

Dakota Hudson

Collateral Damage

BOOK TWO IN THE DUTY TO THE HEART SERIES

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Collateral Damage

Book Two in the Duty to the Heart Series

by

Dakota Hudson

Quest Books
by Regal Crest
Tennessee

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Print ISBN 978-1-61929-270-3
eBook ISBN 978-1-61929-271-0

First Printing 2015
9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Cover design by Acorn Graphics

Published by:

Regal Crest Enterprises, LLC
1042 Mount Lebanon Rd
Maryville, TN 37804

Find us on the World Wide Web at <http://www.regalcrest.biz>

Published in the United States of America

Acknowledgments

First and foremost I must acknowledge the readers who embraced my first work, *White Roses Calling*, and encouraged a sequel. As a fledgling author the positive support and feedback was the primary motivation for an attempt at a second work.

Thanks to Kasie, who once again patiently allowed me to bounce plot ideas and legal theories off her during the writing of *Collateral Damage*. To Corina, who once again served as my beta reader, providing honest critique and feedback. And to my wife, Staci, who has provided unending support throughout this experience.

Finally, thanks to the women of Regal Crest. The patience and support of the editors and publishers makes it possible for someone like me to create written work others can hopefully enjoy reading.

Dedication

For this, my second published work, I reached back into my military background for some of my plot lines and background story. In 2012, after over 12 years in military service, I resigned my commission in the United States Navy in public protest to the Don't Ask-Don't Tell policy. This book is dedicated to the gay and lesbian service members who served prior to abolishment of DADT: those men and women who were ironically willing to sacrifice themselves on behalf of a nation which, at the time, relegated them to virtual second class citizenship.

Prologue

IT WAS NEARING midnight as Sam made her way down the pier and approached the commercial fishing boat slip in the port of Halq al Wadi, in the city of Tunis, Tunisia. It was a warm mid-summer night and the crescent moon shed just enough light for her to see by. The weapons delivery would take place once the seller confirmed receipt of payment to a numbered Swiss account. Sam knew him as “Prizrak,” Russian for “The Ghost.” This was the name given to the unidentified arms dealer whom intelligence agencies throughout the world had spent years attempting to apprehend. He was thought to be of Russian descent and was believed to have almost independently provided arms to support terrorist actions and other violent organizations throughout the world.

Sam paused before boarding the boat, and the hair on the back of her neck stood up. Something wasn't right. Her gaze swept the vessel for signs of life. Finding none, she moved cautiously aboard. A dark smear down the side of the bridge cabin caught her eye and she crept closer. Blood. Lots of it. It looked like someone injured had fallen against the surface and slid down the wall. The crew was dead. The operation was burned. She was sure of it.

Sam turned and stealthily descended back to the dock as she ran through the preselected extraction plan in her mind. Then a dark figure stepped out from behind a loading crane apparatus and into her path.

“Prizrak sends his regards,” came the gravelly voice from the man standing partially concealed among the shadows. Sam's brain registered shock at the lack of accent—he was an American. Then she heard a faint shuffled footstep from behind her. She ducked just in time as a fist, attached to a stocky well-muscled arm, whistled over her head. The rear-kick she delivered to the attacker's solar plexus dropped him to his knees. Another individual attacked from the side and she dodged and blocked several blows before connecting with her own series of fists and elbows. As she turned to meet a third man, the gravelly voice came once again from the shadows.

“Ms. Black, there's someone perhaps you should see.”

Sam paused, maintaining a defensive position, balanced and on her toes. Her eyes moved toward the man in the shadows as he was joined by another individual. Sam watched him reach toward the approaching figure and take from him the unwilling, more feminine silhouette he'd been dragging with him. He stepped forward, forcing the female captive into the dim light and Sam's breath caught as a large blade came up to the woman's neck. Sam saw terror in the woman's eyes and opened her mouth to scream just as the knife plunged into the woman's flesh and was drawn across her throat. Blood spilled down the innocent woman's chest as Sam's scream caught in her throat.

Sam took a step toward her. The man shifted, momentarily exposed to the dim light, allowing Sam a brief glimpse of his appearance. Then he released his grasp on the woman and she dropped to her knees, her eyes never leaving Sam's. The light left the woman's blue eyes as she collapsed forward, still and lifeless.

Two attackers closed in on her, but Sam barely felt the blows to her body. Her ears picked up the quiet laughter of the gravelly-voiced leader and rage engulfed her. Some tenacious, practical portion of her brain told her to run, to escape to fight another day. She regained her footing and bolted left toward the end of the finger pier, heading for the water, knowing there would be no escape any other way. The dark figure stepped out from a shadow just before she reached the end of the pier and she saw the flash of moonlight on a large blade as she tried to dodge past. The slashing blow to her back came as she launched herself, cutting easily through clothing and biting into her skin laterally down her back from shoulder blade to hip. Then she was past him and plunging into the cold waters of the Mediterranean.

Over an hour later, exhausted and in pain, Sam could only hope she had made the deadline for the contingency escape plan. The boat was only supposed to wait until one a.m., and it seemed like she'd been in the water for hours, carefully avoiding the search conducted by her group of attackers, making her way from dark shadow to shadow in the water.

As she hid, swam and struggled silently for her own survival, she thought about the young woman whose body she'd been forced to abandon on the pier. Kirsa Jorgenson was a staffer at the Danish consulate in Tunisia. Sam and Kirsa had become intimately involved over the past several weeks while Sam was in Tunisia to covertly investigate the illegal arms trade cycling through the capital's port. Kirsa was an innocent victim, her death used purely as retribution against Sam, who now had to live with the guilt and the blood on her conscience.

As Sam continued to struggle in the water, the picture in her mind drifted back to the brief glimpse she'd caught of the man as he shifted in the light. The image was seared into her brain.

Sam finally approached the portion of the port used for personal pleasure craft and was relieved to see the designated boat slip was still occupied by the moderately sized yacht she immediately recognized. She pulled herself from the water and up the ladder, collapsing to the dock surface. Moments later she felt the wood vibrate beneath her cheek, then heard footsteps approaching. She tried to rise, then struggled weakly against the arms that lifted her. She calmed when she recognized the quiet female voice.

"Relax, Sam. I've got you."

Chapter One

Two Years Later

IT WAS A warm June night and a cool breeze blew in from the coast and through West Los Angeles. Shortly after eleven p.m. an explosion ripped through the front entry lobby of the West Los Angeles Gay and Lesbian Center. Two similar explosions had already occurred in the region. One had been two weeks prior at a gay outreach center in West Hollywood. Another several weeks prior to that when a vehicle was bombed outside a gay bar. Unlike the two previous attacks, this bomb was placed inside the facility, concealed somehow near the reception desk in the lobby. It resulted in the death of the facility's assistant director and the injury of another employee, both of whom were working late that particular evening.

ASSISTANT DISTRICT ATTORNEY Sydney Rutledge awoke to the alarm sounding. She reached over and shut it off then put her head back down for a few extra moments of rest. A trim and muscular arm reached across her midsection and she felt a body snuggle up to her from behind.

"Good morning," the sleepy voice of her lover, LAPD Sergeant Alex Chambers, said. Sydney smiled in response to the voice whispering into her ear. She lay there unmoving, allowing Alex's strong five-foot-nine inch frame to wrap comfortably and protectively around her slightly smaller body.

"Good morning, Sergeant Chambers." Sydney finally turned over and looked into the woman's still drowsy hazel eyes. "You were late last night. I was afraid you weren't coming over. I'm sorry I couldn't manage to stay awake for you."

"It's okay," Alex responded. "I just wanted to sleep next to you. I've missed you."

It had been a hectic week for the two of them, and they hadn't seen each other for several days, surviving on their multiple phone calls each day but both hoping for more.

"Anything interesting?" Sydney prodded, feeling there was something Alex wasn't telling her.

"The Department went on citywide tac-alert close to the end of watch, so my squad was held over." Alex referred to LAPD's Tactical Alert where all on-duty personnel were held over when a critical incident occurred somewhere in the city.

"There was another bombing. The Gay and Lesbian Center in West L.A. this time," Alex added quietly after a moment. "Looks like it's a homicide."

Sydney tightened her arms around Alex then leaned forward and kissed Alex gently on the lips.

Alex brushed Sydney's long brown hair away from her chestnut eyes.

"Would you reconsider stopping your work at the Center for a while?" Alex asked. "Just until they figure this out?"

Alex was referring to Sydney's volunteer work at the Hollywood LGBT Center where she provided legal assistance and advice to members of the gay community on issues such as discrimination in employment or housing and adoptions for gay couples. Some of her cases even involved petitions of emancipation for minors who were kicked out of their homes and disowned by their parents.

"We can't let whoever they are win through intimidation," Sydney replied. "And everyone at the Center knows I'm an Assistant District Attorney. Of all the people there I can't be the one to show I'm giving up or surrendering, or that I've lost faith in our law enforcement and your ability to stop this."

Alex was already nodding. "I knew you'd say that, but I had to ask. Promise me you'll be careful?"

"Don't worry, Sergeant Chambers, I'm always careful. And the directors have already called a meeting for Monday evening to discuss the situation and make sure we're doing everything we can to protect everyone and the community. Now you go back to sleep and I'll call you later." She started to get out of the bed only to be pulled back into Alex's arms for a long and passionate kiss.

"Something to remember me by until later," Alex said as the kiss broke.

"Oh, I'll remember," Sydney said breathlessly. She leaned forward for another kiss, then pulled away, knowing she'd never make it to work on time if she let this continue. "I'll see you later." She rose slowly from Alex's arms and headed into the bathroom to shower.

Thirty minutes later she gave one last glance at Alex's sleeping body before she exited the master suite and proceeded down the rear spiral stairs to the kitchen one floor below. She found the coffee maker already prepped and ready to start brewing. Her travel mug stood nearby with a handwritten note sticking out of the top.

"I miss you already. — A"

Sydney smiled as she read the note, knowing Alex must have prepared the coffee maker, written the note and placed it there when she came in very early that morning. She pressed the button to start the coffee brewing and turned toward the fridge. She placed the note under a magnet on the fridge and couldn't help but consider how things had changed. Who could have imagined six months ago that she would be here now, in this wonderful relationship, partnered with a strong, intelligent and incredibly sexy woman?

Sydney and Alex met the year prior when Sydney prosecuted the case against Matthew Sinclair for a dozen murders of young professional women. Alex testified as the principal arresting officer.

The emergence later of an apparent copycat killer who targeted female attorneys brought the two women together once again and the original attraction to one another continued to grow. Their relationship developed into romance when Sydney's attraction to Alex ultimately led to her own self-discovery and personal acceptance as a lesbian. Their beautiful relationship took root and they'd been virtually inseparable in the months since then. Sydney carried the smile and the warm feeling with her out the door with her coffee and bagel, comfortable in the support and affection she felt from the naked woman sleeping in her bed.

SAMANTHA RUSSEAU SMILED at the cabin attendant as she exited the plane at Baltimore-Washington International Airport after arriving from Czechoslovakia. The attractive, leggy blonde had provided an enjoyable diversion in Prague the previous evening. The cabin attendant gave a knowing wink and a smile in return.

“Thank you for flying with us,” she said to Sam. “See you next time.”

“I certainly hope so,” Sam said. She walked past the woman and entered the terminal. She bypassed baggage claim on the way out of the airport, proceeding directly to a plain black SUV with dark tinted windows parked at the curb. Sam opened the front passenger door, tossed her backpack into the rear seat and nodded at the driver.

“Joe,” she said in greeting as she sat down and closed the door.

“Hey, Sam,” he said, and pulled the vehicle away from the curb. “Flight okay?”

“Yeah, it was fine. Any idea what this is about?” she asked.

He shook his head. “Not my gig. I’m just your ride.”

With that Sam leaned her seat back and was asleep within minutes. She had learned a long time ago to take advantage of such opportunities as the unexpected frequently happened in her line of work. She never knew when her next opportunity for sleep might be.

Almost an hour later Joe pulled in to the long driveway of a plantation style property somewhere over the state line in Virginia. Two additional sedans, also with heavily tinted windows, were visible in the front driveway of the large house.

Sam sensed the vehicle coming to a stop and awoke from her nap.

“Were you told to wait?” she asked. He nodded in the affirmative. “Good. I’m gonna leave my bag then.” She exited the vehicle and made her way up the front steps and through the doors without pausing to knock.

As she entered, Sam nodded to the man standing in the front room exactly where she’d expected to find him. He was alert and attentive as he stood in a position to observe anyone approaching up the front drive. Her mind barely registered the open door to a small room nearby. That room was occupied by another individual who didn’t acknowledge Sam’s presence, but instead continued to watch the bank of monitors showing the views of various cameras placed throughout the property. These things were to be expected in a facility of this type—a government safe house for clandestine operations.

Sam made her way to the dining room where she found two people already seated at the table waiting for her.

“Welcome back, Sam,” Elena Turlow said. The middle-aged woman smiled as Sam entered. She’d been Sam’s original case agent, or “handler” throughout Sam’s career with the Central Intelligence Agency and continued to direct her field and covert operations.

“You remember Director Stansfield?” Elena added, indicating the distinguished looking gray-haired man sitting beside her. Carl Stansfield stood and extended his hand.

“Sam,” he said as she took his hand. “That was some nice work last month in Serbia.”

Sam nodded at the CIA’s Deputy Director of the National Clandestine Service and Sam and Elena’s boss in the CIA. When she entered the room she’d been able to hide her surprise at his presence, but only barely. Stansfield turned to retake his seat and Sam glanced at Elena, raising her eyebrow briefly in an unspoken question. Elena’s look told her all she needed to know. Sit, listen, say nothing.

“Thank you, sir,” Sam said, then reached for the coffee pot and a mug already on the table. She sipped as she sat patiently, waiting for one of the two to break the silence and tell her why

she'd been summoned and why Stansfield was here. A man in his hierarchical position rarely had reason to deal directly with field agents.

Elena slid a file across the table as Stansfield took a sip from his coffee.

"I've got a new one for you, Sam. Something a little different this time around," Elena said. "You're on your way to Los Angeles."

"Los Angeles?" she said, unable to hide her surprise. "As in California?" she asked without reaching for the file.

Elena nodded. "There's a task force being established consisting of the FBI, ATF and the locals. We'll be officially monitoring the progress of the investigation, but we want you on the ground as well. If you're able to make connections there that's fine. As usual, it'll be your call what deals you make.

Sam nodded and reached for the file. "This is about the bombings, isn't it?" she asked before she flipped it open. With the third bombing in the Los Angeles area, the attacks had made headline news. Even the television monitors in the airport prior to her departure carried constant news updates containing what little information was being made available to the public.

Elena nodded. "We've been monitoring the situation. There was another bombing last night. There were fatalities this time. The explosive is very common, TATP. But the timing device seems to be a step above that. It may indicate someone a little more technically savvy. There's been chatter about transnational terrorists exploiting U.S. hate groups to cause chaos and dissension amongst the various communities. We need someone on top of it from the receiving side monitoring firsthand how this develops. Director Stansfield is personally engaged in this because of the sensitivity. As you know, we technically can't put an operator in the field here inside the U.S. But it's been determined at the highest levels that the CIA has a concurrent interest in any developments, so we're playing a little fast and loose with that legal issue. Obviously that means your presence and activities have got to stay covert."

Elena referred to the fact the proliferation of black market arms and explosives on the international front, as well as transnational terrorism, was very much the CIA's area of jurisdiction. But this scenario was complicated by the CIA's legal restrictions regarding active clandestine operations or investigations within the United States.

Sam nodded. This had always been one of her primary areas of operations. She had investigated international arms traders and explosives suppliers from Eastern Europe to the Arabian Peninsula to South America during her time with the Agency. She'd been involved in tracking down several high level international suppliers who provided weapons and explosives to terrorist organizations and upstart dictators throughout the world. Some had also been linked to far right-wing groups bent on destabilizing democratic governments in a variety of countries. Sam had always known there was a likelihood they would eventually connect with domestic right-wing terrorists in the U.S. who were looking to seriously up their game.

Sam and Elena suspected some of these players could not continue to operate without at least tacit approval from high ranking U.S. officials. Elena shared Sam's suspicions that some of their investigations were intentionally diverted by someone in the chain of command in order to direct them away from certain protected black market arms dealers. Her experience two years prior in Tunisia led her to believe there was possibly a turncoat within the Agency. Every instinct screamed she'd been set up and it cost the life of an innocent person very dear to her. Elena, who had violated the rules to save Sam's life that night, was the only one she'd ever discussed that suspicion with. Both agreed it was unwise to share that information with anyone else.

Sam flicked through the few pages of intelligence gathered so far on the recent bombing in Los Angeles.

“Any other reason I’ve been chosen for this one?” she finally asked with a note of good humored sarcasm, glancing briefly at Elena then concentrating her gaze on Stansfield.

“I’ll leave you two to figure out all the details.” Stansfield looked slightly uncomfortable as he rose and extended his hand. “Sam, good luck. I don’t have to tell you how sensitive you’re work on this one is. But if this turns out to have international connections like we think, those connections become the CIA’s primary jurisdiction. So make sure you keep us in the loop.”

Sam also rose and shook his hand. He turned to Elena, shook her hand as well, then retreat from the room. She heard the front door open then close as she turned back to Elena with a slight smile on her face.

“I seem to remember the homo thing made him a little uncomfortable,” she said. “So, you wanna tell me what’s really going on here?” Elena returned the smile.

“Admittedly, you’re uniquely qualified for this assignment, in a variety of ways. Your orientation is a plus, considering the targets. Your knowledge of explosives, weapons trade and manufacturing, the international connections, all good. We’ll be using your A.P. cover, that way you can sniff around and ask questions and it won’t look suspicious.”

Sam nodded. She had worked investigations in other regions of the world posing as an investigative reporter for the Associated Press. Several bylines in print media over the past several years contained the name of “Samantha Black,” thus solidifying the existence of the reporter. This assisted in operations that weren’t entirely covert in nature.

Elena leaned forward and her voice grew serious. “My impression is there’s a lot of political pressure on this one. All indications are these are domestic extremists.” She paused then looked Sam in the eye. “Sam, I think there could be some connections to those cover ups we’ve always suspected.”

Sam knew Elena was referring to the apparent leaks they’d suspected since the fiasco in Tunisia. If their suspicions were correct, it could potentially involve individuals in the highest ranks of the government and the intelligence community.

Sam noted the slightly guilty look in Elena’s eyes. “There’s more. What?”

“Sam, I didn’t select you for this assignment. The direction came above me. Then, as soon as I made the recall notification to you and began arrangements for your cover in L.A., I’m suddenly being called by Stansfield and he’s insisting on being kept in the loop. His interest appears legitimate.” Elena shrugged. “If this turns out to have international connections, the Agency has every reason to make it a priority.”

“But...” Sam paused, trying to prompt Elena to continue, knowing there was more.

“But,” Elena continued. “Why the direct request to be in the loop? Even though we’re overstepping our boundaries a little bit, which could make it politically sensitive, it’s nothing that unusual. So why is the Deputy Director so involved? This wasn’t just a request to be notified should an international arms connection be revealed that the Agency can move on. He’s ordered me to share everything, up to the minute. So why is someone at his level so involved in the weeds? Why not assign a senior operations officer as a liaison? He’s the Deputy Director. It’s just...unusual. They usually want to play politics and maintain their plausible deniability.”

Elena took a deep breath and shrugged again. “And we still haven’t figured out what happened in Tunisia. But we were getting closer. We both know there’s a connection here. I heard rumors there was going to be an independent congressional investigation, but that seems to have stalled out for some reason.”

“We were just starting to make some decent headway with those subtle inquiries we started with Jenkins. This timing is suspicious. And why you specifically? Why now? I guess it could be your orientation, but I don’t know. Something about this just feels...strange. I’ve just about gotten you trained up for this business. I don’t have the patience to start over, so be careful.”

Sam smiled at the jest by her mentor then nodded as she tossed the file back onto the table.

“Okay,” she said. “When do I leave?”

“I know you just got back stateside. Take a few days. We’ll arrange for you to fly out on Thursday. You can get the lay of the land over the weekend. The first meeting for the task force will be Monday. Do you want me to arrange an apartment in L.A. for you?”

“Nah. I’ll stay in a hotel for a few days and check things out then arrange something.”

They discussed a few more details then Sam left the safe house, returning to the waiting escort vehicle that dropped her another hour later at her apartment on the outskirts of Alexandria, Virginia.

Sam lay in bed in her sparsely furnished apartment that night and found herself thinking back to the circumstances that led to her joining the Agency almost eight years ago. She had almost eight years in the Navy just prior to the invasion of Iraq. As an intelligence officer with special operations experience, she’d been assigned to Special Operations Command within the CentCom theater, providing intelligence support to a variety of coalition special forces teams, U.S. Navy SEALs, Army Green Berets, Marine Force Recon elements, British Special Air Service operators, and the innocuously titled task forces which consisted of CIA Special Operations Group personnel.

In the opening weeks of the invasion of Iraq she’d been the one to select and plan for the interception of high value targets, or HVTs—those known terrorist leaders whose capture or neutralization became priority special forces missions. As the chaos of war and conflict overtook the country, individuals who had sought anonymity and concealment within Iraq looked to flee to bordering countries, primarily Syria. Weeks into the invasion she had forward deployed to better direct the missions up close from the Tactical Operations Center, or TOC, which was set up at Saddam Hussein International Airport, later be renamed Bagdad International Airport, or BIAP.

After primary control of Iraq was accomplished, her role transitioned back to exclusive support of the Global War on Terrorism. She spent the next six months supporting operations in Afghanistan, Yemen, the Horn of Africa, and other locations. As time went on she supported counter-terrorism operations in countries in other theaters of the world, some not considered by the average populace to be related to the war on terrorism. Some operations became known in the public eye, some remained classified still. Many of those operations led to increases in the population of Guantanamo Bay, what would later come to be known as “Camp X-Ray.”

As her military career progressed, her special operations combat experience led to her being sought out to support a variety of short term or special operations efforts. Most of those were, once again, classified. As she was promoted, she was assigned increasingly demanding leadership roles in counterterrorism operations, and the occasional counter-drug operations, from South America to Southeast Asia to the Middle East.

She was approached several years later at the conclusion of just such an operation involving members of the CIA’s Special Operations Group. The offer was made. Would she be interested in joining the ranks of the CIA’s covert operators? She hesitated to commit but was told the offer would stand.

Sam tossed restlessly in bed as her mind drifted to the experience that ultimately led to her acceptance of this offer and her departure from the Navy. Her repeated combat tours were draining on a whole different personal level. This was prior to the elimination of “Don’t Ask Don’t Tell.” The policy required Sam to be very much in the closet in her military life. Her returns stateside after each tour were liberating as she returned to the dating arena, suffering a constant urge to satisfy her suppressed libido. She had a club scene reputation as a player and her sex life consisted of an ongoing pattern of one night stands, with occasional repeats with those she found most interesting or satisfying. She made no promises and was always straightforward about her intentions.

After several years of continuous service with overseas commands, Sam was assigned to a joint command in San Diego, California. Her attention was soon captured by the daughter of a rear admiral. For several weeks she and Christina Perry exchanged flirtatious comments and looks. This was followed by a passionate physical relationship.

Sam discovered quickly that the young woman was turned on by risky environments and so would frequently insist on spontaneous sex in the most public of locations. It wasn’t necessarily Sam’s thing, but she went along with it more than willingly. The last such occasion involved a hot sexual encounter in the back of Christina’s car in a dark corner of the parking lot outside her father’s office on the base.

Days later Sam was confronted with an allegation of sexual assault. She learned the most recent sexual tryst was observed by an aide to the admiral. In order to save her own reputation and stay in the closet, Christina claimed she had offered a ride home to the naval officer and that upon entering her vehicle Sam had physically forced herself on the woman. The fact the witness initially stated Christina appeared to be willingly participating in the encounter did nothing to stop the Navy from initiating a full investigation. It was only the admiral’s wish to avoid negative publicity for his family, and his own career, that kept Sam from facing a court martial and military prison time. She was permitted to quietly resign her commission and accept a general discharge.

Sam had been disgraced and horrified. She felt betrayed not only by the woman who had flirted with her ceaselessly for weeks and insisted on such risky public sexual encounters, for whom she believed she started to have feelings, but also by the Navy. Within days of her resignation she was en route to the CIA training facility in Virginia, known as “The Farm.”

The experience in Tunisia years later, and the loss of a woman she had grown close to and cared about, had caused her to be once again distrustful of her own organization and chain of command. With few exceptions, Sam vowed to be distrustful of most people. Only those who had proven themselves by her side over time would be given that faith. Elena numbered one of those few. It was she, after all, who had broken the rules and risked her own career and life in order to save Sam that night in Tunisia.

Sam rolled over, reshaping the pillow beneath her as her mind drifted to Los Angeles, a city she hadn’t been to since visiting a friend from the service years earlier. That friend was one of the only others who had earned a similar level of trust. Just before she fell into a restless sleep Sam briefly wondered what former Marine Corp Gunnery Sergeant Alex Chambers, now with the LAPD, was up to these days.

SYDNEY REACHED FOR the phone on her desk, picking it up before the second ring. “Sydney Rutledge,” she said as she continued to read the trial briefing open before her.

“Hello, Sydney,” a voice from the past said. Sydney paused in her reading and leaned back in her chair.

“Richard?”

“The one and only,” her former fiancé said. “Miss me?”

Sydney sighed silently, choosing to ignore the question. Then out of a slightly reluctant sense of politeness she asked, “How are you doing?”

“I’m good. I’m in town working on a federal task force. I thought we might get together for dinner or something. For old time’s sake.”

“Really? Just for old time’s sake?” Sydney said, trying to give herself time to think through what her options were. She had no interest in seeing him in any capacity. But how could she refuse seeing him while he was in town? It seemed like a reasonably innocent request.

“I suppose I could meet you for lunch tomorrow. But it’ll have to be somewhere close by here in the downtown area. My schedule is pretty busy this week.”

They agreed to meet the next afternoon at a local restaurant within walking distance of the courthouse. Sydney ended the call after a few more minutes of idle conversation and returned to work without further thought of her impending luncheon.

Sydney made no mention of the lunch to Alex when they talked later that evening. She rationalized this by telling herself it was only lunch, there was nothing more to it and no reason it would be a topic of conversation between them. A part of her was uncomfortable with this, though. She recalled months earlier when she and Alex had been looking through her old photo album, during Alex’s recovery from her gunshot wound. She knew Alex was a little uncomfortable with the knowledge that Sydney had a former fiancé. Sydney didn’t want to cause her undue stress or uncertainty, but she still felt somehow dishonest keeping the purely innocent lunch to herself.

AT NOON THE following day Sydney entered the small restaurant and looked around. She spotted Richard when he waved to her from a booth near the back of the dining area. He stood as she approached, and his eyes looked her up and down as he smiled with his appraisal.

“Wow,” he said. “You’re looking as good as ever.”

Sydney wasn’t flattered by his attention or his evaluation. She briefly wondered if this was the way he’d always looked at her and, if so, why it had never made her feel that uncomfortable before.

“Thanks,” she said with little sincerity as she took her seat. It occurred to her once again that this was likely not a great idea and she should make every effort to bring the lunch to an end as quickly as possible. She ordered without hesitation as soon as the waitress appeared, hoping to move the entire process along.

Richard, for his part, was not short on conversation. He proceeded to regale her with stories of his own accomplishments with the U.S. Attorney’s Office, his experience in high profile cases and his quick promotion. Sydney was reminded of Richard’s sense of self importance and arrogance. She only half listened as her mind went through its own processes. She remembered how, when they were together, she’d thought she was comfortable with the picture they presented: two young, bright and promising attorneys, both on the potential career fast track. It

was logical they would end up together and it made for the storybook relationship. How could she have been so immature? So enamored with that image rather than reality? She was thankful she'd realized it was not to be and stepped out of the relationship in the nick of time.

She recalled the conversation the day Richard was notified he was being hired by the U.S. Attorney's Office. He simply told her they would be relocating to his new assignment on the East Coast. He announced it as if it was of no consequence, as if she would just be expected to abandon her own career in favor of his with no questions asked and no discussion. That was the final straw for her and she'd ended their relationship at that point.

After breaking it off, she looked back on the relationship with fresh eyes. It was then she realized how misguided and blind she had been. Her best friend, Tyler, a fellow ADA, and a gay man, had been there throughout, the supportive best friend forced to stand by on the sidelines, often out of sight due to Richard's dislike of homosexuals. Sydney was ashamed of the way she'd allowed Tyler to be treated by Richard, how she defended Richard to Tyler and downplayed his homophobic statements and name calling in her own mind. All the while Tyler patiently waited. Tyler later told Sydney he'd been confident she would eventually wake up and realize the nature of the beast she was partnering herself with.

Sydney wondered where she would be if Richard had not applied to the U.S. Attorney's Office. Was Tyler right? Would she have still realized his sexist, homophobic and judgmental opinions for what they were? Would she still be blinded to his inflated self-importance and ego? Would they be together still if he had not demanded she sacrifice her career in favor of his without question or hesitation? Would she have gone through with the marriage, still somehow enamored with the perfect image they projected? Would she have been open to meeting Alex and would she have the wonderful relationship she had now with a kind and caring lover? Her thoughts of Sergeant Alex Chambers automatically brought a smile to her lips and warmth to her heart.

"You know," Richard finally said, breaking into her thoughts. "I've been keeping track of you, too. You haven't done half bad yourself." Sydney refocused on the conversation as Richard continued. "Major crimes prosecutor? Handling high profile cases? You had to have been one of the youngest attorneys assigned to that unit. And that White Rose case is certainly a feather in your cap. I would've given anything to have a case like that drop into my lap when I was with the DA's office. Then that whole thing with the copycat killer at the beginning of this year? Awesome!"

Sydney was shocked by Richard's lack of empathy for the horrific experience. "You do realize sixteen women were brutally murdered by those men? And Alex and I were almost killed?"

"Yes, of course. It's a tragedy. I'm sure you and your little friend went through a difficult experience," he said with a wave of his hand, minimizing her statement. "But you realize that's a career maker. And a slam dunk case. There isn't a position you won't be considered for now. Your name recognition alone will ensure that."

Sydney realized he was giving no credit whatsoever to her talents as an attorney and prosecutor, nor was he recognizing or complimenting her hard work and dedication. To him it was a lucky break, right place, right time, easy win with a lot of press coverage. It was the perfect, politically safe, career making case. He saw no need to worry about the collateral damage or the tragedy and death that caused all the parties to meet in that courtroom to begin with. Richard's self-centered motivations were so crystal clear now. How had she not noticed it

those years ago. She was no longer hungry and was in fact shocked and turned off by the entire scene. She put down her fork and napkin and gathered her purse to leave.

“It’s time I headed back to the office,” she said as she stood. “I’ve got a case update meeting I’m going to have to get to.”

“No problem,” Richard said. He got to his feet and threw cash down on top of the bill. He followed her out the door and down the street in the direction of the court building. They walked in silence for a minute before Richard spoke again.

“I’ve got a meeting Monday then I’ve got to head back to D.C. for a week or so before I come back to keep this task force on track. How about dinner sometime when I return?”

Sydney looked at Richard, unsure what to say. He still had powerful connections at the DA’s office and she was unsure how much her personal life could affect her professionally. She was also reminded of his homophobic tendencies.

“Dinner wouldn’t be appropriate,” she finally said with a sigh. “I’m involved with someone.”

Richard seemed surprised by this statement.

“Really?” he said as they neared the entrance to the court building lobby. “Hmm. Well, like I said, I’m going to end up being here for a while. I’m sure we’ll work something out.” With that he reached around her and gave her a hug, leaning down to kiss her briefly on the lips before she had a chance to avoid it or pull away. He gave her a smile full of confidence and certainty then turned and walked away.

Sydney, who was shocked by Richard’s audacity and presumption, shook her head and rolled her eyes, again wondering what she had ever seen in the man. She entered the court building and proceeded upstairs and directly to Tyler’s office. She’d been slightly misleading to Richard about the immediacy of her pending afternoon meeting and felt the need to talk with her best friend about this development.

She entered Tyler’s office without invitation and sat down across the desk from him as he cleaned up the remnants of the sandwich he’d just eaten. Tyler looked at her as he swallowed his last bite then threw the wrapper in the trash can and took a sip of his diet soda.

“You look troubled. What’s up?”

“I had lunch with Richard today,” Sydney replied, deciding to just throw it on the table without beating around the bush.

Tyler looked surprised and remained silent for several moments. “How did this come about?” he finally asked.

“He called yesterday. Said he was going to be temporarily assigned here in L.A. for a while on a task force. He asked me to lunch for old time’s sake.” She slouched back in the seat with a sigh, letting her head fall back as she stared at the ceiling overhead. “God, what a self-centered ass. Was he that big a jerk when I was engaged to him? And if so, how did I miss it?”

Tyler smiled and she recognized a look of relief on his face.

“Yes. And I don’t quite know how you missed it. But I forgive you. And you seem to be doing much better with your current situation. Way more class there.”

ALEX HAD BEEN on her way to visit Sydney when she saw her walking toward the court building in the company of the strangely familiar man. For some reason Alex held off approaching the two and simply watched from a distance. A part of her was guilty over her sense

of suspicion. But moments later she watched as they embraced and the man appeared to kiss Sydney. Shock rolled through her and she turned, abandoning her intended visit.

She drove from the building with the nagging feeling the man she'd seen with his arms around Sydney looked distinctly familiar to her. It was minutes later that it hit her. The man was Richard Morrison, Sydney's ex-fiancé. When they'd discussed him while going through Sydney's old photo album, Sydney had said he was now an Assistant U.S. Attorney working in Washington, D.C. What was he doing here? And what was he doing with his arms around Sydney? And why hadn't Sydney said anything about him being here?

Chapter Two

SAMANTHA RUSSEAU ARRIVED in L.A. in the early afternoon on Thursday, picked up a rented Chrysler Sebring convertible—not quite her style, but she'd live with it for now— and checked into a hotel in the Hollywood area. She had arranged to look at several furnished corporate apartments the following day, figuring she'd be in L.A. for at least a few weeks. But tonight she felt the need to have a good time, to get out and be social. Maybe even find an attractive young woman to take back to her hotel room for some adult pleasure. An online check of lesbian venues in the Hollywood area had revealed the Vortex. The club was on the border with West Hollywood and was reviewed as one of the hottest spots for women's evening entertainment. So after dinner she headed out to check on the night life.

Sam was impressed with her initial assessment of the club. She could understand why the place had become a focal point for the lesbian community. Despite its popularity, the design was well done and avoided a feeling of overcrowding. It consisted of a nightclub in one portion of the building, complete with large bar, a dance floor and a stage for live entertainment. It also had what was essentially a second bar separated from the nightclub by a doorway with free standing French doors. While the pounding music could be heard from the adjacent club, this room, with its own dedicated bar along part of one wall, maintained a quieter atmosphere more conducive to conversation. This area included a large fireplace surrounded by soft pillows, chairs and sofas, semi-private booths and tables.

The lounge had its own separate front entrance as well as a hallway with a door leading to the rear parking lot. The lounge operated as a regular bar with free access in the afternoons and into the night, whereas the club did not open until seven p.m. and was closed on Sundays. A large statured female staff member manned the French doors during club hours, ensuring those who accessed the club via the lounge paid the same cover charge being collected at the front doors. A hand stamp allowed people to come and go from the dance club to the outside or the lounge.

Sam made her way around the edge of the dance floor, taking in her surroundings. She leaned casually on the bar and ordered a beer. Her attention was soon drawn to an attractive young blonde at the other end of the bar. As she watched, the woman looked up and directly at Sam, who raised her beer in greeting.

The young woman made her way to Sam's side and without reservation asked, "So do you dance, or do you just stand around looking sexy all night?"

Sam gave a grin in response and put her glass down, leading the woman onto the dance floor. Less than an hour later they left the club together arm in arm.

COURTNEY BRENNAN STOOD in her second floor office and looked down through the one-way privacy window at the Thursday night crowd within the Vortex nightclub. At five-foot-six, slim and trim, with shoulder length blonde hair and brilliant green eyes, Courtney could have her choice of dance partners had she joined the energetic crowd below her. As the owner of

the Vortex Club and Lounge she wasn't present to partake of the nightclub's scene, but was monitoring the activity from her elevated perch.

Soon her eyes stopped on an attractive woman on the perimeter of the dance floor. It was the woman's movement that first drew Courtney's attention. She was slightly taller than Courtney and sleekly muscled. She moved smoothly and deliberately, almost feline in her motions, as if stalking the crowd. She drifted closer allowing Courtney to study her more clearly. The woman had shoulder length, black hair pulled back in a ponytail, with dark eyes and olive skin. Courtney couldn't identify her race, the woman could easily pass for Eurasian, or even part Polynesian. She thought the woman was exotic and undeniably attractive. Courtney forced herself to pull her gaze away and continue watching the rest of the room. The Thursday night crowd was bigger than usual, showing that Courtney's recent publicity efforts appeared to be paying off. She nodded in satisfaction.

After several minutes she was scanning the crowd again for the attractive woman with slightly dark features. She soon found her locked in erotic movement with a blonde woman on the dance floor. Courtney wondered for just a second what it would be like to experience a dance with a woman like that. Then she pushed the thought from her mind, turned away and walked to her desk to resume her work.

Still hard at work an hour later, Courtney looked up at her security monitor in time to see the attractive brunette and her new blonde companion heading out the main door together. She put her head back down and continued her work, not giving them another thought.

IT WAS LATE morning on Friday and Alex had just finished her squad briefing and released the officers to the field when she was approached by her captain.

"Got a request for you from CTB, Alex," the captain said as he handed her a slip of paper with a phone number on it.

"Counter-Terrorism Bureau?" Alex asked as she glanced at the name and number.

"Yeah. Call Commander Freeman. It sounds important. He said to have you call his secretary and set up an appointment as soon as you're able to get on his calendar. I got the feeling he meant right now. So call, if he's available you can head over now, I'll let the patrol watch commander know to listen up in case your task force guys need anything in the field." Alex knew Commander Isaac Freeman from a prior assignment when he was a Captain and she was a young sergeant under his command. Before his own promotion and transfer, Freeman had identified Alex as a motivated and talented supervisor and selected her as one of the squad leaders in her current violent crime task force.

Alex responded to the Police Administration Building and made her way up to the tenth floor where she was greeted by the secretary who led her directly into the Commander's office.

"How are you doing, Alex?" Commander Freeman asked. He leaned across his desk to shake Alex's hand. "Things at Central Division okay?"

"Yes, sir. Everything's good." Alex took the seat he indicated on the other side of his desk.

He looked at her for a few moments as if contemplating his next statement. "Alex, I'd like to make a request of you. You've heard about the bombings around the west side, targeting the gay community?"

"Yes, sir."

“There’s going to be a task force. We’ve had people working it, obviously, and we’ve been liaising with the ATF and the FBI, as well as the Sheriff’s Department. But now, with the homicide, things are going to be ramping up. It’ll be Feds, county, locals, probably some prosecutors from the federal side as well as the DA’s office. The works.”

Alex nodded in acknowledgement and Freeman went on to explain in greater detail.

“The federal government, for their part, will be contributing two FBI agents and two agents from the ATF. The Department of Justice is assigning a Supervising U.S. Attorney to assist with legal advice, obtaining any search warrants and ultimately, it’s assumed, prosecution of the case at the federal level. Supposedly any further questions will be answered in the first task force meeting to be held on Monday.” Alex listed as Freeman continued.

“So far, despite it having a large gay community, West Hollywood hasn’t been targeted. But obviously the Sheriff’s Department is concerned and believes that may only be a matter of time. So they’ll be assigning an additional two deputies from the West Hollywood Sheriff’s Station.”

Alex nodded in understanding. The Los Angeles County Sheriff’s Department would be rightfully concerned due to the predominant, and notable, gay community of West Hollywood, which was a county protectorate, geographically bookended between the LAPD jurisdictions of Hollywood and West Los Angeles.

“We’ll be assigning two detectives from our Anti-Terrorism Section here at CTB and two more from Robbery-Homicide Division. We’ll also be detailing one sergeant and two additional police officers to assist with surveillances and to take lead on coordinating any tactical or enforcement efforts.” Freeman paused momentarily and seemed to contemplate his next words.

“Bottom line, Alex, I’d like you to take the sergeant spot on this task force. I know it’s a bit unorthodox. You’re not a detective, you’re not assigned to Counter Terrorism Bureau, and I’m sure I have several appropriate people who could do an outstanding job. But we already have ATS detectives on board, and you’re equally qualified on all the required fronts. You’ve done surveillance, worked gangs and done extensive investigations. You’re tactically sound and you’ve got your military counter-terrorism background. And the clincher, you have the unique, how shall we say it, ‘background.’” He motioned air quotes with his fingers. “That would be a benefit in this investigation.”

Alex smiled at this comment. They both knew what he was referring to. You couldn’t overlook the clincher for her selection to the task force was her obviously being an out lesbian and thus possessing a unique ability to “mingle” in the gay community.

“Our Department has made extensive progress and inroads in the gay community in the last ten years or so,” he continued. “But in this case it’s important we have trust from the community. We need to give them every possible reason to be willing to talk to us. And needless to say, we need our people to be able to blend in. Obviously it’ll be a plain clothes surveillance and investigative assignment. I’m not going to order you, Alex. But I think you’re the right person for it and I’d be very comfortable with your involvement. What do you think?”

Alex nodded slowly. Even had she not been particularly interested—which she was—she acknowledged there were certain people in the Department you just didn’t say no to. Not solely because they were connected, or going places, but because they had earned the respect of others. Commander Freeman was just such an individual. He fostered trust and loyalty from the people around him, not least of which was Alex. If he asked something of her, she would do her best to deliver.

“I’m in, sir,” she said. “Whatever you need.”

He smiled in response and appeared genuinely relieved. "Outstanding. I'm afraid there isn't much else I can tell you. The meeting on Monday will be at two p.m. The task force has acquired some office space on the fifth floor of the AT&T Building at Twelfth Street and Broadway. I've arranged for a plain car for you and a home garaging permit. You can pick it up from Motor Transport Division today. From this point forward you're in plain clothes. I'll call your CO as soon as you leave here and arrange the loan."

Alex nodded. "Roger that, sir." She stood with him and he leaned across the desk, extending his hand again.

"Thanks, Alex. I owe you one. I'll see you Monday to kick this thing off."

BY LATER THAT evening Alex had finally decided she was being somewhat immature about the entire Richard Morrison issue. So he was in town and had met with Sydney, so what? He was an ex-fiancé and a fellow lawyer. From what she remembered Sydney saying, they had parted on reasonably good terms. There was every reason to expect they would exchange pleasantries. Alex had no reason not to trust Sydney. Having forced herself out of the semi-funk she'd been in for the last twenty-four hours, Alex was optimistically looking forward to a romantic dinner and an evening alone with Sydney, followed by a relaxing weekend enjoying each other's company.

At seven p.m. she pulled into the driveway of Sydney's house in the Hollywood Hills off Mulholland Drive. It was a large three-story residence nestled into the trees, with lots of windows and unbelievable views of the city and out to the Pacific Ocean on a clear day. She exited her car and picked up the bags of Italian food she'd brought.

"Wow," a familiar voice rang out. "Did you get some new, sexy wheels without telling me?"

Alex looked from her relatively new, grey Dodge Charger then up at Sydney standing outside her open front door at the top of the entry steps.

"No, this is a city car. I've got news." Sydney's eyebrows rose in response.

Alex walked up the stairs.

"I see you brought dinner," Sydney said, reaching out and relieving Alex of one of the food bags. "So I take it we're eating in?" This was asked with a sultry smile.

"Yes. I don't want to share you with anyone this evening." Alex leaned down and kissed Sydney, lingering longer than an informal hello required. "And I was hoping to get lucky, so I'm bribing you with Palermo's."

"Well, Palermo's is a good start, Sergeant. You just may get lucky yet."

They made their way back to the kitchen and Alex unpacked an assortment of food as Sydney gathered plates and silverware. By the time Alex had dished out generous helpings of pasta, salad and bread, and carried them into the adjoining dining room, Sydney had poured a glass of wine for herself, retrieved a bottle of Alex's favorite beer, lit two candles and lowered the lights to an appropriate level.

"I'm glad you're here," Sydney said after a few bites. "You seemed a little distant on the phone last night. I've missed you." Alex looked up, shrugging her shoulders and smiling at Sydney.

"So," Sydney continued, "tell me about your new assignment."

"Very astute," Alex said with a smile. "It's short term. Nothing permanent. I've been asked to be on the task force for the bombings." She looked up to gauge Sydney's reaction.

Sydney paused in her eating and looked at Alex. “The targeting of the Gay and Lesbian Centers?” Alex nodded. “Who else is on it?”

“It’ll be us, Sheriff’s, FBI, ATF and I guess possibly some people from the U.S. Attorney’s Office and probably from your office,” Alex said. “It’ll be some intelligence gathering, canvassing neighborhoods, interviews, probably a lot of surveillance. I’d imagine it’ll be a lot of evenings and nights considering that’s when the bombings have been. It’s gonna be some long hours.”

“When do you start?”

“First meeting will be Monday.”

“But you still have this weekend off?” Sydney asked.

“Yes.” Alex reached for her hand.

“Then we’ll have to make the most of it,” Sydney said, squeezing Alex’s hand in return.

After dinner they made their way up the rear spiral staircase that led up from the first floor den to the second floor master suite. They tended to utilize this intimate and convenient passageway far more often than the formal staircase near the front entryway and formal living room.

As Sydney reached the top of the staircase and entered the master suite, she reached for the wall mounted light controls. Alex, following right behind her, intercepted her hand, gently turning Sydney into her embrace. With her arms wrapped around Sydney, she leaned down to meet the shorter woman’s lips, kissing her deeply. Sydney responded by wrapping her arms around Alex, their bodies pressed together.

Alex rubbed Sydney’s back over the top of the thin material of her blouse, gradually working her way under the bottom of the material. She was warm, wet, and short of breath when she pulled away from the kiss.

“So, Ms. Rutledge, tell me what you’d like to do this evening,” she said in a half whisper.

Sydney grabbed the front of Alex’s shirt near her neckline, bringing Alex’s lips down to meet her once again. Sydney’s kiss was more forceful and demanding. When they parted, Alex gasped from the passion Sydney imparted in that contact. She read the want in Sydney’s eyes before she even began to speak.

“God, I’ve waited way too long for you to be here like this again. Take me, Alex, now. I want you to take me like you want me.”

It was all the permission Alex needed. She grabbed Sydney by the hips, lifted her up and kissed her again, more forcefully. Sydney responded by wrapping her legs around Alex’s waist as she was carried to the edge of the king-sized bed. Alex let Sydney slide down until her feet hit the carpet, noticing that Sydney had previously pulled the bed covers down in preparation for their arrival. She smiled then attacked Sydney with her mouth once again, working her kisses down Sydney’s jawline to her neck. Her hands drifted to Sydney’s pants, unbuttoning and unzipping them, demanding skin on skin contact.

Sydney groaned into Alex’s shoulder as Alex’s hands then worked their way up under her blouse again. Not wanting to take the time unfastening buttons, Alex simply pulled the blouse up and over Sydney’s head in one move, throwing it to the floor. One hand covered an exposed breast and squeezed, the other went to the small of Sydney’s back. She worked up to the clasp of Sydney’s bra and Sydney pushed her crotch against Alex’s thigh.

Alex deftly unlatched the bra and pulled the material forcefully from Sydney’s body, also tossing that to the floor. She plunged her lips to an already erect nipple as her hands moved lower and continued to work Sydney’s pants and panties down her hips.

Sydney pressed one hand to the back of Alex's head, pulling Alex's lips firmly against her breast. Alex lifted Sydney off her feet and lowered her onto the bed, then pulled Sydney's pants and underwear off her legs in one motion. Sydney's lips were on hers once again as Alex's weight settled gently on top of her.

Alex nipped and kissed down Sydney's jaw, her hands, stroking and stimulating what time together had taught her were Sydney's most sensitive points.

"I want to taste you, Sydney. Please?"

"God, yes," was all Sydney could manage to whisper, her hands went to Alex's shoulders and slowly pushed her downwards. Alex moved down Sydney's body, her lips pausing briefly at each of Sydney's breasts as one hand gradually moved to the apex of her legs. Alex's fingers found it warm, wet and inviting. She moved further down, her shoulders settling between Sydney's legs. Sydney's knees looped comfortably over Alex's shoulders as her lips caressed a silky, inner thigh.

Alex's finger entered Sydney as her lips and tongue took hold of Sydney's already stimulated clitoris. Sydney's response was immediate as she moaned and thrust her hips up to meet Alex's touch. A second finger joined Alex's first and the two women were quickly moving in perfect rhythm.

Alex's overly aroused clit was further stimulated as she responded to the smell, taste and sounds of her lover. She sensed Sydney's climax building as the thrust of her hips became more demanding. Alex's fingers quickened and she suckled Sydney's engorged nub. Sydney gasped Alex's name as she was pushed over the edge.

Sydney lay unmoving for several moments even after Alex moved up to lie beside her. Her eyes were closed and a thin sheen of perspiration covered her naked body. Alex lay beside her, propped on one elbow, watching the woman recover her breath. Moonlight streamed in through the numerous windows, bathing Sydney in a romantic glow. Alex's eyes moved to the pale scar running along the top of Sydney's breastbone, the lone physical evidence of their terrifying experience in the mountains six months ago. Alex leaned forward and kissed the scar, then moved up to kiss Sydney's lips, once again feeling her arms move around her neck and shoulders. Their lips parted and they looked deep into each other's eyes.

"Thank you, Sergeant Chambers," Sydney whispered. She brushed a lock of hair off Alex's forehead. "That was—"

"Okay?"

Sydney smiled. "I was thinking something more along the lines of exactly what I needed," she said. "But we have a problem." Alex raised her eyebrows in question and Sydney placed a hand against Alex's chest. "You still have your clothes on."

"Sorry. I was kind of in a hurry." Alex leaned forward and kissed Sydney, but was interrupted when Sydney pushed against her, driving her backwards. Alex rolled over and Sydney moved with her, ending up straddling Alex, who was now on her back in the bed. She allowed Sydney to move her arms over her head and hold them there, permitting her lover complete control.

"Well, now it's my turn. I'm going to undress you and have my way with you," Sydney said. "And I'm going to do that over and over again for the entire weekend."

As the evening turned into morning and the day led to the weekend, Alex thought Sydney more than lived up to the promise.

IT WAS LATE Saturday night, technically Sunday morning, past one a.m., and Courtney was filling in behind the bar because one of her regular bartenders called in sick. She delivered drinks to a couple of customers then glanced up to see the exotic, olive skinned woman from Thursday night walk off the dance floor and come toward the bar. Following some unknown urge, Courtney made her way to the end of the bar and leaned on the rear wall. There she was partially concealed by the shelves of liquor displayed against the wall as well as the constantly moving bodies of her other two bartenders.

The woman took a stool at the opposite end of the bar, her back to the wall. She ordered a drink then looked around. The intensity in her gaze gave Courtney the impression she knew she was being watched but wasn't quite sure where from. Courtney continued to admire the woman for several seconds, noting her strong jaw and straight nose, and her dark colored eyes that gave a possible hint of Asian in her lineage. She leaned toward another attractive woman who stepped up to the bar to order a drink. They spoke for several minutes and then the woman with the dark exotic eyes paid for the other woman's drink. Courtney mentally kicked herself, wondering what the hell she was doing. She rolled her eyes, frustrated with her own thought process then looked away and saw her club manager approaching the bar.

"The lounge side is slowing down, Court, so Sue's got it over there," Elizabeth said. She came through the opening at the end of the bar. "Want me to fill in back here until closing?"

"Thanks, Liz," Courtney said with a certain sense of relief. "I'll be in my office if anyone needs anything." She looked back at the other end of the bar, but the stool was now vacant. She made her way up the stairs leading to her office and glanced across the club floor to the front door. Her eyes soon located the woman and her new companion as they exited the club together arm in arm.

THE NEXT MORNING Courtney made her way into the French Market Café in the heart of West Hollywood. This was her ritual Sunday morning breakfast location. She enjoyed the courtyard seating, alternating between people watching and reading the Sunday morning newspaper. Sundays were more relaxing than most other days of the week, as the club portion of Vortex would be closed. The lounge would be open in the afternoon for drinks and socializing, but she frequently left it to the staff to manage and took Sundays off.

Courtney finished her breakfast, lingering over her coffee. She glanced up to see a familiar figure being led to a nearby booth. Courtney impulsively raised the newspaper above her eye level to conceal her face. She felt momentarily foolish and wondered what made her take that action. She lowered it several seconds later and surreptitiously watched last night's olive skinned and dark eyed visitor to Vortex. The woman had her back angled slightly toward Courtney and was seated a couple booths away and across the aisle.

This was the first time she'd seen the woman in daylight and Courtney spent a few seconds admiring her strong and majestic profile. She was again curious as to her nationality. The eyes certainly indicated a possible touch of Asian in her ancestry. The olive skin and dark hair could indicate any number of nationalities, from Greek or Southern European, to Asian or Polynesian. The woman had an exotic, almost androgynous appearance that could be described as handsome

as much as beautiful, though either adjective would apply. The athletic cut short sleeved shirt and Bermuda shorts showed off an exceptionally trim and fit body.

The waiter brought the woman's coffee then took her order and moved away. Courtney watched her scan the front page of the day's newspaper headlines, then put the newspaper down and replace it with a worn paperback book. She opened it to a page with a folded down corner and proceeded to read as she sipped her coffee.

Courtney admitted to herself she was wasting her time spying on this woman like some kind of voyeur. She paid her bill and left money for a tip, then collected her purse and newspaper and rose to leave. At that moment the waiter delivered the other woman's breakfast and she put the book down on the table in front of her. As Courtney moved past the table on the way out of the café, she glanced down in curiosity to see what was being read. Courtney was shocked to see it was an anthology of Emily Dickinson poems, probably the last thing she'd expected to be in the possession of the latest frequent customer at the Vortex.

SAM NOTICED THE blonde beauty as soon as she entered, and her heart skipped a beat when the hostess led her to a seat in the same area of the restaurant. She'd also taken in the amazing green eyes before the woman raised the newspaper over her face. Sam smiled at the avoidance as she took a seat. Sam sat with her back to the woman and glanced at the newspaper headlines. She happened to overhear the attractive blonde engaging in casual banter with one of the waiters. This solidified Sam's opinion that the woman was a regular. She leafed through the collection of Emily Dickinson poems she'd picked up at the local used bookstore and was just contemplating turning around to charm the lady when her waiter brought her breakfast. Too soon after that she saw the woman walk by on her way out of the restaurant.

She admired the sleek form and body of the woman and decided she would be spending more time in this restaurant.

Chapter Three

ON MONDAY AFTERNOON Alex entered the appointed conference room at a few minutes before the scheduled meeting time and found several other individuals already seated around the large table. She nodded to each of them, and they exchanged quick introductions. She recognized one of the two LAPD officers, Reggie Carlisle, who she knew was an openly gay officer. Reggie was a former marine and could be a poster boy for either the military or the Department. He was good looking, athletic and charming, and had a reputation as a very capable and proactive field officer. Alex had no doubt he'd been recruited for some of the same reasons she had. He would be capable and comfortable maneuvering in the gay community.

She shook hands with the second officer, Caroline Wagner, whom she'd never met, and silently questioned whether she could be a lesbian, then quickly concluded she was not.

The two Anti-Terrorism detectives, Tony Salvadore and Antonio Gutierrez, entered soon afterwards. Alex knew Salvadore from when she'd been a gang officer and he'd been a gang detective, before he was promoted and then transferred to ATS. Moments later they were joined by two detectives from LAPD's Robbery-Homicide Division. Alex was happy to see Chuck Severs and his partner Robert Kim enter. She'd been friends with Chuck since he'd trained her when she was a young rookie officer. She had gotten to know his partner, Robert, during the White Rose Murder investigation.

The two RHD detectives were closely followed by the two Sheriff's Department investigators from West Hollywood Station, Jesus Marquez and Kevin Brubaker.

The FBI and ATF agents were easily recognizable when they entered. The two FBI agents, Tanisha Jackson and Max Neelson, were wearing what appeared to Alex to be virtually matching dark blue suits. The ATF agents, Steve Mijares and Dan Levenstein, were dressed more casually in khaki pants and polo shirts.

Within minutes the door opened once again and Commander Freeman entered, followed by a second man in a suit that Alex pegged as another FBI type. When next individual walked through the door, Alex's breath caught. Standing before her was none other than Richard Morrison, Sydney's ex-fiancé. Alex shifted nervously and looked down at the surface of the table in front of her.

The last suit to enter introduced himself as Dale Miller, the Special Agent in Charge of the FBI's Los Angeles office. He introduced Commander Freeman, who said a few brief words, then identified Richard Morrison, the U.S. Attorney who'd been assigned to provide legal support and advice.

After formal introductions were made around the room, Richard Morrison took the opportunity to make some self-serving statements.

"The U.S. Attorney's office sent me here to ensure there would be no mistakes in this investigation. The viability of a federal prosecution should be your primary consideration in everything you do. I'm sure many of you have never handled a case of this caliber before. That's why I'm here."

Alex almost laughed out loud when she glanced over at Chuck and watched him cross his arms and lean back in his chair, his body language clearly expressing his dissatisfaction. Chuck had been a detective for over a decade, working his way into the LAPD's most elite investigative unit. He'd worked high profile organized crime cases and serial rape and murder cases. He'd been putting criminal cases together probably since before Morrison was even in law school. She was sure all of the agents and detectives here were selected to represent their agencies because of their investigative experience and proven talent. They were undoubtedly, as the saying went, the cream of the crop, and Morrison was showing absolutely no personal or professional respect for any of them.

Alex looked around the room at the other task force members, trying to gauge their response to Morrison. Few of the occupants looked the slightest bit impressed by his bluster, yet the egotistical U.S. Attorney droned on.

"No one should take any action without my review and guidance." Alex saw Commander Freeman's eyebrows rise a little bit at that comment, and she could've sworn she saw the FBI Special Agent in Charge roll his eyes. "I'll review every report and every warrant application and tell you every arrest that needs to be made."

At this point, apparently having heard enough, and noticing the disenchanted, and in some cases angry, looks on the faces of some of the task force personnel, the Special Agent in Charge, Miller, stepped in.

"Thank you, Mr. Morrison. Special Agent Jackson will be taking investigative lead for us on this task force, but we stress this is a team effort," the SAC stated. "Commander Freeman and I, in conjunction with the Sheriff's chain of command and the ATF, have been very careful about the personnel we selected for this task force. We don't want petty turf wars or egos getting in the way. You've all been selected because we have confidence in your ability to work on such a collaborative effort. Don't let us down. Now, Agent Jackson, please feel free to take over the briefing." The attractive African-American woman stood and moved to the front of the room to begin the briefing.

She spent the next several hours covering a very thorough overview of the three bombings and the evidence that had been collected. Photos and forensic reports were handed out for review. Then Jackson rose again to address the team.

"All right, why don't we talk about partners and work assignments. We expect you to work well together and respect one another. Commander Freeman and I don't want to see any stove-piping here with information. Everything gets shared. We have seasoned agents and detectives here, the best in the business, you all know what needs to get done and how to do it."

She paused and Alex saw her glance toward Morrison as if emphasizing the last statement. "The federal agents and detectives will work with their regular partners, no need to change that up. We'll be working an early day watch shift and then an afternoon to night swing shift to cover about eighteen hours of the day. Obviously, as things develop we'll adjust to the needs of the investigation." She looked around the room, receiving nods from everyone, then continued.

"As you know, we have a contingent of officers from the LAPD and deputies from the L.A. County Sheriff's Department. While not detectives, they were all chosen because they're seasoned officers with strong investigative as well as tactical backgrounds. They'll be assisting with canvassing areas and conducting preliminary interviews, and they'll be taking lead on any tactical operations or warrant services that may come into play. That's what they're here for and what they do best." Agent Jackson approached Alex and placed her hand on Alex's shoulder.

“Sergeant Chambers will be supervising all the uniformed personnel. I want to emphasize that. You detectives and federal agents call the shots on the investigative avenues. She calls the shots on anything tactical and will make any plans for warrant service or arrests.”

Alex saw several heads nod and noticed everyone seemed satisfied with that statement, until her eyes met Morrison’s. It was evidently now his turn to not look impressed. She wondered if it was because she was a local officer, a woman, a lesbian, or perhaps something else completely. She figured only time would tell.

LATER IN THE afternoon Alex walked out of the office building the task force had rented space in and saw a figure leaning against her vehicle. She paused momentarily when she recognized the woman and a smile overtook her features.

“Hey, jarhead,” the woman said as Alex approached.

“Squid,” Alex responded with the somewhat derogatory reference to the Naval service as the two embraced. “Long time no see. What the hell are you doing here?” Alex asked when they stepped apart.

“I’m working for the Associated Press now. I’m here on a story and figured I’d look you up.”

Alex’s eyebrows rose at this, though she had the sense not to ask how Sam’s ability to look her up had led to her identifying her city car and the unlisted location of the temporary task force office.

“Uh-huh,” she said instead. “And exactly what story is it you’ll be working on while you’re here?”

Sam smiled. “Well, how about I tell you all about that while you buy me a beer.”

Fifteen minutes later they were comfortably ensconced in a booth at the Vortex lounge.

“You know this place?” Sam asked.

“Yeah, I’ve been here a few times.”

“I’ve come here a couple times since I got here last week. I like the scenery,” Sam said with a roguish smile.

“Oh, yeah. I’ll bet you do.” Alex couldn’t help but smile in return as she thought back to some of the adventures they had experienced together in their younger, single years. “Haven’t lost your touch, huh?” she said.

“I try to maintain my youthful exuberance for life.”

“So, what’s this Associated Press gig?” Alex finally asked after their beers arrived at the table. Sam pulled a business card from her wallet and slid it across the table. Alex picked up the card and read the name on it. Her eyebrows rose again. She looked back up at Sam, took a drink of her beer and said nothing.

“If you were to check you’d find my name as a contributing reporter on several A.P. news articles over the past few years,” Sam said innocently.

“Oh, I’m sure I would,” Alex said, barely keeping her eyes from rolling. “And let me guess, you’re here to work on a story about the bombings?” Sam nodded. “For the Associated Press?” Sam only raised her own eyebrows as she drained her glass in one deep swallow.

“If I were to ask who you really work for would the answer be anywhere near the truth?” Sam shrugged, this time with a smile emerging on her face.

“Uh-huh. That’s kind of what I thought,” Alex said, also with a smile. “Well, Ms. Black,” this time Alex raised two fingers on each hand indicating the air quotes around the name. “How

about you buy the next round and you can tell me all kinds of lies about what you've been doing for the last eight or nine years."

An hour later they were still reminiscing about their time together in the service when Sam switched gears. "So, how do you feel about your task force? Everyone seem competent?"

"Yeah, actually, everyone seems pretty solid. Except..." Alex paused and looked down at the table.

"Except?" Sam prodded.

Alex took a deep breath. "There's one guy, the U.S. Attorney assigned to advise the task force."

"A piece of work, huh?"

Alex leaned back and rolled her eyes, then took a big swallow of beer.

"You've met him before?"

Alex shook her head. "Nope, never met him. But I've seen his picture. He used to be..." She paused, searching for a way to describe it. "He used to be involved with someone I'm now involved with. I've always wondered," Alex said, changing the subject before Sam could inquire further. "What made you leave the Navy? I always thought there was a chance you'd be a lifer."

"I got an offer for a job I was interested in," Sam replied, not really meeting her eyes. "It was an opportunity to see the world in a different capacity...and there was nothing left to hold me back."

There was a long pause following that statement, finally broken by Alex. "You know, just for the record, I never believed any of that story...about you assaulting the admiral's daughter. I always knew it was bullshit."

Sam merely shrugged.

Alex could see it was a topic Sam wasn't comfortable with. She'd said what she felt needed saying so she changed the subject.

"So, the Associated Press gave you an opportunity to see the world, huh?" she asked with a devilish smile.

Sam reached for the pitcher and topped off each of their glasses. "Something like that."

"Uh-huh, and—"

"Well, hello there."

Alex was interrupted by Sam's quiet exclamation. She looked up to see Sam's eyes locked on something across the bar. Alex turned and looked in the same direction and her eyes came to rest on two beautiful women who had just entered the bar. The two of them, one blonde and one with auburn hair, were both slim and exceptionally attractive. The heads of several women in the bar turned in their direction as they wove their way amongst the tables heading in Alex and Sam's general direction.

Alex looked back at Sam and noted her eyes hadn't left the duo.

"Wow," Sam said just loud enough for Alex to hear. "How do I convince one of them to keep me company tonight?"

Alex quickly put her beer glass to her lips in order to conceal her smile of amusement.

SAM WATCHED THE beautiful duo approach then rose from the booth.

“Ladies,” Sam said as she stood partially blocking their progress. She indicated to Alex who remained seated. “My friend and I were wondering if we could interest you in joining us for drinks.”

The auburn haired lady looked back at her blonde companion then turned back to Sam. “Just drinks, huh?” she asked with a slightly amused grin and a sparkle in her eye.

A surge of optimism sped through Sam. “Nothing says we have to stop at drinks.”

The woman glanced once again at her blonde companion, who didn’t seem anywhere near as amused as she was.

“I don’t know about you,” she said, “but I’m kind of turned on by the quiet one.” With that she moved past Sam to Alex’s side of the booth, knelt on the bench seat and leaned toward the seated woman. She grasped Alex by the back of the neck, capturing her in a passionate kiss.

Sam watched Alex’s body stiffen briefly in shock, her hand tightening around the beer glass she’d been holding. Moments into the assertive move Alex relaxed her grip on the glass and returned the kiss with equal passion and enthusiasm.

Sam’s stomach did a slight somersault in excited anticipation as she turned back to the gorgeous blonde. The second half of the eye-catching duo had taken a nonchalant pose with one shoulder leaning on the wood partition dividing the booths as she watched the lengthy kiss between Alex and her companion with a mildly amused look on her face. Sam had recognized her instantly from breakfast at the French Market Café .

Sam took a step toward her and reached for her waist. “How about you and I—”

The blonde crossed her arms and gave Sam a look clearly meant to dissuade any advances. “Don’t even think about it.”

Sam took a step back when she saw the fierceness in the woman’s incredible green eyes. She heard giggling behind her and turned to the two occupants of the booth. The passionate kiss came to an end and the auburn haired hottie was now seated beside Alex, leaning casually into Alex’s embrace as Alex kept a possessive arm draped around her body. Sam noticed how together they looked, how comfortable. She knew instantly they were a couple and that she’d been duped.

“Shit,” she said. Then she turned back to the green eyed blonde and raised her hands in a gesture of surrender. “I’m sorry, I was just trying—”

“I’m quite aware of what you were trying to do,” the woman said. “The same thing you’ve done the last couple nights you’ve been in here. Apparently succeeding with several women whose standards are clearly far below mine.” She shook her head. “Well, not tonight, and definitely not me, hotshot.”

Sam was at first shocked by the words, then her ego stepped up and took control. “So you’ve noticed me when I’ve been here before, huh?” she said with a crooked smile. “And you’ve noticed who I’ve left with.” Sam leaned closer and lowered her voice. “Perhaps part of you wished you were one of those women?”

“Please!” Came the exasperated response. “You’ve been hitting on just about anything female with a heartbeat. That kind of desperation is hard to miss.” She turned to the other two women who watched the exchange in amused silence.

“Chardonnay, Syd?” she asked.

“That’d be great, Court,” Sydney replied. Courtney picked up the now empty beer pitcher and looked at Alex with a question in her eyes. Alex nodded in agreement and Courtney moved away from the table.

Sam watched the green eyed wonder, who she now knew was “Court,” make her way across the club and then behind the bar. Courtney nodded and exchanged greetings with the two bartenders there as she filled a new pitcher of beer and then poured a glass of wine. Sam couldn’t help but admire the trim body and well proportioned derriere beneath the jeans that were just tight enough to show it off. Then she sighed, shook her head and slid back into her seat. She looked at the two women seated across the table from her.

“That was cruel,” she finally said, looking back and forth between them. “And you’ve been holding out on me, Chambers.”

Alex smiled then made introductions. “Syd, meet Samantha—”

“Black, Samantha Black,” Sam interrupted as she extended a hand across the table. She saw Alex pause briefly with a questioning look on her face in response to her fabricated last name, but then her friend continued the introduction.

“Sam was with the United States Navy, now with the Associated Press. We knew each other in the service and now she’s here trying to exploit me for a story on the bombings. Sam, meet my girlfriend, Sydney Rutledge, Assistant District Attorney.”

“So, Ms. Rutledge...” Sam began.

“Please, it’s Syd.”

“Syd.” Sam smiled and winked at Alex as Alex rolled her eyes. “May I ask who your gorgeous green eyed companion is?” She nodded toward the bar where Courtney was speaking with the various bartenders and cocktail waitresses.

“That’s Courtney Brennan. She owns the place.”

“This place? She owns it?”

Sydney nodded in the affirmative.

Sam looked back in Courtney’s direction, clearly impressed and intrigued.

“We both volunteer at the Hollywood LGBT Center, that’s how Alex and I know her. That’s where the two of us came from this evening,” Sydney added.

At that moment Courtney came from behind the bar and made her way back to their table, bringing with her Sydney’s glass of wine and a fresh pitcher of beer. She put the wine down in front of Sydney and the beer in the middle of the table.

“Enjoy, ladies,” she said, aiming the comment pointedly at Alex and Sydney, virtually ignoring Sam on the other side of the table. “I’ve got paperwork to take care of in the office, so I’ve got to go. Good seeing you, Alex. Syd, I’ll meet you tomorrow evening at the Center?”

“Yep, see you then,” Sydney said as Courtney departed.

“Be right back,” Sam said hurriedly as she rose to follow Courtney toward the base of the steps leading to the small second floor landing and the door marked “Private.” As Courtney began to ascend the steps Sam spoke up.

“Excuse me, Ms. Brennan?”

Courtney turned and looked at Sam.

“I just wanted to say thanks for the beer,” Sam said. Then she put on her most charming smile. “Can I buy you a drink in return to show my appreciation?”

“I own the place,” Courtney said. “I can drink for free anytime.” She turned to continue up the stairs.

“Well that’s okay. We’ll skip drinks and I’ll take you to dinner,” Sam said, leaning nonchalantly against the stair rail. “I promise you won’t be disappointed.”

Courtney rolled her eyes as she turned once again to Sam. “Unlike the women you’ve scored with the last couple nights, I’m not desperate for sex or enchanted by your good looks and

charm. I like a little more...substance. I assure you, you're wasting your time." She continued quickly up the stairs, entering through the door marked "private" and shutting it behind her without turning back.

MEANWHILE, ALEX AND Sydney were discussing Sam's efforts.

"What do you think of that?" Sydney said as she watched Sam follow Courtney.

"Not a chance," Alex replied, not even bothering to watch. She reached for the pitcher of beer to refill her glass. "Courtney's way out of Sam's league."

"How well do you know Sam?"

Sydney thought she saw a look of concern, almost guilt, in Alex's eyes for a brief second before her expression became neutral once again.

"We were together in Iraq and a few other places," Alex said.

"But you said she was Navy. You were a Marine." Sydney knew there was more to the story, and was aware once again that she knew very little about what Alex had done in the military.

"She was Navy intelligence and I was Marine Corp intel. We were assigned together in a joint command. We ran into each other a few more times on assignments and exercises when I was still in the reserves. She left the Navy after I left the Marines. Evidently she took a job reporting for the Associated Press. I haven't seen her in several years." Sydney nodded, choosing to accept the explanation but knowing there was probably something more to the story. Eventually, she hoped, Alex would feel comfortable enough to open up to her more.

They both looked up and watched as Sam made her way back to the booth and took her seat across from them.

"So, how'd that work out for you?" Alex asked with a smile as she refilled Sam's glass from the pitcher.

Sam reached for the glass and took a large taste then leaned back in the seat. "She thinks I'm good looking and charming," she said with a roguish smile.

Sydney laughed as two thoughts crossed her mind. One was that these two women must have been terrors on the club scene when they were together in their younger years. The second had to do with a certain blonde friend of hers and what the future may hold for her and the woman seated across from her.

LATER THAT NIGHT, after leaving the club, Sydney and Alex were snuggled together in front of the television in Sydney's den.

"So, what are your first impressions of your task force?" Sydney asked. She leaned with her head on Alex's chest and Alex's arm wrapped around her shoulders.

"Everyone seems pretty squared away. I already knew one of our officers assigned. Chuck and Rob Kim are on board for RHD. The Sheriff guys seem like team players. Even the FBI guys seem okay, you know, for FBI guys. There was one little surprise."

"Oh?" Sydney looked up at Alex, waiting for her to continue.

"The U.S. Attorney assigned to advise the task force..." Alex paused when she felt Sydney tense slightly. "It's Mr. Richard Morrison."

Sydney lifted her head and looked at Alex. "He's here for your task force?"

Alex nodded but said nothing more as she watched Sydney's reaction.

"I knew he was in town." She put her head back down on Alex's chest. "He called me and told me he'd be in L.A. for a while. He didn't say exactly why he was here, but he did mention a task force I think. I should have put two and two together. Is this going to make things difficult?"

"No. It's no big deal," Alex said. "I'm sure I can avoid him if I need to." Alex didn't mention that she knew Richard had done more than call Sydney. She wondered why Sydney would withhold that information and it made her a little uncomfortable.

Chapter Four

TUESDAY IN THE late morning Alex met with the rest of the team at the task force offices for a briefing on the developments of the last twenty-four hours. The forensic examinations and tests revealed that the explosive used in the latest bombing was the same as the two prior, Triacetone Triperoxide. The compound, known as TATP or “the mother of Satan,” was made infamous when it was used in the 2005 London subway bombings. It was easy to make using completely legal chemicals purchased from home improvement and beauty supply stores.

