

Excerpt  
THE GIRL IN THE PICTURE

**A Howard Drew Novel**

by

**LARRY DARTER**

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The Girl in the Picture is entirely a work of fiction. The names, characters, and incidents portrayed in it are the work of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events or localities is entirely coincidental.

It was midnight, and the driver of the eight-year-old white Ford Transit cargo van had spent a half-hour cruising Santa Monica Boulevard. With all the tranny and young male prostitutes inundating the area, he had almost given up on finding what he was looking for. But, as he made a right on Highland Avenue, she caught his eye. He pulled to the curb where she was standing on the sidewalk. She was wearing jeans, a black hoodie, and sneakers. She was normal looking with none of the over-the-top sex for sale stuff like the clothing other female streetwalkers on the stroll wore that screamed it out. Still, he knew by looking at her; she was a prostitute. She was exactly what he was looking for. He felt his breath and pulse quicken as he hit the switch and lowered the front passenger door window glass.

The girl leaned into the car and studied his face for a moment. She was wearing a delicate gold chain around her neck with a single pearl dangling from it. Tall and blonde, he saw in her blue eyes life had hardened her well beyond her age, which he guessed to be seventeen or eighteen. Satisfied, she opened the passenger door, hopped in, and the van slid away from the curb into the night.

"Sex or a blow job?" the girl said. She was all business with no time for a polite chat. There was a hardness in her voice, a tone that said she had been through this plenty of times before. At the same time, she seemed vulnerable and even a little scared.

"Blow job," he said. "It's all I have time for, and I don't do motels."

"No problem, the car is fine," the girl said. "Turn left down there, into the parking lot."

The man turned left where she had pointed. It was a pay lot but closed in the evenings. The attendants had left the yellow parking gate up on the exit side of the driveway.

"Keep going to the back, then turn left again," she said. "There is a little employee's parking lot behind a closed business. It's my usual place. Plenty of privacy there."

The driver made the second left, stopped at the back of a building, and killed the headlights. He shifted the transmission into park but left the engine running. He removed his seatbelt and then shifted the driver's seat as far back as it would go.

"It's fifty, in advance," the girl said.

"I only have forty on me," the driver said. "Take it or leave it."

"Okay, forty," she said, holding out her hand, palm up.

The man pulled two twenties out of his shirt pocket and put them in her hand. She angled her legs and leaned over toward him. She unbuttoned his jeans and slowly pulled down the zipper.

He reached behind the front passenger seat with his right hand and grabbed the Sabre stun gun from the seat pocket. With his left hand, he brushed her long dirty blonde hair aside to expose her neck. As she pulled down the waistband of his briefs and took him in hand, he shoved her head down in his lap. He touched the electrodes of the stun gun to the back of her neck and gave her the juice. He held it there for four or five seconds, feeling her body tense and then go slack. Then he took his finger off the switch of the stun gun and replaced it in the seat pocket.

Taking a syringe from above the sun visor, he pulled the orange cap off with his teeth and depressed the plunger until a small amount of liquid spurted out. He then

stabbed the needle into the girl's neck and depressed the plunger to inject the ketamine into her body. It worked fast, taking only two or three minutes at most to render a victim unconscious. Once confident she was out, he lifted and pushed her body back upright into the passenger seat. He pulled the waistband of his underwear back up, opened the door, and got out. He buttoned and zipped his jeans. The fun would come later.

Walking around to the passenger side, he opened the side cargo door and then the front passenger door. He took the unconscious girl under the arms and pulled her out. Then he picked her up in his arms and laid her on the floor in the back of the van. Even as a dead weight, she felt light to him. He guessed she weighed little more than a hundred pounds. Climbing in after her, he positioned her in the middle of the floor then rolled her onto her stomach.

