeve.

Marshall, reading her response, spoke quickly to try to assuage Cynthia's rising vortex of emotion, 'I know you must feel guilty, like there was something you could have done to help Elizabeth, but,' He paused as Cynthia collapsed into her hands. Fresh sobs emanating from her mouth as her nostrils flared red between her palms.

Frank interjected quickly, his words utilizing a practiced tone cultivated from years of police work to help soothe Cynthia back into the present, 'What my partner means is that we understand how traumatic this day has been to you. But we need your help in catching the person who did this. So they can be brought to justice.' Justice. The last word had scarcely left Frank's mouth when Cynthia retracted her face from the depths of her palms. Sitting back in her chair with a protesting squeak.

Cynthia was silent for a brief moment, breathing becoming less labored, chest rising and falling measured with an even pace, to calm the swirling miasma of guilt and horror that fluctuated within her gut. Her mouth moved with the effort of forming words. That struggle finally deploying a small reservoir of resolve that had latched onto the final word last spoken by Frank. *Justice*.

Internally, within Cynthia's mind and body the tinder flame of anger was now lit, renewed. Coaxing itself back from flickering despair. Building to a pyre. Feeding off the wish in

her heart of hearts that whomever had taken James and Elizabeth from this world would be subjected to the harshest punishments that the American judicial system could contrive. This pyre of anger fanned itself into her speech. Igniting her words to a white-hot focus. Re-forging the fractured, strained, glass house of her mind. Words began to flow forth like molten glass, 'I was in the Botanical Gardens as you say. Earlier I had seen the news about what had happened – to James,' a brief struggle of anger and pain ruptured her renewed effort at speaking his name, but only briefly. 'But at the time I had no idea that what had happened in that alleyway was him. I went about my day with no reply from James of course. I thought nothing of it at the time. But as I was walking back from classes and study I started to receive text messages from him.'

Frank pursed his lip suddenly in confusion, 'I'm sorry, the text messages, who is *him*? ' *I know from the report about the text messages. But there has to be bread crumb. Come on Cynthia give me the morsels I need. Something to put all these pieces together.*

'James. Well, his number, I – I thought it was James until I realized it wasn't him.' Cynthia shoved her hands into her pockets and pulled out her phone. A slender finger unlocking the screen, clicking on a conversation, and sliding it to the Detectives who both craned their heads over to read it.

Marshall gingerly extending the index finger of his left hand to begin scrolling through several of the most recent messages. The conversation during the Botanical Gardens. Frank meanwhile raised his head to return his gaze at Cynthia. 'These started when you were in the Botanical Garden? None prior?'

'No. I thought it strange that I had not heard anything from James all day. We talked daily and had plans together after school,' replied Cynthia.

'Care to be more specific about these plans?' questioned Marshall looking up from the phone screen.

Cynthia paused for a second but Frank interjected before she could answer, 'I interviewed Anthony Perrot and Carlos Rodriguez yesterday.' Cynthia's head cocked ever so

slightly, Frank continued, 'They describe James as being unusually jovial before he died. But they could not name any specific reason for this. You wouldn't happen to know why, would you?'

Cynthia's eyes shifted between both men as her mind formulated an answer to this combined question. Eyes moving between both men as she spoke, 'He mentioned having an important meeting for a job once, which, I assumed to be behind why he was so excited to graduate.'

'Do you know what the job was?' replied Frank while Marshall jotted down several notes from the text message chain displayed on Cynthia's phone. Sliding the device back to her with a professional smile.

'Do you need it for evidence?' said Cynthia as she slowly eased her hand forth to retrieve the cell phone.

'We'll get the text message records from your provider if need be,' said Marshall politely.

'Oh, okay,' replied Cynthia before returning her gaze to the older detective, 'Uh, yes, for a biomedical firm. I'm sorry I forget the name.'

Frank shifted in his seat as his face moved to a neutral expression upon hearing that reply. *That is okay Cynthia. I know already.* Saying back to Cynthia, 'That is okay if you can't remember. If you do just feel free to blurt it out. Is there anything else you could tell us?'

Cynthia frowned, 'Um, no, uh,' the young woman's brow furrowed in concentration. Searching the recesses of her mind for any recollection about the past, brief, conversation she stated having with her deceased lover. The silence of delay. Uncomfortable in its descent upon the inhabitants of the interrogation room. Not that the officers would have termed this an 'interrogation,' of course, but merely a means of 'sourcing more information' regarding the crimes committed. Cynthia placed fingers on the temples of her head as she fought to remember. The answer slowly dragged to the fore by the talons of memory. Words coming slowly, laced with

uncertainty, 'Something about a place up near Calabasas. A private party interested in his Hematology studies?'

'Hematology. Study of blood. Interesting,' remarked Marshall. Frank gave a sideways glance at this interruption in the flow of conversation. Not that he could really speak about that. Considering he had done so twice already. A fact he was all too conscious about and thus didn't go beyond the brief glance about such a comment being largely irrelevant to the question posed to Cynthia, nor her reply for that matter.

'Yes, he was interested in that.' Cynthia stopped abruptly.

'Please, Miss Summers, speak freely,' urged Frank.

Don't give up on me now, Cynthia.

The younger woman resumed, 'James was unsure about being able to afford studying that field as a specialization. His family's finances were tight according to him. That's all we discussed.'

'His family owns a home in Los Feliz. Not cheap,' mused Frank with a twitch of his left eyebrow.

Cynthia nodded to no one in particular and said, 'His parents both lost high paying jobs in the Real Estate industry back in 08'. They've been doing okay, but money has been tight since then.'

Frank could see the unease in the woman's face to divulge such information to the detectives. Even if credible it was not so far a stretch to understand that such words could be seen as looking down upon the late James Dawson's family. Something that Frank knew Cynthia never wanted to do. It was written, all across her face brighter than any neon sign on the Los Angeles strip.

Need to move this along, thought Frank as he continued the questioning, 'The night you last saw James. At Good Luck's. Did he mention what he was going back to the restaurant for?'

Cynthia frowned a half-second before responding, 'He mentioned forgetting his wallet.'

'Wallet. Got it, and you last saw him about eight? Or before?'

'No, about eight.'

That is a pesky wallet.

'And do you know of anyone who would sought to kill James Dawson?'

'No. He was well liked by everyone who knew him.'

Everyone keeps saying that. Keeping his musings to himself Frank looked at his colleague for a moment before rising from his seat, 'I think that is all the information we need. We will notify you if we need to speak again.'

Marshall looked at Cynthia and gave a polite nod, 'Thank you for your time, Miss.' Both men prepared to leave the interrogation room when Marshall stopped halfway to see Cynthia had reached into her shirt and revealed a strange necklace bearing a bone white pendant. *Ivory.* About to make a comment a hand tapped his shoulder. He turned to see Frank indicating him to follow. Leaving the interrogation room while a uniformed officer moved in to collect the young woman. She would have be escorted to a shelter home. There she would be staying until all the forensic evidence at the apartment had been

retrieved and the departments use for it as a crime scene removed. Which, both Frank and Marshall hoped for Cynthia's sake was not long.

Both men moving down the hall and into the Homicide Division's offices with the younger detective inching ahead in pace. Marshall stopped by his desk and signaling for Frank to stop with him.

'What is it?' asked Frank.

The hands of the younger detective momentarily disappearing into the bowels of his desk to fish out the manila folders bearing the contents from the Tijuana case. 'I want to go over some things with you real quick. Something isn't sittin' right with me ever since Dawson's autopsy,' replied the younger detective. Letting Frank open up the first manila folder before quickly adding off hand, 'Say how did Charles even find these anyways? San Diego helped out with this case, not L.A.P.D.?' added Marshall with equal hurry. Handing over the small stack of manila folders holding the written contents for the Tijuana bodies. Frank flipped over the top of the first

folder. Thumbing through the contents slowly as he replied calmly, 'L.A.P.D., assisted on the case. We were able to get San Diego's copies of the case files sent over.'

'Oh?'

'Yeah, also says so right here.'

Marshall squinted at the small slip that Frank removed from under a paperclip on the top folder. Holding up the small order slip for several seconds while his eyes were still running along the contents of the reports. Marshall rolled his shoulders back and shrugged at the wise crack reply. *I deserved that.*

A patrol officer, Wilkinson, walked up to both detectives and placed down a hefty evidence box on Marshall's desk. 'Feds dropped this off a couple minutes ago for you detective.'

'Thanks, Mike.'

Officer Wilkinson raised a hand as if to say, *no problem*, and took a few steps back. Placing his hands on his hips and said, 'Say, did either of those Federal agents have anything to say about what's going on?'

Frank lowered the folder, 'Either?'

Wilkinson paused, confused, 'Yeah, there was two of them. One with shades and his superior. Little shorter, older, wore a blue suit?'

'No, we never saw an agent in a blue suit and the guy with the shades,' Frank snapped his thumb onto his palm to ring up the field agent's name, 'Locke. Seemed to be as much in the dark as we were.'

'Okay, have to say I got a weird vibe from them both. Saw them snooping around the body in the ambulance before leaving. Didn't strike me as normal procedure.'

Frank opened and closed his jaw upon hearing this. 'Did anyone else speak to them?'

Wilkinson tilted his head slightly from side to side, 'Just some of field techs. One of the forensic photographers seemed to be a bit spooked by the guy in the shades.'

'Why?'

'Just seemed like he was searching for something specific but didn't want to tell anyone. I don't know she wasn't

very clear. Said a photo was missing from the roommate's room.' Wilkinson gesticulated one of his hands, trying to remember which room belonged to which girl.

'Cynthia Summers? The one going under police protection?'

Wilkinson's turn to snap his fingers, 'That one. Yeah. Apparently, took that and bolted on out of there.'

'Huh, well thanks, Mike.' *Peculiar.*

'No problem.'

