

Chapter One

Evening One: Downtime

There came a point when even the best police officers had to raise their hands and admit they were done.

Insufficient unto the day.

It was time for alcohol. Or something stronger. Perhaps an evening with the one person who could still make a desiccated heart beat faster. Perhaps a few hours with a DiJi cat.

The LAPD had seen it all from its own. As long as an officer returned for the next shift, the department was not inclined to judge.

Crowe and Elly were bundled into the back of an emergency spinner, both still coated in concrete dust and what some laboratory technician had decided synthetic dog hair probably looked like.

Within minutes, Cedars-Sinai-Honkou emerged through the fog.

The hospital appeared doubly unreal through Elly's unsynchronized vision. Its towers overlapped and separated whenever she moved her head, while landing lights streaked across the darkness in pairs. Crowe's concussion did little to make the view more convincing from his side of the cabin.

Then came the landing.

Gurney wheels squealed through corridors lit with an aggressive, clinical brightness. Hands searched them, moved them, cut away clothing, pressed against wounds, and inserted needles.

Voices accompanied the hands.

"You're going to be all right."

"We'll take care of you."

"You're one of ours."

There was an old saying in the department.

If you were not a cop, you were little people.

Cedars-Sinai-Honkou was well equipped, and its surgeons worked quickly.

Crowe awoke with his chest wrapped in bandages and a sympathetic nurse explaining that there was little else to be done. Two ribs were broken. They would heal, eventually. Until then, every breath, cough, turn, and unfortunate laugh would remind him they were there.

Elly received better news, depending on one's definition of better.

The damage to her right eye had been extensive enough that the surgeons had discarded the entire unit and installed a replacement. Nexus subassemblies were hypoimmunogenic—or some similarly pretentious medical term. They did not trigger rejection syndrome, which made it easier to remove a damaged part and replace it than attempt a delicate repair.

She would wear an eyepatch for two days while the socket healed.

After that, the physicians assured her, it would be as if nothing had happened.

They were preparing to discharge themselves when a vid-phone activated beside the bed.

Deputy Chief Holden appeared on the display.

“Well,” he began.

Then he stopped and glared at them.

He appeared divided between his professional obligation to ask after the condition of two injured officers and a deep personal desire to tear each of them a second anus.

“What do I need to know?”

Crowe cleared his throat.

He was accustomed to this.

He never knew precisely where he stood with the bluebacks. His years in Internal Affairs had marked him as an outsider among ordinary police officers. They worked with him, tolerated him, and occasionally relied on him.

They never fully trusted him.

“Sorry, sir. We’re a little behind on our KIA updates. After getting blown up, I didn’t have time to activate an out-of-office message.”

Holden’s glare deepened.

“While we were lying around,” Crowe continued, “we were hoping to learn whether anything came back from the parts manifest, stock analysis, vehicle search, insurance-claim request, blood samples, hazardous-duty-pay inquiry, and identification-card update.”

Crowe glanced toward Elly.

“My partner’s eye color no longer matches her credentials.”

There was no response from the other end of the call.

“Crowe,” Holden said eventually, “your KIA hasn’t left the spinner in weeks. Its battery died two days ago. Get your shit together, or I’ll sort you out myself.”

“Yes, sir. We’re about to compare notes with Wylde. Thank you for providing additional resources at this critical time.”

“I also want the weapon-discharge report. And if you intend to send me the same scripted one you always use, at least change the dates.”

“Yes, sir.”

Crowe adjusted his position and immediately regretted it.

“Can we get a ride back to our spinner?”

“Figure it out. This is a police department, not a shuttle service. I want a real update from you two—make that three—soon.”

The screen went dark.

Crowe left the hospital carrying a transparent plastic bag containing the remains of his shirt, his identification card, and several forms no one had explained.

The card still listed him as deceased.

The shirt made a stronger argument.

