

STEPHEN EAGLES



ENEMY MINE

Jessie Richter: Origins

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BEGINNINGS- A JESSIE RICHTER ORIGIN STORY

STEPHEN EAGLES



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Printed in the United States of America

First Printing: September 2020

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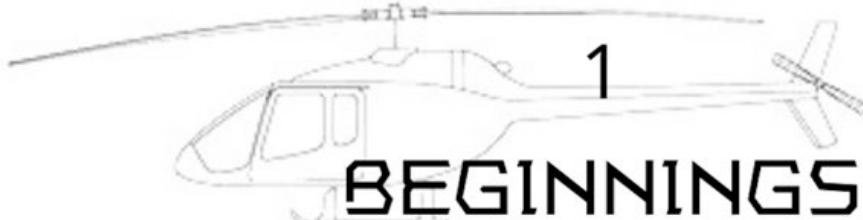
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For Michele Corbitt. My sounding board, my muse, my rock, my Goddess. Perhaps the most intelligent, selfless, beautiful woman I know. The person who believes in this story (not just this origin story, but the entire series) to the point that, even with the incredible stresses and strains of life, I almost believe it myself.



MYRTLE BEACH, SOUTH CAROLINA
SUMMER, 2009

Jessie Richter moved closer to her full-length mirror and adjusted the fit of a new Body-Glove bikini she bought just an hour earlier from a local surf shop. The racy, black and neon-yellow suit looked painted on, and she nodded in approval at the svelte, athletic figure staring back at her. It was her seventeenth birthday, and the suit was as much a present for her boyfriend, Ronnie Collins, as it was for her.

"Thank you, gymnastics gods," she said quietly.

She flexed her lean, muscular thighs and launched into her very best 'Arnold' pose, stuck her tongue out at the mirror, and then burst out laughing. She jumped a little when her oversized cat reached out with a tentative paw and touched the bare skin on her leg. Jessie bent down, picked him up, and rubbed her nose against his.

"You think he'll like it, Boots?" she asked.

"Yeowr," the cat replied. His wide, saffron eyes gazed into hers, as if pleading to tell her a secret only he knew. The cat pressed his face against her cheek, his purr a deep rumble of contentment.

"You are so funny!" Jessies said. "I know what you want."

She stood him on the bed, scratched his head, and plopped down beside him. She closed her eyes, concentrated, and briskly rubbed her hands together to warm them up. Boots settled into position and stared at her with an alert expression, anticipation in his eyes. Jessie was still surprised that the black-pawed Scottish Fold—and just about every other animal on the planet—had finally come to like her. Until around three years ago, he'd outright avoided her. It was during that time when Jessie's mother made the proclamation that Boots had changed because Jessie had changed.

"The waves of Myrtle Beach," she said dramatically, "have washed away my little girl and replaced my child with this more mature and beautiful young woman." Jessie had always wondered if her mother wasn't partially right. Over the years, a power had steadily grown within her, an ability she had kept secret since the age of twelve. She'd never told anyone about it.

Well, except maybe her older half-sister, Kate.

She opened one eye, glancing down at Boots who vibrated with excitement, readying himself to pounce. She suppressed a laugh, snapped the eye closed, and gasped softly the moment she connect to the energy. Power coursed through her like a sun-driven wave. It

moved outward, washed through her veins, and pulsed from her heart. She smiled at the feeling of power flowing into her arms until tiny bolts of lightning, no thinner than strands of fine silk, emerged to dance along the whorls and ridges of her fingertips.

She moved her hand closer to the mesmerized cat and spread her fingers. Boots reached up to paw at the crackling strands of light until they popped out of existence. The air filled with the smell of burnt ozone. Jessie giggled at the cat who rolled over on his back and continued to swipe playfully at the miniature arcs of electricity.

"Be careful," she said. "Remember what happened to Kate?"

Jessie thought back to an incident a couple of years ago when she had demonstrated a more robust version of her little 'Tesla' display for her older sister. Jessie had created a pencil-sized bolt that undulated back and forth between her palms. When Kate had reached out to touch it...*Boom!* Kate was knocked half-way across the room. Her hair had stood on end, and she'd stuck singed fingertips in her mouth.

Although Kate had laughed it off, it had frightened Jessie a little. It still did. Jessie couldn't quite control it back then. She tucked the memory away and sighed. The power flowing through her had so much more potential.

But for what?

"There's got to be more than this parlor trick, right Boots?" she said. The cat ignored her, which was fine for now.

Thinking of Kate, Jessie considered calling her to get some advice regarding her plans with Ronnie for the coming event at the beach, but a car horn sounded off, startling her from her train of thought. She wound down the power, extinguished the energy, and jumped up from the bed to peek out the window.

Ronnie was waiting for her in the high school graduation present he'd received from his father: a perfectly restored, metallic blue '68 Camaro. He waved at her and honked again, motioning for her to come. She left the window, quickly pulled on a pair of blue jean shorts and her favorite T-shirt, a black wounded warrior tank top. She gave Boots one last belly rub, snatched up her backpack, and scooted out the door.

Jessie slid into the passenger seat and across the bench seat right up against Ronnie. She gave him a small kiss on the cheek but didn't say a word during the ride to the beach. Jessie noticed Ronnie giving her a questioning look. Once again, her face was an open book, and the slight frown she wore told him everything.

"What's wrong, babe?" her boyfriend asked.

Jessie looked back at him and smiled. "Nothing, babe. Just thinking."

She kept the smile on her face but retreated back into her mind, trying to decide if she was going to give in or not. At summer's end, Ronnie would be off to college. The enormity of losing her virginity still seemed too big to wrap her head around. *So it's now, or never. Am I ready?* She looked over at him and her heart skipped a beat. *God, he's beautiful. Yes, I'm ready.*

As they entered Myrtle Beach State Park, she snuggled closer to him and giggled.

"What's so funny?" Ronnie asked, half looking down his nose at her as he navigated the winding park roads.

"Ninth grade," she said. "Do you remember when I walked up to you in the gym, and you accused me of being a stalker?"

"How could I forget? You were insufferable," he said, and then attempted to impersonate Jessie's ninth grade voice. "Ronnie, I don't follow you. I just run into you a lot."

Jessie stopped Ronnie's laughter by reaching down and yanking a few hairs from his bare thigh. "Hey now," he whined. He released her and rubbed his leg with his free hand. "Don't be a hater," he said. "You know it's true." He grinned, wrapped his arm around her once again, and pulled her close.

"Now who's the stalker?" Jessie asked, and teased him with a kiss on the cheek. *Yes, I'm ready.*

They parked the Camaro, collected their cooler and blanket from the trunk, and headed down a natural game trail that twisted and turned past some of the largest live-oak trees in all of South Carolina. Although the air temperature was a scorching ninety-four degrees, a nice breeze came up the shore from the ocean, cutting through the stifling humidity. By the time they reached their special spot, the smell of saltwater and clean, ocean air calmed Jessie's nerves.

Ronnie spread out a blanket and pounced on it. With a not-so-innocent grin, he patted the space next to him. Jessie rolled her eyes, crawled beside him, and laid down on her back. As she looked up through the boughs of the trees, a helicopter, one used to provide paying tourists a bird's eye view of Myrtle Beach, flew overhead.

"Did I ever tell you I want to be a helicopter pilot one day?" she asked.

Ronnie chuckled. "Yeah, every time you see one," he said.

Jessie punched him playfully on the arm. Ronnie leaned in to kiss her, but a blue jay interrupted him as it swooped in and landed on the ground right next to her. It cocked its head to inspect the pair, as if trying to decide if it would give them permission to continue.

Ronnie batted the bird away. "Shoo, bird! What's with you and animals?"

"I don't know. You tell me," Jessie teased. "Why do *you* like being around me so much?"

Ronnie didn't get it right away, so Jessie giggled.

"Very funny, Miss Richter," he said, then leaned in, again.

Within seconds, his kisses moved from her mouth, across her cheeks, and down to her neck. A moment later, she peeled off her T-shirt, and he nuzzled his face in her ample bosom. "Nice bikini," he said. She playfully pushed him away, even though his lips on her skin cranked up the Little Generator to a whole new level, making her fingertips, and now other parts of her body, tingle.

He growled playfully and pressed his face into her cleavage once more.

"I love you, Ronnie Richard Collins," Jessie said. She knew why she said it. She knew some little inside voice attempted to seed doubt about her decision, but the Little Generator screamed, "Yes! More!"

"I love you, too, Jessie Marie Richter."

Their eyes locked, and as they closed in for another kiss, electricity arced between their lips.

"You shocked me," Ronnie joked, and they tried again. Jessie had always felt amped up when they made out and petted, but this felt much more powerful. At the moment, she felt ready to explode.

Jessie returned his long, deep kiss eagerly. She felt her body relax as Ronnie worked his mouth to her breasts once again. He lightly bit at her nipple through the thin fabric. She gasped but smiled at the tingling sensation as it rippled through her entire body. Jessie reached behind her back and unhooked her bikini top, slid it out from under her, and tossed it to the sand beside them.

A mild burn smoldered deep in the pit of her belly. Her heartbeat accelerated as the Little Generator cranked up to full power. Ronnie's

touch was no longer safe, nor easily dismissed. She welcomed the feeling as it flooded into her. Her body crackled with anticipation, and the energy built upon itself. The electricity charged through her like a herd of wild horses. A sudden realization struck her like a slap across the face. There was a connection between Ronnie's lustful efforts and the Little Generator's power. She also understood at that moment that it wasn't him stoking the flames of desire burning deep inside. She wanted *it*, the intense power flowing through her, just beyond her grasp.

She focused on the energy surging through her, vaguely aware of Ronnie's fingers exploring beneath the fabric of her shorts, pressing and wriggling into the soft, hidden places where...*oh, my God*. Her eyes shot open as a river of pleasure flowed into her ocean of power. She relaxed into his muscular arms. He held her tight against him as tiny flecks of light, like electrified dust motes, lifted off her skin and floated in the air, where they blinked out when about six inches away. She had never seen this new effect before but smiled, knowing Ronnie's foreplay had caused it.

"Can you see them?" she asked, her voice breathless.

Ronnie mumbled something she could not quite understand. Her shorts and bikini bottoms were now off. Before she could say anything, his mouth smothered her mouth and his erection pressed against her.

"Condom," she said.

Ronnie held up an empty foil envelope for her to see.

"You came ready?" she asked.

"No, I lifted it from your back pocket," he replied, grinning.

She opened her mouth to speak only to have it filled with Ronnie's tongue. At the same time, he entered her. She gasped at the sharp pain Kate had warned her to expect, but the powerful

current flowing through her absorbed it instantly. Ronnie started slow, gradually thrusting faster into her again and again. She arched her back, as if willing the locomotive of pleasure to run over her.

A full-size bolt of lightning formed inside her. *Is this an orgasm?* she asked herself, on the verge of release. Intuitively, she knew sex had to be the catalyst to this newer, more intense power surge. But something else lingered just out of reach, something much bigger.

"What is this?" she asked. Her eyes opened. In mid-kiss, her brow furrowed as some kind of translucent electrical field surrounded them. This power felt different than what she had summoned in the past. A foreign sense of fear enveloped her, along with an equally desperate need to connect with the energy as it pulsed through her body, an energy and a danger that threatened to overwhelm her. Something told her she might lose herself if she continued, but she lacked the will to resist its call.

"It's so close, I can almost...Ronnie, I'm...I'm..." Her eyes opened wide. Ronnie threw his head back, his face contorting with pleasure. "Ronnie," she said, reaching her hands forward. Her fingers touched his face.

A flash of light blinded her, and the crack of thunder filled her ears.

Time and the world around her stopped.

Her heartbeat sounded like a battery of civil war canons being fired. *Thu-thump. Thu-thump.*

As if making up for the loss of it, time suddenly shot into fast-forward and motion slammed into her.

Oh, God.

Sucked into what felt like some kind of vortex, she flipped upside down and twisted around until something deep within her snapped. An invisible force grabbed at her spine and ripped her inside out. Her

scream caught in her throat, her body and soul scraped against each other like shifting tectonic plates. The sound of it shrieked in her ears like hundreds of fingernails pulling across a giant chalkboard. Pain, hot and mixed with pleasure, singed every nerve ending in her body. She tried again to cry out, but words would not come. For an instant, Ronnie's face appeared. Then, it morphed into her own face as her soul slammed back in place.

Just as her mind started to slip into darkness, it stopped. It ended.

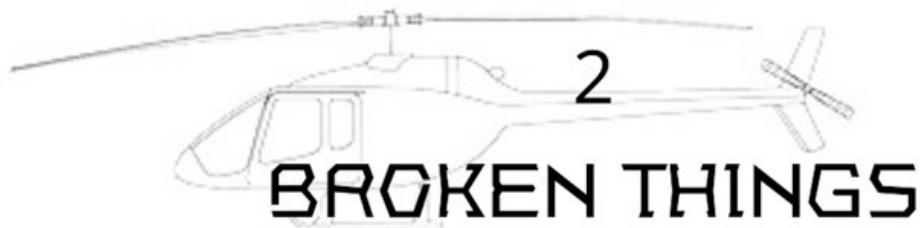
That was no orgasm.

Breathing hard, her eyes fluttered open, stinging from sweat. She reached up to wipe it away, startled by the appearance of a large, heavy, and somewhat hairy hand.

"What the hell?" she said in a low, masculine voice she didn't recognize. Her body jolted at the alien sound in her head, and she jumped to her feet. She looked at her hands, then her chest and legs. She leaned in to look at the body lying on the blanket at her feet and gasped.

"Impossible," she said.

Through the eyes of Ronnie Collins, she stared down at her own body and let out a terrified scream.



Four years later...

MYRTLE BEACH, SOUTH CAROLINA
SUMMER, 2013

Jessie jerked upright and glanced at the clock: 3am. She had been home from the restaurant for less than an hour, but a jarring noise had pulled her out of her sleep. She moved to lay back down when the noise came again.

Bang, bang, bang!

"Shit," she said. Bailing out of bed, she pulled on her bathrobe and moved to the bedroom window to sneak a peek through the blinds. A taxi sat parked behind her Jeep, headlights on, the rear

passenger door open. She padded to the front door and stood on her tip-toes to look through the peep hole mounted six inches too high in the center of her apartment door. "Shit," she said again and pulled the door open.

There in the doorway, backlit by the taxi's headlights, stood a barefoot and battered woman, wearing only an old Harley Davidson motorcycle jacket, which covered a bikini top and jean shorts. A single tear rolled down the right cheek from the corner of the woman's black, blue, and swollen eye socket.

Kate.

Jessie had tried calling her sister when she hadn't shown up at the restaurant they both worked at, but she'd only received a text in response. A normal thing for Kate, who'd also shown up on her doorstep on more than one occasion when things got heated between her and her abusive boyfriend, Terry Hoffman. A normal couple's thing, according to Kate.

"Kate. Oh, my God. Let's get you inside," Jessie said.

Kate said nothing and didn't move either. Humiliation hung heavy and limp around her older sister like an old, wet blanket. Jessie could not and would not say anything about it.

Jessie moved forward, gently wrapped an arm around Kate's waist, and pulled her inside. Before she could secure the door, a foot wedged itself between the door and jamb.

"Excuse me, sorry," the smiling taxi driver said. "She hasn't paid her fare. It's fifteen bucks."

"I'll get it," Jessie said. She tried to push the door closed, but the driver's foot still blocked the door. Jessie released her sister and cocked her hip to the side before narrowing her eyes at the driver. "Come on, man, really? You're going to show you're an ass over a fifteen-dollar fare who's been beaten up? You think I'm going to stiff

you?" The driver glared at Jessie for a full five seconds. Jessie huffed, turned on her heel and stomped back to her bedroom. She returned with exactly fifteen dollars in one-dollar bills. The driver reached for the cash, which she pulled through his fingers at the last second and hurled at his feet.

"Now you know why you never get laid," she said, slamming the door in his face, then twisting the deadbolt locked.

She turned to find Kate sitting on the edge of Jessie's favorite vintage-leather library chair. Kate's body trembled, her right foot bouncing with anxiety. Jessie didn't have to ask what had happened.

Fucking ass-hole boyfriend, Terry, that's what always happens.

Instead, she went into the kitchen to make tea and count the seconds until Kate started venting about her latest fight.

Because that's what she always does.

Kate surprised her this time by remaining quiet while she made the tea, even as they drank it together. As she watched Kate set down her empty mug, Jessie felt a rush of affection for her big sister. When she tried to pull her into a gentle hug, Kate winced in pain.

Alarmed, Jessie said, "Oh my God, Kate..."

Kate said nothing and stared at the floor with hollow, defeated eyes. *She looks so tired*, Jessie thought, noticing Kate's left eye swelling up fast. Jessie stood, moved behind her sister, and tugged at the collar of the coat.

"Let's get that jacket off." Kate cried at the effort, and when the jacket came off, Jessie gasped. "What the..."

Welts covered Kate's upper body, and for the first time in a long time, the Little Generator inside Jessie kicked to life.

"Damn, Kate. I think your shoulder is dislocated," she whispered, counting the dark bruises on Kate's skin. Some were days old and some were lighter, brownish hues, still in the process of healing from

past beatings. Jessie willed herself to calm down, but when her eyes moved to Kate's head, she froze.

"Oh, Kate." Blood droplets were forming where her hair met her scalp. Terry had knocked Kate around before, but never like this. Unable to stop her own tears, Jessie said, "I'm calling the police," as she hustled back into the kitchen to retrieve her cell-phone.

"No," Kate said. "Please, don't call the police. He'll get out and... and kill me."

Jessie's hand wavered over the phone, but she didn't pick it up. Instead, she turned to the refrigerator and retrieved an ice pack from the freezer. She moistened a kitchen towel, wrapped it around the frozen gel-pack and went to her sister's side. She gently held it to Kate's head.

"Kate, we can't let him keep getting away with this. It's way worse. He's going to kill you if we *don't* call the police." Kate wrapped her arms around Jessie's waist and sobbed.

"I'm begging you, please don't. Oh, God, Jess. It's different this time. This is a hundred times worse than ever before."

"What started it?" Jessie asked.

Kate sniffled and coughed out the words. "I refused him because he's too rough, and he wanted to bring home another dancer from the club."

"So, he beat you for not wanting to have a threesome?" Jessie said.

"Honest, Jess," Kate said, her voice quaked with fear. "I wasn't mean about it. I just told him I'm not really into girls. I told him he could fuck her, that I didn't care. He...he...it's all my fault."

"This is not your fault," Jessie snapped, "It makes me sick that you're even thinking it."

"Great, I make you sick, too," Kate said. "I'll just leave."

"Stop it, Kate. That's not what I meant, and you know it." Jessie thought about how many times the police had come, and how many times the police had left, with either Terry or Kate in the back seat of a police cruiser. Sometimes they both shared the experience. The system was fucked up. They were fucked up.

Kate sniffed and dropped her face into her hands. "He threw me out and told me to mooch off you from now on," she said. "Then he dragged me from the house by the hair. Down the stairs." Jessie frowned and surveyed the bare skin of her sister's shoulders.

"I have a doctor friend who will fix your shoulder and not report it," Jessie said.

Kate continued, as if she hadn't heard what Jessie had to say. "He said my shit will be on the lawn, and you could pick it up."

Jessie stood silent, her arms across her chest for a long moment, then she said, "I'm not going to let that fucker get away with this. I have to think."

"He's smoking it again," Kate said, talking to herself.

Fucking crack. "That's no excuse."

"He's...he's not like this when he's not smoking it," Kate replied, then added, "I can't go back, I just can't."

