

## CHAPTER

# 2

**W**hat are we rolling on?” Hitch asked.

“Don’t know. You ever heard of a Hollenbeck dick named Rick Laguna?”

“Ricky Laguna? Yeah, we were in Southwest Patrol together. He’s a good guy when he’s not drinking.”

“He wouldn’t give me anything over his cell. Just said that I wouldn’t like it.”

“What’s to like anymore?” Hitch grumbled, still bummed over this morning’s deposition. “Damn job is getting to be less like police work and more like sewage management.”

We took Broadway to the 101 Freeway, turned east, and headed toward Hollenbeck Division.

“Get my laminated division map out of the glove box and tell me where the Four-A-Fifty-Nine Basic Car Area, will you? I need a good off-ramp for North Savannah Street.”

Hitch opened the glove box and reached for the map.

“I can’t believe how the job has changed,” he grouched, leaking

cynicism. “Think about how much time is being wasted on fuckheads like Quadry Barnes. That animal shoots two kids in a market and we got the killing on tape, but our patrol guys have been jacked up over it for a month. Half a dozen cops and witnesses get stuck doing depositions; then we have to waste a week next month testifying. All so this bleeding hemorrhoid can get a ride to L.A. from Soledad, sit at the advocates table in his orange prison jumpsuit, and laugh at us. Worse still, these one-eighty-one complaints are like penicillin-resistant clap. Even when they’re cleared, they never get off your record.”

Of course, I was in complete agreement. Hitch fell silent as he looked down at the division map.

“Best off-ramp is First Street; then go left,” he advised, then dropped the map, pulled out his phone, and hit a preset number.

“Jerry, it’s Hitch. When you pick this up, I forgot to tell you I sent the story option papers for *Trial by Fire* over to Ziff last night for a legal opinion. I think the second eighteen-month renewal option is okay, but it shouldn’t be free. Warners should have to pay for it. Call me once you’ve talked to him.” He clicked off.

My partner hit the jackpot when he sold a big murder case of his to the movies a few years ago. It ended up being a box-office smash. The case was about a serial murderer Hitch caught when he was in Metro Robbery Homicide. The killer believed the only way he could stay alive was to drink his victims’ blood. The film was *Mosquito* and it starred Jamie Foxx in the lead role of Detective Sumner Hitchens. The damn thing grossed over \$600 million worldwide. Hitch had three back-end points, making him instantly wealthy.

The second case he sold was one we worked together last year, which he calls *The Prostitute’s Ball*. We’re still in script development on that and it probably won’t get shot for a year or so, if at all. I

reluctantly took a piece of it, because my half of the story rights payment is rebuilding my son Chooch's garage apartment at our house in Venice, California. "Chooch" is short for "Charles." He's my only child and is in his final year at USC on a football scholarship.

Hitch has agents at United Talent Agency. The guy he just called was Jerry Eisenberg, who heads their film department. Ziff is a Hollywood power lawyer named Ken Ziffren. These guys are all at the highest levels of the Biz, and Hitch sometimes manages his movie interests from the front seat of our D-ride.

"I'm thinking we're running out of road here, dawg," Hitch complained as he holstered his cell, still marinating over his morning deposition. "You gotta have a law degree to do police work anymore. I'm thinking maybe it's time for us to jump out of this free-falling safe before it hits ground. Team up for real, make movies full-time."

It was a discussion we had at least twice a week lately. I don't want to be a movie producer—I'm a cop. I think I'd look really stupid in silk shirts and overlapping gold chains. But it seemed like Hitch was becoming more and more disenchanted with the job. I had been trying to find a way to pull him out of his funk.

When we arrived at North Savannah Street, I started picking up curb numbers, looking for 1253. In the late forties, the houses in this district were newly built postwar homes for middle-class factory workers, but the last sixty years had taken a heavy toll on the neighborhood. Now the decrepit stucco and wood-sided bungalows displayed security-barred windows, peeling paint, and graffiti as they squatted in a ragged line of weed-choked postage-stamp-sized lawns.

