

LT. COMMANDER MOLLIE SANDERS

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PART I – BACK-SEATER

CHAPTER III – LOS ANGELES COAST GUARD

San Pedro Coast Guard Headquarters

April 18

0630 hours

Mollie kept her face expressionless as she spotted the burnt and damaged cranes appearing on the skyline as the Navy car pulled into the port of San Pedro. Damn whoever did this! They had to be stopped before they could do more damage.

Mollie, Surfer and Perez got out of the car and entered the door held open by the Navy driver.

Inside a young enlisted Coast Guard sailor with the name Thurman on his uniform stood as they entered. Then he motioned them to follow him.

They approached an open office door with the sign COMMANDER SUNIL JAISWAL next to it.

Thurman motioned them to enter the office.

Per Navy rules when inside a building, Mollie, Surfer and Perez did not salute him. Instead they shook hands with the dark-haired Indian while Mollie gave their names.

Mollie wondered where in India his family was from. She knew he could be Hindu or Muslim. If Muslim, would it be harder to work with him on this assignment?

“I’m Jaiswal. Welcome aboard.”

“Thank you, sir,” Mollie said.

Jaiswal motioned them to be seated.

“What can the Navy do for the Coast Guard?” Jaiswal said. “Usually it’s the other way around.”

“Sir, we’re here to help you any way we can. Starting with intel.”

Jaiswal hesitated for a moment. “How?”

“If you can get us all the cargo manifests filed in Asian ports of inbound ships, we’ll check them against all ships as they approach the 12-mile territorial limit.”

Jaiswal shook his head. “We can board every ship but we can’t check every container. And it only takes one container loaded with explosives. Or worse.”

Mollie nodded. “I’d like us to get on to Ensign Perez’s CO. Have her temporarily assigned to this project.”

Jaiswal turned to the ensign. “Perez, this okay with you?”

Perez smiled. “I’m happy to help out.”

Jaiswal motioned for Perez to rise. “Go speak to my yeoman about this.”

Jaiswal turned to Mollie as Perez left the room. “I’ve been briefed on your role here.” Then he turned to Surfer. “And what’s your role in this effort?”

“Damned if I know. I’m just a simple Navy pilot flying off an aircraft carrier.”

Mollie ignored the glare Surfer sent her way.

Jaiswal laughed. “It’s a good thing you’re used to sea duty, Commander. The work space available is about the size of the officers’ mess on a sub.”

Mollie jumped in. “It’ll work for us.”

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1640 hours

Kevin followed Jaiswal and Gearhead down the hall. Kevin had just decided he would stop thinking of the woman as “the woman” and start thinking of her as “Gearhead.” It was the best strategy for getting through this ridiculous assignment.

Jaiswal opened a door and they all entered a small space. Kevin could tell immediately that this had clearly been a storage room. Now the room held folding tables and chairs. Also laptop computers, a fax machine, and phone lines. The Coast Guard had wasted no time in getting ready for their arrival, although what the Coast Guard thought they could find ...

Gearhead turned to Jaiswal. “You’ve gotten us the basics. And if you could ...”

Thurman hurried into the room and spoke directly to Jaiswal.

“Sir, there’s a boat speeding into the harbor that refuses to identify itself. No flag flying.”

“Wasn’t it boarded outside the harbor?” Jaiswal asked.

“Seems to have gotten through the perimeter.”

“Where’s the 41 boat?” Jaiswal asked.

“It’s at the other end of the harbor. Can’t get there in time. And we don’t have anyone to fly the one helo that’s available”

Ha! Something Kevin could do. “I can fly the helo. Sanders, Thurman, come with me. If you don’t mind, Commander?”

Jaiswal nodded. “Remember you have no authority to do anything. Thurman has to make any arrests.”

“Aye, aye, sir,” Kevin said.

Jaiswal waved them to go, and Thurman led Kevin and Gearhead to the helo.

Kevin got in the pilot’s seat and Gearhead got in besides him, Thurman in the back.

Kevin checked the instruments and took off into the wind, then dipped low and headed for a tramp steamer racing towards the harbor.

Thurman leaned out one side with a loud-hailer: “This is the U.S. Coast Guard! Heave to and prepare to be boarded.”

The boat below didn’t slow but continued speeding towards the harbor.

Kevin kept the helo low and chased the boat.

Gearhead shouted over the whirl of the blades: “Surfer, can you hold the helo in a tight circle?”

Kevin realized what she had in mind. “You’re crazy,” he said.

Gearhead ignored him. She turned to Thurman. “Thurman, do you request assistance?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Now Gearhead spoke to Kevin. “And call in our position.”

What the hell!

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0703 hours

In the rear of the helo Mollie took weapons and flak vests out of the gun cabinet. She handed a vest and an M-16 to Thurman and pulled on her vest.

She reached back into the cabinet and extracted ammo magazines, giving Thurman a handful and taking three for herself.

She tapped each on the copter bench, shoved two into the pockets on her vest, loaded the third in her M-16.

