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MICHAEL CONNELLY

DESERT STAR

Some crimes you
can't forget. Others
you can't forgive.

A RENÉE BALLARD &
HARRY BOSCH THRILLER

DESERT STAR

Also by Michael Connelly

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In memory of Philip Spitzer, who believed in Harry Bosch

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PART 1

THE LIBRARY OF LOST SOULS

1

BOSCH HAD THE pills lined up on the table ready to go. He was pouring water from the bottle into the glass when the doorbell rang. He sat at the table, thinking he would let it go. His daughter had a key and never knocked, and he wasn't expecting anyone. It had to be a solicitor or a neighbor, and he didn't know any of his neighbors anymore. The neighborhood seemed to change over every few years, and after more than three decades of it, he had stopped meeting and greeting newcomers. He actually enjoyed being the cranky old ex-cop in the neighborhood whom people were afraid to approach.

But then the second ring was accompanied by a voice calling his name. It was a voice he recognized.

"Harry, I know you're in there. Your car's out front."

He opened the drawer under the tabletop. It contained plastic utensils, napkins, and chopsticks from takeout bags. With his hand he swept the pills into the drawer and closed it. He then got up and went to the door.

Renée Ballard stood on the front step. Bosch had not seen her in almost a year. She looked thinner than he remembered. He could see where her blazer had bunched over the sidearm on her hip.

"Harry," she said.

"You cut your hair," he said.

"A while ago, yeah."

"What are you doing up here, Renée?"

She frowned as though she had expected a warmer reception. But Bosch didn't know why she would have after the way things had ended last year.

"Finbar," she said.

"What?" he said.

"You know what. Finbar McShane."

"What about him?"

"He's still out there. Somewhere. You want to try to make a case with

me, or do you want to just stand on your anger?”

“What are you talking about?”

“If you let me in, I can tell you.”

Bosch hesitated but then stepped back and held up an arm, grudgingly signaling her to enter.

Ballard walked in and stood near the table where Bosch had just been sitting.

“No music?” Ballard asked.

“Not today,” Bosch said. “So, McShane?”

She nodded, understanding that she had to get to the point.

“They put me in charge of cold cases, Harry.”

“Last I heard, the Open-Unsolved Unit was canceled. Disbanded because it wasn’t as important as putting uniforms on the street.”

“That’s true, but things change. The department is under pressure to work cold cases. You know who Jake Pearlman is, right?”

“City councilman.”

“He’s actually your councilman. His kid sister was murdered way back. It was never solved. He got elected and found out the unit was quietly disbanded and there was nobody looking at cold cases.”

“And so?”

“And so I got wind of it and went to the captain with a proposal. I move over from RHD and reconstitute the Open-Unsolved Unit—work cold cases.”

“By yourself?”

“No, that’s why I’m here. The tenth floor agreed: one sworn officer—me—and the rest of the unit composed of reserves and volunteers and contract players. I didn’t come up with the idea. Other departments have been using the same model for a few years and they’re clearing cases. It’s a good model. In fact, it was your work for San Fernando that made me think of it.”

“And so you want me on this ... squad, or whatever you’re calling it. I can’t be a reserve. I wouldn’t pass the physical. Run a mile in under ten minutes? Forget it.”

“Right, so you’d volunteer or we’d make a contract. I pulled all the murder books on the Gallagher case. Six books for four murders—more stuff than you took with you, I’m sure. You could go back to work—*officially*—on McShane.”

Bosch thought about that for a few moments. McShane had wiped out the whole Gallagher family in 2013 and buried them in the desert. But Bosch had never been able to prove it. And then he retired. He hadn’t

solved every case he'd been assigned in almost thirty years working murders. No homicide detective ever did. But this was a whole family. It was the one case he hated most to leave on the table.

"You know I didn't leave on good terms," he said. "I walked out before they could throw me out. Then I sued them. They'll never let me back in the door."

"If you want it, it's a done deal," Ballard said. "I already cleared it before I came here. It's a different captain now and different people. I have to be honest, Harry, not a lot of people there know about you. You been gone, what, five years? Six? It's a different department."

"They remember me up on ten, I bet."

The tenth floor of the Police Administration Building was where the Office of the Chief of Police and most of the department's commanders were located.

"Well, guess what, we don't even work out of the PAB," Ballard said. "We're out in Westchester at the new homicide archive. Takes a lot of the politics and prying eyes out of it."

