

CHRISTMAS TIME

John Boston

John Dominic was lucky to get the job. He had only one week left of unemployment before he was cut off. He had milked it for all it was worth. He really had over the last year tried to find a job, but none were worth taking. They expected the world out of you and returned very little. He knew Salvatore from his church. He was the one who got him hired. It paid eleven dollars an hour and had no benefits, but the job was cake. He was a security guard for the Triboro shopping Mall. It was still owned by the same family who had built it in 1978. The mall had its shares of ups and downs over the years, there were several empty storefronts, but the mall had hung on. Its main attraction were the movie theater and the huge flea market downstairs every Sunday. Twenty dollars a booth, that was all the mall charged. They could have farmed out the security to a private company, but the owners balked at the suggestion.

So, just who the hell would be watching them? said one of the owners of the mall when it was brought up. They did hire private security in the late 90s and it was nothing short of a disaster. John had spent three years in the Army and impressed the Mall Manager.

"Firm handshake, I like that. Nothing worse than a man with a weak grip. I like knowing my people have a little sauce in their pasta if you know what I mean." he said during the interview.

"Yes sir."

"Well, the job is nothing to write home about. You are just the eyes and ears for the police. Under no circumstances are you to put your hands on the customers. You have every right to defend yourself, but if the crap is about to hit the fan, you call me or Sal, or just dial 911. We do have several uniformed and plainclothes officers in here during the busy season. You're going to have to hit the ground running. This place can be a zoo, especially on Sundays. Some of the old hens like to take their time leaving, so don't rush them. Be polite, but firm. We've hired others who took it upon themselves to alienate our vendors and customers. Sal spoke very highly of you. Consider the holidays your probation period. Pass that, we hire you on full-time. I expect an honest day's work for an honest day's pay, am I clear?"

"Absolutely sir, I won't let you down."

"I'm sure Sal told you, we are like a big family here at the mall. None of that corporate BS. Now, go see Sal for your uniform and radio and whatever you do, do not lose the damn radio. Those things cost a fortune. Any questions?"

No sir, just like to get started. I've been away from the workplace for too long."

"Don't worry, after a week on your feet in this place, you'll remember why you left it." said the Mall Manager.

Sal was a police officer for six years. He left because cops are mega drama queens, at least that's how he described it.

"Yeah, the pay and benefits were great. I even earned a pension. The problem was the guys I worked with were just dirtbags. I couldn't trust them. I knew it was time to leave." he said as he walked John around the mall.

"Why didn't you just try and be a police officer somewhere else?"

"That's the problem, John. See, everybody thinks just cause you have a badge, you can do whatever the hell you want. Truth is, every little decision you make is constantly scrutinized and criticized. You can't even fart without somebody complaining. The final straw for me was when I got physical with a bunch of punks from this mall. One of them got hurt. I called for backup for fifteen goddamn minutes and nobody came. The hell was I supposed to do? Those damn kids should be lucky I didn't shoot them. The Mall Manager Gus hired me as soon as he found out what happened. I've been here ever since. This place might not pay much, or have any benefits, but this family takes care of you, they really do. I've been to the owner's house several times. Good guy. I wish more businessmen were like him."

"That's cool. You really think this mall will be around much longer. I hear there's a retail apocalypse going on." said John as he played with his radio.

"Well, you'd never know it in here. Sure, we have our slow times of the year, but in a week or two, this place will be so damn crowded, you'll be fighting for a parking space. Now, here are your keys. Don't lose the radio, it costs a fortune. This weekend is Black Friday. Total fustercluck in here. The flea market runs on both Saturday and Sunday during the holidays. Watch out for those old ladies, man can they be nasty."

"Thanks, man. I owe you one."

"Don't worry about it. This place did me a favor years ago and I'm just paying it forward. We don't do any of that overnight foolishness on Thanksgiving. We open for business at 10 AM, Friday morning. Just be here around nine in the morning on Friday. The radios work pretty well in here, except for one spot in the parking garage. You got my cell number and I'll give you Gus's number as well. He's a good guy, he really is. We've just had so many deadbeats in here over the last few years, he kind of dumps on all the new hires. Just show him you're serious and he'll treat you right."

"Right Sal, see you Friday at nine."

