

Prologue

Six months ago...

“How long has she been out of the hospital?”

“Four days.”

Miles grunted, staring through the interrogation room’s two-way mirror at the young woman sitting in the metal chair. Bruises rose in angry welts on her face, her dislocated arm hung in a sling, and judging from her expression, the terrifying experience remained fresh in her mind.

“Report states she’s waking up screaming in the night. We should wait until she’s fully healed to offer the deal.”

Miles shot a look at Jay. “Now.” Perfect timing. She was weak, beat to shit, and getting the feel of a jail cell. “Besides—” he shifted his attention back to the woman, “—I’m running out of time getting this program off the ground.”

All he wanted, all he needed, was SIDE to be a success.

Jay shook his head. “Wouldn’t know by looking at her that a hundred and fifteen-pound wisp of a little lady could take such a beating from a one-ninety-pound, mad-as-hell man.”

“She’s tough. Works in her favor.” That’s why he wanted her. Tough recruits, tough job.

“Might turn us down, Miles.”

“I’ve studied each of these recruits. Know their demons like the back of my hand. I won’t hesitate to use their deepest fears to get what I want.”

CHAPTER ONE

Friday

12:33 a.m.

Body heat and cannabis stench suffocated the air inside the crowded public bathroom, making her feel as if she were sucking tainted oxygen through a straw.

Trying not to inhale too deeply in order to avoid a contact high, Ana Moreno finger-combed the irritating strands of hair stuck to her face. Her lips and throat were dry, but her body was slick with sweat, pasting the screen-printed I'll Try Being Nicer, If You Try Being Smarter T-shirt to her stomach and back. She didn't pull at the black material, didn't fidget. Nothing to call attention to the wire taped between her breasts.

She kept her line of vision open as much as possible given the dimly lit area and group of stirring bodies. Enough to spot the thick rusted door that stood as a barrier between the bathroom and the decrepit theater vibrating with techno music and gyrating youths high on a variety of mood-altering drugs.

And enough to keep tabs on Stephen "Boner" Johnson, twenty-two-year-old drug dealer, and idiot.

In the light of a faint gas lantern set on a broken sink, Boner's rangy body twitched as he worked an illegal sale with two teenaged Candy Ravers—suburban kids decorated with candy necklaces, fake tattoos and body paint.

Boner was small-time. A couple of possession charges with the intent to sell and a tendency to shoplift. Nothing major. In the last six months, she'd assisted in the arrests of plenty low-status dealers just like Boner. She'd strolled the streets as an undercover buyer, attended parties and learned who distributed the purest goods.

The thing was, none of her prior arrests had been the core focus of a SIDE—Secret Informant Drug Enforcement—mission before. At no time had she been given an actual file on one specific dealer with the explicit instructions to find him—only him—and initiate a transaction.

This entire set-up gave her a bad feeling.

There hadn't been time for questions. Even if there had, it wouldn't have mattered. Sarge, her boss, lived by a follow-orders-no-questions-asked motto. Just one of the several reasons they bumped heads as often as a junkie chased the dragon.

Paul Galvini, codename Skates—the newest member of SIDE and her partner for the night—lurked five feet away in the center of the room. Tall and thin and just past twenty, with his blue Kool-Aid-colored hair and the crotch of his pants sagging to his knees, he blended in among the other partygoers. His usually vibrant blue eyes were now dark shadows flicking around the room, pale cheeks curved taut against high cheekbones, wide mouth tightened in a straight line. He played the lookout, in case something went wrong. Too bad the kid turned into a shivering puppy at any hint of conflict.

Boner finally turned toward her, rubbing his rigid nose. The dim light didn't catch any dilation in his pupils, but it did reveal the bumps of acne on his face and the way he continuously smacked on a piece a gum.

Characteristics of a dealer who likely dipped into his own supply. Just what she needed. A strung-out target could be as unpredictable as any wild animal.

“Now,” he said, his wide eyes scanning her up-and-down. “Anything you want, I probably got.”

She took a step toward him. Gave the fool the impression she trusted him. Gave her concealed wire a clearer transmission. “You sure about that?”

He jerked his thin shoulders. His black trench coat swayed around his knees with the movement. “Let’s find out.”

“Eight ball. Zoot.”

