

CHAPTER FOUR

A Whore's Panties

Beefy slowed the Crown Victoria to fifty as he made the wide, sweeping turn from I-210 onto Interstate 15, heading up into the foothills of the Sierras towards the town of Victorville. A few miles north of Victorville was their destination, the Adelanto Detention Facility, a USCIS administered prison complex run by Immigration and Customs Enforcement officers. Leafy and Beefy had visited Adelanto on a couple of prior occasions, and on a light traffic day such as today, the journey from downtown LA could be made in as little as ninety minutes.

It was nine in the morning on the third day of the N. Emma Johnson case, and things seemed to be shaping up quite nicely. The AK-47 had been recovered from the storm drain and was undergoing examination at the forensics lab. The same scrutiny was being applied to the Dodge Charger BADASS 39. Leafy, Beefy and a team of other officers had scoured Rosita's Long Beach home and surrounding property, but apart from finding an illegal handgun in each room of the sixteen-room house, the place had been spic and span and devoid of any other illegal items. Two laptop computers, an Android tablet and four cell phones had been seized and duly dispatched to the Digital Forensics Unit. Armand Hammer had just called Beefy to let him know that those items would receive priority treatment and an examination report would be ready by the end of the day.

An interview with their only suspect, Jesús Malverde, had been booked for ten o'clock this morning and with about forty-five miles still left of their journey, that timeline was easily attainable. For once, both detectives were well rested and had a solid plan of attack in place, and the higher they climbed into the mountains the cooler and clearer the air became. Despite the grimness of their destination and the fact that they would soon be in close proximity to a truly evil human being, it felt good to escape the stiflingly hot streets of Los Angeles, if only for a few hours.

Beefy set the cruise control to fifty-four miles per hour and lifted his foot from the gas pedal. The two had been largely silent on this trip; a comfortable, contemplative silence that merely indicated that neither man had anything much to say. Eventually, Leafy chose to break that silence.

"I don't *get* dancing."

"Dancing?"

"Yeah, dancing. I just don't get it."

"What's not to get about dancing? You move your body to the rhythm of the music. That's all there is to it. What don't you get about that?"

"It's the whole concept. I mean, where did people ever come up with the idea of dancing? I would never have come up with the idea of dancing on my own. It serves no real purpose. It doesn't provide humans with any evolutionary advantage in the fight for survival. If anything, it's an impediment to survival. It's like, while you and your tribe are strutting your stuff outside the communal cave, the bad-guy tribe from across the mountain sneaks up and rapes the men and pillages the women. And have you ever really watched people when they're dancing? It's a ridiculous way to pass the time. People look silly when they dance. I look silly when I dance. Even top-notch professional dancers look silly when they dance. Am I the only one who sees it like this?"

"Well, first off, Leafy, you're a white boy . . ."

"That's downright racist!"

". . . and nobody really expects white boys to do too much in the dancing department. Just like basketball. There are a few exceptions — like Shawn Spicey for instance — but by and large white boys are what we

in the dancing world like to call choreographically challenged. It's just like being born blind or deaf or stupid. It's a handicap . . . and it's very, very sad. Just get on with your life, man, and concentrate on all the good things and try not to dwell on your disability."

"Do you know, Beefy? I think I'm feeling better about it already. I'm really glad we had this conversation."

"Me too."

They relaxed into a comfortable, contemplative silence. Eventually, Leafy chose to break that silence.

"What do you do with your arms when you're asleep?"

"I really wouldn't know. You wanna know why? Because I'm asleep."

"All right, I'll rephrase that. What do you do with your arms just *before* you go to sleep?"

Beefy gave the question some considerable consideration, picturing himself beside his wife in their king-sized bed in the moments before unconsciousness.

"I don't do anything with my arms before I go to sleep. They just hang in there, free to do whatever they want to do until I wake up the next morning."

"So you've got this kind of unwritten contract with your arms," observed Leafy. "That when you're asleep, they can goof off and flail around the bed all they want, as long as they're available for whatever you need them for when you wake up."

"You better believe it. I've got the same deal going with my head, my legs, my torso and my penis."

"So you're telling me that your penis has the full run of the house when you're asleep? And when you wake up, you have no idea where it's been or what it's been up to?"

