

UNSHUT

A Limited Series

by

Matthew E. May

LOS ANGELES POLICE
DEPARTMENT
HOMICIDE RECORD NO: 1899 - 1

DECEASED: *Simon Christenson*
VOCATION: *Seamster*
DATE: *September 9, 1899*
CAUSE OF DEATH: *Suicide by train*

Inspired By A True Story

UNSHUT SEASON 1: "MURDER NUMBER ONE"

This story is inspired by the first homicide ever recorded in the Los Angeles Police Department murder books.

On the night of September 9, 1899, the mutilated body of Simon Christenson was found on the downtown tracks of the Southern Pacific Railroad.

The Christenson case remains the city's coldest.

An aerial, sepia-toned photograph of a dense urban cityscape, likely Los Angeles, showing numerous multi-story buildings and streets. The text is overlaid on this background.

LOGLINE

The first recorded murder in Los Angeles was never solved — because it was never meant to be

When the LAPD dismisses her uncle's death as suicide, a grieving nurse in 1899 Los Angeles forms an unlikely alliance to overturn the official record—and expose the conspiracy behind the first recorded and still unsolved murder in the city's history.

SYNOPSIS

The mutilated body of teamster Simon Christenson is found on the downtown Los Angeles railroad tracks on September 9, 1899. Police have closed the case, declaring it just another immigrant suicide. Simon's beloved niece, **Anna**, travels from San Francisco to tidy up his affairs. Her nurse's training prompts her to challenge the official cause of death. When she starts asking questions, the lies unravel fast, sparking an unlikely alliance with sidelined LAPD detective **Virgil Vega** and struggling L.A. Times reporter **Clara Bell Grady**. Over six tightly plotted episodes, the trio exposes a murderous conspiracy behind Simon's death that stretches from city hall to the railyards—and could cost them all their lives.

THEMES

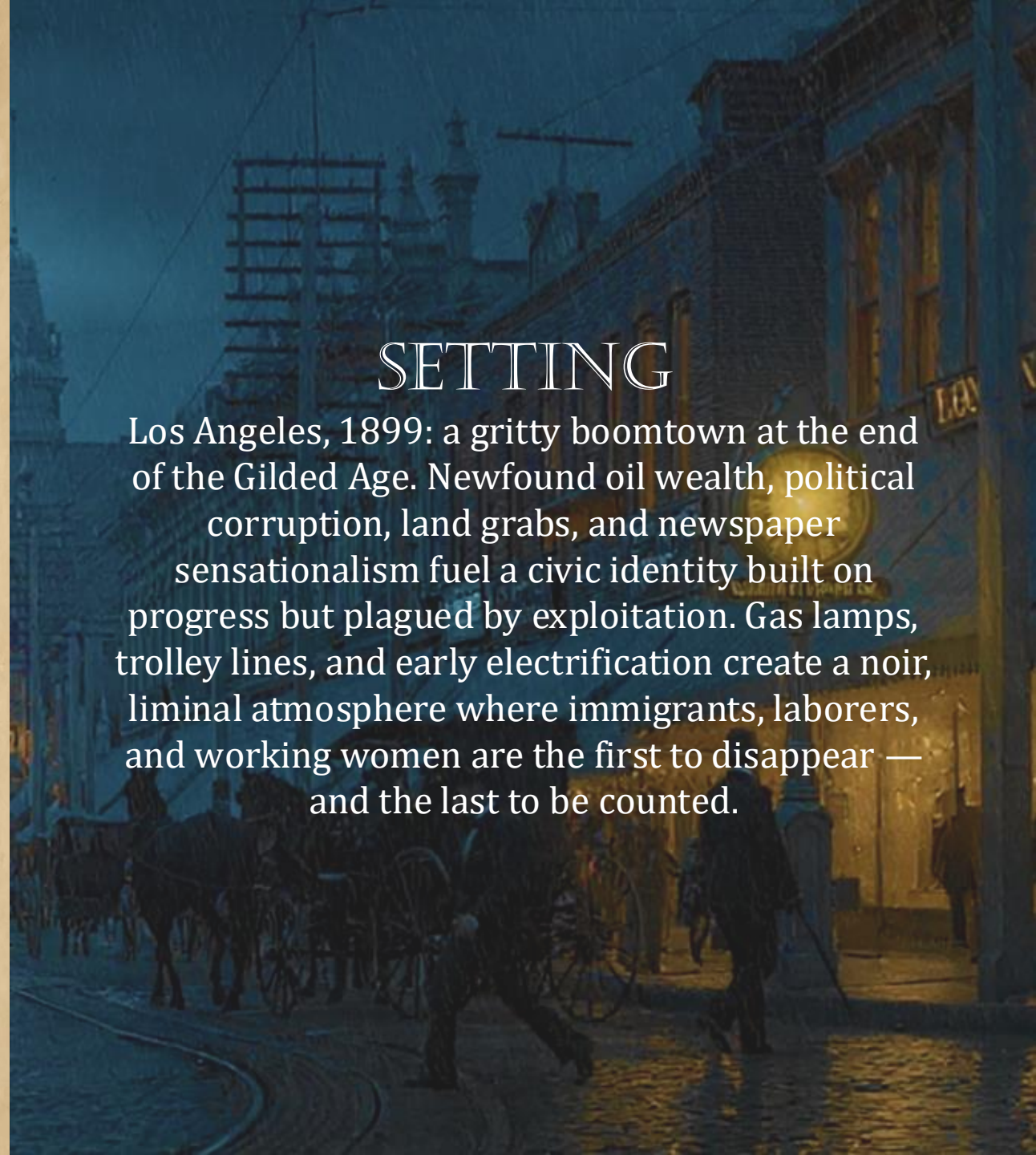
A prestige murder mystery series resting on modern themes of female agency, institutional erasure, immigrant vulnerability, and the weaponization of truth.

