



“Roxanne St. Claire touches off a bold new series with this taut, complex and intelligent page-turner, skillfully blending deep romance with labyrinthine mystery and hard-boiled action. Readers will thrill to this dynamic tale and its nonstop action, sweet and sexy romance, lively characters, and celebration of family and forgiveness.”

- Publishers Weekly

**The following short story
is a free read prequel to EDGE OF SIGHT.**

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“St. Claire has become the go-to gal for romantic suspense. Rip-roaring fun, gripping intensity and sizzling passion span the pages of Edge of Sight.”

- 4.5 Stars from Romantic Times Magazine

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TAKEN TO THE EDGE

A Prequel to *EDGE OF SIGHT*

by

Roxanne St. Claire

The last thing Samantha Fairchild wanted to do on a Friday night after a week like she'd had was head downstairs to a party. But Vivi wasn't accepting excuses.

"I know you had a shitty day in the advertising cubes, Sam." Party noise in the background almost obliterated Vivi's voice over the phone, but her exasperation came through. "I *know* all you want to do is have a B&B."

Sam smiled at their inside joke. "A beer 'n' bath sounds so good. I wore those damn Michael Kors platforms which only added to my misery. And trust me, the client never noticed my feet while he was tearing the proposed campaign to shreds and making the entire Millennium Marketing creative department look like whipped dogs."

"But you're a junior account manager, Sam. The creative issue isn't your fault."

"Trust me, I could feel that promotion to *senior* junior account manager slip away the moment the client uttered the words "agency review" during his tirade." Sam sighed. "I'm just not up for a party, Viv."

"It's casual," she insisted. "Family, neighbors, a few people from the *Bullet*. Please, Sam. I promised...them you'd be here."

"*Them?*" Like Sam didn't know who "them" was. "Who do you think you're kidding?"

Vivi just laughed, not even trying to deny the truth. "He's only here for three weeks, Sam," she said in a whisper. "Then it's wheels up and back to Iraq. Can I help it if I want you to meet Zach? I know you two would hit it off."

How did she know that? Nothing Vivi had said about her twin brother had appealed to Sam. An Army Ranger, reported to have a sizeable ego and a penchant for getting in trouble, Zach Angelino didn't sound like Sam's kind of guy. Although since she'd started working at the ad agency a few

years ago, Sam didn't really have a guy of *any* kind, just a job that chewed her up and spit her out in small pieces.

Plus, she couldn't help imagining spiky-haired, nose-studded Vivi in a male form when she pictured Zach. Deliciously funky on Vivi, but on a guy? No, thanks.

"I'll meet him some other time, Viv. I really have --"

A burst of laughter in the background cut Sam off. "I gotta go, Sam. Just, please. For me? Half an hour? I'll cook you dinner every night next week. My Uncle Nino's meatball recipe is to die for," she added in a temptress's voice.

"Listen, let me take a shower and then--"

"Cool. See you soon." Vivi clicked off before Sam could finish her sentence.

"—I'll decide if I want to come," she said into thin air, closing the cell phone. "Why do I even bother to fight that woman?"

One hot shower and an ice cold Sam Adams later and she actually braved high heels again, the only feasible choice with straight-legged jeans and a low-cut black halter top.

Giving her hair a final fluff, she snagged her purse and considered lip gloss. No, sorry, army guy. The cleavage

would have to be femme fatale enough to convince Vivi that Sam had given this her best shot.

Grabbing a bottle of pinot grigio from the fridge to add to Vivi's festivities, she slipped into the hall and down the stairs to apartment 414. Just as she raised her hand to knock, the din of a party in full swing, and 80's classic rock rolled out as the door opened.

A man looked down at her, tall, broad, dark and...imposing. He stood stone still and completely silent, filling the doorway, not even a hint of a smile pulling at his generous lips. Lips, Sam noticed, that were surrounded by the shadow of a day or two's worth of whiskers. His hair wasn't much longer than his beard growth, but so thick and so dark it almost rivaled his eyes.

Those were fringed with an unfair amount of lashes, topped with thick brows, and glinting with...interest.

"Well, if it isn't the elusive upstairs neighbor come to do some damage." His gaze meandering down just slowly enough to leave a trail of warmth, one corner of his mouth quirking. "Hello, Sammi."

She didn't know where to start with a comeback. Elusive? Damage? *Sammi*? But no retort formed in her head because every single cell in her body that called itself female woke up, shook itself off, and came out to play.

"You must be Zach."

For a moment, neither one spoke, or moved. Or maybe breathed.

He couldn't have looked less like his twin sister, and right that minute, Sam couldn't have been happier *not* to be in the bath with a beer. Unless, of course, he climbed in with her. That would be just fine.

#

The moment Samantha Fairchild hit his scope, Zach had one simple thought.

