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VIGILANTE

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CHAPTER

1

The filthy rug limped along the sidewalk on swollen plastic baggie-wrapped feet, hunched against the chilly February wind. It was a Persian design with a navy and cranberry center surrounded by a stained, red and gold border. The rug was worn to the nub. I watched as it leaned against the wall of a six-story ornate rococo structure located on the corner of Broadway and Third Street in downtown L.A. A minute later a puddle of urine seeped from underneath it and spread across the sidewalk to drain into the gutter. The rug was pissing on the north wall of the magnificent Bradbury Building, built in 1893 and considered by most to be one of Los Angeles's most significant architectural landmarks.

A minute later, the rug turned, revealing that it was wrapped around the shoulders of an ageless man with a complexion like a strawberry pie that had exploded in the oven, the planes and furrows of his face made red by a landscape of sores and broken capillaries. He was one of L.A.'s street denizens. This homeless resident of downtown was on a breakfast tour of the overflowing Dumpsters that sat in the alleys behind

Broadway and had paused during his 8:00 A.M. buffet for a leak in plain view of a line of commuter traffic.

He deposited about a quart of dark, yellow liquid on the side of the rococo brick building, the top four floors of which currently housed the Internal Affairs Group of the LAPD.

I'm a police officer posted to Homicide Special, an elite investigations unit that is part of the LAPD Robbery-Homicide Division, and this was my first cop dilemma of the day. As a sworn badge carrier, I knew I should arrest this guy on half a dozen public nuisance ordinances, but it was chilly outside and warm in my car and I had left my overcoat back at the office, so I really didn't want to budge. Emotionally, I was sort of past this stuff. I'd given up rolling drunks years ago when I'd left Patrol.

I sat there, buffered against the crisp February wind, and tried to conjure up some pity. He was just a poor soul who had slipped through the cracks in our transient, fast-moving society. But ignoring him wasn't working, because he still had his junk out and continued to urinate in public. I reminded myself that he was pissing on a building that housed the LAPD Internal Affairs Group, an act that most cops would certainly applaud.

I was working on these excuses, while waiting in the red zone in front of the Bradbury, hoping my partner, Sumner Hitchens, would hurry up and come down from a deposition he was giving upstairs at Internal Affairs Group. If he arrived in time I could get out of here without incident and leave the homeless guy to his urine-soaked wanderings.

Detectives all drove department cars, the sole exception being Homicide Special, because of the high-profile, often covert nature of our investigations. Hitch had called me this morning to ask if I could

pick him up at IA because he'd dropped his Porsche Carrera off for servicing a block away on Broadway before walking over to the Bradbury.

Hitch was giving this deposition on behalf of two patrol officers who had been accused of beating a suspect named Quadry Barnes in a Hollywood Station interrogation room. My partner had been in the adjacent holding area when the event was supposed to have happened and had witnessed everything. He told me the arresting cops never laid a hand on Quadry, who by the way had just held up a 7-Eleven, killing two teenaged clerks, casually blowing them out of their socks with Teflon Black Talon 9mm hollow points, also known as cop killers, without so much as a shrug.

There was a continually changing set of rules in the street game we all now played. This felon had committed a double murder and, stupid asshole that he was, had done the deed in full view of the store's surveillance cameras. Once confronted with the video, he abruptly cut a deal with the prosecutor and drew a "Skip Court, Pass Death Row" card, saving the court the time and expense of a lengthy trial and the state endless capital appeals, not to mention the final medical dispatch of Mr. Barnes to the lower regions of hell. As a result, this dirtbag got to keep breathing until he died of natural causes or got shanked in some prison yard brawl.

Right after making his lifesaving deal, Quadry promptly accused the arresting officers of doing a drum solo on his head in the station I-room with their PR-24 aluminum nightsticks.

The EMTs were called but couldn't find a mark. This fact was of almost no consequence. Once the charge was made, regardless of its validity, Internal Affairs was mandated to take the case. The two patrol cops were pulled from the field and put on paper-clip duty for

several months until the adjudication of their IA Board of Rights hearing.

Filing a false police report was a Class C felony worth, at best, only a year in jail, which meant nothing to Quadry Barnes, who had just agreed to serve a life sentence. It was just another part of the endless cycle of BS that cops were now forced to deal with.

I watched as the Persian rug wearer turned to look at the street. He still had his equipment out and now began waving it at the passing commuter traffic. I'd been studiously trying to avoid dealing with this guy, but he'd finally crossed the line. I opened my car door and got out. As I approached him I began to pick up a raw downwind odor, which grew in intensity as I neared.

"Excuse me, sir, but you're unzipped," I said politely. "Exposing yourself in public is a violation of Criminal Statute Three-One-Four, punishable by fines and incarceration."

"You miss me wid dat, dog breath," he growled through a busted mouth with the few teeth he had spaced wide like the front grille of a '53 Buick. He waved his meat at me to make his point. "Dis here be the English Sentry. The English Sentry, he do what he do. I got no say over Lord Ding Wallace."

"Don't make me arrest you," I said. Of course we both knew jail would be a step up in his accommodations. To back my empty threat I pulled out my badge. The wind shifted, and I was suddenly treated to an overpowering mixture of ripe odors well beyond my limited powers of description.

"The fuck do I care 'bout dat?" he said, taking offense.

The exchange was starting to escalate, as it usually does with schizophrenic street people.