Grabbing a roll of duct tape, he bound her wrists together behind her back. After making several turns around her ankles with the tape, he tore off a six-inch strip. Turning the girl's body onto her left side, he placed the tape across her mouth. He felt sure she'd remain out of it until he got her to the shop, but he was the type who left nothing to chance. Satisfied his precious cargo was safely bound and secure, he got out and closed the side cargo door. After closing the passenger door, he went around the van and climbed back in behind the wheel. He could feel his breath coming quicker, the prickles of excitement needling his skin.

After backing out of the blind corner, Raymond turned the van toward Highland and switched on the headlights. Exiting the lot, he turned left and drove north. At Lexington, he turned right and continued to Lillian Way, where he made another right to go south. Halfway down the block, he turned left into the driveway of an indistinctive white cinder block one-story shop building with a flat roof. He pushed the button on the opener attached to the sun visor as he approached the overhead door. After the door raised, he drove into the parking bay and killed the engine. He pressed the button to lower the door. Safely inside the shop building, the hard part was behind him.

Howard Drew had no memory of when the suicide bomb vest detonated. He was standing several meters behind his squad leader, Staff Sergeant David Lamb, oriented on the southwest corner of the compound. Drew's Ranger platoon had just arrived and had made the typical "call out" ordering those inside the mud-brick house to come out. The Rangers were attempting to capture a high-value Taliban target intelligence had said was inside the compound. A Haji wearing manjams had appeared from the doorway. He had complied with the instructions of the unit's Afghan Terp by dropping to his knees and raising his shirt to show he wasn't wearing a suicide vest. Drew had observed that out of his peripheral vision before returning his full attention to his team's security sector. The next thing he knew, Drew found himself on his belly in the dirt with dust and smoke filling the surrounding air. He was deaf and his eyes were burning which blurred his vision. Getting first to his knees and then to his feet, Drew looked down and saw a dark red stain on his body armour. There was more blood on his pants. He felt no pain. He patted down his body. Chest, armpits, crotch, thighs. He found no injuries. It's not my blood. Looking down, he saw Lamb on the ground through the dusty haze and discovered where the blood had come from.

When his cell phone on the bedside table rang, Drew immediately woke from the dream. He sat up suddenly, soaked in perspiration. Throwing his legs over the edge of the bed, he blinked. Finally, he realized he was in his bedroom in Los Angeles, not on patrol in Kandahar. Nearly ten years after his last deployment there, he still had the nightmares. He rubbed his eyes and looked around. Pale morning light slashed through the gaps in the window blinds. He reached out for the phone and answered the call.

"Drew," he said into the phone.

"Someone could die by the time you answer your phone," a female voice said on the other end. It was voice of his partner, Stella Ruiz.

"Sorry, what's up," Drew said.

"We got a call, a DB up at Griffith Park," Ruiz said. "It's off Fern Dell drive. You know it?"

"Yeah, I know it. Off Los Feliz."

"Yep, that's the place. I just got the call from the Hollywood watch commander. He wants us to take it. I'm on my way now."

Ruiz told him what little she knew, and they agreed to meet at the body. Drew hung up and headed to the bathroom to shower. He brushed his teeth, but skipped shaving. Then he got dressed. He grabbed the leather holster that held his gun, a Glock 23 compact 40 caliber, loaded with thirteen rounds of Speer Gold Dot 40 S&W hollow points. After clipping the holster to his belt, Drew shrugged on a sports coat, but left his apartment without a tie. He knew the decedent wouldn't mind.

After switching on the overhead fluorescent lights, Raymond opened the side cargo door of the van to unload. He scooped up the girl and carried her through an open door into what had once been an office. He had converted it to another use. He laid the girl on her stomach on the single bed in the room's corner. It had only a mattress covered with a fitted plastic sheet.

