The Fallen

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Extract

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Prologue

When the sixth floor of the Las Palmas Hotel caught fire Robbie Brownlaw was in the diner across the street about to have lunch.

It was a cool March afternoon in San Diego and Brownlaw's turkey burger had just arrived when he saw orange flames roiling behind the hotel windows. He took a bite of the sandwich and hustled outside. The sixth-story windows blew and an orange explosion knocked him back against the brick wall of the diner.

Robbie heard screams up there in the fire. He had never heard screams like these. Then he heard all the yelling as people spilled from the restaurants and offices, pointing up at the Las Palmas while debris clattered to the asphalt – a splintered chair, a flaming lampshade, a nightstand with the drawers hanging out.

Fire alarms shrieked competing warnings down the street. Brownlaw heard a guy screaming up on the sixth floor right through the ringing. Such

fear. He looked up, still braced against the wall of the Sorrento Diner, heart pounding like a dryer with a load of sneakers.

Then he pushed off and ran toward the Las Palmas, weaving between the stopped and honking cars, past the smoking carcass of a television set with the wall mounts still on it that had crashed onto Fourth.

Brownlaw pulled up at the lobby door of the hotel and let the onrush of humanity sweep past him: a young man in a blazer with a nameplate on and a phone to his ear, a wide-eyed oldster on a wobbling cane, a cleaning lady still wearing yellow rubber gloves and glaring at Robbie as if he had caused this. Then two more old men in shabby suits, a gangsta in a wifebeater shirt swearing in Spanish, an Indian couple with three bawling children, a tall black man in a Sonics T-shirt, then a pretty young woman with a tangle of blond hair, a black eye, and a bathrobe around her.

Robbie headed up the stairs past an old woman with a Yorkie in her arms. He felt lucky and useful. The smoke was thick by the fourth landing and hot by the sixth. There was a weak moaning behind the first door he came to. It was locked but it took him just one kick and a shoulder slam to break it down. Inside he found a very old woman trapped under the mattress, which had apparently fallen onto her from the upended springs and frame. Only her neck and head and one arm were sticking out

from under it. She looked up at him through the smoke as if he were God himself and Brownlaw told her she'd be fine as he bent and dug his fingers into the mattress and pulled it away. The old woman couldn't get up so Brownlaw just hauled her over his shoulders and ran back down the stairs with her.

By the time he got back up to the sixth story, he was coughing hard and his eyes burned and the sirens were wailing closer and all but one of the room doors had been thrown open.

Behind that door Brownlaw could hear the screams of a man, the same terrified, animal sounds he'd heard on the street. One kick later the door shuddered open and he was in. The smoke was thick but Robbie could see the guy kneeling at the glassless window with his back to him. He was wearing shorts and that was all. He was clutching the windowsill, bellowing at the city with wild fear.

When Robbie was halfway across the room the man turned and looked at him and Robbie realized it wasn't fear at all. The man wheeled and came at him fast. He was very big and had Robbie in a wrestler's bear hug in an instant. He lifted Robbie off the floor and swung him around the room. During those two rapid orbits Brownlaw stared from inches away into a face he would never forget or understand – a face of rage and desperation whose depths he could not measure. Pitiless eyes. He tried to groin the guy with his

knee but the man was so tall that all he got was thigh. His gun was in his shoulder rig, which was under his sport coat, but his arms were pinned. He could not draw breath.

At the end of that second rotation – he was pretty sure it was only two – Brownlaw felt the big hands lock around his arms and fling him out the window.

The air was cool and he felt absolutely alone. His first thought was that he could stop his fall using pure willpower.

And it seemed to be true. He focused all of his will on staying up. *Up! Up! Up!* Raising his arms, Robbie clawed the sky and felt his body suspended in the great liberty of air. He wasn't falling at all, but moving forward with good speed, and for an instant he wondered if he might collide with the building across the street. Or maybe even crash through a window, land on his feet, and get back to the Sorrento before the waitress took away his lunch.

Then Brownlaw came to the end of his outward momentum. There was no hesitation, no moment of suspension. Just a heavy pivot of weight and down he went.

Fast, then faster. He had never felt such speed before, nothing close to this. Faster still. Robbie Brownlaw, on his back now with his arms spread and his hands reaching for nothing, watched the top of the Las Palmas rise up into the gray clouds and felt his ears bend forward in the awesome

velocity of descent. He understood that he was now in the hands of something much larger than himself, if he was in any kind of hands at all.

