

LT. COMMANDER MOLLIE SANDERS

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PART I – BACK-SEATER

CHAPTER II – PORT OF LOS ANGELES

**Los Angeles**

*The tangle of freeways threads through and rings the sprawling metropolis of Los Angeles. East from Santa Monica at the ocean past Westwood, West LA, the surrounded city that is Beverly Hills, Miracle Mile, Koreatown, all the way east to the actual downtown with its skyscrapers, Staples Center, Gehry-designed Disney Hall, and urban blight and then beyond to Boyle Heights and heading out to Palm Springs. And on the southern rim of the basin that is Los Angeles, going north from the port of San Pedro past the oil pumps near Los Angeles International Airport that keep rhythm alongside freeways that dash or crawl north to the San Fernando Valley and beyond to Antelope Valley and other points farther north on the way to Santa Barbara and ultimately San Francisco.*

*This huge area has as many neighborhoods and as many people speaking as many languages as can be imagined. Which is why looking for one person or a group of people camouflaged by normal Los Angeles life is like looking for a needle in a haystack.*

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**April 17**

**2 p.m.**

In a nondescript ethnic neighborhood of Los Angeles – one of those neighborhoods that people don't know about unless they actually live there – a small mosque nestled among the California bungalows and stucco apartment buildings.

In the house next door to the mosque Omar alBaghadi sat at a shabby wooden desk in a small room filled floor-to-ceiling with Formica bookcases stuffed with large volumes. His fingers traced the Arabic words in the volume before him as he read.

A beep sounded.

He moved aside the volume he had been reading, revealing a sleek laptop computer. He lifted the screen, clicked on the incoming message.

The Arabic message read: MISSILE TESTED IN PACIFIC. TARGETED JET EVADED ATTACK.

Omar closed the laptop screen without replying to the message. He glanced at the wall calendar hanging on the closed door of the room.

August 2<sup>nd</sup> was circled in red. He allowed himself a small smile, then returned to his reading.

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## **Aboard the USS Nimitz, Pacific Ocean**

**April 17**

**1430 hours**

Mollie again stood next to the CAG. This time he looked at a printout on his desk.

She leaned over and indicated a spot on the map. “No islands or atolls within launching range.”

“Subs?”

“Not unless ONI, NSA, the CIA, CINCPAC, and our own little flotilla of submariners all got confused. I’ve plotted all possible suspect ships from Asia headed for the west coast of the U.S.”

The CAG drummed his fingers on the printout. “Coast Guard provided you with data?”

Mollie smiled. “All ships which were supposedly cleared for U.S. customs before leaving Asia under the new compliance system.”

Now the CAG smiled. “And where did you get the rest of the data?”

Mollie straightened her spine before she replied. “National technical means, sir.”

“You have direct access to satellite data?”

“We geeks stick together, sir.”

The CAG stared in her eyes. “And you found?”

“Three cargo vessels that would have been in range to fire on us today.”

The CAG hesitated. Mollie knew he was accessing the dangers of jumping to conclusions. “That your theory?”

Mollie didn't hesitate to give her opinion. She never had. "I suggest we alert the battle group destroyers. Send them out to board each ship."

"And if nothing is found?"

"Better nothing found after a search than no search and the weapons are still there."

The CAG stood. "I'll go see the admiral." He stopped with his hand on the latch of his door. "You're sure?"

Mollie nodded. "Unless somebody has an undetectable ship or sub, sir."

The CAG shuddered, then nodded and left his office.

Mollie gathered up the printout. She had no worries that she was wrong. Something or somebody out there had targeted the Surfer's plane for a kill.

