

## ▪ CHAPTER ▪

# 4

We powered up Laurel Canyon with the siren squealing and turned right onto Mulholland Drive, which runs for a way along the top of a mountain ridge that separates Hollywood from the Valley. The road was almost a thousand feet up and provided spectacular views of Studio City on the right and Hollywood to the left. The view was the reason so many multimillion-dollar estates dotted this hillside.

About a mile down Mulholland, we saw Skyline Drive. It cut in on the left heading farther into the mountainside. As I made the turn I almost hit a blue Maserati that flashed past, speeding onto Mulholland. Alexa snapped her head around to look through our back window but the car had already disappeared.

“Didn’t get it,” she said, referring to the license plate.

The engine on the Acura roared loudly beneath my siren as we

continued up the grade, passing more cantilevered mansions that hung off the mountain like glass-walled palaces. We were in the 2800 block, which meant we still had a ways to go.

Then a red Ferrari Mondial sped past us. There were two people inside. The savvy driver flashed his high beams up into our eyes so we couldn't read his plate.

"Didn't get that one, either," Alexa said. She was looking out the back window again but missed the rear plate because of the dark, underlit street.

We passed two bumper-chasing Escalades. Both had their headlights off and were screaming down the hill. No front plates. Next, a half-million-dollar Mercedes McLaren whipped past, its high beams blinding us, followed by a Bentley Azure, then another Maserati. This one was yellow with a maroon racing stripe.

"Nope," Alexa said, turning again. It was way too dark to see much.

"Cockroaches running for the baseboards," I muttered as I grabbed a curb number. 3140. The house we wanted was going to be near the top of the hill.

The last car to pass us was a new black Mercedes 350. It was also running without lights, but this time as Alexa spun around she managed to catch the first four letters on the back plate.

"4 L M C!" she exclaimed. "Didn't get any other numbers."

We got to the address and I skidded the MDX to a stop, flipping off my emergency package as Alexa and I bailed.

I clawed my party gun, the backup Taurus Ultra-Lite .38, from my jacket-slimming ankle holster and we both surveyed the scene, our hearts pounding.

3151 was at the very end of Skyline. The driveway looked like an extension of the street leading up a hill onto a large property dominated by a looming overgrown mansion on the left. We were the first unit on the scene.

The huge house was a big, rundown Spanish structure that looked like it was built in the early 1900s, well before the rest of the sixties-style neighborhood had filled in around it. The front yard had gone to seed. An old wooden gate was hanging crooked but standing open across the driveway. I could hear Christmas music coming from the back—Bing Crosby singing “Silver Bells.”

“Let’s clear it,” Alexa said.

I nodded and we passed through the open gate and started up the drive with our guns drawn, moving carefully, ready for anything.

The mansion was dark. As far as I could see, not one light was on inside. We walked up the steep drive, hugging the mansion’s south wall, heading toward the sound of the music.

When we neared the top of the hill a huge eight-car garage came into view and we could see lights coming from a large backyard area. We crested the drive and saw that the house sat right on a promontory point. A magnificent half-acre pool area with a spectacular view overlooked the lights of the Valley on the left and parts of Hollywood on the right.

There were neighboring houses on either side but they were newer and sat a little farther back from the point, allowing them views in only one direction or the other. This property was obviously the first estate up here and, as a result, was in the prime location.

There was a pool house with Spanish arches that matched the old architecture of the estate, but newer plate-glass windows indicated it was a more recent addition. It looked empty but was ablaze with lights. The Christmas music seemed to originate from a sound system located inside.

We kept our backs to the wall and edged around the corner to get a better look at the layout.

It was then that I saw two female bodies floating facedown in the rectangular, Olympic-sized pool. Their tangled hair and colorful dresses

were illuminated by the powerful underwater lights. Both appeared to be Caucasian, their inert bodies leaking large amounts of dark arterial blood into the turquoise water.

Alexa and I continued to stand with our backs to the wall of the house, surveying the terrain for any sign of movement. In addition to the two women floating in the pool, I could now see a third person. There was a man bent over the back of a pool chaise with his ass poking up in the air. His face was looking down at the green canvas chair pad as if it contained something of great interest to him.

“Police! Stay where you are! Put your hands in the air!” I shouted.

He didn’t move—didn’t twitch. In that instant, changing categories, going from potential adversary to victim number three.

“Go,” Alexa directed.

While she covered me, I ducked through the gate into the backyard and sprinted across the deck to the side of the pool house, throwing my back to the wall. From where I now stood, I could see the rest of the backyard. It looked deserted.

“Backyard looks clear,” I called as I raised my gun into a firing position to cover Alexa. “Go!” I shouted and she sprinted across the lawn, past my position and into the pool house. I followed behind her and covered her as she threw open changing room doors, checking both bathrooms.

“Clear,” she called.

I left her and sprinted to the far side of the house to check the north side of the property and the path that led back to the street. It was also empty, the pathway lit by an old rusting Spanish-style carriage lamp.

“North side clear!” I shouted, then checked the back door of the house. It was fastened securely by a heavy commercial-sized Yale padlock. The bracket was bolted to the side of the house and attached to the door with two-inch bolts that went all the way through the solid oak.

I looked through the kitchen windows into a pantry. The house was dark and appeared deserted—more than deserted, it looked to be in terrible disrepair. For some reason only the backyard and pool house of this estate had been maintained.

Next Alexa and I checked the mammoth garage. All eight pull-up doors and the side entrances were securely padlocked.

Once we were finished we returned to the man who was still bent over the pool chaise, obviously very dead. He was a middle-aged Caucasian, and had three huge grapefruit-sized exit wounds in his back. All of them were oozing thick blood the consistency of ketchup but the deep purple-reddish color of eggplant. He'd been shot with some kind of large-bore weapon.

"I'll check on the others," Alexa said, moving toward the two women floating in the pool.

They looked young and fit, both in colorful strapless party dresses, which in death had floated up around shapely thighs. Their leaking wounds were now beginning to turn the Olympic-sized pool a weird greenish pink.

Alexa grabbed the nearest one by the arm, pulled her over, and checked for a pulse. Then she repeated the process with the second body.

"Both dead," she said, but made no attempt to pull them out of the water. We had to leave the scene pretty much as we found it for the homicide tech teams and photographers because our 415 with shots fired had just morphed into a triple 187.

As I studied the bloodstained man bent over the pool chaise, I noticed a wallet in his back pants pocket. I carefully fished it out using my thumb and index finger, then dropped it onto a nearby glass-top table and took a pen from my jacket.

I flipped the wallet open, revealing a driver's license encased in a plastic sleeve. The picture of a tanned, good-looking man smiled out

from under the State of California seal. The date of birth on the license revealed that he was fifty-five. Then I read the name.

“You won’t believe who we have here,” I called over to Alexa, who was still by the pool. “This vic is Scott Berman.”

Alexa stood, her face now drawn. “Then we’re sitting on a full-blown disaster,” she said.

Bing Crosby didn’t seem to get it. “Have yourself a merry little Christmas,” he sang happily.

This incident, I later learned, was something screenwriters call the inciting story event. But for me, it was the beginning of two weeks I’m going to call “Shane’s Midlife Crisis.”