

THE IRAQ GENERATION

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Dedicated to Sarah & to Joe

NOTES

The characters in this book are works of fiction. All historical figures and present world leaders mentioned were/are real people, and any information disclosed about them in the novel is accurate. Most places featured do in fact exist, with the rare exception of a few specific streets. The plot is fictional; however, global events that occur past April 2008 are based in historical facts and current conditions. They legitimately “could happen,” so to speak.

Certain illegal and/or questionable behavior witnessed in this novel is not meant to be glorified or endorsed by the author. Such behavior features prominently at times as a necessity of the plotline.

PROLOGUE

"I wish," I announced, "I was an alcoholic."

My photographer raised his red eyebrows over his dirty beer glass. "You mean you're not?"

I considered this as I drained my own glass and signaled the bartender for another of whatever the fuck it was I had been drinking tonight. "Sure, it's very possible, I haven't written a story not half-crocked in ages, but that's not my point. My point is, those lucky bastards have it easy. Junkies too."

He chuckled—my photographer's laugh came as easily in Lebanon as in the States—and humored me. "How do ya figure that?"

"Because," I responded, pausing to light a cigarette, "anytime they finally decide they've had enough of living for that next drink or that next needle, there's a million hotlines for them to call, hundreds of groups for them to get support within walking distance of their houses, rehabs for them to seek shelter—never mind the financial costs of such things, my point is merely that the option is there for some—and numerous pairs of arms waiting to embrace them for even considering stopping. Hell, even those lucky pricks—no pun intended—who can never get enough action have like, nymphos anonymous."

My photographer stroked his chin thoughtfully and waited for me to finish my half-drunken monologue. I shrugged almost helplessly.

"Let's face it, kid," I said softly, "if I decided to quit, there wouldn't be any safety net for me."

He nodded in agreement. "No, probably not. Why, are you thinking about quit—"

Whatever he was about to say was lost as another journalist ran into the hotel bar and grabbed the other two from his network. His words to them were whispered, but every media affiliate in the room knew the meaning anyway.

"Looks like the Lebanese are moving in on the camp," my photographer remarked. "Time to saddle up, boss?"

"Time to saddle up," I agreed with an eager smile I didn't bother to hide as I stood up.

My photographer clinked his glass with mine and we both drained the remainder of our drinks. Colin offered our standard toast, an old journalists' creed.

"Comfort the afflicted."

"Afflict the comfortable," I responded automatically, while what I was actually thinking was, *thank God, time for another hit.*

Hello, my name is Kristen, and I am an adrenalin addict.

PART I FLASHING BEFORE YOUR EYES

Ch. 1

My twin and I watched the panther pace back and forth in his metal cage, transfixed even as our parents tried to shoo us to the next exhibit. Back and forth, back and forth, back and forth—he never slowed for even a moment, his shoulder blades rising and falling in some morbid rhythm beneath his jet black fur. Some unseen hunger seemed to be consuming the panther alive.

“Come on, kids,” our mother called. “Come look at the tigers!”

My brother looked at me, but I was staring at the panther, something breaking in my five-year-old heart. Here, I felt kinship and I didn’t know why.

“But, Mom, the panther,” Jimmy protested as she came back to collect us.

“Oh, honey, don’t worry about him. He’s probably just having a bad day. Maybe he’s sad about something.”

My brother shook his head, his eyes too wise for his face even in those days.

“No,” he said with a calm certainty, “he’s not sad. He’s just like Kristin.”

Fourteen years later, Nirvana’s “Lithium” pummeled me into abrupt consciousness, and I sat up, muttering obscenities under my breath. I was no longer in the zoo, dreaming about events long past, and the space in the bed beside me was warm yet empty.

“...I like it, I’m not gonna crack, I miss you, I’m not gonna crack, I love you, I’m not gonna crack, I kill you, I’m not gonna crack, ye-aah, YEAH--”

The music finally ceased and I glanced around as I reluctantly rubbed the sleep from my eyes. Travis was already across the room, his cheekbones eerily highlighted against his black hair by the glow of his cell phone screen.

“How many fucking times do I have to tell you I resent being woken up by a ‘90s grunge band?” I grumbled at him halfheartedly.

He held up a hand to me, still speaking to whoever was on the other end. There were only two types of people who would call Travis at this hour: the restless drifters he called friends needing a place to crash and his boss calling him to an emergency. There was no way to tell by his facial expression or his short, clipped responses—Travis was nothing if not disturbingly steady in his reactions to all people and situations—but I hoped it was his boss. I didn’t feel like getting dressed if his crew descended on his apartment in a drunken melee.

“Yes. Yes. I can be there in fifteen. See you then.”

Travis snapped his cell phone shut and began rummaging through his drawers without turning the lights on.

“What are you looking for?” I asked, resisting the urge to lie back down.

“Clothes. I think leaving the apartment in my boxers constitutes some sort of misdemeanor,” he chuckled in his slight southern Virginian accent, still rooting aimlessly through his rickety bureau, “even though I look pretty good in ‘em, if I do say so myself.”

“No shit,” I replied acidly, still cranky at being woken up. “I meant what clothes.”

“Oh. Well, why didn’t you say so? My DCFD shirt, and something resembling a clean pair of jeans.”

I yawned. So he was headed to work.

“The shirt’s in your closet, on the shelf. Clean jeans...check the floor of the closet.”

Travis investigated his closet and came out holding the requested shirt and jeans. He ambled over and kissed the top of my head before starting to get dressed.

“Thanks, babe. You know, sometimes I almost think I’d rather you than a housekeeper.”

“Screw you.” I laid back down and pulled the covers back up over me. “Big blaze?”

“Five alarm,” he replied cheerfully. “Some warehouse along the Anacostia is turning into a real nice inferno; two guys from another firehouse already down for the count with smoke inhalation, and another headed for the hospital with a possible broken back.”

“Oh baby,” I teased, “aren’t you scared?”

He finished tying his shoelaces and ruffled my hair.

“Sure, babe. But I’m going to take that fear and feed off of it. Fear gets the blood flowing, kick starts the senses—everything is sharper when you’re afraid.” Travis stood up. “You know it as well as I do—the rush doesn’t mean anything unless it might be your very last.”

It was Travis I was thinking about as a man crumpled to his knees from the force of an AK-47 thrust into the small of his back. I couldn’t hear his individual anguished cry over the chaos, but the expression on his face was enough. I was 22 years old as I stood in Tahrir Square, as the riot-gearred police closed in. The protesters were outnumbered 20 to one, and goddamn, I was afraid—terrified, actually. Travis had been right; every sense was heightened. I noted everything about the scene, jotting it all down in my tiny notebook even though it was already being permanently burned into my mind. The Washington Post had tried to give me a high-tech recorder, tiny enough to fit in a pocket, but I’ve never liked recorders. I thought it made journalists lazy, always looking for sound bites and not paying attention to what their source was actually saying—too much like journalism’s bastard half-brother, broadcast.

Anyway, I was standing in Tahrir Square, covering the chaos that had become Egypt since good old Hosni Mubarak--the "democratically-elected President" of Egypt--had gone to meet Allah. His son, Gamal, had attempted to take power in the resulting power vacuum, but he lacked the power and influence that comes with 30-some years in control that his father had wielded, and the Muslim Brotherhood, previously beaten down, imprisoned, tortured, and outlawed under Hosni, seized their opportunity. Of course, the Muslim Brotherhood had the support of the lower classes, and a chunk of the disaffected youth of the upper classes, but they weren’t strong enough to control the entire country either. So what resulted was an Egypt no one knew what to do with, with the

masses rioting and the army attempting to retake some semblance of control. The only way the Egyptian military knows how to regain order, by the way, is by means of "beat everyone, arrest those who don't run fast enough, torture the ones you arrested, and if you get frustrated enough, just open fire." The chaos, ongoing for the last three months, threatened to destabilize the entire region, a region that was only barely containing what was left of that graveyard of what had once been Iraq. So what was a 22-year-old journalist doing standing in its midst, praying every morning that things would not calm down enough to force her home?

The day Hosni died, I walked myself down to the Washington Post's office and knocked on the door of the foreign editor's tiny and cluttered office. He smiled when he saw me. The editor liked me--I'd applied to the Post for a foreign correspondent job when I graduated, but he had told me I was just too young and inexperienced. He'd offered to get me a job on the Metro desk, but I couldn't stomach the thought of covering local high school basketball games.

"Mubarak's dead," I said by way of introduction. I'd never been one for small talk. Mr. Greene nodded. "So I've been told. What can I do for you?"

"I'm sure I don't need to explain to you what situation that leaves Egypt in, Mr. Greene."

"Well, I'm no Middle East expert, so why don't you tell me what you think," he responded.

I knew he was baiting me, but I took it anyway.

"It's going to explode. There's a massive power vacuum, a surplus of angry jobless young people, a Muslim Brotherhood with a huge following, a regime that has beaten down the people for the last three decades, and a lot of anxious neighbors in a dicey region. If the chaos stays just in Egypt, it'll be a miracle."

Mr. Greene stroked his weathered chin.

"So, you don't think there's any hope, eh? It's going to explode and that's that?"

"Yes. And Americans are going to be interested--Egypt's one of our only allies over there."

"I hate to say it, but I tend to agree with you. But you didn't come all the way down here just to give me a current events analysis."

I shook my head and said, "No, I didn't. I came down here to ask to be sent over there."

He didn't look surprised and sighed.

"What have you been up to since you refused my offer of a Metro job?"

"Bartending," I replied without any shame.

A pained look crossed his face and he said, "What in God's name are you doing bartending? With your talent and education?"

I shrugged. In all honesty, I wasn't really sure either—it was a question I received on a continual basis, and one I generally just joked away. The money was good, the hours were good, and I wasn't sitting behind a desk. I was simply passing the time, and that was what I told Mr. Greene in so many words.

"Waiting for someone to pay for me to go where the action is."

"Why should I send you to Egypt? You're 22 years old, never worked as a journalist, not employed by the Post."

"Because I know Egypt. I know the people, I know the language, I know the situation. I'm probably more qualified than anyone else you have in this office, and I have less to lose."

Mr. Greene took off his glasses and massaged the crease on the bridge of his nose. Then he looked up at me and asked, "But why do you want to go over there? If Egypt is this powder keg you describe, then shouldn't you be running as fast and as far away from it as you can?"

I chewed my lip, debating this question for a moment, and gave him the most honest answer that I could at the time.

"I'm afraid," I replied quietly, "I don't work quite like that."

Three weeks later, I was standing in Cairo International Airport. The tension and fear was so thick in the air that one could almost taste it. I lit a cigarette, took a long drag that was equal parts nicotine and adrenaline, and smiled. Welcome back.

I was at a protest in Egypt once before, in front of the Press Syndicate building, when I was studying here at the American University of Cairo during my junior year of college. That was before Mubarak died, of course, so it was quite a different situation. Back then, it was the beginning of the dying leader's harsh crackdown on his people--in retrospect, it was in attempt to prime the nation for his son's takeover, but we didn't know that at the time. I went to the protest with my Egyptian friend Heba and her little sister, Maha. The government had recently arrested 46 bloggers and some of their family members as well in the middle of the night, ostentatiously on charges like "insulting Islam" and "defaming the president." Egypt was looking more and more like a Cold War-era regime every day. A classmate of Heba's and mine had been among those arrested. Mohamed was a popular, well-liked class clown--no one ever suspected he was a part of the underground blogosphere, which was essentially the only place to get real news and express dissent, the traditional media having long been crippled by censorship and fear.

So the three of us stood eyeing the protesters across the street, backed against the Press Syndicate building by scores of heavily-armed police and soldiers. The armed trucks containing a few hundred more soldiers stretched the length of several blocks, outnumbering the protesters easily 15 to one. Maha slipped her hand into Heba's and joked feebly,

"Man, just picturing Mom and Dad's reaction makes the soldiers seem a whole lot less frightening, huh? They're going to kill us when they find out about this!"

Heba gripped her little sister's hand and we exchanged a look that clearly said, "She shouldn't be here."

Maha was just barely 17, while we were big grown up women at 20. But she said she was going whether we allowed her to come with us or not, and since we couldn't definitively stop her, we figured she was safer with us than by herself. My stomach hurt and my hand slid down my cargo pants to a side pocket, feeling the shape of my passport for reassurance. I was fully aware that the U.S. Embassy wasn't going to come to my rescue if anything happened, but being an American still carried some weight in Egypt at the time, at least with the authorities. Of course, it would be for naught if Heba and Maha were arrested as well, because while I had many flaws, disloyalty wasn't one of them. I wouldn't abandon my friends

"Well then, let's do this."

And with that, we crossed the street, went around the police, and joined the protest. Never one for the spotlight, I headed for the back, but Heba grabbed my hand and pulled me back.

"No, no, we need to stay in the front."

"Are you crazy? If your parents see you in any pictures of this..."

Heba forced a smile and replied, "This isn't about Maha and me. It's about you. The police need to see your face."

"What, so they can fucking call me a *sharmuta*?" I demanded.

Sharmuta meant whore in Arabic, and as a reasonably attractive white woman, it was a word I heard a lot in Cairo.

She shook her head. "No, because you're clearly a foreigner, and they'll assume American. As long as foreigners are here, they'll be hesitant to get violent."

I ran a hand through my bright blond hair and Heba added quickly, "I understand if you don't want to, I mean, I know it's a lot to ask of you and--"

"Heba, shut up. I'm here to do whatever I can to help."

That wasn't entirely true; protesting was only part of the reason I was standing on the Press Syndicate steps that morning. The other was, well, because of my reason for doing most things—it sounded like it held the potential for a rush.

I backtracked to the front of the protest, three inches from the barricades and six from the soldiers, their faces hidden beneath riot helmets and masks. You think you were afraid that time you ran from the cops busting your underage party? Try staring down the muzzle of an AK-47, knowing you can't leave, because the minute you do, your friends are as good as dead, and even if you do stay, you might not be able to protect yourself, let alone them. Afraid is a bit of an understatement. And with the primordial fight or flight reflex sending my adrenaline levels surging, I'd never felt more alive. Like Travis said, it doesn't mean anything unless there's that possibility it might be your last.

I called Heba from Reagan International Airport, waiting for my flight.
Ring....ring...ring...

"'Ello," she answered.

"*Salam waylakum, haibibi*," I returned in Arabic.

"Kristen?" she demanded.

We generally kept in touch via email, given both the cost of calling and my inherent dislike of telephones.

"Hey, Heba," I said, "how are you?"

"I'm fine, *al-hamdu li-lah*," Heba replied, "but Kristen, what is this about? You never call."

Heba was not one for small talk either, which marked her as very odd in a culture where conversational formalities were regarded as indispensable interactions.

"Well, I'm currently in the airport in DC, about to catch a flight to Paris, and from there--"

"You're not coming here, are you?" she interrupted shrilly.

"Hell yes, Paris to Cairo. What, don't you miss me?" I joked.

"Oh *habibi*, you can't! Haven't you been following the news? Things are...tense here, and I think that perhaps they're going to get...worse. It isn't safe for you; now is a terrible time for a visit."

"I know the situation, Heba, and I'm not coming for a visit. I got a job with the Washington Post; they're sending me over to cover things."

Heba sounded more than a little distressed. "For how long?"

"I don't know--as long as it takes, I suppose. I didn't buy a return ticket."

There was another worried sigh, but Heba said, "What time will your flight be in? I'll come get you, you stupid crazy American."

FROM: jp_fawk@mastersoninsurance.com

TO: kristin_wilson@washpost.com

SUBJ: everything ok?

Kris, I hate to be a paranoid freak, but me and Melissa were watching CNN a few minutes ago, and it looks like all hell is breaking loose in Tahrir Square, and I know you live around there. I figure you were/are there covering the rioting, and we just wanted to be sure you were alright. I'm sure you are, it's just that this looks so bad...So just humor my oddness—I guess it's leftover from all those years of smoking the MJ, huh? Which I suppose I shouldn't say in my company email address either--and call or email me and let me know you're alright. I'm just kinda worried. Don't know what I would do if you weren't around to drink with over the holidays, haha. Alright, talk to you soon I'm sure.

---JP

I read the email in surprise. I'd been in Cairo several months at that point, and JP had never so much as raised an eyebrow. What the hell was CNN saying, anyway? To the average reader, it seemed like a perfectly reasonable, calm email, but for JP, it was the equivalent of running around a crowded building screaming "Bomb!" Granted, he had a point—all hell had in fact been breaking loose—but still, it was JP and he was my rock. Maybe Melissa riled him up, I thought, then grinned at the idea of JP's girlfriend actually being concerned enough about me to cause him undue worry. Not knowing how else to respond to such an unusual display, I wrote back lightly:

Re-fucking-lax, dude. I'm fine, everything's fine. CNN always blows everything way out of proportion, all the cable news stations do. Don't watch broadcast, man, stick to print (hint hint: read the Post! Esp. articles by yours truly!). If this is you sans pot, you better start smoking again, dude, work drug tests or no work drug tests. I'll Skype you in a few days, alright? Just to prove this is in fact me writing and not my ghost or something, haha.

Peace, Kristin

PS. Hi Melissa!

I didn't see Heba when I exited the airport terminal. I didn't view this as a problem, given that nothing in Egypt—including Egyptians—really runs on any kind of schedule. I leaned against a wall, lit a cigarette, and studied the people. They were all staring at me, so I saw no reason not to stare right back. It seemed to me that many more women were now wearing the hijab than last time I had been here—over two years ago—and some even had their entire faces covered, which had been an extreme rarity before. I glanced down at my bare forearms and frowned. This had been appropriate for a white non-Muslim woman before, but now...

"Kristen!"

I turned around and saw a veiled young woman grinning.

“Heba?”

She answered my question by throwing her arms around me. “It’s so glad to see you, habibi, it’s been so long. How was your flight? I’m sorry I’m late—the traffic, I’m sure you haven’t forgotten what that’s like. Some things never change, no matter how long you leave. Where are your bags? Is this all you brought?”

I let Heba pelt me with questions while I returned her hug without bothering to answer any of them.

“What’s with the hijab?” I asked when I pulled away. “You didn’t covert without telling me, did you?”

Heba and her family were Copts, a small Christian minority in Egypt. As I looked at her more closely, I saw she was also wearing a long, loose skirt, and a loose tunic—I’d never seen her in anything except jeans, ever.

Heba blushed deeply and shook her head. “No, no. I’ll explain later—some things are not the same here, Kristen. Here, I brought you this, thought you might not realize it was necessary now...”

She handed me a lightweight jacket. I accepted it gratefully, and my scandalous forearms were out of sight.

“You don’t have to veil, at least in the wealthier parts of Cairo...for now.”

Ch. 2

“We already have a Cairo correspondent, you know,” Mr. Greene said. “What makes you think we need you?”

“I know. Her name is Susan Mofosky, and she has two kids under the age of ten living in Cairo with her and her husband. There’s no way in hell she’s staying in the country. I’m willing to bet a lot of money that she put in for a transfer, if she’s not gone already.”

The editor’s bushy white eyebrows went up a few centimeters. “How did you know that?”

I allowed myself a small grin. “I guess you could say I’m one hell of an internet researcher.”

Mr. Greene stopped rearranging the papers on his cluttered desk and looked up at me. “Go write me an article. I don’t care what about—it doesn’t have to be international. You’ve been slinging drinks for the last six months; I want to make sure you’ve still got what it takes.”

My grin widened slightly. “I’ve *always* got what it takes,” I responded before I could stop myself.

He shook his head in exasperation. “Go, go. You’ve got one week. Stop pestering me and make it count.”

I continued smiling as I left the Post building, knowing full well he wanted me over there as much as I did. All I had to do was earn it.

Kiki10: so I need you to do me a favor

Jpm420: sure, shoot

Kiki10: there’s a protest tomorrow

Jpm420: oh fuck no kristen! don't even think about it

Kiki10: shuddup and listen to me. i'm going whether you like it or not, all I need from you is to let someone know if i get into trouble—im sure as hell not telling anyone else from home

Jpm420: shit. youre such a fucking dumbass

Jpm420: why cant you ever torture your frigging boyfriend with this insanity? why does it always have to be me that's gonna have to make the the "she's dead" phone call?

Kiki10: if you don't hear from me in 24hrs, just call my parents, ok? it should be ok, this is just a precaution, ok JP

Kiki10: and i use you instead of travis b/c travis would say, "go and enjoy yourself," and would laugh if i told him to call my parents. i love the bastard, but his idea of a safety net is not having enough money in his bank account to warrant a will. i may be crazy, but i sure as fuck don't want to end up getting ass-raped in some egyptian prison either

Jpm420: lucky fucking me. goddamnit kristen, why are you always trying to get yourself killed

Kiki10: cuz i figure you'll prlly die of stress first dear. so you'll do this for me?

Jpm420: course. i hate you, but you know i have your back

JP was one of my best friends through high school and college, despite his not being an adrenalin addict. On the contrary, JP was a laid-back stoner who liked nothing better than to play his guitar with a joint in his mouth. As perhaps a result of his frequent pot smoking, JP was left in an almost permanently chilled-out state, and he was extremely difficult to upset or rattle. This led to my employing him as my safety net whenever I was about to do something stupid; he didn't worry like other people would. At least, he didn't used to. The older we got, the more he seemed to worry about me, which may have been due to the fact that the older we got, the more risks I took. Watching me jump from an overpass into the river in the middle of the night on a dare in high school, JP could handle. Calling him and telling him I was drunk out of my mind and didn't know where I was in college, JP could handle. Being in the car with me when I did a hundred any chance I could, JP could handle. He had an increasingly hard time while I was in Cairo being the responsible party back in America as I traveled to the most dangerous places I could obtain visas to. That protest at the Press Syndicate almost threw him over the edge, picturing me getting tortured in some Arab prison, and I relaxed for awhile after that to spare his nerves.

But still, two years after that first protest, JP was the first one I called as I walked out of the Washington Post office.

"JP, guess what? I got a job!"

"No shit? No more bar? You mean I'll actually have to start paying for my own drinks?"

"Fuck you. Do you want to know or not?"

"Course, shoot."

"The Washington Post."

"The Post? As in, the place you turned down for a job because they wouldn't let you head back to the sandbox?"

"Mhmm, one and the same."

“So why do you sound so damn chipper? Thought you didn’t want to cover high school sports...” The realization that I wouldn’t have called him to tell him about a high school sports job abruptly hit JP and he groaned loudly. “Aw hell, Kristen. What did you talk them into letting you do?”

“Egypt, here I come,” I responded cheerfully.

“I can’t believe you’re going to put me through this *again*,” JP grumbled, then stopped, realizing it was a lost cause. “Meet me at the pub after work and we’ll talk then. I’m not happy about this, but congratulations anyway.”

“So I was thinking.”

“There’s something new,” Travis’s voice responded from inside the hood of his ’96 Ford pickup—which alone marked him as unusual in a city where everyone drove SUV’s—where he was fooling around with the engine. “Were you thinking about anything in particular, or just allowing neurons to bounce off each other at random?”

I threw a tennis ball I’d found in the gutter outside his apartment building at him. It bounced off his bent back, leaving a muddy splatter on his T-shirt.

“What just hit me? It felt wet.” He hadn’t been concerned enough to stop what he was doing, or even lift his head up from the engine.

I paused for a moment, ignoring his question, then said, “I was thinking we should try coke.”

That got his attention, even faster than I’d anticipated. He was facing me before I had time to blink, wiping his oily hands on his jeans and asking, “What did you just say?”

I swallowed and felt beads of sweat gathered at my hairline roll down my neck. D.C. was brutal in July, but I didn’t pretend the sweat was purely a result of the 100 degree weather. This had to be played very carefully. Here, I was in dangerous territory with Travis. “I said I think maybe we should try cocaine. I mean, you don’t have to—I thought it might be fun for us to do together, but I can do it alone too.”

“The hell you will,” he said. His eyes were flat and his voice was monotone, but having dated him for a year and a half, I knew he was furious. His accent thickened ever so slightly when he was angry; you could judge exactly to what degree by how slowly his words came. His gray eyes went unreadable, as if a shield magically dropped over his brain when he was experiencing a strong emotion.

“Why not? I mean, it’s not like it’s much different than any of the other stuff we’ve done. You run into burning buildings for a living, for God’s sake. Coke’s a risk, and we like risks, remember?” I offered him a smile, but his face didn’t change in the slightest.

“Cocaine is not a risk,” he responded, each word arriving slower than its predecessor. “It’s a goddamn fool thing to do, and I won’t have you even thinking about it. Running into fires—and everything else, for that matter—takes courage, stamina, a sense of your own—and everyone else’s—mortality. Snorting some white powder and hoping you don’t go into cardiac arrest,” he shook his head in disgust, “is stupidity at its height. Don’t ever mention it to me again.”

A muscle was twitching in his jaw as he went back to work on the car, seemingly more forcefully than before. I felt almost bad for doing this to him. The jaw muscle movement meant that I’d done more than just anger him. Now he was shook up, and for a man who lived like Travis, that was damn near impossible to do.

“Well,” I said slowly in a deceptively sweet voice, “I was thinking about something else too.”

“Let me guess,” the accent still heavy enough to reveal his continued anger, “shooting heroin into your eyeballs?”

“No, no. No more talk about hard drugs, I promise. Actually, what I was thinking about was studying abroad this fall, and maybe the spring too. I was thinking maybe going to uh, Cairo.”

I chewed my lip and waited. I lived for and on fear, but this was not the type I relished. Facing down death was one thing; facing down my boyfriend was entirely another.

Silence met my words, and “Cairo” hung in the humid air uncomfortably. The sounds of work ceased from inside the car’s hood, but it was another moment before Travis straightened up.

“Cairo, huh? And why would you want to do that?”

I shrugged. “I don’t know. It’s something new and exciting, I guess, and kind of dangerous. I wanted to go to Beirut, but the program got canceled after the war back in ’06. I have taken Arabic the last two years, you know, and I’m good with languages. I could be fluent if I went overseas. And being fluent in Arabic would open a hell of a lot of doors in crazy fields, or so UMD keeps telling me.” I could see this logical argument hadn’t won him over, as it had my anxious family, and so I reluctantly moved to Plan B. “I’m just kind of...drifting here, I suppose, and I want something different. It could be a new fix, you know, and those are hard to come by.”

Those two sentences got the reaction I was looking for, just the slightest frown that told me he was thinking exactly what I wanted him to. Travis regarded me for several seconds before saying,

“You’re bored? Is that where the drug talk is coming from?”

“Yeah. Yeah, I guess so.” I tried not to smile.

Travis picked up a water bottle and took a long drink. He wiped his mouth on his sleeve and questioned, “If you went to Cairo...you think you’d be less bored? No drugs?”

He was bargaining with me, and that meant he would stay with me if I went.

“No,” I promised, “no drugs. I swear.”

Travis considered this and then nodded. “Alright. Go ride some camels, smoke some shisha, and run around travel advisory zones for a few months. I’ll be here when you get back.” Then he turned back to his mechanic work without another word on the matter.

I was back at my own apartment when my cell phone rang. I glanced at it—Travis—and let it go to voice mail. I had known it wouldn’t be long before he realized he’d been played; Travis had never been book-smart, but he was sharp and not much slipped past him. I had won this time only because I used his one known weakness against him.

“Kristin, you son-of-a-bitch,” his voice told my voice mail, a slight chuckle behind the words, “You played me. You never were planning to do any coke, were you? That was just a smoke screen for Cairo. You knew the cocaine would throw me so badly that I wouldn’t blink when you suggested going to Egypt for eight months. And you were feeling me out to see if I cared enough to stay with you if you did go. I can’t believe you played me like that. Worse yet, I can’t believe I fell for it. I’m losing my edge in my old age. I know you’re there and not picking up the phone, by the way, in case I was pissed

off. Man oh man. Well, touché, kid, touché. This round goes to you. I'll call you tomorrow, but if you think we're having angry make-up sex, you're crazy." There was a pause, and then, "I'm just kidding about that last part. Please remind me that I'm pissed tomorrow." Then he hung up.

I grinned despite the nagging guilt. Travis and I were junkies of slightly different breeds. He didn't grin in the middle of the night when his phone rang, calling him to an emergency, even though he needed the hit. I suspected it was because he was considering the men who would run into danger beside him, the men who didn't enjoy this death-defiance like he did. He once joked that he wished there were more adrenaline addicts in the world, because then we could band together and spare normal people all of the fearful tasks; I didn't think he was kidding, even though I would never call him on it. He had a certain serenity about him, something that told me he had accepted what he was a long time ago and was determined to live around it. I, on the other hand, couldn't stop grinning when anticipation of another rush presented itself. I'd had been described by people as "a ball of nervous energy," "wound a little too tight," and "constantly on edge," which weren't inaccurate descriptions. I had a hard time sitting still and grew restless easily, and people sensed the addiction, even if they couldn't quite name it as such; I knew I unnerved more than a few of the people I'd met. I didn't have Travis' peace, and I didn't suspect I ever would. There wasn't much I wouldn't try if it involved risk, and therefore the suggestion of cocaine hadn't been much of a stretch at all.

Its suggestion, however, hadn't been fair to do to Travis. A majority of the crew he had grown up with—mostly adrenaline junkies themselves—in some tiny mining town in rural Virginia were dead already; three had died from overdoses, probably using the same logic I'd presented to Travis. They were bored with what life had to offer, and artificial rushes were the only alternative left to them. Travis had found the body of the last one facedown in his trailer. He'd been dead for three days. There aren't many elderly adrenaline addicts, and there's good reason for that. What natural selection doesn't handle, we take care of ourselves.

Bridge Day sounds like an awfully innocuous title, I thought to myself as I drove past the "Welcome to West Virginia—Wild and Wonderful" sign on the highway. I had borrowed my brother Jimmy's old Honda without fully explaining my need for it. I never quite *lied* to my twin per se, but unlike JP, Jimmy did ask questions, and did demand answers. So over the years, I had gotten very good at telling him as much truth as possible without either upsetting him or lying to him. To the best of my knowledge, he had never caught on, or perhaps he simply chose not to. I had a hard time believing my brilliant lawyer-to-be brother couldn't recognize *de facto* lies when he saw them, but then again, he had been born with a deep faith in me that I had never deserved.

I made good time from D.C. to Fayetteville, pushing the poor Honda's engine to its thresholds. It's good for the car to be really driven every once and awhile, I reasoned, Jimmy probably never gets it above 55 even on the highway. I didn't mind the long trek from D.C.—say what you will about West Virginia, but goddamn does it have some beautiful scenery—and I loved to drive more than almost anything. I had a hard time paying attention to the road in front of me because I kept staring down at the sparkling river below me. Every now and again, when the odd thought crossed my mind about what I would do with my life if I wasn't so hopelessly addicted to brushing shoulders with

death, I thought that perhaps I could be happy someplace like this. The car's tires crunching on the gravel of my destination's parking lot cut my musings short, and I smiled as I pulled the car into the space directed by the traffic people. I got out of the car, looked around, and smiled. Whether I could be happy elsewhere was irrelevant—I *was* addicted, and right now, I didn't mind that fact one bit.

There's a trick to overcoming both pain and fear. Whenever you're afraid, you just picture the time in your life that you were the most afraid and compare it to the current fear you're feeling. Nine times out of ten, it will be less than that "most afraid" time, and if that's the case, you may as well relax, because you've already survived worse. It works the same way for pain. Slam your hand in the door? That time you broke your arm hurt a lot worse, so what's the point in crying? It's all relative really, and becomes almost irrelevant when you begin to look at things this way. Of course, that one time when the pain or the fear breaks the threshold of the previous worst time, that's when you can get really fucked. I cherish the memories of my fearful and painful times, because without them, I couldn't continually push the limits. I feel such pity for people who have never known true fear or pain, because they haven't really lived.

I bet you're thinking right now that I must come from a very messy, broken home, the product of an abusive childhood, an extremely rough upbringing. I hate to disappoint, but my childhood was ordinary in every way: two loving parents, a twin brother, two little sisters, a little brother, a dog, nice house in the suburbs. It's scary that there are people like me running around out there without any cause for being the way we are, isn't it?

My parents were waiting for me at the Baltimore-Washington Airport with nervous grins on their faces. I saw as I exited the terminal that they'd brought the whole family, despite how many times I'd attempted to nicely tell them I hated these emotional scenes. Christ, I thought as I walked towards them, dirty and exhausted after close to two days of travel, Jimmy's even brought his girlfriend. The only one who was missing was the fucking dog, and he's the one I'd be happiest seeing right now. The old hound never asked me hard questions upon my return; Herbert always just licked my face, happy that I've come back and not caring about the reasons I was gone in the first place.

"Kristen!" several voices said in unison, and then everyone was hugging me, pelting me with questions and comments, and not giving me an instant to breathe.

"How was the flight? You actually made all your connections this time?"

"You've lost weight, haven't you been eating? Well, don't worry, I have a huge family dinner all prepared for you."

"My God, you're so tan! I'm so jealous, I've been going to the tanning salon for a month and you're a hundred times darker than me!"

"We told all your friends that you're home; everyone is so excited to see you, you were gone so long this time. And of course you need to go see your grandparents, and Aunt Jaime and Uncle Nick and—"

"Did you manage to come home with all your bags this time? You must have lost some; this can't be all you have, right? Here, let me carry it for you anyway."

I wanted to scream and get right back on the plane. I was a master of my emotions by this point, however, and politely smiled and answered questions and tried to look

thrilled to be home. Jimmy took my duffel bag and backpack from me and we eventually made our way to the parking lot. My hands were trembling slightly from the nicotine withdraw I was beginning to experience after almost a full day without a cigarette, but I couldn't light up; my parents didn't know I smoked, and even at 23 years old with hundreds of days logged in the most volatile region on the planet, I didn't want to disappoint them. They had taken two cars to get here, and I immediately jumped into Jimmy's Honda. My mother looked slightly crestfallen that I hadn't wanted to ride with them, but I couldn't take another moment without the nicotine. Jimmy glanced at me, noted my hands jammed into my pockets to hide the shaking, and then said to his girlfriend,

"Susan, why don't you go with my parents? They can drop you off on their way home; I know you've got that big test in the morning and I don't want you to have to come all the way back to my family's place and then go back."

That line of reasoning made little sense to anyone who thought about it too much—Jimmy could just as easily drop her off as my parents—but my brother had a way of saying things so rationally and confidently that you never thought to argue or question him. Sure enough, Susan and my parents both nodded and she got into their car. My little sisters and brother looked at us questioningly and Jimmy shooed them towards the SUV. As soon as everyone was in their respective cars and the SUV was pulling out sight, I dug my Marlboro Lights from my purse. Thirty seconds later, I realized I didn't have my lighter, the unfortunate victim of airport security.

"Fuck," I swore.

The only thing worse than not having a cigarette when you need it is having a cigarette and not having a light.

Jimmy reached into his pocket and tossed me a cheap lighter.

"Not that I'm not grateful, but since when do you carry lighters? You haven't started smoking, have you? This shit's bad for you, dude."

Jimmy shook his head as he eased the car into traffic and replied, "Nope, I just figured you'd probably need one getting off the plane, so I stopped at the 7-11 on the way here, allegedly for coffee."

I exhaled my bordering-on-orgasmic first drag and said, "Brother, I love you, have I told you that recently?"

Jimmy laughed. "Yeah, so when you get lung cancer someday, I can be blamed for it. Great!"

I almost offered my standard amused reply, *don't worry, I'll never live to see cancer*, but I stopped myself. That would've been just cruel, and I really did love Jimmy. Of all of my family members, I worried what my getting hurt or killed would do to him most. Jimmy heard my response in my abrupt silence anyway and reached over to mess up my hair.

"Hope you're taking care of yourself over there, Kik," he said quietly.

I smiled at the use of my childhood nickname—Kiki—and that was all we spoke of it the rest of the drive home. Jimmy only pushed for information when he saw the need, and in return, I never punished him with needless painful details. Instead, we talked about his law school classes, about his rec league softball team, about considering a proposal to Susan. I didn't know his soon-to-be fiancée well, as most of their relationship

had taken place while I was abroad, but everyone had told me positive things about her and I had liked her the few times I'd been around her.

"Do you love her, Jim? Like, really love her? And can see yourself spending the rest of your life with her?"

He nodded without a second's hesitation. "Yes. Without a doubt, Kik. There's no one else I would rather be with."

"Then do it. Life's too short to hesitate. Besides, I've never known you to be wrong about a person. You've got a sixth sense for good people, and if you think she's the right one, I'd be willing to bet a million bucks that she is."

Jimmy grinned. "Thanks. Sometimes even I need a little confidence-boosting. Speaking of significant others, how are things with JP?"

I groaned aloud and shook my head. "It's complicated, Jim, so very complicated."

JP and I sat across from each other in a dark little corner in our favorite pub, each a few beers in. He was drinking whiskey on the rocks and I was nursing my fourth Sam Adams, and he was sighing and saying,

"I don't understand why you have to live this way, Kris. You're a helluva writer; just go get a job at the Post and cover the local shit for awhile. It won't kill you. Then go take up some dangerous sport, go base jumping or sky diving or something on weekends. You'll get your kicks and no one will have to worry about your face showing up on al-Jazeera before those crazy fucks cut your head off."

Just drunk enough to be brutally honest, I responded with a chuckle, "Oh come on, JP. You know I'd blow my own head off before I let that happen."

JP tossed back the remainder of his whiskey and said, "Just for that one, you're buying my next drink. So I suppose I'm the lucky man who is going to have know all the stupid dangerous shit you pull before you do it, am I right?"

"You know you wouldn't have it any other way, dear."

A year and a few months later, I was still in Cairo, covering yet another protest. Egypt was out of control by then; the State Department had slapped a nice big "travel advisory" on the country, warning all Americans to avoid it if at all possible. The Post had offered me a nice job at home and Mr. Greene had almost begged me to take it. My parents sent me daily emails to make sure I was alive and I got a frantic phone call from some family member or another every time CNN announced something bad happening in Egypt. Heba repeated tried to get me to go home, even threatening to kick me out of the apartment she, Maha, and I shared. And I could not have been more alive, however temporary that condition may be.

This particular protest was getting rather dicey, rapidly developing into an armed clash between the people and the military. Tears flowed down my cheeks from the tear gas, and my ears were ringing. Something whizzed by my side and shattered the glass window behind me, sending splinters flying through the air. I didn't stop to think of what the whizzing object may have been; I was too busy snapping pictures. I no longer took notes during these chaotic scenes; I didn't need to. All I needed were the photographs to accompany the stories. I was no photographer, with only a few college photography classes under my belt, but I was insane enough to snap pictures during the melee, and, in the minds of the Post editors and the Post readers, that more than made up for it. I giggled

slightly manically every time someone from home asked me who had taken the photos that ran beside my stories. I was giggling maniacally a lot those days, come to think of it. A soldier ran up to me and began gesturing wildly at my camera.

In Arabic, I responded loudly over the noise, "I'm a journalist with the Washington Post; I'm allowed to take photos."

"Give me the camera," he yelled back, "you cannot take pictures!"

He made a grab for my camera and I stepped back, clutching it to myself. This promised to be one of the bloodiest stories coming out of Egypt since I'd be in-country, and I would be damned before I'd let this soldier smash my film into bits. He pointed his gun and abruptly there was an AK two inches from my face. His finger was on the trigger and my camera was still in my hands. Oh man, I thought, JP's going to be pissed that he's going to have to call my parents and tell them I'm dead. Over a fucking camera, goddamn. People always ask me later, on the rare occasion I can be goaded into telling the story, why didn't I just drop the camera? The answer is simply that the thought never occurred to me.

"Camera!" he yelled.

"Fuck you!" I screamed back, "I'm a fucking journalist!"

Then there was a tremendous explosion, louder than I thought my death would sound, and I found myself on the ground. There was warm blood running down my arm, but I certainly didn't feel dead, and jumped to my feet. The soldier had also been on the ground and was just getting up as well. His eyes went, not to me, but to the smoking crater in the middle of the street a few hundred yards from us. Suicide bomber. He took off running towards the scene without a second glance at me. Instead of taking my good fortune and running home, I sprinted after him, to record the story in all its horrific glory. I'd been more afraid than this.

It really was a beautiful fall day, I thought to myself, and it was so nice to be out of the city. D.C. didn't have autumn like this. I really should move here to West Virginia. I could buy a car, and a kayak, and adopt some big dumb mutt, and—

"Are you nervous?" the long-haired young man behind me in line asked.

I glanced back at him and didn't bother to ask him the same question. He was sweating bullets.

"Nah, man, it's going to be a cakewalk. It'll be fine."

"*Cakewalk*?" he practically squeaked. "Dude, are you stoned or something? This is *base-jumping*, not some amusement park ride. It's the most dangerous sport in the world. Some dude *died* at Bridge Day last year, and a bunch more broke bones and shit."

"Statistically speaking, I don't think this is the most dangerous thing you could do. How many have we lost in Iraq? Something close to five thousand now, isn't it? One guy dead from base-jumping, eh—I feel like joining the Marine infantry or something is probably a lot worse for your health."

The young man shook his head and extended his hand. "Goddamn, lady, you're crazy. My name's Ronnie, by the way."

"Kristin," I replied as I shook his hand. "First-timer, huh?"

He nodded with a small embarrassed smile at himself. "Yeah, is it that obvious? You?"

“Only if you don’t count the bridge I jumped from without a ‘shute in high school. And back then, I *was* high, and not exactly sober either. I figure in light of those two facts, my odds are infinitely better today.”

I was rewarded with an actual smile, and some of the tension left Ronnie’s face.

“So, what brings you to Bridge Day?” he asked.

“Actually, believe it or not, for right now, I’m a freelancer with the Washington Post,” I said.

Ronnie’s eyes lit up. “No shit? You going to interview me? Hey though, I thought I saw a Post guy down below the bridge earlier.”

I grinned. “Sure, but he’s not going to jump, now is he? Journalism’s a dog-eat-dog world, and I’m willing to bet my job they’ll run my story over his.”

Ronnie laughed out loud as the person in front of me prepared to make her jump from the railing of the New River Gorge Bridge, almost 900 feet in the air.

“Kind of lucky that you just happened to be a reporter covering Bridge Day and an experienced sky-diver too, huh?”

“I am nothing if not lucky,” I responded.

Ronnie couldn’t have known my grin was due to the fact that for me, “experienced sky-diver” constituted three jumps, exactly 97 below the number I was legally required to have done before being allowed to participate in Bridge Day. The woman before me stepped onto the railing. The number of rules I was breaking hovered somewhere around a dozen or so, and I owed it all to an old friend of Travis’ who happened to be a Bridge Day coordinator. He would certainly lose his job if I lost my life, but Chaz had been the one I’d first gone sky-diving with, and he had a soft spot for me. That, and he too was an addict—he had been the one to kick off the day’s celebrations by being the first jump at dawn. All it had taken for Chaz to pull several strings and get me registered and cleared was a phone call and only a little bit of sweet talking. He understood the need. The woman’s body disappeared from my vision as her feet left the railing and gravity took its course. Of course, it helped that I was very good at getting people to do what I wanted. One second...two seconds...three seconds...Her parachute opened and she began her safe descent back to earth. The crowd of over 200,000 erupted into relieved cheers at the river bank below. My turn. I turned back to Ronnie and extended my hand.

“Good luck, dude, not that you’ll need it. I’ll see you at the bottom for a post-jump interview, eh?”

His face split into a grin. “Shit, sure, definitely! Good luck, Kristin!”

I stepped onto the railing and looked down at the New River snaking below me. My heart somehow made a swift jump into my stomach and my throat simultaneously—which isn’t actually possible, I reflected—and I swallowed terror’s pure metallic taste. You’re about to jump off a *fucking bridge* into a *fucking river* with a *fucking parachute*, my reason reminded me. You’re goddamn right I am, I told it. The air never smelled sweeter and the sun never felt better. My feet left the railing and launched my body into pure nothingness. One second...two seconds...three seconds...How can you get more alive than this?

“You really need to be careful over here, Kristen,” Heba admonished me as she drove me back to her apartment from the airport. “This isn’t the Cairo you left in college.”

“Is that why you’re wearing the hijab now?”

She nodded. “Yes. The harassment just got worse and worse, and we started to hear stories in the less wealthy areas of women who refused to veil being attacked...I just decided it wasn’t worth my life. I hope if I keep wearing it, eventually Maha will decide it’s the best policy too...”

I grinned. Maha was the rebellious sister, bucking convention at any opportunity, whereas Heba was the serious, cautious one. Of course, although it was Maha who was labeled with the “rebellious” title, it had been Heba who had taken over the family when both their parents had been killed in a car accident two years ago. Against every social norm imaginable, she had refused to drop out of school and get married, or move in with extended family in Alexandria. Instead, she had rented a small apartment for her and her little sister, got a job in the computer industry as soon as she graduated, and ensured that Maha would stay in college. She’d never spoken of it, but I knew she faced almost insurmountable pressure from, well, just about everyone because of her decisions.

“Maha refuses to wear it, huh?”

Heba sighed. “Yes, she refuses. So stubborn, that one.” She shot me a dirty look. “Just like you, always trying to get herself into trouble. I wake up every day fearing she’s grown into you, Kristen.”

Heba was prim, proper, and dutiful in every sense of the word, but I sometimes thought she was the strongest person I’d ever known.

“*Insha Allah*,” I replied cheerfully, watching the insanity of Cairo traffic hurtle by my car window. Some things never change.

Now Heba was standing over me as I sank onto the couch, wringing her hands anxiously and fretting.

“My God, Kristen, you look terrible. We heard things were going terribly downtown, but the news isn’t saying anything and I knew you were probably there...are you alright? Is there anything I can get you?”

I waved a hand at her to hush her questions for a few moments—my head felt like it was going to explode—and she gasped,

“Kristen, you’re bleeding!”

I glanced dully at my upper arm, coated in drying blood, and shrugged. “Suicide bomber,” was all I offered by way of explanation.

Heba gasped again and then hurried into the kitchen, presumably to get something to deal with my arm. In the meantime, Maha came through the door, looking as dirty and exhausted as I felt.

She saw me and mouthed, “Heba?”

I pointed to the kitchen, and she nodded and put her finger to her lips for my silence. Then she crept to her room to wash away the signs of her having been at the protest before Heba could get upset. I said nothing and she was back in the living room, clean and smiling now, as Heba returned holding a wet cloth and a first aid kit. I remained silent as they greeted each other with a traditional kiss and silent as Maha lied through her teeth about her trip to the City Stars Mall with friends. At Maha’s age, I had

been regularly playing a metaphorical game of Russian Roulette with my life every weekend just for the rush. At least Maha had a cause to risk herself for, so who was I to say anything? Heba probably would have strenuously disagreed, which was why I never opened her eyes to the secret life her baby sister was living. Your family's worry is the single biggest burden to carry when you live your life a few breaths away from death; keeping them in the dark as long as possible is the kindest thing you can do for them.

Heba cleaned up my arm for me—a four inch gash down the inside my upper arm that definitely needed stitches and just as definitely would never receive them—and I wrote my story with a cigarette dangling from my lips after a few beers. I emailed it, along with the best pictures, to my editor as soon as I was finished, smiling a bit to myself at his reaction if he knew that I wrote most of my stories under the influence. Although, Ed had been a combat reporter before eventually settling down at his editor's desk, so maybe he wouldn't be so surprised. His office was practically wallpapered with photos from some of the hottest spots of the second half of the 20th century: Somalia, Sudan, Cambodia, Vietnam, Soviet-era Afghanistan, amongst half a dozen others, though he rarely spoke of the things he'd seen in those places.

I had one more beer—Stella, Egypt's only beer, which I had grown to love for lack of anything better to drink—for good measure, and then stumbled off to bed. Tomorrow would require a follow-up story on the fallout from today, but for now, there would be dreamless sleep. I never had nightmares back in those days; the day never haunted me in my sleep. I just consistently woke up with a clenched jaw and hands for reasons unbeknownst to me.

The sound of my cell phone jarred me out of my sleep and I clumsily reached it, knocking several things off my bedside table in the process.

“Ello,” I yawned into the phone.

“Kristen?? Is that you?” I recognized JP's voice, albeit considerably more uptight sounding than usual.

“Yeah, JP, it's me. It's like five fucking a.m. here, what do you want?”

“What do I want? *What do I want?*” he demanded, his voice sounding slightly hysterical, “I want to string you up, that's what I want! Why didn't you fucking *call me?*”

Abruptly I remembered telling JP the evening before about the protest and its potential for violence. And my promise to call him when I returned.

“Shit,” I groaned, “you didn't call my family, did you?”

“No, I've just called you about a million goddamn times tonight! I've been up all fucking night with my phone in my hand, Kristen!”

I glanced at my phone's screen and winced. Eight missed calls from JP.

“Sorry, JP. It was a bad day and I just came back and passed out.”

“Sorry?? That's the best you've got, Kristen? Jesus Christ, I thought you were *dead!* Do you have any idea how fucking sca—“ his voice abruptly broke off, muttering angrily to himself.

If I hadn't known better, I'd have sworn he was trying not to cry...I'd never seen JP like this, ever.

“Guess I'll have to find someone else to make my safety net, huh, JP?” I joked gently, except that I wasn't joking at all. I couldn't do this to him anymore.

I called my family from Heathrow Airport in London. Ring ring ring...

“Kristen?” my mother’s anxious voice answered, “Is everything alright?” It had been awhile since I’d called home, and even longer since I’d been back.

“Hey Mom. Yeah, everything’s fine. Can you put Jimmy on for me please?”

It was Sunday. Everyone had family dinner together on Sunday. Everyone except me, the wayward child.

“Jimmy? But...” I could hear the hurt in my mother’s voice and knew she didn’t deserve it. But I just didn’t have the energy to care.

I fidgeted with the press badge still around my neck as I waited for Jimmy to pick up the phone. People were staring at me, but in a very Western manner of trying to look like they weren’t staring while simultaneously gathering as much visual information on the curiosity in front of them as they could. I glanced down at myself and didn’t blame them for staring. Dirty, worn sneakers, battered jeans, a tank-top stained with something suspiciously rust-colored, and an oversized camouflage jacket, courtesy of a Marine I’d briefly dated stationed at the American Embassy in Cairo. More than the clothes though, I recognized what my fellow travelers were noting nervously—the look of someone bordering on their proverbial edge, a 24-year-old about to lose the fight for their own sanity. I could see the look in my eyes when I happened to catch my reflection in the mirror and it amused me immensely, because it was a reflection of something I didn’t feel. I was in complete control. In such complete control in fact, that I hadn’t even bothered to change out of my blood-stained shirt before getting on the fucking plane. Nice call, Kristen, I thought to myself, thank God you’re a cute blonde and therefore obviously not a serial killer.

“Kristen? What’s wrong?” Jimmy’s voice jarred me from my thoughts.

I almost smiled. It had been too long since I’d heard his voice.

“You away from the rest of the family?”

“Yeah, I went upstairs. Now what’s going on?”

“I’m in Heathrow. My plane to Dulles lands at nine tonight, your time. Can you come pick me up?”

“Pick you up? You left Cairo? Without telling anyone until you were in London? Kristen, what happened?”

I glanced down at the bloodstains and zipped up my jacket. “It’s not important right now. I just need you to come get me and not to let anyone else come. I just need...I just need some space...I just can’t deal with...”

Jimmy’s voice was calm, soft, reassuring. “Sure, Kristen, no problem. I’ve got you.”

It was just Jimmy waiting for me as I exited the terminal. He smiled tentatively as he saw me and pulled me into a hard hug as I got close.

“Jesus Kiki,” he said with a forced smile, “you look like hell.”

“Thanks,” I replied wearily, running a hand through my hair. Everything ached.

He glanced down at the sole small backpack I carried and began to inquire where the rest of my bags were, but then thought better of it. Instead he said,

“Looks like you left Cairo in a hurry.”

I opened my mouth to reply, but I began to giggle instead. That was so close to the truth that it was funny. There was simply nothing else to do except laugh right now. My more than a little hysterical laughter apparently didn’t sit too well with Jimmy, who put his arm around my shoulders and said quietly,

“Ok, kiddo, lets get you home. You could probably use a hot shower and a good night’s sleep, right?”

I got a grip on my giggling long enough to respond as I wiped the tears from my eyes, “I could use a cold beer, a cigarette, and perhaps a gun to my head.”

Jimmy just gripped my shoulders a little tighter and led me to the parking lot. I began chain-smoking the instant we hit the cold night air and didn’t stop. We were home much sooner than I would’ve expected and I frowned.

“My place,” Jimmy explained as I looked at the unfamiliar townhouse, “figured you wouldn’t want to go home quite yet...”

“But what’s everyone going to say?” I murmured and Jimmy managed a smile.

“Come on, Kik, gimme a little credit, huh? I didn’t tell them you were coming in. They can find out in a little while—what they don’t know for one night won’t hurt them.”

Ch. 3

What they don’t know won’t hurt them. That was the mantra I had lived my entire life by, with surprisingly good results. It was growing harder every day I spent in the Middle East, and conversely, the harder it became to alleviate their fears, the more I worried about the ones I loved. I felt like I was drowning under their weight and there were nights I laid awake, knowing that somewhere, my parents were watching the news and fretting. I couldn’t concentrate on my own safety because I was worrying about them worrying about my safety—the irony was not lost on me. This situation made for some awkward reunions. My first trip home, after six months in Egypt, was probably the worst.

It was Christmas Eve and I had landed in the country five long hours before. My mother was smiling too much and putting the finishing touches on a lovely honey-baked ham and talking about everything except my last six months.

“So I said to Cathy, I mean really, where does he get the nerve to...”

I was nodding at all the appropriate places without really listening as I chopped the carrots.

“Jesus Kristen,” my sister Kat exclaimed, “be careful! You’re going to slice a finger off!”

I glanced down at my still-intact fingers. I was using my palm at a cutting board, the edges of the serrated knife just grazing my flesh every time I made a slice into the carrot. It didn’t seem like a problem to me and I shrugged. But I was doing my best to act normal and grabbed a cutting board out of the cabinet.

“Better?” I asked.

Kat nodded silently, eyeing me with a slightly curious look. I didn’t really know my baby sister Kat very well. She was only 14, and I’d lived away since she was 9 with only rare intervals home. She seemed to me like a quiet, shy girl who, I’d been told, was quite the accomplished flutist. But then, I didn’t really know her. Maybe she was only quiet and shy around me. I glanced into the living room at the sibling I knew even less, my 12-year-old brother Tyler, currently attached to some sort of video game. He looked like me though: bright blonde hair, blue eyes, a perpetual tan, and sharply defined features. I had no idea what his interests were, who his friends were, what kind of music he listened to, but there was something in his eyes that seemed familiar to me.

“God, Kristen, is that what you’re going to wear to dinner? Couldn’t you put on something a little nicer?”

My 19-year-old sister Mary was another story. She and Kat looked a lot alike—both beautiful, though Kat was still in her awkward phase and wouldn’t have known what to do with Mary’s makeup if it fell on her head—but Mary I found to be vapid, shallow, and utterly lacking in substance, and I was fairly positive that these traits were present when I wasn’t around. I looked at Mary’s makeup, perfect hair, heels, and coordinated outfit, then down at my bare feet, sweatshirt, and jeans and responded,

“What’s the problem?”

“It’s Christmas dinner, Kristen! Couldn’t you at least pretend to care? A little effort not to look like you’re still running around with the terrorists wouldn’t kill you.”

“And a little effort not to be such a shallow bitch probably wouldn’t kill you either, why don’t you give it a try?”

It was about to get ugly, but fortunately my mother stepped in.

“Mary, leave your sister alone, she looks fine. Kristen, watch your language around Kat.”

Behind my mother’s back, Kat rolled her eyes, her face clearly saying, oh yeah, because I’ve never heard the word ‘bitch’ before. I bit back a grin. Perhaps she wasn’t so shy after all. Mary shot me a dirty look, I returned it, and we finished preparing for dinner in silence. My father, Jimmy, and Jimmy’s new girlfriend Susan returned shortly thereafter with the last few items. The entire family greeted Susan warmly while I stood awkwardly off to the side. She was only new in the sense that I’d never met her; she and Jimmy had been dating for eight months now. I was the outsider, not her.

“Kristen, I’d like you to meet my girlfriend Susan. Susan, this is my sister Kristen.”

“Nice to meet you,” I said, pleased with my quick recall of normal social conventions as I shook her hand.

She offered me a genuine smile and said, “So nice to finally meet you! Jimmy’s told me so much about you.”

“Nothing good I hope,” I chuckled.

Jimmy handed me a Sam Adams from the case he’d just brought home and responded, “Never worry about that, dear sister.”

“I’ll let that slide only because you bought the beer,” I said as I cracked it open, and for a moment, things seemed almost...normal.

Then I drained half my beer without even considering it and Susan’s eyebrows went up. It occurred to me that perhaps that was not socially acceptable and I uncomfortably put the remainder of the bottle on the counter.

Eventually we all sat down to dinner and I ate quietly while everyone else chatted about their lives. I worked my way through my second beer—allegedly my first—as Mary gushed about her Penn State sorority, as my parents discussed their jobs, as Jimmy and Susan talked about Georgetown law school, as my mother tried to make Kat talk about her flute solo at the school’s holiday concert, and Tyler occasionally interjected with whatever it was sixth grade boys talked about. It all seemed so surreal. I should be, I thought, adding to the conversation with tidbits about my ongoing master’s degree, about my boyfriend, about my job. But I had nothing to offer: I had declined my acceptance to grad school, I had neither the time nor the inclination for a boyfriend—besides the fact

that finding one to put up with my danger-seeking would be all but impossible—and my job was the last thing on earth I wanted to talk about. Of course, no one was going to let me off the hook that easily. The conversation came to a lull and I braced myself with a long sip. My father turned to me and, with a well-meaning, “let me include my oldest daughter and show interest in her life” look on his face, said,

“So Kris, tell us about Egypt. Is it really a lot different than when you were there in college?”

That night was the beginning of the maniacal giggling.

JP picked me up at the airport on my second trip home, another five months later; it was Kat’s flute performance and no one in the family wanted to miss it. I thanked God for it and insisted they all attend. JP gave me quick hug as I wondered what my baby sister’s flute-playing sounded like.

“How are ya, Kristen? How was the flight?”

“I could really use a beer, or three.”

JP laughed and said, “What a coincidence, so could I! You’re in no rush to get home, right?”

“Never. Let’s go; we can probably still make the happy hour specials.”

I glanced sideways at JP’s profile as he drove towards a nearby bar. He didn’t smoke much any more—his insurance job drug tested him on occasion—but his face retained the same calm, unruffled look it always had since the days he’d begun each morning with a few hits. What JP was doing in corporate America, I had no idea. I don’t think he knew either.

After a few beers each and mindless chat about airports, old friends, and his job, he leaned back and said, “So Kris, tell me about Egypt. I feel like you haven’t told me anything in months about what’s going on over there. What happened to the days you used to delight in detailing all the insanity you get yourself involved in? I feel like I read more about your life in your Post stories.”

His face was smiling and he tried to make his words light, but he failed. There was something I couldn’t quite identify behind his relaxed tone. I considered this for a moment as I lit a cigarette—had I really stopped talking to JP? We communicated almost every day over the Internet, the same as we always had. I frowned and ran through the events last few months—going down to the police station to demand quotes after mass arrests, covering increasingly violent protests, learning that “I’m a journalist” held almost no weight anymore, beginning to carry a small 9mm pistol. Then I realized I hadn’t told JP about any of this. I’d stopped telling him things after that frightened email he’d sent me a few months back. It hadn’t even been a conscious decision.

“I can tell the difference between a suicide bomber and a car bomb just by the sound,” I said nonchalantly, waiting for his reaction.

A shadow crossed his face slightly, but he nodded. “I suppose,” he managed to say with a small smile, “that’s a useful trait for your stories—cuts down on investigation time, right?”

I chuckled and got us both another round. JP would be alright.

TO: kristen.wilson@umd.edu, johnpaul.fawkes@umd.edu,
heather_crayman@unc.edu, strvingactres19@gmail.com
FROM: armyartie9@yahoo.com

SUBJECT: A FUCKING EMAIL BITCHES!

Hey guys,

Sorry for the mass email, and sorry i've been so bad with keeping touch lately. It's been busy here, and i've only got a couple minutes of online time, and i've got pretty awesome dreams of getting a kickass cold shower (hot would be better, but water's water when you've been out in the field for two weeks, right?) in the near future, so i've got to keep this on the short side. Things are good here. Just standard war shit---yes sir, no sir, you're a fucking god, sir, and some bangs and booms and shit. You know. My buddy from boot, macdonald-you guys met him once, that weekend I came home for 4th of july I brought him with me-got kinda hit with an IED. he's gonna be ok, they said, bet he's gonna have some pretty badass scars. I don't wanna get blown up obviously but I bet you bitches would show a little more respect if I was a fucking purple heart winner, rite! Hit the 1/3 mark of being here last week...not that i'm counting or anything, haha. they tell us not to count, but i cant fucking help myself, even though i sometimes think they're rite and it really does make it go longer. So I should be home before next christmas, I mean unless they extend us, which you know my luck, probably will fucking happen, haha. Man did it suck to be here for christmas. You guys know how much I fucking love christmas (dont tell anyone here that though, bastards here would never let me live it down). Hate fucking palm trees, theyre nothing like christmas trees. Fucking desert. When I get home im going out to the woods and cutting myself down the biggest goddamn christmas tree I can find. JP you can help drag it, you women can decorate it. And bake me some pie too. Speaking of food, got the package you sent Heather, really appreciated it, shared the cookies with my boys and they were mad delicious. Promise ill call soon. JP & Kris, hows everything at umd? JP still smoking plenty, kris still being a suicidal fucktard, I hope. JP, man, write a little goddamn bigger in your letters, I cant fucking read your stoner handwriting. Monica, hows NY working out for ya? Havent heard from ya in a long time, hope youre doing ok. Lemme know. Alrite my civilian friends, say hello to america for me, and ill see ya all in...10 months!

Take care of yourselves, you miserable bastards

ARTIE

Ed Greene grabbed my arm as I headed towards the conference room with the grim expression of one going to face the guillotine on my face.

"Hi Ed," I said glumly, "Come to walk me to my firing?"

He tightened his grip on my arm so I stopped walking. "Kristin, just follow my lead in the meeting, alright? Don't let me hear one unnecessary word come out of your mouth."

I looked at him blankly—it's about all I had to offer at this stage in the game—and he said in frustration, "Kristin, this is important. I've left out...certain...facts, if you

will, from my memo to the higher-ups on your...situation. Don't mess this up, or you won't be the only one losing their job today."

Now Ed sat across from me with a serious expression on his face. He was joined by a few other bigwigs at the Post. I'd been the Post's Egyptian correspondent for the last two and a half years, and I looked exactly the same as I had the very first time I'd sat in his office. I'd even changed out of my blood-stained shirt and camouflage jacket for the occasion.

"Kristen, first off, I want to say how excellent your stories have been. For the last two years, you've covered a country in crisis with incredible skills, dignity, and courage."

I raised one eyebrow slightly—a trick I'd learned from Travis that I was quite proud of—at all this praise.

"Thank you," I managed. Except that I said it in Arabic—*shokran*---and didn't notice until I saw the baffled looks on the other execs' faces. Then, in English, "You gave me an incredible opportunity." Then I sat back and waited for the "But" sentence that I knew was coming.

"However," Ed said gently, "we understand that your...situation in Egypt has... been altered by circumstances outside of your control."

"Are you going to fire me?" I broke in, breaking my poor editor's earlier request for silence.

I didn't want to do this awkward dance around the 300 pound gorilla in the corner demanded by social convention.

"Fire you?" Mr. Davies' face registered shock, "Kristen, why on earth would we do that?" This was my boss' boss speaking, and I frowned.

Major conflict of interest. Complete lack of objectivity. The desire to see large numbers of the people I was covering blown to bits. The fact that I'm becoming unhinged. Oh yeah, and maybe that gun I fired, amongst half a dozen other things. I shrugged.

"Just a question."

"Ms. Wilson, you're one of the finest young foreign correspondents we've had in years. At a time when papers around the country are being forced to all but eliminate foreign bureaus, it's become increasingly difficult to find quality reporters to work in dangerous areas for little reward. We'd be foolish to let you go over one incident in a high pressure situation," one of the suits said.

