

Chapter One

“Mom, I’m scared.” Tyler’s voice was scarcely louder than a whisper. Curled up in his bed with one arm wrapped around his favorite stuffed bear and the other tucked beneath his head, he was a small, thin boy who hardly made a dent in the covers. His black hair was still damp from the bath she had made him take just before getting into bed and smelled, just faintly, of baby shampoo. The expression in his blue eyes proclaimed his absolute conviction that she could keep him safe from all harm. Samantha Jones looked down at her four-year-old son and felt a pang in the region of her heart. She was a twenty-three year old single mother with a precarious job situation, very little money and absolutely no experience raising kids, and she was all he had.

Probably she wasn’t going to get mother of the year any time soon, but she was doing her best.

“Close your eyes and go to sleep, and I’ll be home before you wake up,” she promised. Like Tyler, she was slim and fine-boned, with unruly black hair – hers reached the middle of her back – and blue eyes. She sat beside him on his twin bed in the pool of lamplight cast by the room’s only illumination, the small red lamp on the night stand. Her back rested against a pillow tucked against the headboard and her knees were bent to prop up the book she’d just finished reading to him. Dressed in jeans and a well-washed blue uniform shirt, all she needed to do was pull on her boots and she would be out the door and on her way to work, which was where she was going just as soon as she finished her nightly ritual of putting Tyler to bed. “Mrs. Meniffee is here.”

The sound of the TV in the living room confirmed it. Cindy Meniffee, a fifty- something widow who lived alone in the duplex next door, had a key and let herself in as needed. The first thing she always did was turn on the TV. Mrs. Meniffee worked days as a bookkeeper for a tire store. Like everyone else Sam knew, she lived from paycheck to paycheck and was glad, for the little Sam could pay her, to stay with Tyler at night while Sam worked, saying that since she was right next door anyway it was almost like getting paid to stay home.

“I know.” Tyler’s voice was even smaller. His skin was fair, like hers, but unlike her he had freckles scattered across the bridge of his nose. His eyes beseeched her. “Couldn’t you stay home this once?”

Sam’s stomach tightened. She knew that feeling guilty because she had to go to work to earn money to support them was a waste of time, but Tyler actually was a little extra needy tonight. He’d had a bad day at pre-school: his friend Josh had invited two other boys from their class to a sleepover, but had left Tyler out. To make him feel better, she’d rented a movie he’d been dying to see, and he and she had spent the evening eating popcorn and watching it, which was why he was still awake. Almost she

hesitated. Almost she gave into the impulse to say, *just this once*, and stay with him. But she had to work, or they didn't eat or have a roof over their heads or anything else. She had tried to arrange things so that she and Tyler spent as much time together as possible. During the mornings, while he was in pre-school, she took classes, with the eventual goal of becoming an Emergency Medical Technician. As an EMT, she would make enough to one day maybe be able to buy a small house, and pay for things like a bicycle and braces. At night, when he was sleeping, she went out and repossessed cars. She was tired and stressed out a lot, which she tried her best not to let Tyler see, but they were making it.

"Big Red's waiting out front. He'd be sad if I didn't come out." Big Red was Tyler's name for the (big red) tow truck she drove. Sliding off the bed, putting the book down on the night stand, Sam kept her tone light.

"Did you use the monster spray?" Tyler's lower lip quivered. Sam felt another of those mommy-guilt heart tugs. Tyler had been having nightmares lately, nightmares that the pediatrician said were perfectly normal and part of a developmental phase and yada yada. Still, they worried her terribly. She'd come up with the idea of filling a plastic spray bottle with water and telling Tyler it was a potion to keep bad dreams away. He loved the idea of it, called it monster spray, had her spray it under his bed every night before he went to sleep – and continued to have nightmares anyway.

Sam couldn't help thinking that if he had an older, more experienced mother, if he lived in a house in the suburbs and had a dad who was actually a part of his life and all the good things he should have, he wouldn't have nightmares.

