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SUSAN MAY WARREN SUNBURST



SKY KING RANCH
BOOK 2



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GLOBAL SEARCH AND RESCUE

The Way of the Brave

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The Price of Valor

SKY KING RANCH

Sunrise

Sunburst



SUNBURST

SUSAN MAY
WARREN



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DEAR READER,

I always dedicate my books the same way: Soli Deo Gloria. Because this is my heart—for God to be glorified in every story he gives me. But if I could add a second dedication, it would be to my beautiful daughter-in-law, Ovoke Precious Izu Warren of the Delta Tribe in Nigeria. She and my son Peter met in Italy, where he served as a Navy Corpsman. I fell in love with her the moment I met her—her beautiful smile, her sweet personality—and I couldn't wait for her to join our family. Because of the pandemic, we weren't able to attend their wedding in Italy—nor was she able to have a traditional wedding in Nigeria.

This story is my way of giving her the wedding she always dreamed of and to honor the culture we are so blessed to be invited into via her family.

I'm deeply grateful for her insights into Nigerian life and culture. When she came to America (when they got engaged), she made goat soup for us (so I had to put it in the book!). Then, we met on Zoom for hours, and she explained to me the traditions and helped me brainstorm how to make them work for my story (and my story to work for them!). She read my manuscript, helped me with the pidgin, and even sent me Nigerian wedding vlogs, pictures, and Nigerian movies to watch. Most of all, she

let me into her heart to experience her culture and her background.

We are so blessed to have Precious in our lives. I couldn't have picked a better wife for my Peter. (Good thing God already had them chosen for each other!)

I hope you enjoy reading this journey in Nigeria as much I enjoyed writing it. Thank you, Presh!

Blessings!

Susie May

PROLOGUE

FOUR YEARS AGO . . .

Ranger wasn't here to get into trouble, but wow, she was pretty.

And clearly his brother Colt noticed too.

"She's cute."

Ranger looked back at Colt, who sat across from him on a high-top stool on the deck of the Bahama Mama, a beachside resort in Key West. He was nursing a mojito, the minty smell mixing with the jalapeno-and-onion spice of the ceviche dip on the table.

"I don't have time for romance," Ranger said, but yes, he'd been watching the woman armed with a camera take shots of the sunset as its rays cast over the frothy ocean and the cobblestones of the long pier at Mallory Square. The fire hovered above the horizon, the clouds a deep purple, with a deep amber rim over a golden spill of light and a darkening orange simmer.

The perfect place for Ranger to unwind. Sorta.

"Stop taking life so seriously. I mean, who wears khakis and a dress shirt to dinner?" Colt lifted his mojito but shot his smile at a girl in a bikini and a white cover-up headed toward the pool. "Meeting a hot girl just might be good for you."

Colt had *vacation* written all over him, in his half-open

Hawaiian shirt, his past-reg long dark hair, his sunglasses. Not to mention the wicked tan he'd gotten while Ranger spent the better part of the day in the fifty-foot free-ascent dive tower on the Army Spec Forces Underwater Operations school over on Fleming Key.

A mix of music—from the mariachi band at the hotel to a guitar player in the square playing “Peaceful, Easy Feeling”—added to the festive air of the nightly sunset festival. Black-winged seagulls dive-bombed tourists’ treats—fish tacos, coconut shrimp, and French fries dropped on the cobblestone surface—while jugglers and a magician performed for tips as hundreds of tourists set up chairs or pressed against the deck railing hoping to catch the last rays of the sun in the southernmost tip of America.

“What’s wrong with my clothes?” Ranger asked. “You said we were going out for dinner.”

“At a *tiki* bar. Catch up, dude. Sheesh. Do you ever go out with your team?”

“Yes.” No. Sometimes. Most of the time to make sure his buddies got home safe. Okay, so he was a little boring.

Ranger Kingston was the guy who got the job done.

His gaze drifted over to the woman again. Beautiful and petite, she wore her full and curly dark hair pulled back in a pink handkerchief, and she had on a white sundress, a patchwork satchel over her shoulder. As he watched, she crouched and took a picture of a seagull perched on one of the pier posts.

