

The Burning Room

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One

It seemed to Bosch to be a form of torture heaped upon torture. Corazon was hunched over the steel table, her bloody and gloved hands deep inside the gutted torso, working with forceps and a long bladed instrument she called the butter knife. Corazon was not tall and she stood on her tiptoes to be able to reach down and in with her tools. She braced her hip against the side of the autopsy table to gain leverage.

What bothered Bosch about the grisly tableau was that the body had already been so violated for so long. Both legs gone, one arm taken at the shoulder, the surgical scars old but somehow raw and red. The man's mouth was open in a silent scream. His eyes were directed upward as if beseeching his God for mercy. Deep down Bosch knew that the dead were the dead and they no longer suffered the cruelties of life, but even so, he felt like saying, *Enough is enough*. Asking, When does it stop? Shouldn't death be the relief from the tortures of life?

But he didn't say anything. He stood mute and just watched like he had hundreds of times before. More important than his outrage and the desire to speak out against the continuing atrocity inflicted on Orlando Merced was Bosch's need for the bullet Corazon was trying to pry loose from the dead man's spine.

Corazon dropped back on her heels to rest. She blew out her breath and temporarily fogged her spatter shield. She glanced at Bosch through the steamed plastic.

“Almost there,” she said. “And I’ll tell you what, they were right not to try to take it out back then. They would have had to saw entirely through T-twelve.”

Bosch just nodded, knowing she was referring to one of the vertebrae.

She turned to the table, where her instruments were spread out.

“I need something else...,” she said.

She put the butter knife in a stainless-steel sink, where a running faucet kept the water level to the overflow drain. She then moved her hand to the left of the sink and across the display of sterilized tools until she chose a long, slender pick. She went back to work with her hands in the hollow of the victim’s torso. All the organs and intestines had been removed, weighed, and bagged, leaving just the husk formed by the upturned ribs. She went up on her toes again and used her upper-body strength and the steel pick to finally pop the bullet loose from the spinal column. Bosch heard it rattle loose inside the rib cage.

“Got it!”

She pulled her arms out of the hollow, put down the pick, and sprayed the forceps with the hose attached to the table. She then held the instrument up to examine her find. She tapped the floor button for the recorder with her foot and went on the record.

“A projectile appearing to be a large-caliber bullet was removed from the anterior T-twelve vertebrae. It is in damaged condition with severe flattening. I will mark with my initials and turn over to Detective Hieronymus Bosch with the Open-Unsolved Unit of the Los Angeles Police Department.”

She tapped the recorder button with her foot again and they were off the record. She smiled at him through her plastic screen.

“Sorry, Harry, you know me, a stickler for formalities.”

“I didn’t think you’d even remember.”

He and Corazon had once had a brief romance but that was a long time ago and very few people knew his real full name.

“Of course I would,” she said in mock protest.

There was almost an aura of humility about Teresa Corazon that had not been there in the past. She had been a climber and had eventually gotten what she wanted—the chief medical examiner’s post and all of its trappings, including a reality television show. But when one reaches the top of a public agency, one becomes a politician, and politicians fall out of favor. Teresa eventually fell hard and now she was back where she started, a deputy coroner with a caseload like anyone else in the office. At least they had let her keep her private autopsy suite. For now.

She took the bullet over to the counter, where she marked it with an indelible black pen. Bosch was ready with a small plastic evidence bag and she dropped it in. He then marked the bag with both of their initials, a chain-of-custody routine. He noted the heft of the slug. He believed it had come from a rifle. If so, that would be a significant new piece of information in the case.

“Will you stay for the rest, or was that all you wanted?”

She asked it as if there were something else going on between them. He held up the evidence bag.

“I think I should probably get this going. We’ve got a lot of eyes on this case.”

“Right. Well, then, I’ll just finish up by myself. What happened to your partner anyway? Wasn’t she here with you in the hall?”

“She had to make a call.”

“Oh, I thought maybe she wanted us to have some alone time. Did you tell her about us?”

She smiled and batted her eyes and Bosch looked away awkwardly.

“No, Teresa. You know I don’t talk about stuff like that.”

She nodded.

“You never did. You’re a man who keeps his secrets.”

He looked back at her.

“I try,” he said. “Besides, that was a long time ago.”

“And the flame’s gone out, hasn’t it?”

He pushed things back on subject.

“On the cause. You’re not seeing anything different from what the hospital is reporting, right?”

Corazon shook her head, able to move back as well.

“No, nothing different here. Sepsis. Blood poisoning, to use the more common phrase. Put that in your press release.”

“And you have no trouble linking this back to the shooting? You could testify to that?”