"Tyler, do you want me to sit in here with you while you go to sleep? I can sing to you," Mrs. Meniffee said from the doorway. Mrs. Meniffee knew the drill: Sam was supposed to be at A+ Collateral Recovery by eleven p.m. to receive her assignments for the night. It was twenty minutes until eleven now. She had to go.

"Okay," Tyler said.

"Thanks." Sam smiled at Mrs. Meniffee with real gratitude as the older woman pulled the red rocking chair that Sam had carefully painted to match the lamp and the headboard up beside the bed and sank down in it. Mrs. Meniffee's tightly curled hair might be a little too red and she might wear a little too much makeup and her blouses might be a little too tight and low cut over her ample bosom in hopes of attracting husband number three, but she was kind-hearted and good to Tyler and absolutely reliable. In the year since Sam and Tyler had moved into the duplex next door to her, they'd all three developed a comfortable friendship in which Sam did things like water her plants and feed her cat when she was away visiting her grown daughter in Chicago, and Mrs. Meniffee watched Tyler.

"See you in the morning." Still keeping it light, Sam headed for the door.

“We’ll be fine,” Mrs. Meniffee said comfortably.

Pausing, Sam took one last look at her son. He was perfectly fine, cozy in his own bed in his own room, with Mrs. Meniffee rocking beside him.

His eyes were wide open and tracking her. “I love you, Mom.”

Her heart gave another of those mommy-pangs. “I love you, too, baby.”

As she left the duplex to go to work, Mrs. Meniffee’s slightly off-key voice singing “Camptown Races” followed her.

About fifteen seconds before the first bullet hit him, Daniel Panterro accepted the fact that he was probably going to die. Given the fact that he was bound hand and foot, stuffed in a car trunk and just conscious enough so that he knew something bad was getting ready to go down, there wasn’t a whole lot he could do about it. Except bitterly regret the circumstances that had gotten him into the mess in the first place.

“You really think we wouldn’t find you, asshole?” Army Veith was the name of the guy pointing the pistol at his head. Real average looking. Average height, average weight, not old, not young, nothing to make anyone remember him. No way for anyone to guess that he was a killer for hire. One of the best. Currently in the employ of the Zeta cartel. Veith had just arrived on the scene, which was how Danny knew his life could now be measured in seconds. Everything that had come before had been courtesy of his thugs. “Where’s the money?”

Danny’s mouth was still dry from the gag that had just been ripped out of it so that he could talk. He tried to swallow, but came up with so little saliva that it was hardly worth it. He had no idea what money Veith was talking about, but he sure as hell was not going to let Veith know it.

“Sock drawer,” Danny croaked. He might be done for, but he’d be damned if he was going to cringe. He tried not to think of his mother, a sixty-six-year-old widow who doted on him, her youngest child and only son. His death would devastate her. It would leave his three sisters reeling. He would never play basketball or videogames with his nephews again.

Please God let -

Veith shot him. Just like that.

In the thigh. At the last minute Veith had shifted his aim. The pfft of the discharge – Veith’s gun sported a silencer – registered on Danny’s brain at approximately the same instant as the bullet tore through him.

Danny screamed. It hurt like a motherfucker. His thigh felt like a flaming splinter had blasted through it. He could feel the instant engorging of his flesh, the hot upwelling of blood. Had the bullet hit an artery? Broken a bone? Sweat poured over him in a wave. He almost vomited. His body wanted to roll and kick and contort in protest, but between the way he was tied and the fact that he was a six-foot-two, one-ninety pound guy crammed into a car trunk, the opportunity for movement was limited. Cursing, he tried to block out the pain, tried to force his poor battered brain to work, to think of some way out of this.

Unfortunately, his brain was coming up with zilch.

“Next one goes through your elbow.” Veith’s eyes were as cold and merciless as the black waters of the Mississippi River that ran behind the warehouse. The river where, unless Danny was mistaken, his corpse was shortly going to end up. “I’m gonna ask again: where’s the money?”

