

# 3

**T**HE VICTIM WAS lying on his back at the water's edge, his light cloth jacket pulled high under his armpits, but no longer covering his face as Thrasher indicated. The victim's eyes were wide open and rolled back into his head. He'd been shot in the right temple, but there was no exit wound. The bullet was still lodged inside his head.

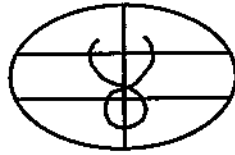
On the previous murders the head shots had all been through and through. Since we didn't know where any of the killings had originally taken place, we'd never recovered a bullet before. Retrieving this slug might be the first break we'd had since Zack and I caught this case seven weeks ago. After we pulled on our latex gloves, I shined my light over the body, working down from the head, pausing to study his ten fingers. Each one was neatly cut off at the first knuckle.

"He's in the club," Zack said softly.

"Yep." I didn't want to move the body before CSI and the crime photographer got here, but I kneeled down and reached under the corpse, being careful not to shift his position. I felt his back pocket for a wallet, but already knew I wouldn't find one. Unless we turned up a witness who knew him, he was going to go into the books as Fingertip John Doe Number Four.

I snapped on my recorder and spoke. "Jan ten, oh-five. Four-ten A.M. Shane Scully and Zack Farrell. Victim is in the L.A. River, one block east of Barham and appears to be a homeless man in his mid-to-late fifties, no current address or ID available. All ten fingers have been amputated at the distal phalanx in exactly the same fashion as the three previous corpses. Cause of death appears to be a gunshot wound to the right temporal region of the head, but there is no exit wound. Respondents who found the body said his jacket was covering his face, same as the other three John Does." I shut off the tape and motioned toward the dead man's chest. "Let's see if he's got the thing under there."

Zack knelt down across the body from me and we unbuttoned the victim's damp shirt and pulled it open. Carved on his chest was the same design we'd found on the other three victims. A crude figure eight opened at the top, inside an oval, with two parallel lines running horizontally and one vertically.



In homicide there is a simple formula. *How* plus *Why* equals *Who*. The modus operandi of an organized kill is part of the *how*. It tells us how the unsub did the murder. But MOs are dynamic, meaning they can be learned and are subject to change.

## COLD HIT

They are basically methodology and evolve as a killer gets better at his crime and attempts to avoid detection or capture. But this symbol on the chest was not MO, not part of the *how*. It was what is known as a signature element and was part of the *why*. Signatures have psychological reasons. In this case, I thought the unsub was labeling his victims and the symbol was part of the ritual and rage of the crime. If we could decode it, we'd gain insight into the why of these murders. So far the cryptologists at Symbols and Hieroglyphics downtown had not been able to identify it. We quickly rebuttoned the shirt, covering the mutilation.

Zack and I had kept this signature away from the press. On high-profile media crimes, there was never any shortage of mentally deranged people who step up to take credit for murders they didn't commit, wasting hours of police time. Zack called them "Droolin' Just Foolin's." By holding back this symbol, we were able to easily screen them out.

Zack informed me that he had to go tap a kidney and went back up to the road in search of a tree to water.

While we waited for the ME and crime scene techs to arrive, I took a second careful visual inventory of the body. This victim had bad teeth. Dental matching was a good way to identify John Does except when it came to homeless people who obviously didn't spend much time at the dentist.

I knew from all the books I'd been reading that the homeless were low-risk targets and high-risk victims. A fancy way of saying they were vulnerable and easy to attack and kill. I shined my light over the body, trying to see past the carnage into the killer's psyche. John Douglas, one of the fathers of criminal profiling at the FBI Behavioral Science Unit at Quantico, once said that you can't understand the artist without appreciating his art. So I studied the mutilated corpse trying to step into the killer's mind-set.

Then I noticed something on the victim's eyelids. I knelt further down and shined my light onto his face. His eyes were half

open so I slowly reached out and closed them. Four strange symbols were tattooed on each lid.