"Don't be late. Gus will probably be there to make sure you show up on time."

His name was Adam. He was homeless and loveless. He had spent a year in Iraq and had done some truly terrible things. Some men are scarred forever by what they see in war, Adam just loved every minute of it. He just couldn't understand how people could be upset for doing what comes naturally to most men. Adam wasn't gay, but he wasn't quite straight either. He was fluid, adapting to any situation as it required. Lately, though, he had become rather upset at what he was seeing. At least the Iraqis fought back. Most people were so pathetic and weak, he almost

felt like they were the ones he should be killing. He fought it at first, but as time went on, he knew he had to do it. Someone had to put these poor fucks out of their misery. He volunteered for this suicide mission because no one else would. No one else would have the brains or the balls to pull it off. He was going to do it in style. He was going to make a splash. People were going to remember him alright, everyone in this whole pathetic, fucking country was going to know his name after this weekend. He was going to make a big mess and not clean it up.

The mall hired him to be their weekend Santa. He was older than he should be. He was barely forty and already going gray. Stupid assholes never even ran a background check on him. He loaded his AR and magazines into his big red Santa sack. He had another sack loaded with Claymore mines. Those were for the pigs. Biggest party poopers ever. They were going to spoil his fun. He'd already cased the mall and knew exactly where he was going to put the bombs. He was so excited, he could hardly contain himself. Shit was going to be just like a video game. Santa was going to get down and dirty with these soccer moms. They could finally know what it would be like to be with a real man, right before he killed them. Christmas was never going to be the same again.

Friday morning finally arrived. He loaded up his van with his toys. He had to be careful. One wrong move and the whole party would be ruined. He heard there were only going to be four security officers working that day. Probably a few pigs too, nothing he couldn't handle. One crazy white boy with an AR could do some serious damage, as the world would soon see.

His first day of work could politely be described as "controlled chaos." The weather had turned nasty overnight. He had only been punched in for fifteen minutes when he and Sal had to break up a fight between two irate mall walkers. John was worried they might each have a heart attack before the fight had started. Two geezers screaming and hollering at one another while their wives tried to remain in their respective corners. John and Sal, along with two mall employees came running into the courtyard.

"You got to be kidding me," said Sal under his breath.

He ran over to them and separated the two of them. John took one of them into the food court and let the old guy give his side of it. The old fart was still rambling on ten minutes later but had cooled down. Sal was a big, imposing figure. John figured he probably tipped the scales at around 260 or so. Sal didn't have to say a word. The old guy knew he was behaving like an idiot. He asked Sal if he and his wife could finish their Christmas shopping.

"Any more drama out of you and you're gone. Understood?"

"Yes sir. I'm sorry, I lost my temper. Damn medication has me all screwed up." said the old guy.

"Thank you." said his wife as she quickly gathered their belongings and yanked her husband away.

Sal stood next to John for a few minutes, just to make sure they went their separate ways.

"The hell was that all about?" asked John

"Who cares? Nothing more pathetic than a seventy-year-old teenager. There is no fool quite like an old fool."

John and Sal spent the next two hours walking all over the mall. Sal told him to spend the money and buy a comfortable pair of walking shoes, the kind that has built-in supports. It was good advice. His feet were already starting to hurt.

A round, as far as Sal was concerned, really did take about two hours. John was expected to do two of them during his shift. It covered nearly everything, from the parking garage to the food court, even checking the roof and the perimeter. Sal seemed more interested in the outside of the mall, rather than the inside. The public might see a mall cop as just a joke, but everyone on the staff took their job very seriously. You just never knew what you were going to encounter in this job. Sal had to get physical a few times over the years with some of the patrons. The mall had backed him one hundred percent. Many times you would be greatly outnumbered and had to think your way out of a situation before it got nasty.

"I always play the What-If Game?" he told John

"What's that?"

"Just think of some crazy scenario and then ask yourself: what would I do? Shootings, hostage-taking, power failure. We have a policy and procedure manual that covers the most common ones. I'll have you go through it when we slow down a bit."

"You guys have a procedure manual?"

"Sure do. It's like five hundred pages. Gus put it together. He's been working here since it opened in 1978. He was only 22 then. Figured he worked here for the summer, then saved up some money and travel. Guess that plan didn't quite work out."