Jessie stared at her sister a moment, felt the power coursing through her. Jessie thought about how she hadn't felt the Little Generator in a long time. *I kind of miss it.* "I'm going to run you a bath. I'll be right back." A few minutes later, she returned with a second cup of chamomile tea and passed it into Kate's trembling hands.

"Look," Jessie said, "it's my turn to take care of you, and I've got an idea. It's lucky we both work at the same place. I'll call Rob and have him switch our schedules so we can work the same shift. He knows all about Terry, so I'm sure he won't have a problem with

that. We'll ride in together and work something out. There's no way Terry will go for you if we're together."

"No, Jess, no," Kate said. "You don't get it. Terry said if he ever sees me again, he's going to kill me. I've got to leave town."

Jessie snorted. "Where are you going to go? You going to quit your job? Hide? He's had you under his thumb for almost three years now. Do you have money stashed like I've been telling you to do?"

Kate shook her head.

"No," Jessie said, "of course not. No car, no money. You don't have much of a choice. You're staying with me, and that's that."

BY DAYBREAK, JESSIE PULLED HER OLD JEEP CJ-7 UP TO THE CURB OF TERRY Hoffman's surfside beach home. As he'd promised, Kate's stuff had been tossed onto the lawn in a disheveled heap. Jessie shut off the engine and looked around for the asshole before setting the parking brake. *Not here, that's good.* She loaded an armful of clothes in the back of the Jeep, but when she turned for another, there stood Terry. Although he only wore board shorts and flip-flops, he reminded Jessie of a silverback gorilla, all puffed up to protect his territory by flexing his bare, muscular upper body to look as intimidating as possible. He glared at Jessie, like he was king of the world.

Inside her, the Generator instantly kicked on again and cranked up fast. Jessie glared back at the man, not hiding her disgust. Despite her desire to have a go at him, intuition reminded her not to poke the bear. They just stood there, sizing each other up. Jessie hadn't liked Terry from the moment the three of them had met at Crossfit Sandbox. Kate had been attracted to Terry's bad boy

attitude, his perfect physique, and formidable package. Jessie's warning had fallen on deaf ears. Kate and Terry were almost screwing before they even got off the mat.

Jessie shook her head in dismay, knowing how Kate had gone from a self-sufficient, licensed Massage Therapist to Terry's fuck-puppet over the past couple of years.

Maybe this will be the turning point, finally.

"May I continue, my lord?" she asked.

As if he had been waiting for the question, Terry gave a flourish of approval with his hand. Then, he crossed his arms and resumed glaring at her.

"Let Kate know she can come home now," he said. When Jessie didn't reply, the smile slipped from his face. Jessie suppressed her own grin at the realization that Terry was pissed because it wasn't Kate standing on his lawn, begging for him to take her back. Jessie would have loved to rub his face in it, but she knew she might end up losing in the long run.

Don't poke the bear.

"That won't be happening, Terry. Not this time. You've gone too far." Jessie tossed the last load in the Jeep, climbed into the driver's seat, and looked up at Terry who still stood there gloating at her from the height of his deck. "Oh, and by the way, you're banned from the Box. Show up, and I'm calling the police."

Terry flipped her the middle finger. Jessie returned the gesture.

Jessie, being half-owner of Crossfit Sandbox, had already initiated her quest to get the word out to the other Crossfit facilities in the area about what had happened. *Don't poke the bear.* In her rear-view mirror, Jessie saw Terry standing in the street. Yelling profanities, he turned his back to her, bent over, and dropped his shorts.

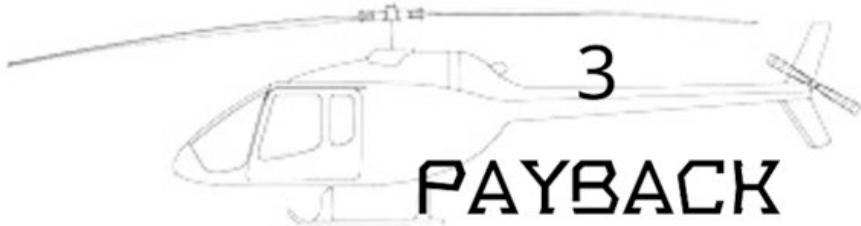
"Real mature, asshole!" she yelled back, and flipped him the middle finger again. Jessie felt certain that Terry would ignore her trespass warning because, once again, Kate had refused to call the police. Kate had never actually called the police in the past. Usually a neighbor, or Jessie had that responsibility.

And that's going to change, too.

She returned home to find Kate asleep, curled up in her bed like a wounded animal. Jessie bent over and kissed her on the forehead. Kate barely roused herself, her eyes fluttering open for a brief moment in acknowledgement of her sister's presence. Jessie knew Kate would probably be sleeping a lot in the coming days. She desperately needed to heal physically before she could even think about how to heal emotionally.

"I've put your stuff in the living room," she said, pausing for a response. Kate did not move. Jessie rested a hand on her sister's hip. "I'm off to work," Jessie whispered. "I'm doing a split shift today. I'll be home by three, but then I have to go back at six." Jessie walked to the bedroom door and turned around for another look. Kate still wasn't moving. "Love you, sis," she said, and then gently closed the door behind her.

As Jessie locked the apartment door from the outside, she didn't see that Kate's eyes were wide open.



That afternoon, when Jessie returned from work, her stomach lurched at the sight of a police car in her driveway. She parked, then rushed to her front door where a young, female police officer stepped out to meet her. She knew this officer from the Box.

Amy, she thought.

"Jessie..."

"What happened? Where's Kate?"

"Let her by, Amy." The voice came from inside Jessie's apartment. Amy moved aside as Jessie stepped in to meet a plain-clothes police detective she did not know. He took notes, assessing the scene.

"Where's Kate?" she demanded, again. "Where's my sister?"

And then she saw the blood. Jessie's knees buckled, but the detective caught her, quickly followed up by Amy. Jessie struggled to stand. Blood didn't make her weak at the knees, but the rush of power about knocked her on her ass.

"Let us help you sit," the detective said. They eased her into the leather library chair, the same one her sister had occupied the night before. Amy went to Jessie's kitchen, opened the fridge, and returned with a bottle of water. Jessie took it, smiled a little and nodded.

"My sister."

"She's been transported to Grand Strand Medical," the detective said.

"What happened?"

"We're not sure," the detective replied, a frown on his face. "She's not talking. Your neighbor saw her talking to some muscle guy by the front door."

"Mrs. Rickley saw them?" Jessie asked.

The detective glanced at his note pad and nodded, then continued. "She said they were hugging and kissing, and when they went inside, Mrs Rickley went in too. A couple of minutes later, she heard screaming. Mrs. Rickley and other neighbors came back out just as the guy ran from the apartment and around a corner. She didn't follow him. She went to check on your sister, found her on the floor, and called 9-1-1. A marked police unit arrived less than five minutes later, but the guy was gone. The guy was in and out of your place in a few minutes. He beat your sister pretty badly."

The power inside Jessie surged. Her body slid half out of the chair, her arms flailed to hang on. The detective reached out to steady her.

"Amy, call the amb..."

"...Don't touch me," Jessie said, cutting him off. "I don't need an ambulance. I need answers."

The cop raised his hands, took a step back and said, "Sorry."

Jessie closed her eyes and gripped the armrests of the chair. "You don't understand," Jessie said softly. At that moment, she felt so amped up with the energy flowing through her, she feared she might accidentally end up in his body just from standing too close. In all the years she had experimented with 'slip-streaming', as she called her ability, she had never been more overwhelmed by the surge of power than at that very moment.

Not even the first time.

"Are you okay?" the detective asked kindly.

Jessie regretted snapping at him. The power undulated beneath her skin, and a bold sense of clarity suddenly came over her. "Sorry. You didn't deserve that. I'm fine." She took a deep breath to steady herself. "I'm just angry."

"I take it you know this guy," he said.

"Yes," she said, and made up her mind.

Time for a little pay back. Jessie knew the risks, but she also knew that the system had failed Kate too many times before. Restraining orders, jail time, tens of thousands of dollars in fines—nothing worked to keep them away from each other. Kate wasn't the only one, either. Terry had a heavy hand with all the other women in his life. But unlike the others, Kate always went back. Hell, even Kate had been arrested once for violating her own restraining order. They called the disease Kate suffered from 'the cycle of abuse', and the way the legal system tip-toed around domestic violence contributed greatly toward continuing the cycle.

"He's her jackass boyfriend," she said, shaking her head. "I'm surprised you don't know him. He's a regular at Myrtle Beach P.D. and the Horry County jail."

"No, I'm kind of new to Myrtle Beach. I transferred up from Charleston a couple weeks ago. My mother lives here and isn't doing

so well."

"I'm sorry about your mom," Jessie said, then pulled her phone out of her pants pocket. "Let me show you a picture." She activated the gallery app, found a good photo of Terry's face, and turned the screen around for the detective. "Give me your phone number and I'll text it to you."

She couldn't help but think the timing was perfect. Euphoria and energy flooded through her veins, pulsing in her temples and her chest. She had to move fast. She felt the familiar belly burn that accompanied slip-streaming, despite there being nothing even remotely sexual about the situation. Slowly, she squeezed her legs together and hoped no one noticed the heat radiating off her body.

Yeah, she thought, I'm ready right now.

"I have to go," she said. She looked at her watch: 3:15pm.

"Can you give me his name, first? How about an address?"

"His name is Jack-ass," Jessie said. The detective looked up from his note pad and raised an eyebrow. "How do you spell that? J-a-c-k..." he paused.

"OK, it's Kerrin Huff," she lied, and then spelled it phonetically. It was all she could come up with on the fly.

She knew this fib would cause her trouble. Terry's reputation as a mean son-of-a-bitch was well deserved. And the man was strong.

Very strong.

She had confidence in her skills from sparring with much bigger men during her MMA classes and knew how to get out of sticky situations. She frowned thinking about it. Truth be told, skill or no skill, all muscle or not, she only stood at five-foot-two and just over a hundred twenty-five pounds. She couldn't beat him unless she got the drop on him. A surprise attack. Her plan, as it formulated in her

mind, didn't include fighting him. Today, she had something else in mind.

"He should be teaching a fitness class at North Beach Crossfit at six o'clock." The detective wrote the information down, so she continued. "I bet you can catch him there. He drives an older white Porsche 911." She punched the detective's phone number into her messaging app. "I just texted you his photo. Show it to Mrs. Rickley. She'll identify him." She saw the detective write "Kerrin" and hoped the lie sounded believable enough to give her the time she needed.

The detective looked at the picture on his phone and nodded.

"Please arrest the asshole. I'll get my sister to cooperate," she said, and headed out the front door.

"Wait," he said, "I need a statement from you, too."

"If you have any more questions, you can find me at the hospital," she replied without slowing down. She hopped back in her Jeep and headed straight for Terry Hoffman's house. She hoped the detective hadn't noticed she drove the wrong direction.

When she arrived, she drove right onto Terry's lawn, jumped out of the Jeep, and vaulted to the deck, taking three steps at a time. Vibrating with anger and power, she pounded on the front door with a closed fist. She flexed her fingers and watched the small threads of electricity crackle between them. The familiar tiny motes of light lifted off her skin. Her anger was hot and aggressive. It moved through her faster than ever before. She pounded again and compared the feeling blasting through her with the first time she'd accidentally slip-streamed into her old boyfriend, Ronnie.

This is ten times what flowed through me that day.

The power felt thick and pliable, but also nimble. It steeled her muscles. She looked at her Sunnto watch: 3:35pm, sharp. She banged on the door a third time. With his car in the driveway, he

had to be here. "Motherfucker Terry! Open the Goddamned door, asshole!"

A second later, Terry opened it, a sleepy look on his face, "What the fuck do you want?"

In reply, Jessie front-snap kicked him in the chest as hard as she could. He grunted and stumbled backwards into the foyer wall. She leapt through the door, punched him in the face, and used what Brazilian Jujitsu skill she had to arm-bar him straight to the living room floor. She locked his wrist in the center of her chest, forcing her body down to keep the pressure up. She loosened her grip, ready to slip-stream. She reached out to connect with his face, but in doing so, Terry's wrist slipped free. He spun out of her hold, vaulted up, and got behind Jessie to maneuver her into his own wrist lock. Jessie gritted her teeth from the pain, but she did not cry out.

"Whoa now, missy," he hissed. "You like to fight, huh? I like to fight, too."

He wrenched her arm behind her back at an impossible angle. Jessie felt her shoulder separate from the socket. She groaned, the pain mixing with the energy as it pulsed through her body. Her ability to heal faster than a normal person had to be one of the best side effects of slip-streaming. But it still hurt. Able to take a beating or not, she cursed herself for having misjudged her physical skill. *I'm not giving up. Now it's time to dance.*

She let rip a war cry and stomped backward onto the bridge of his bare foot. Terry screamed something that did not sound like a war cry, but he maintained control of his wrist lock. He spun Jessie around to face him, just as a fist met the side of her head.

Jessie didn't feel the pain. She felt the need to *slip*.

She lunged at Terry, threw a right hook, but missed, and received another punch to the left side of her face, along with a sneer from Terry.

"Oh, yeah, baby," he taunted her. "Come on. You're way better than your sister. I should have made you my whore instead."

Jessie spun on him and unleashed three lightning fast roundhouse kicks toward Terry's head; the third one connected with force that even surprised her. He staggered back into the wall, but as she moved in for another kick, Terry sprang forward, grabbed her foot and twisted. Her body spun around so her back now faced him. He threw her into a bear hug, lifted her from the floor and rushed forward, slamming Jessie face first into the living room wall.

She turned her head at the last second to protect her nose, but the impact sent stars into her vision and a fresh, powerful wave of sheer rage through her body. Despite the power pumping through her veins, she couldn't move. He had her pinned against the wall. She felt no pain but did feel his erection pressing against her ass.

"You're one sick motherfucker, Terry," she hissed through clenched teeth.

He spat blood into the side of her face. "Fuck yeah, I am. And I think you like it," Terry said, cinching down like a vice.

Jessie gasped at the man's strength. Although she could barely breathe, power still flowed through her body. The female warrior bad-ass plan wasn't working. She needed to come up with a different strategy.

Now.

Terry easily restrained Jessie with one hand and unbuttoned her pants with the other, sending another jolt of terror rippling through her body, fueling the fire already burning inside her.

"No!" she shrieked, trying—and failing—to move and kick with her legs.

Terry pulled her back and rammed her body against the wall again. Somehow, he got her pants down to her knees. She heard the rip of Velcro and felt Terry's board shorts slide down the back of her legs. She gritted her teeth together and did her best to resist as he thrusted himself between her butt cheeks. She hadn't envisioned herself being in this situation and suddenly regretted not working with the detective.

I need to turn around.

She stopped resisting. Terry noticed the sudden change in her demeanor but didn't move his hips until Jessie relaxed and started to grind her ass against his hardness. The gesture caught him by surprise.

"Fuck me," she whispered, her voice husky and breathless. Terry froze as her butt cheeks rotated, grinding into his erection. He hadn't entered her. Not yet, but she decided to do whatever it took to get the upper hand. "Fuck me like you fuck my sister," Jessie said, hoping she sounded convincing and not like she was about to vomit. "I've always wanted you. You've known it. Come on, Terry, give it to me."

Terry paused a moment then hissed in her ear, "No games, bitch, or I'll snap your fucking neck."

"No games," Jessie said softly and wiggled her ass once more. In one swift move, Terry spun her around, but still held her against his body, her arms crushed against his chest.

Don't throw up, don't throw up.

She moved to wrap her legs around his waist but couldn't. She could hardly breathe. "My shorts," she whispered.

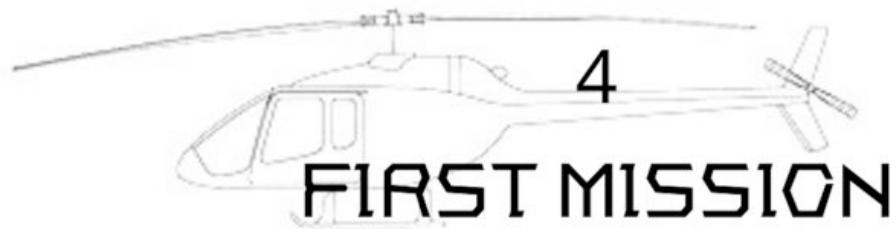
"No games, bitch," he repeated, slamming her back against the wall so hard that a squeak escaped her throat.

"No games," Jessie grunted. Then, she leaned in to kiss him. He kissed her back, roughly. He shoved his tongue into her mouth, and then bit her lip hard, drawing blood. Jessie winced, but leaned back, looked into his eyes, and licked her lips. "Oh yeah, come on, be rough with me," she said, and thrust her hips into his.

I'm ready, motherfucker.

Terry grinned and released his hold just enough for Jessie to reach up and touch the sides of his face.

Gotcha.



Jessie's body instantly collapsed into Terry's strong arms. Still, she stumbled, shocked at the effect of adrenaline, and who knew what else, pumping through Terry's body. She clung to her own limp form with one arm and slapped her free hand against the wall for balance.

"Whoa boy," she said, and shuddered at the way his voice sounded in her mind.

She had slip-streamed into men before. But this? This felt entirely different. Normally, she needed a few minutes to acclimate to her host's body and senses. Not now. She shook her head, amazed at the intensity vibrating through her. She felt ready to burst out of Terry's skin.

"You are fired-the-fuck up, boy!" she whooped. "Yeah, I'm good to go."

She carried her body into Terry's bedroom and gently laid it on the bed. "Weird," she said, "thinking about my body as being an 'it'."

She looked at her watch: 3:40 pm. The police were probably at North Beach CrossFit by now. She pulled up Terry's board shorts and patted down the pockets until she felt his phone. She yanked it out, fondled it.

"Ugh, I don't know the code."

She took a deep breath. "Relax, Jessie," she said. She was already getting more accustomed to his voice. She calmed her mind, took another deep breath, and on the exhale, she concentrated, probing Terry's brain for...

A quick bolt of pain shot through the middle of Terry's head. A weird squeak came from his lips that he would never have made on his own. She stumbled but caught the bedpost and hung on until the pain subsided.

"That's a first," she said, just as the numbers came to her like a lighthouse beam through the fog. She entered 7 2 9 5 5 8 into the keypad, and the screen cleared.

"Yes!" She immediately launched the banking app, which also required a code. She punched in the same numbers—and it worked. "Stupid fucker," she growled. "I bet that's the code for every security measure he has."

She flipped through the account and frowned at the measly fifteen hundred bucks he had in checking, but when she clicked open the savings tab, she gasped.

"Eighty thousand dollars? Holy shit." Another memory came to her in the background of the phone code. Her eyes widened as she stepped to his dresser and slid open the top, left drawer. There, under Terry's socks, lay a safety deposit box key. "Hmm. Going to have to check that out, too."

Jessie knew Terry had money but had no idea how much. Terry always made a point to let everyone know he came from old-south

money. His momma happened to be 'widow rich'. Terry's mother had rescued him from jail in the past, so Jessie guessed that the Grand Lady Hoffman bank-rolled him more often than not. She shook off her thoughts. It didn't matter anymore.

Because in the next couple of hours, he won't have any of it.

Her nerves were getting the best of her. So far, her first mission as a thief hadn't gone as planned. She noted bruises already showing on her body, and she felt lucky as hell that she hadn't been raped in the process. She shook off the doubt that crept into her mind.

