

CHAPTER 2

Tony Filosianni's office was crowded with pissed-off people. Pissed about being dragged to the chief's office at twenty past midnight, pissed about the reason they were forced to be there. The LAPD sure didn't need another high-profile scandal right now, and that fact was etched on everyone's faces.

I immediately recognized all of the people standing there. The chief of police was dominating the large space. Usually a happy, pixiesque, round-faced presence, tonight Tony Filosianni scowled like a Chinese wood carving, his bald head shining in the bright overhead lights. Next to the COP was an assistant city attorney named Cole Nichols. The ACA didn't want to be there either, but he was filling in for City Attorney Chase Beal, who was up north on some kind of rubber-chicken junket. Everybody knew Chase was planning on making a run for governor and was always out at fundraisers working on his war chest. Next to Nichols was my Peace Officers Union rep, Bob Utley. He was the only one to hesitantly

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engage my eyes. Bob was a big heavy guy with a Santa-friendly face who had twice successfully defended me against bogus charges at Internal Affairs. Next to Utley was the LAO, or head LAPD legal affairs officer, a tall black captain named Linc Something. Next to him was yours truly in my borrowed Trojans sweatshirt and rain-soaked windbreaker. Behind me stood Lieutenant Matthews, the deputy commander of PSB. But by far the most bitter flavor in this alphabet soup was the chief of detectives. The COD was my own wife, Alexa. She stepped across the threshold seconds later and frowned.

Lieutenant Matthews closed the large double doors to the chief's office, signaling the start of the meeting.

"Detective Scully, I'm not sure you know FBI Agent Ophelia Love," Chief Filosianni said without a trace of the cordiality that usually marked his demeanor. He indicated a tall, lanky blonde in her mid-thirties whom I'd missed during my first quick scan of the room because she was seated against the far wall near a mahogany console.

Agent Love immediately stood at the mention of her name. She wore a cheap off-the-rack tan pantsuit and had a careless beauty that was partially disguised by rawboned farm-girl features, the most startling of which were piercing ice-blue eyes.

"Bob, what's going on?" I asked my union rep. I already knew the answer, but it's always better to play dumb at these things and let the other guy go first.

"Regarding the Venture investigation, you've been charged with felony case-tampering and blackmail," the chief said, cutting in and answering my question.

"I don't know what you're talking about." My heart rate was inadvertently beginning to rise. *We're into it now*, I thought.

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"You can deny it, Detective, but your own partner was the one who brought this to our attention. And her concerns have been independently corroborated by Agent Love and the FBI."

"Detective Quinn turned me in?"

Sally Quinn was my partner at Homicide Special. We had only been working together for about a year. She'd been out of rotation on maternity leave for the last six months and had just returned to duty.

"I only had time to glance at the charge sheet in the car. It says I intentionally lost evidence. I told Captain Calloway how those tapes went missing."

"Unbeknownst to us, the FBI has been running their own surveillance on Harry Venture for half a year and they've got you and his wife on tape," Chief Filosianni said.

What he was referring to was a Homicide Special case, which I had been working for two weeks. Harry Venture's birth name was Aviv Zahavi, but he'd legally changed it when he came to America and went into the film business ten years ago, forming Venture Studios. Harry was a fifty-year-old Israeli national who had made his initial fortune as a black market arms dealer in the Middle East. With the hundreds of millions he'd made in the gun trade, he moved to L.A. and went into the movie business, becoming one of Hollywood's most successful action movie mini-moguls.

Money being the powerful aphrodisiac that it is, Harry soon seduced a budding young actress half his age named Tiffany Roberts, who was starring in low-budget genre movies when he met her. She was beautiful and had a Playmate's body and, as the showbiz saying goes, was willing to do "nude" if it was shot "tastefully." The gossip on the street was that Tiffany instantly saw what Harry could offer and became Mrs. Venture. Big-budget movies and mega-stardom

followed. But after she'd done "tasteful" nude scenes with some of Hollywood's hottest leading men, Harry's bedroom seemed to have lost some of its appeal and Tiffany had been quietly hunting around for a hit man to take her pudgy, foreign-born husband off the count. Word of this was quickly leaked to us by a street informant.

Since a murder solicitation by an A-list Hollywood star was an extremely sensitive situation, the squeal ended up going to Homicide Special, which is the elite LAPD homicide squad that typically handles high-profile, media-sensitive investigations.

I'd been working out of that rotation for almost three years and was assigned the Tiffany Roberts case. I was supposed to have been setting Tiffany up, posing as a hit man and wearing a wire when meeting with her behind various discount stores, to work out the terms of the assassination of her husband Harry. I was supposed to get her solicitation on tape, but told my captain that I had carelessly left the tapes in my car one night while I went into a Ruth's Chris to get something to eat. My car was broken into and my briefcase stolen. My boss, Captain Calloway, instructed me to reboot the deal and get her to repeat the offer of murder, but Tiffany became suspicious and broke it off. The case is currently in limbo. Now, apparently, the way they were reading it was that I had deliberately lost the tapes in return for some kind of blackmail payoff.

Of course, I'd seen all this coming. As soon as I'd reported the missing briefcase, the shit had started to ooze downhill just as I knew it would. It had ended up as felony case-tampering.

"Why is the FBI involved with this?" I asked, turning to face Case Agent Love.