High pressure situation. I bit the inside of my lip to force down the giggling even as I realized what Ed had done for me. They didn't know about the gun.

"And let us express our sincerest condolences at the death of your friend," Mr. Davies added in. "We were truly saddened to hear that news."

I stiffened—*that* was something I hadn't begun to process yet—but forced myself to nod appreciatively.

"We simply cannot allow you to return to Egypt, given the situation," the female suit continued. "But we want you to remain a Middle Eastern reporter, as that is your area of expertise."

Does being able to scream, "back the fuck off," in Arabic make me an expert? I wondered.

"So what does that mean for me?"

"How do you feel about Iraq?"

I felt the smile creeping across my lips, and this time I didn't bit it back. Iraq sounds like just the place for an unhinged person.

Ch.4

Bam. Bam. Shatter. *Fuck*. Heat. Smoke, a few more bams. Ring. I grabbed my cell phone and glanced at the number. Jimmy. One of the only people whose phone calls I never ignored.

"Hey Jim, what's up?"

The line crackled and his voice sounded far away.

"Hey Kiki, how are you? Is now a good time?"

I glanced out my window at the smoking crater half a block away. Car bomb. The scene was deathly quiet—no pun intended. I had just had to get him off the phone before the first responders showed up with their sirens. Not that there was much left for them to respond to.

"Yeah, now's fine. What's up?"

"So Susan and I actually to had change the date I originally told you—as it turns out, Mary has finals that Friday and Monday, and so do half our law friends who don't graduate 'til next year, and we felt terrible doing that to everyone...I don't want to be held responsible for Mary's GPA!"

Distracted, looking now at the hesitant locals beginning to creep out of their homes towards the blast site, I asked, "Date for what?"

"Our wedding, Kris."

Oh, right. Anyone else would've been offended that I could forget such an important event in their lives, but Jimmy's voice lacked annoyance.

"Oh yeah, sorry. So when is it now?"

"May 15th—it's a Saturday, six months from now, two weeks after Sue and I graduate Georgetown instead of one week, like it was before. You didn't buy your plane tickets yet, did you?"

I never bought plane tickets sooner than forty-eight hours before I needed to be anywhere—too much was uncertain, and I didn't trust what my world would look like that far in advance.

"And do you want me to tell JP about the change, or do you want me to call him?" Jimmy asked.

I winced. Jimmy sensed something had happened between my best friend and I, but he didn't know how to ask, and I was too ashamed to tell him. So JP had been invited to the wedding, and out of respect for my family—who he'd known for over a decade—I knew he would attend, however awkward it would be for both of us.

"Ok, great, Jim. I'll get the tickets soon. I'd appreciate it if you'd call JP, actually, if you don't mind. You know, you could've just sent me an email about this—this call is costing you a fortune."

"I know...It's just good to hear your voice sometimes, Kik. I miss you..."

I winced. I missed my brother too, even more after three months in Iraq than I had in my two years in Cairo. He was my other half, a half I wished I could separate so I could stop hurting him with my absence. The van with sirens attached that passed for an Iraqi ambulance and the pickup with a mounted machine gun that was the police both

arrived, sending the sound of sirens through my window. I moved as far as I could away from the window, but Jimmy's anxious voice asked,

"Kristen, is that sirens I hear?"

"No, it's just—"

BAM. This blast was several yards closer to my hotel than the first one, and my window, already cracked in several places, shattered. Fuck, I thought as I hit the floor, that's the fourth window in three months. I give up. My phone was still in my hand and I could hear Jimmy's panicked voice demanding,

"Kristen?? Are you alright? What was that? Kristen! *Kristen!*?"

I shook the ringing out of my ears and sat up.

"Jim? Still there? Yeah, I'm fine, everything's fine."

"Everything is *not* fine. I just heard an explosion or something. What was that, what happened?"

Good question. I looked out the window frame, my shoes crunching the glass on the floor. The ambulance, police truck, and a nearby car were now flaming shells. Plant a second bomb and blow it as the emergency people show up, a favorite trick of the terrorists. Assholes.

"Nothing happened, Jim."

"Don't bullshit me, Kristen," his voice had a note of steel I wasn't accustomed to, "I'm not stupid."

I paused for a moment, debating, then responded, "Car bomb down the block, Jimmy. I'm ok, a few dozen other people aren't."

"*Jesus Christ...*" he exhaled slowly.

I began to gather up my gear. There was a story to be written.

"I think that maybe," my mother said to me on my second trip home, "you should talk to someone."

I tore my eyes away from CNN's coverage of the latest riot, thinking, I should be there now, covering that, envious of the adrenalin rush those reporters were getting. I meanwhile was going stir-crazy on my family's nice suburban Maryland house, enjoying nice meals and a nice bed and counting down the days until my flight left for Cairo.

"Talk to someone in what sense?" I asked suspiciously.

My mother sat down on the couch beside me and patted my knee.

"A professional, maybe. I just think that you've probably seen a good deal of hard things while you've been over there and maybe you might do better if you perhaps talked to someone about those things."

"What things exactly are we talking about here, Mom?" I asked, barely hiding my irritation. I had done an excellent yet exhausting job of hiding anything from the last year beyond mildly upsetting from everyone. She didn't even know what she was talking about.

"Well, just the things we read sometimes in your stories—they're really good, I'm not trying to say they're not wonderful—but sometimes the stories make us worry about you."

Suicide bomber kills four. Government troops open fire on protesters. Twenty-three dead in food riot. Egyptian journalists jailed for treason. Mass-execution kills fifty-eight. I wondered which headline had gotten to her.

“What makes you think I’m not fine?”

I hadn’t developed any nervous ticks or habits that she could identify, beyond the giggling, which I had kept fairly in check.

My mother pursed her lips. “Well, I found a pack of cigarettes in your pocket last night when I was doing the laundry. I think it might be a coping mechan—“

I couldn’t stop the grin from forming on my lips. “Cigarettes?” I managed, swallowing back the desire to laugh hysterically. “You didn’t wash them, did you?”

My mother looked utterly at a loss. “Well, no, I didn’t, but Kristen, smoking is—“

“Bad for my health, I know,” I interrupted. “I’ll quit, ok? Is that it?”

Her face was so confused as to what to say it was almost comical. “That’s good, I really think you should quit...but I still think you might need to talk to someone, I just think it’s a really good idea to talk to someone who knows how to deal with what you’re going through...”

I almost felt bad for her. This wasn’t in any parenting manual. She had four other nice, normal children, and she had no idea what to do with me. I half-heartedly debated telling her that I’d been a smoker since I was 14, and decided that probably would not help the situation. I said gently instead,

“What I am going through is a tough job that I love doing. I don’t need any professional help right now, but I promise you that if I ever feel I do, I’ll get it, ok?”

It was a lie and my mom knew it, but she didn’t care. She wanted the lie and I was more than happy to deliver. She hugged and kissed me and asked what I wanted for dinner. Meatloaf, carrots, and a side of desperately wanting someone to ask me how things are and actually want the truth. I settled for the meatloaf and the carrots.

JP and I were both drunk when we left the pub near the airport. He handed me the keys to his car without a word. It wasn’t because I was more sober, merely because I was a much better drunk driver. I had a lot of practice in college. We reached my house and both got out.

“You think you’re ok to drive home? You’ve got like an hour drive back to DC from my parent’s place; you’re welcome to crash here for awhile ‘til you sober up.”

JP shook his head and leaned against the car. “Nah, I’m ok. I’m just going to head to my parents’ house and spend the night there. They still leave the back door unlocked for me.”

I smiled. JP’s parents had been hell-raisers in their day before they settled into suburbia, and thus it had come as no surprise in high school that their son was a stoner with a penchant for alcohol. They figured both habits would run their course and just always left the back door unlocked for him whenever he chose to stumble in. More than once, that back door had been unlocked for me too.

“Tell them I say hey.”

JP nodded. “Will do.”

There was a silence, and there it was again—that occasional sexual tension that arose between us from time to time. JP felt it too, as his eyes shifted away from me towards his cigarette.

“So Melissa broke up with me,” he said, trying to sound nonchalant.

Melissa was JP’s girlfriend, on and off since our sophomore year of college.

“Oh shit, JP, I’m so sorry. I didn’t know. When did that happen? Did she say why?”

JP’s eyes remained glued to his cigarette. “A few months ago. Right after I sent you that email...”

I winced, wondering simultaneously why he hadn’t told me sooner, and he continued quietly, “She was with me that night, sleeping over my place. She watched me glued to the television all night, scouring the Internet for more news, sweating bullets. She was over my shoulder when I finally sent you that email asking you to call and verify that you were alright. And the next morning, she said we needed to talk.”

“I don’t understand...” I murmured.

“She said it was obvious I was in love with you.”

I gasped. “Oh fuck, JP! I’m sorry! I can call her for you, explain that nothing has ever happened between us, tell her we’re just friends. I’m so sorry; I don’t know where she got that impression.”

“I do.” JP finally looked up and met my eyes. “Because it’s true.”

I sat in the tattoo parlor in my bra, the artist inking a design into my shoulder, just above several others I had there. The pain barely registered. The artist tried to make small talk with me, but after a few attempts, gave up. I was 26 years old and done with social convention entirely. It was infinitely ironic to me that I looked precisely the same as I had in college—put a tank top and heels on me, and I was instantly transformed into a Kristen ready to hit the clubs. The tattoos were the only way I knew how to remind my body that the mind that inhabited it was no longer the same.

“All done,” the artist announced. “Want to take a look?”

I stood up and glanced over my shoulder into the mirror. It was simple, black, Arabic writing, just like all the others except for one.

“It’s perfect,” I told the artist as I put my shirt back on, “Thanks.”

“That was Arabic, right?” she asked hesitantly.

I nodded and waited for the second question.

“What’s it mean? And all the others?”

“The old Arabic ones are Cairo, Baghdad, Mosul, and Jerusalem. The one you did is Beirut.”

“Aren’t those all places?”

“Yes.” And waited for the final question, one to which I would give the truthful answer.

“What’s the significance?”

“They’re all places I should’ve been killed.”

The shock registered on her face and her jaw remained slack as I pressed the tip money into her hand. It was always easier to tell the truth to strangers.

Ch. 5

Kiki10: so they’re gonna make me declare a major soon, boo

CheerHCxoxo: haha oh the horror! you had to know you were going to have to do that at some point, kris. you’re not in college just to drink natty and smoke with JP, ya know

Kiki10: im not? that's news to me, lol. yeah, i know...it's not that i mind declaring per se, its more that i don't have a clue in hell WHAT to declare

CheerHCxoxo: i like business pretty well. its not super easy, but you're a smart girl, you could handle it.

Kiki10: haha, come on, heather, could you honestly see me in a power suit someday in some corporate office?

CheerHCxoxo:ok, maybe not so much. Lol, you should just enlist, you look good in green, and military boys are hot!

Kiki10: ironically enough, i made that same suggestion to artie a few weeks ago, and he didn't think it was funny at all. Kinda yelled at me, actually. and so i think i promised i wouldn't do that.

CheerHCxoxo: he tell you he's going to iraq?

Kiki10: yeaaaaah...didn't sound too thrilled about it from what i could tell.

CheerHCxoxo: yeah, he's not. i wish he'd never enlisted, kris. he hasn't been happy since the day he signed the papers. he should've just come to college with us.

Kiki10: he couldn't afford it, remember?

CheerHCxoxo: oh, i know...i just hate seeing him so unhappy. and i don't know how im going to get through his being over there...the thought kills me. what if something happens to him?

Kiki10: don't say shit like that. artie'll be fine, he always is. And you'll be fine too.

CheerHCxoxo: of course i will be. I didn't mean just me worrying, i meant all of us, obviously. anyways, i guess we'll cross that bridge when we come to it. now, back to your major situation. what are you good at?

CheerHCxoxo: and if you say drinking or speeding, ill drive up from NC and murder you, don't even think about it.

Kiki10: haha, you took the words right out of my mouth. Ummm things im good at. i duno, is there anything im good at except doing stupid shit?

CheerHCxoxo: of course there is. Lemme think.

Kiki10: ok, haha, ill wait while you figure out my future for me.

CheerHCxoxo: got it! Didn't you work on the paper in high school for a little while?

Back in like freshmen or soph year?

Kiki10: haha, oh yeah, for like a semester, before they kicked me off for not writing the fluffy bullshit they wanted. i wanted to do an article on the drug raids the cops kept doing and they wouldn't let me

CheerHCxoxo: but you did a few articles before that, right? Remember how you won that award for writing about the shooting that happened over at west high school soph yr? i remember that article, it was amazing, everyone said so---remember how surprised all the smart kids were that you actually had talent? They all thought you were such a burn-out! OMG, remember christina thompson's reaction?? She was all like, "and we all thought you'd sooner BE a school shooter than win an award for writing about one!" SUCH a BITCH that chick

Kiki10: hahahah, oh shit, I had totally forgotten about that! man, good times. i saw christina at 7/11 last time I was home, by the way, and she had gotten huge, haha.

CheerHCxoxo: so did beth martin, which made me laugh, cuz I remember at our last cheerleading match before grad, she was all like, well I'M not worried about the freshmen 15, i NEVER gain weight! Ironical, right? amber got fat too, but that's cuz she

got preggies with that sketchy boyfriend of hers right after grad. anyway, back to your major. So you should totally do that

Kiki10: do what exactly? Major in making fun of fat people?

CheerHCxoxo: no, smartass, major in writing for a newspaper—journalism!

Kiki10: hmm...that's actually not a bad idea, heather

CheerHCxoxo: of course its not, im always right. now stop talking to me and go declare it, and remember to give me credits for all the rest of the awards you're going to win someday

I came out of my blackout with a ringing in my right ear. I took the phone from my ear and frowned at it. What was it doing in my hand again? And why was it ringing? Was I calling someone?

"Yo Kris," came a voice on the other end of the phone.

I apparently had been indeed been calling someone, and that someone sounded like JP, even through the clouded feeling in my head.

"JP?" My voice sounded strange to my ears, disembodied and unfamiliar.

"Yeah, Kris, I'm here. You sound pretty trashed there, kid. Where are you?"

I gave a small laugh. "That's sort of the problem, actually."

"You don't know where you are?"

"Um, no."

"Is anyone with you?"

"Uh-uh."

JP's voice didn't waiver in its calm. "Ok, Kris, ok. Can you take a look around and tell me what's around you?"

I scanned the area. I was outside. My feet were cold. I glanced down and noted I was not wearing any shoes. My arms were bare as well. I was leaning against something hard. With some effort, I turned my head and observed a concrete wall of a large building behind my back. Lights in front of me. Moving lights. Cars? Yes, cars. A street. A stoplight.

"I'm outside," I mumbled, "and I'm cold."

"Ok, outside. Can you give me some more detail there, Kris? I'm going to get you inside as soon as I can, but you've got to work with me."

I didn't answer him, instead staring slack-jawed at the cars moving through the night.

"Come on, Kristen, focus. I know you haven't passed out, so talk to me." JP's voice still hadn't gone up an octave.

I suddenly giggled. "JP, are you stoned?"

"It's Friday night and I'm 19 years old—of course I'm stoned. And you're absolutely wrecking my chilled state."

"There's a building. And a street. And a, um, stoplight."

"Are there any street signs?"

I squinted. "Uh-huh."

"What's it say? That'd be useful information."

"Um...Maybe Cattle Street?"

JP exhaled, a sigh of perhaps relief, or, more likely, a puff of marijuana smoke, and corrected, "Capitol Street, you dumbass. Some journalism major you are, can't even

fucking read. You're outside Travis' apartment. I'm going to hang up and call him now, and bitch him out for letting you wander outside as drunk as you are. Don't go anywhere, alright?"

"Ok, JP. Don't smoke anymore tonight, ok? That shit's bad for your lungs..."

JP laughed out loud, sounding as relaxed now as he had a few moments ago when I was lost and drunk. "The girl who's plastered and lost is going to give me health lessons? Jesus Christ, Kris. You're out of your fucking mind sometimes, you know that?"

"You'd miss me if I was gone," I mumbled as I slid down to sit on the sidewalk.

I lit a cigarette and took a long drag. My mother shot me a look. She hadn't quite given up the battle to make me quit—every time I came home, I found nicotine patches and nicorette gum on my dresser, and every time I threw them away—but she usually maintained her silence, choosing instead to wage this particular war tacitly. She didn't, however, appreciate my smoking in front of Kat and Tyler, who were at those influential ages of 17 and 15 respectively. This, I actually had to agree with, and I ground out my cigarette quickly. I was bordering on chain-smoking by my third trip home, but there was no need to set a bad example for my younger siblings.

"Your big sister," I told them, "is an idiot and smoking is probably going to kill her someday. Don't imitate me."

My mother was saying something to reiterate this point and Mary was pattering on about cigarettes turning your teeth yellow, but I wasn't paying attention to either of them. I was studying Kat and Tyler's faces. Kat was turning into a beautiful young woman, and Tyler's little boy looks were being rapidly replaced with a man's swagger and charm, but it was their eyes I was searching. Kat's merely held displeasure at my smoking, a thousand anti-smoking commercials clearly running through her head, and I nodded to myself in satisfaction. There was something in Tyler's blue eyes that caught my attention however. It was a spark I used to see in myself, the beginnings of a certain hunger. *Oh honey, no*, I thought to myself almost in panic.

"I'm going to run to the 7-11 for some coffee. I'll be back," I announced, abruptly rising out of my lawn chair on the deck.

"Can I come?" Tyler asked me, already on his feet.

I nodded and he followed me to the driveway. He pulled a pack of his own cigarettes from his pocket as soon as we were out of sight of the house.

"We smoke the same brand," he remarked with a grin as he lit it and took a drag.

"You *smoke*?" I demanded in horrified surprise, "You're 15!"

"I'll be 16 in a month," he countered, "and anyway, how old were you when you started?"

I opened my mouth to protest, but then stopped to consider this. JP had given me my first cigarette the day we had met...in our freshman year of high school. I sighed and shook my head. "Goddamn, kiddo, that shit's still bad for you, regardless of what stupidity I exhibit on a daily basis."

He just smiled and took another drag and I considered asking what other activities he was into. Then I decided I was better off not knowing and extolled some advice anyway.

"Always check the proof. Liquor hits you harder than beer. Drink water before going to bed. Vitamins help too. Don't drink and drive, and always check the driver

before you get in the car. Don't buy weed off people you don't know, don't smoke it if you don't know where it came from, and don't try anything harder than weed. Use protection, even if the girl says she's on birth control. And whatever you do, *don't get caught* by Mom and Dad. As Artie always says, 'if you can't be good, be good at it.'"

Tyler regarded me silently for a moment, then chuckled. "Looks like someone was a badass in her day. And to think, everyone thinks poor sorority girl Mary is the lush!"

I winced and Tyler laughed again and patted my arm. "Relax, sis, you give me more credit than I deserve. I don't need most of the advice you just gave me—yet. And I promise to keep it all in mind when I do, ok?"

I nodded, not exactly happy, and we continued the trip to 7-11 as if we were normal siblings. It wasn't until we pulled back into the driveway that he turned to me and said quite simply,

"By the way, I know why you're not worried about cigarettes being bad for you. You don't expect to live to 'someday'."

Then he got out of the car and headed back to the barbecue. I remained in the driver's seat for a long moment, resting my forehead on the steering wheel in utter defeat.

"Jesus, you all are looking at me like I'm already fucking dead!" Artie joked with a big laugh that failed to belay the few beads of sweat gathered at his hairline.

"That's *not* funny, Artie!" Heather said harshly, "your sense of humor *sucks*."

"Damn, Heather, chill out. Be nice to the man about to go to war, huh?" JP interjected quietly.

Heather's face softened. "Artie, I'm sor--"

He put his arm around her shoulders and pulled her against him for a moment, his face daring one of us to make a comment. No one did.

"Shuddup," he said, "it's nothing. We should all get another round."

We were barely sophomores in college, and quite some time away from our 21st birthdays, but the bartender at the local pizza joint had been friends with Artie's older brother when they'd graduated high school a few years before us, and was giving us a free pass just this once.

"Support the troops, give their underage members free beer," he had joked when he appeared with the first round.

Free beer at nineteen was usually something to be celebrated and enjoyed immensely, but this time, it didn't taste quite right. I took another sip anyway and tried not to stare across the booth at Artie. The idea that tomorrow morning, he would be back on base, and within a week, he would be touching down in Baghdad was a disconcerting one. And I was not looking forward to the goodbyes that loomed in our immediate future. We sat in the booth, idly chatting about nothing and sipping our beers, until the shop was just about to close. We started to pull out our money, after forcibly preventing Artie from attempting to pay by taking away his wallet, but the bartender walked over.

"Hey guys, don't worry about it. Tonight's on the house."

"You don't have to--" Artie started to protest, but I interrupted,

"Dude, we appreciate you getting Artie if you want to, but we've got ourselves. We're not headed anywhere except back to college."

The bartender shook his head. “Nah, I'm serious, you're all on the house tonight. You guys pay me back by writing to this loser sometimes or something, alright?”

We all nodded and gathered our things as the bartender and Artie shook hands, and we awkwardly shuffled towards the doors as he wished him good luck and safety. We reached the parking lot, me muttering about the cold weather as usual, and smoked our cigarettes as we leaned against our cars, the same thing we'd been doing together for years. I smoked my cigarette until its ember was licking my fingertips, reluctant to throw it to the ground and end the evening. I looked around and realized everyone else was doing the same thing, even Heather, who had quit last year, choking on their last harsh drags. I threw mine to the ground with more force than necessary and said sharply, breaking the silence,

“Time to grind 'em out, guys.”

Everyone looked at me, startled for a moment, then down at the smoldering stubs between their fingers. One by one, sheepishly they tossed the cigarettes to the asphalt, grinding them out and leaving the silence remaining. Finally, Artie said with a forced smile,

“Guess it's that time, huh? I've got an early ride back tomorrow morning.”

We all stared at him. I don't know what the others were thinking, but I was memorizing his dirty blonde crewcut that he'd once grown out over the summer to shock us with the mass of natural curls we'd never imagined existed, the deep scar below his grey eyes where he'd been punched in a fight junior year of high school—some football player had called Monica a freak—, his calloused hands from many years of baseball, and his ever present half-smile. Monica, she who was tougher than all of us, moved first. She extended her hand roughly, and Artie grinned and pulled her into a tight hug instead.

“Keep your goddamn head down,” she instructed gruffly.

Artie nodded. “And you put some goddamn weight on, woman. I expect to see you looking like you weigh more than a crack addict next time I see you, you got that? I don't care if you live in New York now—it's no excuse for looking like a cokehead. Otherwise I'll force a couple dozen MRE's down your throat, and believe me, you don't want that.”

Monica cracked a smile for the first time all night, and I reminded myself to consider asking her if everything was alright, once I had dealt with tonight. This was the first time she been home since last Christmas, several months before, and she had lost a good deal of weight. Her clothes hung off her, and the circles under her eyes were jet black. I knew she wouldn't tell me even if everything had gone to hell. Even after knowing her for four years, I knew precious little about her broken home life. She was not one to complain.

He and JP shook hands for a moment, then awkwardly, Artie pulled him into a half hug, chuckling about “don't ask, don't tell.” Artie released JP and looked at me. I remained leaning against JP's car, biting my lip for a moment.

“Come on now, Kris, ya gotta give me a hug,” Artie smiled, holding his arms open.

If I don't say goodbye, I thought, nothing can happen to him. But I couldn't let him leave without it either. I hugged him and he said quietly in my ear before I could pull away,

“Remember, Kris, it's better to be empty than dead.”

I said nothing in return except, "Call us every once in a while, huh?"

He nodded. "Of course. You're my people, I can't forget about ya." A muscle twitched in his jaw, but he swallowed sharply and said, "Alright kiddos, time for me to peace out. JP, keep an eye on blondie here and make sure she doesn't do anything too retarded, alright? And make sure Monica starts eating? And that this one," he tossed his arm lazily around Heather's waist, "doesn't get her heart broken by any dumb football player down there in the South." Artie smiled as he said it, but Heather's eyes were filling with tears.

JP mock-saluted. "Aye, sir. Take care of yourself, dude. We'll, we'll be seeing ya."

Then JP, Monica, and I left, leaving Heather and Artie alone. I glanced back into the rear view mirror, and she was crying into his shirt.

"Is Heba home?" Maha asked as she walked through the door of the apartment. This had become almost her standard greeting in recent weeks, as she became further and further entrenched in something I didn't understand and Heba even less.

"No, she's out grabbing a few things from the corner store. She should be home soon—she doesn't stay out past dark alone."

Of course, few women in Cairo did these days. Maha nodded in satisfaction and sat down at the table across from me.

"I have something for you." She placed a small wrapped up bundle on the table and I reached for it. She placed her hand on mine before I got to it and said,

"But before you open it, you need to promise me that you won't ask me any questions, and especially that you won't say a word to Heba."

These were rules I lived my own life by, so I had no problem abiding by them for Maha's sake. I nodded and she released my hand. I pulled the cloth from the object and couldn't withhold a small sharp gasp.

"It's a gun!"

Maha chuckled slightly and replied, "Very astute, my journalist friend. Yes, it's a gun. A nine millimeter pistol to be more precise."

"Where did you—?" I started to question, then bit my tongue and instead asked, "Why are you giving this to me?"

Maha smiled humorlessly and responded, "Kristen, *habibi*, in case you've been sleeping through those stories you've been writing, Cairo has become a scary, scary place. I want you to be able to defend yourself if you ever need to. *Insha-allah*, you won't ever need it, but," Maha shrugged, "no harm in hedging your bets, right?"

"What about you? I feel like you need this more than I do."

Maha responded by pulling up her loose tunic just enough that I could see the beginnings of a holster underneath. "My bets are already hedged, *habibi*."

I touched the cold steel gingerly, chewing my lip in thought.

"What's wrong?"

"I don't know...I, uh, journalists aren't exactly supposed to carry guns." I offered Maha an embarrassed smile, and she questioned incredulously,

"Are you kidding me? You, Kristin Wilson, who has probably broken every rule ever laid in front of her, you're trying to tell me that the one rule that might get you killed is the one you want to uphold?"

I considered this while eyeing the gun warily. She had a point; who was I to make moral judgments on anything? I could probably count the number of things I believed in on one hand, and rules were not included on that short list. But I didn't know if I could actually fire it, actually wound, actually kill, another human being. And even I could, what did that mean for my craft? Where did objectivity find its place when reporters were prepared to shoot their subjects?

"Take the gun, Kristin," Maha said roughly. "If not for yourself, then for me."

I sighed and pulled the gun—a Glock 26, I was later to learn—closer to me. *Mais salama*, I bid objectivity. This is a whole new war, and I am a new breed of reporter.

"How do I load it?"

A large creek ran behind the neighborhood I grew up in that had a tendency to overrun its banks in the heavy rains. During one particularly bad storm when I was 12, the creek became a raging river, swirling with debris it had swept from other backyards and large tree branches the water had ripped from the trunks. My brother, a few of his friends, and I stood several feet away from the edge—a place we had all been specifically banned from being, of course—observing in mute fascination the fury of the creek we frequented waded in.

"Man, did you guys see that? That was a bench that just went by! Do you think it came from the park?" One of Jimmy's friends exclaimed.

The bench didn't remain a bench for long, as it slammed into the top of the concrete bridge that, when not covered in flowing water, crossed the creek. The bench broke into several pieces which were promptly swept down into the swirling blackness. They did not resurface.

"My raft could handle that no problem," Jimmy joked in false bravado to his friends.

The previous summer, Jimmy and my father had constructed a small raft for the purpose of floating on the creek—not during a flood, of course.

"Oh yeah? Go prove it," his friend Mark challenged, the note of sincerity ringing all too clearly in his voice. "Unless, of course," Mark added, grinning, "you're afraid."

I winced. There it was, the challenge laid down. My brother lacked many of my flaws—he was my anchor in most circumstances, keeping my worst impulses in check—but he too could not refuse a challenge. Later, this trait would find him slaving away in the wee hours of many a morning over countless legal texts—our lawyer uncle said Jimmy wasn't cut out for law school, and so poor Jimmy found himself studying for the bar exam. Georgetown Law was many years away yet; for now, Jimmy eyed the river with a clenched jaw. He was afraid, but no one could tell that except me. And no one except me expected him to respond,

"Fine then. I'll go get it."

Ten minutes later found us gathered at the edge of the ominous water, up to our ankles in icy mud, Jimmy's little raft now accompanying us. I drew close to my brother.

"Jimmy," I said in a low voice, "I'm coming with you."

"The heck you are," he responded, "Mom will kill me if you drown."

"And I'll run and tell Mom what you're about to do if you don't let me come," I retorted.

Jimmy sighed and rubbed the bridge of his nose, a nervous habit that always signaled defeat. I smiled silently. Thirty seconds later, we were pushing the raft further into the creek, and three seconds after that, we were caught up in its rage.

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“I, I don’t know what to do with that,” I managed to respond, “you took me, um, kind of off-guard.”

JP shook his head. “I didn’t expect a response. I actually didn’t mean to tell you that. Your fault, you got me drunk.”

He offered me a slight, goofy smile, allowing me the opportunity, if I wanted, to joke back and forget this conversation had ever happened. I knew that would be the best policy. JP was my best friend, my rock, one of the only people on earth who understood me, and when he didn’t understand, would stick by me anyway. Doing anything other than joking back and forgetting would immensely complicate things, and I didn’t have the energy to deal with additional complications in my life right now. I couldn’t do anything but that to him; it wasn’t fair to pull him farther into my fucked up existence. These were all very valid points I acknowledged through the slight alcohol haze. Then I took one step closer to him so that we were only an inch apart.

His breath on my cheek made it difficult to think, but I managed to whisper, “You don’t want to get involved with me, JP.”

“It’s a little late for that,” he whispered back, his lips just grazing my ear now, “I’m in love with you.”

I didn’t respond that I loved him, but I did the next worst thing. I put my arms around his neck and drew him into a long kiss.

I’d never seen Jimmy’s new townhouse before, bought in anticipation of his and Susan’s wedding sometime next year, and I managed to say as we walked through his front door,

“It’s a really nice place, Jim.” I winced at the numbness in my voice—a zombie could have done a better job at social interaction—but Jimmy nodded appreciatively at the attempt.

“Thanks, Kik. I have to admit that Susan did most of the decorating though. What can I get you?”

I sank down on his couch and looked up hopefully. “Something strongly alcoholic? Please?”

Jimmy nodded and disappeared into the kitchen. He returned a moment later carrying a bottle and two glasses with ice. He set them down on the coffee and took a seat beside me.

“Whiskey ok? It’s quality stuff too, good enough to drink on the rocks. Got it as a congrats-you-got-engaged gift from a few of my classmates.”

“Oh Christ Jim, this shit’s expensive. Don’t waste it on me,” I protested as he poured two glasses.

“Nonsense,” he responded as he handed me a glass, “couldn’t think of another person I’d rather share it with.”

A half an hour later, I was on my fourth glass while Jimmy was still nursing his first. He had put some music on in the background—his favorite, Jimi Hendrix, which always amused me, given Jimmy's generally straight-edge lifestyle—to kill the silence as I did nothing except drink, fast.

"You drunk yet there, Kiki?" Jimmy asked me.

I giggled slightly. "Brother, I have a confession to make. I drink like a fuckin' fish these days. Four drinks ain't going to do it for me. Told ya you shouldn't waste your expensive stuff on me."

Jimmy reached over and ruffled my hair. "There any reason for that, kiddo? The heavy drinking I mean?"

"I've seen," I said as I drained the remains of the fourth drink, "some bad things."

Jimmy saw his opening and asked quietly, "What kind of things, Kristen?"

I respected his attempt, but I couldn't even find the words to explain. I poured another drink and downed half of it in shot-form. "Ask me in a few drinks. Also, you should know, I really like alcohol. Aside from the bad things. Before then. College... man, college was a blacked-out time," I glanced over at my brother, older than me by four minutes. "I'm glad you don't like it the way I do. I'm glad you don't like a lot of things like I do."

Jimmy took off his glasses to rub the bridge of his nose and didn't say anything. Instead, he poured himself a second drink and said nothing as I poured my fifth. Halfway through, he commented quietly,

"Kristen, I trust that you can handle your alcohol, but I'm capping you after this one."

I waved a dismissive hand at him. "In college I called this pre-gaming."

"Travis was a bad influence on you," Jimmy replied before he could stop himself.

I turned to face him, my eyes flashing in anger. "*Fuck you*," I spat.

Jimmy tentatively reached over and squeezed my shoulder gently. "I'm sorry, Kik. I, I didn't mean to say that. I know it's a tough subject. I just—" his cell phone began to ring. He glanced at it and frowned. "It's Susan. She wouldn't call this late unless something was—"

"Go ahead, take the call," I said, no longer angry, "tell her I say hi."

Jimmy nodded, answered the phone, and mouthed, "I'll be right back," as he stepped into the other room. I took advantage of this opportunity to uncap the whiskey bottle and put it to my lips. There was a horrible, gaping hole inside me that five drinks simply wouldn't fill.

Jimmy was only gone ten minutes, but I'd killed two thirds of the bottle in his absence. Much like other things had been killed lately. He didn't notice initially and sat back down on the couch.

"Susan's alright. She just back from her last law final, thought it had gone badly. She worries too much about grades sometimes," Jimmy flashed me a smile, "Not unlike yours truly, of course."

The additional obscene amount of alcohol hadn't kicked in yet, and so I was able to process this and chuckle slightly at Jimmy's little joke. He was very intelligent without a doubt, but worrying about grades was something Jimmy was particularly good at. He used to worry himself almost sick about missing a spelling word on a quiz in grade

school. I, on the other hand, got good grades without ever trying, or caring for that matter.

“You going to spend your whole lawyer career being a ridiculous perfectionist too?”

“That’s what I do best.”

“It’s what’s going to make you a good lawyer, though I feel bad for you and Susan’s kids. The two of you are going to drive them insane.”

Jimmy smiled. “Well, they’ll have a laid back aunt to balance me and Sue’s influence out, right?”

The alcohol began to hit me and I leaned my head against the couch’s back.

“Kris?” Jimmy looked at me urgently, “Kristen, are you ok?”

The room spun interestingly. “Yep...”

Jimmy’s attention turned from me to the coffee table. He picked up the whiskey bottle and stared at it for a long moment. Then he looked at me. “Oh Christ, Kristen,” he stammered. “*Please* tell me you didn’t drink this.”

I shrugged. “It’s been a bad couple of days. Can I finish the rest? There’s only like another shot or two in there.” I reached for the bottle, but Jimmy snatched it away.

“Hell no, you’re not finishing the bottle. Damn it, Kristen, you’re probably triple the legal limit. You’re going to be really, really sick in a few minutes, aren’t you?”

I glanced sideways at my brother and chuckled. “You didn’t drink much in college, did you, Jim?”

“No. Never liked the taste, honestly. Or the feel for that matter. And none of my friends really drank.”

“Mhmm...so you don’t have much experience around very drunk people, do you?”

Jimmy shook his head and I sighed. I knew, given the amount I’d drank and from considerable experience, that I was going to be violently drunk in the not too distant future. And Jimmy was not the man I wanted to see me this way.

“Just go away for a bit,” I muttered, “just leave me alone for a couple of hours.”

Jimmy shook his head again. “Hell no, Kristen. I’m staying right here.”

“Awesome. Just fuckin’ awesome.”

The night after we graduated from high school, JP, our friends Monica, Heather, and Artie, and I sat on an abandoned train trestle over the local river, alternating between a few well-rolled joints and a bottle of Jack. Our crowd was a mixed bunch, drawn together, perhaps, due to our inherent inability to fit in. It was not as though we could not blend in throughout our years in high school—it was more, perhaps, that despite whatever crowd we individually found ourselves associated with, we all recognized some underlying, discontented state. During the school day, we all had our own crowds—Monica was a theater kid, Artie was heavily immersed in Junior ROTC, Heather, oddly enough, was a cheerleader, and JP, of course, was a stoner. I, much against my will, fell in with the smart kids, though they all had regarded my apparent lack of concern about college applications with much suspicion. But every summer since freshmen year, when high school crowds melted away, we were together, passing idle and mostly contented time until September.

“Fucking drug tests,” Artie said mournfully, eying jealously at the joint being passed over him.

Artie had, as everyone expected, enlisted in the Army infantry. He would ship out to boot camp in a matter of weeks, and was doing an excellent job of pretending to be pumped full of macho pride to almost everyone, even us. But in truth, it seemed more that the decision had happened to him and not the other way around. I passed him the bottle to comfort him and he took a swig.

“Seriously, man,” Monica said, exhaling smoke, “you should just peace before it’s too late. Your name is fucking Artie, they’re going to eat you alive in the Army. They’ll probably laugh you out of the barracks.”

Monica was headed to New York with a few hundred bucks and her battered suitcase to try her hand at making it big. Her home life was beyond broken and there was no one to tell her no.

“Fuck you, Monica,” Artie grunted, wiping his mouth, “I’ll go by my last name.”

I stole the bottle back from him, and JP chuckled. “Eisner? Yeah, that’s really badass, man. Monica’s right, they’re going to ass-rape you in the shower.”

Heather put her arm around Artie’s shoulders and shot them dirty looks over his head. “Knock it off, guys. He’s going into the military, not prison! You should all be more supportive; he’s going to fight for your country.”

Artie’s eyes widened slightly at the word “fight,” but apparently decided to temporarily forget about Iraq’s looming presence in his life and take advantage of her sympathy by leaning into Heather’s chest. Heather was not only pretty, she was smart, although she made a conscious effort to conceal this fact by answering questions intentionally wrong in class; no one but us knew she spent entire evenings with books open as we drank. She had made the cheerleading team at the University of North Carolina on a partial academic scholarship, making her officially the kind of girl all other girls hate. But Heather was as lost as the rest of us, only wanting genuine affection from people, which, ironically, was the one thing denied to her by her talents.

JP snickered at this and tried to lean into my chest imitating Artie. I took a long drink of the Jack and then smacked the back of his head. He laughed, rubbing the back of his head, but didn’t move until I shoved him. JP was coming with me to the University of Maryland, majoring in God knows what—it would later morph into finance for reasons JP couldn’t quite account—his acceptance based solely on his parents having been alumni. Why JP was going to college was a mystery to everyone—he had hated school since the first day of kindergarten—except that perhaps he wanted another four years to smoke pot and pursue his own random collection of knowledge.

Heather continued to let Artie lean against her and stroked his hair absently, a faraway look on her face. She was a little bit in love with him, I thought, but never had the heart to ask. It could never be, so why bother asking anyone to voice the impossible?

My editor-in-chief handed me a University of Maryland Press Badge.

“Things get dicey, you flash this, got it?”

I accepted the badge and tucked it into my back pocket. “Why would you ever suspect anything else of me?” I asked Jake with a sweet smile.

“Put that around your goddamn neck—what good do you expect it’s going to do you if no one can see it? And why don’t I believe you? Partly because of stunts like that,

and don't forget who edited your columns from friggin' Egypt." Jake shook his head, his shaggy hair falling in front of his glasses and reminding me of an irritated sheep dog.

I grinned at him. He had indeed been in charge of editing my work while I'd been a "study abroad columnist" for the Diamondback, and had frequently responded with emails saying nothing except "ARE YOU INSANE?!? IT'S GOING TO BE SUCH BAD PR FOR THE PAPER WHEN YOU GET YOUR DUMB ASS BLOWN UP!"

I'd never wanted to be involved with the school's newspaper in the first place; my brief experience in high school with student-run publications had left a bad taste in my mouth, and I had never been one for school activities. But Travis had pushed the issue as soon as I'd declared journalism as my major and he'd read some of my work.

"You're talented, Kris," he had said, "and any major newspaper would love to have someone with your abilities onboard. But no one is going to take you unless you build that foundation. You've got to put in the grunt work before they're going to send you off to do the crazy shit; it's just the way of the world."

Travis had dropped out of school at 17, but he was smarter than most people I knew, and I had always trusted his advice. He might have seen no problem with my carrying on ounce of marijuana through the airport just to see if I could, just to feel my heart pound as I went through security, but he would get angry when I got a B on an exam. It was probably his influence that had kept me in school all the way through my senior year, and with the Diamondback almost as long.

"You going to be ok?" Jake asked as I headed out the door.

I paused in the doorway and offered a relaxed smile. "Of course. It's just a wee protest, and American riot cops tend not to fire at random, unlike Cairo."

"I didn't mean the protest," Jake said. "I know you can handle that...I meant, since this is your first article back and all..."

"I'm fine," I replied roughly, noting that my knuckles on the hand I was gripping the door handle with were turning bone white. I heard the tension, the on-the-edge quality of my voice, and winced. I eased my grip and said in what I hoped was a more relaxed, "No worries, Jake. It was a minor sabbatical, and now I'm back, good as new."

Jake nodded slowly, though I could tell he didn't believe me. No one did, and rightfully so. I was not alright, and I didn't expect I ever would be. But I left the office anyway and headed downtown, where protestors were reminding everyone that today, March 19, was the fifth anniversary of the Iraq War. Artie was two months into through his second tour and planned to sign his reenlistment papers as soon as he landed stateside.

Protests in America didn't seem like much after those I'd attended in Cairo—though in those days *I* was one of the protestors—and I found myself getting bored with the entire scene after a few hours.

"Looks like the party is just about over," the girl I'd been interviewing commented, indicating down Pennsylvania Avenue.

I glanced in the direction she pointed and saw a fair number of protestors wrangling with D.C police, and several already kneeling on the ground, their hands flexicuffed behind them.

"It appears that way, doesn't it?" I agreed.

The protestor, a junior at American University named Diana Kane, extended her hand. "Hey, well, it was great talking to you. I'll look for your article in the Diamondback on Monday, if I'm out of jail by then."

“Planning on getting arrested for sure then, huh?”

She shrugged. “I don’t see why not. That guy—” she pointed down the street at a young man flailing on the ground, attempting to kick a police officer, “happens to be my boyfriend, and he’ll have bragging rights if he gets arrested and I don’t.”

I laughed. “Yeah, that I can understand. Is it hard to get arrested?”

Diana shook her head, her low pigtails swishing across her shoulders. “Not at all, at least not right now. When they’re arresting loads of people like that, they tend to just sweep everyone up and sort ‘em all out later. It’s just a matter of being in place, really.”

“Excellent.” I took off my press badge and tucked it into my wallet.

“Don’t you need that not to get arrested?”

“Exactly.”

Diana looked at me incredulously. “What the hell are you doing taking it off then?”

I grinned. “Following the story, of course.”

Things were spinning in and out of focus. I recognized, through the incredible fog most of Jimmy’s bottle of whiskey had left me with, that I was probably the most drunk that I’d ever been. That, I decided, was not a good thing, given all the times I’d been smashed in college and bordered on needing medical attention. And here I was left with Jimmy, poor straight-edged Jimmy who’d never been more drunk than one too many drinks at happy hour after a Constitutional Law final. His face already bore the signs of panic, and I hadn’t even begun getting sick yet. My poor twin. He didn’t deserve me. I summoned any remaining sobriety and told him,

“Jimmy, I drank too much. Way too much. But I promise I’m not going to die. I’m just going to probably get very, very sick later. And maybe also not make a lot of sense either. Just ignore me. I’ll be ok tomorrow.”

“Kristen, maybe if you’re going to be that sick, maybe we should go to a hospital?”

“No! No hospital. Don’t do that. I’ll lose my job or something. I’m 24 years old; I’m too old to be going to hospitals for alcohol poisoning. I’ll be ok. You just need to not panic.”

Then my memories turn to nothing except fuzzy recollections of tasting Gatorade—lemon-lime, my favorite drank-too-much-alcohol flavor, how did he know?—and babbling many things I shouldn’t have been talking about.

I found myself crying against a shoulder that felt familiar, but not like Jimmy’s. The hand rubbing my back felt like Jimmy’s, but not the shoulder. That didn’t quite fit, and I made the effort to raise my head to see whose shoulder my tears—tears? When the hell did I start crying? How much had I said?—had stained.

“JP??” I demanded furiously, “Where the hell did you come from?”

“Easy, Kiki, don’t get mad at him,” Jimmy’s voice soothed, “That was my fault. I called him. I don’t have much experience with drunk people, and I got nervous. I’m sorry. You want to be pissed off at someone, you can be pissed at me. JP’s only here because I asked him to come over.”

“I don’t even *like* him,” I spat, pulling myself away abruptly. I apparently did it a little too enthusiastically, because the movement sent me toppling off the couch. JP’s reflexes were slightly quicker than Jimmy’s and caught me before I hit the floor. “Don’t

touch me,” I muttered sullenly at him. JP’s face didn’t register any pain at this attack, and he simply pulled me back against his chest.

“Drink some Gatorade, Kristen,” he said, putting the glass to my lips.

“Fuck you,” I responded, trying to muster up the energy to pull myself away from him again.

JP ran a hand through his hair and remarked calmly, “You know, you were a much more compliant drunk in college.”

“A lot has happened since college,” I mumbled, giving up the fight to pull away and resting my head against him.

“You’re telling me, kiddo,” JP said softly, his hand brushing my hair out of my face, “you’re telling me.”

As the daylight faded and we approached the twelfth hour of our arrest, I commented to Diana, who was sitting beside me in the bus we’d been herded onto—the holding cells at the local precinct could not accommodate us all, apparently—“Well, congratulations, everyone—we’ve officially spent more time behind bars, so to speak, for protesting a war than Lindsey Lohan did for drunk driving, car stealing, several hit and runs, and possession of coke.”

Diana laughed and a male voice from several seats behind us—Diana’s boyfriend, I suspected—called up,

“Don’t forget Nicole Richie! That bitch only spent a few hours in jail for driving her car the wrong way down the highway while hopped up on narcotics!”

The rest of the bus was now listening, and someone in the back of the bus offered, “And Paris Hilton’s little brother! He just did like one night for underage drinking, driving at like three times the legal limit, *and* running over a gas station attendant!”

“SHUT THE HELL UP!” the officer in charge of the bus bellowed, not finding our sense of humor amusing, apparently. “I will keep you people here for the rest of your lives if you don’t quiet down!”

“Oh, goody,” I whispered loud enough for those nearby me to hear, “maybe we’ll actually get to say we served more time than Paris herself!”

Two hours later, it was finally my turn to be booked by the District of Columbia Police Department. After being fingerprinted, I had my mug shot taken. I glanced at its appearance on the computer screen and commented,

“Damn, officer, I take a pretty decent mug shot, huh?”

He looked at me in a combination of embarrassment and awkwardness; he was a heavyset young guy, probably my age, with a baby face.

“Uh...”

A few of protestors lined up behind me awaiting their own booking snickered at his discomfort.

“Can I have a copy of that, officer?”

“Can you, can you what?” he fidgeted with his badge.

“Can I have a copy of my mug shot? It’s a pretty badass picture, and I need a new photo for my Facebook account!”

The people behind me—mostly college students themselves—erupted into laughter, and he looked around the precinct in bafflement. His face relaxed when he

noticed his fellow officers within earshot were also chuckling as they went about their duties, and he allowed himself a small smile.

“No, ma’am,” he said, “I’m sorry, but that’s official police property. I’m not authorized to give it to anyone.” He looked downright apologetic, and I grinned.

“It’s ok, sir. But someday when I’m famous, make sure to leak that picture to the press, ok? That’s definitely the one I want to be remembered by.”

I called Travis as I walked out of the police station a short while later. It was now dark outside, and I was exhausted. My wrists ached from spending so much time behind my back.

“Hey babe,” he greeted, “what’s up?”

“Guess where I just got released from?” I said as most people say “hello.”

“Hmm...a brothel?”

I chuckled. “Close. Fun piece of trivia for you: Even if you ask nicely, the cops will not give you your mug shot for Facebook.”

“Cops, huh?” he asked, no trace of concern in his voice. “That implies an arrest, babe. How did that happen?”

I knew his lack of discernable worry wasn’t because he didn’t care; it was because he wouldn’t see the need to be concerned. Obviously, if I was on the phone with him now, I must be alright.

“Eh, it’s a long story. You feel like coming to pick me up? I’m beat and I don’t feel like taking the metro.”

“Yeah, I can do that. So, do you have a criminal record now?”

“Nah, not according to the cops I don’t. I did something called **forfeit and disclosure**. I just paid the fine and the case got closed without a conviction, so I think all I have is an arrest record.”

“No conviction, huh? Must have been a misdemeanor then, which means it can’t be that great of a story. I’m on my way now, but you better have thought up a better reason for getting arrested than some little piss ant misdemeanor by the time I get there.”

“The last two weeks...have been the happiest two weeks of my life,” JP said to me, his trademark easy smile always making it seem as though he found some great joke behind every word that he uttered, even those said in seriousness.

I ran a hand through my hair and adjusted my duffel bag on my shoulder. They’d be calling my flight back to Cairo soon, and I simultaneously had not enough and too much time, with too few words and too many things to say.

“You’re just saying that because you got laid,” I joked, knowing even as I said it that it was the wrong thing to say.

JP’s smile temporarily dropped from his face. “You don’t really think that, do you? I mean, no offense, Kristin; I think you’re friggin’ beautiful, but if all I wanted was sex, I could find that somewhere less complicated than my best friend.”

I chuckled. “No, JP, I don’t think that, and I’d hope if you were only after sex, you’d go after someone much hotter than me.”

There was a long silence, and then JP asked heavily the question we’d both been avoiding, “So...now what?”

The muscles in my jaw tightened. “Well...I’m headed back to Cairo. I’ll probably be back in six months or so, as usual.”

JP nodded. "Ok. I can do that."

"Do what?"

"Wait. For you."

"JP...I don't want to drag either of us into a long-distance relationship like this. It isn't fair to you. You shouldn't have to spend your twenties waiting for some chick who can't even stay in the same country with you for more than a few weeks every six months. I've been in Egypt a year now, and who knows how much longer I'll be there? I probably won't be back to stay next time I come home either."

"How about you stop worrying about what you think I want or need, ok?" JP responded without hesitation. "What I want is you, and I don't care how long I have to wait for you. I can do long-distance—that's why God invented the Internet, right?—but if that's not what you want, if a relationship seems too...demanding for you, then we can just not put a title on it, ok?"

"But..." I protested without really wanting to.

JP leaned in and kissed me for a long moment. "We will cross the rest of those bridges when we come to them, ok? I, I love you, Kristin, and if you love me back, then lets just let things progress and see how it works out, ok?"

"I love you too," I heard myself saying back as they announced my flight over the PA system, knowing it was both the truest and cruelest thing I could've said.

A bachelorette party was just about the last place on earth I wanted to be. The bar was crowded, noisy, and dim, filled with people who kept banging into me. My nerves felt raw and exposed after only a few minutes. I had only landed back in the States a few hours before. But it was Susan's big night, and everyone expected me to be there. I had failed at most other aspects of familial responsibility in the last few years, and I was determined not to fail at this. My twin brother was getting married in two days, and I was a bridesmaid, and bridesmaids threw bachelorette parties, and goddamn it, everyone had a good time. So here I was, sweating bullets and gripping my drink so hard my knuckles had turned sheet white. I'd been in Iraq for six months by then, and it had left its mark on me more visibly than two years in Egypt had. Cairo had been a city I was familiar with, a city I had friends in, and a city that, albeit spiraling into chaos, still had some semblance of order. Iraq, on the other hand...It had turned me into a person who was spending my soon-to-be sister-in-law's party eyeing every person who entered the bar for suspicious bugles. I was looking for explosive vests, of course. Suicide bombers, you see.

A car backfired outside and I instinctively prepared to hit the floor. I stopped myself just barely and leaned against the bar, gripping it tightly and trying to steady my breathing. I glanced around, relieved to see no one else in the bridal party had noticed my reaction. They were too busy playing some game or another with shots and an anatomically correct blow-up doll they had christened Ted. I shook my head and wondered how long I would have to wait before I could sneak outside for a cigarette, adding a few curses for the politicians who banned indoor smoking.

"You alright?" someone asked close to me a few minutes later.

I turned and surprised to see my sister Mary standing beside me, a look vaguely resembling concern on her pretty face. "Sure," I said, "do I not look alright?"

Mary reached down and put her hand over mine on top of the bar. "Your hand is shaking, hun."

Embarrassed, I pulled my hand away and shoved it into my pocket roughly, annoyed with it betrayal of me. “I’m fine, Mary.” I heard the roughness in my voice and winced. Sometimes I hated who I was becoming. I was no longer a nice person. “Thanks for asking though,” I added in what I hoped was a gentler tone.

Mary smiled and patted my hair. “You look really pretty tonight, Kristen. I know you don’t care about that kind of thing, but,” she shrugged, “you do anyway. You’re going to look so much better than the other girls at the wedding, with your tan and your blonde hair, even in those awful colored dresses Sue picked out. Nice girl, but,” Mary rolled her eyes, “someone was worried about being upstaged at her own wedding. Poor girl is marrying into an attractive family, that’s for sure!”

I actually laughed out loud—something I hadn’t done for more months than I cared to remember—and was glad for this shallow moment with my younger sister.

“You fucking *moron*!” Jake snapped at me, waving my article around in the air like it was a weapon he could use to knock some sense into me.

The entire Diamondback office was silent, watching their editor-in-chief pace around and mutter angrily to himself in between bouts of yelling at me. I leaned back against his currently unoccupied desk and tried to look contrite. They—and I—were all used to Jake’s occasional meltdowns. He was high-strung, but he was a good editor and a decent guy, so we all just patiently waited for the storm to pass.

“I can’t *believe* you got yourself arrested! I just can’t believe it, when my very last words to you before you walked out that door were to behave yourself!”

“You didn’t specify what type of good behavior you were expecting, exactly,” I replied nonchalantly. “I didn’t get drunk or stoned, I didn’t get in any fist fights, and I didn’t flash anyone. Doesn’t that count for something?”

The freshman behind him couldn’t prevent herself from giggling and Jake whirled around. “Is something *funny*?” he demanded.

She turned bright red and before she could begin stuttering her apologies, Jake had turned back to me.

“And *you*! You think you’re funny? You think getting arrested is *funny*? Are you trying to *kill me*?”

I bit my lip hard to force down the smile—Jake always reminded me of an overexcited small dog when he was angry—and shook my head.

“No, Jake,” I managed, sounding somewhat sincere. “I’m not trying to kill you, and I wasn’t trying to be funny. I just wanted to give the Diamondback the best story possible, and I thought that meant going with the protestors all the way. The story wasn’t over when they got loaded into the buses headed for jail, and since the cops weren’t exactly going to allow me to ride along, I had to get arrested with them.”

Jake exhaled heavily, some of the angry leaving his face. He could never argue with anything that made the newspaper better; it was his baby.

“Fine,” he almost snarled, “but if you think we’re running your goddamn insane article, you’re even crazier than I thought.”

To the entire newsroom, he announced, “And if anyone on this staff thinks that imitating Wilson over here is a good idea, you can just walk out the door right now!”

I nodded, locking my eyes contritely to the carpet so I didn't further aggravate him with the grin I was having difficulty concealing. I already knew the story would be on the front page above the fold; space had already been laid out for it on Jake's orders.

"You're goddamn lucky you're so talented," Jake grumbled to me a few hours later, throwing a copy of the paper in front of me.

I picked it up and grinned at my article—front page, above the fold, just as I expected—like a proud parent. "Thank you, dear," I chirped, hopping out of my chair to peck his check.

"Such bullshit," he sighed amicably, "that someone like you is going to be working for the Times or the Post someday."

Kiki10: im thinking of dropping out artie

Armyartie9: you thinking about doing what??

Kiki10: dropping out of college.

Armyartie9: but why the hell would you do that?

Kiki10: i duno artie, im jus so fucking bored. I've only got a year under my belt and the idea of 3 more kills me

Armyartie9: wtf would you do if you weren't in school though, work at fucking walmart

Kiki10: actually im thinking about enlisting

Armyartie9:are you FUCKING INSANE?!

Kiki10: no, thank you very much. I've talked a couple of recruiters and such. i could do communications. i'd go marine corps though—they usually get closer to the action, no offense. they said if I wanted, i could do this program that would pay me 25k jus for shipping out immediately, and then I could be in Iraq or a-stan in under a year

Armyartie9: I repeat, are you fucking insane kristen? get a motherfucking grip on yourself, this isn't a game. You've got everything going for you why would you throw it all away for nothing

Kiki10: shit artie, i jus feel so fucking empty all the time. the only time i feel fucking alive is when im doing something like jumping off the bridge. enlisting seems like it would solve that problem

Armyartie9: you'd hate the military, kris, and im not just saying that to keep you in school. It's all hurry up and wait, all the goddamn time. most of the time im sitting on my ass waiting for some higher-up to get their shit together. Youd be even more bored here than you are there. seriously. stay in school. you're too good for the shit i've seen here.

Kiki10: you sound like you regret it...

Armyartie9: aw hell. No point in thinking about it, what's done is done, right? we all do what we have to do. i got my official orders last night

Kiki10: and?

Armyartie9: looks like im not gonna make it to thanksgiving. baghdad, in like 2 months

Kiki10: shit

Armyartie9: yeah well.

Kiki10: im sorry artie. i guess that doesn't mean anything but...

Armyartie9: its ok, not your fault. just promise you'll stay the fuck outta trouble, k? and by trouble I mean enlisting. being empty is better than dead.

Armyartie9: don't tell anyone about the orders yet, ok? esp heather. Ill tell everyone in my own time. how is she, btw? Its been awhile since ive talked to her

Kiki10: shes fine, says she likes UNC a lot—shes always so goddamn upbeat though, hard to tell what she really thinks about anything, ya know? And how come you haven't talked in awhile? shes been online...

Armyartie9: yah i know how she can be...and ah fuck kris, i duno. i guess i just don't want to hold her back or for her to think she owes me anything

Kiki10: ?

Armyartie9: you need to keep this quiet

Armyartie9: cuz we both promised not to tell anyone. But I trust you can keep your mouth shut. we kinda hooked up right before i left for boot. And everytime ive been home on leave too

Kiki10: !!!

Armyartie9: yeah yeah, shut up. i duno wtf im doing. i know it cant ever work

Kiki10: why not?? Omg im so happy to hear this, ive been waiting for this for YEARS! I cant believe no one fucking told me!!

Armyartie9: oh come on kris. don't be naïve. shes beautiful and rich and smart, and im a dumbass army grunt from white trash. she'll never cross her parents by being with me and i know it

Kiki10: youre not white trash artie and I never wanna hear you say that again

Armyartie9: but im right about us not working and you know it

Kiki10: ☹ i duno artie

Armyartie9: its ok. ive always known it. hurts more now that i know she likes me back though. what can ya do, lifes a bitch. Hows the rest of the crew doing?

"JP," I mumbled into JP's shirt, my words very slurred, "I think I'm going to get sick."

"Ok Kris," JP responded, easing me off him into Jimmy's arms, "that's fine, but it'd be even better if you didn't get sick on me personally. I feel like the bathroom is a much better place for that."

"You are a funny man," I giggled, leaning my weight against my brother as JP got off the couch. Jimmy held me up, but it felt like his arms were trembling. "JP, am I fat?"

"Are you what?" he asked incredulously, taking me from Jimmy.

"Fat? Jimmy's arms were shaking..."

JP picked me up easily and carried me into the bathroom, Jimmy trailing behind and protesting in confusion, "I didn't say that! I can so carry you, you're not heavy at all, really, I—"

Then I was violently throwing up in the toilet and not really paying so much attention to him. Finally I leaned back against JP and glanced up at my brother hovering in the doorway, his face sheet white. It occurred to me in a brilliant and very short-lived flash of sober thinking that my brother's arms had been shaking not because of any physical strain, but because I was scaring the hell out of him.

"JP," I mumbled to the man holding my hair back, "I still don't like you, but I don't want Jimmy to..."

JP pulled a rubber band from his pocket to tie my hair back, and replied conversationally, as if this was a perfectly normal moment we were having, "I don't like you either babe, but I hear what you're saying. Hold on for thirty seconds, ok?"

He eased my head down on the floor and stood up. I could hear him speaking urgently in low tones to Jimmy. It sounded like Jimmy was protesting, but after a minute, I was once again leaning against JP. With considerable effort, I tilted my head up and noted with surprise that my brother was no longer in the doorway.

“He’s a lawyer; no one ever wins an argument with him...”

JP chuckled just before I began to vomit again. “I’ve got your back, Kris, even though we’ve made a mess of things. Hell, this is just like college anyway, right? Only without the panic of also getting arrested for being underage—things are improving as we age, huh?”

Ch. 7

I opened my email. It was 3 a.m in Beirut, and my deadline had been several hours ago, but my editor would just have to deal. It’s not like they were going to fire me. I spotted a particularly large cockroach scurry across the floor as I waited for the slow internet connection to send my story across the ocean and winced. I could get used to almost anything, but the sight of cockroaches in my living space, however humble, still disturbed me slightly. I noted that I had an email from my sister Mary, which was unusual. I opened it and read it with a sinking heart.

Hey Kristen,

So Tyler just got pulled over for doing 107 in a 55-zone. I know you used to do the same thing, even though you never got caught. Mom and Dad are freaking out. He’s probably going to lose her license for awhile. He’s in a lot of trouble. And he doesn’t seem to care. He just looked blank when the parents were yelling at him. I almost didn’t recognize him. He reminded me of you when you got caught skiing on that trail that was closed up in the mountains that one time, remember? And there was no reason for him to be driving that fast. He couldn’t explain himself. Kristen, I know we aren’t really close, and to be honest, I don’t really get you a lot of the time. I don’t know why you do the things you do. But I’ve come to believe over the last few years that it’s something you can’t help, something inside you that’s restless or unsatisfied with stuff that makes other people happy. It doesn’t seem like it’s a kind of life that makes you happy either though. I don’t want to see Tyler end up unhappy, and I don’t think Mom and Dad can take any more worrying. Maybe you can talk to him? I hope you don’t take offense to this. Your choices in life have been different than most people’s and I don’t pretend to understand them, and I think that you really can’t control it anymore. But Tyler is still a baby. Maybe it’s not too late for him. Think it over and talk to him if you think it’ll help. Hope you’re taking care of yourself and being safe over there. Love you, Mary

I left the email open as I put my head in my arms on the battered table. The thought of my baby brother having my sickness was almost more than I could bear. And how could I explain to Mary that there was nothing I could do? Once you get that first taste of adrenalin...it’s already over. Everything Mary said about me was true; I couldn’t control myself and I wasn’t happy. I hadn’t been in a long time. I had left behind a family worried sick, a man who loved me, and a horrible example for a brother to follow. I

began to cry and didn't stop until I had run out of tears, leaving me hollow and empty and alone.

I had one thought entering my 12-year-old brain as the current swept up our humble little raft, and I didn't know it at the time, but it was a thought I was to have many times in the coming years: *this was probably a poor decision*. The raft was coming apart underneath us, its boards being ripped away by the water, and I glanced at the boys on the bank. Their faces were terrified and they were all screaming something at us, but I couldn't hear their voices over the noise of the river. Jimmy was gripping me so tight that I was having a hard time breathing, as if holding me was going to prevent us both from drowning. I could feel someone's heart beating wildly through their chest, but I couldn't tell if it was my heart or my twin's. The boys were now gesturing frantically at something ahead of us. I glanced up and saw the bridge mere yards away, sweeping debris much bigger than us under and holding it there in the black water. If we were to hit that bridge, we were dead, that much was clear. I tugged Jimmy's arm, trying to make this clear over the noise. There was no way he could've heard me—I couldn't hear my own voice—but he nodded in understanding anyway. We toppled from the raft at the same moment and struggled frantically against the current towards the bank. We were both good swimmers, but we were children battling storm-swollen water that already claimed several lives in its path. We almost didn't make it; Jimmy hit the bank two yards from the bridge, and I landed six seconds after him. His friends waded in and pulled us from the mud. Their faces were sheet white. Jimmy and I sat on the ground, shivering and gasping for several minutes, until finally Mark broke the silence by exclaiming,

“Jeez, you guys almost got killed! If you hadn't gotten out before that bridge...”

Jimmy forced a smile of bravado and crossed his arms across his chest to stem the trembling his entire body was doing. I glanced down and noted that my hands were not shaking. In fact, the entire environment around me suddenly seemed so much more... alive.