The coroner's wagon pulled in just as the sun was beginning to lighten the sky. A slight man made his way down the flagged trail toward me. As he neared, I recognized Ray Tsu, a mild-mannered, extremely quiet, Asian ME known widely in the department as Fey Ray. He was so hollow-chested and skinny, his upper body resembled a sport coat draped on a hanger. Straight black hair was parted in the middle and pushed behind both his ears.

"Who's the guest of honor, Shane?" Ray whispered in his distinct, undernourished way as he knelt beside me.

"No wallet. Unless you can find me something that puts the hat on, he's John Doe Number Four." We both looked at the clipped fingers. I pointed out the symbols tattooed on the victim's eyelids.

"How the hell do you tattoo an eyelid without puncturing the eye?" I asked, thumbing the lids back to their original position.

Ray shook his head. "Beats me." He opened the shirt and studied the chest mutilation. "Sure wish we knew what this was." His gentle voice was almost lost in the sharp wind.

"I need this guy to go to the head of the line, Ray."

Normally, in L.A., there's almost a two-week wait on autopsies due to the huge influx of violent murder. But our Fingertip case was drawing so much media attention we had acquired the treasured, DO NOT PASS GO autopsy card.

Tsu looked at his watch. "I'll squeeze him in first up," he said. "Doctor Comancho will want to do the Y-cut, but I oughta be able to get everything done here and have him back to the canoe factory by eight." The ME's facility was dubbed the canoe fac-

## COLD HIT

tory because during an autopsy, the examiners hollowed out corpses, removing organs and turning their customers into what they darkly referred to as body canoes.

"Thanks Ray, I owe ya."

Just before I stood to go, I shined my light one more time over my new client. I wanted to remember him this way. Shot, mutilated, then dumped in the river like human trash.

I named him Forrest, for Forest Lawn Drive.

Homicide cops see way too much death, so lately, to fight a case of overriding cynicism, I've been naming my John Does, who are generally referred to as "its" and thought of as "things" with no gender or humanity. By giving them names, it helped me remember that they were once alive, walking around with treasured hopes and dark fears just like all the rest of us. Life is God's most precious gift, and nobody, no matter where they are on the social spectrum, should end up like this.

I looked at Forrest, taking on emotional fuel as the beam from my light played across his face. Then something caught my attention. I moved closer and leaned down. The top of his right eyelid refracted light slightly differently than the left.

"Hey, Ray. Come take a look at this."

The ME moved over and while I shined my light, he looked down into Forrest's eyes, then took forceps out of a leather case and carefully lifted the lid.

"What's that look like?" I asked.

"Contact lens pushed up in the eye socket. Right one only," he said, leaning closer, studying it.

"So where's the other lens, I wonder?"

"I'll have CSI look around down here, see if they can find it," he answered. "Probably washed out when he was underwater."

The crime scene van was just pulling in as I got back up to the road and spotted Zack talking to some cops over by our car. As I started toward him he laughed loudly at one of his own jokes.

Some of the cops near him shifted awkwardly and frowned. The crime scene is the temple of every investigation. Zack was drunk, defiling our temple.

I was starting across the street when I felt a hand on my arm. I turned and found Mike Thrasher staring at me.

“Your partner’s loaded,” he said flatly.

“He may have had a few,” I defended. “We were off duty when we caught this squeal.”

“This is your murder. There’s no excuse. You’re senior man and you need to take action, Scully. He’s been stumbling around up here pissing on the bushes in front of the press, breathing whiskey on everybody. If you’re not going to take care of it, I’ll be forced to file a one-eighty-one. With all the bad shit this department has been through since Rodney King, O.J., and Rampart, none of us need this.”

Of course, he was right. But I felt my heart pounding in anger, my cheeks turning red with frustration.

“It’s not your problem, Sarge. You don’t know what he’s been going through. He’s in a messy divorce. He just lost his moonlighting job at the Galleria. He’s having big problems. Why don’t you just be a good guy and stay outta his business?” Thrasher glared at me, so I said, “And if you file that one-eighty-one, I’ll have to look you up and do something about it.”

After a moment, he turned and walked away.

I’d won. But I’d also lost because I’d been forced to watch all the respect drain out of his cool gray eyes.