

ONE
BY
ONE

About the author

Born in Brazil of Italian origin, Chris Carter studied psychology and criminal behaviour at the University of Michigan. As a member of the Michigan State District Attorney's Criminal Psychology team, he interviewed and studied many criminals, including serial and multiple homicide offenders with life-imprisonment convictions.

Having departed for Los Angeles in the early 1990s, Chris spent ten years as a guitarist for numerous rock bands before leaving the music business to write full-time. He now lives in London and is a Top Ten *Sunday Times* bestselling author.

Visit www.chriscarterbooks.com or find him on Facebook.

Also by Chris Carter

The Crucifix Killer
The Executioner
The Night Stalker
The Death Sculptor

Chris Carter

ONE BY ONE



SIMON &
SCHUSTER

London · New York · Sydney · Toronto · New Delhi

A CBS COMPANY

First published in Great Britain by Simon & Schuster UK Ltd, 2013
A CBS Company

First published in paperback in 2014

Copyright © Chris Carter, 2013

This book is copyright under the Berne Convention.
No reproduction without permission.
© and © 1997 Simon & Schuster Inc. All rights reserved.

The right of Chris Carter to be identified as author of this work has been asserted in accordance with sections 77 and 78 of the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988.

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Simon & Schuster UK Ltd
1st Floor
222 Gray's Inn Road
London WC1X 8HB

www.simonandschuster.co.uk

Simon & Schuster Australia
Sydney

Simon & Schuster India
New Delhi

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Paperback A ISBN 978-0-85720-308-3
Paperback B ISBN 978-0-85720-307-6
Ebook ISBN 978-0-85720-309-0

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are either a product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual people living or dead, events or locales is entirely coincidental.

Typeset by Hewer Text UK Ltd, Edinburgh
Printed and bound in Great Britain by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY

ONE
BY
ONE

One

A single shot to the back of the head, execution style. Many people consider it a very violent way to die. But the truth is – it isn't. At least not for the victim.

A 9mm bullet will enter someone's skull and exit at the other side in three ten-thousandths of a second. It will shatter the cranium and rupture through the subject's brain matter so fast the nervous system has no time to register any pain. If the angle in which the bullet enters the head is correct, the bullet should splice the cerebral cortex, the cerebellum, even the thalamus in such a way that the brain will cease functioning, resulting in instant death. If the angle of the shot is wrong, the victim might survive, but not without extensive brain damage. The entry wound should be no larger than a small grape, but the exit wound could be as large as a tennis ball, depending on the type of bullet used.

The male victim on the photograph Detective Robert Hunter of the LAPD Robbery Homicide Division was looking at had died instantly. The bullet had transversed his entire skull, rupturing the cerebellum together with the temporal and the frontal lobes, causing fatal brain damage in three ten-thousandths of a second. Less than a full second later he was dead on the ground.

The case wasn't Hunter's; it belonged to Detective Terry Radley in the main detectives' floor, but the investigation photos had ended up on Hunter's desk by mistake. As he returned the photograph to the case file, the phone on his desk rang.

'Detective Hunter, Homicide Special,' he answered, half expecting it to be Detective Radley after the photo file.

Silence.

'Hello?'

'Is this Detective *Robert* Hunter?' The raspy voice on the other end was male, the tone calm.

'Yes, this is Detective Robert Hunter. Can I help you?'

Hunter heard the caller breathe out.

'That's what we're going to find out, Detective.'

Hunter frowned.

'I'm going to need your full attention for the next few minutes.'

Hunter cleared his throat. 'I'm sorry, I didn't catch your na—'

'Shut the fuck up and listen, Detective,' the caller interrupted him. His voice was still calm. 'This is not a conversation.'

Hunter went silent. The LAPD received tens, sometimes hundreds, of crazy calls a day – drunks, drug users on a high, gang members trying to look 'badass', psychics, people wanting to report a government conspiracy or an alien invasion, even people who claim to have seen Elvis down at the local diner. But there was something in the caller's tone of voice, something in the way he spoke that told Hunter that dismissing the call as a prank would be a mistake. He decided to play along for the time being.

Hunter's partner, Detective Carlos Garcia, was sitting at his desk, which faced Hunter's, inside their small office on

the fifth floor of the Police Administration Building in downtown Los Angeles. His longish dark brown hair was tied back in a slick ponytail. Garcia was reading something on his computer screen, unaware of his partner's conversation. He had pushed himself away from his desk and leisurely interlaced his fingers behind his head.

Hunter snapped his fingers to catch Garcia's attention, pointed to the receiver at his ear and made a circular motion with his index finger, indicating he needed that call recorded and traced.

Garcia instantly reached for the phone on his desk, punched the internal code that connected him to Operations and got everything rolling in less than five seconds. He signaled Hunter, who signaled back telling him to listen in. Garcia tapped into the line.

'I'm assuming you have a computer on your desk, Detective,' the caller said. 'And that that computer is connected to the Internet?'

'That's correct.'

An uneasy pause.

'OK. I want you to type the address I'm about to give you into your address bar . . . Are you ready?'

Hunter hesitated.

'Trust me, Detective, you will want to see this.'

Hunter leaned forward over his keyboard and brought up his Internet browser. Garcia did the same.

'OK, I'm ready,' Hunter replied in a calm tone.

The caller gave Hunter an internet address made up only of numbers and dots, no letters.

Hunter and Garcia both typed the sequence into their address bars and pressed 'enter'. Their computer screens flickered a couple of times before the web page loaded.

Both detectives went still, as a morbid silence took hold of the room.

The caller chuckled. 'I guess I have your full attention now.'

Two

The FBI headquarters is located at number 935 Pennsylvania Avenue in Washington DC, just a few blocks away from the White House and directly across the road from the US Attorney General. Aside from the headquarters, the FBI has fifty-six field offices scattered around the fifty American states. Most of those offices also control a number of satellite cells known as 'resident agencies'.

The Los Angeles office in Wilshire Boulevard is one of the largest FBI field offices in the whole American territory. It controls ten resident agencies. It is also one of the few with a specific Cybercrime Division.

The FBI Cybercrime Division's priority is to investigate high-tech crimes, including cyber-based terrorism, computer intrusions, online sexual exploitation and major cyber frauds. In the United States, in the past five years alone, cybercrime has increased ten-fold. The US government and its networks receive over a billion attacks each and every day, coming from multiple sources all around the world.

In 2011 a report was submitted to the US Senate Committee on Commerce, Science and Transportation, estimating that internal cybercrime was bringing in illicit revenues of approximately US\$800 million a year, making it the

most lucrative illegal business in the USA, exceeding drug trafficking.

