

TO PROTECT AND SERVE

by

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CHAPTER ONE

Lieutenant Alex Troy wondered what could be important enough for the chief to pull her from high-priority surveillance. Her cop's intuition smelled trouble. As she mentally flipped through possible scenarios, she punched the elevator call button again. Like everything else in this central North Carolina municipal building, the lifts moved at the pace of the bureaucracy housed within the beige walls.

When she pushed the button again, a woman approached, head down, sorting a file of papers as she rushed. She collided headlong into Alex. Numerous pages burst from her file and fluttered through the air, landing around Alex's feet.

"Damn, I should watch where I'm going." The woman did not even bother to look at Alex directly. She dropped to her knees and swept the scattered pages together with her hands, offering Alex a view she was not expecting.

A silky red tank top hung loosely on her braless body, leaving nothing to the imagination. A pair of unencumbered breasts, the firmest, most perfectly shaped olive mounds she'd ever seen, were centered by erect dark-chocolate nipples that beckoned invitingly. Alex's pulse quickened. She still couldn't see the woman's face. Soft waves of chestnut hair brushed her bare shoulders and fell loosely into place as if finger-combed by a lover. As the woman crammed her documents back into the file, she offered an apology that was at best routine, then stood.

"You." Shocked cobalt blue eyes lifted to Alex's. Almost immediately a hint of challenge entered her gaze. "Lieutenant, I wasn't expecting to see you."

Alex gave herself a moment to take in the simple beauty before her. Perfectly shaped lips parted to reveal teeth so white against the olive complexion, they seemed to glow. An oval face was highlighted by eyes that brimmed with curiosity and something else, a hint of barely restrained passion that beckoned to Alex.

She wouldn't normally explain herself to a subordinate, but Keri Morgan was flustered and Alex decided to cut her some slack. "I've been in Vice/Narcotics for a while."

She extended her hand, half expecting it to be ignored. Keri had walked away from the simple courtesy the last time they'd encountered each other. When a cool palm finally slid briefly against hers, Alex's nerves sparked with a jolt of excitement she hadn't experienced in far too long. "You look well," she said.

"Thank you." Keri folded her arms across the file, which she held to her chest as if suddenly self-conscious of her questionable attire.

Her guilty demeanor made Alex curious, and she paid closer attention to the color-coded folder. "I assume you're authorized to have 'eyes-only' documents pertaining to a known drug lord." The information originated in the Vice/Narcotics office and had to be released by someone at the rank of captain or above.

"My captain told me to review it." Keri's tone was polite, but it was obvious that she yearned to tell Alex to go intimidate someone else.

Alex found it hard to believe three years had passed since the excessive force interview in her downtown office. The officers involved, one of them Keri, were not her direct reports, and under normal circumstances she would not have been involved in the investigation. But the incident had occurred in an affluent area of town and the evaluation had to be above reproach. The chief had requested she handle the distasteful task personally.

Keri had been angry about the violation of her usual chain of command and the investigation itself, proclaiming the innocence of her partner. Their interview had rapidly degenerated into scathing looks and heated comments, until she accused Alex of conducting a witch hunt and stormed out of the room. The same heat sparked from her eyes today. Evidently three years had done little to temper her resentment.

Shortly after the investigation, Alex was transferred to the Vice/Narcotics Division satellite station. Keri had remained on the graveyard

shift housed in the central municipal building and their paths had not crossed since. Time had been kind to Alex, allowing her to forget the tug of attraction she'd once felt to the younger woman, or that's what she'd believed. Seeing Keri now, an uncomfortable feeling settled in her chest.

"The elevators in this building are always so damn slow." Keri's gaze was fixed straight ahead at the unyielding steel doors.

"Yes, they are." As Alex mashed the lift button a third time, she made another covert visual evaluation. Nice, very nice indeed.

The past three years had only improved Keri. Her body was sleek and well-muscled, and her honey-colored skin shone with healthy radiance. She appeared a little thinner, and signs of premature graying showed in a few strands of the wavy brown hair that fell recklessly across her forehead. But now as then, her expressive eyes pulled Alex into their depths. Though the fire still burned in them, she seemed to be able to contain her emotions and remain civil. Alex smiled to herself. Perhaps the young officer was maturing.