"We can do this and succeed," she said out loud. Jessie pulled off his damp T-shirt and wiped down Terry's sweaty torso before rifling through his dresser for a clean one. She pulled on a white v-neck and noticed a gaudy Hawaiian shirt hanging from the bedpost. He was rarely seen without one. She snatched it and flung it on. "One cleaned out bank account and jail time to boot, coming right up dickweed," she said.

She did a quick look in the mirror and glanced at his watch: 3:48 pm.

"Now for the keys," she said. She marched into the living room where a row of key hooks hung below a face mirror by the front door. As she approached, Terry's reflection stopped her cold.

"Oh shit, I forgot about that," she said to Terry's reflection.

She leaned in for a closer examination: his irises were undulating, bright red, and deep black, like a fresh lava flow at night. She searched the key hooks, then the kitchen, and finally went back into the bedroom. No car keys. "Fuck me, gotta drive my Jeep," she said.

She snatched a pair of Ray-Ban sunglasses off his dresser and stopped. She watched her body as it lay in the deep meditative state

necessary to stream her consciousness through others. She leaned down and lightly positioned her fingers on her wrist to check her body's pulse. It felt steady, right at fifteen beats per minute. She leaned over, placing Terry's ear over her mouth, and felt the faintest movement of air escape her lips. Concern etched her face. The beating she just took might have injured her body more than she'd realized.

"Still blows me away that I can do this," she said. Terry's voice reverberated like an echo as it sifted through her own body's ears. "Be back soon. Stay put," she said. Then she rushed out the door.

As JESSIE ENTERED THE B & A CREDIT UNION LOCAL BRANCH, THE WALL clock showed 4:10 pm sharp. *Perfect timing*, she thought. *The cops are probably setting up in the wrong place by now.*

"Good afternoon, Mr. Hoffman." She looked up to find a greeter with an outstretched hand. She shook it and nodded. The greeter politely asked, "How can we help you today, Sir?"

"I'm here to make a withdrawal," she said.

"Please, step this way. Melody will assist you," the greeter said.

After filling out the required paperwork, the manager approached Jessie, his eyes glued to the forms in his hands.

"So, you wish to close the account, Mr. Hoffman?"

"Not at all. I want to leave one dollar, or whatever the minimum is required to keep the account open."

The manager raised an eyebrow. "That's still a lot of money for us to count out, Sir. We close at six. Perhaps..."

"Then we've got plenty of time, it's only 4:25. Let's get this done, so you're not late for dinner," Jessie said, and then remembered

something else. "Oh, and I'd like access to my safety deposit box while you're getting my cash together," she added, dangling the key in front of her. The greeter frowned, checked his own watch, and then looked back up with a forced smile.

"Of course, Mr. Hoffman."

A little over an hour later, having concluded her business at the bank, Jessie pulled up in front of Terry's house and checked his watch again: 5:25 pm. She wondered if the police had figured out her lie, or if they'd already shown up to check out Terry's house, but she didn't think so. She reached into the backseat of her Jeep, grabbed her pink Under-Armor hat, and pulled it on. She gave Terry's face the once-over in the rear-view mirror. "

"What a hot-mess," she said. Then she slowly got out of the jeep and tried to look as conspicuous as a muscle-bound guy wearing a brightly-colored floral pattern shirt, a pink ball cap, emerging from a topless, doorless red Jeep could look. She wanted anyone looking out their window to see him.

Jessie took her time getting into the house and hustled once inside. Pressed for time, she knew if she screwed up the next part of this seat-of-the-pants mission, she would be dead, dead, dead.

Her barely breathing body lay right where she'd left it: shorts and panties partially down, shirt ripped, one breast exposed. She effortlessly lifted her body from the bed.

"Goddamn, he's a strong bastard. I do *not* feel like one hundred twenty pounds." Once in the living room, she stopped cold when she realized the Little Generator had not yet kicked in. She wasn't sure what this meant. In former test subjects, she could always sense the energy humming in the background and had been able to release her hosts without trouble. Something was missing. "Fuck me, what now?"

Fuck me...exactly.

"Stay calm, girl. Recreate the moment," she said. She tried to stand her own body up against the wall in an effort to pick up where they had left off. She fumbled and tripped in the attempt, almost dropping the deadweight of her own body onto the floor.

After a little rough handling, she finally maneuvered her torso into place. With a hand flat on her chest to keep her body upright, she took an arm's length step back to survey the scene.

She shook her head. "I have no fucking idea what I'm doing," she said. With her free hand, she pulled out his cell phone, typed the screen code in with her thumb and dialed 911.

"Nine-one-one, what's your emergency?" the operator asked.

"My name is Terry Hoffman," she said. "I live at 2980 Beach Run, and I'm calling to turn myself in."

"Sir? Can you please repeat that? Turn yourself in for what?"

Jessie had watched every episode of *48 hours* at least twice, so, she knew the operator stalled for time to get a fix on her location for the uniformed cops. She squeezed her eyes shut and pressed her index finger to her temple.

Think.

"I broke into my girlfriend's sister's house and beat the shit out of her," Jessie said, hearing Terry's voice shake.

Breathe. Relax. Stick with the plan.

"You broke into a house and beat up your girlfriend's sister?"

"No, you stupid bitch, I beat up my girlfriend. Her sister is here. At my house. So, stop the bullshit. Let me just tell you this: You better get a cop here now before I kill this little whore. You understand that, bitch?"

"Sir, can you—"

Jessie hung up.

She tossed the phone across the room. She moved in right up against her body and concentrated on a memory of a girl she'd seduced in college—another experiment. Then, she leaned in and kissed her own lips.

Nothing.

"Ugh," she said. Her stomach knotted up. "This feels kinda 'rapey' all over again."

For the most part, she had gotten over the weird feeling of self-violation during college. But this was different, because Terry intended to rape her.

And this isn't over yet. If I don't play this just right...

She repositioned herself and tried again, this time focusing on last year's experiment with a hot Myrtle Beach firefighter.

Nothing. Strike two.

"Goddammit."

Her head shot up when she heard a police siren in the distance. She knew she had to hurry because she didn't want to end up in jail, stuck in Terry's body.

"No way they're that fast," she whispered. She needed to know how much time she had, so she leaned as far as she could toward the living room window and snuck a look. She jerked away at the sight of a police cruiser as it pulled up to the curb two houses down.

"Aw, shit," she said, jerking her head down. "Shit, shit, shit!" A wave of panic surged through her so powerful, she almost blacked out. But with the fear came the energy.

About damn time.

The Little Generator cranked away at full throttle, the power to slip back at her command.

She heard the car doors open. Adrenaline and testosterone mixed with her energy as it flowed through Terry's body. Despite her

fear, Terry's body had responded to the excitement of the moment with a full-on erection.

"Fucking creep," she said.

During slip-streaming, her hearing went hypersensitive and directional, like an owl, if she cupped her hands behind her ears, so she figured the sounds of doors closing were probably farther away than they sounded. A police radio crackled outside, its volume suddenly shunted. It sounded too close.

"No way." Panic kicked in another gear as the creak from the wooden steps leading to Terry's front door sounded crisp in her ears. "Not yet," she whispered through clenched teeth. "Wait for it, wait for it."

Energy thrummed in Terry's temples. She kept as low as possible and let out a breath she didn't realize she'd held as the tension of the timing gripped her. She glanced over her shoulder and gasped as the top of a cop's head came into view. "Shit!" she squealed and reached out to touch the sides of her body's face.

The bright light, excruciating pain, and flipping up and around lasted only a second, and she was back. Once again, she and Terry were both screaming their heads off.

Terry blinked twice before his consciousness settled back in. He stopped screaming, a befuddled look on his face as if he had forgotten something important and suddenly remembered it. Growling like an animal, he slapped Jessie hard across the face, seized her by the throat and threw up his free hand to cover her mouth.

"Fucking bitch," he said as he tried to force her legs apart, not skipping a beat from over an hour ago. "I said no games. Now you pay."

Jessie called upon her considerable strength to lock her legs together tight.

Hold on.

Until finally, what she had been waiting for happened. Terry's phone rang. Jessie winked at him and laughed through the hand still covering her mouth.

The sight of someone's head coming up the deck snapped Terry to attention. He shoved Jessie to the floor and leaned toward the window.

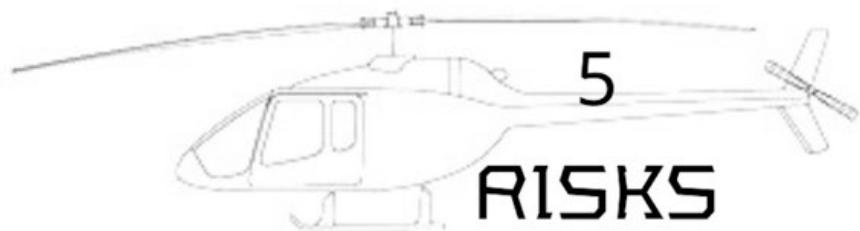
"Cops?" he asked, bewilderment etched on his face. "How the..."

Jessie completed a back-spring to her feet, sprinted for the front door, and hurled it open.

"Help me!" she screamed at the two uniformed cops who were just a few steps below the landing, hunched over, guns drawn. She recognized both of the cops from Crossfit Sandbox.

"Mike! Amy!" Jessie yelled, and moved to step out onto the deck but was jerked violently backward by her hair, and thrown into the foyer wall, stunning her. Terry slammed the door shut and spun the deadbolt just as the cops bodily slammed into it, flexing the frame with the impact. The door held. He had Jessie pinned to the wall again, the whites of his eyes burned brilliant red with rage.

Terry seized her by the throat with a grip that cut off her air. The cops were pounding on the door, kicking it. Terry was physically too close to her, which rendered her attempts to kick out ineffective. She grabbed the hand around her throat with both of hers and dug her nails in. He yelled, but his grip tightened. He pulled his balled-up fist back, the last thing Jessie saw before her world went dark.



Jessie's eyes fluttered open to a bright light above her. For a moment, she thought she might be in the middle of slipstreaming. Her eyes slowly focused on the face of the detective from her apartment. No smile, this time. Although lying down, she felt like her surroundings were spinning. She moved to sit up, and then came the pain. Lots of pain.

"Aw, fuck me sideways," she groaned. "I feel like I got run over by a truck."

"Welcome back," the detective said. "And I would say your friend, Mr. Hoffman, qualifies as a truck. Of sorts. You're lucky you're not dead."

"He's not my friend," Jessie replied, wincing.

"Really? I couldn't tell," the detective shot back, his annoyance obvious.

Jessie blinked several times, looking around the room. "Where am I?"

"Grand Strand Hospital," he said, "alongside your sister." He reached out and pulled the white privacy curtain aside. Kate's blue, tear-filled eyes stared back at her through bruises and bandages.

"I'm so sorry, Jessie." The words sounded more like a mumbled excuse than an apology. Kate turned her head away. Jessie, too, turned her own head away, looking out the window. Now she understood the meaning of rock-bottom defeat.

"That was a pretty stupid thing you did," the detective said. Jessie didn't turn her view from the window, because she couldn't look the detective in the eye. She knew she'd bit off more than she could chew but had no plan to admit that to him. Or Kate.

After a few moments of silence, Jessie said, "It was worth it to put him in jail where he belongs."

The detective drew in a deep breath. "He's not in jail."

Jessie's head snapped to face him, as her heart skipped a beat. Fear flooded into her and ignited the Generator. "Your guys were right there!" she shouted.

"Your screaming forced the officers to move in, and—"

"Damn right," Jessie said, cutting him off.

"Listen. My guys were waiting for backup, and they were still a couple of minutes away, Miss Richter."

"So what?" Jessie said, screaming again. "They had their guns drawn! I was right there in front of Mike and Amy!"

The detective sighed. "He got away."

"He got... away?" Jessie screamed. "Oh my God! He got away! You've got to be kidding me! Holy shit! How the hell did he get away?"

"Mike and Amy kicked in the door. It took them several tries, but they did it. By the time they made it through, they found you unconscious on the floor and Hoffman gone," he said. "Amy

rendered aid while Mike attempted pursuit. When backup arrived, Mike directed them down the side of the house to the beach, but..."

"You're telling me that in that single lane strip of houses, houses raised up on stilts, you couldn't find him? There's nothing there but sand dunes and sea-grape bushes!"

"The county brought in a dog and a helicopter. We searched for hours."

Jessie saw the frustration on the detective's face, but it didn't quell her anger, "Jesus Christ. We're so fucked." She looked over at Kate who stared straight ahead, focusing on the white wall across the room, an almost imperceptible tremor in her hands. Jessie tried to sit up, but a nurse rushed in out of nowhere to ease her head back down.

"You need to rest, honey," the nurse said. "You've got a serious concussion."

"Screw that," Jessie said. "We need to get out of here."

"And we need to make sure your brain doesn't swell," the nurse explained, "so lie back down, please."

"You don't get it," Jessie said, her voice riding a wave of panic. "We need to go. Now. Until the totally lame police catch him and put him in jail."

"You're safe here," the detective said. "I've got a uniform on the door, and we'll keep one there until he's caught."

"What about outside, detective? You going to have someone watch the street to ensure he doesn't shoot the hospital up with one of his AKs?" Jessie asked. She wasn't being sarcastic.

"We secured the guns in his house, Miss Richter."

Jessie glared at the detective. The little flecks of light fueled by her fear and rage rose from her skin. The idea of slip-streaming into

the cop zipped through her mind. "That's a great start. What about the ones *not* in the house?"

"Miss Richter, come on. I'm not going to argue with you about this. Need I remind you that you lied to me?"

Jessie scoffed as she swung her feet over the edge of the bed and tried to stand. Her knees buckled. She staggered into the detective's arms as her head swam with stars that had nothing to do with slip-streaming. With little effort, he hoisted her up and gently laid her back into the bed.

"I told you, young lady," said the nurse, "you've got a concussion. A nasty one, with a matching welt the size of a baseball on the back of your head and a hairline fracture on your cheekbone." The nurse covered and tucked the blankets under Jessie's legs in one swift, practiced movement. She checked the monitors, leaned in close and hissed, "Don't make me strap you down. Because I will if you keep this up."

The detective nodded in agreement from over the nurse's shoulder. Satisfied Jessie had given up on acting stupid, the detective and nurse stepped into the hallway to talk.

A battle of shooting stars filled Jessie's vision, forcing her to give in. Her head flopped to the side where she watched Kate shivering with fear. For the first time in a long time, Jessie felt helpless.

A single tear rolled down Kate's cheek, soaked into the gauze wrapped around her nose. "We're dead," Kate said. "I'm so sorry, Jess."

Jessie's skin prickled. "So am I," she said. "I think it's time we found new stomping grounds."

"What about The Box?" Kate asked.

The question brought happy images to Jessie's mind: working alongside Kate at the Boathouse Restaurant and Bar, putting aside

money for the insanely expensive Crossfit certifications, bursting with pride when she opened Crossfit Sandbox; the first official Crossfit training center in Myrtle Beach. Jessie hadn't considered the business side of the Box since this madness began. Tears burned her cheeks. She turned her face away from Kate.

It's just a thing, she thought, willing herself to believe it. *Besides...*

A small smile rose on her lips, knowing a hundred and fifty thousand dollars lay hidden away, locked up in her office at Crossfit Sandbox.

"I'll ask Monique to buy me out," she said. "She'll do it. Then we'll start another one, wherever we end up."

THREE WEEKS LATER, JESSIE PULLED HER JEEP AROUND THE BACK OF THE Boathouse Bar and Grille, the restaurant where she and Kate had worked since they were teenagers. She'd opened her CrossFit facility, quite literally, across the street, and the restaurant was a popular spot for local athletes and golfers.

She scanned the parking lot for Terry, whom the police had yet to find. She shook her head, dismayed, not only at his escape, but at the existing domestic violence laws that needed to be fixed. Restraining orders only had power if the abuser honored them. Everyone knew that.

She turned to her sister in the passenger seat. She took in the deep, purple bruises surrounding Kate's eyes and the sling covering her left arm. Jessie's muscles rebelled as she climbed out of the Jeep, a testament to her error in judgement on how to handle Terry. But Jessie had fared much better in her battle with the man because

she could fight. Kate couldn't or wouldn't. Also, it helped that her ability had allowed her to heal much faster than normal.

She glanced at the custom locker welded under the backseat of her jeep. Terry's not-so-hard earned cash was piled inside it. A slight smile lifted at the edge of her lip as she flexed her muscular back.

Yeah, it was worth it.

"I'll be right back," Jessie said.

"Bullshit," Kate said, climbing out her side of the Jeep. "I'm coming. Rob's my friend too, you know?"

Jessie smiled. "Good. Rob needs to see what Terry did to you." Jessie disconnected the quick-release steering wheel, holding it up for Kate. "You can't steal it if you can't steer it," she said. The sisters chuckled and headed toward the service entrance of the restaurant.

Inside, the kitchen staff appeared elbow deep in eggs and waffles for the breakfast crowd. Jessie hugged and kissed her way to the dining room where a couple dozen patrons in their finest golf attire and gym clothes were busy wolfing down those eggs and waffles to fuel up for the day ahead. Word had already gotten out to Jessie's and Kate's local customers that the sisters were leaving Myrtle Beach. A couple of them came up to say their goodbye's, handing them envelopes with cash. Jessie couldn't let on that she had no need of it. She played it cool, humbly accepting the gifts. Rob, the restaurant owner's envelope felt very thick.

"Rob, I can't take this, really. I appreciate everything you have done for us, but..."

A scream ripped through the kitchen.

Out of nowhere, Terry slammed into Jessie, ramming her body into the back of the bar. Rob, trying not to panic, shoved Kate toward the exit door behind her. "Someone call the police!" Using himself as a shield to protect Kate, he moved backward into the

dining area and picked up a chair to defend her. Other's picked up chairs too and moved in to bolster Rob's protective wall.

"Terry," he shouted, "get the fuck out."

But Terry's wasn't listening. He had Jessie's dazed body by the throat, balling up his free fist. He jerked his neck to the side with a loud crack, then punched the wall phone, shattering it to bits. He grabbed Jessie's leg with his now free hand and pressed her effortlessly over his head. Then he roared and threw her over the bar, forcing Rob to jump back as Jessie's body bowled over a table and chairs.

Half the patrons had their phones out now—videoing, texting, calling.

Terry ignored them all.

He leapt to the top of the bar like a cat, ripped off his t-shirt, and growled down at Jessie. "Where. Is. My. Money?"

Jessie scrambled forward on hands and knees, trying to escape. She felt numb to the fresh pain layered onto her still-healing body as adrenaline, mixed with power from the Little Generator, flowed through her. She felt like she moved too slow, and she was right.

Terry pounced. He landed beside Jessie and stomped into her back, pinning her to the floor. He crouched down and leaned in close to her ear. "I don't know how you did it," he spit in her face, "but I know it was you, because when I went to the bank and reported a theft, your Jeep was on the video, you stupid cunt."

He stepped off her back. Jessie scrambled forward like a bug on the run until a savage kick that lifted her several inches off the wood stopped her cold. She felt no pain, not yet anyway. She knew it would come in full force tomorrow.

If there is a tomorrow.

With her face flat on the floor, she saw two men across the dining room get up from their table. Big, fit men. They were closing in fast. They wore golf shorts and polos. Something in the way they moved told her these men were not going to end up on the floor beside her. Terry grabbed her by the hair and lifted. She felt her scalp separating from her skull and reached up with both hands to hang on to Terry's wrist as the men got closer.

