

ONE

I raced into the studio and hopped into the empty chair in front of Bonnie, the makeup wizard. I had just five minutes till airtime. She gave me an exasperated look as she whipped the red nylon cape around me.

The television in the makeup room—always tuned to the studio's news programs—showed a reporter standing in front of Chloe Monahan's apartment. I turned to look. Bonnie grabbed my chin and turned my head back. But I couldn't help myself. My head swiveled around again when the reporter snagged the lead detective for a sound bite. Bonnie gave an exasperated huff. I turned back to face the mirror again. "Sorry."

I kept thinking they'd come up with some new leads. Or actually, any leads—period. So far, there was nothing but speculation, and most of it centered on the burglar theory. The only other possible suspect I'd heard mentioned was a drug dealer. But no one was giving that idea much play—in large part because the source was Amanda Trace, the snarling muckraker who hosted *Justice on Fire!* Even Tony Banks, a frequent guest on her show and one of my fellow criminal defense attorneys, disagreed and pointed out that Chloe had been clean for nearly a year. Tony could kiss that guest spot good-bye. No one was allowed to

argue with Queen Trace. Which was one of the many reasons I refused to do her show. Her producers started calling after my first appearance on Sheri's show, *Crime Time*, and though I've turned them down consistently, they still haven't given up. I don't know whether they're admirably tenacious or mush-brained robots who have me on speed dial.

I heard Chloe Monahan's voice on the television and the shock of it made me jerk my head toward the screen again—but it was just a clip from her interview on *Ellen*. Bonnie put her hands on her hips and fixed me with a death ray. "Once more, Brinkman, and I'll let you go out there looking like a raccoon in drag."

My sparring partner for the evening, lawyer Barry Stefanovich, sauntered in and flopped down into the seat next to mine. "Actually, that sounds kind of cute." Bonnie shot him a dagger. Barry blew her a kiss and turned his chair to face me. "Hey, Sam." I didn't think I could rock the "raccoon in drag" look, so I kept still and just wiggled my fingers at him. He nodded at the television. "When they get the guy, are you going to try for it? It's gonna be huge."

Which is always good for business. And as Michelle, childhood BFF, paralegal, and the lone "associate" in my firm, the Law Offices of Brinkman and Associates, would say: "Take the damn case; we need the money." Ordinarily, it would be a no-brainer. I've handled uglier cases that had no publicity benefits, but this was different. I'd been a fan of *Dark Corners*—and of Chloe in particular. I'd seen her on the late-night talk-show circuit. She was cool, very real, not actress-y. And she was funny. In that weird, sort of ridiculous way we have of bonding with people we see only on television, I felt like I knew her. So my human side said, *No frigging way*. But the lawyer in me said, *Isn't that why you got into this business to begin with? To stick up for the underdog?* I shook my head. "I don't know."

The production assistant ran in, her long single braid swinging behind her. "We've got to get you guys seated. Barry, you're in Studio B. Samantha, you're in Studio A."

Bonnie yanked off the cape and I vaulted out of the chair. Barry and I fell in behind the assistant as she led us down the hall. “Are we going to talk about Chloe Monahan?”

The assistant shook her head. “*We* are, but you guys aren’t. There’s no real news yet, so Sheri’s just doing personal stuff with some of Chloe’s friends.”

I raised an eyebrow. Since when did they need real news to justify the slugfest? Barry gave me a knowing smile behind the assistant’s back as he ducked into his studio.

I trotted into Studio A next door and sat down. Dane, the audio guy, was waiting for me. He clipped the mike to the lapel of my blazer, handed me my earpiece, and left. The door closed with a solid, air-compressing *thunk*. When you see me on television, it looks like I’m sitting in some cool twenty-sixth-floor office with a panoramic view of the Los Angeles skyline at sunset. Really, it’s just a dark coffin-size room with a printed backdrop. Claustrophobics would bounce off the walls.

And thanks to the magicians in the makeup room and a shot that catches me from only the chest up, I look like I just stepped off the red carpet. You can’t see the safety pin that’s holding my skirt together, the scuffed pumps that’ve been resoled four times, or the old coffee stain on my blouse—which is still missing the last two buttons because I can’t face up to the chore of searching through the overstuffed bag of spare buttons crammed under my bathroom sink.

