

Command Indecision

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Chapter One

Our private pow-wow every day at the Solomon Agency conference room was one of the few times when all the staff collaborated. That is, if collaboration included eating a box of donuts in ten minutes flat because I didn't. So, not a whole lot else was going on around the table of the small boardroom. Ever since my colleagues discovered that I not only could handle the cases by myself, but also solved three on the go, they were speaking to me with a modicum of respect.

"These donuts taste like shit," muttered Lucas Givens, our resident tech geek and ex-criminal. He swallowed the last bite of a pink sprinkle donut.

I did say "modicum."

"Sorry. I forgot how testy you got when all the maple crullers are gone," I snipped back as I peered into the box. It was empty, but for a meager dusting of sugar.

The meeting wasn't just about sampling donuts. Our daily catch-ups kept us all clued in on the cases the agency was handling, and the resources needed. Other than that, we largely worked alone or in pairs, which suited me just fine. We'd yet to take on a full team op, that I knew about anyway. Somehow, I still didn't think I was getting the full deal about our caseload. I was fairly certain Solomon, my boss and irresistible lust interest, took other jobs that he didn't mention, at least, to me. Occasionally, I got a whiff

of suspicion that the others might be working on secret stuff with him. But they never said and I never asked. Instead, I kept my eyes open and my ears perked because sooner or later, one of them would drop the ball. Until then, I fought an inner struggle as to whether I should care, or not give two figs that they still kept some “boys’ club only” secret.

The sugar buzz could have made me paranoid, of course.

Today's meeting seemed to be skipping along at its usual pace. Steve Fletcher, ex-CIA man and pain-in-the-butt, was still working on his current surveillance case. Lucas was overwhelmed at dealing with our many requests for information, as per usual, but seeming to enjoy it. Or in his words: "I haven't been arrested this year, so, *awesome*." Tony Delgado's case got approved after running through the top line details. His hard, angular face was pinched with concentration.

“I’m out of here,” Fletcher mumbled through a yawn he stifled with the back of his hand. He waved at us as he backed out of the office. Solomon looked up from his paperwork, nodded, and returned to the case file he was reading.

I tapped my fingers against my leg and held back my yawn by biting the insides of my cheeks and pulling a face. I had nothing, which sucked. Not even a pro bono case, otherwise known as the “no-hopers” that no one saw any merit in other than I. As per my agreement with Solomon, which had something to do with simultaneously solving three cases, I got to pick a no-hoper pro bono if I saw one that intrigued me. But it seemed like there wasn't a lot of crime happening in Montgomery right now. No bosses needed us to snoop on employees potentially defrauding them; there were no cheating spouses or missing persons; or cold cases that needed fresh eyes. Either the criminals

had given up or just gotten smarter. Personally, I thought they were probably on a break. It would give me time to catch up on a few personal things, like, oh, having a life. I wasn't the only one; Fletcher looked about ready to fall asleep before he took off. Matt Flaherty, an ex-detective who was rendered an invalid and taken off the force by the lasting effects of a bullet, was making noises about going home and painting his house, and Lucas was licking the sugar from his fingers.

From beginning to end, our meeting took only ten minutes, so when I got up to file out after my colleagues, I was expecting to tootle home and do nothing, or hang with my best gal pal, Lily Shuler. I hoped to take advantage of her downtime and my boyfriend's work schedule, since he was currently undercover. Such was the nature of our work. I could work non-stop on a case, evenings and weekends included; then hit a dry spell, which even made my laundry look interesting. Fortunately, I had better plans: they involved Lily, a bottle of tequila, and a bucket of limes. Lily texted me to let me know it would be "epic."

"Lexi?" Solomon's voice stopped me as I picked up the empty donut box. I was ready to trash it before I exited the office, hot on Lucas' heels.

"Yup?" I plastered a smile on my face, turning back to him as Flaherty squeezed past.

"Close the door."

