

# BLIND FAITH

*by*

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2008

## CHAPTER ONE

*Mid April*

Seventeen-year-old Isabelle Sanchez's body was bent nearly in half. She was doubled over, her long hair draped over the silver trash can she was clutching with both hands. As another wave of nausea crashed down on her, heaves rippled through her and bile burned the back of her throat.

Although Isabelle was no longer focusing on the big screen at the front of the room, the cinematic images flickering across it sent flashes of light into the darkness around her. She heard a woman moan and shivered. Goose pimples speckled what Dom had once called her *dulce de leche* skin. Isabelle thought about Dominique, the way the girl's dark eyes captivated her when they were together. Even though it was just a memory, she could practically smell Dom's musky scent and her body responded, dampening the delicate pink panties she was now forced to wear under the unsightly knee-length skirt. These garments were not her choice. She preferred cotton boy-cut briefs, but like a lot of things these days, she didn't have much choice in the matter.

She glanced up at the screen where two women were having sex—their naked bodies crashing against each other, eyes closed and heads thrown back as they took turns making each other orgasm. Damn it. She was now nauseous *and* horny. What the fuck was wrong with her? She didn't even like porn.

The image in front of her blurred, the room spun and Isabelle puked. She wiped her mouth with the tissues provided. This was apparently all part of the treatment. They wanted her to throw up. Why wasn't the

fucking therapy working? She'd been stuck here in this kiddie prison for months on end. Long enough to figure out that the pill she took after lunch, the one the counselor insisted she take exactly ten minutes before going into the viewing room, was what really made her sick. It was meant to. This therapy was supposed to keep her from getting hot for other girls. But it hadn't changed a fucking thing. She'd gotten to the point where she *wanted* the treatment to work. She couldn't take it for much longer.

Dom had abandoned her five months ago, vanishing from Pioneer back in November, and if she couldn't be with Dom, Isabelle didn't care if she *was* a dyke anymore. She didn't want some other girl. Without Dom nothing mattered. They might as well make her a breeder. At least her father would be happy. A few weeks ago, Pioneer Institute added electroshock to her treatment. Isabelle hoped it would work—and *soon*. No wonder Dom ran away. But why hadn't she taken Isabelle with her? Why had Dom abandoned her?

The film reached the end of spool and the screen went blank, shining more light into the room. One of the counselors would come soon to usher Isabelle back to the dorms where she could rest until the full effects of the drug wore off. She hoped her escort was Miss Dix today. She was the coolest Pioneer peep hands down. There was something in Aimee Dix's eyes that made Isabelle feel like the woman cared. Maybe she even felt bad for the kids whose parents sent them to Pioneer.

Isabelle would never forget the day she was dragged in, literally kicking and screaming. As soon as they'd driven through the gates and she saw the razor wire curling above the fence, she'd known she didn't want to be here. When the family attorney pulled her out of the car, she'd kicked him in the shins a couple of times. She could feel the corners of her lips curl into a faint smile just thinking about it. Her Doc Martens must have left serious bruises. Served that fucker right, tricking her into coming here. He'd told her he was paid by her parents. They wanted her at Pioneer. Did that mean *papi* actually wanted her back? Isabelle conjured up an image of her father, House Representative Javier Sanchez, standing in front of a podium with his second wife, Bridget by his side. He was always campaigning, a fake smile on his face while meaningless politico-speech streamed out of his mouth. He'd probably left Isabelle's mother for political reasons, replacing her

with that power-hungry Republican bitch when Isabelle was ten. One of his campaign advisors probably had statistics showing a WASPy wife would bring more votes. Javier was light skinned and non-threatening. Like Isabelle, her mother had darker roots, the kind that didn't bleach away. She would always blame Bridget for her mother's death just months later, and for the loss of her mother's extended *familia*. Isabelle hadn't seen them for so long they probably wouldn't know her.

