

VERTICAL COFFIN

IT WAS MID-SEPTEMBER, hot and dry, the kind of hot that makes you think of frosty cans of Coors and long swims in the ocean. I was standing in a small, burned-out shack ten miles east of Palmdale in the high desert. There wasn't much left—a rock chimney and some blackened footings. My shoes were already covered with soot from kicking at scorched rocks and the remnants of charred furniture. It was ten on a Tuesday morning and the lizards had already abandoned their flat rocks to slither into the shady crevices between granite outcroppings.

This had been a Palmdale P.D. crime scene a month ago. Now it was mine. I'd driven out here in a primed Ford Bronco along with Sonny Lopez. The truck was his privately owned vehicle, known in police circles as a POV. Sonny was a sheriff's deputy working L.A. Impact, a multijurisdictional law-enforcement task

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force located in Los Angeles County, in Lancaster. The TF was a bad pork stew made up of LAPD and state cops, LASD, and a smattering of feds from the FBI, Customs, and ATF. All of them pretending to be a kick-ass unit, while at the same time trying to get past their deep jurisdictional prejudices.

Sonny Lopez was in his mid-thirties, tall, and movie-star handsome. He was working meth labs for L.A. Impact. This one had exploded and burned to the ground. At first it was thought to be a gas leak, but the county fire teams had learned to call the cops if they saw chemistry glassware in the ashes. When they were raking the debris cold, too many test tubes came up in the furrows. Since crystal kitchens tended to explode more frequently than Palestinian suicide bombers, the Palmdale P.D. did tests on the soil and found high quantities of methamphetamine. In fact, the dirt was so laced with amp, the site started to get nightly visits from local crankheads. They hauled away the soil, taking it home to mine it for meth. A dirt lab is what we called it. L.A. Impact did a lot of meth investigations, so they were called in.

I came from a far more depressing direction.

Two kids had starved to death in a house in Fullerton; fourteen-month-old Cindy and her four-month-old brother, Ben. Their mother, Paula Beck, was a crystal addict with half a dozen meth-cooking busts in her package. Paula was currently in the Sybil Brand Institute facing two involuntary manslaughter charges. The D.A. wanted to boot it up to murder two and had asked Special Crimes at LAPD to look for extenuating circumstances. Since my partner, Zack Farrell, was on a temporary leave of absence to be with his ill mother in Florida, and since it was mostly a background check, which required no partner, I got to work on that grizzly little double homicide. The D.A. thought if he could file the bigger charge against Paula he could get her to roll on her ex-boyfriend, Paco Martinez, a high-profile drug dealer. Paula had

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been banging him until a month ago, when she'd finally gotten so tweaked and crankster-thin he kicked her out.

Once Deputy Lopez determined that this burned out hacienda had been Paula Beck's pad, the sheriff's and LAPD crime computers played "Let's Make a Deal" and that's how we ended up in Palmdale together. Because Paco Martinez was such a major player, I'd been expecting to find a big crystal plant. But now that I was here, I knew I'd wasted the trip. This was just a user lab, a Beavis and Butt-head kitchen where poor, strung-out Paula Beck cooked her own personal bag of crystal, then fried her brains. I wondered if little Cindy had crawled in the dirt out front while Ben lay screaming in soaking diapers watching his mommy shoot the moon. I wondered if she'd gotten so tweaked in Fullerton that she just forgot she had left her two babies locked in their room till they starved to death.

So now Sonny and I were standing in Paula's kitchen, both silently wondering, if somebody had taken notice sooner could this whole terrible tragedy have been avoided?

But crystal is the oxymoron of narcotics. Technically, methamphetamine is the artificially synthesized version of the body's natural adrenal hormone. Cook up a good batch and it makes you feel beautiful, sexy, attractive, and alert. The problem is that it also takes away whatever it was that you wanted from it. If you use it for sex, you can't have an orgasm. Take it for work, you become totally inefficient. And very quickly it goes negative. You start to get so drowsy you need to load up just to keep your eyes open. It's a nightmare drug. I've seen recovered heroin users, but not one recovered meth addict. They all check off the ride at the first possible stop.

Cindy and Ben had paid Paula's trip ticket and now I was out here trying to cash her in for a D.A. who really only wanted her boyfriend. It was part of an endless cycle of death and destruction.

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More and more I was finding it difficult to do this job. All I saw was human wreckage. Even when I succeeded in doing something that felt right, more often than not, I'd been cursed for it. People didn't want cops around. Even my victories produced confusion. I had been fighting these feelings by not thinking about them, pushing them aside like bad food, knowing that if I ate much more it would soon make me sick. But you can't run from moral dilemmas, and I knew my days in law enforcement were numbered unless I found an answer.

"This lab burned a month ago?" I asked, jerking my ruminations out of this deep rut and back onto Paula's cratered family.

"Yep." Sonny looked around the flat, dry desert, his dark good looks clouded by his own elusive thoughts.

A hawk wheeled high overhead, a black shadow against the cobalt sky. The bird called softly to me. A mournful sound: too late . . . too late . . . too late.

"You gonna write any of this up?" Sonny asked. "I got the PFD reports. I can burn you a copy if that'd help, but there's nothing much here. It's been baked and raked. Whatta ya say we head back?"

"She's out here cooking up a batch, gets so amped out, she burns her own place. It's a wonder those kids lasted as long as they did."