Taking the razor-sharp folding knife out of his front pocket, Raymond flicked it open. He cut the duct tape from the girl's wrists and ankles. He rolled her onto her back and undressed her. After removing the delicate gold chain from her neck, he pocketed it. He stuffed her hoodie, shirt, bras, panties, and sneakers into a black garbage bag. After removing the two twenties he had given her earlier from a front pocket of the jeans, he put them in the bag. He'd get rid of the clothes later. She wouldn't need them anymore.

Raymond grabbed a digital camera off a shelf and approached the bed. After spreading her legs wide apart, he took photographs he'd enjoy looking at later. He was pleased she shaved between her legs. Hairy girls disgusted Raymond. He took several close-ups of her bare genitals and the colorful butterfly tattoo to the right of her bare pubic mound. After snapping a few photos of her average breasts, he turned the girl back onto her stomach and took more photos. He felt the throb of excitement building, the thrum of his pulse hammering in his temples. It had been a long time since he'd taken a girl. Too long.

Finished with the photos, Raymond put the camera aside. After removing his clothes, he grabbed a condom package from a box he'd retrieved from the shelf. He ripped it open and slipped on the lubricated condom. Crawling on top of the still unconscious girl, he ran his hands over her bare ass for a few moments, then penetrated and sodomized her. He always enjoyed that part while they were unmoving and relaxed.

Raymond was so aroused it took only two or three minutes of thrusting before he finished with a loud groan, panting for breath. After slapping her ass, he withdrew and got off the bed. He removed the condom and placed it in a second garbage bag. Then he flipped her over onto her back.

Returning to the shelf, he grabbed a package of heavy duty cable ties. He secured her wrists and ankles to the metal bed frame with the plastic ties leaving her spread-eagle, exposed, and readily accessible. It was time to wait until the ketamine wore off. He wanted her conscious for the next part. It was always better when they struggled while he raped them. He walked back out to the shop area to ready the equipment he'd need later.

After about fifteen minutes, Raymond returned to the office. The girl started to stir. Then her eyes opened, wide in fear, and she jerked against the restraints on her wrists. She screamed, but the duct tape over her mouth muffled the sound. Raymond looked at her and smiled.

"Wake up sleepy head," he said, standing over her. He removed another lubricated condom from the package and rolled it on. He climbed onto the bed. The girl bucked and twisted trying to resist, but with the restraints, it was useless. Once he pressed his

weight down onto her body and penetrated her, she lay still whimpering with her eyes clenched shut. That didn't stop the tears from escaping and running down her cheeks.

"If you promise not to scream, I'll take the tape off," Raymond said. "Even if you scream, there is no one to hear you. But I don't want to listen to it."

He reached up, peeled a corner of the tape off her face, and then pulled it off.

"Please, please don't hurt me," the girl whimpered.

"Don't worry," Raymond said. "Let's just enjoy ourselves."

Ragged sobs escaped the girl's throat, and her tears flowed while Raymond thrust. This time he had more control. It was a good ten minutes before he finished with another satisfied groan. Raymond took his hands off her breasts and moved them to her throat. As he squeezed harder and harder she tried to scream, but it only came out as gurgling, choking sounds. Raymond continued squeezing with his hands until she went still. He laid his head on her chest while he panted for breath, listening for her heartbeat. He heard none. Reaching up, he covered her mouth with his hand and pinched her nostrils closed. She didn't struggle. She was gone.

Looking at his watch, Raymond saw it was nearing two A.M., and time to finish it. Getting off the bed, he put the used condom in the trash bag with the first. Then he dressed in white disposable coveralls with a hood and put on black rubber boots. He slipped on a pair of heavy rubber gloves. After cutting off the cable ties, he carried the dead girl out to the shop bay and laid her down on the concrete floor where it sloped to a large metal floor drain.

He picked up the case containing the equipment he had purchased from a mortuary supply company while on a recent trip to Mexico. Raymond inserted a cannula, a hollow body piercing needle, into the girl's common carotid and another into her internal jugular. He attached rubber tubing to the cannulas and then attached the other ends of the tubing to a small electric-powered pump. He switched the pump on and drained the blood from her body. A length of tubing from the discharge side of the pump directed the blood into the drain.