Shit. Danny realized that he was panting like a dog. He could feel blood gushing from his leg, soaking his jeans, and knew that blood loss was going to be a problem if he lived longer than the next few minutes. Which, face it, meant it probably wasn’t going to be a problem at all. A black wave of anger hit him: somebody had fucked up big time. But this wasn’t the moment to get pissed about it. This was probably the moment to be making peace with his maker, but he’d rather try to come up with some way to survive. Forget cringing. Now that he’d gotten a real taste of what was getting ready to come his way, he would have begged if he’d thought it would do any good. Despite his efforts to block the pain, it threatened to overwhelm his senses. Jesus, when he’d signed on for this gig he had accepted the possibility that he might die – it came with the territory - but getting himself blasted to bits before they killed him was worse than anything he had foreseen.

Damn Crittenden anyway. Where was he, where were they all, while this shit was going down? The key here was that he wasn’t actually supposed to die.

Veith’s gun hand moved, almost imperceptibly. Danny’s heart lurched. He thought of his mother having to identify his mutilated body, pushed the image out of his head.

“Santos has it,” he groaned. It was a lie, but if lying worked to buy him some time, he was ready, willing and able to lie like a two-dollar whore.

Veith didn’t fire.

“Santos?” Veith repeated. Except for one dim light bulb swinging from a wire high overhead, the warehouse was dark. If you didn’t count Danny, Veith, two other thugs and the BMW Danny was crammed into the trunk of, it was also deserted. *The better for torturing and killing you in, my dear.* Given Danny’s present position, reading Veith’s expression was nearly impossible. But he could hear the sudden interest in his voice.

Veith thought there might be a possibility that he was telling the truth. Danny automatically filed that information away to be passed on to Crittenden later before he remembered that he most likely was not going to be passing on anything.

Because he was going to be dead.

Jesus, Mary and Joseph, he didn't want to die. He was thirty-two years old. Had a big, boisterous extended family. A hot girlfriend. A good (although dangerous, see present situation) job. Tickets to the NBA championship game in two weeks. Lots of things in the works.

"You have five seconds to tell me everything you know."

Veith was taking careful aim at his right elbow. The one that was uppermost. If a bullet tore through his elbow at that angle, the pain would make the blazing agony in his leg feel like a mosquito bite. To say nothing of the fact that it would shatter the joint and he would probably never regain the full use of his arm. Not that he was going to need it where it looked like he was going anyway, but still.

Shit.

"One. Two. Three. F -"

It was the thought of more pain that pulled his foggy thought processes together enough to allow him to try to improvise.

As a new wave of sweat enveloped him, he broke in on Veith. "Like I said, Santos -"

"They're coming. They know where we are." Thug number one – Danny hadn't gotten a good enough look at either of them to be able to identify them – came running, his feet thudding on what sounded like a concrete floor. From where? Danny didn't know, although he presumed a lookout was being kept.

Theoretically, he was too valuable to the feds who'd been holding him for them to just abandon him. Veith would expect a search and rescue team to be coming on strong.

So did Danny, for entirely different reasons.

Veith swore under his breath. To Danny's immense relief, he lowered the pistol.

"We'll finish this later, Marco," Veith told him.

Yeah, Marco, as in Rick Marco, because Veith had no idea who he really was. Which was the only reason Danny was still alive.

Then Veith stepped back, and the trunk lid slammed down.

A moment later, the car was peeling rubber out of there. Danny lay in the trunk, blind as a mole in the pitch dark, woozy with pain, fighting to find enough oxygen to keep him conscious in the superheated, carbon-monoxide tainted air.

The assault on the safe house where as Marco he'd been under twenty-four hour guard, the lightning-fast slaughter of the U.S. Marshalls assigned to protect him, his own kidnapping and brutal interrogation: he was still trying to process exactly what had happened. No, *how* it had happened.

They're coming. Danny held onto the promise implicit in that gasped warning like a drowning man to a lifeline. 'They' had to refer to the feds. He was an undercover FBI agent, for God's sake. His fellow federal agents would not just leave him to die.

Two a.m. in gorgeous downtown East St. Louis, which was an oxymoron if she'd ever heard one, Sam reflected glumly. A Friday night. She was still pretty enough that guys were always hitting on her. She should have been out dancing, partying, or at least seeing a movie and getting a pizza. Something.

