

**JONATHAN
KELLERMAN**

**TRUE
DETECTIVES**

A NOVEL



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CHAPTER

1

August 9, 1979

Alleged air-conditioning,” said Darius Fox. “What’s your take, John Jasper? Motor pool morons set us on bake or broil?”

Jack Reed laughed and used a meaty, freckled forearm to clear sweat from his face. Scanning the night-darkened dumpsters and butt-sides of shuttered, low-rent businesses that lined the alley, he sucked on his Parliament and blew smoke out the cruiser’s window as Darius kept the car moving forward at ten mph.

Ten years ago, to the day, the Manson Family had butchered Sharon Tate and a whole bunch of other people. If either Fox or Reed was aware of the anniversary, neither thought it worth mentioning.

Crazy Charlie’s crimes might as well have been on another planet; big-ticket outrage on high-end real estate. Fox and Reed’s Southwest Division shifts were filled with nonstop penny-ante crap that sometimes blossomed into stomach-churning violence. Reality that never made the papers because, as far as they could see, the papers were works of fiction.

Fox said, “Man, it’s a steam bath.”

Reed said, "Alleged, as in this is a motor vehicle. More like a shopping cart with a cherry on top."

Fox had prepped for driving the way he usually did, hand-vacuuming the driver's portion of the bench seat, then wiping the steering wheel down with his private bottle of Purell. Now it was his own sweat coating the plastic. "Hand me a tissue, J.J."

Reed complied and his partner rubbed the wheel till it squeaked.

Both men continued to study the alley as they crawled. Nothing. Good. One half of the shift had passed.

Jack Reed said, "Alleged, as in Jimmy Carter's a commander in chief."

"Now you're getting unpleasantly political."

"That's a problem?"

"Night like this it is."

"Truth is truth, Darius. It was Peanut Boy helped that loony towel-head back into Eye-Ran and look at all the crap that brought down."

"No debate on Farmer Bucktooth being a nitwit, John Jasper. I just don't want to pollute our precious time together with small things like international affairs."

Reed thought about that. "Fair enough."

"I'm known for my fairness."

Slow shift; the usual drunk and disorderlies at Mexican dance halls on Vermont, a couple of false-alarm burglary calls, an assortment of miscreants warned and released because none of them was worth the paperwork.

The last call they'd fielded before embarking on alley-duty was yet another noise complaint at a USC fraternity, already taken care of by the campus rent-a-cops by the time Fox and Reed arrived. Rich, confident college boys saying yessir and nossir, scooping up beer bottles from the lawn, hurrying inside to continue the merriment. Wink wink wink.

Reed smoked his Parliament down to a shred, pinched it cold between his fingers, flicked the remnant out the window. He was a ruddy, blond fireplug, five nine on a good day, two hundred muscled pounds, thirty but looking older, with skin leathered by the sun and a nose flat-

tened by high school football. A hay-colored crewcut topped his bullet skull. A naturally grainy voice was coarsened further by two packs a day.

Three years out of the service, all his time spent running an armory in Germany.

He said, "Tell you what *alleged* is, Darius: L.A. nights cooling off. Night like this, might as well have stayed in Bull Shoals."

"And missed the opportunity to ride with me?"

Reed grinned. "Perish the thought."

"Damn heat," said Fox, dabbing sweat from his straight-edge mustache. He was a tall, rangy black man, thirty-one years old, a former air force mechanic who'd been told by many people that he was handsome enough to act.

Jack Reed, a small-town Arkansas boy, was comfortable with black people in a way northerners could never be. He found L.A. scary. Everyone pretending to love everyone else but the streets hummed with anger.

Working with a black man—sitting side by side, eating, talking, trusting your life to a black man—was a whole different level of comfort for a transplanted southerner, and he was surprised how fast he'd gotten used to riding with Darius.

Knowing what Darius was thinking without Darius having to put it into words.

He could only imagine what his cousins would say if he bothered to talk to them anymore, which he didn't. All that ignorance and stupidity was history.

He contemplated another cigarette as Darius exited the alley, drove a block, entered a neighboring back lane. More garbage and accordion-grated rear doors.

Same old same old; both patrolmen were bored and crazy-hot.

Darius used his forearm to wipe sweat off his chin. Shiny nails flashed. Jack resisted the urge to kid his partner about the weekly manicures. Night like this, no sense being tiresome.

Jack had been to Darius's neat little bungalow in Crenshaw for barbecues and the like, played with Darius's little boy, made chitchat with the woman Darius was supposed to be committed to till death do us.

Madeleine Fox was a small-waisted, curvy, strong-featured white girl who thought she was an artist but had no talent anyone else could perceive. Great teeth and hair, even better body. Those big soft . . . Jack imagined Darius getting close to her. Sliding down the bed and putting his manicured hands on . . . Jack's own face and body and hands transferred to the scene.

Feeling like a shit, he shut down the movie, lit up another Parliament.

"You okay?" said Darius.

"Yeah."

"You got fidgety. Pumping those knees, like you do."

"I'm fine."

"Okay."

"Okay, what?"

"You fidget when something's bugging you."

"Nothing's bugging me."

"Okay."

Jack said, "All that intuition, apply for detective."

"Big fun," said Darius. "Sitting on my ass all day typing, no more stimulating conversation with you? Not to mention fringe benefits?"

Jack had been riding with Darius for thirteen months, knew the perks his partner was talking about.

