

MISSING COP

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Chapter One

The First Clue

“**T**he average length of a grunion is eight inches. It buries itself in the sand and lays its eggs. Then the male deposits his milt to fertilize them,” Elpidio said. The thin boy with plastic framed glasses carefully watched the little wakes in the sand created by the sea water flowing back into the ocean. He knew each disturbance was caused by the antennae of a partially burrowed bug, and he didn’t want to step on them with his bare feet. Though he didn’t understand why they were called ‘sand crabs’. They looked more like fat gray cockroaches.

“Hmmm.” Hernan Delgadillo said fascinated. Not by the information the kid had given him; but by the amount of insignificant crap he knew.

At sixteen Hernan was only three years older than Elpidio and he had joined the environmental group Oceana Mexicana because he was infatuated with Suleima Solis who was also a member. Hernan hoped that his interest in the group would inspire ‘Suly’ to see him as more than just a friend, even though she was an older woman of eighteen years.

The plan for the morning was to recover as much of the abandoned roe as possible and to take it to the back room of the Tijuana Aquarium on Paseo de los Heroes. It was there that the group established a part time preservation room devoted to providing a safe place for the rescued fish eggs to be fertilized.

Hernan had high hopes when the search teams were assigned he would be paired with Suly, but was disappointed when he got the talkative dork as a partner.

“Did you know,” Elpidio said, “that some of the dinosaurs in Jurassic Park weren’t even alive during the Jurassic period?”

“Do you want to take a break now?” Hernan asked, not waiting for an answer.

He turned and began walking toward Suly and her search partner, who were twenty yards down the beach.

“A ‘holdfast!’” Elpidio shouted.

The excitement in his voice even caused the girls to look up from what they were doing.

Hernan saw his younger partner running toward a big clump at the wave line almost as tall as Elpidio himself.

The object was surrounded by seaweed. The stalks that trailed back into the ocean looked like giant alien claws clinging to the large mass.

The lump created a small tide pool in its lee.

By the time Hernan re-joined him, Elpidio was squatting and looking over the spot. The young man touched the submerged sand and a flat fish stirred from the bottom of the shallow pool re-positioning itself a few inches away.

“That’s a sand dab,” Elpidio said. “My Father fries them with calabasa.”

The fish looked like it was frowning and it had eyes on top of its head, looking in different directions. It reminded Hernan of Uncle

Miguel. He could also see a few cone shells that were moving in the shallow pool. The largest one was the size of his fingernail.

“Those are hermit crabs,” Elpidio said.

Hernan took one in his hand. It had a speckled shell and he held it up to the girls who were jogging toward him.

“I got a hermit crab.”

“No way!” Suly said tucking a lock of curly brown hair behind her ear.

The young girl reached up to touch it. She got so close that Hernan could feel her breath on his face. It smelled of sweet peppermint gum. Hernan held his own breath when Suly’s finger touched his palm as she nudged the tiny crustacean.

A wave came up and retreated around their feet. It pulled the leading strands of kelp causing the holdfast to roll several inches toward the ocean, partially revealing its underside.

A mottled human arm entangled in the clump rolled into view. It was attached to a shoulder that was attached to a head.

Elpidio screamed and then Suly screamed and then the little hermit crab tucked back into its shell as it fell to the sand.

Chapter Two

"Ten- Nineteen."

“Unit three Lincoln twenty-three, ten-nineteen watch commander after you complete your call,” said the voice of the Los Feliz police dispatcher.

Field Training Officer Lucilla Deltoro acknowledged the radio message. It was never good, she thought. She was being told to return to the station to see the Lieutenant. She scowled so deeply that the hair bun at the back of her head moved.

Normally things in patrol were handled by the Sergeant. If the Lieutenant wanted to see her it was something out of the ordinary. What had she done now?

Or maybe it was the young man sitting beside her in the patrol car that had done something wrong. The man was her trainee. His name was Zoltan Pivey and when he first got into her car four weeks earlier she thought he looked sixteen years old. He was as smart as a box of rocks too. She wondered if anyone in the hiring division of the Los

Feliz police department ever really worked, or if they just stood around playing in inter-department ping-pong tournaments.

On the recruit's second day on the job Deltoro saw him by the police car with a sandwich in one hand and his cel phone in the other. He was trying to lead an animal into the back seat of their unit and was recording the process.