"That's right," replied Beefy proudly. "But I know the old John Thomas can't roam too far because it's securely attached to that very large mass of flesh, bone, sinew and gristle called William Goodness, who in turn is guarded by his very light-sleeping wife. There was a time when my penis might have thought about gaining some sort of nocturnal freedom, but that was all just a crazy dream. So do you have some sort of problem with your arms when you're sleeping? What do you do with your arms before you go to sleep?"

"I don't do nothing with my arms. My arms are just fine when I'm sleeping."

Beefy momentarily took his eyes off the freeway and offered his partner a sideways glance.

"You truly are a facile person," he observed. "Do you ever give any thought to the serious issues of the day? To any of the burning political questions that are facing America at this very moment?"

"Sure I do."

"Like what?"

"Well . . . if POTUS and FLOTUS went riding in a Lotus, would SCOTUS even notice?"

"Jesus H. Christ!" replied Beefy, amused and appalled but by no means surprised. "Leafy, you must have realized at this stage in your life that your elevator doesn't quite reach the top floor. And of course, you were never exactly the brightest bulb in the chandelier, were you?"

"Hey, that's a serious political question."

"Okay. So what's the serious answer to your serious political question?"

"SCOTUS wouldn't notice, but the voters at General Motors would almost certainly notice POTUS and FLOTUS riding in a Lotus."

"Please don't take this the wrong way," said Beefy. "But you're a goddamned idiot."

"Right back at you, muchacho."

For the first time in several weeks, Beefy switched off the vehicle's air conditioner, and yet again, the two lapsed into a comfortable, contemplative silence. This time Beefy broke that silence.

"I was waiting in line at the bank the other day, and I saw that TV inventor guy behind me in the queue. I can't recall his name . . . but do you remember those commercials about relieving stiffness and sore backs while you're driving in your car?"

"Driva-Bubble, Driva-Bubble," sung Leafy, who never let the fact that he couldn't hold a tune to save his life deter him from singing with verve and conviction, "alleviates your spinal trouble."

"Precisely," affirmed Beefy. "He's the one who came up with the original idea of cutting a hole in your vehicle's roof and fitting a Plexiglas dome so you can stand up while you're driving. Apparently, the optional treadmill attachment was his wife's idea."

“You see, Beefy, ideas like that are what’s going to Make America Great Again.”

“Damn straight they are! It’s just like that recumbent exercise couch with the built-in TV and soda pop dispenser that my wife got me for our anniversary.”

Coincidentally, a blood-red Bugatti Vayron II overtook them at a high rate of speed with a Driva-Bubble fitted to both the driver and passenger sides of its roof.

“Wasn’t that David McSavage driving that? The boss of that brainwashing, pseudo-scientific, anti-psychiatry, holy-roller cult over on Sunset Boulevard,” queried Leafy.

“David *Miscarriage*,” corrected Beefy. “Yeah, as a matter of fact, I think it was.”

“It looked like he was punching somebody out in the Driva-Bubble next to him.”

“That’s okay . . . as long as it was for purely religious reasons.”

“First Amendment rights? Right?”

“You better believe it,” asserted Beefy, knowledgably. “You’re free to beat up whoever you want to beat up in this country, as long as it’s in the name of the Judeo-Christian-God or some other authorized deity or force. And of course, the beating has to be connected with a legally-recognized, tax-exempt religion.”

“The Founding Freemasons thought of just about everything. In-freaking-credible attention to detail! It makes me proud to be American, so help me God and hope to die.”

“Leafy, do me a favour — *please* don’t sing the national anthem again.”

“Oh, say can you see . . .”

Beefy knew that while Leafy’s cacophonous rendition of Francis Scott Key’s epic poem was super-hard on the ears, it was at least born out of true patriotism. He took his right hand from the steering wheel and, as he always did for the SSB, placed it with the utmost of solemnity over his heart.

