

Katz Cradle

By Gregory Huffstutter

In order to solve his partner's murder, a homophobic rookie cop is forced to team up with a gay-rights activist.

One

Harsh July sunlight bounced off the hood of my '84 Camaro, reflecting the overhead smog. Long-time Angelenos swear the air quality's gotten better. I think their brains have been cooked from too much carbon monoxide.

Every couple months, a rainstorm sweeps through the LA basin, scrubbing the air to where you can see all the way to the Santa Monica Mountains.

The view never lasts long.

A day or two, then the heat, emissions, and inversion layer bring back the milky haze — isolating each neighborhood within the urban sprawl more effectively than fear or inadequate public transportation.

Turning onto my street, Doble Avenue, I found three LAPD black-and-whites manning a perimeter around the Candy Lanai apartments.

A cluster of onlookers took in the commotion from behind waist-high portable crowd barriers.

I pulled up to the nearest Harbor division patrol car.

“Hey, man, I'm a P-II Dawg out of Southeast. That's my building over there. Can I reach into my pocket for my ID?”

It's a common misconception us cops always carry badges. LAPD started issuing laminated IDs after two off-duty officers were involved in a hair-salon

robbery. The thieves left with their loot, opened the stolen wallets, saw the gold shields, came back and killed the cops to keep them from being witnesses.

“Officer Z.M. Katz,” the patrol officer read off my card, logging my name, department, and serial number. “Better head over there, see the assistant watch commander.”

“You gonna tell me what’s going on?”

“187. Off-duty officer took two in the chest.”

“Oh, man. Who?”

“One of your fellow Southeasters. PO named Wilson.”

Behind strands of yellow police tape, the rear of a Honda Accord jutted into the street, as though its owner hadn’t planned on staying long.

Of all the possibilities running through my mind during the furious drive home, this hadn’t made the list.

A curly-haired evidence tech bent over something behind the car, snapping pictures. When he lifted a white sheet, I saw black shoes — toes to the sky.

Dazed, I struggled with the concept this was *my* apartment complex — with the communal patio and planter of begonias where I kept a hide-a-key in case my girlfriend Jennifer locked herself out.

And my brain flatly rejected that there on the sidewalk, lying flat, arms splayed, was the body of my partner, Officer Raymond Wilson.

The blood splatter reached from the car’s front headlight to a coiled garden hose several feet away. I’m no coroner, but know a shotgun wound when I see one.

Ray? What the hell? It’s our day off!

With the crime tape, I couldn’t get too close – but the center of his chest resembled a pincushion, pockmarked flesh and gristle peeking through his torn gray T-shirt.

My partner's face escaped the blast. It appeared a stray pellet caught his right cheek, but otherwise, his mouth was calm and expressionless. Eyes upturned. Unblinking and wholly lifeless.

The evidence tech clicked away, set a portable screen around the body, blocking my view. On my left, two paramedics climbed into their ambulance, switched off their emergency lights, and slowly backed through an opening in the perimeter.

Don't know how long I stood against the crime tape before hearing the words: "You Katz?"

The 3-stripe assistant watch commander introduced himself as Sergeant Dickerson. I nodded, shook his hand.

"Just talked to your girlfriend — she was the PR who ID'd the body. The vic was your partner?"

I nodded again. Lips didn't want to work, but I got out: "Jennifer OK? Where is she?"

Dickerson took my upper arm in his meaty fist. The Sergeant had a good three inches on me, with broad shoulders that spoke to a youth in dockyard labor or competitive rugby. "She's shaken up, but fine. R-H has already taken over. They're in your apartment with her right now. I'm sorry, Son. Nobody should see his partner like this."

"Can I talk to her?"

"In a minute. The detectives want a quick statement from you first. You mind waiting in my car?"

Head swirling, I sat in his back seat, watching a succession of official vehicles arrive at the scene. More plain-clothed detectives. The deputy chief of the South bureau.

The opposite car door was opened by a man so thin he swam inside his slacks. He introduced himself as Robbery-Homicide Detective Kevin Kipler, sliding into the vacant seat beside me without removing his rubber gloves.

“You’re Wilson’s partner?”

“That’s right.”

“Ugly business. Hate to see this happen to one of ours,” he said in a nasal, reedy voice while opening a spiral notebook. “And your full name is...?”

“Z.M. Katz.”

“Just the initials?”

“That’s what’s on my driver’s license.”

“How long you been at this address?”

Calculating the months was a struggle. I usually performed well in a crisis, but my synapses didn’t want to fire. “Uh, a little more than a year.”

“And you’ve been with LAPD how long?”

My face began to burn, sudden anger cutting through the fog. “Is someone gonna tell me what happened? I come home to...” Maybe if I didn’t say the words, didn’t admit what I saw, there was a possibility it never happened. “To find Ray like that, and you’re asking—”

Kipler attempted to sound sympathetic. “Hey, we just got here twenty minutes ago and been playing catch-up. Evidently your partner called while you were gone, talked to your girlfriend, and arranged to come over. He pulls up to your apartment, steps out of his car, and in broad daylight, bammo.”