She glanced at the ACA, Cole Nichols, who nodded his okay, so she started to tell me. She had a low, husky alto voice that didn't sound like it belonged inside her. The accent was from the South somewhere—the Carolinas or Tennessee, maybe. She was

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a no-nonsense fed whose demeanor told me she held me in a good deal of professional disdain.

"I'm here because after five years of working Harry Venture for gun smuggling, we finally convinced him to cooperate," she began. "He still has financial dealings with some of his old arms-dealing buddies from the Middle East. New Russian-made Kalashnikov 100 series submachine guns and PP-90 M-1s with nine-millimeter breaches suitable for NATO rounds are currently flowing into L.A. The AK-100-series ordnance is on Homeland Security's watch list and we've pinned this smuggle to the Hispanic Eighteenth Street gangs in downtown L.A. They've established a new pipeline bringing this stuff into the country. They're smuggling it up from the Baja Desert in Mexico. Naturally, we didn't want Harry's wife to murder him in the middle of a federal op where he just became a cooperative witness. For two weeks we've been taping you taping her. Let's say your conduct was less than professional."

I glanced at Alexa, who was standing by the door, her face a frozen mask.

"We can play our surveillance videos for you, but unless you insist, out of deference to your wife I think it's better to say you're in the bag and let it go at that." Agent Love hesitated before continuing. "We accessed your bank statements and discovered you have a recent ten-thousand-dollar deposit, which none of your pay stubs or personal finances support. Unless you can tell us exactly where that ten thousand came from, then we're going to assume that you got it from Ms. Roberts in return for booting your undercover sting against her."

"Don't you have to prove that before just accusing me?" I challenged.

"We think we can," Chief Filosianni said. "Right now Harry Venture is going through his wife's bank withdrawals. If he finds

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one that was issued on or about the end of last month in the amount of ten thousand dollars, then that fact will be established and added to your charge sheet.”

“This is all pretty damn circumstantial,” I said. But I knew it wasn’t. They would find that withdrawal slip. I was going down for this.

Cole Nichols, the ACA, said, “I’ll take that kind of circumstantial case any day. I can also get the FBI video and, along with the fact that you reported your UC tapes stolen, it will make a very compelling picture for a jury.”

“Then why am I here?”

“The city attorney and the feds both want to prosecute you, but I convinced the mayor and the federal attorney that this department doesn’t need any more bad press or police department scandal,” Chief Filosianni said. “I’m willing to offer you a take-it-or-leave-it deal. You have to decide right now, tonight. It’s off the table after this meeting.”

“A deal?” I looked at Bob Utley, who gave me a hand gesture indicating I should shut up and let them finish. I ignored it.

“I don’t want to cop to this flimsy bullshit.”

“Your IA file is thick enough to choke a goat,” Lieutenant Matthews chimed in from behind me. “Nobody is going to believe anything you say. If I was you, I’d listen to the chief.”

“So what are you offering?”

“Resign,” the chief said. “Make a statement for the file indicating guilt so we don’t have to worry about facing a lawsuit over it later. You’ll cop to a lesser charge and then we’ll dismiss you for cause and seal the case for the benefit of the LAPD. What really happened in this room tonight, the real reason for your dismissal, will remain a closely guarded secret.”

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“What about my pension?”

“You lose it. You confess to the lesser charge, waive your pension and quit,” ACA Nichols said. “This is a great fucking deal, Detective. You don’t deserve it. If the department wasn’t still in PR trouble from the Rampart scandal, O.J. and the immigration rights melee, they wouldn’t be cutting you this much slack. If I try this case, I promise a conviction. You’ll do three to five, easy. Even if the sentence is halved for good behavior, that still puts you in the dog pile at state prison for at least two years. I’ll make sure there’s no special housing unit for you. A cop in gen pop is a prime target for yard aggression. That five-year stretch will turn into a death sentence.”

I looked at Bob Utley. He was supposed to jump up and object, but he said nothing. Every time I glanced at Alexa, her face was cold with fury.

“Could I have a minute with my client?” Utley finally said.

We were shown into a little six-chaired conference room that adjoined the chief’s office. Bob shut the door. When he turned, his eyes weren’t Santa-friendly anymore. He was staring daggers. Like all honest cops, he hated police corruption. He knew I was dirty, and it pissed him off.

“They can’t—” I started.

“Take it,” he interrupted.

“Admit I was on the take? That I took money to boot the case?”

“You tanked a solicitation-of-murder investigation and got into a sexual relationship with that movie star. I know it, and they all know it. Take the deal. It’s a lifesaver.”

“And sign away a twenty-year pension?”

“If you’re convicted, you’ll lose your pension anyway. If you fight this, you’ll go down, Shane. They’ve got a very tight case

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backed by videotape of you and Tiffany Roberts swapping spit all over town.”

“But—”

“Take the fucking deal! You’re damn lucky the department doesn’t want to eat any more bad press.” His voice was rising in anger. We’d been friends for years, but I could tell he had nothing but contempt for me now.

“What’s the lesser charge they’re gonna accuse me of?”

“Obstruction of justice. It’s a misdemeanor requiring no time served but results in your immediate resignation without benefits.”

“Can’t I at least have a day to think about it?”

“No. The chief said the offer comes off the table the moment this meeting is over. After tonight, you’ll face the full IA charge sheet.”

“How come I get the feeling you’re on their side?”

“Shane, take the deal.” Frustration with me was packed into every word.

“Okay, okay,” I said. “Calm down.”

“Okay, what?”

“I’ll do it. I’ll sign the damn confession.”