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# MICHAEL CONNELLY

THE DARK HOURS

  
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*This is for Robert Pepin,  
translator, editor, friend since the start.  
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PART ONE

# MIDNIGHT MEN

# 1

It was supposed to rain for real and that would have put a damper on the annual rain of lead. But the forecast was wrong. The sky was blue-black and clear. And Renée Ballard braced for the onslaught, positioning herself on the north side of the division under the shelter of the Cahuenga overpass. She would have preferred being alone but was riding with a partner, and a reluctant partner at that. Detective Lisa Moore of the Hollywood Division Sexual Assault Unit was a day-shift veteran who just wanted to be home with her boyfriend. But it was always all hands on deck on New Year's Eve. Tactical alert: everyone in the department in uniform and working twelves. Ballard and Moore had been working since 6 p.m. and it had been quiet. But it was now about to strike midnight on the last day of the year and the trouble would begin. Added to that, the Midnight Men were out there somewhere. Ballard and her reluctant partner needed to be ready to move quickly when the call came in.

"Do we have to stay here?" Moore asked. "I mean, look at these people. How can they live like this?"

Ballard surveyed the makeshift shelters made of discarded tarps and construction debris that lined both sides of the underpass. She saw a couple of Sterno cook fires and people milling about at their meager encampments. It was so crowded that some shanties were even pressed up

against the mobile toilets the city had put on the sidewalks to preserve some semblance of dignity and sanitation in the area. North of the overpass was a residential zone of apartments fronting the hillside area known as the Dell. After multiple reports of people defecating in the streets and yards of the neighborhood, the city came through with the portable toilets. A *humanitarian effort*, it was called.

"You ask that like you think they all want to be living under an overpass," Ballard said. "Like they have a lot of choices. Where are they going to go? The government gives them toilets. It takes their shit away but not much else."

"Whatever," Moore said. "It's such a blight — every overpass in the fucking city. It's so third world. People are going to start leaving the city because of this."

"They already have," Ballard said. "Anyway, we're staying here. I've spent the last four New Year's Eves under here and it's the safest place to be when the shooting starts."

They were quiet for a few moments after that. Ballard had thought about leaving herself, maybe going back to Hawaii. It wasn't because of the intractable problem of homelessness that gripped Los Angeles. It was everything. The city, the job, the life. It had been a bad year with the pandemic and social unrest and violence. The police department had been vilified, and she along with it. She'd been spat on, figuratively and literally, by the people she thought she stood for and protected. It was a hard lesson, and a sense of futility had set upon her and was deep in the marrow now. She needed some kind of a break. Maybe to go track down her mother in the mountains of Maui and try to reconnect after so many years.

She took one of her hands off the wheel and held her sleeve to her nose. It was her first time back in uniform since the protests. She could make out the smell of tear gas. She had dry-cleaned the uniform twice but the odor was baked in, permanent. It was a strong reminder of the year that had been.

The pandemic and protests had changed everything. The department went from being proactive to reactive. And the change had somehow cast Ballard adrift. She had found herself more than once thinking about quitting. That is, until the Midnight Men came along. They had given her purpose.

Moore checked her watch. Ballard noticed and glanced at the dashboard clock. It was off by an hour, but doing the math told her it was two minutes till midnight.

"Oh, here we go," Moore said. "Look at this guy."

She was looking out her window at a man approaching the car. It was below 60 degrees but he wore no shirt, and he was holding his dirt-caked pants up with his hand. He wore no mask either. Moore had her window cracked but now hit the button and closed and sealed the car.

The homeless man knocked on her window. They could hear him through the glass.

"Hey, officers, I got a problem here."

They were in Ballard's unmarked car but she had engaged the flashing grille lights when they parked in the median under the overpass. Plus they were in full uniform.

"Sir, I can't talk to you without a mask," Moore said loudly. "Go get a mask."

"But I been ripped off," the man said. "That sumbitch o'er there took my shit when I was sleepin'."