She sighed. *Get real. If you weren't doing this, you'd be working the third shift at Wal-Mart. Or Waffle House. Or somewhere equally shitty.*

Instead she was driving Big Red, a junky hook-and-chain tow truck, down a pothole-heavy street lined with bars and tattoo parlors and seedy restaurants and liquor stores. Getting double vision from looking at too much neon. Ignoring the street walkers and drug pushers on the corners. Ignoring the bands of looking-for-trouble punks, too. If they wanted trouble, she had a Smith and Wesson revolver on the passenger seat beside her. And a tire iron tucked beneath her seat. Much as she hated to admit it, these were her people. These mean streets were her mean streets. She could handle herself.

Didn't mean she had to like it.

Her cell phone rang. Her best friend, Kendra Wilson.

"What?" Sam said into it.

"I'm just about to leave work." Kendra cashiered weekends at the local Publix grocery store. They'd been besties since kindergarten. When the shit had hit the fan in Sam's life some five and a half years ago now, Kendra had been one of the few people Sam had been able to count on. "You need anything?"

"Could you get me some pancake mix?" Sam answered. "And syrup. Tyler likes pancakes on Saturday morning, and I'm out."

'Some five and a half years ago' meaning when she'd found out she was pregnant with Tyler. Fresh out of high school, working as a waitress at Red Lobster while she tried to figure out what she wanted to do with her life, she had been a wild, heedless eighteen-year-old who had just wanted to have fun when the pee-stick had turned pink. Now she was a struggling single mother, and 'fun' had given way to 'survive'. Which was why she was driving around in a tow truck in the middle of a starry June night. Her 'uncle' had died the previous year, leaving her his truck, along with his working relationship with A+ Collateral Recovery. Most nights, especially since the economy had tanked, A+ would give her a list of vehicles to be repossessed, and she would go out on the hunt. She was paid a bounty for every collateral recovery (that's what the contract called it; in reality it was a repo) she completed. She wasn't getting rich, she wasn't even getting middle class, but she was keeping a roof over her and Tyler's heads and food on the table, and that was what counted. And lately business was picking up: last week, she'd towed in ten vehicles. At seventy dollars per, minus expenses, she'd cleared five hundred dollars, which was more than she could make doing anything else except stripping, which she wasn't yet desperate enough to do. Of course, almost the entire amount had gone for rent, but at least she'd been able to pay rent, even if it was a week late. Out of the check she was expecting tomorrow, she would have to pay utilities and Tyler's pre-school, plus Mrs. Menifee and the usual expenses associated with the truck, and then add a little to her tuition-for-her-upcoming- fall-class account. Which would leave her just about enough for a week's worth of groceries, if she was careful.

"Tyler's lucky it's Friday." By that, Kendra meant she had gotten her paycheck tonight. Like the rest of them, Kendra was always broke by the end of the financial week, which for her ended on Fridays. Which was why she had offered to pick up groceries for Sam. Sam's week ended on Saturday nights, when A+ Collateral ponied up.

"I'll pay you back Sunday," Sam said.

"I know," Kendra answered. "Will you be done soon?"

"Should be. I'm on the trail of this BMW. When I find it, that's it for the night."

"Nice car." Kendra's voice perked up. "Maybe the owner will be around. If he owns a BMW, he could be your ticket."

"If his BMW is being repossessed, I doubt it," Sam retorted. "Anyway, I don't need that kind of ticket. Tyler and I are doing just fine."

"Yeah, I heard it before." Kendra was determined to get her fixed up, and Sam was just as determined to resist. Tyler was a wonderful gift, but his father – not so much. In fact, as soon as he'd found out Sam was pregnant he'd cut and run. Sam had seen him exactly twice since. He'd contributed zero dollars to Tyler's support, and since he didn't have a steady job there was nothing Sam could do about it. They were the same age, and he was still running around free as the wind, while she – she had grown up. And in

the process pretty much sworn off men for life.

