

Wednesday, October 1
5:05 a.m.

I pulled off Western Avenue and into the empty parking lot of Great Redeemer Church of God in Christ.

The Dodge Neon was parked in the alley, near the garbage bins, almost invisible in the fog. The car's windows were white with condensation—it had been sitting there all night.

I parked in a space a few feet away and waited to meet “T.H.”

No one exited the Neon.

Western Avenue . . . This South Los Angeles street was always mentioned in the papers and on the six o'clock news.

Four killed on Western in a gang-related shooting.

Seventy-six-year-old grandmother raped in her home off Western.

And yet here I was.

I didn't rush to leave my car—I barely hit five feet four and have the muscle mass of a Rice Krispies Treat. Besides, my car had a robust heater, seat warmers, satellite radio, and an SOS satellite system in the event of car trouble. Why leave all that, especially with all the fog and all those crime stats—*seventeen rapes and six murders in the last five months.*

Maybe T.H. left to get coffee.

I plucked my iPhone from the cup holder and sent T.H. a text message. *I'm here now. Parked across from you.* I hit Send but the bar above the message stalled.

Ah.

No reception. A dead zone.

At 5:15, I opened my car door.

The rank odor of urine assaulted me. That and the stench of spilled beer and sour-sweet rotting meat.

I threw a few nervous glances up and down the alley. Cold, dead air pushed me from all sides. *Nothing will happen to me. I'm at a church. I'm protected by angels with swords and . . .*

Rustling sounds, and buzzing, lots of buzzing, came from the Dumpsters just ten yards away from me. To my left and a block down, mechanical squeaking, like a shopping cart wheel that needed oil, pierced the air.

Something brushed against my ankle.

I yelped, hopped, and scanned the wet asphalt with wide eyes.

There it is!

A rat the size of a rabbit waddled past me and headed to the garbage bins.

The mechanical squeaking sounded closer than before. A bright white light flashed—I saw it out of the corner of my eye. Wasn't much. Small. Quick.

I peered in that direction but saw nothing.

Just my imagination.

I turned back to the Neon.

No one had left the car.

I waved in its direction to let T.H. know that I was Syeeda McKay, the writer who had answered the text message and had driven in the dark to this neighborhood to meet someone I didn't know.

The Neon's door didn't open.

I muttered "Crap," and waited with my keys held between my knuckles.

Once upon a time, my father had been a bus driver, and his route had been up and down Western, passing car washes, elementary schools, chicken joints, Baptist churches, Laundromats, motels, motor inns, pawn shops, Koreatown, Little Armenia. Over the course of his thirty-year career, he had been jumped and shot at countless times. He had broken up fights, rescued abandoned babies, and prevented late-night rapes, all of which happened on his bus. The violence didn't kill my father. The cigarettes did.

I glanced at the phone's clock—5:25—then mumbled, "This is crazy." I stomped over to the Neon and into a cloud of flies, the source of that crazy-loud buzzing. I tried swatting them away. Too many.

"Hey!" I shouted at the driver's-side window. "You in there?" I swiped the glass with my jacket sleeve.

Empty seat. No T.H.

Are you kidding me? I've been waiting out here since—

I glanced over the top of the car, to the giant Dumpsters filled with trash. My gaze dropped to the wet asphalt.

An ocean of rats swarmed over a pair of brown legs. A woman's legs.

I quickstepped around the Neon, heart in my throat, and darted to the woman on the ground. "Hey! *Hey!*" A wave of nausea washed over me as I kept swatting at those flies. The rats bumped and crawled over my shoes, skittered and scratched against my bare ankles. I screamed in my head, and held my breath to block those rotting alley smells. Tried to avoid the puddle of goopy liquid oozing toward the toes of my sneakers, knowing that it was blood. Her blood.

A trash bag had been dumped on top of the woman.

I pulled it off.

Her face was shattered. One glassy dead eye stared at the dark sky. The second eye . . . Where was the second eye?

God help me.

