

## CHAPTER

# 5

The media control area was located a block to the west of the crime scene across from the Evergreen Cemetery on Sloan Street. I found Nix Nash standing at the back of his van in the middle of a circle of ten production people. He was a slightly plump, relatively short thirty-five-year-old man about five feet, seven inches tall. He had blue eyes and a cherubic face framed by teased blond salon-highlighted hair. His clipped moustache was the standard Errol Flynn, darkened a few shades to give it presence.

When he saw me approaching, his circle of peeps and sycophants parted and he walked out majestically to greet me like a star emerging from behind a curtain. He was smiling warmly as he extended his hand.

“Gee, Detective Scully, this is really great,” he gushed. “I’m Nix Nash. What a total pleasure to meet you.” Napoleonic insincerity.

We shook hands and before I could reply he went on: “I can imagine what you probably already think about me, but please be assured that all I want here is to help catch this killer.”

There was a warm likability about him. A charisma that I didn't trust for a minute, because most accomplished performers can affect it. He took a step back and bowed his head in a gesture of theatrical humility. When he looked up, his expression had become contrite.

"Please give me a chance to be your colleague on this," he said earnestly. "Let me show you what I can do before you judge me."

"You said you have a witness who will advance my murder investigation?" I said, sticking to my mission.

"I do. I surely do." Then he shook his head in mock amusement. "Damnedest thing, how this keeps happening to me of late. How my fans recognize me from the show or because they've read my book. They're interested in the good work I'm doing and simply want to help out. This particular fan saw me setting up, walked right over, and volunteered some amazing stuff."

There must have been more than half a dozen personal pronouns in that statement.

"People feel helpless today," he went on. "Government is too big, justice too scary; people just want a chance to get back in the game." Then his smile widened. "I'm certainly not kidding myself that you're glad I showed up here, but here's something you need to know, Shane." He paused. "Can I call you Shane?"

I shrugged.

"You need to understand that I'm a man of integrity. If you're cool, then I'm gonna be cool. I like to say any cop who does his job right has not one thing to fear from Nix Nash."

He was still overdosing on personal pronouns and had just added one third-person reference. This guy was really high on himself.

"Where's the witness?" I asked.

“In the van.”

“What’s he doing there?”

“Backgrounding with my producer, Laura.”

“Backgrounding? What’s backgrounding?”

“Fact-checking, getting corroboration on some of the things he just told us during our taped interview.”

“You’ve already interviewed my witness?”

I was starting to get pissed, and obviously that annoyance had leaked into my tone, because he said, “There’s no reason to be alarmed. For the love of Mike, I’m only trying to help move this along.”

“Well, you’re not helping. If he’s a witness in a murder, and if you’ve interviewed him before the police, then you’ve contaminated him. You’ve put a statement on film that could contain falsehoods. That’s going to make it much harder for me to get to the real truth, because he’s already locked in by what he just told you on camera. The fact that you went ahead without checking with us constitutes obstruction of justice.”

I was trying to back him off with that, but it didn’t work, because he quickly turned to the group of people standing behind his van and called out, “Marcia, could you help us out over here for a moment, please?”

An extremely attractive middle-aged blonde wearing a tailored pinstripe pantsuit broke away from the others and walked toward us. I immediately recognized her from her time as a prosecutor here in L.A. Her name was Marcia Breen and I’d worked one case with her in the nineties. It was before I’d met Alexa. Marcia and I had actually gone out a few times when she was in the DA’s office. A few years after our short romance, Marcia had blown a high-profile murder

prosecution. That loss had caused a media feeding frenzy and our politically astute DA had scapegoated Marcia, dumping her from the division to save his own ass.

After that she left town and I'd lost track but wasn't surprised to see her here, because Nix Nash liked to hire ex-cops and prosecutors like Marcia Breen who'd once been locals to give him additional tentacles into the local power structure. He liked to put these experts on the air as well, and Marcia certainly wouldn't hurt his ratings, because she was beautiful.

"Hi, Shane," Marcia said as she approached, a small bemused smile on her chiseled features.

"Is this really your new job, Marcia?" Not bothering to hide my disdain.

"The good news is I'm down to eating my pride one show at a time." She said this without a trace of rancor.

"Marcia, please confirm my opinion and tell Detective Scully that it's not obstructing justice for us to interview a volunteering witness," Nash said.

"That's right, because he sought us out," Marcia explained, still favoring me with her smile. "He's in the Evergreen gang and hates cops. There's no way he would ever have talked to you to begin with, so nobody obstructed anything. As a matter of fact, we didn't obstruct; we *instructed* him to talk with you."

