

CHAPTER ONE

Hand over hand, she glided along the riverbed, grasping and pulling at rocks, roots and rotted muck. She sailed from one grip to the next, her movement as fluid as the water streaming around her. She became the river, and so kept her pace for miles.

Occasionally, she coasted. The channel ran shallow, only a meter or so deep, so she expended no effort to reach either bottom or surface. When she wanted to communicate with the world, she simply rolled onto her back as the stream carried her on, and raised the device on her left wrist beyond the murky green stream. Then she brought the gadget close to her eyes to read the train of numbers, coordinates for her position as transmitted by the GPS satellite 390 miles above Earth. The wrist device also kept time. So far, on schedule, despite the unfortunate caiman that had mistaken her for dinner two miles back. She now carried her shock box strapped to a forearm, a more convenient place than her hip.

She pulled from grip to grip through the shallow, dark water. The night made her invisible in her matte black wetsuit. She was a slim wisp in the river, a darker current, a trick on the eyes, she hoped. She traveled lightly to focus her strength, most of her stuff in the pack at her thigh. With so little drag, she sailed in the water, and would make little noise when she left it.

Which was just about now, she told herself, and dropped her knees to brake on the mucky riverbed. She rotated onto her back and craned her facemask just out of the water.

It's a talent, she thought. The trees formed a black canopy above. Lights shone from the left, a makeshift camp of tarps and gathered wood. Two silhouettes stood at the bank, holding their rifles loosely.

She dropped onto her side in the mud. She unzipped her pack and searched it by touch. She removed her Beretta automatic with its long, ugly silencer and pushed it into her empty shoulder holster, careful of the baggie that kept the weapon dry. She checked for the knife strapped to one calf, then angled herself toward the two lax guards on the bank.



They stood at the water's edge, enjoying the tiny hint of breeze the river brought from somewhere far upstream. They were miserable, they agreed. Why couldn't they head back west, back into the mountains and the much cooler weather? Too many mosquitoes with malaria in the jungle, and too many snakes and caimans. Of course, their godforsaken bivouac hid them from the Colombian and Peruvian armies, and it was just a few more days, after all, long enough to score that drug deal and hatch another plan for ransoming the Americans. Then it was back to the fight, back to the revolution. They whined about their isolation and groused about the jungle that bled them of sweat. All the while, they leaned into the river's seductive breeze, watching toward camp for their supervisor.

They watched the wrong way.



Sergeant-first-class Alexander Grace clicked off his watch alarm and spoke into his headset transceiver. "That's it. Go time. Make for the pickup as per the order." Instantly, the helicopter banked, and everyone grabbed for handholds. Grace glanced at his men -- all four of them -- and gave them a thumbs-up sign. He scrupulously ignored the CIA puke riding beside him.

"I still don't like it," the CIA man griped over his headset. He looked obvious in his khaki jacket and pants. His white shirt fairly glowed in the dark. By contrast, Grace and his men were ghosts in battle dress camouflage and dark face paint. "It just ain't right," the man griped again. "She shouldn't be out there by herself."

"True," Grace answered, "but according to your spook bosses, we shouldn't be here, either. We aren't on this mission, aren't over this freaking jungle without the permission of the Colombian government, and aren't about to assault a pack of FARC rebels on vacation from Peru. And, since we aren't doing any of that, why sweat the details of who gets the details done?"

"Don't get smart, Grace. They don't pay you for smarts."

"Well, they wasting that pay on you, man," one of the others chirped. A short blast of laughter at the spook man's expense, and palm slapping all around.

"Good one, Ruiz. You too cool."

"Check equipment," Grace said, ignoring the slight against his nominal equal.

"Hey, Top, this is Pilot. Isn't her transponder on? I get nothing from GPS."

"Don't sweat it. Hit the LZ. She's probably still in the water."

"Oh. Belay that. I got a signal, now."



She rose from the water with consummate stealth, four feet behind the guards. Hardly a drip fell from her body, the knit of her wetsuit channeling the water along her curves and down the length of her legs. She was invisible, silent, and armed with the knife.

She dropped the first guard with an effortless slice that she wasn't even sure had connected until the sudden spray of blood from his neck. He crumpled mute to the ground as his partner jerked under two quick slashes across his torso and a pommel slam to his head. She lowered the second man to the muddy ground, then dropped her facemask and snorkel onto his chest.

From the bodies, she scavenged a few grenades and a rifle. Then she rolled the corpses into the water and kneeled at the bank as she took a baggie-wrapped headset transceiver from her pouch. She tore the bag with her teeth and secured the radio one-handed to her head, noting as she did so a sudden seething of the water by her feet. Piranha, she thought, falling onto blood. Big red memo: don't go back in the water.

She moved toward camp. It was a ramshackle, decentralized bivouac, partly due to its poor location and amateurish occupants. A dozen or so structures squatted among the trees, mostly lean-tos of tarps, sticks, and palm fronds. The shelters were widely separated, each built on whatever dry, vacant spot its owner had managed to find. The mess both eased and complicated her task, because it lessened the enemy's control of his land and made her search more tedious.

Did these guys get off on the mud and mosquitos? The clearing wasn't far. That's where they were supposed to be, where common sense had placed them. The infiltrator frowned, disappointed. These guys weren't even close to her level.

She prowled the perimeter, marking the numbers and positions of hostiles, peeking into shelters. The rebels were lax. Many loitered around a fire that sparked dangerously close to the trees. Others slouched in their lean-tos, their boots off, their weapons thrown aside. Indigenous music blared from a boom box.

She found her objectives in a guarded lean-to. A black woman, western dress, mid-fifties, along with a teenaged girl and a boy about ten. They huddled at the back of the shelter, away from their three semi-

alert guards. They all looked dirty and wasted, guards included. The woman looked both frightened and insulted, as Americans kidnapped in third world countries often do.

“ETA, five,” the headset whispered into her ear. “Acknowledge.”

The intruder tapped her mic input twice, then edged around to the back of the shelter.

The guards sat on rotted logs, yammering in Spanish about sports and women. She picked one man, took careful aim with the Beretta, and that unfortunate bastard flew backwards off his perch, his rifle tumbling into the air. One of his buddies watched him fall, staring stupidly at his comrade’s missing face. The third guard reacted more sensibly. He sprang to his feet and brought his rifle to bear on a corner of the lean-to. The wrong corner.