Thousands of the FBI's 'web crawlers', also known as 'bots' or 'spiders', search the net endlessly, looking for anything suspicious concerning any type of high-tech crime, inside and outside the United States. It's a mammoth job, and the FBI understands that what the crawlers find is merely a drop of water in a cybercrime ocean. For every threat they find, thousands go unnoticed. And that was why on that autumn morning at the end of September, no FBI web crawler came across the web page Detective Hunter and his partner were looking at back at the Police Administration Building.

Three

Hunter and Garcia's eyes were glued to their computer screens, trying to take in the surreal images. They showed a large, see-through, square container. It looked like it was made of glass, but it could've been Perspex or other similar material. Hunter guessed each side to be approximately 1.5 meters wide, and at least 1.8 meters tall. The container was open-top – no lid – and it seemed to have been handmade. Metal frames and thick white sealant connected the four walls. The whole thing looked just like a reinforced shower enclosure. Inside the enclosure, two metal pipes of about three inches in diameter, one on the left and one on the right, ran from the floor all the way up and out the top. The pipes were sprinkled with holes, none wider than the diameter of a regular pencil. But two things worried Hunter. One was the fact that the images seemed to be streaming live. Two was what was at the center of the container, directly between the two metal pipes.

Sitting there, tied to a heavy metal chair, was a white male who looked to be in his mid to late twenties. His hair was light brown and cut short. The only piece of clothing he had on was a striped pair of boxers. He was a chubby man, with a round face, plump cheeks and chunky arms. He was sweating profusely, and though he didn't look hurt

there was no doubt about the expression on his face – pure fear. His eyes were wide open, and he was taking in quick gulps of air through the cloth gag in his mouth. Hunter could tell by the fast ‘up-and-down’ movement of his belly that he was almost hyperventilating. The man was shivering and looking around himself like a confused and frightened mouse.

The entire image had a green tint to it, indicating that the camera was using night-vision mode and lenses. Whoever that man was, he was sitting in a dark room.

‘Is this for real?’ Garcia whispered to Hunter, covering his mouthpiece.

Hunter shrugged without taking his eyes off the screen.

As if on cue, the caller broke his silence. ‘If you are wondering if this is live, Detective, let me show you.’

The camera panned right to a nondescript brick wall where a regular, round wall clock was mounted. It read 2:57 p.m. Hunter and Garcia checked their watches – 2:57 p.m. The camera then panned down and focused on the newspaper that had been placed at the foot of the wall, before zooming in on its front page and the date. It was a copy of this morning’s *LA Times*.

‘Satisfied?’ The caller chuckled.

The camera refocused on the man inside the box. His nose had started running and tears were streaming down his face.

‘The container you’re looking at is made of reinforced glass, strong enough to withstand a bullet,’ the caller explained in a chilling voice. ‘The door has a very secure locking mechanism, with an airtight seal. It only opens from the outside. In short, the man you can see on your screen is trapped inside. There’s no way out of there.’

The frightened man on the screen looked straight at the camera. Hunter quickly pressed the 'print screen' key on his keyboard, saving a snapshot of his entire desktop to the computer's clipboard. He now had what he hoped would be an identifiable shot of the man's face.

'Now, the reason why I'm calling you, Detective, is because I need your help.'

On the screen, the man started panting heavily. Fearful sweat covered his entire body. He was on the brink of a panic attack.

'OK, let's take it easy,' Hunter replied, being certain to keep his voice calm but authoritative. 'Tell me how I can help you?'

Silence.

Hunter knew the caller was still on the line. 'I'll do everything I can to help you. Just tell me how.'

'Well . . .' the caller responded. 'You can decide how he's going to die.'

Four

Hunter and Garcia exchanged uneasy glances. Garcia immediately clicked off the call and quickly punched the internal code to be connected to Operations again.

‘Please tell me you’ve got a location for this creep,’ Garcia said as the phone was answered at the other end.

‘Not yet, Detective,’ the woman replied. ‘We need another minute or so. Keep him talking.’

‘He doesn’t want to talk anymore.’

‘We’re getting there, but we need a little more time.’

‘Shit!’ He shook his head at Hunter and signaled him to keep the caller talking. ‘Let me know the second you get something.’ He disconnected and tapped back into Hunter’s call.

‘Fire or water, Detective?’ the caller said.

Hunter frowned. ‘What?’

‘Fire or water?’ the caller repeated in an amused tone. ‘The pipes inside the glass enclosure you can see on your screen are capable of spitting out fire or filling the enclosure with water.’

Hunter’s heart stuttered.

‘So pick, Detective Hunter. Would you like to watch him die by fire or water? Shall we drown him or burn him alive?’ It didn’t sound like a joke.

Garcia shifted in his chair.

‘Wait a moment,’ Hunter said, trying to keep his voice steady. ‘You don’t have to do this.’

‘I know I don’t, but I want to. It should be fun, don’t you think?’ The indifference in the caller’s voice was mesmerizing.

‘C’mon, c’mon,’ Garcia urged between clenched teeth, staring at the line lights on his phone. Still nothing from Operations.

‘Choose, Detective,’ the caller ordered. ‘I want *you* to decide how he’s going to die.’

Hunter kept silent.

‘I suggest you pick one, Detective, because I promise you that the alternative is much worse.’

‘You know I can’t make that decision . . .’

‘CHOOSE,’ the caller shouted down the line.

‘OK,’ Hunter’s voice remained calm. ‘I choose neither of the two.’

‘That’s not an option.’

‘Yes, it is. Let’s talk about this for a minute.’

The caller laughed angrily. ‘Let’s not. Talking time is over. It’s decision time now, Detective. If you don’t pick . . . I will. Either way, he dies.’

A red light started flashing on Garcia’s phone. He quickly swapped calls. ‘Tell me you’ve got him.’

‘We’ve got him, Detective.’ Excitement colored the woman’s voice. ‘He’s in . . .’ She paused for a moment. ‘What the hell?’

‘What?’ Garcia pushed. ‘Where is he?’

‘What the hell is going on?’ Garcia heard the woman say, but he knew she wasn’t talking to him. He heard some more undecipherable whispers coming from the other end of the line. Something was wrong.

‘Somebody better talk to me.’ Garcia’s voice raised about half an octave.

‘It’s no good, Detective,’ the woman finally answered. ‘We thought we had him in Norwalk, but suddenly the signal jumped to Temple City, then to El Monte, now it’s showing the call is coming from Long Beach. He’s rerouting the signal every five seconds. Even if we keep him on the phone for an hour, we wouldn’t be able to pinpoint him.’ She paused for a moment. ‘The signal just moved to Hollywood. Sorry, Detective. This guy knows what he’s doing.’

