

DESOLATION POINT



CARI
HUNTER



Synopsis

“He’s going to find me,” Sarah whispered. “He’s going to find me before you do.”

One wrong step in Los Angeles leaves Alex Pascal scarred and traumatized, unable to continue the career she loves.

In England, a drunk driver shatters Sarah Kent’s family.

For Sarah, leaving England to explore the North Cascades is an opportunity to regain her health and her confidence, while Alex has already abandoned LA to make the mountains her home. Drawn to the beauty and history of Desolation Peak, Sarah is hiking alone when a storm leaves her stranded. Determined to track her down, Alex heads into the wilderness, never anticipating the terrible danger she will face. Because Sarah is already running for her life, fleeing from a ruthless criminal with a mission to complete and nothing left to lose. With everything stacked against them, neither woman expects to survive, let alone fall in love. All they have to do now is find a way out.

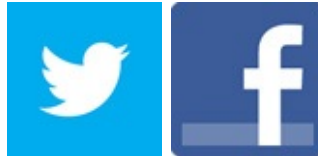
Desolation Point

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DESOLATION POINT

by
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2013

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Snowbound

Desolation Point

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Dedication

For Cat
We're a matched pair, sweetheart.

Chapter One

Los Angeles

Glass crunched beneath Alex Pascal's boots as she took hesitant steps down the alley. The stink of garbage dumped and left to rot in the midsummer heat hit the back of her throat, and she clamped her mouth shut, sucking in breaths through her nose as if that made a difference.

"Jack? Anything?" She kept her question taut, too focused on her immediate surroundings to engage fully in conversation. Her radio crackled into life as her partner responded.

"No, all clear. I'm gonna double back, meet you halfway."

"Copy that."

Sweat trickled down her forehead. When she lifted her hand to wipe it away, her flashlight's beam swung crazily across the brick walls and doorways that hemmed her in and provided so many shadows for a potential ambush. She had been driving back to the station at the end of an uneventful shift when Jack spotted the twins on the opposite side of the road, brothers who were wanted for the rape and violent assault of a fifteen-year-old girl. Their victim was still in the hospital, having needed more than fifty sutures to repair the wounds inflicted upon her.

Alex brought her hands back into position, balancing one wrist on top of the other to ensure her flashlight and her gun were aimed in the same direction. She approached and then peered warily up the ladder of a rusted fire escape, but nothing moved in the darkness and no one jumped down on her. Multiple sirens wailed in the distance, closing in at speed but not quickly enough to be of any comfort to her. With her heart thumping against her breastbone, she set off walking again.

A metal can skipped out from beneath her boot and clattered across the alley. She gasped, whirling around as the unexpected noise sent rats skittering for shelter.

"Shit." She smiled ruefully and took a deep breath to try to slow her racing pulse. A second light at the far end of the alley caught her eye: Jack making his own tentative progress. She straightened her back, drawing confidence from the gun in her hand and the knowledge that she wasn't completely alone.

Determined to complete her fair share of the sweep, she angled her flashlight toward a door that hung from a broken hinge. She frowned, pushing the door with her foot. It opened too easily, the trash that had been collecting in front of it newly cleared aside. Goose bumps prickling at the nape of her neck, she reached for her radio, but a sudden swish of air made her hesitate. She turned toward the sound, barely catching a glimpse of the two-by-four before it splintered across her upper back, the force throwing her to the ground. Too stunned to cry out, she landed heavily, her gun flying from her hand, its momentum carrying it beyond her outstretched fingers and out of sight. She saw a figure move past her, grimy sneakers with frayed laces looming in her vision before disappearing just as quickly. One of the sneakers struck out to connect hard with her gut; she moaned low in her throat, pulling up her knees to protect her chest even as a hand grabbed her by her collar and dragged her through the ruined door.

"Don't—" The word left her in a rush as she was propelled forward, with no time to do anything but try to break her fall.

"Cops're fucking everywhere, Manny." The voice was that of a young male, breathless with fear but strangely laced with excitement. She could hear his feet tapping as he circled her restlessly. "Wanna goin' down in style, then, yeah?"

“Fuckin’ A, bro.” The exchange gave Alex her positive identification: Manny and Tomas Alvarez, the brothers for whom the APB had been issued.

Tomas’s hand patted her shirt. He pulled her radio free and launched it against the wall, where it shattered into pieces. She lay motionless, counting his steps and attempting to gauge his location. Then she twisted sharply, whipping her legs out to lock around his. She heard his startled yelp and felt his legs waver as he lost his balance. When he fell, he fell awkwardly, and landed in a crumpled heap at her side.

“Bitch!” A boot this time, smashing into her cheek. Her teeth caught her lip, filling her mouth with blood. She gagged and coughed on the thick fluid, dragging herself up onto all fours, her head lowered to stop herself from choking.

“Alex?” Somewhere in the alley, Jack was shouting frantically.

The beam of his flashlight cut across the room, but it was only a fleeting glimpse of rescue, extinguished completely when a hand clamped over her mouth and she was pulled farther into the building. She bit at the fingers straying carelessly close to her teeth and had the satisfaction of hearing her tormentor shriek in pain, but then his fist connected solidly with her face and her knees buckled. Sparks of light danced in her eyes, her head lolling forward as she tried and failed to hold herself up. Something long and thin lashed into the small of her back, and she realized dully as she hit the concrete that one of the brothers had taken her own nightstick to beat her with.

“Stay down.”

Manny wasn’t giving her a choice, his bony fingers grinding her face into the filth that coated the floor, while Tomas straddled her hips. She could feel Tomas tugging at her uniform, tearing at the straps on her Kevlar vest, and she heard him laugh wildly as he finally yanked her T-shirt halfway up her back.

“Can I? Can I?” That same tone of jumpy excitement, undoubtedly fuelled by the same liquor she could smell on Manny’s breath as he gave his answer.

