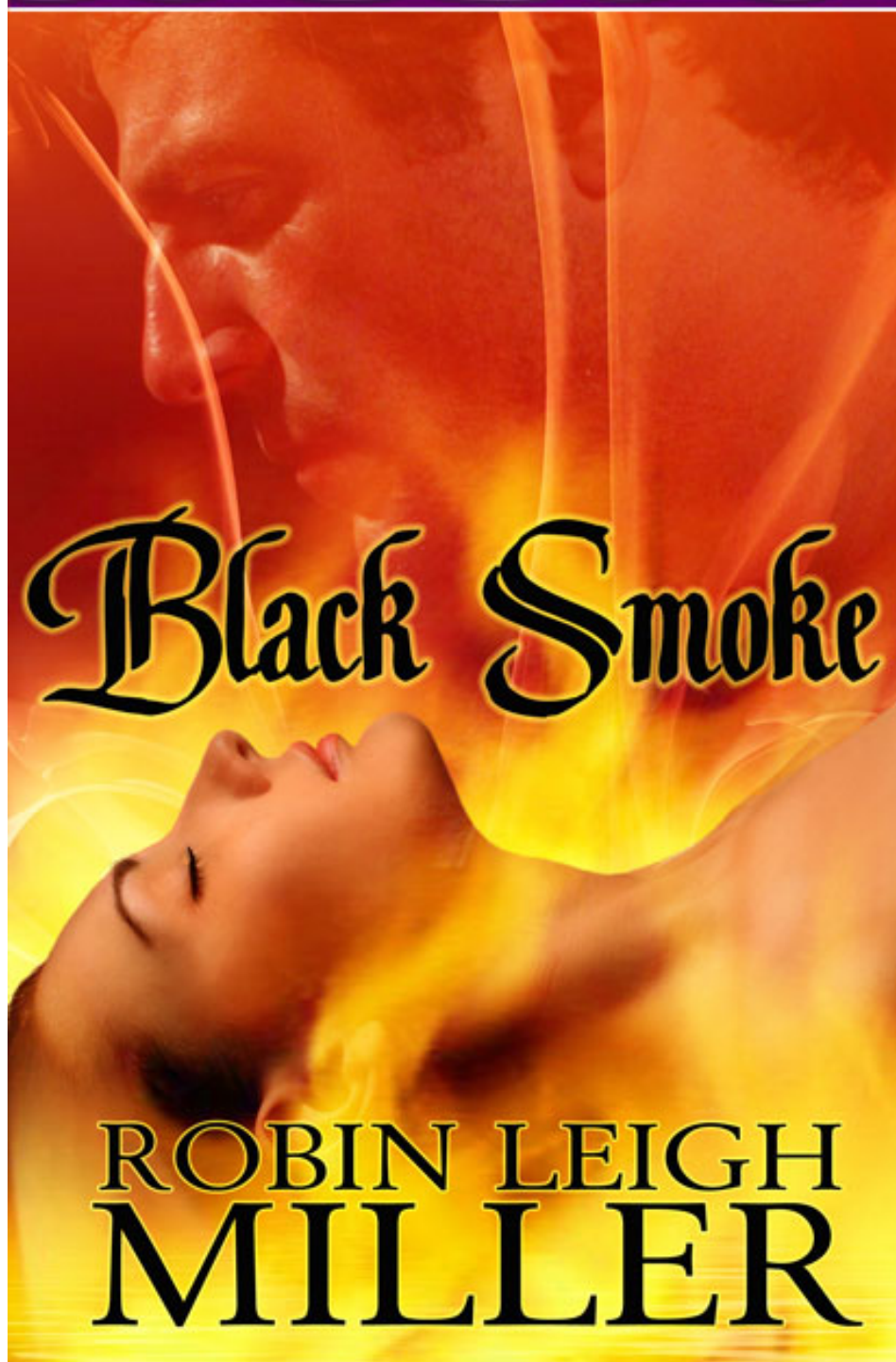


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Black Smoke

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BLACK SMOKE

Robin Leigh Miller

Dedication

This book is dedicated to my best friend, my husband. Not only did he believe I could live my dream, he helped me do it by picking up the daily routines of motherhood and giving me the time and space I needed. While I typed away at my small desk in the basement, he bathed the kids, read to them and tucked them into bed. I'd also like to thank Cerridwen Press for giving me a chance. And a small shout out to the others that guided me—you know who you are.

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Granola bar: Biggs and Featherbelle, LLC

Mustang: Ford Motor Company

Chapter One

Samantha Wells lay buried in the mud, a small tube protruding from her lips just barely reaching the surface of her makeshift grave. This small piece of plastic was her only way of drawing air into her lungs. Her entire body was covered with earth, dead leaves and twigs. No one would know she was there, even if they walked over her. She sucked the air through her tube in slow, long breaths. It had taken her years to perfect this method without jumping from the ground and hyperventilating, but it was worth it. She could hide for hours, even days if necessary. The small collapsible shovel she carried served her well for digging into the soft earth. With experienced movements, she dug a hole wide and deep enough for her to slip into. Starting at her feet she carefully covered herself with fresh earth until she couldn't be seen.

Today she only needed to hide for the next two hours until darkness fell. Her quarry lay just five hundred feet away from her, inside a small cabin. It would only take her seven minutes to cross the distance, enter the cabin, incapacitate the captors and leave with the target.

Seven minutes. She'd run the scenario over and over in her mind, carefully planning every step she would take. The layout of the cabin was ingrained in her brain. All she had to do was close her eyes and she could see it.

Young Peter had taken a great risk showing her around the cabin when he was sure the captors were out. Peter was also the one that gave her the proof she needed that her target was in the possession of this foul man. The woman's wallet had been tossed into a dumpster where the boy was looking for cans to recycle.

Sam lived for this kind of work. It was what kept her sane, knowing she was doing something worthwhile. Unfortunately, she had to deal with the scum of the earth, like these evil excuses for men who held this young woman captive.

Sam was sure she knew what he had planned for the young woman, but dwelling on that wouldn't help the situation. She needed to keep her mind wrapped around the plan. Once she had the woman free, she would call the police and let them deal with him. It wasn't her job to act as judge and jury. She was just the black smoke that swirled into a building and freed all those who needed to be free. Black Smoke. That's what she'd been named by the others in her profession. It was a name she bore proudly.

No one knew who Black Smoke was. She was extremely careful not to let anyone know her real name, or even that she was a female. Her Uncle Walt dealt with those that contracted for her services. He simply filled her in on what needed to be done. So far it had worked out well for both of them. Not only did she do retrievals for the

private sector, she also worked for the government—but only on those rare occasions when it needed to be kept quiet.

Sam pressed deeper into her grave when she heard a car drive up to the cabin. Even with her eyes closed, she could picture in her mind what was taking place. The sound of two car doors slamming told her that her hunch was right. There were two of them, two men to torture this poor woman. The contents of the cabin clearly had shown two people.

The muffled cries of a female in distress caused the hairs on her arms to prickle, even under the thick layer of dirt that covered her. Her heartbeat began to quicken. Had she been wrong to wait until nightfall? Would it be too late? Would this poor woman be brutalized before she moved? Sweat seeped into the rich, dark soil that surrounded her.

You must be patient.

Sam's heartbeat began to slow. That soft whisper she'd relied on her entire life was never wrong. The woman cried out again, this time a painful, heart-wrenching scream. Sam nearly bolted from her self-made grave. Every muscle in her body tensed, ready to do battle.

Not yet, she will not be seriously harmed before nightfall.

Again, the whisper inside her head calmed her. As a child the soothing voice had saved her life and as she grew older it had helped her work through the turmoil of adolescence. When she began her career, she relied on it to keep her safe. It had never let her down before. It wouldn't let her down this time. By her calculations, she had ninety minutes before all hell would break loose. Concentrating on her breathing and relaxing her muscles, Sam said a quick prayer to her spirit guide to wake her when the time came.

As she sank within herself, she could only hear the sound of her own breathing. All other sounds were pushed away. Sam concentrated on the sound of the air being sucked through, then pushed out of the small tube. As it happened over and over again it became a hypnotic rhythm that soon had her resting comfortably beneath the earth.

A peaceful scene unfolded in her mind's eye. A cozy, whimsical room with colorful fairies decorating the walls filled her head. A wind chime near an open window tinkled in the light breeze of the evening. It too was adorned with fairies. A large doll's house stood in the corner, fairy dolls placed in each room. As Sam's eyes searched the room, she saw a beautiful bed with a frilly pink comforter. Large overstuffed pillows covered the bed. Nestled amongst the pillows was a big stuffed dog.

A sense of warmth and happiness washed through Sam's body. She recognized this place, that dog, the tinkling sounds of the wind chime. It was all so familiar and comforting.

Sam's peaceful feeling was shattered by the sound of wood splintering and heavy footsteps coming upstairs. Her heart began to race as she heard shouting from across the hall. Was that her father's voice she heard pleading?

The beautiful serenity of the room became a violent swirl of color as the shouting became more intense, more violent. She could hear flesh being slapped and a woman's voice cried out in pain. The room began to spin. Sam's stomach clenched. That was her mother. Her mother was screaming. Sam tried to move toward the door, but with every step she took, the spinning became worse. Her stomach began to heave with nausea, but she swallowed hard to fight it back. This was no time to be sick. She needed to help her parents. Dear God, what was happening to them? She could still hear shouting, loud thuds, more shouting. She stepped carefully toward the door, then fell with a hard crash. Unwilling to be defeated, she started crawling, but for every inch she gained, the door seemed to move away three inches.

Sam opened her mouth to call out, but she became mute. No matter how hard she tried to call to her parents to tell them she was coming nothing but air came from her throat. Her mother's screams became fierce. She could hear her father pleading for the intruders to stop, begging them to take him and leave her alone, but the screaming continued. Then suddenly, her door burst open.

Samantha, you must wake. It is time. Wake child.

Sam gasped through her small tube, sucking dirt down into her throat. Her heart was racing, pounding so loudly in her ears that it deafened her. Her arms and legs ached from being clenched and still for so long. She felt heaviness grow in her chest, a feeling she hadn't felt in eighteen years.

She needs you. It is time.

Sam bolted from her shallow grave as she heard the woman inside the cabin scream—a scream much like the one in her dream. Her upper body stiffened as she pushed against the weight of the earth and sat up. She spit the small tube from her mouth and kicked her legs, dislodging them from the earth. Discipline and focus made her push past the stiffness in her limbs and jump to her feet. Adrenaline poured through her veins as she inched her way toward the cabin. Her vision became a tunnel. She saw nothing except the small cabin that held her target. Red began to blur the edges of her vision. Pure anger and hatred was driving her now.

As she approached the small window that she had left cracked open on her earlier visit with Peter, another scream ripped through the night air. Sam sucked air between her teeth as she peeked in the window. Anger engulfed her as she watched one of the men rip the woman's blouse open. Sam reached down into her boot and pulled out a small pistol. She placed the barrel in the gap between the window and the wall and fired.

A loud curse let her know she had struck the intended victim. She watched as he dropped to the floor. The second man looked down at him, his sickening smile turning to a look of confusion and fear. Sam took aim again and fired. The drunken man jerked as the dart skimmed by his thigh.

"What the hell!" he slurred as he staggered about the room.

Sam cursed herself for missing. She never missed. This meant she'd have to take him out with her hands. Oh well, she thought, then jumped straight into the air and grabbed the tree limb that hung out above the window. As the man continued to stumble around the room, Sam crashed through the window and landed in a crouched position. Her eyes made a quick survey of the room. The first man was already out cold on the floor. The target was tied with her hands above her to a beam.

Baring her teeth like a hungry wolf, Sam sprang toward her prey. With one quick strike of her foot the man's head spun to the side and blood spewed from his mouth. He dropped to the floor. Sam pulled her pistol out again and shot a dart into the back of his neck. She stood staring at him, trying desperately to rein in the pure hatred and anger she felt toward this man.

The soft whimper from the corner of the room pulled her from the dark recesses in her mind.

As she turned her head slowly, she saw the young woman sobbing quietly. The sight of the woman ripped at Sam's heart. There were red handprints on her face, her arms were bruised and blood trickled down her stomach. Sam slid her pistol back into her boot and walked slowly toward her.

"Don't be afraid. I'm here to get you out," she said softly.

The woman's eyes met Sam's. Tears spilled down over her cheeks. Her body shook from her sobbing. Then her face took on a look of new fear. "There's another one." She said breathlessly. "There's another one. He's not here yet."

Sam pulled a knife from her utility belt and cut the woman loose from the beam. "It's okay, calm down. It's okay."

"No, you don't understand," she said with a shaky voice. "Another man."

Sam stilled, "What do you mean, another man?"

"There are three. He's not here yet. We have to go. Now!" the woman said as she headed toward the door.

"Wait, we need to go through the window. If there's another one coming, we don't want to go out the front door." Sam pulled the woman toward the window and shoved her through. As she was about to climb through herself she heard a car stop out front of the house.

"Run into the woods, find a place to hide and I'll find you," she whispered to the woman.

Without needing to be told twice the woman took off into the darkness. Sam looked around the room and found a place to hide. She wouldn't leave here until all those responsible were taken down.

Just as Sam crouched behind the small island bench in the kitchen the door swung open. Heavy footsteps crossed the floor. Sam held her breath as she closed her eyes and pictured what the man was doing at that precise moment.

She could see him looking at the two men lying on the floor, then his eyes moved to the spot where the woman had been tied. She could see the anger in his face. She could feel the turmoil swelling in his guts. His plans had been sabotaged, his night of so-called fun spoiled. Sam stood slowly as she raised her pistol taking deadly aim. Before she could pull the trigger the man spun to face her.

Her finger pulled the trigger. She watched as the dart shot toward him. With amazing speed he moved just enough to let the dart shoot by him. Using the same speed he hurled himself toward Sam. Years of reflexes took over. Sam ducked behind the island bench again then scooted to where he had been standing. He was standing on top of the counter looking over it. Stepping quietly forward and reaching out with her right hand she pulled his foot out from under him causing him to land on his head on the opposite side of the island.

A bitter curse made her smile. He was hurt and this gave her satisfaction. She pulled her canister of mace from her utility belt and leaned over the counter. Once she had him disoriented she could tranquilize him as well.

"Who the hell are you?" the man grumbled.

"Your worst nightmare," she snarled at him as she unloaded her mace in his face.

He never screamed like most do when the burn becomes too painful, he just lay very still.

Sam pointed her pistol at him to fire its final dart and once again, with amazing reflexes the man jumped up, his shoulder knocking the pistol from her hands. Without a thought Sam countered with a jab to his face. Blood rolled from his lip and down his chin. Before she realized what had happened he had grabbed her wrists wrapping them in a vice-like grip. He kicked her feet out from underneath her, knocking them both to the floor with a bone-jarring thud.

His weight had her pinned to the floor, unable to move. Sam bucked and kicked trying to throw him off balance to get her hands free. But he was a skilled fighter. He knew how to subdue a person. Somehow he had managed to remove the black mask she always wore during a mission.

"Well, well. Look what I have here." He laughed, blood spraying all over her face. "Just a little girl."

Sam continued to kick, trying desperately to get her knee between his legs. His hold on her wrists was much too strong. Never before had she encountered a man she couldn't outmaneuver, or outsmart.

Stay still Samantha. Stay still.

Sam instinctively obeyed the whisper in her head. Relaxing all her muscles she became a rag doll. It only took a few moments for his harsh grip to relax on her wrists.

"Since you found it necessary to let my entertainment for the evening go free, I'll just have to use you." The man laughed, continuing to spray blood over her face.

When Sam moved her head to the side to avoid the blood, she spotted the pistol on the floor.

All she had to do was reach out and grab it. But she had to wait for the right moment. If he tightened his grip on her wrists again she would lose her chance.

"You'll have to pay for what you've done." He said reaching for the zipper on his jeans.

Sam took that moment when his hands were the furthest away from her arms and reached for the pistol. Turning swiftly, with her other hand she grabbed a handful of his crotch, squeezing with every ounce of strength she had. The man's face turned white as she dug her fingers into his soft flesh. His hands instinctively reached down between his legs, frantically trying to release her vice-like grip.

"Sounds to me like your mouth's writing a check your dick can't cash," she hissed through her teeth.

The sounds he was making made her smile, so just for the sheer fun of it, she dug in deeper.

"You bitch!" He screeched digging at her hand.

Sam pointed the pistol directly at his crotch. "Oh, that isn't me being a bitch," she said with a smile. "This is." She pulled the trigger launching the dart directly into his so-called manhood.

The man screamed like a little girl would in a haunted house. His body stiffened like a board then rolled to the side, freeing her from his weight. Sam dragged herself to her feet and watched as his frenzied hands tried to remove the dart. Pulling her cell phone from her pocket, she called her uncle.

"It's done. Three down." She said simply then hung up the phone. She watched as the man succumbed to the tranquilizer. Satisfied that all three would rest quietly until the authorities could arrive, she retrieved her mask and slid it over her head then climbed out the window and began her search for the woman.

It didn't take her long. The woman was hiding behind the biggest tree in the area. Sam walked to where she had stashed her bag, retrieved it and made her way to the woman. As she neared, the woman stiffened and held her breath.

"It's over. The police are on their way." She said as she pulled a jacket from her bag.

"You'll have to wait until they get here. You need to be on the premises when they arrive." Sam made a quick survey of the woman's wounds. Nothing serious. A knife slash where they cut her bra and some bruising.

The woman shook her head as she stared at Sam. "Thank you. I thought I was going to die tonight."

"I know. We'll wait here until we hear sirens, then you can walk back to the cabin."

"Are they dead?" She asked with a shaky voice.

"No, just sleeping." Sam replied. "Listen, I know you've had a traumatic experience, but you have to look at this with a positive attitude." The woman's eyes

reflected her confusion at Sam's words. "You were lucky. There were at least two other women that weren't. Your bruising, your cuts, they'll all heal. It's up to you whether or not your mind heals. If you let this affect you, affect the way you live your life, then they have won. Be strong. When it comes time for a trial, stand up and tell people what sick, twisted, little cowards they are. Tell them how they dealt with someone weaker than they are. Show them that you're a survivor."

Understanding grew within the woman's eyes. Even as her body shook from her trauma, her chin jutted out. "I will."

Sam wrapped her arm around her and the woman lay her head on Sam's shoulder. A prayer was sent to give the woman strength to overcome her ordeal and defeat the personal demons that were sure to haunt her.

It was eleven o'clock when Sam finally reached the waiting helicopter that would take her home. She crawled inside, mask in place and relaxed for the first time in what seemed like hours. She watched as the ground grew further and further away from her and when she felt satisfied that she was on her way, she closed her eyes.

"Thank you," she whispered.

No need for thanks Samantha. You did well. Rest now. You will need it.

Sam grunted. *What was that supposed to mean?* she thought to herself. When no answer came she drifted off into a light sleep. It always amazed her that she could sleep so soon after a mission was completed, but then she was sure she had help.

She found herself back in the pretty little bedroom. The tinkling of the wind chimes made her feel warm and cozy. Then the shouting started again, her mother's scream, her father's pleas.

Sam reached for her knife but it wasn't there. She looked down at herself and saw she was wearing a pink, frilly nightgown. She ran for the door but the room started spinning. The nausea welled up inside her. She opened her mouth to scream, but just like the last time, nothing would come.

No, she thought to herself, *not again. I won't lose them again.* But try as she might she couldn't make it to the door. Without warning her door burst open. A man dressed in blue jeans and a button up shirt stood in front of her. She watched as he reached out for her, her eyes drawn to a symbol on his hand.

She felt his hand reach into her hair and pull hard. His mouth was moving but she couldn't hear any words. He tied her to a chair, smiled at her, then headed for the door. Sam could see across the hall into her parents' bedroom. Her father was tied to a chair. Her mother lay naked on their bed. Two men stood over her arguing. She could still hear her father begging them to leave his family alone, but her mother lay still and quiet.

Her bedroom door slammed shut leaving her all alone and scared. She could hear herself praying for help, praying for her parents. Then she heard it for the first time, the whisper inside her head. It told her how to move her hands to get them free from the

bindings. She heard it tell her how to get out of the house. *Use the window, slide down the spouting.* She found herself obeying every word.

Then the gunshot came. Her blood turned to ice as she screamed and fell. The sickening crunch of the bones snapping in her ankles echoed in her ears. Pain jolted through her legs making it impossible for her to walk, so she crawled through the yard. She knew they were coming. She could sense it. Her skin prickled and her stomach clenched. Then he was there, standing over her. He said something into a walkie-talkie, his voice sounding like an old forty-five record put on slow speed. She tried to crawl away, her fingers digging into the earth, pulling her wounded body across the grass, but she felt a sharp pain in her back, then came another gunshot.

Sam sat straight up, sweat running down her face. Her heart thundered in her ears. As she looked around she saw the helicopter was making its landing. A dream, she thought to herself, just a dream.

Chapter Two

Sam glanced at the helicopter pilot. To her relief he didn't seem to notice her distress. When they landed she turned toward him and nodded her thanks. He nodded back as she jumped from the helicopter. Once she was clear, he took off again. Her uncle's private airfield and training ground was deserted for the night, leaving Sam in solitude. Sam made her way to her sixty-six Ford Mustang, tossed her bag into the backseat, removed her mask and settled behind the wheel. A few deep breaths had her mind clear of her nightmare and ready to go.

A smile spread across her face as her hands wrapped around the steering wheel. She loved this car, loved its simplicity, loved the time it came from. She had taken great care in picking out the perfect red for it, nothing tending to orange or maroon. Red Blaze. That's what the color was called and it fit her perfectly. She smiled when she turned over the ignition and the car purred to life. Yes, she loved this car.

As she cruised away from the training grounds the cool night air blew through her pixie cut hair. She wondered if her Uncle Walt would be waiting for her. Of course he would, she thought to herself, he always did. Her Uncle Walt was the only family she had left. He'd raised her after her parents' murder. Treated her like his own daughter, attended all the parent teacher conferences, all the school events and even helped her pick out her senior prom gown. He was everything to her and she to him.

She wasn't surprised to see the light on when she pulled in front of the two storey brick building he used as his office. But she smiled and felt warm inside anyway. It was always nice to have someone waiting for you when you returned.

With enthusiasm Sam jumped from her car and walked eagerly toward the front door. To anyone else this building would look like an everyday office building. Only a select few knew what really went on behind the doors.

Sam punched her security code into the keypad by the door then waited as the three locks released. Once inside she reset the alarm and jogged up the steps to the second floor where her uncle's office was.

The door was open so she stood in the doorway drinking in the sight of her uncle with his nose buried in paperwork. He was a handsome man with black hair like hers, only his had gray peppering the sides. He still had his chiseled jaw, broad shoulders, and muscular arms. He was quite an attractive specimen for a fifty-five-year-old man.

It was a shame he had never married. He would have made a great husband and father she thought.

Sometimes Sam felt guilty. Maybe if he hadn't been raising her it would have been easier for him to find a wife. Not many women would want to take on a soldier with a child, she reasoned.

He made the right choice. Things work out the way they are meant to, her whisper told her.

Still, Sam would always feel a twinge of guilt for her intrusion into his life.

"Are you going to stand in that doorway all night or are you going to come and give me a hug?" he said quietly without looking up at her.

Without hesitation Sam walked to her uncle's desk. "How did you know I was standing there?" She asked.

"After all these years I know when you're around. I may not always be able to see you but I can feel you." He said as he stood and held out his arms. A warm smile spread across his face.

Sam stepped into his loving embrace. She'd always felt love and comfort when he held her, just the way she'd felt when her father would hold her when she was small. Walter Cannon had made up for her father's absence in so many ways and for that she would walk into hell for him.

"I take it everything went well tonight?" He asked then placed a kiss on the top of her head.

"Intelligence neglected to tell me there were three men involved." She replied sharply.

"So I heard. Chief Zimmerman called and said one of the men had a tranq dart in an, um uncomfortable area."

"He'll think twice about harming another woman," Sam hissed through her teeth.

Walt chuckled then kissed her on top of the head again. "Sit. We have things to talk about."

Sam sat in the chair across from his desk, her eyes glancing at the photo her uncle kept on the table behind his desk. It was her favorite picture of her mother and father in a playful hug. Walt had always kept their memory alive in her heart.

"Did your guide help you tonight?" he asked in a matter-of-fact tone.

"Absolutely, in more ways than one."

"Oh, something I should know?" His eyebrows arched in a concerned manner.

"Nothing serious." Because she could always tell him anything she told him of her two dreams. As a child she was often plagued with the same nightmare. Walt had taken her to several doctors in the hope of ridding her of the nightly trauma. No matter how much she talked about them, they still crept into her sleep. With the onset of her teenage years they became less frequent. Once she had started her career the nightly horrors stopped altogether. Now they were back and she couldn't help wonder if it meant something. Was it possible her guides were sending the dreams to her, a warning of some type? She could ask but knew she wouldn't receive an answer. Some things a person needed to find out on their own.

"Do you need to take some time off? You've been working steadily for the last six months. Maybe you need a vacation." He didn't like the fact that her dreams were returning any more than she did.

"No, I'll be fine. If they get any worse, I'll tell you."

Walt nodded. He had no doubt that she would. "Okay, I have another mission for you, if you're interested?"

Sam smiled at him. He always said that, even though he knew she'd take it. "What've you got?"

"This one's sticky Sam, it involves the government."

Rolling her eyes she said, "So what else is new. Anything dealing with the government is always sticky. Let's hear it."

"It involves the government, but only in a 'we know nothing' way," he told her then pushed a file in front of her. "They want this taken care of, but they don't want anyone to know they want it taken care of. Understand?"

Sam opened the file and saw a picture of a pale, redheaded man. He looked like he came straight from a farm in Idaho. "I understand what you're saying. Fill me in," she said as she closed the file. No point in reading it. Walt would tell her everything she needed to know.

"Mr. John Williams is a biologist. He was sent by our government to do some studies on Afghanistan's soil, vegetation, wildlife, etc. They say we don't need to know what he was studying, just that in the middle of taking samples out in the desert he was kidnapped. A very poor quality video was received by our military forces stationed there showing Mr. Williams bound and gagged with a large knife at his throat. The voice on the video said the US had five days to withdraw from their country or Mr. Williams would be executed."

Sam closed her eyes. Everyone was aware of Americans being kidnapped these days. It was all over the news. Most people were also aware that those poor souls had little chance of surviving. The government was not going to pull out and finding them was next to impossible. But she asked anyway.

"They want us to bring him home?" he asked in soft voice.

"Yes."

"Okay, do they have any idea where he is? I mean, hasn't special ops, SEALs, everyone they send in to bring these hostages home, said it's impossible?" If they couldn't find where the terrorists were hidden how was she going to find them?

"I'll get to that, but first you have to think about this carefully Sam. They requested you personally. They requested Black Smoke. They have no idea you're a female and we both know what will happen if they capture you. So, please think about this." Walt knew she rarely turned down a mission, but this was one he felt like begging her to turn down.

Lying her head back on the chair, Sam closed her eyes. *What should I do? This is dangerous, more dangerous than any other mission. What should I do?* The questions were directed to her guide and she knew they would be answered.

Yes, this is dangerous, but you must take it. The answer was swift and sure, almost forceful in its nature. Sam had never heard her whisper so firm and commanding before.

"I'll do it," Sam told her uncle as she looked him straight in the eye.

"You're sure? I mean, were you told..."

Sam cut him off. "Oh yes, I'm sure. I was told in a very firm manner to take it, so I have to believe it's right."

Walt sat back in his chair and eyed her. He had learned early in their lives together never to question the voice she heard. It had saved her life more than once, but right now he felt like being the protective parent and grounding her for a month. "You'll need to work with a small team," he told her.

"I've done that before Uncle Walt."

"Yes, but this team will be different. I was given special permission to use some very non-traditional soldiers. They won't like not knowing who's got their back," he said carefully.

Sam closed her eyes again. *You're sure about this? These men will hold my life in their hands.* She questioned.

More than your life will be at stake with these men child. Rest assured all will be well

Walt watched her have the silent conversation in her head. When she opened her eyes he knew it was done. All that was left was to make the arrangements. "I'll make a phone call. Be at our training grounds by one tomorrow afternoon. I'll have the men there by one-thirty."

"Great. Now I'm going home to get a bath and some rest," she said standing up. "I suggest you do the same."

"Sam, you're sure about this? I mean, these men won't be like the others you've worked with."

"No worries Uncle Walt." She told him with a smile then leaned across the desk and kissed him on the cheek.

Walt grunted as he watched her leave the room. So why was he so worried? He knew her combat skills were as good as those of any man he'd ever seen. Her sharp mind could get her through any predicament and her ability to talk and be guided by an entity, or angel, or whatever it was, gave her an added edge. Still, his uneasy feeling wouldn't go away and that bothered him.

He picked up the phone and dialed. When the voice on the other end answered he simply said, "Black Smoke is a go," then he hung up. If she returned from this alive, he was going to take her on a long vacation.

* * * * *

Sam pulled into the driveway of her small ranch house. Next to her car this was her favorite possession. It didn't look like much, just a plain three bedroom, one floor house, but it was hers.

It was the second thing she'd purchased. Her car was the first. She'd decorated it herself, painted the walls, picked out the furniture, all to suit herself.

Some people might expect that a woman who ran around the world burying herself in dirt, hiding in trees and participating in hand-to-hand combat would have a barren, almost empty home. But this home was truly home. She had all her favorite pictures hanging on the walls, knickknacks she'd picked up on her travels placed tidily on shelves. Frilly curtains were hanging in the windows. Puffy throw pillows sat neatly on every piece of furniture and her bathroom had lush towels, fragrant soaps and lotions sitting ready on the vanity.

Just because she worked like a man didn't mean she wanted to be one. She enjoyed being female, even enjoyed things like painting her own toenails. When she wasn't Black Smoke she referred to herself as White Lace. And tonight White Lace was going to soak in her garden tub full of freesia bubbles while candles flickered around her.

When morning came Sam woke with renewed energy. The sun was shining, birds were chirping on her front lawn and all seemed perfect in small-town Pennsylvania. Sam filled her coffee pot with water and ground coffee and waited for the aroma to fill the kitchen as she watched children walking down the sidewalk to meet the school bus. What would it be like to have one of those children hers, to be called mom and be hugged tightly around the neck?

Well, maybe another two years playing rescue then she'd settle down and try to find Mr. Right and make those dreams come true. After another two years she wouldn't have to worry about money. Uncle Walt had made sure she got paid well for her services. She had a healthy six-figure bank account. Maybe she'd open up a spa for all those mothers who ran around frantically trying to get their children to all the after-school events they were in. Then again, maybe she could write about her exploits and become a best-selling author. The choices were endless as far as she was concerned.

Not today though, today she had to meet her new team and see if they could all work together to accomplish their goal. Sam looked at the clock. Eight. She still had time to do some shopping before heading for the training field. She loved shopping. It was how she treated herself for a job well done. She never bought anything extravagant, just something small and personal.

* * * * *

While Sam strolled through the shops three men landed on the airstrip on the training field. Men who only knew they were going to be tested for a mission. No

questions were asked. They simply boarded the plane at the appointed time. That's how they operated – take orders and reach the goal. To them this was just another day.

Walt Cannon met the three men on the airstrip. He'd heard they were the best and now he'd find out. He didn't like the idea of men he didn't know finding out who Black Smoke was.

When Sam worked with military men in the past they followed her lead, did the job, then disappeared. To the men she worked with she was just another man, one who was trained extensively in covert operations.

These men however would not work with her without knowing who she was. Like Black Smoke, they were used only when the situation was deadly. If they never returned it was considered an acceptable loss. Unfortunately, they didn't work well with outsiders, especially one they knew nothing about.

Walt walked toward the three men sizing them up, mentally warning them that if they caused Sam any harm he would personally deal with them. He may not have been her father, but he was the closest thing to it and any unprofessional conduct toward her would be punished.

"Gentlemen, if you'll come with me I'll show you to your barracks," Walt said in an unusually stern tone. The men nodded then followed him.

Once they reached the barracks Walt waited until they dropped their duffel bags on bunks then proceeded. "There's a small kitchen in the next building. It's fully stocked. Help yourself to anything in there. Showers are in the back of the barracks. If you find you need anything else please feel free to contact me."

"One question." One of the men asked.

"Go ahead."

"Why do we need a training run? We've never needed a training run before an op." He asked with attitude.

"I'll fill you in on that when we meet up in," Walt said looking at his watch. "One hour. I'll pick you up and take you out to the field and fill you in then." Walt turned to leave.

"Hold up!" The man demanded.

Walt turned. "Yes."

"You got a computer I can use around here?"

"There's one in the rec hall two doors down. Help yourself." Walt told him then left.

"Man don't say much does he?"

"He said he'd fill us in Ricochet, just roll with it."

"It kinda pisses me off havin' to do a trainin' run. Who do they think we are? Your everyday grunts?" Ricochet snarled.

"Must be big," came a deep voice from their left.

"I was thinking the same thing Boomer. I was just thinking the same thing."

"Yeah, well, I'm gonna do some diggin' on this Cannon guy. See what his story is." Ricochet said marching out the door.

Boomer snickered. "Man don't know when to keep his nose out of things."

"Yeah, tell me about it." Kong, the third man, tossed his bag to the floor and stretched out on an empty cot.

Thirty minutes later, Ricochet came strolling back through the door of the barracks. Boomer was caressing explosives that he always carried with him and the third man was still lying on his cot. Ricochet shook his head at the sight of the two.

"While you two been snoozin', I found out a little about our man Cannon." Neither of the men stirred. "Well, don't ya wanna know?"

"Fill us in. You won't be happy until you do," the third man yawned.

Ricochet flopped down on an empty cot. "This Cannon guy is retired military. Decorations and all." After a few moments of silence, Ricochet huffed. "Well?"

"Is that all?" Kong commented, disinterested.

"Yeah, that's all! I couldn't find a thing about him. Every time I got to a file on him, it said government classified. Don't you think that's strange?"

"It's none of our business," Boomer said in his slow deep voice.

"It doesn't concern us. Let it alone Ricochet."

Ricochet flopped back on the cot grumbling to himself. "Don't come crawlin' to me when things get weird." Then he closed his eyes, his mind trying to figure out the puzzle they had found themselves in.

Chapter Three

When the jeep pulled up in front of the barracks the three men were ready to go. They were dressed in military camo and black boots with military issue rifles at their sides. Walt looked them over then motioned for them to jump in. The ride to the field was quiet. Not one of them asked any questions. Walt hoped that they wouldn't demand too many answers when it came to Sam, but deep down in his gut he knew once they found out who she was that would all change.

The four men pulled up to a tent that was set up in the middle of a field. As Walt jumped from the jeep the other three men looked around. There wasn't much here—just open fields and a small patch of woods about three hundred yards to their left. They looked at each other then followed Walt into the tent.

"Have a seat men. I'll fill you in on why we need this little exercise." Walt sat in a folding chair behind a makeshift desk, while the other three sat across from him.

"The government has asked me to send a team to Afghanistan to recover an American scientist who has been kidnapped. As I'm sure you know when the Taliban gets their hands on an American we are unlikely to see them ever again. There are some who have been returned for ransom. I'm afraid however, this won't be a ransom case." He looked into their faces as he told them. He liked to get a feel for how they handled the news that was dropped into their laps. So far there was not even a blink.

"We've done recovery before. We've never had to run an exercise beforehand," the third man stated.

"I have no doubts about your abilities gentlemen. If I did, you wouldn't be here. That's not what this is about," Walt replied.

"Then what is it about?" Ricochet asked with attitude.

"This is to see how well you can work with another team member." Walt watched their faces closely. Again there were no surprised looks. He knew they had worked with other military teams before, but never with an outsider.

"Still not making sense Sir," the third man said respectfully.

"This team member is not military. And this exercise is to see how you deal with the unorthodox ways of an independent." Now Walt was seeing some reaction in the three faces looking back at him. Not much, just slight frowns and maybe even a little confusion.

"Your first exercise will be to retrieve a flag at these coordinates." Walt handed each man a small square piece of paper. "I'll decide if we need another exercise when this one is completed."

"You've got to be kiddin' me. We came all the way here to play a child's game?" Ricochet grumbled.

"I assure you, this will be no child's game. You must retrieve the flag without being killed and I'm willing to bet you each a beer that you won't make it." Already Walt could feel Sam's presence in the area. He had no idea where she was, but he could feel that she was there. He stood and crossed to a large metal box, opened it and pulled out a paintball gun.

"What the hell is that?" Ricochet laughed. "We really are playing kid's games."

Boomer and Kong looked at each other puzzled. Neither had ever used a paintball gun in an exercise before. Now they wished Ricochet had been able to find out more about Cannon.

"You'll use these. The fourth team member has an electronic device strapped to him. They tell me if you hit him an alarm will go off. I've never heard it personally," Walt chuckled.

"Do we get an alarm?" Boomer asked.

"No, if you're taken out you'll know because you'll find a bright red sticker plastered to your body somewhere." Walt watched their faces and saw utter confusion.

"You're telling us that the fourth team member isn't carrying a gun?" The third man asked, slowly drawing out the words.

"That's right. When you see him it's because you're about to die." The smile that crossed Walt's face made the three men stiffen.

Ricochet stood, "Let's get moving then."

"Whenever you're ready," Walt replied, still smiling.

Walt watched the three men pull out their compasses, hook their radios in their ears, then start out across the field. "This was going to be fun," he thought to himself. The soldiers would be at a disadvantage for this exercise, but that couldn't be helped. Besides, no one ever knew what to expect from a real mission.

* * * * *

"Hey Kong," Ricochet whispered in his radio. "Who do you think this fourth person is?"

"Black Smoke," Boomer's voice said into their ears.

"You're outta your mind Boomer. That's just talk."

"It doesn't matter who it is, we have a job to do so keep your eyes open," replied Kong. His eyes darted from side to side looking for any movement in the field. He looked across at his two teammates sure they would be doing the same thing.

They were almost to the treeline when he heard a noise through his earpiece.

He looked across the field for his two teammates and only saw one. Boomer was crouched down looking in the direction where Ricochet had been.

"Ricochet, was that you? What happened? Respond," Kong whispered anxiously into his mouthpiece. When no answer came, he whispered again, "Ricochet, damn it answer me!"

"Ah hell," his voice came through loud and clear. "I got me a big red target on my chest. Can you believe this? I'm out already, damn it."

"What happened?" Boomer asked calmly.

"Hell if I know. I was creepin' along, then all of sudden I'm lying on my back looking' at the sky. Man, I didn't see anythin'!"

"Ricochet, please return to base." Walt said into the radio. He couldn't help the chuckle in his voice.

"Black Smoke," Boomer repeated.

"Keep alert Boomer," the third man told him. As they entered the small patch of woods he slid behind Boomer. He knew he'd be opening himself up for attack but he felt he could handle it. "I've got your back Boomer."

Ricochet jogged back to the tent where Walt waited and watched through binoculars. "Hey man give me a pair of those. I want to watch."

Walt looked at him with a cocky grin. "Radio first," He said holding out his hand.

"What, you think I'm gonna give'm a heads-up?" Ricochet snapped.

"It's what I'd do," Walt answered, his hand still outstretched.

Ricochet smiled then handed over the radio. He lifted the binoculars to his eyes and scanned the wooded area. For the life of him he couldn't figure out where this fourth team member had come from, or how he was taken out without him ever getting a glimpse at what was coming.

Not seeing anything, he settled the binocular sights on Boomer and Kong who were creeping through the woods scanning everything and listening for anything unusual.

Everything seemed to be going well until Boomer stopped dead in his tracks and swung his paintball gun to his right. It was a slight sound, nothing a normal person would think twice about. Boomer however, was trained to be cautious of every sound.

"What is it, Boomer?" Kong asked.

Boomer didn't answer. Instead he crouched down and looked through the gun sight. He could see a leaf flickering on a tree limb. None of the other leaves were moving. Boomer smiled to himself sure he'd found member number four.

Without telling Kong what was going on, he lay on his belly and began to crawl toward the tree with the vibrating leaf. His movement was slow but sure, a crawl he'd done hundreds of times usually without making a sound. His confidence was iced when he reached the tree and no one was there.

Boomer stood and scanned his surroundings with an eagle eye. Nothing. His brow furrowed with confusion then he turned to head back toward Kong. Before he finished turning, he took a kick to the ankle and a jab to the stomach. Fortunately for Boomer his fighting skills kicked in instantaneously.

Dropping to a crouch, he stretched out his right leg and spun, kicking Sam's legs out from under her. When she hit the ground she arched her back and sprang upward again. Sam knew these woods better than anyone and she knew how to lure someone into an area that would be to her advantage. Without looking she knew a tree branch was directly over her head.

Reaching into her pocket she pulled out a big red target, dropped it to the ground and stomped on it causing it to stick to the bottom of her boots then jumped for the limb. Boomer lunged forward as she kicked her feet out.

He was big, so she put every bit of strength she had into it. Boomer's eyes were huge as he was lifted off his feet and thrust backward. He landed with a bone jarring thud, all the air rushing from his lungs. When he could breathe again he looked down at his chest and saw the red target firmly in place.

"Hunh," Boomer huffed then dropped his head back to the ground. "I'm out," he said into his radio.

Kong had watched Boomer belly crawl toward a tree. The next thing he saw was Boomer flying through the air and landing on his back. He didn't know what had taken place but he knew the result. Clenching his jaw, he set his sights on the flag and moved forward.

"Boomer, return to base," Walt said over the radio.

"Damn! No one ever takes Boomer out that fast," Ricochet snarled at Walt.

"This isn't just anyone." Walt replied then placed his binoculars back to his eyes to watch the final man.

Sam tailed the third man a few hundred yards before she got bored. It was time to take him out. Her instincts told her he would be a harder target than the other two so she needed to be sure of her moves. When she saw they were almost to the flag, she picked up a stone and tossed it off to his left. She watched as he held his position scanning the area.

Okay she thought to herself, she'd confuse him a little. She picked up another stone and tossed it to his right. Then picked up a stick and tossed it into the tops of the trees just above his head. She watched as he followed the sounds with his head moving ever so slightly. Then she picked up a bigger stone and threw it hard toward him.

Kong felt the stone nail him in the back and turned with his finger on the trigger ready to fire. Nothing. Nothing was there. He knew he was being played with, but that was fine, he'd been played with before. Hell, he'd done it himself a time or two. All he needed to do was move a few more yards and he'd have the flag. As he turned back to begin walking dirt was thrown in his eyes.

The temporary blindness gave Sam the seconds she needed to finish him. She dropped her body to the ground, swung her legs out to kick his feet out from under him but was met with a hard kick to her shoulder. She spun to the opposite side and tried again. Again she took a kick to the shoulder. Adrenaline was pumping like fire through her veins fueling her. She stood and gave a straight leg kick to his stomach. The blow

connected and Kong doubled over. But not before he grabbed her foot and twisted her leg. Sam followed the movement, kicking off the ground with her other leg and spinning in the air. Her free foot kicked out and struck the side of his head causing him to drop her foot.

Before Kong could recover he felt a hard blow on his chest, which knocked him off his feet and onto his butt. He figured this was it, he was finished, but Sam had other plans.

Just for fun and a bit of revenge, Sam dropped down on his chest and pinned his hands with her knees. She reached down and placed two fingers into his trachea then waited for his eyes to focus on her masked face. The look in those eyes was made chills run down her back. This was a dangerous man.

Slapping the target onto his chest, she continued to look into his eyes. Once she got past the look of pure anger she started noticing their deep blue color and how his black eyelashes framed his eyes so perfectly. She found herself getting lost in his eyes, forgetting everything that was around her.

Samantha, let the man up. You are choking him.

Sam mentally shook herself then removed her fingers from his throat. She jumped easily to her feet then took off into the woods. The whole time she ran she cursed herself for her reaction to him. Why, of all possible times, had she chosen that moment to notice a man's eyes? She could have killed him. She'd never been distracted like that before and that could only mean one thing—trouble.

Kong reached for his throat and massaged the area where she had dug in her fingers. He was gasping for breath. His mind was reeling from what had just happened. This guy was fast and could take a serious hit. Yet, something wasn't quite right about him. Kong couldn't put his finger on it but something was off. He looked down at the red target on his chest and swore.

"I'm out," he grumbled into the radio. He picked himself up and started back toward the tent. He kept running the whole incident over and over in his mind trying to pinpoint the cause of his uneasy feeling, but it just wouldn't come.

When he arrived at the tent, Boomer and Ricochet met him. "How'd you go down?" Ricochet asked.

"Fast," was all Kong would say.

"Black Smoke," Boomer chimed in.

"Damn Boomer. Would you give it a rest already. I keep tellin' ya, there ain't no such thing," Ricochet snorted.

"Gentlemen, come in and have a seat please," Walt said from behind them.

The three men filed into the tent and sat, waiting for an explanation. From the smug look on his face they decided things had gone exactly the way he'd expected.

"First, I have to tell you no one has ever made it that close to the flag before," Walt said, trying not to let his smile show. "Tell me, is the flag still out there?"

Ricochet gave his trademark snort then said, "You telling us you don't even know if there's a flag out there?"

"Well, I put one out there three years ago. It hasn't been touched by human hands since. Like I said, no one's ever made it that close before." Walt sat in his chair and stretched his legs out in front of him, then crossed his feet.

The three men looked at each other then Kong spoke. "Excuse me Sir, but are you going to tell us who that guy is?"

Walt sat straight in his chair. "Are you telling me you'll do this job with this team member?"

"With all due respect Sir, I think the four of us could retrieve anyone from anywhere," Kong said with conviction.

"Would you do the job without knowing the identity of this fourth member?" Walt asked.

"Now hold on a minute," Ricochet said before Kong could speak. "Is this one of those, 'now you know who it is and after the job we'll have to kill you to protect this guy's identity'? Cause I ain't down with that."

"Sir, do you really expect us to go into battle with someone we don't know the first thing about? Yeah, he's got skills, but can we count on him to cover our backs?" Kong asked in a quiet voice.

"No son, I don't," Walt said rubbing his eyes. "I was just hoping." Walt moved to the front of the table and leaned against it. "This person's identity has been kept a secret for several years and for good reason. I have to ask you to keep the identity to yourself after the mission is completed. If I get the slightest wind that this team member's name has been given out you'll find yourselves discharged from the service so fast you won't know what happened. Then your military records will show that you were discharged because of mental illness and the only job you'll be able to get is scrubbing the fryers at the local hamburger joint. Do I make myself clear?"

"Oh man," Ricochet said in a high-pitched whiny voice. "I knew it, I knew it. This is one of those 'I can tell you but then I'll have to kill you' things."

"Relax Ricochet it's nothing like that. All I'm asking is for you to help keep this person off the most wanted list of about twenty drug kingpins and mafia bosses across the country, not to mention a whole slew of corrupt people around the world," Walt reassured him.

"You have our word Sir," Kong said.

"I don't get it. If this guy is so good, how come he hasn't been recruited by special ops like us? How come the military hasn't got him already?" Ricochet asked.

"There were some areas that he didn't qualify in," Walt said slowly.

"Like what?" Kong asked, concerned. If this guy was a loose cannon, they had a right to know.

"Like I don't have the proper plumbing," Sam said softly from behind them.

All three men jumped to their feet and turned. Sam stood there confidently. She still wore her mask, not ready to remove it until the time was right.

None of the men heard her comment. They were too startled at how she managed to creep up behind them without being noticed to pay attention to what she said.

