

Chapter One

“All available units, report of a large crowd and 459s in progress at the corner of Rio Linda and South Ave.,” the dispatcher’s voice called out over the radio.

Sergeant Brian Conner clicked the microphone in his patrol unit. “1-Sam-12 responding.”

“Hey, Tommy, isn’t there a church on South Ave.?” Conner asked.

Tommy Robinson, a Black rookie officer assigned to Patrol District 1 in North Sacramento, turned in the passenger seat, checking for cross-traffic at the intersection. “Yeah. It’s one of those pop-up, God-in-a-box churches. You know—no denomination, takes all comers.”

“Why would a church be a target for looting at midnight?”

“It’s right on the edge of Tru Heights Bloods territory. Could be gangbangers after the food pantry and the donations the church’s brought in.”

“Tommy, let me ask you something. You’ve been married a while, so you’ve got this whole relationship thing down. When Emily says she isn’t ready to move in together, what does that mean?”

“Um, Sarge, you think I’m the one to answer that? Shouldn’t Emily—I mean Detective Hunter—tell you why?”

“I mean, sure, but I thought everything was going great—and then, she’s not ready. You ever have anything like that?”

“No. But then my Baptist momma would’ve slapped me into tomorrow if I thought about living in sin.”

“That’s not helpful, Tommy.”

Conner shot north on Rio Linda. The flashing blue lights from other patrol units ahead

marked the location. As Conner pulled into the church parking lot, he expected a crowd spilling out of the church and into nearby businesses. There had been a rash of daylight attacks on retail establishments in the city, where mobs of thieves grabbed armfuls of whatever they could carry. Hitting a church in the middle of the night was a new direction.

“Where are they? The looters?” Tommy said.

Conner parked near the church entrance, ahead of another Sacramento Police Department SUV, and stepped from his vehicle. He couldn’t spot a single person near the church, except for the six police officers who had responded to the call.

“Dispatch, 1-Sam-12, have a callback number on the RP? Looks like a false alarm.”

“Negative, 1-Sam-12. Caller didn’t give their name.”

An officer rounded the corner of the church building and approached Conner. “Nobody’s here, Sarge. What gives?”

The hairs on the back of Conner’s neck pricked up. He swiveled around and surveyed the darkened windows on the street opposite. They were lured here.

“Got movement across the street—second floor, left side,” an officer called out. His brass nameplate read TUCKER.

Conner spotted the window and the flare of a cigarette. Someone watching the police respond to this snipe hunt?

“We see any evidence of a break-in? Broken windows, open doors, anything?”

“Nada. Simmons and I walked the perimeter. No sign of entry. No sign of anything,” Tucker said.

“Someone wanted all the units in District 1 to respond. A report of a large crowd breaking into businesses would draw us out here.”

“They needed a diversion so they could pull off whatever they were into somewhere else,” Tucker said.

“Maybe. I haven’t heard anything new from dispatch. Why would we get a callout to the edge of Tru Heights territory?”

“Westgate Crips are on the other side of the freeway. I could see them making a false report to push us to roust a couple of their rivals.”

“Well, nothing going on here. Why don’t you and your partner hit the road. Let dispatch know this was a dry hole,” Conner said.

“Got it, Sarge. You need Parker and Cortez in the other unit? They’re watching the back of the church.”

“Nah, send them on their way, would you?”

“You got it.”

“Thanks, Tucker. Be careful out there. I’ve got an uneasy feeling about someone sending us here.”

“I hear you.”

Conner started back to his SUV, paused, and turned. “Hey, Tucker, anyone check the front door lock?”

“Yeah, I shook it. Locked up tight.”

Tucker and his partner got into their SUV, shut off the lights, and backed out of the church parking lot.

Tommy Robinson wandered to the front entrance and peered through the smoked glass doors. “Place is empty. Nothing going on—hey, what’s up with this?”

A metal donation bin sat to the right of the front door. Gang graffiti adorned the side of

the four-foot-tall, repainted mailbox.

Conner caught the glint from a thin wire attached to the donation box door. On the concrete below, a cut padlock lay in the shadow.

Tommy reached for the bin.

“Tommy! Wait!”

Conner ran to the young officer as he tugged on the lid.

“Stop,” Conner said.

Tommy was focused on the unlocked donation bin and didn’t hear Conner.

Conner shoved Tommy as a click echoed in the entry vestibule. A microsecond later, a fireball erupted from the donation bin.

A pressure wave of heat and metal shards exploded. Conner caught the blast in the back as he pushed Tommy away. The force of the explosion picked Conner off his feet and threw him into the brick wall opposite the donation bin.

Conner couldn’t hear anything through the ringing in his ears, and his vision was a blurred kaleidoscope of flames and smoke. From where he fell, he could see the parking lot and the window across the street. The glowing ember from the cigarette was gone, but he swore he spotted a flashing red strobe.

Another explosion sounded to his right. A flash of orange shot from the parking lot. Conner squinted through his warped vision and saw a police SUV on fire. Tucker and his partner, Simmons. He couldn’t see them anywhere.

He tried reaching for his shoulder-mounted radio microphone and his arm wouldn’t move. A quick glance down and Conner saw his broken arm pointing in the wrong direction.

“Tommy. Tommy, you okay?”

Conner couldn't hear anything but the high-pitched ringing in his ears.

He wasn't even supposed to be working tonight. Conner swapped the shift with a buddy so his friend could go spend some time with his kids.

Conner felt cold, and a heavy blanket of exhaustion fell over him. Emily. He wanted to tell Emily how much he loved her one more time. She'd wanted to take it slow, but now he felt regret. He should've told her how he felt when he had the chance.

The sirens in the distance pierced through his muffled hearing. They would not be in time.

"Emily" . . .