"This place gets scary huh?"

"Only time you got to be careful is with large groups of teenagers. All of the stores and kiosks have to be on the same page. We had an incident a few months back, where a bunch of these punks, bout a dozen of them just ran into a clothing store and started grabbing everything they could. We couldn't stop all of them. Fortunately for us, two uniformed officers were in the building and stopped them at the door. I honestly thought the kids were going to take them on. One of the kid's mothers actually worked in the store. We have a code name for them, we call them "Blue Alerts." If you hear one over the radio, it will be followed by the location. Don't think that the kids working in these stores are friends with these punks either. They're the first ones to report a Blue Alert.

John took a lunch break. His feet were now hurting. A good pair of walking shoes with cushion inserts were like seventy dollars. John would have to ask his parents for a loan until his first paycheck. He hated asking them for money at his age, but he had no choice. His feet couldn't take much more of this.

Sal spent the rest of the day introducing John to the cashiers and salespeople in the stores. He met Gertrude, the old woman who ran the flea market. The old woman had an iron grip for a handshake. She and the owner of the mall were childhood friends.

"Definitely want to stay on her good side. Just give her whatever she wants. This is her show here, but she does a good job of keeping it running smoothly. There are over a hundred booths reserved for tomorrow." said Sal.

On their way back upstairs, they met a nice lady from the Hot Chocolate Club who would be handing out hot chocolate tomorrow at the main entrance. The drinks were free.

John was kind of put off by the woman. She was for lack of a better word, "weird." Something about her just rubbed him the wrong way. She was constantly smiling. The whole time she was in the mall offices, John noticed she never stopped smiling. People like that always creeped him out.

The hell happens when they stop smiling?

John stood by the door as she left. Sal finished some paperwork and clocked them out for the day.

"The Hot Chocolate Club, that's like really a thing?" asked John

"Yup. Gus gave them permission. I guess he thought we should try and go full-on Christmas. Makes people want to spend more money." said Gus

"I wouldn't take a drink from a complete stranger."

"I bet they'll be out of hot chocolate within an hour," said Sal.

Adam checked on everything. He was ready. Tomorrow would be the day. He wasn't sure why he was going to kill all these people. He just couldn't think of a reason not to. The things he had to do in Fallujah and Tikrit. The horrible things he was asked to do. Things no one else had the stomach for. He comes back home and can't even get a job. His VA counselor tried to have him committed. He took care of her. She wouldn't be making any more trouble. Adam had found his calling. He had finally found the one thing he was good at... ..and that one thing was killing people. It wasn't mass murder to Adam. These people were just as guilty as he was. Every American had blood on their hands. There were no innocents in Iraq....and there sure as hell wouldn't be any in the mall either.

Saturday morning started at eight. John made his rounds, with the other two security officers, Rueben and Tommy. Rueben was a reserve deputy in the city. Tommy was nearly three hundred pounds and got winded going up a flight of stairs. He took the job to try and get back into shape. He had lost over twenty pounds since he started a few months ago.

They spent the first half-hour making sure all the tables had paid their fees at the flea market. The next hour was spent doing traffic control in the parking lot. Sal wanted John to watch the Santa the mall had hired. He didn't mind, the less walking he had to do, the better. He had to

meet him at the main office upstairs. He didn't know why Sal wanted him down here. The company that the Santa works for had worked overnight to set up the fake North Pole and Christmas-themed area downstairs by the food court. The line to see Santa could get long and as Rueben pointed out:

Those moms can get nasty.

Last year, there was a fight between two moms over which one was next. They had been waiting over an hour and their tempers just boiled over. They were finally separated from other customers. By the time Sal got down there, they were both crying and apologizing. John was almost looking forward to seeing a real chick fight. He had seen one in the army. It was as funny as it was erotic. There had to be some fringe benefits with this job. He was hoping this would be an easy day.....he was hoping.

Sal let John go on his own. This was definitely the type of position that valued *on-the-job training*. Sal and Gus figured anyone who can keep their shit together when bullets are flying right by you can keep it together when it really counts. John figured they would just cut him loose after the holidays. He didn't mind. He could restart his unemployment claim. Getting paid to sit at home and watch football beat the hell out of this.