UNSHUT asks:

What does it cost to pry open what people want closed?

SETTING

Los Angeles, 1899: a gritty boomtown at the end of the Gilded Age. Newfound oil wealth, political corruption, land grabs, and newspaper sensationalism fuel a civic identity built on progress but plagued by exploitation. Gas lamps, trolley lines, and early electrification create a noir, liminal atmosphere where immigrants, laborers, and working women are the first to disappear — and the last to be counted.



PILOT: THE POSED BODY

We cold open on a freight train rumbling into 1899 Los Angeles on a Saturday night in September, the engineer doing everything he can to stop from hitting something on the tracks up ahead: a mutilated body, that of **Simon Christenson**, a Danish-American teamster. The police declare it a suicide and immediately shut the case—just another disposable foreigner.

When **Anna Christenson** arrives from San Francisco to settle her Uncle Simon's affairs, she is shocked to hear newsboys shouting headlines of suicide. Nothing about the story feels right, and she knows that Simon—her only remaining family member—would ever end his own life.

At the Hotel Ramon, **Clara Bell Grady**, a sharp-tongued L.A. Times reporter stuck interviewing a high-society biddy, gets tipped off by the hotel clerk that a hot lead—Anna—is at the counter. Sensing a real story, Clara quietly begins following Anna, does some digging on her own, and publishes a provocative piece under a pseudonym.

Anna first visits Simon's lodge, the secretive Independent Order of Odd Fellows, who originally notified her of his death. The lodge secretary offers little help beyond suggesting the police might have the answers she's looking for. She heads to Simon's boarding house to collect his belongings, where the owner, **Miss Hansen**, and housemaid **Ruthy Monroe** mourn him with unsettling restraint. Something about Miss Hansen and the house feels off. Still, Anna accepts her offer to stay in Simon's boarding room for as long as she needs, then heads straight to the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD), where a hostile desk sergeant stonewalls her and sends her away. As she leaves, sidelined detective **Virgil Vega** discreetly shares a name: **Doc Hays**, the county coroner, who admits that he's skeptical of the suicide claim, yet is hesitant to go on record officially. Only the engineer who found Simon's body gives Anna the unvarnished truth: Simon wasn't hit by a train. As she leaves the railyard, she senses what she can't know: she's being followed.

