



Chapter Two

Alex locked her car and ran in the front door and up the closest of the two half-circle staircases on either side of the lobby. The stairways always reminded her of an elegant hotel lobby from some old black-and-white movie, and they seemed out of place in the middle of the dilapidated station entrance.

At the top of the stairs, she ran into one of the consulting psychologists, carrying a tall stack of files. As they bumped, the files dropped to the floor.

"Sorry," Alex said, leaning down to scoop them up.

"Don't worry." Dr. Richards straightened the files in her arms. "It's a zoo in there today."

Alex nodded, handing her a stack of papers. "Always is." That was what she loved about police work. Every day was a new adventure.

Alex edged her way through the crowd of people waiting at the desk.

"I'm telling you, he said he wanted to buy the cycle," one man yelled. A black leather jacket covered his white dress shirt and the jacket of a gray suit, a helmet tucked under his arm. "Brand-new BMW bike. Fuck," he muttered under his breath.

Alex moved past another man who rolled up his sleeve and showed his tattoo to the administrative officer. "Does that look like an eagle to you? It's a goddamn Tweety Bird. I paid a hundred bucks for an eagle and the asshole won't give me my money back."

Alex looked at the tattoo. It was definitely not an eagle. She thought even Tweety looked tougher than the wimpy bird on his shoulder. Rotten luck.

"That's really not a police issue. You should contact the consumer bureau to file a report," the officer behind the counter explained.

"A report? I ain't going to file no damn report. I want my fucking money back."

Alex wished she had time to stay and watch the man get himself thrown in jail for assaulting an officer. Through a large solid oak door, she entered the administrative division where they housed the fingerprint and mug-shot files. The department planned to scan them all so they would be accessible by computer at any station in California and eventually the nation. Great intentions but the process was unbelievably slow. She'd had to "thumb" through the records more than a

few times in her months on the force, and it wasn't an enviable job.

"Morning, Alex," Detective Sam Portreo called. A brown tie curved over his round belly as though it had been starched against a bowling ball. This particular tie was his favorite because it hid the coffee stains.

"Hey, Sam. How's it going?"

His coffee cup raised, he gave a half smile. "I could complain, but what good would it do?"

"Exactly. Nice tie, by the way."

"Never been cleaned," he said proudly.

"I'm impressed."

"Knew you would be."

On the way down the hall, she leaned into her brother's office.

"Hey," James called, waving her over.

She leaned over his desk and pointed to her empty wrist. "I'm late, but I wanted to ask: Do you remember if any of us walked in our sleep as kids?"

James raised an eyebrow. "Sleepwalking now?"

She shook her head, realizing the question sounded strange coming from someone already late for work, especially to James. James was Internal Affairs and his intense stares made an average cop's suspicious nature seem like child's play. "I just thought I remembered something from when we were kids."

"Not that I know of." Then, turning back to his work, he added, "You'd better get to work. And no sleepwalking on the job."

Feeling better, she almost smiled at the remark. It was the closest James would come to humor on the job. He took his work very seriously. It was something she respected about her brother despite the fact that it occasionally made him difficult to be around.

In the locker room, she dressed as quickly as she could. It was normally a ten-minute process with the lace-up ankle boots, the twenty-five-pound equipment belt, and a bulletproof vest. This morning, she finished in five. The first few steps with all the extra weight always made her feel as though she were walking through water. Today, rushing around, it felt more like she was running through water.

As she reached the second-floor squad room, a square, windowless area, she scanned for her partner. They were due in the briefing in three minutes.

Four patrol officers, one with a ball tucked under his arm, headed in after their morning two-on-two basketball game.

"You should join us some time, Alex."

She smiled and waved off the comment. "I'd hate to embarrass you guys."

"I think they need bigger help than you can offer," another joked.

"And I thought guys always swore size doesn't matter," she sparred back.

The first one laughed and the two exchanged high-fives. One of the others mumbled something about kicking their butts tomorrow. Alex turned back to search for Greg.

Other officers waved from tables, but Greg was nowhere in sight.

"I wondered when you'd show up. Late date last night?"