The detectives from LAPD’s ATS and the FBI were interviewing everyone who had been at the center that day and no one reported seeing any packages, boxes or bundles near the front desk. The current presumption, based on blast patterns, was that the device had been concealed within something near the front counter, possibly a small rack of pamphlets with information on such things as AIDS/HIV testing and suicide hot lines.

The investigators had pulled information and compiled files on about a dozen right-wing anti-gay extremists who were known to live in or near the Los Angeles area. Each of the task force officers was provided copies of those electronic files, and they all spent several hours reviewing them in detail. As Alex read each one she sent the photo and specific details to her phone for easy access.

The Chief of Police and the Mayor were going to hold a town hall style meeting in Hollywood that night to address the public concerns over the bombings. Alex, along with the other LAPD officers, intended to be there early to check the location for any threats, attend the meeting and get a feel for the community’s state of mind. Alex already knew that Sydney would be there, likely with several other staff and volunteers from the Hollywood LGBT Center.

“HOW ARE THINGS going in L.A., Sam?” Elena said when the telephone was answered.

“Okay. I’m wondering if you’ve picked up anything we haven’t regarding the forensic analysis? Anything I haven’t heard yet?” Sam asked. The evidence had been collected and submitted to the federal lab for analysis.

“Nothing so far, Sam,” she answered. “But you know how this works. The compound probably won’t be traceable. It’ll be components purchased at any hardware store and beauty supply store, mixed together from directions anyone can download off the internet.”

“I don’t know. It seems real clean for some local crazy with a hate complex,” Sam finally said.

“Well, it’s the same easy-to-make compound used around the world, from Iraq and Afghanistan to Europe. And TATP isn’t completely unheard of here. All I can tell you for certain is we’ve got no reports or chatter regarding anyone claiming responsibility.”

“Yeah. Okay. Well, let me know right away if anything at all pops up. I’ll keep you informed from this end.”

ALEX DIDN'T SHOW any surprise when Sam asked for details about the community meeting, nor was she surprised to see her when she showed up at the meeting before it started.

At shortly after seven that night, they were standing in the back of the Hollywood community auditorium as the first community members began filtering in. Sydney and Courtney were among the first to arrive. Sydney made her way directly to them and Courtney followed slowly behind.

"Hey, you," Sydney said.

"Hey, babe." Alex pulled Sydney into her arms and kissed her briefly.

"Sergeant, aren't you on duty?" Sydney said, surprised by the public display of affection.

"Shhh, I'm undercover as a lesbian," Alex said in an exaggerated whisper. "I'm just trying to fit in."

"Oh, I see," Sydney replied with a grin.

"Ms. Brennan." Sam nodded to Courtney as she joined them, unable to conceal the slightly devilish smile as she gazed into her beautiful green eyes.

"Hey, Alex." Courtney gave Alex a smile that she promptly removed from her face as she turned toward Sam. "Ms. Black." Courtney simply nodded at Sam.

"I'm going to grab a cup of coffee. Anyone want anything?" Courtney asked.

"No, thanks," Sydney said.

"I'm good," Alex chimed in.

Courtney didn't wait for a reply from Sam as she moved toward a table off to the side of the auditorium where coffee was being served.

"I'll catch up with you in a few minutes," Sam said to Alex, then moved to follow Courtney.

WHEN SHE ARRIVED at the table, Sam silently filled a cup from the large coffee dispenser then drifted over to the creamers and sugar packets where Courtney was stirring the contents of her paper cup. Courtney noticed Sam's arrival but made no move to leave.

Sam leaned closer to Courtney. "So, you were curious enough to ask Ms. Rutledge about me, huh?" she said quietly.

"What are you talking about?"

"Well, you've obviously learned a little bit more about me than I shared, so I'm assuming you asked your friend Sydney, girlfriend of my protégé, Alex," Sam said, a smile on her face. "So you're curious? Just a little interested, maybe?"

Courtney rolled her eyes in an exaggerated fashion, refusing to admit she in fact had asked Sydney about Sam.

"You have a very high opinion of yourself, Ms. Black," was all Courtney said before turning and making her way back toward Sydney and Alex.

SYDNEY AND ALEX watched Sam head over to the coffee table at the side of the room. Alex laughed quietly as Sam casually gathered a cup and coffee and drifted closer to Courtney who was standing near the creamer selection at the end of the table.

“I wonder how long it’ll take before those two hook up,” Sydney muttered.

“What are you talking about?” Alex asked in surprise. “I told you Sam doesn’t stand a chance. There’s no way she’s Courtney’s type. Courtney’s more settled. She’s been burned before. She’s not going to take a chance on someone like Sam. Sam’s too much of a player.”

“I seem to recall someone else who was also quite a player up until not too long ago.” Sydney looked into Alex’s eyes and smiled.

“Please! Sam’s on a totally different level. The way I remember she’s never been interested in any kind of serious relationship. Courtney, on the other hand, has no interest in one night stands.” Alex looked over to see Sam lean in to say something to Courtney, who seemed shocked and shook her head. “You can’t be serious. You really think...?” Alex seemed to think about it for a second or two, then emphatically shook her head. “No way.”

“Come on, Alex. You don’t feel the sexual tension between those two? Trust me. Courtney’s interested. She may not want to admit it, but she’s most definitely interested. You mark my words.”

Alex watched as the interaction between the two women continued, then Courtney turned away from Sam, looking noticeably irritated. Alex turned back to Sydney. “Like I said, not a chance.”

“You are so misreading that. You just wait,” was all Sydney said before the two women joined them again.

As the four of them talked quietly, waiting for the community meeting to commence, Alex tried to pay closer attention to the body language between Courtney and Sam. She did begin to notice how Courtney’s eye would occasionally stray to Sam, who stood nearby watching people enter and occasionally scanning the growing crowd. Alex also noticed how Courtney hid her gaze, looking away when Sam’s eyes would swing back toward her. Likewise, Alex noticed the appraising glances Sam would send Courtney’s way when she knew the other woman wasn’t looking.

At one point Alex glanced at Sydney, who had obviously noticed the strange dance of alternating glances occurring between the other two. Sydney raised her eyebrows at Alex as if to say, “I told you so.” Alex gave her a slight shake of the head which essentially translated to, “That doesn’t prove anything.”

Suddenly a group of individuals walked through the door. They were dressed in business attire, unlike most of the occupants of the auditorium, and they moved with a certain air of self importance. Sydney, Courtney and Alex, all being from Los Angeles, recognized the Mayor in the middle of the group and made the proper assumption that the rest of the suits were his entourage.

COURTNEY NOTICED THE group enter the meeting hall and was about to suggest that they all grab a seat when she glanced at Sam and saw the woman’s body stiffen and a cloud pass over Sam’s eyes. Following Sam’s line of sight, Courtney looked toward the Mayor’s group. When she looked back she saw Sam turn toward Alex.

“I need to get some air,” Courtney heard Sam say. “I’m gonna step outside for a few.” Sam left without waiting for a reply, heading out a side door rather than the main entry and foyer where the Mayor and his people still loitered. Courtney wondered what had caused that response and the momentary look of some unpleasant emotion pass across Sam’s face. Was it pain?

Uncertainty? It was gone almost as quick as it appeared, and had Courtney not been looking at that precise moment she would have missed it. Still another part of her wondered why she was concerned. After all, it wasn't as if the woman interested her.

SAM MADE HER way out one of the side doors into the parking lot, stopping to lean on the wall and take a few deep breaths. She certainly hadn't expected to run into that woman here. Sam knew she hadn't handled it well, but seeing Christina came as a shock. Sam kicked herself as she realized she had pretty much fled like a little baby, running from her own past.

Eight years prior Christina had simply been the youngest daughter to a rear admiral. Now, she apparently had a job in politics. A job noteworthy enough to ingratiate herself with the staff of the Mayor of Los Angeles. It was a chance thing, a fluke, and it was the last thing Sam had been prepared for. She shook it off and started moving, figuring she'd take a walk then return to the auditorium quietly, avoiding the Mayor's party at all costs.

Forty-five minutes later Alex and Sam were standing at the rear of the auditorium once again, listening in on the question and answer session. Alex leaned over to Sam and said quietly, "I saw your reaction earlier and took a closer look at the Mayor's group. I think I put two and two together."

Sam shrugged, her face masked in nonchalance. She turned back to the audience and Mayor on stage in front of the microphone. Alex continued to speak.

"I asked around. Christina Perry is now on the staff of a local Congressman. He's coming in from D.C. sometime in the next week or so. She came ahead and has been assigned to liaison with local and state officials. She's here tonight with the Mayor's people to evidently get an idea of what the community feels." Alex looked over at Sam. "You okay?" she asked after a few moments.

"It was a long time ago. It's done. I'll deal," Sam said, her eyes never leaving the stage and podium.

Before Alex could inquire any further she was interrupted by her phone vibrating in her pocket.

"Chambers," she answered quickly. She listened for a few seconds then covered the phone and leaned toward Sam. "I'm going to need to leave," she said quietly before turning back to the phone call to collect the information. "Can you get Syd and Courtney for me?"

Sam made her way quietly down the side aisle of the auditorium. Fortunately Courtney and Sydney had taken seats near the back along the very edge. She crouched down and tapped Sydney lightly on the shoulder. She caught the eye of both ladies and motioned for them to rise and follow her. They met Alex in the empty foyer just as she was getting off the phone.

"There's been another bombing," Alex said. "They hit a club called Escapades in West Hollywood. It went off about twenty minutes ago. Set up under the owner's car in the parking lot. There are at least three people dead, several others have been critically injured."

"Oh, God. Do you know who? Do you know the names of the injured?" Courtney asked. As a club owner in the relatively close-knit gay community, she knew most of the other owners and managers.

"I don't have any specifics yet," Alex said, shaking her head. She took Sydney by the hand. "Look, I'm not comfortable with the way this is developing. You guys came together right? From the Center?"

They both nodded in response.

“I drove,” Sydney said.

“My car’s still at the Center,” Courtney added.

“That’s what I thought.” Alex turned to Sydney. “Why don’t you head home? I can take Courtney back to the Center to pick up her car.”

Sydney shook her head. “Nonsense. It’s practically on my way home anyway. I can take Court to pick up her car.”

Alex didn’t look happy, but acquiesced without too much of an argument. “Okay. But I’ll follow you there and see you guys out of the lot and on your way.” She turned to Courtney. “I’m going to follow you back to check out your club, then I need to get to West Hollywood.”

“I’ll follow you, Alex,” Sam interjected. “I’ll give you a hand at the Vortex then I’m following you to the location in WeHo.

Then you can honestly say you didn’t tell anything to the press.”

Less than ten minutes later Sydney’s Mercedes pulled into the parking lot to the rear of the Greater Hollywood LGBT Center and pulled up beside Courtney’s white Audi A5. Alex and Sam pulled into the lot behind them and parked, then both exited. Alex walked to Sydney’s driver’s door as she rolled down the window. Alex bent down and leaned on the open windowsill.

“I really wish you’d reconsider your work here for a while,” she said. “This is getting crazy, more brazen and more deadly each time.” Alex took Sydney’s hand and kissed it. “I don’t want you getting caught in the middle of this, Syd.”

“Alex, I…” Sydney’s first reaction was to argue the point, but she could see the sincere concern in Alex’s eyes. “I’ll think about it, okay? We’ll talk more.”

Alex knew that was likely the greatest concession she was going to get at the moment, so she accepted it, leaned in through the window and kissed Sydney before she straightened up and waved as Sydney drove from the lot.

Meanwhile, Sam had exited and followed Courtney to her nearby vehicle.

“Ms. Brennan,” she said as Courtney opened the door of her Audi. “Your club is also a potential target. You heard what Alex said, they targeted the club owner’s car. Have you thought about a little extra security?” she asked.

“I’ll think about it,” she said.

Sam seemed about to say more, then stopped herself and simply nodded. “We’ll follow you to the club,” she said, then walked back to her car and re-entered. The small caravan left moments later, all following behind Courtney’s Audi.

Courtney led the way into the rear parking lot of Club Vortex, which was fairly full considering the weeknight. Both the lounge and the club seemed to be doing decent business for a Tuesday night.

“You want to check the parking lot and I’ll walk the perimeter?” Sam asked Alex after they parked and exited their cars.

“Roger that,” Alex said as they moved apart. She smothered her emerging smile when she heard Sam’s next statement.

“And someone should talk to Ms. Brennan about some precautions.”

SAM WORKED HER way around the entire club, checking for anything suspicious. She paid especially close attention to areas that could conceal a device and shined a flashlight under the vehicles parked in spaces adjacent to the building. When she had made a full circle of the building she returned to the parking lot to find Courtney leaning against her car in the reserved parking space near the back entry door to the lounge. Sam saw Alex's flashlight beam inspecting vehicles in the far corner of the parking lot.

"Are you going to be here the whole night? Until closing?" Sam asked.

"Yes, and maybe a little later," Courtney replied.

"Will anyone be here with you after closing?"

"Maybe for a little while."

"You need to be careful when you leave, especially if you're alone," Sam said.

"Really, Ms. Black," Courtney's tone was defensive as she responded. "I've been running this place for a long time. I don't think I need a reporter telling me how to close my club after last call."

"I don't mean to tell you how to run your business," Sam said quietly. "I'm just saying, be careful. When you leave each night maybe take a look around before you come out. Maybe remind your people to keep an eye out for anything unusual. It's their safety as well. And be sure to do a quick inspection of your car before you get in it." Sam shrugged her shoulders. "I would think about a modern camera system as well. It won't hurt to be a little careful, considering..." She didn't complete the sentence.

"Very well," she finally said with a sigh. "I appreciate the advice. I'll talk to my employees."

"Looks good," Alex said as she approached. "I've gotta head out," she added.

"Okay," Sam said, then turned to Courtney.

"Have a good evening," she said simply, then walked to her waiting car.

Courtney was flustered by her strong reaction to the woman. Sam had only been giving her some sound advice and expressing polite concern. And she was right, Courtney should be considering the safety of her employees. But for some reason this woman caused Courtney to have such strong emotions. She watched the two women drive from the parking lot, now more confused than ever about her reaction and feelings about Sam. She turned and entered the lounge, trying unsuccessfully to drive all thoughts of the woman from her mind.

WHEN ALEX PULLED up to the club in West Hollywood she experienced a momentary flashback to a place half way around the world and almost a decade ago. Alex looked over at Sam, who had followed her from their vehicles to the perimeter of the crime scene marked off by yellow tape. Sam stood there, showing little emotion, taking it all in stride. This was a familiar scene to her as well, though this time it was here, in the United States. This wasn't a military recruiting post in Afghanistan or a police station or a street market bombing in Iraq.

The hulking remains of what had once been a car, surrounded by other heavily damaged vehicles, stood in stark testimony to the power of the blast. Three bodies were covered with white sheets, and the discarded evidence of medical equipment packaging and bloody clothing revealed the valiant effort by paramedics to save numerous other victims. That battle continued at nearby hospitals where they now knew seven other victims had been transported.

"This is bad, Sam," Alex said quietly. "This isn't an empty office building after it's closed for the day and these victims weren't unintended collateral damage. This is a busy club during an

evening social hour. I guess we should be thankful it was early, rather than after last call when everyone would have been coming out to their cars.”

Sam nodded. “Whoever it is, they’re getting more brazen.”

Alex looked around the scene, then moved under the tape and walked over to what seemed to be a discarded and broken piece of electronics lying nearby. She stood over it and looked down, then glanced up toward the roofline and over the door.

After looking around for a couple more minutes she drifted back to where Sam stood outside the tape. No investigator would knowingly allow a reporter into the crime scene.

“I think that’s what’s left of a security camera,” she said, nodding to what might have been the mounting bracket over the door to the club. “I wonder what the chances are that we got lucky and there’s something on the security footage?”

Hours later she had her answer. They did get lucky, and there was something on the video footage, but it wasn’t much.

By five a.m. Alex’s eyes were like sandpaper as she finally leaned away from her computer monitor, forced to admit that any further work was pointless as she was too tired to be sure she wasn’t going to miss a crucial observation. She gathered her equipment, having already decided she had one more business call to make before her work was done.

Twenty minutes later Alex plugged the thumb drive into Sam’s laptop computer as she sat down on the couch in Sam’s recently rented corporate condo.

“Here’s what we got,” she said as she allowed the video to play. It ran all the way through the recording. Sam reset it and allowed it to run all the way through a second time. She then leaned back in her seat as Alex looked at her for a reaction. Alex finally broke the silence.

“Sam,” she said with a sigh. “I know this A.P. cover is bullshit. I know you’re still in the game, though I admit I’m not sure who for.” Alex leaned forward and unplugged the thumb drive. “At least you better be, ‘cause if you’re not I’m seriously fired for this.” She handed Sam the thumb drive. “Let me know what you find out.” With that Alex retrieved her jacket and walked out of the condo without looking back.

FORTY-FIVE MINUTES LATER Sydney entered the diner just a few blocks from the courthouse. She’d been on her way downtown when Alex called her and they agreed to meet for breakfast. Sydney made her way to a table near the back of the diner and sat down across from Alex, noting the haggard look and bloodshot eyes.

“You should be at home in bed.” She sat down and took Alex’s hand. “You look exhausted. You’ve been up all night?”

Alex nodded. “We pulled the security footage from the club. We’ve been going through it all night. We’ve got a suspect planting the bomb on video, but he was either very lucky or very careful. We’d never be able to I.D. him from that video. So we spent all night reviewing video from prior days to see if we see him again, or anything else suspicious. Maybe he cased the place or something.” She shook her head. “Nothing so far.”

“Was there anything left at the scene that may be beneficial, other than the video recording?”

Alex shrugged. “A piece of a possible cell phone the bomb experts think may have been the timing device or initiator. Some fragments of fabric that was likely the small duffel bag we saw him placing under the car on the video. That’s about it. The bomb guys think it was a different explosive. Might be military grade.”

“Are you back on later today?”

Alex nodded. “I’ll meet up with the rest of the team at four this afternoon. I don’t know if we’ll take another crack at the video tape or go back out and canvass some potential targets.”

They paused briefly to give the waitress their order. Once the waitress had collected the menus and walked away, Sydney reached across the table again and squeezed Alex’s hand.

“I saw the news footage last night and this morning,” she said quietly. “It looked terrible.”

“There were three dead at the scene. They lost another one at the hospital.” Alex took Sydney’s hand in both of hers and gazed up into Sydney’s eyes. “They’re clearly intent on causing fatalities now, not just property damage. Please tell me you’re reconsidering your work at the Center?”

Sydney had to admit to herself she was a little scared as well. Alex was right, the attacks were getting more blatant, more deadly. This wasn’t just a campaign of intimidation anymore. They were intentionally killing people. She saw concern in Alex’s eyes, her fear for Sydney’s safety. She gave Alex’s hand a reassuring squeeze.

“I won’t go to the Center without talking to you first. How’s that?”

Alex took a deep breath and nodded. “That’s probably the best I’m gonna get from you, huh?” Sydney smiled at her capitulation.

“Yes. Now eat.” Sydney nodded her thanks to the waitress who placed their breakfast in front of them. “We need to get some food in you then you need to get home to bed.”

AFTER ALEX LEFT her apartment, Sam looked at her watch and noted the time difference with the East Coast. She was just about to punch up the numbers when her phone rang. The caller I.D. showed a D.C. number she recognized. Elena must’ve been reading her mind.

“Sam, your latest bombing is all over the news,” Elena said.

“Yeah. I was out at the scene. I didn’t get as close a look as I would’ve liked, but it definitely looks like high-grade military stuff. Preliminary info right now indicates there may have been a remote detonation by cell phone. Tell me you’ve got something I can work with. Something here doesn’t feel right. I know it has all the makings of an individual homemade attack campaign. But it seems too clean, too careful. The average wack-job right-wing bomber would have made a mistake by this point. This is just too...professional. And how on Earth would a local have the connections for military grade explosives?”

“Yeah, I was monitoring the ATF testing of the explosives. It’s definitely military grade. It appears they’re tracing it back to a variety of Semtex, with certain chemical variables that indicate it may be part of a stockpile maintained in Africa. There was a notable theft there last year in Kenya. Initially the weapons and explosives were believed to have gone to a Somalian warlord.”

“Kenya? How would a right-wing extremist in the western U.S. get hooked up with military explosives from the African continent?”

“We’ve swept all the known arms dealers we know are operating in the western hemisphere and we’ve accounted for all of them and their activities over the past few months. Nothing indicates they’ve had any dealings in the North American region, and certainly no ties to Africa. Most of them are supporting the various narco-terrorist and anti-government rebels in Central and South America,” Elena said. “And no indications or chatter of anyone giving even guidance or training to anyone domestic. On the surface, except for the new explosives, this has all the

indications of a homegrown lone extremist. But I'm getting the same feeling you are. It's just too clean."

"Shit." Sam interrupted herself with a yawn. "So we've got nothing?"

"I didn't say that. But what I do have is very loose. We're talking major rum-int here," Elena said, referring to the phrase for "rumor intelligence," essentially unsubstantiated and uncorroborated chatter. "The Ghost is unlocated and hasn't been heard from in a while."

Sam's fuzzy brain cleared instantly. "If I remember right, the intel from eastern Europe theorized he may have relocated to Mexico, and there was some indication he'd made a few connections in Southern California. Rumor was he was trying to recruit Marines out of Pendleton to go mercenary for him. I didn't give it a lot of credence." Sam paused. "And we both know he's huge in North Africa and has been active in the Horn." The Horn of Africa, the area encompassing Somalia and Djibouti that had been a haven for warlords and pirates for decades. "Elena, he's got to be somehow connected or protected by the Agency or someone else. You know I didn't get myself burned. Someone gave me up."

"Yeah. Listen, Sam," Elena hesitated for a fraction of a second before continuing. "This whole thing, with all the outside interest in your operation, it's unusual. I still can't figure out who ordered it. So I started looking into things a bit more. Two years ago Congressman Jenkins from New York was apparently starting to sniff around and some say he threatened to propose a joint investigation into possible government involvement in grey market arms deals." Elena was referring to the intelligence community's—primarily the CIA's—borderline legal clandestine association with certain illicit arms dealers and other large scale international criminals, and the occasional drug cartel. This act of turning a blind eye to certain activities, or tacit approval, was argued to be necessary to infiltrate higher connections in order to fully disrupt such activities or organizations. But it was seen by many as an "end justifies the means" argument that resulted in more harm than good.

"That was the congressional investigation we heard was being initiated. But before he could officially propose his investigation and gain any ground he was killed in a vehicle accident," Elena continued. "A one car accident."

They were both silent after this revelation. Both were thinking about the coincidental timing of the "accident."

"Anyway," Elena said. "I was able to get a look at The Ghost's Agency file through the system. There's no current intel on him, his organization, or his possible location beyond your last report two years ago." Elena referred to the CIA's internal intelligence file that would have been maintained on such an individual of interest. "There should have been some kind of update or brief on him and his activities, or it should have at least been updated that his location and precise current activities remain unknown. But there's nothing. I can't tell who manipulated the file, but it was de-prioritized with no investigation or updates scheduled."

The comment hung in the air. They both knew what wasn't being said. This type of lack of apparent interest could indicate someone was protecting him. Someone with enough influence to avoid standard intelligence gathering missions to collect or interrupt his illicit international business.

"I don't like it, Elena," Sam finally said. "Even if he's not involved here, he's a big enough player that someone at the Agency should've been working a case file on him after I left. You're telling me there's nothing on his known activities or suspected interests? His communications? His possible associates? Something's not right here." Sam sensed Elena nodding her head in

agreement. "Listen," Sam went on, "send me what you can on him, at least the most current stuff we have."

"Will do. And, Sam, I don't have to tell you to keep this between us."

This avenue of investigation would not be shared with Stansfield or anyone else in the hierarchy of the CIA until they were comfortable with where they stood and exactly who could be trusted.

IT WAS ALMOST twenty-four hours later and after three o'clock in the morning when Alex entered Sydney's house in the hills above Hollywood. She'd crashed at the station and gotten several hours of sleep at one point in the midmorning, then worked almost two more full shifts continuing the review of video tape the day watch officers had obtained from various ATM's and other businesses in the area surrounding the previous day's bombing. The entire team had finally quit for the day after being unable to turn up anything of any apparent value. Alex had also left a message on Sam's cell phone but had yet to hear back from her. A small part of her couldn't help but wonder if she'd done the right thing sharing the video with Sam. But she was convinced that Sam was still engaged in the intelligence business and had connections and resources far beyond anything Alex had access to.

After parking her car in the garage she entered via the door into the main house. Alex placed her gun on the coffee table in Sydney's den and sat down on the couch. The visions of the bombing kept going through her mind, interspersed with disturbing mental pictures and flashbacks of previous scenes she'd witnessed during her military service overseas. While part of her ached to be with Sydney, she hesitated to go up the stairs to her sleeping lover's bedroom, not wanting to take those disturbing images with her. The experiences and observations of the last few days left her frustrated, tense and anxious. She felt the need to be close to Sydney, knew she needed that connection and to feel that healing bond. But she also knew a large part of her felt aggressive and wired, so she hesitated to venture up the stairs. Instead she sat, leaned forward on the couch with her head in her hands, her elbows resting on her knees as she tried to get control of her racing emotions.

SYDNEY LAY IN bed waiting for Alex to enter. She'd been sleeping only lightly, waiting for Alex's arrival. She was aware the moment the car pulled into the driveway and entered the garage. She rose from the bed and ventured down the spiral stairs leading from the master suite to the den on the floor below.

Sydney paused at the bottom of the stairs and looked at Alex's form on the couch. She sensed the tense muscles and even the barely controlled aggression that practically radiated off the woman. She'd seen Alex in this state before, usually after experiencing something disturbing at work. Sydney was more than aware of what this would likely lead to. She knew what Alex needed, what she craved. Alex needed to counter her experiences of death and destruction, torment, loss and chaos. She needed to feel alive and in control and Sydney was determined to provide that.

She approached Alex and stood quietly before her. Alex looked up at Sydney and grasped Sydney's hips. In the pale light streaming in through the window Sydney watched as Alex's eyes

turned rapidly to smoldering pits of want. The hands at her hips pulled Sydney gently toward Alex, who then lowered her head and buried her face against Sydney's stomach. One hand moved away from her hip to raise the light material of the t-shirt Sydney wore, baring her stomach which was kissed and suckled by Alex's warm lips.

After several moments Alex pulled away, gazing up at Sydney once again, desire clearly emanating from her.

"I need you," Alex said, her voice husky, demanding.

Sydney nodded. "I'm yours," she whispered.

The look of desire and demand in Alex's expression grew, if that was possible. Then Alex's hands dropped to the back of Sydney's thighs and she pulled first one and then the other forward. Sydney did as she was silently requested, dropping her knees to the couch on either side of Alex's thighs, straddling Alex and ultimately being seated on her lap as they faced one another. Alex's mouth went to Sydney's, her tongue demanding entry as her hands made their way under Sydney's t-shirt. One hand circled to the small of her back, supporting her as the second made its way up to her chest, palming one of her breasts and pinching at her nipple.

Alex's lips dropped to Sydney's throat, kissing and then suckling at the pulse point there. She leaned back, away from Sydney, then forcefully stripped the t-shirt over Sydney's head in one move, leaving her in only her lacy panties. Without hesitation Alex leaned back and took one of Sydney's nipples in her mouth.

Sydney writhed with desire as Alex aggressively took her nipple into her mouth and warm wetness flowed between her legs. Sydney was turned on by her lover's aggressive desires and wetness began to flow at the point between her legs. She ran her fingers through Alex's hair and groaned when Alex cupped her sensitive crotch then began to rub. Alex returned to Sydney's lips, her tongue again plunging into her mouth and moving in concert with her hand below. Without conscious thought Sydney's hips began to rock, driving into Alex's hand in an effort to increase the delicious contact. Alex moved her fingers to the edge of Sydney's lacy panties and pushed them aside, stroking her warm moist lips beneath. Sydney moaned and again pressed into the contact.

Within seconds, Alex had stripped her of her panties and Sydney was on her back on the couch, completely naked, as Alex came to rest on top of her. Their lips met and Alex kissed her forcefully, her hand returning to Sydney's engorged clit.

Alex was still fully clothed and Sydney reached down to pull Alex's t-shirt up. But strong hands quickly took her wrists and moved her arms over her head, holding them against the couch, removing all of Sydney's control. Alex's lips again closed over one of Sydney's nipples, sucking and tugging.

Sydney gasped, pushing her chest into Alex's lips and pulling against Alex's grip in a half-hearted effort to free her hands. Alex raked her fingers down the length of Sydney's body and plunged a finger into the moist folds between Sydney's legs. Sydney thrust her hips upward in response.

"Alex!"

She half screamed moments later when Alex entered her, now with two fingers, driving into her strongly and repeatedly as she continued to suck at Sydney's breast. Sydney wrapped her legs around Alex's hips, pulling their bodies together. Alex's hand between them drove into her with each thrust.

Alex responded by thrusting her own hips forward, growing in speed, her own need driving her on. She extended her thumb, allowing it to rake across Sydney's clitoris each time her fingers

drove into her. Turned on by her own complete lack of control and her lover's forceful passion, Sydney climaxed. Her muscles spasmed repeatedly around Alex's fingers as she continued to thrust, drawing out the orgasm as long as possible.

Alex's lips settled on Sydney's breast, then traced a trail of kisses back up Sydney's throat and jaw to her lips, kissing her deeply and passionately. Both were breathing deeply from the passion and exertion as they rested with their foreheads touching, neither speaking. Sydney groaned with the final spasm as Alex gently removed her fingers.

Alex laid kisses back down Sydney's throat and collarbone as Sydney's breathing slowed. Alex looked up and their eyes met, and Sydney thought for a moment she might have caught a slight look of worry or embarrassment in Alex's eyes. She leaned up to Alex and caught her lips in her own passionate kiss, sending as much reassurance as she could, then she guided Alex's head to lie on her chest, willing her to sleep.

INCESSANT BEEPING BROKE into Sydney's sleeping mind and she became aware of Alex's comforting weight between her legs and up her torso, Alex's head resting at her chest. She ran her hand across Alex's back and was confused by the feel of clothing she found there.

She opened her eyes to find herself in her den, lying on her couch, and the events of much earlier in the morning came back to her. She finally identified the beeping as her alarm clock, chiming from the master suite above her. She looked up at the clock over the fireplace mantle. Six-thirty a.m. The same sweeping gaze took in her panties, still hanging from her own ankle partially suspended off the edge of the couch. She couldn't help but smile, unable to deny the erotic pleasure she took in the experiences of just a couple hours prior, and hoping it had provided the release and relief Alex so obviously needed.

Sydney leaned her head down and kissed the crown of Alex's head, running one hand through the short sandy brown hair.

"Alex, hon," she said, rubbing Alex's back. "I need to get up and we need to get you into bed."

Alex lifted her head and took in her surroundings, then looked down, taking in Sydney's naked form and her own still fully clothed body. Sydney watched as an expression of confusion turned to recognition and then concern as Alex's eyes turned to hers.

"Oh, God! Syd, I'm sorry..." Alex started to rise, pushing herself up and off Sydney.

"Shhh." Sydney's fingers against her lips froze Alex's words momentarily, and her arm wrapped around Alex's shoulders kept her from pushing further away. "There's nothing to be sorry for."

"But I—"

"You didn't do anything I didn't want you to do, Alex."

Sydney pulled her back down to lie on top of her once again. "I gave myself to you freely." She leaned in and kissed Alex, trying to relieve her concern. "I welcomed it." She kissed Alex again. "And I knew you needed it."

Alex looked into her eyes for several seconds before replying.

"God, I so don't deserve you," she finally said. Then her head came down and her lips met Sydney's chest, laying gentle kisses as her lips made their way toward a nipple.

Sydney's body automatically responded and she arched her back into the caress before she realized and was able to stop herself. She recovered and brought both hands up to Alex's face, pulling her away from her breast to look her in the eye.

"Alex, as pleasant as this is, I really have to get up and get in the shower. And you need to get into a real bed and get some more sleep," she said with a smile. "Please don't start something we can't possibly finish because you'll just make my work day unbelievably frustrating."

Alex's forehead dropped against Sydney's chin and she chuckled quietly.

"Come on," Sydney said with a laugh of her own. She rose from the couch, forcing Alex to rise with her. She didn't miss the look of obvious admiration that crossed Alex's eyes as she stood naked before her.

"Nuh-uh," Sydney said, again reading Alex's mind as she pulled Alex to her feet as well. "You're going to bed."

"You don't hear me arguing, do you?" Alex said. She reached out to place a hand on Sydney's bare derriere. Sydney slapped Alex's hand away as she turned to the spiral staircase.

"To sleep, Alex. Come on, you need to get some more sleep." Sydney made her way up the stairs, where she led Alex to the bed. "We'll continue this at another time."

"Promise?" Alex said as Sydney helped her change into the boxer shorts and t-shirt she used as pajamas.

"Yes, I promise."

Alex climbed onto the bed and under the covers left turned down when Sydney had exited them much earlier that morning. Sydney leaned over and kissed her. "One thing, though." Alex's eyebrow rose in question as Sydney stood and began to walk to the bathroom. Sydney turned just before going through the doorway. "Next time, it's my turn to be in control," she said with a smile, then the bathroom door closed behind her.

"Oh, geez," the frustrated exhalation came through Alex's lips as her head dropped to the pillow.

Despite this, however, the exhaustion of the last several days took over and Alex was asleep once again when twenty minutes later Sydney exited the bathroom and moved to the walk-in closet to get dressed for the day. After dressing Sydney made her way to the bed, leaned down and gently pressed her lips to Alex's, then brushed the errant lock of hair from her forehead.

"Sleep well, Sergeant Chambers. And please be careful," she said before she rose and walked from the room.

Chapter Five

THURSDAY AFTERNOON FOUND Sydney working in her office after a long day of handling pre-trial motions in court. She was intent to catch up on her work and head home because she and Alex had plans for the evening. They hadn't seen each other since the very early morning tryst on her couch two days before. She was so engrossed in her work she didn't notice that someone had quietly entered her office.

"Hello, Sydney."

Sydney was startled out of her concentration and looked up to see Richard Morrison standing in her doorway holding a single red rose.

"Richard." She leaned back and took a deep breath to calm her irritation. "What are you doing here? And how did you get in?"

"Cathy remembers me, of course," he said, referring to the clerk who handled the front desk and played gatekeeper to the offices. He walked farther into her office, making his way around her desk as she rose. "I came to say hello and to bring you this," he handed her the rose. "And to follow up on making those dinner arrangements."

"I told you, Richard, dinner would be inappropriate. I'm involved with someone."

"Hmm." Richard's eyes glanced over Sydney's desk. "It can't be that serious," he said. "I don't see a photo of him."

"It is that serious," Sydney said, then took a deep breath. "And there is a photo."

Richard turned to look once again, moving past the photos of Sydney's deceased parents, the one of her and Tyler and another of her and her sister, Jennifer. His gaze stopped suddenly on the small framed photograph sitting in a position of prominence right next to Sydney's computer screen. It showed Alex standing behind Sydney with her arms around her in a close embrace, smiling together at the camera. It had been taken just a month prior on a warm spring day during a barbeque at their friends, Sal and Tiffany's house. It was Sydney's favorite photo of the two of them.

Richard picked up the picture.

"This photo?" he questioned as he looked at her. "A woman? You're involved with a woman?" Sydney nodded without replying.

Richard looked back at the photo, scrutinizing it more closely and suddenly realizing he recognized the short haired woman in the photo. It was the LAPD sergeant he'd met the prior week at the task force meeting. The one he knew was with Sydney in the mountains when they were stalked by the serial murderer. When he'd heard about the attacks and read the news articles, he assumed they were with a group of friends, perhaps on a ski weekend.

"You have got to be kidding me! You're infatuated with her because of what happened in the mountains. Is that it? Or did she convince you that you owe her something because of what happened? Because she supposedly saved your life?"

Sydney shook her head emphatically. "No, Richard," she said with exasperation. "We were a couple before we ever even went to the mountains together. Listen, I don't have the time or

energy to discuss this with you. It's been a long day. I have work to do and I want to get out of here for the evening. I have a date." Sydney wasn't quite sure why she threw the last comment in.

Richard turned his eyes to the ceiling and took a deep breath.

"You're going to regret this," he said quietly. Not so much sounding like a threat as making it sound like a moral certainty. "This thing will never work," he said, indicating the frame as he put it down on her desk. "And it's a mistake you're going to pay for the rest of your career. Think of your reputation. Jesus, Syd! Someone has to save you from yourself and your silly feminine emotions."

"Get out, Richard!" She stood suddenly and stepped toward him, "God, just get out!" She projected such anger he actually stepped back and into her open doorway. Her slamming of the door managed to force him the rest of the way out into the hallway.

Sydney turned and leaned on the door, suddenly very tired and wishing Alex was there, wanting to feel her arms around her. She wasn't sure what to do about Richard and his overtures and pressure.

Several moments later there was a knock at the door. Sydney turned and opened it a crack, then stepped back after seeing who was there. She allowed Tyler to enter, and he closed the door behind him.

"Okay, what just happened here? I saw the great Mr. Morrison leaving after I heard your door slam, and he looked a little frazzled."

Sydney collapsed into her chair in frustration.

"That arrogant bastard barges in here uninvited and seems to think he's entitled to intrude on my life! Like he actually thinks we have a future or something. Do you believe this? I told him about Alex and tried to get him to understand how much of a pipedream his vision is. Then he proceeded to tell me how I'm ruining my reputation and my career."

"He always thought he was God's gift to everything and everyone," Tyler said, the dislike obvious in his tone. Then he smiled. "He must've loved hearing about you and Alex. Kind of sweet karma, though. Someone like him getting dumped and his ex-fiancé not just moving on but picking up with a woman." The last part Tyler added in a conspiratorial whisper with a smile on his face.

Sydney couldn't help but return the smile. Tyler could usually cheer her up. Then her look turned serious again.

"He keeps calling. I've been avoiding picking up the phone, but he leaves message after message and won't take a polite clue. He insists on trying to get me to go to lunch, to go to dinner, to meet him for coffee. I just hope that by being honest and laying it all out there he'll leave me alone."

"Did you tell Alex about him pressuring you?" Tyler finally asked. Sydney shook her head.

"With everything going on right now with the bombings and the task force, and the hours she's working, I can't do that. We're not seeing each other half as much as we'd like and she's exhausted with the hours she's working. I don't want to add to her stress. It'll just make her angry and she's likely to go off on him. You know he's advising her task force?"

"Oh, shit," Tyler said. "That's not good."

Sydney nodded in agreement. "That's why she can't know what's going on here." It suddenly occurred to Sydney that while Alex didn't know about Richard's actions, Richard now most certainly knew who Alex was. "In fact," she added, "I probably made a mistake telling Richard about us. Who knows what he may do or say to her."

“Yeah, you could be right. It’s not a big step to imagine Dick could try and cause issues for Alex, knowing what he knows now.” They both sat in silence for a few seconds.

“You still haven’t told your sister, huh?” Sydney shook her head.

“Not yet. I finally got the courage up and was planning on having Jen come down sometime this month. I wanted to tell her in person and I want her to meet Alex. But Alex is so busy right now with the investigation. Her hours are crazy and who knows when that may end. I wanted them to have some time to get to know each other, like over a weekend or something at least.”

“Jen’s gonna be totally cool with it, Syd. Trust me. You know she and I have always gotten along. She’s never had an issue with me. She doesn’t have a homophobic bone in her body. And it’s not as if she ever really liked Dick. We used to talk about him when you were together, you know. She thought he was, well, a dick.” Sydney laughed.

“Yeah, I know. When I finally broke it off with Richard she let me have it. She told me it was about time and then listed everything about him she disliked. She never said anything serious while we were engaged, but she sure was glad to see it end.”

Tyler nodded. “Uh-huh. We used to sit around bitching to each other on the phone about him. We both felt eventually you’d come to your senses and see the light, and sure enough you did. And trust me, hon, when she meets Alex, she’s gonna absolutely adore her.”

COURTNEY LEFT HER office and wandered into the lounge to check on the relatively slow Thursday afternoon business. As she looked through the sparsely populated room, her eyes settled on a now familiar figure seated at the end of the bar. Sam was engaged in conversation with what appeared to Courtney to be an exceptionally young woman. Courtney’s mind categorized the young woman as a “baby butch” judging by her short hair and tight t-shirt with rolled up sleeves. She was somewhat surprised at the pairing as the young woman was definitely not what Courtney would have considered Sam’s “type.”

Courtney wandered near her manager, Elizabeth, currently tending the bar.

“The youngster at the end of the bar,” she said. “Did we check her I.D.?”

“Yep,” Liz replied. “She’s barely twenty-one. Had military I.D.”

Courtney nodded in response, then continued after a brief pause. “You want to take a dinner break before it gets busier?”

“Sounds good. I’ll shoot across the street to the diner.” Liz made her way to the opening at the end of the bar. “Can I get you anything?”

“I’m good,” Courtney said. “Take your time. I’ll hold the fort here.”

Several minutes later Courtney glanced up to see the young butch catching her eye.

“Can we get a couple more beers, ma’am?” she said once Courtney approached.

“Go ahead and put them on my tab,” Sam said when Courtney put the fresh drafts on the bar in front of them. She smiled briefly in thanks as she slid off her bar stool. “Come on. Let’s grab a more comfortable seat,” Courtney heard Sam say as she led the way to one of the more private booths along the wall.

Courtney busied herself with organizing various glasses and bottles, first wiping down the bar, and then the shelves behind the bar, between serving the occasional customer. She attempted to keep her eyes diverted away from Sam and her companion in the booth across the room. It was almost an hour later when Courtney saw Sam and her young companion slide out of the booth. She was surprised when they simply shook hands, then the younger woman turned and

walked out of the lounge. Sam watched her leave, then turned and walked back toward the bar. Courtney quickly looked away and attempted to appear busy.

Sam took a seat once again at the end of the bar, looking deep in thought. After several minutes curiosity got the best of Courtney and she made her way to Sam, leaning one hand on the bar as the other wiped away non-existent blemishes on the bar surface.

“So, the baby butch wasn’t susceptible to your charms?” she asked with a certain level of sarcasm.

Sam looked up, apparently confused by Courtney’s statement. “Sorry, what was that?” she asked.

Courtney nodded toward the door through which the woman had retreated. “She seemed a little bit young, even for you,” Courtney said. “And not really your type.”

Sam looked in the direction Courtney had nodded then seemed to realize what Courtney was insinuating. Courtney felt guilty for a moment when she saw a spark of defensive anger pass through Sam’s eyes. Sam shook her head.

“That’s not what that was about,” she said. “I could tell when she walked in she was military and fresh from the desert. She’s a young Marine who just got back from her first tour in Afghanistan.” Sam shrugged. “We chatted for a little while.”

Courtney couldn’t stop herself from asking. “How could you tell that?”

“What do you mean?” Sam asked.

“How could you tell she came back from the desert?”

“Sometimes you can just tell. The look. The body language. Even the tan lines. Combat uniforms can leave a very distinct tan line high on the neck and arms.” She shrugged again, still staring into her drink. “Sometimes you can just tell,” she repeated quietly. After a moment she continued. “Sometimes they need to talk to someone who’s been there. The least I could do was buy her a beer and give her a few minutes of my time.”

Courtney thought about what she was hearing, but her mind was still having trouble countering the thoughtfulness she occasionally watched Sam exhibit with the relentless playgirl that visited her club so frequently.

Sam slid off the barstool then put some bills down on the bar in front of her. She pushed the money and bar tab toward Courtney then drained the last of her beer.

“Have a nice night, Ms. Brennan,” Sam said quietly, then turned and left the lounge, making her way down the rear hallway to the door leading to the back parking lot.

Courtney was somewhat surprised by Sam’s sincere response. Her demure attitude was uncharacteristic in comparison to the woman’s usual brashness. She again considered the possibility there was a lot more of a story behind Sam’s comments and observations. Perhaps some experiences she hesitated to share with others. Some rationale for her playgirl act. There certainly appeared to be more depth to the woman than Sam allowed people to see. And Courtney was struck by the thought that a part of her very much wanted to get to know the woman.

Courtney could no longer deny a part of her was growing somehow attracted to Sam. There was a battle going on within her between the two halves, one wanting to reach out and connect with Sam and one wanting to run from her as fast as she could.

The rational, reasonable part of Courtney recognized all the signs. Sam was a player, living for the moment, for the conquest. She was an exciting, charming risk-taker, in life as well as in love. Sam was good looking and knew it, and she was clearly never short of invitations for a bedmate. She no doubt accepted many of those invitations. Courtney had been burned by

someone with similar proclivities before, and she was determined not to allow that to happen again.

Courtney and Helen had built a life together in Seattle over a four year relationship. They'd purchased a large house and were co-owners in a profitable advertising and marketing business they built together from the ground up into a seven figure a year profit. Helen was an exciting, charming and exceptionally good looking woman and outstanding lover. When Courtney caught her cheating the first time, Helen swore it was a one-time indiscretion and begged Courtney to forgive her and remain together. Courtney believed she was sincere and the relationship had continued.

Then one morning a year later, Courtney returned home from a business trip early to find another woman, wearing Courtney's robe, sitting at her kitchen table sipping coffee while Helen was in the shower. Deep down Courtney had known for several weeks prior to that morning's discovery that there was something off in their relationship. But she'd chosen to ignore the signs, to hide from them and pretend to continue living what she wanted to be a perfect life with a woman she wanted to believe loved and valued her. That morning the painful truth was thrust undeniably before her and she was forced to deal with it.

Courtney had turned and walked out without a second look back. Helen tried at first to convince her once again to return but Courtney refused. Ultimately Helen bought her out: the house, the business, everything. Courtney left Seattle a wealthy woman, traveled to Los Angeles, purchased Club Vortex and never looked back.

It had been over a year since that departure and during that time Courtney had thrown herself into her work, trying to fill the void left by her broken heart. With that energy and her marketing background she'd made Vortex one of the most successful lesbian clubs in Southern California. In that intervening year Courtney had plenty of opportunities for relationships but had avoided every one, dating only sporadically and maintaining virtual celibacy. Her heart had been broken once, she would not allow it to happen again.

Courtney took a deep breath as she thought back over those familiar emotions. She found her attraction to Sam almost irresistible and this scared and frustrated her. She failed to keep her eyes from being drawn to the security monitor mounted behind and below the bar, and she watched Sam make her way across the parking lot. She wondered what the woman would be doing tonight and who she would be doing it with. A part of Courtney, a significantly large part, wished she was leaving with Sam.

ALEX AND SAM spent the better part of that Friday together at Sam's apartment. Alex had shown up with several additional videos that she showed to Sam. They hadn't spoken further about Sam's employment. Alex had simply called Sam and offered copies of the additional evidence.

They reviewed the video recordings from the bombed club for several hours. They thought they had a secondary view of the same suspect from days prior walking through the parking lot. But once again he had concealed his appearance with loose clothing and a non-descript baseball cap. He was seen walking through the parking lot just once, looking around him, not entering the club, then continuing out the other side of the lot.

Alex had spent part of each shift that week conducting what field operations she could with the officers and deputies, canvassing the businesses and talking to the community about

measures to protect themselves, being aware, asking about suspicious people or activities. She spent many evenings cruising the known target locations in search of just such suspicious activity. She'd spent hours parked either in front of possible target locations, or in rear parking lots. She occasionally accessed nearby business rooftops to watch a wider area. Again, this effort, being matched by the other task force members, had thus far turned up nothing.

Alex spent the late night and early morning hours of Friday into Saturday with Sam, reviewing all the security camera video tape taken from surrounding businesses. They were both hoping to catch some view of the suspect from another angle, perhaps entering or leaving the area, or if they were really lucky, entering or exiting a vehicle. So far, after literally hundreds of hours of videotape from dozens of businesses in the vicinity, they had nothing.

It was now past midnight and Alex noticed Sam stiffen in her chair as she ran through a clip of video. She turned and slid her chair toward Sam.

"Got something?" she asked.

Sam's head shook in uncertainty. "I don't know, maybe," she said. Alex looked over her shoulder at the video clip she was watching.

"I recognize that one," Alex said. "That's from a hidden camera. The business owner was having his property vandalized in the alley behind his store and had hidden a camera to try and catch the suspects. It figures that not too many people knew the camera existed."

"Uh-huh," Sam said. "Watch this."

She re-keyed a segment of the video and let it play. They both watched the grainy footage that showed the entrance to a rear alleyway off a side street. The focus of the video was the alley approach to a restaurant's rear loading and delivery area. At the corner of the video, where the alley met the street, they could see the front, right quarter panel and wheel of a car parked at the curb.

A figure came into view in the video. The male, probably Caucasian, although this was not obvious by the grainy black and white security footage, walked around the front of the car and into view at the mouth of the alley. He appeared to loiter there, standing partially concealed around the corner of the building, glancing regularly down the length of the alley. He was wearing a baseball cap and sunglasses and appeared to look at his watch before pulling what appeared to be a cellular telephone out of his pants pocket. He opened the phone and looked at it, glanced once again down the alley, then appeared to turn and walk away back around the front of the car. Approximately two minutes later the car pulled away from the curb and out of the view of the camera.

"That's all it shows. It may be our suspect or it may not be. His jacket is obviously gone, but that doesn't mean anything. We have more of his face on this one, but from a farther distance and the video quality is crap. We can't be absolutely sure, but the general times kind of match up. The explosion I think would've been around when he turns away with the phone." Alex pulled a map of the bombing area across the coffee table and pointed to a location at an intersection.

"Here's the club," she said, then moved her fingers along the paper to a point two blocks down the street. "Here's where he was, looking westbound down the east-west alley just north of the boulevard." She then traced her finger along the map westbound and stopped at the intersection where the club was located.

"He was looking down the alley and watching the club's rear parking lot," Alex said quietly.

"Maybe," Sam said. "And maybe not. We can't be sure, but we've got nothing else to go on. Because the camera was hidden no one would know it was there. So if he is our suspect, it fits he

didn't take the precautions he did in the lot behind the bar. There he was clearly aware of the security cameras and was careful to conceal his appearance." Sam leaned back in her seat and sighed.

"Can you get me copies of video tapes from the other bombings?" she asked. Alex nodded in response. "We can at least review the video tapes of the other bombings to see if anyone looking like this guy shows up in them. The shot probably isn't good enough for an I.D., but maybe your FBI guys can do something with that. And they may be able to type the car from the front fender and headlights. All we know right now is it's a dark car, but it looks like it's probably some kind of sedan." Sam paused as if she was hesitating to say something, then her voice dropped in volume despite the fact they were alone in the condo.

"I've got some friends back east I can send a copy to as well. They might be able to do something with it." It was the first tacit admission that Sam had provided that her Associated Press employment may not be entirely above board.

Alex nodded then watched silently as Sam loaded the video onto a thumb drive, pulled out a laptop computer from her backpack, logged into a secure network and downloaded the video. Sam engaged in what Alex assumed was either e-mail communication or instant messaging, then logged out of the network and shut down the laptop. Alex still questioned Sam's true employment, but had no doubt it was somewhere within the nation's intelligence community. She didn't bother to ask questions she was pretty sure she wouldn't get answers to anyway.

"My brain is pretty well fried and I don't think I can look at another frame of video," Alex said as she stood. "I'm gonna slide out of here. I'll swing by the office and get this out to the rest of the task force."

"I'll walk you down," Sam said. A moment later they entered the elevator to the complex's subterranean garage. "I've got a couple stops to make tonight. You heading to Sydney's?"

Alex shook her head. "It's too late. I'll probably try and see her for lunch tomorrow before the shift." When the elevator came to a stop in the parking garage and doors opened they stepped out.

"See you later," Alex said. They separated and made their way to their respective cars then drove from the garage in separate directions.

An hour later Alex had forwarded the video to all the members of the task force. She had done some basic computer manipulation and blown up the best still frame she could identify, zeroing in on the suspect. She had then texted that still shot to the officers working the field, just in case. As she completed this task she spoke with the FBI agents over the phone.

Both agreed to forward the video through their respective federal channels to work on any enhancement or facial recognition software they had access to.

As Alex left the task force offices she couldn't help but wonder if the stops Sam had to make this evening were for business or pleasure. After all, with Sam anything was possible. Alex pondered this while climbing into her car. She smiled at the memory of their conquests when they were both single, young and wild in the military together.

SAM ORIGINALLY INTENDED to find an active bar or club and some company for the evening. But twenty minutes after separating from Alex she was driving down Hollywood Boulevard toward Club Vortex. It was after two a.m. when she pulled past the front of the club and into the driveway leading to the rear parking lot. She closely observed the area around the

club, telling herself she was just checking for anything suspicious and would do a quick pass then head elsewhere.

As she rounded the corner she saw that a single car remained in the lot. It was a white Audi S5 convertible parked in the reserved space near the Club's rear entry door. Sam recognized it as Courtney's. She parked next to it and sat unmoving for a moment, then exited and walked to the back door that led into the lounge portion of the club. She was surprised and concerned to discover the door was open slightly, the latch apparently having failed to catch when the last person went through the door either entering or exiting.

Sam pushed it open and entered, silently working her way down the hallway to where it opened into the lounge area. A radio played soft rock over the lounge speakers. Sam saw Courtney behind the bar with her back to Sam, then she allowed her eyes to sweep the rest of the empty room. She silently traversed the length of the lounge, unnoticed by Courtney who kept her back to the room, apparently counting bottles on the shelves behind the bar. What slight noise Sam's footsteps made were covered by the low volume of music coming from the speakers. Sam pushed open one half of the swinging French doors that led to the main dance club, confirming no one appeared to be there either.

She made her way back to the bar, watching Courtney, who still had not noticed her presence. Courtney had a pen in one hand and a pad of notepaper in the other. She was occasionally leaning down to inspect the contents of certain cupboards and refrigerators below and behind the bar. It appeared to Sam that she was conducting some kind of inventory. As she drew closer, Sam noticed a portion of the bar top, near the middle, was folded back to allow access through a break in the counter. She entered through the break and leaned against the bar only five or six feet from the other woman, wondering how long it would take for Courtney to realize she was no longer alone.

After more than a minute Sam finally spoke, obviously startling Courtney with the mere sound of an unexpected voice.

"You know," Sam said, then paused as Courtney jumped and turned, giving a startled yelp as the first words left Sam's lips. Sam continued, "If I was a bomber I could've saturated the place in gasoline by now, lit a match and walked out without you even knowing I'd been here."

THE SUDDEN AND completely unexpected voice so close behind her startled Courtney. She jumped and turned, finding Sam leaning nonchalantly on the inside surface of the bar.

"Geez," she gasped, closing her eyes and momentarily putting a hand to her chest. "You scared the living daylights out of me!"

"Sorry," Sam said with a slight smile, not bothering to hide the fact her eyes slid to Courtney's heaving breasts. "Your back door was standing open. Looks like it didn't fully close and latch the last time someone went through it."

Courtney crossed her arms in front of her body, having noted Sam's lingering gaze. She was again irritated by her own reaction as she felt a not-so-distant part of her mind enjoying the woman's appreciation. "I took some trash out a while ago and probably didn't push it closed. It's been sticking lately and I've been meaning to get it fixed." She leaned nonchalantly on the counter behind her, arms still crossed.

"Why are you here?" Courtney asked pointedly, with a slightly irritated tone to her voice.

Sam shrugged. "I was out and about," she said. "This was on the way back to my condo so I thought I'd swing by and look around. I saw your car and then the back door open." She looked around casually. "I figured I'd make sure everything was okay."

"So, Ms. Black. I assume you've satisfied yourself there's nothing happening here. Certainly nothing worth the attention of the Associated Press. Is there any other reason you're here?"

"Are you saying you don't like the company?" Sam said with a charming smile. She took a step closer to Courtney then leaned back on the bar casually. They now faced each other with only a few feet between them.

Courtney fought the rising sense of arousal she felt within her. Making every effort to appear casual and unimpressed, she picked up a bottle of alcohol from the counter and turned her back to Sam.

"Like I said, any reason for you to stick around, hotshot?" she said over her shoulder as she aimlessly maneuvered bottles on the shelf in an attempt to look busy.

"Not unless you want to give me a reason," Courtney heard Sam say quietly from behind her. She turned to find that the woman had closed the distance between them and they were now looking at each other from only inches apart.

"Excuse me?" Courtney said in a startled whisper, trying but failing to sound angry. She felt her heart rate increase and she couldn't deny her body's response. Sam took another small step toward her, extending her arms to lean on the counter on either side of Courtney, effectively trapping Courtney between her body, her arms and the rear bar counter. Sam leaned closer, their bodies almost, but not quite, touching.

"What do you think you're doing?" Courtney said again, trying to sound forceful and angry, but knowing she was failing miserably as a quiver of excitement went noticeably through her body. She fought the urge to reach out and pull Sam's face to hers. To make matters worse, Sam seemed to read that thought right from her mind.

"I'm thinking that somewhere deep down you really don't want me to leave," Sam said quietly. Her eyes studied Courtney's face, coming to rest on her lips. She leaned her head forward, their lips almost touching. "I'm thinking you want me to kiss you," she practically whispered.

Courtney closed her eyes momentarily and took a deep breath, trying to force herself to regain her composure and self-control.

"I most certainly do not," she finally said, as casually as she could. "So what will you do now, Ms. Black? Force yourself on me?"

The reaction Courtney saw was the last thing she expected. Sam's eyes grew wide and she jerked backwards as if she'd been physically slapped. Before Courtney could say or do anything further Sam turned and walked out of the lounge area back down the hall toward the rear door.

Courtney was stunned at the effect her words had. In that moment before Sam turned away Courtney saw incredible pain and hurt in Sam's eyes. That look had quickly been concealed and then turned to a flash of anger.

"Sam!" she called as soon as her own shock wore off. But the woman was already out the door. Courtney leaned on the bar, fighting her own inner battle, concerned over the hurt she'd obviously caused, and no longer able to deny the incredible attraction she had to the woman who had just left. Sam had read her like a book. Courtney most certainly had wanted Sam to lean in and kiss her.

"Shit," she said quietly to herself in a moment of honesty. "You wanted her to do a lot more than that."

It was that attraction, that personal weakness and near loss of control that had irritated a part of her mind. Her last emotional investment had resulted in nothing more than a broken heart. She'd spent over a year convincing herself she would never allow that to happen again. Now this woman she barely knew, this fascinating, dark featured, exotic creature, was awakening feelings in Courtney that she had successfully repressed for so long. Courtney had no idea how she was going to deal with this.

COURTNEY'S WORDS RIPPED through Sam and she reacted without thought, giving in to the instant urge to flee. She was through the doorway and moving across the parking lot before she calmed enough to finally listen to the warning voice in her head that screamed at her to pay attention. By that time it was already too late. She looked up to see a large statured man step from the shadows against the wall near the front of Courtney's Audi. Sam came to a stop and sensed movement to her right. She knew instantly, without looking, that she was surrounded and heavily outnumbered.

The man in front of her was large, over six feet and tipping the scales at around two-forty. He had an evil glint in his eyes as he closed the distance to within a few feet of her. When he stopped Sam momentarily took her eyes off him to look around her. There were five of them, all white males, all in their twenties, all well-built, though none as large as the first. The one off to the right of her held a baseball bat, but other than that none of them appeared armed.

"Well, look at who we have here," the first one said. Sam pegged him as the leader. "She's not too bad looking, for a lesbian." He took a step toward her and Sam sensed more than saw the other four match this move, closing in around her.

"What's wrong?" he went on. "You never had a real man satisfy you so you turned to the other team? How about I show you what it's like to be satisfied by a real man?" Sam rolled her eyes at the stereotypical homophobic male statement. Did they really think she'd never heard that before? The other four, however, giggled like schoolboys. Sam looked around now that they were in closer proximity and studied her enemies. Even in the dim light of the parking lot she could tell at least two of them were somewhat intoxicated.

She turned back to the ringleader. "Really gentlemen, if you guys are the best samples of what's available in the heterosexual male population, how can anyone blame me for being a lesbian?"

The ringleader's smile disappeared and anger flashed across his face.

"So that's how you wanna be, huh?" he said. "That's going to make what I have to do a lot more enjoyable." He took several steps closer and reached for her arm, clearly expecting no physical resistance. He was shocked when she stepped inside his reach and quickly brought her bent arm forward in an elbow strike to his face. She was slightly off target due to his height, connecting more with his mouth as well as his nose. But the strike was solid and he staggered back in surprise and pain, his hand covering his split lip as blood ran down his chin.

Sam didn't hesitate as the next attacker closed in on her left. She turned in time to duck a sloppy punch thrown at her face. As the fist passed over her head, she again stepped into the attack and delivered a knee to his now exposed rib cage. She pivoted to the left again to counter one of the men positioned to her rear, meeting his headlong charge with a roundhouse kick to the side of the head, dropping him instantly. She allowed the momentum of the kick to carry her

through to a fourth attacker, pivoting again and lashing out with a palm heel strike to his nose. This time her aim was true and she felt the satisfying crunch of nose cartilage beneath her blow.

All of this took place in only a few seconds. Sam knew the unexpected speed and violence of her actions had saved her so far, but her luck wouldn't last. None of her blows had been permanently debilitating and she wouldn't hold out against five on one odds for too long. Her thoughts went briefly to Courtney and she hoped the woman stayed inside the bar and didn't unknowingly walk out into the middle of this.

Sam turned back to find the big leader advancing on her once again, his fists clenched and an enraged look on his face. The others were all recovering, some more slowly than others, but all were back on their feet. The only one who had so far not involved himself was the one with the baseball bat. He remained stationary, bat raised to his shoulder, shifting his weight from foot to foot as if nervous and gathering the courage to engage.

Figuring her best defense was still a strong offense, Sam threw herself again at the leader, charging headlong at him. The sudden attack caught him off guard once again and he staggered backwards as she managed several strikes to the face. She sensed a presence converging from the right and slightly behind her and came up with a reverse roundhouse kick to a face, likely breaking a jaw.

Intent on doing as much damage as possible in hopes of disabling the biggest physical threat and maybe shaking up the leadership, she turned back to the leader who was once again advancing. Knowing she had only moments before the others finally converged, Sam dodged another misguided and rushed punch, grasped the man by the shoulders and pulled him forward and down toward her. He clearly hadn't expected anything like this and the maneuver jerked him off balance. Sam quickly brought a leg back, cocking her knee, intending a debilitating strike to the big man's groin. As the knee came forward Sam sensed another presence beside her a fraction of a second before a solid fist connected with the side of her head. It sent her off her balance just as her knee was connecting, resulting in a grazing blow to the big man's privates. She knew it would hurt and anger him, but it would not be the fully incapacitating blow she had intended.

Sam saw stars as she tumbled sideways into the back of Courtney's car and then to the ground. But she came up to her knees as quickly as she could, then leaned on the back of the white Audi and climbed to her feet. The rest of the men were converging on her as she rose, and Sam tried to maintain contact with the car to eliminate their possible approach from behind her. Though heavily outnumbered, she managed to place several well directed punches and another knee to someone's midsection. But the constant motion of the altercation pulled her away from the car and she was quickly surrounded then virtually incapacitated by a sudden blow from the baseball bat delivered to her back just above the kidneys. The hit drove the breath from her in a gasp.

She struggled to stay on her feet, collapsing back and leaning across the trunk of the Audi to help maintain her balance. Hands grasped her arm and shoulder and spun her around.

Sam managed to deliver several more blows, making some of them count as was evidenced by the gasps and grunts they elicited. But she knew her time was limited and there didn't appear to be an avenue of escape. She finally took another punch to her exposed midsection that doubled her up, and she turned partially into the vehicle once again in an effort to protect her face and head. The baseball bat was again deployed against her, jabbing into her ribs.

Sam's eyes were watering and her breath came in gasps as she registered four figures gathered around her silhouetted against the elevated lights of the parking lot. She continued to

strike out desperately, determined to do as much damage as possible before she dropped. Even outnumbered and injured she connected several times and was even able to dodge a few particularly sloppy punches. But the incoming fists were too numerous and quickly overwhelmed her defenses.

A final jab of the baseball bat to her undefended solar plexus drove the air from her lungs and bent her forward. The bat was followed by an overpowering punch to the side of her face, her head collided with the vehicle's bumper as she was driven to the ground on her hands and knees. A swift boot to the ribs sent her onto her back and she folded into a fetal position, bringing her arms to her head and face in defense as the kicks rained in on her.

"Hold it! Back off!" The commanding voice came from outside the men encircling her and the kicks stopped. Sam peered up to see the circle of men around her back off and the original big man stalking toward her, limping slightly, his hand caressing his groin tenderly. Sam moved her hand slowly downward in the direction of the compact handgun concealed in a holster on her inner left ankle as the other men looked away from her at the approaching leader.

"Grab her and get her on her feet!" he ordered. Two of the men moved forward and each took an arm, lifting Sam to her feet before she could retrieve the weapon. She was dizzy and weak and virtually dead weight. She watched through partially closed eyes as the leader tore the baseball bat from the other man's grasp and closed the distance to her. Without hesitating he jabbed, driving the bat into her gut once again. Sam could no longer hold her own weight and began to double over and drop to the ground, but she was held upright by the men on either side of her. She struggled to catch her breath as her head dipped forward. The big man with the bat stepped up to her.

"Maybe we should take her someplace else and have a little fun," one of the others said as the leader grasped Sam's hair and pulled her head back, forcing her to look at him.

"We're just supposed to make sure she's out of the picture," he replied over his shoulder. "With the other three we got tonight it'll just look like a string of gay bashings, and this one unfortunately went a little too far." He turned back to Sam. "How does it feel to know you're going to die tonight, bitch?"

Having taken the few precious seconds as he talked to try and catch her breath, Sam collected herself and did the most appropriate thing she could think of under the circumstances. She gathered the copious amount of blood streaming into her mouth from her battered lip and face and spit at him with as much force as she could muster, sending bloody saliva into the face glaring at her from only inches away.

His reaction was exactly what she expected. He lashed out with his fist to her face. Expecting the blow, she was able to turn partially with it, slightly limiting the impact and taking it more in the side of the head than the face. She allowed herself to be thrown to her right, knocking the man holding her upright on that side off balance and causing him to release his hold on her arm. She fell to her knees, reaching her right hand toward the ground as if to brace herself as the man on her left maintained control of that arm. She knew she would never get to her left ankle, so instead she moved her hand only inches to the outer portion of her right ankle. This time she was successful, retrieving the switchblade knife tucked in the top of her boot. She clenched the knife, its presence unnoticed in the darkness.

"Get her back up," the angry voice ordered.

She knelt with her head down in feigned semi-consciousness and watched his boots step closer once again.

Finally, when she noted his feet had moved close enough, she toggled open the blade. It flashed momentarily in the dim light as she lunged at the man, driving the knife deep into his thigh. She instantly twisted the blade then yanked it out as the man dropped the bat and collapsed to the pavement on his back, grasping his thigh in both hands, letting out a noise that was part scream, part grunt.

Sam turned to her left, pivoting on her knees and slashing out with the blade. The man on her left released her arms and tried to dodge back out of the way but was too slow. The knife sliced across his forearm opening a deep cut.

He too released a strangled yell and grasped at his arm as he fell back. "Fucking bitch!" he screamed as blood seeped from between his fingers. He walked a wide birth around Sam, moving to his other fallen comrade.

Sam pivoted back to her right, looking for the man who had been holding her from that side. She saw he was already moving away, his hands raised to chest height in a gesture of surrender.

The other two leaned over the one she had stabbed in the leg, coaxing him to stand, clearly intent on a hasty exit as they eyed her warily. Sam struggled to her feet, trying to look stronger and more capable than she actually was. She leaned on the side of Courtney's Audi for balance and watched as the men made their way to the side of the club, two of them practically carrying the big guy with the leg wound. They made their way around the corner and down the driveway toward the street in front. Sam thought she heard car doors open and slam and the sound of a throaty, muscle engine start and then fade away as the car drove off.

Sam took a faltering step, trying to reach the club door, but at that point what little energy she had maintained ran out completely. She sensed herself falling but was unconscious before her body actually hit the pavement.

Chapter Six

COURTNEY LOCKED THE rear door of the club then started for her car. She had spent another thirty minutes trying to complete the inventory but had finally given up. Her mind constantly turned to Sam and their previous interaction, and she'd been entirely incapable of completing the task.

As much as she hated to admit it, even to herself, Courtney was beginning to enjoy the attention and flirtatious comments Sam directed her way. She thought again that there was more substance to the attractive woman than she had originally given her credit for. There was the poetry, and then the tenderness and empathy she had extended to the young Marine. And Sam's concern and competence in the face of the bombings was a comfort. Sure, she was cocky and self-assured, but in a charmingly roguish kind of way. And Courtney was no longer able to deny that she thought the woman was sexy as hell.

As she pressed the button on her key fob to unlock her Audi, she looked up and around her and was surprised to see a second vehicle in the lot. It appeared to be Sam's rental and Courtney wondered if the woman was perhaps seated inside it. Had she been waiting for Courtney to exit? Courtney felt her stomach flutter in anticipation at the thought.

She was so engrossed in her hopeful analysis of the other vehicle parked several spaces away that as she rounded the rear of her own car she initially didn't notice the figure leaning on the driver's side struggling to stand. When she did she instantly recognized Sam and stifled a scream as Sam collapsed and fell against the car with a groan.

Courtney dropped her purse and lunged forward, partially catching Sam and breaking her fall, slowing her as she slid down the side of the vehicle to a seated position on the pavement. She knelt by Sam and reached a hand out to her chin, tilting it up. She gasped when she saw the bloody and battered face. Sam's eyes were glazed over and partially closed.

"Sam?" she said as she laid a hand against her cheek. "Hold on. I'm going to call an ambulance." Courtney leaned away and reached for the purse she had dropped, intent on retrieving her cell phone. She felt a hand grasp at her arm.

"No," Sam said in a weak voice.

Courtney turned back to see the woman looking at her. "No," Sam repeated. "Don't need it."

"You need a doctor, Sam, and we need to call the police."

"No. No police. No ambulance." Courtney looked at Sam's pleading eyes and eventually nodded. She glanced down at the rest of Sam's appearance, searching for other injuries. Her eyes came to rest on the bloody switchblade still in Sam's grasp.

Sam wiped the blade clean on her pants and toggled it closed, then shoved it into her pocket. Her moves were slow and deliberate and Courtney couldn't help but notice they appeared to cause her a great deal of pain.

Sam took a deep breath and appeared to gather herself, then pushed herself up, leaning once again on the car for support. Courtney stood with her and reached out to provide a steadying arm. They both noticed the trail of bloody handprints Sam left up the side of the white vehicle.

“I guess I’m going to owe you a car wash,” Sam said through clenched teeth.

Courtney shook her head. “That’s the least of our worries. If you won’t let me call an ambulance we need to at least get you to a hospital.” She stood next to Sam and held the slightly taller woman around the waist to keep her balanced. Sam seemed to start to shake her head, then groaned and leaned more into Courtney as her balance became precarious. Courtney tightened her grip around Sam and looked into her face, waiting for the dizziness to end. Sam’s eyes finally opened. “How’re you doing?” Courtney asked with concern.

Sam paused then looked down at Sydney’s arm around her waist, then gave a mischievous grin. “Well, if I’d known this is all it would take to get you to put your arms around me,” she said in a half whisper. “I would’ve arranged to get my ass kicked a long time ago.”

“God, you just never quit, do you?” Unlike Courtney’s previous retorts, however, this one was said quietly, with tenderness and a slightly amused lilt to her voice.

Sam brought her hand up and gently pressed the back of her knuckles to Courtney’s face, running them lightly along her cheek and jawline. It was Courtney’s turn to tingle at the contact. Then Sam pulled away and the contact was lost. Courtney watched as Sam’s eyes half closed.

“Courtney?” Sam whispered.

“Yes?”

There was a lengthy pause, then finally, “Oh geez, I think I’m gonna puke.” Sam pulled away and turned from Courtney toward the front of the car. She leaned on the Audi for support as she bent forward and her stomach heaved. Her balance gave way and she dropped to her knees, emptied her stomach and gasped for breath.

Courtney lunged toward Sam, grabbing her around the middle as quickly, yet tenderly, as possible. Courtney’s chest pressed against Sam’s back as she wrapped her arms around Sam’s body to keep her from toppling into the puddle of her own vomit.

When Sam’s stomach finally finished ejecting its contents, they both held the position for an extra minute as Sam caught her breath. Sam reached up with one hand and placed it over Courtney’s supportive arm and squeezed it in appreciation.

“Do you think you can stand and make it to the other side of the car?” Courtney asked quietly from her position behind Sam.

“Yes,” Sam replied, somewhat out of breath.

Courtney helped her to her feet once again, and together they slowly made their way around to the passenger side of the car where Sam took a seat. Courtney retrieved her purse and quickly entered the driver’s seat, then looked over at Sam, sitting stiffly with her head leaned back.

“I really think we should get you to an emergency room,” she said. When Sam didn’t reply she took it as a sign of consent and started the car. Courtney headed for the closest emergency room, pulling up to the entrance to Cedar Sinai Hospital less than five minutes later.

Sam seemed to sense the car come to a stop and opened her eyes to look out the window. “God, woman. You just don’t listen, do you?” she said.

Courtney rolled her eyes as she exited the car and made her way around to the passenger side, opening the door and leaning down. “It’s your über-butth attitude that’s the issue, not me. You look like you’ve been beaten within an inch of your life. I’m betting you’ve got a concussion and you pretty much passed out again in my car. Come on, you’re seeing a doctor,” she said as she helped Sam from her car.