Sex.

There were more responses battling for brain time, but that one took precedence over everything. He wanted her. As soon as humanly possible.

He blocked her with two arms on the door jamb, a move that made her almost take a step backwards. But she held her own and met his gaze.

"Vivi lied to me," he said, already imprinting the image of finger-tickling blonde hair and soul-searching blue eyes onto his memory to be called up at will some night in a filthy Baghdad bunker.

"She told you I wasn't going to show?"

"She told me you were pretty."

One lovely brow arched north, her kissable lips opening to a little "o." "Sorry to disa--"

"She didn't tell me you were gorgeous."

"—point...for you. Nice opening line, Sergeant, is it?"

"Just Zach for tonight."

"And for tomorrow?"

He leaned closer, got a whiff of something that smelled like lemon and heaven and *girl*. "By then you should call me..." *Sex*. It really was his only intelligible thought. "Lover."

Her hand landed right on his chest. "Right now I'd call you optimistic. Can you move so I can come in?"

"I don't think so."

She laughed, just enough to make her deep blue eyes dance and reveal perfect teeth as she held up a bottle of white wine. “I bring gifts.”

Once more he let his gaze fall from her face – where it would be perfectly happy spending a few hours – to the hollow of her throat, to an inviting, soft, feminine valley of breasts. Jesus, where would his mouth begin? “You have plenty of gifts, Sammi. Nicely displayed, too. So, sorry, I can’t let you in.”

She obviously didn’t know whether to laugh or argue, and that made every feature even more alive, and hotter. “Why not?”

He glanced over his shoulder, down the hall where two of Vivi’s journalist-type buddies were deep in conversation, one a player who’d been flirting with someone not even close to this girl’s league.

“Because there are at least three other guys in here who are going to zero in on you, try to lure you into a corner, and talk you into bed. And I really don’t want to kill anyone tonight.”

She leaned a little closer, torturing him with her scent and proximity. “I promise I will not be lured, cornered, or talked into bed,” she whispered. Just as he came an inch closer, she jabbed her elbow into his solar plexus. “By *anybody*. Move it, soldier.”

She ducked under his arm, quick as liquid mercury, then strode right down the hallway behind him. His head swiveled like she had him on a short leash.

Heels clicked. Hips swayed. Hair flounced.
And his boner sprang to life.

He waited until she reached the clowns from Vivi’s office, who, predictably, stopped talking and opened ranks to let her sail through, their gazes locked on her ass.

They didn’t even notice Zach until he was right between them. “Put your tongues away. She’s taken.”

In the doorway of the kitchen, blonde silk swung over bare shoulders as she sliced him with a look. “Excuse me?”

“You heard me.” Very slowly, he smiled, and watched the color rise in her cheeks as she tried not to react. But he knew by the little tremble in her lip, she was his.

It was like they were screaming the word at each other, so loud everything else in the room silenced while they connected with one simple thought.

Sex.

#

“You made it!” Vivi launched her butt off the counter, bouncing on her checkered Vans sneakers, shooting her hands out to reach for Sam. “I knew you’d rally.”

They hugged for a second, then Vivi pulled back, taking the bottle Sam offered. “Thanks. Did you meet --”

A warm, large hand landed on Sam’s bare shoulder, no words to accompany the claim. He didn’t need any, unless he wanted to howl “*Mine!*” at the moon.

Why, for the first time in her life, did such possessiveness turn Sam into a pool of lust from the waist down? This was *crazy*.

“We’ve met,” she said, stealing a look at him and getting flattened by the intensity of his gaze. “You failed to mention your brother is a...”

“Smart ass?” Vivi gave her brother a sly smile, reaching up to squeeze his jaw. “I knew you two had a lot in common.”

Zach raised his free hand, a brown beer bottle nestled in his palm, the label familiar. “Want one?” he asked Sam. “Or are you a wine drinker?”

“I prefer beer,” Sam admitted, reaching for the bottle. “And Sam’s my favorite.”

“Mine, too,” he said, the comment loaded with double entendre.

The glass rim was warm, like his mouth had just been there. She slugged the foamy, bitter liquid to cool the blast of heat that thought generated.

“And now we’ve just shared our first Sam Adams,” he said softly, way too close to her ear. “Here’s to it being the first of many.”

She had to work to swallow the gulp. She did, though, and lowered the bottle slowly, vaguely aware that Vivi was taking in the exchange with a wicked gleam in her dark eyes, black brows raised to her tousled short hair.

“What’s so amusing, Viv?” Sam asked.

“Just how things somehow have a way of working out.” Vivi winked, matchmaker all over her smug little face. Subtle, she wasn’t.

“Vivi! Someone’s at the door!”

She held up a finger and waggled her eyebrows. “Can I leave you two alone for a few minutes?”

