

STORMY WEATHER BABY
A SECURITY SPECIALISTS INTERNATIONAL NOVELLA

MONETTE MICHAELS

Stormy Weather Baby by Monette Michaels

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Dedicated to my fans.

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Chapter One

June 15th, 8:30 A.M., Sanctuary.

Keely Walsh-Maddox entered the kitchen at the main lodge. Gathered around the table in the breakfast nook were Quinn Jones and his wife Lacey and Scotty, the SSI cook and a second father to Keely. The three looked up and smiled.

"Hey, princess," Scotty called out. "How are you feeling today? I made your favorite egg dish. It's in the warmer. Your orange juice is here on the table."

"Thanks, Scotty. And as to how I feel? Stir crazy." She walked to the warming drawer and pulled out a plate containing a goat cheese, spinach and mushroom frittata.

"You were just out yesterday." Quinn pointed his toast at her for emphasis. "You can't be stir crazy."

Thus speaks another over-protective male.

"Quinn, shut up." Lacey tapped a finger on her husband's mouth then lovingly wiped away a crumb that had caught on the corner of his lips. "I told you Ren is smothering her. He's operating under the misapprehension that pregnant women are invalids."

"Ain't that the truth." Keely sighed, put her food on the table, then slid onto the bench seat built into the breakfast nook. "I feel like one of those frou-frou, yappy little dogs. You know the ones. Their owners take them to the doggy beauty parlor and carry them around in a special doggy purse. All I need is a collar and a leash. It's like Ren thinks I'll hurt myself if I walk across the floor." She waved a fork full of egg and cheese around. "Do you know what he told me this morning before he left to go to the ranger station outside of Coeur d'Alene?"

Lacey smiled. "No, what?"

"To stay in bed!" The three laughed. "It's not funny. He wanted me to rest after the arduous journey to the obstetrician's office yesterday." Keely slapped the table with her free hand, rattling the silverware. "The most stressful thing I did yesterday was stand up and sit down. He barely let me walk on my own. - - Arrgh! The man is driving me frick-fracking nuts!"

"He wants to protect you," Quinn said. "I felt the same way when Lacey was pregnant. Of course, my lovely wife," he turned and placed a kiss on Lacey's cheek, "soon showed me the error of my ways."

"And he kept on protecting me anyway." Lacey's tone was teasing and affectionate. "My advice is to do what you need to do until you can't do it anymore."

"Exactly!" Keely smiled at the other woman before shoveling some eggs into her mouth.

"What did the doctor say, Keely?" Scotty asked. "Did she tell you and Ren something that set him off again?"

"Again? Scotty, the man has never stopped since he learned I was pregnant."

That had been back in November. The actual “deed” had been done in late October after Ren had returned from South America via Boston. Once Ren had gotten over his fears about her small size, they’d made love night and day. A few missed birth control pills and an extremely virile man, and *voilà*, one pregnant Keely.

Scotty chuckled. “I stand corrected. But what did the doctor tell you? I haven’t had *my* report yet.” He winked at her.

Keely giggled. “The doctor said she’d see me next week for the regular checkup. That I was still on schedule for the C-section in three weeks, which is still one week shy of my due date. And that Riley is head down and everything looks good.” Keely ran her fingers through her mass of red-blond curls. “Ren heard every single blessed word the doctor said and then completely disregarded them.”

Ren had also refused to make love to her last night and this morning, even though the doctor had said love-making was fine as long as Keely was comfortable and the act was not too vigorous. Hell, she didn’t blame Ren. What man wanted to make love to a waddling cream puff?

“Ah, yes, the selective listening capabilities of the alpha-male,” Lacey said. “Know it up close and personal.” She patted Keely on the shoulder. “What do you want to do today? The men are all gone...”

“Hey, two males present here!” Quinn protested.

“Sorry, my love. I meant the three primary males who have made it their duty to keep Keely penned up at Sanctuary - - her hubby, her brother and her hubby’s brother - - are gone.”

“Well...” The phone rang before Keely could reply. Being closest, she picked it up. “Sanctuary, Main Lodge. Keely Maddox speaking.”

“Oh, Keely. Um, this is Fiona Teague, Price’s sister. Is he there, please?”

“Oh, Fiona, I’m sorry. He isn’t here. In fact, he’s in your neck of the woods. The U.P. in Michigan. Hasn’t he called you?”

“No. Well, this is a hell of a mess.” The woman sighed loudly. And was that a sob?

Keely had never met Fiona, who was Price’s youngest sister and an emergency room doctor in Detroit, but it was obvious the woman was upset. Keely put the call on the speaker so the others could listen in. Something was wrong and she might need Scotty and Quinn’s advice on how to handle it.

Price was part of the SSI family; that made Fiona family too. Family helped family.

“What’s a mess? Are you in trouble?” At her mention of “trouble,” the other three stopped their quiet conversation and listened intently. “Call Price on his cell. He can be in Detroit in a matter of hours.”

Fiona choked out a hesitant laugh. “That’s the problem. I flew to Idaho for a surprise visit. I’m in Grangeville at a diner called Ma’s. The Greyhound bus from Boise dropped me off here. I was hoping Price would come pick me up since there isn’t a taxi service to Sanctuary or a rental car agency.”

“I’ll come get you,” Keely offered, waving off the beginnings of protests from the two men seated at the table. “It’ll take me about fifty minutes to an hour to get there. So, sit and enjoy some of Ma’s good food.”

“Oh, Keely ... that’s ... that’s too much trouble. Price told me you were pregnant and...”

“I’m pregnant,” Keely snarled. “Not disabled. I’ll pick you up. Just hang tight.”

“O-o-okay. See you soon.” The call ended from Fiona’s end.

Keely put the phone back in its charger and turned a smiling face to the others. “Well, that’s just what I needed - - a good excuse to get out of the house and off Sanctuary. What?” Scotty and Quinn glowered at her while Lacey hid her smile behind a hand.

“You can’t pick up Fiona. Ren will kill me,” Quinn said bluntly. “He told me to keep you safe.”

“From what? It’s just a two-hour round trip to Ma’s and back. It’s not like I’m hopping in the Hummer for the six-hour-drive to Boise and the mall or something. And if you mean potential danger from the Department of Defense traitor? Well, he hasn’t sent anyone after me since March. I can’t live my life worrying whether or not someone might be coming after me some day in the future. I refuse to live my life in fear.” She reached across the table and grabbed Quinn’s hand and squeezed. “If I thought there was real danger out there, I wouldn’t leave. I would never expose my unborn child to danger.”

Quinn frowned. “Jesus, Keely, I know that, but...”

“There’s no but about it. I’m picking up Fiona.” Keely wanted to scream in the face of Quinn’s continued stubbornness, but knew that wouldn’t faze him. Rational arguments with lots of back up from Lacey would. “Lacey? Am I asking too much here? I’m an adult. I’m not sick or disabled or mentally defective.”

“Nope, you’re exactly right. You are none of those things. I think you should go if you feel like it. Eight months pregnant is far enough away from your due date to still live your life as you wish,” Lacey said. “But Quinn is correct on one point. Ren will ream him a new asshole if he finds out you’ve left the premises.”

“Call and tell him after I’ve gone,” Keely said. “That way you’ll have done your duty in reporting my break for freedom and Ren can be mad at me. See? Easy solution.” She turned to Scotty. “Fix me a Pepsi to go, please? I need to get my snow gear. The wind is from the north and really cold. The predicted weather front should hit just about the time Fiona and I are heading home.”

The Weather Channel had talked about a late spring-early summer snowstorm for this part of the Bitterroots. Mother Nature’s one last joke before milder weather set in for the summer. She wasn’t worried. The Hummer could handle the roughest weather, as could she.

“Are you sure about this, princess?” Scotty asked.

“Abso-fricking-lutely. This is just what I needed. A road trip - - alone. I love my husband, but he needs to understand that I need my space from time to time.”

One hour later, Grangeville, Idaho.

After an uneventful drive to Grangeville, Keely entered Ma's Bar and Grill and looked around. She nodded to the owner, a large, burly, bald guy named Nick. "Ma" was his mother and she told anyone who'd listen that she'd earned her retirement. Of course, she came in every day to watch over Nick to make sure he didn't let her high standards down.

Ma waved at her from the pass-through to the kitchen. Keely waved back.

As usual the place was packed even with the threat of snow. Late spring into early summer in northern Idaho was not for the faint of heart. This year especially had been one for the record books as winter did not want to give up its hold on the Bitterroots. But not even the threat of thunder-snow, sleet, hail, and gusty winds stopped an Idahoan from going where he wanted.

She paused once she moved farther into the room and away from the door and rubbed a hand over her stomach where her son, Riley, was doing jumping-jacks in her womb. God, she could hardly wait to hold her baby in her arms instead of on her bladder. She would also like to see her feet again.

Keely walked the perimeter of the small eatery, nodding at patrons. She recognized most of the people eating Ma's delicious home-cooking. Not much of a surprise since there weren't many residents in this part of Idaho and very few places to eat and socialize.

When she'd almost finished one full circuit of the restaurant, Keely spotted the only female who looked out of place. The curly-haired redhead sat in a corner booth and was not dressed for the inclement weather. Fiona Teague was so short that the booth in which she sat almost swamped her. She looked as if she was barely sixteen-years-old and a strong wind would knock her on her butt. Her hair was secured into a high, messy ponytail and added to the look of youth. Her striking blue-green eyes were almost too-large for her face with long lashes matching her hair. Her skin was pale - - and bruised.

Some son of a bitch had hit her - - and recently. Keely's intuition during their earlier phone conversation that something was wrong in Fiona's life had been proven correct.

Keely rushed to the booth. "Fiona?"

"Keely? God, you're almost as short as me. From the stories Price has told me about you, I expected an Amazon." Fiona frowned and her gaze strayed to the obvious baby bump under Keely's Navaho-woven wool coat. "How far along are you? Price never gave me details, just said you were pregnant." The woman's trained medical eye assessed Keely from top to bottom.

"I have about another month, but I'm scheduled for a C-section in three weeks."

"Really?" Fiona scowled. "You look full term. Your baby has obviously dropped ... uh, sorry, professional habit. You might just carry low, some women do. I'm sure your OB knows what he or she is doing." She slid over and made room in the booth. "Here get off your feet. You look as if you could use a warm drink. This weather is nuts." Price's sister shivered visibly, dressed only in a light-weight denim jacket, t-shirt and jeans.

Keely slid into the booth and drew off the scarf around her neck then unbuttoned her much more practical winter-weight coat. She rubbed a hand over her belly, soothing the baby who had switched from calisthenics to playing drums on her spinal cord.

Not much longer, Riley, and mommy will play with those little kicking feet and hands.

"I could use a cup of tea." Keely signaled Nick who nodded.

The owner knew what she liked well enough. She and Ren drove through Grangeville on the way to and from the OB visits in Coeur d'Alene. Ma's was always a stopping place on one side or the other of the now weekly visits. For a period in the middle of her pregnancy, Keely had craved Ma's meat loaf. Ren had made the one-hundred-mile round trip several times a week just to get it for her.

Fiona picked up Keely's wrist and took her pulse. Several seconds passed before Fiona spoke. "Too rapid. You're grimacing from time to time. What's going on, Keely? Why did the men let you pick me up when you look as if you'll pop within the next ten minutes?"

Keely didn't know whether to laugh or be insulted by Fiona's forthrightness and take control attitude. For someone who looked like a pixie in a Disney movie, the woman was assertive. But then she was an emergency room physician and the attitude probably went with the territory. "Fiona..."

"Call me Fee, please. Only my mother calls me Fiona, usually when she's bitching about my career choice and her lack of grandchildren." She sighed. "Sorry, I guess I can come over kind of strong. But Price told me how protective your husband and the other men are."

"Yeah, they've been somewhat vigilant." Keely snickered. "Ren just looks at me and gets this look of horror on his face. It's as if he's thinking 'My God, what have I done?'" She shook her head. "Even with the doctor - - and my mother who's my size and had six kids including a set of twins, all vaginally - - telling Ren I'll be fine, he still has nightmares. Plus, for a while, we were dealing with mercenaries sent to kill me; that situation didn't help his mental health, either."

"Jesus ... and I thought I had problems." Fee frowned and looked around the crowded restaurant. She leaned closer to Keely and spoke in a lower tone of voice. "Is it safe for you to be here? Do you know all these people?"

"It's safe. I wouldn't endanger my baby. Besides, you're the only stranger here. I also have a sixth sense about trouble. My spidey senses are all good at the moment." She smiled at Nick as he delivered her usual snack. "Hey Nick, thanks for the tea and blueberry scone."

"Anything for you, Keely. When you're ready to throw that asshole Maddox over, you just let me know." The gentle giant smiled and gave her a naughty wink.

"You're so sweet, but I think I'll keep the asshole for a while longer." Keely fluttered her lashes. "I'm just getting him broken in."

Nick barked out a laugh and lumbered toward his counter, greeting regulars as he made his way.

"Everyone seems really friendly." Fee heaved a sad-sounding sigh as she glanced around the noise-filled room.

“Idahoans for the most part are very friendly.” Keely blew on her steaming green tea then took a cautious sip. Her gaze never left Fee’s very expressive and bruised face. She wondered where else the doctor was bruised - - or worse. “I’ll apologize in advance for being nosy, but since you’re Price’s sister that makes you one of the family. So ... who beat on you? And why hasn’t Price frick-fracking killed the bastard yet?”

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“I, uh ... I can’t ... talk about ... just can’t.” Fee shook her head, hating the tell-tale quiver in her voice. *Control, Fee. Control.* She gripped the glass of watered-down cola until her knuckles turned white, fighting to hold back the tears she’d refused to let fall ever since she’d given notice at her job in Detroit. She refused to revisit the memories of what had driven her to Sanctuary. If she did, she’d start crying, screaming - - and never stop. She let out a shuddering breath as she beat her demons back.

Keely patted Fee’s arm. “Are you here to ask Price for help? And don’t deny there’s a problem, because I can see that there is.” Keely traced a gentle finger over Fee’s bruised jaw and cheek.

“Price can’t fix the problem.” Fee had attempted to deal with the situation herself and had been stone-walled every step of the way. Power and money always trumped justice. Lesson learned. And while the thought of Price beating the crap out of her nemesis sounded good, it wouldn’t solve the problem and could only cause trouble for her beloved brother. Her leaving Detroit had been the only solution.

“Wrong answer.”

Fee shot her an incredulous look. She couldn’t believe the woman who looked like a pregnant fairy princess wouldn’t leave it alone.

“Yeah, yeah, I know, I’m pushy.” Keely grinned cheekily and rubbed Fee’s arm. “O-o-kay, if you aren’t here to ask for help then why the surprise visit? Not that you aren’t welcome, like I said you’re family, but I’m damn sure your brother wouldn’t have taken off if he’d known you were coming for a visit.”

Fee sighed. “I didn’t call him, because this trip was a spur of the moment thing. Since he’s not here, I can leave tomorrow. If you could just put me up for the night?” She swirled the remnants of her cola, wondering if she needed another one. The altitude was making her damn thirsty. Water would be better, but her energy hadn’t been good lately and the caffeinated sugar kept her going.

“Of course you can stay. Price has an apartment in the main lodge you can use. And no, you will not leave tomorrow. We can get Price back here in less than a day. He’d be pissed if he missed you. He’d planned on stopping by Detroit to see you before heading back to Idaho.”

“Price was planning on seeing me? When? What did he hear?”

God, had someone called him? Did he already know what had happened? She’d hoped he would never have to hear about the whole fucking mess. He’d be so disappointed that she’d run instead of taking on the big boys.

