

TRAUMA ALERT

by

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CHAPTER ONE

Dr. Ali Torveau was late, and she hated being late. She supposed her psychiatrist friends might call her rigid or inflexible or even obsessive for insisting her OR cases start on time and requiring her clinic hours to begin and end on schedule. *She* thought of it as being in control, and a surgeon, especially a trauma surgeon who worked in the midst of chaos, needed to be in control. So she was faintly annoyed as she hurried down the stairwell to the auxiliary conference room on the ground floor of the Silverstein Pavilion a little after seven p.m. on what was supposed to be her night off. She'd been elbows-deep in the belly of a gunshot victim a little after four p.m. when Ambrose Rifkin's secretary had called to inform her that she needed to cover the chairman's lecture in the TER-OPS training course that night. The edict had been politely phrased in the form of a request, but refusal was not an option. Never mind that she had four lectures of her own to give later in the month. Not even a senior attending like herself said no to the chairman.

Ali resolutely squashed the image of sitting in front of the fire with the book she'd been trying to finish for a week and a glass of Pinot Noir. The Littorai 2006 she'd been saving had been described as brooding and powerful. Tonight, the brooding part, at least, fit her.

Putting regrets about the lost evening aside, she shouldered through the door and surveyed the strapping young men lounging around the conference table. They were pretty much exactly what she expected firefighters to look like—husky, clear-eyed jock types in jeans and shirts or sweatshirts emblazoned with Philadelphia Fire Department paramedic emblems. A little windswept and flushed from the cold

November air, they slouched in their seats, legs spread, arms draped over chair backs. Self-assured and a tiny bit arrogant, not all that much different than most of the surgical residents she dealt with, although her residents generally opted for earnest and respectful demeanors—at least on the surface.

“I’m Ali Torveau, one of the trauma surgeons. Dr. Rifkin couldn’t make it tonight, so I’ll be filling in for him on crush injuries to the chest.” She counted heads, frowned. “Aren’t there supposed to be six of you?”

“Cross went out on a call right at the end of shift,” a ruddy blond with an incongruous spattering of freckles across his nose and cheeks that made him look about fourteen replied in a deep baritone voice.

“It’s my understanding that all the TER-OPS trainees are to be relieved for these sessions. They aren’t optional, and you can’t make them up. The state certification board is very clear on that.”

The blond grinned and shrugged. “Nothing gets Cross out of the field.”

Ali plugged her jump drive into the computer sitting on the conference table, thinking that the firefighter paramedic in question probably ought to reconsider his plans to join the new PFD technical rescue unit. A unit like that demanded discipline and tight teamwork, and Cross sounded like a cowboy.

“Okay,” Ali said. “Let’s talk about sucking—”

The door burst open and a woman in a sweat-soaked T-shirt plastered to her broad shoulders and sculpted chest shot into the room. “Someone mention my favorite subject?”

A couple of the men chuckled as the latecomer dropped into a chair and tossed Ali a confident smile while pitching a denim jacket, too light for the unseasonably cold late November weather, onto the table. She looked vaguely familiar, but Ali was sure she would have remembered her had they met. She was about Ali’s height—a little above average—and like the male firefighters, fit and strong looking. Her bare arms were subtly corded and her threadbare jeans stretched tight over muscular thighs. The soot streaking her lightly tanned face did nothing to detract from her good looks. Casually layered collar-length dark brown hair shot through with shimmering red highlights clung to her neck in damp ringlets. The startling softness of those sensuous curls against a canvas of carved muscle and bone gave her the

look of a fallen angel. Her ridiculously blue, blue eyes flickered with amusement and Ali realized she was staring into them.

Abruptly, Ali cut her gaze away. She'd been dealing with these showy types all her life. Surgery bred—or perhaps simply attracted—super-confident, sexually charismatic, egotistical pains in the butt. Unfortunately, as annoying as these sorts might be, they often made the best surgeons. Maybe the same was true for firefighters. Any other time she would have ignored the relatively harmless flippancy, but she hadn't completely forgotten about her missed glass of wine and interrupted evening of relaxation. She was feeling a little testy.