“For a few hours,” Zach said, making Vivi laugh as she headed to the door. Instantly, he was closer, the pressure of his hand imperceptibly stronger. “She thinks I’m kidding,”

Sam looked up, challenging herself to remain perfectly steady under the weight of his attention. “She’s told me a lot about you.”

“Like what?” He took a sip of the beer, then held it to her mouth, the move as intimate as a kiss.

Still holding his gaze, she just ran her finger over the round top of the beer, liking that she was touching the spot where his lips just pressed. For the life of her, Sam couldn’t remember what Vivi had said about her brother, but it sure as hell hadn’t been that he was drop dead gorgeous. Or was built like a Roman god. And she’d definitely neglected to mention

his stunning smile and his beautiful black bedroom eyes. And, Lord above, what a mouth. Made for --

“Waiting,” he prompted.

“Thinking,” she shot back.

“About?”

Kissing you. “How much she’d want me to tell you.”

“Vivi and I shared a womb,” he said, managing somehow to get even closer. Sam’s back hit the wall. “And a crazy childhood. We have no secrets. What’s the matter, Sam?”

“You’re cornering me,” she said.

“You like it.”

“Flirt much?”

“I’m not flirting.” One more inch. “But I am cornering.”

There were three or four other people in the kitchen, more in the hall, and a burst of laughter, all competing with Led Zeppelin blaring from the living room. Somehow, nothing mattered outside of this one foot imaginary circle Zach Angelino had managed to trap her in.

She took the beer back for another drink. She had to change the tide here, or she'd be attached to that mouth in about five minutes.

"So, do you like the Army?"

His eyes flickered at the shift in topic, then he shrugged while she sipped.

"Usually," he said, his attention dropping to the corner of her mouth where she felt a drop of beer, zeroing in like he might...lick it off. "Except for three weeks from now, when I fly to Kuwait." He waited a beat, still scrutinizing her face like it was a work of art up for auction and he was making the next bid. "Do you like advertising?"

"Usually," she echoed. "Except for today, when I got annihilated by a client and felt the corporate ladder sway under me."

"You climbing that ladder, Sam?"

"Fraid so."

He smiled, another slow one, with a twinkle in his eye. "Bet the view's nice for the poor schmuck right below you."

She shrugged, digging for a comeback, which was no mean feat in the face of this relentless assault. "I'm too busy stepping on his hands. Is this your second tour of duty?"

"Third. But I do have nineteen more days in the states." He leaned down an inch, a half smile pulling. "How do you want to spend them, Sammi?"

Her knees actually weakened. Like someone had kicked them from behind and threatened her stability. "I'll be working. That's what I do."

"Twenty-four seven?"

"Feels like it sometimes."

He shook his head. "You gotta sleep. Or at least, go to bed."

Good God, he had a gift. "I suppose you plan on joining me there?" Why dance around this?

"Vivi's right," he said, reaching over her head to bracket her with muscular arms again. "You're a smart girl."

"No, Zach, she said smart *ass*. Big difference."

"Your ass is perfection."

She had to laugh. "So's your game, Sergeant. What makes you so sure I'll sleep with you?"

“Because.” He took the bottle, tilting his head back, teasing her with the rise and fall of his Adam’s apple. “It’s inevitable.”

“You.” She pointed at him. “Are arrogant.”

“I’m not arrogant,” he replied. “I’m confident. Big difference. And you want to laugh in my face, push me away, and go tease the losers in the hall? Have at it.”

She didn’t move, pinned by the sheer force of him.

“I thought not,” he said, easing back just a little.

She rooted around her hormone-pickled brain for some common sense. “Look, I hate to break the bad news to you, but *nothing* is inevitable.”

He just grinned, slow and sexy. “That’s where you’re wrong.”

And, deep inside, she just knew he was right. “Will you excuse me, now? I need some air.”

She pushed off the wall and he had no choice but to drop his arm, letting her step away and out of the kitchen.

“Sammi?”

She stopped as he said her name, closing her eyes for a minute. She’d always hated that nickname, except...she liked

the way he said it. Slowly she turned, raising her eyebrows to respond.

“*We* are inevitable.”

###

Zach let her breathe and move into the living room to talk to a few girls she appeared to know. From his spot in the kitchen doorway, he leaned on the jamb and looked beyond the dozen or so people in the room, only one blip on his radar.

“Told you she was all that and a bag of Doritos.”

He didn’t take his eyes off his target. He knew Vivi wore her most self-satisfied smile. “If you like ’em tall, blonde, sexy and smart-mouthed, yeah, you were right.”

“She’s also very special,” Vivi added.

Across the room, Sam laughed at something one of the women said, her gaze drifting across the room to him. Again. Fifth time at least. The eye contact fried the room like an arc of blue-white electricity.