‘Shit!’ Garcia tapped back into Hunter’s call and shook his head. ‘He’s bouncing the signal,’ he whispered. ‘We can’t get his location.’

Hunter squeezed his eyes tight. ‘Why are you doing this?’ he asked the caller.

‘Because I want to,’ the caller came back. ‘You have three seconds to make your choice, Detective Hunter. Fire or water? Flip a coin if you need to. Ask your partner. I know he’s listening in.’

Garcia said nothing.

‘Wait,’ Hunter said. ‘How can I make a choice if I don’t even know who he is, or why you have him in that tank? C’mon, talk to me. Tell me what this is all about.’

The caller laughed again. ‘That’s something you will have to find out for yourself, Detective. Two seconds.’

‘Don’t do this. We can help each other.’

Garcia’s eyes had left his computer screen and were now locked on Hunter.

‘One second, Detective.’

‘C’mon, talk to me,’ Hunter said again. ‘We can figure this out. We can come up with a better solution for whatever this is.’

Garcia held his breath.

‘The solution is either fire or water, Detective. Anyway, time’s up. So what is it going to be?’

‘Look, there’s got to be another way we can . . .’

TOC, TOC, TOC.

The sound exploded through Hunter and Garcia’s phone so loudly that their heads jerked back, as if they had been slapped across the face. It sounded like the caller had slammed his receiver against a wooden surface three times to get their attention.

‘You don’t seem to be listening to me, Detective Hunter. We are through talking. The only word I want to hear from you right now is either *fire* or *water*. Nothing else.’

Hunter said nothing.

‘Suit yourself. You don’t want to pick, I will. And I pick fi—’

‘Water,’ Hunter said in a firm voice. ‘I choose water.’

The caller paused and let out an amused chuckle. ‘You know what, Detective? I knew you would choose water.’

Hunter stayed silent.

‘It was obvious, really. When you considered the options you had, death by drowning seemed less awful, more humane, less painful and quicker than being burned alive, right? But have you ever seen anyone drown, Detective?’

Silence.

‘Have you ever seen the despairing look on a person’s eyes as he holds his breath for as long as he can, knowing death is all around him and closing in fast?’

Hunter ran a hand through his short hair.

‘Have you ever seen the way a drowning man frantically looks around himself, confused, searching for a miracle that is just not there? A miracle that will never come?’

Still silence.

‘Have you seen the way the body convulses, as if it was being electrocuted, as the person finally lets go of hope and breathes his first mouthful of water? The way his eyes almost bulge out of his skull as water enters his lungs and he slowly starts to suffocate?’ The caller deliberately breathed out heavily. ‘Did you know that it’s impossible to keep your eyes shut when you’re drowning? It’s an automatic motor reaction when a person’s brain is starved of oxygen.’

Garcia’s gaze returned to his screen.

The caller laughed one more time. This time a relaxed giggle. ‘Keep on watching, Detective. This show is just about to get much better.’

The line went dead.

Five

All of a sudden and with incredible speed, water started jetting out of the holes on both pipes inside the glass enclosure. The man tied to the chair was caught by surprise, and fear made his whole body jerk violently. His eyes widened in complete desperation as he realized what was happening. Despite the gag in his mouth, he started screaming, frantically, but on the other side of the screen Hunter and Garcia couldn't hear a sound.

‘Oh my God,’ Garcia said, bringing his closed right fist to his mouth. ‘He’s not bullshitting. He’s going to do it. He’s going to drown the guy, goddammit.’

The man kicked and wiggled ferociously inside the enclosure, but his restraints wouldn’t give an inch. He couldn’t break free no matter what he did. The chair was solidly bolted to the floor.

‘This is insane,’ Garcia said.

Hunter stood still, his eyes unblinking, staring at his computer screen. He knew that from their office there was absolutely nothing they could do – except maybe collect evidence. ‘Is there a way we can record this?’ he asked.

Garcia shrugged. ‘I don’t know. I don’t think so.’

Hunter reached for his phone again and got the LAPD switchboard.

‘Punch me through to the head of the Computer Crimes Unit, *now*. This is urgent.’

Two seconds later he heard a ringing tone. Four seconds after that the phone was answered by a baritone voice.

‘Dennis Baxter, LAPD Computer Crimes Unit.’

‘Dennis, this is Detective Hunter from Homicide Special.’

‘Hello, Detective, how can I assist you?’

‘Tell me, is there a way I can record a live webcam broadcast that I’m watching on my computer right now?’

Baxter laughed. ‘Wow, is she that hot?’

‘Is there a way or not, Dennis?’

Hunter’s tone knocked the play out of Baxter’s voice.

‘Not unless you have some sort of screen recording software installed on your computer,’ he answered.

‘Will I have one?’

‘On an LAPD office computer? Not as standard. You can put in a request and IT will install one for you in a day or two.’

‘No good. I need to capture what’s on my screen right now.’

A split-second pause.

‘Well, I can do it from here,’ Baxter said. ‘If you’re watching something live over the net, just give me the web address. I can log into the same website and capture it for you. How does that sound?’

‘Good enough. Let’s try it.’ Hunter gave Baxter the sequence of numbers the caller had given him minutes earlier.

‘An IP address?’ Baxter asked.

‘That’s right. Aren’t they traceable?’ Hunter asked.

‘Yes. That’s actually their main purpose. They work almost like a license number plate for every computer

connected to the net. With that, I can pretty much tell you the exact location of the source computer.'

Hunter frowned. Could the caller have made such a silly mistake?

'Do you want me to start a trace?' Baxter asked.

'Yes.'

'OK. I'll get back to you as soon as I get anything.' He disconnected.

The water was already reaching the man's waist. At that speed, Hunter calculated that the man would be completely submerged in another minute and a half, maybe two.

'Operations said that there was no way they could trace the call?' Hunter asked Garcia.

'That's right. He was bouncing the signal all over town.'

The water reached the man's stomach. He was still trying to wiggle himself free, but he was steadily losing energy. He was shivering even more now. A combination of uncontrollable fear and the water temperature, Hunter guessed.

There was nothing Hunter or Garcia could say, so they both went eerily quiet, watching death rise inch by inch around the man on their computer screens.

The phone on Hunter's desk rang again.

'Detective, is this for real?' Dennis Baxter asked.

'Right now, I have no reason to believe it isn't. Are you capturing it?'

'Yeah, I'm recording it.'

'Any luck with tracing it?'

'Not yet. It can take a few minutes.'

'Get back to me if you get anything.'

'Sure.'

The water reached the man's chest, and the camera slowly zoomed in on his face. He was sobbing. Hope had left his eyes. He was giving up.