Santa wouldn't kick off until three PM. He still had a full day left ahead of him. He didn't think this was just going to be an eight-hour day. He figured he'd be here until the mall closed at ten that night. That was the real shit shift. You had to make certain everyone was out of the mall and the security alarms were activated. No one would be back in until the cleaning crew arrived at four the next morning. The alarms were state of the art and had caught many people trying to hide out overnight. Once the invisible tripwire was activated, it actually followed you around the mall. They caught two teenagers last month hiding out in the food court. The cameras followed their every move. Gus had wanted to put someone on overnight, which for John, would be a dream job. He could see a bright future here if he played his cards right.

A very irate mother had walked up to him and told him that two women were having sex in one of the stalls in the second-floor women's room.

"Seriously?"

He got on his radio and called Sal. Rueben and Tommy were still on traffic duty, Sal had to speak to the parents of the kids caught hiding in the mall after hours, so he was on his own. He was close to the restrooms and opened the door. Sure enough, he could clearly see two people, whom he assumed were women having sex in the stall. They were both quite loud. He couldn't believe this was happening.

"Ahem.....ladies, would you mind doing that someplace else."

"You can join us if you want?" said one of them, giggling.

"Yeah, that's tempting but, I'm going to have to pass. Come on, there are kids that come in here, for God's sake."

Two teenage girls came walking out a minute later. They were both bright red. They said nothing but just giggled as they walked by him.

Sal called to make sure he was alright. He called the janitors and told them they had a bodily fluid spill in the women's room. One of them barely spoke English. Hopefully, they would catch on quickly.

"I'll be right there." said one of them.

Sal called them either "the Mexicans" or Jos-a and Jos-b, as in Hose-a and Hose-b. How either of them was legally authorized to work in the country was beyond him. He wouldn't hire either of them to build him a snowman.

A few minutes later, he took a call from Gus and said that they had a suspicious person near the fountain. Sal said he would meet him there.

Gus usually didn't respond to calls, unless he was nearby. He was nearly seventy years old and would be about worthless if the shit really hit the fan, but Rueben told him he had a concealed carry permit and was always armed.

"The old bastard doesn't leave anything up to chance," he said

He could see a bunch of people who could fit the description as being suspicious. They could also fit the description for fat, balding, and generally hopeless. He zeroed in on one. He saw Gus out of the corner of his eye, sipping a cup of coffee. He pointed at the guy John was following. John just walked behind him. The man was carrying a backpack. He turned and saw John and Gus following behind him. He sped up a little bit. Gus radioed for Tom and Rueben to meet him at the south entrance.

"I'm guessing he didn't pay for whatever is in the backpack," said Gus over the radio.

"Guys, Metro will be at the south entrance also," said Sal over the radio.

The man turned the corner and headed out through the doors. He didn't even make it outside before he was stopped by Rueben and two uniformed officers. They searched his backpack and found a wad of hundred dollar bills and a photo of a girl. Rueben recognized her from one of the stores. They ran his ID and he was a level 2 sex offender. He had registered with the city, so there wasn't a whole lot they do. Gus said they couldn't prevent sex offenders from entering the mall, even if there were children around.

"Yeah, he could always say he was going to visit his girl or something." said Sal.

"Who dates a sex offender? What kind of loser does that?" asked Gus

"You think he was here for the kids to see Santa?" asked John

"Who knows. Keep your eyes and ears open son. We have you down there to keep an eye out for freaks like him." said Gus.

It was then that John realized he isn't paid to just walk around the mall and smile at people. He didn't like being put in a situation of being expected to be a police officer, but not having the training or experience to do what a police officer would do. Sal had six years as a deputy to draw on. He knew what he could do and what he could not do. The mall had been sued several times but had beaten all of them because the security staff did the right thing. There were a lot of very delusional, dangerous people floating around in society. It was his job to make sure they knew they were being watched. It also made him a target for those same people. He was between a rock and a hard place and it would only get worse as the day wore on.

He headed downstairs to Christmasland as it was called in the mall. He passed by Adam on the escalator who was not wearing his Santa outfit. He just looked and smiled at John who smiled back. Smiling was an important part of the job.