She was surprised when Keri asked bluntly, "Lieutenant, do you like Vice/Narcotics?"

"Yes, it's actually my favorite assignment so far. Why?"

As soon as she'd spoken, Alex regretted inviting more discussion. She was well aware that the guys on her squad warned everyone about the ambitious female lieutenant. They described a superhuman cyborg able to regurgitate procedures verbatim, arrest fleeing felons, and defend the rights of the downtrodden, all while spooning out bitter doses of discipline to the deserving. If Keri needed any more reason to dislike her, she would find it the first time she sat down for a beer with anyone in the division.

"I've always had an interest in narcotics work and do a lot of street-level enforcement. I'd like to take it to the next level someday." The cool blue of Keri's eyes turned dark. The intensity of her words hinted at something deeper than a simple career move. She seemed to ponder her next statement. "I was wondering, if you don't mind my asking, is it important to insulate yourself from people on the job in order to *do* the job at your rank?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"I'm sorry. Is that too personal?" Keri paused, enjoying the flicker of discomfort on Alex Troy's face. She recognized the look: suspicious,

untrusting, and perhaps...lonely. Curious to know if anything besides blue lights and sirens got this woman's pulse racing, she asked, "I just wonder if it's difficult and how much of a toll it takes."

A trace of conflict in Alex's eyes told her she wasn't going to get an answer. Aware that she was treading on Alex's toes, Keri said quickly, "Lieutenant, with all due respect, I was only trying to...never mind."

Alex regarded her evenly. "Do you always say what's on your mind? That can get you in trouble around here."

"I'll remember that." Keri held her gaze, eyes steady.

God only knew what lay behind those cool pools of innocence. Trouble, Alex decided. Mentally adding "still sensitive and emotional" to her growing list of adjectives to describe Keri Morgan, she said, "Morgan, it was just a suggestion. You don't have to take it personally."

The minute she said the words, she wanted them back. She'd said something very similar in that room with Keri three years ago and the response had been swift and emotional. She held her breath.

"I take everything personally. Otherwise what's the point?" Keri tried for a flippant tone, but the criticism stung.

She caught a mental flash of the two of them staring across a table at each other during that unforgettable interview. Thankfully, she could hide her feelings better now and had learned to think before she opened her mouth. She wished she'd made a better impression, but the formidable lieutenant would not be easily impressed. Keri glanced down at her skimpy top. It was just her luck that she was dressed for a night on the town. She and her best friend had partied until early morning and she hadn't had time to go home before work. She was going to change the subject but she realized they were still standing in the middle of the hallway in front of the elevators, oblivious to the people maneuvering around them. The steel doors were finally open. Alex was moving with the crowd.

"It was nice to see you again, Morgan," she said as she followed a man into the confined space. "Keep up the narcotics work."

"I will." Keri stepped aside as the doors swished closed. She had no plans to ride the elevator jammed up next to Alex Troy.

Irritated, she hurried toward the stairway exit. It was almost time for lineup and she wanted to review the confidential file before her shift. She knew she shouldn't have allowed Alex's stoic attitude and criticism

to get under her skin. She wondered why she cared what that woman thought. Hadn't she lost all respect for Alex Troy a long time ago?



Alex stared straight ahead as the elevator ascended a few floors. She felt unsettled by the surprise encounter with Keri Morgan, and irrationally annoyed that Keri had avoided taking the lift at the last minute. Obviously she'd interpreted Alex's comment as another criticism. Alex reminded herself that she didn't have time to babysit an angry officer with a chip on her very lovely shoulder. Officer Morgan's tender feelings were not her responsibility. Her intentions hadn't been malicious, and if Keri could get over herself perhaps she would have seen that. All the same, Alex was reluctant to end their brief conversation on a sour note. Three years had passed. It was time for both of them to move on.

