

POINT OF IGNITION

by

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CHAPTER ONE

I need two apple martinis, a screwdriver, and a Long Island iced tea.”

“Three Heinekens, a mudslide, two cosmos, and a vodka, neat.”

Alexi Clark acknowledged each server with a quick nod, already pouring liquor with both hands. She’d been tending bar for more than half her thirty-nine years and could fill even the most complex orders with ease. But these days, as part owner in this particular bar, she spent less time slinging drinks and more time hunched over a desk in the office. So she actually enjoyed the nights when she could get behind the bar.

The hectic pace of the typical Friday night made time pass quickly. And though she knew she would be worn out by the time the shift was over, she took a measure of pride in the people filling every table and sitting elbow to elbow at the bar. During peak tourist season, they drew a good share of out-of-towners. But her core customer base consisted of local sports fans, many of them regulars.

Alexi credited her staff with much of their success. Her bartenders were knowledgeable and able to suggest the perfect drink for any occasion. She’d relented when her business partner insisted that the servers be mostly women, young and attractive. But she made sure they understood that while friendliness was

perfectly acceptable, they were to remain professional as well. And Alexi had won the argument over uniforms, nixing the too-short shorts in favor of khakis and polos. She wouldn't let her establishment have the same reputation as a certain wing joint just a few blocks away.

"Two Budweiser drafts and two Lights in a bottle," one of Alexi's most dependable waitresses called as she passed a food order through the window to the kitchen.

Alexi tilted a mug under the tap and pulled the lever.

"You still here?" Alexi's business partner, Ron Volk, asked as he moved behind the bar. He uncapped two beers and set them on a tray next to her drinks. A nasty flu had been making the rounds of their employees, and tonight, two of their bartenders were among the casualties. Ron and Alexi had taken up the slack, and now it was only three hours until closing time.

Alexi laughed and draped an arm over his shoulders. He was built like a bulldog, short in stature but broad and muscled through his chest and shoulders. "This place is my life. You, on the other hand, have a beautiful wife waiting at home. So get out of here. I'll close."

"You sure?" He pushed his wire-rimmed glasses up his nose in what Alexi was sure was a habit he didn't even notice.

"Yes."

Ron's wife, Danielle, had been Alexi's friend since their early twenties when they tended bar together in a dive on Woodland Street. Of course, that had been before East Nashville became the trendy young-professional-and-coffee-shop area it was now.

"She's probably asleep already."

"Go. I've got this." Alexi took the towel he twisted in his hands and draped it over her shoulder. She pulled a bottle of vodka and flipped it in the air, then caught it and filled the glass in front of her.

"Circus tricks don't impress me," Ron said dryly.

"Get out of my bar." Alexi grinned and slid the drink across the polished mahogany bar she'd restored herself seven

years before when she and Ron bought the dilapidated building downtown. Situated one block off Broadway, the building's location was good enough to justify the months of work it had taken to get the place in shape before opening.

Ron waved as he headed for the kitchen and the back door beyond. Alexi grinned and went back to filling drink orders. Cheers from patrons who watched the highlights from that night's hockey game punctuated the steady hum of conversation in the room. Rumor had it that the Predators had a shot at the Stanley Cup this year, and Nashvillians were really getting behind the team. Alexi still wasn't convinced that the perpetually unreliable team could pull it off, but if they did, it would be good for business. She had carefully positioned eight flat-screen televisions around the room so customers could see one from anywhere, and they were usually tuned to a variety of sporting events.

Hours later, as Alexi retrieved the remote from behind the bar and turned off each television, she made mental notes on some promotions the bar could offer if the Preds got into the playoffs. Having sent the last of her employees home ten minutes ago, Alexi now wandered alone around the room. It had long been her dream, but she hadn't realized how much pride she would feel when she finally had her own place. Ron had hired a decorator to help out with the design of the interior, and Alexi was pleased with the result. The dark woods and rich colors in the main room made the large space feel more intimate. In the back, a cluster of pool tables sat under stained-glass lamps, and four dart boards lined the walls.

Among the tastefully scattered sports memorabilia were several pieces from Alexi's own collection. A basketball signed by Magic Johnson that belonged to her father held a place of honor in a square case behind the bar. And because she knew he would have liked it, a display humidor with a mahogany finish and Spanish cedar trays held a selection of premium cigars. A familiar pang in her chest accompanied thoughts of her father, and as always, she wished he'd been around to see this place.

Alexi didn't need a shrink to tell her why creating the kind of upscale sports bar he would have frequented had still mattered to her a decade and a half after his death. Of course, she had spent so many years in between oblivious to just how many of her decisions had centered on her father's death.

Alexi glanced at a row of liquor bottles on a shelf behind the bar, and, though still present, the familiar urge to have a drink faded a bit every day. Whatever else had happened, she'd persevered, with some help from her friends, and now she had this place to show for it.



