

A ROBERT HUNTER THRILLER

# CHRIS CARTER

FIRST  
HE  
TAKES  
YOU

THEN  
HE  
BREAKS  
YOU

THE DEATH  
WATCHER

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**CHRIS  
CARTER**

**THE  
DEATH  
WATCHER**



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# Dedication

I would like to dedicate this novel to all the readers out there who for the past fifteen years have shown me the most incredible support and love. I have been privileged enough to have met so many of you throughout my career, and I'm always humbled by how amazing, kind and patient you all are.

You are the reason I do what I do. You are the reason I'm still here. From the bottom of my heart, thank you all so much for keeping me and my dream alive.

See you on a book tour sometime soon.

This story was inspired by real events

# One

Consciousness returned to Shaun Daniels in unsteady waves. First came a heavy flutter of the eyelids, quickly followed by a desperate, gasping breath. The little air that he managed to breathe in felt musty, leaden, with an odd mixture of smells he couldn't quite identify. He swallowed the few drops of saliva that his glands were able to produce, but as he did he felt his throat scrape and burn, as if he had gulped at a bowl of crushed chili, garnished with broken glass. The pain made him wince and hold his breath for a couple of seconds. His eyes, lost and out of focus, instinctively moved left then right.

Nothing.

Shaun could see nothing other than darkness.

'What the hell?' The words dripped out of his dried lips in a slumber, his eyelids feeling too tired to blink fully open. *Have I passed out again after another heavy night of drinking?*

The thought didn't surprise him and the headache that had just exploded inside his skull surely did feel like the mother of all hangovers.

'Urgh,' he grunted, as he took another lungful of stale air. He tried to swallow some more saliva, but instead he ended up coughing, which triggered the burning pain in his throat to join forces with his headache, making his whole face throb.

'Fuck,' Shaun whispered, as he exhaled another drowsy breath. 'What the hell did I drink last night... gasoline?'

It was then that he realized he was lying flat on his back, against some not-very-comfortable surface. This certainly wasn't his bed.

*Where the fuck am I? The kitchen floor?* The thought came with another tired breath. *I guess I better get up. I don't even know what time it is.*

But as Shaun tried to move, nothing happened.

'What the fuck?'

He tried moving again.

Absolutely nothing – his toes, his feet, his legs, his arms, his hands, his fingers, his neck... nothing moved.

‘What the hell is going on?’

That was when Shaun heard an odd sound coming from somewhere to his right. It sounded like someone shifting their weight on a chair.

Shaun’s eyes immediately moved in that direction, but there was nothing for him to see.

‘Hello? Who’s there?’ he tried calling out, but his throat was too dry... his vocal cords too weak to produce any sounds louder than a whisper. Still, he carried on. ‘Please, can you help me? I can’t move.’

Shaun got no reply.

‘Hello?’ he tried again. ‘Is anyone there?’

Silence.

*What the fuck is happening? Is this a dream? Why can’t I move?*

Shaun squeezed his eyes shut as tight as he could before blinking them open again. It didn’t feel like a dream. Everything was still there – the darkness, the throbbing headache, the burning throat, the stale air... and he still couldn’t move. He felt desperation quickly settling in.

‘Good. You’re awake.’

The flat and smoky male voice Shaun heard came from his right.

He tried as hard as he could to turn his head in that direction, but his neck muscles simply didn’t respond. His eyes, on the other hand, moved as far right as they possibly could.

‘Who’s there?’ Shaun asked, his words sounding strangled. ‘Can you help me, please? I’m not sure what happened, but I can’t move.’

‘Yes. I know,’ the man calmly replied, as he flicked on the light switch.

Directly above Shaun, a light bulb inside a heavy-duty metal mesh box flickered a couple of times before engaging, bathing the room in so much brightness, it burned at Shaun’s retinas. Instinctively, he once again squeezed his eyes shut, but since the back of his head was flat against whatever uncomfortable surface he was lying on and he couldn’t move his neck, he had no real way of escaping the bright glare that hit him like a sucker



punch. Despite having his eyes shut, the light was still strong enough to travel past his eyelids and through the optical nerve to collide with his already unbearable headache. Right then, his brain felt as if it were about to melt.

‘Urgh,’ he moaned, his breath catching on his throat. ‘That’s so goddamn bright.’

‘Give it a minute,’ the man said, his tone placid. ‘Your eyes will get used to it.’