On April Fool's Day, 130 *Los Angeles Times* staffers were laid off due to "steep revenue declines." Two crime reporters were a part of that number, and I was one of those two. Initially, I hadn't been too upset—I wouldn't have to visit dark alleys in the worst parts of town when the sky was still wet. So, yeah. Cool. I had already published two novels, and had written and sold the screenplay of novel number two to my movie-director big brother, Kenny. With the film's release and my severance package, I had enough money to forge a freelance writing career. I could chase my own stories. Make my own hours. But at 1:28 this morning, a text message had pulled me from sleep.

Have info re Phantom Slayer. Meet @ 6561 Western 5 am. Im in the silver neon. T.H.

My first thought? *Who the hell is T.H.?*

My second thought? *A meeting at five-freakin'-o'clock in the morning?* I had just finished hosting a spa party, and my friends had trudged out of my house a little after midnight.

But T.H. had information about the Phantom Slayer. And since no one, including me, knew much about the Slayer, I needed to make this meeting with T.H., whoever the heck that was.

I did know that in 1990, the Slayer murdered a prostitute named Angie Kane in an alley off Western Avenue. He had left DNA in her mouth—semen. But forensic investigators could not match his DNA profile with anything in the state or federal databases.

So, Angie's killer eluded the police—blame budget cuts and backlog.

In 2005, some paper-pushing number cruncher in the city council's finance department found money in the couch cushions, and detectives scored twenty extra dollars to put more effort into solving Angie's and other cold cases. Investigators studied backlogged bullets as well as hair and skin fragments from unsolved murders. They found matches in bullet striations from homicides committed in 1990, 1991, 1994, 1995, 2000, and 2001. The same gun had been used in all six crimes, and each victim had worked as a prostitute on Western Avenue.

The Slayer then murdered two more prostitutes—one in 2006 and another in 2007.

I had been the investigative reporter who broke the story of these murders. A deputy medical examiner in the coroner's office (and a family friend) tipped me to a string of body dumps off Western Avenue going back eighteen years. With his help, I discovered those matching bullets and the identities of the victims.

Los Angeles had a new serial killer.

No one in the police department shared this information with the public. Not one press conference was held. Not one press release was written and distributed. The police chief refused to discuss these deaths with the public and ignored each of my interview requests. Guess he didn't appreciate me telling *Times* readers about the secret task force of detectives that had been formed to find the monster. Guess he didn't like that I had named the killer "the Phantom Slayer."

We don't discuss ongoing cases. That's what his press officer told me.

People should know. That's what I told him. And I would publish my stories with or without the LAPD's help.

With great reluctance, detectives offered me a deal. They'd share bits of information about the case only if I heeded certain conditions. Like, "you can't mention any weapon specifics" and "you can't mention any current suspects."

I took the deal.

Profilers, including my sister, Eva, who worked for the FBI, believed that the Slayer knew this part of the city well. They hypothesized that he was an educated black man now in his forties. That he succeeded because he blended in with the community. His M.O. was simple: He killed in the alleys of South Los Angeles, left filled trash bags over his victims—always prostitutes—then disappeared into the shadows.

I now stood in one of those alleys off Western Avenue, behind Great Redeemer Church of God in Christ, as police officers armed with ribbons of yellow crime-scene tape swarmed the church parking lot. I pulled at the dry skin on my bottom lip and waited for someone to shoo me away, but no one seemed interested enough. The detectives were clustered together near the victim's car. Patrol cops had finished cordoning off the murder site and were now monitoring the small crowd.

My eyes darted to the Dumpsters, to the gawkers, to the spaces between the patrol cars and emergency vehicles. I couldn't shake that feeling of being watched.

Someone tapped my shoulder.

I startled and spun around.

"Ma'am, you need this?" A redheaded paramedic offered me the blanket in his hands.

I whispered, "No, thanks," then watched him amble back to the ambulance.

Clean white light burned from the forensic team's halogen lamps. Those lights and that fog made it hard to see the church's bright white cross. The large storage containers and Dumpsters looked like elephants huddled in the mist. The bars atop the patrol cars lost their urgency—soft pink, no longer bloodred. That yellow tape had no bite, those black words CRIME SCENE DO NOT CROSS suggesting and not demanding.