In the hazy light of early morning, a column of smoke wound above the city skyline. What less than an hour ago had been a thick, black plume had faded to a light gray. But Kate Chambers had been on enough fire scenes to imagine it as it had been. As she steered her Tahoe onto Fourth Avenue, her heartbeat accelerated at the cluster of fire apparatus parked in the street. The remembered rush of responding with lights and sirens to a scene sang through her blood. She parked next to the curb, and when she stepped out the familiar smell of smoke made heavy and humid by the water used to suppress the fire assailed her.

After grabbing a turnout coat, helmet, and flashlight from the truck she walked toward a group of firefighters clustered near one of the engines. The flames had nearly been extinguished, but a flurry of activity still surrounded the charred skeleton of the building that rose from the water-soaked debris. Unidentifiable men and women in turnout gear manned heavy lengths of hose around the perimeter of the building, and a couple of lines snaked inside the front door. Kate had listened to the radio on her way in and knew that a half hour earlier the district chief in charge had called for a defensive attack and all personnel had been withdrawn from the interior. Now that the fire had been knocked

down, they were going back in to check for hot spots, areas still burning or smoldering.

The white shirt of the chief stood out among the smudged turnout coats. As Kate headed toward him, several firefighters stepped aside and she caught sight of her partner, Jason Hayworth, standing with him.

“Hey, Chambers.” He glanced up from the notes he jotted in a spiral notebook. As she stopped beside him, she had to tilt her head back to meet his eyes. At five foot eleven, Kate was often as tall as most men, but Jason topped six feet by several inches. Add to that a broad chest, shaved head, thick black mustache, and deep voice, and he could be quite intimidating. Though Kate knew he was as gentle as a puppy, he’d told her that his imposing appearance often convinced witnesses to be straight with him. That was one tactic Kate wouldn’t be able to employ. People tended to underestimate her because of her slim figure and blond hair.

“What have we got?” She slipped her flashlight under her arm and pulled out her own notebook.

“Looks like you drew a good first case. Sports bar. It went up quickly. I haven’t been inside yet, but from what the chief is describing, I’d put money on an accelerant. The owners are on the way. We’ve got a witness over there.” He gestured toward a woman talking to one of the firefighters. “You get her statement and I’ll start talking to firefighters.”

Kate nodded. In twelve years on an engine, she’d responded to countless scenes, but this was her first as an investigator. Jason had been with the fire marshal’s office for eight years so she was glad he was there to guide her, especially if this one turned out to be arson.

As Kate approached, the witness looked at her nervously, wringing her hands and shifting her weight. Her hair was matted and pulled into a sloppy braid. Kate didn’t even want to guess when the last time her layers of tattered clothing had been washed.

No doubt she was one of the group of homeless that lived under the nearby interstate overpass.

“Ma’am, can you tell me what you saw?” Kate clicked her pen.

“A black car.” Her voice was rough and shaky.

“Could you tell what model?”

“I don’t know nothing about cars. It was a black one’s all I can say.”

Kate nodded. That wasn’t much help. “When did you see the car?”

“It drove off a few minutes before I smelled the smoke. Then I called 9-1-1 from that pay phone over there.”

Kate glanced at the phone on the side of the vacant building across the street. It was covered in spray paint, and the metal shelf below the phone hung by one side as if someone had nearly succeeded in tearing it off. She was surprised the phone even worked.

“Which way did the car go?”

The woman pointed toward the interstate.

“And you didn’t get a look at the driver?”

“I didn’t know I needed to. It was gone by the time I realized there was a fire.”

So not only was the black car not a good lead, it might not be one at all. Just because it was in the area a few minutes prior to the fire didn’t mean the occupant was involved. Kate left the woman with her card and instructions to call if she remembered anything else. But she wouldn’t wait for that call.

Minutes later, as she relayed the witness’s statement to Jason, Kate was surprised to see a black Cadillac park behind her Tahoe. The driver’s door opened and an African American woman stepped out. Her tan overcoat hung open to reveal baggy jeans and a wrinkled T-shirt. Her hair was extremely short, merely an ebony cap that enhanced her angular features. She looked at the remains of the building, then away quickly. Her eyes darted among the people moving about the scene until they locked on

Kate's, and Kate felt the connection like a hand reaching into her chest. As the woman drew near, she continued to hold Kate's gaze, worry evident in her dark brown eyes.

"What happened?" she demanded. Her brows drew together, marring otherwise smooth skin.

"There was a fire." Jason stated the obvious. "Are you the owner?"

"One of them. Alexi Clark," she answered, without taking her eyes from Kate's face. "My business partner is on his way. Do you know what caused the fire?"

"Not yet, Ms. Clark. Maybe you can help us with that. Is that your car?" He pointed at the Cadillac.

"Of course it's my car."

"Did anyone borrow it earlier?"

"No." She glanced between Kate and Jason. "What's going on?"

"Alexi! Alexi, what happened?" a man shouted as he rushed toward them.

"That's my partner, Ron Volk."

"You finish up here," Jason said to Kate as he moved to intercept the approaching man.

Kate nodded, knowing he would want to question Mr. Volk and Ms. Clark separately.

