

I DROVE TO MY ASSIGNED PARKING SPACE ON THE THIRD UNDERGROUND level of the Police Administration Building at Parker Center. When I arrived, there was a black-and-white “shop” parked in my spot. “Shop” was cop terminology for a patrol car. This one was a slick-back with no light bar, and I could tell from the “00” city tag number that it was a detective car from Internal Affairs. The Professional Standards Bureau is located in the Bradbury Building, five blocks over on Broadway. When I.A. dicks come to the Glass House on business, they tend to poach our parking spaces. After all, who in their right mind is going to have an Internal Affairs car towed? But today, I was in no mood for some iron-ass from the rat squad. I decided to park directly behind this rude bastard and lock my car, forcing him to come looking for me. Then I would set him straight on PAB parking etiquette. I pulled in, blocking the vehicle.

Just as I was getting out of my car, a woman’s voice said, “Detective Shane Scully?”

I turned and saw an extremely attractive, raven-haired lady in a tan pantsuit, carrying a briefcase. She looked Hispanic, early thirties, nice shape.

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"Is this your slick-back?" I asked, nowhere near as annoyed now as I was a second before, beauty trumping anger. "Can't you read my name on the sign?"

"I parked it there because I wanted to talk to you and I didn't know what you looked like. I'm Secada Llevar." She smiled and handed me her card. D-III Investigating Officer with Professional Standards.

"Don't tell me I'm in trouble over at PSB again."

"Not that I know of."

"There's a first."

"I need to talk to you. I didn't want to do it upstairs. You mind if we go get a bite? I haven't had lunch."

I studied her for a moment. Her demeanor said she was used to getting her way. I reasoned this was partly because she knew she was hot looking, and partly because she had natural self-confidence. Whatever it was, it was working.

"Get in. I haven't eaten either. We'll leave your shop where it is."

She settled into the front seat of my Acura MDX and I headed up the garage ramp. Her perfume immediately filled the car with a lavender scent. Or maybe it was peach. Whatever it was, she smelled great.

We picked an Italian place called Leonardo's, two blocks from the Glass House. The joint was *Godfather* corny with plastic checkered tablecloths and wine jugs hanging in nets from the rafters. The pungent smell of garlic clung to the walls. We took a booth in the back and ordered. Lasagna for her, pizza for me. After the waiter left, I faced her with my dumb, hard look in place. Whatever Secada Llevar wanted, I was determined to fend her off.

"I'm sorry I took your parking space. Seemed easier than going upstairs and asking around."

"What's on your mind, Detective Llevar?"

"Call me 'Scout'; everybody does."

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“What’s on your mind?”

“I’m having a little problem and I thought maybe you could help me.”

I didn’t respond. Experience has taught me that dealing with I.A., at best, is never much fun. If she was having a “little problem” and managed to lay it off on me, then I was going to end up hosting a disaster.

“I got a letter from Corcoran State Prison two days ago,” she began. “It was sent to me by an inmate named Truit Hickman who’s doing life for Murder One. Tru is twenty-five and a crank addict. He pleaded guilty to killing his mother, Olivia Hickman, a little less than a year ago. The police report states he got into an argument with his mom over two hundred dollars she apparently had in her purse and wouldn’t give him. She had just cashed her paycheck from a part-time job as a checker at a Vons Supermarket. The detective report speculates her son wanted the money to do crystal meth.”

“I’ve only got about twenty minutes. Is this going to be a really long story?”

“I’ll go fast,” she said. “According to neighbors, Tru and his mother hadn’t been getting along for years. The police report says when she wouldn’t give him the cash in her purse he waited that night for her to come home and stabbed her to death with a kitchen knife. Then he took the money and ran. According to the primary detective’s notes and the confession he eventually signed, Tru woke up from a drug haze the next morning in some alley, realized what he’d done, and came up with a revised plan. He knew he’d be the prime suspect in his mom’s murder, so he returned home and pretended to find the body. Then he called nine-one-one. His original story was he’d been at a party, got tweaked on meth and can’t remember who was there, stumbled out to the alley and passed out. So basically he had no alibi. Later, in the I-room at Van Nuys Station, they threatened him with a premeditated, lying in wait murder for financial gain. A death penalty case. Under the threat of

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going down for capital murder, he changed his story, copped to a straight first degree homicide, and took a jolt for twenty-five to life. That was last August. Because of prison overcrowding, he was in the inmate classification center for seven months. They should have assigned him to a Level One minimum support unit because he's basically a brain-dead tweaker with no prior violent crimes, but somehow, he got a classification score above fifty-two. The poor schlub ends up being sent to Corcoran and placed in Level Four with a bunch of hardcore assassins. It's a rough car, full of gang killers." A car was what inmates called a housing unit.

