

COLD  
HIT

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CANNELL

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For my son, Cody  
You have made your dad very proud

**COLD HIT:** Police terminology referring to a ballistics match tying one crime or weapon to another.

They that can give up essential liberty to obtain a little temporary safety deserve neither liberty nor safety.

—*Benjamin Franklin*

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# 1

**2**:30 A.M.

The phone jack-hammered me up out of a tangled dream. “Detective Scully?” a woman’s voice said. “This is Homicide Dispatch. You just caught a fresh one-eighty-seven. The DB is on Forest Lawn Drive one block east of Barham Boulevard, under the bridge.

“In the L.A. River again?” I sat up and grabbed my pants.

“Yes sir. The patrol unit is there with the respondents. The blues say it looks like another homeless man so the duty desk at Homicide Special told us to give you the roll out.”

“Isn’t that in Burbank? Have you notified BPD?”

“According to the site map, it’s just inside L.A., so there’s no jurisdictional problem. I need to give patrol an ETA.”

“It’s gonna take me forty-five minutes.” I started to hang up,

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but hesitated, and added, "Have you notified my partner, Detective Farrell?"

"We've been trying," she replied carefully, then paused and said, "He's not picking up."

There was doubt and concern in her tone. *Damn*, I thought. *Did even the civilian dispatchers in the Communications Division know Zack Farrell had become a lush?*

"Keep trying," I said, and hung up.

I rolled out of bed, trying not to wake my wife, dressed quickly in fresh clothes, and went into the bathroom where I did my speed groom: head in the faucet, towel dry, hair comb with fingers, Lavioris rinse, no shave. I checked myself for flaws. There were plenty. I'm in my late-thirties and look like a club fighter who's stayed in the ring a few years too long.

I snapped off the bathroom light, crossed to the bed, and kissed Alexa. Aside from being my wife, she's also my boss and heads the Detective Services Group at LAPD.

"Wazzzit?" she mumbled, rolling toward me and squinting up through tousled, black hair.

"We got another one."

Coming up to a sitting position immediately alert, she said, "Son of a bitch is six days early."

Even in the half-light, Alexa took my breath away. Dark-eyed, with glossy hair and the high cheekbones of a model, she could have easily made a living on the covers of fashion magazines. Instead, she was down at Parker Center, in the biggest boys club on earth. Alexa was the only staff rank female officer on the sixth floor of the Glass House. She was an excellent commander, and deft at politics, while managing to avoid becoming a politician.

"The L.A. River?" she asked.

"Yeah, another homeless guy dumped in the wash near Barham just inside our jurisdiction. I don't know if the fingertips have been clipped off like the other two, but since it's almost a week off his timeline, I'm praying it's not our unsub."

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*Unsub* stood for *Unknown Subject*, what law enforcement called perpetrators who hadn't been identified. We used to use words like *him* or *his*, but with more and more female perps, it no longer made sense to use a pronoun that eliminated half the population.

"If the vic's homeless and is dumped in the river, then it's our unsub," she said. "I better get downtown. Did dispatch call Tony?"

Police Chief Tony Filosianni was known affectionately by the troops as the Day-Glo Dago, a term earned because he was a kinetic fireplug from Brooklyn. The chief was a fair, hard-nosed leader who was also a pretty good guy when he wasn't causing havoc by reorganizing your division.

"You better check Tony yourself. I'll let Chooch know." I said.

We'd converted our two-car garage into a bedroom for my son when his girlfriend, Delfina, lost her family and came to live with us last year. I stopped there before leaving the house.

Chooch was asleep with our adopted, marmalade cat Franco curled up at his feet. At six-foot-three-and-a-half, my son was almost too long to fit his standard-sized bed. When I sat on the edge, he rolled over and squinted up at me.

"I'm heading out," I said.

He was used to these late-night callouts and nodded.

Then his eyes focused as he gained consciousness and his look changed to concern. "What about tonight?"

Chooch was being heavily recruited by three Division-One schools for a football scholarship. Pete Carroll from USC was coming over for a coach's visit at six this evening.