Wilkinson receding from Marshall's desk Frank turned back to the latter, 'So, you going to tell me what doesn't sit right with you? Why am I looking at these again?' The other detective raised his index fingers, 'Notice any mention of foreign particulates like hair, specifically hair and a tooth, or anything for that matter to give clues as to the perpetrator?'

Frank continued looking through the reports one by one, as Marshall looked on in silence. Only punctuated by the occasional small nod side to side. Until Frank broke this pattern of silent nodding by coming to Marshall's desired

conclusion, 'None of these reports speak about canine hair, or foreign particulates at all other than what was in the cistern, no tooth either.'

Marshall looked to the side, pursed his lips, and flicked through the reports before him rapidly, 'Okay. But why would a F.B.I. Agent say that they found some?' Marshall's index fingers dropped down to close the latest case file freshly deposited back into his hands. The manila cover swishing close with a light *clap*.

'I hope that okay was, like a *eureka*, okay! And not just a normal okay?'

Flicking a hand up. Marshall extended an index finger dramatically as his eyes betrayed the racing thoughts swimming throughout his consciousness.

Frank's eyes squinted in apprehension, 'I can see a connection percolating?'

Causing his colleague to blink twice rapidly, 'Who says percolating anymore?' Frank rotated his wrist rapidly at Marshall as if to gesticulate physically for the man to explain

himself. Marshall's index finger was joined by its compatriots along with his other hand. 'Okay. Do you find it strange that these reports seem to be contradictory, missing even innocuous facts, and that a random F.B.I. Agent starts popping up every time a body drops? Hangs around, and takes things from crime scenes without a word?'

'So innocuous is fine but you draw the line at *percolating*?'

Marshall dropped his raised hand down on his hip, while his other arm came to rest on his desk as he sat down leaving one raised palm facing outwards as a gesture to compliment his words, 'Frank, focus. Now, hopefully, there is more here.' Deftly opening the box deposited on his desk the younger detective pulled out several folders. Toxicology, written statements, autopsy reports, photographs. Items that Frank took and began idly flipping through. Placing them back onto the desk for Marshall to then shift through in turn. Threading through each folder until Frank closed the last one.

The older detective put the last remaining file onto Marshall's desk as he straightened his back. Placing both hands on his hip while his eyes looked out the window next to the latter's desk. Marshall's head tilting ever so slightly as he awaited Frank's response. 'No, you're right.' The abruptness of Frank's words, or perhaps the sudden agreement when mere seconds prior the older man had seemingly doubted Marshall's train of thought, causing the young man to sit back in his chair casually. Frank lazily pointed a finger at his colleague. 'Open it.'

Marshall flipped open the folder and froze. A photograph of oneself, taken by one of the three found in the cistern, accompanied by the other two, and in the background a mound with other individuals seen, barely in focus. However, barely was all Marshall needed. James Dawson, Carlos Rodiguez, Anthony Perrot, Elizabeth Wallington, and Cynthia Summers. There was something else. Something overlooked. The photographer of this picture was holding something in

their hand, a necklace bearing an ivory pendant. A wolf's head wreathed in feathers.

'Pictures in Dawson's bedroom showed the same kind of necklaces,' declared Frank. 'I think we have our connection between the Tijuana case, it's too coincidental,' Frank cocked his head to the side, still looking out the windows, his own course of thought seeming to guide itself onto the track Marshall's own thinking now rode upon, 'Charles mentioned something after you and him questioned Elizabeth Wallington. About a phone.'

Marshall lightly bit his lip, muttering the words, 'The messages.' Apparently, still loud enough for Frank to hear as he picked up where Marshall left off, 'Charles said Elizabeth observed Dawson checking his phone periodically, abnormally so, but a phone which wasn't left at the restaurant or on his body. Everyone spoke about the wallet which has also been missing.'

Marshall swung himself in front of his computer.

Punching in his password and pulling up the data that had been

retrieved on James Dawson's phone. A blip immediately materialized on the monitor screen. Scrolling digits indicating the passage of time moved forward as Marshall moved through the window of time the signal was active. Pinging off the nearest cell phone towers as text messages were sent before going dead right around the time Charles had been jumped in the backstreet behind Cynthia and Elizabeth's apartment.

'Well, I'll be damned,' muttered Frank as he maneuvered himself to stand behind Marshall, peering at the monitor. Squinting at the tags of various locales and the serials of the cell towers that triangulated Dawson's cellphone signal. Arriving at an industrial looking building in another part of Los Angeles. 'Skid Row. Charles was jumped behind the girl's apartment. Might be how our killer planned to pick off Cynthia; except, it is in the wrong neighborhood.'

'Accomplice?' perked up Marshall in response.

'It makes sense. Dawson was quickly subdued and killed by two people. Body stuffed behind the dumpster with his wallet and phone removed. Likely, our perpetrators know

their way around a phone enough to prevent it being easily tracked.'

'Okay, this is probably a dumb question, but why do you think the perp' has his accomplice far away. Unable to help in eliminating his next target?'

'That I'm not sure. Possibly to throw us off the trail. Make sure someone watching for such activity went to Skid Row instead of-.'

'Looking for the real killer miles away.'

'So we see if we can get a last known location on that ping.' Marshall's words hung in the air as he worked the keyboard before him. Scrolling his mouse wheel as he zoomed in on the signal as best that could be done. The name of the street and local business running along in bold white letters as the blip of the signal pulsed. 'South San Pedros Street, right at Tokihama Food Processing,' finished Marshall with a grin as he beamed at Frank. The older man knelt down to get a better look, 'Rough neighborhood, 'eh, looks like our accomplice may be an employee?'

'Would it be worth a shot to swing by?' replied Marshall quickly.

Causing his older compatriot to smirk and say, 'Always worth a shot to nab an accomplice.' *Grab the accomplice. Corner the one doing the deed.*

* * *

The mid-day Sun was firmly on the decline when the ATS Coupe rolled into the parking lot of Tokihama Food Processing. Its brick and egg white painted concrete body resting squat beyond the cracked, weathered, asphalt. Pulling into the parking lot before the Food Processing plant, easing into the closest open spot, for the lot was nearly full with the hulls of various cars and trucks no doubt belonging to staff. Exiting the vehicle with the light slam of car doors the duo looked about the environment around them.

Pupils cast about the worn, uneven, streets. Weaving between the aging buildings about them. Long bleached from a once upon a time freshly laid deep noir to a pale gray. Sidewalks sporting tufts of sickly brown grass emerging

between the crooked slabs. Buildings bearing signs bubbled and warped by the relentless rays of the sun. Brick and mortar chipped and cracked. A cascading tumble of plastic shopping bays skipping across the sun bleached pavement. Interrupted, abruptly, with the passage of an old Cadillac automobile sporting a busted window covered by duct-tape.

Marshall inflated his cheeks and let out a stream of focused air at the sight of the squalid conditions around them. 'Man and they process food here?'

'Losing your appetite,' jabbed Frank as the duo began to walk towards the front doors. Marshall frowned for a moment before smirking. *I mean who would exactly be hungry knowing their food was processed in such a dirty neighborhood.* The thought manifesting into speech, 'Not exactly the most clean part of L.A.'

The detective shrugged, 'Most food industry places aren't located in what one might call *desirable* real estate.' A hint of jest mixing into Frank's speech as he kept his gazing to a more narrow, forward, corridor of vision. Eyes latching onto

the idly lounging forms of four processing plant workers. Puffs of smoke swirling from their lips and nostrils in a slight haze about themselves. Both detectives resisted the urge to crinkle their nostrils as the stench of frequent cigarette usage assaulted their senses. Marshall blinked as the gaseous emissions emanating from the processing plant employees agitated his eyes. Frank seemed less perturbed at the toxic cloud and merely asked, 'Is there a Chase Anthony employed here?'

The men regarded Frank with a mixture of curiosity and annoyance. The one closest, an older man with streaks of gray visible in the man's sideburns protruding from under the lip of a yellow hardhat, replied in mock curiosity, 'Depends.'

'Depends?' questioned Frank with a slight squint of his eyes. The processing plant worker folding his arms and moving to lean up against a supporting brick pillar that held the overhanging roof before the plants front doors. Speaking as he did so with the same tone as before, 'Yeah, depends whose askin!'

Marshall was taken aback at the sudden inquiry about the homeless man who had found the body of the recently departed James Dawson. But he chalked it up as some angle being worked by his far more experienced colleague. The hostility of the processing plant workers did strike a chord with the younger detective, rousing some suspicion, and put his hands in his pocket with a sigh. *Perhaps judging a book by its cover is prudent observation.*

Frank's flick of the wrist, as he fetched his badge, caused Marshall to snap back to the confrontation at hand. Practiced muscle memory taking over to fetch his own wallet from the folds of his suit jacket pocket. A mimicry to the motion of his older partner. Twin badges gleamed in the sunlight as the worker leaning up against the brick support pillar stood up and dropped his arms quickly. 'My apologies, officers.'

'Detective,' shot back Frank with a hint of vindication that only Marshall seemed to detect as the younger man cast a

sideways glance. Both men sliding their wallets back into their suit jackets at this sudden change of tone.

'Detective, right, so what is it you want with, ah,' the worker looked back at his colleagues with honest forgetfulness. Not that trusting the police ran smooth in these parts reminisced Marshall. The memories of days not terribly far gone breaking forth to the front of his mind. The feeling of walking a beat not far from Frank and him now stood. Long nights in a patrol car between calls. Something that Marshall thought he would miss terribly, but now? No. Marshall smiled inwardly at the prospect of not having to do such twelve-hour shifts again.

One of the worker's coworkers scratched the scruff around his chin as he spoke to his colleague about a, 'Chase.'