"What are you doing?"

"I thought we could take it to the Humane Society, Ma'am."

Deltoro, known for having a glare that would shame Medusa, aimed it at her rookie.

"I've never seen a German Shepherd this emaciated, Ma'am."

"Have you ever seen a coyote?" she asked.

"Only in cartoons."

The animal snatched the sandwich from the young officer's hand and ran off.

"That's a coyote," she said referring to the tic-infested predator.

"Oh."

On the third day on the job Deltoro and the young recruit responded to Pacific Park where a man had been seen running around in the nude. When they found him loitering near the picnic tables asking for food, she stood back to watch the recruit make contact with the naked person.

"Sir, would you mind stepping over here please?" The young officer asked, taking a hold of the nude man's elbow and nudging him toward the bathroom, out of view of the general public.

"You don't have any weapons on you. Do you?" The recruit asked.

"Nope," came the response.

"Do you mind if I check?"

"Go ahead."

The young officer performed a search as he was taught. A sweep with his hands down the man's chest and then across the waistline. Then a nudge up in the crotch with a sweep down both legs. He squeezed each ankle. When he was done he had the man sit.

"Why do we conduct a search?" Deltoro asked.

"To look for weapons."

"Where would these weapons be?"

"Concealed under his clothes, Ma'am."

"Correct," she said. "This man has no clothes. So, you basically just gave him a light nude massage with no happy ending."

"Oh."

After Pivey's first week Deltoro walked him in to the office of the watch commander, Roger Lenahan.

The lieutenant was tall and imposing. He also had a deep booming voice, but everyone liked him because he was fair and treated co-workers, from maintenance personnel to superiors, with respect.

"I will be honest, young man. Your future here is a little shaky. According to Officer Deltoro your geography is weak. If an officer calls for help you need to know the quickest way to get there."

Pivey explained that he had the same problem in the military, he overthought things. He was so focused on not missing a detail that he did everything by rote. He was so intense about doing things just right that he ignored his common sense.

After that talk with the lieutenant things with her recruit improved. But every now and then Pivey would lapse into his overthinking and Deltoro was right there to knock him back on track.

"Ten nineteen." Pivey said. "Doesn't that mean to go to the station?"

“After we finish this call for service. But, you don’t worry about that. The only thing I want you thinking about right now is the incident that we’re on. Read the screen.”

“Right.”

The rookie shifted the mobile computer toward him.

“Four-fifteen, noise complaint,” he read out loud.

“Go on,” she said.

“Caller reports loud music coming from lower apartment. Possible radio. RP is not willing.”

“The address?”

“Twelve, zero, one south Bradley.”

“Do you know where that is?”

“No. Ma’am.”

“Can you point in the direction that you think it is?”

He looked around and after a moment pointed north.

“No. You have three other choices.”

Two guesses later they were heading in the right direction.

The apartment complex was U-shaped with the open portion facing the street. A center courtyard was bisected by a walkway that had cement tributaries leading to the front of each doorway. The unit in question was the last one on the west side.

“Your investigation starts now,” she said as they stood on the sidewalk facing the complex. “Tell me what is going through your head.

Pivey took in a deep breath and then puffed his cheeks as he slowly blew it out.

“I guess we just knock on the door and tell whoever to turn it down.”

“What did I tell you about handling your cases?”

“Oh.”

“You treat every incident, no matter how insignificant it seems, like it’s the most important case in the world,” Deltoro said.

“Oh, right.”

“What is the first thing you do when you’re on the most important case in the world?”

“Well, I can’t hear the music.”

“Right. But what is the first thing you do every time. On every call?”

“Oh. Look at the surroundings.”

“And, why?”

“Because anything could turn to crap in an instant.”

“Good,” Deltoro said. “Now act like I’m not here and handle the call.”

Before Pivey got a chance to begin his investigation the hi-lo alert tone of an emergent call was broadcast over the radio.

“Any unit, clear and respond to assist One-Adam-Fourteen, on a residential burglary alarm at eighteen-twenty north Thompson. Possible male inside the residence.”

Since a loud music complaint was a low priority Deltoro decided to go on radio and advise the dispatcher that she would delay on the noise complaint and respond to assist on the residential alarm instead.

