

Chapter 1: Sting Me Once

They say lightening doesn't strike twice.

They don't say that about sting operations.

I used to say my life was charmed, but after a year in LA I was beginning to wonder.

I got stung for the first time back in 2007, just one year after my move to California. I graduated from college in Ohio and moved to Hollywood to pursue my life-long dream of making it as a screenwriter/director in the glamorous world of show business.

Two of my creative partners from college, Opal and Wanda, arrived a year before I did. Opal, a striking caramel skinned beauty who turned the heads of men and women alike, said so far LA had been torture. Wanda, a cute blonde stoner chick with a happy disposition and an LA native, loved everything about the place. Opal got a job as an extra while waiting for me to get there. Wanda lived off royalties from a Cheetos commercial she did ten years earlier and smoked massive amounts of weed. Both of their lives sounded amazing to me as I finished out my last semester in Ohio. I dreamt of Hollywood since I was a child, and hearing about their adventures had me chomping at the bit to get out there and have my own.

Opal was working for an 'inflatable crowd' company. In Hollywood, even the extras are being replaced by, literally, inflatable crowds. For large shots in stadiums and the like, it happens to be cheaper to invent, manufacture and fill a fake inflatable crowd with air than it is to hire that many actual people.

Upon my arrival in California, Opal and I founded Novice Hack Entertainment, a production company that would one day become failed business number one. But for now, it was a life-long dream forming into a reality. In those first few months in LA before I found my niche of like minded people it felt like everyone I met was inflatable. Mostly shallow, easily puffed up

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and manipulated by flattery, and thoroughly invested in their own lives. The blow up dolls passing for people in Los Angeles didn't even make good eye contact, unless it was with a mirror.

I started to feel like an extra in my own life.

Set dressing in my own fucking story.

Was moving across the country to pursue a career in Hollywood with no money and no plan really a good idea? All I had going for me was a certainty that I was *supposed to* do this, and after a few months of the grind even that was beginning to fade. I had no plan whatsoever. I was glad Opal and Wanda were there to soften the landing. Familiar faces in a sea of vapid self-interest meant everything to me.

Also, Wanda was my only weed connect, so I saw her pretty much daily.

Finding a job in a good bar or restaurant was next to impossible in those days. Throngs of new actor slash waiter's migrated to LA each year, and they all needed jobs. And most of them were hotter than me. Way hotter. Some restaurants required headshots, just like the movie studios. Some even called their interview process "auditions." I had definitely arrived in Hollywood and I felt thoroughly under-qualified to be there.

I was flat broke and far from home.

After five weeks of half-hearted job hunting and post-college depression I got lucky. I was one of only three souls fortunate enough to tend bar at a coveted Beverly Hills hot spot right smack in the center of restaurant row called "The Stinky Bulb - A Garlic Tavern". I landed the job that first summer in LA and quickly became the bar manager Omar's right hand. With things like Garlic Martinis and Garlic Ice Cream on the menu, not to mention every entree being drenched in the stuff, it's easy to understand how I, a marathon-running, goal-driven thirty year

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old homo, only a stones throw away from the gay mecca of West Hollywood managed to stay single for the entire two years I worked there.

After ten months of stinking up the Stinky Bulb I got a call from my manager's manager, "Brian, would you be so good to come in early tonight?" Maximo, the austere Russian G.M. bellowed eloquently into the phone. You'd think one can't bellow with eloquence, but somehow Maximo could.

It was Friday around lunch time, so at that point I was on joint number three with Wanda, my favorite couch potato partner and a bigger pot head than me. We were currently balls deep into our fifth episode of *Boston Legal*, pajamas on, with a pizza en route.

What time was it anyway?

I had to quickly calculate how long it would take me to come down from my high and not seem too stoned if I came into work thirty minutes earlier like Maximo requested.

Okay, only 1:30, I don't have to be at work until 5:00, thirty minutes early makes that 4:30, which is three solid hours from now. That's plenty of time. I can still smoke two more joints and take thirty minutes to collect myself, douse with cologne and eye drops, and show up to whatever this mysterious meeting was about, looking Friday fresh.

When I pulled up, Maximo was waiting for me in the valet area outside, with a dollop of cocaine predictably hanging on the end of his nose. He was a huge coke head, and despite the avalanches he'd leave in his mustache or on his tie, he thought it was his little secret.

Damn, does this mean he's going to be in one of his more 'talkative' moods? My heart sank. How long was this going to take and what could it be about?

He lead me through the front of the house where the gaggle of girls working the host stand gave me strange second glances. Then we rounded a corner into the kitchen and down the

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long hallway to his office, where members of the kitchen staff looked grave or averted their gaze from me altogether.

What the hell was going on? Did someone die? Was I fired? Do I seem paranoid? Oh my god, do I look paranoid?

We arrived at his office and sat across the desk from each other, the cocaine crumb in his nose both mocking and distracting me.

If I'm gonna get fired, can I at least get a bump before I go?

Finally, after seconds that seemed like entire shifts the Coke Head Russian spoke, "Brian, I very upset."

Fuck, here it is, I'm gonna be fired and this hopped up asshole is going to deliver the news and then go do rails, not giving it or me a second thought. I'm fucked, totally fucked. What did I do?