“Since it's your favorite subject,” Ali said conversationally, directing her comments to the newcomer, “maybe you'd like to give the rest of us a quick overview on sucking chest wounds. Cross, is it?”

“That's right. Beau Cross.” Beau leaned back in her chair, affecting a blasé attitude to buy herself a few seconds to get her game back on. The woman standing at the end of the conference table with her arms folded across her chest and an expression of supreme control put her off balance, and that just never happened to her. She worked with strong, commanding women all the time. Female firefighters and emergency medical personnel needed to be smart, tough, and resilient to handle the work and disprove the lingering belief in some quarters that women couldn't cut it in the fire department. No, there was something else about this particular woman that tripped Beau up.

Beau studied her through lazily lowered lids. Taken separately, the brunette's short tousled hair, matching dark eyes, trim figure, and delicately etched features could be carelessly termed “pretty.” But her high-bridged nose and dark, dramatic brows emboldened her profile and moved her from attractive into the arresting category. Still, the surgeon might conceivably go unnoticed amidst the literally hundreds of other women and men roaming the hospital in shapeless, faded green scrubs. Maybe. Maybe if someone were comatose. But Beau rarely *didn't* notice a good-looking woman, and she could never remember a single one throwing her off stride.

Not just off stride. The look she'd gotten from the surgeon when she'd breezed into the room had almost stopped her in her tracks. Those deep dark eyes had swept over her with the intensity of a flashover, assessing her, summing her up, and then—just as quickly—dismissing her. Beau had spent the last ten years of her life honing her image,

perfecting her façade. Everyone believed she was exactly the person she wanted them to see. And that worked just fine for her. But for a few seconds, as she was evaluated and discarded, she'd felt the weight of maintaining her image tighten like a chain around her chest, and she'd wanted to cast the mask aside. A very dangerous reaction. Her heart raced, and usually only a multi-alarm or a do-or-die crisis could do that to her. Her pulse didn't even pick up when she came, not like this. She took a deep breath, forced a grin.

"I'm sorry, I didn't get your name," Beau said.

"That might be because you were late." Ali was aware of the others in the room watching the exchange avidly. If one of her surgical residents had been as irreverent, she could have threatened the hapless soul with weeks of floor work. Being locked out of the OR was a fate worse than death for a competitive surgeon-in-training. But this firefighter wasn't her resident, and why she seemed compelled to joust with the woman was completely mystifying. Holding the turquoise gaze without blinking, Ali said softly, "The question?"

"Occlusive dressing and positive pressure ventilation," Beau said.

"Good," Ali acknowledged. "And if the BP bottoms out?"

Beau hesitated, and when she flicked a glance at her colleagues, Ali realized the firefighter was giving the others a chance to answer. Interesting. Not quite as egotistical as she initially appeared.

"What if I told you there was a midline shift in the trachea?" Ali said when the room remained silent.

"Tension pneumothorax," one of the men blurted out.

"Yes." Ali nodded and canted an eyebrow at Beau Cross. "Care to amend your treatment?"

"Same treatment," Beau said, "but the dressing needs to be adjusted. Lift one corner to create a flutter-valve. Air goes out, but not back in."

"Agreed." Ali reached behind her to the wall switch and dimmed the lights, then opened her PowerPoint presentation. "Let's talk about the mechanism of closed chest injury and variations in presentation."

For the next sixty minutes Ali ran through emergency management protocols for life-threatening chest trauma, comfortable with a topic she'd discussed hundreds of times before. She described, questioned,

challenged, and found the paramedics sharp and eager. She enjoyed the session, as she always did when talking about something she loved. The hour passed quickly, and the entire time, she was aware of Beau Cross just a few inches away. Even though she couldn't see the firefighter's face, she sensed her presence like a heat signature flaring against a backdrop of shadows.

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"Hey, Ali, I thought you were off tonight," Wynter Thompson said when Ali walked into the surgical locker room. She pulled a pair of black pants from her locker with one hand and tossed her balled-up scrub pants into the laundry hamper with the other.

"I was. I am." Ali unlocked her locker and kicked her clogs into the bottom. They made a satisfying thud. "I got shanghaied into giving the boss's lecture tonight."