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## **Port of San Pedro**

**2:30 p.m.**

*The giant container cranes rolled above the huge ships being offloaded. The cranes picked up containers like matchsticks.*

*The port stretched for acres – and was open like a sieve to any attack.*

*A solitary small boat splashed through the gentle swell of the harbor. It could be a pleasure boat from Malibu.*

*Suddenly two Middle Eastern men appeared on deck and dove over the sides into the water – just as the boat approached an ultra-oil tanker.*

*The small boat slammed into the side of the tanker – which exploded in a fireball!*

*Klaxons blared out over the harbor. Onshore emergency vehicles raced towards the explosion.*

*A Coast Guard ship maneuvered close to the burning wreckage. Sunil Jaiswal, a Coast Guard commander, used a bullhorn to hail the burning vessel as smoke engulfed him.*

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## **Aboard the USS Nimitz, Pacific Ocean**

### **1800 hours**

Wearing a skimpy exercise bra top and matching shorts, Mollie worked out on a Nautilus machine in the onboard exercise facilities – a small room crammed with exercise equipment. Her well-defined muscles stood out as she pumped her arms.

Southerner pilot Banger entered the room and strode up to Mollie. “Hear our boy took you for a rollercoaster ride. You’re back-seating a real cowboy.”

Mollie grinned. As if she didn’t already know that. Then she saw Surfer was right behind Banger.

“You’re not jealous, are you, Ashley Wilkes?” she said to Banger.

Surfer stopped in front of her. “We’ve got orders. We’re to pack our bags and be on the flight deck at 2300.”

Now Mollie stopped pumping her arms. “Where’re we going?”

“Stateside, dammit!”

Surfside and Banger both fled the room before Mollie could respond. What the hell?

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## **2300 hours**

Kevin stood with his new back-seater on the flight desk next to the CAG while the flight deck operations commenced. The lights on the flight deck shone almost as bright as day.

The CAG turned to the woman. “Gearhead, you were right. One of the boats boarded by our destroyers had a shitpot of SAMs.”

Kevin felt anger boiling inside of him. Of course the woman would be right!

“Where was the ship headed?” she asked.

“Los Angeles.”

She nodded. “So that’s taken care of.”

“That particular event.”

Kevin looked at the CAG. What was he getting at?

“Something’s happened stateside?” she asked.

“A tanker exploded in San Pedro harbor. Fortunately it was built to the new standards. Double-hulled, multiple independent tanks, advanced fire-suppression equipment ...”

The boom of a plane taking off caused the CAG to pause momentarily.

“... the emergency response team contained the blaze. The ship is repairable,” the CAG said.

“Casualties?” Kevin asked.

“Nine crew, three response team members.”

“Accidental” the woman asked.

“Preliminary investigation suggests from the sea – small boat rammed into the side of the ship.”

“Shit! In San Pedro?” Kevin said.

“Where the ship that fired on us was headed,” the woman said. “Could be a dress rehearsal. Checking the stage for launching the big performance.”

Again the CAG nodded. “That’s what the big domes in Washington say.”

“What’s our role in this?” she asked.

“Your work at STORC was considered valuable. You’ve been assigned temporary duty to the Coast Guard in LA. They’re way understaffed for the intelligence effort needed.”

“What’s she supposed to do?” Kevin asked.

“Find the sons of bitches before they blow up Los Angeles.”

Kevin stared at the CAG. “And what about me? I’m just a simple ...” – he glanced momentarily at the woman – “flying truck driver.”

The CAG smiled. “She’s your back-seater. Without her you don’t have a crew. You can help in this search. Get on the COD and get going.”

Oh shit! Off flight status and stuck working with this woman! “CAG, don’t you have anything else for me to do shipboard? Head inspection officer? Clean the erasers in the briefing room?”

The CAG did not smile at this. “You’re on orders, Mister. Go!”

Kevin and the woman saluted the CAG, grabbed their seabags and ran to the Carrier Onboard Delivery (COD).

The COD aircraft – a turboprop plane – took off and headed into the wild blue yonder.

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## **Onboard the COD**

### **2310 hours**

Mollie sat across from Surfer in fold-down passenger seats – this was no luxury airliner. She could feel his anger although he had as yet said nothing.

Now he turned his eyes upon her and raised his voice to be heard over the props. “This is one of those really, really idiotic military moves. What the hell are we supposed to be doing?”