Bammo? What the fuck is that?

“So far, nobody’s stepping forward as a wit, but we’ve got detectives canvassing the neighborhood. Your girlfriend was one of the few people home. She was the first respondent, called 911, identified the vic as an officer. Hate to be the one asking you these questions, but you know the drill — the faster we get on it, the faster we find our doer.”

That explains how Robbery-Homicide got the quick call. In Los Angeles, there’s so many dead bodies it takes several levels of detectives to keep up. Harbor Division has their own homicide squad for the run-of-the-mill shootings and

stabblings. More complex cases get kicked up to a Bureau unit, which covers multiple Divisions at once. But since Jennifer immediately ID'd Ray as a cop, it skipped all the way to Robbery-Homicide, which handles the high-profile, media-friendly crimes.

I swallowed back the rage and bile. "I'll help any way I can."

"Knew you would. So, how many years you with the department?"

"Three. Did my probation in Hollywood, wheeled to Southeast last January."

"How long did you and the deceased work together?"

"About a year and a half."

"So where were you today?"

Brain lock. "Uh, I got up at 0500—"

"You're on days?"

I'd been trying to talk Ray into getting us transferred to PM watch, which saw more action and arrests, but he liked a slower pace. "Yeah. But today we had an RDO."

"You got up at five a.m. on your day off?"

"What can I say? I'm a morning person. Drove to the Angeles National Forest, went for a long hike, started home—"

"What part of Angeles Forest?"

"East Fork trail. I was in Azusa when I got a message from my girlfriend begging me to hurry home. Look, I need to see her."

"My partner's taking her statement right now. So you got her message..."

"I couldn't really hear what she said — bad connection — but I knew something was wrong. Tried calling back, nobody answered, so I drove like hell."

"How long that take?" When Kipler talked, his Adam's apple danced more than a bantamweight in a pay-per-view fight — something you'd expect from a hormonal teenager, not a homicide detective in his late forties.

"I got to my car at 1120 hours, got the message at 1140, came straight here."

“You made good time.”

“Told you. I drove like hell. Jennifer sounded freaked — I may’ve taken a few liberties with speed laws.”

“Don’t blame you. Would’ve done the same myself. You got a hiking partner?”

“No.”

“Anybody see you out there?”

“Nobody I know.”

“Just a few more questions.”

“Shoot.” I immediately regretted my word choice.

“Get a lot of gang activity on this block?”

“May not be much to look at, but it’s a quiet neighborhood. Young couples, teachers, good people. We always felt safe.”

“Know why anyone would want to kill your partner?”

“I don’t... can’t think of anything. I mean, we’ve had our share of punks threaten us... part of the job, right? But nothing that serious, you know.”

“Think more about that. We’ll want to follow up once you’ve had a chance to collect yourself. You on tomorrow?”

“Yeah.”

“I’ll call your watch commander. They’ll probably force you to take some time off. Got any VC saved up?”

“Not really.”

“Play your cards right and you might be taking a vacation on the department. But you didn’t hear that from me.”

“Please, can I see my girlfriend now?”

“I’m heading in myself – you can follow me up – but I need to check your cell phone first.”

At this point, I would’ve given him anything to end the conversation and look in on Jennifer. Kipler made a note of my phone number, scrolled through my call log.

Satisfied, the detective led me around the perimeter of the crime scene. Ray's body was still hidden behind the screen, but the Honda's front door hung open. For such an orderly person on the job — Ray never left our "shop," or patrol car, dirtier than we got it in the morning — his personal vehicle was always a pit. Old newspapers, shopping bags, shoe boxes, dirty laundry, fast food wrappers, crushed soda cans, unfolded street maps, plastic coffee mugs; they all enjoyed free rein inside Ray's Accord.

When asked about it, he said being clean and respectful on-duty sapped his willpower when it came to maintaining his own car.

Heading up the laundry room stairs, I saw a woman in a lab coat measuring the dimensions of our courtyard. The front door to our apartment — #8 on the northeast corner — was ajar, and I heard voices within.

Candy Lanai offered a one-bedroom, 950-square-foot box, with limp brown carpet and puke green linoleum. The foyer slash living room slash dining area was hardly palatial, with just enough space for a couch, computer desk, and four IKEA chairs around a flimsy dinner table. It felt cramped with two people inside, downright stifling with four.

Jennifer sat at the kitchen table, her face whiter than our tablecloth, straight blonde hair pulled into a practical ponytail.

Seeing her, I felt a palpable rush of relief. Disappearing into my chest, her body recreated the Northridge quake, measuring at least 6.0 on the Richter scale. Or maybe my body did the shaking. Hard to tell.

My recorded voice said, "I'm on the 605 heading home — be there as soon as I can. Call me when you get this so I know you're OK!"

