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Nine Dragons

Written by Michael Connelly

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**MICHAEL
CONNELLY**

**NINE
DRAGONS**



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PART ONE
Homicide Special

1

From across the aisle Harry Bosch looked into his partner's cubicle and watched him conduct his daily ritual of straightening the corners on his stacks of files, clearing the paperwork from the center of his desk and finally placing his rinsed-out coffee cup in a desk drawer. Bosch checked his watch and saw it was only three-forty. It seemed that each day, Ignacio Ferras began the ritual a minute or two earlier than he had the day before. It was only Tuesday, the day after Labor Day weekend and the start of a short week, and already he was edging toward the early exit. This routine was always prompted by a phone call from home. There was a wife waiting there with a toddler and a brand-new set of twins. She watched the clock like the owner of a candy store watches the fat kids. She needed the break and she needed her husband home to deliver it. Even across the aisle from his partner, and with the four-foot sound walls separating work spaces in the new squad room, Bosch could usually hear both sides of the call. It always began with "When are you coming home?"

Everything in final order at his workstation, Ferras looked over at Bosch.

“Harry, I’m going to take off,” he said. “Beat some of the traffic. I have a lot of calls out but they have my cell. No need waiting around for that.”

Ferras rubbed his left shoulder as he spoke. This was also part of the routine. It was his unspoken way of reminding Bosch that he had taken a bullet a couple years before and had earned the early exit.

Bosch just nodded. The issue wasn’t really about whether his partner left the job early or what he had earned. It was about his commitment to the mission of homicide work and whether it would be there when they finally got the next call out. Ferras had gone through nine months of physical therapy and rehab before reporting back to the squad room. But in the year since, he had worked cases with a reluctance that was wearing thin for Bosch. He wasn’t committed and Bosch was tired of waiting for him.

He was also tired of waiting for a fresh kill. It had been four weeks since they’d drawn a case and they were well into the late-summer heat. As certain as the Santa Ana winds blowing down out of the mountain passes, Bosch knew a fresh kill was coming.

Ferras stood up and locked his desk. He was taking his jacket off the back of the chair when Bosch saw Larry Gandle step out of his office on the far side of the squad room and head toward them. As the senior man in the partnership, Bosch had been given the first choice of cubicles a month earlier when Robbery-Homicide Division started to move over from the decrepit Parker Center to the new Police Administration Building. Most

detective 3s took the cubicles facing the windows that looked out on City Hall. Bosch had chosen the opposite. He had given his partner the view and took the cube that let him watch what was happening in the squad room. Now he saw the approaching lieutenant and he instinctively knew that his partner wasn't going home early.

Gandle was holding a piece of paper torn from a notepad and had an extra hop in his step. That told Bosch the wait was over. The call out was here. The fresh kill. Bosch started to rise.

"Bosch and Ferras, you're up," Gandle said when he got to them. "Need you to take a case for South Bureau."

Bosch saw his partner's shoulders slump. He ignored it and reached out for the paper Gandle was holding. He looked at the address written on it. South Normandie. He'd been there before.

"It's a liquor store," Gandle said. "One man down behind the counter, patrol is holding a witness. That's all I got. You two good to go?"

"We're good," Bosch said before his partner could complain.

But that didn't work.

"Lieutenant, this is Homicide Special," Ferras said, turning and pointing to the boar's head mounted over the squad-room door. "Why are we taking a rob job at a liquor store? You know it was a banger and the South guys could wrap it up—or at least put a name on the shooter—before midnight."

Ferras had a point. Homicide Special was for the difficult and complex cases. It was an elite squad that went

after the tough cases with the relentless skill of a boar rooting in the mud for a truffle. A liquor store holdup in gang territory hardly qualified.

Gandle, whose balding pate and dour expression made him a perfect administrator, spread his hands in a gesture offering a complete lack of sympathy.

“I told everybody in the staff meeting last week. We’ve got South’s back this week. They’ve got a skeleton crew on while everybody else is in homicide school until the fourteenth. They caught three cases over the weekend and one this morning. So there goes the skeleton crew. You guys are up and the rob job is yours. That’s it. Any other questions? Patrol is waiting down there with a witness.”

“We’re good, Boss,” Bosch said, ending the discussion.

“I’ll wait to hear from you, then.”

Gandle headed back to his office. Bosch pulled his coat off the back of his chair, put it on and then opened the middle drawer of his desk. He took the leather notebook out of his back pocket and replaced the pad of lined paper in it with a new one. A fresh kill always got a fresh pad. That was his routine. He looked at the detective shield embossed on the notebook flap and then returned it to his back pocket. The truth was, he didn’t care what kind of case it was. He just wanted a case. It was like anything else. You fall out of practice and you lose your edge. Bosch didn’t want that.