Outside, the rain had diminished into the fine, oily mist that seemed permanently suspended over Los Angeles. Traffic hissed along an elevated roadway, casting pale reflections beneath the hospital’s entrance canopy.

Crowe stopped and looked at Elly.

“You look better.”

It was not true.

Both detectives looked as though they had been dragged through a ventilation shaft behind an industrial furnace. The hospital staff had removed the blood, closed the cuts, and determined that neither was actively dying.

By LAPD standards, they were fit for duty.

Elly's replacement eye remained covered by a temporary patch. Her movements were rigid and deliberate while the new optical unit calibrated beneath it.

Wylde waited near the curb, leaning against an unmarked spinner with a paper cup in one hand.

The vehicle was not theirs.

Crowe had already been informed that their own spinner had not moved from the warehouse. This fact continued to be presented as though it represented a personal moral failing on his part.

Wylde looked them over.

"They let you out?"

"The hospital is experiencing a bed shortage," Crowe said. "We agreed to continue suffering elsewhere."

He raised the plastic bag.

"They also returned my personal effects. Apparently, I'm still dead."

Wylde looked at the identification card through the plastic.

"Might simplify the paperwork."

"It hasn't so far."

Crowe opened the rear door and lowered himself carefully into the spinner. Every movement produced a new opinion from his ribs.

Elly climbed in beside him, displaying the same inflexible caution.

Wylde settled behind the controls but did not start the engine.

"All right," he said. "Compare notes."

Crowe looked through the rain-streaked windshield toward the hospital entrance. Uniformed officers passed beneath the white lights, blue-backed and anonymous.

"We entered the tunnel after following the second trail from the warehouse," he began. "There was a pack of canimoids blocking the passage. At least one had already been damaged. They heard the gunshot, but they didn't attack."

Wylde took a drink from his cup.

“They ran?”

“No. They didn’t retreat either. They stopped.”

“Stopped how?”

Crowe glanced toward Elly.

“Like they were listening.”

He returned his attention to Wylde.

“That’s when the explosion happened. No visible device. No warning. The blast originated farther down the tunnel and cleared it like someone had pulled a trigger on the entire structure.”

“Gas?”

“Possibly. But something would still have needed to ignite it, and the canimoids appeared to know it was coming.”

Elly added what she remembered.

The direction of the pressure wave.

The debris thrown from farther down the passage.

The way the canimoids had held their positions.

A possible glimpse of movement beyond them before the tunnel turned white and the air became solid.

Crowe listened without interrupting.

Some portions of the event remained perfectly clear to her. Others existed only as disconnected images: concrete dust suspended in emergency light, the taste of blood, and half a synthetic dog attempting to lick her face.

When Elly finished, Wylde looked between them.

“So either the canimoids were waiting for the blast, or whoever triggered it was waiting for you.”

“That is a possible conclusion,” Crowe said.

“And you didn’t include that in your update.”

“I was unconscious during the reporting window.”

“You’ve been conscious for several hours.”

“I’ve been medically conscious. Administratively, I remain deceased.”

Wylde stared at him.

Crowe cleared his throat.

“There’s more. We submitted several requests before the explosion. Parts manifest, stock analysis, vehicle search, insurance records, and blood samples.”

He shifted carefully in his seat.

“If someone has been rebuilding canimoids from salvaged components, those parts have to come from somewhere.”

“And the blood?”

Crowe looked toward Elly.

“That depends on whether the samples come back human.”

For several seconds, the only sound inside the spinner was the rain tapping against its roof.

Wylde placed his cup in the console and started the engine.

“Good,” he said. “That almost sounded like a real update.”

Crowe leaned back and immediately discovered that he had chosen the wrong angle.

“Our desk master also wants the weapon-discharge report.”

Wylde guided the spinner away from the curb.

Crowe watched Cedars-Sinai-Honkou recede behind them through the rain.

The spinner rose into one of the city’s designated aerial lanes.

Traffic was light for the hour, allowing Wylde to increase speed as they crossed the skyline. Towers moved past on either side, their lights distorted by the wet glass and poisonous air.