Comped meals, "donations" of merchandise by grateful civilians.

Last week, both he and Darius had gotten brand-new pocket calculators from an Arab with a store on Hoover after they'd busted two kids trying to shoplift cassette tapes.

Darius's favorite perk had nothing to do with tangible goods.

Police groupies. Hit the right cop bar at the right time and they swarmed like ants on molasses.

Sad girls, for the most part, not Jack's thing. But he didn't judge.

Sometimes he wondered, though. Darius married to a good-looking, downright sexy girl like Maddy, nice backyard, cute little Aaron.

Jack ever got married, he was pretty sure he'd never step out.

Sometimes he thought about Maddy, those teeth. The rest of the package. Sometimes that brought on headaches and long, itchy

thoughts. Mostly when his crappy little single in Inglewood got real quiet and *Penthouse* wasn't gonna cut it.

Darius said, "Wind blows the heat in, then the heat just sits down and stays until another wind finally decides to kick its ass out of town."

Jack said, "Tonight's weather report is brought to you by Cal Worthington Dodge. Now for the latest on them Dodgers."

Darius laughed. "Nasty night like this, almost a full moon on top of the heat, you'd think we'd be having more fun."

"People carving each other up," said Jack.

"People shooting each other full of holes," said Darius.

"People stomping each other till the brains ooze out of their cracked skulls."

"People strangling each other till the tongues are sticking out like limp . . . salamis."

"For a moment I thought you were gonna say something else—hey, look at the land-yacht."

Pointing up the alley to a big white car idling, maybe ten yards up, pulled to the left. Lights off but the security bulb of a neighboring building cast an oblique band of yellow across the vehicle's rear end.

Darius said, "Caddy, looks pretty new. How come it's smoking worse than you?"

He rolled closer and each of them made out the model.

Big white Fleetwood, matching vinyl top, fake wire wheels. Tinted windows shut tight.

Someone's A.C. wasn't alleged.

Darius rolled close enough to read the tags. Jack called in the numbers.

One-year-old Caddy, registered to Arpad Avakian, address on Edgemont Street, no wants or warrants.

Darius said, "East Hollywood Armenian. Bit of a drive to Southwest."

Jack said, "Maybe something worth driving for."

"*Real* worth driving for."

Both of them thinking the same thing without having to say it: no logical reason for Arpad Armenian or whoever was using his wheels to

be in this crap-dump neighborhood in a newish luxury boat unless someone had a serious *jones*.

Dope or sex.

Or both.

Guy with a fresh Caddy had the potential to be a fun bust, bit of diversion from the brain-dead locals they usually dealt with.

If Arpad was polite, they might even let him go with a warning. Some of those Hollywood Armenians owned stereo stores and the like. Nothing wrong with chalking up another grateful civilian.

Darius got closer, put the cruiser in Park. Got out of the car before Jack could place his hand on the door handle.

Jack watched his partner hitch up his trousers, approach the Caddy with the cop swagger that originated when you learned to walk with all that heavy gear on your belt. Like making your way on the rolling deck of a boat; eventually, you came to like it.

Darius walked right up next to the Caddy, shined his flashlight at the driver's window, holding it high, the way they were trained, to prevent it being grabbed. His free hand hovered near his holstered .38, and Jack felt his own paw settling on his weapon. Nowadays everything had to be logged, so he called in the stop, caught a bad connection on the radio, tried twice more before reaching Dispatch.

Meanwhile, Darius was rapping on the window.

Tinted almost black. It stayed closed.

"Police, open up."

The Caddy sat there, smoking away.

Maybe suicide? Or a carbon mono accident? Normally, you had to be in an indoor situation to asphyxiate yourself with exhaust, but Jack had heard about venting gone bad.

"Open up *now*." Darius put that menacing edge in his voice. You'd never know this was a guy who loved his weekly salon manicure.

The Caddy's window remained shut.

As Darius repeated the command, he reached to unsnap his holster and Jack moved for his own gun and opened the cruiser's passenger door.

Just as he got to his feet, the window slid down silently.

Whatever Darius saw relaxed him. He dropped his gun arm. Smiled.

Jack relaxed, too.

“License and reg—”

The night cracked.

Three shots in rapid succession. Each hit Darius square in the chest. Each caused him to buck.

He didn’t fall back the way they did in the movies. He sank down into a sitting position, hands flat on the asphalt, as the Caddy lurched into gear and shot forward.

At first glance, just a guy resting.

Crazily, Jack thought: He’s okay.

Then Darius pivoted, half faced Jack. What looked like motor oil leaked through Darius’s tailored navy shirt. His face was that of a stranger.

Jack screamed and fired at the fleeing car. Emptying his revolver as he ran to Darius.

“Oh man, oh Jesus, oh man, Lord Jesus . . .”

Later, he’d learn that one of his bullets had pierced the Caddy’s rear window, but that hadn’t slowed the big car down.

Darius continued to sit there. Three wet holes in his chest.

Jack cradled him, put pressure on the wounds. “Hold on, Dar, you’re gonna be fine, just hold on hold on hold on.”

Darius stared at the sky with dull, sightless eyes.

His mouth gaped.

Jack felt for a pulse. Gimme something, c’mon, c’mon, gimme . . .

Darius’s skin turned to ice.

Jack began CPR, covering Darius’s cold mouth with his own.

Like breathing into an empty cave.

Darius lay there.

Still as the heat that had blown in from the desert and decided to stay.