'I don't think I can watch this,' Garcia said, moving from behind his desk and pacing the room.

The water reached the man's shoulders. In a minute it would be past his nose, and death would arrive with the next breath. He closed his eyes and waited. He wasn't trying to break free anymore.

The water reached the underside of his chin, and then, without any warning, it stopped. Not a drop more came out of the pipes.

'What the hell?' Hunter and Garcia looked at each other for a second and then back at the screen. Surprise etched on both their faces.

'It was a goddamn hoax,' Garcia said, approaching Hunter. A nervous smile on his face. 'Some nutcase pulling our chain.'

Hunter wasn't so sure.

At that exact moment the phone on Hunter's desk rang again.

Six

The sound of the phone ringing cut through the silence like thunder ripping through a night sky.

‘You are very clever, Detective Hunter,’ the caller said.

Hunter quickly signaled Garcia one more time, and within seconds the call was being recorded again.

‘You almost had me fooled,’ the caller carried on. ‘I thought your concern for the victim was quite touching. Once you realized there was no way you could save him, you picked what seemed to be the less sadistic, less painful and quicker death of the two choices I gave you. But that was only half of the story, wasn’t it?’

Garcia looked confused.

Hunter said nothing.

‘I figured out the hidden reason behind your choice, Detective.’

No reply.

‘You realized I was about to pick fire, and you quickly interrupted me and chose water.’ A self-assured laugh. ‘Water would’ve given you hope, right?’

‘Hope?’ Garcia mouthed the word, frowning at Hunter.

‘The hope that when, and if, you come across the body, maybe your—’ the caller put on a silly voice

‘—super-advanced, high-tech forensics lab could uncover something. Maybe on his skin, or hair, or a trace of something under his nails or inside his mouth. Who knows what microscopic clues I might have left behind, isn’t that right, Detective Hunter? But fire would’ve destroyed it all. It would’ve carbonized his entire body and everything else with it. No clues left, microscopic or not.’

Garcia hadn’t thought of that.

‘But if he drowns, the body is intact.’ The caller moved on. ‘Death comes from suffocation . . . skin, hair, nails . . . nothing gets destroyed. It’s all there ready to be analyzed.’ The caller paused for breath. ‘There might be a million things to find. Even the water in his lungs could provide you with some sort of clue. That’s why you chose water, isn’t it, Detective? If you can’t save him, do the next best thing.’ The caller let out an animated laugh. ‘Always thinking like a detective. Oh, you’re no fun.’

Hunter gave himself a subtle headshake. ‘You were right the first time around. My concern was the victim’s suffering.’

‘Of course it was. But . . . just in case I’m right, guess what? I was already prepared for it.’

The man on the screen had reopened his eyes. He was still shivering. Despite the darkness, he looked around himself, waiting . . . listening.

Nothing. Not a sound. The water had stopped.

Behind the gag his mouth twisted into a shy smile. A glimmer of hope returned to his eyes, as if it all had been just a bad dream . . . a sick joke. He swallowed hard, closed his eyes and tilted his head back, as if thanking God. Tears found their way through his closed eyelids and cascaded down his face.

‘Keep on watching, Detective.’ There was a proud ring to the caller’s voice. ‘Because you’re about to get the “Cirque du Soleil” of shows.’ He disconnected.

On the screen the water level started decreasing.

‘He’s draining the container,’ Garcia said.

Hunter nodded.

The water drained fast. In a matter of seconds its level had gone back down to the man’s chest.

Then it stopped.

‘What the hell is going on?’ Garcia asked, lifting his palms up.

Hunter shook his head. His full attention never leaving the screen.

The camera zoomed out just a little, and all of a sudden the submerged portion of the pipes sprang back into life. Like a Jacuzzi bath, the underwater jets ruffled the water as they spat more liquid into the enclosure. But there was something different this time. As the colorless liquid exited the pipes and mixed with the water, it was producing an odd effect, as if the new liquid was denser than that already inside the enclosure.

Hunter leaned forward, bringing his face closer to the monitor.

‘That’s not water,’ he said.

‘What?’ Garcia asked, standing right behind him. ‘What do you mean?’

‘Different density,’ Hunter replied, pointing at his screen. ‘Whatever he’s pumping into that tank, it isn’t water this time.’

‘What the hell is it, then?’

At that moment something started flashing at the top right-hand corner of the picture. Four letters inside parentheses. The first, third and fourth were in capitals.

(NaOH)

‘Is that a chemical formula?’ Garcia pointed to it.

‘Yes.’ Hunter breathed out.

‘For what?’ Garcia rushed back to his computer and opened a new tab on his web browser.

‘No need to search for it, Carlos,’ Hunter said grimly. ‘That’s the chemical formula for sodium hydroxide . . . caustic soda.’

Seven

Garcia felt a knot tighten in his throat. Years ago, when he was still just a uniformed LAPD cop, he'd responded to a domestic violence incident where a jealous boyfriend had thrown half a pint of caustic soda in his girlfriend's face. The boyfriend fled the scene but was arrested five days later. Garcia still remembered helping the paramedics strap the girlfriend down to the gurney. Her face was just a mess of raw flesh and burned skin. Her lips looked like they had melted onto her teeth. Her right ear and nose had totally disintegrated, and the solution burned holes into one of her eyeballs.

Garcia looked at Hunter over his computer. 'No way. Are you sure?'

Hunter nodded. 'I'm sure.'

'Son of a bitch.'

The phone on Hunter's desk rang again. It was Dennis Baxter from the Computer Crimes Unit.

'Detective,' he said in an anxious voice. 'NaOH is caustic soda. Sodium hydroxide.'

'Yes, I know.'

'Shit, man. That stuff is highly corrosive. Many times worse than acid. If somebody is dumping sodium hydroxide into that much water, for now, the solution will be over-diluted and not very strong, but soon . . .' He went silent.

'It will turn that whole thing into an alkaline bath,' Hunter finished the sentence Baxter couldn't.

'That's right. And you know what that will *do*?'

'Yes, I know.'

'Holy shit, Detective. What's going on?'

'I'm not sure. Did you manage to trace the transmission?'

'Yes. It's coming from Taiwan.'

'What?'

'Exactly. Whoever is doing this . . . he's good. It's either a hijacked IP address or he stole one from a Taiwanese server pool. Bottom line . . . We can't trace it.'

Hunter put the phone down. 'We can't get him through the Internet transmission either,' he told Garcia.

'Shit. This is messed up, man.'