“JP? What are you doing here?” I looked at JP as he came into my hospital room. Though perhaps it was not JP—the pain meds were making me more than a bit fuzzy. JP sat down in the uncomfortable chair beside my bed and shrugged.

“Don't know. Thought maybe you could use the company.”

His eyes were bloodshot, but I couldn't tell if it was from pot or crying. Both were reasonable things to be doing at this current time, and knowing JP, he had done both.

“You stoned?”

He smiled slightly and replied, “So asks the girl hopped up on narcotics.”

This was a fair point. So neither of us was in their right mind in some sense or the other. Given the last few days, this was unquestionably a good thing.

“Shouldn't you be at the...” I swallowed and forced the word out, “funeral?”

JP frowned and didn't answer. I didn't push him for a response, not when I could barely ask the question myself. After a few silent moments, he said quietly without looking at me,

“I tried to, Kris. I, I really did. I went to the wake, and everyone was there, and they were all crying, and...” He looked at me, the most distressed I'd ever seen him, lines burrowed into his forehead to force down tears. “I just couldn't stay. I felt like everyone

was looking at me, knowing I'd been there, knowing I could've stopped it, hating me. I couldn't cry there; no one would think I even had the right to." JP's head sank into his arms on the edge of my bed.

Whatever the events of the last week had spared of my heart was broken at the sight of my best friend's agony, even through the morphine coursing through my veins, but I couldn't think of anything to say. If I opened my mouth, my own guilt—legitimate guilt, unlike JP's—would come flooding out, and I wasn't in a place where I could handle that. I didn't think I ever would be. So instead I took the coward's way out and just stroked JP's hair as his shoulders shook with silent sobs. As long as his head was buried in his arms, he couldn't see the tears streaming down my own cheeks. I didn't deserve to mourn.

"Oh God, Kristen, it doesn't fit! You promised not to lose any more weight before the wedding; we don't have time to take in your dress *again*!" Susan wailed at the final fitting before tomorrow's wedding.

I thought of several caustic things to say to this, but held my tongue and instead glanced in the mirror at the damage. I couldn't exactly argue with her, because she was right—my bridesmaid's dress was definitely too big in several places, and I wondered off-handedly how much weight I'd lost since the last fitting.

"I'm sorry, Sue," I managed, trying to sound as sincere as possible, "I didn't do it on purpose. It'll be fine, it's not that bad."

Susan still looked on the verge of tears, and I sent panicked looks at both of my sisters. Kat shrugged helplessly and mouthed to me, *so eat more!* She was a little frightened of Susan's high-strung personality, worsened by her recent bride-zilla development. Mary, however, put a reassuring arm around Susan's shoulders and said, smiling,

"Oh come on, Sue. You're supposed to be center of attention, not Kristen. Everyone's going to be so busy looking at you they won't even notice her dress being a little loose. You look absolutely beautiful."

If Susan had known my sister a little better, she would've seen through the act and smacked Mary for the insincerity. But Mary was a good actress, and after all, she had been a sorority girl in college—she had plenty of experience lying about other girls' appearances. It was exactly what Susan needed to hear at this moment however, and as she hugged Mary in relief, I mouthed to my sister, *thank you*. Mary just smiled and I read the look in her eyes—I'd be paying her bar tab later tonight.

"Jesus Christ, Kris, Sue's right; I can count your ribs," Kat commented as I pulled the dress over my head a few minutes after Susan had left.

I glanced down at myself and frowned, then shrugged. "I can only eat so much pita bread and humus," I chuckled.

The truth was I just didn't have much of a stomach anymore. Most of my nutrients came from nicotine chased with alcohol.

Mary stuck her head out of her dressing room and eyed me critically. "You've lost all your curves, honey. Both your younger sisters have bigger boobs than you do!"

I could feel both of their concern suffocating me and hastily threw back on my clothes. "Don't worry about it," I said roughly. I knew from much experience, however, that commanding people not to worry only led to greater concern, and so I joked lightly,

“Oh hell, girls, it’s not like anyone’s seeing anything anyway! Kat probably gets more action than I do!”

Kat turned scarlet red and Mary burst into laughter. “But,” Mary asked slyly when she had stopped laughing at poor Kat’s expense, “what about JP?”

I hadn’t expected that and wasn’t able to keep from flinching. “Nothing,” I mumbled, “JP and I aren’t, aren’t, um...” I was turning as red as Kat had been a minute ago. “Things just got complicated,” I finished lamely.

“But he’s your date for the wedding!” Kat protested.

“That’s just for convenience’s sake. I didn’t say we’re not friends, just that we’re not...anything else.”

That was a lie; JP and I hadn’t spoken in months. He was my date solely because we had been best friends when the invite list had been created, and it was too awkward to change it now.

“He’s a good guy, Kris,” Mary remarked as my blush made an abrupt return, “and I’m willing to bet the reason you two are not something more is entirely of your doing.”

Maha was spitting a large number of words that nice Egyptian girls typically don’t say under her breath as she grabbed a duffel bag from the closet. Some were untranslatable into English, but the tirade went something like “fuck fuck fuck motherfucking hell god fucking damn it.” I stood awkwardly in the center of the living room, staring blankly ahead as Maha threw some of my clothing and my laptop into the bag.

“Where’s your passport?” she demanded without looking at me.

I remained half-slack jawed, noting the sticky blood on my shirt was beginning to dry, and didn’t respond. Her question didn’t seem reasonable at this particular juncture. She dropped the bag on the floor and marched over to me. Maha then grabbed me roughly by the shoulders and shook me forcefully.

“God damn it, Kristen, focus! We don’t have time for this! Where is your fucking passport?”

My eyes finally left the far wall and met hers. My mouth was cotton dry as I murmured, “But Maha...”

“*I know*, Kristen, I frigging know,” Maha snapped, her voice on the verge on cracking, “but I can’t do anything right now except get you to safety. You need to get out of Cairo right now.”

I silently pointed to the bedside table and she grabbed my passport and tucked it in the bag.

Maha was methodically placing last minute things in my bag and then zipping it up. “I’ll have the rest of your things shipped to you later. Do you have enough on your credit card to book a flight somewhere? It doesn’t matter where, whatever flight leaves within the next few hours. You can always book another flight home once you’re out of here.”

I stood listening to her numbly until she pointed impatiently at the computer and snapped, “Well, do it! I have to make a few calls.”

I sank into the chair and let my fingers handle the booking from memory without thinking about it. Maha was in the background on her cell, barking at someone in sharp Arabic so fast I had a hard time following her.

“...need a car right now. Possibly, yeah. Actually, it’s almost a given. They’ll be looking for her by now. Classify this as a hot run. *Insha Allah*, we won’t need the muscle, but I’d just as soon have it. Yeah, yeah, I know, I don’t have time to get into it...”

Maha hung up the phone and said, “Well?”

“Cairo to Istanbul was the best I could do,” I said numbly, my eyes locked to a family photograph on the desk where Maha, Heba, and their parents had their arms around each other.

Maha nodded. “Yeah, that’s fine. There are frequent flights to Western Europe from Istanbul. You’ll be able to get home from Europe without any problems.”

“But what about...?” I tried again but couldn’t force any more words out.

Maha winced visibly and her face softened, losing the hardened revolutionary I barely knew, just for a moment. “Kristen, *habibi*, please. I can’t think about that right now. It, it will break my heart if I do.”

Ch. 8

Foreigneditor01: What’s the situation looking like today?

Kiki10: Word has it there’s going to be a confrontation at the mosque within the next day between Israeli troops and the fundamentalists holed up in there. The Israelis have been showing some restraint so far because of it being an important mosque etc., but they’re not going to hold much longer.

Foreigneditor01: How’s the media being treated so far?

Kiki10: Not well. The Israelis are guarding that mosque like it’s the coming of the Messiah. Which is kind of an ironic analogy. Anyway, they’re not letting anyone get too close, especially the media, and I’ve heard from a few CNN guys that they’ve gotten kind of rough with some people. I haven’t seen that personally though, just word of mouth. There are a lot of silent shadowy types milling around though, probably Mossad.

Foreigneditor01: Hmm. Well, do what you can *within the bounds of reason*, Kristen. You get yourself into trouble, this isn’t Egypt where you can just fly out. You don’t want to tangle with the Mossad, and you don’t want to get caught in the crossfire when this explodes.

Kiki10: You don’t want the Post to have the exclusive, “Inside the al-Asqa Mosque”?

Foreigneditor10: Don’t even joke. Now go get me a story that will make us look good but that doesn’t have your blood on it either.

Kiki10: They’ve always got someone’s blood on them, Ed.

I signed off aim with Mr. Greene and my photographer, a scrappy kid just out of college—it seemed that was the only type of people running around these places anymore—looked at me expectantly.

“Well, what’s the word, boss?” Colin asked, barely containing his enthusiasm.

This was his first assignment overseas; he had been in Nazareth covering the discovery of some new tombs thought be Jesus’ relatives or something like that and had been routed to me by necessity. He was 23, three months out of Syracuse University, and no war reporter. Then again, I suppose I hadn’t been either, a few long years before now. I had difficulty sometimes remembering that I was only a few months from my 26th birthday myself.

I looked at him and then said heavily, “Colin, take a seat for a sec.”

He sat down across from me in the run down Jerusalem Internet café and I said in a low voice,

“Colin, I need you to understand what we’re about to get into. This isn’t going to be pretty and it isn’t going to be fun. There’s no glamour, if that’s what you’re expecting. Reporters and photographers get killed all the time on assignments like this. Killed, Colin, you understand?”

He nodded slightly, and I continued, “I’m sure you know by now that I have a reputation for getting closer stories than a lot of reporters in conflict zones. I didn’t get that rep without reason; I take a lot of risks in my reporting, and I don’t expect anyone else, let alone a kid supposed to be covering old tombs, to take those risks with me. This doesn’t have to be your responsibility, whatever they told you at the Post. I’ll cover for you, just stay back and snap whatever pictures you can get from behind the barricades and it won’t be any different than the photos anyone else would have. No one expects more than that.”

Colin was silent for a moment, contemplative, it seemed, then he took a deep breath and squared his shoulders. “I’m not scared. What good will a great story be without great photos to go along with it? Besides,” he grinned suddenly, a boyish smile full of teeth and innocence, “I want to show up those pussies at the Times.”

I came out of my blackout to find myself lying on my side on a bed. JP was taking off my shoes. I stirred and made a half-hearted attempt to rise, but JP put a hand gently on my shoulder.

“Easy there, Kris. You’re ok. I’m just taking off your shoes so you don’t get dirt all over the nice clean sheets. But while you’re awake, you should drink some more Gatorade.”

JP eased me into a sitting position against someone else’s chest and this time I was too tired to fight him. The person I was leaning against put a bottle of Gatorade to my lips and JP went back to untying my Cairo-blackened sneakers. Then he moved up and put his hands to the zipper of my battered camouflage jacket, chucking quietly,

“This is one fucking ugly jacket, Kris.”

Something struck me and I murmured as he began to unzip the jacket, “JP, I don’t think we should have sex right now; I’m really sleepy.”

The person behind me made a little noise of surprise and JP blushed deeply.

“Kiddo, I’m not—I mean, I’m just, I, uh...Jesus, Kris, I don’t think Jimmy needed to know that.”

I frowned. “Where’s Jimmy?”

The person behind me ruffled my hair with a slight chuckle. “Right here, Kik.”

“Oh. Hi Jimmy. But I still don’t think it’s a very good idea, JP. Things got too messy later—even though you were the best I was ever with.”

JP’s face was now a color I didn’t think it was possible for a human being’s face to be and he put a hand lightly over my mouth. “Please, Kristen, you’re killing me here. We can talk about all that in the morning, promise. Now just really isn’t a good time; I just don’t want you to say things you’ll regret tomorrow, ok?”

Since my eyes were suddenly growing very heavy, I decided to concede this point and nestled my head against Jimmy’s shoulder.

“Jimmy,” I murmured, “don’t tell JP I said he was good in bed, ok?”

Jimmy barely stifled a laugh at poor abused JP's expense and JP just shook his head in defeat before unzipping my jacket. When he did, however, he swore aloud in horrified surprise.

"Holy *shit*, Kristen!"

"What? What's is it? What's wrong?" Jimmy demanded, moving my head slightly so he could see whatever was upsetting JP. When he did, his reaction was considerably worse.

"*Fuck!*"

I could've probably counted the number of times my brother had used the word 'fuck' in his life on one hand, and I too wished to see what was on my shirt responsible for that outburst. But I didn't have the energy and decided to go back to sleep until someone chose to enlighten me. Then Jimmy was shaking me and JP was holding my face in his hands and demanding,

"Kristen, is any of that blood yours? Are you hurt anywhere? Kristen, come on, talk to me, *where's all this blood from?*"

Blood? I frowned and bit my lip, trying to recall how that may have come to be on my shirt. I felt tears begin to brim in my eyes and then spill down my cheeks even before I remembered where the blood was from. I shot resentful looks at my concerned and anxious twin brother and best friend, angry that they had made me remember. Then I turned my head into Jimmy's shirt to quell the grief and refused to answer of their questions, leaving them to their worries.

"I'm worried about Maha," Heba said as she took a seat across from me at the table.

I glanced up from my laptop's keyboard, where I had just noticed my "m" key was a little off-centered, and asked, "Worried about her how?"

It was a pointless question; I knew as well as Heba did that Maha was in deep with something. The sneaking out at night, the late night phone calls, the heavy smoking and dark circles under her eyes, the sharp tongue and short temper that had replaced a once witty and cheerful personality, none of it had escaped my notice. I just wasn't sure how much Heba had noticed as well, and I wasn't willing to provide additional ammo against Maha, however justified and needed that ammo might have been.

Heba sighed heavily and played with her necklace absently. "I don't know, she's just so...different lately. She always seems so tense and wound up."

"The whole city is tense and wound up," I reminded her.

Heba frowned. "I know that. It's something different with her though. You don't see it? How she's changed in the last few months? You don't think she's maybe... involved with...people?"

"With who, Heba?"

Heba's frown grew deeper and lines chiseled themselves into her pretty face. "That's the problem. Nothing fits. She's not with the Brotherhood, obviously. But she was such an opponent of the government before. I can't see her working with Mubarak's people. It's got to be something else. I just don't know what else it could be."

Heba looked at me helplessly for support and I suppressed a wince. Heba was one of my best friends, second only behind JP. She had been my rock during my year abroad in college, befriending me when I was a bewildered American suburbanite in a huge

Middle Eastern city, and she had been my family during the year and a half that I'd been in Cairo for the Post, calling to check on me when I was late, making me dinner when I was working on a big story, and sometimes just hugging me when she thought the day's events had shaken me, even when I didn't say so in any words. And she was right to worry about Maha, who, at 21, I suspected was in over her head. I had heard things, nothing substantiated, just whispered rumors, that a third actor was at work in the country, a group that could conceivably be called the moderate side. But in a bitterly divided place such as this, embattled and desperate—yet still well-funded and supplied—government guns on one side and ill-equipped and zealous—yet growing stronger every day—fundamentalists on the other, moderates were the enemy of all. Maha would do better to choose whichever she considered the lesser of two evils than to try to walk the middle ground.

"Have you tried to talk to her?" I asked, stalling for time while I tried to find my own neutral path.

Maha too, was my friend and my adopted family, the mischievous teenager who introduced me to smoking shisha and taught me how to blow smoke rings in that year abroad, and now the young woman who would get me a Stella and not ask any questions when I stumbled in dirty and shell-shocked. I couldn't betray her by revealing my suspicions to Heba either.

"Yes, repeatedly. She just says everything's fine and shuts down." Heba looked on the verge of despair. "She never talks to me anymore, Kristen. I feel like the enemy, but I'm just so worried about her. She's my baby sister."

"How about I talk to her?" I suggested. "She might listen more to me over a few Stellas."

Heba brightened considerably. "Would you, habibi? She's always looked up to you."

"Course I will. Relax, Heba, everything's going to be fine. You're going to give yourself wrinkles before you're thirty if you don't stop frowning every now and then!"

Ch. 9

JP's 21st birthday party had wound down as the clock began to read the wee hours of the morning, the remaining party-goers spread out across JP's apartment's living room in varying degrees of horizontality. JP, JP's girl Melissa, Travis, and I were sitting around the coffee table—heavily scratched and cigarette scarred, bought for \$5 off Craigslist—passing the bowl around.

"It's really a sweet piece, Travis," JP said admiringly as he exhaled, "I appreciate it. And this weed is fucking amazing—best I've had since that Hawaiian stuff in high school, remember that, Kris?"

Travis waved away his thanks and instead accepted the bowl. "No worries, dude. Didn't cost much. It's not every day you turn 21, but you're not much of a drinker, so I figured it wasn't worth buying you a case or anything like that."

He took a long inhale and passed it me. I shook my head.

"Going to light my eyebrows on fire," I muttered, squinting so I saw only one of my boyfriend instead of two.

I was no angel—I'd certainly smoked more than a few times—but I simply didn't really enjoy smoking it. It lacked the excitement of alcohol, stripped your evening of the possibility of any insanity. There was no associated rush.

Travis and JP both laughed out loud at me—my irrational fear of burning my eyebrows off while attempting to light the bowl was well-documented—and then, because they were stoned, continued to laugh at me for several minutes, until none of us precisely remembered what I'd done that was so amusing. When they finished, JP said quietly, to me and no one else,

“I really liked your gift too, Kristen.”

I grinned. I had given JP his gift separately than everyone else, because I hadn't wanted to embarrass him. Few people knew of JP's love of ancient Greece, and I had a feeling that this knowledge wouldn't sit well with most of his friends' stoner image of him. So I had tucked a book of ancient Greek philosophers into his bag after Psych class earlier today when no one, including him, was paying attention.

Melissa, previously half-slumped backwards against the couch, perked up and demanded in a sugarcoated but keenly interested tone, “Oh? What did you get him, Kristen?”

Normally Melissa and I got along fine. It was only after a few drinks that some confusing semblance of claws on her part appeared. I never how to respond to these occasional outbursts of jealousy and looked at JP for help.

“An iTunes gift certificate,” JP responded smoothly, “gave it to me earlier so I wouldn't lose it after I got drunk.”

Melissa's features relaxed slightly and she said pleasantly—with just a hint of coldness now—“That's nice.” Then she moved closer to JP and whispered in a voice at a volume carefully calculated to sound as a whisper but ensure I heard every word.

“Wait until you see what gift I have for you later, baby.”

Travis and I stayed a few more minutes, watching Melissa snuggle closer and closer to JP, until Travis leaned close to me and whispered in my ear,

“Babe, I'm thinking we should head out—I think we're, ahem, forestalling a passionate evening.”

I drunkenly giggled and agreed. Travis stood up and pulled me to my feet.

“Hey, JP, man, we're going to head out. Happy 21st again—we'll have to hit the bars for real tomorrow night, none of this sit on the couch and smoke all night shit.”

JP disengaged himself from his girlfriend's drunken affections for a moment to look up and wave. “Yeah, yeah, thanks for coming, guys. You, uh, need to crash here?” He cast a sidelong glance at his girlfriend, clearly wanting us to say no.

Travis chuckled. “Nah, we're good, man. I wouldn't drive unless I was alright. Ya'll enjoy your night.”

JP grinned wickedly. “Oh, I will—Trav, she's about to fall over there.”

“Fuck you, JP!” I announced cheerfully, “I'm fine, wonderful even!” I swayed against Travis' lean frame and he slipped an arm around my waist.

“How about you leave that to me?” Travis whispered in my ear with a grin as we walked out the door.

I giggled and stood on my tiptoes to kiss him. It was that devilish smile I had fallen in love with, almost three years ago. Then I tipped over and he grabbed me before I fell into the recently fallen snow.

“You’re such a wreck,” Travis said affectionately. “I didn’t know it was supposed to snow tonight, did you?”

I shook my head and blinked snowflakes out of my eyelashes.

“Oh well,” Travis shrugged, “A little ice ought to make things interesting, huh?”

There was the smile again, the one that sent my heart racing, followed by another slightly more dangerous look, and I felt abruptly energized through the alcohol. Travis was promising an adrenalin fix with that look.

I reached up to covertly brush away the tears before they fell as Susan—for all her stressing and insanity, looking absolutely gorgeous and joyous—began her walk to the altar. Jimmy was visibly sweating as he waited for her, but he too glowed in a way I’d never quite seen before.

“What do you know,” Mary whispered almost inaudibly to me, “the ice queen *can* cry.”

Even if I’d had the opportunity and the motivation, for all my writing skills, I couldn’t have found the words to explain that I was not crying for my twin’s happiness, but for...something I could never have? For JP? For myself? For I knew that everything I couldn’t have was entirely my own fault? And for everything being so far beyond the power of my redemption. I wiped my eyes, careful not to smudge my mascara, and smiled at my little sisters. Let them think what they needed.

Monica passed me the joint and I handed off the Jack to Heather. Artie lit a cigarette and JP laid back on the tracks, his hands behind his head and a contemplative look in his marijuana-reddened eyes as he stared up at the night sky. I took a drag on the joint, then coughed violently for several minutes.

“Fucking hell,” I muttered, and Monica laughed.

“Aw man, Kristen, you’re going to get high as hell now.”

I made a face and traded Heather for the Jack. Sure enough, a few minutes later, I began to feel it and, as always, regretted the decision to smoke. It always made me sleepy and philosophical, two feelings I did not enjoy one bit. I laid back beside JP and looked at my friends in turn. Artie was still leaning against Heather, his face contented, yet a conflicted look in his eyes. I thought I saw fear there. And Artie didn’t know it, but Heather bore a similar expression on her pretty face and in her blue eyes. There was no fear though, only resignation and perhaps regret as she exhaled smoke. Monica sat with her legs dangling over the edge of the trestle, swinging her feet and staring into the water, very stoned. Yet the marijuana couldn’t mask the years her eyes already bore. She had grown up as Heather’s neighbor in the same wealthy development, but domestic violence did not consider socio-economic status. JP’s eyes were closed; I couldn’t tell if he was asleep or simply resting and thinking.

I looked at my friends, and I could already see their futures as clear as if they had occurred years before. Artie would go into the Army, miserably serve his four years swearing the entire time that he was getting out, and then reenlist for lack of anything else to do. He would keep reenlisting, always with the intention of eventually figuring out what he wanted elsewhere, until eventually the strain of pretending he was happy with his decisions turned him into a bitter, angry old man. He would divorce a few times, but

never have any children, and wouldn't leave the Army until they forced him to retire. He would keep in touch with us for a few years, but would allow the time between contacts to grow larger and larger until we had all lost track of him completely.

Heather would go to college and be popular. She would pledge the pretty girls' sorority and date popular football players until she eventually married one right after college. She wouldn't really love him, but she would convince herself she did because he was handsome and had a good job, and she would drop everything to have several children and make sure dinners were on the table when he got home from work. She would send letters at Christmas to us with pictures of the adorable children and tell us how good things were going. And she would never stop wondering what would have happened if she had just told Artie...

Monica would head to New York already knowing it was in vain. She was talented, but lost, and she would live in a rat-infested apartment in a bad neighborhood with other struggling artists until eventually the need for income would send her into stripping or "artistic" photos. She would send postcards from the Big Apple, always with the news that her big break was coming, but it would be dripping with insincerity and self-deprecation. She would cut off all contact with us shortly before she turned to stripping and we would never hear from her again.

JP would smoke pot heavily through college until he eventually met some nice girl who would straighten him out. Her cute little nose would wrinkle in unhappiness whenever he rolled a joint, but he would love her anyway. For her, he'd quit, start wearing polos and cologne, start saving for their wedding. He'd find a good job somewhere in corporate America and would later tell his children that drugs were bad and he had never tried them, even though they wouldn't quite believe him. I hoped we'd still be friends.

And me? My own future was as blank as if it didn't exist. I frowned at this revelation and reached further back into my drugged brain for enlightenment on that. None came and I found myself starting to get irrationally upset, as occasionally happened when I drank and smoked a lot at the same time. I bit my lip hard crossed my arms tightly over my chest, trying to keep calm. The other three were laughing about something, enjoying our post-graduation freedom, and I didn't want to ruin their night. JP stirred beside me, and glanced over.

"You ok, Kris?" he said quietly so the others didn't hear.

I managed a nod, focusing my energies on forcing down the panic rising in me. "Smoked a bit too much," I muttered, "weird thoughts."

JP nodded and stroked my forearm for a moment. "Relax, kiddo. It's all in your mind—literally even. Here." He grabbed the Jack from Artie, ignoring Artie's drunken half-hearted protests, and gave it to me.

I took several gulps and a deep breath. "Thanks. That helped. I'm good. Sorry."

"No worries."

"You having some issues there, Kristen?" Monica laughed.

I held up my middle finger. "Why don't you go jump off the bridge?"

"Why don't you?" Monica countered, a sly look appearing on her face.

I raised my eyebrows. "Is that a challenge I hear?"

"Maybe it is. Unless you're a little too strung out on the big, bad weed, of course. Wouldn't want to cause you any psychological damage."

I stood up and noted the spinning I had to overcome to keep from falling over. I glanced down into the river below, hearing JP tell Monica harshly to shut her mouth. JP was afraid of heights. It was about a twenty foot drop into the blackness below. Artie glanced down as well and commented,

“The river here is a couple of dozen feet deep. You could jump without breaking your neck or anything. Shouldn’t be too cold either this time of year.”

“Yeah, the only problem being she can’t see what’s down there before she jumps. Could be rocks, debris, other shit people have dumped into the river. She could smash her fucking skull in,” JP retaliated.

Heather frowned, trying to think rationally through the alcohol. She was borderline passing out, her head now on Artie’s lap, and all she could manage in the way of protest was a sleepy,

“Kris, I don’t know...”

Artie shushed her and he and Monica both looked at me expectantly. I was amused no one had mentioned the fact that we were all drunk and stoned, and that if I drowned in my intoxication, none of them were in any state to get help. JP had crossed his arms in disapproval, but he would not say anything more than offering the facts. JP didn’t believe in fighting battles he knew he would lose.

“Sure,” I said, “I’ll do it.”

Ch. 10

A bullet whizzed past my head. I pressed my body harder against the wall, willing myself to shrink, for my flesh and blood to become one with the pockmarked concrete and barbed wire while still remaining intact. Something a veteran wartime correspondent had once told flashed through my head, and I turned and yelled over the noise to Colin, flattened against the wall beside me,

“As long as you can hear the bullets, you’re not hit!”

Colin looked at me incredulously for a moment, beads of sweat running down his freckled face, and then cracked his trademark goofy smile. “That’s very motherfucking reassuring!” he shouted back.

I could’ve sold my soul for just one puff of a cigarette. A fresh round of machine gun fire sounded into the other side of the wall, courtesy of the Lebanese army. The guerillas returned AK-47 fire above our heads and through little holes in the wall. Somewhere close, a baby wailed even above the noise. Man, I thought, that kid has a hell of a set of lungs on him.

“How are we going to file the story in this nuthouse?” Colin yelled.

Now it was my turn to stare at him incredulously. The guerillas prepared to fire an RPG a few feet away and I clamped my hands over my ears. When the explosion had passed—resulting in apparent chaos on the other side of the wall, judging from the cries echoing over the barbed wire—I shouted back,

“File *what*? Are you crazy? How the fuck do you expect to do that in *this*?”

Colin shrugged and responded, “We have to find a way—isn’t that what we’re doing here?”

I heard the whistling shortly before I heard the cries in Arabic of “mortar!” I grabbed Colin’s arm and yanked him roughly to the ground with me, knocking the wind

out of us. I couldn't draw a breath, but I ignored this detail and threw my arms over my head and listened for the "KA-BOM!" that should occur as the mortar made contact. If I didn't hear it, it had made contact with me and my arms would do my head no good.

We took the back stairs down to what passed as a lobby, but Maha grabbed me before we reached the open and hissed,

"Stay here out of sight until I come back."

I was operating totally on auto-pilot at this current time and nodded silently. I leaned against the dirty wall and watched Maha walk slowly out into the lobby, looking around carefully, and then out the door onto the street. A taxi pulled up and Maha exchanged a few words with the driver. Then she threw my duffel bag into the trunk and hurried back inside. She gestured for me and I followed her to the taxi, taking a quick look backwards at the building as I left. I had a feeling I was never coming back here. We slide into the back seat, and I noted there was also a young man in the passenger seat.

"Maha.." my voice trailed off uncertainly as the taxi pulled into traffic.

She patted my shoulder. "It's ok, I know them—friends of mine. They're our... shall we say, escort. They're just going to make sure we get to where we're going safely. And *habibi*? Don't ask any more questions."

I nodded mutely and she said briskly, "Now then. You're a mess. You can't get onto a plane like this. You're all bloody; is any of it yours?"

I shook my head without actually knowing the answer, but it seemed to please Maha, and she continued, "Good. I didn't think to grab a shirt out of your bag before I put it in the trunk, do you have anything to cover yourself?"

My camouflage jacket had been tied around my waist and conveniently had avoided any bloodstains, and I put it on and zipped it up.

"Ok?"

"Yes, very good. Now, your face and hands..." Maha dug through her purse until she found a packet of tissues and a water bottle.

She wet the tissues and began to gently wipe my cheeks and forehead. The tissues came away solidly red. "Give me your hands," she said quietly. I placed my hands in front of me and Maha scrubbed the blood away from them too.

"Here."

She handed me a brush and lip gloss. I looked at her blankly and Maha explained gently,

"It's important you don't look like you just...It's just good to look normal when you get into the airport, Kristen. So brush your hair and put on the lip gloss and try to look like a tourist, ok?" I complied obediently and she forced a smile when I was done. "Beautiful."

Then we sat in silence with our driver and our escort, both of whom I dimly suspected were heavily armed, and I watched Cairo fly by my streaky window, familiar sights more comfortable to me than home anymore, and felt a lump in my throat for my city. We reached the airport and Maha turned to me.

"I need your gun, Kristen."

I stared at her in confusion until I remembered the 9mil. pistol holstered beneath my tank top. I removed it and handed it to her, noting vaguely that it was still warm to the touch. I will never carry another weapon ever again, I vowed to myself. She nodded her

thanks and tucked it under the seat. Then we both got out of the alleged taxi and Maha grabbed my bag from the trunk. I slung it over my shoulder and we stood staring at each other for a long moment.

"I can't come in with you," she said, "so we need to say our goodbyes here."

I nodded and swallowed hard. "Will you be ok? What about...everything?"

Maha forced a smile. "Don't you worry about that. I've got enough friends in high places. Everything will be taken care of; you're not going to get in any trouble."

"I wasn't talking about me."

A muscle in Maha's jaw twitched and she said roughly, "I'll survive. I, I...I have work that still needs to be done." But her eyes were filling with tears. I stared at her helplessly, unable to absorb any of her pain for fear of drowning under its weight. She threw her arms around me and I hugged her harder than I've ever hugged anyone. "I'll miss you, *habibi*," she whispered, "I don't know what I'll do without you."

"Take care of yourself, Maha. Please. Be safe, for me. I love you." I could barely force enough air past the knot in my throat to form words.

"I, I love you too." Then Maha pulled away, the unshed tears vanished back into her body to keep the grief company. "Now get going out of this hellhole. Go home, Kristen, go find yourself a nice boy and a pretty house and have beautiful little babies and write stories about happy things. Go home and forget about this place."

I opened my mouth to tell her that was impossible, that I would carry this place and its people indelibly in my heart forever, but she was already shooing me towards the airport entrance. The look on her face told me no more words need be said. I took one more look at Maha, recalling several years of memories in a single moment, and walked across the street to the terminal. I turned back as I reached the doors and waved tentatively. She was leaning against the car, a cigarette between her fingers, looking as lost as anyone I'd ever seen. She waved back, flicking ash into the early night sky like a tiny explosion, her mind a thousand miles already gone.

I sat in the tattoo parlor's chair, my crutches leaning against the wall and my palms a bit clammy with nervousness.

"I don't see too many people come in alone," the artist remarked as he prepared his tools, "especially for their first tat."

I shrugged. "This tattoo is just for...just for me. I didn't want to share it with anyone else." That was much closer to the truth that I'd intended to reveal and I frowned in minor irritation at myself.

He nodded. "Sure, I understand that. I won't ask what it means then." I offered him a grateful smile and he said, "Ok, ready?"

I nodded and I felt a sharp prick in my shoulder. It hurt, but it was nothing compared to the pain I'd endured in the last six weeks, and once I called up the memory of the first moments before the ambulance arrived, this pain seemed downright pleasant.

"What did you do to your leg?" he asked conversationally as he etched the ink into my skin.

"Skiing mishap," I lied, shooting a dirty look at my right leg, the weakness of which made strangers ask questions I didn't want to answer.

He chuckled and related a story about how he had shattered his arm skateboarding the previous summer. "Ok there, Kristen, all done. Want to take a look?"

I nodded and looked at my new tattoo in the mirror over my shoulder. The lettering was simple and black, directly under mine left shoulder blade.

Maryland Route 56, it read.

I stared at it for a long moment, burning its image into my mind, then remarked quietly, "Thank you. It's exactly what I needed—I mean, wanted."

The artist smiled and handed me my crutches. He walked me to the door and said with a grin as I left,

"Be careful out there on the ice—and on your skis next time too! I got right back on my board the moment I could; you seem like the type who'll do the same as soon as you're healed up."

I managed a weak smile as I headed into the cold wind, hoping he was wrong and praying I could leave my addiction behind. I had the tattoo now to remind me of the cost.

I woke up with the worst hangover of my entire life. My head felt like someone had bashed it in with a mallet and my stomach felt as if holes had been burned in it with acid, neither of which I was entirely sure hadn't happened. I tried to sit up and a feeble groan escaped my lips. A shape slumped in a chair beside the bed stirred, and I identified the shape as my brother. Jimmy rubbed his eyes and squinted at me in confusion for a moment. Then he shook his head and put on his glasses.

"How're you feeling, Kiki?" he asked softly.

"Like I've been hit by a semi," I responded through a cotton dry mouth.

"That's not a big surprise," he said. "I'm just glad you're awake and talking. Can I get you anything? What will help with a hangover?"

"Water? And some crackers? And Tylenol? Please?"

Jimmy nodded. "Sure. I'll be right back."

While he was gone, I glanced down and noted I was no longer wearing my clothes. Instead, I was clad in someone's loose tee-shirt and sweatpants, presumably Jimmy's. I frowned and wondered who'd undressed me, then couldn't decide what the better of two evils was, my scorned lover or my twin brother. My underwear and bra appeared to be still on, so I decided not to give it much more thought than that. Jimmy reappeared while I was frowning and he said apologetically,

"I'm sorry about the clothes. They're mine. You didn't have any pajamas or anything like that in your bag. Here." He handed me the water and several Tylenol and placed a box of crackers on the nightstand.

I forced down half the bottle of water after swallowing the pills in the hopes they would absorb before the inevitable next-day vomiting began. I remembered a time when I didn't ever have hangovers and sighed. Jimmy sat down on the edge of the bed and said softly, hesitantly,

"JP left a little while ago, said he hopes you feel better." The he swallowed and said, "Kristen, about last night..."

I grimaced. "I don't want to talk about it. I'm sorry. I'm really sorry about everything. I didn't mean to get that drunk. Just lost control for a bit. I'm ok."

Jimmy chewed his lip, desperately trying to meet my eyes and finding my refusal to do so. "Kik..."

He looked utterly at a loss for a long moment, then took a deep breath, summoning, I knew, strength. Jimmy said forcibly,

“Kristen, you show up at Dulles without any warning, drink an entire bottle of whiskey, and spend the entire night vomiting and talking about, about, really horrible things. And then we find out you’re covered in blood and you won’t tell us why, and—“

“Was any of it mine?” I interrupted. “I wasn’t sure.”

Jimmy looked thrown off for a moment at the interruption, and then answered, “Not most of it, as far as we could tell. You had a few cuts on your shoulders. You, you wouldn’t tell us where the rest of it came from. We had to take off your shirt and jeans to see if you were really hurt somewhere and hadn’t told us. Do you have *any idea* how hard that was, Kristen? Thinking any moment I was going to see some horrible injury on you? And then knowing that even though the blood wasn’t yours, something really horrible had happened to you? And not knowing what?”

My brother’s tone was furious, but his voice was breaking even through his attempt at anger. I felt my own heart breaking. I had never wanted to hurt him. I put my head in my hands, as much at a loss as he was.

“I’m so sorry, Jim,” I whispered into my hands, feeling warm tears beginning to trickle through my fingers, as if I should even have any tears left. “I just don’t know what to do.”

“Jesus Christ, Kristen,” he murmured, almost pleading, “neither do I.”

I felt my brother’s arms wrap around me, our respective pains melding together to form something almost insurmountable. I felt like I was going to drown under the weight of my guilt. Then Jimmy pulled back, wiped my cheeks, and forced a smile.

“You know, Kik, I learned way more about your love life than I ever wanted to last night.”

The guilt abruptly vanished under a sudden hailstorm of humiliation and I blushed deeply. “Do I even want to know?”

Jimmy grinned wickedly, though his own cheeks were blushing as well.

“Probably not. But I’m going to tell you anyway. Let’s see: first I found out you and JP, um, slept together. Then I found out he’s apparently very good in bed. And then you announced that Travis liked to have sex in public places, something that you were not a huge fan of.”

My cheeks were on fire and I clamped my hands over my ears. “No more, please!”

“Oh no, you owe me, you’re going to hear it all. Poor JP tried to shut you up, because he was about to die of embarrassment himself, and you told him that it was fine, because you knew perfectly well that I was having sex with Susan, and that you’d seen condoms in my room in high school while I was dating Beth senior year, so clearly I wasn’t a saint either.”

“Oh my God, Jimmy,” I managed, “I am so sorry.”

Jimmy laughed, a genuine one this time, and replied, “I think it’s more JP you owe the apology too—I thought it was hysterical, once I got past the horror of the thought of you even kissing a boy. You were kind of harsh on him last night though, Kris.” Jimmy looked at me searchingly, and added, “I don’t know what went down between the two of you, other than the whole, uh, sex thing, but I think you hurt him pretty bad at some point, hon.”

I winced and agreed softly, “Yeah. I did.” But I couldn’t bring myself to explain how I had broken JP’s heart to my twin, and just shook my head in quiet helplessness.

“What is *that*?” my mother exclaimed in horror as I stood in front of the full-length mirror as we—Susan’s five bridesmaids—tried on dresses.

“What’s what?” I asked, twisting to look over my shoulder and see what she was so upset about.

“That!” my mother snapped, jamming her finger into my back. “Don’t pretend you don’t know it’s there! All that,” she almost spat the word, “Arabic scribble!”

“Oh. That,” I responded, frowning.

I had legitimately forgotten about the tattoos on my left shoulder, the collection which I had been adding to for several years now. I tried to remember how many places were now scrawled across my flesh and came up with four: Cairo, Baghdad, Mosul, and of course, beneath them, marking the beginning, or perhaps the end, Maryland Route 59. Only the first three were visible in the dress’s cut.

“Had you really never seen those before?” I asked my mother. “I never tried to cover them up or anything.”

That wasn’t entirely true—I had specifically gotten the first tattoo low enough on my back, just below my shoulder blade, that it was not visible in anything except a bikini, which I hadn’t worn in years. That tattoo had been inked in a time when I was trying to change what I was. The next three were a resignation.

“Not trying to cover them up, huh?” my mother laughed harshly. “Oh come on, Kristen, don’t patronize me! Just because you’re some big shot journalist now does not make me stupid! You never wear anything but tee-shirts.”

I turned around to face my mother, angry almost that she thought the tee-shirt wearing was for her benefit. I wore tee-shirts when I was home because after spending months at a time in strict Muslim countries, it was all I felt comfortable in. I opened my mouth to tell her this, but caught the looks on everyone else’s faces. The shop had fallen quiet and my future sister-in-law was staring at me with a look that questioned the family she was about to marry into. I bit my tongue and said as calmly as I could,

“I never attempted to cover them up, Mom, but even if I did, that is my prerogative. I am an independent, responsible adult and I reserve the right to do what I want with my body. I’m sorry if they upset you, but they are important to me.”

My mother still looked unhappy, but her face softened slightly and she said, “I’m sorry too, honey, I didn’t mean to overreact. I just...what about your own wedding someday? Are you really going to want those showing in your wedding dress?”

I stared blankly at my mother for a few seconds, recalling the explosions, bullets, blood, and tears that were barely contained under the surface of my shoulder’s ink, and attempted to process the concept of a wedding through all that. She was smiling, my mother who had been a good parent, given me everything I’d ever wanted or needed, asked for little in return. But I was unable to stop the maniacal laughter that frightened everyone, including me.

I stood on the edge of the train trestle, JP holding my shoes and the rest of my friends standing silently behind me, feeling the wind rustle my hair. The moment before you do something death-defying is actually the best part of the rush. That last split second, when you can still turn back, when every single cell in your body is screaming that this is terrible idea, when you say *fuck you* to all rationality in pursuit of another hit

of adrenalin, is borderline orgasmic. A large chunk of the excitement is lost once the decision is ironclad and you are no longer in control. I relaxed my muscles, took a deep breath, and smiled. Then I leapt into the blackness.

I hit the water like a bullet, so hard it knocked the breath out of my lungs as the force of my jump propelled my body deep into the black water. Now lacking air, I flailed towards the surface frantically, but in my drunken state, my perception of distance and space was a mess, and I couldn't figure out which way was up. My lungs began to scream for air and my flailing grew more desperate. Two red dots appeared in front of my eyes. Huh, I thought rather calmly, I didn't actually anticipate that I'd drown tonight. Then I broke the surface of the water, gasping and spitting water. People were screaming and it took my oxygen-deprived brain a moment to figure out what was going on. I realized my friends were all screaming my name from above me.

"KRISTEN! KRIS, ARE YOU OK? KRISTEN?!?"

"Yeah," I tried to shout up weakly, but my voice didn't carry very far.

"I heard her voice," I heard JP tell the others. Then he yelled down to me, "Get to the bank, you motherfucking dumbass! We're coming down now; wait for us."

I swam slowly to the shore and dragged myself onto the bank. My entire body ached, but the rest of me felt good, another dance with death successfully completed. That rush would hold me for awhile now; I wouldn't start getting antsy for another big hit until the closing days of summer. I smiled in contentment at this realization. My friends appeared moments later, pulling me to my feet. The girls were both hugging me, Heather crying and Monica apologizing profusely. Artie was grinning.

"That was a hell of a jump, Kristen," he chuckled.

"Don't fucking encourage her," JP grumbled as he handed me my shoes. "Come on, Kristen, let's get going home."

"JP, what about your clothes?" Monica asked. "Don't want to walk home half-naked, do you?"

I frowned and looked at JP. He had been wearing clothes when I'd jumped, but now he was only wearing his boxers. He nodded and pulled back on his jeans, shoes, and tee-shirt.

"Let's go, Kris. We'll see you guys tomorrow. Be safe getting home."

I forgot about JP's brief nudity and obediently followed him back to his house. I wouldn't be going home tonight; my parents didn't know I drank, let alone smoked pot, let alone jumped into rivers in the middle of the night. They thought I was at Heather's graduation sleepover. Artie's parents thought he was at a ROTC buddy's house, and Heather's parents thought she was at a cheerleading send-off. In reality, Heather would probably crash in Artie's car with him until he was sober enough to drive and she was sober enough to sneak in. Monica would walk home now, for no one at her house gave a fuck where she was or what state she came home in. JP's parents didn't know precisely where he was, but they could guess what he was up to. They just didn't particularly find it a major source of concern; JP always found his way home safely, often with me in tow.

We went in through the backdoor of JP's house and upstairs to his room. He shut the door and flicked on a small light, then rummaged through his drawers until he found a tee-shirt and mesh shorts.

"Here. Some dry clothes. I'll turn my back."

I tipped over several times in the process of getting off my wet clothes and into JP's dry ones. When I finished, I collapsed onto JP's small bed and stretched lazily. JP turned around and protested,

"What makes you think you're sleeping in my bed, bitch? I'm not sleeping on my own floor!"

I knew he was kidding. In the several dozen times our evening activities had necessitated my crashing at his house, JP had always given me the bed and taken the sleeping bag on the floor. I yawned sleepily and said,

"You can sleep in the bed too if you want. I'll move over." I scooted over and offered him some of the blanket.

JP looked taken back for a long moment, then hesitantly laid down beside me, careful not to touch my body. He reached over and shut out the little lamp, and we laid in silence in the darkness. I abruptly felt something I had never felt while with JP, in all the years I'd known him. An attraction of sorts. It almost seemed as though there was some sort of sexual tension passing between us in the single bed. I frowned and couldn't wrap my addled brain around the concept. So I gave up and chalked it up to drunken horniness, and after another uncomfortable moment, it had passed.

I was almost asleep when JP's voice reached over quietly, "Kristen...you scare me sometimes."

I roused myself slightly. "Huh?"

"You just do...with the stuff you do. I don't understand. You could've died tonight in that river, over a stupid dare. You don't drink too often, but when you do, you always drink enough to risk hurting yourself. You drive way too fast for no reason. You take the most dangerous paths you can when you go skiing. You sit on your roof during thunderstorms. I sometimes think...I think that sometimes you're trying to get yourself killed."

I tensed at this accusation and found I had no answers prepared. Instead, I said lightly, "You're drunk, JP. So am I. We should go to sleep."

JP nodded in the darkness, acknowledging the truth of that statement, but his silence told me he was waiting for an actual answer regardless. I leaned my head against his shoulder, something I never would have done sober and something I'd never done before.

"I don't know, JP," I whispered, "I'm sorry for scaring you."

JP touched my hair hesitantly, briefly, and said, "I'm not asking for apologies, Kris. I'm just worried about you. I wonder if...I wonder if something ever happened...to you...that maybe you're trying to maybe deal with in the wrong way?"

I sighed heavily. It would make poor JP's life—and mine—so much easier if I could just offer him that explanation—a death in the family when I was young, abuse as a child, rape in time before he knew me, something to make my insanity valid. But I had nothing to give him.

"No," I said into the darkness, "nothing ever happened. I'm just...I'm just like this, JP. I'm not normal. I just need...need the adrenalin, I guess. I'm sorry."

"Can you stop needing it? Does it go away?"

JP felt my head shake a mournful "no" against his shoulder, and there was a long silence. Then he touched my hair again said softly, "Ok, Kris, ok. I guess I'll just have to

make sure your addiction doesn't take you," this next part was murmured, not meant for my ears and probably never meant to be spoken out loud, "away from me."

We both fell asleep soon after, my head still on his shoulder. We awoke awkwardly, muttering red-faced apologies to find ourselves so close, and never spoke of the previous night's conversation. It didn't hit me until years later why JP had taken his clothes off on the trestle. He had stripped the moment I'd leapt, preparing to jump in after me.

I stood with Colin behind the lines the Israeli army had set up, assessing the situation silently amid the dozens of other journalists and photogs milling around. Colin's eyes were wide with excitement, but I could almost see wheels spinning in his head and couldn't help but wonder what he was thinking about. Time was of the essence—the atmosphere was tense, and everyone knew it would only be a matter of hours before the military stormed the mosque. Negotiations had broken down and the firebrand sheikh holed up in one of the most important sites for two monotheistic religions had avowed his intention to spill his martyr's blood on the holy ground. His would not be the only blood that would stain the ancient stones, that much was for certain. I had already filed the standard "this is what's happening" breaking news stories, and now my only duty was to sit around and wait with all the other journalists for the next headline. But I had never been one to wait around. I could already feel myself growing restless. I motioned to Colin and we stepped several feet away from the crowd.

"I've got a plan," I said quietly.

He waited silently, and I continued, "See those women over there? The veiled ones crying? They're our in. I think they're some of the wives and mothers of the militants inside the mosque. We need to go talk to them."

Colin frowned slightly and questioned, "But don't you think everyone else has already tried that? If they wanted to talk, wouldn't they have done it by now?"

"Look around at the types we're dealing with here, Colin. I mean the journalists, not the women. Brash, arrogant, uncovered, mostly men, non-Arabic speakers. That's not the way to get a Muslim woman to talk to you. I'm going to try a different way. You need to stay here though."

Colin opened his mouth to protest and I cut him off. "It's nothing personal. You're a man. They won't talk with you around. I swear, I'm not going to cut you out of this. I'll come back as soon as I get some information."

Colin still looked unhappy, but he nodded his understanding. I buttoned the final button on my loose shirt and pulled a scarf from my bag. I tied it around my hair and neck and headed towards the small group of distraught women. They tensed when they saw me approaching, weary of being harassed by Westerners. I stopped before I got too close and said in Arabic,

"*Salam waylakum*, sisters. My name is Kristen."

They looked at me suspiciously. With my blonde hair covered, my desert-tanned skin could easily allow me to pass as a Palestinian. But my aim was not to deceive.

"Who are you?" one of them, clearly the spokeswoman, asked, stepping forward a bit.

"I'm a journalist, sister."

"Are you Palestinian?"

“No, sister, I’m not.”

“You speak Arabic.”

“Yes. I’ve lived in Egypt and Iraq for several years.”

She hadn’t asked if I was American and I didn’t plan to volunteer the information. She continued to look at me closely, but she hadn’t turned away either.

“I am a friend,” I added softly after a moment.

A long minute passed while I held my breath, then she stepped back into the group and beckoned me closer. There were almost a dozen women of varying ages, and several children. The women, regardless of their years, bore expressions of silent suffering and resignation, while the children sat quietly at their feet with eyes entirely too old for their little faces.

“What do you want from us?”

“To tell your story,” I replied. “You’re the wives and mothers of the men inside, the grandmothers and mothers of their children. You suffer as much as your men, but silently. Who are you? Who are your children? Who are the men you shed tears for?”

“Why should we trust—” the spokeswoman started to ask, but she was cut off by the youngest looking member of the group, whose words flowed out in a desperate, breathy rush.

“My name is Nawal al-Abeer. I am seventeen. My husband of one year, Mahmud, is in there with the sheikh. This,” she stroked the head of a tiny baby in her thin arms, “is our son, Mohammed. Please, can you help my husband?”

The spokeswoman stared at her, though not unkindly, and Nawal bowed her head in apology. But her eyes didn’t leave my face.

“I have no authority with the Israelis, sister,” I said gently. “I can’t get your husband out safely from the mosque. All I can offer is a chance to tell the world about his life.”

Nawal’s eyes were brimming with tears, but she summoned her strength and nodded. “My husband is a good man,” she stated quietly, “he is a good Muslim and a good father and a good husband. I want everyone to know that.”

Forty-five minutes later, the names and lives of six of the men whose fates had been sealed the moment they entered the mosque, six men who were leaving behind a total of four mothers, six wives, and fifteen children, were preserved in my notebook. It would not be an adrenalin-inducing story, it would not produce breaths of surprise amongst the Post’s readers, it would not make the evening cable news. But it was truth, and I was satisfied with it.

I was almost back to Colin when I heard footsteps behind me. I turned sharply to see Nawal following me. She reached me and whispered urgently,

“Kristen, I know a way in, if you want to meet the men in your story.”

Ch. 11

My brother’s wedding reception was in full swing. Everyone was grinning with just a bit too much alcohol in them, and the dance floor was a scene of merriment for all. Tyler was wandering around, seemingly wanting to chat up all the guests, when in fact I knew he was actually swiping half-filled champagne glasses, left unattended by their owners. He caught my eye and winked before furtively drinking one three-quarters of the

way full in a single, impressive sip. I leaned back in my chair and watched my grandfather attempt to teach Mary swing dance. Mary had one or two too many glasses of champagne, and she kept tripping, to the infinite amusement of my grandfather. I needed a cigarette, but I was unwilling to leave the reception even for a few minutes. Everyone looked so happy, and I was enjoying the warmth created by so much goodwill. It wasn't often I was in a crowded place where the people's smiles weren't marred by the fear a suicide bomber had marked their celebration for death. I winced slightly at the thought of going back to Iraq. I'd been there almost a year, and I was more than a little fatigued. But if I didn't go back, no one else would replace me. And if I didn't go back, what else would I do? It was a little late for covering high school sports. I rubbed the bridge of my nose, then drained the rest of my champagne.

JP was dancing with Kat. She had been sitting shyly in the corner earlier, unwilling to go onto the dance floor alone and even more unwilling to ask the boy she'd brought to the wedding as "just a friend" to dance with her. JP, ever the white knight, had asked her to dance with him, laughing that he was too chicken to go out there by himself and I was too much of a bitch to dance with him. That was an oversimplification of facts, but too much truth for me to argue. JP leaned in and said something in her ear, and she blushed and giggled. I smiled; he had probably just told her how pretty she looked. They both looked over at me and I blew a kiss towards them, not really knowing which one I meant it for. Perhaps both, even though it was a cruelty to let JP think it was for him at this point.

The song ended and JP bowed to her and headed for the bar. Kat sat down beside me, grinning and her face flushed from the dance.

"Hey honey," I greeted her, "you looked good out there. You didn't get my inability to dance, I see."

Kat laughed. "You can too dance. I remember at Heather's wedding, you danced. You just won't anymore."

Heather, as I had predicted, had gotten married shortly after college, to the quarterback of the UNC football team. She had invited my entire family to the huge wedding. JP, Monica, and I had all gone, but Artie had been deployed in Afghanistan at the time. It had probably been for the best. No, I agreed silently, I don't dance anymore.

"I got an email from her the other day," I said, "she's pregnant with her second kid already—apparently it's going to be a little girl—and wanted my opinion on the name Madison. Her first kid's named Conrad."

Kat wrinkled her nose. "Conrad? What a terrible name. Poor kid."

I raised my eyebrows. "Isn't that the name of the boy you like?"

"No, his name is *Conner*!"

"Conner, eh? Thought he was here with you as 'just friends'?" I asked slyly, barely containing my grin.

Kat turned bright red. "You tricked me!" she exclaimed in horror. "My own sister!"

"He's a cute one, Kat, and very polite. I like him. And he was definitely staring at you and JP when you were dancing together. Looked pretty jealous if you ask me."

Kat's annoyance at being tricked vanished in her sudden interest in this new revelation. "Really?" she inquired, trying to look nonchalant. "How jealous?"

“Very. I think you should ask him to dance. Pick a faster one, so it’s not too awkward for the first one.”

A few minutes later, Kat was laughing and dancing with Conner, and I crept stealthy over to the deejay. I explained my request, and after two fast-paced songs, a pretty, slow song came on. Kat looked startled; usually the deejay announced the slow songs before they were played. Now it was too late to get off the dance floor, and Conner pulled her close, grinning goofily in a combination of glee and awkwardness. I smiled to myself and sat back down. Kat caught my eye over Conner’s shoulder, and I winked. It was nice to be able to be a good older sister, even if only for a few hours.

My cell phone vibrated in my pocket during fourth period history class. I glanced around and covertly glanced at the text I’d just received.

Need cig, wana cut 5th w/ me and smoke?

Sure, I texted back to JP, meet u b/h bleachers in 10

I ran into JP as we both headed down the back hallway of the school towards the athletic fields.

“Fuck,” I swore as we reached the early fall air, “it’s so fucking cold! I hate the fucking cold!”

JP laughed. “I knew you were going to say that. Why do you never think to bring your jacket, dumbass?”

“I’m going to move to the friggin’ desert someday, I swear to God,” I muttered, rubbing my hands together and blowing into them.

JP laughed again and pulled out his pack as we neared the bleachers. “I assume you didn’t bring any of your own?”

The question was merely a formality; we’d been friends for a year now, and smoking together almost as long, and not once had I ever had my own pack.

“Yeah, yeah, shut up. I’ve got gum for after we smoke; it’s a fair deal.”

JP pulled out two cigarettes, and, ever the gentleman under his shaggy hair and lazy smile, lit mine first, as he always did. I took a drag and suddenly noticed we were not alone under the bleachers. This happened occasionally, that some other degenerates would join us, but I was surprised at the two we happened to run into this afternoon.

“Um, hi,” I said.

Heather clamped her hand over her mouth to muffle her small squeal of surprise, and her cheeks began to turn red. Then I noticed a joint in her hand and began to giggle to myself. The most popular sophomore in the class, varsity cheerleader, beloved by all, with a squeaky-clean image, smoking pot behind the bleachers during fifth period—why, it was hysterical. With...I cast a glance at her companion and vaguely recognized her as a girl who hung with the theater crowd. Her hair was dyed black, her makeup was severe, and her clothes were almost entirely black as well. I began to sort through my mental catalogue for a name for her, but my thoughts were interrupted by finding myself abruptly shoved into a support column.

“Listen,” the girl—Monica, that was her name; my mind was never one to falter under pressure—spat, her face centimeters from mine, “you say one word, I mean one motherfucking word, and I swear to God—”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa, everyone, just chill out for a sec,” JP implored, putting one hand hesitantly on Monica’s shoulder.

She spun around to face him. “Don’t you fucking touch me, asshole!”

JP held up his hands innocently. “Dude, just relax. It’s no big; we’re not going to tell anyone—I mean, fuck, we’re out here too, aren’t we?”

Heather spoke up softly. “He’s right, M, it’s fine. They’re not going to say anything. It’s fine.”

Monica’s shoulders relaxed slightly, but she remained hostilely facing JP. My cigarette was burning away idly in my hand, and I figured since no one was currently paying attention to me, there was hardly a point in letting it go to waste. I took a furtive drag and grinned at poor JP over Monica’s shoulder, trapped helplessly between the hottest girl in our class on one side and some crazy theater bitch on the other.

“Oh man...I guess this is a bad time, huh? Man, I really need this fucking smoke though...”

Everyone looked over at this sudden new voice. Another sophomore had entered our little battle circle, this one dressed in our school’s JROTC uniform, talking through a cigarette dangling from his lips. I decided the situation officially couldn’t get anymore ridiculous, and began to giggle out loud. Everyone turned and stared at me. I exhaled smoke and shrugged.

“Oh come on, guys. This is friggin’ ridiculous, you can’t deny it.”

JP began to smile and agreed. “Yeah, dude, lets all just smoke, ok?”

He settled down on the ground and took a drag. I sat down beside him, and after a goofy smile and a shrug, the JROTC boy sat down as well. He offered his hand to JP and then me.

“Name’s Artie Eisner.”

“JP Fawk.”

“Kris Wilson. Nice to meet ya.”

After hesitating for a moment, Heather sat down gingerly on the ground as well and offered us a tentative smile. “I’m Heather Crayman,” she said, and I remember thinking her voice was surprisingly soft for a cheerleader.

“Oh, I *know*,” JP and Artie both said at the same and Heather turned bright pink as they began to laugh.

Shy too, I thought, how odd.

She patted the ground beside her. “Come on, M, sit down.”

After studying us suspiciously for another moment, Monica sat down as well. She didn’t introduce herself, but instead passed the joint to JP. He glanced at me, shrugged, and smiled, and with that inhalation, our little circle of friends was born.

“Your sister is worried about you,” I said to Maha as we sat in a dark corner of a rundown bar among several bottles of Stella, “and frankly, so am I.”

Maha blew a few rings as she exhaled shisha smoke and looked me directly in the eyes. “You’re one to talk,” she challenged, “Heba shaves years off her life with all the worrying she does about you.”

I winced but didn’t try to defend myself on that. I knew it was true enough. Instead, I countered calmly, “Come on, Maha, it’s not the same thing and you know it. I’m doing my job, and sometimes it’s dangerous, but I can’t do anything about that. If I didn’t, no one would know or care about what was going on here. Heba understands that, even though she worries. What you’re doing, she doesn’t understand. If something

happens to me, she knows why and what it was for. If you don't come home one night, she won't even know where to begin looking for you."

"Would you?" Maha questioned.

"Probably. I could find out, if I was so inclined."

"You know what I'm doing, then?"

"I have my suspicions."

"But you haven't told Heba?" Maha looked surprised.

I shook my head. "No. It wasn't my place to tell her. You're her sister. You need to talk to her, explain at least a little. It would make her feel a lot better if she just understood why."

"And if I don't?" Maha raised her chin defiantly.

I shrugged. "Then you don't. I'll tell her I talked to you and you wouldn't tell me anything. But just keep in mind, Maha, that this is your sister, the woman who's given up everything to take care of you, who loves you more than anything. It's not fair to keep her suffering in the dark."

A tense moment of silence passed between us until Maha grumbled, "You damn journalist types, always with your noses in everyone else's business."

But her face was without anger, and she passed me the shisha.

JP and I were still lying in my childhood bed together when we heard the car pull in the driveway. He stirred and said,

"Your family is home. Guess we should get dressed and such pretty quickly, eh? Could be more than a little bit awkward otherwise."

He grinned at me and I nodded my agreement. But I didn't move for a long moment. I had a bad feeling the second we parted, we would never be able to be this way again. It had felt surprisingly good to lie against him, listening to his heartbeat and feeling his breathing. There was no associated adrenaline rush, no fix, nothing to quicken my pulse and heighten my senses. Yet somehow, defying everything I had come to accept as my life, it was nice. For a moment, I almost felt as if I could have laid beside JP forever and been utterly content. But my family's arrival wouldn't wait for me to enjoy these last few seconds, and I reluctantly got out of bed and began quickly pulling my clothes back on. We went downstairs and sat down on the couch. JP clicked on the TV, and settled back, looking as if he'd been comfortably watching Nick at Night all evening. He caught my eye, grinned, and smoothed down my hair.

"You had some pretty nice sex hair going on there, Kris," he chuckled.

I smiled back while the concept that I had just slept with my best friend began to uncomfortably sink in.

My family walked in the front door, and I gritted my teeth, asking for the strength I always needed during these reunions and never ever received. After several painful minutes of hugging and interrogation, I was able to escape for a few moments to walk JP out. We got to his car and stopped. I paused, and he leaned in to kiss me softly.

"I'll call you tomorrow, k?" he said. He was smiling, happy.

I nodded without speaking, and he got into his car. He beeped as he left my driveway, and I waved a little, forgetting he couldn't see my gesture in the dark. I exhaled heavily and ran a hand through my hair, recalling without my willing it the feel

of his fingers in my hair. I was suddenly very sober, and very afraid of what I had just done.

TO: kwilson@washpost.com, jp_fawk@mastersoninsurance.com,
strvingactres19@gmail.com

FROM: armyartie9@yahoo.com

SUBJ: an email update courtesy of the united states fucking army

Hey guys,

Monica, I don't even know why I bother sending these emails to you, since god knows where the fuck you are. Haven't heard from you since when, after my first tour? But I guess I'm a creature of habit, and hell, it's not like I've got a ton of other friends to write to. Shoot me an email sometime and just let me know you're alive, alright? Kris and JP, how's things with you guys? JP, how's the insurance business treating ya? Can't say I ever expected to see that one man! Bet they drug-test too, don't they? Remember how you all made fun of me that summer before I enlisted? As they say around here, payback's a real motherfucker, haha. You still dating that Melissa chick? Been awhile now for you two, huh? Ya ain't thinking marriage yet, are you? I watch all my guys get married around here really young, and just always seems to end badly. Kris, how about you? How's Egypt? Can't believe you managed to weasel your way into that mess! You've been there awhile now, haven't ya? Over a year, right? Get your ass home woman! Even the fucking army doesn't keep us here much past a year—ya get mad fucked up if ya hang around arabs that long, haha. Sorry the emails are so infrequent...I'm an important bastard now that I'm a friggin staff sarge now, haha. I'm sure you guys heard Heather's getting married, right? To that football player dude she was dating for awhile there. She told me last time I called. Good for her, right? Shake his hand for me next time you see him—she deserves nothing but the best. I won't be able to make the wedding, probably. She said it'll be sometime early next year, and rumor has it we'll be back in A-stan by then. Bullshit, man, I like the iraqis better, haha. In other news, they're extending us over here in good ol' al-iraquia for another few months. Looks like I'll be missing yet another Christmas. Whatever, ya know. I know I was saying I was gonna get out after this tour, but, eh, I think I'll sign the reenlistment papers. Why not, right? I don't know what I would do anyway. Not much to come home for these days. Well, that's the end of my internet time kids, so I'll be going. Take care of yourselves and thanks for staying in touch. Means a lot, ya know.

