A FREE COMPANION TO UNLIKELY HERO

Warning Only

Twenty years before the night on Highway 74, a rookie patrolman trusted his gut once.



RICHARD LOWE

Warning Only

The coffee came before I asked for it, the fourth Saturday in a row.

She set the cup down at my elbow and slid the cream across without looking at me, already turning toward the booth by the window where a man in a feed store cap was waving his fork for a refill. The diner was two blocks from the academy and it smelled like bacon grease and bleach water and the burnt edge of a pot that had sat on the warmer too long. I had a pressed uniform shirt on a hanger in my car and a vehicle code manual open on the counter, and I had not read a word of it in ten minutes.

I was twenty-three. I thought I could read people. I had been told so by a recruiter, a sergeant at my oral board and my own mother, and I believed all three of them.

I had read her the first Saturday. Nursing student, I figured, from the textbook with the colored tabs she kept under the register and the way she checked the old men's hands when she poured their coffee.

Somebody who worked weekends because weekdays were spoken for. Somebody who was tired and didn't let it show on the customers.

What I couldn't read was whether the coffee meant anything. Every cop in the place got coffee. The cadets got it faster because we tipped like scared people.

She came back with the pot and topped me off. I'd had two sips.

"You're going to drown me," I said.

"You're going to sit there and study the same page again," she said. "So you might as well have something hot."

The man in the feed store cap laughed into his eggs. My ears went warm. I closed the manual.

"What's your name?"

She put the pot down on the counter, on the burn mark where it always went, and wiped her hands on the towel at her hip. She took her time with it. The fry cook dropped a basket in the oil behind her and it hissed like a crowd.

"Maria," she said. "I was starting to wonder what was taking you so long."

"I was working on it."

"Four Saturdays." She picked the pot back up. "I had a bet with Lupe that you'd make it to five."

"Who's Lupe?"

She tipped her head toward the kitchen. A heavyset woman in a hairnet raised a spatula at me through the pass-through window and shook her head, disgusted, like I'd cost her money. I had.

"What time are you off?" I said.

"Two."

"I'll be here at two."

"I know you will," Maria said, and went to fill the feed store man's cup.

I sat there with my coffee and my closed manual and I felt like I had made an arrest.

That was how I thought about it then. I had read the situation, I had waited for the right moment, and I had been right.

I was good at this. I was going to be good at all of it.

* * *

Nine months after graduation I was riding alone on graveyard out of the Hemet side of the county, and I still thought so.

My training officer had been a man named Hollis Brandt, twenty-two years on the road, a belly that hung over his duty belt and a mustache he kept trimmed with a pair of nail scissors he carried in his shirt pocket.

Brandt had signed off on me two weeks early. He told the sergeant I had a nose.

He told me I had a nose, too, and that most rookies spent their first year writing everything down because they didn't have one.

“Paper is for court,” he'd said, the second week, with his boots up on the dash of the Crown Vic and a burrito from a gas station going cold in his lap. “Paper is what you do after. Out here you do it with your eyes. You'll know a drunk before he rolls his window down. You'll know a liar by how he holds his license. You either got that or you don't.”

I had it.

He said so, and I could feel it. I had a small spiral notebook from a drugstore in my breast pocket because the academy told us to carry one, and by that winter half its pages were still blank.

It was a Tuesday in February, cold for the valley, the kind of night where the windows fog from the inside and you keep the heater on your feet and the cold air on your face so you don't nod off.

I'd had a quiet shift: a dead battery on Florida Avenue, a mattress in the number two lane of the 215 that took me twenty minutes and most of my patience to drag onto the shoulder, and a kid with no taillight who called me sir six times in ninety seconds and lived three blocks from where I stopped him, so I let him go.

At ten to one I was westbound on 74 out past the west end of town, where Florida Avenue stops being a street and the highway runs flat and dark toward the 215.

A pickup came the other way, eastbound, headed into Hemet. It was a newer Ford, a big one, white, clean enough to shine under my headlights.

It wasn't speeding. It drifted.

Not much. The left tires touched the double yellow and came back. Then a quarter mile later they touched it again and stayed on it for a second, maybe two, before the truck eased back into its lane like a man who'd caught himself falling asleep in church.