One appeared to be a bit older, maybe in his late fifties. He was tall, but muscular. The other stood as tall, and just as beefy but looked younger. Maybe in his mid-thirties. Both were built for business. Jessie guessed they were either off-duty cops, or maybe soldiers. She squirmed in Terry's grip in an attempt to keep him focused on her, and not the men.

"How did you do it, bitch?" Terry said, pulling back his fist. "Drug me or something?" Terry pulled up hard on Jessie's hair until her knees barely touched the floor. Jessie squealed and held on. "Where is my money?" His face was so close to hers, she smelled something like blood on his breath, "Where. Is. It?"

"Fuck you, asshole," Jessie grunted, willing the two men to hurry. Terry stood up straight, cocked a fist back.

Oh shit.

Jessie squeezed her eyes closed, braced for the impact. But the blow didn't land. Instead, she heard a slapping sound, followed by the sickening crunch of bone, sending shivers through her. Suddenly, the feeling of free-falling enveloped her, like some skydiver even though the drop could be no more than a few inches. She landed on the floor with a thud and found the strength to scramble away again. She skittered low on all fours toward her sister. Rob reached out and snatched Jessie by the hand, pulling her to safety.

Kate and Rob helped Jessie to her feet. "Can you walk?" Kate asked.

"I'll sure as hell walk out of here," she said.

She wrapped one arm over Kate's shoulder and lurched forward. As they moved low behind the bar, Jessie glanced over the bar top. The tall, younger guy had Terry in a choke hold. Terry snarled and kicked, but one of his legs looked to be bent backwards at a wrong angle.

"The police are on their way," Rob said from directly behind the girls.

"No," Jessie said. She gripped her sister's waist a little tighter, then she threw her weight toward the kitchen door. Over her shoulder she said, "Rob, tell the detective to call me. I'll press charges, but we're leaving." She bent over and snatched up her Jeep's steering wheel. "Let's go."

Once outside, Kate dragged Jessie across the parking lot to the driver side of the Jeep. Racked with pain, Jessie struggled as she climbed up into the seat. The power coursing through her was the only thing helping her stay upright and conscious.

"Can you drive?" Kate asked.

"Half dead, I'm a better driver than you," Jessie said. She reconnected the steering wheel, and then froze. She patted her pockets and banged her forehead softly against the wheel in exasperation. "Fuck me."

"Lose these?" an accented voice said.

Startled, Jessie and Kate turned their heads to the older, tall guy standing beside the Jeep, the keys to the ignition dangling from his fingertips.

"It's not polite to run out after someone rescues you," he said.

Jessie couldn't place the accent and had no idea why she was even thinking about that.

Kate grinned and said, "You guys kicked Terry's ass good. I've never seen anyone take him on like that. I don't think he's ever going to walk right again the way your friend caved in his knee. He deserved it. He's a fucking asshole."

"Shut up, Kate." Jessie said. Her knuckles were white as she gripped the steering wheel, her brow furrowed in frustration.

The man asked Jessie, "Are you okay? You took one hell of a beating there, young lady. I just thought..." He paused, noticing Kate's bruises, too. "He do that to you?" Kate nodded. The man frowned.

At the sound of police sirens in the distance, Jessie groaned. "Can I have my keys?" she said, not able to look her rescuer in the face.

"You're not staying for the police?" he asked.

"Hell no," Kate and Jessie replied as one.

"You know, if you don't press charges, he'll never stop," the man said.

"He'll never stop either way, mister, that's why we've got to go," Jessie said. She cursed inwardly at not being able to hold back the tears as they rolled down her face. It occurred to her that she did not know this guy. "Who are you, anyway? You a cop or something? Because so far, the police have been useless."

"Yeah," Kate added. "He got away from the cops once already and look what happened." She half-raised her slung left arm.

"I get that. Look, my name is Jon, Jon Daly, and the other guy is Chip Rasher. We're not police, but let's just say we do a lot of specialized work for the government."

Jessie scrunched her face. "Now that really doesn't make sense." She hadn't slip-stream in front of him or displayed any electrical fireworks. This stranger probing her for information made the small hairs on the back of her neck stand on end.

"Listen, I've been through a lot of crazy things in the past, but I don't think I've ever seen a man that angry before." His expression toward Jessie turned hard. He asked, "All because you stole some money from him?"

Kate punched Jessie lightly in the arm. "Jessie Marie! No you didn't! How much?"

"I can help you," the man said, as he studied Jessie's expression. Jessie snorted. "Why?"

"Because situational planning is my specialty, and I can tell by the look in your quickly swelling eyes that you haven't got a plan," he replied, pushing a business card toward her before relinquishing the keys. Jessie snatched it up and handed the card to Kate.

"What is Crue Intellis?" Kate asked.

"It's the company I own," he said, handing Jessie the keys. She grabbed them, but he didn't let go. "If you get into a pinch, no matter where you are," he said, "call me."

Before Jessie could tell him to go to hell, police lights appeared on Highway 501. She felt the energy inside her start to build again. "Can I, please, please, please, have my keys?" she said.

Jon grabbed the door frame and said, "On one condition."

Jessie glared at him, incredulous. "Really? And what might that be?"

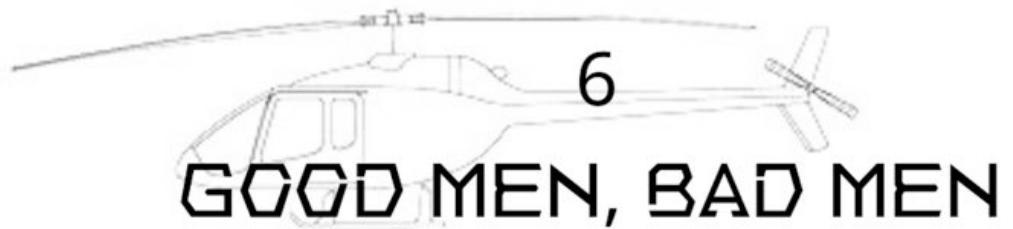
"When the time comes, I want you to look me in the eye and tell me the truth about why that guy just tried to beat you to death."

Jessie held the man's stone-cold gaze as the lights and sirens approached. Finally, she said, "If I decide to call you, I will tell you

the truth."

Jon released the keys.

Seconds later, the Jeep's wheels kicked up dirt as the trailer Jessie towed fishtailed toward the exit onto Fantasy Harbor Lane.



Jon returned to the bar and watched as a police lieutenant and patrolman helped the angry man, now identified as 'Terry', rise to a pair of unsteady feet. Chip stood with his arms crossed in front of him, wearing an unreadable face.

Terry glared at the two men, his bloodshot, bulging eyes flitted back and forth between them.

"This ain't over," Terry said. He spat a wad of blood on the floor. "You guys got the wrong criminal. I'll be pressing my own charges." As the two policemen escorted Terry from the dining room, they edged past Jon, who leaned forward to look closer at Terry's face. The man's nose looked to be broken as blood oozed down the wild-man's lip.

Jon raised an eyebrow at Chip. "Did you get an extra lick in?"

"Hey, Boss," Chip said, "I can't take credit for the broken nose. That's courtesy of the police lieutenant over there." Chip pointed with his chin at a tall, black man walking toward them. "But he deserved it. Once he came to, he started swinging."

The lieutenant stopped in front of Jon and Chip, sizing them up. His uniform name tag read, "Darrell Lewis." A telling frown and deep lines etched the man's face. "Good morning, heroes," he said.

"We are in Myrtle Beach to golf," Jon said with a weak smile. "We're no heroes..."

"But we're not going to stand around and let a lady get her ass beat either," Chip finished for him.

"Yeah, I get it." The lieutenant eyeballed each of them. "You guys soldiers or something?"

"We used to be soldiers. I'm Jon Daly," he said and held out his hand. The lieutenant shook it. "Many years ago, I was a former Selous Scout from Rhodesia, and this is Chip Rasher, former Major, US Army. We are..." he paused, searching for the word, "... independent."

"Yeah, I can see that, too," Lewis replied. "So, you're soldiers, of sorts." Jon didn't acknowledge the comment. "I'm guessing this ruined your tee-time?" Lewis asked.

"There's plenty of daylight left for golf, Lieutenant," Jon said. "Maybe we'll get lucky and get an open slot, later."

Lewis nodded. "Maybe you will. Looks like it was unlucky for Mr. Hoffman that you guys just happened to be in the right place, at the right time."

"But very lucky for the young lady, wouldn't you agree?" Jon said.

"Yeah, very lucky." Lewis folded his note pad and put it in the pocket of his soft body armor. "Look, I need you both to hang around long enough to give your statements to the detective."

"Oh, yeah," Chip said, "we'll stick around."

"Certainly," Jon said.

"Good—" Lewis began.

Jon cut him off. “—Because I’d like to interview the wild man myself.” Lewis snorted out a laugh as Jon pulled his wallet from his rear pocket and placed Department of Homeland Security credentials into Lewis’s hand.

“I thought you said you were independent?”

“We are,” Jon said. “Let’s just say that Homeland is one of our better customers.”

Lewis looked to Chip for confirmation. Chip just shrugged.

“Did you buy that badge down on the boardwalk?” Lewis asked, unimpressed. Chip laughed.

With another smile, Jon replied, “Call whomever you must for confirmation, Lieutenant, but I *am* going to have a talk with your prisoner.”

WHEN JON AND ERIC LOOKED THROUGH THE OBSERVATION WINDOW INTO Interview Room Number Three, they saw Terry Hoffman shackled hand-and-foot to a steel table bolted to the concrete floor. His swollen face told Jon all he needed to know about his non-compliance to the repeated “stop resisting” commands from the police.

Lewis exited the room and joined them at the window. Chip said, “That was an effective, single shot to the schnoz, L.T. Good work.” He held out a fist to Lewis.

Lewis, looking as if he thought the man mocked him, hesitated. After a moment of indecision, he fist-bumped.

“Well, the bad news for all of us is this,” Lewis said, as Jon accepted the prisoner’s intake file from him, “Hoffman’s asked for his attorney. So, no interrogation.”

After a quick scan of the file, Jon raised an eyebrow and said, "Shit."

Chip leaned forward, "What, Boss?"

"He's former Army. Tenth Mountain Division. Light infantry. I hate it when good soldiers have gone bad." He handed the folder to Chip, who opened the file and flipped quickly through the pages.

"His DD-214 says he got out on an 'Other Than Honorable' in 2008, Boss. He was not a good soldier. Well trained, maybe. But not good by a long shot."

Jon nodded and turned to Lewis. "I promise I won't ask Mr. Terry Hoffman a single thing about the events at the bar."

Lewis shrugged. "The guy lawyered up. Lawyering up means lawyering up. There's no..."

"Come now, Lieutenant. I promise, no questions about the attack we witnessed."

Lewis raised his eyebrows. "These girls he attacked? He's done it before. One he beat half to death, and the tough one is her little sister. They are no strangers to Hoffman's heavy hand." Jon and Chip looked at each other, their faces hardened at the revelation. "So, if not the attacks, then what do you want to talk to him about?"

"I can only say that my questions have very little, if anything, to do with him."

Lewis leaned in, locking eyes with Jon. "One word about what happened at the restaurant, and you're out."

Jon nodded. "We'll give our statements when I'm done," Jon said, stepping into the room and closing the door behind him.

"DIDN'T YOUR BOSS SAY HE WAS A SCOTTISH SCOUT OR SOMETHING?" LEWIS asked.

Chip eyed him for a moment before answering. "Selous Scout. From Rhodesia. Well, it's Zimbabwe now."

Chip and the lieutenant settled in behind the one-way glass.

"I'll give him ten minutes," Lewis said.

"That's more than he'll need," Chip replied.

"Why do I get the feeling that this is going to be good?" Lewis asked.

"You have no idea," Chip said, a huge smile on his face. "I love watching the boss work."

JON PULLED UP A METAL CHAIR AND SAT. HE LAID THE FOLDER ON THE TABLE, his gaze fixed on the defiant face of Terry Hoffman, but said nothing. After a minute, Terry broke the silence. "You're pretty brave for an old man," he said, sneering at Jon, "I'm going to be out of here before you leave the building, asshole."

As fast as a rattlesnake, Jon slapped Hoffman across the face with an open hand.

"Ow!" Terry cried. "Motherfucker! Why'd you hit me?"

"Each time something comes out of your mouth I don't like, you'll get another," Jon said. His jaw clenched. His grey eyes burned. "You're here to answer my questions, understand?"

"Fuck you, old man," Terry replied. "You can't do this!"

SLAP!

"Ow! Goddammit, stop hitting me!" Terry cried. "You're violating my rights, asshole!"

SLAP!

"You're half right, mate," Jon said. "The police can't do this, but I'm not the police." Jon gave Terry his best Cheshire Cat grin.

Tears flowed from both of Hoffman's eyes, then down and around the sides of his swollen, broken nose.

"This is bullshit," he says. "I want my law—"

SLAP!

"Okay, okay," Terry said. "Fucking stop hitting me, man!"

Jon paused, raised a questioning eyebrow.

"Are you sure?" Jon asked. "I can do this all morning."

Terry's tear-filled eyes were murderous, but he nodded.

Jon leaned back in his chair, glanced up at the mirrored glass behind him, and pulled his thumb across his throat. A few moments later, a *tap tap tap* from the other side told him that the voice recorder and cameras were not activated.

"No video, no voice recording, no evidence against you," Jon said, "but if you lie to me, the slapping will resume, understand? And I'll know if you're lying to me."

Hoffman hesitated. His knees bounced. His eyes darted to the mirrored window and back to Jon. Finally, he nodded.

Jon smiled, nodded back, then said, "Tell me why you think the woman, Jessie Richter, stole your money."

WATCHING THE INTERACTION BETWEEN HOFFMAN AND JON DALY, THE lieutenant made funny little sounds each time it looked like Jon was going to slap the man again.

"Hoffman looks like he's spinning a mighty passionate tale in there," Lewis said. "What is it about the Richter girl? Why the interest?"

"Honestly, Lieutenant, I don't know. My boss has a strange way of unravelling mysteries. He's got a nose for it," Chip said.

Lewis nodded slowly. "Well, I do remember that a couple weeks ago, a call came in from the bank that a customer was raising hell, but he left by the time we got there. The manager did identify Hoffman, but as you know, no complaint, no report." Lewis peeped again when Terry flinched. "Well, if your boss isn't asking him about the attack, Hoffman's lips wouldn't be moving. I'm surprised his lawyer's not already here. So, I guess he's not asking anything important. Terry's an animal, but he's one smart dog."

"You know this guy?" Chip felt sorry for anyone who happened to know Terry.

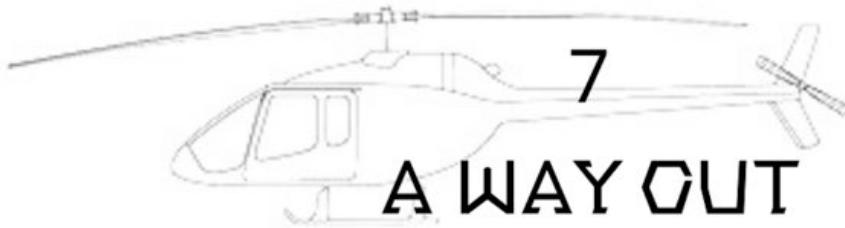
"Yeah, he's probably our biggest local asshole," Lewis said. He turned to look at Chip. "But you two are a couple of interesting guys. Don't be put off if I don't ask more about you. I'm not sure I want to know."

"Probably a wise choice, Lt.," Chip said.

As predicted, in fewer than ten minutes, Jon stood up, turned away from Hoffman, then left the room. "We're done here," he said. "I'm ready to give my statement to your detectives."

"Me too," Chip said, grinning.

"Let's do it," Lewis replied, "and let's see how long we can keep jackass in jail."



Three hours into their ride, Jessie couldn't take it anymore. She didn't need to look at Kate to sense her sister's eyes burning into her.

"I wish you'd stop staring at me," she said.

"I can't believe you'd do something so...so..."

"Stupid? Well, look who's talking," Jessie interrupted.

"I was going to say dangerous," Kate replied. "I mean, look at the side of your face. Are you okay?"

The pain from the earlier beating had finally settled in, and now that Jessie thought about things, the pain kept her awake. Every inch of her throbbed.

"Like I said. Look who's talking." Jessie threw on her turn signal and exited Highway 52. A minute later, she pulled into a filling station. The worn sign on the door said, "Welcome to Wadesboro, North Carolina."

Jessie shut off the engine. "Better hit the restroom," she said. "We're driving straight through."

"Straight through to where?" Kate asked.

"Boone, I guess."

Kate climbed out of her seat and stretched. "I love Boone. It's... expensive, but..."

"But what?" Jessie asked.

"Terry will find us," Kate said, the fear plain in her wavering voice and behind her eyes. "He's taken me to Boone before."

"Then where, Kate?" Jessie said, and blew up. "Where in this godforsaken country hasn't your rich, abusive boyfriend taken you where we'll be safe?" Jessie instantly regretted being so harsh, but it was too late. Kate's eyes welled with tears.

"I don't know, Jessie. I just don't know. I'm scared, that's all. He's the real deal, you know. He's not going to stop. We're dead bitches walking."

Jessie started the pump, walked around the Jeep to her sister, and pulled her into a hug. "I know. I'm scared, too."

The two women stood in silence and held each other for a long moment. Jessie thought about how Terry had violated every restraining order ever issued by the courts on Kate's behalf, and had other cases dropped at Kate's insistence because of her failure to cooperate with prosecutors. A system to handle domestic violence existed, but it was far from perfect, and now, they were way, way past trusting the police. After a few minutes, the pump clicked off.

"So, do you have a plan?" Kate asked, softly. Jessie screwed on the gas cap, avoiding her sister's terrified gaze.

Jessie's mind reached for the business card stuck in the Jeep's ashtray, but she forced the idea of retrieving it away. He'd said his name was Jon. Jon Daly. He seemed legitimate, but she had no idea why he seemed so interested. She still felt a little suspicious as to why he would be willing to help either of them. What happened,

other than getting her ass kicked, that would interest the man, and more importantly, what was in it for him?

"Well," Jessie said, "I thought we'd get up to Boone for starters."

"I just told you—" Kate jumped in.

"Or maybe Asheboro," Jessie continued.

"Asheboro," Kate scoffed.

"See what the job market is like," Jessie said.

Kate stared at her sister with stony disbelief. "So, you don't have a plan."

"Look," Jessie said, "we can just lie low for a while, see if the police catch him. We've got plenty of money. We wouldn't need to work for months."

"How much money did you take from him, exactly?" Kate asked. Jessie went quiet. "Jessie?" she repeated, "How much, Goddammit?"

Jessie exhaled, folded her arms across her chest.

"A little over a hundred and fifty thousand." Kate's mouth fell open. "We have about one-forty left after the work I had done on the Jeep last week."

Kate glared for too long. "He's going to *kill* us, Jessie, you know that?" Jessie tried to walk away, but Kate stepped in front of her. "Just because you're a buff, Crossfit MMA chick doesn't mean you can take on Terry."

Jessie frowned. For some time now, Jessie had been the one taking care of her big sister, now, it looked like the old, self-sufficient, think-before-you-act Kate was back. To make matters worse, Jessie knew Kate was right. With Terry's former Army and professional MMA training, not to mention being constantly amped up on steroids and crack cocaine, he acted like a bomb waiting to explode.

"He can't follow us," Jessie said. "I cleaned out his bank account."