“Black Smoke,” Boomer said again with his deep voice.

“Boomer!” Ricochet scolded.

“He’s right. Gentlemen, meet Black Smoke. I know you think all the stories were just that—stories. But they are real. Now tell me, do you men think you can work with this team member?” Walt asked.

Chapter Four

Boomer stepped forward. "You worked with an old friend of mine a year ago over in China. He told me how you pulled their butts out of the fire a couple of times. He has nothing but respect for you. I'd be honored to work with you."

Sam knew the job he was talking about. It had gone wrong from the very beginning, yet they had all pulled together and successfully completed the mission. She had great respect for those four men she'd worked with. A smile formed behind her mask at the memory and at Boomer's words.

Out in the woods he had looked like a big man. Now that she was up close he was bigger than she thought. He was about six foot five and his shoulders were massive. He wore his hair in the traditional military buzz cut, but she could tell it was a dark blonde. His eyes looked gentle, too gentle for a man of such size.

"Damn," Ricochet said looking the black cloaked figure up and down. "You're just a small thing. But hell, if that's what lets you move so fast that's okay with me. I'm in."

Sam nodded at his response. This man wasn't as large as the one called Boomer. He was shorter but muscular. The chocolate-colored skin on top of his head glistened with sweat and his speech told her he was definitely city raised.

Then she turned toward the third man. The one they called Kong, the one whose eyes had mesmerized her. He wasn't being so easily won over. She could see it in those eyes. He had doubts and they would probably get worse once she removed her mask. Her eyes scanned up and down his body. He was an in-between version of the two other men, her head coming to his shoulders. And nice shoulders they were too, solid and strong. Shoulders that would cradle a woman's head nicely. His chest was hard and muscular, causing images to float into her head of what he'd look like without his military-issue shirt. Sam suddenly drew her eyes back to his face, realizing she was gawking.

"What about you?" Walt asked Kong. "Yes or no?"

Kong absently reached for his throat and rubbed it. This guy was small but fast. He'd heard the stories everyone else had heard and often wondered what it would be like to work with the legend. He was sure nothing would be able to stop the two of them. But right now, at this moment, he wasn't sure. Something was still off.

Sam watched him argue with himself in his mind. She knew how hard it was for some of the soldiers to put their lives in the hands of someone they knew nothing about. She understood that, respected it.

Will he trust me? She asked silently in her head.

Not at first. It will take time.

Will he work with me? She asked.

A soft musical laugh echoed through her head. It was the first time Sam had ever heard her whisper laugh. *Better than you have worked with anyone.*

Sam cocked her head to the side. A touch of fear slid through her body. Why she couldn't say, but it was there. She looked past Kong to her uncle. His brow was furrowed with concern, his eyes were crinkled at the corners. It was obvious he wasn't sure about this situation yet either.

"Okay, I'm in," Kong finally said.

Sam snapped her eyes back to Kong's face. He may have agreed but there was still indecision in his eyes. Those beautiful eyes that a woman could get lost in forever. Sam found herself wondering what they would look like in the heat of passion. A soft musical laugh fluttered through her head again, shaking her from her fantasy. Giving herself a mental slap, she brought her thoughts back to the situation at hand.

"All right," Walt said moving to Sam's side. He looked down at her and she nodded. "I'd like to introduce you to Black Smoke. Also known as Sam."

Sam pulled her hooded mask from her head. She almost laughed out loud at the looks on their faces. God, she wished she had a camera right now.

"Whoa," Boomer said in his deep slow voice.

"Damn!" Ricochet screeched.

Kong dropped his paintball gun, along with his jaw. Sam could only imagine what was going through his mind. He'd been beaten in hand-to-hand by a woman and now he was expected to let her watch his back in battle. For some reason she held her breath waiting for him to say something. Swear at her, shake her hand, anything would be better than that empty stare he was giving her.

"Son of a..." he said, then turned and kicked the chair behind him.

Walt felt Sam flinch slightly when the chair sailed to the other side of the tent. He wanted to wrap his arm around her, protect her. But he knew she could protect herself. His muscles went on alert in case Kong came for her. He wasn't sure what went on in the woods, but this guy was not happy that it came from a woman.

Sam had no idea why she flinched or why she felt a sinking feeling in the pit of her stomach.

She only knew this wasn't the reaction she'd hoped for. And why that was confused her even more. Feeling her uncle move closer to her made her snap out of her self-pity. She watched Kong's back as he took several deep breaths to calm himself. When he turned back toward her his face was neutral but his eyes still told his true feelings.

"Sam, this is Lieutenant Ben Campbell." Walt said hoping to draw attention away from Kong.

"Nice to meet you Lieutenant." Sam said then reached out to shake his hand.

"My pleasure and it's Boomer."

Walt continued, "This is Lieutenant Carl Underwood."

Sam reached out to shake his hand and smiled when he took her hand so gently. "They call me Ricochet."

"And this is Lieutenant Mark Lowe."

Sam didn't reach her hand out to him. She'd shake his hand when he decided the time was right. Instead their eyes met and held for a brief moment. Sam felt her stomach flutter and her knees shake. Just when she thought it was time to move on, he reached out to shake her hand.

"They call me Kong," he said calmly.

Sam put her hand in his and swore she felt electricity shoot up her arm and directly into her heart. She held his eyes the entire time and knew he felt it as well. Immediately they dropped the handshake and both reached to rub their arms.

"Now, if you'll all take a seat you can ask Sam some questions to put your minds at ease. But keep in mind she won't be able to answer them all," Walt said.

All five sat, Kong sitting in the chair that he'd kicked across the tent. He'd placed himself so he could have a good view of her face while they spoke. He knew something wasn't right and now he knew what it was. He'd never worked with a woman like this in his life. Especially one so beautiful.

Boomer and Ricochet sat on each side of her firing questions at her. Kong wasn't paying attention to what they were saying. He could only look. She was petite but strong. Her muscles showed underneath her black turtleneck. She wore her jet black hair in a short wispy style that accented her high cheekbones and creamy skin. He could tell she wasn't wearing any makeup, probably because she didn't need to. Her eyes were a light gray, gun metal gray was how he would describe them. They almost sparkled when the light hit them just right. Her dark eyelashes made them stand out even more.

When she glanced up at him he felt as though she could see into the deepest depths of his soul.

Kong's eyes slid to her mouth, which at the moment was smiling. Her lips were lush, pink and looked as soft as rose petals. His stomach clenched then fluttered when he started wondering if they felt as soft as they looked. Not good, he thought to himself, not good at all.

"Kong, hey Kong. Is there anything you want ask her?" Ricochet asked when he noticed Kong sitting there staring at her.

Kong groaned silently to himself. What the hell was wrong with him? He didn't even know this woman and here he was eyeing her like she was a piece of prime beef. God, this wasn't going to work out very well.

"Yeah, I have a question. What kind of training have you had?" he asked with a smug look on his face.

Boomer's voice rumbled through the tent. "How can you ask that? Does it matter? She's been on more ops than the three of us put together. Weren't you listening?"

No, he'd been too busy trying to figure out if her lips were soft. "I know she's been on a lot of ops. I still want to know what kind of skills she has. See, Boomer here, he's a skilled sniper, and the best man walking this Earth with explosives. Ricochet's a black belt and expert sniper."

"And what are your skills Lieutenant?" Sam asked, purposely using an overly feminine voice.

Walt snickered at her tone. He'd seen her do the ego battle with men before and every time she came out on top. But not only that, she would have earned their respect by the time they were done.

Kong sat straight in his chair. He had no doubt she was making fun of him and he wasn't going to let her make him look like a fool. "Sniper, explosives, camouflage, you name it, I've done it." He snapped.

"That impressive. I guess that doesn't compare to me. Should we get on with our instructions so we know where we're headed and how much time we have to complete this mission?" Sam said turning her attention away from Kong and directing it to her uncle.

Walt sat stunned. Sam never turned away from a battle of egos with a soldier. She always told him it was her only small joy. Why on earth was she letting this one run her down? But when he looked at her and she gave him that quick wink he decided she knew what she was doing.

He pointed to a spot on a large map that he'd spread out on the table. "This is your destination," he said, then moved his finger to another spot on the map, "and this is where you'll be dropped off. The kidnappers gave a five-day deadline. That gives you less than three days to get to Afghanistan, reach your destination, find the building the hostage is in, plan your attack and extract the hostage. Once you have him you'll be picked up here," he said moving his finger again. "A chopper will lift you out, drop you off at another location where a plane will bring you back home."

"What about intelligence?" Sam asked.

Walt tossed a fat envelope in front of her. "It's all in there."

"How do we know this is where the hostage is being held? No one's ever been able to find these guys," she asked.

"Most of the Afghan people are tired of the old ways. They like being able to make their own decisions, go where they want when they want. And they know the only way to get us out of their country is to get rid of the bad seeds. Their cooperation is overwhelming."

Sam nodded her understanding then asked, "Are they still requiring women to be covered?"

Walt leaned back in his chair, he had been hoping to have this conversation in private, but if they were all going in together they should all know the score. "Sam, women are still seen as objects to be owned over there. It will be extremely dangerous for you if you're captured." Walt dropped his head not wanting to think about what could happen to his niece. "Well, just listen to your inner voice," he said looking up at her.

"Don't worry, we won't let anything happen to her," Boomer said with conviction.

Sam smiled at him. For such a large guy he sure seemed like a teddy bear. And that voice of his shook her to her bones.

"You don't need to worry about me Boomer. I've been through worse," she said patting his large hand.

Kong sat watching and listening to the scene in front of him. This was a bad idea. He felt it to his bones. Women, especially Americans, were not safe in that part of the world. If one of the Taliban got his hands on her, she would be ruthlessly tortured before she was killed. His heart tightened at the thought.

"So what you're saying is not only do we have to watch our backs, but we have to make sure she doesn't get her little ass snagged," Kong grumbled.

Sam stood instantly, her anger bubbling up from nowhere. He may have bedroom eyes and a body that would make a woman burn with lust, but he had the personality of a rattlesnake. "I can assure you Lieutenant my little ass has been in worse situations than this. I don't get requested for jobs just on the size of my ass. If you have any doubts about my abilities I suggest you and I step outside and you can get a first-hand account of my skills. Only this time, I might not take my fingers out of your throat until your face turns blue!"

"You think I want to fight a woman? I don't know what kind of men you like honey, but I'm not one who has to get rough with women," Kong sneered.

"No, you're the one that can't stand the thought of being bested by one, which you were earlier. That's it isn't it? Your precious pride was hurt because I got the drop on you."

"Yeah, that's it honey. You got it," Kong replied sitting back in his chair and kicking his legs out in front of him.

Sam lost control of her temper. She was trained to be in control, never to lose sight of the mission and yet this man plowed through her defenses like a wrecking ball and burrowed himself deep under her skin, wrapping himself around every nerve ending until she could no longer stand it. Her vision tunneled and red tinged its outskirts. They shared the same training. They both knew it was imperative to remain calm in any situation, yet his annoyance with her seeped past his wall of defense. So be it. If he wanted proof of her capabilities she would give him proof. With two quick steps she launched herself in the air toward Kong. Her feet shoved against his shoulders tipping him backward onto the ground. Kong reacted by kicking his feet up over his head and

rolling, taking Sam with him. In the middle of the roll, Sam jabbed both elbows into his solar plexus then brought her head up into his mouth.

Boomer and Ricochet stood to intervene but Walt stopped them. For some reason these two needed to do this and it was better to get it out of the way now rather than out in the field. He winced a few times at the blows they both received but managed to keep out of it. He knew the root of the conflict. It was something he'd seen before and shamefully admitted to feeling at one time. Men weren't accustomed to women on the battle field and didn't trust they were capable of getting the job done. Sam knew this, she'd come up against it before. Why she let it bother her to this extent confused and unsettled Walt.

The joust continued for a few more minutes, both of them taking and blocking blows. Neither was ready to give up or back down. Two strong wills collided against each other like the world depended on the result. In Kong's eyes their lives did depend on it. He couldn't allow his friends to enter enemy territory blindly with an over sensitive woman that would hesitate pulling the trigger to save their lives.

Sam decided she had allowed the sparring to go on long enough. With a swift jab of her fist into his stomach, then a high kick to his jaw, she laid Kong on his back. Just like before she sat on his chest, pinning his arms with her knees. Kong looked up at her and saw the smoldering hate in her eyes. Somewhere deep inside himself he regretted that, but to him it was necessary.

"Did you learn what you needed to learn Lieutenant?" Sam asked. "Or do we need to go another round? I'll warn you first, if we do this again I won't just spar with you I'll take you out completely."

Kong drew in a deep breath then looked down at her crotch sitting right in front of him. His body hardened with fierce speed. "We're cool," he grumbled, then began to sit up. If he didn't get her off of him now he would embarrass himself in front of the others.

Sam jumped to her feet and moved away from him. Kong pulled himself up and adjusted his shirt. Boomer and Ricochet just looked at him with blank faces. Walt scrubbed his face with his hands.

"If you two are finished with the playground antics I need to fill you in on the last of the details." When they all turned back to him he continued, "You'll fly out at twenty-hundred tonight. What you do until then is your own business. Your pickup after you retrieve the hostage is at eighteen-hundred three days from now. Any questions?"

When they all chorused "No Sir", Walt continued. "Sam, meet me in my office at the barracks. I want to talk to these guys a moment."

"That's not..."

"Please," Walt interrupted.

Sam gave him a quick glare, then turned and left the tent. She couldn't believe he was going to lecture them about her. He'd never done that before. She could defend

herself. Sam ran with lightning speed back to the barracks, her anger pumping her legs faster. This whole situation was crazy. Hadn't she proven herself over and over again? Why was she letting this particular man get under her skin? Sam stopped in front of her uncle's office and bent over to catch her breath. A hot shower, she thought to herself, that's what she needed. She could use the time to calm herself and think this situation through.

Back at the tent Kong felt Walt's eyes bore through him. "Sir, I'd like to explain."

"No need," Walt replied.

"Yes Sir there is. She's young, in her twenties as far as I can figure. Surely she hasn't had the years of training we've had and you're asking us to trust her. I'm sorry Sir, but my trust doesn't come that easily," he said, looking at Boomer and Ricochet.

"Is that so? Tell me Lieutenant just what do you know about her?" Walt asked.

"That's the point. I don't know anything." Kong was working hard at keeping his tone low-key.

"Okay, let me enlighten you. She's twenty-six years old and started her training eighteen years ago." Walt let that tidbit of information sink in.

"You tellin' us she started training when she was eight?" Ricochet asked.

"Exactly. By the time she was twelve she'd gone through four martial arts masters, each one teaching her everything he knew. When she was thirteen, she started coming here and training with my men. She watched, listened and learned everything she could. One day I put her out there with some of the guys on an exercise. Twenty minutes into the session she took out four men.

"And if you're worried about how she'll handle herself if she's captured by the Taliban, don't be. Yesterday she went to Jersey to retrieve a woman who had been kidnapped. Our intelligence told her there were only two men. Imagine her surprise when a third walked in. At this very moment he's undergoing surgery to repair major damage to his penis and scrotum. Now, she didn't tell me, but I'm assuming the man thought he'd use her for his entertainment since she had let his intended victim go."

The men cringed at the thought of what she could have done to him. Kong smiled to himself, these were the answers he needed. She could fight, no doubt about that, his ribs and face would attest to her fighting skills. But now that he knew how she handled herself when she was outnumbered, some of the tension started to ease from his body.

Chapter Five

When Walt finished with the men, they all climbed into the jeep and headed back to base.

Walt knew Sam would be furious with him for talking to them without her being there, but he also knew she'd get over it. One thing he knew about his Sam was that she never held a grudge for very long.

When they pulled up to the building housing Walt's office he turned to the men and said, "If you want to leave camp for a while you can use this jeep. Just make sure you're ready to go at twenty hundred." He climbed the two stairs to the front door and disappeared inside.

Sam was already sitting in his chair showered and changed. The look on her face told him that she wasn't ready to forgive him yet. That was okay, he deserved it. "Outta my chair."

She stood and moved to the door. "Did you tell them not to pick on the little girl?"

"No, I gave them reason to fear you if you must know," he said without looking at her.

"Oh. How'd you do that?"

"I told them about the guy you shot in the balls last night. I don't think you'll have any problem with Lieutenant Lowe now," he said with a smile.

Sam rolled her eyes and left the office. If she'd known that's all it took to get a man under control she'd have used it lot sooner. She left the building and walked to her red Mustang, which was parked between two buildings. To her surprise, Lieutenant Lowe was looking the car over.

When Sam approached, he looked up at her, then did a double take. His mouth went dry and his throat closed. She was wearing a pair of khaki shorts and a white tank top that showed exactly how female she was. Funny he thought to himself, he didn't remember feeling her breasts brush against him during their sparring match. That was something a man would remember.

Clearing his throat, he asked, "Is this your car?" When she didn't answer, he said. "Sweet ride."

Sam tossed her bag into the backseat. "Is there something I can do for you?"

"I just wanted to apologize, that's all," he said leaning up against the car and crossing his arms.

"For what?" she asked.

"You knew I was goading you into that fight and you went along with it. Why?"

Sam rubbed her eyes, then placed her hands on her hips. "It was the only way I was going to earn your trust. Well, maybe trust isn't the right word. You needed to know I was capable of taking care of myself so I showed you. Why apologize for that?"

"I get the feeling you're not used to people questioning your authority. I didn't mean any disrespect, honest. It's just my way of looking out for my men," he told her.

Sam looked at him. She could see he was being sincere. And she was sure if she thought about it long enough she'd probably do the same thing in his shoes. "You're right. I'm not used to people questioning me. Look, all we have to do is get through the next four days," she said opening the car door and sitting inside. "Then we won't have to see each other ever again."

Sam started the car, put it in reverse and started backing away. "I'm sure that won't bother you one bit," she yelled, then took off toward home.

"Yeah," Kong said to himself. Yet he couldn't explain the sinking feeling that gave him.

He was half tempted to jump in the jeep and follow her. Why, he couldn't say, but he fought the feeling and went to join his friends in the barracks.

When he walked in, the two men stopped talking and quietly went about packing their packs.

Kong went to his bunk and sat, placing his face in his hands. This was supposed to be just another op, but somehow it had gotten out of hand.

"Let's hear it. You two have something to say to me so say it," he said into his hands.

When they didn't answer he stood. "You want to know why I didn't just instinctively trust her? Well, my question is, why did you?"

"It just felt right," Boomer explained.

"Look, where I come from, you tick a woman off bad enough and she'll kick your ass up and down the street without taking a breath. It's normal to me," Ricochet explained with a shrug of his shoulders.

"It doesn't come that easy for me," Kong said. "I wish it did but it doesn't."

"It's cool. Just don't bust her ass too much," Ricochet said as he grabbed a towel from his locker. "Something tells me we may need her in a bad way before this is over." Then he walked to the back of the barracks for a shower before they left.

"What did you mean it just felt right Boomer?"

"I don't know. I get these feelings about people, ya know, like whether they're trustworthy or not. She gives me good feelings," he said looking up at Kong. "It doesn't hurt that she's hot too."

Kong felt an instinctive surge of jealousy surge through him. Confused by this he banked it down for later scrutiny. He wished he could feel as sure about this as his buddies, but he couldn't and this was something he didn't need before leaving for an op.

Sam drove home thinking about Kong and her sparring match with him. That little match didn't bother her. What bothered her was how turned on she was by the whole thing. When she was sitting on his chest, she could feel herself getting moist between her legs. That was something she'd never experienced before, especially during a fight. He wasn't even her type of guy. His ego was bigger than he was and he was big. His attitude toward working with a woman just plain sucked and she hadn't seen much of a personality yet.

So why did this guy turn her on so much? Had it been so long since she'd had a romantic relationship that she was desperate? She started thinking how long it had been since she'd been with a man. Six, no seven months ago. Her last affair had been a dud. Sean was his name. He was a computer geek, nice enough looking, but he lacked fire when it came to the bedroom. And if he couldn't talk about programs and viruses he wouldn't talk at all.

That was it, she was horny. It had been months since she'd had sex and even longer since she'd had good sex. Kong was built like a Greek god and her body was responding to him.

Satisfied with that reasoning she continued her drive home listening to the radio, keeping her thoughts clear of him. It would be hard enough working with him the next four days without her mind concentrating on that excellent body.

After another hot bubble bath and rubbing herself down with lotion, Sam started to carefully pack her supplies. Her pack was specially made for her. There were small pockets hidden everywhere inside and out. She didn't really need too many clothes, but she always made sure she had an extra shirt, mask and underwear.

Next came the Meals Ready to Eat she'd need on the trip. Along with those she packed granola bars, candy bars and trail mix. Then came the essentials. Waterproof matches, a lighter, her pen light, compass, radio. Eight bottles of water, a first-aid kit and a black box that contained tranquilizer darts. Once the inside was full, she started filling up the outside pockets.

She slid her tranq gun into its special pocket then her sidearm into its pocket. She didn't use it very often, but she never traveled without it. She never knew when a moment would come where she found herself trapped and had to defend herself by taking a life. That was something she didn't like to think about.

No matter how bad a person, she felt she didn't have the right to take a life. It had only happened once and it took her months to deal with it.

Once her packing was complete, she looked at the clock and saw she had an hour before she needed to leave. Lying back on the bed she closed her eyes and said a silent prayer that all would go well and that they would all return home unharmed. That done, she lay quietly for a few moments more then spoke.

"Why does this feel so different from all my other missions?" she asked aloud.

Because it is, came the reply in the soft whisper.

Why? Sam questioned.

You will bring home much more than you expect this time.

I don't understand, Sam said inside her head.

I cannot tell you more than that. If I do, I will be taking away your free will. You must make your own decisions from here on. It is only my place to direct you to the proper people.

Will you still help me on the mission? Help me keep my team safe? Sam questioned.

Of course Samantha, I will always guide you away from harm.

Thank you, she said, then relaxed into a light sleep. There were many nights when she was growing up that she lay in bed and talked with her whisper. It had taught her about free will and what it meant. Everyone was free to make their own decisions in life, whether they were good or bad decisions. Even though her guide directed her on missions it was ultimately Sam's choice to take a life or not. The one time she did her whisper consoled her nightly, telling her that on some rare occasions a life had to be taken to save another.

Sam didn't care. It still tore at her soul that she had done such a horrible thing. But every time she ran through it in her mind she saw no way of getting around it. Once Sam asked how God felt about soldiers who took lives. She was told not to worry about it, that those she had worked with and who took a life were judged based on their own decisions. Sam understood what she was being told, but still could not justify her own actions.

As the clock ticked off the time, Sam rested peacefully. While she slept, a bright white light came down through the ceiling in her room and washed over her body. It lingered for a few moments covering her from head to toe. When it was time for her to wake the light rose back to the ceiling and disappeared. Sam opened her eyes feeling a sense of warmth and love deep inside. Her body felt renewed and ready for the task that lay ahead of her.

With this renewed energy she dressed in her black clothes and left the house. Somehow she knew things would be okay. No matter what happened over the next few days, everything would be just fine. She climbed into her Mustang with a smile and headed off to work.

Ricochet, Boomer and Kong were standing with her Uncle Walt when she arrived at the air strip. One look at Kong made her tranquil feelings dissipate into the early evening air. She scolded herself for letting this man affect her the way he did. With her head held high she marched directly toward the group.

"Sam," Walt said smiling at her. "Is there anything else you need before you take off?"

"No, I have everything. Thanks," she replied.

Kong watched the two of them, there was true affection between them. Was he her father, brother, or lover? Kong figured by the time the op was over, he'd find out. The sound of the plane landing drew his attention away from them.

Once it landed Walt shook the hands of the three men and wished them luck. When he was sure they were aboard the plane, he turned to Sam and brushed the backs of his fingers down her cheek. "Be careful honey and come home to me."

"I will Uncle Walt. I love you," Sam said, then reached up and hugged him hard.

Kong peered around the open door and watched as Sam hugged him. That feeling of jealousy washed through him again. Aggravated with himself both for spying and for his feelings, he marched back into the plane, tossed his pack onto the floor and flopped in a seat. Boomer and Ricochet looked at him, then at each other. Kong's actions since finding out who their temporary teammate was baffled them.

Sam entered the plane, stowed her pack and took a seat by Boomer and Ricochet. She glanced over at Kong and saw he had his eyes pinned directly to the seat in front of him. Nothing was said for the first two hours of the flight. It seemed they all needed the time to mentally prepare themselves for what lay ahead.

When the plane landed they were escorted to a cargo plane that would take them the rest of the way to Afghanistan. This ride would be noisy and incredibly uncomfortable. Once they were all aboard it only took moments until the plane took off. Sam sat between Ricochet and Boomer, while Kong sat across from her on a crate. He had yet to say anything to her at all.

"Hey Ricochet," she shouted over the noise of the plane. "I've always been fascinated with how you guys get your nicknames, how'd you get yours?"

Ricochet laughed, "Well I'll tell ya. When I first started in special ops I went on a 'job' in a country that if I told you about, I'd have to kill you."

Sam laughed, she knew what he was telling her and it was fine with her if he didn't tell her the details.

"Anyway, we needed to take out a target that had been doing his own version of genocide. I was hunkered down on my belly in this little gully and had him in my sights, fired and the damn bullet ricocheted off his car and came right back at me. Little did I know that right behind me, on his knees, was one of his own men pointing a gun directly at the back my lovely black head. Now, didn't that bullet come straight back and nail him right between the eyes." Ricochet let out a loud ha ha laugh and shook his head. "Guess it was my lucky day."

Sam couldn't help but smile, she knew luck had nothing to do with it. His own guide had saved his life that day. And someday, he'd realize it. "Did you get your target?" she asked.

"Sure did. I managed to fire another round when I saw what was happening. Been called Ricochet ever since."

"How about you Boomer, how'd you get your name?" She asked.

Boomer smiled, his face lighting up that she asked. "I like explosives. Even when I was a kid I ran around with firecrackers, strapping them to plastic rockets and cars and blowing them up. It was only natural that I got into it in the Army. My parents started calling me Boomer when I was a kid, it just stuck."

Sam didn't know whether to be charmed or scared. If he had taken a different path in life, she could possibly be hunting him instead of working with him. She sent a silent prayer of thanks to his guide that he'd chosen his path wisely.

When Sam looked over at Kong, he was looking right at her. He had no intention of telling how he got his nickname, she could read it in his face. So she turned to Ricochet and asked him.

Ricochet snickered, "In our early days in special ops we had this tradition of going out and getting shit-faced after we returned from a 'job'. One night we were all at a bar, loaded, when a bunch of groupies came strolling in."

"That's enough Ricochet," Kong grumbled.

Ricochet wasn't deterred, he continued. "Our boy here took a shine to one. Spent the next hour getting her liquored up. Next thing we know the two of em are headed out the door. Guess they couldn't wait to get to a hotel cuz the next thing we hear is her screaming at the top of her lungs, 'King Kong, King Kong.' The rest of us nearly peed our pants laughing."

Kong threw a rolled-up piece of paper at him then called him a nasty name. Ricochet took it in his stride. "He don't like that story."

"Tell me," Sam asked. "Does that refer to your stature, or the size of your package?"

Boomer and Ricochet busted out laughing, Sam joined in. She could picture a younger version of the lieutenant getting it on with a dim-witted woman screaming at the top of her lungs. From the strained look on Kong's face, he was trying very hard not to laugh with them.

"I haven't been able to shake the name or the story ever since. Thanks to the mouth here," Kong said throwing another piece of paper at Ricochet. Kong was relieved that Sam was laughing about the story. He was afraid she'd think less of him than she already did.

They all continued to laugh for a few more minutes, then everyone went quiet again. They still had a long trip ahead of them and this silence was going to drive Sam nuts. She searched her mind for topics to pass the time, but she really didn't know much about them so she couldn't come up with anything.

Ask about their families.

Some people don't like to talk about their families, she replied inside her head.

Sometimes people need to share.

Sam rolled her eyes. Okay, she thought, she'd give it a shot. "Do you have any family Ricochet?"

"Oh yes I do, I do. My moms and my sister. My moms raised me and my sister by herself. She worked two jobs six days a week. On Sundays she spent the day with us, took us to the park and when she could afford it, to the movies," he told her proudly.

"She sounds like a remarkable woman," Sam said smiling.

"You bet your life. We didn't have much but we had each other. Moms made sure my grades stayed high. She wanted more for me than living in the projects like we was. When I finally graduated from high school, I went down to the local recruiting office and signed up. Moms was proud. She figured in the service I'd get three square meals a day and stay outta trouble."

"What about your sister?"

"She graduated two years ago. She's goin' to nursing school. Says when she gets a job and some money saved up, she's moving moms outta the projects. I send money home each week for her to put away in an account to help her with that goal."

Sam was humbled by his story. Just looking at him you only saw the military man. But deep inside was a more complicated man. She figured if she dug much deeper she'd find someone who wanted to become president.

"What about you Boomer?" she asked.

"My dad lives in Ohio. He owns a hardware store. I have a brother too. He's five years younger than I am. My mom died after she gave birth to him, so my dad raised us alone. When my brother turned ten he got a real bad fever and spent a week in the hospital. When he came home, he was deaf. My dad didn't know how to deal with a deaf kid so I took him to sign language classes and we learned together. I tried to teach my dad too, but he refused to learn," Boomer explained.

Sam felt deep sorrow for Boomer. He hadn't had it easy growing up either. "What does your brother do now?"

"He teaches in a school for the deaf. He's good too. Was voted teacher of the year twice." The look of pride on his face eased the sorrow in Sam's heart.

When she looked at Kong, he was staring at her, daring her to ask him. So she did. "Tell me about your family."

Kong leaned forward. "Unlike some, I didn't grow up in the perfect two storey house. I grew up in trailer parks all over North Carolina. My mother was drunk and drugged up most of the time. My father was the local dealer and hauled women in and out of the trailer on a regular basis. One night neither of them came home. A social worker showed up and took me off. I spent the rest of my childhood being shuffled from foster home to foster home. When I turned eighteen, I joined. The rest is history." When he finished, he leaned back against the crate, waiting for her reply.

Sam crawled over to him and leaned into his face. "I don't have any parents either. They died when I was eight," she said into his face. Then sat back in her spot between Ricochet and Boomer.

Chapter Six

Kong spent the next hour trying to piece her story together. Cannon had told them she started her training when she was eight. She just told him her parents died when she was eight. That meant Cannon wasn't her father. That left either her brother or her lover. And what would make an eight-year-old start extensive training? There was much more to this woman than met the eye.

After an hour of sitting in the same position, Sam started getting bored. She rose and stepped over Boomer who was fast asleep, along with Ricochet. When she glanced over at Kong, she saw his eyes were closed too. Sam knew she should be trying to sleep herself, but she needed to stretch first.

She walked to the rear of the plane and started doing some stretches to loosen her muscles. When she finished she found some free space on the floor and lay down. When she closed her eyes, it only took her moments to fall asleep. Only this time she didn't rest easily. Her dream came back with a fierceness she hadn't experienced since she was a child. The dream started out the same, the sound of the wind chimes, the peaceful feeling. Then came the sound of men entering her home. This time everything was real. Too real. She could smell the night air, hear the words that were being shouted. She actually felt her hair being pulled by the man with the marking on his wrist. She felt the ropes as he tied her to the chair and saw a man raping her mother while the door was open.

Kong opened his eyes when he heard her whimper. He sat a few moments waiting, listening. When she began to get louder, he rose and saw her lying on the floor thrashing around, mumbling in her sleep. He watched for a few moments debating whether or not to wake her. But the pain he saw in her face tore at him. He made his way over to her and crouched down beside her.

"Sam, wake up," he said shaking her. "Sam."

When her hand shot up, Kong ducked in time to miss a jab to his jaw. "Sam!" he shouted. Her eyes flew open and her breathing was ragged. She looked at her surroundings, then focused on Kong's face. His eyes held concern and that she couldn't take. She sat up and scooted away from him, wrapping her arms around herself.

"That must have been some dream," he said sitting down on the floor across from her. "Want to talk about it?" When she shook her head no he said, "Suit yourself."

He stood to leave her, then crouched back down. "Regardless of what you think of me, I'm not an ogre. I know you can take care of yourself, but sometimes, there are things that haunt us and it helps to have someone to talk them out with." With that he stood and left.

Sam sat there mulling his words over in her mind. Did he really think she'd tell him her darkest secrets? That was a joke, yet why did she feel the need to call him back?

Sometimes the least likely person is the one we need.

Sam rolled her eyes. Like she needed him. Hadn't she proven herself to him?

Battle is not what I mean.

She sat a few moments thinking, then got up and stretched. Boomer and Ricochet were still asleep. Kong was lying back on his crate. Maybe she should try to talk to him, get the air cleared before they landed. Sam made her way over to the crate. When Kong saw her coming he sat up and made room for her.

They sat for a few moments and then Kong asked, "Is Cannon your boyfriend?" He didn't know what possessed him to ask, but the words were out now and there was no turning back.

Sam snorted. "No. He's my uncle."

Kong felt a wave of relief crash over him. Shaking it off he asked, "Did he raise you?"

"Yeah, he took me in and raised me like his own. I'm sorry he lectured you after our little..." She made a back and forth motion with her finger between the two of them. "He's never done that before. Usually he lets me handle the situation."

Kong smiled. "He didn't really lecture. He just filled us in on your training history."

"Oh." Walt never told people about her training. Why were things so different this time?

"It's impressive, your training. Mind if I ask what possessed a young girl to take on so much?"

Sam looked at him. "That's kind of personal. I never really talked with anyone about it before."

"I see. Well, if you feel the need. I listen well."

"Why did you ask if Uncle Walt was my boyfriend? I mean, he's so much older than me," Sam asked.

"Well, ah, there just seemed to be something there. Plus, I didn't want to return home and have him after my head if something happened." Kong felt heat rise in his face, the more he talked the deeper he got.

"If something happened? You mean if I got captured?"

"Yeah, yeah, that's it," he said looking the other way. "So, do you have a boyfriend?"

"No. It's hard to find someone that will accept my job. Men don't exactly like a woman that spends her time kicking ass."

"What about a military guy? You'd have something in common."

"No, no, no. I don't date military men. When I'm in a relationship, I'm committed to it and I want him to be committed as well. I don't go for my bed one night and someone else's when they leave town," she explained.

Kong felt the hit hard in his chest, but he pushed it away. "Yeah, your type probably likes the meek and mild type. The kind that like to be dominated by women." He sneered.

"My type. What the hell does that mean?" Sam asked a bit miffed.

"Well, women that like to be in control of everything around them."

"You don't know the first thing about me. How can you stereotype me like that?" she snapped.

"What do you mean? Like you just stereotyped military men?" he grumbled back.

Sam opened her mouth to respond, then thought better of it. He was right. All he did was feed it right back at her. She had it coming. "Sorry, you're right. I did didn't I?"

"Listen, not all men are like that. Some of us would appreciate having someone they could relate to on a work level. We're not all pigs," he laughed.

"It would be nice to have someone to talk to about my work, then get naked with every night. I could live with that," Sam told him in a lighthearted tone.

Desire started to grow in the pit of Kong's stomach. Just hearing her say those words was enough to make him hard. *God*, he thought to himself, *what is wrong with me? I've never reacted to a woman like this before.*

"Do you have a girlfriend?" Sam asked quietly, afraid of what the answer might be.

"No, it's hard to find a woman who trusts military men," he said glancing at her out of the side of his eyes. When he saw her wince, he knew he'd made his point. "There are what we call groupies, the women that like the idea of being with a soldier, but all they really want is a few nights of sex, then they move on. A real woman is hard to find."

Sam looked over at him, their eyes met. His blue eyes seemed to sparkle in the dim light of the cargo plane. She could see gentleness in them and wondered how gentle he could be. Her mind started wondering again about what it would feel like to be touched by him and what those eyes would look like if they were filled with passion.

The desire Kong felt earlier grew from his stomach and inched toward his groin. That didn't surprise him, but when it hit his heart, he froze. It was almost like she was looking straight through him with those light gray eyes. He dropped his eyes down to her mouth and absently licked his own lips. He felt such need to touch those lips with his own, to feel them give under his, he wanted to explore the inside of her mouth and taste her.

When they both realized what was happening, they jerked their eyes away from each other, both looking in opposite directions and both uncomfortable. Sam looked over at Boomer and Ricochet, trying to bring herself under some sort of control. The way her heart was racing she was sure he could hear it. Her palms were sweaty and

moisture had started to pool between her legs again. This wasn't right, she was walking into a deadly mission and she was lusting after Lieutenant Mark Lowe.

Kong closed his eyes and took several deep breaths, demanding that his body settle down. If he had to stand up at this very moment his desire for Sam would be clear to everyone. It took a few moments, but eventually he had himself back under control.

"You're lucky to have such good friends," Sam said still looking at the two sleeping lieutenants. "I've often wondered what it would be like to have someone to just hang out with." Kong tilted his head and looked at her profile. She seemed sad. "They're the best. I can always count on them to watch my back. And I don't mean just in the field, I mean no matter what the situation." He paused for a moment then continued, "Are you saying you don't have any friends to do things with?"

Sam straightened, irritated with herself for saying anything. "It's hard to have friends when you have to keep your identity such a secret," she told him in a flat tone. Irritation rippled through her body. She'd allowed her guard to slip just enough to reveal something simple, but personal about herself. She'd have to keep in mind it was easy to talk to him when he wasn't being an ass. That was something she had to avoid.

"I imagine it is." He felt for her. He knew he'd be lost without his two sidekicks and couldn't imagine the loneliness she must feel.

"How about we go over the intelligence Uncle Walt gave us, then look at the map and start making plans. Unless you want to sleep some more?" she said looking down at the floor.

"That sounds like a good idea. I've got the data in my pack." Kong pulled the map and envelope out, then the two spread everything out on top of the crate. "Should we wake up the sleeping beauties or let them be?"

Sam glanced over her shoulder and smiled at how peaceful they both looked. "Let 'em sleep." Besides, she was enjoying this one-on-one time with the lieutenant. He was actually showing some promise in the personality department.

"Okay, what do we have?" he mumbled as he pulled out a few pieces of paper from the folder. "Not much."

Sam took the papers and began reading aloud, "Subject has reported seeing Americans being walked inside the dwelling with their hands tied behind their backs. Subject says he has never seen them being removed from the building. A group of five to eight Taliban warriors is reported to be holding the Americans." Sam scanned the rest of the paper. "The rest of it is just info on landmarks, empty buildings surrounding the area and the closest markets." She looked at the papers she held and couldn't help the uneasy feeling that was sliding its way through her.

"That's it? That's our intelligence?" Kong sneered.

"I have to admit, it's sparse. Kong, what if we get there and there's more than one American?" she asked quietly.

Kong looked at her with concern. He was just thinking the same thing. "What makes you say that?"

"I don't know, just a feeling. It says they've never seen anyone being removed. What if..." Sam paused and ran the thought through her mind again. "What if they hold a bunch, then kill them all at once?"

Kong scrubbed his face with his hands. It was eerie how much they thought alike. Then he looked at her with stern eyes. "Then we get them all out."

"It's going to be hard moving more than one person to the extraction point without being noticed," she told him.

Kong thought for a second. "Let's just work on the assumption that we only have one for right now. When we get there and it turns out we have more, we'll stash them and work up a new plan."

Nodding her head in agreement, Sam began looking at the map to find a place that they could use as a hideout if needed. Then she took the intel papers and studied them. After a few moments, she pointed to a spot on the map.

"This building right here. We can use it to watch what's going on and hide the hostages in it."

"That's right next door to the target."

"Damn straight it is. How does that saying go? Keep your friends close and you enemies closer," she said smiling at him.

Kong's face lit up. "So you're saying, they'd never think to look there because it's so close. They'll think we hightailed it out as soon as we do the rescue." When Sam nodded he said, "I like the way you think."

Disturbed with the amount of satisfaction that statement gave her and not wanting him to see it for himself, Sam looked back at the map, shrugged her shoulders and said, "Well, it's something to start with. When we get there, we may need to change plans."

Kong nodded his agreement. "How much faith do you put into these intelligence reports?" he asked tapping his finger on the one sheet of paper.

A small snort escaped Sam. "Not much. I learned a long time ago to take it with a grain of salt."

"Like your last job?" he asked quietly.

Sam continued to study the map, while she spoke. "Yeah, like my last job. Intel said two players, I found three."

"And that didn't jar you?"

Without looking up she replied, "No, should it?"

Kong shrugged his shoulders, "I don't know. You work alone most of the time, seems to me you'd need your plans to work out to the letter. Something new pops up the whole thing goes down the tubes." He knew he was treading on touchy territory, but he needed to feel her out, see how she dealt with surprises.

Sam hopped off the crate, crossed her arms over her breasts and looked him in the eye. "This may come as surprise to you, but my whole life has been about dealing with the unexpected. I don't get rattled. I don't go screaming into the night and pouting

because things didn't go as planned. I deal and I move on." Sam knew he was fishing. She could understand that. Hell, she could respect that from most people. From him, it grated on her ego.

"That's good to know," Kong said with a small smile—one that reached his eyes and made them glint in the dim light of the cargo plane.

That simple smile and his warm eyes sent heated ripples through Sam's body. Her stomach fluttered and her pulse quickened, nearly making her gasp for breath. Without realizing it, she was staring at his mouth and licking her bottom lip with the tip of her tongue. How could this man make her so furious one moment and hot the next?

Kong watched as Sam's tongue caressed her bottom lip. The slow movement and the small amount of moisture it left behind on her lip were more than he could bear. His body responded in record time. Muscles clenched, heat burned in his groin and blood pulsed through his veins, all rushing to one area. Suddenly aware of how he was reacting, he turned slightly to the side.

It wouldn't do him any good to let her know how she affected him, not now, not when they were ready to land in enemy territory.

Kong cleared his throat as he looked away from Sam. "Look, I didn't mean to suggest you're some girly girl. I just wanted to make sure..."

"You wanted to make sure I didn't leave you and your men hanging when something went wrong," Sam interrupted. He was doing it again, going from hot to annoying in two seconds flat.

Sometimes we all need a little reassurance.

Sam rolled her eyes to herself and pulled back on her temper. The whisper was right. He was no different from what she was. "I'm sorry," she said in a kinder voice. "I don't know how to prove to you that I know what I'm doing. I know it's asking a lot for you to just trust me, but it's all I've got." She ran her fingers through her hair.

His body under control now, Kong turned to her. "Yeah, it is a lot to just take you at your word," he said, then looked over at his buddies. "But they trust you, so I'll give it a shot."

"That's all I can ask for," Sam muttered to herself.

Awkward silence stretched between them for a few moments. Neither of them was sure what to say. Sam had seen a slightly different side to Kong for a few moments. Then he was testing her again.

"Maybe we should wake them up, show them the maps. You know, give them a chance to see what's up," Sam said turning toward the paper spread out before her.

"Let them sleep a few more minutes." Kong wasn't ready to share her with her two biggest fans yet. He liked being able to talk to her on his own, he liked how fast she could respond to his needling.

"Suit yourself," Sam said, continuing to study the map.

"What happened to you when you were eight?" Kong asked boldly.

The question froze Sam for just a moment. Where warmth had once spread through her body from looking at him, ice took its place. This was something she didn't share with people, especially people who didn't trust her.

Chapter Seven

"Hey!" came a groggy shout from where the two men had been sleeping. "What'd you throw at me?" Ricochet asked.

Kong looked over at him with a confused look on his face. "What're you talking about? I didn't throw anything at you."

"Someone sure did. It smacked me in the ear." Rubbing his left ear, Ricochet stood and stretched. "If ya wanted me up, all ya had to do was yell."

Sam grinned to herself. *Was that you?* she thought in her head.

Now is not the time for talk of the past.

Got that right, Sam replied to herself.

Kong saw the whimsical, knowing look on Sam's face. He knew she didn't throw anything at Ricochet, yet she looked like she knew who did. Damn if she wasn't mysterious and didn't it just make him hotter for her.

"What's going on?" Ricochet asked as he adjusted himself, then sauntered over to join them.

"We were just going over the maps we have," Sam replied, shaking her head and turning away. Why men needed to do such things in front of women simply amazed her.

"Might as well wake Boomer up, fill him in too," Kong grumbled. He would get his answer to his question before this job was over. Come hell or high water, he'd find out what gave her such nightmares and what made her who she is today.

Kong roused Boomer, while Sam and Ricochet chatted about the single piece of paper with the intelligence on it. Ricochet made some colorful remarks about the less than abundant amount of information, causing Sam to laugh. Her soft throaty laugh cut through Kong like a knife. He needed to get out of this plane and get some distance between them before he did the unthinkable and embarrassed himself in front of all of them. His body didn't seem to be his own since his sparring match with her. A good old-fashioned battle was exactly what he needed to get back on track.

When Boomer joined them, they all reviewed the map and discussed what their first moves would be. Sam listened as the men decided where they would go first, who would take point, and who would bring up the rear. It seemed they had forgotten they had a fourth team member.

Boomer looked over and saw Sam's stone face and blazing eyes.

"What do you think?" he asked her with a gentlemanly tone.

"Excuse me? Where you talking to me? I'm sorry, I thought you all had it under control. Just let me know when I come into the picture." Sam made it clear she was irritated with them.

The three men looked at each other, then back at Sam. "Um, what would you like to do?" Kong asked sheepishly, suddenly realizing he'd taken over the team.

Deep breath. Calm. Patience, the whisper said.

Sam took a deep breath to calm herself, then began to speak. "I know you aren't used to working the way I do. But I feel it might be in our best interest to let me take point. I've had experience with this."

Kong began to object, when Boomer spoke. "I think that's a good idea." When Kong glared at him he continued, "My buddy said you were like magic in the field. Always knowing what obstacles were ahead long before they got there."

"You and I should have a talk about what all your buddy told you about me," Sam said in a dry tone. She didn't like the idea of people talking about her that way. "Anyway, I know you probably have a problem with that," Sam said looking at Kong. "But I am good at it."

Kong couldn't peg the feeling building inside his gut. It was a mixture of anger at her for trying to take over his team and the need to keep her out of harm's way. Why he didn't know. She'd been doing this a long time and he knew she was skilled—if she wasn't, she wouldn't be alive. Biting the inside of his cheek, he nodded.

"Okay, you're point. For a while anyway." He'd see just how good she was, then make his decision on who took point the rest of the way.

Relief swept through Sam like a wave, nearly knocking her off balance. She'd been prepared for a fight, but it didn't happen. This man was not predictable. She felt as though she was under a microscope most of the time. One minute she was acceptable, the next she was diseased.

"Now that we have that hammered out," Ricochet said, "let's plan our route of attack."

Boomer leaned against the crate and began to look over the map, while Kong and Sam continued to eye each other skeptically. Neither sure what the other was thinking, yet neither wanting to be the first to look away. Power struggle was all that came to Sam's mind.

Let it go Samantha.

Not on your life, she thought to herself. No way was she giving him the satisfaction of being the first one to move. She was just as proud as he was and she intended for him to realize it.

Will this help your objective?

No, she thought, but it would make her feel better.

A light musical laughter floated through her head. She'd never heard her whisper laugh so much as she had over the last twenty-four hours. This was out of character and when something was out of character, it put her on defense.

You want to tell me what's so funny lately? Sam asked inside her head.

You.

Great, Sam thought, I'm glad I provide you with amusement.