"Don't worry, I'll be here. No way I'll miss that. Gimme a hug." I put my arms around him and squeezed. I felt him return the embrace, pulling me close. A warmth and sense of peace spread through me.

I jumped in my new gray Acura and pulled out, wondering where the hell Zack was. I prayed my partner wasn't drunk,



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propped against a wall in some after-hours joint with his cell phone off. I owed Zack Farrell a lot. He was my partner for a rough two years when I was still in patrol. I was completely disillusioned and close to ending it back then, tick-tocking along, heading toward a dark future. After work I'd fall into my big recliner in front of the tube, swig Stoli in a house littered with empty bottles and pizza boxes, and stare numbly at my flickering TV. By midnight I'd be nibbling my gun barrel, looking for the courage to do the deed.

In the morning my crotch was usually wet with spilled booze, my gun poking a hole in my ass somewhere beneath me. I'd dig it out, stumble to my car, and stagger back to work for another bloodshot tour. I was disheartened and circling the drain.

After two years working X-cars in the West Valley together, Zack left patrol and we hadn't seen much of each other in the years that followed. When Chooch and Alexa entered my orbit they gave new meaning to my life. But the reason the lights were still on when they arrived, was because Zack Farrell had watched my back and carried my water for those depressing two years. He refused to let our bosses take me down. All I had back then was the job, and if I had lost that, I know one night I would have found the strength to end it. It was a debt I'd never be able to square.

I pulled my life together after that and was now a Detective III assigned to Homicide Special on the fourth floor of Parker Center. This was Mecca for the Detective Division because all unusual or high-profile murders picked up on the street were turned over to this elite squad of handpicked detectives.

When I was assigned there, I found to my surprise, that Zack was also in the division. He told me he didn't have a partner at the time so we went to the captain and asked to team up again.

But I hadn't paid enough attention to some troubling clues. I didn't ask why Zack's last two partners had demanded reassign-

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ments, or why he'd been in two near-fatal car accidents in six months. I hadn't wondered why he only made it to Detective II, one grade below me, despite two years of job seniority. I looked past these very obvious warning signs, as well as his red eyes and the burst capillaries in his cheeks. I never asked him why he'd gained seventy pounds and couldn't take even one flight of stairs without wheezing like a busted windbag. I soon came to realize that I didn't really know him at all.

Two weeks ago I looked up one of his recent partners, an African American named Antoine Jewel. After almost twenty minutes of trying to duck me, Jewel finally leaned forward.

"The man is a ticking bomb," he said. "Stressed out and completely unreliable. Been so drunk since his wife threw him out, he actually backed over his own dog in the driveway. Killed him."

I certainly knew about his messy divorce, but Zack hadn't told me about the dog, which surprised me. Although by then, most of his behavior was hard to explain.

I made a detour so I could shoot up Brand Boulevard through Glendale to the apartment Zack moved into after his wife, Fran, threw him out.

Like so many buildings in Los Angeles, the Californian Apartments were ersatz Mexican. Two stories of tan stucco with arched windows and a red-tiled roof—Olé. I could see Zack's maroon department-issued Crown Victoria in the garage, but his personal car, a white, windowless Econoline van, was drunk-parked, blocking most of the driveway, which would make it impossible for his neighbors to leave in the morning.

I walked toward his downstairs unit and found the front door ajar, stepped inside and called his name loudly, afraid he would come out of an alcoholic stupor, pull the oversized square-barreled cannon he recently started packing, and park a hollow point in my hollow head.

"Zack? Hold your fire. It's Shane."

Nothing.

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The place had the odor of neglect. A musty mildew stench tinged with the acrid smell of vomit. The rooms were littered with empty bottles and fast-food wrappers. Faded snapshot memories of my old life flickered on a screen in the back of my head.

I found him in the kitchen, out cold, sprawled on the floor. Zack was almost six-three and well over three hundred pounds, with a round Irish face and huge, gelatinous forearms shaped like oversized bowling pins.

He was face down on the linoleum. It looked as if he'd been sitting at the dinette table, knocked down one too many scotch shooters, passed out, then hit the table, tipping it as he rolled.

How did I deduce this? Crime scenes are my thing and this was definitely a crime. There were condiments scattered on the floor and blood under Zack's right cheek, courtesy of a dead-drunk bounce when he hit.