Oh *no*. The last time we had a "close the door" conversation, it resulted with me getting furious and insulted. My heart plummeted as I tapped the door shut and took Fletcher's vacated seat. Apparently, none of my colleagues could figure out why Solomon had hired a formerly-blonde bimbo who wore cute, little skirts and high heels.

Since that time, I'd been wearing pants or jeans, (still with heels because I do have standards), and I solved a bunch of cases. Right now, they could suck it. Tequila not included. I could wear whatever I liked.

"I've got a job that I want you to work on with me," said Solomon, cutting into my internal indignation.

"Oh?" That was a surprise. I blinked. Twice.

Solomon glanced up, his liquid chocolate eyes roaming briefly and alighting on me, but giving nothing away. "But it's something that you can refuse."

I was intrigued. Solomon wasn't keen on the word "no." He definitely liked the word "yes." I occasionally had the fleeting thought that he probably liked "yes, yes, yes!" a whole lot, not that I'd ever found myself in a position with him where that slipped from *my* mouth! I'd been firm on that front. Our relationship was strictly professional; plus, I had a boyfriend: Adam Maddox, detective, hottie and all around good guy. The very thought of him could make my heart sing.

"Go on," I said. The door swung shut with a light click.

"An old friend of mine at Fort Charles requested our help. There was a murder last week and the main suspect is in custody."

"So why do they want to hire us?" I asked, cutting to the chase.

Solomon leaned back in his chair, his eyes running over me for a long moment, long enough to make me shiver. Then he answered. "My friend thinks they've got the wrong guy."

"Isn't this a military police case?" I asked. My eyebrows were pinched together as I thought of everything I knew about Fort Charles. I had a vague mental image of a

sprawling compound, around thirty miles south of Montgomery. It housed a sizeable population of serving Army personnel, their families, and civilian workers. Every so often, the soldiers would whoop it up in Montgomery, drink the town dry, and wake up in the wrong beds. Then there would be a crackdown, during which we wouldn't see them again for months. It was something my best friend, Lily, used to lament before she started dating my brother, Jord. Now she only had eyes for him. And he'd become a sappy idiot.

"The military police are involved, but we're not being hired by them," Solomon explained as he flipped a page. "The suspect is a sergeant who works in the gym. Nathaniel Tate. The person killed was a civilian working on base."

"Some kind of argument?" I asked. I don't know why I bothered. If it had been a simple misunderstanding, Solomon would have said so. And he wouldn't have even brought it up, because we wouldn't have been hired. I haven't known Solomon for too long, but I do know he likes an interesting case.

Solomon shook his head. "Doesn't seem to be. They were known to each other, but nothing extra special from what my man tells me. The victim was a woman."

"Was there some kind of fight?" Ah, a spark in his eyes. *Bingo.*

"Apparently, there was an argument a few hours before the murder, but it's unconfirmed, as of yet. The suspect isn't cooperating."

I rested my back against the door jamb and contemplated that. "If the military police can't get him to mouth off, why does your friend think we can?"

"He doesn't. He wants me undercover. I'm going to be talking to everyone else."

I had to admit, as much I thought myself pretty solid during investigations, I felt this

was more of a case for one of my colleagues. Aside from my brief skirmish with the Army, which ended at boot camp, I wasn't what anyone would call a "hard-ass." I'm slight and pretty, and I favor nice dresses and heels, and I like to look groomed, not drenched in sweat on a run. I don't like camo much. It doesn't match my eyes. I don't enjoy macho man-posturing, unless it's for my benefit; and I definitely don't like the Army. It's too muddy. Literally. I decided against it on my first mud crawl and flunked out. However, I doubted Solomon much cared what I thought of military fashion.

"Wouldn't Fletcher or Delgado be better for this?" As soon as I said it, I realized he would already have asked them if he thought so, which begged the question, why ask me?

As I pushed off the wall, pulling out a chair, Solomon replied, "I thought a woman would be better on this one."

The one occasion where my boobs won.