‘What’s going on?’ Shaun asked, his tone gaining a desperate edge. ‘Where am I? Why can’t I move? Who are you?’

‘You’re in my OR,’ the man replied. ‘On my operating table.’

‘Operating table?’ Shaun shot back, his eyes blinking open for a split second before he squinted, the light still too strong for him to be able to fully open them. ‘This is a hospital? Was I in some sort of...’ his voice croaked at the implications ‘...accident? Oh God, what happened? Please tell me that I’m not paralyzed... please.’

The man paused, as if pondering what to say. He decided to go with a question instead of an answer. ‘What’s the last thing you remember, Mr. Daniels?’

Shaun heard the man’s footsteps go around him to the other side.

‘Umm...’ He tried to think, but his headache seemed to have built a fortress around his memory. ‘I... I can’t really recall. My head is pounding so much it feels like it’s going to blow.’

‘Take your time,’ the man said, his voice now coming from Shaun’s left. ‘You’ve been sedated. The headache, the dried throat, the numbness, the blurred memory... it’s all quite normal.’

Right then, Shaun heard a new sound, something like metal clunking against metal. He breathed out and blinked again, his eyes finally calming into the brightness enough for him to be able to semi-open them. As soon as he did, they immediately moved from right to left, trying to take in as much as he could.

Due to his inability to turn his neck and the position of his head – its back lying flat against the operating table – Shaun wasn’t able to see much.

The ceiling was painted all in white. The walls were tiled, also in white, and, from what Shaun could see, they looked to be squeaky clean. The smells that he couldn’t quite identify earlier began making a little more sense then – cleaning agents, antiseptics, disinfectants... the typical odd combination of scents that usually came with every hospital.



‘Umm...’ Shaun closed his eyes and tried pushing his memory again. The headache was proving to be a very worthy opponent. ‘My head is a mess... and it hurts like hell. Could I maybe get something for the pain?’

‘That wouldn’t be a good idea,’ the man replied. ‘Painkillers don’t work well with the sedative you were given. Please, just try your best.’

*What do you think I’m doing?* Shaun thought, his eyes shooting left. *Singing ‘Mambo Number 5’ in my head? I’m doing what I can here, buddy.* He took a deep breath and fought through the headache until flashes of something began coming back to him, but they didn’t amount to much.

‘My memory is as hazy as a meth hooker,’ he said, once again blinking against the bright light. ‘But I... kind of remember going down to my local bar for a couple of drinks.’

‘Where’s that?’ the man asked. ‘Do you remember the name of the bar? Do you remember where you live?’

Shaun hesitated for a quick moment, his memory misfiring like an old engine.

‘Umm... I live in South LA.’

The man waited but Shaun offered nothing else.

‘Can you be a little more specific?’ the man pushed. ‘Can you remember the neighborhood in South LA you live in?’

A single-second pause.

‘Yeah,’ Shaun replied, as things finally started taking shape inside his head. ‘I live in Lomita – at the corner of Eshelman Avenue and 250th Street.’

‘That’s very good, Mr. Daniels,’ the man said, finally stepping close enough for Shaun to be able to see him for the first time.

The man towered over the operating table, but from a lying-down position and with the light shining down straight into his eyes, it was impossible for Shaun to even guess how tall he really was. The man’s hair, if he had any, was completely tucked under a teal-colored scrub cap. His nose, mouth and chin were also hidden behind a standard-issue surgical mask. All Shaun could really see were the man’s eyes – dark and deep-set behind a pair of operating goggles.

‘Anything else you can remember?’

Shaun pushed his memory a little more.

‘Umm... I think that I was having a chat with someone. But I can’t remember who.’

‘In the bar?’

‘I think so, yes.’

‘Good. Can you remember anything else?’

Shaun tried, but his memory was just a puddle of mud.

‘No, nothing,’ he replied, his eyes filling up with tears. ‘Please tell me, what happened to me? How come I’m here? How come I can’t move? How come I can barely remember anything?’

The man stepped back from the operating table, disappearing from Shaun’s line of sight for a quick moment.

‘That’s totally fine, Mr. Daniels. No need to worry. To be completely honest, memories can’t exactly be trusted, did you know that? Especially the ones that are formed directly following a traumatic event. They warp, they shatter, and then, as we try to recollect, memories are put back together in ways that look nothing like the original. And that’s when the problems really start. People put so much faith in what they supposedly remember, thinking of it as a verbatim record of what happened. But that’s rarely the case. Where there are gaps in our memories, the brain takes a best guess, filling those gaps with whatever it thinks fits. Important details that can’t be remembered get substituted by imagination. Can you see how problematic that can get?’