"You slip-streamed," Kate said. It wasn't a question. "I would never think you'd use that gift to steal, but if you would have talked to me first—" Kate held up her hand to cut off Jessie's comment, "Stop, let me finish." Jessie's mouth snapped shut. "I'd have told you that he's got more than that stashed away in his closet safe. And he's got even more in different shell accounts that I have access to. I should know, I set up his program access. Almost all of it is from illegal steroid sales. It would have been much easier to get to than going to the bank."

Dealing in illegal steroids was just a past time for Terry, and although he didn't openly advertise it, everyone knew Terry as the primary local source. Jessie cursed herself, yet again, for not thinking this through. Jessie hadn't considered Terry's insanely rich family, either. Terry's mom had bailed him out last time. She would certainly do it this time, if she hadn't already.

Every time.

"So, why would he care when he's got money to spare?" She knew it was a stupid comment the moment it left her lips, but she didn't want to admit to Kate how frightened she had become.

So much for having a superpower.

"Because it's still a lot of money, Jessie. Did you forget how pissed he was this morning? Did you forget how he tossed you over that bar like a rag doll? You don't have any idea what he's capable of. You just got a taste." She leaned in close and pointed an accusatory finger at her sister. "We're screwed."

"He was coming after *you* either way," Jessie said, and cursed herself again. The stupid shit coming from her mouth just wouldn't seem to stop flowing. "He always keeps coming."

Kate looked at Jessie, tears welling up in her eyes. "I try, Jessie. Really, I do. I don't know what's wrong with me."

"Neither do I, but I have always been there for you, no matter what, right?" Kate nodded. "What happens when I'm not there to protect you? To take you in when you're all battered and bruised, standing in the rain? You're lucky he didn't kill you this time. What's it going to take to get you to see that?"

"Maybe if I could talk to him, tell him..."

"No Kate! No fucking way." Jessie pushed her sister away. "Oh my God, you just can't see what's happening to you. Kate, you're lost and don't even know it. You're not strong enough to handle him, to fend him off in any way. Any attempt to contact him would be playing right into his hands."

"Neither are you. That's what scares me most."

"Neither am I, what?"

"Strong enough. I'm sorry Jessie. He's coming for both of us now."

Jessie thought about this a long moment. She knew her sister had a lot of healing to endure, and what she needed most was time away from the monster. Jessie would never verbalize that she felt like walking away. Even though she hated what Kate had let herself become, she despised Terry Hoffman for what he'd done to her sister. She hated funerals even more, and walking away from her sister would end in Kate's death.

Jessie never took the time to wonder about her own future anymore. It seemed like over the past couple years, taking care of Kate had become more than a part time job. She sighed and looked over at her sister. There would come a time when Kate would have to take care of herself. But now was not that time.

"Are you using the restroom or not?" Jessie asked, trying to detour the argument.

Kate stomped to the passenger side of the Jeep and leaned in. She yanked the business card out of the ash tray, stomped back to Jessie and shoved it in her face. "Call him."

"We don't need him, Kate," Jessie replied, "We can—"

"No, we can't, Jessie!" Kate sobbed. "Who are you kidding? The only way out of this would be..." Kate trailed off. She didn't have to say more.

Jessie chuffed. "You think I'm going to ask a complete stranger to smoke Terry?" Jessie asked. "You're bat-shit crazy, Kate."

It then dawned on Jessie that her sister wasn't inferring that Jon Daly should do it.

She does think I'm strong enough. She thinks I should do it.

Not only had Jessie bitten off more than she could chew by thinking she could beat Terry, the thought of outright killing someone sent a shudder through her. She quickly dismissed the idea from her mind.

"Of course not, but he said he'd help us," Kate said. She flicked the card with a finger, then read it to Jessie, "Jon Daly, CEO, Crue Intellis."

"Let me see that." Jessie snatched the card from her. "There's no address. Just a name." She flipped the card over to see a phone number scrawled on the back. "It's a handwritten number," Jessie said, flipping the card through her fingers.

"What does that mean?" Kate asked.

"It means there's no other information on the card because Jon Daly and Crue Intellis can only be found when Mr. Daly wants to be found. Cloak and dagger bullshit."

Kate went quiet a long moment, deep in thought. "You're not taking into account one important consideration," Kate added,

quietly. "If those two guys hadn't stepped up, you'd be dead. We both know it."

Jessie frowned, mostly at having to swallow her pride that once again, her bigger, self-destructive sister was right. To make matters worse, Jessie also had a feeling that this morning's encounter with Terry would probably give her nightmares for weeks to come. She had no choice but to accept that her impulsive behavior had jeopardized both of their lives, but she wouldn't give up. There had to be something she could do to shake Terry. A spark of fear ignited that familiar, tiny thread of energy deep in Jessie's mind.

We're in trouble.

She palmed the back pocket of her jeans and felt the outline of her cellphone. "Let's get to Boone tonight, get some rest," she said. "If we wake up feeling the same way tomorrow, then I'll reach out to Mr. Jon Daly."

"No," Kate said, "please, I'm begging you. Call him now. Once he steps in, there's no way Terry will come after us. This guy scares Terry. I can tell." She snatched Jessie's wrist and pushed the hand with the card in front of Jessie's eyes.

Jessie stared at it a moment before flipping it around again to look at the number. "Okay, I'll call," she said, and pulled her cellphone from her pocket.

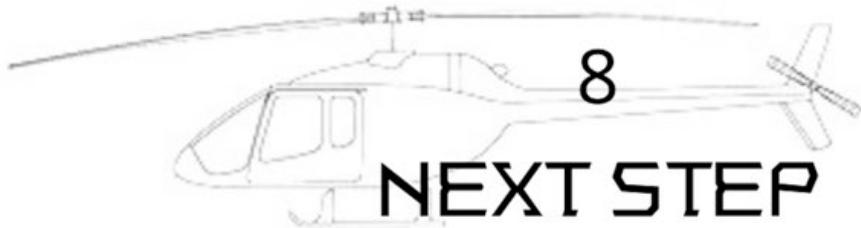
"We've got nothing to lose," Kate said.

Jessie shook her head at her sister as she punched the numbers onto her screen. "Speak for yourself," she said.

She almost hung up when Jon answered and said, "Hello, Miss Richter. How are you holding up?"

Jessie frowned.

What the hell have I gotten us into?



It was noon as Jon, Chip, and one other member of Crue Intellis sat on the balcony of their eighth-floor oceanside condo. They were deep in discussion about the morning events while the summer tourists frolicked on the hot Myrtle Beach sand. Chip's eyes were stuffed into a pair of green, rubberized Steiner 10x50 binoculars, scanning the beach below.

A moment later, Jon's bikini-clad better half stepped out from the living room, handed him a fresh glass of iced tea, and kissed him on the cheek before sauntering to a chaise lounge.

"Thank you, Krys," he said. His eyes lingered on her svelte body as she removed the sarong and stretched out her tanned frame on the nearest lounge chair. She smiled at him and winked. Jon's own smile reached his eyes, and he found it hard to tear his attention away from Krys and back to the set of folders in his lap. He flipped the first one open, thumbed through the contents.

"Jessie Marie Richter, born on December 22nd, 1992, Valid driver license, 4.0 GPA in high-school, 4.0 in college until she dropped out with a top ten rating in the state for gymnastics, and looks here like she had a shot as an Olympic hopeful." Jon paused to hold up a photo of Jessie about ten feet off the mat during a vault. Those around him leaned in for a closer look. He took a sip of his iced tea, wiped the cold condensation from his fingers onto his board shorts, and flipped a page. "When she dropped out of her second year at Coastal Carolina University, she applied for a small business license. Check this out, Gunny. This is right up your alley."

Jon handed the folder to his helicopter pilot, former Marine Warrant Officer, Eric Ramos. Eric had come up through the enlisted ranks, and once he made E-7, Gunnery Sergeant, he finished college and made selection to the Warrant Officers flight training program. Jon couldn't help but glance at the photo-realistic tattoo of a UH-1Z Cobra attack helicopter on the muscular bicep of Eric's arm as the man reached for the folder.

Flipping through the pages, Eric raised an eyebrow. "It's for a Crossfit franchise. Crossfit Sandbox, opened here in Myrtle Beach in December of 2012. She looks the part, too," he said.

"She's got better abs than you do," Chip said.

"And not an ounce of fat, unlike you," Eric taunted, pressing the folder into the taller man's side. As Chip reached out for the folder, not taking the binoculars from his eyes, Eric pulled it back and chuckled at Chip's reach for thin air. "Why the interest, boss?"

Jon blinked. He hadn't really thought about it. "I suppose I'm just curious. There's something about her, about the accusation, about her tenacity that interests me."

"We did a good deed today, Boss," Chip said. "Do you believe Hoffman?"

"Why would he lie?" Jon asked. "He lost a ton of money and claims that either she drugged him, or she put a spell on him. The evidence does show the girl's Jeep at the bank and a Crossfit Sandbox gym bag with her name clearly stenciled onto it. If she had something to do with it, it wasn't well thought out, that's for sure. I've done this long enough to know she's hiding something, and regarding the bank, he's telling the truth as he knows it."

"Yeah," Chip said, somehow taking a swig from a beer can without taking the Steiner's off target. "She's super-fit and tough and all, but she's no match for that Hoffman dude. There has to be a reason she thought she could take him on and win."

"You think she did put a spell on him?" Eric asked. "Or maybe she controlled him somehow?"

"I don't know about spells, but I do know about manipulation and control," Jon said. "If she can get a guy to steal his own money, and he doesn't even remember it, I want to know how she does it. That's something special. Think of the application of a skill like that in our trade?"

"So, what you're saying is that you want to recruit her?" Chip asked, still not dropping the binoculars from his eyes. "She's tough, that's for sure."

"That depends." Jon took another sip of his tea. "At the very least, I need to know the truth."

"She's a Sagittarius," Krys said softly from the lounge chair. "She is a child born on the winter solstice."

"Is that important?" Jon asked.

He posed this question because Krys, beautiful though she may be, with her white hair, Northern European features, and incredible Nordic figure, had more to offer than just being available as Jon's

girlfriend. She knew things about people, especially once she touched them.

Jon had never believed in the paranormal, fortune telling, or any other mystical mumbo-jumbo. Not even as a kid. Until Krys. Fifteen years ago, he had run into her in a small market outside the capital City of Reykavik, The moment she'd locked those Icelandic blue eyes on him, she'd cast him under her own special kind of spell. He was still under it. But as Krys told it, she remained one of the few Volva, or Norse 'seers' left in the world. Her knowledge, superstitions, and the Gods she still worshipped went back thousands of years. But more importantly; she had never been wrong.

"She's stubborn and independent," Krys added, "likes to take care of herself. I don't think she's going to call."

Jon gazed at her and nodded. He closed Jessie's folder, handed it back to Eric. "What about you two?"

"She's more than tough," Eric said. "I mean, I wasn't there, but it seems you two like her." He stared at a professional photo of Jessie in workout attire. "I think she'll call, but not for at least a week. Maybe longer. She'll dig in somewhere, reconnoiter, and then reconsider." He slid the folder on the table, picked up his cup of coffee.

Chip finally lowered the binoculars. "You just like her because she does that Crossfit shit like you do," he said, slapping Eric hard on his bare shoulder. Eric spilled a little coffee between his feet and scowled.

"Do that again, Rasher, and you're going over the side."

"Lighten up, Gunny," Chip said. "I'm with Krys. Based on the way she handled herself at the restaurant, and what's in the police report from three weeks ago, she's an ass-kicker. I say she moves on and won't call at all."

Jon picked up Kate's folder. "I think Krys and the captain are partially right. Leave it up to Jessie, and she pops smoke." He turned around the photo of Kate's occupational license for massage therapy and tapped it with a finger. "This is the big sister. She's the one who's the catalyst behind Jessie's actions. I can feel it. I think Kate's the deciding factor. If Jessie really cares for her sister, and I think she does, she'll call before dinner time."

"You wanna bet on that, boss-man?" Chip said.

"A hundred bucks says she calls before dinner," Jon said.

Chip pointed a pistol finger at John and dropped the trigger-thumb. "You're on."

"I'm in. I give it a week," Eric said as Krys chimed in voting no-call as well.

Just as Jon closed Kate's folder, his encrypted cell phone rang, stopping all of them cold. Jon looked at the caller ID.

"Well, well. What do you know?" he said. "Pay up, comrades. You too, my dear." He turned the phone around and showed them Jessie's name on the caller I.D.

"Wow, did I read that one wrong," Krys said and threw Jon her best pouty face. "I can't wait to meet her."

"You're sure she'll agree?" Jon asked.

"Have I ever been wrong, twice?" Krys asked, smiling.

"Point taken," Jon said. He motioned for the others to move closer and punched the green button to answer the call before clicking the speaker button. "Hello, Miss Richter, how are you holding up?" Chip rolled his eyes, and Krys huffed before going back to her sun-time.

"How did you know it was me?" Jessie's voice sounded uncertain.

"As cliché as it may sound, it's my job to know. It's what we do at Crue Intellis. We collect information."

"I thought you planned things?"

"That's right. I plan missions to collect information."

"So, what do you know today, Mr. Daly?"

A slight smile lifted on Jon's lips at the girl's spunkiness. "Hold on one second." Chip nodded, showing a thumbs up sign, and Eric whispered, "I like her already." Jon popped open the cover of his iPad and clicked on an app. Her number, obtained directly from a cell-data base, had already loaded into the program.

"Ah, well, I know that you and your sister are at a fuel stop on Highway 15 near Wadesboro, which, as fate would have it, is perfect!"

"Perfect for what? How..."

"I also know your Jeep's registration expires next month, your driver license isn't due for renewal until next year, but Kate's has been suspended for not paying a speeding ticket. Actually, she hasn't paid several speeding tickets, but there's no warrant for her arrest. Not yet, anyway. But on a good note, her state professional license for massage therapy is still active for another year—also potentially fortunate for all of us."

Jon imagined he could almost hear the gears turn in Jessie's head. Another alert popped onto the screen. Jon snapped his fingers and turned the screen for the others to see. "Miss Richter, I..."

"Please, call me Jessie."

"Jessie, I don't mean to alarm you, but I just received an alert that our mutual friend, Mr. Hoffman, is in the process of posting bail through his mother. Apparently, a one-million-dollar bond was well within reach. My offer of assistance is still on the table, Jessie." The phone went silent, but for the faint breathing. "Unless you feel that you can navigate through this problem on your own," Jon added.

"I honestly have no idea what to do next. Terry has been everywhere in this State. I'm not scared of him, but Kate is." Before Jon could speak, she added, "Well, that's not completely true. I am scared of him. How could I not be? But the difference is, I'll fight back as best I can and do what I have to do to defend us."

Jon silently acknowledged that, despite the police report, Jessie appeared to need better defensive tactics training. Although, as evidenced by the beating she took, she seemed abnormally resilient.

All simple things that can be fixed.

"With your permission, I'd like to text you an address to our company's mountain retreat. It's another four or so hours northwest from where you're at. You should be able to make it there by four or five."

"Your company retreat?"

"Yes. It's the place we go to unwind after a stressful mission or when the beach is too hot. It's also the safest place in North Carolina. We'll try to meet you there in a few hours so we can chat about your situation. Perhaps we'll get to the point where you can make good on your side of the bargain."

"Bargain?"

"Yes. Remember what we spoke about in the parking lot of the Boathouse Grille? You have a truth to share."

"So, you're saying if I don't tell you how I did it, you won't help?"

"I think it's only fair. I have a lot to offer. Is the truth too high a price, Miss Richter?"

Another long moment of silence passed. "No, Mr. Daly. The truth is not too high a price. I feel good about you so far, and my gut tells me it's the right thing to do, so it's a deal. You're going to meet us there? Aren't you still in Myrtle Beach?"

"Yes, I am. But don't worry, if we're not there before you, someone will be at the Camp to meet you."

"Is it a retreat, or a camp?" Jessie asked. Chip chuckled and Eric snorted at the girl's attention to detail.

"It's both, Jessie. Our private little retreat is called Camp Summit. We're all looking forward to getting better acquainted with you and your sister."

"See you there, Mr. Daly." Jessie said, and hung up.

"Well, looks like we have an interview," Jon said.

Without a word of resentment, the men tossed their hundred-dollar bills on the table and made ready to leave. Krys got up out of the chaise lounge, stretched her long, lithe, barely clad body, and moved catlike up to Jon.

"I'll pay you, later," Krys said, leaning into Jon to kiss him on the lips.



Kate gave Jessie her best impersonation of the Cheshire Cat. She sprang forward, pulled Jessie into a bone-crushing hug while laughing and crying. Jessie groaned at the pain of being squeezed so hard.

"Oh, sorry," Kate said, wincing at Jessie's obvious discomfort. But her concerned look twisted into a sly smile. "See? That wasn't so bad. I told you it would work out." She pushed herself away, grabbed her purse from the floorboard of the Jeep, and headed toward the building.

"Nothing has been worked out, yet. It's just an invite. Wait," Jessie said, "where are you going?"

"I need to pee," Kate said, "and get some ice for your face. I'll be right back."

"Why didn't you go before when I was begging you to?" Jessie shouted.

"I couldn't pee then," Kate said, "because I was too pissed." She chortled at the lame joke and disappeared into the restroom.

"Hurry!" Jessie said. "I want to be there before dark!" No reply. Jessie sighed, then grabbed her backpack and went inside the convenience store. She bought a bag of pretzels, a package of mixed nuts, and a Vitamin Water, then headed back to the Jeep where she entered the address of the retreat into her phone's map app. Surprisingly, it popped up.

Jessie still wanted to get an answer as to why this guy Daly had offered to help them.

Several minutes later, Kate climbed into the passenger side. "Ah, much better. Let's go!"

AT 4:15 PM, JESSIE TURNED THE JEEP UP A PAVED DRIVE AND STOPPED AT huge iron gates with signage across the top reading: Camp Summit. She and Kate got out and looked closer at the magnificent artwork sculpted into the iron.

"There must be a hundred birds formed into the metal," Kate said.

As Jessie reached to press the intercom button, a voice startled her. "You two are right on time," a young sounding male voice said. "Please proceed up the driveway. Someone will meet you."

They climbed back into the Jeep as the gates folded inward, slow and silent. Jessie dropped the Jeep into gear and slow-crawled it the quarter mile up a paved road that meandered through tall pines, maples, and oaks. The trees gave way to an open field that ended at a hill. On the hill, now in front of them, stood the resort house.

"That is one big-ass log cabin," Kate said.

Jessie didn't reply because, for some reason, she felt nervous. She glanced at her sister and noticed that Kate seemed nervous too, having been quiet most of the ride into the mountains.

Jessie rolled up to the massive hand-carved stair landing where an older couple waited for them. Jessie and Kate looked at each other with surprise. The man was simply huge, a full two feet taller than the woman standing next to him. "She looks like a 60's hippie, standing next to Jaws from Moonraker," Jessie said. The woman wore a long, tie-dyed summer dress and a bandana holding up a pile of flaming auburn hair. Both had warm smiles and waved as they approached.

"Be nice," Kate said. "I like hippies."

"Well, they certainly seem pleasant." Jessie bit her lower lip and looked around for others as Kate shot her sister a foul look.

"Don't be Miss Suspicious, Jess. It's too late for that, don't you think?" Kate did her best to maneuver her body out of the Jeep and bobbed up to the older woman first. Kate opened her mouth to speak, but the woman snatched Kate into a long, strong hug. Jessie smiled as she watched the tension disappear from her sister.

"Welcome to Camp Summit," the woman said. "I'm Mora, and this is my husband Dan."