“Sure, li’l bro.”

Cold metal pressed against the skin Tomas had exposed. Alex closed her eyes and curled her hands into fists, determined not to utter a sound as she felt the blade begin to slice smoothly into her flesh.

*

There was a smell of cordite and clotted blood and a buzz of overlapping voices. As Alex clawed her way back to consciousness, she could still feel hands holding her in place, but it wasn’t like before; this time their touch was careful and her own hand was being tightly gripped by another.

“Jack?” The word was little more than a croak, her throat sore and parched. She had been screaming—why had she been screaming? The answer was provided by an ill-advised attempt to push herself upright.

“Oh, Jesus Christ.” She panted for air, the pain unanticipated and brutal.

“Whoa, lie still. Oh shit, just—please, don’t try to get up.” Jack’s voice bore an unfamiliar edge of stress and Alex obeyed it at once, forcing herself not to struggle as she tried to cope with the agony ripping across her lower back.

“Wh...happened?”

Tomas had cut her; she knew that. She could feel blood pooling beneath her and the draft of air over raw wounds, but she had no memory of anything else that he might have done.

“You’re going to be fine. They’re bringing the paramedics in now.”

She shook her head in frustration, which only made the throbbing in it more relentless. “Not what I asked, Jack.”

He sighed and she heard him shift uncomfortably. He knew her too well to try to placate her with platitudes and half-truths. “We could hear you, but we couldn’t find you, not straight away.” He spoke in a monotone, and Alex recognized it as a tactic that they both relied on at times, a way of recounting events while trying not to connect with them. “Manny had a semi-auto. He took two bullets, died instantly. Tomas was pulling at you, trying to use you as a shield. He was shot in the shoulder, but he’ll live. He, uh...” Jack ran his hand through his close-cropped hair. “He didn’t rape you.”

She let out a soft sob of relief, her shoulders beginning to shake with the effort it was taking not to fall completely apart in front of her colleagues.

“Did he...?” Her question trailed off as Jack put his hand out and touched her cheek.

“Yeah, he had enough time for that.”

The young girl whom the brothers had attacked had been found with the word *BITCH* carved into her back. Tomas had signed his mutilation with his gang tag.

“Shit,” Alex whispered. An unrealistic part of her wanted to grab something, *anything*, and cover herself up, cover the wounds so that no one would see them, but she knew it was already too late for that. It seemed as if half the division was crammed into the small room, and the other half would know within the hour. That was how it worked; that was how it had always worked. It had never bothered her before, but in the five years she had been on the force, nothing like this had ever happened to her. Nausea rolled over her in waves. She closed her eyes miserably and tried to shut it all out.

*

Manchester, England

It took less than a minute for Sarah Kent’s life to be smashed apart. Five seconds for the driver to succumb to the alcohol with which he had washed down his business lunch, ten for him to swerve from his own lane and into that of Sarah’s family. Ten seconds of tearing metal, screaming, and the impact that hurled her violently against the side window of the car. Twenty seconds of pain, obliterating everything else in a razor-sharp barrage. Three seconds for it all to fade to black.

*

The touch on Sarah’s throat was warm but not skin-to-skin, the sensation artificial and rubbery. It pressed and held, and then jerked away suddenly.

“Bloody hell! This one’s breathing. It’s okay, love. It’s okay. You’re okay. Shit.” Fainter then, as if the man had turned from her. “John, get the stretcher right up here. Spinal board, small collar. Pass me the oxygen before you go. Tell Control we have two Code One, one critical, one walking wounded. Make vehicles four.”

Another man answered, his voice wavering with stress. “Okay. Make vehicles four. Will do.”

“Oh-two, John.”

“Yeah. Shit. Sorry.”

Cold air flooded out from the mask as it was hurriedly fixed over Sarah’s nose and mouth. She tried to raise a hand to loosen it, but her effort amounted to little more than a twitch of her fingers. Something pressed heavily on her chest, making it almost impossible for her to pull in a breath, and she heard a panicked cry for assistance an instant before hands reached in and hauled her from the wreckage. There was a brief lucid moment in which she recognized that she was probably going to die.

and then darkness claimed her again.

*

Overly bright strip lighting and an odd rocking motion made Sarah blink and squint in confusion. Incapable of processing complex thoughts, her mind gave precedence to the baser instincts telling her that she was cold and that every part of her hurt. She whimpered, her hands flexing against the restraints pinning them to her sides.

“Shh, try not to move, love.” A man’s voice that she vaguely remembered from some time earlier. “You’re in the ambulance. We’ll be at the hospital in just a few minutes. Can you tell me your name?”

He used a piece of gauze, already blood-soaked, to stop more blood from trickling into her eyes. She licked her lips, tasting something salty-sweet and coppery.

“Sar...” Her head ached horribly when she tried to shake it, though a hard collar and two rubber blocks prevented the movement from being anything more than a gesture. “Sarah.”

“Sarah what?”

“Molly...”

“Is that your surname, love?” The paramedic’s brow wrinkled in confusion, his pen poised above his clipboard. He moved toward the gurney and pulled Sarah’s mask up slightly, straining to hear her.

She tried again, each word punctuated by a gasp as her breathing faltered. “In the car, my sister. My mum. They okay?”

He lowered the mask again and leaned back in his seat. He didn’t give her an answer, but then he didn’t need to. The bleak expression on his face told Sarah everything that she needed to know.

*

Sarah’s gurney came to an abrupt stop at the side of a hospital bed. Faces loomed above her, their expressions intent, some more overtly worried than others. Several hands fumbled in their rush to release the safety belts, and she heard the paramedic tell the medical team that he and his colleagues would deal with the straps. In a voice strained by tension, he began his handover as a series of jolts raised the gurney to the level of the bed.

“This is Sarah. Twenty-five years of age. Rear seat passenger in a rollover, two-vehicle collision. Seat belt worn, air bags deployed. Main impact to the driver’s side, but severe widespread damage to the car. Unconscious at scene. Rapid extrication when her resps dropped off.”

