

PROLOGUE

Susie didn't mind playing the cops and hookers game, an unavoidable situation for a working girl. She would come out no worse for wear if she only played by the rules. She had learned to be friendly but respectful, even a little playful at times, and she knew to give the cops something they didn't have when they called her over.

Nothing happens on the street without these girls seeing it, hearing about it, or being directly involved in it. They know who peddles the dope, who runs the guns, who whacked the last guy, and who is getting whacked next, and why. If a girl wanted to stay on the street making her money, she would need to provide information to the cops from time to time.

Susie glanced toward the white panel van as it slowed, pulled along the sidewalk, and followed her as she sauntered north on the sidewalk of Long Beach Boulevard. The driver leaned toward the open passenger's window and looked her over. As the vehicle came to a stop, she drifted toward it, smiled, and said hello to the lone occupant while stealing a glance into the back of the van. It appeared to her only as a dark hole, her delicate frame standing maybe five-six in her four-inch heels.

She looked up and down the boulevard, this time looking for cops, something bothering her about the man in the van, his cold eyes telling her nothing about his soul. There were none in sight; the local sheriffs who routinely cruised the streets and alleys like sharks searching for prey were nowhere to be found. Nor could Susie spot any undercovers, the cops who dressed in jeans and sweatshirts and ball caps while driving vans and pickups and sedans of every make and model, invisible to all but those whose survival depended on street smarts and instinct. Not a single cop in sight at one of the few times Susie had hoped to see one.

The streets of South Los Angeles were alive late on this warm Friday night. Music played loudly from cars and apartments, the sounds of mariachi or rap setting the background to engines revving, tires squealing, an occasional burst of gunfire, and the shrill sound of police sirens.

Girls like Susie survived the streets by instinct and the grace of God. Vans were the red flag, though all too often even they would be

overlooked by the most desperate of the lot. Odds were on the side of returning unharmed—relatively speaking that is—but therein lies the grace of God.

Susie glided away from the van in her short red and blue sequined skirt, and black fishnet stockings. An evening breeze gently lifted the jet-black hair off her shoulders as she glanced back toward the van. The man inside snarled something as he pulled away, though it was indiscernible over the rumbling acceleration.

Like a drive-thru burger joint, one vehicle replaced the previous, customers abundant and hungry in this low-rent, red-light district. Susie tilted her head to the side, her eyes searching the interior of the vehicle with the next potential customer as the screening process began again. This time, it was another lone male, but in a compact sedan. She had felt uneasy throughout the evening, and not only with the creep in the van. It seemed there had been a steady flow of undesirables, which really said something in this market. The man in the sedan didn't seem right either, so she motioned for him to move along.

Susie forced a smile and picked up her stride as she stepped to the passenger's door of the next vehicle to arrive, recognizing the driver as an associate, one with whom she recently had a disagreement. No matter, she thought, they could handle whatever business brought him here, and she would enjoy a short break from the freaks on the street. Maybe they would go somewhere to get some coffee or a bite to eat, if he were in a better mood now. She looked up and down the street, and across to the other side. This time she hoped to catch a glimpse of one of her friends, or maybe her roommate, someone with whom to check in. It was a manner of keeping track of one another, an unwritten code for the girls on the street. But there were no friendly faces in sight.

Susie wondered where her roommate had gone. She hadn't seen her take a job, and it had been only a few minutes since Susie had seen her further down the block. Maybe she had gone back to their room.

Susie lowered herself into the vehicle and was startled to see a second man sitting low in the back seat. She looked over at the driver, who offered no explanation. Rather, he quickly pulled away from the curb before her door had even closed. Clearly, he was not in a better mood.

Susie was unable to relax, and her eyes scoured the streets as they rode away, still hoping to see a friend or even a cop. Someone who might see the apprehension in her eyes. Someone who would be able

to report with whom she was last seen. But there were no friendlies, and no cops, only darkness beyond the city lights, a vast emptiness of space that reminded her of the inside of the van she had earlier dismissed. She thought of her roommate and pictured her in the dark hole, gagged and tied, and considered it however briefly as a possible explanation for her absence. Then she pictured other girls from the street, and finally herself, replacing one with the other, each having her final ride in the van. But she dismissed these thoughts and refocused on the situation in which she found herself, and her feeling about it was not a good one. The familiar company of this tattooed man offered no relief from her anxiety, and the presence of his mysterious companion only validated her fear.

Susie believed in her Lord Jesus Christ, having been raised a faithful attendant of the Renewed Life Baptist Church in Compton, and on this night, as she sat unnerved in the presence of a familiar but dubious companion, she silently prayed that her Savior would watch over her and protect her, and forgive her for her sins. She thought of her mama, and asked that He watch over her too.