I flipped around in the dirt pullout and came up behind it.

I ran the plate while I followed. It came back clean, registered to a Gilbert Ostrander with an address on the west end of Hemet.

He had no wants.

I hit the lights at the next wide spot, and the truck went over onto the shoulder smooth and slow and stopped well clear of the lane.

He used his signal the whole way. That counted with me. Drunks either didn't stop or stopped badly.

I walked up on the passenger side the way Brandt taught me, flashlight in my left hand, right hand loose.

The window came down before I got there. A man in his sixties sat behind the wheel with both hands at ten and two.

He wore a canvas work coat with corduroy on the collar and a pair of reading glasses pushed up on his forehead. The cab smelled like wintergreen and old coffee and a hospital, that rubbing alcohol smell that comes home on your clothes.

“Evening, Officer,” he said. “I know. I was all over the road. I'm sorry.”

“License and registration, sir.”

He had the license out already, in his hand on top of the wheel, and he gave it to me without fumbling. Gilbert Ostrander, date of birth that made him sixty-one.

The registration was in a plastic sleeve clipped to the sun visor. He was an organized man.

“Do you know why I stopped you?”

“I crossed the line. Twice, probably. Maybe more.” He took his glasses off his forehead and folded them and held them in his lap. “I'm coming from Loma Linda. My wife's been up there since Thursday.”

“I'm sorry to hear that.”

“They did the surgery Sunday. It didn't go like they wanted.” He looked out the windshield at the dark road, at nothing. “I've been in that room four days. The nurses finally ran me out tonight. Told me to go home and sleep in a bed or they'd admit me too.”

His eyes were red. Wet at the edges and red around the rims, the lids heavy. I put my light on them for a second and he squinted and didn't complain.

“Have you had anything to drink tonight, Mr. Ostrander?”

“Coffee,” he said. “More than I want to count. And I've been chewing these.” He held up a roll of wintergreen mints, half gone, the foil torn back. “Doctor took me off cigarettes in 1981 and I've been chewing these ever since. Thirty-three years married and she still says I smell like a candy cane.”

He smiled when he said it, and then the smile went away and didn't come back.

I stood there with my flashlight and I read him.

That's what I would have told you I was doing. I looked at his steady hands and his clean truck and his organized registration and his red eyes, and I smelled the mints and the hospital and nothing else, nothing sweet or sour underneath.

I heard a man who answered every question in the order I'd asked it.

I thought about my own father sitting up three nights with my mother when she had her gallbladder out, and how he'd driven into a mailbox on the way home the third morning, stone sober.

The man was tired. He was sad and he was tired and he was eleven minutes from his own bed.

I could have had him out of the truck. I could have run him through the eyes and the walk and the one-leg stand and the whole thing would have taken me fifteen minutes.

If he was what I thought he was, he'd have passed and gone home fifteen minutes later than he otherwise would have, to an empty house.

I thought about that. I thought it would be a small cruelty to a decent man on the worst week of his life.

“Mr. Ostrander,” I said. “I'm going to let you go with a warning.”

“Thank you.” He shut his eyes and opened them again. “Thank you, Officer. I mean it.”

“Roll your window down the rest of the way. Get some cold air on your face. Radio up loud. You're what, ten minutes?”

“Little more. I'm off Sanderson.”

“Then you go straight there. Don't stop for anything. And if you feel your eyes go, you pull over and sleep in the truck. I'd rather find you asleep on a shoulder than in a ditch.”

“Yes, sir.”

I gave him back his license. He put his reading glasses in his coat pocket and buttoned the flap over them, and I noticed that, too, how careful it was, and I counted it in his favor.

He pulled out with his signal on and went east toward the lights at the speed limit, and I watched his taillights stay dead center in his lane until they went around the bend by the nursery and out of sight.

I went back to my car and keyed the radio and cleared the stop. Dispatch gave me a time. I didn't write it down.

The notebook stayed in my pocket. There was nothing to put in it. I'd made a good stop and a good call, and you didn't take notes on a warning.

* * *

The call came at twenty-four minutes after one. I know that because I have since read it on the log, more times than I could count.

Injury collision, Sanderson Avenue south of the canal, two vehicles, one possibly overturned. Hemet fire en route.