He scrunched up his face. “It’s a rave, man.” A thick bead of sweat ran down the side of his shaved head. “Ya want to feel good, ya go for X, Batmans, Toonies. Crank’s only gonna get ya tweekin’.”

She shifted her weight to her right foot, the soles of her boots sticking to the grimy floor. “Do you have it or not? I don’t got all night.”

“All right. Take it easy, half pint.” His tone mocked her. “I have somethin’ better for ya.”

He opened the right side of his trench coat.

Ana stilled, her pulse skittering.

Boner flashed the butt of a Glock shoved inside the waistband of his jeans.

Stay calm.

Pushing the streets strapped with a gun sent a direct statement: *double cross me—you’re dead.*

One would think she’d be comfortable with the risks of her job by now. Apparently not. She’d have given pretty much anything at that moment to wave a middle

finger over her shoulder and walk away.

Wouldn't happen. Not until she paid her debt to society.

Boner extended his hand, palm up. A small chunk of substance resembling roofing tar was twisted in plastic wrap on his palm. Had to be Mexican Black Tar.

"MBT," Boner confirmed. "The Blue Light Special for heroin. Low-cost, but still does the trick."

The guys from the Narcotics Division, listening from a van outside the abandoned theater, likely wore wide, vicious smiles. Any involvement with heroin would mean jail time. Narcotics already sported—she had to say it—a serious hard-on for Boner. Maybe they wanted his supplier, which would explain the importance of the mission. Bigger fish plucked from the dirty pond of drug trafficking were like trophies to them.

She gave Boner a nod. "I'll take it."

Boner let out a sound somewhere between a snicker and snort. "Thought you'd say that."

She made the switch. One hand drugs, the other money. His fingers lingered on hers with a deliberate caress, leaving behind a trail of sweat.

"Maybe we could hook up sometime," he said.

Yeah. Right. And maybe someday there'd be world peace. "No thanks."

"Come on. I could give ya a discount for the right favor. I've got important connections. There's gonna be prime shit comin' to the city." A grin cracked across his face. "Somethin' big—*bigger* than ya've ever seen."

"Yeah? Who's your connection?"

His jaw moved restlessly, munching on his chewing gum as if his life depended on it. Swiveling his head left to right before zeroing back on her, he said, "Ya heard the

name Saven?”

So Boner wanted to brag about his supplier. Strange. When a drug dealer was eager to talk about his source, it usually stemmed from an arrest and a deal with the District Attorney’s office.

She frowned. “Saven?”

Boner nodded and stepped closer. His body odor invaded her already suffering senses.

Muscles tightened down her spine, stilling her body. He kept enough distance that their bodies didn’t touch, but he loomed close. Close enough if he became a threat, she could grab the Glock. She’d been trained for scenarios like tonight and lived by her own internal instinct, one she’d picked up living off and on in the Frisco streets. She knew never to bring a weapon into play unless she held the advantage—or as Sarge always said, “If there are no other options.” This wasn’t the case.

In her peripheral vision, she glimpsed Skates shuffling closer. Anxiety trickled in her gut. She halted the kid with a barely moved finger. *Don’t play hero, kid. Don’t blow the deal.*

Ignoring a tear of sweat crawling down her neck, she lifted her chin, then moved her gaze to Boner’s nose. Staring into his eyes, those empty pits, was too personal. She never made it personal. “Haven’t heard of this Saven. Tell me about him.”

“Get down on your knees and I might,” he whispered softly. “You Mexican chicks like things hot, right? ’Cause I’ve got plenty of heat.” Another irritating laugh scraped through his mouth.

Bitterness pricked her insides. The idiot didn’t know

she didn't care for anything hot, let alone a disgusting loser like him.

Her eyes belligerently traveled from his acne-pitted face to his sagging chest and back again. "You trying to make me puke all over my favorite boots?"

Boner bared crooked teeth. "Ya wanna know why they call me Boner, *skank*?"

There. The telltale sign, the shift of his body.

Heart pounding, she braced for it.

His chest smacked hers, knocking her backward. Spreading her feet apart, she found her balance. But when he rammed up against her, his hard-on nudging her stomach, she jerked, repulsion devouring her caution in one giant swoop.

Damn it! Her knee flew up—quick and on target. Pure reflex.

"Bitch!" Boner cringed away, sucking in a hard growl, shoulders vibrating. One hand shot to his groin, the other fumbled with his coat.