Shaun didn’t know that.

‘Too many people take memories as fact,’ the man continued. ‘But they simply don’t work like that. They are more a perception of what happened than actual reality.’

‘So...’ Shaun hesitated, tears gathering at his lower eyelids. ‘Are you telling me that I might never remember what happened to me?’

‘No, not at all. That much I can tell you. You went drinking at your local bar, Mr. Daniels, and while doing so, you ran into some trouble.’

Once again, Shaun heard what sounded like metal clunking against metal. Not a heavy sound – more like instruments being placed on a metal tray.

‘Trouble?’ Shaun queried, his tone hesitant and worried in equal measure. ‘What do you mean? What sort of trouble?’ A tear ran down the side of his face.

The man stepped back into Shaun’s line of sight. This time, he brought an instruments cart with him.

‘You were chatting to someone at the bar, Mr. Daniels,’ he replied. ‘And that someone was trouble.’

‘What?’ Shaun asked, yet again squinting at the harsh light, trying hard to remember.

Had he been in a fight? Had he been stabbed... or shot? Did this someone who he was chatting to at the bar somehow damage his spine? Was this why he couldn’t move? Was that what the doctor was trying to tell him.

Among all those questions, a new thought rushed to the top of the pile, bothering Shaun. He tried to focus on the man’s face.

‘I don’t understand. How do you know that the person who I was talking to at the bar was trouble?’

The man chuckled, holding the suspense for a couple of extra seconds. ‘Because that man was me.’

Shaun frowned at him. ‘What?’

The man reached for something on the instruments tray to his right. ‘I have a question for you... *Shaun.*’

The change in how the man addressed Shaun had clearly been deliberate. From the instruments tray, he retrieved a small hammer and something that looked like a chisel with a thick, round end, instead of a pointy one.

‘For breaking bones,’ the man asked, ‘do you think this sort of chisel will do, or should I go for something a little heavier... perhaps sharper?’

‘*What?*’ Shaun’s eyes moved to the hammer and chisel for a second before refocusing on the man’s face.

‘I don’t want to break skin,’ the man explained. ‘I want to fracture the bone, but I don’t want to make any cuts to the skin or flesh.’ He shrugged. ‘Hematomas and bruises are fine, obviously. It’s hard to break bones without any bruising, right?’

Shaun’s heart stuttered. ‘I... I don’t understand.’

‘Oh, sorry,’ the man said, placing both the hammer and the chisel back on the instruments tray. ‘Please allow me to clarify. Back at the bar, last night, I spiked your drink.’

This time, Shaun simply squinted at him, trying to figure out if he was joking or not.

‘It was about a quarter past eleven,’ the man continued. ‘That was when you told me that you had to go. I offered to buy us one more round – for the road, you know? I knew

that you wouldn't say no to another whiskey, so, while you went for a piss, I drugged your drink.'

'Is... this a joke?'

The man broadly gestured to the room they were in. 'Clearly not.'

Shaun blinked and a new tear ran down the side of his face.

'I've done the "drink spiking" thing quite a few times before,' the man carried on. 'And I can say that I've got my technique and timings down to perfection. We had already finished our drinks and were just exiting the bar when the drug started to take effect. By the time it rendered you unconscious, we were right by your car. No witnesses. Getting you inside was a piece of cake.'

'I... I don't understand.' Fear had clearly taken over Shaun's tone of voice. 'Why? Why are you doing this?'

'The short answer?' the man replied. 'Because I'm going to hurt you, Shaun. A lot.' There was no play in his voice.

Shaun tried moving again, but no muscle in his body responded.

'And this is the great thing about the state you are in, Shaun,' the man explained. 'No matter what I do to you – shatter bones, rip your toenails out, crush one of your testicles, whatever... you won't feel a thing.' There was a deliberate pause. 'For now... but the neuromuscular blocking agent that I've administered, which has paralyzed you from the neck down, will wear off in...' The man checked his watch. 'About an hour and fifteen minutes. Then, the pain *will* come... mild at first, as your nervous system slowly regains its sensibility. It will probably start with muscle aches, which will gradually turn into spasms. Then, your joints will feel like they've been ripped out and replaced with shards of broken glass.'

Shaun's petrified eyes were on the man, who was once again towering over the operating table.