He looked back at Colt, who grinned at him.

Ranger reached for a chip. “Nope. Sorry. Women are trouble. Something you should probably remember.”

He raised an eyebrow, but Colt lifted a shoulder, looked out at the sunset. “Old news.”

It probably wasn’t old news to their brother Dodge, who still hadn’t returned home after the epic fight between him and Colt six years ago over, yes, a girl.

A girl Colt probably didn't even like—not in the way Dodge did. As in, give your heart and soul for life to one person.

Worse, Colt had kissed her. Ranger had seen it happening, inserted himself into the drama that followed, and since then, watched his family disintegrate. He talked to Dodge. He talked to Colt. And all three of them occasionally talked to their sister, Larke, as well as their father, who was still back at Sky King Ranch in Alaska.

But Dodge and Colt didn't speak to each other.

Maybe never would again.

Still, Ranger couldn't help the desire to keep the family together, somehow, so of course he invited Colt down to the Keys during his training. After all, Colt had re-upped too, and this time had secured a position in the elite Delta Force.

"I'm here for my free-diving cert, nothing more," Ranger said, finishing off his lemonade. The woman had moved into his periphery now, taking a picture of another woman who painted the sunset, her easel set up in the square.

"How's it going?" Colt's gaze hung over Ranger's shoulder, on the dance floor. Probably on some cute girl dancing with her girlfriends.

"I have a fifty-foot test dive in two weeks that I don't want to fail. Right now, I'm hunting forty feet, so I'm making progress."

"Isn't this just an add-on cert? Something to fill the gap before sniper school? You could do this in your sleep."

"Hardly. It's all about relaxing, about learning not to take a breath when your body is calling for it, mind over matter, and yes, technique. But my breath hold time is improving."

"Relaxing is the key? Oh bro, this is why you need me."

Ranger laughed. Yes, he needed Colt, but not quite how his brother wanted to help. He needed, most of all, to know that Colt was okay.

That inside the happy exterior, his anger had died to a

simmer, maybe long enough to see that he was forgiven. Or could be, if he wanted it.

Colt picked up a chip, the tags around his neck glinting in the sun. His smile dimmed. “Had a buddy who nearly died during the ascent test. Panicked. Experienced a shallow water blackout.” He dipped the chip into the seafood mix. “So . . .”

“I got this, Colt.”

The girl now stood in the middle of the square, taking a shot of a knife juggler, tattoos covering his bare upper body. She put the camera down, watching the man. Yes, she was pretty. Cute, pixie nose, a wide mouth, eyes that shone—or that might just be the sunlight.

Still, something about her caught him.

She lifted her camera and took another shot.

Then, she turned the camera lens, her back to the sunset, and circled the pier.

Stopped the viewfinder on him.

He averted his eyes, back to Colt. “So, where to next, after your leave?”

“Back to North Carolina and then . . .” He lifted a shoulder. Which was correct—as a member of Delta, he might end up anywhere, anytime.

“Good thing you could sneak—oh no.” His gaze had, of course, returned to the woman, and she still had the camera on him.

As if taking his picture.

He slid off the high top. “Be right back.”

The sun hovered just above the horizon, backdropping her, silhouetting her in white as he walked toward her. She lowered the camera. He stood maybe a foot taller than her, but she didn’t move as he closed the gap between them. Instead, she lifted her face, cocked her head, and said, “What can I do for you, sailor?”

“What?”

“I just saw you, the way you scanned the plaza, the way you sat in your chair . . . You’re an operator, aren’t you?”

He blinked at her.

“Don’t worry. I didn’t take your picture. But you’re not doing a great job of being on vacation, if that’s why you’re here.”

He stood, taken aback. How—

“Your shirt, for one. It’s an Oxford. At least roll up your sleeves. And maybe wear flip-flops instead of dress shoes. I dunno, but just an idea. Otherwise, how’re you going to feel the sand between your toes?”

“I don’t like sand between my toes,” he said before he could stop himself.

“A BUD/S reaction? Not so fond of sand after inhaling it for six weeks?”