No one really paid much attention to Adam or to Christmasland. Why would they? The same company had been doing it for the last ten years. No one in the security office even bothered with them. No one was watching Adam as he placed the homemade pipe bombs and explosives under the fake trees and snow. No one noticed that he had stashed an AR-15 with several thirty-round magazines in his red sack. No one was watching, because no one was supposed to be watching him. No one would ever expect something like this. That's why it's called an "unexpected event."

John met up with the rest of the security staff at the main entrance. All of them were sipping hot chocolate and eating donuts. John and hot chocolate didn't mix. The last thing he wanted to do was tempt fate, not on a day like today. Sal wasn't kidding. For such a dead mall, this place was packed. It seemed like every parking space was filled. That weird lady he met in the office was busy handing out hot chocolate to just about everyone. The sign at their table read:

FREE HOT CHOCOLATE!

COURTESY OF THE HOT CHOCOLATE CLUB

MERRY CHRISTMAS!

John couldn't believe that people would just accept food from total strangers. Who the hell knows what's in there? Just seemed like a bad idea.....who the hell was the Hot Chocolate Club? Lonely old women with too much time on their hands?

"You're missing out man. Best hot chocolate I've ever had," said Sal.

"I'll pass, thanks. Do you want me to head downstairs? There's already a line beginning to form."

"Would you like some hot cocoa, young man? It's our own special recipe." said one of the old ladies, practically shoving a cup of it in his face.

"I'll pass but, thank you," said John.

"Yeah, may as well. You mind hanging around tonight for some overtime?"

"No problem. I gotta buy myself some better shoes anyway," said John as left the group and headed downstairs.

On his way downstairs, he passed by a couple sitting on the bench. The man looked sick. John thought about asking him if he was ok, but he remembered what Sal told him about "letting them come to you, otherwise, you'll never get anything done. People are going to think you're a cop and people love to talk to cops." he said.

In half an hour, the line to see Santa went from a few people to about a dozen, to more than twenty. John watched the guy playing Santa get dressed behind the stage curtain. He didn't look much older than he was. He put on his fake Santa belly and attached his beard. It was designed so that if a child were to tug on it, it would stay in place. He had an earpiece in his ear, hidden by the beard, so he could communicate with one of the elves who would be talking to the kid's parents. It was a cool scam and the kids seemed to love it.

John spent six months in Saudi Arabia when he was in the Army. The kingdom had lavish Christmas decorations at his base. They had a Christmas Land that would put this one to shame. It was open to everyone, even Saudi citizens. For a country that is supposedly so backward, he had never seen so many beautiful Saudi women in his life. At the base, the veils came off quickly and most women spoke English. He also remembers the MP's took no chances and had snipers deployed on the high points. Security was heavy. He was assigned to work with a K-9 MP unit. Everyone had live rounds. It was very surreal. Americans took peace and tranquility for granted. Most other countries were not so fortunate. Getting murdered was not something out in the left field, it was a daily occurrence. Death was never too far away. John had been in a very close call while deployed. His unit was attacked by an IED. He had developed an almost sixth sense about imminent danger. He could sense it. For some strange reason, he was getting the same feeling now, standing in Christmasland. It was so strong, the hair on the back of his neck was standing up. At least in Saudi Arabia and Iraq, he was always armed. He could fight back. Now, he carried just keys and a radio. Not much help.

He shrugged it off, as just being in a new place, surrounded by masses of complete strangers. It wasn't 100 percent accurate, it was more like 80 percent accurate. It was just a strange time to get that feeling.

Christmasland was filling up quickly. John wasn't quite sure what he was supposed to be doing. He just stood in the corner and looked for people without kids. They were a big red flag. Sal came over the radio and said he and Tom were following two suspected shoplifters upstairs. John offered to help, but Sal told him to stay put. He wanted eyes and ears on the ground floor should anything go wrong. John never realized how important Christmasland was for the mall. A hundred families here to see Santa were bound to want to do some shopping, if for no other reason than to make the kids happy. The food court was slammed. There weren't any empty seats anywhere.

He noticed two other people sitting, or rather barely being held up on a bench. One was older and one was much younger, about his age. John thought the old guy might be in trouble, so he walked over.