She heard their father’s voice, “*You can’t be my child. Teagues do not run. Teagues stand and fight.*”

Keely leaned over the table. "Fee? You just went white." The other woman's voice had softened, become gentler. "What's going on, sweetie? Hey, you can tell me. We height-challenged gals have to stick together in a world of big, bad-ass men."

Keely wasn't going to give up. Better to give her something then move on to the bigger issue in the room - - why Keely was denying she was in early labor.

Fee took a bracing sip of her cola. "I've left my job in Detroit. I've asked to be sent to another under-served hospital, preferably in a rural area, so I can finish paying off my medical school Federal loans. I had some down time so I decided to visit with Price until the Feds tell me where they're sending me."

"Uh-huh, and pull my other leg, why dontcha?"

Jesus, Keely was like one of those yippy, little, ankle-biting dogs who sank in their sharp little teeth and didn't let go. "That's the truth. It's why I'm here."

Keely snorted. "Price told us you loved that job. That you planned to stay there even after you'd worked off those loans." She gently squeezed Fee's fingers. "Are you running from the bastard who hurt you?"

Fee choked back a sob. "No."

Way to control your emotions, Fee. The cat is out of the bag now.

Keely would persist until she had the whole story - - and then she would tell Price.

Fee didn't plan on being around when that happened. She didn't want to see the look on her brother's face. He would be so disappointed that she hadn't called him to "fix" things. The one thing she hated most in the world was disappointing the only male who had ever stood up for her.

"Liar." Keely scooted around the booth then hugged Fee. "Shit, sweetie, we kick butt on a regular basis at SSI. If the asshole follows you, he's toast. Or, better yet, Price and some of the guys can go to Detroit and pay the abusive jerk a visit. Teach him a lesson."

"No ... no ... that won't help." Fee took a panicky breath. Despite her resolve, tears streaked down her cheeks. She swiped at them with the cocktail napkin. "He won't follow. And I don't want anyone going to Detroit. I've handled the situation." She wiped her eyes on the back of her sleeve after the napkin shredded from too much moisture. "God, look at me! I'm a fucking mess. I'm an intelligent twenty-nine-year-old doctor for chrissakes. In my ER, I've dealt with shot-up and knifed gang members, drunks going through DTs, junkies coming off drugs, and abusive men demanding to see their beat-up women. And I let one overly aggressive ER doctor scare me away from my home and the job I loved."

Fee looked Keely in the eye. "I was doing some fucking good in that hospital and the bastard took it away from me."

"You're running from a fellow doctor?" Keely asked.

Shit, she had just told the woman too much.

Fee stiffened as Keely grimaced and let out a little gasp. "You okay, Keely?"

"Fine. Don't change the subject. Who are you running from?" Keely nibbled on her scone and made a face. She shoved the scone toward Fee. "Here, eat something to soak up all the cold caffeine you've been drinking. Looks like all you had to eat or

drink during the hour you waited on me was cola. You need real food and hydration so you don't get sick at this altitude."

"Talk about changing the subject. Aren't you hungry?" Fee shoved her distress over the past aside. She straightened in her seat and scrutinized Keely with a clinical eye.

Keely waved off the concern. "I ate before I drove here. I'm good. Go on, tell me about the A-hole who beat on you."

"Persistent cuss, aren't you?" Fee's lips twisted into a reluctant smile.

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"Takes one to know one," Keely retorted. She clenched her jaw as a wave of nausea came and went in an instant. She rubbed her stomach where Riley was bouncing around like a Mexican jumping bean. "Now talk to me. Maybe I can help."

"No. It's over. He's not worth another second of my time or yours - - or my brother's." Fee's mouth had a mulish twist to it. Keely had seen the same look on Price's face. Like brother, like sister.

While Fee was good at changing the subject, Keely was damn sure Price would get the full story from his sister. Charm and good looks aside, he was a force to be reckoned with when he chose as were all the SSI operatives. His sister wouldn't leave Sanctuary until her safety had been assured. Big brothers were very protective. Keely should know; she had five of them.

"Can we get started?" Fee looked around. "Your health and that of your baby is far more important than sitting here and revisiting my problems with Dr. Adam-fucking-Stall. I think we need to be heading back to Sanctuary."

Woot! Now Keely had a name. Good. By nightfall, she and Tweeter would know whether Dr. Adam-frick-fracking-Stall wore briefs or boxers and whether his dick dressed right or left.

Keely tossed a ten on the table and shoved Fee's money toward her. "I've got this covered." She signaled Nick then pointed to the money. He smiled and waved her on. Scooting out of the booth, she joined Fee and led the way to the door.

Maybe Fee had a point about her health, but she didn't think so. Still, it wouldn't hurt to head home. If Quinn had called as soon as she'd left, and she bet he had, Ren was probably about half way home by now. And her brother and Trey would be heading back to the Lodge with orders from Ren to fetch her ass home.

Keely rubbed her lower back through her thick coat as another mild twinge made itself known. She was pretty sure she was having another round of Braxton-Hicks. The cramping in her stomach had moved to her lower back and seemed regular, but then so had the false labor she'd experienced several times over the last few months. Plus, her OB had been darn certain Riley would not come early and cited all the statistics about first births. Keely, as a numbers kind of person, had been reassured by the stats. Ren had just snorted and said "FUBAR" happens.

At the moment, the sensations were like really bad menstrual cramps and more than tolerable.

Fee followed on Keely's heels with an attitude like an over-protective mama grizzly. As if a woman two inches shorter and who weighed about hundred pounds could protect her.

Keely snickered silently. Even pregnant, Keely was more lethal than four out of five of the people in the restaurant.

"Looks like the weatherman got it right for once." Leaving the steamy warmth of the diner, Keely drew her scarf more closely around her neck.

"I can't believe it's snowing in June! It was sun-shining when I arrived here." Fee's teeth audibly chattered as she pulled the collar of her spring-weight denim jacket up closer to her ears. "Brrr. Don't you people have spring? And I thought Michigan had crazy weather."

Keely laughed. "Just winter's one last hurrah. I have some warmer clothes you can borrow once we get home."

The predicted snow had begun to fall since her arrival at Ma's less than twenty minutes ago. The flakes were large and wet and coming down steadily. The snow covered the ground and vegetation like slushy mashed potatoes. The winds gusted upwards of thirty miles an hour, making visibility semi-lousy. The really bad news was as they climbed in altitude on the way to Sanctuary, the conditions would be worse. The snow could be blizzard levels and the roads icier. The trip home would be dicey, but she'd driven in worse.

"Where did you park, Keely?" Fee hissed as a particularly vicious wind gust hit them. Keely grabbed Fee's arm to steady her.

"We're heading for the black Hummer at the far end of the front row." Keely pointed to the big, armor-clad behemoth which the men insisted was the only vehicle she should drive. It had every safety feature imaginable and some she and Tweeter, her alpha-geek brother, had designed. She could survive on the moon in that vehicle.

At the Hummer, Fee stopped on the passenger side and sent her a sideways glance. "Um, is there a drop-down ladder so we vertically challenged types can climb up?"

Keely laughed. "Nope. But there are built-in steps - - two of them - - and the hand-holds. It's sort of like mounting a horse. Grab the hand-hold, place your foot on the lower step and sort of spring up and grab hold of the other hand-hold and pull yourself in." Keely held her hand out for Fee's bag and tote. "Give me your bags. I'll place them in the back."

"Maybe I should stow them," Fee said.

"Give me the damn bags, Fee." Keely stared until Fee handed over the luggage.

"Here goes nothing," Fee said as she opened the door.

Keely smiled when the woman made it on the first try. The doctor had some upper body strength and a good sense of balance.

After stowing the bags, Keely went around and opened the driver's door then paused. Something niggled at her senses besides the aching in her back and stomach.

She casually swept some snow off the side mirror and looked around as she cleaned the windshield with the scraper. She saw nothing out of the ordinary and shrugged. Maybe it was the drop in air pressure from the storm causing the feeling.

After slapping the snow off her gloves and kicking slush off her boots, Keely climbed into the vehicle, shut the door, and engaged all security.

Ren had hammered home many a time that engaging security was rule one when Keely was out driving alone. "No use having the systems," he'd said, "if they aren't used." The one time she'd forgotten and he'd caught her, he'd swatted her ass. The light spanking had led to sex - - and it had been some of the best sex she'd ever had. While she liked pushing Ren's buttons from time to time, now, while she was hugely pregnant and couldn't enjoy the side bennies of it, was not the right moment.

Keely looked at Fee and noted she was all buckled in. She started the engine, shifted into first gear, then pulled out, quickly picking up speed. The heavy vehicle handled the almost two inches of slushy snow like a thoroughbred.

"How long will it take us to get to Sanctuary?" Fee asked.

The doctor's tone was too casual. Keely eyed her but saw nothing but polite inquiry on Fee's face. "About fifty minutes on a good day. Maybe more like an hour and fifteen minutes on a day like today. I don't want to push too hard through some of the S-curves in these conditions if I don't have to."

"So, where is the nearest hospital?" Again, Fee's tone was even, no inflection at all.

Keely would play along. "If you're asking where Riley is to be delivered, we're talking Coeur d'Alene. That's an almost six-hour drive. We'd use the helicopter in an emergency. Boise is a six-hour or so drive to the south. Sanctuary is pretty isolated and the surrounding area as a whole is sparsely populated."

"Jesus! There's nothing closer?" Fee's voice held emotion now - - shock and maybe a tinge of fear.

"Well, there is the regional medical center near Elk City, which is on the other side of Sanctuary by about twenty minutes. But Ren ruled it out. Not modern enough for his wife and son. It's more like a clinic than a hospital. Serious cases are medevaced to Coeur d'Alene or Boise."

"This really is the middle of nowhere." Fee sounded worried.

"Welcome to the wild west." Keely chuckled. "Why are you asking, Fee? I told you what my OB said."

Keely eyed her mirrors as she routinely did and noted a silver-gray Escalade as it pulled out of a little-used side road. The SUV was about a quarter mile behind them and shortening the distance quickly. She'd seen the car before - - on her way to Ma's. The rental car plates on the front gave it away; it was the same SUV which had followed her part of the way to Grangeville from Sanctuary.

She'd thought nothing of it at the time since Ma's was a popular destination and this road led to the interstate. But the vehicle was definitely following her once more. Her internal warning system went to red alert.

God! She'd endangered her baby by leaving Sanctuary. Ren would freak. Hell, she would kick her own butt once she was able. Right now, she had to take all the precautions she could. Nothing and no one would hurt her baby.

Fee had been mumbling something Keely hadn't caught as she'd assessed the situation. Whatever was bothering the doctor wasn't as urgent as the current state of affairs.

"Make sure you're buckled in tightly, Fee." Keely hit a combination of key codes into the on-board communications system. Any SSI operative within one hundred miles would respond to the call for help and track to her position using GPS.

"What's wrong?" Fee's gaze assessed Keely as if looking for a medical issue. God, the doctor thought it was the baby.

"It's not the baby." Keely angled her head toward the back of the Hummer. "Looks like I picked up a tail. We can't go back to Ma's because it's safer to outrun the bastards."

Going back would make them more vulnerable to an attack by their pursuers; the bad guys would love for her to play into their hands by slowing down and turning around. So, she would force them to play catch up.

She also needed a back-up plan. There was a high likelihood that her pursuers had buddies up ahead on the road to Sanctuary. She didn't want to chance a full-out gun battle if she didn't have to. She had the baby to think of - - and a civilian.

"Fee, I might have to take us off-road before we get to Sanctuary in order to elude them - - and whoever they might have in front of us."

"A tail? Who? Where?" Fee looked in the passenger side mirror. "And how do you know that they aren't just lost or something?"

"The fact the Escalade followed me part of the way from Sanctuary toward Ma's and that they just pulled out behind us once we cleared Grangeville's city limits. Fee, there's nothing in this direction but the Nez Perce National Forest, lots of mountains, and Sanctuary." Keely looked in the rear view mirror and grimaced. "Plus, my shit detector is going off the charts."

Fee took in and let out a deep breath. "So - - what are we gonna do?" She looked in the passenger side mirror. "Jesus, Keely, they're staying awfully close. Will they try to ram us?"

"They could try. I almost wish they would. I've been taught by the best. And if they decide to play bumper cars with that piece-of-shit street vehicle against my armored, military-grade Hummer, I would win that game." She pushed the powerful vehicle up to seventy miles an hour from the far safer fifty she'd been doing. She noted with a smile the guy behind her didn't seem comfortable driving that fast on snow-covered roads. Good, she had an advantage and would milk it for all it was worth.

"As to your other question, I've already sent an SOS to all SSI operatives in the area. And in a second, I'll notify the Idaho County Sheriff. Law enforcement out here is spread thinly over a vast area and I ain't holding my breath anyone can get to us in time." She took a deep breath and turned to look at Fee whose formerly pale face had gone somewhat green. "My guys aren't close. We might have to play hide-and-seek with the bad guys until help arrives."

Keely used the cell phone plugged into her car's blue-tooth system and put the County Sheriff on alert to the situation. The sheriff's dispatcher would notify the State Police. But as Keely had thought, it would take time to get someone to their position.

The weather had grounded the law enforcement copters and the road patrols weren't anywhere near her current position.

The weather wouldn't stop Ren from flying, though. She prayed he'd be careful, but knew he'd push it to get to her. She'd expected to hear from him and the others as soon as the alert had gone out. Obviously, the weather had affected SSI's communications satellite signal. She'd barely gotten the emergency call out to the sheriff; her cell signal had gone in and out.

"What do you mean by not close?" Fee asked after Keely had ended her call to the sheriff. "Where are they?"

"Ren travelled to a ranger station near Coeur d'Alene." Keely heaved a big sigh. "He's flying in this mess."

Fee looked out the window at the swirling whiteness and swore under her breath. "Will your husband be horribly angry that you picked me up?"

Keely heard the worry and what sounded like dread in Fee's voice. Obviously, Dr. Adam frick-fracking Stall had really done a number on her. Not all men were abusive and Fee needed to know that. "He'll be upset, but he won't hurt me. Good men do not beat on women."

"Okay ... good. I'd hate for you to ... be chastised because of my surprise visit."

"No punishment. Just a few snarls and growls and a look of disappointment. After which, he will lecture me then take me to bed." Keely winked at Fee. "A win-win all around. He gets to reinforce he is the man and I get hot, monkey sex and lots of orgasms out of it." She glanced at Fee whose eyes held disbelief. "Sweetie, only lame-ass cowards beat on a woman when they're angry."

Fee choked back a laugh. The mood in the car lightened for the moment.

Mission accomplished. She needed Fee's head in the present, not the past or the possible future.

Keely slowed to sixty miles per hour for a particularly sharp S-curve. Their pursuers, she noted, slowed far more than she did, so she was able to pick up some precious yardage coming out of the curve. Her knowledge of the roads and area was a tremendous tactical advantage.

Fee looked in the side mirror, her left hand grasping the arm rest between them. "So, Ren is out of the picture for now. Anyone closer?"

"My brother and Ren's brother were working on Sanctuary's northernmost perimeter security. They took ATVs," at Fee's frown, she clarified, "all-terrain vehicles with special all-weather tires. They are almost certainly heading back to Sanctuary at Ren's urging to come get me." Fee still had a confused look on her face. "Oh, God, I didn't tell you. When your call came in, Quinn, Ren's third in command, heard it. I told him to tell Ren where I was going. So, my guys could've been travelling for almost an hour when the emergency signal went out. Things aren't as dire as they could be."

Fee half-laughed, half-choked out a breath. "Thank God. You aren't totally without commonsense."

Keely sniffed. "I think I might be insulted. And why are you worrying so much? I can handle those guys behind me."