Ana's stomach tightened into a solid knot.

"*Switch!*" Skates called out her codename.

She didn't look back. *No time.*

Gripping her left hand over her right fist, teeth clenched, she cocked back her arms and slammed a punch into Boner's solar plexus, the force of the blow quivering through her arms.

His body snapped back, mouth gulping for air.

Someone shoved open the bathroom door and screamed, "Raid!"

Bodies scattered like startled ants, some trying to dump their drugs, most rushing out the bathroom's exit.

Boner, still gasping, reached out to shove her aside. She gripped his arm, twisted as he past, and shoved. He

tripped, skidding on the soiled floor, before staggering up toward the bathroom exit.

Adrenaline swam through her blood. The sounds of muffled scrambling feet and yells of fleeing kids rushed in her ears. Ignoring her throbbing hand, Ana shoved the drug in her pocket and bee-lined for Skates. She took a firm hold of his wrist. “Don’t leave my side.”

Like the others, they headed for the closed restroom door. Crazed, Boner yanked the rusted handle, gritting his teeth as he strained to open it. A frenzied fat kid pushed him aside and tried himself.

No luck.

The bastards had barred the entry. She blinked in disbelief, a wave of trepidation rippling through her.

No escape.

Strict protocol for an undercover op stated to always have a means of flight or safety. Narcotics had taken that option away, sending a clear message: SIDE undercover operatives were nothing more than disposable bait.

“Th-They...” Eyes wild with panic, Skates paused, probably to swallow. “...Locked us in.”

“Got that.” Her insides quaked, but she didn’t let the dread out. She locked it in tight, gripping her left fist into her tender hand. Thumb pushing against the top of her forefinger, she cracked one knuckle then moved to the next one. She glanced at Fat Kid. Sweat ran down his doughy face in a stream. “Locked in a civilian kid with us. Idiots.”

Would Narcotics hear her warning before they barged in, guns cocked?

“Nah, man! Nah.” Boner rubbed his hand over his

stubbled hair, over and back, over and back. Trying to get the dead brain cells to rejuvenate? “This is wrong,” he hissed.

He whirled toward her, catching her off guard, grabbing her T-shirt. “Stupid bitch!” He tossed her away like a piece of trash, and she fell on her ass.

“Gotta get out of here.” He repeated the words like a mantra. His panicked eyes darted to the far wall opposite the exit, a compact window embedded over rusted urinals.

He ran over and boosted himself like a nimble cat, bent his elbow and struck a blow, cracking the glass. Pulling out the Glock, he smashed broken shards.

The door burst open—armed officers jammed in the doorway. “Freeze, police!”

Ana regained her footing, seized Skates’s arm, and pulled him out of the line of fire.

Shouts blasted from the cops, more from Boner.

Fat Kid huddled against the wall.

“Take cover!” she hollered at him. He cowered under a sink.

Boner, hanging on the wall, swung his weapon toward the door.

“*Shit.*” She jerked Skates’s arm. They dove into a stall behind them. Skates cursed as his head knocked the ceramic bowl on the way to the floor.

Gunfire echoed off the ancient walls. Her body flinched as if invisible bullets riddled parts of her own huddled form. A wounded scream followed, then deathly silence.

Slow seconds passed. Someone cursed. Bodies moved. Voices rose.

Skates trembled next to her. Her eyes watered from the foul sewer fumes drifting from the toilet. She reached

across the filthy tile, hesitated, then placed her hand over his cold one and squeezed.

“It’s over,” she managed to whisper before someone hauled her from the floor by a firm grip on her arm. Her hair slapped her face, covering her eyes and sticking to her sweaty skin. Careless hands forced her body against one of the scummy walls. Her feet were kicked apart.

Gritting her teeth, she held herself still when deep within she wanted to shove back.

The officer patted her down, found the smack. “Going away for a while for this one, little girl.” His voice sounded both gleeful and condescending.

Ana didn’t say a word. He’d fallen for her appearance, like most people. What she wouldn’t give at the moment to say, “Kiss off.”

Through the veil of her hair, she caught a glimpse of Boner—sprawled out like a broken doll, eyes frozen in a stare of horror, glazed with death. Blood pooled on the cracked floor beneath him.

So much blood. She swallowed as familiar visions fogged her mind.

Lying whores!

Touch us and you’ll regret it.

Little wetback bitch.