The man on the screen started shaking again. But this time Hunter could tell it wasn't from fear or cold. It was excruciating pain. The solution was getting stronger and starting to corrode his skin. His mouth opened wide to release an agonizing scream that neither Hunter nor Garcia could hear. Secretly, both detectives were relieved by the lack of sound.

As more and more caustic soda was added to the mixture, the water started gaining a faint, dull, milky color.

The man closed his eyes and started shaking his head violently from side to side, as if having a seizure. The alkaline bath was starting to scrape away his skin like an electric sander. It took only a few seconds for the first pieces of skin to be ripped from his body.

Hunter rubbed his face with both hands. He had never felt so helpless.

As more and more skin started to float around the tank, the water began to change color again. It was now going pink. His entire body was bleeding.

The camera zoomed in on something else floating inside the enclosure.

‘What is that?’ Garcia asked, pulling a face.

Hunter pinched his bottom lip. ‘It’s a fingernail. His body is dissolving.’

The camera zoomed in on another one, and another one. The solution had already dissolved his cuticles and most of the nail beds on his fingers and toes.

The water was getting bloodier. They couldn’t see through it anymore. The man’s face, though, was still above the water line.

The victim had lost control of his body, which was now shaking incessantly, guided only by pain. His eyes had rolled back into his head. His mouth was contorted into an excruciating shape. His teeth were relentlessly grinding against each other, and he was now bleeding from the gums, nose and ears as well.

The water was starting to boil.

The man convulsed for the last time. His chest kicked forward so violently it looked like there was something inside it, trying to explode out of his body. His chin fell to his chest, submerging his face under the bloody water and sodium hydroxide mixture.

There was no more movement.

The camera zoomed out, showing the entire glass enclosure.

Hunter and Garcia couldn’t find any words. They couldn’t look away either.

A few seconds later a message flashed across their screens.
I HOPE YOU’VE ENJOYED THE SHOW.

Eight

The LAPD's Robbery Homicide Division's captain, Barbara Blake,

wasn't easily intimidated and, after so many years in the force, very little ever shocked her, but this morning she sat in absolute silence inside her office on the fifth floor of the Police Administration Building with a disbelieving look on her face. The office was spacious enough. The south wall was taken by bookshelves crammed with hardcovers. The north one by framed photographs, commendations and achievement awards. The east wall was a floor-to-ceiling panoramic window, looking out over South Main Street. Directly in front of her desk were two comfortable-looking leather armchairs, but none of the three other people inside her office were occupying them.

Hunter, Garcia and Dennis Baxter were all standing behind Captain Blake's desk, staring at her computer monitor, watching the footage Baxter had captured from the Internet minutes earlier. The Operations Office had also already sent Hunter a copy of the recorded telephone conversation between him and the mysterious caller.

Captain Blake listened to the recording and watched the entire footage without uttering a word. At the end of it all

she looked up at Hunter and Garcia, her face paler than moments ago.

‘Was this real?’

Her stare jumped to Baxter, who was a big man, none of it muscle. He was in his forties, with curly fair hair, a plump face made heavier by a double chin, and a thin mustache that looked more like peach fuzz.

‘I mean,’ she said. ‘I know that nowadays CGI technology can make anything look real. Can we be sure that this whole thing isn’t just digital and camera trickery?’

Baxter shrugged.

‘Well, you’re the head of the Computer Crimes Unit.’ The captain’s voice went hard. ‘Tell me something.’

Baxter tilted his head to one side. ‘I just captured the whole thing moments ago after getting a call from Detective Hunter. I haven’t really had time to analyze it, but at first look and on gut feeling – it’s real.’

The captain ran a hand through her long jet-black hair before allowing her stare to return to Hunter and Garcia.

‘Too complex and bold to be just a hoax,’ Hunter said. ‘Operations couldn’t trace the call. The caller was bouncing it around town every five seconds.’ He gestured to Baxter. ‘Dennis said that the Internet transmission came from Taiwan.’

‘What?’ Captain Blake faced Baxter again.

‘It’s true. What we had was an IP address, which is a unique identifying number given to every single computer on the Internet. With that, we can easily pinpoint the host computer. The IP address used was assigned to a server in Taiwan.’

‘How can that be?’

‘Easy. The Internet makes the world a global market. For example, if you want to set up a website, there is no law

that tells you that you have to host it in America. You can search the net for the best deal, and have your website sitting in a server absolutely anywhere – Russia, Vietnam, Taiwan, Afghanistan . . . it makes no difference. Everybody can access it just the same.'

Captain Blake thought about it for a second. 'No diplomatic relations,' she said. 'Not only does the United States have no jurisdiction, but even a diplomatic approach, such as calling the server company and asking for their help, would fail.'

'That's right. He could've also hijacked the IP address,' Baxter added. 'It's like stealing number plates from a car and putting them on yours to avoid being caught.'

'Can that be done?' Captain Blake asked.

'If he's good enough, sure.'

'So we've got nothing?'

Baxter shook his head. 'Though I have to admit that we're limited in what we can do at the Computer Crimes Unit.' He pushed his wire-rimmed glasses up the bridge of his round nose. 'Our investigations are usually restricted to crimes committed using computer-stored information, or sabotage to computer-stored information. In other words, database and information hacking – from private individual computers to schools, banks and corporations. This kind of thing isn't really what we deal with.'

'Fantastic,' the captain said, not impressed.

'The FBI Cybercrime Division, on the other hand,' Baxter said, moving on, 'is a much more powerful unit. They deal with every kind of cybercrime. They even have the power and the equipment to terminate any internet transmission made from within the US territory from their office.'

Captain Blake pulled a face. 'So you're saying that we should get the FBI involved?'

It was no secret that the FBI and any police force in any American state didn't have the best of relations, no matter what politicians and heads of departments said.

'Not really,' Baxter replied. 'I was just stating a fact. There's nothing the FBI can do now. The transmission is over. The site is dead. Let me show you.' He pointed to the computer on her desk. 'May I?'

'Go right ahead.' Captain Blake pushed her chair back a couple of feet.

Baxter leaned over the captain's keyboard, typed the IP address into the Internet browser's address bar and hit the 'enter' key. It took only a few seconds for a web page to load: ERROR 404 – PAGE CANNOT BE FOUND.

'The site isn't there anymore,' Baxter said. 'I already set up a small program that carries on checking that address every ten seconds. If anything comes up again, we'll know.' His eyebrows arched. 'But if it does, maybe you should consider at least liaising with the LA FBI Cybercrime Division.'

Captain Blake scowled at him and then looked at Hunter, who remained quiet.