“God, Price did *not* exaggerate. And I didn’t believe him. I’ll apologize to him - - if we survive.” Fee pointed toward the back of the Hummer. “Keely, you’ve exposed your very pregnant self to danger for me. If something happens to you or the baby, I’ll never forgive myself.”

The stern doctor Fee was now present in the car. The scared, abused Fee buried in light of the current danger. Keely really liked Price’s sister - - she had guts.

“Nothing is going to happen,” Keely told her as she increased her speed to eighty on the straight-away. The Hummer handled like the expensive dream it was. “If we can’t lose them, I’ll take them out.”

“With what?” Fee shook her head. “Jesus, Keely, you’re only slightly bigger than me and most of that is baby weight. And if I’m not mistaken, you’re in the early stages of labor. You’re grimacing. Your stomach is moving like something out of a horror movie. And you keep arching your back.”

“Not labor, just Braxton-Hicks.” Keely inhaled sharply and gripped the wheel tightly. As if Fee’s words conjured it up, an extremely sharp pain shot through her pelvis. Its origination? Her lower back. “Damn, that one hurt. I think Riley just jabbed a nerve with his hand or foot. I swear this kid is going to grow up to be a kick boxer.”

She smiled thinly at Fee who didn’t look at all convinced. “Trust me. I’ve had several bouts of false labor off and on starting several months ago. Ren has flown me to the hospital in Coeur d’Alene at least three times on false alarms.”

“That was the past. Let’s deal with the now. I bet the baby is head down, bouncing on your pelvis, ready to come out. If your water breaks, I don’t care if you’re dilated or not, you would be quickly enough.” Fee let go of the arm rest to touch Keely’s arm. “Honey, you’re in the first stage of labor and will have this baby in the next twenty-four hours more or less. I’ve delivered a lot of less than full-term babies in the ER. I know the signs. So, fighting? Out of the question.”

“Don’t bet your retirement plan on that.” Keely gritted her teeth against the pain in her lower back. She had some tricky driving ahead, a series of four sharp S-curves, and needed to concentrate. She planned to gain some mileage not just yardage on their pursuers. “Hold on, because I’m about to show the guy behind me he shouldn’t mess with an angry, pregnant woman.”

Chapter Two

“What are you talking about?” Fee held onto the sissy bar above the passenger door as Keely punched the Hummer’s speed even higher. She was shocked to see that they were now traveling over eighty miles an hour on slush-covered roads she’d hesitate to drive forty on even with a heavy four-wheel drive vehicle.

“Are you nuts?” Fee noted the pursuing SUV was now a mile or so behind them, taking the curves at a much slower speed. Damned if Keely wasn’t leaving the bad guys behind!

Keely emitted a sound somewhere between a snort and a laugh. “Nope. Just determined to put enough space between us and them so I can lose ‘em on a ranger access road. With luck, they’ll lose control of that piece of crap and crash.”

“If we don’t crash first,” Fee muttered after she stifled a girly screech as Keely took a curve at sixty-five miles per hour. The right-side wheels left the road and traveled the slush-rough shoulder until they came out of the bend.

“I heard that.” Keely chuckled. “I’m a much better driver than the guy behind us. And this is a better engineered vehicle. We’ll be fine.” She patted Fee’s knee.

“Keely, for chrissakes!” Fee shoved the hand back. “Keep both hands on the wheel. Ten and four, please, for these types of conditions.” She remembered Price telling her ten and four was better than ten and two for hazardous driving.

“I’m fine. Now reach under your seat and pull out the submachine gun for me, would ya?”

“Gun?” Fee got a sick feeling in her gut. Now she wished she’d allowed her brother to teach her how to handle one. But she’d seen too many results of what guns could do in her ER. She hated guns. “I don’t know how to shoot a gun.”

“You don’t have to use it.” Keely’s tone was humoring. “Just pull it out so I can access it if needed.”

“God, help me. I’m riding with a pregnant Rambo-ette,” grumbled Fee as she pulled the ugly looking weapon from below the seat. “Okay, now what?”

Keely looked over and grinned. “Just keep it close.”

“Close. Right.” Fee nodded and gave the ugly black gun in her hands a frowning look. God, she hoped she didn’t accidentally shoot the both of them.

“Keely, what the fuck is going on?”

Fee started as a male voice rumbled around the interior of the Hummer. An angry voice. Flashbacks of Adam raging at her assaulted her mind. His face, ugly with fury because she’d reported him as a stalker, because she’d rejected his sexual advances. The beating he’d administered right before he’d raped her.

She wrapped her arms around her waist and moaned low in her throat.

“Keely, fucking answer me!” The male voice ordered. “Are you in pain? Is it the baby?”

"That wasn't me, Trey." Keely shot Fee a concerned look.

The voice belonged to Trey Maddox, Keely's brother-in-law. Fee shook off the horrible memories. The here and now was more important. She'd survived Adam's abuse. The jury was out if she would survive the current predicament.

Trey snorted loudly forcing Keely to add, "I'm fine, Trey. That was Fee making the noises. Some bad guys tailed us out of Ma's. I've already notified the sheriff's dispatcher who'll notify the State Police."

"Fuck!" Trey groaned. "Ren will go fucking nuts."

There was a pause and a rumbling of low male voices came over the speakers. Fee couldn't make out what they said, but the conversational tone wasn't a happy one.

"Tweeter said to tell you he'd spank your ass if your hubby doesn't."

The man's voice was a low growl and once again Fee had to steal herself against bad memories. Clinically, she knew she was suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder; emotionally, she was still a victim.

God, would she ever be able to hear an angry male voice again without having flashbacks? How could she work in an ER where all sorts of angry males visited every day? She had to hope that time and sheer Teague stubbornness would get her through the next days, weeks, possibly even months.

"Him and what army?" Keely snorted, a cute and disdainful sound.

Keely was nuts and without fear which probably explained how she could live in a male-dominated household. The petite woman wasn't afraid of the men on the other end of the call or her husband. Fee envied her unconcern.

"Goddamn it, Keely. This is not the time to joke." Trey sighed, sounding much put-upon. "I know you have a plan. So, what is it?"

Fee noted Keely's hands tightening on the wheel. Shit, another contraction. Fee checked her watch. Keely's last contraction had ended about five minutes ago, right before Trey had connected with them.

Get with the fucking program, Fee. Keely and that little baby need you at peak performance.

"I figure our pursuers have friends between me and Sanctuary," Keely said. "So I need to go off-road and find a place to hide until you big, strong men can come and take care of the badasses."

"Sounds good. Tweeter has a fix on your GPS. We'll find you."

"I'll be stopping soon. I'm less than five minutes from the ranger access road leading to Cave A-5. I plan on getting far enough ahead of my tail so we can abandon the Hummer and hike to the cave."

"Keely, tell me the real reason why you aren't heading straight for Sanctuary?" Trey's voice was rough and snarly. Fee couldn't decide if he was mad at or just exasperated with Keely, but he seemed to understand his sister-in-law's actions and could read between the lines. "Quinn and Scotty can head out now and clear the road from that end."

"Trey, I can't outrun them to Sanctuary." Keely grimaced and bit her lip.

Besides the telling facial contortions, for the first time, Fee noted a hint of fear and worry in Keely's voice.

“It could prove to be dangerous for the baby.” Keely’s breath hitched on a sob and she visibly controlled the weakness to continue, “Talk to the doctor for a few seconds. I need to concentrate on the next set of S-curves. It’s damn treacherous up here and I’ll be doing seventy through them.”

“Doctor? What fucking doctor? Baby, answer me, damn it!”

The voice was male but a different one. This had to be the husband, Ren Maddox, and Price’s boss and former SEAL team buddy.

“This is Fee Teague, Ren. I’m Price’s sister. And your wife is in labor. How she’s handling contractions that are five minutes apart and driving like a bat out of hell, I’ll never know.”

“Keely!” The male roar was full of gut-wrenching anguish - - and love.

Keely gave Fee a nasty look. “You didn’t have to scare him.” She heaved a shaky sigh. “Ren, I’m fine. The contractions aren’t all that bad right now...”

Fee pinched Keely’s arm. When Keely glared at her, she mouthed “liar.”

Keely stuck her tongue out and continued to placate her husband. “... and feel like really bad menstrual cramps. My water hasn’t even broken. Heck, I’m not even convinced I’m in real labor. But I’m playing it safe by getting us to a secure place as soon as I can.”

Fee closed her eyes in horror as Keely took a particularly nasty set of S-curves with the panache of a driver at Monte Carlo. With deep drops on one side and sheer mountain walls on the other, she prayed silently and held on until Keely accelerated out of the last curve.

Chancing a look back, Fee didn’t see their pursuers. “You lost them?” Her words came out on a squeak, her throat still tight with the fear of imminent death in a car crash. She coughed and cleared her throat. “Uh, nice driving.”

“Thanks. But they’re still back there. I just bought us some time. I’m turning off just ahead. With any luck they won’t follow, but I ain’t holding my breath.”

“If they do follow?” Fee asked and was ashamed to hear a quivering in her voice.

“If they do,” Ren’s voice boomed across the speakers, “Keely will do what is necessary to protect all of you.” It sounded more like an order than a statement of confidence. “It’s a good plan, baby, considering the circumstances. But you’re in big trouble for leaving Sanctuary without an escort.”

“Ren ... I’m so sorry, but I felt hemmed in and...” Keely’s voice was all-soft-female and placative with just a slight hint of tears. Fee checked and saw no indication of extra moisture anywhere in Keely’s eyes.

“Hell. We’ll talk later, baby. I love you.” Ren’s voice sounded almost as pacifying as Keely’s. He paused, coughed and reverted back to his previous all-knowing male tone. “Now, describe the fuckers’ vehicle.”

Fee’s lips twisted with wry amusement. Maybe she needed to study at the hands of a master manipulator of alpha-maledom. Keely had taken one outraged male and had twisted him around to her way of thinking and back to the business-at-hand in less time than Fee could think it ... with just her voice!

Keely answered, “A silver-grey Escalade, dark tinted windows. Nevada plates, Zulu- four-four-four-Charlie.”

Fee was amazed that Keely had gotten the plates. She hadn't even thought to look. She checked the side mirror, something she found herself compulsively doing every few seconds, and still didn't see their pursuers. But with all the curves in the road, they could be just one curve behind them and blocked by the mountainside

"Got it, sprite. I'll get the description out to the Sheriff and the State Police."

"You do that, big guy. I expect you to come get me at A-5." Keely actually smiled at Fee and winked. "Just think of the stories we'll tell our grandchildren some day about how their daddy participated in a high speed chase while still in the womb. Not many kids can tell that kind of story. And, Ren, don't worry. *If* I'm in labor, at least I have a doctor with me. Fee has assured me she's delivered a lot of babies in her ER."

"God, sweetheart. You'll be the death of me." Keely's husband sounded scared but affectionate. "I love you. Don't get you or the baby dead - - Fee either, for that matter. Take the sat phone with you and leave it on so I can monitor you."

"Love you back, Ren."

Fee noted Keely purposely ignored responding to Ren's order. She was beginning to understand how Keely survived surrounded by all that protective male testosterone - - the little minx complied with the orders she wanted and ignored the rest.

"No messing around, baby." Ren was obviously aware of his wife's *modus operandi*. His voice held sternness moderated by amusement. "I'll head straight for the cave once I land."

"Be careful," Keely said. "And I'm not messing around. I'm taking this threat to me, our baby, and Fee very seriously."

Ren's aggravated sigh came loudly over the car's communication system. "Keely, do not engage the enemy. You hear me? Do not stop to take them out. Just get your sweet ass to safety. Let Trey and Tweeter carry the load with the bad guys. Tell me you heard me."

Keely stiffened at her husband's tone. Fee had to smile. So? There was a tipping point when Ren pulled the dominant-male-card.

"Give me some credit, Ren. I'm pregnant not brain dead."

Keely's sigh held the same amount of aggravation in it as her husband's had. Fee choked back a laugh. If they hadn't been in a life and death situation, she would enjoy observing the couple's relationship dynamic - - maybe she could learn something. Keely continued in a slightly affronted tone of voice. "I hadn't planned on a pitched battle ... but I can't promise not to engage. If they shoot at us, big guy, I will shoot back."

"Well, my brother and yours had better get a move on then ... because I won't be happy if I find out you got involved in another gun battle while carrying our son. The last time still gives me nightmares."

"Me, too, Ren. I promise to do all I can to avoid a gunfight."

"God, baby, please stay safe - - I can't lose you."

"You won't lose me, I promise. Just come get me."

"Damn right, I will."

The resolve in Ren's voice was convincing. Nothing would stop him from getting to Keely's side. Fee wondered what it would be like to have a man love her that much. And would she recognize the right man if he appeared in her life?

After the number Adam-fucking-Stall did on her, she wasn't sure she'd ever be able to trust a man again. Hell, who was she fooling? It was herself she didn't trust. She'd had a horrible track record with men even before Adam.

Fee checked Keely's condition and noted no grimacing at the moment. The contractions seemed to be regular, for the time being, at about five minutes apart. She prayed that would hold until they got to the promised safe place or the men reached them. She checked the side mirror again, keeping an eagle eye out for their pursuers. At the moment, Keely was in control of their future, the least she could do was watch their behinds.

Chapter Three

Keely chanced a glance at Fee. The doctor gripped the sissy bar so hard her knuckles were white. Her general color was ashen, making the bruises look that much worse. Even without the actual details of the abuse Fee had suffered, from her own past experiences Keely had a fairly good idea of what might be concealed by Fee's clothing. The current predicament had to be exacerbating Fee's already fragile emotional state. All things considered, Price's sister was holding up really well.

Since the situation was bad and would probably get worse before it got better, Keely needed Fee to continue functioning to the best of her ability. Price had told her once all of his sisters were extremely A-type and dedicated to their professions. What she needed to do was to keep Fee focused on her and the baby as patients.

"Uh, Fee, do you really think my contractions aren't Braxton-Hicks this time?"

Fee staring at the side mirror turned and blinked as if she were coming out of a daze. "Um, yes. From what I can read from your facial expressions, the hitches in your breathing, and your convulsive gripping of the steering wheel, you're experiencing contractions every five or so minutes, and they seem to be lasting anywhere from thirty to forty-five seconds. This is typical of early labor."

Keely held back a smile. Price knew his sister well. Fee was now all clinical concern - - right where Keely needed her.

Angry male grumbling told Keely the men were still monitoring them.

"How long to the more active and painful parts of labor?" Keely thought about cutting the communications until she glanced in the rear view mirror and became distracted by a glimpse of the SUV pursuing them. They weren't as far back as she would've liked. "Damn, those assholes are taking chances. Ren? Trey? Tweeter? You guys need to get a move on. The guy driving the SUV is better than I thought."

"We're coming, Keely," Trey said. "Tweeter and I are using old logging trails to intersect your destination from the Sanctuary side. We should be able to park then hike the footpath down from A-5 as you girls make your way up. Just stick with the plan, little sister. We'll be there to cover you."

Keely let out a breath and barely managed to stifle a gasp as her entire lower abdomen and back seized with a huge cramp. She eased off the accelerator and corrected for an inadvertent swerve. Good thing her exit was coming up soon, because this contraction was unlike the previous ones. She was afraid it was a harbinger of what was to come and she didn't want to be driving when the next one happened.

Fee took her pulse and laid her other hand on Keely's baby bump. Her gaze was calm as she mouthed "you'll be fine." And Keely hoped that Fee knew what she was talking about since this was strange territory for her.

"Baby, I should be landing in the next ten minutes. How close behind you are the bastards?" Ren's voice soothed her just as it had done that time in Argentina when

they'd first met. It was his voice then and during the months they'd been together since that drew her from the nightmares of the abuse she'd suffered, the kills she'd been forced to make.