She whipped her eyes away. Her stomach swirled, turned over. Her lungs grew tight.

No. She shook her head, fighting for even breaths. Not now, *not now*.

Bile surged up her throat. She gagged, choked back the sourness.

Chaotic sounds from the Narcotics Division and the

ravers echoed around her, fading in and out like someone placing their hands over her ears and then removing them. Prickles of tiny needles danced under her skin.

Her head fell forward, hitting hard against the tiles. The sticky wall felt cool, a welcome reinforcement for her dizziness, and a life preserver in a stormy turmoil of a nightmare. Her body sagged.

“Hey, kid.” The cop hauled her up. “Don’t pass out on me now.”

Can’t get sick. A rush of air emptied from her. She *would* beat it. Nothing would get the best of her. Nothing.

With her eyes squeezed shut, Ana envisioned a blackness covering any unwanted visions in her head. Sort of like taking a spray can and painting over the blood from Boner’s body, over his lifeless form, until it turned into one big void. Black and empty.

The cop pulled her hands behind her back and cuffed her wrists so hard she winced. The stale scents of the bathroom drifted up once again into her nostrils along with the fresh coppery odor of the blood...

It didn’t matter.

Mission complete.

Friday

6:15 a.m.

“Hey, good-lookin’.”

“Hey, yourself,” Ana countered, and rubbed her bleary eyes. She glanced up from her seat to see SIDE member Aaron Nabarro, codename Romeo, standing in front of her.

He set a soda can of Mr. Pibb on her table. “It’s not

Dr. Pepper.”

“It’ll do me.” She popped the tab, glancing at him. She wasn’t used to people doing nice things without a price tag attached. “Thanks.”

“Don’t mention it. Heard about last night.”

“What’s that?” She took a swig of soda.

“That you caught your target. Cleaned his clock before he was put down. That brings up your arrest count.”

“I guess.” She set the perspiring can down, turning it with her fingers. She hadn’t thought about her average. The first thing she’d done when she returned home was take a long heated shower, scrubbing away the evidence of the rave before crashing for a few hours of restless sleep. She’d awakened feeling gritty. A cold ten-minute shower hadn’t revived her any more than the brisk two-block hike from her studio apartment to the old three-story brick firehouse SIDE used as headquarters.

“Sorry it went down like that. Seeing someone killed. It’s rough.”

Ana shifted in her seat. Nabarro wasn’t christened Romeo for nothing. He’d been arrested for sweeping older women off their feet and leisurely taking gifts. Unfortunately, the “gifts” hadn’t been offered. And from the time she’d met him six months ago, he’d done nothing but tease and flirt with her and Julia Kelly, the other female on the team. So now his sincere words snuck out of left field.

She stared down at the can. “Do you know what it’s like?” When he didn’t answer right away, she met his gaze.

He smiled. Romeo was bi-racial—Filipino and white—and twenty-one years old, the same age as her. Sometimes she felt a mild kinship toward him because of her own mutt status.

All she knew was that her mother was Caucasian—she'd never been informed what nationality—and that her father had been Mexican, leaving her with a question mark on what nationality to check when filling out forms. Her multicultural background had been considered a problem in the state homes she'd grown up in. She wasn't white, yet she wasn't full-blooded Mexican. Half the time the counselors hadn't known what type of family would offer a home for her, and without a clear identity, Ana had always floundered with which clique would accept her in the girls' home.

After a while, she'd given up trying to fit in anywhere.

Romeo leaned down. "Push it aside, Switch, and move on. It'll eat you up if you don't." He walked to Skates, placing a hand on his shoulder.

Good advice given too late. She'd tossed and turned in bed, fighting the lifeless images of Boner. His eyes staring in horror, his mouth slack with stark red blood drooling from his thin lips, the puddle growing and growing beneath him. She'd never seen a dead body before, never witnessed a death, but she felt she'd seen enough blood to last her a lifetime.

"Listen up," commanded Miles "Sarge" Winters as he sauntered into the meet room.

Blinking away the gruesome images, Ana straightened in her metal seat and raked her fingers through her black chin-length chopped hair.

Justin Smythe, aka Jay-man, Sarge's sidekick-slash-

assistant, lurked a couple feet away to the right. His face was composed in its habitual passive expression as his solid black form towered over everyone in the room.