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CHAPTER FIVE

A Hollow-Eyed Crack-Head

Leafy Green and Beefy Goodness could not recall another homicide investigation that had caused them more frustration than the N. Emma Johnson case. Even their two unsolved cold cases had not been as bad, for the simple reason that no viable suspects had ever come to light. For all intents and purposes their current inquiry had been solved — at least in the sense of the trigger-man — and with such airtight and damning evidence against Malverde an arrest had been only a couple of hours away. And with the prospect of the death sentence on the table, it was not entirely beyond the bounds of possibility that the gangsta might have flipped on his co-conspirators. It was scant consolation that their killer was now dead, because although divine justice may have been meted out, the cause of earthly justice had by no means been served. And serving earthly justice was what Leafy and Beefy were all about.

That there was more to the case than met the eye was a gross misrepresentation of the situation, and by no means did they consider the investigation closed. The mere fact that Malverde had first of all been detained by ICE and subsequently drew his last breath one hour after they had interviewed him did more than raise a few eyebrows; it stunk to high heaven. The sinister undercurrents of the case were both perplexing and deeply troubling and served only to stiffen the detectives' resolve to track down Malverde's co-conspirators.

Even the suggestion that Jesús Malverde was in any way suicidal was a laughable idea, and the very concept was *'reductio ad absurdum,'* as the Romans used to say. Malverde was still a young man; relatively healthy and wealthy; had no good reason to believe that a murder charge was about to befall him and he was as tough and cunning as a pack of rabid hyenas. In both a physical and psychological sense, the gangbanger was not only eminently well equipped to deal with whatever violent conflicts lay ahead of him, he was clearly the sort of person that would look forward to and indeed relish those conflicts as an integral part of his own savage existence. Therefore, Leafy and Beefy were absolutely certain that El Carnicero had not committed suicide.

Captain Calderon Casablancas — or Triple C, as Leafy and Beefy were prone to calling him, disrespectfully, behind his back — was the chief of detectives and a summons to his office, as opposed to a meeting with the lieutenant in charge of the Homicide Bureau, did not usually bode well for those that were summoned. As a general rule, Leafy and Beefy preferred to work on their own and were somewhat secretive — if not proprietary — about their oftentimes unconventional investigative methods. This was partly due to a broad streak of competitiveness that was intrinsic to both of the detectives' personalities and which greatly assisted them in maintaining their partnership at the number-one spot in the Homicide Bureau. The other reason for their tight-lipped approach was an inherent distrust of any police officer above the rank of lieutenant. This approach had garnered them few allies in the higher echelons of the LAPD, but their incredible batting average generally served to shelter them from negative fallout from above. But such was not the case on the afternoon of the third day of the N. Emma Johnson investigation as they stood in the captain's office facing down on Triple C.

"I see you guys have been doing that phony K9 routine again," observed the captain sourly. "You are aware that you're barely skirting the laws of entrapment, aren't you?"

"The legal department and the lieutenant gave us the green light to go ahead," replied Beefy. "The results should speak for themselves."

“Over a dozen handguns and an assault rifle were taken off the streets,” retorted Leafy, not content with the results speaking for themselves. “Not to mention that the ‘phony K9 routine’ gave us the evidence we needed to well and truly nail our trigger-man.”

Even for Captain Casablancas, it was difficult to find fault with results such as those. Instead, he decided to change tack, while at the same time stubbornly withholding any credit for the detectives’ handling of the case thus far. For their part, Leafy and Beefy stubbornly withheld any verbal reference to Triple C’s rank.

“I understand that your trigger-man is no longer in the land of the living,” said Triple C. “So if you guys are so sure that he was your perp, I guess you will be moving on to the next homicide investigation. As usual, we’ve got murder cases piling up around our ears, and it sounds to me like you’ve cracked this Hollywood Sign thing wide open.”

“We’ve still got a few loose ends to tie up,” replied Beefy.

“Oh yeah,” probed Casablancas, his expression and tone of voice highly sceptical. “Like what?”

“Like the fact that we have every reason to believe that other people were involved in the murder,” stated Leafy, deliberately circumspect.

“Is this another one of your conspiracy theories, Green? Why can’t you ever take things at face value? I mean, do you really believe that the Illuminati are trying to take over the world? Or maybe they’re just trying to take over this investigation?”

