

Chapter One

The thump of the music vibrated through the wall.

Detective Hunter Morgan scowled and watched the coffee in his mug ripple in time with the sound waves.

He set the mug down on his coffee table with a sigh. It was late. He'd had a long day at the station, juggling close to a dozen cases. Once he'd gotten home, he'd stripped off his jacket, tie, and holster, and changed into comfortable clothes. All he wanted now was some peace and quiet.

But his new neighbor of the past few weeks wasn't letting that happen.

With a low growl, he stalked out of his living room and down the stairs. He'd bought the three-story townhouse at Hunters Point a year ago. After the U.S. Navy had cleaned up the old Naval shipyard, it had been redeveloped. Now it was filled with new townhouses, amenities, and parks, all with a view of San Francisco Bay.

Hunt loved sitting in his open plan kitchen and living area and watching the ships go by. His top floor bedroom also had a view of the city to the north. Best of all, it was only a ten-minute drive to the Public Safety Building that housed the San Francisco police station where he worked.

Now, his new neighbor was disturbing his sanctuary. She had music thumping at all hours of the night, and through their shared wall, he often heard her making clunking noises as she moved things around.

He'd knocked on her door before, but she'd never answered.

He'd looked into her. Savannah Cole was a graphic designer and was squeaky clean.

Too clean.

Hunt didn't trust clean. His time in the military, and then with the SFPD, had taught him that no one was black or white, good or bad. People were shades of gray, usually shot through with some wild color every now and then.

Anyway, he'd had enough.

He opened his front door. Despite being summer, the night was cool, especially with the breeze coming in off the water. He'd changed into jeans and a T-shirt, and he hadn't even bothered with shoes. He was going to talk to Ms. Cole if he had to ram her door down to get to her.

He crossed to her front door. Their townhouses shared a wall, and like his, the façade of hers was made up of a combination of cream stucco and wood siding. He thumped his fist on the door and waited.

No response.

He thumped again, a little harder, and kept going. He wasn't even sure she could hear him over the music. His anger was on a low simmer. There were families in the complex, kids who'd be sleeping, so her inconsiderate music was affecting more than just him.

He rapped again. If she didn't—

The door opened.

And Hunt found himself staring into a pair of blue eyes so light, they looked gray.

He was six foot three, so she seemed small, but he knew from his background check that she was five foot five.

Her slim body was dwarfed by a huge, white men's shirt, that was currently splattered with paint, and he noticed the hem of tiny, denim shorts peeking from beneath. The shorts

showed off her bare legs that ended with toenails painted a bright yellow.

He jerked his gaze back up. The pale-blond hair had some curl to it, and it was piled on top of her head in a messy knot.

She eyed him with those gray eyes, sharp and filled with annoyance.

“Detective,” she said, in a voice that made him think of late-nights and silk sheets. “You planning to hammer a hole in my door?”

“If you’d answered the first time, I wouldn’t have had to.” He tilted his head. “You know who I am?”

She leaned against the doorjamb. “Detective Hunter Morgan. Oh, the neighborhood loves to gossip over its heroic detective.” She swiveled and headed back up the stairs. “If you’re coming in, close the door.” She disappeared.

Hunt yanked his gaze off her shapely legs and scowled. He closed the door. The place had the same layout as his. The lower floor had a small entry, and the garage off to one side, and a bedroom and bath on the other. Being a detective, he snooped.

The garage was empty, with just a few boxes stacked against the wall. That jived since he hadn’t found a car registered in her name. The bedroom was being used for storage. He frowned. It was filled with rolls of what looked like canvas leaning against the wall and lots of boxes.

What the hell?

He stomped up the stairs and the music got louder. The scent of paint hit him. Was she decorating?

He reached the living area and froze.

Savannah stood at a large easel that held a huge canvas. It was partly filled with paint, and she was busy stroking a brush over it. For some reason, the way she held the brush made him think of a female warrior with a sword in hand, about to head into battle.

“Come here,” she said, not even looking at him.

Music throbbed from a small speaker. Joan Jett’s gritty voice was front and center.

Savannah snatched up a piece of netting off a side table that was covered with an array of unusual items. She pressed it to the canvas.