"You alright sir?" he asked.

"I don't know what's wrong with me son, I had a hard time walking all of a sudden. I'm fine. You get to be my age, each day is just a big guessing game as to what the hell is going to go wrong with you next." said the old man.

"Do you need medical help, I can call an ambulance for you?" asked John

"No, I'm fine. Just help me up," he said and extended his arm.

John helped him up. He was in a motorized scooter, so walking wasn't a problem. John watched him for a minute as he left and disappeared into the crowds of people. He looked over at the other guy on the bench, the one that was roughly his own age.

"You okay?"

"Shit man, I knew those hot dogs were bad. Never should have eaten them, but they were so damn good. I gotta crap these things out of me." he said and walked past John.

John decided to follow him to the men's room, just to make sure he was okay. He was shocked to see the line for the restrooms. It was about fifty people long. He was glad the mall employees had their own toilets. The closer he looked, he got that same uneasy feeling. These people weren't just waiting to pee, they looked sick as if they were going to throw up. Sure enough, a moment later, one of them did. All over the floor. He radioed for the janitors and put a wet floor sign over the puke. The people standing in line just left.

He heard Rueben call for an ambulance. Someone was having a heart attack on the second floor. Fell right into the fountain. Sal and Gus were on their way.

"Johnny, I'm going to need you upstairs, I think we have another medical emergency near the Shoe Barn. Dude's shaking on the floor. I've already called the paramedics." said Sal.

"I'm on my way," said John as he ran up the escalator.

That sixth sense he had was now almost screaming at him. He passed by another person who was collapsed near the stairwell. He stopped to assist.

"I don't know what happened. I get dizzy. I'm ok now, you go." said the woman in broken English.

"Sal, are you noticing an awful lot of people getting sick?" he asked over the radio.

"Yeah, that's pretty typical around here. Over the summer I had four heart attacks in one day. We had EMTs here all day. I don't feel too hot myself. I thought I was going to puke a few minutes ago."

"Me too man. I shouldn't have had so much to drink last night." said someone else over the radio.

John followed Sal's instructions. This state had a Good Samaritan Law that was quite clear: if the victim was unable to give a response when asked if they needed medical help, it was implied they did. The person rendering the aid was immune from any lawsuit that may follow. Sal and Tom had the victim sit up and had an oxygen mask around his neck. The paramedics were already working on the second victim.

"When it rains, it pours here. John, I think we got it here. You better get back downstairs, I want you to keep an eye on things down there. The last thing we need is an incident involving kids. There are two uniformed metro officers here as well, they should be downstairs shortly."

"Okay, holler if you need me."

John headed back downstairs. He passed by another couple that was being held up by the wall. He was now very concerned. Something wasn't quite passing the smell test here. These people weren't just catching their breath, they were genuinely sick. If you're feeling that lousy, why bother going to the mall at all. Whatever was happening here, was striking quickly.

"John, one of the janitors just radioed, said things are really bad down there in the food court restrooms. We're sending the paramedics down there next."

"I'm on my way," said John.

It took him a minute to get down there and he was shocked at what he was seeing. Several people were now laid out on the floor. One of them was laying in the kid's puke. Herb was the janitor, he ran up to John.

"I don't know what the hell is going on here, but I think we got us a big freggin problem here. These people all got very sick, very quickly. Like it just hit them out of the blue."

Sal and Gus came downstairs with the paramedics. The sight of them seemed to calm the crowd down. They quickly radioed for more EMTs and ambulances.

"Boys, I think we got a problem here," said Gus.

"What the hell is going on?" asked John.

"I don't know. They just got real sick all of a sudden. This isn't normal." said Gus, who looked like he was about to have a heart attack himself.

One of the EMTs walked over to Sal. He could tell by the look on his face, that something was very, very wrong."

"I don't know, it's like food poisoning, but it's attacking the central nervous system. One of them went into cardiac arrest. Food poisoning doesn't do that. They all have one thing in common.....they all drank that free hot chocolate this morning when the mall opened."

Sal went as white as a ghost. He had drank two cups.

"You think they poisoned the hot chocolate?" asked Gus

"We need to find them, now!" said the EMT.

"John, you stay put," said Sal.