He paused while a disembodied voice counted to three. Without further warning, the board on which Sarah was strapped was lifted across to the hospital bed. Even though it landed with only the slightest impact, she cried out at the pain that ricocheted through her. The paramedic resumed his handover and she tried to listen, but she only half-understood the medical terminology in the rapid-fire list of her injuries.

“Right femur’s gone, left tib-fib. Reduced breath sounds on her left side. Complained of left upper abdominal tenderness. BP initially unrecordable, she’s had a liter of saline and it’s hovering around seventy systolic now. She’s got a scalp lac that was bleeding heavily, but I couldn’t find any other head injury.”

She choked back a sob as someone began to cut her clothes off and a needle was slid into her arm with only the most perfunctory of warnings. The paramedic drew a blanket up to cover her and then deliberately stepped into her line of sight.

“Hey there. You’re in the hospital and they’re going to take really good care of you, all right?” He squeezed her hand, the one without the IV line, and she caught her breath at the pain his gesture

unintentionally caused. He looked horrified and placed her hand carefully back down on the board. "Her left wrist is broken," he said quietly.

He stepped away then, toward a young nurse who didn't seem to have a role in the team and was watching the proceedings with wide eyes.

"What happened to her?" the nurse asked, eager for details. They hadn't moved far enough from the bed; even through the wail of monitors and the babble of voices, Sarah could hear the conversation.

"Drunk driver took out a car of three. Double-fatal on scene." The paramedic nodded toward Sarah. "She's a real mess."

"Damn. The drunk?"

"Busted nose, minor lacerations. Bloody typical. The bastards always seem to walk away from it. The police arrested him."

The nurse nodded and patted him sympathetically on his back. "Go get yourself a cup of tea, mate."

"Yeah. Yeah, I might just do that." After one final glance toward the bed, he pushed through the door of the trauma room. Sarah stared at the doors as they closed behind him, and then she squeezed her eyes tightly shut and did her best not to scream.

*

"Are you sure you're okay to continue, Officer Pascal?"

Alex set the plastic cup back down on the table, all too aware that the tremor in her hand must have been noted by the detective sitting beside her.

"I'm fine." She really wasn't fine. Her lower back burned constantly, the pain exacerbated by the infection that had taken hold over the past twenty-four hours; apparently, weapon cleanliness was not something that gangbangers considered a priority. The IV antibiotics were strong enough to upset her stomach. She had gone cold turkey on the morphine in preparation for giving her statement, and—add insult to not inconsiderable injury—the detective investigating the case looked as if she had just walked out of a fashion shoot.

The detective raised one perfectly shaped eyebrow, but finally nodded and un-clicked the pause button on the small tape recorder.

"So, just to confirm, it was Tomas Alvarez who had the knife and Manuel Alvarez, his brother, who was holding you down on the floor."

Alex gave a small nod before realizing that wouldn't be enough for the tape. "That's right. I tried to fight them, but I didn't have any strength left." She cleared her throat and reached for the water again, shame at the admission of her own weakness making her cheeks hot. "I couldn't do anything to stop them..."

*

The door to Alex's hospital room had opened almost soundlessly, but the low whistle from her visitor was a good deal less subtle.

"Well, you look like hammered shit." Jack was standing in the doorway with his arms full of flowers. He grinned toothily and made his way to the bedside.

"Thanks, partner, I love you too." She smiled as he planted a wet kiss on her cheek.

"Still a little warm, Officer Pascal." His hand rested on her cheek and then her forehead, the pleasant coolness of his palm the only reason that she made no attempt to swat him away.

“Doc said the fever’s on its way out. I actually felt like eating something earlier.”

Jack set the flowers down and pulled up a chair. “I swear, your losing your appetite was like the first sign of the fucking apocalypse. I told Burke and Toledo, and they were both genuinely freaked out.”

Alex laughed. “Idiot,” she said without malice, her fingers tracing the edge of a petal. “These are beautiful.”

“Guys had passed the hat, and I think”—he lifted the larger bouquet and pulled out a spray of roses—“these are from the paramedics who came out that night. They’re glad you’re doing okay.”

“They didn’t need to do that.” She closed her eyes before they could tear up and took a breath of the sweet scent. “Tell them thanks, if you run into them.”

“Of course.”

“So, you coping without me?”

He gave her a look that set her off laughing. “You know they paired me with Rookie Road.”

“I know.” She was trying to keep a straight face, but she wasn’t trying all that hard.

“He’s a *rook*, Alex.”

“I know.”

“He eats ice cream. Constantly.”

“I know.” Her shoulders were shaking. “Hence the nickname.”

“I hate you,” he growled, not at all convincingly. “Please come back soon.”

*

Awareness returned to Sarah in a series of fractured images. Lights blinked on monitors, numbers flashing, their values never static but constantly fluctuating in response to the slightest change in her condition. Her right leg was suspended in traction, weights keeping the shattered bone in alignment. A plaster cast prevented her left ankle from moving no matter how hard she tried. Intravenous drips and blood transfusions hung in a line alongside syringes in pumps that beeped shrilly whenever the tubing became kinked, like infants demanding attention.

Gradually, as she managed to stay awake for longer periods, she began to recognize the faces of the medical staff: nurses with singsong voices and gentle hands, doctors who peeled back her eyelids and spoke in terms too convoluted for her to understand. As soon as someone deemed her strong enough, and with a nurse standing solicitously by the cubicle door, a police officer confirmed what Sarah already remembered even through the haze of drugs, the condolences he offered, professional but utterly sincere. She nodded and thanked him politely for taking the time to visit. The nurse hovered, waiting for Sarah’s inevitable breakdown, but it never came. She hurt too much to move. Crying would have been unbearable.