“Very special,” he agreed.

“And she really doesn’t date much.”

“Who said anything about dating?”

As if she heard him, color rose to Sam's cheeks as she attempted to hold her conversation and obviously failed. She didn't have to hear him; their silent communication was loud and clear.

"You can't just sleep with her," Vivi said, elbowing him in the side.

"Who said anything about sleep, either?"

Vivi laughed softly, then stepped in front of him to force his attention on her and not Sam. "I knew you two would spark."

More like ignite. He didn't answer, his attention back on Sam. Like magnets, their eyes just couldn't go anywhere else but on each other. She took a stabilizing breath and returned to her conversation.

"You look like you're about to *eat* her."

He just smiled. "That could be arranged."

"Zach!" Vivi gave him a punch in the stomach. "I thought you guys would enjoy spending some time together. Vertical, not horizontal."

He finally dragged his gaze from Sam to his sister.

"Vivi, your friend is, what, our age?"

"Yeah, she's twenty-seven."

"She's a big girl. She doesn't need you to be her bodyguard."

Vivi huffed a breath. "Just go easy on her. And, oh my God, speaking of bodyguards, did you hear where Johnny Christiano got a job?"

He frowned, thinking of his cousin down in New York, a bull of a guy who could cook like Uncle Nino. "Christiano is one step away from the law. Who gave that hoodlum a job?"

"The Bullet Catchers. Heard of them?"

He snorted softly. "Who hasn't? Every special ops guy in the Army wants to quit the corps and work for that Sharpe woman."

"That business has so much potential, Zach," Vivi said, finally off the subject of how he should stay away from Sam. "When you get out, you should work for her. Although, I understand she's very picky with new hires."

"She took Christiano. She'd be lucky to get me. What's he doing for her, anyway?"

"Making buckets of money, that's what."

"It's not always about money, Vivi."

Sam moved away from the crowd and instantly a guy was on her with a much-too-friendly hand on her shoulder. Zach felt the twinge in his fist, but he squeezed it around the unfinished beer that still tasted like her mouth. “Who’s that prick?”

Vivi looked over her shoulder. “That *prick* is my new boss at the *Bullet*. Please don’t suckerpunch him.”

Just as he was about to relieve the jerk’s hand from Sam’s body, she inched away, her gaze once more flicking to Zach, and this time she winked. Talk about a suckerpunch. He felt the impact down to his heels, rocking him.

She walked across the room toward the hallway. As she passed, they held eye contact and one pretty blonde eyebrow lifted imperceptibly. Message sent and received, Sammi.

She continued on into the hall, and disappeared toward the bathroom.

“scuze me, Vivi.”

“You’re just going to follow her into the bathroom?”

He looked down at his sister, then handed her the almost empty beer bottle. “She just invited me.”

“She didn’t say a word.”

“She didn’t have to.”

#

She left the bathroom door open an inch...so he knew not to knock.

Her heart skipping around wildly, Sam opened her bag and took out her lip gloss, her fingers a little shaky as she opened the tube.

She didn’t know much about Zach Angelino, but she knew this: he’d be in this bathroom in under two minutes. And she’d be here, waiting.

What was wrong with her?

“Nothing,” she mouthed as she dabbed at her lower lip. Nothing was wrong with her. This was a perfectly normal female response to an overdose of testosterone and pheromones, emanating from the single hottest guy she’d seen in years.

In the mirror, her cheeks grew pink and her eyes glinted in anticipation. She couldn’t remember the last time a guy got to her like this. Since college, her life had been nothing but *advertising*. Which was turning out to be miserable.

So why shouldn't she make out with him? Just one kiss.

One long, hot, wet, crazy...

The door creaked, inching open. She leaned back against a towel rack, watching the mirror, waiting for his face to appear.

"Hey," he said softly when their eyes met in the mirror.

"I'm freshening my lip gloss," she said, as though he'd asked if he could come in. As if a guy like Zach would *ask*.

He stepped inside, instantly taking every molecule of air in the room and replacing it with heat. Behind his back, he locked the door. "Lip gloss is a waste of time, Sammi."

Still pressed against the towel rack, she slipped her lower lip under her tongue, tasting the gloss, aware she'd never made it to the top lip. "No one calls me Sammi and lives."

He closed the space between them. "Then it looks like I'm about to die happy."

Attempting to swallow, she looked up at him, his sheer closeness stealing her ability to talk.

"Did you get enough air out there?" he asked.

She nodded, still speechless.

"Good." He slid his hands on her waist, and slowly glided up her sides. With a little pressure, he eased her arms up, like he expected her to reach around his neck. "'Cause I'm about to take your breath away."

He pinned her arms over her head, his eyes scanning her face from top to bottom like he couldn't decide where to start.