I was the closest unit. I was eight minutes out, and I made it in five with my lights and siren going and the heater still blowing on my feet because I never thought to turn it off.

I knew before I got there. I would like to tell you I didn't.

I'd like to say I came over the rise on Sanderson and saw the pickup in the field and was surprised, but I had known since dispatch said Sanderson, the way you know a phone call at three in the morning is bad before you pick it up.

My stomach went cold and heavy and stayed that way.

The white Ford was on its wheels in the dirt on the east side of the road, nose down in the drainage ditch, front end folded up like a soda can someone had stepped on.

Forty yards past it a small car lay on its roof in the westbound lane. A Civic, I'd learn later, a green one, older.

In my headlights it looked black. One wheel was still turning.

I put my car across both lanes and set flares. My hands did that part without me. Then I went to the Civic.

There was a girl in it. She was upside down in her seat belt with her hair hanging toward the roof and the roof pushed in to meet her.

She had on a gray sweatshirt with the name of the community college across the front in red letters.

There was a backpack in the road behind the car, unzipped, and a spiral notebook had come out of it and lay open on the asphalt, pages lifting in the wind off the fields.

I got down on my belly on the broken glass and put my hand through the window and found her neck. I held my fingers there long enough to be sure and then longer than that.

She was warm. The heater in her car was still running, too, and the radio, some late-night call-in show turned low, a man's voice talking about mortgage rates.

I said, “Miss. Miss, can you hear me,” a few more times than made any sense.

Fire got there four minutes after me. A paramedic named Alvarado crawled in where I'd been and came back out and looked at me and shook his head once.

Then they went to the pickup.

Gil Ostrander was sitting up behind his wheel when they pried the door. His face had hit the airbag hard and his nose was bleeding into his corduroy collar, but he was talking. He was talking when they lifted him out and he was talking when they laid him on the board, and I stood at the edge of the light and heard every word.

“Is she all right? The other one. Is she all right? She came out of nowhere. She came right out of nowhere.”

She hadn't. Her car was in her lane. His tire marks went across the double yellow and kept going.

One of the firefighters, a big kid with a shaved head, leaned down close to Ostrander's face to check his pupils and then stood up and looked across at me.

He didn't say anything. He didn't have to.

I could smell it from where I stood, now that I wasn't standing in a cab full of wintergreen. It came off the man the way heat comes off a road.

They were loading him when he saw me. His eyes found my uniform and then my face, and I watched him put it together. He lifted one hand off the board and pointed at me, and the paramedic pushed it gently back down.

“You,” he said. “You told me to go home.”

“Sir, lie still.”

“You told me to go home. I was going home.” He started to cry, a wet, choking sound. “I was doing what you said.”

Alvarado looked at me over the stretcher. I looked at the flares.

* * *

Brandt rolled up at a quarter to two. Somebody had called him at home, or he'd heard it on the scanner he kept by his bed, which he did. He was in his uniform pants and a sweatshirt with his badge clipped to the front of it and his hair standing up on one side.

He took a long look at the Civic, and then at the pickup, and then he walked over to where I was standing by my car and said, “Walk with me.”

We walked down Sanderson, past the end of the flares, out to where the road was dark and the only sound was the canal water moving in the culvert under us and, behind us, the generator on the fire engine. He had a cigarette going. He'd been quitting for as long as I'd known him.

“Talk,” he said.

I told him. All of it. The drift, the plate, the stop, the mints, the wife at Loma Linda, the warning.

I told him I hadn't smelled it. I told him I'd looked right at the man and hadn't seen it.

Brandt smoked and listened and didn't look at me. When I was done he flicked the cigarette into the canal and watched it go out.

“What did you put on the radio?”

“I cleared the stop.”

“With what?”

“Just cleared. Dispatch gave me a time.”

“You run the plate?”

“Yes.”

“You write anything?”

I took the notebook out of my pocket and held it up. He took it from me and paged through it in the light from his little flashlight.

He found the last thing I'd written, which was the mattress on the 215 at twenty past ten, and he flipped forward through the blank pages after it, one, two, three, all the way to the cardboard. Then he gave it back to me.