He thought of his young wife, Gina, with whom he was ferociously in love. He understood that the power of their love would be a factor in the outcome here. It seemed impossible that their days together were about to come to an end. Something like relief flowed through Robbie and as the clouds rose away from him he tried to figure his estimated time of arrival. Sixteen feet per second? But is that only at first? Surely you accelerate faster. How high is a story in an old hotel? The phrase 'two more seconds' came into his mind.

But in spite of Robbie's belief that he would live to love Gina for years to come, a more convincing idea now flashed into his brain: *This is it*.

He suddenly believed in the God he had doubted for all his life, his conversion completed in a fraction of a second.

Then he let go. He felt insight and understanding: He saw that his first five years of life had been happy, that his childhood had been filled with wonder, his teenage years were a search for freedom, his young adulthood had been a storm of confusion and yearning for love, his twenties a happy grind of Gina and friends and Gina and friends and Gina and Gina and Gina, and Robbie plummeted through the screams of sirens and

alarms and onlookers and crashed through the faded red awning over the entrance to the Las Palmas Hotel like an anvil through a bedsheet and hit the sidewalk with a cracking, echoless thud.

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My name is Robbie Brownlaw, and I am a Homicide detective for the city of San Diego. I am twenty-nine years old. My life was ordinary until three years ago when I was thrown out of a downtown hotel window.

No one knows it except my wife, but I now have synesthesia, a neurological condition where your senses get mixed up. Sometimes when people talk to me, I see their voices as colored shapes. It happens when they get emotional. The shapes are approximately two by two inches and there are usually between four and eight of them, sometimes more. They linger in the air midway between the speaker and me, about head high. They fade quickly. I can move them with my finger or a pen if I want.

Shortly after my fall I used graph paper and colored markers to make a chart of which words and word combinations triggered which colored shapes. This was time-consuming and not always

pleasant, due to some very painful headaches. I also observed that blue triangles generally came from a happy speaker. Red squares came from a deceptive one. Green trapezoids usually came from someone who was envious – green really is the color of envy, just like we were always told.

But as the weeks went by, I noticed that identical words and sentences could sometimes trigger very different shapes and colors. I was afraid that I had posttraumatic swelling in my brain and worried that my synesthesia would worsen to the point where I'd spend the rest of my life drooling at invisible shapes while people tried to talk to me.

I spoke my fears to Gina one night and noticed that when she told me I 'shouldn't worry about it,' her words came to me as the black triangles of dread. I looked them up on my chart just to make sure. It was then that I began to understand that the colorful shapes are provoked by the *emotions* of the speaker, not by the words themselves.

So I have what amounts to a primitive lie detector, though I'm not certain how reliable it is. I think a remorseless psychopath could fool me, or even an accomplished liar. Who knows what colors and shapes they might cause? In my line of work, people will lie to you about the smallest and most trivial things.

Synesthesia is considered a gift by synesthetes – the people who have it – but I'm not convinced that it is. There's a San Diego Synesthesia Society,

and for over a year now I've been thinking about going to a meeting. I browse their Web site and note the date and time of the next meeting, but I've never attended one. I'm curious, but a little afraid of what I might discover. The condition is hard for me to talk about, even with Gina. Although she's tolerant and wonderfully opinionless about how others view the world, it annoys her that even her white lies announce themselves to me as bright red squares. It would annoy me, too.

When I was thrown out of the window I hit hard. You have no idea how hard cement really is until you land on it from six stories up, even if your fall is largely broken by a canvas awning. During the fall I came to believe in God. It is true what they say about your life flashing past when you believe that you are about to die, but it is not your entire life. Obviously. I should have died, but only a few bones broke, and I'm in perfect shape again, other than the large scar on the back of my head, now hidden by hair, and the synesthesia.

One benefit I got from that fall was two very quick promotions. As soon as I proved I was in great health and could do the job, doors opened right up. From Fraud to Sex Crimes to Homicide just like that. Everyone expected me to die from the fall. All of the media coverage made the department want to reward its unlikely hero. The reporters nicknamed me 'the Falling Detective.' And my superiors sincerely felt that I deserved a

little something extra for all I'd been through. Anyway, I'm the youngest detective in Homicide, but nobody seems to resent me for it. I'm part of Team Four. Our case-cancellation rate last year, 2004, was eighty-eight percent, which is considered excellent.

