

HOT ASH and the Oasis Defect

sample chapter

1. DUTY CALLS

She held up the two bras in front of the mirror. The yellow one looked *nice*. Maybe she could find a pair of matching panties and play banana for a lucky someone to peel later tonight...

An alert suddenly came in on her work phone. Crime in progress within five hundred feet of her location. The system requested that she respond immediately and begin pursuit.

Detective Ashley Westgard of the Jacksonville Police Corps reluctantly hung the bras back on the rack. Her potassium fantasy would have to wait.

She checked herself in the mirror. The dark teal combat bra with sparkling glitter she'd been wearing for work lately looked damn good. She wasn't crazy about the ivory hoodie though—light gray seemed to accentuate her golden-tanned skin better.

Ash zipped the sweatshirt closed and marched out of the boutique clothing shop. She'd splurged here before and would definitely be back—but duty called, even when she was supposed to be done for the day.

She set her phone to start routing the new data to her matching silver video-bracelet and earring-speaker combo. An automated voice provided the latest information—Caucasian male, late twenties, suspected theft from one of the mall's high-end department stores.

Ash stuck the phone into her back pocket and began sprinting down the corridor, desperate to beat the in-house robot cops to the punch. She thought it was important to deliver *a personal touch* when apprehending lowlifes.

A piece of good news came in while she hurtled down an escalator: whatever the perp had stolen was manufactured with Sekür microchips, which were now broadcasting their location in real time. It would not be long before Ash and the shoplifter came face to face.

The voice in her ear now said that the embedded beacons had stopped moving somewhere in the vicinity of the cuisine court.

Ash slowed to a brisk walk. She was essentially wearing street clothes, so it was unlikely this perp would take her for a cop—sculpted shoulders and thighs notwithstanding. But this was Florida, lots of people were in great shape.

She turned a corner and entered a large open seating area. Dolls in skirts everywhere. Sitting by themselves drinking coffee. Half the chairs around them were occupied by fancy shopping bags overflowing with crepe paper.

Not many men in here. Typical of any shopping mall, really. She saw one dandy in a crushed velvet suit standing in line at the teriyaki booth empty-handed. Another was sitting at a large table snapping pictures of himself surrounded by his many purchases—Ash decided he was too conspicuous to be the thief.

Suddenly she darted down the center aisle heading for the restrooms. On the way she passed two other

flamboyant men who were gesturing wildly to each other, but again trusted her intuition that neither was her prey.

She kicked open the gray steel door, then stomped her boot loudly. There he was. Hunched over the counter desperately clawing in search of the sewn-in microchips.

“Too late, you son of a bitch,” Ash said. She heard the door close behind her. “So whatcha doin’?”

The man raised his arms pleading innocence. “Whaddya mean? I bought some presents for my girl, that's all.”

“We'll see about that.”

Ash sauntered up to the counter. She let her fingers run through the hard leather straps of the two designer handbags.

“Nice,” she said. “Imported?”

“Yeah, probably.” The man giggled nervously. “You wanna know what store, maybe get one for yourself?”

Ash shook her head. “No. I want to see your proof of purchase.”

“My... proof?”

The man made a move toward the inside of his jacket. Ash leaped forward and pinned him back against one of the air dryers.

“And what's in *here*?” she snarled. “Something above-board or... ooh, something sharp!”

She pulled a folding knife out of his pocket, inspecting the contours of the maroon handle before whipping the blade open and pressing it against his cheek.

“This doesn't look like a receipt, now does it?”

“It's not what you think,” the man gasped. “I just needed...”

Ash felt the tension in his body release as he crumpled down onto the floor. She took a step back, but kept the knife at the ready.

“What is this shit?” she muttered. “What kind of a

crook are you? Crying like a baby over purses, for Nano's sake!"

The man was now wiping tears out of his eyes. "You don't understand," he whelped. "I have to get these things for her, or else."

Ash glanced back at the loot, saying, "They look real posh, I'll give you that. But why are you *stealing*? I'm sure you get a stipend just like everybody else. These shouldn't be out of reach for you, if you save up."

The man sniffled. "This girl I been seeing, she got needs. *And*, she let me know I got competition. So I gotta keep up, 'cause she don't care if I run out of money."

"Competition, huh?" Ash said. "Like who?"

"Aw, shit... She told me, and I quote, 'all options are on the table.' That means other dudes, girls, hired help, plastic pickles, whatever."

"Sounds like my kind of lady."

"Yeah, yeah. You make it sound like it's all that. Always being chased. But maybe it's *you* looking over your shoulder worse than me! Think about that."

"Alright, you worm. Stand up, will ya?" Ash waved the knife encouragingly as he got back onto his feet. "Now what's the deal here? You tryin' to make a point?"

The man nodded at the purses. "Hey, what's gonna happen about that stuff?"

"We'll get to those gorgeous pieces of contraband soon, don't you worry. But, Mister Philosopher, it sounded like you were ready to share some *profound* insights about love. I'm all ears."

"Okay, uh..." He shrugged. "Feed me, fuck me, and I'm happy. Get it? I don't need VR or pills or gifts to get *me* off! But this girl... She's just like all the rest. My body ain't enough. Not my words... not the dinners... Hell, even these bags won't be enough!"

Ash said, "Then why are ya doing this, guy? Putting

your freedom on the line for one little attention whore? You sound like a fool.”

The man started tearing at his hair. “Because she's got me... She's my whole life! I *need* her!”

For just an instant, Ash felt a touch of compassion for this man. Somehow he had stumbled behind the curtain and gotten an unvarnished glimpse at the dating game's inner rules. But instead of using that wisdom to master the field, he had reverted back to infancy. Sneaking around, ripping off stores at an upscale shopping mall—and then bawling for sympathy after getting caught. It was unforgivable.

“No wonder she's looking anywhere and everywhere else,” Ash said with disgust. “No way a sniveling piece of shit like you could keep her satisfied.”

She closed the knife and put it into her hoodie pocket. Without warning, she lunged forward and cracked the man on his left jaw. He staggered away from the punch and slammed against a stall door. Feebly he held out his wrists.

“Cuff me, baby. It's okay. I couldn't face her now anyway.”

“God, you're pathetic,” Ash said. “But I don't have any handcuffs on me, because *I too* was doing a little shopping just now. So we're gonna march outta here on the honor system—and if you try to run, I'll have my foot up your ass in five seconds.”

The thief bowed his head and dutifully shuffled toward the exit. Ash slung a purse under each forearm, giving herself a quick glance in the mirror before following him out.

This striped one is cute. Pity I can't keep it.

There were two rolling security bots waiting outside the restroom door. Ash handed the suspect and stolen merchandise off to them without a word, then strutted away.

It was Friday night and she was ready to party.