ARTIE

My family all went home after waving goodbye to the happy couple headed for the airport and their honeymoon flight to the Bahamas. Everyone was in a good mood. The wedding and reception had been lovely, Kat was still beaming from her dance with Conner, my parents were holding hands and looking younger than they had in years, and

Mary's new boyfriend, Chad, seemed to be getting along with everyone. He was the first non-meatheaded frat boy she'd ever brought home—well, reformed frat boy, as he himself pointed out with a quick laugh when my brother had noticed the Greek letters tattooed on his upper arm. My father turned on the television.

"Who's up for some late night TV?" he asked, settling into his easy chair.

Kat grabbed my arm and pulled me slightly back into the hallway. "Kris, I've got something to tell you." Her face was glowing.

I leaned in. "What's up, babe?"

"Conner *kissed* me!" she whispered.

I grinned back. "Oh yeah? Tongue or no tongue?"

Kat blushed and smacked me lightly. "Ew, Kristen! You can't ask that!" she squealed.

"Oh my Gosh," I heard my mother gasp.

Kat's eyebrows went up and we both stepped back into the living room. The late night news was on and the newscaster was talking.

"...This is a breaking news update. Again, if you're just joining us, it appears that Palestinian terrorists under the direction of Sheikh Qasim Mustafa al-Jabeer have taken control of a significant part of the Al-Asqa Mosque in Jerusalem. The Al-Asqa Mosque is one of the most important holy sites in Islam and the site is also extremely holy to Jews, who regard the site as..."

"Shit," Chad remarked, "that sounds pretty bad."

My cell phone began to ring at that moment. Everyone's head whipped towards me from the television instantly. I glanced down at it. It was my editor. I swallowed.

"Go ahead," my mother said in a strained voice, "answer it."

I hit "answer" and said, "Hi Ed."

"Kristen, I'm sorry to bother you, I know it's your brother's wedding today, I waited as long as I could—"

"What's the deal?" I interrupted.

"Well, I have good news and bad news for you. You're getting on a plane for Israel in two hours. You need to check in with David Eli, who's our Jerusalem Chief; I sent an email to your Blackberry with his contact information."

"What's the bad news?"

Mr. Greene sighed and I could picture him rubbing his bald spot in frustration. "That *was* the bad news, Kristen. The good news is, you've just been promoted. Congratulations, you're now a Middle East Bureau Chief. Essentially, it's just a shiny new title and a raise, because you're currently a roving journalist, but it's in recognition of the work you did for the Post in Cairo and Baghdad."

"Hmm, I don't remember putting in for that particular position. Interesting on both counts, Ed. Thanks. I'll call you when I get there."

I hung up and my family looked at me expectantly. There was a tense silence, and I glanced at Mary's new boyfriend. Poor bastard, I thought, some welcome to the family. On the television screen, CNN was broadcasting images of past violence in the troubled region.

"Well, the good news is, I'm not going back to Iraq for awhile," I said lightly. Ah, a change of pace from car bombs. I glanced at the screen and couldn't force down the excitement at the new assignment. I'd never dealt with the Palestinians before, and I'd

heard some crazy things from correspondents who'd spent time there. This should be interesting. My baby sister's horrified voice cut my pleasure short.

"You, you're not going...going *there*, are you, Kristen?" Kat asked, her eyes huge with fear.

I grimaced and put my hand on her shoulder. "Honey, it's my job—"

"So get a different job!" she snapped at me, shaking my hand off sharply.

I'd never actually seen Kat angry before and I resisted the urge to back up.

"Kiddo, you don't understand. I have to go, my paper needs me over ther—"

"Did it ever *fucking* occur to you that maybe *we* need you *here*?" she yelled.

"Katrina, relax," my mother said, her voice much calmer than it normally was when I announced these things. "Yelling at her won't change anything. Come here," she put her arms out for a hug, but Kat remained glaring at me with more hostility than I'd ever felt from any enemy.

"Kat, please," I tried again, but she stepped away from me too.

"Don't touch me. Don't come near me. You are such a liar, Kristen. You come home and like to play big sister every few months, and then you just disappear. I don't mean anything to you. None of us do."

Stung, I protested feebly, "Hon, you know that's not true. I, I love you guys."

"Then prove it," she challenged. Kat put her hand on her hip and said, "Stay here."

I opened my mouth and could find no words. I waited for someone to tell her I couldn't do that, to explain for me, but no one did. Looking around, I realized that secretly, my family was all hoping that Kat had gotten through to me, that I couldn't possibly bear to break my little sister's heart by getting on that plane. Maybe I could stay, I suddenly thought, maybe I should call Ed and tell him I can't do this anymore. They won't fire me. I could get a job on the domestic desk easily. I could still write. I could be around for Jimmy and Sue's first pregnancy, I could be here for Mary's college graduation, I could be around to help Kat get ready for her prom, I could teach Tyler how to drive stick shift like he wanted. I could call JP and maybe we could work through things. I could go back to grad school at night and rent a little apartment in DC and buy Ikea furniture and reconnect with Monica and Artie and Heather and...I could avoid breaking my little sister's heart. I swallowed the knot in my throat harshly. And eventually the addiction would grow more insistent for a fix until it suffocated me and turned me into a bitter unsatisfied old woman with a drinking problem.

"It's not that simple," I said weakly.

I saw a change take place on Kat's face. Slowly, all the fear and anger vanished, replaced by a mask of virtual nothingness. I recognized that look. It was a look Travis too had been able to conjure, to shut off everything and say nothing but the pure unfiltered truth. That look had always meant pain, and I tried to brace myself.

"Fine then," she said coldly, "Go. But do us all a favor and don't come back. We don't need your cameo appearances."

My bracing had been for naught, and I felt hot tears begin their brimming in my eyes. I turned away and went upstairs. I had to pack. Jerusalem wouldn't wait for my personal crises.

Twenty minutes later, I threw my backpack across my shoulders and picked up my duffel bag. Kat's door was shut tight. I knocked softly.

“Kat?”

There was no response, and after a minute, I hung my head in defeat. I went back downstairs to find my family having a conversation that stopped when I entered the kitchen.

“I’m out of here,” I announced roughly. “I’ll see you all in a few months.”

My mother hugged me hard. “Call me when you get there, ok? I love you.”

“I love you too. I will.”

My dad got up from his chair and gave me a brief hug and a peck on the top of my head. As always, he said gruffly, “Take care of yourself. Be safe. And don’t forget to call your mother.”

“I love you too, Dad.”

Mary hugged me for a long moment. To my surprise, I realized her eyes were wet. “Kris, she doesn’t mean it. She’s just a scared little kid. Please, promise me you’ll come home,” she whispered in my ear.

I had sworn to myself years before never to make any promises like that to anyone, and instead I said, “Tell her I said bye, ok? And that I’m really sorry.”

Mary nodded and finally released me, almost reluctantly, and Chad extended his large hand. “Hey, I know we just met and all, but good luck over there, Kristen. Keep your head down, huh?”

“Thanks, Chad. I will. Treat my sister good, or I’ll come back and declare jihad on your ass, ok?” He grinned, and Mary even smiled a little.

Tyler eyed me with a smile that was all-too-knowing and gave me a perfunctory hug. There would be no “be careful’s” from him—I had the unnerving sense that my 16-year-old brother knew this trip was exactly what I wanted, or needed, or both.

I forced a relaxed smile, waved, and walked out the door to my waiting taxi. Something struck me and I darted back inside. All of their heads jerked up hopefully and I said,

“Don’t tell Jimmy when he calls, ok? I don’t want to ruin his honeymoon. Just make up something until he gets home.”

Then I left again, for good this time, and tried in vain to erase the looks of dashed hope on their faces from my mind.

Pain. Lots and lots of pain. Stretchers, people in white, anxious voices fading in and out, and a threatening darkness that hovered at the edge of my vision, seeming to almost...beckon me to it...Earlier there had been flashing lights which I hadn’t liked at all, but the pain hadn’t been as bad then I thought.

“Kristen! Come on, Kristen, stay with us, stay...” the voice imploring me was unfamiliar and so I ignored it. The darkness was so tempting...

I found my vision clearing for a moment and I noted an IV in my arm, along with the rather upsetting fact that I wasn’t wearing any clothes. I made an upset noise to try and tell these people about the nakedness issue and found a tube in my throat. Tears began to slide down my cheeks at my helplessness.

“It’s alright, sweetheart, don’t cry, everything’s going to be just fine,” a large black nurse crooned at me, stroking my hair back.

My vision began to cloud again, and the hovering darkness seemed to offer an alternative to this miserable nakedness and pain. I thought I heard the nurse ask in a low, urgent voice,

“Does she have any family on the way?”

I couldn’t make out the response; the darkness was starting to impact my hearing, and the pain was happily lessening. The space that awaited seemed nice and I resented the machines that had abruptly begun to beep rather frantically—they were marring the quiet. Then,

“Where is she? I’m looking for Kristen Wilson! I got a call from here, saying she was hurt—shit, *Kristen!*”

There was a flurry of movement, and doors banging, and voices saying, “Sir, sir, you can’t go into the ER, a doctor will be with you shortly, sir, sir, please!”

Then his voice was close by my head, and I could sense my brother’s presence through the darkness. His hands gripping mine hurt, but the pain I could hear in his voice was a thousand times worse.

“*Fuck, Kiki, please, please don’t die, you can’t die, I, I can’t, I can’t have you do that, I love you, please God—*” There were tears on my face now that weren’t my own, and I wished I could summon the strength to grip his hands back, or at least to open my eyes for him.

The ER staff finally got a physical grip on Jimmy, and I felt his hands leave mine. I made a tiny noise of protest as his fingers slipped away, and I could feel my twin’s heart breaking with a terrible sob as they led him away from me. The darkness didn’t seem as appealing now as I realized it was a place my brother could not follow.

“Well, they’re saying we need to clear the camp. Noncombatants have a half an hour window to get out before the army seals off the exits and we’re locked down with the guerillas,” I said to Colin by way of greeting.

He roused himself from his “bed” on the hard-packed dirt floor of the refugee camp and I handed him a cup. “Here, some instant coffee. It tastes like hell, but it’ll get the job done.”

“That’s what we used to say about Everclear when I was a freshman,” Colin muttered as he accepted the cup.

I laughed and continued, “So, needless to say, everyone is clearing out. I just got off the phone with Ed, and of course he said to follow the herd and get our asses back to Beirut.”

Colin chugged half his coffee in a single gulp, made a hideous grimace, and replied, “We’re not leaving, are we.”

There was no actual question in his words and I grinned. “What do you want to do, Colin?” I knew what his answer would be—Colin had been my photographer, my partner in crime, ever since Jerusalem, and I would not work with anyone else—but I always asked anyway.

“We leave and the Lebanese can come in here and blow the entire camp to shreds, claiming every Palestinian in here was a terrorists, because obviously, they didn’t clear out in the wonderful half hour they were given with nowhere to go,” Colin stated. “We stay and they can still blow the camp away, but everyone will know what happened. Assuming, of course, we survive to tell the tale.”

I nodded, acknowledging the truth in his words. My photographer had humanitarian concerns I frequently overlooked, and while occasionally I found them to get in my way, I usually found myself grateful to him for reminding me of the world outside my story and my fix.

“That’s always the assumption I operate under,” I replied. “I mean, hell, we’re the guys who walked into the fucking Al-Asqa Mosque under siege and walked out with the story.”

Colin grinned and finished the rest of his coffee. This time he didn’t grimace.

“Ooh-rah, boss.”

The sound of a bell going off invaded my dreams. I ignored it and then a hand was touching my shoulder and a voice was saying hesitantly,

“Um, Kristen? The fire alarm is going off. I think we, um, need to leave the building.”

I rolled over, extremely annoyed, to face my freshman year roommate. “Did you honestly wake me up over a motherfucking fire alarm? The frats pull them every godddamn weekend! It’s like twenty fucking degrees outside; there’s no way in hell I’m going out there.”

Poor Jill winced. She was a nice, quiet Christian girl from Missouri, and in retrospect, I think she was rather terrified of me. “I, uh, know that, but, uh, Kristen, I think I smell smoke.”

“Are you sure you’re not smelling the clothes I wore out? I was at a party, they probably reek of cigarettes.”

“It doesn’t smell like cigarettes,” Jill responded meekly, probably thinking to herself, *but I specifically requested a roommate who doesn’t smoke...*

I rubbed my eyes, still muttering obscenities under my breath, and sat up. “I don’t —“ I started to say angrily, but then stopped. “Yeah, I smell it too. Alright, you win. Guess we have to leave.”

We joined the streaming masses of freshman exiting the dorm, many still drunk from their earlier evening activities. I was no exception. We reached the outside, where, as I had predicted, it felt like twenty degrees.

“I don’t see any fire,” I grumbled to Jill. “If I have to evacuate the goddamn building in the middle of the night, I want to see the fucking building in flames.”

Jill didn’t respond and just tensed ever so slightly at my language. She’s gotten better, I reflected as I hunted for a loose cigarette in my jacket pocket; she doesn’t add “saves!” after I swear “Jesus Christ” anymore. Jill tugged on my sleeve.

“Kristen, look!”

She pointed and I noted a large storage shed on the other end of the dorms ablaze.

“So that’s our grand fire, huh?” I commented, “Ten bucks frat pledges did it. I suppose you wouldn’t happen to have a lighter on you, would you? Oh never mind, stupid question.”

I asked around, but it appeared that no one else had thought to grab a lighter on their way out either. I frowned in irritation at the unlit cigarette between my fingers, the burning storage shed just at the edge of my vision, when a thought occurred to me. There’s a perfectly good fire right over there. Why not utilize it? I headed towards the shed, surrounded by fire trucks and firefighters. RA’s were doing their best to control

their charges, but it wasn't difficult to sneak past them. I was within three feet of the shed, enjoying its heat on my face against the biting cold, when a booming voice demanded,

"Hey you! What are you doing? You're not supposed to be there!"

I glanced over at the fireman rapidly bearing down on me and sighed. Busted. He reached me and demanded again as he led me back to safety,

"What the hell are you doing?"

I held up my cigarette. "Just trying to bum a light," I replied innocently.

He stared at me incredulously and I noted that he had gray eyes that almost glowed.

"You could've been killed over lighting your cigarette. Did you not consider that?"

Behind us, the shed collapsed, sending a shower of sparks into the air. I shrugged and responded lightly, "It wasn't foremost in my mind, no. It wouldn't have really factored into my decision anyway. I suppose it's too much to hope for that you have a lighter on you, right?"

The soot-streaked man with the captivating eyes regarded me for another long moment, then reached into a pocket and produced a Zippo lighter. "The name's Travis," he said.

"Kristen...where are you going?" JP stopped mid-inhale on his joint and stirred on the couch of the crowded New Year's party we were at, where he was slumped lazily against its pillows, his free arm draped around Melissa.

I stopped for a moment as I passed him, leaning heavily against the man at my side. "It's ok, I'm leaving with..." I glanced at the frat boy for his name, and he completed with a wolfish grin before chugging his beer,

"Me."

JP rubbed his reddened eyes and tried to think through his high. "I...don't think...that's...such a good idea, Kris..."

I half-tipped over, and the boy grabbed me. He slid his hand under my sweater, running his fingers down my ribcage, and said, loud enough for everyone in our vicinity to hear,

"Not time to be horizontal yet! Unless you want me that bad..." He laughed and pulled me into a rough, sloppy kiss, and I was too drunk to find this particularly offensive.

"I suppose I can wait," I giggled back.

A little part of me, still conscious of what I was doing, wanted to vomit. But that voice was easy enough to silence as unknown boy and I weaved through the smoky crowd towards the door. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw JP slowly get to his feet, ignoring Melissa's protests. We reached the sharply cold night air and headed towards what appeared to be the boy's car.

"Kristen!"

I half-turned around, and JP was standing on the doorstep.

"Kristen, get your ass back here!" he called to me without any anger in his voice.

The boy yelled, "Hey, dude, back off! Go find your own ass!" He tugged my arm, none too gently. "Come on! Lets go!"

I took a step towards his car, and JP swore half-heartedly at me. And then, even though he was barefoot and only wearing jeans and a thin tee-shirt in the biting late December temperatures, he walked quickly onto the snow-covered lawn.

My escort swore as JP reached us, his teeth chattering violently. “Goddamn it, would you get this douchebag to go home!”

JP reached out take my hand. “Come on, Kris, let’s go back inside. I don’t have any fucking shoes on, and you don’t want to do this. You’re really fucked up, and you’re going to regret this in the morning. Come on, please—I’m freezing my goddamn ass off out here.”

“I want to,” I protested, shaking JP off, grabbing the boy’s face, and kissing him hard in defiance of JP. “See? You can’t tell me what to do!”

JP crossed his arms, trying to warm himself up, and shook his head in frustration. “Fuck, I’m not trying to. I just think this is a bad idea. Getting smashed and fucking random assholes isn’t going to make you stop hurting, Kris. It didn’t last time, did it? Or the time before that?”

I glared at JP in rage for reminding me of that unpleasant fact. But it filled the hole for a few hours, and gave me something to hate myself for in the morning, which was better than craving the adrenaline rushes I had given up.

“Fuck you, this isn’t any of your business,” I mumbled at him, swaying into my stranger.

JP sighed. His lips were turning blue. “Goddamn it, kiddo,” he murmured in defeat. JP wouldn’t actually stop me; he never did.

“Yeah, dude, fuck off,” the frat boy said, crushing his empty beer can with his free hand, “bitch is going home with me.”

Abruptly, JP’s features tightened. “Hey, asshole, you watch how you talk about her.”

The boy pulled me closer and put his hands under my shirt again, in full view of JP this time. “I’ll say and do what I want—this fuckin’ slut loves it, right?”

Without warning, JP swung his fist, his knuckles connecting with the boy’s nose with a horrible crunch. He fell back against the car as I screamed.

“JP!”

The boy jumped up and punched JP in the face, but JP only faltered slightly. His knuckles were raw from the first punch, but he swung again, his fist again smashing into the boy’s face with considerable damage. Then he grabbed him by the shirt and slammed him against the car.

“Now listen up, you motherfucker,” JP’s breath was harsh, and his voice was controlled, though the anger I heard in it frightened me, “you’re going to get in your car, and you’re going to drive away, and you’re not going to talk about this. Otherwise, I’m going to make your life a living hell. Got it?”

JP’s words were deadly serious, and even though somewhere in the back of my mind I knew his threats were idle, the terror on the boy’s face was completely understandable. JP looked capable of almost anything right now.

I looked at my best friend blankly, unable to process this side of him I’d never imagined existed. The boy nodded shakily and JP slammed him into the car once more for good measure. Then he released him and backed away. The boy’s tires screeched as he sped from house, and JP turned to me as the taillights disappeared from sight.

“Are you alright?” he asked, his voice soft now and his eye beginning to swell closed.

I stared him for a moment, then I promptly burst into tears for reasons I couldn't quite articulate, and sank down onto the snow, feeling the cold seep through my jeans. JP dropped to his knees beside me and put both his arms around me, pulling me against his chest.

“Shhh, it's ok, you're fine, everything's alright...” he soothed. “I'm sorry I lost my temper—I just got so pissed seeing that asshole treat you like that...”

“JP, I'm, I'm so, so sorry, I didn't mean for you to get hurt—” I sobbed.

“Shh, honey, shuddup with that kind of talk. I'm fine. Not even any blood—he hit like a pussy—just a wee black eye, and honest to God, I've always wanted one, ever since I was a little kid, 'cause they're so badass. I've never been in a fight before tonight—tonight, I am officially a man!”

He offered me a grin and wiped a tear from my cheek.

“I don't know what's wrong with me,” I mumbled into his shirt, “I'm sorry...it just hurts... and I just, just want it to stop.”

“I know, kiddo, I know. I, I'm hurting too, a lot, as a matter of fact, even if I'm not so good about expressing it. But this, this isn't the answer. You're so much better than this bullshit. From now on, whenever you get the urge to go do something like this because you're sad, come talk to me, ok? We'll get through this, together.”

From the house, we heard, “FIVE FOUR THREE TWO ONE—HAPPY NEW YEAR!!!”

“I'm sorry you missed the countdown with Melissa—she's gonna be really mad, huh?”

“Eh, I'm probably sleeping alone tonight—but I figure, I stopped you from getting any action tonight, so it's only fair.”

I managed a weak chuckle, and JP tightened his hug for a moment and gave me a quick kiss on the top of the head. “Happy New Year's, Kris.”

Ch. 12

“Come with me,” I said in a low voice to Colin.

He nodded without asking any questions—I liked that about him, I had to admit the kid was growing on me—and followed me into an alley, away from both the Israeli soldiers who would stop us and the other journalists who would steal our story. I glanced around and then said quietly,

“How serious were you about really wanting good pictures?”

“Dead serious,” Colin responded, with only the faintest hint of a smile at the irony of his statement.

“Good. Because I've got a way into the Mosque.”

Colin waited patiently and I continued, “Apparently the women and kids I talked to are only a fraction. They were inside with their men until recently—the Israelis don't know that, of course. Some of the women decided to stay with their men. We can get in the same way these women got out. We don't have much time though; the Israelis will figure it out pretty damn quickly, if they haven't already.”

“How will the terrorists feel about us tramping into their mosque? Won’t they just shoot us? Or take us as hostages?”

I shrugged. “It’s been my experience that, for the most part, people like to tell their stories. Even terrorists. Dead journalists and photographers aren’t very effective storytellers. But who knows? They could shoot us on the spot, or they could give us the story of a lifetime. No way of knowing ahead of time, Colin. This is how the game is played.”

Colin chewed his bottom lip for a moment, then said, “Well, what are we waiting for then? Time is of the essence, right?”

I grinned and clapped him on the shoulder. “That’s what I like to hear, kid.” I adjusted my veil and took a quick glance down at my clothes. Then I took stock of Colin—wincing slightly at my poor photographer’s red hair and freckles—and asked, “What’s the chain under your shirt?”

He pulled the gold chain from under his shirt, producing a small crucifix and a little pedant.

“Catholic,” he explained.

“Take it off.”

Colin looked taken back. “No way. I never take it off.”

“Well, today you have to. Can’t go running into Islamic terrorist cells wearing a friggin’ crucifix. I’ve got no issues with your religious beliefs, Colin, but it’s just plain stupid.”

Colin clutched his necklace a little tighter and shook his head again. “No. It stays on. I can’t think of another situation in which I’d need it more. If that’s what gets me killed,” Colin shrugged, “well, this cross got me through—” He stopped abruptly and blushed a bit.

“Got you through what?”

“Nothing. Never mind. Anyway, I’m not taking it off, and you need me. And we’re wasting time.”

I had to respect his standing his ground, and I finally sighed, muttering under my breath, “Stubborn fuckin’ Irish.”

Colin grinned as if it was a compliment and silently followed me into an ancient and long disused sewer several blocks away beneath the streets of Old Jerusalem. It was almost collapsed in some places, and we had to resort to crawling on our hands and knees, and in a few places, on our stomachs. We crept along in complete silence and almost perfect darkness for what seemed like hours, with only my tiny keychain flashlight to light our path. And then, voices...

I stopped suddenly and listened. They were still too far away for me to make out what they were saying, but it was clearly Arabic. I beckoned Colin and we continued forward slowly. The fear was building instead me steadily and I allowed it to absorb into every fiber of my being like a drug. For this, I had left my family, my friends, my lover, and right now, I had absolutely no regrets. Because right now, I was alive in a way all the love in the world could not make me feel.

We were almost upon the speakers, and I halted again, standing against a wall. Colin fell in instantly beside me without a sound. I gestured for him to stay behind me, then I took a deep breath, embracing the last moment before the metaphorical jump from the bridge—*oh God*, what a high—and stepped into the little circle of light.

“Salam waylakum, brothers.”

All conversation instantly ceased and six AK-47s simultaneously swung towards me. I noted Colin, for once, had disobeyed my directions. He stood beside me, ready to take whatever was about to befall us. For some reason, I found myself feeling grateful even as I waited to feel the bullets tear my flesh.

“I’m done,” I said, draining my beer. “I’m abso-fucking-lutely done.”

JP looked at me through marijuana-reddened eyes. “Eh? Done what, Kris? Your beer? Want another?”

We were sitting in his apartment living room, drinking in the midst of finals week our first semester of senior year of college. Neither of us believed in studying—I didn’t have to, and JP didn’t give a damn. I was stretched out on the couch, resting my leg, which had been recently freed from its cast, and JP was slumped in a ragged armchair, his bare feet on the coffee table.

I shook my head. “No. I’m done living my life this way, JP. I can’t do this anymore. It’s selfish. Look at the cost.”

“So you’re not going to drink anymore, or...?” JP looked confused, and I snapped,

“Goddamn it, JP, stop pretending like you don’t know what I’m talking about! I know you do, you of all people!”

JP put his joint into the ashtray and straightened up in his comfy armchair. “You mean the, uh, risk-taking behavior,” he stated softly.

For all the insanity JP had witnessed, for all the dumb stunts he’d bailed me out of, for all the years we’d been best friends, we had never spoken of it aside from that one drunken conversation in high school.

I nodded, subdued now. “Yeah. Yeah, I guess you could call it that. I’m going to stop it. No more risky shit. Enough’s enough.”

“Can you stop?” JP questioned, not making eye contact with me.

Therein lay the question. I wanted to yell at JP for doubting me, to tell him that of course I could stop, to fault him for even asking the question. But all I felt within myself was doubt. I stretched to ease the constant ache in my back and neck and several popping noises resulted. JP flinched at the sound, vocal reminders of November’s loss. Finally I met JP’s eyes and said meekly, miserably,

“I don’t know, JP. But don’t I have to at least try?”

JP stood up and walked over to the couch. He sat down on the edge and replied quietly, “You do what you have to do, Kristen. All I want is for you to be happy. And I never ever want to have to go to another funeral. Now sit up, I’ll give ya a back rub if you promise to stop cracking your goddamn neck—the sound gives me the chills.”

Three months later, three months that had turned me into a sharp-tongued, short-tempered person that no one, least of all me, recognized, I decided I’d had enough. I was edgy, anxious, irritable, drinking and smoking way beyond what I’d ever done before, passing classes only just barely, and exhausted of fending off everyone’s concerned inquiries. *It’s because of what happened last semester*, I knew everyone was saying when I wasn’t around, *she’s depressed. Anyone would be, I mean, after...She should really talk to someone, I’m sure it would help.* But I wasn’t depressed. I just couldn’t think of anything except getting an adrenalin fix. And my experiment in normality ended one

Saturday morning the weekend before spring semester midterms as I jumped into nothingness from an airplane several thousand feet up. I slept like a baby that night.

"You look...different," JP said suspiciously that Monday as we walked out of an exam. "What did you do?"

"What makes you think I did anything? Maybe I just got a good night's sleep," I teased, feeling light-hearted for the first time in months.

"Because I know you. You don't smile to yourself the whole way through a Statistics midterm because you got a good night's sleep."

"You said you wanted me to be happy, right, JP?" I meant it as a joke, but JP took the deeper meaning, and I thought his face fell a little.

"No more anti-risk taking, huh?" he asked, trying to sound casual.

"Only if you call skydiving a risk," I chuckled back.

JP took off his glasses, which he'd accidentally left on from the test, and rubbed the bridge of his nose. "Goddamn, Kristen, you're going to be the death of me. Come on, I see Melissa. Lets go say hi and see how her Finance midterm went."

I shook my head. "Nah, you go ahead. I'll catch up with you later. Got some studying to do for my history midterm if I don't want to fail the friggin' class."

That was bullshit, and JP knew it. I wasn't going to go study. But JP needed a girl who would make him stop smoking weed and wear polos and someday own a nice house with kids in the suburbs. I was not that girl, never would be, and I didn't want to stand in the way. *Stand in the way of what?* a little voice in my head asked softly, *what makes you think you affect anything? Do you want to?* Maybe I wish I could, I responded to the little voice, if I could just be someone else. Then I shook my head, banishing these thoughts, and looked back at JP. He remained standing half on the path and half on the lawn, between staying with me and going to Melissa.

"I'm a journalist. I'm not an Israeli. Your wives sent me. I spoke to them," I explained for the third time to six sets of unsympathetic eyes. They had not spoken a word nor lowered their guns, but they hadn't pulled any triggers yet either, so I took that as a good sign.

"I spoke with Fatima bin Latif and Haifa Al-Shrubi and Nawal Al-Qasim—"

"You spoke with Nawal?" one of the men abruptly broke his silence and looked at me, unable to conceal the eagerness on his face.

"Are you Mahmud?" I asked quietly and he nodded.

"Yes, yes. You saw my wife? And the baby, what of the baby? Did the Israelis harm them? Are they safe?"

I took a closer look at his face and saw how young he really was. He looked barely old enough to shave, probably the same age as Kat. Jesus, I found myself thinking, you're just a baby, what are you doing here with this gun in your hands? But such thoughts had no place here, and I refocused quickly.

"Yes, they're both safe. She and the baby are both with the other women and the Israeli army hasn't been near them. They don't know the women were here with you before."

"Do they now?" another older, rougher looking man interrupted.

I shook my head. "No, sir, they don't. No one knows where this entrance is except us. We didn't tell anyone."

“Why should we believe that?”

“Because if the Israelis know where you are, they would come barging in here, guns blazing. I’m a journalist; I want the story, not your blood. I have no side in this.”

“You’re an American,” he challenged, but I knew very well he had no way of knowing this.

“I’m a journalist,” I repeated, “I have no side.”

He regarded me silently for another long moment, then stepped back to confer with the others. Colin glanced at me. He didn’t look afraid, which I found odd. You’re supposed to be snapping photos of old tombs, kid, I thought, why aren’t you scared right now? The men stepped back into the light and the older man said,

“You will publish what we say?”

“I’ll tell the story.”

“Then we will talk. But time is short; the Israeli army won’t take long to find this entrance.”

A half an hour later from inside the Mosque itself, with notes jotted down as fast as I could take them—along with, I was most unhappy to resort to, a tape-recorder—and hundreds of pictures snapped by Colin, we heard gunfire come from the tunnel.

“The time has come, *al-hamdu li-lah*,” one of the men breathed.

Mahmud paled slightly in the dim light and muttered, “*Al-hamdu li-lah*.”

But his hand shook slightly on the grip of his weapon.

“You two must go,” he said, “immediately.”

I pulled my press ID from my back pocket and strung it around my neck. Colin did the same.

“What do we do now?” he whispered in English.

I shrugged. My plans hadn’t extended past getting into the Mosque.

“Out through the front screaming we’re press and hope they don’t shoot us?”

Colin wiped the beads of sweat from his forehead and offered me a cockeyed grin.

“Works for me.”

I explained this plan to our hosts and they hustled us towards the main entrance. Mahmud grabbed my hand and instantly dropped it as if he had been scalded, blushing and muttering profuse apologies for having touched me. When he finally stopped, he drew himself up and said,

“Tell my wife that I died a martyr for Islam and Allah and to raise my son as a good, strong Muslim man.”

A thousand things to say lay at the tip of my tongue, but all I could do was nod silently. He nodded his thanks and disappeared towards the tunnel. Colin and I stood alone at the huge doors now, the sound of gunfire growing closer.

“Ready?” I asked.

He reached over and tugged the veil off my hair. Then he pulled the crucifix from under his shirt and made the sign of the cross. “Now I am.”

The buildup of terror, the anticipation of possible death, the complete unknown on the other side of those beautiful doors...I smiled and we pushed the doors open, flooding the mosque with ill-fitting sunlight.

“PRESS! PRESS! WE’RE JOURNALISTS, DON’T SHOOT!” I screamed the only phrase I knew in Hebrew.

Colin yelled the same thing in English as we ran towards the Uzi-brandishing soldiers and their tanks, our hands in the air. They met us partway, gracious soldiers that they were. Everyone was screaming, a boot was pressed into my back, I was breathing dirt, and there was a clicking sound I couldn't identify immediately somewhere above my head. My muscles braced for a bullet even though I instinctively knew it wasn't a gun. It took another moment to identify the sound of a camera, and another few to realize through my disbelief what that meant. The crazy son-of-a-bitch was still taking photos! If they don't shoot him, I thought, I'm never working with anyone else ever again.

I sluggishly woke up without opening my eyes, becoming aware that there was yelling happening around me, and the voices were familiar.

"How could have you let her get in the car with him like that?" the voice—Jimmy's?—was angry, furious even. "What the hell is the matter with you—were you trying to get her killed, or were you just too goddamn stoned to care?"

"Jesus Christ, I'm so sorry, I didn't mean for this to happen! I didn't know—"

"What? Are you going try and tell me you didn't know he was fucked up? Huh? Do you really have the balls to try and say that to me right now?"

"No..." JP's voice was almost a whimper, choking on the words. "No, I, I knew. Christ, Jim, I love her, Trav's one of my best friends, I never wanted to see this happen."

"Sure doesn't fucking seem that way to me," Jimmy spat and a sound came from JP that almost sounded like a sob.

Did he just say love?

"Jim, you've got to understand...this kind of shit always happened, and they were always ok...I just didn't think..."

"Are you trying to tell me now that Kristen drives around drunk all the time?"

There was a long silence and I waited. JP could save his own skin now at my cost, and I deserved that. It wasn't his fault, and he'd had my back for entirely too long now anyway. Go ahead, I urged him through the painkillers in my veins, tell the truth. Tell him what I am. Tell him I bait death for a weekend rush and got what I deserved. I'm tired of living this lie.

But JP didn't sell me out. He sighed and said quietly, "No. No, that's not what I'm trying to say. Forget it."

I finally summoned the strength to open my eyes—still the same pale green hospital room as last time I managed to do so, same hospital gown, same IV's and beeping machines, goddamnit—and they both looked at me immediately. Jimmy rushed to the side of my bed.

"How are you feeling, Kiki? I'm sorry, did we wake you? JP and I were just talking...Mom and Dad just ran to get some dinner, they haven't eaten in a few days I think..."

JP remained hovering a few feet away, eying Jimmy and clearly nervous to move any closer. There was a question I had to ask and I looked at JP.

"JP...where's Travis?" The very act of uttering three words sent waves up pain throughout my body.

JP looked like a deer caught in headlights for a brief moment, then slowly walked over to the other side of my bed. With a quick glance at Jimmy, he put his hand in mine. Upon closer inspection, he looked like hell. His eyes were red-rimmed, he hadn't shaved,

and he was still wearing the same clothes he had on during his party last night—two nights ago? Maybe three? Four? I had lost all concept of time. And he looked at me as if I'd just asked him to douse himself in kerosene and light a match. He swallowed hard and cleared his throat.

"Honey, he's..." JP stopped and took a deep breath. "Travis...the accident..." He inhaled violently to keep the tears at bay, but he failed, and they began to slide down his cheeks. "*Jesus Christ*, I'm sorry..." He began to turn away sharply to hide his face from me, but I gripped his hand.

"JP."

He finally met my eyes, and sank into the chair beside the bed helplessly. His anguish was causing an impossible knot to develop in my throat.

"He's dead, isn't he?"

"You got all your flight and travel arrangements down?" Ed asked.

I nodded. "Yep. It's not like anything ever changes, right? DC to Paris, Paris to Cairo. Heba picks me up in Cairo, I make a glorious return to my hovel on Sharia Ibrahim Naguib. No sweat."

Ed chuckled. "Aren't you the suave world traveler, after two whole years abroad? You need anything else?"

I shook my head and started to walk out of his office. Then I abruptly stopped in the doorway. "Actually, Ed, there is one thing."

"Sure, anything."

"I, uh, need to change my emergency contact."

Ed's bushy eyebrows rose, but he said nothing.

I continued awkwardly, "It's currently, uh, John Paul Fawk. I need to change it to..." I abruptly realized I had no idea whose unlucky name I would say.

There had been no one else in my life who I thought could potentially handle a late night phone call besides JP. And now...it was certainly unfair to expect that from him. A memory from several years before flashed through my mind.

"You know, I knew, even before Mom and Dad called," Jimmy said quietly one afternoon as he drove me to physical therapy.

"Knew what, Jim?"

"That...something was wrong. That you were in trouble, pain. I woke up and I couldn't breathe. I thought I was having a heart attack at 21 years old. And then, when I got to the hospital...seeing you lying there all all bloody and banged up in the ER...Goddamn, Kiki." Jimmy shook his head slowly before turning to look at me. "I thought for sure I was going to die too."

"My brother, James Wilson. He lives in Rockville. Here's his number," I heard myself say as I handed Ed a scrap of paper with Jimmy's cell phone number scrawled on it.

Of all people, a phone call with news of my injury or death would hurt Jimmy the worst. But I had a feeling he would already know before the first ring, no matter how far away I was from my twin.

Ch. 13

Heba flipped through the channels on tiny television for the fourth time in five minutes, looking increasingly frustrated.

“Why aren’t they saying *anything*?” she demanded.

I took the remote from her gently and set it down. “Sweetie, you know they never do.”

“But how can they just ignore this? Why are Haifa music videos playing when Talat Harb Street is probably in flames?”

Heba picked up the remote again as I threw my notebook and pen into a small bag. “Have you seen my press ID?”

Heba stopped channel-surfing and looked at me, aghast. “You’re not going down there?”

I sighed. Why did we always have to do this?

“Heba, it’s my job. You know that. Of course I have to go down there. It’s the only way anyone’s going to find out what’s going on, right? Someone’s got to observe and report independently, right? I’m always careful.”

Heba snorted at that last remark, but she produced my press ID from the desk drawer.

“Thanks.” I tucked it in my jacket pocket. “I’ll call if I don’t think I’m going to make it home before dark, ok?”

Heba nodded, looking resigned. “Alright, *habibi*. Be very careful.”

I was almost out the door when Heba’s horrified voice reached me. “Kristen, you don’t think Maha is there, do you?”

I half-turned around. “Nah, Heba, I’m sure she isn’t,” I lied, equally sure that she was in fact downtown amidst the chaos.

Heba’s face remained a mask of worry and anxiety, and I noted for the first time the crow’s feet beginning to etch themselves into the skin of her pretty twenty-three year-old face. “She should have been home from school by now.”

“She’s probably just studying in the library.”

Lie number two, I was fairly certain Maha had dropped out of school months ago.

“I’ve told you before, I’ve never seen her at any of the riots or protests.”

Lie number three, I’d seen her several times.

“I’m sure she’s not involved in any of this, Heba.”

Number four, the pistol she’d given me rested comfortably against my ribs under my loose shirt.

“I’ll call you later,” I repeated. “Don’t worry so much, you’re giving yourself wrinkles.”

Then I was out the door, closing it in the face of Heba’s fear.

Downtown was indeed a scene of chaos. A few small unrelated protests had morphed into a full-blown riot. I paused for a moment, absorbing the picture and its characters. Then I began scribbling frantically, my back against a wall so no foe could come up unexpectedly from behind, and eying up potential people to grill for information. A car bomb exploded down the street, blowing out the windows up and down the block. Somewhere too far away, sirens began to sound, but the screams were much closer. I’d begun to run towards it even before the smoke plumes reached the sky. Gunfire abruptly erupted and I instantly fell flat against a nearby storefront, trying to identify where the shots were being fired from. It wasn’t from the soldiers, who were also

frantically trying to find the shooters. There was a brief lull—reloading, I thought—and I stuck my head around the corner without leaving my storefront. I saw them, five ski-masked youths, reloading their AK's. One of them, the smallest one, looked over at the same time I noticed them, and my jaw dropped. I recognized those big brown eyes and the bracelet dangling from the shooter's wrist. I'd given it to her for her 21st birthday.

"Maha..." I breathed, my knuckles turning white as I unconsciously gripped my notepad. Then reality kicked in and I ducked my head back around the corner, pressing my body into the wall and wondering just what the fuck to do next.

"Kristen!"

But the shout of my name came from the other direction, away from Maha. *What the hell...* I turned and, to my horror, saw Heba running towards me. I grabbed her wrist harshly as she reached me and yanked her hard against the wall, just as the gunfire began again.

"Heba, what in the motherfucking hell are you doing here?" I screamed over the noise.

She looked at me in a combination of helplessness and fear. "I don't know—I, I just had a bad feeling, that Maha was here and in trouble."

I just stared at her, dumbstruck for the first time in my journalistic career. Finally I managed, "She's not here, Heba. Go home, *now*."

Heba winced at my tone and began to say something, but another car bomb exploded, this one too close for comfort, drowning her words in fire and smoke.

"Are you al—" I started to ask through coughs, but I too was cut off. This time it wasn't by a car bomb, but a familiar voice.

Heba's eyes went huge and she demanded, "Was that Maha?"

I opened my mouth to vehemently deny this fact, but Heba was already halfway into the street, trying to reach her baby sister. Right into the zone where the militia and the army squad were shooting at each other.

"HEBA!" I screamed, already running towards her, but a second explosion threw me backwards.

I hit the wall hard and fell onto the street, bits of fiery debris raining down around me. One landed close to my head, and I opened my eyes. A hand, its fingers still tightly curled. Had it belonged to the suicide bomber or one of its victims? Better question: was it mine? I did a quick mental assessment—one arm, two arms, one leg, two legs—and sat up coughing violently as I came to the satisfactory conclusion that none of the fiery bits belonged to me.

Then, the thought: *Jesus Christ, Heba.*

There was a crater in the street, billowing smoke, and not far from it, a crumpled figure. I was running towards it before I was even aware that I'd gotten to my feet. I dropped to my knees beside her. I gently rolled her over, revealing a horrible pool of bright red on the street beneath her and a face badly burned. *Please God please please please, I'll do anything...*

"Heba?"

Her eyes were open, but glazed, and the blood was rapidly soaking through her shirt. I pressed my hands against her chest, and finding this completely ineffective, pulled my tunic over my head. I held it to her wounds, but the blood kept coming. I couldn't even tell where she was bleeding from.

“Heba, please, please, don’t die, stay with me, habibi, please Heba...” I kept repeating, without actually knowing if she was even still alive and too panic-stricken to check.

No one was shooting anymore, despite my kneeling in the middle of a battle zone—no one really wanted the bad press of shooting a foreign reporter trying to aid an injured friend, apparently—and now a soldier was standing in front of me, yanking my arm.

“You must put your shirt on!” he yelled at me.

I glanced down at the thin, now blood-splattered, tank top I wore underneath my tunic. “My friend is dying here, you fucker!” I spat back and continued trying to stem Heba’s bleeding with my tunic.

He grabbed both of my arms and forcibly pulled me off the ground. “I’m arresting you!”

I looked into his face, twisted with anger at my bare shoulders, and then at the prone form of one of my best friends, and something in my head snapped. I felt my hand reach for the cold steel of the pistol at my side, and felt my arm extend to point it at the soldier, and felt then my finger close around the trigger. His eyes went wide, and I was as detached from my body as I’d ever been in my life. Huh, I thought, this may prove to be a poor decision.

I pulled the trigger.

The retort of the gun shocked me back into my sense and I stared down open-mouthed at two bodies, friend and foe, both bleeding at my feet. The gun dangled limply in my hand. A red stain was blossoming on the soldier’s uniform at the shoulder, and he moaned feebly. I felt hands grab me from behind as the soldiers behind their barricade began to yell, and I braced for the onslaught. But the hands that spun me around were familiar.

“Come on,” Maha screamed, still wearing her ski mask, “We need to go, NOW!” She began to yank me down the street, but I resisted and tried to shake her free.

“What about Heba?” I screamed back at her, and Maha just tightened her grip on my arm.

“*She’s dead*, Kristen,” she snapped harshly, “and you’re about to be if we don’t get out of here.”

The word “dead” hit me like the bullet I’d just fired. I sprinted down the street after Maha blankly. She yanked her mask off as we rounded the corner. It fell to the ground amidst broken glass, and I stopped for a moment, looking back at it. It looked so lonely and neglected.

I had made the decision to end things—title or no title—with JP when I returned to the U.S. on my third trip back, but I found myself unable to do it in the two and half weeks I had home. I couldn’t imagine my life without him, and I selfishly, cruelly, used those days to memorize everything about him, to see his lazy smile, to hear him laugh as many more times as I could, to lie in bed with him and listen to his heartbeat a few more times. For after this, I knew I never would see or hear those things again.

“I wasn’t even sad when Melissa broke up with me,” he remarked on the last night before I was to board a one-way flight back to Egypt. “It almost felt like...like a weight had been removed from my chest.”

I was sitting on the bleachers of our old high school, and JP was stretched out, his head resting in my lap. I stroked his hair back and looked across the deserted and dark football field.

"I was never unhappy being with her... Things were never bad per se. I did really care about her, still do. I just... I just was never in love with her. I spent years trying to force it. But it just wasn't there."

I thought of Melissa and abruptly felt sad for her. *I'm sorry*, I thought softly to myself, *that I got the love meant for you. I don't deserve it.*

"You could've been throwing away a happy relationship for nothing," I replied quietly. "You didn't know what I'd say."

JP shifted slightly in my lap and looked up at me. I refused to meet his eyes.

"I still don't. It's been six months, Kris, and I haven't asked for anything."

I flinched. "What do you want from me, JP?"

He sat up to face me. "I want to know what you want. I love you, Kristen, always have. I've wanted to be with you since the day I met you. Every second I've spent with you since that first night we were together is the happiest I've ever been in my life, and not just because the sex is great." He offered me a crooked grin to lighten the sentiment.

I ran a hand through my hair and found myself at a loss. "It's not as simple as what I want, JP," I managed, turning my face away from him.

Even though I want you more than anything else.

He gently took my hand and pulled me towards him. "Why not?"

"It's about what you want too. You want a nice, stable, settled-down girl you can take home to your family, a girl who you can eventually own a nice house in the suburbs and have cute little kids with. Your pot-smoking days are over, JP, and you know it, and you're ok with that. You want someone you're going to grow old with."

And I can't promise you I'll ever get there.

"If I'm not who you want to be wi—" he began to say, but I cut him off.

"It's not *you*, JP. I hate to use the most clichéd line in existence, but this is about me. I'm not ready to settle down; I'm not ready to make a commitment like that."

I don't want to tie you to me, I will only drag you down.

"Kris, of the last six months, I've gotten to spend a total of less than a month with you, and I, I'd be willing to do a lifetime if I had to if it meant even a few weeks a year with you," he protested, and the hurt was beginning to show on his face. "I can wait."

That was probably the most beautiful thing anyone had ever said to me, and my throat began to close against the words I knew needed to be said. *Please JP, stop making this harder than it has to be. I don't want to hurt you, but I will if you force my hand.*

"I don't want you to," I said with a forced finality.

"I don't understand... Why not?" He looked like a puppy who'd been repeatedly kicked.

"I'm getting on that plane tomorrow, JP, and when I come back, there'll be another plane, and another after that. It's my life, and I don't want anything or anyone else to interfere with that."

I don't want to ruin yours.

"Is that what you think I'm doing? Trying to interfere with your life?" JP looked almost angry now through his deep hurt, and that was good.

Anger was a good balm for pain.

I shrugged, seemingly indifferent, and he said sharply,
“After all I’ve put up with for you? All the times I’ve supported every fucking crazy thing you’ve ever done and never questioned you?” “

“I never asked you to do that,” I shot back.

You’ve been the best friend I could’ve ever asked for.

“What are you going to do then? Just keep landing in war zones until someday someone finally fucking shoots you?” JP was almost yelling now, and I reluctantly raised my voice as well.

“Don’t worry! I’ll make sure it doesn’t interfere with your nice orderly life!”

I think of you every time I think I’m in my last moments, and I’m sad I’ll never see your face again.

“What the fuck is *wrong* with you? You need some serious fucking help, Kristen!”

“Because I don’t want what you want?” I retorted.

Because I can’t have you.

“You know what I think?” he challenged. “I think you just don’t want to be happy! You *enjoy* scaring the hell out of everyone who gives a damn about you! It wouldn’t be any fun otherwise, would it?”

“You’re not listening to me, are you, JP? I don’t care if you give a damn!”

It’s much better for both of us if you don’t, because worrying about everyone who gives a damn is in fact killing me.

“If you don’t want me, just say it already.”

His voice caught on those last words and I saw my opening. *Please God, don’t make me do it, I can’t say it, I just can’t...*

“I’d rather be in Cairo.”

The coldness of my own voice startled even me, and I saw his face crumple. *I love you, that’s why I’m doing this, please understand.*

“Fine.” His last word was a tiny sound, and I saw the tears on his cheeks catch on the moonlight as he turned away from me. “Then why,” he asked so softly I almost didn’t hear him, “did you...?”

I didn’t want to, but I had to put the final nail on the coffin, to make sure he never thought of me again except to curse my name.

“The sex was good.”

Please don’t hate me, this is breaking my heart.

JP didn’t respond. He simply walked away from me. I stood alone on the cold bleachers, waiting until he was far enough away before I could let the tears come. When he was almost to his car, he turned back and said stiffly,

“Have a safe flight back to Egypt.”

Then he drove away and I sank down, racked with sobs, all the while trying to tell myself I’d done the right thing and not believing myself for a moment.

I squinted and watched the speedometer’s little needle climb. 95...99...107...

“This stretch of road accounts for a third of all the accidents in the county,” Travis said conversationally as someone else might discuss the weather.

Yet the car handled smoothly under his hands despite the increasing snowfall and slick roads, and of course, his probable partially drunken and stoned state. He took a

curve sharply and the wheels slid on unseen black ice. I watched the guardrail rapidly approach with some fascination. Would we right ourselves in time, or go plummeting over the edge? I found myself grinning regardless of the outcome. The car pulled back onto the road at the last moment and I giggled drunkenly. Travis glanced over and winked.

“You like that, huh?” He pressed the accelerator a little harder. 112... “So when do you think JP is going to declare his love for you, babe?”

My head jerked sharply towards him. “*What?* Travis, I’ve *never*—“

Travis reached over and rubbed my knee. “Relax, babe, I’m not accusing you of anything. Merely making an observation about JP.”

I shook my head vehemently. “No way. We’re good friends, that’s all. He’s been with Melissa for a long time, and I’m with you. We’re just friends.”

Travis chuckled, leaving one hand on my thigh to drive one-handed. “Regardless, he’s in love with you; it’s obvious whenever he looks at you.”

“And you’re ok with this?” I asked in disbelief.

“Sure, why not? You’re eventually going to end up with him anyway, so why would I have a problem with it? He’s a solid guy.”

“I’m going to *what?*”

Travis squeezed my leg. “Relax, kiddo, you’re going to ruin your buzz. I just think you and JP will eventually end up together.”

“But...but what about you?” I asked softly.

Travis chuckled gently. “Babe, God help you before you end up with me. You don’t want that.”

“But, but why not?”

We’d been together close to three years; certainly the idea that I would marry Travis had crossed my mind on more than one occasion.

“Because I’m not good for you. I’m not good for anyone but myself, and even that’s questionable a lot of the time.”

“You’re a good man,” I protested and Travis snorted.

“No, I’m not. I serve my own addiction and nothing else.”

“That’s what I do.”

Travis shook his head as he weaved around another razor sharp bend in the road. 115 m.ph....

“Nah, babe, it’s not. You’re not like me. You’ll beat this eventually, for the love of someone. I’ve never wanted to try.”

Then I saw headlights, high beams that blinded me, and I instinctively shut my eyes. I heard Travis swear and I forced my eyes open to see another car losing control, skidding on the narrow road’s black ice. It was spinning between both lanes, mere feet from us, and Travis had a decision to make in the few seconds remaining—allow the car to smash into our own, causing massive injuries or death for the passengers of the other car, or jerk our car into the guardrail, which, at the speed we were traveling, would never keep us from the drop-off below. We would probably survive the first option. We would not survive the latter.

I summed this all up in my mind in milliseconds and felt the adrenaline rush explode as I waited for Travis to make his decision, even as I knew in my heart what he would decide. He was a good man.

And I'd never been so afraid.

Our car hit the metal guardrail with a horrendous shriek and he glanced at me, his face calm but his eyes apologizing. Then the car broke free of the guardrail and began to hurtle towards the ground. There was the sound of shattering glass, and something I probably would've recognized as severe pain if I had been cognizant of such things at that moment, and I was flying freely through the air, away from the car. There was no rush now, just a single thought:

My life is about to end.

And then one more.

What a waste.

Then there was nothing else.

PART II

EVERYWHERE AND NOWHERE

Ch. 14

The ground exploded around us, rocketing dirt and blood yards into the air. My eyes rang and I gagged on the dust I was inhaling, but the RPG had landed in the tiny house in front of us and not on our heads. I sat up, rubbing my eyes and shaking my head. Colin was doing the same and looked at me.

“...”

I frowned at the mystery of his lips moving yet producing no sound and shrugged. He frowned as well, and I noted his nose and lip were both bleeding. I wondered through the pain in my head if perhaps his vocal cords had been injured for a few moments until the realization that the entire refugee camp had also gone silent hit me.

Hmm, I thought, that doesn't make a lot of sense.

“I think I've gone deaf,” I said to Colin calmly, and he paled, making the blood on his face and neck all the more vibrant.

I could feel warm liquid on my own face as well, and reached up to my throbbing temple. My fingertips came away red.

“I've gone deaf,” I repeated, this time with a little less calm in my voice.

I shook my head violently, and while I was in the process of doing so, Colin abruptly threw his arms around my shoulders and yanked me back down to the ground. I felt the heat as another RPG exploded without a sound a few yards away. When I sat back up, the world spun and Colin said, a concerned look on his face,

“...ok?”

I perked up at the last word and responded, “I heard something!”

I noted at approximately the same time that the baby I'd heard earlier had ceased its crying.

We sat huddled against the wall for the next two hours, enduring the shelling and allowing bits of my hearing return. The Lebanese finally took a break from their offensive and Colin and I took advantage of the cease-fire to gather the necessary elements of our story. Everything ached as we moved around the camp, Colin snapping pictures and me talking to the bloodied and wailing residents.

“Why don't you leave now, before they start again?” I asked a middle-aged mother, rocking her still toddler, whose tiny chest did not appear to be rising and falling.

Her three other children sat gathered in the remains of what had once been their one-room house, the youngest sucking his dirty thumb, a numb look on his little face.

She looked at me blankly. “And go where?” she asked heavily, “My husband is here, fighting, and he will be arrested if he tries to leave. Then what will I do without a husband? I have nowhere to go; my family is all here, and there is no one to take us in outside the camp. This is all I have.”

“You could all die here,” I replied gently, adding silently, and your son already has.

“Then we will die together.”

Colin's camera clicked, focusing, I knew, on the dead toddler in the woman's arms. The boy had a head of curly black hair and still wore his pajamas.

An hour later, the Lebanese announced over a bullhorn that they would open the exit one more time and allow remaining noncombatants to leave before they resumed the attack. Colin looked at me, the blood on his face dried now in a macabre mask.

“We should go this time,” he said, “let’s get out of here and file the story. We’ve done all we can; at least people will read what’s going on in tomorrow’s paper. They’ll never see it if we get blown up.”

I nodded. “Yeah, Ed would be pissed if something happened to that expensive camera. Time to peace.”

We joined the throng several dozen tired and shell-shocked refugees moving slowly out of the camp, carrying injured loved ones and precious few belongings, facing uncertain futures. The Lebanese commander made sure Colin and I received immediate medical treatment when he saw our press badges. When we boarded the plane back to the States, several gashes on both of our bodies had been stitched back together, Colin had two smashed fingers, and 30 percent of my hearing was never to return.

“Great,” Colin commented with a wry smile as the plane took off, “a journalist with no hearing and a cameraman with fucked-up fingers. What an awesome team we make, huh, Kristen?”

I laughed out loud. “It’s the stuff of a B movie, alright,” I agreed. “Colin, I noticed something about the way you shoot pictures when we were in the camp.”

He seemed to tense slightly. “Oh yeah? What’s that?”

“Well, I’m not a photographer or anything, but it seems like you don’t use the zoom on your camera at all.”

His features relaxed. “Oh, that. Yeah, you’re right actually, though I’m impressed how observant you are. I don’t, never have.”

“How come?”

“Well, I know I’ve told you before that I’ve always loved to take pictures, from the time I was a little kid. My mom used to joke that I was practically born with a camera in my hand. So for my eleventh birthday, she got me a biography of this photographer, Robert Capa. He was one of the best war photographers of his time, covered everything from the Spanish Civil War from World War II. Anyway, he made this famous comment that really struck me when I read it. He said, ‘If your pictures aren’t good enough, you’re not close enough.’ I thought that was the most badass thing I’d ever heard, and I decided that I was going to be that kind of photographer.”

“Capa...I remember reading about him at some point in college,” I remarked. “Didn’t he die young?”

Colin nodded. “Yeah, he got killed on assignment in ‘54, covering the first Indochina War, the war France fought in ‘Nam before we got there. He actually died with a camera in his hand—ballsy son of a bitch, huh? Anyway, he’s not the only reason that I don’t use the zoom though. I read this book while I was in—uh, college, about this guy who actually travels across Afghanistan while the war is still going on—it’s called “The Places In Between,” if you’re interested—and he meets this photographer who doesn’t use the zoom ever either. And when somebody asks this guy why not, he responds, ‘*I am the motherfucking zoom*’.” Colin grinned and added, “I may have taken a bit of artistic

license with the addition of ‘motherfucking’. But anyway, those two statements, they’re the kind of photographer I want to be. I want to be the motherfucking zoom.”

I shook my head. “You are one crazy bastard, Colin. I’m glad you’re working with me and no one else; otherwise, you’d be some stiff competition.”

I looked for Jimmy as we exited the terminal at Reagan National airport.

“I don’t see my brother,” I complained to Colin, who was to catch a connecting flight to Pittsburgh from Reagan.

“Is that him?” Colin asked, pointing to a thin, blonde-haired man with glasses.

“Oh yeah, that’s Jimmy. How’d you know?”

Colin chuckled. “He’s your fucking twin, remember? He looks like you would if you took a couple of testosterone shots.”

I smacked him as we approached Jimmy. Jimmy smiled when he saw me and pulled me into a brief but hard hug.

“Man, it’s good to see you, Kiki,” he said cheerfully. “It was entirely too long this time.”

I nodded affectionately at my brother—I had not been home since Jerusalem, fourteen months ago, though whether that constituted “too long” was a matter for debate—and introduced,

“Jim, this is my photographer, Colin McNalty. Colin, this is my brother, Jimmy.”

They shook hands, and Jimmy asked, gesturing to our facial stitches, “So, should I bother asking what happened to you guys?”

“Oh, a minor domestic dispute,” I answered at the same time Colin replied nonchalantly,

“Lebanese RPG.”

Jimmy’s eyebrows shot up and I glared at Colin halfheartedly.

“Damn it, kid,” I grumbled and Colin asked innocently,

“What?”

He had told me once before over several gin and tonics that there was no one at home for him except his retired and stoic Marine Corps father. Whether he had done a better job of cutting his personal ties better than I had, or whether life had just been cruel when doling out his allotment of affection, he had never said. But I did know as a result he didn’t understand the worry of others, and I couldn’t be all that angry.

“Nothing,” I shook my head, “never mind. You better get going; you’re going to miss your plane.”

He extended his hand again to Jimmy. “Nice meeting you, Jim.” To me, he said with a wicked grin, “Boss, go heal up, drink heavily, and get laid, and I’ll see you in a month in good ol’ *al-Iraq*.”

He slapped me affectionately on the back and headed off towards his next terminal, whistling “When Irish Eyes Are Smiling” to himself.

“Interesting kid,” Jimmy commented with a small smile.

I chuckled. “Yeah, that’s for sure. He’s been with me since Jerusalem; I wouldn’t want to work with anyone else. You look good, Jimmy—how’s the married life treating ya?”

Jimmy shouldered my bag and we headed towards his car—as I recalled all the other homecomings over the years, and how my family had finally given up on meeting me at the airport.

“It’s good,” he said. “Sue and I are really happy. She kind of wants to start trying for a, uh, baby, in the next few months, but I don’t know. Fatherhood, that’s, it’s, well, it’s a big deal. A big responsibility, you know. Maybe I wouldn’t be very good at it.”

I shook my head in wonder at the thought of my brother as a parent, wondering briefly where the years had gone. “I wouldn’t rush into anything until you’re sure, Jimmy, but I can’t picture anyone else being a better dad than you.”

He blushed a little and grinned. Then he asked, “So, do you want the rundown on what’s going on in the Wilson clan as of late?”

I nodded and he began, “Well, Dad got that promotion at work he’s been dying for. He’s really pleased with himself, even though he keeps pretending it’s not a big deal. It’s a nice raise too, which Mom’s eyeing for a new car. Her Toyota is on its last legs, and she’s dying for a convertible ‘in her golden years,’ as she keeps saying. You know Mom’s friend Cathy? She got diagnosed with breast cancer a few months ago. They caught it early, so the doctors were saying her chances look really good. Mom’s been living over at her house though, because her youngest two kids are still in junior high and her ex isn’t really around... Obviously, Kat had her high school graduation in June, and she was planning on going to good ol’ Georgetown like her big brother, because she got waitlisted to U-Penn. But then Penn got back to her last week and said if she still wanted to come, they had a spot for her. I’m sure you know Penn was her first choice, so naturally she was ecstatic. Mom wasn’t thrilled with the idea of her baby going to Philly, but she eventually caved.”

I took a long drag on my cigarette and stared out the window.

“Has she decided on a major?” I asked with just the smallest catch in my voice.

I hadn’t known my Dad was up for a promotion, let alone what his new position was, my Mom hadn’t mentioned Cathy’s cancer—who’d I’d called Aunt Cathy in my youth—and Kat’s college choices had been a mystery to me until just now.

“Sure. She wants to do biology. She’s talking about med school after college. Mom and Dad must have done something right, huh? A lawyer, a journalist, and a doctor!”

“You forgot interior decorator,” I reminded him, “How’s Mary doing?”

Jimmy grinned. “She’s got some pretty big news to tell you when you get home, actually. I was sworn to secrecy, though.”

“Jimmy! Tell me!” I protested indignantly.

He shook his head. “Sorry, Kik, a promise is a promise. You’ll find out soon enough.”

I sighed and questioned, “Well, how about Tyler? Mary sent me an email last month about a speeding ticket...”

Jimmy winced and nodded. “Yeah, he got into some trouble with the police. His license was suspended for six months and he has to do some community service, but he got off comparatively easy, considering how fast he was going and the fact that he didn’t stop immediately when the cop tried to pull him over.”

“God damn. Ballsy little bastard, huh? What road was he doing over a hundred on anyway? Not too many roads around here you can get that kind of speed up for long.”

A muscle in Jimmy's twitched and he stared straight ahead at the road, even though we were stopped at a red light.

"Uhh, the beltway."

I frowned and continued to stare at my twin. He was a terrible liar, and I couldn't figure out why he'd want to lie to me about what road it had been.

"Bullshit," I challenged, "traffic's always way too heavy on the beltway for that kind of speed. There's no way."

Jimmy gnawed on his lip intensely, and I questioned again, more forcefully this time,

"Jim? What road was it? Why are you lying to me?"

The light changed to green and Jimmy put his foot on the gas.

"You won't like it, Kik," he said gently, glancing my direction.

I waited, my eyes boring holes into the side of my brother's head, and finally he answered quietly,

"Route 56."

My heart fell into my stomach. Tyler had only been barely twelve when Travis had been killed. I didn't think anyone had ever explained to him what had happened, just that I had been in a bad car accident. I opened my mouth to speak and found no adequate words at my disposal. Jimmy reached over and patted my shoulder.

"I'm sorry, Kik. That's why everyone was so freaked out...Dad damn near killed him for being so stupid—"

"Did he know?" I interrupted sharply. "Did he know about what happened on that road?"

"I don't know," Jimmy lied, his jaw muscle twitching again.

I decided I didn't want to know anymore just now and rested my head miserably against the car window. Jimmy patted my shoulder again, and allowed the rest of the drive to continue in silence.

Ch. 15

This had been the longest absence of my career, and I discovered when I arrived home that my family had finally given me what I wanted. No one asked any questions. There were no tears, no long hugs, no emotional scenes. I was given quick embraces and 'welcomes home's' and promptly forgotten about. They accepted my obvious lie about a minor car accident to explain the stitches on my temple without batting an eye.