I got the call from our lieutenant at four that morning. An anonymous caller had tipped us to a body in a car near Balboa Park. Patrol had confirmed a black Ford Explorer parked in the trees near the Cabrillo Bridge, which spans Highway 163. The lieutenant told me there was a man slumped dead in the driver's seat. Blood, sidearm on the floorboard, probable gunshot.

I called my partner, McKenzie Cortez, then poured a cup of coffee. I sat for a minute on the bedside in the dark, snugged up the sheets around Gina and kissed her.

In the weak light of the breakfast nook I wrote her a note saying I'd be careful and I loved her. Spouses worrying about their loved ones getting killed on the job is what ruins a lot of cop marriages. And I like Gina to have something nice to wake up to. She works as a hairdresser at Salon Sultra downtown, which is top of the line. She cut Mick Jagger's hair when the Stones played L.A. not long ago. Just a trim, actually. Mick flew her up to his hotel in Beverly Hills in a helicopter. Paid a thousand for the cut and gave her another five hundred for a tip.

The drive from my house in Normal Heights took twelve minutes. It was a cool, clear March morning. There had been rain the night before, more than enough to leave shallow black puddles along the freeway. The stars were bright in the sky and the car lights sharp in the dark. The moon looked dull and cold as frozen steel, like your tongue would stick to it. When I see the wide-eyed grimace of the man in the moon I wonder if that's what I looked like on my way down from the sixth floor. The videotape they played on the news wasn't quite clear enough to show the expression on my face. At least that's what Gina tells me. I've never watched it.

There were two PD cruisers and the Ford Explorer parked off of the dirt road under the Cabrillo Bridge. The bridge was built to suggest a Roman aqueduct. It is a graceful old structure, rising up majestically from the greenery, built in 1914 for the big United States–Panama exhibition. That morning it looked stately and uncaring in the March dawn. One end of the bridge led directly into Balboa Park, while the other became Laurel Avenue. Under the bridge ran the highway. All around the great caissons rose the lush trees overflowing from the park. The air smelled damp and dense. Three cars sat in a small grassy swale shaded by big Canary Island palms and the ivy-covered stanchions of the bridge. One cop had pulled his cruiser broadside to the SUV and left his headlights on. The raindrops on the Explorer glistened in the beams.

The driver's-side window was nothing but a pile of shattered safety glass, most of it on the grass. A few pebbles lay on the door, by the lock. The guy was collapsed on the driver's side the way only a dead man can be. Like he'd been poured into an odd shape, then begun to harden. Head against the window frame at a weird angle. Left arm against the door, palm up. Right hand closed and resting against the center console. Autoloader on the passenger floorboard. Keys still in the ignition. A brushed-aluminum briefcase on a backseat. Blood all over the windows and the cloth seats and dash and console and headliner. Seemed like gallons of it. I walked around to the other side to make sure I was seeing who I thought I was seeing.

'It's Garrett Asplundh,' I said.

'Yes, sir,' said the patrolman. 'DMV confirmed. His car, I mean.'

Garrett had been one of our Professional Standards Unit sergeants until a few months ago. PSU is part of Internal Affairs. PSU are the cops who watch the cops. Garrett Asplundh was mysterious and a little feared. His young daughter had drowned in a swimming-pool accident about nine months ago, and it destroyed his career and his marriage.

I didn't know him well. Just after my fall, he had come to the hospital and we talked awhile, mostly about fly-fishing, which we both enjoy. Odd that two men in such circumstances would

choose to talk about fishing. We agreed to fish Glorietta Bay together but never did. Cops don't hang out with PSU. Asplundh was quiet and neatly handsome. Dark eyes, smile lines on his cheeks. Within the department he was considered a man on the rise. He easily drew Gina's attention in the hospital that day.

Just a few months ago, Garrett had taken a lower-stress job as an investigator for the San Diego Ethics Authority Enforcement Unit. I say 'lower-stress' because Ethics Authority personnel aren't cops any longer, though most Authority officers are formerly sworn officers or agents. Some carry weapons. The Authority was created two years ago to keep politicians, city administrators, and businesspeople from breaking laws in order to make more money and gain more power. The Ethics Authority watches city personnel the same way the PSU watches the cops.

'You think suicide?' asked the officer.

'Tape it off,' I said.