THERE WAS NO mistaking the note of concern in Courtney's voice and eyes, and for a moment Sam had to battle the urge to lean down and kiss the woman whose body was pressed up against hers. Instead Sam took an unsteady step and allowed Courtney to put an arm around her in support, enjoying the feel of their closeness as they made their way slowly up the walkway and through the automatic doors. Courtney assisted Sam to a seat in the corner of the waiting room.

"Let me get you checked in. Do you have an insurance card or anything?" Courtney asked. Sam gingerly leaned sideways and reached into her back pocket. She removed her wallet and pulled out a Virginia driver's license and an insurance card, both in the name of Samantha Black. She also removed a business card with an office number as well as her cellphone number. Any investigation would reveal there was in fact a driver's license and a medical insurance policy issued in that name. The number on the business card would access a voicemail purportedly belonging to her editor, and would be handled by Elena. Any notification to the insurance carrier, from anywhere in the world, would also send an alert to Sam's handler. She knew from prior experience that her phone would likely ring within the next hour or two inquiring as to her status.

"If anyone wants to call the police, just tell them it's already been done. If we absolutely have to I suppose we can call Alex," Sam said.

Courtney nodded then moved to the reception window. Sam watched her explain the situation to the admissions nurse then once again leaned her head back and dozed off.

It seemed like only seconds later Courtney's hand was gently squeezing Sam's shoulder. Sam jerked awake.

"Sam? Come on, they'll take you right away," Courtney said, and nodded at a female nurse standing nearby with a wheel chair. "I'm putting your I.D. and insurance card back in your pocket, okay?" She slipped them into the same back pants pocket Sam's wallet was in.

"That's not needed," Sam said as she gathered herself to rise. She noticed Courtney look up at the waiting nurse and roll her eyes. Sam got to her feet, determined to appear confident and capable, but the room swam in her vision as she was overcome again by dizziness and a stabbing headache. Courtney once again put her arms around her and steadied her.

"YOU OKAY NOW?" Courtney asked once Sam seemed to have regained some strength and balance.

"Yeah, I'm good. Just a little dizzy." She began walking slowly, with Courtney's assistance. Courtney had wondered whether she should wait in the lobby for Sam to be treated, but this pretty much nullified that question as Sam kept an arm around her shoulders and leaned on her as they walked through the door being held open for her by the nurse.

The nurse indicated one of the bays with the privacy curtain pulled back located off the large central nurse's station and followed them in. The nurse pulled the curtain closed behind her, then pointed to the exam table.

"Do you think you can climb up?" she asked.

"Sure," Sam said with what sounded like confidence, but Courtney stepped forward to help when she saw Sam wince as she turned and tried to pull herself onto the table.

"I understand the police have already been notified?" the nurse asked as she looked over the paperwork provided her by the admissions nurse.

“Yes,” Courtney said as she looked at Sam. “They said they were required to make a notification, so I called Alex. She’s on her way.” Sam only nodded.

The nurse proceeded to obtain vital signs from Sam and asked her some basic questions about her injuries. She was replaced several minutes later by a pleasant, middle-aged female doctor with kind eyes.

“Good evening, or morning, I guess. I’m Doctor Estrada.” She spoke with a slight accent which revealed her Hispanic heritage. She reviewed the clipboard the nurse handed to her then looked up at Sam.

“You appear to have had quite a night. Let me take a look at you.” The doctor first pulled a light out and shined it intermittently into each of Sam’s eyes. “Consumed any alcohol tonight?” she asked.

“No, ma’am.”

“Hmmm. Let’s clean you up so we can see exactly what we have.” She lifted one of Sam’s hands and glanced at the bruised and lacerated knuckles. “Looks like you may have done some damage to them as well.”

Courtney, who was listening from behind Sam in a seat out of the way against the wall, thought instantly of the bloody knife she’d seen Sam holding when she first found her. She looked up again when the next question was asked.

“HOW MANY WERE there?” Sam heard the doctor ask quietly as she turned to gather some gauze pads and solution.

“Five,” Sam said simply, then remained silent as the doctor spent the next several minutes cleaning up her facial injuries. She listened as the doctor explained stitches were not necessary for the cut over her eyebrow, instead applying medical adhesive to close the wound. Throughout the treatment Sam was aware of Courtney’s silent presence behind her.

When the doctor was done, she laid a gentle hand on Sam’s knee.

“Tell me, did they hurt you in any other way? Other than the beating?” Sam knew instantly she was referring to a sexual assault.

“No, ma’am. Just fists and feet,” she replied. “And a baseball bat.”

The doctor nodded, then said, “You better take your shirt off and let me take a look at those ribs.”

Sam nodded and began unbuttoning her shirt. As it fell from her shoulders to the table, she heard Courtney’s sharp intake of breath and knew what she’d seen. Her torso was covered with developing bruises from the blows and kicks she had taken. But Courtney’s shock was more than likely caused by the large scar that slashed diagonally across her back, extending from one shoulder, beneath her bra strap and down to her side, ending near her waistband on the opposite side.

The doctor moved around the table inspecting her torso and paused at the back. She touched the scar. “What happened here?” she asked softly.

“Industrial accident,” Sam said simply.

“Mm-hmm.” The doctor didn’t inquire any further as she probed Sam’s kidneys gently with her fingers. Sam winced and couldn’t stifle a groan when she hit a few tender areas. The doctor then had her lie back on the table where she continued the examination, tenderly prodding her ribcage and abdomen, eliciting much the same response from Sam in a few areas.

Finally the doctor helped Sam back to a sitting position. “You don’t appear to have any organ damage. I’m going to have them take you over to X-ray and get a scan of your head and neck to be safe. I’m sure you have some cracked ribs, which we’ll have to wrap. I can see you’re dizzy and not moving too well, so we’ll get someone with a wheelchair to take you.”

The doctor slipped out, leaving Sam and Courtney to sit in silence for several minutes. Before either of them spoke Sam’s phone rang and Courtney moved to the nearby bench where Sam’s wallet, phone and keys sat after being removed from her pockets. Courtney handed Sam the phone and Sam answered without looking at the screen, knowing exactly who it would be.

“Yeah? No, I’m okay. We need to talk...yeah, give me a few...okay.” Sam disconnected the call seconds before an attendant showed up with the wheelchair.

“You can wait here if you’d like,” the attendant said to Courtney. “Radiology is not too far up the hall and there’s no wait. We should be back in a flash.”

True to his word the X-rays only took about ten minutes. As she was being wheeled back to the exam room, she asked to make a detour into a nearby women’s restroom. The attendant knocked at the door and after determining no one was inside, he propped the door open and wheeled her in. It quickly became apparent he didn’t intend to leave.

“Uh. I’ll be all right. It’s okay if you wait outside.” He looked at her doubtfully and was clearly hesitant. She pressed on, putting a shy look on her face and hesitation in her voice. “I, uh, kind of have performance anxiety. I can’t really go if there’s an audience.”

The attendant finally gave her an understanding look, wheeled her close to the nearest stall door then leaned down and locked the wheels on the chair.

“I’ll be right outside. Just holler if you need anything. I can only give you a minute or two then I’ll have to check on you,” he said.

“No problem. Thanks.”

As soon as the door closed behind him, she was on the phone. She called Elena back, reciting the information as quickly as possible.

“Listen, I can’t be absolutely sure, but there’s a possibility I was a specific target,” she told Elena. “There were some statements made that they were supposed to make it look like a gay bashing gone too far. They said they’d attacked at least three others to add to that impression.”

“How far was too far going to be?” Elena asked.

“They were supposed to eliminate me.”

“Why? Who did you piss off? It’s not as if you’ve made much headway.”

“I know, but evidently we’ve touched a nerve somewhere,” Sam said with a sigh. “Elena, how many at your end are in the loop on what I’m doing here? On the questions we’ve asked?”

“Aah, geez, Sam. Probably at least three or four within the chain of command and then some support personnel who have access to the assignments, or through whom the information and requests are transmitted. And who knows how much is being transmitted across channels to the FBI and who knows who else. Remember there’s a formal request by the Deputy Director, so even though I’m trying to keep things close, I can’t account for everything. I know what you’re thinking and I really hope you’re wrong, but I can’t eliminate the possibility.”

“We were asking about The Ghost. You and I both know he looks protected. Maybe that started this? What else has been transmitted?”

“The picture you sent. The one from the video,” Elena said quietly. “The request was to enhance it and send it through facial recognition.”

“Shit, that’s right. Dammit, I forgot about that. I’m afraid my brain’s just not working too well right now.”

She was about to add more when a knock came at the door from the attendant.

“Ms. Black? Everything okay in there?”

“Yes. Sorry. I’m just moving a bit slow.” Sam lowered her voice to the phone. “I’ve gotta go. I’ll call you tomorrow sometime.” She signed off just as the door opened and the attendant’s head poked in. She smiled meekly at him as she lowered herself again into the waiting wheelchair.

“Sorry about that. My phone rang and it was a friend who’d heard I was in the hospital. I had to put their mind at ease.”

They moved back to the exam room where Sam abandoned the chair and moved to sit on the exam table once again. As the attendant left Doctor Estrada entered carrying the X-rays which she held up to the light to examine.

“Just as I thought, you have some cracked ribs, though not too bad.” She proceeded to wrap Sam’s torso with a wide elastic bandage. Sam winced several times during the process.

“You’ll need to keep this wrapped as much as possible for the next week or two,” the doctor said as she finished. “I’m going to give you some medication to help with the discomfort. You also have a slight concussion.” The doctor now turned to Courtney.

“She’ll need to be monitored for at least the next ten or twelve hours to be safe. She should be awoken every few hours while she sleeps. Any loss of consciousness or excessive dizziness and she needs to come back.” She turned back to Sam. “Also any blood in the urine you need to come in right away.”

Sam nodded. “Thank you, ma’am,” she said. Though she smiled slightly at the doctor’s apparent presumption that they were possibly a couple and that Courtney would be willing to “monitor” her.

When the doctor finished relaying a few additional details, she told Sam she would return shortly with the prescription. Sam reached for her shirt and began putting it back on. The movement sent a flash of pain through her torso and she gasped. Suddenly she felt Courtney behind her, assisting with pulling the shirt up her arms and onto her shoulders. Sam sat unmoving, still seated on the edge of the exam table, as Courtney moved around to her front and pulled the shirt forward then began buttoning it.

Sam looked into Courtney’s face but the woman seemed to avoid her eyes, concentrating instead on her fingers as they maneuvered the buttons. On the third button down, Courtney’s knuckles briefly brushed one of Sam’s breasts and Sam reacted with a sharp intake of breath. Courtney paused and her gaze finally came up to meet Sam’s eyes. They stared at one another for a moment, both reading the desire they saw in the other, their faces inches apart.

“Courtney,” Sam whispered. She reached out and Courtney offered no resistance as she pulled the woman to her. Sam leaned forward as Courtney’s eyes closed in expectation. Their lips were just touching when the curtain to the ER bay was pulled back and the doctor stepped in. The moment was instantly shattered and Courtney stepped back out of reach. Sam’s hand dropped from her waist.

Seemingly oblivious, the doctor rattled off directions for the medication then told Sam a police officer had arrived to speak to her.

“Shall I show her in?” the doctor asked.

“Sure. Thank you, ma’am.” Sam finished buttoning up her shirt as Courtney leaned casually against the wall nearby. Neither of them looked at the other.

ALEX RUSHED TO the hospital as soon as she received the call from Courtney. After checking with E.R. admissions she paced the waiting room until she was passed through the door into the treatment area. From there she was directed to a curtained off cubicle.

“Geez, Sam!” Alex looked at the woman’s face. “Are you okay?”

“I’ll be fine.”

“What the fuck did you get yourself into?” Alex asked as she continued to examine Sam’s battered face.

“I got jumped outside the Vortex,” Sam replied without preamble. “Five guys looking for a gay bashing. And if they were telling the truth, I wasn’t the only one.”

“How so?” Alex asked.

“They said something about me being the fourth one tonight.”

“Do you think it’s possible they’re linked to the bombings?”

Sam hesitated a moment. “I don’t know,” she replied. “None of them had the look of the guy from the video, that’s for sure. And they didn’t seem sophisticated enough to be working with those kinds of explosives. But the bombings maybe motivated them to commit the attacks, or they may be somehow related. I’m not sure.”

“Okay, I’m going to need the whole story, tonight unfortunately,” Alex said as Sam nodded and climbed gingerly down from the table, then she leaned back against it for support. Alex noticed Courtney take a half step toward Sam, then stop herself from reaching out to help her.

Alex turned her attention fully to Courtney. “Court, other than what you told me when you called, is there anything else you can add from your observations?”

Courtney shook her head, settling back against the wall once again. “No. I came out and found her. They were gone by then so I didn’t see anything.”

“I don’t see any reason to keep you up any later if you want to get out of here. I can get this troublemaker back to her place and get all the information I need there then leave her to get some rest.”

Courtney seemed to hesitate, then said, “The doctor said she needed to be monitored for at least the first twelve hours,” she nodded toward Sam. “She’s got a slight concussion, has to be woken up every few hours.”

“I’m fine,” Sam said. “I don’t need a babysitter.” But the look she gave Courtney said something totally different.

Courtney shook her head but said nothing, turning to Alex as if the two of them alone needed to decide Sam’s fate.

Alex watched the brief interaction in silence and for the first time began to consider that perhaps Sydney was right. There did seem to be a little bit of sexual tension or attraction between them. And why would Courtney still be here, much less bring up the need for Sam to be monitored, unless a part of her was willing to do it herself? Alex remembered how her relationship with Sydney had flourished during her convalescence from a gunshot wound shortly after they first met. She decided to play the hunch.

“Well,” Alex said, feigning uncertainty. “I’m going to have to complete this report, get it processed and make some notifications. I’m afraid as much as I’m willing, I can’t do all that from Sam’s place. I’m gonna have to head into the office, and I figure completing this will likely take me well into midmorning.”

“She can stay with me.” Sam and Alex both looked at Courtney, who shrugged. “It’s not as if there’s another reasonable option,” she said with a sigh. “She can’t be left alone.”

“Uh, hello? She’s right here. And she can take care of herself,” Sam said, looking back and forth between the two of them, though once again, Alex got the feeling she wasn’t going to fight the proposal too strongly.

“Right, tough girl,” Courtney said, rolling her eyes in exasperation. “That’s why you can barely stand up and you were puking your guts out not too long ago.” Courtney moved to the curtain and pulled it back. She glanced at Alex. “You get your buddy and follow me back to my place. The least I can do is make you some coffee since you’re going to be dealing with this for the rest of the morning.”

Alex looked from Courtney back to Sam and noticed a sparkle in Sam’s eye and a slight curl of a smile on her lips. Evidently Courtney noticed the same thing. “Don’t get any bright ideas, hotshot,” she said. “It’s one day. And it’s only because the doctor said it was medically necessary.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Sam said, the sparkle in her eye evident.

Twenty minutes later Courtney pulled into the subterranean garage at her high-rise condominium near the intersection of Sunset and La Brea, waving to Alex to follow behind her then directing her to the parking space beside hers. That particular space was also reserved for her condo but had rarely been occupied.

Alex again noticed Courtney watch Sam as she climbed slowly out of Alex’s car. Alex couldn’t help but smile as it appeared to her that Courtney was fighting the urge to step forward and assist Sam.

“The elevator’s over here,” Courtney said then turned away and led them a short distance through the garage. They rode the elevator directly to the top floor of the twelve-story building with no interruptions.

As the elevator doors opened, Alex noticed there were only four doors in the hallway on this level. Courtney led them left to the door at the end of the hallway and then into the condominium after unlocking the door. Alex and Sam were led into a spacious living room with an attached dining area. A raised bar separated a sizable kitchen from this common area. Alex saw a hallway off the living room and what appeared to be a master suite through a doorway at the end of the corridor. She presumed the extra doors led to perhaps some guest rooms and a bathroom.

“Make yourselves comfortable,” Courtney said, nodding toward the open area containing a dining area and family room as she closed the door quietly behind them. “I’ll start some coffee brewing.”

Alex and Sam made their way to the dining table and sat down.

“You look like shit, Sam,” Alex said. “I’m going to make this as fast as possible, before you pass out on me. Why don’t you tell me what you remember about what they looked like.”

They heard quiet sounds coming from the kitchen and a short time into the interview Courtney entered, putting a large mug of coffee in front of Alex, followed by a glass of water for Sam. She then went to check the guest bedroom as Alex and Sam spent the next almost thirty minutes going through a detailed review of the attack.

When Alex heard Courtney enter the room about twenty minutes later, she looked up and saw a look of concern on Courtney’s face. Alex followed Courtney’s gaze to Sam and noticed she looked exhausted and uncomfortable. She stopped and closed her notebook.

“All right, that’s good enough for now. You need to get some rest,” she said. “You know how to get ahold of me if you recall anything important.” Alex rose from the chair.

Sam was sitting with one elbow resting on the table, her head in her hand, pain evident in her eyes. She nodded briefly, then held up her hand as if she just recalled something.

“Wait, there’s one last thing you need to know.” Sam took a deep breath and looked up. “You may want to get ahold of some of the hospitals. A couple of them may need medical attention.”

Alex paused and her eyebrow rose. “Why does this not surprise me?” she said, then gave Sam the “tell me more” look. Alex lowered herself back to her seat and re-opened her notebook.

“I don’t need to hear the gory details,” Courtney said, and made her way into the kitchen.

Sam watched her go then looked back at Alex. “The big guy, the shot caller in the group, he’ll have a stab wound to his left thigh,” Sam said quietly. “And the second guy, the one wearing the red t-shirt and black jeans, he’s probably gonna need some stitches to his forearm, the right one I think.”

“Okay.” Alex paused, pretty sure she knew where this was heading. “Where’d the knife come from?”

Sam reached into her pants and pulled the switchblade from her pocket, placing it on the table between them. She looked up at Alex, saying nothing. Alex looked at the knife, noting the dried blood encrusted on the handle.

“Shall we just say that happened to come into my possession in the midst of the fight?” was all Sam said. “But, Alex,” Sam said, pausing momentarily to look toward the kitchen where Courtney shuffled about. “You need to find those other victims. You need to make this case without me. I can’t testify. I won’t be here once this task force is done. Shit, you’ve probably figured out enough to know Samantha Black might not even officially exist anymore after this task force.”

“What about Samantha Rousseau?” Alex asked as she reached out to take the knife.

“Samantha Rousseau stopped existing a long time ago,” Sam replied quietly.

“Well, maybe you’ll find a reason to stick around with us a little longer.” Sam looked up at Alex and then without conscious thought, her gaze drifted toward the kitchen. Alex noticed it but said nothing. Before either could speak again Courtney entered the room.

“I made you a fresh cup of coffee for the road, Alex.” She handed Alex a travel mug.

Alex rose from her chair, sweeping the switchblade into her hand and tucking it out of sight behind her notebook. She reached for the mug with her other hand then gave Courtney a quick hug.

“You two gonna be okay?” she said as she backed away from the hug, looking between the two women.

Sam looked up at her, but before she could speak Courtney answered.

“We’ll be fine. You drive carefully and get done you need to do. Say hi to Syd for me.”

Alex nodded and turned to Sam, who was still seated at the table.

“I’m gonna finish this report and get it processed, make some calls and notifications and see if we can track down any additional victims. I’ll keep you posted.”

Sam nodded, clearly fading fast.

“Want me to come and pick her up later today?” Alex asked Courtney as they walked to the door together.

“No, that’s okay. I’ll get her back to her car at some point when she’s up to driving,” Courtney said. “By the way, we just upgraded our security system in the last couple days and added exterior video cameras. I’ll leave a message for my manager at the club and have them

pull the security video and put it on disk for you. It should be done by this afternoon. You can have anyone pick it up, just have them ask for me or the manager.”

“Thanks, Court.” Alex put her arms around Courtney and gave her another hug when they reached the front door. “You two look good together, by the way.”

Chapter Seven

ALEX HAD ADDED the last statement so quietly she'd been out the door and the door had closed before Courtney had time to react. The quiet statement caused Courtney to pause for several moments before turning from the door.

Courtney had spent most of the past thirty minutes trying to convince herself she had offered her assistance only because she felt somewhat responsible for Sam's medical condition. The beating had, after all, occurred in her club's parking lot. But she was struck once again by the fact that deep down she was attracted to the woman. The attraction had grown over the intervening weeks since she'd first seen Sam at the club. Several times this morning, as she'd watched Sam struggle through her interaction with Alex, Courtney had to consciously restrict the part of her mind that wanted to reach out and comfort Sam.

Courtney entered the dining room and saw Sam leaning on the table and pushing herself onto slightly unsteady feet. This time she didn't hesitate to step forward and reach out to her.

"Come on, let's get you into bed."

"I'm good. I can just crash here on the couch. I don't want to be a problem," Sam protested, even as she was led past the couch and out of the room.

"Don't be silly." Courtney led Sam into the spare bedroom and directed her to the edge of the bed. "We need to get those bloody clothes off you."

Sam nodded and sat down on the edge of the bed. Courtney watched her as she tried to lean down toward her bootlaces. She dropped to her knees at Sam's feet when she heard the painful gasp.

"Here," she said as she pushed Sam's hands aside and reached for the laces. "Let me get those."

"Wait."

Sam's quiet statement was said with such an urgent and insistent tone that Courtney froze, then looked up at her.

"Um, I..." Sam seemed unsure of what to say. Then she pulled a pant leg up, revealing a black nylon ankle holster around her calf, overlapping the top of the boot. She slowly reached back down and unfastened the holster then sat back up. She looked at Courtney, appearing slightly sheepish and uncertain. "I—"

"I don't want to know, Sam," Courtney said. She reached back down and undid each of the laces then pulled the boots from Sam's feet. She stood up and held out her hand. "Stand up. The pants are next." Courtney noticed the weapon had disappeared, she presumed under the pillow next to Sam.

Sam stood and reached down without hesitation to unsnap and unzip her pants. Courtney waited for the smart sarcastic response or sexual innuendo, but initially none came. Sam's exhaustion was obvious and she fell forward into Courtney when she bent slightly to begin pulling down her pants. Courtney caught her and held her steady.

“All right, how about you lean on me and I’ll take care of that.” Sam rested her hands on her shoulders while Courtney moved the pants down over Sam’s hips and partway down her legs. When she had the pants gathered near Sam’s knees she straightened up. Sam’s hands remained on her shoulders and they looked at each other, faces only inches apart. Courtney was almost swept away by the urge to touch Sam. Almost. She quickly broke eye contact and stepped back, allowing Sam’s hands to slip from her shoulders.

“Sit back down, and I’ll get those pants the rest of the way off and let’s get you into bed,” she said.

Sam sat and Courtney leaned over, carefully pulling the jeans from one leg and then the other. As she finished she looked up and once again saw the mischievous look in Sam’s eyes, coupled with a look of deep longing or hunger. Everything Courtney was feeling in herself was visible on Sam’s face and in her eyes. Then a slight smile finally played across Sam’s features and for a fraction of a second the old spark returned to her tired eyes.

Courtney straightened up. “Are you kidding me?” Courtney said quietly as she crossed her arms in front of her, trying to erect a mental and emotional barrier between them. “After what you experienced tonight, sitting here with a concussion and just about dead on your feet, that’s where your mind goes?”

“I’m sitting in bed with an unbelievably beautiful woman taking off my pants. How can anyone really blame me?” Sam responded in a whisper.

“Don’t read more into this, Ms. Black,” Courtney replied. “I’ve been known to rescue and bring home the occasional stray animal as well. That doesn’t mean I keep them.” Courtney wasn’t even sure Sam heard her. It appeared the exchange had taken what little energy Sam had left. Her eyes began to close again, even as she sat on the edge of the bed.

“Okay, hotshot. How about the shirt?” Courtney said, verbally prodding her. Again Sam nodded without comment and her hands came up and began unbuttoning her shirt. Courtney watched as Sam moved to shrug it off her shoulders, letting it fall to the bed. Courtney was a little shocked when Sam moved to remove her bra, unsure if she should turn away. But she saw that Sam was having a problem reaching to unclasp the garment and moved to assist her. She stepped forward and reached around to Sam’s back, then pulled the bra forward down her arms.

Courtney’s breath caught as she momentarily admired the virtually naked body that was revealed before her. Despite the bruises covering her torso, Sam had an exceptionally trim and attractive body. Courtney forced herself to reign in the inappropriate thoughts the view brought to her mind. She turned away, retrieving a t-shirt from the bedside table.

“I pulled out an extra sleep shirt for you…” But Sam had already collapsed into the bed, clearly either entirely comfortable sleeping in nothing but her underwear, or too worn out to care at this point.

“I’ll be in to check on you every few hours like the doctor said.” Courtney softened her voice. “I’m across the hall at the end if you need anything. I’ll leave the door open.”

Courtney held the bed covers up as Sam pulled her legs onto the bed. It appeared that Sam was already out before Courtney pulled the sheet over her body. She paused at the door and turned back around to glance once again at the sleeping form. Courtney couldn’t help but think if the circumstances were slightly different she wouldn’t be so willing to walk out of that bedroom right now. She forced the thought from her mind and made her way across the hall to her own bedroom.

Courtney sat down on her bed and took a deep breath, trying to figure out the emotions rolling through her mind. She glanced at the clock. It was almost six in the morning. She

undressed and put on an oversized t-shirt, set the alarm timer to go off every three hours, and then lay down. She tossed and turned for quite a while before finally falling into a fitful sleep.

Courtney was rudely awoken three hours later by the beeping of the alarm timer intruding into a particularly erotic dream. Sunlight streamed through the bedroom window as she leaned over and hit the reset button for the alarm. She lie in bed for several minutes collecting what remnants of the pleasant dream she could, then was startled by her realization the focus of the dream was none other than the woman currently sleeping across the hall from her.

“Just what the hell am I doing?” she asked herself. She rose and put on a short robe then proceeded out into the hallway. She pushed open the door to the guest bedroom to find that room also bathed in faint sunlight peeking through the partially closed curtains. Sam was on her side, her back to Courtney, the sheet pulled up under her arm so that it covered her chest and draped over the lower portion of her back.

Courtney’s breath caught when she once again saw the scar, which stretched from one shoulder diagonally across Sam’s back, disappearing under the edge of the bandage wrapped around Sam’s torso. The scar and bandage did not mar what Courtney admitted to herself was an otherwise perfect body.

Courtney approached the bed and sat down on the edge, reaching out and running a finger gently down the length of the exposed scar, feeling the raised line against the soft skin. She tried to imagine what could’ve caused this injury, what danger or violence befell the woman lying before her. Sam’s claim to the doctor that it was the result of an “industrial accident” seemed largely inadequate.

Sam shuddered slightly beneath Courtney’s touch but didn’t wake. Courtney pulled her hand away and took a deep breath, trying to control the thoughts and emotions that threatened to overtake her. She was surprised at the emotion, the concern the thought provoked. She had a sense of fear for this woman she hardly knew.

Courtney moved her hand to Sam’s bare shoulder, again startled by the sharp tingle the skin on skin contact caused in the pit of her stomach. She rubbed Sam’s upper arm until Sam stirred and slowly rolled onto her back. As she moved, Sam reached across her chest and took Courtney’s hand in hers. Sam came to rest on her back, their hands resting together on Sam’s stomach, fingers interlaced.

Courtney looked at their hands clasped together and then up at Sam’s face. Her eyes were still closed and the woman was obviously still fast asleep. Taking Courtney’s hand was an unconscious move on Sam’s part. Courtney left their hands clasped and reached out with her free hand, gently running her knuckles down Sam’s cheek to wake her.

“Hey, how are you doing?” Courtney asked quietly when she saw Sam’s eyes flutter slightly.

“Okay,” Sam said sleepily, barely opening her eyes. “I can get up and be on my way. Don’t want to be any trouble,” she mumbled, though she obviously had trouble keeping her eyes open.

Courtney smiled at this as she watched Sam fall back to sleep. Sam’s eyes closed and her breathing once again grew slow and steady. Courtney continued to watch her for a minute, again noticing her exotic beauty, evident even through the bruises. She tried to toss out what she characterized as senseless thoughts that invaded her mind. Sam was incredibly attractive, sexy and charismatic...and Sam clearly knew it. Courtney didn’t want to be attracted to Sam. She was not a fool. Samantha Black was a dangerous woman, a player and a heartbreaker. Courtney wasn’t going to sign up for anything Sam might have to offer. She refused to put herself out for that kind of disappointment and pain ever again.

“Don’t be a fool,” she told herself quietly as she shook her head once again. She started to rise, slowly trying to pull her hand from Sam’s grasp.

Courtney was startled when Sam’s grasp tightened around her fingers. Then she was pulled down as Sam turned away from her, pulling Courtney’s hand and arm with her as she rolled. Courtney was forced to wrap her arm over Sam’s torso as the woman turned. Sam gave a slight groan of discomfort as she rolled onto her side, but didn’t waken.

Courtney allowed herself to be pulled, telling herself she simply didn’t want to disturb or wake the injured woman. She was soon lying behind Sam, spooning in the bed. Her arm remained wrapped around Sam’s middle, their fingers still intertwined, her chest close to Sam’s back and her pelvis almost, but not quite, touching Sam’s rear end. Courtney convinced herself she would simply ensure Sam was settled comfortably and fast asleep and would then extricate herself. She was still thinking that as she relaxed, surprisingly comfortable, and as she fell asleep just minutes later.

Several hours later a faint beeping permeated Courtney’s dreams. Her eyes opened as she became aware of an intimate closeness with another warm body. She was still locked in an embrace with Sam, essentially spooning her, her chest pressed to Sam’s back and their hips and legs snuggled front to back. Courtney’s arm remained wrapped around Sam’s torso. She froze when she realized her arm was trapped by Sam’s arms, locked against her abdomen and chest. The sheet had dislodged and was pulled down to near Sam’s waist and the palm of Courtney’s hand was nestled against Sam’s bare breast.

Courtney raised her head carefully and realized the beeping was coming from across the hall. It was the three hour timer she had set on her alarm clock. She knew she had no choice and, after taking a deep breath, raised her body and pivoted to a seated position on the edge of the bed, simultaneously gently but firmly pulling her hand from Sam’s grasp and pulling the sheet up to cover Sam’s naked torso and chest. Her hand came to rest once again on Sam’s bare shoulder as the woman stirred. Sam’s eyes opened and her head turned to Courtney.

“Hi,” Courtney said. “How are you feeling?”

“Okay,” Sam said, partially rolling onto her back to look at Courtney. “What time is it?”

“Probably close to noon. I just came in to check on you and make sure you weren’t in a coma or anything. You should go back to sleep for another few hours. I’ll wake you in a while.” Courtney started to rise.

“Wait. You weren’t here...I mean...you didn’t have your...” Sam paused, obviously unsure what to say.

“What?” Courtney asked as Sam looked at her with a question in her eyes.

“I just felt like...” Sam closed her eyes and took a deep breath. “Nothing. I guess I just had a dream. It was nice.”

“Go back to sleep, I’ll be around if you need anything.” Courtney got up and walked to the door. She glanced back briefly before walking out, then turned away quickly when she saw Sam looking at her with questioning eyes.

Courtney made her way across the hall, entering her own room and crossing to the bathroom. She closed the bathroom door behind her and leaned against it, closing her eyes and taking a shaky breath. She recalled the tactile sensation between herself and Sam and how it had permeated her own sleeping mind. Their bodies had fit together comfortably and she’d felt strengthened by the contact. The experience had clearly been similar for Sam, though she was fortunately left with the impression it was only a dream. Courtney, on the other hand, knew very

well how real the experience was, how her body and mind reacted to the presence and closeness of the other woman.

Courtney disrobed and entered the shower, turning the water down as cold as she could stand it in an effort to wash the overwhelming thoughts about Sam from her mind. It didn't work.

SEVERAL HOURS LATER Sam awoke to an empty room. She lay still for a moment recalling the previous sensation of an intimate connection, a warm body pressed to her back and an arm around her torso with a hand pressed against her chest. Apparently it was a dream, though it felt so real, so comfortable. And there was no doubt in Sam's mind whose body she had dreamt was wrapped around her.

The entire experience, being near to Courtney, caused a certain sense of uncertainty within Sam. She was sure Courtney felt something in return. There were moments at both the bar and in the hospital when Sam had sensed the reciprocated desire within the other woman. But for some reason Courtney hesitated to open herself to act on it. She would come close then shut down.

Sam analyzed her feelings and admitted that at first she'd been attracted to the green eyed beauty because of her looks. She'd then been challenged by Courtney's rejection. But their ongoing interaction led to a different sensation entirely within Sam, one she couldn't identify. It was no longer about the sexual conquest of a beautiful woman. She wanted to spend time with Courtney, to get to know her. She had an urge to make Courtney smile, and to be the cause of that happiness. Sam's normal social behavior, the constant one night stands to simply satisfy her libido, seemed very unsatisfying now. She wanted something more, and she associated Courtney alone with that "something more."

Sam was accustomed to physical and intimate contact. She was used to sex. What she wasn't used to was this mental connection, this emotion. Sex had never before been about emotion for her. It was fun, exciting, satisfying. But these sensations and emotions she felt around Courtney had her constantly off balance.

Sam slowly and stiffly sat up at the edge of the bed. When she looked down at herself she was surprised to find she had nothing on except for her underwear. She didn't recall undressing. Of course, she thought to herself as she put the shirt and pants on, she'd been a little out of it last night, or early this morning she guessed. She wandered out of the room and down the hall, pausing at the entryway to the living room.

Her eyes traveled around the room, taking in the details she'd been too exhausted to analyze the night before.

Windows lined the exterior walls of these common rooms, including a floor to ceiling sliding glass door exiting onto a wraparound balcony that covered two sides of the corner unit.

The other end of the balcony seemed to Sam to extend all the way down to the master suite which she knew was behind her at the end of the hallway. There was a small table and two chairs on the balcony outside the glass door. The view beyond the balcony was impressive, looking slightly northeast with a view of the Hollywood Hills and the famous Hollywood sign.

Her eyes then came to rest on Courtney, seated at the balcony table, reading a folded newspaper as she sipped from a coffee mug.

Sam was amazed once again at the woman's beauty. Even simply dressed in an oversized t-shirt and shorts Sam thought she was amazing to behold. She stood still and watched Courtney's

profile, silently taking in everything from her legs to the way her fingers wrapped loosely around the handle of the coffee mug then moved to tuck an errant lock of hair behind her ear.

After several moments Courtney seemed to sense Sam's gaze through the open balcony door. She turned and their eyes met. Seconds passed as neither of them moved or spoke, then Courtney stood and entered the living room, stopping just inside the large sliding glass door. Sam's gaze dropped momentarily to the front of Courtney's thin t-shirt. She couldn't help but recognize the woman had no bra on. Courtney's nipples stood out stiffly against the material.

COURTNEY SAT AT the balcony table looking at the newspaper, though she wasn't really seeing it. Her mind was elsewhere. As much as she tried to prevent it, her thoughts kept drifting to the woman sleeping in her guest bedroom and who was the subject of more than one erotic dream in the past few hours.

Courtney was suddenly aware of a warm sensation, as if she was being watched, and she turned to see Sam standing in the living room looking at her. She sat for a moment gazing at her, seeing something different than the cocky roguish playgirl she'd been trying to convince herself Sam was. As she rose she was aware of her body's reaction and cursed when it became apparent Sam had seen the same thing. Sam's eye's paused momentarily on Courtney's chest, then, surprisingly, Sam glanced away.

"I was about to come in for your three hour check," Courtney said. She crossed her arms in an effort to conceal her protruding nipples. "How are you feeling?"

"Good, thanks." Sam looked back at Courtney. "Would you mind if I took a shower?"

"Not at all. Let me get you some towels." Courtney led the way back to the guest bathroom off the hallway across from the guest room. She pulled fresh towels from a hall linen closet then removed a new toothbrush, toothpaste and deodorant from a drawer in the bathroom.

"Take your time," Courtney said. "When you're done I can fix you something to eat." She walked out, leaving the bathroom door slightly ajar. Partially out of view in the hallway, Courtney paused and turned, briefly watching the reflection in the bathroom mirror.

The shirt Sam had been forced to put back on at the hospital was stained with the dark red-brown of dried blood. Her face was bruised and battered, though not terribly swollen. Clumps of dried blood could still be seen in her hair. Courtney turned away when Sam began to slowly disrobe.

Courtney retrieved a clean t-shirt from her bedroom, intending to give it to Sam to change into after she exited the bathroom. She pushed the bathroom door partially open, her initial intent was to simply leave the shirt just inside on the counter. Then her body seemed to override her mind and she entered the bathroom without stopping. She stood inside the door and watched the partial image through the steamed-over glass shower doors. Courtney's breath caught and she couldn't pull her eyes away as she watched Sam standing unmoving under the stream of water, one arm extended to brace herself against the wall. Then Sam turned toward her and Courtney knew, even through the obscured view, that they were looking at one another.

"I brought you in a clean shirt," she said after several silent moments, waving the folded shirt in her hand then placing it on the counter beside her. Courtney's eyes never left the figure in the shower.

AFTER DISROBING CAREFULLY, Sam climbed into the shower, finding the warm water was refreshingly revitalizing as she stood and let it run over her. She stood like that for several minutes, one hand leaning on the wall to brace herself. She finally looked up and glanced through the steamed-over glass shower door to see the silhouette of a figure standing inside the bathroom door, apparently watching her.

Sam reached out and wiped the glass at eye level, clearing it somewhat so she had a better view of the woman standing across the bathroom from her. Their eyes met again, locking onto one another for several seconds, neither of them finding the intangible contact uncomfortable.

“Thanks,” Sam finally said. Courtney nodded and then was gone.

Once again Sam was struck with the knowledge that Courtney obviously shared her attraction. And once again she was amazed and somewhat confused by her own reaction to the feelings she was sensing for Courtney. Why was this so difficult? Why was she not simply yearning for sexual conquest and satisfaction? Sam was questioning her own intentions as she acknowledged that Courtney’s wishes and desires, Courtney’s feelings, were important to her.

“Jeez, what’s going on with me?” Sam whispered to herself.

Twenty minutes later Sam was still in the bathroom, dressed in her pants and having gotten her bra on, though with some difficulty. She was now attempting to re-wrap the heavy duty elastic bandage around her damaged ribs

When she sensed she wasn’t alone she looked up into the reflection in the mirror and met the gaze of Courtney’s almost overpowering green eyes watching her through the partially open door.

“Do you need some help?” Courtney offered quietly.

“Uh, yeah. That would be great. It turns out it’s a little more difficult than I thought it would be.”

Sam turned and Courtney reached forward and took the bandage from her. Sam didn’t take her eyes off Courtney’s face as she stood before her and reached around her body. Sam sensed the building tension as their bodies remained close and their faces moved within inches of each other when Courtney leaned forward to repeatedly circle Sam’s body with her arms.

When Courtney finished she reached up and pulled the t-shirt down over the bandaged torso. “There you go,” she said quietly and took a step back. Sam reached out and grasped each of her hands, stopping her escape.

“Courtney, wait,” Sam said, the words coming out in a whisper. “There’s something happening here, isn’t there?” Sam said. “You can’t possibly deny you feel it, too.”

“No,” Courtney finally said in a slightly strangled voice as she pulled her hands from Sam’s gentle grasp and took a step back to create distance between them. “There’s nothing happening here. I won’t let anything happen.”

“Why?” Sam asked, disliking the slightly desperate lilt that permeated the question, but unable to contain it. “Why won’t you let it happen?”

“I don’t know who you are, Sam. I don’t know what you are. You claim to be a reporter but you’re carrying a hidden gun?” Courtney closed her eyes and took a deep breath. “What I do know is you’re a player, Sam Black. I’m not going to be just one of your conquests to temporarily satisfy you and then be tossed aside. I’m not having my heart broken again.”

Sam didn't know how to address the weapon. For some reason she couldn't spin off one of her routine cover stories. It didn't feel right to lie to her. She also couldn't deny the description did fit her in some ways, at least in her past. Though she'd never intentionally or even willingly hurt any of the women she'd been with. There had never been any promises of commitment or serious relationships with any woman, so she was sure she'd never broken any hearts. Perhaps she'd disappointed some women who'd hoped something more would develop, but she'd never lied or misled anyone. Sam wanted to find a way to explain to Courtney how her intentions, her feelings, were now so different than her previous relationships.

"Court—"

"No, Sam. This was probably a mistake. I certainly didn't mean to mislead you." Courtney turned and walked back down the hallway. Sam leaned back on the counter in the bathroom and stood there for several minutes.

Again. Courtney said she didn't want to have her heart broken again. Sam wondered who hurt Courtney so badly that it caused her to refuse to act on what were obviously strong feelings. She was momentarily angered at this unknown party and was then stunned to realize the anger stemmed from the sense of protectiveness she had developed toward Courtney.

Then it hit her, Courtney was right. Sam was dangerous, physically and emotionally. In the short term, judging by the statements made by her attackers the previous night, she was being targeted. Anyone around her was in danger. On top of that, if she and Courtney gave in to their desires, there was a possibility she really would break Courtney's heart. Sam was a covert government operative. That role precluded developing long term relationships of any substance. Her assignment here was only temporary, thus any relationship she developed could only be temporary. Sam realized she couldn't offer any true future to Courtney. It was incredibly ironic that for the first time in her life she was possibly developing true feelings for a woman, and because of those feelings she was determined to keep herself from acting on them.

Her mind made up, Sam took a deep breath and walked out of the room and down the hallway into the living room. She had work to do, and for both their sakes she needed to put some physical distance between herself and Courtney.

She found Courtney in the kitchen rinsing out mugs and dishes and placing them in the dishwasher. It appeared to Sam that she was engaging in busy work, trying to distract herself.

"Uh, I hate to be a pain, but would it be possible to get a ride back to my car? Then I'll be out of your hair."

Courtney looked over at her and nodded. "I've got to head into the club anyway. Give me a couple minutes to change."

Thirty minutes later they turned off Santa Monica Boulevard and into the rear parking lot at the Vortex. Courtney pulled into her reserved parking space near the back door and turned off the engine. Neither of them moved for a few moments.

"Thank you," Sam finally said.

Courtney looked over at Sam to find the woman looking at her, everything about her screaming compassion and sincerity. She couldn't seem to find her voice or think of any reply, so she simply nodded. Sam seemed to accept that and opened the door, exiting slowly, still feeling the stiffness and discomfort, and then turning around and leaning back into the vehicle.

"Take care, Courtney. See you later," she said, then closed the door and turned to walk to her car, still parked several spaces away. She looked back briefly and it appeared as if Courtney was going to say something more. But then she exited her car and didn't look back as she walked up to the back door of the club and unlocked it to enter.

Sam rounded her car to the driver's side and watched Courtney enter the club. She took her own deep breath once Courtney disappeared inside and the door closed behind her. She had work to do, at minimum a bomber to catch and possibly a conspiracy to identify. She needed to clear her mind. She recalled again the statements made by her attackers. Apparently she was a target, and therefore couldn't take anything for granted. She took a step back from her car, aware of how vulnerable she was, how her vehicle had been left here, unsecured.

She circled the vehicle, conducting a relatively thorough inspection, checking for any telltale signs the vehicle had been tampered with or a device planted. Finding none, she climbed in. Sam partially held her breath as she put the keys in the ignition and started the engine. The car started without a hitch. She took another deep breath of relief then backed out of the space and drove from the parking lot.

ALEX SPENT MOST of Saturday morning completing the report, making notifications and passing information along to detectives. Chuck Severs and Roger Kim had responded from home to handle the investigation, figuring it might be linked in some way to the bombings. A few phone calls later they identified two possible additional victims who had sought medical attention at local hospitals. By midday Alex was completing her necessary duties and passed the investigation fully off to Chuck and Roger. They would follow up with the victims and retrieve the security footage from the Vortex.

Alex called Sydney as she pulled out of the station.

"Hey, you," Sydney said, having looked at the caller I.D.. "I got your text. What dragged you out so early this morning? There's nothing on the news about another bombing."

"I didn't want to wake you that early by calling. Courtney called me at about three a.m. Sam was attacked last night outside Vortex."

"Oh, my God! Is she okay?"

"They worked her over pretty good. She's got a mild concussion and some cracked ribs, some bruises. Nothing that won't heal."

"You sound tired," Sydney said. "Why don't you concentrate on driving here and you can tell me more once you arrive."

"Are you sure you want me to come over?" Alex asked. "I'm not sure I'll be great company."

"Just come over and let me make you something to eat and then you can get some sleep. I want to see you."

"I was kind of hoping you'd say that," Alex said, not able to keep the smile from her face.

"What? That I'd feed you or that I'd let you sleep?"

"Actually, the part I liked best was where you said you wanted to see me. But I won't turn down food and sleep."

An hour later Alex was lounging on the sofa in Sydney's den as Sydney cleared the dishes from their lunch. Alex had relayed to Sydney what she knew of Sam's attack and the discovery of the additional victims.

"So it looks like an anti-gay hate crime rampage?" Sydney asked as she pulled Alex to her.

"Pretty much." Alex lay down on the couch and allowed Sydney to guide her head into her lap. "We can't be sure, but we're thinking it's not directly linked to the bombings. Maybe some hicks watched the bombings develop and it helped get their courage up. Who knows."

“So you still don’t know if the bomber is working alone or part of a bigger organization?” Sydney asked as she ran her fingers through Alex’s hair.

“Nope,” Alex said quietly, looking up into Sydney’s eyes. “I’m afraid we’re not making much headway at all. It’s frustrating as hell.” She reached up and took Sydney’s hand, bringing it down to her lips and kissing her fingers.

Sydney leaned down and kissed Alex tenderly.

“Okay,” she said. “Now you relax and take a nap. I’ll let you sleep for a few hours and then we’ll think about what to do for dinner. Do you want to head up to bed?”

Alex shook her head and settled into the couch as Sydney rested her hand on Alex’s chest with Alex’s fingers entwined in hers.

“This is good,” Alex said as her eyes closed. Sydney smiled then reached for the television remote on the end table beside her. Alex was asleep before the television was turned on.

THE NEXT MORNING Sam sat in the French Market Café, her eyes pinned to the page of a paperback study on religious myths and legends. Usually fascinated by philosophy, comparative religions and paganism, Sam hadn’t actually turned a page or even read a word in several minutes. Her mind returned to the conversation she’d had with Elena the day before and the information Elena had sent her on a secure e-mail network.

The photograph of the man captured in the hidden security video, the one who had loitered at the mouth of the alley, apparently watching the bombed nightclub’s rear parking lot, had not returned with a match via facial recognition within the government’s extensive intelligence databases, including those on foreign intelligence operatives. Sam and Elena discussed the possibility this was a rogue operative from the American military or intelligence community, and Elena set the search to now include Department of Defense files and any others that may provide a match. Something in Sam’s gut told her he was either current or former military or intelligence, so she was hoping for a hit. Something also told her he was somehow vaguely familiar.

Elena was also compiling everything she could gather on The Ghost, including appealing to other Federal and allied intelligence agencies, though she had couched the request in terms of it being part of a standard update of several known international arms dealers as opposed to indicating he was a specific person of interest in a current investigation. Sam had reviewed the current package on The Ghost, obtained through old connections within the CIA, and agreed with Elena’s assessment. The lack of attention given to the intelligence file in the past two years tended to indicate an effort by someone to keep attention off The Ghost, thus allowing him to operate on the fringes without regular monitoring or intelligence updates. Someone at the Agency, someone with at least moderate influence, was manipulating what should be a standard intelligence file update.

On its face, this didn’t indicate anything entirely inappropriate. The Agency operated on the fringes of these criminal organizations with some regularity. Turning a blind eye, even tacit cooperation, in return for information about more important or more crucial CIA interests was standard operating procedure. However, it could complicate things as Sam and Elena had no idea what hornet’s nest they may be disturbing with their investigation.

All of this tumbled through Sam’s mind as she sat in her booth near the window. And all of it came to a dead stop when she looked up and saw Courtney being led past her table by the hostess.

COURTNEY WOKE UP that morning and set out to enjoy her normal Sunday morning routine. As she made her way to the French Market Café, she wondered if she might run into Sam there as she'd done the previous weekend. Despite her statement the day before, she couldn't deny her increasing attraction to Sam. Viewing the security camera footage of Sam's beating the day before was gut wrenching. After seeing the first moments of the violent attack, she'd turned away from the recording, unable to watch any further. She had to make a conscious effort to resist the urge to call Sam and once again check on her.

Courtney entered the Café and followed the hostess to a small table. Her eyes swept the dining room as she was seated and came to rest on a familiar face. Sam was seated in a booth against the window, a baseball cap pulled low over her face, the shadow partially concealing the bruises. Their eyes met and held for several seconds before Sam gave a smile and nodded her head in greeting, then turned back to her coffee, the remains of her breakfast and the book she held propped in front of her. Courtney glanced at the title. *Religious Myth and Ritual*. Really? Again, Courtney couldn't deny the curiosity this observation stimulated in her. What kind of eclectic taste did this woman have?

Courtney suddenly realized the hostess was still hovering.

"I'm sorry," she said. "What was that?"

"Your waitress will be with you in a few minutes. I was just wondering if I can get you something to drink?"

"Oh, yes. Coffee would be great, thanks." She reached for the menu, glancing back at Sam as the hostess moved away. Having pushed her breakfast plate aside, Sam was again engrossed in the paperback. Courtney silently hoped Sam hadn't noticed how flustered she'd been by Sam's mere presence.

Courtney ordered then reviewed the headlines on the front page of the local newspaper. As she reached out to pick up her coffee, she glanced over to see a waitress standing at Sam's table. The woman was an attractive, young brunette wearing a too tight shirt stretched over her well-endowed chest. The woman placed her hand on Sam's shoulder. She practically caressed Sam's neck with her finger tips then she leaned down to say something in Sam's ear, pulling away with a question in her eyes. Sam didn't appear to respond as the waitress put the bill on the table, picked up the dirty plate and moved away while giving Sam a seductive smile.

Courtney was irritated by the blatant flirtation and wondered what exchange had occurred between Sam and the woman throughout the course of the breakfast. She grew further irritated by her own reaction. Why should she care if someone was flirting with Sam?

Sam looked over at her and seemed to have a guilty look on her face. Courtney was momentarily distracted as her own waitress set her food down and refilled her coffee. Courtney smiled and thanked her. When she glanced back in Sam's direction the waitress was once again loitering at Sam's table. Sam glanced past the waitress at her and Courtney was surprised that Sam appeared somewhat uncomfortable and embarrassed by the attention. She thought perhaps Sam just wasn't feeling well due to her injuries. After all, this reaction was distinctly different from the reaction Courtney had observed under very similar circumstances when Sam had played off that kind of attention as if it was expected.

Sam rose from her seat slowly as her injured ribs protested the movement. She glanced once more at Courtney, giving her what appeared to be a hesitant smile and another nod of acknowledgment, then made her way to the front counter to pay her bill.

Courtney watched Sam leave and again analyzed her own emotions. She noted Sam wince as she stood, one hand moving to her injured ribs. Courtney was momentarily perplexed as a stab of concern shot through her. She paused to analyze her feelings and was shocked at the reaction watching the waitress had created within her. Surely she wasn't feeling jealousy?

Sam and Courtney hadn't shared a word, had barely acknowledged each other's presence, yet Courtney felt her absence deeply. She returned to her breakfast and newspaper and attempted to take in the details of the various articles as she read them. But her brain wasn't collecting what her eyes were reading and her mind kept returning to Sam. She soon gave up and simply gazed out the window as she sipped her coffee.

SAM SPENT MOST of the day in discomfort, though not just physically. Complicating matters was the fact she was confused by her reaction that morning to the flirtatious behavior of the attractive, young waitress. Any other day she would have moved on the obvious invitation, have a phone number in hand and more than likely a date set up for the very near future. Yet she'd been distinctly disinterested. At one point she'd glanced at Courtney and noticed her watching. Was it disgust she'd seen on Courtney's face?

Sam knew where her mind was and why the waitress's game of flirtation no longer held an attraction for her. She admitted she was attracted to Courtney on a level she'd never been with anyone else. And yet she knew that Courtney, for her at least, was likely unattainable. The woman had made it very clear to Sam they were not destined to have any possible future, no matter what feelings either of them may be developing for one another.

Sam wandered into the Vortex that evening then thought maybe it was a mistake to visit the club. She was there in hopes of seeing Courtney again. But why? It was clearly a waste of effort, so why couldn't she give it up?

Sam took a seat at the bar on the lounge side of the club and ordered a beer from the waitress on duty. Moments later the beer was put in front of her and a familiar voice broke through her thoughts.

"So, what's up with the philosophy and the Emily Dickinson? You think looking like some deep, sensitive thinker will attract chicks?" Courtney said with sarcasm.

Almost without thought, Sam slipped into her player persona as she pushed aside the discomfort the barb caused.

"Well, you obviously noticed, and it's clearly been on your mind since you're asking about it hours later," Sam said with her patented roguish smile. "So it begs the question. Is it working?"

"On me? Please. Keep working it, though. I'm sure it'll work on some of the bimbos who seem to find you attractive." Courtney wiped the bar with a towel. "And who knows, maybe if you keep reading that kind of stuff it'll teach you some character and sensitivity. You know, some substance."

Sam refused to allow the hurt from the comment to show as she gathered her beer and laid money on the bar.

"Don't hold your breath, Ms. Brennan. You know people like me, with no substance, we rarely change."

COURTNEY WATCHED SAM turn away from the bar and walk to the door leading into the nightclub. The music could be heard thumping loudly as the doors opened momentarily then closed behind her. Courtney rolled her eyes in frustration at herself. She'd watched Sam come into the lounge and approach the bar. She'd come down from her office specifically to interact with Sam. Now she kicked herself for her sarcastic comment. She'd seen the brief hurt that passed in Sam's eyes before she apparently banished it, resorting to her own defensive attitude. Courtney knew she had driven Sam to escape into the club and likely into the arms of some other woman for the night.

When Courtney realized the image her mind was creating, and the apparent stab of jealousy that followed, she mentally kicked herself again.

Chapter Eight

ALEX ENTERED THE task force office on Monday afternoon. She chatted briefly with Chuck and Roger about Sam's attack.

"So I guess your friend is on the mend, huh?" Roger asked.

"Okay I guess. Feeling a little better," Alex replied. She sat down and turned her chair toward the two detectives. "Hey, guys, if this case goes to trial Sam may not be around too much for testimony. You know, her job kind of sends her all over the world. She's only here to report on the bombings."

"Yeah, we kind of figured that. I talked to her on the phone this morning and she explained the same thing," Chuck said. "She did give us the number for her editor so we can call and see if she may be available if we do need her. She was able to clarify a few things on the phone, but her statement was surprisingly thorough when you interviewed her. I mean, considering the state she was in."

Roger picked it up at that point. "We had two additional attacks that night, probably by the same crew. But the other victims didn't see anything helpful, and there's no video from those attacks. We lucked out on your friend's. That club has a pretty good system, and the video is fairly good quality and captures almost everything." He handed a thumb drive out to her. "Here's a copy of the video. We've sent it out through channels in hopes one of them is known to someone."

Alex took the thumb drive. "Yeah, Courtney mentioned she'd just upgraded the system and added exterior cameras a few days before this happened." Alex turned back to her computer and plugged in the thumb drive, satisfied she was the only one with suspicions as to Sam's true employment.

At about four o'clock Alex's phone rang and a familiar voice greeted her when she answered.

"Hey, can you get me a copy of the footage from Courtney's club?" Sam asked without preamble.

Alex looked around her. She was pretty much alone.

"Sure," she said. She picked up a thumb drive and placed it in her pocket. "I've got a copy of it on a thumb drive. Where do you want to meet me?"

"Step outside. I'm down on Broadway across the street from your offices."

"YOU DON'T LOOK as bad as I thought you would," Alex said with a smile when she joined Sam minutes later on the sidewalk beside her car. "How are the ribs?"

"A little sore, but I'll live."

Alex handed her the thumb drive

Sam pulled a miniature laptop computer from a backpack resting on the trunk of the car. She turned on the computer, which Alex recognized as a highly advanced miniature netbook, the type

that was frequently carried into the field by military special forces and utilized to access satellite communications. She watched silently as Sam proceeded to log on to what she presumed was a secured satellite network. Alex noted it took a series of passwords before Sam plugged in the thumb drive. Sam attached the video to an e-mail, pressed send, then returned the thumb drive to Alex, logged off and shut down the computer.

As she packed up the computer a car pulled up and parked at the curb behind them and Richard Morrison exited. The two women went silent as Richard approached and leaned on the back of the car without an invitation. His gaze left Alex and looked over Sam's still bruised face.

"Ms. Black, I presume?" he said with a nod toward her. "Richard Morrison, Deputy U.S. Attorney. I was reviewing the report on your attack. You're feeling better I hope?" He thrust his hand forward.

"I'm fine. Nothing that won't heal," Sam replied as she shook his hand. Alex's tension and dislike for the man could be felt from several feet away.

Morrison nodded to Sam then said, "Would you mind giving Sergeant Chambers and me a moment or two? I have something of an official nature I'd like to discuss with her."

Sam turned to Alex and raised her eyebrows in question. Alex gave Sam an almost unnoticeable nod.

"I'm sure it won't be more than a minute or two," Alex said. She and Morrison walked back toward Morrison's vehicle about twenty feet away as Sam leaned casually against her own car and pulled out her cell phone.

When they arrived beside Richard's car, Alex turned to him, crossed her arms and leaned back casually against it. She allowed a slightly impatient and bored look to take over her face. Morrison didn't hesitate to get to the point.

"Sergeant Chambers," he said, "I want to talk to you about Sydney."

"Really?" Alex said. "I don't think we have anything to discuss. And if we do, then Sydney should certainly be present for that."

"If you care about Sydney then you'll save her a lot of time and make this as easy as possible for everyone, but especially for her. You do realize it's inevitable, don't you?"

"What exactly do you think is inevitable?"

"Us. She and I." Morrison smiled smugly at Alex. "Come on, she's not like you. Surely you realize that. Circumstances beyond her control led her to believe she had some kind of feelings for you based on some extreme circumstances, the stalker, the killer, all that. This whole thing between you two is just a momentary fascination and she's beginning to realize that. Now that I'm back she'll remember what we had was something real and realize she can have it again. But she's a kind and sensitive woman and she doesn't want to hurt you. You shouldn't make this realization difficult on her."

"And how would I be making it difficult on her?" Alex said, though she had a feeling she knew what was coming.

"Don't make her have to tell you it's over between you two. She'll struggle over that because she doesn't want to hurt you. She's sensitive like that. Why don't you save her that discomfort and break it off yourself? Like I said, it was a momentary fascination for her, mainly because I wasn't here."

Alex pushed away from the car and rose to her full height, putting her equal to him as she stood almost toe to toe.

"A momentary fascination? You son of a—" She was interrupted by Sam stepping up next to her.

“Alex, we should go,” Sam said.

WHEN ALEX AND Richard moved away, Sam tapped out a text to Elena, telling her she had sent the video for analysis. She took a position that allowed her a view of Alex and Morrison without looking too obvious. Alex’s body language soon revealed the tense situation, and Sam started for them when it looked like the situation between them was going to escalate. While she hadn’t heard everything that was said, it was apparent Alex’s temper was about to get the best of her.

When Sam interrupted them Alex glanced at her out of the corner of her eye, but remained in her confrontational position facing Morrison. Sam indicated with her head for Alex to back away from Morrison as she tried to physically step between the two of them. When Alex hesitated, Sam shook her head emphatically, silently telling Alex not to do anything stupid. Alex gave Morrison one last glare, then turned to walk away.

“You need to step away gracefully, Chambers,” Morrison said in a parting shot. “It’s not as if you people ever have relationships that are actually worth anything. Just move on.”

Sam reached for Alex, ignoring the sharp pain it caused to her ribs. She was able to get her arms around Alex just as the taller woman lunged back at Morrison. Sam wasn’t sure what Alex planned to unleash on the man but knew it would be better for everyone if she prevented it. She maneuvered herself in front of Alex, physically putting herself between the two.

“Stand down, Gunny,” she said quietly, utilizing Alex’s former military rank in hopes Alex would grasp onto some internal discipline. “Whatever’s going on, he’s not worth it.” She pushed Alex backwards to the other parked car. “Let’s go.” With what sounded like a quiet animalistic growl, Alex finally turned and allowed Sam to lead her away.

“Wanna tell me what that was all about?” Sam asked several minutes later. They were once again standing on the sidewalk, having watched Richard enter his own vehicle and drive away. When Alex didn’t respond Sam thought she may have overstepped her bounds, but then Alex began to speak.

“That’s Richard Morrison. He’s the Assistant U.S. Attorney advising the task force. Though if you ask him he’ll tell you he’s running the whole show.”

“That much I kind of figured out. But we’ve both dealt with egotistical pricks like him when we were in the military, Alex. So I’m thinking there has to be more to this story.”

Alex looked at Sam and smirked, then glanced away.

“Dick,” Alex emphasized her disdain in the name, “knows Sydney. He disagrees with our relationship.”

Sam’s eyebrows rose in surprise.

“Ah, I see,” she said. “Anything I can do? You know, I’ve still got some friends in the spec-ops field,” she added with a smile. She was grateful this seemed to bring a smile to Alex’s face as well.

“Uh-huh. Are you offering to make him disappear?” Alex asked. Sam just smiled and shrugged. “I’ll keep that in mind,” Alex said, finally relaxing slightly and showing her own grin.

SAM WOKE THE next morning to her cell phone ringing from the table beside her bed.

“Yeah?” she said, still half asleep.

“Wake up, Sam. I’ve got news for you,” Elena said in a voice that brought Sam to full awareness.

“What’s up?” she asked.

“We got a hit on one of the guys in the video you sent me yesterday evening. The big guy.”

“What do you have?”

“Facial recognition matched him. He’s James Michael Fenbrook, 36 years old. He’s a former Army Ranger. Served in Afghanistan in the early phases. While he was there he faced allegations of rape from a village in the Paktika Province. The victim’s mother evidently befriended a female army doctor. She brought her daughter for treatment in an effort to protect her from the girl’s father and the village elders.”

Sam nodded silently as she listened. She knew strict Muslim cultural dictates frequently resulted in rape victims being punished, exiled or even murdered for allowing themselves to be raped and bringing shame upon their families. She listened as Elena continued.

“The doctor evidently gained the girl’s confidence and the story came out. She then made a complaint to the regional Army commander after determining who Fenbrook was. Shortly afterwards the rape victim and her family were found murdered. The father, mother, two sons and the daughter. At least one American soldier was seen fleeing the village when the family’s hut burst into flames. Fenbrook was later identified by the witnesses. The provisional government wanted him tried there, but the Army had him removed and sent back to the U.S. where he was quietly court martialed and then discharged. That was 2004.”

“Where’s Fenbrook been since 2004?”

“He returned to his family home in Montana for a while. Then in mid 2005 he signed on with a mercenary group. There’s some evidence he may have served in Eastern Europe, possibly on the payroll of the organized crime elements that have been emerging there. It’s nothing solid though. He’s been a foot soldier, never in a leadership role, so no one’s ever kept a real file on him. Customs records show him returning to the U.S. last year. He was off the radar for a while then popped up in California about six months ago when he was arrested after a bar fight. He’s living in a house left to him by a deceased uncle.”

“Where exactly?”

“Riverside,” Elena said, identifying the more rustic inland area of the state, about fifty miles east of Los Angeles.

There was silence on the phone line for several seconds before Sam spoke.

“Okay, so what have we got? A military veteran with a violent streak goes merc and is on the payroll for Russian organized crime. The same mob that we believe has ties to arms dealing and The Ghost. Am I reading more into this than I should, Elena? Do I want those dots to connect so bad I’m seeing ties that aren’t there? Just because I want another shot at Prizrak?”

“Follow your gut, Sam. Keep your eyes and your mind open, but trust your instincts.”

“My gut tells me to go check out this house he’s living in. Who else has this info?” Sam asked.

“The FBI agents on the task force made the same identification requests with the video tape through their own channels. They’re a little behind us but they’ll probably get the info in the next few hours. What do you want to happen with that? I can speed it up for them or I can delay it if you need time to work?”

“Can you give me the heads up when they get the positive hit?” Sam asked.

“Consider it done.”

“Good. Send me all the info you’ve got on him. I’ll let you know what I find.”

JUST UNDER TWO hours later Sam pulled onto the street in Riverside listed as Fenbrook’s address on the arrest report. Elena notified her the task force had gotten the positive identification on Fenbrook an hour or so after her and would likely be en route to the house shortly.

She drove slowly by the one story bungalow, noting the unkempt structure and overgrown front yard. She took a right turn at the end of the block, then another right to circle the block. There were several “for sale” signs displayed in front yards and many of the houses looked vacant. The entire neighborhood had an overall rundown and uncared for appearance.

Sam left the car parked at the mouth of the alley she saw running behind Fenbrook’s house, then exited and headed down the alley on foot. The fences around the rear yards on many of the houses were broken down and missing boards. She glanced in them as she walked by and observed the rear yards were just as overgrown and unkempt as the front yards. On her drive by the front Sam counted the houses, so when she reached the fifth house from the end of the street she knew she was standing behind the house she needed. She glanced up and down the alley one last time to ensure she was alone, and then squeezed through a convenient gap created by several missing wood slats in the fence line.

Sam silently approached the window at the closest corner of the house. Glancing in, she recognized a kitchen. The overall appearance matched the exterior of the house, with unwashed dishes lining the counter and gathered in the sink and a trashcan overflowing with fast food bags, boxes and containers. She moved on to the next window and looked in on a sparsely furnished family room extending the depth of the house. At the opposite end she saw a matching window that overlooked the front yard. Another doorway led out to what she figured was a front hallway or entryway. There were no surprises so far, and her observations supported her original assessment. Fenbrook’s house was an unkempt, one bedroom bungalow.

Sam made her way to the door leading into the kitchen, removed a small zippered pouch from her pocket, pulled two thin metal picks from the pouch and inserted them into the simple door lock. The fact the door had no dead bolt lock would make her job that much simpler. A proficient lock picker could bypass a locked doorknob like this one in less than thirty seconds, but Sam was more than proficient and had past experience with far more secure locking mechanisms. The lock she was manipulating clicked, and the knob turned in her hand less than twenty seconds later.

Sam replaced the lock picks, zipped the pouch and returned it to her pocket. After checking around her one last time, she pushed the door open, silently thankful and even somewhat surprised the hinges rotated silently. She stepped into the house and pushed the door closed behind her. She glanced around the kitchen and her eyes focused on several photographs displayed on the refrigerator. All of them looked faded, and the edges were frayed. She recognized the group of individuals who attacked her at the Vortex. In one photo they were all gathered at a picnic or barbeque of some kind. In another they were all gathered around a pool table in a dimly lit bar. Sam removed her cell phone from her pocket and snapped photos of the pictures. Her gaze then moved over the remaining items in the kitchen. Finding nothing of further interest she moved on.

The kitchen had two doorways. One led to a hallway leading to the front door, and a second door led to the adjacent family room. She moved through the second doorway into the family room. It contained a threadbare couch, a single coffee table stacked with empty beer bottles and a tall entertainment center along the opposite wall. Her eyes moved rapidly over the television and cable box and several more empty beer bottles as well as an empty, greasy pizza box shoved haphazardly onto a shelf. Then they caught on a framed photograph sitting on the top shelf.

Sam moved closer, ignoring the layer of dust that coated the frame. The photograph showed four individuals wearing desert camouflage uniforms and combat gear. In the photo's background Sam recognized the giant crossed swords of Qādisīyah, marking the two entrances to Saddam Hussein's Great Celebrations Square in Baghdad. She again recognized Fenbrook but didn't recognize the two standing to Fenbrook's left.

Then her eyes moved on to the man standing off Fenbrook's right shoulder and her heart froze. The desert camouflage, slouched boonie cap he wore put his face in partial shadow and obscured his facial features. But that was almost an aid rather than a hindrance. He'd been in similar shadows the last time she'd seen him. Standing in the picture with Fenbrook was the man who led the violent attack against her in Tunisia years prior. The one who had personally slit the throat of Sam's innocent, young lover.

This photograph was clearly taken in the opening phases of combat operations in Iraq, probably 2003, shortly after coalition forces took over Baghdad. That was years before Tunisia. Here he was in a photograph with Fenbrook, an army soldier, wearing combat gear. However, his camouflage battle dress uniform, while clearly military in appearance, lacked the standard name tag and military insignia.

Sam shook herself back into action and again pulled out her phone, focused on the frame, snapped several photos, then moved out the second doorway into the hall. While this information was shocking, she had a job to do, so she moved on.

As she had previously thought, the hallway led to the front door entry and two doors. One door revealed a hallway closet with a single denim jacket hanging there and several empty hangers.

The second door led, as Sam had thought, to a single bedroom covering the front corner of the house. An unmade double bed and a simple dresser were all the furniture in the small room. A closet with one missing door revealed more clothing on the floor than was actually hanging up. Sam quickly but thoroughly ran her hands along each of the hanging items, then moved to the dresser, giving equal attention to each of the drawers. She moved back to the closet and was considering sifting through the clothing gathered inside on the floor when she heard the sound of a vehicle pulling up nearby. Sam glanced out the window and saw a beat up, red pickup truck pulling into the driveway. Fenbrook exited and walked around the front of the truck carrying a six-pack of beer and another bag of fast food.

Sam made her way out of the bedroom, down the hallway and back through the kitchen. Just as she was closing the back door behind her she heard Fenbrook's keys in the front door. She moved away from the windows to avoid being seen, then jogged to the rear fence, slipping through the same gap and making her way back to her car at the end of the alley.

She was on the phone as soon as she drove away.

"Elena, I've just sent you a photo. The guy on the far right is obviously covert ops of some kind. I need a match on him."

"Okay, Sam. I'm pulling it up now. Yeah, I see what you're talking about. He's a friend of Fenbrook's?" Elena asked, obviously noting the rest of the parties in the photograph.

“Yeah, evidently. But that’s not the important part, Elena. He was in Tunisia. He was the shot caller on the pier.”

“He was there?”

“So he’s with…” Elena’s voice faded off as she thought of the implications.

“Yeah, he’s a direct link to Prizrak.”

“WE’VE GOT A match from the video of your friend’s assault.” The statement from Chuck greeted Alex as she entered the task force office. She dropped into a chair near Chuck and his partner, Robert.

“What do you have?” she asked.

“It looks like our Feds got a match on him through facial recognition.” Chuck nodded to Tanisha Jackson and Max Neelson, the task force’s FBI agents sitting nearby. Tanisha took over the explanation.

“He matched through facial recognition on a D.O.D. database.” She read from the printout. “James Michael Fenbrook, age 36, faced a court martial and a dishonorable discharge from the Army in 2004.” Max slid a military photo across the desk along with a close-up and enhanced still frame taken from the Club Vortex security video. Alex compared the two and nodded.

“Yep,” she said. “That looks like him.”

“Got him!” Officer Reggie Carlisle said with a hint of excitement in his voice from his position in front of a nearby computer. “And he’s got a record. He was arrested for assault at the beginning of this year. He did ninety days in jail and is still on probation. I’ve got an address in Riverside.”

“Map that address for me, will you?” Alex asked, looking at Carlisle’s partner, Caroline Wagner, who nodded and turned to her own computer. Alex turned back to Carlisle. “Can you see if you can get a copy of the arrest report? Let’s try and see if they identified anyone with him when he was arrested. We’ve still got four missing suspects.” She turned back to Chuck and Robert.

“Warrant?” she asked. Chuck nodded.

“We’ll start the affidavit.” He looked at his watch. “If we move fast and I can find a judge available, we should have it before lunch.”

“I’ll send Carlisle and Wagner out with a photo lineup to any of the victims we can reach quickly. We’ll see if we can’t get a couple positive identifications to support the warrant.”

It was several hours later when Alex, her two officers and the two RHD detectives pulled into a corner strip mall about a mile from Fenbrook’s residence. They exited each of their vehicles and gathered together, donning bullet-resistant vests emblazoned with “Police” as they talked.

“What did you see?” Alex asked the two younger officers who had been sent to do a drive-by to briefly study the residence.

“It’s about mid-block, east side of the street. Single-story bungalow style house. Front door is in the middle with two front facing picture windows, one to some kind of sitting room and the other has a curtain, maybe a bedroom. House looks like it used to be yellow, but the condition is shit and the front yard is completely overgrown.” Officer Wagner secured the last elastic strap on her vest then continued. “The front yard isn’t fenced, and from what we could see the rear fence has a wood slatted fence, also in crap condition. Alley runs to the rear parallel to the street for the

full length of the block so you can enter from either end to cover the back. We didn't drive the alley 'cuz we didn't want to burn it. No evidence of a dog. Looks like he's home, the red truck that was impounded when he was arrested was in the driveway."

They all nodded. "Nice job," Alex said then turned to Chuck, the senior detective on scene. She raised an eyebrow in question. This was technically an investigative follow-up, meaning he had authority to call the shots.

"How do you want to do this, Alex?" Chuck asked, indicating he was giving her lead on the tactical approach. Alex accepted the duty without hesitation.

"I'll go to the front with you and Wagner. Robert and Carlisle can cover the rear."

Robert nodded and smiled. "Good, send one of the youngsters with me. Chuck is hardly fleet of foot these days. If Fenbrook runs I need someone who can keep up."

"These days?" Alex said. "Shit, Chuck wasn't fleet of foot fifteen years ago when we were partners. I was always the one chasing the runners back then as well."

"Hey, I always called for backup and coordinated the airship. I still took care of you."

"Yeah, whatever," Alex said, but she had a smile on her face.

Ten minutes later the team converged on the location, having parked at the end of the block and approached on foot. From her position near the front of the house next door, Alex contacted Detective Robert Kim and Officer Carlisle.

"Kim, you guys in position back there?"