“I have a few things to add,” Wylde said.

He summarized what he had discovered from the data already transmitted to headquarters. There was useful footage. Two names had appeared in the system, though their connection to the

investigation remained uncertain. Whatever linked them suggested that something significant had occurred that evening.

Wylde continued through what was known about the perpetrators, the company involved, its dealings, and several secondary observations he had drawn from the available records.

There were leads.

None were yet clean enough to be called answers.

“I’m planning to get a drink after I drop you off,” Wylde said. “Unless either of you wants to join me.”

He glanced at them through the mirror and chuckled.

“Based on how you look, though, that might be inadvisable.”

Crowe looked toward Elly.

“Normally, I’d invoke seniority and send Detective LE1 to retrieve our spinner.”

He paused.

“But since I’m apparently the reason we were blown up, this one is on me.”

Crowe looked toward Wylde.

“If you can put me down near the warehouse, I’ll limp over and collect it.”

He turned his face toward the window.

The events of the day passed through his thoughts. The warehouse. Varela. The Tyrell crates. The blood. The loading dock. The canimoids waiting in the tunnel.

Thinking caused pressure to build behind his eyes.

Crowe could not decide whether his body or his soul was telling him that he had done enough for one day.

“I could go for steamed dumplings and shumai, though.”

Elly listened while Crowe volunteered to retrieve the spinner.

Her replacement eye was still attempting to decide how far away he was.

OPTICAL SYNCHRONIZATION: 94.2%

Her left optical feed placed Crowe beside her.

The right placed him several millimeters farther away, surrounded by a faint amber outline that lagged behind whenever he moved. The hospital had assured her that the neural interface would complete calibration within forty-eight hours.

The hospital had also assured Crowe that broken ribs required rest.

Neither recommendation seemed likely to survive contact with the LAPD.

Elly turned her head.

Static washed briefly through the right side of her vision. Crowe's face divided, shifted, and realigned into one exhausted image.

"You're not the reason we were blown up," she said.

Her tone was flat. It sounded less like reassurance than a correction entered into an official record.

"We followed evidence into the tunnel. Someone had prepared an explosive event, and the animoids appeared to anticipate it."

She paused.

"Unless your Internal Affairs training included remote detonation through force of personality, causation has not been established."

Another pause.

"Although that might explain some of Deputy Chief Holden's reactions to you."

A diagnostic process tagged the statement as probable humor.

Elly ignored it.

Crowe was pale beneath the concrete dust the hospital had failed to remove. His breathing remained controlled but unnaturally shallow. Every inhalation stopped before it could expand his chest enough to disturb the damaged ribs.

He had shifted position several times since leaving the hospital. Each movement had been followed by the absolute stillness of a man pretending that it had not hurt.

SUBJECT: CROWE
RESPIRATORY PATTERN: GUARDED

PROBABLE PAIN RESPONSE: ELEVATED
RECOMMENDATION: REST / REDUCED ACTIVITY

The diagnostic overlay was unnecessary.

Elly looked instead at the city beyond the rain-covered window.

Light from the surrounding towers fractured across her mismatched vision. Every advertisement became two images before the replacement eye corrected the discrepancy.

A smiling woman promised artificial memories indistinguishable from real ones.

Above her, the Wallace logo shone through the mist like an unblinking eye.

Elly had not asked which model the hospital had installed.

It was functional.

That was what mattered.

She raised one hand and covered her left eye.

The city sharpened through the replacement unit.

Edges appeared too clean. Colors were slightly oversaturated. Movement separated into measurable vectors. Wylde's reflection in the windshield registered in greater detail than the man himself.

Crowe's pulse was visible beneath the skin of his throat.

Elly lowered her hand.

RIGHT OPTICAL UNIT: FUNCTIONAL
DEPTH CALIBRATION: INCOMPLETE
VEHICLE OPERATION: NOT RECOMMENDED

Not prohibited.