As she exited the elevator and entered the chief's office, she made a concerted effort to clear Keri from her thoughts. Glancing around the reception area, she marveled that instead of memorabilia of the chief's career, the walls were lined with photographs of officers who had been recognized for their accomplishments. The collection continued into the chief's private office.

Chief of Police Rudy Lancaster rose from behind his vertically enhanced desk, towering over Alex as he greeted her. Framed by the light pouring in through a bank of windows opposite the door, he seemed even larger than his six-foot-four. Alex liked this amiable African American man and had come to respect him as a boss since he took up the position a year ago.

"It's good to see you, Alex." He shook her hand and motioned her to a chair. "How are you holding up?"

Alex's jaws clenched. "It's still hard to believe they're both gone, but I'm doing okay, sir. Thanks for asking."

"If you need anything, let me know."

His sincerity touched her. Blinking back tears, she said, "Thank you, Chief. How're Carol and the kids? Do they like it here?"

"They love it. I wasn't sold on the move, as you know, but Carol's family is here. It's convenient for vacations, too. Four hours from the coast and four hours from the mountains."

Granville, North Carolina, was a midsized town with a small-town mentality. Alex had lived here since college and it felt like home. She'd attended UNC and had decided to stay on because of the know-your-neighbor feeling. And there was enough nightlife to keep an experimenting lesbian in playmates. The thought made her frown. She could hardly remember when she'd last enjoyed either. The occasional one-night stand made little impact. Her parents' deaths a year earlier, coupled with the end of a painful relationship, had led to months of self-imposed solitude. To return to work without falling apart, she had exercised all the emotional self-restraint she was capable of. She still wasn't back to full steam, and frequently skipped meals and restless sleep hadn't helped her health or state of mind. But she'd accepted the personal price as a necessity.

The chief slid the family photos on his desk to one side and pulled a piece of paper toward him. "I don't get to see much of you, but your name crosses my desk often. You and Wayne are doing good work."

"We try, sir."

Alex thought about her supervisor and mentor, Wayne Thomas. He and Alex's father had been best friends, and when her parents died, Wayne had become like a surrogate father and kept her from falling apart, personally and professionally. She owed him so much and wanted to make him proud. But she was surprised he wasn't here. It was unusual for him to miss a meeting with the chief unless something more important came up.

Chief Lancaster got to the point. Handing her a single sheet of Granville Police Department memo paper, he said, "Alex, I've got a special assignment for you. Wayne and I discussed it earlier and agreed on the basics."

Alex scanned the memo and her pulse quickened. This was the opportunity she'd been waiting for ever since making lieutenant five years ago. When she looked up, the chief was smiling.

"I take it you have no objections to heading up a multijurisdictional task force to target our most notorious and elusive drug dealer?"

The multijurisdictional aspect sent a shiver up Alex's spine and she took a deep breath. "I have no problem whatsoever, Chief. I'd love to make life hell for Sonny Davis."

"I know I don't have to tell you this, Alex, but the series of deaths recently from drug overdoses on college campuses has the community

in an uproar. We've got five institutions of higher learning in this town. You and Wayne have been to enough of the meetings to know what the citizens are saying about—"Lancaster paused as the phone at his elbow rang. "Excuse me a second."

Alex watched his brow furrow with what could only be bad news. He was silent for a few seconds before asking, "Any ID on the victim yet?" He covered the mouthpiece with his hand and murmured to her, "Another overdose."

They needed to get this creep off the streets, Alex thought. Sonny Davis had been on their radar since he ran a gang of drug dealers in high school, but he'd never been convicted of anything. He dealt every drug that came down the pipeline and often used brutality to keep his people in line. They'd sent several of his cronies to prison but Davis's hands were always clean.

"Thank you for calling," the chief said. "I'm going to send Alex Troy down there right now. She'll be running the Sonny Davis task force, and I want her to take a look at what you have. Keep me posted."

He hung up and turned back to Alex. "The MO's not quite the same as the others. This one is off campus, but I'd like you to take a look anyway." He scribbled the address on a piece of notepaper and handed it to her. "Come back by when you finish, if it's not too late, and we'll wrap up the task force details."

"Will do, sir."