'The head of the unit there is a good friend of mine, Michelle Kelly. She's not your typical FBI agent. Trust me, when it comes to knowing about cyberspace, the buck stops with her. The FBI is much better equipped than the LAPD to track these kinds of cybercriminals down. Back at the Computer Crimes Unit, we liaise with them all the time. They aren't pretentious field agents in black suits, dark shades and earpieces. They're computer geeks.' Baxter smiled. 'Just like me.'

'I'd say let's cross that bridge when we get there,' Hunter replied, looking at Baxter. 'Like you've said, there's nothing

they can do now, and we've got nothing to indicate that this is a federal case, so at the moment I see no point in bringing the FBI into this. At this early stage it will only complicate things.'

'I agree,' Captain Blake said. 'If at a later stage it becomes necessary that we liaise with them, we will, but for now, no FBI.' She addressed Baxter again. 'Could this transmission have been watched by anyone else, like the general public?'

'In theory, yes,' Baxter confirmed. 'It wasn't a secure transmission, meaning it didn't require a password to access the page. If anyone other than us came across that web transmission by chance, then yes, they could've watched it, just like we did. But I have to add that that is very unlikely.'

Captain Blake nodded and turned to address Hunter. 'OK, so we've got to assume this whole thing is real. My first question is – why you? The call went directly to your desk. On the phone, he asked for you by name.'

'I've been asking myself that same question, and at the moment the answer is – I'm not sure,' Hunter replied. 'There are basically two ways an outside call can end up on a detective's desk. Either the caller dials the RHD number and adds the specific desk extension when prompted, or he calls the RHD switchboard and asks to be put through to a specific detective.'

'And?'

'The call didn't come through the switchboard. I've already checked. The caller dialed my extension directly.'

'So my question still stands,' the captain pushed. 'Why you? And how did he get your extension number?'

'He could've gotten hold of one of my cards somewhere,' Hunter said.

‘Or he could’ve called the RHD switchboard anytime before the call in question and simply asked for the extension number,’ Garcia said. ‘Hell, I wouldn’t be surprised if he hacked into our system and obtained a list of detectives’ names from there. He was bouncing his call signal around like a pro, and he had some sort of firewall good enough to stop the LAPD’s Computer Crimes Unit from getting to him. My guess is that he knows his way around cyberspace.’

‘I’d have to agree,’ Baxter said.

‘So you’re saying that he could’ve picked Robert’s name by chance from a list of all RHD detectives?’ Captain Blake asked.

Baxter shrugged. ‘It’s possible.’

‘Strange coincidence, don’t you think?’ the captain added. ‘Given that a UV case like this would’ve gone straight to Robert anyway.’

Inside the Robbery Homicide Division, Hunter was part of a special branch. The Homicide Special Section was created to deal solely with serial, high-profile and homicide cases requiring extensive investigative time and expertise. But Hunter had an even more specialized task. Due to his criminal behavior psychology background, he was always assigned to cases where overwhelming sadism and brutality had been used by the perpetrator. The department referred to such cases as UV – *Ultra-Violent*.

‘Maybe it wasn’t a coincidence,’ Baxter came back. ‘Maybe he *wanted* Robert on the case, and this was his way of making sure he got him.’

Captain Blake’s eyes widened a little, waiting for Baxter to carry on. He did.

‘Robert’s name has been in the papers and on TV plenty of times. He’s worked on most of the department’s

high-profile cases for the past . . . I don't know how many years, and he usually gets his guy.'

Captain Blake couldn't argue with that. Hunter's name had been in the papers again just a few months ago, when he and Garcia closed the investigation into a serial killer the press had dubbed The Sculptor.

'Maybe the caller picked Robert because of his reputation,' Baxter said. 'Maybe he read his name in the *LA Times* or saw his face on the evening news.' He indicated the captain's computer screen. 'You saw the footage; you heard the call recording, right? This guy is cocky and challenging. He's daring. He stayed on the phone for that long because he knew we wouldn't be able to trace the call. He knew we wouldn't be able to track down his web transmission either.' Baxter paused and scratched his nose. 'He forced Robert to choose how the victim was going to die, for chrissakes, and then threw a twist into it. It's like he's playing a game. And he doesn't want to play it against just any detective. He wants a challenge. He wants the one the papers talk about.'

The captain thought about it for an instant. 'Great,' she said. 'That's all we need, a new psycho playing *catch me if you can*.'

'No,' Hunter replied. 'He's playing *catch me before I kill again*.'

Nine

Hunter and Garcia's office was a 22-square-meter concrete box at the far end of the Robbery Homicide Division's floor. It didn't have much more than two desks, three old-fashioned filing cabinets and a large white magnetic board that doubled up as an investigation pictures board, but it felt claustrophobic nonetheless.

Back at their desks, both detectives watched the Internet footage and listened to the telephone recording over and over again. Baxter had supplied Hunter and Garcia with a software application that allowed them to advance the recorded footage frame by frame. And that was exactly what they'd been doing for the past four and a half hours, analyzing every inch of every frame, looking for anything that could give them any sort of clue, no matter how small.

The camera work concentrated mainly on the glass enclosure and on the man inside it. Every once in a while it would zoom in onto the victim's face, or something floating on the bloody water. It had broken that pattern only once, when it panned right to show the wall clock and today's copy of the *LA Times*.

The wall was made of red bricks and mortar. It could've been anywhere – a basement, a backyard shed, a room inside a house or even a small garage in some godforsaken place.

The clock fixed to the wall was a round battery clock of about 13 inches in diameter with a black frame. It had an easy-to-read white dial with Arabic numerals, black minute and hour hands and a red second hand. There was no manufacturer's name on its face. Hunter sent a snapshot of the clock to his research team, but he knew that the chances of their linking it to a specific shop, and then identifying the buyer, were almost impossible.

The floor was nondescript and made of concrete. Again, it could've been just about anywhere.

The screen print Hunter took of his desktop came out perfect. The man sitting inside the glass enclosure was looking directly at the camera. Hunter had already emailed the picture to the Missing Persons Unit. The agent he spoke to on the phone told him that because of the gag wrapped tight around the victim's mouth, the face recognition software would only be able to analyze a limited number of facial comparison points. If the man had indeed been reported missing, it could still be enough for a match, but they had to wait and see. Hunter told the agent to search for entries dating back only a week. He had a feeling that the caller hadn't kidnapped and kept the victim for more than a day or two before throwing him into that glass tank. Victims kept in captivity for anywhere over forty-eight hours always showed signs of it – exhausted and drained face and eyes from lack of sleep, or spaced-out eyes from being doped. Personal hygiene also suffered considerably, and there were always the inevitable signs of malnourishment. The victim inside that tank had displayed none of it.