Kong watched as Sam's eyes flashed, rolled and showed irritation. If he hadn't known better, he'd swear she was holding a conversation with someone. Even at this very moment, it seemed as though she were looking right through him. Without realizing it, he'd tipped his head sideways and studied her.

You are being watched Samantha.

When the words sunk in, Sam focused on Kong. He was watching her, not staring like they had been earlier, but actually watching her. Studying her. *Oh God*, she thought to herself, *he must really think I'm crazy.*

No. He is not sure what you are yet.

Boomer and Ricochet looked at the other two, then at each other. They weren't sure what was happening between them, but it was definitely something that needed to wait until this job was completed.

"You two gonna join the party, or just stare at each other all day?" Ricochet barked.

His tone snapped Kong back to reality, causing him to blink a couple of times, then look at the two men watching him. By the looks on their faces, they were as confused as he was. Sam smiled to herself, it was a small victory, but one nonetheless. He'd looked away first and she'd held out. Full of herself, she leaned against the crate and began looking at the map with Boomer.

Ricochet continued to eye Kong. He wouldn't say anything now, but when they had a chance, he'd no doubt nail Kong to the wall about what his problem was.

Kong leaned against the crate with the others and tried to focus on the task at hand.

Unfortunately his brain wouldn't let go of the sight of Sam. He could swear she was talking to someone, or to herself. She just kept getting more mysterious as the hours passed.

It took them an hour to map out the route they'd take, along with several alternatives in case things didn't go well. Sam was a stickler for having several backup plans and it seemed Kong felt the same way. At least there were some areas where they could see eye to eye.

"Hey, when we land, are you gonna just pop outta the plane with us in your black garb, or what?" Ricochet asked Sam.

"Nope, I'm gonna change into one of your uniforms. I'll blend in until we get off base." Sam replied with confidence.

"One of our uniforms?" Kong asked with a grin. "You think you'll fit into one of our uniforms?"

Sam looked over the three men, her eyes moving up and down from head to toe. When she looked over Kong, she couldn't help the tingle she felt in her stomach, but pushed the feeling aside. "Ricochet's will work."

He grumbled to himself as he pulled his spare shirt and pants from his pack. "Don't rip it or nothin'. It's the only spare I brought with me," he mumbled as he handed it to her.

"Don't worry. I won't have it on long." Sam pulled the shirt on and buttoned it, then pulled the pants on over her black ones. It was still too large, but she could make it work for a few minutes.

The men watched as she tucked the shirt into her pants then pulled the excess material behind her and tucked it into her black pants. Then she did the same with the trousers. To keep from walking on the hems of the pant legs she had to roll them up underneath. It wasn't a comfortable getup, but it would serve the purpose for the time being.

Kong watched in awe. From the front it looked slightly baggy, but pretty good. For as long as she needed it, it would pass. When he looked at Boomer and Ricochet, he could tell they were impressed as well.

"Well," Sam said looking at the three faces watching her, "will it do?"

"Works for me," Boomer told her.

"Damn girl, where'd you learn to do that?" Ricochet asked in his high-pitched street tone.

"A girl has to learn all sorts of tricks with clothes when she's small." Sam told him with a smile.

Kong lowered his head to hide the smile on his face. He hadn't thought of it before, but she was small. He imagined her tucking and pinning all sorts of outfits to pull off some of the jobs he'd heard she'd done. He had to admit, if he hadn't watched her, he would never have guessed she was wearing Ricochet's uniform.

A red light came on in the cargo bay, indicating they were getting ready to land. It seemed Cannon had everything worked out for them. Once they got off base, they'd be on their own.

This reality had Kong going into soldier mode.

"Okay people, it's almost show time. Let's gather our gear," he barked.

Boomer, Ricochet and Sam all slid easily into work mode as well. They put their packs on their backs, then moved to rear of the plane and sat. No words were spoken. They all knew what to do. Kong took a brief glance in Sam's direction. Her face mirrored his two comrades'—a soldier ready for action.

They felt the drop in altitude, felt the plane bounce as the landing gear hit the runway. When the plane came to a stop, it was a good fifteen minutes until they heard voices on the other side of the door. Kong looked over at his teammates and nodded. All three nodded back, indicating they were ready.

When the door finally opened, they were greeted by one soldier. He quickly stepped inside the cargo bay and inspected the four soldiers he encountered. His eyes lingered on Sam, looking her up and down. Kong felt a strong twinge in his gut and his hands balled into fists. When he looked over at Sam, he could tell it didn't bother her to be scrutinized in such a way. Still, that twinge wouldn't let up.

"I'm Commander Hollis. Cannon has filled me in on your mission. If you need to use any of the facilities on base before you set off, feel free," he said aiming his eyes directly on Sam.

"You'll be picked up at these coordinates in three days," he told them as he handed Kong a piece of paper. "The time is there as well. If you can't make those coordinates at that time, one more extraction point has been listed with a day and time."

When the four simply looked at him without comment, he continued. "Are there any questions?" he asked in true military fashion. When none came, he said, "Good luck then and Godspeed." With that he turned and disappeared.

"Let's rock," Ricochet said. And all four left the cargo plane.

Boomer walked in front of Sam and Kong followed close behind her. No one paid any attention to them, but Kong felt better with her sandwiched between them. It wasn't usual for four people to get out of a cargo plane, so if anyone noticed, it would cause suspicion. And having a small woman with them would look even more peculiar.

Sam looked at the men and women wandering about, moving crates, fueling vehicles—just going about their daily duties. She felt a small pain in her heart for these people and wondered how long they'd been here. What struck her the most was how young they looked. Most didn't look much older than twenty.

As they walked further, she noticed she could tell the ones that had been there the longest.

Their faces were drawn and tired-looking. Many had dark circles under their eyes. The newest on the base still found it easy to smile and laugh. But she knew time would soon take away the easy smile, the bright look in the eyes.

They're so young, she said inside her head.

Yes, they are.

Why, why does war have to happen? she questioned.

War happens because it happens. Sometimes it takes a drastic action to stop another.

That made sense to Sam, but she couldn't help the heartbreak she felt for these people. Just then a young soldier walked by and glanced at her. He looked like he should be home making plans for a night out with his girlfriend, not here baking under the hot sun. Not wondering day in and day out if he would go home at all.

Those that are meant to return home will.

Sam closed her eyes a moment and thought about that. How many faces she saw today would return home to the arms of mothers and fathers, girlfriends and boyfriends and how many would return home in a box? How many good lives would

be thrown away instead of them becoming something productive? Her stomach rolled with the sadness she felt.

"Sam, Sam!"

The voice shook her from her torment. "What?" she snapped back.

"I asked if you need to, ya know, do anything before we head out?" Kong asked in a loud whisper.

"Like what?"

"Ya know, use the facilities?"

Sam rolled her eyes. "No. Let's just get the hell outta here."

"I'm for that," Kong replied and backed away from her. He wasn't sure what had her so snippy, but he could guess. Probably the same thing that was eating at him. She wasn't the only one affected by the young faces around them.

When the four reached the edge of the base, they stopped and gathered together. From the map they'd been provided they found a gate that had only one soldier guarding it. When the man saw them he turned his back and took several steps away. Sam smiled at her team. Walt had arranged their exit for them. From here they could head out into the desert away from the population.

"Once we leave base, we're on our own," Kong reminded them. "Sam's point. We follow twenty yards behind. Let's hook up our radios and do a check."

All four hooked their radios around their ears and turned them on. Each one worked with sure, fast movements.

"Boomer."

"Ricochet."

"Kong."

"Smoke."

Their voices sounded in each other's ears with remarkable clarity. But Sam knew not to get used to it. Once they were out in the desert, the blowing sand and heat would wreak havoc on the equipment.

"When we get far enough away from base, I'll peel this uniform off and drop it on the ground, Ricochet can pick it up as he follows," Sam said to them. She knew it would be getting dark soon and her black uniform would serve her better.

When Ricochet groaned, Sam smiled to herself. It would mean he'd have a spare uniform full of sand, but it couldn't be helped. She'd make it up to him, somehow.

"Okay Smoke, you're up," Kong said looking at her with a stern face.

Without a word, Sam slipped by the guard shed and seemed to disappear. "Hold your position," she whispered over the radio. Just ahead of her were three Afghan men huddled together and talking.

What are they saying? she asked her guide.

These men are harmless. They feel safer when they are near the base. Also, they hope to be given odd jobs and paid.

"We have three Afghan men off to my left just fifty yards from the shed. Harmless. Just keep quiet," she informed her team.

"Roger," came over her earpiece in a whisper.

Can you keep them occupied? she asked.

I will.

Sam moved forward, never once doubting that her team members would be invisible to the three men hoping for work. Not only would she be watched over on this mission, but they would as well. If she was meant to do this job, that meant they were meant to do the job and return home with her.

When they were a few miles out into the desert, the sun started going down. The cool night air was a welcome relief from the searing sun. But none of them was foolish enough to think it would stay comfortable. Once the sun went down all the way, the desert became cold.

As promised, Sam began to shed Ricochet's uniform. She even took a few moments and folded it as neatly as she could. The time she lost in doing the small chore, she quickly made up.

"Ricochet, start looking" she said over her radio.

"Roger," he replied.

Sam continued to lead them toward their destination. Hours had passed and miles had been walked. Sam didn't feel the least bit tired and she was sure her companions felt the same way.

So as long as no one called her off, she would continue toward the small town.

Another two hours passed without them encountering any obstacles. Sam was beginning to feel uneasy. They should have come across someone by now, but everything was quiet.

Too quiet.

She walked for another half an hour when her guide spoke.

Samantha, there is a group of men ahead. These men look for trouble.

Sam immediately stopped where she was. She knew when a warning was given, it was real.

"Hold your position," she said over her radio.

Dropping to the ground, Sam belly crawled across the desert floor until she heard voices.

Many voices. The hair on the back of her neck stood straight up and that meant trouble. She crawled as close as she could before stopping to listen.

Chapter Eight

What are they saying? she asked.

They are looking for Americans. These men are what you call Taliban. There is much hatred in their hearts.

Are they connected to the missing Americans? she asked.

No, these men are rebels. They have no reason but hate to harm.

Sam ran the map through her mind. She needed to get her team past these men without a confrontation. There were too many for the four of them to take and once they engaged any action, word would be out that there were Americans in the desert.

"Smoke, report."

Kong's voice came across her radio with a harshness that set Sam's teeth on edge. He'd just have to wait until she was far enough away from the group of men to answer. And those men were her main concern at the moment.

"Smoke." His voice came again.

Sam pushed the sound away and began to backtrack. She heard the three men talking over her earpiece. Something about her being in trouble and Kong swearing. When she was far enough away, she took a deep breath and responded.

"We need to move south for a while," she said, talking over something Boomer was saying.

Kong swore to himself and then let out a breath he'd been holding for the last five minutes.

"What the hell happened to you? Didn't you hear me?" he barked into his mouthpiece. He would never tell them, any of them, but he was scared. Scared something or someone had gotten her. His heart never pounded so hard in his life.

"Sorry Kong, but I had things to deal with, other than your ego that is," she retorted.

Kong swore again then took a deep breath to regain his temper. "What happened?"

Sam smiled to herself. That was better. "A group of the Taliban was out cruising. They were looking for some Americans to party with," she told them.

"How many?" Ricochet asked.

"About twelve, fifteen, too many to confront. Word would be out in less than an hour that Americans were crawling through the desert."

Kong knew she was right. They couldn't afford to let anyone know they were there. "Okay, let's move out. Tell us where to move to."

Sam gave them new directions then began to move herself.

"Hey Smoke, how close did you get?" Ricochet asked.

"Close enough to smell them," Sam replied, then dropped it.

After another hour of traveling, Kong chimed in over the radio. "How close are we to the target?"

Sam looked at her compass on her wrist. "We have another hour then we can call it a night."

"Good, start looking for a site to set up camp. We'll need to regroup."

A group of rocks sticking out in the middle of the open sand caught Sam's attention. It was time to start looking for a campsite and this looked like it would provide some sort of cover.

But first she had to make sure no one else was using it.

Is that group of rocks safe for us to camp in? she asked her guide.

It is. You will rest undisturbed.

Without hesitation, Sam strolled over and checked it out. There was a place for her to sleep away from the men, it wasn't big, but it would work. She pulled her pack from her back and tossed it on the ground. She stretched her tense muscles then flopped down next to her pack.

"I found a campsite. It's twenty degrees north and twelve degrees east of your position," she said into her radio.

"Roger that," came Kong's voice.

She figured it would be at least another fifteen minutes until they arrived, so she kicked off her boots and rubbed her feet. They weren't sore, but if she didn't work out the tension, they'd be sore by tomorrow. While she was rubbing her feet, she listened to the night, wishing there was a stream or oasis near by. The sand in her shirt was rubbing against her skin and causing sore spots.

While she was dreaming of cool water, a soft trickling sound caught her attention. She stopped her hands and tilted her head to hear better. Sure enough, she could hear trickling. This was too good to be true, she thought to herself. But the sound was too inviting, so she stood to investigate. Not far away was another group of large rocks that framed a small spring. Sam wanted desperately to stick her feet in it, but she knew the men were due soon.

Thank you, she said to her guide. Then walked back toward the camp.

Sam no sooner returned, when the three men came strolling toward the rocks. Boomer looked somber, no different than he'd looked on the plane. Ricochet smiled as he looked over the campsite and Kong looked like he was ready to chew nails and spit rust.

"Nice job Smoke. I thought we'd be sleeping exposed," Ricochet said, then slapped her on the back.

Boomer was already pulling a Meal Ready to Eat from his pack and settling in, Ricochet followed suit.

Kong tossed his pack on the ground and stood with his hands on his hips. He was still worked up over not being able to reach her on his radio and he was looking for a fight.

"This isn't all guys," Sam said ignoring Kong. "There's a spring over at the next group of rocks."

"No shit?" Ricochet said in his high-pitched voice. "Damn."

Boomer smiled his approval, not at all surprised she'd found a good spot for the rest of the night. He'd expected it.

Kong still stood with his hands on his hips, glaring at her. Sam just ignored him and began pulling an MRE from her pack. If he wanted a fight, he'd have to pick it. She was too tired.

"What kind of stunt was that?" he snapped at her.

Sam froze where she was and looked up at him. "Stunt?"

"Yeah, stunt. Why didn't you answer me when I called you?"

Sam slowly stood, then moved from her spot in the rocks with smooth fluid motion—much like a cat stalking its pray. "I didn't answer because I was less than ten feet away from the enemy," she said stopping a few feet away from him.

Boomer and Ricochet stopped eating and watched. The way she was moving toward Kong caused them alarm. Ricochet expected her to take him down in a blink, but she didn't.

"Why were you ten feet away from the enemy? They could have seen you, you put us in jeopardy, not just yourself, the whole team," Kong barked at her.

Sam tilted her head to the other side and studied him. Was he serious? "No one but me was in jeopardy and I was careful," she said in a soft, steady voice. "Are you telling me Boomer or Ricochet wouldn't have done the same thing? They would have just crawled away like a frightened child?"

Kong felt uneasy by her tone. She wasn't yelling, but she was mad, there was no question about it. "No," he growled.

"But you want me to run and hide. Let me tell you something Lieutenant, since we've never worked together before, I'm going to forgive that remark. But be aware, be very aware of the fact that I don't need a man to protect me. I know my job and I do it well."

Kong held her glare for a moment, then continued his interrogation. "Why didn't you tell us you spoke Afghan?"

"I don't." Sam regretted it as soon as she said it. Her temper was ruling her now and that always led to trouble.

"Then how the hell did you know what they were saying?"

Sam just looked at him, then turned and went back to her spot among the rocks. She couldn't lie to him if she didn't answer him.

But Kong wasn't having it. "Tell me damn it, how the hell did you know they were Taliban, and they were looking for Americans?"

"I can only ask you to trust me," Sam said with a softer voice.

"Trust you? You're keeping secrets from us and you expect us to trust you? Good one."

Instead of Kong's anger ebbing, it was growing. Was she taking risks with their lives? Sure she kept them away from the Taliban in the desert, but if she couldn't speak their language, how did she know they were Taliban? Then another thought crossed his mind, one that disturbed him even more. Were there actually men there? Was she working her own agenda on her own private mission? Couple this together with the way she seemed to be talking to someone on the plane and he was sure she was up to no good.

Kong looked to his two companions, he could tell her "trust me" statement had them disturbed as well. Even Boomer who thought she walked on water seemed perplexed. Well, he'd just have to keep her in his sights tomorrow, let one of the other two take point. That would royally piss her off, but at this point in the game, he didn't care.

When he looked back at her, she was eating and paying him no attention. Well, he thought to himself, if that's the way she wants to play it, so be it. He walked over to the area where Ricochet and Boomer were seated and sat with them.

"What do you guys think?" he asked in a whisper.

Ricochet shook his head. "I don't know man. She's skilled and from what I hear, damn good at what she does." He shrugged again. "Still, I don't like not knowing how she knew who those men were if she doesn't speak their language."

Kong looked at Boomer. "What about you?"

Boomer sat a moment staring at his meal. He trusted her and from what he'd heard, she'd keep them from getting killed, but something inside him was beginning to doubt. "She hasn't really let us down yet, has she? I mean, you're pissed because she did something that any of us would have done. Why is that?"

"That's not the point and you know it," Kong ground out between his teeth.

Boomer just shrugged. "I think it is. I think you're looking for something to bust her on and that's your problem. But I'm like Ricochet, something bothers me." He shrugged again. "Maybe I'm just tired."

"Yeah." Kong got up and went to retrieve his pack. He took a quick glance over at Sam and saw she seemed to be sleeping. She was stretched out with her bare feet crossed and her left arm was slung over her eyes. Her right hand was lying on her stomach and she was breathing in a deep steady rhythm.

He stood and watched her for a few moments, taken back by the sight of her. Even though he questioned her motives, his body still reacted to her. Angry with himself, he swore under his breath and returned to his men.

"Ricochet, you take first watch tonight. Boomer, you take second, I'll take third," he said pulling a bottle of water and a granola bar from his pack.

"What about Sam?" Boomer asked.

"I'm not sure I trust her to watch over us while we sleep," Kong replied dryly.

"Okay boss." Ricochet stood, grabbing his gun and found a position to watch from. Kong and Boomer settled in for a few hours of rest.

Sam lay still listening to the men. She knew Kong thought she was asleep and that was the way she wanted it. Tears stung at her eyes while she listened. His words cut deep into her, much like the knife did to her back when she was eight. She had no idea why it mattered so much what he thought of her. But it did. She wanted to cry, she wanted to get up, march over to him and tell him everything about her so he'd understand. But she couldn't.

What did it matter anyway? In a few days this would all be over. He'd move on and she'd take another job. Only the next one she would work alone. She'd had enough of teammates to last her a lifetime. All it got her was heartache.

Clear your mind Samantha. Rest. Tomorrow will be a new day.

Sam didn't argue. She just wanted to sleep and disappear into nothing for awhile. Maybe he'd feel differently tomorrow morning. Maybe he'd feel bad for making her feel so alone. Yeah and maybe Bin Laden would walk into camp tonight and surrender. Sam closed her eyes and drifted off into darkness.

* * * * *

When it came time for Kong's turn to watch, he grabbed his pack and gun and sat in the dark.

He pulled an MRE from his pack and began eating. He always liked having a full stomach before he started out the day. A guy never knew when he'd get to eat again. While he blindly ate his food he thought over the day ahead. He'd put Ricochet on point, followed by Boomer, Sam, then himself. That way he'd be able to keep a close eye on her. Somewhere inside he felt a little guilty about the way he jumped her last night, but he quickly corrected that by reasoning that she had it coming.

A soft whimper came from behind him. He stopped chewing and listened. When he heard it again, he stood, this time the whimper came along with a gasp. Kong grabbed his gun ready for a fight. As he walked around the group of rocks, he heard a sob. His heart began pumping wildly inside his chest. It was Sam.

Making his way to the spot where she was sleeping a new wave of feeling flooded through him.

What if someone made it into camp? If they found her, they'd do horrific things to her. Panic made him crouch down and walk faster. When he reached her, he heard her sob again. She was still asleep, dreaming. He thought about waking her up, but then decided he'd just watch for a while. See what he could learn. Sweat glistened on her

forehead in the moonlight, her fists were balled tight and her breathing was shallow. Whatever she was dreaming about had her fighting. In some twisted way, he was proud of that. She even put up a fight in her dreams.

He watched as her body jerked and twisted. Then he heard her sob, "Mommy." Her voice was small, meek. Like a child's. Was this the same dream she had on the plane? Did this have to do with how she lost her parents? Was she haunted by her childhood?

"No, please. Mommy, Daddy," Sam whimpered.

Kong nearly reached out to wake her up, but she jerked her legs up and cried out in pain. It startled him to the point of freezing with his hand in midair. Her breathing became deeper, like she was struggling for breath. Then she bolted upright with a gasp. Her face was pale, sweat trickled down over her skin. Her eyes were open, but she wasn't awake. Without so much as a word, she flopped down on her back.

His own heart racing, Kong watched her for a few moments to make sure she was resting. He scrubbed his face with his hands, then stood and went back to his watch spot. God, how awful it must be to be plagued by nightmares every night, he thought to himself. This little ball of fire carried a lot of baggage with her. He wondered if Cannon had any idea she suffered so badly at night, then decided it wasn't any of his business. In a few days, they'd never see each other again.

Sam woke drenched in sweat. The sun wasn't up yet, so she figured she had time to sneak away to wash off in the stream. Remembering that Kong was the one who had last watch, she crawled through the rocks soundlessly. He was the last thing she needed at the moment.

When she reached the stream, she pulled her shirt off, then leaned over the water and began splashing herself. The cold water felt good against her sticky skin. It also soothed the sores the sand had begun to make under her arms and down at her trouser line. When she realized she'd forgotten to bring her first-aid kit with her, she scolded herself for letting Kong distract her.

Nonetheless, she enjoyed her bath and meant to make the most of it.

Kong stood to stretch. While he did, he walked over to have a peek at Sam, just to make sure she was resting peacefully. When he saw her spot was empty, panic slapped him. He did a quick look through the rocks, then scanned the open desert. There was no way she could have gotten out of camp without him knowing it, he thought.

Kong leaned down and shook Ricochet, then Boomer. "Wake up. Sam's gone," he told them. "Wake up."

"What'd you say?" Ricochet asked.

"Sam's gone."

Boomer sat straight up, then grabbed for his gun. "How long?"

"Hell, I don't know," Kong grumbled.

The three men stood looking around. "I'll go check by the other group of rocks," Kong said walking away.

Boomer remembered what she'd said about a stream being over there and shouted after Kong, "Wait, she might be cleaning up in the stream." But Kong didn't hear him.

"Well if she is, we'll know it soon enough," Ricochet snickered.

As Kong got closer to the stream, he saw her. She stood facing it, her bare back to him. With the moon light he could see three large, rough-looking scars on her back. The skin was puckered and pale compared to the rest of her silky smooth back. He sucked in his breath at the sight and knew they were knife wounds. He'd seen those before. Some of his friends had them on their legs and arms, but he'd never seen any on a person's back.

Anger welled deep inside, along with that overwhelming, annoying need to protect her. But there was nothing to protect her from. These wounds happened a long time ago and he'd be willing to bet that she repaid the favor. Still, their location was deadly. Two were placed over her lung area and the third was lower on her back. The fact that she survived such a stabbing amazed him.

Chapter Nine

Who the hell would knife someone in the back? From the looks of them they were old, she'd had them for a long time. He thought a moment, about the way she acted when she was dreaming, her parents dead. He didn't have all the answers yet, but they were coming together, piece by piece.

When she reached over to grab her shirt, he caught the side view of her bare breast and when she leaned over to rinse it out in the water, he almost lost his breath. The view she was giving him, with her firm round behind sticking out toward him and her bare back, made him hard instantly. Without a word, he began to creep backward toward camp. He didn't want her to know he'd seen her like this. She'd really hate him then. Hell, he was hating himself. This was a sight he wouldn't soon forget.

By the time he'd reached camp, he'd thought about everything he could to bring his body back under control. When Boomer saw him, he gave Ricochet a slow wide smile. Ricochet turned toward Kong and shook his head.

"Guess you found her. Was she at the stream?" Ricochet asked.

"Yeah," Kong grunted. His face was flushed and sweat was now running down his face. He held his gun in front of him to conceal the hard bulge in the front of his pants.

The three men were leaning against the rocks when Sam returned from her bath. The way Boomer and Ricochet were smiling, she knew she'd missed something. Kong on the other hand still looked like he'd sat on a cactus. She knew she wouldn't be let in on the joke, so she went to her pack and pulled out her first-aid kit.

"Is everything all right?" Boomer asked with concern in his voice.

Without looking up she answered, "Yeah, everything is just wonderful."

"You need some help with something?" he asked. By now the other two were curious enough to look over at her.

God, couldn't she get a moment's peace? At least she had her bath alone. Deciding not to let them make her feel uncomfortable, she lifted the side of her T-shirt and began rubbing some ointment on her sore spots.

When Boomer saw how raw they were, he winced. "That looks sore."

"It is. That's why I'm taking care of them," she snapped.

Ricochet looked away, but Kong's brow creased. He hadn't seen the sores when she had her shirt off.

"How'd you get those?" he asked sympathetically.

"When I was crawling through the sand yesterday to see how many of the Taliban we were walking into. The sand gathered in my shirt, the sweat and the movement rubbed me raw," she told him.

The mention of the Taliban put Kong right back in his foul mood. "Ricochet's on point today, followed by Boomer, you, then me."

"Want to keep a close eye on me?" she asked with an attitude.

"Damn right I do," he replied with the same attitude. "We move out in ten," he said then walked away.

The four of them trekked through the desert toward the small town that was supposed to house the kidnapped victim. The sun was blistering hot today, around one hundred and two Sam figured. So far everything was going smoothly. Ricochet led well and Kong was stuck to her backside like glue. No matter she thought, if that's the way he wanted it.

Four men ahead Samantha. Not your Taliban. Trouble nonetheless.

Sam's step faltered. *What kind of trouble?* she asked.

Deadly. The answer was short but to the point.

"Ricochet. Trouble ahead. Keep your eyes peeled," she said into her radio.

"How the hell do you know?" Kong sneered.

"Four men." She replied without answering Kong.

"I don't see nothing," Ricochet answered back.

They see him Samantha. He is in danger.

The urgency in her guide's voice disturbed her. This was wrong, she should be up front. Without a second thought she pulled her mask from a side pocket on her pack and slid it on. Once it was in place, she sprinted toward Ricochet.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" Kong shouted in the radio.

"Ricochet, drop now."

Just as he did, a shot rang out through the dry air. Boomer dropped instantly, along with Kong. His heart jumped into his throat. "Ricochet, report."

"I'm okay, but where the hell did that come from?" His voice was breathy and tight.

"Where's Smoke?" Boomer asked.

"Hell if I know?" Ricochet answered.

"Move forward toward Ricochet, stay low Boomer."

"Roger that," Boomer replied.

When they got closer to him, Kong saw a rifle peek up out of the sand and point toward Ricochet. In an instant Kong knew his buddy was about to take a deadly bullet. Then out of nowhere, a black gloved hand snaked out of the sand and grabbed the barrel of the rifle shoving it toward the sky. Sam's upper body burst from the sand as she wrenched the rifle out of the man's hand. In one smooth, fluid motion she swung

the butt of the rifle around and connected with the man's face as he rose from the ground.

While Sam dealt with this man, another shot cracked through the desert. All three men looked around trying to figure out where it came from, but saw only open desert, barren sand. Sam finally dispensed with the first gunman, then seemed to vanish again.

"Where the hell did she go?" Ricochet shouted into his microphone.

While they lay in the sand looking for their attackers Sam was crawling just under the surface of the sand toward where the other shot came from. Again, like flash, she burst from the ground behind their attacker, reached into the sand and pulled a second man to his feet.

"You three gonna lie around all day, or what?" she said as she jabbed the man with her fist. When he doubled over she brought her knee up into his face. Blood spurted from his mouth and nose as he dropped to the ground.

When she turned around, she saw her teammates standing behind her. "Two more. They've got foxholes dug in the sand, covered with burlap. Watch where you walk."

The three of them looked at her with awe. They'd never seen anything like her—the way she moved, the way she buried herself in the sand. It was amazing. It was a tactic they all had been trained to utilize, but had never seen done so efficiently and with such ease.

Samantha.

"Drop!" she shouted to them.

Without hesitation they did, just as another shot split the dry, hot air. Boomer looked over at her and watched as she dug herself into the soft ground. In seconds she was gone. This time Kong, could tell the direction of the shooter, so he began to belly crawl toward that area. Within moments he'd crawled up to a foxhole, covered with burlap just as Sam said.

Before Kong could lift the burlap, the man hiding beneath raised his gun to fire. Kong rolled to the side and avoided the bullet. Now that the man had exposed himself, Kong jumped in the hole with him, easily disarming the man and proceeded to beat him into submission.

Satisfied that man would no longer give them trouble Kong crawled from the hole on his stomach then looked for his teammates. Ricochet was crawling north, Boomer south, but he still didn't see Sam anywhere. As his eyes scanned the area, he noticed sunlight gleaming off something behind Boomer. When he squinted against the sun, he could make out a rifle barrel.

Kong no sooner saw it, than Sam appeared again. Like before, she burst from the sand with the speed of a lightning bolt. Kong watched as she stomped on the barrel, forcing it back under the sand. In a split second she was swallowed by the earth. Kong saw her hands fly into the air as she lost her balance and disappeared.

"Smoke's in trouble," he shouted scrambling toward the area where she went under.

The three men dug in the sand, furiously trying to find her. When the muffled gunshot sounded, Kong's heart stopped. "No, no," he thought to himself. She'd saved their asses, she couldn't be dead. All three dug with fierce speed. When they reached what once was a foxhole, they saw a dark crimson color in the sand.

"Smoke," Kong growled. She couldn't be dead, not like this.

Boomer fell backward as a black gloved hand pierced through the sand. The three men pulled her up to the surface and laid her out on her back. Kong checked her over for a bullet wound. When he saw blood oozing from her left arm, he ripped her shirt only to find she'd been grazed, not shot. The relief he felt was nearly overwhelming. His hand shook as he brushed sand from her wound and his heart was firmly lodged in his throat.

Sam was spitting gritty sand out of her mouth and brushing it from her eyes. The burning she felt in her arm was nothing more than a minor annoyance at the moment. She was more concerned that everyone was all right. When she had the majority of the sand out of her eyes, she looked at the faces that surrounded her. Boomer, Ricochet, Kong. They were all there.

While she oriented herself, Kong ripped part of her sleeve from her shirt and wrapped it around the bullet graze. It didn't look that serious, but it could become infected in record time. He'd seen it before, along with the consequences. He was determined not to let her lose her arm.

Samantha, you must move.

"We have to clear out, fast," she said as she jerked her arm from Kong's hands.

"She's right. If they had friends in the area, they heard the gunshots," Boomer said in his slow manner.

Kong looked at Sam, then nodded. "Let's move."

It only took a few minutes to hide any evidence that they'd been there. All the men were buried in the sand. Those that were still alive were left room around their noses so they could breathe. Sam saw to it herself. The one that grazed her with a bullet was dead. Something she regretted – but unfortunately it was unavoidable.

Ricochet took point again and Kong stayed even closer to Sam. While watching for trouble, he pondered how she knew those men were there. Ricochet was on point, he should have seen them, but he didn't. Sam was in the back with him and he didn't see them. Who the hell could see them buried underground? More secrets he thought, secrets that he had a right to know. And he'd damn well find out what they were.

Sam felt numb as she walked beneath the hot sun. She ignored the wound on her arm. Over the years she'd learned how to push pain away and deal with it later. Her heart was still thundering in her chest from the action. Ricochet came so close to losing his life it shook her.

Not only Ricochet, but Boomer as well. God, if Kong hadn't been so stubborn, so egotistical, they would never would had been in danger.

All worked out well.

Yeah, but it almost didn't, she replied to her guide.

Have you not learned to accept what is given?

Sam thought a moment. She'd learned a lot over the years, but in this area, she'd refused to accept things so willingly. How was she supposed to accept her parents' brutal murder, or the fact that someone would stab a child three times?

You refuse to accept, because you refuse to share.

Share what? How painful it all is? No one wants to hear my sob story, no one cares. Sam scolded, then immediately regretted it. The events had made her edgy and she had no right to take her frustrations out on the one being that helped. *I'm sorry,* she said inside her head.

Do you feel better now that you have released some anger?

Sam smiled to herself. Yes. She did feel a little better. A gentle breeze whisked across her face. With it came the soft scent of freesia. Sam closed her eyes and breathed it in. It was her guide's way of letting her know she wasn't alone.

"Hey, what's that smell?" Kong said over the radio.

Sam turned and looked at him with surprise. She was supposed to be the only one to smell it.

How in the world was he smelling it?

"It smells good," he said. When he saw Sam looking at him, he stood straighter and replaced his expression with one of indignation. What, he wasn't allowed to like pleasant odors?

"What's the plan Kong? We're on the outskirts of town," Ricochet told the team.

"I think we should find a place to hole up for a while." Kong replied. "We could all use a little breather."

"I think we should let Smoke find the spot." Ricochet said. "She did pretty well last night."

Kong hated to admit it, but he agreed. "Are you up for it Smoke?"

The flutter in her heart made her voice sound a little breathy. Was he beginning to trust her?

"I'm up for it."

"Move ahead." Kong instructed.

She didn't have to be told twice. Before he could change his mind, Sam sprinted up toward Ricochet. The poor man looked whipped, sweat beaded on the top of his bald head and his face was shade lighter than it had been this morning. Her heart went out to him. It wasn't everyday you have ground moles shooting at you.

Is there someplace out of the way that has water and shade where we can hole up? she silently asked her guide.

After a few brief moments of silence, her answer came. *Half a mile behind you.*

Sam took off in a southward direction. Ricochet watched her silently until his two buddies caught up with him. They all waited patiently until Sam gave the word to move.

What she found was a grouping of trees that had once been used to water animals. There was a small, shallow pond with fresh water trickling into it in another small grouping of trees off to the left.

Is it safe? she asked.

Yes.

Thank you. You've outdone yourself again, she told her guide.

Once she radioed the men and gave them the coordinates of the oasis, she dropped down in the shade of the trees. Suddenly she was very tired. The throbbing pain in her arm was catching up with her now. She'd have to clean the wound while they were here. With the water supply close, it would make it a lot easier.

Sam removed her pack and lay down on her back for a few moments. It would probably take the men a good twenty minutes to reach her, so a break wouldn't hurt. As she lay in the shade, the sores she had on her skin began to burn as well. A good dose of doctoring would have to be done so she didn't get any infection. That was last thing she needed out here in the desert, especially in a country where being an American was a death warrant.

At the moment she was just too tired to do much of anything but close her eyes. She never used to get so worn down after a fight. Nowadays she seemed to need a nap after such a great burst of energy. Just another reason to consider retiring in another few years.

Your teammates are approaching.

It took all her energy to sit up. When she did the throbbing in her arm worsened. Her head and her stomach turned. No more wasting time, she thought to herself. She needed to attend to her wounds.

When the men approached, Sam was pouring a bottle of peroxide over her arm. She had to bite her tongue to keep from screaming, but the look of pain on her face was clear. When the wound finished bubbling, she began spreading an antibiotic ointment over it.

Kong saw her working on her arm, saw the pain in her face. He knew it hurt, he'd heard some of his friends scream when they were being cleaned. But Sam sat there like an old pro, enduring the pain and continuing to administer first aid to herself.

"Well, you did it again," Ricochet said looking around the trees. "Any water?"

Sam jerked her head toward the other grouping of trees. "Over there," she said in a tight voice.

"Why don't you let me help you with that?" Kong said as he squatted down next to her.

"That's okay. I have it under control," she snapped.

"Damn it Sam, I know it hurts!" he snapped back. "Let's not play who has the bigger balls, okay. Just shut up and let me help you."

More stunned than angry, Sam just nodded. She watched him carefully as he checked to see how deep the graze was. When he grunted and reached for his pack, she panicked.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

"It's deeper than I thought." Pulling a small package from his first-aid kit he asked, "How did you travel all that way in so much pain?"

"My pain threshold is higher than most," she said as he closed the wound with small strips of surgical tape.

When he was finished, he wiped down the surrounding skin with a moist wipe. He didn't like the fact that she was hurt. It could possibly put a kink in their rescue if she got an infection. The protective feelings he felt were ignored. Once again, he was struggling with his feelings. How could he still be so attracted to her and not trust her at the same time?

When Sam winced, he realized he was so lost in thought that he was putting too much pressure on her wound. "Sorry," he grunted.

Sam jerked her arm away. "It's nothing. Thanks for the help." She didn't get this man. One minute she's the enemy, the next he's treating her like a team member. She'd never encountered such a frustrating person in her life. Even worse, she'd never encountered anyone that could push her buttons so fast. *Friend or foe*, she thought to herself. *Make up your mind Kong.*

Chapter Ten

"How's the arm?" Boomer asked as he sat down next to her.

"It's fine," she told him with a small smile.

"So, what next? We sit and wait for nightfall?" Ricochet asked as he leaned against a tree.

"I think that's best. When it starts getting dark, you can run into town and check things out," Kong told Boomer and Ricochet. "If everything looks good, me and Sam will meet up with you."

"Sounds like a plan." Ricochet said. "I think I'll grab a bite to eat and catch some z's."

"Me too," Boomer said as he stood.

Sam found it strange that no one was talking about the men they'd encountered. But she supposed Kong would take his opportunity when the other two left for town. Until then she'd enjoy some peace and quiet and grab some food herself. Maybe that would help her shake this overwhelming need to sleep.

While the other men slept, Sam did some stretching and practiced some of her martial arts moves. That always seemed to help wake her up, but it wasn't working today. She walked over to the small pond and splashed cold water in her face, that didn't work either. Nothing was going to work, except sleep.

Finally, she gave in. It was starting to get dark and it would take a good forty-five minutes for Boomer and Ricochet to make it to town. Once there, they'd need to locate the building. She calculated that gave her two, two and half hours of sleep. That should snap her out of whatever was wrong.

When she walked back over to the trees, she saw Boomer and Ricochet checking their packs. Kong was giving them orders and checking to make sure their radios were working. With the three of them awake, she could finally lie down. Before closing her eyes Sam said a silent prayer for Boomer and Ricochet, asking for them to be kept safe from harm on their journey. Then she asked that she and Kong be watched over as well. As a side note, she asked that she be allowed to rest peacefully. Sam no sooner finished with her prayer than sleep pulled her into darkness.

Kong watched his two best friends in the world head toward the town that held their target. When they were out of sight, he did another radio check with them, just to make sure everything was working. Satisfied that he could do no more until he heard from them, he turned back toward the trees.

The sun was almost completely down now and the moon was shining brightly. The cooler air felt good against his skin. When he looked for Sam, he found her sleeping

deeply. Her face was pale, dark bags had begun to form under her eyes and that bothered him. Maybe infection had already started in the wound. He wanted to wake her, check her arm again, but couldn't bring himself to do it. Rest was best now.

Kong explored the surrounding area for about an hour, never going out of sight of their campsite. Sam was vulnerable right now and he doubted she had the strength to fight. Damn, he wished she was awake, there were a lot of questions he had for her. With the two of them alone, he'd be able to get some answers.

He looked toward the trees that hid the pond and decided to wash up. When he was done, he'd wake her up. Telling her he wanted to check her arm was a good enough excuse.

Kong stripped down to his boxers, then stepped into the shallow pond. The water was clear enough for him to see nothing was swimming with him. It wasn't cold water, but nice and cool. Just enough to cause goose bumps on his skin. With a loud sigh, he lay back into the water, letting it lap over his body. The sand under his back felt silky against his skin, relaxing him. He lay like this for about fifteen minutes, then dipped his head under the water and stood. He felt invigorated, alive, with the cool night air against his damp skin.

As he walked back toward camp, he decided to go easy on Sam. What was the old saying? "You catch more flies with honey"? Yeah, he'd be her friend, then maybe she'd open up to him. Approaching the trees he could see a bright white light coming from where Sam was sleeping. It wasn't a flashlight. No flashlight he ever saw put out a light like that. Concerned, he crouched down and pulled his pants on, then slid his boots back on all the while watching this incredible white light.

Dressed now, he crept toward the light. He didn't hear anything, not even Sam dreaming. When he approached her, he stopped dead. Sam was still sleeping, but she was blanketed in a brilliant light. Kong looked up into the trees but saw nothing to indicate it was coming from up there. It was just there. As he debated whether or not to yell and wake her up, a gold ball of light appeared between them.

For some reason he didn't feel fear or the need to fight. He felt calm. As he looked at the gold light, a face started to appear in it. Beautiful clear, topaz eyes peered at him, then came a smile that sent warmth through his body. The face disappeared and the gold light floated toward Sam.

It traveled the length of her body, stopping at her wound for only a few seconds. Kong wasn't sure what was happening, but he knew he'd never experienced anything like it before.

When the gold ball of light was finished with whatever it was doing it sailed high into the tree tops and disappeared. Kong brought his eyes back to Sam. This time two figures were forming in front of him. One seemed to be a male figure, the other female. As the faces formed, Kong tilted his head and studied them. The eyes of the female were almost identical to Sam's, the shape was small and petite like Sam's. The male's face was shaped much like Sam's.

Kong's brow furrowed. If he didn't know better, he'd swear he was looking at her parents. As that thought floated through his mind the two figures smiled at him and inside his head he heard words.

Take care of our precious angel.

While Kong puzzled over that short phrase, the two figures parted, as if to let him past. He wasn't sure why, but he seemed to be moving toward Sam. As he came closer to her, the white light that had been covering her lifted and like the gold light, disappeared into the treetops.

Kong took a few moments and looked around. He knew he wasn't dreaming. His heart was beginning to pound so hard it hurt his chest. What the hell just happened? And why was Sam being watched over by...by... Hell, he wasn't even sure he knew what it was.

"Sam, Sam, wake up! Wake up!" he shouted down at her.

Sam's eyes flew open and she bounced to her feet. "What is it, what's wrong?"

Kong noticed that her color was better and he eyes were sharp. "You tell me! Damn it Sam. I want answers and I want them now!"

Realizing they weren't in any immediate danger Sam relaxed, then scrubbed her face with her hands. "What is it now Lieutenant?"

Kong started pacing. "Where to begin," he mumbled. "Let's see, how about you tell me how you knew those four men were there today. None of the rest of us saw them. How come you did? What, are you some kind of psychic?"

"No more than you are," she replied.

"Then I come back from the pond and what do I see?" he asked in a sarcastic tone.

"I have no idea." Sam was weary from the day and not at all interested in Kong's rants.

"You covered in a bright white light. Then some gold ball floats in between us and a face appears. Then whoosh, it disappears. Then two figures form out of the white light that was surrounding you. One male and one female. What the hell is going on! I think I have a right to know!"

Sam felt her knees go weak. White light, gold light. Male and female figures. What happened to her while she slept? She could feel the color drain from her face. Her stomach did a slow roll.

"Damn," Kong swore and reached for her. She was going down and it was because of him. Scratch the idea of becoming her friend. He was sure to be on her top ten list of enemies now.

"Don't touch me," she said emphasizing each word. "Don't put your hands on me." As she spoke she started to back away from him. He wanted answers? Well so did she. She turned and ran for the pond.

Once there, she knelt down and stuck her whole head into the water. Pressure was beginning to build behind her eyes. She held her head under the water as long as she

could, then pulled it out, flinging water from her hair. Pulling her shirt off over her head, she began to cry. Why was this happening to her? Everything was going so well in her life. She did a job and moved on. No one ever hassled her about it. Why him, why now? Neglecting to take her pants off, she waded into the water and lay back. "Tell me what's happening, please?" she begged her guide. But no answer came. "Have I done something wrong? Am I being punished for something?" Still no answer came.

Sam sat in the water for a few moments then dragged herself out. Her emotions were raw, along with her eyes and her skin. With her back to the campsite, she bent to pick up her torn shirt.

Kong waited as long as he could, pacing and wondering what the hell was going on. The look on her face was one of shock when he mentioned the two figures that stood over her. Could it be that she didn't know this happened? How could she, she was asleep. Not willing to wait for her any longer, he headed for the pond.

When he got there, she was standing with her bare back to him again. Her hair was wet and so were her pants. "Sorry," he said and began to turn away.

"For what? It's not like you've never seen a woman's bare back before." Her voice was scratchy and filled with anger.

"Not like yours," he said in a soft voice.

Sam froze. He was talking about her scars. Well, they were part of her and if he didn't like them, then he didn't have to look.

"I'll wait for you back at camp." Kong walked away.

Sam was ready now, ready to fight him if she had to. It didn't matter if he hated her, or thought she was some crazed woman. She had a job to do and damn it, she was going to do it.

As she approached the campsite, her guide spoke.

Is it not time to share your story Samantha? Maybe if you share, your burden will lessen.

With him? He hates me, she responded silently.

Sometimes it is easier to share with a person we do not know well. How could he hate a person he does not even know yet?

Sam rolled her eyes. She was tired of being nagged about it. If this was what was expected of her, so be it. She'd tell him the whole gruesome tale, then he'd know her and have a reason to hate her.

When she saw him, he was sitting on a rock, staring at the ground. Trying to be the bigger person, she went and sat next to him, then took a long deep breath.

"When I was eight years old, I had two wonderful parents. We lived in a nice two storey house in a beautiful neighborhood. My childhood was great. My parents showered me with love and gifts. Then one night, while I was in my room, I heard the front door crash open. I heard heavy footsteps coming up the stairs. Then I heard my dad shouting. I was so scared I just sat on my bed and listened. I could hear fists hitting flesh and my mother's screams. I wanted to help, to do something, so I started walking

toward my bedroom door. But it flew open and a tall man was standing in front of me, he pulled me by the hair and pushed me into a chair, then tied me up."

Sam paused and took another deep breath. Kong was watching her intently, not saying a word. He would let her tell her story. It was obvious she'd never shared it with anyone before by the way she spoke so fast. Almost as if she were constantly reliving it.

"Before he closed the door, I peeked across the hall to my parents' room. My father was tied to a chair. His face was bloody and swollen. My mother was on the bed naked with two men raping her. I can still hear my father's pleas to leave my mother alone." Her voice broke, so she cleared her throat and continued.

"The man that tied me up told him that when they were finished with my mother, they'd use me next. I was only eight. I didn't understand what that meant, but I knew I had to get out. So I started praying for help, praying for someone to come and stop the men. That's when I heard it for the first time. A soft, calming voice that told me how to untie my own hands. I did what it said to do and the next thing I knew, my hands were free. I wanted to run across the hall and help my parents, but the voice told me to go out the window. So I did. We had some spouting that ran down the side of the house. I climbed out the window and started lowering myself to the ground. When I heard the gunshot I screamed and fell to the ground. I tried to stand and run, but my ankles hurt too badly. The voice, the whisper as I call it, told me to start crawling. So I did."

Sam chanced a look at Kong, his face was stoic, but his eyes held anger. Whether it was anger at her, or anger about her story, she wasn't sure. But she had started this and now she had to finish it.

"They must have heard me scream, because the next thing I knew, the man was standing over me. I felt a sharp pain in my back and tried to crawl away. Then another sharp pain. When I heard the sirens I thought we were safe, but then I heard another shot and felt another sharp pain. My whisper told me to play dead, so I did."