“Okay,” he said. “This is what happened. You ran a plate on a vehicle you observed. It came back clean. You made contact. No objective signs of impairment, no odor, no slurred speech. You cleared. That's what the log says, and that's all the log says, and that's all that happened.”

“I didn't run him through anything.”

“Because you had no reason to. That's what I'm telling you.” He turned and looked at me for the first time. His eyes were flat and tired. “You go in there and write some long narrative about how you had a feeling, and how he had a sad story, and how you decided not to do your job because you felt bad for him, and I'll tell you how it goes. His lawyer reads it. That girl's family reads it. Every newspaper in the Inland Empire reads it. And then the man who killed that girl is the Highway Patrol. He's you. You'll be out of a uniform by summer, and you know what? He'll do less time. That's what your feelings buy her.”

“He was drunk,” I said. “Right there in front of me. He was drunk and I sent him home.”

“He was a drunk with a roll of mints and a good story. You know how many of those I've let go in twenty-two years?” Brandt held up his hand with the fingers spread. “Neither do I. I never counted. Most of them made it home. That's the job. You make the call and most of the time it's the right call, and the time it ain't, you don't make it worse.”

The canal ran under us. Somewhere out in the fields a dog was barking, steady, the way they do at nothing.

“You're a good cop,” Brandt said. “You got a nose. You had a bad night. Don't throw your career in a ditch next to that truck.”

He clapped me on the shoulder and walked back toward the lights. I stood there with the notebook in my hand until the fire engine's generator shut down. My feet had gone numb in my boots and I didn't know when that had happened.

* * *

I got off at six. I didn't go home.

Maria had an apartment in a stucco fourplex in Riverside then, upstairs, with a window unit air conditioner that dripped on the walk and a landlord who never fixed it. She had clinicals at seven. When I knocked she opened the door in her scrubs with her hair still wet and a piece of toast in her hand, and she looked at my face and stepped back to let me in without a word.

The kitchen was the size of a closet. Her anatomy book lay open on the table next to a jar of peanut butter with the knife still in it.

The radio on top of the refrigerator was playing the news low, traffic and weather, a stall on the 91. I sat down in the one chair and she leaned against the counter.

“Somebody died,” she said.

“A girl. Nineteen. She was coming home from the library at the college. She had a notebook in her backpack. It was all over the road.”

Maria put her toast down on the counter.

I told her the rest. I told it worse than I had told Brandt. I kept losing the order of it and going back, and the more I went back the more I didn't know.

Had I seen his pupils?

I'd put my light on him, but had I looked, or had I seen red eyes and decided they were crying eyes?

Did he say coffee first, or mints first? Did his hands shake when he gave me the license?

I'd have sworn no, but I couldn't see it anymore.

I could see the girl's sweatshirt. I could see the mortgage man on her radio. I couldn't see Gil Ostrander's hands.

“Brandt says I made contact and cleared,” I said. “No signs. That's all that happened.”

“Is that all that happened?”

“No.”

She looked at the clock on the stove. It was twenty past six. She had to be on the floor at seven, and the hospital was half an hour away, and she was going to be late, and she didn't move.

“What did he tell you to do?” she said.

“Keep my mouth shut.”

“And what are you going to do?”

“I don't know.”

She didn't say anything to that. She went to the drawer by the sink, the one that stuck, and worked it open with her hip, and took out a yellow legal pad and a ballpoint pen from the hospital with the logo on the side. She put them down on the table in front of me, on top of her anatomy book.

“You can't remember his hands,” she said.

“No.”

“By tonight you won't remember what he said first. By next week you'll remember it the way Brandt told it to you.” She tapped the pad once with her finger. “Whatever you decide, Don, write down what you saw. Now, while it's still yours.”

“And then what?”

“Then you'll know what you saw.” She picked her keys up off the counter. “I'm going to be late for Mrs. Haddad's dressing change. Lock the bottom lock when you go. The top one sticks.”

She kissed me on the top of the head on her way past, and the door shut, and I heard her on the stairs, and then her car, which needed a muffler.

I sat there with the radio on. They were talking about the collision now, a fatal on Sanderson in Hemet, a nineteen-year-old woman from San Jacinto, name withheld pending notification of family.

Pending notification. That meant that right now, at half past six in the morning, there was a mother out in San Jacinto making coffee who didn't know yet.