Ferras stood with his hands on his hips, looking up at the clock on the wall over the bulletin boards.

“Shit,” Ferras said. “Every time.”

“What do you mean, ‘every time?’” Bosch said. “We haven’t caught a case in a month.”

“Yeah, well, I was getting used to that.”

“Well, if you don’t want to work murders, there’s always a nine-to-five table like auto theft.”

“Yeah, right.”

“Then, let’s go.”

Bosch stepped out of the cubicle into the aisle and headed toward the door. Ferras followed, pulling his phone out so he could call his wife and give her the bad news. On the way out of the squad room, both men reached up and patted the boar on its flat nose for good luck.

2

Bosch didn't need to lecture Ferras on the way to South L.A. His driving in silence was his lecture. His young partner seemed to wither under the pressure of what was not said and finally opened up.

"This is driving me crazy," he said.

"What is?" Bosch asked.

"The twins. There's so much work, so much crying. It's a domino effect. One wakes up and that starts the other one up. Then my oldest kid wakes up. Nobody's getting any sleep and my wife is..."

"What?"

"I don't know, going crazy. Calling me all the time, asking when I'm coming home. So I come home and then it's my turn and I get the boys and I get no break. It's work, kids, work, kids, work, kids every day."

"What about a nanny?"

"We can't afford a nanny. Not with the way things are, and we don't even get overtime anymore."

Bosch didn't know what to say. His daughter, Madeline, was a month past her thirteenth birthday and almost ten thousand miles away from him. He had never been directly involved in raising her. He saw

her four weeks a year—two in Hong Kong and two in L.A.—and that was it. What advice could he legitimately give a full-time dad with three kids, including twins?

“Look, I don’t know what to tell you,” he said. “You know I’ve got your back. I’ll do what I can when I can. But—”

“I know, Harry. I appreciate that. It’s just the first year with the twins, you know? It will be a lot easier when they get a little older.”

“Yeah, but what I’m trying to say here is that maybe it’s more than just the twins. Maybe it’s you, Ignacio.”

“Me? What are you saying?”

“I’m saying maybe it’s you. Maybe you came back too soon—you ever think about that?”

Ferras did a slow burn and didn’t respond.

“Hey, it happens sometimes,” Bosch said. “You take a bullet and you start thinking that lightning might strike twice.”

“Look, Harry, I don’t know what kind of bullshit that is, but I’m fine that way. I’m good. This is about sleep deprivation and being fucking exhausted all the time and not being able to catch up because my wife is riding my ass from the moment I get home, okay?”

“Whatever you say, partner.”

“That’s right, partner. Whatever I say. Believe me, I get it enough from her. I don’t need it from you, too.”

Bosch nodded and that was enough said. He knew when to quit.

The address Gandle had given them was in the Seventieth block of South Normandie Avenue. This was just

a few blocks from the infamous corner of Florence and Normandie, where some of the most horrible images of the 1992 riots had been captured by news helicopters and broadcast around the world. It seemed to be the last-
ing image of Los Angeles to many.

But Bosch quickly realized he knew the area and the liquor store that was their destination from a different riot and for a different reason.

Fortune Liquors was already cordoned off by yellow crime scene tape. A small number of onlookers were gathered but murder in this neighborhood was not that much of a curiosity. The people here had seen it before—many times. Bosch pulled their sedan into the middle of a grouping of three patrol cars and parked. After going to the trunk to retrieve his briefcase, he locked the car up and headed toward the tape.

Bosch and Ferras gave their names and serial numbers to a patrol officer with the crime scene attendance log and then ducked under the tape. As they approached the front door of the store, Bosch put his hand into his right jacket pocket and pulled out a book of matches. It was old and worn. The front cover said FORTUNE LIQUORS and it carried the address of the small yellow building before them. He thumbed the book open. There was only one match missing, and on the inside cover was the fortune that came with every matchbook:

*Happy is the man who
finds refuge in himself.*

Bosch had carried the matchbook with him for more than ten years. Not so much for the fortune, though he did believe in what it said. It was because of the missing match and what it reminded him of.

“Harry, what’s up?” Ferras asked.

Bosch realized he had paused in his approach to the store.

“Nothing, I’ve just been here before.”

“When? On a case?”

“Sort of. But it was a long time ago. Let’s go in.”

Bosch walked past his partner and entered the open front door of the liquor store.

Several patrol officers and a sergeant were standing inside. The store was long and narrow. It was a shotgun design and essentially three aisles wide. Bosch could see down the center aisle to a rear hallway and an open back door leading to a parking area behind the store. The cold-beverage cases ran along the wall on the left aisle and then across the back of the store. The liquor was on the right aisle, while the middle aisle was reserved for wine with red on the right and white on the left.