The effect was dizzying. She was helpless, vulnerable, exposed. And completely seduced.

He lowered one hand and thumbed her bottom lip, gliding across the slick gloss, his nostrils flaring as each breath grew tighter. Her chest rose and fell, mere inches from his.

He put his thumb to his mouth and slowly ran his tongue over the remnants of her lip gloss, an imperceptible grunt from his throat.

Holy hell...*hot*.

"You ready, Sammi?"

Her body coiled with sexual response. Her nipples hardened, her knees buckled, her toes curled, and her arms grew heavy with the need to wrap around him.

“Cause once we start, sweetheart, we’re not gonna stop.”

She tried to breathe, tried to come up with a quip or a comeback, but all she managed was a powerless gasp. Instantly, his mouth was on hers, trapping that breathe in her lungs, covering her lips, teasing her with the tip of his tongue.

Sweet mother of God, this was a kiss.

Dreamy, wet, and warm, her lips burned and melted at the pressure of his mouth. He tasted like Sam Adams and peppermint, bitter and sweet. She lost her grip on everything but their kiss, a perfect exchange of affection and attraction. Under her feet the world spun away and disappeared.

A low moan from his chest vibrated in hers. The first press of his hips pulsed and pulled her into him. His palm settled on her waist while his thumb brushed under her breast...grazing so close to her nipple she wanted to cry with need.

He angled his head, deepened the kiss, and dragged his hand down her bare arm leaving a billion goosebumps behind. With both hands finally free, she closed her fingers over his

face, whiskers scraping under her palms as she slid her hands into his hair.

Finally, he inched back but she couldn’t open her eyes. Couldn’t come back to earth. She sure as hell couldn’t talk.

Neither could he. When she looked at him, he was staring at her, memorizing her, silent. For a long, endless minute, she stared back at his flawless face.

Zach Angelino, where have you been my whole life?

“I’ve got nineteen nights left. How many can I have, Sammi?” Gruff, raspy, his voice was an unholy baritone that made her blood course and pool and bubble.

“Nineteen nights, Sammi.” He kissed her again, harder this time, his hands gripping her, his palms moving up to capture her breasts. “How many?” he demanded.

She arched, helpless, his erection huge against her stomach. “Nineteen.”

###

Zach didn’t need to open his eyes to know she was gone. The sheets were no longer tangled and pulled to her side, silky hair was no longer brushing his cheeks, the scent of

woman was just a lingering memory, and there was no soft, familiar breath like music in his ear.

He knew the routine now. After a week and a half of waking up in Samantha Fairchild's bed, he was used to her slipping out while he was asleep, covering him generously like she hadn't just spent the night sheet-stealing, and kissing his cheek before puttering about her apartment to get ready for work.

He loved to lie in her bed, hands locked behind his head, and watch her step into precious, lacy underwear, then cover all that sexy skin with something conservative and crisp. A few times he'd managed to get all those corporate clothes right back off again and make her late for work. She hated that. And by hated, he meant she came three times in five minutes.

But then she'd leave to conquer the world of advertising. He'd drink some of her designer coffee, read the *Globe*, then head down to his sister's apartment to pester her while she tried to write an article or interview a source. Then he'd work out, maybe run around the reservoir at Cleveland Circle; although today he had other plans. But mostly he was

waiting...for Sam. When she came home, they got horizontal and happy.

Several times a night.

It wasn't a shitty way to spend his last three weeks in the States. As long as they kept this thing light and sexy, he could kiss her goodbye and, well, kiss her goodbye. And so far everything had been low key and very, very sexy. The goodbye kiss was still another week and a half away.

The snap of a cell phone closing made his eyes pop open.

"I'm going straight to hell." Sam stood in the doorway, wearing nothing but that lacy stuff he'd been thinking about and one extremely sly smile.

He sat up on one elbow to get a better look. "Wear that. The devil will give you special privileges."

"You are the devil."

He grinned and threw the covers back to invite her in. "Offering heaven, not hell."

She took a few steps closer, tapping the cell phone to her cheek playfully. "Don't you want to know my sin?"

"After we commit another one. C'mere, Sammi."

“I lied to my boss.” She bit her lip, eyes sparkling. “I told her I had an emergency.”

He indicated his hard-on, already prominent and ready. “Not a lie. Get over here.”

She laughed, easing onto the bed. “You’re not listening to me, Zach. I’m taking the day off.”

She might as well have said she was moving to the North Pole. “Seriously?”

“Seriously.” She finally curled up next to him. “We have the entire day together. What do you want to do?” She closed greedy fingers over his erection, her touch familiar but still incredible. “Other than the obvious, of course.”