"They're maybe four or five minutes behind." She managed to keep the pain out of her voice. She didn't want her hubby freaking out while he flew a helicopter in the mountains in high, gusty winds. "Ren, I can't count on them missing the turn-off. There's not enough traffic out here to hide my tracks. I'll be leaving an easy trail to follow."

"Understood. Can't be helped. Getting to safety is paramount." Ren paused. "Sprite - - go straight to the cave. No detours."

"I hadn't planned on giving Fee a tour of the sights, big guy."

His amused snort was a good sign he hadn't heard the fear or pain in her voice. But she wasn't sure how much longer she could breathe normally and not moan. This last contraction had lasted for what seemed like hours, but she knew it had to have been under a half-minute.

"Fee?" Ren's voice sounded grim. "Answer Keely's last question, please. How long until she's in more active labor?"

Keely looked at Fee. "And don't sugar-coat it. I don't want to be caught in the open giving birth in the snow with those murderous assholes on our butts. I would need time to make us a snow shelter we can defend if we can't make it to the cave."

If birth were imminent, then no matter what she'd promised Ren, all bets were off. She'd find a place to make a stand and shoot the men following her before they shot at her. She wasn't in the mood to mess around with them. And she wasn't sure how much longer she'd be able to control her pain. Excruciating pain and shaky hands did not make for accurate shooting.

"Jesus, are you for real? We're not planning to go to war here." Fee waved off any answer Keely might have made. "Sorry, the stories Price told me are beginning to make sense. You are a warrior sprite." Fee rubbed a hand over her eyes before looking at Keely. "Okay, looking at the averages, you could go for hours before giving birth. Since your OB didn't tell you to stick close to home, I assume you had no dilation and had not started to present?"

"Are you asking me or telling me?" Keely sighed. "Sorry, little tense here. No dilation. The baby had not entered the birth canal as of yesterday at 0900." She checked the rear view mirror and couldn't see the SUV, but knew it was hidden because of the sharp curves in the road. The bad guys were back there and maintaining their distance - - for now. She'd gain time once she hit the ranger access road. The pursuer's SUV wouldn't be able to handle the rutted dirt road as well as the Hummer; the driver would bottom out the street vehicle if he drove too fast.

"That's good." Fee looked as relieved as she sounded. "In theory, you could be in this stage of labor for a while. First births tend to take longer. Once your water breaks, though, the contractions will get closer together and be much stronger as you dilate fully for the birth. At that point, we need to be in a safe and preferably warm, dry place. A snow shelter doesn't float my boat, by the way. A nice modern hospital would be the best, but from the sound of things, I've deduced that isn't happening any time

soon.” Fee grabbed the sissy bar as Keely quickly decelerated. “Why are you slowing down?”

“We’re getting off here.”

Keely made a sharp right onto a snow-covered dirt road which led to the ranger station. They wouldn’t make the full trip to the top of the mountain, but would turn onto an even worse road or more like a track leading to a break in the thick forest where they’d leave the Hummer. From the clearing, it would only be a short hike to the cover of rocks and the hiking/climbing trail to Cave A-5. The cave was on Sanctuary land and completely defensible.

With any luck, she’d lose their pursuers during the climb. They had to be strangers to the area and would get lost easily. With Fee’s assistance and Mother Nature providing enough snow and wind, she’d cover her and Fee’s back trail so as not to give the bad guys anything to follow.

“Ren, I’m on the ranger access road. And FYI, I counted only three heads in the SUV.”

“Roger that. I’ll be setting the bird down in the meadow not far from A-5 on national forestry land. I’ll be there as fast as I can, but you know as well as I that the climb to the cave could take some time in this weather.”

That was a hell of an understatement, since Ren would be making a difficult-even-on-a-mild-day climb in blowing snow. After first arriving at Sanctuary, she’d made the same climb to work on the perimeter security system. But she’d had Tweeter spotting her as they’d traversed the sheer mountain faces like spiders on a web.

“God, Ren, please be careful.”

“Count on it.” His beloved voice was calm and sure. “Nothing will stop me from being with you and our baby.”

The certainty in his voice lulled the fears roiling in her mind. A determined Ren was a force to be reckoned with and she knew she’d see him soon.

Keely steered the Hummer onto the smaller track which led to the clearing where she’d park the vehicle. The narrow lane was uneven and tricky to drive in the best of conditions and these weren’t. The wide vehicle brushed the trees lining the route and bounced like a bulky pogo stick on the washboard texture of the snow-covered, packed gravel and dirt track. The strain on her arms, legs and lower back as she attempted to keep the Hummer out of the trees was tremendous and exacerbated the now dull but building contraction she sensed coming.

Shoving her discomfort to the side, she fought the vehicle, the crappy road, and the elements. “Fee, after we stop, we won’t have a lot of time. We’ll need to exit the Hummer quickly. Keep the machine gun you’re holding with you. I’ll get a couple of other packs we’ll need from the back.” She chanced a quick glance away from the lane to look at Fee’s feet. “I’m sorry I don’t have any other winter clothing in the back. But I do have some rain boots that might fit you. What kind of boots are those?”

“Doc Marten Motorcycle boots. They’re comfortable and warm, thank God. This weather is nuts!”

As if to underline the fact, a particularly strong gust of wind shook the Hummer. Keely swore under her breath and tightened her grip on the steering wheel. Pain shot from her hands to her shoulders adding to the pain gripping her back and pelvis.

"They have rubber soles and some tread?" Keely gritted out the words. Her jaw clenched against the pain shooting up and down her body as if the Marquis de Sade played the xylophone on her spine with knives. Every muscle in her body seized in sympathy.

"Yeah, why?" Fee scowled. "Don't answer that. We're going to make like mountain goats, right?"

"Yep. Your boots should do fine." Keely gasped and had to force her eyes to remain open as the agony threatened to rip her insides apart. She could not afford to crash. They had another quarter mile to her planned parking spot. She needed to get them as close to the cover of the rocks as she could.

God, please let me get through this without killing my baby.

"How was that pain?" Fee reached over and felt Keely's wrist. "Tell me."

Keely pulled her hand from under Fee's light touch to flick off the communications system just as Ren started to roar her name.

"He doesn't need the distraction." Fee looked at her as if she'd grown an extra head. "He's flying a damn helo, okay? In treacherous conditions. Besides, the pain's bearable. He doesn't need to be freaking over my minor aches. Um ... I've had worse menstrual cramps."

What a liar. The cramping - - and that was too innocuous a word for what she experienced - - was excruciating. It felt as if someone simultaneously raked her insides and stuck a poker in her lower back while squeezing the air out of her lungs. She'd had less pain being shot.

Fee arched a brow and sighed. "He can't hear now. So tell me the truth. I need the truth so I can help you - - it hurt like a son of a bitch, right?"

Keely choked back a laugh. "Pretty effin' much. I might need you to help me up the last fifty or so feet to the cave. But I can do this. I will do this. I have to."

"I'll do whatever I can, Keely. But the last two contractions were closer together and noticeably stronger. You're progressing rapidly for a first-timer. You might be one of the infamous outliers in the birthing statistics. How long were your mother's labors, if you know?"

With an audible sigh of relief, Keely pulled the Hummer into the small clearing and shut off the engine. If she'd had to drive further, she might have wrecked the Hummer.

She turned to look at Fee as she opened the driver's side door. "All five deliveries including the twins were less than three hours from the time her first contractions started - -"

Fee muttered "oh shit" under her breath

"- - that's why Ren flew me to the hospital for every blasted set of false labor and why he's scared out of his mind now. My mother and her sisters are the queens of the short and quick labor."

“Well, hell, now you tell me.” Fee opened her door and looked down. “Jesus, with my luck the gun will go off as I get out of this monster car.” She looked over her shoulder at Keely. “Go on, get out. I’ll figure it out and meet you at the rear of the car.”

Keely laughed as she heard Fee mutter “I fricking hate tall cars.” Keely’s exit was not as graceful as usual, but she managed to get to the ground without falling face first into the knee-deep snow. She slammed the door and moved to the rear where Fee stood, shivering in silence, the H&K cradled awkwardly in her arms.

“Let’s get what you need from the back.” Fee’s teeth chattered. “The sooner we walk, the warmer I’ll be

Keely had to brace herself against the vehicle for a second. Between the wind gusts and weakness from the pain, she wasn’t as steady on her feet as she would’ve liked. But she’d be damned before she gave up; they had to get to cover. She had to protect her baby.

“Keely? You okay?” Fee had the machine gun hanging from her shoulder, freeing up her hands. She rubbed Keely’s back.

“Been better, but I’ll deal. Watch out for the door.” Opening the rear of the Hummer, she retrieved the extra sat phone and the medical kit and handed them to Fee. While the cave was fully stocked for most medical emergencies, Ren’s paranoia had been instrumental in the creation of a field medical kit for a FUBAR-birth scenario.

God, she was lucky her husband was an over-protective control freak. Not every mother-to-be had a Marine field medical kit with diapers in it - - maybe she’d set a new trend? They could package and sell them to the survivalist market over the Internet. She snickered at the idea.

Fee shot her another worried look.

“Inside joke. Tell you later,” Keely said.

The doctor had shifted the medical kit to one small shoulder and now awkwardly cradled the machine gun once again in her arms. The sat phone stuffed in a pocket of her denim jacket. Between the gun and the kit, Fee was carrying at least an extra twenty pounds, about one-fifth of her body weight. The doctor was stronger than she looked.

“Just need to get one other thing and we’ll move out.” Keely opened her sniper rifle case and quickly assembled the Lapua and pocketed several extra magazines. Her hands were steady despite the cold and the lingering discomfort from the last powerful contraction. She mentally thanked the men in her life that had her keep her weaponry training up-to-date. Not even impending birth disturbed the familiar routine of assembling her rifle and loading it. She’d fall back on that training for as long as she could. She had three lives dependent on it: hers, her baby’s, and Fee’s.

Less than two minutes had passed since they’d stopped. They had maybe four or five minutes on the bad guys.

Keely could feel the ache preceding the next contraction simmering low in her back and wanted to be in or as close to the rocks before it took her breath away.

“Okay, let’s go.” Keely reached for the H&K Fee held, shouldering it, and carried the sniper rifle, allowing Fee to carry the medical kit and the phone. “We have about a five-minute walk through the woods before we hit the rocks and start climbing.”

Keely set a rapid pace. She walked a zigzag trail through the trees, using as many of the areas without snow so as not to leave an obvious trail. She back-tracked several times in order to leave deliberate prints in the deeper snow, hoping to confuse the men following them.

“Keely.” Fee had followed wherever she led without complaint. “Your husband said to have the sat phone turned on.”

She spoke over her shoulder. “Leave it off. The GPS works either way.”

“But your husband said...”

“Fee, if we don’t make it to the cave, I might have to take the assholes out. Ren does not need to hear that. Trust me.” She stopped, bracing her hand on a new-growth tree. Gasping for breath, she hunched over the rifle she cradled one-armed against her distended belly. Fee grabbed her around the waist and supported her. “Um, he’ll be landing soon ... and then he has ... shit ... to climb ... climb’s a bitch ... in good weather. He can’t effing hear me like this ... okay?”

“Okay. You’re doing fine. Keep breathing.” Fee rubbed Keely’s lower back.

Keely grimaced as the contraction took her over. She bit her lips and refused to scream. Noise carried far in the mountains. But she couldn’t stay completely silent; she’d never felt this kind of pain before. “God, oh, God ... uh, shit ... he heard what I didn’t say ... he knows ... hell that hurts ...” She panted through the contraction as Fee continued to support her. “He knows I’ll shoot the asses to save our baby.”

“Shoot the asses!”

Fee’s voice was shrill - - with concern or fear, Keely couldn’t tell. Probably both at this point and she didn’t blame the doctor. The conditions were not optimal for delivering a baby.

“Keely, for the ever loving hell of God, you can barely stand ... how on earth - -”

“You’d be surprised...” Keely took several cleansing breaths as the sharp pain receded to a threatening simmer. “...what I can do when needed. Let’s get moving.”

Fee shook her head but kept quiet and walked. She stayed by Keely’s side, an arm around her waist.

They broke trail together now. No use trying to lay anymore false trails - - they needed to get to cover in the rocks ASAP. Keely wasn’t sure how much longer she could go on with the strong contractions coming more closely together. Fee was a babe in the woods and could not find adequate and defensible shelter without Keely’s assistance.

“How long was that last one?” Keely concentrated on putting one foot in front of another on the uneven ground.

“Forty-five seconds or so. And before you ask, it was less than four minutes from the last one you had in the car. Did your water break this time?”

“Nope. All dry. But Riley is pounding his head on my pelvis and thumping limbs along my back. This is one active kid I’m bearing.” Keely would’ve chuckled but she needed to focus on the deep breathing the maternity nurse had taught her in pre-natal classes. “I’ll start panting at the beginning of the next contraction instead of in the middle. Also just realized I can’t pant and talk at the same time.”

“Yeah, funny how that works. And you’re doing super on the deep breathing. For the life of me, I don’t know how you can. It seems to me we’re walking straight uphill. The altitude is making it hard for me to breathe normally.”

For the first time, Keely noted that Fee panted and wheezed like an asthmatic puppy. The woman’s color was more green than the earlier ashy gray and made her bruises look even more grotesque. What a pair! If the situation hadn’t been so dire, she’d laugh.

“I’m used to the altitude and climbing. You’re not.” Keely was concerned Fee would collapse before they made it to the cave.

God, she needed Fee whole and healthy for the impending delivery. Maybe it was time to go to Plan B.

“Um, Fee, this is the easy part of the climb. You’re already having difficulty and showing symptoms of altitude sickness. I think we’d better look for a place to build a snow shelter.”

“Jesus Christ, Keely! If you can fricking climb while in labor, I sure as hell can climb with a little nausea.” Fee gasped like a guppy and held more tightly onto Keely’s waist.

Under the current circumstances, who supported who would be a toss-up.

“Okay, but let me know if you get dizzy.” At that point, Fee wouldn’t be getting enough oxygen to her brain and would be in serious, and potentially life-threatening, danger. “No matter where we are, we’ll stop and find a place to defend.”

As Fee opened her mouth to argue, Keely growled but it came out more like a groan. “Listen, Fee. I’m scared. I need you clear-headed and strong - - not lying on the ground unconscious. My baby needs you ... besides, Trey and Tweeter will follow the GPS signal from the sat phone. They’ll find us no matter where we end up. There’s no use in making yourself sicker.”

“You’re right. That makes sense. I forgot about Trey and your brother. Not sure where my brain went,” Fee muttered.

Keely looked up the trail and spotted the distinctive bush Ren had planted to indicate the entrance to another and less obvious trail leading to the cave. “See the holly bush?” She pointed with her rifle.

Fee followed Keely’s finger. “Yeah.” The word came out on a quavering breath.

“That’s our first objective. We’ll stop there. I can see the parking area and most of our back-trail from that vantage point.” *And put the fear of God into the bastards with my sniper rifle.* “Can you make that?”

Her dad had always said, “Little girl, small achievable goals boosts morale.”

A pale, sweaty-faced Fee nodded.

A warm, wet gushing between Keely’s legs had her swearing silently. Now was not the time to tell the struggling doctor that her water had just broken.

Taking slow and deep breaths, Keely trudged forward with Fee at her side.

Chapter Four

In the air.

When Keely switched off the communications in the Hummer, Ren wanted to hit something, but he had his hands full keeping the Bell jet helicopter from meeting up with the side of a mountain. Adjusting for another sharp change in the swirling winds, he spoke into his headset. "Trey! Where in the hell are you?"

