

CHAPTER

4

Hitch and I decided that I would question the leasing agent while she observed her demeanor. Ms. Valente looked up from the laptop she was working on when I knocked on her car window and flashed my creds. Then she opened the door and got out. She was a big-boned Hispanic woman about thirty-five, wearing a nice-looking dark business suit and conservative two-inch heels.

“Ms. Valente? I’m Detective Shane Scully. This is my partner, Sumner Hitchens. We’re taking over this investigation. We understand you found Ms. Mendez’s body?”

“Yes, I did.”

Vanessa Valente was not fat, but she wasn’t exactly thin either. A good description would be “abundant.” Her features were rounded, pleasant, and ordinary. She also seemed strangely unaffected by the violence that had greeted her this morning.

“I came over because the old tenant who used to rent this duplex had a list of things that needed to be retrieved,” Ms. Valente said with no trace of an accent. “Things that had been left during the move.

I talked to Lita about it and we set a time to meet and go over the list first thing this morning.”

“Detective Laguna said you opened the door, walked in, and found her already dead?”

“Yes. It was ajar. She was in the kitchen. Those green flies were everywhere. I touched her. I hope that was okay. I only took her pulse. When I couldn’t find one I called nine-one-one.”

“Were the lights all on when you got here?”

“Yes. I guess that means it was still dark when she was killed, huh?”

“Probably.

“Was her body stiff when you tried to take her pulse?” I asked.

“Why does that matter?”

“If it was stiff that means rigor mortis was present. Rigor sets in about four hours after death. It might help us determine when she was killed.”

“When I touched her she was cold, but not stiff,” Vanessa said.

Upon hearing that and after looking at the fly larvae, my guess was the body was at least six hours old. Lita probably had been killed during the night before turning off the lights to go to bed.

“Did you use the phone in the house when you called nine-one-one?”

“Yes.”

“We’re going to need to take a set of elimination prints and a hair and skin sample before you leave. We’ll also need your shoe prints. CSI should be here momentarily and can do it.”

“Okay. That works.”

“You don’t seem too upset,” I said.

“I was born around here. I came back to this neighborhood after

college. My office is at a REMAX ten blocks away. People die frequently on these blocks, Detective. I saw my first dead body when I was seven. I was roller-skating to school. He was shot, lying across the sidewalk right up from my house. That one scared the shit out of me. I've become more accustomed to the experience since then."

"Can you think of anything that could be helpful, like any enemies she had, recent disputes, or people who might want her dead?"

"I'm sorry. I don't know of anybody who would want to kill her."

I did. Half the cops in Hollenbeck. But I didn't say that. Instead, I handed Ms. Valente my card and said, "Give me a call if anything occurs to you."

She nodded and I started to leave but then turned back. "Were you also friends with the victim?"

"Lita was my client. It was hard to be friends with her. She was . . . I don't know . . . 'Driven,' I guess, is the word. She saw everything through a very unique prism."

Hitch and I returned to the house and were walking up the drive when I looked back and saw Nix Nash along with his camera crew being escorted down the street by two patrol officers. None of the TV people looked too happy.

Once we were back inside I again noted the faint odor of garlic. "You smell that?" I asked Hitch.

"Yeah, it's stronger in the kitchen. Besides garlic I also smell cooked onions with sage, or maybe it's bay leaf, like a Bolognese sauce or something."

"A Bolognese sauce? Get the fuck outta here. We're in the Mexican ghetto."

"You can eat Italian in a Mexican ghetto. I was raised in South Central and my mom made the best pasta *vongole* you ever tasted."

Among his many other talents, Hitch is a gourmet cook. When he goes on vacation, he frequently takes classes at the Cordon Bleu in Paris, something that millionaire movie people get to do. They also go to tennis camps run by ex-Wimbledon champs.

We stood for a moment, taking in the pungent garlicky odor that clung to the drapes and was mixing badly with the slight copper-sweet smell of Lita's blood and decaying brain tissue.

I saw a uniformed sergeant pull up in a department slick-back. He was holding a yellow sheet, which I knew was our search warrant.

"Better glove up," I said. Both Hitch and I pulled latex packs out of our jacket pockets and put them on.

Then a CSI van pulled up, followed by the ME's wagon. We went outside to meet them. Once they were gathered around us on the porch, Hitch, Laguna, and I began organizing the investigation, starting by turning the house over to the videographer so he could document the crime scene. CSI and the MEs would then take over, working the body, dusting for prints, and looking for shoe impressions inside and out.

