

CHRIS CARTER

HE WATCHES

HE WAITS

HE KILLS

THE NIGHT STALKER

THE SUNDAY TIMES BESTSELLER

THE NIGHT STALKER

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 the *Sunday Times* bestselling author of *The Executioner* and *The Crucifix Killer*.

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Also by Chris Carter

The Crucifix Killer
The Executioner

CHRIS CARTER THE NIGHT STALKER



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One

Doctor Jonathan Winston pulled the surgical mask over his mouth and nose and checked the clock on the wall of autopsy room number four on the underground floor of the Los Angeles County Department of Coroner. 6:12 p.m.

The body on the stainless steel table a few feet in front of him was of an unidentified white female in her late twenties, early thirties. Her shoulder-length black hair was wet, its tips plastered to the metal table. Under the brightness of the surgical light, her pale skin looked rubbery, almost unhuman. It hadn't been possible to identify the presumed cause of death at the location where the body was found. There was no blood, no bullet or knife wounds, no lumps or abrasions to her head or torso and no hematomas around her neck to indicate she'd been strangled. Her body was clear of trauma except for the fact that her mouth and vagina had been stitched shut by whoever had killed her. The thread used was bulky and heavy – the stitches untidy and careless.

'Are we ready?' Doctor Winston said to Sean Hannay, the young forensic assistant in the room.

Hannay's eyes were glued to the woman's face and her sealed lips. For some reason he felt more nervous than usual.

'Sean, are we OK?'

'Umm, yes, Doctor, sorry.' His eyes finally met Doctor Winston's and he nodded. 'We're all set here.' He positioned himself to the right of the table while the doctor activated the digital recording device on the counter closest to him.

Doctor Winston stated the date and time, the names of those present, and the autopsy file number. The body had already been measured and weighed, so he proceeded to dictate the victim's physical characteristics. Before making any incisions, Doctor Winston meticulously studied the body, looking for any marks that could help identify the victim. As his eyes rested on the stitches applied to the victim's lower body, he paused and squinted.

'Wait a second,' he whispered, stepping closer and carefully moving the victim's legs apart. 'Please pass me the flashlight, Sean.' He extended his hand towards the forensic assistant without taking his eyes off the victim. Concern crept into his gaze.

'Something wrong?' Hannay asked, handing Doctor Winston a small metal flashlight.

'Maybe.' He directed its beam towards something that had caught his eye.

Hannay shifted his weight from foot to foot.

'The stitches aren't medical suture,' Doctor Winston said for the benefit of the audio recording. 'They're amateurish and imprecise. Like a teenager sewing a patch onto an old pair of ripped jeans.' He moved closer still. 'The stitches are also too spread apart, the gaps between them are too wide, and . . .' he paused, cocking his head, '. . . no way.'

Hannay felt his whole body shiver. 'What?' He stepped forward.

Doctor Winston drew a deep breath and slowly looked up at Hannay. 'I think the killer left

something inside her.'

'What?'

Doctor Winston concentrated on the flashlight beam for a few more seconds until he was sure. 'The light is being reflected off something inside her.'

Hannay bent down, following the doctor's gaze. It took him only a second to see it. 'Shit, the light is reflecting off something. What is it?'

'I don't know, but whatever it is it's large enough to show through the stitches.'

The doctor straightened up and grabbed a metal pointer from the instrument tray.

'Sean, hold the light for me; like this.' He handed the flashlight to the young assistant and showed him exactly where he wanted him to focus the beam.

The doctor bent over and inserted the tip of the metal pointer between two of the stitches, guiding towards the object inside the victim.

Hannay kept the flashlight steady.

'It's something metallic,' Winston announced, using the pointer as a probe, 'but I still can't say for certain what it could be. Pass me the stitch-cutting scissors and the forceps, will you?'

It didn't take him long to slice through the stitches. As he cut through each one, Doctor Winston used the forceps to pinch and pull the thick black thread from the victim's skin, placing it into a small plastic evidence collection container.

'Was she raped?' Hannay asked.