Who *was* this girl?

She stepped over to him, showed him the digital viewfinder. “See, no pictures of you, or your buddy. Now that’s a sailor who knows how to be on vacation.”

“He’s not in the Navy,” Ranger said and took off his sunglasses to see the pictures better. Nope, not a one of him and Colt, although she’d captured a couple holding hands, a beautiful shot of a seagull dive-bombing a fish with the backdrop of the sunset, and one of the juggler, a knife glinting rose gold. “Pretty good shots.”

“Thanks.” She let the camera drop around her neck and gestured toward the Bahama Mama. “You’re staying at the same hotel I am. I saw you walk by the pool earlier today in your BDUs, so . . .”

Right. The Navy had put him up at a hotel near the base because of the overflow in military housing. “I’m doing some training.”

She crossed her arms. “Of course you are.”

He frowned, but she suddenly put her hand on his arm. “We’re missing the sunset. C’mon!” She practically pulled him

over to the railing, shoving into a space between an elderly couple and a woman with a stroller. She stood up on the railing and pulled her camera to her eye. “Isn’t it glorious?”

Only a wink of sunlight remained, but indeed it *was* glorious. Liquid fire spilled out across the jagged horizon, a trail of golden luminescence across the waves. Overhead, orange seeped into the deep indigo sky, painted in shades of lavender and magenta.

He’d seen plenty of sunsets, all over the world, but agreed this was an especially pretty one. Especially when she rested her camera on the railing and looked back at him, grinning. “I got it.”

The sun slipped away, and the crowd clapped as if it might be something spectacular. It was, really.

Each day, a gift.

He held out his hand as she jumped down.

“Now, we celebrate. Have you ever eaten a conch fritter?”

He opened his mouth, not sure if he should abandon his brother, but she grinned. “Your buddy is gone.”

He turned, and sure enough, Colt had vanished. A waitress was cleaning their table.

Huh. He turned back to her. “Conch fritter sounds dangerous.”

She grinned. “So there *is* a fun guy inside there.”

Maybe. She took his hand, pulling him toward the Mallory market. Inside, all manner of vendors served everything from French fries to ice cream to, yes, conch fritters. He ordered a basket and sauce, and she met him with two cups of lemonade. They walked out to a table in the square. The stars began to arrive, and a slight wind carried a hint of something fresh. Maybe rain.

She sat and he set the fritters down. “I hope that’s Caribbean dipping sauce. It’s the best.” She reached for a fritter, dipped it, and handed it to him. “Tell me this isn’t the best thing you’ve ever tasted.”

He took the conch. “Not until you tell me your name.”

She took a piece, dipped it. “Noemi. And you are?”

“Ranger.” He put the fritter in his mouth. “This is good.”

Shoot, he liked her. And for the first time in hours, he wasn’t thinking about breath holds and rates of ascent.

“Told you.” She wore a smirk.

He could play this game. “Have you ever eaten octopus?”

“Of course.” She shook her head as if saying, *Silly man*.

“How about coconut tree grubs?”

“Do mopane worms count?”

She leaned back, folded her hands in her lap. “A delicacy in Zimbabwe. Interesting. No. It’s on my list.” She leaned forward. “How about crickets?”

“Salted and deep fried are the best.” He took another fritter. “But have you had horse sausage?”

She made a face. “That’s like eating a dog.”

“Also good—”

“Please. I like you. Don’t wreck it.”

He laughed. “Okay, fine, how about giraffe weevils?”

“They taste like shrimp.” She took a drink of her lemonade.

“So, what, you travel the world tasting crazy cuisine?”

“No. I just travel the world. Peru, Egypt, Thailand, Korea, New Zealand. I teach English as a second language. Short-term gigs that allow me to dig my feet into the soil of a new country.”

“And now you’re in Key West taking pictures.”

“It’s a stopover while my father fixes our sailboat. We had a bit of damage when our autopilot went out.” She pointed to herself. “I’m in the brig for falling asleep on watch.”

He gestured to the nearly empty basket. “Then the last one is yours.”

She took it.