I guess they don't like their bartenders coming into work stoned after all. But I'm not your typical stoner; I get shit done. I'm friendly, social, a picture of grace. If he couldn't see that, then fuck him.

He continued, "Omar left cash drawer out last night. He get too drunk on job and I can no have those kind of mistake anymore."

Omar? He's upset with Omar! This is great news.

Omar, the perpetually drunk bar manager, and my immediate supervisor, had left a thousand dollars in cash just sitting out. No way me being stoned at work rates higher than that. I'm home free.

"I demote him and want make you bar manager. You my guy. I need you step up."

Okay, what just happened? I'm not fired, that much I got. But I was still pretty stoned, so I thought he said I got a promotion too. That can't be right.

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“So, how that sound?” the Russian Coke Head raised his shoulders impatiently after what must have been too long of a pause before answering him, or even reacting at all. I was completely stunned. The cocaine crumb was still hanging there at the tip of his ruddy nose, held in place by a tuft of nostril hair, but I was beginning to find that amusing now that I wasn’t being fired.

“Yes, that sounds good” I rejoined the conversation.

We went over all my new perks and my new raise in pay. I would get my pick of the schedule now. That meant all the good-money shifts. I was thrilled. It sucked for Omar, but the moron left a wad of cash sitting on the counter, and besides, this was my day to celebrate; my moment in the garlic laden sun.

I chugged a few more stealthy mojitos than usual behind the bar that night. I was the manager now, who’s gonna stop me? Besides, I was just promoted, I deserved to celebrate.

By 9:00pm the bar was full, as per usual on a Friday night. I was making mojitos and garlic martinis left and right. Those were our two specialty drinks and I knew my customers would tip better when they were drunk, so I went heavy on the rum and light on the crushed up leaves. I slid one down to Debbie, my favorite regular, a loud and friendly black woman who worked as a Unit Production Manager for real honest to goodness Hollywood movies. I had no idea what a Unit Production Manager was or what she actually did on set, but she was a riot who made her presence known when she walked in. Her drinks were always doubly strong and half the price. Tipping well got you all kinds of perks. We were laughing about something when suddenly the Russian popped his snow dotted face around the corner looking grave, “Brian, come with me please.”

Buzz kill; what did he want now?

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This must be about some important bar manager duties I have to learn, some kind of bar manager initiation maybe. Or perhaps they had a congratulatory cake waiting for me in the back office where all the other managers and executive types would be waiting, smiling and ready to pat me on the back, shake my hand and welcome me into their elite executive fold. Maybe there's an executive washroom and Coke Head is about to bestow upon me my personal washroom key. As I was trying to determine which of these great events was about to occur we rounded the corner, and standing there at the end of the long hallway were two uniformed police officers and one of my bar patrons from moments ago.

What the fuck was this?

Are they gonna bust me for being stoned at work after all? Or had someone reported me for knocking back a few extra mojitos that night? At this point I wasn't even paranoid anymore, because I was drunk, but I was intrigued.

Maximo introduced me to the two pretty boy Beverly Hills cops, cocaine littering his lapels like so much dandruff, with a simple "this is him."

This is him! What the fuck did that mean? If you sell me out for smoking some measly Mary Jane in a state where it's legal for medical use then I'm sure as hell gonna tell the 5-0 to search you for an eight ball, so don't mess with me you red-faced Russian mother fucker! And blow your goddamn fucking nose while you're at it; I mean come on.

Suddenly officer Blue-Eyed-Statue-of-David was in my face,

"Sir, you served this young lady a beverage," he was like a sexy robotic Ken Doll.

So fucking what? I thought.

"Yes, that's right," I said, disarmed by his beauty, with that last mojito kicking in.

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This was before I knew better that you keep your mouth shut around cops. I was half indignant and half flirty-homo, so I definitely said too much that night. It was finally explained to me that she was a decoy, a shill, sent undercover into bars to see which ones of us would fall into their trap and serve a minor. So this is what it felt like to be entrapped; to be the victim of a sting operation. I had been stung by Alcohol Beverage Control (ABC). I was outraged. Not only did this supposedly 19-year old sell-out narc look like she was pushing thirty-five, with the nose hair and female mustache to match, but nobody under fifty pretty much ever came into this garlic dump. Except for the rapper and shitty tipper Exhibit, this clientele was decidedly geriatric. The deck had been stacked against me!

This was some bullshit.

They stood me next to the mannish thirty-five looking teenage shill and made us pose for a picture.

“And what’s this for?” I said to Robo Cop with the faggiest mean girl attitude I could muster.

“Evidence,” Sexy Ken Doll replied flatly.

I turned to the decoy narc and whispered, “what do you get out of this?”

Her simple reply stunned me, “It’s a job.”

Fuck you it’s a job. You’re just a sell-out bitch, I thought to myself. Well at least I still have my promotion.

On the way back to the bar area to finish my shift the Coke Head dropped this little nugget,

“You know about before, we can’t do that now. I going have keep Omar for manager. You understand.”

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No, I didn't understand.

When Opal and Wanda found out what happened later that night, they laughed their asses off. I didn't find it the least bit funny.

I was promoted and then demoted in four hours flat.

That's only the first time I got stung by a bullshit sting operation.