'There are cuts and bruises around her groin that are consistent with forced penetration,' Doctor Winston confirmed, 'but they could've been caused by the object that's been inserted into her. I'll take some swabs and send them up to the lab together with the thread samples.' He placed the scissors and the forceps on the used instrument tray. 'Let's find out what the killer has left us, shall we?'

Hannay tensed as Doctor Winston inserted his right hand into the victim. 'Well, I was right, it's not a small object.'

A few silent, uneasy seconds went by.

'And it's oddly shaped too,' the doctor announced. 'Sort of squared with something strange attached to its top.' He finally managed to grab hold of it. As he pulled it out, an attachment at the top clicked.

Hannay stepped forward to gain a better look.

'Metal, relatively heavy, looks handmade . . .' Doctor Winston said, staring at the object in his hand. 'But I'm still not sure what . . .' He paused and felt his heart hammer inside his chest as his eyes widened in realization. 'Oh my God . . .'

Two

It took Detective Robert Hunter of the Los Angeles Robbery Homicide Division (RHD) over an hour to drive from the Hollywood Courthouse to the disused butcher's shop in East LA. He was paged over four hours ago, but the trial in which he was testifying had run a lot later than he'd expected.

Hunter was part of an exclusive elite; an elite that most LAPD detectives would give their right arm *not* to become part of. The Homicide Special Section (HSS) of the RHD was created to deal solely with serial, high-profile and homicide cases requiring extensive investigative time and expertise. Inside the HSS, Hunter had an even more specialized task. Due to his criminal behavior psychology background, he was assigned to cases where overwhelming brutality had been used by the perpetrator. The department tagged such cases as UV, *ultra-violent*.

The butcher's shop was the last in a parade of closed-down businesses. The whole neighborhood seemed to have been neglected. Hunter parked his old Buick next to a white forensic crime lab van. As he stepped out of the car, he allowed his eyes to study the outside of the buildings for a while. All the windows had been covered by solid metal shutters. There was so much graffiti on the outside walls Hunter couldn't tell what color the buildings had originally been.

He approached the officer guarding the entrance, flashed his badge and stooped under the yellow crime-scene tape. The officer nodded but remained silent, his stare distant.

Hunter pushed the door open and stepped inside.

The foul smell that hit him knocked him back and made him gag – a combination of putrid meat, stale sweat, vomit and urine that burned his nostrils and stung at his eyes. He paused for a moment before pulling the collar of his shirt up and over his nose and mouth as an improvised mask.

'These work better,' Carlos Garcia said, coming out of the back room and handing Hunter a surgical nose mask. He was wearing one himself.

Garcia was tall and slim with longish dark hair and light blue eyes. His boyish good looks were spoiled only by a slight lump on his nose, where it had been broken. Unlike all the other RHD detectives, Garcia had worked very hard to be assigned to the HSS. He'd been Hunter's partner for almost three years now.

'The smell gets worse once you enter the back room.' Garcia nodded towards the door he'd just come out of. 'How was the trial?'

'Late,' Hunter replied as he fitted the mask over his face. 'What have we got?'

Garcia tilted his head to one side. 'Some messed up stuff. White female victim, somewhere in her late twenties, early thirties. She was found on the stainless steel butcher's worktop in there.' He pointed to the room behind him.

'Cause of death?'

Garcia shook his head. 'We'll have to wait for the autopsy. Nothing apparent. But here comes the kick. Her lips and her vagina were *stitched* shut.'

‘What?’

Garcia nodded. ‘That’s right. A very sick job. I’ve never seen anything like it.’

Hunter’s eyes darted towards the door behind his partner.

‘The body’s gone,’ Garcia offered before Hunter’s next question. ‘Doctor Winston was the Forensics lead here tonight. He wanted you to see the body and the scene in the exact way in which it was found, but he couldn’t wait any longer. The heat in there was accelerating things.’

‘When was the body taken away?’ Hunter mechanically checked his watch.

‘About two hours ago. Knowing the doc, he’s probably halfway through the autopsy already. He knows you hate sitting in on those, so there’d be no point in waiting. By the time we finish looking around this place, I’m sure he’ll have some answers for us.’