Chapter Three

No Blood

The call was in a hilly area of the city where expensive homes were built. The front yard of the house had a high manicured hedge that hid most of the front yard from the street. Two other patrol officers arrived before Deltoro and were standing by the front of the garage which jutted out from the residence proper. One was a tall and slender man in his forties named Emil Joseph Koch, or 'EJ'. The other was his partner Daryl Dagnasses who was ten years younger than EJ and a head shorter.

"You guys cover the front. We'll check the rear," EJ said to Deltoro when she and Pivey walked up.

Deltoro took a position by the edge of the garage and instructed Pivey to position himself at the opposite side of the garage door.

EJ was glad the side gate was not locked. He wasn't in the mood to climb any fences since the last time he did it he ripped his uniform pants. As Dagnasses was admiring the stone decking around the pool, EJ checked the sliding glass door. It was locked so he peered through the glass.

"I've got someone inside," he said. His voice was calm because he had found people in homes on several prior alarm calls. It was always either a son who came home early or a homeowner that forgot to turn off the alarm.

"Might be a 'resi'," EJ said. "He's sitting in a chair, maybe asleep. Can't tell 'cause he's facing away."

EJ knocked on the glass.

"Los Feliz Police." he said.

When there was no response or movement he repeated himself. He then asked Deltoro, over the air, to ring the front door bell. She did so several times and when there was no response she told Pivey to see what he could see and pointed to the picture window next to the front door.

The recruit moved up and looked through the glass. The man in the chair was twenty feet from the door. He was about thirty years old and was wearing a suit and tie. His eyes were wide open and there was a bullet hole in the middle of his forehead.

Pivey tried to talk and gasp at the same time and inhaled his saliva. He coughed violently as his body expelled the liquid in his wind-pipe. He pointed to the window and made gun motions with his hand.

"What the Hell?"

Deltoro came up and looked through the stained-glass window and saw what Pivey had seen.

"Three-Adam-Twenty-three, we have a man-down inside with a possible gunshot wound to the head. Have fire respond and stage. We will be making forced entry," she said into the radio.

By the time Pivey had accumulated enough oxygen to stop coughing EJ and Dagnasses had rejoined them at the front. Dagnasses kicked the door three times and it finally swung open. Deltoro entered first and passed the body.

"I'm covering the stairway. You check the victim."

EJ moved up and pressed his finger against the neck of the man in the chair. The skin was cold. He looked into the man's eyes.

"No pulse. No pupil reaction," he said.

"Pivey, you stay with the body the rest of us will clear the house."

Deltoro, EJ, and Dagnasses moved through the rooms methodically, with one officer covering an area while the other two searched it. They made their way through the place in this manner until the location was clear.

The officers then exited the house and EJ directed Dagnasses and Pivey to place yellow crime scene tape all around the lot.

When the fire department arrived Deltoro requested that only one paramedic enter the house to check the body and pronounce the victim as deceased, providing an official time of death. Field Sergeant William Farr arrived and set up a command post one block away, where incoming resources could check in and get a debrief of the incident. He also requested a detective call-out.

Deltoro and Pivey remained just outside the front door.

"Now we hurry up and wait," she said. Then, "Let's go over this call. Why did it require a code three response?"

"Because with a man being inside it could be a burglary in-progress."

"Good. When we get here and find that a man has been shot. Why didn't we look for a wallet or any kind of identification in his pockets?"

"Because nobody touches the body until the County Coroner arrives."

"Why did we bug out as soon as the house was clear?"

"To minimize contamination of the scene," Pivey said.

"I guess you have been paying attention."

"Yes. Ma'am. Since we have a little time do you mind if I look into something?"

"Like what?"

"Lucy." The male voice came from beyond the manicured hedges.

Detectives Avo Avenissian and Janice Jezak appeared from the opening in the bushes.

Deltoro noticed that Avo glanced down at the bar pinned above her left uniform pocket. It was red and had the word 'Valor' engraved in gold plated letters. She had earned it performing a rescue at the scene of a deadly train crash last year. She knew that he had also earned a medal of valor at the same incident after being shot trying to capture the suspect who caused the tragedy. All of the first responders of the incident called each other by their first names.

"So, what happened here," he asked.

