

# ACT ONE

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## ▪ CHAPTER ▪

# 5

Scott Berman had produced some of the biggest movies in the history of Hollywood. Until tonight, he'd sat atop a massive production empire located at Paramount Studios, where I'd read he had just made an overall deal. His last three blockbuster hits had been produced there. Berman was an A-list Hollywood player, one of the few world-famous producers whose name was as important as those of the stars who worked for him.

I was already the primary responder on this 187, being first on the scene. Because I was also assigned to Homicide Special, which handled high-profile celebrity murder cases, I knew Jeb Calloway would probably assign this one to me.

We turned off the music and marked a predetermined access and egress path on the grass at the far side of the driveway for the patrol

cops who would soon arrive. We didn't want them blundering in, disturbing any trace evidence that might exist. By the time the first black-and-white had pulled up, the crime scene was basically locked down. Seconds later two more X-cars chirped in.

"We're Code Four," Alexa called to the six armed cops who were running up the drive with their safeties off.

Alexa got on the phone to Jeb Calloway to notify him we had a department red ball, slang for a big media case. Next she dialed the district attorney's twenty-four-hour desk to start the process of getting a judge to write us a warrant that would allow CSI to do a search of the property at 3151 Skyline Drive.

I organized the patrol guys, got them stringing tape, and expanded the initial area that Alexa and I had secured. I had them block off Skyline Drive all the way down to Mulholland. I like to start with a big campus, because I've learned it's easy to shrink a crime scene but almost impossible to grow it.

I nabbed one of the patrolmen and told him to keep the crime scene attendance log, cataloging the names and times of arrival for everyone. Then I walked down and retrieved my crime scene notepad out of the car, returned to the pool area, and began sketching the positions of the three dead bodies in the large backyard. I walked around the main house checking every opening. Every door on the ground floor of the old mansion had been securely padlocked, every window locked.

We didn't find any IDs for the two dead women in the pool. One of the people escaping in those fancy cars must have stopped to gather up their purses so we couldn't identify them, making me wonder why they'd taken the time to do that but had left Scott Berman's wallet in his pocket where it was sure to be found.

Besides sketching the physical layout, noting first impressions, and making a list of vehicles we'd passed coming up the hill, along with

that one partial plate on the black Mercedes, there wasn't much I could do until the warrant, ME, and CSIs arrived.

While I waited for forensics and the medical examiner, I decided to go next door to see if anybody had witnessed the shooting. My best bet was the house on the Hollywood side of the property because it sat slightly above, although a little back from the promontory point. There were a few dark windows on the north wall that looked like they had a decent view of this backyard.

As I headed away from the pool area I again studied the landscaping. Unlike the paint-starved, weed-choked mansion that fronted it, the backyard had been scrupulously cared for. Newly planted winter cyclamens showed bright red and white faces as they peeked over low hedges in freshly manicured flower beds. The pool house looked recently painted.

Again, I wondered why the mansion was such a wreck, while the backyard could have been a photo spread for *Better Homes and Gardens*.

Arleen and Cecil Prentiss lived next door and they supplied the answer.

"Nobody's lived over there since way before we moved in ten years ago," Cecil said.

He was a tall, gaunt, fifty-year-old character with a chin patch and frizzy hair that was growing in a Bozo the Clown half-moon shape. His wife, Arleen, was one of those thirty-five-year-old Hollywood health club exhibits—too thin, too buff, too tan, with bleached-blond hair and the required silicone enhancements.

"Did you hear the shots?" I asked them after we'd exchanged introductions.

"We were the ones who called it in," Cecil said. "We heard it, but didn't see it because it was getting pretty racy over there. We have a

ten-year-old, so once they started groping each other, we pulled the blinds down on the back windows.”

“Let’s start with what you saw before you pulled the shades,” I suggested. “Did you recognize anyone?”

“Nobody,” Arleen said. “But whoever they were, they had money. The girls were beautiful, at least from a distance. Looked like actresses. The guys seemed older. Bunch of fancy cars parked on the street. There’s a foundation that owns that place. They only rent out the backyard. Mostly it’s for charity events and parties but we’ve heard the house is completely off-limits.”