Sam sat straight up and continued. "The next thing I knew, I woke up in a hospital. I could hear my uncle Walt talking to someone. He said he'd raise me. I was all he had left and he would raise me."

Kong almost commented, but held back. She was talking to him and he wasn't about to give her a reason to stop. It was a wild, tragic story and he wanted to hear the rest. When she simply sat there, twisting her hands, he knew he'd heard all that she would say.

"My God Sam," he said pushing his hand through his damp hair. "You've been through hell haven't you?"

"Don't you dare pity me!" she said forcefully. "I don't want your pity." Sam stood and started pacing. "Ya know," she said turning toward him. "I've never told anyone that story before. Except Uncle Walt. It almost feels like a weight has been lifted from my shoulders." To her surprise, her voice was calm. The pressure that was building behind her eyes eased and for the first time in her life she felt as if she could take a deep breath without something sitting on her chest.

He didn't feel pity for her, not exactly. But at the moment it felt like someone was squeezing his heart. How could a child come through an experience like that and not hate the world? "The nightmares you have, is that what they're about?" he asked softly.

"Yeah, I haven't had them in years. They started again the day before Uncle Walt told me about this job. Why they started again, I don't know."

The way the moonlight was shining on her face made her look almost angelic. Her skin was pale, but with the moonlight, it glowed. He pictured her as a small child, happy and playing with dolls. Then he pictured her witnessing her mother being raped. Anger stirred in his gut.

"Did they ever catch the guys who did it?" he asked.

"No. When I was old enough, I requested the police reports. To me it seemed like they did a half-assed job. They worked the case for about six months, then the reports just stop," Sam explained. "Some day, I think I'll go looking for them myself," she said in a dry, flat voice.

Kong felt a shiver run down his spine. Maybe it was the way she said it, or maybe it was the thought of her looking for her parents' killers on her own. It didn't matter what the reason, it felt wrong. Mentally shaking himself, he decided to press her further about her story.

"So, you heard voices in your head?" he said looking away from her. "Voices that told you how to escape? Voices that you still hear today?"

"Yeah."

"Yeah." Kong scrubbed his face again with his hands. "Did you ever talk to anyone about these voices?"

A small laugh slipped out of Sam's mouth. "You think I'm crazy? You think I need to be locked up in a rubber room?" She looked to the sky. "I told you he'd think I was crazy."

Give him time Samantha. This is not as new to him as he thinks it is.

Sam shook her head then looked back at Kong. If it hadn't been such a serious situation, she would have laughed at his expression. He looked like a child who was being taught algebra and didn't understand a word being said to him.

"Look. Whether you choose to believe me or not, it's true. The voice I hear is my spirit guide. It's how I'm so successful with my missions. It keeps me from harm, gives me information that I need and, well, besides my uncle Walt, it's the only friend I have."

Now that last statement made him sad. A voice in her head was the only friend this beautiful woman had? His heart squeezed a little bit tighter. It couldn't all be hogwash. What he'd seen earlier was proof of that. He'd always believed in the afterlife. In God. Maybe this was the proof he'd always needed.

"Okay. Tell me more about this spirit guide. Tell me how it works."

"Why?" she asked suspiciously. She'd watched his face as his emotions played across it while he thought.

"I want to understand," he replied.

Sam sat on the ground with her legs crossed. "There really isn't much to tell. I hear a whisper in my head that tells me when danger is near. Or it gives me information I may need to successfully complete my mission."

"How do you know it's not," Kong started to stammer. "Ah, ya know."

"How do I know it's not just my own head playing tricks on me?" she asked with a smile.

The way he was stammering was cute. And he really did seem like he was trying to understand.

"It's different. The voice has a different tone, a different style about it. For instance. There isn't any slang."

The crackle of the radio interrupted them. Kong looked from his radio to Sam. He had a lot more questions for her, but they'd have to wait now.

Chapter Eleven

"Kong, you readin' me?"

Sam felt a sense of relief when she heard Ricochet's voice. She knew they could handle themselves, but when you were part of a team, you always felt worry for your teammate. And for some reason, she felt a great deal of worry for these men. Even Kong.

"I've got ya Ricochet. Report," Kong replied.

"We've reached the town, there aren't many people moving around. I figure when the sun goes down, it's safer indoors."

"No doubt. Did you find the target?"

"Not yet. I just thought I'd let you know we made it to town. Boomer's checking the map to find out how far away we are from it. When we find it, we'll let you know."

"Roger. Keep your asses low," Kong told him.

"Roger that," Ricochet replied.

Silence spread between the two, neither knowing what to do or say next. Sam wanted to head for town, but for some reason Kong wanted to hold back. She could tell he wanted to say something to her, but he was struggling with it.

"Ah, Sam, I don't know, I mean..." he stammered.

"Just say it Lieutenant."

"First of all, quit calling me Lieutenant. My name is Mark. And in all honesty, I'm blown away by your story. How you survived is a miracle in itself. I have the utmost respect for you. As for your voice you hear, well, I'll just have to take your word for it. I've always believed in God and the afterlife. And after what I saw tonight, well, hell. I don't know."

Sam wasn't prepared for the flutter she felt in her stomach when he told her he respected her. It was the nicest thing he'd said to her since they met. But she didn't understand why it made her feel giddy. Maybe it was the way his face looked in the moonlight, or the way his damp hair was all mussed.

"What exactly did you see?" she asked curiously.

"Just what I said. You were covered in white light and then a gold ball of light appeared and floated over your body. It disappeared and two figures formed." He wasn't about to tell her what he'd heard inside his head. That was something he'd deal with later.

Sam sat listening intently. The gold light must have been her guide and it would explain how she healed so fast. But the white light and two figures, that she didn't

understand. *Remind me to ask you about this later*, she said to her guide, then pushed it aside.

"Well, at least you heard me out. Like I said, I've never told anyone my story before. People I work with only know me as Smoke and that I'm good at what I do. Beyond that, I'm nothing."

"You're not nothing!" Kong practically yelled. When Sam startled, he cursed himself. "I mean, if someone took the time to find out who you are, you'd have lots of friends."

Sam could see color creeping into his cheeks. "Are you saying you're my friend Mark?"

Kong looked over at her, he intended to tell her no, but when he saw the moonlight in her eyes, he figured he was just kidding himself. "Yeah Sam, I'm your friend." He smiled.

"So, is this a truce? No more browbeating me, thinking I'm the enemy?"

Her smile melted all the indifference he'd felt toward her. All that was left was a need. After all she'd told him, his body still wanted her. "You're not my enemy Sam." The words came out thick and husky.

Sam shivered from the look he was giving her. Heat pooled in the center of her stomach, then began to travel lower. Try as she did, she couldn't push the feeling away.

After clearing her throat, she said, "So we're cool? I'm a team member just like the other two?"

"You're a team member. But not like the other two," he told her. "Not at all like the other two."

The air between them seemed to grow thick and hot. Sam's skin began to prickle and her heart started to race. From the look on Kong's face, he was feeling it as well. This was new to her, something she'd never felt before in her life. And man, did it feel nice.

"What I said earlier, about your back. I wasn't talking about your scars. I saw them, but I saw past them," he told her reaching out and brushing his knuckles across her cheek. As soon as he touched her, a lightning jolt ran through his arm and went straight to his chest. His heart squeezed, then released, giving him a light, warm feeling. This feeling was far beyond lust and it scared the hell out of him.

Sam nearly melted from his touch. It was so soft, so caring. Something she'd never experienced before in her life. Yes, she'd taken lovers in the past, but they never made her feel so wanted with just a simple touch.

"Kong, you readin' me?"

Both jumped at the sound of Ricochet's voice. Both let out breath that they had been holding.

Sam looked away from his gaze, afraid that she'd revealed too much in her eyes. When she did, Kong lightly grabbed her chin and turned her back to face him. The

moment had been lost, but the look in his eyes was still telling. He wanted her to know that, wanted her to see that it wasn't a mistake.

"Kong."

This time, Kong reached out with his free hand and lifted the radio to his mouth, while still holding Sam's face. "I read you," he said into the radio, then dropped his hand.

When he did, Sam jumped to her feet and put some distance between them. This was way too intense for her. Feelings were running through her body at record speed and all of them were new to her. They were exhilarating feelings and scary. Now wasn't the time for this, they had a job to do. People's lives depended on them. Mentally shaking herself, she forced the feelings aside.

"We're at the target. It's not big," Ricochet reported.

Still watching Sam, Kong replied, "Is there any activity inside the building?"

"Negative. There's one light on, but no sign of anyone movin' around."

"If they have him in there, someone should be watching over him," Kong said with concern.

"I agree. But so far, nothin'. Maybe everyone went to bed." Ricochet yawned into the radio.

"Yeah, maybe. Sit tight and keep an eye out. I'll get back to you."

"Roger that," Ricochet replied.

Kong sat a moment and kicked a few scenarios around in his head. The biggest one was that they missed their opportunity. Or possibly, they had been given bogus information. Either way, they needed to check it out.

Sam could see he was puzzling it out and didn't want to disturb his train of thought, so she stayed quiet and let him alone. It wouldn't be wise to step in now. Besides, the way her body was still humming, she needed the space.

They are inside Samantha.

So we do have the right building? she asked silently.

Yes.

Sam trusted that Kong would make the right decision. He wouldn't come this far and walk away, she felt sure of it. Letting him think it through for himself was the best thing at the moment.

"Sam, what do you think?" he asked.

The surprised look on her face made him chuckle. "Don't look so surprised. Can you tell me anything or not?"

Sam strolled over and sat across from him. "It's the right house. They're inside."

"You're sure?"

"Yes, I'm sure."

"Don't get testy. I'm trying," he said as he stood.

She knew he was right. He was trying. "Sorry, I'm just not used to anyone other than Uncle Walt knowing about this."

"Fair enough," he said then stretched out his hand to help her up.

Sam hesitated, then put her hand in his and allowed him to help her to her feet. The feel of his hand wrapped tightly around hers was making her body start to hum all over again. When she stood, he didn't release her. Instead, he rubbed his thumb over the back of her hand in a soft stroke. Shivers ran up and down her spine, then she gave a short gasp.

When Kong heard it, he couldn't help but smile. He wasn't sure what was happening between them, but he knew he wasn't the only one feeling it. For some reason, that made him feel better.

"Let's roll," he said, then dropped her hand.

* * * * *

Sam led the way through the dark. Kong was a few feet behind her, but it felt like he was right next to her. Her body was still feeling the effects of him and that wasn't good. She needed to be fully alert if they were going to pull this off. And she was definitely not fully alert.

Kong watched her as she walked silently through the desert. She moved like a large cat would stalking its prey. Silent and deadly he thought, in more ways than one. The spectacle he'd witnessed earlier wasn't as shocking to him now as it had been. Sure, at first it shook him to his very core, but now it was something beautiful.

Thinking back to his childhood, he remembered a few times when he'd been in need of help himself. Times when his father was so drunk he didn't know who he was punching, or how hard.

He could remember cowering in the corner of his small room in the trailer, screaming out for help inside his head.

Only when his father passed out did the young Mark relax enough to let the help come through. The soft touch to his face by a hand that wasn't there, or the warmth that seemed to surround him like a heavy blanket had been wrapped gently over his shoulders. He remembered the smell of roses, often late at night when he was wishing he'd never been born.

Then there was the time when he'd turned fourteen. He'd been in his eighth foster home. The people were nice enough, but they had two other foster children living with them as well. One a girl, the other a boy two years older than him. The girl was small and shy, never speaking unless spoken to and quick to make herself useful. The boy on the other hand was always trying to stir up trouble. Blaming Mark for stealing money he'd taken, or making it look like Mark was responsible for broken furniture, or windows.

On one particularly bad day, Mark came home from school to find a police car sitting in front of the house, along with an ambulance. Mark walked by the officers unnoticed and made his way inside. He found his foster mother sitting on the couch covered in bruises. Blood was running from her nose, her clothes had been torn. Fear made the young Mark begin to shake as he watched the paramedics administer first aid.

"He's sixteen Mr. Hester. He'll probably do adult time," one of the officers told his foster father. "We'll need you to come down to the station and give us a complete statement."

Mark knew who they were speaking of. It didn't take a rocket scientist to figure it out. His foster brother was a time bomb waiting to go off. And from the looks of it, today was the day.

"We need to call social services. They'll have to come and pick up the other two children. I don't think my wife will be able to take care of them any longer," Mr. Hester told the officer.

It wasn't long until the familiar face of Ms. Kennedy, the woman in charge of his case, made her appearance. She ushered him and the girl into the back of her car and started down the road.

Mark sat quietly in the back, watching as the trees and houses went by, wondering if he'd ever find someone to love him. That's when he heard it. The voice so clear and calming inside his head.

You will find your place one day. And someone to love you. Be patient Mark. Your time will come.

The voice was soothing and full of hope. He'd held onto those words until he turned eighteen. The day he enlisted he swore he would take care of himself from now on and to hell with anyone coming along to love him.

Now here he was, in the middle of the desert, in a hostile country, working with a woman who claimed she heard these voices all the time. Not only heard them, but was guided by them. And not just any woman. A woman who made him think of things he swore he could live without. Things like tenderness, companionship and the need to have someone by your side all the time.

"Kong."

The single word brought him from his thoughts. How long had he been walking blindly behind her, not paying attention to what was happening?

"Kong, you still with me?" she asked.

"Yeah, what's up?" he responded.

"We're almost there. You want to radio Ricochet and find out where to meet them?"

Kong switched his radio channel to Boomer and Ricochet's frequency. "Ricochet, give us your location."

Sam waited and watched with an eagle eye as Kong received the coordinates. She was feeling jumpy, uneasy. She never felt like this during a mission and that made her all the more uneasy.

Something bad was going to happen, she could feel it all the way to her core.

Tell me this will all work out, she said silently in her head. Tell me we will all go home alive.

No answer came, just silence. Sam knew when she didn't receive an answer it was because she wasn't supposed to. Things would work out the way they were meant to and she'd have to live with it.

She didn't hear or even sense Kong as he came up next to her. The start he gave her was clear on her face. God, she had to get it together. She needed to make sure these people all made it home alive.

"Everything okay?" Kong could see her eyes and they were unsure.

"Yeah, fine. How far away are they?"

Kong didn't answer right away, he didn't like the look in her eyes. Something wasn't right.

"They're holed up in an abandoned building behind the target. You know, the one you picked out? Still no sign of movement."

Sam nodded her head. "Okay, let's go."

Kong followed her closely. It only took fifteen minutes to reach the building where Ricochet and Boomer were hiding. They had only encountered one person on the street, an elderly woman almost running down the sandy street. Her whole body was covered in the traditional Burka. Kong doubted she'd be able to see them in the dark. The heavy material surrounded her face acted like a shield. When the woman scurried inside one of the dilapidated dwellings the two continued on. The silence on the street was almost deafening. Kong preferred activity over silence. With activity around, every sound you made didn't seem like it was going over an intercom system. Nonetheless, no one seemed to be around to hear them tonight.

When they met up with the other two, Sam felt a great sense of relief. Even though she knew they were all right, it was still good to see them. Why she felt so connected to these three men confused her. She'd never felt so responsible for other people she'd worked with. This was something she'd have to put aside for now and study later. That list was growing by leaps and bounds.

"What's up?" Kong asked the two men.

"Ya know, that's the weird part. Nothing. Absolutely nothing," Ricochet said in his high-pitched street voice. "I don't like this Kong. I don't like it one bit."

"How about you Boomer? What's your take on the situation?"

"Well," Boomer's lazy style of talking made Sam smile. "I agree with Ricochet. Usually we see some kind of activity, no matter what the situation. But I haven't seen one ounce of movement."

Kong sat and watched the building himself for a few moments. This was strange. Surely they wouldn't walk away with a hostage inside the building? Or would they? He needed to see what was going on inside.

"Smoke, what can you tell me?" he asked without taking his eyes off the dwelling.

"Only that it's the right building and that he's in there," she replied.

Ricochet and Boomer looked at each other, then at Kong. When they left the campsite, the two were at each other's throat. Now he was asking her for an opinion.

"I need to see inside the building, see what the layout is like." Kong said to all three.

"Let me do it." Sam was sure she'd meet some resistance, but she needed to do it herself. Kong looked over at her in the darkness. The worry was still thick in her eyes, but her face showed determination. "Okay. Don't take long."

The three men watched as she seemed to disappear into the darkness. When she was out of sight, Ricochet leaned back against a large rock that had once been used as part of the dwelling's wall. Running his hand over his bald head a few times, he studied his friend.

"Ya wanna tell us what's going on?" he asked in a tired voice.

"Hunh?"

"When we left, we were sure only one of ya was gonna make it outta camp alive. Now, ya treatin' her like she's one a us. What gives?"

"Nothing gives Ric. I just understand her a little better, that's all."

"You want to fill us in?" Boomer asked patiently.

Kong turned then and looked at them. He'd never held anything back from them before in his association with them, but this wasn't his story to tell. "Look, I misread her, that's all. We talked a while and I see where she's coming from, that's all."

"You sure?" The questioning look in Boomer's eyes made Kong feel a bit guilty, but it couldn't be helped. Like he said, it wasn't his story to tell.

"I'm sure."

Chapter Twelve

Sam stepped with sure, quiet feet toward the building. The closer she got, the more uneasy she began to feel. Her eyes darted from side to side as she neared the building, watching and waiting for anything to spring from the shadows. The debris that lay around her was a sign that this village had seen fighting. Whether it came from American bombs or tribal wars she didn't know.

It saddened her to think of the people that must have died. Surely with this much destruction lives had been lost. Then the sight of the towers falling in New York flashed through her mind, along with the Pentagon scene and the hole in the ground in Pennsylvania where the last plane went down. Her heart swelled with pride as she thought of all those people on that plane, doing what was necessary to stop more innocent lives from being taken.

It wasn't her job to be a judge in this situation. Her job at the moment was to get the hostage out safely and back home where he belonged. A job that was supposed to be routine, but was quickly becoming anything but.

Sam spotted a dim light seeping through a crack in the wall off to her left. She crossed over to the crack and pressed her eye up to it. There was just enough light for her to see two people lying on the dirt floor, bound and gagged. Both men were covered in filth, but Sam could see red hair beneath it on one of them. The other man was older, frailer looking. He'd either been held longer, or his age had not allowed him to hold up under the duress he'd been forced to endure.

There is one more Samantha in a back room.

Sam continued around the outside of the dwelling, her feeling of unease growing by the second. As she neared the center of the wall, she felt a strong force stop her. Sam was used to these things happening to her, so she stopped. Listening with her ear to the wall, she could hear sobbing. Female sobbing. The hair on her arms stood straight up. They had themselves a woman. Sam's stomach rolled. She knew what these men did to women. Fury replaced the sick feeling in her stomach.

Looking up, she saw a small window just a foot over her head. Sam found a piece of rubble to stand on, then pulled herself up to the window. The burning, tearing feeling she felt in her arm was ignored. She had to see what was behind this wall.

The sight sickened her, then pure anger washed over her. The woman was shackled to a cot, her naked body covered with cuts made by a knife. Even in the dim light of the moon she could see the bruises that covered her body. It was hard to tell if she was American or Afghan. To Sam it didn't matter. A brutalized woman was a brutalized woman.

Sam vowed that she would remove this woman from her torture chamber, but she would have to wait. Leaving her made Sam angry all over again. Anger was what was going to fuel her to complete this mission. Sure now that there had to be Taliban men in the building, she jumped down from the window, then continued her search. Sure enough, two men were seated outside the door of the woman's chamber. They were laughing and eating.

What are they saying? Sam asked her guide.

Is this necessary to complete your mission?

No games, no riddles. I need to know what they're saying. Please.

They are talking of how they will end her life tomorrow.

Over my dead body, Sam told her guide.

If you allow emotion to rule you now, in this moment that is a possibility.

Sam froze for a brief moment. She'd never been warned of letting her emotions rule her before. Then again, she knew this mission was different.

Are there any more men inside the building? she asked patiently.

No. More will come within the hour. This is not where death will occur. They will transport the hostages to another building out in the desert.

Sam's brow furrowed. So they moved them to do the killing. But why? She needed to fill the others in on the situation.

When Sam returned to the others they could see the raw fury in her eyes. Kong was sure he saw actual fire burning in her retina.

"What is it?" Kong asked calmly.

"Three hostages. Two are being held in a room in the center of the building. It can be accessed from the outside, if we're careful." Sam paused and gathered her composure before she continued. "They have a woman in a back room. No easy access, except from the inside of the building."

When the word "woman" left her lips, she watched their faces. All three of them gave a different expression, but all were expressions of anger. Anger for what they knew had been done to her.

"She's shackled to a cot, naked and hurt badly. I don't know if she's American or not. Two men inside. Tomorrow is D-day," she explained.

"Hell," Kong said, then rubbed his chin. "We can take the two men and move them out without any problem. Once we deal with the two Taliban warriors we can remove the woman."

"Kong, this isn't where they do the killing. More Taliban will arrive within the hour to move them." Sam relayed the information slowly hoping he would understand where she got it.

He did, then looked to the other two. "What do ya think? Do we do the rescue now and risk getting company in the middle of it, or wait and follow them? Take them all out at once?"

Ricochet answered first. "I say we wait, follow the bastards, then take them all at once."

Kong nodded, then turned to Boomer. "How many are we talking about?" He asked slowly.

Kong turned to Sam and watched as she closed her eyes, then opened them again. "Six."

"Okay, let's do it."

They repositioned themselves closer to the front of the building so they had a better view. It only took twenty minutes until they heard the roar of a truck. They watched with strained patience as the two men were dragged from the building and thrown in the bed of the truck. It was obvious that they were weak either from starvation or beatings.

Five minutes later, the woman was dragged from the building. A blanket had been draped over her body. Her hands were tied behind her back and her legs barely held her weight. Fury began to grow inside Sam's belly again. Kong must have been able to sense it, because he reached out and placed a hand on her arm.

Amazingly, that simple touch did wonders to calm her. She wasn't alone like she had been when she was eight. She had three strong, capable men who were here to help her. And that was going to make all the difference.

When the truck pulled away, the four jumped from their hiding places and began to follow on foot. Sam was concerned about how they would keep up. Her worries vanished when the truck began to spit and sputter then slow. Loud shouts could be heard above the coughing engine. Sam could only assume they were curses. The man sitting in the back of the truck with the hostages didn't see them. Even if he did it wouldn't make a difference. Sam could easily pull him from the truck and end his part in this instantly.

Do not follow too closely Samantha. I will lead you to your destination.

When Sam backed off from the truck, Kong became concerned. "Smoke, what is it? Why are you backing off?"

"I know where they're going. We'll be there five minutes after they get there," Sam said calmly into her radio.

"How the hell does she know where they're going?" Ricochet snapped in his radio.

"Trust her."

Those two simple words gave Sam a boost of energy that ran from the top of her head, all the way to her toes. She wasn't going to let these people down. They were all counting on her.

Just as Sam had said, they arrived minutes after the truck did. The building was small, one room. But then you didn't need a lot of space to behead someone. There were two other structures in the area. Kong picked one and sent Boomer to check it out. If

everything was okay, they'd use it to shield the hostages while they cleaned up the mess.

When Boomer came back and gave the thumbs-up sign, Kong moved on to the next phase. Getting them out. They could storm the place, but that meant putting the hostages in more danger. Sneaking in was the best bet.

"Smoke, you get as close as you can. When it looks clear, start taking out targets."

"Roger that." Sam crawled toward the shack on her belly. She'd already picked out a spot to bury herself just outside the door.

Kong, Boomer and Ricochet watched through night vision goggles as she neared the building. They watched in awe as she flipped on her back and like a lizard, scooted and dug with her body until she was completely covered with sand. The fact that she did it with so much speed was not lost on the men.

"Damn, I wish I could do that!" The more Ricochet watched her work, the more impressed he was with her.

"Maybe she'll teach us," Boomer drawled.

Kong was impressed, but he was also worried. She'd crawled right into the belly of the whale so to speak. And he didn't like that. Those protective feelings were rushing forward again, making him uncomfortable. She didn't need to be protected. She was well trained, smart and had otherworldly beings looking out for her. She didn't need him watching her back.

"Boomer, position yourself as close as you can. If she needs help, I want you there," Kong said with a tight voice. So much for not protecting her, he thought to himself.

"Roger." Boomer slipped off into the darkness and found himself a spot thirty yards from the shack. He worked at burying himself deep in the sand so he wouldn't be seen. It wasn't as good as Sam, but he wouldn't be spotted as quickly this way.

"Ricochet, you take the other side. Keep as close as you can."

"You got it." Ricochet hid underneath the truck that had been parked off to the side of the building.

Once they were placed, Kong hunkered down where he was. He needed to be able to see the whole scene. When the front door opened, he held his breath. If the man stepped out the door and placed his foot too much to the right, he'd step right on Sam. Just as his foot hit the ground, Sam's hand popped out and grabbed him by the ankle. The man dropped like a rock to the ground without a sound.

Kong watched as Sam herself appeared from the ground and wrapped her arm around the man's neck. In the moonlight, he couldn't see the man as he turned a pale shade of blue while Sam cut off his air supply. He'd seen it before. He didn't need to see it now.

"Boomer, remove him now before someone walks out and sees him."

Through the night vision goggles he watched as Boomer picked the man up and heaved him over his shoulder. Simultaneously, Sam buried herself again. One down, he thought, five more to go.

It took about ten minutes before the other Taliban warriors noticed their companion hadn't returned. Kong held his breath. When the door opened again two men stepped outside this time. Sam was good, but could she handle two? His question was answered in short order.

Sam waited until the two men walked away from the door. With them side by side, it would make it easier for her. Without a sound, she rose from the sand and stepped up behind them.

Kong couldn't see what she held in her hand, but whatever it was, it was now in their necks. They fell to the ground in a heap. Sam turned and repositioned herself once again.

"Boomer, Ricochet! Clean up!"

The two men appeared and carried off the Taliban warriors. Kong could hear Ricochet chuckling in his radio. Three down, three to go.

It wouldn't be so easy now. Three of their men were missing, that would put them on alert. This time it only took five minutes for the remaining men to notice the other two were missing as well. Kong could hear the shouting coming from the shack. He may not have known what they were saying, but he knew aggravation when he heard it. The front door opened again. Kong's heart seemed to beat in his throat as he watched. Waited.

He held his breath when the door shut and Sam rose up from her hiding spot. "Smoke, what are you doing? Get back." He didn't know if she heard him or not, but she wasn't doing as he asked.

Sam positioned herself next to the door, she could hear the woman sobbing again. The sound tore through her like the knife that had torn through her flesh when she was a child. The sobbing sounded so much like her mother's that it started to cloud her mind.

"Smoke!" Kong yelled again.

"I hear the woman inside the shack," Boomer whispered over the radio.

"Damn it Smoke, it's not your mother in there. Listen to me, you can't take the three of them on." Kong changed his tone, yelling at her wasn't going to get him anywhere. He needed to reach her with a calm approach.

She is in danger Mark.

The voice flowed through his head like a breeze. He'd heard it before, that soft, soothing voice that had told him he'd find someone to love him. Kong shook his head, thinking he'd imagined it.

Her guide cannot reach her. Her mind is preoccupied with the injured woman. She is in danger.

This time the voice boomed inside his head. There was no chance that he was imagining it this time. It was warning him and he had to do something about it.

The front door opened again and Sam pointed her dart gun at the man standing in front of her. Without hesitation, she pulled the trigger. The small slender man crumpled to the ground.

Kong's heart leapt into his throat. She'd just exposed herself to the two men left. Shouting poured from the cabin when Sam rushed through the door. Kong was already scrambling toward the shack when the two male hostages stumbled out the door. Boomer lifted each by an arm and headed toward the building they were using to shield them.

Ricochet and Kong flanked the outside of the building. Ricochet was talking in the radio. Kong could barely hear him through the thundering blood rushing through his ears. A scream pierced through the darkness from inside the shack. Kong's heart dropped from his throat to the pit of his stomach. If they hurt her, he'd personally see to it that they never took another breath again.

Inside, Sam stalked the two remaining men. Her focus was clear. They had to be eliminated. Her mind confused the two scenes. One moment she saw her mother spread out on the floor, the next she saw the small woman it really was. Her breath was deep and heavy. When the man closest to the woman kicked her in the face, Sam reacted with a kick of her own to his face. Her kick was more sure, more deadly.

The man flew backward into the wall, then slid down to the floor. His head lolled to the side, while deep red blood oozed from his nose. The kick had forced a piece of bone into his brain, ending his life instantaneously.

With her senses dulled, she didn't notice the last man slide behind her. With the butt of his rifle he slammed her across the back. Sam fell forward toward where the woman lay sprawled on the floor. Another strike hit her in the back of the head. Blinding white light flashed through her eyes. With every bit of strength she could muster, she stayed conscious. When her head started to clear, she realized she'd messed up, in a big way. She wasn't dead yet. That meant he intended to interrogate her before he killed her.

Faintly she remembered seeing the two men flee through the front door. But her focus was on the woman. And because she let her emotions rule her, she was about to die. Movement at the window caught her eye. Mark, he'd get them out. He wouldn't let him hurt her.

Sam pulled herself together and started talking. "Let her go. You can have me, but let her go."

The man studied her a moment. The voice was female, but the fighting was male. With the rifle pointed directly in her face, he pulled her mask off. Surprise flashed through his eyes, then an evil smile. "A woman," he said in broken English. "Where are my men?"

Sam smiled herself. "Dead."

The man's face sobered. The way she smiled when she said it made a cold chill run down his back. "You lie," he shouted.

She looked over at the man slumped against the wall. "Do I?"

"You will die for what you have done." He pointed his rifle at her head.

Sam braced her back against the wall and stood. "Maybe. Are you going to kill me without interrogating me first?" As she spoke, she moved slightly toward the other wall. If she could get his back to the window, Kong would be able to take him down.

"Don't move," the man yelled. "Get back where you were." When Sam didn't move, he grabbed her by the hair and pulled her back.

Boomer and Kong watched the scene play out. Kong clenched his jaw when the man laid his hands on Sam. It was time to end this.

"I will play with you before I kill you," the man said. "Women are good for only one thing. American women are garbage."

"You really want to take me on?" Sam said tipping her head to the side. "Bring it on."

Chapter Thirteen

The man knew he didn't stand a chance against her. Not after what she'd done to his brother. Raising his rifle, he shot her in the leg. Sam dropped to the floor and cursed. Pain burned up her leg, through her hip and right out her back. She couldn't believe the son-of-a-bitch shot her.

"Now you won't give me any trouble," he spat out at her.

"You're going to be very sorry you did that." Sam's voice seethed with pain and venom. Her eyes all but shot arrows through the man. If he wasn't afraid before, he was now.

Boomer had to restrain Kong when the shot split the night air. Kong thought he knew what it was to feel fear, but nothing he'd felt before measured up to what he was feeling now. She'd taken a bullet to save a woman she didn't know. Hell, for all they knew, the woman might be half dead at this moment.

Sweat began to pour down Kong's face. His heart hammered so hard he could barely breathe. His vision focused down to a tunnel on Sam. She was speaking to him, Kong couldn't hear what she was saying, but whatever it was had the man turning a pasty shade of white. Good, he thought to himself, don't let the bastard know you're scared.

"I can't get a clean shot at him Kong." Ricochet's voice was strong, hard and determined. When Kong didn't respond, Boomer took over. "Hold fire. We need to wait and see what she does."

"Roger."

Sam looked around the room. The furnishings were sparse. The only thing she saw for cover was the table off to her right. If she could get the woman and herself near it, she would signal Boomer to throw a grenade. Sam had no doubt that her teammates were outside the building at this very moment. That fact gave her the strength to do what was needed. With searing pain spreading through her body, she stood. Blood pooled where she had been sitting, the smell of it wafted through the room. Sam pushed all of the pain, the smell and the anger aside. She had to end this now.

"I'll never understand you people," she said calmly as she moved closer to the table. "You claim to be so religious, but you think nothing of killing. Like it's your right to take lives." Sam had no idea if what she was saying was making sense, but she had the man's attention and that's what she wanted.

"You run around killing woman and children like they were nothing more than animals. Where is it written that you have the right to decide who lives and who dies?" Sam could see Kong just outside the window. With her right hand, she started to sign.

It took Kong a moment to see her hands making small motions, when he did, his head cleared and he began to pay closer attention. "Boomer, what the hell is she doing?"

Boomer peeked above the windowsill. He watched as she signed to him. She hadn't told them she could sign, just another one of her many secrets that only came out when necessary.

"Boomer, what the hell is going on?"

"She's signing. She wants me to toss a grenade on her signal," Boomer relayed.

A grenade. Was she out of her mind? She'd be blown to bits, along with the woman she was trying to save. Bile rose in Kong's throat. He'd be damned if he let her die in that shack. "No."

Boomer watched her hand closely. "She says she's going to use the table for cover. The man won't move so we can get a shot at him." Boomer looked over at Kong. The distress in his friend's face told Boomer the whole story. He had feelings for this woman and they went beyond friendship. "Look, she's right, it's the only way. If I toss it in toward the front of the shack, she'll be far enough away from the blast. The table will give them plenty of cover."

Kong curled his fingers in his hair. This was insane, he'd never had to throw a grenade in on a team member before. How had this gone so horribly wrong? "What should I do?" he whispered to himself.

Trust in her Mark, as she trusts in you.

The sweet voice filled his head and his ears. Was it that simple? Of course it was, she was trusting that they were there, that they would save her. Now he had to put up, or shut up. With renewed conviction, Kong looked square in Boomer's eyes. "Watch for her sign. I'll tell Ricochet to cover his ass."

Boomer nodded his acknowledgment. He pulled a grenade from his belt, placed his finger in the pin and waited. His heart hammered in his chest as he watched Sam start to ready herself. If he didn't place the grenade in just the right spot, Sam could be hurt, or worse, killed. "No pressure," he mumbled to himself.

"Ricochet, get your ass down. Boomer's going to toss a grenade," Kong told him.

"Roger." A grenade? What the hell was happening? he thought to himself.

When Sam reached the small table, she leaned on it for balance. The pain from her leg was breaking through her barriers. She could feel the cold sweat running down her back, her sight was becoming blurry. God help me, she whispered to herself.

"You know what really pisses me off about you people? You're going to be forgiven eventually and that's just not fair." Using every bit of strength she had, she grasped the table and swung it over toward where the woman lay. "Now!" she yelled.

Boomer pulled the pin, counted to five and tossed it through the window toward the front of the building. Kong and Boomer ducked at the same time and held their breath. Sam tipped the table on its side, protecting as much of the woman's body as she

could, then dived behind it herself. The man stood stunned, unsure of what was happening. When the blast came, it was hell on earth. Blinding white light flashed, the sound echoed throughout the desert. Wood splintered and shot through the air like bullets. Sam pulled herself over top of the woman. She'd take the shrapnel before the woman did.

Kong burst into what was left of the shack, kicking pieces of wood out of his way. When he reached the small table, he lifted it with a growl and found the two women lying still. Adrenaline pumped like fire through his veins at the sight of Sam bloodied. When he reached down and grabbed her arm, she began fighting him.

Sam could feel hands on her, but she couldn't see anything. When she screamed, she heard nothing. She could feel herself being lifted, then tossed over someone's shoulder. Pain ripped through her body causing her to scream.

Sam's screaming tore at Kong. He knew he was probably hurting her, but it couldn't be helped at the moment. They had to gather the rest of the hostages and get the hell out. The explosion would have been heard all the way into town. It wouldn't be long before more of the Taliban were crawling out of the sand.

Boomer checked to make sure the man was dead. Ricochet gathered the other woman and followed Kong. When they reached the outer building, the two men were huddled together, wide-eyed and frightened. Kong only spared them a glance and kept moving. Boomer quickly filled them in on what was happening, then forcefully urged them to follow Kong.

"We have two hours before the chopper comes," Ricochet breathed into his radio. The woman he carried weighed next to nothing. But the pace they were keeping was exhausting. The soft moans he heard reassured him that she was still alive.

"Keep moving," Kong demanded.

After an hour of moving through the soft sand, Kong was getting tired. Sam had stopped screaming and lay limply over his shoulder. In a small way, he was grateful she'd passed out. At least she wasn't feeling any pain.

"How are we looking Boomer?" It took all of Kong's strength to speak. Now that the adrenaline had worn off, he was fading fast.

"See that building up ahead. That's it. It's a good thing too, these guys aren't going to make it much further." The radio went silent for a brief moment. "How's Smoke?"

"She's out. I need to take a look at her leg." It was hard, but he spoke in a neutral, calm voice.

The group walked for another ten minutes then collapsed outside a rundown shed. The two hostages dropped like rocks. Boomer immediately pulled two bottles of water and some food from his pack. The men drank without stopping, then devoured the granola bars Boomer handed them. After a quick once-over, Boomer was sure they'd be all right.

Ricochet gently laid the woman down in the sand, then pulled the blanket away to get a better look at her. She was young, maybe in her early twenties. Her hair was

matted and stiff. The bruises that covered her body were a deep purple and black. The knife slashes were encrusted with dried blood and oozed with pus that gave off a terrible stench.

Turning his head away for a moment, Ricochet cursed the world for letting this woman suffer so horribly. When he turned his head back, her eyes were open and staring directly into his.

"Is it that bad?" she croaked out.

"Nothing some first aid won't help," he said gently. "What's your name?"

"Rhonda." Her throat hurt and sounded like a bull frog when she spoke. "Do you have any water? I haven't had any today."

Cursing again, Ricochet pulled a bottle from his pack, lifted her head and poured some into her mouth. "Take it slow, your stomach might reject it at first."

The water was lukewarm, but it felt like silk against her parched throat. "Thank you."

"Don't thank me yet, I have to start cleaning up some of those wounds. It may hurt and I'll have to see all of you to do it." He didn't want to add to her humiliation, but it had to be done.

"After what they did to me, this will be nothing." The woman laid her head back on the ground and closed her eyes, readying herself for the pain to come.

Kong lay Sam down as gently as possible. Her face was pale, her eyes had black circles under them and her pulse was weak. When he lifted her hand, it lay limply in his. He rubbed his thumb over the back of her hand and felt how cold her skin was.

"Boomer, I need help over here!"

When Boomer knelt next to them he swore. It was something he rarely did, but this was a situation that called for it. "We need to stop the bleeding in her leg." When he spoke, his voice was tight and strained.

Kong pulled his knife from its sheath and sliced her pant leg open. Then he pulled a bottle of water from his pack and poured some over her leg so they could get a better look. As soon as the blood washed away, it was replaced with a fresh stream of dark red blood. Boomer tied a tourniquet tightly around the wound, instantly slowing the bleeding to a trickle. His next step was to check her pulse. It was weak but steady. Now that they had the bleeding all but stopped, she should be out of danger.

"That's all I can do for now," Boomer told Kong. The look of fear in his friend's face told Boomer all he needed to know. "While she's out, you could start pulling the wood splinters out of her arms."

Kong nodded, never looking away from Sam. "Yeah, I'll do that," he whispered.

Boomer slapped Kong on the back, then stood and made his way over to Ricochet. When he got there, he stopped short of kneeling down next to them. Boomer frowned when he saw the state she was in. Oozing wounds, her bones protruding through her

pale skin making her look like a sack of bones wrapped tightly in flesh. Her eyes were sunk deep in their sockets. If she lived, it would be a miracle.

"You need any help?" Boomer asked softly.

"Help would be appreciated. She has some serious injuries."

"Is she awake?" Boomer asked squatting down next to them.

"I'm awake." Her voice was still weak and scratchy, barely audible. "The woman that saved me, is she all right?" she asked peering through half open eyes.

Ricochet's hands stilled as he waited for the answer. He knew she lost a lot of blood from the gunshot. And the shrapnel from the grenade had to be lodged all over her body. His chest tightened.

"I think she'll be okay ma'am. She's seriously injured, but I think we'll get her help on time."

His slow drawl was soothing and comforting, as were his hands as he dabbed at open wounds. "I'll say a prayer for her," the woman said as she closed her eyes.

Ricochet began working again. "How bad?"

"We got the bleeding stopped. Her pulse is weak, but steady. Kong's pulling splinters from her now." He continued to clean wounds silently for a few moments before he spoke again. "I think something's going on between them."

"You just noticin' that? Hell man, I noticed the first time he set eyes on her. When was the last time you saw Kong fret about a woman so much?" he said with a grin.

"He's never fought with one before."

A chuckle erupted from Ricochet. "No, he never did that before, maybe because he never found one that could kick his ass."

Boomer looked at Ricochet, then over at Kong. His was talking to her while he pulled large shards of wood from her arms and legs. "You're saying the fact that she can hold her own against him, attracts him to her?" The confusion in his voice made Ricochet chuckle again.

"Two peas in a pod, my friend. Two peas in a pod."

Boomer pondered that for a second, then shrugged his shoulders. Ricochet may have a point. Kong had never been able to find a woman who could deal with what he did. Surely Sam found it just as difficult to find a man who would understand what she did. "Well I'll be," he muttered with a smile.

Kong worked with gentle but sure hands as he pulled wood from Sam's body. What the hell did she think she was doing back there? Had she lost her mind? She just had to walk into that shack on her own. Couldn't wait for the rest of them. No. She had to be the hero. Well, look where it got her. Shot up and full of five-inch splinters.

"I swear Sam, when you recover, I'm gonna kick your ass for this. Where do you get off scaring me like that." The fear was still running deep in his veins like ice water. When he first saw her lying there her body slumped over the other woman, all the air in

his lungs had dissipated. His mind could only think of one thing. Get her out of there and run. Run far, far away, so no one could ever hurt her again.

Kong snorted. She wasn't a woman who needed to be protected. She could damn well take care of herself. She sure didn't need him watching over her.

She needs you.

Kong froze when he heard the voice. He'd forgotten. After all the excitement he'd forgotten he'd heard it earlier. It warned him she was in trouble—told him her guide couldn't reach her. Then it told him to trust her. Now it was telling him that she needed him. He wiped his forehead with the back of his hand. He was losing it, that's what was happening. He was tired and his mind was playing tricks on him.

Sam fed him that story about hearing voices, so now his mind was creating one too. He wanted to believe in her so much. Wanted to believe what she told him. God he was so stupid.

Have you forgotten me?

The voice echoed through his head, a voice he recognized from his childhood. That's right, he told himself. He'd heard it long before he'd met Sam. He remembered how he clung to those words, how the invisible hand would caress his cheek.

Kong groaned to himself. His life was fine until he met this woman. Now his head was all screwed up. If he was smart, he'd walk away from her when this was all over. Jump on the first plane out of Pennsylvania and never look back. Then things would return to normal, his kind of normal.

The whole time he was convincing himself he needed to run, his heart was telling him he needed to stay. That it had found its other half. Walking away now would change his life, but not in the way he thought. He'd spend the rest of his life alone and sad.

"It's my decision. No one else's. Mine. Stop screwing with my head!" he said aloud. The outburst caused every one to look at him. When he realized it, he took a deep, long breath through his nose, then let it out his mouth. When he didn't feel the sense of calm he always felt when he did this, he repeated it.

The thundering of propellers went a long way to bring him back to some sense of reality. He stood listening to the low pitched thwap, thwap, of the blades. His heart seemed to beat in rhythm with it. He stood with his eyes closed and let it take over his body. This is what he needed, this familiar sound, the familiar scent of aviation fuel. The job.

Straightening his back and jutting out his chin, he turned toward his men. "Let's get them ready to travel. Boomer, you help Ricochet." He pointed toward the two men they'd rescued.

"You two can walk. Follow them."

With the orders barked out, he turned back to Sam. Without letting himself think, he lifted her into his arms, picked up their two packs and headed toward the chopper as it began to land.

Boomer helped Ricochet get the woman inside, then pulled the two men in. Once they were settled, he held out his arms to take Sam from Kong.

Kong simply stepped inside brushing past Boomer. He wanted to hold her. He knew that for himself. No voice had to tell him. He had to hold her, just for a few moments.

Once inside, Boomer slapped the pilot on the back, letting him know they were ready. The chopper lifted gracefully off the ground and headed toward the American base. Kong would get hold of Cannon when they got there, let him know what went down. Sam would be looked over, stabilized and put aboard a plane bound for home. That's the way things should be.

Organized, thought out. Not directed by some disembodied voice.

Kong sat staring straight ahead oblivious to his teammates' gaze.

"He has it bad Boomer. Real bad," Ricochet said.

Boomer could see what Ricochet couldn't. The turmoil that was going on behind the eyes. The desperation, the fear. Fear for Sam or for himself, Boomer wasn't sure. Just fear.

Chapter Fourteen

When the chopper landed, three gurneys were wheeled toward it. The woman was removed first. Disgust, horror and hatred crossed the soldiers' faces as they moved the frail woman onto the soft gurney. Many of these young soldiers hadn't seen what the Taliban could do to a female body. Now it would haunt them in their sleep.

The red-haired man helped his fellow hostage from the helicopter and then helped lift him to the next gurney. When a soldier started pushing him toward the remaining one, he held up his hands.

"I'm fine. You have an injured soldier in there. Take her," he shouted over the sound of the helicopter blades winding down.

The news that a soldier was injured caused a rush toward the door. Kong stood with Sam in his arms. He would carry her to where she needed to go. No one was touching her until he was sure they knew what they were doing.

"Sir, let us take her! We'll help her!" The soldier shouting at him was young. Far too young to be seeing gunshot wounds and torn bodies.

Kong looked down at the young man. The concern in his eyes was enough to keep Kong from shoving him aside. "I'll carry her. Show me where."

The young man nodded, then led the way. Ricochet and Boomer followed. The doors to the makeshift hospital flew open. People were shouting orders, nurses were jogging from one bed to another. No one paid attention to the tall man cradling the small woman in his arms.

"Put her here," the soldier said gently. "I'll make sure she's seen as soon as possible."

Kong gently laid her down on the soft bedding. Somehow she looked more frail now. The white sheets of the bed seemed to wash her out. Hours ago she was kicking ass without taking names. Now she looked like a china doll that would shatter with the slightest touch. His heart squeezed hard in his chest. No. He was becoming too attached to the situation. Still looking down at her, he began to back away from the bed.

"I have to contact Cannon. Let him know what went down," he muttered to his friends.

"We'll stay with her," Boomer told Kong as he turned to leave.

"Suit yourselves," he said indifferently then stormed out the front doors.

The two men were left standing wondering what the hell was happening. One minute he wouldn't let anyone touch her. The next he acted as though he didn't care.

"Cannon, it's Lowe. Mission accomplished," Kong growled into the phone.

"Everything went well?" Walt asked with relief.

"We ended up grabbing three hostages instead of one. Two male, one female."

A woman. Walt sighed. "How bad?"

"Bad as she can be without being dead."

"Well, if I had known."

"With all due respect Sir. If you had known, your niece would probably already be dead."

Kong regretted the outburst as soon as it left his lips.

"What the hell are you talking about Lowe? What happened to Sam?" Walt's heart leapt into his throat. "Well?"

"Your niece decided to go solo at the end. She walked in on two Taliban warriors. Killed one then took a bullet in the leg. We couldn't get a clean shot at the guy, so Smoke decided a grenade was in order. She's at the base hospital as we speak." Kong slowed himself, took a deep breath then continued. "She lost a lot of blood Sir. And they're going to have to pull shrapnel from her body."

Walt sat dumbstruck. What had happened? She never got hurt on a mission. She swore her guide saw to it that she never got hurt. Killed. She actually killed a man? Sweat beaded over Walt's brow.