Solomon thought it quite advantageous to have a woman on staff. He believed I could get into places or talk to people where big, hard-looking men, (i.e. my colleagues), couldn't. The only reason I found for Solomon to hire me over a female ex-cop or an experienced investigator was because he had a soft spot for me... That and because he found a brain he liked, mine, one he could mold to his own style of investigating. He also admitted he liked to look at my legs in the office, but I'm not sure if he was joking. I suspected not.

"Why's that?"

"The victim was a woman," Solomon answered, rifling his file and coming up with a photo, which he held up. "This is Jillian Connor. She was working on base part-time,

temping. Stands to reason the people she would talk to most, and socialize with, would be other women, and most likely, civilians."

Possibly sexist, but not necessarily untrue. I like to think that I could get along with anyone, but I have three older brothers, all cops, and I can hold my own with any mouthy uniform. But this was Fort Charles, where testosterone-laden Army boys were so butch, it hurt. They were probably all big mommas' boys in truth, but I couldn't see them having long heart-to-hearts with a civilian female temp.

"So you want me to go undercover and get friendly with her pals?" I guessed.

"That's about it."

"How long will it take?"

I think Solomon must've heard the sigh in my question, or perhaps, the longing for the tequila slammers, because he said, "A couple weeks, maybe, and the pay will be shit. Basic, with no percentage. That's why I said you could refuse it."

A couple of weeks. It didn't sound so bad, except I hadn't seen Maddox in a little over four weeks, as he was out of town on an undercover op. What he was doing undercover I didn't know because Maddox didn't share that kind of information with me. It was now two weeks since we'd last spoken. I left a couple of messages on his answering service, which he hadn't returned. I was resisting the urge to leave another, in case he thought I was needy, which I wasn't. I just missed him. From what he said during our last, fleeting conversation, there was a good chance that he would come home in the next two weeks. I didn't want to miss that by being out of town on a stake-out. Plus, I was as horny as hell with high hopes for absolutely no sleep within the first twenty-four hours that Maddox got off duty.

That wasn't needy. That was planning ahead.

"I'm gonna go with no," I said. I wanted to keep it simple because if Solomon thought I was giving up on an undercover op so I could play under-the-covers-ops with my boyfriend, he might question my commitment to the job. Also, it was better if he thought the "basic, with no percentage" he casually tossed out was the real problem. The Solomon Agency paid my salary, which covered my rent, utilities, and a few other basics, but the completion percentage was the bonus that made life more fun and the inconsistencies of the job more tolerable.

"Not a problem," Solomon said, with no hint of annoyance. The brief thought that I wondered where he would find another woman, and who she might be, flashed through my mind, but I ignored it. As I got to my feet, he pulled another file out while holding a hand up, stopping me. I sank back down again and tried not to huff in exasperation. "I need you to do some simple surveillance tonight. Can you manage that?"

"Yes." I frowned at the way his voice cooled. "I guess."

Solomon passed me the file. I opened it, taking a cursory glance through. "Possible cheating spouse case. I've been following Don Hassell a couple weeks and there's nothing on him. I think he's clean. A workaholic. The wife thinks he's got some fancy dinner with a mistress tonight. I need you to scope it out, get some pictures. Everything's in the file. You still got the camera?"

"In my trunk."

"Good. Restaurant details are in the file. The wife heard him booking the restaurant for eight. Get there by seven thirty at the latest."

"No problem." This time when I got to my feet, Solomon didn't stop me; but as I

turned the door handle, he said, "If you change your mind, call me. I want to go to Fort Charles tomorrow. I'll be back in the office when I can, but you can get me on my cell phone if you need me otherwise."

I glanced back at Solomon, but he had already buried his head in the file, dismissing me. "Sure," I said, taking the file with me as I returned to my desk. Leaning back in my padded leather office chair, my boots resting on the lip of the desk, I read through the file, slowly this time. Solomon, as always, was very thorough. I read through the initial case document the wife filled out when she secured the agency's services. It was where we got all her details regarding the job, in this case, her husband. Then I flipped through Solomon's neat, handwritten notes documenting the movements of the man he'd surveilled. Nothing interesting. Could be that the wife was paranoid, or that Solomon just hadn't gotten lucky yet.