She was nodding before Bosch was finished speaking.

“Mr. Merced died because of blood poisoning, but I am listing cause of death as homicide. This was a nine-year murder, Harry, and I will gladly testify to that. I hope that bullet helps you find the killer.”

Bosch nodded and closed his hand around the plastic bag containing the bullet.

“I hope so too,” he said.

Two

Bosch took the elevator up to the ground floor. In the past few years the county had spent thirty million dollars renovating the coroner’s office but the elevators moved just as slowly as ever. He found Lucia Soto on the back loading dock, leaning against an empty gurney and looking at her phone. She glanced up as Bosch approached and then stood up hurriedly like a kid who’d been caught doing something wrong.

“Got it,” Bosch said.

He held up the evidence bag containing the bullet. Soto took it and studied the bullet through the plastic for a moment. A couple of body movers came up behind her and pulled the empty gurney toward the door of what was known as the Big Crypt. It was a new addition to the complex, a refrigerated space the size of a Mayfair Market where all of the bodies that came in were staged before being scheduled for autopsy.

“It’s big,” Soto said.

Bosch nodded.

“I’m thinking we’re looking for a rifle,” he said.

“It looks like it’s in pretty bad shape,” Soto said. “Mushroomed.”

She handed the bag back and Bosch put it in his coat pocket.

“There’s enough there for a comparison, I think,” he said. “Enough for us to get lucky.”

The men behind Soto opened the door of the Big Crypt to wheel the gurney in. Cold air carrying a disagreeable chemical scent blasted across the loading dock. Soto turned in time to see a glimpse of the giant refrigerated room. Row after row of bodies stacked four high on a stainless-steel scaffolding system. The dead were wrapped in opaque plastic sheeting, their feet exposed, toe tags flapping in the breeze from the refrigeration vents.

Soto quickly turned away, her naturally brown face turning white.

“You okay?” Bosch asked.

“Yes, fine,” she said quickly. “That just grosses me out.”

“It’s actually a big improvement. The bodies used to be lined up in the hallways. Sometimes stacked on top of one another after a busy weekend. It got pretty ripe around here.”

She held a hand up to stop him from further description.

“Please, are we done?”

“We’re done.”

He started moving and Soto followed, falling in a step behind him. She tended to walk behind Bosch, and he didn’t know if it was some sort of deferential thing to his age

and rank or something else, like a confidence issue. He headed to the steps at the end of the dock. It was a shortcut to the visitor parking lot.

“Where do we go?” she asked.

“We get the slug over to firearms,” Bosch said. “Speaking of getting lucky—it’s walk-in Wednesday. Then we go pick up the murder book and evidence at Hollenbeck. We take it from there.”

“Okay.”

They went down the steps and started crossing the employee parking lot. The visitor lot was on the side of the building.

“Did you make your call?” Bosch asked.

“What?” Soto asked, confused.

“You said you had to make a call.”

“Oh, yes, I did. Sorry about that.”

“No problem. You get what you need?”

“Yes, thanks.”

Bosch was guessing that there had been no call. He suspected that Soto wanted to skip out on the autopsy because she had never seen a human body hollowed out before. Soto was new not only to the Open-Unsolved Unit but to homicide work as well. This was the third case she had worked with Bosch and the only one with a death fresh enough for an autopsy. Soto probably hadn’t been counting on live autopsies when she signed up to work cold cases.

In recent years the crime rate in Los Angeles had decreased markedly across the board, including and most dramatically in the number of homicides. This had spurred a

shift within the LAPD's investigative philosophy and practice. With fewer active murder cases, the department increased its emphasis on clearing cold cases. With more than five thousand unsolved murders on the books in the past fifty years, there was plenty of work to go around. The Open-Unsolved Unit had nearly tripled in size over the course of the previous year and now had its own command staff, including a captain and two lieutenants. Many seasoned detectives were brought in from Homicide Special and other elite units within the Robbery-Homicide Division. Also a class of young detectives with little if any investigative experience was brought in. The philosophy and edict handed down from the tenth-floor OCP—Office of the Chief of Police—was that it was a new world out there, with new technologies and new ways to look at things. While nothing beats investigative experience, there is nothing wrong with combining it with new viewpoints and different life experiences.

These new detectives—the “Mod Squad,” as they were derisively called by some—got the choice assignment to the Open-Unsolved Unit for a variety of reasons ranging from political connections to particular acumen and skills to rewards for heroism in the line of duty. One of the new detectives had worked in IT for a hospital chain before becoming a cop and was instrumental in solving the murder of a patient through a computerized prescription delivery system. Another had studied chemistry as a Rhodes Scholar. There was even a detective who was formerly an investigator with the Haitian National Police.