The intruder hammered three closely grouped bullets into his chest and he dropped backwards to match his immobile partner. The remaining guard finally sloughed off shock to realize his predicament, but only in time to take a violent kick to his head. The reinforced polyethylene soles of the wet suit cushioned only slightly the exacting force of that blow.

That last man down, the woman crouched before the captives. They cowered from her in the back of their lean-to, edging away as pigs might quail from a panther. The mother grasped her children, shielding them as best she could with her arms and legs. The intruder looked at them, the act intentional, showing them clearly and for the first time her very white face, her freckles, her red hair clinging wet to her skull. She drilled the message into their fearful eyes: I am not your enemy.

On seeing that face, the captives ceased their shuddering. Slinging the rifle across her chest, the redhead extended a hand to the mother, and became human.

The black woman blinked, her mouth struggling for voice. Her children held to her tightly. “Who *are* you?” she asked.

“NSA, ma’am. National Security Agency. Please, let’s go.”

A scuffle of boots from the left. The redhead darted the pistol toward the disturbance. A startled rebel stood twenty feet away, frozen in the act of zipping his pants. The pistol spat two flashes, and the man vanished into the trees.

He managed a short, gurgling scream before he died.

Conversation stopped in the camp. The men around the fire, just visible through the trees, peered toward that last, unpleasant sound. “Pablo? *Que está?*”

The redhead darted her free hand into the pack at her thigh and extracted a dark, spherical object. She hesitated only a moment to aim, then pitched the object precisely through the trees and into the big campfire sixty feet away. She turned to the captives. “Now!” she snapped.

The mother moved as the grenade exploded. The blast, the light, the shower of burning wood setting off screams around the fire, all these slapped her into action. She grabbed her children and struggled to her feet.

“This way.” The rescuer prowled into the trees, turning frequently to urge on her charges, hesitating often at suspicious sounds and movement. Chaos surrounded them. Men ran shouting, sometimes shooting automatic weapons at phantoms in the trees. No discipline.

“Did my husband send you?” the mother finally asked.

“No. Quiet.”

They dodged through the forest, the escapees always close to their protector. She was almost invisible in the dark except for her starkly white face. She used it as a beacon, hiding it within her hair or behind an arm when rebels passed too close, then turning it to her charges that they might easily find her. She never stumbled; was always sure of where she was and what she was doing. She forced a good pace through the gauntlet of confused, then startled, then enraged enemies.

Gradually, the riot of the camp retreated to their backs. Their enemies no longer surrounded them, only followed.



"I don't get it," Silvestri wondered aloud. "Shouldn't she already be at the clearing? Isn't that where the bad guys are?"

Grace stood just off the open cargo door, watching as Ruiz and Sizemore rigged the winch and rescue cage. "Obviously, the ground situation has changed..."

"Or, maybe she's been captured," the CIA man said from his seat.

"She knows her job," Grace said. "Pilot, follow her in."

"We need the winch?" Ruiz asked. "If they ain't coming up through trees..."

"Rig it. You never know."



A meeting engagement. A gaggle of four rebels crashed through the underbrush to literally stumble over the mother and her teenaged daughter. The girl screamed. The boy yelped at losing his mother's hand. She and the girl rolled in the mud with two of their recent captors while the other two stood over the boy, startled.

The shadow intervened. She stepped between the boy and the melee and shot the two bystanders dead with four flashes of her almost silenced gun. Rather than a soft puff through the muzzle-end baffle, the final round sounded with a loud, sharp crack. Oh, well. As silencers went, hers had been a trooper.

She reached into the tangle of bodies on the ground and slapped a head with the handgrip of her weapon. She flung that man aside and reached for the other one, but he jerked away, tottered, and fell backwards over a thick growth of root. He swung his rifle blind.

She couldn't stop the long, staccato burp of his gun. She could only dive for the boy and drag him to the ground. The rebel peppered the dark with aimless determination; he saw no target, just his fear of something that had already killed his comrades. He screamed for help as he hosed the woods.

"Stay down! Stay down!" the redhead yelled as she lay atop the boy. She swung her pistol toward the bellowing assault rifle and squeezed off her last four rounds. The final bullet was perhaps redundant.

"Okay, up!" She dragged the boy to his feet and pressed him toward his mother. "After that, they know where we are. Here. Take this." She drew something from the pouch at her thigh and clipped it to the mother's blouse. A plastic box. About the size of a cell phone or walkie-talkie.

The mother grabbed at the device. "What-- What's this?"

"A beacon. I've set it. Go. Straight that way. My people will come for you."

"What?" the mother protested. "Aren't you coming with us?"

The woman unslung her borrowed rifle. "There's a clearing a little way up. Wait for the chopper."

"But, aren't you--"

"Go, dammit! There isn't *time*!" She turned toward the crunching and snapping of brush.

The mother heard it, too. She grabbed her children and stumbled into the forest.

"No!" the protector fairly snapped. "*That* way!" She watched them correct, then took the remaining grenades from her pack. She lobbed them in three flat arcs into the cracking, shouting blackness.

"Duck, this is Deer, in trouble. Package is headed toward the clearing, Objective Sierra. Pick them up there. Read Beacon Two. I'm trying for PZ Charlie, to draw away the heat." She caught a movement to one side. Were they flanking her, or confused? She drifted away through the brush, scanning systematically with her peripheral vision. If only she could see in the dark...

But, thermal goggles had been a non-starter, too big, too heavy, and too much drag in the water. Well, so what? Not a wishful thinker, the shadow shoved aside those thoughts. She took comfort in her enemy's equal blindness, and his apparent inability to deal with it.



"So what do I do?" the pilot asked.

“Exactly what she says, and give me updates on her GPS.” Grace spat out through the cargo door and cursed under his breath. Ruiz crouched beside him, gripping his rifle in one hand and an outcrop of metal with the other. His young face held worry, but also concentration, a mood duplicated in Silvestri and Sizemore. Only Hicks seemed oblivious of events. The always low-key grunt watched the rushing canopy below. He waited for orders, calm as a stone.

The CIA man looked disgusted.

“Clearing’s ahead,” the pilot reported. “Beacon registers at the edge. Five seconds.”