"Roger that. The fence back here is broken down. We've got eyes on the back and we can see down each side of the house to the gate between the back and the front. Carlisle's got the south side of the house and I've got the north side."

"Rog. We'll be making our approach and knocking now." Alex nodded to Chuck and Officer Wagner, and the three of them made their way across the overgrown grass yard.

Wagner took a position at the front corner of the house as Chuck and Alex moved stealthily past the window to the front steps. Alex stood to the side of the door and looked at Chuck on the opposite side, both had their hands on their still holstered weapons. She raised her hand after getting a nod from him and gave three solid knocks with her fist. They waited several seconds with no apparent response, then Alex knocked again.

"I've got movement on the curtain." Officer Wagner's voice came from behind Alex, indicating she'd possibly seen someone at the front window. Alex pivoted away from the door and toward the window, leaning slightly away from the wall to get a better angle of observation. Though distorted by the curtain Alex could make out a shadowy image through the material. The curtain fluttered then moved aside and Alex saw a face appear. She noted the facial features and size of the individual bore a striking resemblance to Fenbrook's picture and description.

The man's eyes met hers then moved down her body to her beltline, taking in the badge on her belt and the hand still on her gun. Then the curtain suddenly dropped and she saw the shadowy silhouette move rapidly away and disappear from view.

"He's spooked!" Alex said to her partners, then hit the transmit button on her radio. "Carlisle and Kim heads up. He's made us and he's probably heading your way."

"Got it," Alex heard Kim respond. "He's coming out the back door," she heard broadcast moments later, followed by, "He's on the run around the north side of the house heading toward the front!" Alex could tell Robert Kim was giving chase and she and Chuck both moved away from the steps farther along the front of the house toward the north corner. Before they got there they heard the side gate crash open then Fenbrook came past the corner and crossed laterally

across the next-door neighbor's front yard. Kim was following close behind him and Alex took off behind the two of them.

Kim caught up to Fenbrook, grabbing the back of his sweatshirt and pulling back. Kim, however, was heavily outweighed by the much larger man, who continued running, virtually dragging the slimmer detective with him through the yard, though significantly slower now.

Alex closed on the two and decided she would go low on the running suspect, diving for his legs and grasping him around the thighs and tripping him up. Fenbrook lost his balance and pitched forward just as he reached the edge of the grass. He fell forward onto the pavement, though he was able to get one arm free to break his fall. Kim was somewhat protected as he went down on top of Fenbrook's torso, maintaining control of one of his arms. Alex gritted her teeth as she felt her left arm grind into the rough asphalt, trapped between the ground and Fenbrook's legs, with her added weight on top of that.

"Stop resisting! Give me your hands!" Kim yelled and Alex looked up to see him struggling with Fenbrook, whose left hand was still out of sight under his body. She pulled her arm out from under Fenbrook's thighs, feeling more skin tear away, and jumped to his left shoulder to try and control his free arm. Wagner and Chuck ran up and Wagner knelt down on Fenbrook's thighs and hips to control his lower body as Alex worked on pulling his left arm from beneath his body.

"Give me your fucking hand!" she told him as she felt him roll slightly on his right side and plunge his free hand farther under his body, as if reaching toward his front waistband. She then felt his arm start to move outward and saw a brief flash of metal clenched in the hand beneath his body.

"Gun! Left hand!" Alex hollered to her fellow officers. "Don't do it, Fenbrook! Drop the gun!" Alex accompanied the shouted order with a punch to Fenbrook's face, but he jerked his upper body at the last moment in an effort to pull the gun completely out from under himself. Alex's fist glanced off his cheek, driving into the pavement beneath him before she could fully pull back on the punch.

Pain radiated up through Alex's knuckles and into her wrist. She pushed that aside as Fenbrook shook off the blow and again tried to lift his body up and pull the handgun out from underneath him. Alex pulled her right arm back again and drove her elbow downward, delivering a solid strike to Fenbrook's temple, sending his face into the pavement. Clearly stunned, Fenbrook faltered and Alex grasped at his left wrist, pinning the hand to the pavement in an effort to control the gun. Suddenly, a large frame, metal flashlight flashed through her vision, crashing against the knuckles of Fenbrook's gun hand.

"Aaaaahhhhh, fuck!" Fenbrook gasped in pain as Alex easily pulled the weapon from his now battered fingers. She then easily pulled the arm to Fenbrook's back to be handcuffed by Kim. Alex looked up to see Chuck standing over her, holding his flashlight and displaying a slight smile. He waved the flashlight at her.

"Old school style, Alex," he said. "I told you I've always taken care of you."

"Whatever, Old Man," she said, also smiling, as she helped Kim pull Fenbrook to his feet. They turned him over to the two younger officers who led the still cursing man away.

"You're bleeding again, Alex. You think you might've broken something there?" Chuck asked. She looked down at the slightly swollen, mangled and bloody knuckles of her right hand. She flexed the fingers, which were sore but didn't feel broken. "I don't think anything's broken," she said.

“Here too,” Chuck said as he lifted and turned her left arm for her to see the elbow and forearm which was equally shredded and bloody. “We’re gonna need to have an ambulance come take a look at him before we transport, we’ll have them clean you up, too.”

Alex nodded and they both returned to the house with the intent of conducting the search of Fenbrook’s residence.

ALEX AND BOTH detectives returned to the task force office downtown after thoroughly searching Fenbrook’s house. The two police officers on the team left before them and transported Fenbrook back to Los Angeles for booking. The paramedics who responded to the house in Riverside had determined his knuckles were bruised but not broken and his lacerations to the face from the asphalt did not require hospital treatment.

Alex’s forearm and knuckles, while severely lacerated, were similarly treated and she now sported a heavy gauze wrap that already had distinctive red stains seeping through.

“The booking go okay?” Alex asked the officers waiting in the office when they arrived.

“Well,” Officer Carlisle said. “When he was booked and I did the strip, we found a fairly gnarly fresh stab wound to his right thigh. Isn’t that where one of our victims reported she did the defensive stab?”

“Yep. No doubt it’s him. But we already pretty much had him I.D.’d for the beatings,” Alex said, unable to hide the satisfied smile on her face.

“You guys got something else, didn’t you?” Officer Carlisle asked, apparently noticing the sergeant as well as both detectives looked fairly pleased. “The Feds said the ATF guys headed out in a hurry before we got here.” Carlisle referred to the FBI agents also assigned to the task force.

Kim held up a dark, hooded sweatshirt in response. “This matches what two of the victims described him wearing for the attacks. But yeah, we got more,” Kim said. “We called out the Bomb Squad to pick up what appeared to be bomb materials. Luckily Sergeant Chambers recognized it as a possible explosive. I for one thought it just looked like Playdoh.”

“No shit? This guy may really be our bomber?” Wagner asked.

“Possibly. Or he may be helping them out with the explosive procurement, or even just stockpiling materials for them. He is ex-military, so he would know more than the average person. But there’s no way to know at this point. It was only a small amount of explosives, some blasting caps and detonation cord.” Chuck turned to his partner. “We need to get that analysis request in as quickly as possible. We need to get an additional warrant to have the clothes tested for explosives as well as DNA so we can conclusively match them to Fenbrook. If we can type the explosives and match it to any of the bombings, that may be our only avenue since we still have no solid witnesses. And you know how long SID can take.” Chuck referred to the infamous evidentiary analysis backlog at the Department’s Scientific Investigation Division. His partner nodded in acknowledgment as he packaged up the sweatshirt in a large envelope marked for analyzed evidence.

“I’ll get this booked before I go end of watch and get the warrant request done for the analyses. Hopefully we can do the SID request first thing tomorrow,” Robert said.

Alex’s phone vibrated, indicating the arrival of a text message.

Did you see the photos?

The text came from Sam. Alex responded.

What photos?

The one on Fenbrook's entertainment center and the two on the fridge.

Although somewhat puzzled by the question, Alex had to smile at the fact that Sam was ahead of the game and had been inside Fenbrook's house. But photos? What was Sam talking about? She responded via text again.

There were no photos. I searched the kitchen myself—the fridge was clean. But we got explosives.

There was a significant pause before the next text came.

We need to talk.

AN HOUR LATER Sam opened the door of her condo to allow Alex entry.

"What the hell, Sam?" Alex moved past her. "What's going on?"

"Wow. What happened there?" Sam asked as she followed Alex further into the condo, pointing to the red stained gauze still wrapped around Alex's forearm. Alex shrugged it off.

"It's nothing. Fenbrook didn't want to go to jail. What's up with these photos you're talking about?"

"You're sure there were no photographs? Nothing on the fridge and nothing on the entertainment center in the front room?"

"I'm positive. I was the one to search the kitchen, and I walked through the family room and remember specifically looking over that entertainment center. There were no photographs anywhere." The two moved to the high counter separating the kitchen from the living room and Sam opened a laptop computer sitting there as Alex pulled out a barstool and sat down.

"What explosives are you talking about? What did you find?"

"We got a small amount of C4 and a couple blasting caps. It was sitting plain as day in the family room."

Sam shook her head and frowned as she started manipulating the laptop.

"You hit the place around one didn't you?" she asked.

"Yeah, about one p.m." Alex concealed any surprise she had at Sam's knowledge of their warrant operation.

"Well, I have it on very good authority that at about eleven a.m. these photographs were hanging on his fridge." Sam turned the computer toward Alex to display two photographs of the same group of men. Alex recognized Fenbrook among three others, gathered at a bar in one photograph and outside, possibly at a picnic, in the other.

"Hmm, gotta love the Confederate flag t-shirt," Alex said. "You recognize the other guys?"

"Yeah, that's my entire fan club," Sam said, indicating all four had been involved in her beating. She then pivoted the computer back and brought up another photo, then turned it back to Alex. "This one was on the entertainment center. Notice anything interesting about it?"

Alex studied the photo, recognizing the crossed sword statues in the background and Fenbrook in the foreground. Her eyes moved over the other three men in the picture, pausing on the individual standing off Fenbrook's right shoulder. The boonie cap obscured his face but something about him caused her to concentrate on him. She carefully studied everything about him, then it hit her.

"The BDUs," Alex said, referring to his camouflage battle dress uniform. "That guy." She pointed to the man on the right. "Uh-huh, no markings or tags. You know what that means." "Yep, he's definitely not military. At least not any more at the time this photo was taken. So he's CIA?"

"There are one or two other possibilities, but that's definitely possible." Sam continued to scrutinize the photo.

Alex watched Sam closely as she analyzed the photo.

"You recognize him," she finally said.

Sam chose not to answer the question, just looked at Alex then took a seat on the second barstool.

Accepting the fact she would not get an answer, Alex simply moved on.

"Okay, you're telling me these photographs were in that house hours prior to us hitting it with the warrant?" Sam nodded in response.

"But there's more. Prior to your entry, at the time these photos were still there, there were absolutely no explosives in that house."

Alex stood up and began pacing, thinking as she walked for a full minute before she responded.

"We don't know when Fenbrook got to the house or who else might've been with him before we hit the house," she said.

"There were no explosives and the photos were still there in plain sight when Fenbrook came home with his lunch at just after eleven that morning. No one came to his front door between then and when you served the warrant, and he never left again before you getting there."

Sam looked Alex in the eye, both acknowledging the unspoken agreement that had developed between them. Alex knew Sam was at the house and searched it prior to the arrival of her task force officers with the warrant. Sam knew Alex knew this, but neither of them was going to openly acknowledge it at this point.

"I can guarantee you those photographs were not in the house. We tossed the place pretty good, and we would've keyed on those, especially the ones with his little right-wing buddies."

"And I can guarantee you the explosives also were not there before. And I'm pretty sure the only thing Fenbrook came in with was his lunch and a six-pack of beer. So," Sam leaned back as she spoke, "it appears someone knew you were gonna serve the warrant, made sure these photos were removed and then placed the explosives for you to find."

"But you said they didn't come through the front. That means they came through the back. It begs the question, did Fenbrook even know they were there?"

"Well, it certainly looks like they didn't bother to tell Fenbrook he was about to get served. So maybe Fenbrook didn't know they were there." Now it was Sam's turn to look thoughtful for a moment. "The photographs were on the fridge and in the front family room. Do you know where Fenbrook was when you took the house down?"

"It looked like he was in the bedroom. He saw us through that window rather than the family room window. I saw a couple empty cans of beer next to the bed, one of them partially full and still a little cold. So yeah, I'd say he was in the bedroom."

“So what do we think here? He has lunch then takes a nap? While he’s asleep someone comes through the back, takes the photos and places the explosives?”

“Someone wants to make him a scapegoat? And there’s something about these photos they don’t want revealed?” Sam asked as she turned back to study the photographs more closely.

“What did you guys take in the warrant?” she finally asked.

“The explosives, obviously. Then we took some clothing we think he may have been wearing during the attacks. Figured we could at least test it for DNA. Nothing else could be tied to the beatings. One of the other guys must have the bat.”

“I’m guessing there’ll be an analysis to see if there’s anything to match to any materials used in the other bombings?”

Alex nodded. “Yeah. We’ll include testing of the clothing for the precursors for TATP. We’ve never figured out the timing devices, so there’s nothing else we can think of that would link him directly to the bombings.”

“You know, he’s not the guy who planted the bomb under the car at Escapades. The build and his movement seem wrong,” Sam said.

“Yeah, the walk is different. I don’t think he’s a match for either of the surveillance videos,” Alex said, referring to the club video that showed the suspect bending down and placing the bomb under the vehicle, along with the second video that recorded a similar looking individual watching from an alley further down the block and captured him possibly activating the explosive via cell phone. The quiet between them extended for several seconds.

“So,” Sam’s voice broke the silence between them. “Scapegoat? Or accomplice?”

Chapter Nine

SYDNEY LOOKED OUT the window of Alex's house when she heard the car pull into the driveway. She watched Alex climb slowly from the vehicle and walk up to the front door. She could see exhaustion showing in Alex's almost lethargic movements. Knowing the long hours Alex had been working recently, Sydney chose to await her arrival, intending to treat her to a home-cooked meal and a relaxing evening. She opened the door as Alex stepped up to it and saw a spark light up Alex's tired eyes.

"This is a pleasant surprise," Alex said as her arms went around Sydney. They stood in each other's embrace for several seconds. Then Sydney leaned back and ran her hands from Alex's shoulders down her arms.

"I made din—" She stopped talking when her hand hit the gauze wrapping beneath the sleeve of Alex's light jacket. Alex flinched slightly when she gave the elbow a gentle squeeze. "What's this? What happened?"

"I'm fine, really," Alex said. Sydney pushed the jacket off her shoulders to reveal the arm. "Hey." She reached up and took Sydney's hands in her own, stopping her almost frantic motions. "I'm fine," she repeated, leaning in and placing a kiss on Sydney's lips.

When their lips parted Sydney looked into Alex's eyes, seeing amusement there. Then she glanced down at their joined hands and saw the skinned and swollen knuckles on Alex's right hand.

"And your hand, too?" She took the hand in each of hers, gently manipulating Alex's fingers. "Alex, what did you do to yourself?"

Alex caressed her cheek and brought their lips together once again.

"Honestly, it's okay. I'll be good as new in a few days. I just had a disagreement with a patch of asphalt and got scratched up a bit."

Sydney gave Alex her best "I'm not convinced" look, but let the statement slide for now.

"How about I take a quick shower, then we'll have some dinner. Then I really just want to relax and hold you for the rest of the night. Please?"

"That sounds perfect," Sydney said. "I'll finish dinner. You take a shower. Then I want to look at that before we eat," she added, indicating the still concealed elbow before she retreated back into the kitchen.

Ten minutes later Sydney made her way down the hall to the master bedroom and pushed the door open to the bathroom as Alex shut off the water. She could make out the silhouette of Alex's naked form behind the steam covered glass of the shower door, then it slid open several inches and an arm reached out, snagging the towel hanging nearby.

Sydney leaned down and opened the cabinet beneath the vanity. She pulled out the basket of medical supplies and straightened up. She glanced at the nearby trashcan, taking in the bloody gauze bandages now crumpled there. She thought about how frequently she'd gone through these precise actions over the last several months and shook her head. Alex definitely had a habit of getting banged up on a regular basis, whether it was on the job or while engaged in her many off-

duty physical activities. She turned and saw the woman in question now standing outside the shower, wrapped in only the bath towel, a somewhat sheepish look on her face.

“Come here,” Sydney ordered, unable to keep a slight smile off her lips, though she attempted to sound commanding. “Before you bleed all over the bath towel.”

Alex shuffled closer, her eyes never leaving Sydney’s face.

“Let me see.”

Alex held out her arm to display the raw and slightly mangled surface of her elbow and forearm.

“Oh geez, Alex, did a doctor look at this?”

“I had the paramedics clean it up for me after it happened. They said to keep it clean and put some of that antibacterial stuff on it. There’s nothing else to do. It’ll heal.”

“Well, you’re consistent at least. It seems to be the same arm each time.” Sydney looked up at Alex. She was thinking back to when they first started dating and she’d been sitting at lunch in a downtown café one afternoon when Alex’s pursuit of robbery suspects ended in a dramatic crash and foot pursuit right in front of her. On that occasion Alex also ended up with her left elbow similarly shredded.

“I’ll try and be tender, but I think this is going to sting.” Sydney applied the medicinal cream as gently as possible then carefully covered the lacerations in gauze pads before wrapping the arm.

“Now let me see that hand,” she said, reaching for Alex’s right hand and inspecting the knuckles.

“I don’t think there’s anything that can be done with that,” Alex said.

“I’ll be the judge of that,” Sydney replied, dabbing more of the ointment onto the worst of the lacerations. Once she was done she gathered the first aid items and put them back in the vanity.

When she straightened back up Alex wrapped her in strong arms, and warm, soft lips covered hers.

“Thank you,” Alex whispered when their lips parted.

“Well, someone has to take care of you,” Sydney said. She gave Alex a final squeeze then released her. “Put some clothes on and come to dinner. Then we can relax for the evening.”

SYDNEY WOKE THE next morning to the comfortable closeness of Alex’s body lying beside her, or more accurately, partially on her. Alex was lying on her stomach sprawled across the bed. Her head rested on Sydney’s stomach, and one of Alex’s arms was extended across her hips. The warm summer nights made bedcovers and blankets unnecessary, and the sheet covered only Sydney’s legs and hips, leaving her upper body, scantily clad in a silky camisole, exposed to the cool air movement created by the ceiling fan overhead.

Still half asleep, Sydney ran her fingertips in faint circles over the sleeping woman’s back and felt Alex’s arm grip her hips more snugly in response. She smiled and ran her fingers through Alex’s hair. Alex moved her hand from Sydney’s hip and worked up under the bottom of her skimpy top.

“Good morning,” Sydney muttered as warm, moist lips kissed around her belly button and began working up her stomach.

“Good morning to you,” Alex responded then resumed kissing her way up toward Sydney’s chest. Sydney spread her legs as Alex moved to lie between them, moving up to for a passionate kiss.

“I feel like I neglected you last night,” Alex said. “Perhaps I can make it up to you somehow?” Alex leaned down again to kiss along Sydney’s collarbone as Sydney smiled. Alex had fallen into bed and been asleep before Sydney had even finished getting undressed.

“I think you can probably figure something out.” Sydney leaned her head back against the pillow, granting Alex easier access to her neck. Her fingers ran up Alex’s back as Alex again began to work her camisole top up her body.

They were interrupted by the sound of a cell phone ringing from the bedside table. Alex sighed and dropped her forehead to rest against Sydney’s chest in obvious frustration.

“This is not happening right now,” she said in a staged whisper.

Sydney giggled and reached over to grab the phone, then looked at the display.

“It’s Chuck,” she said as she rubbed Alex’s back.

“I hate Chuck right now,” Alex said in response, still refusing to lift her face from Sydney’s chest, causing Sydney to once again giggle at her frustration.

“Come on, sweetheart,” she said and leaned over to kiss the top of Alex’s head. “Duty calls.” She passed the phone into Alex’s hand and watched as Alex raised her head and pressed the button to connect the call.

“This better be good, Chuck. I’m in the middle of something.” Alex leaned down and kissed the top curve of Sydney’s breast, which was exposed above the top of her camisole. “Okay, then I’ll adjust my statement. I was trying to get into the middle of something.” She tugged the neck of the camisole down revealing more of Sydney’s breast and brushed Sydney’s tender skin again with her lips.

Alex suddenly straightened up, attentive only to the voice on the phone. “What? What do you mean he made bail?” She moved away from Sydney and sat on the edge of the bed. “How could he possibly make bail? There’s no way he came up with that kind of money.” Another lengthy pause. “What attorney?”

Sydney watched Alex’s frustration grow. Alex was soon pacing as she listened to the phone held to her ear.

“Do we know where he is right now?” Alex rolled her eyes at the response she got. “Shit, Chuck. This is a cluster fuck. No return on the explosives analysis yet? So we don’t know if there’s a match to any materials used in the other bombings?” She nodded as if the answer was what she expected. “Well, I guess we’ll be on a man hunt today. I’ll be in shortly.”

THE STREET WAS filled with police and fire vehicles by the time Alex pulled up to a busy scene in West Hollywood. Shortly after the phone call from Chuck, she and Sydney had reluctantly parted ways and Alex and the other task force officers and deputies had spent most of the day searching for Fenbrook, contacting what friends and family were on record and even a former employer. Alex had even asked all of them about any photographs they may have of Fenbrook and any friends or family. She was hoping she could legitimately, and legally, locate photographs of Fenbrook’s compatriots in Sam’s assault. After all, the photographs Sam had didn’t officially exist as far as the legitimate criminal investigation was concerned. Alex was

hoping if she could track down Fenbrook's accomplices that might give them more information on how the beatings were tied to the bombings.

Unfortunately, their efforts and hours of work had thus far revealed nothing, as they discovered Fenbrook was not well respected by neighbors and former co-workers. The few individuals who were friendly with Fenbrook and may have known something useful seemed to share his right-wing ideals and were hardly willing to cooperate with law enforcement. Hours later the team still had nothing to show for their efforts when in the late afternoon word reached them about another bombing.

Alex parked near the first set of crime scene tapes and walked almost a block to the scene.

"Holy shit," she exclaimed quietly when they came around the last fire engine and finally had a view of the damage.

The Lambda Legal Offices had been a three-story office building on a major business street in West Hollywood. Every window was blown out and what had been the face of the first two stories was now a gaping cavern. The remainder of the front of the office building was a collection of shattered walls and twisted metal window frames, and a portion of the second floor had collapsed into the first floor front lobby, with portions of the third floor above looking ready to buckle as well. Alex looked at the exposed desks and wall decorations and recalled pictures she'd seen of the exposed interior of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City after the 1995 bombing.

Alex looked around and noticed the damage surrounding them. Windows in the buildings across the street were similarly shattered and blown inward. Several cars parked at the curb in front of the blast were damaged. Alex recognized the pattern. She'd seen this firsthand time and time again in Iraq and Afghanistan, and studied damage in post-blast investigations from attacks in Israel and Egypt.

"How did we get out of this with only two dead?" she asked herself out loud as she glanced up and down what was obviously a busy commercial street. Agent Jackson heard the question Alex muttered as she approached him near the edge of the rubble.

"We were lucky," Jackson said then nodded toward the two L.A. County Sheriff Deputies assigned to the task force who were standing nearby. "Marquez and Brubaker were out here just yesterday and spoke to management and the front office staff about precautions they could take, suspicious people, suspicious packages, the works. Evidently management listened. So when they saw an unidentified package in the conference room and couldn't figure out who it belonged to or how it got there, they self initiated a building evacuation and called 911. The first sheriff's unit hadn't even arrived when it went off, but fortunately they'd gotten everyone away from the front of the building."

"Whoever made the call to take that action saved a lot of lives today," Alex said.

"No kidding," Jackson said. "Especially considering there was some U.S. Congressman scheduled for a meeting here in the same second floor conference room, right about the time the bomb went off."

Alex looked back at the gaping crater and wondered how many fatalities they would have had if that meeting had actually taken place.

"The conference room where the bomb was is on the second floor?" she asked. "And someone managed to get a device in there?"

"Yep," Jackson said. "Our two fatalities were from that room. One guy was from the congressman's staff. He was here ahead of time setting up some equipment for a video presentation. Evidently he didn't want to leave without his equipment so he was trying to pack it

all up. The second victim was senior counsel for Lambda, pretty big name politically. She was doing a sweep of the building after the suspicious package was found to make sure everyone else was out and got caught in the blast. The bomb was partially under a heavy conference table, so when it went off most of the blast wave went down and out the front of the building.”

“But how did someone get that far into the building? Surely they don’t let people freely come and go in the office spaces and meeting area?” Alex asked.

“Not usually, but it looks like they had propped the rear door open to allow for some deliveries for the congressman’s meeting. People were dropping off refreshments and equipment. We’re thinking someone took advantage of that.”

“And the congressman?” Alex asked. “What happened to him?”

“He pulled up right when the package was discovered and the evacuations were starting. His staff left with him without even letting him get out of the car.”

Over the next hour the members of the task force gathered together and made a plan for the on-scene investigation. The FBI agents, augmented by additional agents from the Los Angeles field office, and joined by both the ATF agents and the LAPD detectives assigned to the task force, would interview each and every occupant of not only the Lambda offices but also every other building on the block.

Alex, along with the other LAPD personnel and sheriff’s deputies assigned to the task force, would again scour the immediate surroundings, collecting security video from every camera positioned along every possible ingress and egress route that a suspect could have taken to the building. They would then begin the long and exhausting process of reviewing every frame, working back from the time of the explosion.

SAM DRIFTED along the edge of the perimeter with other members of the press until she finally caught Alex’s eye and the two met up across the street in an isolated area.

“Hey, Alex,” she said. “What can you tell me?”

“Why do I think you can quite possibly tell me more than I can tell you?” Alex asked with a friendly smirk on her face. Sam gave a noncommittal shrug and Alex continued. “Off the record?” she asked.

“Of course.”

“The bomb was in an unmarked, sealed box left in the second floor meeting room under the edge of the conference table. Fortunately the staff noticed it and when they couldn’t trace it to a legitimate owner they reacted better than we could have ever hoped. They didn’t touch it and initiated an evacuation. The bomb detonated at just after three, by that time there were only two people left in the building, both of them apparently in or near the conference room on the second floor over the lobby.”

“Anything on the explosives?”

“Nope, not yet. The ATF guys are working with sheriff’s bomb techs. But it was bigger than the prior bombs.” Alex paused and looked around before speaking again. “Fenbrook made bail this morning right after arraignment. According to the assistant D.A. handling the case at the local level, even Fenbrook looked surprised when the guy popped up in the courtroom and claimed to be representing him.”

Sam nodded. "I heard. I also heard he's a high dollar attorney who has ties to right-wing organizations and motorcycle gangs. Apparently he won't reveal who paid his fees or provided the bail money."

"Yeah. All before we could get any return on the explosives analysis. We had the state charges for the beatings and the possession of explosives, but no way to charge him on the bombings or murders. And it was before we could set up for any kind of surveillance."

"What about federal charges for the explosives? Shouldn't the Feds have claimed concurrent jurisdiction and held him for their charges as soon as he was arraigned on the state charges?" Sam asked. "Especially if he was potentially going to make bail."

"You'd think so, that's the way it usually works. I'm not sure what happened there." Alex shrugged. "In the meantime, he's in the wind."

They watched the activity around the damaged building in silence for several moments more.

"You're gonna be here a while, I'm guessing," Sam finally said.

"Yeah. My people will be here as late as we can reasonably canvass for witnesses, and we'll map out potential security cameras in the area. Then we'll be back at it tomorrow to continue interviews and follow up on camera locations." Alex looked around before continuing. "This building is in the heart of a pretty robust business district. We're going to have a lot of security cameras, ATM cameras, cameras at corner gas stations. We're going to have to pull everything that could catch anyone coming and going then track movements of anything or anyone with potential."

Sam nodded again. "I'm gonna stick around for a while and get the lay of the land, listen in wherever I can. You know, hit the press conferences, that sort of thing." Alex's eyebrow went up but she didn't say anything in response. "Can we talk tomorrow?"

"Sure thing. Give me a call around midday or so." Alex turned away, took a deep breath, and headed back to the heart of the bombing scene.

ALEX'S PHONE RANG as she approached the criminal courts building. She recognized Sam's number and connected as she entered the lobby.

"What's up, Sam?"

"Listen, Alex, there's something weird going on. Obviously, you never heard any of this from me."

"Okay." Alex stopped walking and stepped into a quiet isolated corner of the lobby.

"You guys booked Fenbrook on local charges for the gay bashing. Morrison was handling the federal side of the prosecution and filed for a federal hold on Fenbrook because of the explosives. The warrant was approved just like we figured it should be," Sam said. "Somehow the warrant was delayed in getting delivered to the jail."

"Wait a minute, that should have been automatic. It should have been electronically teletyped to the jail and attached to his record. After arraignment he would have been held and only released to federal custody for their court procedure."

"Exactly."

"So what happened? How did that get screwed up? It's simple, just like an immigration hold or a parole hold, the jail handles probably hundreds a day."

"As near as I can tell, somehow the hold got routed to the wrong facility. It went to the Sacramento county jail. The teletype coding was wrong and by the time Sacramento determined

it wasn't their body and wasn't in their facility, and got around to notifying the Feds, Fenbrook was already released on bail."

"So it was just a stupid mistake?"

"Maybe. Possibly." Alex noticed the hesitation in Sam's speech.

"There's something else. What is it, Sam?" she asked.

"I talked to someone who looked at the warrant abstract. The teletype coding was correct and the warrant was issued with plenty of time. It should have been delivered to your metropolitan jail without any problem," Sam said.

"But?"

"But it was somehow redirected in the system. No one's figured out where or how yet. It could be a glitch or an honest mistake. Or..." Sam let the statement hang without finishing it.

"Or someone with some pull is manipulating this whole thing. Facilitating Fenbrook's release before anything could complicate or delay it."

"Exactly. I'm assuming you guys will pick this up, but I'm betting the official word is to blame it on incorrect data entry, that the coding for the recipient agency was entered incorrectly for Sacramento. But I'm telling you, it was correct at the time of entry and was redirected later. You never heard it from me."

"Okay. By the way, the ATF and bomb squad guys are in agreement that this was something new, not the TATP compound used on the past bombings. This looks possibly military grade. No one's sure what that means, except that perhaps they're upgrading their stock. Maybe they've got new support or connections. Who knows."

"Okay, thanks for the info. Just watch your back, Alex."

"Yeah. Same to you, Sam." Alex hung up and continued on her way to the elevator, wondering exactly what games were being played here. She still had questions about the guy in the photo with Fenbrook. The one she was sure Sam recognized. But she knew she couldn't ask. Even if she did, Sam would likely never answer. That was the way the game was played. And Alex was sure now more than ever that Sam was still in the game.

SYDNEY WORKED HER way through her paperwork in an effort to finish up on time. She was hoping Alex got off at a reasonable hour so they could enjoy a quiet Friday evening together, having not seen her since they parted on Wednesday morning. She'd spoken to Alex twice in the last two days, both times only briefly. Alex had called her the evening of the bombing, and Sydney knew Alex had worked long hours that night and into the next morning, gotten a few hours of sleep, then been back at work. They spoke once more the previous evening and Sydney sensed Alex's growing frustration and exhaustion during the phone call.

She looked up at the sound of a knock on her office doorframe. Richard stood there with a smile on his face, holding a single red rose in his hand. Sydney leaned back, knowing what the rose indicated—Richard had no intention to honor her wishes that he accept the fact there was no chance at any relationship between them. She recalled Richard's disrespectful pushiness, which had been increasing in the phone calls he'd made to her over the past couple of days.

Without an invitation he walked into her office and around her desk, picking up the framed photograph of Alex and Sydney, waving it at her.

“You don’t seriously think some experimentation with a woman has long term relationship potential, do you? I mean seriously, do you have any idea what this little adventure could do to your career?” He dropped the frame face down on the desk as if in disgust. “This is ridiculous!”

Sydney shook her head in exasperation.

“No, Richard, it’s not a sexual adventure and it’s not ridiculous.” She reached to turn the frame upright, but Richard reached out and grasped her hand as he put the rose down on her desk.

“Sydney, you’re not one of those women.”

“Excuse me? One of those women?”

“Yeah. It’s not like you’re a lesbian. You can’t seriously believe this is worth whatever thrill you get from it. It’s certainly not the way to get promoted.”

“My God, Richard! It’s my personal life. It has nothing to do with getting promoted.” She shook her head. “You wouldn’t understand.”

They were silent for a few moments, Sydney looking at the floor as Richard looked at her. Then he changed his tactic, his voice becoming tender, simulating understanding.

“Come on,” he said. “Of course I understand. But you know this isn’t you. You and I belong together. You need to give us another chance.” Sydney thought she heard someone approach her open doorway, but then Richard leaned down as if to whisper in her ear, his lowered head effectively blocking her view of the doorway.

Sydney wanted to scream at him to get out. His arrogant belief that he could so easily win her back just continued to fuel her anger. Then when she thought she heard someone approach her office, she halted the strong reaction. Despite her discomfort and frustration, she still didn’t want to cause a scene. But then she felt Richard’s hands on her hips and noted they quickly moved down to her rear end. She moved her hands to his chest and tried to push him away, but he strengthened his grasp around her and whispered into her ear.

“I mean,” he said in what he intended to be a seductive tone of voice. “If you really wanted to have a little adventure on the side, that’s fine with me. Geez, pick another real woman rather than Chambers and I’d even join in and make it worth your while.” Richard chuckled.

The last comment was more than Sydney could tolerate. She pushed him back suddenly and forcefully, breaking his grasp around her torso and barely suppressing the urge to slap him.

“God, Richard! You’re such an arrogant ass. Just get out.”

“Come on—”

“Get out, Richard. I mean it.”

“You need to wake up, Sydney. I’m not going to wait around forever here.”

“Do us all a favor, Richard, and don’t wait!” Sydney crossed her arms in finality.

“You’re going to realize your mistake here,” Richard said as he walked out her door into the hallway where he stopped. After glancing down the hall he turned with a smile on his face. “And you know I enjoy a challenge.”

BY THE TIME she exited the elevator, Alex had forced her mind to consider far more pleasant subjects. She made her way down the now familiar hallway of the eighteenth floor of the Central Courts Building, heading for Sydney’s office. She’d been waved through the reception area without question, now a welcome visitor to the office spaces. She smiled and gave

a brief wave to Tyler as she passed the open door to his office, then continued on to Sydney's open office door farther down the hallway.

As Alex came to the doorway and looked inside she was startled to find Sydney locked in an embrace with precisely the man who had caused her so much trepidation. Alex's breath caught as she came face-to-face with the fear she'd been trying to override for the past week. Richard Morrison's arms were wrapped around Sydney's torso as Sydney appeared to have her hands resting on his chest.

Alex glanced down at Sydney's desktop and noted the overturned picture frame. She recognized the frame as the one that held the photograph of Sydney and her, now unceremoniously placed face down as if to conceal the contents.

Her eyes came back up and met Richard's when he looked toward the door. She watched silently as his hand moved from Sydney's back down to her hip to rest near her buttocks. Alex noticed the lecherous smile on Richard's face and watched him shift to whisper something in Sydney's ear.

Alex's heartache and dismay was overridden by anger. She turned from the doorway, unable to watch any further and incredibly unsure of what her response should be. She rushed down the hallway, her face flushed with outrage, almost colliding with Tyler who was exiting his office. She glanced at him as she went by, but said nothing, her eyes meeting his only momentarily before she turned into the reception area.

Alex made her way down the elevator and exited the building, moving quickly to her vehicle parked at the curb in front. Before she could enter the car she heard a male voice behind her.

"Sergeant!"

Alex turned to see the source of her anger standing nearby on the street, having obviously followed her from the building.

"She doesn't belong with you, Sergeant. She's no lesbian. I told you before, if you know what's good for the two of you, or at least for her, you'll back off gracefully."

Alex entered her vehicle and drove away without giving Richard another look.

SYDNEY SAT AT her desk with her head leaned back. She opened her eyes when she heard someone approach her still open doorway.

"Uh, what just happened here?" Tyler asked with concern.

Sydney sat up then reached forward to correct the overturned frame holding the photo of her and Alex. She put it back in its rightful position then took a deep breath.

"Richard was back again. He just doesn't get the picture. He was a little...pushy. Would you believe he felt me up? Like he had some kind of entitlement! I swear he thinks he's God's gift to women, like I'm supposed to fall at his feet for the opportunity to date him."

"I couldn't help but notice that Alex seemed about as enamored of him as I've always been. Did they have words?"

"What do you mean, Alex?" Sydney said, her voice revealing a note of concern.

"When Alex stormed out just now. She was standing right here at your door, then she stormed out. I assumed she'd had words with Richard. You didn't know?"

"Oh shit!" Sydney leaned forward with her head in her hands, wondering what Alex saw. She stood up abruptly and turned to the window behind her desk, looking out into the street below. "She just left?" She leaned forward and looked down eighteen stories.

“Yep. Just seconds before Dick.”

“Dammit!” Sydney knew exactly what had happened just before Richard left her office. She knew what Alex had likely seen and how easily that must have been misinterpreted. She was also sure Richard was likely aware of Alex’s presence and that’s why he’d played it up.

Sure enough, as Sydney watched she saw a familiar figure cross the street below and approach the driver’s side of the dark gray Dodge Charger parked at the opposite curb. She saw Alex unlock the door then pause, looking back as a second figure joined her in the street. Sydney recognized Richard as well. Moments later Alex entered the vehicle and drove off. Richard turned and sauntered back to the sidewalk out of Sydney’s view.

Sydney could almost feel the anger and hear the screech of the tires from eighteen floors up. She picked up her phone and dialed Alex’s cell number. It rang several times then went to voicemail.

“Alex, please call. I need to talk to you. I think there’s been a misunderstanding.” Sydney could think of nothing else to say. She hung up and looked at Tyler still standing in her doorway.

Chapter Ten

ALEX HEADED TOWARD the on-ramp to the 110 Freeway, taking it north on her way home. Her cell phone rang in her pants pocket. She removed it and saw Sydney displayed in the caller I.D. She put the phone back in her pocket without answering it.

She was too restless at home and the sense of claustrophobia quickly forced her out. She'd mounted her motorcycle and ridden without thought. The onyx black and chromed Yamaha V-Star handled the freeways and several winding hill streets at speeds that were beyond reasonable. She rode aimlessly, then hours later made her way back into the San Fernando Valley, up and over the Hollywood Hills and down into Hollywood.

Late in the evening Alex was sitting at the end of the bar in the lounge at the Vortex. She had avoided the loud club and dance floor and took a seat at the end of the bar in the quieter lounge. There she remained, going through several shots of tequila followed by numerous beers. She'd lost count of exactly how many.

Somewhere in the back of her mind a semi-rational thought process concluded she was in no condition to drive home and she brought out her phone to call her best friend and fellow sergeant, Sal. She was just about to complete the connection when she remembered Sal and his girlfriend Tiffany were vacationing in Europe and wouldn't be back from their two week trip until the following day. She dropped her phone on the bar and polished off the last of the beer in her glass. She was contemplating her next move when she became aware of a figure standing across the bar counter from her. Alex slid the glass in that direction and said, with a slight slur in her words, "Could I get another, please?"

"I really think you've had enough, Alex," a soft voice said that was vaguely familiar to her. Alex looked up and was able to focus her gaze on Courtney standing there with her elbows on the bar.

"Shit," Alex said quietly.

"Yolanda filled me in on your progress here," Courtney indicated the bartender who was filling orders further down the bar. "You've put away quite a bit tonight." She picked up Alex's empty beer glass and the empty shot glass sitting beside it. She then filled a clean glass with ice and water and placed it in front of Alex. "I'll get you some aspirin and then why don't you work on that until Syd gets here."

"Syd's not coming," Alex said and looked away.

"Yes, she is," Courtney responded. "I called her."

"Shit," Alex repeated. She rose from her stool. "I gotta get out of here." She made her way to the connecting doorway, then across the larger and busier nightclub toward the main doors, apparently having completely forgotten her bike was parked in the back parking lot.

“ALEX!” COURTNEY TRIED to grab Alex’s sleeve as she almost stumbled into several women trying to make their way through the doorway into the club.

Courtney followed Alex and as they both hit the light of the entryway she noticed Sam standing near an attractive, young brunette. Sam’s young companion was leaning into her and had one hand behind Sam’s neck and her other hand pressed to Sam’s naval area with her fingers looped inside Sam’s waistband.

The young woman leaned in and said to Sam, “Come on. You know you want to leave with me. Let’s get out of here.” Courtney felt a strange reaction to this, possibly jealousy, followed by a sense of relief when she heard Sam decline and make an obvious attempt to disentangle herself from the woman. Sam pulled the young woman’s hand from around her neck and from inside her waistband. Sam didn’t appear to have noticed either Courtney or Alex until Alex nearly ran into the two of them.

“Alex!” Courtney called again as she followed her partway down the sidewalk. Alex paused on slightly unsteady legs and leaned back against the wall of the building.

“Come on,” Courtney said as she approached. “This is silly. Just come back inside and relax. You can wait in my office if you want.”

“I’ll be fine.” Alex said, her words slightly slurred. “I’m just getting some air and then I’ll figure out what I’m doing.”

“You’re in no condition to figure anything out,” Courtney said, suddenly aware that Sam had fully disengaged from her “companion” and followed them, and was now standing only a few feet away.

“I’m not sure what you told Syd to convince her to come,” Alex said, anger and resentment in her voice. “She’s most certainly got someone else she’d rather be with.”

“Oh geez,” Courtney heard Sam mutter quietly. “All right,” Sam said more loudly as she stepped forward, taking Alex by the arm and pulling it over her shoulder. “Let’s go, buddy. You can come with me.” Alex leaned on Sam as they moved down the sidewalk to the end of the building and the driveway leading to the rear parking lot.

Courtney followed and watched Sam guide Alex into the passenger seat of her car and close the door. She confronted Sam as she made her way around the car to the driver’s side.

“Sydney’s on her way. She was worried about Alex when I got hold of her. Something happened between them today. You need to wait until Syd can get here.”

Sam shook her head. “Not a good idea. Did you hear what she said?” Sam indicated to Alex, who appeared to have already passed out in the front seat of the vehicle. “Yeah, something definitely happened between them. And now she’s angry and upset and has had way too much to drink. Between the anger and the alcohol she’s liable to say something to Sydney she shouldn’t and that wouldn’t be good for their relationship.”

“And what exactly would you know about what’s the right thing for a real relationship?”

Sam looked hurt. “Probably not a lot. But I’m an expert when it comes to drinking and being drunk.” Sam gave Courtney that sly grin and shrugged. “I’ll take care of getting her sobered up, then they can figure it out from there.” Sam entered her car and pulled slowly out of the parking lot. “Tell Syd she’s in good hands. I’ll try and get Alex to get ahold of her tomorrow.”

Courtney watched the car drive off and her mind drifted to the hurt she had seen in Sam’s eyes when she made the comment. A part of her wondered again if maybe she was judging Sam too harshly.

SYDNEY PULLED HER Mercedes roadster into the parking lot and made her way into the lounge side of the club. She looked around and noticed Courtney standing at the top of the stairs to her private office. Courtney waved to Sydney, indicating she should join her upstairs. Sydney moved rapidly through the crowded room and up the stairs. The door closed behind her, shutting out much of the noise from below. Sydney looked around the comfortably furnished office, clearly having expected someone else to be there.

“Where’s Alex?” she asked.

“She left,” Courtney said, leaning back against her desk.

“But I saw her motorcycle out in the parking lot.”

Courtney nodded. “She got a ride from Sam.”

“Sam? So Sam’s taking her home?”

Courtney shrugged. “Honestly, I’m not sure where Sam’s taking her, but I doubt it’s home. Sit down,” she said.

Sydney collapsed onto the sofa with an exhausted sigh.

“Alex showed up a couple hours ago and sat at the bar in the lounge,” Courtney said.

“Yolanda, the bartender working in there tonight, recognized her as a friend and let me know about an hour later. By that time she was already pretty deep into the tequila and beer. I watched her down a couple more before I called you. When she found out I called you she suddenly decided it was time to leave. I couldn’t convince her to wait. Sam was here, probably looking for some entertainment for the night. Sam saw what was going on, and considering Alex’s level of intoxication and how upset she was, she thought that maybe it would be best if she sobered up before you guys talked.”

Sydney leaned forward and put her elbows on her knees then buried her face in her hands.

“Want to talk about it?” Courtney asked.

Sydney lifted her head and looked at her. “Geez, Court, nothing happened.” She took a deep breath. “No, that’s not true. I know what happened. It’s just a big misunderstanding. Alex saw something that she misinterpreted as something it wasn’t.” Sydney saw the look of confusion on Courtney’s face and realized she probably needed to start at the beginning. She slowly retold the circumstances of her ex-fiancé’s arrival, his pushiness and arrogance, his phone calls and unscheduled visits to her office and what had occurred, including Tyler’s observations of Alex’s presence.

“So Alex just saw him hugging you? That doesn’t seem like too much, friends hug all the time.”

Sydney shook her head. “It wasn’t that kind of a hug. His hands...wandered.” Sydney got up and paced. “God! I never should’ve let it get to that point. I know what he’s like, but I was trying to not create a scene.”

“What’s he like?”

“He’s a controlling, arrogant ass!”

“And you were engaged to him?” Courtney asked with a slight smile. Sydney responded with a slight smile.

“Well, I was young and enamored...and foolish. He was good looking and a rising star in the D.A.’s Office. Clearly I overlooked some of his more prominent personality faults.” She shook her head as she thought back. “He was even an asshole to Tyler. He’s quite the closet

homophobe, or so I've figured out since then. I think deep down inside I knew it all along, even knew it would never work out. But I had no interest in dating any other men, and I didn't want to deal with the drama of the break-up until I had to. Then when he was accepted to the U.S. Attorney's Office, he announced to me that we would be moving to the East Coast. No discussion, no input from me. That was the straw that broke the camel's back for me. But even then he was convinced I would eventually go back to him. The fact I didn't date much afterwards probably just strengthened that belief for him. He told me that again right before he moved. That was four years ago."

Sydney had been pacing as she spoke but stopped and returned to her seat on the sofa. "Of course, after Alex came into my life it all made sense to me in hindsight. Why I had no interest in dating other men, that sort of thing. I'd just never allowed myself to consider other options, consciously or unconsciously."

"You mean you'd never considered women? That you were a lesbian?" Courtney asked.

Sydney nodded.

"So have you had any contact with him since then? Before now I mean."

Sydney shrugged. "The occasional e-mail or phone call, always initiated by him."

"Did you respond?"

"I tried to be polite. I didn't see any reason not to." She leaned forward, putting her face in her hands once again. "Oh, God. Is that what caused this? Could he really have thought I was waiting for him? That I was pining after him? Just because I tried to be polite sometimes?"

"Well, if he's as arrogant and self-centered as you say, then yeah, I think he could have convinced himself of something along those lines. And judging by what he said about you and Alex, he probably thinks the two of you are just a phase or a meaningless exploratory fling."

Neither woman spoke for several seconds.

"Syd, please excuse me if I'm sticking my nose where it doesn't belong. But I think we've gotten to be pretty good friends over the past six months or so, so I'm going to take a leap here." Sydney nodded her permission. "Where do you two stand? You and Alex?" Courtney asked. "I mean, I know you guys are serious. But, you know, have you said the L-word yet? I don't think I've ever heard you say it to one another."

Sydney paused before speaking.

"I...we...neither of us has said anything," she said. "I don't know the whole story about Alex's past experiences, but I do know there are certain things she's a bit gun-shy about. She ended a prior relationship because her girlfriend wanted to take the step of moving in together and Alex, I guess, just...couldn't. But I got the feeling there's something else in her past that makes her hesitant to commit like that. Don't misunderstand, she's honest and honorable and loyal. I'm confident she would never stray. But because of that hesitant part of her, I've held off saying anything. I didn't want to pressure her, to smother her." Sydney looked up at Courtney with a shy smile, then continued.

"It hasn't been easy. I do love her...with all my heart. And I'm pretty sure she loves me. I'm just hesitant to say it out loud to her. And now, geez, I don't know what to do now. She won't even answer my calls or texts."

Courtney moved over and put her arm around Sydney's shoulders.

"Listen," she said. "You know Alex is probably passed out on Sam's couch, wherever that is. You need to get home and get some rest, and you guys can talk and get this sorted out tomorrow. Maybe you can meet up after the meeting with the congressman."

ALEX WOKE TO sunlight streaming in on her. Her head ached and her tongue felt swollen. She rolled onto her side and looked around her, startled by the unfamiliar surroundings. She thought back to the night before, at first wondering if she'd done something dishonorable. Had she come home with some woman? She looked down and saw herself covered with a light blanket. She was fully clothed except for her boots, which she saw sitting neatly on the floor beside the couch she was laying on. Finally she remembered vaguely leaving the Vortex with Sam. Just then Sam walked into the room from a hallway. She was wearing boxers and t-shirt and looked like she herself had just woken up.

"Any match on the photo?" Sam's question was directed into the cell phone she held to her ear. "No chatter yet on the international front regarding sales into the U.S.? Can we check any black market arms dealers known to be active near North America? Even rumors?" She looked at Alex and smiled, then gave her a sign that she would be done momentarily. "Right, I'll see what I can work up from this end. Anything else? Okay, bye."

Sam disconnected the call and turned to Alex.

"Sorry. That was my editor."

Alex gave a look she hoped expressed her disbelief, while still acknowledging she had no expectation of hearing anything different. Sam apparently ignored the look.

"Well, you're alive I guess." Sam went into the adjacent kitchen and Alex saw her fill a large glass with water then pull some aspirin from a cabinet. She came back in and handed both to Alex without comment before taking a seat. "You actually don't look half bad, all things considered."

Alex sat up and swallowed the aspirin followed by half the glass of water. "I didn't embarrass myself too badly, did I?"

Sam smiled in response. "Nah. You were well and truly shitfaced, but you weren't totally out of control. You didn't puke or grab anybody's ass or fall flat on your face. You did, however, keep me from being able to grab some particularly attractive ass. So you owe me, my friend."

"Well, sorry about that. I'll try and make it up to you." Alex guzzled the remaining water and put the empty glass down in front of her. "I take it my bike is still at the Vortex?"

Sam nodded in the affirmative. "After I grab a quick shower, I'll give you a ride back to your bike." Sam stood up and took Alex's empty glass and walked to the kitchen, refilling the glass and returning to hand it back to Alex.

"So what exactly is going on?" Sam asked as Alex took a long drink from the second glass of water. "Why the bender?"

Alex shook her head and said nothing.

"Well, your girlfriend was worried about you. Courtney called her and had her coming to pick you up. Do you remember that conversation?"

"Vaguely."

"Well, you apparently didn't really want to see her. And considering how much it looked like you'd had to drink, I figured it might not be such a good idea. Anger and alcohol tend to make people say things they shouldn't. So I got you the hell outta there before you had a chance to say something to someone important to you that you'd likely regret later."

"Yeah. Thanks," Alex said simply. "Anything you wanna talk about, buddy?" Sam finally asked. "Not much to say. It looks like maybe Syd is getting back with her ex." "Ouch."

“Yep. Her ex-fiancé. Assistant U.S. Attorney Richard Morrison.”

“Oh, shit,” Sam said quietly, remembering the arrogant man she’d been briefly introduced to. His staunch opposition to Alex being with Sydney now made so much more sense.

“That’s...complicated. Complicated on multiple levels. What are you going to do?”

“What can I do? I’m certainly not being chased off this task force.”

“Okay. But what are you going to do about your girl? You gonna be chased away from her?”

Alex shrugged. “That’s not entirely up to me, is it? She’s got to make her own decisions.”

SEVERAL HOURS LATER Alex had made her way to the gym at the Police Academy in Elysian Park. Sam gave her a ride back to the now closed Club Vortex where she retrieved her motorcycle. Knowing she didn’t want to go home and needing to work off a lot of aggression, and sweat out a lot of alcohol, she figured a good long work out might help. She’d been at it for over an hour, working her chest and triceps ruthlessly. She moved on to twenty minutes of abdominal work, trying to drive herself to mind-numbing exhaustion in order to escape the constant thoughts of Sydney with Richard Morrison, together. Nothing seemed to work.

She glanced at her cell phone after a set of sit-ups and saw a text from Sydney. “Please call. I’m worried.” She put the cell phone down and moved on to the next set.

It was almost noon, with the sun at its fullest, when Alex decided the next logical step was to go for a run. Securing her workout bag and cell phone in a locker, she started with a slow jog down the hill from the academy, passing the rear gate to Dodger Stadium and heading down Stadium Way overlooking Interstate 5. Partway down the hill she turned right onto Angels Point Road and began the ascent. The run was known as “Cardiac.” It wound its way up the road into the hills behind and above the Police Academy, ultimately coming down through Solano Canyon Park and back onto Academy Road. It involved a rather rigorous uphill trek no matter which way you ran it, thus the title of Cardiac.

She reached the crest of the hill, the halfway point of her roughly four mile run, and it was at that point her body finally rebelled. Whether it was from the mental stress or the physical abuse she’d been forcing on it for the last two-plus hours, or a combination of both, Alex couldn’t be sure. She leaned on a large rock, poised over the steep almost cliff-side of the roadway and heaved up what little water she had forced herself to consume throughout the morning.

Alex was vaguely aware of a vehicle pulling to a stop nearby and the sound of a door opening and closing. Moments later her stomach gave her a slight reprieve, ceasing its dry heaves. She turned to seat herself on the large boulder she’d been leaning over and found a bottle of water being extended to her, held by none other than her best friend, Detective Sal Donatelli. The two of them had been friends and officers together, then sergeants together over the past year on a violent crime task force in Central Division. Sal had recently transitioned to detective and transferred to the neighboring Rampart Division.

“Well, don’t you look like shit, Chambers,” Sal said without preamble.

Alex took the water and drank several mouthfuls before she felt she could speak.

“Screw you, Sal.” Alex took several more gulps of water then brandished a weak smile at her friend. “I’d give you a hug to welcome you back but you’re kind of clean and I don’t think you’d really appreciate that right now. How was Europe and when did you get back?”

“Europe was fantastic and we got back late last night. Luckily we both were able to sleep some on the plane, so the jetlag wasn’t too bad coming back. We’re both surprisingly functional

today. Functional enough to be making phone calls and catching up with friends.” Sal gave Alex a pointed look over the top of his sunglasses. “Tiffany called Syd this morning.”

Alex didn’t respond, instead drinking the last of the water in the bottle and then engaging in a relatively thorough visual inspection of the state of her own running shoes, refusing to meet Sal’s eyes. Sal seemed to realize Alex wasn’t going to volunteer information and he grew tired of the silence.

“Geez, Alex, what the hell’s going on? From what Tiff told me you’ve got Sydney going out of her mind with worry. She says you haven’t returned any of her calls or texts after something happened yesterday. Supposedly she talked to Courtney who told her you tied one on at the Vortex last night then never made it home. When you wouldn’t answer your cell phone for either of us, Tiffany insisted I come looking for you. I’m supposed to report back when I find you. You know how Tiff is.”

“Who said I never made it home?”

“Syd went to your house shortly after midnight last night then spent the rest of the night there waiting for you. You never showed.”

“So how did you find me?” Alex asked, still looking down at her shoes and refusing to meet his eyes.

“I put a text all-points-bulletin out on your ass. Got a response from Manny,” Sal replied, referring to an academy classmate of theirs. “He said he’d seen you working out in the academy gym about an hour ago. So I drove up and saw your bike in the parking lot. One of the guys said he thought he saw you take off on a run, so I figured I’d drive Cardiac first. And here I found you in all your wondrous glory, puking your guts out off the side of the cliff.”

“Yeah, well, I figured I’d sweat the alcohol out, or something,” Alex said, somewhat sheepishly.

“Uh-huh. You wanna tell me what’s going on?” When Alex hesitated, Sal came at it from a different angle. “Okay. How about I give you a ride back down the hill. You can shower and get cleaned up, then we’ll grab a bite to eat.” Alex grimaced at that idea.

“I’ll grab a bite,” he amended. “You can have some toast and water or something. Then you can think about filling me in on what I’ve missed.”

Less than an hour later they were seated in Astro’s, a popular diner located down the hill from the academy. Sal ordered a greasy burger and fries for himself and toast and a Sprite for Alex.

“Ran into an old friend I served with overseas,” Alex said. “She’s a reporter for the Associated Press now. Travels all over the world to interesting hot spots reporting on issues. One thing has gotten interesting, she seems to have a thing for Courtney.”

“Courtney?” Sal asked.

“Hmm. My impression of Courtney was she wouldn’t go for someone just passing through. I figure her as only being open for someone very stable, very mature. You know? If she’s even looking for anyone at all, that is.”

Alex nodded. “That’s what I thought, too,” she said. “And believe me. Sam is anything but stable. She plays around even more than I did in my most active years. But Syd…” Alex’s voice almost caught when she mentioned Sydney’s name. “Sydney seems to think they’re hot for one another but each playing hard to get. Sam playing the aloof playgirl, and Courtney denying she’s the slightest bit interested. And I gotta admit, even I’ve sensed some sexual tension there. Definitely seems like there’s something going on.”

“Okay, enough avoiding the issue. What the hell is going on with you and Syd?”

Alex absentmindedly began wiping the perspiration from her glass with her finger tips, unsure exactly where to begin. She finally just took the plunge.

“I think she’s going to ditch me and get back together with her ex.”

“What ex? Who...” Sal finally said.

“Her ex-fiancé. He’s an Assistant U.S. Attorney out of D.C., but he’s back in town. Working on my task force of all things.” Alex shook her head and smiled slightly, though it was without humor. “I caught them together in her office when I showed up unannounced yesterday. They were...” Alex paused as she searched for words for precisely what she had seen.

“They were what?” Sal pressed.

“They were hugging, and...”

“And what?”

“And his hands were all over her.”

“And where were her hands?” Sal asked quietly.

“I don’t know. I don’t remember. But it didn’t look like she was fighting him off too hard, that’s for sure.” Alex took a deep breath. “And I’d seen them together the week before, outside the courthouse. He kissed her.”

“And did she kiss him back? Was it really that kind of kiss?” Sal asked.

“Oh come on, Sal. What does it really matter? Isn’t it obvious what’s going on? You called it in the beginning. She’s a straight girl out for some fun. I was a temporary diversion. Now he’s back and she doesn’t need me anymore. Just say I told you so and let’s move on.”

“I’m not saying I told you so,” Sal said quietly. “Even if I thought everything you’ve told me, the way you perceived it, is exactly the way it happened, I still wouldn’t say that.”

Alex finally raised her eyes to look him in the face. “I appreciate that,” she said, then took a deep breath. “What do you mean by how I’ve perceived it?”

“I mean I’ve watched you two over the last six months. No matter how I felt in the beginning, I find it hard to believe you were just a diversion for a straight girl. I think Syd really cares about you. A lot.”

Sal raised his hand in a stopping motion when Alex opened her mouth to argue. “Remember what happened with you and Regina in the hospital? How Syd perceived that? And was that really what was going on?”

Sal was referring to a visit by Alex’s ex-girlfriend when Alex was recuperating in the hospital after she and Sydney had been targeted by the White Rose serial killer. Sydney had appeared in the hospital room doorway just as Regina had leaned in to kiss Alex, surprising Alex and shocking Sydney into fleeing the hospital, believing Alex was playing her for a fool.

“Hasn’t Syd been trying to get hold of you?” he asked. Alex nodded. “What’s she saying?”

Alex shrugged and looked somewhat sheepish. “I left yesterday, after seeing everything, and ended up at Vortex. I don’t remember much after a few shots of tequila and a bunch of beer.” Sal rolled his eyes and leaned back. Alex continued. “I guess Courtney cut me off and Sam ended up taking me back to her place to sleep it off.”

“Sam’s your friend from the military? The reporter?”

Alex nodded then continued. “When I left Sam’s I came here to try and work it out. I haven’t listened to the voicemails. I was angry...now I guess I’m just scared, too. Her texts just asked me to get hold of her, that she wants to explain. Her last one said something about being worried.”

“Yeah, no kidding,” Sal said, and Alex raised her eyebrows in question. “I called Tiff while you were cleaning up. While I was looking for you, Sydney called her several times, begging us

to find you. By now at least Tiff will have told her I tracked your ass down and at least she'll know you haven't driven your bike off a cliff somewhere."

The two sat in silence for several moments before Sal spoke again.

"You can't keep running away from this, Alex. No matter how this is going to end you need to confront it. You have to talk to Syd, you know that."

"I'm not sure what I know anymore. Or what I want to know."

Sal leaned forward and spoke quietly. "Tell me something, and you need to be absolutely honest with me and with yourself. Do you love her?"

Alex looked him in the eye, then nodded.

"Yeah, I do," she whispered.

"Then you need to see her. And you need to tell her that."

SYDNEY HAD SLEPT restlessly on the couch at Alex's house, waiting and hoping for Alex to walk through the door. She woke up that morning with a stiff neck and still alone. With no other options, and needing something to sidetrack her, she'd driven in to the Gay and Lesbian Center for her Saturday volunteer shift. Today was a big day at the Center, with a visit from Congressman Jason Vaughn scheduled for midday.

When Tiffany called earlier to announce their return from vacation, Sydney had told her she and Alex had a misunderstanding and Alex disappeared and wouldn't return her calls. Tiffany assured her Sal could likely find Alex, so Sydney waited restlessly for this phone call that would tell her Alex was accounted for and perhaps willing to talk.

Sydney put down her cell phone after concluding her conversation with Tiffany. She was relieved to hear Sal had possibly tracked Alex down and was en route to the police academy to find her. She was still concerned about what would happen next between them. She hoped Sal could get Alex to call her so they could talk things through and she could have an opportunity to explain what happened, or hadn't happened, between her and Richard.

"Hey, how ya doing?" Sydney looked up to see Courtney sitting across the desk from her.

"I'm okay." Sydney knew she didn't sound entirely convincing.

"How was your night? Have you seen her?" Sydney knew Courtney was asking about Alex.

"I spent the night at her house last night. She never came home. Tiffany called earlier this morning. She and Sal got back in town last night." Sydney took a deep breath. "I told them what happened and asked them to find her. That was Tiffany again on the phone. Sal just found out Alex was at the academy this morning. She might still be there."

Courtney raised her eyebrow in question. "Are you two going to talk?"

"I'm hoping I can get her to see me this evening."

"Good. Let me know if I can do anything, okay?"

Sydney smiled and nodded. "Thanks." She stood up. "Right now I'm going to take a walk down to grab a decent cup of coffee before the meeting with Congressman Vaughn. Can I get you anything while I'm out?"

"No thanks," Courtney said as she also stood. "I promised Dan I'd help finish setting up chairs for the meeting." She was referring to the Center's director. "I'll see you up there when you get back."

“Save me a seat,” Sydney called as they headed out of the office space, Courtney turning left to head to the rear stairs up to the large meeting room on the second floor and Sydney turning right toward the front of the building.

Sydney smiled at the front desk receptionist as she walked through the front lobby. She glanced through the front windows as a Lincoln Town Car pulled to the curb and the occupants exited. Sydney deduced the car likely indicated the arrival of the congressman. She turned back to the receptionist at the desk.

“I think I just ran out of time and my coffee run will have to wait. I’ll let Dan know it looks like the congressman is here,” she said.

Sydney was just reaching the door to the hallway when a massive explosion erupted at the front of the building. She was instantly thrown off her feet, her upper body and head impacting violently with the lobby wall. She was unconscious before she hit the ground as portions of the lobby collapsed around her.

COURTNEY DROPPED TO her knees as the blast shook the room of the older building. Dust fell from the roof tiles and the building shook momentarily as if in an earthquake. Then it was quiet, almost silent, for a few seconds and she and Dan looked at one another with wide eyes. Then the screams began.

“That was an explosion!” Dan hollered as he ran to the door. “We need to get everyone out of the building.”

Courtney was right behind him as they entered the hallway. People were streaming out of the other rooms and offices and making their way toward the rear stairway. Courtney heard people yelling closer to the front of the building, and it seemed to her the smoke or dust was denser at that end of the hallway.

“I think the explosion came from the front,” she told Dan as they guided people to the stairs.

“I’m going to check the front offices.” Courtney nodded and followed. The people evacuating had trickled to only a couple and those individuals had visible injuries. Many were bleeding from minor to serious lacerations and a couple were forced to lean on the walls to stay upright. Courtney and Dan paused to ensure they could keep moving under their own power, provided reassurance, directed them to the rear stairs, and then kept moving.

All of the rooms they passed were empty. As they neared the end of the hall they moved past the stairway leading down to the public lobby. Courtney glanced down the stairs but was unable to see past the top eight or ten steps. Dust and smoke billowed in the stairwell, obscuring visibility. Courtney’s mind registered the front lobby seemed to be the focal point of whatever had happened.

The end of the hallway terminated in a smaller conference room. Courtney’s breath caught as they walked in. The room was virtually destroyed, with the front window and a portion of the wall overlooking the front sidewalk blown out. The conference table was overturned, and broken pieces of chairs and wall materials were scattered about.

Courtney moved toward the gaping hole in the front wall, but was stopped by Dan grasping her arm.

“Careful,” he said, pulling her back to the doorway. “We don’t know how stable the floor is.” He looked around at the damage. “Thank God nothing was scheduled for this room today.” Courtney could only nod her agreement as her eyes again swept over the destruction. “Why don’t

you head to the back stairs and get out of here?” Dan asked. “I’m going down to the lobby to check if anyone...” His voice trailed off. Clearly he was unsure what to say. Courtney shook her head.

“No. I’m going with you.” Dan nodded then turned toward the nearby entry to the building’s front stairwell.

Courtney took a deep breath and followed him down, pulling the collar of her shirt up to cover her nose and mouth as they entered the cloud of dust and smoke that grew heavier at the stairwell landing. They turned on the landing and continued down the second set of steps. Visibility was only a few feet. It cleared slightly as they exited into the lobby. Courtney figured out why as she looked around her.

The front of the building was gone, exposing the entire lobby to the open air and the street in front. The lobby was completely destroyed. Pieces of lobby furniture littered the floor like kindling. Pieces of paneling and light fixtures hung precariously from the ceiling. Here and there small fires burned sporadically amongst unidentifiable articles. She heard Dan move away to what was left of the sizeable lobby desk.

Courtney was momentarily mesmerized as she watched the dust and smoke shift like fog in the breeze coming in through the gaping hole that used to be the front wall of the lobby. She could make out a destroyed black hulk that she finally registered used to be a larger car. A few vehicle sirens could be heard coming from somewhere down the street, likely activated by the explosion.

All of this Courtney saw and considered in a matter of seconds, then her eyes flicked back to the interior of the lobby, sweeping over the destruction and coming to stop at the doorway leading from the lobby into the hallway. The door had been blown out of the doorway and lay several feet into the hallway. Then Courtney saw the legs lying partially visible, protruding from beneath the broken door. She moved to the door, lifting it carefully off the body beneath it and letting it fall to the side.

“Oh, God. Syd!”

SAM WAS TALKING with Elena, discussing the questionable developments with Fenbrook, the warrant service and search of his house. They were both still frustrated by the lack of identification on the man in the photograph.

“He’s U.S. covert ops somewhere, Elena, I’m sure of it. He’s too chummy with Fenbrook not to be.”

“I agree, Sam, that’s what all the signs tell us. But if so then he should be in the databases somewhere, Defense, State, our own Agency recruiting files, somewhere. It’s almost as if someone scrubbed the files and—”

Then there was a gap in the conversation and Sam questioned Elena’s sudden silence.

“Elena? You still there?”

“Sam. Are you getting this? There’s just been another bombing.” Sam’s cell phone vibrated with an incoming text. She pulled the phone away from her ear and put Elena on speaker as she opened the most recent text. Sam knew that since the West Hollywood bombing a couple days prior, the National Operations Center had tied into local notifications to monitor any other developments. Elena had ensured they were both tied to the emergency text notifications put out by the nationwide monitoring agency.

“Got it.” She read the information out loud. “Explosion at the Greater Hollywood LGBT Center on Santa Monica Boulevard. Shit.” Sam knew that was where Sydney and Courtney volunteered. She also knew they were both scheduled to be there today for the visit from Congressman Vaughn. “I’m en route. I’ll update you when I can.” Sam hung up and grabbed her car keys. She was dialing Alex as she headed out the door.

“Alex, where are you?” Sam asked as soon as the call connected.

“I’m on my way home from a workout at the academy. I’m on a day off.”

“You need to get down to Hollywood, there’s been another explosion. Alex, it was at the Hollywood Center.” There was a distinct pause as Sam could imagine Alex processing this.

“Sydney,” she heard Alex say quietly. “There was a meeting there today.”

“I know. Listen, I’m just a few minutes away. I don’t know anything yet but I’ll call you as soon as I do.”

With her rented condo only a short distance from the Center, it was only a few minutes later when Sam pulled up on Santa Monica Boulevard. She was forced to stop blocks away as traffic became congested. She found space at the curb to park and jogged toward the Center. As she ran she was passed by several fire engines and ambulances still responding to the bombing. The entire scene was still in chaos with no official perimeter or crime scene established yet. She walked freely amongst the rubble as she neared the gaping hole in the front of the building. Several bodies were sprawled across the sidewalk and street, having obviously been covered by fire and paramedic personnel using the distinct plastic, yellow sheets.

Sam looked up as a rolling gurney, guided by multiple paramedics, was half rolled, half carried out of the front of the building and over the rubble strewn sidewalk to the back of a waiting ambulance. She recognized the dust covered and disheveled figure walking behind the gurney.

“Courtney!” Sam called as she approached. Courtney turned toward her and Sam saw shock written on her face. Sam’s eyes swiveled to the gurney and she recognized it was Sydney who was being loaded into the ambulance.

“Court, are you okay?” Sam asked quietly, grasping the woman gently around each arm and turning Courtney to face her. Eyes brimming with tears settled on Sam’s face. “Are you hurt?” Sam asked with concern. Courtney silently shook her head.

Sam looked over as the paramedic began securing the ambulance doors. “Where are you taking her?” she asked.

“We’ll be going to Cedars.” Sam nodded her thanks, looked around at the increasing activity around her as more police officers and fire personnel flooded the area, then turned back to Courtney.

“Let’s get out of the way.” Courtney allowed Sam to put an arm around her and move her down the sidewalk and around the corner to the side of the building. She was thankful Courtney didn’t seem to notice the sheet covered bodies lying within view in the street nearby. “Hey, you sure you’re okay? You’re not hurt anywhere?” Sam asked again.

She opened her arms and embraced Courtney in a hug, somewhat surprised when Courtney folded against her, apparently welcoming the contact. Courtney’s arms went around her and she buried her face in Sam’s chest.

“She wasn’t moving.” Courtney’s voice was muffled against Sam’s shirt. “She never moved. Never opened her eyes. What if…” Courtney didn’t continue the statement. Sam knew she was talking about Sydney.

“She’s alive,” Sam said into her ear as her hands rubbed up and down Courtney’s back. “She’s alive and on her way to the hospital. She’s in the best of hands.” Sam continued to hold Courtney in her arms, providing what comfort she could.

The moment was soon broken by the ringing of a cell phone. Courtney pulled one arm from her hold on Sam and displayed a dust covered cell phone she was holding.

“It’s Syd’s,” Courtney said then Sam saw her shrug. “It was underneath her when they rolled her over. I didn’t want to just leave it lying there.” Sam nodded then took the phone from her as it rang again. The cracked screen displayed a slightly distorted view of a photograph identifying Alex as the caller. Courtney’s arm went back around her and they stood holding each other as Sam connected the call and put the phone to her ear.

“Alex, it’s Sam...”

THIRTY MINUTES LATER Alex rushed into the emergency room at Cedars-Sinai and found Sam and Courtney waiting for news.

“Where is she? Is she okay?” Alex asked.

“They took her into the emergency room. The doctors are with her now,” Sam told her.

“Did she wake up? What happened?” Alex was frantic and paced as she talked, looking frequently at the double doors heading back into the ER treatment area.

Courtney moved to comfort Alex. “I saw Tiffany when they took her back. I’m sure she’ll get word to us as soon as she can,” Courtney said. She put her arms around her for a hug. “Let’s sit down.” Courtney pulled Alex to one of the nearby seats. Sam followed, wanting to stay close to Courtney who was obviously still shaken up. As they sat down Alex looked at Courtney, apparently taking in her dusty and disheveled appearance for the first time.

“Are you okay?” she asked.

“I’m okay. I was upstairs in the back of the building.”

“What happened? How did Syd get hurt?”

“Syd and I had been talking in one of the downstairs offices. We needed to finish setting up for the meeting with Congressman Vaughn, so I went upstairs to help in the large conference room. Syd was going to run to the corner for a cup of coffee. That was right before the explosion.” Courtney’s eyes closed and she shivered as she appeared to relive the experience. Sam moved to sit down beside her, putting a comforting arm around her shoulder as she continued in a broken, halting voice.

“I found her in the hallway just past the lobby. The door was on top of her. She didn’t move. The paramedics were there seconds after I was. There was blood coming from somewhere...somewhere on her head. Then they brought her here.” She looked up at Alex. “I’m sorry, that’s all I know.”

Alex took a deep breath and her gaze swept away from Courtney to Sam. Sam gave her an apologetic look and a slight shake of her head, indicating she knew nothing further. Alex nodded, and the three of them settled into silence.

Another thirty minutes later Alex couldn’t sit still any longer and began pacing throughout the waiting area.

“Tiffany will let us know as soon as—” Courtney began, only to be interrupted by the doors from the ER treatment area sweeping open.

Alex was instantly moving as Tiffany came through the doors.

“Tiff, what’s happening? Is she okay?”