“Hold that.” She grabbed his hand and pressed it to the netting.

Then she started splattering paint again... All over his hand.

Scowling, Hunt watched her face. She was completely absorbed by her work. Then she stepped back, nodded, and smiled.

Hunt’s gut knotted. That smile lit up her entire face.

She lifted her gaze and saw him watching her. Her smile vanished. She had a long, narrow face, and high cheekbones.

She set the brush down, grabbed a rag, and wiped her hands. “You did well, Detective.” She handed a rag to him, as well.

The music was still thumping, echoing in his ears. He wiped his hands and turned the speaker off. “We haven’t been officially introduced.”

Her lips quirked. “No, we haven’t. But we both know that you already know my name.”

“Savannah Cole.”

“And now we’ve met.” She headed to her kitchen. It was neat as a pin, and made him think that she didn’t cook. She filled a glass with water. As she drank it, he watched the slim line of her throat.

“You’re an artist.”

Smiling, she set the glass down. “With those keen powers of observation, you must be a very good detective.”

Ms. Cole clearly had no problem with sarcasm.

“You sell these?” He glanced around, there were several other finished paintings leaning

against the walls. Then he looked back at her. He caught a quick look of grief before she hid it. *Hmm*. His instincts flared to life.

“This is a hobby,” she said. “Graphic design is my bread-and-butter.”

He studied the wild, passionate painting she was working on. It was of the Bay, the waters looking moody. Or at least, he thought it was. There was a surreal quality to it, like he was looking at it in a dream.

This definitely looked like more than a hobby to him, but what did he know about art?

“You play your music so loud that my walls shake,” he said.

She ran her tongue over her teeth. “Sorry. I lose myself when I’m working.”

“There are kids in the neighboring homes—”

“I’ll keep it down.” A strand of hair had escaped the bun, caressing her neck. It looked like spun gold, and he had the oddest urge to touch it.

He eyed her. His gut said that what he saw here was only the tip of the iceberg. He wanted to know more.

“So, where you from?” he asked.

She moved to the sink to wash up the glass, not looking at him. “All around. My family moved around a lot.”

That was a well-practiced non-answer. “Where were you born?”

Her head flicked up. “Interrogating me, Detective Morgan?”

Prickly thing. “No. Just being neighborly.”

“Right.” She moved to the stairs. “I’ll see you out.”

Ah, he’d been given his marching orders. He followed her down.

“I will try to keep the music down.” She opened her front door. “I don’t want to get arrested for disturbing the peace.” Her voice was dry.

But as Hunt watched, she scanned the quiet street outside. Her face was alert, watchful.

He straightened. What had Savannah Cole looking so carefully over her shoulder?

Every instinct he had stood up and shouted at him.

“Savannah—”

“It was nice to meet you.” She practically shoved him out the door. “Good night, Detective.”

She slammed the door shut between them.

Hunt crossed his arms over his chest and stared at the wood. Something was definitely off about his new neighbor.

He was a cop. It was his duty to find out exactly what it was.

And it had *nothing* to do with the long, appealing length of her bare legs.

Savannah Cole sagged against the door, closed her eyes, and blew out a breath.

Her new neighbor was hot with a very large H.

As an artist, she appreciated men of all shapes and sizes. She saw the beauty in slim, androgynous, pretty faces, as well as big, fit, streamlined athletes.

But apparently her body had decided tough, slightly scowly, with a rock-solid, muscular body was exactly what lit her fire.

Shaking her head, she started up the stairs. Detective Hunter Morgan was *not* for her.

She could practically see that steel-trap mind of his working overtime. He was a man who'd demand answers, who'd work to uncover every secret.

And Savannah had a truckload of secrets, and no answers to give.

Back in her living room, she stared at the painting she was working on. She was mixing in textures. It was mostly blues, inspired by the shifting waters of the Bay. Sadness cut through her like a blade.

And no one would ever see it.

She had to keep her passion hidden, had to deny her attraction to men like Hunter Morgan.

She didn't get to live a normal life. There was too much at stake.

Dragging in a breath, she waited for the pain to pass. She'd already stayed in San Francisco too long, but she loved the city.