Once the pump had done its work, Raymond prepared to aspirate her abdominal cavity. After death, blood pools in the organs, and the first procedure had only removed a fraction of the blood from the girl's body. The aspiration would remove the rest along with various other bodily fluids, urine, and feces.

After inserting a large twenty-inch needle with a tip that looked like a medieval torture device above her navel, Raymond attached the vacuum-like aspirator. Sweeping the large needle through her gut, he sucked everything out. His mind returned to his days in high school when he had worked part time at a funeral home. There he had picked up the techniques he now used in his hobby. He laughed aloud recalling one of the first embalmings he had assisted with. He hadn't put on a face shield and hadn't paid attention when the aspirator got backed up. When he pulled out the clogged aspirator, feces had sprayed all over him, including his face. It hadn't been funny back then, but he could laugh about it now.

After finishing with the aspirator, Raymond used a scalpel to cut around both her wrists. Using a battery-powered reciprocating saw, he cut through the radius and ulna above both wrists to remove the hands. He placed the hands in a third garbage bag. Taking up the scalpel again, he sliced her face from the corners of her mouth to her

ears. He'd never done it before, but it suited his plans for the body. He would pose this one, a new wrinkle in his repertoire.

After washing the body with a garden hose until only clear water ran into the drain, Raymond vigorously and meticulously scrubbed the body, front and back with bleach and a stiff bristle brush. Afterward, he washed the body thoroughly a second time with the water hose, taking care to flush the orifices thoroughly. After cleaning the rubber gloves with bleach and water, he picked up the body and placed it on a large piece of new plastic sheeting he'd laid out on the floor. After wrapping the body tightly in the plastic, he returned it to the back of the van.

Going back into the office, Raymond stripped off the coveralls and gloves. He deposited the coveralls inside the garbage bag containing the used condoms. After adding the plastic sheet from the bed to the bag, he secured all three bags with twist ties. He would discard each of them in different dumpsters at different locations later after he returned to clean the shop. But, it was getting late. He still had the final task to do first before the sun came up.

After getting dressed, Raymond got in the van, raised the overhead door, and backed out. After closing the door, he drove back to Santa Monica Boulevard. He made his way over to North Western, headed to Griffith Park for that was to be her place of final repose.

As he drove around the curve where Western Avenue became Los Feliz Boulevard, Howard "Howie" Drew listened to Toby Keith crooning "I wish I didn't know now what I didn't know then" on the stereo. Drew had developed a taste for country western music during his four-year stint in the Army. What Drew didn't know as he listened to the song about an unfaithful lover was the words would soon take on a whole new meaning for him once he arrived at the scene he was on route to.

Two minutes after turning north off Los Feliz onto Fern Dell Drive, he slowed when he saw the first black and white parked across the roadway where it entered Griffith Park. Drew stopped beside the blue suiter standing next to the patrol car. He held out his open badge case.

"Drew from West Bureau," he said. "I'm supposed to meet my partner up here."

The cop nodded. "The scene is about a quarter mile up the road," he said, jerking his head toward the north. "At the intersection with Black Oak Drive. You can find a spot to park up there before you hit the tape."

Drew read the cop's name off the silver plate above his pocket. Having recently transferred to West Bureau from Van Nuys, he didn't know many of the blue suiters in Hollywood, or the Super Six, as the Hollywood cops called the division.

"Thanks, Taylor," Drew said before driving around the patrol car and continuing north.

Further along Fern Dell Drive, there was a plain wrap detective sedan and another patrol unit. Dean pulled his Camaro in behind the plain wrap and got out. Another officer in uniform leaned against the fender of the black and white. The plastic yellow crime scene started beyond the front of the patrol unit. In L.A., they used miles of the stuff.

The cop stood up when Drew approached. He held up his open badge case again to flash the gold LAPD detective shield.