"That was over two months ago. He now says the confession was coerced, that he didn't do it."

"Try singing that to 'Over the Rainbow.' It won't change the outcome, but it might sound a little better."

She ignored me and said, "You know Internal Affairs is tasked with checking up on incomplete or inadequate investigations. If we get a complaint alleging any problems with due process, it's our job to check it out. I got this one."

"Sounds like fun." I had no idea where she was going, and certainly didn't want to find out.

"Actually, it hasn't been fun at all." She pulled a stack of photocopied arrest and police reports out of her briefcase and started to push them toward me.

"Don't give that stuff to me. I don't want anything to do with this."

"Just listen then."

I made my face look disinterested and dull, something I'm uncommonly good at.

"The primary investigator on the case is a lieutenant named Brian Devine. As it turns out, Lieutenant Devine has an I.A. record of borderline brutality cases going back fifteen years. It's a thick folder. He's been in all the high testosterone units: SIS;

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SWAT. Suffice it to say, the lieutenant's a cowboy. Now he heads the Van Nuys Division Homicide Squad. How dirtbags like him make supervisor baffles me."

"If he's the head of Van Nuys Homicide, he should be behind a desk. What's he doing in the field running a murder case?"

"You're right. As a supervisor he normally wouldn't take on a homicide investigation. But his story is he was a block away from the house when Tru Hickman phoned nine-one-one. So he rogers the call and shows up as the primary on Olivia Hickman's one-eighty-seven. After they take this kid in and sweat him, they put him on the Box and, according to Lieutenant Devine, he tanks the polygraph. There's a bloody shoe print at the scene, same size and shape as Tru's boots, and Lieutenant Devine's initial report speculates that Tru made the print. Stepped in his mother's blood while in the act of killing her. Under all this bad news, the kid panics. He's got a laundry list of old drug busts, a deceptive poly, and no alibi. He knows nobody will believe him and he's headed to death row, so in less than forty-eight hours, he accepts a plea."

"This is fascinating, but it's still no excuse for leaving your car in my assigned parking spot."

She smiled. Her teeth were pearl white against almond skin. Secada "Scout" Llevar was a stunner. That smile brought her another few minutes of this nonsense.

"It gets better. Tru Hickman has this Hispanic friend, Miguel Iglesia. Miguel has anglicized his name. He's Mike Church now. Iglesia means 'church' in Spanish."

"Okay."

"Church is your basic, gang-affiliated, West Valley gorilla. All through high school he ran with the VSLs—the Vanowen Street Locos, a bad Valley gang. He's been banging since he was fifteen and now he's one of their most feared veteranos. Tru Hickman and Mike Church met in tenth grade when both were doing juvie time in the sheriff's Honor Rancho. They're an unlikely pair.

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Hickman was in for gas-bagging crystal and selling it around school. Church was doing a stretch for agg-assault and attempted murder. They're from opposite ends of the food chain so it's a little strange these guys hang together at all. Church is a shark. Hickman's bait. In his initial police statement, Hickman said Mike Church came over to his house the day of the murder and got into an argument with his mom. They screamed at each other. Mrs. Hickman didn't like Mike Church because she correctly thought he was a bad influence on her son. Tru told the lieutenant about Church being at the house and screaming at his mother. Before he confessed, Tru said he thought maybe Church was the doer. Lieutenant Devine went out and had a talk with Church about this, and guess what?"

"He has an alibi."

"Nope. He's got deep knife cuts all over his palms and fingers. The kind you'd get if you stabbed someone using a kitchen knife with no scabbard and your hands slip down on the blade during the attack. Church explains the cuts by saying that he got into a knife fight in a bar, but doesn't know the guy who cut him."

"That makes Mike Church the new prime suspect. So why is Tru Hickman the one doing Level Four time?"

"Because Lieutenant Devine turned Church loose. He was so sure Tru killed his mother he never went any further with it. The investigators speculated that Tru laid in wait and killed her for the two hundred dollars to buy meth. The lying in wait and killing for financial gain aspects allowed the D.A. to kick it up to a Special Circumstances death penalty case. It looks to me as if Lieutenant Devine didn't want to muck up his slam-dunk murder with another suspect, even one who'd had a recent argument with the vic and had knife cuts on his hands. Classic target fixation."

Our food came and we started digging in.

"Anyway, I got the letter from Corcoran two days ago, and got permission to work it from Captain Sasso."

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"You report directly to Jane Sasso?"

"Yeah. You know her?"

"She's so driven, can anybody really know her?"

