



## LINE OF DUTY

By Terri Blackstock

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### Chapter One

Ashley Morris sensed the doom in the Icon International Building. She had listened to the news reports of layoffs and the company's crashing stock value with the detached interest of a sixteen-year-old, but it was hard to ignore the reality now. In the lobby, grim-faced employees spoke in low voices. Some wiped tears as they carried boxes out to their cars. Reporters with camera crews waited outside, interviewing exiting employees who'd just gotten the ax.

She'd picked a lousy day to hit her mother up for money.

Popping her gum, Ashley got onto the elevator with two women and a man. One of the women gave her a look as if she had just parachuted out of a UFO. Ashley looked right back at her and blew a bubble. The woman looked away.

Ashley grinned and looked down at a chipped fingernail. She had to admit, she had dressed for the occasion. Her bright orange T-shirt—two sizes too small—clashed with her burgundy hair. She had cut the sleeves off at the seam and frayed the edges, so that her tattoo of some Chinese word she didn't know was more visible. The shirt didn't quite meet her jeans, and her belly-button ring sparkled against her pale skin. Her jeans had been slit in parallel lines down the fronts of her legs, revealing other tattoos—a butterfly and a rose. And she'd worn a chain from her nose ring to her earring, just for added effect.

"Sarah got canned," the man said. "She's cleaning out her desk."

"I'm next. I know I am. And my whole retirement's gone.

Where am I going to find another job at my age?"

“They’re saying they’re going to indict Merritt in the next day or so,” the woman who’d stared at Ashley muttered.

“They ought to take him out and shoot him.”

When the others got off on the tenth floor, Ashley leaned back against the elevator wall. This could be serious. Her mother was the administrative assistant to Donald Merritt, the corrupt CEO. And if things weren’t looking good for him, Ashley’s mother was probably taking the brunt of it. She would be in a terrible mood and wouldn’t have much patience for her daughter.

Yeah, her timing really stank.

She stepped off on the thirtieth floor, her hiking boots squeaking on the tiles. A large, opulent Christmas tree blocked the view of Canal Street. She wondered if her mother had been responsible for decorating it this year. She remembered so many years past, when she had come here with her mom on a Saturday and helped dress the tree. Ashley had hung some of her own cheesy handmade ornaments among the expensive balls and lights. Her mother had given them spots of honor.

Ashley walked through the door to the executive office suite.

The suite that housed the CEO, president, and CFO looked much like a hotel lobby. She remembered when the company had moved into this building. Her mother had been irritated at the amount of money spent on the decor. But some designer had really racked up on it.

There was a sitting area on either side of the door, with leather sofas and homey easy chairs clustered around oriental rugs. Lamps created a soft glow around the room, making it look less like a place where deals were made and schemes were laid than a place of comfort and rest.

The walls were painted in a rich jade green, and artwork, which Merritt had picked up on one of his junkets to Paris, graced the walls, illuminated by inset spotlights.

Three doors marked the offices of the men who ran the company, and outside their doors sat their administrative assistants, who did all the real work.

Her mother sat at her desk now, just outside the CEO’s door.

She was deeply engrossed in whatever filled her computer screen and hadn’t seen Ashley come in. She looked as if she’d aged ten years since Ashley had last seen her a week ago. Deep lines seemed etched around her eyes and into her forehead, and she looked as if she hadn’t slept in days.

Ashley wondered whether she was responsible for that, or if she could blame it on Icon.

“Hey, Mom,” she said.

Debbie Morris looked up, and a smile flickered on her face.

“Ashley!” She seemed glad to see her daughter, even though her eyes swept over Ashley with critical dread. She got up and hugged her. “What are you doing here?”

“Just dropped by to say hi.”

Her mother’s face tightened. Clearly she knew better than that. She glanced toward the closed glass doors of the conference room. Ashley could see people inside. “Honey, I’ve asked you—begged you—to try to look a little more conservative when you come here.”

“I’m not changing my look for a bunch of judgmental snobs.

If they don’t like the way I look, they can turn their heads.” She ran her fingers through her mousse-tousled hair. It stuck up all over, just as she liked it.

Debbie sighed. “It’s not a good time for a visit. It’s chaos around here, and I’m trying to hold it together.”

Ashley picked up a paperweight off of her mother’s desk and rolled it around in her hand. “I don’t know why you want to hold things together for that crook.”

“Ashley!” Her mother took the paperweight back. She looked around, making sure no one had heard. The CFO’s assistant seemed to be concentrating on the file on her desk, and the president’s assistant was talking on the phone.

“Lower your voice,” her mother whispered. “He’s right in there with a lawyer who’s suing him. Trust me, he’s in a firing mood, and no one’s job is sacred.”