Two years ago, when she was fifteen, she came out to her father and he exploded, threatening to lock her in her room until she'd gotten over the crazy notion that she was a pervert. The next day, while he and Bridget were away, Isabelle bolted, leaving their Texas home and drifting westward. She ended up in LA where she'd lived on the streets, adopted by a gang of Chicana trans girls who turned tricks and injected silicone at pumping parties in the San Fernando Valley. They taught her not just how to survive on the street but how to walk in heels, milk men for money, and work every single one of her Goddess-given assets. Somehow giving strangers blowjobs was worth the freedom it afforded her and the T-girls told her it was easier for lesbians to do sex work since they weren't looking for love from every dude on the street. Isabelle could see that, though she doubted turning tricks was fun for any woman. But Isabelle had gotten picked up in a sting and charged with prostitution six months ago. It turned out the john she'd been busted with was some kind of quasi-famous reality TV star, and the story was quickly plastered on tabloids across the country. Isabelle thought the media leak was probably engineered by the guy's publicist after discovering that Isabelle wasn't one of the bionic girls that usually frequented the strip where they were busted. *Big Brother* sex scandal indeed.

Isabelle could imagine Representative Sanchez's face going crimson with rage and embarrassment when he realized the working girl splayed across the covers of those sleazy papers he so derided was his daughter. If the press had made the connection it would have *ruined* him. And she'd probably be dead now instead of just locked up until someone could cure her lesbianism and turn her straight. Luckily for her, she hadn't used her real name when she was arrested and she didn't have any identification documents on her. She didn't call her father for help, not even after she'd been in jail for a week. She knew he wouldn't come. He could have found her at any point, if he'd wanted. But he and

the stepmonster didn't care if she'd *died* on the streets. It would have been politically expedient, in fact, if she had.

So it had taken her completely by surprise when their lawyer, Mr. Ibsen, suddenly showed up and bailed her out. She was even more surprised to learn that *papi* had sent him to bring her home. Then the rat bastard brought her to the Pioneer Institute instead and here she was puking through porn, moping quietly over Dominique, and realizing she wouldn't get out of here unless the goddamn therapy worked soon.

Clatter in the hallway yanked Isabelle back to the present. What was taking so long? Miss Dix should have been here by now. The clamor outside the treatment room was getting louder. Someone was shouting. Isabelle stood up cautiously, checking her balance. The effects of the medication seemed to be wearing off. She moved to the door and gradually turned the knob. It was unlocked so she inched it open. Immediately, a rumbling shook the floor beneath her like a herd of cattle was stampeding down the hallway.

Isabelle flung open the door, dipped her head around the jamb, and found herself looking down the barrel of a gun. A group of men rushed toward her at full speed, dressed head to toe in black riot gear marked SWAT, heavy artillery at the ready. Ever hopeful, Isabelle wondered if they were shutting this godforsaken place down.

"Get back! Get back!" an officer barked, motioning her back into the dark viewing room. Sweet Virgin Mary. Isabelle complied, shutting the door and instinctually crossing herself. Holy Mother of God, what was happening? She crossed her fingers and prayed she was being rescued.



Aneko Takahashi's hand shook, causing the barrel of the nine-millimeter Beretta to stutter across the man's cheek, leaving a crimson dimple. *Good*. She hoped it stung. He deserved it. Time seemed to be passing in slow motion, as though she were in a dream. She watched a bead of sweat slide from the man's hairpiece, roll slowly down his temple and under the arm of ebony glasses with lenses so thick they made his eyes bulge like a goldfish's. The droplet settled near his right earlobe where it irrigated a thicket of bushy, oily sideburns. She was certain that trickle of perspiration meant something significant. Could

it be a physiological indication of dishonesty? Aneko wished she could hook the bastard up to a lie detector machine before reiterating her questions.

“Where is my sister? Where is Saya?” she demanded, shouting the mantra she’d repeated a dozen times already. This time she pronounced her words slowly, rolling each consonant around in her mouth and pressing the gun deeper into Dr. Barnabas Gage’s flesh to underscore the urgency of her question.

“I’ve already told you, Miss Takahashi,” he said in a slow, patronizing drawl that sounded like it belonged on the Mississippi gulf coast rather than in Northern California. “Your sister ran away with another student. I know nothing more than that.”