As she settles into Miller House, Anna finds hidden in a floorboard what may have cost Simon his life: *a ledger tracking suspicious land transfers, maps marked with red stars, a cryptic note, and a sealed letter addressed only "E.H."* She braves a late-evening visit to the undertaker to arrange Simon's burial, only to be haunted by the memory of her father, Simon's fraternal twin.

As she leaves, she collides with Clara and Virgil, both of whom have been following her for different reasons. Virgil tells Anna to bury her uncle and go home. Anna refuses. Discovering that they each have a piece of something they know goes beyond one body, they form an uneasy alliance, not because they want to, but because they have no choice if they're to survive in a city they can't trust.

Virgil sneaks them into the LAPD archives, where they discover Simon's file buried, not sealed; his case wasn't closed, it was never opened. A police photo revealing a time-of-death mismatch confirms the lie. Someone deep inside or very high up buried the truth.

As she returns to Miller House with Clara, Ruthy shows them a shadowy figure watching the house from across the street. The pilot closes with Clara penning another anonymous exposé that puts them all in danger, and Anna getting an ominous midnight visit to her room from none other than Virgil's former partner **Lt. Byron Kettler**—clearly not there with Anna's best interests in mind. His opening line sends chills down her spine: "You have his eyes."

CINEMATIC FEEL

Prestige noir: Chinatown meets The Knick, with a touch of True Detective — gritty, elegant, and morally layered

VISUAL STYLE

Gold tones, natural light, textured costuming. Gaslight, soot, shadows, sultry moods, slow pans

SHOW WORLD

EMOTIONAL TONES

Grief drives agency, guilt and anger beneath proprietary, fear blocking truth, shifting moral code

DIALOG RYTHM

Intelligent but not intellectual, period-accurate vocabulary, banter hides smoldering tension



CHARACTERS



ANNA CHRISTENSON



27, a Danish-American nurse from San Francisco, beloved niece of Simon Christenson. Anna is empathic, reserved, and trained to stay composed even under enormous pressure.

Anna carries a deep flaw: she cannot abide preventable loss, after failing as a young nurse to save her father, Simon's fraternal twin. That wound weaponizes her grief, driving her past caution and into danger.

Saving her uncle's name offers Anna a chance at absolution, and her transformation from quiet healer to truth-teller is the backbone of the series.



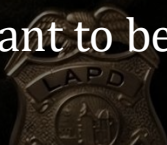
Type: Florence Pugh



VIRGIL VEGA

32, a sidelined Mexican-American LAPD detective who has learned to survive department corruption by keeping his head down. Anna's resolve reawakens Virgil's buried integrity and forces him to confront a system that he not only serves, but that punishes boat-rockers — and shaped him into a man he never meant to become.

[Type: Diego Boneta]



CLARA BELL GRADY

24, a cheeky Irish-American reporter stuck on the gossip page of the Los Angeles Times. Witty, restless, and ambitious, but hiding a hurtful early career misstep behind her sharp pen, Clara uses a male pseudonym to publish real reporting and risks her job (and safety) for the story no one else dares to touch.

[Type: Olivia Cooke]



SIMON CHRISTENSON*

(50s, Danish-American, Claes Bang type)

Anna's beloved uncle, teamster,
first recorded murder in Los
Angeles Police Department files.

MISS SARAH HANSON*

(40s, Angeleno, Keeley Hawes type)

Miller House* proprietor,
elegant, reserved. Secret lover
of Simon Christenson.