I pulled out my cell phone to do one last Twitter blast.

I’m on LIVE with Sheri! Talking the Samron case: 14 Yr Old who shot her brother—tune in! #HLN

I’ve been doing the cable news circuit for about six months now. Contrary to popular opinion, it’s not a paying gig, so only the young and desperate do it—or the already successful types who have the time to do it for fun because they’re paying the young and hungry to do the

real work. It's a real time suck, and if it'd been up to me, I'd have said *gracias* when one of Sheri's producers first approached me. But Michelle elbowed her way in between us and said, "She'd love to!"

I'd been pissed. "I don't have time for that crap, Michy."

She'd hissed under her breath. "Are you nuts? This 'crap' is how you snag the kinds of cases that'll finally put us in the black. You can't afford *ot* to."

So far it's netted me only a couple of DUI cases and a lot of requests to take on pro bono work. But it *is* kind of fun. A limo picks me up, hair-and-make-up wizards make me look fabulous, and I get to hammer other lawyers without having to worry about getting locked up by the judge. Where does any of that go wrong?

But since it still hasn't proven to be a cash cow, I limit myself to one or two shows a week. A lot of the lawyers who do this cable circuit are hoping to get their own show. I have to admit, I think about it, too, every now and then. It'd be nice not to have to worry about whether I've got enough money to feed Beulah, my ancient Mercedes, who—in addition to having a rear passenger window that no longer rolls all the way up and an ugly dent in the right rear fender (which, coincidentally, showed up the day a client got convicted of murder and his girlfriend threatened to kill me)—is a gas hog.

And it'd be a real personal coup if I could wind up living as well as my mother—*without* having to slide underneath a rich old guy every night. But I love what I do; I *believe* in what I do. Sticking up for the little guy is why I went to law school.

So I keep doing it, hoping to score my big break. A shrink who was on one of the shows with me a few months ago said the real reason I did the cable circuit was because I needed to prove that I was "somebody." Probably to my parents. I told the shrink I'd never met my father, and the only thing that would make my mother think I was "somebody" was if I married a rich "somebody." And then I told him I thought *he* did these shows because he was a self-important ass waffle who probably

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got his degree from an online “university” in Belize. I hadn’t meant to pop off like that—not that it didn’t feel good to take down that self-important, patronizing jackass. But I figured that was the end of my brief stint as a talking head. Which just shows how green I was. The producers booked me for three more shows on the spot.

As I was finishing a tweet, Dane, the audio guy, spoke in my ear-piece. “Could you give me a ten-count, Samantha?”

“Sure.” I counted to ten while I scrolled through my Twitter feed.

Go get ’em, Samantha! #onetoughlawyer

Love you, Samantha! #onehotlawyer

Your a cunt. #SamanthaBrinkmansawhore

I retweeted the first two and answered the last:

You’re a cunt. You are=you’re.

Dane was back in my ear. “Okay, Samantha, coming to you in ten. Heads up.”

The case we’d be banging around tonight was a simple one. Fourteen-year-old Linette Samron, who’d had enough of her bullying big brother, Ryan, “borrowed” her dad’s 9mm and plugged him three times. If it’d been you or me, we’d be dead. Ryan, however, was in “stable condition” and resting comfortably.

It’s the Law of Douche Bags. Douche bags walk away with enough holes in them to look like a colander, while good guys go down for the count with one random punch to the head.

Sheri—one of my favorite hosts; I love her tough, funny ’tude—came to me first. “Samantha Brinkman, you’re our expert defense attorney. Linette’s lawyers are claiming it was an accident. What do you think of their strategy?”

"I think Linette would be better off hiring Justin Bieber. Three shots? An accident? Look, she wins on popularity, not the law. She's the David to his Goliath. They've got a boatload of evidence that Ryan beat her up in the past. She needs to put it all out there and go for self-defense—"

Barry jumped in. "Come on, Samantha. They can't sell self-defense. She went and got the gun and then hunted him down—"

"So what? A jury who hears about those beatings is a jury who'll say screw the law and screw him. She walks. A jury who hears a lot of BS about trigger pulls and safety malfunctions says, 'Screw her.'"

Sheri leaned in. "Then, Samantha, you're banking on an emotional verdict, aren't you?"

"Sheri, since when *aren't* we?"