Somebody was driving to her house. Maybe it was somebody I knew.

I picked up the pen.

I wrote the time I first saw the truck. I didn't know it, so I wrote “approx 0050, verify w/ dispatch log.”

I wrote the drift, both times, and where. I wrote the plate.

I wrote that I made a passenger-side approach.

I wrote that the cab smelled of wintergreen, coffee and rubbing alcohol. I wrote that his eyes were red and watery and that I attributed this to fatigue and crying. I wrote “attributed.” Then I crossed it out and wrote “I decided.”

I wrote that I did not ask him to exit the vehicle. I wrote that I did not administer field sobriety tests. I wrote why.

When I got to his hands I wrote, “I do not remember.”

It took four pages. My handwriting got worse as it went and I didn't stop to fix it. When I was done the window unit had kicked on and was dripping on the walk below, slow, like a clock that couldn't keep time, and the news had gone back around to traffic and weather.

I read it over twice. It was the worst thing I had ever written and it was the only true account of that night in the world.

I tore the four pages off the pad and folded them in thirds and put them in my shirt pocket behind the drugstore notebook. I locked the bottom lock.

* * *

I gave it to my lieutenant that afternoon, typed up, as a supplemental to the collision report.

I signed it. I gave Brandt a copy first, because he'd been my training officer and I owed him that much, and I watched him read it standing up in the hallway outside the report room.

He read all four pages. He took his time. When he got to the end he folded it up and handed it back to me.

"You know what you just did," he said.

"Yes, sir."

"No, you don't." He wasn't angry. I'd have felt better if he was. "You think you just did the honest thing, and you did. You also just handed a defense lawyer the best gift he's going to get all year. Gil Ostrander's going to sit in a courtroom and his lawyer's going to read your own words out loud, how you looked at his client and saw a sober man. A trained officer of the California Highway Patrol saw a sober man. You think a jury hears that and gives him the max?"

"I don't know what a jury does."

"I do." He put his hands in his pockets. "And that girl's mother is going to be sitting in the second row when he reads it."

He was right. For years afterward I wanted him to be the bad guy in this, and he wasn't. Everything Brandt told me in that hallway happened the way he said it would.

* * *

The review took three months. I sat in a room with a captain from another division and a lieutenant I'd never met and a man from headquarters who took notes on a laptop and never once looked up, and I answered their questions.

Most of them were questions I'd already answered in the four pages.

They asked anyway, and I answered the same way each time, because I had it written down and I didn't have to remember.

I got a letter of reprimand for my file and a second round of field training, eight weeks riding with a woman named Sergeant Cuevas who had been on the road for fifteen years and who never in my presence pulled over a car without writing down the time. She didn't explain it. She did it.

On the third night I bought a notebook to match hers. On the fourth night she looked at it and said, "Get the kind with the tabs. You'll want to find things."

Brandt and I worked the same shift for another two years before he retired. He was civil.

He never rode with me again, and he never asked me how it went, and the one time I asked him to the house for a barbecue after Maria and I were married, he said he had a thing that weekend. I didn't ask again.

Gil Ostrander pleaded to vehicular manslaughter in October. His lawyer had read my supplemental.

I know because he quoted it in the motion he filed, the sentence about the red eyes. The deal was four years.

With good time he'd do a little more than two.

I was in court the morning he was sentenced, in the back, out of uniform. I hadn't been subpoenaed. I was there because I'd decided to be there.

His wife was not there. She had died in June, at Loma Linda, while he was out on bail. I read it in the paper.

The girl's mother was in the second row, the way Brandt said she'd be.

She was small and gray-haired and older than I'd pictured, in a navy blue cardigan with a tissue balled up in one fist.

When the judge said four years she didn't make a sound. She kept her eyes on Gil Ostrander's back and did not move.

Then she turned around in her seat, the way you'd turn around to find someone calling your name, and looked at the back of the courtroom.

I didn't know if she knew who I was. I didn't know if she'd read the four pages. I have never known, and I've had twenty years to wonder.

She looked at me for a while. I didn't look away. It was the only thing I had to give her, and it wasn't anything, and I gave it anyway.

Then the bailiff said all rise, and she turned back around.