Hunter’s cell phone rang in his pocket. He grabbed it and pulled his surgical mask down, letting it hang loosely around his neck. ‘Detective Hunter.’

He listened for a few seconds. ‘What?’ His eyes shot towards Garcia, who saw Hunter’s entire demeanor change in an instant.

Three

Garcia made the trip from East LA to the Los Angeles County Department of Coroner in North Mission Road in record time.

Their confusion doubled as they approached the entrance to the coroners' parking lot. It was blocked off by four police vehicles and two fire engines. More police cars were inside the lot. Several uniformed officers were moving around chaotically, shouting orders at each other and over the radio.

The media had descended upon the scene like ravenous wolves. Local TV and newspaper vans were everywhere. Reporters, cameramen and photographers were doing their best to get as close as they could. But a tight perimeter had already been established around the main building, and it was being strictly enforced by the LAPD.

'What the hell is going on here?' Hunter whispered under his breath as Garcia pulled up by the entrance.

'You'll have to move along, sir,' a young policeman said, coming up to Garcia's window and frantically gesturing for him to drive on. 'You can't—'

He stopped as soon as he saw Garcia's badge. 'I'm sorry, Detective; I'll clear a path right away.' Hunter turned to face the other two officers who were standing next to their vehicles. 'C'mon guys, make way.'

Less than thirty seconds later, Garcia was parking his Honda Civic just in front of the stairway that led up to the main building.

Hunter stepped out of the car and looked around. A small group of people, most of them in white coats, were huddled together at the far end of the parking lot. Hunter recognized them as lab technicians and coroner staff.

'What happened here?' he asked a fireman who had just come off the radio.

'You'll have to ask the chief in charge for more details. All I can tell you is that there was a fire somewhere inside.' He pointed to the old hospital-turned-morgue.

Hunter frowned. 'Fire?'

Certain arson cases were also investigated by the HSS, but they were rarely considered UV. Hunter had never been assigned as the lead detective in any of them.

'Robert, over here.'

Hunter turned and saw Doctor Carolyn Hove coming down the steps to greet them. She'd always looked a great deal younger than her forty-six years. But not today. Her usually perfectly styled chestnut hair was disheveled, her expression solemn and defeated. If the Los Angeles County Coroner had ranks, Doctor Hove would be second in command, just under Doctor Winston.

'What in the world is going on, Doc?' Hunter asked.

'Absolute hell . . .'

Four

Hunter, Garcia and Doctor Hove climbed up the steps together and entered the main building via a set of large double doors. Several more police officers and firemen were lingering around in the entry foyer. Doctor Hove guided both detectives past the reception counter, down another set of stairs and onto the underground floor. Even though they could all hear the extraction fans working at full power, a sickening smell of chemicals and burned flesh hung in the air. Both detectives cringed and reflexively cupped their hands over their noses.

Garcia felt his stomach churn.

Right at the end of the corridor, a section of the floor directly in front of autopsy room four was drenched in water. Its door was open but it seemed to have been dislodged off its hinges.

The fire chief in charge was giving instructions to one of his men when he saw the group approaching.

‘Chief,’ Doctor Hove said, ‘these are Detectives Robert Hunter and Carlos Garcia of the RHD.’

No handshakes, only polite nods.

‘What happened here?’ Hunter asked, craning his neck to try to see inside the room. ‘And where is Doctor Winston?’

Doctor Hove didn’t reply.

The chief took off his helmet and wiped his forehead with a gloved hand. ‘Some sort of explosion.’

Hunter frowned. ‘Explosion?’

‘That’s right. The room has been checked and there are no hidden fires. In fact, the fire itself looked to have been minimal. The sprinklers put it out even before we got here. At the moment we don’t know what caused the blast, we’ll have to wait for the fire investigator’s report.’ He looked at Doctor Hove. ‘I was told that this is the largest of all the autopsy suites, and it doubles as a lab, is that right?’

‘Yes, that’s correct,’ she confirmed.

‘Are any volatile chemicals – maybe gas canisters – stored in there?’

Doctor Hove closed her eyes for a moment and let out a heavy breath. ‘Sometimes.’