"I want a full report by the time you return Lowe. I want every blessed detail, right down to what color boxers you were wearing. Is that understood soldier?"

"Perfectly Sir." Kong's tone mirrored Walt's. Both were angry at each other. Both blamed the other for things going wrong. Kong blamed Cannon for getting this woman involved in rescue work. Cannon blamed Kong for not watching her back.

When Kong slammed the phone down, he scrubbed his face with his hands. How was he going to tell the man that she'd lost contact with her guide for crying out loud. If she lost contact with her guide, that meant she lost her focus. And that was something a soldier never does. She let personal feelings cloud her judgment and if it happened once, it damn sure could happen again.

Walt sat at his desk, his hands fisted. If he unclenched them they would shake. His Sam was hurt, shot. How could that be? She went solo? Sam never went solo when she was working with a team. "Your niece would probably already be dead." The words played over and over in his head. How did Lowe know she was his niece? He hadn't said anything. That meant Sam told him. But why? Questions, too many questions. He needed to see Sam. Relaxing his hands, he picked up the phone and dialed.

Kong stood outside the hospital for fifteen minutes before working up the nerve to go in. He didn't want to walk in and find out she was dead. Just the thought made his stomach knot. But Boomer and Ricochet were inside waiting for him. Turning toward the door, he walked in as if nothing in the world bothered him.

He found the two men sitting in chairs. Boomer had his head in his hands. Ricochet had a blank look on his face. The knot in his stomach tightened. His legs felt like lead as he walked toward them.

"Hey, what's up?" he asked.

Boomer lifted his head. "They have her in surgery," he said quietly.

"That's good. Right?"

"Yeah. Great," Ricochet responded.

"What about the other three? Heard anything about them?"

"Yeah, our main target is fine. They didn't have him long enough to starve him. The other guy, well, it's going to take a few days to find out how extensive his damage is." Boomer's voice was flat, expressionless.

"What about the woman?" Kong asked.

Ricochet turned his head slowly, looked up at his oldest friend, then stood. "She has gangrene all over her body. She's so dehydrated and malnourished that her body was feeding on itself to stay alive. Her hair is falling out, her fingernails are gone and she was so brutally raped that if she does survive, she'll never have sex again because her insides are hamburger."

Hatred, fury, the need to kill again was so strong in Kong that he looked away and cursed. Humanity never ceased to amaze him. Why God didn't just wipe the face of the earth clean and start all over again was beyond him. Where were these so-called guides when this woman needed them? Why didn't they stop it? Why let this woman be brutalized? What was the point in having a guide if it didn't protect you from animals? More reason for him to distance himself from the situation.

"Did you get a hold of Cannon?" Boomer asked, snapping Kong from his warring mind.

"Yeah, I got him. He wants a detailed report of what went down. Right down to the color of our boxer shorts." Deciding it was time for them to know some of the truth, he pulled them away from where they were standing. "Listen," he whispered. "Sam is Cannon's niece. So he's not at all happy right now. He's gonna want someone's head for this. So I'm giving him mine."

"What?" Ricochet growled. "His niece? The man sends his own blood out to risk her life?"

"Yeah, that's kinda what I think too," Kong breathed.

"Don't pass judgment." Boomer interjected. "We don't know the whole story. It's not our place to judge what we don't understand."

Ricochet groaned. "Leave it to Boomer to be the voice of reason through all this. Look man, if Cannon wants heads, he'll take all our heads. Not just yours. We were all there. Sam just went loco. That's all I can figure."

"Ric's right. We all hang together," Boomer said quietly.

Kong stood looking at them. He should have known they wouldn't let him take the heat alone. They weren't that kind of people. They were good people, people that could be trusted and counted on.

"Thanks."

A commotion started outside the hospital. The three men ran for the doors to see what was happening. When they got there, jeeps were pulling up with wounded men. They held the doors open while they were carried and wheeled inside.

"What's going on?" Boomer asked one of the jeep drivers.

"I don't know what happened, but the Taliban just started driving through the streets shooting everyone they could see. My buddy said they were yelling 'death to all'. Like I said, I don't know what happened, but whatever it was sure pissed them off." The man jumped back in his jeep and drove off.

"Damn. You suppose that because of us?" Ricochet asked.

"Un-huh. Sounds like we opened up a can of worms." Kong replied.

As they helped carry the injured inside, they noticed trucks pulling out loaded with soldiers. Up above, planes and helicopters flew. Tanks rolled by the outside gate of the compound.

"It's about time," one soldier yelled to his buddy. "Now we get to fight back. All this time we've been sitting with our thumbs up our asses, taking it. Now we get to do something about it."

Battle cries filled the air. Not one soldier looked as if he was regretting what was about to happen. A twinge of guilt hit Kong. He knew some innocents would die today. Innocents that meant nothing to the Taliban.

As the rush of casualties slowed, the three men ventured back inside the hospital to wait for the doctor performing Sam's surgery. They watched as gurneys were shoved in the hall, sheets pulled up over bodies. Screams spilled from doorways. Bloodied towels and sheets were tossed to the floor. Chaos reigned here—an organized chaos. The dead were moved aside, then dealt with by another team. The injured were moved from room to room, depending on their injuries.

"I hate this," Boomer mumbled.

"You're not the only one buddy." Ricochet's stomach wasn't dealing well with all the blood. He wasn't squeamish, but he hadn't eaten in what seemed like sixteen hours. He was just about to mention that they remove themselves when the doctor walked out of the chaos. "Are you Captain Lowe?" he asked looking right at Kong.

"Yes Sir."

"The surgery went well. I was able to repair the damage to her leg. All the shrapnel was removed and the wounds cleaned. We'll be moving her to Recovery. I assume you three will want to see her?"

"Yes Sir," they all said in unison.

"Okay, give her three hours. Then the nurses will let you in." He turned to leave when Kong stopped him.

"Sir, did Walter Cannon contact you?"

"Not me personally, but he's being kept up to date." The man didn't have time for bureaucracy. He was a doctor. He didn't give a damn if he wasn't supposed to let them see her. He didn't know what they'd done, but they were a team. That was clear. And team members needed to see each other.

Relief slammed Kong right between the eyes. She was going to all right. The other two men shook hands and smiled at each other. Kong started to shake, his vision blurred and his stomach churned. Just when did she become so important to him? He'd only known her a few days. Just a few days and he was acting like his life depended on her.

Rubbing his eyes with his thumb and forefinger, he took a few moments to think. This wasn't healthy. No way was this even remotely right. Not once in his life had he fallen so hard for a woman that she shook his strength. He'd been with a lot of women over the years, some small, some not so small. Some were highly intelligent, some not so intelligent. Some just wanted to have sex with him, others wanted a life. Every time, he walked away not feeling one bit bad about leaving.

Did that mean something was wrong with him? Hell no. He couldn't help it if he never felt anything more than lust for them. At least he was honest about it. How many guys did he know that led women on, told them everything they wanted to hear, then walked away laughing. He always prided himself on being honest.

So what was happening now? Why was he feeling like he'd just been pulled from the edge of hell? In his mind, in his world, it wasn't possible to harbor feelings for someone you only knew for a few days. Hell, it wasn't possible for him to harbor feelings for anyone.

"Hey man, you all right?" Ricochet asked.

Kong cleared his throat. He needed to put some distance between him and her, this place. He needed to think. "Yeah, I'm gonna go find something to eat."

"We'll come with ya." Boomer knew Kong was struggling with something. It was so clear on his face it was almost painful. But this was a struggle he'd have to face on his own. No one could bail him out.

The three men strolled the base until they found the mess tent. When they walked in lunch was just being cleaned up. Fortunately, the serving crew took pity on the way they looked and piled their trays full. After eating MREs for the last two days the chow tasted like it came from a four star restaurant. Ricochet and Boomer dug in. Kong pushed his around his tray.

When the two men were finished, Boomer looked at Kong and said. "We're gonna take a look around the place. We'll meet you back at the hospital." Then Boomer grabbed Ricochet's arm and led him from the table.

Kong continued to sit and shove his food around. His mind was pushing his feelings around inside his head. He didn't notice the female soldier watching him until she walked up to the table and spoke.

"Are you finished?" she asked in a sultry voice.

Kong looked up at her. She was pretty, even in her khaki fatigues. She was tall, with long legs. Her blond hair was partially hidden under her cap. He lowered his eyes to hers. They were a light blue, like the sky. Her lips were full and round and her skin was flawless. As he let his eyes skim over the rest of her, he prayed that he'd feel something. Some kind of desire. She was slender with an hourglass figure, the kind men drooled over.

Not him though. Nope. Absolutely nothing. Not even a twinge of lust. He found himself starting to compare her to Sam. Sam was short, had rich black hair. Her figure was muscled, strong. Not delicate. Sam's eyes were unique as though they could see right through you.

When she got no response from him, just a thorough examination, she spoke again. "I haven't seen you around here before."

Finally finding his voice Kong replied, "No you haven't."

"My name's Rebecca, Rebecca Holston," she said reaching out her hand.

Kong met hers and wrapped his fingers gently around her hand. No spark, no zing up his arm and into his chest. "Mark Lowe," he told her with just a touch of disgust in his voice.

When they dropped hands, he shoved his in the front pocket of his pants. Almost feeling guilty because he wasn't attracted to her. Oh boy, he thought to himself. If Boomer and Ricochet were here, they'd never let him live down the fact that he wasn't hot for a tall blonde built like Marilyn Monroe.

"I'm getting off duty for the day in a few minutes, would you like to take a walk or something?" The "or something" was said in a very seductive tone.

Any other time, Kong would have reveled in the attention. Today it just annoyed him. "That's nice of you, but, ah, I'm meeting my two partners over at the hospital in a few," he said picking up his tray.

Concern flashed across her face. "Oh, I hope everything is okay?"

Kong walked to the trash can and emptied his tray. "Yeah, one of our teammates was shot." His heart did a funny little skip when the words left his lips.

"Is he going to be all right?" she asked putting her hand on his arm.

Kong looked down at the long, slender, very feminine fingers on his sleeve. Maybe if he just took her up on her offer, he'd shake himself out of whatever the hell was wrong with him.

Maybe that was the key. He hadn't been with a woman in months and he'd just spent the last two days with one he couldn't touch.

A small smile eased across his lips. "He'll be fine. We just wanted to see him when he wakes up in recovery."

"Oh, that's good." Rebecca could feel the tight muscles under her hand. She'd always liked being with a man who was well-built. "We could meet up later," she said looking up through her long eyelashes. "I could show you around the camp. There's a lot of quiet places tucked around here."

Kong made a decision, right or wrong, it was made. "Maybe I'll do that." As soon as the words were out, his throat dried up and his stomach seemed to pinch.

"Good. Meet me back here by three o'clock," she said squeezing his arm.

Kong watched as she sashayed off, her lush bottom swaying to a beat that only she could hear. When she turned around and winked at him, her eyes made promises he once would have begged for from a woman like her. Now he was feeling like the biggest dog in the world.

After slamming his tray down on top of a stainless steel cart, he left in a hurry. Once outside, he slowed his pace. He spent the next forty five minutes wandering around the base. It was always a bustle of activity, he thought. Like ants building and rebuilding their tunnels.

Off in the distance he heard shelling, if he looked hard enough past the blaring sun, he could see smoke coming from miles up the road. He wished he could tell them exactly where to find the Taliban. At least the ones in the small village where the hostages had been held. But that wasn't up to him. That was up to higher powers.

Looking at his watch, he realized he'd killed enough time and decided to head back to the hospital. Ricochet and Boomer were probably already there waiting for him. He dreaded seeing Sam in that hospital bed. Seeing how fragile she'd be. Then he thought of his rendezvous with Rebecca. As soon as her face entered his mind his heart skipped again, this time taking his breath away. Pain centered itself in his stomach.

By the time he reached the hospital he'd managed to catch his breath and the pain had subsided. Just as he knew they would be, Boomer and Ricochet were sitting outside in the hall waiting for him.

"Where ya been man?" Ricochet asked in his high-pitched voice.

"Walking around, checking the place out. Guess what. I met a cute blonde shaped like Marilyn Monroe. We're meeting up in twenty minutes." He tried to show excitement in his voice but he wasn't quite sure he was pulling it off. From the looks on their faces, he must have been.

Chapter Fifteen

The two men stood silently for a few seconds, neither wanting to voice their opinion about this situation. Boomer noticed his hands were balled into fists and carefully relaxed them.

"Well, I guess we better get you inside. We wouldn't want to hold you up?" Boomer pushed past Kong and walked up to a nurse standing at a desk.

"What's wrong with him?" Kong asked.

Ricochet looked at Kong. He knew what was wrong but he wasn't going to step into the middle of it. "Long day I guess," he said looking down at his feet.

When Boomer came back, he looked at Ricochet and said, "It's right through here. She said we could only stay a few minutes every half hour."

The three men walked to a curtain that served as a door to a small cubicle. Boomer hesitated briefly, then pulled the curtain to the side. To his relief, her eyes were open.

"Hey Sam, how ya feelin?" Ricochet asked in a soft, gentle tone.

At the sound of Ricochet's voice, Sam's eyes darted toward the foot of her bed. The sight of the three men went a long way to speed her recovery. Her eyes immediately focused on Kong.

"Hey guys. How's it going?" Her throat was raw and sore.

"Not bad," Boomer replied.

His smile was big and warm, his eyes showing his relief. Ricochet was smiling as well. Sam couldn't help but smile at him. She loved the way his bright white teeth gleamed against his dark skin. But when she looked at Kong, he averted his eyes, his face indifferent.

"They won't tell me about the hostages. Are they all right? What about the woman?"

"Well, the two men are going to be fine. Our main target was pretty healthy, so they'll look him over and release him. The other guy, they'd had him a while, so he needs more medical care, but they say he should recover." Boomer stopped, not wanting to tell her about the woman.

"What about her? Is she going to make a full recovery?"

Kong spoke first. "We don't know yet." His answer was short and terse. It was harder than he thought it would be, seeing her so pale and weak. He wanted to go to her, hold her, tell her she'd never have to do this sort of work again.

"Glad to see you're feeling better. Take it easy, get some rest. I'll come back later and see ya," Kong said, then turned and left the room. When he got on the other side of

the curtain, he stopped and rubbed his eyes. His overwhelming protective feeling was all the more reason for him to go find Rebecca. He needed to prove to himself that he didn't actually care for her. These crazy feelings were only because she was woman in a deadly situation. What man wouldn't feel for a woman looking so pale and vulnerable? Once he had a warm sensual body next to his he'd forget all about Sam and these ridiculous emotions would fade away like the desert sunset.

"What's with him?" Sam asked more than a little confused. The last time they spoke, he was kind. There was heat building between them, she was sure of it.

"Nothing Sam. He's meeting someone in a few minutes, guess he's in a hurry." Boomer told her.

Ricochet gave him a scalding stare.

"I see. Does he always find a woman at every base you guys visit?" Sam tried to sound flip about it, but her emotions were heavy in her voice and in her eyes.

Kong almost reached through the curtain when he heard Boomer tell her he was meeting someone. They were his friends for crying out loud! They were supposed to cover for him. Then when he heard the hurt in Sam's voice his anger dissolved into self-disgust. Walking away he tried to convince himself that he hadn't done anything to make her think he was seriously interested in her. He thought back over the words he'd said. He'd told her she wasn't like the other two. So what? That could mean anything. She was more skilled, she was, hell anything would make her different from the other two. So he told her he saw past the scars on her back. He was just trying to make her feel better.

Kong marched across the base, pounding his feet into the sand. The more excuses he made for himself, the harder his feet hit the ground. It wasn't his fault she'd taken everything the wrong way. None of this was his fault.

When he reached the mess tent he saw Rebecca standing inside, out of the sun. He stopped, looked at her and heard Sam's voice echo inside his head. "I never date military men." He closed his eyes. He couldn't recall the exact words, but it all boiled down to them leaving her bed and jumping into someone else's.

Bile rolled up in his throat. He had told her not all of them were like that. He was actually offended by her words. And now here he was, doing what he said he didn't do. Sure, he hadn't slept with her, but even after all the excuses he made for himself, he knew he wanted to.

Kong ran his hands through his hair. What was he supposed to do now? He wanted this woman just to prove that he didn't want the other.

"Mark, is everything okay?" He was obviously going through an internal war. He was going to back out and she wasn't going to put up with that. After being in this miserable desert for eighteen months she needed a man. Not the boys that were crawling all over her every day, but a man. "Is your friend still doing well?"

Kong flinched when she touched him, then quickly smiled to cover it. "Yeah, he's fine. I guess the heat is just getting to me."

A sexy smile spread over her face. "Well, let's just get you out of this hot sun." She slipped her arm through his then began to move him off. He was not getting away from her and there was no way he was going to be able to resist her once they were alone.

Kong allowed her to drag him. His mind was in so much turmoil he had no idea where they were going. He heard her talking, something about how long she'd been there and how lonely it got. The further they got from the hustle of the base, the heavier his feet felt. When they rounded a corner and walked toward a small tool shed, he felt as though the entire lower half of his body was made of lead.

At the door of the shed Rebecca looked around, opened it and pushed Kong inside. Light seeped through the cracks between the shed's wood planks. Sand covered everything. Straight ahead of him he could see a makeshift bed. Nothing more than a few blankets spread over the sand.

Without warning Rebecca shoved him against the wall then stepped back from him. She smiled as she began to unbutton her shirt. Kong felt the blood begin to drain from his head.

When she reached the last button, she pulled the sides away, revealing two shapely mounds covered with a lacy bra. She let her shirt slide down her arms and fall to the ground, then she reached between her breasts and unhooked her bra.

When that hit the ground, Kong was sure he would follow it. Rebecca didn't give him time to move. She thrust her heavy breasts against his chest and crushed her mouth against his. Kong stood stone still. It didn't seem to matter to her that he wasn't participating. When she pulled back, she grasped his hands and planted them firmly on her breasts.

Kong felt as if he was watching from outside his body, trying desperately to urge himself on, to take what was offered freely. But his body just stood there, unresponsive. When she dropped to her knees and began unzipping his pants, a load roar rushed through his head. When her hands reached inside and cupped him, he all but jumped out of his skin.

Rebecca squealed when he reached down and grabbed her hands, pulling them away from him.

"Stop!" he growled at her.

"What's the matter honey? You do like women don't you?" she asked in a thick, sexy voice.

"Yeah," he thought to himself, "what's the matter? You have a luscious woman ready to take you to heaven and you're acting like a frightened virgin." Then Sam's face appeared in his head. Her sexy little smile, her exquisite eyes. He remembered how soft her skin looked and how much he wanted to feel her lips on his. Like it or not, he had a thing for that little spitfire.

"Yeah," he finally said. "I like women. One in particular." He pulled Rebecca to her feet, then reached down and grabbed her shirt and bra.

"She's back home. No one will ever know," she said pushing her breasts toward his chest.

"She's not back home and I'll know," he said thrusting her shirt at her.

Rebecca cursed. She'd lost him, the first man in weeks to make her body burn with genuine desire. With quick, jerky movements, she dressed herself. "What, is she some kind of beauty queen? Do you know how many other guys around here would kill to be in your shoes right now?"

"I'm sure every guy on base would love to have you," Kong said looking away as she hooked her bra.

"Then why the hell don't you?" she snapped.

"I wish the hell I knew," he replied running his hands through his hair.

Rebecca looked at his face. He was confused, honestly confused. Her temper melted away as she realized that he must be in love. "She's really special huh?"

When Kong didn't answer, Rebecca pushed further. "Your friend in the hospital, it's not a he is it? It's her?"

When his eyes met hers, she knew she was right. "So why even agree to see me? It wasn't like you didn't know what I wanted."

"I don't know." He sighed. "I guess I wanted to prove to myself that she didn't mean anything to me. I'm still not sure she does," he said leaning the back of his head against the wall.

Hope began to bloom inside Rebecca. "So how does she feel about you?"

"She probably hates me right about now."

A wicked smile pulled at the corners of Rebecca's mouth. "Then she's a fool. How could anyone hate a man who would do what you just did?"

He should have picked up on it, that hint of temptress in her voice. But he was too busy wallowing in his own misery. "That's just it. My buddies told her I was meeting someone, so now she thinks I hunt for women at every stop I make."

The smile grew. "That's her problem. If she doesn't trust you..."

Kong cut her off. "I have to go. Maybe I can talk to her," he said brushing past her as he moved for the door. "I need to talk to her."

"Good luck!" Rebecca called after him. "Better get to her before I do."

* * * * *

By the time Kong arrived back at the hospital, Boomer and Ricochet were just leaving her small cubicle. When he walked up to the men, he was sweaty and sticky from his jog back.

His two friends mistook it for something else and looked at him with disgust.

"Shit Kong, you coulda at least cleaned up first," Ricochet snarled at him.

Boomer didn't say anything but his silence said volumes.

"I need to talk to her," Kong said pushing past them.

"No you don't. She's asleep. And you're gonna clean up before you show your face to that woman in there." For the first time in his life, Ricochet wanted to punch his best friend.

When he tried to push past them again, Boomer grabbed his upper arm with squeeze that meant business. "No. Let her rest. We're going to see Rhonda, you know, the woman hostage. You go clean up and then we'll all meet back here. You can go in with us."

Kong saw the anger in his eyes and decided it was best to do as they said. He backed off and nodded his head. "Okay. I'll meet you back here in thirty minutes." When Boomer let go of his arm, he backed away. For the first time, he was almost afraid of them.

"Damn Boomer, you looked like you were gonna pop him one." Ricochet's normal street talk was back.

"I almost did. She doesn't deserve to be treated like one of his tarts."

"Tarts? Man you and me gotta have a lesson on vocabulary." Ricochet slung his arm around his buddy and led him down the hall.

While Kong found the showers and Boomer and Ricochet paid a visit to Rhonda, Rebecca made a call to one of her friends at the hospital. Once she found out that no one was with Sam, she talked her friend into letting her in to see her.

Rebecca wasted no time in finding Sam. When she walked into the cubicle, she looked the sleeping girl over carefully. She really couldn't understand the man's fascination with her. Sure, she wasn't looking her best at the moment, but this wasn't a woman who could hold a candle to her. This woman was small and muscular. Her face was somewhat plain. Okay, maybe pretty Rebecca thought.

Her body wasn't voluptuous. It was petite, almost boyish. It was almost an insult to be turned away for a woman like this. She almost changed her mind on the way over, thought maybe it was being petty. But now that she was here she had to convince Sam that Mark had sex with her, just out of spite.

Sam opened her eyes, feeling that someone was watching her. She didn't recognize the woman standing over her but an instinct told her she wasn't going to like her either. Sam said nothing, just lay there waiting.

"My name's Rebecca. I've heard about you."

"I'm sorry I can't say the same."

"No, I'm sure Mark wouldn't tell you about me." She watched Sam's face, looking for some sign.

Mark. So this was the woman he ran off to fuck, Sam thought to herself. "He doesn't need to tell me about his business." Sam kept her eyes and voice flat.

"He was so worried about you. I felt it was my duty to take his mind off you." Rebecca walked around the bed, watching for some kind of anger.

"That was nice of you. Do you see to everyone on base?" She couldn't help it. It was too good an opening.

Anger flashed across Rebecca's face, but just for an instant. "Only those that are in desperate need of a real woman. Out here, they only have access to butchy women. You know the type, muscular, hard. Not soft and supple."

Sam couldn't help feeling the dig. She never thought of herself as butch, but she supposed that some might see her that way. Those that didn't know her. "Well, I'm sure your services are appreciated then. Now, if you don't mind, I'd like to get some sleep."

"Of course you would. I just wanted to come by and check on you. That way when I meet Mark later, I can tell him how well you're doing. That should clear his mind, if you know what I mean."

"I guess you didn't do your job if he is still worrying about me," Sam said turning her head to the side and closing her eyes.

Rebecca's little gasp went unheard.

Sam sensed, more than heard, her leave. Only when she was gone did Sam allow herself to feel the pain. Why it hurt she couldn't say, but it did. It felt like someone was sticking a red hot poker in her heart. They had only known each other for a few days, but it felt like they'd been looking for each other for eternity.

"One more reason not to get involved," she said aloud to herself, then closed her eyes.

When Boomer, Ricochet and Kong met up again, Kong was freshly showered. He had put on his last clean uniform and was ready to have a talk with Sam. He would need to get the other two out of the room first and that didn't look like it was going to be easy. They'd made themselves her bodyguard. And right now, he was the number one threat to her body.

All three walked in together. Sam pulled herself up in bed as soon as they arrived.

She was surprised to see Kong with them. Then again, he would see it as his duty to check on her before running off to the softness of Miss Rebecca.

"Hey girl. Did we wake you?" Ricochet asked dragging a chair in the room.

"No. In fact, I didn't get much sleep. I had another visitor," she said glaring at Kong. "I would appreciate it if you would tell your friend that I don't need to hear about your activities."

Kong's lungs seized. "What are you talking about?"

"Rebecca. She thought it necessary to come and find out how I was. You know, since you were so worried about me and she had to take your mind off everything." Sam couldn't stop herself. Now that she had started, she intended to let it all out.

Boomer and Ricochet looked down at their feet. He'd made his bed, now it was time to lie in it.

"Rebecca came to see you?" Kong's face paled. "What did she say?" Did she tell Sam how he was feeling about her, how confused he was about her? Would she do that?

"God, how desperate could you be to go to a woman that services the whole base." Sam closed her eyes and tried to regain some dignity. "Look, it's none of my business what you do—just keep them away from me. Okay."

Humiliation, embarrassment and rejection were just a few of the emotions that rampaged through Kong. "You're right. It's none of your business," Kong said, then turned and stormed from the room.

Sam fought the tears. She never cried, especially over a man. But right now, the tears were burning behind her eyelids. Her hands were shaking and her heart had just shattered into a thousand pieces. She was hoping he would deny it, hoping he would tell her that he'd turned her down and she was just being a vindictive bitch. But he didn't.

"I'm sorry Sam," Boomer said quietly.

"For what?" They knew. They both knew, damn it. Was it that obvious that she cared for him? When Boomer shrugged his shoulders, she lay her head back. "So, tell me how the woman is. You went to see her. I know you did."

"It doesn't look good Sam. If she does survive, she'll be a medical basket case. Her body is basically destroyed. They starved her, withheld water for days. I'm beginning to think she'll be better off moving on." The sadness in Boomer's voice was unmistakable and by the way Ricochet was looking, he felt the same way.

"Is she conscious?"

"Yeah. How, they don't know."

She is waiting to be told it is time to let go. She needs you.

"I think I'll pay her a visit," Sam said sadly.

"I think she'd like that," Boomer replied, patting her hand and smiling at her. "She keeps asking about you."

Chapter Sixteen

Kong stormed out of the hospital, anger oozing from every pore in his body. Never in all his thirty-two years had he been in such a mess. Even as a child. The best thing to do at this point he thought, was to cut his losses and walk. It didn't matter at this point how he felt about Sam. He could take the next fifty years to figure out his feelings and it wouldn't mean squat.

Rebecca had seen to that.

He started walking toward the mess tent. He knew he wouldn't find her there. He didn't want to find her. He never wanted to see that woman again. He just wanted some strong, black coffee.

He went inside, grabbed a mug, filled it, then found the most secluded table he could and sat. Oblivious to the soldiers walking in and out, he sank deep inside his head. He had no one to blame but himself for all this. If he wasn't such a coward, he would have stuck at the hospital with Boomer and Ricochet. Would that have hurt him? He could have sat and talked about the weather, about the hostages, about anything. It wasn't all about him. If he could have just played it cool, everything would be fine.

"Hey, did you hear about those hostages they brought in today?"

Kong's head snapped up when he heard the comment.

"I hear they got the scientist back. I think the other guy was a schoolteacher. He came over to help get schools set up for girls," the young soldier told his friend.

"Didn't they say he had a woman with him when he was kidnapped? Wasn't she taken too?"

"Yeah, they brought her back with him."

"You mean to tell me she's still alive? No way, as long as they had her, there can't be much left." Both men shook their heads. The Taliban were notorious for their treatment of women.

Kong's mind ran back to the shack where Sam was shot. He'd almost forgotten about the woman. In all his self-pity, he forgot about the job. Boomer and Ricochet had tended to her, cleaned her wounds. What was it that Ricochet said? Her body was feeding on itself? Kong shook his head.

"I hear they brought in another wounded woman."

Kong's ears sharpened, he turned just enough to hear it all, but not enough to be obvious.

"We had a woman soldier out there? Who was dumb enough to do that?"

"She's not a soldier. You ever hear of Black Smoke?"

"No. What's that?"

"Not a what, a who. It's this guy the government hires from time to time to do jobs they don't want special ops to do. He mostly does private work, but occasionally, he works for the government."

"So, what's that got to do with the woman they brought in?"

"How much you wanna bet, that Black Smoke is that woman? I've heard guys that worked short missions with him or her, that swear it's got to be a female."

"Why?"

"The way she's built. Short, small-boned, the eyes. I'm gonna try and get in the hospital and take a look at her. See what I can see."

"If it is Black Smoke, you won't get within twenty feet of her."

"So? At least I'm gonna try."

Damn, Kong thought to himself. That's the last thing she needs, rumors running around about her. If someone finds out who she really is, her cover is blown. Kong chugged down the last of his coffee he stood, ready to leave. He needed to fill the guys in on what he heard and they needed to get Sam out of there. Before he had taken three steps, Rebecca was standing in front of him, smiling.

"Hey there handsome. What's up?"

The need to reach out and shake her was overwhelming. So to keep from doing it, he shoved his free hand in his pocket. She certainly looked satisfied with herself for some reason.

"Why'd you do it Rebecca?"

"Do what?" The look on her face said she didn't know what he was talking about, but the eyes said differently.

"Look, you oversexed whore." His words were vicious, but to anyone watching, the smile said he was flirting. "I don't know what your game is but you had no right going in to see her like that. I don't know how you got in, but I'm damn well gonna find out. And when I do, the only dick you're gonna get is what's watching the stockade."

Panic was set firmly in place now. Rebecca was starting to back away. She never thought about that. God, not only would she get locked up, but so would her friend who let her in. "You wouldn't."

"Oh wouldn't I? You couldn't seduce me, so you went to the hospital to get your revenge. It's a shame you don't know me Rebecca! Or you would have found out that I have a mean streak in me. You messed in my business, now I'm gonna mess in yours." He left her standing there, trembling.

"That felt good," he said to himself on the way out of the tent. With that little bit of business taken care of, he needed to get to the guys and tell them what he heard.

* * * * *

Ricochet and Boomer helped Sam from her bed and into a wheelchair. She managed to push the pain aside while they moved her, but she wasn't sure how long she could hold up. It didn't matter how long she could hold up. This needed to be done, now.

"Are you sure you wanna do this? I mean, if that doctor finds out you're not in bed, he's gonna stroke," Ricochet said lying a blanket over her legs.

"Don't worry about me. I have to see her."

The two men wheeled her down the hall, down another hall and into a small cubicle like hers.

Sam's heart sunk when she saw how horrible the woman looked. All her hope was gone now – there would be no recovery for this woman. The only thing Sam could do for her now was help her to the other side.

"Will you leave us alone please?" Sam whispered. The two men left, but didn't go far. They planted themselves firmly outside the curtain.

"Hi," Sam said wheeling herself next to the bed. "You must be Rhonda." It was going to take an enormous amount of control not to break down. Even with all the medical help and cleaning they had done to her body she still looked like the walking dead.

Tears welled in Rhonda's eyes. "Yes, I am. What's your name?"

"My name is Samantha. They tell me things are pretty bad." Sam's throat grew painfully tight. She didn't want to do this.

This is not a bad thing Samantha. This is good. She has family waiting for her.

"Is there anyone I can contact for you? Family?" Sam asked taking the frail woman's hand.

"I don't have any family alive. I came here to make a difference, help with the schools. I figured it was better I came instead of someone who had a family. That way if something happened, well, no one would miss me." The more Rhonda talked, the weaker her voice became.

Hot tears spilled down Sam's face. This was selflessness, something Sam rarely saw in people today. "Is the pain bad?" Sam asked. The least she could do was help her to be comfortable.

"Surprisingly enough, I don't feel anything but weak, tired. I've been fighting to stay awake so I could talk to you. I asked your fellow soldiers how you were doing and they said very well."

"Yeah, I'm a tough old bird," Sam said with a smile.

"I don't think that's it. You're blessed," Rhonda said trying to squeeze Sam's hand. "I saw it back at the cabin." Rachel's eyes seemed to focus on something far away. Like she was seeing something in a different place and time.

"You saw what?"

"I saw the angels with you. Two of them. So beautiful. They helped you move the table over us when the explosion happened." Rhonda closed her eyes and smiled. "The most beautiful sight I've ever seen."

"You saw angels?" *What did she really see?* Sam asked silently.

She just told you.

Another question to add to the list of things she had to think about when she got home. Were these angels always with her and if so, why hadn't her guide told her about them? And most importantly, who where they?

Sam closed her eyes and laid her head on the side of the bed. "Rhonda, your angels are with you as well. In fact, you have lots of angels waiting for you on the other side. Are you ready to join them?" Sam's eyes burned from the force of the tears running down her face.

"Do you really think I have someone waiting for me Samantha? I'd like to believe that."

Rhonda's voice was becoming barely audible. Her strength was draining with every breath she took.

Tell her Mahana is waiting for her.

"Mahana is waiting for you Rhonda." Sam's voice broke and a hiccup escaped from her mouth.

Boomer and Ricochet were listening at the door. To Ricochet's alarm, Boomer didn't seem all that surprised about what he was hearing. As they stood listening, Kong came strolling down the hall. Boomer lifted his finger to his lips, as he came closer.

"Mahana? Mahana is my grandmother. She raised me and died when I was eighteen. How did you know about her?" It took all of Rhonda's strength to smile at Sam, but when she did, it was full of hope.

"Rhonda, this is hard for me. Please trust what I'm telling you is the truth. I have a strong connection to my spirit guide. We talk constantly. She's telling me they are waiting for you."

Sam was shaking from the power of her tears. In one sense her heart was breaking. In another she envied Rhonda the journey she was about to make.

"I believe you Sam. After what I saw at the cabin, those glorious angels, I believe you. How do I go?" No fear now, not for Rhonda. If her family was waiting for her, she was more than willing to join them.

Sam could already feel the life draining from her body. All that was left was to let her soul go with it. "Relax and sleep Rhonda. I'll sit here with you. Just close your eyes and sleep."

"Thank you Samantha. God bless you." With those words, Rhonda took two last breaths and passed over to the other side.

Sam watched a brilliant light float above Rhonda's body. Through the tears, she smiled.

She says to tell you not to give up. Your happiness is close at hand.

Sam couldn't take any more. She dropped her head to the bed and wailed. Her body shook, and her hands fisted. Kong started to go to her, but Boomer stopped him. With one look Kong could see he'd lost something he'd had with his friends.

Kong stood back and watched as Boomer and Ricochet cradled Sam in their arms. She leaned on Boomer and held Ricochet's hand tightly. Kong's arms ached to hold her. He wanted to let her cry on his shoulder, to be the one to soothe her pain. Instead, he added to it.

"You have to tell the doctor she's gone. Tell him I was with her when she went. I want him to know she didn't die alone," Sam said wiping her face. "Get me back to my bed, would ya?"

"No problem," Boomer said looking up at Kong. "Can Kong wheel you back? I'll go find the doctor."

Sam looked up into Kong's face. She saw the pain and the regret. So he didn't want her for anything more than a teammate. If she couldn't handle it, she had no business doing this kind of work. "Yeah, if he has time." She didn't mean for it to come out so nasty. But her feelings were raw.

Kong stepped behind her wheelchair and pushed. He didn't say anything to her on the way, but his eyes darted from person to person as they passed. He only got a quick look at the guy who was claiming he knew who she was. But if someone so much as looked at her crossways, he was taking them out.

"If you have few minutes, could you help me into bed? I'm exhausted," Sam said as he reached her room.

"I'm not going anywhere Sam," he growled at her.

"I know you have other things to do. Just help me up and you can go." She was so tired she could barely hold her head up.

"Damn it Sam. I didn't do anything with that woman. That's why she came here, to make trouble for me. She's pissed off cause I turned her down." Kong explained as he lifted her into the bed. God, she felt so good in his arms.

"I know that Mark," she whispered.

"Jeez, the woman's the base tramp for God's sake," he grumbled as he spread her blanket over her.

"Are you just figuring that out?"

"If you knew I didn't...well...you know. Why didn't you say something to them? They're acting like I'm the number one enemy."

"I knew you didn't have sex with her, because your eyes told me. You have the most beautiful eyes, by the way. I just didn't appreciate her coming in here acting like I wasn't worthy. Do I seem butchy to you? Is that why no guy wants me, because I'm butch?" Sam's head lolled back on her pillow. "Anyway, you'll have to ask the guys why they're mad. I'm too tired to care right now."

Kong stood over her bed with his mouth gaping open. She said he had beautiful eyes. It wasn't a declaration of love, but she was talking to him. And she knew he didn't sleep with Rebecca. Things were looking up.

"Did you see what I saw in there?" Ricochet's voice was coming up the hall. "Don't tell me that didn't shock the hell outta you? It sure did me. And what's up with spirit guide stuff?"

"I see you knocked her out already," Boomer said walking through the curtain ignoring Ricochet's comments. He'd seen and heard and it only added to his affection for Sam.

"She's wiped out. She fell asleep as soon as her head hit the pillow." Kong said still looking down at her. Her skin was still pale and her eyes were swollen and red. His hands ached to brush the moisture from her cheeks.

"That was hard on her. She risked her life to save that woman, only to hold her hand and help her die. No one should have to endure something like that." Boomer's heart broke for her. He was sure now more than ever that she was special.

"She's endured more than you know," Kong whispered. Then he turned and looked at the two men. "Tell me you saw it too?" The question was more for his sanity, than anything. If they saw what happened, then maybe he wasn't losing his mind.

Boomer nodded his head. Ricochet made a deep throaty sound, meaning "Hell yes". The three stood over her for a few more minutes, just watching her sleep—all of them afraid to leave her, none sure how to help. The subject of what they saw was dropped. It was a personal matter for each of them to deal with.

"Look, we have a security problem. I heard some talk in the mess tent. There's a guy who's heard about Black Smoke. It's no secret that we brought hostages in and word's out that a female soldier was brought in injured. He thinks he has it figured out. And he's right," he told them.

"So, let him think what he wants," Ricochet replied.

"If that was all it was, I wouldn't be so worried. But he thinks he's gonna walk in here and see for himself."

"Like hell he will." Boomer's eyes flashed with anger, it reflected in his voice.

Kong started wondering if his friend was beginning to have feelings for her. Not wanting to deal with it at the moment, he rubbed his eyes. "Look, I'm gonna get a hold of Cannon, see if he can get us moved out. We'll take shifts standing guard. No one but doctors and nurses walk in here."

"I'll go first," Boomer said pulling a chair next to the bed. "Ricochet, you go get something to eat and get some rest. You can relieve me in a few hours."

"Sounds good to me." He left Kong and Boomer alone in the room with Sam and headed for the mess tent.

Silence filled the small space for a few moments, then Kong spoke. "Boomer, tell me you're not falling for her." There was a hint of desperation in his voice. He hated it, but it couldn't be helped.

Boomer continued to gaze at Sam, a weak smile on his lips. "I wouldn't say I'm falling for her. I sort of feel like a big brother. She's so small, I feel like I should protect her." Then he looked up at Kong. "Not just her life, but her feelings too."

"I don't want to hurt her Boomer. Believe me, that's the last thing I want to do." When Boomer looked away, Kong continued. "Look, she scares me all right. She scares the hell outta me. You know me. How many times have I been scared by a woman? And I don't mean because she can kick my ass either."

Boomer gave a small laugh. What was it that Ricochet said? Two peas in a pod. He decided to push Kong a little further. "What is it then?"

Kong didn't want to have this conversation. Not with Boomer. These were his feelings they were about to discuss, his private feelings. He wasn't about to lay them out to another man.

Kong's silence angered Boomer. Why was it so hard to admit he loved her? "You better figure it out. Sometimes we don't get second chances," Boomer told him.

That scared Kong even more. "Look, I have to call Cannon. I'll be back later."

"Don't blow it Lowe," Boomer said in a stern voice. "Don't go looking for gratification somewhere else. It's the sure way to lose what's special."

Kong knew exactly what he meant and it pissed him off that he thought he was running to Rebecca. "I didn't Campbell. I thought you knew me better than that." Having said that, Kong left.

When he stepped outside, the sun was going down. The blistering heat was fading to the coolness of the darkness. God, he wanted out of here. He wanted to go home, back to the States, where Sam would be safe and he could get the chance to know her better. Sometime in the last hour or so, he'd decided that was what needed to be done. If he got to know her better, maybe these agonizing feelings would let up. Maybe he'd find out she wasn't as sweet and tender as she seemed to be. Maybe she was boring outside of work. If that were the case, then he could walk away free and clear. No regrets.

Chapter Seventeen

"Cannon, it's Lowe," Kong said into the phone.

"How's my niece doing Lowe?" Walt wasn't sure he liked Mark Lowe. It seemed he knew more about Sam than was comfortable for him.

"She's doing fine Sir."

"How are the hostages doing?" The small talk was just to gauge the attitude of the man. Something Walt learned was important years ago.

"Well Sir. The two men are going to recover."

"The woman?" This he did want to know. If Sam had risked her life to save her, he hoped to hell she was going to make it.

"She passed away just a short time ago." Kong's voice reflected the grief he felt.

Walt closed his eyes, Sam had taken a bullet for nothing. "I'm sorry to hear that."

"The doctors couldn't understand how she hung on as long as she did. Sam went to see her Sir. She helped her go." Kong knew he would understand what he meant.

Walt's heart sunk to his stomach. "What do you mean soldier?" He didn't know how much Sam had told him yet and he wasn't going to let anything slip.

"I think you know exactly what I mean Sir."

So there it was. He knew more about her than Walt wanted him to. But that was out of his hands. He hoped to hell she knew what she was doing. "The purpose for this call Lowe."

"Yes Sir. We need to get her outta here. ASAP. Talk is already spreading about Black Smoke being on base."

"Talk is talk. No one can prove anything." Walt didn't like that. As he spoke he was flipping through his phone book, looking for the number for his pilot. He wanted her on her way home by first light.

"Why take the chance? If enough people get curious, you'll be hearing rumors for the next five years. Some of those rumors are going to be true. Like what she looks like, what her name is." He didn't think he'd have to convince Cannon to get her out.

"Hold on." Walt placed Kong on hold. Once he had his pilot on his way to the airfield, he got back to Kong. "The plane will land by four a.m. your time. I'll clear everything. You just make sure she's ready to go."

"Already done, Sir." Kong hung up the phone and headed back to the hospital. All they had to do was keep anyone from seeing her tonight and they were home free.

Boomer was still sitting next to Sam's bed, his chair facing the curtain. There was just enough space underneath it that he could see people's shoes as they approached.

He scared one nurse as she came in to check on Sam's dressing. He didn't mean to—he felt awful about it—but he wasn't taking any chances.

When Kong approached, Boomer could tell it was him. His feet were quiet and he had a certain step that Boomer had come to know. When Kong slipped through the curtain, he looked relieved.

"We good to go?" Boomer asked.

"Four a.m. Cannon's clearing everything. Any visitors?"

"Just a nurse," Boomer grinned. "I think I made her pee her pants."

Kong grinned back. "Why don't you go get some rest. I'll watch for a while."

Boomer didn't argue, his stomach had been growling for the last half hour. If he didn't eat soon, he'd wake Sam up with all the noise. "Sounds good to me."

Kong sat in the chair when Boomer left. He looked over at Sam. She seemed to be sleeping peacefully, so he just watched. The redness around her eyes was fading and her color was beginning to come back. That was a good sign.

It wasn't long before Kong heard her start to whimper like the times when she was dreaming. He didn't know if he should wake her or not. If she became too distressed he would. Otherwise, he'd leave her alone.

"Why can't you let her sleep in peace?" he asked. He wasn't sure to whom he was speaking, but it made him angry that she had to deal with this now.

Seconds after the words left his lips, the bright gold ball of light appeared over her bed. Kong started, then relaxed. He watched as it hovered over her head then began to float down over her body. When it reached her leg it stopped. He wasn't sure what was happening, but he could feel warmth coming from it.

After only a few seconds, it moved back up to her injured arm and hovered there. It was paying close attention to her wounds. As the thought slipped through his mind, the light pulsed.

"What? What do you want me to do?"

A face appeared again. The same face he saw back in the desert. The words flowed through his head like a breeze.

Her journey is not over. Protect her.

He watched as the light lifted to the ceiling then winked out. What did that mean, her journey wasn't over? Was there going to be trouble on the way home? Couldn't it be more specific?

He noticed Sam had calmed, her nightmare gone. When she opened her eyes, they were more alert than they had been earlier. Without thinking, Kong took her hand in his and began to run his thumb over the back of it. As before, he felt the shock all the way to his chest.

Sam felt it too. She was enjoying the warmth of his skin against hers. It wasn't fair. Why would a man she couldn't have affect her so strongly? When she turned her head their eyes met. She loved his eyes. They were just as warm as his skin.

"Hey."

"Hey yourself. How do you feel?"

"Pretty good. The pain seems to have let up."

So that's what was happening. She was being healed. *Thank you*, he said inside his head. "I have to tell you something. Cannon's sending a plane in the morning to pick us up. Seems your reputation is well-known. Too well known. Some of the soldiers are piecing together some facts. Three hostages that couldn't be found and a wounded female soldier."

"So?"

Kong smiled. "No matter how much you cover yourself up, you can't hide the fact that you're female. Rumors are spreading that Black Smoke is a female. These guys aren't dumb Sam. They have nothing to do but think in their spare time."

When he smiled, she lost her breath. She almost didn't hear what he was saying, until he said she couldn't hide the fact that she was female. "You don't think I look butch?"

Now his smile turned to a frown. "You said that earlier. Who the hell told you that?"

When she didn't answer, he knew. "I'm sorry Sam. That bitch had no right, no right at all to say those things to you. I'm sorry I even met her."

Sam squeezed his hand. "It happened for a reason I guess. So Uncle Walt is rescuing me? It'll be good to get home. I could use a hot bubble bath."

The vision that appeared in his head was sensuous. Her naked skin slick with water and covered with silky bubbles, her damp hair clinging to her face. "You like bubble baths?" he asked with a thick, husky voice.

Sam could tell he was picturing her in the tub. Maybe a little payback was in order. Her smile spread as she spoke. "Don't you? There's nothing like having warm water and bubbles sliding over your skin."

Kong's hand tightened around hers. "Funny, I was just thinking the same thing."

He was saved by a rustling noise outside the curtain. Kong propelled himself from the chair and over to the curtain. When he pulled it back, he was met by the startled face of a rescued hostage, the man who had been working with Rhonda. Kong saw the tears in his eyes and decided he had just heard the sad news.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to interrupt. I was wondering if I could speak with her?" the frail man asked.

Kong was about to open his mouth to object, then closed it quickly. This man meant no harm to Sam. It couldn't hurt to let him speak with her. "Just a moment, I'll see if she's up to it."

When Kong closed the curtain, he turned to find Sam sitting upright in bed. "I heard. Let him in." As Kong turned she stopped him. "Will you stay? I think I'll need your strength." Her playful eyes were gone now, replaced by old, sad eyes.