Aneko’s every instinct told her Dr. Barnabas Gage was lying. She was absolutely convinced that something disturbing lurked beneath the cultured veneer of the Pioneer Institute and its creepy administrator. Although she could only speculate on the details, she feared the school was responsible for Saya’s disappearance. Perhaps Dr. Barnabas had imprisoned Saya in a religious torture chamber, or convinced Aneko’s parents to send Saya elsewhere, to some place even worse than this one.

As she ticked through potential scenarios, Aneko held herself back from imagining the worst. She refused to consider that Saya might be dead.

While she wanted to blame the man in front of her for her sister’s absence, she worried that maybe this was all *her* fault. After all, it was she who’d abandoned Saya, leaving her to face their family alone. Aneko couldn’t have known Saya would follow in her footsteps, coming out as a lesbian and having the same audacity to tell their parents. Coming out was never easy. Coming out in restrictive Asian American families could be fraught with even more complexity. Aneko had ripped their family apart by bringing her lesbianism into the public sphere. She’d been banished for disgracing their name and the psychological baggage around her traumatic coming out had bogged her down for years.

In that time, Saya had fallen by the wayside, left with no support and the knowledge that sharing her identity with her closest kin could cost her everything. Yet she’d fallen in love with another girl and announced the fact to their parents. Saya had always been the brave one. Aneko felt guilty about not being there when Saya needed her. She

hoped to God that she was not too late. If she failed to locate Saya she would never forgive herself. Never.

“For the last time,” she shouted, cocking the gun so the meaty, sweaty doctor could hear his minutes ticking away. “Where is my sister?”

Dr. Barnabas seemed suddenly blithe, the pall of his skin brightening. He looked almost hopeful. What had changed? Was he finally ready to reveal the truth? Aneko had been trying to get this guy to tell her where her sister was for two months. He was more and more edgy at each meeting, like a nervous finch about to crash into a sliding glass door. This time he seemed close to cracking, but perhaps that was just wishful thinking. His nervousness had suddenly gone and she saw a taunt in his eyes: *I know something you don't know.*

There was a lot that Aneko didn't know. She hadn't even known Saya had been banished to the Pioneer Institute until Velvet Erickson showed up at her door. The reporter was investigating the institute for a *San Francisco Chronicle* article. She'd told Aneko about reports of several missing kids. The families had been uncooperative and by the time she reached Aneko, Velvet was fresh out of leads and seemed to be losing interest in the story. Saya's trail had gone cold, and Velvet had hinted that Barnabas Gage was a major roadblock in the investigation and seemed to know more than he was saying. Aneko was determined not to leave before she discovered exactly what it was Dr. Barnabas was hiding.

She had to make him tell her. The cold steel of the gun barrel against his temple wasn't the incentive she'd hoped for. Clearly, Dr. Barnabas did not believe she could kill him. He was probably correct in his judgment; her conscience offered an environment rather hostile to homicidal impulses. Still, Dr. Barnabas had underestimated her. She might not be capable of murder, but she was *quite* willing to do him great harm. Aneko slid the barrel away from his temple and took aim at his right knee. She flipped the safety off with her thumb, the way the trainer at the gun range had shown her. Settling into her shooting stance, she braced herself for the gun's recoil. Her index finger curled around the crescent moon.

It took a surprising amount of force to pull the metal back far enough to fire the weapon. She applied more pressure and was rewarded with movement in the trigger. It inched slowly backward just as she heard

a din in the vestibule outside, the march of feet rapidly approaching. The door to Dr. Barnabas's office was rammed with such force the floorboards shook. Wood splintered and screws turned projectile as the door was ripped off its hinges.

A gruff voice shouted, "Drop the weapon!" and an avalanche of armed men descended, their weapons aimed at her head.

"Drop the weapon, Aneko." She recognized the voice of Dakota Manning, the female police officer who'd spoken with her about her sister's missing person case. Dakota had been frank with her, explaining that Fremont's police department did not have the resources to devote manpower to every reported runaway or missing person. But she'd at least created a file and posted Saya's information in the National Crime Information Center's vast database.