Sonny nodded and looked up at the sun. "Man, it's hot. How did my ancestors put up with this heat?" He wiped his face with a handkerchief, anxious to get moving.

"Let's roll," I said.

We trudged back to the Bronco. Sonny cranked the air up, but it blew hot for almost three minutes before things got better. We took the Grapevine over the hill and in less than an hour dropped back into the Valley. My car was at the Agoura sheriff's substation where we'd met. We rode in silence most of the way.

Finally, somewhere near Sunland, Sonny looked over and

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shook his head angrily. "How do you get so wired you forget your own kids?" he grumbled. "It's bummin' me out."

"We both shoulda gone into retail," I replied.

When we arrived at the substation all hell was breaking loose. Sonny almost hit a black-and-white Suburban that was careening out of the parking garage. I could see the wide-eyed, adrenaline-charged face of the uniformed driver as he bounced the vehicle out of the lot and squealed away up the street.

"That's our technical command vehicle," Sonny said. "The area commander uses it to roll on hot calls." Seconds later, ten sheriff's deputies ran out of the station carrying shotguns and Kevlar, trying to buckle into their Tac vests as they ran.

"This don't look good," Sonny said. He squealed into a parking spot, jumped out, and ran toward the substation.

I was LAPD and this was an L.A. Sheriff's Department roll-out. As I picked up my briefcase and headed toward my black Acura, I told myself, leave it be, I've got enough action on my own beat.

The joke in LAPD is that the sheriffs are just rent-a-cops on steroids. The reason is that LASD sells their services to any unincorporated city in L.A. County that needs them. They contract out, just like the square badges who work the malls. The rip is they wear stars not badges, and that *star* is just *rats* spelled backwards. Of course, that's just a sleazy, jurisdictional cheap shot. The LAPD, gods that we are, are paid by the almighty taxpayers, giving us superior placement in the jurisdictional universe. All of which is worth about what you paid for it. Nothing.

I was unlocking the Acura when Sonny Lopez ran back into the lot with four deputies and a lieutenant. The "LT" was cradling a Tactical Operation Tango 51, which I'd read was their new Remington 700 Action sniper rifle. It was an extremely accurate long gun that fired a 168-grain Boattail .308 hollow

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point. Huge stopping power. Something big was definitely going down. The deputies and their watch commander piled into a new sheriff's Suburban with a Mars Bar, hit the cherries, and squealed out fast. Sonny never even glanced back at me. He was that pumped.

I reached into my car and switched to the Impact channel on my police radio. The LAPD and LASD work on completely different radio frequencies, but since I had worked with L.A. Impact twice before on overlapping cases, I had put their TAC frequency on my scanner. This was a major scramble and I figured some of the Impact crew was undoubtedly rolling on it. If so, I'd be able to crib their transmissions. They used Tactical Frequency 4. I switched it on and immediately heard somebody screaming:

"... Deputy down! Thirty-Mary-Four is down! He's layin' up on the porch right in the door. Every time we try and get to him, the sonofabitch inside starts pourin' lead out at us." You could hear the adrenaline in his voice.

Somebody else came back yelling an order. "Forget Emo! We can't get him out of there—not yet. Set up your fire lines. Cover the back. Get a secure perimeter and somebody run over and tell those fucking SRT SWAT guys not to canister the place with hot gas. I don't have their frequency. Tell 'em we can't take a fire. This neighborhood is too dense and the brush is too dry."

Emo? I thought. Emo Rojas?

I pulled out of the substation parking lot as I triggered my mike. "This is LAPD Sergeant Scully. What's your location?"

"Get the fuck off this channel," somebody barked.

"Where is this?" I yelled. "What's the Twenty?"

"Hidden Ranch Road," someone else answered.

I don't ride that much in the county and had no idea where that was, so I pulled over and programmed the street and city into my Acura's GPS. A map appeared on the LCD screen. It was the main road in a housing development called Hidden

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Ranch. The street dead-ended at a cul-de-sac in the foothills of Agoura two miles behind me. I swung a U, put the hammer down, and made it there in two minutes, with my on-line bitch goddess screaming directions. *In two hundred feet turn right*, she ordered.

You could hear the gunfire from almost half a mile away. Not the flat popping sound of 9 mm handguns, or the hard crack of an Ithaca pump, but the BLAPBLAPBLAPBLAP of an AK-47, or some heavy-ordnance machine rifle on full auto.

When I reached Hidden Ranch Road I saw a residential area full of two-story builder houses in the mid-to-expensive range tucked up against the dry San Gabriel foothills. Fifteen LASD's cars were already on the scene. At least twenty-five deputies were fanned out hiding behind garden walls and parked squad cars. Some were pouring 9 mm rounds into a house at the end of the cul-de-sac.

Just then a shooter appeared in one of the downstairs windows and let loose with an AK-47. The weapon tore holes right through the sheriff's van parked in the center of the street. Then the gunman ducked back out of sight. Two sheriff's air units and a TV news chopper added to the wall of noise as they circled relentlessly overhead. I rolled out low from the Acura, hung my badge case open on my jacket pocket, grabbed my Beretta and ran toward the sheriff's vans and the Suburban TCV parked in a semicircle in the middle of the cul-de-sac.

The shooter's house was a phony Georgian with fake trim and Doric columns. Sprawled across the threshold of the front door was a uniformed deputy. He wasn't moving. But I recognized those shoulders, that short black hair. It was Emo Rojas. Flat on his face, lying in the vertical coffin.