“Let’s sit down,” Tiffany said and took Alex’s hands in each of hers, but Alex refused to budge.

“Tell me how she is, Tiff. Please.” Tiffany gave in to her plea as Courtney and Sam rose and stood nearby to listen.

“She’s stable. But she has head trauma. There’s internal bleeding that’s putting pressure on her brain. It’s to be expected in a case like this. They’ve induced a medical coma, to give her brain a chance to stop swelling and bring the bleeding under control.”

“She’s in a coma?” Alex appeared to almost double over in physical discomfort, looking ready to collapse.

“Listen to me, Alex. It’s medically induced. It’s the best thing. There’s every reason to believe that in a day or two we’ll reduce the meds and she’ll wake up and make a full recovery.”

“She has to be okay, Tiff. We...we fought. I didn’t...I haven’t spoken to her...I was angry and...she just has to be okay.”

Sam pulled Courtney away to give Alex and Tiffany some privacy as they talked. She was a little surprised when Courtney leaned into her and put her arms around her.

“She’s alive,” Courtney said. “God, I was so scared for a while. She looked so broken.”

Sam hugged her, pulling back to look down at the face leaning against her shoulder. She could see the physical and emotional exhaustion written all over the woman.

“I don’t think there’s anything else we can do here. You heard Tiffany, there’s no way Sydney’s going to wake up anytime soon. How about I take you home so you can get some rest?” She watched as Courtney thought it through then slowly nodded.

They moved back to Alex and Tiffany.

“I’m going to take Court home so she can get cleaned up and rest,” Sam told Alex as Courtney stepped forward to give her a hug.

“She’s going to be okay, Alex. She’s in the best of hands now. They’ll take care of her,” Courtney said as she pulled away.

Tiffany stepped in and hugged Courtney next. “Are you okay?” she asked, stepping back and looking the woman over. “Anything I need to look at?” Courtney shook her head.

“I’m just dirty and worn out. Other than that I’m fine.”

Sam tugged Alex out of earshot.

“Is there anything you need, Alex? Anything I can do?” Alex shook her head. “I’ll touch base with the investigation as much as I can,” Sam continued. “I’m sure your guys will take care of everything. You just concentrate on Sydney. Call me if there’s anything you need, anything I can help with, for either of you.” Alex nodded again.

“Thanks, Sam.” She had a slightly vacant look in her eyes when they focused on Sam. “You just take care of Court.”

SAM PULLED INTO the subterranean parking at Courtney’s condo building and parked as Courtney finished a phone call.

“Thanks, Liz,” Courtney said to her club manager. “I owe you one. I’ll be in later tomorrow at some point and I’ll cover the closing...okay, bye.” She hung up and reached down to grab the bags of food between her feet. Together the two made their way to the elevator and up to Courtney’s floor.

On the way from the hospital they agreed to pick up Chinese for dinner. As Courtney unlocked the door Sam relieved her of the bag of food.

“Why don’t you grab a shower and make yourself more comfortable while I get the food ready?” Sam said as they entered the condo. Courtney nodded and made her way directly down the hallway to the master bedroom as Sam turned into the kitchen.

Thirty minutes later Sam picked up the empty plate from in front of Courtney, placing it near the sink. She returned with the rest of the bottle of wine she had found already open in the fridge and picked up each of their glasses.

“Come on, why don’t you relax on the couch?”

Courtney, now dressed in loose sweat pants and an oversized t-shirt, shuffled behind her into the family room. Sam sat down on the couch and hid the slight surprise she felt when Courtney sat down next to her rather than at the other end of the couch or perhaps on a separate chair. Sam leaned forward and put the glasses on the coffee table in front of her and partially filled them with the last of the wine. She sat back and handed one glass to Courtney, then stretched one arm across the back of the couch behind her.

“How are you doing?” Sam asked after she took a sip from her glass, watching Courtney do the same.

Courtney shrugged. “I don’t really know. It’s all kind of, overwhelming, I guess. It’s still hard to believe.” Sam watched as Courtney brought the glass to her lips once again and drank the remaining wine in one gulp. A lone tear trickled down her cheek.

Sam reached over and removed the glass from Courtney’s grasp and put it and her own glass back on the coffee table.

When she leaned back she tugged Courtney toward her and felt the woman willingly lean into her, collapsing into Sam’s shoulder, her face snuggling into her neck. Courtney’s hand came up to grasp the front of Sam’s shirt as a sob escaped from her lips.

“I was so scared. There was smoke and I couldn’t see very well. People were screaming and bleeding.” Sam hugged Courtney and brought a hand up to gently run fingers through her hair as she let her ramble and vent. “We came down into the lobby and it was just...gone. The whole front wall was gone. Then I saw Syd. She was just lying there, bloody, not moving.”

Sam brought her lips down and kissed the crown of Courtney’s head, then leaned her cheek against her hair. “But she’s alive. We know that now. And it looks like she’ll be okay.” Courtney took a deep breath and then nodded her head against Sam’s chest. Sam mentally gathered her courage before speaking again.

“When I got the call about the explosion, my first thought was that you were there. I knew about the congressman’s visit. I knew you were going to be there to help out. I was terrified,” she whispered as her arm wrapped around Courtney tightened slightly. “When I saw you walk out I was so relieved.”

Courtney pulled back slightly and looked up into Sam’s eyes. Neither moved for several moments, then Courtney let go of her shirt and moved her hand to the back of Sam’s neck, pulling Sam’s head forward. Their lips met, softly at first, then more insistent. Sam kept one arm around Courtney, her other hand dropping to rest on Courtney’s hip.

Sam let Courtney set the pace, welcoming her tongue as it pressed against and then parted Sam’s lips. Courtney’s hand dropped from her neck down to her chest, coming to rest on her breast. Courtney squeezed her breast and Sam responded with a faint moan. Sam brought her hand up to cover Courtney’s, grasping it to prevent further manipulation. She slowly pulled away from the kiss, leaving their lips only inches apart.

“Court—”

“Please, Sam. I need to feel close to someone. To feel alive.”

Sam felt a slight pang of hurt at these words.

“I understand. And I’ll be here for you,” she said. “To hold you. To comfort you. Whatever you need. Just please not like this. Not now, not this way.”

Sam saw the flash of anger pass through Courtney’s eyes and Courtney pulled away from her.

“So I’m not good enough for you? Please! I’ve seen you leave with a different woman practically every night you’re at my club. Clearly none of them could have mattered to you in the thirty minutes you spent with them before you decided they were good enough to fuck. But somehow I’m not?” By the time she finished, Courtney was standing over Sam, arms crossed defiantly across her chest.

“Court,” Sam reached out to take Courtney’s hand, only to have her take a step back, clearly out of reach. This didn’t stop Sam. “That’s just it, Court,” she said. “They didn’t matter. And we both knew that, them and I. I’ve never misguided anyone or promised anything more.”

“They didn’t matter to you, yet they were good enough to fuck. I’m clearly not. So you let me humiliate myself.” Courtney shook her head and turned to walk away. “I’m going to bed. You can see yourself out.”

“Court?” Sam was surprised and relieved when Courtney stopped, though she didn’t turn around. “That’s just it. They didn’t matter to me. You do. And if we were to—”

Sam wasn’t sure how to say what she was feeling. She got up, grabbed her jacket off the back of a nearby chair and put it on as she moved to the door. Courtney still stood, unmoving at the entrance to the hallway, her back still turned. Sam opened the door and looked back toward her.

“I don’t mean to hurt you, Court. I realize you’ve had a shock and, like you said, you’re human and you just want to feel alive, with anyone.” Sam tried to resist the pain that acknowledgment caused. “But I could never be with you and have it mean nothing. I already care too much. You mean too much for me to treat you like the rest of them. I would like it to mean more to both of us than it would with just anyone.”

Sam walked out, closing the door quietly behind her.

Courtney froze as the words hit her. She stood still for several seconds after the click of the door latch. Once again she had assumed shallow motivations for Sam’s actions and apparently completely misread her intentions.

Courtney replayed Sam’s words in her mind then turned and ran for the door and threw it open. But the hallway outside her door was empty, and the elevator was closed and already descending toward the garage. She re-entered her condo, closing and locking the door then walking slowly to her master bedroom, turning off lights as she went. She lay in bed, unable to sleep, wondering about what exactly had transpired and whether she could fix it.

Chapter Eleven

ALEX SLOUCHED IN the chair beside the hospital bed. It had been more than two days since she received the terrifying calls stemming from the bombing. Sydney had yet to gain consciousness, and Alex hadn't left the hospital in over forty-eight hours.

Fortunately Chuck covered for her with the task force and no questions were raised regarding her absence. Alex knew the death toll from the bombing was at six. The Center's receptionist and two visitors who'd been in the lobby, as well as Congressman Vaughn and two members of his staff were killed. One bystander on the street and Sydney were the two critical injuries, and dozens both inside the Center and out on the street suffered moderate or minor injuries.

Tiffany's position as a nurse, along with Alex's status as a police officer, gained her tacit approval to remain at the hospital despite her lack of formal family status. While the medical staff was unable to officially share information with Alex, Tiffany provided her with the basic details.

In addition to the relatively minor, though numerous, bruises and lacerations, Sydney had taken a severe blow to the head resulting in swelling and pressure on her brain. After she was stabilized on the first day she'd been moved out of emergency and given a private room in the Intensive Care Unit.

Tiffany, despite her emergency room position, continued to monitor her medical condition and assured Alex the condition was improving and no invasive surgery was necessary. The swelling gradually reduced, as had the medication she was being given. Alex was told that Sydney could wake at any point.

Alex looked up as the door opened and Tiffany entered. She approached Alex and handed her a steaming cup of coffee.

"How are you doing?" she asked. Alex simply shrugged as she sipped at the cup. "Did you at least get away for a while?" Tiffany asked.

Alex shrugged again. "I drove down to Hollywood Station yesterday afternoon and grabbed a shower." Alex wasn't willing to leave to go much farther than the closest police station, just a few miles away.

"You look like shit, Alex. You need to get some rest and a real meal."

Alex shook her head. "I'm fine," she said. "Sal and Court have each brought food when they stopped by."

"Yeah, and my information is you've barely eaten any of it."

"I'm fine. I'm not going anywhere. I need to be here when she wakes up."

"What about her sister?" Tiffany asked.

"Tyler finally tracked Jennifer down last night. She'd been with friends up at a mountain lake cabin in upstate New York and had no cell service. She should be getting here anytime now."

"How are you going to handle that?" Tiffany asked. "She doesn't know about you two yet, does she?"

Alex shook her head. "I'm not outing Sydney to her sister. Syd can tell her when she's ready. When Syd talked about me Jennifer was under the impression I was a guy. Syd hasn't corrected that yet. That's her decision to make, on her time line and when she's comfortable with it. So for now I'm a friend. Besides, everything was so messed up when this happened. I don't know..."

"Sydney was planning on telling Jen about you two within the next couple weeks," Tyler said from the doorway. He entered and looked at Sydney lying still in the bed. "She invited Jen to come for a weekend and was going to introduce you two." He looked back at Alex. "She hesitated to tell you because she didn't want to put more stress on you with the bombing case and everything."

Alex studied her hands wrapped around her partially empty coffee cup. "But, what about...what about everything that was happening with Morrison?"

"Alex, there was nothing between Syd and her ex. He's an arrogant ass who was making the moves on her. She was trying to extract herself without creating a scene, but he wasn't accepting the message. You need to believe that."

Alex looked at the still unconscious figure lying in the bed and said nothing. She was trying to accept what Tyler said. But her mind was so full of uncertainty about her own importance to Sydney and about Sydney's certainty in her own sexuality. About everything she saw and about Sydney's failure to reveal what was happening with Morrison.

As her mind tried to deal with all the issues and questions, several things began to happen simultaneously. The door was pushed and held open by a nurse, allowing an attractive brunette to walk past and into the room. The nurse recognized Tiffany and nodded then let the door close as she walked away.

The new arrival paused with her eyes locked on the still figure in the hospital bed. Alex recognized the similarity and stood as Tyler moved toward the woman.

"Hey, Jen," he said as the two embraced.

"Hi, Ty." Jennifer moved to Sydney's side and took the unconscious woman's hand then looked up at Tiffany, identifiable in her nurse's scrubs. "How is she?"

"The swelling has gone down," Tiffany said. "She could wake up at any time. She got banged up quite a bit but nothing that won't heal. We'll know more about any long term effects once she's awake."

Jennifer nodded and looked back at her sister for several moments, then seemed to notice the other occupant in the room. She turned and looked at Alex, then again at Tiffany, then finally turned to Tyler.

"This is Tiffany," Tyler said in answer to Jennifer's unasked question. "She's a friend and happens to be a nurse here at the hospital. That's been a big help since none of us are technically family, so without her we wouldn't be permitted to be here." He turned next to indicate Alex. "And this is—"

"Sergeant Alexandria Chambers," Alex said as she stepped forward to shake Jennifer's hand. "I'm a friend of Sydney's from work. We know each other from some cases she's handled."

Before anything else was said, they all heard a groan from the bed.

Tiffany was the first to react, moving to Sydney's bedside, glancing over the various machines to which she was hooked.

"I'll get the doctor," she said as she moved to the doorway.

Without conscious thought Alex also moved to the bedside and grasped Sydney's other hand. Three people leaned forward, their view locked on Sydney as her eyes fluttered and then slowly opened. She blinked several times and then looked around her.

SYDNEY'S HEAD HURT and she was slightly nauseous. Her eyes finally focused on her sister.

"Jen?" she said with a weak voice.

"Hey, you," Jennifer said quietly through a teary smile. "How are you feeling?"

"Got a headache," Sydney replied. She closed her eyes briefly. "Things are a little fuzzy." She opened her eyes and struggled to focus again then her gaze moved on to Tyler. "Ty?"

He stepped up beside Jennifer and smiled at her. "Welcome back, Syd."

Sydney felt her other hand squeezed and shifted her head slightly and let her eyes roam to the other side of the bed. Her eyes came to rest on the tall figure standing near her shoulder with a hand clasped around hers.

The woman smiled reassuringly and Sydney made an effort to return the friendly smile. She recognized a look of fondness and concern expressed through the woman's eyes. She studied the face, feeling a vague sense of familiarity, like she should recognize this striking woman. But she just couldn't place her.

"Hi. I'm sorry, I seem to be a bit mixed up. Do we know each other?" she quietly asked. For a moment she thought a strange look passed over the face of the woman, a look of almost panic.

TIFFANY NOTICED AN ominous stillness in the room as she entered following behind the doctor. She looked to Alex and saw her standing frozen then glanced at Sydney who seemed to be looking at Alex with a look of confusion on her face.

"I hear someone has decided to join the waking world?" the doctor said. Four sets of eyes turned to look at him as he approached, three from among those standing around the bed and the last from Sydney. Tiffany then looked away from the doctor and continued to study Alex, whose eyes were still locked on Sydney.

"Alex?" she asked quietly, concerned by the expression on her face. Alex didn't respond. Tiffany took Alex's arm and pulled her away from the bed as the doctor approached. As Alex was forced to release Sydney's hand, Tiffany saw Sydney's eyes look down at their hands and then back up at Alex. Tiffany saw the confusion in Sydney's eyes. There may have been a momentary glimmer of recognition in Sydney's eyes, but then it passed.

"Alex, what is it?" Tiffany asked in almost a whisper.

"Sydney didn't recognize her," Tyler whispered to her as Alex still maintained her shocked silence. Tiffany's breath caught as the information sank in. What should have been an exceptionally joyful experience had turned terrifying for Alex.

"How about the rest of you give the young lady and I a few minutes, and you can come back in again after that?" the doctor said to the group. "I promise not to monopolize her for too long."

"We'll be right outside," Jennifer said to Sydney, giving her hand a reassuring squeeze then releasing it. "We'll see you in a few minutes."

Tiffany didn't take her hand from Alex's arm, concerned about her reaction to Sydney's lack of recognition. Before stepping away herself, she leaned toward the doctor.

"Doctor, there may be a problem with short term memory, recognition of some people she knows," she said. The doctor shared her look of concern and nodded.

“Thank you, Tiffany.”

Alex stumbled out of the room, guided by Tiffany’s hand. The look on Alex’s face was one of virtual shock and panic.

“Hey, you okay?” Tiffany asked Alex in almost a whisper. Alex turned and slumped with her back against the corridor wall. She shrugged then shoved her hands into her pockets and her head fell forward, looking down at her feet.

“She doesn’t know me, Tiff. She doesn’t recognize me.” The pain was evident in Alex’s quiet response.

THEY ALL STEPPED out of the room and Alex leaned back against the wall for support. Tiffany followed her and stood close by and rubbed Alex’s arm in an effort to comfort her. Jennifer and Tyler both moved a step closer as Tiffany turned to include them in her next statement.

“It’s not unusual for there to be some memory loss after moderate to severe head trauma. It usually returns over time, sometimes very quickly. We just have to wait and be patient. The doctor will be able to tell us more when he comes out.”

“Alex, I’m sure it’s just temporary,” Tyler said as he too reached out to squeeze her shoulder affectionately. Alex looked up at Tyler and simply nodded. “But I really think you should tell Jen ___”

“No. It’s not my place. And I don’t want to pressure Syd into something she doesn’t...if she never...” Alex couldn’t finish the statement. The possibility Sydney may never remember her and their time together was terrifying. Alex’s eyes went up to the ceiling and she took a deep breath, trying to get control of her own emotions.

“But, Alex—” Tyler began, only to be interrupted by the doctor exiting the room.

“Okay,” the doctor said as the four of them hurriedly gathered around him. “I understand you’re Ms. Rutledge’s sister?” Jennifer nodded in response. “And you’re a surgeon?”

Jennifer nodded again and the doctor continued. “We can talk in more detail if you like as I imagine you may have more detailed questions. With Sydney’s approval I’d be happy to make her full records available for your review. But for now, for the sake of everyone else, let me put this in simplified terms. Sydney suffered a fairly severe blow to the head. Physically, I have no major concerns. She’s healing nicely. She suffered a rather significant concussion, but the swelling is reducing and the headaches and nausea will decrease given a little more time. But,” he paused and looked at each of them then returned his focus to Jennifer, “as you may have noticed already, she does appear to have some memory loss. As family and friends, you will be better able to determine how widespread that loss is, but it appears to be relatively short term, gaps in recent life experiences, versus any kind of long term amnesia.”

“Did you ask her what her last memory was?” Tyler asked.

“She seemed to remember something about an important trial she handled.” The doctor looked pointedly at Alex. “As I was speaking to her, she suddenly recognized you as someone who was involved in that case. She mentioned she remembers you testifying. She doesn’t seem to remember how it ended. She’s understandably frustrated. Frequently, this sort of thing is temporary and the memory comes back. But we can’t eliminate the possibility that a portion of her memory may never return.”

The doctor's voice began to phase out in Alex's ears as the doctor's statement that Sydney's memory loss could be permanent played over and over in her mind. She wasn't sure how long her mind processed this information before a familiar voice from behind her broke through to her consciousness.

"What period of time does this memory gap cover?" Another male voice came from off to the side and behind Alex. She turned to see Richard Morrison standing off her shoulder. Their eyes met for a moment, and Alex saw the blaze of hate in the look he gave her.

"Well, as I said, you'll be in a better position to determine the precise gap, but it appears to cover from somewhere in that trial she mentioned up through her injury."

"That's got to be the White Rose case," Tyler said, looking at Alex. "So that's about a year."

"She remembers nothing from the past year?" Morrison asked.

"At this time, that's what it appears."

Morrison's gaze turned to Alex again, and she noticed what appeared to be a look of victory take over his eyes and the corners of his mouth turn up in a slight smile. She looked away, her eyes caught by Tyler who gave her a definite look of concern.

"But again," the doctor continued. "As I said, all or a portion of that may come back gradually or all at once in the coming days, weeks, or months."

"May I go in?" Jennifer asked.

"Yes," the doctor responded. "But as you know the most important thing for Sydney right now is rest. She's been given something to deal with the nausea and help her sleep more, so she's not going to be awake for too long, and I would ask that you all limit your visits today. In the next day or two, limit visits to one at a time and don't wear her down. She doesn't need over stimulation. Generally, this period of recovery is limited to family visits only." He turned to Jennifer. "I'll allow you to use your judgment on who you would like included on any family authorized visitors. Also, for all of you," he expanded his view to take in the entire small group, "she shouldn't be pressed to remember. Let her go through this at her own pace naturally. We can talk more about this in the coming days, and I'll make sure our staff counselor is aware to have a consult with her."

"Thank you, doctor," Jennifer said then moved toward the door to Sydney's room.

Tyler moved to Alex's side, but before he could say anything Richard broke in.

"So, no memory for the past year," he said, now with a blatant smile on his face. "Well, it's not as if anything important happened in her life in the last year. I'm sure we'll have no problem compensating for that loss." He gave one last look at the door to Sydney's room then turned and walked away.

THE NEXT TWENTY-FOUR hours were spent in a virtual haze for Alex. She spent time at the task force office and tried to review the investigative notes on the bombing. The analysis of Fenbrook's clothing came back with trace amounts of the precursor chemicals used to make TAPT, the explosive used at the first several bombings. The technicians and agents conducting the on scene investigations had concluded C4 was used at the Lambda Offices bombing, and something even higher grade was used at the Greater Hollywood LGBT Center.

With the death of Congressman Vaughn, the investigation was in high gear and Los Angeles was flooded with additional federal personnel, primarily the FBI. Fenbrook himself was

immediately put at the top of the FBI's most wanted list. Every cop in the Los Angeles region was actively assisting in the search for the publicly identified bombing suspect.

Most of Alex's free time, though, was spent loitering around the hospital, watching from a distance as Sydney's sister had remained, entering and exiting occasionally. Sydney spent most of the time sleeping, assisted by a regimen of sedation medication.

Tiffany kept Alex apprised of Sydney's status, and Tyler had visited several times to see Sydney and talk with Jennifer. He would then speak separately with Alex. Both Tiffany and Tyler pressed Alex to talk with Jennifer. Both tried to convince her to explain her relationship with Sydney, but Alex steadfastly refused. She didn't want Sydney making any decisions under pressure and felt it wasn't her place to force Sydney out of the closet to her only remaining family. She knew Sydney's relationship with her sister was important to her, making that kind of conversation a very important and personal issue.

Besides, Alex constantly wondered, what if Sydney never remembers? And even if she did remember, what if they never reconnected on the same level? Alex thought about how her heart had been broken years prior and wondered if this would have similar results.

Alex cared about Sydney to the extent that even if they weren't meant to be together, she would do anything to support Sydney's happiness. While the thought of a life without Sydney terrified her, it was a sacrifice she would have to make. Alex would walk away if it came to that.

So Alex remained largely hidden from Jennifer. Only once over the past day had she made her presence known to Sydney's sister, talking briefly and inquiring as to Sydney's welfare.

Then Alex had been present near the nurse's station at one point, largely out of sight, when Richard had arrived and confronted first the floor nurse and then Jennifer who was coming out of Sydney's room. At least it had looked like a confrontation to Alex. She first overheard the nurse advising Richard that Sydney's visitations were limited to only immediate family and those who had been designated and approved by family. The nurse advised Richard he was not on that list, which led to an argument. Alex smiled to herself when she considered what Richard's reaction may be if he discovered Jennifer had added Tyler to the list.

Moments later Alex saw Richard move beyond the nurse's station and confront Jennifer in the hallway outside Sydney's room. While the two were a distance away and Alex couldn't hear the interaction, it was clear to her that Jennifer wasn't giving Richard the answer he wanted. He was visibly angry when he finally stormed away.

JENNIFER WATCHED RICHARD stalk off. As she turned back toward Sydney's room, she noticed the tall police sergeant at the other end of the corridor. Jennifer wondered again about the woman who seemed extremely concerned about Sydney's welfare. Sergeant Chambers appeared devastated when Sydney didn't remember her. They had obviously formed a strong friendship over the past months, and Jennifer's additional observations made it clear to her that Tyler was obviously supportive of the bond. Although Jennifer felt there was something more that the two of them, along with the friendly nurse, Tiffany, were keeping from her, she didn't feel overly uncomfortable about that.

Jennifer thought this quiet concern and support was in such stark contradiction to Richard's reaction. She'd never liked the man and so her current judgment was likely still clouded by that history. She always thought of him as extremely arrogant and conceited, and she'd never understood Sydney's attachment to him. She'd been quite relieved when Sydney broke off their

engagement, and Jennifer noted her sister seemed to flourish afterwards. Richard's re-appearance and his claims the two of them had renewed their relationship over recent weeks to the point of renewing their engagement was of great concern to her. A large part of her seriously doubted the truthfulness of his claims. She resisted his insistence that she put him on Sydney's list of approved family visitors and was further angered by his insinuations that he was in a better position than she to be making decisions about Sydney's care. Richard also made no effort to conceal his dislike for Sergeant Chambers, and Jennifer had to wonder exactly what that animosity stemmed from.

As she watched her injured sister sleep, she again wondered about the elusive Alex whom Sydney had been so enamored with. Where was he? Maybe they'd had a break up since they had last spoken. But she still thought that if they'd been as close as Sydney implied, he would have at least been there to offer support as a friend. What kind of man was this Alex? Surely he was better than Richard.

Chapter Twelve

FRUSTRATED AND RESTLESS, Alex spent her daytime hours loitering around the hospital, then monitoring the on-scene bombing investigation at the Hollywood LGBT Center, and assisting with surveillance shifts at the known locations of Fenbrook's friends and family in hopes he would show up. She would collapse into her bed in the early morning hours of each day, frequently finding it incredibly difficult to get even a few hours of restless sleep.

"Hey, Sam," Alex said over the phone one early morning on her way home.

"Hey, Alex. How's Syd?"

"I guess getting stronger. I haven't seen her today. But her sister seems to think things are going better."

"That's good to hear. She's gonna recover, Alex. I'm confident of that. She's gonna remember everything. You two are gonna be good again."

"Not even the doctors are sure about that, Sam. Nothing's for sure. All we can do is wait and see." Alex made an effort to change the subject. "Anyway, what have you got?"

"Nothing big, just wanted to check in with you. I know the search is on for Fenbrook. Are your guys really convinced he's the main guy?"

"Well, the tests came back with explosives residue on his clothes that match the explosive compound used for the Hollywood Center and the nightclub, and the Semtex found in his house match the general type of components used in the Lambda Legal bombing. Add to that he was out of jail and unaccounted for just in time to do the latest bombing and his direct involvement in targeting gays for beatings, and yeah, everyone's pretty satisfied he may be the main player."

"What do you think, Alex?"

"That's not a fair question, Sam. Thanks to your involvement I know stuff I shouldn't know. Stuff that can't be included in a criminal prosecution." Alex paused and considered the quandary. The unstated belief she had was that Sam was a government agent of some kind. Her entry into Fenbrook's house was essentially illegal, making her observations inadmissible. But that didn't change the fact it appeared someone had planted bombing evidence, and removed photographs for some reason. Then there was the fact someone had misdirected the federal hold on Fenbrook and apparently arranged anonymous bail money. "But in answer to your question," Alex continued. "I think he's involved somehow, but is likely being scapegoated for the major stuff and might not know it even now. And I think whoever's directing this is powerful, to a certain degree at least."

"Yep. Either officially powerful, or connected to official power. You know what that means?" Sam asked.

"That means it's a race to find him before he becomes expendable."

"My thoughts exactly. But what's the point? Hate groups kill because they hate. But if our suspicions are correct, this was an organized effort with connections. That's high risk, so for what reward? What is accomplished by a bombing campaign against the Los Angeles gay community?"

Motive for the attacks was the question they had no answer for at this point.

SEVERAL EXHAUSTING DAYS later, in the early afternoon hours in the middle of the week, Alex was told the outer perimeter of the bombing crime scene was being reduced and vehicles parked there could be released to their owners. As she stood talking to the ATF investigators, a familiar and unwelcome voice came from behind her.

“I believe the bomb investigators have more important business to attend to here than gossiping with you, Sergeant Chambers?” Alex turned to look at Richard as he came to a stop beside them.

“Actually, the bomb investigators have information important to my officers as far as knowing what to further look for and perhaps what to ask the public and possible witnesses about, so it’s kind of important that we exchange information. But I wouldn’t expect you to understand the importance of something like that to field investigative work.” Alex returned her focus to the ATF agent. “So you guys have already shrunk the perimeter down?”

The agent followed Alex’s lead and chose to largely ignore the presence of the arrogant U.S. Attorney.

“Yep,” he said. “We already opened up the rear parking lot and have let owners retrieve their cars. The blast wave never impacted the rear of the building, and there was no damage or evidence there. We’re still holding the front out past the curb line, so the street will stay closed for at least another day or two.”

“Thanks, Dave,” Alex said then turned to walk away, not bothering to speak or further acknowledge Richard’s presence.

RICHARD WATCHED ALEX walk back to her car, enter it and drive from the scene.

“Bitch,” he said, slightly louder than he intended to. His utterance was clearly overheard by another man in a suit that approached him as he stood on the sidewalk.

“Irritating, isn’t she?” A nearby gentleman said to Richard.

“Excuse me?” Richard hadn’t even noticed the man approach or come to a stop next to him.

“Sergeant Chambers,” the man said, nodding toward Alex’s departing Dodge Charger. “I couldn’t help but notice the disrespect she showed you. If it were up to me, she wouldn’t even be employed by our department any longer.”

“Really?” Richard was now intrigued.

“I’ve tried to put my department’s management on notice about her, but she’s got some of them fooled into protecting her. She’s out of control. Immoral. I could go on. Mark my words, she’s a liability. She most certainly should never have been put in her current assignment.”

“Oh, I’m more than aware that she shouldn’t be on my task force,” Richard said, now causing the other gentleman’s eyebrows to raise.

“You’re running the task force? Good to meet you, sir.” He extended his hand, which was automatically grasped by Richard. “I’m Lieutenant John Ramos, the commanding officer of Central Area Detectives. Chambers was my problem before she very obviously became yours.”

ALEX KNEW THE matte black, two-seater Mercedes SL500 was Sydney's pride and joy, so she'd been waiting for the opportunity to retrieve the vehicle from the parking lot behind the Hollywood LGBT Center where it had been left following the explosion. In the first days of Sydney's hospitalization, Alex had obtained the keys from her belongings in preparation for securing the vehicle when she was able.

After leaving the crime scene she picked up Sal and they returned together to the Center. On the way there Sal tried in vain to get Alex to change her approach to Sydney's memory loss.

"But, Alex, you've got to fight this. Fight for Sydney," Sal said as they neared the Center. "I know I was a little slow to get on board in the beginning. But I've seen you guys together and I don't doubt Sydney's feelings for you. They're genuine."

Alex was slow to reply, but finally spoke.

"I don't know, Sal. There isn't really any way to fight this. She doesn't remember. Not me, not us. Nothing. How do I fight that?"

"You spend time with her. She'll remember eventually. I'm betting there's an unconscious level where those feelings are still living inside her. But you can't be invisible. You've got to be around for her to link those feelings to you."

"And what if the feelings don't really run that deep for her, Sal? What if they never did? What if the reason she doesn't remember is because they never did? What if..." Alex's voice tapered off.

"What if she's like Tamara after all? Is that what you're wondering?" Sal asked in a quiet voice.

Alex just shrugged, unwilling to admit out loud that Sal had hit the nail on the head. Alex feared a repeat of the experience she'd had many years prior, when her heart was manipulated and broken by a woman she believed she was in love with and who she thought loved her in return. Alex later discovered Tamara Walker had simply been experimenting with women, had never truly invested in their relationship and had no intention of any long term commitment outside the male population. Alex spent many years recovering from her broken heart and hesitated to commit to any serious relationships after that until Sydney appeared. Even then, if Alex was honest with herself, her relationship with Sydney had progressed at a relatively slow rate, with neither of them mentioning to one another the depth of their feelings and no discussion of taking any next steps beyond monogamy. Even now, years later, Alex was still gun shy.

Sal sighed and was thoughtfully silent for several seconds before he spoke again.

"I just don't think so, Alex. I really don't. But I do think that ex-fiancé is going to seriously take advantage of your absence. And I think it's possible he could do a lot of damage."

As they pulled into the parking lot, Alex was thankful Richard was no longer present. She entered Sydney's car and drove from the lot with Sal following in Alex's truck to Sydney's house in the hills.

Fifteen minutes later Alex turned into the long driveway and hit the button to open the garage. She parked the car carefully, then walked back to her car as Sal moved around to re-enter the passenger side. When Alex entered the car and reached up to push the button to close the garage, she noted an unfamiliar car turning in and coming up the driveway. She heard the engine gun and saw the vehicle accelerate and for a moment actually began reaching for the weapon holstered at her waistband. Then she recognized the driver and relaxed somewhat.

Richard screeched to a halt beside her in the wide driveway and jumped from his vehicle. “What the hell are you doing here?” he demanded from across the hood of his own car.

“I could ask you the same question, Morrison,” Alex replied through her open window. She reached for the key in the ignition to start the engine.

“You’ve got no business here. For all purposes, you’re no longer in Sydney’s life. She doesn’t even remember you, Chambers. You’re no one to her!” Alex froze with her hand halfway to the ignition. A look of pain crossed her face, was quickly erased by a blank expression, then was even more quickly replaced by a look of pure hatred.

“Don’t, Alex,” Sal said from beside her. “We need to leave.” Sal reached over to the ignition and turned the key, starting the truck. “Let’s go, Alex. Just back up and let’s get out of here.”

Alex took a deep breath and put the truck in reverse, backing away from Richard then driving slowly from the house.

“She’s gonna get her memory back, Alex,” Sal said, trying to reassure her. “Tiffany says people who are injured the way she was usually make a decent recovery. When that happens he’s gonna be gone again, and you two will be back to the way it was between you two.”

“I don’t know, Sal,” Alex said quietly. “I just don’t know if it’ll ever be the way it was.”

RICHARD WATCHED THE truck pull away at the bottom of the driveway, heading out of the foothill community back into the heart of Hollywood and Downtown L.A. He turned and walked toward the front door, stopping briefly and reaching down to pick up a fist-sized rock in the landscaping beside the stairs leading up to the porch and front door. He smiled when the compartment on the bottom of the fake rock slid open revealing a key to the house.

“Nice to know certain things haven’t changed,” he said as he replaced the rock and climbed the stairs. He walked into the house and closed the door behind him, putting the key in his pocket. He was somewhat surprised to see the alarm panel flashing and beeping on the wall beside him. Sydney had rarely utilized the alarm system when they had been together. It took him a few moments of concentration to try and remember the code she had utilized. He got it on his second attempt and watched with satisfaction as the code was accepted. The flashing screen turned green and stopped beeping.

Richard wandered throughout the house noting very few changes overall in the décor of the house since he’d been gone. But then he looked more closely at the smaller details. The first thing he noticed was in the kitchen. A magnet held a hand-written note pinned to the refrigerator.

“I miss you already. — A”

Richard felt his anger rising. He knew exactly who had written the note. He continued out of the kitchen and into the nearby den. Glancing out through the picture window into the backyard, he noted one significant addition. The rear deck now sported a first class Jacuzzi. Nice, he thought to himself.

As he moved away from the window, he saw several framed photographs on the fireplace mantel. Once again he felt his anger and frustration mounting. One photograph was of Sergeant Chambers in her uniform, leaning casually on the hood of a police car, smiling affectionately at whoever was holding the camera. Richard could tell from the background of the shot that it had been taken in front of the downtown courthouse. Next to that was another photograph of Sydney

with Alex standing and embracing her from behind, smiles on both the women's faces. Several other photographs included Sydney and Tyler together, and Sydney and Alex amongst other friends. In every one of the photographs he noted the two women were embracing, touching or leaning intimately into one another.

Several minutes later Richard departed the residence. Without bothering to reset the alarm he locked the door then slipped the key into his pocket as he walked to his car. The thoughts that had been going through his mind since learning of Sydney's memory loss began to solidify into a focused plan. With that in mind he headed for the hospital. Regardless of the regulations and the bothersome sister, he would get in to see Sydney and begin ensuring her injured brain began healing properly.

ALEX DROPPED SAL back at home and stopped briefly to say hi to Tiffany, but declined their invitation to spend the evening with them despite Tiffany's obvious concern. Instead she returned once again to the hospital.

Despite the late hour, and it being well after visiting hours, Alex's badge and police identification gained her access into the depths of the facility without too many questions. She made her way slowly down the largely empty hospital corridor, looked around her, then quietly pushed the door open and entered the dimly lit room. She stood just inside the door, unmoving, and looked at the sleeping figure for several moments. The sense of loss was once again almost overwhelming. Alex shook it off and moved quietly to the bedside table, removing Sydney's keys from her pocket and placing them on the nightstand. She took out a pen and leaned over to begin writing a quick note. She was interrupted by a voice from the nearby bed.

"Hi, there," Sydney said.

Alex's breath caught as she straightened up, and it took her several seconds to find her voice.

"Hi. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to wake you. I was just dropping off your keys and leaving you a note. The investigators have released vehicles from the parking lot at the...where the explosion was. So I took your car back to your house." She paused and the two women looked at each other in silence for a few moments. "Well," Alex finally said. "Here's your keys. I'll leave you to rest."

"Wait. Please?" Sydney said, raising a hand and indicating for Alex to come closer to her. Alex stepped up beside the bed and Sydney took Alex's hand in hers, squeezing it and giving Alex a tired smile.

"You've been here. I've seen you sometimes, but you haven't said anything or talked to me," Sydney said. "I thought I was dreaming the first time, but then I saw you again standing near the door."

Alex didn't think Sydney was aware of any of the times she'd visited over the last thirty-six hours. She'd entered the room several times when she thought Sydney was sleeping and sat for several minutes just watching her. Alex had hoped to satisfy herself that Sydney was resting comfortably and not in distress.

She spent most of her time there hoping Sydney would regain her memories of their time together.

"I just stopped by to check to make sure you were doing okay," Alex said.

"But why don't you ever stick around so we can talk?"

“I didn’t want to wake you or bother you or anything,” Alex replied weakly. “You need your rest.”

“But we know each other. We’re friends, right?” she asked.

Alex swallowed her emotions and tried to give a reassuring smile.

“Yeah,” she said with a nod.

“Close friends?”

“I like to think so,” Alex finally replied after giving a shrug.

“I can tell,” Sydney said. “I don’t remember. But I can tell. I can feel it.” Alex watched as the smile on Sydney’s face faded slightly. “God, I want to remember. It’s so frustrating.”

“Hey, don’t push it,” Alex said with a reassuring squeeze of Sydney’s hand. “Just let it come back gradually. Don’t try and force it.”

“I know. That’s what everyone keeps telling me.” Sydney took a deep breath as if calling on energy reserves to stay awake. “So where exactly was my car?” she asked.

“You were in a building in Hollywood when there was an explosion,” Alex answered after thinking about it. Tiffany told her Sydney would be curious and would ask questions as she tried to fill the gaps in her mind. According to the doctors they should be honest and answer the questions but not push additional information on her or overstimulate her with more information than she could handle. “Your car was parked in the rear parking lot, so it was kind of part of the crime scene for the last couple of days. We were able to get it out today.” She could see Sydney processing this information. Sure enough, the next logical question came out.

“What building was I in? What was I doing there?”

“It was the Greater Hollywood Gay and Lesbian Center. You volunteered there sometimes giving free legal assistance to people who can’t otherwise afford it.”

“I don’t remember anything like that. How long have I been doing this?”

“About five months,” Alex said. “You’re very well-liked and respected there, and you’ve really helped a lot of people who needed it. Some of them are just kids who’ve been abandoned by their families.”

“You seem to know a lot about it. Do you work there, too?” Sydney asked.

“No, I’m not as smart as you and can’t provide the same assistance you do,” she said with a smile. “But we have mutual friends who work there as well, so I hear a lot about it.” Alex noticed Sydney’s eyes drooping.

“Courtney,” Sydney said, a thoughtful look on her face. “I don’t remember her either. But she visited and said we were friends from some volunteer work we did together.”

“I need to leave and let you rest,” Alex said after a few moments of silence. “The most important thing for you is rest.” She watched Sydney smile weakly, looking half asleep already. Then she felt Sydney’s fingers manipulate the gauze bandage that was wrapped around the still healing injury to her forearm. Sydney’s gaze dropped to her arm.

“You hurt yourself,” she said. Then as Alex watched, Sydney’s eyes grew big as she stared at the bandage. She felt Sydney’s grip on the arm tighten slightly. “This arm,” Sydney said. “You’re always hurting this arm.” She looked up at Alex. “How do I know that?”

Alex was shocked and unsure how to respond, but was interrupted when suddenly the door to the room opened and Richard entered. Alex stepped away from the bed and turned to face Richard, who, upon seeing her, came to a halt just inside the doorway.

“What the fuck are you doing here?” he exclaimed, glaring at Alex.

Alex hurriedly looked over at Sydney’s bed and was disappointed to see her struggling to sit up in the bed.

“Richard, what are you...oh, God.” Sydney suddenly collapsed onto her side, gasping.

“Syd!” Alex lunged for her.

“What are you...?” Richard sputtered as he surged farther into the room.

Alex ignored him as she moved to Sydney’s side.

“Syd?” she inquired softly as she leaned down and squeezed Sydney’s shoulder. Sydney was on her side, her head almost hanging off the edge of the bed. “You okay?”

“Sick,” Sydney groaned. “I think I’m going to be sick.” Her eyes were tightly clenched shut.

Alex reached for a basin lying on the small table beside the bed. As she lifted it Morrison grabbed her shoulder and attempted to pull her away.

“Get back, Chambers, this is none of your...hey!” Richard’s breath caught and he was forcefully interrupted as Alex’s free hand reached out and clamped the front of his shirt near the collar, pulling him momentarily toward her, their noses almost touching.

“Back! Off!” Alex enunciated each word carefully in a threatening whisper. Then she pushed him away and turned back to Sydney just as the woman became violently ill into the basin Alex now held suspended at the edge of the bed. Alex carefully and tenderly moved Sydney’s hair back and then slowly rubbed her back as Sydney continued to retch. Alex paused only long enough to hit the nurses call button suspended nearby.

When the dry heaves stopped Sydney collapsed with her head and shoulders half hanging off the bed. Alex placed the basin on the floor then helped the semiconscious woman to roll onto her back. She reached for a nearby towel, dampened it with cool water from a bedside pitcher and began dabbing Sydney’s face. Sydney’s eyes opened in slits and looked at Alex, who tried to give a comforting smile.

“You have a concussion, silly,” Alex said. “You can’t be getting up or moving around suddenly like that. Trust me, I’ve been there.” At that moment the nurse entered, her expression revealing obvious surprise at the presence of the two additional parties in the room.

“What’s going on?” she asked as she approached the bed. “Neither of you should be here. It’s after visiting hours and Ms. Rutledge should be resting.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Alex said, her eyes never leaving Sydney’s. “She tried to sit up a little too quickly and it made her quite dizzy and nauseous.”

“Well, that would be expected,” the nurse replied. She looked tenderly at Sydney and carefully adjusted her pillows. “You shouldn’t be moving around like that. I’ll see about getting something for the discomfort and nausea so you can rest.”

“She wouldn’t be in this situation if you hadn’t been in here bothering her!” Richard said loudly to Alex’s back. Alex ignored him, her attention remaining on Sydney’s face.

“Feeling a little bit better at least?” she asked in a calm and quiet voice.

Sydney blinked, afraid to move her head in case it would increase the dizziness and ill feeling.

“Yes, thank you,” she said.

“I’m sorry about all this,” Alex continued, still quietly, her eyes pinned solely on Sydney. “I guess I should leave.”

“Yes, you should. You need to get out. Now!” Richard’s voice came once again from behind her.

“You both need to get out,” the nurse said. Then she turned angry eyes on Richard. “And you will lower your voice while in this hospital.”

“But I’m her fiancé,” Richard said. “I belong here.”

Alex, who had been moving toward the door, intent on ignoring Richard's presence, jerked her head around to look at him, shocked by the assertion.

"I don't have a record of a fiancé on the paperwork, and even then, I don't care if you're the King of England," the nurse said. "Visiting hours are over and you will not be creating any further disturbance in this hospital. Leave now or I'll get security to escort you."

Alex opened the door into the corridor and stood waiting for Richard to exit. He stopped in front of her in the doorway.

"Don't think this is over," he said. "Your time is done. You're no longer welcome around her. I'll make sure of that." He then stormed from the room and down the hallway.

"Tiffany told me to take good care of Ms. Rutledge," the nurse said. "Said she was a family friend. She also said you might be visiting some. I'm sorry that had to be handled that way, but with him causing such a ruckus I really couldn't turn a blind eye to anyone in the room."

"No, I completely understand," Alex said. "I apologize for having any part in that or causing you any problems."

"Is he really her fiancé?" the nurse asked.

Alex looked up one last time at the departing back of Richard Morrison as he entered the elevators at the end of the corridor and stepped out of sight.

"I don't know," she said, several events from the past week flashing across her mind. "I honestly don't know." Before Alex made her way down the hallway to the elevators, she watched as the nurse opened her cell phone and located a number in her contacts list. Moments later the phone was obviously answered at the other end.

"Tiffany, it's Sarah. Listen, there's something you need to know..."

Alex gave her a brief smile and mouthed a silent "thank you" before turning and walking away.

Chapter Thirteen

THE NEXT MORNING, with coffee in hand, Jennifer smiled at the nurse just exiting Sydney's hospital room. "Good morning," she said. "How's my sister today?"

"She had some late evening visitors last night and there was a bit of an issue. She moved around a little too much and ended up sick and uncomfortable. She's doing okay this morning, all things considered," the nurse said, indicating the partially empty tray she carried. "She managed to eat a little breakfast and says the headaches aren't too bad."

"What visitors? What issues?" Jennifer asked.

"Well, her fiancé and that nice lady police officer got into some kind of argument that got her a little upset," the nurse said. "It was just as my shift was starting. They were both here after visiting hours. Neither of them was on the family list for special visitation." Jennifer nodded.

"To be quite honest," the nurse continued. "The way I heard it, it was mainly her fiancé that was being loud and creating the disturbance. You go on in, but be aware he came back early this morning." The nurse nodded at the door, indicating the man was still inside. "If he really is her fiancé and she wants him here, you or she need to have him added to her unrestricted visitation list. But he can't be raising his voice and causing a disturbance like he did last night." Jennifer nodded again.

"Her fiancé?" she said quietly to herself as the nurse walked away. "I didn't realize she had gotten that serious with Alex. It's about time he showed up, though." Jennifer turned to push the door to her sister's room open, hoping to finally meet the thus far absent Alex. When she'd questioned Tyler about him, he looked uncomfortable and had only been willing to say that perhaps it was best that they all wait for Sydney to explain. When she entered the room what she saw only made the questions raise further in her mind as she noticed Richard standing beside Sydney's bed. He was holding Sydney's hand in both of his as she sat slightly propped up in the bed.

"But that's what we decided before your accident, Sydney," Jennifer overheard him say before both of them looked up to see her enter.

"Jen!" Jennifer sensed as much as heard the relief in Sydney's voice as she greeted her sister. She smiled at Sydney in response then turned to Richard.

"Richard," she said by way of a greeting to the man at her sister's side, nodding her head at him as she approached the opposite side of the bed. He simply nodded back, and she couldn't help but notice he didn't seem happy with her arrival.

Jennifer put her purse and coffee down on a bedside table then leaned down to kiss Sydney's cheek. Sydney hugged her in return and Jennifer felt a wave of insecurity go through Sydney's body as she held the hug longer than usual.

"How are you doing, Sis?" she asked.

"I'm okay, I guess," Sydney replied.

Jennifer looked into her younger sister's eyes and saw emotions she had rarely witnessed in Sydney's expression. Insecurity, fear and discomfort were clearly visible. As Jennifer leaned

over to retrieve her coffee, Sydney's grip tightened on her hand, as if she didn't want to lose the contact. She noticed after the hug that Sydney had not re-initiated her handholding with Richard, who still stood giving Jennifer a look as if he hoped she would leave. She instead sat down in the nearby chair she had been in most of the previous evening and leaned over to talk to Sydney.

"The nurse said you had a little episode last night. How are you really feeling? How are the headaches?"

Sydney sighed.

"Last night I just, well I—"

"You were harassed by an unwanted and unneeded visitor who had no business being here," Richard said. "And I'm going to see that it doesn't happen again."

"Richard, she's a friend and she didn't do any harm."

"You don't even remember her!" Richard's voice started to rise. "She couldn't have been that important of a friend considering that. And she's nothing but a problem. But it's nothing for you to worry about. I'll take care of it."

"Richard, please. I'm sure I'm starting to remember things. I feel very strongly that the Sergeant and I were friends, that she's important. Until I can get it all figured out, I need you to just be patient."

Jennifer had a distinct feeling that Sydney was talking about a lot more in that statement than she let on, and that it possibly had something to do with the conversation she had interrupted on the way through the door.

"So how are you feeling? I mean really feeling?" she asked.

"Well, the headaches are there all the time, to some degree at least. A little nauseous sometimes, mainly when I get dizzy from moving too fast. I feel okay other than that, I guess. I just want to go home. Can't you get me out of here? You're in town, so it's not like I'll be alone. You're a doctor, Jen, surely they'll release me to your care."

"Nonsense," Richard interrupted. "When you leave you'll be coming home with me. Or I suppose I can take care of you at your place."

Both women looked at him briefly, and Sydney sighed in tired exasperation.

"I'll talk to the doctor. We'll see." Jennifer finally said as she squeezed Sydney's hand. "Anything else happening?" she asked. She wasn't sure how to come right out and ask about Sydney's memory. Sydney leaned back with her eyes closed and gave another tired sigh.

"I had some weird dreams last night," she said.

"That's not unusual," Jennifer said. "Your mind is healing and remembering. Anything helpful in the dreams?"

"No, just flashes. Images I don't fully understand. Things, people, some faces I recognized, some I didn't. Sometimes it's actions or events that seem familiar but people's faces are fuzzy. I know I should recognize all these people and places and occurrences, but I don't."

Jennifer nodded in understanding and was about to say something supportive when Richard broke in.

"None of that matters, Sydney," he said. "Nothing over the last year is that important. You'll be out of here soon, and I'll take you home. Then we'll start making arrangements to get you moved back east with me just like we planned."

Jennifer's head snapped up and she looked at Richard. Nothing in any of the conversations she'd had with Sydney mentioned Richard being back in her life. Everything had been about the Alex that seemed so prominent in Sydney's life. Jennifer suspected Richard had been

manipulating the situation and taking advantage of Sydney's memory gap. She noticed Sydney seemed frustrated by his talk as well.

"Richard, please," Sydney said as her head fell back against the pillow. "I told you, I'm not up to talking about that yet."

"That's okay," he said and then looked at his watch. "It's nothing for you to worry about right now. I've got to get to the office and keep these officers on track with this investigation. You relax and I'll see you this evening." He leaned down to kiss her, and Jennifer watched as Sydney turned her head, presenting Richard her cheek for the kiss. He didn't even look at Jennifer before he walked out of the room. Jennifer turned back to Sydney after the door closed.

"Everything okay there?" she asked, not wanting to push too much. She knew parts of Sydney's memory might or might not return over time, and that it was important not to make her feel pressured or try to influence her memories as that would only frustrate her further. Jennifer strongly suspected Richard wasn't following those guidelines.

"I don't know," Sydney said. "Richard is telling me a lot of stuff that he says has happened over the past year. But some of the stuff he's telling me just doesn't...I don't know. He's feeding me a lot of information, but some of it just doesn't feel right."

Jennifer looked at her, trying not to allow her face to reveal that inside her anger was growing exponentially.

"Oh?" she said in a noncommittal fashion. Just as she suspected, Richard was going against everything the doctors had recommended to help in Sydney's recovery. Jennifer once again thought briefly through her conversations with Sydney over the past year, and she was sure Richard had been out of the picture. But where and who was this Alex that had been the focus of Sydney's attention over the past several months? It was understandable that he fell in the time period that was a gap in Sydney's memory, but it was hard for Jennifer to understand why he wouldn't be here for her and she was growing increasingly angry with his absence.

"I remember us breaking up when Richard moved to D.C.," Sydney went on. "And I remember, quite frankly, not being upset about that. He says we'd recently gotten back together and had decided that I would be moving back east with him. But..." Sydney paused and Jennifer watched her forehead wrinkle and eyes clench as if in concentration.

"But..." she prompted quietly.

"But I just don't know," Sydney said. "Something doesn't feel right. But maybe my mind is stuck on the emotions of a year ago when we were no longer together. If we had reconnected during the period I've lost, then I guess it's logical I would miss the emotion as well as the memory. Right?" Sydney's eyes opened and she looked at Jennifer for an answer.

"I don't know, Sis." Jennifer squeezed Sydney's hand, whose frustration only seemed to increase.

"But what do you know, Jen?" she asked. "What's been happening in my life? Did I tell you anything about Richard coming back?"

"You haven't mentioned him to me in a long time," Jennifer said, deciding it was safe to answer Sydney's specific questions and that it may counter Richard's inappropriate influences. "But you have to believe the important stuff, the meaningful emotions and feelings, will come back to you and you'll know it. There's no need to rush it. Don't push yourself and don't make any leaps or commit to anything you're not sure about or that you're not ready for. If you and Richard are meant to be, then that connection, that love, will return, even if your memory doesn't. If you're meant to be, then he should love you enough to wait for you to be comfortable and confident in that connection. Someone who loves you won't push."

Sydney nodded and appeared deep in thought for a moment. "I think I had a flash of memory when Sergeant Chambers was here last night."

"Oh?"

"Yeah. It was brief, and incomplete, but the flash I got was very clear, very vivid."

"What did you see?"

"Well, the sergeant had a bandage on her arm, from her elbow almost down to her wrist. I saw it and then suddenly I flashed to a moment when I was standing next to her. I felt like I'd just finished putting on the bandage, but I'm not sure about that. What I clearly remember is thinking to myself that she has hurt that same arm before. I could practically hear myself saying that, like I was accusing her of always hurting herself there." She took a deep breath and looked back at Jennifer. "That was it. But like I said, it was short but very vivid."

"Could you see anything else, where you were or anything?" Jennifer couldn't stop herself from prompting just a little bit, out of curiosity herself. Sydney shook her head.

"No, everything else was fuzzy."

The two sat silently for several moments with Jennifer watching her carefully. She could tell Sydney's mind was desperately reaching out for any wisp of additional memory, trying to make sense of the flashes and images. Sydney's eyes opened suddenly.

"My computer! I have a laptop computer somewhere. I remember having one before. Can you find it for me?"

Jennifer hesitated for a moment, figuring she knew why Sydney was asking for the computer. She knew it was best to allow her to remember at her own rate. Then she thought to herself, this was Syd's idea, so...

"Okay, I guess I can head over to your house this evening and look for it."

"Head over? What do you mean? Aren't you staying at the house?"

"Nope." Jennifer shook her head. "When I flew in I came directly here. So I just grabbed a room at a hotel down the street. I've been staying there since I got here."

"I'm sorry, Jen. I should have asked earlier, but I was just so out of it yesterday. You shouldn't be staying at a hotel, silly. You know you always have a room at the house. Check out of your hotel and go home to the house today. My keys are in that drawer." Sydney indicated a drawer on the bed stand beside her, and Jennifer leaned over to open the drawer. "Sergeant Chambers was kind enough to bring them in last night. She said she took my car home for me." She paused. "It was parked at the...where the..." Sydney swallowed and plucked nervously at the thin hospital blanket. "I asked her how I...what I was doing there."

Jennifer simply raised her eyebrow, saying nothing as she retrieved the keys from the indicated drawer. She was aware of exactly where Sydney had been. The explosion and the ongoing pattern of bombings was the focus of news over the last several days. She'd asked Tyler about Sydney's presence there and been told of her volunteer work. She had again sensed something was being withheld from her but had not pressed Tyler for details.

"When I asked her she said I volunteer there sometimes to help out people with legal problems. Mainly victims of discrimination," Sydney said.

Jennifer slipped Sydney's key ring into her purse and sat simply listening as she sipped on her coffee, again trying not to show any reaction to what Sydney was sharing.

"That sounds like something you would do," she said with a smile.

"Do you know Sergeant Chambers?" Sydney asked.

"We never met before the other day. She's obviously been concerned about you. She seems nice. I guess you guys have become friends over the past year."

Sydney's face took on a deeply thoughtful look.

"I remember we met during a trial. She was the arresting officer. I feel like we became close, but I can't seem to remember much more." Sydney looked back up at Jennifer. "Richard doesn't like her," she added.

Jennifer had to fight to keep a smile off her face, thinking that Richard's dislike of the woman may be reason alone to like the police sergeant.

"Why's that?" was all she asked.

Sydney shrugged in response. "Because she's a lesbian," she said.

"So?" Jennifer responded.

"Richard says she's a predator, that she's dangerous. He claims if I continue to associate with her it will damage my reputation and my career. He said I had no business helping out at the Center and it was probably Sergeant Chambers who influenced me to do it and so her fault that I was hurt."

"Oh, please." Jennifer rolled her eyes. "You don't believe that, do you?"

"No!" Sydney's response was immediate and strong. "I get the feeling they've never gotten along. Maybe they've clashed over the past year and it's just more of what I don't remember?"

"Could be," was all Jennifer would say. But in her mind she made a decision to look into this a little more, and perhaps speak to the sergeant to try and fill in the blanks for herself.

AS THE SUMMER sun was setting on the horizon, Jennifer drove up the driveway of the large and familiar chalet style house in the Santa Monica mountains above Hollywood. She was surprised to see another unfamiliar car parked in the driveway. She pulled to a stop beside it and tried to figure out who it could belong to as she removed her suitcase and made her way up the steps to the front door. She removed Sydney's keys from her purse and had already inserted the house key before realizing the door was entirely unlocked. She turned the knob and pushed the door open in time to see Richard coming back into the entryway through the nearby door leading from the garage.

"What are you doing here, Richard?" she asked.

"Just making sure everything's okay," he replied, though Jennifer picked up a little nervousness in his mannerisms. "You know, making sure it's ready to bring Sydney home and everything."

"Uh-huh," she replied. "I think you can go now, Richard. I'll take care of anything else that needs to be done here." She moved past him to place her rolling luggage at the base of the stairs leading up to the second floor bedroom suites. When she turned around he was still standing in the entryway. His expression was one of resentment.

"You need to start getting used to having me back in Sydney's life, Jennifer. She and I had been working on getting back together and when I came back to L.A. to supervise this task force she and I were able to solidify that. When this is over and I go back to D.C., she'll be going with me."

"You sure about that, Richard? Because I have a hard time believing something that significant would have happened in Sydney's life without her talking to me about it. Besides, I happen to know for a fact she's been seeing someone else over the last few months. I have good reason to believe that relationship had gotten quite serious." Jennifer watched anger flash in his eyes.

“You don’t know what you’re talking about. She hasn’t been involved with anyone with any serious potential. That I can guarantee you!” Then he stormed out the door.

Jennifer rolled her eyes as she locked the door behind him and looked around her. Her first duty was to search for her Sydney’s laptop as she’d promised. Starting in the den and library, she began a systematic search of the most logical places it could be. Forty minutes later she stood in the kitchen, sipping on a bottle of water, frustrated with her failure thus far. It occurred to her that the computer might be in Sydney’s office at the courthouse. She could contact Tyler and have him check. Then one remaining possibility hit her.

“Her car! Of course!” she said out loud. She retrieved the keys from the counter where she’d dropped them then made her way to the entryway and through the doorway into the garage. She figured no one had removed anything from Sydney’s car yet. If she had taken the computer into the center to do her volunteer work, it was likely gone, buried somewhere in the rubble. But if she didn’t then it had to be in the car in the garage.

Jennifer stepped through the open door and slid her hand up the wall beside her, flipping on the garage lights then making her way to the parked sports car. She glanced through the car window and saw nothing in the front passenger seat of the two-seater so moved on to open the trunk. Sydney’s leather, soft-sided briefcase satchel lay by itself in the trunk. She lifted the bag and felt the obvious weight and stiffness of a laptop computer.

With a satisfied smile she lifted the satchel and closed the trunk. As she made her way back to the door into the house, she practically tripped over a garbage bag. Something sharp protruding through the side of the bag banged painfully against her shin as she brushed past it on her way to the step leading back through the doorway. The bag looked as if it had been simply dropped or carelessly discarded at the bottom of the steps. It was notably out of place in the otherwise organized and clean garage. The trash cans were against the same wall just a few feet away, and Jennifer couldn’t imagine her somewhat anal sister simply tossing a bag of trash out through the doorway rather than putting it properly in its place.

When her shin brushed against the bag, it fell open and Jennifer noted a flash of color. She leaned over to inspect it more closely and saw what appeared to be several framed photographs. The corner of one had been the object which had painfully caught her leg on her way past.

She put the satchel aside and removed the top frame from the bag. It contained a photograph of Sydney with Sergeant Chambers standing behind her. The tall officer’s arms were wrapped around Sydney’s waist and her chin rested on Sydney’s shoulder as they both smiled at whoever was standing behind the camera. Several other photos showed Sydney and the sergeant together, some with additional friends in social environments. In one photo Jennifer recognized the nurse she’d met the first day she arrived and to whom she had spoken several times in passing over recent days. Clearly these were friends of Sydney’s, though the focus of most of them was Sydney and the striking police sergeant. It was obvious to Jennifer that the two women had developed a strong friendship.

She put down the frames and photos and opened the bag to further investigate its contents. She found primarily clothes: t-shirts, shorts, a couple pairs of jeans and sweats. Jennifer noted all the articles appeared to be entirely too large for Sydney. As she lifted a well worn t-shirt with “Marines” emblazoned across the front, a small slip of paper fell from it back into the bag. Jennifer lifted the note up to the light and inspected the handwritten message on it.

“I miss you already. — A”

“So this must be from the mysterious Alex I have yet to meet, but where’s your photograph? And where the hell are you in Sydney’s time of need, mister?” She replaced the articles in the bag, carefully placing the framed photos back on top. She paused over the last photo of the two women together. Then in a sudden flash she recalled her first introduction to Sergeant Chambers.

“Alexandria Chambers—Alex!” Jennifer almost fell over backwards as the explanation hit her. “Oh, Syd. You’ve been keeping secrets, my sneaky little sister.” She smiled to herself and looked again at the photographs before her. Sydney looked so entirely happy in each of the photographs with the individual she now identified as Alex. They both looked happy. Jennifer smiled as she examined each of the photographs in this new light. It was obvious to her now there was an element of intimacy between the women that had been caught in each of the photos.

“Oh, hon. Why didn’t you tell me?” Jennifer asked her absent sibling.

Then she paused. Why was this bag of items discarded out here in the garage? Had they had some kind of a falling out prior to the explosion? Had Sydney cleaned out everything associated with Alex out of disgust or anger? Then Jennifer remembered where Richard had been when she entered the house. He’d been exiting the garage and coming back into the house. And he was acting a little hurried, or nervous, or guilty.

“Son of a bitch! That bastard!” Richard had been cleaning out any evidence of Alex and obviously, hurriedly got rid of the bag when he heard her approach. “He actually intends to hide the truth from her, to manipulate her memory.”

Jennifer took a deep breath, then carefully twisted the bag closed and picked it up, lifting the leather satchel and computer in her other hand and heading into the house.

RICHARD LEFT THE house quite angry after being interrupted by Jennifer. He was concerned with her statement. It didn’t appear she knew about Chambers, but she seemed to know something.

Richard felt he was making headway with Sydney, convincing her their relationship had been on the mend and that she’d agreed to return to D.C. with him. With a little luck, Sydney’s memory would not return anytime soon.

Over the past two years in D.C. Richard ingratiated himself into the proper political and social circles. But for some reason he’d recently become stagnant in his progress and felt he was being limited by the fact he was approaching middle age and still single. He felt he didn’t fit the most politically advantageous image. But with the right wife on his arm to play the proper hostess, he could move to the next level and mingle with those

D.C. power players who had the influence to ensure his continued rise in stature and power. He had determined Sydney would fit that role beautifully.

Richard was convinced he simply needed to move Sydney safely out of Los Angeles as expeditiously as possible. Once she was properly married to him, even if her memory did return, she’d be away from the influences of Chambers. He couldn’t imagine at that point she would have any urge to return. How could she turn down being married to a successful and rising star in the United States Attorney’s Office? He just had to make sure Chambers wasn’t permitted to influence her away from him in the immediate future.

After spending some time at his temporary office space in the Federal Building in downtown L.A., he thought he had a solution. Shortly after the lunch hour, he pulled out a business card he’d recently been provided and dialed the number.

“Lieutenant Ramos, this is Richard Morrison, the U.S. Attorney running the task force... yes, we met at the bombing. Listen, I was hoping I could meet with you briefly this afternoon. I would appreciate your assistance in dealing with our mutual problem.”

Chapter Fourteen

JENNIFER ENTERED SYDNEY'S hospital room and saw Sydney sitting up looking far better than she had in the previous days. She was more awake and alert and even had a smile on her face as she chatted with Tyler, who was in the seat beside the bed.

"Hey, Jen," Tyler said, standing up to give her a hug. Jennifer moved on to hug Sydney.

"How are you feeling this morning?" she asked.

"Better. I went for a little walk with Tyler then he took me out into the courtyard in the wheelchair so I could get some fresh air."

"Don't overdo it, Syd," Jennifer said with concern.

"I won't, but the doctor said I can start moving around more. The trip to the bathroom and back has gotten old, so Tyler supervised a morning field trip. You'll be babysitting me for my afternoon field trip. The doctor says I've got a chance at getting out of here this weekend."

Jennifer was surprised at that statement and thought for a moment perhaps Sydney's recovery was being rushed a little bit.

"Don't worry, Jen. If they release me it'll only be to go home and sit around doing nothing. It's not like they're letting me go back to work or anything."

Jennifer nodded. "Just as long as you accept that and follow the doctor's orders to the letter."

"Well, I've got to get to the office." Tyler stood and leaned forward, giving Sydney a gentle hug and kissing her forehead. "Be good. I'll swing by tomorrow and see if there's an update on your release." He turned to Jennifer. "Jen, anything at all you need? Anything I can do?"

"I'll walk you out," Jennifer said. She put her purse down on the table beside Sydney's bed then glanced at Sydney. "I'll be back in a while, Syd. Don't be wandering off anywhere," she said. She smiled as Sydney rolled her eyes.

As Jennifer and Tyler made their way in the direction of the elevator, Jennifer glanced over to see Sergeant Chambers standing near the nurse's desk speaking with Tiffany. Tyler followed Jennifer as she veered toward the sergeant.

"Sergeant Chambers, good morning."

The sergeant appeared momentarily surprised and somewhat uncomfortable. "Good morning. How is Sydney this morning?"

"She's doing better. Evidently she's got a chance at being released this weekend sometime." Jennifer watched closely and thought she saw a look of relief pass quickly through the sergeant's eyes then she once again looked slightly nervous.

"That's good to hear." She cleared her throat. "Well," she continued, "I just stopped by to chat with Tiffany. I better get going."

"Sergeant, if you have a few minutes, there's something I'd really like to talk to you about?" She watched as Alex's discomfort seemed to increase and she glanced over at Tyler, who looked equally confused.

"Both of you," Jennifer said looking from Tyler to Alex. She glanced over to Tiffany. She recognized the nurse as also having been in some of the photographs Richard tried to hide. "And

you, Tiffany. I think you may also be able to help me out here. Is there somewhere quiet and a little bit private where we could talk?"

Tiffany nodded. "Sure, follow me." She led them down the hall and around a corner then pushed open a conference room door. After glancing in to make sure it was empty, she reached up and flipped a sign on the door indicating the room was occupied and in use then walked in and held the door open for the three others.

Now that she was here, Jennifer wasn't sure exactly how to start the conversation, so she stalled, indicating the table and chairs. "Please, can we sit down for a moment?" She pulled out a chair at the head of the conference table. The others followed suit, taking seats at the same end of the table, Tyler to her right and Tiffany on Jennifer's left with Alex beside Tiffany.

Jennifer took a deep breath and began.

"I discovered last night that Sydney has been keeping a little bit of a secret from me. For months I've been hearing about this love interest of hers. Someone she was very excited about. Someone she was getting serious with. So imagine my surprise when I get here to find Richard Morrison claiming he and Sydney were supposedly rekindling their prior relationship."

As she spoke Jennifer glanced first at Tyler. He looked at her with eyes large, appearing slightly embarrassed. Then she looked over to Tiffany. Tiffany looked back at her with honest contemplation. It occurred to Jennifer the expression on her face was one of almost satisfaction with the direction the conversation was taking. Her eyes finally settled on the sergeant sitting next to Tiffany, the woman Jennifer could finally identify as Alex.

Alex sat silently, both hands spread flat on the table surface, her eyes staring down at them. Jennifer thought the obviously strong, usually physically imposing woman looked drained, as if she were barely holding on to her emotions.

Then it hit Jennifer. It was obvious from the conversations she'd had with Sydney over the past weeks that Sydney was falling in love with Alex before the explosion. If Alex felt the same way about Sydney, then this entire experience, and being forced to have their relationship go unrecognized, must be devastating to the woman. It was this recognition that drove her next words.

"Alex," she said, her voice full of compassion. Alex finally looked up at her. "I know now how hard this must be on you. I'm sorry I didn't put it all together sooner. You're just about all she talked about these last few months. I feel kind of dense after being here the last few days, but I'm afraid I never made the connection. Sydney talked about you all the time, I just never connected you to the Alex she was always mentioning. Not until last night." Alex looked up, shock clearly written on her face. Jennifer continued "Why didn't you tell me, Alex? About you two? About who you are to her? Who you are to each other?"

"Syd was planning to tell you," Tyler broke in. "She was making plans to have you fly out in the next week or two so she could talk to you and have you meet Alex. She didn't want to do it over the phone." He paused and looked over at Alex. "She delayed it because of the bombings."

"We can't be sure about that," Alex whispered. Tiffany looked at Alex and reached out to grasp Alex's hand in a comforting way.

"Alex—" she began only to be interrupted.

"We don't know, Tiff," Alex insisted. "He came back and..." Alex's quiet voice trailed off and she shrugged.

Tyler leaned forward. "Alex, you can't possibly think Syd was really interested in Richard. There was nothing there."

Alex looked up at him briefly then back at the table. She shrugged again. "I saw them together," she said simply. "They looked...together." Jennifer saw that Alex was clearly struggling painfully with what she was saying.

"But Alex, you saw what Richard wanted you to see. What you saw was him pushing himself on her knowing she would hesitate to create a scene." Tyler pleaded for her to believe him.

Jennifer was confused. "Wait, what are you talking about?"

"Richard has been, well, pushy with Syd since he's been back in town." Tyler said since Alex was clearly hesitant to speak. "At first Syd figured she'd simply have a quick lunch with him, just to be polite. But then he showed up unannounced at her office a couple times. When Syd told him about her and Alex, he made some really nasty comments and became more insistent. Friday, the day before the explosion, he showed up again at our building. From what Sydney told me he was pretty disrespectful, got a little inappropriate with his hands. Alex can say more about what she saw."

"You were there?" Jennifer asked, looking at Alex.

"I stopped by Syd's office. When I got to the door they were in there together. They were..." Alex's reply was almost whispered and she faltered, as if the memory was painful. She shrugged once again, unable to continue.

"No, Alex." Tiffany squeezed the hand she was still holding as she shook her head. "I took the calls from Syd on Saturday morning. I can't believe there was anything going on with her ex. She was frantic with worry about you."

"When she found out you'd seen something on Friday afternoon, Sydney freaked out." Tyler said. "She figured out you were likely there when Morrison got all handsy with her, and she knew you'd misread the whole thing. Both Syd and I were pretty sure at that point that Dick did it on purpose, that he knew you were watching." He nodded in confirmation when Alex looked up at him. Everyone was silent for a few moments then Jennifer spoke again.

"But, Alex, when all this happened. Why didn't you say anything? Why didn't you tell me?"

Alex took a deep breath before speaking.

"It wasn't my place to say anything. I know she loves you. You're her family. You and Tyler, you're everything to her. So telling you about us, how she tells you, when she tells you, it's a personal thing. It's not my place. And then, when she woke up and she couldn't...she didn't..." Alex again struggled with what she was trying to say. She stood up abruptly and turned away from the table, walking to the other side of the room. Her fists clenched and unclenched as she struggled with herself.

"She doesn't remember. She may never remember. Maybe subconsciously she doesn't... maybe she isn't..."

"No way!" Tyler exclaimed. "There's no way, Alex. I know what you're saying, and that's not happening. Syd loves you, Alex. She hesitated to say it because she didn't want you to feel trapped or scare you off or something. But she loves you."

"Maybe she thought she loved me, Ty. But now? Who knows what she's thinking. Where her mind is now. She's lost the last year. Everything we've had, everything she may have felt, it's gone."

"So we make sure she remembers," Tyler said. He looked to Jennifer and Tiffany for support. Jennifer and Tiffany looked at each other as the silence in the room lengthened. "What?" Tyler asked.

"It's not quite that easy, Ty," Jennifer said after a pause. "We can't force this. It's not healthy. She'll remember when she's ready to remember."

“If she’s ready to remember.” The statement came from Alex, still standing at the other end of the table. She looked at Jennifer for confirmation. Jennifer begrudgingly nodded then spoke.

“But, Alex, it’s not quite like that. You don’t close off parts of someone’s life when they are suffering from amnesia. You don’t hide things. You just don’t force things. If she asks questions she should be given honest answers.”

“But this isn’t things like where she lives or her job, or what vacation she’s taken in the past year that she doesn’t remember. This is a devastatingly difficult and personal issue. You don’t tell someone they’re gay, I don’t care if you’re absolutely sure. You have to let them figure it out for themselves. If that’s in fact the case.”