I listened silently to the conversations of a family I was no longer part of with the painful acknowledgment that this bed had been of my own making, and had to swallow back a knot in my throat every time I lifted my fork to my lips. Susan and even Chad belonged here far more than I did. The phone rang for Kat during dessert, and Tyler made a joke about Conner—were they dating now? I didn't know, for Kat hadn't spoken a word to me in 14 months, and her greetings tonight had been terse and unfeeling. She'd gotten a trendy haircut, and her eyes were lined in pretty makeup. Where had my bookish, dorky little sister gone?

After dinner, I announced, "I'm going take Herbert for a walk. Tyler, want to come with me."

Tyler heard the absence of a question mark in my words and went to grab his sneakers without argument. Once we were outside, he asked with a sly grin,

“So what really happened to your face?”

“RPG in a Palestinian refugee camp in Lebanon. Lost a solid chunk of my hearing too; the docs don’t think it’s all going to come back.”

This family member, I would not shield.

“Damn,” Tyler exclaimed. “It must have been pretty close to have fucked up your hearing, huh?”

“It landed in the house a few feet from me and my photographer. Another few inches closer, who knows?”

He whistled. “Christ, Kris. Well, I’m glad you’re home safe—must have been a hell of a trip, right?” He grinned at me, and I shook my head.

“Not so much, not when I’m getting emails about you getting pulled over for doing over a 100.”

Tyler’s smile dropped, and he said, “Oh come on, Kristen. You know what it’s like. I’m sure you did some stupid shit when you were my age. You’re the one running around refugee camps with RPG’s landing on your head.” He offered me an impish grin.

“I did do stupid shit when I was your age, Tyler, lots of it. I sped, I drank, I smoked pot, I jumped off friggin’ bridges. I played fast and loose with my life, and I got very lucky. Just because I got away with it doesn’t mean you will.”

I knew what I should be talking about was how Travis didn’t get that lucky, but I couldn’t bring myself to say it. I hadn’t spoken his name in six years, and I wasn’t sure I could now.

“Alright, alright, I’ll be more careful, ok?” Tyler said, clearly humoring me.

I lit a cigarette and offered him one. He took it and after a few blocks of silent smoking, I asked quietly,

“Tyler, what were you doing on that road? Why that road? Didn’t you know...?”

Tyler’s face finally lost any semblance of humor, and he exhaled heavily.

“I *am* sorry about that, Kris. You weren’t supposed to find out, everyone agreed not to tell you the road...”

“That doesn’t answer my question.”

He stared at the road ahead uncomfortably. “Shit, Kris, I don’t know. There’s just...something *in* me I can’t explain. Like if I’m not getting that adrenalin kick, I’m not really alive. A walking corpse or something. I don’t know what the hell is wrong with me. I’ve tried to explain it to my buddies a couple of times, and they think I’m fucking insane. I think you understand—you’re sure as hell not doing what you’re doing for the pay, right? You’ve always been almost immortal in my eyes—almost as long as I can remember, you’ve been doing crazy things and being fine, so I never understood why anyone ever worried about you. Hell, one of my earliest memories of you is watching you get caught in the riptide when we were at the beach. And the lifeguards had to go rescue you, remember? And when they got you safely back on the shore, everyone was crying and all, and you? You were fucking laughing. I never forgot that.

“I didn’t know the story about, uh, your boyfriend ‘til this summer. No one ever talks about it. I remember you getting in a car accident when I was a kid, but that’s it. I felt like it had been this big secret everyone had been keeping from me, that you weren’t unbreakable. And then I started watching the news and seeing the craziness over where you were, and all of sudden, it occurred to me, something could happen to you.”

Tyler offered me an embarrassed slight smile. “I thought maybe you’d already used up all your luck, cuz you should’ve died that night in that accident, cuz your boyfriend really did. And I started worrying about you when I never did before. I guess... maybe I wanted to test myself against what almost took you.”

Tyler frowned deeply, and said sincerely, “I’m sorry, Kristen. About what I did, and about what happened back then. It must have really sucked.”

Touched, I had no words to say for a moment. Then I put one arm around my little brother’s shoulders for a moment and responded quietly,

“Know what the worst part about the accident was? It wasn’t that Travis”—so the name still did hurt, after all these years—“died. I think somewhere in the back of my head, I always expected he would die young. The worst part was the things people said after. All anyone could talk about was how he’d been drunk behind the wheel, that he’d been speeding, that he’d tested positive for weed on the, uh, autopsy, that he’d almost gotten me killed. No one cared that he was dead because he’d swerved to let the people in the other car live. And I mean, fuck, I know what we were doing that night was wrong, but,” I found, to my surprise, a small crack in my voice—“everything good about him was lost in the aftermath. That’s what I don’t want to happen to you, Tyler. I can’t make the adrenalin cravings go away for either of us. But it would kill me to see something happen to you to invalidate the good person you are.”

Tyler looked on the verge of tears, and he put his arms around me in a brief but hard hug. “I’ll be more careful, Kris, I swear.”

Ch. 16

“So what’s this big news I hear you have to tell me?” I asked Mary as we sat on the front porch later that night, watching the fireflies.

Mary giggled, and pulled her left hand from her jacket pocket. A diamond sparkled on her well-manicured finger. “Chad proposed! We’re getting married!” she practically squealed.

I stood up and put my arms around her—probably the first genuine hug I’d given anyone in quite some time—saying, sincerely, “Oh, Mare, congratulations, I’m so happy for you, honey. The ring is beautiful. Tell me all about it. How did he propose?”

“Oh gosh, Kris, it was so romantic...”

An hour later, we were still sitting on the porch, just catching up on life, and I had the abrupt thought that my younger sister had grown into someone I actually liked and respected. I was wondering how that had happened when she commented,

“So I ran into JP the other day at the drugstore. He was buying Nicorette, said he was trying to quit smoking.”

I was grateful for the darkness that hid the uncomfortable blush that manifested itself on my cheeks.

“Good for him,” I said as nonchalantly as I could manage. “I should probably quit too. I picked up a cold a couple months ago—just how the fuck does one catch a cold in the middle of the desert, I want to know—and it left me with this permanent cough. I’m guessing my two-pack a day habit isn’t helping much.”

Not appearing too interested in my cigarette intake, Mary said, “He asked about you. Said he saw the Beirut thing on the news, and figured you were there. He wanted to know if I’d heard from you.”

Mary waited for me to respond, and instead, I busied myself with digging through my purse for my Malboros and lighter. After a moment, she continued,

“He said he hadn't talked to you since the wedding. That was over a year ago...do you guys really not speak anymore?”

Realizing my sister was not going to simply vanish into thin air if I kept ignoring her commentary, I responded shortly, “No, Mary, we don't speak anymore.” Then, to soften the harshness of that statement, I added, “Well, how is he?”

“He looked good. He put on some weight, which looks good on him—he was always a little bit too thin, if you ask me. It's funny; he looks all grown up and clean-cut now, when he used to look like such a stoner.”

I chuckled in spite of myself. “He used to *be* such a stoner. Can't believe Mom and Dad never picked up on it. Though I guess he was always such a polite motherfucker.”

“He was with a girl.”

I winced visibly and took a deep drag to steady myself. I wanted to snap at my sister: *Why would you tell me that??* Instead, I commented, in what I congratulated myself for being a remarkably calm voice,

“Is that so? Well, good for him. I hope it works out for him.”

Mary reached over and put her hand on my arm. Her engagement ring caught the moonlight and glittered against the night backdrop.

“You're a lot cuter than she was, and honestly, hon, JP didn't look all that into her. He didn't even introduce me—she had to do it herself! And he showed no embarrassment asking about you right in front of her! What does that tell you?”

“Why would he be embarrassed to ask about me? We were good friends for a long time.”

Mary frowned at me. “Oh come on, Kris, don't lie to me. I might not be as smart as you, but I do pay attention. Something was going on between you two for at least a little while there...” she studied my face carefully, observing all the signs I was unable to conceal, and said softly, “You slept with him, didn't you?”

I ran a hand through my hair and leaned my head back to stare at the peeling white paint on the porch roof. Then finally, I answered in a tiny voice,

“I fucked up, Mare. He loved me, and I ruined everything”

“Loves,” Mary corrected, “he still is in love with you, Kristen. It was written all over his face. He looked like he was going to cry when he said you guys didn't talk anymore. If you still love him, then why not give him a call while you're home?”

“Oh hell, it's not that simple.”

“Why not?”

“Because I won't *be* home for long. I can't do that to him. He needs to move on with his life.”

Mary shook her head at me. “That's ridiculous. Why don't you let him make that decision for himself? He loves you, you love him, just let everything else fall into place.”

Because my 'everything else' includes shrapnel, bullets, and an addiction I can neither explain nor fight.

Instead, I said gently, “Mary, I appreciate what you're trying to do. I know you mean really well. I'm so happy for you and Chad and your engagement—just be content in your happiness and don't worry about me on this one, ok? I know what I'm doing.”

But Mary frowned and pursed her lips. Then she said, "You know, Kristen, I mean this affectionately, but for someone so smart, you can be really stupid sometimes."

"Kristen! Phone for you! Kristen, your boss is on the phone!" My mother's voice jarred me from sleep.

"Fucking hell..." I muttered, fumbling around on the nightstand for the phone. "Hello?"

"Hi Kristen, how was your flight home?"

"Jesus Christ, Ed, what time is it?"

"Half past one."

"In the afternoon?"

"Yes."

"Shit...well, I was going to yell at you for calling so goddamn early, but I guess 1:30p.m is a pretty reasonable time...Friggin' jetlag...What's up?"

My editor laughed. "Good Lord, Kristen, I'm glad you went into print and not broadcast! The woman can produce brilliant work in the middle of a combat zone, but God forbid you wake her from sleep!"

"I wouldn't call anything I write brilliant," I yawned.

"Neither would I," Ed chuckled, "but, apparently, someone in New York thinks otherwise."

"What's that supposed mean? You selling me to the *Times*? Colin will be pissed."

"Not quite. The news is actually quite amazing, Kristen. We just got word that you've been nominated for a Pulitzer!"

"So this call isn't about you sending me somewhere cool for my next assignment?"

"Kristen!" Ed exclaimed. "I'm talking about the *Pulitzer Prize*, for God's sake. The highest award in journalism! Can't you at least *fake* some enthusiasm, for the sake of your elderly boss?"

I laughed. Ed was a good editor. He let me away with a lot of shit.

"Alright, alright. Only for you, Ed. I suppose the reasonable question to be asking right now is: which story?"

"'Inside the Al-Asqa Mosque,' for the international news section. For, and I quote, 'a distinguished example of reporting on international affairs.' Honestly, Kristen, that story beat every other story last year. Nothing else came close. Not in our paper, not in anyone else's. I'd say you're a shoo-in. I've seen the other nominees, and they're nothing compared to you. I hate to boost your ego and have you thinking you can go freelance or write for some fancy magazine, so take this all with the knowledge that a reporter is only as good as her editor. And I, Ed Greene, am a fine editor."

I grinned. "That you are, Ed. I'll split whatever measly sum of money the award committee doles out with you. Speaking of which, is Colin included in this?"

"Actually, he was also nominated, but in his own category--'Breaking News Photography.' For the same story, of course. His photographs were...phenomenal. And from a boy who was supposed to be shooting tombs! Thank God that whole mess happened, huh? I mean from a journalist perspective, of course—we've never have known what he was capable of without it. Do you want to call him, or should I?"

"I will, absolutely," I responded, grinning for the sake of my redheaded photographer. "The story wouldn't have been half as good without his pictures. God damn, Pulitzer prize nominee on his first assignment—lucky little bastard. I'm going to go call him right now."

"Alright, Kristen. Congratulations again, and I mean that. You deserve it. Enjoy the rest of your break and try to relax. I'm sure we'll have some good assignments for you when you come back to DC."

"Thanks, Ed. Talk to you soon."

I hung up the phone and sat silently on my bed for a moment before I realized I was grinning like a maniac.

God damn, the fucking Pulitzer. *The Pulitzer*. It was no less than the Holy Grail of journalism, and I, well, I was beyond honored. You're 27 years old, I thought to myself, and you're a Pulitzer nominee. Job well done, apparently. I was surprised to find myself so pleased. I had thought four years of violence and blood and cravings and fixes had stripped the capacity for such emotions from me.

I flashed back to where I had begun my career, and I thought of Heba, and Maha, and all of Egypt, which had given and taken so much, and I found a knot in my throat, as happened from time to time when I thought of them. I didn't know what had happened to Maha—I'd never heard from her again after leaving Cairo that last afternoon. My emails bounced back, my letters remained unanswered, her cell phone was disconnected. I suspected she had gone underground, but I didn't really know.

And I had never been allowed the moment to mourn Heba. I had never been able to find the words, I of so many, to explain to my family or friends what had happened in my last days in Egypt, and so I had simply not tried. No one outside the senior editors at the Post knew, and that had been a necessity. I suspected Jimmy and JP had gotten a few drunken details the night I landed and drank a bottle of whiskey, but neither had ever pushed me for any details sober.

And I, I survived. That's the funny thing about death...it does get easier on the second time around.

"Kristen? Honey, what was that about?" my mother appeared in the doorway.

I quickly wiped my eyes, muttering about allergies, and stood up. "I've got good news."

My mother physically winced. "Where are you headed this time, honey?"

It briefly saddened me that her first thought was one she anticipated would bring her pain, but I quickly brushed it aside as an unfortunate fact of life.

"Possibly New York, actually. I was nominated for the Pulitzer Prize for my Jerusalem story."

"Ohmygosh!" My mother exclaimed. She was across the room in fewer seconds than I thought possible, and throwing her arms around me. "Honey, I am so so proud of you! That's so wonderful! Congratulations! Oh wow, are you thrilled? We have to call everyone!"

"Easy there, Mom," I chuckled. "I haven't won yet."

"Nonsense. Of course you'll win. You're an amazing reporter. The best out there, I expect. But even if you don't, still, what an honor!"

I smiled in spite of myself. I was unused to such praise from my mother. Our relationship in the last several years had been marked by faked conversations and

unasked questions. She knew little about my life, and didn't want to know more. I knew she missed the Kristen who had kept the adrenaline demons hidden. This, however, was something we could bond over, even if it was a brief thing.

"I've got to call my photographer," I said, "and tell him the good news."

"The skinny Irish one?" she asked. "Colin?"

I nodded, surprised she had remembered his name. Maybe she paid more attention than I thought.

"Well, go ahead," she urged. "I'm sure his family will be thrilled too!"

I highly doubted that, but I dialed the phone. After several rings, Colin's voice answered.

"Hellooooooo Kristen! Are we going somewhere cool??"

"Hey, Colin, how's it going?"

"Aw, man, boss, it's going, it's going. Ya know. Pittsburgh and such shit like that. Well, Pittsburgh itself as a city is not in fact *going* per se, since that, that my friend, would imply it was *moving* its location. No, life, life is going, I think was what I meant."

I bit my lip and glanced at my mother, wishing I could get her to leave the room.

"Colin, are you drunk?"

"Helllllll yes, I'm d-runk! I've been drunk since I got off the plane. Some buddies met me at the airport, and we drank drank drank, and I don't quite think we've stopped. Oh shit, yeah, boss, I met this hot little blonde at the bar, and God damn, she was fuckin' balls-to-the-wall beautiful."

I tried not to laugh. "Ya get her number, Colin?"

He laughed devilishly. "Oh, I got a lot more than her number, boss. She unwrapped a starburst with her tongue at the pub, and I was in love. And god damn, that thing they say about the unwrapping the starburst thing, it was totally tru--"

"Colin," I interrupted, looking at my mother's face, who could clearly hear everything he was saying, "Although I am extremely interested to hear all about this, it'll have to wait. I called because I've got good news. We got nominated for a Pulitzer!"

"A what now? Ohhhh yeah, that journalism thingy. Cool, cool. Guess we're officially badass now, huh, boss? Think if I tell the guys, I can get them to buy me more booze? Or, better yet, if I tell my blonde, I can get her to--"

"Yes, you go wake everyone up and tell them you've been recognized as the most incredible photographer in the world, Colin. I'm going to go eat breakfast now, but I'll give you a call in a few days once you've sobered up a bit, ok?"

"Ok, Kristen!" Colin agreed cheerfully. "Have you gotten yourself drunk and laid yet? Because if you haven't, man, I'm telling ya, it does wonders for the soul! I think I had a fucking religious experience or something last night. Don't tell the Pope though; I think he frowns on experiences of that nature."

I was almost drawing blood biting my lip to keep from laughing. "I'll work on that, kiddo. Have fun, be safe."

I hung up the phone and shrugged at my mom. "The world of combat reporters and photogs draws a curious bunch."

"So I see," she said with something that just may have been the faintest of smiles.

The plane touched down and I felt my stomach clench. I swallowed hard and chided myself for my discomfort. But of all the cities in the world, all the crazy, far flung places I'd been, this particular location was my least favorite. I was mildly terrified of it, as a matter of fact.

"Welcome to John F. Kennedy International Airport and thank you for flying American Airlines," the pilot said. "Please enjoy your stay in New York city."

I gritted my teeth and gathered my things. Fucking New York. The *Times* could offer me a million dollar salary, a BMW, and a lifetime guarantee of crazy assignments, and I *still* would never consider moving here. I called Colin as I exited the terminal to find out where he was.

"Where do you *think* I am?" was his amused response.

"The airport bar?"

Colin's first stop after a flight—good flight, bad flight, or indifferent flight—was always the bar for a pint.

"Lucky guess. Come meet me and I'll buy you a beer. We've got a couple of hours to kill before we can go eat at that goddamn luncheon—a luncheon, Christ, couldn't we get a big shindig like the Nobel Prize people? And hell, we're combat zone junkies—they practically *expect* us to show up a bit sloshed."

I laughed. "Colin, my friend, you do little to erase the Irish stereotype. Every day you're on Earth makes it a little worse, I imagine."

"Stereotypes exist for a reason," he fired back cheerfully, "and if I was born to reinforce them, well, who am I to question such a task?"

I shook my head. My photographer was insane.

"I appreciate the offer man, but I've got something I've to handle."

He heard something in my voice, despite my efforts to conceal my nerves, and his voice changed.

"Need backup?" he asked in a quiet voice that contained a steel edge.

No questions, no interrogation, no demands for information—just a simple, immediate offer of support. Almost like...I winced and banished the thought.

"Nah, that's alright. Just got an old friend I want to look up. It's nothing."

"Alright," Colin replied, his voice relaxed again, but he added, knowing me, "but you call me if you need me, and I'll be there, got it?"

"Yeah, yeah, I've got it. I'll see you at the hotel later this afternoon, ok? Don't drink so much that you can't get there on your own—this is New York, not Beirut. You could get mugged or something."

Colin laughed loudly. "The fact that you find New York more dangerous than motherfucking Lebanon demonstrates how incredibly fucked in the head you are, you know that, right? See you this afternoon, Kris."

An hour and a half later, I found myself standing in a dimly light hallway, knocking on a battered and graffitied door, deep within in New York's non-tourist territory. A cockroach scurried past, and I could still hear the disjointed mutterings of the crackhead I'd had to step over in the stairwell. I'd seen the depths of poverty before, and plenty of it, but it seemed to me that there was something unique about American inner-city poverty. Something more...hopeless, perhaps. I frowned, trying to explain this feeling to myself, and was thereby startled when the door finally opened a crack. The chain

remained on, and I had a hard time making out the features of the person who peered from behind it.

“What do you want?” a raw voice demanded.

Female, I thought, but it was hard to tell—a long-standing cough had taken its toll.

I didn't bother offering a friendly smile. “I'm looking for someone. Monica Deporte.”

“Never heard of her,” the door began to close.

“Hold up,” I said in my most commanding voice, “I know she lived here within the last few years. This last letter I got from her was postmarked from this address. If you don't know her, maybe you know someone who does.”

The door didn't slam, and the voice asked suspiciously, “Why would she be sending you letters?”

“A postcard,” I said, “and because she was one of my best friends, a long time ago. We lost touch a few years ago. I'm in town for a few days, and I was just hoping to meet up with her while I'm here, that's all. My name's Kristin Wilson.”

The bloodshot eyes peering through the crack blinked, and I heard the chain come off. The door opened enough to reveal the woman—much younger than her voice and much too thin for her frame—and she questioned in a tone just slightly less frigid,

“The fucking insane one?”

I chuckled. “I'll take that as a compliment.”

The woman's—girl, almost—cracked lips turned up a bit at the corners and she said, “I've heard stories. I'd invite you in, but...” she glanced backwards into the dark apartment and shrugged.

I knew enough not to ask—violent boyfriend sleeping off hangover, utilities that had been shut off, rats, empty beer cans and needles—I could read shame on a person, and it was none of my business what she was trying to hide.

“Know anywhere local we can grab coffee, then?”

She hesitated, and I added, “My treat.”

The lips almost curved into a smile, and she stepped into the hallway, closing the door behind her.

“There's a little place on the corner. It's no Starbucks, but it's cheap, and the coffee's decent, for this ghetto anyway.”

I didn't bother asking where her coat was as we reached the sharp cold. Fucking snow storm in March, how ridiculous, I complained silently, fucking city. She jammed her hands into her jeans' pockets and I cast a sidelong glance at her as we walked. I had been told it was a disturbing habit to many people, but I couldn't help it—I was a journalist, and studying people was what I did, even when I wasn't on the clock. She looked even younger in the afternoon light—19, 20 at most, despite the worry lines already etching themselves into her skin—and I imagined that beneath the sunken eyes, yellowed skin, and dirty clothes existed a fresh-faced Midwestern beauty. More dreams gone wrong, I imagined. We reached the tiny shop, and I ordered both of us a large coffee. She sat across from me at a greasy and nicked table, and on second thought, I ordered a large plate of fries as well.

“You don't have to--” she began to protest, some residual of pride offended.

"I wasn't asking you to eat 'em, was I? I'm fucking starving, I'll eat them all if you don't want any," I fired back before she could think about it any farther.

She frowned and took a gulp of her coffee.

"So what's your name?"

Her head jerked up from her cup and eyed me with renewed suspicion.

I help up my hands. "Look, kid, I don't know who you think I am, but I've got no interest in you. I'm here because you happen to live where Monica does or did, and I was hungry, and I hate eating by myself. I wasn't sent by your family, or your pimp, or your parole officer. You don't wanna tell me your name, fine. I was only asking out of simple politeness."

I dug my Post press badge out of my wallet and slid it across the table. She picked it up and studied it. Watching her face while I was speaking a moment ago, I knew I'd hit the nail on the head with "family," and figured she was a runaway from some small town I'd never heard of. But I didn't push it, despite my inner journalist instinctively screaming at me to *get the story, get the story, get the story*.

"So you're really a real-life reporter?" she said softly, more to herself than me, and then handed my ID back. "Monica always swore you were, but we could never afford a newspaper, so she couldn't prove it. I always thought she was making it up...Not you the person, but that you were a big important reporter. Monica likes to exaggerate sometimes, ya know?"

I smiled. "Can't argue with that."

She bit her lip, then asked shyly, "So...did you really once punch a cop?"

I laughed out loud. That brought back memories. It was Christmas of our junior year of college. Artie had recently returned from his first tour of duty in Iraq, and I had landed stateside from my first semester in Egypt only days before. I had been sorely tempted not to come home for Christmas at all, but Travis had protested, and even I had to agree that expecting a relationship to survive an entire year abroad was asking a bit much. Monica had said she didn't have the money for a bus home from New York, and she was too proud to accept money from any of us. So JP had borrowed his parents' car, unbeknownst to anyone, and arrived in New York unannounced, two days before Christmas, to take her back home. So all the old crew, plus Travis, gathered in our favorite hometown bar—favored because its bouncers weren't strict on the legitimacy of our group's underage members' ID's—and celebrated our reunion as we always did: by drinking, heavily.

"I can't believe you're voluntarily hanging out with those ragheads," Artie grumbled at me.

His upper arm was emblazoned with a new tattoo proclaiming his Army unit, and his neck bore two small pink scars where hot ammunition had landed in his collar during a firefight.

"What the fuck are you thinking?"

"You did it voluntarily too, asshole!" I fired back, my words ever so slightly slurred.

"That's different! You, like, fucking, talk to them and shit! You sit beside them and speak their filthy language and pretend they don't all want us dead!" The anger was visible on Artie's face, his cheeks red from too many beers.

"And killing them instead makes you so motherfucking superior, huh, Corporal Eisner?" I sneered.

"Why don't you--"

"Guys, guys, guys," JP interjected. He put a relaxed arm around both of us. "Let's not talk politics at the bar, ok? We all acknowledge that you're both very badass in your own special way, and lets just leave it at that for now, eh?"

JP's easy smile was hard to say 'no' to, and I relaxed my shoulders. After a moment, Artie did the same. We were both considerably drunker than the rest of our friends, our tolerances having taken a blow in the months we'd spent in a non-drinking land. JP jerked his head at Travis, and Travis disengaged himself from a conversation with the grizzly old bartender—a favorite pastime of his, striking up discussions with bartenders—and made his way towards me.

"You stirring up trouble again, babe?" he chuckled.

I shook my head. "Artie's fault," I muttered, "him and his stupid Army talk. He started it."

Travis glanced across the bar, where Artie was now talking to Heather, who looked as beautiful as ever.

"There," he commented quietly, "is a man who's hurting."

I wrinkled my nose. "What?"

Travis shrugged. "Just a feeling, a vibe he's giving off...Him and Heather used to have something, didn't they?"

Surprised, because Travis had just met Artie tonight, I answered, "Well, yeah...but he went to Iraq, and they were never really dating, and her family never would've accepted him, and now...She's been with this guy down at her college for awhile now."

"Poor sonofabitch," Travis said, and I remained silent.

I was unused to Travis expressing sympathy for another human being, and the sentiment threw me off. Then he shook his head, and said,

"Come on, let's get another round."

Several rounds later, Monica ambled over to me and said, "Kris, come smoke a cig with me."

I kissed Travis and stumbled after her outside.

"It's fucking freezing out here!" I complained. "I miss the Sahara."

Monica laughed as she lit a cigarette. "You crazy bitch. Still can't believe you're going to go back."

"I can't believe you live in New York." I shuddered. "How's Broadway looking? Any auditions?"

Monica emitted a sharp, bitter laugh. "Oh yeah, fucking tons. Come on, let's walk around the block or something to keep warm."

I offered my arm—neither of us were walking especially straight—and she took it with a grin. Her shivering had gotten so violent within five minutes that she was shaking me as well.

"Don't you have a winter coat?" I asked, eyeing her thin jacket.

"Oh yeah, with all that money I have just sitting around."

I frowned, sensing sarcasm through my drunken haze, and unlinked arms with her for a moment. I unwound my scarf from my neck and handed it to her. She began to protest, so I simply tied it around her neck for her.

"There," I said, satisfied, "much better."

Monica sighed, but she let the scarf remain where it was, and we continued our drunken trip around the block.

"Shit, Kris," she said after a moment of silent stumbling, "things are such a fucking wreck, and I don't even know where to start. I'm so broke, and there's no work, and the city's so expensive, and I just miss acting so much, and my parents wouldn't take me back in if I begged--"

Through her words, I heard shoes crunching on the snow behind us. Then I sensed, rather than heard, the presence of someone behind us. Four months of living in Cairo—world's capital of sexual harassment, especially for blonde-haired Americans—had honed several instincts in me. And in that moment, with a stranger less than a foot behind me, I was not in Maryland, taking a walk around the block, yards from all my friends. I was on Talat Harb Street, with a young Egyptian man about to put his hand behind my legs or grab my ass. The alcohol did little to remove me from the flashback. I whirled around and felt my fist connect with a cheek, and a man stumbled backwards, grunting in pain.

Pain slammed up my arm as well, and I clutched my throbbing knuckles with my other hand, feeling blood trickle between my fingers.

"Fuck, fuck, fuck!" I exclaimed, the pain startling me back from Cairo and into Maryland, where a furious man was staring at me, his hand touching his cheek as if in shock.

Monica was talking, but I realized it wasn't to me. She was already on her cell phone. "...get here right now. I mean, right the fuck now. He looks pretty mad, and—ohhh shit, JP, he's a fucking cop!"

The man was in fact holding a badge, and I frowned. This could be problematic, I thought. I don't particularly want to get arrested right now. That probably wasn't a good decision. I heard footsteps rapidly approaching, and the entire crew arrived on scene, breathing hard from their sprint from the bar. Travis squeezed my shoulder as he walked past me towards the officer, and Heather moved to put her arm around me. But it was Artie to whom I turned as tears of surprise and embarrassment began to well up in my eyes.

"Shit, Artie, it was just like Egypt, and I just thought he was--" Artie pulled me into a tight hug and patted my back.

"It's ok, Kris, I got ya. I understand. Flashbacks can be a bitch, eh? It's alright. I dove under a table last week when a car backfired outside my house. I understand, don't worry about it..."

I could feel everyone's eyes staring at me in uncertainty and awkward silence, but Artie's hostile glare prevented anyone from asking any questions. For that moment, Artie and I were united in something none of our friends could ever understand, and for that, I think just for that moment, we both hated them all a tiny little bit.

“How did you not get arrested?” the girl asked, her eyes shining with the pleasure of having just heard a good story—I'd been told few people were storytellers of my vein, on the rare occasion that I chose to story-tell—and I answered,

“My boyfriend was a D.C. firefighter. He talked the cop down from taking me in, out of professional courtesy, and promised to take me home immediately. I believe he may have alluded to my having a drinking problem, that hypocritical bastard.”

The girl laughed through a mouthful of fries, which she had immediately begun devouring as soon as they'd arrived.

“That's fucking ridiculous. You were mad lucky.”

“Story of my life,” I agreed, showing her the tiny scars that still ran across my right knuckles. “That night was actually the second to last time I ever saw Monica.”

“When was the last time?”

“Our friend Heather's wedding, and she got married a year or so after college, so...four years ago, damn. We didn't think Monica was even going to show to the wedding...I didn't get to talk to her though—she bolted right after the ceremony—and so I guess that night at the bar was the last time I actually talked to her.”

I glanced at the girl, and asked quietly the question I didn't really want to ask, and the question I sensed she didn't really want to answer. “So how is she?”

The girl swallowed hard and chewed her lip for a long moment before answering, “She's...well...she...could be better.”

The girl shrugged helplessly, and I didn't push her for more information. Instead I asked,

“Well, can you tell me where I can find her?”

There was another long silence before she told me an address.

“Where she works,” she added after a pause, and I had a feeling it wasn't a theater company.

We left soon after that and I walked her back to her apartment. Impulsively, I pulled the remaining \$20 I had in my back pocket and handed it to her.

“Here.”

She looked startled and then shook her head. “No, no, I can't accept that. Thank you, but you already bought me lunch, and coffee, and talked with me like I fucking matter, and I'm just some worthless stupid kid from fucking Nebraska--” her voice stopped abruptly, embarrassed, and I pressed the money into her cold hands again.

“Kid, just take it. Buy yourself a good meal or a sweater, ok? And hell, it's not like I need American currency in the Middle East, right? For payback, just promise me you'll think about heading home at some point, ok? I'm betting you've got people back in Nebraska worried about ya.”

Her cheeks reddened, and I thought I saw a sudden longing for some tiny farm community somewhere hundreds of miles away in her eyes.

“My name's Judy,” she said softly.

Then she darted up the steps without another word.

Ch. 18

“We shouldn't have said we were cool with sharing a room,” Colin announced as we walked into our hotel room following the quiet, orderly, luncheon, full of people who were more important and distinguished than us.

I raised my eyebrows. “Eh? Getting prudish on me there, Colin?”

Colin laughed deeply and knelt down beside the tiny fridge. “

No, because then we'd have two minibars! Twice the booze, dumbass!”

“Such a fucking lush,” I chuckled, and he handed me a beer.

“Oh come on, don't tell me you don't need one after that. We didn't fit in there, and you know it. I mean, hell, it's amazing and all that we both got the Pulitzer, don't get me wrong, but,” Colin shook his head, serious for an instant, “everyone was talking about their newspapers and their plans and how great this is going to be for our careers and all. And I won't speak for you, Kris, but I don't think like that. I never get past the next assignment.”

I accepted the beer silently, wondering what it was that drove my young partner. It wasn't the adrenaline—I'd been around enough addicts to know one when I met them, and Colin just wasn't, plain and simple. But something inside me was afraid to ask—what in the hell could drive you if it wasn't adrenaline or ambition?—and so instead I responded lightly,

“Well, you've got to keep in mind how much younger we were than everyone else in the room—we were the babies by a decade at least. Probably in ten or 15 years, we'll give a shit about all that stuff. So, what are you going to do with all that money? Ten thousand whole bucks?”

Colin shrugged. “I don't know—probably be irresponsible and blow it all. Maybe knock a chick up so I need to pay child-support payments, play the Pennsylvania lottery 10,000 times, have you bury it somewhere and make me a treasure map, who knows. Nah, in seriousness, I'll probably put some of it in the bank, blow some of it on assorted vices, and probably buy some new camera equipment with the rest. Professional stuff costs more than you'd expect. How about you?”

I frowned. “I don't know. Hadn't gotten that far. There's nothing I really need or want, honestly. I've got a couple of college loans that I still a little bit on, but otherwise...”

“Well, congratulations, boss, you've officially found enlightenment. Should I call Ed and tell him you're joining the Buddhist monks? Do you want me to book you a plane ticket to Tibet?”

I finished the rest of my beer and threw the can at his head. He ducked and it bounced off the wall behind him.

“Fuck you. Listen, I've got something I've got to handle; I'll be back in a few hours. Think you can amuse yourself without getting into trouble for a bit?”

“Another issue? Jesus, Kris, how many ex-boyfriends do you have in New York?”

“Very funny. Nah, this is the same issue as before. I didn't end up finding the friend I was looking for this morning, but I've got an actual address now, so I'm going to try again.”

Colin glanced at the window. “It's getting dark,” he commented.

“Good,” I said without considering how that might sound, but thinking that wherever it was Monica was working probably was not a daylight establishment.

Colin's eyebrows shot up, and he remarked, “Why am I getting an extremely bad feeling about this? I think I should come with you.”

“No. I don't want to scare her off—my friend, I mean. This has got to be just one-on-one.”

Colin looked extremely unsettled, and I sighed.

“Look, if I don't call by midnight, you call me. If I don't pick up--” I scribbled down the address, “Here's the address of where I'm headed, ok? But I promise everything will be fine. Shit, Colin, I've tangled with everyone from Al-Qaeda to the Muslim Brotherhood to the Mossad—I think I can handle New Yorkers.”

I offered him a smile that he didn't return, but he nodded.

“Alright. I'm headed over there if you don't check in by 11. And call me if things start to look sketchy. Remember, this isn't exactly your comfort zone. There's a big difference between rapists and suicide bombers, ok?”

I found the address after several wrong subway stops and lines—taxis are the general mode of transportation in most Middle East cities—and eyed the place suspiciously, attempting to identify what I was walking into. Colin was right; this wasn't Baghdad or Beirut. I knew what to do when people exploded and guns fired, but crackheads and gangbangers were animals of a different color. This place didn't appear to be a crackhouse though, to my great relief. A neon pink sign blinked above the building. MISS KITTY'S, it proclaimed, though some of its letters were burned out. There were no windows. I chewed my lip and decided this was probably a cheap strip club, or a whorehouse. I'd never been to either, and had never intended on doing so. Ah well, there's a first time for everything, I thought to myself. Just pretend this is for a story.

I pushed in the rusty door and found myself in a dim building with loud music thumping from a base somewhere out of sight. As my eyes adjusted, I realized I was in a small, abandoned lobby. I stood awkwardly in the dirty room, eyeing the double doors from where the music blasted and strobe lights flashed, and waited for someone to come and tell me what to do. After a long ten minutes—which was in reality probably only two—I walked over to the double doors and stepped into the big room. A stage greeted me, upon which three G-string-clad women swung around metal poles in varying positions. A dozen solitary men sat at tables, nursing beers and staring up at the women with lust. The dancers looked exhausted beneath their heavy makeup. Startled, I stopped abruptly in my tracks—all the while thinking to myself, what did you expect to find in a strip joint, dumbass, a bunch of fucking nuns?—and regretted coming here. If this—this dirty, raunchy, Godforsaken place—was where Monica worked, I didn't think I wanted to see anymore.

“Can I help you?” An icy voice inquired, “Do you want to sit down?”

I glanced to my right and found another woman—clearly not one of the dancers, in her well-coordinated outfit and perfect makeup—staring at me with an expressionless face.

“I, uh, um, no, I didn't come here for—do I look like I would...I mean...” In a rare event, I found myself speechless.

She took me by the elbow, none too gently, and said in a voice that left no room for discussion, “Come with me, please.”

I found myself being towed towards the bar area on the side of the room, and then into a small office behind the bar. The woman—the manager, I'd guessed by now—shut the door behind me. I noted the presence of a well-muscled black man in the corner, his huge arms folded ominously over his chest. Bouncer. Had my years in the Middle East

attached some dangerous air to me that I was unaware of? Because the bouncer seemed to be really overkill for my 5'5 stature.

“What are you here for?” she said sharply.

I looked at her blankly. What had I gotten myself into?

“My name's Kristin Wilson; I just came to see someone,” I responded meekly.

This woman scared the hell out of me for reasons I couldn't explain. Maybe it was her expressionless face, or the fact that I couldn't get a read off her at all...and I also found myself unable to cease silently questioning the kind of woman who could make money off of using their own gender like this.

“Who?”

“Monica Deporte...I was told she worked here...”

The woman shook her head. “I don't know her.”

I frowned, and tried to explain Monica as I had last seen her, “Um, black hair, thin, big brown eyes, lots of eyeliner, kind of on the pale side, a little bit shorter than me...” After a second, I added helpfully, “Pretty big boobs, maybe a small D cup? Really likes theater shit, wanted to be an actress...”

The bouncer's face broke into a sudden smile. “Oh yeah! You mean Shawna!”

I shrugged. “Maybe. Last I heard, her name was Monica, but things can change I suppose.”

“Most of the girls take different names when they start working,” the bouncer assured me. “It doesn't mean nothing. But Shawna, she's good people.”

The woman fired him a frigid stare, and his smile vanished.

“If this Monica is in fact the same woman who works here, what business of it is yours?”

“She's just a friend of mine from high school. I haven't seen her in a few years, and I'm in town on business, so I figured I'd look her up.”

“What business?”

“I'm a journalist,” I said without thinking.

The expressionless face actually hardened a bit more, which I hadn't previously thought was possible, and she said in a voice so cold I felt its sting from three feet away,

“I think we're through here. Bruce, please escort our 'guest' to the door.”

“But I--” I started to protest, but the bouncer had already taken my elbow, considerably more gently than his boss had a few minutes earlier.

“Come on, miss,” Bruce said as he led me from the office.

I didn't know what else to do except to follow him back through the strip club and out into the lobby. He leaned in close for a moment as he opened the door to the sidewalk,

“Wait for me in the alley out back.”

Then I found myself back on the street with the door closing behind me. I stood there for a long moment in bafflement, weighing my options. Go meet the random bouncer—who could easily break me in two with one arm—in the dark alley behind the sketchy strip joint you've just been thrown out of, or call tonight a valiant effort and head the hell back to the hotel? I chuckled at my poor, misguided brain actually attempting to have an internal debate about this. I lit a cigarette and headed behind Miss Kitty's.

I waited for ten, fifteen, then twenty minutes, in the broken-glass littered alley. A solitary bulb above the club's back door cast an eerie gray shadow. My cell phone buzzed, and I glanced at it.

Where are u? Everything ok?

From: Colin, 10:12

I texted back: yeah, im fine, will be home in awhile, chill.

I neglected to mention the alley and the bouncer, who, as I finished sending the text, stepped out from the doorway. I snapped my cell shut and tucked it into my back pocket.

"On my smoke break," he explained with a wry smile, "Even the strip club's are smoke-free these days."

I lit yet another cigarette in unison with him—that made for a pack and a half today, very friggin' healthy, Kristin—and waited, carefully having positioned myself with my back to the street. That way I'd have an exit if need be, and I knew there was a large rock two inches to the side of my foot, just out of the small circle of artificial light, if exit didn't turn out to be possible. Rules for the Middle East—always have an exit strategy, always know where your weapons are, and always know whether fight or flight had a higher chance of success—weren't as foreign here as Colin may have imagined.

After a few deep drags on his cancer stick, Bruce—he had a surprisingly gentle voice for such a tough-looking man—commented,

"You shouldn't have said you were a reporter. Clarissa *hates* reporters—always trying to do investigation shit and all, you know? Maybe try and close down the club, or make it look bad? But she was suspicious anyway, so I guess it wouldn't have mattered."

"Suspicious? Of me? Why?"

Bruce frowned, and made a sweeping gesture towards my body. "Well, look at you. You clearly don't belong here, in this neighborhood, or at a place like Kitty's. The only time we get women like you in the joint is when they looking for little sisters or cousins or friends to take them home...You know, save them." Bruce sighed, and added, "A lot of the girls have problems, you know? Like, rough boyfriends, or drugs, or little babies at home they gotta support?"

"So she thought I was there to take Monica—I mean, Shawna—away from the job?"

Bruce nodded, and I considered my next words carefully.

"Well, Bruce, I'm not here for any other reason than what I said. I haven't seen Monica in years, and I just happened to be in the city. We were really tight in high school, and I just wanted to, you know, say hey. Didn't seem right to be in her city and not look her up."

Bruce looked wary, on the fence about his next action, and I frowned. Then I said quietly,

"Honestly, man, I'm not in any place myself to save Monica from anything. I can barely get a grip on my own life, let alone hers. Hell, I don't even have a permanent address. I won't lie to you; I *hate* the idea of her working--" I gestured at the decay around me--"*here*, but I don't think I could really help her even if she asked me to."

I think it was the knowledge that those words had been true that brought a sudden knot to my throat, but Bruce was nodding as he ground out his cigarette.

“Ok. Ok, miss, I'll help you, only because I really like Shawna—she watches my kid sometimes when my woman has to work the late shift at her job—but you've really gotta not burn me on this. Clarissa will fire my ass if she finds out about this, and I need this job.”

Without waiting for a confirmation from me, the big man with the gentle voice disappeared back into the club. Was he getting Monica? I steeled myself against what she might look like these days. Witnessing a friend's decay was also infinitely harder than a stranger's, however tragic the stranger's may be; I dreamed of charred bodies, tiny coffins, and screaming relatives right along with Heba's burned face, and of Travis' final calm moments, but it was only visions of Heba and Travis that caused me to awake drenched in a cold sweat. The other dreams...well, I had long ago accepted them as an unfortunate aspect of a hazardous duty. The door creaked open again, and my heart leaped into my mouth even before I saw if anyone was even behind the bouncer. Then,

“Oh, God, *Kristin*,” the woman breathed as she stepped down into the alley.

Her cheap high heels crunched on the broken glass. Bruce smiled at me and vanished back inside.

I stepped closer to her, abandoning my strategic position, and offered tentatively, “Hi, Monica.”

I unprepared for the tears that began to flow in mascara-blackened lines down her blush-reddened cheeks.

“Oh Christ, Kristen, why did you come here? I don't want you to see me like this,” she cried, burying her face in her hands.

I was within in arm's length of her, but I didn't offer anything in the way of physical comfort. I was too paralyzed. Monica had always been thin, but now she was even gaunter than the last time I'd seen her. I'd seen refugees with more meat on their bones than her; in her tiny skirt and midriff top, her ribs were sharply defined and her hip bones jutted out. Her ankles looked swollen, probably from long hours in impossibly high plastic heels. Her cheeks were hollowed out and her skin had an unhealthy yellowish cast to it, despite the make-up camouflage, which only succeeded in emphasizing the deep worry lines in her 27-year-old face. Monica's beautiful eyes had an unnatural glaze in them, the look of someone who has given up on life and everyone in it. *Despair* was the only word that came to mind, and I said weakly, idiotically,

“It's good to see you again, Monnie.”

She rubbed the tears off her face viciously, leaving black smudges around her eyes, and swallowed hard.

“What are you doing here? How, how did you find me?”

I shrugged and tried to joke, “I'm a fucking reporter—tracking people is what I do for a living.”

Again, that was the wrong thing to say, and Monica made a small, sad sound.

“And I take my clothes off for a living,” she choked out bitterly.

I winced—I couldn't remember the last time I'd been at such a loss—and apologized, “I didn't mean it that way...I just got a shitty sense of hum--”

She interrupted. “I know you didn't, Kris. And I really, really appreciate you trying to find me and all, but now, I just want you to go. Please.”

“Monica...can't we go grab some late night food or something? Just catch up for awhile?”

"I'm working," she reminded me.

"I can wait. Your shift has to end at some point, right?" I stubbornly returned.

Monica shook her head. "Kristin, please. Don't make me beg. You...you are from a different part of my life...a part I try not to think about, because it makes this reality seem a hell of a lot more God-awful. You have a great job, and you're successful, and you're getting to do what you always wanted with your life, and I am not lying when I say that I am so *so* happy for you...But you have to understand, things didn't quite turn out that way for me, and reminders of that are not really welcome."

I cracked my aching neck in the silence that followed, and then said in a rapid-fire paragraph that gave her no time to interrupt,

"Since last time you saw me, I broke my leg, assorted ribs, and two vertebrae in my neck in a really glorious car crash off a cliff. My boyfriend died. It was at least partially my fault. I almost failed out of school. I spent half a year working in a bar. I spent another two years watching people and cars blow up, and calling that a job. I fucked JP a few times and then broke his heart. I watched my one best friend in Egypt die, and the other disappear. I shot a soldier. I've lost 30 percent of my hearing. I smoke two packs a day. I border on functional alcoholism. My little sister refuses to speak to me. My little brother probably will wind up just like me and I can't do anything to stop it. I know I am killing myself, and I can't stop that either. I don't expect to live to 30, and I know it is all my own goddamn selfish fault."

I looked at her, realizing I was on the verge of unshed tears for the second time tonight.

"I know it is my fault," I repeated quietly.

Monica really was crying again, and to my great surprise, I found her hugging me, much harder than I would've even expected her tiny frame was capable of. I could feel every fragile bone in her back as I returned the hug without any more words.

"Kristin, I'm so so sorry," she managed through her tears. "I heard about your boyfriend, and that you were so hurt...Heather called me...she said they didn't know if you were even going to live, and I wanted to come down and see you, but I just couldn't face anyone...I was just so ashamed. She was so angry at me that she wouldn't even give me the number for your hospital room. That's why I left right after Heather's wedding...I just couldn't..."

I stroked her hair back. "Jesus, Monnie, that was a long time. Stop apologizing, please. You have nothing to apologize for. I wasn't trying to make you cry...I was just making the point that things haven't turned out as anyone expected—and that happiness, well, as it turns out, it's a hell of a lot trickier than we all thought at 18. And that my unhappiness is largely the result of my own fuck-ups and insanity...You, on the other hand, have nothing to look back on in shame. You've given it your best shot."

Monica snorted, wiping away the latest bout of tears. "*Please*. Don't pretend I'm a saint. I've made a lot of mistakes...When I first got here, I was just so overwhelmed with everything in the big city...and I got involved in some things, some people, that I should've known enough to avoid. I was--" she laughed bitterly--"having a fucking great time. And by the time I realized how far gone things had gone," Monica shrugged, "it was too late to get out. *Que sera, sera*, right? Mr. Ricardo's Spanish class, eighth period senior year, remember?"

I smiled in spite of myself. “Ha, yeah, when we weren't cutting out early to go to the diner for cheese fries and smokes.”

Monica returned my smile and then asked, “So...I don't have a lot of time, but how is everyone else? It's been a long time...”

“Everyone's alright. Heather's got two kids now, a little boy who's two, named Conrad, and a brand new baby girl named Madison. I haven't seen the baby yet, but Con's a cutie—such WASP names for those poor kids though, huh? She's obviously still married to Darren, and she's a full-time stay-at-home mom now. She still looks as gorgeous as ever—two kids later, she still has her cheerleader body, can you believe it?”

“Is she happy?” Monica asked softly. “I talked to her right before the wedding, and she was having doubts...”

I winced. I hadn't known that, but it didn't come as any surprise. “I don't know, Monica. She loves her kids like crazy, she doesn't want for anything, Darren provides a great life for her and the kids. But,” I shrugged, “he travels a lot, he works long hours, I don't know that she really loves him...I think she's comfortable, and lonely. Whenever I visit, she never complains, just smiles and offers another cup of coffee.”

“What about Artie?” Monica asked in a way that said she too knew about that lost love.

“Artie...Artie's a soldier. He bitches a lot about the little shit, same as he always has, but never says a word about the war or anything. He got pretty bad with the drinking for awhile there, after his first tour, but then he just woke up one morning with one hangover too many, and decided he was done. He's solely a Gatorade guy now. He's pretty high up in the ranks these days, got a lot of guys under him—did four tours, two in Iraq and two in Afghanistan. He's not married, no kids, no girlfriend that I'm currently aware of—nothing more than the occasional random chick, and the last time I talked to him, he was trying to get sent out for a fifth tour.”

“He really likes war that much? I remember he seemed pretty shook up after the first tour; what happened?”

I shook my head. “I don't think he likes it...I just don't think he knows what else to do with himself. I think he's afraid the moment he sits down and takes a stock of his life, he'll realize the hole he has there without Heather. So he stays in uniform.”

Monica sighed heavily. “*Idiots*. Both of them. In so much fucking love, and all they could do was sleep together. Neither of them ever had the balls to say anything beyond, 'oh God I'm coming.'”

I laughed out loud, and Monica repeated, “They could've been so happy. Idiots. What about JP? You guys slept together...?”

I ran a hand through my hair and stared at the starless sky as Monica commented, “Have to say, I never saw that one coming.”

I lit another cigarette to steady the nerves that any discussion of JP always rattled. “Ah, hell, Monica, neither did I. As it turned out, he was in love with me.”

“And what about your feelings?”

Almost in a whisper, I responded miserably, “I crushed them...I mean, him. I had to...”

I looked at Monica pleadingly, and she didn't push me any farther. I continued on as casually I could,

“I haven't spoken to him in...awhile, but the last I heard, he was working at an insurance agency on the accounting end of things—making a good salary, has a nice condo in Alexandria. He's cleaned up a lot, doesn't look like a stoner anymore. He doesn't smoke weed anymore, and apparently he was trying to quit smoking cigs too. He's dating some girl,” I shrugged, “and I guess he's happy.”

Monica put a hand on my shoulder briefly, then pulled out a makeup compact from her purse. She studied herself in the tiny mirror and carefully wiped away any signs of crying. She redid her mascara and powdered her nose. Then she looked at me.

“I need to get back to work,” she said in a carefully neutral tone, “but, Kristin, thank you. I mean that. Thank you from the bottom of my heart. It means so much to know everyone is doing alright, and that you all haven't forgotten about me. I never forgot about you guys, even if it looks that way. My, my happiest memories are with you all.”

I wiped away an errant tear at my eye, and protested, “Do you really have to go? I mean, I can wait, I don't mind; I want to hear about you--”

Monica shook her head. “No, you don't. It isn't a pretty story. Go back to your hotel, and know I carry you all in my heart, and that I am doing...the best that I can right now.”

“Is there anything I can do for you?” I asked softly. “Do you need anything...?”

Monica pulled me into another hug, and didn't let go as she said, “Just this.”

I opened my mouth to begin to say what I had sworn not to—to please please please come with me, leave this life, get help—but Monica put her hand over my lips before I was able to form any words. Still with one hand around my shoulders, she looked me in the eyes for the first time and shook her head.

“Please, Kris. Don't insult me by pretending it's that simple.”

I nodded and swallowed my words. She was right; my brief appearance in her life was several years too late. If just walking away would solve everything, she would have done it already. That was something I could understand.

Then she hugged me one more time, briefly, and smiled as she released me. “Take care of yourself, ok, Kristin? Don't go getting yourself killed—it, it wouldn't be right.”

“I'm doing the best I can right now,” was my reply, and she nodded.

Then Monica—Shawna—opened the pockmarked door, spilling harsh light and loud music into the alley's relative peace for a brief moment, and stepped inside. She blew me a kiss before the door closed with a loud bang, throwing the alley back into darkness and quiet once more.

I threw my cigarette at the door in frustration, and leaned back against the stone wall, a thousand fleeting moments that seemed so unimportant in their own time—a shared dirty joke, a lunch period together, a note passed in the hallway, a trip to the mall—running through my mind...and now, *this*. Life, I decided as I walked slowly out of the alley, was simply that—a series of inconsequential events strung together to form something, or nothing at all.

I arrived back at the hotel shortly before midnight, wondering why Colin hadn't called as he'd threatened. Probably passed out drunk, I thought to myself as I opened the room door. Instead, he was sitting on his bed, watching television, not a bottle in sight. I frowned.

“Hi, Kris,” he greeted with a overly big yawn, “How was your night? Successful?”

Something was off, and I studied him a little closer. He was trying too hard to be casual.

“How come you didn't call?” I asked.

He shrugged and pointed at the television. “Sorry, lost track of time. A marathon of 'Fresh Prince' came on—you know how much I love this show.” He offered me a cheerful grin, and I glanced at the laughing characters on the screen.

“Oh yeah? Catch me up—what's this episode about?” I asked as I sat down on the other bed.

He faltered for just a split second. “Uh, Will is failing chemistry, and Carlton is trying to tutor him.”

I pulled off my shoes and challenged, “Bullshit. I've seen this episode before.”

That was a lie, but he didn't know that. The slight reddening of his cheeks was enough for me to question, “So how come you still have your shoes on, Colin? Where have you been tonight?”

He frowned, and the blush spread to his entire face. Then Colin sighed and said, “Ah, hell, Kris, I was just worried about you.”

“You *followed* me?” I exploded. “Who the fuck do you think you are?”

He didn't react to my anger and instead offered an apologetic smile.

“Couldn't let you get jumped on my watch, now could I? Ed would never forgive me.”

I shook my head in irritation and snapped back, “I'm not a friggin' two-year-old, Colin. I'm an adult, and I'd appreciate it if you treated me like one.”

Then I grabbed a beer out of the mini-fridge and downed it in two gulps, reminiscent of my college binge drinking days. Then I slammed it down on the nightstand angrily, with a pointedly hostile look at my young photographer. Colin shrugged, and turned up the television.

I laid back on the bed and stared at the ceiling for several minutes. The beer reached my veins and cooled my blood, and I glanced over at Colin, who appeared to be totally absorbed in Will Smith's on-screen antics. Without bothering to sit up, I commented,

“Well, how the hell did you manage to follow me all the way there and back without my even noticing? I'm not exactly an unobservant individual.”

Colin grinned. “My dad's a retired Marine, remember? I was raised to be quiet, and deadly.”

I chuckled. “Quiet, I'll give you—deadly, I'd have to see to believe.”

“I'll give you *dead*, woman.”

Colin threw the remote at me, skimming the top of my hair. In retaliation, I threw my second beer can of the day his direction, missing by several feet.

“So, how was your friend...? She a dancer at that club...?” he asked quietly.

I winced. “Yeahhhh...she's a dancer at the club. She...”

I swallowed hard and found myself having to wipe tears away, *again*.

“She's got a lot of problems, and I, I can't do a goddamn thing to change any of it. We were *friends*, and I just...I walked away from her tonight. The worst part, Colin, is that I really saw all this shit coming. I *knew* Monica was going to end up a mess up here

in the city, I *knew* Heather was going to marry some guy she didn't love, I *knew* Artie would never leave the Army even though he would hate it...I saw it waiting for them, and I never did anything to stop it..."

I was really crying now, and Colin got up from his bed and sat on the edge of mine. He rubbed my back for a brief moment, and said nothing. There wasn't anything to say.

Ch. 19

Our arrival back at the Post was almost surreal. Everyone kept shaking our hands, offering sincere congratulations, only a few jealousy-tinged, and treating us like we were minor celebrities. As one who ever disliked the spotlight, I was more than a little uncomfortable, and I glanced at Colin for help. I knew he had to be equally miserable—it was an ancient adage among photographers that their one wish in life was to be invisible—but it didn't show on his face. Instead, he shook hands and slapped backs and smiled cheerfully at our colleagues, pretending to bask in his own happiness and their happiness for him. Not knowing what else to do, I followed his lead, poorly. I had never been any good at faking normalcy.

Ed had been my editor for the last five years, and he knew by now what I was like, so when we finally had waded our way through an office full of well-wishers and made it to the relative safety of his, he didn't gush.

"Congratulations to you both," was all he said. Then, moving swiftly on, "Have you given any thought to what you are going to do next?"

The question took me off guard, and I managed "Uh...head back to the Middle East...write stories as shit happens there...you know, what we've been doing for the last couple of years..."

Ed shook his head. "Not if you don't want to."

I looked at him in bewilderment. Surely he wasn't going to assign me to the City Desk *now*?

"You're Pulitzer-winning reporters, guys," he said. "You didn't think the Post was just going to keep making you cover bombings for the rest of your careers, did you? No, for at least a few months, you're getting a special treat. Go do whatever you want."

"Huh?"

I looked at Colin, expecting to see equal levels of confusion, but he was grinning.

"Take a few months, take several, and go write and photograph whatever you both want. You can keep working as a team, you can separate, whatever works for you. You know those ideas you have kicking around in the back of your head for years, topics you'd like to explore in-depth, features you want to write, but never have time for because the job gets in the way? Now's your chance."

Colin was shaking Ed's hand in thanks, and I frowned. I had no idea what he was talking about. What else was there except the job? I just followed the story; I didn't invent it. Ed looked at me and saw the confusion I could not hide written all over my face, and he sighed.

"You don't know anything except war, do you, Kristin?"

I reddened slightly, feeling uncharacteristically embarrassed, and Ed said almost sadly,

"You know who you remind me of?"

I shook my head, and he answered, “Dickey Chapelle. I met her once, when I had just started my very first tour in Vietnam in ’65, and she was on her fifth. She was one fidgety little woman, with a voice like a bullhorn. She smoked like a chimney, and she could never get too close to the danger. The running joke among the veteran reporters was that you couldn’t find a war anywhere in the world where Dickey wouldn’t show up.”

I smiled legitimately for the first time in several days. Dickey Chapelle was one of the first female war correspondents, and one of the best combat reporters—male and female—of her day. I had written a term paper on her while in college, and counted her among my very few heroes. Being compared to her was a compliment I did not deserve, and didn’t expect I ever would. Ed’s face, however, was deadly serious.

“You know what happened to Dickey not a month after I met her?”

I nodded and let Ed continue, “She was killed while on patrol with a Marine squad by a land mine.”

“The first American female reporter to die in combat,” I added.

My old editor pointed to a black and white photograph on his wall, in which a much younger Ed Greene smile and linked arms with a middle-aged woman, dressed in fatigues with a cigarette dangling from her lips and large glasses dominating her petite features.

“Me and Dickey in ‘Nam,” Ed explained.

I sensed what Ed was trying to say—you are going to end up dead before your time, just like her—but I protested,

“You were a combat reporter too, Ed.”

He shook his head. “I covered what needed to be covered, and I got out when it was time to get out. I didn’t make war my drug.”

I winced despite my best efforts—that last comment hit just a little too close to the truth—and I said,

“I’ll get out when it’s time, Ed. I just don’t know when that is going to be yet.”

He nodded, still looking at the decades-old photograph, and we quietly left his office.

We had to go through another round of congratulations on our way out—now additionally having to dodge the “what are you going to do next?” question—and I exhaled a sigh of relief when we reached the street.

“Damn,” Colin commented, the pleasure evident on his face, “pretty sweet deal, eh?”

Helplessly, I shrugged.

“I guess so,” I said weakly.

“You don’t think so? Why not? This is fucking fantastic, boss. Most reporters wait their whole careers for an opportunity like this.”

“I’m not saying it’s not cool. It’s just that...I don’t think I know how to do anything else except to cover the bombings and the explosions and the craziness. I, uh, I don’t have any ideas like Ed was talking about. I don’t think like that, I guess.”

“Well, we’ll think of something together then,” Colin said confidently. “We make a pretty good team, right?”

I smiled in relief. I had been mildly concerned that perhaps Colin would want to go do his own thing, and after two years together, two years in which he was rarely out of my sight, I couldn't imagine life without his presence.

"We'll think of something," I promised. "What are you planning on doing now? We've still got another few days off."

Colin shrugged. "Don't know. I guess I'll rent a hotel room and just waste some time until we report back to work. I don't really know anyone down here, and it's not worth heading all the way home for a few days."

I chewed my lip, then heard myself saying, "Well, you could come home with me if you wanted."

Colin raised his eyebrows. "You sound pretty hesitant there, boss."

I flushed. "It's not you," I said quickly. "It's more...I try to keep my work life and my family separate. I have a hard enough time being somewhat normal around them, let alone taking my photographer home with me."

"You're worried I'll blow your cover as a good girl, eh?" Colin grinned. "No worries, boss, I'm very loveable. I've never met a parent I couldn't charm."

As it turned out, he was right. Colin chatted with my parents about the economy and the weather and politics, he listened intently to Jimmy's court room stories, he played video games with Tyler, and he wowed Mary and Kat with his photographs of the region. I was frankly in awe of him. Not once did a suspicious word cross his lips or a dark look appear on his face. He could've been a photographer for the National Geographic from the way he spoke about his work. He made my entire family laugh with funny stories—stories I'd witnessed as well—about security checkpoint mishaps, language barriers, and cultural blunders. I'd never considered telling those types of stories; in light of everything else I'd seen, they never seemed relevant. He also seemed to know exactly where to end a story, censoring out the upsetting parts and boiling down everything to a friendly tale when in fact large chunks of it had been terrifying and the ending had been bloody. Maybe it was a journalist's curse, but I had no concept of how to do that. For me, the truth was what it was, nothing more or less. I could simply keep silent, but I did not know how to alter it.

I stood over his shoulder as he showed off photos from Jordan, from Palestine, from Pakistan. His photographs showed beautiful mountains, stunning sunrises, gorgeous mosques with soaring minarets, mothers peacefully rocking infants, little children playing soccer. Where, I wondered, were the explosions that marred those mountains and sunsets? Where were the bullet holes in the mosque walls? Where were the mothers wailing in grief over tiny coffins, and where were the suicide bombers some little children would grow up to be? Had they always been there, and I'd missed them? Maybe that was what separated Colin and me, I considered; he can see the beauty through the hell. I was fairly certain my family liked him better than me, and would later wonder, when we'd left, why I couldn't just be more like him. I couldn't answer that question, and hoped it was one no one would ever ask aloud.

I was leaning over the back of the couch, watching Tyler and Colin play Halo VI—Colin appeared to be winning, and very pleased about this fact—when the phone rang. I heard my mother answer, and then she came into the family room.

“For you,” she said as she handed it to me. “I think it’s your friend from high school.”

I frowned and took the phone. No one ever called my house phone; I didn’t even know who still had this number.

“Hello?”

“Hey, Kris,” came a familiar voice over a scratchy connection.

“Artie? Hey, what’s up? Why are you calling my house?”

“Yeah, sorry about that. I called your cell, but you didn’t answer, and Heather said you were home for a few days, so I figured I’d try your house. I’ve still got the number memorized from back in the day before we had cell phones, can you believe it?”

I chuckled while my mind raced. Why was Artie calling in the first place? He had always preferred email to keep in touch, and I actually couldn’t remember the last time we’d spoke on the telephone.

“So, yeah, I just wanted to call and congratulate you, Kris. I heard through the grapevine—a.k.a. Heather—that you won the Pulitzer. That’s pretty fucking badass, man, and I just wanted to say that I’m impressed.”

I bit my lip to keep myself from challenging “bullshit.” While I did not doubt for an instant that Artie was sincere in his congratulations, I also knew that he would not have known what the Pulitzer was if it fell on his head, and even on the off chance that he did, he would have normally just sent an e-card.

“Thanks, dude. I appreciate it. Where are you, Artie? Are you on base?”

The line crackled, and Artie laughed humorlessly. “Not exactly, Kris. Listen, I’ve got to go, but congrats again, and take care of yourself, ok?”

Disturbed now, I questioned, “Artie, is, uh, everything alright? Are you ok?”

“Sure, sure,” he responded dismissively, “I’m fine. No worries. I’m just out of time is all.”

“Ok, Art. Call me next time you’re home, ok? It’s been too long, man.”