Scout didn't answer, but something shifted behind her eyes. I'd struck a nerve. Captain Jane Sasso had been appointed by my wife, Alexa, to head the Internal Affairs unit. She was a notorious department hard-ass. After a moment Scout nodded, went on. "I ran Tru Hickman's yellow sheet. This kid is such a loser, he couldn't find the ceiling if he was on his back looking through binoculars. I called him on the phone up at Corcoran and he says he didn't do it. He doesn't understand how he could have flunked the lie detector test. He says that bad poly was the main reason he pled out, but he says nobody ever showed him the test. He never really had a lawyer. The P.D. who got the case met him once or twice for an hour and cut a deal to drop the special circumstances. The straight Murder One plea was accepted by the D.A. and the whole mess cleared the system by the end of the month."

"This is great pizza," I said. "How's the lasagna?"

She frowned at me. "I've been looking into the case with Captain Sasso's tacit permission for the last two days. She's not too big on these bad due-process things. But the more I checked, the more it seems that what Tru claims in his letter is more or less accurate. They sure didn't look at Mike Church very hard. Lieutenant Devine got a quick confession from a confused guy who'd cooked off too many brain cells doing glass. But now that Tru's had a chance to think about it, he says he was framed."

"Show him the poly."

"Can't."

"Why not?"

"It's missing."

"Happens."

"Also, I can't find any lab work matching the photo of the

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bloody shoe print to Tru Hickman's boots. I don't think they ever finished that part of the investigation. After Tru confessed, they just never sent it through for a match."

"That can also happen."

She wrinkled her nose. She was getting frustrated with me. "Mike Church has a long and prolific criminal VSL gang history that includes multiple aggravated assaults and multiple attempted homicides. Lame as his story is, I don't think Tru Hickman premeditated his mom's murder, or killed her for two hundred dollars to buy drugs."

"Why not?"

"When I talked to him yesterday, I got the impression that Tru couldn't premeditate a decent bowel movement. He's in a perennial daze. A loser with a capital L."

I finished my pizza, pushed the plate away. "Why are we talking about this? It doesn't concern me."

"Yesterday, I take my doubts to Captain Sasso. I tell her I think there's enough here to put a new homicide number on it and reopen the case."

"Good. Way to go." I took out my wallet. "I gotta get back. Let's dutch the bill."

"Sasso took the case away from me. Told me it was closed."

I shrugged. "She's a captain."

"What does that mean?"

"Captains get to tell detectives what to do," Secada deadpanned me. "Don't take my word on that. If you don't believe me, look it up in your manual."

She gave that a frustrated shake of her head, then plunged on. "I had already filed a request for a duplicate photo of the bloody shoe print to get the lab work done. I went to pick it up, just to add it to the IO file before I sent it down to records. Then, at end of watch last night, I get called into Captain Sasso's office. It's a regular sixth-floor ambush. There's a commander named Summers, in

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there along with Deputy Chief Frank Townsend, from operations. They found out I'd been down to pick up the photo after Sasso told me to drop the case. All three of them start bitching me out. 'Why didn't I do what I was told to?' 'Don't I know how to take a direct order?' I try and explain that I was just gathering up loose ends, but they won't listen. They start threatening my career. 'Keep this up and you'll be back on traffic detail.' That kinda thing."

"So now, in a gesture of friendship, you want to give this glowing red ball to me, is that it?"

"Shane . . . can I call you Shane?"

"No."

"This is a bad investigation. Shit is missing from the file. The right moves weren't made. When I start looking into this, which is my fucking job, I get hijacked by sixth-floor brass and told to drop it immediately or my career goes in the bag. A slight overreaction if you ask me, which makes me wonder what the hell is really going on here."

"I'm not taking this case!"

"This kid is scared out of his skull. How the hell CDC qualified him for Level Four is a mystery. Somebody's got it in for him. They have him housed with hardened gang killers, for God's sake. I was going to drive up there tomorrow, but after that meeting in Sasso's office I don't think that's a good plan anymore."

"Are you through eating? I really need to get back."

"Listen, Scully. Listen to me."

"What?"

"This is wrong, okay? It's wrong. I've read about you. I've heard the stories, how you make your own way around here. You aren't afraid of these sixth-floor guys. You've got *cajones*, homes."

"Aaawwww, come on. Stop it."

"Look, I'll work it with you. On the sly. Okay? After hours. This has my Latina blood boiling. I'll risk it if you will. You're the only one who can help me."

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“Yeah? Why’s that? And no bullshit about my *cajones* this time.”

She took a moment and then leaned forward and lowered her voice. “Your wife is the head of the Detective Bureau. She’s tough and smart. If she can cover us, I know we can find out what’s really going on. With Sasso on the warpath, we’re gonna need her help if we want to survive.”