I glanced at my phone: 6:02.

Too early in the day to think about NASH reports.

Natural, accident, suicide, or homicide?

Geez, officer, I wanted to say to the first cop on the scene, I don't know. I'm just a writer, and she was like that when I got here. Got a cigarette?

I snapped at the rubber band around my left wrist (an intervention to kick my two-packs-a-day habit) and winced as the elastic popped against my skin.

Cigarettes: bad.

I glanced at my car, a late-model Mercedes-Benz now part of a crime scene. In early September, two weeks after my breast cancer surgery, I had purchased it with money left from the movie deal. I considered the Benz a "life" gift . . . Or a "death" gift . . . My perspective shifted every day.

"Sweet, sweet Sy."

I turned to Detective Adam Sherwood. He held a blanket in one hand and a small steno pad in the other.

Today he looked more like his black mother than his white father. Maybe it was the strange morning light. Maybe it was the way he said, "*Sweet, sweet Sy.*" More Barry White than Barry Manilow.

Adam was a detective in the Robbery-Homicide Division of the Los Angeles Police Department, specifically the division's Homicide Special Section. HSS detectives spent the bulk

of their careers working the city's high-profile cases, like the Manson family murders, the Hillside Strangler case, and the O. J. Simpson fiasco. He now headed the formerly secret 320 Task Force charged with finding the Slayer, the third detective to lead the investigation. His predecessors had abandoned the hunt without much luck or much hair.

But Adam had a law degree and a ninety percent success rate in solving cases. If he couldn't unravel this mystery, then we were all S.O.L.

"You can't be here right now," Adam said as he draped the wool blanket across my shoulders. At a solid six feet three, he towered over me, a green-eyed mulatto Superman wearing an off-the-rack Armani suit.

My hands shook as I held up the faded press pass dangling from the cord around my neck. It belonged to Steve Tupper, a journalist (and ex-boyfriend) now working the AP desk in Frankfurt. No one had ever cared to check the validity of the pass—*Why is a black woman wielding a white man's I.D.?* But if someone studied it too long, I would smile and ask what cologne he wore. I'd compliment her shoes, her handbag, or his deep, deep voice. Drops of flattery that blurred the eyes of the Keepers of the Gate and got me all I needed.

Adam peered at the photo on the pass and chuckled.

"Couldn't find mine," I said, pulling the blanket closer. "And it was too early in the morning to look."

"Not that your pass means anything now," he said.

"I'm still on payroll until December."

"Great. But you gotta move behind the—"

"I'm not moving from this spot. I found her and I sure as hell ain't letting some bitch from the *Sentinel* steal my story."

"I'm not tryin' to break your crayons, Sy, but this is a crime—"

"I know what it is. I'm not moving."

"You look a little pale," he said with a cocked eyebrow. "And you're shaking." He reached to touch my face. "Are those dried tears on your—?"

I swatted his hand. "Make fun of me all you want, but I'm not moving."

He turned to look at the cadre of detectives clustered together. They all stood back as forensic investigators from the coroner's office processed the crime scene. By the cops' sideway glances at the lab techs, and the lab techs' glares at the cops, I could tell that the LAPD had touched too much.

My gaze moved past them and back to the trash bins, to the church and those empty spaces. Still searching for those eyes that had been trained on me since my arrival.

"If you make me leave," I said to Adam, "I'll write the most explosive story yet to be written about the Slayer. And I'll organize a press conference for the victims' families, too. You know those families: They're the ones you continue to keep in the dark—"

"Just stop, okay? Let me think." He swiped his pointy long nose and clicked his teeth.

"I won't publish the next article until I run it past you first," I said, tamping down the desperation in my voice.

He grinned. "Same song, different verse."

"I'll acknowledge you in the book, just like I've done in the articles." I paused, and added, "Well, I'll acknowledge you once you solve the crime and give me an ending so that I can finish the book. Again, solving the crime is imperative here. Maybe Lou can help me."