Turbines screamed overhead, and the deep-throated drum of rotors. A hurricane wind swept over the family and flattened the grass of the field before them. Then a giant blackness dropped with a crunch to the ground, like some science-fiction grasshopper the size of a boxcar. It nearly spanned the width of the field.

She had mentioned a helicopter, the mother thought. Well, there it was.

The children cowered and tried to buck away. The mother held them close to her. She wanted to soothe them but she was too near panic herself.

Anyone at the tree line could have attacked the aircraft at deadly range. The chopper filled the clearing so completely that the two figures jumping to the ground ran only a few steps to the cringing civilians. They offered no greetings, no deference, just forceful urgings to *move!* Americans, the mother supposed, and a surge of elation unraveled her control. She was rescued! She and her children were safe!

Once lifted bodily into the aircraft and belted into uncomfortable nylon seats, the family slumped, exhausted from stress. The helicopter was dark, its crew blue-black ghosts, and the deck a shaking hell of screaming noise. It looked and sounded wonderful.

A man in civilian clothes placed intercom phones on the mother’s ears. “Mrs. Irvine! Dick Short of the CIA! Welcome aboard an American rescue aircraft! Do you know what happened to your State Department escort?”

“Dead. What about that woman?” Mrs. Irvine asked as she hugged her children. “She’s still out there...”

As if in answer, a different voice cut across the intercom. “Location, Pilot. Talk to me!”

“About a hundred meters inside the wood line, fifty degrees to starboard.”

“I’ll go get her, Top. Me and Hicks can kick it.”

Mrs. Irvine’s eyes darted in the confined space, assigning figures to words. A big man crouched in the cargo doorway, leaning toward a shadow on the ground. Shadows. They were *all* shadows.

Suddenly, sparks flashed against the ship, inside and out. The kids screamed and thrashed against their harnesses, panicked. The figures on the ground turned and threw red streaks of light into the woods. So beautiful! the mother thought. The Fourth of July!

“That’s it!” someone yelled. “Get aboard! Pilot, let’s jam it!”



She closed her eyes to protect her vision, then let loose a withering stream of tracers into the brush. A flash of answering weapons missed her as she dived to one side to hide her position. Wood splintered behind her, and the leathery fronds of tropical plants grunted dully from bullet strikes. Screams, then urgent pleas to cease fire. Her enemies were shooting each other to pulp.

She released another two volleys of gunfire at the rebels she could locate. Then she ran, bounding between trees and over roots while angry arguments raged behind her. Somehow, her headset had gone missing.



"PZ Charlie," Grace said as the chopper jumped skyward. "Where the hell--"

"That's the river one," Ruiz snapped, his English growing garbled as he grew more tense. "The island one, or the rock, whatever."

"I know where it is," the pilot announced.

"Then get there!"



Out of ammo. She threw the rifle aside and drew her blade as she moved toward the nearest clutch of men. They tracked toward the east, no more than four. They paralleled the river for no better reason than to not get lost. She looked down the eight-foot drop-off to the water, out to the tangled deadfall jammed center-stream. That was the landmark, the pickup zone. She could hide out there for the chopper, but she hated the exposure of wading to a rescue cage, especially if weaponless. Risking aroused piranha was one thing; risking unanswerable tracers was another. She needed more ammo, and knew where to get it.

She let the leader go by, then sprang from the brush to shove the number two man flailing into the river. The leader turned at the racket, saw a shadow snatch the third man's rifle and brutally slash his gut with a knife. Number two splashed, cursed, and thrashed upright in the water. The shadow dodged to the brush just as the leader raised his rifle and fired, toppling the last man in line. The leader gawked. He was alone as the predator darted to flank him. Then she sprang once more, hammering the butt of her stolen rifle hard into his chest. He staggered, teetered, then belly flopped to the water. An instant later, the screaming began.

The shadow peered over the bank to see two men roiling in froth. Arms slapped the water, legs kicked, but their struggles dwindled rapidly to nothing.

Shit. The fish.

The brush around her exploded. She rolled onto her back, aware of the puffs of mud spattering her face and flaring between her calves. Pieces of leaves fell to her like confetti. She sprayed the woods with gunfire, but the hail only intensified.

Rotors drummed overhead.

Great. Guns or fish.

She emptied the rifle, threw it aside as she twisted to a crouch, then launched herself into the river.

She stretched, knifing into the water well beyond the roiling marine buffet. She splashed, then met the riverbed immediately. Her hands ran in the mud, diverting her from a hard strike of the bottom. She hoped the resultant cloud of silt might confuse any fish moving to attack, and buy her precious seconds.

Her hand grabbed something hard and rough. She pulled along it and up, her face breaking the surface. The deadfall, she thought. Up and out. Up and out. Her feet dug in, fighting to leave the terrifying river, the same river she had so blithely negotiated only minutes earlier. She felt relief as her ankles cleared the water.

The wood splintered around her, and the familiar firecracker sound of assault weapons asserted itself in her mind. Another sound intruded as she scrambled up the twisted pile of wood and sought the shelter of its far side. She caught the report of a rescue cage crashing through the tight forest canopy. The seven-foot aluminum bullet appeared a moment later, heralded by a shower of wood and leaves pummeling the water eight feet off her tangle of fallen trees. A few steps, she told herself, just a few in the water.

But the weapons fire continued. At least six men stood on the riverbank, all blasting freely at her hiding place -- her prison -- a tenuous island in deadly waters.



"We can't stay!" the pilot protested.
"She ain't coming up," Sizemore added. "No weight in the cage!"
Grace hesitated only a moment. "Reel it in!" he ordered.
"She's down there!"
"Reel it *in*!"



The cage retracted. Her heart sagged. Well, what did she expect? The mission was paramount, and she was not. But now she was trapped, unable to leave the deadfall through the infested river, unable to escape by any other means. Could the rebels get to the other bank, or were they as trapped as she? That last would be good. They wouldn't be able to hit her where she cringed, fallen trees interceding, and they wouldn't cross the river to get her. Maybe. Maybe they'd blow her hiding place apart with man-carried rockets. Maybe they'd find a crossing further upstream where no blood excited the fish. Or maybe she'd be left to survive on her own in that godawful jungle. No food, no weapon, no nothing.

Such choices.

Then that crashing again, and the rescue cage returned. It was occupied.