Deltoro filled them in on the details then at Avo's request she led them inside the home. She remained by the door as the two Detectives looked all around the room before approaching the body.

Avo walked slowly around the seated corpse and then squatted in front of it, shining his flashlight on the face and peered into the partially open mouth. He made his way around it illuminating the ears and leaning in close. He took a step back and motioned Jezak to come forward and do her own exam.

"What do you notice right away?" he asked Jezak.

"No exit wound."

"What else?"

Jezak looked around the room again.

"No signs of a struggle. No broken windows," she said.

"What about you?" he said, directing his question to Deltoro who was surprised to be asked.

"Me? Well, I noticed there was no blood."

"No blood," Avo repeated, looking at Jezak.

"I was going to say 'no blood' but I thought it was kind of obvious," the younger Detective said.

"You're going to be handling your own cases now. If you see it, say it."

It looked to Deltoro as if Jezak was trying very hard not to roll her eyes.

"Officer Deltoro," Pivey said walking up behind her.

She was glad to be pulled away from the vibes she was feeling from Jezak.

"I need to see you out here."

"It's going to have to wait."

"That's okay, Lucy. We got It from here," Avo said.

"What is it," she asked Pivey when they both stepped outside.

"I did what you told me to always do and scanned the area as we arrived. When I did I noticed this car."

"Which car?"

"I'll show you."

He led his training officer across the street where a woman in her twenties was standing.

"I called dispatch and ran the plate and contacted the owner."

"Why?"

"It's a Tesla. Ma'am."

"Am I missing something?"

"Teslas have a built-in security camera that is always on."

"They do?"

The young girl said her name was Tam and she invited Deltoro to sit in the drivers seat. She then leaned in and activated the dashboard screen.

"It looks weird because it's infra-red. This was at one o'clock last night." the young girl said.

Deltoro watched the view from the car looking across the street at the residence in question. A Range Rover pulled into the driveway and stopped halfway up.

"That's Hank," the girl said as a man in his thirties got out of the car and went to the hatch and popped it open.

A few moments later Deltoro said, "You have got to be kidding me."

Deltoro stepped out of the car and her forehead was in full furrow for the second time that day.

"You have got to be freaking kidding me," she said again.

Tam giggled.

"It's a Hollywood prop," Deltoro said to Avo and Jezak.

Avo smirked and this time Jezak didn't mask her annoyance at Deltoro.

"What the Hell are you talking about?"

"We saw footage of the homeowner carrying it in from his car. He works for the movies. The head even fell off once," Deltoro said.

Avo motioned for Jezak to step in front of the body and then he shined his flashlight on the face again.

"Look in the mouth, at the back of the throat. Do you see that?" Avo asked Jezak.

"It looks like..."

"A serial number," Avo said.

"You knew?"

"I was waiting to see how long it would take you."

"What about the call-out?"

"I texted Sergeant Farr to cancel everyone."

EJ and Dagnasses walked in. EJ was laughing as he went up to the body and gave it a tug.

"You couldn't see that it was a fake?" Jezak asked.

"Look at it. He's even got eyelashes! And by the way I was right."
"He didn't have a pulse."

He laughed again which annoyed Jezak further. She knew that she was going to get ridiculed by the Homicide Team and although she always went along with it she hated it immensely.

"You could have told me sooner," she said to Avo.

"I was just about to when Lucy walked in and spilled the beans."

Jezak then glared at Deltoro who was herself upset about the situation. Like Jezak, she knew she would get some ribbing from the guys. And, like Jezak, she hated it.

After her shift ended Deltoro had planned to get a workout in the department gym. But, she felt exhausted and opted to go straight home.

"Did you think you were going to sneak out without seeing me?"

It was Lieutenant Lenahan, the Watch Commander for the day shift. He was standing in the hallway outside the women's locker room. He was dressed in his civilian clothes and had apparently waited for her.

"Oh my God, sir. I am so sorry! I completely forgot that you wanted to see me!"

"I'm kicking you off of my patrol team."

"Did I do something wrong?"

"Let's just say that last call was appropriate for you."

"I don't understand."

"You solved a murder."

"It was actually my trainee that figured it all out."

Lenahan grinned and held his hand out.

"Congratulations Lucy," he said.

"Sir?"

“You’ve been promoted to Provisional Detective in Homicide.”