Next she gave a rappelling belt to Thurman and buckled another around her waist. Then she worked her way up to Surfer, hand signaling him. He gave her a thumbs up.

“On my count,” she said.

Mollie stood in the helo door, clipping to a line, her M-16 slung over her back. Thurman stood next to her, also ready to go.

Surfer dove the helo toward the tramp steamer, scattering its crew.

Before the crew could react, he spun the helo, positioning the helo door over the boat stern.

Mollie and Thurman fast-roped the few feet from the helo to the boat stern. Piece of cake, Mollie thought.

Mollie and Thurman hit the deck and pulled out their M-16s.

As the crew on deck rushed toward them, Thurman trained his M-16 on them and they stopped in their tracks. They were unarmed and had no choice.

Mollie spotted a crew member moving towards a storage locker. She pointed her M-16 at the man and he backed away. She waved him over to join the other crew members.

Time for the Arabic she'd been learning. In Arabic she said, "You are being boarded by the U.S. government under international maritime rules. If you resist we will shoot. Get down on your knees."

The men kneeled on the deck.

Thurman spoke to Mollie. "You speak Arabic."

"Learned a few important phrases from a computer program."

She gestured at Thurman. "Keep them here. I'll search the boat."

While Surfer kept the helo in a tight circle over the boat, Mollie held her weapon and advanced slowly inside the filthy boat.

Suddenly she spotted a crew member dashing towards the forward hold. She yelled again in Arabic what she had said on the deck: "You are being boarded by the U.S. government under international maritime rules. If you resist we will shoot. Get down on your knees."

The man hesitated, about to try to run again, then kneeled. Mollie grabbed him by his shirt and pushed him into the forward hold. Let's see what he was so interested in reaching, she thought.

Inside the forward hold of the tramp steamer Mollie took a plastic wristband out of a pocket and indicated the man should put it on his hands.

Once he had done so, she could turn her attention to the man's destination.

Bags labeled RICE. She pulled out two bags. She shifted them in her hands, feeling the weight.

She burrowed farther into the stack, picked up bags, hefted them, and put them aside.

She felt another one and stopped. Taking out a knife, she cut the bag open.

Buried in the rice were cylinders of a grey play-dough-like substance.

She smiled. “Gotcha!”

Mollie emerged on deck holding the bound crew member with one hand and her M-16 with the other.

She shoved the crew member to join the other crew members.

At that moment a Coast Guard boat pulled alongside. Female and male Coast Guardsmen threw a line across the boat and tied up. Then the Guardsmen boarded the boat.

“I found Semtex in the forward hold,” she said. “Bag these guys and get them to shore. We’re going to have to tear this piece of crap apart.”

An hour later Mollie and Jaiswal stood on the bridge of the tramp steamer looking at the navigation charts. Mollie rolled up one.

“Some notes here in Arabic. I’ll get them translated,” she said.

“They wouldn’t leave their plans so openly available?” Jaiswal asked.

Mollie shook her head. “I’m not looking for plans. I’m looking for clues – the kind people don’t know they’ve left.”

Jaiswal eyed the rotten steamer. “Do you think this steamer is connected to your needle in the haystack?”

“Everything is connected to everything. Just depends how connected.”

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0924 hours

Kevin sat at a folding table playing bridge on his cell phone. Where the hell was Gearhead? Did she think she could make him sit around and wait like some lowly sailor?

At that moment Gearhead and Jaiswal entered the room.

“The boat is being searched and the crew is being held at our detention center,” Jaiswal told Kevin. “We’ll be interrogating them before they get sent to Gitmo.”

“Thanks for keeping a lid on this, Commander,” Mollie said. “I don’t want to tip off anyone.”

Jaiswal nodded. “Can’t promise how long the news lid will stay on. And there may be a tussle with the Justice Department. We’re Homeland Security now, not military. They may want to try these fuckers.”

Kevin stood up. “Shouldn’t be too difficult to get a conviction.”

That remark earned him a glare from Gearhead.

“I know what they *did*. I need to find out what they were *going* to do,” she said. “I’ll just have to interrogate them myself.”

Kevin saw Jaiswal give her the same look Kevin knew he was shooting at her. The look that said: Who the hell do you think you are?

“I meant, I’d really like to assist with the interrogation,” she said.

Slightly better, Kevin thought.

At that moment Ensign Perez entered the room and spoke to Gearhead. “Our billets are arranged. Got my clearance to remain here.”

Gearhead nodded, turned to Jaiswal.

“Have you located a translator yet?”

“Yes, and he should arrive within a few hours.”

Kevin heard his stomach growl. That very early morning “snack” wasn’t enough grub. “While we’re waiting, can we eat something?”

Jaiswal smiled. “I’ll have some food brought over from the officers mess.”

Fifty minutes later Kevin wiped his hands on a napkin. He, Gearhead and Perez were just finishing food brought on trays from the officers mess when Jaiswal entered the room.

Gearhead spoke first. “This meal is better than those served at the officers mess on the Nimitz.” She smiled at Jaiswal. Oh, honestly, was she trying for brownie points with the Coast Guard commander?