“So,” Ranger said, “you’re staying at the hotel while—”

“Dad works in the yard. I probably should be helping him,

but he gets a little crabby when he's fibreglassing, so . . ." She shrugged. "No. He's great. Just a little bossy sometimes."

Or protective, and Ranger could guess why. Pretty girl, seeing the world—it seemed like a recipe for danger if she wasn't careful.

She drew her straw to her lips. "I saw that nice ride you came in on too."

Oh, the motorcycle he'd rented? Seemed like a fun and easy way to get down to the Keys after his flight into Miami.

She kept looking at him, smiling.

"You want a ride?"

"I thought you'd never ask." She put her cup down.

"Now?"

She stood up. "The night is young, sailor. And the best stars are on the south side of the island."

He stood too. "Um. But . . . you just met me. I could be a murderer."

She walked over to the trash can. "Are you a murderer?" She turned, met his eyes. In the glow of the lights that soaked Mallory Square, her eyes turned a deep golden brown, her dress almost ethereal, caught in the wind. It felt a little like an angel peering into his soul.

"No."

"I didn't think so." She grabbed his hand again. "Besides, if you hurt me, my father will dismantle you."

Oh. Well, he got that too.

She practically led him to his bike, parked in front of the hotel. He had his keys in his pocket. He got on and held the bike for her, and she climbed on behind him.

For some reason he expected her to put her hands around his waist, but she held on behind her, her legs against his, leaning with him as he drove them through town to the south beach.

The moon was rising, the stars so bright, they shed silvery light upon the beach. They parked and she climbed off the bike.

“You’re going to have to take those fancy shoes off.”

They weren’t fancy, but he *was* a little buttoned-up. Maybe Colt was right.

He needed to relax.

He slipped out of his shoes and socks and while he was at it, rolled up his khakis. She stepped up to him and unbuttoned his shirt cuffs. “These too.” Then she headed out to the beach.

He followed her, pushing up his sleeves, his feet sinking into the silky, cold sand. The surf rolled onto the beach in the distance as if in thunderous applause. Noemi dropped her bag some ten feet from the surf and raised her camera.

She stood a long time, and he caught up to her before she was done with the shot. “Narrow aperture gives you the best picture of the moon,” she said. “Widest shot, nice and crisp. Shutter speed around 125. I wish I had a longer lens, but I think it turned out.” She showed him the picture on the viewfinder.

The moon was caught just hovering over a silver surf, a hint of luminance on the indigo plane. “It’s beautiful. You’re a real talent.”

“It’s a hobby. I once sat for sixteen hours in Peru stalking a harpy eagle.” She capped the lens of her camera. “My father says he should train me to be a sniper.”

He wanted to laugh, but it felt a little too close. “What did you say?”

“A sniper. You know, a guy who—”

“I know what a sniper is. Why did your dad say he should train you?”

She lifted a shoulder. “Because he thinks I should know how to take care of myself. He put me through a SERE school scenario when I was a teenager.”

He’d gone a little cold. “Is your dad an operator?”

“Sometimes.” She put her camera into her satchel. “Okay, ready for a swim?” She reached for the hem of her dress.

“Hey—wait—um—” His heart had suddenly slammed into his chest. “Stop.”

But her dress was in a puddle on the sand, and she stood there, in a one-piece swimsuit, also white. “What?”

He stood, nonplussed.

“Did you think I was stripping down?”

He swallowed, his pulse calming. “I . . . I don’t know what to expect.”

“Take a breath there, sailor. Nothing’s going to happen here. I’m harmless. I just wanted to swim under the moonlight. No big deal.”

She headed into the ocean.

Oh brother.

And now he stood in the sand like an idiot, not sure if he should shuck off his shirt and . . . this just felt so terribly un-hinged.

Had Colt put her up to this? He nearly looked around for his brother, half expected to find him doubled over, laughing. “*Who says trouble? Fun, bro. Stop taking life so seriously.*”

But no brother, just an empty beach, a few boats tied up at a nearby dock, the smell of fish and brine and sand and a pretty girl standing at the edge of the surf, her hands up, as if in praise.