But sometimes, on the cruel and wicked streets of sin and Satan's rule, *Thy will* does not deliver one from all evil, for there shall come a time when *He* will bring all evildoers to a wretched end.

And the brothers and sisters in Christ said *Amen*.

CHAPTER 1

The problem with the shrink was you couldn't tell her everything, really level with her about what went on upstairs. Not when you carried the baggage of a veteran homicide detective. I'd humor her with my feelings to a small extent, but mostly I'd tell her what I thought she expected or wanted to hear. Sure, I could tell her some things I wouldn't tell Val, but the stakes were higher in doing so. At worst, Val could pack her bags and leave, say I'm nuts, and maybe file for divorce. Who'd argue? The shrink, on the other hand, being employed by the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department, is tasked with keeping the crazies off the job, and keep those on the job from joining the ranks of the crazy. Which meant that with the stroke of a pen, this powerful doctor could have my badge, gun, and pension. With a single phone call, she could have me locked down for a psych evaluation, seventy-two hours in four-point restraints, *a danger to himself or others*. And then what?

So, what I told her, recalling the session the best I could as I crept along the Pomona Freeway in bumper-to-bumper midday traffic, was: Yes, I do feel anger at times, but what cop doesn't? Do I drink? Of course I drink. Excessively? Not compared to my partner. No, I don't feel the steady diet of death has taken a toll; maybe it's just that I'm numb after twenty years. Sure, dead kids get to me, but they always have. That's not a big surprise, is it, Doc?

Jesus.

Not even noon and thanks to traffic, smog, too many beers last night, and now this broad with the big sofas and hair, my head throbbed. Better a headache on my way to the office, I thought, than an escort to the Augustus Hawkins Mental Health facility. Which could have easily been the case, if she knew the half of it.

Maybe that's what I should have done, just laid it all out there. Tell her about the recurring, vivid sensory recall of crime scenes. Tell her about the persistent dreams where I see my victims in their final moments, hear their pleas and their screams and their final gasps of life, yet have nothing to offer, no way to help. Tell the good doctor that sometimes, while interacting with others, I envision them dead and see them naked on a metal slab.

These revelations alone could end my career, or at the very least make a strong argument for reassignment. Maybe during the next visit I'd put it all out there and take my chances. Get a psych retirement out of the deal, start sleeping late and playing golf a couple times a week.

Or end up at Augustus Hawkins.

Goddamn shrinks.

I envisioned the snarky doctor telling colleagues over lunch about the crazy cop she sees, this one who sees people naked, as I turned into the parking lot of the Homicide Bureau to see Tommy Foster strutting toward the back door in his trademark short-sleeved dress shirt and tie, cowboy boots beneath double-knit slacks. His sleeves were tailored to fit snug, the fifty-something former bodybuilder who still regularly hit the gym, still confident, maybe cocky as he nears retirement. *Now that guy's nuts*, I thought. And as I placed the car in park and prepared to face the day, I looked at my hat and shades in the rearview mirror and said, "As long as they grade us on a curve around here, you're probably okay, Dickie Jones."

* * *

“Let’s go, Dickie.”

“What?”

“We’ve got a case.”

Jesus, been in the office five minutes, on the shitter for two, and hadn’t even had a chance to grab a cup of coffee yet.

“Where’re we going?”

“They have a case for us. Where the hell have you been, anyway? You just show up at noon now?”

“It’s like eleven, not even close to noon . . . and I had an appointment with that shrink you’re so fond of. I swear I hate that woman.”

“She loves me, Dickie. But we get along, have fun during our sessions because she knows I’m normal, just there to make the wife feel better. She’s probably figured out that you’re completely nuts.”

“Yeah, you’re the normal one.”

Floyd said. “Jesus, what the hell are you doing in there?”

“What do you usually do in the head, dumbass?”

“Well hurry up,” he said.

“What, like I’m in here reading the paper?”

“I’ll meet you at the desk.”

“Hey!” I said, folding the sports page.

“What?” Floyd said, then mumbled, “Goddamn zit on my nose.”

I could see it, Floyd posing in front of the mirror—he’d never met one he hadn’t liked—okay with the hair, but that zit . . .

“You didn’t tell me where we’re going.”

“Malibu. Wipe your ass, let’s go.”

The bathroom door opened, closed, and moments later, reopened.

“I’m hurrying, asshole!”

“Excuse me?”

I didn’t recognize the voice. The shoes were familiar; they looked like almost every other pair worn at the Homicide Bureau: unpolished, black leather wingtips.