Marshall looked at the man who had just spoke, bringing both his hands to his hips as he did so. Glancing between the two men as the first worker appeared to not have any recognition. Leading to the second worker to continue speaking, 'Chase Anthony, you've seen him before, one of the

homeless guys at the encampment on the other side of the fence out back? Comes around to collect bottles and cans every now and then.'

Still the first worker seemed did not church bells ringing in his mind. Marshall felt the tides of impatience begin to swell within. Training and self-discipline being the twin levees keeping the crashing waves of frustration at bay. Marshall gesticulated with an open palm as he interjected himself abruptly into the conversation, 'I'm sorry, you seem to know who we're asking about, Chase Anthony lives in the homeless camp on San Pedros?'

The second worker, still scratching the scruff about his face pointed his opposing hand behind him, 'Yeah, pretty sure he lives there. See him about two to three times a week over there or round about.'

'So he is not an employee.'

'No. Management occasionally lets him take some old food wrapping paper for warmth at night. That's about it.'

'Wouldn't happen to have seen him recently?'

'Depends what counts as recent?'

'Today?'

'Uh, no. Saw him yesterday loitering about over there when I drove home. Least I thought I did.'

Frank took hold of the conversation now that Marshall had seemingly removed the last barricades of awkward apprehension from the two workers. Saying, 'Anything suspicious about him?' Earning a pair of negative side-to-side nods. A motion mimicked by the other two workers leaning up against the processing plants exterior wall.

Looks no one wants to talk to us. 'Thanks for speaking with us guys.' Frank ended the conversation curtly as he rolled his shoulders and motioned for Marshall to follow him. The quartet of workers watching them casually as they walked away and rounded the corner.

Sticking to the sidewalk as they moved around Tokihama Food Processing. The back of the property were various refrigeration equipped eighteen wheeler trucks were awaiting delivery orders to be loaded for shipment across

California. Turning around the final corner to see the straight asphalt line of South San Pedros laid out to their left and right.

To the left South San Pedros stretched off into the distance. Flanked on the northern side by multi-level housing projects while the southern side of the street was host to a long line of impoverished businesses.

Refuse, primarily plastics and discarded fast food containers, caked the road where it met the curb of the sidewalks. A row of grime stained tents had been pitched on the northern side of the street. Their owners or otherwise occupants loitering nearby. Marshall frowned at the blatant squalor of the area as he brought his vision along in a sweeping arc to the right. There, Marshall's vision matched Franks as the older man squinted into the distance. South San Pedros to both men's right was very much like the left except the number of tents was several orders of magnitude larger. A proverbial tent city lined the sidewalks, hugged the street front of businesses, and scaled the walls of alleyways where vagrants fought piles of trash for space.

The denizens of which meandered about walking back and forth. Shuffling along as they pushed shopping carts piled with their findings and even belongings. Squatting beside residential access stairs and under shop windows. Others stared out from the mouths of alleyways as Frank and Marshall swung right, towards the tent city that had taken over this particular patch of southern Los Angeles, and Marshall could not help but feel out of place.

Here he was, well dressed as a consummate professional of law enforcement, moving up in the world. His family not particularly well off but by the appearance of the squalid conditions down here in the Skids? Marshall could only wonder if this is what it felt like to be one of those Hollywood elites. Who have come down on a strange sojourn from their palatial homes in the hills to walk among the groveling masses.

Glancing to his older colleague, Frank, who seemed to be utterly immersed in his own surroundings. Vigilant eyes disciplined through decades of service in the Los Angeles Police Department moving left and right. Observing every

detail like the world was a well of information pouring its contents into the opaque black of Frank's pupils.

'What is it?' queried Frank without looking at Marshall. The younger detective averted his eyes to make it seem that he too was observing the shambling pedestrian inhabitants of this particularly impoverished region of Los Angeles.

'You still think Chase Anthony is the accomplice?' The answer was obvious to Marshall nearly as soon as the question materialized in his conscious. The younger detective's eyes roved along the dirty landscape. Then behind them and back, as both men's feet took them along the southern sidewalk of South San Pedros. Until Marshall's eyes found something not like the others. A shapely automobile, sleek, and even more starkly contrasting to the surrounding environment than they were. Sitting parallel parked next to the curb near the intersection of Winston Street and South San Pedros. *A proverbial diamond in the rough. Someone with that kind of money surely does not live here.* All sound and awareness faded away as the automobile sparked Marshall's memory. Something, deep

within Marshall's gut tumbled and churn, unsettling with the prickling waves of *deja vu* coursing through the flesh of his stomach, hands, and scalp. *I've seen you before haven't I? Where James Dawson died. You were sitting there like you are now. Your owner leaning on your sleek black frame. I-*

'Marshall?' The young man snapped back to reality with a gulp. Fighting the nauseating sense of his sub consciousness trying to tell him something. A cold chill ran down his spine with the detective trying to shrug it off. Looking at Frank and then back at the car as a well-dressed man in a black tailored suit opened the car door. Raven black hair kept and wearing sunglasses. Swinging himself into the luxurious interior of the vehicle before the black miasma of tinted windows rendered his figure opaque.

'Yeah, just got a gut feeling, then a *deja v-*,' Marshall tried to stammer quickly only to be rendered mute once more by Frank placing a gentle palm on his shoulder. The wizened detective smiled as he spoke, 'If you're feeling worn out or sick

let me know. Can't have you nodding off on me now can't I, right?'

Marshall nodded his head reassuringly and replied in a far more even tone than moments before, 'Yeah, sorry, I was running the case over in my head. That's all.' Casting his eyes away towards the sleek muscle car; or, rather where it had been. For the vehicle was no longer there but swiftly diminishing off into the distance.

Frank looked away with his smile slowly vanishing, yet the reassuring personality remained etched all over the older man's face while he said, 'Right. Well, I take it you didn't hear anything I said?'

'No, sorry, I spaced when I was, yeah,' Marshall gestured with his left hand as he said this. As if the added motion of his arm and hand would make the fact carry more weight in some inexplicably pointless way.

Frank released Marshall's shoulder and both continued walking as they moved to the intersection crosswalk with the former replying, 'I was saying that Mister Anthony is our only

eye witness and currently the only one in this pile of awfulness that sticks out to me as a possible accomplice.'

'Well didn't the two college guys you brought in seem off too?' said Marshall quickly while the crossing light flashed to signal they could cross.

Frank raised his eyebrows quickly up and down slightly at this sudden topic change. A mental shrug of his own sort as he looked idly both ways. Only speaking once both feet were firmly back on the side walk, 'Yes, but they don't strike me as the homicidal type. Plus, they couldn't have done all that by themselves and are very close friends with the victims.'

'Most victims are in some way related to the perpetrator.'

'That is true, sadly. But there was cause. No wedge between the group that could explain homicide let alone dislike for the victims.'

This narrowed down the possible options to one. Both detectives likely thought the same thing as they moved along the side walk. Passing housing projects squatting on wide

poured concrete slab foundations to their left and right. A corner kwiki-mart crowned the corner to their right on the opposite side of the street. Before them, stepping out in gray dirty sweatpants, surplus army boots, and a ragged blue hoodie. All of which boasted at least a dozen noticeable stains and discolorations to their material. Stood Chase Anthony, cradling his jaw with his left hand, moaning lowly, obviously in pain.

'Mister Anthony.' Frank said abruptly, notes of sweet serendipity leaving his lips. Stopping as the homeless man turned to them slowly. Revealing a neat set of contusions topped with a quarter-sized welt above his left eye.

Chapter XIII

Skid Row shuffled past in the reflection of tinted windows. The black painted muscle car rumbling down sun faded asphalt pavement. Four tires gripped the rough pavement to provide continuous purchase for such a powerful vehicle. Allowing it to practically glide along the rough street surface.

Aged and worn storefronts regularly switching places in the tinted reflections of the automobile whose own passage was presaged by the throaty growl of its engine block. Leaving only the small gusts of stirred up debris in its wake.

Plastic bags, crushed Styrofoam, and ruined articles of paper dancing in neat twirls behind the chrome bumper of the vehicle. Its operator silhouetted as a faint black mass sitting in the driver's seat. Ignoring the latched gazes of forlorn

passerby's eyeing the unusually luxurious travel through their neighborhood.

The tires squelched ever so slightly as the muscle car swiveled its front tires to the left. Gracefully, swinging its steel frame sidelong in a tight left hand turn. Speed bleeding off the waxed body of the vehicle as silhouetted driver inside scanned the sidewalk before him. Flicking on the turn indicator once more, the car's muscled body swung to the right and down a residential street. Both sides lined with squat multi-story housing projects to the left and right. A small kwiki shop sat to the left on the far corner of the street where the road merged with the busier street of South San Pedros.

Pulling itself next to the curb, like a prowling tiger slowing to view the horizon for signs of prey, all four tires slowing to a crawl. The Driver-in-Black expertly maneuvered the automobile into a perfectly spaced parallel park. The driver side door swinging open as fine black leather shoes touched the worn pavement. Supporting an equally well-dressed frame of in a midnight black three-piece suit.

The light thud of a closing car door and The Driver-in-Black moved onto the sidewalk and then beyond. Shoes crunching on bits of cracked, chipped, asphalt worn down by equal disrepair and heavy use. Conditions mirroring the structures rearing up to either side of the plain walkway.

The uniformity of the neglect crawled up the cracked and stained vinyl siding of the residential buildings. Mass produced uniformity in construction like the walkways threading between the squat structures of the residential apartments. Mass produced uniformity in slowly crumbling ignorance as well. The state of the buildings and walkways forming a microcosm for the state of the entirety of the surrounding neighborhood. Such details plainly clear and yet seemingly ignored by the well-dressed man whose mere existence conflicted with the rest of the imagery around him.