'Next...' The man clearly wasn't done. 'Your stomach will fill with bile and you're going to vomit. There's nothing you can do about that, but vomiting will feel like someone is ramming a burning fist down your esophagus, scorching and tearing at its walls, sending blood dripping down the back of your throat, which will choke and gag you, making you feel like you're drowning. The more your nervous system awakens, the more pain signals it will send to your brain... the more pain signals your brain receives, the

more you'll vomit because the pain will be unbearable, I'll make sure of that. But in your case, I've got a real cool surprise for the grand finale.'

Shaun felt as if the air around him had become heavier... harder to breathe.

The man once again reached for the hammer and chisel on the instruments cart. Even though his nose and mouth were covered by his surgical mask, Shaun could tell that he had a smile on his face.

'I'm sure that you've realized this by now,' the man said. 'But you're not really in a hospital. And I'm not really a doctor, but I'll do my best.' He turned and consulted a piece of paper on the instruments cart. 'OK, shall we start?'

'Please...' Shaun begged, his voice strangled by tears. 'Whatever you're thinking about doing... please don't. I don't have much money, but you can have whatever I've got. Please don't do this. Please... just let me go.'

'Shhhhh,' the man breathed out, as he placed the chisel against Shaun's right thigh and lifted the hammer high in the air. 'Don't close your eyes.' He nodded. 'Watch this.'

# Two

## Thirty-two days later

Located on the fifth level of the famous Police Administration Building in Downtown LA, the LAPD's Ultra Violent Crimes Unit's office sat at the far end of the Robbery Homicide Division's floor. Even though it was named a 'unit', Ultra Violent Crimes was composed of only two detectives: Robert Hunter – the head of the unit – and his partner, Carlos Garcia. They were both just about to exit their office when Barbara Blake, the division's captain, appeared at their door.

'Going somewhere?' she asked. Her long jet-black hair was elegantly styled into a bun, pinned in place by a pair of metal chopsticks. She wore a silky white blouse, tucked into a well-cut, navy-blue pencil skirt. Her flat-heel shoes were black and shiny, with a silver detail at their tip.

'Just about to go grab some lunch,' Garcia replied, instinctively checking his watch. It was a quarter past two in the afternoon. 'Why, Captain? What's up?' he asked, quickly noticing the yellow folder that Captain Blake had with her. Usually, investigations assigned to the UVC Unit came either in a black or dark-gray folder.

'I wanted you two to have a quick look at something for me,' the captain replied, stepping into the office and closing the door behind her.

'Sure,' Hunter said, standing up to meet her. 'What is it?'

'It's an autopsy report,' Captain Blake explained, handing a copy of the report to each detective.

'Linked to which case?' Hunter asked.

'At the moment, to a traffic incident,' the captain replied.

Hunter and Garcia both frowned at her.

‘About forty-five minutes ago,’ Captain Blake clarified, ‘I got a call from Dr. Hove. She had just finished a post-mortem examination on a Shaun Daniels, forty-six years old and a resident in Lomita. His body was found by the side of Lake Hughes Road in the Sierra Pelona Mountains, victim of an apparent hit-and-run.’

‘A hit-and-run?’ Garcia asked, flipping open the report. Hunter did the same.

‘An *apparent* hit-and-run.’ Captain Blake re-emphasized the word as she nodded at the files in their hands. ‘Just have a look at it and tell me what you think.’

‘Well,’ Garcia said, even before he started reading the file. ‘If the LA County Chief Medical Examiner called the LAPD Robbery Homicide Division’s captain with an *apparent* hit-and-run, something clearly didn’t sit right with her at the autopsy.’

Captain Blake lifted her hands in a surrender gesture. ‘Like I’ve said – have a look at it and let me know what you think.’ She pulled a chair in front of Hunter’s desk and took a seat.

Garcia’s eyes widened at her. ‘What, like right now?’

Silence.

‘But lunch...’

Captain Blake sat back on her chair, crossed one leg over the other, and calmly rested her hands on her knees before glaring back at Garcia.

‘...can clearly wait.’ He finished his sentence, leaning back against the edge of his desk. His tone carried no enthusiasm.

Hunter had already begun reading the file, which started with an occurrence sheet from the LAPD Valley Traffic Division.