Alex turned to see Brenda behind her, her long lean frame easily six inches taller than Alex's.

Alex covered her mouth, remembering. "I was supposed to pick you up this morning! I'm so sorry."

Brenda laughed, her flawless black skin creasing into tiny lines around her eyes as she smiled. "No biggie." She waved her finger at Alex. "I did call your house, though. No answer. Who's the latest? Because when you cut him loose, I've got someone to set you up with."

Some people seemed to find it weird that Alex was thirty-five and happily unmarried. Alex had relationships--some short, some longer. But none had worked out. In the end, it was always for the best. Some people were good at relationships, some weren't. Alex put herself in the "suck" category. If she met someone special, she'd worry about it. For now, it was one less thing to concern herself with.

Brenda's huge almond-shaped hazel eyes widened as she waited for an answer. "So, is it still Tom?"

Alex smiled. "Not last night."

Since going through Los Medanos Police Academy in Contra Costa County with Brenda, Alex had found herself sharing more with her than with anyone else. But confiding wasn't something she did much of. Her former fiancé and her best friend in L.A., both cops, had often said she kept more secrets from them than they did from each other. Nobody knew her better than those two.

And they knew each other very well, too, she realized when she found them in bed together two months before the wedding. Still together, from what Alex heard from friends in L.A.

Strangely, after a brief pissed-off period, the whole incident had rolled off her like water off wax. She was further from being concerned about marriage than ever.

"I totally overslept," she lied, thinking it wasn't so far from the truth.

Brenda frowned. "Overslept? You all right?"

"I know, the one time I can actually fall sleep, I can't wake up."

"You don't look rested. You sure you slept at home?"

Alex looked up at Brenda, catching the jest in her gaze. "Positive."

Someone yelled Alex's name and she turned to face her partner, Greg Roback. Thankful for the distraction from Brenda's questions, she took a step toward him. Greg was easily six foot five and so skinny he looked like he might break in two like a pencil under pressure. Only slightly meatier, Alex knew why they were often called the bean team.

"Are we late?"

He shook his head. "But we're about to be."

The shift briefing meeting was held in a cramped windowless room in the center of the building. The walls were littered with everything from wanted posters and APBs to furniture sales and baby announcements.

People milled about as Alex sank into a hard plastic seat and the captain started the meeting. He was in a sour mood, so the normal repertoire of jokes was kept to a minimum. He went over a couple of internal memos and let them know they had an armed robber on the loose driving a white Honda Civic.

"Great. That'll be easy to spot," Officer Nancy Yim joked from up front.

There was a round of laughter and the captain cracked a crooked smile.

He read off the car assignments and tossed his clipboard on the table.

"That's it. Get out there."

Alex stood and headed for the door. "What's up with the captain?" she asked when they were out of earshot.

Greg shrugged. "Political bullshit, probably."

She followed Greg out the door toward their squad car, stifling a yawn. She almost always drove the first shift, preferring to drive in the morning when she was most awake and alert. Usually that meant right after the first cup of coffee of the day. Today, without her caffeine and a good night's sleep, Alex thought she'd fall asleep before they were out of the station's parking lot.

"You know what Al Capone's business card said?" Greg asked, throwing out the first trivia of the day.

"Used furniture dealer."

"Damn. How'd you know that?"

"Saw The Godfather six times," she said.

Greg shook his head. "You're the weirdest chick I know."

"Thanks. What's up with Lori?"

"Over," he answered flatly.

"Why?"

"She threw a fit when I wanted to watch the game." He shrugged then

looked over. "I missed breakfast. Want to run by Noah's?"

"I'm dying for a cup of coffee," she agreed.

His seat belt clicked into place as she started the car. "Miss your morning fix?"

She nodded.

"Coffee machine broken?"

"Something like that."

"I heard you missed a pickup, too."

"I overslept, Roback. Drop it, okay?"

"Sure. You overslept. From the woman who never sleeps. I'll buy it."

Alex didn't answer him, but she was thinking he was right. She'd never even slept through the garbage pickup. How had she slept through driving somewhere in her car?

