

MONDAY: 7:28 A.M.

1.

She liked waiting for the wave more than riding the wave. Facing the cliffs, straddling the board, her hips finding the up-and-down rhythm of the surface. Riding it like a horse, making her think about Kaupo Boy when she was a child. There was a reverence to the moment before the next set came in and it was time to dig down and paddle.

She checked her watch. She could fit in one more. She'd ride it all the way in if she could. But she savored the moment of just floating, closing her eyes and tilting her head upward. The sun was just over the cliffs now and it warmed her face.

"Haven't seen you here before."

Ballard opened her eyes. It was the guy on the One World twelve board. An OG with no wetsuit, no leash, his skin burnished to a dark cherrywood. She braced for what she knew would come next: territorial male posturing.

"I'm usually at Topanga," she said. "But there was nothing there this morning."

She didn't mention that she'd consulted a wave app. The OGs would never look at an app.

He was twenty feet to her left, riding the low rollers sideways so he could keep an eye on her. Women were unusual at Staircases. It was a big boy's break. Lots of rocks in the short tide. You had to know what you were doing, and Ballard did. She hadn't crossed anybody's tube, had not pulled out of a wave too soon. If this guy was going to try to school her, she would shut him down quick.

"I'm Van," he said.

"Renée," she said.

"So, you wanna get breakfast at Shoreline after?"

A little forward, but okay.

"Can't," she said. "Got one more set and then I got a job. But thanks."

"Maybe next time," Van said.

Before the conversation got more awkward, somebody farther down the line began paddling, aligning his board with an incoming wave. It was like a bird startling and jumping the whole flock into flight. Ballard checked over her shoulder and saw the next set coming in tall. She flipped forward and brought her legs up on the board. She started paddling. Deep strokes, fingers together to get speed. Digging down. She didn't want to miss the wave, not in front of Van.

She glanced to her left and saw him paddling stroke for stroke with her. He was going to press her, show her whose break it was.

Ballard paddled harder, feeling the burn in her shoulders. The board started to rise with the wave, and she made her move, jumping up into a crouch on the center line. She put her left foot behind her and stood just as the wave crested. She pushed the nose down and began slicing down the face of the wave.

She heard Van's voice in the wake, calling her goofy foot.

She put her hands out for balance, heeled the board into a turn, and went up the wall before cutting it back down and taking it all the way in. For eight seconds everything about the world was gone. It was just her and the ocean. The water. Nothing else.

She was coasting on foam when she remembered Van and looked back for him. He was nowhere in sight and then his head came up in the surf along with his red board. He raised his hand and Ballard nodded her goodbye. She stepped off, lifted her board, and walked out of the surf.

She had her wetsuit stripped down to her hips by the time she rounded the dunes and got to the parking lot. The combination of sun and wind was already drying her skin. She leaned her board against the side of the Defender and reached under the rear wheel well for her key box.

It was gone.

She crouched down and looked at the asphalt around the tire for the magnetic box.

It was not there.

She leaned in, looking up into the well, hoping she had set the box in the wrong spot.

But it was gone.

“Fuck.”

She quickly got up and went to the door. She pulled the handle and the door opened, having been left unlocked.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck.”

There was the key and the magnetic box on the driver’s seat. She saw that the glove compartment was open. She leaned in, reached under the driver’s seat, and swept her hand back and forth on the carpet.

Her phone, gun, wallet, and badge were gone. She swept her hand farther under the seat and pulled out her handcuffs and a seven-shot Ruger boot gun that the thief had apparently missed.

She stood up and looked around the parking lot. No one was there. Just the row of cars and campers belonging to the surfers still out on the water.

“Fuck me,” she said.

2

With her wallet containing her ID card stolen, Ballard could not pass through the turnstile at the entrance of the LAPD’s Ahmanson Center, so she drove into the overflow lot behind the massive training center and called Colleen Hatteras on her new phone. Hatteras answered with an urgent tone.

“Renée, where are you? Wasn’t the unit meeting at nine?”

“I’m in the back lot. I want you to let me in the exit door, Colleen.”

“Are you sure? If the captain—”

“I’m sure. Just open the door and I’ll deal with the captain. Is everyone still there?”

“Uh, yes. I think Anders went to the cafeteria but he didn’t say anything about leaving.”

“Okay, tell Tom or Paul to get him while you open the door for me. I’ll be there in two.”