Alex was halfway to the door when the chief added, "Whoever is bringing this poison into our town is turning it into a death trap for our young people. I want it stopped, Alex. Whatever it takes, make it happen."



The drive to the crime scene in the low-income housing area of town took only five minutes. Captain Ted Joyner, the evening watch commander, met her in the parking lot of the complex, handed her a pair of latex gloves, and led her into a modestly furnished apartment.

"She's back here in the bedroom. We still don't know who she is, didn't have an ID on her. We're canvassing the other members of the group."

"What group?"

“This girl was trying to help organize a community watch group in the neighborhood. Guests from half the complex were in the house and the backyard for a cookout.”

Alex worked her hands into the gloves on her way to the back bedroom. Dodging officers pretending to be busy, she stepped into the small space. The young woman’s body lay face down on the bed. Alex moved in for a closer examination. The body was in full rigor and the skin had an ash-gray tone that made it appear death had occurred days ago instead of hours. “Looks like she had some sort of seizure,” Joyner said.

“Help me roll her over,” Alex directed one of the paramedics standing by the bed. She took one arm and turned the body toward her.

As the victim’s face came into view, Alex froze. Time collapsed around her as she looked into the thinly clouded eyes of Stacey Chambers. Those haunting orbs of once-living human substance begged for help. The young woman’s mouth gaped open. Emesis had dried around her lips and nose. Alex wondered what words had died on Stacey’s lips as her last breath passed over them. A knot rose in her throat and bile churned in her stomach, threatening to escape.

“Oh my God,” she whispered.

“Alex, do you know this girl?” Joyner asked.

“Yes. Stacey Chambers. She worked for me as an intern in Vice/Narcotics last summer.” Alex backed up to the door and grabbed the frame for support. “She just graduated from college.”

“You don’t mean Councilman Chambers’s daughter, do you?”

“Yes.” Alex couldn’t take her eyes off the lifeless form that once hosted the lovely and vibrant spirit she knew. Her breath came in staccato bursts. She’d seen more than her share of dead bodies, but never someone she knew, not even her parents. “She didn’t do drugs, Ted. This has to be investigated as a suspicious death. We can’t afford to leave any questions on this one.”

He nodded. “You don’t need to be here. Would you brief the chief? He’ll want to tell the councilman himself.”

“Of course.”

As Alex exited the room and hurried from the apartment, images of Stacey’s contorted features flashed through her mind over and over

like a hiccup in an old reel-to-reel movie. Once in the confines of her vehicle, she allowed the hot tears pooling in her eyes to escape. The drive back to police headquarters seemed to take twice as long as the earlier trip.

Chief Lancaster was pacing in his reception area when Alex walked in. He motioned her back into his office and closed the door. "From the look on your face, I'd say you don't have good news for me."

"This one hit close to home, Chief. It'll be in the papers before morning. The dead girl is Stacey Chambers, the city councilman's daughter. She interned in Vice/Narcotics last summer."

"Jesus."

"She collapsed at—of all things—a community watch meeting in one of our low-income neighborhoods. It was called in as an overdose, but she had no drug history. It's just not possible. I knew her. I worked with her. I'd stake my reputation on it."

Alex had liked Stacey Chambers immediately and they'd formed a sort of mentoring bond. Stacey wanted to become a drug abuse counselor. Now all that potential was snuffed out. Gone. There was no way on earth Stacey would have been using drugs. Something was badly wrong and Alex planned to get to the bottom of it.

Lancaster wiped a bead of sweat from his brow and shook his head in disbelief. "I'll have to break the news to Councilman Chambers personally. I can't imagine losing a child, especially like this."

"There was no trauma to the body," Alex said. "But Captain Joyner is handling it as a suspicious death for now. We'll have to wait for the coroner's report before we know anything definite." She flinched at the thought of the state ME impassively probing Stacey's body in search of clues. "It has all the signs of a drug overdose, but we'll need to see a copy of the tox report before that can be confirmed."

"The councilman and the mayor are going to want answers on this one in a hurry."