The index finger of The Driver-in-Black's left hand reached up. Finger digits wrapped in the tight embrace of matching black leather reaching out. Decompressing an egg-white circular button to the side of the door. Only to

withdraw just as quickly with a sound of stretching leather as the index finger curled back to join it's siblings in a closed fist. Silence. The digits of the index finger extending slower now, cautiously as the slight sound of shifting leather could be heard if one was standing alongside the well-dressed man. The finger once more withdrawing with a hint of less reassurance. Silence. Digits moved to extend for a third, less patient, time. Hovering ever so close to that plain, simple, egg white button for uniformity when the doorknob suddenly turned.

The door flung back to reveal a slightly disheveled man in dirty, stained, ragged casual attire. The blue hoodie, gray sweatpants, and surplus army boots completing his set of clothing adorning his body forming yet another example for the neighborhood's uniform neglect.

A long second passed were the man who answered the door comprehended the nature of the person standing before him and his eyes went wide. Giving the impression of the man's receding hairline an almost comically busted appearance.

However, he never got the chance to inquire who was standing before him.

An open palm girded in black leather latched onto the right-hand side of the man's face and in a smooth physical exertion the man's skull shifted violently to his left. Skin met door-frame in a bone rattling crunch. The man's eyes seeming to blink in slow motion as he stumbled back ungainly from the sudden assault. His brain just now processing the flared agony slicing through a freshly cracked jawbone. He barely had time to react to the swift kick to the gut that followed. Falling onto his back with a resounding thud.

'Chase Anthony?' said The Driver-in-Black in a question bearing just a touch of matter-of-fact annoyance. Thrown in for nothing more than simple formality. Polished black shoes stepped through the threshold. Fine rubber soles coming to tread on musty carpet.

'Who? Who, the fuck are you!' Chase Anthony stammered through a pained jaw. Realizing rather swiftly, at the core of the burning pain, that to speak was to invite the

unsettling granular sensation of fractured bone grinding together.

'That would be a yes,' remarked The Driver-in-Black as he cast his obscured gaze across the detritus strewn apartment. Drug paraphernalia covered a grimy glass topped coffee table, which at one point could have been transparent. No longer, between the dust and the layer of bongs, rolling paper, lighters, ashtrays, and jars of Marijuana. Off to the side, stacked rather neatly, were bricks of tightly wrapped cocaine.

The Driver-in-Black shut the door behind him slowly without turning around and said, 'Is there anyone else here with you?' Seeming to take the stammered outcry from the downed Chase Anthony with little regard.

A male voice called out from the hallway, 'Who's there Chase!'

'Good to have confirmation,' remarked The Driver-in-Black with a slight curl of his lips. Evidently finding the situation to possess a slight amusement as he sauntered

over to the bricks of cocaine. Chase Anthony cradling his jaw with one hand struggling to get up behind him.

'Careless. Leaving these out like this,' mused The Driver-in-Black as he idly picked up one of the bricks of wrapped cocaine before tossing it back. Meanwhile, the struggling, still somewhat shocked form of Chase Anthony arose, finally upright.

Chase Anthony fought through the pain, 'Who. The fuck. Are you man, my ja-fuck!'

'My name is not important, Mister Anthony. What is important is why I am here. Which, why I am here is because you have witnessed a murder. The perpetrator of which my employer would like to be apprehended,' explained The Driver-in-Black. Tone clipped and concise. Like a butcher separating flesh from a kill. Turning halfway to look at the pained face of Chase Anthony. It was practically a dismissive posture.

The supposed vagabond squinted, 'So! What are you a fucking cop?'

The Driver-in-Black frowned for a moment and raised his right hand, index finger straight, while responding, 'No. But I believe you know well enough to not make me ask the same question twice.' *In truth, I wonder why he would even make that presumption. Seldom do officers of the law assault then question.*

Another tense pause as it was Chase's turn to frown. The dawning revelation spreading across his face in perverse epiphany. Jaw slacking, a deep contusion of burst blood vessels slowly spreading, Chase Anthony retreated a few steps. Steps mirrored by The Driver-in-Black as he followed Chase four feet across the living room.

'I-look, I'll stop doing that shit in Los Angeles, I-I didn't mean to intrude on Hugo's turf!'

'I'm not here about your method of income. Though,' The Driver-in-Black held up both hands to gesture towards the ceiling, 'for an alleged homeless man you seem to defy expectation.'

Footsteps started to come down the hallway and The Driver-in-Black mechanically swiveled to keep Chase and the corner of the hallway entrance firmly in his arc of vision. For coming around the corner, there emerged an African-American male holding a bong and a nine millimeter Glock pistol. Marijuana smoke rushing out of his mouth as the newcomer stopped at the sight of Chase and the well-dressed man standing in the living room. Managing only to say, 'Oh.'

'Friend of yours?' asked The Driver-in-Black casually.

'Uh, he owns the place.' Chase replied quickly as he looked back and forth between the nameless newcomer who'd assaulted him so. Evidently, Chase was more a squatter than a vagrant.

'Who the hell is this?' said the owner of the apartment with a twitch of his pistol bearing hand. Starting to raise it as if to point the weapon at The Driver-in-Black. Who silently remained passive from behind his sunglasses, sizing both men up and down silently, hand instinctively moving to his own side.

Chase held up both hands, grimacing with the pain of his fractured jaw, and spoke. His words slightly slurred as swelling began to take hold across his mouth, 'He's an acquaintance!' Pointing to The Driver-in-Black while attempting to look reassuringly at the owner looking increasingly annoyed by the second.

The owners face matching the sharp words firing from his mouth at Chase's hurried attempt at reassurance, 'Acquaintance? How'd he know to come here? You a fuckin' rat! He a cop!' The owner shot up his hand but The Driver-in-Black was already moving.

Right hand scooping up a brick of wrapped cocaine resting beside him, dust arcing to catch the lighting in the room and forming a twinkling cloud of grit, with the brick somersaulting from the well-dressed man's gloved hands. The heavy weight of the packed brick swinging up in its trajectory to strike against the chest of the newcomer in a blazing puff of white powder. The impact taking the man by surprise as he

stumbled back. Inadvertently releasing his side arm from his grasp. The weapon thudding to the floor.

The Driver-in-Black was already moving and as the owner tried to grasp for the weapon The Driver-in-Black kicked it away.

Chase could only watch as the violence erupted before him. The gun spinning away from the owners grasp. Black-clad man before him lowering himself down to grasp the downed man by chin and posterior of the skull. Arms cocking and snapping in a twisting motion.

Turning the owner of the apartments face into a thousand yard stare. One of shocked confusion and terror forever able to be glimpsed through glossy eyes. The man was dead. Neck snapped and his skull now sitting at an unnatural angle to his body.

The Driver-in-Black turned and began to cross the living room rapidly towards the silent Chase. The latter only putting in a half-effort step back at the killing he had just bore witness too. That he had possibly caused. A pair of gloved

hands were upon him and forced him against the wall with a resounding thud. His grimy form rising a few inches so that only the very tips of Chase's boots could dangle in a futile attempt of finding purchase against the carpet.

'I need to know why you were in Los Feliz.' The Driver-in-Blacks remained calm despite every syllable holding a murderous edge. The opaque blackness of those sunglasses boring into Chase Anthony's startled, bulging, eyes.

'I wasn't-.' Crack. One arm kept Chase pinned to the wall while a gloved fist smashed into the right side of the helpless man's rib cage. Just enough force for Chase to feel the gasping flair of traumatized muscles. Lips quivering, solitary tear presaging a meek gasp of for air as the oxygen in his lungs violently ejected from his mouth. 'I was forced too!' Chase croaked through clinched teeth.

'By who?' Pressed Chase's captor in his still disturbingly calm voice. Fist drawing back slowly in preparation for another strike to the helpless man's ribs.

Chase's eyes latched onto the motion and they instantly shut as his nostrils flared. Anticipating the agonizing, stabbing, pain that would soon come as spittle foamed on his lips as he started, 'Ple-,' Crack. Chase howled helplessly as the gloved fist crashed home. The throbbing pain flaring with all the concussive force of an explosion in the man's side as bone bruised and muscle tore. Feeling the contusion form as blood from crushed blood vessels pooled in a widening circle of purple under his clothes.

'Who?' Repeated The Driver-in-Black as the fist drew back one more for a third jab. Chase gasped as his mouth fought to form the words above the arm that pinned him to the wall, 'I never got his name! He cornered me in an alley and told me that I had to be in Los Feliz by a certain time or I'd end up like the others!'

'The others?'

Chase Anthony dribbled his words through clenched teeth, 'he had pictures! Bodies lying in a hole, Oh God!'

'God left you a long time ago,' stated The Driver-in-Black with a little more force behind his arm that kept Chase pinned to the wall. 'What else did he have you do?'

'He had me take a phone! It is in the room down the hall! Told me to send some messages!'

The arm holding Chase relaxed ever so slightly. Chase continued, emboldened by the sudden lightening of the forceful tension weighing in on his body, and said, 'It's all in the phone. Even his number, yeah, that's how he's kept in touch!'

Boots hit the floor. Chase nearly stumbling as the dirty carpet once more was under his soles. Would have crumpled to the ground had it not been for his assailant holding him up by the scruff of his hoodie. Only to crash to the side in a sprawling slump from the oncoming haymaker. Brutally bashing him away to slump against a dirty recliner of dusty living space.

The Driver-in-Black was already moving. Smoothly advancing towards the other side of the living room. Between the small kitchen divider and the entrance of the hallway. Stepping over the sprawled legs of the man, he had recently

dispatched. Glossy eyes momentarily reflecting his well-dressed form as he passed by without care. Gliding along down the hallway. Bottom hem of his black-suit jacket trailing ever so slightly with each sauntering step.