Dakota repeated her demand forcefully, and her voice seemed to cut through the fog Aneko was in. As she got her bearings, it dawned on her exactly what she was doing: threatening a man's life, at gunpoint, in broad daylight. Cops swarmed toward her. If this didn't cost Aneko her life, it would surely cost everything else that mattered: her job, perhaps even her freedom. She'd never live this kind of thing down. Losing her job, going to prison, the shame of it would be too much to bear. Her life was over. Perhaps it was better to die here, in this room. Aneko could suddenly understand why people chose so-called "suicide by cop." She wouldn't even have to do anything. If she didn't put the gun down they would shoot to kill. She would not have to live through a trial and witness her parents telling reporters what a disappointment she'd always been.

"Aneko, *please* don't do this," Dakota pleaded as though reading her thoughts. "Think about your sister. You'd never see her again. Think about what a terrible burden it would be to her if you died here. Saya would blame herself, Aneko. Do you want that?"

She would *never* see Saya again. She couldn't do that, could she? Dakota was right. She had to live. She had to find her sister. This was about *Saya*.

Although her grip on the gun had begun to falter, Aneko found her voice again. "He's hiding information. He knows more about my sister's disappearance, I can feel it. Maybe he's done something terrible to her. Why else won't he tell me what he knows?"

"Aneko. This does nothing for your cause. If Dr. Gage is involved

in Saya's disappearance, he will have to face the consequences." She took a step closer. "Saya *needs* you. She needs you to help find her. Drop the weapon. *Please.*"

Aneko relented. "Promise? You have to promise to find my sister."

She set the gun down on the desk in front of her, her shoulders slumping in acquiescence. SWAT members immediately rushed her, pressing her face down on the floor while yanking her arms back and cuffing them behind her. As she was led to one of the many police units parked in Pioneer's front parking lot, she stole a glance at Dr. Barnabas. This time the smug bastard actually smirked.



As Aneko Takahashi was led away the adrenaline rush from the hostage situation drained, leaving Dakota crashing as though she was coming off a sugar high. She felt the tiredness seep into her bones and settle there, the way it seemed to do more and more often when she witnessed a travesty of justice. *Why did it have to come to this?*

Aneko turned her head and Dakota expected their eyes to meet. Ready to silently convey pity through that connection, she was surprised when it never happened. Aneko wasn't looking at her. Dakota followed the young woman's piercing stare and saw the smirk that distorted Dr. Barnabas Gage's face. *That bastard.* Dakota was positive the son of a bitch knew more than he'd admit about Aneko's missing sister and the other runaway girl, Dominique Marxley.

Dr. Gage wanted so desperately to be a celebrity psychologist on par with Dr. Phil that he insisted on the moniker "Dr. Barnabas," even though he wasn't a doctor of any sort. He did hold a PhD, but in theology, not psychology. Dakota knew a few other noteworthy tidbits about the illustrious Dr. Barnabas, having taken the call last fall when Pioneer reported two of its students had run away. She'd been suspicious from the start when she heard the girls had already been missing for three days before the school bothered to report their absences.

Sure, it was true that adults had to be gone for seventy-two hours before they could be considered missing, but with minors the rules were different, and for good reason. Every hour they were missing was an opportunity for them to get farther away or fall victim to a predator.

And even though the police didn't have the man-hours to track down every teenage runaway, time was still of the essence. The sooner they entered the kids' stats in the National Crime Information Center, or NCIC, the better the chance that they would be located alive.

Although she could not prove it, Dakota was certain that Barnabas Gage had delayed making the missing persons' report on purpose. She wasn't sure what his motive could be. Maybe he just didn't want to admit to the parents that, despite the school's hi-tech security systems and razor sharp fencing, Pioneer could not keep, cure, or even contain it's LGBT students.