“Alex—”

“No, Ty. Nobody tells her anything. Even outside the medical and psychological issues, I can’t have her feel pressured to rekindle our relationship if that’s not truly who she is. If we aren’t what she truly she wants.” Alex crossed her arms as she stood at the end of the table, distant from everyone, staring at the table surface. Her voice was resigned as she continued. “Maybe her memory, her mind, is responding this way for a reason.”

“God, what a nightmare. It just doesn’t seem right,” Tyler said.

Jennifer got up and moved around the table to Alex. She put a hand on each of Alex’s biceps and turned Alex to face her.

“Listen to me, Alex. I appreciate what you’re saying. And I acknowledge you have some very valid points. This is a little more unique, a little more sensitive than even the usual amnesia case. And I’ll keep your wishes in mind. But I can’t make any promises.” Jennifer saw moisture in Alex’s eyes as their gaze met. “Sydney is my sister and I have to act in what I truly believe is her best interest. Like I said, while I admit things need to be handled carefully, I refuse to completely hide things from her. If Sydney asks questions, I’m going to have to figure out how to answer them without lying.” Alex finally gave a slight nod, and Jennifer enveloped her in a hug. “Don’t be a stranger, Alex. Even if you only visit as a friend, Syd needs to see you. She knows you’re someone special.”

Tyler was next, also hugging Alex. “Don’t give up, Alex. She’s going to remember. There’s no doubt in my mind about that.”

Tiffany rose next and moved to stand before Alex, speaking quietly.

“I figured it out. I know what it is you’re afraid of.” She nodded as Alex looked at her with momentarily angry eyes. “Yeah, what you’re afraid of. I know something happened in the past. I don’t know all the details, but I think this is maybe something you think has a chance of being too similar.” She took Alex in a hug, speaking into her ear as she refused to let go, forcing Alex to hug her back. “I don’t know who she was or what she did to you, Alex, but Sydney isn’t her. Sydney’s feelings for you are real. And whether she remembers finite details or not, she’s going to figure out those feelings one way or another.” She pulled back but didn’t release Alex, placing her hands on either side of Alex’s head and meeting her eyes once again. “Don’t run away, Alex. Don’t you dare hide from her. Tyler was right. She needs you.”

Alex finally nodded after a brief hesitation.

SAM FINALLY VENTURED back to the Vortex Saturday night, a full week after the explosion and walking out of Courtney’s condo. The club was hopping by the time she arrived well into the evening. Luck went her way when a small booth opened up near the back of the

club. Sam sat alone at the table and glanced across the dance floor to the stairs against the far wall. Her eyes followed them up to Courtney's office door at the top then over to the mirrored window she knew looked down on the club interior. She wondered if Courtney was up there now, perhaps looking down at her.

Sam tried to shake the thought out of her head then raised her beer for another sip. It had been a long week since the bombing. For her, the investigation had become even more convoluted as the FBI had taken over the case, partially shutting out the local task force members. Between that and Alex being so distracted with Sydney's injury, Sam's insider access to the investigation had been partially shut off.

She and Alex had exchanged what information each of them could, and they'd come pretty much to the conclusion that Fenbrook was likely being set up as the scapegoat. Sam still felt the photographs that had been removed from Fenbrook's house when the explosives were planted were somehow important. But the unidentified man in the desert cammies had yet to be identified. Both she and Alex knew he had to be from one of the intelligence organizations, probably CIA, but none of Elena's quiet connections or database searches had been able to identify him. This meant one of two things to Sam. Either he was an unidentified foreign agent, or he was a U.S. operative, either former or current, who had been scrubbed from their systems.

As these thoughts continued to consume Sam's mind, her eyes were continuously scanning the bar interior. Although, contrary to her normal habit, her eyes were not captured by any of the individuals present, regardless of how attractive many of them were. Sam admitted to herself that her heart just wasn't in it. There was one woman her mind kept returning to, and Sam felt that woman was beyond her reach. Her glance once again went to the door at the top of the stairs.

Sam turned her beer on end, draining the last of it and contemplating calling for a second, when a figure passed in front of her view and was immediately recognized. Sam fought the urge to get up and find a darker corner, or simply leave, as she watched Christina Perry walk up to the bar nearby. The attractive and provocatively dressed woman stood leaning on the bar top as she waited to catch the bartender's eye.

It occurred to Sam that a nightclub was a strange place to be when her boss, and presumably her friend, Congressman Vaughn, had been killed less than a week prior. Sam had a fleeting thought that Christina had been exceptionally lucky to have not been with the congressman that morning. The thought was abruptly interrupted as Christina turned away from the bar, drink now in hand. Sam watched as Christina paused momentarily and took a sip, her eyes scanning the room in an almost predatory fashion. Sam refused to flinch when those eyes came to rest on her. Christina smirked, then immediately began moving toward her.

"Well, well." Christina slid into the seat across from her, putting her drink down on the table and leaning forward with a sultry smile. "Fancy running into you here. How are you, Lieutenant Commander?"

"I no longer have the privilege of that title, thanks to you," Sam said, not bothering to keep the anger from her voice. "And I don't remember inviting you to sit."

"Come now, Sam. You can't still be angry about that little mix up, can you?"

"You call that a little mix up?" Christina shrugged in response.

"Please. You have to admit, you and me," Christina pointed back and forth between the two of them as she spoke, "we had a good time together. We were great while it lasted, Sam." She leaned forward and ran her tongue over her lips before continuing. "We still could, you know. For old times' sake. How about it? One more night together?"

“What kind of psychopath are you? After everything you’ve done you think I’m going to hop back into bed with you? You lied to save your own ass from your father’s right-wing whack job judgment and because you thought it would injure your future career prospects.” Sam stood, almost shaking with the intensity of her anger and anguish for a life, a dream, which had been destroyed. “You ruined my name. You destroyed my military career.”

“Please.” Christina giggled and leaned back in her chair as she looked up at Sam. “We both know you managed to move on to bigger and better things.” She winked as if to imply she meant more than what she was saying. Sam looked at her, understanding there was more meant by the statement than was actually spoken, and instantly wondering just how dangerous this woman was.

Sam felt a firm grip on her arm. Another hand came to rest intimately on her stomach as a voice she immediately recognized spoke to her, loud enough for Christina to hear.

“I believe you promised me a dance, Sam. I’m calling in my marker.” Courtney’s hand moved from Sam’s stomach up to her cheek, pulling Sam’s gaze away from Christina to look at her. “Come on, Sam. Dance with me.” Courtney leaned in to whisper in Sam’s ear. “Let me help you. Just go with it.”

Sam took a deep breath then nodded. She allowed herself to be pulled to the club’s center dance floor, not bothering to look back at Christina. As they crossed onto the floor, the thumping bass changed and the lights dimmed slightly as a slower song transitioned through the speakers. Sam was somewhat surprised when Courtney looped her arms up and over Sam’s shoulders to clasp her hands behind her neck. Sam’s hands automatically went to Courtney’s hips as their bodies settled closer together. Their eyes met as they began swaying together to the popular romantic song.

“You okay?” Courtney asked. “It looked like things were getting a little heated there.”

Sam nodded. “Yeah, I’m okay. She’s just...” She wasn’t sure how to complete the sentence.

“I recognize her from the mayor’s town hall a couple weeks ago. She an ex?” Courtney asked. Sam shook her head.

“I wouldn’t call her that. We were, intimate I guess you could say. Physically at least.” Sam looked away from Courtney, unable to look her in the eyes during her admission. “You know me, that’s what I do. I’m not much good at anything else.”

“Is she the reason why?” Sam’s eyes snapped back to Courtney at the question.

“What do you mean?”

“Is she the reason why you only hook up for sex? Why you don’t spend time in relationships?”

“She was...I...” Sam struggled to come up with a reply.

“I’m sorry,” Courtney interrupted her efforts. “I shouldn’t have asked that. It’s none of my business.” Now Courtney was the one who looked away nervously. “Listen, Sam, about last weekend, after the bombing. I’m sorry about what I did, or what I tried to do. What I said, it was mean and out of line.”

Sam shook her head. “It’s okay. I understand where you were coming from. What you were looking for. You had no reason to think anything different about me. I just didn’t...I couldn’t.” Her eyes met Courtney’s once again and they stopped dancing, standing still together on the dance floor, unmoving as they stared into each others eyes. Sam finally continued. “I could never be with you and have it mean nothing, Court. I just couldn’t.” She took a step back, breaking the moment. “I should go. Thanks for the rescue tonight.” Sam turned away quickly.

“SAM, WAIT,” COURTNEY called. But Sam either didn’t hear or chose not to acknowledge her call. Sam quickly disappeared in the crowded dance floor. The music changed once again, resuming its previous quicker techno beat, and the floor filled with faster moving bodies.

As the two had swayed together on the dance floor and Sam admitted the prior relationship, Courtney had seen the pain in her eyes. It suddenly made sense. Sam had engaged in the playboy behavior as a protective measure. She refused to connect emotionally for fear of the same rejection or deception she had been subject to in the past, at the hands of that woman, Courtney presumed.

Courtney remained unmoving for a few moments as she thought this all through then made her way in the opposite direction, heading to the private stairs and the seclusion of her office. The door shut behind her and the music became muffled within the partially soundproofed walls. Courtney collapsed onto the couch, leaning her head back as she replayed the conversations with Sam, both tonight’s and the previous one which had taken place the night of the explosion. She was ashamed of her actions that night. Yet, part of her knew she had reached out to Sam in that fashion almost as a test.

Courtney was admittedly attracted to Sam, despite her conscious wishes to the contrary. The logical, rational part of her was hesitant to allow herself to feel anything. That part of her believed Sam would jump at the opportunity she presented that night. That part of her was waiting for Sam to prove she was simply after Courtney as another conquest.

But another part of Courtney, a deeper, more spiritual part, felt an attachment to Sam on a different level. She knew Sam was dangerous, yet there was a part of her that felt uncompromisingly safe in Sam’s presence. It was confusing, maddeningly so. It went against everything Courtney had instilled in herself over the past two years as she recovered from her relationship with Helen. But she knew she was going to have to figure it out, one way or another.

MANY HOURS LATER Courtney was still in her office. The club had closed over an hour ago and Courtney was trying to close out the weekly payroll. There was a brief knock at the door then it opened. Liz, her manager, stuck her head through the open doorway.

“We’re good to go downstairs, Court,” she said. “We’re cleaned up and the staff has headed out. I’ll be in tomorrow morning for the beer delivery. You need me to stick around for anything else?”

Courtney shook her head. “Nope. Thanks, Liz. Have a good night.”

Liz waved in response as the door closed and Courtney heard footsteps retreat down the stairs to the lounge floor below. Courtney glanced at her watch and figured she had about thirty minutes of work left before she could quit for the night then tucked her head back into her computer and concentrated on reviewing the last of that week’s payroll records.

Her mind soon drifted to her last interaction with Sam the night Sydney had been injured. Courtney had reached out for the woman out of an almost desperate need to feel alive. She had figured based on their previous interactions that Sam wouldn’t turn her down. Courtney’s initial reaction had been anger and she had lashed out at Sam. She considered she seemed to have a

habit of doing that. But she had been undeniably hurt by what she initially felt was rejection. But Sam's departing statements had rung true, and Courtney admitted the woman's hesitation to be intimate that night, under those circumstances, was almost chivalrous.

The thoughts went around and around in her mind, and she became increasingly frustrated and confused by her inability to fully grasp the woman and her own reactions to her.

Twenty-five minutes later she printed the last of the records she wanted to review at home, saved everything and began shutting down the computer. She gathered her purse and briefcase and exited her office. She was just turning the key in the office door at the top of the stairs when she heard the sound of breaking glass from a far window along the front of the lounge. Out of the corner of her eye she caught the flash of an object as it sailed through the window and crashed to the floor in the middle of the room below. As Courtney's eyes tracked the object, there was a sudden blast of heat and a burst of flame immediately illuminated the entire lounge. A fraction of a second later, a second window shattered and another flaming bottle came through it, breaking as it hit the floor and the contents spread fire along several items of furniture and the floor directly beneath the landing Courtney was standing on.

The sudden burst of heat and fire caused Courtney to take a rapid step back, but her foot found nothing but air as she unwittingly stepped over the edge of the top of the staircase. She grasped frantically for the railing. Her fingers slipped over the wood as she failed to get a solid grip. The desperate lunge only twisted her body further off balance as she fell, crashing to the descending stairs and tumbling to the floor below. A searing pain went through her left arm and shoulder as she tried to break her fall, then her head cracked against the bannister. Blackness overcame her and her limp body tumbled down the last steps to the floor below.

AFTER BOLTING FROM the club, Sam spent the remainder of the evening driving the streets of greater Los Angeles. She tried to concentrate on the investigation, but she knew it was stalled at this point. Elena had yet to identify the man in the photo, the lone tie to Prizrak and everything that had occurred in Tunisia, and the clear indicator that this was undoubtedly bigger than a domestic hate campaign.

The now enhanced task force was conducting an exhaustive search for Fenbrook, the individual they were obviously focusing on as a lone bomber. Sam knew Alex at least shared her unwillingness to support that theory.

She'd also been dealing with her own confusing reactions to Courtney. Restless and somehow unwilling to engage in her normal social behaviors, Sam now drove the late night dark streets back in the direction of the Vortex. She told herself she was simply going to drive by and continue on to her rented condo. She had no business at the club. She certainly had no reason to go inside, even if she were to see Courtney's car still parked there.

As she approached the club on the largely deserted boulevard, she noticed a strange glow coming from the front windows of the lounge portion of the building. It took a moment for her mind to register the cause. Fire! There was a fire in the lounge. And Courtney's office was above the lounge.

Sam accelerated up the driveway then down the side of the building to the rear parking lot. There her fear was realized as she saw Courtney's white Audi parked in the reserved parking space near the back door to the club. Sam raced from her vehicle to the back door, but it was

closed and locked. She ran as quickly as she could around to the front of the club, dialing 911 on her cell phone and reporting the fire and her belief there was a victim inside the burning building.

Reaching the front windows she noticed several of them were already broken as if an object had been hurled into the building. As she contemplated ways she could get inside, a part of her mind registered the fire was probably started by some kind of incendiary devices tossed through the windows.

Seeing no other options immediately available to her, Sam approached the window she knew would be closest to Courtney's office stairs and shoved her jacket covered elbow through the already partially shattered glass. After clearing away as much glass as she could she hoisted herself up and through the window.

The heat was intense, almost overwhelming, as Sam dropped to the floor inside the club. She quickly registered what appeared to be two separate ignition points for the fires, one near the center of the lounge where a plush rug, several pieces of furniture and a portion of the bar were engulfed in flames and billowing smoke. The second fire burned across a stretch of floor and several support struts for the stairs leading to Courtney's office.

Sam yelled for Courtney as she pulled her jacket up to cover her nose and mouth. The smoke was intense and Sam bent lower, hoping to avoid the worst of the billowing smoke. Her eyes swept the room and came to rest on an unidentifiable mound at the base of the stairs. As she moved closer the flames illuminated the area and her breath caught as she recognized Courtney's crumpled body. Sam knelt next to Courtney, rolling her onto her back and brushing her hair from her face. She noted the bruising and swelling on Courtney's temple and forehead.

"Court? Come on, baby, open those beautiful green eyes for me." Sam caressed her cheek as she received only a groan in response. With the fire spreading Sam knew their safety depended on getting out of the building before the flames completely encircled them. She pulled Courtney to a seated position then tried again. Her thumb brushed gently over Courtney's cheek and lips.

"Courtney? We need to get of here, hon." Sam watched as Courtney's eyes fluttered open and she tried to focus.

"Sam?" Courtney asked weakly.

"Yeah, can you stand?" Sam's question was met with only gasps and coughing as Courtney attempted to answer. Sam heard the creaking of the stairs and turned to see them fully engulfed in flame. Then a nearby plush sofa burst into fire nearby. "We need to get out of here, now!"

She grabbed Courtney's purse lying nearby, and carefully helped Courtney to stand. The woman was weak and stumbling. She would have fallen if not for Sam's arms around her, holding her upright. Courtney's head fell against Sam's shoulder as she coughed and gasped in the smoky air.

With the flames blocking access to the front doors, Sam moved along the bar to the rear door. It seemed to take forever and Sam's lungs burned from the smoke and exertion. Finally she made it down the hallway and turned and drove her hip against the release mechanism on the door, throwing it open and allowing her to pull Courtney with her out into the cool, clean night air.

Sam continued across the parking lot away from the building then carefully lowered Courtney to the pavement as she heard sirens approaching the front of the building. She held her partially reclined against her chest as the semiconscious woman continued to cough and gasp. Sam noticed the way she cradled her left arm against her chest. Moments later she saw the first firefighters come down the drive to the rear of the property, joined quickly by two paramedics. Sam waved away the female paramedic who started to ask her questions, indicating they should both give their attention to Courtney.

“I found her inside. She was unconscious and she’s never fully woken up. She took a blow to the head, and I think she injured her left arm.”

The paramedic placed a mask over Sam’s nose and mouth and pushed the elastic strap over her head to hold the mask in place.

“At least keep this on awhile. Try to breathe easy and don’t worry, we’ll take care of your friend.” The paramedic turned to assist her partner who had positioned a similar mask over Courtney’s nose and mouth.

Sam realized her hand was still wrapped around Courtney’s body as Courtney continued to lean against her, her head against Sam’s shoulder. As Sam looked at her, Courtney’s eyes fluttered open and met hers over the mask. Courtney’s hand moved up to grasp Sam’s, holding it against her stomach. Sam squeezed Courtney’s hand. She was surprised to feel Courtney’s squeeze in return.

Sam tuned out the multitude of activity around her as she felt herself falling into Courtney’s eyes. She wasn’t sure how much time passed as she gazed into the sea of green before the paramedic broke into her consciousness.

“The gurney is being brought back now. We can’t bring the ambulance back here in the confined space with the building engulfed. We’ll be taking her to Cedars-Sinai hospital. You can either ride with us or follow if you’ve got a car.”

Sam pulled the oxygen mask from her face, handing it to the paramedic.

“I guess I can...” She was interrupted by a squeeze on the hand still held by Courtney. She looked down again to see Courtney lips moving behind her own mask. She was interrupted by a rolling gurney being pulled up next to them. The firefighters collapsed the gurney down on its folding wheeled legs, bringing it within a foot of the ground, and the paramedics moved to help Courtney move to the wheeled stretcher. As she was moved, Courtney never released Sam’s hand. Her eyes clenched in discomfort and her hold on Sam’s hand tightened.

Sam moved with her, looking down as she was settled and strapped into the gurney. A fresh bout of coughing shook Courtney’s body and a lone tear escaped from her clenched eyes, tracking down her soot smudged face.

Sam reached out with her free hand and wiped the tear from her cheek. Courtney’s eyes opened and met Sam’s. Sam saw her lips move as Courtney attempted to speak again. She leaned down, putting her ear closer to Courtney’s mask covered lips.

“Stay with me,” she heard Courtney say in a scratchy whisper.

Sam straightened up and looked at Courtney, unable to hide her surprise at the request.

“Please.” Courtney sounded timid and scared.

“Of course. For as long as you want me to,” Sam told her, giving a reassuring smile and a squeeze of her hand.

Chapter Fifteen

COURTNEY SLOWLY OPENED her eyes and tried to focus. She took in the clean white medical surroundings. Her eyes came to rest on a figure near the bedside, slouched uncomfortably in a hard, upright chair immediately next to the bed. Sam's chin rested on her chest, and her eyes were closed in sleep. Courtney could make out soot smudges that still remained on Sam's face and near her hair line, the residue from a vague attempt to wash her face.

Sam's chair faced Courtney, who was lying in the hospital bed with her head slightly elevated. Courtney realized her right hand was lying on top of the light blanket that covered her body, and it was grasped lightly by the woman asleep in the chair next to her.

"Sam?" Courtney whispered the question, surprised by Sam's presence. Her voice was scratchy and her throat sore.

"Yep," came the reply from a voice on the opposite side of the bed. She turned her head and recognized the nurse standing beside her. She had met Tiffany a few times during group gettogethers hosted by Alex and Sydney. "She's been with you the whole time. Refused to leave. Insisted she didn't need any treatment herself."

"Is she okay?" Courtney was unable to keep the slight note of concern out of her voice.

"For the most part, I think. Some smoke inhalation, but certainly not as much as you." Tiffany paused then smiled. "So I guess I'm a bit out of touch. You've managed to meet someone interesting while I've been on vacation?"

Courtney rolled her eyes in response, but they drifted back to Sam. "Oh, please. Don't read anything into it, Tiffany. Sam is just...stubborn."

"Uh-huh. Well, you're lucky she's stubborn." Tiffany raised two fingers in air quotes as a sign of her humorous sarcasm to the characterization. "Otherwise you may not be around for us to be having this conversation."

Before Courtney could respond the door to the room opened and Doctor Estrada walked in, stopping near Tiffany and taking the clipboard of medical documents Tiffany was holding. Courtney immediately recognized her as the doctor who treated Sam after her beating behind the club.

"Ms. Brennan," the doctor said as she briefly reviewed the top sheet. "How are you feeling?"

"Okay, I guess, all things considered." Courtney looked over at Sam as she moved, having woken up when the doctor entered. Sam straightened up and their eyes met. Courtney felt her hand squeezed as Sam stood and moved closer to the bed. She recognized concern and compassion in Sam's eyes. Then the moment was broken as the doctor addressed her again.

"Ms. Black and I spent the early morning hours getting re-acquainted." Doctor Estrada nodded her head toward Sam. "That's two times in a couple weeks you two have visited my emergency room in the very late night hours."

Courtney looked briefly at Sam then turned back to the doctor who continued speaking.

"How's the arm?" she asked.

Courtney noticed for the first time that her wrist was encased in an elastic bandage. She attempted to manipulate her wrist and grimaced at a flash of dull pain.

"I remember falling on it when I tripped down the stairs. What's wrong with it?" she asked.

"You've got a bad sprain, but nothing's broken," Doctor Estrada said. "You took a good blow to the head, too, but no evidence of a concussion. My main concern was your smoke inhalation. You've been out for a while because we gave you a mild sedative when you got here and had you on oxygen for a while." Doctor Estrada lifted her stethoscope. "May I?" she asked.

Courtney nodded. The doctor moved up closer to the head of the bed, across from Sam who remained standing beside Courtney, still holding her hand. There she maneuvered the stethoscope under the loose neck of the hospital gown Courtney suddenly realized she was wearing. She noted simultaneously that she was now also without a bra. She had no memory of her top ever being changed, and her eyes went to Sam. She felt the warmth of an embarrassing flush move up her neck and face as she wondered whether Sam was present as her clothing was changed.

"Take a breath for me," the doctor asked. She complied, trying to take a deep breath and was quickly overcome by a hacking cough. She felt Sam's hold on her hand squeeze slightly tighter.

"Sit up for me," the doctor said. Courtney began to lean forward and immediately felt Sam's steadying hand around her arm, helping her to a sitting position. Once again the doctor slipped the stethoscope beneath the gown, now moving it along Courtney's back, listening carefully. "Take another breath for me," she said.

The simple breath, just slightly deeper than the shallow ones Courtney now realized she had been taking, sent her into a fit of coughing. Her body folded as the hacking receded into gasping breaths. As she regained control Courtney realized she was leaning into Sam, who had placed an arm around her shoulders to help hold her upright. Even after realizing their somewhat intimate position, Courtney didn't bother to move her head from where it leaned on Sam's shoulder. Sam rubbed small comforting circles on her back, and Courtney pretended not to see the smile cross Tiffany's face as she stood behind the doctor on the other side of the bed.

"I know it's uncomfortable, but none of this is unexpected considering what you were exposed to," Doctor Estrada said as she began to make notes on Courtney's medical record. "I'm going to prescribe an inhaler to help relax your bronchial tubes and lungs. I'll also prescribe an antibiotic to avoid infection and some mild pain medication to help with the discomfort if you need it. I strongly suggest you at least take them in the evenings before you go to bed. You need to take it easy for at least a week or so. You'll probably find you're quite short of breath for a while as you heal, so don't exert yourself."

Courtney nodded.

"You relax for now while I fill out the paperwork. You should be able to take her home in about an hour or so." This last part of her statement was directed at Sam, who nodded.

"Thanks, Doc."

"You two try and stay out of my emergency room for a while, will you?" the doctor said with a smile then turned and left the room. Courtney again avoided looking at the smug smile on Tiffany's face as she approached the bed and ran her hand across nonexistent wrinkles in the bedding. Still, Courtney didn't move from where she was still comfortably ensconced in Sam's embrace.

"Why don't I pick up that prescription so the two of you can just relax until Sam can take you home?" Tiffany said before she turned to head out the door.

"Wait, Tiff," Courtney called in her hoarse voice. Tiffany looked back over her shoulder.

“How’s Sydney?”

The look on Tiffany’s face immediately turned serious. “She’s better. She was released yesterday afternoon and her sister took her home.”

“What about, you know, Alex?”

Tiffany shook her head. “She won’t let anyone mention anything to Sydney. You know she was here every day checking on her. Jennifer, Syd’s sister, figured it out and confronted Tyler and Alex and me. Alex is afraid of putting pressure on Sydney, and I think she’s a bit gun shy because there was something else happening between them just before Sydney was hurt.”

“What about Morrison? Where’s he in all this right now?” The question this time came from Sam. Tiffany moved back to the bed, her face clearly displaying her frustration.

“Richard Morrison is still very prominently trying to put himself in the picture. I think Sydney is not entirely comfortable with him or the story he’s managed to tell, but she’s so unsure of everything. You have to keep in mind that her memory for the past year or so is a blank slate. She’s sensing things. I know she’s had some dreams and some flashes and images of memory, but nothing concrete she can hold onto. And Mr. Morrison seems to be feeding her what some of us are pretty sure is a distorted, if not entirely fabricated, storyline. But none of us can prove it.”

“But Alex knows!” Courtney exclaimed, almost pleading.

“Tiffany’s right. Something did happen just before Syd lost her memory,” Sam said. “You remember that night Alex tied it on at Vortex? We talked the next morning, Alex and I. She saw Morrison and Syd together. Now it’s like she’s lost confidence in her place in Sydney’s life.”

“Yep.” Tiffany nodded. “And then Sydney lost her memory, leaving Dick all the room he needed to make a move. That manipulative asshole,” Tiffany said.

Sam nodded her agreement. “I’ve seen him in confrontations with Alex, and heard what he’s said to her. I got the feeling it was as much about beating out Alex as anything else. It seems like for him it’s more about conquering the competition than it is about any love he may have for Sydney.”

“But Syd loves Alex. She told me,” Courtney insisted. “She came to me the next morning, after that night you took Alex home with you. She told me what happened and how much she needed to find Alex, to set things straight, to reassure her that Morrison meant nothing to her. Then the explosion happened that afternoon. God, what a disaster.”

Just then, both Tiffany and Sam’s cell phones chimed almost simultaneously, indicating text messages. They each glanced at their respective devices and Tiffany was the first to speak.

“Looks like Sal and Alex are on their way here from the club,” Tiffany said. “Sal is following Alex in your car,” she said to Sam, who nodded as she put the phone back in her pocket. Sam had spoken to Alex earlier in the morning before Tiffany started her daytime shift, and while Courtney was still sedated.

Sam turned her head to Courtney, who was still leaning on her shoulder.

“And Alex is asking if you want to be interviewed here or would you be more comfortable at your condo? The FBI agents will be doing the interviews.”

“What about the club? I want to see it, and I need to pick up my car.”

“Your car was taken back to your condo complex.” Sam’s hand was again making calming circles on her back. “When Alex gets here with my car, I can take you wherever you need to go. The club evidently isn’t as badly damaged as it could’ve been. The lounge main floor is pretty damaged and most of the furniture in there is a goner. And they got one Molotov cocktail through into the dance club that caused some damage to the dance floor and the main stage. But

other than the stairs being damaged and maybe some smoke damage, your office is pretty untouched. The bar back areas and stockrooms are pretty much undamaged.”

“I want to see it. Can’t they do the interviews there?”

Sam looked up at Tiffany, who gave a barely perceptible shrug.

“Why don’t I drive you there and you can take a look, then we’ll see how you feel.

Remember what the doctor said about getting rest and not exerting yourself?” Sam said. “You don’t need to be climbing around with all the smoke and soot. Other than looking around there’s nothing you can do.”

Courtney nodded in agreement, a part of her very thankful Sam was somewhat taking charge. She had to admit she was still feeling exhausted despite her concern for her business.

“I hope you don’t mind, I asked Alex to run by your condo and pick up some clothes for you to change into. I thought you might prefer something a little cleaner and less smoky when you left here.”

Courtney nodded and squeezed Sam’s hand, which she was still holding onto. “Thanks,” she said, tilting her head up to look into Sam’s face, hovering just a few inches away. She was vaguely aware of the door slipping closed as Tiffany left the room.

“So, you’ve been here the entire time?” Courtney almost whispered. Sam nodded in response. “Why did you stick around? You didn’t have to.”

“Yes, I did,” Sam replied, just as quietly. “You asked me to. I promised you I would.” She saw the confusion on Courtney’s face. “At the club, before the paramedics put you in the ambulance, you asked me to stay with you. So I did.”

Courtney thought back to the club, the fire bursting into the club below her, the sense of panic as she fell down the stairs toward the flames. She remembered being confused and scared, blinded by the smoke and unable to breathe. Then she remembered a calm voice reassuring her then strong arms around her guiding her out. Those same arms held onto her and comforted her, the same arms that held her now.

“So you were here when they took my shirt off and put me in this hospital gown?” She plucked at the offending garment.

“Well, to be perfectly honest, I turned my back and then slid out while they treated you.” Courtney’s eyes raised in disbelief. “Honestly. You can ask the doctor,” Sam insisted. “I wouldn’t take advantage of you like that, Court,” she added, still speaking quietly and sincerely.

Courtney’s head was still resting against Sam’s shoulder, still wrapped in Sam’s partial embrace, and as Sam spoke she looked down at Courtney, their lips only inches apart. Courtney was aware of Sam’s hand on her shoulder, now pulling her slightly closer into Sam’s chest, and she sensed Sam’s head tilting very slowly toward her. Courtney closed her eyes as their lips moved closer, waiting for them to inevitably meet.

“Hey, you two! Oh. Uhhh, oops?”

Courtney and Sam’s heads jerked up and Courtney pulled away from Sam’s embrace, lying back against the slightly raised head of the hospital bed. Sam simultaneously took a small step back from the edge of the bed. They both looked at Alex, who had come to a sudden stop in the entryway after throwing the door wide open. Sal had managed to halt without crashing into her back.

“Uhhh.” Alex held the gym bag up as if in explanation, apparently unable to find words appropriate to the situation.

Sam walked to Alex and took the bag from her extended hand.

“Thanks, Alex. Keys?”

“Oh, yeah.” Alex reached into her pocket. “Here you go.” She turned to Courtney. “Court, how are you doing? You okay?”

“Yeah, thanks, Alex,” Courtney said in her still scratchy and weak voice.

“Good.” Alex turned back to Sam. “Sam, meet my old partner, Sal. Sal, Sam and I knew each other back in the service. She’s in town reporting on the bombings for the Associated Press.”

“Hey, Sal. Good to meet you.” Sam reached out to shake his hand.

“Yeah, likewise,” Sal said. “Considering the craziness I know Alex is capable of now, I’m betting you’ve got some killer dirt on her from stuff she’s gotten into in the military.”

“Oh, yeah. We’re definitely gonna need to talk.” The two exchanged devious smiles then both looked at Alex.

“Whatever, you two.” Alex pushed the two apart then focused on Sam. “I brought you a change of clothes as well. You’ve both got some sweats and t-shirts. Court, you’ve got some of Syd’s stuff that was at my house. I figured it would fit you better.” There was a moment of silence as Alex looked uncomfortable at the mention of her girlfriend. Then she continued. “I left your car in short term parking outside the emergency room doors. Any idea when you guys will be up for interviews? The Feds are still at the club looking things over.”

“Thanks,” Sam said. She walked the bag back and put it on the bed next to Courtney, having removed her own clean clothes. “Courtney wants to take a look at the club, so I’ll take her by there. If she’s up to it your agents can talk to her there. If not we’ll figure out something later at her condo.”

“Sounds good.” Alex pulled out her phone. “I’ll let them know and we’ll see you at the club shortly. Sal followed me in his car so he can give me a ride back.” She turned to exit the room and make the call, and Sal took her place in the doorway.

“Hey, Court, you take it easy and feel better. You can always call Tiffany or me if you need anything,” he said.

“Thanks, Sal. I appreciate it.” Sal waved and then let the door close behind him as he followed Alex out into the hallway.

Sam and Courtney looked at each other across the now empty room. A certain amount of tension remained following the untimely interruption by Sal and Alex. Sam finally broke the silence, clearing her throat quietly and then speaking.

“I’ll give you some privacy to get dressed,” she said. “Unless you need me for anything?”

“No, thank you.”

“Court, I meant what I said before. I respect you. I would never take advantage of you like that.”

Courtney sensed Sam’s sincerity and nodded. Then a fraction of a second later she watched as the roguish look once again took over Sam’s eyes and smile.

“Besides, I’m patient. I’ll just wait until you beg me to watch you take your clothes off.”

“Why you arrogant—” Courtney’s aim was perfect as the pillow sailed across the small room. But by that time a smiling Sam quickly exited the room, the pillow bounced harmlessly off the closing door.

ALEX JOINED THE primary task force members sifting through the evidence with the assistance of arson investigators from the fire department.

“Here we go,” she heard Detective Robert Kim say from behind Courtney’s desk. “I’ve rolled the video back to just prior to the fire.”

Chuck and Alex gathered behind him, intently watching the computer monitor, which was split into four views from separate camera feeds.

“We’ve got eight separate camera feeds covering the interior and exterior. You recall right before the beating a couple weeks ago they had upgraded and expanded the system a little. It’s pretty decent technology so we may get lucky. These two cover the front doors and the front sidewalk area,” Robert said, pointing to the two upper boxes. He then moved his finger through the bottom two quadrants. “This is the rear door and parking lot, and then another view of the rear lot and the side driveway approach to the back lot.” He manipulated the computer mouse and brought up a separate set of four camera views. “These are the interior cameras.” Again he pointed to the four different quadrants one at a time. “The dance club side has a wide angle of the dance floor and then one from behind the bar. Then the bottom two are from the lounge side with the same idea, one wide shot of the lounge floor and one view from behind the bar. Looks like the bar mounted views were focused primarily on the cash registers and bar activity then the wide angles were for floor activity.”

Robert went back to the first screen and began the playback then fast forwarded through the recording as all three of them waited to see anything notable. After several minutes both cameras covering the front of the club showed movement. With the click of the mouse Robert made one of the views larger, taking up the entire monitor. They watched as at least two individuals moved onto the sidewalk, venturing in and out of the camera view. They appeared male, dressed in dark clothing, and appeared to be aware of the possibility of cameras as they had masks tied around their noses and mouths and baseball caps pulled low over their eyes. The two figures bent together and seemed to manipulate their hands near to one another then there was a flash as something ignited near their hands. One of the figures stepped out of view as the other threw the flaming object at the building.

“Definitely looks like a Molotov,” Chuck said. Alex nodded in agreement.

“Rob, pull up the other front camera for that time stamp,” Alex said. Robert clicked the mouse a few more times, and the view from the second camera mounted at the front of the club came up on the screen. He once again fast-forwarded to the proper time period then began to play the video at regular speed.

The three officers soon saw a view of activity from the opposite angle. Near the top of the screen they noticed the movement of two individuals from the waist down. They identified them as the same ones they had seen in the prior view. Though they couldn’t see the action of their hands from this view, they saw the burst of light that indicated the bottle had been lit then saw one of the men back away farther into their view as the flaming object was thrown.

Then a third individual came into view nearer their camera view. The figure that previously lit the first incendiary moved farther under the current camera, nearer the third suspect who could now be seen clearly holding another bottle with a cloth protruding from the neck. The bottle was lit then the man turned to throw, causing him to face the camera. As he pulled his arm back, the mask fell away from his face.

“Wait, freeze that!” Alex ordered. Robert immediately paused the playback. “I recognize him, from Sam’s beating.”

“Yeah, I think you’re right,” Chuck said. “So they came back to torch the place. Well, at least we know who we’re looking for.”

Alex’s phone chimed indicating she had a text. It was from Sam.

We're pulling up now. Where do you want us?

"The owner, who was inside when it happened, just arrived. Sam's with her if we want her to take a look at that guy," Alex told the detectives as she typed back a quick message for them to stand by on the front sidewalk.

"I'll let the team know," Chuck said. "I think the FBI guys will want to be in on each interview and maybe one of the ATF guys to listen in case he's got questions about the incendiary. We can do Ms. Brennan's interview in here. Rob, you want to walk Ms. Black through what she saw from the outside in?"

Robert nodded and followed Alex toward the door.

"Okay," Alex said. "You want to show Sam the video after her interview?"

"That sounds good. When we're done with Ms. Brennan's interview, I'll let you know and you guys can bring her up here to take a look."

IT WAS AT least forty-five minutes later when the office door opened and Sam saw Chuck lean out and call to Alex, telling her to bring Sam up.

"We've been told by the fire department the stairs are solid," Alex said as she led Sam up. "Just don't lean on the bannister for the first few steps. That part got burned a little and may be weak."

Sam nodded and made her way up, keeping to the side closest to the wall as she followed Alex. When they entered the office Sam's eyes automatically sought out Courtney seated on the couch. Sam noticed Courtney looked drained and moved to sit on the couch beside her.

"How are you doing?" she asked.

"I'm okay. Glad the damage isn't as bad as I was imagining."

Sam nodded. "Alex and I were poking around downstairs. It's not that bad. The club side has some smoke and water damage, but no fire. The flames were isolated to the lounge side and never made it past the front seating area and the base of the stairs. You'll be closed for a little while but it's all fixable."

"Ms. Black, there's something we'd like you to look at here on the video." Robert moved behind Courtney's desk to manipulate the computer and video feeds. Sam gave Courtney a reassuring look and squeezed her thigh before she rose and walked to join the detective.

She looked at the computer monitor and saw a frozen video screen shot showing a surprisingly clear view of a darkly clad man drawing his arm back to throw a flaming bottle. She recognized him immediately. She straightened up and looked at Detective Kim.

"Recognize him?" Robert asked.

She nodded. "Yeah, he was one of the ones who came after me that night. He was the one with the baseball bat."

"What?" Courtney was on her feet and moving behind the desk to join them as soon as she heard Sam's statement. She looked at the screen. "Was he alone?"

"No. There were at least three of them," Alex said from her position leaning against the wall near the door.

"Can I see the whole thing?" Sam asked, looking at Alex and then turning to Detective Kim beside her. He in turn looked to Chuck, the senior detective present, who nodded his permission.

Robert leaned down and brought up each of the exterior views and let each of them play through the suspects' actions.

"Anything shown on the inside views?" Sam asked.

"Not much," Robert said then brought up the four interior feeds on the monitor, letting them all play simultaneously on the screen from the proper time stamp. Sam focused her attention on the two bottom video feeds showing the lounge. They all watched as the flaming object suddenly shattered through the window and left a flaming trail across the lounge floor, followed seconds later by a second window crashing inward and flames erupting closer to the bottom of the stairs.

Sam heard Courtney's sharp intake of breath as a figure could be seen just at the corner of the screen as it collapsed at the bottom of the stairs. Sam looked over at Courtney then moved a hand to rub her back as she turned back to the screen.

They watched as an arm was shoved through the window glass, making the hole larger, then Sam appeared climbing through the opening and dropping to the floor inside. Courtney leaned into Sam as they all watched the screen as Sam moved to Courtney at the bottom of the stairs and practically carried her out of view toward the rear of the bar.

When Robert leaned forward and paused the video feeds, Sam became aware that at some point she had put her arm around Courtney's shoulder as Courtney continued to lean into her.

"That's all of it," Robert said. "I think that's all we need for now."

"Why don't we get you home, then?" Sam said to Courtney, giving her shoulder a slight squeeze.

"What about my club? If you guys are almost done, I need to arrange to fix the windows or something. I can't just leave it like this with no one here."

"Already taken care of," Sam said. "I called for a board-up company and they'll be able to start working while the investigators are still here. Alex said she'll stick around to make sure they get it all locked up before she leaves."

"You already arranged that?"

"Yeah, while you were being interviewed."

"Do you have an extra set of keys?" Alex asked.

"Yes. There should be some in here somewhere." Courtney leaned down to open a desk drawer and rummaged around a bit. She straightened up with a set of keys and handed them to Alex.

"Are you sure, Alex? I don't want to cause any hardship for you. I'm sure you've had a long day already."

"It's no problem. I'll make sure they get it all secured and let myself out through the back door and lock up there. I'll get the keys back to you sometime in the near future."

"As long as you're sure. Just tell them to bill me here." Courtney picked up her purse from where she had left it on the coffee table in front of the couch then looked up at Sam.

"Let's get you home now," Sam said. "Thanks, Alex. Detectives." Sam nodded her appreciation to Chuck and Robert. "Alex knows how to get ahold of either of us if you need anything else." Both detectives nodded in response.

Alex held the door open for the two women to exit the office. "See you guys later. I'll keep you informed." She looked at Sam as she made the last statement.

"HEY, COURT? WE'RE here."

The voice broke into Courtney's sleeping mind, and she woke in Sam's car parked next to hers in the subterranean garage of her condominium building. She blinked several times then turned to the open passenger door beside her to find Sam crouched down next to the car looking back at her.

"You okay?" Sam asked, giving her a slight smile.

"Yeah, I think so." Sam stood then put her hand out, helping Courtney as she rose then closing the door behind her.

Courtney felt Sam's arm go around her as they made their way to the nearby elevator to head for her condo on the top floor. Courtney reflected on the comfort it provided her as the elevator made its way upward. They exited and stepped into the hallway. It was only when they paused outside her door that Courtney realized Sam had her purse and was reaching into it to retrieve her keys.

"Geez, I didn't even realize I didn't have my purse. I don't know where my mind is right now."

"That's all right," Sam said. She pushed the now unlocked door open and guided her through. "You've had a hell of a day so far. You'll feel better after you get some real rest." She turned and locked the door behind them.

Courtney paused and looked down at herself, noticing the still soot smudged hands and arms under the clean clothing Alex had brought for her. She looked up and studied Sam, seeing some of the same evidence on her clothing and exposed skin. Sam had chosen not to change into the clothes Alex brought for her.

"We could both use a shower. You can use the spare bathroom if you want."

"Maybe I'll take you up on that as soon as I'm satisfied you're okay and tucked into bed."

Courtney allowed Sam to guide her down the hallway, pausing at the doorway of the master bedroom as Courtney passed through it.

"Will you be okay alone in the bathroom?" Sam asked. Upon hearing the inquiry, Courtney examined Sam's expression but saw nothing but concern displayed there.

"I think so." She replied as she sat on the ottoman at the foot of her bed and bent to take off her shoes.

"Okay. Just yell if you need me for anything." Sam pulled the door almost all the way closed, just leaving it open a few inches, before making her way back down the hall to the kitchen area.

Courtney let herself relax under the hot water as she thought about the morning. She was a little surprised when she realized her mind spent more time thinking about Sam and what seemed to be happening between them rather than being focused on the damage to her club. As she stepped out of the shower and dried off she glanced at the clock on the counter. It was late morning, heading toward noon. She'd been up for almost twenty-four hours and figured Sam probably had as well. That thought progressed to the realization she didn't really want Sam to leave yet.

Courtney, now dressed in a conservative top and pants pajama set, walked slowly down the hall towards Sam in the kitchen. Sam rose from the table near the large, glass windows.

"Feel better?" Sam asked with a slight smile. Courtney gave a small smile in return and nodded. "I hope you don't mind. I rummaged around in your kitchen and found your stash of tea there on the counter. I made a small pot of one of your soothing decaf teas for you. It should be steeped by now." Courtney felt Sam's fingers trail across her back as she moved past her to a teapot sitting on the counter.

“You’ve discovered my guilty pleasure,” Courtney said with a tired smile. “That sounds perfect. I’ve got bagels and cream cheese as well if you’re hungry. I realize it’s not much, but I don’t think I have the energy to mess with much more.”

“That sounds good.” Sam held a steaming cup of tea. “Here, sit down. I’ll find everything.”

“But—”

“Don’t worry, just sit down and relax. How do you like your tea?”

“Just sugar. It’s on the counter to the left of the stove.” Courtney acquiesced and sat on one of the barstools at the raised counter. Sam brought the sugar bowl, then located the bagels, cream cheese, knives and plates and brought them to join her.

They ate in comfortable silence, both too tired for any conversation. When the meal was over Sam pushed her plate away and stood.

“You relax while I clean this up,” she said.

Courtney smiled as she watched Sam tidy up and put everything away. She thought she may have dozed off when she felt a presence behind her. She welcomed the feel of Sam’s hands on her shoulders as she spoke into her ear.

“Come on. You’re almost asleep sitting there. Let’s get you to bed.”

Courtney again allowed herself to be guided down the hallway to her bedroom. This time Sam didn’t stop at the doorway, instead following her in, then stepping past her to pull back the top sheet and comforter.

“Come on. In you go.” Courtney willingly followed her directions and Sam pulled the sheet back over her. “Do you want the comforter?” Sam asked.

“No, that’s okay.”

Sam nodded then backed away.

“Sam? You aren’t leaving are you?”

“Do you want me to stay?”

Courtney hesitated for only a moment.

“Yes.” She saw the smile envelope Sam’s face, a different smile than the cocky grin she usually wore.

“Okay then. You relax and get some sleep. I’ll take a shower and come back and check on you when I get out.” Courtney nodded and let her eyes close as Sam made her way out of the room.

Courtney woke sometime later as a dry, irritating cough shook her body. She felt supportive arms around her shoulders gently pulling her into a seated position.

“Here you go, take a sip,” Sam said.

Courtney opened her eyes to see Sam holding a glass of water. She took several sips then nodded her thanks.

“Better?” Sam asked. She nodded again. “They said you may have a dry, sore throat and some coughing from the smoke for a while.”

Sam put the glass on the bedside table, and Courtney noticed she was now clean and wearing one of her oversized shirts and some running shorts. Sam helped her to lie back down and then seemed to notice her inspection. She looked down at herself and smiled as she looked back up at Courtney.

“I hope you don’t mind. I found these with some of your clean clothes folded on top of the dryer in the hallway laundry closet. They looked more comfortable than the jeans Alex brought me.”

Courtney shook her head in response.

“Of course I don’t mind. I’m sorry I didn’t think of that before I fell asleep.”

“There’s more water there if you need it.” Sam pulled the sheet back up around Courtney’s shoulders. “You get back to sleep.”

Courtney grabbed Sam’s hand as she started to turn away. “Wait, Sam. Why don’t you lie down here?”

Sam looked a little shocked at the invitation.

“Are you sure?” she asked.

Courtney nodded then patted the bed beside her.

“Come on,” she said. “It’s a king-sized bed. Plenty of room.”

COURTNEY WOKE MANY hours later to the darkness of full night visible through the window. She glanced at the clock on the bedside table and saw it was almost midnight. She’d been asleep for a good eight or nine hours at least.

She momentarily froze as she considered her position. She was on her side with her front pressed against Sam’s back as the other woman slept beside her. She tried to figure out if she’d consciously assumed the spooning position with Sam or if she’d unknowingly gravitated to it in her sleep. Regardless, she accepted the fact she was comfortable and didn’t want to move. Suddenly, a whispered voice broke the silence, coming from the woman around whose torso her arm was wrapped.

“Are you awake?”

“Yes,” Courtney replied, then began to pull away. “I’m sorry. I’m not sure how—”

“Don’t.” Sam caught her wrist before she could pull her hand away from where it rested against her stomach. “Don’t move. I mean, unless you really want to.”

Courtney relaxed against Sam, completely comfortable. After a moment she snuggled closer. She was sure she felt Sam respond by pushing back slightly into her. Now not a gap remained between their bodies.

“Sam,” Courtney finally broke the comfortable silence again. “About last week, the night of the bombing...”

“You don’t need to explain, Court. I know what you meant. I know what I must look like to you. I admit that up until recently your opinion was absolutely valid.”

Courtney tried to collect her thoughts so she could better explain. “But I didn’t really mean it. Even as I was saying it. I was angry. And I was a little hurt. I thought you were rejecting me and I lashed out. You didn’t deserve that.”

“Maybe I did. I’ve been that person. The one you were angry at.”

“But you’re not now. You proved that by leaving that night. And by what you said before leaving. I was hurt at first when you left. But when I stopped and thought about it, what you said meant a lot. It told me a lot... about you.” Courtney tightened her arm around Sam, spreading her palm against the t-shirt clad stomach. “I haven’t meant a lot of the stuff I’ve said to you over the last few weeks. I think I was, well, interested in you from the beginning. But seeing you constantly leaving with a different woman each night, it drove me a little crazy. It made me lash out at you.”

“And I did that in the beginning because, well, it’s just the way I am. Then after I met you I did it because I was sure I couldn’t have you. You were too good for me. Then I just couldn’t do

it anymore. Because they weren't you." She looked over her shoulder at Courtney. "You've broken me, you know, Ms. Brennan."

Courtney smiled back at her then kissed her lightly below her ear.

"I want to get to know you better, Sam. A lot better." Courtney tapped Sam's stomach again. "This Sam. The real Sam. Not the Sam you've created to try and hold people at a distance."

SAM LISTENED TO Courtney's words and her heart skipped a beat. Here before her was exactly what she'd avoided for years now. It was an invitation from a wonderful woman she was undeniably attracted to. Her mind took several seconds to consider the dangerous ground she was treading. Could she invite this woman into her life at that level? What about the secrets she kept? The life she had to lead? Could she afford this personal entanglement even if her heart could soften enough to allow the connection? It only took her a moment to recognize her heart already had, and she had no choice.

"You know," Sam finally said. "The last time I was here, I had a dream about this. We were lying just like this, you behind me like you are, with your hand resting here." Sam squeezed Courtney's hand as it rested just beneath her breasts. "It was really nice."

Sam's breath caught again when she felt warm moist lips caress the back of her neck. Then she heard Courtney's almost whispered response.

"It wasn't a dream, Sam."

Sam turned over to face Courtney and slowly ran a finger down Courtney's hairline, from her forehead to her ear, then along her jawline to her chin. She saw the invitation in Courtney's eyes and leaned forward to bring their lips together in a kiss. She felt Courtney's hand at the back of her head, holding their lips together and prolonging the kiss, which at first embodied gentle caring and exploration that quickly turned to passion.

They pulled apart slightly after several seconds.

"Wow," Sam said quietly with a genuine smile.

"Yeah, wow," Courtney echoed then moved closer, pushing Sam onto her back and moving to lie on top of her.

"Court?" Sam said with a little bit of uncertainty, fighting the passion that threatened to overtake her.

"Yes?" Courtney replied, leaning forward to nuzzle just below Sam's ear. Sam caught her breath, trying to calm the growing warmth coming from various parts of her body as she forced herself to continue.

"Court, you don't have to do this. We can slow down. We really don't have to do this."

Courtney rose up with her elbows planted on either side of Sam's head and looked down at Sam with a teasing smile.

"You don't want to do this?" she asked.

"No, I...I mean I do. God, yes. I really, really do. But I don't want you to think..." Sam's sentence faded off.

"Don't want me to think what?" Courtney asked, playing with Sam's hair.

"I don't want you to think you're like the rest, like the others you've seen me leave with and..."

"And take to bed?" Courtney said, causing Sam to feel that much more ashamed.

"Yes. I want to prove to you it's different. That you're different for me."

Courtney leaned down and kissed Sam lightly on the lips.

“You’ve already proven that, Sam,” she said, and leaned in for another kiss, prolonging it and demanding more.

With that Sam finally surrendered to her own urges and her arms went fully around Courtney, pulling their bodies together. Her hands worked under Courtney’s shirt, finding and caressing the skin of her back briefly before pulling the top up and off. Their lips briefly separated as the material passed between them, immediately rejoined once the shirt was removed. Sam’s hand went without hesitation back to Courtney’s back then worked downward and under her waistband. She palmed Courtney’s buttocks beneath the material, again pulling their bodies together, increasing the contact and friction.

Courtney groaned into their kisses and Sam took that as clear consent to continue. She worked the pajama pants down past Courtney’s hips then in one decisive move bent a leg and planted a foot and rolled them both over, putting Courtney on her back, with Sam poised over her as she stripped the pajama bottoms off.

Sam paused, sitting back on her knees, savoring the breathtaking vision of the naked woman lying before her.

“God, you’re so beautiful,” she whispered as she lowered herself to lie on top of Courtney. She kissed her passionately then worked kisses down the side of Courtney’s neck to her pulse point and still lower when she felt her own top being tugged upwards.

“Off,” was all Courtney said.

Sam rose up on to her knees between Courtney’s legs and quickly stripped off her top.

“Bottoms also,” Courtney ordered.

Sam complied then dove back down to resume her kisses down the top of Courtney’s chest. Nails lightly scratched up her back as she cupped one of Courtney’s breasts. Her thumb massaged the nipple as her tongue caressed its sister. Courtney arched into her, obviously welcoming greater contact. Sam moved her hand down Courtney’s body, lightly resting on her hip before moving inward to nestle and rub within the moist folds.

“Oh, God, Sam,” Courtney gasped and her hand went to the back of Sam’s head, grasping her hair.

Sam drew the nipple into her mouth and suckled then ran her teeth gently across it. She kissed down the center of Courtney’s abdomen as she moved lower between Courtney’s legs. Courtney gripped her shoulders and the back of her head, guiding her to where she needed her most.

Sam brought one arm around Courtney’s hip and up to rest on Courtney’s abdomen as she teased Courtney’s clit. Courtney’s hips bucked and pressed into her. The rhythm of Courtney’s hips increased and Sam sensed her pending orgasm. She pressed the hand on Courtney’s abdomen down to restrain Courtney as she increased the pressure of her tongue, simultaneously plunging two fingers into her depths.

Courtney’s hands grasped at the back of Sam’s head and her hips drove upwards.

“Sam!” Courtney screamed her release. Sam didn’t stop her actions, only slowed them momentarily as she allowed the tension to build again then drove Courtney moments later to a second, even more powerful orgasm.

Courtney collapsed beneath her and Sam pulled away, kissing and caressing her inner thighs and then her stomach as she worked her way up Courtney’s body. She kissed around both breasts then lowered her body onto Courtney’s thigh.

She groaned with her own need as her crotch made contact with Courtney's thigh. She'd almost climaxed just feeling and listening to Courtney. Her body had never responded in that fashion to bringing pleasure to any previous lover. She tried to push her need aside as she nuzzled Courtney's neck, but Courtney seemed to sense her need and maneuvered her body beneath her, creating more contact as she raised her thigh between Sam's legs.

"Oh, God!" Sam gasped, unable to keep her own hips from responding and her movements quickly coated the leg beneath her with her heated moisture. She propped herself on her elbows on either side of Courtney, driving her moist crotch into Courtney's thigh with greater urgency. She was vaguely aware of Courtney's hands scratching down her back then coming to rest on her hips, helping to guide her now frantic motion. She opened her eyes momentarily and looked down into Courtney's face. Their eyes met, and seeing the passion and love looking back at her sent Sam crashing as her orgasm overtook her. She screamed Courtney's name before collapsing onto her.

Chapter Sixteen

“WE’VE GOT HIM!”

Alex looked up when she heard the shout from Officer Reggie Carlisle on the other side of the task force office. They’d all come in for an early start on Monday, following the lengthy and exhausting on scene investigation at the Vortex that encompassed the entire previous day. While they had no definitive proof, they were working off the theory that the firebombing and Sam’s attack were related to the larger bombing campaign.

“I’ve got Riverside Sheriff’s on the line. They just picked up our primary suspect from the firebombing. One of their clerks recognized him from the bulletins we sent out last night. Would you believe he’s her neighbor’s brother?” Officer Carlisle added.

Alex looked over at Chuck, who was already gathering his suit jacket.

“Rob and I will head there to pick him up.” He looked up at Carlisle. “Let them know we’re en route to take custody and text me the address of whichever station they’re at.” Carlisle nodded and picked up the phone headset, releasing the call he’d placed on hold. Chuck turned to Alex as he started for the door. “We’ll call you with details and any follow-up potential.”

Alex nodded then pulled her cell phone out, pulling up a number and connecting the call. It was picked up on the second ring.

“Hey, Alex.”

“Hey. How’s Courtney?”

“She’s, uh, okay. She’s good.”

“Glad to hear it.” Alex didn’t ask anything further, but smiled at the hesitation in Sam’s response. She wondered what time Sam left Courtney’s condo after dropping her off the previous day. “Listen, we think we may have the guy we caught on video at the Vortex. A couple of our detectives are heading out to Riverside to pick him up now. The Sheriff’s office out there has him in custody.”

“How sure are we?”

Alex raised the still shot printout of the video frame showing the man tossing the Molotov cocktail then the cell phone photograph of the individual in custody sent to them by the Riverside Sheriff’s deputies. “He looks good to me. I’m pretty sure it’s him. Chuck and Rob won’t get there for another hour or so then they’ll probably do a preliminary interrogation before bringing him back here to book him on the open charge. As long as he’s willing to talk, we may get some info on the other guys.”

“Got his name and everything?” Sam asked. Alex gave her what she had.

“I don’t expect this to appear in a newspaper article tomorrow,” she said after giving Sam the suspect’s name and birthdate.

“I can assure you won’t have an issue there,” Sam said. “Did he have a cell phone on him?”

“Not sure yet. I can find out. It’ll be coming back with him and be booked if he does.”

“Can you get me the cell number?”

“Legally I can’t access that phone until we get a warrant for the contents,” Alex said.

“Nothing I do with that number is ever going to be presented in a court of law, Alex,” Sam continued when Alex hesitated to respond. “You and I both know this goes higher than this guy and Fenbrook. Something way bigger than us, or your task force, or even this whole L.A. bombing campaign. We can meet and talk, but I’m telling you something twisted is going on. If I can get that number, it may tell me something.”

“I’ll see what I can do,” Alex said. “I’ll call you when I know anything.”

“Sounds good. Hey, anything new with Sydney?”

“Nothing new. She’s been at home for almost two days. I haven’t seen her, but Jennifer texts me every day to let me know she’s okay.”

“You should go see her, Alex. I know you don’t want to say anything to pressure her, but she knows you were friends at least. It wouldn’t be unusual for you to go by and say hi.”

“Yeah, maybe I will sometime soon. I’ll see.”

SAM AND COURTNEY had wakened almost simultaneously, comfortably entwined together in the sheets. They’d showered together, which led to another session of tender love making under the spray of warm water, then enjoyed a small breakfast together on the balcony overlooking the famous Hollywood sign.

Their morning was interrupted when Sam’s phone rang with the call from Alex. Shortly thereafter they were standing together at Courtney’s front door.

“I’m sorry. I don’t want to leave, but I do need to get back to work,” Sam said.

“I understand.” Courtney leaned in and kissed her briefly. “I actually need to start making arrangements to get inspections and damage estimates for the club.”

They leaned into one another to meet in a passionate kiss then pulled apart as Sam reached for the door with a sigh.

“Call me later?” Courtney asked, and Sam leaned forward for a final kiss.

“Absolutely,” Sam replied with a smile then let the door close behind her as she made her way to the elevator.

TWO HOURS LATER Sam was on the phone with Elena, providing the number to Daniel Sherman’s cellular phone. Alex gave her the number for the now identified firebombing suspect once Chuck provided it. She’d told Sam the task force was preparing a search warrant for Sherman’s home, vehicle and the contents of his cellular telephone and call records.

“I need a record of his cell phone activity, calls and texts, say for the past six weeks at least,” Sam told Elena. “And if the Feds on the task force get a warrant for any further forensics on the phone that we don’t have access to, can you let me know?”

“Got it, Sam. I’m going to keep this on the down low. Just you, me and Teddy.” Elena was referring to the hacker who often worked with Sam in a largely-off-the-record capacity.

Sam recruited the young computer wiz several years prior when she discovered him syphoning money from an African warlord’s lucrative accounts. The accounts consisted of money obtained through the black market sale of food and medicine that was sent to the African continent in the form of international aid shipments. The items, which were supposed to be given

to the needy members of downtrodden and impoverished African communities, were hijacked by the warlord's troops and sold to fill his own coffers.

Sam's investigation revealed that Teddy, while keeping a relatively small portion for his own living expenses, contributed the vast majority of the money he hijacked to a variety of African aid organizations, in an effort to ensure the money went to those it was originally intended.

Sam approached the young man and offered him a relatively generous income to work in an off the books, as needed capacity for her and Elena. He'd proven invaluable in many situations since then.

If Elena was using Teddy to do the leg work on this, she suspected a leak.

"What's going on, Elena?"

"Questions, Sam. Too many questions. About you, about what you've discovered, who you may have identified, what you know that the task force may not know."

"Questions from whom?"

"Stansfield most recently. Ever since we ran the facial recognition on the surveillance video from the alley camera, he's been sniffing around a lot."

"Does he know about the second photo of the guy I recognize?"

"No. And he's not going to. Not from me. My inquiries on that one have been very discrete, and only to those I trust. But he's been using the death of Congressman Vaughn as an excuse to sniff around a lot."

"I need you to do me a favor on that. Can you pull me a full briefing on Vaughn?" Sam asked. "Something about this whole thing is weird. I can't help but think maybe it has something to do with him."

"I'll pull everything I can and put together a file for you. I should have it for you by tomorrow. Knowing Teddy he'll have the cell records for you in a few hours."

A FEW HOURS later Sam sifted through pages of cellular telephone records for the last two months. She was interrupted by a knock at the door. She closed the file, shut off her laptop and made her way to the door and looked through the door's peephole. Her hand fell away from the handgun in her waistband as she stepped back from the door, unlocked it and opened it to allow Alex entry.

Sam locked back up when Alex entered then moved past her into the small sitting room in the hotel mini-suite.

"You gonna tell me why we're meeting in a hotel room instead of your condo, Sam?"

"Yeah, we'll get around to that. Anything happening with Sherman?" Sam asked, referring to the individual they had in custody.

"Mr. Daniel Sherman is currently singing like a canary. The minute he was told he would face charges for conspiracy, arson, assault with a deadly weapon, and attempted murder, all with hate crime enhancements, he couldn't wait to cooperate. He's named the other two guys, and I.D.'d Fenbrook as the ringleader. He says Fenbrook directed them to the club the night of your beating and sent them to do the firebombing on the Vortex. He says they were told there were no cameras in the back parking lot."

"Which there hadn't been until Courtney enhanced the system just a day or two before they came after me back there."

Alex nodded. "Exactly. They expected to get away with it. Someone gave them outdated info that there were no cameras there or on the side driveway, so they didn't conceal their appearances. They at least wore hats and sunglasses when they beat the other guy. But you," Alex shook her head. "Sherman didn't admit it outright, but they didn't expect to leave you alive, Sam. They as much as admitted that to you at the scene."

"What about the bombings?" Sam asked.

"He denies he had any involvement in those. Says he knows nothing about them and he doesn't think the other guys did either. But he couldn't be sure about Fenbrook. He says Fenbrook seems to have spent most of his time over the last few weeks away from Riverside, probably here in L.A. They had contact mainly by phone."

"You think he's telling the truth?"

"Yeah, I do. He's a small time player in all this. He doesn't have the brains to pull this off or lead it, quite frankly. He's your classic hate group follower who gets off on attacking others to make himself feel better about his own pathetic existence."

They each sat down in the sitting area of the hotel suite and were silent for a moment.

"Okay," Sam said. "So we've got a few pawns that are being manipulated. But what about Fenbrook? You've had direct interaction with him when you served the warrant and arrested him. Do you make him as a leader in all this, considering what we know now?"

"The task force does." Alex spoke in a measured tone.

"But do you, Alex? Come on, you haven't been out of the game that long. You know how this stuff can work."

"No," Alex finally said. "I still say someone else is pulling the strings on this. Someone a level above Fenbrook."

Sam nodded. "I agree," she said. "With one difference." She pulled the file on the table to her and opened it. She shuffled a few papers then pulled out an image and laid it on the table between them.

"This," she pointed to the cropped image of the man in unlabeled desert cammies who was in the now missing photograph with Fenbrook. "I'm betting he's one level above Fenbrook. But I don't think he's giving the orders. I think it goes higher than that." She looked over at Alex. "A lot higher."

"You think it's coming from inside."

Sam noticed Alex didn't seem shocked. "You getting the same feeling?"

"Well, if I wasn't before I certainly am now. There's something else Sherman said that was weird." She looked Sam in the eye. "They had a picture of you, Sam. Sherman says the night you were beaten they were shown a picture of you. And Fenbrook got a call right before he drove them directly to the club to confront you."

Sam leaned back on the couch. Her suspicions now confirmed.

"You knew," Alex finally said. "That's why we're meeting here in a hotel room."

"I suspected," Sam corrected. "Strongly enough to be careful. I ditched the car and made sure I couldn't be traced here. Had a buddy reserve a second car and the room on an untraceable credit card not associated with me. A fictitious corporate account that's never been associated with me."

Alex nodded. "I was careful, too. I figured something was up when you used the old fashioned method to set up the meet." Alex referred to the handwritten message she'd discovered in her car when she got in it to go home that evening, vastly different than a convenient cellular

telephone call. A call that could potentially be monitored. "I came up on the red line subway and did a couple switchbacks to make sure I wasn't followed. And shut the cell phone off."

Sam smiled at Alex. "So you haven't completely lost your touch, huh. You can still play the game with the best of them?"

"And you're still in the game, big time." Alex gave a slight smile in return. "Samantha Black, A.P. reporter, my ass."

Sam shrugged before turning back to her file and spreading some more papers out on the coffee table.

"These are Sherman's cell records for the past two months." She indicated the list of incoming and outgoing calls with associated phone numbers. "Several of these we've already eliminated as being calls to and from work, friends, his ex-wife, etc. But that left a couple unidentified numbers, likely from prepaid phones. Here's what caught my eye." She pointed to a specific incoming call.

"That's the day before your attack."

"Uh-huh. And Sherman called these two numbers in the next hour after receiving that call." She pointed to two other cellular numbers and the names associated, both of which appeared one after another on the chronological record. "I've already tracked down some records on the account holders to those two. I recognized their photos when I got their records pulled up."

"So you know Fenbrook and Sherman and now you've identified the two additional guys involved in your beating. I suppose our official investigation will catch up with this at some point with our warrants since that was simply off cellular account records."

"Yep. It gets better, and I think we can see a pattern. Sherman called that original number back the next evening. I got a buddy to triangulate a likely location for the cell when it received the call. The cell tower it cycled through places Sherman in the Hollywood area when he made the call."

"So Sherman gets a call, presumably from Fenbrook, telling him to bring his buddies into Hollywood from Riverside County the next day to do something nasty. They call Fenbrook back right after arriving in town?"

"That's what I'm thinking. There's more." Sam turned the page to a new entry and pointed at a line again. "This call came in to Sherman from the same cell the day before the Vortex was torched. It cycled out from the same cell tower, putting the caller somewhere in the northeastern portion of Hollywood again." Sam's fingers moved slowly down the column, pausing at two more lines to show where shortly after the incoming call, Sherman called the same two other accomplices.

"Any chance of positively identifying the account holder?"

Sam shook her head. "Not with records. It's a burner phone, pay as you go. Since it's not with a traditional carrier with billing records where we can simply hack into the account, there's no way to identify an owner."

"But we can bet this number," Alex pointed to the originating call to Sherman, "that's Fenbrook." She said it with certainty.

"Exactly. And I'd love to see the records of calls in and out of that phone."

"Yeah, like who possibly called him just before your beating. Who gave him the order," Alex said.

Sam nodded in agreement.

"I've got a buddy, let's just say he's good with computers...really good. He's tracking that one, the one we think is Fenbrook's phone. He's pinging it occasionally." Sam referred to the

technological capability to send a covert signal to the phone in order to track its location without the owner's knowledge. With the right equipment, the track could be narrowed to within feet of the phone's true location. "It looks like somebody's trained him to be pretty secure, and he's had the phone off for the last several hours. So he's off the radar for now. Like I said, it'll be a little challenging to get the records and that's further complicated by the fact I'm also not absolutely positive who I can trust. I can't use all the national assets I'd usually have access to. But Teddy's good, he'll get me something given a little time."

THEY WORKED THEIR way through a pizza together, talking about possible avenues of investigation before Alex left for the evening. Sam gathered the paperwork back in the file and thought about calling Courtney when her cell phone rang. She recognized the number on screen before putting the device to her ear.

"Talk to me, Teddy-boy."

"Your guy just tried to make a call. Whoever he was calling didn't answer, but he acted like he was gonna leave a message. Listened through the entire recording, even hesitated before he hung up without saying anything."

"Was it long enough?"

"You bet it was. I'm working the location now, give me a second..." Sam heard Teddy's fingers clicking across his keyboard. "Okay, got it. Let me zoom in here...looks like 6551 Franklin Avenue in Hollywood. It's an old apartment complex, two story square structure with a courtyard in the middle just large enough for a rectangular swimming pool. Looks like he's the farthest northeast unit. Second story, back right apartment as you enter the front gate."

"Got it. I'm heading there now. Do me a favor and call Elena and let her know what you've got and what I'm up to. Then get me a work up on anything you can get on whatever number he just tried to call."

"You got it, Sam. Be careful."

Sam was already heading out the door as she pocketed the phone. As she drove toward the location, she considered the address Teddy had traced the call to. It wasn't far away, in the older apartment neighborhoods just northeast of the well known touristy areas of Hollywood. It would be easy to rent an apartment for cash with little to no identification.

She turned east on Franklin from Highland and slowed as she came within a few blocks of the address, carefully considering the best way to approach. The first step was to determine for sure it was Fenbrook. Sam figured he would recognize her pretty much immediately upon seeing her. So the straightforward, knock on the door, "oops, sorry, I got the wrong address," approach wouldn't work.

After parking about a block away, she leaned over the seat to retrieve a baseball cap from the back. Hopefully, between the nighttime darkness and the cap, her appearance would be somewhat distorted to a casual observer. She wandered up the sidewalk casually, seeing no real activity around the target apartment building. The front entry gate was conveniently propped open, and she paused just inside the entry breezeway to look at the names displayed on the bank of mailboxes there.

She memorized the name of a female renter of what she presumed from the number was a second floor apartment. If her presence was questioned, she'd pretend to be looking for that resident. Having settled the ruse in her mind, she exited the breezeway into the pool courtyard

area and looked up at the somewhat run down, square shaped complex surrounding her. She didn't focus on the apartment at the upper northeast corner of the square complex, but did notice the second set of stairs located at that corner and walked around the pool in that direction.

Sam glanced at her watch as she walked. It had been maybe twenty-five minutes since the call from Teddy, so perhaps thirty minutes since the call was made on the cell phone he'd been monitoring. A lot could happen in thirty minutes and her target could be long gone, but Sam was hoping she'd moved fast enough.

As she walked up the stairs, she noticed the curtains in the apartment's one courtyard facing window were drawn, but the illumination of an interior light was obvious. She exited the top of the stairs onto a conveniently dark corner of the second floor of the complex then made her way along the wall. She stopped at the edge of the window, glancing through about a one inch gap between the window frame and the curtain that afforded her a limited view of the apartment interior.

The view was of the front living room area of the apartment, which connected to a kitchen further back. She was lucky the light was on inside, because she noticed the unmoving legs of a person lying prone on the floor, protruding partially from behind the cabinets of the small kitchen. Sam looked quickly around her, seeing no one else in the courtyard and only lights and television reflections emanating from behind primarily covered windows then made her way to the apartment door. The knob turned easily beneath her hand and she pushed it open after ensuring the room was empty, stepping inside and out of the open doorway as she drew the small handgun tucked into her waistband. She silently closed the door behind her.

The legs remained immobile and Sam figured the man was either unconscious or dead. Satisfied it was her and the unmoving man alone in the front rooms, Sam focused on two doorways off to the left. One clearly led to a bathroom and the second to a disheveled bedroom holding only a mattress. She ensured no one was hiding behind the shower curtain or in the one bedroom closet then returned to the kitchen.

Sam recognized Fenbrook, despite the massive trauma to the side of his head. She avoided the large, relatively fresh, pool of blood surrounding his head and leaned down, confirming he had no pulse. She straightened up and examined her surroundings. Nothing on the counters, no food, groceries or housekeeping supplies. She leaned over and opened the nearby fridge and one cabinet. The fridge held two beers in a cardboard six-pack holder. The cabinet held one can of soup and one of baked beans. She determined this was a temporary crash pad. She glanced into the family room area that held a threadbare couch, a broken down recliner and an older, box style television set.

Her eyes paused momentarily on the floor next to the TV stand. There, still plugged into the nearby wall outlet, was a cellular phone charger cord. But no phone was attached.

Sam leaned down over Fenbrook's body once more and searched through his pockets. There was no phone there. She opened the medium sized duffle bag sitting on the floor near him. She froze and her breath caught the minute the zipper fell open to reveal the contents. The cheap digital watch on top was connected by wires to what she recognized as a standard store bought pressure cooker beneath.

As Sam watched, the timer visible on the watch continued to count down the remaining ten seconds.

Chapter Seventeen

SAM SCRAMBLED BACKWARDS, tripping over Fenbrook's legs as she turned and fell to her stomach on the linoleum floor. As she placed her hands to push up she happened to glance toward her escape route. The recliner sat in a position between her and the front door, and in that fraction of a second her mind registered the cell phone lying on the dirty carpet, just under the edge of the chair.

Sam moved to her feet, bending and retrieving the phone as she ran by and out the door. In her mind she was silently counting down.