“Call me Sunil,” he said. Oh for chrissakes.

Gearhead beamed at Jaiswal, then flicked her eyes toward Kevin.

“Sure, Sunil. At Special Tactics and Operations Research Center we try to do some out-of-the-box thinking about terrorism.”

“And your specialty is ...?” Jaiswal asked.

“Electronics, you could say. Actually, my work is mostly classified.”

Damnit! Jaiswal looked fascinated. And of course her work was classified. Kevin needed to redirect the conversation.

Kevin would assume the Sunil invitation included him also as Kevin and Gearhead were the same rank. “Sunil, what improvements have been made to port security since 9/11?”

Jaiswal shook his head. “The city of LA gave us \$25 million to strength 40 miles of seacoast. The money is a drop in the bucket.”

That’s an understatement, Kevin thought.

“How much commerce passes through here a day?” Gearhead asked.

“Estimated at \$1 billion.”

Perez got in first. “If the port were totally disrupted for even one day?”

Jaiswal just shook his head.

Gearhead now jumped in. “Look, the plastique wasn’t even unpacked. They were bringing it in, not making a suicide run.”

“We don’t even know if they’re tangoes or just ordinary smugglers,” Perez said.

Kevin nodded in agreement with Perez. Well said, and obviously the ensign wasn’t afraid to stand up to Gearhead.

“Let’s go talk to the crew,” Gearhead said.

Kevin held up his hand. “Torture is frowned upon right now. Didn’t you get the memo?”

Gearhead shot him another one of her glares. “I’m not going to torture anybody. I might scare them a little, though.”

Jaiswal now chimed in. “I can’t let anybody interrogate them until we get this matter straightened out with the Justice Department.”

Kevin saw Gearhead’s expression, and also saw how she controlled saying anything.

Jaiswal stood. “But I’ll let you know when the translator arrives.”

“Thanks,” Gearhead said. “In the meantime we’ll get to work looking at the cargo manifests.”

At 1600 hours Kevin had about had it. They’d been sitting in this cramped room all day looking at individual straws in the haystack. Two hours ago the translator, a dark-skinned young civilian named Abdullah ibn Suliman, “call me Sam,” had shown up. He’d been escorted to some closet down the hall where he was to work on translating the Arabic notes on the navigation chart.

In the meantime Kevin, Gearhead and Perez had been refueled with more food from the officers mess. Still, enough is enough.

At this moment “Sam” entered the room. Immediately Gearhead turned to him with an expectant look.

“The references are to verses in the Koran. If I’ve figured this out right, they indicate a meet tomorrow morning at 10 at the merry-go-round on the Santa Monica pier.”

Gearhead’s excitement shone on her face. “Would you go with me? Pose as the contact,” she asked him.

Sam hesitated. “They won’t be expecting a woman. They’ll be suspicious.”

Ha! Gearhead’s expression showed how furious she was about not being able to go – and probably about having forgotten this, Kevin thought.

Gearhead looked at him. “Commander Witlow will go with you. Ensign Perez and I will be nearby. We’ll be able to blend into the crowds on the pier.”

Nothing like being volunteered for a meet. Hell! Kevin was a pilot. Not some Homeland Security agent.

He opened his mouth to speak, but Gearhead spoke to him first.

“We’ll get some more food and call it an early night. We’ve been up 34 hours and Perez met us at 0430. Early tomorrow morning we’re to look at the harbor with Commander Jaiswal. Then we’ll go to the Santa Monica pier.”

Wow, Gearhead actually had to sleep sometimes. What else did she also have to do?

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1900 hours

Mollie, Surfer and Perez walked up to the reception desk at the bachelor officers quarters. An enlisted man handed a key to Surfer and a key to Mollie. They both had their seabags but Perez had nothing with her.

“We’re pretty full tonight, so the ladies will have to share,” the enlisted man said.

Mollie nodded, then glanced at Perez’s empty hands. She asked the enlisted man, “Have any extra bathrobes? Ensign Perez didn’t know she was staying over.”

“I’ll bring some supplies to your room – including a toothbrush.”

Surfer turned to Mollie and Perez. “Good-night, ‘ladies.’ Sleep tight, don’t let the bedbugs bite.”

Asshole! Exactly what you’d expect from an airplane driver.

A half hour later Perez emerged from the bathroom of the billet room in her borrowed military robe and got into bed.

Mollie sat on her twin bed working her BlackBerry.

“Is your gear being set up tomorrow morning?” she asked Perez.

“My mother will take a seabag to the base tomorrow to be sent up here.”

“You live with your mother?”

Perez smiled. “Nearby.”

Mollie looked away, her expression unreadable. A mother living nearby. Then Mollie got out of bed and locked the door.

“You’re Academy, right, ma’am?” Perez asked.

“Yes. You can call me Mollie – when we’re off duty.”

Perez hesitated. “I’ve heard about how hard it can be for women at the Academy.”

Mollie shrugged and snapped off the light. She said into the dark room: “Nothing I couldn’t handle.”