The hallway was short, with a small hall-closet to the left, while a solitary bedroom with a square shape floor plan lay at the end. An unmade bed sat up against the Northern wall. A small, packed, clothe strewn bedroom closet bore into the Eastern wall. The furniture was sparse and non-uniform. Given the scuffmarks, scratches, and discolorations of the furniture's wood clearly marked the pieces as second-hand. Their outlook matched the state of the carpet, like the rest of the apartment, as the only true consistent aesthetic for the residence. The furniture tops themselves kept with this infectious theme via the layer of detritus covering their once smooth surfaces. More drug paraphernalia, food detritus, clothes, nick-knacks, a small flat screen television, and a set of cellphones strewn along the top of a small brown-topped bureau. Most of which appeared to be track phones.

Quickly advancing in the direction of the cellphones, one by one taken up into gloved hands. Buttons pressed, devices turned on, and when able the depression of an arrow pad allowed The Driver-in-Black to quickly move through the recent communications conducted on this motley assortment of phones.

First was nothing, an old beat up Nokia, looking like it was ripped straight from the late 1990s. *Belongs in a museum.* The phone was unceremoniously placed back onto the bureau exactly as it had been. The second and third were ever so slightly more modern flip phones. Again, nothing of value. The process repeating itself thrice more before what these devices served rammed itself to the fore of The Driver-in-Black's mind.

Burn phones, no doubt for this little drug operation they have set up here, smart. Sunglasses swiveled back down the hallway for a second. *But evidently not that smart.*

Gloved hands dropped to the side, what he needed was not before him, perhaps he had been lied too? *But why? Chase*

is out cold. Surely, he wasn't naive enough to think I'd just let him go?

Turning around, sunglasses swiveled about the room, casting their reflective gaze over the contents of the haphazardly cluttered bedroom. Eager eyes searching about the room until they rested upon a dresser drawer ever so slightly ajar.

Unless, of course, there are others of your kind not left in plain view.

A few swift steps and fingers curled around the dull, worn, brass handle of the drawer. Pulling open the drawer gently there, a corner of platinum gray under neatly stacked male undergarments. The only semblance of order thus so far seen within the chaos-strewn apartment.

Reaching down gingerly a gloved hand plucked the platinum corner from underneath the undergarments. Revealing the back of an iPhone. Flipping over the device in his palm he thumbed the home button on the bottom front of the device.

The screen unlocking to reveal the square icons illuminated on the screen. Two rows across a wallpaper of young woman.

No password? Looks like you've been already cracked.

Indeed, the cellphone security had already been hacked and bypassed. The sunglasses once more looked down the hall,

But by those two? Unlikely. This guy is just a local dealer. Probably holding onto all these devices for an actual fence to sell on the black market.

Pressing the messages icon the screen changed to reflect a series of text conversations. Most of which were the last messages the late James Dawson ever typed. Keeping his thumb depressed on the screen The Driver-in-Black scrolled through the conversations up and down. The latest last two being the only ones to stand out. The first, opened by a quick thumb press, revealed several messages containing instructions from an Anthony Perrot. Along with copies of what were presumably replies from Chase Anthony. The last message bore a simple instruction to, 'meet at the Shakespeare Bridge at

midnight tomorrow for payment regarding services rendered.

Bring the other two with you as well.' *Bring the other two with you as well.*

A swipe to the right deleted the message and brought the log of conversations back into view. A second thumb press and a conversation conducted with a Cynthia Summers popped up. *Cynthia Summers, the room mate of the second victim, so that is how He's choosing targets. Interesting.*

Scanning through the conversation it became clear what was going on. *So you're using the dim wit in the other room as your middle man before likely offing him too. Clever.* Killer likely was planning to kill Chase at the Shakespeare Bridge tomorrow night to cover up their tracks even further. A second swipe and the conversations were deleted. That was he caught the edge of the wallpaper. There, around the nape of the woman on the screen's neck, was a necklace. The same necklace seen in the photographs. *She's your next target. I need to find this Anthony Perrot.*

Crunch. The phone, screen first, was rammed full force into the corner of the dresser. Spider webbing the glass screen. Several more strikes and the phone warped, cracked, splintered, with screen glass shattering to the ground. The abrupt violence did not end there as the gloved hands pulled out components, destroying each in turn, before making his way down the hallway once more. This time stopping in front of the kitchen sink and forcing the broken components and pieces of the cell phone into the sink. A flick of the switch and the whirring guttural cacophony of a struggling garbage disposal. Several seconds passed with the smell of smoking metal wafting up from the sink. The switch flicked down and the guttural cacophony ceased.

Footsteps signaled The Driver-in-Black's departure from the kitchen. Pausing by the unconscious, sprawled form of Chase Anthony as the helpless man stirred back to consciousness, and thinking,

No loss in you dying now is there?

The door opened and closed quickly with a dull thud. The Driver-in-Black departed down the pathway. Quickly moving back to his vehicle just as gracefully as when he first arrived. The rumble of tires carrying the automobile back up the road from whence it came.

* * *

The Sun was firmly in the descent now by the time the 69' Ford Mustang pulled into the parking, once more, in front of the doors of the *Le Sage* Hotel. The black-clad operator of the vehicle maneuvering to the back of the car and following a quick insertion and twist of a key raised the lid of the trunk. Reaching down and pulling open a false bottom to reveal an assortment of weaponry. Ballistic firearms shared space with all manner of knives, blades, and trinkets of an esoteric nature.

Reaching inside his black coat a gloved hand located the holster of his concealed side arm. Pulling out a P22 Walther pistol and ejecting the magazine. One by one, the bullets ejected out of the magazine and placed in a padded container flipped open by The Driver-in-Black's free hand. As the last

one was slotted away a series of bullets were taken from another row in the open container of rounds. Except these bullets, unlike the previous, had a cavity at the point of the round. Hollow-points. Carefully, expertly, and quickly the magazine was filled with these rounds before the magazine was swiftly slotted back into the firearm. Slide pulled back with a satisfying click of a freshly chambered bullet.

The P22 swiftly disappeared back into its holster underneath the left armpit of The Driver-in-Black. Hidden from view by the fine materials of his suit jacket. But the trunk did not close. No, the gloved hands moved once more among the firearms as a second pistol. A stainless steel Marlin BFR revolver. The five round, single action, big frame revolver bore a characteristically long muzzle.

Popping open the cylinder of the revolver it was swiftly loaded with smooth precision. Longer, 350-grain rounds bearing long brass metal jackets. Holding enough propellant capable of launching each smooth golden bullet in excess of eighteen hundred feet per second. Flick of the wrist and the

revolver's cylinder slotted and locked back into place.

Carefully being placed into a brown holster pulled from a small case off to the side. The black suit jacket momentarily coming off as the second holster was belted on to rest snug below the right arm pit. Both weapons being quickly obscured by the dark fabric of the suit jacket mere seconds later.

The false bottom placed back into position while the trunk closed with a small click. His small arsenal now secured The Driver-in-Black pulled out his flip phone. Flicking open the phone he dialed a sequence of digits. Raising the phone receiver to the side of his face and once the sound of someone on the other line picking up occurred he spoke without waiting for a greeting, 'Kai. I know where our killer will be. I just need to know where Cynthia Summers will be.'

The phone closed with a loud click before disappearing back into the depths of the man's trousers. Lowering himself back into the driver's seat the muscle car's engine roared to renewed life as the vehicle peeled away.

First. Time to check off some loose ends. Dawson had two other friends, Anthony Perrot and Carlos Rodriguez. Two others on that photograph, two in the vision he'd seen from the Orchestra, two people mentioned in the phone conversation, how much you want to bet petty rivalries run deep below the surface?

Sure enough, a text message from Kai flashed onto his phone screen, giving a pair of addresses. One for Dawson's two friends, and the other being the location Cynthia. *Was she being protected by the Los Angeles Police Department? Not that they would be able to stop what is coming.*

The Mustang roared along the roadways in the direction of the University of California's Los Angeles campus for the second time today. The Sun dipping ever lower as evening approached unabated. The Los Angeles traffic picking up as workdays ended for both white collar and blue collar workers. Each swarming the asphalt arteries of the city as they jockeyed along the roadways homeward bound. So that by the time the sleek frame of the 1969 Ford Mustang Mach 1 Super Cobra Jet

pulled onto the campus grounds. The distinct brilliant dimness of twilight having descended across the cityscape of Los Angeles.

Darkening skies met the fierce fiery red of the descending Sun. Casting glows the color of molten glass across a million windows. Yet, even this picturesque imagery did little to pause the ceaseless traffic or surging hordes of Los Angeles denizens making their way along to whatever newly beginning night lifestyle they chose to partake.

Tires rumbled onto the grounds of the University Campus' Apartments. Their build and style matching that of the school. Industrial mass made uniformity; not entirely different than the grimy residence where Chase Anthony had been found; yet, unlike that of Cynthia Summers and the late Elizabeth Wallington's abode.

Casting his eyes about for passerby's he spotted a pair of young women walking along the path. The Driver-in-Black smiled politely to them as he exited his vehicle and said, 'Excuse me, wouldn't happen to know Anthony Perez and

Carlos Rodriguez live?' *I already know. But to hide in plain sight offers the easiest path.*

The woman closest furrowed her brow warily at the stranger. The other did the same for a split second until her eyes noticed the make and model of the car. Both pairs of eyes brightening at the icon of American muscle cars before them. However, it was the woman closest who responded first, 'Uh, who are you?'

'I'm their Uber driver. But I think they gave me the wrong address?'

'Oh, uh.'

The woman further away pointed to a set of apartments another row of apartments further up from where he was sitting, 'They live up on the hill, next turn, Unit Forty-Four!'

'Thank you so much, Miss,' replied driver before them smoothly.

'You're an Uber driver?' spoke the cautious woman quickly. The Driver-in-Black kept his polite visage as he humored her with a lie, 'It's a side gig.' Rolling up the window

the Mustang peeled away. Leaving the two women to watch the back of the vehicle as it sped away onto the next street.