* * *

I bought the notebook at a stationery store on University Avenue in Riverside, the week after I started riding with Cuevas. Maria came with me. It was a Saturday, and she had come straight from a study group with a yellow highlighter still stuck behind her ear, and she stood at the end of the aisle with her arms folded while I picked up one notebook after another and put them back.

"It's a notebook," she said.

"I know what it is."

"You've been in this aisle twenty minutes."

"I want the right one."

I took a black one with a hard cover that fit my breast pocket, and a pack of colored tabs to go with it: red, yellow, green, blue.

At the register the clerk, a kid with a ring in his eyebrow, asked if I was a student, and I said no, and he rang it up anyway with the student discount, because it was Saturday and he didn't care.

In the car I opened it on my knee and wrote my name and badge number inside the front cover. Then I sat there with the pen.

"What are you going to put first?" Maria said.

I thought about it. I thought about it the way I'd once thought about whether a pot of coffee meant anything, all that confidence about what I could read in people, and I wanted none of it anymore.

I looked at the clock on the dash and wrote down the time.

"That's it?" she said.

"That's the first thing," I said. "You always write the time first. Everything else hangs on it."

She looked at me for a second, and then she reached over and took a red tab out of the pack and stuck it to the edge of the first page.

"So you can find it," she said.

I started the car. I checked my mirror and signaled, though the lot was empty, and pulled out onto University Avenue at the speed limit, and the notebook rode home on the seat between us with the red tab sticking out of it like a tongue.

The World of Unlikely Hero

A short guide to the people, places and dates of Unlikely Hero. Nothing here gives away how the night on Highway 74 ends.

The People

The two voices

- **Trevor Kane.** A career burglar from Redlands, California, who started stealing as a boy and broke another boy's arm in juvenile hall at fourteen. Six-foot-three, two-twenty, jailhouse tattoos on both arms and teardrops under his left eye. He served eight years in Pelican Bay for killing a man during a burglary in Fontana. He has one rule, about children, and he cannot tell you where it came from.
- **Don Martinez.** An officer of the California Highway Patrol, twenty years on the road, who works Highway 74 out of the Hemet valley as Unit 47. He writes everything down in a notebook marked with colored tabs, because early on he learned not to trust his own judgment over his notes. The story in this book is how he learned it.

The Martinez family

- **Maria Martinez.** Don's wife of twenty years, a nurse who has worked the night shift for eight. She met Don when he was a trainee and she was a nursing student pouring coffee on weekends. She makes her decisions early and waits for you to catch up.
- **Elena.** Their daughter, fifteen, studying for a history test on the Civil War.
- **Miguel.** Their son, twelve, always still eating.

In Kane's world

- **Joseph Castellano.** A restaurant owner in his sixties with two sons, four cousins and a patient voice. Kane owes him twelve thousand dollars from a poker game.
- **Marcus.** Kane's first partner, met in juvenile hall. Sixteen, in for auto theft. Within a year Kane was running the operation.
- **Detective Isaac.** Gray hair, dead eyes. He broke Kane's jaw in the courtroom on the day of sentencing.
- **Sarah Walsh.** The assistant district attorney who put Kane away.
- **Delgado.** Runs a reentry program out of a church annex in Riverside, with a corkboard of photos of the men who stayed clean.
- **Mrs. Sully.** Kane's half-deaf neighbor, who watches her soap operas with the volume up.

In Martinez's world

- **Captain MacLeod.** Martinez's supervisor for six years. A good man and a by-the-book administrator.

- **Linda Kellerman.** A driver Martinez arrested for DUI on Highway 74. Her trial is on his calendar the day the book begins for him.
- **Robert Blackwood.** Her defense attorney, who usually finds something to attack.

The three men

- **Khalil Nazir.** Forty-six, a former university lecturer from Aleppo with a doctorate in political philosophy. He lost his wife Amira and his daughter Lena in 2015.
- **Rashid Al-Mansouri.** Forty-three, a construction man who built a business and a life in Dearborn, Michigan, over fifteen years. His brother Tariq stayed in Raqqa.
- **Jamal Kassem.** Grew up in Anaheim and has never been to Syria. He found Nazir through his essays.