I checked my watch. Five p.m. I knew the restaurant, Alessandro's, and exactly how to find it. That gave me two hours to kill before I'd have to make my way there. Just long enough to get some groceries, go home, and get back out on the road. It should be enough to distract me from why Maddox hadn't called me yet.

I knew going undercover could be hard on a cop. Funnily enough, we met while he was undercover. Back then, he was Adam Sheppard, sexy-but-annoying manager at the insurance company where I temped. It was only after we witnessed the murder of our CEO that he confessed he was a local detective, investigating a multi-million fraud, a case that I ultimately cracked.

During the same investigation, I met Solomon, who was working the joint taskforce with Maddox. According to Maddox, however, no one really knew who the hell Solomon

was or whom he really worked for. That was how I ended up with this job. I thought a few things about Solomon too, because I had a pulse and he was honest-to-goodness, smokin' hot. But as things turned out, Maddox became my boyfriend and Solomon was my boss, which worked out pretty well for me. Both my days and evenings were now considerably more fun than they had been just a few short months ago.

So I had some sympathy for the strenuous nature of the job an undercover cop had to endure, but surely he got some time off from his suspects? He couldn't be with them twenty-four/seven. Didn't he take bathroom breaks? Or go to bed? Or lie and say he was going to the store for some gum or something, so he could call his girlfriend, aka me?

I missed him and, without being sappy, I hoped he was missing me too.

I powered down my laptop and stuck it in the desk drawer, which I locked. Grabbing the file and my purse, I called out goodbye to my colleagues, and headed to the underground parking lot to get my VW.

Traffic was a bitch with everyone apparently leaving their buildings the same time as I, but I managed a swift grocery run, a visit to the gas station and a hot coffee to go. It was still warm by the time I dumped my shopping in my second story West Montgomery apartment and turned back to hunt my mark.

Parking spaces were easy to find this time of day, so I took my time while driving past to eyeball the best spots for viewing Alessandro's before swinging around and gliding into a space. It was a good place to eat. Smart, sophisticated, pricey. It catered to ladies who lunched, decent dates and making good impressions. I'd been there a few times and my sister, Serena, was a regular until she had a baby and instigated a

divorce from her philandering husband.

Solomon seemed to think the mark was a sure thing. With some luck, I wouldn't have to waste my whole evening freezing my butt off in the car when I could be doing something more useful. Like painting my nails, or, or... I couldn't think of anything and that was sad. Had my life suddenly come to this? Where it was more interesting to hang out on the side of a street, waiting to snap surveillance photos of some scumbag? No, wait. I'd forgotten Lily.

Pulling a face, I rummaged in my jacket pocket for my phone and called her.

"Are you ready?" she screamed down the line. I held my phone at arm's length from my ear.

"I can't make it until later," I told her as I checked out the pedestrians. "I got stuck with a surveillance job. I should be done by eight thirty. I'll be back around nine."

"No problemo, dudette. Don't be late. Tequila waits for no woman."

"Don't start without me."

I hung up, sighing at my bad luck as I fiddled with my camera. I retrieved it from my trunk earlier, pulling off the lens cap while simultaneously continuing to scan the area. No sign of Don Hassell on the street yet. Maybe he was already inside one of the coffee houses, or browsing some of the boutiques. I checked the photo. Don was a chubby businessman in his late forties. Nice, navy blue suit, crisp, white shirt and blue striped tie. He was losing his hair and the years hadn't been kind; he had jowls and a red nose. No, not a boutique man. Maybe a bar?

All the same, I started with the buildings closest to me, running my eyes over the various people taking seats and approaching the bars. No one fit his description.

Twisting in my seat, I turned to the sidewalk across the street. It seemed like it was predominantly a late, after-work crowd tonight; the men and women were mostly still suited, a few couples on dates, but not many yet.

And that's when I saw them.