Sarge, an ex-Vice cop and a hardcore believer in drug enforcement, headed the SIDE program. Standing behind a shoddy metal desk with his standard police-issued Glock snug in his hip holster, Sarge held court like some kind of would-be king, his face deadpan and his thick arms crossed against the polo shirt molded over his linebacker chest.

“DEA’s received recent information about a large shipment of Ecstasy tablets coming into San Francisco within the next week.” His voice, as usual, sounded as if his throat was packed with gravel. His black eyes moved over each of the five SIDE members in the room. “The time frame’s uncertain. When I say large, I’m talking similar size to the Ecstasy confiscation in 2008 where a half-mill of tablets were pulled in.”

That was Sarge. No time wasted for pleasantries. But yeah, she was intrigued. To date, that bust had been the largest Ecstasy seizure in the United States.

“Tip came from a foreign source. Not only is a cargo of a Substance I drug coming into the U.S., the load’s mixed with identical PMA tablets.”

“Shit,” Romeo swore aloud.

Her sentiments exactly. In tablet form, both drugs deceived the user with their near duplicate stimulant properties. PMA, aka chicken powder, was considered one of the most dangerous of amphetamines. The drug increased heart rate, blood pressure and body temp just like MDMA, the chemical abbreviation for Ecstasy, but to

one big mother of an extreme.

Ecstasy heightened sexual awareness and feelings of euphoria, making it a sought-after designer drug for upscale crowds. Like most street drugs, this one had its share of dangerous side effects, including messing with hormone levels and causing brain damage.

Sarge nodded and ran his thumb and forefinger down the sides of his thick mustache. “We’re dealing with a real nut job.” Sarge’s voice went oddly dull. “You all recall the incident a few years ago when ravers mistook PMA tablets for Ecstasy? They called it the Rave Massacre.” At the team’s mumbled agreement, he went on. “Due to the delayed reaction of PMA, multiple doses were consumed. The incident resulted in nearly fifty deaths.”

The obvious wasn’t stated. Now, with a lethal cargo heading for San Francisco, the same fatal disaster could occur.

Ana scraped her teeth across her bottom lip.

There’s gonna be prime shit comin’ to the city. Somethin’ big—bigger than ya’ve ever seen.

“Last night’s target, Stephen Johnson, was one of the sources we found with the PMA on him at the Rave Massacre. Other sources are either still incarcerated, not talking, or not to be found. Johnson, underage at the time, had claimed he didn’t know what he was selling. We took a chance he’d be connected to this next shipment. With Johnson gone we’re at a dead end.”

Ana cracked her knuckles as the importance of last night’s mission sunk in. And how she’d been given no clue beforehand.

Sarge’s wiry brows pushed together. “You can be damn sure nobody wants another large death toll on this city’s hands. We’re going over all the info we have. If

need be, question every scum dealer in this city, search every corner of each filthy alley until we find out the source behind this Ecstasy load.”

He shifted, rolled his thick shoulders and went to the corkboard. “DEA has come up with three potential suspects.”

Various eight-by-tens of individuals lined the board. He tapped a finger against the first picture of a man with a light complexion and a brown receding hairline. His gray eyes stared flat. Empty. If Ana ever came across him, she’d have to fight the urge to knock on his head and ask if anyone was home.

“Salvador Tyler. Five-seven. One-seventy-five. Age forty-one. This guy, only a mother could love. A dead mother. She was fished out of the bay ten years ago.”

“Are you saying he killed his own mom?” Julia, codename Digit, asked, mouth agape.

“No one’s been convicted but I wouldn’t put it past him. Tyler’s hand is in a little of everything, from drug pushing to black market porn. We’re led to believe he does business through the Internet. He has alleged illegal drug connections with every leading foreign drug source. Israel, Belgium, Netherlands, Peru.

“Three years ago he was brought in on cocaine trafficking charges. Evidence went missing, along with witnesses. He walked. Heroin is his favorite candy to shop around. A lethal batch of pills could be his next.

“I’ll pass around a file on each suspect. Learn it. This new operation is priority. We’ll be referring to it as Operation Deadly Adam.”

Ana smirked. Real original naming the operation

after a street slang for Ecstasy.