The chief nodded. ‘Maybe there was a leak, but as I said, we’ll have to wait for the investigator’s report. It’s a sturdy building with solid foundations. As it’s a basement room, the walls down here are much thicker than the ones throughout the rest of the building, and that helped contain the blow. Though it was a powerful enough blast to cause a lot of internal damage, it wasn’t powerful enough to compromise the structure. For now, there isn’t much more I can tell you.’ The chief took off his gloves and rubbed his eyes. ‘It’s very messy in there, Doctor, in a *very* bad way.’ He paused as if unsure of what else to say. ‘I’m really sorry.’ His words were coated with grief. He nodded solemnly at the rest of the group and made his way back upstairs.

They all stood in silence at the entrance to what used to be autopsy room four, their eyes taking in the destruction. At the far end of the room tables, trays, cabinets and trolleys were bent out of shape.

and turned over everywhere, showered in debris and bits of skin and flesh. Part of the ceiling and the back wall were damaged and covered in blood.

‘When did this happen?’ Garcia asked.

‘An hour, maybe an hour and fifteen minutes ago. I was in a meeting in the second building. There was a muffled bang and the fire alarms went berserk.’

What was bothering Hunter was the amount of washed-up blood and the number of black impermeable covers he could see scattered around the room, covering bodies or body parts. The cool body storage facility was located on the wall opposite where the blast occurred. None of the fridges looked damaged.

‘How many bodies were out of the coolers in here, Doc?’ Hunter asked tentatively.

Doctor Hove knew Hunter had already caught on. She lifted her right hand, showing only the index finger.

Hunter let out a laden breath. ‘An autopsy was taking place.’ It was a statement rather than a question and he felt a shiver grab hold of his spine. ‘Doctor Winston’s autopsy?’

‘Shit!’ Garcia ran a hand over his face. ‘No way.’

Doctor Hove looked away, but not fast enough to hide the tears that were forming in her eyes.

Hunter’s gaze stayed on her for a couple of seconds before returning to what was left of the room. His throat went dry, and a choking sadness surrounded his heart. He’d known Doctor Jonathan Winston for over fifteen years. He’d been the Los Angeles Chief Medical Examiner for as long as Hunter could remember. He was a workaholic and brilliant at his job. He always tried his best to conduct most of the autopsies on murder victims whose death circumstances had been deemed out of the ordinary. But most of all, to Hunter, Doctor Winston was like family. The best of friends. Someone on whom he’d counted on numerous times. Someone who he respected and admired like few others. Someone he’d sincerely miss.

‘Two people were present.’ Doctor Hove’s voice faltered for an instant. ‘Doctor Winston and Sean Hannay, a 21-year-old forensic assistant.’

Hunter closed his eyes. There was nothing he could say.

‘I called as soon as I found out,’ Doctor Hove said.

Garcia’s expression was one of pure shock. He’d seen many dead bodies in his career, several of them grotesquely disfigured by a sadistic killer. But he’d never personally known any of the victims. And despite meeting Doctor Winston for the first time only three years ago, they’d quickly become friends.

‘How about the kid?’ Hunter finally asked. And for the first time, Garcia heard Hunter’s voice quiver.

Doctor Hove shook her head. ‘I’m sorry. Sean Hannay was finishing his third year of pathology at UCLA. His ambition was to become a forensic scientist. I was the one who approved his internship only six months ago.’ Her eyes glistened. ‘He wasn’t even supposed to be in this room. He was just helping out.’ The doctor paused and considered her next words carefully. ‘I asked him to do so. It was supposed to be me assisting Jonathan.’

Hunter noticed that the doctor’s hands were shaking.

‘It was a special circumstances death,’ she continued. ‘Jonathan always asks me to assist on those. And I would’ve, but I got held up in my meeting and asked Sean to take over for me as a favor.’ Her eyes filled with horror. ‘He wasn’t the one who was supposed to have died here today – I was.’