“Uh, never mind, thought you were someone else.”

The shoes left before I finished up in the stall.

I left the restroom, still drying my hands with a paper towel as I headed for the front desk at a fast clip. As I passed the captain’s office I glanced in to see his feet propped on his desk; they were wrapped in brown loafers. Only guys who spent all day in the office wore loafers.

I passed through the reception area where phones ring non-stop as any combination of two or three homicide detectives and civilian employees work around the clock answering calls from all over the county and beyond. The calls could range from a deputy sheriff reporting a death, to civilians asking about the progress of their loved one’s case, or maybe the media inquiring about the recent killing of God knows who.

I homed in on the package sitting atop the front counter that separates the desk personnel from a reception area, a small, tiled alcove with a few plastic chairs and a muted television suspended from the wall. I plucked a chocolate chip cookie from the foil-covered plate that had enticed me, and gave an indirect “Good morning” to the desk crew.

Sylvia Ramos, a civilian who works the desk on day shift Monday through Friday, sat to the left of David Castaneda, a veteran homicide investigator who had apparently drawn the short straw and today had his turn in the barrel.

“What do you have for us, Davey?”

Davey laughed. The guy always seemed to be in a good mood despite the job, showing no signs of stress. A real exception among the otherwise terminally fatigued.

“Shit, hoss, your partner already grabbed it, said he’d handle it without you because you were powdering in the ladies’ room.”

“He’s an asshole,” I said. “So, what is it?”

Davey halted me with a raised finger as he reached for the phone, still grinning, enjoying life while dealing with death.

Two lines rang as Sylvia said, “Hold, please” into one and then punched another blinking light to tell someone else, “No, Detective Grimes is not in the office, would you like his voicemail?”

“Good cookie,” I said to Sylvia.

She had the phone propped against her shoulder and reached for a message pad with her left hand, a blue pen hovering in her right. Her long, dark hair flowed over the phone, across her tanned arm, and came to rest on the cluttered desk in front of her. “Thanks,” she said, now tucking the mouthpiece beneath her chin as she glanced my way.

I continued: “You made them?”

“I did,” she responded.

Sylvia then turned her attention back to the phone, “No, but I could transfer you to his voice mail . . . uh-huh, you’re welcome.” She hung up and rolled her eyes. “Freaking morons.” Then she looked at me and said, “What’d you say?”

“I asked if you made the cookies.”

“Me and my daughter made them last night, thought we’d fatten you guys up a bit.” Her smile at the end of the sentence was sincere, though maybe a bit forced, likely due to the stress of the job.

“Like we need the help,” I said, and patted my stomach.

Davey dropped his phone in its cradle, leaned back in his chair and looked up at me.

“Here’s the deal, hoss. The case in Malibu’s a little strange, may have some complications.”

Not words I wanted to hear. *Piece of cake, it’s a walkthrough*, those types of comments were preferred. *It’s a little strange, or Ab Jesus, boss, this one’s a piece of shit*, were the types of comments I could do without, especially on a morning that started as this one had.

“How strange, Davey?”

“Some asshole in Malibu decided to whack his old lady, then turn the gun on himself.”

How tough could this be?

“Simple enough,” I said, “murder-suicide.”

“Problem is, she hasn’t died.”

“So, attempted murder-suicide,” I said and shrugged, still not seeing the problem.

“Yeah, but—”

“But what, Davey?”

“Well, your lieutenant doesn’t want to send a team, since it’s not actually a murder. He’s thinking a one-man response for the suicide, and said the attempted murder can be handled by the station dicks.”

“What’s he thinking?” I asked. “More than likely she’ll eventually die too, and then what? We’ve got a homicide case handled like a suicide . . . doesn’t make sense to me.”

“Your partner jumped on it, hoss, said he’d be happy to take it as a one-man response.”

I chuckled, but not from being amused.

“He hates being on call,” I said. “The asshole will probably unplug the poor broad, make sure we’re credited for a murder just to get us out of the rotation for the weekend. I don’t put anything past Floyd.”

Sylvia rolled her eyes. “You guys are sick.”

I could use the break myself, I thought, but didn't bother saying so. Thinking how ironic it was that when I first came to Homicide, it had been difficult to sleep for the anticipation of being called out in the middle of the night. After a few years, it began wearing on me, never knowing when the call would come or what kind of mess we would inherit. Just another asshole, or a dead kid? Some murders mattered more than others. Some murders *weighed* more than others.

"Shit, hoss," Davey said, "last I saw, Floyd was headed out the back door, ice chest in hand. My guess is he's got a six-pack iced down for end of watch."