He wore dark pants and an open-necked, blue shirt underneath a smart sports coat. His hair was beginning to get a slightly unruly look from his obvious avoidance of the barber. His arm was slung around a pretty woman. She looked a couple years older than I, with a sweetheart face and dark hair drawn back in a ponytail that swung in a smooth, glossy wave behind her. I felt my heart stop as she reached up and patted his hand. He smiled down at her affectionately before opening the restaurant door and ushering her in.

If this were my surveillance guy, I would have been happily snapping away, but it wasn't. This was Adam Maddox, and I think my heart might have stopped for a moment or two. I watched, transfixed, as a waitress took my boyfriend and the pretty woman to a table where another couple waited. I stared, nearly catatonic, as the four shook hands and exchanged kisses.

If I weren't mistaken, my boyfriend was on a date. A double date. Not exactly the undercover job he told me he was working on weeks ago, the last time I saw him. Unless it was, I thought with a steaming fury, an *under-her-covers* job.

I grabbed my cell phone and re-dialed.

"Hello," Lily's voice chirped into my ear.

"I'm going to kill him," I said.

"Super awesome. Who?"

"Maddox," I said though gritted teeth as I watched the woman place her hand on Maddox's arm. Her fingers curled around it in a manner that seemed way too familiar.

"Um, I guess this is where I ask why?"

"You know I said he went undercover?"

"Uh-huh."

"Well, I'm sitting outside Alessandro's, watching him and a woman sit down for dinner with another couple. He's on a double date!"

Lily gasped. "In Alessandro's!"

"No, that new place across the street. It's Japanese, I think."

"Oh, right. I know it. I went there with Ruby Kalouza and they have the best California rolls."

"I don't care about the California rolls. He had his arm around her!"

"You sure he isn't working? Or maybe they're his colleagues?"

"I've never seen them before and I know everyone." This was true. Thanks to living in Montgomery my entire life, and having a family the size of a small police force, not to mention, most of them serving as cops, I had seen just about everyone with a badge at one time or another. This woman I did not recognize. Nor did I recall ever seeing the other couple.

"Maybe they're friends," persisted Lily, who could see no bad in anyone, which was exactly why I loved her.

I made a strangled noise as I watched the table. "She just kissed him and he gave her one of those hug squeezes."

"What kinda kiss?"

"Cheek."

"So... good friends. Family?"

I trained my camera on them, zooming in. "I can see under the table and she has her hand on his thigh."

"Maybe she isn't good with boundaries?" Lily said hopefully. "Maybe she's European? They're very tactile."

I watched as Maddox folded his hand around hers and brought it up to the table, laying their hands between place settings. My heart raced. "Neither is he, by the looks of it; and he's definitely American. I've seen his passport."

"Look, don't jump to conclusions, okay? Maddox is a good guy. Why don't you call him?"

"Sure!" I snorted.

"He's your boyfriend. You should be able to call him any time. Maybe he'll just tell you what he's doing and you won't have to worry."

She had a point. "I guess."

"I'm sure it's nothing. Call me right back."

Lily hung up. With my heart pounding, I hit "speed dial" and called Maddox. I watched as he reached into his jacket pocket, glanced at the screen and... hung up on me! I didn't wait for the robotic voice to invite me to leave a message. I hung up and dumped the phone on the passenger seat with a frustrated sigh. I watched them as they ordered, laughing with the waitress. While their wine was poured, it took all my restraint not to go over there and march in, demanding to know exactly what Maddox was doing.

Despite my furious indignation, I reminded myself of my actual job. Every so often, I

scanned the street as well as the nearby glass window fronts, looking for my mark. Finally I hit pay dirt, squeezing off a couple shots before Don Hassell disappeared from view. No cheating there, by the looks of it, unless it was with the two middle-aged men he strolled in beside. Well, really, who knows? I watched them a little longer without a hint of flirting, fired off a few more shots and lay my camera on the seat. That done, all I could do was fume.

As I watched, cell phone in hand, wondering what to do next—go home or torture myself some more—the woman leaned over and planted a kiss on Maddox's lips, just as he turned his head towards her. I saw red. Holding up my phone, I zoomed in and snapped a photo, watching as it froze on the screen.

I had the sudden urge to vomit.