Sal called a Code 1, which in mall cop terms means the shit has hit the fan. The two uniformed officers ran up to the main entrance, only to find the Hot Chocolate Club had left some time ago. They put out an APB, but didn't have much to go on. More officers were on their way. One of the EMTs told the other to prepare a toxic screen when the victim got to the hospital. By the time the wave of victims arrived, they were barely breathing. Whatever was working its way through their system was deadly. Two of the first victims were rushed right to the ER.

"John, you copy?" said Gus over the radio

"Go head, Gus."

"I sent Sal and Rueben to the hospital, just to be safe. I've got a real shit storm up here, people are dropping like flies. We've got cops on their way to help us, just keep an eye on things down there. Don't bother dialing 911, everybody and their mother in the mall is calling them. You didn't drink any of that hot chocolate, did you?"

"No."

"Good, I know you were in combat and you can keep your shit together when things get ugly. Things are about to get real ugly in here."

"I won't let you down, Gus."

Well, this is a fine mess you've gotten us into, now isn't it? John thought to himself.

He knew he was expected to stay by Christmasland and that's where he stayed for the next hour. Most of the people in line arrived after the hot chocolate was handed out, so they were fine. He just couldn't shake that feeling that something was wrong. Very wrong.

Like IED about to go off type wrong.

Sal showed him where the employee restroom was yesterday. Santa took a ten-minute break and John decided to use the restroom with him. There was only one toilet, so John let him go first. It was when Santa came out that he was almost certain he had seen it. He thought he was dreaming, but he wasn't.

Why was Santa carrying a 9mm in his suit?

John waited until he was out of earshot, then got on his radio.

"Gus....Gus, we got a big problem down here!" he said nervously over the radio.

"Gus....Goddammit, come in!"

It was then that he remembered Gus sipping hot chocolate with Sal and the others.

John was completely on his own down here.

He was between a rock and a hard place alright. Did he see Santa carrying a gun? If he was wrong, he was done. On the other hand, if he were right....."

"Is anybody there, anybody?" he said into the radio.

"This is Officer Baez with Metro, who is this?" came a voice over the radio.

"John Dominic. I just started working security yesterday. Um, we have a very big problem down here in Christmasland." he said.

This day is going from bad to worse, like real quick. He thought as he scurried out to Christmasland. He didn't want Santa to get away. Maybe Santa was a firearms enthusiast. Maybe all of this had a perfectly logical explanation. It was possible.

John watched Santa with the kids. Whoever this guy was, he was clearly no Santa. John noticed that he had peed all over himself and kids were still being put in his lap. He was only about five feet away from him now. He looked over Officer Baez, who had come running down the stairs, past the food court, and into Christmas land.

"So, what would you like from Santa, little boy?"

"I want a fire truck from the TV show, Danger is my Middle Name."

"Seriously, a fucking fire truck? Don't you want affordable health care or something a little more relevant to your life?" said Santa

"No, just a fire truck. Maybe some jelly beans, the kind from France."

"Ok, fuck off. Who's next?"

The mother was babbling away on her phone and was totally oblivious to what had just happened. The elf scooped the child up and gave him back to his mother.

Baez walked over to him.

"You're sure you saw him carrying a 9mm?"

"Positive. I carried one for six months in Iraq."

"I hope you're wrong."

"Yeah, me too."

Officer Baez stepped forward in front of Santa before the elf could put the next child in his lap.

"Folks, I do apologize, but we are going to have to close Christmasland. We have an emergency situation in the mall, your understanding would be greatly appreciated," he said.

No one in line really seemed to pay much attention to him. He looked over and could see people laying on the ground in the food court, with frantic family members and friends calling 911. One of them was convulsing so badly, he was knocking over tables and chairs.

"It's ok, boys and girls. Santa will be back next week to brighten your day and widen your smiles. Merry Christmas to all!" he said standing up.

"Santa, you're supposed to say Happy Holidays, not Merry Christmas." said a very millennial-looking elf.

"The holiday is Christmas, you little shit!" he said. He took out his 9mm and shot the elf right in her chest.

Santa then turned and shot Baez several times. John dove behind a small tree, off the platform.