“He wouldn’t fire you. You know where all the bodies are buried.”

She thought her mother might faint. “Come with me, young lady,” she said through her teeth. She grabbed Ashley’s hand and started pulling her toward the door.

“What did I do? I need to talk to you. Are you throwing me out?”

Debbie pulled her into the hall and turned to her. She was shaking. “It may not have occurred to you that I need this job, Ashley. There are already plenty of reasons I might lose it without my daughter’s mouth getting me fired.”

“Sorry,” Ashley said, raising her hands innocently. “I didn’t know you were so touchy. I was just kidding.”

Debbie blew out a heavy breath and started toward the exit sign. “Come with me. I need to get a printer cartridge out of the twenty-ninth-floor stockroom.”

Ashley knew her mother just wanted to get her off the floor before she said something else to embarrass her. Amused, she followed her. “I really hate that you’re ashamed of me.”

“No, you don’t. You work too hard at it.” Debbie opened the door to the stairwell and started down the steps. Halfway down, she turned and regarded Ashley again. “You’re a beautiful girl, Ashley. Why you insist on having things hanging from you and stamped on you—”

“Oh, I forgot to show you this.” Ashley stuck out her tongue, revealing the gold stud in the center of it.

Her mother gasped.

Ashley laughed. “Get used to it, Mom. I’m an individual, with my own style.”

“No, you’re not, honey. You’re a clone of those friends of yours. And they’re out to destroy you. Making you drop out of school and leave home to live in some kind of commune—”

“Mom, this is not the sixties. Several of us just share a house to help with expenses.”

“You’re sixteen, Ashley! You should be living at home with me!”

Ashley considered a smart-aleck comeback but then remembered that fifty bucks she needed.

“I didn’t come to fight with you, Mom. I came because I got a speeding ticket and if I don’t come up with the fifty-dollar fine by this afternoon, they’re going to arrest me.”

Her mother stopped on the landing and gave her a skeptical look. “Ashley, I’m not giving you money. I told you when you left home that you can’t expect me to support you financially. Not until you come back home.”

“Fifty bucks, Mom. That’s all I need. Come on, please. I make minimum wage. I didn’t count on a stinking speeding ticket this month. Do you want me to go to jail?”

Debbie opened the door onto the twenty-ninth floor. The light caught a tear in her eyes.

“Well, do you?” Ashley demanded.

“No, I don’t want you to go to jail. I don’t think they put people in jail for speeding tickets.”

“They do if you don’t pay your fine.”

“All right, Ashley. Let me get the cartridge I need, and when I get back to my office, I’ll write a check to the municipal court.”

Ashley might have known her mother would pull that.

“Mom, they don’t take checks. I need cash.”

Her mother wasn't buying. "You're not using this to buy drugs, are you? I want to see that ticket."

Ashley grunted. "Well, it's not like I carry it around with me."

"Then I'm not giving you a dime."

Ashley rolled her eyes and followed her mother toward the stockroom. Her mother had read too many books about tough love and parenting prodigals. Some author who probably didn't even have kids was dictating their relationship now. Ashley resented it.

"What do I have to do to convince you that I'm not a drug addict?"

Debbie reached the stockroom door and turned back to her.

"Come home. Move back in and go back to school."

"Mom, come on."

Her mother opened the door. "Ashley, I'll give you the fifty dollars if you'll come home tonight."

Ashley could agree to that. She didn't have to follow through.

"It's a deal."

"Don't lie to me, Ashley."

"Mom, come on. I'm in a hurry."

Her mother flicked on the light . . . and gasped.

A crude machine sat at the center of the floor, surrounded by ten-gallon watercooler jugs. Wires ran from the contraption to a digital clock on the floor next to it.

"Whoa, what's this?" Ashley asked. "Is that a bomb?"

Her mother froze. "Ashley, get out of here. Take the stairs and get out of the building."

"It is a bomb!" Ashley just stood there, staring as if it were a joke.

"Leave!" Debbie reached for the phone on the wall. "Ashley, get out!"

Ashley knew she wasn't kidding. "Mom, you have to come, too."

"I will," her mother cried, punching numbers into the phone, "but I have to tell security so they can evacuate the building! Go! I'll be right behind you!"

The numbers on the digital clock changed, second by second. . .

“Answer the phone!” Debbie cried, her back to Ashley. “For heaven’s sake, pick it up!” She turned and saw Ashley still standing there. “Ashley, for once in your life will you do what I tell you?” she screamed.

Ashley took off. She burst through the exit door and started down the stairs. Twenty-nine floors. What if the bomb went off before she could get out? What if her mother didn’t make it before it exploded?

She thought of the Twin Towers and the Pentagon. And she began to take the stairs two at a time.

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