After another week of fading in and out, she turned her aching head to see her stepfather sitting by her bedside. Caught unawares, he dropped his gaze from her face, and then looked up a few seconds later with a relieved smile that didn’t reach his eyes. Even doped up on morphine, still half-anesthetized from whatever surgery her doctors had deemed necessary the day before, Sarah had been able to decipher his initial expression. He left soon afterward, the question still unvoiced but lingering in his eyes: why had she survived, when his wife and his little girl had died?

*

The gentle drift of oxygen from the tubing beneath Alex’s nose wasn’t enough to hide the scent now wafting through the room. Heady and expensive, it might have been pleasant in lesser quantities.

but its wearer was more concerned with announcing her wealth than with the subtle effect that a more judicious application might have achieved. Only hours out of surgery, Alex was still nauseated from the anesthetic, and the smell was enough to tip her over the edge. She reached for the bowl that had been positioned strategically near her by the nurse who had cared for her after her first two surgeries and had barely managed to tuck it beneath her chin before she began to vomit. Through a frenzied onslaught of pain, she dimly heard an exclamation of distaste from the person at her bedside. A urgent buzzer sounded, followed by a series of sharp clacks as her visitor rapidly exited the room in a pair of designer heels. Shortly afterward came the welcome approach of someone wearing shoes that were far more appropriate. Alex nodded gratefully as gloved hands kept the bowl in place for her and then wiped her face and her mouth clean.

“Same old, same old, huh?” Ella, the nurse who always seemed to draw the short straw—the post-surgery shift—offered her a spoonful of ice chips before injecting another drug into her IV port. “Should help with the nausea.”

“Thanks.” Unthinking, Alex took a deep breath before she realized her mistake and had to fight not to gag again. Desperate to distract herself, she shifted slightly in the bed, wincing at the now-familiar pinch of fresh sutures in her back. “How’d they do?”

On this occasion, the skin graft had been taken from her right thigh, in the third and hopefully last stage of a painstaking process to cover up the legacy Tomas Alvarez had left her with. She would still have scars, her plastic surgeon had already warned her of that, but at least the epithet Alvarez had carved into her would no longer be legible.

With a smile, Ella gently but firmly lifted Alex’s hand from where it was straying toward the dressing on her back, and placed it onto the sheets.

“They did good. Dr. Rachman was really pleased. He said he’ll come by just as soon as you stop puking.” She held her hands palm up in apology. “His words, not mine.”

“Yeah, sounds about right.” Alex crunched an ice chip between her teeth and then grinned as Ella shuddered at the noise.

“I wish you wouldn’t do that.”

“I wish you’d let me have a beer,” Alex countered without hesitation.

Ella made a show of ignoring her. She took a quick note of the vitals displayed on the monitors and then tucked her pen into her pocket. When she dared to look back up, Alex greeted her with an expression of complete innocence. Ella shook her head in exasperation. “For the last time, Alex, I am not smuggling beer in here for you!”

“You’re no fun.”

“Yeah, yeah, and you’re stalling.”

“That obvious, huh?”

“Fraid so, hon.” She ran a hand through the unruly mess of Alex’s hair, smoothing it back from her face in an attempt to make her a little more presentable. “You want me to send her in?”

“No,” Alex said, “but I guess you should.”

The door closed behind Ella, only to reopen seconds later. Celia Pascal stood in the doorway, her hair and makeup immaculate, her clothing unruffled by her time spent sitting in a hard plastic hospital chair. The draft from the corridor brought her familiar scent rushing back toward Alex. Clutching a fresh bowl, she swallowed hard and managed a weak smile.

“Hi, Mom.”

“I came as soon as I could, darling. Your father and I were in the Mediterranean when we heard.”

Alex nodded but made no reply as she watched her mother dab a handkerchief beneath eyes that were yet to actually shed a tear. She knew that Jack had contacted her parents on the night she had been assaulted, and she had been in and out of the hospital for almost a month now, yet her mother

sun-bleached hair and freshly suntanned arms strongly implied that she had chosen to finish her cruise before putting in an appearance at her daughter's bedside.

"My poor baby, what they did to you..." Loud sniffles were added to the face blotting.

Alex closed her eyes, too tired to deal with her mother's histrionics. She wondered whether another bout of vomiting would be enough to get her a reprieve, and then cursed the anti-nausea medication for having finally worked.

She let her breath out between her teeth. "I'm fine, Mom. They've got me fixed up, mostly." She tried to ease the pressure on a sore spot by tucking her knees up, but all that did was make the pain from the donor site on her thigh more pronounced. Even though she managed to repress a moan, she saw her mother eye her suspiciously. She forced herself to smile. "I think they're letting me go home in a few days."

As if this was the cue her mother had been waiting for, she abandoned the handkerchief and handed Alex a small business card she had taken from her purse. "Your father plays golf with this fellow once a month. He's an absolutely wonderful surgeon. He reshaped Effie Thayer's nose, and honestly, you'd hardly recognize her."

Alex arched an eyebrow, certain that she wouldn't recognize Effie Thayer if the woman were to next to turn up in her hospital room. Her mother had never introduced her circle of friends to her, and Alex had her doubts that the more recent additions were even aware of her existence. She placed the card face down on her bedside table without giving it a glance.

"I have a plastic surgeon, Mom. I don't need another."

Her mother pursed her lips and huffed with exasperation. "Well, we'll see what he has to say about that during your first consultation." With a flourish, she opened a leather-bound diary and used her dampened finger to flick through the pages. "I have it all set up for the eighteenth. That will give you plenty of time to get you settled in at home."

So far, counting the drops of saline steadily falling into the chamber of her IV had been enough to keep a check on Alex's temper, but she felt that control slipping as she stared open-mouthed at her mother. Digging her fingers into her palms, she shook her head. "I'm not going back to Boston with you, Mom." It took a lot of effort to keep her voice level, but she was just about successful, though the soft flesh of her palms stung from the force of her nails.