"Sir, I can't help you until you get a mask," Moore said.

"I don't have no fucking mask," he said.

"Then I'm sorry, sir," she said. "No mask, no ask."

The man punched the window, his fist hitting the glass in front of Moore's face. She jerked back even though it had not been a punch intended to break the glass.

"Sir, step back from the car," Moore commanded.

"Fuck you," he said.

"Sir, if I have to get out, you're going to County," Moore said. "If you don't have corona now, you'll get it there. You want that?"

The man started to walk away.

"Fuck you," he said again. "Fuck the police."

"Like I never heard that before," Moore said.

She checked her watch again, and Ballard looked back at the dash clock. It was now the final minute of 2020, and for Moore and most people in the city and the world, the year couldn't end soon enough.

"Jesus Christ, can we move to another spot?" Moore complained.

"Too late," Ballard said. "I told you, we're safe under here."

"Not from these people," Moore said.

## 2

It was like a bag of popcorn cooking in a microwave. A few pops during the final countdown of the year and then the barrage as the frequency of gunfire made it impossible to separate it into individual discharges. A gunshot symphony. For a solid five minutes, there was an unbroken onslaught as revelers of the new year fired their weapons into the sky following a Los Angeles tradition of decades.

It didn't matter that what goes up must come down. Every new year in the City of Angels began with risk.

The gunfire of course was joined by legitimate fireworks and firecrackers, creating a sound unique to the city and as reliable through the years as the changing of the calendar. The over/under at roll call was eighteen in terms of calls related to the rain of lead. Windshields mostly would be the victims, though the year before, Ballard had caught a callout on a case in which a bullet fell through a skylight and hit a stripper on the shoulder as she was dancing on a stage below. The falling bullet didn't even break the skin. But a jagged piece of falling skylight glass did give a customer sitting close to the stage a new part in his hair. He chose not to make a police report, because it would reveal that where he was didn't match where he had told his family he would be.

Whatever the number of calls, patrol would handle most of them unless a detective was warranted. Ballard and

Moore were mostly waiting for one call. The Midnight Men. It was a painful reality that sometimes you needed predators to strike again in hopes of a mistake or a new piece of evidence that could lead to a solve.

The Midnight Men was the unofficial moniker Ballard had bestowed on the tag team rapists who had assaulted two women in a five-week span. Both assaults had occurred on holiday nights — Thanksgiving and Christmas Eve. The cases were linked by modus operandi, not DNA, because the Midnight Men were careful not to leave DNA behind. Each attack started shortly after midnight and lasted as long as four hours while the predators took turns assaulting women in their own beds, ending the torture by cutting off a large hank of each victim's hair with the knife that had been held to her throat during the terrifying ordeal. Other humiliations were included in the attacks and helped link the cases beyond the rarity of a two-man rape team.

Ballard, as the third-watch detective, had been the responding detective on both cases. She then handed the cases over to the day-watch detectives from the Hollywood Division Sexual Assault Unit. Lisa Moore was a member of that three-detective unit. Since Ballard worked the shift when the attacks had occurred, she was informally added to the team.

In past years, a pair of serial rapists would have immediately drawn the attention of the Sex Crimes Unit that worked out of the Police Administration Building downtown as part of the elite Robbery-Homicide Division. But City Hall cutbacks in police funding had seen the unit disbanded, and sex assault cases were now handled by the divisional detective squads. It was an example of how protesters demanding the defunding of the police department had achieved their goal in an indirect way. The move to defund was turned away by the city's politicians, but the police department had burned through its budget in dealing with the protests that followed the death of George



Floyd at the hands of police in Minneapolis. After weeks of tactical alert and associated costs, the department was out of money and the result was freezes on hiring, the disbanding of units, and the end of several programs. In effect, the department had been defunded in several key areas.