That intrigued Bosch.

"Six books," he said, musing out loud.

"Stacked on an empty desk with your name on it," Ballard said.

Bosch had taken copies of many documents from the case with him when he retired. The chrono and all the reports he thought were most important. He had worked the case intermittently since his retirement but had to acknowledge he had gotten nowhere with it, and Finbar McShane was still out there somewhere and living free. Bosch had never found any solid evidence against him but he knew in his gut and in his soul that he was the one. He was guilty. Ballard's offer was tempting.

"So I come back and work the Gallagher Family case?" he said.

"Well, you work it, yeah," Ballard said. "But I need you to work other cases, too."

"There's always a catch."

"I need to show results. Show them how wrong they were to disband the unit. The Gallagher case is going to take some work—six books to review, no DNA or fingerprint evidence that is known. It's a shoe-leather case, and I'm fine with that, but I need to clear some cases to justify the unit and keep it going so you can work a six-book case. Will that be a problem?"

Bosch didn't answer at first. He thought about how a year earlier, Ballard had pulled the rug out on him. She had quit the department in frustration with the politics and bureaucracy, the misogyny, everything, and they had agreed to make a partnership and go private together. Then

she told him she was going back, lured by a promise from the chief of police to allow her to pick her spot. She chose the Robbery-Homicide Division downtown and that was the end of the planned partnership.

“You know, I had started looking for offices,” he said. “There was a nice two-room suite in a building behind the Hollywood Athletic Club.”

“Harry, look,” Ballard said. “I’ve apologized for how I handled that but you get part of the blame.”

“Me? That’s bullshit.”

“No, you were the one who first told me you can better effect change in an organization from the inside than from the outside. And that’s what I decided. So blame me if it makes you happy, but I actually did what you told me to do.”

Bosch shook his head. He didn’t remember telling her that but he knew it was what he felt. It was what he had told his daughter when she was considering joining the department in the wake of all the recent protests and cop hate.

“Okay, fine,” he said. “I’ll do it. Do I get a badge?”

“No badge, no gun,” Ballard said. “But you do get that desk with the six books. When can you start?”

Bosch flashed for a moment on the pills he had lined up on the table a few minutes before.

“Whenever you want me to,” he said.

“Good,” Ballard said. “See you Monday, then. They’ll have a pass for you at the front desk and then we’ll get you an ID card. They’ll have to take your photo and prints.”

“Is that desk near a window?”

Bosch smiled when he said it. Ballard didn’t.

“Don’t press your luck,” Ballard said.

2

BALLARD WAS AT her desk, writing a DNA budget proposal, when her phone buzzed. It was the officer at the front.

“I got a guy here, says he was supposed to have a pass waiting. Heron—Her—I can’t say it. Last name is Bosch.”

“Sorry, I forgot to set that up. Give him a visitor pass and send him back. He’s going to be working here, so we’ll have to make him an ID later. And it’s Hieronymus. Rhymes with *anonymous*.”

“Okay, sending him back.”

Ballard put the phone down and got up to receive Bosch at the front door of the archive, knowing that he would be annoyed with the front-desk snafu. When she got there and opened the door, Bosch was standing six feet back, looking above her head at the wall over the door. She smiled.

“What do you think?” she said. “I had them paint that.”

She stepped out into the hallway so she could turn and look up at the words above the door.

OPEN-UNSOLVED UNIT Everybody Counts or Nobody Counts

Bosch shook his head. *Everybody counts or nobody counts* was the philosophy he always brought to homicide work, but it was also his personal philosophy. It wasn’t a slogan and especially not one he liked seeing painted on a wall. It was something you felt and knew inside. Not something advertised, not something that could even be taught.

“Come on, we need something,” Ballard said. “A motto. A code. I want some esprit de corps in this unit. We are going to kick ass.”

Bosch didn’t respond.

“Let’s just go in and get you settled,” Ballard said.

She led the way around a reception counter that fronted the rows of

library shelving containing the murder books organized by year and case number. They moved down the aisle to the left of the shelves to the official work area of the reconstituted Open-Unsolved Unit. This was a collection of seven workstations connected by shared partition walls, three on each side and one at the end.

Two of the stations were occupied, the heads of the investigators just cresting the top of the privacy partitions. Ballard stopped at the cubicle at the end of the pod.

“I’m here,” she said. “And I’ve got you set up right here.”