“Yeah, it’s all padlocked,” I told them.

“During the holiday season, there’s something going on over at that pool house all the time,” Arleen continued. “We complain, but the city-use ordinances in this sector are pretty loose, so we can’t get them to stop. If it gets too noisy, then Cecil has the number to the pool house, which has its own line. He phones over and if we threaten to call the cops, that usually quiets things down.”

“Who got killed?” Cecil asked, as he craned his skinny neck forward and began wringing bony hands, taking him out of his friendlier Bozo persona and into a less attractive praying mantis mode.

“Not sure, yet,” I told him noncommittally. “You get any license plates for the cars parked out front?”

“No,” Arleen said. “A year or two ago we might have, but it’s sort of become like a normal thing, so we’re just trying to deal with it now.”

“What did the gunshots sound like?” I asked.

“Like some kind of machine gun. BLAPBLAPBLAPBLAPBLAP! Like that,” Cecil said, mimicking the sound of the weapon.

“And you didn’t look out?”

“Yeah. After we heard the shots. But by then, everybody was running like crazy. I couldn’t pick out the person with the gun. They were gone in seconds. Car doors slamming, engines starting, tires squealing.”

It turned out Cecil was a TV producer. Arleen had just started working with him and was, as the saying goes, learning the biz. They had offices at the old MGM studio, which is now Sony.

“Maybe this will finally end all of this,” Cecil said, more concerned with the area’s use and noise regs than the three dead strangers in the neighboring backyard. “We’ve been talking about getting the City Council to pass a number of night location rules, like they have over in Pasadena. Maybe this will finally get somebody’s attention.”

“You never know. Could happen,” I said.

After we exchanged cards, I walked out their front gate and saw Captain Jeb Calloway pulling up in a brown Crown Vic Interceptor. His D-car was followed closely by a new, top down, midnight blue Porsche Carrera Cabriolet with a tan interior.

“Shit,” I muttered as the Carrera pulled in and shut off its lights.

Sumner Hitchens unhooked his seat belt and exited the hundred-thousand-dollar sports car. He paused for a moment to straighten the creases on his expensive pleated trousers.

As usual, Hitch was dressed like a runway model. This evening it was a dark rust-colored suit, purple shirt, black silk tie with matching pocket square. His shoes were glittering Spanish leather. An oversized thirty-thousand-dollar special-edition Corum wristwatch flashed rose gold from under French cuffs with diamond links. His neatly trimmed mustache and handsome coffee-colored face were lit by his standard devilish grin.

Hollywood Hitch, mean and lean, had made the scene.

“Hang on, Skipper,” he called to Jeb Calloway, hurrying after our captain, who was heading up the drive toward the crime scene.

I’ve been a cop for almost half my life and other than Sumner Hitchens, I’ve never heard anyone on the job call a police captain “Skipper.” That only happened on TV, in the movies, and in Hitch World, which I had come to learn had a very large zip code.

The way the story went, Sumner Hitchens had sold one of his big homicide cases to the movies. That happened just a year before he was transferred to Homicide Special. Back then Hitch was a detective in the Metro Division downtown. He and his homicide table had busted a dangerous serial killer, a nutcase who thought the only way he could nourish himself and stay alive was to drink the blood of his victims.

Paramount produced the film and Jamie Foxx ended up playing the starring role of Detective Sumner Hitchens. The movie was entitled *Mosquito*, and the damn thing grossed over six hundred million dollars worldwide. Hitch had two back-end profit points—hence the hundred-thousand-dollar Carrera, the pricey watch and wardrobe, as well as his new multimillion-dollar house in the Hollywood Hills, all of which he never tired of bragging about. His Hollywood representatives were a gang of sharks at United Talent Agency.

In my opinion, Sumner Hitchens was the ultimate pretender so there was no way I was going to let that hairbag end up as my partner.

He spotted me standing on the neighbors' steps ten yards away.

I must have been frowning because he waved and shouted, "Hey, dawg, cheer up. It's you and me now, brother."