He walked toward the waves.

Her scream rent the air.

She danced back, picking up her feet, turning.

Right behind her, coming out of the brackish tangle of mangroves, charged a massive animal.

No. Not an animal. *A crocodile.*

What—?

He sprinted toward her and before he could think through his actions, kicked the reptile with everything inside him on its soft—or not so soft—belly.

It was big. Heavy. And his feeble kick did nothing more than knock the creature off course, just a little. It rounded on Ranger.

But he was already up the beach. He caught Noemi on the way and flung her up into his arms, running fast until he hit the pavement.

When he reached it, he put her down, but she climbed up onto a short retaining wall.

He stopped, turned.

The reptile stood on shore, some thirty yards away, its pursuit abandoned, the moonlight glistening on its dark hide. Then, just like that, it retreated and slipped back into the water.

Noemi put her hands on his shoulders, standing just about eye level. “So maybe I won’t go swimming.”

And something inside him just sort of snapped. He laughed and laughed, and she pulled him toward her in a hug until he lowered the top of his head on her shoulder.

“There you are,” she said, pushing him away. “Finally.”

He looked up at her, still laughing. “Who?”

“The guy who watched me tour the square.”

“I didn’t—”

“You *did*. I saw you.” She held his face in her hands, meeting his eyes with hers, something magical in them. “And I knew that guy, *this* guy, had a big heart just waiting to be awakened.”

He narrowed his eyes. “Are you flirting with me?”

“Oh boy, you’re in worse shape than I thought.” She smiled then, her golden-brown eyes alight in the moonlight, and the smell of her, maybe coconut oil she’d used by the pool, and a hint of the salty air, conspired to stir something deep inside him.

Something he’d successfully ignored for the six years of training and deployment.

Maybe, yeah, his heart—because there was no room for excess emotion in his job. And he was *always* on the job.

“But like I said, nothing’s happening here.” She let go of him and jumped off the retaining wall. “Yet.” She bent to brush the sand off her legs. “Tomorrow, when you pick me up for dinner, then we’ll see.”

She waited near the bike as he ran down to retrieve her satchel and dress. By the time he returned, the sky had started to rumble. She put on the dress, then her satchel, as he put his shoes back on.

He climbed on the bike, and she got on behind him. Slipped her arms around his waist. And shoot if he didn't take the long way around the island. It may have been a bad idea, because the skies opened up, and by the time they reached the Bahama Mama, they were both drenched, his white Oxford plastered to his torso. The rain spilled off the tiki roof into the parking lot and lightning cracked the sky.

They both got off and made a dash for the lobby. He stood, shivering, sopping wet, not quite wanting to leave her, the way she smiled at him. Her dress clung to her body, her hair dark and curly, and maybe she was right . . .

She *had* awakened something inside of him.

He just hoped it didn't get him killed.

ONE

Forty-two seconds to freedom.

Noemi had done the math. Freedom lay just two hundred yards out of camp, buried in the thin shimmer of fading orange light caught between the thick-trunked Kuka trees and past the brown and yellow grasses, ramshackle houses, battered motorbikes, and the smoking campfire simmering rice in a pot.

Forty-two seconds away.

She'd have to run past the two guards who stood barefoot, smoking cigarettes, AK-47s hung on old belt straps over their bony shoulders. Clearly not devout adherents to the Islamic Haram, these terrorists who had kidnapped them three weeks ago. Not devout, but still dangerous.

"Is tonight the night?" The whisper came from behind her, from Blessing, the fifteen-year-old girl also hidden in the hijab and abaya their kidnapers had forced the women to wear.

Noemi didn't care—the abaya kept her warm when the night closed in, protected her from the ants and moths that burrowed into the ground beneath her.

The costume also hid the assortment of weaponry she'd acquired. Like a dull-edged dinner knife she'd discovered near the firepit and had quietly honed to a fine point. And a shattered mirror, now wrapped in a piece of cotton and secured to the waistband of her filthy underwear.

But most importantly, it hid Freddie's cell phone.