RUTHY MONROE

(20s, Irish, Erin Kellyman type)

Housemaid at Miller House.*
Victim of the conspiracy. Sister to
Cary Monroe, Simon's protégé.



LT. BYRON KETTLER

(30s, Jack O'Connell type)

Corrupt LAPD detective, Virgil's former partner, antagonist, Odd Fellows* member.

SAM REDDICK

(40s/50s, Mark Ruffalo type)

Clara's reluctant editor at the Los Angeles Times. Becomes her eventual champion.

DEPUTY J.B. LOVING*

(40s/50s, LaKeith Stanfield type)

First black deputy appointed by Los Angeles Sheriff (1899). Investigates related murder.



THE SEASON

ACT 1 (Episodes 1 & 2)

S1E1:

The Posed Body

When the mutilated body of Simon Christenson is found lying in an unnatural position on the downtown train tracks in 1899 Los Angeles, the police rule it a suicide. But when his grieving niece Anna arrives to settle his affairs, she senses foul play. With demoted LAPD detective Virgil Vega and L.A. Times gossip columnist Clara Bell Grady circling the same mystery, she weaponizes her pain to begin uncovering the truth. Anna gets an intimidating midnight visit from Virgil's former partner, LAPD detective Lt. Byron Kettler.

S1E2:

The Red File

The trio begins tracing the clues Simon left behind, pointing to a targeted pattern of erased neighborhoods. Clara risks her career with a provocative article, Ruthy faces eviction, and Miss Hansen reveals that Simon left Anna with a mysterious key. Kettler warns Virgil to back off. Anna and Clara uncover links to vanished land records, and someone known only as "E.H." The decomposed body of a woman is found near the L.A. riverbed. On her wrist, a charm bracelet with the initials "E.H."



ACT 2 (Episodes 3 & 4)

S1E3:

The City Beneath

The trio pursues Simon's trail into the city's underbelly, where erased deeds and secret tunnels tell a story of vanished properties. Ruthy's apartment is torched, putting her in the hospital and leaving her homeless. The trio realizes that the forces behind Simon's death are both organized and protected. They believe "E.H." might be missing city councilman Ezekiel Harrington. Meanwhile, L.A. Sheriff's deputy J.B. Loving is assigned to investigate the riverbed corpse

S1E4:

The Unfortunate Truth

The trio closes in on damning evidence. Ruthy returns to Miller House carrying memories too dangerous to speak aloud. Clara leaks confidential information to a rival paper. Virgil discovers records vanishing from police files, forcing him to deal with former partner Lt. Byron Kettler. Miss Hansen's poise begins to crack, and the trio begins to realize Simon may have died knowing far more than he ever shared. The "E.H." charm identifies the river corpse as city clerk Esther Haldeman, but the body mysteriously disappears from the morgue.

THE SEASON



THE SEASON

ACT 3 (Episodes 5 & 6)

S1E5:

The Dead Reckoning

Clues point to Simon's employer, C. Leonhardt. As Clara's latest article rattles the city, Virgil corners the shadowy watchers who've been tailing them. C. Leonhardt reveals to Virgil how parcel erasures tie to the coming oil boom. All hard evidence now erased, the trio is left with one option: bait Simon's murderer into the open. Unable to locate the riverbed corpse, Deputy Loving approaches Clara with evidence of the LAPD's complicity, as the two investigations merge. Anna and Virgil share intimate moments.

S1E6:

Ninth of September

The city teeters as Clara secures Harrington's testimony. Virgil springs the trap, tricks Kettler into confessing. Anna is devastated to learn Simon's murder was simply happenstance—covering a shift for Ruthy's brother Cary. She finally reveals her secret to Virgil. Deputy Loving provides Clara with documents proving LAPD complicity in the Haldeman death. Clara pens her final piece and leaves the Times to start her own "people's voice" sheet. Virgil lays down his badge, and Anna decides to stay in L.A. In the silence left behind, the city roars. With two murders pointing toward him, Kettler takes his only way out...to where it all began: the train tracks.