Greg pulled something off the seat. "Alex, this is gross."

She looked over at one of her chewed-up pens and snatched it from his hand. "Deal with it. At least it doesn't stink up the car like that monstrosity you eat for breakfast."

"It's getting worse. Everywhere I look, I find some slobbery pen. You know, there are easier ways to get out that aggression. Joe in Narc's always looking at you. I bet he'd go for some one-on-one."

"No way." She backed the car out of their spot and pulled through the parking lot.

"This must be the no cops rule. You ever going to explain that to me? What did a cop ever do to you? I mean, besides that jackass fiancé. Is that what this is about?"

"I get enough of cops at work, thank you."

"Speaking of which, when are we going to do that report for the captain?"

More at ease, she gave him a smug look. "Finished it yesterday after you went home."

"You didn't."

She grinned.

"I knew there was a reason I loved having you as a partner."

"We both know there are a thousand reasons. But don't think I'm giving you any credit for this one, Roback."

He grinned. "You wouldn't leave me out."

"I'm actually looking forward to it," she said.

"Yeah, right."

She winked. "What about this one: All the clocks in Pulp Fiction were set

on one time."

Greg smiled. "Four-twenty."

"You've heard that one before."

"It's one to one." He looked over at her. "See the game last night?"

"Knicks won?"

"You missed the game?"

She shrugged. "I was busy."

"Busy last night, overslept this morning. You going to tell me about him? He's got to be something if he's getting you to fall asleep. He wear you out, or what?"

"Quit probing," she teased. "What are you--jealous?"

"You're dreaming," he snapped back. After an awkward beat, he said, "Did you know the giant squid has the largest eyes in the world?"

Alex laughed. "Did you know an ostrich's eye is bigger than its brain?"

"They use Murphy's Oil Soap to clean elephants."

She looked over. "What the hell's Murphy's Oil Soap?"

Greg smiled. "How the hell would I know? I'm a bachelor, for Christ's sake."

She laughed again. "Did you know cats have over one hundred vocal sounds and dogs only have about ten?"

"Dogs are still cooler," Greg responded.

"Definitely."

They drove the rest of the way to Noah's in silence. Another police car sat at the curb in front. Alex smiled at the way Noah's bagel shop had replaced Dunkin' Donuts as a cop hangout. At least it was healthier.

For them, stopping at Noah's had become a ritual, always ordering the same thing. For him, it was an onion bagel with garlic cream cheese. The smell in the car got so bad even the people who had to ride in the back complained about it.

"Hey, I'm addicted," he would say with an exaggerated shrug of his shoulders. She had taken to keeping a pack of breath mints for him in the glove compartment.

"The usual?" her partner asked.

Nodding, she leaned back against the interior of the front seat and closed her eyes. She heard him close his door and walk around the car.

"Maybe I should get you a decaf."

Prying her eyes open, she looked at Greg, his long skinny frame bent down in the door. She smiled and closed her eyes again. "You trying to kill me?"

He laughed. "That obvious, eh?"

Squinting against the sun's morning glare, she opened her eyes. "If I don't have coffee in my stomach in three minutes, I'm going to get violent."

Greg raised his arms in surrender. "Sheesh, I can take a hint."

She blinked hard, taking in the familiar sights of downtown Berkeley.

Across the street was Barnes and Noble. It was where she came on her days off-- her favorite brewpub, Jupiter, was two blocks in the opposite direction. In the last decade, this area of Berkeley had really cleaned up. That change made it very easy to patrol and she was thrilled that it was part of her beat.

Of course, bagels and coffee on the way to work in the morning didn't hurt, either. And nothing made her happier than a cup or three of black coffee first thing.

Motion caught her eye and she glanced down the side street, her internal alarms sounding. An older female lay on the sidewalk, and she spied a young Caucasian male running up the street.

Alex glanced toward the bagel shop, but Greg was nowhere in sight. The woman started to get up, so Alex revved the engine and sped after the suspect. Sirens screeching, she lunged through traffic. A car leapt in front of her. She swerved to miss it. "Shit!"

The running man made no move to stop.