"MERRY CHRISTMAS.....HO, HO, HO," shouted Santa as he reached into his bag and pulled out an AR-15. Christmasland erupted into complete chaos. He could see Santa firing blindly at just about anything that moved. He could hear people screaming. He knew he had to do something, but he didn't even have a gun. He could see Santa, stumble, then vomit all over the stage. He collapsed, then stood back up and started firing. He shot another elf who was hiding behind a bench.

"Looks like we're going to need some new elves," he shouted.

He waited until Santa had his back turned, then ran up behind him and tackled him. He sent him flying off the platform. Santa was much bigger than he was. They wrestled for control of his weapon.

"FOR GOD'S SAKE, SOMEBODY HELP ME!" John shouted as he was fighting for his life against a much bigger opponent.

Santa threw him on the ground. He squeezed the trigger, but his magazine was empty. He was struggling to load the other clip in the weapon. He was shaking violently.

"The fuck is wrong with me? WHAT'S WRONG WITH ME?" he screamed. John reached up and kicked him in the nuts as hard as he could. Santa collapsed to his knees. He pulled out his 9mm and began firing, but he was shaking so badly, he missed, even though John was only about five feet away.

John saw something come out of his mouth and Santa began coughing and choking. He fired one more shot that grazed John's ear, then fell face-first into the fake snow. John grabbed his gun, emptied the clip, and cycled the round in the chamber. The 9mm was now empty. John did not want to get shot when the cops arrived. He rolled Santa over. He was still alive and trying desperately to tell John something.

"Not fair.....not fair. I barely killed anybody."

John kicked his face as hard as he could, knocking Santa out instantly. A minute later, the first officers arrived downstairs. They took Santa and John into custody. Officer Baez was wounded, but the vest had saved his life. He was losing blood but was able to tell the other officers what had happened. If John had not stopped him, the death toll would have been much, much worse.

John was shaking so badly, he could barely sit still. So many people were asking him questions. He spent over an hour with the police and firefighters, trying to help anyone he could. One of the poisoning victims was a sixteen-year-old girl. She died right in his arms before the EMTs could help her. There wasn't much they could do anyway. They had to get them to the hospital as fast as they could before the poison killed them. How much hot chocolate they drank, determined how much poison they had in their body, and thus, it determined if they were going to live or not.

The officers walked him upstairs and the nightmare was brought into focus. There were over a hundred victims scattered all over the mall. Some were dead, some were clinging to life. The poison used was called Di-Buteral-4. It's a common industrial chemical used in the manufacturing of plastics and adhesives. Tasteless and odorless. If ingested, the result can be fatal. What makes it unique among poisons is that it can take up to four hours before symptoms start appearing. Once they set, unless the patient is given a poison antidote, the end result is almost always fatality or paralysis. Di-Buteral-4 is a neurotoxin. The Church of the Sun knew exactly what they were doing. They didn't want people keeling over as soon as they ingested the poison.

They killed 23 people that day and sickened dozens more. Some would never be the same again, losing a portion of their nervous system. Sal had been fortunate. Once they knew he ingested the poison, he was immediately given the antidote. It wasn't one hundred percent effective, but it did stop the poison from attacking the main organs. Gus had saved his life.

The FBI assumed the Santa attacker was just part of the cult. They never did bother to answer the burning question of why he ingested the poison if he knew what was going to happen? John never did believe he was part of the cult. He knew this whacko was a lone wolf, who just happened to be stopped from committing a horrible mass murder by another mass murderer. Two competing evil forces had collided that day by accident and John was right in the middle of it.

Adam was quickly identified, but he was dead before he left the mall. The poison had ended his life just as it had with the rest of the victims.

He had been to Iraq. He had been in combat. He had watched people die right in front of him on the battlefield. He thought he had left all of that behind him when he came back to the states. Turns out, he was just leaving one battlefield for another. Evil doesn't just stop at someone's border. Evil doesn't care who it kills, as long as it kills. Law enforcement launched a massive manhunt for the cult and its leaders. They caught some, but many had gotten away. He knew this was only the opening round of what was sure to be a long and bloody conflict. He had come face to face with a monster and lived to tell about it. The fact that Santa was a fellow veteran just rubbed salt on his wounds. He had met the scariest adversary in the world.....he had met his fellow Americans.