Standing over our answering machine was a short, squat Asian man wearing an olive suit that managed to look cool even in our unventilated apartment. He introduced himself as Robbery-Homicide Detective Hiram Hong.

Underscoring the contrast in their appearances, Kipler tucked his uninspired maroon tie into the gap between the third and fourth buttons of his wrinkled dress shirt. “You ready to walk the grid again?”

“In a minute. We’re finishing up.” Hong’s gentle voice sounded more Hawaiian than Korean.

I fetched Jennifer more water. She sat back down, took the cup, gaze somewhere else.

After offering his condolences, Hong asked Jennifer, “Did Officer Wilson tell you why he was coming over?”

Jennifer paused, gathering herself. When she spoke, the words came out uncharacteristically flat and expressionless. “He said he needed to drop off the hunting stuff.”

“The deadline for a deer license was coming up and I had to get his paperwork in right away,” I interjected. “We were planning a trip to Colorado.”

Miraculously, I’d talked him into joining me for a hunting weekend in September. Since he wasn’t a Colorado resident – whereas I kept a State ID with my mom’s address for that very reason – I’d planned on pulling strings with my buddy at the Division of Wildlife.

“He said he’d talked with Z about coming over after three, but something came up and he needed to stop by right away.”

“Officer Wilson never made it to your door, correct?”

“I was scrubbing the tub when I heard a loud noise. Thought it was the garbage people, but they only come on Mondays. So I went to the window—”

“That one?” Detective Hong motioned to the open window above my CD collection.

Jennifer nodded.

“So you got to the window, what did you see?”

“Ray’s car against the curb. There’s a tree down there, so I didn’t see him right away. But then... all the blood on the sidewalk and I... Oh God—”

“That’s fine, you’re doing great. When you were at the window, are you sure you didn’t see anybody driving away? Maybe someone walking?”

She sniffed back a runny nose. “No. Nobody. The street was empty.”

“How long did it take you to get to the window?” I asked, taking Jennifer’s hand.

Kipler stabbed his pen at me with irritation. “This will go a lot faster if we ask the questions.”

“That’s my partner lying out there, so don’t tell me I don’t have the right—”

“You’re in no position to—”

“She’s my girlfriend, I think I have a better idea of how—”

Hong stepped in. “Officer Katz, don’t make me pull rank and please don’t interrupt again. Now Jennifer, can you estimate how much time passed between hearing the noise and reaching the window?”

Jennifer looked up at me then shook her blonde ponytail. “It wasn’t right away. I thought it was the garbage truck dropping the dumpster. I don’t know.”

“Fifteen seconds? Twenty?”

“I guess so.”

“Did you call 911 before or after you went outside?”

“After,” she sniffled again. “First I ran out to see what happened. I got there and he was just... there on the sidewalk, twitching. His eyes were open. So I bent over to see if he was breathing and he... he just went still.”

“You’re doing great. I’m getting it straight in my head. What’d you do next?”

Part of me wanted to leap in, protect Jennifer, tell Hong to back off. Another part of me wanted to hear her answer. Inaction and curiosity won out.

“I think I screamed for help, but nobody answered. So I ran back and called 911. I couldn’t reach Z, didn’t know what to do. That’s when I heard the dog. I

went back to the window and one of our neighbors — don't even know his name — was walking his Russell Terrier. He couldn't get his dog to stop barking. I went back downstairs to see if he could help Ray, but before we could do anything, the ambulance showed up."

"Thank you. You've been very helpful. Unfortunately, I need to ask two more favors. I'm going to need to borrow the answering machine tape and I'll need to bring your shoes and clothes to the lab for testing."

"You need all of her clothes?" I asked.

"She was first on the scene. There could've been evidence transfer, but we won't know for sure until we check it out."

Jennifer remained silent, seeing whether or not I'd object.

"You going to stain them with all kind of chemical tests?"

"Hope not. But can't make any promises. Tell you what, if we ruin them I'll make sure the department buys her a new outfit."

The prospect of updating her clothes didn't register on Jennifer's face. Untying her laces, her shoulders quivered when she saw the blackish red stains on her sneakers. Hong pulled a large plastic baggie from an evidence kit, dropped the shoes inside. "Yours too," he said to me.

"Mine? What for?"

"Can't be too careful with an officer homicide. I'm afraid we're going to need your statements one more time for the record."

"Oh, fuck." It hit me all of a sudden. "Who's going to call Maureen?"

"Who's Maureen?" Kipler asked.

"Ray's mother. She lives in Seal Beach."

The gaunt detective re-opened his notebook. "We'll be paying her a visit. Comes with the territory. She got a heart condition?"

"No, she's a spitfire. But Ray was her only child — she doted on him. You want me to come with you?"

“Afraid we can’t let you do that. And I’ll need you to stay out of the crime scene until we’ve cleared it for you to come downstairs.”

In my heart of hearts, I took a small measure of relief at not having to deliver the bad news to Maureen.