“Yeah, yeah, I know. Definitely. Oh, and happy early birthday too. Peace, kid.”

Then the line went dead and a loud dial tone met my ears, empty of Artie’s voice. I frowned deeply and hung up the phone.

“Everything ok?” my mother asked, trying to cover her anxiety with a smile.

“Yeah...that was Artie, calling to congratulate me on the Pulitzer win.”

“That’s nice, dear,” my mother said, looking relieved.

“And he wished me a happy early birthday.”

The tension leapt back onto my mother’s face. “Sweetie...” she said uncertainly, “your birthday isn’t for another two months.”

I swallowed hard and nodded. “I know.”

“Well, he is a man. They forget things like that all the time, you know. Your father once bought me flowers for our anniversary three weeks early, haha. I’m sure Artie just thinks it’s a lot sooner than it is,” she offered, squeezing my shoulder.

I smiled at her. My mother hadn’t known anything about my life in years, and she knew it, but still, it meant something to me that she continued to offer comfort, even when we both knew it was a lost cause. In return, I said with false confidence,

“Yeah, I’m sure that’s what it is. Thanks, Mom.”

An hour later, “Are you going out?” my mother asked as I grabbed my shoes from the hallway.

“Yeah, out to the bar with Colin and Jimmy,” I responded.

Artie’s phone call had unnerved me, and I needed a few drinks to unwind.

Colin came up behind me and slung an arm loosely around my shoulders. “Don’t worry, ma’am; I’ll make sure she behaves herself.”

My mother didn’t catch the humorous note in his voice, and nodded. “Thank you, Colin. Kristin, a postcard came for you today.”

I elbowed him sharply in the ribs when her back was turned. “A postcard, huh? That’s weird; who’s it from?”

My mother handed me the postcard. “I don’t know,” she replied. “I didn’t read it.”

At my upraised eyebrows, she protested, “Kristin, I didn’t!”

I chuckled, not believing her for a moment, then looked at the postcard. The front of it was the Los Angeles skyline, and I grinned. I knew who this was from. I flipped it over and read in a familiar, almost illegible scrawl that I hadn’t seen in many years:

Dear Kristin,

Didn’t I always tell you that despite—or maybe because of—your complete and utter insanity, you’d be the one winning all the awards? I saw your name come across the wire at work, and I jumped up and screamed, “Holy shit, I used to be that crazy bitch’s editor! I went to college with her, and I once almost fired her for getting arrested!” I don’t think anyone here believed me though, haha. Anyway, I just wanted to say, in all sincerity, congratulations on your Pulitzer win, Kristin. You certainly deserve it. Everyone out here was shocked reading your article—“she snuck into the al-Asqa Mosque?? In the middle of a standoff with the Mossad??—but I wasn’t surprised at all. I always knew you were

destined for great things. I hope everything in the rest of your life is going as well as in your professional life (my apologies for sending this to your parents' address—I don't know where you call home these days) and feel free to drop me a line. My email is Jacob_Izyacosky@latimes.com. Best of luck in everything, and keep those articles coming—my reporters will have plenty of competition to offer you next year, now that they know what they're up against!

---Jake

"Who's it from?" Colin asked, peering over my shoulder as he rubbed his sore ribs.

I handed him the postcard; there was little private in my life from Colin by that point in our friendship.

"My old editor at the Diamondback—UMD's newspaper. He was a good guy, a little high strung, threatened to fire me on a pretty regular basis, but a good guy. He did well for himself; he's the city desk editor out at the LA Times in California, where, from what I hear, he's doing a bang-up job. I wouldn't be surprised if his reporters really do pull in a Pulitzer next year. Jake wasn't a man to be outdone back in the day, and I doubt that has changed much in the last several years."

My mother was still hovering as we got ready to leave, and as I kissed her goodbye, she finally asked,

"Kristin...honey, did you really ever get arrested in college?"

I laughed out loud. I had forgotten that she didn't know about that.

"Nah, mom," I lied with a smile, "it's just an old inside joke. Don't worry about it."

"Oh," she said with visible relief, "right, of course. Well, have a nice time, honey. You too, Colin."

"Know what I think would be funny?" Colin said over the loud music in the bar a short while later.

I couldn't hear what he said next, and yelled back, "Dude, I'm frigging deaf, remember? Speak up!"

Colin laughed at my RPG-acquired disability and said louder, "I think it'd be hysterical if we got your brother drunk!"

I glanced at Jimmy, who had stupidly decided to bankroll Colin's and my bar tabs in congratulations for our recent awards. Success did have its perks.

"Can't—he's driving."

"I'll drive; this is only my second, and I'll cap it after one more."

"I don't know if I trust you to get me home safely," I joked, even though I knew that of all of the people I had called friends over the years, my photographer was probably the one with whom my life was safest.

"Come on," Colin urged, his eyes glittering with the possibility of corrupting my poor twin, "the man looks like he could use a little loosening up."

Jimmy appeared back at the table, holding two beers. "What?" he questioned suspiciously, sensing he'd been a topic of conversation.

"Nothing," Colin replied easily. "Here, Jim, you should take this beer. I've got to make a phone call outside, and I don't want the beer to get flat."

Jimmy frowned, clearly trying to recall if beer could in fact become flat, and responded, "I can't. I've already had one, and I need to drive you both home."

Colin stood up and playfully slapped Jimmy's back. "Come on, man, didn't you ever see those DARE charts with the alcohol amounts you need to get drunk? You're still legal until at least three or four. Drink up, and I'll be back in a few." He slid the beer across the table and winked at me as he walked outside.

Jimmy pushed his glasses up on his nose and I took a sip of my own beer.

"It's Sam Adams Summer Ale," I told him. "You'll like it, promise."

He considered this for a few more moments and then raised the glass to his lips. After a tentative sip, he grinned. "You're right; it's pretty delicious, actually."

By the time Colin returned from his alleged phone call bearing more drinks, I'd talked Jimmy into his third beer of the evening, and his cheeks were more than a little flushed.

"Carbombs for everyone!" Colin announced as he sat back down.

"I," Jimmy started to protest, but Colin put the shot in his hand.

"It's already been paid for, man. You can't let good booze go to waste—it's a mortal sin."

Not being a Catholic himself, this argument didn't quite satisfy Jimmy's inner lawyer, but Colin added, "Well, if you don't drink it, I'm going to have to, and then who's going to drive home? Besides, it's really good."

That seemed to do the trick, and Jimmy found a glass in one hand and a shot of Bailey's in the other.

"Carbomb...?" he questioned, his words ever so slightly slurred. "But that's so offensive...I would think of all people, you guys..."

"It's ok," Colin assured him, "I'm Irish. We're the only ethnicity that could turn our terrorism into an alcoholic beverage!"

Jimmy's jaw dropped, and I laughed.

"Don't over think it, Jim. Some things are best laughed at and nothing more."

He nodded, still slightly perplexed, as Colin explained proper carbomb drinking etiquette.

"You got it? Ok, so, before we do it though, we need something to cheer to."

Jimmy looked at us helplessly, until I said, "How about to Ed Greene?"

Colin grinned. “Yeah, that’s a good cheer. To Ed Greene, best goddamn editor the Post ever had!”

We clinked our glasses together, dropped our shots into the beer, and chugged. Colin and I slammed our empty glasses on the table within seconds of each other, but Jimmy didn’t lag far behind. He wiped his widely-grinning mouth with his sleeve and laughed.

“That was fun! Can we do another one?”

Colin and I looked at each other and bit our lips to contain our mischievous smiles.

“Soon, bro, soon. Just give that one a few minutes to really kick in, ok?”

We sat back in our chairs, making idle chatter and being amused at Jimmy’s first experience with drunkenness, until Jimmy abruptly said with a somber note in his voice,

“So I ran into Mrs. Marquez on Wednesday downtown on my lunch break.”

I winced. “Yeah? How’s she doing?”

Jimmy frowned deeply. “She’s aged a lot...I mean, *a lot*. She looks years older than she should...I didn’t ask...I really should have kept in touch with her better, Kik.”

Mrs. Marquez was the widow of the man who had been Jimmy’s baseball coach throughout his elementary school years. Vicente Marquez had worked at the Pentagon, and had been killed instantly on September 11. They’d barely recovered enough of his body to bury.

There was a long silence until Colin—who had heard the story before—commented quietly, “Hard to believe it’s been ten years, huh? Our whole lives have been molded by that one day.”

“Yeah,” I agreed, “they don’t call us the 9/11 Generation for nothing, I guess.”

Jimmy shook his head slowly. “No.”

“No what, Jim?”

He shook his head again, his thoughts forming slowly through the alcohol haze. “No...no, I don’t think we’re the 9/11 Generation at all. That’s not right. I mean, sure, lots of people were affected by it. But I don’t think...I don’t think it’s what’s created our generation.”

“Then what has? What are we?”

“I think...I think the war has played such a bigger role. Iraq changed...well, everything in the military, in politics, in international stuff, in how we fight wars, in how the world views us, and maybe...maybe in how we view ourselves.”

“So we’re the Iraq Generation, eh?” Colin said contemplatively, clearly taken by the idea.

Jimmy nodded. “Yeah, maybe. I don’t know. It’s just something I think about sometimes. Guys, I’m drunk. You got me drunk. I can’t go home like this—Sue will murder me...”

I had temporarily stopped listening to my twin, the wheels in my own head spinning. *The Iraq Generation...created us...changed everything...in how we view ourselves...* The wheels stopped spinning and everything fell into place.

“I’ve got it,” I announced, cutting short my companions’ conversations.

They both looked at me curiously.

“Got what, Kris?” Colin inquired.

“Our feature.”

He leaned forward. "I'm listening."

"We've got almost exactly a year before the 10th anniversary of the war. Twelve months, twelve stories. Let's go and see where we've all ended up as a result."

A wide smile slowly made its way across Colin's mouth. "Ooh-rah, boss. Let's go find our generation."

Less than a week later, half a dozen hours remained to me before my flight left for Kabul, Afghanistan. Where I was going after that, I didn't know, and when my feet would touch American soil again...well, I supposed I never really knew the answer to that. I glanced out the car window, scanning the winding highway's shoulder as I drove. It had been a long time since I had been on this road, and I was worried I wouldn't recognize my destination.

Headlights... "Fuck!" ...tires squealing...a sharp swerve, a last glance, gray eyes, metal upon metal, shattering glass...Nothing.

I recognized the place. I shook my head clear of the flashback and pulled the car over to the side of the road. I allowed myself to sit in my seat for a long moment forcibly controlling my breathing. I had far fewer flashbacks than one would expect for my lifestyle, but they still threw me off for a few moments after their occasional appearance. The clock on the dashboard eventually remembered me I'd been sitting in the car longer than the flashback warranted, and any further delay constituted a display of cowardice. I got out of the car and leaned against it as I lit a cigarette. The sun was beginning to set, and the view really was beautiful from the cliff.

Finally, I forced myself to walk over to the guardrail. It had been replaced in the years following its destruction at our hands, and now even showed its own signs of age and rust. I reluctantly peered over the low guardrail, a curious tightening in my stomach. The ground looked back at me from 20 feet below. Grass, a few scraggly bushes, a lone pine tree, scattered litter from the road above and what looked like an ancient oven, lying on its side covered in rust...Nothing to distinguish it from a billion other barren roadsides. Well, what did you expect? I asked myself in irritation. *Of course* it looks normal; it's been six years. *Yeah, but...* a little voice protested in the back of my head, but I silenced it, angry at myself for expecting—hoping, almost—for a sign of what had been lost here. I was halfway to the car when something small and white caught the corner of my eye. I dropped to my knees when I reached it. It was a little cross. On it was a mounted a sign.

Travis David Bannerman

April 3, 1983-November 9, 2007

A Hero in Life & in Death

District of Colombia Fire Department

Travis, you will always be missed & never forgotten.

I felt a tear slide down my cheek. *A hero in life and in death.* Someone other than me knew the truth. Someone else knew that in the end, it was not Travis' addiction that had claimed him. It had been his good heart. How had I gone all these years not knowing this was here? Another tear splashed in the dirt beneath his memorial. I suddenly wished I had something to leave here, even though I knew Travis would have laughed at such a

gesture. I pulled my cigarette pack out of my jacket pocket and laid them at the foot of the cross.

“Happy birthday, babe.”

I touched the top of the cross and couldn't help wondering where my life would be today without that night...Maybe Travis and I would've gotten married and settled down—I stopped and smiled sadly.

“You're out there somewhere laughing at that thought, aren't you?” I said quietly, the slight wind carrying my words away. “God, I miss you so much sometimes...”

The sound of tires crunching on the gravel behind me startled me out of my reverie, and I was on my feet in seconds. I didn't recognize the car, and swallowed hard, considering my limited exit and weapon options. I could conceivably sprint to the car, but will I be able to start it before this stranger gets to the driver's side window? The stranger's car door opened and someone stepped out.

“Kristin?” I couldn't make out the speaker's features in the fading daylight, but I certainly recognized the surprised voice.

“JP?”

He stepped closer to me until I could see him in the headlights of his car, not the junker he'd had since high school, but one befitting an adult.

“Hey, yeah, it's me. What, what are you doing here?”

“Jesus, JP, you scared the hell of me.”

“I'm sorry. I just didn't expect to see you here...”

I crossed my arms over my chest. “Why wouldn't I be here? Don't I have as much of a right as you?”

JP held up his hands. “I didn't mean it like that. I just meant...I didn't think you...believed in stuff like this. You said once you'd never been to his grave...”

“I remember,” I said shortly.

That was true; I didn't even know which cemetery he was buried in, and I'd never wanted to know.

“And I don't. Believe. In stuff like this.”

We stood awkwardly staring at everything but each other for a long moment. Finally, JP said stiffly, “Well, I don't want to bother you. I can come back tomorrow. Hope all is good with you.” He turned to go.

“No, JP, don't go. It's fine. Please stay. I mean, I, I was about to leave anyway.”

I clenched my jaw to stop myself from continuing to fumble for words I didn't have, and JP stopped.

“Oh. Ok. If you're sure.”

“Yeah, yeah, I am. I've got a flight to catch soon anyway. It's not until 5 a.m., but you know how airports are. Got to be there a decade before your flight, and God knows Homeland Security doesn't like all the stamps on my passport.”

I forced a chuckle as I demanded to myself, *why are you still talking? Just shut up and go! Leave the man in peace, for God's sake.*

JP's chuckle sounded as forced as mine. “Yeah, flying's a bitch. I've had a few business trips recently, and I hated every minute of it. I didn't even know they *had* airports in places like Tulsa, Oklahoma, ha.”

“Ha, yeah, who would've guessed? So, everything's good with you?”

Stop, stop it, stop talking to him.

“Yeah, yeah, things are all good. I can’t complain. Work keeps me busy, but I’m making decent money and I don’t hate what I do, which is more than a lot of people can say. How about you? Your mom told mine you won the Pulitzer—that’s really incredible.”

Just work? Isn’t there a girlfriend in your life? What about the girl Mary saw you with?

“Eh, you know, it was really just lunch with a bunch of old people... Food was pretty decent though. Yeah, I’m doing good. Still at the Post, obviously, still working for Ed, and got a photographer who’s a good kid. About to start a new series of articles that I’m pretty excited about. So, yeah...”

JP forced a smile that resembled more of a grimace and he responded, “Well, good, I’m glad to hear it.”

“Thanks. I’m, I’m really glad to hear you’re doing well too.”

Do you love her?

“I guess I’ll get going now. Just...”

He looked at me expectantly—*hopefully?*—and I asked, “Who put the cross up?”

Did his face just fall the slightest bit?

“Oh, yeah, that. Travis’ firehouse did it not long after the funeral. They were pretty angry about all the negative coverage he received, because the accident reports all confirmed that if Travis hadn’t swerved, the people in the other car would’ve died, and that the alcohol and weed hadn’t played a role in the crash. He really was a hero, even though none of the newspaper reports wanted to publish that. His firehouse buddies basically told MADD to go fuck themselves when MADD told them it was inappropriate to include Travis’ name on their memorial of fallen firefighters at the station.” JP smiled at the memory. “I think Travis’ would’ve loved that, huh?”

I looked at my one-time best friend and lover in shocked silence for several moments. “I...I never knew any of that. I thought I was the only one who thought...How come you never told me?”

JP frowned. “I guess I thought someone else had told you. I come up here twice a year, on his birthday and the anniversary; I figure this place means more than where he’s buried...But you never wanted to talk about him, Kris, not ever. You got mad whenever I tried...I figured you wanted to forget, and so I just stopped bringing him up...” After a second, he added, “I’m sorry. If I’d known you didn’t know about the reports, I swear I would’ve told you.”

I waved a dismissive hand, still trying to swallow the lump in my throat. “No, no. It’s, it’s ancient history now, I guess. I’m not mad or anything. I really need to go. I... Take care, JP.”

I began to walk towards my car before he could respond to avoid facing him for the rest of the goodbye. His voice reached me.

“You too, Kris. It was...nice to see you.”

I couldn’t form any words and let the sound my car door slamming closed respond for me.

I pulled away from the shoulder, leaving the memory of one love and the living ache of another. *I just think you and JP will eventually end up together... You’ll beat this eventually, for the love of someone.* I couldn’t silence Travis’ voice in my head no matter

how loud I turned up the Honda's radio. Travis had been wrong, and it was breaking my heart.

He had been wrong about one more thing, and it was that thing that kept the tears at bay as I headed for Afghanistan.

I'm not good for anyone but myself, and even that's questionable a lot of the time...I serve my own addiction and nothing else.

Travis Bannerman, a hero in life and death.

Ch. 20

"That's got to be her," I said quietly to Colin as we pulled up to the ramshackle clinic.

Colin glanced at the woman in the doorway of the clinic, speaking to another woman, who looked pregnant under her long, loose dress. He shook his head.

"She's veiled."

"So am I, dumbass."

Colin glanced back at me from his seat in the front and laughed out loud, earning a dirty look from our stoically silent taxi driver.

"I forgot." He ran an appreciative hand through his orange-red hair. "I still can't believe you wanted me to dye this gloriousness."

Attempting to have Colin dye his attention-grabbing hair was an old battle, one we'd fought and I'd lost almost as many times as the battle to get him to remove the crucifix around his neck. He claimed he wanted to die with the hair color God and his own redheaded mother had given him. It didn't help that he completely failed at growing facial hair in a land where beardless men were regarded with more than a little disdain.

To our driver, he said, "Dude, seriously, can you? I mean, this color is pretty amazing, right? Even though it did get me called 'carrot top' in middle school."

The driver grunted and the car stopped.

Colin snickered. "The strong, silent type, eh?"

"I don't think he speaks English, Carrot Top," I muttered as we exited the taxi. To the driver, I asked in Tajik, "How much?"

"300," he responded roughly.

"300," I translated to Colin, and he paid the driver.

After the driver drove off, Colin commented, "I didn't think they spoke Arabic here. And that didn't sound like Arabic anyway."

"It wasn't. They speak a couple of different languages here, but in this region, the most common is Tajik."

"Since when the hell do you speak Tajik?"

"I don't. After I had to peace out of Egypt, I figured I'd eventually wind up in Afghanistan at some point, so I started trying to pick up some of the major languages. I spend a lot of down time on planes and in airports, you know, so I figured it wasn't a bad way to fill the hours."

"You learned fucking Tajik in the airport?" Colin replied incredulously. "Man, I should stop listening to my iPod and start studying, huh?"

"Don't bother. You're a photographer—all you need is 'XXX'¹ and you're good to go."

¹ I was unable to find a Tajik translator online.

We reached the clinic compound and Colin grinned. He didn't need a translation for that one; it was a phrase he also knew in Hebrew and Arabic.

"Don't shoot; I'm a journalist," he repeated in English happily.

The women in the clinic's doorway looked at us, and the non-pregnant one—clearly an African-American woman, now that we were closer—raised her eyebrows.

"That wasn't directed at you, of course, ma'am," Colin said.

I shot him a look, then extended my hand to her.

"I'm Kristin Wilson. If you're Dr. Dana Odami, we've spoken on the phone. This big-mouth is my photographer, Colin McNalty."

The woman smiled widely. "Yes, yes, of course. Nice to meet you in person. I'm Dana. This is one of my patients, Awa, and we've just finished up our appointment." She smiled at her patient, and added, "She's due with her first baby next month."

"Hello," I greeted her. "Congratulations."

She offered me a timid smile back, and I noted that she was more of girl than a woman, sixteen at the most. I suddenly thought of Nawal and baby Mohammed in Jerusalem, and wondered what happened to them.

"You speak Tajik?" Dana asked as we went inside the clinic.

I shook my head. "Not really. I've just picked up a few phrases, just enough to get by."

"Don't believe her," Colin interjected. "This is a woman who became fluent in Arabic in four years."

Dana chuckled as I shot Colin another death glance, and she said,

"Well, why don't we sit down? Can I offer you anything? We don't have much, but the tea is always plentiful around here."

I accepted the cup of tea she placed in my hand and said, "So, Dana, tell me—what are you doing here?"

KABUL—Dana Odami keeps a nine-year-old map of the Middle East framed on her desk at Bibi Baharah Clinic. Beneath the shiny glass, the map is pock-marked with tiny holes and covered in scribbles.

"RJ 8/06," reads one such scribble over eastern Afghanistan.

"Bravo co., 4/04," reads another in the Northwest Province.

These scribbles helped her keep track of her fiancée, Sgt. Raymond Jackson, during his two tours in Afghanistan, Odami explained.

"He wasn't so good with keeping his location quiet," she said with a smile. "I used to wonder why the Army was so relaxed these days about its troop movements, and then I realized that it wasn't—it was just Ray having a big mouth."

Odami and Jackson grew up together in a tough Bronx neighborhood of New York City. Their families were neighbors, but Odami spent far more time at Jackson's rowhome than her own. Her family, she said, had "some problems," and she, an only child, was always treated as part of the Jackson family, which had eight children.

"I think they sometimes forgot I didn't actually share a bloodline with them," she laughed. "I got yelled at and grounded right along with all the other kids when I was misbehaving."

Lashaina Jackson, Ray's little sister, now 22, remembered, "Dana taught me how to braid hair and to do my makeup. My mom worked long hours and didn't have time for

that kind of thing. She was like my second mom, and I used to ask Ray every night when I was little girl, 'when are you going to marry Dana, so she can be my real sister?'"

Jackson asked Odami on their first date when they were getting on the bus after school one day junior year. He was so nervous, Odami remembered, that he stared at the ground the entire time.

"I was so excited," Odami said. "I'd been waiting for months for him to ask me, but he kept chickening out."

The two quickly became a couple, but things almost ended the day Jackson was arrested for drug possession at 17. He was just holding the heroin for a friend, he told her, but he was charged with possession with intent to distribute. Odami almost broke up with him. She'd seen many young men in the neighborhood begin a vicious cycle of drug use, prison, and parole, and back again, and she did not want to be involved with Jackson if he was headed down that path. She did not like the crowd he had begun hanging out with, and told him he had a choice to make. It was either her or the lifestyle.

"I had big plans for myself," Odami said, "plans that did not involve marrying a small time drug dealer and staying in that neighborhood forever. I had every intention of getting out, and I wanted Ray to come with me—but if he didn't want to, I was going alone, even though it would've broken my heart."

Jackson, to Odami's surprise, backed away from the rough crowd, and began, with her help, pulling up his low grades. When Odami got a scholarship to City of New York's Hunter University, Jackson enlisted in the New York National Guard, much to everyone who knew the freewheeling, easy-going young man.

"I said, 'baby, what are you doing? You're no soldier,' and he said to me 'you're going to make something of yourself, and I'm not going to let you down by staying here my whole life,'" Odami said. "It was probably the sweetest thing he'd ever said to me."

Following his completion of boot camp, Jackson was stationed at Fort Hamilton in Brooklyn, an installation commonly known at the "Army's Ambassador to New York City. He later told Odami that he had chosen the National Guard over the Army because he wanted to stay close to her and his family.

His unit was called up and deployed to Afghanistan during Odami's sophomore year of college. It was a rough time, she said, but Jackson called as frequently as possible and wrote her once a week, even though he was embarrassed by his poor spelling. She later found out that he often had his friends proofread his letters to her before he sent them. His girlfriend, he told them, was a college girl and he was worried that she would think less of him if his letters were poorly written.

"Man, he talked about his girl everyday," Jackson's best friend in the Guard, Akeem Arnold, said. "We'd get in from being in the field for a week and everyone else would automatically run to the showers or to chow. Ray would make a run for the phone to call Dana."

Jackson and his unit returned from Afghanistan after a 14 month tour, and were sent on their second a year later.

Odami had just graduated with her nursing degree from Hunter University, the first in her family to earn an advanced degree, when Jackson proposed. The night she said "yes," he signed his National Guard reenlistment papers, Odami said.

"I was so in debt with my loans from school, and he didn't have a lot saved. Ray said he wanted us to have a really nice wedding, so he reenlisted to earn the money."

Odami shook her head. "He didn't tell me until it was too late. I would've gotten married in a drive-through chapel sooner than have him back over in the fighting."

Odami's eyes shifted from Afghanistan to Iraq on the map. There is a single mark north of Baghdad, reading,

"Ray, 12/08."

Jackson's last phone call to Odami came on Christmas Eve of that year, telling her his unit was headed out on patrol. The next phone call came from Jackson's father, with the news that Jackson, 23, had been killed on December 26 when his Humvee hit a roadside bomb.

"He never wanted to go to Iraq," Odami said. "He loved Afghanistan. I don't mean he loved war, but he was always talking about resilient the people were, how they were survivors. He really felt he was doing good when he was there. Then he went to Iraq," Odami paused, then smiled despite the tears in her dark brown eyes, "and he found out that they were survivors too."

When Jackson's sister, Janelle, heard the news of his death, she went into early labor and suffered a miscarriage.

"For the family to have lost both Ray and Janelle's baby, well, it was just devastating. I could barely get out of bed for a month," Odami said.

If that was true, her supervisor, Mindy Brown, R.N., at St. Barnabas Hospital in the Bronx, where Odami worked on the obstetrics floor, she didn't show it.

"Dana showed up for work the day after the funeral. We told her to take a few more days, but she refused. She said there were women who needed her, and she wasn't going to abandon her patients," Brown said.

Jackson's mother, Coretta Jackson, agreed. "We never would have gotten through losing Raymond without Dana. She was our rock. She took care of Janelle after the miscarriage, she called to check on me every day, she handled the paperwork for me." Jackson's voiced cracked, but she continued, "I lost my son, but I gained a daughter in Dana."

Odami applied to the nongovernmental organization Doctors Without Borders on the six month anniversary of Jackson's death. They turned her down because she had only worked as a nurse for a year; the organization requires a minimum of two years professional experience for its medical personnel.

"So I kept working. I got certified as a nurse-midwife in the meantime because I thought that would help my chances [of getting selected]. I really felt at home working with mothers-to-be anyway, so the midwife training was a natural fit."

"We're used to the people who want to change the world, the idealists, the do-gooders," said Dr. Jared Garrison, who interviewed Odami in New York. "But Dana? To have gone through what she had, and still want to help—that takes a true tenacity of spirit."

Odami was accepted to Doctors Without Borders in November of 2010, and was crushed to learn that the organization had suspended its Afghanistan and Iraq operations in 2004 due to increased security concerns. Five Doctors Without Borders volunteers were shot and killed in Afghanistan in October of 2004.

"I desperately wanted to go where Ray had been," Odami said. "I'd spent our relationship hearing about the Afghani people; I felt like they were already a part of me,

as if I already knew them. I would've even gone to Iraq, even though Ray was only there for a little while. He said the Iraqis had a great sense of humor."

Instead, Odami accepted a six-month mission to the Democratic Republic of Congo, where a vicious civil war has been raging for decades. She carried her map with her as she educated Congolese villagers about neo-natal health and helped to deliver 26 newborns.

"Dana never tires," said Martin Laurel, project coordinator for the Congolese mission. "We would work for 20 hours straight, and then a call would come in about some woman three villages over having trouble, and Dana would be on her feet headed for that village without a second thought."

"The DRC was an eye-opening experience for me," Odami said. "To see the kind of conditions women there are expected to deliver babies in...I couldn't believe it. Most of the babies I delivered were the products of devastatingly violent gang-rapes. Rape is a weapon of war in the DRC, and most women can't even get any medical treatment afterwards, let alone help in delivering their babies."

Odami had only been back in the U.S. for a few weeks when Doctors Without Borders announced that it was reopening its Afghanistan operations. Odami immediately requested a position there, and became part of a women's reproductive and maternal health mission in northeastern Afghanistan. Odami and her team of two doctors, one nurse and an administrator opened the Bibi Baharah Women's Clinic with the help of local villagers. Bibi means "mother" and "Bahrah" is a Tajik—the language spoken in the village—name that means "one who brings springtime."

"Before they [the Doctors Without Borders mission] came, things were very bad here. Now, there is some hope," village elder Atash Azad said through a translator. "We are happy they are here."

Nine out of ten Afghani women give birth without any help, leading to some of the highest maternal and infant mortality rates in the world. On average, 1,600 of every 100,000 mothers die in childbirth, and 257 infants die for every 1,000 live births, according to UNICEF. The maternal mortality rate in Badakshan Province is much higher, where Odami is based, averaging closer to 6,000 deaths per 100,000 mothers.

"Life has been very cruel to Afghani women in particular," Odami said, "but every day, I am astounded by their will to live."

"I cried when I learned I was pregnant again," said Souzan, 20, through a translator. "Not because I was happy, but because I was so sad. I was pregnant two times before, and both babies died. I was worried my husband's family would make him divorce me because I could not bear him children, and I wanted to die with my babies."

Souzan smiled down at her three-month-old son, Farzad. "He is a blessing from God, just as Miss Dana is. I wanted to name him after her, but Miss Dana said her name is for a girl. I named him 'Farazd,' which means 'splendid birth' instead. So when I have a daughter, her name will be Dana. I do not care that it is not an Afghani name, because I owe my happiness to Miss Dana."

The map has one marking in a different color than the somber black of the rest.

It reads, "The Ray Jackson Clinic," in Badakshan in a bright green ink.

Odami rested her fingertip on the spot for a moment.

"I know it's really called Bibi Baharah, but I like to think Ray played a part in it. He never had any hatred in his heart, even though he saw some terrible things, lost

friends, went through three tours,” Odami said. “So how could I hate after he was gone? I like to think that every new baby I help bring into the world helps to preserve his memory.”

“*Mais salama*, Kabul,” Colin waved as we entered the airport.

“That’s Arabic,” I corrected. “What you want is *khayr*.”

Colin tried to look offended. “I finally got a little Arabic down, and you’re going to bust on me? We can’t all be linguistic geniuses like you, you know. You’re getting so demanding these days, boss. Jesus.”

I laughed. “Yeah, I know. You’re free to peace any time you’ve had enough. I don’t want to overburden your sensitive soul.”

“Fuck you,” Colin responded in a conversational tone as he turned around in a circle, scanning the direction signs above. “Where’s our friggin’ terminal? This airport is a nightmare.”

He was right about that. It took several minutes and wrong turns before we found the correct terminal. My blackberry buzzed to indicate an email. I picked it up, remarking to Colin,

“First time I’ve had service in three weeks.”

The email was from Jimmy, which was uncharacteristic of him. He preferred any excuse to call me.

Hey Kiki,

I wanted to tell you this in person, but I know it’s going to be awhile before you get back stateside and this information is sort of on the time-sensitive side. I tried to call you, but you haven’t been picking up your phone, so I guess you don’t get service where you are. Hopefully an email might get through instead. I guess I should just wait until you call back, but I can’t wait that long: SUE AND I ARE HAVING A BABY!!! I’M GOING TO BE A DAD!!! Isn’t that crazy?? We’d only been trying for a little over a month, and she found out that she’s two weeks pregnant when she went to the doctor’s on Friday! Can you believe it? We’re ecstatic! (If you couldn’t tell from all the exclamation points, haha.) You’re going to be an aunt, and a Godmother (if you don’t mind; there isn’t anyone else I’d be more honored to have for my son/daughter, though maybe it’s a bit early to be asking you already!) in...eight months and one week (give or take a few days)! Sue’s already buying baby name books and planning to turn the office into the nursery. She asked how I felt about Phillip and buttercup yellow this morning (for a name and a color, respectively), and I’m still in shock I think. Call me as soon as you get this! I think I like Phillip, what do you think? I don’t know about yellow though. Hope your first article is going great and can’t wait to talk to you! Love, Jimmy

“What are you smiling like a maniac about?” Colin asked. “Someone send you some hot pictures?” He leaned over my lap to peer at my Blackberry.

I shook my head, feeling my cheeks ache from the unaccustomed sensation of grinning so hard. “Nah, it’s better. My brother’s having a baby. I’m going to be an aunt!”

Colin grinned as well. “Oh yeah? Good for him, I like the guy. Pass along my congratulations to him. Hope his kid has a higher alcohol tolerance than he does though.”

I laughed as the loudspeaker announced, “Now boarding Flight 877, Kabul to Kuwait City.”

“Kuwait, here we come,” Colin said cheerfully as he grabbed our bags. “Off to meet our mercenaries.”

“They prefer ‘private military contractors’,” I reminded him. “I have a feeling you’re going to seriously piss people off if you use ‘mercenary’.”

“Alright,” he replied, his voice still light but his eyes holding an uncharacteristic serious glint, “how about ‘money-loving bastard sell-outs’?”

Catching my horrified look, he winked. “Don’t worry, boss. I’m going to let you do all the talking on this one. Oh-rah, let’s go to Kuwait.”

Ch. 21

The temperature hit 110 degrees in Kuwait City, but Brad Mazaretti didn’t break a sweat as he lit a Marlboro Red. His favorite brand is impossible to find in Kuwait, he explained, but his wife sends a few cartons of them a year.

“Don’t know why she bothers,” he remarked with a shake of his head. “It’s not like I’ve ever done anything for her.”

Mazaretti, 28, pulled out a photograph from his wallet. A little girl, with light-brown hair tied back in pigtails, big brown eyes, and two missing front teeth, grinned widely at the camera.

“My daughter, Isabel,” he said. “She’s a cutie, huh? Looks just like her mother.”

Mazaretti hasn’t seen his wife, Maria, or his daughter, 7, in over a year. Phone calls are infrequent, and emails even less so, as Mazaretti said neither he nor his wife are much for writing.

“A lot of the guys over here worry that their girls are cheating. I worry that Maria’s not!” Mazaretti said with a sharp laugh.

Every few weeks for the last year, Mazaretti gets in an armored Humvee for the trip across the border to Iraq. Sometimes he is back in Kuwait within a few days, and other times, he spends several months there.

“Whatever the mission needs is how long we’re there,” he said with a shrug. “I’d rather be there than here anyway.”

Mazaretti does not wear the desert camouflage of the U.S. military, despite the impression the garish tattoos adorning his bulky arms may leave the casual observer. He still wears his blonde hair in a crew cut, but his standard uniform is instead a black tee-shirt, jeans, sturdy boots, and dark-tinted sunglasses that rarely leave his face. It is the de facto outfit of many private military contractors. Mazaretti signed with DynCorp last year.

****Talk to his bosses at DynCorp, do more research about the company!!!****

“Everyone was going Blackwater for awhile there,” he said, “but they just got to well-known. Blackwater became the face of the whole operation, when the whole idea of PMC’s is to run under the radar. Sure, they made a ton of money by becoming a prima donna there for awhile, but they sure got burned, didn’t they?”

****Explain the Blackwater scandal back in '07, try to get some Blackwater reps on the phone!*****

Mazaretti tucked his daughter’s photograph back into his wallet gently. He tapped the grinning skull tattoo on his right upper arm and smiled broadly himself.

“To think I almost joined back up,” he chuckled.

Mazaretti is a three tour veteran of the Iraq War. He served two tours with the U.S. Army and one with the Army Special Forces, commonly known as the Green Berets. It is the Green Berets' grinning skull displayed most prominently on Mazaretti's arm.

"I always wanted to be a Green Beret," he said. "I loved everything about it—the uniform, the weapons, the mission, the fact that it would be crushingly difficult. The challenge, the fact that most men cannot be Green Berets, made it exactly what I wanted."

Mazaretti was in his high school woodshop class on Sept. 11, 2001. The teacher heard the news about the first plane hitting the World Trade Center, and turned on the classroom television in time to see the second plane hit.

"I remember watching the towers come down and thinking, 'this is my war.' I was almost relieved, because I had been afraid the age of real American warfare was over," Mazaretti said. "It didn't matter who we were going to war with, and it didn't matter why—all that mattered was that I would be there."

Mazaretti went home that day to his parents and told them he wanted to enlist in the Army. The Army allows 17-year-old minors to enlist in the service, but they must have a parent's signature. Mazaretti's parents, who owned a small farm in Nebraska, initially refused.

Rose Mazaretti, his mother, said she and his father, Michael, wanted their son to finish high school before enlisting.

"We're from a small farming community," Mrs. Mazaretti said, "and Michael and I didn't graduate high school. We knew Bradley was never destined for any high learning, but we wanted him to do better than we had."

Michael Mazaretti had a heart attack and passed away in 2009, but his wife said he was equally opposed to his son's joining the Army so young.

"We were all thinking about buying cars and getting girls and graduating, and all Brad could do was talk about the war," remembered Chris MacDonald, who grew up with Mazaretti. "We all kept saying, 'dude, what about the football season? You're the captain this year, for God's sake!' But Brad would just shake his head and say he was worried that if he waited for the season to end, the war would be over."

"I can be one stubborn son-of-a-bitch when I want," Mazaretti laughed, "and I'm sure my mom will back me up on that."

According to Mrs. Mazaretti, Mazaretti threatened to run away from home unless his parents signed the papers. They knew their son did not make idle threats, she said, and figured if he was in the Army, they would at least know where he was.

"I could never control him," Mrs. Mazaretti sighed. "I thought maybe a drill sergeant could do a better job."

Mazaretti, a starting quarterback for Mills Creek High School, led his team to the district championships his junior year. The Warriors' coach, Bob Dawes, remembered Mazaretti coming to practice in early October holding his uniform neatly folded in his hands.

"'Coach,' he told me, 'I've got good news and bad news. The good news is, I just got my G.E.D. The bad news is, you've got to find the team a new captain.'" Dawes shook his head. "I told him, 'son, why would you go and do a fool thing like that?' But I knew it was probably for the best."

Dawes and Mazaretti's mother both recalled Mazaretti's occasional run-ins with the law growing up. He was arrested for stealing a car when he was 14, and for vandalism at 16.

Mazaretti shrugged those incidents off as mostly harmless pranks, claiming he had planned to give the car back and the vandalism was "just a bit of graffiti expressing my school pride."

"Brad wasn't no angel," Dawes said, "but during the season, when his behavior mattered to the team, he was always perfect. I never had a single problem with him." Dawes said Mazaretti was one of the few players who never had issues with drinking or drug use. "He knew the other players depended on him."

Mazaretti had never been farther from his home town of 10,000 than to Lincoln, Nebraska's capital, until the day he arrived in Fort Benning, GA, for boot camp.

"Boot camp sucked, and I still loved every single minute of it, because I knew every minute I was getting closer to being a Green Beret."

Mazaretti paused for a minute and added, "The only time I was homesick, the whole time I was there, was the day I heard we'd lost districts. I felt like I'd let the team down by not being there."

Sgt. Lewis "Bull" Masterson, Mazaretti's drill sergeant at Fort Benning, said Mazaretti was a natural.

"Some men are just meant to be soldiers," Masterson said, "and Mazaretti was one of them. I knew that from almost the first day."

As a result, Masterson said, he was harsher on Mazaretti than the other recruits. He was cocky, according to Masterson, and needed to be "knocked down a few pegs, or ten."

Mazaretti graduated at the top of his class and remained in Fort Benning after being assigned to an infantry unit. It was there that he met his future wife, Maria Anna Garcia, in a karaoke bar. Mazaretti was out with friends, being "loud and drunken and obnoxious," when Garcia got up to sing a song.

"I heard two words of the song, and I had to turn around to see who was singing," Mazaretti said. "And she was beautiful, the prettiest brown eyes you've ever seen."

Garcia at first refused to let Mazaretti take her on a date. She didn't date soldiers, she said. But as before, Mazaretti was persistent.

"He showed up at the bar every karaoke night with a flower for me," Garcia remembered. "When the number reached a dozen, I said yes."

Mazaretti and Garcia had been dating for six months when he received deployment orders in early 2003. America was going to war, and Mazaretti's unit was going to Baghdad.

"I'd been watching the coverage for months and hoping that moron [Saddam] would just do something stupid and give us an excuse to march on in there. I guess in retrospect, he really didn't, but I sure as hell didn't care," Mazaretti. "I was trained for war, and that's where I wanted to go. Iraq was promising a better show than Afghanistan, I thought."

His girlfriend was less than thrilled. Garcia said she spent three days trying not to cry every time she looked at him. She had never expected, she said, the country to actually go to war with Iraq, let alone for Mazaretti's unit to be leading the first push.

"But what could I do?" she said. "I thought it would be a few months, and he would be home. Of course I told him I would wait."

Mazaretti and his unit shipped out to Kuwait in preparation for the invasion on March 19, 2003. The few months Garcia and many others expected would eventually turn into an 18-month tour.

"I had to try not to smile every time they extended us," Mazaretti said, "because I knew a lot of the guys wanted to get home to their girls and their kids and all. But me? War was everything I'd always thought it would be."

The way he speaks at times gives the impression that Mazaretti was a soldier in the vein of the torturers implicated in the Abu Gharib scandal in 2004, but fellow soldiers and superiors said this was not the case.

"He was one of the best squad leaders I'd ever had," said Lt. David Hornbuckle. "He was a good soldier—no, make that a great soldier—and he knew his job and what was expected of him. But he was smart enough to ask the right questions when things looked off."

"Yeah, he comes off like a head case, all right," laughed Army bunkmate Ronnie Ronson, who has since left the Army, "but Brad's solid. He wasn't some cowboy either. He followed the rules, followed the orders. He just really, really loved his job. He'd take a bullet for you, no questions asked."

Their unit arrived home on leave in early 2004, and, as has become common when a company returns from a long deployment, the number of pregnant women at Fort Benning spiked dramatically. Maria, much to the couple's surprise, was one of them. Mazaretti said he offered to pay for the abortion immediately.

But Maria was a Catholic from a religious family, and she wanted to have the baby. She said she was afraid of being a single mother, and of her parents' reactions, but that she had named the fetus "Isabel" the moment the test came back positive.

"I told her she didn't want to bring anyone into the world with my genetics," Mazaretti sighed, "but she wanted it, and who I am to tell her what to do with her body?" He paused and laughed. "Christ, I sound like a feminist or something."

When Maria's parents found out about her pregnancy, they demanded that she and Mazaretti get married. No daughter of theirs, Maria remembered them saying, would be an unwed mother.

"And then, in the course of two weeks, I was not only a dad, but I was also husband. Some leave, huh?" Mazaretti said. "But really, I didn't have a problem with it, because I wanted Maria and the kid to get my military benefits and all anyway."

Maria and Mazaretti were married on February 19, 2004. The night before the wedding, Maria said her fiancée looked at her and told her that he loved her and the baby, but that she shouldn't expect him to be a real husband.

"I thought, at the time, that he meant he would cheat," Maria said, "and I wasn't happy, but I grew up in a culture where many men do, and I guess I figured at least he was marrying me."

Three days later, the Golden Dome Mosque in Samarra, Iraq, was almost destroyed in a bombing, sparking a massive wave of sectarian violence.

"Maria cried for a long time," Mazaretti said, "because this time I think she realized that this was going to be a long war. I'd never dreamed I'd get this lucky."

The unit headed back to Iraq to complete the second half of their tour, and Isabel Jimena Mazaretti was born shortly after their return, on October 28, 2004.

"I never handled anything gently in my life, ever," Mazaretti said, "so you better believe I was shaking when they handed me this tiny, little wrinkly baby."

Despite his earlier threats, Maria said her new husband proved to be an excellent father. He frequently got up in the middle of the night to rock a crying Isabel back to sleep without complaint, changed diapers, and proudly carried a photo of his daughter in his wallet at all times.

"I thought maybe fatherhood had changed him, would make him want to stay," she said. "But now...now I realize he was just biding his time until he could back to being a soldier."

Still, Maria said, her husband seemed to fare far better than many of the other returned soldiers on the base. He didn't drink, didn't have nightmares, and didn't seem at all changed by his experience. Therefore, she said she couldn't complain when his unit was called up for a second tour in April of 2006.

"I knew I needed to go, and I knew I wanted to go," Mazaretti said, but was surprised at how sad he felt upon leaving his wife and daughter. "I knew Izzy wouldn't recognize me when I came back."

Mazaretti had been in Iraq for three months when Maria received a late night phone call. Her husband had been shot, and the caller did not know how badly.

"My heart was in my throat," she said, "and all I could do was kneel with Isabel in my arms in front of the little crucifix on my wall and pray and pray and pray. It was the longest night of my life."

Mazaretti's squad had been on patrol in a volatile Shiite neighborhood in Baghdad, known to be a stronghold of the Mahdi Army, when they came under sniper fire. Every man in the squad immediately took cover except for one soldier, an 18-year-old recruit not long out of Infantry school. The soldier, Pfc. Jamie King, froze in the middle of the street as shots rained down around him. His fellow soldiers screamed at him to take cover, but the young soldier seemed paralyzed.

"I don't know what happened," King said, "except that all of a sudden, my life was flashing in front of my eyes, and I was thinking, oh shit, it's been way too short."

Seconds later, a bullet tore into King's leg and he collapsed to the ground, screaming. The other soldiers had not identified where the fire was coming from, and they could not safely reach King, who was bleeding heavily.

"I really thought I was going to die that day, that moment," King said, "and through the pain in my leg, I was picturing the chaplain showing up at my mom's door, and thinking that my girl was going to be really pissed off at me for getting killed."

Mazaretti, the squad leader, sprinted into the street as enemy shots fired from seemingly every direction and pulled King to safety. A bullet burrowed into his shoulder blade, but Mazaretti didn't alert the medics with the second squad who showed up moments later until after King's wounds were being treated.

"I asked him if he was alright, because he looked a little pale," said former Army medic Lcpl. Chris Nichols. "And he turns around, and the whole back of his shirt is soaked in blood. You know what he said to me? He goes, 'well doc, I think I might have gotten shot.' Then he passed out. I'd never seen anything like it."

Doctors later said that had King, whose femoral artery had been nicked by the bullet, not been rescued when he was, he would probably have bled to death in moments. Mazaretti was credited with saving his life, and received the Silver Star, the second highest military award for courage in battle that a soldier can receive. He also received a purple heart for his own injuries.

"I never knew what all the fuss was about," Mazaretti said with a shrug. "I was the squad leader, and it was my job to make sure all my guys came home safely. What was I supposed to do, leave King dying in the street? Any good leader would've done exactly the same thing as me."

Mazaretti had only been home from his second tour a few weeks when he applied for the Army Special Forces. He figured, he said, that a silver star, a purple heart, and two tours of duty might just be enough to get him in the door.

"I wasn't worried about it past getting accepted," he said. "I knew I could handle whatever they could throw at me after that."

****Get more information about Special Forces training, get a hold of some of his trainers at SF school, some SF friends!!!****

Mazaretti graduated second in his class—a fact he does not often reveal, because he claims to be embarrassed that it was not first—and his mother, father, wife, and daughter were in the crowd.

"I didn't like it any more than I liked the previous tours," Maria sighed. "But I knew it had always been his dream. How could I ask him to give that up? And I was proud of him, even though I didn't tell him so."

Mazaretti headed back to Iraq with his Special Forces unit, proudly wearing his Green Beret. He was not at liberty to discuss most of his deployment, and even if he could, he gave the impression that he would prefer not to anyway. However, he did say of his third and final tour,

"Every time a shot was fired, every time a mortar fell, I prayed the next one would be closer. It's not because I wanted to die—I didn't—but because I felt a little more alive the more at-hand the war was. I wanted to fight every battle."

Mazaretti's second enlistment period ended in 2005, and, after eight years in the Army, he did not reenlist. At 25, he did not feel ready to quit being a soldier, but Maria begged him to retire. Isabel was 5 years old at that point, and Maria had grown tired of answering their daughter's constant question of "Where is daddy?"

Mazaretti agreed to give the civilian life a try, and Maria's father got him a job in construction. The couple bought a small house, their first outside of a military base, and for the first time since the day they were married, they made plans as a family. Maria said she thought their first few months together were idyllic. Mazaretti arranged to always be home from work by 6 p.m. so Maria could begin attending night classes at the local community college, and Isabel became a "daddy's girl" almost overnight.

Mazaretti's bosses at the construction job were pleased to acquire such a hard worker, they frequently told him, and even Maria's father, who had never been Mazaretti's biggest fan, began to say positive things about his son-in-law.

"I guess to the outside world, everything looked fine. I looked fine," Mazaretti said. "And God knows, I loved them, and I was really giving it my best shot. The same dedication, the strength, that I used to get through boot camp and Green Beret school I threw at living the civilian life."

He paused to light another cigarette and shook his head. "I tried marijuana a few times, early on in high school—not during the football season, of course—and once, I had a bad reaction. I felt this horrible panic bubbling up inside me, and felt like if I didn't rip it out of my body with my bare hands, I was definitely going to die, curled up on the floor and screaming," Mazaretti said. "That year I spent at home was just like that."

The health-conscious former soldier began drinking heavily, a vice he'd never possessed before, and the walls of the Mazaretti home began to resemble "Swiss Cheese," from all the holes he punched in them. By Mazaretti's own admission, he is a "mean, nasty drunk," and slowly, his wife and daughter began to pull away from him. He felt suffocated, he said, a condition that grew worse every day.

"I knew something was wrong," Maria said, "but I didn't know what it was or what to do. He stopped talking to me."

One night he and Maria got into an argument—an occurrence that had become frequent—because he was drunk again and she could not leave Isabel with him to attend her night class. Mazaretti said he was furious, so angry that he wanted to hit her as she yelled.

"But I've never hit a woman in my life, and I'd sooner blow off my own hand than hit my own wife."

Instead, Mazaretti smashed his fist through the wooden door of their bedroom. Neither he nor Maria knew Isabel was behind the door, listening to the fight in the hallway. Wood splinters from the door scratched her cheek.

"It was just a little scratch, no worse than the kitten next door had given her a few days before, but the way she looked at me..." Mazaretti said. "It was like I was a monster. Listening to her cry in her mother's arms was the worst thing I've ever heard."

Mazaretti said he knew that night that he had to leave. Maria begged him to stay.

"I tried to make him get help, counseling, something," she said. "I knew he hadn't meant to hurt Izzy, and I knew he didn't want to be the way he was then."

But Mazaretti said the best way he could be a husband and father to them was by leaving them. He had planned to rejoin the Army, but he happened to run into a former military buddy who suggested taking a look at private military corporations. The friend told him the salary, the benefits, the equipment, and the action were all better than what the military could offer, and that such corporations were recruiting heavily among former Special Forces soldiers.

Mazaretti joined DynCorp after a little research, and found himself ferrying back and forth across the Iraqi-Kuwait border not long after joining. Isabel cried for her father every night for six months after he left, Maria said, and she could not offer her daughter a good reason for his absence. These days, though, the seven-year-old has stopped asking questions.

"Doing this helps me provide a good life for my daughter—and it keeps everyone safe from me," Mazaretti said. "I'm ok as long as I'm here behind the .50 cal, kicking in doors, hearing those mortars fall. I was built for war."

He ground out his cigarette and put his iPod earphones into his ears. Tomorrow morning, he will leave for Iraq again. Music—the song "Bodies," by rock band Drowning Pool—began to blast so loud from the earphones that passersby could make out the lyrics.

*One - Nothing wrong with me
Two - Nothing wrong with me
Three - Nothing wrong with me
Four - Nothing wrong with me
One - Something's got to give
Two - Something's got to give
Three - Something's got to give
Now
Let the bodies hit the floor
Let the bodies hit the floor
Let the bodies hit the floor*

"Jesus Christ, Mazaretti," a fellow DynCorp employee joked, "how can you hear yourself think with your music that loud?"

Mazaretti simply offered a relaxed smile in response. Perhaps, his smile suggested, that was just the point.

I put away my recorder—cursed thing though it was, my hands had taken too much of a beating over the years to write for such a long interview fast enough—and closed my notebook. Colin began to pack his camera equipment away, looking eager to be headed home, which was at this moment, our tiny hotel room.

"Where you guys headed? Why don't you come out with us and grab a few beers, smoke some local shisha?" Brad said congenially.

"Nah," I began to say, "I've got work on this story. On deadline, you know, and I've got more phone calls to make."

"Oh, come on. We don't get to hang out with Americans all that often. Just a drink or two won't hurt."

I smiled. "I'm not supposed to drink with sources."

Colin snorted diversely as he finished packing his gear and I glanced at him with a raised eyebrow. He had been off since we'd landed in Kuwait, and seemed noticeably uncomfortable during the interview. His usual wide smile had vanished the moment he'd seen Brad and the other contractors this morning, and it had yet to return.

"Well, my deadline isn't tomorrow morning anyway."

Brad cheerfully slapped me on the back. "Excellent. My sergeant always used to say, 'never trust a man who won't drink with you'—or, in your case, a woman."

He and his three friends—also DynCorp contractors—gathered their things. Colin grabbed my arm and said quietly, intensely,

"Kristin, we're not going anywhere with them, right?"

I shrugged. "Well, I am. You don't have to if you don't want to."

He gripped my arm a little harder. The golden flecks in his eyes seemed to smolder.

"Kris, that's not a good idea. Let's just go home, ok?"

I shook his hand off me. "Knock it off, Colin. I said you didn't have to come. Unless you can give me one good, solid reason why I shouldn't go, then I'm going."

A muscle in his jaw twitched, but he remained silent.

"That's what I thought. Now, are you coming or not?"

He exhaled slowly through gritted teeth and slung his camera bag over his shoulder in response.

The contractors tried to make conversation with Colin as we headed to a small expat bar, but he stoically refused to respond.

“Your cameraman’s no conversationalist, huh?” Brad said to me.

Irritated with Colin’s mood, I replied, “Eh, just let him be cranky. He’s probably just PMS-ing.”

They laughed and Colin shot me a dark look. The scowl on his face deepened and didn’t leave as we entered the bar. Brad ordered everyone a round of beer, and one of the contractors, whose arms bore almost full-sleeve tattoos, remarked to Colin,

“Dude, it looks like you’ve got some tats there.”

He pointed at Colin’s forearm, where the edge of black ink was now visible where Colin’s sleeve had been pushed up.

“What do you have? I’m a bit of an enthusiast, if you can’t tell.”

Colin immediately yanked down his sleeve to cover the evidence and almost snarled, “None of your business.”

I hadn’t noticed that he’d put long sleeves on before the interview until just now, which was ludicrous in this heat unless you were a woman. Halfway through my beer, I said,

“He’s got the letters ‘SF’ on his forearm.”

Colin now looked like he was about to murder me, and I made a mental note to stop making comments until I figured out what was wrong with him, and to definitely not mention the other tattoos I’d glimpsed—though had never quite seen—that Colin had on his chest and back.

“‘SF’, eh?” the tattooed contractor remarked. He looked Colin up and down and then said, “That’s got to be short for either ‘Special Forces,’ or ‘Semper Fi,’ right? And I was Special Forces—though I was a SEAL, not a Green Beret—and no offense, kid, but you look more like a jarhead to me.”

“It’s short for San Fran-fucking-cisco,” Colin snapped.

The contractor held up his hands. “Dude, relax. No need to get so goddamn touchy. I was just making conversation.”

Everyone returned to their beers and other conversations, leaving Colin to sit hunched over his beer angrily.

“So, now that we’re not interviewing anymore,” Brad said to me, “how do you really feel about the war?”

The question took me back and I gave my standard reply. “I don’t have an opinion on it, really.”

Brad laughed. “Oh come on, you don’t have to be in journalist mode while you’re having a beer, right? I won’t tell anyone, promise. You’re part of this generation too, you know—where would you be without the war?”

I considered this, and realized my standard reply was startlingly close to the truth. I didn’t have an opinion. It was a place I needed for the rush, and little more thought went into it than that. I’d simply never worried about it further. It was arguably the defining event of my generation, and I had nothing to say about it. Was I even human?

“Honestly...I’m thinking about it right now, and I don’t feel one way or the other about it. A good buddy of mine has served several tours over there, I’ve been there a

bunch of times covering stories, I once got arrested covering protests against it...But that's that."

Brad chuckled and shook his head. "That pretty much makes you the perfect reporter, huh?"

"Or a sociopath who happens to be reasonably decent with a pen," I joked back.

"Hey, if you're mentally unstable, I think it's safe to say that you're in pretty good company," one of the contractors said. "We play war for a living."

"And blood money," Colin muttered under his breath.

The table fell silent, and I swore silently.

"What was that? You got something to say, kid?" the contractor demanded as he pushed his chair back from the table.

Colin stood up, his hands clenched into fists. "Maybe I do."

I stood up at the moment as the contractor—who was easily twice Colin's thin frame—and interjected quickly,

"No, he doesn't. We're leaving now. Thanks for the beer, Brad. I'll be in touch about the article."

I quickly gathered up my things and turned towards the doors.

Colin hadn't moved, still staring down the bulky contractor with burning eyes, and I snapped,

"Colin, *now*. We're leaving."

After another moment's pause, Colin slowly backed away from the table, never breaking eye contact with the other man.

When we got outside, I exploded, "Do you mind explaining to me *what in the fucking hell* that was?"

"Yes," he replied acidly, "as a matter of fact, I do mind."

"Oh, that's very cute! You've got a real great sense of humor there, Colin, really. You think you almost blow a fucking story for me and then not explain yourself?"

"Yeah, what if I do?" Colin shot back. "Last time I checked, you're not my fucking mother."

The idea that Colin wouldn't tell me what was going on was almost beyond my comprehension, and it drove my journalist self insane.

"What the hell, Colin? You're being absolutely ridiculous. Stop acting like a goddamn two year old!"

"And you stop acting like I'm one of your goddamn stories! Back the hell off and mind your own business for once, Kristin. I told you I didn't want to go out with them."

Unexpectedly stung by that comment, I shook my head and began to quickly walk back towards the hotel. Colin hurried to catch up with me, but we spent the rest of the evening in a tense, alien silence.

My eardrum was pierced later that night with a high-pitched ringing, interrupting a disjointed dream about an earthquake I'd once covered in Pakistan. I forcibly yanked my consciousness from the dream and found my Blackberry ringing loudly beside my head. I'd apparently fallen asleep on the rickety hotel room table, my fingertips still on my laptop. I stood up and rubbed my aching neck with one hand as I picked up the phone. I didn't recognize the number, and I frowned; not many people had this number. But it was the U.S. country code. At least I knew what language to answer the phone in.

“Hello?”

“Kristin? Is, is that y-you? I, I’m sorry, to-to-to bother you, but I, I just—”

“Heather? Yeah, it’s me. Heather, what’s wrong? Are you alright?”

She must be calling from her home phone, I thought rationally as I braced for the worst; that’s what I didn’t recognize the number.

She was crying so hard that I couldn’t understand her. “I, oh God, it’s, it’s...” She broke into unadulterated sobs at that point.

Colin stirred on the bed, where he’d fallen asleep in a fetal position amongst a pile of photographs and camera equipment. He looked at me quizzically, but didn’t ask.

“Heather, you’ve got to talk to me. I can’t help you if I don’t know what’s wrong. Is it one of your kids? Is someone sick? Did something happen to Darren? Monica? Is she in trouble? Talk to me, honey, come on.”

There was sniffing on the other end of the line and I could tell she was making an effort to get her breathing under control.

“That’s it, Heath, good. Just breathe for a minute, and then talk to me. I’m not going anywhere.”

Finally, she managed, though she was still clearly crying, “Kristin, it’s, it’s Artie. His mom just called, and he’s, he’s...”

I sank down onto the edge of the bed, an anvil dropping into my stomach.

“He’s hurt really bad, Kris. She said they don’t know if-if he’s going to make it,” Heather was beginning to sob again, and I said quickly,

“Where is he?”

“She said in, in, um, Germany right now, or maybe he’s already flying from there—he should be back here soon, she said.”

“Here where? Walter Reed?”

“Yeah, yeah, the, uh, Army hospital. Oh God, Kris, what am I going to do? I, I just can’t handle this, I—”

I cut her off sharply. “Yes, you can, and you will. You’re at home North Carolina right now, right? You’re not far from the airport in Raleigh. Call a taxi and book a flight to Reagan.”

“I can’t do that. Darren is on another business trip, he’s been gone for two weeks and he won’t be back for another five days. I can’t leave Con and Maddie all alone...”

“His parents live in Raleigh, don’t they? Call them, tell them there’s been an emergency, and you need them to take the kids until Darren comes home.”

“Ok, ok, I can do that. They won’t be happy, but their housekeeper will watch them—Con and Maddie really like Rosa...But I can drive up; I don’t need to fly.”

“No, you can’t, not in this condition. Book the flight. It’s not like you can’t afford it, right?”

Heather laughed slightly hysterically. “Yeah, yeah, I know, but...I’ve, I’ve never flown alone before. I don’t know how to...Jesus, Kristin, I didn’t even know he was back in action! I just talked to him like two weeks ago and he didn’t say a word about it. He called just to say hi! I just don’t understand...”

“I didn’t know either, hon,” I said, thinking of the phone call I’d received from Artie shortly before leaving for Afghanistan. “But everything is going to be fine. He’s alive, and he’s strong, and he’s going to get the best medical care in the world, I promise.

And you can certainly handle an airport on your own—you graduated college with a 4.0, remember?”

“That was a long time ago,” Heather murmured. “Ok, Ok. I have to pack up the kids’ things and call Barbara and Luke and book a flight. I’m really sorry to have bothered you, Kris. I know you’re really busy. You gave me this number in case of emergencies a long time ago...I just didn’t know who else to call...”

“Shut up, Heather. I’d have killed you if you hadn’t called me. I’ll see you at the hospital. You’re obviously going to get there before me, but I’ll get there as fast as I can,” I said, already sitting at my laptop checking flight times from Kuwait City.

“You? But you’re in...where are you, anyway? Your last article was from Afghanistan—are you in Afghanistan?”

“Kuwait,” I corrected as I dug through my belongings, searching for my credit card.

Colin sensed what I was looking for, and found the card before I did. He began entering in my information online for me, and raised his eyebrows at me before clicking “submit.” I nodded my confirmation without bothering to check how much this last minute flight was going to cost me as I hurriedly threw my life into two battered duffel bags.

“Kuwait,” Heather echoed. “But, but aren’t you working? You’re working. Won’t you get in trouble for leaving?”

“I’m just won a fucking Pulitzer, hon. They’re not going to fire me for heading home for a family emergency. Besides, I was getting sick of Kuwait anyway. It’s too friggin’ hot here. I’ve got to go, but I’ll see you soon, ok? It looks like my flight lands at —” I glanced at Colin, who mouthed, “11:30”—“11:30 tomorrow night. I’ll call you when I get to Reagan, ok? Everything’s going to be fine, Heath.”

I hung up the phone and placed my head in my hands for a moment, the autopilot mode temporarily leaving me. When I lifted it up, Colin handed me a lit cigarette.

“Aren’t you useful?” I commented, noting the flat tone of my voice, and took a deep drag.

“Something happen to your friend in the Army?”

I nodded. “Yeah, looks that way. He was supposed to be in fucking Georgia at Fort fucking Benning. I don’t know how he wound up in combat somewhere.”

“How bad?”

I swallowed. “I don’t know. Heather said they didn’t know if he’d pull through...” I clenched my jaw, trying not to picture Artie bloody and broken.

“He can’t be that touch-and-go, Kris, or they wouldn’t have put him on the plane from Landstuhl. They would’ve sent his parents over there instead if he were dying. So he’s probably in pretty bad shape, but he’s got to be at least somewhat stable,” Colin said. “I don’t know if that helps at all, but it’s got to be better than thinking he’s dying the whole flight home, right?”

“Yeah, Col, it helps a lot. Thanks.” I offered him what I hoped was a smile. “And thanks for booking the ticket and such.”