Grace started firing as soon as he cleared the canopy, first with the SCAR assault rifle on automatic, then with its underslung grenade launcher. He caught his comrade at the edge of his vision, just a blur that rose from the woodpile and hurled itself at the cage. She splashed two feet away and sank to her chest, struggling to grab the aluminum structure.

"Go!" she pleaded, her voice shrill with fear. "Go *now*!"

"Pull it!" Grace shouted into his headset just as his weapon went empty.

The cage jerked upward. In seconds, it slapped its way through the tunnel it had bored in the intertwining branches and thickly packed leaves. Grace was trapped erect in the narrow device. He couldn't see if he had her. Then the trees dropped below, and there were only the stars and the basso drum of rotors.

The cage locked at the winch stop. Ruiz snatched Grace from its cavity and pushed him rudely away. He and Silvestri dropped to their bellies and scrabbled below the cage, each hanging half out of the chopper.

"Pilot, get out of here!" Grace ordered. "Hicks, Sizemore, get in there and help!"

Together, they pulled her from beneath the skeletal bullet. It was a frightening task with the jungle a hundred feet below, but the shadow held on as her people brought her safely aboard. Then she lay prone on the helicopter's deck, looking up at concerned and familiar faces.

"I'm all right," she said, panting and trembling from relief. "I'm all --oww!"

"It ain't nothing," Ruiz assured her as he helped her sit up. "A gouge on your leg. Knife, whatever."

"Piranha," she corrected, and poked at the two thin lines on her calf.



The *USS Vengeful* waited fifteen miles off Colombia's Caribbean coast. The two-hundred-foot United States Coast Guard cutter was far from home and her crew nervous. The men stood their seventh straight hour at action stations, ever since that Army helo's departure on its late night search and rescue mission. An Army chopper. A Coast Guard pilot. CIA. NSA. If any mission defied armchair analysis, this one was it.

The helo approached from the south after a return flight carefully planned to evade Colombian radar and skirt populated areas. It dropped to the cutter's pad with practiced precision, was met before the rotors stopped by three seamen and the medic, who ushered the rescued family below decks.

The CIA man, Short, left his fellow infiltrators without so much as a word, headed toward the bridge. In moments, the ship turned from the South American coastline and pointed its bow toward home.

"That was different," Silvestri said as he hopped from the aircraft and left the pad. They all walked together, looking exhausted, relieved, and energized all at once. Another mission done, and nobody seriously hurt. "I'm telling you, that was *different*," Silvestri repeated. "Actually put Top to work that time, didn't we, Ruiz?"

"Damned straight." Ruiz grinned. "And I got to shove him around. Hey, Captain, you sure you're all right? You got a little limp."

"Just stings," the woman said. "Nothing a shower and some chocolate won't cure."

"Can't help the chocolate, but the shower's a go," Grace said. "You take care of that, ma'am. I'll whip these mo-rons into shape."

"You always do, Top. How are we for time?"

"You'll get there, ma'am. Transportation's laid on, or somebody hears from me."

"You take good care of me, Top."

Grace shook his head. "College grads. Somebody's got to wipe your bottoms."

"What about *our* bottoms, Top?" Sizemore asked with theatrical whining. "When do we get a shower?"

"Shut your hole, grunt. You get a shower back in Belvoir, after inventory and weapons cleaning detail. That's the best deal you get, and you can thank me for it."

Sounding like school children, the men droned in unison, "Thank-you, Sergeant Grace."

Everyone laughed but Hicks.



She showered, but the river clung to her nostrils, so she still smelled its sour decay. Half an hour later, she was back on deck, crisp in Army camouflage with the stylized sun-and-rose insignia of military intelligence on one lapel of her collar, black captain's bars on the other. Her hair fell straight to just above her shoulders, reflecting yellow-red in the warm light of dawn. Her scrubbed face glowed white by contrast. Grace and his men sat atop scattered duffel bags and fiberglass trunks, all but Hicks smoking cigars. As she approached, they stood to salute.

"Belay that," she insisted as she dropped her duffel to the deck. "We're all family here. Hey, Hicks, shorty-pants! How long you got now, two hundred twenty days?"

"Fuckin' A," Hicks grunted.

"Articulate as ever. When's our flight, Top?"

"ETA twenty minutes. Here to Florida, then transfer to a C-12 for Belvoir. I have a chopper on call for you there, just in case the schedule gets tight."

"You're the big brother I never had." Her green eyes sparkled. "Ruiz, Silvestri, everyone, thanks for pulling me aboard."

Ruiz gestured broadly. "We had to, Captain. Dropping officers looks bad on the after-action report."

"Besides," Sizemore offered, "we would've read about it on our next evaluations."

Everyone laughed but Hicks. Hicks rarely laughed. He rarely spoke. He was big, thick-featured, "brave, but not overly intelligent," the captain liked to say. Though you couldn't tell to look at him, Hicks liked the description, she imagined. It sounded appropriately ... tough.

The seaplane landed to starboard twenty minutes later. The four soldiers loaded gear into a launch, their superiors helping, when the CIA man shouted from a wing of the bridge.

"Captain Street! You're wanted up here, ASAP!"

"Go on," Grace said as he heaved a duffel to Silvestri. "This isn't officer work."

"As long as you're sure," she said, passing him a case. "You know I'm no wallflower."

"Roger that, ma'am. We can handle it."

The CIA man met her at the head of the companionway leading to the bridge.

"Hello again, Mr. Short. Why so curmudgeonly? Professional spook thing?"

"Don't give me that holy NSA bullshit, lady. You're just as much a ghost as anybody. Somebody wants you on the bridge. Please, try not to kill 'em." He moved aside, holding the bridge hatch open.

The captain, a Coast Guard lieutenant commander, stood centered in the small compartment. The officer of the deck, who really ran the ship, stood a few feet to one side and two other crewmen manned the controls. In the captain's elevated, padded command chair, a familiar figure sipped coffee from a ceramic mug decorated with the Coast Guard coat of arms. She looked more civilized in clean military khakis than she had in muddy civvies.

"Is this her, Mr. Short?" Mrs. Irvine asked as she swiveled to face her rescuer.

"Yes, ma'am. It's her all right."

"What is your name, young lady?"

"Captain Fiona Street, US Army Intelligence," the redhead said crisply, standing at ease.

"You look very different after a bath, Captain Fiona Street. More feminine, less ferocious."

"Thank-you, ma'am. You clean up pretty well yourself."