"It's all gone," Alexi said quietly as Jason walked away.

Her eyes filled with tears as she stared at what was left of her business. Kate had recognized the stark sense of loss on the faces of property owners before, but something about seeing it on Alexi's strong features made Kate think she should look away, as if she was invading Alexi's privacy. Kate's chest ached and she finally did angle herself toward the scene, needing to escape the heartbreak emanating from Alexi.

"By the time the firefighters arrived they weren't able to save your bar—"

"In Left Field."

"What?"

“That’s what it’s called. In Left Field.”

“Okay. Do you have any idea how the fire may have started?”

“No.” Alexi whispered so softly Kate barely heard her.

Kate lifted her hand then jerked it back, realizing she’d been about to touch Alexi’s shoulder. She pulled her pen from her shirt pocket in an effort to cover the motion.

Those dark eyes met Kate’s again, determination shining through her pain. “Can I go inside?”

“No. We can’t let you in until we’ve completed our investigation.”

“What’s your name?” Alexi snapped.

“Kate Chambers. I’m an investigator with the fire department.”

“Well, Ms. Chambers, that’s my whole life in there. I just want to see if there’s anything left.” When tears spilled over high cheekbones, she swiped at them angrily and turned her head away as if she didn’t want Kate to see them.

“I understand. But we can’t risk any potential evidence being disturbed.” Kate shifted uncomfortably. More accustomed to working with the crews packing up gear around them, she still hadn’t adjusted to her new role. But she was positive that no one was allowed inside until they finished documenting the scene.

Alexi jerked her head back to meet Kate’s eyes. “You think this was arson?”

“It looks that way. Where were you this morning?”

“At home in bed.”

“Alone?”

“What business is that of yours?” Alexi’s tone was defensive, but Kate would make no apologies for doing her job.

“Is there anyone who can verify your whereabouts?”

“No.”

“What time did you get home?”

“I closed last night. So, I guess I was probably home by three thirty.”

“You don’t know?”

“Three thirty or quarter till four.”

“What about Mr. Volk, when was the last time you saw him?” Jason and Ron stood near Kate’s Tahoe. Ron pushed up his glasses and glanced at Alexi as he spoke. Alexi looked up, and though Kate’s attention never left Alexi, she could tell by the stiffening of Alexi’s posture that their gaze met. Kate searched Alexi’s face for some hint of communication between the two of them, but none was evident.

“I sent him home around midnight.”

“He didn’t close up with you.”

“No.” Alexi still watched Ron and Jason. “Business was slow, so I told him to go.”

“Are the two of you usually so involved in the day-to-day operations?”

When Alexi turned back to Kate, her expression was immediately wary. “It’s not uncommon. Usually there’s a lot of administrative stuff that gets our attention first. But we were short-handed last night, so we both pitched in.”

“We need a list of your employees. And I’d like to know which ones worked last night, or were supposed to and didn’t show.”

“I can give you names, but Ron should have a complete personnel roster, with addresses and phone numbers. I imagine you’ll want that as well.”

“Please. If you could, note which employees have keys to the building. Do you have an alarm system?”

“Yes.”

“Was it armed?”

Alexi nodded.

Kate made a note to check with the monitoring company. “Is there anyone who might have a grudge against you or Mr. Volk?”

Alexi stared at the investigator, hearing her words but struggling to absorb their meaning. It hadn’t occurred to Alexi

that the fire was anything more than an accident. She'd imagined the worst when she'd been summoned downtown only hours after closing the bar. But still she'd been unprepared for the horror of seeing her livelihood reduced to ash.

"Ma'am."

It took Alexi a moment to realize that Kate Chambers was talking to her. Alexi shook her head, forcing herself to pay attention to what Kate had asked. Was there really a chance the fire was set intentionally? Electrical problems, maybe. But arson? What was it Chambers had asked her? Did anyone have a grudge against Alexi or Ron?

"No." Alexi shook her head. "I don't know anyone who would do this." She met Chambers's gaze once again, struggling to focus on something besides the surreal events moving around her. Her stomach clenched painfully. Shock and adrenaline were the only things that kept her from dropping to her knees and vomiting.

The investigator was tall, matching Alexi's nearly six-foot frame. Eye to eye, Alexi could see that Chambers's irises were the clearest green she'd ever seen, bringing to mind the waters of Florida's Emerald Coast. Pale blond hair was drawn back tightly from her face and into a bun at the base of her neck, and her equally light brows were shaped into delicate arcs. Aside from the uniform, she didn't look like a firefighter. With a classic, runway-worthy bone structure, she was an attractive package, but Alexi's interest lasted only as long as it took her to figure out she was on this woman's list of suspects.

"Listen, it'll probably be a few hours before we can let you inside, maybe you should—"

"I'm not going anywhere until I've had a chance to examine my bar." Alexi was surprised to see understanding seep into Chambers's expression.

"There's a coffee shop across the street. You might be more comfortable waiting there."

Alexi folded her arms across her chest. “I’ll wait right here.”

“Suit yourself.”