"Wylde can set us down on the warehouse landing pad," Elly said. "I'll retrieve our spinner."

Her emphasis made the decision clear.

She continued before Crowe could object.

"My eye is new. Your ribs are broken. Of the two conditions, mine is less likely to result in a punctured lung."

Elly glanced toward him.

“And I am not concussed.”

Probably.

A low pressure remained behind the new optical unit. It was accompanied by a phantom sensation where the damaged eye had been removed.

Elly could still remember the final image the old unit had transmitted.

The tunnel turning white.

Crowe lifted from the ground.

Concrete moving like water.

Then darkness.

Then Crowe’s weight collapsing into her arms.

The memory possessed no diagnostic marker. No timestamp. No clean separation between corrupted optical data and biological recollection.

It returned whenever she blinked, filling the fraction of a second before the replacement eye restored the world.

Elly folded her hands in her lap.

“As for the rest of the evening, food is advisable.”

Her nutritional monitor agreed. It had been issuing the same recommendation since before the explosion.

“Steamed dumplings and shumai are acceptable.”

She considered Wylde’s invitation.

“First, we recover the spinner and send Holden a report sufficiently detailed to delay the termination of our employment until morning.”

A pause.

“Then, perhaps, a drink.”

Her gaze returned to Crowe.

“You may sit in the passenger seat and remain administratively deceased.”

The amber ghost surrounding him finally moved into alignment with his body.

OPTICAL SYNCHRONIZATION: 96.8%

Elly blinked once.

This time, the tunnel did not appear.

At least the discrepancy was decreasing.

The remainder of the ride was quieter than the trip out.

Wylde guided the spinner back toward the warehouse and eased it into the crime scene with practiced precision. The vehicle settled onto the landing pad, its turbines winding down with a familiar whine before the cockpit fell silent.

Crowe unbuckled and gathered the evidence satchel from the footwell.

“Appreciate the lift, Detective Wylde.”

He climbed gingerly onto the landing pad and paused before closing the door.

For a moment, it appeared he intended to walk toward his own spinner.

Instead, he turned back.

“I’m buying dinner.”

The words came out flat, almost like another assignment.

“There’s a place a few blocks over.”

He glanced between Wylde and Elly.

“Chinese-Mexican fusion.”

A brief pause.

“It sounds questionable.”

Another pause.

“It isn’t.”

The restaurant was wedged between a synthetic-noodle stand and a pawn shop whose windows had been painted over decades before. Its faded neon sign buzzed stubbornly in three languages, half the letters burned out.

Officially, it served Chinese-Mexican fusion.

Unofficially, it served police officers, dockworkers, and anyone who wanted to disappear into the background for half an hour.

Crowe pushed open the door.

The owner looked up from behind the counter and gave him a single nod.

“Usual?”

Crowe stopped.

His eyes moved from Elly to Wylde.

“Three.”

It was not a place he had ever brought coworkers before.

The scent of star anise, grilled peppers, soy, garlic, and cilantro filled the room. A battered spinner rotor hung from the ceiling beside faded paper lanterns. Someone had decided decades ago that the decorations belonged together.

No one had questioned it since.

Crowe led them to a booth at the back.

He slid into the seat with his back against the wall and his eyes naturally aligned with the entrance. A wince escaped him as he shifted his torso.

“The dumplings are worth ordering,” he said. “The five-spice carnitas tacos aren’t authentic to anything, but they’re excellent.”

He picked up a menu despite clearly having no need for one.

“Don’t ask for substitutions. Mr. Liu takes it personally.”

Crowe looked over the menu at Wylde.

“Detective Wylde.”

He spoke with unusual confidence.

“They age the tequila in oak with Sichuan peppercorns and smoke the citrus before mixing it.”

Crowe gave a slight shrug.

“I’ve worked my way through the menu over the years.”

He glanced toward the counter.

“Mr. Liu claims it’s the best margarita in Los Angeles.”