"This isn't going to work like it did in Miami and Atlanta," I said to Nash. "I don't intend to stand back while you investigate my homicide behind my back. I'll file so much paper you'll think you're in a ticker tape parade."

"We've broken no laws," Nash said.

“I assume you paid him for the witness interview?” I replied. Since neither Nix nor Marcia denied it, I knew I had guessed right. “If we ever want to use this wit in court, the defense attorney will challenge his statement, calling it paid-for testimony. That violates the statute on dissuasion of evidence.” I was on pretty thin ice with this argument, and from their expressions I could tell we all knew it.

“If you’re talking about Criminal Statute 136.1, that only deals with dissuasion through intimidation,” Marcia said. “But I’m pretty certain you already know that.”

I’d lost that round. Time to move on.

“Why don’t I get back to you later on the legal stuff. So where is he? Produce the witness.”

Nix nodded to a man in a V-TV windbreaker standing a few feet away, who opened the rear door of the production van. A moment later a tough-looking gang-tattooed *vato* wearing baggy jeans and a Pendleton shirt buttoned at the throat jumped down from inside the van. It was the same guy we’d seen Nash interviewing down the street as we’d pulled up.

“Meet Edwin Chavaria,” Nash said, introducing this obvious thug. “He likes to go by ‘Chava.’ Just to save you the trouble I had Marcia call a friend of hers downtown. We found out that Chava has a criminal record but no outstanding warrants. I’m sure you’ll probably want to run him yourself, but he’s trying to cooperate, so you should cut him some slack.”

Now Nash was explaining my job to me. “Chava,” Nash continued, “Detective Scully is going to ask you some of the same questions we just asked. It’s perfectly safe to cooperate with him as we agreed.” Treating me like a guest at my own party.

The banger didn't say anything but held my gaze insolently.

"Come with me," I said. "We'll talk over there." I pointed to a spot across the street.

"I ain't going over there with you. You wanta talk, *chota*, we talk here or not at all." He shot Nash a look. That little glance for approval told me they'd agreed to this provision in advance.

Just then, a slender, freckled woman with a mop of curly red hair, dressed in a work shirt, Birkenstocks, and jeans motioned at two cameramen who shifted HD cams up onto their shoulders and started flipping switches. Power lights blinked on. They were hot and rolling.

"I'm not doing my interview as a segment for your show," I said.

"Can't say I blame you." Nash smiled sympathetically. Then he turned to the freckled woman, who seemed to be in charge of the crew. "Laura, we've already done our piece with Chava. It's your call of course, but the police always prefer to conduct their business in private. Whatta ya say?"

The slender woman seemed to consider this as if it were actually her decision and not his, in spite of the fact it was actually mine. Then she motioned the cameras down.

"This is Laura Burke, my producer," Nix explained. "You'll get to know her shortly. Laura runs this traveling circus from transpo and equipment rental to music and postproduction. We all do pretty much what Laura wants around here." Nash was smiling at his no-nonsense producer, who was clocking me with brown Rottweiler eyes. "Go find a nice spot to chat," Nash suggested. "Why don't you try the other side of the white van. We'll wait here."

Chava shrugged, so I led him off. I wasn't about to go where Nash instructed, but Chava came to an abrupt halt on the far side of the

production van. “This is far enough,” he said. “I don’t gotta do nothin’ you say. If you wanna talk to me, we do it here.”

Since we were out of earshot of Nash and the TV crew I decided to give in on this point and took a digital tape recorder out of my pocket, slated it verbally with the time and date, along with Chava’s full name and address.

Edwin Chavaria’s eyes were alive with anger. I was the hated *chota*, and he was determined to hold his ground. The big *E* on the right side of his neck and the two teardrop tattoos under his eyes marked him as an Evergreen street killer.

“Let’s hear it,” I said, holding the tape recorder between us.

He just glowered. I shut off the tape so I wouldn’t record what came next.

“Listen, Chava, I’m nowhere near as good a guy as Nash told you. Actually, I’m sort of a raging shithead. My word is worth nothing. Get me angry and I’ll dig up some open paper on you. I don’t care if it’s just an unpaid ticket, I’ll find a way to slam your ass in jail.”

He took a long moment just to let me know he wasn’t worried.

“You should lighten up, *malandro*,” he finally said, then took a breath and nodded, so I restarted the tape. After a moment, he began slowly telling his story. It sounded rehearsed.