“Well, what happened? You didn’t call and didn’t answer our calls. We were starting to get worried.”

Ballard got out of the Defender and headed to the back door of the complex. She was already exasperated with Colleen and the day hadn’t even started.

“Calm down, Colleen,” she said. “Everything’s fine. I lost my phone and wallet at the beach. I had to go home to get a credit card and then hit the Apple Store to get a new phone. So please just open the door. I’m almost there and I’m hanging up now.”

She disconnected before Colleen could respond as Ballard knew she would. She walked up to the fire exit, pulling her jacket closed so maybe it would not be obvious that she had no badge clipped to her belt.

Colleen opened the door and an ear-piercing alarm sounded. Ballard quickly stepped in and pulled the door closed, and the sound cut off.

“How did you lose your phone and wallet? Were they stolen?”

“It’s a long story, Colleen. Is everyone here?”

“Tom went to get Anders.”

“Good. We’ll start as soon as they’re back.”

The fire exit was located behind the murder-book archive. Leading Colleen, Ballard walked along the back row of shelves to the bullpen of the Open-Unsolved Unit. The center of this area was dominated by the “raft”—eight interconnected desks with privacy partitions between them. The side walls of the bullpen were lined with file cabinets and mounted whiteboards on which current investigations were tracked.

“Sorry I’m late,” Ballard announced as she reached her desk at the end of the raft. “As soon as Tom and Anders are here, we’ll start.”

Ballard sat down and logged into her city computer terminal. She went through the department’s password portal and pulled up the database containing crime reports from the entire county. She searched for reports on thefts from vehicles at county beaches and soon was looking at several occurrences. From this she was able to cull a list of thefts that occurred at popular surfing beaches. From Trestles up to Dockweiler, Ballard had been surfing the Southern California coastline since she was sixteen years old. She knew every break and could see a pattern of BFMV—burglary from motor vehicle—reports occurring at places where she knew the parking facilities weren’t visible from the ocean.

This told her three things. One, this was likely the same thief or group of thieves. Two, they were familiar with surfing and probably were surfers themselves. And three, because the thefts were

spread out up and down the coast and across multiple police jurisdictions, the pattern had not been noticed by law enforcement. The thefts were seen as individual crimes.

Ballard started reading the summaries of the reports to see if any witnesses had seen anything helpful, if any suspects' fingerprints had been found, or if there was any follow-up to the initial reporting of the crimes. None of the thefts were large enough to warrant much interest from law enforcement. Wallets, phones, cash, and spare surfboards were the things most often stolen. Taken separately, Ballard knew, these cases likely died with the initial report. As protocol dictated, they would go to an auto-crimes desk somewhere, but without a description of a suspect, a fingerprint, or even a partial license plate of a getaway car, the reports would go into the great swirling maw of minor crimes that did not merit much attention from the criminal justice apparatus. It was the story of the modern age. Reports were taken largely for insurance purposes. As far as law enforcement went, it was a waste of paper.

Colleen stuck her head over the half wall separating Ballard's desk from her own. From her angle, she could not see Ballard's screen. "So, what are you working on?" she asked.

Ballard logged out of her search. "Just checking email," she said. "Is everybody ready?"

"Anders is here," Colleen said.

Ballard stood up to address the team.

3

Other than Ballard, who was a full-time sworn officer, the members of the Open-Unsolved Unit were all volunteers. Two years ago, following a law enforcement trend that had budget-challenged police departments across the country using retired detectives to investigate cold cases, Ballard had been placed in charge of the LAPD's previously mothballed unit. She was also the chief recruiter, which meant that she had to convince people to lend their skills to the noble effort at least one day a week, for which they received fifty dollars a month to cover expenses. She had finally reached a point where she was happy with the squad she had curated.

Gathered at the raft were Tom Laffont, FBI retired; Lilia Aghzafi, who had done twenty years with Vegas Metro; and Paul Masser, formerly a major crimes prosecutor with the district attorney's office. Colleen Hatteras had never been a police officer. She had been a stay-at-home mom who got hooked on genetic genealogy and took online courses in its application to law enforcement. She was a relentless warrior at the keyboard and at butting into the personal business of the other members of the team, with a primary focus on Ballard. She was also a self-described empath who never shied away from expressing the feelings she picked up from people. Ballard reluctantly put up with this because of Colleen's case-related skills.