Soto was only twenty-eight years old and had been on the force fewer than five years. She made the jump from a one-stripe patrol officer to detective by being a twofer. She was second-generation Mexican-American and spoke both English and Spanish

fluently. That fit nicely with the new philosophy of the OCP. But she also punched a more traditional ticket to the detective ranks when she became an overnight media sensation after a deadly shoot-out with armed robbers at a check-cashing store in Pico-Union. She and her partner engaged four gunmen. Her partner was fatally shot but Soto took down two of the robbers and held the second pair pinned in an alley until SWAT arrived and finished the capture. The gunmen were members of 13th Street, one of the most violent gangs operating in the city, and Soto's heroics were splashed across newspapers, websites, and television screens. She was later awarded the department's Medal of Valor. Her partner received the award as well, posthumously.

Captain Greg Malins, the new commander of the Open-Unsolved Unit, decided the best way to handle the influx of new blood into the unit was to split up all the existing partnerships and pair every detective who had OU experience with a new detective who had none. Bosch was the oldest man in the unit and had the most years on the job. As such he was paired with the youngest—Soto.

“Harry, you're the old pro,” Malins had explained. “I want you watching over the rookie.”

While Bosch didn't particularly care to be reminded of his age and standing, he was nonetheless happy with the assignment. He was entering what would be his last year with the department, as the clock was ticking on his DROP contract. To him, every day he had left on the job was golden. The hours were like diamonds—as valuable as anything on earth. He thought that it might be a good way to finish things, training an inexperienced detective and passing on whatever it was he had to pass on. When Malins told him his new partner would be Lucia Soto, Bosch was pleased. Like everybody else

in the department, he had heard of Soto's exploits in the shoot-out. Bosch knew what it was like to kill someone in the line of duty, as well as to lose a partner. He understood the mixture of grief and guilt that would afflict Soto. He thought that he and Soto could work well together and that he might train her to be a solid investigator.

There was also a nice bonus for Bosch in being teamed with Soto. Because she was a female, he would not have to share a hotel room when on the road on a case. They would get their own rooms. This was a big thing. The travel component to a job on the cold case squad was high. Oftentimes those who think they have gotten away with murder leave town, hoping that by putting physical distance between themselves and their crimes, they are also outdistancing the reach of the police. Now Bosch looked forward to finishing his time in the department without having to share a bathroom or put up with the snoring or other emissions from a partner in a cramped double at a Holiday Inn.

Soto might not have been hesitant when pulling her gun while outnumbered in a barrio alley, but watching a live autopsy was something different. Soto had seemed reluctant that morning when Bosch told her they had caught a live one and had to go to the ME's office for an autopsy. Soto's first question was whether it was required that both partners in an investigative team attend the dissection of the body. With most cold cases, the body was long in the ground and the only dissection involved was the analysis of old records and evidence. Open-Unsolved allowed Soto to work the most important cases—murders—without having to view a live autopsy, or for that matter, a homicide scene.

Or so it seemed until that morning, when Bosch got the call at home from Malins.

The captain asked Bosch if he had read the *Los Angeles Times* that morning and Bosch said he didn't get the paper. This was in keeping with the long-standing tradition of disdain that existed between the two institutions of law enforcement and the media.

The captain then proceeded to tell him about a story on the front page that morning that was the origin of a new assignment for Bosch and Soto. As Bosch listened, he opened his laptop and went to the newspaper's website, where the story was similarly receiving a lot of play.

The newspaper was reporting that Orlando Merced had died. Nine years earlier, Merced became famous in Los Angeles as a victim—the unintended target of a shooting at Mariachi Plaza in Boyle Heights. The bullet that struck Merced in the abdomen had traveled across the plaza from the vicinity of Pleasant Avenue and was thought to have been a stray shot from a gang confrontation.

The shooting occurred at 4 p.m. on a Saturday. Merced was thirty-one years old at the time and a member of a mariachi band for which he played the *vihuela*, the five-string guitarlike instrument that is the mainstay of the traditional Mexican folk sound. He and his three bandmates were among several mariachis waiting in the plaza for jobs—a restaurant gig or a *quinceañera* party or maybe a last-minute wedding. Merced was a large man, thick in the middle, and the bullet that seemingly came from nowhere splintered the mahogany facing of his instrument and then tore through his gut before lodging in his anterior spine.

Merced would have become just another victim in a city where the media hits and runs—a thirty-second story on the English news channels, a four-paragraph report in the *Times*, a little more longevity in the Spanish media.