“Next on the list, Raymond Brooks. Six foot, brown eyes, one-ninety. His looks are plain, ordinary—the average Joe. Never been brought in, not enough evidence to pin on him. This guy’s slick. Got a reputation for illegal gambling, rumored for drug pushing. Money is growing out of his ass, and no one knows where it’s coming from. Owns a couple of businesses, one an art gallery. Surveillance revealed interesting Israeli connections. A high indicator he could be our guy.

“Brooks is venturing out with a new club called Zero. It’s opening tonight. I’ll expect a couple of you to attend.”

“Right,” Ana said. “How do you propose a couple of *us* are going to be able to waltz into a hot new club on opening night?”

“Bribe the doorman. Don’t care, just find a way.” With no more elaboration, Sarge continued. “Brooks has a right-hand man who never leaves his side. Name’s Jonas Saven.”

Ana studied the photo. The man in the picture stood with his hands tucked into his front pants pockets. His gaze focused somewhere right of the camera, expression distant, as if he couldn’t give a rat’s ass. She pictured men following his orders *and* women falling at his feet. Lips full, with no smile; clean-shaven jaw. Rich brown hair slicked back from a strong forehead and bound at his neck. His too-gorgeous face showed only one flaw—a scar cut across his thick dark eyebrow.

Ana frowned, tucking her hair behind her ears. Was this Saven the same person Boner mentioned last night?

“The guy’s a pretty boy, brown eyes and hair. Five-eleven. One-seventy. Age twenty-seven. A reputation for

having a head for business as well as an eye for the ladies. He runs Brooks's security, his business ventures. Hires men out as bone breakers. It's unknown how the two met, but they've been working together for five years.

"Our last suspect is Rico Garcia, leader of the Black Dragons gang. Got a rap sheet as long as the Constitution, from assaults to petty theft to drug trafficking. Keeps his brother, Tomas Garcia, close to his side.

"Members of the gang have never talked. Their followers are loyal and dangerous. They're just one of the more notorious gangs in San Francisco, but the only group with recent evidence of an Israeli connection."

The picture of Rico Garcia didn't *say* gang member, it screamed it at the top of its lungs. He sported a black bandana tied on his head, and bore something tattooed on his neck. His lips curled as if in a permanent snarl and his head appeared shaved.

Sarge turned toward the group. "Any questions?"

"How do you expect us to find out about the deal?" Billy Donavon asked. A surprisingly logical question coming from a major jerk. Donavon, codename Jax, led the team with twenty-six arrests. Ana placed second, with twenty-two. Their competitive egos were just one of the reasons they didn't get along.

Sarge walked around the front of his desk, crossed his hairy arms and leaned back. "The same way you always do. Study the targets, hit the streets, and ask around. Put it this way, I *require* you to do whatever it takes to crack this case. You won't like the alternative if funding for this program is pulled."

Skates sat up from his slouched position two seats

away from Ana. The bruise on his forehead, from hitting the toilet last night, stood out like a smudge of purple paint against his pale skin.

“We could be put back in prison?” he asked.

Silence.

Ana’s stomach tightened as she held her breath, waiting with the rest of the team for the worst answer of their lives.

No one talked about the program being shut down or their own personal reasons for taking a position in SIDE. They just dealt with each day as it occurred and concentrated on keeping themselves whole while they waited for their terms to be up. Some of the team had spent time behind bars, others hadn’t, yet they all clung to the same goal of staying out of a prison cell.

The chance the U.S. government felt SIDE wasn’t worth the effort had never occurred to Ana. Although she should have expected this. She’d never been worth the effort to anyone.

Sarge grunted. “I see I have everyone’s attention now. It’s not a secret there are forces against us and if the money goes, so does everyone. We have seventy arrests to date, and it’s not enough. We need something to prove we’re making a difference. Like this X shipment.

“If you want to stay out of lockup, find the answers. Who. When. Where.” He pushed off the desk and turned to the suspects lining the corkboard. “Meet at the gym for training in thirty. Dismissed.”

Ana ran a finger over the right side of her sweatshirt as familiar resentment shoved yet another brick in the towering wall inside of her. Even through the layer of clothing, she knew the precise location of the vertical two-inch scar under her right collarbone. A two-by-two

tracking device resembling a small pacemaker had been surgically implanted when she agreed to join SIDE.

The team obeyed the rules Sarge laid out, listened to each of his cold threats. He knew they did their jobs. It wasn't like they had much of a choice. Years in a caged cell or living free in the real world. Yeah, a difficult decision.