Five

Hunter understood what was going through Doctor Hove's mind. In the immediate aftermath of the blast, her self-preservation instinct had kicked in and she had felt relief. She'd had a lucky escape. But now reason and guilt were settling in and her mind was punishing her in the worst possible way. *If my meeting hadn't run late, Sean Hannay would still be alive.*

'None of this is your fault, Doc,' Hunter tried to reassure her, but he knew that words would have little effect. Before accepting anything, they all needed to understand what had happened in that room.

Hunter took a step up to the autopsy room door as his mind tried to process the scene in front of him. Right now, nothing was making sense. Suddenly, something caught his eye and he squinted for a second before turning to face Doctor Hove.

'Are autopsies ever videotaped?' he asked, pointing to something on the floor that resembled a camera tripod leg.

Doctor Hove shook her head. 'Very rarely, and the request has to be approved either by me or . . . her eyes moved from Hunter to the inside of the room, ' . . . the chief medical examiner.'

'Doctor Winston himself.'

A single, hesitant nod from Doctor Hove.

'Do you think he might've chosen to record this autopsy?'

Doctor Hove considered it for a moment and her face flared with hope. 'There's a chance. If I considered the case intriguing enough.'

'Well, even if he did,' Garcia cut in, 'how would that help us? The camera was certainly blown to shit like most of the room. Just look at it.'

'Not necessarily,' the doctor said slowly.

All eyes went back to her.

'Do you know something we don't?' Hunter asked.

'Autopsy room four is sometimes used as a lecture room,' the doctor explained. 'It's the only examination suite we have equipped with a video camera connection hub. It links directly to our mainframe computer. That means that the images are simultaneously stored into our mainframe hard drive. To videotape a lecture or an examination, all a doctor has to do is set up a digital camera, hook it to the hub and they're good to go.'

'Can we find out if Doctor Winston did that?'

'Follow me.'

Doctor Hove moved purposefully back to the same stairway they'd come down and went up to the ground floor. They passed the reception area before continuing through a set of metal double doors and into a long and empty hallway. Three-quarters of the way down, they turned right. A single wooden door with a small frosted glass window stood at the end of the corridor. Doctor Hove's office. She unlocked it, pushed the door open, and led them inside.

Doctor Hove went straight to her desk and logged onto her computer. Both detectives gathered behind her.

‘Only mine and Doctor Winston’s login has administrator’s rights access to the video directory of the mainframe computer. Let’s see if we got anything.’

It took Doctor Hove only a few clicks to get to the video directory where all recordings were stored. Inside the main folder there were three subdirectories – New, Lectures and Autopsies. The doctor expanded the directory named *new* to find only one .mpg file. The timestamp on it indicated that it had been created an hour ago.

‘Bingo. Jonathan did record the autopsy.’ Doctor Hove paused and anxiously looked at Hunter. Hunter noticed that she had fractionally pulled her hand away from the mouse.

‘It’s OK, Doc; you don’t have to watch this. We can take it from here.’

Doctor Hove hesitated for a second. ‘Yes I do.’ She double-clicked the file. The screen flickered and the computer launched its default video player application. Hunter and Garcia moved closer.

The pictures weren’t of great quality, but clearly showed a white female body on an autopsy table. The image had been filmed from above and at an angle, and was partially zoomed in so that the table occupied most of the screen. On the right, two other people in white lab coats could be seen from mid-torso down.

‘Can you zoom out?’ Garcia asked.

‘The image was recorded this way,’ Hunter replied, shaking his head. ‘We’re not controlling the camera here. This is just playback.’

On the screen, one of the two people to the right of the table moved towards the body’s head and bent down to examine it. Doctor Winston’s face suddenly appeared in the shot.

‘There’s no sound?’ Garcia asked as he watched Doctor Winston’s lips move in silence. ‘How come there’s no sound?’

‘The microphones on the cameras we use to video examinations aren’t of great quality,’ the doctor explained. ‘We usually don’t even turn them on.’

‘I thought pathologists had a habit of dictating every step of their examinations.’

‘And we do,’ she confirmed. ‘Onto our own personal recording devices. We take them into the examination rooms with us. Whatever Jonathan was using, is now mangled up with everything else in that room.’

‘Great.’