With a shaking hand, I hit “redial” and watched as Maddox disentangled himself and... hung up on me again.

The bastard!

I could not believe he was doing this to me. Our relationship might not have been long, but as far as I knew, it was a good one. We spent several nights a week together, and we went on dates where we held hands and snuggled. On one particularly memorable occasion, we even did something a serving officer of the law should not do with his date, especially in the open air. And now he was pretending to be on some undercover job when he was actually snuggled up to an annoyingly pretty woman. I'd have rather he just dumped me than cheated. I hated cheaters.

With one last glance through Alessandro's plate glass window, I took a couple of begrudging shots of Hassell and his two male dinner companions before turning back to

Maddox.

So, he wouldn't answer my calls? Fine. Maybe he'd like a photo message instead. I called up the gut-wrenching photo and embedded it into a message. Then I added Maddox's number, and typed *GFY. We're over* in the message box. My thumb hovered over the "send" button. I looked up to see them laughing with the other couple, and, with my lips set in a thin, angry line, I hit "send."

As I fired up the car engine, I saw Maddox pull his phone out with a shake of his head. He said something to his dining companions, then blanched.

So he got the picture.

He wasn't the only one.

I watched a moment longer, just long enough for him to say something to his date, stand up, and make for the exit. No doubt, he was probably wondering where the hell I was.

Well, I'd seen enough.

I pulled out into the traffic, tears prickling my eyes. In my rearview mirror, I saw him step onto the sidewalk as he looked around. Without a backwards glance, I hightailed it home.

By the time I pulled into my parking space outside the building Lily and I rented from her parents, my eyes were blurring, my breathing rapid, and I couldn't see straight. A burning urge to flee filled me. I couldn't stand the thought of being in the same town as Maddox. I didn't want to see him ever again. In a burst of clarity, I knew what I was going to do. I grabbed my phone and dialed.

Solomon picked up on the second ring. He didn't seem surprised to hear from me,

though, come to think of it, he never did. "Hello?"

"Got some photos of your guy," I said. "No dice, unless he's into dudes."

"Send the photos when you get a chance."

"Solomon?" I paused, my heart doing that pounding thing again. "I changed my mind about the Fort Charles' job."

"I'll pick you up at eight tomorrow," he replied, without asking why.

"In the morning?" I squeaked, pausing to pull the phone from my ear as the "call waiting" noise sounded. I checked the screen. Maddox. The cheating son of a gun! Like I was going to answer! He could shove his explanation where his badge didn't shine. I stuck the phone back to my ear. "What do I need to bring?"

"A week's worth of clothes. Bring some sportswear and some smart stuff for the evening."

"Like ball smart or restaurant smart or bar smart?" What was it with men? Tell a man smart, he wears a suit, a tie and fits in just about anywhere. Tell a woman smart, and she doesn't know what the heck to wear.

"Socializing," he said. "Find something that will cover any casual evening activities." Clear as mud.

"Gotcha," I said, holding down the lump in my throat. With a curt, "See you tomorrow," I hung up and stomped my way into the building. I knocked on Lily's door.

"Hello!" She beamed as she answered, her blonde curls bouncing around her shoulders. My face crumbled. "Did you lose the mark? Did a bird doo-doo on your car? Did someone get murdered?"

Lily had a strange collection of ideas of what might make my face slump faster than

a bulldog that had his kibble taken away.

"Maddox," I sniveled as my eyes began to stream, "is a scumbag."

"Yes, he is, sweetie," Lily automatically agreed, pulling me inside. She immediately produced our two favorite men, Ben & Jerry, and two spoons.

I spilled my story right from the beginning, then cried on Lily's shoulder while she tried really hard to disagree that Maddox was a bastard and all men were scum. Then we cursed him for ringing three times and not leaving a message. After three tequila shots, we pro-actively changed Maddox's name to "Jerkoff" in my cell phone contacts. Then we ate too much ice cream, added a few more shots, and somewhere around midnight, I bear-crawled upstairs to my apartment after calling this a crappy night.