“Last night, me and some a my boys was sittin’ on lawn chairs in the front yard of my cousin’s place over on Savannah Street,” he began. “We was blazin’ up sticks, y’know, gettin’ mellow. Little later, my posse gets up and goes inside for beer and to play videos. I’m sittin’ alone on my chair out there enjoyin’ my *mota* when this short, really mega-fat chick rolls up inna truck and parks across the street in front a the house where that woman got capped.”

“What time was that?”

“I don’t wear no fuckin’ watch. I use my phone and it was inside. Eight, nine, how do I know?” I nodded and he went on. “So this *chica* gets out, walks up, and bangs on the fuckin’ door with her fist. Even from across the street I can see this is one very pissed-off *puta fea*. Minute later, that Lita person, she opens up. Next, these two bitches start screamin’ at each other. Shit gets real loud. So loud, I could even hear what they was sayin’ from all the way across the street.”

“Tell me.”

“The fat one screams, ‘I want my motherfuckin’ ceiling fan back!’ and the little one, Lita, she tells her to fuck off and it ain’t her place no more, so it ain’t her fan ’cause it was like an attached fixture or some such shit and goes with the apartment. They screamin’ at each other over this stupid ceiling fan. Nobody about to give nobody no play. Then the short fat bitch grabs the little one an’ they all up in each other’s shit, pullin’ hair and stuff. Lita knees the fat one inna pussy and before she can get upright slams the door in her face. Then the fat one screams, ‘I’ll get you, bitch!’ and waddles back to her truck, revs the engine, and squeals out. That’s it.”

“What kind of truck was it?”

“I don’t know—Ford, Chevy. I wasn’t payin’ no attention, but I got a plate.” He smiled at me, showing two gold teeth.

“Would you mind giving me the tag number?”

He hesitated for a long time to show me what a *retazo macizo* he was. He finally reached into his pocket and handed me a slip of paper with the tag number 3-T-S-G-4-5-5 written on it.

Then he said, “Since I just made your whole fucking case, how ’bout you kick somethin’ down, homes?”

“Pay you for a police statement? How long you been doing street



crime, homes?” He frowned as I transferred the plate number down in my crime book. Then I shut off the tape and led him back to where the TV crew was waiting.

Nash handed me his card. “Put that in a safe spot, Detective,” he advised. “There’ll come a time soon when you’re going to need it.”

I certainly hoped not.

I walked back to my Acura, still parked in front of Lita’s house, picked up my radio mike, and started by running Edwin Chavaria. He’d done five years as an accomplice to a second-degree murder in 2004, got out a year early, and was currently almost at the end of his parole. As Nash had said, there was no paper pending. Then I ran the license number Chava had just given me.

The truck was a late-model Chevy Sidewinder registered to Carla and Julio Sanchez at 1414 Lorena Street, a few miles away, also in Boyle Heights. I ran both Sanchezes and found out Carla and her husband were part of White Fence, a rival gang to Evergreen. Carla had a pile of priors—everything from drug dealing and running a prostitution ring in ’03 to assault with intent to commit and illegal possession of a firearm. She’d done two short nickels in the California women’s prison in Tehachapi, where she was far from a model prisoner, with a long list of write-ups for assault and other yard crimes. Her husband, Julio, had a decent yellow sheet full of assaults and drug beefs. So far he’d only done county time. Neither was currently wanted.

I walked from my car back into Lita’s house, filled Hitch in on what had transpired, and then played back Chava’s statement on the digital recorder. Despite the fact that this was a very good lead, like me, Hitch wasn’t too impressed, because it had come from Nash. We entered the kitchen, where the ME was now working over the body with two evidence techs.

I looked up for the ceiling fan, but there was only a jagged hole overhead with stripped red and green electrical wires hanging down. It looked as if whatever fixture had once been up there had been hastily ripped out. The fan, if there ever was one, was missing.

Put with Chava's story, this offered an interesting thematic option.

It was certainly conceivable that Carla Sanchez had snuck back here later to make good on her threat to "get the bitch." Carla could have found her way inside, killed Lita Mendez, then ripped off the fan and split.

If Nix Nash hadn't supplied this lead, Hitch and I would have been high-fiving each other about now. Put another blue dot up on the homicide board. Case solved.

Carla Sanchez had motive, method, and opportunity. She had a violent prison record and a string of violent priors, along with an eyewitness to the inciting event.

A perfect slam-dunk murder case. Yet neither of us could quite get behind it.

It all just felt like a setup.