THE TWIST

Simon Christenson was not a murder target. As a teamster working for a freight company, he handled documents, overheard conversations, and began making private notes. He suspected illegal land parcel clearances and rezoning but didn't fully understand the danger. He was killed simply because, in an act of unselfish kindness, he covered a weekend shift for a younger teamster he mentored (Ruthy's brother). When he shows up too early to pick up a shipment containing evidentiary documents being routed for incineration, he comes face-to-face with LAPD Lt. Byron Kettler, who cannot allow a witness to live. His death was a tragic chance masquerading as a conspiracy — a simple but devastating case of bad timing.

ANNA'S SECRET

In a moment of vulnerability, Anna finally reveals to Virgil the devastating secret that shaped her: she once made a fatal medical mistake as a young nurse forced to treat her own father...then lied under oath at the coroner's inquest. Her relentless fight for truth is penance, a driving force, and a chance for rebirth.



TRUE CRIME + PRESTIGE PERIOD DRAMA + MODERN RELEVANCY

- Inspired by real events surrounding the LAPD's first recorded murder (Simon Christenson, 1899) which was never solved
- Strong female leads, ensemble cast, rich historical tension
- Explores timely themes: female agency, corruption, gentrification, immigrant displacement, institutional erasure
- Appeals to modern premium audiences craving smart, character-rich, slow-burn true crime mysteries with emotional payoff



BEYOND SEASON 1

The title UNSHUT speaks to the show's central ethos: *prying open what the powerful want closed*.

Imagined as a standalone 6-episode series, **UNSHUT** could follow the arc of Anna, Virgil, and Clara as they refuse to accept “open-and-shut” explanations handed down by powerful institutions. Future seasons tackle real, historically unsolved cases in different American cities at the turn of the 20th century. Drawn to situations where the official story never matches the evidence, the trio must confront the consequences of seeking truth in places designed to bury it.

Season 2 — The Poison Holiday (San Francisco, 1905)

When Anna returns north to her home in San Francisco with Virgil on her arm, the trio reunites around the mysterious poisoning of Jane Stanford, co-founder of Stanford University. Official accounts fail to align with the medical evidence; the deeper they dig, the more they uncover a web of academic politics, elite secrecy, and medical malpractice. As San Francisco approaches the catastrophic 1906 earthquake, pressure mounts and institutions tighten their grip on the narrative.

Season 3 — The Locked Trunk (New York City, 1909)

Clara, now building a proto-Village Voice paper in Greenwich Village, pulls Anna and Virgil east when the sensational murder of 19-year-old Elsie Sigel explodes across New York media. Found strangled in a locked trunk above a midtown Chinese restaurant, the case exposes deep currents of xenophobia, moral panic, and media exploitation. As public frenzy grows, the trio faces their most ethically precarious case yet—one that forces them to confront who they are, and who they might become.



FRANCHISE
POTENTIAL

MATTHEW E. MAY

WHY ME

During my close work as a strategy advisor to former LAPD Chief William Bratton, I learned that the very first homicide ever recorded in the department's murder books—that of Danish teamster Simon Christenson on September 9, 1899—remains unsolved. It is literally the coldest case in the city's history.

My up-close knowledge of the inner workings of powerful systems and how they become corrupt put me in a perfect position to offer a fictionalized but believable story based on the few remaining facts.

BIO

After 30 years of advising powerful CEOs in large corporations and publishing six bestselling business books with traditional publishers, noted author Matthew E. May turned his attention to exploring themes of institutional corruption and organized conspiracy through fiction.

Agnostic about format, he thrives on delving into the secrets that bind or break people, writing historical mysteries and real-event-based/inspired thrillers with modern thematic resonance, in which mostly ordinary people use their particular capabilities to achieve extraordinary things and discover what it costs to take on those in control.

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