"If that's what you want?" When she nodded, he pulled the curtain back and allowed the man to enter the small space.

Kong motioned to the chair, allowing him to sit close to her. Kong wasn't sure if the man intended to chastise Sam or thank her. Either way, he would be there for her.

"I'm sorry. I never got your name," he said faintly.

"No names, please." Sam was worried enough about the rumors running around the base, she didn't want this tired, beaten man to accidentally let her name slip out.

"I understand. They told me Rhonda passed away and that you were with her. I wanted to thank you for rescuing us, her especially. And for allowing her to die with dignity." Tears slid down the man's face. "You can't imagine what they did to her and yet she never once screamed or begged. When they couldn't humiliate her, they dragged her in front of us and continued to torture her. I begged. I pleaded for them to stop, to kill me instead."

Sam stopped him there. "Don't blame yourself. Even if they had killed you, they would have continued to torture her. Women are nothing to them, less than nothing, simply objects to be owned and discarded. You couldn't have saved her." She reached out and took his hand careful not to squeeze his bony fingers too tightly.

"I don't think I'll ever be the same. I don't think I'll ever be able to close my eyes at night without seeing those horrible scenes."

"Can I tell you something about Rhonda?" When he nodded, she continued. "She was a strong woman, young in body, but with a century-old soul. Did they tell you there was no reason for her to still be alive? It was sheer determination on her part to live. Her body was gone, but her soul wasn't finished yet. I believe that she's happier now wandering the streets of heaven without pain or mental turmoil. I don't think she'll be happy to know that you remember her that way."

The frail man's face lifted. "When I called the organization we work for, they said that they were going to set up a scholarship fund in her name."

Sam smiled. "See, that's how she should be remembered. Her love of learning, her love of teaching. That's the proper way to think of her."

"You're right. Still..."

"When you return home, you need to find someone to help you. Promise me that you'll find someone to talk with about all of this, be it a preacher or a therapist or a friend, but someone to help you lessen the burden. If you don't, it will eat you alive. Then they will still have won."

The man gazed at Sam. "You talk about Rhonda having an old soul. I think yours is older and much wiser." He stood, ready to leave. "Thank you again. Thank you all."

Kong pulled the curtain back to allow him out. When the man took a few steps away, Kong stopped him. "Sir, I need to ask you a favor."

"Anything."

"If someone asks you about her, you don't know anything about her. You don't know what she looks like, or if she's even a female." Kong watched the man's face to see if there was any sign of information already given out. "Her identity is closely guarded. Do you understand?"

The man straightened his back and jutted his chin forward. "I won't say a word. I would do anything for you people and if that means doing nothing, that's what I'll do."

Kong knew then that the man would be all right. He offered him his hand and said, "Good luck to you Sir."

The man shook his hand and turned to leave. He took only a few steps before he stopped and turned. "You take care of that one. Her journey isn't over yet." Then he walked away.

Kong felt his brain spin. Those were almost the exact words the light had said. Couldn't someone tell him something more specific? What was with these bits and pieces of information?

When he returned to Sam's bedside, she was lying back down, her eyes closed. Kong sat and took her hand in his. When she squeezed it, he was surprised. He was certain she was asleep.

"He'll be alright Mark. It'll take time, but he'll get through it."

"He will now. You should be a counselor. Your skills are remarkable," he said full of pride for her.

Sam opened her eyes and looked at him. "You think so? I never thought of that. I'm not sure I could deal with all the sadness though."

"Yeah, there is that," he said yawning.

"You should get some rest. You look exhausted." His eyes had dark circles under them and he needed a shave. Sam couldn't resist the urge to run her hand over his beard. She lifted her hand to his cheek and let her hand lightly skim the thick hair.

Kong turned his face and kissed the palm of her hand when it came close to his mouth. She had a few calluses, but for the most part her palm was as soft as a flower petal. Sam let her hand rest there, savoring the feel of his lips on her skin. Heat began to build in the pit of her stomach.

When Kong wrapped his large hand around her small wrist, visions of her petite body being pressed against his filled his head. He wanted her, no question about it. If they were anywhere else right now, he'd take her, slowly and carefully. He'd fill her small body with his and show her what heaven really was.

"Excuse us," Ricochet said from the curtain. "You want us to come back later?" he asked sitting on the end of the bed.

"Could ya?" Kong said glaring at him.

"Nope. Hey that guy you heard talking in the mess tent. You didn't happen to get a name did you?" Ricochet asked.

"No, why?"

"There's a group of guys hanging around outside. One of them has a camera," Boomer chimed in.

"Great." Kong looked at his watch, seven hours until the plane arrived. "Who's in charge around here? We need to get a hold of him and see about putting some MPs at the front door."

"I'll do it. You look like shit. Get some sleep," Ricochet said leaving the room.

"Maybe we can move her to a more private area of the hospital?" Boomer suggested.

"This is a MASH unit Boomer. They don't do private," Sam said with a disgusted voice.

"And I won't take a room that's needed for someone in serious condition. Look if you guys are that concerned about it, I'll just leave through a back door. Surely there's someplace around here that I can hide out?"

"I don't think you should be moving around. You just had surgery on your leg." As far as Boomer was concerned, the subject was closed.

"I feel fine Boomer. Find me a place to hide and I'll go."

Boomer looked from Sam to Kong. "What do you think?" he asked Kong.

"It's the lady's leg. It's her decision."

Boomer grunted, then left to find a place to hide for the next seven hours. "It was her decision that put her there in the first place," he thought to himself. As soon as he thought it, he cursed himself. He was tired and frustrated. And that was no excuse to take it out on her.

Kong leaned forward in the chair and put his head down on the side of the bed. Sam lifted her hand then hesitated. She told herself that running her hand through his hair would relax him, help him to sleep. But deep down she knew she wanted to feel his hair in her hands once again. When she began stroking his head, he moaned. A deep throaty moan.

"You're going to drive me crazy doing that."

"Shhh, relax."

It only took him a minute to fall asleep. Her soft touch was therapeutic, almost melting the tension from his body. If her hands felt this good on his head, he would lose his mind if she ever touched his skin like that.

An hour later, Ricochet returned to the room, followed by Boomer. It seemed the two were in constant perfect timing. Sam wondered if outside of work, they still showed up everywhere at the same time.

"Head Doc says he doesn't have time to worry about someone's privacy now. Too many injured from this afternoon to deal with," Ricochet said flicking Kong's ear.

Kong's opened his eyes, but didn't bother to lift his head. "Can't blame him."

"There is nothing on this base that can be considered a hiding spot," Boomer informed him.

"Okay. So we do our best here. Same plan as before. No one in unless they pass us first," Kong said yawning.

"You get some more sleep. We'll watch on the other side of the curtain. Ya know, just on the other side of this flimsy piece of cloth. So if the two of ya get any ideas about bumping uglies keep in mind, we can hear ya." Ricochet's smart mouth didn't go unappreciated by Sam. Her laugh was full and real.

Chapter Eighteen

It was one-forty-five in the morning when Boomer's voice woke Kong up. Sam was sleeping with her hand resting in his hair. Kong gently lifted it and placed it on the bed. Now that he was awake, he could hear the stern authority in Boomer's voice.

"Sorry, only people in are doctors or nurses," he said for the third time.

"Don't get your shorts in a twist. I'm leaving," the man said.

Kong didn't believe him. They'd be approached by a phony doctor next. He had to do something fast. Kong walked over to the curtain. "Ricochet, go find some rolls of gauze."

"On it."

"How's it going Boomer?"

"He's the third one. They're up to something Kong. It's the same group I saw outside earlier."

"Hold 'em off a few more minutes. I have a plan."

When Ricochet returned he slipped his arm through the curtain. Five rolls of gauze in his hand. Kong took them then went to the bed to wake Sam. Her eyes fluttered open as he lifted her hand to his lips. The sweet kiss he placed on her knuckles made butterflies come to life in her stomach.

"What's up?"

"The wolves are at the door. We need to do some quick cover-up work. You with me?" he asked showing her the bandages.

"You're kidding?"

"Nope."

"You into bondage Lieutenant?" she asked with a grin.

Kong's hands faltered. "Never tried it. But I'm game if you are?" He may have sounded like he was kidding, but his body was ready. Kong wrapped Sam's hands first. She was small-boned, so even if her head was covered, her hands would give her away. He made sure to put plenty of wrap around them so they looked bigger than they were. When that was finished, he started on her head. He left an opening for her mouth, but completely covered her eyes.

"You okay?" he asked when he finished. His next step was to pull the covers all the way up to her neck. She still looked small underneath the covers, so he pulled some of her pack and an extra blanket from the cubicle next to hers and bunched them under the blankets. Now she looked larger.

"It's no different from being buried in the ground," she said through the wrapping. "Just don't leave me laying here and take off."

"I'm not going anywhere without you. Couldn't even if I tried," he added to himself. An hour later there was a loud bang and shouting coming from out front. Kong knew this was it. They expected it, a diversion so they could get just a few seconds to snap a picture. "Go ahead, give 'em what they want," Kong whispered out to the others.

"Man, I hate actin' like a fool," Ricochet whined.

"Sam, you awake?"

"Who sleeps through a racket like that?"

"Good, I'm gonna hide under the bed. It won't take them long, they'll snap a few pictures then we're done with them. Two hours and we are gone."

"No problem. Want me to moan in a low voice or something?"

Kong could hear the sarcasm in her voice. Just to see what she'd do, he leaned down next to her ear and let his hot breath seep through the bandages. "When I want you to moan baby, I'll make you moan."

Sam's heart raced. "We'll see who makes who moan," she whispered back.

Kong was blown away. No matter how hard he tried to rattle her, she managed to rattle him back with her wit. Strong, self-assured, witty and beautiful. God he was in trouble. He dropped to the floor, slid beneath the bed and pulled one of her blankets down over the side to cover himself. As if right on cue, Sam heard the curtain pull back. She heard the snap of a shutter, then a low curse. Sam made a very deep moan come from her throat. When Kong heard it, he poked the underneath of the mattress with his finger. Sam moaned again. The intruder let out one last profanity, then scurried off.

Ricochet's voice echoed through the halls. Kong reacted. He slid from under the bed and listened. "Watch where you're going pinhead." Kong smiled. Ricochet should have been an actor.

"Is it all over?"

He looked down at her pink lips surrounded by the white gauze. Kong licked his own, then leaned down. "Not yet. Hold very still." He pressed his lips to hers. Sam jumped then relaxed. It wasn't a brushing of the lips, but a full hard kiss. "Not like this," she cried in her head. She wanted to see his eyes. She had to see his eyes when he kissed her. While her mind shuddered, her arms reached out and wrapped around his neck. God, he tasted sweet, like a piece of candy. Her bandaged hand slipped down his chest and rested over his heart. It was beating hard against his chest. She tasted spicy, exotic, like something you would only find on an island. Her lips were smooth and baby skin soft. The fact that she couldn't see him made the whole experience that much more erotic for him. Now the moan coming from her throat was hot and sexy. Kong took the kiss deeper, urging his tongue between her lips. When she parted them for him, he was lost.

The power she held over him was dizzying and terrifying at the same time. He didn't know whether to run, or give himself completely over to her. The voices coming down the hall snapped him back to reality. When he pulled away from her, she moaned in protest.

"Don't worry baby, I promise we'll pick that up when we get home," he whispered.

"Count on it," she whispered back.

Ricochet and Boomer strolled through the curtain, then stopped and began to laugh when they saw Sam wrapped like a mummy. Kong chuckled with them, she did look funny.

"What's so funny?" Sam asked.

"You baby girl," Ricochet snorted. "Ya look like ya should be sealed inside a pyramid."

"Laugh it up boys. When I get out of here I'll kick all your asses." Her threat only made them laugh more.

"Did it at least work?" Boomer asked between his own snorts.

"Yeah, you should've heard the guy when he realized he was snapping pictures of our mummy. It was all I could do to keep from laughing. Then smart ass here let out a moan, like she was suffering or something." Kong's cheeks hurt from laughing and smiling. But he was proud of her, anyone could see that.

"If you guys are done laughing at me, I would like to take this stuff off now. I need to get ready for the plane." Sam was anxious to leave Afghanistan and this broken-down bed. She wanted her own lush pillow and her soft, colorful comforter wrapped around her. Not to mention the hot bubble bath she talked about with Kong.

The three men continued to snicker as they each unwrapped a portion of her body. Kong took her head and Ricochet and Boomer each did a hand. When she was finally free of the white bindings she let out a long breath. The cooler air felt good against her cheeks and she clenched and unclenched her fingers, stretching them.

"Okay gentlemen. I need my clothes. Everyone on the other side of the curtain please," she ordered as she swung her legs over the side of the bed. Ricochet and Boomer respectfully exited and waited in the hall. Kong remained behind. "Funny," she thought as her legs dangled over the edge of the bed. Her leg seemed to be getting better by the hour. The burning pain was gone, now it only felt as though she'd been kicked. When her feet touched the floor, she carefully allowed her weight to settle on the leg. No pain shot up it, just a bit of pulling from the stitches but otherwise nothing. She noticed Kong watching her, his brow furrowed slightly. Then his eyes moved to her arm. Sam pulled the sleeve of gown up and pushed her fingers into the bandage that covered her bullet graze. Nothing. Her eyes met Kong's, his brow still bunched. Sam peeled the bandage off and to her surprise, she found only a red streak across her arm. Again, she pushed her fingers on her skin. No pain, nothing. Now her brow furrowed as she looked back at Kong.

"I guess I heal fast," she muttered. Bumps and bruises had always healed fast for Sam, but these weren't simple bruises. These were flesh tearing wounds and she was healing at record speed. "I don't understand."

Kong pulled her pack from under the bed and handed it to her. "We'll talk when there aren't so many ears around. I think you should know a few things." She had no idea how she healed so quickly and he felt she had the right to know.

"What things?" she asked curiously.

"Later." Kong stepped through the curtain and stood with Ricochet and Boomer. "God I'll be glad to get outta here," he said.

"What happens when we get back to Cannon's base?" Boomer asked in low voice.

Kong hadn't really given it much thought. Normally when they completed an op they returned to their base and helped train rookies until they were called again. The idea of leaving when they got to Cannon's made him uneasy. He wasn't ready to leave Sam yet. He wanted a few days with her, to get to know the woman behind the black mask better.

"I don't know. I'd like to stick around for a few days, make sure Sam's healing okay." It was a lie, he saw she was healing fast. Then the words echoed in his head. "'Her journey isn't over yet, protect her.'" Those words lay under the surface of his skin like an itch he couldn't scratch. Ricochet glanced at Boomer. They knew Sam was healing incredibly fast, almost miraculously and had discussed it. Something was different about her, something they couldn't put their finger on. They knew Kong was aware of it as well but he seemed to have a better grasp on what was happening than they did. The only question was, would Kong cut and run, or would he stick around? Each had their own opinion on the subject. Ricochet thought Kong would want to leave as soon as possible. Boomer felt he would stay a few days.

"I could stand a few days of R and R," Ricochet said nodding his head and grinning.

"Me too. See what Pennsylvania has to offer," Boomer agreed.

It seemed it was settled, no arguments, no hounding. Just agreement. Kong couldn't have been more surprised.

"Okay boys, I'm dressed," Sam said from behind the curtain.

The three of them filed back into the small cubicle. Sam stood in her trademark black pants, and black shirt. "I'll need your spare uniform Ricochet. Don't wanna look out of place when we walk to the plane."

"I hate the thought of ridin' in that plane for hours again," Ricochet grumbled as he pulled his clothes from his pack.

"So do I," Sam agreed.

"I have an idea," said Boomer stepping outside. He was gone for ten minutes and when he returned he was smiling. "Anyone for a game of poker on the way home?" he asked holding out a deck of cards.

"Nice job man," Ricochet said as he grabbed the cards from him. "Who'd ya steal these from?"

"There's this pretty little nurse that kept watching me," Boomer told them with a slight blush in his cheeks. "So I just stopped and asked her if she knew where I could pick up some playing cards. She gave me hers."

"You dawg! And exactly what did ya give her for them?" Ricochet asked.

"Nothing. She just gave them to me." Crimson crept from his cheeks until it covered his entire face. Boomer wasn't used to having admirers. "You know how to play poker Sam?" he asked trying to take the attention away from himself.

Sam gave a confused look. "Well, I'm not sure. You guys might have to show me," she said. It wasn't nice to play them like that, but Sam knew they wouldn't be mad when she cleaned their clocks. How many times had she beaten her Uncle Walt at poker? He finally quit playing with her.

The four hung out in the cubicle until the plane was almost due to arrive. When they were ready to leave, Sam pulled a piece of paper from her pack and wrote a quick note to the doctor and nurses. It thanked them for their help and their kindness and explained that she had to leave. It wasn't her nature to walk out without giving her thanks when something was done for her.

"Ready?" Kong asked as he watched her prop the note on the pillow.

"Let's get out of here," she said smiling at them.

There weren't many people in the halls of the hospital at three forty-five in the morning so they were able to slip out practically unnoticed. When they got to the front doors Kong held Sam back and looked around outside. When he didn't see anyone lurking in the shadows, he motioned for her to follow.

The four stayed out of sight until they saw the landing lights of a small plane approaching. As it landed, they all jogged toward the runway. Once it stopped the door opened and they boarded. Ricochet whistled as he entered. This wasn't like the cargo plane they arrived on. This was a jet, with plush seats that lay back. A small refrigerator was in the back, along with a coffee pot. Sam opened the small cupboards and found that her Uncle Walt had them well stocked.

"Make yourselves comfortable boys. The cupboards are stocked and the fridge is full. Take what you want," she said sitting down. Her leg had started to throb a little after not being used for a time. So she propped it up on the seat in front of her.

"Buckle up. We're outta here," the pilot said over the intercom. It had taken a lot of favors being called in, but Walt Cannon wanted his niece out of that country as fast as possible. He used every marker he'd accumulated over his career, the biggest being his White House connections. It would take years to collect any more markers, but at this point he didn't care, Sam's safety was more important.

When they were clear to unbuckle, Ricochet stood. "Who wants something to eat?"

"Grab me a beer would you?" Sam asked.

Ricochet returned with his arms loaded. "A beer for the lady and one for you guys." He tossed them their beers, then turned a seat and dumped the bags of chips and cookies into it.

"I say we have the makin's for a poker game."

"Don't worry Sam. We'll take it easy on you," Boomer said as he opened the bag of cookies.

"Promise?" she asked in a tone that had Kong thinking they were about to be taught by a master.

Sam let them win the first couple of hands. Then she decided it was time to let them feel her wrath. "Okay, I think I have the hang of it now. How about we make this interesting?"

"You mean a wager?" Ricochet beamed.

"Sure, just a friendly little wager. Isn't that what poker's all about?" she asked innocently.

Kong had the sinking feeling they were about to be had. "What kind of wager?" he asked.

"If any of you guys win, I cook you your favorite meal. If I win, you guys take me out to the most expensive restaurant in town. Simple enough?"

"I could use a home cooked meal. Haven't had one in a year. I'm in," Ricochet said.

"I'm in," Boomer responded.

Kong looked at her. She continued to surprise him. Bubble baths, fancy restaurants and cooking. This woman was more complex than he thought. "You cook?" he asked.

"Well, kind of. I make a mean spaghetti." It didn't matter that she couldn't cook because she wasn't planning on losing.

Four hours into the flight home, Sam had a date at the most exclusive restaurant in town, a one-on-one explosives lesson, a day at an amusement park and enough IOUs to last her a lifetime. They had to quit playing because the three men were afraid she'd have them going shopping next.

"Hustler," Ricochet grumbled at her.

"You're just a good teacher Ricochet and I'm a fast learner," she told him.

"Humph," he grunted as he laid his seat back and closed his eyes.

"Didn't anyone ever tell you it wasn't polite to hustle people?" Boomer said hiding a smile.

"Don't worry guys. I'll still feed you."

"So I guess we have to hang around a few days to pay you off," Kong said as he cleaned up the empty cookie and chip bags.

Sam rose to clear away the empty bottles. "Yeah, I guess you will. Is that a problem?"

Kong stuffed the bags into the waste can. It was almost like she knew what she was doing, like it was her plan to keep them around all along. He turned and cupped her chin. "Not for me. But you didn't need to hustle us. We were gonna stay a few days anyway," he told her.

Surprise crossed her face. "You were?" Her heart began to race, whether from his hand touching her or from the fact that they were going to stay anyway she wasn't sure.

"Yep," he replied still holding her chin.

Snoring came from the front of the plane where Boomer and Ricochet were seated. They both laughed and Kong dropped his hand. Sam missed his warm skin touching hers. Kong took her hand and led her back to the seats. When they sat next to each other, he put his arm around her and pulled her next to him.

"Can I ask you something?" she asked as she snuggled next to him.

"Sure." It felt so right, having her pressed against his side. Like something had been missing and now the gap was filled.

"Why?"

"Why what?" he asked.

"Why were you going to stay?" She held her breath as she waited for his answer. It was too much to ask that he wanted to stay for her, but hope bloomed inside her chest.

"I guess because..." Kong didn't know what to say. Should he tell her it was because he couldn't leave her yet? If he did, would she read too much into it? Deciding to take the safe way, he answered, "We wanted to take a few days off and figured why not there."

Sam's heart dropped into her stomach. "Oh." She was new to these feelings. The few times she was with a man, it was only for companionship, nothing more. But with him, she wanted more. No matter how hard she tried to convince herself she didn't, she did. The disappointment in her voice bothered Kong. He knew she wanted to hear it was because of her they were staying, that he was staying. But he couldn't bring himself to say it. It would be like opening himself up too much to her. And that was something he couldn't do.

"So, this restaurant we're taking you to, do we have to dress up fancy?" He wanted to change the subject, get away from his feelings.

"Hunh? Oh, yeah." Suddenly it didn't seem like as much fun. "Don't worry, I won't hold you to it. I was just having fun with you guys."

"We made a bet, you won. We'll take you." He pulled her closer to him. Even though she was next to him, he felt her putting distance between them.

"It's your vacation, you should do things you want to do. There's some great hiking in the mountains and fishing. If you don't mind the ride, you could visit Gettysburg."

"Sam, it's not..."

"I'm sure Uncle Walt will have something else lined up for me anyway," she interrupted.

"He better not!" The outburst surprised even him. "I mean, you need to heal first."

"I'll be fine. That reminds me. You said you wanted to tell me something. What is it?"

Now didn't seem to be the time to talk about her healing methods. "We'll talk about that later. I want you to understand that it is my vacation and I want to spend it with you."

"You feel obligated, don't you?" That's what it was, she was sure of it now. He didn't have real feelings for her, he felt like he had to spend time with her. "It's okay. You don't owe me anything. I'm a big girl Mark. I know that kiss didn't mean anything."

Now his temper was up. "It sure as hell did to me!" How could she sit there and say that it meant nothing? "I meant what I said, as soon as we're alone, I'm picking up where we left off."

So it was just sex he wanted. Well, she shouldn't feel so bad. She'd done the same to other men. If this was the only way she could have him, even for just a few days, then she'd take it and be thankful for the time she had.

Chapter Nineteen

Sam snuggled closer to Kong. She buried her nose close to his chest and took in deep a breath then closed her eyes. His body was warm and comforting, like something she'd been missing her entire life. It didn't take long for her to drift off into a deep sleep.

Kong felt her sink into his body and mentally sighed. She felt so small and good. He cursed himself for being such a coward when it came to her. But the emotions she stirred inside him were foreign. He didn't know how to deal with them or even if he should. A day or two with her would probably cure him of his lust. He was sure that was all it was. He'd never loved anyone so he doubted it was that.

When the plane landed Boomer and Ricochet gathered their packs and got ready to disembark. Kong shook Sam gently to wake her up. When her eyes opened, the sun was shining and light, fluffy clouds floated across the bright blue sky. Rich green mountains sprang from the earth.

"Home," she said to herself.

"Yeah, home. Green grass, no sand," Kong agreed.

Sam looked out the window and saw her Uncle Walt waiting for them. His jaw was set and his eyes were hard. She knew that look, it meant trouble.

"Uncle Walt doesn't look happy," she told Kong.

"He's not. I have to give him a detailed report on the mission and why you were shot," he told her sliding his pack onto his back.

"What?" He wanted a report as to why she was shot? What was that about?

"Don't worry Sam, I can handle it," he said grabbing her pack.

"The hell you will. I'll handle it. It was my fault I was shot, not yours. He wants a fight, I'll give him one." Sam stood at the door and waited for the pilot to open it. When he did, Sam bounded down the steps toward her uncle.

Walt watched with amazement as Sam jogged toward him. From what Lowe had reported, she had taken a bullet in the thigh and underwent surgery almost twenty-four hours ago. But how could that be? She was jogging for Christ's sake. No one jogged after surgery. As she grew closer, he could see the fire in her eyes. Obviously, she knew he was ready to rip Lowe limb from limb.

"There she goes, protecting people again," Ricochet snorted.

"She knows it was her fault she took a bullet. She doesn't want anyone else taking the fall for it. That's just who she is," Kong remarked as he walked down the steps.

"Sam. Are you all right? I thought you had surgery on your leg?" Walt asked holding out his arms to her.

Sam slid in between them and wrapped her arms around his waist. She may have been mad at him, but she still loved him. "I did." Then she looked up into his face. "It was my fault Uncle Walt. I let my emotions take over. I knew it was wrong, but I couldn't stop myself and barged right in. They tried to stop me, they really did. It was like I was in my own world. All I could hear was the woman moaning in pain."

Walt hugged her tighter. He knew what she heard and it wasn't the woman, it was her mother.

"Okay Sam. I understand." Walt looked up as the three men approached. They looked haggard and beat. Nothing a hot shower and a good meal wouldn't fix. When his eyes met Kong's they were still hard. He wasn't quite ready to forgive him yet.

"Sir," Kong said as they eyed each other.

"Lieutenant." He reached out and shook the man's hand, then shook the hands of the other two. "You can grab a shower in the barracks and a hot meal in the mess hall. When you're ready, let me know and I'll have you flown home."

Kong smiled. "That won't be necessary Sir. We're gonna grab a hotel room in town for a few days." Satisfaction filled Kong's chest as he watched Cannon's face. There was no mistake he didn't like the idea of them hanging around.

Sam saw the look her uncle gave Kong. She grabbed his hand and started pulling him toward the building that housed his office. "We need to talk Uncle Walt. You guys can use the jeep while you're here. There's a hotel about five miles out on the main road. It's called the Regal Inn. I'll call you there later."

The three men watched as she pulled her uncle away from them. "He don't like you man," Ricochet chuckled. "He thinks you're bangin' his niece."

"No skin off my nose. It's not him I'm interested in. You guys go ahead, I'm gonna wait for Sam," he said walking toward her little red Mustang.

When Sam got Walt inside the building, she pointed her finger at him and started lecturing. "You promised to stay out of my private life if I stayed out of yours. No comments, no snide remarks, nothing. I love you Uncle Walt, but my life is my life."

Walt walked to his desk, opened a drawer and pulled out a bottle. He didn't even bother to pour the clear liquid into a glass—he just drank straight from the bottle. He waited for the fire in his throat to pass before he spoke. "I thought you were seriously hurt. Lowe called and said you were shot, that you walked right in and confronted two of the Taliban. My God Sam. I was scared to death. I was sure I was going to lose you," he said slamming the bottle on the desk. "I was ready to kill Lowe for allowing you to walk in there. Why didn't he stop you?"

"In the first place, no one allows me to do anything. I do what needs to be done. I don't answer to anyone. Not when I'm working. They couldn't have stopped me without shooting me themselves." Sam saw the distress in his face and hated herself for putting it there. "Look, I don't expect you to understand how I work. I heard nothing inside my head. I couldn't be reached. I was so far gone that all I saw was mom on the

floor. The man I killed wasn't part of the Taliban. He was one of the murderers." Sam's voice broke. "Don't you see? I wasn't rescuing a kidnap victim, I was rescuing mom."

Walt walked to her and slipped his arms around her. "I'm sorry Sam. If I had known there was a woman there, I wouldn't have told you about the job." The kiss he placed on the top of her head made her smile.

"Let's just agree that the job was successful and leave it at that. I'm healing nicely, see?" she said jumping up and down. "No pain."

Walt was still shocked about that, he made a mental note to call the base and get her medical records. "Okay. But what about them staying for a few days? And how did Lowe know that you were my niece?"

"Yeah, well. I was being urged to tell him about myself," Sam told him. "So I did. Turns out he's more understanding than I thought. He stuck with me the whole time Uncle Walt. Hardly ever leaving my side." Except for when he met with Rebecca, but that was something she would keep to herself.

"I like him, a lot. I like all of them." When Walt rolled his eyes, Sam went on. "I don't have any friends Uncle Walt. No one I can relate to. These guys are different. Each one is different in his own way. We laugh together, play poker together and get along great. Don't begrudge me that."

He knew she was right. She didn't have any friends and if these guys filled some void in her life, then that was fine with him. "You played poker with them?" he asked curiously. Sam gave him a big smile for her answer.

"I take it you won?"

"They owe me dinner at Petrie's, an explosives lesson and a day at Hershey Park. Not to mention a list of IOUs as long as my arm," she told him proudly.

Walt chuckled her chin. "That's my girl."

"I'm going home and getting a bubble bath. I'll call you later," she said and kissed him on the cheek.

As she moved toward the door, Walt stopped her. "Sam, are you sure it's safe for him to know about you?"

"I wouldn't have been told to tell him if it wasn't." She smiled and left.

When she reached her car, Kong was leaning against it with his arms and feet crossed. "Still in one piece I see."

"He means well Mark. We only have each other. So, ah, where are the other two?" she asked looking around.

"They went to the hotel," he said watching her face.

Excitement exploded inside her stomach. "Does that mean you're coming home with me?"

"If I'm welcome."

Sam walked over and stood right in front of him. "Ever take a bubble bath?" When he smiled she stepped to the driver's door and climbed in. She was determined to make the most of the next couple of days.

On the ride home, Sam showed him the highlights of the small town she called home. The closer to her house they got, the more she talked. For the first time in her life she felt like a schoolgirl on her first date. At least she thought that's what it felt like. Her stomach was full of fluttering butterflies, her palms were sweaty and she had to continually lick her lips to keep them from drying out.

Kong swore he was more nervous than Sam although he hid it better. The way she was rambling made him laugh. He watched as her hair blew in the wind and every time her tongue darted out and licked her lips, an ache spread through him. If they didn't get to her place soon, he was going to make her pull over so he could drag her into the woods.

When they turned onto a tree-lined street, he figured she was trying to kill time. But when she pulled into the driveway of a pretty ranch-style house, he was dumbfounded. Sam left the car, grabbed her pack from the backseat and headed for the house.

"Did you change your mind?" she asked when she got to the door.

"This is your place?" he asked getting out of the car.

When she opened the door and walked in he was amazed. It looked like an actual home. Not a sparse, barren space. She had pictures hanging on the walls and matching furniture with pillows. Kickknacks hung on the walls in a perfect design.

"You live here, alone?" He wandered around the living room studying the pictures and trinkets she had collected.

"Yes, I live here alone. Why?"

"I don't know." Once again she surprised him. It was truly homey. A lovely nest that she had created for herself. "Most people in our line of work don't bother to create such a comfortable environment for themselves."

"I'm not most people." He was impressed with her home and for some reason she felt relieved and happy.

Kong turned and walked toward her. When he was within arm's length, he reached out and pulled her against him. "No, you're not. You're special." He lowered his mouth and brushed his lips across hers. He wanted to take it slowly, to savor her. But her taste made him wild. He crushed his mouth down on hers and began running his tongue across her lips.

If he hadn't been holding her up, Sam would have melted right to the floor. The man was fire. He made her burn from the inside out, a heat that was addictive. Sam's breasts hardened, she felt her nipples push against her shirt. When he slid his tongue between her teeth, she made a noise that she didn't know she could make.

An ache began between her legs and spread into her thighs. Without knowing it, she pressed her pelvis against his groin. He was already hard and pushing against his

pants. Her hands roamed down his chest and slid between them, cupping the hard shaft pushing toward her. He felt so big, her brain whirled. Would she be able to take him? Would it hurt?

As soon as Sam's hand cupped him, his muscles tightened. He wanted to take her slowly, to make her feel every emotion he had buried deep inside himself. When he felt her hand run the length of him, he almost lost control. Her body went rigid as she moved her hand up and down him.

Pulling his mouth away from hers, he buried his face in her hair. "It's okay. I won't hurt you, I promise. We'll go slowly." Immediately he felt her relax. It took all his willpower, but he managed to slow himself. "What about that bubble bath?"

"We'll save that for later. Right now I just want you to touch me." Her hands pulled his face down to hers. When his lips were nearly touching hers she said. "Make love to me Mark."

In one fluid motion, he scooped her up in his arms. "Where's the bed?"

"Down the hall. First door on the right." Their eyes never left each other as he carried her down the short hall. Sam's heart beat hard against her chest, making her breath come in short gasps.

Kong laid her down on the bed then knelt over her. "I want to undress you. I want to explore every inch of your glorious body." He started with her boots, untying them with speed and pulling them from her feet. Next came her socks. After he pulled them off, he ran his fingers over her toes, across the tops of her feet, then to the soles.

"You have such dainty feet. Pretty toes," he whispered. When he was done lavishing his attention on her feet, he moved to her upper body. "I didn't tell you this before," he said as he unbuttoned her shirt. "I saw you at the stream the first night in the desert. You had your top off.

"I got so hard just looking at your back." Instead of wasting time pulling the black turtleneck over her head, he grasped the material and pulled, ripping it right up the middle. He slid the material down her arms, feeling a hundred butterflies take flight in his stomach when she shivered. Her bra was simple black cotton with no frills. He reached behind her and released the hooks that held it close to her body.

Sam held her breath as he gazed at her naked breasts. She wasn't large, but she wasn't flat either. When he sucked his breath between his teeth and his eyes glazed over, she relaxed. It was so important to her that he be pleased.

His hands cupped her breasts and gave a light squeeze. "Beautiful," he whispered. Next his fingers glided down her belly, circled her belly button and came to rest on the button of her pants.

With quick skill, he released the button and lowered the zipper in one smooth action. Sam quivered as his fingers grazed her skin. The more time he took, the hotter her body became.

Before he removed her pants, he leaned down and ran his tongue across her flat, smooth belly.

Sam reached for him, only to be stopped by his large hands. When he finished tormenting her with his tongue, he grabbed the bottoms of her pant legs and jerked them down, off over her feet.

Her panties were simple white bikinis, but on her they were sexy. Kong grabbed the front of them with both hands and ripped them from her body.

Sam gasped as she felt the material rip. The sheer animalistic act had her panting for him. The next thing she felt was his fingers sliding between her outer lips. She was sure she heard him say something, but her blood was rushing so hard through her ears, she couldn't be sure. The soft kiss he placed between her legs made her cry aloud.

He held on with every ounce of control he had when she cried his name. He wanted to bury himself deep inside her, now. But she deserved better than a fast tumble, she deserved to be satisfied first. He lowered his head again and ran his tongue around her clit, then sucked gently on the pink nub. Sam's legs were shaking, her hands fisted in the comforter on the bed. When he darted his tongue inside her, she flew apart in his mouth.

This is what heaven is, was the last thought she had before she shattered. White light burst behind her eyelids, pleasure rippled through every nerve ending in her body. Somewhere in the distance she heard a voice crying out. Only when her body started to come back to Earth did she realize it was her own voice she had heard.

Watching her fly apart made him so hard he ached. His pants were painfully tight against his erection. When her body began to relax, he moved from the bed and tore his clothes off. He couldn't wait any longer, he had to have her. Sam rolled her head to the side and watched as he removed his boxers. Fear flashed through her eyes when she saw how big he really was – then she remembered his words. He wouldn't hurt her and she believed him. Sam watched him pull his wallet from his pants and remove a small square pouch. Mark tossed his wallet on her nightstand with one hand while raising the pouch to his mouth with the other to tear it open with his teeth. Sam licked her dry lips as she watched him place the latex on the tip of his erection and roll it up his shaft.

The bed sank when he lay down next to her. With his large hands he reached over and pulled her on top of him. Pressure built in his chest when she looked down into his face, her silky breasts hard. He raised his head and took one of her nipples in his mouth, rolling it on his tongue.

Sam pressed against his mouth. When he started to suckle she gasped and pressed harder against him. "Now." It was a voice she never heard come from her mouth before. One of need and desire.

Kong lifted her by the hips and slid her over the top of him. When he pressed against her outer folds he held his breath. Sam wiggled until she was ready to take him in, then lowered herself onto him. She felt herself stretch as he filled her. Kong was careful not to force himself deeper, but her silky inside was too enticing.

Sam relaxed as she took him in ever so slowly. She reveled in the feel of the fullness he gave her. The more of him she took in, the more she wanted. Before she knew it she

was sliding up and down his shaft, taking in the full length. Her body clenched around his as she climbed the peak again, her vision blurring as she felt herself begin to let go.

Kong was sure he was going to die as soon as he released. Her body was made for him, her soft tunnel caressing him with every stroke. "Never," was all he could think. Never had he felt such pleasure. He grasped her hips and pushed hard into her when he couldn't hold back any longer.

On a wave of bliss they plunged over the cliff together with joint cries of ecstasy. Sam collapsed on top of him as he buried his face in her neck and breathed in her heavy scent of musk.

You've done it now, he thought to himself. Walking away would not be as easy as he had assumed it would be. And now he wasn't sure he wanted to.

Chapter Twenty

"I don't think I can move." Sam's body was weak from the power of her climax. Books had described these kinds of earth-shattering moments, but she'd never experienced one. Not until today.

"You don't have to. Just lie with me." Her naked body felt warm and soft pressed against his. He tightened his arms around her, fearing that if she moved, he would never get to hold her again. Cold hard reality smacked him in the face. This was the first time he had actually made love to a woman. All the other times had just been satisfying a primal need, but this, this went far beyond satisfying. His emotions had taken over—he didn't act with just his body he acted with his heart.

They lay together for a while, both lost in their own thoughts—Sam wondering how she would go on when he left, Kong fearing these new emotions that were stirring inside his heart. When Sam began to giggle, he smacked her bottom.

"What's so funny?"

"I understand how you got your nickname now." She laughed.

"I didn't hurt you did I?" He wasn't bragging he was concerned. She was so small, he so large.

Sam pushed herself up with her palms pressing against his hard, muscular chest. "No Mark. You didn't hurt me. In fact, I'm more than a little surprised that I was able to take you the way I did." Sam stopped short of telling him it was almost like they were made for each other. She didn't want to scare him off.

"You're full of surprises," he told her cupping her breast with his hands. "So why are you laughing?"

"Like I said, I understand the name now. Oh, don't look like that," she told him when his brow furrowed. "Your body is wonderful." To prove it to him, she began trailing kisses across his chest.

Heat began to build inside him again. If she didn't stop, he'd need to take her again. "I think that bubble bath is calling our names." His voice was thick and husky, filled with desire.

Sam sat up and looked into his eyes. Just as she suspected, they took on a dark, dangerous look. Her hands framed his face, as she stared into his eyes. He made her feel like a woman, a feeling she had thought she could live without.

"I'll go start it." When she moved from on top of him and walked to the bathroom, she felt her legs protesting. With a smile she walked across the hall into the bathroom. It felt good to be sore from being loved.

Kong lay with his arm draped over his eyes. Already his body missed her. He thought this need for her would diminish after sex, but it didn't. In fact, it was growing. Looking through the open bedroom door, he watched as she bent over the tub and sprinkled something into the water. The sight of her firm, round behind exposed like that made his body jerk.

Moaning to himself, he turned his head away. "Way over your head Lowe," he muttered to himself. A few days of this, maybe that's all he needed, just a few days of making love to her countless times. He didn't deserve her, she needed more than he could offer. She needed stability in a man and he was far from stable.

Spending the next few days with her would be a gift. When it was over, he'd carry the memories of that gift with him for the rest of his life. He didn't know how to love, but he could give her pleasure. So much pleasure that she would beg him to leave when she couldn't walk anymore.

"Your bath is ready."

Kong pulled himself from the bed, crossed the hall to the bathroom and looked around. The tub was a large garden tub filled with bubbles. Candles were placed all around the room filling the air with a light scent of ocean breezes. The colors on the walls served to accent the aroma. This room was yet another extension of the woman.

Looking down at her sitting in the tub, his heart squeezed tight in his chest. What a picture she made. The water level came only to her nipples, enticing him to join her. He didn't need to be told more than once. Letting his body lead him, he stepped into the water.

Sam moved so he could sit behind her. When she leaned her back against him, she sighed. What she wouldn't give to feel this way for the rest of her life. Mark ran his hands up and down her arms, then around her tummy. When they made their way to her breasts, she tipped her head back and closed her eyes.

The bubbles helped his hands glide over her skin, enhancing the fires that began to burn inside both of them. Sliding his hands between her legs, he washed away the sweat and stickiness of her own juices, caressing and teasing at the same time. He could feel her begin to swell with desire and smiled. It gave his ego a boost to know he could affect her so quickly.

Not wanting them to move too quickly this time, Sam turned in his arms. She pulled him away from the back of the tub and slipped her legs over his hips. Starting at his shoulders, she began to lather bubbles across his skin. He never took his eyes from hers as she moved down his chest, around his sides and across his back.

When she reached between them her hand cupped him then gently began to stroke. He knew she was exploring him, sizing him up, so he did his best to relax and not allow himself to come in her hands. It wasn't easy, her touch was gentle, yet electrifying. His body hummed from the glorious feelings she aroused.

Unable to stand any more of her skillful hands, he pulled her closer to him and kissed her. Lifting her at the waist, he lowered her back down over him and groaned as

she slid her hot canal down his shaft. Was it possible to ever get enough of that hot, silky rapture? It would have to be, he thought.

Sam set the pace, sliding up and down with a slow, agonizing rhythm. Tilting her head back, she allowed herself to enjoy the feel of her body stretching to accept him. When his mouth captured her nipple, she almost cried from the pleasure. Pressing herself against his mouth, she quickened the pace.

They climbed the cliff of ecstasy together, their voices joining as one when they careened over the edge. Clinging together, they fell back to Earth with a soft, sweet landing. Arms wrapped tightly around each other, they gasped for breath both hoping that somehow it would never end.

* * * * *

"Should we call Boomer and Ricochet, see that they're up to?" Sam asked munching on a piece of toast. They had finally left the tub when the water cooled. Kong lifted her from the tub then with gentle, loving hands, dried her body. She returned the favor, burning the feel of his body into her brain.

"We could," he responded with a mouthful of pretzels. They were both starved and in need of some serious nourishment. "Or we could just refuel and go back to bed," he said winking at her.

Sam gave a subtle laugh. "Just sex," she reminded herself. That's all this was. "You might have to give me some time," she said looking down at the counter.

Concern covered his face. "You're sore?"

"A little. But it has been some time since I had any intimate exercise. I guess I'm out of shape." She tried hard not to let her voice betray her and show her disappointment.

Now why did that please him? "Okay, then what would you like to do?" Reaching across the counter, he took her hand and squeezed it.

"It's your vacation, you tell me." Warmth began to spread through her body, just from the touch of his hand. God she was in deep.

"How about we call them and you can show us a place to get some good food. Then we can decide how to spend the rest of the day."

"Okay." Sam left the counter and pulled the phone book from the top of her fridge. After looking up the number to the hotel, she jotted it down on a piece of paper and handed it to Kong.

"You call them. I'll go clean up." Mostly she just needed time to gather herself. She needed to put it all in perspective again.

Kong watched her walk out of the kitchen. When she was gone, he let out a long, cleansing breath. He didn't miss the look on her face when he said he wanted to take her back to bed. Sex was all she thought he wanted and she was willing to let him have it. Not once did she bring up them spending time alone. Truth was, he didn't want to share her with the other two. He wanted her all to himself.

"Don't be stupid," he thought. "You're the one that told her you were taking a vacation. If you had told her you wanted to be with her, you wouldn't be calling the two guys you spend all your time with." Finished with lecturing himself, he dialed the phone.

Pulling a brush through her hair, Sam stared blankly at herself in the mirror. What they shared was incredible – it couldn't not mean anything to him, could it? He couldn't make love to other women that way, could he? Or was she just being a silly schoolgirl, thinking her knight in shining armor had just ridden into her fortress?

"Stop it Sam," she scolded herself. "He only wants an affair and that's what you're going to give him. You knew going into this he wouldn't stay, now accept what he gives you and be thankful."

Finished with punishing her hair, she grabbed a pair of shorts and a tank top from her drawer. For the first time she wished she had something a little more sexy to wear for him, something frilly and feminine. But she didn't go out often and when she did it was usually as casually as possible.

Walking from the bedroom to the kitchen, she heard him talking to one of the other guys. Not wanting to interrupt but curious, she stopped where he wouldn't be able to see her and listened.

"I'm not sure. She hasn't said anything about it. If she doesn't want me to stay with her tonight I'll share a room with one of you guys and get one of my own in the morning."

Sam winced. She just assumed he would stay with her while he was here, but he was waiting for her to ask him.

"Man I don't know. I don't know her well enough. Yeah Boomer, I know. I won't, I won't, I promise. Okay, listen, we'll wheel by the hotel and catch up with you there, then decide. Okay buddy, see you then."

When she heard him disconnect the phone, she turned and scooted back down the hall to her bedroom. She wasn't sure what that last part of the conversation was about, but she knew what she was going to do about the first part she heard.

Hearing his heavy footsteps coming down the hall, she picked up her brush again and began running it through her hair. As he stepped through the door, he stopped and stared at her. Sam suddenly felt self-conscious, was he disappointed in the way she dressed? Or was he already trying to figure out how to walk away?

Her question was answered when he walked up behind her and wrapped his large, strong arms around her. "My God, you're beautiful," he whispered over the top of her head.

Red began to creep into Sam's cheeks. "I bet you say that to all your conquests."

She watched in the mirror as his brow crinkled. "I don't think I've ever said that to anyone." With that realization, his face took on a more concerned look.

Sensing his uneasiness, Sam turned in his arms and wrapped her arms around his waist. "I wanted to ask you something." She waited until his eyes met hers. "Is there anything you need while you stay here? I mean, do I need to unwrap a new toothbrush or something?"

A smoldering fire began in his eyes and his arms tightened around her. "Are you asking me to stay here, at your house?"

"Yes, I was hoping you would, but if you don't want to, I'll understand."

"I don't want to be anywhere else." Lowering his mouth to hers, he kissed her with a tenderness he didn't know he possessed.

* * * * *

Sam and Kong met up with Boomer and Ricochet at the hotel. She took them to a bar in town that served outstanding sandwiches. When they were full of food, she took them around town. They cruised around stopping at every sporting good store, or hot rod shop they found. Every time they got out of the car, Kong took Sam's hand in his. It took every ounce of self-control on her part not to read anything in to it.

When they ran out of manly stores to visit, they took a ride on the local riverboat. After, they stopped at her favorite ice cream store and indulged in banana splits. Sam couldn't remember enjoying her town so much. Of course the great company helped. She found herself wishing she had a camcorder to capture the day forever.

"So, you guys up to driving two hours tomorrow and visiting Hershey Park?" she asked as they climbed back into the car.

Kong prayed the other two would come up with an excuse not to go. He wanted to take her, alone. To his dismay, Ricochet quickly agreed. The death stare Kong gave him only made the man smile more. Boomer chuckled, he knew Kong wanted her to himself, but they had already decided to impose themselves as much as possible.

