

THE  
INCITING  
STORY EVENT

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## ▪ CHAPTER ▪

# 2

The chief's Christmas celebration was being held at the Magic Castle, an old baroque mansion in the foothills just above Hollywood Boulevard. It was a private club that normally catered to L.A.'s large population of magicians, but was also available to rent out for special occasions such as this one.

Half a dozen professional sleight-of-hand performers were ripping up twenty-dollar bills or cutting apart ugly neckties then magically restoring them before a crowd of half-lit captains and deputy chiefs who'd seen their share of deception and were squinting through alcohol filters, trying to bust these tricksters.

The party was for the chief's command staff and their spouses. More than a few of the braided hats were getting seriously hammered at the open bar, sometimes exposing their dark, competitive natures

or revealing dangerous political aspirations. The music was about peace on earth, goodwill toward men, but most of the people in this room had seen too much street crime to believe it.

Our chief, Tony Filiosiani, mingled happily, wearing a blue double-breasted pinstripe over his lunchbox-shaped frame. On his shiny bald head was a Santa hat. He moved through the room, grinning and slapping backs, the ridiculous red hat bobbing along, identifying his position like a hazard warning.

It was hard not to wonder what would happen once this half-lit badge-heavy crowd hit the street and ran into the poor stiff in our Traffic Division.

As usual, my beautiful wife, Alexa, was the center of attention, her looks both a blessing and a curse. Gleaming black hair, reefwater blue eyes, and high fashion-model cheekbones made Alexa attractive in a way that drew people to her but also made it impossible for a few of the old boy cops in this room to accept her as a division commander. Some of the wives stared enviously, while others wondered openly about her.

I was only here as Alexa's husband and was haunting the corners of the room, trying for invisibility. I look like a middleweight club fighter with a nose broken too many times and short black hair that never quite lies down, so people stay out of my way.

On that December night, Alexa was riding on a political wave of congratulatory remarks. The day before, it had been announced that she was being promoted to captain and would finally be able to drop the word "acting" from her title of Detective Division commander.

For two years she'd been running the Detective Division that supervised three hundred plainclothes cops. In L.A. only captains can head police divisions, but she took over the job as a lieutenant and the "acting" adverb had been haunting her authority like an asterisk. With

her appointment to captain came full-fledged membership in the department's double bar club.

I watched as a few of the more aggressive career assassins mingled and schmoozed, wearing big, deceptive grins. They cruised the party like ocean predators, their dangerous personalities barely visible, only the hiss of their dorsals giving them away.

"You ready yet?" I asked Alexa, trying for the third time to get us out of there. I'm a line officer, a Detective III. I don't mix well at these things. Because I was uncomfortable, I wasn't drinking alcohol, so I wouldn't inadvertently insult somebody who could later decide to wreck my career.

"In a minute," Alexa said, turning toward a florid-faced commander named Medavoy, who ran the Special Operations Support Division. I knew he had actively opposed Alexa's appointment to captain, but you'd never know it as he congratulated her, gave her a big, expansive hug, and told her she was the absolute best. The putz.

I wandered off to find a backwater as the music changed and the annoying strains of the Chipmunks singing "We Wish You a Merry Christmas" began to claw relentlessly at my brain.

"Shane?"

I turned to find Sally Quinn, my partner from Homicide Special.

"Sally! What're you doing here?" I was surprised to see her because this was a command-floor-only party. Short, with a bob hairstyle and freckles, she looked as uncomfortable as I did.

"Cal invited me as kind of a going-away thing," she said, referring to both Jeb Calloway, our captain at Homicide Special, and the bombshell she'd laid on me without warning that afternoon.

"I was hoping to get some time with you before I left tomorrow," she said.

Sally and I had been partners for three years, although much of

that had been interrupted, first by her maternity leave and then by medical complications she'd had following the birth of her daughter. I got benched right after she got back because I'd been wounded and needed time off to recover. As a result, we'd only been working the job together for a little over eighteen months.

Earlier this afternoon, she'd informed me she was taking another family leave. She and her husband had just received the difficult news that their little two-year-old daughter, Tara, had been diagnosed with autism. Sally had decided to stay home to work with her.

"Now that it's sunk in, I hope you're not too upset," she said. "You seemed a little quiet after I told you."

"Of course I'm not upset." I took her hand. "I'm gonna miss having you as my partner is all. I thought we were finally through the medical stuff and ready to kick ass."

"I'm sorry we had such a choppy go. After the baby, I had more stuff going wrong than a Russian airline." She squeezed my hand. "I just wanted you to know I think you're a great partner and I'll be back once Thomas and I have a good support program set up."

"I'll be waiting," I told her.

"You know yet who Cal is going to assign to our desk?" she asked.

"Nope."

"I hope it's not Hitch. You deserve better than that."

"I doubt he'll put Hitchens with me." But the truth was, I'd been worrying about that ever since Sally told me she was taking another home leave.

Sumner Hitchens had been bouncing between partners, hitting the guardrail, getting slapped to the center, and ringing all the tilt buzzers, before ending back in the return tray like the kinetically overshot pinball he was. We were currently the only two unattached detectives at Homicide Special.

A captain from Ad Vice jostled us as he made his way back to the

bar. "These guys look sloshed," Sally commented. "It's dangerous to drink at these things."

"It's a Christmas party," I said noncommittally. "Hopefully, Yellow Cab's gonna make the difference."

Sally hugged me and we wished each other luck.

Twenty minutes later I had Alexa by the arm and we were mercifully out of there. We walked to the valet stand out front, followed by the faint strains of "Frosty the Snowman."

My black MDX pulled to the curb and we both got in. Alexa and I had ridden in together this morning because of the party. My wife never drinks at police events either, so thankfully, with what was just about to happen, we were both completely sober.

I turned out of the parking lot and headed down the hill, then took a left on Franklin, making my way toward the Hollywood Freeway.

According to the Communications Division, the radio call we answered a few minutes later hit dispatch at 10:13 P.M.

It was December 22nd, three days before Christmas.