She remembered the first time she drove through Pioneer's gates. With its razor wire and grim buildings, it looked more like a high security prison than a residential program for troubled teens. The institute was located on the industrial row of Fremont's Peralta Boulevard where it would have blended into the other featureless buildings if not for the fence and oppressive gates. These were fashioned from thick metal bars spaced so close together Dakota's fist would not have fit between them. Each was topped with spikes so medieval looking they seemed best suited for displaying the heads of one's enemies.

She'd pressed the crackling intercom box and asked for entry. There was no verbal response. Movement caught her eye and Dakota spotted the security camera. She showed it her badge and made a number of euphemistic hand gestures. In response, the hulking gate creaked open and she darted through.

The building was a fortress. Inside the rectangle of walls stood a lawn-covered courtyard and sturdy palm trees. This anomalous retreat provided the idyllic photographs Pioneer used to advertise its adolescent penitentiary. Dakota was generally opposed to the whole concept of ex-gay ministries. No matter how many smiling, converted straights they trotted out for their marketing campaigns, she thought the inference that reparative therapy could change someone's sexual orientation was utterly preposterous. With the research supporting her view, she didn't know how these shady programs continued to operate. They should be illegal. They held children against their will and forced them to undergo therapies that were like military torture techniques, not psychological counseling.

The good doctor himself was a lot like the school, a false front with an artificially saccharine demeanor. From his clammy handshake to his

“aw shucks” vernacular, every part of Barnabas Gage was insincere. When he spoke in Biblical riddles, he seemed even more unpleasant, almost sinister.

“I’m afraid, Miss Manning, that they were likely caught in the magnetic pull of the Devil,” he’d informed her that day, using the first of many non-sequiturs to avoid giving any real information on the two runaways.

“So you think the girls took off because of the Antichrist? I’m not sure I can put that in my report,” she said with just enough sarcasm. If he called her “Miss Manning” one more time she’d strangle him.

“Well, Miss—that is, *Officer Manning*,” he stammered, drawing out the word “officer” like it was blasphemy. “We find that the souls most in need of ministering fight it the hardest.”

His bullshit got on her nerves. He wasn’t helpful in determining how the kids had gotten out of the secured facilities, claiming their escape had occurred in the middle of the night while everyone else was sleeping. Just as the best way to find a murderer was by learning all one could about the victim, recovering a missing teen often depended on examining her habits and family history. So she asked to speak with the other students. Barnabas Gage then became entirely uncooperative and called the school’s attorney. It was the first she’d ever heard of a high school with a lawyer on retainer.

If she’d been allowed to speak with Saya’s friends, Dakota might have learned sooner that Aneko existed. Older siblings living on their own were often the first destination for runaways. Aneko would have been the logical person for Saya to call for help. The fact that she hadn’t attempted to contact her sister didn’t bode well.

Dakota couldn’t blame Aneko for coming unglued after months of silence about her baby sister and she obviously blamed Gage for that the lack of progress, maybe rightly so. Perhaps if Pioneer had reported the break out when it happened, or if he’d been more forthcoming or allowed the police to debrief the other students—maybe then they could have picked up the kids’ trail in time.

At least he’d been straightforward about one thing: he said it would be “most unlikely” for the teens to head home. Neither of the runaways came from a supportive environment.

Dakota’s own parents hadn’t taken too kindly to her coming out as lesbian, but at least they hadn’t sent her to a place like Pioneer. If

they had, she was certain it would've been the last they'd see of her. Of course that would probably have been cutting off her nose to spite her face. She was glad that she hadn't given up on her family. Eventually they'd grown into the kind of parents worthy of the dedication and loyalty she'd shown them. Still, it was the hubris of youth to think parental betrayal was unforgivable, so Dakota didn't expect the kids to have headed back to Mommy and Daddy. Still, people were drawn to the familiar, especially when running scared and looking for security.

"What will become of Miss Takahashi?" Barnabas Gage asked, pulling Dakota back to the present and her eyes to his face. There she found a look of concern that seemed heartfelt enough at first glance. But there was something under the surface that made Dakota shiver. She remembered a detail she'd heard about sociopaths, how they learned to model the emotions expected of them. That's what Gage's concern felt like to Dakota. Pure facsimile.