Before Sam knew it, the day had slipped away and darkness was taking over the small town. She hated it to end, but the night ahead was full of promise. Butterflies swished through her stomach as she thought of being loved all night long by him. Once again, she reined herself in, scolding herself for letting her emotions take over.

With Boomer and Ricochet dropped off, the two headed home. They weren't inside the door for two minutes when Kong had her undressed and on the floor. Every room in the house was utilized to its fullest extent. They ended in the bathtub, covered in bubbles and warm water, their bodies slick and sated.

The next two days flew past. The day at the amusement park was a blast. They rode every roller coaster three times, toured the chocolate factory and brought home five-pound chocolate bars. Sam collected on her explosives lesson and showed Boomer how to bury himself underground. By the end of the day, Kong had started acting funny, his mood sour and his temper as hot as the scorching sun.

Sam should have known, or at least guessed what his mood was about. But she was having too much fun with them—her first real friends. Later, she would realize how much of a fool she was being, ignoring the obvious.

That night, he made the most passionate love to her yet. He took his time, running his hands over her body, lavishing her skin with agonizing attention. He told her how beautiful she was time and time again, making her feel as though she were the most beautiful woman on Earth.

Three times he made her reach her peak before he entered her.

When he was about to climax she was sure she saw a tear in his eye. That's when it finally dawned on her. His bad mood all day and now his so sweet lovemaking meant he was saying goodbye the only way he knew how. Sam held back her tears and clung to him. She wouldn't think of the future without him, not now, not while he was still inside her. When he was gone, she would cry, but not now.

* * * * *

Dawn broke without sun. It was a steady rain that woke Sam. She loved rainy days as it was the time she used to treat herself with a good book while curled up on the couch. As she listened to the patter of the rain on her bedroom window, she stretched and was reminded of the night before.

Her muscles were sore and stiff. Not an unpleasant feeling, but one she enjoyed. It meant she had been loved over and over again the night before. As she stretched, she reached across the bed to wrap her arm around him, like she had done for the last three mornings.

This time, he wasn't there. Sam listened for him in the bathroom across the hall, but didn't hear his usual whistling, or the water running. Confused, she sat up and looked around the room.

His duffel bag was missing and on the pillow was a folded sheet of paper. Her heart sank. A tear rolled down her cheek as she reached for the paper. Her hands trembled as she picked it up.

Dear Sam,

Cannon has a plane waiting for us this morning. We're scheduled to leave at nine-thirty. I didn't tell you last night, because I didn't want any long goodbyes. Thanks for the last couple of days sounds too hokey to say, but I can't think of any other words to use. You can't begin to know how much it meant to me. Take care of yourself and watch your back out there.

Mark

A tear dropped on the paper as she read the last line. Her bedroom clock read eight fifty-five, if she hurried, she could catch him before he left. Kicking the blankets aside, she pulled on a pair of jeans and a black t-shirt, then slipped on her sneakers. Did he really think he could leave without saying anything to her? Did it all mean that little to him?

Tires squealed as she backed out of her driveway and she pressed the accelerator to the floor. Her anger grew as she raced down the streets toward her uncle's base. He may not love her, but he could damn well treat her better than this. She wasn't one of his groupies he picked up in bars.

When she reached the base, she threw the car into park and bolted from it. Rain poured over her as she ran for the runway. The door to the plane was closing as she approached, then the plane started moving. Sam ran to the edge of the runway and watched as it picked up speed and lifted into the air.

"No! Damn you!" she yelled, then collapsed onto the ground. "Damn you Mark, I love you."

Chapter Twenty-One

Four weeks later

Kong, Boomer and Ricochet were returning from the field where they had been helping to train a new batch of rookies when their commander called out for them.

"Campbell, Underwood. I need to see you," he yelled.

"I'll catch up with you guys back at the barracks," Kong said then walked away.

The two men jogged over and saluted the commander. "Sir," they said in unison.

"I have an important phone call for you two. I suggest you take it in my office," he said in an unusually sympathetic tone. When he left the two looked at each other, then entered the office.

Boomer picked up the phone and put it on speaker so they could both hear it. "This is Lieutenant Campbell and Lieutenant Underwood."

"Boomer, Ricochet, it's Cannon. I need your help."

Both men straightened at the sound of Cannon's voice. "Yes Sir, how can we help?" Boomer asked as he looked at Ricochet.

"Black Smoke is missing. I need you to help me find her." Walt's voice nearly broke as he spoke the words. He hadn't slept in three days and had barely eaten. His mind was consumed with how to find his missing niece.

"Sir, what makes ya say she's missin?" Ricochet asked.

"She was working on a case and kept in constant contact with me four times a day. Three days ago, I lost contact with her." He had to be careful how much information he gave over the phone. The people that probably had her, if she was still alive, had the means to listen to anything they wanted to hear. "Are you willing to help me find her?"

Without hesitation both men spoke as one. "Yes Sir, we will."

A slight sigh was heard over the speaker, then, "I'll have the plane there within the hour. I'll clear everything with your commander. And men. Thank you." The phone disconnected abruptly.

"Damn, missing?" Ricochet said in disbelief, then his head snapped up. "He didn't mention Kong coming along."

"You know as well as I do he doesn't want Kong involved with this. You saw the same thing I saw that day we left. He walked away without so much as saying goodbye to that woman. Cannon would probably kick the shit out of him if he saw him."

Boomer wanted to kick his ass. Not just for hurting her, but for ignoring their friendship with her. They had never had the opportunity to say goodbye and now it looked as if they would never see her again.

"I'm not gonna disagree about that. But he's gonna wanna come, you know it."

"I know. Come on, we have to pack up, then break the news."

"Boomer? You think she's still alive?"

"I hope so buddy. But if she's not, I'll kill whoever killed her. That I promise you."

Ricochet nodded his agreement as they walked out of the office. Both had felt a surge of panic when they heard Cannon say Sam was missing, but training had them reacting calmly and coolly. Neither was cool when they hit their barracks, both slammed through the door and headed for their lockers. Because of their high ranking status, the three didn't have to share a barracks with any other men.

Kong was walking out of the shower when he heard the locker doors slamming against the block wall. "Hey, we headed out somewhere?"

The two men looked at each other for a few moments without saying a word. When Kong walked up and crossed his arms then stood staring at them, they knew it wasn't going to be easy.

Ricochet threw his duffel bag on his cot and slammed his locker door shut. Boomer slouched his shoulders and stared at his feet.

"You better sit down Lowe," Boomer's voice was soft and low. He wanted to yell, he wanted to hit something, but it wasn't going to help her.

"I'll stand. What gives?" Something had them rattled, no doubt about that. Whatever it was he wanted to know and he wanted to know now.

"Cannon called," Boomer said evenly.

Kong felt his blood drain from his face. Gauging by their reactions, it wasn't good news. "Go on."

"Sam's missing. She was working a case and he lost contact with her three days ago. He asked us to help him find her."

The floor dropped out from under Kong. He felt his legs start to give and caught himself before he hit the floor. Missing. How could Sam be missing? She was too good. She was well trained. She had her spirit guide. How could she possibly be missing?

Bright white light flashed in his eyes as his heart sped up then nearly stopped. It took every fiber of his being to gather himself to speak. "Cannon asked you two to help?"

"Yeah. We both spoke with him," Boomer said quietly.

He knew why Cannon didn't call him. He'd seen her on the runway that morning. He could see her mouth moving as she yelled. He had watched as she dropped to the ground in the pouring rain and her uncle ran to her side. The man didn't want him near his niece. Well that was too damn bad.

Kong turned away from the two men and went to his locker. His vision still wasn't clear and his heart was racing but still he managed to pull his duffel from his locker. He didn't give a damn what Cannon thought. He was going after his Sam.

"You think it's a good idea you go?" Boomer asked from across the room.

The loud sound of metal hitting mortar echoed through the room. He'd have to put up with it from Cannon, but he shouldn't have to put up with it from his two best friends. "Why?" he growled.

Boomer's temper was rising. He'd been angry with Kong for some time. Now that Sam was missing he couldn't control it any longer. "Why? Maybe because of what you did to her. You think we didn't see her that morning? You think we don't know that you walked out of her bed without telling her you were leaving? We would've liked to say goodbye to her ya know. You may have been through with her, but she was our friend!"

Boomer balled his hands into fists. He'd never forgive him if she was dead and they never got to say goodbye. Ricochet echoed Boomer's feelings. He missed the sassy little thing and not getting to tell her that bothered him. Now he may never get to.

Kong spun around and faced them. His face flushed with anger. "You don't know anything about it!" he yelled. "What the fuck do you know about anything?"

"I know she was in love with you. Hell, even Ricochet knew it back in the desert. You used her like she was one of your sluts from a bar, then walked away! That's what I know!" Boomer was losing his control. He wanted to hit something and right now. He wanted to hit Kong.

When Kong started marching across the room toward Boomer, Ricochet stepped up next to him. He'd have to take them both on, because they both felt the same way.

Kong stopped toe to toe with Boomer. "She is no slut and I didn't use her damn it!"

"Then what do you call it? Showing her a good time? My God Lowe, she trusted you!" Boomer's voice grew louder. "She trusted you and you threw it back in her face! How many people do you think she's trusted in her life?"

The words struck like a fist. Kong's head snapped back, his eyes softened. She had trusted him. She told him about her childhood, about her gift. She willingly gave him her body, when she so obviously hadn't shared it with many others. How could he have been so stupid? The only other person that knew those things about her was her uncle. She had no one and yet she trusted and loved him.

Kong ran his hand through his hair. She loved him, he knew it, but was so wrapped up in his own feelings that he didn't see what she was offering him. Love.

"You don't know what love is do ya Lowe?" Ricochet could see it in his eyes. He knew his background, knew that he wasn't loved by anyone as a boy. Love was nothing to him. "You never had no one to love you, so when it came, you freaked. That's it isn't it?"

Kong paced back and forth. All the emotions and feelings he'd pushed aside a month ago came rushing back. The need for her touch, to see her, to hear her laugh, to see her smile. His stomach twisted hard, causing him to double over. He'd lost her. He was given a precious gift and he had tossed it aside.

"We have to find her," he said with a choked, strained voice. "I have to find her." Those words came back like a sledgehammer in his head. *Her journey isn't over yet. Protect her.*

This must be what the warning was about and he'd screwed up. He'd left her. Run like a frightened child. Boomer went to him then and shoved him down on his bunk. He paced back and forth in front of him, running his hands over the top of his head. What a mess, he thought to himself. If he'd realized that Kong didn't know what to do, he would have talked to him. But being the good friend he was, he'd stayed out of it. Now look what happened.

"My stomach, it feels like I've been punched. You didn't sneak one in did you?"

Boomer looked up at Ricochet both shaking their heads. "That's called love Lowe. You just found out that the one person in this world you love is missing and your soul is reacting."

Boomer and went to his locker. "You better get packed. The plane will be here in less then forty-five minutes."

When he was packed, Kong went to the runway and sat. His mind played over the last night they spent together. How he wanted to tell her how he felt, but couldn't. How she felt wrapped around him. The sadness in her eyes when she realized he was leaving, yet she never pleaded with him to stay. She thought he just wanted an affair, so she settled for that.

The agonizing note he'd left on her pillow and the way she looked sleeping as he placed it next to her. God, how many times had he written that note, only to crumple it up and start over. He knew it sounded lame, but he wasn't a poet that could spout flowery words to make her feel better.

His dreams were haunted by the vision of her standing in the rain, watching the plane take off, her uncle running to her side. The dream came every night. He supposed it was because she was the last thing he thought about before he went to sleep and the first thing he thought about when he opened his eyes. Not to mention the countless times her face popped into his head during the day.

Cannon wouldn't like him coming along, but he'd have to deal with it. Because this time, he wasn't leaving her. This time he would plant himself in that perfect home she made and stay, forever. If she refused to give him a second chance, then he'd rent an apartment and show up on her doorstep every morning. If she was alive. God please, let her be alive.

"Come on Kong, plane's here," Boomer yelled to him.

The plane touched down in Pennsylvania less than an hour later. Kong braced himself for the confrontation he knew was coming. It couldn't be helped. If the man wanted to pummel him so be it, but he'd have to wait until he brought Sam back home.

Ricochet and Boomer left the plane first and headed toward Cannon who was standing there waiting to meet them. Kong watched the man's face when he walked

down the steps of the plane. It was no surprise when he saw deep-seated hatred burn in the man's eyes.

"What the hell are you doing here?" Walt growled.

"I came to find Sam."

"Wasn't it clear when I called, when I asked specifically for the two of you, that I didn't want him involved?" he shouted at the other two. "I thought you two cared about her?"

"With all due respect Sir, it's going to take the three of us working together to find her," Boomer replied in a calm voice. Inside, his stomach was churning and acid was burning into his throat. He understood Cannon's anger, felt it himself. But now wasn't the time for this, they had to find her.

Walt turned abruptly and walked toward his office building. His hands clenched into tight fists, he cursed under his breath. This whole mess just kept getting worse by the second. Once inside the building, Walt turned and faced them. "I sent a couple of detectives to her last known location two days ago. They didn't find much, but what they did find is in here," he said tossing a file on his desk.

"You sent her out on another job so soon after she was shot?" Kong snarled at him.

"I didn't send her anywhere Lowe." Walt stepped out from behind his desk and stood face to face with Kong. The two men that loved her most in the world were going to have it out before this was over. "You want to know what happened after you left? I'll tell you. She didn't come out of her house for almost a week. I had to go and drag her out. She was a mess!" He left out the part about having to break her door down and the fear of what he'd find when he entered. "It took two straight days of me going over there and talking to get her out. Sam and I agreed a long time ago not to interfere in each other's personal lives, but I warn you. If you think you're going to use her and walk away again, I'll take you down."

Kong met the man's stare. He had no idea she was destroyed by his leaving. Hell, he didn't even know she was in love with him. "I think we should settle this later Cannon. Right now, we need to find her." His throat was tight as he spoke, his emotions teetering on a thread.

Walt continued to stare him down for a few more moments then sat down at his desk. The need to punch him was too strong and it wasn't going to bring her back any faster. Kong was right, they would settle it later.

"Two and half weeks ago, she told me she found a lead on her parents' murderers. I tried to convince her to turn it over to the police but she wouldn't."

"They did a half-assed job," Kong muttered. "That's what she told me."

Walt burned a glare through Kong then continued. "I agreed to give her what she needed to follow up on it, if she agreed to turn it over to the police. She spent the last two weeks or so following a man who had a tattoo that matched the one on her parents' killer. They both had it in the same spot. Four times a day, she called and checked in with me, let me know where she was, what she was doing and what she found out."

"A mark on his hand," Kong mumbled, remembering the bits and pieces of what she'd told him.

"What do you know about them?" Boomer asked calmly.

Walt sat back in his chair and looked the three men over. No matter how much hate he felt for Lowe, Kong was good at what he did and he needed him. Unfortunately that meant telling him the whole story.

"I doubt Sam knows what her parents did for a living. She was so young and children don't generally care what their parents do as long as they love them." He paused and rubbed his eyes.

"My brother and his wife were low level spies when they died. Before Sam came along, they were the best the government had to offer. Once she was born, they decided it was time to take less risky jobs. Marcy, Sam's mother, had been gathering intelligence on a terrorist cell in a small town in New York State. Ben, my brother, was working with the CIA and making plans about how to infiltrate the cell.

"Marcy was always too good at her job. She dug too deep and ruffled some feathers. It didn't take long for them to find out who was asking all the questions and digging up records. Turns out they had their own surveillance team. They followed her home one day and watched the house.

"Two nights later Marcy and Ben were dead and Sam was dying."

Kong felt the floor tilt. She didn't tell him all that, in fact when she spoke about it, she didn't even seem to know who the killers were. "Does she know who killed them?"

"No."

"You never told her who killed her family?" Now Kong's temper was up. "You let her go after a terrorist group alone? What the hell were you thinking?"

Walt stood and pointed his finger at Kong. "I'll tell you what I was thinking Lowe. I was thinking of how destroyed she was after you left. When she got onto this lead, it pulled her from her depression. Hell, I didn't think it would pan out. What are the chances she'd stumble on them here, in Pennsylvania of all places? Why do you think I moved her here?"

Kong's face was paling. The fact that he could destroy something so strong and gentle was overwhelming. He'd never forgive himself for it and Cannon wasn't about to let him forget it. Now wasn't the time to sulk like a child. She needed them, she needed him.

"That doesn't excuse withholding information from her about her family." Kong's tight throat made his voice sound hoarse.

"I didn't think she'd find anything substantial," Walt said quietly. He'd been mentally beating himself for the last three days for not telling her the truth. "When the murders happened, the police did their best to investigate. When they started to get too close to the cell, the government stepped in and called them off. I stayed in the military long enough to find out what I could."

Walt sat back down at his desk then motioned for them to sit as well. "I called in a lot of favors, risked some good friendships, but I found out about the cell. I even went as far as to let the police think Sam was dead. I knew if the terrorists found out she was alive, they'd come for her. There is no mercy in their world, not even for a child."

Memories of Sam as a child flooded Walt's mind. How tiny she looked in the hospital fighting for her life, the smile on her face when she managed to beat her first martial arts instructor in hand-to-hand. If he lost her now...

"How much do you think she knows?" Boomer asked interrupting Walt's thoughts.

"I went to her house the second day she didn't contact me. Sam's good at taking notes and keeping files on things she works on. I found this," he said opening his drawer and pulling a large envelope from it.

Kong took it first and opened it. Inside were handwritten notes on what kind of cars they drove, what time they met and at what bar. How many she felt were involved. As he flipped through the pages, he found disturbing photos. The first photo showed large crates being unloaded from commercial vans, the next showed one of the men holding up a surface-to-air missile.

As Kong shuffled through the photos he wondered exactly how close she had been to take them. How much did she risk in finding her family's killers? The last photo he came to was older, worn. His heart skipped as his eyes focused on the battered body of a woman lying on an autopsy table. Then his heart fluttered when the face of the woman looked familiar.

"This is her mother. This is her autopsy photo. How the hell did she get it?" Kong couldn't stop himself. His eyes roamed the photo from top to bottom. The woman had been beaten beyond belief. Her breasts had what looked like dozens of bite marks. Her arms had deep slashes in them. One rib was poking through her abdomen and her lower body had been carved up so badly it was impossible to tell what was used.

"Her face wasn't touched. Why?" he asked absently.

"They were sending a message. They knew who she was, what she was doing. They wanted the government to know that." Walt pulled his bottle from his drawer. "As for how she got that photo, I have no idea," he said as he poured the clear liquid into a glass.

The earth shifted. "If they have her, if they know who she is..." Kong couldn't finish the sentence. He wouldn't allow the thought to interfere with what he had to do.

"The plane is fueling to take us to New York. That's where she last contacted me. That's where my men found her abandoned car. That's where we'll find her." Walt downed the rest of the liquid in his glass and stood.

"You're coming with us Sir?" Boomer asked.

"She's my niece. Yes, I'm coming with you."

Chapter Twenty-Two

Pain burned through Sam's body as she fought through the thick haze in her mind. There was searing pain running from her wrists, down her arms. As she tried to move her arms she realized they were stretched above her. Heavy metal shackles held her wrists, every time she wriggled, the thick metal cut deeper into her flesh.

Panic pushed the haze away. Her heart beat like a drum against her chest as she realized she couldn't move. Her intense training over the years snapped into motion. First she stilled then calmed her mind. She couldn't help herself if she allowed panic to rule and helping herself was the only way she was going to get out of this.

Take stock first. How badly are you hurt? Sam began with her arms. Her wrists burned, that she knew. She also knew she was held by heavy metal shackles. With her mind, she followed the pain down her arms and into her sides. Bruised ribs, if not broken. Okay, she could deal with that. Next she let her mind float across her chest. Pain with every breath she took.

Her legs were spread and chained to something, she didn't know what. Metal was poking into her back, so she assumed she was lying down on some sort of cot frame. Her left knee throbbed and pressure was building in it. Running was going to be difficult.

Sam tried to open her eyes and see where exactly she was, but they wouldn't move. Blindfold? Nothing seemed to be wrapped around her head, so that couldn't be it. Again, she calmed her mind and allowed herself to feel. God her face hurt. She wasn't blindfolded, her eyes were swollen shut.

Think Sam, what is the last thing you remember? Relaxing her body, even through the extreme pain, she let her mind replay the last events she could remember. Following a white van, explosives inside, parking her Mustang on a dirt road in the woods, walking through the woods toward a shabby farm-type house. The tattoo on the man's hand, the man she saw in the bar back home. That's how this started. The tattoo.

It was the same tattoo she saw on the hand of her parents' killer. Same one, same place. She remembered how fear and panic ripped through her body when she saw it. Gathering herself together, she followed the man to an abandoned building. She watched as three others joined him, all of them branded with the same tattoo. Two days were spent watching them go to that same warehouse, waiting for something to happen.

Then on the second day a moving truck pulled into the lot. Sam knew they wouldn't reveal what was inside there for the whole world to see, so she waited for the truck to be moved inside the building. Once she felt it was safe enough to leave her

vehicle, she crept toward the building the way she would creep through thick woods, or barren desert.

The old building offered her a wealth of vantage points to see in. The best was a second storey window with its glass broken out. With deliberate skill she began to scale the side of the building. Careful not to knock mortar loose, she slipped her fingers between cracks in the cinder block wall. Muscles bunched in her arms and legs as she climbed up the building to the window.

A small balcony outside the window served perfectly for a perch and gave her an excellent vantage point to view the meeting inside. Sam's pulse quickened as she watched the group of men unload large heavy crates from the back of the truck. When the first crate was open, she gasped.

The weaponry inside those crates would arm a small country, or destroy one. Her mind raced. What were their plans? Who did they want to destroy? And most importantly, what would her parents have to do with people like this?

More determined than ever to find out what was going on, she followed them here, to Elmira, New York. That's where she was, New York State. She called her Uncle Walt, told him where she was then continued to follow them at a distance.

The ride seemed to take forever with her mind refusing to believe that her loving father and mother would have any dealings with people that seemed destined to take lives. And if her guess was correct, innocent lives. How many times had her father stopped her from squashing spiders in the yard, or sternly lectured her about teasing the wild rabbits that would come and forage through her mother's flower beds?

"All God's creatures are special. Treat them the way you would like to be treated," he'd say, then pick her up and spin her over his shoulder until she laughed so hard, her stomach hurt.

When the van finally pulled off the main roads and started driving down one-lane dirt roads, Sam decided to park her car. She turned it around facing the opposite direction, so if a fast escape was needed, all she had to do was jump in and drive away.

She trekked through the dense woods until she came across an old rundown farm house. At first she thought she hadn't traveled far enough, until she saw the front of the white van peeking out from behind the back of the house. The men were carrying the crates inside.

Needing a place to hide, she crept around the outskirts of the house looking for somewhere that would allow her to observe unseen. That's all she wanted to do, observe. She was smart enough to know this was bad news, that she couldn't take them down herself. But if she could see what they were up to, she could report it to the police.

That's when she encountered one of the men. He was just as surprised as she was when they met face to face. Sam gave him a quick kick to the face and turned to run, only to be taken down by a kick to the legs. They struggled and fought for what seemed like ten minutes. Each punishing blow Sam delivered was countered by one of his to

her. Her disadvantage was she'd been caught off guard, something that had never happened in the past.

Her guide had always warned her of upcoming danger. It was something she relied on. Today however, she was not warned. In fact, she hadn't heard a whisper in her head since, well, since Mark had left.

Sam seemed to be fueled by the anger she felt when his name fluttered through her head. Her kicks became more wild, her jabs more potent. She was about ready to chop his windpipe when strong hands grasped her arms and threw her to the ground. Thrusting her legs out and arching her back, she sprung to her feet ready to continue the battle.

Once again, strong hands pushed her back to the ground and a large foot planted itself in the middle of her chest. The pressure was unbearable, but Sam struck out with her legs and knocked the man to the ground. Just as she was about to spring to her feet again, another much larger foot was planted in the center of her chest.

It seemed the man stood with all his weight on her, crushing her sternum. Sam had no other choice but to stop fighting. If he continued the pressure, her sternum would surely collapse. She gasped for air and looked into the eyes of the devil himself. There was no mercy there, no humanity. Just emptiness.

The man waited until her gasps for air became shallower then kicked her in the rib cage. Hands picked her up and held her while the man she had originally fought unleashed his vengeance. One blow after another landed. There seemed to be no end to the brutal punishment he was willing to give her.

Sam heard popping and cracking as bones failed under the severe beating. It was the last blow to her face that sent her spiraling into the darkness, a darkness she welcomed because, for the first time in her life, she couldn't fight back.

She must be inside the house. Voices could be heard, but they seemed far away. Every once in a while she could hear something thump above her. If the sounds were above her, then she was in the basement. But why were they keeping her? Why not just dump her somewhere, or kill her?

"Let's see if our visitor is awake yet." The voice was scratchy and low and coming closer. Sam fought to keep herself calm as she waited while whoever it was came into the room. Her thoughts went to her Uncle Walt. How worried he must be and how angry he would be. Then she thought about Mark. Would she ever get the chance to see him again, to tell him she didn't hate him, but loved him? Would it even matter to him?

"Wake up!" The voice boomed into the room.

Sam cursed herself for jumping, for giving them the satisfaction of seeing her jump.

"Who are you?" the voice asked.

Sam tried to open her eyes as much as possible to see the man's face, but her eyes were too swollen to open even a crack. What would she tell them, that she suspected them of killing her parents eighteen years ago? She needed to tell them something.

"I asked you a question," the man said grabbing her face.

The moan escaped her mouth before she could stop it. His hands were brutal, squeezing her already bruised cheeks. All she could do was fight the pain.

"Not talking, or can't?" he grumbled. "You guys were too rough. How we going to find out anything with her all busted up like that?" he asked as he let go of her face. "Clean her up. Give her some water. The boss'll want to see her when he gets here."

She heard footsteps walking away, then the sound of water being run into a bucket. Sam tensed as she waited to see what would be done to her. A chuckle seemed to come from over her, then ice cold water flooded over her body. A loud gasp could be heard through the room, as Sam sucked in her breath. Every cut, open wound or sore flamed from the force of the water.

Another laugh filled the air, then water running again. Sam braced herself this time, waiting for the deluge to pour over her. When it came, she held herself stiff as her body protested the clash of ice cold water and pain.

She suffered through two more buckets until the man decided she was clean enough to be seen by whoever the boss was. It would have been easy for Sam to plot how she would kill each and every one of them, but that wasn't prudent. She needed to keep her mind on getting away. Some how, some way, she needed to free herself.

Help me, she pleaded inside her head. You helped me free myself once before, help me now.

The only sound Sam heard was silence. No answer. *I'm sorry if I let you down, she continued, I won't question you again, just help me.* Those days after Mark left were hard. She had found herself questioning every event that led to their meeting.

I cannot help you Samantha.

Relief swept over her at the sound of the familiar voice inside her head.

Why? she questioned. Why can't you help me?

I cannot interfere.

I won't tell anyone, I promise. Just tell me how to get out of these shackles.

You do not understand Samantha.

Please, she cried within herself. Please don't let them kill me the way they did my mother. Take me now before they steal what's left of my dignity.

Heavy footsteps came down the stairs and the door to the room opened. Sam held her breath, waiting for what would come. She could feel the shackles cutting into her wrists. If need be, she would slice herself open all the way and bleed to death before she would allow herself to be ravaged the way her mother was.

"Well, well. What do we have here?" The voice was familiar, a voice from her past. A voice from her dream. He walked around her once, then stood next to her before crouching down beside her. "My men did a number on you, didn't they?" Sam could feel his breath on her skin as he spoke. "You shouldn't have been snooping around." He

seemed to be studying her between his sentences. "A pretty little thing I think. Of course it's hard to tell with your face all messed up like that."

His hands slid between her breasts, down her stomach and stopped between her legs. *No!* She screamed inside her head. *Don't let this happen!*

"Pity, I have other plans at the moment. But you aren't going anywhere are you? You'll wait for me."

"We have plans to make. Time is running out," another voice came from across the room.

"Yes, I know," he said walking away. "Don't let her die. I want to have the pleasure of taking her life."

Sam held her breath until she was sure all the footsteps were gone. Then she waited and listened to see if anyone stayed behind. When she heard nothing, she began jerking her legs against the chains around her ankles. Pain ripped through her knee with every jerk, but she didn't stop.

You don't want to help me, I'll do it myself. Haven't I done everything you asked of me? How many people have I saved over the years because you wanted me to? Now you leave me to be used by these animals and killed.

Her head was beginning to ache from her mental screaming. Pushing past it, she continued to jerk her legs. If she could just work enough space loose, she could slide her foot out.

Stop Samantha. You are injuring yourself further.

What difference does it make? When he comes back, he'll do worse.

Tears began slipping from between her swollen eyelids. It couldn't end like this. Not after all she'd done for others. Where was her happiness in life? Was she asking too much—a simple happy life with someone that loved her? A family of her own?

Through a small crack in her swollen eyes, she saw what seemed to be a brilliant white light fill the room. Sam stopped struggling and tried to open her eyes further. Warmth spread through her body, peace settled inside her mind and heart. What felt like electricity started from her toes and ran up her body to her fingertips.

Sam, you must not struggle. Your body is damaged badly enough. Don't make it worse.

This voice wasn't her guide. It sounded like her mother. Was the warmth and peace she felt coming from her mother?

"Mom?" she asked aloud.

Please honey, don't hurt yourself any more. Help is on the way. You just have to hold on.

"Mommy, is that you? Don't leave me please." Sam gasped for breath as she spoke. Was it possible? Could her mother help her?

I'm always with you Sam. I always have been.

The light began to dim in the room and the warmth lessened. "No! Don't go, please." But it was too late, darkness swallowed her once again. "No, no. Don't leave." Sam whispered.

* * * * *

The men upstairs made lists of who would plant bombs and where. Next came who would target planes in the air. A sense of finality settled over the room.

"The time has come my brothers." The leader spoke. "All our years of planning have paid off. Tomorrow we will exact our revenge on those disbelievers. Nonconformist Americans will never rest safely in their homes again. We will hold power. We will decide what they believe in and what they buy from now on. Our great leader will be safe to lead openly once again."

Cheers filled the room, handshakes were passed from one man to another. Everyone was joyful at the thought of taking down a great materialistic, and in their mind, evil power. All but one man. He smiled and shook hands with the others, but the secret he held behind his smiling eyes would bring them all down.

There was only one problem, the woman downstairs. Who was she? How did she find them? Was she sent by his superiors? These questions niggled away at his brain as he joined in the celebration among the men.

Normally he wouldn't care. Just one more acceptable loss in the war on terror. But there was something about her, something he couldn't put his finger on. He'd seen the way she fought, the way she didn't back down. Training, extensive training. She had to be government, no one fought like that unless they were trained by the government.

He hadn't been told another agent was being sent in. Wouldn't they alert him? Or had he become expendable? Silently he cursed. He didn't spend the last two years of his life living with these psychos and reporting their every move to be thrown away like garbage at the end. How could they do this to him? Then again, maybe she wasn't government. Maybe she was a vigilante. If that were the case, then he had bigger problems. She wouldn't be working alone. Surely she had others out there waiting for her return.

He had to find out. He had to be sure. He couldn't let all his work be blown because of vigilantes. When all the partying was over and every man was sleeping off the drink they were about to share, he would sneak downstairs. She would answer *his* questions. He was trained in how to interrogate prisoners and he would utilize every method that was at his disposal.

Chapter Twenty-Three

The plane landed in New York without any problems. The four men disembarked and walked straight to a car parked on the tarmac. A small man got out of the car and held his hand out to Walt as they approached. The handshake was brief. More important things crowded niceties out of Walt's mind.

"Kevin, these are Lieutenants Campbell, Underwood and Lowe. They've come to help me find her."

"I've got a car waiting for you outside the airport. Maps and all the information we have are in there. If you need anything else, call me." With that statement, Kevin got back in his car and waited for them to join him.

They were dropped off at their car, the keys were handed to Walt and the little man drove away. Kong was eager to get on with it, so he opened up the front passenger door and climbed in. All the papers were lying on the console of the car and Kong wasted no time going through them.

"What do they say?" Walt asked as he started the car.

"Her car was found two miles away from an old rundown house. The police think she's inside there, but they can't move in. I guess the government sees her as being expendable," he snarled.

"No surprise there. If they've been watching this cell for the last eighteen years, they won't let a single woman stand in their way," Walt remarked.

"Are we going to let them know we intend to get her out?" Boomer asked from the backseat.

Walt and Kong looked at each other. "No, because we're expendable too," Walt said, then pulled away from the airport.

"So you're sayin' we're gonna go in there, snatch her and get the hell out right? Isn't that gonna piss a lotta people off?" Ricochet asked.

"I really don't give a damn," Walt replied.

"Okay. Just checkin'."

"I want to talk with this officer who found her car. He may know something that isn't in his report," Kong said.

"That was my first plan of action. Cops always know more than they put in their reports. He may even be able to help us find a way into those woods without being seen."

They drove for a while in silence, Kong's mind already working out a plan of attack. It didn't matter that he knew nothing about the layout or how many men might

be in the house his only thought was getting to her and bringing her home. Samantha Wells had become the most important person in his life and he needed her.

Kong looked over at Walt. "You were an ops man in the military weren't you? You were like us."

"I was you Lowe. I traveled around the world doing any job my army wanted me to do. In between I found myself a pretty little thing that would keep me warm and satisfied at night."

That comment wasn't lost on Kong. He knew it was a dig at him, but he chose to ignore it. He'd just add it to the pile of things to be dealt with after Sam was home.

"When my brother was murdered, I took a desk job and raised Sam. Once I learned all I could about the murders, I retired and started W&S Incorporated. I lost my taste for the military after I found out Marcy's and Ben's murders were being swept under the rug."

Understanding bloomed inside Kong. He was rapidly losing his taste for the military as well.

"Her last name is different," Kong said more to himself than to Walt. It had only taken him a month to realize that.

"Yeah, well, as far as the world's concerned, Samantha Cannon died when she was eight years old. I changed her name to Wells before she left the hospital. It was my mother's maiden name."

Walt remembered how confused Sam had been when he told her that her last name was now Wells. Not only did she lose her family, she had lost her identity as well.

"I couldn't chance it. If they knew she was alive, they would come back and finish her. She was the only one who saw their faces and lived. There's a small headstone in the cemetery with her name on it, right next to her mom and dad's."

Kong didn't want to think about a headstone with her name on it. He pushed that unthinkable notion from his head. "So all these years, Sam thought what? That her family was murdered by some burglars? She's smarter than that Cannon. The fact that she had that autopsy photo proves that."

"I don't know how she came across that photo. But I do know that the information about the terrorist cell was buried so deep she would never find it." It had taken him years to find out who killed his brother and his wife, Sam couldn't have found out in a matter of days. "I don't even know how she knew these guys were involved."

"It was the tattoo," Kong said. "Back in the desert, she would dream about it. She would always see the tattoo. You said she recognized it on one of the men's hands. She didn't dig up any information, she fell into this mess. Damn it, that's what they were telling me." It was all making sense now. He wasn't supposed to leave, he was supposed to stay and help her. "Protect her, her journey isn't over."

The car stopped in the parking lot of the local police station. Walt turned off the ignition and stared at the front of the building. "Who told you that? Who told you that her journey wasn't over yet?"

Kong smacked the dashboard with his open hand. He'd been an absolute fool through this whole thing. "They did!" he yelled, his eyes trying desperately to relay his meaning without saying the words.

Walt's brow furrowed. He understood. He understood completely. So that's why they urged her to tell him about herself. They had a connection, one that was meant to keep her safe. "I think I'll go in and try to find this Officer Burns," Walt whispered.

The three men sat in the car and watched Walt walk into the building. Kong's hand was gripped around the door handle. He wanted to go inside and talk with Burns, he wanted to find out what the man knew, but he was too emotional. If the man didn't give him the answers he wanted, no telling what he would do. So, he gripped the handle harder and waited. "I don't like this, man," Ricochet huffed. "I don't like this one bit. If she's in that house with a bunch of terrorists, how long until they..."

Boomer responded before Ricochet could finish. "She's tough. She wouldn't let them take her without a fight. My bet's on Black Smoke."

Kong thought back to the first day they met. How fast she took him down and hard she fought. But she'd taken them one by one. Two or three she could handle, but there was no telling how many men she had encountered. A cold chill ran down his spine as horrible images rushed through his mind. Would they kill her right away? No. They'd want to know who she was and who she worked for and she wouldn't give up that information easily.

That meant they would drag it out of her. And that meant torture tactics. Kong's blood turned to ice. "Sam, where are you?" he whispered to himself. Unable to sit any longer, he threw open the door and slid from the car.

Walt was coming back out the door as Kong walked toward it. The look on Walt's face told the whole story, no info. Well then, they'd just have to go in blind. At this point, Kong didn't care. He just wanted her back.

"Hey!" a man shouted from the side of the building. Walt looked over at him, then at Kong. Both men walked to where he stood. "I heard you talking to the captain. He goes strictly by the book so he ain't gonna tell ya nothing."

"But you will?" Kong asked looking the man over.

"I don't like the fact that we have this scum living here. We would've taken them down a long time ago, but for some reason, we aren't even allowed to drive by the place." Sweat was beading on the man's forehead as he spoke. "I've personally dealt with dead bodies that turn up and are tracked back to that house. Every time, I'm pulled off the damn case," he told them.

"You have any information that can help us get near the house?" Walt asked in a flat tone.

"I can tell ya, there's about six or eight of 'em living there. And I can tell ya that a couple of days ago I saw a white van head down that road. A few minutes later a red Mustang followed."

Burns watched the faces of the two men standing before him. He had their attention now.

"You're the man the captain doesn't want us talking to?" Walt asked suspiciously.

"We got a call about an abandoned car sitting on the road, so I went down and checked it out. The captain," he said nodding his head toward the building. "He said if it had anything to do with that house, to just leave it be."

"But you didn't?" Kong asked.

"I checked out the car. Found the registration, a small bag packed with women's clothes and a notebook." Burns watched intently as Kong and Walt glanced at each other.

"I don't suppose you still have the notebook?" Kong asked.

Burns shook his head.

"Didn't think so. But you read it didn't you?"

"I looked through it. There was a lot of stuff about crates of missiles, surface-to-air, explosives. Sounds like a war is comin'," Burns said wringing his hands.

"Anything else?" Kong asked impatiently.

"Well, let me think." Burns rubbed his chin and lowered his head.

Patience wasn't a strong trait in Kong. "Look, you either remember something or you don't. We're burning daylight."

"Nothing important. Just a bunch of female stuff, ya know, like she was bummed about some guy. 'I'll never trust another guy.' Or 'happiness is an illusion.' Some kinda crap like that. Sounds to me like her head wasn't totally where it needed t' be."

Pressure began to build in Kong's chest. If she was distracted, she wouldn't be as aware as she normally would. And it was his fault.

"I appreciate you help," Walt said, turning toward the car.

Burns spoke quickly before he left. "If they have her, well, I can tell you from experience. She won't last long. Those are some sick sons of bitches."

Walt's step faltered. His vision blurred. He couldn't be too late.

Kong felt like he took a crushing blow to the chest by a sledgehammer. His breath caught and it took every ounce of control he had not to fall to his knees. God, what an asshole he'd been. How could he walk away from her like he had done? Now he might never get the chance to make it right.

Both men walked to the car their faces pasty. Boomer and Ricochet watched the conversation from the car, neither needed to hear it. When Walt nearly fell over his own feet and Kong looked like he'd been punched in the stomach both knew it wasn't good news.

"Damn, I don't like this Boomer. I got a real bad feelin'."

"Me too buddy. Me too," Boomer said faintly. He closed his eyes and said a prayer that she was still alive.

When Walt got back into the car, he let out a long breath. "Two miles away from the house. She was too damn close," he muttered.

"Boomer, you got your explosives with you?" No time for guilt, Kong told himself. Later, when it's all over and you know if she's alive, but not now.

"Do I ever travel without them?" Boomer replied.

"We get her out. I don't care if she's...we get her out, then you blow that place to hell," Kong said. It took enormous effort to get the words out. The pressure in his chest was making it difficult for him to breathe—squeezing him like a boa constrictor.

"Roger that."

"Ricochet, you find yourself a place to disappear. Anyone outside is dead. You understand?"

"Completely."

Walt looked at Kong. He seemed to be taking this personally. Harder than he thought he would, like he cared. "Government may have a man inside," he said without feeling.

"How would you know anyway?"

"Gut feeling."

"Then that man better do what he can to protect her, or he's just as dead as the rest." The temperature in the car dropped with his words.

Maybe he does care, Walt thought to himself. Too bad the man wasn't smart enough to figure that out a month ago. Sam wouldn't be in this mess. With that thought, Walt started the car and drove toward the house that held his niece.

* * * * *

They drove down the road and past the driveway that led to the old farm house. A quick survey was needed before they started moving in. The house sat about a half mile up the road, shielded by the treeline. Thick woods surrounded the house. There didn't seem to be any other houses in the area, so this had to be the one.

Walt drove back up the road, slowing slightly so they all could get a good look at the front of the rundown building. No one was outside, but there were seven cars sitting out front, all of them the same make and the same color.

"That's not good. Why would they all want to drive the same car?" Boomer asked absently. Ricochet's eyes darted around the house, looking for somewhere he could hide without being noticed. A large oak tree with huge, heavy limbs grew near the house. The thick foliage would provide perfect cover.

"When ya get past the house, slow down Cannon. I found my sweet spot," Ricochet said as he pulled his radio from his pack and slipped it on his head.

"Watch your back," Walt told him, then slowed down and watched as Ricochet dived from the moving car.

Boomer placed his radio on his head and waited for Ricochet to contact them. When they reached a safe enough distance away from the house, Walt stopped. The three men prepared themselves for the fight ahead. Knives were placed in sheaths, guns were checked and rechecked. Then radio contact was established with Ricochet.

Before they headed into the thick forest Walt turned to Kong. "That's my baby in there Lowe. I decide when we move and no one moves until I say so. Is that understood?"

The look in Walt's eyes was nothing short of hatred mixed with fear. Kong swallowed hard and decided it was time to tell the man how he felt. "You may not believe me, but I care about her Cannon. More than you know."

Walt slipped his revolver into the waist of his pants. "You lost the right to care a month ago."

"That's her decision to make, not yours." Kong said as anger burned in his own eyes.

"You're damn right it's her decision. And one I'm sure she'll make properly," Walt countered.

"She won't be able to make any decisions if we don't get moving," Boomer interjected before the two came to blows. The two men stared each other down for a few seconds then started moving into the woods. The thick underbrush was difficult to move through, yet they all seemed unaffected by the task. Every ten minutes Ricochet checked in, telling them all was quiet, no movement outside the structure. As they neared the house, Kong's pulse quickened. The pressure in his chest increased and his palms began to sweat. When they reached the treeline that opened up around the house, they halted.

"Ricochet, what's happening?" Walt whispered into his radio.

"Nothin' outside. But I have a pretty good view into what looks like the livin' room. They seem to be partyin'. They must have something to celebrate, cause the bottles are being passed around," Ricochet relayed.

Good, Kong thought to himself. If they're drunk, they won't be as likely to get off any good shots. "Any sign of Sam?" he asked.

"Negative."

"How long have they been drinking?" Walt asked.

"Since before I got here. The empty bottle pile is growin'. I'd say another hour or so and they won't know what day it is."

"Anyone venture outside?" Walt was sure with all the drinking they were doing someone would eventually stumble outside and take a piss.

"Negative." Ricochet breathed into his radio.

"Boomer, you think you can do your magic on that van? I don't want it to blow now, but get it ready." Walt didn't want to move yet. With them drinking he figured waiting would be best.

"Roger that," Boomer replied crawling toward the white van.

"I've got your back buddy," Ricochet radioed.

As the pressure built in Kong's chest, he closed his eyes. *Please don't let her die. Don't take her away from me. I was a fool. I didn't know what I was feeling. I don't care if she hates me for the rest of my life, just don't let her die,* he pleaded inside his head.

She is still alive came a soft reply.

Relief swept over him with a force he'd never felt. His body began to shake uncontrollably, some of the pressure in his chest releasing. Unable to stay in his crouched position, he sat on his butt in the middle of the thick underbrush. *Is she hurt?* he asked.

When no reply came he began to sweat. No answer had to mean yes. "Think damn it, ask something useful," he muttered unaware that his muttering was going over the radio.

Walt looked over at him and watched as he repeatedly ran his hands through his hair. "Kong, get a hold of yourself," he whispered into the radio. When he didn't respond, or even look over at him, Walt knew the man was in trouble.

Tell me where she is. Can you at least tell me where she is inside the house? Kong asked frantically inside his head. Again, no answer. *Talk to me, please.*

She is inside, safe for the moment. A soft caress ran down his chest, relieving some of the pain he felt deep inside.

"Boomer, you almost finished?" Walt asked urgently. "Kong's losing it."

"I'm okay Cannon." Now that he knew she was inside the house and safe for at least the time being, he was able to pull himself together. "She's inside and at the moment safe."

Walt looked over and their eyes met. He didn't need to ask how he knew. Working with Sam for the last eighteen years taught him a lot. Walt simply nodded in understanding then focused his eyes back on the house.

Chapter Twenty-Four

All the men inside the house had either passed out or were staggering around finding an empty place to pass out. All but one. He'd learned over the last two years how to make it look like he was drinking. Meager sips worked to taint his breath and his acting skills were superb. He could stagger and slur his speech enough to make anyone think he was drunk. Passing himself off in front of those who already were drunk was a piece of cake.

When the last man slumped to the floor, he took his opportunity and slipped away to the basement. He would have his answers. She would tell him who she was and what she was doing here. No one was going to take his glory for bringing down this terrorist cell. Not after all his hard work and sacrifice. As he took each slow step toward the basement door he pictured himself being praised and rewarded for all his outstanding work. The glasses raised in his honor, the endless handshakes. Yes, he thought to himself, he would be the hero. Reaching the door, he laced his fingers and cracked them. Limbering them for the task ahead. She thought what they had done to her was painful—she'd think it was nothing compared to what he was willing to administer. He reached out and turned the knob carefully, then gently pushed the door open.

Someone was there. Sam could feel the slight shift in the air when the door opened. Was it him? Did he return to brutalize her before ending it all? *God forgive me for all my sins. But I can't let this man take me the way he took my mother*, she prayed.

Soft footsteps neared as she prayed, then they stopped next to her. Her body braced for the feel of rough hands on her skin, her wrists pressed closer to the metal that would end her torment. But nothing happened. She could hear breathing, but nothing more.

He looked at her. So small, he thought to himself. Just a sprite, but a muscular one. Not bulging muscles, but taut, powerful ones just the same. Her face was a mess of black and purple, accented by the splits in her skin where the flesh had given way to the force of the swelling. Blood trickled from her petite nose. It too was swollen with a repulsive black and purple mixture of color. His eyes traveled down her body, stopping briefly on her breasts. No doubt the almighty master that lay upstairs would turn those two perfect mounds into something just as horrid as her face. His eyes continued their scrutiny, eyeing the knee that was surely broken and the ankles that were now bruised from her battle with the chains that held them. Such a shame a once beautiful specimen would end up alongside the road like so many others that dared to show their faces in this hellhole. But then, she made her decision, just like all the others. No one forced her to come here. Unfortunately once here, all decisions were made for you. When, where and how you died.