The body had been discovered four days ago, in the early hours of the morning, by Marcus Stamford and his son Julian as they drove up Lake Hughes Road in the direction of their favorite fishing spot in the Castaic Lake. At around 5:10 a.m., about 150 yards past the entrance to the community church, heading north, both father and son spotted what looked to be a body by the side of the road – one that didn’t look like an animal. Concerned, Mr. Stamford stopped the car and went to check. That was when he discovered the lifeless body of an adult male, who looked to have been run over by a vehicle. Mr. Stamford then proceeded to call 911.

The LA County Sheriff’s Department was first at the scene, quickly followed by an ambulance and Detective William Sharp, from the LAPD Valley Traffic Division.



Hunter flipped a page on the report and studied the scene photographs. There were twenty-six in total. The first eight were of the body in full, taken from various angles. The next twelve were close-up shots, detailing the severity of the injuries that the body had sustained. There was an exposed fracture to the right wrist and one to the right tibia, where the bone had even protruded through the fabric of his black trousers. His left shoulder and clavicle were visibly dislocated and broken, and there were lacerations to his face, head, arms, legs and hands, with the skin having been scraped at places.

The final six photographs showed the road, mainly concentrating on the tire skid marks that were clearly visible against the asphalt. There were four of them, with all four showing just as prominently. That, together with the gap between the front and the rear skid marks, indicated that the vehicle that had hit Shaun Daniels had almost certainly been a four-wheel-drive pickup truck. One of the photographs showed measurements done against the skid marks – the ones created by the front wheels were both around four and a half feet long, the rear ones just a couple of inches shorter.

According to Detective Sharp, the position and the distance of the body in relation to the skid marks was consistent with a hit-and-run accident where the victim was struck by a vehicle traveling at a speed somewhere between forty and fifty miles per hour. The brakes seemed to have been initiated just a fraction of a second before the fatal collision, indicating that the vehicle's driver did not see the pedestrian until it was way too late. Upon impact, the victim was thrown over the vehicle's hood, made contact with the windshield and was projected forward and to the right, landing back on the road.

'My first question here is,' Garcia said, flipping back and forth on the report for an instant. 'What was the victim doing up in the mountains at that time in the morning?'

'Fishing, maybe?' Captain Blake speculated. 'Hiking?'

'You would've thought so, right?' Garcia came back. 'But there's no mention, or photos, of anything else found by the side of the road – no backpack, no bag, no cases, no fishing rod... nothing.' He shrugged. 'Yes, there are quite a few fishing spots around where the body was found – near the picnic area. But even if he was there hiking, fishing, or having a lonely picnic in the dark, what was he doing crossing the road all the way at the top? What I mean is – the picnic areas and the fishing spots are well away from Lake Hughes Road.'

'Good question,' Captain Blake agreed.

‘His station wagon was found parked down a dirt road, not that far from where the body was found,’ Hunter said, reading from the report. ‘It doesn’t say anything about a picnic basket, a bag, a backpack, a fishing rod... nothing.’

‘Was his cellphone found?’ Garcia queried.

Hunter flipped back and forth on the report for a moment. ‘There’s no mention of it, so probably not.’

‘So the theory here would be what?’ Garcia asked. ‘He drives up there, parks his car, goes for a stroll and gets hit by a truck, which then flees the scene?’ His eyebrows arched at Captain Blake.

‘Suicide?’ she asked, but her tone carried no conviction.

‘No.’ Garcia shook his head, a gesture that was reciprocated by Hunter. ‘He lived in Lomita, Captain. If the plan had been to kill himself by stepping in front of oncoming traffic, then why drive all the way to a quiet road up in the Sierra Pelona Mountains, when he had the super-busy Pacific Coast Highway right at his doorstep. This wasn’t suicide; if it was, it wasn’t a planned one, that’s for sure.’

Captain Blake agreed with a nod. ‘I just wanted to make sure that we had covered as many possibilities as we could—’

‘Before suggesting murder,’ Hunter said, anticipating where the captain was going.

The captain angled her head slightly left, as her perfectly drawn eyebrows arched at her detectives. ‘Please, read on.’

Hunter and Garcia both moved on to the autopsy report. In it, Dr. Hove had confirmed that most of the injuries to the body, especially the exposed fractures to the right wrist and lower right leg, were consistent with a pedestrian being struck by a moving vehicle at speed.

Hunter paused for a moment and quickly went back to the photos of the body in full. One of them had been taken from a distance, where the body and all four skid marks were visible. Something in that image got the gears in his brain turning just a little faster, but his thought process was quickly interrupted by Garcia, who had jumped straight to the final page of the report to check on the cause of death.