Mollie smiled. “I’m supposed to be thinking some naval-type thoughts that might help Homeland Security find these bastards. You’re supposed to be helping me.”

“Excuuuuuuuse me, Wonder Woman. How many ships use that port every day? To say nothing of tugs, yardboats, fuelers, pleasure boats, jet skis, and every other damn thing that floats. How is even your giant brain going to pick a needle out of that haystack?”

Well said. It was a hell of a long shot that they could find the perpetrators.

Now she glared back at him. “There may not be a snowball’s chance in hell that we can stop whatever is about to happen. But we sure as hell have to try.”

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## **Los Angeles**

### **11:30 p.m.**

*The street in front of the small mosque was quiet. Nobody was around to notice the two Middle Eastern men who jumped ship in the San Pedro Harbor right before the tanker exploded.*

*The men glanced around at the quiet street, then entered the house where Omar stood at the open door.*

*Without speaking the men followed Omar to the small room at the end of the hall. Omar ushered them in, then gestured at the wall calendar with its red circled date and the maps laid out on the desk.*

### **North Island Naval Air Station, San Diego**

**April 18**

**0430 hours**

Mollie watched out the window as the COD landed on the field and taxied to a hangar. She glanced at Kevin, who had napped the entire flight without saying another word.

“Let’s go, cowboy. It’s show time,” she said to him as she grabbed her seabag.

He glared at her, then also grabbed his seabag and followed her out of the COD.

They descended the fold-down stairs, where a young woman in a spotless white uniform awaited them.

“Ensign Yolanda Perez,” the young woman said.

“Lt. Commander Mollie Sanders.”

For a moment Surfer hesitated. Was he calculating how it was now two women to one man?

“Lt. Commander Kevin Witlow,” he then said.

“My orders are to drive you immediately to the San Pedro Coast Guard station.”

“No time to eat?” Surfer asked.

“Box meals in the car,” Perez said.

Mollie followed the woman as she led them towards a military car parked outside the hangar.

“From the mess hall?” Surfer asked.

Mollie grimaced. Naturally he’d be concerned about his chow.

“From Starbucks. They serve breakfast now.”

Mollie smiled. How appropriate. Then she and Surfer got into the back seat of a Navy car while Perez got in the front with the driver, an enlisted man.

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Mollie watched the landscape out the window with one eye as she worked on her BlackBerry. The freeway had been running well this early in the morning. She knew they had to be making very good time.

Suddenly she spotted a sign that said STOP AHEAD FOR CUSTOMS INSPECTION.

“What’s going on?” she asked.

“It’s a check for illegals,” Perez said. “See that sign over there?”

Perez pointed to a sign featuring a man, woman and child running across the road.

“Warning you not to run over anyone who might be exiting cars right now, trying to avoid the roadblock.”

“Going where?” Surfer asked.

“This is government land. Camp Pendleton runs for the next several miles. The *undocumentarios* try to make it on foot across the installation. To get picked up again further north.”

“And do they?” Surfer asked.

“Lots of security. And also lots of open land. Depends how lucky they are. Some make it, some get sent back.”

“Only to try again!” Mollie said.

Perez glanced back over her shoulder to look at Mollie. Mollie smiled at her while the customs officer waved through the Navy car.

“Rank hath his privileges?” Surfer said to Perez.

“When I drive up here in civvies to visit my family, I’m always stopped,” Perez said. “The customs offices are surprised to see my Navy ID.”

Mollie looked up from her BlackBerry. “Will you be working with us in San Pedro?”

“I’m just the escort. Coast Guard Commander Sunil Jaiswal is waiting for you.”

“What’s your specialty?” Mollie asked.

“All-Source Intel Analyst.”

Mollie nodded. “When we get to San Pedro, I want to contact your CO. I’d like your help.”

“Yes, mam,” Perez said.

Mollie couldn’t see Perez’s face, but Mollie knew Perez had to be pleased by this request. Poor Surfer. He was going to have to work with two women.