Throughout the seventies and eighties, these blocks had slowly been turned over to poor Hispanic families who came north to find a better life. Make recently, the neighborhood had become ensnared

in a dense maw of gang violence. Tagger art announced the competing sets. Varrio Nuevo Estradas claimed blocks right next to Clique Los Primos. Farther down were White Fence and Krazy Ass Mexicans, Avenue 43's, Fickes Street Locos, and Evergreen territories. At last count there were over forty-five Hispanic gangs operating in the Boyle Heights section of Hollenbeck Division.

During the daylight hours these blocks looked forlorn but not overly dangerous. Most of the *vato* hitters worked their drug corners all night, stayed up until dawn, and slept until late afternoon. This left the streets to little kids and old women with swollen ankles who ventured out to make their morning trips to the market, pushing their stolen silver schooners from Vons or Albertsons.

After dark, as any Hollenbeck patrol officer could tell you, this hood had a whole different vibe. Lowriders full of young killers were parked on every street with the lights off, watching their turf. Heavy salsa beats rocked the tires while marijuana smoke, called *yerba*, drifted from the open windows. The nights were often interrupted by the savage rip of a MAC-10 spitting out copper-jacketed death.

It was easy to spot the crime scene. Six patrol cars were parked at the curb with a bunch of cops milling out front. Graffiti tagged the street as Evergreen turf. As we headed toward the address, we drove by a new white Ford Econoline van with a big blue V-TV stenciled on the side.

"Uh-oh," Hitch said as we passed the vehicle. The back door on the van was open, revealing an impressive array of large, silver-studded equipment boxes. A TV crew had set up in a yard and was interviewing a tattooed Hispanic youth, gunning off footage using two digital cameras and an elaborate lighting package.

"We're fucked," I groaned as I caught a glimpse of a familiar man

conducting the interview. He was a medium-built blond-haired guy wearing a blue blazer and diagonally striped tie. It was Nixon Nash, host of *Vigilante TV*, a hot nationally syndicated TV show that was currently riding the top of the Nielsen ratings.

“That guy needs a permanent room at the asshole academy,” Hitch said sourly. “Just one more example of what I was saying.”

He turned around, looking out of the rear window at the receding TV van. “It’s not bad enough we got wet farts like Quadry Barnes to deal with. Now we gotta also put up with this guy.” Then he added, “With him here, now I’m really wondering who got murdered.”

*Vigilante TV* had sprung to national prominence a few years back. The show billed itself as a police watchdog. Nash actually referred to himself on the air as America’s number one video vigilante. *V-TV* was just beginning its third season. However, according to the show’s main title, the police legacy of its host, Nix Nash, had started twenty years earlier in Miami Beach.

Most cops across America knew Nash’s history by heart, because we all watched the show like ghoulish rubbernecks checking out a free-way disaster. In the mid-nineties Nix Nash had been a patrol officer in South Florida. After just three years on the job, he’d decided to change professions and quit the police force to go to law school.

As a lawyer he found his way to L.A. and began practicing here. The majority of his clients were violent predicate felons who, by the account of most, were guilty as hell of the charges brought against them. Despite that fact, Nash did very well getting them off, usually by claiming every imaginable brand of police impropriety. His favored courtroom tactic was to put the arresting officers on trial.

From 2000 to 2006 he expanded his L.A. practice to cover civil

lawsuits against cops. The word around the courthouse was he was not above buying false testimony, although, in all fairness, that claim had never been proven.

If there is such a thing as karmic payback, it made a heartfelt appearance in 2006 when one of Nash's partners turned him into our bunco squad for embezzling from his own law firm to support an over-the-top Hollywood lifestyle. Needless to say, a lot of overtime went into that investigation, but not one of the cops working it put in for even an hour. The case quickly rose to the level of divine providence.