The diary closed with a snap. "Of course you are. Your father and I had a long discussion, and we have both decided that it really is for the best, Alexandra."

The all-too-familiar tone her mother had wrapped around Alex's full name made her flinch as she had been slapped.

"I haven't spoken to my *father* in over five years." She sounded each word deliberately; it was the only way she could force them out. "He made his feelings perfectly clear before I left, and I am not going back."

Her mother patted her arm lightly. "But you're all over that business now, darling. You aren't even with that girl anymore."

For a long moment, Alex wasn't sure whether to laugh or cry. In the end, she merely lifted her mother's fingers away from her arm. "That doesn't mean I'm sleeping with men. Being gay isn't something I'm going to grow out of."

Her mother's face paled beneath its bronzed façade, but she quickly managed to compose herself and gave a high, short laugh. "Well, your father doesn't need to know that, does he?"

"He does know that, Mom. I'm guessing it's the reason you're here on your own."

The laugh again, wilder this time, a little more desperate. "Oh, you know how busy he is. He had a meeting that he really couldn't reschedule and then he has a series of conferences in England and France next week." Her mother's voice faltered slightly, and when she spoke again, she sounded tired.

and defeated. "He'll probably be away for the next month—"

"Mom—"

Ignoring Alex's attempt to interrupt, her mother continued to speak, her words falling over each other in feigned enthusiasm, even though she was unable to meet Alex's eyes. "But we have it all arranged for you, and he's happy you're coming home. Really."

"Mom, it's okay." Alex took hold of her mother's hand and gave it a gentle squeeze. "I'm okay."

This time when her mother managed to look up, the tears in her eyes were genuine. "You don't look okay." Her bottom lip trembled and a tear spilled down her cheek. "I wanted to come straight away, but your father..." With a shake of her head, she tucked a loose piece of hair behind Alex's ear. "I like it like this, longer. It suits you."

"Yeah?" Alex smiled and relaxed back into her pillows. "I'm glad you came, Mom."

"But you're staying here, aren't you?" Her mother already sounded resigned to the inevitable.

Alex nodded. "Yeah, I'm staying here."

*

"You have got the worst case of bedhead, my darling."

The brush caught on a tangled strand of Sarah's hair, but it was the familiar voice of her best friend and not that small discomfort that made her open her eyes.

"Well, look at you." Ash was standing at the side of the bed, her face lit up with a grin.

Sarah managed her own tremulous smile, ignoring the sting of slowly healing wounds.

"Didn't mean to wake you up," Ash said, gingerly extricating the brush from where it had become ensnared. "I'm crap at this. It's been years since I had long hair."

Ash had had short, spiky hair for as long as Sarah had known her, and the thought of her with anything so overtly feminine as a ponytail made Sarah start to giggle.

Narrowing her eyes, Ash folded her arms indignantly. "I don't know what you're finding so funny, young lady. I'll have you know I had a beautiful perm in the eighties."

Sarah's hand flew to her left side, trying to splint fractured ribs and a fresh surgical wound as she laughed harder. "Oh fuck, please don't. Oh, you bugger, that hurts."

Ash steadied the morphine pump Sarah was fumbling for. The dose Sarah administered had been long overdue, and she lay completely still until she felt the drug slowly begin to take effect.

"Better?" Ash asked. She stroked the back of Sarah's hand, encouraging her to relax her grip on the pump.

"Mm, yes." Sarah sighed with relief. "Thank you."

"For what? Busting your stitches open?"

"No." Sarah passed the brush back to Ash, who resumed the task of unknottedting her hair. "I can't remember the last time I laughed."

"Hardly surprising, love. You've had a pretty terrible few weeks."

"I know."

Ash set the brush down and pushed the last few strands of sweat-damp hair from Sarah's forehead with her fingers. "Richard phoned me, said he'd arranged for me to be allowed to visit you in here. The intensive care unit had a strict *immediate family only* policy, which meant that Sarah's stepfather had been her only visitor since the accident. Ash, often forthright to a fault, now looked unusually reticent. "He said to tell you that he was going away for a while, that he didn't know when he'd be back."

"But that..." Sarah frowned in confusion. "That means he'll miss the funerals."

Ash was already shaking her head, her expression stricken. Sarah stared at her in disbelief.

“I’m so sorry, Sarah.”

“No. No. I wanted—”

“Your mum and Molly were buried two days ago.”

Sarah slammed her fist against the side rail of her bed, her body trembling with rage. “He must have known...” Anger gave way instantly to grief, and she started to cry, the words choking off in her throat as she sobbed. “He must have known and he did it anyway.”

Ash perched on the bed and gathered her close.

“I just wanted to say good-bye to them,” Sarah whispered, tears soaking the front of Ash’s shirt. “He couldn’t even give me that.”

*

Cruel hands held Alex to the floor, pressing her face into the ground and forcing the breath from her. She couldn’t shout for help, she could barely breathe, and she couldn’t fight them off. The hands moved lower, a man laughed, and a blade dug into her back. With the one breath she managed to take she started to scream.

“Oh fuck...”

She covered her face with her hands and fought to stop herself from hyperventilating. Thin, early morning light was already creeping in beneath her drapes and the air in her bedroom was stifling. She kicked her legs, freeing them from the mess of twisted sheets, and then pushed herself into a sitting position, her knees drawn up and her arms wrapped around them. She shuddered as she tried to rid herself of the residual terror still clinging to her. The nightmare was always the same; sometimes she managed to wake herself up before the cutting started, but more often, she failed.