"She's being taken down to the station, where she'll be booked. She'll probably get a lawyer and if the DA and the lawyer can come up with a plea agreement there won't be a trial."

"Oh, yes. Well, it really shouldn't come to that. Can't we just forget about all of this?"

"She held a gun to your head and threatened to kill you, Mr. Gage." Dakota thought she saw him wince at the salutation. He'd made it clear in their previous meeting that he preferred "Doctor," but while it was her professional responsibility to remain polite, it didn't mean she had to do cater to his egotism.

"That young lady was just upset about her sister. I'd hate to see her punished. It seems like your department hasn't been much help to her, but now that she understands the situation, I'm sure Miss Takahashi won't be back."

"*Mr. Gage*, the police can't drop this just because you don't want to press charges." If Dakota hadn't been watching for his reaction, she might have missed the tightening of his jaw that told her he wasn't used to being told *no*.

"Why not?" he demanded. "I'm sure Miss Takahashi is contrite and I'm willing to forgive her."

Although his arrogance irritated her, Dakota wished—in this case—that it were that simple. Aneko had a right to be upset with the lack of cooperation from Gage, but that didn't justify her actions and

she hadn't gotten him to admit *anything*. And that made it all the worse that her life might be ruined over this incident. So Dakota wished it could all be forgiven and forgotten. But the law was the law, and she was sworn to uphold it. And despite Dr. Barnabas's bloated assessment of his own importance, his forgiveness meant little. The chief had committed multiple officers and deployed SWAT in order to resolve the situation. No one was walking away.

"I hardly imagine they'll be satisfied with anything short of a conviction," Dakota said. "Especially given all the media coverage this case will generate. With a dozen law enforcement officers on scene, bearing witness, the district attorney's office won't even *need* you as a complainant. They can call any one of us."

Gage didn't speak. His eyes were hooded like a habitual user's. Wondering what he was plotting, Dakota said, "If you feel Aneko Takahashi shouldn't be punished, you could speak with the DA. Maybe you can help reduce her sentence."

He responded with an affable smile that seemed genuine. When he grabbed her left hand, Dakota fought the urge to fling him to the ground in one of the defensive tactics the department practiced regularly. He was damn fortunate not to have gone after her right, which was resting on the butt of her service pistol. As she left, a Latina teenager peered out from behind a door. "Hi. Can I ask you something?"

Dakota glanced over her shoulder to check they were alone before answering, "Sure. What is it?"

"That Japanese woman, what did she do?"

Dakota considered her options. She wasn't supposed to reveal the details of an arrest, and usually suspects were only that; individuals *suspected of* committing a crime. But, as she'd just pointed out to Gage, they'd caught Aneko with her hand in the cookie jar. There was no question as to her guilt and the story was sure to make every news outlet in town.

Dakota kept her answer vague. "She threatened someone."

"Wait." The girl's eyes darted nervously up and down the hall. She lowered her voice. "Is she Saya's sister?"

Dakota nodded. "Do you know Saya?"

"Have you found her and Dom?" The girl's voice cracked as though she were about to cry. "Dominique Marxley?"

Dakota shook her head. "No, I'm sorry. Were you two close?"

Before the girl could answer, there was a noise down the hall and she ducked out of sight, closing the door quickly.

“Hello, officer. May I help you?” The approaching woman asked.

“No, thank you. I’m just on my way out.”

She offered a hand. “I’m Aimee Dix, one of Pioneer’s counselors. We owe you a great debt Officer...?”

“Manning. Dakota Manning.” Dakota took the blonde’s delicate hand in her own and shook it. “No need to thank me.”

“Oh, don’t be so modest. You saved Dr. Barnabas’s life. He’s such a good man, I don’t know what we would do without him.”

Dakota searched Aimee Dix’s face for a hint of sarcasm but didn’t find any. *Could she be serious?* “I was just doing my job, ma’am.”

“Call me Aimee. Do you mind if I walk you out?”

“Of course not.”