Either he hadn't a clue that he'd dropped it last night or . . . or the twelve-year-old boy soldier who'd been assigned to

guard them under the massive tamarind tree had finally become her friend.

She prayed so. No, more accurately, Selah prayed. Because her friend was under the illusion that God actually cared. Might even show up to rescue them. Nope—Noemi did the actual work of planning their escape and dearly hoped that she didn't get found out.

She couldn't bear another person getting hurt—or killed—because of her. Even if he might be a terrorist.

Now, she glanced at Blessing, her dark brown eyes the only thing she could see of her beautiful face. "I don't know," Noemi said to her question. Escape, tonight? "Maybe. Stay alert. If they—"

"Stop talking!" one of the guards shouted. She thought his name might be Jala. He was older, gray woven into his dark knotted hair. He wore a pair of tattered slippers and his ribs stuck out from his black threadbare T-shirt. She guessed him maybe a buck forty, sopping wet.

Sometimes Noemi pictured herself walking out of camp, daring Jala to follow her. She wasn't a wisp of a girl, and her father had taught her skills. If not for Jala's gun . . .

Noemi turned back to the rice she stirred. In it, she'd added wild onion and Kuka leaves, which she hoped might help Colt heal from his recent go-round with the real tough guys.

The ones who threatened, randomly, to execute him. It was a sort of evil game they played.

Smoke stirred up around the fire, filtering into the fading sunlight. Every night, the same war raged inside her.

Survive. Evade. Resist. Escape.

Master Chief Pete Sutton would never have been imprisoned this long—three excruciating weeks. She imagined her father looking down from heaven and shaking his head. "*You're not here to survive this. You're here to take charge of it.*"

Fifty feet away, in another section, a couple men walked to

the edge of the dusty camp and fired off their weapons. Beside her, Blessing jumped, but Noemi took her hand.

“They must have seen a wild dog.” Selah came over from where she had been gathering firewood from the outskirts of camp. The men liked her better—probably because of her blond hair and the way she never snapped back at them. Selah was calm in the chaos, and at night when the darkness settled, she sang hymns. But it wasn’t enough to drown out the cacophony of the savannah at night—the high-pitched squeak of the gray hornbill, or the chipped whine of guinea fowl, or worse, the incessant cackle of a francolin.

But the real danger were the wild dogs that roamed the outskirts of the camp. Feral and bold, sometimes they ran right in toward the fire and she had to ward them away with glowing sticks.

She imagined the dogs retreating into the darkness where they waited to gobble her up.

Coward.

If she didn’t run, they’d never be rescued.

Just forty-two seconds. She’d use the dusk to hide herself behind the massive tree, then scuttle through the brush and grasses, parallel with the dirt tracks that wound through the wild savannah plains of northeastern Nigeria, away from the lush and beautiful montane forests to the east.

Away from the city of Jalingo, toward rescue.

Except, after the raid of the school there, she probably wouldn’t find anything but fear in the community. No, rescue had to be somewhere else.

Maybe her uncle’s home in southern Nigeria. If she could get there.

Selah added a gnarled stick to the fire, one of the many fallen from the massive tree that imprisoned them at night. “Did you talk to Moses?” She gestured to one of the four men across the compound. They hadn’t bothered handcuffing Dr. Aaron

Hanson—not with his gunshot wound slowly turning septic. The sixty-year-old American had stopped moaning a few days ago. He mostly lay in the shade where Noemi and Selah had moved him, not even bothering to swat at flies.

He emitted a terrible odor, and the sight of him could make her weep. *I'm sorry.*

Moses, their translator, tried to bargain for medicine for him, early on, and had lost two teeth in the terrible wound one of their captors had delivered with the butt of his machine gun. His mouth had finally started to heal. But he sat, legs drawn up, head on his knees, humming, most of the time.

Moses didn't deserve to die out here, not after everything he'd done for them.

The other two men, however, were bound hand and foot. Maybe because they'd been armed. Or because they'd fought back.

Because they were American soldiers who would, despite their injuries, grab the first chance to escape.