Jessie lifted herself out, marched up to Dan, and reached a hand out. "Hello, I'm Jes..." Before the words were out, the towering man also pulled her in for a hug, lifting her off her feet. It surprised Jessie, but she felt comforted by his big arms. Dan crushed her against his chest with his powerful grip. The way her face pressed against the big man, she found herself looking at her sister as Kate looked back at her. They both smiled as tears of relief flowed freely down Kate's face. Jessie wasn't used to having complete strangers be so friendly.

Maybe I needed a hug, too.

Mora then led Kate and Jessie up the wide wooden steps for a quick tour of the massive lodge. The main floor opened up at the top of the deck landing into a spacious great room with a fireplace large enough that Jessie thought she might be able to stand up straight inside the hearth. She peered at the length of the stone chimney work going up the far wall, through the roof.

"Holy cow, that's a lot of stone," Jessie said. "How tall is the chimney?"

"Thirty feet," Dan said. "All stone pulled from the ground this cabin sits on."

Where oriental wool rugs didn't cover the floor, the wood had been polished to a high gloss. Animal taxidermy adorned every wall, letting any who visited know this be a place where hunters dwelled.

"Looks like a Cabela's store," Jessie whispered.

"Yeah, it's kinda cool," Kate responded. More stairs lined the side walls behind them, leading up to what Jessie guessed were bedrooms. In the center of the wall on the other side of the room, two large swinging doors no doubt led to a fancy kitchen.

The tour circled back to the gathering room. Dan pulled open a pair of tall, sliding glass doors, then ushered them outside onto the west deck. Jessie and Kate gasped at the view. The deck was huge, and tiered. There were several chaise lounges with beach-style umbrellas and a large, stainless bar-b-que on the top deck, a hot tub in the center of the middle deck that looked to be the size of a small swimming pool, and close to the ground, a third deck with all-weather couches surrounded a large firepit.

The sun started getting lower in the sky; its light painted the distant clouds in brilliant colors. The sisters leaned on the rail that

surrounded the deck, soaking in the beauty of the buttercup and wildflower laden fields and the deep woods beyond them.

"I could get used to this," Kate said.

"Mm," Jessie hummed her reply.

A roar in the sky above their heads caused them both to jump. They looked up to see a sleek, black and red helicopter slip its tail around, then lower itself almost to eye level.

"Talk about an entrance," Kate yelled over the rotor noise.

"I'd say." Jessie caught the pilot's eye and then applauded him with a golf-clap.

He held up an index finger as he mouthed the words, "One minute."

Jessie nodded, grinning from ear to ear.

The pilot dipped the nose of the helicopter around to face a flat section of the lawn below them. As soon as it landed, a side door slid open, disgorging four military-looking occupants from its belly. Jessie felt nervous again.

What the hell have I gotten myself into?

Thankfully, the Little Generator remained quiet.

Kate nudged Jessie in the ribs, using her chin to point toward the man coming around the nose of the helicopter beside the pilot. "Our mysterious knight in shining armor," she said.

"Yep, I see him." Jessie turned her attention to two female soldiers racing each other to the stairs. She descended to the middle deck and watched. When the women reached the wooden staircase, they upped their game, taking two steps at a time before rolling onto the middle deck, triumphant. They called out the men for eating too many donuts on the ride in.

The camaraderie between the women made Jessie feel a little nervous about being there. She bit her lower lip.

Laughing raucously, one of the women got to her feet and eased toward Jessie. A tight-fitting tank top showed the woman was fit. Her military-style pants were tucked into her boots, and a light brown ponytail stuck out the back of her "Magnum Research" ball cap.

Tomboy. Good. I like her already, Jessie thought. *And she's not much older than me.*

The woman reached Jessie with her hand outstretched, a genuine smile on her face, and breathlessly said, "Hi, I'm Taina Volkov. Welcome to Camp Summit."

Jessie matched the woman's strong grip and found Taina's Russian accent kind of sexy. "I'm Jessie, Jessie Richter, and this is my sister, Kate."

"Of course, you are!" The older blonde woman who'd also raced up the stairs playfully hip-checked Taina, then slipped between the Russian and Jessie. She held out her hand. "I'm Krys. Krys Johanseen, Jon's better half. It's nice to finally meet you both." Krys didn't have the crushing grip of Taina, but she didn't immediately let go of Jessie's hand either.

Jessie's eyes went wide at the warmth flowing through Krys's hands. She looked down at their clasped hands, expecting to see them glow. They weren't glowing, but when she looked up into Krys' face, the woman's head tilted back slightly, eyes closed. Jessie watched her lips move, like she was chanting something.

Krys' eyes popped open. "Oh, my. You are the special one, indeed," she said, smiling. "I think you are a daughter of Freya." Her smile shone bright and genuine, and when Krys' hands finally slid away from hers, she wasn't sure what to say to the woman still beaming at her. Jessie thought, *Frey- who? Okay, that was weird.*

"Your accent. It sounds...Nordic," Jessie said.

"Very good. Yes. I grew up in Norway, by way of Iceland." She stepped to the center of the deck and spun around, her arms out to her sides, hands spread wide. She looked up into the cloud-filled sky, and Jessie's eyes followed to see what Krys had focused on. "So, what do you think?" Krys asked.

"I think you're stunning," Kate gushed, a flurry of red filled her face.

Jessie covered a laugh with her hand. *But you are right, sis. A little strange, for sure, but definitely a beauty.*

Krys' laugh made Kate blush even harder. "Well, thank you for that," Krys said kindly, "but what I meant to ask is, what do you think of our little cabin in the mountains?"

"Little? Oh, my God," Kate said. "It's just unbelievable. I love it. What a perfect spot and..."

Jessie watched as Krys skillfully slipped her hand under her sister's arm and led Kate away. Krys glanced at Jessie and winked as they walked up to the main deck and into the gathering room. The sound of stomping and the feel of the deck vibrating below her feet forced Jessie's attention to the wooden stairs where a tall, good looking man with short brown hair and a tan complexion stepped onto the deck. Jessie knew this man. He'd put Terry in his place at the bar just before she had blacked out. This man marched straight up to Jessie and presented his hand.

"I'm Chip Rasher. You can call me Chip, ma'am."

Jessie pushed past his extended hand and threw herself into his arms, softly kissing his cheek before hugging him tightly. "Thank you for saving my ass, Chip," she said.

"Ma'am..."

"It's Jessie. Please."

"Jessie, I'm just sorry I couldn't have a few more minutes with him. Taking him down was my pleasure."

Taina walked up to Chip and snorted. "Big tough guy. Now that you've cast him under your spell, I have to re-educate him," she said, smiling at Jessie as she dragged Chip up the steps to the main deck.

Jessie felt like everyone seemed to be in a hurry to give her some space. When she turned around, she saw why: Jon Daly stepped onto the deck with the helicopter pilot at his side.

"Good afternoon, Ms. Richter," Jon said. He offered his hand. "I'm very happy you decided to come."

Jessie hadn't had much of a choice. However, despite her predicament, she had the strong urge to hug him too, and she did. She pushed herself away after a moment. "I'm sorry I was such a bitch back at the bar. You and Chip. You guys saved my life. I'm certain of it. Thank you."

"You are quite welcome, young lady. As you can see, we're all close here. A family of sorts. If you're around us long enough, you'll learn that at Crue Intellis, we have each other's backs." Jon looked at her strangely, then reached for her chin. "May I?" he asked. Jessie nodded. He gently moved her head from side to side, looking at her face. "You don't have the bruising your sister has. In reality, you don't look like you took a beating at all."

Jessie blushed furiously. "I heal fast. I guess it's another weird talent I have," she said, feeling stupid for stating the obvious. She now felt so awkward, she couldn't look Jon or the pilot in the eye. She leaned sideways to look around the men, down onto the field where the helicopter sat on its long skids, its giant rotors barely spinning.

"What do you think of our camp?" the pilot asked.

"It's not like any camp I've ever seen," Jessie said. "I mean, it's a beautiful place you have here, Sir."

"Where are my manners?" Jon said. "Jessie Richter, allow me to introduce Eric Ramos, my pilot and—"

"USMC retired, ma'am," Eric said. "I flew Huey Cobra attack helicopters in Iraq and Afghanistan." He winked at Jessie. "No better pilots than Marines, ma'am."

"And as you can see, Jessie, he's entirely too modest," Jon said with a smile. "He's also our fitness and training officer."

"And, oh, we do mostly Crossfit and Sandbag training," Eric added.

"Hopeless," Jon said, teasing.

Eric held out his hand. Jessie slapped her hand into his, immediately forming an iron grip. He squeezed, and she glanced at his tattooed, balled up bicep. She squeezed back. Hard. The right edge of her lip lifted along with her eyebrow, forcing a radiant smile from Eric, who also glanced at her flexed, muscular arm before he let go. *Settle down, girl.* Jessie chided herself for being a little flirty.

Jessie caught the knowing look in Jon's eyes as he glanced between her and his pilot. "I trust Dan and Mora gave you the nickel tour?" Jon asked. Jessie felt the heat rise to her face as she averted her eyes and nodded, but she couldn't help smiling at Eric who took his turn to blush. "I do apologize for not being able to meet you when you arrived," Jon said. "We underestimated our fuel requirements."

"We had to fly in headwinds most of the way here," Eric said, still smiling.

Jessie wondered privately if she felt attracted to Eric's masculine handsomeness, or his talent as a helicopter pilot. *Maybe it's a little bit of both.* She half-smiled and scrunched her nose. "You have a

helicopter," she said. She remembered when she and Kate would take the short helicopter tours in the little four seat Robinson's down at the beach when they had a little extra money. Which was rare.

"Yes," Jon replied. "And other cool flying machines, as well. At our airfield and headquarters, which isn't too far from—"

"But you have a helicopter," she interrupted, pointing at the machine as it squatted on the lawn like some sleek, alien beast, because Jon just didn't seem to appreciate it.

The pilot laughed. "Yeah, I think it's pretty cool, too."

As Jessie looked from one to the other, she realized they were totally at ease, attempting to get her to relax. Maybe even trying to gain her trust. *And it's working,*

"Want to go for a ride?" Eric asked.

Jessie's eyes went wide. When she saw Jon's lopsided grin of approval, she felt her reservations about him slipping away. "Right now?" she asked.

"Yes," Eric said. "You can co-pilot, if you like. We'll catch the sunset. It will be incredible from the air."

"And I'll come along, to give you a chance to settle up," Jon added.

"Settle up?" Jessie said, playing dumb.

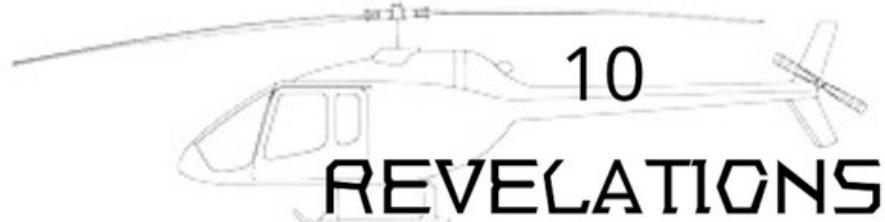
"With regard to Mr. Hoffman's accusations," Jon replied. Seeing the worry written on Jessie's face, he added, "I understand that trust is earned, Jessie. And I freely acknowledge that we haven't had adequate time to build that trust."

Jessie nodded.

"But," Jon continued, "it seems to me that you're pressed for time. We can talk about it during your flying lesson."

Jessie rubbed a sudden chill out of her bare arms.

He's right. Terry's out. The hunt is on.



10 REVELATIONS

"Right hand on the cyclic," Eric said, indicating the stick between her knees. "Put your feet on the rotor pedals and keep them there."

In the co-pilot seat next to him, Jessie settled her right foot and then her left foot onto the steel pedals and wrapped her hand around the grip on the cyclic.

"Left hand on the collective," Eric continued, indicating a control lever with a twist grip next to Jessie's seat. "The collective is your throttle and moves the helicopter up and down. The cyclic moves it left and right and forward and aft. The pedals adjust the direction the nose is pointed horizontally. Does that make sense?"

"I think so," Jessie said. She held the collective in her left hand, like Eric directed, kept her right hand on the cyclic, and positioned her feet in the middle of the peddles, the way Eric showed her. Even though he controlled the helicopter from the pilot seat, she felt the craft's subtle movement with each control input.

"Gently," Eric added, riding the controls with her. "Good," he said, after her fingers relaxed a little. "That's the way. Now I'm going to turn right over this ridge of trees, then level out. I want you to feel what I'm doing, okay?"

As soon as Jessie nodded, Eric took the aircraft into a right turn, then leveled off. Jessie knew Eric flirted with her a little, and she couldn't deny she liked it. If Eric attempted to impress her, it had already worked. She shook off the momentary daydream when Eric gave more commands.

"Now to the left," he said. Jessie paid no attention to the beauty of the Blue Ridge Mountains surrounding her as the helicopter turned. She concentrated completely on the feeling in her hands and feet.

"Feel it?" Eric asked.

"Yes," Jessie said.

"Good," Eric replied. "Your turn. Turn right. Slowly. Take your time."

Jessie eased the cyclic right, and the helicopter began to turn. She felt the aircraft start to settle, so she pulled in collective to maintain altitude, per Eric's direction, riding her pedals to keep her nose pointed straight through the turn. As the helicopter continued to bank through a wide arc, she squealed with excitement.

"Good. Now level off," Eric said.

Jessie straightened out the bird.

"You're a natural," Jon said, from the back seat.

"Yeah, whatever," Jessie said, rejecting the flattery. "But I'd love to really learn how to fly one of these."

"What do you mean?" Eric said. "You've already started. Shall we continue?"

Eric indulged her even more during this first lesson, coaching her on how to increase altitude while maintaining her airspeed to power up and over the next ridge line. After about twenty minutes, Eric glanced back at Jon, showing him his hands were not on the controls, his feet were not on the pedals. Jon gave him a thumbs-up.

"Why do you want to know about what happened in Myrtle Beach between me and Terry?" Jessie asked, catching both men off guard. "What's in it for you, because there is no way this is about me." She wasn't sure why she blurted out this question, but she sensed the flying lessons were almost over, and she knew that Jon Daly expected answers she didn't feel eager to give.

Eric said nothing but slowly put his feet and hands back on the controls.

"Let me do it," Jessie said, glancing at Eric. "You talk about trust, and I'm not going to try and land or anything, but you gotta trust me now."

Jon nodded.

Eric grinned and relinquished control of the helicopter. Neither man said anything during the next few minutes. Jessie had total control of the big machine.

"You're actually doing way better than I did, even after a week," Eric said.

Jessie studied his face. His smile was genuine. She flipped her head back toward Jon. "Well?" she asked.

"To be honest, I'm not sure what's in it for me. I just know what I know," Jon said, "and for the first time in my life, I saw and heard things that don't make any sense."

"What do you know, Mr. Daly?" Jessie asked, dropping the relaxed pretense. "What did you see that you can't explain?"

Jon looked out the window and took a deep breath. "During the incident at the bar, Hoffman accused you of stealing his money."

"Yes, go on." Jessie banked the big Bell 222 helo to the right with smooth precision.

"So, once you took off, Chip and I went down to the police department to interview Mr. Hoffman. He claims he never went to the bank and never withdrew the money. He claims you must have put a spell on him, slipped him some type of drug or something, because when the bank called the police for him, and they reviewed the tape, it was him."

"Sounds like it was him, to me. What's the unexplainable part?"

"During the interview, he said he had a Porsche. Seeing your old Jeep, and the Crossfit Sandbox gym bag being loaded with money was the tip-off that you had something to do with it, somehow."

Jessie remained quiet a long moment. "How are we on fuel?"

Eric leaned in to examine the gauge. "We've got enough for another couple hours, but it's getting dark."

Jessie nodded. She felt torn. What they asked her to share was a big risk for her. To trust in these men. Yes, they had saved her life, but did that earn them access to her secret? Weren't they trusting her with their lives right now? She shot a look toward Eric. Completely off the controls, he just sat there, relaxed, taking in the beauty of the Blue Ridge Mountains, as if she were the one giving the tour. A thought occurred to her. If she wanted to intentionally crash this bird, they could do nothing to stop her. *Is that trust worth any less? What does my gut instinct tell me?*

"What I can do...I call it Slip-Streaming."

Jessie looked over her shoulder at Jon, then back at Eric. They seemed not to have heard her.

"Did you hear what I said? I mean, I just told you the biggest secret of my life." Jessie scrunched her face, not sure if she felt relieved or offended. But then again, how were they to understand?

"Would you like Eric to take the controls so we can talk?"

"No." Jessie snapped. She didn't intend to sound that harsh but crashing the helo was still an option she decided to keep close to the vest. "I want to keep doing this. Flying. If that's okay."

"She's doing great, Boss," Eric said. "Bank right and get on a heading of 230. That will get us close to camp in about ten minutes." He pointed at the compass on the dash.

Jessie nodded and banked the helo, her eyes glued to the compass, waiting for what felt like forever for 230 to reach the center line. Finally, it did, and she leveled out.

"What exactly is Slip-Streaming?" Jon asked.

"You're not going to believe it," Jessie said. Her mind was focused, razor sharp, and for the first time since Kate showed up at her door, she felt in control.

"I'd like to think I'm pretty openminded," Jon said. "Try me."

"We'll see about that," she said. "But no one knows what I'm about to tell you."

"Except Kate?" Jon asked.

Jessie felt simultaneously unnerved and reassured by how easily Jon read her. She glanced out the door window and took a moment to appreciate the gorgeous sunset as she flew over the forest. She took a deep breath, knowing she was at the point of no return. She said, "Right, no one other than Kate."

"Understood. I will treat this information with the utmost care," Jon said, then encouraged her again. "Please, go on. You have my undivided attention."

"That was Terry in the bank, but I was controlling his body." Jessie looked to her left and only barely resisted the urge to laugh at the look on Eric's face. "I mean, I had slipped into him."

"Which means what?" Jon asked, leaning forward.

"I was live-streaming my consciousness through Terry's body. I slip in, then stream. The only analogy I can give you is that it's like playing a video game. I'm at the controls, the character on the screen does all the action."

"So, you are him? Or control him?" Jon asked. Jessie slowly reached over with her left hand and lifted Eric's jaw shut.

"I can't explain the science behind it," Jessie said, "but I know it's electrical in nature. I can control his body, well, anyone else's body. Every aspect. I feel what they feel, see what they see, smell what they smell."

"Sounds to me like you've done this before." It wasn't a question. Jessie felt a little judgement threaded into the comment and frowned.

"Of course," she said. "But never for anything like this. Mostly, it was just experimenting."

Jon said nothing, but sat staring out the window, deep in thought.

"You know, this was not the reaction I expected from you, Mr. Daly," Jessie said. "I mean, it almost feels like this kind of thing doesn't surprise you, but you also said you needed answers. Don't you believe me?"

"I'm still trying to wrap my head around it, Jessie. I'm sorry if my response seems anticlimactic, but do you realize what you're telling us?"

"So, you don't believe me."

"I didn't say that. I said I'm still trying to process it."

No one said anything for a few minutes, until the lodge came into view.

"If it's okay with you, I'll land," Eric said, but didn't move to take the controls. Jessie nodded.

"He beat my sister half to death and almost..." She lost the words, but the energy in her kicked to life at the memory of Terry's sexual attack on her at his home. "There's a power in me that kind of ignites. I call the source the Little Generator. When something happens, it turns on—"

"The what?" Jon interrupted.

"I call it the Little Generator," she said. The tops of the trees were close. Jessie saw the others standing on the deck, waving at them. She didn't wave back. "An electrical current builds up inside me. I guess that energy is my consciousness. The Little Generator powers up to the point where I can slip my consciousness into another person's body."

