

He'd been branded like a steer. Los Angeles Police Detective Verity Thrett leaned in to examine the wound. She held her breath out of force of habit although she'd daubed her nostrils with Vaporub.

Under the raw festering mess, the injury on the man's upper left buttock had a discernible shape--oval, maybe three by two inches big, with a horizontal line across the center. Curious. She snapped a picture of it with her phone.

Hector, the coroner's tech, pointed to a red streak like a comet trail on the man's hip before replacing the bandage. "Looks like the wound went septic," he said.

Verity ran her eyes over the full length of the body: male, white, twenty-five to thirty-five years old. Dressed in a fashionable shirt and jeans, polished loafers. Definitely not the homeless transient that she'd expected when she'd received the callout of city sanitation workers finding a stiff on an abandoned couch in a West Los Angeles alley.

His eyes bulged in a shocked stare, the whites firm and round as hard-boiled eggs. Death had pounced on this guy like a highway robber.

"So sepsis could be the cause of death," she said.

"We'll find out. There's also this." Hector rucked up the man's shirt to expose his back covered with red polka dots amid the purpled lividity. Some had scabbed over.

"Those look like burn marks. Cigarettes," she said.

"And this." Hector hiked up the legs of the guy's jeans. His sockless ankles were encircled with bracelets of bruises. "Maybe a week old."

"Wrists?"

Hector picked up the arms. They displayed the same pattern of contusions.

He'd been tied up, branded, burned. Tortured. But he'd been walking around for a while with the wounds.

"ID?"

"He's a John Doe. No wallet or phone on him," Hector said.

It was a complicating factor, but this was a guy who would be missed sooner rather than later. His identity would turn up.

"Time of death?"

"Six to eight hours ago, give or take. He was likely running a fever when he died, which makes body temp a little hard to gauge. He died here on the couch. No visible signs of drug use."

"Detective Thrett?"

She wheeled toward the baritone voice that boomed behind her. Cheap mud-colored suit, lightly salted hazelnut hair combed back. Cop. He stuck out his hand. She shook it warily. Who the hell was this?

“Finbar McNab, Fin. Transferring to West LA with the new DP today. The LT asked me to come over and assist. I’ve been a murder cop for the past seven years. Newton.”

Verity knew he’d added the last part to emphasize his bonafides. Newton Division had a handful of homicides per month as compared to West LA’s handful of homicides per year, if that. The implicit putdown scraped her.

“It’s under control,” she said. “No assistance needed. It’ll be up to the slice and dice to determine if there’s anything to investigate.”

The lieutenant had mentioned they were getting a new guy at the previous week’s squad meeting. She’d also said he’d be a floater, that Verity, as the major crimes detective in the bureau, could assign him where needed.

And that wasn’t here.

McNab craned his neck to take in a vertical view of the victim’s back as the coroner’s techs lugged it onto a gurney and into the waiting body bag. “Those wounds don’t look like an accident or natural causes.”

She returned his quizzical look with a flint-edged stare. “Suspicious death.” She squeezed out a smile to punctuate the conversation with a period and shifted her gaze to the row of stores that backed onto the alley.

The sun’s first rays washed the landscape of low-rise urban sprawl with pale clarity. She normally reveled in the sliver of dawn that impregnated the new day with possibility, but she now felt intruded upon by this newcomer.

“TOD?” he said.

“It’ll be in my report,” she snapped then regretted her tone. The lieutenant had probably dispatched him to the scene to give him something to do. She’d give him something else back at the station.

She had a stack of cases that she hadn’t had time to do much work on since her partner had died. She relented. “Between eight and ten last night.”

Verity looked back at row of businesses. The Pen & Ink Café was the only business with a light on in its rear window. She could use coffee. She’d skipped that crucial step when she’d bolted out of bed in pre-dawn darkness.

She turned to two uniforms standing around bullshitting. “Let’s get a strip search going. One of you at the east end of the alley, the other at the west. We’re looking for a wallet, cell phone, keys, drug paraphernalia. Check the couch.”

The officers shifted to opposite ends of the alley and started trudging back and forth across its breadth, sweeping the ground with their eyes, sifting through tufts of weeds growing along the fence, checking the Dumpsters.

“I’m going to the coffee shop,” Verity said.

“I’ll play Tonto,” McNab said.

“You know *tonto* means dumbass in Spanish?”

“I said I’ll play Tonto, not that I am *tonto*.”

So he was asshole who thought he was a smartass.