The older woman laughed, though the gesture seemed to take effort. She looked Fiona critically up and down. They always did that, always astonished that so petite, so round-faced and freckled a girl had snatched them from captivity or death with such precision and such violence. Always. How many people had Fiona murdered in the night? She couldn't be sure.

"Thank you for my life," Mrs. Irvine said, "for my children's lives. I won't forget this, Fiona Street. I am in your debt."

"Not really, ma'am. This is my job. Your husband and I, we're paid by the same people."

The woman nodded. "Still, I have my eye on you. You'll be rewarded for what you've done. I promise it."

Fiona grinned, and her freckles lit up. "I already have my reward, ma'am." She gestured expansively, mimicking Ruiz. "Caribbean cruise, y'know?"



After twelve days of promises, the call came through in the middle of the night. Well, the sun was up, sort of, but he still lay in bed, and was due another hour's sleep.

"Yes?" he groaned into the telephone handset after snatching it from the bedside table.

"Mr. Speaker? State Department, sir. Good news. Your wife and children are safe."

He sat up in bed. "Excuse me? What was that?"

"Rescued, sir. They're safe on a Coast Guard cutter headed for Florida as we speak. We're sending a car for you, and a plane to Florida has also been arranged."

"My God, I never expected..."

"Yes, sir, I understand. The car will arrive at your house in about thirty minutes. Is there anything else we can do for you, sir?"

"Yes. Are they all right? Were they hurt, or-- Are they all right?"

"The word I get is they're fine, sir. A little tired, but fine."

"Tell me who did it. Who saved my family?"

"I'll check on that. Goodbye, and we're all very happy for you, sir."

The line died, and he hung up the phone. Evelyn alive! he thought. The kids! He had almost given up hope. He tossed away the covers and started to go for his robe.

A hand slid to his naked hip. "What is it, honey?"

"Nothing," he answered, having forgotten all about her. "I have to go to work."

"So early? Should I stick around?"

"No, I don't think you should."



Silvestri was a skinny guy, smaller than most men and even some women. To offset his stature, he talked big, but no one minded because he so often delivered in the crunch. "How many this time, Captain?" he asked during the second leg of their homeward flight. "Me and Ruiz got the record at eight and sixteen, me with sixteen. What do you say, Captain?"

Fiona Street held a wisp of hair to her nose, and sniffed. "Let's see, two at the river, three at the camp, no that was four. Four more in the woods and four at PZ Charlie. How many is that?"

"Fourteen," Grace said, his voice fuzzy. The C-12 was the Army's answer to the Lear jet. Its gently swaying rhythm always made him sleepy.

"Hey, check that," Sizemore teased. "She just about got you, Silvestri, and she ain't even counting probables."

"Fourteen?" Silvestri looked intentionally skeptical. "Well, I'll trust you, Captain. But, it ain't like they were Iraqis, or Serbs. That's where I got my record, in Kosovo. Am I right?"

"You always full of shit," Ruiz said.

"Does my hair smell bad?" Fiona asked. She wasn't sure she wanted to hear the answer. "What do you think, guys? Smell."

"Not me," Ruiz leaned away from her. "I don't smell officers' hair. That's fraternization."

"Come on, guys, no kidding. This is important."

"Well," Sizemore offered, shifting in his seat, "there is this faint bouquet..."

"...of river water." Silvestri nodded. "But nothing like when we hauled you onto the chopper."

"Yeah," Ruiz agreed. "You were real stanky back there. The shower helped."

"Looked bad, too," Sizemore added. "I hadn't seen such a mess since basic, when they'd run us through those mud holes."

"Not a pretty sight," Ruiz said, laughing.

"Somewhat ... defecated," Silvestri said, "wouldn't you say, Ruiz?"

"Don't know, man. What's defecated? You mean, like, gung-ho, or something?"

"No, you spick. That's *dedicated*. I said *defecated*."

"Guys, for pity's sake--"

Sizemore leaned toward Fiona. "River water and jungle scum, Captain. That's what you looked and smelled like."

"Big turd," Hicks offered blandly.

Fiona screwed up her face. "Aww, man..."



They hit Ft. Belvoir, Virginia at 8:35 that morning. Grace had a Hummer waiting just off the runway. "Take it onto main post to the Defense Mapping Agency," he told Fiona as they disembarked the jet. "The first sergeant there's a friend of mine. He'll let you use the showers and a place to change."

"So you think I stink, too?"

"No, ma'am. Use lots of shampoo."

"Aww, man..."

"Your special gear's been sent ahead. Specialist Hayak in the orderly room is holding it for you. Get back here ASAP so we can get you out on the chopper."

"Thanks, Top. You're a keeper."

"Get going, ma'am. I have work to do, and you're in the way." But he admonished the Hummer's driver to get her there and back as efficiently and respectfully as possible. He used his most severe sergeant's voice to ensure faithful compliance.



"Holy shit!" Ruiz breathed when the Hummer returned her an hour later. She stepped from the vehicle in white high-heeled pumps, white hose, and a turquoise dress scooped suggestively at her neck and with a hemline hovering at least two inches above her knees. It was tucked and gathered in all the right places, so the men didn't notice its somewhat silly color.

"Man," Sizemore whispered as she approached, "the captain's got legs."

"The captain makes getting the boot for fraternization look pretty good," Silvestri said with a grin.

"That's enough," Grace growled. "Keep your attention on that weapons cleaning."

The men ignored him, put down their rifles and cleaning tools, and stood to greet their operational commander with wolf whistles and applause.

"Belay that shit for sure," Fiona snapped, but she couldn't hide the suggestion of a grin. "I worked too hard training you boys. I'd hate to can the lot of you and have to start all over."

"Yes, ma'am!" the men thundered.

"I'll try to think of my sister," Ruiz crowed, "but I can't remember her name, even."

"You can get plenty of time to remember while walking the Korean DMZ, Ruiz."

A hearty bout of laughter at Ruiz's expense.

"All right, already," Grace warned. "Get to work, you dipshits. Come on, ma'am. The chopper won't wait all day."

They returned to the Hummer. Grace climbed in front after helping Fiona into the vehicle so that her dress did not touch its exterior. At a signal from him, the driver jerked the Hummer into gear.

"Sorry, Top, didn't mean to cause any trouble."