McKenzie Cortez came across the damp, springy grass, hands jammed down into the pockets of her coat. Jeans and construction boots and her hair under an SDPD cap. Her breath made a little cloud in front of her mouth, not a common thing to see in San Diego.

'What's up, Robbie?'

'Garrett Asplundh.'

'Really.'

She walked past me to the Explorer, looked in.

I saw her right hand trace a quick cross upon her front side, then return to the warmth of the pocket. She stared awhile, then came back to me.

'Looks like he might have pulled his own plug,' she said.

'Kinda does.'

'You don't sound convinced.'

'Seems like he'd have done it sooner.'

McKenzie nodded and looked at me. She's a few years older than me, half Anglo and half Latina. She is strong and intelligent. Single, proud, unfazed by risk. Her face is pretty but rudely scarred by acne. She's tough and unhappy.

'Let the GSR decide,' she said.

The hand of a suicide by gun will be peppered with gunshot residue, mostly the barium and antimony contained in gunpowder. It's easy to lift off with tape. But if the hands are clean, you might have a homicide. A tricky bad guy can shoot someone up close, then put the dead or dying person's hand around the gun and fire it somewhere the bullet can't be found, so it looks like a suicide. But this happens in books and movies much more than in real life and death.

There were no known witnesses, although one elderly motorist stopped to tell us that he'd driven past here around nine the night before and seen a red Ferrari parked down by the side of the freeway. It was pulled over not far from where the black Explorer now stood. He also saw a man moving in the trees, just barely visible. I had one

of the officers detain and run a records and warrants check on the motorist, but he came back clean. Retired Navy. He sat in the back of a prowl car with a look of authority while the check went through.

The anonymous caller who had reported the Explorer and possible victim was male and spoke English with an undetermined accent. The conversation was partially recorded by a desk officer at headquarters.

McKenzie and I watched the crime-scene investigators sketch and measure and photograph and video the scene. Glenn Wasserman, one of our best CSIs, brought me a small paper bag with a cartridge casing in it, a nine-millimeter Smith factory load by the look of it.

'Up on the dashboard,' he said. 'Almost fell down into the heater vent.'

'Nice grab,' I said.

'It's Garrett Asplundh, isn't it?'

'Yes.'

'I never worked with him.'

I talked briefly with the first-on-scene officers. They'd handled the scene by the book: checked for signs of life, called Dispatch with the possible 187, taped off the scene using the convenient tree trunks, and waited for the Homicide hordes to arrive. They confirmed that the passenger's door had been like it was now – closed, with the window up.

The Coroner's team pronounced and removed

the body. They just opened the driver's door and guided Asplundh onto a plastic body bag atop a lowered gurney. Before they zipped it up, I pulled his wallet from his coat pocket. I noted the currency and credit cards, the driver's license and 'City of San Diego Employee' ID. I noted that his birthday was in November and that he would have turned forty years old. I slid the wallet back in. I saw the cell phone clipped to his belt. I saw that his necktie was almost completely drenched in blood. A small portion of it was still light blue. There are few places where blood looks more startling than on a necktie.

They zipped him and covered him with a blanket. I thought of how he had once seemed large and been feared. And how the death of his daughter and the ruin of his marriage had left him smaller. And how, soon, not one recognizable molecule of him would be left.

I reached into the Explorer, slipped the automatic garage door opener off the sun visor and put it in my pocket. Then I walked alongside Asplundh to the Coroner's van. Hoped his soul would be well taken care of. After all, he was once one of us.

Over on the passenger side of the Explorer I hoped to find good footprints but found none at all. The grass was healthy and wet and too springy to hold an indentation for long. But a second vehicle had been parked here very recently. And it had left dark green tracks coming down the

hillock, just as the Explorer had. The tracks of the second vehicle were deeper and darker than those of the Ford, and I wondered if its driver had perhaps gunned it in reverse to back up the side of the swale. With the grass wet from the rain, it might have taken a four-wheel drive to back up that hill.

I bent down a little and looked straight through the passenger-side window to where Garrett's head would have been when he was alive. Sitting there. Talking, maybe. Looking ahead. Hard to imagine he was unaware of the shooter.

Then I looked beyond him, trying to estimate where the bullet might be if it had continued in an approximately straight line. It would have shot across Highway 163, bored through several yards of tree foliage unless it clipped a branch and veered off, then lodged in the rising slope of earth toward the far end of the bridge. But the chances of an approximately straight line of flight were not good, given the skull and glass the bullet had to pass through. The chances of the bullet's being in one piece were not good at all. I made an unhopeful note to have the CSIs look for fragments.