"Tweeter and I just parked the ATVs above A-5. While the weather is absolute crap, we can still be at the cave in four or five minutes and down the trail to intercept the ladies shortly after that." His brother's confident, calm tone went a long way to steadying Ren.

"Good ... that's good." He maneuvered the copter through a narrow opening between two mountains and spotted the meadow where he wanted to set the Bell down. He'd have to test all the approaches. With the wind gusting and eddying, it might take him two or three tries before he could land safely.

He made one pass than another. Over the Motorola communications system, he was vaguely aware of Trey and Tweeter's muttered conversations and heavy breathing as they pushed themselves to get to the women. It was all white noise. His focus had to be on figuring out the bitch winds that threatened to toss him into the side of the craggy mountains. He wouldn't do his wife and baby any good dead.

Then it hit him. "God, I'm going to be a father."

Trey and Tweeter's laughter came across his headset.

"Jesus, Ren. I figured you knew that already," Tweeter said. "It's not like the Imp hasn't been carrying an extra thirty pounds around for the last month or so."

"You okay, brother?" Trey's baritone rumbled in his ear. "You need to stop worrying and pay attention to landing that bird then getting your ass up and over the mountain to A-5."

"Well, start praying for me." Ren assessed the way the trees blew and made a decision. "I'm landing now. My gut is telling me those fuckers chasing my pregnant wife are far too close. And I didn't like the sound of the last conversation we heard before Keely cut us off."

"Neither did I," Trey said. "We're at A-5 and no one's home. After we weapon up, we'll head down the mountain and find the girls. Tweeter has Keely's GPS signal. They're at the base of the trail leading to the cave and not moving."

"Let me know the sit rep." Ren paused and took a deep calming breath as he made his approach to the meadow. "And Trey - - get her in that cave no matter what. Tweeter can handle the fuckers until you get back to him."

"I'll take care of it."

Tweeter chuckled evilly. "I'll be more than happy to take care of the assholes. Trey will be lucky if I leave him one."

“I want at least one of those bastards alive, Tweeter. I want to know who in the hell sent them after my wife.”

He was fairly sure the culprit was the DoD traitor. The fucker was still in the wind. No matter what Tweeter and Keely had done in their many attempts to track him down and lure him into a trap - - the slimy turncoat had managed to slide under the radar. In the game of chasing shadows, victories never came easily.

“I’ll do my best.” Tweeter chuckled. “Give my sister credit, she does nothing in the normal way.”

“Isn’t that the truth. After she recovers from the birth, I’m beating her sweet little butt for leaving Sanctuary to pick up Price’s sister. She could’ve called you two. Price’s sister wouldn’t have died waiting at Ma’s for one of you to pick her up.” Ren settled the helicopter onto the snow-covered meadow. His tense shoulders and clenched jaw relaxed as he took a full breath and let it out. “I’m down. I’ll get geared up for the climb. Tweeter, which route should I take up the mountain? Didn’t you and Keely set some new pitons out this way last October?”

“Yeah. From the meadow, take the northern route. It’ll put you on the mountain farther from A-5, but it will be the safest route and has some shelter from the winds.” Tweeter’s voice was all business now. “You should be able to handle the climb without a buddy. I’ve done it.”

“Thanks. See you soon.”

“Safe climbing, bro,” Trey said.

Ren heard the concern in his brother’s voice, but that was because Trey hated mountaineering even on a calm, sunny day. His brother normally let Tweeter, Keely when she wasn’t hugely pregnant, Ren, and a couple of the other SSI agents do the climbing necessary to check on Sanctuary’s complex security array and the solar-powered batteries that kept the system running. Trey could hike all day long, up and down the trails, but climbing sheer, vertical mountain walls with ropes and safety harnesses was not his brother’s idea of fun. Today’s outing had been necessitated because no one else had been around to spot Tweeter.

“I’ll be fine, Trey. I’ll maintain silence unless you need me.”

“Roger that.”

Ren geared up for the arduous climb with only the sounds of his brother’s and Tweeter’s even breathing and the whistling of the fierce mountain winds coming over his headset for company.

*

Trey turned to Tweeter who kept pace immediately behind him on the narrow hiking trail leading down the mountain from A-5. The ice and snow made the rocky path slipperier than shit and potentially life-threatening. The sooner they got the women up it, the happier he’d be.

Something about Price’s sister just showing up in Idaho with no advance warning bothered him. Price hadn’t said anything about a sister visiting and, in fact, had planned on visiting his family in Michigan while he was there helping Risto Smith finish outfitting SSI-East.

"Tweeter, you ever met Fiona?" Trey stared down the path and only saw snow. The conditions were nearing blizzard levels. Worry for his brother ate at his gut, but if it were his pregnant woman being harried by mercenaries, he'd be taking the same risks Ren was. A man protected his family ... period.

"Nope. She's the youngest. An ER doc, I think. All three of his sisters are very talented. Too bad Price didn't get any of the smarts."

Trey barked out a laugh. Price was intelligent in his own way - - and a damn good soldier. "Has Price mentioned anything about her? Is she in some sort of trouble?"

He didn't do small talk about personal things like families with the other operatives. He didn't consider himself stand-offish or even uninterested. He liked to think of it as respecting a person's privacy. If the operatives wanted him to know something, they told him.

"Well, she owes a lot of money if you want to call that trouble. Ticked Price off she wouldn't accept a loan from him to pay her Federal school loans." Tweeter came alongside Trey as the path widened. "She has to work in underprivileged or under-served areas of the U.S. to pay back her loan. For each year she works, they forgive a portion of the money owed." Tweeter took a deep breath. "Price doesn't like his little sister working in an ER in the inner city of Detroit."

"Fuck, neither would I." Trey glowered.

"I've seen pictures. She's smaller than Keely." Tweeter snorted back a laugh. "Price told me Fee had the heart of a lion. She loves her job and told him to take a long walk off a short pier when he forbade her to work in the inner city."

"God save us all from tiny women with more courage than strength. Keely has put so many gray hairs on my brother's head, I'm going to start buying him Grecian Formula."

"You are so jealous." Tweeter socked him in the arm. "Ren has no gray hairs, but you do, old man."

Tweeter dodged Trey's retaliatory head slap.

As they turned to follow another jag in the zig-zagging trail, Trey spotted the parking area through a break in the blowing snow. The lot was about a hundred feet down and just east of his and Tweeter's current position. He pulled his binoculars out of his parka pocket and zeroed in on the activity below. "Shit, there are two vehicles besides Keely's Hummer."

"Ren, do you copy?" Trey spoke urgently into the headset. "We have two sets of bogies in pursuit. Both vehicles just pulled into the clearing. Six, I repeat, six bogies are exiting their vehicles. They are heavily armed men, dressed in white snow gear." Keely and Fiona were in more trouble than previously thought. The men geared up like a well-trained unit. "Tweeter's updating the Sheriff and the State Police."

Ren replied, "Do what you need to do."

Trey understood that to mean "don't worry about keeping any of the bastards alive. Keeping the women safe is more important."

"Roger that," Trey said as Tweeter put in, "You got it, boss."

"Since there are more bad asses than we thought previously, it's a good thing we decided to pick up some extra ordnance." Trey's lips quirked with amusement. "With me

and Tweeter on one side and the local law enforcement blocking them from the highway side, these bogies aren't going anywhere, brother."

"Figured that. I'm about a quarter of the way to the top of the mountain. See you soon. Out."

"Steady climbing, Ren. Out." Trey turned and looked at Tweeter. "Shock and awe?"

"Oh hell yeah. Flash bangs are just what we need to send the a-holes scurrying. However, I bet by the time we get to the ladies my baby sister already has her Lapua trained on those fuckers and is taking them down."

"Not taking that wager. I always bet on your sister when it comes to sniping." Trey shook his head, an unholy smile on his lips for the first time since Keely's SOS signal had gone out. "Those bastards didn't understand what they'd gotten themselves into. No way the DoD traitor is paying them enough to get killed. Let's go."

Chapter Five

Fee couldn't remember the last time she felt so horrible.

Well, she could, but she didn't need to fall into that dark and hellish abyss at the moment. They were in serious danger. Keely needed a competent partner not a hysterical albatross.

Damn, it was cold. Her teeth chattered and she swore every muscle in her body trembled. She wasn't dressed for this kind of weather and thought fondly of her down-filled coat back in her apartment. She hadn't counted on June in the Bitterroots to feel like November in Detroit. At least, her feet were warm and dry.

"Fee?" Her name was gasped out on a breath filled with pain.

"What's going on, Keely? Talk to me. Describe what you're feeling." Fee pulled Keely the last few steps to the holly bush and then behind it. They were now partially sheltered from the wind and the sight of anyone coming up from the clearing where they'd left the Hummer. The trail leading up and to the promised safe haven tantalized just ahead.

"Pain..." Keely moaned and bent over, clasping her abdomen while leaning against a rock.

The laboring woman still managed to hold onto her weapons, the automatic weapon hanging over her shoulder and the sniper rifle hugged against her distended abdomen. Fee knew if push came to shove, Keely would use the guns if she had to in order to protect them. She was frickin' amazing - - Keely was a prime example of women being the stronger sex.

"Pant through it." Fee panted along with Keely while rubbing the tightened muscles of Keely's lower back. "Good girl. Keep panting. Heh, heh, heh..."

As Keely huffed and puffed through the contraction, Fee did a surreptitious check to see if Keely's water had broken. It had.

"When did your water break?" Fee smoothed hair out of Keely's face as the younger woman straightened and took several deep breaths to cleanse as the contraction receded.

"At the beginning of the path leading here." Keely turned what appeared to be totally unapologetic eyes at Fee. "You weren't looking so hot. What could you have done anyway? We needed to get to shelter and you don't know where it is."

Fee sighed and hated that Keely was correct. What could she have done? She felt useless. She was not an outdoors-woman and had been counting on Keely to get them to safety. Fee hated feeling helpless.

All that aside, she was the doctor and needed to take charge - - beginning *now*. She had a patient - - soon two - - to care for.

"Forget how I look. You're getting ready to have a baby. Let's get moving before the next contraction hits."

Keely nodded, turned and led the way.

Fee was happy to follow since the trail through the rocks was too narrow at that point to walk side by side. Plus this way she could always catch Keely if she fell.

However, Keely seemed to be moving just fine, slower, but still moving. Fee felt as if she could lie down and sleep curled into a ball for a week. She couldn't be that out of shape; she ran and did Pilates and yoga. It had to be the altitude. She prayed the medical kit had both acetaminophen and anti-nausea meds. She needed to be alert for Keely's sake and the way she felt right now, she wouldn't be without chemical assistance. Altitude sickness was extremely debilitating and could lead to hypoxia and dehydration and ultimately to death if not treated properly and as soon as possible.

After five or six minutes of climbing, they reached a flat area where Keely stopped and braced her rifle on a rock, the barrel cushioned by a bean bag she'd removed from her pocket. Fee leaned against another rock and watched as Keely placed her eye to the scope. She dripped with sweat, which meant Keely had to be damp and over-heated also. Although, other than panting through another contraction about a minute ago, Keely looked as if she could climb Mt. Everest.

Fee could easily despise the younger woman. She felt like a wimp.

"What do you see?" Fee placed the medical kit on a hip-high rock and opened it. Eureka! The kit was neatly and logically organized. She easily found the compartment with all the meds and located acetaminophen and nausea meds. Because her symptoms had increased incrementally as they'd climbed, she dry-swallowed a double dose of each. Even if Keely hadn't needed this rest, Fee had.

"Bad news." Keely kept her eye on the scope and flexed her finger, lightly touching the trigger, then let up, adjusted the aim of the barrel and chambered a bullet before fingering the trigger once more.

"What kind of bad news?" Fee watched as Keely took several deep, slow breaths and pulled the trigger. The sound was louder than she would've expected and echoed off the rocks. In a split-second after the first shot, Keely ejected the casing and chambered another round and fired again.

Keely looked away from the scope. "Six bad asses instead of three. Two are now down - - injured but not dead 'cause I rushed the shots - - and the rest scrambled to hide like the frick-fracking rats they are. I just bought us some respect and time. Let's go." She pocketed the bean bag and stood up, cradling her rifle.

"Shit ... shit ..." Keely gasped and panted as she moved to lean against the rock behind her. "The contractions are coming closer together. Pain is stronger too. Doesn't that mean the birth canal is widening?"

"Yes." Fee frowned and timed the contraction. And yes, it still lasted approximately forty-five seconds, but this one had been far closer to the last one. "Tell me about the pain," she demanded as Keely struggled to take a full breath after the contraction ended.

"Like I'm splitting in two. My back hurts as much or more than my pelvis." She hitched a breath. "I can barely concentrate on breathing. I feel as if I'm hyperventilating. Even now, the pain is there, just bubbling and ready to explode."

“Shit, sounds like they’re overlapping.” Fee braced Keely as the woman dropped her rifle on the rock and bent over, both arms holding her stomach, as another contraction piled right on top of the previous one. “Damn, I hate it when I’m right.”

Keely moaned and gasped. “Fee ... help...”

“Shit, shit, shit. Fuck. Just fuck.” Fee placed an arm around Keely’s waist in an attempt to keep her from falling to the ground. Because if that happened, Fee would never get her up and they’d be delivering the baby here, in the open.

“Is that any kind of language for a doctor to use?” A deep male voice came from behind her. A familiar male voice, thank the Lord. “What’s wrong? Is Keely ready to have the baby?”

Fee slipped the machine gun from Keely’s shoulder and managed to keep an arm around the woman’s waist as she turned to point the weapon at the man. He was tall with dark hair and piercing pale eyes. He had an ugly looking gun, but it was aimed at the ground. The look on his face was a mixture of affection and concern for Keely.

“Who are you?” She was pretty sure this was Keely’s brother-in-law, but it didn’t hurt to ask. If he gave the wrong answer, she’d figure out how to use the damn machine gun if it killed her.

“Trey Maddox. We heard Keely’s shots. Tweeter’s moving down the path to provide some interference so I can get you ladies to the cave. Here,” he held out the gun in his hand, “hold this for a second so I can pick up the little warrior. Do you know if she hit any of the fuckers?”

“Um, two, she said. Not dead, just injured. There’s six total.” Fee found herself holding yet another gun as she relinquished her hold on Keely.

“Yeah, I saw that from above.” Trey pulled Keely into his arms and held her against his chest as if she weighed nothing. “Stay close. I might need that gun. Leave her rifle here. Bring the field kit. The assholes won’t make it this far to steal the Lapua. I’ll be lucky if Tweeter leaves me any bad guys to tromp on.”

Normally, Fee would’ve refused being bossed around on principle. Trey Maddox reminded her too much of her brother and father, but oddly enough not of Adam or any of the other losers she’d dated. Plus, she was out of her element, and not being stupid or suicidal, she’d follow his instructions and take whatever help she could get.

She and Mother Nature would be in charge once the baby started coming. Although, she had a sneaking suspicion this man could deliver the baby if she weren’t around. He looked immensely competent and confident. It was in the way he carried his large body and in his calm demeanor. And, yes, in the gentle way he spoke to Keely, soothing her as he carried her laboring body up the mountain.

Fee followed Trey as he set a brisk pace. She panted and wheezed as silently as she could. She didn’t want him to slow down on her account. Keely was in pain and her contractions were over-lapping; she was obviously dilating quickly. And, Fee suspected, Keely had back labor, a situation in which the baby’s hands and feet were facing too far toward Keely’s spine. Thus causing more pain than normal - - and normal was bad enough.

Fee would have to turn the baby more sideways before delivery. At least the baby was not breech. As soon as the head crowned, she should be able to maneuver

the little guy into the proper position to ease the shoulders, the widest part on a newborn, through the vaginal opening.