"Don't worry about it. I'll dress the bastards down to where they'll never notice a woman again."

"Oh, come on! I've worked with those guys for over a year. They were kidding, Top. Weren't they?"

"They're enlisted, ma'am. You're an officer. All parties involved need to recall that fact."

"Well." She crossed her arms, uncrossed them, afraid she'd wrinkle the dress. "Thanks, I guess." She sat a moment in silence. "I wasn't flirting, you know."

"Yes, ma'am, I know. They were, and they'll regret it."

"Sometimes this job's a bitch. If I were male and showed up in a tuxedo, there wouldn't have been an issue."

He turned far around in his seat so that she could see his frown. "If you were male, there wouldn't have been any wolf whistles."

Fiona offered grudging agreement. "Well, okay. But please, don't be too hard on them."

Grace turned back to the front. "I'll be just hard enough."

The Hummer pulled along a line of helicopters, the medium lift Blackhawks used as troop carriers. It stopped at a ship pulled ahead of the line. An officer inspecting the aircraft gawked at Fiona as she and Grace dismounted the truck. Apparently, Grace hadn't briefed him on his passenger.

"Okay, I have to know--" Fiona began as they approached the bird.

"Perfume," Grace said immediately, and watched her slump. "Or maybe lemon juice. It's barely noticeable, ma'am. If I hadn't been looking for it..."

"Why don't I just transfer to the zoo, to the stinky pig exhibit?"

Grace wasted no words with the pilot. "Lieutenant, be advised that you are presently ogling a superior officer."

"What?"

Grace shook his head and sighed. "College grads... This is Captain Street, your manifest. You have the mission? We're short on time."

"Huh? Oh, sure. Sorry, ma'am. I thought I had a stodgy old general or something. Show you to your seat?" He went to pull open the cargo bay door.

“Umm, don’t want to be where I can’t see what’s up,” Fiona called to the officer. “I appreciate even the illusion of control. Mind if I ride up front?”

“Hell, no! I mean, sure, ma’am.” He scrambled to open the co-pilot’s door.

“God give me strength,” Grace muttered.

Fiona grinned at him.

Grace returned her mirth with a hard look. “We’ll drop your gear at the office,” he said, and turned back to the Hummer.



Minutes later, the helicopter screamed toward Washington, DC.

“You must be something else to rate a Blackhawk, ma’am,” the pilot said over his intercom.

“Got that right,” Fiona responded cryptically. “I’m certainly something else.”

“It’ll be tight. When I got the mission, I checked the LZ. Lots of overhead wires.”

“I stand in expectation of your skill.”

A few minutes later, she caught him glancing around the cabin. He looked distracted, almost disturbed. “What’s the problem, LT?”

“Huh? Oh, nothing. There’s just this smell...”

Aww, man... She cringed, and wanted to jump from the ship.



“Where is she?” Menyell Highball fretted for the umpteenth time that day. “She’s supposed to *be* here, with me. She *said* she’d be here.”

“Well, I’m not surprised,” her mother said flatly as she hooked the last clasp at the back of Menyell’s dress. “Not a steady one, that Fiona Street. Too much of a party girl, a rich girl. She doesn’t know about commitment.”

“Please, Mom, she’s my best friend.”

“You can do better. There. How’s that feel?”

Menyell appraised herself in the full-length mirror. Her dress was a stunner, that was sure, and perfectly, symmetrically balanced with the bridesmaids’ matching outfits. She was white with turquoise pumps to the bridesmaids’ reversed color scheme. She was long, form fitting despite the strategic tucks and gathers, theirs were short, but otherwise similarly draped. She looked like one of those goddesses in Greek statuary, with their robes both heavy and provocatively clinging, leaving little to fantasy. And that was the fantasy, after all, that and her coffee skin against the stark white material. Jaws would drop when she entered the church. She was perfect. “Feels like medieval torture. When do I get to breathe?”

“After the wedding, dear. After the wedding.”

“Where *is* she?” Menyell fairly spat.

Her mother might have launched another acerbic comment, but the baritone throb of helicopter rotors cut short the opportunity. After a moment, Menyell realized the sound would not go away.

“Since when does this wedding need a traffic report?” Her mother asked.

“Mom...”

Both women went to the room’s one window. It looked out over the church garden with its gorgeous beds of red and yellow roses, gladiolas, and late summer daisies. Beyond the garden, the parking lot stretched nearly empty, the fifty or so cars of the wedding guests nestled in the slots closest to the building. A few arriving guests and another few on smoke breaks stood transfixed, watching the back of the lot.

A helicopter lowered itself gingerly to the pavement.

“Dare I ask?” Mrs. Highball said.

Fiona stepped daintily from the front seat of the chopper, holding down her dress as the aircraft returned to the sky. The bystanders applauded, as if it were a show for their benefit.

"It appears that Her Majesty the Maid of Honor has arrived."

"Aww, man..." Menyell groaned.



"Ta-da! I said I'd make it, and here I am!" Fiona announced as she entered the bridal room. "How'd you like my entrance?"

"It's about God damned time," Menyell rumbled, fussing with her veil in the mirror. She had sent her mother away in order to confront her friend in private. "As for your entrance, do I have to remind you whose wedding this is? *I'm* supposed to make the entrances around here."

With waving arms and a dropped jaw, Fiona made a show, though a playful one, of flustered confusion. "Do I detect something of a sour disposition?"

"Sour? Me? I think I'm more than reasonable. Where the hell have you been? You missed the rehearsal, Fiona-girl. You missed the rehearsal *dinner*. I asked you to be my maid of honor, not the Invisible Woman."

Fiona walked over, took Menyell's hands from the veil, and began arranging it herself. "Let's review," she said. "I told you I'd miss the rehearsal. I also told you my job is unpredictable."

"This is my *wedding*. I'm betting it'll be my only one."

"I know it'll be your only one. I also know we set up your mom in case something happened, now didn't we?"

"Fiona..."

"Menyell." Fiona grasped her friend's face and looked her lovingly in the eyes. "This is your day. I love you more than anyone I know. I'm here for you. Let's make it good."

"I wish that sounded reassuring, but you have this history-- What is that *smell*?"

Fiona cringed and backed away.

"It's you, isn't it? What have you been *doing*? You're maid of honor at my wedding and you spend the day in the *sewer*?"