Adam rolled his eyes. "Your girl is a divisional detective. What the hell would she know about this case? Look, I know you're frustrated, and I know you wish I would wrap everything

up by the end of the year, but if wishes were fishes . . . As for acknowledging me, you've already used that bribe."

"And I've never broken my word. Professionally."

He smiled, but said nothing.

"If I come across any new information that advances the investigation, I'll pass it on to you immediately." I arched an eyebrow. "You'll be one step closer to solving a case that's kicking your ass."

"Who says it's kicking my ass?"

I shrugged. "Just an observation. Just another dead woman in an alley."

A blue and white coroner's van rumbled to the perimeter and parked. Three morgue attendants hopped out and hustled to the van's back doors.

Adam pointed to me. "Don't touch anything and don't leave."

I nodded, exhaled. "I'll stay out of your way."

He strode toward the Neon and whistled to his team. "All right, fellas. Let's do this."

The driver's-side door of the Neon was now open. A lab tech had clicked off the dome light, and a forensic photographer now snapped a series of pictures. *Pop, pop, pop.* The flash looked dangerous, atomic. The guy with the camera moved away to let a videographer record the scene. *Blood now the color of chocolate on the church's stucco and on the asphalt. Plastic yellow evidence cones poking from the pavement like dandelions. The young woman in the middle of it all, still and soul-less . . .*

Adam snapped his fingers in front of my face. “—won't talk to me now, then I'll have to drive you downtown.”

I blinked and said, “Huh?”

“I'm talking to you and you're ignoring me.”

“I didn't see you.” My gaze returned to those yellow evidence cones, to that dried blood. “It's just . . .” I swallowed, then closed my eyes.

He took my elbow and guided me to his black Crown Vic. He opened the passenger door and motioned for me to get in.

It was as cold inside the car as it was outside. Even with the blanket wrapped around me, the leather seat stole my body heat and made me shiver. I could see the crime scene from the windshield—detectives stood next to the Neon as they pointed to the dead woman on the ground, then pointed north to who knows where.

The photographer had moved his lens away from the Neon and now trained it on the group loitering behind the yellow tape.

Some murderers return to the crime scene to enjoy the aftermath of their depravity. So, crime scene investigators take pictures of any bystanders, and then they study each face to identify possible suspects.

Was the Slayer here?

Adam climbed into the driver's seat, a hulking figure even in a ginormous American car. He pulled that steno pad and a pen from his pocket, and grabbed a small tape recorder from the car's utility tray. He sat the machine on the dashboard, and pushed its red Record button. After a preamble that included my name, and the date and time, he asked, “When did you get here?”

I took a cleansing breath, and slowly exhaled. “A little past five.”

“And you called 911 . . . ?”

“Around 5:20.” The willies were returning. Trembling. Breathlessness. The urge to weep.

I had staggered away from the victim, run back to my car, and lunged behind the steering wheel. I was crying so hard I gagged, and to keep from choking, I jammed my hand in my mouth. Calmer, I had pawed through my messy glove compartment and found a can of pepper spray. I held it out before me, my hand unsteady. My eyes had skirted the alley for the murderer. Fear froze my blood, my limbs, all of me. I couldn't reach for the keys to turn the ignition. Couldn't use my phone to call for help. Couldn't do anything. I sat in the car, don't know for how long, until my fingers thawed enough to tap the Emergency Call icon on my cell phone . . . only to discover that I had no reception. So I ran to the front of the church, phone held out before me like a divining rod, and darted up and down the sidewalk until I found a hot-spot.

When I had reached an emergency operator to report the dead body, the dispatcher had started speaking to me in Spanish—my words had refused to fall into the proper sequence of an English speaker.

“Syeeda,” Adam said, touching my hand, “just relax and focus, okay?”

“Yeah.” I waggled my head to shake off that anxiety. Didn’t work. Still, I said, “Okay.”

“Why did you take so long to call?”

I stared at the gold detective badge hanging around his neck. “I didn’t think anyone was in the car.”

“That’s not what I asked.”

“I was scared. I couldn’t move. I froze.”

“Were you here by yourself? Could there be other witnesses?”