"Whoops." Wynter laughed and wiggled her scrub shirt over her prominently pregnant belly. "I guess I shouldn't mention the Eagles tickets Pearce got from a patient's family for tonight?"

Ali stopped in the midst of buttoning her shirt and glared at her good friend, who also happened to be the senior trauma fellow. "You're kidding. The chief is at a football game right now with your spouse? Why am I having trouble seeing the two of them tossing back beers and chowing down on hot dogs?"

"Father-daughter bonding." Wynter pulled on a navy blue cable-knit sweater and tugged on the loose pants. "I think Ambrose has finally forgiven Pearce for not following in his academic footsteps, but still...they don't have much chance to spend time together. So when something comes up, I push her to go."

"I understand." Ali sighed. Ambrose Rifkin had expected his daughter Pearce to pursue a lofty career at one of the top ten medical schools, and Pearce's decision to take a general surgery position close to home so she could marry Wynter and raise a family had put father and daughter at odds. Ali tipped her chin toward Wynter's belly. "How are you feeling?"

"Like it's much harder to be pregnant at thirty-one than it was at twenty-five."

“If you need to rearrange the call schedule—”

Wynter shook her head. “No. I’m not due for seven weeks and I don’t want any more time to make up than I already will.”

“You’re not required to make up maternity leave.”

“You know that’s not how it works for female surgery residents. The guys might be a good bunch, but they’d never let me hear the end of it if I didn’t make up for the lost time.” Wynter shrugged. “Besides, I wouldn’t like being out that long either. I need the cases.”

“Ah...I don’t suppose you’d play the chairman’s daughter-in-law card? You *are* owed leave, and we could cut down on your floor time when you return. Get you more cases—”

Wynter snorted. “Oh sure. That would really win me a few friends.”

Ali grinned and shouldered her locker door closed. Funny, she’d never noticed the reddish highlights in Wynter’s chestnut brown hair before. Wynter’s eyes were a sharp clear blue too. She wondered how it was that Wynter and Beau Cross could share some superficial physical attributes and yet look completely different. Wynter was softly elegant—especially now that she was pregnant. And Beau...Beau was seething sexuality and raw strength. Both were incredibly attractive women, but Wynter was much more Ali’s type. Steady, calm, focused. And completely responsible. On the rare occasions Ali imagined herself with a steady girlfriend, she envisioned a woman like Wynter.

“Ali? You okay?” A tiny frown line marred the smooth skin between Wynter’s brows.

“Hmm? Sure. Why?”

Wynter gestured to Ali’s jeans on the low bench that bisected the space between the two long rows of lockers. “You forgot your pants.”

Ali glanced down at her bare legs extending below her half-buttoned, and forgotten, shirt and her face flamed. She grabbed her jeans and yanked them on. “Sorry. I was just thinking about the session earlier.”

“What was that for?” Wynter reached for her heavy gym bag stuffed with clothes, study guides for the trauma accreditation boards, and toiletries.

“Hey, I’ll take that.” Ali quickly shrugged into her black wool greatcoat and grabbed Wynter’s bag along with her own. “Come on, I’ll walk you to your car.”

“You don’t have to do that.”

“My big plans for the evening got waylaid by TER-OPS. Besides, I could use the exercise.”

Wynter gave Ali a look. “Since when? You’re like Pearce. You never take the elevator—well, not unless I’m on rounds with you—and I can tell it drives you crazy.”

“Not really,” Ali lied while keeping pace with Wynter to the elevator. She would have preferred to run down the four flights of stairs, but she’d seen the swelling in Wynter’s ankles. Their day had started fifteen hours earlier with rounds in the TICU at six a.m. Wynter had to be exhausted.

“Thanks.” Wynter leaned against the back wall as the elevator descended. “So what’s TER-OPS?”

“Technical rescue unit. The Philadelphia Fire Department is setting up two special units, one in each division, to respond to any kind of mass casualty event. Bombings, bio-hazard contamination, natural disasters. We’re one of the training centers for the paramedics. They all need eighteen hours of recertification.”

“That sounds cool. Do they need any docs?”

“What? Why?” Ali laughed as they filed out into the lobby. “We don’t keep you busy enough in the trauma unit?”