"Hey, I really tried. I took two lousy showers."

"Three might have helped. What have you been *doing*?"

Fiona pulled a length of short, red hair to her nose and sniffed. "I can't tell you that. I'm sorry. I should leave."

Menyell looked at her, unsure for a moment what to say. But Fiona looked fine, and the smell was rather faint... "Oh, no. You don't escape that easily." She grabbed her friend's arm and pulled her into the adjoining bathroom. She rummaged through a few paper bags left there on the counter, things brought from home. "I swear, Street, one day you'll learn to take your responsibilities more seriously. One day you'll--"

"What's that?"

Menyell shoved a bottle before Fiona's face. "Rose water. It'll cover up the smell."

"You want me to walk down that aisle with wet hair, hinting of potpourri?"

"It beats a bag of shit. Besides, we got blow dryers. Bend over the sink."

Fiona stiffened, but, in the end, there was nothing she could say. Her hair stank. This was her best friend's wedding. She was the maid of honor. It was her *job* to make everything perfect. So she clamped shut her mouth and, in the face of Menyell's stern determination, bent her head to the sink.

"Now, this'll hurt you more than me," Menyell said in a lame attempt at humor. To protect the dress, she draped a towel across Fiona's neck. Then she poured the bottle over that red hair. She rubbed it in, then used the towel to pat the hair reasonably dry.

"I'll get the frizzes," Fiona complained.

"Shut up and hold still."

After a moment, Fiona raised her face to the mirror over the sink. Her hair looked a mess.

"Nothing a brush and a dryer won't fix," Menyell said, noticing the sag of her friend's shoulders. She no longer felt angry, or imperious, just wrong.

Fiona looked hurt. She ran white fingers through red tresses. "You're all I've thought about for days," she said. "I hope you believe that. If only you knew the effort involved to get me here--"

"I've heard it before. Problem is, I believe it," Menyell rubbed her temples. "I mean, why else would I put up with you so long?"

"I came all the way from-- Well, from a good distance."

Silence fell between them. It felt uncomfortable.

"Sorry I yelled at you," Menyell said. "I guess I'm somewhat, umm, on edge."

Fiona took the hair dryer Menyell offered her. "Nervous? What about? You're the one marrying the hot, buff professional in the office of the president, the one with the rich family." She powered the dryer to "low."

Menyell frowned.

"Well, okay. It's the office of the chief of staff of the president."

"He's a secretary."

"Well, sure, but a secretary in the office of the chief of staff of the president! Isn't that cool?" She forced a smile. "Anyway, he's still hot, and his family's rich, and he'll probably be secretary of state some day."

"Not married to me."

Fiona groaned. "Oh, not that again..."

"Fiona..."

"Menyell, Donald is not martyring himself by marrying a black woman. He's marrying you because he loves you, and because you kill in that dress. Besides, it's the twenty-first century, for pity's sake."

Menyell snorted. "Tell that to the hundred and fifteen people out there in that church. A lot of folks on my side of the aisle don't approve of this match." Her voice lowered, and weakened. "I don't know, maybe they have a point."

Fiona put down the dryer. She inspected herself in the mirror, grabbed a brush from the vanity, and turned to her friend. "You love Donald?" she asked, grasping Menyell's shoulders.

"Yes."

"Donald loves you?"

"I guess..."

"Uh-uh. Donald *loves* you? He worships you? He stutters in your presence? His whole life is directed to making you happy, keeping you safe, and getting you naked?"

Menyell couldn't help it. She smiled slyly, feeling guilty for doing so. "Well, I guess ... the naked part, for sure..."

"Good. Then get out there and marry the boy. And, remember: anybody has a gripe, I'm watching your six."

"My six what?"

"It's a figure of speech. It means I got your back."

"Oh, Fiona-girl, you see things so plainly. You're such a trooper."

"That's me, girl." They hugged each other. "Now, let's git out thar and snare us a man, yuh-huh! Oh, does my hair still reek?"



The wedding was perfect. Despite Menyell's fretting, everything moved on schedule. The bride and her maid even found time to pace the floor in the bridal room. Fiona took every opportunity, contrived or otherwise, to awe at Menyell's beauty, and Menyell fussed at the bandage on Fiona's calf, its contour just

discernible beneath the thin white hose. Eventually, though, the music swelled, and they steeled themselves at the bridal room door as if preparing to walk a gauntlet.

"Good luck, babe," Fiona said as the designated player swung open the door. "I love you."

"I love you, too, Fiona-girl. Thanks so very much."

The afternoon sun sent jewels of colored light through the church's stained glass windows, lending the gathering an ethereal quality far beyond the means of the cantor's marvelous voice and the practiced organ accompaniment. Menyell's vows, composed over weeks, were heartbreakingly honest and hopeful, and Donald's were adorable in their awkwardness. Or maybe it was his delivery. He couldn't take his eyes from his devastating bride. He was gorgeous, Fiona noted with a twinge of jealousy. Well, yes. He had fallen in love with her friend, but you'd think two years of off-and-on dating a vivacious redhead would have given said redhead imminent domain, or something. Anyway, Donald's little brother, all twenty years of him, was pretty cute himself, and best man. She hoped he knew how to dance.

The reception was somewhat overblown for the number of people present. A good, local soul combo played discreetly in the rose garden to the dozens of couples turning and sometimes gyrating on the rented dance floor. More guests mingled around the food tables in the adjoining church community center. Interestingly, Fiona and Menyell noted, the dancers were mostly white, the minglers black. They concluded it had something to do with the band's repeated covers of *Soul Train* and *Boogie Wonderland*. The black folks were beyond all that, Menyell had laughed, hoping no one but Fiona heard.

They only spent part of the evening in catty commentary on Menyell's new mix of relatives. They also danced. Fiona danced a *lot*. It was her reward for having survived as chief bullet catcher in Menyell's Year of Crazyiness. Never mind. That was, after all, the maid of honor's job, just as her duties included dancing with every single usher as well as the luscious groom. In fact, she so enjoyed fulfilling those duties that she failed for hours to notice how little she actually saw of Donald. He was clearly, she thought, elusive if not invisible. Did he avoid her? Was she that scary now that he was married? Not one to be cheated, she hunted him. She began in the reception hall, then moved farther into the church.