Unit Forty-Four was as much like the other apartments around it. Brick with vinyl sidings topped with a black tiled roof. The Driver-in-Black cast his gaze all along the front of the apartment. Every window closed with blinds pulled. Door shut, likely locked, a single faint glow from a lone light on the top floor could be seen amid the dying twilight.

At least someone is home.

Musing to himself as he pulled into a parking spot on the opposite side of the lot which services the automobiles owned by the student residents of this community. Killing the engine with the twist of a key The Driver-in-Black sat back in his seat as he adjusted the rear-view mirror. Allowing him a clear image of any coming and goings behind him. Especially, should anyone arrive or leave via the front door to Unit Forty-Four.

The wait would not be terribly long as the evening classes ended and the shuffling mobs of students made their

way from the classroom to their boarding residence. Singularly or in groups students walked along the paved footpaths. The Driver-in-Black watching them all casually as they passed in blissful ignorance to his existence. Sure, some spared a glance at the sports car parked. But none approached nor seemed to care beyond sparse momentary stares or a few whispered statements to peers.

Darkness spread among as the minutes ticked by. Ensnaring everything and anything terrestrial with but a light-less touch. Shadows drew themselves along the ground in the shapes of their casters. Warping and twisting to the pace of time until what they originally were spawned from became utterly incomprehensible masses of noir.

Another hour turned over on the analog clock of the Mustang's interior, and with night comes, even in Los Angeles, an ever so slight measure for silence. Complementing the wreathed grasp of shadow now blanketing the cityscape around The Driver-in-Black. The sound of crickets forming an orchestra of life all around him. Pairing their chirps with the

occasional sound of laughter in the distance, or the throaty rumble of a combustion engine.

Motion passed into the field of view captured on the reflective surface of the rear-view mirror above and to the right of The Driver-in-Black's head. Sunglasses motioning ever so slightly in response to the activity as it was revealed by his gaze. A young man shuffling along on the footpath holding a thirty-pack of Pabst Blue Ribbon beer. An eyebrow raised from behind the sunglasses still straddling the face of the patiently observant driver. The young man turned right and began to approach the front door of Unit Forty-Four. A gloved hand now coming to a rest on the handle of the driver side door in readiness. However, the sunglasses and the gaze behind them remained transfixed on the young man whose shuffling gait became awkward as he shoved a hand into the pockets of his trousers. Turning as he did so. Giving a clear angle for the lurking driver to see his face. *Anthony Perrot*. Finally fishing out something small that was placed near the lock of Unit Forty-Four's front door. A key.

The young man's attention completely focused on the jingling of the key into the lock, mouth forming little fluctuations in his lips likely creating muttering curses about the task that he remained oblivious to a car door opening off to the right. Ignorant to the silent shutting of said car door and the rapid, wraith-like, measured approach of a dark figure coming across the lot toward him.

'Finally, shit,' The Driver-in-Black heard Anthony say as the front door swung open. Stepping into the apartment in triumph. Too late. The dark figure that is The Driver-in-Black was upon him now.

Coming up behind the young man, The Driver-in-Black tensed like a panther who had crept up to potential prey, totally unaware to the danger they were in. Rearing up, the right leg of the dark figure behind the young man shot out. Striking the young man in the square of his back with the full weight and force of the man behind it. A snap-crack of vertebrae presaged the heavy thud of the beer case smashing to the floor. Flung from the young man's grasp. The weight, force of impact, and

suddenness of the action causing more than one can of Pabst Blue Ribbon to burst open. Spewing its light brown, watery, fermented smelling contents across the dull blue carpet of the university apartment.

The young man grunted in surprise as his arms whipped upwards to try to break his tumble. Kicking the door shut a gloved hand shot out and grasped the back of the young man's skull. Yelping, once more off balance, the young man could not catch himself in time to stop the brain rattling impact of forehead on wall. Denting in the wall, cracking the paint, while the door was slammed shut as The Driver-in-Black advanced. An odor, sweet and pungent, very faint but present nevertheless, wafted into the nostrils of the young man's dark assailant.

The Driver-in-Black grasped the back of the man's skull by his short hair. A blur of motion erupting before him as the young man twisted and snarled. Skin peeled back from the skull to show a yellow-white complexion underneath, sickly in tone, while the scalp of the young man thought firmly grasped

in The Driver-in-Black's gloved hand tore. Leaving only a tuft of hair clumped to several square inches worth of flapping skin. No red crimson of freshly spilled blood fomented forth.

The fiendishly snarling thing before The Driver-in-Black rose to the fore while motion sounded from the floor above. The Driver-in-Black backed away quickly as the source of the commotion upstairs surged forth across the ceiling. The form of a second young man vaulted down the narrow staircase to land behind the downed creature. Face cast in shadow by the dimness of the interior of the residence.

The Driver-in-Black's hand shot into the interior of his suit jacket as the snarling figures surged forth. The familiar reassurance of the revolver in the palm of his hand. The long barrel of the revolver stabbed forth and for but a second illuminated the interior of the foyer with the small brilliance of a newborn sun. A resounding crack of the propellant ignited. Sending the gleaming yellow bullet crossing the distance from wielder to target in a fraction of the time that both flash and sound could be comprehended. Anthony Perrot, or what was

once Anthony, flung back with a shrieking howl as the bullet pulped its throat before embedding itself into splintered vertebrae. The vaulting newcomer leaped with surprising dexterity and smoothness.

A second sun erupted in the apartment. A second figure flipped over backwards in a sickening whiplash. Thudding to the floor behind the body of the first. Smoke coiling like a dancing serpent from the barrel of the revolver. The Driver-in-Black cautiously kept his aim switching quickly between the two downed silhouettes. Moving over to the nearest light switch and gently decompressing the simple white switch. Bathing the foyer in the warming orange light.

The sunglasses slowly pulled away from The Driver-in-Black's eyes. The frames of which were carefully folded and tucked away into the small chest pocket. Allowing him to view the scene before him in its full-unfiltered macabre glory.

What was the young man who had been carrying in the case of beer possessed a grisly torn face. Revealing a sickly,

bone white visage underneath the thin, almost mask like exterior flesh. Sizzling smoke arising from his, no *it's*, destroyed neck. It gurgled and stirred weakly. Reflexes took hold as the hammer of the revolver once more was brought back and released with the depression of the trigger. A third flash of rolling thunder disturbed the silence of the apartment. Smoke and the sizzling bubbles of black blood as the third round punched through its victim's skull. The barrel's aim moved on.

The second figure was sprawled on its back, silent, mouth agape in an expression of mixed anger and shock. The same vile black ichor for blood dribbled pooled around the back of its blown out skull in a liquid halo. *Must move quickly. Everyone for hundreds of yards would have clearly heard.*

The hammer of the revolver was drawn pack a fourth time; The Driver-in-Black slyly stepped around the foyer. Gently grasping a series of stainless doorknobs allowing access through the three doors on the bottom floor. Two bedrooms and a bathroom were revealed as the black-clad man stealthily

snaked his way into each. Opening drawers, closets, and searching even under the beds for any sign or clues to the identity for mysterious homicidal maniac that had orchestrated this whole series of events. *The police will be arriving soon.*

Nothing, the bedrooms look like they had not been properly inhabited for a long while, and the bathroom was otherwise dusty from lack of regular cleaning.

Moving past the bodies in the foyer The Driver-in-Black ascended the stairs warily. Creaking ever so slightly despite the careful, methodical, placement of his feet. Arising to the second floor, revolver leveled, the black-clad man moved into what was a small kitchen and living space. The television was dusty and off. Clearly having not been used in a great while. Only a single lamp was lit. Source of the light seen from outside. Its bulb casting a soft glow about the apartment in an inadequate attempt of banishing the shadows from the second floor. Dimness hugging the edges of the second floor as The Driver-in-Black moved into the kitchen and opened the refrigerator door.

There, in Ziploc bags, was an assortment of raw meats. Slowly reaching in, the coolness of the refrigerators temperature chilling the slightly exposed skin of his wrist. He felt the coolness kiss his face ever so softly as black leather fingers plucked a bag from the top shelf. A human liver now held in his hand.

Well, found Carlos, or is this Anthony? Guess it's safe to say both of you have been dead awhile. Ghouls. Our Amarok is working with tomb crawlers? Wonder what price it took to persuade these wretches to leave their desolate forgotten cemeteries for Los Angeles.

Tossing the Ziploc bag back onto the shelf and shutting the refrigerator door The Driver-in-Black moved briskly to the oven. Aged and still running on gas it seemed. Turning on the knobs, smell of gas filling the air around him, The Driver-in-Black placed a metal pan fetched from a cupboard onto one of the oven's burners. Followed by a pouring of cooking oil swiftly taken from the pantry. Last but not least, a match, which was carefully lit away from the oven and placed

delicately onto the counter where it could burn unhindered.

Awaiting the expanding invisible cloud of gasoline.

Back down to the foyer. The addition of a small knife in his hands. Lowering himself onto his haunches next to both bodies. Still pooling in their own escaping vitality. Mismatched eyes, left iris a deep almost violet blue while its opposite shone as a brilliant emerald green, peered at the bodies. Two swift, delicate, motions and the golden bullets were retrieved from the downed Ghoul's skulls. Clutching them in a gloved hand The Driver-in-Black exited the apartment to the sound of approaching police sirens. Calmly closing the door and stepping away from the apartment. Holstering the revolver in one graceful motion The Driver-in-Black retrieved his shades and slid them back on over his face. *Enjoy the fireworks.*

Chapter XIV

A skittering thud across a sleek silver-gray surface. Faint clouds of cooling condensation trailing behind the fast moving rectangular object. An ice pack traversed itself across the stainless steel table. Rocky clunks received into a freshly outstretched palm. Leaching warmth from flesh as it ascended from the table to rest on a swollen jaw. Frigid relief soothing its way through the wounded tissues of skin, muscle, and bone.