After several minutes of a grueling pace, he finally spoke. "What's wrong with Keely? You were cursing up a storm when I arrived." His voice was low, but it easily carried to her position behind him. And he wasn't even out of breath, damn him.

"The labor went from slo-mo to fast forward in the blink of an eye." She panted and concentrated on putting one foot in front of the other. She was miserably cold and damp and would kill for a hot cup of anything. The meds while she knew they had to be working had been taken too late to stave off most of the symptoms of mountain sickness. Her head throbbed and her vision blurred from the pain. At least, the nausea had subsided to a dull simmer rather than a full out boil.

"Well, then it's a good thing I'll get you both to safety in a couple of minutes. The cave is dry and can be warmed up quickly." Trey muttered something she couldn't hear and realized he was talking into a headset.

"Are you talking to Keely's husband?" Fee stopped abruptly so she wouldn't run into the man. "We're here?" She looked around. "Where is this cave Keely spoke of?"

Trey turned, cradling the pain-wracked Keely in his arms. He rubbed his cheek over her hair. "Hold on, little sis." While a tinge of panic was in his voice, the look he turned on Fee was calm. He was scared for Keely but he would never admit it. "Yeah, Ren has landed and is making tracks for us now. He has some heavy climbing to finish first. And we are here. Push on the spot that looks darker than the rest of the rock face, would ya?"

Fee did as he asked. Her mouth formed an "o" as a futuristic panel appeared in the rock wall. "Holey moley."

Trey snorted his amusement. "Punch in 8-9-9-2-4-6 and hit enter."

She did so and a door slid open. She followed him into a dimly lit antechamber which led to another door in another rock wall just ahead. The door to the outside swished closed behind them. Fee let go of some of the tension in her jaw and neck now that they were inside and away from the pursuers. "Now what?"

"Step aside. I'll use the retinal and palm scans."

Fee moved and watched as he leaned over just enough so his right eye could be scanned. Holding Keely against his chest with one muscled arm, he placed his right palm on a small pad and the door opened, smoothly and quietly. Inside, the space was one big black hole, but heat seemed to rush out at them. She sighed, happy at the evidence of warmth.

"Where do I find the light switch?" she asked.

"Lights will come on as we move into the space. They're on motion detectors." Trey adjusted his hold on a squirming Keely and strode into the space. "Come on, don't dawdle, doc. I need to get you ladies set up and then go help Tweeter exterminate the roaches."

"Lovely image." Fee walked behind Trey and was pleased to find the place clean, well-lit, and dry. "I want to get Keely into something loose and dry. She'll need to be on a flat surface. I'll need blankets for warmth and lots of pillows or something similar to prop her up for delivery."

“We can do all of that.” Trey led her further into the cave and stopped in what looked to be a sleeping area. “Pick the bed you want. They’re all clean.”

Keely moaned, groaned, and panted in Trey’s arms. His face was grim as he muttered soothing nonsense against her hair. He turned tortured eyes on Fee. “Hurry, doc. I’ve never seen her like this before.”

“She’s doing fine. Tell her that. She’s having a baby, not dying.” Fee hurried and arranged a bed to her satisfaction. “Hold her so I can strip her pants off, then you can lay her on the bed. I can handle the rest. I’ll need it warmer in here, if possible. I could also use hot water and soap to scrub my hands and later to clean the baby.”

“On it.” Trey helped her get Keely to bed.

Keely turned onto her side and curled into a semi-fetal position. The pain now rolled over the laboring woman in huge swells, each contraction crashing into the next with very little respite.

Trey swore under his breath. His voice when he continued to address Fee’s requests displayed none of his emotions, but his distress at Keely’s condition was present in his light green eyes. “There are clean T-shirts and ski underwear in that cabinet at the end of the row of beds. I’ll take care of upping the heat some more. Hot water is instant and in the bathroom,” he angled his head to a door in the rock wall, “and in the kitchen which is in the main area we walked through.”

“Good.” Fee looked around as she rubbed Keely’s back through another contraction. “Pant, Keely. That’s a good girl. Keep panting. It’s easing some, take a deep breath. Good. You’re doing well.”

Pale under his tan Trey muttered into his headset.

“If that’s her husband you’re talking to - - tell him he’d better hurry. This baby is on a fast clock.”

Trey nodded and whispered into the microphone. After he’d finished relaying her words and the situation, he turned toward her. “The other medical supplies are in the cabinet by the door to the bathroom.” He retrieved the medical kit from where she’d dropped it and brought it to her.

“Thanks. Now go help Keely’s brother. Keely and I’ve got this. We women will do just fine.”

“Bossy little thing, aren’t you?” Trey moved around the room, adjusting electronic panels. The heat, she assumed.

“Yes, I am - - so don’t forget it.” Fee briskly removed Keely’s coat, sweater and bra. Trey handed her a T-shirt. She slipped it over Keely’s head then tucked the blankets around her.

Keely’s brother-in-law had a worried look in his eyes but he kept the conversation light. She suspected he didn’t want Keely to see or hear his fear. “I like bossy little women. My brother did just fine by finding himself one.”

Fee almost laughed when he winked at her outrageously. But she shook her head. “Stop flirting. So not in the market.” At a strangled gasp from Keely, she shoed Trey out of the area. “Go. I need to take care of Keely.”

“I’ve turned the sat phone on.” He placed the phone on the night stand. “Punch one then the pound sign and someone will come running. You’re safe here - - no one can get in but one of the SSI operatives.”

“We’ll be just fine. We bossy little women are tough - - and I have delivered babies before. Once I did triplets in an elevator. So this is a piece of cake. Now go.”

Trey’s lips thinned. He swept a trembling hand over Keely’s sweaty hair. Then he leaned over and kissed Keely’s forehead. “That was from Ren, sprite. He told me to tell you he loves you.”

Keely looked at Trey through obviously pain-glazed eyes. Speaking with a clenched jaw, she said, “Tell him not to get dead ... and I love him, too.”

Trey, a grave look on his face, left.

When Fee heard the outer door shut, Keely let out a guttural scream. How the woman had held in all that pain while her brother-in-law was present, Fee would never know.

“Go ahead. Scream all you want. It’s just us women now.” Fee stroked a damp, golden-red tress off Keely’s face. “Now, let’s see where you’re at. Can you hold your legs apart for me, Keely? Bent at the knees?”

Chapter Six

Keely panted through another excruciating contraction which threatened to tear her body in half.

“Keely? Hon? Can you hear me?” Fee was directly in her face, stroking it with a cool, damp cloth.

“I thought ... there were ... supposed to be ... uh, plateaus.” Her words were punctuated with gasps and groans.

“Yeah, but you breezed through early and active labor and went straight to transition.” Fee’s eyes held sympathy and concern. “All you can do now is take each contraction one at a time.” Keely grimaced and Fee chuckled. “Yeah, I know easy for me to say, huh?”

“Yeah ... too close ... hard to control ... breathing.” She moaned low in her throat, bottling up the scream threatening to erupt. She was not a screamer and refused to start now.

Fee rubbed Keely’s abdomen and murmured soothing nonsense throughout the back-arching pain.

“Want Ren.” Keely hated the pathetic whine in her voice but couldn’t help it. If Ren were there, he’d fix this - - he’d never stand for her being in pain. Somehow, some way, he’d take care of it.

“I know, sweetie. He’s coming as fast as he can.” Fee touched Keely’s face lightly. She struggled to concentrate on what the doctor said. “Keely, I can give you Tylenol. A mild analgesic won’t hurt the baby and might help. This very well-equipped facility has IV-setups.”

Biting her lip, Keely shook her head. She remembered the no-drug lecture the birthing instructor had given. She was pretty sure that had included all drugs. Riley would come into this world drug-free. She hadn’t taken even an aspirin since before her last bullet wound back when she’d found out she was pregnant.

“Okay, then.” Fee patted her shoulder. “Let’s check to see how dilated you are and if you’re ready to push this little guy out.”

Fee moved away from Keely’s direct line of sight. She sensed the doctor’s hands between her legs, but wouldn’t swear to it since every nerve in her body protested the agony pulsating through her. It was as if all her body parts had morphed into one - - and they all hurt like hell.

When Fee came back into Keely’s eyeshot, the doctor’s face was a mask of neutrality.

“What?” Keely attempted to control her breathing as a sharp pain shot from her lower extremities to the top of her head. “What’s wrong?”

“Good news is you’re fully dilated and are able to push. Bad news is the little guy is facing fully backwards.”

“What does...?” Keely grabbed her abdomen and felt the huge moving bulge as it seemed to shimmy and shake just under the surface of her skin. The image the motion evoked was Sigourney Weaver’s character giving birth to the alien. “Riley wants ... out.”

“Yeah, he does.” Fee’s lips quirked. “But we need to make it easier on you both. I have to turn him to the side so his head and shoulders can be delivered.”

Fee cupped Keely’s face between her hands and stroked Keely’s cheekbones in a soothing manner. “Keely, this means you’ll have to resist the urge to push when I say so. At a certain point, your body only wants to push. So, you’ll need to resist. Understand?”

Keely nodded. She wasn’t sure why this was a problem. Whatever it took to take this pain away and put little Riley in her arms was fine with her. She hissed and panted rapidly then groaned. “Oh God ... bad one.”

Fee gently removed Keely’s hand from where she had gripped the doctor’s arm. “Ready to do this?”

“Just ... do it.”

Keely grimaced and uttered another guttural moan. She was so ready and hoped the stories about women not remembering the pain were true, because if she remembered, she’d never get pregnant again. Ren would just have to settle for one natural heir and adopt any more kids he wanted. She couldn’t believe her mother had done this five times!

Fee chuckled. “Let’s prop you up so gravity will help.” She arranged several pillows behind Keely’s back, elevating her upper torso.

If it had been hard to catch a deep breath before, it was worse now. With her knees bent and her stomach pressing into her diaphragm, it was difficult to do anything but gasp for breath.

“Not comfortable.” Fee rubbed Keely’s stomach. “I know but the angle will help push the baby out more easily.”

Keely had an image of a toothpaste tube and rolling the end to get the last bit of paste. She snickered then groaned.

“During the next contraction, Keely, pant until I tell you to push. Okay?”

Keely scowled. “Only having ... contractions.”

“Yeah, I know. They’re overlapping, lots of peaks. Just pick a point where it hurts the most and start panting.”

The doctor must not be paying attention since that was the only way Keely could breathe now. But she couldn’t get enough air to call the doctor on her inattention.

Keely huffed and wheezed like a hippo in respiratory arrest as the pain became unbearable. The urge to push was great, but Fee said Riley wasn’t ready, so she resisted the urge - - and it hurt, dammit! “How long ... now?”

“Varies...” At Keely’s snarl, Fee laughed. “Nature has her own schedule. Remember, one contraction at a time. The baby’s head is almost down far enough for me to turn him. Once I do, we’ll try for three good pushes per contraction. We want to work with the contraction, Keely. Understand?”

No, she didn’t, but she nodded anyway. Anything to keep Fee on task and to bring Riley into the world safely. She closed her eyes. Pain was a color now - - all red,

orange and yellow lights behind her lids. Her body was putting off heat like a nuclear reactor - - and her body and everything around her was wet and uncomfortable. She wanted this done ... now!

Fee's soothing, calm voice and gentle, cool hands were the only anchors in the sea of agony ebbing through her body.

"Okay, sweetie." Fee gently nudged Keely's knees further apart. "Hold this position if you can. I can see lots of lovely dark hair." Fee's hand had moved to Keely's abdomen. "I feel a contraction building right on top of the one that just finished. We need to work with them even though they are close together ... ah, there it is ... lovely, strong one ... Keely, pant for me. Push when I tell you."

Keely panted for all she was worth. If there was a blue ribbon for panting, she'd effin' win it.

Then the blessed words she had been waiting to hear. "Push, Keely."

Keely stopped panting, gritted her teeth, and bore down. A stinging, burning pain shot up her spine from her pelvis. For the first time since she'd been tortured in a Boston warehouse, she screamed. And screamed. And screamed. She was very glad her mother wasn't there because she uttered several loud "fucks" to punctuate the cries.

"Keely! Stop! Stop pushing."

Fee's shouts finally reached her through the inferno of pain permeating every cell in her body. Keely panted for breath, realizing she needed air.

"Whoa, there, hon." Fee's voice seemed muffled and Keely looked down to see the top of Fee's head still between her legs. "Man, you've got strong abs. You almost shot Riley out before I got him turned. That would've torn you up badly."

Keely watched Fee's messy, red pony tail bob as the doctor continued to work between her sprawled legs. "Is ... baby okay?" She panted. "Need to ... push again."

Fee looked up. "Not yet. You're doing great. Get some air into your lungs. Breathe slowly. In and out. In and out." Keely forced her breathing into compliance. "Good girl." Fee smiled. "The next contraction I want you to push for all you are worth."

Closing her eyes against the distracting lights, Keely laid her head back against the mound of pillows and concentrated on controlling her breathing as she began to list prime numbers in order. But that took too much concentration, so she worried about her brother and Trey fighting the mercenaries and Ren making the climb to reach her side.

All too soon her worries were buried under an avalanche of pain. She was also light-headed from the combination of pain and the lack of breath. The world behind her lids was chaotic, filled with swirls of hot, angry colors and flashes of heat lightning. She refused to succumb to the darkness that beckoned; she needed to be conscious to push Riley out. So, she attempted to breathe between the ebb and flow of waves of pain.

She was about to ask Fee if she could push again when large, warm masculine hands cupped her face and Ren's unique scent and that of clean mountain air cut through the miasma.

"Baby, I'm here." His lips brushed hers lightly before he kissed her. With long, slow breaths, his tongue and lips took her away from the real world for a short time,

breathing for her. When his lips left hers, she moaned. Her eyes opened. His stormy blue gaze filled with concern and love strengthened her.

But her respite was short-lived as pain pounded her body once more. She screamed.

“Keely!” Ren’s voice was filled with panic. “What’s wrong, Doctor?”

Keely couldn’t worry about soothing him now - - the urge to push battled her eroding self-control. All she wanted now was one little word - - push.

Ren held her shoulders. His warm hands were a welcome support, a focus for her willpower. Her big strong man paled, his concern turning to fear right before her eyes. She wanted to reassure him but she didn’t have the breath.

“Doctor! She’s in pain. What do I need to do?” he asked Fee without turning his gaze from Keely.

“Your strong wife - - man, she has abs - - has almost done it all.” Fee paused and grunted. “There we go, little man. Just needed to make sure the cord wasn’t in the way.”

Keely moaned as anguish shot up her spine and wreaked havoc with her pelvis.

“Hold her up just like you are and massage her abdomen when I tell her to push,” Fee instructed.

With one arm around her shoulders, Ren braced her even further upright. His other hand covered both hers on her abdomen. He brushed a kiss over her sweaty brow. “Ready, love?”

Keely turned her face into his shoulder and inhaled his scent, letting it soothe her. The pain was still there, a mixture of stabbing hot pokers and rending and tearing, but she felt more in control. Ren’s presence was better than drugs. “Yes ... ready.”

Chapter Seven

On the mountain.

Trey reached the lookout where he'd found the women. The mountainside was quiet except for the sounds of the wind blowing through the pines. Too quiet considering the weapons Tweeter had on him.

"Tweeter?" Trey spoke into the headset. "Sit rep?"

"Keely's two shots hit major organs and those fuckers are bleeding out. I sort of slit another guy's throat. The other three are hunkered down by the vehicles, having a little conference." Tweeter grunted with disgust. "Looks like they're making some phone calls. Guess they didn't expect a pregnant woman to fight back."