Noemi had a feeling that at least one of the two had been a SEAL. "*Calm is contagious.*" She'd heard the blond—a man named Fraser—say that as the truck had jostled them into the night. He hadn't groaned, not even once, despite the terrible set of his arm, his broken wrist.

Reminded her way too much of another SEAL, the one who lived deep in her memory. Tough, his emotions carefully tamed, the kind of guy who could look pain in the face and not blink.

Ranger Kingston probably hadn't a clue what he'd done to her heart, either, but it had been the right thing, letting him go, walking out of his life.

Her broken heart was her own stupid fault.

It was the darker one, the tougher one—ironically, Ranger's brother Colt—who the rebels most feared. Which was why Abu, the big terrorist with the black eyes and the tribal scars down

his face, hauled him out for sport, put a gun to his head, held up a cell phone to record his murder . . . and waited. Waited for him to sweat or swear or just shout at them.

He did nothing, and that made Abu angrier each time.

How Colt stood up to his beatings, she didn't know, but Abu would drag Colt's unconscious body back to the others, and by morning, Colt sat, huddled up with his fellow warrior, watching the camp with those unflinching brown eyes.

She might be a little afraid of him too.

The water in her rice pot boiled up, and she hooked the handle with a stick and took it off the fire, setting it in the dirt.

She just needed a distraction. Something to capture the attention of Freddie and Jala, and forty-two seconds to disappear. Because if she didn't escape, and soon, she had no doubt that one—or all of them—were going to die.

Take charge, Noemi.

She had found and cleaned a couple dented metal bowls and now ladled out the rice into them. Handed one to Selah for Dr. Aaron.

The other she picked up, and with a glance at Freddie and Jala, walked over to Colt. She crouched in front of him. He stared at her out of one eye, the other terribly swollen. His nose had clearly been broken, maybe reset by Moses, but blood caked his nostrils, and a bruise darkened his chin, swelling that too. Blood also edged his ear, but she thought it might be from the nearby head wound.

His entire body bore bruises, and the way he breathed, catching now and again, she guessed he might have a broken rib, or two.

“Hey,” he said quietly. “What’s on the menu?”

“A nice T-bone,” she said and held up a spoonful of rice.

He opened his mouth, let her feed him. “Needs salt.”

“I’ll tell the chef.” She ladled in another mouthful.

He smirked, and under all those wounds was a man who

clearly didn't let darkness control him. He took another spoonful, then, "How are you ladies doing?"

Sweet. She lowered her voice. "I think I can get away."

His eyes widened. "You're barefoot."

"Oh no, really? Shoot. I left my Tevas back at the spa. What-ever shall I do?"

He smiled again, humor in his eyes. "Jala falls asleep right after dinner."

"I know. But Freddie likes to sit with us by the fire. What I really need is a distraction."

Colt swallowed another spoonful of rice. One more, and she'd give the rest to Fraser. A glance at the SEAL said he was listening, but his gaze stayed on the camp. His jaw was drawn in a tight line.

"I can give you that," Colt said softly. He met her eyes.

A fist tightened in her gut. "They'll kill you."

"No, they won't. They want to, but they're too scared. They know I'm an American. I'm worth something. And their higher-ups want to sell me."

"He'd rather die helping you escape," Fraser said quietly next to them.

Colt nodded.

Noemi shook her head. "No."

"Get ready," Colt said. "You'll know when."

She moved over to Fraser. "No." She held out the spoon to him. He was less battered, a handsome man with a Midwestern accent. Both men had thick beards, although they'd been clean-shaven when they'd been taken.

"Don't let his sacrifice go to waste," Fraser whispered.

She practically shoved the next spoonful into his mouth. "I'll figure out another way."

"When?" He said it with his mouth full. Swallowed. "Moses heard them say they were moving us north."

She halted the next spoonful. Glanced at Moses. He was

watching them, too, his wizened fifty-year-old eyes confirming Fraser's words.

"They're watching," Colt said under his breath.

Noemi fed Fraser more. Selah, meanwhile, was trying to get Dr. Aaron to eat, urging him awake. She put her hand on his forehead, her mouth pinched tight.

