

CRIME SCENE

AFTER EMO'S CORPSE left in the ambulance I tried to disappear. I wanted to hide in some dark place and check my psyche for damage, to see how I really felt about this, before something I couldn't fix broke inside me. The Agoura station's area commander, Captain Matthews, was still in charge because the incident commander from LASD headquarters didn't make it to the site until Vincent Smiley had changed categories, going from an active shooter to a crispy critter. When the IC finally showed up the site was already Code 4. He didn't want any part of it and gave this disaster a kiss and a wave, leaving a dead deputy, a smoldering house, and angry neighbors for Captain Matthews to deal with. Naturally, Matthews was pissed. He recognized career leprosy when he saw it.

He grabbed my arm and stopped me from leaving. "Gonna need your statement," he growled.

"Right, Skipper. Solid," I said, trying to sound hard-boiled and competent.

"Wait in that patrol car by yourself," he instructed. "I don't want you talking to anybody, changing your story around to fit somebody else's account."

So I sat in a sheriff's car alone, and watched the rest of the place burn to the ground, fueled by the hot gas grenades and Smiley's illegal explosives. It didn't take long either. The place burned down faster than a Skid Row hotel. The fire crews kept the hill from going up and managed to keep the structures next door wet. Even though those houses didn't catch fire, the adjoining walls were scorched from the intense heat.

I tried to think about the brand of insanity that had made Vincent Smiley, whoever he was, strap on all that body armor and trade rounds with half the uniforms in the Valley. He'd stayed inside his burning prefab Georgian, raining death indiscriminately out the windows, endangering his entire neighborhood until he was buried in a collapsing inferno. Was he trying to get the sheriffs to kill him?

Suicide by Cop was the new hot category in law enforcement. It covered situations like this, where the perp's actions defied conventional rules of behavior. I thought hard about it, because I was trying to keep my mind from sinking into a painful memory of Emo Rojas. I wasn't sure I could face where that would take me yet.

I had really liked Emo. He was one of those cops who could wear a badge without letting it change what he weighed.

The fire crews hosed down the smoldering remains of the house, then raked the embers cool. When it was over there wasn't much more left than at Paula Beck's shack out in Palm-dale. Just a chimney and a mound of steaming ashes.

I watched the neighbors gather in little knots, looking on with

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wide, blank expressions—staring at the charred ground that hours ago was a fancy, two-story Georgian.

The M.E. and SID arrived shortly after the smoke monkeys knocked down the flames, then stood around and waited. Once it was cool enough, a team of CSI techs started sifting through the ash and bagging brass, while the coroner's people began searching for Mr. Smiley's remains. They found him in a bathtub. He'd been parboiled, then charbroiled. When they tried to get him out of the tub, he was so cooked he broke into pieces. God knows how hot the fire had been downstairs, but it sure didn't leave much for the coroner to identify. They loaded him into three rubber body bags and rolled him out on a gurney. The neighbors watched him leave with tight expressions of fear and relief. Teenage girls clustered together chewing the sides of their thumbs, muttering platitudes.

"How does this happen?" whispered a young mother who was standing near the car I was in.

It was my question, too.

"You Scully?" a voice asked, interrupting these thoughts. I looked through the side window and saw a tall angular man in a tan suit. Old-style Ray-Ban Aviators were perched on his face with fifty-mission swagger. The plastic nosepiece had yellowed years ago. He was chewing a toothpick, his hair was one week past a buzz cut, and his face had the weathered, no-nonsense look of somebody who'd spent a lot of time squinting down a barrel at big game.

"Yeah," I said. "Shane Scully, LAPD."

"Right." He looked me up and down—a quick, professional appraisal. "Sergeant Bob Dodds. I'm running point on the shooting review for SEB. We got a division commander and somebody from the D.A. headed out here. Gonna do the OIS review at the Agoura substation." OIS stood for Officer Involved Shooting. "I'm gonna need your preliminary statement now."

He climbed in the back seat with me, turned on a tape

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recorder and held it between us. "This is Sergeant Robert Dodds and I'm conducting a post-incident statement given by Sergeant Shane Scully, LAPD. It's one forty P.M. September fourteenth." Then he turned to me.

"So what's the story here, Scully? Can't get enough action in town, you gotta jump out on county calls?" It was an old interrogation technique. Start with an insult, see what happens.

I smiled back at him. "Are you planning to ask me what I saw, Sergeant Dodds, or would you rather just chew on that toothpick and act like an asshole?"

We sat looking at each other, breathing in that funky squad car smell. They all smell pretty much the same: Lysol, vomit, warm plastic. The M.E.'s Black Mariah rolled past, taking Vincent Smiley to the morgue for his last earthly checkup. Dodds and I both watched him leave, then he looked back at me.

"This is a mess," I said. I pointed out the window. "That SWAT team over there, the men in black, hit this hood like Rommel's Africa Corps. Nobody stopped to call for a qualified negotiator. Half your Valley day watch and an SEB team also rolled, everybody's cranking off rounds. . . ." I motioned again toward the black-suited SWAT team that had fired the gas grenades. "That bunch starts lobbing hot gas canisters while we're still up under the porch. Almost turned this neighborhood into a mini-Waco." He said nothing. I could see my warped reflection in his Ray-Bans. "This isn't my jurisdiction," I continued. "I'm a non-sheriff and a potentially friendly witness, so what I say will carry a lot of weight. I can tell this two or three different ways." I smiled thinly. "Now, how we gonna play it?"