After the stunt Narcotics had pulled during the rave op last night—the uncertainty if she and Skates would walk out of that building or be carried out in body bags—hearing the threat now of the team's freedom being taken away was like a sucker punch in her gut.

“Wait a minute,” she called out.

Sarge's broad shoulders rose then lowered as if taking a breath. Slowly he faced her, and Ana confronted eyes so cold she felt the frost bite straight through her bones.

“Got a problem, Switch?”

“As a matter of fact...”

“Switch,” Skates whispered a warning.

Ana ignored him. She wasn't breaking the rules of SIDE's contract. She'd known most of her life that if she wanted somebody to stick up for her, that person had to be herself.

Leaning forward in her seat, she met Sarge's pissed-off stare with one of her own. “We bust our backs for this program, put up with the crap law enforcement shovels at us, and now you're telling us our efforts have meant nothing?” She settled back with a scowl on her face. “This is bullshit.”

Sarge walked toward her, his wide build shifting

with each step. He leaned down to prop his hands on the table in front of her and leveled his rugged face with hers.

The fragrance of Old Spice hit her.

Max had worn that scent.

For the first time she noticed the finer lines around Sarge's hound dog eyes and mouth. The wild locks of salt and pepper hair usually stole her attention, until his attitude slammed against her.

"You looking for demerits?" The question was quiet, menacing.

"No." She already had enough black marks in her damn file. "Just telling you how I see it."

"Let me tell you how I see it, Switch. The day you broke the law, you lost your freedom. Instead of taking the consequences of your crime, you agreed to do a job. No questions asked. You're damned lucky you were chosen for SIDE in the first place."

"Sure. Locked in the john with a doped-up dealer and caught in a shoot-out? Real lucky! We could have caught a bullet, and for what? A second-rate dealer so high he thought he could survive flying lead?"

He pushed off her desk. "You got yourself twenty demerits."

"Screw that." She stiffened in the hard chair. "For putting our lives on the line, we deserve to know what we're dealing with before we head into a situation like last night."

"Don't give me that shit. I sent you in to pull off a simple deal. We needed Johnson by the balls in order to make him tell us what he knew about the X shipment. Instead he ends up dead because *you* couldn't keep your head."

"You're not laying that on me. I did my part. He

gave me Saven's name, didn't he?"

"That won't hold up."

"We find his supplier—"

"That's just it. We don't have his goddamn supplier because the punk's dead. If you got a problem following orders, forfeit your position on the team. There's a cell waiting for you in Northern Cal's Women's Facility."

She shoved back her chair, but gritted her teeth against a retort she'd regret later. "I follow the rules. It's the jerks in Narcotics—"

"Damn it! Sixty-fucking-demerits, Switch. If I have to go any higher, your ass is back where I found you. You got that!"

Back where he found her...

A mild concussion, two black eyes, dislocated shoulder, and forever coated with someone else's blood.

She jerked away from Sarge's ruthless face, stared down at her fists in her lap.

"That's right," he said gruffly. "A ten-year sentence instead of five. A lousy thief whose luck finally ran out. Let's get something straight." He raised his voice to ensure everyone in the room understood. "You're all dispensable. There's always someone else to replace you."

When she didn't say a word, his bulky shoulders rolled. "Anybody else have anything to say?" His tone implied an unspoken, "Do and die."

No one said a word.

Not the Hacker, the Gigolo, the Versatile Crook, and for sure not the Walking Underground Info Bank. They knew what she did: Sarge could snap his fingers and

they'd disappear.

Ana scanned their faces, swallowing past the rock in her throat. The team wouldn't even look at her. Big freaking surprise.

Can't go back to a cell. She rubbed at her nervous stomach. She'd waited years to be out of the system. To be able to go where she chose, be able to do anything she pleased. Working for SIDE had been the lesser evil, the only way she'd be able to live and breathe, compared to more years of having no control over her life.

Now the little freedom she coveted might be taken away.

Sarge scanned the room. "That's what I thought. Now don't make me tell you again. Head for the gym. After your workout, contact your sources. I want information on all suspects. And I want it yesterday." His stare hit Ana like a bull's-eye. "As for you, Switch. You're on my shit list for this operation. I say jump, you don't ask how high, you just damn well better jump."

Ana rubbed her hands across her face.

Yeah. The story of her life.