"Hey, Zack." I removed his gun and rolled him over. His nose was broken, laying half-against his right cheek. Blood dripped from both nostrils. I got a dishtowel, went to the sink, wet it, then knelt down and started mopping his face, trying to clean him up, bring him out of it.

"Fuck you doing here?" he said, opening his eyes.

"We got a fresh one. Vic's in the L.A. wash just like the other three. Dispatch couldn't raise you."

I helped him sit up. He put both catcher's mitt-sized hands up to his face and started polishing his eye sockets.

"Let's go," I said.

"Isn't our guy. Too early."

Our unsub was on a two-week clock and this was only day eight. But sometimes a serial killer will go through a period of high stress and that pressure will cause them to change the timetable.

Zack winced in pain as he discovered his nose was bent sideways and in the wrong place. "Who broke my goddamn nose?"

"You did."

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He touched it gingerly and winced again.

"You want me to straighten it? I've done mine four times."

"Okay, I guess." He turned toward me and I studied it. Then I put a hand on each side of his busted beak, and without warning, pushed it sharply to the left toward the center of his face.

I heard cartilage snap and he let out a gasp. I leaned closer to check it.

"Perfect. Gonna hafta send you a bill for my standard rhinoplasty, but at least you qualify for the partner's discount." I helped him up. "Now let's go. We gotta make tracks."

"It's fuckin' killin' me," he whined, then started with half a dozen other complaints. "I ain't all together yet. My eyes are watering. Can't see. Gotta get another coat. This one's got puke on it." He looked around the kitchen like he was seeing it for the first time. "How'd I get here? You bring me home?"

"Stop asking dumb-ass questions," I snapped. "We gotta go. The press is gonna be all over this. I'm twenty minutes late already." Okay, I *was* pissed.

While he changed his coat and tried to stem his nose bleed, I moved his van. Ten minutes later he was in the front seat of my Acura leaning against the passenger door. He had twisted some Kleenex and stuffed a plug up each nostril. The dangling ends were turning pink with fresh blood.

"The Kleenex thing is a great look for you, Zack," I said sourly.

"Eat me," he snarled back.

I stopped at an all-night Denny's on Colorado Boulevard and got him some hot coffee, then we went Code Two the rest of the way to Forest Lawn Drive.

When we finally arrived at the location there were more satellite news trucks there than at the O. J. trial. This was the first big serial murder case in Los Angeles since the Night Stalker. The press had dubbed our unsub "The Fingertip Killer," and that catchy title put us in a nightly media windstorm.

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Two overmatched uniforms were trying to keep fifteen Newsies bottled up across the street away from the concrete culvert that frames the river. Occasionally, a cameraman would flank the cops, break free, and run across the street to try and get shots of the body.

"Damn," Zack said, looking at the press. "They appear outta nowhere just like fucking cockroaches."

We parked at the curb and ducked under the police barricade. Camera crews started photographing us as Zack and I signed the crime scene attendance log, which was in the hands of a young patrolman. A damp wind was blowing in from the coast, chilling the night, ruffling everybody's hair and vigorously snapping the yellow crime scene tape.

"Detective Scully," a pretty Hispanic reporter named Carmen Rodriguez called out as she and her cameraman broke free and ran across the street, charging me like hungry coyotes after a poodle. They ducked under the tape uninvited.

"Is this another Fingertip murder?" she asked.

"How would I know that yet, Carmen? I just got here. Would you please move behind the tape? We put that up to keep you guys back."

"Come on, Shane. Don't be a hard-ass. I thought we were friends." She was trying to keep me occupied while her cameraman pivoted, subtly maneuvering to get a shot of the body in the culvert forty feet below. I moved up and blocked his lens.

"You shoot that body, Gary, and I'll bust you for interfering with a homicide investigation."

"Everybody calls me Gar now," he said.

"Unless you turn that thing off, I'm gonna call you the arrestee. Now get behind the tape. Move back or you're headed downtown." Reluctantly they did as I instructed.

From where I was, I could just make out the vic, lying half in and half out of the flowing Los Angeles River.