'There's nothing here,' Garcia said, sitting back in his chair and rubbing his exhausted eyes. 'There was nothing in that room except that water tank, the victim, the clock, the

newspaper and the camera that broadcast the whole thing. This guy isn't stupid, Robert. He knew we would be recording the broadcast and then scrutinizing it to hell.'

Hunter breathed out before also rubbing his tired eyes. 'I know.'

'I, for one, can't watch this anymore.' Garcia got up and walked over to the small window on the west wall. 'The desperate, pleading look in the victim's eyes . . .' He shook his head. 'Every time I look at them I can feel his fear crawling up my skin like a fire centipede. And there's nothing I can do but watch him die again, and again, and again. It's screwing with my mind.'

Hunter was also sick of the footage. What really turned his stomach inside out was watching how the man's face had lit up with hope once he realized the water had stopped. And then, just a minute later, how his eyes burned with terrifying dread, as the liquid surrounding his whole body started burning and eating away at his skin and flesh. Hunter could pinpoint the exact moment the man gave up the fight, as he finally understood that he would never be getting out of there alive. The killer was just toying with him.

'Did you pick up anything from his tone of voice or something?' Garcia asked.

'No. He was calm throughout the whole conversation, except for when he yelled at me to make a choice. Other than that there were no angry bursts, no overexcitement, nothing. He was always in control of his emotions and of the conversation.' Hunter leaned back on his chair. 'But there's one thing that bothers me.'

'What's that?'

'When I told him that he didn't have to do that.'

Garcia nodded. 'He said that he knew he didn't, but he wanted to. He said that it would be fun.'

'That's right, and that could indicate that the victim was nobody in particular. Probably a complete random choice.'

'So this guy is just another fucking psycho, killing people for kicks.'

'We don't know yet,' Hunter replied. 'The problem is -when I told him that I couldn't make a decision because I didn't know why the victim was being held captive, the caller told me that that was something I would have to find out for myself.'

'And?'

'And that would indicate that the victim *wasn't* a totally random choice. That there was a specific reason why he was chosen, but he *wasn't* about to tell us.'

'So he's literally fucking with us.'

'We don't know yet,' Hunter said again before pushing himself away from his desk, checking his watch and letting out a deflated breath. 'But I'm through with this as well.' He powered down his computer. The same helpless feeling that had overtaken him when he was watching the live broadcast returned, burning an empty hole inside his chest. There was nothing else they could squeeze out of that Internet footage or audio recording. Right now, all they could hope for was some sort of development from the Missing Persons Unit.

Ten

Hunter sat in the dark, staring out the living-room window of his small one-bedroom apartment in Huntington Park. He lived alone – no wife, no kids, no girlfriends. He'd never been married, and the relationships he had were never long term. He had tried in the past, but being a detective with the Homicide Special Section in one of the most violent cities in America had a way of taking its toll on any relationship, no matter how casual.

Hunter had another sip of his strong black coffee and checked his watch – 4:51 a.m. He'd managed only four hours of sleep, but for him that was as close to sleeping bliss as he could ever get.

Hunter's battle with insomnia had started very early in his life, triggered by the death of his mother when he was only seven. The nightmares were so devastating that as a self-defense mechanism his brain did all it could to keep him awake at night. Instead of falling asleep, Hunter read ferociously. Books became his refuge, his castle. A safe place where the ghastly nightmares couldn't breach the gates.

Hunter had always been different. Even as a child he could solve puzzles and work out problems faster than most adults. It was like his brain was able to fast-track just about anything. In school, his teachers had no doubt he

wasn't like most students. At the age of twelve, after being put through a series of exams and tests suggested by Doctor Tilby, Hunter's school psychologist, he was accepted into the Mirman School for the Gifted as an eighth-grader, two years ahead of the usual age of fourteen.

Mirman's special curriculum didn't slow Hunter down. Before the age of fifteen, he had glided through their entire program, condensing four years of high school into two. With recommendations from all his teachers, and a special mention from Mirman's principal, he was accepted as a 'special circumstances' student at Stanford University. Hunter decided to study psychology. By then his insomnia and nightmares were relatively under control.

In college, his grades were just as impressive, and Hunter received his PhD in Criminal Behavior Analysis and Biopsychology just before his twenty-third birthday. The head of the psychology department at Stanford University, Doctor Timothy Healy, made it clear that if Hunter ever showed interest in a teaching position, there would always be a place on his staff for him. Hunter respectfully declined, but said that he would keep it in mind. Doctor Healy was also the one who forwarded Hunter's PhD thesis paper entitled *An Advanced Psychological Study in Criminal Conduct* to the head of the FBI National Center for the Analysis of Violent Crime. To this day, Hunter's paper was still mandatory reading at the NCAVC and at its Behavioral Analysis Unit.

Two weeks after receiving his PhD, Hunter's world was rocked for the second time. His father, who at the time was working as a security guard for a branch of the Bank of America in downtown Los Angeles, was gunned down during a robbery that had escalated into a Wild West

shoot-out. Hunter's nightmares and insomnia came back with a vengeance, and they had never left him since.

Hunter finished his coffee and placed the cup down on the window ledge.

It didn't matter how tightly he closed his eyes or ground his fists against them, he couldn't shut down the images that had been eating away at him since yesterday afternoon. It was like he'd memorized every second of the footage, and someone had turned on the *endless loop* switch inside his head. Questions were being lobbed at him from every corner of his mind, and so far he hadn't come up with a single answer. Some of them bothered him more than others.

'Why the torture?' he whispered to himself now. He understood very well that it took a certain type of individual to be able to torture another human being before killing him or her. It might sound simple but, when the time comes, very few were ever able to go through with it. One needed a level of detachment from regular human emotions that few can achieve. The ones who can are referred to by psychologists and psychiatrists as *psychopaths*.

Psychopaths show no empathy, or remorse, or love, or any other emotion associated with caring for someone else. Sometimes their lack of feelings can be so severe that they will display none toward even themselves.

The second fact that was digging around in Hunter's mind like a bulldozer was the *choice game*. Why did the killer go through the tremendous trouble of creating a torture chamber capable of two horrific deaths – either by fire or water? And why call him on the phone, or anyone else for that matter, and ask them to make that choice?

It wasn't uncommon for a murderer, even a psychopath, to doubt his decision to kill someone right at the last minute,

but that didn't seem to have been an issue with this killer. He had no doubt the victim would die; he just couldn't make up his mind on which was worse – burned to death or drowned. Two opposites of sorts. Two of the most feared ways a person could die. But the more Hunter thought about it, the more stupid he felt. He was sure he had been tricked.