I climbed the gentle embankment down which the Explorer had traveled to get to the secluded, shaded swale. It was easy to pick out the tire tracks that had been left by the vehicle. Easy, too, to see the second set that came down the embankment and stopped right next to it.

I waved to Glenn, pointed to the tracks. He

worked his way up the hillock toward us, shooting digital and video. For a moment we stood at the top. I looked out at the cars charging by on Highway 163.

'Asplundh was a kick-ass cop, wasn't he?' asked Glenn.

I nodded.

'What a turnaround,' said Glenn. 'From Professional Standards to this.'

We went back down for a closer look at the Explorer. Another CSI was examining and photographing the tires before they towed it off to the impound yard to be dusted for fingerprints and combed for hair and fiber.

'Look at this,' she said.

I came around and knelt and looked at the shiny green rock caught in the tread of the left rear tire.

She photographed it. Two angles, three shots from each. Then she shot some video, explaining what she was shooting. Then she pried the rock out and dropped it into a small paper evidence bag. I took the bag and stared down, holding my flashlight beam steady. It wasn't a rock at all but half a small glass marble. It was bright green. I remembered that size from when I was a kid.

'We called them minis,' I said.

'Right,' she said. 'Smaller than a shooter.'

It looked like it had lodged in the wide tread of the SUV tire, then been sheared off to a half sphere. There was a fragment of something pale

and red-orange embedded in the glass. Part of the cat's eye, maybe. Or some other kind of inner design. The sheared surface around it, recessed into the tread, was pitted.

'Fifty bucks he shot himself,' said McKenzie.

Odd words for her to use, because the lavender ovals that spilled out of her mouth and hovered in the air between us meant she was feeling genuine sympathy for Garrett Asplundh. I nodded as the ovals bobbed like corks on a slow river, then dissolved. McKenzie likes to talk tougher than she feels. After three years I don't pay a whole lot of attention to the colors and shapes of other people's feelings, unless they don't match up with their words.

'I don't think so,' I said. 'He used to be Professional Standards. One of the real straight arrows.'

'Straight arrows can't bend,' said McKenzie.

We walked around to the other side of the vehicle. I pulled on some gloves, then swung open the right rear door. In spite of the cool early hour, the flies had already found the blood. I squared the aluminum case on the seat in front of me, pushed the thumb buttons, and watched the latches jump. One yellow legal pad with neat handwriting on the top page. Two pens, two pencils, and a tiny calculator. An address book. A datebook. A small tape recorder, a digital camera, and a .45 automatic Colt pistol in a heavily oiled leather holster. With a pencil I poked and pried

around the items, looking for something hidden or loose or out of place. But all of it was splendidly organized into cutouts in the foam that lined both the bottom and the lid.

Cops and their guns, I thought. Pretty much inseparable, right up to the end.

'Look how organized he was,' said McKenzie. 'Must have cut the foam himself to get it all neat like that.'

I put the automatic garage door opener in the briefcase, closed it up, and locked it in the trunk of my car.

A tall, slender man in a long black coat came skidding down the hillside, well away from the crime-scene tape, feet turned sideways and leaning back for balance. It took me a second to recognize him. It was Ethics Authority director Erik Kaven, a man feared in the same way that his investigator Garrett Asplundh had been feared.

'He got the news pretty fast,' said McKenzie.

Kaven sized up the scene and came toward us. His handshake was strong.

'Garrett?' he asked.

I nodded.

'Robbery?'

'Suicide looks more like it,' said McKenzie.

'It wasn't suicide,' said Kaven. He looked at McKenzie, then me. Kaven was tall and big-jawed, and his face was deeply lined. His gray-brown hair was thick, straight, and undisciplined. He wore a gunslinger's mustache that somehow

looked right on him. I guessed him at fifty. He'd been a district federal judge here in San Diego before signing on to lead the new Ethics Authority two years ago. Kaven had made big news when he shot two bank robbers out in El Cajon one Friday afternoon. Two shots, two dead men. He carried a gun on the bench, and he'd just gotten off work. He'd been depositing his paycheck when the robbers' guns came out. His eyes were deep-set and pointedly suspicious.

'It wasn't suicide,' he said again. 'I'll guarantee it.'