Lisa Moore was a perfect example of how all of this led to a downgrade in service to the community. Rather than the Midnight Men investigation going to a specialized unit with many resources as well as detectives who had extra training and experience in serial investigations, it had gone to the overworked and understaffed Hollywood Division Sexual Assault team, which was responsible for investigating every rape, attempted rape, assault, groping, indecent exposure, and claim of pedophilia in a vast geographic and population-dense area. And Moore was like many in the department since the protests, looking to do as little as possible between now and retirement, no matter how far away it was. She was looking at the Midnight Men case as a time suck taking her away from her normal eight-to-four existence, where she dutifully filed paperwork the first half of the day and conducted minimal investigative work after that, leaving the station only if there was no way the work could be done by phone and computer. She had greeted her assignment to work the midnight shift with Ballard over the New Year's holiday as a major insult and inconvenience. Ballard, on the other side of that coin, had seen it as a chance to get closer to taking down two predators who were out there hurting women.

"What do you hear about the vax?" Moore asked.

Ballard shook her head.

"Probably the same as you hear," she said. "Next month — maybe."

Now Moore shook her head.

"Assholes," she said. "We're first-fucking-responders and should get it with the fire department. Instead we're with

the grocery workers.”

“The fire guys are considered health-care providers,” Ballard said. “We’re not.”

“I know, but it’s the principle of it. Our union is shit.”

“It’s not the union. It’s the governor, the health department, a lot of things.”

“Fuckin’ politicians ...”

Ballard let it go. It was a complaint heard often at roll calls and in police cars across the city. Like many in the department, Ballard had already contracted Covid-19. She had been knocked down for three weeks in November and now just hoped she had enough antibodies to see her through to the vaccine’s arrival.

During the brooding silence that followed, a patrol car pulled up next to them on Moore’s side in one of the two southbound lanes.

“You know these guys?” Moore asked as she reached for the window button.

“Unfortunately,” Ballard said. “Pull your mask up.”

It was a team of P2s named Smallwood and Vitello, who always had too much testosterone running in their blood. They also thought they were “too healthy” to contract the virus and eschewed the department-mandated mask requirement.

Moore lowered the window after pulling her mask up.

“How’s things in the tuna boat?” Smallwood said, a wide smile on his face.

Ballard pulled up her department-issued mask. It was navy blue with LAPD embossed in silver along the jawline.

“You’re blocking traffic there, Smallwood,” Ballard said.

Moore looked back at Ballard.

“Really?” she whispered. “Small wood?”

Ballard nodded.

Vitello hit the switch for the light bar on the patrol car’s roof. Flashing blue lit up the graffiti on the concrete walls above the tents and shanties on both sides of the overpass.

Various versions of "Fuck the Police" and "Fuck Trump" had been whitewashed by city crews but the messages came through under the penetrating blue light.

"How's that?" Vitello asked.

"Hey, there's a guy over there wants to report a theft of property," Ballard responded. "Why don't you two go take a report?"

"Fuck that," Smallwood said.

"Sounds like detective work to me," Vitello added.

The conversation, if it could be called that, was interrupted by the voice of a com center dispatcher coming up on the radio in both cars, asking for any 6-William unit, "6" being the designation for Hollywood, and "William" for detective.

"That's you, Ballard," Smallwood said.

Ballard pulled the radio out of its charger in the center console and responded.

"Six-William-twenty-six. Go ahead."

The dispatcher asked her to respond to a shooting with injury on Gower.

"The Gulch," Vitello called over. "Need backup down there, ladies?"

Hollywood Division was broken into seven different patrol zones called Basic Car Areas. Smallwood and Vitello were assigned to the area that included the Hollywood Hills, where crime was low and most of the residents they encountered were white. This was a move designed to keep them out of trouble and away from confrontational enforcement with minorities. However, it had not always worked. Ballard had heard about them roughing up teenagers in cars parked illegally on Mulholland Drive, where there were spectacular views of the city at night.

"I think we can handle it," Ballard called across. "You boys can go back up to Mulholland and watch for kids throwing their condoms out the window. Make it safe up there, guys."