"Drew, West Bureau," he said.

The cop handed him a clipboard. Drew printed his name, and serial number on the scene access log then handed the clipboard back to the cop, a muscular guy with a dark tan and short brown spiky hair. After reading Drew's name, the cop looked at him.

"You must be new," he said. "I haven't seen your name before."

"Yeah, I transferred over from Van Nuys two weeks ago," Drew said.

The patrol officer whose plate above his pocket said his name was Harrison looked at Drew through his Ray-Bans.

"First homicide case?" he said.

"Something like that," Drew said. He changed the subject. "Know who found the body?"

"Some jogger from the neighborhood back there," Harrison said, jerking his thumb toward the west. "She was pretty freaked out about it when we got here."

"Bad one?" Drew said.

Harrison grinned. "Let's just say you caught a good one for your first. Welcome to fucking Hollywood, Detective."

Drew nodded but said nothing more.

“Better let you get to it,” Harrison said. “SID is already up there. I guess they are done with the search, and the ME has already left. If you don’t get up there quick, the body snatchers will haul your vic away, and there will be nothing to detect.”

Drew nodded again and ducked beneath the plastic tape. He looked up and saw three news helicopters circling overhead. The chaff-chaff-chaff from the whirling rotor blades echoed off the brown summer-dried hills. As he approached the intersection, he saw his partner, Stella Ruiz, standing in a small clearing on the northeast corner. She was sketching the scene on a clipboard. She was an attractive woman with shoulder-length dark brown hair, maybe mid-forties, with a slim-build. She was wearing slacks and a blazer over a navy tee shirt; the suit type favored by female detectives because it allowed them to carry their weapons on their hips instead of inside purses. The suits also made them look formidable in a way dresses never could.

Ruiz glanced up at Drew over the top of her aviator sunglasses when he walked up. She gave him a wave of acknowledgment with a latex-gloved hand.

“Howie, where you been?” she said.

“I had to shower and get dressed,” Drew said.

As he stepped into the clearing, Drew saw the body in the grass covered by one of the silver space blankets the patrol cops carried in the trunks of their shops.

“Come take a look,” Ruiz said. “It’s a bad one.”

She lifted a corner of the blanket, careful to keep it strategically positioned to block the body from the views of the vultures circling above in the news helicopters.

“Jesus Christ,” Drew said.

“Roger that,” Ruiz said.

The body was a young woman, maybe seventeen or eighteen. She was lying supine with her legs spread wide apart. Both of her hands were missing. Someone had mutilated her face with deep cuts from the corners of her mouth to her ears on both sides. Her skin was white as a vampire’s.

“Why is she so pale?” Drew said. “Dead bodies I’ve seen looked grayish.”

“Corner’s investigator said her body has been completely drained of blood,” Ruiz said. “As you see, there isn’t a drop of blood anywhere around the body.”

“It smells like bleach.”

“Yeah, the killer washed the body and scrubbed it with bleach,” Ruiz said. “Cleanest murder scene I’ve ever been on. What’s it all tell you, Howie?”

“Body dump,” Drew said. “The suspect killed her elsewhere and brought her here. There is another scene somewhere else.”

“Very good,” Ruiz said with a grin. “We might make a murder cop of you yet.”

Ruiz was a D3, a veteran detective with twenty-four years on the job. Early in her detective career, after five years in patrol, she had investigated gang crime in Southland. Later she had been assigned to the elite Robbery-Homicide Division (RHB) Homicide Special Section before transferring into West Bureau. Drew had worked property crimes in Van Nuys when he was first promoted to detective. When he transferred into West Bureau homicide, the L-T had paired him with Ruiz so she could teach him the ropes.

“The cuts on her face are gnarly,” Drew said.

“There is a term for that kind of disfigurement,” Ruiz said. “It’s known as the ‘Glasgow smile’ among other things. The killer used it in the Elizabeth Short murder.”