New in this story

- **Hollis Brandt.** Martinez's training officer, twenty-two years on the road, who believes in reading people with your eyes and saving paper for court.
- **Gil Ostrander.** A sixty-one-year-old man driving home from his wife's hospital room.
- **Sergeant Cuevas.** Fifteen years on the road. She writes down the time before she does anything else.

A Timeline

WHEN	WHAT HAPPENS
Kane, age 8	Hits a double in a baseball game in Redlands while his father cheers. He is already studying a neighbor's garage.
Kane, 13	Steals a hunting knife from a sporting goods store he has cased four times, then buries it.
Kane, 14	Picked up for breaking into a garage. Breaks Decker's arm in juvenile hall. Meets Marcus.
About twenty years before the book	Don Martinez, a trainee, finally asks Maria her name on the fourth Saturday. Nine months after graduation, the stop on Highway 74 in *Warning Only*.
Kane, 19	First real arrest: a house in San Bernardino. Thirty days in county.
Kane, 21	A car dies under him in Rancho Cucamonga. He waits at a bus stop with twenty thousand dollars of jewelry.
Kane, 22	Six months for burglaries. Beaten in county. The old man with the walker in Victorville.
Kane, 23	A bank in Pomona goes wrong. A child dies. Kane leaves a duffel bag of money on a porch in Glendora.
Kane, 24	The house in Fontana. Sentenced to eight to fifteen years.

2014 to 2016	Nazir teaches through the war in Aleppo, loses his family in September 2015, and comes to America in 2016.
2017	The fight for Raqqa. Al-Mansouri loses his brother's family.
Eight years in	Kane is released from Pelican Bay and drives for six hours with nowhere to go.
Three months before	A Friday night: Martinez arrests Linda Kellerman on Highway 74.
Three years, eight months out	Kane gets a final notice on his apartment, and Castellano gives him one day to pay.
Thursday	Martinez is up before his half-past-five alarm, testifies at two and goes back out for the graveyard shift on Highway 74 at ten. A job in Pasadena falls through for Kane, and a man in Azusa tells him about a warehouse in Hemet.
Thursday night	A little before eleven, Kane picks the side door of the warehouse by the Hemet airport.
Before dawn, Friday	Kane wakes up on the warehouse floor. The clock starts.

Places

- **Hemet and Valle Vista.** The valley towns at the foot of the San Jacinto Mountains, about two hundred thousand people asleep on the night of the book. Florida Avenue runs straight through Hemet. Martinez's family lives here, and the drugstore Maria sends him to is on Sanderson Avenue.
- **Highway 74.** Martinez's road. It runs straight out of Valle Vista and then climbs the grade into the mountains through granite cliffs, pine and manzanita, toward Mountain Center and the Highway 371 junction.
- **The warehouse.** Gray metal siding, rust and graffiti, the last building on a dead-end street by the Hemet airport. Officially it stores auto parts.
- **Redlands.** Where Kane grew up. His parents still live in the same house.
- **Fontana.** The house with the white floor, the coffee maker and the small dog.
- **Pelican Bay.** The state prison where Kane served eight years.
- **Riverside.** The county seat: the Superior Court where Martinez testifies, and the church annex where Delgado runs her program.
- **Pasadena, Azusa, Pomona, Glendora.** Stops on Kane's working map east of Los Angeles.

A Short Glossary

- **CHP.** The California Highway Patrol.
- **Unit 47.** Martinez's call sign on the radio.
- **Crown Vic.** The Ford Crown Victoria patrol car Martinez drives, modified for pursuit.
- **Graveyard.** The overnight shift.

- **The grade.** The long climb of Highway 74 from the valley floor into the San Jacintos.
- **County.** The county jail, as opposed to state prison.
- **Three strikes.** California's sentencing law. One more felony would send Kane back for twenty-five to life.
- **The file.** Kane's word for a memory that will not clear.
- **The rule.** Not women and kids.
- **The notebook.** Martinez's, with colored tabs, so he can find things.

Read the Novel

Warning Only is how Don Martinez learned to write everything down. Unlikely Hero is the night he puts the notebook away: a paroled killer, a stranger's car, a clock in the trunk and a few minutes on a mountain road to decide whether to believe him.



Unlikely Hero

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