Bob Dodds took off his shades. "Why don't we start over?" he said, then put out his hand and we shook. "Emilio Rojas was a friend of mine," he added.

"Me too. It's why I came up."

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Dodds picked up the tape recorder, rewound it and hit record, reslated it, then began recording over our false start.

"Begin with why you came up here," he said in a much friendlier voice.

"I heard it on TAC-four. Heard somebody say Emo was down, lying up on the porch. Since I knew Emo, I came. Got here and basically hid behind a car."

"The lieutenant says you and Sergeant Lopez disobeyed his direct order not to attempt to pull Rojas off that porch. He's a little torqued about it. 'A foolish stunt,' is what he called it. You could have been killed rescuing Rojas, who was already dead."

"Here's how that story tells," I said. "I don't work for the lieutenant, don't even know his name, so, in a strict command sense, he can't order me to do anything. On the other hand, if I'd heard his order, I certainly would have obeyed it in the spirit of interdepartmental cooperation."

"You would, huh?" Dodds frowned. "Am I gonna need to roll up my pant cuffs here?"

"I'm a book guy," I said. "But here's what happened. Nobody knew then if Emo was alive or dead. I saw him lying up there, and since he was a friend, I kinda freaked. I took off without asking anybody . . . I can see now it was a big mistake. Sergeant Lopez was just trying to stop me. Chased me right up the lawn. Next thing you know, we were both under the porch. Once we were there, seemed like there was no reason not to pull Emo down."

Dodds shut off the tape again.

"Is that the way Lopez's gonna tell it?"

"It is, if you give me a minute to explain it to him first."

Sergeant Dodds smiled. "So it's like that, is it?" he said.

"Yep. How 'bout we cut this brave deputy a little slack?"

Dodds smiled, and after a moment he nodded. "Okay," he

said. "If you get to him before I do, I guess there's not much I can do." He turned the tape back on.

"So who's in charge of those trigger-happy kazoonies in the cool black jumpsuits?" I asked.

"They're feds," Dodds answered, confirming my guess. "An SRT unit from Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosives."

SRT stood for Situation Response Team—federal SWAT. The media-conscious feds had stopped using ballsy acronyms for their urban assault team, preferring nonviolent handles like SRT or SWT. Even after all the flack that the LAPD had taken of late, we still cling stubbornly to kick-ass unit designations, preferring names like CRASH or SWAT. It seems some lessons are impossible for us to learn.

Dodds handed me his card. "You better call your watch commander and tell him you'll be here most of the afternoon. Drive down to the substation and check in with Jan Micklyn. She's with our Internal Affairs Shooting Review Board. She'll find a place for you to hang out. We'll get your complete statement, wrap you out fast as we can." He snapped off the tape.

I started to get out of the car, then turned back, "A Situation Response Team from ATF? They're located downtown. What were they doing way the hell out here?"

"It's a good question. Their team leader says they were doing range work, practicing clearing houses at their training facility in the foothills. They were driving back and heard it on the L.A. Impact frequency."

"Sounds good." I shot him a little smile. Even though we were buddies now, my smile didn't seem to warm him much. He squinted at me with that weathered shooter's expression, making me feel like game in a laser sight. Then, without saying anything else, he got out of the car and walked away.

I found Sonny over by the van, sitting on a curb looking at the burned-down house. He had soot and Emo's blood on his shirt, a frown on his face. I filled him in on my statement to Dodds

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and he looked up at me and nodded. "Thanks, Shane. I owe you for that."

"No you don't. We did the right thing. Why let a bad order and a dumb section in the rule book change it?"

On the drive back to the substation I called and checked in with Lieutenant Jeb Calloway, who was a twenty-year LAPD vet and my new boss at Special Crimes. Cal, as everybody called him, was a big African-American with a shaved head who looked like he should be working event security at a rap concert.

"That shoot-out is all over the news," Cal said after I explained where I was. "Sounds like the IC up there got froggy and pulled the string early."

I told him the incident commander didn't make it and that Captain Matthews, the area commander, got caught wearing the hat. After I explained the rest of what happened he just grunted. He'd seen enough CYA in his career to know everybody was probably ducking.

When I arrived at the substation the ATF SRT truck was parked in the secure lot in a visitor parking stall. As I walked past it I banged on the side to see if anybody was home. Nobody answered. The back was a locked box that contained all their high-tech toys and deadly ordnance. But I didn't want what was in the back. I walked around to the driver's side and checked to see if the alarm was set. All SWAT vehicles have very sophisticated alarms, and the trucks were never supposed to be left unattended without that alarm set. However, this one was open, the alarm light off. Probably, with all the adrenaline overload, the cherry in charge of team security just forgot. He was going catch a ration of shit later, but I didn't care. I stepped up on the running board, opened the door, and jumped in. Then I turned on the police scanner and started flipping through channels.

The unit didn't have TAC-4. I knew that channel had to be

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specially programmed by a communications tech, because I'd had to have it done on my scanner.

So who was kidding who here? If these guys didn't hear the call on TAC-4, how the hell did they know a shooting was in progress?