Bosch saw two more patrol officers in the rear hallway and he guessed they were holding the witness in what was probably a rear storage room or office. He put his briefcase down on the floor by the door. From the pocket of his suit coat he pulled two pairs of latex gloves. He gave a set to Ferras and they put them on.

The sergeant noticed the arrival of the two detectives and broke away from his men.

“Ray Lucas,” he said by way of greeting. “We have

one vic down behind the counter here. His name is John Li, spelled *L-I*. Happened, we think, less than two hours ago. Looks like a robbery where the guy just didn't want to leave a witness. A lot of us down here in the Seventy-seventh knew Mr. Li. He was a good old guy."

Lucas signaled Bosch and Ferras over to the counter. Bosch held his coat so it wouldn't touch anything when he went around and squeezed into the small space behind the counter. He squatted down like a baseball catcher to look more closely at the dead man on the floor. Ferras leaned in over him like an umpire.

The victim was Asian and looked to be almost seventy. He was on his back, eyes staring blankly at the ceiling. His lips were pulled back from clenched teeth, almost in a sneer. There was blood on his lips, cheek and chin. It had been coughed up as he died. The front of his shirt was soaked with his blood and Bosch could see at least three bullet entry points in his chest. His right leg was bent at the knee and folded awkwardly under his other leg. He had obviously collapsed on the spot where he had been standing when he was shot.

"No casings that we can see," Lucas said. "The shooter cleaned those up and then he was smart enough to pull the disc out of the recorder in the back."

Bosch nodded. The patrol guys always wanted to be helpful but it was information Bosch didn't need yet and could be misleading.

"Unless it was a revolver," he said. "Then there would have been no casings to clean up."

"Maybe," Lucas said. "But you don't usually see too

many revolvers down here anymore. Nobody wants to be caught in a drive-by with just six bullets in their gun.”

Lucas wanted Bosch to know that he knew the lay of the land down here. Bosch was just a visitor.

“I’ll keep that in mind,” Harry said.

Bosch focused on the body and studied the scene silently. He was pretty sure the victim was the same man he had encountered in the store so many years before. He was even in the same spot, on the floor behind the counter. And Bosch could see a soft pack of cigarettes in the shirt pocket.

He noticed that the victim’s right hand had blood smeared on it. He didn’t find this unusual. From earliest childhood people touch their hand to an injury to try to protect it and make it better. It is natural instinct. This victim had done the same here, most likely grabbing at his chest after the first shot hit him.

There was about a four-inch spatial separation between the bullet wounds, which formed the points of a triangle. Bosch knew that three quick shots from close range would usually have made a tighter cluster. This led him to believe that the victim had likely been shot once and then fell to the floor. The killer had then probably leaned over the counter and shot him two more times, creating the spread.

The slugs tore through the victim’s chest, causing massive damage to the heart and lungs. The blood expectorated through the mouth showed that death was not immediate. The victim had tried to breathe. After

all his years working cases Bosch was sure of one thing. There was no easy way to die.

“No headshot,” Bosch said.

“Right,” Ferras said. “What’s it mean?”

Bosch realized he had been musing out loud.

“Maybe nothing. Just seems like three in the chest, the shooter wanted no doubt. But then no headshot to be sure.”

“Like a contradiction.”

“Maybe.”

Bosch took his eyes off the body for the first time and looked around from his low angle. His eyes immediately held on a gun that was in a holster attached to the underside of the counter. It was located for easy access in case of a robbery or worse, but it had not even been pulled from its holster.

“We’ve got a gun under here,” Bosch said. “Looks like a forty-five in a holster, but the old man never got the chance to pull it.”

“The shooter came in quick and shot the old guy before he could reach for his piece,” Ferras said. “Maybe it was known in the neighborhood that the old man had the gun under the counter.”

Lucas made a noise with his mouth, as if he was disagreeing.

“What is it, Sergeant?” Bosch asked.

“The gun’s gotta be new,” Lucas said. “The guy’s been robbed at least six times in the last five years since I’ve been here. As far as I know, he never pulled a gun. This is the first I knew about a gun.”

Bosch nodded. It was a valid observation. He turned his head to speak over his shoulder to the sergeant.

“Tell me about the witness,” he said.

“Uh, she’s not really a witness,” Lucas said. “It’s Mrs. Li, the wife. She came in and found her husband when she was bringing him in his dinner. We’ve got her in the back room but you’ll need a translator. We called the ACU, asked for Chinese to go.”