He shook his head dismissively. “Course. I’ll stick around here for a few more days and tie up some loose ends. You just call me when things settle down in D.C. and let me know where I should head. If you leave me your notes, I’ll see who I can track down

here, get any follow-up questions you had answered, etc., you know, if you trust me not to fuck up your work too badly.”

“Yeah, of course I trust you. I’d really appreciate that, Colin, thank-you.” I took several more drags on my cigarette and added sincerely, “Hey, dude, I am really sorry about earlier. I was way out of line, and you were right. No more treating you like one of my sources, I promise. I won’t pry again.”

Colin nodded. “It’s alright. I overreacted too. Guess we had to have a fight at some point, with all the hours we spend together, right? I still love ya, boss. Now, get your shit together. You’ve got a plane to catch and wounded soldier to tend to.”

I slung my bag over my shoulder and headed for the door. As I opened it, Colin said, “Hey boss.”

I turned in the doorway, and he offered me an unreadable half-smile.

“Just so you know—the SF on my arm doesn’t stand for Semper Fi, or San Francisco, for that matter.”

I smiled back. “Thanks. In return, I won’t ask what it does stand for.”

I was at Walter Reed two layovers and thirty-some hours later, probably looking I’d just stumbled from combat myself. After getting lost several times, I finally found the Intensive Care Unit waiting room, where Heather was sitting. She was dozing, but woke up with a start when I sat down beside her.

“Hey hon,” I said quietly. “How is he?”

Heather gave me a long hug before answering, “I don’t know. He landed a few hours ago. His mother is with him right now. They said family only, so I’ve just been waiting... The Humvee he was riding in hit a roadside bomb, apparently. The other three guys with him were killed instantly.” Heather looked me up and down and shook her head. “You look like hell, Kris. Here.”

She handed me a tube of lipstick and a brush, and I couldn’t help but smile. Heather was completely pulled together, every hair in place, even though her eyes said her heart was breaking.

“I don’t think I’ve worn lipstick since Jimmy’s wedding,” I commented.

Heather squeezed my arm affectionately. “I have no idea why we’re friends,” she responded, managing a small chuckle. “I’d give you my face powder too, but you’re too tanned for my shade.”

“Damn, and I was counting on that powder too! What will Artie think? Do we know where he was or what he was doing there?”

“His mom said the Army keeps screaming ‘classified’ every time she asks, so we don’t have a lot of details. Can they do that?”

“Sure. They’re the Army; they don’t have to tell us much, honestly. My best guess is that he was in Iraq on some covert op or another. We don’t have many troops there anymore, and it’s not politically or publicly popular to be fooling around there anymore, so the Pentagon keeps that kind of stuff very under wraps.”

“They did say he volunteered for a special assignment, and that he knew the risks.” Heather shook her head. “Why in the world would he volunteer for something that would be so dangerous, Kris?”

“Kristin!”

I turned to see Artie's mother approaching from down the hallway. Heather and I both stood up. Mrs. Eisner threw her arms around me as soon as she reached me, even though it had easily been four or five years since I'd seen her.

"Hi, Mrs. Eisner," I said, "Nice to see to see again. How are you? How's Artie?"

She released me. Her eyes were wet. "It's so good of you to come, Kristin. Heather said you were in Kuwait...I'm sure Artie will really appreciate it when he wakes up. We, we should sit down."

I found myself clenching my jaw as we took our seats back on the uncomfortable waiting room chairs. What if Artie was brain-dead? What if he was in a coma? What if he would never wake up at all? What if—I stopped myself and glanced at Heather, whose leg was trembling violently. I reached over and grabbed her hand. She forced a wan smile, and we looked expectantly at Mrs. Eisner. Artie was her only son, and really all she had; his father had walked out years before, and she'd raised him on her own.

"Arthur...Well, he's been pretty badly injured. His...his...He, uh, they, they had to take his leg, uh, above the, his knee..."

Heather made a small choking sound, and I gripped her hand harder, more for myself than her. *Oh God, Artie...* He had always been so athletic and independent; this would surely kill him if his injuries didn't first. Mrs. Eisner dabbed her red-rimmed eyes with a tissue.

"But girls," she said, placing her own wrinkled hands on ours, "the doctors said they can do so much with, uh, you know, fake legs these days, and they said people even, um, climb mountains and stuff after they, uh, lose their legs. So it'll, it'll be alright for Arthur." She looked at us beseechingly, even as she tried to comfort us, and I swallowed the lump in my throat.

"We know that, Mrs. Eisner. You raised a very strong son. He once, uh, ran a marathon with a broken ankle. Remember that, Heath, the fall of our senior year, when he was running cross-country track? He looked at us right after he crossed the finish line and said, 'So I think I might need to go to the hospital now.'"

Heather chuckled through her efforts not to cry. "Yeah. I almost killed him on the way to the ER for that. And then he hacked off his cast early so he could compete in states!"

Mrs. Eisner smiled. "I remember that. He came in second place too! He was always doing things like that growing up."

I patted Mrs. Eisner on the shoulder and hoped my own fear for her son didn't show in my voice. "See, Mrs. Eisner? Artie has always been tough. This won't be enough to break him. He'll be climbing mountains in no time, you'll see."

"Does he have any other injuries?" Heather asked quietly.

I hadn't wanted to ask, and was surprised Heather had. Perhaps she was stronger than I gave her credit for.

Mrs. Eisner sighed. "Yes. He has a broken arm, and a dislocated shoulder, and a lot of cuts and bruises...and, uh, head injuries."

"How bad?" Heather asked, again where I was too weak to do so.

"They don't know yet. The doctors said they have to wait for the, uh, swelling on, um, his brain to go down. It might not be bad...and it might be. They said we just have to wait and see. Wait and see..."

Ch. 22

After several hours of sitting in the waiting room, I fell asleep on Heather's shoulder, two and a half days without sleep having finally caught up to me. I dreamed about Travis and about Iraq. I saw Heba explode and Artie collapse. Shots rang out and Maha was arrested and tortured. Kat told me over and over again never to come home, and I stood at Tyler's funeral, dead of an addiction I'd never tried to save him from. Muffled voices penetrated my nightmares.

"...muttering the whole time she's been asleep. She sounds so distressed, but I didn't want to wake her; she looked so tired."

"Don't worry about it. She's been talking in her sleep since she got the job in Cairo. I'm not sure if she knows she does it though. Better to let her sleep."

"How do you know that she talks in her sleep?"

"Eh...long story."

I opened my eyes and sat up, startled to find Heather and JP chatting about me.

"Uh, hi," I said, brushing my hair out of my face. "I, uh, didn't know you were, um, coming. How long have you been here?"

JP forced his best attempt at a casual smile. "A few hours. How could I not come? I'd have been here sooner, but I was in upstate New York in the middle of nowhere for the last few days. I don't get service up there, and I just got Heather's voicemails when I got back."

"How's Casey? Did you have a good visit with her family?" Heather asked.

Casey? His girlfriend's name was Casey, and he was so close to her that he traveled all the way to New York to visit her family with her? *Wonderful*. Oh Christ, Artie, I thought, you're going to owe me for this visit when you wake up.

JP shifted uncomfortably as he responded, "Oh yeah, yeah, it was nice. Her folks scare me a little bit, but you know how parents are. Her dad's got a fucking moose head on their living room wall. I let it slip that I was a vegetarian in college, and I think the entire family had simultaneous heart attacks, ha."

Heather chuckled, oblivious to the discomfort that hung in the air. "Yeah, don't forget you're talking to a girl who lives in the South now. Darren's family is very upscale and all, but still, some of the people I've met down there, oh man—makes me miss home like crazy sometimes. Is Casey coming by?"

JP almost visibly winced at the question. "Well, she was planning on it. She had to go to work today, but she said she'd come by afterwards, so she should be here soon, I guess. I didn't expect..."

JP looked at me without finishing the question, but he didn't need to as he quickly averted his gaze: *I didn't expect you to be here. Shouldn't you be somewhere with deserts and bombs trying to get yourself killed?*

I felt the lump in my throat returning and abruptly stood up.

"I'm going to go get a cup of coffee," I announced, forgetting that both knew I hated coffee.

Caffeine made me jittery; the running joke earlier in our lives was that caffeine was the only addiction that had failed to grab a hold of me.

I left the waiting room without any particular destination in mind before either could remind me of this fact. I eventually found myself outside the hospital. It was a nice night; D.C. summers were hell, but it was beautiful in April. I leaned against a wall and

lit a cigarette. My lungs protested as I inhaled, and it occurred to me without much concern that I could no longer take as deep of breaths as I once could. You better hurry up and kill me, I warned the world silently; otherwise I'm actually going to get lung cancer. I took another drag and watched the blue-gray smoke drift into the darkening sky, thinking that I should've just told them I was going to smoke a cigarette. There would've been no risk of anyone trying to come with me; both had quit years before. You're the only one still going through two packs a day, I reminded myself with no small trace of bitterness; you're the only one who hasn't gotten your act together.

"*Ma'lesh*," I sighed out loud.

The Egyptian phrase meant something akin to "it can't be helped," and it neatly summarized what had become the life of Kristin Wilson. I remained outside for almost an hour as the sun finally set and the temperatures dropped. Finally I knew I could stall no longer and headed back inside, with all the resignation of a prisoner condemned to die. It can't be helped.

She—Casey, I assumed—was sitting beside JP when I entered the waiting room. All three stood up when they saw me.

"You smell like an ashtray," Heather chided, wrinkling her nose. "I knew you weren't going to get coffee! I can't believe you haven't quit yet, Kristin. You were gone forever; how many did you smoke?"

I shrugged, eying JP's girlfriend. She looked nothing like me. Where I was all sharp angles and pointy bones, she was rounded and curvy. Where I was inherently radiating a restless energy, she was smiling pleasantly. Where I was weathered and lined with stress, she was fresh-faced and peaceful. He deserves to be happy, I reminded myself, and extended my hand.

"Hi," I said with as much goodwill as I could manage, "I'm Kristin. It's really nice to meet you. I've heard a lot of good things."

That was a lie—it would've been difficult for JP to tell me anything, positive or negative, when we weren't on speaking terms—but one I figured couldn't hurt.

She smiled widely. It was a sincere smile. "It's so nice to finally meet you too! I'm Casey. Heather and JP were just telling me about your last feature on the nurse in Afghanistan—that's so fascinating! What are you working on now?"

Ah, fuck, why does she have to be so sweet?

We all sat back down and I caught JP's incredulous look over his girlfriend's shoulder as I boiled my job down to its pleasantries suitable for conversation—a trick Colin had been forcing me to work on over the last few years. I locked eyes with JP for just a moment without breaking the rhythm of the conversation.

What, my eyes told him with just a touch of hostility, you didn't think I could play nice?

We were finally allowed to see Artie, even though he was still unconscious, around midnight.

"Five minutes each, and only one at a time," the nurse informed us, but as soon as her back was turned, Heather gripped my arm.

"Kris, come with me."

"The nurse said—"

"Kristin, I *cannot* go in there alone. *Please.*"

I nodded and we entered his room. Heather still hadn't let go of my arm. It was silent except for the rhythmic beeping of several machines.

"Oh Christ, Artie," I breathed without intending to.

He looked bad, worse than even I'd anticipated. His head was shaved and wrapped in bandages, and both his eyes looked blacked-out. His arm was in a cast, and an IV was attached to the other. His nose looked like it had been broken and reset, and he was hooked up to more machines than I cared to count. And his left leg...there was an empty flat space under the white sheets where his leg should have been.

"*God*," Heather groaned, and I, who had seen more death and violence in the last few years than most people ever will in a lifetime, had to turn away to hide the tears beginning to run down my cheeks

When I finally composed myself to a reasonable degree, I turned around to find Heather sitting by his bed, holding his hand in hers and stroking his cheek gently.

I didn't move any closer, just stood a few feet from his bed, cracking my knuckles uncomfortably. The walls felt like they were closing in around me. Heather was whispering quietly to him, but I couldn't make out her words. After a few minutes, she kissed his hand and backed away. She looked at me expectantly, and I forced myself to take the six steps to his bedside. Artie looked worse the closer I got. His chest didn't seem to be rising and falling enough to keep him alive. I bit my lip hard and touched his hand lightly.

"Hey man," I said quietly, "Kristin here. I, uh, I flew all the way from Kuwait to see you. So, uh, you better pull through, huh? It was always supposed to be me who got blown up, not you, remember? Hang in there, buddy. You've, uh, got a lot of people who love you, and I, uh, I'm going to be pissed if I've got to go to your funeral, ok?"

I kissed my fingertips and touched his bruised hand again, then stepped away. Heather and I left the room, and found JP waiting expectantly outside the door with Casey. She held his hand supportively. JP winced at our faces—both drained of blood, I imagined—and said shakily,

"Oh, Jesus. Does he, uh, does he look that bad?"

I couldn't answer, and Heather just shrugged helplessly. JP took a deep breath and walked into the room, leaving Casey to stare at us in legitimate concern. Much to my great surprise, she pulled both of us into a hug.

"I'm sure he'll be fine, ladies," she offered when she released us. "JP's always talked about how strong Artie is."

I nodded without responding and noted that my hands were shaking slightly. I crossed my arms to conceal this fact. JP was sheet-white when he returned, and his eyes were welling with tears.

"*Shit*," he managed as he roughly rubbed his eyes, "Fucking God damn *hell*. I, I didn't, *ah God*..."

Heather began to cry for the first time at seeing JP's reaction, and JP's efforts at stopping his own tears failed. Casey looked from one to the other helplessly, and finally her eyes landed on me, the only one not choking on tears. I was just choking. She was clearly appealing to me for help—little did she know how ill-equipped I was to deliver such succor—and I found myself unable to refuse. Heather had been the strong one since my arrival; it was my turn. I put an arm around each of them—the first I'd touched JP in several long years—and said as lightly as I could manage,

“Come on, guys. Artie will be fucking furious when he finds out we all stood bawling outside his room. We spent most our friendship drinking together—let’s make Artie proud and go ask someone where the nearest bar is.”

Ch. 23

“I am,” Heather giggled as she finished her fifth beer, “a fucking mother of two. I have no business in dive bars drinking cheap beer anymore!”

“I’m glad to see all those years as a southern socialite haven’t impacted your ability to hold your alcohol,” JP commented, slamming his own—sixth? seventh?—bottle on the heavily scratched table beside hers, “or your foul mouth!”

“Oh, you’re one to talk! You work in insurance, for God’s sake!” Heather fired back. “You’re not exactly a badass anymore yourself!”

JP laughed. “Yeah, it’s true. Somehow, I managed to turn into a reasonable adult. My parents always said it would happen, didn’t they?”

“I sure as hell never believed them,” I commented wryly, the Sam Adams having loosened my tongue and blurred painful memories. This, this was almost like old times.

“You know, Kris,” JP said thoughtfully later on, “you looked as bad as Artie that night...”

Casey looked at JP, clearing thinking, “what accident?”, but she sensed it was not a question that she had any place asking. This was not something she could not be a part of. I wondered how much else he hid from her as I shook my head, recalling against my will Artie’s gray face and *aching* fragility.

“No way. That’s impossible.”

Heather nodded her agreement. “It’s true. I didn’t see you until I could get home from UNC two days later, and you still looked awful.”

“You looked two minutes from death when I got to the ER,” JP recalled. “And hell, you pretty much were. I got there not long after your brother, and when I got there, one of the doctors pulled me aside and told me to not leave Jimmy’s side. They were afraid you were going to code and he was going to lose it.” He shook his head. “Fuck though, it’s not like I was in much better shape than him.”

I ran a hand through my hair and wondered if he knew how much he was hurting me. There wasn’t enough alcohol in the bar to give me immunity.

“And you turned out just fine, even though you were in bad shape,” Heather said brightly. “So Artie will be fine too.”

“Of course he will,” I murmured, staring into my beer. I looked at my watch and said in an empty voice, “It’s getting late. We should all get some sleep—I don’t know about you guys, but I can’t handle the alcohol like I used to. The hangovers kill me these days.”

JP groaned. “Oh hell. Yeah, I’m man-down all the next day if I have more than like four fucking beers. Remember the days in college when we used to get destroyed the night before early morning finals and wake up just fine? Man, do I miss those days! Tomorrow is going to hurt, huh?”

“Yeah,” I agreed softly, “tomorrow is going to hurt.”

“Where do you ladies want to go? My place is closer than JP’s, so we’re just going to stay there tonight. You’re both more than welcome, if you don’t mind sharing the pull-out couch,” Casey offered.

JP grinned at us as he stood up, swaying slightly. “Oh, I’m sure these girls have slept in worse places—Kris in refugee camps and Heather in frat houses!”

Heather laughed and smacked him lightly as I frantically tried to think of an excuse, any excuse, not to go to his girlfriend’s apartment. Heather inadvertently came to my rescue.

“Oh, thanks so much, Casey, but I’d actually already booked a hotel room a few blocks from the hospital before arriving here. I didn’t want to be a burden on anyone. Kristin, you’re more than welcome to stay with me, unless you want to head to your brother and sister-in-law’s house—they don’t live too far from here, right?”

I shook my head. I could just imagine Sue’s reaction if I stumbled unannounced into their townhouse at 2 a.m. on a Tuesday.

“I’ll stay with you, Heath, if that’s ok.”

JP hugged me goodbye after Casey dropped Heather and I off at our hotel, as if the clocks had somehow magically reversed themselves several years, as if I had never broken both of our hearts. I knew in the morning, he would regret the hug.

“I have something to show you,” Heather said as we got ready for bed.

I got myself a glass of water—oh, tomorrow’s hangover would be most unfortunate—and sat down on my bed.

“Oh yeah? What’s that?”

She withdrew an official looking document from her purse and handed it to me.

“Holy shit, Heather!” I exclaimed as my disbelieving eyes took in the paper’s identifying information. “You, what, you aren’t really going to--?”

She nodded calmly and reclaimed the paper. “Yes, I am.”

“But...” I shook my head vehemently. “Sweetie, this is a horrible idea. Artie wouldn’t want you doing this. Divorcing your husband is not going to heal him, you know that. It isn’t the solution, and you’re in no condition to make decisions like this right now anyway. You’re under a lot of stress and pressure, and sometimes we all make really rash choices in situations like this—”

“*Kristin*,” she interrupted me smoothly. “Listen to me. We haven’t slept in the same bedroom in over a year. We’re not in love, and we never were. Darren is a good man, he provides me with everything I could ever want, and he gave me two wonderful children. But I can’t remember the last time we really *talked*, the last time he made me really smile, the last time either of us wanted to just spend time together. He has his life, and I have mine, and we look good together at his work functions. We have no marriage to speak of beyond that. And it isn’t his fault, because I knew all these things when I married him. Marrying him was what I was supposed to do, and I wanted the security, and, Kris, I was running away. I knew when I left for college knowing that Artie was who I wanted, but I...he couldn’t provide the life everyone expected me to have.” Heather brushed a stray tear from her eyelash before it could smudge her makeup. “I’ve been carrying those papers around with me for six months. And it occurred to me that I have never been happier than in the moments I’ve spent with Artie. I have never ever cheated

on Darren, but I...I've always belonged to Artie. And I've spent the last ten years hating myself for not having the courage to tell him so. I just can't live with this mistake anymore."

"Shit," I muttered. "I don't know what to say, Heath."

I certainly hadn't seen *this* coming.

"Where will you go? What will you do? What about your kids?"

Heather sighed. "I didn't say this would be easy. I'm going to make a lot of people very angry, and I'm going to hurt others. I'd move wherever Artie needs, and I do have a college degree, for all the use I've gotten from it—I'll get a job. Artie's mother said she would help me if I moved back here—I told her this morning, and she was so happy...She said she couldn't wish for a better daughter, can you believe that? Con and Maddie are still so young...they'll be alright. I'm a child of divorce, and I turned out ok, right? Darren's been gone for weeks at a time on business since the day they were born, so it's not like I'm depriving them of a father figure. I've been a single mother for years." Heather smiled slightly, if sadly. "Who knows? Maybe they'll gain a father from this."

There was something that had to be said, and I couldn't call myself her friend if I didn't force myself to voice it. "

Heather...what if Artie...doesn't make it?"

Heather closed her eyes for a brief moment, and when she opened them, her voice was steady. "I've considered that, and it doesn't change my mind. If he doesn't ever wake up, I want to spend every second he has left by his side. I want to do right by him, just this once, no matter what is waiting for us. Maybe not all things can be fixed, but it's never too late to try. I owe him the attempt."

I stared at my friend for a long moment, realizing that she looked more at peace, serene even, that I'd ever seen her. I stood up and hugged her.

"I think this is the right decision," I told her.

Later, I laid in the pitch darkness, staring up at the ceiling and wondering about life. If we'd been told ten years ago what life was holding in store for us...I'd certainly never expected such a radical decision from Heather, queen of organization and order and perfection. Where does she get the strength to aim a gun at her entire world and pull the trigger? I wondered. Maybe it is never too late to change.

I went home that night, the guilt of being forty-five minutes from my family and not stopping by finally getting too much to bear. Tyler opened the door at my knock.

"Kristin! What the hell are you doing here?" he said, pulling me into an awkward hug. He had several inches on me now. "Mom and Dad never said anything about you coming home."

"Well, I imagine that's probably due to the fact that they didn't know. I had to come back stateside for a few days unexpectedly, and I figured I'd drop by and say hi." I neglected to mention Artie's life-or-death condition. "Where is everybody?"

Tyler shook his head. He seemed different somehow; calmer, more relaxed, stiller, maybe. The change I couldn't put my finger on disconcerted me.

"No one else is home. Mom and Dad are out to dinner with Aunt Cathy—it's the first anniversary of her cancer going into remission."

"What about the girls?"

Mary had moved home after college and commuted to work in Baltimore, and Kat should still be home...

My little brother looked at me and shook his head. "You really don't ever know what's going on around here, do you, Kris?" he asked without malice. "Mary and her fiancée just bought a condo outside of Baltimore—they're not living together yet, because Mom would have a heart attack, but Mare occasionally crashes at the new place when traffic's bad or she gets out of work late. And Kat's in Philly, at school. She's in college now, remember?"

I frowned. "But she was home last time I was here, and that was only like two months ago."

"She was home on spring break," Tyler explained. "Now she's back at Penn. It's apparently almost finals week, and she's been calling home in tears a lot."

I sat down at the kitchen table. "Does she, uh, like it up there?"

Tyler took a seat across from me. "Yeah, yeah, she really does. Her and Conner broke up a couple of months back, but she's been 'talking' to this other guy from New York, and she seems pretty happy with him. She's stressed a lot with classes; Dad says she's a lot like Jimmy like that. He says I'm like you, and no one knows where Mary came from."

Tyler grinned, and I tried to smile back. When I failed, my little brother asked in a serious tone I wasn't accustomed to,

"Do you guys really not talk?"

"Me and Mary? Sure we do. We email back and forth every few weeks, and occasionally she calls to give me some update about the wedding. She asked me to be her maid of honor, did she tell you that? I was touched."

Tyler shook his head. "No, I meant you and Kat."

I winced. This was probably something, like Travis and Heba and JP, that would always ache.

"Nah, kid, we don't," I responded softly, regretfully.

"Why not?"

I shrugged helplessly, unable to voice my responsibility.

"I asked her that same question," he said, locking eyes with me.

I almost choked on the soda I'd gotten from the fridge. "You did *what*?" I sputtered.

Tyler didn't blink and repeated, "I asked Kat why you two don't talk anymore. I remember you two being close when we were younger—she always looked up to you. It was bothering me, so I asked. Do you know what she said?"

I shook my head mutely, and he answered, "She said she couldn't take watching the hurt everyone else went through every time you went crazy. She said Mom cries every time you leave, and she and Dad get into fights about you, and that it was slowly killing Jimmy, and that Mary was happier back when you two weren't close. She said someday you are going to come home in a casket, and it won't matter to you, because you never gave a damn anyway, but it'll kill everyone else. She said she couldn't get close to you because she was going to have to pick up the pieces after you were gone."

I was crying before he'd even finished, and I turned my face away, embarrassed to be crying in front of my 17 year-old brother.

“Jesus frigging Christ, Tyler,” I managed, “why would, why would you t-tell me that?”

“I had to,” he responded quietly, “to explain why I decided some things that I have recently.”

I wiped my eyes and turned back to face him. He looked maybe just a little empty. There didn’t seem to be any light in his eyes. The hunger, the energy, had vanished.

“What do you mean?” I whispered.

“I was going to end up like you. I don’t think anyone could see it yet—you hid this pretty well until you were older too—but it was always there, wasn’t it? You were born like this, fucked up, and I was too. It was getting harder and harder for me to cover it up, and I think Mom and Dad suspected I was going the way you had after I got arrested last year. And Kristin, Kat’s right—seeing everyone worry about you...it fucking *sucks*. Jimmy, Jesus, that poor bastard is going to have a heart attack one of these days. I saw the sheer *panic* in their eyes when they picked me up at the police station. They were too fucking freaked out to even be mad. And hell, Kris, it’s not like I don’t care about you. I can’t just turn it off like Kat. I worry, but not like they do—I know you’d just be dying in a different way if you weren’t out there. I did try to just chill out for awhile while I was on probation, be a normal fucking person for a few months, see what it was like. You ever try?”

I nodded and he continued without any question in his words, “Didn’t work, did it. The need for the rush doesn’t go away just because you’re not getting it. Those months, they fucking sucked, and I was miserable. Mom and Dad finally wanted to take me to see someone, a shrink or something, because they thought I was depressed.”

Tyler paused and then said slowly, deliberately, “And so I sat them down, and I told them what was wrong with me.”

I inhaled sharply; the idea was almost literally beyond my comprehension. Non-addicts didn’t get it; they just couldn’t understand. They would probably toss us all in psych wards in straight jackets if they ever had a clue...

Tyler laughed without humor. “They took it better than anticipated, actually. Mom cried for a little while, but it seems you broke them in pretty well. They’re hard to shock these days. Thanks for that, I guess. So, I wound up seeing a shrink anyway.”

“Did it help?” I asked in a barely audible voice, my throat dry.

Tyler chuckled mirthlessly again. “No. But the pills sure did.”

“Pills?”

“Sure. A prescription for a nice cocktail of drugs. As long as I take my little handful of pills every morning, no adrenalin craving. I can eat and sleep—unlike when I was trying to quit by myself—and my grades are better than they’ve ever been. I’m thinking about going to community college next year, until I can pull up my GPA enough to get into a four-year program, when last year, I didn’t even care if I graduated high school.”

“That’s, uh, great, Tyler,” I said, staring hard enough at the table where I’d eaten a hundred thousand meals to burn a hole in it.

“Yeah. It’s great.”

His voice was hollow, and I forced myself to look up and meet his non-addicted eyes.

“Mom and Dad think they’ve found the magic bullet, so to speak. They think they can fix you too, Kristin.”

I bit my lip, hard. “Should I let them?”

Tyler reached across the table and patted my trembling and clenched fist. “There are...consequences to the drugs. I fake it pretty well, I think...but I feel like I’m just floating a lot of the time. It’s like...I’m watching myself living my life and not really feeling anything at all. Before, in between getting hits, when I started craving it, I felt... jittery, pent-up, like a caged-up animal. It was irritating as hell, but it was *something*. Now...I feel the real Tyler Wilson...well, if he’s not dead, then he’s sure as hell buried pretty deep. I don’t feel the need anymore...but I don’t feel too much of anything else either, Kris.”

I stared at my baby brother, utterly at a loss for words.

“I’m going to stay on them,” he continued, withdrawing his hand, “because I don’t see how else I can function. Everyone is so happy to see me acting so damn normal...No one notices.” He tilted back in his chair and stared at the ceiling. “But you can.”

I nodded without my willing it, and Tyler sighed. “Yeah. I knew you would be able to. That’s why I’m telling you. Because the next time they see you, the folks are going to push this, and they’re going to push it hard. They haven’t said as much, but I’m betting they’re going to pull Jimmy and Mary and Kat into it too, and the siblings might go along, thinking they’re saving your life.”

“Wouldn’t they be?” I asked, surprised to hear my own voice.

Tyler shrugged. “Sure, maybe on the physical level. But let me ask you something, Kris—did you love your boyfriend who got killed? Do you care about your friends? Does the bad shit you’ve seen bother you?”

“Yes,” I said, closing my eyes briefly, “every goddamn day.”

Tyler continued, his voice dull, “My girlfriend, she said she loved me for the first time a few days ago. A few months ago, I felt it. But last week...” he shrugged, “I didn’t feel anything toward her except some residual affection. She’s so goddamn happy that I’m not driving like a maniac or playing chicken or drinking anymore that I don’t think she even notices the difference. Or maybe she notices, and she just doesn’t care. I don’t honestly know which is worse. You might come home in a casket someday, Kristin, but you, you will have lived.”

“At what cost though?” I murmured. “If I’m killing everyone else...”

Tyler shook his head with a small smile playing on his lips. “Nah. I’ll hold them together.”

He met my eyes, and suddenly looking briefly like a little boy again, questioned, just a touch of anxiety in his voice, “You don’t, uh, think of less of me? That I’m weak?”

“Less of you? Ty, how could I ever think less of you? You are...a thousand times stronger than I ever could be.” I stood up and gave him a hard hug, choking on my words. “I am so sorry you had to make this decision. I wish I could’ve spared you somehow.”

He pulled back from me and smiled. “I’m glad you weren’t able to. If I never do anything else worth mentioning, I have this. And that’s why, Kristin, there’s one more thing you need to know.”

I steeled myself against whatever he was about to say, and Tyler said slowly, carefully, “I am not going to protect you against them.”

I looked at him in confusion, and he continued, “When they try to convince you to go on the meds...they’re obviously going to use me as an example. They’re going to hold me up to you and say ‘look how well Tyler is doing,’ and I am not going to contradict them. The only thing that is keeping me going, Kristin, is the fact that I’m doing the family good. But the moment they think they’re hurting me somehow, or taken something away from me, because of the meds, I lose that. So I’m not going to tell them it’s bad, and I’m going to keep letting them think this is the magic bullet, and frankly, it’s going to make you look pretty damn bad in their eyes. They’re not going to understand why, if there was a way out, you’d keep going, keep hurting them. And you can rationalize anyway you like, but I need your word as my sister that you won’t burn me on this.”

I clenched my jaw. That was more than fair. I’d abandoned him to his fate long ago; this was well within his rights to demand. “Alright.”

He locked eyes with me, and for just a split second, I thought I saw a flash of old intensity resurface. “*Swear to me.*”

“I swear. I swear on...on Travis’ grave. Whatever they say, even if they never speak to me again, this stays between us.”

I stayed at there the next two nights, much to my parents’ delight when they returned, and on the third morning, I woke up to the sounds of a hushed argument. I quickly pulled my clothes on and crept from the bedroom to the top of the stairs, where I could hear my mother and Mary exchanging quiet but heated words.

“I don’t care. This isn’t right, and I refuse to be a part of it.”

“But honey,” my mother pleaded, “this is for her own good. We just want to help her. Look at how good Tyler has been doing.”

“No, for the last time,” Mary spat. “I am not going to lose my sister over your ridiculous desires for normalcy.”

Interesting, I thought, then I walked down the stairs.

“Morning, ladies,” I greeted. “What’s for breakfast? Or did I sleep through it again?”

My mother immediately plastered a smile on her face to cover the startled look of guilt, and Mary shook her head.

“Kris, I’m sorry. I can’t stay. Call me before you head back to Kuwait and we’ll get lunch.” Then she promptly walked out the front door.

I cast a sideways glance into the living and found my intervention already assembled. Jimmy, Sue—just beginning to show her pregnancy—Kat, Tyler, and my father all sat, waiting for me. *Jimmy?*

My mother touched my shoulder. “Don’t worry about her. She’s just stressed with work and wedding plans lately. Why don’t you come sit in the living room for a few minutes? We have something we want to talk with you about.”

I sighed and obediently followed her, wishing I had time for a drink. I listened silently to my parents as they explained my little brother’s medications and the wonders they had done for him.

“Yeah,” I said. “He told me about that.”

Tyler paled slightly and I offered him a tiny smile in reassurance. Don’t worry, kid; this is my battle.

“I’m really glad to hear he’s doing better. But I’ve got to ask—what does that have to do with me?”

There was a long silence as various family members exchanged unsure looks—*does she really not know she has a problem?*—and I smiled to my myself. That had been perhaps a bit cruel, but I couldn’t help myself.

“Kristin, honey, you haven’t noticed that you might, uh, have some of the same issues that Tyler did?” my father inquired painfully.

I faked a surprised look. “Issues? Nope, can’t say I’d noticed any.”

“But you’re always doing such dangerous things,” my mother reminded me, her smile still forcefully remaining on her lips. “You don’t think that’s evidence of a problem?”

I shrugged. “I’m a reporter in one of the volatile regions on the planet. A little danger is part of the job description. Are you really going to try and tell Christiane Amanpour or the CNN guys who covered the first Persian Gulf that they need meds? What about Walter Cronkite?”

Silence met my question and I saw the uncertainty began to settle on their faces. I had them, and Tyler bit his lip, trying not to smile. Then,

“Oh, *for God’s sake!*” Kat snapped. “Are you all really going to sit there and listen her *bullshit*? You’re really going to let her just con you all like that with some important names?”

Kat met my eyes and challenged, “You’re a *liar*, Kristin. Don’t you dare sit there and act like you just love journalism so much and the danger is just a necessary evil. You *love* the *danger*, and you’ve been loving it for *years*.”

Knowing I should just keep my mouth shut, but feeling too hemmed in not to say anything, I protested weakly, “That’s not true. I love my job. I can’t help it if it gets dangerous sometimes.”

Her eyes flashed, and I realized I’d made a terrible mistake. I remembered the last time Kat and I had fought; this wasn’t going to be good.

“Oh yeah? Could you help it when you went to Egypt in college? Could you help it when you kept going to places that you weren’t supposed to while you were there? Could you help it when you went base-jumping in some ridiculous attempt get hired by the Post? Could you help it when you started smoking two packs a day and the dozen other vices I’m sure you have? Could you *help it* when you were in that car your boyfriend was drunk driving?”

“*Katrina*,” my father broke in sharply, “that is enough! There is a line, and you have crossed it. You and I will be having a chat about your behavior later.”

I was close to tears, and I dug my nails into my palms to stop them from coming.

“Regardless that Kat was too harsh,” my mother continued gently, trying to make eye contact with me and meeting my cold refusal, “we all agree with her point that this has been a long-term problem for you. How many times has it been a close call, Kristin? How many times have we almost lost you?”

I was considering the tattoos on my back—taking up much of the flesh between my shoulder blade and my lower back by now—and knew it was a rhetorical question. Still, I answered wearily,

“More times than you’d probably care to know.”

My mother squeezed her eyes shut for a moment, and my father said, "And we appreciate that you've tried to shield us from a lot of that, Kristin. I'm sure that isn't easy on you. But we'd rather have you safe and alive. And these medications that Tyler is taking right now could help you do that. You can't lead a normal life the way things are right now, honey. Couldn't you just try? We're your parents; we would never tell you to do anything that would hurt you. Don't you trust us?"

Fuck, I swore silently. I had nothing to say in response that wouldn't break my promise to Tyler.

"Jimmy? Do you have anything to say?" my mother asked.

Jimmy's head jerked up like a deer caught in headlights, and he cleared his throat uncomfortably. "Uh, yeah, I think this might be a good idea. Just to give a chance maybe, you know."

I stared at my twin. "You think there's something wrong with me, Jimmy?"

He refused to meet my eyes. "I just...I just want to make sure you're going to be around, Kiki. I'm afraid that you, that you might get hurt or something. Again."

"That didn't answer my question," I said coldly.

His presence here bothered me more than anyone else's did. He was my twin, my other half, and thus how could this not be a betrayal?

He finally looked up from the hole his eyes were burning in the carpet. "Damn it, Kik," he said quietly. "Why do you have to do this? You know as well as we do that your behavior is not normal. It never has been, ever since we were little kids. How much longer do you think you can live like this?"

"Are you really worried about me," I shot back, finding myself getting angry now, his perceived betrayal clouding my rationality, "or are you just sick of worrying? You're all settled down now, and you'd really like it if I could just do the same and make your life a little more convenient, is that it?"

"*What?* How could you even ask something like that? Yes, I am worried about you, and god damn it, *yes*, I am sick to death of worrying about you. The last thing I do before I go to bed every night is check my email and my phone and the Internet and make sure nothing is going wrong in your part of the world, and it's the first thing I do every morning when I wake up. When things are dicey where you are, I get up a few times during the night and check too, because guess what? It's not like I'm sleeping anyway!" Jimmy glared at me, breathing hard in frustration.

"Take some Ambien," I said without a trace of discernable feeling in my voice. "It does wonders for insomnia."

Much to my great surprise, Jimmy absolutely exploded. "God damn it, Kristin!"

I couldn't remember the last time my twin had called me by my given name, and its sound from his lips shook me deeply; it sounded more like a swear word than my name.

"What the fuck is wrong with you? I have done everything for you that you've ever needed! I showed up at the hospital the night of the car accident, I picked you up from Dulles the night your friend in Egypt died, I didn't ask a single question when you drank *an entire bottle* of whiskey! I didn't even fucking ask why your shirt was soaked in *blood*, and I've never told anyone else about any of those things, not even my own wife! If I could take your place, if it could be me who needs to be constantly risking my life, I'd do it! But I *can't*, and I have never asked anything of you, ever. When something goes

wrong in my life, you're always the first person I want to call, but I never do. You know why? Because you're always off somewhere with bombs going off in the background! And now, when I ask—no, when I *beg*—you to just *try* something different, you react with *sarcasm*, and *anger*, and *mean, nasty comments*. That reaction, more than everything else you've ever done, has proven to me that you need help, Kristin." He shook his head. "I don't want my kid learning from your example someday."

It took every remaining bit of self control to not visibly wince at that last comment. He's terrified his unborn baby will be like me...I wanted to vomit, but instead I stood up. Sue gripped Jimmy's hand with whitened knuckles as if she was afraid that I might hurt him. Jimmy gently loosened his wife's hand from his, and stood up to face me. There was hurt, and anger, and something else—hope?—on his face.

"Et tu, Brute?" I commented quietly, just loud enough for him to hear, and his face fell.

There, now I'd hurt him as badly as he'd hurt me.

Then, louder, for everyone's ears this time, "I'm sorry I am not what you all need. I imagine your lives would be easier without me in them, and I think you'll be pleasantly surprised at how quickly I can have that arranged."

They were all shocked into horrified silence. Before they could recover, I turned and walked out of the room, touching Tyler's shoulder briefly as I left. I merely meant that I'd stop communicating with them, but I knew my family had taken it a very different way. Let them panic, I thought. I'm done caring.

Two days later, Artie opened his eyes and demanded to know why he wearing a fucking nightgown. Forty-five minutes later, Ed called me. Dana Odami, another nurse, and their translator were dead. They'd been on their way back from conducting an infant nutrition class in an isolated village, and when they hadn't returned to the clinic by nightfall, their colleagues and several villagers went looking for them. Their bodies were found beside their SUV, their hands bound and bullets in the backs of their heads, execution-style. Doctors Without Borders would be suspending their Afghanistan operations as soon as they could evacuate their personnel, and the clinic would be shut down.

"I'm sorry, Kristin," Ed said. "You know this isn't your fault."

"Yeah," I said numbly, "never is, is it? I've got to go, Ed. I'll call you later."

I leaned against the hallway outside Artie's room weakly and felt my legs giving out from under me. I allowed it to happen and sank onto the floor. I hugged my knees to my chest and realized I was feeling absolutely nothing inside except a terrible weight on my chest. I am getting too old for this, I decided; I just don't have the heart for this job anymore. People like Dana Odami get their skulls blown off, and people like me just keep going. It wasn't fair, but what was I supposed to do? I put my head in my hands and let myself be empty until I felt a hand on my shoulder.

"Kris?" JP's voice asked hesitantly. "Are you alright?"

I looked up at him and made no effort to stand. "Yeah," I responded hollowly, "I'm just peachy."

JP chewed his lip uncertainly for a moment, then sat down beside me. "Do you, uh, need someone to talk to? I used to be pretty good at listening, remember?" He offered an encouraging smile.

I gritted my teeth until the pain in my jaw was enough to balance out the rawness of that sentence. All I wanted to do was put my head on his shoulder until I could absorb the pain of Dana's murder and reconcile my possible role in it, and JP had always been there when I needed him. But I couldn't do that to him. Man the hell up, Kristin, I commanded myself.

"The woman in my last feature was found murdered," I said brusquely.

"Shit, Kris, I'm so sorry," JP started to say, but I cut him off harshly.

"It doesn't matter. I just need a minute."

He put his hand tentatively on my arm, but felt my muscles go rigid at his touch and quickly withdrew. He jammed his hand into his pocket roughly, seemingly almost angry with himself. I stood up and he followed suite immediately.

"I've got to get back to work," I said. "I've left my photographer alone in Kuwait with a half-finished story for the last five days, and God knows what kind of trouble he's gotten himself into by now."

"You're leaving right now?" JP questioned, staring everywhere but at me.

"Yes. I have to. Tell everyone else I said goodbye, and that I'll call soon. Casey seems like a great girl, JP. Don't fuck that up, huh?"

Before he could respond, I headed down the hallway, leaving the only friends I'd ever had behind me, again. People may change, but I certainly never did.

Ch. 23

"Are you alright, boss?"

I looked at Colin. "Of course. I'm on a plane to fucking Baghdad. Why wouldn't I be alright?"

"You don't look alright. You haven't said three words since you got back from D.C."

"I'm fine," I repeated, and Colin shook his head.

"You look like you haven't slept in a week, and I swear you've lost more weight. You're getting too thin, Kris. Try eating something other than cancer sticks and cheap beer, huh?"

I didn't dignify that with a response, and Colin added after a minute, softly,

"Kris, you know you can talk to me. I know we mostly joke around and stuff, and I'm not really ever serious, but...I've seen most of the shit you have, and I've been in a lot of the same positions as you. I feel it too, even if I don't say so."

To my surprise, I heard myself saying more harshly than I intended, "You don't talk about stuff. Why should I be the weak one? Nothing ever bothers you."

"Sure things do. Lots of things bother me. But I'm Irish, and we don't do feelings very well. We've sure got 'em, but we just drink or fight instead of dealing with them."

After a long moment, I asked, "Colin, do I talk in my sleep? Honestly?"

He looked startled by the question. "Why?"

"Because I overheard JP and Heather talking when I was with them in D.C., and JP said I talk in my sleep, that I always sound, uh, distressed."

Colin frowned deeply before answering slowly, "Well, yeah...you do, sometimes."

"What do I say?"

“It’s not like I keep a running transcript, boss,” he tried to chuckle, but I didn’t lessen my stare, and he was forced to answer, “Eh, you sound kind of upset sometimes. Sometimes you talk about Travis...and sometimes Egypt, and your friends there...and sometimes about JP...Last night you were talking about Tyler—that’s your kid brother, right?”

My cheeks burned. I hadn’t wanted to talk about Tyler, and was humiliated to hear that I sometimes talked about JP.

“There are,” Colin noted, “only three things that I’ve ever seen you blink at, boss. One’s your family, two’s your friends, and three’s JP. So, given that I already know Artie was hurt, and you told me about Heather divorcing her husband, and you mentioned seeing JP and her new girlfriend, I’m going to assume it’s your family on your mind right now.”

I silently raged that Colin knew me so well and I knew so precious little about him for a moment before responding through gritted teeth, “Yes.”

Colin waited patiently, as I knew he would the entire flight if he had to, and I explained brusquely, “Tyler’s like me. Fucked in the head like I am. He couldn’t take doing to my family what I’ve already done, and so he told my parents. Now he’s on a nice cocktail of numbing drugs.”

“That sucks. I’m sorry.”

I shook my head, angry, “No, you don’t get it. It’s my *fault*.”

Colin frowned. “How is that your fault? You didn’t create him, and you can’t even say he learned by example, because you were gone for most of his growing up anyway.”

“I don’t expect you to understand,” I exhaled heavily in frustration. Then, more to myself than Colin, “And he told me he couldn’t protect me. *He* had to tell *me* that he couldn’t protect me, his 27-year-old sister. He’s just a baby...”

“You were 17 once and alone, even without an older sibling like you,” Colin reminded me. “And you figured shit out.”

I flashed back to my 18th birthday, where I had played chicken with an oncoming Amtrak train, standing on the tracks until seconds before it would’ve careened into me.

“No,” I said quietly, “I was never alone.”

JP, Monica, Artie, and Heather had been feet away that night, as they always had until I forced them away. They couldn’t have stopped me, but they were there anyway.

“My family, they wanted me to go on the meds. They ambushed me when I was home, all of them except Mary, and I, I said some things I shouldn’t. I said I was leaving the family, because they were better off without me. My mother and Jimmy have been calling nonstop since I left, and I haven’t picked up the fucking phone.” I shook my head, wishing I could light a cigarette.

Colin winced. “That’s rough, boss. But your brother had to make a decision, and so did you. It doesn’t look like there were any easy answers in this case.”

“You’re saying I should’ve gone on meds too, huh?” I responded glumly.

He was probably right.

Colin shook his head quickly. “No, I’m not saying that at all. Hell, boss, if you had, just think of the stories that never would’ve been written. Someone has to go the places you’ve gone and bear witness to the things you’ve seen, and it might as well be someone who enjoys it, right? What would the world be without adrenaline junkies?”

I smiled slightly. Colin reminded me of Travis just briefly.

“What are you doing here, Colin?” I asked. “You aren’t like me or the private security guy; I know you’re not. You don’t need this life.”

For just a moment, I saw something in Colin’s eyes, something I did not recognize. A flashback, perhaps.

“Oh, I need this life,” he said with an uncharacteristic solemnity in his voice. “I need it more than you can possibly imagine.”

“Welcome to Iraq,” the pilot said, and Colin smiled.

“I’ve got a present for you,” he commented when we reached our hotel deep within the Green Zone. “I know your 28th is still a few days away, but since we’re in Iraq now, I wanted to give it to you early.

I dropped my battered duffel bag. “Oh yeah? What’s that?”

“You’ve got to promise not to laugh at me first though.”

“I’m intrigued,” I replied. “Sure, I won’t laugh.”

Colin dug through his bag until he pulled up a small box. He handed it to me—it looked like a jewelry gift box—and I chuckled,

“Col, I think it might be unprofessional for us to get married, and of all places, Baghdad isn’t really the locale I’d pick anyway. Though I *am* flattered.”

“Screw you, boss,” he grinned back. “Stop being a bitch and just open it.”

I opened the little box and saw a small silver medal on a chain. I removed it from the box and saw it had the engraving of a man’s likeness and in tiny lettering, said, “St. Francis de Salles.”

I looked at Colin questioningly, and he explained, blushing slightly,

“It’s a medal of St. Francis de Salles. He’s, uh, he’s the patron saint of reporters. Catholics believe that you can pray to certain saints for certain things, and they’ll intercede to God for you. The medal I wear under my cross is St. Veronica, the patron saint of photographers. My mom gave it to me for my 16th birthday, right before she passed away. I know you’re not religious, but the patron saint of reporters is supposed to help protect reporters especially, and I figured you of all people could use a little extra protection. It can’t hurt, right?”

Colin offered an embarrassed smile.

“I might not always be there to protect you, so I figured my boy St. Francis might pick up the slack if you ever need it.”

Touched, I replied, “Thank you, Colin. I don’t ever expect a day to come where you won’t have my back, but I, I really appreciate it. I’ll wear it if you don’t think I’ll get smote by a lightning bolt for wearing a religious symbol around my heathen neck.”

Colin shook his head as I gave him a quick hug.

“Nah,” he said with an abrupt solemnity, a smile still on his lips but the light extinguished from his eyes, “I don’t think so. If anyone is going to get smote while we’re in Iraq, it’s going to be me.”

BAGHDAD--Bluish gray smokes swirled around Osama Abdul-rahamen’s face as he exhaled from the hookah, a traditional Middle Eastern water-pipe. Abdul-rahamen shook his head and commented,

"You know, if I ever go home, this is something I'm really going to miss. You can't get shisha like this in the States."

It has been almost two years since he was last home in Dearborn, Mich. These days, the place Abdul-rahamen calls home is a once beautiful structure endlessly pock-marked with bullet holes and half-crumbling from continued explosions in the wealthy Mansur neighborhood of Baghdad. He shares the house with close to two dozen family members.

"My grandfather kept going out and patching up the holes after the carbombs would happen," Abdulrahamen said, "but after awhile, he just got so disheartened watching the home he'd raised all his children in fall to pieces that he had to give up."

Adbul-rahamen, 24, speaks fluent English and claims his Arabic is considerably worse. This is because he was born in Michigan, where his parents had fled in the late 1970s. The Abdul-rahamen family is Sunni, the Muslim sect of the late dictator Saddam Hussein's ruling Baathist Party, but his father was an outspoken university professor who was eventually arrested and tortured for suspected treason against the regime.

When his father, Mohammed, was released from prison after six months, he and his wife Lena knew they had to leave the country as soon as possible. They illegally crossed the border with Turkey, when Lena was three months pregnant with Osama's older sister Fatima, and eventually made their way to the United States. They left behind a large extended family on both sides.

"It was difficult to leave," Mohammed Abdul-rahamen acknowledged, "but we didn't have another choice. The police were watching my every move, and I didn't want my children growing up in such an environment."

The large Iraqi community in Michigan made them feel welcome, according to the elder Abdul-rahamen, and they tried to raise their children—Fatima, Osama, and Baara—as proud of both of their heritage and their new nation.

Abdul-rahamen grew up hearing stories about the family—a mixture of Shiites and Sunnis—in Baghdad, and became pen-pals with his first cousin, Rafed, who was only six months older, when he was in kindergarten.

"My mother always read my letters over before I sent them, to make sure I didn't say anything that could get the family in trouble," Abdul-rahamen said. "I didn't understand it at the time, or why Rafed's letters used to come already opened and marked up [censored by the Baathist government]. I just knew he was my best friend in the world, even though we'd never met."

Abdul-rahamen was 12 when the terrorist attacks on Sept. 11 occurred, and he remembered thinking,

*"Man, that f***** has my name!"*

Adbul-rahamen shook his head in disgust. "Osama" is a perfectly acceptable and respectable name, a name that has been in his family for generations, he said, and he resented his mother's attempts to call him "Oscar" instead after al Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden was named the perpetrator of the attacks.

"I was trying to protect him," Lena Abdul-rahamen said. "It was such a climate of fear, and I was afraid that people might mistreat him because of his name."

Lena said her son refused the name change and clung to his Iraqi roots.

“Just imagine if your first name just happened to be Adolf in 1945—sucks, right?” he said, emphatically banging his hand against the table. “But that shouldn’t make you—or me—any less proud of your name.”

Abdul-rahamen was too young to understand the ramifications of war as the tanks rolled into Baghdad in March 2003. He was thrilled, he said, because he assumed this meant he would finally be able to meet his favorite cousin in person.

Rafed’s father, Firaz Abdul-rahamen, began working for the U.S. military in Baghdad as a linguist in May 2003, and the death threats against he and his family began shortly thereafter.

“My brother,” Mohammed Abdul-rahamen said with a note of pride in his voice, “was born brave. He was never one to back down from anything in his life.”

In early 2004, a nephew of Firaz Abdul-rahamen, a Sunni who had been living in a Shiite area of the capital, was abducted by insurgents. His body was later found dumped in the Tigris River. That day, Mohammed said, his brother packed his family up and began searching for a way to get them out of the country.

He, his wife Mays, and his three children, including Rafed, made their way to Jordan, where they lived for almost a year in a cramped one room apartment in an Amman slum. Firaz finally secured visas to the United States in 2005, and Mays, Rafed, and his two young daughters, Farrah and Amira, arrived in Michigan in the first batch of Iraqi refugees. Firaz, however, turned down his own visa and returned to Baghdad to continue working for the U.S. military.

“Our parents and several brothers and sisters and all of their children and many, many cousins were all still in Baghdad, and Firaz said he could not leave until he was sure everyone was safe. He said he thought things were going to get worse,” Mohammed said.

The American-based branch of the Abdul-rahamen family took in their Iraqi brethren, and Rafed and Osama became immediate friends.

“He was the brother I’d never had,” Abdul-rahamen said. “We did everything together.”

Abdul-rahamen recalled teaching his cousin American slang, joining the high school soccer team together, and learning to drive—sometimes with unfortunate results—side-by-side. They even covered for each other when they went on dates with girls from school, something neither of their conservative mothers would have approved of. The night of their prom, both Lena and Mays Abdul-rahamen believed the cousins were on a fishing trip together.

Rafed quickly became “the most popular guy in school,” according to Abdul-rahamen.

“Most likeable...guy in the universe,” agreed high school friend Charlie Carthy. “God, he had such a great sense of humor—even the teachers had to laugh sometimes.”

According to Abdul-rahamen, Rafed never let occasional displays of racism bother him. Unlike Abdul-rahamen, he would just let comments roll off his back and smile. Shortly before the boys graduated from high school, a fellow student called Rafed “a name for Arabs you probably can’t print in your newspaper.”

“I went to hit the kid, but Rafed grabbed my fist and yanked me away,” Abdul-rahamen said. “I was so pissed, I kept saying, ‘Raf, what the hell, let me go back there

and handle this!’ But do you know what he said in response? He said, ‘O, swinging your fist only proves their point. You’ve got to be the bigger man here.’”

Both were accepted to the University of Michigan’s prestigious Ann Arbor campus and were roommates their freshmen year. Abdul-rahamen was a business major and Rafed was a double-major in philosophy and political science. He wanted to be a lawyer, according to Abdul-rahamen.

“Not only was he better-looking than me, he was smarter and funnier too!” Abdul-rahamen laughed. “It’s a miracle anyone ever paid any attention to me when Raf was around.”

On Sept. 21 of their sophomore year, Firaz Abdul-rahamen was shot by unknown insurgents while on his way to pick up one of his nieces from elementary school. He died shortly after arriving at the hospital. Firaz was the thirteenth member of the family to lose their lives since the way had begun. Mohammed Abdul-rahamen, who had been born with a weak heart, had a severe heart attack the moment he found the news and had to be rushed to the emergency room.

After Abdul-rahamen’s mother called with the news, Rafed immediately began packing his bags, according to Abdul-rahamen. Abdul-rahamen began packing as well, but Rafed grabbed him by the shoulders and demanded to know what he was doing.

“I said, ‘I’m coming with you, duh.’ But he said no, that I couldn’t come, and I told him he couldn’t stop me, and I just kept packing. I mean, how could I let him go back there alone? He was my brother.”

When Abdul-rahamen awoke in the morning, Rafed and his belongings were gone, and there was a note beside the charred remains of Abdul-rahamen’s American passport. Abdul-rahamen pulled a carefully folded piece of notebook paper from his wallet. The note reads in large block letters,

“HA! I bet this will slow you down!”

*Abdul-rahamen shook his head. “That son of a ***** torched my passport, can you believe it? I was ready to kill him I was so angry.”*

Below the large letters, in smaller, neater handwriting, the note continues, “Osama, please don’t try to follow me. I have a duty to continue my father’s work and I need you here to watch over my family. Just as our father once parted ways for the sake of their families, we must be strong like them and do what is required of us. Your duty is to stay here, finish school, and protect our American family. Mine is to protect our Iraqi family. We will meet again, insha-Allah.”

“He was right, of course,” Abdul-rahamen said. “I did need to be home, taking care of our family while my father recovered from his heart attack. But that didn’t make it any easier. I had this idea in my head that if I was with him, he’d be alright.”

Rafed was back in Baghdad a little over a year before he disappeared. For Abdul-rahamen, that was the final straw. He took a leave of absence from school and got on the first flight to Baghdad. He had gotten a new passport by then, in preparation for this moment.

Abdul-rahamen had never been to his native country before, but the grandparents he’d never met welcomed him with open arms, and despite the additional burden he is certain he created, the entire family “rallied around me as if they’d known me since the day I was born.”

Rumors swirled in the neighborhood that Rafed had actually been arrested by the Americans. At first, Abdul-rahamen said he was relieved.

"Better the Americans than the Mahdi Army, right? And I figured since Rafed had a green card, and I was an American citizen, it would be relatively easy to clear up whatever misunderstanding had happened."

Abdul-rahamen, however, soon found that answers would not be easy to come by. He could not, he said, even receive a confirmation or denial that Rafed was in U.S. custody. He was treated with suspicion, he said, as if he himself was a terrorist.

"I just wanted to bang my fists against their doors and scream, 'How could you think my cousin is a terrorist? How could you arrest him? He loves Big Macs and chugs Starbucks and listens to the Dave Matthews Band! His father died for you, and he just came home to help his family!'"

Abdul-rahamen's eyes filled with frustrated tears for a moment, and he turned away to roughly wipe them away. He freely admits that he does not know what his cousin was doing during that year in Baghdad, and other family members say that Rafed had become increasingly disillusioned with American actions in Iraq.

"He was angry at times," his grandmother, Baraa Abdul-rahamen said through her grandson's translation. "He didn't like what he saw happening to his country, and he was still sad about his father."

Abdul-rahamen shook his head at his grandmother and disagreed with her sharply in Arabic. Returning to English, he said heatedly,

"You're telling me that in one year, the man who once told me that fighting isn't the answer became a terrorist, willing to help rip his country apart just because he was angry? I don't believe it. Rafed could no more become a terrorist than I could, and I, Osama Mohammed Abdul-rahamen, am no terrorist."

Abdul-rahamen has been Iraq almost two years, and his face no longer resembles the smiling young man in his high graduation photos. It is lined with weariness and a new bright pink scar runs across his forehead.

"Suicide bomber in the market," he said with a resigned shrug.

He is frustrated and fatigued, but he has no plans of giving up. Abdul-rahamen said he knows his cousin is out there somewhere, and he will not lose hope until he has seen Rafed's body.

"I believe with all my heart that my cousin is alive," he said quietly, his eyes staring at the ground, "but if he is dead, then I will bring him home and give him a proper burial. He deserves that."

Through tireless efforts, he recently got a U.S. refugee visa approved for his cousin Ghadah, who worked as a linguist at Camp Victory outside of Baghdad, and her husband. Half of the Abdul-rahamen family has fled Baghdad, and are scattered throughout the country, in Jordan, and in Lebanon.

His mother calls frequently, he said, to ask when he coming home. Somewhere not too far away, the sound of an explosion shook the walls of the Abdul-rahamen house. Abdul-rahamen did not flinch and looked around his grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins.

"I am home," he said with a small, determined smile.

I inhaled deeply on the hookah and blew several smoke rings. Colin and I were just killing time before our flight back to D.C. Ed had tracked down a young politician who, according to Ed, had a compelling story.

“I hate D.C.,” Colin sighed. “Too many suits. Do we have to go?”

I chuckled. “Yeah, I think so, dude. Besides, you’re not the one who was just there. I was in D.C. only a month ago; it’s been three months since you were back there.”

He took the hookah from me and attempted—and failed, as always—to blow a smoke ring.

“Purse your lips,” I instructed, scrolling through my recent emails on my Blackberry, “like you’re going to kiss someone.”

I stopped when I reached an unread one from an unfamiliar email address.

TO: Kristin_wilson@washpost.com

FROM: D.P.Kane@gmail.com

SUBJ: Your articles

Hi Kristin,

I’m sure you don’t remember me, but this is Diana Kane. I know it’s been years and years, but we were arrested together back in college, when you were a reporter for UMD’s paper. I was the junior from AU, and you interviewed me while my boyfriend was being arrested. I’ve been reading your series on the “Iraq Generation,” and they’re really, really good. Anyway, you probably don’t need my help or anything like that, but if you want another good story, I know someone you could cover. Her name is Jamie Nguyen, and she’s pretty interesting. Her grandmother was a refugee from the Vietnam War—her grandfather died in an NVA prison camp—and she was really involved in the anti-Iraq war movement. She was arrested a ton of times, and eventually she got fed up and left the country. She’s worked in a few refugee camps for Iraqis in Jordan and Lebanon, and I believe she also got involved with Palestinian issues there for awhile. She’s living in Paris right now, doing something with dissident media (not entirely what though, sorry!). I’m sure she’d love to talk to you, if you’re interested. Her cell is 001-33-171-202-6655 and her email address is nguyen.j@gmail.com. Just say you’re a friend of mine—it’s been a while since we’ve talked, but she’ll remember me from my protester days. I work for a little NGO focusing indigenous rights in Latin America now, but it’s been awhile since I’ve been arrested, haha. I got married last spring (NOT to the idiot I went to jail with!) and my first baby is due in three months, can you believe it? Anyway, I hope all is going spectacular with you, and you now have my email address if there’s anything else I can do for you! -----Diana

I looked up at Colin, still concentrating hard his smoke ring failures, which looked more like cumulus clouds than anything else, and asked casually,

“So, remember how you didn’t want to go back to D.C.? How do you feel about Paris instead?”

Ch. 24

Sixteen hours later, we had landed in Paris, which, ironically, despite the many times I’d had layovers at DeGaulle or Orly, I’d never seen beyond airport terminals and tarmacs.

“So, what’s this chick doing in Paris again?” Colin asked as we collected our belongings from baggage claims.

“Don’t know—that’s what we’re here to find out, isn’t it?”

We reached the exit, and stepped outside onto Parisian soil. Colin looked around, grinned, and said,

“*Hello*, Europe. Let’s go get excessively drunk.”

“Keep it up,” I threatened Colin several hours and entirely too many drinks later, “and I will kick your ass.”

He chuckled drunkenly as we fumbled for the keys to our hotel room and lightly slapped my butt again.

“I will keep smacking your ass until you find those keys, woman.”

“Christ, it’s nice to be in Europe where we can stumble around trashed like fucking morons without getting shot, huh?” I said cheerfully. “It’s been too long since we’ve been this drunk!”

For the strong reputation we both had acquired as alcoholics, neither Colin nor I usually got actually drunk while on assignment. We might need a few drinks to sleep, in Colin’s case, or in mine, to write the story, but we both valued our respective craft too much to risk not performing at our best. That, and the Middle East was not exactly what one could call an alcohol-friendly location.

“Yeah,” he agreed as he finally located the keys in my jacket pocket, “and I’m liking Europe for all the cleavage I’ve gotten to see! God, French women are gorgeous, eh? Even the ugly ones sure beat burqas! Hell, even on your worst day, Kris, you beat the *abaya*!”

I turned around to hit him, but he smoothly deflected my fist and I found myself lying on the floor.

“What the fuck...?” I muttered as he helped me up. “How the hell did you do that? Where the fuck did you learn ninja moves?”

Colin laughed. “Come here; I’ll show you.”

And I found myself lying on the floor again, although without any pain. He was somehow able to flip me onto the ground so quickly and gently that I didn’t even feel it—although, I considered, the alcohol in my bloodstream may have contributed. By the fourth time Colin went to flip me, I thought I’d found a weakness and failed my arms towards his thighs. I did successfully throw him off-balance and he stumbled backwards a step or two, but on the other hand, I also smashed hard into the floor this time. My body abruptly reminded me that I had once almost destroyed it, and I arched my back in pain.

“*Fuck*,” I groaned.

Colin went to help me up, but I held my hand up, and he instead settled down beside my prone form on the dirty carpet.

“Why did you do that?” he complained, rubbing his thigh. “You wouldn’t have gotten hurt if you hadn’t flailed around like that! Did I really hurt you?”

“The car accident,” I muttered, staring at the ceiling. “I broke some things in my back.”

“Oh Jesus,” Colin said, now looking concerned through his drunkenness, “I forgot about that! Man, I’m sorry. Come on, I’ll help you up; this hard floor can’t be helping.”

“No, no, no.” I shook my head. “I don’t want to get up yet.”

Colin stood and looked down at me, frowning.

“Fine then.”

Then he bent down and picked me up. Before I could form the words to protest, I was lying on the bed.

“You are,” I giggled, “stronger than I anticipated. Especially for such a beanpole.”

“Hey now,” Colin laughed, messing up my hair with one hand as he sat down on the bed beside me. “I am *not* a beanpole! I’ll have you know I have one hell of a six-pack.”

“Bullshit! I’ll believe *that* when I see it.”