The water in the glass on her bedside table was warm and stale, but she drained it regardless, pulling a face at the taste. Her alarm clock ticked over to 3:17 a.m. In the corner of her room, her police uniform was just about visible, neatly laid out over a chair. Feeling more exhausted than she had when she’d gone to bed, she closed her eyes and rested her chin on her knees. For the past week she had been attending sessions with the departmental therapist, a mandatory step on the road back to active duty. He had been reassuring her that nerves were only to be expected, that a sense of trepidation was normal and healthy, and that he would have been more concerned if the trauma she had suffered hadn’t affected her. As cold sweat soaked her tank top and set her off shivering, Alex wasn’t so sure that she wanted to be normal. She wasn’t sure what she wanted anymore.

Chapter Two

The bar beneath Sarah's fingers was slippery with sweat. She gripped it more tightly, trying to find the purchase that would give her legs the support they needed.

"You're doing great, darlin'." Standing at the far end of the parallel bars, Ash waggled the gift-wrapped bar of chocolate she had brought as motivation.

"Fuck off," Sarah muttered, her teeth gritted as she tried to summon the strength necessary to take another step. Her left leg obeyed her without too much complaint, but her right, its femur held together by a titanium rod, told her in no uncertain terms that it had had enough. "I can't." An uncontrollable trembling started in her arms. She shook her head. "I can't do this."

"Three more steps." The warm hand in the middle of her back belonged to Isaac, her physiotherapist. He had shown infinite patience, surprising in such a young man, first in coaxing her out of her hospital bed and then in getting her to the point where she was confident enough to stand. Not wanting to let him down, she concentrated on slowing her breathing and then straightened her shoulders. She reached out with her right hand, making sure of her grip before bringing her weaker left arm forward.

"Good, that's good." Isaac was close behind her, poised to steady her if necessary but allowing her the space to make her own move.

"This really is a *huge* bar of chocolate," Ash announced, before making a show of zipping her lips shut when Sarah scowled at her.

"Not helping, Ash," Sarah gasped as she lifted her right leg. It dropped down clumsily, but she had succeeded in taking a full step, and she glanced up. "Okay, if it's Cadbury's then you're helping a little bit."

"Dairy Milk," Ash confirmed. "Two more steps and it's all yours."

"Yeah, no problem." Lowering her head, Sarah ignored the pain coursing through her battered body and slid her fingers along the rail again.

*

Alex's first day back in uniform passed in a haze of comradely smiles, careful claps on the back, nods, and well-wishes. She had been assigned desk duty for the week: a gentle and mandatory reintroduction to the job she had lived and loved for five years. Immersing herself in reading through a stack of case reports, witness testimonies, and official bulletins helped the morning pass uneventfully. With a pleading expression, Jack had dropped a tub of ice cream on her desk as he wandered through, his temporary partner in tow. She had laughed, waved at him as he headed off again, and then eaten the ice cream in lieu of lunch.

As the clock on the wall crept around to five p.m., the regular clerical staff started to straggled toward the exit, their complaints about aching backs, budget cuts, and the inevitable snarl up on the freeway filtering through the desk partitions. Lights dimmed one by one, leaving Alex with only the glow of her computer screen and a bulb that flickered intermittently above the fax machine. Somewhere down the corridor an industrial vacuum cleaner began to hum, the rise and fall of its volume as it was steadily moved reassuring Alex that she wasn't entirely alone.

The case file she had located earlier that day was easy for her to access, no one having had the presence of mind to lock it against her username. For the space of two breaths, she stared at the small icon, her hands slick against the plastic of the keyboard. One tap of her finger gave her an inde

ballistics, CSI, crime scene photography, medical reports, witness statements. Calmly deciding on an organized approach, she started with ballistics.

The vacuum cleaner and its operator had gone and the corridors had long since fallen into silence. After three hours, the caution Alex had initially employed had been subdued by her own exhaustion and the repetitive, often impenetrable nature of the forensic analysis. With only two items remaining on the index, and her mind already distracted by thoughts of a long, hot bath, she was largely functioning on autopilot as she opened the penultimate folder.

“Jesus.”

The sequence of images filled the screen rapidly and without warning. Instinctively, she pushed her chair back, trying to distance herself from photographs she could not remember being taken. The photographs that recorded in unflinching detail the injuries she had suffered. Unable to close down the images fast enough, she resorted to shutting her eyes, cursing herself inwardly for being so stupid and then cursing herself with more vehemence for being such a coward.

In her last counseling session, the therapist, sitting in his cozy office with its lofty view and its expensive coffee maker, had blithely told her to confront her fears. She had just about resisted the urge to throttle him at the time, satisfying herself with a sarcastic comment that had drifted right over his head as he smiled infuriatingly and nodded in unthinking agreement. She was quite certain the scenario wasn't what he'd had in mind, but she decided that for once she would follow his advice. On the count of five, she opened her eyes.

The woman in the photographs seemed like a stranger. Bloodstained and beaten, she stared unseeing at the camera as gloved hands guided her into position. Alex could remember only the terrible sense of disorientation, the clamor of multiple voices, and finally, the irresistible pull of strong narcotics. The medics had obviously waited until she was unconscious before they unwrapped her back.

Cleansed of blood, the lettering was easy to decipher, the H slipping away clumsily where the assailant had started to lose his nerve. In the hospital, she had compulsively traced her fingertips first across the lines of sutures and then across the raised scars, but she had never actually seen the initial damage. It was only now, weeks later, that she appreciated the tact of the doctors and the fierce protective determination of the nursing staff. She closed the images one by one, to leave only the snow-capped mountains of her desktop wallpaper. The computer shut down with a cheerful tune. She wiped her face dry and reached for her jacket.

*

The grass was brittle underfoot, an unusually prolonged spell of hot weather having scorched the green from its stems so that they crackled as Sarah negotiated a careful route through the stones. The walking stick that the hospital had given her tapped and jarred against the flattened markers, guiding her path and just about enabling her to keep her balance.

“Only another minute or so,” Ash said, keeping close but being careful not to hover by her side.