She loved riding her bicycle through the shipyard area. Loved visiting galleries and museums. Loved the artsy vibe of the Mission District.

She'd been here six months. At first, she'd rented a small apartment in the Castro. Then the chance to house-sit this townhouse for a couple currently overseas had turned up. It had been perfect for her.

Savannah knew she should uproot and leave. She should dump the stuff she didn't need, buy a shitty, second-hand car and go. Maybe she'd head south, to Arizona or New Mexico.

Looking at her canvas, her heart clenched. Once again, she'd have to get rid of all her paintings and sculptures. Once, her art had been celebrated, admired by hundreds.

Now, she had to hide it.

She liked graphic design and doing digital art, but it didn't feed her soul like using a brush, palette knife, or clay did. But doing graphic design meant it was easy to keep her style generic, and she had several online accounts set up across the world. It made it easier to shuffle her money around and avoid detection.

She rubbed her throbbing temple. Life could be so horribly unfair. She thought of her mom and brother, and prayed that they were okay. She thought of her best friend Saskia. She thought of them, missed them, every day.

Maybe she'd head down to LA one day, find a Dark Web hacker, and send her mom an encrypted email.

No. They were safer not knowing where she was.

Anger, grief, and rage welled inside her.

She was the victim of a psychopath, and yet she paid the price over and over again.

Snatching up her palette knife, emotions welled through her. She wanted to turn the music back on, but she didn't need Detective Morgan back at her door. Smelling good—like sandalwood and man—and looking good, tempting her with things she couldn't have.

She ripped open her paints and dipped the knife in. Violent red. *Excellent*.

She attacked a new canvas.

Soon, she was lost in it. Every part of her was engrossed, letting the emotions inside her pour out. She worked hard, desperate to capture the beautiful moment that formed in her head, borne of wants, needs, and desires she had to deny.

She had no idea how long she worked. When she finally stepped back, she was exhausted. Her lower back ached, and she set the palette knife down and stretched.

Then her gaze fell on the canvas and she sucked in a breath.

It was a couple. They were surrounded by flames. It was done in her old, signature style, with blotches of paint giving an impressionist feel. It burst with emotion, passion, and sensuality.

She couldn't do her art like this anymore, because it was too recognizable.

In the painting, the man was dressed, with a hint of a business shirt, tie, and short brown hair. The woman was naked. She was arched back, surrendering to her lover. He held her thigh pressed tight to his hip and his mouth was at her breast. Her blonde hair fell down like a rain of pale gold.

Savannah shifted, feeling desire simmer in her belly. She hadn't been with a man in so long and she'd forgotten what it felt like to have a hard cock slide inside her, filling her up.

She bit her lip and stared at the painting.

Clearly the detective had made an impression.

She opened the door to the small balcony and stepped into the cool night air. Pressing her

hands to the railing, she let the air wash over her.

She had to stay away from Hunter Morgan. She had four more months of housesitting. There was no rental agreement, or bills with her name on them. The name she was very aware Morgan suspected was fake.

It was, but it was a good fake. She'd paid a fortune for it.

Susannah Hart was dead. She couldn't go back and paint a target on the people she loved.

She'd protect them the only way she knew how.

That meant running, and being Savannah Cole.

And she'd protect herself, as well. She didn't want to die. She may not get to live the life she'd once dreamed about: a successful art career, a hot, sexy man, and a home with a light-filled studio for her to work in.

But she could steal little moments of life here and there. Then she'd move. Staying on the run was the only way to avoid the very sick man who was obsessed with her.

She lifted her head, and spotted a lone figure at the end of the street. She stiffened. The man was wearing a hoodie, and mostly hidden in the shadows.

Her mouth went dry, and her heart started pounding. For a second, she worried a panic attack was going to hit. She hadn't had one in over a year.

Then the figure turned and walked away, swallowed up by the night.

Savannah released a shaky breath, and squeezed the railing with her fingers. Just someone out for a late-night walk.

When she'd first gone on the run, she'd seen her stalker everywhere. In fact, he'd almost caught her three times.

She released another breath. She'd gotten better at laying low and running. He'd never touch her, or her family, again.

Savannah slipped back inside and closed the sliding door.

This was just another reminder that there would be no sexy detectives for her.