His eyes shuttered as she stroked him, automatically rocking into her. Instantly she melted into his arms, closing her eyes and lifting her chin to give him access to that sweet spot he loved on her throat.

Like they’d been lovers for years instead of days, they barely needed to speak to tell each other what they wanted.

Then he remembered Nino. He stopped mid-lick to lift his head. “I’m going to Sudbury today to see my uncle.”

“I’ll go...” Her voice trailed off, but she didn’t have to say the rest. *With you.*

He froze a little inside. If he took her to his family’s house, if he walked through that door and introduced her to Uncle Nino...it changed everything. That was not keeping things low key.

She watched his wheels turn, no doubt putting it all together in that razor sharp head of hers.

“Nevermind,” she said quickly, reaching for the phone. “I’ll call Amber back and tell her I solved the emergency.” Something flashed in her eyes...hurt? Disappointment?

How about a reality check? Didn’t she realize that in less than two weeks he’d be boots on the ground in the most dangerous place in the world?

“Don’t do that,” he said, surprising himself by taking the phone and closing it. “You know as well as I do you’ll never steal another day off.”

“Or you could hang with me to day and go to see your uncle tomorrow?”

She was offering him an out. One that would be easier, and safer. No family ties. No chance for Nino to meet Sammi

and make big old Italian eyes behind her back as if to say,
Ragazzino, she's perfect! I smell love in the air!

"Nino is counting on me today," he said. Christ, that sounded pathetic. Why didn't he just take her? Nino would love her. It didn't have to mean...anything.

"You really should spend some time with the rest of your family before..." Once more, she couldn't finish the sentence.

"Before I leave," he said flatly. "No use tiptoeing around it, Sam. I'm going to war in, what? A week and a half?"

A little muscle in her jaw pulsed as she nodded. "All the more reason to go see your uncle."

All the more reason to take her with him. Or not, depending on his perspective. And ever since he first kissed this woman all his perspective seemed to do was...change.

"I want you to come with me," he said gruffly.

She just looked at him.

"I do," he repeated, convincing himself. "Nino will love you." Which, of course, was the problem.

"All right," she said, closing her eyes and sliding a long, bare leg over his. "But first let's celebrate my lying to the boss."

In a space of one touch, one kiss, one moan of helpless surrender, he forgot Nino and Iraq and the calendar. All that mattered was Sam's slick, soft skin. All that mattered was Sam's mouth, trailing a path south to taste every inch of him. All that mattered was the burning hot need that rocked both of them every waking minute.

Sex.

But was that really all that mattered? With this amazing woman who made him laugh and made him...feel things he had no right to feel?

Yes. It had to be, at least until he came back from the war. *If* he came back.

"Hey." Sam's voice pulled him out of the fog, her hair dangling over his body as she looked up at him. "Where'd you go?"

Where was he *about* to go, that was the real question. Truth was, he was the one going to hell.

“I’m just thinking.” He reached down to tunnel his hands in her hair, palming her head, inching her up. “About how much I want to kiss you.”

She crawled up his body, torturing him by dragging herself over every inch along the way. “Then kiss me and stop thinking about anything else.”

Lowering her face, she pressed her mouth over his, making the connection that had become as natural as breathing to them. When her eyes closed, he just kept looking at her.

Forget Baghdad and IEDs and terrorists who lurked around every filthy corner. None of that really bothered him. But this woman? This kiss? This feeling in his gut?

This scared the holy hell out of him. And Nino Rossi would figure that out in about four and half minutes.

###

“And this, child, is what Italy smells like.” Nino Rossi waved the basil leaves under Sam’s nose, his knobby fingers clutching the stems tightly. She inhaled, closing her eyes in appreciation of a scent ten times more pungent than any bag of store-bought herbs, one of a dozen wonderful smells assaulting her in the backyard garden.

“Beautiful,” she agreed.

“Italy,” he repeated, pronouncing the word like it had no middle vowel, his raspy voice an aging, deeper version of Zach’s. Uncle Nino moved around his garden with surprising ease and grace for a man who had to be nearly eighty years old, although Zach had warned her he either didn’t know or wouldn’t admit his actual age.

He looked past Sam to focus his deep brown eyes on Zach, his dark brows furrowing his forehead into a ripple of lines that ran up to a balding head fringed with gray wisps.

“You remember Italy, *ragazzino*?”

Zach shrugged, his hands stuffed into the pockets of khaki pants, his own brow drawn as he ignored the garden to look over the lake that backed into the yard where he’d grown up. Although, Sam had yet to hear him refer to the big colonial where the Rossi family was raised side by side with two Angelino Italian imports as *home*. “Barely,” he admitted. “Haven’t been to Italy in a long time.”