Almost on his tail, she halted. The bumper of the squad car came within feet of the perp. Moving quickly, he ducked down a narrow alley. Her hand was on the door before the car was completely stopped. The emergency brake on, she threw open the door and bolted after him.

Alex drove her feet against the pavement, determined to catch him even if it meant a marathon around the damn city. She pressed her shoulder radio. "Officer Kincaid here." Her eyes nailed to her suspect, she sucked in a quick breath.

"Go ahead," came the voice of dispatch.

"Female down on Dwight at Shattuck. Suspect proceeding down alley between Shattuck and Channing," she panted. "I'm on foot pursuit. White male juvenile, seventeen or eighteen years, six foot, plus or minus. Dress is jeans, red T-shirt, black baseball cap."

"We read," came the response.

Alex knew backup would be on its way immediately, but there was no time to waste. If she stopped, she was guaranteed to lose him.

The suspect shot a quick glance over his shoulder.

"Stop, police," she yelled.

The kid leapt onto the fence at the end of the alley and climbed like a monkey scaling a tree. She had no doubt he had done this before. But so had she. On the other side, he jumped to the ground and continued running. He had a good head start.

"You can't outrun me," she muttered. She pulled herself up the fence. The sharp wire cut her hands but she didn't ease up. She swung her legs over the top and dropped to the ground on the other side. Concrete jolted her ankles as she landed.

The perp disappeared and she forced her legs faster, keeping her breath at an even pace. She hoped the suspect wasn't a damned marathoner.

At the other end of the alley, she bolted onto the street, glancing in both directions. He was gone. "Damn!"

Spinning around, she caught a glimpse of the suspect just as he came down on top of her. She hit the ground with a thud, her head knocked sideways against the hard pavement. The perp was above her, holding her arms.

Trapped, her breath came faster. She struggled against his strength, fighting off the wave of nausea that always came with being confined.

His grip tightened.

Focused, she contained her breathing until she felt a slight loosening of his tension. Then, in a lash of anger, she freed one leg and rammed her shin into his groin.

With a groan, he rolled off her onto his back. She was on him before he could recover.

Shaking off the pain in her head, she pulled her cuffs from her belt. His right hand in her grasp, she bent it back and rolled him over with a forceful tug. Her heel digging into his back, she cuffed his right hand. "Didn't your mother teach you any manners?"

"Fuck off."

She wrenched his left arm behind him and cuffed it. "I don't think so."

With a hard yank, she dragged him to his feet and shoved him toward the street.

Just then, Greg pulled around the corner and jumped out of the car. "Saw the car down the street and knew something had happened. You okay?"

She nodded, pushing the perp toward the car and letting Greg handle him. As Greg put the suspect in the back, she touched the area just above her ear and felt a warm spot of blood. She moaned.

In the car, she leaned back as Greg drove toward Shattuck. "Arbor's bringing the woman down to the station to identify him," Greg said. He motioned

to the perp. "We just have to drop him off. Arbor should meet us out front. He'll do the paperwork."

"Yeah, yeah, fine, but where's my coffee?"

"I didn't have time to get it. We've got to run back after we drop the thug off."

A moan fell from her lips as she closed her eyes.

In front of the station, Greg stopped and pulled the suspect out of the car, handing him over to Arbor.

Alex waved to Arbor as Greg drove off again.

"Let's get some coffee before you attack your next victim," Greg joked.

"I'm serious. I don't think I could do it again without some caffeine."

He parked in front of Noah's. "This one's on me, Wonder Woman."

She smiled. "It's the least you could do, Robin."

"I don't even get to be Batman?"

"Not the way you drive."

In less than a minute, he was back. When he opened the door to hand her the coffee, he touched her head.

Wincing, she pulled away.

"Jesus Christ, Kincaid. You're bleeding."

"No shit, Sherlock."

"You need a doctor."

"It's barely a scrape. Come on."

As Alex took a long sip of French roast and started to relax, a call came through.

"Adam Nine, code four-fifty-nine at the corner of Henry and Yolo. Please report."

Alex nearly choked at the address. Yolo Avenue.