But a simple twist of fate changed that. Merced and his band, *Los Reyes Jalisco*, had performed three months earlier at the wedding of city councilman Armando Zeyas, and Zeyas was now ramping up a campaign for the mayor's office.

Merced lived. The bullet damaged his spine and rendered him both a paraplegic and a cause. As the mayoral campaign took shape, Zeyas rolled him out in his wheelchair at all of his political rallies and speeches. He used Merced as the symbol of neglect suffered by the communities of East Los Angeles. Crime was high, and police attention low—they had yet to catch Merced's shooter. Gang violence was unchecked, basic city services and long-planned projects like the extension of the Metro Gold Line were long delayed. Zeyas promised to be the mayor who would change that, and he used Merced and East L.A. to forge a base and strategy that separated him from a crowded pack of contenders. He made it to the runoff and then easily took the election. All the way, Merced was by his side, sitting in the wheelchair, clad in his *charro* suit and sometimes even wearing the bloodstained blouse he wore on the day of the shooting.

Zeyas served two terms. East L.A. got new attention from the city and the police. Crime went down. The Gold Line went through—even including an underground stop at Mariachi Plaza—and the mayor basked in the glow of his successes. But the person who shot Orlando Merced was never caught, and over time the bullet took a steady toll on his body. Infections led to numerous hospitalizations and surgeries. First he lost one leg, then the other. Adding insult to injury, the arm that once strummed the instrument that produced the rhythms of Mexican folk music was taken.

And, finally, Orlando Merced had died.

“The ball’s in our court now,” Malins had said to Bosch. “I don’t care what the goddamn newspaper says, *we* have to decide if this is a homicide. If his death can be attributed medically to that shooting nine years ago, then we make a case and you and Lucky Lucy go back into it.”

“Got it.”

“The autopsy’s gotta say homicide or this whole thing dies with Merced. No matter what the fucking *Times* says about it.”

“Got it.”

Bosch never turned down a case, because he knew he was running out of cases. But he had to wonder why Malins was giving the Merced investigation to him and Soto. He knew from the start that it was suspected that the bullet that had struck Merced had come from a gang gun. This meant the new investigation would almost wholly center on White Fence and the other prominent East L.A. gangs that traversed Boyle Heights. It was essentially going to be a Spanish-language case, and while Soto was obviously fluent, Bosch had limited skills in the language. He could order off a taco truck and tell a suspect to drop to his knees and put his hands behind his head. But conducting careful interviews and even interrogations in Spanish was not in his skill set. That would fall to Soto, and she, in his estimation, didn’t have the chops for it yet. There were at least two other teams in the unit that had Spanish speakers with more investigative experience. Malins should have gone with one of them.

The fact that Malins had not gone with the obvious and correct choice made Bosch suspicious. On one hand, the directive to put the Bosch-Soto team on the case could have come from the OCP. It would be a media-sensitive investigation, and having

Soto, the hero cop, on the case might help mold a positive media response to the investigation. A darker alternative was that perhaps Malins wanted the Bosch-Soto team to fail and very publicly undercut the police chief's edict to break with tradition and experience when he formed the new Open-Unsolved Unit. The chief's jumping of several young and inexperienced officers over veteran detectives waiting for slots in RHD squads did not go over well within the rank and file. Maybe Malins was out to embarrass the chief for doing it.

Bosch tried to push speculation about motives aside as they rounded the corner and entered the visitor parking lot. He thought about the plan for the day and realized that they were probably less than a mile from Hollenbeck Station and even closer to Mariachi Plaza. They could take Mission down to 1st and then go under the 101. Ten minutes tops. He decided to reverse the order of stops that he had told Soto they would make.

They were halfway through the lot to the car when Bosch heard Soto's name called from behind them. He turned to see a woman crossing the employee lot, holding a wireless microphone. Behind her a cameraman struggled to keep his camera up while he negotiated his way between cars.

"Shit," Bosch said.

Bosch looked around to see if there were others. Someone—maybe Corazon—had tipped the media.

Bosch recognized the woman but he could not remember from which news show or press conference. But he didn't know her and she didn't know him. She went right to Soto with the microphone. Soto was the better-known quantity when it came to the media.

“Detective Soto, Katie Ashton, Channel Five, do you remember me?”

“Uh, I think...”

“Has Orlando Merced’s death officially been ruled a homicide?”

“Not yet,” Bosch said quickly, even though he was not on camera.

Both the camera and the reporter turned to him. This was not what he wanted, to be on the news. But he did want to get a few steps ahead of the media on the case.

“The Coroner’s Office is evaluating Mr. Merced’s medical records and will make a decision on that. We hope to know something very soon.”