“Too long,” Nino said, bending over to pluck more basil. “Come here, Samantha. Let me show you how to pick the best leaf for the Genovese pasta. Then I’ll teach you how

to make it.” Looking up, he bared yellowed teeth in a teasing smile. “It’s Zaccaria’s favorite.”

“Zaccaria?” She threw a smile at Zach before kneeling. “Is that the Italian version of Zachary?”

“Yes,” Nino confirmed. “And you may call me *pro zio*, which is Italian for Great Uncle. Which, in my case, is redundant.”

She laughed and let him lead her hand to the greenest leaf. Wordlessly, Zach walked past the perimeter of the garden patch and started down the hill toward the lake.

“He seems happy,” Nino said, watching his great nephew. “It’s good.” He nodded, smiling. “Someone like you could keep him alive over there. Give him a reason to come home.”

Her breath caught a little, and she covered by looking over her shoulder at Zach’s powerful silhouette, his shoulders so strong and broad, his hips narrow. Right down to her toes, she felt...everything. Attraction. Desire. Affection. As much as she tried to convince herself otherwise, her feelings had deepened faster and harder than anything she’d ever known.

It had become increasingly difficult to think of Zach as a fun romantic fling.

But she was too smart to admit that to Zach, or this keen old man. Especially when she could practically smell the fear on Zach in bed this morning at the mere thought of her taking the next step and meeting Nino.

Zach Angelino, for whatever reason, wanted to keep this thing...a fling.

“He has plenty of reasons to come home,” she said, busying herself with the basil. “This wonderful family, for one.”

“Ehhh!” Nino waved a hand, then pushed himself up., but needed the hand Sam automatically offered. “He’s never really felt a part of this family.”

“Of course he does,” she replied. “He probably just doesn’t show it like Vivi.”

“When those two were orphaned in Italy,” Nino said. “I was given the greatest responsibility – and one of the greatest joys – of my life. Their mother, Rossella, was my sister’s daughter, and even though I moved to this country long before Rossella was born, she was very important to me.”

Sam listened, the smell of the herbs, the press of the sunshine making his story somehow more poignant.

“When the cancer took her, nine years after her husband had been killed, I should have fought her will and let them stay in their home country.” He blew out a low, sad sigh. “But I didn’t because, frankly, I wanted them here. For Vivi, it was good. She fit into the Rossi family like another one of the kids. For Zach?” He shrugged. “He’s always been on the outside looking in.”

She stole another look at the young man standing lakeside now. “I think he could fit in anywhere, with anyone,” she said. “He’s so confident and capable.”

Nino gave a wry smile. “Don’t be fooled by all that bravado. He lost his father as a baby, and his mother as a child. Now he’s surrounded by death and dying in this war, his own life on the line every time he puts on his boots and picks up a gun.”

“I really don’t know him that well yet,” she admitted.

“All you need to know,” Nino said, placing the basil in her palm and closing her fingers over it. “Is that Zaccaria Angelino is capable of great love. He just doesn’t realize it.”

Her heart stuttered around a little as she smiled at him. “Really, Nino, we just met less than two weeks ago.”

“Great love,” he repeated. “You just have to be patient.”

She turned to look at Zach, who strode up the hill toward them, his hands still in his pockets, his attention riveted on Samantha now. Her whole body warmed at the sight of him, and she knew – just knew – it wasn’t purely a physical reaction. Not for her.

“He’s worth the wait,” Nino said.

“I know that,” she said softly.

“La fidanzata.”

“Excuse me?” The Italian word had gone right by her. “I didn’t understand that.”

But Nino just smiled. “Some day you will.”

###

Over Sam’s head, Zach was only able to see the blue numbers of the alarm clock with one eye. But that was all he needed to watch them progress, minute by minute, second by second, from 3:18 when she finally fell asleep in his arms until now, 4:57.

In three minutes, he would find the strength to separate his hand from the much smaller one he held fisted against his chest. He would lift his head from this pillow and, for the last time, inhale the citrusy scent that always clung to her hair like she'd washed it in lemon juice. He would pull his body away from hers, the imprint of her skin forever in his memory.

And he would go to war, a different man than the one who'd left Baghdad four months ago.

This was never supposed to happen, damn it. The thought made him tighten his grip on Sam's hand and she rustled the sheets, adjusting her body so her backside curved into his stomach even more perfectly.

He wasn't supposed to do anything during this leave but rest and recuperate, readying himself for the toughest assignment he'd ever face. This time he'd be in charge of four squads with the job of supporting Delta ops and Navy SEALs to clean out al-Qaida caves and safe houses. Death around every corner, behind every wall. Death.

He blinked at the clock. 4:59.

Without really moving, he pressed his lips against the cornsilk of her hair, the insane softness of it almost making him shudder.