This magnificent investigatory effort resulted in a three-year sentence for Nixon Nash at Corcoran State Prison in Central California and the stripping of his law license. However, because of "good time" served, he got out in eighteen months.

While in jail, Nash wrote a book about his adventures taking corrupt cops to court. The book was titled *Vigilante*. It won the Prison PEN Award, was published in New York, and became a national best-seller. With its success, Nash arose like a battered zombie in a George Romero film. Nash optioned the rights to *Vigilante TV* to a local TV station in his hometown of Miami and continued his crusade against local law enforcement there, only now it was playing to a much larger audience. The guy was like a fungus you couldn't kill.

The first season of *V-TV* with Nixon Nash aired on a local channel in Miami Beach. At the end of the year the show had left a trail of broken police careers in its wake but had earned a huge Nielsen share in the Miami market. That encouraged a big syndicator to pick it up and distribute it nationally.

Then *V-TV* moved on for a second highly rated season in Atlanta, this time going after two homicide detectives who had mishandled a serial murder case that took place in Piedmont Park. Because of Nash

and his show, the two Atlanta detectives were humiliated on national TV and took early retirement. Two months later, under intense media scrutiny, the Atlanta police chief also resigned.

Now Nix Nash was in L.A., ripe for vengeance against the city that had cost him his license to practice law. The third season of *V-TV* was about to start, but nobody yet knew what case they were going to cover. So far the show had been riding our radio calls, and sending crews to crime scenes, where they would shoot a little test footage and leave.

“Maybe this will just be another dry run,” I said hopefully, looking over at Hitch, who just grunted as he turned to look through the front windshield at the murder house we were pulling up to.

Ricky Laguna was waiting by the curb. He was a short, stocky forty-year-old Hispanic detective who wore his too-tight blue suit uncomfortably, like the costume from his high school play. He had a low forehead, lots of black hair, and tobacco-stained teeth. His garish tie was too wide and out of style. The whole ensemble screamed cop. Adding in his drinker’s red nose, all that was missing was the white socks.

His partner was a tightly wrapped female detective named Pam Becker who, after we all introduced ourselves, stayed outside with Patrol, busily organizing the yellow tape detail.

We got what we needed from our briefcases, stuffed our pockets, and got out of the car. Rick Laguna walked us up to the house. He seemed glad to see Hitch.

“I seen your movie. Good shit, homeboy.” He grinned as he pulled aside some yellow crime scene tape blocking the front door, then said, “Better put on your paper booties.”

Hitch and I reached into our pockets and pulled out hospital slippers to protect the crime scene from unnecessary shoe prints. We put them on and stepped inside.

The front room of the house had several bedsheets tacked up on the front windows. I wondered why. All the lights were on. We followed a premarked entrance path strung with yellow tape along the east side of the small living room that had been set up by the patrol officers. They had also taped off the murder room and marked an egress path. All of this was standard academy-taught procedure for primary responders on any murder scene. It kept the swarm of LAPD officers and crime techs from inadvertently leaving their own trace evidence near the body. I glanced around the living room. It was strewn with old Coke cans, fast-food boxes, and magazines.

“Is it okay for you to tell us now who the vic or vics are?” I asked Laguna as we paused outside the kitchen, which had a big X in yellow tape across the threshold, identifying it as the murder scene.

“One vic. Female. Looks like she got beaten first, then double-tapped in the face with a large-bore weapon.”

“You got an ID on the deceased?” I asked.

“Oh yeah,” he said, and rocked back on his heels like a man surveying a tall building.

“So who is it?”

“Lolita Mendez,” he said.

“Shit,” Hitch hissed under his breath.

“Lita Mendez lives here?” I said, looking past Laguna into the kitchen, where a woman’s lifeless body was sprawled.

With the V-TV van parked half a block up the street I instantly knew that this was the case Nix Nash had been waiting for.