“Will this restart the investigation of Mr. Merced’s shooting?”

“The case is still open and that’s all I have to say at this time.”

Without further word Ashton turned ninety degrees to her right and brought the microphone under Soto’s chin.

“Detective Soto, you were awarded the department’s Medal of Valor for the Pico-Union shoot-out. Are you now gunning for whoever shot Orlando Merced?”

Soto seemed momentarily nonplussed, then replied.

“I am not gunning for anyone.”

Bosch pushed past the videographer, who had swung around to film over Ashton’s left shoulder. He got to Soto and turned her toward their car.

“That’s it,” he said. “No further comment. Call media relations if you want anything else.”

They left the reporter and videographer there and walked quickly to the car. Bosch got into the driver’s seat.

“Good answer,” he said as he turned the ignition.

“What do you mean?” Soto responded.

“Your answer to her about gunning for the Merced shooter.”

“Oh.”

They drove out onto Mission and headed south. When they were a few blocks clear of the coroner’s office, Bosch pulled to the curb and stopped. He held out his hand to Soto.

“Let me see your phone for a second,” he said.

“What do you mean?” Soto asked.

“Let me see your phone. You said you had to make a call when I went into the autopsy. I want to see if you called that reporter. I can’t have a partner who’s addicted to or feeding the media.”

“No, Harry, I didn’t call her.”

“Good, then let me see your phone.”

Soto indignantly handed him her cell phone. It was an iPhone, same as Harry had. He opened up the call record. Soto had not made a call since the previous evening. And the last call she had received had been from Bosch that morning, telling her about the case they had just caught.

“Did you text her?”

He opened the text app and saw the most recent text was to someone named Maria. It was in Spanish. He held the phone up to his partner.

“Who’s this? What’s it say?”

“It’s to my friend. Look, I didn’t want to go in that room, okay?”

Bosch looked at her.

“What room? What are you—”

“The autopsy. I didn’t want to have to watch that.”

“So you lied to me?”

“I’m sorry, Harry. It’s embarrassing. I don’t think I can take that.”

Bosch handed the phone back.

“Just don’t lie to me, Lucia.”

He checked the side mirror and pulled away from the curb. They were silent until they got down to 1st Street and Bosch moved into the left-turn lane. Soto realized they were not heading to the regional crime lab with the bullet.

“Where are we going?”

“We’re in the neighborhood. I thought we’d check out Mariachi Plaza for a few minutes, then go to Hollenbeck for the murder book.”

“I see. What about firearms?”

“We’ll do it after. Is this related to the shoot-out—your not wanting to go to the autopsy?”

“No. I mean, I don’t know. I just didn’t want to see that, that’s all.”

Bosch let it go for the time being. Two minutes later they were approaching Mariachi Plaza and Bosch saw two TV trucks parked at the curb with their transmitters cranked up for live reports.

“They’re really jumping all over this,” he said. “We’ll come back later.”

He drove on by. A half mile later they came to the Hollenbeck Station. Brand-new and modern, with angled glass panels creating a facade that reflected the sun in multiple

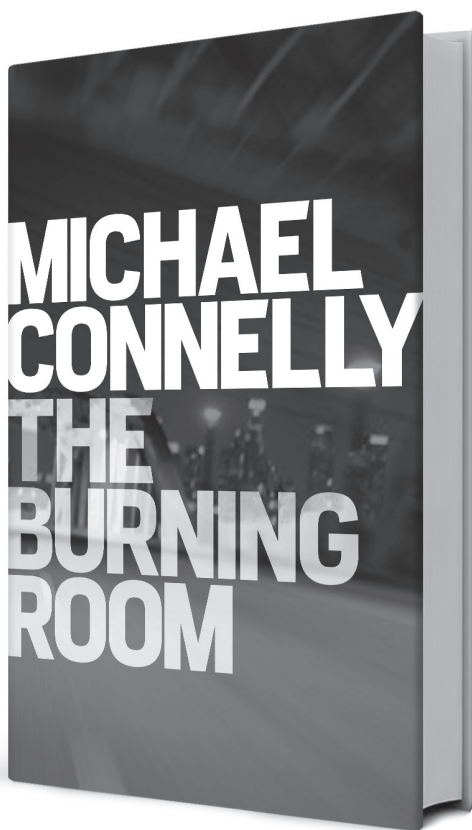
angles, it looked more like some sort of corporate office than a police station. Bosch pulled into the visitor lot and killed the engine.

“This is going to be pleasant,” he said.

“What do you mean?” Soto asked.

“You’ll see.”

A cold case unlike any other.



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