Trey chuckled. "Nope, your sister is one of a kind." He picked up Keely's rifle and adjusted the sight and the shoulder butt pad. He checked the magazine and found three of the five bullets remaining. After springing open the bipod, he rested the rifle on the flat rock. Through the sight, he checked out the area where Tweeter said the three remaining killers lurked. Unfortunately, no heads popped up, but there was always time.

"How's Keely?" Trey could tell Tweeter was moving.

"In pain. Lots of pain." He gulped, his stomach churning at the helplessness he'd felt. "I've seen gut-shot guys feel less pain. How in the fuck do women do it?"

"Hey, they are the stronger sex just ask my mom and sister." Tweeter sang under his breath, "One little, two little, three little Indians."

Trey chuckled. "You have a shot, kimosabe?"

"Nope, but I can lob a little flash bang and flush them out for you. We need to take care of them before the locals get here. Dan just radioed on the alternate frequency that he has the ranger access road blocked and his team and a State Police SWAT team are heading up the mountain."

"Well, hell. Flush the fuckers out." Trey put his eye to the scope. "Let's see how many little Indians I can take out before Sheriff Dan comes riding in to ruin our fun."

"I'll clean up any you miss. Let's get this done. I want to see my sister and, I hope, my little nephew."

"I'm with you there." Trey smiled.

And he would never admit it out loud to Tweeter who would tease him mercilessly, but he'd like to get more closely acquainted with one bossy little doctor. He'd always liked red-heads. He smiled as he imagined all that fiery temper tamed and in his bed. If Price didn't kill him first, that is.

When Tweeter shot the flash bang into the midst of the vehicles, Trey only had to wait a second or so for the three men to run away from the shock and awe. They were temporarily blind and deaf - - and soon-to-be permanently dead. It was like shooting fish in a barrel.

“Contraction’s coming. Ooh, a nice big one. This is it. Keely - - pant for me. Push when you feel like it,” said Fee.

Again the contraction ate away at Keely’s control. The urge to push was a prime imperative. But she refused to lose face in front of Ren. The torment continued and grew until it engulfed her. She bit her lip, holding in the screams. The taste of blood was coppery in her mouth.

“God, baby, let go.” Ren’s voice cut through the tsunami of pain sweeping through her mind. His lips brushed her forehead, her eyes, her lips. “Let go and push, sweetheart.”

No! If she pushed, she’d scream. She refused to scream. She was embarrassed that she’d screamed earlier. What must Fee think? What would Ren think? Only cowards screamed.

What the hell, Keely Walsh-Maddox? You were tortured in Boston and you screamed. So what? Doesn’t make you a coward. And if you let go and scream now? Still doesn’t make you a coward. It makes you human ... and in pain. Ren would be the last person to judge you. Scream and push that baby out!

The dam to her subconscious shame broke, releasing all the pent-up feelings of disgrace she hadn’t even realized she’d held inside.

Keely screamed and screamed and screamed some more - - and pushed for all she was worth.

This time Riley was coming out. Enough was enough. She reached deep and pushed with everything in her.

Ren’s voice cut through the noise of her shouts. The tone of his voice and what he said gave her the extra strength to deal with the agony ripping her apart.

“God, baby! You are so beautiful. So strong. I love you.” His voice hitched. Her big strong man was crying. “Sprite, he has dark hair like mine. One more push, sweetheart.” His hand massaged her stomach as he peppered kisses and words of praise and love over her face and hair.

After one huge burning sensation tore through her pelvis, the pressure, the pain lessened - - so much so, that she could breathe again without screaming or gasping. She took several deep breaths and relaxed into Ren’s supporting arm.

“God, look at him, Keely. Look at our son.” Ren kissed the top of her head and continued to massage the area over her now empty womb.

Keely opened her eyes as Fee held up a messy little bundle that kicked and flailed. His strong cries echoed off the cave walls. She cried and laughed at the same time. Riley was strong and vocal and a miracle. She looked at Ren whose teary eyes held love for her and the child they’d created.

He kissed her lips gently, reverently. “God, he is so beautiful. You’re beautiful.” Keely scrunched her nose. “He’s gunky ... and loud.”

Ren barked out a laugh. “Jesus, baby. Only you would point that out.”

Fee, looking as exhausted as Keely felt, smiled broadly and reassured her.

“Keely, Ren is correct. Your son is beautiful. He has all his fingers and toes and other assorted parts right where they should be.” The doctor wiped the white, cheesy looking

stuff off Riley with a wet towel. The baby screamed even louder than before, his little fists looking for a target.

“What’s wrong? Is he hurt?” God, what if he was hurt inside and they didn’t have the equipment to figure it out?

“He’s fine, Keely.” Fee’s tone was confident and humoring. Keely imagined the doctor had a lot of practice calming patients and their families. “Since he’s an early baby, we’ll do some tests when we get you both to the hospital. But he looks to be just fine. He’s big for his gestational age. I’m not sure you could’ve delivered him vaginally if he had cooked a little longer.”

“That’s what my OB said. Which is why we’d scheduled a C-Section.” Keely ached to hold Riley, but Fee was taking her damn fine time bringing him to her. Ren patiently waited by her side, but she felt the tension in his body as he watched the doctor like a hawk. “You didn’t answer my question. Why is he crying?”

Fee smiled. “Wouldn’t you cry if you were jerked out a skinny tunnel from a nice warm, dark place and ended up cold and wet with bright lights all around you?”

“Yeah, guess so.” Keely felt so stupid, but since she’d never been around babies much how would she know? Well, there was a learning curve in everything she’d ever undertaken. She had the books she’d bought and she’d figure out how to take care of this precious little life. Plus, she wouldn’t be doing it alone - - she had Ren, her family, and the SSI family to help. Riley would probably turn out to be the most-loved baby in all of Idaho.

“Ren, would you like to cut the umbilical cord?” Fee held Riley with one arm, cradled securely against her chest. Her other hand held surgical scissors.

“Yeah.” Ren moved away from Keely. She immediately missed his warmth and nearness. But he’d be back - - and he’d better bring their son with him.

Keely watched as her big strong man swept a gentle hand over his son’s head.

The breadth of his palm completely encompassed Riley’s skull. She bet Riley’s length wouldn’t even fill the space between Ren’s elbow and the tip of his fingers. Their son was so tiny.

Ren took the scissors Fee held. His hand steady - - hers would’ve been shaking so badly she wouldn’t have trusted herself - - he cut the cord. He didn’t take the baby from Fee but moved back to Keely’s side.

“Um, why didn’t you bring Riley with you? I want to hold him.”

“Fee’s still cleaning him up, love.” He nuzzled the top of her head as he sat on the edge of the bed. The look on his face made her insides turn to goo. She’d known that he loved her, but this look was a combination of love, awe, and adoration. “Thank you for our son.” He kissed her lips, his hand cradling her face.

When he broke away, she whispered against his mouth, “You’re welcome.”

Keely lay back and let Ren fuss with her blankets. She vaguely sensed him putting something warm and dry on her and changing the soiled linens around her. Fee’s soft voice and Ren’s rumbling one surrounded her in a pool of calm.

Everything was a blur now that the horrendous pain was gone. Though, she still felt some abdominal cramping and had a raw feeling around her vaginal opening. She

was so tired but refused to sleep. Instead, she floated in a fugue state. She needed her son in her arms, then she could sleep.

Riley's cry startled her from her drowse. She focused on the doctor as Fee did whatever doctors do after a baby's born. Ren watched Fee also. They were two of a kind. Nothing and no one would ever get within a mile of their child without them knowing it.

Finally, Fee wrapped Riley in one of the fluffy blue blankets Keely had put in the field medical kit. "Here, I swaddled him. Now hold him on your chest so he can hear your heart beat. The sound will soothe him. Talk to him. He knows your voice. He's been hearing it for months." Fee laid Riley on Keely's chest.

Ren held Keely against his side as she held their son. His body angled to cover them in case of danger.

Keely cupped Riley's head. His dark hair was soft and silky. She looked into his sapphire blue eyes. He stared at her. "Hey, Riley, welcome to the world." She placed a kiss on his little scrunched forehead, then his nose. He smelled unlike anything she had ever scented before. His skin was so fragile she was afraid to touch him.

And his reaction to her attentions? His lips made sucking motions, little bubbles forming on the tiny rosebud mouth.

Ren laughed and kissed the top of Riley's head. "That's my boy, wanting to kiss the girls already."

"I think that means he's hungry, big guy." Keely swept a finger over Riley's lips and he tried to capture it. She and Ren looked at each other and laughed.

"Well, that's like me, too." Ren nuzzled her cheek and whispered against her ear. "I love to suckle your breasts almost as much as I like kissing you."

Keely snorted and would have made a teasing remark when another contraction, albeit a much milder one than those earlier, moved through her body. "Fee? I..."

"It's okay, Keely. Just the placenta and umbilical coming out." The doctor was between her legs again. "Ren, could you massage Keely's stomach gently for me? It will help deliver the after-birth."

"On it." Ren kissed Keely's cheek and nuzzled her ear as he massaged her stomach. "Feeling better, sprite?"

"Sort of shivery, but this is mild compared to earlier." When Ren frowned and swore, she hurried to reassure him. "Ren, I'm fine. Although you might have to do some mighty fine persuading to get me pregnant anytime soon."

"God, baby, I should have been with you."

"You were with me when it counted. You helped immensely. Just knowing you were here and safe was better than any pain medicines." Keely reached for him as she cuddled Riley with her other arm. "Come here, big guy. I need you to hold me."

Ren looked at Fee. "Is that okay, Doctor?"

Fee turned from whatever she was doing on a side table and smiled. "Yep, you can hold her. But let's get the bottom half of the bed and Keely cleaned up again. She needs warm, dry layers around her for when we transport her and Riley to the hospital."

Ren nodded. "Hold onto Riley, sprite. You don't have to move a muscle. Let me do all the heavy lifting while we swaddle you just like our son."

Keely yawned. "So tired. Need to rest now." She rubbed a hand over Riley's back. He was asleep, snuggled on her breast, his mouth pursing and blowing baby bubbles. Her son was clearly more tired than hungry. Being born was hard work. "Don't want to let him go."

"You don't have to," Fee said. "I think your big strong husband can lift you two. Just rest. If you feel me checking you from time to time, that's normal. I need to make sure your uterus is contracting and no excessive bleeding occurs."

"Kay." Keely closed her eyes to the murmurs of Ren and Fee. She felt as if she floated on a cloud and was quite willing to hover in this warm, comforting world for as long as she could.

*

"Doctor ... Fee... tell me the truth. Is everything all right with Keely? She seems so out of it."

Fee had to laugh at the big, dark male looming over her, watching her every move like a predator ready to pounce. He was a protector just like Price.

"She's fine. She's exhausted. Having babies is hard work normally. Keely had a rapid progression, skimmed through a few steps, and had overlapping contractions - - and no drugs. So, she is more tired than most." Fee tucked the blankets to Keely's waist and then stroked a hand over Riley's back as he lay nestled on his mother's chest.

Instinctively, Keely's hand moved to hold her baby closer.

Fee smiled and pulled the blankets up and over the baby, stopping them at the base of his head now covered in a little baby cap of the softest blue cashmere. "You have a beautiful family, Ren. If you can move them without waking them, go on and hold them like she asked. I'll just clean things up around here and package what the hospital lab will need to test."

"Ren, hold me ... won't sleep fully until you do." Keely peeked at them through her lashes as she stroked Riley's back.

Fee watched in amazement as Ren managed to lift Keely without disturbing the baby or the nest of blankets. He settled on the narrow bed next to his wife, pulling her into his side, one arm under and one arm over her and the baby. He literally surrounded them with his strength and protection.

Sighing at the sight, Fee wondered if she'd ever find a man who'd put his body between her and the world? Who'd ever look at her as Ren did Keely? God, what was she thinking? It must be exhaustion and the altitude sickness making her so maudlin. Men like Ren and her brother were rare.

A rumbling male voice came from behind her. "Look at that. I'm an uncle."

Fee turned "You're all right?"

Trey Maddox turned away from staring at his new nephew and smiled down at her. "Yep. The mother fuckers didn't have a chance." He turned back toward his brother. "Man, Ren, the little guy looks just like you."

Ren grinned and stroked a gentle finger over the baby's cheek. Riley made little sucking motions and the men laughed quietly.

“What’s so funny?” Keely’s brother had entered the cave just as quietly as Trey. His gaze drifted to the loving scene on the bed. “Damn, look at that. My baby sis has a baby.” Tweeter pulled out his phone. “I need to send pictures to the folks and the brothers.”

Trey nodded. “Good idea. I’ll send pictures to our sister and parents.”

Fee was floored by what big softies these macho men were at heart. Then she realized that they were looking at her. “What?”

“Are they okay?” Tweeter asked, holding his smart phone up. “My family will want to know. Riley was a month early.”

Trey frowned and nodded. “Do we need to get them to a hospital to be checked out? We might be able to get the medevac helicopter to lift them out.”

“They’re fine at the moment. And, yes, a medevac would be good. I don’t see us carrying them down that treacherous hill. I would like to get them to the hospital. There are tests that need to be done on Riley and other things.” Like a circumcision, if requested, but she never mentioned that in front of men since they seemed to get queasy just thinking about it.

A wave of dizziness swept over Fee. She wobbled and braced herself on a table. “Plus, there’s always the potential of Keely continuing to bleed. I would feel better if we were in a medical facility...” She looked around the cave and the well-supplied medical cabinet. “... although, I think if needed I could start a saline IV here if she required fluids.”

“I’m her blood type,” Tweeter offered. His gaze took in the bloody bedding Fee had kicked out of Keely’s sight. No need for a new mother to see how messy the birthing process was. Experiencing the pain was bad enough.

Fee patted his arm. “Good to know. Let’s not worry yet. Your sister did a super job and is very healthy - - as is the baby. Everything went extremely well considering the circumstances.”

The men smiled and some of the tension went out of their bodies.

Fee looked Trey and Tweeter over and noted both were disheveled, bruised, and bleeding. All she wanted to do was get warm, lie down, and sleep for a week, but if she had patients still, she would find the energy to take care of them. While she had been safe inside this cave, the two men had risked their lives for her and Keely.

“Do you two need medical care?” asked Fee.

“We’re fine, little doc,” Trey said. “You need to sit down. You look like someone dragged you through a keyhole backwards and then pulled you back through again.”

Fee glared at him. “I’m fine.”

“Trey! Stop teasing Fee and make a full report.” Ren spoke in a soft, but authoritative murmur. He soothed his son’s back as the baby whimpered in his sleep.

Trey turned from her and approached the bed, but Fee sensed he knew exactly where she was and what she was doing as she cleaned up after the birth.

“Keely had already gotten the numbers down to four. By the time I got back to pick up Keely’s sniper rifle, Tweeter had taken out one more. The remaining three made it easy by gathering near the vehicles. One flash bang and three .338 caliber bullets later, the battle was over. The Sheriff and the State Police are doing clean up.

Dan wants to talk to all of us - - tomorrow. I told him about Keely being in labor. He asked me to convey his best wishes.” Trey glanced with what Fee would call fondness at his sister-in-law. “Keely wounded the first two. The fuckers are in serious condition, but probably will survive for us to question them at their hospital bedsides.”

Tweeter approached on the other side of the bed, his gaze never straying from his sister and nephew. “Like Trey said, we didn’t suffer a scratch. The torn clothing is mostly from scrambling over rocks while checking security arrays earlier today.”

“And the blood?” Fee asked. They had too much blood on them for scratches from climbing rocks.

A wicked smile appeared on Trey’s face as his green eyes sparkled with malicious glee. “Not our blood, little doc. But if you want to kiss the bruises I got bouncing off mountain walls earlier today, checking out electrical conduits, I wouldn’t mind.”