He knew that there was no way the caller had that amount of sodium hydroxide sitting around for no reason at all. It had all been part of the game. He had said so himself. He was expecting Hunter to pick water instead of fire, for all the exact reasons he had mentioned over the phone – it was a kinder, less sadistic and faster way of ending the victim's suffering. But water would've also preserved the state of the body, and in case they came across it anytime soon, a forensics team would have a much better chance of finding a clue, if one was to be found. Fire, on the other hand, would've simply destroyed everything.

Hunter ground his teeth in anger and tried in vain to fight the guilt that was nibbling away at his brain. There was no doubt in his mind that the caller had played him. And Hunter hated himself for not foreseeing it.

The ringtone from Hunter's cellphone dragged him away from his thoughts. He blinked a couple of times as if waking up from a bad dream and looked around the dark room. The cellphone was on the old and scratched wooden dining table that doubled up as a desk. It rattled against the table-top one more time before Hunter got to it. The call display window told him it was Garcia. Reflexively Hunter checked his watch before answering it – 5:04 a.m. Whatever it was, Hunter knew it wouldn't be good news.

‘Carlos, what's up?’

‘We've got the body.’

Eleven

At five forty-three in the morning the back alley in Mission Hills, San Fernando Valley, would've still been cloaked in darkness, if not for the flashing blue lights of three squad cars and a pedestal-mounted power light from the forensics team.

Hunter parked his old Buick LeSabre by the single lamp-post at the entrance to the alleyway. He stepped out of the car and stretched his six-foot frame against the morning wind. Garcia's metallic-blue Honda Civic was parked across the road. Hunter took a moment to look around before entering the back alley. The lamppost's old bulb was yellow and weak. At night, if you weren't looking for it, it would've been very easy to miss the alleyway. It was located behind a quiet road of small shops, away from the main streets.

Hunter zipped up his leather jacket and slowly started down the alleyway. He flashed his badge at the young officer standing by the yellow crime-scene tape before ducking under it. He saw light fixtures above some of the shops' back doors, but none was on. There were a few plastic and paper bags scattered around, a few empty beer and soda cans, but other than that the back street was tidier than most he'd seen in downtown LA. The second half of the alleyway was lined with big metal dumpsters,

four in total. Garcia, two forensics agents and three uniformed officers were gathered just past the third dumpster. At the end of the alleyway a bedraggled, dirt-strewn black man of indistinct age, whose wiry hair seemed to explode from his head in all directions, was sitting on a concrete step. He seemed to be mumbling something to himself. Another police officer was standing a few feet to his right, one hand cupped over his nose, as if protecting himself from a violating smell. There were no CCTV cameras anywhere.

‘Robert,’ Garcia said as he spotted his partner walking toward him.

‘What time did you get here?’ Hunter said, noticing his partner’s strawberry-pink-rimmed eyes.

‘Less than ten minutes ago, but I was awake when I got the call anyway.’

Hunter’s eyebrows arched.

‘I had zero sleep,’ Garcia explained and pointed to his head. ‘It’s like I’ve got a cinema in here. Now, guess which movie has been playing on my screen all night.’

Hunter said nothing. He was already looking past Garcia’s shoulder to the commotion around the third dumpster.

‘It’s our victim,’ Garcia said. ‘No doubt about it.’

Hunter stepped closer. The three officers nodded ‘good morning’, but no one said a word.

Mike Brindle, the forensics agent in charge, was kneeling down by the dumpster, collecting something from the ground with a tiny pair of tweezers. He paused and stood up when he saw Hunter.

‘Robert,’ he said with a nod. They’d worked together on more cases than they could remember.

Hunter returned the gesture, but his focus was on the naked male body on the ground. He was lying on his back, between the third and fourth dumpsters. His legs were stretched out. His right arm was by the side of the body, bent at the elbow. The left one was resting casually on his stomach.

Hunter felt his throat constrict a little as he looked at the man's face.

There was none – no nose, no lips, no eyes. Even his teeth seemed to have rotted and corroded away. The eyeballs were still in their sockets, but they looked like punctured, half-full, silicone bags. In fact, the skin around his whole body seemed to have been sandpapered away. But the exposed flesh didn't look red-raw. It had a pink-gray tone to it. Though shocking, it didn't surprise Hunter that much. The alkaline bath had, in a way, cooked his flesh.

Hunter stepped a little closer.

The body had no fingernails or toenails left.

Despite the total disfigurement, Hunter had little doubt it was the same man they'd seen yesterday on their computer screens. When the man had finally died, his lifeless head fell forward, submerging his face into the alkaline mixture, but not his entire head. His short brown hair was almost intact.

'He's been dead for several hours,' Brindle said. 'The body is in full rigor mortis.'

'Three twenty-six yesterday afternoon,' Hunter said.

Brindle frowned at him.

'He died at three twenty-six yesterday afternoon,' Hunter repeated.

'Do you know him?'

'Not exactly.' Hunter looked up. The three police officers nearby had moved back to the crime-scene tape. Hunter

quickly gave Brindle a summary of what had happened the day before.

‘Jesus,’ Brindle said when Hunter was done. ‘That would explain the grotesque disfigurement to the body, and the odd change of color to his flesh.’ He shook his head, still shocked by what Hunter had just told him. ‘So you were not only made to watch, but he forced you to choose the death method as well?’

Hunter nodded in silence.

‘And you have the whole thing digitally recorded?’

‘Yes.’

With heavy eyes, Brindle looked down at the tortured body again. ‘I don’t understand this city, or the people in it anymore, Robert.’

‘I don’t think any of us do,’ Hunter replied.

‘How can anyone make sense of something like this?’

Hunter kneeled down to better examine the body. With the strong forensic light, every detail was visible. The smell was already crossing the line into putrid meat territory. Hunter used his left hand to cover his nose. He noticed little dents on the man’s feet, legs and arms. ‘What are these?’

‘Rat bites,’ Brindle said. ‘We had to scare a few off the body when we got here. There’s quite a bit of food in these dumpsters. This back alley services a bakery, a butcher’s shop and a small coffee shop stroke diner.’

Hunter nodded.

‘We’re going to sieve through most of the trash inside all four dumpsters in case the killer decided to discard something around here,’ Brindle said. ‘But after the story you told me, he doesn’t sound like he would be that careless.’

Hunter nodded again. His gaze moved over to the black man at the end of the alley. He was dressed in ripped and

stained clothes, and wearing an old, colorless long coat that looked to have survived an attack from a pack of hungry wolves.

‘His name is Keon Lewis,’ Brindle offered. ‘He’s the one who found the body.’

Hunter stood up, ready to go ask some questions.

‘Good luck with that,’ Brindle said. ‘You know how homeless people love talking to the cops.’