"Man or woman?" Jon said.

"Either, both," Jessie replied.

"What about animals?" Eric asked, eyeing Jessie sideways. Her brows furrowed in a most disgusted look. Eric quickly attempted to back-pedal out of his implication. "No, no. I'm sorry. I'm not trying to get weird or anything. I'm talking about taking over the body of animals. Like coyotes, wolves, cats. You know what I mean? It would explain the Native American myths. Skin-walkers, stuff like that."

"Humans, yes," Jessie said. "Animals, no. Even before I learned I could slip-stream, I've had a very close connection to animals. Domestic and wild, from owls to rats, horses to tigers. I think that dogs are the most affected. It all started when I was about twelve, or thirteen. When I first realized I could make electricity." Jessie

spun in her seat, shoved her hand behind her and rubbed her thumb against her index and middle fingers, then spread them. Tiny bolts of electricity sizzled between the tips, making both men gasp. She snapped her fingers, popping the tiny strands of light out of existence. Jessie continued her story like her display was no big deal. "But slip-streaming into animals? No. I don't know if it can be done, but I can sense something about doing that is...dangerous. Besides, there's another catch to being able to slip-stream."

"That's so cool," Eric said.

"What's the catch?" Jon asked.

"There has to be an emotional catalyst for the generator to kick on."

"Like anger?" Eric asked. "Fear?"

"Yes," Jessie answered, and started to say more, but Eric cut her off.

"So, she goes to Hoffman's house to kick his ass," Eric said, unintentionally ignoring Jessie. "I'm guessing that her Little Generator was going strong?"

"Yes," Jon said, "in retaliation for what he did to Kate."

"So the anger's got her all amped up, right?" Eric gently set the helo's skids on the ground and powered down the engine.

Jon ignored him. "I think I'm starting to understand." He looked straight ahead, out the front canopy of the helo. "During the fight, she slips her consciousness into him," Jon concluded, smiling.

"That's right! Exactly!" Jessie said, clapping her hands, feeling happy she didn't have to try and explain anymore. Her head had started to hurt.

"So, anger and fear are the primary triggers?" Eric asked.

"They are both very powerful emotions. Both can cause a person to behave in a way contrary to their normal behavior," Jon said.

Eric looked at Jon and scratched his head. "So, you're saying fear and anger are the same? I don't agree."

"I'm not saying that. It's so much deeper than that, Eric."

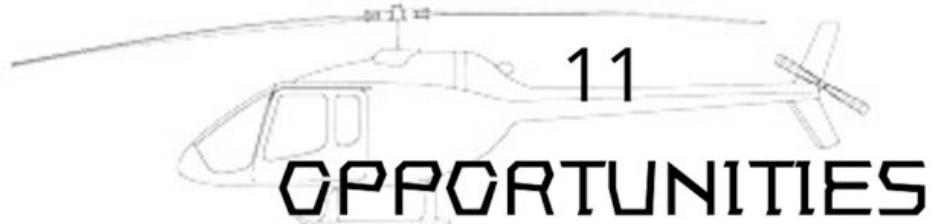
Bristling at being ignored, Jessie lost her resolve to stay silent, blurting out, "Actually, the most sure-fire way for me to slip into someone is by having sex with them."

Jon and Eric both snapped their heads in her direction. Jessie felt the heat rise to her face. No reason to admit she didn't think it through.

"Sex," Jon said.

"Of course," Eric said.

"I should have thought of that," they said in unison.



"Took you long enough," Kate said when Jessie reached the deck landing. Eric and Jon were trailing right behind her.

"We had a lot to talk about," Jon said.

After a quick nod, Kate grasped Jessie's hand and pulled her away to speak in private. "They've offered me a job!" she said. Jessie felt the excitement vibrating through her sister. "Right here! They have guests all the time and were already looking to hire an on-staff massage therapist. The salary is better than any salon in Myrtle Beach, by a long shot. And I can live here at the lodge as long as I agree to chip in with the cooking and cleaning like everyone else."

With an ironic smile, Jessie asked, "And how do you feel about that?" She couldn't remember the last time she saw Kate this happy.

"Well," Kate said, her smile disappearing, "it's a great opportunity, but..."

"But what?" Jessie asked.

"Well, what about you?"

"This isn't about me. I'm very happy they want you on board. You can stay here regardless of what I do." The smile returned to Kate's face, and she pulled Jessie into a hug. Over her shoulder, Jessie saw Krys walk up and kiss Jon on the cheek.

"Dan and Mora say food is on. I hope you're both hungry," Krys said.

THE EVENING WAS WARM WITH GOOD FOOD, WINE, AND LAUGHTER. EVEN Jessie found the company interesting. Jessie met other members of Jon's company as they arrived in small, loud groups. She listened as they all spoke in military jargon, and even though she'd grown up where an Air Force base used to be, she felt lost. She did her best to take in these people, to glean what she could and get a feel for what working with them might be like.

So far, Kate seemed interested in the only member of this Crue group who didn't actually look or act like a soldier. Jessie didn't know his name but assessed Kate's interaction with him from a distance. The guy acted like he didn't even notice the bruising on Kate's face, and Kate behaved as if she didn't have any. Plus, he had the cute factor going on big time. Unlike the others, this guy wore his blonde hair long, sported a Red-Hot Chili Peppers concert t-shirt, board shorts, and flip flops. Jessie had him pegged as a California Surfer. *Wrong.* She learned he was a former Air Force Para-jumper, or something like that. Jessie realized that everyone in Jon's little group was a former military hotshot of one kind or another.

Except me.

A few hours in, Jessie noticed that Kate seemed to be drifting off in the middle of the conversation. She had seen this look before and quickly excused herself from a deep "Delta Force" conversation with one of the new arrivals. Smiling, Jessie marched over to her forlorn looking sister. "Looks like we both could use a little mountain air," she said, pinching her sister's arm while dragging Kate to her feet and out the sliding glass doors.

"Ouch! What?" Kate asked.

Jessie slid the door closed and spun around on Kate. "Don't 'what' me. I know what you're doing." Jessie folded her arms across her chest and pointed an accusatory finger at her sister.

"What!?"

"Don't you get it? If he catches up to us, we're dead, Kate."

"I know, but I still love—"

"No!" Jessie said, flaring up. "What I did, getting us out of there. *That's* love." Tears rolled down Kate's cheeks as she turned away to face the wash of stars in the night sky. Jessie moved in and hugged her from behind. Kate tried to pull away, but Jessie wouldn't allow it, forcing her sister to stand there and listen. "Kate, this is your chance. Your chance to break free. You need to give this place, these people, a shot. Not for me, but for yourself. Look! Look at those people in there." Jessie spun Kate around to face the dining room. "What do you see?"

The long-haired surfer guy seemed to have been watching them all along. He raised his glass and flashed them a perfect smile.

"A beach bum," Kate said.

"A nice guy," Jessie corrected her.

"A former Air Force something-or-other."

"A nice guy."

"A nice guy," Kate repeated.

After a pause, Jessie whispered in her sister's ear, "You deserve a nice guy, even as a friend, Kate."

Kate leaned back into her sister's arms, both watching the group's obvious happy interaction. After a minute, Kate said, "You know, I think Surfer Boy David might be interested in me."

"His name is David? I can't remember all of them. There's too many."

"Do they know about you?" Kate turned to Jessie, her face serious.

"I told Jon and Eric, the pilot."

"What did they say?"

"Honestly? Other than 'that's cool', they only asked me questions."

"He didn't offer you a job or anything?"

"Why would he?"

Now it was Kate's turn to roll her eyes. "Haven't you been listening to these guys? They are a private military group. David said they specialize in something called HUMINT. Do you know what it is?"

"Yeah, kinda like spies, but out in the open," Jessie said, remembering from her college studies that human intelligence collection operations really started in the Vietnam War with Lyndon B. Johnson. *Win their hearts and minds.*

"Well, I think they do more than that. And you would be perfect, considering what you can do."

Jessie leaned back a little, gazing into her sister's face. She agreed to a point but knowing how the slip-stream process worked and what she had to do to achieve it, she was not sure she had the guts. "Remember when I was a kid, and you told me that if the government ever found out, I'd be turned into an experiment?"

"You're still a kid," Kate said, playfully punching Jessie in the arm.

"The line about the government cutting me up?"

Kate snorted an unladylike guffaw. "That's funny you remember that. I completely forgot." She turned to look inside at the camaraderie between the group. "Where do you think their lab is? The basement?" she asked.

"That's not funny, Kate. I'm being serious."

"Come'on, Jessie, look at them. They just don't look the type."

"Yeah? Well the nights not over yet, is it?"

"You don't trust them?" Kate asked.

"It's not that." Jessie shook her head and turned away again, gazing at the stars. "I'm not sure I trust myself. That I wouldn't make mistakes and get caught. This is serious shit." A plethora of movies flashed through her mind where spies who were caught got brutally tortured. The chair scene in *Spectre* and the electric cheese slicer from *Red Sparrow* flashed in her mind. She shivered.

Kate moved to argue when the sliding glass door opened. The sound of laughter and friendship flowed onto the deck like a wave.

"You ladies alright?" Jon asked from the door.

"Just talking to Kate about her future," Jessie said. Jon stepped out and held his hand toward the open glass door.

"Kate, could you give me and Jessie a minute? Besides, David looks about ready to come get you."

Kate smiled, looked over Jon's shoulder at the surfer waving for her to come back inside. "You're right, I'm sure the conversation in there is better."

Jessie shook her head and frowned as Kate walked back inside, pulling the door closed behind her.

"Is Kate okay?"

Jessie had to think about the question. She had concerns that her sister was retreating back into her own dark place so soon after the attack, along with Kate's behavior since leaving Myrtle Beach. Jessie knew Kate had a hard road ahead. Years of emotional abuse had left her dependent on Terry, causing the lines between love and violence to blur. To keep Kate straight, there would be a mental and emotional battle to fight. Jessie also knew in her gut Camp Summit would be the perfect place for Kate to not only start over but regain her footing on life.

"Yes, she'll be fine. She's been knocked around so much by Asshole over the past few years, she doesn't feel like this is real. I think once she gets working with Dan and Mora, and spending more time up here, she'll get better."

"I'm sure you're right," Jon said. "Dan just told me that he offered Kate a place here. He didn't consult me first, probably because he knew I would support his decision. He and Mora have a knack for helping those in need to help themselves. This is a great environment, a great team. She'll thrive here and be protected. She can't get that anywhere else."

Jessie said nothing but folded her arms across her chest and rubbed the coolness from her bare arms. She looked up at the Milky Way, thinking it looked like God took a paintbrush full of brilliant stars and color and wiped it across the night sky. *Beautiful.*

"What about you?" Jon asked.

"Me?" Jessie let out a half-hearted laugh. "I'll be fine. I can start again, anywhere. But I'm not going back to Myrtle Beach. I never knew my father, and our mother moved to Charleston a couple of years ago. There's nothing for me at the beach anymore. I'm ready to move on."

"What do you think about this brawny bunch of pirates?" Jon asked, turning toward the huge picture windows.

"Pirates?" She followed his gaze to look at Jon's team, sitting around the table, laughing it up. A couple more women had showed up an hour ago. "They're awesome. Seems like a really tight group."

"Since our conversation on the helo, I spoke to Chip, Eric, and Krys."

"Not the others?" A thread of fear crossed Jessie's face.

"Not yet. I told Krys about you. Although she has no military background, she's got a special gift."

The revelation piqued Jessie's attention. "I felt it," Jessie said, remembering the warmth that flowed into her from the woman's hands. "Is her ability like mine?"

"No, nothing even close. She comes from a Norse lineage. Her family goes back thousands of years."

"She's a Viking."

Jon chuckled. "In a sense, yes. We don't have time to go into it tonight. That is her story to tell. I told her your story because I value her opinion. Once she meets someone, she can provide an insight that is," he paused, trying to figure out how to say it, "otherworldly and spot on accurate."

"What does she have to say?"

"Krys says you come from a line of people as old as hers. She thinks you are a daughter of one of their gods, Freya, the goddess of war."

"Wow, a goddess! I could accept that!" Jessie said, grinning.

"Don't take it lightly. Before I told her what you shared, she said that you have an immense power you have yet to realize. She also said you belong here. With us."

Jessie raised an eyebrow and laughed. "She said that? How would she know that kind of stuff?" Jessie played indifferent. She didn't want Jon to see how much that statement affected her. She thought briefly about her father; not the man who raised her. Her mother explained their time together had only been a short, torrid, love affair. She said his name was Anton Valentin, and the day he left, he told her mother that the old gods had given her a gift. Obviously, that gift, nine months later, turned out to be Jessie. She had always known she was different. Had always known Kate was her half-sister. But now..."

"Like I said, that's her story to tell," Jon said. "Let's get back to you. I'd like to know what you think?"

"About what Krys says? That's a lot to take in, Jon, I mean..."

"Not that," Jon interrupted. "I'm talking about staying on with us. Becoming a member of the Crue. Crue Intellis."

"Does it pay well?" Jessie asked, half-joking.

"I think that you'd be surprised by how well it pays. But I get the feeling you're not one who's in it for the money." He paused, then smiled. "Unless you live for the challenge of stealing it?" He poked at Jessie, who got it and laughed softly.

There he goes again, reading my damn mind. "Why me? Well, I guess I know why. I mean, slip-streaming, right? That's what Kate just told me. Something about HUMINT."

Jon looked toward the dining room where Kate gave others her undivided attention. "She is an observant young lady. But yes. I'm not even going to try and push you into this. It can get pretty deep. It can be dangerous. But I can tell you are cut from the same cloth as every other person in that room. After some training, I have a feeling you would excel at it."

"Gee, you make it sound like so much fun. I'm guessing it's nothing like the movies. I mean, Netflix and my entire James Bond DVD library—I have them all, by the way—are my only references," she said.

"Rarely is life like the movies. In real life, serious, skilled fights only last a minute or less, and someone usually dies. Information gathering sometimes takes years, not hours. Hollywood doesn't show you how boring it can be. But you? Watching you this morning, then on the video at the bank, and interacting with you today? That was like being in a movie."

"I was getting my ass kicked."

"And you kept moving. Honestly, any normal human would have crumbled. Chip and I were surprised you didn't."

"Is there a compliment in there somewhere?" Jessie asked.

"There most surely is."

Jessie turned away from Jon, standing in silence a long moment. She didn't know what to feel. Until now, she never could have imagined using her ability as a spy. Yet the offer had now been laid on the table.

"I've told you what I can do, but I'm not sure I can do it," Jessie said.

Jon leaned back, mouth open and shook his head. "Your comment surprises me since you've already completed your first mission."

"Oh, yeah," Jessie said. "About that. I'm thinking that could have been planned and executed better."

"There were some sticky points that could have been avoided. We can work on that, if you're up for the challenge."

Jessie looked at him a long moment and tried, but failed, to suppress a yawn. "Can I sleep on it? It's been a long, painful day."

"I think that's a great idea. We're all about ready to call it a night ourselves. We're planning on going white water rafting after breakfast. You and Kate are welcome to join us, of course."

"That would be great. Thank you, Jon." Jessie smiled, nodded, and walked with him to the sliding glass doors. As Jon touched the handle, she covered his hand with hers and sent a tiny shock his way. He jumped a little but didn't move his hand. She looked up into his face, lit only by the bright lights from inside the house, and searched his eyes, her own holding an intense level of seriousness.

"You're not planning on cutting me up to experiment on me, or turning me over to the men-in-black or anything, are you?"

The look on Jon's face made her laugh. "I take that as a no." She stood on her tiptoes, kissed him on the cheek, then hugged him one last time. "Thanks for saving our asses today, Jon. Thanks for everything."

"You see those people in there?" Jon asked. Jessie turned away and looked inside.

"Even before tonight, even as a stranger, any one of them would lay down their life for you, or your sister. Do you believe that?"

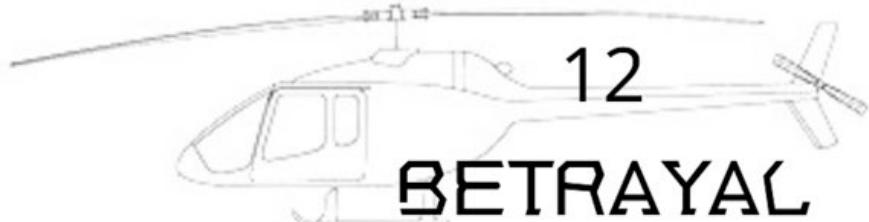
"Yes. I do," Jessie said. "I saw that in action this morning."

"I see that same quality in you. I've witnessed your warrior spirit. That is the primary reason I would like to have you on our team."

"Not slip-streaming? Not seducing people to steal their secrets?"

Jon chuckled. "I'll admit that I find your ability fascinating. But no. I don't care what kind of skill or power someone has. If they don't have the warrior spirit, it's useless. I just have a gut feeling that we can both learn a lot from each other, and I am certain in my heart that you belong here, with us. Get a good night's sleep. This mountain air will clear all our heads, and we can chat over breakfast."

"Waffles *and* white-water rafting," Jessie said. "How can a girl say no?"



The following morning, Jessie jumped out of bed. She stood before she realized she was even awake, her head only just coming out from the cloud of an alcohol-laden evening that had gone on for a couple more hours after she'd decided to go to bed. She froze in mid-yawn at a sound.

What was that?

She walked to the bedroom window and breathed deeply. The first signs of daylight on the horizon interrupted the starlit sky. She smiled at the silver sliver of a new moon, accompanied by the planet Venus; a brilliant, white twinkle burning beside it. She turned back to the bed and reached over to wake up Kate. She flipped on the light. Kate wasn't there.

"Kate?"

Puzzled over the empty bed, Jessie checked the bathroom. *Not there either.* She pulled on her jeans and grabbed a second tank top from her bag. She pulled that on before heading downstairs to check

the kitchen. No. The lodge was quiet. She stepped out onto the deck, hugging herself against the morning chill before she heard...a scream?

Voices floated down to her. From where? Over the roof maybe? "Kate?" she asked the air, not sure if exhaustion and nerves were playing tricks on her.

At the second scream, now definitely a scream, Jessie charged back inside the lodge. She sprinted through the great room toward the front doors. Jon and Eric, armed with Glock pistols, came crashing down the stairs. Others followed. They all scrambled onto the front deck. Voices, definitely voices this time, reached their ears from the—

"Front gate!" Jessie shouted, pounding barefoot down the deck stairs and storming down the drive. Jessie saw other Crue members she didn't yet know pour out of the lodge, armed, and sprinting in different directions on the property. She wasn't sure what they were doing, and she didn't care.

No, Kate! What have you done?

They froze when the iron gates came into view because Terry Hoffman had his arm through the iron gate, pinning Kate's face and neck against the iron bars, his pistol at her head. "Open the gate," Terry growled.

Rage and power ripped through Jessie to the point she almost passed out. But she didn't stumble. Instead, she harnessed it. This was no Little Generator. This was a nuclear level of power surging through her. She was ready.

"That's not happening, mate," Jon said. Chip came up fast from behind and stood next to Jessie, armed with a small black rifle, but her eyes were glued to Kate. From her peripheral vision, she saw Chip and Eric take small steps further out to the side, while other

members of the crew, out of Terry's field of vision, headed to the trees farther down the fence line.

Jon had the man's attention. "Good to see you again, Mr. Hoffman, how about..."

"How about you open the fucking gate, old man, or how about I put a hole in her head? How about right here? Right now."