"Elizabeth Short murder?"

"Yeah, you heard of it?"

Drew shook his head.

"How about the Black Dahlia?" Ruiz said. "Ring any bells?"

"Wasn't that a movie?"

"Yeah, a movie and book," Ruiz said. "The Black Dahlia was a name the media gave a woman named Elizabeth Short after her murder. A passerby found her mutilated body posed in the Leimert Park neighborhood. The killer had mutilated her face the same way."

"You mean this is a serial? It connects with the Short murder?"

Ruiz laughed. "No, Howie, Elizabeth Short was murdered in 1947," she said.

"But, technically it's still an open-unsolved. They never caught the killer back then. I'm only saying there are similarities here. Maybe our killer copied some of what Short's killer did to her."

"Are there other similarities besides the facial disfigurement?"

"The killer posed our vic in a public place like Elizabeth Short's body was so it would be immediately found."

"Did the killer amputate Short's hands too back then?"

"No, worse," Ruiz said. "In that one, the killer severed Short's body into two pieces before posing it."

"Jesus Christ," Drew said. "We have any identification on our vic?"

"Nope, nada," Ruiz said. "SID searched the area. They found no clothing, no purse, no nothing."

"You think the killer cut off her hands so there would be no fingerprints we could use to identify her?"

"Yep, be my guess," Ruiz said. "Makes you think the killer had some reason to believe her prints would be on file with us or some other law enforcement agency. If I were guessing, I'd say she might have been a working girl."

"She looks pretty young for that," Drew said.

"It's fucking Hollywood, Howie," Ruiz said. "There are kids all over the strips selling it. Runaways from the Midwest who came out here seeking fame and fortune. Then reality reared its ugly head. They discover the only way to get a roof over their heads and food for their stomachs is selling their only assets. Their bodies."

Drew inspected the girl's face. Her light blue eyes were open, staring up into space. But, beyond the blank stare he'd seen in the eyes of other dead people, he felt he could still see the fear in her eyes.

"Good thing we have no identification," Ruiz said with a smirk. "You aren't dressed for making a death notification."

Drew felt the heat in his cheeks and neck. He'd thrown on a pair of jeans and wrinkled shirt under the sports coat.

"I thought casual would be okay on a callout from home," he said sheepishly.

"Just screwing with you," Ruiz snickered. "If you want to come to work looking like a homeless person, that's your call."

It was times like this Drew couldn't be sure whether Ruiz was joking or being serious. He didn't know her well enough yet to read her. But, he knew her well enough to believe she'd never turn up on a scene dressed the way he was. So, he assumed

he'd received a mild rebuke. He'd learned Ruiz was quick with a correction when he screwed up, but thankfully she was quicker with a smile. He'd put up with enough asshole supervisors in his short career he could fade a few cutting remarks from his partner if he had to.

"What did the coroner's investigator give you for a time of death?" Drew said.

"The usual bullshit," Ruiz said. "His wild ass guess was she's been down eight to twelve hours, but he couldn't be more specific until after the medical examiner makes the cut."

"Cause of death?"

"That's an easy one," Ruiz said. "Did you see the bruising on her neck? Manual strangulation."

"Sexual assault?"

"No way to know yet," Ruiz said. "Since the killer washed the body, there is nothing obvious in that regard. Again, we won't know until they do the autopsy."

"Any evidence at all?"

"The corpus delicti," Ruiz said. "Other than that, we've got squat. Well, a SID tech found a footprint in the dirt near the body. It looks like it came from a generic athletic shoe. It probably won't give us anything."

A transport team from the office of the Los Angeles County Medical Examiner-Coroner arrived with a stretcher and body bag.

"Hey, guys," Ruiz said. "I know it's a pain in the ass, but could you wait to bag her until you get the body inside your van?" She pointed a finger to the sky. "I'd like her to have a little dignity by keeping her out of sight of the vultures circling up there."