She pointed to a cubicle that shared a partial wall with hers, and Bosch moved around to it. Ballard stepped all the way into hers and folded her arms on the partition so she could look down at his desk. She had already stacked murder books in two separate piles, one big and one small, on the work surface.

“The big pile is Gallagher—I’m sure you recognize that.”

“And this?”

Bosch was opening the top binder in the smaller two-book pile.

“That’s the catch,” Ballard said. “It’s Sarah Pearlman. I want you to start with a review of that.”

“The councilman’s sister,” Bosch said. “You didn’t already look at this?”

“I did, and it looks pretty hopeless. But I want your take on it—before I go back to the councilman with the bad news.”

Bosch nodded.

“I’ll take a look,” he said.

“Before you dive in, let me introduce you to Lilia and Thomas,” Ballard said.

Ballard stepped down to the end of the pod configuration. The last two workstations were occupied by a man and a woman who looked like they were mid to late fifties. Ballard was closest to the man and put her hand on his shoulder as she introduced him. Both gave off professional vibes. The man’s suit jacket was draped over the back of his chair. He wore a tie pulled tight at the collar. He had dark hair and a mustache and wore half glasses for the desk work. The woman had dark hair and was dark complected. She was dressed like Ballard always dressed, in a woman’s suit with a white blouse. She had an American flag pin on her lapel and Bosch wondered if that was to deflect questions about whether she was a foreigner.

“This is Thomas Laffont, who just joined us last week,” Ballard said.

“He’s FBI-retired and I’ve paired him with Lilia Aghzafi, who did twenty

years with Vegas Metro before wanting to see the ocean and retiring out here. Tom and Lilia are reviewing cases to find candidates for genetic genealogy follow-up, which you may have heard is all the rage in cold case circles.”

Bosch shook hands and nodded to the two investigators.

“This is Harry Bosch,” Ballard said. “Retired LAPD. He won’t toot his own horn, so I will. He was one of the founding members of the old cold case unit and basically has more years in homicide than anybody in the entire police department.”

Ballard then watched Bosch clumsily handle the how-ya-doin’s and small talk. He was not good at hiding his long-held distrust of the FBI. She finally rescued him and took him back to his workstation, telling Aghzafi and Laffont that she had more to go through with the “rookie” member of the squad.

Back at the other end of the pod, they moved into their workstations and Ballard once again stood and leaned over the privacy wall so she could see him while they spoke.

“Wow,” she said. “I just noticed you got rid of the porn-stache. Was that since we talked?”

She was sure it was. She would have noticed its absence up at his house. Bosch’s face reddened as his eyes darted to the other end of the pod to see if Aghzafi and Laffont had heard the comment. He then rubbed his upper lip with a thumb and forefinger as if to make sure he no longer had a mustache.

“It was turning white,” he said.

No other explanation was offered. But Ballard knew it had been turning white since before she had even met Bosch.

“I’m sure Maddie’s happy about that,” she said.

“She hasn’t seen it,” he said.

“Well, how is she doing?”

“As far as I know, fine. Working a lot.”

“I heard she was assigned to Hollywood Division out of the academy. Lucky girl.”

“Yeah, she’s over there on mid-watch. So, this genealogy stuff, how’s that work?”

It was clear to Ballard that Bosch was uncomfortable with the personal questions and was grasping at anything to change the subject.

“You’re not going to have to worry about it,” she said. “It’s good and valid, but it’s science, so it’s expensive. It’s the one place I have to pick our shots. We got a grant from the Ahmanson Foundation, which donated

this whole place, but a full genetic rundown costs about eighteen grand if we go outside the department. So we have to pick and choose wisely. I have Tom and Lilia on that, and another investigator you'll probably meet tomorrow. We have carte blanche on regular DNA analysis because it's all in-house now. With those, we just have to get in line and wait. I also get one move-to-the-front-of-the-line card I can play each month. The chief gave me that. He also gave us a lab tech specifically assigned to work with our unit's cases."

"Nice of him."

"Yeah, but let's get back to your orientation. What I'm requiring of our reserves and volunteers is that they give me at least one day a week. Most of them are doing more than that but I stagger them so that we have at least one body in here Monday to Thursday. I'm here full-time and I have Tom and Lilia come on Monday, Paul Masser and Colleen Hatteras on Tuesday, Lou Rawls on Wednesday, and now you ... I would say Thursday, but I know you'll be here much more than that. Most of these guys are as well."