"Let her go, Terry," Jessie said, conscious that her body shook with pent-up power...or...something else. *Vibrating, maybe?*

"I don't think so, bitch," Terry said with a laugh, squeezing Kate harder and harder until he forced a yelp from her. "You boys drop your guns and open the fucking gate, so my honey and I can leave." He grinned at Jon, teeth bared like some angry mountain gorilla. "And you," he said to Jessie, "little miss pris-pot money thief, are coming, too."

"I'll go with you, Terry. Just let Kate go," Jessie said, cursing that her voice also shook with anger.

"How fucking noble."

Chip moved a step toward the gate.

"Go ahead, be a hero, tough guy," Terry said, pulling his body even tighter behind Kate's. Then he screamed, "All of you put the guns down now, or she dies in three, two..."

"Okay," Jon said. The men squatted down and laid their weapons on the driveway. "Just take it easy, Terry. I have to send someone up to open the gate." Jon nodded at Chip, who turned and sprinted back up the drive.

"Hey tough guy!" Terry yelled. Chip stopped and turned around. "You need to drive the bitch's Jeep down here. I know the money is under the seat. Right baby?" Terry stuffed his face into the bars, and without taking his eyes off Chip, he licked the side of Kate's face.

"Terry," Jon said, getting Terry to focus on him instead of the man who hyperextended Terry's knee, "he can't do both things at once. He can get the Jeep. I'll call the SOC to have them open the gate."

"Whatever you gotta do, old man," Terry said. "Call security control, but make it snappy. I want to leave. Now!" Chip glowered at Terry, turned away, and double-timed it up the driveway.

Glaring at Kate, Jessie's brow furrowed, "You called him."

"I'm so sorry, Jessie," Kate sobbed.

Jon reached for the phone in his back pocket, glancing down the fence line while doing it. Jessie carefully followed his gaze and saw two Crue members halfway up the fourteen-foot perimeter fence, well out of Terry's line of sight.

"Whoa there, old man," Terry said.

"Just reaching for my phone to tell them to open the gate," Jon said.

"Two minutes," Terry screamed, causing Jessie to jump. "Two fucking minutes or she dies!"

Jon turned his hips to the side so Terry had a clear view of him removing the phone. He activated the push-to-talk app and pressed the button. "David, you copy?"

After a couple of seconds, Jon's phone beeped in response. "Yes, sir," David West replied calmly. John knew David monitored the gate camera.

"Get downstairs to the control panel, open the gate, and get Chip the keys to Jessie's Jeep. Chip is on his way, copy?" A moment later, the phone beeped.

"Copy," David said.

"When?" Jessie asked, still glaring at Kate, fury in her eyes. One hot tear rolled down her cheek.

"From Wadesboro, you stupid bitch," Terry said, "and last night." Jessie's breath caught. Kate wouldn't look her in the eyes. "She asked me to let the money go. To let *her* go." He squeezed harder, and Kate yelped again. "Said she had a new life. Said I needed to leave her be." He pressed the barrel tight into her head. "Well, that just ain't gonna do, is it, baby doll? I texted her this morning, told her I was here, and wanted to talk. Only talk. And well, here we are, talkin'. Right baby?"

Enraged, Jessie visibly shuddered, and then suddenly relaxed.

"She loves me, don't you, baby?" Terry laughed, then jerked Kate's neck against the iron rungs again. He kissed the side of her face through the bars and made guttural sounds as he pressed the pistol harder into her temple.

At the sound of her sister's whimper, Jessie saw the tell-tale tiny motes of light lift off her own skin. She turned to face Jon. He gasped when he saw her eyes glowing like red-hot coals. Reading her mind, Jon ever-so-slightly shook his head.

Too late.

"I'm coming to you, Terry. Please let her go. Take me instead," Jessie said, stepping closer. Jon and Eric saw electrical energy dance on her hands, like small tentacles of Tesla electricity. "Just relax. Please don't hurt her, Terry. I'm coming. I'll go with you."

"Stop blubbering you whore. Get over here."

Jessie eased forward, her feet felt glued to the ground. "Please don't hurt her."

"Please don't hurt her," Terry mocked, then laughed, removing the gun's barrel from Kate's head, using it as a pointer, rolling it in the air while barking commands, "I said get the fuck over here..."

Jessie lunged forward with lightning speed, ramming the pistol up and away from Kates head as she released the energy stored up

inside her. The gun went off as Arcs of electricity danced off the iron bars and pistol. The bullet zinged past Eric's head and struck a tree behind him.

Terry released Kate, who fell to the ground and tried to scramble away on all fours as Jessie reached through the gate with her free hand and grabbed Terry's shirt. She pulled him toward her, holding him against the gate, letting the power flow. Terry convulsed and involuntarily screamed as spittle flew from between his clenched teeth. A bullet struck the gate, surprising Jessie into letting go. Terry shook off the daze of electrocution, staggering backwards.

"You fucking freak," he yelled. The gate creped opened.

As Kate crawled toward Jon and the others, Terry pointed his gun at her.

"NO, NO, NO!" Jessie screamed, and lunged for her sister.

Jon and Eric dove for their pistols, but Terry had the drop on them.

"Fuck you, bitch!"

Terry got off three quick shots, the bullets striking Kate's body before Jessie reached her. Jon and Eric rolled forward, coming up with pistols in hand and fired at Terry as he zigzagged across their path, disappearing into the woods across the roadway. Other shots, from Crue members who made it over the fence, struck the trees. It was too late, he was gone.

Chip returned, without the jeep, but had two more short-barreled AR rifles and handed one each to Eric and Jon before he reached down and picked his up off the driveway. Krys and David were right behind him with a med-kit and immediately rushed in to assist Kate. Blood pooled under Kate's limp body as the iron gates continued to open. The Crue members who climbed the fence rushed up from the sides. One of them called out that they couldn't get a clean shot.

"Spread out, let's get a lead line into the trees and find him," Jon said. Several armed men and women spread out. A shot rang out from the trees, ricocheted off the ground near Jessie's feet. Everyone but Jessie dove to cover, then the air exploded with gunfire, filling the tree-line in front of them.

Jessie didn't flinch when the round struck the ground near her feet. Screaming and sobbing uncontrollably, she ran out the gate toward the woods, but Eric got to her first and grabbed her by the waist. "Jessie, wait. We'll get him"

Jessie spun on Eric. It didn't matter to Jessie that Eric might be the most well-rounded and skilled former soldier in the group. What mattered now was that he happened to be the closest.

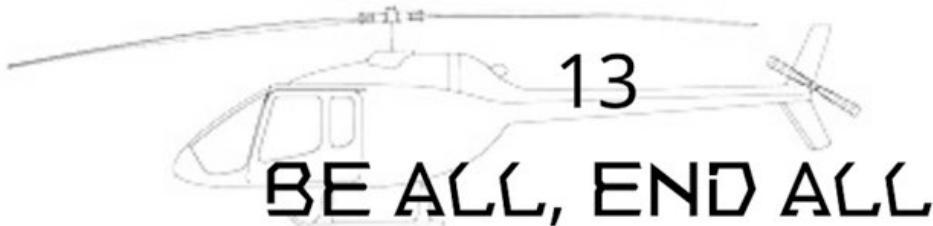
Sorry bud. Right place, wrong time.

"You're damn right we will. I'll make it up to you later," she said and reached up, slapping her hands to the sides of Eric's face.

Jon rushed in and caught Jessie's body as it collapsed next to her sister's. He laid her down as gently as possible and jumped to his feet when Jessie, using Eric's vocal chords, roared as loud as a lion.

She turned Eric's body to face Jon and the others. They all gasped at his glowing red eyes. Energy crackled off the fingertips of Eric's free hand. They watched as she flipped the rifle to the side, press-checked the bolt to confirm a round was chambered and turned to the others.

"Let's end this," Jessie said, and ran.



Terry burst out of the thick trees into a small clearing. He looked around and moved to a small stream that wove its way downhill. He dropped to his knees, plunged his burnt hands into the icy water. A layer of crispy black flesh peeled away with the partially melted plastic grips of the Model 1911 .45 caliber pistol. He spat blood and pieces of his teeth into the water, broken when he had clenched his jaws from the shock.

"Fucking, fuck!" he said, inspecting his hands and looking around for a better escape route. He didn't know these particular mountains, but his former Army Mountain warfare training kicked in to full gear. He knew how to survive. "At least it ain't snowing," he grumbled.

He picked up the pistol, groaned as he checked the function of the slide, and reloaded with a fresh magazine from his back pocket. He glanced around, spied a deer trail in front of him and stepped forward.

CRACK CRACK!

A bullet ricocheted off the rocks at his feet. He dove forward and turned toward his assailant, firing back with his pistol as he crashed into the water. His body struck the rocks in the shallow creek hard. But he soon realized it wasn't the stones that caused him to drop his gun.

Lying on his back, his shoulder gushed blood. "Fucking fuck," he said again, bringing his raw hand up to feel the damage. A man stepped up to him, pointing a black rifle at his face.

"I don't know you," Terry said. "I got no beef with you, man. Just let me go, and ya'll won't see me again."

The man said nothing for a brief moment, then – *Crack!* He shot Terry in the left kneecap.

Terry howled like a wolf caught in a foot trap. "Motherfucker! So, you're going to just kill me? Not even give me a chance to fight? Fucking pussy."

The man lowered the rifle to Terry's other knee and pulled the trigger again – *Crack!*

"Oh! Goddamit! Okay, man, just do it. Just fucking kill me, man, I don't care!" Terry cried.

The man standing over him flipped the safety on, squatted down, and laid the rifle across his lap. With a flat look on his face, the man leaned forward and peered into Terry's face. Terry's eyes went wide when he finally saw that the man's eyes were glowing like red and black orbs.

"It's you. I fucking knew it. You're a fucking witch."

Jessie smiled at the recognition in Terry's eyes. "You shot my sister, motherfucker." Terry said nothing, but his eyes darted around, looking for an escape route. Jessie spat on his chest. "You're a rabid dog, Terry. What's the best thing to do with a rabid dog, Terry?"

Jessie stood up, snapped the carbine to her shoulder, and took aim through an Eotech gun site mounted on the rifles' top rail. The sight circle on the center of Terry's forehead held steady. A defiant, nervous smile crept onto Terry's face.

"Jessie, you don't have to do this," Jon's voice said from behind her.

Jessie stepped back and lowered the rifle but didn't take her eyes off Terry. Jon, Chip, Taina, and two others who came in from who knew where, moved in, covering Terry with their own rifles. Jessie glanced downstream. Other members of the Crue she didn't yet know were coming up on her position.

No, Terry's not getting away with it this time.

Jessie leaned in and locked eyes with Terry. "You're a former Army Major, right Chip? You've been in plenty of battles?"

She could see Chip nod in her peripheral. "Yes ma'am." Other Crue members moved in closer from the woods. They surrounded her, watching without judgement, waiting to see what Jessie would do next.

Although none of those who surrounded her knew of Jessie's ability, they knew something important was happening. Only Jon and Eric, who's body she now occupied, knew for sure. She glanced at those around her, knowing the red eyes had their attention. She squatted down, formed a Tesla-coil display of electricity in her and touched Terry with her index finger.

His body, only partially in the creek water, jolted and bucked for a few seconds before she cut it off and stood up. Some of the Crue members took a step back, but she had everyone's undivided attention now. She had never been this amped up before, not even when she slip-streamed into Terry.

Being in the healthy, highly trained, and physically fit body of Eric gave her confirmation that something was terribly wrong and dangerous about the man lying in the creek before her. Looking into the other Crue faces, she saw no judgment. She knew they were there to back her up, no matter what.

"What would you do, Chip?" Jessie asked.

Chip said nothing, which answered her question.

Jon spoke up. "Jessie, we've called for a medi-vac helo, since you've got our pilot occupied. It should be here any minute, but Kate is asking for you. Let us take it from here. The authorities are on their way. He won't get out of it this time."

Jessie's face relaxed. Without looking down, she side-stepped directly onto Terry's blown-out knee and leaned in. Terry screamed. "You guys are supposed to be a bunch of shit-hot soldiers," Jessie said. Anger coursed through her. She saw the tiny motes of light flitting off Eric's skin. She felt ready to slip-stream right now. "You said we'd be safe up here, and then this asshole shows up and shoots my sister."

"Whoa there!" Terry said, half laughing, half coughing, "She called me, remember?" Terry glanced over at the Jon and the others. "I told you, mister. She's a fucking witch or something. But you ain't no killer, are you, Jessie girl?" Terry smiled up at her. "So, do as the man says. Give him the gun, and turn me in. I give up." Terry had a stupid grin on his face that ratcheted Jessie up to another level.

At that moment, Terry jerked his body toward the pistol, burnt hand outstretched.

The world slowed down. Jessie's hand extended, she barely heard Eric's voice say the words, "I got this."

At first, Jessie thought she might be slip-streaming again. Then she realized she was experiencing the high-speed reflexes deeply

ingrained in Eric through years of training and experience. His brain gave her the time necessary to process and act, even though the events were unfolding in real time.

This is new, that's for sure.

Barrels flew up all around her, but Jessie extended a hand just as quickly, and heard Eric's voice say, "I got this" in ultra-slow motion.

Emotions of fear, anger, and excitement spun through her as violent as the man lying in the creek before her. She was acutely aware of Terry's hand wrapping around the pistol's grip. *The eyes are a window to the soul*, a voice, possibly Eric's, said deep in her mind. *But the hands are the windows to intent.*

Without thought, her finger moved to the safety; the click of it to 'fire' sounded crisp in her ears. She raised the rifle barrel, just as the chrome slide of Terry's pistol came out of the creek, water droplets twinkled like glass gems in the rays of morning light, slicing through the trees.

All eyes followed the gleaming pistol as Terry's barrel tracked toward Jessie's face, as Jessie's barrel tracked toward Terry.

Terry's laugh grated on her index finger.

"You stupid, fucking bit—"

Crack!

The dense forest absorbed the sound of the single gunshot.

Time reverted to normal speed.

Breathing heavily, Jessie leaned in to look at the perfect, round hole in the center of Terry's forehead. She watched, mesmerized at the wash of blood, bone, and brain as it slipped downstream with Terry's consciousness. A movement forced her rifle back up into position. She scanned his body, from hands, down his torso, to his legs and frowned as his left foot twitched. Surprisingly, she wasn't

repulsed by what she saw, but the experience lacked something she could not put her finger on.

Jessie flipped the safety on and had no idea why she just pulled the magazine from the lower receiver, checked the round count, then slapped it back in. She walked the short distance to Jon, Chip, and the other Crue members who had all now gathered around. She handed the rifle to Chip, who took it and gave Jessie a small nod, his lips pressed into a tight, thin line.

She looked each of the Crue members in the eye. Not one of them flinched or broke eye contact with the lava-like glow of power undulating in Eric's eyes. No, she didn't know most of them, but she saw the recognition in their eyes. They all knew her. They all now understood what she could do, and that she had the balls to do it. She shuddered, unable to think about what now lay ahead.

"That's slip-streaming, ladies and gentleman," she said. The eyes of everyone around her were fixed on the somber expression painted on Eric's face. Frowning, she balled up her fist. Killing Terry didn't quell her anger. It didn't have the satisfying feeling she imagined she would get from pulling the trigger. She was still ready to fight. "Now, if it's okay with you, I'd like to accompany my sister to the hospital. Again."

Sirens. The sound seeped through the thick forest like some distant wail of a tormented ghost. *Maybe Terry's ghost?* A deafening roar from the treetops forced everyone to look up as a medivac helicopter appeared overhead, before disappearing over the treetops and heading toward the lodge.

"I need to go." She moved forward into the thick forest between the road and the iron gate.

Jessie stopped and turned around to face Jon and the others, who followed up from behind. A lopsided grin rose on the edge of

Eric's mouth as Jessie looked once more at the other Crue members. Some were smiling, others nodded their approval.

"By the way," Jessie said. "I'm in."



ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First, I have to thank my very good friend Robert Rogers. Even from afar, he has been there for me step-by-step, for the better part of eight years. Maybe more. He has helped me find my voice and offered ideas and suggestions that made this story grow. Then there was the agent I pitched my masterpiece to, who told me to ditch the part you are about to read, and carry on with the REAL story (The full Novel- *Enemy Walks*- coming soon) So, I did. My beta readers, Barbara, Patsy, Carol, Lisa Colligan, and many others, felt ditching Jessie's beginnings would be a big mistake. They wanted to know how she became a spy, and they were adamant; they really liked this story. I agree. Thank you!

I will be thanking my writing group in all the following books, as they are directly responsible for helping me with this project. I find it shocking that our group has hashed it out for over six years! They have all taught me to become a better writer. Primarily JP Goggin (who gets double nods as my helo-pilot consultant), James Lopez, Linda Robinson (both who get double nods as my computer consultants), and Coyote Jack Thomas, our resident 'Nam-Vet and outstanding writing mentor.

The group also has writers who used to be part of our group and who still pop in occasionally to be bashed: Joe, Brandy, Jordan, Karen B-Rylander (who started it all), Brian, and a few others. I continue to learn so much from this group of fine writers. I will be forever grateful for their knowledge and expertise.

A shout out to editor Aryl Shanti, who really found some glaring holes, and got me one step further, and to Fiona Jayde Media for the awesome, awesome covers!

Finally, a big thanks to my editor, C.J. Anaya, who read my story, fell in love with it, and as if by magic, shook the book so hard that one good story suddenly turned into two fantastic full-length novels; *Enemy Walks* and *Enemy Way*, the next steps in Jessie Richter's evolution. Thank you C.J.

Thank you all!

ALSO BY STEPHEN EAGLES

Enemy Mine: A Jessie Richter Prequel

Enemy Walks: Book 1

Enemy Way: Book 2

Book 3 (Title Coming Soon)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Stephen Eagles is the author-alter-ego of a US Navy veteran, former cop, and former wildlife educator who draws heavily from his interesting and unusual life experiences, including (but not limited to) working in Naval Intelligence during the Cold War, as a homicide detective in South Florida, as a licensed NRA Law Enforcement firearms instructor, and as a professional master-class and eagle falconer.

Throughout his law enforcement career, he explored his Native American roots alongside his grandmother and danced the professional pow-wow circuit for several years where he made many life-long Navajo, Seminole, and Lakota friends.

Stephen currently lives in San Antonio, Texas with his lovely and supportive fiancé, Michele. Sign up for Stephen's newsletter at <https://www.stepheneagles.com> where you can get a glimpse of current and future projects.

Stephen considers himself a common-sense conservationist and stays active in common sense approaches for protecting our natural resources and wildlife in the US and throughout the world. Visit his friends at the [VetPaw.org](#). Stephen also contributes directly to [Wounded Warrior Project](#) and the [USO](#). He encourages you to donate to these or other Veteran organizations as well as to support your local [POLICE](#).

When Stephen is not writing, he's honing his firearms and defensive tactics skills and trying like hell to get back into Crossfit shape. But more often than not, you'll find him stuffed in a corner of some small San Antonio coffee shop, iPad in hand, clicking away at the keyboard.

ABOUT THE ENEMY WAY SERIES

In 2009 while working as a contract falconer and Cross-fit instructor in Chicago, Illinois, Stephen experienced "*The Slipstream*" at exactly 0300 hours during an intense and vivid dream. He sprang out of bed, cracked open his MacBook Pro and started writing. This book is the result of that long endeavor and the Jessie Richter series just keeps growing into what is quickly becoming its own "Walker Universe". Stephen plans on collaborating with his growing fan base and other authors to develop and craft exciting spinoff character stories.



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