Across from the owner of the swollen jaw sat two men. One upright with the posture of unbowed youth. Skin taut and flush with a smoothness not yet roughened by the passage of many winters. To his left sat an older man, ever so slightly slouched, whose folds around their eyes represented the

experiences of decades. Allowing, perhaps, an even sharper observance to the world around him than the undoubtedly faster, but not yet tempered, young man beside him.

'Mister Anthony, you're saying that the injuries to your face was caused by a fall?' The younger man's voice across the table from the solitary ice pack wielding individual couldn't sound more disbelieving.

Chase Anthony nodded quickly in affirmation.

'You seem nervous,' added the older man on the left. His tone was not questioning. It was factual. A statement of deduced truth.

'Sorry, detectives, I am just not quite sure why I'm here,' came the lonely reply.

The younger man on the left opened a manila folder and slid across a photo-copied piece of paper lined with information boxes and lines of typed dictation. Speaking confidently as the younger man spotted recognition in the eyes from the wounded man across the table, 'Mister Chase Anthony, is this not a statement you gave when questioned

about a body found near Rosalia Road, up in Los Feliz?'
Silence might have reigned had the younger detective not continued, 'A body you discovered and also reported.'

This addition finally drawing a grunt of a clearing throat on behalf of Chase Anthony. An act which caused him to shut his eyes as a stabbing bolt lanced through his face. The pain in his jaw dulled but no less agonizing. Agony which had to be endured. For Chase spoke with but small, momentary, lapses of silence, 'I remember. But you still have yet to tell me what questions you need me to answer, detectives?'

The younger detective whom had introduced themselves as James Marshall as Chase recalled. Glanced sidelong at his older partner. Who had in turn introduced himself as a Franklin Kirkwood. Returning his gaze to Detective Marshall offered the first question again, 'Did you happen to see anyone in the alley with Dawson?'

Chase's mind blanched and he could not help but look down as his innards wretched back and forth inside him. His

stomach writhing, coiling, as he could only blink in response while looking off to the side.

Detective Kirkwood's brow furrowed ever so slightly as years of experience picked up on the subtle ticks of a person hiding something. Something which was struggling to be free. *What are you afraid to say Chase? Has someone got something on you? You didn't get those injuries from a fall did you.* Frank processed the clear apprehension of Mister Anthony clear as day. Already running through possible reasons internally. Before finally saying what was known to everyone in the room, 'I have a distinct impression there is something you're not telling us Chase. Something which may be beneficial to us solving this case. Am I correct?'

I am correct Chase, don't you lie to me now.

Chase mumbled something incomprehensible and Marshall quickly shot back curtly, 'I'm sorry?'

Spurred on by both Detectives, Chase looked at them both quickly, 'There was two others, down at the other end of the alley, I – I wasn't sure if they were part of –.' Chase's lips

quivered as the imagery of Dawson's body flashed across the tormented man's conscious.

Detective Kirkwood leaned forward, arms cross on the table, eagerness for a decisive answer edging itself throughout every syllable, 'Part of Dawson's murder?'

Chase leaned back in his chair, sighing heavily, water forming at the edges of his eyes. Only managing to sigh slowly as a raspy, 'Yeah,' escaped his battered mouth.

Detective Marshall shot a notepad across the table, following the trajectory of the previous ice pack, minus the comet trail of condensation. A pencil following to crash into the metal wiring which made up the notepad binding. 'Can you describe both of them to us?'

Chase warily put down the ice pack. As if unsure, or not wishing, he wanted to relinquish the soothing cold given to him. Numb fingers gravitating slowly to the notepad as his eyes picked his gaze up and firmly placed the cones of his vision on the white, lined, paper, which had been slid before him. He could not feel the thin roughness of the papers edge as

his fingers hooked the notepad. Pulling it towards him until it was but an inch away from the tables' edge. Chase did not pick up the pencil, however.

No, shutting his eyes momentarily in focused remembrance or maybe in planning, Chase spoke in measured words. Syllables enunciated flat and without traces of emotional betrayal which could belie his exposition,

'Both were men, I mean male! Athletic looking, young.' Hand pulling the notepad back from its proximity to the table edge, while mulling over his next words, not making eye contact with the piercingly observant stares from the two detectives, 'One was shorter than the other with black hair and dark eyes, olive skinned, um, Hispanic or Latino complexion I'd say?' Chase shrugged but continued without prodding this time, 'the other, um, was a little on the taller side with light brown hair.'

'Would you say both could possibly be Hispanic or Latino?' shot back Detective Kirkwood at breakneck speed.

Chase looked at the pencil near the notepad as if he were finally realizing that it had been there the whole time. Speaking in that same flat tone, 'Yeah,' Chase looked up to lock eyes with Frank, 'I could say that they were.'

Detective Kirkwood leaned back in his chair. Eyes expressing for all to see mental puzzle pieces previously unable to fit fall into place seemingly of their own accord. Drawing Marshall's confused attention at the sudden shift in body language given by the older detective.

Marshall turned back to Chase slowly and said, 'Why didn't you detail this in your statement?'

Chase could only shrug with an accompanied sigh of released breath. Despondently replying, 'I just didn't think they mattered.'

* * *

Detective Franklin Kirkwood sat, elbows resting on thighs, as he looked out at the falling sunlight. The footage from Good Luck's played idly on a small department television set beside his desk. He had been over the footage multiple

times. Nothing. No item left behind. Another dead end in this endless labyrinth of seemingly nothing but dead ends. Light conquered by the rapidly approaching dark with every passing tick. The beating pulse of Los Angeles did not cease despite the ascension of Moon in the dimming azure sky.

I had you, I had you both, right here! How could I be so blind? Every clue I could ever want was right there in front of me. Yet, one thing remains unexplained. Elizabeth. Franks eyes shrank in their sockets as his brow asserted itself. Contorting his face in time with the tumultuous ocean of self-loathing coursing through every fiber of his being. A knife blade, tearing into his chest, sawing itself around his weary heart. Unable to retaliate. Limbs deadened by the unmovable metaphysical weight chaining him down onto the edge of his office chair.

Crash of thunder. Whirlwinds invaded the somber stillness of Frank's office. Head swiveling to the right at the sudden intrusion to look upon the storming approach of Detective Marshall. Chair creaking as Frank's torso slowly

swiveled to match the direction of his gaze. The look on the other detectives face was shocked. 'University of California had a gas fire. Evacuated the whole campus community. Two fatalit –.'

'Anthony Perrot and Carlos Rodriguez?' Finished Frank, standing up quickly that his chair bounced into the wall behind him.

Marshall, for shock either at Frank completing his sentence or the speed in which the older man had just moved, was speechless for a solid minute. 'Yeah, bodies were pretty badly burned. But they match physical descriptions and the right Unit.'

But why are they dead. They were the –. Because you're cleaning house. If they saw Dawson's murder then they needed to be eliminated. But Anthony's statement of seeing them at the sight of that particular crime destroys the timeline of events. Unless they were the accomplices.

'Where is Cynthia Summers right now?'

Marshall looked away, then back, in confusion, 'What? Why? We gotta get to UC —.'

'There's no time!' Shouted Frank. Bolting from behind his desk with a speed not before seen by Marshall, who could only backpedal to avoid a collision with his colleague. Forcing the younger detective behind to follow.

'Why are we going to Cynthia?' Marshall inquired through heavy breathes as the two raced from the building to Franks awaiting vehicle. The older detective neglecting to answer, out of inability from the physical exertion or focus Marshall could not be sure. Breaking out into exposition only when both had clambered into his automobile.

'Because. Anthony and Carlos was our perp' cleaning house. I don't know why those two would slaughter their friends. But they were pawns. The one behind it all still has one target left! Now, get dispatch on the radio. Tell them to keep tabs on Miss Summer's protection detail until we arrive.'

Frank floored it. Screeching out of the precinct parking lot with all the fiery intent of a bat-out-of-hell. Sending the

ATS Coupe, protesting all the while, blazing down Los Angeles streets.

* * *

By the time, the ATS Coupe pulled onto the long driveway of the small split ranch on the edge of Encino that served as a shelter. Operated by the city of Los Angeles as a place generally reserved for battered women or children to reside temporarily. This particular property now served as the hiding place for Cynthia Summers.

A lone squad car sat in the driveway. Its cabin dark, masking any uniformed officer who may have sat behind the wheel. Matched by the pitch-blackness of the house itself. Rolling to a stop next to the squad car Frank peered into the cabin. No one was sitting there in the gloom.

Frank did not turn to Marshall to speak. Instead, he kept his eyes roving the darkness around them. 'Where are they? They reported in ten minutes ago?' Marshall did much the same when he responded. With the addition of drawing his side arm. His nine-millimeter service pistol resting heavy in his hands.

'Both Luttich and Xavier checked in.' Marshall placed his phone to his ears. Raising dispatch and telling the operator on the other side of the line to see if they could find out where Luttich and Xavier had gone.

'I don't like the look of this,' muttered Frank as he slowly opened his car door. Marshall following, phone still raised, side arm sweeping out beside him. The click of the safety from Frank's own service pistol being brought to bear being the only man made sound. But silence, which could have been welcoming in hearing anything around them, simply couldn't survive the barrage of cricket chirps filling the air. Trees and tall grass ringed the property. Another home not being for another two thousand yards down the road.

Pitter-patter. Frank swung his sidearm around. Sighting down the barrel. Tall grass gently swaying in the cool breeze. Buffeting in from the Pacific to lash itself across the property. Fading away just as quickly as it had arrived. Behind Frank, Marshall lowered his phone and spoke, 'Dispatch can't raise Luttich or Xavier. Just static.'