The newest member of the unit was Anders Persson, who was even more of an outlier than Hatteras. His law enforcement experience was limited to volunteer work with the Swedish Police Authority in his hometown of Stockholm. But Persson, just twenty-eight years old, now used his computer skills to run an L.A.-based software company by night and assist the OU team by day. While Hatteras was the expert in running down family histories and genetic connections, Persson was the go-to guy when it came to navigating the internet and finding people who had gone to extreme lengths to avoid being found. Together, Hatteras and Persson were a formidable team that complemented those on the unit with real police and investigative experience. And while the unit

and Ballard were still recovering from a major hit to their reputations caused by an earlier case that had gone awry, Ballard felt the team was now humming like a well-tuned motor. The raft had room for two more volunteers, but Ballard was satisfied with what they were accomplishing. The unit cleared, on average, three cold-case murders a month. It was a drop in the bucket compared to the six thousand unsolved murders stored in the archive shelves behind the raft, but it was a solid start.

Ballard stepped over to the whiteboard wall to begin the meeting. Normally she would have left her suit jacket draped over her chair, but today she kept it on in an effort to hide the fact that she didn't have her badge.

Four side-by-side boards were used to track the cases that were in some level of play. Every Monday morning, the team gathered to discuss their progress. The first board listed all cases that contained evidence to be submitted for forensic and technological analysis. This primarily meant DNA, fingerprints, and, sometimes, ballistics. The application of DNA in criminal prosecutions had not been approved by the California courts until the early 1990s, and technology in genetic analysis had taken major strides forward in recent years. This made unsolved cases from the last three decades of the previous century fertile ground for review. Additionally, fingerprint databases had greatly expanded. The ballistics databases lagged behind these advances and were not as useful, but in gun cases they couldn't be ignored.

What put sand in the gas tank of the unit's well-tuned motor was that many of the cases were so old that the killers the team identified were already dead or incarcerated. This brought answers to grieving families, but it felt like justice that was too little too late. And the Open-Unsolved team were denied what every investigator wanted and needed at the end of a case: the opportunity to confront the evil behind the murder. This was why so-called live cases—where the killer was believed to be living and still out there—were the investigations the team rallied behind. Though the archive contained records of unsolved cases going back to the early 1900s, Ballard set a timeline and directed the team to work only on cases recorded since 1975.

Ballard scanned the first board to see if any new cases had been added. Every team member was charged with pulling cases from the archive and reviewing them for possible follow-up when not working on a current investigation.

“Okay, anybody add anything new to our in-play list?” she asked.

After a round-robin of negative responses from the raft, Laffont raised his hand. “I think I'll have one to add this week,” he said. “Expecting to hear something back from Darcy today—if I'm lucky.”

Darcy Troy was the DNA tech who handled cases from the Open-Unsolved Unit. It was good to have a go-to person at the lab, but Troy was not assigned solely to OU cases. Current investigations were always a priority, and Troy had to handle DNA analysis from those cases ahead of anything that came in from the raft. Sometimes the wait was frustrating.

“What's the case?” Ballard asked.

“A sexual assault and murder from '91,” Laffont said. “A bad one. Not that there are any good ones, but the guy assaulted her several times before he strangled her. Ejaculated outside the body but left something behind on her clothes. Darcy took it. Last week she said she'd have something this week.”

“Good,” Ballard said. “What's the vic's name?”

“Shaquilla Washington,” Laffont said. “A south-end case. Didn’t get much attention in the day.”

Ballard nodded. It went without saying that the archives were disproportionately heavy with cases that hadn’t gotten much attention because they were from minority communities on the city’s south and east sides. This could in part be explained by the fact that there were more murders in these communities and the detective workloads there were the heaviest in the city. But it could also be explained by a lack of commitment to those communities and an absence of empathy for the victims. Ballard had noticed neither of those deficiencies in Laffont. When he had the time to go into the archives and pull cases for review, he often looked for reports from the south side. He was white and in his late fifties, and he had seldom worked on the south side as an FBI agent assigned to the Los Angeles field office, and he saw his efforts now as a way to partly balance the scales. Ballard respected him for that.

“Hopefully Darcy comes through with something,” Ballard said.

She continued reviewing the boards and the cases with her crew, eventually coming to the last board, which listed the cases that were most active in terms of pending arrests, prosecutions, or closures. The last case on the list belonged to Masser.