They began walking side by side, and for a moment the only sound was the rhythmic noise of Dakota’s leather duty belt shifting around her hips with each step.

Aimee broke the silence. “You said you were just doing your job. Are you a hostage negotiator?”

Dakota chuckled. “No. Just a cop.”

“But I understand you’re the one who managed to talk that young woman down.”

“True, but I had the advantage of having spoken with her before.”

“Really?” Aimee stopped walking. Her wide eyes searched Dakota’s face. “You *knew* her? Then do you know what drove her to such desperate measures?”

“I only know her in regards to a case I worked involving one of the girls who ran away from this place last November, Saya Takahashi. Did you know her, or the other girl, Dominique Marxley?”

“Yes.” Aimee looked down and started walking again. In a barely audible whisper, she added, “So they’ve never been found.”

“Do you know something about this?” Dakota demanded. “If you do, it’s your civic duty to come forward.”

They reached the front door. Aimee stood there shaking her head. “I don’t know what you mean.”

“Dr. Barnabas waited *three* days before reporting the runaways,” Dakota said. “And clearly Saya’s sister thinks he knows something.”

“That was Saya’s sister?” Aimee’s brow crinkled. Dakota wasn’t sure if the counselor was frowning at her for doubting the saintly Dr. Barnabas, or if she was considering the possibility that things were not what they seemed. “It’s too bad she threw away her life for nothing.”

Dakota could not agree more. On the way to the station house, she replayed the conversation with Aimee Dix in her head. Could the counselor really be so naïve about her boss? Dakota wasn’t so sure. Aimee had hovered at the front door as though there was an invisible barrier there she could not cross. What made Aimee nervous and how could Dakota get the woman to open up more?

Dakota was lost in her thoughts as she parked her car and made her way past colleagues who wanted to know about the hostage situation. She wasn’t looking forward to the stack of paperwork generated by the Pioneer Institute drama. She hadn’t been at it long when an unfamiliar man passed her desk on the way to the interrogation room. Dakota immediately pegged him as a high priced lawyer. It wasn’t just the crisp three-piece suit, or the Italian leather shoes, or the diamond on his tie clip. He smelled of new cars and old money. Her desk was close enough to the interrogation room that when the door opened, she heard him demand, “Don’t say another word.”

A detective gruffly announced, “Your lawyer’s here.”

“I didn’t call a lawyer.” Aneko Takahashi’s surprise and confusion were obvious. “I’ve never met this man.”

*How odd.* Intrigued, Dakota listened as the attorney explained, “I’ve been hired by Pioneer Institute to represent you.”

What the hell? What kind of game was Dr. Barnabas playing? Outside of domestic disputes, Dakota had *never* seen a case where the victim hired a lawyer to defend the perpetrator. She wanted to hear more, but the lawyer stepped farther into the room and the door closed behind him, sealing him and Aneko in client-attorney privacy. They were still cloistered there a half hour later when Dakota finished her incident reports. She was on the way out of the station house when she collided with an assistant district attorney. Was it possible Aneko was already talking about a plea bargain, even before she’d been arraigned? High priced lawyers really did buy their clients speedier justice.

Dakota was intrigued and suddenly determined to get to the bottom of this. She rushed into her captain’s office, closed the door behind her, and began laying out her case.

After several minutes of not-so-friendly debate regarding Pioneer's motives for silencing the runaway's sister, the captain said, "Drop it."

"But, Captain, they're clearly hiding something. That's why they don't want this scrutiny."

"Listen up, Manning, I'm only going to tell you this once before I put you on administrative leave. We've got three Norteño shootings on Jackson and bodies are piling up in this gang war. I need you on that case, the one with corpses, not traipsing around looking for runaways who don't want to be found."

The captain was resolute. Though his words weren't menacing, when he cut a bottom line statement, Dakota knew it was time to move on. That didn't mean, however, that she'd drop it. Pioneer and that creep, Barnabas Gage, were up to something and Dakota wanted someone to get to the bottom of it, even if it wasn't her.

Where, she pondered, did she put that PI's business card?