“I'm okay.” Sarah paused to push her hair away from her forehead, tucking behind her ear the strands that routinely escaped her haphazard ponytail. The sun was bleaching the color from everything around them, and she raised a hand to shade her eyes and regain her bearings. She set off again immediately, following Ash's directions and trying to quiet her labored breathing.

“Oh!”

She had suddenly caught sight of her mother's and Molly's names, and she stopped abruptly, a sense of preparation abandoning her in an instant. The intense physical effort and a surge of uncontrollable grief made her vision gray momentarily. She reached out to grip onto the smooth

granite of the headstone. It was warm beneath her fingers, and she stroked it back and forth as the dizziness abated.

“Sarah, here.” Ash held out the bouquet.

Sarah took it from her, the candy-sweet scent of the roses mingling with the cut grass surrounding the graves. It smelled like blissful hot summers, summers when she would come home from university and make up for lost time by playing in the back garden with Molly. She shook her head, her shoulders heaving as tears splashed onto the funeral wreaths that were already faded and wilted at her feet. She dropped to her knees, ignoring the pain from her legs as she tried to clear a space for her own flowers.

“Let me get rid of these, okay?” Ash waited until Sarah murmured her consent and then gathered the older tributes together. “That’s better, bit tidier. I think your mum would want things tidy.”

“She would.” Sarah wiped her nose and face with her shirtsleeve and shrugged apologetically at Ash’s expression of horror.

“Here.” Ash rooted in her pockets until she found a packet of Kleenex. “Thought we might be needing these.”

“Thanks.”

“Any time.” She sat beside Sarah, shuffling until she was in a comfortable position. “It’s very beautiful here.” She held out an arm and Sarah leaned gratefully into her embrace. “We’ll just sit for a bit, then, eh?”

Sarah nodded, unable to reply, as the cheerful song of a blackbird perched in a tree above a freshly dug grave drowned out the sound of her weeping.

*

One by one, the peas dropped off Sarah’s fork. She swore beneath her breath, scooping up more potato to stick them into place. Dexterity was proving to be difficult, with one wrist that still creaked and complained when she wanted it to cooperate, but her mum had always told her not to *shovel her peas*, and even though her mum was gone, Sarah was finding that old habits were hard to break.

“You missed one.” Across the table from her, Ash snorted in amusement and flicked a stray pea back toward her plate.

Tess, Ash’s partner of more years than they could be bothered keeping track of, looked up from the papers she had been engrossed in and noticed Sarah’s predicament. “Sorry, love. I’ll do carrots next time, something you can stab.” She waved her own fork at the printed sheets. “This is quite a lot of money, Sarah.”

Her peas successfully glued into place with potato, Sarah swallowed the mouthful before her appetite—what little appetite she had—faded. “I know.”

“I can give you advice on investments, try to make it work for you and gain some decent interest. Richard may be a shit, but he’s been a generous shit.”

Ash made a disgusted noise that caught the top of her beer bottle and projected itself around the room. “Oh, he’s proper fucking big on generosity, so long as she leaves him alone.”

“Ash...” The warning in Tess’s tone was unmistakable.

While Sarah had been lying semi-conscious in the ICU, Richard had put the family home up for sale. Later, he had forwarded via his lawyer correspondence detailing the settlement of his late wife’s will and requesting that any enquiries be directed to his legal team. They had told Sarah he was in Italy, but beyond that, they had declined to comment.

Sarah placed her knife and fork neatly onto her plate and pushed it aside. “She’s right, Tess. And I’d really appreciate your help.”

Before taking a career break, Tess had been a financial advisor to a number of local charities. She nodded at Sarah and gathered the papers together efficiently. “Okay, if the missus would be so kind as to put the kettle on, I’ll go through these with you.”

Ash’s fork made a clang as she dropped it. “Oh, just because you’re having our child, I have to be your galley slave?”

Tess grinned as she struggled to her feet, her swollen abdomen straining the limits of her T-shirt. “Want to swap? Be my guest. He was kicking me all night, and for the third day in a row, my ankles are the size of tree trunks.”

Ash rolled her eyes. “Tea or coffee?” she asked, and then gave a melodramatic sigh that earned her no sympathy whatsoever.

*

Sarah sipped her tea, glancing around the familiar layout of the living room. Tess was still reading through the legal papers, and in the kitchen, Sarah could hear Ash washing the dishes, clattering crockery and pans with carefree abandon. The living room of their two-up two-down terraced house was small but cozy, with a sofa running the length of one wall and much of the remaining floor space taken up by a home birthing pool, yet to be unwrapped. Following her discharge from the hospital, Sarah had been sleeping in the only spare room, sharing the space with a baby’s crib, a changing table, and stacks of tiny outfits knitted by proud grandparents-to-be.

A burst of rain hit the window, breaking into her thoughts, as the rumble of distant thunder signaled a break in the recent spell of uncomfortably humid weather. Even with the tea burning her throat pleasantly, she found herself unable to relax. Although she had come to terms with her decision over the last few days, she was dreading broaching the subject with her best friends. This was obviously a perfect opportunity, so continuing to tell herself that she was waiting for the right moment sounded like a hollow argument. It was only when her palms began to sting that she realized how tightly she was gripping her mug, and set it on the table.

“Tess?”

“Mm? What, sweetie?” Distracted, Tess didn’t look up, which somehow made it easier for Sarah to continue.

“I handed my notice in at the pool.”

That got Tess’s attention, and her head lifted sharply. “You did? When?”

“Yesterday. I took a walk while you were at the hospital.”

“Must’ve been some walk.” Ash stood in the doorway, wiping her hands dry on a towel. “That’s a good couple of miles each way.”

“Yeah, but I caught the bus home,” Sarah admitted with a small smile.

Ash perched on the arm of the sofa and took hold of her hand.

“You know I’d have given you a lift. Why didn’t you ask?”