She hit the door at roughly six seconds and turned left as she exited. She ran along the second story landing overlooking the courtyard pool. She passed the apartment next door, glancing through the exposed window and noting the family room area completely devoid of furniture. Vacant.

At three seconds she was halfway down the landing and three apartments away. She didn't want to be caught in the open and contemplated a leap over the bannister into the swimming pool below. Then an apartment door opened just a few feet ahead and small child exited and stopped in front of her, startled by her rapid approach.

Sam grabbed the child and turned into the still open doorway, putting her other arm around the shocked mother who was just inside, carrying all three of them over the back of a nearby couch to the floor beyond. She cradled the child between them and attempted to cover the frozen woman's head and face just as a deafening explosion ripped through the complex.

The window above them imploded, sending glass flying into the apartment. They remained stationary for several seconds after the shock wave reverberated through the building. Then Sam pushed up and glanced at the two people with her. The mother was clearly shocked and pulled her child to her chest, staring at Sam.

"Are you okay?" Sam asked, knowing she was talking louder than normal as her ears continued to ring. The woman continued to stare, clearly terrified, saying nothing.

"Are you hurt? Is your son hurt?" Sam tried again. Then taking in the apparent nationality of the woman, she switched to

Spanish. "*Estás herido? Está herido a su hijo?*"

This seemed to finally shake the woman out of her panic induced freeze. She pulled away from her son and spoke to him rapidly in Spanish, running her hands through his hair and up and down his arms, inspecting him for injury. The boy shook his head and continued to cry. The mom pulled her son back into a hug and looked at Sam, now slightly more calm.

"*No estamos heridos,*" she said.

Sam nodded in acknowledgement and gave her a slight smile and a reassuring pat on her shoulder, then stood and looked around. Other than the front window shattering inward and shredding the curtains, there wasn't a lot of damage to the spartan but obviously well kept apartment.

Sam heard crying and yelling outside and moved out onto the balcony. Apartment residents were filtering steadily into the courtyard. Sam walked around the second story landing, doing a complete circuit of the rectangular facility. As she went more people exited the various apartments, some of them bleeding and injured, but nothing serious. Sam paused at those apartments where no one exited, glancing inside each of them to ensure no one lay incapacitated inside the shattered windows.

As she completed her circle Sam heard the first sirens come to a stop on the street in front of the complex. Moments later several firefighters in turnouts and helmets came through the gate into the courtyard. Sam saw a couple residents greet them and point toward the second floor apartment in the back right corner of the building. Telltale smoke still trickled from the nonexistent window and dislodged door.

Sam waited for the team of firefighters to come up the stairs near the front of the complex then went down the stairs and out the front gate. As she did she saw multiple police cars pull up to the scene. Sam silently cursed as she moved away from the building. With the police already at scene she wouldn't have a chance to search for Fenbrook's car, which she presumed was likely parked in the parking lot at the back of the apartments.

She worked her way down the now crowded sidewalk, activating her phone before she reached her car.

"Alex, there's been an explosion at an apartment in Hollywood," Sam said the moment Alex answered.

"An apartment complex?"

"Yeah. Only one person killed, no one else seriously injured. At some point pretty soon they're going to positively identify the dead guy as Fenbrook."

"Fenbrook's dead?"

"Yeah. Listen, Alex. It's going to look like he screwed up and blew himself up on accident with one of his own bombs."

"It's going to look like it?"

"Yeah."

"I sense a 'but' in that statement," Alex said.

"Listen, Alex. This may be the way it ends. If that's what the investigation officially determines, then you need to go with that. If you start asking uncomfortable questions it's going to get dangerous for you. You said yourself, some of the things you already know, you really can't know, you don't officially know." Sam paused as if letting the information sink in. "Just go with whatever the evidence you officially have tells you. Please, Alex."

"You're serious."

"Deadly serious."

"But, Sam. Whoever did this—"

"I'll figure it out, Alex. I promise. And I'll try and keep you in the loop as much as I can."

"All right. But promise me you'll let me know if you need anything? Anything at all, right Sam?"

"Sure, Alex. I may have to go off the radar for a while. But I promise I'll get back to you as soon as I can."

"Just finish this, Sam. Figure it out and make them pay."

"I will. You concentrate on taking care of your woman."

Sam dialed another number as soon as she hung up with Alex. A sleepy, male voice answered at the other end.

“Uh, hello?”

“Teddy, I’m going to need you, buddy. I’ve got a cell phone in my hands right now that needs a work up as fast as you can get it.”

“Sam?”

“Yeah, Ted. It’s me. I need you to wake up, heat up those magic computers of yours and tell me what I need to do.”

“Okayokayokay. Just, just give me a second.” Sam pictured Teddy rolling from his bed and scrambling to pull his glasses on. “Okay, do you have your computer? The one I gave you that I did the upgrades on?”

“It’s not with me, but I have it in the safe back at my hotel room. I’ll be there in about ten minutes.”

“Okay, I’m booting up now. Call me when you get to your hotel room and we’ll hook up the phone and I’ll work through your computer to access it remotely. What kind of phone is it?”

Sam took the phone out of her pocket and gave him the make and model.

“I think it’s a standard pay as you go phone, nothing fancy unless it’s a custom job for someone like you. I’ll know the second we get it plugged in. If it’s not, then I should be able to pull your call and text history up without too much problem.”

“Even if it’s been deleted?”

“Depending on the call history, how much memory it’s used and how far back you actually want to go, I should be able to get a lot right off the phone. If you need more than that, I’ll just have to dig a little further into the cell service system. There’ll be a record somewhere, I guarantee it.”

“Okay, I’m parking now. Let me call you from my room in a couple minutes.”

Twenty minutes later Sam watched what to her was encrypted and coded gibberish scroll across the screen of her laptop computer. She’d followed Teddy’s directions in hooking the phone up to the computer then watched the computer appear to take on a life of its own as Teddy operated it remotely.

“Good. It’s all good. Give me thirty minutes or so and I’ll have the call and text history downloaded for whatever is here on the phone. You can take a look at it and tell me how much additional mining you want me to do with the carrier service.”

“Okay. What about that number Fenbrook called earlier?”

“I’m tracking the number and I’ve got a program running to search for a history, but I’m not holding my breath. The history appears to have been completely scrubbed. To be honest it kind of looks like it may be one of yours.” Sam knew that when Teddy referred to “one of yours” he was talking about a piece of equipment likely in use by a covert service. Something designed to be largely untraceable and which had security measures in place to obliterate traces and histories of usage.

“I’m tracking where the last call cycled to before it hit the voicemail, but it seems to have been redirected several times internationally, so it’s taking a little time. I’ll break it eventually, though.” There was a pause then, “well, isn’t that a coincidence?”

“What? What’s a coincidence?” Sam asked.

“I’m transcribing the call history for you so it looks normal with numbers, dates and times. I just came across another previous attempt to connect with that same number.”

“What’s the date and time?” Teddy read the information and Sam ran the dates back in her mind. “That’s the day Fenbrook got bailed out and released from custody. I’ll bet he tried to get ahold of his handler as soon as he walked out of jail.”

Sam thought for a few minutes as she listened to Teddy's fingers clicking over the keyboard on the other end of the phone line. "Listen, Ted, I've gotta take care of something. Get back to me when you're done, or if any other surprises pop up."

Sam exited her room and went down to her car. She drove from her hotel in Hollywood, and made her way along Santa Monica Boulevard into Century City, the western portion of sprawling Los Angeles, which made essentially a second metropolitan district. Within that particular district of the city were the expected large, high-end hotel chain establishments. This was what she needed. A hotel with heavy corporate and international clientele traffic and a business center with internet available twenty-four hours a day. She selected the Hyatt Regency and drove into the valet lane in front, handing her keys to the valet along with a \$20 bill.

"Can you keep it here for me? I'll be maybe ten minutes. I'm just leaving a message for a guest."

"Yes, ma'am. No problem," the lone valet said, tucking the bill into his pocket and giving her a smile.

She entered and walked without hesitation down a hallway off the main lobby, a sign conveniently pointing her in the direction of the business center. Conveniently enough, a gentleman was just exiting the room as she approached, and he politely held the door open for her as she entered. The door closed behind her and Sam was conveniently left alone in the room with its three available computer terminals.

She took a seat and logged in to an e-mail account. There she typed out a quick e-mail to Elena's personal, unsecured account.

Hi, Elena, we haven't seen each other in a while. I'll be in town all this week and was hoping we could meet and catch up. How does Friday at around noon sound for you?

Hope to hear from you.

Celeste

Before pressing send, Sam opened the signature block settings which identified the sender as real estate agent Celeste Adams. Sam adjusted the contact telephone number for the agent to read as the number from the prepaid, throwaway cellular phone she'd purchased earlier in the day. Completing that, she pressed send, automatically adding the newly formatted signature block to the e-mail. Then she reopened the signature block settings and returned them to the previous settings.

Elena would get the e-mail when she checked the account the next morning. Despite the fact the e-mail account did belong to Celeste Adams, a friend of Elena's from college decades prior, and Celeste was truly a real estate agent, Sam knew Elena would identify this specific message as coming from her. The e-mail would send Elena to a pay phone or perhaps a random business line that Elena would borrow the use of. With no prior notice the call would be untraceable. She would call Sam at a pre-arranged time at the number Sam supplied. It was not entirely secure, but it should be good for one time use, and it would clearly indicate to Elena that Sam was not confident in their normal communications.

Sam logged off and exited the business center, then the hotel, retrieved her keys from the smiling valet and headed back to her own hotel. Anyone who was tracking Elena's e-mails may eventually become suspicious of the message she sent, but it would take time. By then the phone contact utilizing the pay phone and Sam's burner phone would be done and the necessary

information exchanged. If they traced the e-mail back to the Century City Hyatt, it would provide no further clue of Sam's true location.

EARLY THE FOLLOWING morning Sam left her hotel and drove east into downtown Los Angeles. She parked at a metered space and walked several blocks to the small park at Pershing Square, purchasing a bagel and coffee on the way. Then she sat on a planter wall in the square and enjoyed the coffee, waiting for her phone to ring. At just a few minutes after seven, her burner phone rang.

She connected the line and said nothing. Elena's voice came over the phone giving Sam a string of numbers which Sam memorized quickly.

The call was disconnected and Sam dialed the number Elena gave her. It rang only once before it was answered.

"Sorry, Sam. We haven't had to play this game in a while, and I'm afraid I'm a bit low on change."

"No problem. Listen, you've got to hook up with Teddy. And you need to go to him. He's got information you need and you've got to give him everything that we've discussed. I don't trust our comms."

"What's going on, Sam?"

"I think I was set up, Elena. We both wondered why I was requested for this. Now it turns out my beating wasn't random and it was definitely intended to take me out of the picture permanently. They were given my picture and it seems like they were tracking my movements. They got a phone call directing them to my location within minutes of my arrival. The beatings and firebombing of the club are all connected to the bombings. And it all goes back to my guy from Tunisia, who leads directly to you-know-who." They both knew Sam was referring to Prizrak, The Ghost.

"Have you gone fully secure?" Elena asked.

"Yeah. I've ditched the car, the condo and the cell. I've got Teddy monitoring my phone just in case something comes through that I should be aware of. I left it plugged in at the condo. But I can't leave here and go completely under. I need to finish this. You got the update on Fenbrook?"

"Yes. The official report is that he was the bomber and he accidentally killed himself. He led the gay bashings as well, but they're buying that he did the bombings separately and alone. They'll be closing out the case in the next day or two."

"He was dead before the bomb went off. I was there in the last few seconds before the bomb went off and he was dead. Blunt force trauma to the head."

"Makes sense," Elena said thoughtfully. "Even with an autopsy, if they place the body and bomb right it would eliminate any evidence of recent trauma and there would likely be nothing to dispute his death as a result of the explosion."

"Exactly. So someone killed him and made him the scapegoat. I don't think he had anything to do with the bombings. My money is on my guy."

"Okay. I've got one last connection I'm going to tap to try and figure out who this is. It's the only one left that I trust. In the meantime I'll arrange an excuse for my absence, go secure and off the radar then hook up with Teddy. He has secure comms with you?"

“Yeah, we’re good. You know I’ve never used him officially. Other than you, no one at the Agency knows about him.”

“Okay, I should be able to head out to hook up with him tonight. If you speak with him tell him to expect me.”

“Will do. Be safe.”

“You too, Sam. You’re on the hot seat out there. Watch your back.”

Chapter Eighteen

ALEX PULLED IN the driveway of Sydney's home around midday. Her emotions were a jumble of confusion. She was happy to have an excuse to visit, but at the same time heartbroken that she would once again be playing the part of a virtual stranger in the presence of the woman she loved. Alex almost tripped as the thought ran through her mind while exiting her car. The thought came to her automatically, without any deep contemplation; she loved Sydney.

Alex paused in the driveway and leaned on her car. She'd hesitated to admit it even to herself. They'd been together months now, had openly discussed their single dedication to a relationship with one another, but had never uttered the "L-word." Would it have made any difference? Would she still be in this predicament? Or would the open acknowledgment have had some sort of more powerful effect, helping Sydney overcome the gap in her memory, or help her reconnect with Alex more easily even without her full memory? Finally, would Richard Morrison have been able to interject himself so easily between them if Alex had given voice to what she now admitted was the strength of her feelings for Sydney?

She pushed away from the car and resumed her trek up the driveway then up the steps to the front porch, finally knocking on the large, wood door. Moments later it was answered by Jennifer, who smiled when she saw Alex.

"Alex, it's good to see you. Come on in." Jennifer stepped back to allow Alex entry. "We're just putting some lunch together. Why don't you join us in the kitchen?" Alex allowed her to lead the way through the entryway to the kitchen beyond.

"Syd, Alex is here to see you," she said as they entered. Alex looked at her, somewhat startled by the informal familiarity with which she was introduced. She looked over to see Jennifer smiling at her in an almost conspiratorial fashion. Then she looked back to see Sydney walking toward her with a smile on her face.

"Hi," Alex said, unable to get much more out as she was overwhelmed by Sydney's presence. She was somewhat shocked when Sydney put her arms around her in a hug. Despite her shock, Alex's arms went automatically around Sydney in a very familiar embrace.

"Hi, thank you for coming," Sydney said as they embraced. Alex silently wished for the hug to go on. She wondered if it was her imagination that led her to think it went on longer than a normal, platonic greeting hug. When Sydney pulled away, Alex thought for a moment there was perhaps a look of longing in her eyes. Then Sydney turned back toward the counter.

"I was just making some sandwiches. Have you eaten lunch yet?" Sydney asked.

"Uh, no. Not really." Alex looked over at Jennifer, who had seated herself at the informal table on the other side of the counter. Sydney's sister made no effort to hide the smile on her face.

"Good," Sydney said. "Sit down and I'll make you one."

"How are you feeling?" Alex asked as she moved to sit at the end of the table where she could still see Sydney.

“Better. The headaches are coming less frequently,” Sydney replied. “And my energy level is definitely improving.”

“That’s good. It probably doesn’t hurt having not just a doctor, but literally a brain surgeon for a sister who’s here to take care of you.” Alex watched with interest as Sydney began putting together another sandwich.

Gathered on the counter was an assortment of bread and condiments, as well as a bowl of what Alex could tell was freshly made tuna salad. It was one of her preferred types of sandwich, as she considered the tuna to be high in protein and healthier than a lot of the food she was known to consume. It was also something that Sydney used to make for her quite frequently.

Sydney reached without hesitation for the white sandwich bread, avoiding the bag of wheat altogether. She spread a moderate portion of mustard on one slice then spread the tuna salad on the other half. She ignored the head of romaine lettuce, adding instead iceberg lettuce then one large slice of tomato. Then she pushed a jar of pickle relish aside as she reached for a nearby bag containing a sliced red onion and added just a few rings to the sandwich before putting the top slice of bread on then cutting the completed work in half.

Nobody seemed to notice the silence as both Jennifer and Alex watched Sydney turn to the nearby fridge, open it and unhesitatingly remove a Diet Coke. She then picked up the plated sandwich and placed both items in front of Alex before retrieving two more plates from the counter. Sydney sat down at the table as she placed a sandwich in front of herself and Jennifer.

Sydney picked up her sandwich and took a generous bite before looking up. She looked at Alex who hadn’t reached for her sandwich. Then her eyes went to Jennifer. Alex likewise looked over at Jennifer, whose sandwich also sat untouched. Jennifer seemed to know something had just happened that she was unable to put her finger on. Her amused eyes simply traveled back and forth between the other two women. Sydney then looked back at Alex as she slowly chewed.

“Is there something wrong with the sandwich?” she asked after she swallowed.

Alex looked down at her sandwich and then looked back up at Sydney. She shook her head. “No, nothing’s wrong. That’s just it. It’s perfect. It’s…” Alex paused and looked at Jennifer then back at Sydney. “It’s exactly the way I like it. Even,” Alex picked up the can of Diet Coke, “even this.”

“I know that, silly,” Sydney said nonchalantly then started to reach for her own sandwich before she froze. Her head snapped up and her eyes worked frantically back and forth between Jennifer and Alex. “Oh, my God! I know! I mean, I knew. I didn’t even think about it. I just knew. White bread, mustard but no mayo, only one slice of tomato, no pickles or relish.” Her eyes went to the can. “And a Diet Coke. You drink too much Diet Coke,” she added almost in a whisper.

Alex nodded. “Yes. Exactly.” Sydney had frequently mentioned to Alex that she thought Alex drank too much Diet Coke and energy drinks. Alex’s eyes turned to Jennifer, who was now outright smiling then back to Sydney.

“I remembered,” Sydney said.

“Yep,” Jennifer said. “It’ll keep coming.” She picked up her sandwich and took a bite, still smiling as she chewed.

Alex took the hint from Jennifer and took a bite of her own sandwich. She felt a sliver of hope embed itself in her consciousness as she watched Sydney, looking thoughtful, resume eating her own sandwich.

SYDNEY HAD BEEN aware of a small thrill going through her when she first turned away from the counter and saw the tall sergeant standing there in the kitchen entry. The hug she initiated was comforting and a big part of her had wanted to stay in the woman's arms longer. She'd been focused on the feeling of familiarity the sergeant's presence created more so than anything else as she made the sandwich. She never even thought about the contents of the meal as she created it until Alex pointed it out. As she thought about it she realized the making of the sandwich had been equally familiar in a way.

"I've made that for you before," Sydney said between bites. Alex simply nodded as they all continued to eat in relative silence.

"Actually, there is something I wanted to let you know about," Alex said several minutes later as she wiped her mouth and placed her wadded up paper napkin next to the now empty plate. "There was an explosion at an apartment complex off Franklin last night."

"Yeah, we saw something about that on the morning news," Jennifer said. She stood and gathered the plates. "The report said there was someone killed in the apartment."

"Well, he's been identified as James Fenbrook. We know he was involved in some rather serious gay bashings and at least one firebombing of a lesbian nightclub."

Sydney thought for a moment then it struck her. "Courtney's nightclub," she said, then looked up and saw Alex nod in agreement. Sydney turned to Jennifer who was now standing at the kitchen bar counter. "You remember Courtney, Jen? She visited in the hospital a couple times. We volunteered together." Jennifer nodded then both women turned their attention back to Alex.

"We always suspected there was a possible link between the gay bashings and the bombings. The timing, the targets, it just felt like it was all part of the same campaign, but we had no definitive proof. We know Fenbrook was leading the little group that did the beatings and firebombed Courtney's club. We have one of them in custody and he's already rolled on Fenbrook. Then we found some components in Fenbrook's house which have been tied to a couple of the bombings, but by the time the analysis came back he'd made bail. As far as the apartment, the evidence seems to indicate Fenbrook accidentally blew himself up with what was perhaps going to be his next bomb."

"So he was the bomber?" Jennifer asked.

Alex shrugged. "The apartment manager positively identified his picture and said he'd rented that apartment with cash about two months ago. That date would be just before the bombing campaign started. The preliminary on scene analysis by the coroner seems to indicate it was possibly the bomb detonation that killed him. Unless the formal autopsy report says something different, the task force is pretty much concluding the case is closed."

"He acted alone?" Sydney asked.

"That's what it looks like as far as the bombings. We have three other suspects for the beatings and the firebombing. One in custody, two still outstanding. But we've identified them and we're pretty sure we'll have them in custody shortly."

"Well," Jennifer said. "At least Sydney won't have to testify or anything, right?"

"It doesn't look like it. She wouldn't have anything to offer for the other trials. Like I said, there's no evidence those three were part of the bigger campaign."

Suddenly there was a strident knock at the door. The powerful banging sounded almost angry.

“I’ll get that,” Jennifer said as she finished putting the dishes in the dishwasher. She rinsed and then dried her hands when the insistent knock came again, followed by the sound of the door opening.

“Sydney?” The demanding voice of Richard Morrison was heard from the entryway. Sydney cringed in response. It had been a most pleasant day, and despite the topic of conversation, Sydney was really enjoying spending time with Alex. Richard’s presence seemed to cause more confusion in her mind, and she really didn’t want to deal with him right now.

Alex looked up at the kitchen doorway then back to Sydney. Her eyes literally softened, taking on a concerned and compassionate look as their gaze met.

“Sydney, where are you?” Richard demanded. Alex rose from her chair and turned to the doorway, her look and stance defensive as Richard appeared.

“What is she doing here?” Richard said.

“She’s visiting Sydney,” Jennifer said. “And we invited her to join us for lunch. She also waited for the door to be answered and to be invited in, which is generally what polite people do.” Sydney heard the anger in Jennifer’s voice and saw it in her body language as she crossed her arms and stood before Richard.

“She doesn’t need to be here.”

“I was briefing Ms. Rutledge on the investigation,” Alex said. “And the recent developments.”

“I can brief her and answer any further questions she has. Your presence is no longer required,” Richard said.

“Richard, please.” Sydney put her head forward in her hands. “All this yelling, you’re giving me a headache. Would you please just—”

“It’s okay, Sydney,” he said. “I’ll take care of this. If you have any questions, I’m much more qualified to address them. She doesn’t need to be bothering you. You should be resting.”

It occurred to Sydney that Richard completely ignored the fact she had told him he was the one giving her the headache.

“No, Richard, I need you to—”

“It’s okay.” This time it was Alex who interrupted her. “I need to be on my way. I apologize for the disruption.”

Sydney watched her walk to the doorway leading to the front entryway. She wanted to call out for Alex to stay, but the headache was getting overwhelming and she floundered for words. As she opened her mouth to say something, Alex spoke again.

“I hope you feel better, Syd.” Then she disappeared through the doorway.

Sydney looked over at Jennifer, who gave her a concerned look, then followed after Alex, brushing past Richard none too gently.

Sydney once again put her head in her hands, her elbows resting on the table. The headache continued to grow in intensity and she knew it was going to be a bad one. The doctor warned her that too much activity or stress might increase their likelihood and intensity. She felt Richard’s hand on the back of her neck, rubbing it.

“It’s okay, Sydney, she’s gone. I’m going to do what needs to be done to make sure she doesn’t bother you anymore. You really shouldn’t have let her in, though.”

“Dammit, Richard.” She suddenly rose, swinging her hand back to strike his arm as she turned. She’d had enough and her voice rose in frustration and anger. “Don’t you get it? You caused the headache. Not Alex. Please, just leave.”

“Now, Sydney, you can’t possibly believe that any of this is my fault. If it weren’t for that woman you wouldn’t even be injured. You never would have been at that center for her kind if she hadn’t obviously convinced you to waste your free time working there.”

“Just leave, Richard. I don’t have the energy for this right now.” Sydney turned away from Richard and toward the spiral staircase. It was the angry outburst of energy that helped her get to the staircase, but she stumbled on the first step as the migraine headache overtook her fully. Suddenly Jennifer’s arms were around her.

“I’ve got you,” Jennifer said. “Slow and easy, one step at a time.” Sydney leaned into her and concentrated on the steps in front of her. They paused for a moment as Jennifer turned to Richard. “You heard her, you need to leave, Richard. I’m putting Sydney to bed. Please don’t be here when I come back down.”

Through the pain and dizziness, Sydney was vaguely aware of making it up the stairs to her bed, and Jennifer helping her into a large, soft t-shirt then under the sheet.

“It’s a bad one, huh?” Jennifer asked. Sydney nodded, keeping her eyes tightly shut.

“Here, take this for me.” She opened her eyes to see Jennifer sitting on the edge of the bed holding out a pill in her hand and a glass of water in the other. Sydney complied, knowing the powerful prescription pill would likely put her to sleep.

“God, I hate this,” Sydney said.

“I know. But the headaches are coming less frequently and you’re having flashes of memory. This is all good. You’re getting better.”

“No, not that. I mean, I do hate the headaches. But I meant this thing with Richard. And his thing against Alex. I just don’t understand. Nothing makes sense. Something isn’t right. But he just won’t leave me alone and I don’t know what to believe. I can’t trust my own memory.”

“What do you feel, Syd? Feelings don’t lie.”

“I feel like...” Sydney realized what she was about to say and let her voice trail off. She looked up at Jennifer. “I don’t know what I feel,” she lied. She closed her eyes, trying to hide from her own sister. She knew there was some feeling there for Alex. She felt a closeness and familiarity. But she didn’t know where it came from, how deep it was, or if it was shared by the other woman. And she didn’t know if it was something to be telling her sister. She was completely lost and uncertain.

She felt Jennifer’s arms go around her, and she tucked her head into her shoulder and let the tears come. Then she heard Jennifer’s quiet statement.

“I love you, Syd. You’re my sister and I will always love you, no matter what.”

LATER THAT SAME afternoon Alex entered Commander Freeman’s office on the 10th floor of the Police Administration Building, unsure exactly why she’d been summoned. The call had come earlier that morning from the commander’s secretary telling her to be at the office at three p.m. sharp. She wondered if, with the neutralization of Fenbrook, the task force was being disbanded. Since the prevailing opinion was that Fenbrook operated alone, there was little use left for the uniformed officers who had been assigned to the team. The detectives would likely continue to work with the federal agents to tie up any investigative loose ends, but the leg work

and surveillances that had been done by the frontline officers and deputies on the team was likely of no use anymore.

The secretary smiled at her as she entered the outer office.

“I’ll let Commander Freeman know you’re here, Sergeant,” she said as she picked up the phone to call into his inner office. Alex gave her a brief smile and nod.

Moments later the door to the inner office opened and Commander Freeman acknowledged Alex.

“Alex,” he said as he nodded and held out his hand to shake hers. “Come on in. Sorry about the suddenness of this. Something’s come up, I’m afraid.”

Alex walked through the door as he held it open for her. She noticed someone seated in one of the chairs facing his large desk. The seat was facing away from her so she didn’t recognize the occupant. She came to a stop in the middle of the moderately sized office, unsure exactly what was expected of her or whether or not she should take a seat. As the commander closed the door and moved past her to take the seat behind his desk, the other seat’s occupant turned to look at her.

“Have a seat, Alex. I believe you’re already acquainted with Lieutenant Ramos?”

Alex shook off the foreboding feeling that erupted in her gut and moved to the second empty chair, which was located uncomfortably close to Ramos.

“Yes, sir,” she said then turned to glance briefly at Ramos. “Lieutenant.” She nodded in a professional greeting, determined to maintain her composure. Ramos barely grunted in response, a disdainful look passing over his face. Alex was somewhat reassured when she saw the brief look of dissatisfaction pass over Commander Freeman’s face as he looked at Ramos before turning back to Alex. He took a deep breath and rearranged a few items in front of him on the desk surface. Alex got the distinct feeling he was stalling for time, hesitating to discuss something he had no interest in discussing. He finally looked up at her again and began speaking.

“Alex, there’s no easy way to say this. I’m afraid some rather serious allegations have been leveled against you and an investigation has been initiated.”

Alex sat up straight, at an absolute loss as to what the allegations could be. She glanced over at Ramos and saw him smirking.

“What allegations?” she asked, surprised at how calm she actually managed to make her voice sound.

“Ms. Rutledge has brought to our attention the fact that you have been harassing and stalking her.” The statement came from Ramos, who was almost smiling as he said it.

“Syd?” Alex’s shocked utterance came out in almost a whisper.

“Yes, Ms. Sydney Rutledge, whom you have forced yourself upon and become too overly familiar with, has finally seen fit to put an end to your unwanted attention. I believe the final straw was the disturbances you’ve caused at the hospital which have been detrimental to her recovery. Now we hear you’ve been showing up uninvited at her residence.”

“That’s enough, Lieutenant,” Freeman said.

“Sir, I haven’t—”

“She’s clearly been scared to death of you and it was only the return of her fiancé that gave her the support and protection she needed to finally notify the department and call an end to this. Obviously the department has to get involved, considering you’ve seen fit to threaten and verbally accost a United States Attorney.”

“I said that’s enough, Lieutenant.” Freeman’s statement was more forceful this time. “All we have are allegations at this point. There will be a full investigation. I believe you’ve satisfied

your purpose for being here, Lieutenant. You can now assure your captain that Sergeant Chambers has been notified of the allegations.”

“What about the stay-away order, Commander?” Ramos asked, glaring at Alex.

“I will ensure Sergeant Chambers is fully briefed on her restrictions. I remind you however, as well as your captain, that Sergeant Chambers is assigned to me. As such she is my responsibility to manage and discipline as I see fit, until her loan is concluded and she returns to Central Division.”

“The task force is concluded and even if it wasn’t, Sergeant Chambers’s abilities are no longer needed. She has no business remaining on it at this point. She should be suspended immediately,” Ramos said.

“Are you presuming to tell me how to do my job, Lieutenant?” The anger and menace in the commander’s voice was unmistakable, and Ramos appeared to realize he may have overstepped his bounds.

“Of course not, Sir. I’m merely concerned for the reputation of the department and the safety of Ms. Rutledge and her fiancé.”

“I will take it from here, Lieutenant. You can see yourself out.”

“Yes, Sir.” The lieutenant stood, and turned toward the door. With his back to Commander Freeman, he glanced one more time at Alex, a look of hateful satisfaction on his face as he moved past her and out of the room.

Alex sat in stunned silence for a few moments, trying to wrap her mind around everything that had just been said.

“A stay-away order, Sir?” she finally asked, looking up at him.

“I’m afraid so, Alex. The fiancé has made some serious allegations on behalf of Ms. Rutledge. Apparently she’s still too ill to speak with Internal Affairs at this time. But,” he glanced down at a paper in front of him and read the name, “Richard Morrison has been very insistent on her behalf. He has demanded that you be relieved of duty, your weapon be taken and you be ordered to cease any contact with Ms. Rutledge. The Chief has decided that might be the most prudent action at this time, for everyone involved.”

“He made the request on her behalf?”

“Apparently.” Commander Freeman leaned forward. “I am sorry, Alex. But—”

“I understand, Sir.” Alex stood, turning slightly away from him to face the wall as she withdrew her weapon from its holster. With precision she removed the magazine then locked the slide back, catching the round in the chamber as it ejected. She turned back to the desk, placed the now safe weapon down on it, followed by her badge, then her police identification. She then removed the keys to her department vehicle from her pocket and added that to the collection on the desk.

“It’s parked downstairs in the garage,” she said, indicating the official parking in the subterranean levels of the building. “Will that be all, Sir?” she asked quietly.

“I’m truly sorry about this, Alex. The truth will come out. We just have to let the investigation run its course.” Alex nodded and Commander Freeman continued. “For now you’re assigned to home, still on the payroll. This isn’t a punishment, you haven’t been found guilty of anything, it’s just a precaution. As I said, your police officer powers are being suspended, so you’re not to—”

“I understand, Sir.” She knew exactly what the conditions were, despite having never been in this position before. “I’m not to act in my official capacity. I can’t carry a gun. I can’t enter any

restricted area of a police facility without an escort.” Alex swallowed and then continued. “And I’m not to contact Ms. Rutledge in any way.”

The Commander Freeman nodded slowly. “Yes, I’m afraid that’s all correct. He looked down at the keys she had just dropped. “Can I get you a ride home?” he asked.

“No, Sir,” Alex replied. “I’ll manage.” She turned and walked from the room, still stunned, wondering what her next move should be.

“THAT WEEZLY LITTLE bastard!” Sal muttered only moments after Alex got in his car. Alex had explained what happened in Commander Freeman’s office just an hour before. After walking out of the police headquarters building, Alex called her former partner and best friend to pick her up, explaining the occurrence to him as he drove downtown from his home in the suburban neighborhood of nearby Glendale. He looked over at Alex as she pulled on her seatbelt.

“How you doing, partner?” Alex put her head back on the seat and closed her eyes as Sal pulled into traffic and headed for the freeway.

“Okay, I guess.” She shrugged. “It’s not as if I can do anything about it at this point.”

“They really suspended you?”

“Assigned me to home pending the investigation. I’m still getting paid, so not suspended really.”

“But you can’t have any contact with Syd? You don’t think she...” Alex looked at Sal as he drove and could see he didn’t even know how to end that statement.

“I don’t know what to think, Sal. She doesn’t remember us. I’m no one special to her. She could be buying into anything Morrison tells her. And we all know he’s probably capable of telling her just about anything.”

“But how did Ramos and Morrison hook up? Ramos has no connection to the task force.”

“Who knows? But they obviously did.” Alex looked out the windshield and noticed Sal was exiting the freeway rather than continuing on to her home in the nearby Burbank foothills.

“Sal, you’re supposed to be taking me home.”

He shook his head. “No can do, Alex. I’m under direct orders to bring you home with me for dinner. And I have a strong suspicion Tiffany won’t be letting you leave tonight. When she heard she went into predictable mother hen mode.”

“And how did she hear?”

“She dragged it out of me. You know how she can be.”

“You didn’t even know until you were already halfway downtown in your car. The only way she dragged it out of you is if you called and told her there was something to be dragged out.”

“Yeah, well, when you called she told me to let her know what was going on as soon as I learned. So after you told me I had to give her an update. And when she heard what was going on she insisted I bring you straight home with me.”

Alex rolled her eyes and put her head back against the headrest again. But she couldn’t deny that a big part of her was thankful for Tiffany and Sal taking her in for the night. Under the circumstances she didn’t really want to be alone.

Chapter Nineteen

“THAT’S SOME SERIOUS bullshit, Alex,” Sam’s voice came over the phone early the next morning.

“Yeah, well, it is what it is.” Alex continued to put her toiletries into the small duffle bag. “There’s nothing I can do about it.”

“You don’t seriously believe Sydney had anything to do with this, do you?” Sam asked. This caused Alex to pause in her packing.

“I don’t now, Sam. I’m not saying it’s necessarily her idea. But, well, I just don’t know.” Alex took a deep breath then resumed her activity, zipping the bag and looking around the room to see if she forgot anything. She moved toward the door to the garage as she resumed talking.

“There’s nothing I can do about it, either way. I have a stay-away order. If I go near her you can be sure I’ll lose my job. Right now, who knows what my status is. They don’t generally assign people to home unless they think they may fire them.”

“It sounds to me like Morrison pulled some serious strings and tossed his U.S. Attorney weight around. When they do the investigation they’re going to get to the truth, Alex. They’re going to find out—”

“And what if the truth is that Sydney has no true wish to be with me, Sam? What if some variation of Morrison’s story is the truth? What if Sydney really was getting back together with him and she just hadn’t figured out how to tell me? One thing he said is definitely true. She really is sensitive like that. I could see her struggling with having to break that to me. But the fact of the matter is she was straight before me. Maybe I was just an adventure, a test for her to be sure of...shit! I don’t know.” Alex dropped the bag and sat down on the doorstep to the garage. “It’s happened to me before, Sam. So believe me when I tell you I know for a fact this is possible. I just didn’t think it was possible with Syd. But now, who knows?”

“I don’t see it, Alex. I’m telling you I just don’t see it. I know it’s killing you, I understand, but you’ve got to give it a little time. Don’t give up.”

“Oh trust me, Sam. I’ve got nothing to do but give it time. That’s one thing I got plenty of now.” She reached for her bag once again and stood up, punching the button to raise the garage door then approached her motorcycle.

“I’m taking a break from it all and heading out of town for a couple days. I just need to go off the grid for a while.”

“Okay,” Sam said. “Any idea where you’re heading?”

“Nope, wherever the bike takes me.” Alex finished strapping the duffle bag to the back of the cruiser. “I’m trusting you to take care of the rest of that business, Sam. And if you need me to help with that, I’m guessing you can probably figure out a way to find me. As for everybody else though, I’m off the radar.”

“I’ll take care of it, Alex. I promise.”

“WHAT’S GOING ON?”

Arms came around Sam as she stood looking out the window at the Hollywood sign. She leaned into Courtney’s warm body behind her. They had just awoken from their second night together, spent in an equally enjoyable and passionate fashion as the one before.

“That was Alex. That guy who’s claiming to be Sydney’s fiancé has filed a complaint against her and gotten her suspended.”

“What?”

Sam turned to face her, putting her arms around Courtney and pulling her close.

“Yeah. But it gets worse. He’s gotten the department to issue an order that Alex stay away from Sydney. He’s claiming to be acting on Sydney’s wishes, that Alex has been harassing her and that her constant contact is somehow damaging to Sydney’s recovery.”

“That son of a bitch. We know that’s not true.”

“Yeah. But to prove it we’d have to publically reveal their relationship. That’s what Alex is hesitant to do. She’s afraid perhaps Sydney is returning to...well, him, I guess, and doesn’t want to reveal something she thinks Sydney may not want revealed, even if she does get her memory back.”

“We all know that’s not going to happen. They love each other. They’ve both hesitated to say it out loud for whatever stupid reasons, but we know they do.”

“But Sydney never even told her sister,” Sam said. “Alex doesn’t feel it’s her place, or anyone else’s, to out Sydney like that to her only remaining family. So we just have to wait.”

Courtney leaned in, tucking her head into Sam’s shoulder as they stood together in each other’s arms.

“I’m not sure who it’s worse for, Sydney who’s trying to remember her own life, or Alex who has to live with the knowledge of what they had but can’t be near her,” Courtney whispered sadly.

JENNIFER ENTERED THE master suite that morning as soon as she heard Sydney moving around. She joined her in the bathroom, where Sydney had just finished brushing her teeth.

“How do you feel?” she asked.

“Better, thanks.” Sydney put her toothbrush back in the holder beside the sink. “I was just going to take a quick shower.”

Sydney paused to look at her reflection in the mirror, running her fingers over the cuts, scrapes and bruises still visible on her face. Then she looked down at herself and brought her hands up to run her fingers along the “USMC” stenciled in black on the front of the grey t-shirt.

“Where did this come from?” Sydney asked.

“I don’t know. I opened your drawer and found it there. It seemed soft and comfortable, so I grabbed it for you to sleep in. Is something wrong?” Jennifer barely hid the smile on her face as she watched Sydney process the information.

“No, it’s fine,” Sydney replied. “I just...I’m not sure where I got it. But it does feel vaguely familiar.” She looked back up at her reflection in the mirror. “I think I like it. It’s comfortable.”

“Well, I think I saw another one kind of like it in one of your drawers. You go ahead and jump in the shower then come on down for breakfast?”

SYDNEY TOOK HER time in the shower, enjoying the relaxing heat. She pulled her robe on and suddenly had the image of Sergeant Chambers standing near the counter in the same bathroom. Sydney could see the tender smile on the other woman's face as they looked at one another. She felt the gauze bandage beneath her fingers as she wrapped the officer's injured arm. Sydney realized it was the same scene she'd seen before, but it had been a different bathroom in her prior vision. Now she had the distinct impression it, or something very similar, had occurred in this bathroom. She once again felt a distinct intimate attachment to the other woman. "How do I know she's always scraping up that arm?" Sydney thought to herself.

"Syd?" The moment was broken as Jennifer came through the door. "How do you want your eggs?" Jennifer seemed to notice something was amiss. "Syd?" she inquired again as she approached. She reached out and gently grasped Sydney's upper arms. "Hey, are you okay? You looked a little far away there for a minute. You remembered something, didn't you?"

Sydney looked over at Jennifer and gave a weak smile and a nod then felt her face blush. She was sure Jennifer noticed because Jennifer smiled.

"A nice memory?" Jennifer asked.

"Kind of, yeah." Sydney moved past Jennifer out of the bathroom and into her bedroom, a clear signal she didn't want to share any further.

"Okay. I told you it would start to come back. Just let it happen. Don't force it, however frustrating it may get," Jennifer said as she followed her. "I just came up to see how you wanted to your eggs."

"Scrambled is good. And coffee would be great."

"Sure thing. It'll be ready by the time you come down." Jennifer left the bedroom, heading down spiral stairs to the kitchen below.

Sydney followed just a few minutes later, choosing to let her hair dry naturally in the warm summer morning. She'd found another soft cotton t-shirt displaying "Marines" across the front in her drawer, this one in red with gold writing. She'd put that on with a comfortable old pair of sweats. When she entered the kitchen she could tell Jennifer noticed. Jennifer glanced over the t-shirt and Sydney caught the smile before she turned back to the stove.

"Have a seat and I'll bring you a plate." Jennifer buttered some toast then brought two plates of scrambled eggs, toast and bacon to the table, then returned again with two mugs of coffee.

"Decaf," she said as she placed a mug in front of Sydney.

"Oh, God! You're killing me with the no caffeine, Jen! When will this madness end?"

"You don't need to be unnecessarily stimulating yourself. Your head is still healing and there's still a little swelling. Let's just see how things go for a while longer."

As Sydney ate she glanced over at the newspaper sitting on the table nearby. She pulled it over and saw the headline on the front page proclaiming the death of James Fenbrook, the suspected bomber. She read the article, noting the cited anonymous source close to the investigation who concluded the evidence tended to indicate Fenbrook was the likely bomber and that he'd blown himself up prior to being able to plant his latest explosive device.

"Do you feel up to taking a walk after I clean up?" Jennifer's voice broke in and Sydney looked away from the article. Jennifer picked up their plates and walked to the sink. "I was thinking we could just stretch our legs and walk out to the pond in back."

Sydney rose as well and gathered the now empty coffee mugs. This was the first time Jennifer had considered allowing her to do anything the slightest bit active despite her begging and cajoling over the last few days. “Sure,” she said. “After the hospital and then being cooped up here, I’d love a little fresh air and a work out.”

“Not a work out,” Jennifer chastised. “A nice, easy walk. And the minute you get tired or your head starts to bother you, you speak up and we’re coming right back.”

“Yeah, yeah. Just hurry up. I’m going to put my shoes on.”

“I’m only doing this because I know if I don’t I’ll go out for groceries this afternoon and come back to find you trying to take a hike or go for a bike ride or something crazy. So I’m making sure you’re properly supervised.”

Jennifer finished putting the dishes in the dishwasher and was drying her hands when Sydney sat back down in one of the kitchen chairs to put her socks and shoes on.

“Syd, I’m serious. We take this easy and you let me know if anything feels wrong. Remember your headache last night?”

“That wasn’t exertion, that was Richard,” Sydney said as she tied her shoe.

“I know, but it’s the same outcome. Exertion, stress, all that. You need to make sure you don’t overdo it so you can finish healing. Promise me you’ll let me know if anything feels wrong.” Jennifer stood before Sydney with her arms crossed.

“Jen, it’s a walk to the pond and back. It’s nothing.”

“Promise me.”

“Okay, okay. I’ll let you know if I feel sick, or weak, or whatever. Can we go now, please? You’re turning me into a vampire. I need some sun and some fresh air.” Sydney stood up and pushed Jennifer toward the French doors leading to the back patio. Sydney’s house, nestled in the Hollywood Hills adjacent to Runyon Canyon, backed onto a virtual forest.

Together they went down the patio steps and across the grass onto a clear footpath that led through the trees. They talked as they went.

“Remember when we used to play out here when we were little?” Jennifer asked. “Running through the trees and playing hide and seek and tag?”

“Yes, and I remember you cheated.”

“I did not cheat.”

“Yes you did. You climbed the trees when you hid from me because you knew that even if I found you I wouldn’t be able to climb up and tag you.”

“That’s not cheating. It’s not my fault you were too short to reach the bottom branches and get into the trees.”

The banter went back and forth for several minutes as the two walked through the woods, finally coming to an area where the path opened up slightly into a partial clearing. Sydney looked around her as she felt suddenly unsettled. Her eyes darted to some roots protruding from the ground in the path then to the trunk of a large tree nearby. She closed her eyes as a sense of overwhelming fear washed over her followed by a multitude of sensations. She remembered laughing one moment and then being startled as she tripped over those same roots. She felt the scratch of dead branches and the ground beneath her as she lay on her back, the weight of someone on top of her, the draft as her shirt was ripped, panic as hands jerked at the waistband of her pants, a struggle.

Then her mind flashed back and she was tripping over the roots again. She looked up as strong arms went around her to help her stand, and she looked into the eyes of Alex Chambers. Then a figure came from behind Alex, striking out with a branch that connected with Alex’s

head. Sydney watched as the woman collapsed, unconscious. Then all the other sensations were back, the panic, the fear, the struggle with the man on top of her. Alex's fight with the man then her scream for Sydney to run. Then the shot Sydney heard as she was almost back to the house.

Sydney collapsed to her knees as the flood of memories hit her.

"Oh, my God. Alex!" she gasped.

"Sydney? Hey, are you okay?" Jennifer's voice finally broke through. Her arms were supporting Sydney as she sat on her knees on the ground. Sydney looked up at Jennifer.

"I remember," she said. "I remember everything."

"GOD, SYD, I'M so sorry. I didn't know that's where all this happened. You never told me the whole story. You only said this psycho had stalked you and followed you to the mountains when you'd gotten away with friends for the weekend. I mean, I remember you mentioning an officer friend had been shot, but you never said...I mean...I just never would have suggested we take a walk back there if I knew."

"I know, Jen, don't worry so much. It all turned out okay, right?"

"But still, Syd. That should not have been the environment. I was trying to introduce you to things that were familiar that may introduce memories, but I never intended to use a traumatic experience."

"Jen, it's okay, really." Sydney moved over to sit closer to Jennifer on the couch in the den. They'd been talking for the past hour about Sydney gaining her memories and how it happened at the place of the first attack instigated by her stalker.

"Listen, Jen, there's something I need to tell you. Something kind of important. I've been intending to tell you for a while, but I wanted to do it in person. And I just couldn't seem to find the right time to have you come for a visit and...well...Sergeant Chambers and I have grown close over the past months. And...well...you see...we're kind of...well, no, it's not kind of at all. We—"

"I know, Syd."

"What?"

"I know she's your Alex. The Alex you've been gushing about for months."

"You know?" Jennifer nodded. "How? And you're okay with it? With Alex and me?"

"You mean am I okay with you being a lesbian?" Jennifer said. "Yes, Syd. I'm perfectly okay with it," Jennifer smiled. "Admittedly, it isn't necessarily something that had occurred to me at all before I figured it out. But we've been living on opposite sides of the country for quite a few years, so it's not like I had the opportunity to see the clues. I knew you had broken it off solidly with Richard and figured that was definitely over. Then when we'd talk you'd tell me all about this new Alex who was in your life. I could tell this person meant a lot to you and was getting serious. I will tell you I was quite irritated when it appeared to me that this Alex was nowhere to be found in all this." She paused momentarily and looked up at Sydney then shook her head. "I mean, you were in the hospital, in a coma, and no Alex. I was pissed. And this thing with Richard didn't feel right at all. Of course she was there, right under my nose the whole time, but she introduced herself to me as Alexandria and I didn't put it all together until I came back to your house and Richard was inside. Then when I found the bag of stuff in the garage it started to make sense."

"Wait a minute," Sydney interrupted. "What bag of stuff?"

“Richard was here and tried to clean out all of Alex’s stuff. I’ll show you.” Jennifer got up and went into the spare bedroom off the downstairs hallway, returning with a box of items. “Admittedly, when you got out of the hospital I returned a few pieces of clothing to your chest of drawers.” Jennifer looked pointedly at the shirt Sydney was wearing.

“But considering what Alex wanted, and my concern about throwing too much at you at once, I wasn’t really sure what to do with the rest of this.”

Sydney began removing items as soon as the box was put down in front of her. Several framed photos of her and Alex, some alone, some with several of their friends.

“Richard removed all of these?”

“Yep. I think I interrupted him before he could get them out of the house and destroy them or throw them out. He was coming out of the door from the garage when I came through the front door. So when I found the bag later it made sense.”

Sydney came across the hand written note.

“I miss you already. — A”

“This is the note Alex left me the morning before she saw me with Richard. She left it on the coffee maker for me to find.” Sydney wiped a tear from her cheek. “Wait a minute. What did you say about what Alex wanted?” She was a little surprised to see Jennifer almost squirm, looking very uncomfortable.

“Well, when I confronted Alex about what I knew, she insisted that nothing be said to you. She didn’t want you to be pressured into resuming a relationship if that wasn’t what you wanted or where your feelings really were. She seemed uncertain about what was happening between you and Richard. So, the question is, what happened between you and Richard? What did Alex see that made her feel this way?”

“Nothing was or is happening with Richard. And I assure you even less will be happening now. I’m going to kill that bastard.” Sydney took a deep breath to calm herself. “Richard showed up out of the blue for this task force. We’d talked briefly via e-mail a few times over the past year or so, but nothing more, and nothing that would imply anything more than polite updates on life in general. So he shows up and invites me to lunch. I went, to be polite, but he was so irritating and arrogant I actually left partway through. But he kept coming back. He just wouldn’t get the clue. I finally got angry and frustrated and told him about Alex. That was a few days before I got hurt. Then he showed up again and was...a little pushy. He groped me a bit. I found out minutes later that Alex had come to visit me at the office and seen Richard with his arms around me. Tyler saw her storm off. She was angry and refused to take my calls that night.” Tear filled eyes looked up at Jennifer. “That was the night before I got hurt. We never spoke before the explosion.”

“Oh, geez,” Jennifer said thoughtfully. “Now that part makes sense. Alex sees this, then you get hurt and there’s Richard claiming you’ve renewed your relationship and you’re now engaged again. And no one knows enough to be able to set the record straight. That’s why she’s been so unsure.”

The tears were now streaming down Sydney’s face as she thought about the turmoil Alex was going through. “Oh, God. What she must have felt. The betrayal. Seeing what she saw, then all of this, me not remembering her, and Richard playing it up. That bastard took advantage of me, of my injury. He tried to destroy us!” Sydney was now pacing, angry and frustrated and heartbroken over what she had unwittingly helped to cause.

“Stop!” Jennifer said, standing up and taking Sydney in a hug. “We know now, so we can set it right. We just need to find Alex and explain it all. She’s been there, you know? Every day, she’s been there. Even though she didn’t want to force anything on you, I could tell she wanted to be beside you. I could tell she cared deeply about you.” She stopped and pulled back slightly. “And you love her, don’t you?”

“Yes,” Sydney said. “But I’ve never told her that. I have to tell her. I have to find her and explain and tell her that I love her.” Sydney pulled away and went into the kitchen, returning with her cell phone. She brought up Alex’s number and connected the call then pulled it away from her ear almost immediately with a frustrated sigh.

“Directly to voicemail. She’s got her phone off.” Sydney tapped the phone against her chin as she thought. “Sal. I’ll call Sal. He’ll know where she’s at.”

“Hello?” Sal’s distinctive voice came over the line.

“Sal, it’s Syd. Where’s Alex?”

“Syd? Uh, how are you doing? Feeling better?” Sydney could tell Sal was uncomfortable and sensed he was stalling.

“I’m good, Sal. But I really need to reach Alex. Her phone is off. Where is she? How can I find her?”

“Uh, I think Alex is a little busy. Is it something maybe Tiffany or I could help with?”

Sydney could tell she’d been put on speaker phone and assumed Tiffany was listening as well.

“Sal, I remember. I remember everything. Please, I have to find Alex.” There was a long pause. Then finally Sal’s voice came back.

“What about your fiancé?”

“I don’t have a fiancé. I’m not engaged. Richard was...out of line and manipulated the situation. Please, I need your help to make this right.” There was another long pause then Sal finally spoke again.

“Alex is gone, Syd. She left town. We have no idea where she went.”

“What? Why? What about work, the task force?”

“Alex was sus—”

“Why don’t you come over to our house, Syd,” Tiffany’s voice broke in over the speakerphone and interrupted Sal. “I think we can explain everything better in person.”

AN HOUR LATER they were sitting in the living room in Sal and Tiffany’s Glendale home.

“What’s going on? Alex would never do anything to get herself suspended!”

“Well, according to a certain U.S. Attorney, who claimed to be making the complaint on your behalf, she’s been stalking you, forcing herself into your life unwanted and having a detrimental effect on your recovery.”

Sydney looked at him in shock. “Richard got Alex suspended?” Sal nodded. Sydney could see in his eyes that Sal was somewhat leery about what he was telling her. It suddenly occurred to her that Sal thought there may be some truth to what Richard claimed. She looked to Tiffany sitting beside him then back to Sal.

“Sal, there’s no truth to what Richard said. He had no right to do what he did. He made it all up. Even without my memory Alex was always welcome. I felt more comfortable with her

around than I ever did with him. Now all that makes sense. Unfortunately I realized all that a little too late, apparently.”

Sydney’s eyes moved back and forth between Sal and Tiffany again, searching their faces. “She’s really gone? You really don’t know where she is?”

“Alex has been through hell these past two weeks. Ever since she saw you—”

He was stopped abruptly by Tiffany’s hand on his arm.

“Sal,” Tiffany said gently, calming him with her soothing voice and gentle touch. But Sydney knew what he was about to say.

“She told you,” she said quietly. “She told you what she saw that day in my office.” Sydney shook her head in sadness. “It wasn’t what she thought she saw. Richard was...he was out of line. Way out of line. If Alex had just stuck around she would have seen me put him in line. If she’d just let me talk to her and let me explain. But then...” Sydney didn’t have to finish the statement. They all knew—then the explosion happened. “I don’t understand why she wouldn’t talk to me. She’s so damn stubborn.”

“Stubborn?” Sal let some of his own anger at Alex’s anguish seep through into his words. “Stubborn? She wasn’t stubborn. She was protecting herself. She was convinced you were going to tell her there was nothing really between you two, to say to her the words that would break her heart, just like—”

“Just like what, Sal? Like who? Please, Sal? Tell me so I can figure out how to fix this.” It was obvious Sal was torn. She watched the internal struggle displayed on his face, but with a look of resignation and a shrug he began speaking again.

“It was a lot of years ago and we were both a lot younger. It was before Tiffany and I met.” He looked over at Tiffany and as Sydney watched the exchange between them he could see this was the first time Tiffany was hearing this story as well.

“Alex met someone, Tamara Walker, a detective on the job. She was a straight woman who had never had a relationship with another woman.” Sydney didn’t miss Sal looking pointedly at her as he said it. Then he looked away.

“Things got pretty serious. At least Alex thought they did. It was her first long-term committed relationship. She thought she was in love, deeply in love. They made all kinds of plans. Tamara delayed the plans, always having one reason or another. She told Alex they had to keep their relationship secret because her family was extremely conservative, and she needed to figure out a way to break everything to them. So Alex was patient and supportive. Then Alex found out Tamara was spending time with another officer, someone Alex actually worked with. Tamara told her they were old family friends. She admitted that he was interested in her but she didn’t return the affection. That she spent time with him only because her family expected it of her. She told Alex they needed to be careful because if he found out about their relationship he would reveal it to her family out of spite. She asked Alex for patience and strung her along for months on end. I watched all of this. I knew she was playing Alex. But Alex wouldn’t believe it. She defended Tamara, said she had to support Tamara’s sensitivity about coming out to her family.”

Sal leaned back on the couch and Sydney could see the memory of Alex’s experience still anguished him as well.

Sal reached for Tiffany’s hand before he began again. “She let this go on for almost a year. Finally Alex hit rock bottom. She confronted the other officer, asked him about his relationship with Tamara. He told Alex Tamara was his girlfriend and that she often complained about Alex, claiming Alex had created a relationship between them in her head and was now essentially

stalking her. He laughed at Alex. When she later confronted Tamara, she laughed as well. Said she'd always wondered about lesbian sex. She told Alex it had lived up to everything she'd heard, but that Alex was silly to think there would ever be a chance at anything serious between them. Anything more than the 'sex on the side' as she called it. She told Alex she couldn't believe how long she'd been able to keep her on a leash like that."

Sal looked down at the floor through most of his recitation.

"That broke something in Alex. Her heart I guess. From that point forward, even when she eventually started dating again, it was never serious. Never more than passing interest. Regina was somewhat serious, but the minute it got to the point of talking about commitment and moving in and making plans, Alex bolted. She wouldn't let herself go there." He now looked up directly at Sydney. "Not until you came along."

Sydney gasped. "Oh, God. And then she saw Richard and me..."

"Yeah," Sal said. "And Morrison made a point of feeding that by claiming at every opportunity that you two were back together. Telling Alex that you were trying to figure out a way to let her down easy and that Alex needed to just be graceful and walk away."

Sydney realized how everything had then fallen into line for Richard, making it so easy for him to manipulate the facts.

"Then the explosion, and my memory." Sydney could imagine what was going through Alex's mind after her previous experience. "She thought she was just reliving it all over again. She thought I was doing to her what Tamara did."

"I don't think she thought you were being as malicious and manipulative," Tiffany said. "But, yeah. A big part of her thought you were perhaps uncertain about your commitment to...well, to being with her. But, Sydney, even with all that going on in her mind, she couldn't stay away from you."

Sydney saw Tiffany give a meaningful look to Jennifer.

"She couldn't stay away from the hospital. She was constantly seeking assurance that you were doing better, that you were healing."

"It's true, Syd. She was there all the time," Jennifer said. "It was another one of those things I noticed that finally clued me in to what was going on. But this background helps me understand the rest of it. How she told us to let you remember naturally and have the opportunity to make your own decision. A part of me was a little angry that she wouldn't put up more of a fight for you against Richard. But I think I understand better now."

Now it was Tiffany's turn to nod. "I knew there was something in Alex's past. I just didn't know it was something so...ugly." She turned to Sal. "You never told me."

"It wasn't my story to tell, hon. There's a part of me that feels I've violated a confidence telling it now. But I guess it needed to be told." He looked at Sydney again. "You need to understand Alex's fears. What this all did to her. You were seriously injured, but Alex was going through hell as well. She was worried about you, but unable to be with you. She was worried about her place, her worth, in your life. So as much as she could, she threw herself into her job, like she's always done. But I think she needed the job even more now, with all of this going on. And then that got taken from her, too."

"With her suspension, demanded by Richard," Sydney said. "He took the most important thing she had away from her."

"He took the two most important things in her life away from her," Sal said. "Not only was she suspended. Somehow Morrison hooked up with Ramos. Between the two of them they arranged the suspension and had Alex served a stay-away order."

“Lieutenant Ramos? The one who hates Alex? Wait a minute. A stay-away order?”

“Yep. If Alex goes anywhere near you or your home, she’ll face termination. As it is right now, she’ll face the investigation for the stalking and harassment allegations he’s lodged...on your behalf.”

“This is a nightmare. And it’s all a lie and a manipulation by that...” Sydney pulled out her cellular phone. “All right. Who do I have to call to make it stop?”

“Uh, you could call Internal Affairs, I guess. But I think they’d just add it to the investigation and shuttle you around, and you wouldn’t really accomplish anything too quickly. I’d say talk directly to Commander Freeman. Alex was working for him on the task force. He’s the one who had to issue the suspension and stay-away order, but Alex was pretty sure he didn’t agree with it.”

“Do you know his number?”

“Uh, no. I don’t have it. I can probably get it for you with a few calls, though.”

“Nope, that’s okay. He’s Counter Terrorism Bureau, right? I’m sure my boss probably has his direct number.” Sydney stood and began pacing as she waited for her call to connect with her boss, John, at the Major Crimes Unit of the District Attorney’s Office. Sydney was happy to finally feel like she had a direction to head, something to do to try and move forward and correct everything that had gone wrong. Within five minutes she had the number she needed. It would have been quicker, but John spent several minutes expressing his thrill at having Sydney healthy and her memory back. She quickly connected with the next call.

“Commander Freeman? Good afternoon. My name is Sydney Rutledge. I’ve been led to believe my name has been utilized in a punitive measure against Sergeant Alex Chambers.” The other occupants in the room watched as Sydney paced with the phone held to her ear.

“Ms. Rutledge, yes. I was made aware of the concerns that were brought to the attention of one of our lieutenants. I apologize for any disruption the actions of any member of our department may have caused you. There has been a formal investigation initiated and we have engaged in the appropriate measures to ensure there are no further issues pending the outcome of that investigation.”

Sydney sensed the regret in his voice as he gave her the polite and politically correct statement. “I see. Are you aware that Lieutenant Ramos, to whom this complaint was apparently made, never bothered to confirm the validity of these allegations with me before initiating action against Sergeant Chambers?”

“No, Ms. Rutledge, I’m afraid I was not aware of that. Are you saying—”

“What I’m saying, Commander, is the allegations against Sergeant Chambers are completely fabricated. They were maliciously lodged by one individual in an effort to manipulate me while my health was questionable. This was done in collusion with another individual, a member of your department, who knowingly and intentionally is attempting to damage Sergeant Chambers’s career.” Sydney drove on without giving Commander Freeman an opportunity to respond. “I’m in Glendale at the moment, Commander. I’ll be in your office in forty-five minutes at which time I will provide a formal statement that should put an end to this ridiculous investigation. I would like the stay-away order issued against Sergeant Chambers, allegedly to protect me, quashed immediately. I also intend to initiate a formal complaint against Lieutenant Ramos for his involvement in this, as he apparently felt it appropriate to utilize my name and reputation in his vindictive personal campaign against Sergeant Chambers. I assume you will have whoever needs to be present to accomplish this in your office by the time I arrive?”

“Yes, ma’am. You can rest assured I will. I look forward to it.” Sydney could almost sense the smile in his voice as she said goodbye and disconnected the call. She looked back at everyone in the room and saw them all smiling at her.

“Wow, that was impressive, Syd,” Sal said. “You just pretty much ordered a police commander around. Don’t be too hard on him when you get there, though, he’s a good guy. And I do believe he didn’t do anything more than what Ramos and Morrison manipulated IA into ordering him to do.”

“I believe it. Once I started explaining he sounded kind of like he was relieved, almost enthused about what I was asking for.”

“You mean what you were demanding,” Jennifer said, also smiling. She stood up. “And we better get going if we’re going to get downtown for this meeting you’ve now set up.”

“Yeah, you’re right.” Sydney turned back to Sal and Tiffany as they walked them to the door. “You don’t have any idea where Alex could be?”

“No, Syd. I’m sorry.” Tiffany leaned forward and gave her a hug, followed by Sal.

“She took off on her bike. She could be anywhere. Maybe up or down the coast. Maybe out to Vegas. Who knows,” Sal said. “I promise we’ll call you if we hear anything.”

FORTY MINUTES LATER Sydney and Jennifer walked into the office of the assistant commanding officer of the Counter Terrorism Bureau, where the secretary led them without delay into Commander Freeman’s inner office. The slim African-American commander stood and came from behind his desk.

“Ms. Rutledge?” he said, offering his hand. “I’m Isaac Freeman. Thank you very much for coming down to straighten this out.”

“Thank you for seeing me, Commander. This is my sister, Doctor Jennifer Rutledge. It’s been somewhat of a convenience to have my own personal medical doctor considering my recent injury.”

“That’s understandable, ma’am. It’s good to see you up and around and looking healthy.” He turned to Jennifer. “Doctor Rutledge, a pleasure.” He shook her hand then turned to introduce two other individuals in the room.

“May I introduce Captain Michael Sellers and Lieutenant Nancy Ingal, both from Internal Affairs.”

An hour later they were through, having clarified everything that had occurred, or not occurred. Sydney was confident she had cleared Alex’s name, as long as the officers from Internal Affairs acted immediately.

“So, Captain,” Sydney focused on Sellers, “I have your assurance that the case against Sergeant Chambers will be immediately closed.”

“Yes, ma’am. I will personally write the rationale to discontinue the complaint before we go home this evening.”

“And this ridiculous stay-away order?”

“Consider it void. I’ll personally notify Sergeant Chambers as soon as this meeting is over.”

Sydney turned back to Commander Freeman.

“And her suspension?”

“Also voided,” Commander Freeman said. “I’ll revert her existing suspension days to special duty assignments and notify her she can return to work tomorrow. There’ll be no record of any negative action against her.”

“Um, about that.” At this Sydney suddenly felt a little unsure. “You may not be able to reach her. Alex evidently took advantage of the suspension to, well, take a little vacation. She’s off on a road trip and we’re having a little difficulty reaching her.”

“Oh, okay. Well, we’ll make an effort, leave some messages on her voicemail if necessary, notifying her of everything. Since the department pretty much created this situation, I’m certainly not going to hold it against her that she’s not available. She had no idea this would play out so quickly. I’ll show her on a special detail until we’re able to make positive contact with her and figure out how to get her back to work. She’ll have to check in with me to retrieve her badge, I.D. and weapon.”

“That sounds reasonable. And you’ll ensure that she faces no retaliation from Lieutenant Ramos?”

It was Captain Sellers who spoke up this time.

“I can assure you, Ms. Rutledge, Lieutenant Ramos will be dealt with. I will also be personally filing a letter of complaint with the Office of the U.S. Attorney regarding the conduct of Richard Morrison.”

“Thank you.”

Sydney and Jennifer stood up and moved to the doorway, shaking hands and accepting the commander’s wishes for continued improvement to Sydney’s health. Then they made their way out of the building to Sydney’s car. Sydney pulled out her phone as she got in the passenger seat, trying once again to call Alex, reaching only her voicemail. She again hung up without leaving a message, as she had with each attempt.

Sydney sighed, restless and again concerned despite the satisfaction of the meeting they had just left. She definitely didn’t want to go home. She needed to keep moving forward, searching for Alex, somehow. She made a decision and pulled up another contact on her phone as Jennifer started the car and headed for the northbound 101 freeway.

“Court? Hey it’s Sydney.”

“Syd? It’s great to hear your voice.” There was a pause and Sydney smiled as she imagined what was going through her friend’s mind. Then Courtney spoke again, both hope and uncertainty could be heard in her voice. “Wait a minute, Syd? I mean...” She trailed off.

“Yeah, Court. It’s all of me. Complete with my memory intact.”

“Oh my, God. Syd! That’s great. God, Alex must be thrilled.”

“Um, well. I haven’t had a chance to see her. She’s kind of skipped town and turned her phone off. Nobody can reach her.”

“So Alex doesn’t know?”

“No. Not yet. We’ve got everyone looking for her, and people have left messages, but she got on her bike and headed out early this morning, and nobody knows which direction she headed. Sal doesn’t even think she had any specific destination in mind. She was just riding.”

“Oh, geez. Okay. So we gotta track her down.” There was a pause on the other end of the phone then Courtney spoke again. “I might know someone who can help out with that. Let me make a phone call. Are you at home?”

“No, we’re coming from downtown.”

“I’m at the club. Can you swing by here before you head home?”

“Yeah. We can do that.”

“Great, I may have some information for you when you get here.”

“Head for Hollywood,” Sydney said as she disconnected the call.

“What? We’re headed home.”

“Nope, head for Hollywood. I want to stop by Courtney’s club and see how bad it is. And she thinks she may know someone who might be able to help track down Alex.”

Chapter Twenty

SAM SPENT MOST of the day reviewing the growing number of reports and information that Teddy transmitted to her. Elena had joined up with Teddy at his apartment in Baltimore, having established her story of illness, which garnered her several unquestioned days of absence from the CIA facility in Langley, Virginia.

The three of them had discussed the developments and data that had been gathered over a line of communication Teddy had established and secured. Much of it was useless, but had to be reviewed carefully as they attempted to connect the dots of the conspiracy they strongly believed existed.

Elena agreed with Sam's assessment that the primary link appeared to be whoever owned the phone number contacted by Fenbrook, and that person was almost definitely Sam's as yet unidentified suspect from Tunisia. Elena was still waiting for feedback from her last connection who she thought might be able to identify him. Teddy was still mining the system in an effort to gain more information on that phone line, but it was proving difficult as the phone was set up to be extremely secure, with the minimal data Teddy had managed to obtain being encrypted.

Sam focused largely on the file on Congressman Vaughn Elena had prepared. It was a compilation of various unclassified open source and classified background reports on the congressman from various government sources. Suddenly Sam identified what it was that had been nagging her subconscious, and she picked up her cell phone and dialed Elena on her newly acquired prepaid phone.

"Elena, I've been going over the Vaughn file. He was on the House Select Committee on Intelligence."

"Yes. He was Vice Chair I believe."

"Remember we always had a feeling Congressman Jenkins had someone on one of the Intelligence Committees he was working with, either House or Senate?"

"Yes. You're thinking it was Vaughn? Wait a minute, are you thinking Vaughn was the target?"

"I don't know. But it would explain the involvement by someone in government. I cross referenced his schedule. He's had this visit to his congressional district calendared for quite a while. It was no secret that he engaged in this kind of community outreach effort during every congressional summer break. And they hit two places he was supposed to be present. It was pure dumb luck he wasn't right in the middle of the bomb at the Lambda Headquarters." Sam thought some more. "It wouldn't be hard to plan an attack then conceal the target in an overall campaign against the gay community. It would make his death look like collateral damage."

"When in actual fact he was the specific target, and all those other bombings were the real collateral damage," Elena said.

"Have Teddy pull Jenkins and Vaughn's correspondence, both official and personal. Everything he can find—e-mails, cellular and office phone records, and any requests he made for information from other government agencies, especially anything on covert ops and the black

market arms trade. I want to know what Vaughn has been working on, and I want to know if there's any record of Vaughn and Jenkins working together before Jenkins died in that questionable car wreck."

"We're on it, Sam. We'll talk later."

AS COURTNEY SPOKE to Sydney on the phone, Sam appeared through the rear door into the lounge, sparking an idea in Courtney's mind. She smiled at Sam then ended her conversation.

"Hi," she said as she put the phone down on the bar.

"Hi," Sam returned the greeting with what looked to Courtney to be an unusually shy smile. Courtney sensed Sam's uncertainty and so closed the distance between them, putting her arms around Sam's neck. Sam responded with more confidence, putting her own arms around Courtney's body in a comfortable embrace.

"How are you?" Sam asked after a tender but somewhat prolonged kiss.

"Good. Just trying to get an idea of what needs to be done," Courtney said as she waved one arm to indicate the burn-damaged interior of her club surrounding them. "I've had a few contractors and architects come in today. Since I've got to partially rebuild, I've got some ideas for some changes."

Sam looked around and nodded, not releasing her hold on Courtney. "It was really nice before. But I can see the logic in taking advantage of the opportunity to do what you want. It's kind of a blank slate. I know Alex would probably love it if you made it a sports bar," she added.

"A sports bar isn't quite what I had in mind. But, speaking of Alex, she's gone missing."

Sam nodded. "Yeah. She was pretty torn up about it and said she was going off the radar and hitting the road. Can't say I blame her. This has been pretty hard on her and I think having her job threatened was the last straw."

"I guess it's understandable," Courtney said. "But it turns out her timing kind of sucks."

"How so?"

"Sydney's back. I mean, her memory is back."

"You're kidding! That's great."

"Yep. And probably her first thought upon getting her memory back was to reach out to Alex, who's missing and shut her phone off."

"Oh, yeah. Like you said. Timing."

"So, I was thinking. You're a reporter, right?" Courtney said.

"Yes."

"And don't you reporters have those really cool super secret connections that can find out all kinds of information? Information you're not usually supposed to have access to?"

"You mean like connections that can maybe track down a certain wayward police sergeant?"

"Exactly. Sydney's going to stop by here shortly. I was hoping to maybe have some good news for her."

"Well, I can certainly try. Let me make a phone call." Sam released Courtney and pulled her cell phone from her pocket. She leaned forward to give Courtney another kiss before pulling up a number and putting the phone to her ear.

Courtney turned back to the bar where several sketches and drawings sat and began reviewing the various proposals she'd collected so far as she half listened to one side of Sam's conversation.

“TEDDY, I’VE GOT a little side job for you,” Sam said once the call connected.

“Okay, give me what you need. Then I’ve got some info for you,” Teddy said.

“I need to track someone down. She’s hit the road and gone off the radar. Cell phone probably won’t be any help, but I’m betting a simple credit card search will tell us where she’s at or which direction she’s heading. The name is Alex Chambers. Alexandria Chambers, actually. I don’t have a birthdate offhand, but she’ll have a billing address in Burbank, California, and employment with the LAPD.”

“Got it. That’s an easy one. I can get that in just a few minutes.”

Sam heard Teddy’s fingers on the computer keys through the call.

“Okay, its running,” Teddy said. “Now, we’ve got something for you.”

Sam looked up and saw Courtney focused on the papers spread across the bar top, so she turned away slightly.

“What’s up?” she said.

“I’m still doing the work up on Vaughn and Jenkins. But they definitely were in correspondence. I’ve got an e-mail sent between their secured congressional accounts where Jenkins sent a whole file of information to Vaughn back just a couple weeks before he died. That file included an analysis of arms sales to a bunch of African warlords and South American cartels. It included notations on intelligence files that existed on those sales that were never assigned for investigation.”

“The investigations were sandbagged at our end?”

“That’s what Elena thinks. Here, she wants to talk to you.” Sam waited and Elena’s voice came on the line a second later.

“Sam, Jenkins’s file indicates he felt someone on the inside was protecting high level arms sales. Not only were certain files archived when they shouldn’t have been, but the file also includes notes on active investigations where the covert operation was blown. In several cases the operatives were killed or their sources were assassinated.” Elena paused. “Sam, your Tunisia op is on the list.”

“Well, I guess we both knew that. So Jenkins was killed because he was starting to connect the dots and got too close. At some point, though, he transferred at least some of his suspicions to Vaughn. Why wait almost a year to move on Vaughn.”

“Because Vaughn wasn’t named to the Intelligence Oversight Committee until six weeks ago,” Elena said. “There doesn’t seem to be any indication Vaughn did anything with the information after he received it.”