“Fine, boss, I’ll prove it.” Colin pulled himself to his knees and yanked off his shirt and then his tee-shirt underneath. “See?” He drummed on his bone-white stomach. “All Colin McNalty, baby.”

“You’re not bad,” I admitted with a small grin.

He wasn’t actually exaggerating; for such a skinny guy, he was incredibly well-defined, albeit milk white where he wasn’t coated in freckles. The gold crucifix around his neck, usually hidden under his shirt, glowed against his pale skin, and he had several more tattoos than I expected, though I couldn’t focus my drunken eyesight enough to discern any of them.

“Not bad? *Not bad?* Woman, I was going to give you a backrub to make up for your hurting yourself on the floor, but not now. Now you’ve gone and hurt my feelings.”

He pretended to pout, and I reached over and patted his knee.

“If I pretend-apologize, can I still get that back rub?”

Colin laughed. “Oh, sure, what the hell. I’m a sucker for reasonably attractive blondes. Roll over.”

I rolled over onto my stomach and didn’t think to complain, “Reasonably attractive? Fuck you!” until several moments later.

Colin just laughed and kept kneading the muscles in my back. He heard my sharp inhale as he got to the ruined muscles in my left shoulder and neck.

“Oh damn, boss,” he commented. “These muscles are all kinds of fucked. They always this tensed up?”

“Mhmm...”

“You should’ve gotten this checked out years ago. I can probably loosen up some of these knots, but since they’ve been like this for so long, it’ll hurt, probably a lot, and I don’t want to risk fucking up your back more when I’m drunk. I’ll work more on ya sober, so I’ll just go easy here tonight, alright? It should still feel somewhat better though, so let me know if I’m hurting you.”

He didn’t wait for a response, and to my great surprise, for the first time in years, the constant pain in my back felt like it was easing slightly.

“Col, where did you learn to give backrubs?”

He chuckled softly. "You're going to laugh at me."

"No, I won't. Tell me."

"My mom, before she died, had really bad arthritis, from the time I was a little kid. She was always hurting, but her neck was always the worst. And ya know, my dad was never home...so I used to rub her neck for her every night when she got home from work. Otherwise, she wouldn't be able to sleep at night; the pain would keep her up."

"Aw, Colin."

I rolled onto my side and pulled him down beside me.

"That's one of the sweetest things I've ever heard."

He smiled, his breath on my cheek. "Yeah, I have these occasional moments."

I looked at him, noting he had really pretty golden flecks in his green eyes. Then I slid my arm around his neck, pulled him closer, and kissed him for a long moment. We didn't break away for several minutes, but he didn't attempt to move any further either.

"*Fuck*, boss," he whispered shakily. "I don't know..."

I ran my hand across his chest. "Why not? We've known each other for a long time, we're good friends, we're both adults...I'm not very sexy though, I know."

Colin looked deeply perturbed by this and placed his forefingers to my lips. "Shut up. You're gorgeous. I couldn't believe what a beautiful woman I was gonna get to work with on the first day I met you in Jerusalem—I was worried I wasn't going to be able to be professional around you! No, it's because you're really drunk."

"So are you."

"My being drunk is different. I don't want to take advantage of you."

"You wouldn't be..."

Then he shook his head, trying to think clearly, and tried to explain, "It's not just 'cause of the alcohol."

"Then what is it?"

He kissed the top of my head platonically.

"Explaining that to you," he said softly, "would infinitely complicate both our professional and platonic relationship. Now, we both need to go to sleep before we do anything we'll regret tomorrow."

When I awoke, Colin was gone and the covers were carefully tucked around me. I sat up, my throbbing head. I pulled my knees up to my chest and rested my forehead against them, trying not to groan out loud and wondering where Colin had disappeared to. Did he not want to face me? Maybe he didn't respect me anymore...*God* I was embarrassed, more mortified than I could ever remember being.

"Hey boss," Colin's voice greeted cheerfully, "you gonna live?"

I hadn't heard him come in, and realized I'd dozed off sitting up with my head on my knees. With considerable effort, I picked my head up a few inches and smelled coffee.

"Fucking kill me," I grumbled, trying to hide my shame with complaints. "Why are you never fucking hungover? It's not fair."

Colin laughed and leaned against the bed's headboard beside me.

"Take this," he said. "Fresh coffee. I got you a croissant too, but you might want to drink the coffee first. You're going to have to sit up to drink the coffee, as much as I'm sure that's going to suck. And remember, boss, you're two whole years older than me—"

my genetics have forestalled the hangovers, but I'm sure even being Irish isn't going to save me forever. Come talk to me in two years, and it might be a different story."

I pulled myself up a little bit, grimacing at the increased pain in my skull, and took the coffee.

"Come 'ere."

Colin put his arms around my waist and pulled me back against his chest, and I rested my head against his collarbone.

"I moved the interview you had scheduled today until tomorrow morning—figured you wouldn't be up to it."

"You're a saint," I murmured, gulping the strong coffee down quickly. "God, I fucking hate coffee."

He chuckled. "I think my religion might beg to differ on my sainthood. For someone who hates coffee, you sure chugged that pretty damn quickly. Here, eat some scone. It's good."

I shook my head and closed my eyes. "Ugh. No thanks. I'm not hungry."

Colin tried to press the pastry into my hand anyway.

"Come on, have a couple bites at least."

I tucked my hands under the sheets to avoid the food, and he sighed.

"You're too fucking thin, Kris. You need to eat more."

"I am not," I protested. "I'm just fucking hungover."

He responded by pressing his hands into my ribs.

"I am literally counting your ribs right now, boss."

I opened my mouth to protest—although what I could say in my defense was still undetermined—but before I could, Colin was poking my hips.

"And look, here's Kristin's hip bones!"

"Go to hell," I snapped, irritated that I suspected he was trying to punish me for last night. After a moment, I realized that thought was ludicrous, and said, "Never mind. I'm sorry."

There was a long pause before Colin shook his head. "Don't be stupid."

He touched my hair. "I'm not trying to be mean, Kris. I'm just worried about you."

"Nothing to be worried about. I'm fine, I promise." I chewed my lip and asked quietly without looking at him, "So...Colin...do we, uh, need to talk about this?"

"About last night?"

I nodded, shocked by how fast my heart was beating as I waited for his response.

"I don't think," he said carefully, "that we should get in the habit of sleeping together. We do spend practically every waking moment together, so this was bound to happen at some point, right? I don't know about you, but I feel closer to you than, well, just about anyone else in the world, and I don't want to risk that. That relationship is a hundred thousand times more important to me than a sexual one."

He looked at me, and I nodded, amused that he was acting like we'd actually slept together, and not that I tried and he refused me. A true gentleman, I mused to myself.

"Yeah," I agreed softly. "You're right. I, I completely agree."

Colin grinned. "Good. We can start being professional again tomorrow. For now, move over a bit. I need a nap, and your bed is a lot more comfortable than mine."

My Blackberry's ringing woke Colin up before me, and by the time I oriented myself enough to figure out what was going on, Colin was already speaking to whoever was on the other end.

"Yes, sir. She's right here. Hang on one second."

Colin looked at me and mouthed, "Ed," which wasn't necessary; I'd already figured that out from Colin's use of "sir," a habit he blamed his father for and never could quite kick. I propped myself up on one elbow and took the phone.

"Ed? It's me. What's up?" I did some quick mental math and realized it was 3 a.m. in D.C.

"Hi, Kristin. Listen, we need you and Colin to take a break from your feature writing. There's a bit of a crisis that the Post needs you to cover for a few days."

"Sure thing, Ed. Just give me the where and the what."

"The what is an impending coup, and the possibility of the beginning of some ethnic cleansing. The where is Burundi."

"Burundi as in that country in Africa?" I asked, startled.

"One and the same."

"I don't speak---what language do they speak there, anyway? Fuck, Ed, I don't know anything about Africa. Like, I can count on one hand the number of facts I can name you about the entire continent, let alone Burundi in particular. I couldn't find it on a map if you put a gun to my head."

"Welcome to the new nature of foreign correspondence," Ed said grimly. "You've been unusually lucky so far in your career, Kristin; you've been able to focus on a region where you not only spoke the language, but were also comfortable with the culture and people. The very vast majority of reporters can't say that."

"So count my blessings and get my Middle Eastern ass to Africa, is that what you're telling me?"

"Essentially, yes. You're the closest Post reporter to the country, and the AP and the Times already have people there. So get yourselves on a plane as soon as possible."

"We'll be on the first available flight. Just out of pure curiosity, Ed, how dicey is this looking? Are we walking into machete-waving mobs, or what?"

"No one really knows much yet," he replied. "That's why we're sending you to find out. Stay in the capital, don't go anywhere without a translator or guide, and remember that Africa is not the Middle East."

"Awesome, Ed, thanks for that," I said dryly.

"Just get in, file your story, and get out," he said. "No one's expecting much---this is Africa, in a country most Americans have never heard of. It's certainly not going to sell any papers, so don't waste too much time there."

"Alright, I'll call you when we land in---in whatever the fuck Burundi's airport is called."

I hung up the phone and looked at Colin. "Hope you brought sunscreen, kid," I told him, "because we're headed to Africa."

An hour later, we were in Charles de Gaulle International Airport, awaiting our flight to Bujumbura International Airport, Bujumbura apparently being the capital city of Burundi, which Google told me was located in West Africa and bordered by Rwanda, Tanzania and the Democratic Republic of Congo. You learn something new every day, I

thought dryly. My Blackberry buzzed and I swore at it. The constant calls from my family that I refused to answer were beginning to fray even my nerves a bit. Colin took the phone from me, sensing my desire to violently throw it across the airport waiting room.

“Hey, you actually might want to answer this one,” he said, handing the phone back to me. “It says it’s Heather.”

Over the course of the last six weeks, Heather had been shuttling back and forth between North Carolina and D.C. She had given Darren the divorce papers within a few days of Artie’s arrival at the hospital. Darren had taken the news well; he had been surprised, but not angry or really even upset. It’s hard, I supposed, to get angry at the loss of something you never really had in the first place. It would be a very amicable divorce, and he had already told her that he would pay as much child support as needed and wouldn’t drag her into a messy custody battle. I had my money on his being remarried to another pretty blonde within the year. Artie, however, was completely unaware of this development, and was talking about finding a way to stay in the Army. I answered the phone.

“Hey Heather, what’s up? How’s Artie doing, how are you doing?”

“Hi, Kristin. We’re both doing well. Artie’s prosthetic leg arrived yesterday, and you should’ve seen him! He did so well in physical therapy, and he was beaming the whole time. He said it felt great to be on his feet again, and he’s already got a whole host of amputee jokes he loves to tell, can you believe it?”

I smiled. “I’m not surprised at all. And how are you doing?”

“Well, that’s actually what I called to tell you about. Are you busy?”

I glanced at the clock on the wall. “Well, not currently, but I am getting on a plane to fucking Bujumbura in twenty minutes. So I’ve got a bit of time.”

“Where the hell is that?”

“Excellent question. Allegedly it’s in Burundi, which I’m told is in Africa. I’ll confirm that for you when I land.”

Heather laughed. “Ok, I’ll make it quick then. I told Artie about my divorce!”

I held my breath. “And?”

I could almost see the ear-to-ear smile on Heather’s face several thousand miles and an ocean away as she responded,

“Well, I told him by saying I had some important papers for him. Then I just handed the divorce papers to him. You should’ve seen his face, Kristin! He just kept shaking his head like he’d seen a miracle happen. Then he took off his dog tags and handed them to me, and he said he knew they were shitty engagement ring, but that he would get me a real one as soon as he was mobile, and that I should hang onto them as a symbol of his promise to get out of the Army as soon as he could, so he could build a life for me *and* my kids! You remember how I told you he was talking about staying in the Army because he didn’t have anything out in the civilian world for him? And Con and Maddie love him—they’ve met him a bunch of times before, but I brought them up last weekend with me, and he was so good with them. He had them laughing the whole time. Oh my God, Kristin, I’m so happy! I didn’t know I could *be* this happy!”

I grinned as well. “I’m thrilled, Heath, for both of you. Pass along my congrats to Artie as well—soooo, when’s the wedding? Better yet, when’s the honeymoon?”

Heather giggled in a way I hadn't heard her laugh in years. "Oh, gosh, Kristin, we haven't gotten that far yet! It'll be a small wedding, of course—after all, I'm hardly a virginal bride—but do you think I could still wear white? Would that be tacky? How about off-white, do you think that would be better? I think he'd probably like to get married in Georgia, on his base, because that's where all his friends are, and that's fine, since I'd only be inviting a few people from our area, and you wouldn't mind flying to Atlanta, right? Oh, and Maddie can be the flower girl and Con be the ring-bearer! I didn't have either of those at my first wedding—Darren and I didn't have any nieces or nephews or friends with kids the right age at the time..."

I happily listened to Heather babble on about her and Artie's future together for the next eighteen and a half minutes. Then I had to gently, reluctantly, cut her off.

"I've got to get going, hon, because my plane leaves in exactly two and a half minutes, and my boss will be very angry if I miss my flight because I was having girl talk."

Heather laughed. "I'm sorry, Kris, prattling on like that without even asking how things are with you! Send me an email soon, ok?"

"Will do." I glanced at Colin, who appeared to be asleep with his iPod headphones on, and stepped a few feet away. "Heather, I've just got one quick question for you, and I need you to answer it without asking me any questions about it, ok? Does he love her?"

Heather didn't need to ask the who of my "he and her," and responded slowly, "Yeah. He, uh, he's had a ring burning a hole in his pocket for the last six months, but... he's never actually followed through with it."

"Are you sure? Because I don't think he ever loved Melissa...and I don't want what I'm going to say next to be a mistake."

"No, I know what you're saying about Melissa, and I think you're right. But Casey is different."

I took a deep breath, the kind my body was used to taking before some death-defying stunt, and said quickly, before I could change my mind,

"Tell him to ask her."

"Kristin...honey, are you sure?" Heather's tone suggested that she knew much more than she'd ever let on, and I nodded, forgetting she couldn't see me.

"Yes," I said, more firmly this time. "I'm sure. Don't say anything about me; just say you think he should ask. He'll trust your advice."

"Alright," Heather said quietly. "I can do that for you."

I walked back to Colin after we'd hung up, slightly choked up. He was now standing, shouldering both our bags.

"You alright?" he questioned, noting the few unshed tears glimmering in my eyes.

I smiled and was surprised to find I didn't have to force it.

"Yeah," I said, realizing as the words came from my lips that I wasn't lying.

"Yeah, I think I am."

Ch. 25

"Well," I sighed as I watched 'home' flash up on my Blackberry's screen, "at least it's good to find out that I still get service in fucking Bujumbura."

"Your family again? Not going to answer it?" Colin asked.

I shook my head silently as the call went through to voicemail. I called my voicemail to delete the message, but hearing my father's voice surprised me enough that I paused for a moment. All the pleading calls had been mostly from my mother, with a few thrown in from Jimmy, and even one from Sue, asking me to reconsider "for Jimmy's sake." The frequency, fortunately enough, had slowed up a bit over the last six weeks. I found myself listening to my father's message against my will, the sad note in his hesitant voice softening my heart for a moment. I'd never heard my father sound sad before.

"Hi Kristin, it's me, your dad. I, uh, know you're not answering your phone lately, and I understand why you're angry. We're, uh, pretty worried about you, so I really wish you'd at least send an email and let us know you're ok. But, again, I understand that you're angry, and you have a right to be. We handled that situation back home, well, pretty poorly. I just called to, uh, well, I wanted to tell you a little story, so I hope you don't delete this message without listening. I don't think you ever knew this, because your grandmom died before you were born, and I've never talked about, but, uh, I had an older brother. His name was Todd, and he was eight years older than me, so he really came of age during the '60s. He owned a motorcycle, and I, well, I thought he was pretty much the coolest person in the universe. You know how your grandfather died when I was just a toddler, so Todd was really my role model growing up.

"Todd, well, Todd was involved in everything the '60s had to offer. He was a hippie with long hair for a little while, rode in this bright green van across the country with some of his friends, all the way to California, and they stopped at every war protest they could find along the way. He would call to tell us that he had stood toe-to-toe with armed National Guardsmen and riot police, and that he had told them jokes to try and get them to laugh beneath their helmets. Then he got involved in the civil rights movement and headed South to march with the black people in Alabama and Mississippi. He got hurt a few times, he faced down water cannons and police dogs, and he got arrested several times, but he kept saying how great it was. And everyone thought he was such an idealist, but looking back, I think he was just bored, and saw a lot of opportunities for excitement. The '60s were a great time for, uh, adventure-seekers.

"After Tet—you know, the offensive by the North Vietnamese during the war—he and I were watching the coverage on our little black and white television set, and he looked over at me and said, 'Well now, doesn't that look interesting, Lou?' A few days later, he disappeared again, and my mom and I just assumed he'd headed back down South. But then, a few months later, we got a letter from him from Vietnam. He'd enlisted in the Marines as an infantryman without telling anybody, can you believe it? Todd said he'd fought two wars on the home front, and he figured that it was time to fight one somewhere else. His letters home, well, they were infrequent—unlike you, Kristin, he was never much of a writer—but when they did come, they implied he was having the time of his life. He reenlisted after his first tour without ever coming home, and halfway through his second tour, the uniformed officer and chaplain showed up at our door. My mother fainted. The Huey he had been flying in had been shot down over enemy territory, but they couldn't find his body among the wreckage. He was declared missing in action. His name is on the Vietnam Wall, still listed as MIA. The next time you come home, you should go look for Todd James Wilson on it. I like to think he's still out there

somewhere, still having adventures and laughing that everyone thinks he's dead." There was a long pause, and I almost thought my father was trying to hold back tears.

"Looking back, Kristin, Todd was happy. He didn't lead the kind of life that most people did, but he loved the life he had. I didn't want to admit this for many years, but I think he was a lot like you, and like Tyler, and for the longest time now, I've been trying to figure out why he was so much happier being the way he was than my children are. After all, it looks like this is something that runs in the family. Then I, uh, realized that my mother never restricted him. I think she realized early on that he wasn't a typical child, and he never had to sneak around, never had to lie, never had feel that he had to protect our mother or me. He just lived the way he wanted and my mother—and me too, at the time—was always happy that her baby was happy. And I realize now that your mother and I, we've never given you that kind of relief. You've never been allowed any peace, because we've always wanted something different for you. I'm sorry for that, I really am. I just...I really missed my big brother growing up, Kristin, and I never wanted to risk losing you too. Your family just loves you too much. Please know that everything we've ever done—including our badly botched intervention—has been out of love. I'm going to speak to Tyler privately and see if the meds are really what he wants, and I swear that if you can forgive us, give us a second chance, things will be different. We've always loved you, but I promise that from now on, we'll do a better job of showing that we do love you for exactly who you are."

My father exhaled slowly, and commented lightly, "Well, after that rather long, tedious voicemail, I'm sure you're tired of hearing my voice, so I'll let you go. I'm sure you've got important things to do. I hope you're keeping safe, and I, I love you."

Then the message ended.

I hit the "save" key on my Blackberry and slowly took the phone from my ear.

"Damn," Colin remarked, "what was that, the longest voicemail in the history of the universe?"

"My dad," I responded quietly, "telling me he loved me, and apologizing, and telling me he had a brother I never knew about who was just liked me and disappeared, was probably killed, in 'Nam. He sounded so unhappy." I shook my head in bewilderment. "I don't think I've ever heard my father sound like that."

"Well, they love you. We know that, Kris," Colin said. "It's never been a matter of whether they did or not, just a matter of understanding you. So what are you going to do? Are you going to call him back?"

I shrugged helplessly. "I don't know," I admitted.

I looked at Colin pleadingly. "

What do you think? Aren't they better off without me in the long run? I mean, sure, right now, they're upset, but in a year or two, when they've gotten used to my being gone, won't that be better? They won't have to worry anymore..."

Colin threw an arm loosely around my shoulders for a moment. "Tell me, Kris, did your father still sound upset about his brother?"

I heard my father's mournful voice in my mind and reluctantly nodded.

"And what was that, fifty years ago? There's your answer right there, boss."

"Aw, fuck," I said without any inflection. "You're probably right. I'll call them after this assignment. Right now, I need my head in the game."

I'd done my homework on the flight over, and we were looking at quite the situation. Burundi had been the battleground for a vicious and bloody civil war from 1993 until 2006. The majority of the population was of the Hutu tribe, but before 2006, the minority Tutsis had run the country, and the tribes and their varying factions had waged a brutal campaign against each other throughout the country. The government since the signing of peace deals had been governed by the Hutu CNDD-FDD, which had been a side in the war, but had converted itself into a political party and won free elections. The final group to sign the peace accords, the FNL, was also Hutu, but a rival of the CNDD-FDD, and the FNL was rumored to still be training in the lawless Democratic Republic of Congo, whose own decades-long civil war was so hopelessly ingrained in the land that it was more of a way of life than anything else. Members of the Interahamwe, the extremist Hutus who had been responsible for neighboring Rwanda's 1994 genocide of the Tutsis, were also said to be training side-by-side with the FNL.

Burundi's peace since the end of the war had remained very fragile and its development devastatingly slow, with occasional outbreaks of ethnic violence. And now, the FNL had crossed the DRC border and was headed for Bujumbura, with all intentions of forcibly removing the CNDD from power—violently, it was assumed—and instating their own military leadership.

"Wait, wait, wait," Colin interrupted my history lesson. "The government is Hutu, right?"

I nodded and he said, "But the rebels are Hutu too, right? Then who are they killing, if everyone involved is Hutu?"

"The Tutsi minority, it appears."

"Uh, why? The government is Hutu; what the hell do the Tutsis have to do with anything?"

I shrugged. "Seems ancient rivalries die hard, and the FNL sees an opportunity to kill some old enemies along the way."

As the FNL determinedly marched through the African bush towards Bujumbura, rumor had it that they were burning any Tutsi or ethnically mixed village that had the misfortune of being in their way. Everyone, Hutu and Tutsi alike, was fleeing into the capital in mass numbers in terror, and survivors were reporting that the rebels were cutting a path of destruction so severe that they leaving piles of bodies and rivers of blood in their wake. But no one had confirmed any of this, and the FNL army was suspected to be only a day or two away from reaching the city. The government's troops had been consolidated in and around the city, but they were ill-equipped, ill-trained, and most of all, frightened. It was almost certain that the government would fall without international support, and the FNL had refused peace talks. The chaos that would ensue promised to be quite the bloodbath, and media outlets were already pulling their people out right and left.

Within three days, I'd already filed my standard issue situational stories to Ed, and the Post gave us the clearance to hop on the next plane. After all, what happened here didn't matter to our readers. There was little chance that a machete-waving tribesman was going to hijack an airliner and plow it into any American building, so why the hell should anyone care what the body count was? Life means less here, right?

“I was thinking,” Colin commented as we packed our bags. Our flight left in the morning. “I was thinking that there’s more of a story to be written.”

I glanced over at him. “Oh yeah?”

“Yeah,” he nodded firmly, “out there, in the bush, in those villages everyone is saying are burning.”

I stopped packing for a moment and asked, “Col, are you suggesting we leave the city and go hunting for evidence of the rebels’ misdeeds?”

He met my eyes and grinned. “I’m game if you are, boss. We haven’t had any near death experiences lately, right?”

I grinned back, my pulse already quickening at the prospect. “Let’s do it.”

“You want do *what*?” our translator and guide demanded when we explained our idea. “You want go *where*?”

Colin gestured broadly with his hand towards the city’s perimeter, where the untamed wilderness lay just beyond. “Out there, my friend.”

“I not like,” he said, shaking his head. “Out there is bad people. Out there is war.”

“The war is on its way here,” Colin responded. “Don’t you want the world to know what the bad people are really like?”

Our guide considered this for a moment, his brow furrowed and his face conflicted. I, having less faith in humanity than Colin, pulled a wad of bills from my wallet silently and waited for the guide to notice. He eyed the money—more than he would make in several months—and reconsidered the proposition. Then he hopped into the rented jeep and started the engine.

“Money speaks the same language,” I chuckled, “in Africa that it does in D.C.”

Colin shook his head amicably. “I think he would’ve done it anyway, if you’d given him another moment to think about it.”

“Idealist.”

“Cynic.”

We began passing a seemingly endless throng of people headed into the city. They were dirty, exhausted, and shell-shocked; the hopelessness that seemed to arise from them, men, women, and children alike, was almost more suffocating than the cloud of dust that their thousands of feet cast into the sky. Colin snapped photos with an unusual air of solemnity, and I, in the back seat, lit a cigarette contemplatively. I’d never seen anything like this in the Middle East. Ed’s last words to me rang in my ears:

No one is expecting much—this is Africa...

As we got farther and farther from the capital, the exodus thinned; the more miles we put between us and the city, the slimmer the chance was that the villagers out here would make it to the city’s relative safety before the rebels overtook them. We stopped periodically and interviewed people, took photographs, and heard enough of the horror from witnesses—some wearing bloody bandages—to confirm the rumors. The rebel army was trying to ethnically cleanse the Tutsis again, and any Hutu they suspected of being a CNDD supporter, and from the sound of things, they were doing a good job of it.

“I’ve got enough to write a pretty good story,” I told Colin as he walked towards me. “You ready to head back? We go any farther, and we’re not going to make it back to the city before nightfall. I don’t think it’s an awesome idea to chance running into the

first push of the rebels, because I don't think they'd be all that respectful of our press badges."

Colin jerked his thumb at the women he'd just been photographing.

"They said there's an AIDS orphanage about 30 miles from here that has both Tutsi and Hutu kids, and they're not leaving."

"No? Why not? That's just a little bit suicidal, isn't it?"

Colin shrugged. "I don't know. Maybe we should go find out, huh?"

I considered the fact that another 30 miles was going to significantly reduce our chance of making it back to the capital and grinned.

"Ed is going to kill us for missing this flight."

Our guide put up quite the fight against this idea when we presented it to him, but another wad of bills convinced him to take us "just a bit farther."

Almost an hour later, after traveling slowly over a bumpy and potholed path that barely constituted a highway, we pulled up to the orphanage, comprised of several small, ramshackle yet tidy buildings. Several small children kicked a soccer ball around out front, and ran to meet our jeep excitedly. They were clearly unafraid of strangers and grinned widely at us. Colin dug through his bag to find his stash of candy, and while he was preoccupied with them, I went to speak with the older man who had walked outside at the commotion. He shook my hand after I explained who I was and introduced himself as Nduwimana, the director of the Tugiramahoro Orphanage. His English was flawless and his handshake was firm. The name of the orphanage, he explained with a quiet sorrow in his voice, meant, "let's have peace."

"With all due respect, why aren't you leaving? Don't you know the rebels are on the way, and you're right in their path here?" I asked.

He sighed and replied quietly, "Yes, I know. But we have only two staff members other than myself right now, and 41 children ranging in age from six months to fifteen years. We are over a hundred miles from the capital, and we only have a single jeep—I'm sure you can see our predicament."

"You'll never make it," I said slowly, watching Colin kick the soccer ball to a laughing little boy.

The director nodded, and I questioned, "Well, what are you going to do? You can't be planning to just sit here and wait for them to show up, right?"

"No, no. We're going to head for the border. Rwanda is only 15 miles away, through the bush. We stand a chance of making it there, if we stay off the main roads and move quickly. The government of Rwanda is Tutsi, and if we can get in, we'll be safe there. The question is whether the border will be open. People are saying that in many places, the guards are keeping it closed; they don't want to risk destabilizing their own country. They have not forgotten the horror the Interahamwe inflicted on their own country. So if we get to the border and it's closed..."

"You'll be trapped," I finished. "I see the problem."

He closed his eyes for a moment, and when he reopened them, he said very quietly, "I'm not a stupid man. I know we have a very slim chance of even making it to the border. I don't expect that we will survive this."

He looked at the children playing soccer, oblivious to the danger moving swiftly towards them, and continued, "But, for the children, I feel it's better to run and die on our

feet than sit here and wait to be executed. A bullet to the back is at least a gentler death than a machete. If you'll excuse me, I must finish our preparations. You and your friend should head back to the city immediately."

The director went back inside and I called Colin over. He jogged over, his face red from his game and a little boy on his back.

"Kris, I'd like you to meet David Beckham."

I looked at the boy, probably about five or six, and chuckled. "David Beckham, eh?"

Colin grinned and put his new friend gently down on the ground. "That's how he introduced himself. This kid is quite the soccer master, so who am I to question?"

I knelt down and extended my hand to the boy, who had huge brown eyes and an even bigger smile. He was almost impossibly cute, and I said,

"Nice to meet you, Mr. Beckham."

He touched my hand and then ducked behind Colin, giggling. I stood up and said quietly,

"Colin, I need to talk to you."

He caught the serious tone, and sent a protesting David Beckham back to the other boys. I quickly outlined the situation, and Colin took a slow, deep breath when I'd finished.

"Well, shit," was all he said for a long moment. He looked over at the soccer-playing group, then at the gaggle of young girls who were peering from one of the buildings at us and shyly giggling every time he made eye contact with them. Then my photographer straightened up and said decisively in a voice I didn't quite recognize, "Ok, here's what we're going to do. You and the guide are going to take the weakest and youngest kids back with you to the city in the jeep—they're small, and I won't be there, so you can probably fit six or seven if you have one or two on your lap. Then—"

"Wait, wait," I interrupted, "back up. Where the hell are *you* going to be?"

Colin looked at me as if the answer should be apparent. "With the director and the rest of the kids, of course. I'm going to help them get to the border."

"You're going to do *what*?" I almost stuttered. "Are you out of your mind? That's fucking suicide, Colin, and I absolutely refuse to let you do that."

Colin smiled and reached over to affectionately mess up my hair. "I'm afraid, boss," he said without any animosity, "that you don't have a say in this. This is something that I need to do."

"Bullshit," I challenged, vehemently shaking my head. "This is ludicrous, Colin, friggin' ludicrous."

"Kristin, I can't just leave them here to die."

"You can't stop it. Staying here and dying with them won't solve anything. Martyrdom isn't all it's cracked up to be, Colin."

I felt myself getting panicky at the thought of Colin not coming back with me, and even more panicky at the realization that he was deadly serious. I wasn't going to be able to stop him. I gritted my teeth to stop myself from beginning to hyperventilate.

He exhaled heavily and said, "Kristin, there's a lot of things you don't know about me. I'm not, uh, the saint you think I am. I have watched evil committed and done nothing. I swore to myself after that day that I would never allow that to happen again,

that I would never stand by silently as a witness to an atrocity ever again, and that's why I can't leave these kids. I need to do this."

"Colin, what are you talking about?" I pleaded. "Please tell me what's going on. You're, you're really scaring me, dude."

Colin swallowed and said, "I'm sorry, Kristin. I'm not trying to scare you. I just need you to understand."

"Then explain it to me. I'm not just leaving you here without a reason; I will not, I cannot, do that, Colin."

He lit a cigarette and took a deep drag. When he exhaled the smoke, he said,

"It's not a nice story. It's not something I'd want you to remember me by."

After a long pause, he continued at a rapid fire pace, "I was a Marine, in the reserves. I joined up right after I graduated from high school, and figures, I made infantry. I didn't do it because I wanted to, but Christ, my father served his whole goddamn career there, saw action in the first Gulf War and Bosnia—after my mom was gone, it's not like I had much of a choice. He thought photography was for pussies, and I couldn't pay for college on my own, and hell, he was my dad—I wanted him to be proud. And I hated it, Kris, hated it so goddamn much. I was never meant for the military life. Every night I prayed I wouldn't get called up. And when I got my orders, my sophomore year of college, when my unit got called up for Iraq, I changed my prayers. Instead I started praying that I'd get cancer or something so I wouldn't have to go. It wasn't because I was afraid—you know I'm no coward—but because I hated the idea of war. I was afraid of what I might become. I didn't want to become my father.

"But I didn't get cancer or hit by a bus, and off we went to Anbar. I became kind of the unit's de facto photographer, and the Leatherneck—the Corps' magazine—picked up a bunch of my photos, actually. Anbar was a dicey mess back then—this was before the Reawakening—and Christ, I saw a lot of bad things."

Colin paused for a moment, shaking his head, then continued, "On the other hand, I've got to say, I was surprised by all the good I saw, all the humanity in the middle of absolute chaos and hell. Some of my fellow Marines really shined. I saw some of them save up all the goodies from their care packages to give to the local kids, send all their paycheck home to support moms and little brothers and sisters and wives, adopt stray puppies and treat them like they were one of us. I, uh, I found myself actually *proud* of the uniform and the mission for the first time. I was actually thinking of reenlisting there for awhile. That time is the cause of those tattoos on my chest, by the way. Then..."

Colin's voice trailed off and his eyes stared off into the distance, his cigarette burning idly between his fingers. When he continued, his voice was quiet yet made of steel.

"We had a month left to go in Iraq, and only two weeks left out in the field. We were *so* fucking close... We were out on patrol, and we got ambushed. It was, uh, a rough night. Two of our guys got killed. So we got back to base, and we're still all hyped up on adrenalin and anger and, and pain, and there's these contractors there. Their company—and honest to God, I can't even remember which PMC they were with, it didn't matter—had its own base not too far away, and occasionally they dropped by. So we came in, and they were there, and they heard what happened, and they said we should go fucking do something about it.

“And we were too angry to say no, you know? And they said they knew the house where some suspected insurgents in town were, and that those guys were probably responsible. And hell, I look back now, and we were being so goddamn stupid, but our brains were just too clouded. One of the guys killed had been my bunkmate at boot camp, and shit...he was probably my closest friend in the Corps. Tim Morgan, but we called him Rabbit...Anyway, we—me and the rest of my squad, minus Rabbit and Adams—headed over to this house with the contractors. We go kick in the doors like good Marines, and it becomes real apparent real fast that this is no insurgent house. There’s a bunch of fucking women and a couple of kids. And I recognized the women—they weren’t big fans of ours, really; they’d spit at us a couple of times and stuff, and one of their kids had thrown a rock at our Humvee once. They probably were the wives of the guys who’d killed Rabbit and Adams...but they hadn’t done it, and their men weren’t home.”

Colin’s face had lost its color, and he looked up from the ground to meet my eyes.

“You’re not going to want to talk to me anymore after this next part, boss,” he said softly.

Without waiting for my reply—in which, had he given me a moment, I would’ve told him that he didn’t have to tell me anymore, simply because it hurt me too much to see him so distressed—he plowed on with his story.

“So I said to the contractors, basically, what the fuck, these aren’t insurgents, what are we doing here? He said they had information, that they were harboring the insurgents. And I kept looking at these women and everything felt wrong. I said to my corporal, we need to get the hell out here, we’re all going to get court-martialed, but he told me to shut the fuck up, and hell, I was just a lowly PFC. Chain of command and all, you know? He said anyone who had a problem should get the fuck outside and keep watch for the insurgents. And every goddamn nerve in my body, Kris, was just fucking *screaming* at me that something very motherfucking *bad* was about to happen. And all I did was leave the house and walk a few hundred yards down the road to wait for them. A couple of seconds later, two of the other guys from my squad, Rodriguez and Horner, joined me. We didn’t say anything, the three of us, the whole time we were out there on that road. I’d like to tell you maybe we thought they really were just going to ask some questions and leave...but I won’t lie to you. Rodriguez and Horner and I, we all knew something bad was happening in there. I wish I could explain now why we didn’t do anything...and I can’t. I don’t know what was going through my head that night. I still had Rabbit’s blood all over my uniform.

“And after what felt like a hundred years, but was probably only a half hour or so, our corporal came to get us. He was grinning, and he told us to come back to the house.”

I prayed Colin would just stop here, because I truly did not want to know, but he swallowed hard.

“The women and kids...they were all dead, all eight of them. The women, they were, uh, still dressed in their hajji clothes and all, but everything just looked a little off, you know? Like someone who wasn’t a lady dressed them...My corporal said they’d pulled out a few AK’s and tried to fire at them when all they were doing was asking a few questions...But why the fuck were their throats slit then, right? I mean, *why the fuck* would you *slit someone’s throat* who was trying to shoot you, right? That’s just so goddamn *irrational*, it doesn’t make a damn bit of *sense*.”

Colin's voice had grown even faster, and rose an octave or two, as if he was abruptly back in Anbar, hysterically demanding those same questions of himself. I wasn't entirely sure that he wasn't. He inhaled on his cigarette so hard it seemed his very life depended on it. When he continued speaking, his voice had slowed slightly,

"But I didn't ask any questions, the bitch that I was. He was my fucking corporal. And they left the house, and I was still just standing there, and the walls, the walls were just fucking *coated* in blood. I started snapping pictures, dozens and dozens of them. Don't ask me why. It's always been my first instinct, and I just did it. Then I left too, and I just kept waiting for someone to say something, someone to call us out on the obvious bullshit of a lie our story was, someone to open a fucking investigation into exactly *why* eight women and kids had their fucking throats slit by a Marine squad that wasn't supposed to be there in the first place, and no one did, Kris."

Colin shook his head slowly, as if, several years later, he was still in a state of disbelief.

"No one *ever* did. We went home and we got away with it. I heard later that one of the women in that house, her daughter had accused another contractor of something—rape maybe, I don't know the details and I never asked—a few weeks earlier, and he was in a lot of trouble. I guess they, uh, wanted revenge. None of the guys knew I had these dozens of photos, pictures that would blow the lid off the whole thing, and I took them home with me, and every night I looked at them and tried to force myself to pick up the phone and report it, to turn them in, to make this right somehow. I never did. Rodriguez came home and had a nervous breakdown within a month, and I heard Horner turned into a crack head when he left the Corps. I know it sounds like I was just afraid—*again*—but that wasn't it. I was just a reservist, and I mean, fuck, what were they going to do to me? I was so deep in depression already that a court martial would've felt good at that point. I was glad for the first time in my life that my mother was dead, because I know I couldn't have looked her in the eye. And you probably aren't going to believe me—I wouldn't if I were you—but earlier in my tour, at the beginning, I wouldn't have thought twice about blowing the whistle. But by the end...I'd known so many good, decent Marines that the thought of tainting everyone for the actions of a few evil men...it just hurt. Look what happened after Abu Gharib, is how I rationalized it to myself. Making a fuss wasn't going to bring back those people, and it could get good soldiers and Marines killed if the attacks increased because of it.

"So I went back to school, and everyone complimented me on fucking well I was readjusting." Colin laughed bitterly. "They didn't know about the half bottle of Jack I was drinking every night just to be able to close my eyes. I got SF, for *Safir Fayad*, the name of the town, tattooed nice and big on my arm, so I could never forget even if the nightmares ever stopped. I told everyone it was for *Semper Fidelis* whenever I got asked, and it took all I had not to explode when I was saying those words, that *lie*. Very fucking ironic, right?"

Colin stared down at his forearm, and I found my own eyes glued to it as well. I couldn't imagine the self-hatred he must have for himself to have done such a thing, to brand himself, and I abruptly remembered his discomfort and anger at the military contractors in Kuwait, and how he had covered his arms.

Oh Colin, I'm sorry.

"I swore to myself that I was never going to pick up a camera ever again...then I realized that I didn't *deserve* to escape that easily. I had allowed an incredible evil to occur and then go unpunished that night, and the only chance I thought I had of making it even a little bit right was to take up the goddamn camera again and use it to tell the truth about other atrocities. Every time I hear the shutter click, I see those Iraq pictures, Kris. *Every. Goddamn. Time.*"

Colin stared at me, but I didn't think he was really seeing me. Forcefully, he finished,

"You asked what I'm doing here, boss, and there it is. I am the zoom."

I stared at my redheaded photographer slack-jawed for a long moment when he'd finished speaking. His last words hung in the air between us, and he offered an apologetic, ashamed half-smile.

"I told you it wasn't a nice story. I am, uh, pretty fucking far from redemption."

"I'm staying with you," I heard myself say without ever having consciously made that particular decision.

He shook his head quickly. "Oh, hell no. I don't want you dragged into this. That story was supposed to send you running like hell. You need to head back to the city, pretty much right now. You've got nothing to do with this."

"I'm staying with you," I repeated. "Just think of what a great story this'll make."

Colin didn't smile at my wildly inappropriate attempt at a joke.

"Kristin, we're probably going to die out here. You'll never get to file that story."

"We're combat reporters, Col," I said with more calm than I thought possible, "and not the career kind, but the type that make living a few steps from death normal. We were never supposed to make it to old age. WWII took Eddie Pyle, 'Nam got Dickey Chapelle, Michael Kelly died in Iraq, and Kevin Carter handled his death himself. Hell, even your hero Robert Capa, who swore he'd never photograph another war, got blown up in Indochina anyway. This is where we were always destined to end up."

"That doesn't mean it has to happen today," Colin fired back.

I swallowed hard, knowing that he wasn't going to back down until I revealed as much truth as he had just told me, and I said softly, staring down the highway where thousands of armed men were somewhere not far away,

"Colin, you say you need redemption. I've been prepared to die my whole life, always willing to shatter a few dozen other lives in my wake, without an iota of regard for those poor bastards who had the misfortune of being connected to me. Every story I've ever covered has been just so I can get the rush, just so I feel that adrenaline. I am not a good person, and I've never tried to be. If I don't die here today in Africa, I'm going to die next year in Iraq or two years from now in Pakistan, a cold, selfish bitch who never did a single thing for anyone but herself. Let me at least face death for something of value, just this once."

I couldn't live with myself if I left you here, I added silently, *you're all I've really got.*

Colin ran a hand through his hair, his green eyes looking down the highway as well, and murmured in defeat,

"Ah, fuck, boss. How can you not hate me now?"

I hesitantly reached out and touched his shoulder.

“Because you’re one of the best people I’ve ever met,” I replied softly, recalling hundreds of times when Colin had made the decision to stay in the line of fire for the sake of speaking for those who could not leave, “and every day that I’m with you, I’m reminded to try to be a better person myself.”

Colin looked like he was about to cry, and he gripped my hand so hard it hurt. After a moment, he straightened up and said in an emotionless tone,

“Alright. We’ve got a lot to do in a short time. Let’s get a move on. Go find one of the staffers and ask them to pick out the youngest kids, the ones who are going to move slowest. Then tell them to identify all the kids who are Hutu.”

“Hutu? Why?”

“Because that’s the same tribe as the FNL—they’re not burning their own villages. If there’s a Hutu village nearby, we can send them there. They should be safe. The more kids we can stow away, the faster we’ll be able to move.”

I nodded and hurried to one of the staffers, an elderly nun named Sister Margaret. She began rounding up the youngest of the orphans, a total of nine tiny children ranging in ages from two to six. Then she began calling names, and soon another group of fourteen children were gathered in front of us.

“They’re all ethnic Hutus, and they can go to the village of Miburu. It’s about 10 miles away, and they’ll be welcomed in by the families there.”

The children were chattering amongst in each other, holding each other hands tightly. I couldn’t understand their words, but I recognized fear and confusion in their eyes; those feelings tended to be the same the world over.

The old nun wiped a single tear from her eyes and remarked sadly, “We’ve taught them every day since they’ve come to us that it doesn’t matter what tribe everyone came from. We are all Burundians, we always say, and what matters is the kind of person you are.”

Then Sister Margaret walked over to the Hutu children and began to speak to them soothingly, smiling through her own fear and patting their heads reassuringly.

Colin walking towards us, followed by four older boys. All bore AK-47s on their backs, and I involuntarily gasped.

“Got to love the developing world,” Colin commented grimly by way of greeting. “Everyone’s got a shed full of weapons.”

There was a machete tucked into his belt, and his eyes were blank.

“Here.”

He handed me an AK, and I almost dropped it in surprise.

“Do you know how to fire this?”

I mutely shook my head, and he demonstrated quickly.

“It’s pretty idiot-proof, which is why it’s the world’s most popular gun. Loved by dictators, guerrillas, and child soldiers around the globe.”

He smiled morbidly again, and I didn’t recognize this new Colin.

“Do you think if push comes to shove, you can do it?”

I knew what he really asking was *can you kill a man*, and I swallowed dryly. I slung the weapon across my shoulders and responded with one of the very few stories Colin had never heard about me,

“I carried a handgun in Cairo. I shot a soldier once. I can do it again if I have to.”

Even though I swore I would never carry a gun ever again—what promise have I ever made that I haven't broken anyway? This is a new war, and I, I am a new breed.

Colin's eyebrows rose ever so slightly, but he didn't inquire farther. "Alright, good. These," he jerked his thumb at the boys behind him, "are the rest of our guns."

I looked at them—the oldest-looking of them couldn't have been older than fourteen, and the youngest was probably eleven or so—and couldn't form a response.

"Former child-soldiers," Colin responded. "I hate to drag them back into that, but," he shrugged, "it needs to be done. Kill or be killed, right?"

I nodded mutely. The boys—all of whom had been cheerfully playing a heated game of soccer just a short while ago—now stood before us with their feet planted firmly on the ground and their guns resting comfortably in their small hands. A cigarette dangled from the lips of the smallest one, and the two middle-sized boys, who resembled each other so much that they must have been brothers, each had a long, rusty machete tucked into their pants. The oldest, about my height, had a long scar running down his face and neck and disappearing into his shirt.

"Jesus fucking Christ," I muttered under my breath.

This was surreal.

The oldest smiled at me. "No worries, lady." He patted his AK affectionately and put the other hand on the shoulder of the boy beside him. "We number one soldiers. Very good shots."

Jesus, you could be my little brother. I forced a weak smile back and turned away to see Colin pinning our guide against the jeep roughly. I walked closer to see what was going on, but by the time I got there, Colin had released him and the guide was getting into the jeep and the staffers were loading the small children in beside him.

"He wasn't too keen on taking them back with him," Colin explained brusquely, "but a little negotiation changed his mind."

"What happened to having faith in humanity?" I tried to joke, but my words fell flat, and Colin grimaced.

"There is a time and place for everything," he said, not looking at me, "including violence. Hey, David Beckham, come here!"

The little boy came running over, clutching his soccer ball, still chewing on the stick of the lollipop that Colin had given him earlier. Colin scooped him up in his arms, and David grinned at him. Colin handed him another lollipop, rubbed the top of his head affectionately, then went to place him in the jeep. David promptly burst into tears and gripped Colin's neck for dear life.

"No, no, no," he cried, "stay! Friends! Friends!"

Colin held him for a moment longer.

"Yes, we are friends, David," he said, "very good friends, and that's why I need you to go. I need you to be safe."

The little boy shook his head stubbornly, tears still running down his baby cheeks, and Colin was forced to pry his tiny fingers from his neck. One of the little girls in the front seat of the jeep, probably about six, but impossibly thin and sickly-looking, took David in her arms. He continued to sob, and Colin turned away for a moment. Then he turned back, banged the back of the jeep, and said,

"Go!"

The guide hit the gas, and the jeep accelerated quickly. Within a matter of moments, they were almost out of sight. Red marks glowed against Colin's pale skin, and he rubbed his neck with one hand roughly, almost angrily.

Within twenty minutes, the second group, the Hutu children led by Sister Margaret, disappeared into the jungle, taking dirt paths to the safety we all hoped Miburu would offer. Colin and I stared the 18 Tutsi children remaining, four of them armed and stoic, and the rest silent and resigned.

"Get them ready to go," Colin instructed the remaining staffers—two middle-aged women—and the director. "We're leaving in ten."

He grabbed my arm and pulled me a few yards away. "We need to call Ed," he said as he dug through his pack for the satellite phone. "Someone needs to know that we're out here."

I was remembering the face of the man I'd shot in Egypt, the red liquid blossoming under his shirt and the surprise in his eyes, and Colin didn't bother handing me the phone, as he usually did when we had to call our editor. I barely heard him explain the situation beyond noting his alien sounding tone, his Marine voice I supposed. I would never get to hold my unborn niece or nephew. I would never see what kind of man Tyler grew up to be. Mary would have to find a new maid of honor, and Kat would stand at my funeral knowing she had always been right about me. My parents—

"Kristin."

Colin's voice jarred me from my melancholy thoughts and I looked at him, hoping he couldn't see it in my eyes. I'd never had time to think about these things before. The rush was an immediate, orgasmic sensation; it blotted out all other considerations. This, however, was another feeling altogether, and I couldn't help wondering if perhaps I'd experienced something like this earlier in my life, I'd be a different person. Maybe the rush wouldn't have meant as much.

"Ed says be careful. He's not happy though, and he said if we don't get ourselves killed, he's going to fire us the moment we land."

Colin smiled faintly, and I knew that Ed had probably actually said those words, but I was equally sure that right now, our faithful editor was pacing his bedroom floor, the phone in his hand, frustrated and worried sick. He was a good man, and I felt guilty for doing this to him.

Colin handed me the phone. "You've got five minutes. Make any phone calls you need to."

I took the phone and walked a few steps away without really knowing what I was going to do with it. I stared at it, simultaneously recalling every phone number I'd ever known, and thought about JP for a moment.

I should call him and apologize, I thought, tell him I'm sorry for everything that I ever said, that I did love him once and only turned him away to save him. I should tell him how much he always meant to me, and how much of a void his absence has left in my life these past few years. I could tell him that all I ever wanted was for him to be happy, even if his happiness broke my heart.

Even while I was thinking this, I found myself glancing at Colin without willing it. He was sitting on steps of the main building, his hands folded and his head bowed. I'd known him long enough to know he was praying, and I knew he wasn't praying for

himself. He never did. Then I shook my head and knew I could do JP the greatest service by letting him alone.

That chapter was closed.

Instead I dialed Jimmy's work number. It was 2 a.m. at home, and I knew I would get his voice mail. I didn't want to call his house; I couldn't bear to his voice.

"Hello, you've reached the voice mail of James Wilson, Assistant Public Defender at the District of Columbia Public Defender Services. I can't answer my phone right now, but if you leave your name, number, and the time you called, I'll get back to you as soon as possible. Thanks and have a great day."

I swallowed; even hearing his professional tone in the message hurt.

BEEP.

"Hi Jim, it's uh, it's Kristin, your sister. I know it's like 2 in the morning there, but I, uh, I didn't want to call your house and wake you and Sue up. I don't have a lot of time, and I've got a thousand things I want to say to you, and I'm sorry I never did before. You're probably going to be getting a phone call in a little while from my boss at the Post. You're, uh, listed as my emergency contact—I don't know if I ever told you that, actually, so, uh, surprise, I guess. Anyway, yeah, so I'm, uh, actually in Burundi, in Africa. I got sent here a few days ago on a emergency assignment, and—actually, you probably already know all this that if you still read my articles, and I'm babbling, and I'm sorry about that too. So when you get that phone call, Jim, I, I just want you to remember that I love you, and I love Mom and Dad, and Mary, and Tyler, and Kat, even though she hates me, and I'm sorry I've done such a terrible job of showing it over the years. And I'm really sorry for the things I said to you when I was home, I really am. I didn't mean it, I was just upset. I haven't been ignoring your calls for the last couple of weeks because I was angry, but because I was trying to make your life easier, in my own fucked up way. But I guess you already knew I was fucked up, right? I, uh, I don't have a will or anything like that, but, uh, I want the money in my savings account—it's like \$10,000, from the Pulitzer people—to uh, go to Monica Deporte, my friend from high school. She could really use the money, so, uh, if you could make sure she gets it, and uses it to, uh, get help, I'd really appreciate it.

"Jimmy, what I really want you to know is that of everything I've ever done, all the dumb shit I've ever pulled, all the stress and worry and pain I've put you through... what I'm about to do, this thing that's going to cause you probably the most pain ever, this one is probably the only thing I've ever done that wasn't for Kristin Wilson. This one I'm doing for someone else, and maybe, if you ever choose to tell your son or daughter about me someday, this can be the one story you can tell them."

I was crying as I finished speaking.

"I, I love you, Jimmy, and I'm sorry. Take care of yourself, ok?"

I hit the end button, and roughly wiped my eyes. Then I straightened up, took a deep breath, and headed back to Colin. He saw me coming, made the sign of the cross as he finished praying, and stood up.

"What did JP say?" he asked, sounding just a bit too casual.

I shook my head. "I didn't call JP. I don't have anything that needs to be said to him. I called Jimmy and left a message."

"Oh."

Colin looked almost...relieved?

“Who are you going to call?”

Colin tucked the phone back into his bag and smiled at me.

“No one—I’ve got everyone who matters right here.” Then he adjusted his weapon, put his sunglasses on, and said confidently, calmly,

“Time to move out, boss. We’ve got a border to cross.”

Ch. 26

Sweat ran into my eyes, stinging them, but I couldn’t brush it away; I needed my hands to continue carrying the small girl on my back. We’d been walking all night through the brush, and one child or another had been on my back for the entire trip. The eight-year-old boy who walked beside me carried my AK-47 in his hands. My muscles ached, and I’d tripped several times in the darkness over roots and branches in the rocky trail that barely passed as a path. My jeans had holes in each knee that were ringed with blood. I couldn’t remember the last time I’d been so exhausted, but we hadn’t paused longer than a few moments at any point in the trip.

Colin had two children on his back in addition to his weapons, but he didn’t seem to tire, and he never complained. He frequently walked back and forth along the line of fatigued and frightened children, encouraging the stragglers and offering reassuring smiles. I recognized his calm smile, but not the eyes above it. Those eyes were prepared for more than smiling, and I felt as frightened as the child whose trembling I could feel against my back. This trip had left me with too much time to think and count my mistakes. I had never had to account for my life before these hours, and I kept coming up short.

The pitch darkness began to give way to a light gray, and word came down the line that we weren’t far from the border. There’d been no sign of the rebels thus far, and I began to wonder if perhaps we were actually going to survive this. I glanced at Colin and wondered about him.

Was that really relief on his face when I didn’t call JP? When he said he had everyone who mattered with him, did he mean the children, or did he mean...me?

“Kristin.”

Colin was suddenly beside me, his voice low and urgent.

I looked at him and saw a man preparing for his last moments, and knew what he was going to say before I heard the words.

“The rebels are coming, aren’t they?” I asked quietly.

He nodded. “I saw them through the binoculars a few minutes ago. It looks like a group of fifteen or so is a few miles behind us. Probably a scouting party sent to check conditions at the border.”

“Do you think they know we’re here?”

“Yes, but even if they don’t,” he shrugged, “it won’t be long before they do.”

“How long before they reach us?”

“Half hour, forty-five minutes at most.”

“And how far are we from the border?”

“At our current pace, about an hour.”

I bit my lip. “What are we going to do? Hide?”

Colin shook his head. “No. There’s no point on that. We’re going to pick up the pace as much as possible; we’ll sprint the last mile if we have to. Then those of us with

guns will stop a few hundred yards from the border and provide cover fire, if it comes down to that. Do you think you can carry another kid? There's one at the back of the line who's barely moving."

My ruined back muscles were on fire, but I nodded. Colin acknowledged this with a curt jerk of his head, and started to turn away, but then he turned back and briefly touched my shoulder.

"I owe you a back rub," he said with just a trace of a grin and the Colin I knew.

Then he was gone, moving up and down the line, urging the exhausted children to move faster. I found my second charge, and added her tiny frame to my back. Then I too quickened my step and offered cheerful yet urgent commands to the children to keep pace with me. Ten minutes passed, then twenty, and then a half hour, and the director, his old lungs rattling with each heaving breath, told us that the border was just over the next hill. I eyed the giant hill; it blotted out everything else, and the sun had not yet broken over it. Beyond it laid darkness in stark contrast to the light gray that was at our backs, and beyond it laid our sole shot at survival.

"Do you think—" the director began to ask, but his words were cut off by a sharp whistling sound.

He sank to his knees, clutching his throat. Bright red blood spurted through his fingers, and another bullet burrowed itself in the tree beside my head. Ancient bark flew through the air like shrapnel. The old man collapsed to his side, his hands limp now, and I heard Colin's voice screaming somewhere behind us through the blood pounding in my ears.

"RUN! Go, go, go NOW!"

The children were running without any sense of direction, almost in circles, their terrified screams adding to the chaos. I stood there for half a second in shock, until the boy beside me, who'd been carrying my gun, abruptly pitched forward into the dirt. I looked at the almost perfect hole in the back of his skull, and felt something else take over my body. I put the little girls on my back down, snatched my gun from his still hands, and began yelling at the children around me.

"Come on, come on, this way! Come here, come on, come to me!"

I grabbed one of the older children and said sharply, "Head up the hill and don't stop until you get to the border. It's the fence after the hill. Run fast and stay low. You're the leader now, ok?"

He looked at me in a combination of terror and numbness, and then nodded mutely.

I slapped his back. "Good boy. Now get going."

He took off running, and I began sending the children after him. The bullets were coming in a heavier barrage now, and several children were lying scattered on the jungle floor. I could hear the sound of gunfire behind me, but I didn't stop to think about it as I ran to each prone figure and checked pulses. Two were just curled up in frightened fetal positions, uninjured, and I unceremoniously yanked them to their feet and sent them on their way. Three were dead, and a fourth had been shot, but ran at my command anyway.

I began counting in my head as I curled my finger around the AK's trigger, trying to remember how many children I'd seen make their way over the hill. Three dead, plus the boy with my gun who'd been killed, three now running to join them, four with Colin, that left seven—had I seen seven make it over the hill? The two girls who'd been on my

back, plus the boy I'd made leader, the little boy with the missing front teeth, the girl with the long braids, and her little brother, shit, missing one, who am I missing? Fuck, the girl in the blue shirt, *where is she?* The gunfire was moving closer, and I could now make out the sound of Colin's voice, screaming commands at his fellow shooters. I had seconds before the battle reached me, milliseconds left to find my missing child.

Then I spotted the peacock blue of her tunic in a bush, twelve impossible feet away. I took a deep breath and sprinted faster than I'd thought I was capable towards her. I dove to the ground beside her, hearing my rib crack over the gunfire as I landed on a rock.

RAT-TAT-TAT...RAT-TAT-TAT...RAT-TAT-TAT.

The autopilot I'd always relied on for surviving the rush had kicked in, and a bullet almost took my hand off as I knelt to check the final pulse. I stared at my bloody fingertips and grinned almost savagely at their pain. This was something I understood.

Colin and the four ex-child soldiers appeared, gasping for air as they ran.

"The kids?" he yelled.

"Headed for the border," I yelled back, yanking my final charge up from the ground roughly, having no time to pay any heed to her injuries. "All accounted for, minus the dead."

Colin grabbed the girl from me, threw her over the soldier of the youngest gunner, and commanded,

"Take her! Go!"

The boy complied without question, and we followed after him up the hill. I could hear the shouts of the rebels behind us now. The sun had risen on the other side of the hill now, and I could see the border a half mile away. Our children hadn't yet reached the barbed wire fence, but they weren't far.

"We stop here!" Colin yelled as we reached the down slope of the hill, a few hundred yards now between us and the border, and perhaps a dozen feet from the first onslaught.

We all hit the ground.

"When you see the first ones come over the hill, *fire*," Colin instructed, his voice hoarse from screaming. "We make a run for it when the kids are on the other side of the border."

Five, four, three, two, one, and Colin's bullet found its mark as the first soldier to appear in our sight crumpled to the ground. Colin bared his teeth in something that could have been a smile just as easily as a snarl, and I felt myself squeeze my own trigger without being aware of ever having decided to do so. Everything is sharper when you're afraid, every moment means just a little bit more when it might be your last, and my body count rose to three.

The ex-soldiers on my left knew what they were doing, and the rhythm of their shots did not falter when several bullets sent the middle one rolling limply down the hill. Blinking was a luxury we did not have time for. The number of dead rebels piled on the ridge seemed endless, and they just kept coming.

"You lied about the number you saw, didn't you?" I yelled over the noise at Colin.

“Yeah,” he yelled back. “Seemed good for morale at the time. Are they at the border yet? I’ll cover you while you look.”

I half-turned and glanced down. My heart plummeted from its place pounding in my skull down into my stomach.

The children were gathered in a tight, panicked knot at the border, still in Burundian territory. I could see Rwandan soldiers on the other side, but they were not opening the gates. The children were sticking their hands through the fence in terror, rattling the barbed wire fence, and the youngest ex-child soldier we’d sent with the injured child was pacing back and forth at the back of the group, his gun ready. I couldn’t make out his features, but it was clear that the eleven year old was prepared to make a final stand in the event we failed.

“They’re not opening the border!” I screamed. “What the fuck are we going to do?”

Colin was still pulling the trigger as he responded, his eyes staring straight ahead at the men he was killing, “Grab my bag and get our passports and any other American ID you can find.”

“*What?*”

“The boys and I are going to provide cover fire, and you’re going to run like hell to the border. When you get there, show the border guards every piece of American ID you’ve got, tell ‘em American citizens are being killed, that if they don’t open the gates, it’s going to create an international incident. Tell them we’re journalists and everyone knows that we’re here, and they better open those goddamn gates if they don’t want the fucking United States Air Force dropping some bombs on their heads tomorrow.”

I stared at him in horror, still firing my weapon but not aiming at any particular person for a moment.

“*I cannot do that.* Fuck, Colin, I can’t. I won’t leave you. You, you need me here shooting, I, I don’t want to leave you—”

“Kristin, shut the hell up and listen to me, goddamnit!” Colin screamed back. “Don’t you get it? There’s a fucking militia over that ridgeline—we don’t even have enough bullets to kill them all! They’re going to overrun us any minute, and then the kids will be trapped! They’ll die pinned against the barbed wire down there, and the only way we can stop that is to get those gates open! And you are our only shot at getting them open! Do you understand me?”

I swallowed, tasting blood from where I’d bitten through my lip at some point, and nodded. My voice was calmer than it should’ve been when I spoke.

“Alright, alright. I can do that. I’ve got it.”

“Good girl. Now, on the count of three, the boys and I are going to open up like crazy—you got that, guys? Shoot like there’s no tomorrow—and you’re going to get up—keep your head as low as possible—and you’re going to run faster than you’ve ever run in your life, and you’re not going to stop, no matter what, until you reach that fence. Got it? Alright, good. Leave your gun. We need your ammo.”

I fired one last shot and released my weapon. I found my hand going unconsciously to the pendant of St. Francis de Sales that Colin had given me on the necklace under my shirt.

Someone has to go the places you've gone and bear witness to the things you've seen, and it might as well be someone who enjoys it, right? What would the world be without adrenaline junkies?

I believed in few things, but I found myself thinking, *Patron saint of journalists, protect us now, if not for me, for them, for him...*

I crouched low, preparing to sprint. I couldn't breathe, but I didn't see that as particularly important at this moment.

"Ready?"

I stared at the ground I had to cover, a gauntlet unlike anything I had ever envisioned. The adrenaline rushing through my bloodstream was stronger than anything I'd experienced, ever, and my perception of my entire environment—every sense—had skyrocketed. At another moment, it would have been perhaps the best feeling of my life.

I looked at my photographer, who'd been by my side at every turn and who was now forcing me to abandon him, and it all meant nothing. For the first time in my life, it meant absolutely nothing.

Colin met my eyes for just a second, for the first time in what seemed like hours. Sweat and blood ran intermingled down his freckled face.

I am pretty fucking far from redemption...

"On the count of three, alright! And Kristin? I just want you to know, no matter what happens—I motherfucking love you! Now, ONE, TWO, THREE, GO!"

Their weapons exploded into furious action at my back, and I was on my feet and sprinting without time for another word or thought.

Three hundred yards...two hundred eighty...Someone screams in agony behind me, and I don't look back to see who it is...two fifty-five...two-twenty...Bullets are landing in the dust all around me now...two hundred, and my entire life stretches out before me...Something hot hits my calf, one eighty-five, and I stumble.

One eighty, and fire in my lungs, my back, my leg. One seventy... *What are you going to do then? Just keep landing in war zones until someday someone finally fucking shoots you?*...One sixty-five...A new pain in my shoulder, ironically in the flesh marked with my tattoos...I wonder how you say "Burundi" in Arabic... one fifty-five, and I am stumbling more than I am sprinting...one forty...I trip and hit the ground...*You'll beat this eventually, for the love of someone...*I'm back on my feet, one thirty, one twenty-five, one ten, there is nothing left of me except rawness and blood, *No matter what happens, I motherfucking love you...*

One hundred yards left to go, and I am still running, the death I've always sought at my back and the second chance I never thought I wanted before me. Ninety yards to go, and, *oh God*, do I want that second chance.

THE END
20 April 2008
8:32p.m.