The cameraman went in alone and started doing his walk-through. After he was finished, the evidence retrieval team from CSI began to scan of the kitchen floor. We'd asked them for an electrostatic dust print lift, so one of them pulled metallic film sheets from a case and a metal ground plane to create a static charge on the lifting mat. This caused any dust prints below the mat to bond to the film surface, making a precise mirror image of the print on the film mat. They picked up half a dozen shoe sole patterns. Once they were finished securing floor prints, they waved us in.

Hitch checked the sink. It was empty, but there were a lot of pots and pans in the dishwasher. They'd already gone through the cycle,

so there was no telling what she'd been cooking. The coroner would have to provide that for us with a stomach content analysis.

While CSI and the ME continued to work, Hitch and I went back outside and walked up the driveway in a cold wind that was made crisp with the promise of an incoming storm. We checked the garage and found a red '94 Chevy Caprice parked inside.

"We gotta get this towed to Cal State," I said. "Get Forensics to go through it."

Hitch made the note, then looked up. "Nix Nash is going to be all over this," he observed.

"I know."

"He's gonna make us look like douche bags on national TV."

"Yeah."

"We should pull the pin, Shane. Pitch this one back and put in our papers before this guy is leading a five-man camera crew around in our assholes."

"Probably good advice, but I'm not somebody who likes getting chased off."

I looked down and noticed a paper coffee cup in the dead bushes on the edge of the property beside the driveway. It was right where the driver's side door would be if you'd parked there. I looked closer and saw that it was a paper vending-machine cup with a delicate brown floral ring design just under the lip of the cardboard circumference. It was a fairly recent discard, because there was still some wet coffee residue in the bottom that hadn't evaporated.

One of the crime scene techs was just walking up to the porch carrying an equipment case from her vehicle.

"Excuse me." I asked her, "Could you collect this paper coffee cup for me?"

“Yes, sir.”

“Then check with Patrol and make sure none of them dropped it. If it’s not theirs, try and get me a DNA scan off the rim and a coffee content analysis.”

“Okay,” she said, and went back to the CSI truck, returning a few seconds later with a clear plastic evidence bag and forceps.

She picked up the cup carefully and deposited it into the bag, then walked down to show it to the sergeant in charge of the Hollenbeck Division, who had delivered the search warrant. He was now helping Detective Becker supervise the neighborhood canvass by his patrol officers.

My phone rang and I looked down at the caller ID but didn’t recognize the number. It was a 626 area code. That’s somewhere in the East Valley, I think. I picked it up.

“Is this Detective Scully?” a man’s voice asked.

“Yes. Who’s this?”

“Nixon Nash. I’m about a block away in your media control area. I understand you’re the lead detective. I thought we should have a chat.”

“How did you get my name and this number?”

“I have contacts,” he said noncommittally.

“You mean you have a spy inside the police department?”

“Let’s not bicker. I’ve got some information that might advance your case.”

Then we were both silent, listening to each other breathe.

“I’m only a few blocks away. I can help you,” he prodded.

“I’ve seen your show, Mr. Nash. My guess is nothing involving you is going to help me.”

“Geez, that’s kinda rough,” he said as if he hadn’t been trashing cops on TV for the last two years. “If you’re talking about those detec-

tives in Georgia last season, they completely botched it. I'm trying to help the police, not hurt them. How does a bad murder investigation help law enforcement?"

"I'm pretty busy right now," I hedged, not wanting to get sucked in by this guy like those cops in Atlanta.

"I discovered a witness who can help determine motive. I already know Lolita Mendez is the victim. That's gotta be a hot grounder for you guys. How 'bout you and me put our heads together and solve this thing?" I could hear a smile in his voice.

"Just a minute." I put him on hold and looked at Hitch. "It's Nash. He knows the vic is Lita Mendez. He says he has a witness who can supply motive."

"Don't swallow that hook," Hitch said.

"You stay here. There should be a patrolman on the curb with a crime scene attendance log. Get somebody out there and keep this going. I'll go see what he's got."

"What he's got is your pension and a box of matches," Hitch warned.

I gave him one of my goofy funny smiles and punched up the call again. "I'm on my way over," I said.

"Of course you are," Nash replied arrogantly.