“I was alone. I think . . . Don’t know.”

He offered me a stick of Juicy Fruit.

I shook my head and snapped at the rubber band on my wrist more times than necessary.

“A weird place to find a dead body,” he said, slipping gum into his mouth. “Who kills somebody at a church?”

“But she was killed in an alley off Western like the other victims.” I grabbed the door handle. “Can I go now?”

“I’m not finished.”

“Can we catch up later?” I asked, titanium now replacing the Jell-O in my backbone.

“In a hurry?”

“I need to move on this before some other reporter does.”

Adam gasped, and clutched his imaginary pearls. “Well, gee whiz. I thought you wanted the whole world to know about these murders.”

“Of course I do.”

“Then why should you care if some other reporter tells it?”

“I broke the story, and today’s murder could be the case that ends the Slayer’s reign of terror, and I don’t want to share the credit since I’m selfish.” I took a breath and slowly exhaled. “Comes from being a middle child. May I go now?”

He pressed the Stop button on the recorder. “Just because we’re involved—”

“We’re not,” I said. “Not really.”

Adam and I met a year ago, when he had been chosen by the chief of detectives to head the Slayer investigation. Our first kiss happened this past June, on the first day of summer, literally one of the longest days of my life. A week before my surgery, I ended our relationship. Adam wasn’t thrilled with my decision, but my mind had turned to tumors, pain . . . death. I didn’t want him staying with me out of pity—even with a partial mastectomy, I’d still be disfigured, and he hadn’t come into our love affair to grope a gimp boob. When I told him this, he had spat, “I’m forty years old. I’m not some superficial jerk that drools over double Ds and scratches his crotch in public. I’m insulted that you think I am.”

Didn’t matter. I wanted Adam to have a way out, so I forced our separation. I focused on my treatment, no longer worrying about inconveniencing him, or anticipating the weirdness that comes when one party wants to bail but doesn’t want to hurt the other party’s feelings. But on the eve of my surgery, Adam stayed overnight. For dinner, he grilled ahi tuna steaks and asparagus. Then, we made love. Afterward, I crumpled in tears next to the bathtub and he kneeled beside me and held me and told me that I would be okay, that my surgeons were the best in the world, that my operation would be successful. The next morning, he drove me to the

hospital and sat in pre-op with Mom and me. He held my hand until nurses rolled me away to the operation room.

“No matter what we are or aren’t,” Adam said now, “I’m still required to follow procedure. Even if it jacks up your busy schedule.”

I slumped in my seat. “I’m not here because I like kickin’ it with dead people.”

He smirked. “Yeah? Why are you here? Other than to advance your own agenda?”

“The dead cannot cry out for justice; it is the duty of the living to do so for them.”

He lifted an eyebrow. “You just make that up?”

“Lois Bujold. Award-winning sci-fi writer. Met her once. Don’t change the subject. Why you trying to regulate?”

“It’s my job.”

“I want to find this guy as much as you do.”

He nodded. “Wanna know the difference between you and me, though? I don’t wanna make him a star.”

“Fuck you, Adam,” I muttered. “What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

“Tristan Small.”

Successful drug dealer (and my junior high school friend) Tristan Small had let me trail him for a piece I was writing, “How Good Boys Turn Bad.” I had wanted to understand how a former valedictorian from an overprotective, well-to-do family could reject an engineering scholarship to Stanford and instead sling weed and crack for a living. I learned where Tristan’s marijuana and cocaine supply originated, discovered how and whom he recruited to distribute his wares, the types of guns he owned, even the type of women he dated (which had included a brief, postdivorce fling with my best friend Lena). In exchange, Tristan had asked me to keep his name and territory a secret. And I had agreed, to Adam’s chagrin.

“I didn’t make Tristan a star,” I said. “I only informed the public about a drug dealer’s methods without threat of arrest—”

“And that’s a problem,” Adam said.

“People deserve to know what can hurt them.”