"So far, we know the tainted ecstasy in our area is coming from a single source," Alex replied. "And all our street informants finger Davis as the distributor. If we can link Stacey's death with the others through the toxicology results, we might be able to follow the trail to Davis and build a case for negligent homicide."

Chief Lancaster wiped his broad hand over his face again. "I don't

need to tell you how it looks for us when we have a bunch of kids ending up dead because we can't nail this guy." He paused. "Get this tied up in a neat little package and we'll discuss a promotion for you."

Alex didn't point out that bringing down Sonny Davis wasn't all about kudos and a pay raise. "None of those dead kids deserved an end like this. I'm going to find out who's behind Stacey's death and weave a chain of evidence so tight that Sonny Davis will never draw another free breath. *And* some of the asset forfeiture money from his holdings would go a long way in a small department like ours."

Lancaster nodded. In a pensive tone, he said, "Quite honestly, Alex, I need a perspective like yours on my command staff, a vision beyond the ordinary, if you get my drift. A woman's perspective."

Alex's enthusiasm rose. She couldn't deny the part of her that was competitive. She wanted to be among the very best at her job, and a promotion would be her ticket to make some long-overdue changes in the department. Her anger boiled just beneath the surface as she remembered her less-than-ceremonious promotion to lieutenant. The good ol' boys' club worked hard to keep people like her and Lancaster "in their places." The chief had struggled to diversify the force from the bottom up without much support. Many of the white male supervisors in the five-hundred-member department viewed him with distrust. It would really chap their asses if she made captain. Meantime, finding Stacey's killer and putting Sonny Davis away came first. She would have plenty of time to think about getting the railroad tracks on her collar later.

Chief Lancaster continued. "Now, about the task force team. DEA will kick in a techie to help with surveillance and hardware. Caldwell PD is contributing one detective and Layton PD will send a black male-and-female team. You'll be choosing a sergeant and two detectives from our department."

Anxiety shot through Alex's system like splinters. Layton's involvement could be problematic, given her history with an ex who worked there, but she could handle Helen Callahan if their paths crossed. Adrenaline surged as she began to map her plan of attack. "What are the limits on my choices internally?"

"Actually, there's only one." Lancaster studied her closely for a moment before explaining, "I know you have a history with Keri Morgan, but one of my commanders submitted her name to serve on

the team. He thinks very highly of her and I have to admit, her narcotics work in the field is quite impressive.”

Something about the chief’s hesitation stirred anxiety in the pit of Alex’s stomach and she gently chewed the inside of her cheek. Her first instinct was to raise an objection, but she counted slowly to ten. The investigation into Keri’s partner was old news. She didn’t want her boss to think she would allow emotional baggage to affect her decision making.

“I’m certain you’ve moved on and I’d like to give her a chance to do the same,” he said, making her glad she’d kept silent. “One of the things I admire most about you, Alex, is that you never let your feelings get in the way of the job. You have connections to both Stacey Chambers and Keri Morgan, but I’m confident you’ll put the job first.”

Alex forced a smile and hoped the same could be said when this assignment was over. Her mind flashed to Keri Morgan, stooping to pick up the papers, her clinging red top leaving little to the imagination. “I’ll do my best, Chief. So I’ll be choosing a detective and a sergeant?”

Lancaster nodded and stood, signaling the end of their meeting. “I’ll send out the order this afternoon. Start recruiting immediately. You’ll work out of the office next door to Vice/Narcotics. The mutual aid agreements have already been signed. If you hit any roadblocks with the other agencies or their reps, let Wayne run interference for you. I want you totally focused on this. Any questions?”

“No, sir...and thank you again. I won’t let you down.”

Alex left the chief’s office torn between exhilaration and apprehension. The earlier conversation with Keri replayed in her mind. The last thing Alex or this assignment needed was a team member with a grudge. If Keri was serious about moving into Vice/Narcotics, this would be the ideal opportunity. If she wanted to prove herself, she would have to toughen up.

Alex headed for the afternoon lineup with a sense of anticipation she hadn’t felt in a long while. Her feelings had nothing to do with Keri Morgan, she reasoned, but her heart continued to beat faster than it should. Alex found that very unusual.