This wasn't supposed to happen. Sammi with her hair and her wit, with her smartass quips that made him laugh and flat-out sexy mouth that made him come like a freight train without brakes. He'd never known a woman could be so compatible, so comfortable, so...perfect.

Would she wait for him? Of course, he knew the answer—knew it like he knew his name. But...what if he never came home?

The very real possibility weighed on his heart, an anvil of worry. He imagined her counting days on the calendar, giving up dates with perfectly nice guys in order to wait for his infrequent calls, having even less of a life than her life as an advertising exec workaholic afforded her now.

Could he do that to her? Jesus, could he *not*?

He opened his eyes. 5:00.

Time to start the trip that began in an hour and ended God knew when...however many hours it would take to get from here to Benning to Bragg to Frankfurt to Kuwait to...

He hadn't even told her where he was going. And he wouldn't. Not until he got back.

And he would get back, he decided, lurching backward to break the seal that held them with the same force and speed he'd rip a bandage off a wound. She startled at the separation, turning with a sigh.

"Is it time?" she asked, sleepyvoiced.

"Shhh." He kissed her cheek softly. "Go back to sleep. I'm going to take a shower."

Like he weighed a thousand tons, he dragged his body from the bed, heading to the bathroom without even turning on the light. He flipped on the shower water and stepped in while it was still ice cold, the punishing spray needling his skin.

Awake, alert, and clean in under a minute, he twisted the knobs just as the water was starting to warm up. And he froze at the sound of a soft sob from the bed.

He took a step closer, but didn't say anything, his night vision strong enough to see her curled in the bed, her arms around the pillow, her face buried to muffle sound, shoulders shaking as she wept.

This. Damn it, *this*. Was. Not. Supposed. To. Happen.

"I love you, Zach." The words were mumbled, sobbed into the down pillow and ragged with tears. She lifted her head with a gasp, suddenly realizing he was in the room. "Zach?"

"Yeah?"

For a second, silence, then, "Did you hear me?"

He just stood there, dripping, cold, helpless to stop what he never should have started. The least he could do was...not make it worse. Not make promises that some suicide bomber could make damn sure he didn't keep. The least he could do was...lie.

"No. Did you say something?"

She fell back on the pillow. "No."

He dressed quickly, in silence, in uniform. His bag was already packed, and by the door. All that was left was goodbye.

He sat in the only chair, facing the bed to stick his feet in the boots that would, in a few days, march through dust and climb on Humvees and run from exploding devices.

As he tied the laces, he heard the sheets rustle. She was sitting up, the covers wrapped around her, hair everywhere,

legs peeking out from the bottom of the sheet, the first fingers of dawn breaking through the blinds to highlight her beauty.

He took a minute to snap a mental picture. That one would pass some miserable nights in Iraq.

“Zach?”

“Yeah?”

“I love you.”

He just stared at her, knowing what he should say...he should tell her how he felt.

But to tell her that was a contract...and he knew Sam. She'd abide by it. And that would only make her lonely and miserable. He had no right.

“I have to go now,” he said quietly, standing quickly to avoid looking at her, not wanting to see the words hit her heart.

Leaning over her, he kissed the top of her head. She instantly drew back, offering her face, reaching up to his neck and demanding he pull her up. He did, wrapping his arms around her, the rough material of his uniform scratching her delicate skin, but he didn't care.

He squeezed her into him, aching for more than he could ever have, holding her so tight he felt her head collide

with his shoulder. “Sammi. This was not supposed to happen,” he whispered.

She leaned back, her eyes wet with tears. “You called it on the first night.”

“I did?”

“You said it was inevitable.”

“I meant...”

“Shhh.” This time, she put her finger on his mouth to quiet the argument. “I know. But it was inevitable. I love you.”

He kissed her cheek, her nose, her eyes, and finally her mouth. What was inevitable was the enemy, out there just waiting to blast him into oblivion or fire a bullet into his head.

“Will you...call?” she finally asked.

“When I can.” Which would be rarely.

“Email?”

“It's tough over there, with the job I'll be doing.”

She let out a soft laugh, half frustration. “Post card?”

He just smiled, the lump in his throat viciously swollen. “As soon as I get my hands on one.” Son of a bitch, his voice

almost cracked. He hugged her again, his mouth on her forehead. “Sammi...”

“Yes?”

“I...I...”

He could feel her whole body tighten with anticipation.

Say it, Zach. Say it. “I had the best three weeks of my life.”

She sunk a little in his arms. “Yeah. It was fun.”

He kissed her once more, chaste, simple, sweet.

“Goodbye, Zaccaria.”

“Bye.” The lump broke in his throat. He backed away, nodded once, and headed out the door, mentally making the promises he couldn’t make verbally.

When I get back, Sammi. When he got back, he’d change this conversation and make everything right. He’d say the words she wanted to hear, when he got back.

If he got back.

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