Sheri threw it to Barry. "You agree with that?"

Barry smiled. "There's no disagreeing with that. It's just a matter of how you go about it. But Samantha's right: the more the jury hears about those beatings, the better for her."

Which now, thanks to us, they just had.

When my last segment wrapped, I went to the makeup room to find Barry. We'd agreed to join the producers for drinks after the show. The television was playing clips from Chloe's most recent talk-show appearances. A voiceover was talking about the rough times Chloe had been through before she got the gig on *Dark Corners*

She'd been a child star, but in the years after her show went off the air, she'd hit a downward spiral that ended at the tip of a needle. Before she scored the role in *Dark Corners*, the only time she appeared on television was when she landed in court for one drug bust or another. It made her murder an even bigger heartbreaker. I nodded at the screen. "She was really in the shits for a while, wasn't she?"

Barry nodded as he wiped off his makeup. "One of her lawyers is a poker buddy. Said she was heading down the OD track for sure when Paige took her in. He said Paige and that role saved her life." Barry

looked up at the television, his expression sad. “Kind of a tragic irony, isn’t it?”

More than tragic, it was depressing. “Life is one unfair bitch.”

Barry’s cell rang. He frowned at the screen. “I’ve gotta take this. You go on ahead. Save me a seat, okay?”

“You got it.” I headed out, thinking about the icy tequila with lime in my near future.

It was already dark by then, and the studio was on the east side of Hollywood. Not the best neighborhood for a nighttime stroll, but I’d found a shortcut after doing *A.M. Hot Spot* last Monday morning. But the minute I turned onto the smaller street just south of Sunset, I realized that what’d looked fine in daylight looked a lot different at night. I told myself to stop being such a wuss, but my stomach tightened with every step. I scanned the street as I moved, noticing for the first time the abandoned house with broken windows on the corner, the empty lot on the right where used condoms and discarded syringes glowed in the moonlight, and dark alleys on either side of me. I felt like the idiot in those scary movies who makes you want to yell at the screen when she gets into the car with a—*dub*—serial killer.

And then I hit a stretch of road that was totally pitch-black. That was it. I decided that I’d rather be an alive wuss than a dead tough guy. I’d just turned back to head for Sunset Boulevard when I heard the fast slap of running feet coming up behind me. At that same moment, two white men in red do-rags and baggy jeans—the kind that have loops sewn inside the legs to hold shotguns—stepped out of the alley to my left and came toward me with deadly eyes that said anything could happen in the next sixty seconds. A strangled little scream squeaked out of my mouth as I jumped back—and almost fell into the team behind me. I could feel their hot breath on my neck, and the smell of their sweat, oily and sour, wound its way over my shoulder like a snake. The bile rose in my throat.

A heavy-looking metal pipe slid down out of the sleeve of the taller of the two men in front of me. He slapped the pipe against his thigh, stepped close enough for me to smell the cigarettes on his breath, and said in a low, tight voice, "Shut the fuck up, bitch."

And in that second, a surge of anger burst through the fear. This cretin was telling to shut the fuck up? I wanted to rip his stupid head off his neck. I was about to reach for my gun, but then I remembered I didn't have it. And I noticed we were standing at the mouth of a dark alley. It wouldn't take five seconds to pull me into it. Another five and I could easily be dead. I didn't see any lights on in the trashed-out houses nearby, but even if anyone was home, I seriously doubted they'd be in any shape to help me. Rage gave way to reason as I considered my options.

If I'd had a wad of money on me, I could've hoped that they'd just take my purse and be happy with the score. But as usual, my cash on hand would barely cover one drink. Still, it was all I had to bargain with. I started to take my purse off my shoulder. Seeing my move, the other man whipped a .44 out of the pocket of his hoodie and put it to my head. As the cold steel barrel pressed against my temple, I saw my face exploding in a red mist.

A voice behind me that sounded like gravel churning in a Cuisinart snarled, "You don't move, bitch."

I stood frozen, my hand still at my shoulder. There was something familiar about that voice. Could it be . . . ? If I was wrong, I'd be dead. But I had to take a chance."

Excerpted from *Blood Defense*, A Samantha Brinkman Novel with permission of the publisher, Thomas & Mercer. Copyright © 2016 Marcia Clark.