Time to start his charade. Time was running out and he needed to know if she was friend or foe. Crouching next to her, he pushed away the urge to reach out and touch the unmarred skin on the underside of her arm. So soft and smooth.

"Tell me who you are," he asked with compassion. "I don't want to hurt you. I just need to know who you are and why you're here."

Sam felt his breath on her arm. A cold chill slid down her spine causing her to physically react.

"Tell me who you are," she whispered back.

"I asked first. You're in a lot of danger honey. So if you tell me who you work for, I might be able to help you."

"I don't work for anybody." If she acted as the lost traveler, she might have a chance.

"That would be a shame. Because if you worked for someone like, oh, I don't know, Uncle Sam maybe, I might be able to help you." His trap set, he waited for her as she thought that over. What was he trying to tell her? Was he an undercover agent, was he offering to help her?

Should she trust him? Hell no! She was through trusting men. "Are you telling me you're not one of these men?" she asked in a defeated feminine tone.

"I'm not telling you anything. I just wonder about you, that's all. I saw the way you fought. I haven't seen too many women that can fight like that. You've had training, some special training."

"I don't know what you're talking about. I grew up with two older brothers. They taught me how to fight." Her thoughts went to Ricochet and Boomer. The brothers she wished she had.

Enough was enough. She was lying and he didn't have time to play games. "Don't play with me," he snarled, then grabbed hold of her face and squeezed. "I want to know who sent you, and why."

Pain exploded in her face. The skin pulled and tore as he squeezed. "I don't know what you're talking about," she spit through her teeth. It was taking every bit of strength to keep from crying out in pain.

"You want to play games? I have some fun ones to play. I'm sure by the time we're done, I'll have all the information I want." His fingers let go of her face as he stepped back and pulled off his belt.

"What, you think raping me is going to make me tell you something I can't?" *Don't let this happen, don't let this happen* she repeated to herself.

The man laughed then said, "I've never had to rape a woman in my life. They come to me. Besides, that's his pastime, not mine." As he finished speaking, he looped the belt and cracked it down on her injured knee.

A scream tore from her swollen lips. Deep, burning pain radiated up her leg and into her hip. White light flashed behind her eyelids. Her pride wouldn't allow her to

cry, so she snapped back, "You don't rape women. You like to beat them when they're defenseless." She choked, "That doesn't say much for you. Aren't you man enough to fight a woman the fair way?"

The belt came back down again, slapping against her expanding flesh. This time she bit the inside of her lip to keep from screaming. Blood trickled from her mouth as she spoke. "Guess you're no man at all. You're a coward," she spat.

"You even take your beatings like a trained professional. Tell me who sent you."

"No one sent me." The belt cracked on her knee once more. This time no pain surged through her body, numbness replaced it.

"I see this isn't going to do the trick, we'll try something else," he said as he crawled on top of her and straddled her. He moved his face until it was just inches away from hers. Through the slits in her eyes, she could see precisely where he was. He pulled a small packet from his pants pocket and opened it. "Let's see how you like having salt poured into your eyes. I bet you talk then."

Anger poured through every vein in her body. As he leaned forward to open her eyes, she lunged forward with her mouth open. She felt her teeth sink into soft flesh and bit down until she felt her teeth meet. Simultaneously, she jerked the numb leg as hard as she could and pulled her ankle free of the chain. When he bolted backward, she pulled her leg from under him and planted her foot between his legs. Wheezing and gasping filled the dark dingy room. He was still lying on top of her, so she took the opportunity and planted her foot once more in the soft fleshy spot between his legs. With one leg free now, she felt the chains go slack and was able to pull her other leg free.

Her whole body numb from the adrenaline coursing through her veins, she kicked and pulled, positioning him for a chokehold with her legs. When he realized both her legs were free, he rolled from the cot and fell to the floor. Blood spewed from his mouth, his lip dangling on his chin like a piece of partially eaten flesh from a horror movie.

"You bitch!" he whined, rolling on the floor. His stomach heaved as his body reacted to the two blows he'd received in the crotch. Dragging himself to the door, he pulled it open and crawled up the stairs. He needed to get outside into the fresh air. He didn't want the others to know he'd been down there with her and he needed to see how much damage had been done to his face. A quick glance into the living room told him they were all still sleeping, so he stumbled outside.

* * * * *

"We have a visitor," Ricochet whispered in his radio. "And he don't look too good."

"Kong, you up to paying him a visit?" Walt asked.

"My pleasure," Kong replied, then bolted toward the house. His movements were fast, quiet and precise. The man's head was bent toward the ground so he didn't see the blur that was racing toward him.

As Kong approached, the man doubled over and started toretch. Kong circled his arm around his abdomen and dragged him toward the treeline. Once hidden from view of the house, the man felt his body slam against a tree trunk. His vision was blurry, his eyes watery from the immense pain and throbbing in his groin. His breath rushed from his lungs on impact with the tree.

"Fuck." His eyes strained to focus on the face that was inches away from his. "What..."

"No talking. You listen to me and you listen good. There's a woman inside that house. I want her back." Kong was careful to keep his voice low, but his anger was clear in his tone. Still struggling to focus his eyes, the man stared at the stranger's face.

"Who are you?" he asked as blood ran down his chin and throat.

"I can be your worst fucking nightmare if you don't start telling me about the woman." His own vision blurred from rage and fear, Kong didn't notice the state of the man's face. The man's eyes turned hard and cold.

"Who the hell are you people? Did they send you in to take me down with the cell?"

His words seeped into Kong's brain. "You're an inside man. Undercover."

The two glared at each other a few moments, both trying to size up the situation.

"Ask him who his superior is," Walt whispered in Kong's ear.

"Who's your superior?" Kong growled.

"My superior is myself," the man responded.

"He's government," Walt acknowledged.

"You're sure?"

"It's code," Walt told him.

Kong released some of the pressure on the man's body. "Tell me where she is."

"First, you tell me who you are. I've worked too long and hard to let this operation go down because of vigilantes."

"Tell him we're only here to get Sam," Walt instructed.

"I don't give a damn about your operation. I'm only interested in the woman. I'll ask one more time. Where is she?" Kong was losing his patience, he could feel time running out.

From the look on the large man's face, he was being truthful. "She's inside. You don't work for the government do you? This isn't about the terrorist cell is it?"

"No. She stumbled onto this. I'm here to make sure she comes home alive," Kong told him as he started looking at the damage on the man's face.

"That bitch is trained and trained well. You must work for someone," the man said as he placed his finger on his tattered lip.

"What happened to your face?" His bitch comment about Sam put Kong's back up. Did she do this to him?

"I was trying to question her, find out who she was and what she was doing here. The little bitch bit my face and kicked me in the balls, twice," he said rubbing himself.

A small smile slid across Kong's mouth, briefly. She couldn't be too bad off if she was able to inflict that kind of damage. Then realization hit him. He must have been using torture tactics on her for her to react so violently. Kong pressed his forearm across the man's throat, cutting off his air supply.

"What did you do to her?"

"Nothing," the man gasped.

"You must have done something, or she wouldn't have tried to rip your face off like that."

Kong's vision began to blur again. His pulse quickened. "Is she still alive?"

"Yeah, yeah, she's still alive. At least she was when I left her." The man's face was turning blue, his words hard to make out.

"Don't kill him Kong. We need him." Walt's voice was calm, stern and just what Kong needed to make him release some of the pressure on the man's throat. "Ask him what the plan is. Ask him how much time we have before his men move in."

"How much time before your men show up?" Kong hissed between his teeth.

"They're waiting for my call. They'll be here inside twenty minutes and have this place surrounded. Orders are to take as many alive as possible."

"Did you get that?" Kong asked into his radio.

"Yeah. Give me a minute," Walt responded.

"How many of you are there?" the man asked looking around the woods.

"That's none of your concern. Where is she in the house?"

"Basement. If you want her before Rayburn gets his hands on her, you'll have to move fast. I've seen what his women look like when he's finished with them. It's not pretty."

Blood roared through Kong's ears, his breathing became heavy at the thought of Sam being used like her mother. "What about you?" he asked. "How much damage did you inflict?"

"Look man." The man could feel the pressure increasing on his throat again. He reached into his pocket and pulled a small knife out. This man was going to kill him when he found out what he'd done. "I was only doing my job. You know how that works," he stammered.

"Yeah, I know exactly how that works." Before Kong could fist his hand and drive it into the man's already bloody face he felt the cold steel of a knife slide into his

stomach. Anger, fear, adrenaline, the picture of Sam's smiling face all kept him from stepping away from the man and dropping to the ground.

When the pressure didn't let up on his throat, he tilted the knife upwards and jabbed further into his gut. "No one's blowing two years of my hard work. Especially on some half-dead bitch," the man snarled.

Kong felt his muscles give out and his knees wobbled enough to give the man time to side away from the tree. When he was free, he bolted further into the woods. He needed to make his call, he needed to get his men there now and end this before everything went to hell.

Ricochet watched as Kong dropped to his knees and grabbed his gut. "Man down. Man down. That bastard stabbed Kong."

"Can you see him Ricochet? Can you get a shot at him?" Boomer asked.

"Negative. He's hiding like scared little girl behind a tree."

"I'm okay." Kong spoke into his radio. "She's in the basement of the house. If he calls his team, they'll come in here and take down anything that moves, including us. I need to get to her, now."

"Negative Kong. You're injured. Boomer and I will go in." Walt didn't like the eerie calm in Kong's voice. He didn't know how badly the man was hurt, but it was going to take a fully able man to go into that house and bring her out.

"With all due respect Sir, I love that woman and I'm bringing her out." Kong looked up and saw a bright white light appear before him. Walt's protests over the radio were nothing more than an annoying buzz in his ears.

He watched as the white light took on the form of a woman. Although transparent, her features were clear. She was the spitting image of Sam.

Time is running out. She needs your help now. The woman spoke, then reached out her hand. *Come, I'll show you how to get inside the building.*

Walt was still shouting orders over the radio, so Kong reached up and pulled his earpiece from his head.

He didn't need Walt now. Searing pain blasted through his abdomen as he stood, but Kong clenched his jaw and forced himself to his feet. The ghostly woman waited patiently as he staggered toward her.

She led him through the thick woods toward the back of the house. When they were directly behind the building, she stopped and pointed toward a window that was boarded up. *You will be able to get through there when all the wood is removed. You must hurry, he's waking,* she told him with concern in her eyes.

With a nod of understanding, Kong continued to stagger toward the house. Every movement he made caused a fierce stabbing pain to tear through his body. He didn't care. He didn't care if he lived or died. All he cared about was getting Sam.

Dropping to his knees in front of the window, he took the deepest breath he could without passing out, then began ripping the boards away from the window. The flesh

on his fingers tore and bled as he pried apart the planks. He worked mechanically, seeing nothing but Sam's face, hearing nothing but Sam's laugh.

Inside Rayburn, the devil himself, stirred from his drunken sleep. He glanced around the room and took stock of his men. None stirred. He rose from his chair and stretched, then scratched at his crotch. It was time to relieve himself of the alcohol that had processed through his system and now filled his bladder.

Staggering toward the bathroom, he noticed one man was missing. Shrugging to himself, he stepped into the bathroom and sighed as he drained his bladder. The missing man must be in one of the other rooms, sleeping off his booze like the others.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Grunting as he pulled the last board from the window, Kong nearly fell through the opening as his body slumped forward. "Keep it together," he muttered to himself, then looked into the darkness. The room was pitch black and only a small ray of light entered around his large frame blocking the opening at the window.

Sam lay still and listened as the sound of splintering wood echoed through the room. What was happening? Was that bastard coming back to punish her, to finally kill her? As each plank was removed, she heard grunting and moaning. It almost sounded like someone was injured, in pain. She cursed her swollen eyes because she needed to see what was happening.

With agonizing effort Kong lowered himself through the window and into the dark room. He waited until his eyes adjusted to darkness, then looked for Sam. He could hear breathing, but couldn't see anything.

Follow my light.

Kong straightened his spine as the voice of the woman in the woods echoed in his head. A small orb of light floated before him and then moved to the side of the room. Kong followed, his feet shuffling across the dirt floor. When the light came to a stop, he looked down and dropped to his knees.

His breath whooshed from his lungs at the sight of her. "Sam," he gasped. "Oh God baby." Tears rolled down his face as his brain absorbed her injuries. His hands hovered inches above her, wanting to touch her, but afraid of the pain his touch would bring.

Sam held her breath as she listened to the shuffling feet come toward her. Her feet were free, but the horrendous pain had returned to her knee. She only had one leg to fight with and that wasn't going to do her much good. Her body stiffened as she waited for what was to come.

Then she heard it. A voice she thought she'd never hear again.

"Mark?" she whispered, afraid that her mind was playing tricks on her.

"I'm here baby. I'm taking you home." He surveyed the rest of her body, his hand clenching when he saw her wrists and knee. "Tell me where you hurt. I don't want to hurt you any more."

"Everywhere." She could hear the mixture of anger and sadness in his voice when he spoke.

"Why are you here?" she asked, waiting, hoping once again for him to tell her his feelings.

"Cannon called and said you were missing. He asked Boomer and Ricochet to find you."

Kong studied the shackles. Their long chains were only twisted around the cot frame. All he had to do was get them untwisted and she would be free from the cot.

As Kong worked, Sam asked, "Boomer and Ricochet? He asked them to find me?"

"Yeah, your uncle isn't happy with me, so I invited myself along. Sam, you have to help me here. I need you to turn toward your right so I can pull the chain around the leg."

"Sure, no problem." Once again, disappointment cut through her heart. He felt obligated to help her. He still had no feelings for her. When she rolled to her right side, she had to bite the inside of her lip again to keep from crying out in pain. She didn't want him feeling any sorrier for her than he already did.

The chain pulled around the leg of the cot without any problem and loosened the pressure on her wrists. "Okay, now the other side," he told her and moved to lift the cot and free the chains.

When he lifted this time, his vision blurred and cold sweat seeped from his forehead. He'd lost too much blood. He had to get her out of the house before he lost consciousness.

"Can you stand?" he asked weakly.

"I don't think so. I think my knee is busted up pretty bad."

Sweat poured down between his shoulders as he fought the blackness pulling at him. "Okay, we have a slight problem then. See honey, I can't get out of here, so you're going to have to crawl out that window on your own. Your uncle, Boomer and Ricochet are out there in the woods. Once you're out the window, I'll radio them to come and get you," he said fumbling with the ear piece that still hung around his neck. His words were slurring, his vision fading.

"What do you mean you can't get out of here? Are you hurt?" Dear God, no. She could tell by the way he was talking something was wrong, but she could barely see him. She lifted her hands to his face and felt his clammy skin. "What happened?"

"That's not important. Come on honey, let's get you to that window before we get company."

The two leaned on each other as they made their way to the window. All he had to do was make sure she was through it then he could close his eyes.

* * * * *

Rayburn took a quick look around the upstairs rooms of the house for his missing soldier, but he was nowhere to be found. A silent alarm rang throughout his head. Downstairs, he thought to himself.

He must be downstairs with the woman. Anger welled up inside him. She was his. No one was to touch her. He fumbled his way to the basement door and opened it. He could hear grunts and moans, fueling his anger.

He put his foot on the first step and fell, twisting his ankle. He roared in pain before pulling himself up again. Damn it, he was still too drunk to walk straight, he should never have drunk so much.

Sam and Kong heard the yell from the upper basement door. Sam was pulling herself up to the window frame when she heard it and froze. Kong accepted his pain and used it to give one last thrust, which pushed her through the window opening. When her weight left his body, he staggered and dropped to the floor.

"Mark, come on, I'll pull you up. You can't stay down there," she whispered down to him.

"I can't babe. I'm done."

"Like hell you are," she hissed back at him.

Kong pulled his radio to his mouth. "Boomer, she's out. Behind the house. You have to help her," His breath was coming in short pants now, his life draining. "She's hurt bad buddy."

"Roger, on my way." Boomer's legs pumped hard and fast as he made his way to the back of the house. He knew Kong was in trouble, but he had to move Sam first, then he could help Kong.

"Talk to me buddy," Ricochet said into his radio. "How bad are you?"

"Bad," Kong whispered in response. "You guys have to take care of her for me."

Walt monitored the conversation as he watched for the agent that stabbed Kong. He could see him slinking through the trees toward the road. Walt maneuvered so he could intercept him, then crouched and waited. When the man stepped in front of him, Walt placed his pistol in the middle of his forehead.

"Give me one good reason not to scatter your brains all over the ground." Walt's voice was calm, cool and deadly.

The agent froze, his eyes wide, his skin pale. The bleeding from his lip had begun to slow, but now oozed faster because his heart was racing. "What do you want?" he asked. "Just tell me what you want."

"You called your team?"

"Yeah, yeah I called them." Blood dripped from his ragged lip.

"Good, then we'll wait for them. When they get here, you'll tell them you stabbed a man from the elite forces and tortured one of the government's top rescue agents, who happens to be my niece." Walt would see to it that this man paid for what he did to Sam and Kong.

"Elite forces? Rescue agent? Holy shit!" The agent's face paled more. "I didn't know. I swear, I didn't know," he stammered.

"Take me to where you're meeting your team," Walt ordered.

As the two men walked, Walt holding his gun to the man's head, he spoke into his radio.

"Ricochet, I've got the mole. Keep your eyes on the team and let me know what's happening."

"Roger that," Ricochet responded. "Talk to me Boomer. What's happening?"

Boomer found Sam leaning into the basement window. "Come on Sam, we have to get out of here," he said wrapping his arm around her stomach and dragging her toward the trees.

"Mark's in there. Someone's coming. We can't leave him there," she pleaded as she let Boomer drag her off. Once they were tucked in the safety of the trees, Boomer looked at her. His stomach clenched, then rolled at the sight of her face. Her eyes were completely swollen shut, her nose was huge and her lips looked like they had been injected with too much collagen. Her wrists were still bound by the shackles and her leg was enormous.

"Please Boomer, get him out." Tears slipped from the slits in her eyes and rolled down her puffy cheeks.

* * * * *

Inside the house, Rayburn had made his way to the bottom door of the basement. He threw the door open and looked around. The cot was empty, the boarded up window was now open and the room was quiet. As he limped toward the window Kong reached out and pulled at his gimpy ankle. The man didn't have time to scream. His body hit the dirt floor with a loud thud.

Outside, Walt was waiting for the government agents to arrive. His hostage reached inside his pants and pulled his phone from his pocket. He had rigged the house with explosives that very morning. A backup plan in case the terrorists barricaded themselves inside the house. All he had to do was dial the correct number into the phone and boom, most of his problems would be over.

Walt watched the man's face intently, never noticing the man's hands moving. He was listening to his radio, catching bits and pieces of the banter that was going on between Ricochet and Boomer. From what he could pick up, Boomer had Sam away from the house and had then returned for Kong. Ricochet was leaving his tree and making his way to them. By the time Walt noticed the phone in the man's hand, it was too late.

Kong reached over with weak hands and wrapped them around the man's throat. He cursed at not having enough strength to hold him properly. "Going somewhere?" he gasped.

Rayburn clawed at the hands around his neck. "I'll kill you," he growled.

"Too late. I'm already dead."

"Like hell you are," came that familiar deep, slow voice. Boomer dropped down inside the dark room and kicked Rayburn in the head. His flailing feet and clawing hands stopped moving.

"Let's get you outta here."

Kong wasn't as big as Boomer, but he was a dead weight, making it hard to move him. "Come on buddy, you have to help me here." When he felt Kong try and pull himself up, he lifted with his legs and heaved him to the window. Grunts came from Boomer as he shoved and heaved his friend through the open window.

Without warning, the weight was lifted from him. Ricochet had arrived in time to grab Kong by the shoulders and pull him the rest of the way out. When he was out and on the ground, Ricochet reached in and pulled Boomer through.

Each grabbing an arm, they began to drag Kong away from the house. All hell broke loose as they took their third step. The explosion shook the ground, the force threw them toward the treeline and debris rain down on them like confetti. Fire licked at the trees and singed everything within its reach.

Boomer raised his head and looked behind him. There was nothing but flaming timbers and intense heat. No one inside would have survived. Then it hit him. They had weapons stored inside the house. Bombs, ammunition. It wouldn't take long for the heat to affect them. Ricochet lay on the ground, knocked unconscious from the force of the explosion.

Boomer scrambled to his feet and dragged Kong to where he left Sam. "Sam, stay here with Lowe. I have to get Ricochet. Keep your head down low. Those bombs inside the house are going to blow any minute."

Sam couldn't see Kong, but she could feel him lying next to her. "Go Boomer. Bring Ricochet back," she shouted over the roar of the fire.

When he was gone, she reached out and felt Kong's face. It was cold and wet. She placed a finger under his nose and felt the faint breeze of his breath. Relief swept over her, he was still alive. "Mark, listen to me. You can't die, stay with me."

She jerked when she felt his hand lightly wrap around her wrist. "Sam, I..." His words were interrupted as two bright lights surrounded them. Kong struggled to sit up, but his weakened condition wouldn't allow it. Sam could see the light as it seeped between her swollen eyes. To ensure a better view, she reached up with her free hand and pulled one eye open. The two watched as the light swirled around them then stopped and began to form.

Two figures emerged from the light. "Mom, Dad?" Sam gasped.

Before them stood her parents, smiling and holding hands. *It's over honey, her mother said. You've ended the reign of a very brutal man. Both of you. It's time for your happiness now.*

Sam's mouth went dry. Her tongue stuck to the roof of her mouth when she opened it. "I don't understand."

The last eighteen years have been working up to this Sam, her father said. It was your path to find our killers. You've followed that path and now you've come to the end.

"What happens now?" Disbelief, confusion and loss mixed inside her chest as she spoke. Did they mean she was finished with her work? Or that it was time for her to leave this Earth? Had they come to take her with them?

Her mother felt her turmoil and smiled. *Anything you want to happen honey. You still have choices to make. What you do with the rest of your life is up to you.*

Sam glanced down at Kong. His lips were white, his skin growing colder by the second. He was what she wanted, him, for the rest of her life. But his life was fading. Frantically she looked back to her mother and father.

Help is coming, her father said. We're very proud of you Samantha. Your work has saved countless lives. We couldn't be more proud of you.

We'll always be with you Sam. Her mother blew her a kiss then the two figures faded back into the brilliant white light. Warmth and love covered them as the light encompassed them before lifting up to the treetops.

"I like them," Kong whispered. Unable to hold his leaden eyes open any longer, Kong allowed them to close and welcomed the darkness that engulfed him. The hand that was wrapped around Sam's wrist slid to his chest.

Boomer helped a winded and injured Ricochet scramble into the trees just as another explosion ripped through the air.

Boomer held Sam down close to the ground, while Ricochet leaned his battered body over Kong's body, shielding him from the blast. When the final explosion had settled, the two men stood and backed away. They needed to find help for them, now.

Sam cried then. Fat tears that plopped on Kong's chest and ran over his side. It was all a nightmare she thought. She'd wake up and none of it would be real. Kong would still be out of her life, she'd visit Uncle Walt and begin to prepare for another mission and the last couple of days would never have happened.

Lying her head on his chest, she cried until no more tears would come. It would be the last time, she promised herself. The last time she cried for a man she loved, because she would never allow her heart to be stolen and broken again.

* * * * *

Walt held Sam's hand as she was wheeled to the awaiting ambulance. When he reached her she was withdrawn and despondent. When he pulled her from Kong's chest, she wrapped herself around him and clung. It reminded him of when she was a child and had nightmares. He would hold her and tell her stories until she drifted back to sleep.

He watched as Kong was loaded into another ambulance by frantic EMTs. They swarmed over him, pushing needles into his arms and pumping air into his lungs. Boomer and Ricochet stood nearby watching, their faces blank and their eyes moist. He felt for the two men, he knew what it was like to lose a friend and not be able to do anything about it.

When Kong was finally loaded, the ambulance sped away throwing dirt and rocks into the air.

Boomer and Ricochet walked slowly toward him, their shoulders hunched in defeat. When they reached him, they both looked down at Sam.

"They're both being taken to the same hospital?" Boomer asked.

Walt nodded, then leaned down and kissed the top of Sam's head. "I'll follow you to the hospital honey." When she didn't respond, he squeezed her hand, then moved away to let her be loaded into another ambulance.

"Lowe's condition?" he asked.

"He's still alive. Barely, but still alive. They think they got to him in time," Boomer said, his voice cracking. He cleared his throat and asked, "What about the agent? What will happen to him?"

Walt looked over to where the federal agents were clustered. An EMT was administering first aid to the man's mouth, while other agents were questioning him. "I'm not sure yet. But I'll make sure they know what happened here today. He knew what he was doing. Once I told him Kong was elite forces, he panicked. I guess he figured if he blew the house while they were still inside, there wouldn't be any evidence to back me up."

"Son of a bitch doesn't deserve his badge," Ricochet grumbled.

"Oh, don't worry," Walt sneered. "I'll do everything I can to have it taken from him."

Silence stretched between the three then Walt reached out his hand. "Thank you, for everything."

"She's our friend," Boomer said as he shook Walt's hand.

"Yeah, she's one cool lady," Ricochet said, smiling.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Two weeks later

Sweat beaded on Sam's forehead as she stretched her stiff, achy muscles. Two weeks of lying in bed was enough. The swelling in her face had gone away, leaving nothing behind but small cuts and yellowed skin. Her wrists were healing nicely. Scabs had formed where once her skin had been torn. Her knee was the only problem she had now. It wasn't broken, just hyper-extended from a kick she'd taken during her fight. Some exercises would strengthen it and soon she would be back to work again.

"Hey baby girl." Ricochet came strutting into her hospital room with a huge smile on his face. Sam couldn't help smiling back. He was wearing his traditional blue jeans, hiker boots and brightly colored t-shirt and looked good. She'd asked him once why he wore such bright shirts. His response made her laugh. "When ya gotta wear camo all the time, ya take advantage of the times ya don't have to, besides, the ladies like it."

"Hey yourself. Where's Boomer?" she asked wiping the sweat from her brow.

"Oh, he'll be along shortly. He had another visit to make."

Sam knew who he was visiting. She'd asked Boomer only once how Mark was doing. When he told her the damage wasn't nearly as bad as everyone thought, she scolded herself for asking. Then he told her the damage wasn't bad, but the amount of blood he lost was severe. It was a miracle he'd survived. Then she scolded herself for being callous.

"I hear you're being sprung today," Ricochet said intruding on her thoughts.

"That's right. I can't wait to get home. Uncle Walt's flying me home. I guess he thinks I can't make the ride," she said rolling her eyes. Walt had sat by her bedside every day talking. Her depression was only lifted when Boomer and Ricochet started making daily visits. They played poker, told stories and snuck junk food in to her. Neither man offered information about Mark and she didn't ask. If she was going to be able to move on, she couldn't cling to a fantasy.

"I think he's just anxious to get you home." The low, slow voice drifted in the room from the doorway. He'd been in Kong's room, two doors down, delivering a package that Kong had asked him to pick up.

"Hey Boomer. Come to see me off?" she asked tossing the last of her belongings into her pack.

"Sure did. I'm glad you're going home," he lowered his eyes as he spoke.

Sam wondered if Mark had a setback, but bit her tongue to stop from asking. "So, what's next for you guys? Back to the salt mines so to speak?"

The two men looked at each other and smiled. "Somethin' like that," Ricochet answered.

"Don't be strangers okay. Give me a call, or stop in and see me if you're in the area." Tears began to well in her eyes at the thought of not seeing them everyday. Her chest felt heavy from the loss of two friends.

"I don't think that'll be a problem," Boomer said smiling.

"What's not a problem?" Walt's voice came from behind Boomer.

"I just told them not to be strangers Uncle Walt," she said turning her back to them so they wouldn't see her tears.

"Oh." He smiled at the two men, then walked over and kissed Sam on the top of the head.

"Ready to go?"

"More than ready," she said rubbing her eyes. Then she turned, walked over to Ricochet and hugged him tightly. "I'll miss you guys." Boomer held his arms open to her as she walked over to him. She couldn't stop the tears this time, they rolled down her cheeks as she hugged him.

"Don't worry Sam, we'll see each other again," he said lifting her off her feet.

"God, I need a hot bubble bath," she said wiping the tears from her eyes.

"Oh, that reminds me." Boomer reached out into the hallway and picked up a wrapped box.

"This is for you," he said handing it to her.

"You shouldn't have guys, but thanks anyway," she said as she started to unwrap it.

"We didn't." Ricochet was still sitting with a huge grin on his face.

"Oh. Well, who did?" When Boomer looked away, she had her answer. She tossed the box into her pack. "Ready Uncle Walt?"

Goodbyes were said once more then she walked out of the hospital and never looked back. The feeling that she left something behind nagged at her the entire thirty-minute flight home. Finally she just told herself to get over it, whatever it was she could replace it. The sight of her house as Walt pulled into the driveway relaxed her. Home. There was truly no place like home.

"Oh my God, I forgot all about my Mustang," she said with a horrified look on her face.

"Don't worry Sam I've taken care of it. You'll have it tomorrow." Walt left the car and pulled her pack from the backseat. He followed her to the door and unlocked it.

"Aren't you coming in?" she asked when he stood at the door.

"No. You need some time to yourself. Call me if you need anything," he yelled back at her as he walked away.

"Okay," she muttered to herself watching him drive away.

When she tossed her pack on the couch, the box Boomer had given her fell out. She eyed it for a few seconds, then snatched it up and opened it. Inside was a bottle of freesia bubble bath. Sam opened the top and drew the fragrance deep into her lungs. She never got tired of the fragrance. Then she spotted the note in the box and picked it up carefully, like it was snake ready to strike. Figuring it was better to get it over with, she opened it and read.

Dear Sam,

I hope you enjoy your bubble bath. I figure it's the first thing you'll do when you get home. I hope you like the kind I picked out. It's the same thing I smelled in the desert that day. Remember? I've never been able to shake it. Anyway, Boomer has kept me up to date on your progress and I'm glad you're doing so well. My greatest fear was that the world would lose such a caring person. Not to mention, I would lose you. I guess I already have, but it would have been worse if you, well, you know. I hope someday you'll give me the chance to explain things to you. Take care of yourself and make sure you soak for a long time in the bubbles. I'll be thinking of you sunk in the water up to your lovely neck.

Mark

Sam crumpled the note in her hand. She wouldn't cry she told herself. She had promised she had cried for the last time over him. Tossing the note aside, she walked to the bathroom and began drawing water. The scent filled the bathroom as bubbles grew inside the tub. She wiped her mind clear of thoughts and sank to her neck in the water. Home.

When morning broke, the sun was shining so brightly Sam had to walk outside and stand in it. The warmth on her skin made her smile. It felt like a new beginning, a fresh start. When she heard the neighborhood kids walking to the bus stop, she turned and watched them. Funny, she thought. Most of them were carrying umbrellas and on such a beautiful day. Sam shrugged her shoulders and walked back into the house.

The light on her answering machine was blinking, so with hesitation, she punched the play button.

"Hi Sam, I guess you're not home. I just wanted to call and tell you that your agent friend, you know the one? Well, he's been put on desk duty. They say they can't take his badge away from him, because technically, he was doing his job, but the fact that he tried to blow you guys up and cover his tracks was enough to make them doubt his mental state. So he's a desk jockey for a while. I just thought you'd like to know."

Sam seethed at the thought of that little man and what he'd done to her. Well, she'd just have to train harder and come up with new ways to defend herself if she ever came up against those circumstances again. Never ever did she want to feel that helpless and pitiful again. Renewed with a new sense of purpose, she went to the bedroom and pulled a tank top and an old pair of her black pants from her drawer and slid them on. The pants were snug, giving her yet another reason to train harder. Two weeks on her back had made her gain a few pounds.

Realizing she had no car to drive, she called a cab and grabbed some toast as she waited.

Her eye kept wandering over to the crumpled note she'd tossed on the couch last night. Anger flared in the pit of her stomach. She promised herself she wouldn't do this, it was over. He didn't care for her the way she cared for him. Holding on would only bring her misery. The honk of a car horn outside forced her to push it all aside. Today she would start strengthening her muscles again and move forward.

Kong was walking out of Cannon's office when he saw the cab pull up and Sam get out. His breath seized in his lungs as he watched her walk to the training field. He knew she wouldn't stay down long, it wasn't her nature. Slipping out of sight, he watched where she went. He had vowed he'd give her some time, but now that he saw her, he couldn't wait any longer. So he used his training and made himself invisible among the buildings and followed her.

Pain surged up Sam's knee as she stretched it out. It wasn't going to be easy, but she had to keep it working. Letting it atrophy would end her career. Clenching her jaw through the pain, she started jogging into the small patch of woods. The sun had disappeared behind heavy dark clouds, but the air was thick with humidity. She loved August.

A snapping twig behind her caused her to stop and listen. Was someone following her? There wasn't supposed to be anyone on the field today. A rustle in the decaying leaves that were scattered on the ground made her pulses quicken. Foolishness, she told herself. Probably some small animal scurrying about. She began to jog again, this time she could hear footfalls slightly off rhythm from hers.

This wasn't an animal, it was human and following her. Someone wanted a game, so she decided to give him one. Darting off to her left, she slid into a crawl space formed by large rocks.

Listening, she could tell the person was only a few feet away from where she hid. She picked up a pebble and tossed it out in front of her. As she suspected, the person stepped further toward her.

Like a large cat, she sprang from her hiding spot and kicked out with her good leg. Contact was made and a loud thud shook the small saplings that surrounded her.

Sam looked down at the intruder and gasped. Kong was rolling from side to side clutching his stomach. Regret replaced the satisfaction she was feeling. "Oh God, are you all right?" she asked holding her hand over her mouth.

"Nothing a few stitches won't fix," he gasped with a smile.

His perfect smile and his sexy eyes only made her furious. "Serves you right. You shouldn't be sneaking around like the rat you are." Turning, she started to jog away. How dare he show his face here, intrude on her private time.

Kong pulled himself to his feet and gave chase. When he was within arm's length, he reached out and touched her shoulder. He knew she would react and planned his next move carefully.

Sam grabbed for his hand, only to have his other one grab hers. Using his weight, he pushed her against a nearby tree.

"I just want to talk," he said looking down into eyes that were filled with rage. "I need to talk to you. Please."

His voice was soft, gentle and pleading. She shouldn't listen to him. It would only give her more heartache. But God, he felt so right pressed up against her. "There's nothing to say. We had our time together. It's over."

"Not by a long shot Sam." Rain began to fall. Small drops that only annoyed rather than soaked. "You need to know something about me and you're going to hear me out."

Sam decided this had gone on long enough. Using her good leg, she gave him a shot to his shin. When he loosened his hold, she wiggled out from between him and the tree. Kong reached out and grabbed for her. His fingers slid into the waist of her pants, he pulled hard, jerking her down to the ground.

She wasn't going to make this easy, so he fell to his knees and wrapped his large arms around her body, pinning her arms to her torso. "I didn't grow up like you did, having parents that loved me. Mine constantly told me I was mistake. My father loved telling me how they tried to kill me when my mother was pregnant. That the only reason they kept me was that it meant more money from the state every month."

Sam stiffened as he talked. She didn't want to know this, didn't want to hear his life story. It would cause her heart to break again.

"When they died I never grieved. I just felt relief. No more beatings, no more watching them snort drugs up their noses and no more women walking around the trailer high, drunk and naked.

"I was sent to one foster home after another, not once feeling anything for the people that took care of me—probably because most of them felt nothing for me. It was just extra money they received each month for taking care of some poor orphan."

"See Sam, I never knew what love was. I'd never felt it in my entire life. You were loved, you know how to love. I don't." He nestled his face in her hair, breathing in her scent, feeling her soft hair brush against his skin. He felt her body start to relax and sink into his.

"When you came along, well, let's say I wasn't sure about you at first. How someone could be so caring and so tough at the same time blew me away. Then, the more I got to know you, the more I liked you. I started feeling things that I had never felt before in my life and it scared me."

The rain began to fall more heavily, soaking their hair and their clothes. But Sam felt warm and protected wrapped in his arms. His story saddened her, yet sent chills up her spine. She listened, waiting to hear the rest. He was holding her heart in his hands. The rest of what he told her could fill it, or crush it.

"I ran Sam. I'm ashamed to admit it, but I ran scared. Every morning I thought of you, every night my arms ached to hold you. My dreams were filled with the sound of your voice and pictures of your face. I didn't understand it, because it had never

happened before.” He started gently rocking them back and forth. His need for her to understand was overwhelming—he couldn’t lose her again.

“When Cannon called and said you were missing, the Earth dropped out from under me. I got physically sick. I can’t even begin to tell you the feelings that swamped me. Boomer laid into me. He sees himself as your big brother.”

Sam smiled, she felt the same way about him and Ricochet. The family she never got the chance to have. Them feeling the same way about her filled empty spaces in her soul.

“God Sam, Boomer had to tell me it was love. I just had no idea. Can you understand that? As pathetic as it sounds, I didn’t know what love was.” His voice broke with his last words.

Sam leaned deeper into his body when his arms relaxed their hold on her. She wasn’t going anywhere now. “I had no idea,” she said softly. “Mark, if you had just told me.”

“Your uncle didn’t want me coming along to find you. He only wanted Boomer and Ricochet. I understood that, knew he hated me, but I couldn’t stay behind. I threw my chance away once, I wasn’t throwing it away again.” His arms tightened around her again. “When I saw you chained to that damn cot, beaten and bruised, I nearly died right there.”

Sam turned in his arms, placed herself between his legs and held his face. “You almost did Mark. You almost died on me. Do you have any idea how scared I was?” The water running through his short dark hair and over his eyes made her want him in a way she never wanted anything before.

“I didn’t care if I lived. I just had to make sure you were safe. That’s all that was important.”

A smile lit in his eyes. “Besides, we were only two rooms away from each other for the last two weeks and you never came to check on me.”

She dropped her hand away from his face and turned her head in shame. All the hateful feelings she felt toward him were for nothing. He’d loved her the whole time, but didn’t know it. Would he ever be able to forgive her?

His hand gripped her chin with a gentleness that stirred her body. Turning her back toward him he continued, “It’s all right though. Late at night, I would sneak down to your room and watch you sleep. The nurses kept me filled in on your progress and Boomer and Ricochet would tell me about the card games and things you talked about. I figured it was all I deserved.”

Sam’s body began to heat. She swore she could hear her skin sizzle as the rain poured down over her. She didn’t think it possible, but she loved him more now than she did a month ago. Her eyes slid to his mouth, those lips that could send her flying to heaven. She leaned forward and softly brushed hers over his.

His large hands cupped her face and pulled her away. He looked into her gray eyes and saw desire burning deep within. "There's one more thing I have to tell you." Acceptance spread across his face. "I resigned from the army."

Sam physically reacted, her head jerking back like she'd been slapped. "You did? Why?"

"There was nothing left for me there. Everything I wanted is here." His thumbs wiped rain away from her cheeks as he continued to gaze into her eyes. "Your uncle offered us jobs at W&S. I accepted."

Sam's eyes darted around his face, searching for some kind of sign that said he was joking. All she saw was hope. Hope that she would accept him. "Us?"

"Yeah, Boomer and Ricochet resigned too. We're all working for W&S now."

Chapter Twenty-Seven

A slow smile spread across Sam's face. Her heart filled to overflowing, squeezing her chest. Pushing her lips against his, she forced him back onto the ground. Her body spread across his. This was it, her happiness had finally come.

Thank you, she repeated over and over inside her head as she rained kisses over his face.

I didn't understand before, but it all makes sense now. A laugh escaped her throat.

"What's so funny?" Kong asked trying to capture her busy mouth with his.

"It all makes sense now," she laughed.

"What does?" His hands were busy pulling her tank top from her pants, trying to get his hands on her soft, tempting flesh.

"Why it kept urging me to talk to you. Tell you about myself. Why it let you see it. Don't you see?" Her breath was heavy as she spoke, her own hands eager to find bare flesh.

"No," he muttered as his mouth closed over her shoulder.

"We were meant to be together. God!" she yelled when his teeth bit into her skin. Fire flared where his mouth worked, her body hummed. "That first day, the day I laid you out on your back I knew something was different about you. I just couldn't put my finger on it." Her words came in pants as his mouth moved from her shoulder, around her neck.

"I knew it too. When you straddled me during our round in the tent." He panted, his hands sliding down inside the back of her pants and cupping her buttocks. "I was so hard with you sitting on me like that. That's never happened before. Not with a woman I don't know." He pulled her closer to him, pressing her against the shaft that was growing inside his pants.

Sam gasped when he pulled her up his body then yanked her tank top down, exposing her breasts. When his mouth closed around her nipple, she lost all the air in her body. "Aahh. When I thought you were off fucking that woman in Afghanistan, I was sure I would lose my mind."

Her words sliced through his heart causing more pain than the knife that was thrust into his gut. He rolled her onto her back and looked down into her face. "I won't lie," he said. "I thought if I did, it would somehow, I don't know, show me that what I was feeling for you wasn't real." He watched her chest heave with every breath she took. "I couldn't. I couldn't even stand to be near her and the thought of touching her made me sick. I knew I was in trouble, but I didn't know how much."

Wrapping her arm around the back of his neck, she pulled his face down to hers. When their mouths were only a breath apart, she stopped him. "I wanted to twist her blonde head off her shoulders when she walked into that room. Every time I looked at her, I saw you touching her. One warning Lowe," she panted. "Touch another woman again and it will be your neck I twist off."

She crushed his mouth against hers. Her hands hastily worked at pulling his t-shirt up, then moved to the zipper of his pants. She wanted him, needed him deep inside her. Touching her in places only he could reach.

Pulling his mouth away from hers, he said, "I swear to you Sam, to you, to your family, to your guide above, that I will never need or love anyone the way I need and love you." That said he took her breast in his mouth again. The moan she sighed sent heat into his groin. The rain that poured over them was forgotten, only the two of them existed.

When her fingers finally maneuvered the button loose on his pants, she reached inside and cupped him. A smile bloomed on her lips, she would never get tired of feeling the weight of his erection in her hands. It was for her and always would be. That she knew.

He felt himself grow as her hand touched him. It amazed him that she could affect him so quickly. As her hand moved up and down the front of his boxers, he ached with need. Pulling his mouth away from her breast, he hastily unbuttoned and unzipped her trademark black pants.

Looking down at her boots, he groaned. Sam laughed out loud as he unlaced them with speed and jerked them from her feet. "We shouldn't do this out here in the pouring rain," he grumbled yanking her pants off.

"Oh yes we should. The last time I stood in the pouring rain, it was to watch you leave me."

She pulled his pants and boxers down over his hips and felt fire burn in the pit of her stomach as his erection sprang out. "I never thought I would be able to enjoy a rainy day again." She felt him quiver as she ran her tongue up his thigh. "But this will make up for it."

Kong kicked the cumbersome clothing away, glad to be free of it. He looked down at her, half naked, wet with rain, fire burning in her eyes. How could he have ever walked away from her? She was a gift, something to make up for the nonexistent love in his early life.

With wonder and awe in his eyes, he knelt down beside her. "I love you Samantha Cannon Wells. I promise I will love you until my last breath." His hand cupped her cheek as he spoke the word he had never once said to another living soul in his entire life.

The importance of this moment wasn't lost on Sam. She knew now that he'd never used the word idly. He had never professed it in the heat of the moment with any other

woman, or said it to appease a woman that stepped into the part of mother for him. She was his first, his only and his last love.

Turning her face into his large hand, she kissed his palm. "I love you Mark and always will, even after my last breath." When she looked back into his face, she watched as a tear slid from his eye and tumbled down his cheek. "Let me show you how much I love you."

Knee to knee they stared into each other's souls. Sam placed his hand between her breasts and pressed it tightly against her skin. "Feel it? For so many years it was empty, now it's full. You did that."

When he looked away, unable to accept the compliment it was meant to be, she decided it was time to lighten things up. "Now it's time to fill me somewhere else."

Her comment caused his head to snap back around. The devilish smile on her face fanned the flames that were burning deep inside him. He felt his own smile spread across his face, then moved his hand from between her breasts. The palm of his hand rested over her nipple and he felt it harden and push against his skin. The time for words was over, now it was time for flesh. Sam hoped he had one last square pouch in his wallet.

Again he leaned forward and kissed her shoulder, his teeth scraping against her skin. When she turned her head to give him better access, he took it. His mouth slid up her neck to her ear. Hot breath caused goose bumps to appear where the moisture of his mouth had trailed. While his mouth was busy teasing her neck, his hands claimed her round plush breasts, kneading them, rolling her nipples into tight little peaks.

Sam reached out and held him in the palms of her hands. Two could play this game. Placing her palms on either side of his erection, she rolled him between her hands. Up and down she rolled his growing flesh. When his hands tightened on her breasts and his teeth nipped harder into her neck, she gasped and chuckled with satisfaction.

Lying her down in the wet leaves that covered the ground, he pushed her legs apart, then slid his hand between her legs. He groaned when he felt how hot and wet she was, ready to take him in. He lowered his head to that sweet warm spot and softly blew. Her hands grasped at the ground as she cried out. She throbbed with desire as his breath danced across her small nub. When his lips touched her, her back arched as the world shattered around her. She floated and drifted as her body shook with spasms. Sure she couldn't possibly react again so soon, she reached for him. But he wasn't done. Rising to his knees, he pulled her up and positioned her on his thighs. His erection ached as it stretched to an unbearable length. Quickly tolling on a condom from out of his pocket, he lifted her by the hips, placed her over him and lowered her. When his head touched her outer lips, he moaned aloud. Sam helped guide him until he pushed and stretched her tight canal. She let him set the pace enjoying the fullness he gave her. Once he was deep inside and her body accustomed to his size, she wrapped her legs around his waist and held onto his shoulders. Strong arms lifted and lowered her, slowly at first, then gradually with speed. Sam felt herself climbing again, surprised at

her own quick response. They panted with thick heavy breath, staring into each other's eyes as they rose ever higher to the point of pure ecstasy.

His dark eyes seemed to turn almost black as his climax neared. She'd often wondered what they would look like filled with desire, now she knew. And she'd see it for the rest of her life.

Sam couldn't hold back any longer. She threw her head back and screamed his name as her body burst with sensations beyond anything she'd ever felt before. Her vision dimmed then bright light exploded in her eyes. Her breath caught in her lungs, as he continued his frantic pace.

Kong's blood pounded as he felt her muscles clench around him, trying desperately to pull him in deeper. The more he thrust into her, the harder they clenched until he could no longer hold back. He felt the release in his heart first, an explosion inside his chest. All he could do was surrender to it and let it flow from his lungs with a deep, long growl. That was followed by most powerful explosion inside her. He could feel himself pump his essence uncontrollably into her satiny walls.

He held her down tightly over him, afraid that she would somehow drift away and buried his face into her neck and let his body continue its never-ending release. When the throbbing slowed, he felt a chill run down his spine and lightness in his chest. This was how it was supposed to be, this glorious need. Not something to fear, but something to cherish.

Running her hands through his hair, Sam smiled, her face turned up toward the falling rain.

"I think every time it rains, we should come out here and do this."

"It's a date." His voice was muffled with his face pressed into her neck. "For the rest of our lives."

About the Author

Robin Leigh Miller lives in Central Pennsylvania with her wonderful husband, three children, and two German Shepherd Dogs.

A retired dirt track driver, Robin now gets her adrenaline fix by putting her characters through their paces.

Robin welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her author bio page at www.cerridwenpress.com.

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