A pause.

“The bartender says that’s only because they ignore his recipe.”

Crowe’s expression barely changed, but dry amusement moved somewhere behind it.

A waitress arrived carrying a cast-iron pot of jasmine tea.

Without thinking, Crowe poured a cup for Elly before filling his own and sliding the last toward Wylde.

Only after doing it did he seem to realize that it was not something he normally did.

He leaned back.

For perhaps the first time since meeting Elly, Crowe was not scanning every exit or measuring every word. He still faced the entrance—old habits survived explosions—but the tension that normally occupied his shoulders had eased.

Perhaps it was the surroundings.

Perhaps it was the concussion.

He looked toward his partner.

“You handled yourself well today.”

The compliment came awkwardly, as though he had little practice giving them.

“I’ve worked with officers who would have folded after that blast.”

A faint smile pulled at one corner of his mouth.

“You didn’t.”

Crowe raised his teacup.

“So, congratulations.”

He paused.

“You’ve survived your first crime-scene explosion with me.”

For Crowe, it was about as close as anyone came to being formally welcomed to the team.

Elly lifted the small porcelain cup.

Steam curled across her face. She took a measured sip.

For a fraction of a second, her expression remained perfectly neutral.

Then the quiet machinery behind her eyes began its work.

Jasmine.

Longjing green tea.

Water temperature approximately eighty degrees Celsius. Steeping time: perhaps two minutes, possibly slightly less. Trace minerals suggested filtered municipal water. Floral notes masked a faint metallic tang from an aging kettle.

Honey unnecessary.

Sugar detrimental to the balance.

Elly blinked.

“Interesting.”

Crowe looked up from his menu.

“Good?”

Elly studied the pale gold liquid, not as evidence, but as though trying to remember where she'd tasted it before.

"The jasmine is delicate."

She took another sip.

"The water is soft. Whoever brewed it knew exactly when to stop."

A faint crease formed in her brow.

"It reminds me of..."

She stopped.

Another pause.

"I don't know what."

Crowe waited.

"I've never been here before."

"No."

She looked into the cup again.

"But it feels familiar."

Crowe regarded her for a moment before returning to his menu.

"Most people just say it tastes good."

That drew the smallest smile from Elly.

"It does."

She cradled the warm cup in both hands.

"It also..."

She searched for the words.

"...makes everything feel a little quieter."

Crowe looked over the rim of his own cup.

"I was going to say it takes the edge off."

Elly noticed his cup was nearly empty before he did.

Without interrupting the conversation, she reached for the cast-iron teapot and carefully poured until the tea settled just below the rim.

As she set the pot back down, Crowe's fingers lightly tapped the tabletop twice beside his cup.

Tap. Tap.

She looked at him.

"...Did I do something wrong?"

Crowe shook his head.

"No."

He glanced at the cup.

"It's a custom."

He tapped the table once more with two fingers.

"When someone pours your tea, you thank them like this."

Elly studied the gesture for a moment, her unpatched eye lingering on his hand rather than unfocusing in calculation.

"A gesture instead of words."

Crowe nodded.

"My grandfather did it."

She considered that for a moment before a memory surfaced.

"I've heard of something similar."

A brief pause.

"The Qianlong Emperor, traveling in disguise. His attendants couldn't bow without revealing him, so they thanked him by tapping two fingers on the table."

Crowe smiled faintly.

"I knew the gist. Not the details."

"They are not mutually exclusive."

"No," Crowe admitted, lifting the cup. "They aren't."

She refilled Wylde's cup next.

Before she withdrew the teapot, Elly extended two fingers and gently tapped the tabletop.

Tap. Tap.

She looked to Crowe.

"Like that?"

Crowe nodded once.

"Exactly like that. Except the recipient is the one who taps."

It was the first tradition they'd shared that required no explanation beyond the gesture itself.

Wylde looked around the restaurant.

Then he looked toward Crowe.

"How about that margarita?"