As Sylvia reached to answer another call, she said, "You guys are all alcoholics."

"Easy, hoss," Davey said, looking at Sylvia and smiling. "There's no reason to be casting stones here. A guy can get thirsty doing this job."

"So, what are we doing?" Lieutenant Jordan asked as he joined us at the desk, straightening his tie and adjusting the clip as he stepped alongside me. He liked the hanging, dangling, fancy gold tie clips. Most of us barely buttoned our collars or snugged up the knots of our ties, much less bothered with clips. The ones who did generally wore a simple sheriff's star, or maybe a bulldog—the Bureau mascot—or the numbers 187, the California penal code for murder. He reached for a cookie but changed his mind. I glanced at his feet: black wingtips, but they were polished, definitely not the pair from the restroom.

"We're still trying to figure that out," I said.

"Have one, Lieutenant," Sylvia said, "they're homemade."

"No thanks, watching my weight."

"They're low-carb," I said, reaching for another.

"You want this thing?" Lieutenant Jordan asked, looking over the top of narrow reading glasses, his blond brows pushing wrinkles across a tanned and freckled forehead.

"Apparently, my partner does. I say we go have a look, that won't hurt anything. She doesn't die, you can put us back in the rotation. Chances are—"

"You feel like gambling," he said, "it's up to you. She doesn't die, you guys will be back up for murders tonight."

"Yeah, but if she does die," I said, "we get a walkthrough. I could use one right now. No follow-up, no court . . ."

"You got it, big boy," Lieutenant Jordan said.

So, there we stood, gambling on death like vultures. It was my move, but the lieutenant held all the cards. Davey sat content, not much invested in the hand, Sylvia seemed to be disgusted by her fellow mankind.

"Piece of cake, hoss," Davey said, "couple hours at the scene, bang out a short report, and you're having a cold one . . . out of the rotation for the weekend and another case in the Solved column."

Sylvia rolled her eyes as Davey took another call.

When he hung up, he turned his attention back to me as he pulled the Dead Sheet from the tray, a form used by the desk crew to document every death case that comes through the bureau. He hovered a pencil over it, waiting.

"What d'ya think, hoss, you want it?"

"Fine," I said, "We'll take it."

* * *

The drive from downtown Los Angeles to Malibu didn't take long, the red *excuse me* light flashing from the dash of my Crown Victoria as I headed west toward the coast. Floyd had a head start, but I wouldn't be far behind. He would likely be taking it easy, not a worry in the world, probably listening to a rock station, thinking about everything other than the impending death investigation. While I

raced across the southland, monitoring traffic reports and plotting my route, crowding the left side of the fast lane in an effort to clear the way. I thought about the woman who was fighting for her life, trying to hold on, in no hurry to join her husband. Their agendas were apparently very different. Then I considered the possibilities, how the case would be handled depending on her fate, and for a moment felt bad that in essence, I was betting on her death.

Nothing against her, I thought, now feeling a little guilty about being indifferent to her destiny. But, I reasoned, she'd likely be a vegetable if she did survive, and then die in a few months or years anyway. God had the master plan, right? It wasn't up to me, but since it directly impacted my life, was it a terrible thing to hope the good Lord called her home? Then I thought of the damned shrink again and wondered what would she say about these ideas. I decided it was best not to worry about any of it; the poor old lady would die or she wouldn't, it wasn't up to me. And there'd be no sense in mentioning this dilemma during my next session with the doc.

I hit the siren a couple times to alert the driver ahead of me, who apparently didn't know that a red flashing light meant *MOVE!*

* * *

Two black and white Sheriff's patrol cars idled in the street, marking the location in traditional crime scene fashion with emergency lights flashing and a stretch of yellow tape across the driveway and sidewalk of 1455 West Sunset Place. As I pulled to the curb, I noticed a female deputy with her hair in a bun walking toward Floyd's car, her dimples offsetting the businesslike hairdo required by department regulations. Experience told me I'd be working this one mostly by myself, my partner easily distracted by dimples and a nice smile.

"I'll talk to the deputy," Floyd said as he stepped out of his car and pushed his fingers through his hair, facing me just long enough to say it. He added, "You can take care of the scene, right?"

He turned with a big grin and headed for Dimples.

Pretty Boy Floyd. The looks of a Baldwin brother and the testosterone level of a Brahma bull. Add alcohol and prepare for everything from adult entertainment to Floyd-made disaster. It would be hours, or the end of *her* shift, before my partner refocused.

"I'll tell you what, slick," I called out to his back, "why don't I go ahead and take care of the scene."
Asshole.