"Lou Rawls—really?"

"No. And he's not even Black. His name is Ted Rawls, and after he'd spent ten years as a cop, it would have been impossible not to come out of that with the obvious nickname. So some people still call him Lou and he seems to like it."

Bosch nodded.

"You should know, though," Ballard said, leaning forward and lowering her voice so it just barely made it over the privacy wall. "Rawls wasn't my pick."

Bosch rolled his chair in closer to his desk to hear better and complete the confidentiality huddle.

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"We have more applications than we have seats in the pod," Ballard said. "The chief gave me the go-ahead to pick who I want and that's what I've done, but Lou Rawls was a Pearlman pick."

"The councilman."

"He's very proprietary about this, he and his chief of staff. It's about his sister but it's also about politics. He's got higher aspirations than city council, and the success of this unit can help. So he put Rawls in and I had to take him."

"I've never heard of him and I think I would have with a name like that. He's not LAPD, right?"

"No, he's retired Santa Monica, but that was fifteen years ago, so he doesn't bring a lot to the table. A lot of hand-holding required, and the

thing of it is, he's a direct pipeline to Pearlman and Hastings."

"Hastings?"

"Nelson Hastings, Pearlman's chief of staff. The three of them are like best buds or something. Rawls quit Santa Monica PD after ten years to go into business. So to him this is just a side gig."

"What's the business? Is he a PI?"

"No, it's a business business. He owns a bunch of those mail-drop places. Like UPS, FedEx, box-and-packaging stores. Apparently he's got them all over the city and does pretty well. He drives a fancy car and has a house in Santa Monica in the college streets. And my guess is he's one of Pearlman's main campaign supporters."

Bosch nodded. He got the picture. A quid pro quo. Ballard leaned back and sat down after realizing that their whispering had been noticed by Laffont and Aghzafi. She could still see Bosch's eyes over the partition. She continued in a regular tone.

"You'll meet Paul and Colleen tomorrow," she said. "They're solid. Masser is a retired deputy D.A. who worked in Major Crimes, so he's helpful on the search warrants and legal questions and strategies. It's good to have him in-house instead of needing to call the D.A.'s Office every time we have a question."

"I think I remember him," Bosch said. "And Hatteras?"

"No law enforcement experience. She's our in-house genealogist and what they call a 'citizen sleuth.'"

"An amateur. For real?"

"For real. She's a great internet researcher, and that's where it's at with the genetic stuff. IGG—you know what that is, don't you?"

"Uh ..."

"Investigative genetic genealogy. You upload your suspect's DNA to GEDmatch, which accesses a number of databases, and you sit back and wait for a hit. You must know about this. It was trending big time in cold case investigations until the privacy police arrived, and now it's a limited resource but still worth pursuing."

"How they caught the Golden State Killer, right?"

"Exactly. You put in the DNA, and if you're lucky, you get connections to relatives. A fourth cousin here, a brother nobody knew about there. Then it becomes social engineering. Making contact online, building a family tree with the hope that one branch leads to your guy."

"And you have a private citizen doing this."

"She's an expert, Harry. Just give her a chance. I like her and I think she's going to work out for us."

She could see full skepticism in Bosch's eyes as he looked away from her.

"What?"

"Is this all going to end up in a podcast? Or are we going to make cases?"

Ballard shook her head. She knew he would act this way.

"You'll see, Harry," Ballard said. "You don't have to work with her but I'm betting you will want to eventually. That's how sure I am. Okay?"

"Okay," Bosch said. "I'm not trying to cause trouble. I'm just happy to be here. You're the boss and I never question the boss."

"Yeah, right. That'll be the day."

Bosch looked around the room and the pod.

"So, I'm the last guy in," he said.

"But the first I wanted," Ballard said. "I just needed to have everything in place before I visited you."

"And you had to make sure I was cleared."

"Well, that, too."

Bosch nodded.

"So, where's somebody get a cup of coffee around here?" he asked.

"There's a kitchen with coffee and a fridge," Ballard said. "You go out through—"

"I'll take him," Laffont said. "I need a jolt myself."

"Thanks, Tom," Ballard said.

Laffont stood up and asked if anyone else wanted coffee. Ballard and Aghzafi declined, and Bosch followed Laffont to the front of the archive room.

Ballard watched them go, hoping Bosch would play nice with the former FBI agent and not cause a clash on his first day on the job.