‘What? Is this right?’

His eyes shot to Captain Blake.

‘COD?’ she asked.

Garcia nodded.

‘Dr. Hove was one hundred percent certain,’ the captain confirmed.

Hunter flipped over to the last page and paused. ‘*Hypothermia?*’ Doubt coated the word as it came out of his lips. ‘Are you telling me that this guy froze to death?’

‘Not me,’ Captain Blake replied. ‘The report is.’

‘In California?’ Garcia asked. ‘In June? It’s about seventy-three degrees outside.’

The captain saw a sparkle light up in Hunter’s eyes. He looked over at his partner.

Garcia knew that look well enough. He gave Hunter a shrug. ‘I’m a sucker for a mystery, you know that.’

Without saying a word, Captain Blake stood up and left the UVC Unit’s office.

She didn’t collect the files.

## Three

Seconds after Captain Blake had left their office, Hunter called the Chief Medical Examiner for the LA County – Dr. Carolyn Hove. At the time of the call, Dr. Hove was just about to start a new post-mortem examination, but she explained that she would be free to talk in about an hour's time, so straight after lunch, Hunter and Garcia took a quick trip to the Department of Medical Examiner-Coroner in North Mission Road.

After making their way up the lavish steps that led to the main entrance of the impressive old hospital-turned-morgue, they entered the lobby and approached the reception counter. The attendant, a kind-faced, African American woman in her mid-fifties, greeted them with a very well-rehearsed, courteous smile.

‘Good afternoon, Detectives.’

‘Good afternoon, Sandra,’ Hunter and Garcia replied at the same time, both of them returning the smile.

Sandra had been with the Department of Medical Examiner for over thirteen years.

‘How are you doing today?’ Hunter asked.

‘I’m OK, thank you.’

Hunter knew that the question wouldn’t be returned. None of the department receptionists ever asked anyone entering the morgue how *they* were doing, regardless of who they were.

‘Here to see Dr. Hove?’ Sandra asked, already checking her computer screen.

‘That’s right,’ Hunter replied, quickly consulting his watch. ‘She told us that she’d probably be free around this time.’

Sandra gave both detectives a renewed smile. ‘Perfect timing. She just finished an autopsy about five minutes ago. I’ll buzz her for you.’

Hunter and Garcia waited while Sandra had a quick ten-second conversation on the phone.

‘Dr. Hove will meet you in Autopsy Theater Four,’ she said, as she instinctively indicated the double swinging doors to the right of the reception counter.

Hunter and Garcia thanked her, pushed through the doors and carried on down the long, squeaky-clean, white corridor. At the end of it, they turned right into a shorter corridor, where two empty gurneys were pushed up against the left wall.

Hunter pretended to be scratching his nose, but what he was really doing was cupping his hand over it, as the smell of those corridors got to him every time. It was like a smell with a hidden punch – and that hidden punch packed some serious power. Hunter didn’t mind it at first, many years ago, but the more he visited the morgue, the more he noticed it... and the more he noticed it, the more it bothered him because, no matter what, that smell could only be associated with one thing – death.

As they walked past the gurneys, they turned right again. Autopsy Theater Four was the first set of double doors on the right. Hunter pushed them open and he and Garcia stepped inside a room that was chilled to a few degrees below comfortable. This was a small autopsy theater when compared to theaters one, two and three, with only one stainless-steel examination table that sprang out of a long counter that ran along the east wall. On the ceiling, directly above the examination table, there was a large, circular, surgical light, which was already turned on, bathing the room in warm brightness. The west wall was completely made of cold metal storage crypts, which looked more like large filing cabinets with bulky handles than anything else. The interesting fact was that the strong smell from the corridors was a little less intrusive inside the autopsy theater.

Tall and slim, with penetrating green eyes and in her traditional long, white lab overcoat, Dr. Hove stood at the other side of the empty examination table. Her long chestnut hair was rolled up into a simple bun at the top of her head.

‘Robert, Carlos.’ She greeted each detective with a subtle nod. ‘I’m guessing you’re here about the file I sent Barbara early today, right? Male victim, found up in the Sierra Pelona Mountains?’

‘You knew that Captain Blake would come to us with that file, didn’t you, Doc?’ Garcia asked, a quirky smile on his lips.

Dr. Hove replied with an eyebrow-lift. ‘I admit that this victim doesn’t exactly fall under the category of ultra-violent crimes, but it’s certainly a very intriguing case, and I