In point of fact, Leafy did not believe in the Illuminati; but by the same token, neither did he disbelieve in it. In Leafy’s world, just about anything was possible, but until such time as some tangible evidence was forthcoming, his belief remained in a state of suspension. While blind faith was not Leafy’s main credo in life, he remained partially open to the power of suggestion. Triple C’s question was a direct reference to a heated debate that Leafy had got into with another detective at a staff Christmas party some five years ago. Leafy had consumed a few too many margaritas and, just for the hell of it, had decided to play the Devil’s advocate by arguing in favour of that particular conspiracy theory. Apparently, he had still not lived it down and he had long since resolved to never make that sort of mistake again around the office. Leafy’s disdainful silence treated the captain’s question with the contempt that he felt it so rightly deserved.

Beefy stepped in to smooth things over.

“Captain, we need more time. It’s as simple as that.”

“All right,” conceded Triple C, after a few seconds of consideration. “I’m gonna cut you guys a little slack here. Go and tie up your loose ends . . . just make sure you don’t hang yourself with all that extra rope.”

Captain Calderon Casablancas turned his attention to some documents on his desk, the standard signal of dismissal for non-obsequious underlings. Leafy and Beefy made a hasty exit and took the elevator down to the homicide office. At their workstation, Leafy sat down in front of their PC and systematically erased the internet search history for the last three days.

“Leafy, you realize that the history remains on the hard-drive even after you hit the delete button, don’t you?”

“Of course I do . . . but unless the Digital Forensics Unit gets involved, that should slow most people down who might want to pry into our business.”

“Did ya forget to take your paranoia pills again?”

“It’s just like antibiotics, Beefy, I’ve built up a resistance to them. You know what I think? I think we should go undercover for a while.”

“You know, my dear Watson,” replied Beefy, in an atrocious attempt to emulate an English accent. “I think that’s a capital idea. It would appear that we can’t trust some of our fellow constables.”

Against department regulations — or for that matter, the law of the land — the two had set up an anonymous, untraceable internet and phone account in a false name, which they occasionally utilized to ensure the security of their most sensitive case information. They also used the account to make untraceable online searches and, of course, plain old phone calls. Except to bask in the sunshine of Leafy and Beefy’s investigatory successes or, if the case just happened to involve some well-known member of the glitterati, it was highly unusual for Triple C to take an interest in the progress of an ongoing investigation. He was usually far too busy sucking up to his superiors or trying to figure out how to make the next step up the

hierarchical totem pole to concern himself with the mundane minutia of the department's hoi-polloi. This was what had triggered both Leafy and Beefy's alarm bells, and, given the strange series of events that was the N. Emma Johnson case, their secretive approach had just become even more secretive.

"What do you think that self-serving prick wanted, anyway?" asked Leafy, sotto voce.

"I think he was on a fishing expedition."

"Okay. So did he hook a marlin or a minnow?"

"I'm pretty sure he got skunked, but it really doesn't matter. You heard what the man said. He's giving us some more rope. So let's get out of here and see how long it takes to hang ourselves."

"That, my dear Holmes," replied Leafy, in a flawless rendition of a lisping upper-class British accent. "Sounds to me like a perfectly *scwumptious pwoposal*."

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There had been no rain for several weeks, and the whole of southern California was now in a state of drought. With the reservoirs severely depleted and wildfires raging ever closer to urban areas, the governor was on the cusp of declaring a state of emergency. The intense heat of the day, coupled with the desiccating effect of the Santa Ana Winds, had left the inhabitants vulnerable to dehydration and heatstroke, with the government at both municipal and state levels issuing health advisories on an almost daily basis. It was now official: all was not well in paradise. Bottled water was being shipped in and distributed to the most affected areas, but at a rate far outpaced by the demand. Especially vulnerable were the very young and the very old; and of course, the countless homeless people who had little respite from the extreme moods of Mother Nature.