"They can't move us. Dr. Aaron will die," Noemi said.

"He won't be going with us," Fraser said and took the last spoonful.

Oh. Because he'd already be dead.

If she wanted to save the man who'd given so much to Hope School, the one who had trusted her when she said the trip to the village of Lakawa would be safe, she needed to leave, now.

She cleaned out the bowl and stood up, met Colt's eyes. "Don't die."

He grinned. He still had all his teeth despite a bloody mouth. "You're so bossy, Master Chief Sutton."

She shook her head, but yes, maybe her father *had* rubbed off on her.

Yeah, well, she'd gotten them into this mess.

She could get them out.

When she returned to the firepit, Blessing was stirring the rice. Noemi ladled out more and gave it to her to eat. Noemi had probably lost fifteen pounds in the last few weeks. Frankly, despite her love for jollof rice, this was a far cry from the flavorful Nigerian dish cooked in tomatoes and pepper puree.

"Dr. Aaron isn't moving. He won't even wake up." Selah had given her bowl to Moses, who ate it heartily in the fading light.

Noemi glanced at Jala, who had thrown down his cigarette into the dust, and Freddie, now wandering toward their campfire. He'd sit with her and eat the rice. She guessed he felt safer with them than with his fellow boy soldiers at the other camp.

Then she met Colt's eyes.

He drew in a breath. Gave a nod.

Please don't die.

“Hey, you, skinny guy. I need to—”

“Shut up,” Jala said and walked toward him. Noemi winced as he kicked Colt, who pulled up his knees to protect himself.

But the scuffle had turned Freddie and, in that time, she'd stepped back, toward their tree.

Their tree. A massive, ancient tamarind with a canopy of gnarled, arching arms that both imprisoned and hid them.

And around the back, where no one noticed, she'd broken off a few limbs to create an escape.

Colt kicked back at Jala, grabbed his ankles with his feet, and managed to topple the man over. Freddie headed toward the ruckus.

Noemi took off.

She slipped under the hanging branches of the tree, then around it to the back and broke free from its twisted arms into the grassland.

She pulled the long abaya up past her knees, freeing her legs.

Forty-two seconds.

The sun had fallen behind the horizon, long dark shadows cutting through the twilight.

Her foot crunched on something prickly and she bit back a cry. *“The only easy day was yesterday.”*

The massive Kuka tree loomed ahead.

Safety, her heart in her throat, her breaths fast.

Twenty-three seconds.

Her foot caught a branch.

She hit the dirt, rolled, and gasped, staring at the sky, her heart wild.

Get up. *Get—*

A shot echoed into the air, and she rolled to her knees, stayed down.

“Woman!” Abu's voice.

She didn't move.

“I will kill him if you don’t come back.”

She closed her eyes. “*Don’t let his sacrifice go to waste.*”

She turned, started crawling.

“Kari!”

She stilled at the new voice. *No!* The pidgin word for *daughter*.

“Kari, run!”

Moses. She spotted him in the fading light, a frail outline as Abu held a gun to his head.

And then, Abu pulled the trigger.

The memory of Moses’s body jerking violently, the way he crumpled into the dirt, would live with her forever. That, and the scream that emitted from her before she could slap a hand over her mouth.

“*Take charge of your fear.*”

She buried her face into her hands. Breathe.

Then, *Run*.

“Woman,” Abu shouted. “Come back.”

She couldn’t look. Couldn’t turn around, couldn’t move.

Run! The voice came from inside her, but it still galvanized her, sent her running. *I’m sorry—I’m sorry—*

Another gunshot, and she refused to look.

“The next one kills her. *You* kill her!”

She slowed, turned.

Abu held Blessing by the nape of her neck, the gun to her head.

No—she was a child.

Just a *child*.

She held up her hands. “Stop! *Stop!*” Her eyes filled as she ran toward him. “Stop, please— No!”

Abu laughed and shook Blessing, forcing her to her knees, pressing the gun to her head.

Noemi burst through the brush, right up to him, then threw her arms around Blessing, her body a covering. “What is wrong with you? She’s a child!”