“I don’t know, there’s something really exciting about being out in the field with no backup, no monitors, no X-ray machines. It’s all on you, you know?”

“Wait until you’re an attending. You’ll feel that way every single day.”

“I wish.” Wynter sighed. “I don’t get the feeling Ambrose wants me to stay here.”

“Well, I do.” Ali gave Wynter a quick hug. “And so do all the rest of us. We all get to vote. And I think you’re wrong about Ambrose. He has to be harder on you. You’re married to his daughter.”

“Maybe. And maybe when I dazzle him with a grandchild, he’ll forgive me for ruining Pearce’s career.” Wynter laughed.

“Pearce looks pretty happy to me.” Ali switched their duffels into one hand and put her shoulder against the heavy lobby door to open it for Wynter. Suddenly, she was looking into a familiar face.

“Here,” Beau Cross braced an arm on the door and smiled at Ali, “let me get that for you.”

Beau held the door wide as Wynter passed.

“Thanks.” Ali hesitated, caught by the heat in Beau Cross’s deep blue eyes. The firefighter had donned her denim jacket and carried a take-out coffee cup from McDonald’s in one hand.

“No problem. Enjoyed the lecture tonight,” Beau said.

“Did you.”

“Sure. I love a challenge.”

“I didn’t get the sense the material was too much of a test for you.”

Ali detected a hint of smoke and healthy perspiration, a surprisingly appealing combination, and for an absurd instant had the impulse to brush the soot smear from Beau’s cheek. The sensation was so foreign she pushed her free hand deep into the pocket of her coat.

“I wasn’t talking about chest wounds,” Beau said, her voice dropping. “If you’re not doing anything later, maybe I can make up for being late. We could talk about pre-hospital emergency care over a drink.”

Something about the cocky grin triggered Ali’s memory. She *had* seen the firefighter before. On TV. “You were the one who went back into that row house after the little girl last month.”

The rescue had been all over the news for days. A burning building had been declared totally involved and fire crews were pulling back when a hysterical woman had screamed her daughter was still inside. The TV cameras had been rolling when a firefighter raced into the structure through a wall of flames, seemingly on a suicide mission. When the roof caved in, the building appeared to have become a fiery crypt for child and firefighter. Moments later, the rescuer staggered out to the street with the child in her arms, her own breathing mask over the little girl’s face. The firefighter—Beau Cross—had escaped with minor burns and minimal smoke inhalation.

Beau shrugged, her expression blanking. “Yes.”

“Remarkable rescue.” Ali meant the praise, although she’d thought at the time that only a very brave—or a very crazy—person would have run into certain death without the slightest hesitation. Having met the firefighter in question, she added daredevil and glory hound to her list.

“Part of the job,” Beau replied automatically. “Now, back to the important stuff. Drinks? Maybe something a little more excit—”

“No chance, but thanks anyway.” Ali smiled, but made sure her tone conveyed she really wasn’t interested. Cross was attractive and

knew it. She was also exactly the kind of woman Ali had zero interest in.

“Don’t be too hasty,” Beau called as Ali stepped outside to catch up to Wynter. “Remember, first responders make hot company!”

Laughing despite herself, Ali shook her head and didn’t look back.

“Who’s that?” Wynter asked.

“One of the paramedics in the TER-OPS course.”

“Wow, she’s seriously smokin’. Pun totally intended.” Wynter tugged on Ali’s sleeve. “Did she just ask you out?”

“More like a really bad pickup line.” Ali slipped her palm under Wynter’s elbow as they dashed across traffic on Thirty-third toward the parking garage a block east on Spruce.

“So you said no?”

Ali gave Wynter a look. “She’s a wise-ass who thinks over-highly of her charms. Of course I said no.”

“Gee, I don’t know. Her charms seemed kinda A-rated to me.”

“Not my type,” Ali insisted. “Only thing worse than a firefighter is a cop. I wouldn’t date either one.”

“Uh-huh. Okay.” Wynter huffed. “Only boring women for you. Got it.”

Ali didn’t respond to the well-meant teasing. She had her reasons, devastatingly painful reasons, for avoiding women who willfully put their lives at risk, whether for duty or just the thrill of danger. She would fight like hell in the trauma unit to save them, but she would never, ever love one again.