She found him in an office off the reception area, packed in with a herd of other men, all with their backs to the door and brandy snifters in their hands. She suspected the worse. After all, it was July. Baseball, basketball, even some off-season football for some ungodly reason, and she definitely heard a TV or radio beyond the wall of tuxedoed backs.

"Bad boys," she said, crossing her arms. "Bad, *bad* boys."

A few heads turned her way, then dismissed her out of hand. All but Donald. He reached an arm out and pulled her gently through the crowd to the front.

"You're supposed to be at the party, Mr. Groom. You're--"

"Shush."

A portable TV crouched on a desk, cowering before the mass of intently watching men. A familiar face stared back at them, looking concerned and sage.

"...no real explanation for surrendering his fight with the special prosecutor. That brings to nine the high-level government officials who have fallen in three years to Jackson Truman's wide-ranging investigation. First, then Vice-president Kirby fell to charges of peddling influence for the Chinese government. Then the attorney general and President Bennett fell in close succession to similar charges. Their aides followed, including Bennett's White House chief of staff. Finally, in a firestorm of controversy, President Pitara, appointed to the vice-presidency by his disgraced boss, fell under accusations of treason, drug dealing, and perjury after only three months in office. Now, this biggest investigation against a sitting government reaches new heights, or lows, as the case may be, as our third president in twenty-seven months, before even choosing a vice-president to fill the office he vacated, resigns his duties in disgrace."

Fiona turned her face up to Donald's. She looked pain struck. "Donald, your job..."

"Looks like you are definitely screwed, Don old buddy," someone said, and the crowd began to break up. The talking head on the TV continued, but no one listened. The men patted Donald's back, took his hand for quick, awkward moments, and muttered limp condolences. Soon, he and Fiona stood alone in the room.

Another face watched from the set, this one haggard and defeated.

"...though public service has been my life, it is impossible to serve in this most hostile of atmospheres. Every offhand comment, every mistake, every slight transgression, intended or otherwise, is magnified into treason. I spend all my time defending myself, and little on the business of government. The nation suffers. Therefore, effective immediately..."

"Are you okay, Donald?"

He looked at her, forcing a boyishly handsome smile. Menyell, you dog...

"Politics," Donald said. "It gives 'temp worker' a sharper meaning, doesn't it?"

"Maybe they won't let you go. Maybe the new guy will keep the staff together..."

He patted her cheek and straightened away from the TV. "Spoken like the military. Always efficient. But this is politics, and these guys haul their *own* people from office to office. They don't trust the other guy's bunch. Paranoid that way."

"I'm sorry."

"Hey, that's what resumes are for."

"Have you told Menyell?"

"Just found out myself. But if she married me for my money, she's in for a rude surprise."

Fiona hugged him. The gesture was protective. She pressed her head hard against his chest. He did not hug back.

"What was that for?"

"I thought you needed one," she said.

An awkward moment. He looked up the hall toward the party. "I guess we'd better get back," he said. "Menyell and I, we'll soon have to leave."

"I wasn't being fresh, Donald Ryan. You don't need Menyell to protect you."

He looked embarrassed. "I didn't mean--"

"Yes, you did. Come on, boy. Yes, there's history between us, enough that you should know better. You and Menyell are my bestest friends. In a way, I brought you together. Please, don't shut me out."

"Friends, Fiona? You sure you can settle for that?" They started down the hall, leaving the TV running.

"Get real," she said, and blew him a raspberry. "It wasn't exactly fireworks, or I wouldn't have given you up so easily. In fact, I feel kind of sorry for Menyell. She always had such low standards in men..."

"Oh, is that so?"

"Very so. She likes surprises, you know, so I guess she'll need a whole case of Crackerjack. That or you'll have to ditch the argyle socks and white cotton briefs and make yourself more ... festive, shall we say?"

"I'm confused," he laughed. "Are you helping, or hindering?"

"Just offering constructive criticism. And wrangling a dance from the groom. Nothing personal, mind you. It's my job."

"Uh-huh. By the way, whatever you did to your hair, I like it. Smells great."

"Uh-huh."



The TV, abandoned by all but the church clerk, played on.

"...Benjamin Oxenburg, commissioner for the Immigration and Naturalization Service, continues to denounce the independent counsel as a demagogue out to force his beliefs on America. In response to the president's resignation, Oxenburg said today, and I quote: 'We are witnesses to the biggest witch hunt since the McCarthy hearings of the 1950s. This is not about corruption in politics or treason in the White House, it's about the corruption and treason of one man, Jackson Truman. We must not be spectators to his drive to destroy democracy in our nation. We must instead act to destroy this evil man. We must act decisively. We must act now.'"

The church clerk, who owned the TV, went to spread the news, first to his minister, then to any who would listen. Times were grave, he asserted. America had weathered crises before, but none so likely to topple the government. This was bigger than Watergate, bigger than the McCarthy hearings. It *was* the McCarthy hearings, but exploded to nightmarish, unwieldy dimensions.

But hope still lived in the horror. There were heroes as well as villains in this terrible trial. Jackson Truman came to mind. Direct, uncompromising, and open to the people, he had sworn his office of special prosecutor to the death of corruption in American politics. The people clamored, "It's about time!" Congress couldn't do it. That hopeless institution was just as corrupt as any other in government. Oxenburg claimed to protect our freedoms, but he was part of that whole smarmy cancer that Truman fought to destroy. Truman was it. He was all we had, just one man and his battery of lawyers and FBI assistants. Truman would save us, the whispered gossip said. With a name like that, how could he go wrong?

The talking head replaced the harried president's image. "The Constitution provides that, if the president and vice-president are unable to fulfill their duties, the speaker of the House should be sworn into the highest office in the land. That means Speaker Daniel Webster Irvine, whose life has already taken more than one dramatic turn. Just twelve days ago, his wife and two children were kidnapped while on a goodwill mission to Peru. Today, they are free again, rescued by Army covert units. They were delivered to Florida just hours ago, where the family reunited. Now the speaker, the first black man ever to hold that position, returns by military transport to Washington, where he will take the oath of office..."

Everyone talked about it, loudly and in whispers. Everyone but Fiona. She preferred to dance, to laugh, to shout gossip into the faces in equally carefree company. Her only connection to the dire political world was to Donald's livelihood. She was military, apolitical, sworn to obey her commander-in-chief, and uninterested in who he might be. She wasn't even registered to vote.