“So Vaughn is now in a position with the authority to initiate a formal investigation and request information that they didn’t want him to see. So now he’s dangerous and needs to be dealt with. But to have him fall victim in the same way Jenkins did would’ve been suspicious.”

“Right. His death had to look like he wasn’t really the intended target. Just like we were thinking. Rather than him being specifically targeted for his knowledge of a traitor in the U.S. intelligence community, he was the unintended target of a domestic right-wing hate campaign. They needed it to look like collateral damage in a bombing campaign that started before he even left D.C. to return to his district for the congressional summer break.”

It was all starting to come together in exactly the way Sam had feared it might. But before it was theory. Sam had felt strongly enough to take certain precautions because of that theory, but it was a theory nonetheless. Now it was reality.

“Sam, there’s more. Teddy was able to get a little information on that number. The one Fenbrook called right after he was released and then again right before he was killed. It’s got good security, real good. Like he said, it’s likely one of ours. The number redirects numerous times throughout the world so we’re still trying to get a physical location, which we never do. But Teddy kind of reverse engineered the search here, and rather than concentrating on that number, he’s broken into the call records for every cellular carrier and is doing a search for other phones that have attempted to call that number. In the last thirty minutes that turned up some interesting information.”

“Well, don’t keep me in suspense. What did you guys find out?”

“One cellular phone called that number a couple different times. The dates and times link up with a period of time covering only while Vaughn was back here in his district. They also coincide with calls about an hour prior to his scheduled visits to Lambda Legal, and then about thirty minutes afterwards. Another call was made about an hour prior to his visit to the Hollywood LGBT Center. But there was no call made afterwards.”

“So someone started calling that number during Vaughn’s visit back here to his district, while the bombing campaign was happening. They called just prior to his visit to the two places where bombs were placed to try and kill him. They called after the failed attempt at the Lambda offices, but they didn’t call after the bombing at the Center.”

“Because that one was successful.”

“Because that one was successful,” Sam repeated.

“Who does the phone belong to?”

“Here’s the kicker. It’s a government phone. We’re working on identifying exactly who it’s issued to now.”

“We’re getting warmer, Elena.”

“Yeah, we are. We’ll get ahold of you as soon as we have something. Wait a minute. Here’s Teddy again. I think he’s got whatever information you were asking for earlier.”

“Okay, thanks.”

Teddy’s voice came over the phone next. “Sam, I got that credit card info you wanted.”

“Outstanding, let me have it, Ted.” Sam moved over to Courtney, still standing at the bar, then picked up a pencil and paper from amongst the various articles spread out in front of them.

“Chambers used her credit card to charge at a gas station in Laguna Beach, California this morning then at a diner in Mission Bay. But I think this is what you need. She’s got an open charge at a hotel in San Diego right now. The Coronado Island Regency. I’ve got the address if you need it.”

“No, that’s okay, Ted. I’m familiar with it. Coronado’s not a very big island. Thanks.”

Sam disconnected the call then slid the paper toward Courtney, tapping what she had written.

“That’s where Sydney will find her wayward sergeant. She’s got a room for at least tonight.”

“You were able to find her. That’s great!” Sam was pleasantly surprised when Courtney followed up with a kiss. A kiss, it seemed, neither of them wanted to stop. Then they were interrupted by a quiet clearing of a throat. Sam broke apart and looked at the end of the bar near the back entrance and saw Sydney and another woman standing there. Sydney had a very definite sparkle to her eye.

“Uh...hi, Syd,” Courtney said then quickly recovered and moved to take Sydney in a warm hug. “It’s great to have you back. I mean...well, you know what I mean.”

“I know what you mean,” Sydney said. “You remember my sister? I think you were introduced at the hospital.”

“Yeah.” Courtney extended her hand. “Jennifer, right?”

“That’s right. Hi again, Courtney,” Jennifer said, shaking hands.

“And this is Sam. She’s actually a friend of Alex’s from the military. She’s been in town reporting on the bombings,” Sydney said for Jennifer’s benefit.

Sam moved forward and leaned in to give Sydney a hug then also shook Jennifer’s hand. She turned back to Sydney.

“Alex is gonna be real happy to see you,” Sam said.

“God, I hope so. This is all such a mess.” Sydney turned to Courtney, an obviously hopeful look in her eyes.

“Yes,” Courtney said. “We have some information for you.” She leaned to the bar and retrieved the piece of paper. “Alex is checked in at the Coronado Island Regency Hotel for at least tonight.”

“She’s in San Diego?”

“As far as her credit cards are concerned, she is,” Sam said. Sydney looked at her.

“You got this?” Sam nodded and Sydney quickly gave her another hug. “Thank you, Sam. I can’t tell you how much I appreciate it.” She leaned over to hug Courtney again next. “Thank you, too. And you two look great together.” The last part was whispered into Courtney’s ear, but Sam clearly heard it.

“Now, I’ve got to get on the road. Come on, Sis. We’ve got traffic to beat to San Diego.” Sydney was already on her way out of the bar as Jennifer smiled and waved at the other two and followed.

“I’ve got some leads to follow up on for a story. I should get going,” Sam said. “Can you let me out the front? One of your contractors had his truck in the side driveway when I got here. So I just parked at the curb.”

They made their way out the front door after Courtney unlocked it then stood on the sidewalk beside Sam’s car. Having overcome her previous hesitancy, Sam pulled Courtney to her and initiated a much more passionate kiss. Their lips finally separated after several cars honked as they drove by on Santa Monica Boulevard. They stood gazing into one another’s eyes until Sam became aware of a car idling in the lane next to her parked vehicle. She looked over and saw a familiar face.

“So, she’s the reason you wouldn’t take me up on my offer the other night, huh, Sam?” Christina Perry called through her open passenger window. “I’m guessing we were way better together, Sam. But I gotta admit, I would’ve been open to a threesome. She better be careful, Sam. People around you have a way of getting hurt.” She cackled hysterically as she rolled the window up and drove away.

Sam shook her head and looked back at Courtney.

“I’m sorry. I’m sorry my sordid sexual past—” She was interrupted by Courtney’s fingers on her lips.

“Your past is your past, Sam. We all have one. It’s done.”

Sam leaned forward and caressed Courtney’s lips.

“Thank you,” she whispered before pulling back.

Courtney smiled and nodded then glanced over at Sam’s newly rented Dodge Charger.

“This is different than the car you had before. New rental?”

“Yeah. I thought the car Alex got for her assignment was kinda cool, so I traded in my rental for this one,” Sam said, not wanting to reveal her fears about her old car being known and possibly being tracked. Then she saw a look of sadness pass over Courtney’s eyes. “Hey, what’s up? You okay?”

“Sam, I just realized you’re only here temporarily. You travel all over the world. Geez, I don’t even know where you really live. What’s going to happen when this story is over? I mean, here we are thinking about a relationship but...” She looked up at Sam.

“Hey, don’t be throwing cold water on us yet.” Sam put her arms around Courtney and pulled them together, resuming the gentle closeness they had when Sydney arrived. “Have dinner with me tonight and let’s talk about it, okay?” She leaned in to give Courtney a brief kiss. “Please?”

Courtney looked at her then smiled. “A date?” she asked.

“Yes, Ms. Brennan. I want to take you on a date.”

“Then I accept.” Courtney delivered a final passionate kiss, reaching around to fondle Sam’s buttocks, breaking apart as she smiled. “We better stop now or I’ll have you undressed right here on the sidewalk.”

Sam took a deep breath to bring her heartbeat under control then gave Courtney a final hug.

“I’ll come by your place around seven tonight?”

“That sounds good, Sam. I’ll see you then. Oh, and, Sam.” Sam paused and turned back to Courtney before she stepped off the curb. “If that woman lays a finger on you, I’m going to break it. You’re mine now. Like I said. The past is in the past.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Sam said as Courtney turned to walk back into her club. Sam pulled her car from the curb, smiling and surprisingly gratified with Courtney’s statement of ownership.

SAM ANSWERED HER phone before the second ring, recognizing Elena’s new number.

“Give me some news, please,” she said without preamble.

“Oh, I’ve got news all right, Sam.” Sam stopped her pacing in her hotel room as she picked up on the urgent tenor of Elena’s voice. “We’ve identified your guy in the photo. My connection was able to do a hand search of personnel background files after we narrowed the likely date range for his recruitment. He’s been scrubbed from our systems, completely black ops. His name is Dale Miller. He was recruited right out of college, his talent was languages, but with no family connections and then his psych evals, he made a perfect wet team candidate.”

Elena was referring to the rarely acknowledged, very small cadre of independent assassins on the CIA payroll. There was no denying some agents engaged in operations that occasionally required the application of lethal force. The CIA also had covert paramilitary teams that operated in the Global War on Terror and engaged in the occasional assassination or sniper kills of high ranking government and military officials. But wet team members had the training and the psychological profile required to kill without question. Their targets might include men, women or children. Collateral damage was rarely a concern for them. They were problem solvers and got the job done no matter what the cost.

“It looks like he’s been off the books for at least ten years. He just disappeared as far as the Agency was concerned. And no one asked any questions. One guess who his recruiter and handler was.”

“Stansfield,” Sam answered without hesitation.

“Yep. We’ve had some additional luck in that area, though. Well, not luck. Teddy’s a genius, Sam. Gotta tell you. I knew he was good when you started working with him off the books. But I didn’t realize how truly good he is. He’s managed to trace money transfers from multiple foreign accounts into an offshore account, Caymans I think. That account, under several layers, eventually can be linked back to Stansfield. That account has also made wire transfers into a couple other accounts. One is Swiss, we’re betting is Miller’s, though cracking into it may be challenging. The other we shouldn’t have trouble tracing. That one’s less secure, set up by someone with less experience in this game.”

“Take the money,” Sam said immediately. “Take it all, clean it out. We’ve got to force their hand, make them panic. I’m pretty sure having their money disappear might do that. Maybe then they’ll make a mistake.”

“We both thought you might say that. Teddy was already set up to go there.” Sam heard Teddy’s voice in the background. “Okay, Sam. We’re in business. Teddy’s siphoning the money now. He says he can probably have the accounts cleaned out within a couple hours.”

“That should force some chatter between them that we can track.”

“Yeah. I need to figure out politically how I’m going to play this to make sure we’re protected. I’ve got to get support before I can move on Stansfield.”

Sam paused as the information sank in and the plan formed in her mind.

“I’m betting Miller is still under directions to find me and neutralize me. You gotta figure that’s why Stansfield had me recalled. He knew I was investigating Prizrak and was getting closer. There’s no way he would’ve given me access to this investigation, with his involvement, unless he figured he could have two targets in one place for Miller. So Miller’s still gotta be here in

L.A. looking for me.” Sam was up and pacing again as she thought it through. “So I’ve gotta give him a target. I’m gonna have to come up for air, get visible and back on their radar. Maybe even let them know I’m responsible for their money going missing.”

“That’s a dangerous game you’re proposing, Sam. Give me some time to get things organized and I can get a team in place to back you up. I’ve still got a cadre of people I can trust that’s untouchable to Stansfield. With a little luck I can have them organized and in position by tomorrow morning.”

“Okay. I’ve got something I’ve got to do this evening, anyway.” Sam thought to herself the romantic evening she had planned with Courtney was not going to happen quite the way she had previously imagined. “Elena, when this is over. I’m gonna take some time off.”

“Okay...not that you haven’t earned it, Sam. But this is just, surprising.”

“Yeah...well...I’ve got some personal things I need to...take care of.”

“Sam, am I going to lose you?”

“I...I don’t know.” Sam answered honestly.

“You’ve met someone.” It was a statement by Elena, not a question.

“I...yeah.”

“Do you love her?”

“I think so. It’s all happened pretty fast,” Sam said quietly. “But

I really want to take the time to give it a chance.” “I understand, Sam. We’ll figure it out when this over, I promise. You’ll have my full support.” “Thanks.”

“YOU REALLY DO look incredible tonight.” Sam said as they stood on Courtney’s balcony late that night. She had knocked on the door of Courtney’s condo earlier in the evening and had it open to reveal Courtney wearing an emerald green, off the shoulder cocktail dress. The brilliant green highlighted Courtney’s eyes, which at the moment were shimmering with intensity.

“I mean, wow,” Sam said, unable to keep her hands from running along the silky material covering Courtney’s body.

The hand slipped around Courtney’s waist to her back, pulling their bodies firmly together as she leaned down to engage Courtney in a slow and tender kiss. They stood looking into each other’s eyes for several seconds of silence after their lips finally parted.

“Sam, what is it? What’s wrong?”

“I’m not going to be able to see you for a few days. I’ve got to finish up this...this story. I’m not sure exactly how long that will take. Maybe just a few days.”

“And then you’ll be off to the next story won’t you? And you don’t even know where that will be.”

“No!” Sam’s exclamation was strident. She took Courtney’s hands in her own. “No,” she said more quietly. “I told my boss that when this is done I’m taking some time off. She’s okay with that. I mean, I haven’t taken a vacation in...well, in forever.”

“Time off?” Courtney asked.

“Yes. I want to give us some time. Then I’ll figure out what I’m doing next. Who knows, maybe traveling isn’t for me anymore. I’ve done it for a long time.” Sam shrugged and looked out at the horizon again before looking back at Courtney. “I hope I’m not...I mean...I don’t want you to feel like you have to...” Sam stumbled over her words and Courtney finally rescued her.

“Sam, are you saying you’re taking off for me? For us?” Sam nodded slowly.

“Well, yes. If that’s okay. I mean, I’d really like to see where this goes. But I don’t want you to feel—”

Courtney suddenly covered her lips in a ravishing kiss, leaving her breathless when they separated.

“Sam?”

“Yeah?”

“Shut up and take me to bed.”

Chapter Twenty-one

IT WAS LATE in the evening when Sydney and Jennifer pulled into the hotel parking lot on Coronado Island, just over the Bay Bridge from San Diego. Sydney released the breath she didn't even know she'd been holding when she saw a familiar black and chrome motorcycle parked in a space in the corner of the lot.

"That's her bike!" Sydney pointed out the motorcycle. Jennifer nodded as she silently sighed in relief.

"All right," Jennifer said as she parked. "Shall we go in and call her room?" Sydney nodded in response then exited the car, leading the way to the hotel lobby. Jennifer almost ran into her back when Sydney stopped suddenly.

"Syd? You okay?"

Sydney turned to her, tearing up slightly.

"What if she won't see me, Jen? After everything that's happened, everything I've put her through? Richard threatened her career. You heard what Sal said about what happened to her before. God, what if she hates me? She might not even want to have anything to do with me anymore."

"Syd, I'm pretty sure that's not going to happen. I don't think she ever stopped caring." Sydney looked at her, uncertainty written across her face. Jennifer nodded to emphasize her words. "There's something you don't know." Jennifer put her arm around Sydney and led her into the hotel. "While you were still not remembering, she and I talked quite a bit when I finally figured out she was the Alex you always talked about. She was constantly at the hospital before that, kind of hiding, but there. Then afterwards, when I told her I knew, she would call and text me to see how you were doing. She always wanted to know if you needed anything."

"But why didn't she see me? Talk to me? Why didn't you tell me?"

Jennifer shook her head in response and a sigh escaped her lips.

"She swore me to secrecy. Both Tyler and me. She didn't want me to tell you anything about the two of you. She didn't want you to feel pressure in any way. The way she explained it, she didn't want you to be with her out of some misguided sense of premature commitment." Sydney looked up sharply and Jennifer shrugged.

"Those were her words, not mine. But considering what Sal said about her past, it begins to make sense that this whole scenario would make her a little gun shy. But then Richard did his bit with her job, and she was told it was at your request." Sydney's eyes welled up with tears and her shoulders dropped.

"Come on," Jennifer said, pulling Sydney through the doors and into the hotel. "Let's do what we came here for and find your woman."

Several minutes later Sydney's head dipped once again in momentary defeat as the desk clerk hung up the phone.

"I'm sorry, ma'am. There's no answer in Ms. Chambers's room."

“Okay, no big deal,” Jennifer said, hugging Sydney about the shoulders once again. “You know she’s staying here. Her motorcycle is outside, so she can’t have gone far. We’ll just wait here.”

“You talking about the lady driving the big black and chrome bike out front?” the young female clerk standing nearby asked. “You looking for the woman who rode in on that? Tall, short sandy hair, athletic looking?”

“Yes,” Sydney said. “Have you seen her recently?”

The clerk nodded and Sydney noticed the obvious look of attraction in the young woman’s eyes.

“Yeah,” she said. “She left about thirty or forty minutes ago. Wearing a tank top and shorts. Looked like she was maybe going for a run.” The clerk pointed in the direction of the doors across the lobby which led out to the pool courtyard and the beach beyond. “There’s a paved walkway that runs along the beach up toward Mission Bay. She might’ve headed out there.” Sydney’s gaze followed where she pointed then turned back to the woman.

“Thank you,” she said as she grabbed Jennifer. “Come on.”

They walked out the door and around the pool toward the small sand dune beyond as the late evening summer sun began to set over the ocean beyond. As they made their way over the slight rise and had a full view of the beach they were virtually alone. A solitary figure sat on the sand about fifty feet away, watching the sunset. Sydney came to a halt, recognizing the silhouette. Uncertainty flooded her mind once again.

Jennifer seemed to sense her hesitation and gently rubbed her back. “She’s waiting for you, Syd,” she said, taking her sister’s purse then giving her a gentle push. “Go to her.”

Sydney took a deep breath and headed out onto the sand.

SEVERAL HOURS AFTER arriving in San Diego, Alex went for a run. While the ride down from L.A. was pleasant, it failed to calm her racing mind. She’d hoped her normal coping mechanism of physical exertion would help settle her mind. It hadn’t.

She now sat on the sand dune watching the sun set over the ocean. Her mind was still full of thoughts of Sydney and what she once thought could have been. So all encompassing and melancholy was her train of thought that she didn’t register the familiar voice say her name until it came a second time. She turned her head to see the figure standing behind her. She quickly pushed herself to her feet.

“Sy...” Alex started to exclaim then stopped herself and tried to control her emotions before continuing. “Ms. Rutledge,” she said in a monotone voice. “What are you doing here? Where’s your fiancé?”

Alex looked beyond Sydney, half expecting to see Richard approaching across the sand. Her eyes came to rest on Jennifer standing at the top of the sand dune. As Alex watched, the woman gave her a brief wave and a reassuring smile, and then Jennifer turned to head back to the hotel. Alex’s gaze returned to Sydney as she heard her sob.

“Alex!” Sydney took a step and appeared to stumble. Instinctively Alex jumped toward Sydney, catching her as she collapsed. “I remember,” Sydney sobbed as she clutched at Alex. “I remember everything.”

Alex still hesitated to fully embrace what she was hearing.

“You remember...everything?” she repeated. Sydney nodded then lifted her head to look Alex in the eyes.

“Yes, everything. I remember you. I remember us.”

Upon hearing this Alex released the emotion and relief she'd been restraining. Her strong arms went around Sydney as she pulled the woman to her. Sydney buried her face in Alex's chest and sobbed openly, overcome by her relief at Alex's acceptance.

“I'm so sorry, Alex,” Sydney mumbled into Alex's shirt as she held tightly to her.

“Shhh. You have nothing to apologize for,” Alex said. “You were injured, you lost your memory. None of this was your fault. You couldn't control any of it.”

“But I knew something wasn't right. Even missing all that time. I knew deep down that Richard and I were wrong.” She lifted her head to look up at Alex once again. “But when you were there, the few times we were together, even without remembering anything, I knew you were someone special, that we were somehow meant to be. I should have acted on those feelings, Alex. I shouldn't have put you through this, I shouldn't have let Richard...” Sydney's eyes began to tear up again.

“Please forgive me, Alex,” she whispered. “Please come back to me.”

“Shhh,” Alex said again. “There's nothing to forgive and I never really left you.” Alex took Sydney's hand and held it over her heart. “Not here. I'll always be here for you.”

They stood in each other's arms looking into each other's eyes for several moments.

“I missed you so much, Alex. Deep inside I had this big empty space in my heart and soul because you were missing from my life. I know that now.” She leaned up and tenderly kissed Alex's lips. “I don't ever want to feel that empty again,” she said when their lips parted. Alex could only nod and tighten her arms around Sydney, too overcome to speak.

They stood in that embrace for several moments, Sydney resting against Alex's chest, listening to her heartbeat. Eventually Alex felt Sydney shiver as a breeze blew in off the ocean.

“Come on,” she said. “Let's get inside. We can talk more there.”

They made their way over the dune and across the pool courtyard, Alex's hand resting in the small of Sydney's back, hesitant to break the contact between them.

They entered the hotel lobby and saw Jennifer seated in a chair, paging through a magazine. She stood as they approached, a smile taking over her face.

“Hey, Alex,” Jennifer said, stepping forward and putting her arms around the taller woman. “It's really good to see you again.”

“You, too,” Alex replied as she returned the hug. “Thank you,” she whispered more quietly into her ear.

Jennifer gave her a smile and a nod as she pulled away then moved next to put her arms around Sydney.

“How ya doing, Sis?” she asked, handing Sydney her purse.

“Much better now,” Sydney said. “And getting better by the minute.” She took Alex's hand when Jennifer stepped back.

“Well, I went ahead and got a room for the night,” Jennifer said. “It's a little bit late to head back to L.A. I'll leave you two and you can get ahold of me tomorrow morning to plan the next move.”

“Thanks, Jen,” Sydney said.

Alex simply smiled and nodded. Jennifer stepped forward to give Sydney a final quick hug.

“No rush, Syd,” she whispered in Sydney's ear. “I'll find something to occupy my time until you call tomorrow. Probably shopping. You two take your time together.” She took a step back.

“Now I’m going to go enjoy a drink.” She gave them a wave and turned and walked to the lobby bar.

Alex watched her depart and was suddenly nervous and unsure of what to say next. “So, you want to head upstairs?” she finally said. “I just took a run so I really need to jump in the shower.”

Sydney nodded in response.

“Do you have a bag or anything?” Alex asked.

Sydney shook her head. “No,” she said. “I left in kind of a hurry.”

Alex couldn’t hide the smile upon hearing that. “That’s all right, we’ll figure something out.”

They got on the elevator and Alex pushed the button for the tenth floor. As the doors closed Sydney reached down and took Alex’s hand in both of hers. Alex relished the ongoing contact and their hands remained together, fingers entwined, as the elevator came to a stop and Alex led the way to her room and unlocked the door. She held it open to allow Sydney to precede her into the spacious ocean view room. Sydney made her way across the sitting area to the glass door and balcony.

Alex stood still and watched her silently for several moments. She sensed Sydney seemed to be experiencing the same touch of nervousness she was.

“Make yourself comfortable,” Alex said, breaking the silence. “I’ll take a quick shower.” She grabbed a change of clothes and headed into the bathroom.

Despite being thrilled with Sydney’s presence, Alex couldn’t keep some rather disturbing thoughts from running through her mind as she stood beneath the water stream. As happy and relieved as she was to have Sydney back, remembering their relationship, she couldn’t help but wonder what may have transpired in the almost two weeks they’d been kept apart. She took it for granted Sydney and Richard had likely been at least somewhat intimate. As much as she tried to accept it, she couldn’t seem to get past it.

It wasn’t that she blamed Sydney, who after all had no clue, no memory of what had transpired in the past year. But she did hold Richard responsible for the act of deception. Alex’s emotions jumped back and forth between rage at Richard’s manipulations and revulsion at the picture in her mind of him intimately touching Sydney. Alex’s shower grew longer as she fought for control of her emotions and acceptance of what she had convinced herself were the facts of the situation.

By the time Alex exited the bathroom, now dressed in boxers and a t-shirt, Sydney had moved out onto the balcony. Alex stood watching through the open glass doors as Sydney leaned on the balcony railing. Alex was struck again by the thought that Sydney looked as nervous and uncertain as she felt.

Alex moved across the room and silently through the door, her primary urge was to simply provide comfort to Sydney. She stopped mere inches behind Sydney and rested her hand on Sydney’s shoulder.

SYDNEY WATCHED ALEX retreat to the bathroom. The door didn’t quite close behind her, but Sydney couldn’t help but think that not too long ago that same door wouldn’t have been even partially closed between them.

“Before she would’ve undressed in here and I would probably be in the shower with her,” Sydney mumbled to herself. “God, I feel like she thinks I’ve cheated on her.”

Sydney stopped, standing absolutely still as she thought over her previous statement. “Oh, my God, she probably thinks Richard and I...”

She turned away and opened the glass door, stepping onto the balcony. She stood silently watching the water, unaware of the passage of time.

“Hey,” Alex said quietly. “How are you doing?”

Sydney straightened up then tentatively leaned back into Alex. Reassurance flooded through her as Alex’s hand dropped from her shoulder to her hip, accepting this position of closeness that had always been so natural to the two of them.

“Better than I’ve been in a while,” she said. Alex’s other arm wrapped around her waist, Alex’s hand coming to rest against her stomach, pulling her back to snuggle them more closely together. Sydney leaned her head back against Alex’s shoulder and felt Alex’s light kiss near the top of her head.

“God, I’ve missed you,” Alex whispered.

Sydney reached to her stomach and covered Alex’s hands with her own, trapping Alex’s arms around her as the two stood together in silence, listening to the waves crashing below them. Sydney finally took a deep breath.

“Alex, there’s something I need to tell you.” Sydney felt Alex tense. She turned in Alex’s arms then re-initiated the contact between them and pulled Alex’s hands to her hips.

“You need to hear this, Alex,” she said.

Alex took a deep breath. She looked into Sydney’s eyes and nodded.

“Over the last two weeks, Richard and I—”

“Syd, it doesn’t matter,” Alex said.

Sydney felt Alex’s arms stiffen, but her hands didn’t move from Sydney’s waist. Her eyes remained fixed to Sydney’s. Sydney realized she’d guessed right. Alex clearly assumed she and Richard had been physically intimate, to some degree at least.

“I mean, you didn’t know about us. You didn’t remember. You thought Richard was... that you were still...” Sydney quieted Alex with a finger to her lips.

“Alex, nothing happened. Richard and I, we didn’t do anything, at all. Nothing ever happened. Except I should’ve been more forceful with him when he got pushy. Even what you saw, before the...before I was hurt...that was him playing a game. Tyler told me you were at the door. But you didn’t see all of it. You didn’t see me push him away.”

Alex’s eyes closed and her head fell forward to rest against Sydney’s forehead as she let out a breath of obvious relief. When her eyes opened Sydney was looking at her with an understanding smile.

“I know it shouldn’t matter, with your memory and everything,” Alex said quietly. “And it wouldn’t have changed how I feel about you. But...” Alex paused and then shrugged, clearly not knowing exactly what to say.

“I understand,” Sydney said. “If the roles were reversed the whole idea would’ve driven me crazy.” She leaned her head against Alex’s chest when Alex drew her into a close embrace. With her ear pressed to Alex’s chest, she swore she actually heard Alex’s heart beat slow and calm.

“I knew you were someone special,” Sydney said as they looked out over the ocean. “Nothing really made sense because I couldn’t remember anything after the end of the trial. But somewhere inside I knew. When I saw you it was so comforting. Then when you’d leave...” She paused and looked up to see Alex gazing down at her, obviously waiting for her to complete the thought.

“Empty,” Sydney finally said. “When you were gone it felt empty. I felt overwhelmingly lost.”

Alex caressed Sydney’s cheek and Sydney leaned into the touch.

“I love you, Sydney Renee Rutledge. I’m sorry I didn’t have the courage to tell you sooner because deep inside I’ve known it for a long time.”

Sydney smiled back at her. “And I love you, Alexandria Kendall Chambers. I’m so sorry for what you went through with all this. Maybe if I’d told you sooner, when I knew, it would’ve made this easier for you. Thank you for being here for me, even when I..when...” Sydney’s eyes started to water as she thought again about what had happened between them. “God, Alex. I’m just so sorry.”

“I’ll always be here for you, Syd,” Alex said. “As long as you’ll have me.” She leaned down and kissed Sydney, not initially intending anything further. But Sydney’s hand moved to the back of Alex’s neck, trapping their lips together and the kiss grew in intensity. Sydney’s tongue pressed against Alex’s lips, requesting entry which was quickly granted. The passionate kiss went on for quite a while as both women needed the intimate connection. Sydney finally pulled away from the kiss.

“Can we go to bed, Alex, please? Can you just hold me for the night? I need to feel you near me.”

Alex simply nodded then leaned down and swept one arm behind Sydney’s knees, lifting her to cradle her in her arms as she carried her back into the bedroom.

Chapter Twenty-two

SAM TRIED TO brush the memories of the previous night from her mind and focus on the job at hand. When she left Courtney's early that morning she'd returned to her rented condominium. Abandoned originally because she felt it was known and monitored, and probably bugged. The decision to make herself visible and appear reachable made this the first logical step. There she retrieved her Agency issue cell phone that she'd left charging in the condo. Then she'd gotten in her original rental vehicle, the Chrysler Sebring, also quite likely being tracked. She had surreptitiously parked her second car, the one rented by Teddy under an alias, in a long term garage several blocks away. She figured she would leave it available in case of emergency. It was always good to have a fallback plan.

Sam then drove to a press conference being held at the Federal Building downtown where the final conclusions of the inter-agency task force and bombing investigation were being released. There she played the role of attentive A.P. reporter, even ensuring she was caught within the background view of several television news cameras as they filmed their respective reporters. She was, after all, trying to make herself visible.

None of this involved any hidden agenda beyond simply forcing a confrontation. Stansfield would, without a doubt, know the game being played when Sam was visible once again immediately after his money went missing. They would come after her, and they knew she would be expecting them. As Elena had said, it was a dangerous game she was playing. But Sam saw no other way. She had to force the showdown between her and Miller. She assumed Elena would take care of Stansfield, politically or otherwise.

Sam spoke to Elena earlier in the day and was assured a team of trusted field operatives were inbound. She glanced at her watch as she walked from the pressroom through the lobby of the Federal Building. Those agents should have arrived at the airport an hour ago. They were flying into Ontario, east of downtown, avoiding the confusion and notoriety of LAX. That should put them downtown and available within the next hour. The lead agent would then contact her on her alternate phone to coordinate any activities. So, at this point, it remained a waiting game for Sam.

Sam allowed herself to consider more pleasant thoughts for a moment as she leaned on the granite wall in a tucked away corner of the lobby and dialed Courtney's cell number from the burner phone she still considered safe. She got voicemail and left a brief message.

"Hi, Court. Just thinking about you. I hope your day is going okay. Um, I miss you. I'll try you again a little later."

She hung up and dialed the number at the club, thinking Courtney was probably there. She got the automated message explaining the club was temporary closed for remodeling. She tried Courtney's private office line and left a message there as well.

Sam's phone rang, displaying Elena's new number.

"What have you got?" Sam answered with no preamble.

“Teddy was able to single out who that phone was issued to. You remember we figured out it was a government issued phone that made the call to the same number Fenbrook was calling? Someone very pointedly buried those records.”

“Who’s it belong to?”

“It was issued to a member of Congressman Vaughn’s staff. Christina Perry. Why does that name sound familiar to me, Sam?”

Sam sat down as this information hit her. “Shit!”

“Sam? Who is she?”

“She’s the one that got me kicked out of the Navy.”

“Oh yeah. That’s why her name sounded familiar.” Elena was familiar with Sam’s history and the circumstances behind her leaving the Navy, having been Sam’s original recruiter and handler. “Well, a tiger doesn’t change her stripes. She’s always been about personal gain and power plays. She’s playing with the really big boys now. Her number also had calls in the past to a number we’re pretty sure is associated with Stansfield. So she’s been on his payroll for a while. It looks like she got a job on Vaughn’s staff shortly after he got his assignment on the Intelligence Oversight Committee. Before that she hopped around a little bit with the Senate, the House, even did some time on the staff of one of the deputy directors in the FBI.”

“She’s been working for Stansfield the whole time. She got those jobs at his direction, I’m betting, for very specific reasons,” Sam said.

“That’s my thought, too. All of the senators and congressman she’s been associated with have sat on sensitive committees or positions of influence. No doubt she was gathering information for Stansfield.”

“And Stansfield really is Prizrak. Shit.” Sam tried to bring her brain under control as it ran through an overload of information. “So Christina is Stansfield’s mole. She set up Vaughn. Might’ve set up others. Miller is his assassin. He was in Tunisia and took care of the problems there after Stansfield directed him to get rid of me and my connections. He’s the one who killed Kersa,” Sam added quietly.

Then a terrifying thought suddenly entered her brain. Kersa had been killed simply because she was close to Sam. Christina saw her with Courtney. Christina’s words came back to her in a rush.

“She better be careful, Sam. People around you have a way of getting hurt.”

Sam was suddenly out the door, running for her car, parked around the corner.

“Elena, have Teddy track Christina’s phone, now! Ping it, keep pinging it! I need to know where she’s at.”

Sam was already in the car with the motor running when her Agency issue phone rang, displaying a number she didn’t recognize.

“Elena, I have to go, I’ll call you back. Get me a location for Christina Perry.” She hung up and lifted the other phone, connecting that call. She put the phone to her ear without saying a word.

“Samantha. Do you know who this is?” The rough voice came through the phone and Sam immediately flashed back several years to the last and only time she’d heard that voice. It had been on a pier in Tunisia, right before he cut the throat of an innocent young woman.

“Yes,” was all Sam said.

“Good. There’s someone else here who would like to speak to you.”

There was dead air for a few seconds and then Courtney’s voice came over the line, sounding scared and confused.

“Sam?”

“Court—” Sam was cut off as Miller came back on the line.

“Now that I have your attention, you have something that belongs to me and a couple of my companions. Several million somethings as a matter of fact. I want all the money back in the accounts or your girlfriend dies. When I see it returned to the original accounts, I’ll tell you where to meet us. If I don’t see the money, she dies. If you don’t show up when I tell you to, she dies. Pretty simple, don’t you think?”

“I need time. I don’t do the computer work. I have to get ahold of my associate who does that. And it can’t transfer all at once, I do know that. We had to take it out in pieces, so I’m assuming we’ll have to put it back in pieces.” Sam knew it was a weak bid for time, but it was all she had. She continued driving up the 101 freeway toward Hollywood as she negotiated. She could only guess that’s where they were, hoping they hadn’t taken Courtney too far out of the area.

“If I don’t see money start to transfer into those accounts within the next thirty minutes, she dies. Get it done.” The line was disconnected.

“Shit!” Sam reached frantically for the second phone and called Elena back.

“Tell me you have her, please, Elena.” Sam had picked up on Miller’s reference to “us,” implying he had a companion in his abduction of Courtney. She pinned everything on the likelihood that accomplice was Christina and she was with Miller now.

“We’re getting a solid return signal from her phone. Teddy’s pulling up the satellite image of the location now.” There was a pause then Elena went on. “It’s the club, Sam. The club that got firebombed. That’s where her phone is.”

“Send the team!” Sam ordered. “I’m about three miles out. I can’t wait for them. They have a hostage. They’re going to kill her if they don’t see money start moving back into the accounts within,” she moved the phone away from her face and looked at the clock on the screen, “within twenty-six minutes. And track every call that’s made out of that location. They’ll probably be calling Stansfield.”

“Okay. The team won’t be too far behind you. They were just about downtown when you called. I’ll have Teddy start depositing a little bit of money at a time into the one we figured out was Perry’s account. She’s the easiest to track and the least trained at this kind of thing. Maybe that’ll delay them a bit. Who’s the hostage, Sam?”

“Someone important to me. Her name is Courtney Brennan. I’ve got to go in. I can’t let anything happen to her. I’ll try and delay until the team can get there. But tell them to get her out. Please, Elena, no matter what happens to me, they’ve got to get her out.”

COURTNEY’S MIND WAS a jumble. She was still a little dizzy and slightly nauseous from the blow to the head she’d taken from that crazy ex of Sam’s. She had just met with another contractor who gave her a remodel estimate and was alone in the lounge bar looking at the diagrams when the woman came storming in raging about some kind of money she claimed Sam had stolen from her. At the last minute Courtney saw the gun in her hand, right before it was swung at her. She’d tried to dodge the strike but had taken a glancing blow from the handgun wielding woman before her male companion pulled her off Courtney. When she sat up and could see straight, several minutes later, she noticed he too held a gun.

The man with the rough voice ordered the woman to shut up then made a phone call to Sam. He held the phone to her face and when she reached up to take the phone from him he pointed the gun at her and shook his head.

“Just say something so your girlfriend knows it’s you,” he’d ordered. She’d barely gotten Sam’s name across her lips before he pulled the phone away again. She heard him mention something about money and accounts, demanding some kind of transfer then she was terrified to hear him threaten to kill her if Sam didn’t do what he ordered.

Now she waited and watched as they argued.

“I want my money and then you and Stansfield better get me the hell out of here,” the woman demanded.

“Would you shut up? We don’t mention names...ever!”

“What? It’s not like it matters. As soon as Rousseau gets here we’re gonna kill them both anyway.” Courtney’s eyes grew wide at that comment. The woman noticed and once again focused her attention on Courtney.

“That’s right sweetheart. You have your wonderful girlfriend to blame for that. I warned you people around Sam tend to get hurt.”

“I said, be quiet,” the man ordered, having just gotten off the phone with someone else. He’d been too far away for Courtney to hear the conversation, and her attention had been focused on the irate female pacing in front of her with the gun in her hand. He pushed the woman away from Courtney.

She looked at him angrily then back at Courtney seated on the floor against a sofa, not having moved far after being initially knocked down. The woman glanced at the bar top and something seemed to catch her eye. She put the gun down on the bar and reached over, picking up a business card then laughed.

“Samantha Black. Associated Press.” She laughed some more, then looked over at Courtney and repeated it. “Associated Press. This is just so classic. You don’t even know what your girlfriend’s real name is, much less what she does for a living, do you?” She laughed some more, then tossed the card back onto the bar top. “So would it shock you to know your girlfriend is a secret government agent?” She leaned back laughing even louder.

The man seemed to be watching Courtney closely then crouched down in front of her.

“I can see that bit of information comes as a bit of a surprise to you.” He smiled in a menacing way. “Your intrepid Agent Black and I go way back. We have a history. The last time we met I left that little calling card on her back. Perhaps you know the one I’m talking about?”

Courtney thought immediately of the massive scar running down Sam’s back. The man chuckled then stood and walked away toward the front door of the club.

Courtney put her head down, thinking about what the woman had just said. Sam was a government agent? Could that be true or was the woman crazy? Something was going on since two people were in her club with guns, threatening to kill her.

She heard the man standing near the door talking on the phone once again.

“Any movement yet? No? Well she’s got,” he looked at his watch before continuing, “about four minutes left on the time limit we gave her. Okay.” He hung up the phone and Courtney’s eyes met his as he turned away from the door. They were cold and calculating. There was no doubt in her mind that he could kill her without a second thought.

SAM PARKED HER car a block from the club and approached on foot. She hoped they weren't actively tracking the car or her phone at this moment, or they would know she was coming. But she didn't have time to take any precautions. She passed the high windows of the nightclub half of the building, approaching the front of the lounge half. Most of the windows were boarded up, but two remained intact, though coated over from ash and sludge from the fire.

Sam slowly raised her head to peek a slightly cleaner corner of the first window she came upon, hoping her silhouette would not be too noticeable to the occupants. It took her a moment to focus through the blurry black coating, but she made out Christina at the bar then saw a figure move off to the left, near the front door. Then her eyes came back to focus in the direction Christina was looking and noticed Courtney as she sat on the floor.

Sam decided if she came in through the back door that would put her closest to Courtney. But it would also mean Miller and Christina would be facing her, limiting her element of surprise. If she came in through the nightclub and through the swinging double doors into the lounge, she would be behind the two, but farthest away from Courtney. But that way Courtney was less likely to be caught in the crossfire as well.

Her decision made, Sam withdrew from the window and went to the doors of the nightclub, pulled out her lock-pick set and silently entered the dimly lit nightclub within less than a minute. The limited light coming in through the few high windows gave Sam just enough illumination to avoid the tables and chairs interspersed around the dance floor as she made her way to the sound insulated double doors.

Now was the tricky part. Sam had no way of knowing whether anyone's positions had shifted over the last two minutes. The doors between the nightclub and the lounge were not locked and would swing freely, but had no windows. For all Sam knew, either Miller or Christina, or both, were currently facing directly at the doors and would know she was coming before she saw them. So she had another decision to make. She could either rush in, using the element of surprise that would exist even if they did happen to be looking at the door. Or she could open the door slowly, hoping to remain covert and be able to further assess the situation.

Sam made the calculated decision to try and remain covert as long as possible, taking the chance that both of them would likely remain facing Courtney. She drew her weapon, checked her back pocket for the extra magazine of ammunition she had purposely retrieved earlier that morning, and then from a crouching position slowly began to push one of the swing doors.

As the door opened a couple of inches, Sam had the angle to see Christina at the bar and Courtney with her head down on her knees seated on the floor near the middle of the room. She couldn't see Miller, who must still be near the front door. Christina was scrolling through her phone and as Sam watched, the woman suddenly popped off the barstool.

"They've started the transfer!" Christina moved away from the bar across the room from Sam's right to her left. As Sam began to pull the door open farther, her eye caught the butt of a handgun sitting on the bar top where Christina had been.

"Thank goodness for idiots who leave their gun behind for a gun fight," Sam thought to herself as she pulled the door open farther. She had it open far enough to see Christina showing Miller her cell phone as they stood with their backs to her. Sam glanced back at Courtney, whose head was still down, her forehead resting on her knees.

Sam inched slowly through the doorway, careful to remain silent, then letting the door close slowly and quietly behind her. She moved several feet to the burned out frame of a couch that offered her a limited amount of concealment. She took her first breath in several seconds before glancing through the frame and springs of the furniture to see Christina start to argue.

“Yes, of course I monitor the account from my cell phone. How else would I know if the money is there?”

“You’re an idiot. We told you to use nothing but numbered accounts so they wouldn’t be directly traceable to you,” Miller said as he pulled out a cell phone and dialed a number. Sam saw the firearm held in his right hand at his side as he held the phone in his left. When she heard his voice she immediately recognized it. It was the same raspy voice that reached her those years ago on the pier in Tunisia.

“Yeah, Christina says she’s got money moving back into her account. Is that it?...Yeah...I think Rousseau is playing games and stalling...”

Christina moved several feet away from Miller as she continued to look at the screen of her phone. She was still fifteen or twenty feet from the handgun at the bar, and Miller was at least slightly distracted as he talked on the phone.

Sam figured this might be her best chance, so in one fluid movement she rose and moved quickly but stealthily toward Courtney, keeping her weapon trained on both of them. It was Christina who saw her first, evidently attracted by the movement out of the corner of her eye. She looked up, startled.

“Hey, asshole!” she yelled, attracting the attention of Miller, who dropped the phone and immediately brought his weapon up. He grabbed Christina by the back of her jacket and held her between himself and Sam. Sam was caught in the open with no cover as Miller’s weapon came to bear directly on her chest. Sam made an effort to aim past Christina as her finger tightened.

“Hey!” Christina screamed again, this time in anger. She pulled away from Miller, throwing her arms out and jerking away just as the two of them exchanged fire. Christina dove forward, screaming as two powerful blasts echoed through the room.

Miller jerked and dropped to his knees when Sam’s round hit his shoulder.

“Sam!”

Sam heard Courtney’s scream just as the echo of the rounds died. Her eyes left Miller and focused on Courtney, who had risen to her knees when Christina shouted. Sam was quickly scrutinizing Courtney, concerned that Miller’s round, which had apparently missed her, may have struck her lover.

Sam was aware of Christina scrambling across the floor to her left, and began to look back in that direction while simultaneously moving again toward Courtney. Then another shot rang out, and agonizing pain flashed through Sam’s thigh and she dropped to the floor, her left leg no longer able to support her. She looked up to see Miller taking aim at her once again with a slightly shaky hand, his upper chest covered in blood from the bullet wound she’d already inflicted on him.

Sam pushed up to one knee and brought her weapon back up. Again the two of them fired virtually simultaneously. This time it was Sam who took the round in her right shoulder, causing her to drop her gun as she fell to the floor. Miller took her round between the eyes and collapsed, dead where he fell.

“Sam!”

Sam lay where she fell on her stomach and tried to push up off the floor with her good left arm. An almost overwhelming pain swept through her right shoulder and left thigh and she saw stars. Her vision tunneled. She felt Courtney kneel beside and tentatively touch her back.

“Sam? Oh, God. Tell me what to do, Sam.”

“You can die bitch, just like your girlfriend’s going to after she watches me kill you.”

Sam looked to her left and saw Christina standing there, a gun pointed directly at Courtney, poised over her. It all seemed to go in slow motion as Sam saw Christina's finger start to squeeze the trigger and the hammer start to go back on the revolver. She pushed up and over with all the strength she had left, pushing herself into Courtney's kneeling lap and covering her torso with her own just as the gun fired.

Sam thought she heard Courtney scream as there was a sudden searing pain to her chest, then pressure as she found it difficult to breathe. Sam heard noises and shouting all around her, then her hearing as well as her vision tunneled to nothing.

COURTNEY WATCHED SAM fall as the second round of gunfire rang out. She moved forward on her hands and knees as she watched Sam try to rise.

"Sam? Oh, God. Tell me what to do, Sam," she begged, unsure where to touch her without causing more pain.

"You can die bitch, just like your girlfriend's going to after she watches me kill you."

Courtney looked up to see the crazy woman only a few feet away, her revolver pointed squarely at her chest. Courtney froze then everything happened quickly.

Sam suddenly pushed herself up and rolled to a seated position in front of Courtney, falling backwards into Courtney's arms as the gun fired. Courtney screamed and fell backwards as Sam became dead weight in her arms. Then she heard yelling and several more shots fired as Christina Perry screamed and dropped.

Courtney scrambled partially out from underneath Sam so she could sit up and lean over her. Blood was coming from Sam's lower left chest, and Courtney was horrified by the increasing amount of it she saw. She placed her hands over the wound, hoping to slow the flow of blood seeping out.

Suddenly she was aware of movement and men in black surrounding her. Several went to Perry, lying nearby on the floor, still struggling and screaming. Another knelt beside Sam.

"Medic! We need a medic!" he yelled.

There was more activity, but Courtney looked only at Sam as she saw her eyes open and look up to focus on her.

"Court..." Sam quietly gasped. Courtney leaned forward as she felt her hands pushed away from Sam's chest and heard Sam's shirt ripped open.

"I'm right here, Sam," she said. She held Sam's head cradled in her lap. "I'm not going anywhere. Don't you leave me."

"Court..." Sam whispered and Courtney leaned forward, putting her ear almost to Sam's lips.

"I'm here, baby. I'm right here."

"Love you, Court."

"I love you too, Sam," Courtney whispered into Sam's ear. Then she pulled back and saw that Sam's eyes had closed.

"Pulse is weak. Where's that ambulance?" yelled the medic dressed in black who was now holding a bag of solution dripping into Sam's vein. Another was holding a heavy bandage over Sam's chest and shoulder wounds as still another wrapped one around the bullet wound in her leg. They were working from several large black bags containing medical equipment.

Another man dressed in black held the front door open and looked out. He poked his head back in.

“Ambulance just turned the corner. Thirty seconds out,” he yelled then stepped back out the door waiving his arms.

Courtney briefly took in the excitement around her and noticed most, but not all, of the black clad men had “FBI” emblazoned across the backs of the bullet resistant vests they wore and had badges prominently displayed on the front.

She focused back on Sam, still lying limp in her lap, now with an oxygen mask over her nose and mouth. She leaned forward once again.

“Stay with me, Sam. Don’t you dare leave me now,” she repeated over and over again as the men around her prepared her for transport and a rolling gurney was rushed to her side.

No one questioned Courtney as she climbed into the ambulance. A brief part of her brain registered one of the black clad agents climbed in next to her, along with the paramedic. She climbed out again when they arrived at the hospital and ran alongside the stretcher as it was rushed through the doors into the emergency room. But she was stopped at the doors to the trauma unit by a nurse who firmly told her she could go no farther.

“But—” Courtney began in frustration, not knowing what to say.

“Ms. Brennan?” Courtney turned to the man dressed in black now standing beside her. “Why don’t we follow the nurse to the waiting room? That way they’ll know where to find us once they know more about Sam,” he said.

“Why don’t we get you cleaned up first?” the nurse asked. She said something to a younger nurse passing by then led Courtney to a nearby ladies room and helped clean up her hands and face. The younger nurse poked her head in and handed Courtney a hospital scrub top. It was only then that Courtney looked down at herself and realized her shirt was covered in blood. Sam’s blood. She cried quietly as she changed, throwing her own shirt in the nearby trash can. Then she allowed herself to be led out, and she and the gentleman in black, who had waited patiently outside, were led to a private lounge.

The man spoke briefly with the nurse at the door while Courtney sat down in a chair, not paying much attention to what was said. He then came to take a seat next to her as the nurse left.

“Ms. Brennan?” he inquired quietly and Courtney looked up in response.

“My name is Joe. I work with Sam.”

Sydney looked him up and down. He no longer had the vest or the tactical gear on, nor could she see a weapon. He was now dressed in a plain black t-shirt and black cargo pants. But Courtney was sure he’d been in the club with a weapon immediately after Sam was shot.

“So she was telling the truth,” Courtney half mumbled.

“Who? Sam?” Courtney shook her head at his question.

“No. The crazy chick with the gun. She said Sam was a government agent.”

“Oh.” He looked thoughtful for a moment. “Well, my boss, Sam’s boss, will be here in a few hours. Probably before Sam’s out of surgery. Do you think you’d mind sticking around until she gets here?”

“I’m not going anywhere until I see Sam,” Courtney said. Joe nodded in response.

“Okay. Uh...one other thing, for Sam’s safety and yours, can you keep everything that happened to yourself for now? Until you talk to my boss?”

Courtney looked at him and wondered momentarily what they might do if she didn’t agree. What agency was it that Sam worked for? She’d seen FBI prominently displayed on a few vests, but not all of them. But who would she call anyway? It occurred to her the only people she could think of to call were Alex and Sydney, and they were out of town and dealing with their own

issues right now. So she simply nodded in response then settled back for a long and stressful wait.

Chapter Twenty-three

COURTNEY WAS AWAKENED by the sound of the lounge door opening. She'd fallen asleep on the couch and was only sleeping lightly. She turned when she heard someone enter. She was disappointed to see it wasn't anyone from the medical staff, but noticed Joe stand and walk to the attractive middle-aged woman who entered alone. Courtney was aware of a whispered conversation between them as she once again closed her eyes.

She opened her eyes when she heard footsteps walk toward her and watched the woman sit down in the seat that Joe had been occupying. Courtney sat up and the two women looked at each other for a moment without speaking, as if measuring each other up. Joe, Courtney noticed, remained standing at the door, as if guarding it to keep anyone else from entering.

"Ms. Brennan, my name is Elena Turlow. I'm a staff operations officer with the Central Intelligence Agency."

There was a long pause as Courtney processed this information.

"And you're Sam's boss?"

"Yes."

"The CIA?"

"Yes."

Courtney took a few moments again, rising to her feet and pacing across the small family waiting room.

"So you guys have ways to gather all kinds of information, break into computers, infiltrate organizations, all that stuff, right?" she asked. She was aware of Joe shuffling uncomfortably at the door and saw Elena's eyes sharpen slightly.

"Yes." Elena's answer was somewhat hesitant as she drew it out. "Among other things, I suppose," she added.

"Good, then can you please figure out what the fuck is going on with Sam because this waiting is driving me crazy." Elena's eyes grew slightly wider, barely betraying her surprise, but she said nothing. Courtney drove on, frustrated with the lack of response. "Come on. You people are supposed to be master spies. Can't you get someone who can give you some kind of information?" Courtney was once again pacing.

"Ms. Brennan," Elena rose from her seat as Courtney faced her from across the room. Courtney could have sworn she saw a slight smile on the woman's lips. "Give me a few minutes, I'll see what I can find out." Then she turned and walked out the door. Courtney watched her leave and then her eyes came to rest on Joe, who let the door close once again but remained standing next to it. Courtney was absolutely sure she saw a smile on his face before he wiped it away when he saw her looking.

Courtney took a breath and returned to her seat on the couch. She looked up at the man standing at the door.

"So, Joe, what's your last name?" she asked.

"Black," he said simply, a slight quirk to his lips.

“Uh-huh,” Courtney leaned back. “I shoulda seen that coming.”

About thirty minutes later Elena came back through the door.

“Sam’s out of surgery and being taken to a post-op recover room. If you come with me I can get you in to see her for a few minutes.”

Courtney was on her feet and out the door immediately. As she followed Elena she almost prodded the women to move more quickly.

“How is she? Is she going to be okay?” Courtney asked as they got onto an elevator and the doors closed.

“They believe she will survive, though she’s not entirely out of the woods yet,” Elena said. “Ms. Brennan, in the next twenty-four hours, when the appropriate doctors determine it’s safe, I will be having Sam moved from this hospital. We unfortunately have not caught everyone involved in this incident. Until we do, she’ll be in danger. And in her weakened state, unable to defend herself. I need to ensure she’s in a more secure facility. Do you understand what I’m saying?”

“You won’t let me go with her, will you?” Courtney asked.

“No. That’s not possible.”

“But you’ll make sure she’s safe?”

“That is our primary concern.”

Courtney swallowed the tears that were building. Then she nodded.

“I understand. Will you let her know I was here, at least?”

“I’ll make sure she knows you were by her side as long as you were permitted to be.” The woman’s eyes softened as she looked at Courtney. “You’re not out of danger yourself. I realize you don’t know what’s going on. And I’m impressed by the fact you haven’t asked. But the fact of the matter is you became involved in an effort to influence Sam. The possibility remains that kind of attempt could happen again. Plus, there are those who could believe you perhaps heard things you shouldn’t have.” Courtney nodded her understanding and Elena continued. “Joe will be leading a small team that will be staying for a few days to keep an eye on you. Until we clean this mess up. He will more than likely be informed of Sam’s general health status.”

“Thank you.”

They exited the elevator together and found a doctor waiting there for them.

“Elena.” The doctor nodded in greeting, glancing only briefly at Courtney. He turned and Elena fell in next to him, with Courtney following behind them, listening in on their conversation.

“It was touch and go for a while, but she pulled through. If she doesn’t have a setback in the next twelve hours, I’d say if we can move her if we take the full precautions.”

“Very good, thank you, Kevin. I’ll make the arrangements.”

They stopped at a door with two gentleman dressed in hospital scrubs seated outside. They both nodded at Elena, who then turned to Courtney.

“Ms. Brennan—”

“Courtney, please. Just call me Courtney.” Elena nodded and gave a tired smile.

“Courtney, there will be guards at the door at all times. If you need anything please let them know. I’m afraid you won’t be permitted to leave.”

“You mean I can stay?”

Elena nodded.

“I can let you stay until Sam is relocated. If you wish.”

“Yes! Yes, I wish. Thank you.” Courtney stepped forward and pushed open the door stepping inside.

The room was quiet and yet noisy at the same time. Sam was hooked up to all kinds of machines, each giving off its own constant hum or beep. She looked pale and small in the bed, with thickly padded bandages covering her shoulder, lower chest and leg.

Courtney stood beside the bed and leaned over, kissing Sam gently on the lips.

“Hey, Sam. I’m right here. I’m not going to leave you until I have to. Then they’re going to take you someplace safe so you can get better. But until then, I’m right here.” She pulled a seat up beside the bed and sat down, taking Sam’s hand in her own, prepared to spend what time she could just watching Sam breathe.

“MS. BRENNAN. IT’S time.”

Courtney awoke to a hand shaking her shoulder. She opened her eyes to find she was still seated in the chair beside Sam’s bed. Her hand still holding Sam’s. The doctor from the day before was standing over her.

“It’s time?” Courtney asked.

“Yes, I’m afraid so.” He looked at Sam. “She’s stable and looks okay to transport. We’ll move her before the hospital gets too busy.”

“What time is it?” Courtney asked as she stood up and stretched.

“It’s just after four a.m. I’ll give you a minute or two while we get the equipment ready.” The doctor stepped out, leaving Courtney alone with Sam once again.

Courtney caressed Sam’s cheek with her palm, leaned forward and kissed her gently on the lips, and then kissed each closed eyelid.

“I’ll be waiting for you, Sam. I’ll be here if you want to come back,” she whispered into Sam’s ear as a lone tear streaked down her face. She heard the door open behind her and looked up to see Elena standing there.

“I know,” Courtney said. “It’s time.”

Elena nodded then opened the door behind her as several medical personnel entered pushing a gurney. Courtney and Elena stepped back well out of the way as the team quickly and proficiently unplugged Sam from and then reattached her to smaller, transportable variants of various machines.

“How does this work? Will she be allowed to come back?” Courtney finally asked the question she was scared of.

“That’s completely up to Sam,” Elena said. “Unlike how Hollywood portrays us, Courtney, people come and go from our employment all the time. They retire, move on to other careers, enjoy their lives. Admittedly, it takes a certain type of person to do what Sam has been doing, and that type of person is usually in it for life.”

Courtney nodded in acknowledgment, having heard the answer she was afraid of. Then Elena continued.

“Courtney, right before this investigation came to its ugly conclusion, Sam told me she was going to finish this case and then she wanted to take some time off. Now, in eight years of field work for me, Sam has never taken a vacation, rarely even taken a single personal day. She’s been driven and focused. I often wondered if anything or anyone would be able to break that cycle. It

appears something, someone, finally did.” Elena turned to Courtney. “Perhaps that gives you a better answer to your question.”

Elena took Courtney’s arm and pulled her to the door as they followed the medical team out, now pushing Sam’s gurney. Courtney was aware of Joe falling in behind them as they entered a large elevator and descended to an ambulance bay. Elena talked as they walked.

“As I said yesterday, Joe will be staying with a small team here to ensure you’re safe until we’re satisfied with the ultimate resolution of this case. I can’t promise you much information, but if you have any questions, he’ll get you what information he can. These are unusual circumstances, Ms. Brennan. I can’t order you to do anything, and I’m certainly not going to threaten you. You’re a victim in all this as much or more than anybody is. But please understand we’ve been forced into having to trust your discretion in this case. I hope you understand the gravity of the situation.”

Courtney watched as Sam’s gurney was loaded into the back of an ambulance then Sam disappeared from view as the doors were closed. She turned back to Elena.

“I understand fully,” she said.

Elena nodded. “Good bye then, Ms. Brennan.” Elena walked away and got in the rear seat of a black suburban with heavily tinted windows. It then pulled away with the ambulance following and a second black suburban following closely behind. Courtney watched until they rounded the corner out of the parking lot and disappeared from view. Then she turned to the waiting agent, who was now dressed in a polo shirt and slacks and looked more like a golf pro at a country club.

“I’m afraid I don’t have my car. Can I get a ride from you?” she asked.

Epilogue

Five weeks later...

“WOW, COURT, THE place really is coming along great,” Alex said as she looked around.

“It’s going to look fantastic when you’re done,” Sydney agreed.

They were sitting in the lounge, testing some of the newly proposed menu items and catching up with one another.

“Are you still on schedule to open next weekend?” Alex asked

“Yeah. We’re just putting the finishing touches on and hiring a couple extra chefs since we’ll be a partial lounge and restaurant now. But we should be ready to open as scheduled. I’m just glad we managed to keep all the original staff. I’ve got a really good group of employees.”

“Well, it helps that you gave them their full salary over the last month. You take care of your people, they’ll take care of you,” Alex said then looked at Sydney and raised her eyebrows. Courtney caught the look.

“What?” she asked. “What’s going on you two?”

“We were just wondering if you’ve heard any news on Sam?” Sydney asked.

Courtney had chosen to share what she knew with her friends, needing the support herself, and knowing Sam’s previous friendship with Alex. She’d told them everything she knew and suspected, right up through the terrifying shootout in the club—which had never been publicized or even reported to the local authorities as far as Sydney could tell—and Sam’s removal from the hospital. Courtney had noticed that Alex didn’t seem as shocked as she should have been over the revelation that Sam appeared to be a covert government agent.

“Ever since that news two days ago, I just thought maybe...” Sydney didn’t finish the sentence, letting it dangle.

Two days earlier the news had hit the headlines that the FBI had added Carl Stansfield, former Deputy Director of the CIA, to their Most Wanted List. According to public reports, the government had been searching for him since his disappearance over a month prior when his involvement in international criminal activities was discovered. He was now an international fugitive wanted for illegal arms and explosives sales, espionage and treason. The news had gone on to quote an anonymous source close to the investigation who revealed a high level investigation had identified Stansfield’s involvement in an espionage ring consisting of additional unidentified government employees and agents.

“My little babysitting team is still around. So yeah, I guess it’s not over.” Courtney just shrugged as she glanced over at Joe, sitting quietly reading the newspaper in a corner of the lounge. Then she continued.

“I don’t know what that means for Sam. All I keep being told is that she’s recovering as well as can be expected. I’ve tried to get information on these kinds of wounds and everything I see says they take months to heal, that the average victim requires weeks of constant care before they can even begin to engage in basic activities. Even if Sam chooses to come back, I don’t expect that for weeks. I was just...”

“Just what?” Alex asked.

“I guess once the case was broken...I mean, it sounds like Stansfield is on the run and they’ve rounded up anyone else involved. I guess I was just hoping maybe for a phone call or something from Sam. What if this means she isn’t recovering as well as I thought? Or maybe she just doesn’t want to...” Courtney’s sentence faded off as she hesitated to complete the thought.

“She’s gonna reach out to you as soon as she can, Court. I’m sure of it,” Sydney said.

Courtney shrugged again, before speaking.

“So, how do you guys like the new logo design?” she said, indicating to the lighted neon sign hanging over the bar displaying the new name and logo of the lounge and nightclub. It depicted a brightly colored mythological bird rising from the ashes.

“I think it turned out fantastic. And the new name was genius. The club really is a Phoenix, literally rising from the ashes,” Sydney said, allowing the change of subject to occur without further comment.

“And how about you two? Alex, you’re still planning on making the move to Sydney’s house permanent?” Courtney watched as they looked at each other and smiled. Sydney reached over and took Alex’s hand.

“Alex will be putting her house up for rent in the next couple weeks,” she said. “As soon as we get all her stuff moved over.”

Sydney and Alex stuck around another thirty minutes before hugging Courtney then departing after promising once again to be at the grand opening in a week. Sydney tried to distract herself by going over some final refurbishing plans and double-checking furniture delivery dates.

She heard the back door open and looked over to see Joe stand and look in the same direction. Then Courtney’s heart skipped a beat when she saw Elena enter the lounge from the rear hallway. The woman nodded at Joe and he picked up his newspaper, smiled at Courtney and then walked past Elena and down the hall out of sight. Courtney heard the back door open and then close moments later as he exited. Her eyes went expectantly back to Elena.

“Good afternoon, Courtney. How are you doing?” Elena finally said.

“How’s Sam?” Courtney asked without preamble. She saw Elena give a faint smile at the question.

“Sam’s doing as well as expected. Still healing. You know her wounds were very serious.” Courtney nodded as Elena approached, coming to stop beside Courtney as she leaned on the bar. “You’ve seen the news reports on Stansfield, I presume?” she asked.

Courtney nodded. “Yes. They make it sound like everyone that was involved has been apprehended except him.”

“Yes. Fortunately the espionage ring was not extensive as far as we can tell. We’ve tracked the money and the communications. And of course we had Ms. Perry willing to tell us everything she knew.

“When the team stormed the club and shot Christina, she was luckier than Sam. Nothing critical got hit.” Courtney grimaced and continued to listen. “Within a few days she was trying to spin a deal with the government and gave up everything she knew.”

“So, Stansfield, he was the top of the food chain?” Courtney asked. Elena nodded.

“Yes. It all turned out to trace back to him. We’d been looking for Stansfield for years, we just didn’t know it was him. We knew him as an international arms dealer called The Ghost. Sam and I always knew The Ghost had connections in the government, but we didn’t imagine it went

that high. There was an operation in Tunisia a few years ago that went bad. Someone gave Sam up. It led to the murder of an innocent young woman and Sam barely escaped.”

“Her back.” Courtney said quietly. “That’s how she got that scar on her back.” Elena nodded and raised an eyebrow in question. “The man who was here with Perry, he said something about having left the scar on her back when they’d met before.”

Elena accepted the explanation and went on speaking. “Stansfield fled the country. Probably as soon as he had a clue Perry survived. We’ve got a team searching for him, but he got out of the country pretty fast. He’s been in the covert intelligence game for a lot of years. I’m betting he’ll be able to hide for a while. That’s what I need to talk to you about. While he’s still at large, we feel pretty comfortable that we’ve neutralized his contacts and influence here in the U.S. for now. We also feel pretty sure any threat to you is over.”

“You can’t babysit me forever,” Courtney said. “You’re here to tell me my little protection team will be leaving.” Courtney looked Elena in the eye. “And since they’re leaving, you’re wondering what my intentions will be as far as keeping all this information to myself.”

“Very perceptive, Ms. Brennan,” Elena said. “And, yes. It would help us to know what your long term intentions may be as far as this information goes.”

Courtney finally took a seat on a nearby barstool and leaned sideways with one elbow on the bar top as she indicated for the other woman to do the same before she started speaking once again.

“Listen, I figure there’s probably a lot more to this than I know. I think this was something bigger than a series of hateful attacks on gays and lesbians in Southern California. I mean, that’s obvious. It had something to do with Sam’s past. And a director with the CIA is involved in some kind of spy ring or something?” Courtney shook her head. “This is more than I can imagine. I can assure you I don’t want to know anything more. I just want to know Sam is okay. And I want to know if there’s a chance that she and I...that we could...” Courtney had trouble putting the rest into words.

“You want to know if you and Sam have a chance at a future together. Considering what Sam does for a living?”

“I’m not even sure exactly what it is that Sam does for a living. But yes, my main question right now is finding out whether we could have a chance at anything.” She watched as Elena slid off the barstool and stood.

“That would be entirely up to Sam,” Elena said then turned to walk toward the hallway leading to the back door. She turned back briefly before leaving the room. “I wish you both the best of the luck, Courtney.” Then she was gone.

Courtney sat at the bar for several moments, her head resting in her palm as her elbow leaned on the bar. Then she picked up her cellular phone and scrolled to a voicemail left five weeks ago. She pressed play, letting Sam’s voice play out loud as she had so many times over the weeks.

“Hi, Court. Just thinking about you. I hope your day is going okay. Um, I miss you. I’ll try you again a little later.”

She put the phone down and slid off the stool, mentally telling herself not to listen again to the message. She turned to the paperwork and plans before her, trying to divert her attention. Then a similar, but quieter voice came from behind her.

“I’m pretty sure I warned you before about leaving that back door unlocked when you’re in here alone.”

Courtney jumped and turned, startled by the unexpected interruption. The sight she saw stopped her in her tracks.

“Sam?” she gasped, almost scared she was imagining things. It was a skinnier, slightly pale Sam standing before her. But the roguish smile that came back at her was definitely all Sam.

“I like the new name,” Sam said, nodding up toward the Phoenix sign.

“Sam!” Courtney cried, lunging forward. She started to grab Sam in a hug when at the last minute she saw Sam cringe slightly in pain. Courtney stopped dead in her tracks, almost pulling back until Sam let her cane fall and grabbed one of her hands.

Courtney watched the cane fall to the ground then took in Sam’s slightly stooped posture and the way she kept one arm pinned to her torso.

“Oh, God. Are you okay? Do you hurt? Do you need—”

She was silenced by Sam pulling her close as she leaned forward and touched her lips to Courtney’s. The kiss was slow and tender, filled with longing and want. It was everything Courtney needed. She slowly and gently brought her arms around Sam, taking her in a very careful embrace, allowing their bodies to lightly press together. When they pulled apart they remained leaning into one another and Sam sighed.

“I’ve thought of nothing but that since I woke up three weeks ago,” Sam said. “Being apart from you, not being able to touch you or even talk to you, that was more painful than anything. When they finally were satisfied all Stansfield’s contacts here had been caught, all I could think about was getting here to you. Until then I didn’t want to do anything that could possibly put you in more danger. I didn’t even want to take a chance on calling you. But it just about killed me not being able to. As soon as we were sure he was out of the country and we knew the extent of the full operation, Elena figured it was as safe as it was going to get.”

“And then you came back.” It was all Courtney could seem to put into words. All she’d been worried about for weeks. All the uncertainty and doubt were released in tears of relief.

“I came back...to you. I want to always come back to you. If you’ll have me.” Sam tightened her hold with her one good arm. Courtney nodded against her chest. Sam held on as tight as she could while Courtney cried. When the sobs started to die down she spoke again.

“Rousseau,” she said.

Courtney looked up at her, confused. “Huh?”

“My real name. Samantha Jaiden Rousseau. I figure you probably have questions, and I owe you some explanations. Might as well start with that.”

Courtney smiled. “I like it,” she said. “Sam Black was a rogue and pirate and playgirl. Don’t get me wrong, part of me liked Sam Black, although another part of me didn’t want to.” She leaned in and kissed Sam again, long and probing and promising something more then pulled away. “But I think I fell in love with Samantha Rousseau.”

About the Author

Dakota Hudson is a self-described “cop with an overactive imagination.” She has over 20 years with the Los Angeles Police Department, spending the majority of that time in front line law enforcement operations. In addition, she has twelve years of military experience, including a combat tour in Iraq and missions supporting counter-terrorism operations across the globe, providing her with a wealth of experiences upon which to base her writings. This is the second book in the Duty to the Heart series, which began with her first published work, *White Roses Calling*. D.H. lives in the Los Angeles area with her wife and their four furry, four-legged children where she is still a lieutenant with the LAPD and is brainstorming new plot ideas.

Another Title By Dakota Hudson

White Roses Calling

Sydney Rutledge is a rising star in the Los Angeles District Attorney's Office. In the midst of a career making serial murder prosecution she finds herself having an unexpected attraction to the arresting officer in the case—a female police sergeant. The attraction leads her to a confusing journey of self-discovery in regards to her own sexuality.

Sergeant Alex Chambers is a talented veteran of the LAPD. Fearless on the streets but gun shy when it comes to relationships—the result of a heartbreak years prior. Despite this she cannot deny the attraction she is feeling towards a certain beautiful—and straight—assistant district attorney.

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It couldn't be the Mormon girls, Amy and Dakota. Or could it? Perhaps it's Paula, the gallant butch, or her date, the lovely and silent Veronica. A blind woman couldn't do it, but is Jess really blind? And what about Holly, the hotel manager who is just a bit too perky, or Lila, the mysterious owner of the hotel?

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Diega summons help from her three best buddies, Tully, Felicia, and Jenny. Together they delve into the world of television where they encounter an arena where ratings can be a matter of life and death. There's Rachel who was vying with Sheila for a New York job. Or was she? Her husband Curtis maintains Rachel would kill for Sheila's now open position in L.A. But then Curtis has his own, very old, ax to grind with Sheila. Has their past relationship caused her demise?

Then again, Sheila's ex-husband is in the picture as well. Newly arrived from San Diego and famous for hurling items at Sheila's women, does Steve have his own murderous thoughts about Sheila? Aurora thinks so. However, as Sheila's discarded lover, Aurora may have her own agenda.

Family relationships are also suspect. Henry and Francine Shelbourne had two daughters, Sheila and Natalie. Both daughters are now dead. Coincidence? Or did the secret that bound the sisters together bring both their deaths years apart?

In the midst of trying to clear Diega, the four women discover that one of them has an even better motive than Diega for wanting Sheila dead—a discovery that drives a wedge between the friends. In the meantime, new relationships develop and get in the way of their investigation. The ever-amorous Tully finds herself drawn to the enticing police detective and Felicia and Jenny are discovering each other's charms. No one but Diega seems to realize that Relationships Can Be Murder. Then Diega, herself, becomes the target. Is she the victim of one of her own relationships or is she getting too close to the truth?

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Teaching Can Be Murder

by Jane DiLucchio

Diega DelValle and her friends return in *Teaching Can Be Murder!*

Nothing says, “Good morning!” like finding a bloody corpse in the classroom next to yours. Assistant Superintendent Zeke Chambers had no business being in room seven of Vista Elementary, dead or alive, but dead he was and Diega DelValle, discoverer of his body, becomes a suspect.

Diega finds out she is not alone. Her principal, Sally, has been working with Zeke—possibly too closely—on a special, secret project. Sally’s husband is none too pleased with that arrangement. Neither is their daughter who arrives on the scene suspiciously close to the time of Zeke’s death.

Other Vista Elementary employees also have a vested interest in Zeke’s unwell-being. The teacher who’s a cast-off lover. The union rep who accuses Zeke of espionage. The probationary teacher who knows more than she’s telling.

Then there are Zeke’s gambling associates and his extracurricular girlfriends, none of which are to the liking of Zeke’s wife. Nor do his business partners outside the district appreciate him using their money to develop a competing company.

All factors collide when another body is found and Diega, Tully, Jenny, and Felicia discover that teaching can, indeed, be murder.

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by Linda Vogt

Newspaper reporter Riley Logan is looking forward to a peaceful week when she goes with her best friend Marie to beautiful Galiano Island, B.C. Instead, the two find themselves in the middle of an environmental clash, a decades-old mystery and the murder of a well-loved

islander. The women stay at the Cliffhouse, a funky waterfront cottage Riley has inherited from her aunt, where they discover 60-year-old letters that may hold important clues. And then strange things start happening on Galiano... a ferry rams the dock, an oil slick coats the harbor and Riley's new love interest, Kit, disappears and is named a suspect in the murder. Will Riley and Marie use her aunt's letters to solve the murder? What did someone hide on nearby Wallace Island that could break the case open? And what happened to Kit? The answers to those questions, along with love, adventure and a dash of humor, can be found in Linda M. Vogt's debut novel.

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