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Patrol had already taped off a media control area in a vacant lot half a block away. It was currently empty, but we all knew before long this would get phoned in by a neighbor and once the press got wind of the fact that Scott Berman was one of our vics, they would be covering this place like a red carpet awards show.

Crime techs were arriving down by the main gate, talking in low voices while they waited for an ADA to show up with a search warrant so they could start collecting evidence. Until then there wasn't much anybody could do.

Hitch tried to approach me once or twice, but I gave him the slip by saying, "Just a minute, Hitch. Be right with you." I didn't want to give our new partnership even six seconds of emotional currency.

As the primary along with Alexa, I was one of the few people who were permitted to stay on the scene before the warrants arrived. Another exception was my immediate supervisor. I was looking to pull Jeb aside and start with my list of complaints. I'd paid my dues and like Sally said, I deserved better. No way I was going to work with Hollywood Hitchens. Jeb was just going to have to see this my way. I was rehearsed and ready to make my case when I finally caught him alone. He was standing at the side of the house, out of the immediate area of interest, talking on his cell.

"Captain," I said as I approached, but he held up a hand to silence me.

"I don't care who's in the regular rotation," he said into his BlackBerry. "I want you to handle it personally, Meyer. We're gonna need a pile of cover on this."

Meyer was Bert Meyer, better known in police circles as Meyer the Liar, head of our Media Relations Department.

"We're gonna need a media war room with daily press briefings and handouts," Jeb continued into his cell. "This is gonna be everybody's lead story. Matt Lauer will probably be out from New York tomorrow, doing stand-ups in front of this place."

I looked down and saw an old paint-peeled Prime Properties Real Estate sign that had been ditched back here years ago. Underneath, hanging from a chain, was a dirt-smeared placard that read: A BEVERLY BARTINELLI LISTING. I wrote it down.

Jeb finally hung up and turned to me. "I don't wanta hear it, Shane," he said before I could even get started.

"But Captain . . ."

"You're gonna work with him. It's my call and it's already settled. That's all there is to it."

"Captain, can I at least make my case?"

Jeb Calloway was originally from Port-au-Prince, Haiti, and still spoke with a slight French accent. He was marble hard, black ebony with a torpedo-shaped head and Mighty Mouse build. We sometimes called him the Haitian Sensation because of his comic-book proportions. He was a good guy but when he got pissed he could really break your balls. The whole package, every ounce and fiber, now looked extremely menacing. He glanced down at his watch impatiently.

“Go! You’ve got forty seconds.”

“I only need five. Hitchens is a total waste of space and a raging asshole. I won’t work with him.”

A uniformed patrolman started down the path by the side of the house, stringing perimeter tape.

“Can you give us a minute?” Jeb said, and the cop abruptly spun and left us there. Jeb turned back to me.

“Shane, I try to be fair to everyone. You know I’ve got a three-strike rule. He’s down to his last swing and, like it or not, you’re it.”

“Three strikes? He’s already had ’em, Captain. Dick Parsons dumped him over that evidence-tampering thing that went to IA, Chris Molina for being a total dickhead and crashing their unit twice. Barbara Palma last week for seducing her twin sister after the police academy picnic. That’s three.”

“The Barbara Palma thing was a foul tip. Some people misunderstand what Hitch calls personal charm. He and Babs were chemically incompatible. It was my idea to split ’em up, so that one doesn’t count.”

“Captain, please.”

“Shane, work with the guy. He needs your guidance. You’re my cleanup hitter. My *cheval de guerre*. Get Hitchens out of the ditch and back on the road.”

“Do you really want this numbnuts working on Scott Berman’s

high-profile homicide? Forgetting his agents at UTA and the fact that when the movie comes out, Howie Mandel is gonna be playing you in blackface, he's completely unreliable. He's gonna screw up."

"You're the one who's working the case. I'm looking to you. He's just driving the car and learning from a master." Then Jeb looked down at his watch. "You're done, Scully. Request denied and you got a whole two minutes instead of just forty seconds. See what a nice guy I am? Now go out there and hit it. Bring me back a collar and do it before this is next week's cover story in *People* magazine."

During the intervening hour, the rest of the CSI responders hit the scene along with the medical examiner and his staff. They continued to mill around at the foot of the drive, waiting for Carla Morris from the district attorney's office to show up. She finally arrived with the warrant signed by a superior court judge.

"How come this warrant is only for the backyard? What about the house?" Alexa asked as she stood by the sagging driveway gate with a swarm of evidence techs and glared at the paper.

"I thought you said the bodies were in the backyard. I don't think you said anything about a house," Carla said. "If you want me to go back and get a new warrant, it's gonna take another hour."

Alexa pondered this for almost a minute.

On a murder scene, time lost at the outset can allow a perp to get away. Prints or other evidence, if recovered soon enough, could allow us to effect a quick arrest. Since the house was locked and probably not part of this anyway, Alexa made her decision.

"Let's get started. If we need to, we can go back and get a paper for the house tomorrow."

