

## CHAPTER

# 3

Standing in the kitchen doorway, I noted that the inside of the house had a faint but pungent odor of garlic. I looked down and studied the body.

I'd never seen the deceased in person, only in an occasional newspaper photo, or once or twice on TV, but it was now easy to understand why Hollenbeck Homicide had kicked this one over to us.

Lita Mendez was one of the city's most aggressive police critics and gang activists. She'd filed over a hundred civilian complaints against Hollenbeck Division police officers on behalf of Evergreen gang members and their families. As a result, quite a few cops had lost grade and pay. Some had even lost their pensions.

I'd been in break rooms in different stations over the years when Lita's name had come up, and the hatred that poured out was genuine and overpowering. She hated us and we had returned that hatred in full measure. She'd been arrested several times by overly ambitious cops on questionable charges. None of those arrests stuck.

Her younger brother was a notorious Evergreen banger named

Homer “Conejo Loco” Mendez. The Crazy Rabbit was incarcerated in Corcoran State Prison for conspiring to kill a police officer, something Lita Mendez always maintained was a trumped-up charge and another example of police harassment against her family.

I remember reading a news story once that claimed Lita had nothing more than a tenth-grade education. That hadn’t slowed her down, because with natural intelligence and street guile she’d served up a lot of trouble for the LAPD.

Hitch and I took two short steps into the kitchen so we could view the crime scene but stayed well back from the body. The victim was lying on the floor and, in death, no longer seemed as formidable. She just looked shriveled and sad. It was still hard to believe she was dead.

I saw that the “Chalk Fairy” had been here. Patrol officers all carry chalk to mark the pavement during traffic investigations. Occasionally, on murder scenes, they develop the unreasonable urge to draw an outline around the body before detectives arrive. This is in violation of all the rules of a homicide investigation, starting with disturbing the crime scene and up to and including potentially leaving the patrol officer’s own trace evidence on the victim, which can end up sending us on a search for a red-haired killer when the hair actually belonged to the responding officer.

At the academy, it is scrupulously explained to recruits that chalk outlines are only drawn by the medical examiner, and then only just before the body is transported. However, the Chalk Fairy still made the occasional phantom stop at various murder scenes. My guess was in Lita’s case this outline was more than just helpful enthusiasm. Whoever did it was making a statement on behalf of all the cops in Hollenbeck Division.

“You find out which numb nuts chalked her out?” I asked.

“It was like that when we got here,” Laguna said predictably. “Patrol is claiming it wasn’t them, but you know how that goes.”

She’d been such a large presence in life I was surprised by how small Lita Mendez actually was. Only about five-two and no more than a hundred pounds, she lay sprawled on her back in the center of the kitchen. Her once natural gold tan complexion had turned ashen. Purple lividity colored the lowest parts of her body, indicating she’d been dead for a while. Her head had leaked blood and cerebral spinal fluid, the result of two gunshot wounds in the face.

One shot looked like a third eye, dead center in her forehead. The other was squarely in the nose, leaving nothing but a deep, nickel-sized entry wound and fragmented chips of nose cartilage. The exit wounds were massive and had taken out most of the back of her skull. I looked around but couldn’t see any bullet holes in the walls or appliances.

“You see where the slugs went or find any brass?” I asked Laguna.

“Not yet.”

“Maybe she was already on her back when she got tapped. I bet CSI is gonna find the slugs in the floor under her head. From the placement of those wounds, center forehead and nose, this looks execution-style.”

Laguna nodded.

The victim’s legs splayed awkwardly, like she’d been unconscious or even dead when she’d gone down: her arms were bent at the elbows as if signaling a touchdown. The green blowflies that find a corpse within hours of death had been at it for a while. There were maggot larvae in her open mouth and inside the two oozing bullet holes.

“Let’s get an ambient room temperature to help Entomology pin

down a closer time of death,” I said to Hitch, who was sketching the murder scene in the expensive red leather writer’s journal he used as a crime notebook.

He nodded, then took a small digital thermometer out of his pocket and set it on the nearby kitchen counter. Heat or cold has a drastic effect on the speed of fly larva gestation. The warmer it is, the faster they mature.

“I don’t see any footprints near the body,” Hitch said. “But we should get ERT out here to do an electrostatic dust lift for latent shoe prints.”

It was a good thought, because often if a killer doesn’t see that he’s left footprints, he won’t bother to clean up the floor. That doesn’t mean his shoe prints aren’t there. If present, an ESDL would find them and lift them up for us.

“You think that piece of shit, Nash, knows Lita’s the vic?” Laguna asked.

“Probably,” I said. “He’s been cruising our radio calls. Not hard to back-finger this address, use the real estate tax records to find out who owns this house.”

“Except Lita didn’t own it. Just renting,” Laguna said. “Matter of fact, she just moved in about a week ago. The real estate contract is on the front hall table.”

“He’s coming up the street with his camera crew,” Hitch warned. He had moved and was now looking out the side window at the advancing group of TV people in the street.

“Okay,” I said, turning back to Laguna. “Have your partner tell Patrol we’re widening the crime scene area. String the yellow tape all the way down to the intersection on First Street, put a cop on it, then

set up a media control area one block over and make sure Nash waits there.”

Hitch and I stepped back to the kitchen doorway as Laguna went out to talk to his partner.

“We’re sailing into a big storm here,” Hitch said, looking down at Lita’s body.

A moment later, Laguna returned and told us Detective Becker and two patrol officers would take care of Nix Nash and his TV crew.

“Let’s get all the patrol officers off the property,” I told Laguna. “Get hair and shoe-print samples from everybody who was inside and see if there’s a house nearby we can use as a CP. I only want people on this scene who need to be here.”

“Already did that,” Laguna said. “There’s a vacant house across the street. We’re calling the owner and will get the phones turned on. I also had my supervisor call up the superior court. He’s working on getting us a crime scene search warrant.”

“Nice,” I said. “Thanks.”

Without a warrant we couldn’t do anything but secure the scene and the body and do a neighborhood canvas to see if anybody saw anything. The collection of evidence had to be done on constitutionally legal grounds or it would be challenged in court. Until the search warrant arrived we could only observe the crime scene, make sketches, and note transient evidence, which included such things as smell or temperature and the fact the room lights were still on. All pattern, trace, and conditional evidence had to wait for the warrant.

“You call the crime techs yet?” Hitch asked Laguna.

“Soon as I got here. CSI, the ME, and photographers are all rolling.”

“Who found the body and called it in?” Hitch continued.

“Leasing agent. Apparently there was a problem with the old tenant on some of the attached fixtures. The agent came over to work it out this morning and she found the body. The door was ajar, so she just walked in.”

“Where is she?” I asked.

“Waiting in her car out front.” He pointed out the side kitchen window to a blue Prius parked by the curb. “Name is Vanessa Valente.”