For nearly a hundred years, the name Skid Row has been synonymous with the poor and disaffected people of the nation, a place that signifies the lowest rung on the societal ladder, the very antithesis of the American Dream. The physical reality of Skid Row is different to what some people might imagine and consists of a fifty-four block area in downtown Los Angeles bordered by Third and Seventh streets to the north and south, and Alameda and Main to the east and west. Because many of the social services specifically designed to help the poor and disaffected are located downtown, it is only natural that people requiring such assistance would congregate in an area like Skid Row where these services have been available for many years. And no doubt, the powerful and all-pervading doctrine of the NIMBY will ensure that Skid Row will remain faithful to its reputation and location for at least another hundred years or so. In the twenty-first century, the social services have increasingly placed more emphasis on rehabilitation rather than just the provision of food and a place to sleep. Several non-profit organizations had adjusted their policies accordingly and now offered twenty-four-hour services as opposed to just a meal and a bed. One such charitable institution was the Last Chance Mission run by the fiery Evangelical Protestant minister the Reverend Abigail Brown.

The Reverend Brown was a small African-American woman in her early fifties with short, iron-grey hair. Dressed in a smart black trouser suit and with a large silver cross hanging from a chain around her neck, she emanated an aura of strength and intelligence. She also happened to be one of Leafy and Beefy's most highly valued confidential informants, and they had sought out her counsel on many occasions over the years. She was not a paid informant, at least not in the financial sense of the word, but she did require a QPQ for her services. That usually entailed Leafy and Beefy leaving a token charitable food donation and also listening to one of the Reverend Abigail Brown's brutally-honest, politically-charged ad lib sermons. The detectives had been sitting in the minister's small, stuffy office for the last fifteen minutes and with relief they sensed that her holy diatribe was mercifully winding down.

"... and for every so-called 'winner' in America, there are at least ten thousand losers. Our social structure has regressed into a Darwinian doctrine of 'might is right', where only the most fearsome and loathsome creatures in society are allowed to survive and flourish. In that respect, the Eye of Providence — or if you prefer, the 'all-seeing eye of God', which of course, is a pagan symbol that has nothing to do with decent Christian principles — printed above the pyramid on the back of our almighty dollar bill has been conveniently blind since well before the Declaration of Independence. Anybody with even half a dozen

functioning brain cells must realize that *greed* is the superglue that bonds our society together in this great land of the free. A quick visit to Skid Row — or indeed any of the numerous other ghettos, 'hoods and inner-city human trash-dumps that are scattered across our nation — should convince even the most sceptical of souls of the self-evident truths inherent in my words. To base the social dynamics of our entire culture on the single premise of enormous short-term profits for the fortunate few is not only an affront to the teachings of our Lord Jesus Christ . . . it is a wholly unsustainable political concept that will inevitably lead to the societal disintegration of this great country.”

Leafy and Beefy knew better than to comment at this final stage in the ritual and contented themselves with a sage nod of their heads in appreciation of the minister’s harsh wisdom. The righteous fury in the Reverend Abigail Brown’s eyes slowly subsided and she favoured the detectives with one of her rare and mirthless smiles.

“So, detectives. How can I be of assistance to the Los Angeles Police Department?”

Leafy proffered two pictures of Hugo Fürst to the minister, one from Fürst’s internet profile and the other the webcam image captured at the Hollywood Sign.

“We’re trying to find this man, Reverend. His name is Hugo Fürst.”

“You go first?” queried the minister. “Well, I have to say, that’s a very strange name.”

“*Hugo Fürst*, Reverend, with an umlaut.”

“You go first with an omelette? I’m sorry, detectives, but I’m not really following you.”

The reverend favoured Leafy with an uncomprehending, slightly apologetic smile.

“No problem, Reverend, I’ll spell it out for you: H-U-G-O F-U-R-S-T. Umlauts are those two dots that you see above vowels on Swedish restaurant menus.”

“Okay. Now I get it. Well, he certainly has a distinctive face,” commented the reverend, as she scrutinized the photographs. “But I’ve never seen him around here. Is he a criminal?”

“No, he’s not, Reverend,” replied Beefy. “He’s actually a well-regarded research-scientist, but we’re 99 percent certain he’s a homeless person at this present moment.”

“Poverty can be thrust upon us at any time, no matter how well-regarded or successful we think we are, Detective Goodness. We would all be wise to remember that.”

“We also think his life is in imminent danger, Reverend,” added Leafy. “So there is a certain amount of urgency to our request.”

“I understand, detectives. Leave it with me and I will see what I can find out. May God bless and protect you both.”

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