It involved the murder of a clerk at a Hollywood convenience store in 1997. A man in a ski mask entered the store, told the clerk to put all the cash in the register on the counter, then fired a shot into her chest, killing her instantly. The man then jumped into a waiting car and escaped. According to various witnesses inside and outside the store, the getaway driver was a white woman with long black hair. The car was described as a maroon sedan, and one witness provided the first two digits of its license plate.

There was a video camera in the store, and a review of the tape revealed that the gun was fired while the suspect was gathering the cash the clerk had put on the counter. It appeared to be an accidental discharge and it shocked even the gunman; he had turned and run out of the store, leaving half the cash on the counter.

The license plate digits and car description eventually led investigators to a man named Donald Russell, who owned a maroon Honda Accord with a license plate beginning with those two digits. Russell was unemployed and had a history of drug-related arrests. He lived with his wife, who also had a record of drug arrests. She, however, had short blond hair. Both were questioned but denied involvement in the robbery and killing. They provided an alibi that the investigators could neither prove nor disprove. The detectives took the case to the district attorney’s office but prosecutors declined to file charges, saying there was not enough evidence to convince a jury and bring home a guilty verdict. But no further evidence was developed, and the case went cold—until Paul Masser of the Open-Unsolved Unit pulled the murder book off a shelf in the cold-case archive.

Masser reviewed the case and learned that it didn’t have the traditional kind of evidence that could jump-start a cold case. There were no fingerprints or DNA from the crime scene. The bullet had been collected from the fallen clerk’s body, but it did not lend itself to modern ballistic technology because it had flattened when it hit the victim’s spine; this made it useless for comparison with bullets in the national ballistic database. And no weapon had ever been recovered to compare the bullet with.

Masser located the suspects, still living in Los Angeles, and learned two things that could prove useful a quarter century after the killing. The first was that the couple were no longer a couple; they had divorced five years after the murder. The second, which he discovered through social media,

was that the now ex-wife, Maxine Russell, was a recovering addict who had recently celebrated twenty years of sobriety, according to her Facebook page.

Masser, drawing on his experience as a prosecutor, knew that the couple's divorce meant that statutory spousal privilege was no longer in play. The rule held that a wife or husband could not testify against their spouse without that spouse's approval. But the protection was limited to the years of the marriage, which meant there was an opportunity to pit the former husband and wife against each other. Masser, drawing on his experience with an addicted family member in recovery, knew that most rehab programs encouraged participants to keep journals as part of their steps toward sobriety.

With information gathered in the original investigation, Masser drew up a search warrant for the apartment where Maxine Russell now lived and convinced a judge to sign it. The warrant included all journals and documents written by the suspect. On a shelf in the living room, Masser found several journals Maxine had kept dating back to the beginning of her sobriety. He read the journals and found one entry describing the robbery gone wrong and another expressing Maxine's guilt at having been involved in the taking of a life, even though she claimed it had been an accident.

Maxine had been arrested two weeks ago, and she was still in jail, unable to afford a bond on bail set at two million dollars. The department low-keyed the arrest and it had so far escaped media attention. It was now time for Masser to move forward with the second part of the case strategy.

"I'm going to meet with John this afternoon," Masser told the group. "We're going to go to Maxine's lawyer and see if she wants to deal. After two weeks, she is probably getting the idea that incarceration is not how she wants to spend the rest of her life."

"John" was John Lewin, the deputy DA assigned to prosecute cases from the Open-Unsolved Unit. In the news coverage that solved cold cases often brought, the local media had dubbed him "the King of Cold Cases."

"Has she called her ex-husband from the jail?" Ballard asked.

"Not on the recorded lines," Masser said. "I doubt he knows she's been arrested."

"What's John going to offer her?" Laffont asked.

"I don't know where he'll start but he told me he'll go to full immunity," Masser said. "If she delivers the ex."

"And you think she'll go for it?" Laffont said.

"Yeah, I do," Masser said. "I tried to pull the divorce file but it's sealed. But twice since the divorce, she's asked for restraining orders against him. It doesn't look like she has a whole lot of love for him anymore. She's going to flip."

"Hope so," Ballard said. "Let me know when you know."

"Roger that," Masser said.

"Okay, then, that's it," Ballard said. "Sorry I was late and I appreciate everybody sticking around. Let's dig down and make cases."

Ballard always ended the weekly meeting with the same message, taken from a Muse song she loved: "Dig down." The words were on a sign on the wall of her pod. It was her code when it came to both life and cases.