He rubbed his eyes, then surveyed the crime scene. “The public shouldn’t know every single detail, okay? People already think they understand how shit works because they watch *C.S.I.* on Thursdays. Let’s say the Slayer is reading your stories. He then tracks the progress we’ve made, which means he can cover his tracks, or worse: He can send me on another wild-goose chase to fuckin’ Nova Scotia, where I discover that he lived in a hostel for three days in 1967, and when I return from fuckin’ Nova Scotia, he’s either changed the location of where he dumps the bodies or he’s changed his M.O. *Again.*”

Adam had chased leads all over the country. No suspects’ DNA had matched the DNA found on Angie Kane.

I crossed my arms and glared at the dashboard. “I had nothing to do with the Slayer changing his M.O. He had sex with the first victim back in ninety, and that’s the only time. He hasn’t changed his style since. I’ve written four huge features about the Slayer this year alone. I don’t glorify the murders, nor do I glorify the murderer. This detective who reads my stories agrees. He calls my pieces clearheaded and heartbreaking, factual and—”

“I know what I said,” he snapped. “It’s just . . . The nuts who have nothing to do all day wanna play these mind games and I don’t have the time or the interest. And you—”

“And *I* haven’t told the public everything. Nor can I keep people from sending me stupid e-mails and tips and crap. And that one time you had to fly to some swamp in Florida wasn’t my

fault—I thought it was a hoax, and I *told* you that the guy wanted attention. You said that it didn't matter, that you were obligated to check it out. That was all you right there."

He gazed at me without saying anything else. He tapped his pen against his teeth as he thought—a habit that drove me crazy—then pushed the Record button on his machine. "The victim's name was Tamar Haist. Did you know her?"

"Nope." I pulled my own notebook from my pocket and flipped to a clean page.

Adam was staring at me, waiting for more.

I raised an eyebrow. "I answered too quickly? Want me to think about it?" I cast my eyes to the car's ceiling, then shook my head. "No clue who she was. I've never met her."

"What did she know about the Phantom Slayer?"

I shrugged. "She didn't say anything specific in her message."

"And why did she send you a message?"

"Maybe she read one of my articles."

"And why meet so early in the morning?"

"Maybe she wanted to work me in before yoga."

He stared at his notepad, pen to teeth again.

I winced. "Can you stop doing that?"

"What? The pen thing? Is it bothering you?"

"Yes."

He tapped his pen against his teeth, then winked at me. "Strange, how you just . . . *stumbled* on a dead woman, a stranger, in an alley at five in the morning."

"I didn't *stumble*. She texted me and I came. Reporters do that, you know."

He held out his hand. "Can I see that message?"

I handed him my phone.

"I can't believe you came here, Sy," he muttered.

"I know."

"Why the hell would you follow an anonymous text message—?"

"*Adam*," I said. "I know: It was stupid. I'll be more careful in the future."

He shook his head. "No, you won't." He scribbled into his pad, looked out the windshield, then whispered, "Why meet here? It's what? Three blocks north . . . ?"

The coroner's team was rolling a gurney holding an empty body bag toward the Neon.

Still talking to himself, Adam turned off the tape recorder and stuck his notepad back into his pocket.

"You're doing a hell of a lot of mumbling," I said. "Is there something I should know? Shit you're not telling me?"

He snorted. "Of course there is, but I can't share any of that with you right now."

I lifted an eyebrow, and touched his knee. "You've turned off your little recorder." I moved my hand up to his thigh and squeezed. "You can tell me: We're off the record."

We stared at each other until he said, "Sorry. Can't share. Maybe if you move your hand higher and to the left . . ."

I laughed and slapped his leg. "Fine. Keep your little task force secrets. I don't give a damn." I slipped my phone and notepad back into my pockets, then grabbed his wrist. "Please? Pretty please? Just give me something. *Anything*. It's been a hell of a morning."

"The guys are probably finished taking pictures of your car," Adam said, ignoring my pleas. "I'm gonna wrap all this up and head down to Mission. Act contrite as the good doctor lectures me about crime scene contamination."

“I’ll be right behind you,” I said, and shrugged off the blanket.

“You and Brooks speaking now?”

Yes, Spencer Brooks and I were now speaking. Until we weren’t.