Bosch took another look at the dead man’s face, then stood up and both his knees cracked loudly. Lucas had referred to what was once known as the Asian Crimes Unit. It had recently been changed to the Asian Gang Unit to accommodate concerns that the unit name besmirched the city’s Asian population by suggesting all Asians were involved in crime. But the old dogs like Lucas still called it the ACU. Regardless of name or acronym, the decision to call in an additional investigator of any stripe should have been left to Bosch as lead investigator.

“You speak Chinese, Sarge?”

“No, that’s why I called ACU.”

“Then, how did you know to ask for Chinese and not Korean or maybe even Vietnamese?”

“I’ve been on the job twenty-six years, Detective. And—”

“And you know Chinese when you see it.”

“No, what I’m saying is I have a hard time making it through a shift these days without a little jolt, you know? So once a day I stop by here to pick up one of those energy drinks. Five-hour boost it gives you. Anyway, I

got to know Mr. Li a little bit from coming in. He told me he and his wife came from China and that's how I knew."

Bosch nodded and was embarrassed at his effort to embarrass Lucas.

"I guess I'll have to try one of those boosts," he said. "Did Mrs. Li call nine-one-one?"

"No, like I said, she doesn't have much English. From what I got from dispatch, Mrs. Li called her son and he's the one who called nine-one-one."

Bosch stepped out and around the counter. Ferras lingered behind it, squatting to get the same view of the body and the gun that Bosch had just had.

"Where is the son?" Bosch asked.

"He's coming but he works up in the Valley," Lucas said. "Should be here anytime now."

Bosch pointed to the counter.

"When he gets here, you and your people keep him away from this."

"Got it."

"And we're going to have to try to keep this place as clear as possible now."

Lucas got the message and took his officers out of the store. Finished behind the counter, Ferras joined Bosch near the front door, where he was looking up at the camera mounted on the ceiling at the center of the store.

"Why don't you check out the back?" Bosch said. "See if the guy really pulled the disc, and look in on our witness."

“Got it.”

“Oh, and find the thermostat and cool it down in here. It’s too warm. I don’t want that body to turn.”

Ferras headed down the center aisle. Bosch looked back to take in the scene as a whole. The counter was about twelve feet long. The cash register was set up at center with an open space for customers to put down their purchases. On one side of this were racks of gum and candy. On the other side of the register were other point-of-purchase products like energy drinks, a plastic case containing cheap cigars and a lotto display case. Overhead was a wire-mesh storage box for cigarette cartons.

Behind the counter were shelves where high-end liquors were stored, and which had to be asked for by customers. Bosch saw six rows of Hennessy. He knew the expensive cognac was favored by high-rolling gang members. He was pretty sure the location of Fortune Liquors would put it in the territory of the Hoover Street Criminals, a street gang that once was a Crips set but then became so powerful its leaders chose to forge their own name and reputation.

Bosch noticed two things and stepped closer to the counter.

The cash register had been turned askew on the counter, revealing a square of grit and dust on the Formica where it had been located. Bosch reasoned that the killer had pulled it toward him while he took the money from the drawer. This was a significant assumption because it meant that Mr. Li had not opened the drawer and given

the robber the money. This likely meant he had already been shot. Ferras's theory that the killer had come in shooting could be correct. And this could be significant in an eventual prosecution in proving intent to kill. More important, it gave Bosch a better idea of what had happened in the store and what kind of person they were looking for.

Harry reached into his pocket and pulled out the glasses he wore for close work. He put them on and without touching anything leaned over the counter to study the cash register's keyboard. He saw no button that said open or any other obvious indication of how to open the cash drawer. Bosch was unsure how to open the register. He wondered how the killer knew.

He straightened back up and looked at the shelves of bottles on the wall behind the counter. The Hennessy was front and center, with easy access for Mr. Li when members of Hoover Street came in. But the rows were flush. No bottle was missing.

Again Bosch leaned forward across the counter. This time he tried to reach across to one of the bottles of Hennessy. He realized that if he put his hand down on the counter for balance he would be able to reach the row and take one of the bottles easily.

"Harry?"

Bosch straightened back up and turned to his partner.

"The sergeant was right," Ferras said. "The camera system records to disc. There's no disc in the machine. It was either pulled or he wasn't recording to disc and the camera was just for show."

“Are there any backup discs?”

“There’s a couple back there on the counter but it’s a one-disc system. It just records over and over on the same disc. I worked Robbery way back when and we saw a lot of these. They last about a day and then it records over it. You pull the disc if you want to check something but you have to do it in the same day.”

“Okay, make sure we get those extra discs.”

Lucas came back in through the front door.

“ACU is here,” he said. “Should I send him in?”

Bosch looked at Lucas for a long moment before answering.

“It’s AGU,” he finally said. “But don’t send him in. I’ll be right out.”