‘*Eyes – hazel, skin is well cared for, earlobes look like they’ve never been pierced . . .*’ Hunter said before the video showed Doctor Winston turning away from the camera. ‘Damn! I can’t see his mouth any more.’

‘You can lip-read?’ The question came from Doctor Hove, but her surprised look was mirrored on Garcia’s face.

Hunter didn’t reply. He kept his attention on the screen.

‘Where in the world did you learn to do that?’ Garcia asked.

‘Books,’ Hunter lied. Right now, the last thing he wanted to do was talk about his past.

They watched in silence for the next few seconds.

‘Jonathan is performing a regular external examination of the body,’ Doctor Hove confirmed. ‘As the victim’s physical characteristics are listed, including first impressions of their wounds, if any. He’d also be looking for any physical marks that could help identify the victim – she was brought in as a Jane Doe.’

On the screen, Doctor Winston paused and an intrigued look passed across his face. They watched as his assistant handed him a small flashlight. Bending over, he focused the light directly on the stitches applied to the victim’s lower body, moving the light up and down and from side to side.

He seemed baffled by something.

‘What is he doing?’ Garcia instinctively tipped his head to one side, trying to get a better view.

The video played on and they all watched as Doctor Winston used a metallic pointer to probe through the stitches and into the victim’s body. The doctor’s lips moved and they all looked at Hunter.

‘It’s something metallic,’ Hunter translated, ‘but I still can’t say for certain what it could be. Pass me the stitch-cutting scissors and the forceps, will you?’

‘There was something inside her?’ Doctor Hove frowned.

On the screen, Doctor Winston turned away from the camera again and proceeded to use a pair of scissors to slice through the stitches. Hunter noticed there were five in total. The doctor inserted his right hand into the victim.

Moments later, Doctor Winston managed to retrieve an object. When he turned, only its edge flashed past the camera.

‘What was that?’ Garcia asked. ‘What was left inside the victim? Did anyone see?’

‘Not sure,’ Hunter replied. ‘Let’s wait, he might turn and face the camera again.’

But he never did.

Within seconds there was a blast and the whole image was substituted by static. The words – *Ro*
4. *Signal fail* – flashed across the center of the screen.

Six

Absolute silence filled the room for several seconds. Doctor Hove was the first to speak.

‘A bomb? Someone put a bomb inside a murder victim? What the hell . . . ?’

There was no reply. Hunter took over at the computer and was already clicking away, rewinding the images. He pressed play again, and the video resumed from just a couple of moments before Doctor Winston pulled his hand from inside the victim’s body, gripping the unidentified metallic object. All eyes reverted back to the screen.

‘I can’t make it out exactly,’ Garcia said. ‘It moves past the camera too fast. Can you slow down?’

‘It doesn’t matter what it looks like,’ Doctor Hove said almost catatonically. ‘It was a bomb. What the hell puts a bomb inside a victim, and why?’ She took a step back and massaged her temple. ‘Terrorist?’

Hunter shook his head. ‘The location of the attack alone defeats the very essence of terrorism. Terrorists want to cause as much damage as possible with as much loss of life as possible. I hate to state the obvious, Doc, but this is a morgue, not a shopping mall. And the blast wasn’t even powerful enough to destroy a whole medium-sized room.’

‘Besides,’ Garcia said, with no sarcasm in his voice, ‘most bodies in here are already dead.’

‘So why would someone place a bomb inside a dead body? It doesn’t make any sense.’

Hunter held the doctor’s gaze. ‘I can’t tell you the answer to that question right now.’ He paused for a moment. ‘We need to stay focused here. I’m assuming that no one else has seen this footage?’

Doctor Hove nodded.

‘We need to keep it this way for now,’ Hunter said. ‘If news gets out that a killer has placed a bomb inside a victim, the press will turn this into a carnival. We’ll spend more time giving pointless interviews and answering stupid questions than investigating anything. And we can’t afford to lose any more time. Despite our emotions on this, what we have here is someone who is crazy enough to kill a young woman, place an explosive device inside her body and stitch it shut. Consequently, he also took the life of two other innocent people.’