How could they be so relaxed after taking on hired killers? And how had she never known that this was what her brother did? If she’d realized, she would’ve worried about him all the time.

She snorted. “In your dreams.”

Trey laughed and winked at her.

“Stop flirting with Price’s baby sister, Trey.” Ren stroked his wife and child.

“I’m not flirting. I’m dead serious.” Trey turned toward Fee and his warm smile took her breath away.

God, he was handsome, this big, tall, hunk of male. Too bad just the thought of any man touching her made her want to gag. Adam-fucking-Stall had broken her. How could she have been so wrong about him? Adam had looked to be everything most women wanted - - urbane, intelligent, highly educated, rich, and GQ-good-looking. But he’d turned out to be a crazy stalker and an abusive thug. It would take a long time to get over him and what he had done to her - - if she ever could.

“Still not interested,” she said.

Trey’s answering frown made her stomach hurt. Or, was that still the altitude sickness? Why did she feel as if she should apologize to this man for disappointing him? She didn’t even know him - - and he sure as hell didn’t know her or what she’d gone through in the last week or so.

Changing the subject, Fee turned toward Ren. “You live a dangerous life.” She looked at the baby. “You think you can protect your family from people wanting to hurt them?”

“No one will hurt my wife or my child. No one.” Ren’s words were delivered in a fierce tone of voice that made Fee a believer.

Fee felt like a stranger in a strange land. She needed to get back to her world - - the world of healing, preferably unpopulated by predatory, stalking peers like Dr. Adam-fucking-Stall.

“Okay, got that.” Fee nodded. “And from what I’ve seen of Keely, I know she’ll protect her baby. Hell, she protected me and she was the one in labor.”

With shaking hands, she busied herself cleaning up surfaces she'd already cleaned. The world began to swirl around her. *Uh-oh.* Whatever reserves she'd been operating on had just run out. She was sliding downhill fast.

Through what sounded like a vast, echoing tunnel, she heard Keely, "Trey! Catch her. She's had altitude sickness since we left the Hummer."

Trey put his arm around her waist. Fee gasped out "no" and tried to pull away. The last man who'd grabbed her had hurt her. The nightmare in her mind which she'd so successfully sublimated for the last few hours rose to the surface with a vengeance. She whimpered, pathetic mewling sounds, and scratched with clawed fingers at the man holding her.

But he didn't let go. "Stop it. Shh, little doc. I'm not hurting you. You're sick, Fee. Shh. I won't hurt you. No one will hurt you while I'm here, sweetheart."

Fee heard Trey's next words as if from a distance. "What the fuck, Keely?"

"Not now, Trey," Keely's soft voice replied. "Just don't let her hurt herself. I think she needs to see a doctor more than I do."

Fee almost laughed. Keely was more right than she knew. Fee hadn't let anyone see her bruises. She'd treated herself and then left Detroit.

The arms around her tightened and lifted her. She cried out and resumed her struggle. "Don't hurt me anymore, please!"

A man's voice, not Adam-fucking-Stall's, swore colorfully under his breath, but his arms were gentle. He wasn't hurting her.

This is Trey, dummy. Not effin' Stall. Plus, there's a room full of people. You look like a crazy woman. Chill.

Trey pulled her gently against his big, broad chest. Her hands went to the solid slab of muscle and shoved. "Calm down, little doc. Everything is fine." He soothed her in a crooning tone of voice, his breath whispering past her ear. "It's over. Whatever happened - - it is over. I won't let it happen again."

"Let go. I don't like being held." By a man went unsaid. Fee met his smoky green eyes.

"I like holding you - - and you need to be held." He frowned as his gaze traced the bruises on her face. He opened his mouth and she shook her head frantically. She could not answer questions about who had hurt her. It was bad enough she'd let too much slip to Keely. "Okay, little doc. We'll save the questions about who beat on you until later. Once you're rested and Price is back."

"No." She turned her head away from his suddenly piercing stare and found Tweeter and the others watching them. She buried her burning face into her newfound nemesis's chest. Her body shook harder - - the altitude sickness was making her weak. She was also experiencing an adrenaline crash.

"You're one of those people that holds up under fire and then slowly dissolves into quivers once the battle is done, aren't you?"

"I'm a coward through and through - - just ask Price. I couldn't even watch scary movies as a kid. Noises in the night had me screaming the house down. Your world scares me." She wanted to shove out of Trey's arms but knew she'd fall on her face if she tried to stand. She'd reached her physical limits. So, to keep from freaking out

again, she pictured him as a hammock, a warm, muscular, firm hammock, and relaxed into his body with a sigh.

“No, you have quiet courage when it’s needed, little doc. Now just let me hold you until you stop shaking.” He pulled her even closer.

Sighing in capitulation, she laid her cheek on his chest and let him warm and soothe her. She inhaled deeply as she attempted to get her racing heart back under control.

Trey smelled good - - right. His scent was healthy male sweat and a tinge of lemon with an overlay of pine and clean mountain air. His body was a blast furnace pouring off heat. She hadn’t realized how cold she was until he held her.

She ignored Trey’s concerned gaze and turned her throbbing head so she could watch Ren and Keely show Tweeter their son. She wanted what they had - - love, a family. Her lips trembled and tears filled her eyes. She was so damaged - - she might never be able to “be” with a man again after what had been done to her.

Trey must’ve sensed her upset, because he whispered soothing nonsense mixed with vows to make it all right and promises of vengeance against the bastard who’d hurt her. She couldn’t help it, some of the punishments he mentioned were so similar to those she’d dreamt of doing to Adam-fucking-Stall - - she had to laugh. The sound came out on a hiccup and sounded a little watery, but it was a laugh.

God! A man could make her laugh. Yesterday that would not have happened.

Too bad she hadn’t met someone like Ren or Trey or Tweeter a long time ago. Maybe time would heal all wounds, wasn’t that the saying? For now, her path lay elsewhere. She had at least two more years of work in under-served areas to pay off her medical school loans. She’d bury herself in her work - - and hope she would heal.

Epilogue

Forty-Eight Hours Later, on Sanctuary.

Keely stroked the soft dark hair on her son's head as his little mouth sucked away at her breast. Riley's cobalt blue gaze was fixed on her face as if he was afraid she might disappear taking his mid-afternoon meal away from him.

She chuckled and stroked a finger down his little nose. "Don't worry, little guy. Mama won't deprive you of your food."

A sound at the door to the master bedroom had her looking up. Ren stared at her and Riley. The look in his silver-blue eyes made her melt inside. He'd always looked at her with love but now it seemed multiplied by a factor of ten.

"Hey," she husked, "how did things go?" He'd gone to the regional hospital to assist in interrogating the two mercenaries who'd survived.

"They never met the guy who hired them. Their payment was wired from a numbered account to their handler's numbered account and who in turn paid them. Your brother is already on the electronic fund transfers." He moved across the room to sit on the bed by her legs. His hand covered hers as she held Riley to her. "How are my beautiful wife and son?"

"We're fine." At his snort, she narrowed her eyes. "We're fine. It would take more than a little loss of blood to knock me on my butt. I'll have you know that your son and I had a bath today. We splashed and had a good time." She nuzzled the top of Riley's head. "Didn't we, little man?"

With his mouth full of nipple, Riley continued to suck and stare. Silence was assent in most cultures.

Ren laughed, the concern in his eyes gone as quickly as it had appeared. "Okay, so you're fine. Fee said as much..." he leaned over to kiss her forehead and then the top of Riley's head "... but I was worried. She told me to grow some balls." He snorted. "Sounded a lot like you when she said it."

"About Fee." Keely scrunched her forehead. "Did she tell Price about what happened in Detroit to make her quit her job and drop in here so unexpectedly?"

Price had arrived less than eight hours after they'd made it to the regional medical center. Fee hadn't wanted to chance the longer trip to Coeur d'Alene after Keely's bleeding hadn't slowed.

"Not that I heard. Trey might know if Fee talked to her brother." Ren grinned. "My brother is attracted to the little doc as he calls her. Price is having fits about it, warning him off."

"And Price can fuck himself. If the little doc and I want to see each other, we will," Trey spoke from the doorway. "May I come in and see my nephew?"

Ren pulled the baby blanket up over Riley's head, covering Keely's breast. She frowned at him then said, "Come in, Uncle Trey. Your brother is getting territorial about a small amount of exposed breast."

Ren growled. "He doesn't need to be seeing your breast."

Trey laughed. "I won't look I promise. Thought I'd offer to burp the little guy and take him on a walk-about so you two could have some quiet time. Things have been hectic."

"That is so sweet." She shot a glare at Ren. "Isn't it, big guy?"

"Yeah, sweet." Ren crossed his eyes at Keely and she giggled. He turned as his brother sat on the other side of the bed. "So? You and Fee Teague?"

"Not just yet. The little doc is making things difficult," Trey replied, a grim look on his face.

"About time some woman gave you a challenge," teased Ren.

"Eff you." Trey gave his brother the finger then shot an apologetic glance at Keely. "Sorry, Keely."

Trey was steaming mad and attempting to control his anger around her and the baby. She punched Ren. "Stop it, big guy." She turned to Trey. "How is she making it difficult?"

Trey's face went from mad to grim. "The maddening woman ran. Left Sanctuary before dawn to go to Boise for a flight to Santa Fe." He wiped a hand over his face. He looked and sounded weary, defeated. And Keely had never heard either of the Maddox brothers ever sound that way before. "Scotty fed Fee and Price breakfast and overheard them talking. Fee has her new orders from the Feds. Seems she'll be working in New Mexico, close to the border with Mexico."

"I'll be borrowing the jet from time to time." Trey skewered his brother with a piercing glare as if daring Ren to argue with him. "Fee could be the one, ya know? Like Keely was for you. Little doc needs to give me a chance to see if this would work out for us."

Trey sounded hurt. But Keely understood why Fee had run and he didn't. If he'd known even a small part of what had happened to Fee, he and Price would've been on a plane to Detroit to get Fee some justice - - and Fee would still be on Sanctuary.

"Damn it!" Keely said. "She got away before I could twist her arm into telling Price and you guys about the a-hole who hurt her."

Trey scowled. "You know what happened? Who beat her?"

Before Keely could answer, Riley unlatched from her breast and looked at her expectantly. She shifted Riley to her shoulder for a good back rub and burp. Fee's problems forgotten for a split second, the men watched with silly looks on their faces as Riley let out two loud baby burps then fell asleep, his little mouth blowing milk bubbles. "God, he is so cute," she whispered.

Ren used a soft cloth to wipe his son's mouth, taking the opportunity to kiss her on the lips. "You both are cute."

"You're all cute." Trey's voice was a low snarl, ending the intimate moment.

"Now, what should Fee have told Price - - and me?"

Keely sighed and continued to rub Riley's back. "Some asshole she worked with in Detroit attacked and abused her. And, I suspect, raped her."

Ren stiffened and swore under his breath. Trey stomped around the room, swearing a blue streak. His hands fisted at his sides.

Keely used to such alpha-posturing waited them out. Someday the little bundle lying against her shoulder would probably act the same way. She smiled. God, she loved her men, so predictable.

Fee didn't realize it yet, but she now had the protection of every SSI operative at her back. The woman wouldn't know what hit her.

"Okay, sprite, fess up. Who's the asshole?" Ren asked.

Trey approached the bed and stared at her. "You do know who the bastard is, don't you?"

"Of course she does." Ren shot his brother a nasty look. "She's a protector like us. She wouldn't let Fee get away without telling her, even if she was in pain and having a baby."

"My man knows me well." She nuzzled Riley's head. "The creepazoid worked with her in the ER. His name is Dr. Adam-fucking-Stall. Fee's words not mine."

Trey grunted. "Good, at least the fucker ..." He cast a guilty look at the baby. "...oops, sorry ... the effing coward didn't break her spirit."

"Trey," Keely spoke softly, "she's lost her confidence when it comes to trusting a man. She didn't want to tell Price or you guys. She chose to run instead. She's suffering. She needs time and space..."

"She needs someone to hold her and help her work through the nightmares. To show her that not all men are abusive, raping shitheads." Trey turned his back and swore colorfully. When he ran out of steam or breath, she couldn't tell which, his shoulders heaved as he let out a despondent sigh. "Sorry, Keely. I want that little woman. I fell like a frigging ton of bricks for her. Even when she was sick and scared, she came through for you. The woman has grit and is the sweetest little armful ... well, enough of that."

"Yeah, I could tell you liked her," Keely gently teased then sobered. "You'll have to be patient. She'll shove you away if you let her."

"I'll be as patient as she needs me to be." He turned and looked at them. "But first, Price and I need to go kick us some Stall butt. I figure if I help Price beat the shit out of the man who hurt his baby sister, he might put in a good word for me."

Ren barked out a laugh, startling Riley who whimpered. Ren stroked his son's back. He turned to his brother. "Lots of luck, brother. Price knows you. I mean you two cut a swath through the women in Idaho County and the surrounding environs."

"That's in the past. Fee is it for me." A lost look came into his eyes. "What if she never lets me woo her? God, she was so scared of my flirting, she ran clear to New Mexico."

Keely shook her head and smiled. "Well, we could use another doctor in this part of Idaho. I do believe we classify as an under-served rural area. Or at least Tweeter said so after I had him look up the program she is in."

“And that kind of thinking and planning is why I love you so much,” Ren kissed her nose. “Well, that and a lot of other things. Great idea, baby.”

“Thank you.” She smiled at her husband. “I also thought after she finishes paying off the student loan, she could come to work for SSI as our resident doctor. Our operatives and employees deserve the best medical care. Fee is super-smart and damn good in a crisis. Plus she has a way that just makes you want to trust her.”

Trey muttered something and Ren laughed. Keely frowned and looked to her husband. “What did he just say?”

Trey snarled “no, Ren, don’t” as her loving husband replied, “He said Fee had a way which made him want to fuck her.”

Keely giggled and covered Riley’s ears. “Guys, watch your language. Riley is far too young to hear such talk.”

“I figure it’s too late, sprite. He’s been hearing it in the womb since he was conceived.”

Keely sighed. “Yeah, well, try to control it. I might have to follow my mama’s example and charge per f-word.”

Ren leaned over to kiss her. “We’ll put the money in his college fund.”

“Good idea, big guy. MIT costs a lot of money. By the time he’s ready, we should have enough with the way y’all swear.”

The End

To my readers:

I hope you enjoyed this short novella about Keely and Ren and their baby. Yes, I have planned a book for Fee and Trey but it is not the next book. Patience is a virtue.

The second full novel in the SSI series is *Cold Day in Hell* and will feature Risto Smith (he was introduced in *Eye of the Storm*). He hooks up with a childhood friend of Keely and Tweeter's, Calista Meyers. Callie is a Marine brat and a world-famous model who just really wants to track terrorist and drug money.

The third book in the series will be Vanko's story. I then plan (and it could change, but I don't think so) a story for Tweeter which will segue into Trey and Fee's story.

On a plot timeline, not that many months will elapse between Books 2 and 5.

Plus, by the time Trey goes after Fee, Sanctuary will need a full-time doctor. And not just for battle wounds - - the SSI men and their women will prove to be a fertile lot!

Thanks to all the readers who send me mail, telling me how much they love this series. Your kind words and encouragement help more than you know.

Hugs –

Monette Michaels, Christmas, 2011.

Monette Michaels is the author of numerous romantic suspense and paranormal novels. She also writes on the steamier side as Rae Morgan. A life-long resident of Indiana, she lives in a suburb of Indianapolis.

Please visit her web site: www.monettemichaels.com

She loves to hear from her fans and will reply. Please be sure if you are an AOL or ATT member to list Monette's e-mail addy as "permitted" – she has had replies kicked back to her as not permitted! Her e-mail addy is monettemichaels@gmail.com.