'I definitely don't like the look of this,' whispered Frank to no one in particular. Maneuvering around his car door the older detective walked around the squad car. It seemed intact. *Tires aren't slashed, no signs of combat, cameras still in place. The hell is going on here.*

Marshall cautiously advanced up the driveway. Sidearm held out before him in the ready position. Steps carefully placed. One foot in front of the other. Body tense and senses straining against the background noise of crickets and Pacific wind. Moving roughly two-thirds of the way up the driveway Marshall's foot kicked something. Glancing down Marshall froze. A corded wire ran across the front of his shoe. One end severed to reveal naked copper wiring. Quickly kneeling down the young detective pulled one end of the cord. Subtle realization hitting him the more he drew. Until a smashed radio receiver slid into view. Eyebrows rising, irises dilating, he stepped back quickly. Tilting his head back, but still keeping his eyes locked to where his gun-barrel pointed, he spoke in a

low tone towards Frank. 'I got a smashed radio receiver over here.'

The older detective, having advanced now nearly to the garage door, back to Marshall, watching their flank. Didn't turn to talk to his partner either. 'Yeah, well safe to say our perp' got here first. You calling for backup?'

'Already on –.'

Shrill feminine vocal cords shattered through the background noise. Overpowering the background ambiance of nature with bone chilling fear. Frank took off towards the source of the night shattering cry. The house. Reaching the front door he went for the knob. Locked. Marshall hot on his heels. Phone in hand, side arm in the other, maneuvering on past to plant a heel firmly next to the doorknob. Crackling wood previewed the shattering collapse of the door. Slapping with a high pitched crash onto the tiles laid down along the entrance interior. Frank, however, was the first one through the improvised breach. Marshall doing one last expert sweep behind them turned to advance.

'Cynthia!' Shouted Frank. A second cry, so ferocious that both officers felt pain in their eardrums sounded on the level up the short staircase to the right. Frank pushed up and quickly checking his corners he maneuvered left. Marshall hot on his heels. Storming forward down the hall they barely paused to recognize the shattered picture frames which had hung on the walls. Only slowing when they came across a crumpled bedroom door. Wooden frame shattered into several fragments. Blown inward from whatever incredible force had forced its way in.

But beyond was a scene which finally halted both men in their track. Amid the overturned furniture, disheveled mattress, and debris of broken glass from shattered windows. The languid form of Cynthia Summers laid.

Frank hurried over, collapsing next to Cynthia as he cradled her head in his hands, 'Cynthia! Cynthia!' Her eyes lulled white in their sockets. Sweat trickling down his face Detective Kirkwood checked for a pulse. Recognizing after four frantic seconds the beat of faint life.

Marshall moved over to the window, phone still clutched in his hands, the older detective looked up. Eyes catching the position of the phone, 'Marshall?! Did you call for back up?!'

The younger detective jolted, 'I-', giving up on an explanation made to raise the phone to his ear when a sudden gale swept the room. A black mass catching the corner of Frank's vision. Turning as fast as he could. Gun-barrel rising a pair of harsh yellow-white eyes met his but for a moment.

His finger squeezed the trigger involuntarily as a bowling ball pressure thrashing into his stomach. Air bellowing out from violently decompressing lungs. Frank crashed into the drywall with such force incredible force he felt the surface give way. Crumbling inwards as his bones popped in crackling rhythm with the wooden frames cracking behind him. Back of the head slashing across the length one of these wooden supports. Opening his skin like tissue paper. Vomiting warmth along the side of his face as he finally came to a rest in a human heap.

Time slowed for Marshall. The commotion behind him causing him to turn just in time to see a shadowy bulk launch Detective Kirkwood off his feet. He could feel it. The fetid breathe of whatever it was. Bellowing towards him with such speed. Speed that his own body refused to match. Only able to watch with expanding pupils his slow moving hand be brushed aside by the bulk of the thing before him. Marshall felt intense pressure puncture his chest. Bones moving as his rib cage fought to maintain shape. Spittle flowing from his mouth as a sensation of weightlessness flowed over him. The world moving around him. The ceiling giving way to dark sky. Walls to open space hemmed in by tree tops. Stars peering down upon him from above beginning to recede. Time quickening with their retreat. It was at this moment that he heard his own scream. Then swirling black as an unmovable Earth caught his fallen body. Metallic tang washed of his tongue. Ears echoing with what appeared to be the blinding song of his own mind shutting down to the darkness.

Frank groaned as he saw Marshall catapulted from the room. A weight in his shaking hands registered in his mind. Arms shaking, matted hair flowing with his own life, he fought the blackness circling his vision. Muscles burning, nerves shattered, grip wobbling uncontrollably Frank defied the malevolence before him. Fist tightening with all his might.

The room illuminated thirteen times in rapid succession. Barking flares of his gun barrel lit the room before him. Revealing a hulking body of corded muscle and long flowing black hair. Crimson puffs billowing from its body until the room dimmed. Bells tolling in his mind as Frank emptied his entire magazine into the horror which had terrorized so many. Inhuman howls filled the air. The thing stepped towards him. Thudding footfalls. Howls of rage. Not of death.

Frank kept his smoking sidearm before him. Fist squeezing the trigger as fast as his weakening body could. No more barking flashes. Only the sad metal click of an empty gun.

Moaning, Frank felt a strong grasp crumple the front of his shirt. Prying his broken body from the wall, so he did the only thing he could do. Stare. Stare in defiance. Stare into those sick yellow-white eyes leering down at him. Putrid breathe filling his nostrils as whatever it was opened its maw. Ready to deliver the fatal throat tearing that would see his end. Eyes never stopped meeting, even as the world around him illuminated with bellowing flash of noise and light. Even when he felt himself go sideways with the creature holding him captive. Even when he felt himself crash onto the floor next to the languid, barely alive, body of Cynthia Summers. Even as the blackness finally took him.

* * *

The world trembled. A gentle fluctuation. Growing more and more aggressive as one followed the other. Sensations growing, he could feel his breathe, the bindings around his skull. Chest rising, stuttering, and falling. The movement of air on his tender flesh as he reached up to touch the wide of his face. The stinging pain from his own touch. The

feeling of the scab across the side of his head. Ears punctuated by a steady soft beeping.

'Franklin?'

His name, said by what he could surmise to be an angelic being. Dead-weight eyes pressing down into his skull shifted. Eyelids, curtains of his life, rolling back to reveal an all too familiar face. Frank tried to make sound but all that escaped his lungs was a barely audible rasp. 'Claire?'

Her face moved away, his own eyes following, revealing blankets and bedding. A hospital bed. The mechanical thrum of the bed adding a new sound to the beeping of medical machines keeping track of his vitals. Head rising with the changing angle of the bed. He could see more clearly now, and to his right he saw the apparently still sleeping form of James Marshall.

'So the old bag of bones finally got it eh?'

Charles Graham walked into the room. Black slacks, red shirt, black tie, coat jacket draped over an arm. Lucky, when no one reported in dispatch routed back-up to your last

known position. Nick of time too by the looks of things. But, Luttich and Xavier bought it. Found their bodies in the shrubs around the house. Memorial service is next weekend.'

Frank averted his eyes at the news of the department losing two of its finest. 'I'll make sure I'm there for it.' Graham nodded as he glanced back at the still unconscious form of Detective Marshall.

Recollection struck Frank like a lightning bolt. Sitting up stock straight, 'Cynthia?'

'She's fine. A Fed took her into custody along with the body of the perp'. Pity the Fed shot him. Would have loved to see that son-of-a-bitch get what they deserved.'

'What?'

'Yeah, some agent arrived before everyone else,' Graham racked his brain, snapping his fingers when it struck him, 'John Locke.'

Easing himself back into his pillows Frank could only stare blankly before him.

Epilogue

The Shakespeare Bridge's iconic Gothic architecture formed an iconic landmark among the sun-drenched boroughs of Los Angeles. Its steeples angled upwards while its body bore the frequent passage of automobiles. Idle pedestrian foot traffic, light this particular morning, ever present. Parents with jeering children on early morning walks. Mothers jogging while pushing their strollers before them like little snowplows. Occasionally, disrupted by the stream of cyclists crossing from one expanse of the bridge to the other. The beat of *The Passenger* audible through the rolled up windows.

Off to the side, resting on one end of the bridge, a sleek black body sat with engine idling. A lone man clad in a black suit, hands in pockets, watched the morning commutes of these trotting pedestrians. Masked vision smoothly washing over each and every person. Eventually resting on the shadowed figure of a blue trench coat wearing man suddenly standing several feet away. Just within the shadows cast by still tree boughs.

'Kai,' said The Driver-in-Black.

'Mister Korvinus. *She*, took the successful conclusion of this mission quite well.'

Glad to keep the boss happy. 'I trust cleanup will go smoothly.'

Kai opened his mouth as if to speak, eyes slanting away, 'Eh, define smooth. A lot of falsified evidence is still being planted. Kheiron is still finding a stand in corpse for our 'serial killer.'

'Another happy ending.'

Kai chuckled under his breath. Making a big show of breathing in and out before looked past The Driver-in-Black. Speaking with a sudden inquisitiveness, 'What about the girl.'

'Drop her off somewhere safe.'

'John. You're not in the business of saving lives, you know that right?' Kai leaned forward with a sly expression. 'You bury them, Mister Korvinus.'

The Driver-in-Black raised his shoulders as he rolled his gaze away from Kai. Already knowing that he had disappeared. 'Right.' Kicking off the hood of his vehicle The Driver-in-Black cast one last glance at the Shakespeare Bridge. Taking in the smells of the air. That ever present Pacific breeze. View of swaying Palm trees rising above rooftops. The sights and smells of Los Angeles. Intoxicating.

Swinging open the car door to the sound of Iggy Pop's voice humming over the stereo. Lyrics playing through the mind of the silhouetted driver guiding his vehicle off into the distance.