With the warrant in hand, about twenty CSIs and coroner's assistants carrying their crime scene kits full of investigatory tools started up the path Alexa and I had marked in the grass by the side of the drive.

Except for pointing out areas of examination, the primary homicide detective is a third wheel during this stage of an investigation. The tech squad and coroner had full control of the scene.

The CSIs began by setting up an inward spiral search, walking the outside circle of the yard, moving slowly in toward the pool, where the bodies were. Ten investigators walked in a line, looking down, marking anything that looked like evidence with cards that were folded into a teepee shape with numbers that corresponded to a master sheet.

Slowly, they began finding 9mm brass shell casings and meticulously gathering and cataloging potential evidence, photographing footprints and blood spatter.

I walked around the edge of the backyard, looking for my new partner. He was off talking to Tom Rosselli, the crime scene photographer.

I thought, *Well, okay. This is good. At least he's working, helping the guy set up his photo log.* But as I got closer, I realized they weren't talking about the case at all.

"You gotta pound the sucker with a hammer," Hitch was saying.

"You always wanta go to town with the hammer," Rosselli answered. "Is that like an African-American thing or something?"

What the hell is this? I thought and slipped behind the pool house so I could eavesdrop.

"Don't be starting in with me on how to prepare the meat," Hitch was saying. "You gotta hammer it first to make it tender."

"We're talking about a Sicilian meat roll, asshole. It's *supposed* to be a little chewy. I'm *Sicilian*. You're from fucking Sixty-sixth Street in South Central. Whatta you know about Sicilian cooking?"

"I'm the king of Sicilian cooking," Hitch shot back. "Check it out. You arrange your meat on your wax paper, you arrange the ham slices on top of the meat—"

“Ham goes on the outside, not on top, dipshit.”

“This is so pathetic,” Hitch said. “You make your living photographing dead people. What am I wasting my time on you for? It’s like talking to a garbageman about the ballet.”

Not as bad as I first thought but still pretty awful. Here we were at one of the hottest murder scenes of the year and Sumner Hitchens was distracting the videographer with an argument over Sicilian cooking when Rosselli should have been doing his initial walk-through to memorialize the scene before the swarm of techies moved anything. I stepped around the side of the building and faced him.

“Let’s go,” I said. “Let Rosselli do his job. You’re with me.”

I left abruptly and Hitch followed me across the pool deck.

“Try the recipe my way,” Rosselli called after him.

“I gave up vomiting after meals when I found out Lindsay Lohan was doing it,” Hitch called back.

I led him to a place near where Alexa was standing.

“After the bodies are processed I want you to go to the ME’s office with Alexa. Witness the autopsies with her.” Thinking it would at least get him out of my sight for a while.

“I’m not gonna be that easy to ditch,” he said. “I already had this out with Jeb. I’m not the kind of partner you can bullshit. I know I’m junior man, but that’s only in hours. When it comes to working this case, I’m your tight. It’s you and me, cheek to cheek, brother.”

He pulled out a red notebook. It was covered in expensive leather and had gold-embossed edges. Across the center, engraved in gold script, it said: MY JOURNAL. The thing must have cost him three hundred dollars.

“This isn’t going to be a movie,” I informed him. “So you can put away your little writer’s journal.”

“I know you’re upset, but I’m gonna grow on you, man. I got this feeling.”

He smiled at me. He was handsome. He was charming. He was hard not to like. But he was also a hopeless bullshitter and opportunist. At least, that was my take back then.

"I'm not going to the morgue. I can't," he added.

"Why not?"

"I don't get along with dead people. I don't like them; they don't like me." His smile widened. "Besides, I already secured some valuable info for us. The morgue is backfill on any investigation. With a red ball like this, time is everything. We need to be moving forward. Somebody else can watch the coroner fingerprint."

I stood there, not sure how to play it.

"I called a friend of mine in real estate who sold me my Hollywood house last year." He grinned again. "LeAnne has a big case on the Hitchmeister. I'm otherwise involved right now so I haven't gotten around to her yet, but the girl's managed to secure a spot on my farm team. That means she's eager to help me so she ran the title on this house. It's owned by something called the Dorothy White Foundation. It's some kinda trust and the primary beneficiary is listed as . . ."

He flipped open his leather notebook. "Brooks David Dunbar, 236 Schuyler Road. Schuyler Road is a primo street in Beverly Hills, by the way. I've also got the zip if you want it, but I hate showing off."

After the coroner left with the bodies I handed Alexa the keys to the MDX. She was still on the dispatch sheet as one of the primary responding officers so she was going to accompany the ME to the morgue and cover the autopsy. Then she would officially sign off on the case.

Since CSI would have control of this crime scene until almost morning, I agreed to follow up on the Brooks Dunbar lead that Sumner had just supplied.

I told Jeb and Alexa where we were going, then Hitch and I walked down to Mulholland where our cars had been reparked by patrol.

We got into Hitch's Porsche Carrera. As I sat in the soft tan leather passenger seat, he turned on his scanner. Then we pulled out and sped toward Mulholland, top down, both straight pipes snarling like angry jungle cats.