“Because you’d have tried to talk me out of it.” And probably succeeded, Sarah added silently. “But I can’t stay here.” She held up her hand as both Tess and Ash drew breath to protest. “I *can’t*. I love you both, more than I can probably ever tell you, but you need your space. And with the money I’ve been thinking...” She squeezed Ash’s hand, a wordless plea for support, for her not to make things any harder than it already was. “I want to use some of it to travel.”

“Sarah—”

Sarah shook her head at Tess, breaking into whatever she was about to say. “Please don’t.”

Ash ran her fingers lightly through Sarah’s hair as Tess came to sit on the sofa.

“You’ve thought all this through?” Tess asked quietly.

“Yes.” Sarah sounded more confident than she felt. “I never really knew what I was doing before. I got lucky, somehow drifted into a job I enjoyed, but I’m not sure I want to teach swimming for the rest of my life. I’m not sure what I want.”

“So,” Ash said lightly, “you’re going to run off, have fabulous adventures, have fabulous sex with fabulous exotic women, find the real you, and then come home to tell us all the gruesome details?”

Sarah blinked slowly and then looked up at Ash. Ash ignored Tess’s horrified expression and smirked as Sarah started to laugh helplessly.

“You’re a bloody idiot,” Sarah managed to gasp. “I’m not sure about all that *finding the real me* crap, but the rest of it sounds great.”

*

Blue and red flashed steadily, splashing color across the magazines at the front of the store and giving unnecessary prominence to their lurid headlines: *Angels Murdered by their Mommy*, *Stars With Cellulite: Exclusive Photos!* Blue then red, blue then red.

“I didn’t mean to do it. I didn’t mean to do it.” The kid was sweating, hopped up on who the hell he knew what, as he stared glassy-eyed at Alex. Mucus and tears ran together on his face and clogged his throat, giving his voice a perversely childlike quality. In one hand, he still gripped the bag of money he had taken from the cashier, and in the other, his gun was beginning to waver.

“We know you didn’t mean to,” Jack said, unbelievably calm at Alex’s side. “Just put the gun down.”

“I’m sorry. I’m sorry.”

Her wrists aching from the strain of keeping her weapon trained, Alex tried not to allow the crumpled form behind the counter to distract her. Blood still seeped from its ruined skull, and the thick metallic smell was making it hard for her to breathe.

“If you put the gun down, we can help you. We can help *him*.”

Alex nodded when Jack looked to her for confirmation, but she couldn’t speak, and for a split second, she saw a flash of fear in his eyes.

“What’s your name, kid?” he asked.

“Michael.” Barely a murmur, but Jack was undeterred.

“Okay, Michael, I need you to trust me. Here’s what we’re gonna do: you’re gonna hand me your gun and we’ll walk out of here together before this gets any bigger than it needs to, okay?”

The strobes from their patrol car lit up Michael’s face, catching the blond streaks in his hair and the sheen of his semiautomatic. Perspiration trickled down Alex’s neck as she battled the almost overwhelming urge to just run for the door, to let someone else stand in front of a trigger-happy kid with nothing to lose.

“Put the gun down,” she whispered, almost a plea, and Michael flinched at the unexpected edge of desperation in her voice. “Just put it down.”

The kid’s hand shook violently, rattling the coins in the bag, and Jack opened his mouth for reassurance, to placate, to try to bargain some more.

“Just...” Alex raised a finger from her gun, stilling Jack as Michael slowly lowered his weapon.

“Please don’t shoot me.” His gun dropped to the tiles, spinning lazily in place until Alex, reacting quicker, kicked it beneath the magazine rack. The paper bag split, scattering coins as the kid lifted his hands in surrender. Mesmerized, Alex watched nickels and quarters flip and slide while Jack moved in front of her to cuff Michael’s hands. The cashier’s life had been worth less than twenty dollars.

*

~~The technicians from the medical examiner's office were respectful even in their well-practiced~~ efficiency, but Alex still shuddered as the weight of the body bag thudded onto the gurney. The Styrofoam cup of coffee someone had thrust into her hands was too strong, and the few sips she had managed were already churning in her stomach. Her shift had finished more than two hours ago, but they weren't letting her go home; hours of debriefings and statements were still to come, and she was already so tired. Despite the sultry temperature, she turned the heat up in the car. She pulled her jacket tighter and hunched forward with her arms folded across herself.

"You okay?"

She nodded without looking up. It was not the first time that Jack had asked.

"Wanna talk about it?"

"Not really." That was the last thing she wanted to do. It was much safer all tucked up inside her car, tormenting her with aches in her gut, cold sweats, and sleepless nights. If she talked, that would be it. Jack would know everything; but then she remembered the look he had given her in the store and suddenly realized he probably had a damn good idea anyway. "I'm fine," she said, the lie well rehearsed but still completely unconvincing.

"Alex..."

"I'm *fine*." The coffee splashed onto her fingers as her hand shook. It suddenly felt as if there was no air in the car, and she clicked the button to lower the window, her finger blanching from the pressure.

"Slow your breathing down."

She shook her head. How could she slow it down when there was something crushing her chest?

"Alex, slow it down."

Lights danced across her vision as she took huge gulps of air, but some distant, rational part of her brain told her that that was only making things worse. With a massive effort, she closed her mouth and forced herself to breathe through her nose.

"Shit." The lights faded, and Jack's worried face gradually came into focus.

"Better?"

She nodded, her legs trembling as adrenaline flooded her body.

"That cramping in your hands should ease off soon." At some point, he had taken the cup of coffee from her clawed-up fingers.

"Thanks." She wiped her face as best she could.

"They happen a lot?"

"No." Her answer was automatic, but she was too strung out to keep up the pretense, and she looked across at him. "All the time," she whispered, pushing aside the instincts that were warning her to say nothing, to give nothing away. "They happen all the time." Her eyes slid shut; she couldn't look at him and still make this admission. In the dark it was so much easier, and she felt the tightness in her chest begin to loosen its grip. "Jack, I don't think I can do this anymore."

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