“Got to go,” Sam said as the locator affixed to the dashboard beeped, and disconnected. The beep meant she was getting close. Fortunately, the car she was after was only two years old and fancy enough to have its own built-in GPS, with its own built in special signal. Sam’s equipment wasn’t exactly state of the art, but it was up to date enough to lock onto the signal once she was within a few blocks of her quarry.

Left on First, another left on Hennessey. Right down by the river. The night was black and breezy, and the mighty Mississippi gleamed like an oil slick under the light of the pale full moon. Across the river in St. Louis proper, she could see the twinkling lights of the big paddleboats which were the city’s floating casinos. The bridges, the Arch, the tall buildings that made up the St. Louis skyline – all were glowing with light and, from this distance, beautiful.

Across the river in Illinois, where Sam lived, East St. Louis was like that other St. Louis’s really ugly stepsister.

“There you are,” Sam murmured with satisfaction as her beeper started going off insistently. The car she was looking for was parked at the end of Fortnum, just up from the warehouse district. She spotted the big black Beemer with a satisfied smile. A distant glow from the security lighting on the warehouses was all the light there was. On a nearby corner, the only street lamp for a couple of blocks wasn’t working. From the look of it, it had been beaten into submission long ago. There were other cars on the street, most of them junkers, none parked too close to her objective. The buildings across the street were brick tenements, condemned and slated for destruction as part of the city’s effort to combat blight. Started before the economy tanked, it probably had seemed like a good idea at the time. But besides moving the tenants out and boarding up the windows, nothing more had been done. And now the buildings were re-occupied, by the local gangs and drug dealers, free of charge. A lot of activity going on over there tonight. Probably something she wanted to keep her eye on, in case the Beemer’s owner was across the street making a buy.

People, especially men, had a tendency to object if they caught her repo-ing their cars. Which was why she worked in the middle of the night, and at least part of the reason she kept the gun and tire iron handy.

Maneuvering the truck to within about nine feet of the Beemer’s front bumper, Sam lowered the winch, shoved the gun into the waistband of her jeans and pulled her work shirt down over it, and got out, casting a quick glance inside the Beemer just to make sure that it was as empty as she’d thought at first glance: it was. All black leather, clean and expensive, with no personal belongings in view. Good. Personal belongings were a bitch: people were always claiming they’d been stolen.

A gust of warm summer wind sent a tendril of her hair skittering across her mouth. Impatiently Sam pulled it free, tucked it behind her ear. The mass of her hair she’d

confined in a low ponytail to keep it out of the way, but it was thick and wavy with a mind of its own, and strands inevitably worked loose. So close by the river, the air smelled a little like dead fish, with a hint of something acrid – probably burning meth or crack. The chug of her truck engine was loud, and so was the clank of the big metal chain as she got it into position. The racket always made her a little nervous – no covering that sound up – and given the activity across the way it could conceivably attract attention.

Keeping an eagle eye cocked for trouble, Sam got to work. Her truck was a piece of crap, but she'd used it long enough that she knew its quirks inside and out, and could work fast. Grabbing the heavy chain and yanking in order to extend it fully, she hooked it to the BMW, secured the safety straps, and pushed the lever that would haul the BMW up on its back tires.

That done, she was just checking the straps one last time before getting back in the truck when she noticed that the Beemer's trunk had popped open. The trunk's interior light hadn't come on, but the lid was up and rocking. Frowning, casting a cautious look at the boarded up houses where things were really starting to hop, she walked around behind the Beemer to shut the trunk before taking off for the drop yard. She was within a foot of the rear bumper, her hand already up in the air reaching for the trunk lid, when she saw that there was a man, bloody and bound and looking like he'd been beaten to within an inch of his life, in the trunk.

Black hair, cut short; thirty-ish, maybe; tall(from the way he was curled in there like a paper clip); solid-looking shoulders and chest; muscular arms pulled tightly behind his back beneath a short-sleeved t-shirt; narrow hips and long legs in – black, wet, shiny? - jeans.

Black-wet-shiny equaled... blood?

All that registered in a stunned instant. As she stared down at the man in shock, he groaned.

Sam felt a cold shiver of fear run down her spine.