The transport guys nodded. They lifted the body onto the stretcher without removing the space blanket, then draped the body bag over the blanket. Drew and Ruiz helped them carry the stretcher over to the paved road. There the team lifted the stretcher up on its wheels and rolled the body to their white van.

"What's next?" Drew said.

"At the moment, we're waiting for the L-T to show up," Ruiz said. "She lives up in the valley and was an hour away, traffic permitting, when they called her. After we tell her what's what, we'll head back to the bureau to knock out the paperwork."

"Paperwork?" Drew said. "What about the legwork and knocking on doors you're always saying are the hallmarks of good homicide cops? Won't we be out here the rest of the day?"

"Look up in the sky, Howie," Ruiz said. "It's a Sunday morning. Slow news day. We've got three news helicopters buzzing us. I bet you lunch at my favorite taco truck that by now, down the hill, the road is packed with news trucks and reporters champing at the bit to get the juicy details on the most ghoulish murder in recent memory. This will be a high-profile case with the intense media interest. There will be a lot of pressure on the tenth-floor nitwits. I guarantee when the L-T gets here, she will tell us this case is getting kicked to Homicide Special downtown."

"What?" Drew said. "We won't keep it?"

"No way."

Drew hoped Ruiz was wrong but expected she knew what she was talking about. It would be an interesting case. He wished they could investigate it.

"You think we've got a serial killer on the loose?"

“Too big a leap based on one body,” Ruiz said. “I don’t believe this was the killer’s first rodeo, but I don’t recall hearing about other posed bodies recently. This could mean a lot of things. But, assuming the killer has killed before, maybe he has been dormant and has resurfaced. Or, maybe this is a new twist. Or, maybe he is a recent arrival to L.A. from somewhere else and not on our radar.”

“Whoever did this is one sick puppy,” Drew said. “He’s evil. He needs to be taken off the board before he does it again.”

“Roger that,” Ruiz said. “But, that will be a problem for RHD, not us.”

When Lieutenant Marcia Sabatelli arrived at the scene, she quickly scanned the area noticing the body had already been transported. Sabatelli like Ruiz was in her forties and had as many years on the job, give or take. She was of medium build with bleached blond hair she kept short. She wore no makeup. Like Drew, she wore jeans, although her’s were nicer. She too wore a blazer over her tee shirt.

“They transported the victim already, Stella?” Sabatelli said.

“Yeah, about fifteen ago, L-T.”

“So, what do we have?”

Ruiz explained the circumstances as Sabatelli listened intently. When Ruiz finished the briefing, her earlier prediction came true.

“I spoke to the captain on the drive down,” Sabatelli said. “We’re waiting on confirmation from the tenth floor, but with the intense media interest you can assume RHB will take the case.”

Ruiz nodded. “No surprise there, L-T.”

“Anything left to do here?” Sabatelli said.

“No, SID did the search and photographed the scene,” Ruiz said. “I’ve got the sketch and measurements. The blue suiters have canvassed the neighborhoods to the east and west. Everyone has privacy fences up here. This spot isn’t in anyone’s view. The body was dumped early before people were out and about. No evidence to speak of besides the body and the wounds.”

Sabatelli nodded. Turning to Drew, she acknowledged his presence for the first time.

“You doing all right, Detective?” she said.

“Yes, ma’am,” Drew said. “I wish we could keep the case, though.”

“That decision is above my pay grade and way above yours,” Sabatelli said. “There will be other murders. Too much media interest involved in this one for bureau detectives to work it.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Good, then you two can head back to the office,” Sabatelli said. “Stella, make the most of this teaching moment. Show Detective Drew how to put the murder book together. Have it ready to go when RHB takes the handoff.”

“Roger that,” Ruiz said.

Sabatelli turned and left.

“Saddle up, partner,” Ruiz said. “Let’s head to the office.”