SWING GANG

A Vince McNulty Thriller

CHAPTER ONE

\*

“In hindsight, I think we should have stayed in Boston.”

“Thought you always wanted to be Mister Hollywood.”

Larry Unger looked at his technical adviser. “Do you know how much they charge for location services in Los Angeles?”

Vince McNulty kept quiet. This wasn’t the time to give technical advice. “Not to mention there’re more homeless whack jobs than pink poodles.” Unger threw McNulty a sideways glance. “I saw one the other day, had little pink booties and a lace bonnet.” “A homeless guy?” Unger raised his eyebrows. “A poodle. Pink fucking booties.” He let out a lung-emptying sigh. “No. It was better being a big fish in a small pond.”

McNulty looked at the man in charge of Titanic Productions. “Larry. You were never a big fish.”

Unger looked hurt. “Big enough to hire an ex-cop from the U-K who doesn’t have the first clue about police procedures in the U-S.”

McNulty shrugged. “It’s not procedures you pay me for. It’s attitude.”

Unger turned to McNulty. Being short and round, he was facing McNulty’s chest. “Yeah well, it was teaching Alfonse attitude that made him go find a bigger studio.” McNulty had taught Alfonse Bayard to stop walking like a duck and a few other things, and now the actor who’d starred in Titanic Productions’ breakout cop movies had jumped ship. Some of the reason might have been the confident attitude he’d learned from McNulty, but most of it was Larry Unger’s trying to keep the actor on the cheap. Cheap was Larry’s middle name. McNulty glanced across the street where the arc lights and filters were being angled toward the mouth of an alley. A hulking figure split from the rest of the crew and started across the street.

McNulty nodded in the figure’s direction. “Looks like the new fella wants to talk.”

Larry watched as his new actor muscled his way toward them. “Vince. You’re gonna have to stop this guy walking like a bulldozer.”

\*

It was a night shoot, filming in Hollywood but not the glamorous Hollywood you see in the newsreels. They were set up on North Alexandria Avenue just off Hollywood Boulevard. Even Hollywood Boulevard wasn’t the one showcased on Oscar night—at least not the part of Hollywood Boulevard where they hosted the red-carpet event. There were homeless people sleeping rough every three blocks alongside artistic graffiti recalling the Armenian genocide. Little Armenia was just across the street. Little Titanic Productions was around the back of the Papillon International Bakery and the Hollywood Collision Center. The alleyway led to the entrance of the body shop. McNulty reckoned that half the cars being chopped and changed were stolen, but he kept reminding himself he wasn’t a cop anymore. In this location, Larry Unger didn’t have to re- mind himself that he was the big-shot producer of a tinpot movie company.

“What does the big lug want now?”

McNulty watched Dennis Charles Buchinsky march across the street. “He wants you, not me.”

Unger shook his head. “You’re the one supposed to make him walk like a cop.”

McNulty waved a finger. “And you’re the one made his character a fireman who fights crime in his spare time.”

Unger’s shoulders sagged. “Not in his spare time. He’s a fire investigator who gets caught up in crimes as part of his job.”

“Then he should call the police and have them deal with it.”

Unger shook his head. “But then we’d be a generic cop movie instead of something fresh.”

McNulty smiled. “The only thing fresh is the dog shit he just stepped in.”

They both watched the muscle-bound hulk as he scraped his shoe on the curb. He was so top-heavy with his broad shoulders and narrow waist that he was having trouble balancing on one leg. He rested a hand on a telephone pole just below a flyer for a missing dog, a poodle that didn’t look big enough to have shit the turd currently clogging Buchinsky’s footwear.

Unger felt his shoulders sag even more. “You’re going to have to do something about his balance, as well.”

McNulty shrugged. “Maybe you can employ an ex- firefighter.”

Unger pulled himself to his full height, which wasn’t much. “I employed you.” He turned his palms upward. “You must have been to some fires as a cop. Improvise.” He drew his shoulders back and puffed out his chest. “Teach him the attitude.”

Buchinsky stopped cleaning his shoe and was about to make his approach when the director called from behind the camera.

“Chuck. Ready for position one.”

The actor looked at his producer then back toward his director, comical indecision on his face. At least that meant he could show emotion. Unger shook his head and looked at the sky.

“And please god, don’t let them put Chuck Buchinsky on the poster.”  McNulty wasn’t listening. He wasn’t even there. He’d spotted movement out of the corner of his eye and was squeezing between the arc lights and the wall of the alleyway. Half of the Hollywood Collision Center parking lot was in darkness and the other half was bathed in filtered light. It was the dark half that concerned him. Something had glinted in the shadows then stopped as soon as McNulty looked its way. In addition to his job as technical adviser, McNulty was in charge of set security, which meant not letting visitors sneak onto the set.

He walked slowly toward the dark side of the lot, careful not to trip over the spare auto parts stored in the far corner. He moved a hand to his belt before remembering he didn’t carry a flashlight or handcuffs anymore. That life was gone. If this was somebody stripping car parts, McNulty would just have to warn them with a few harsh words.

He stood in the darkness and let his eyes adjust near a stack of boxes covered by a tarpaulin. The edge fluttered, then stopped. He took two steps then reached for the corner and flicked it up. The eyes that blinked back at him weren’t those of a car thief or a burglar. They belonged to a scared child, cowering in the shadows.