New tears started to form in Doctor Hove’s eyes. But she had worked with Hunter in many cases over the years and there was no one in law enforcement she trusted more than him. She nodded slowly and for the first time Hunter saw anger in her face.

‘Just promise me you’ll catch this sonofabitch.’

Before leaving the coroners building, Hunter and Garcia stopped by the Forensics lab and picked up all the available information the team had collected so far. Most of the lab test results would take at least a couple of days. Since Hunter had never got a chance to see the body as it was found at the crime scene, the reports, notes and photographs were all he had to go on at the moment.

He already knew that the body had been found eight hours ago in the back room of the disused

butcher's shop in East LA. An anonymous phone call had tipped off the police. Hunter would get a copy of the recording later.

On their way back to East LA, Hunter slowly flipped through all the information in the forensic files. The crime-scene pictures showed that the victim had been left naked, lying on her back on a dirty metal counter. Her legs were together and stretched out but not tied. One of her arms was hanging off the side of the counter, the other rested on her chest. Her eyes were left open, and Hunter had seen that expression in them many times before – pure fear.

One of the pictures showed a close-up of her mouth. Her lips had been stitched shut with thick black, thorn-like thread. Blood had seeped through the needle punctures and ran down her chin and neck, indicating that she was still alive when it was done. Another close-up showed that the same thing had been done to her lower body. Her groin and inner thighs were also smeared with blood that had seeped through the puncture wounds. There was some swelling around the stitches – another indication that she had died hours after being violated by needle and thread. By the time she died, the wounds had already started to go septic. But that wouldn't have caused her death.

Hunter checked the location photographs. The butcher's shop was a dirty mess. Its floor was covered in crack pipes, old syringes, used condoms, and rat droppings. The walls were plastered with graffiti. Forensics had found so many different fingerprints it looked like a party had taken place in that back room. The truth was: right now only an autopsy examination could shed light onto the case.

Seven

Everyone had already left by the time Garcia dropped Hunter back to his car. Crime-scene tape strung across the street marked the perimeter around the butcher's shop. A sole uniformed cop guarded the entrance.

Garcia knew Hunter would take his time, looking at every possible detail inside the shop.

'I'm gonna head back and see what I can do with the crime-scene photos and the Missing Person database. As you said, our priority is in identifying who she was.'

Hunter nodded and stepped out of the car.

The foul smell seemed to have intensified threefold as Hunter flashed his badge at the officer and entered the shop for the second time that evening.

As the door shut behind him, Hunter was left in pitch-black darkness. He clicked his flashlight on and felt a surge of adrenaline rush through his body. Every step was accompanied by the crunching of glass or the squelching sound of something moist under his feet. He moved on past the old meat display counter and approached the door at the back. As he got closer, Hunter heard the buzzing of flies.

This new room was spacious and linked the front of the store to the small freezer-room at the back. Hunter paused by the door, struggling with the putrid stench. His stomach was begging him to leave, threatening to erupt at any moment and causing him to gag and cough violently a few times. His surgical mask was having little effect.

He slowly allowed the beam of his flashlight to move around the room. Two oversized metal sinks sat against the far wall. To their right was an empty floor-to-ceiling storage module. Rats moved freely on its shelves.

Hunter screwed up his face.

'There had to be rats,' he cursed under his breath. He hated rats.

In an instant his mind took him back to when he was eight years old.

On his way back from school, two older kids stopped him and took his Batman lunchbox from him. The lunch-box had been a birthday present from his mother a year earlier, just months before cancer robbed her of her. It was his most prized possession.

After taunting Hunter for a while by throwing the lunch-box back and forth to each other, the two bullies kicked it down an open manhole.

'Go get it, deaf boy.'

Hunter's mother's death was devastating for him and his father, and coping with its aftermath proved particularly difficult. For several weeks, as her disease progressed, Hunter sat alone in her room, listening to her desperate cries, feeling her pain as if it was his own. When she finally passed away, Hunter started experiencing severe loss of hearing. It was his body's psychosomatic way of shutting off the grief. His temporary deafness made Hunter an even easier target to the bullies. To escape being cast aside even more, he'd learned to lip-read by himself. Within two years, with the

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