

THE WITNESS

JOURNEY'S END TEXAS



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This book contains fantasy themes appropriate for mature readers only. Nothing in this book should be interpreted as Blushing Books' or the author's advocating any non-consensual sexual activity.

PROLOGUE



*A*pril 1903

FRIENDLY LAUGHTER FLOATED through the room as John Wayne scraped his fork across his dessert plate. The man's love for sweets was well-known in the family and the source of many jabs at his expense.

"If you push any harder with that fork, John, you're going to scrape the flowers off that plate." Tom Thornton's eyebrows lifted in mock dismay.

"I'm finished." John leaned back and patted his stomach. An abdomen rock hard in spite of his forty-five years.

The two men leaned back in their chairs while the women cleared the table. The younger men shifted in their seats and shared curious glances, a few shrugged their shoulders. After the meal was finished, the men most often moved to the porch to roll a cigarette, stretch their legs, and wait for coffee. This sitting was unfamiliar and a mite strange, but this was Tom's house. He should be the first to stand, but he simply stared at his folded hands resting on the table.

The women shared a glance when they returned with cups and a coffee pot to find the men folk still gathered around the table.

“Sit down,” Tom instructed. He waited while cups were filled with the steaming brew and the women sank into their chairs.

“John, Marcie, and I have decided to share some information with you—information about your heritage. We’ve kept it secret all these years, but we decided it would be safer if you knew. In case, well, in case something should happen.”

“You’re scaring me, Pa,” Tom’s eldest daughter, Jeanette, leaned into her husband’s shoulder.

“No reason to be frightened. You know being prepared is better than being surprised. Now, that surprise might never come. This family meeting might be for naught, but we will feel better if you know the truth.”

He let his gaze wander up and down the table. On one side sat his eldest son, Tommy, and his brother, Joe. Jeanette and her husband, Jason Blake, were next. Their two small children were tucked up in a bedroom nearby. John and Marcie Wayne were across the table. Their twins, Adam and Ava, sat next to them. Ava’s husband, Seth Walker, rested his arm around his wife’s shoulders and gazed at their infant son as he suckled his mother’s breast.

“Do you want to start, John?” Tom asked.

“No, it began with you. Makes sense for you to start it off,” John replied.

“All right.” Tom’s eyes glittered with emotion barely restrained. He cleared his throat and leaned onto his elbows. “It was September 1883, and we were caught up in the range wars.” He tipped his head toward Jeanette’s husband, Jason Blake. “Your pa and I were working our tails off to keep our ranches going. The bigger ranchers had strung barbed wire all over God’s green earth, and where there had been free range, there were now fences. We took turns sneaking out at night to cut that damned wire so our cattle could get to water. It was dangerous. The big ranchers employed hired guns to shoot men they caught damaging the wire. They were trying to drive men off their land, and they’d had

considerable success. Henry Blake and me... well, we decided to stay."

Tom lifted his coffee to his lips and took a long sip. An expectant hush permeated the room.

"On a night when it was my turn, the sky was lit up like the Fourth of July. Meteors were blazing across a black sky and night looked like day. I don't mind telling you I was nervous as a cat in a room full of rocking chairs. I much preferred the dark to cover what I was up to, but the cattle had to drink. I had to cut the fence. I had just finished and planned to mount my horse and vamoose out of there, but when I turned to go, there she was."

"Who, Pa? Who was there?" Tommy asked.

"Your ma, son. Your ma stood there cussing and kicking at the dirt. She was mad as a hornet and twice as mean." His chuckle was gentle, and his eyes scrutinized the air over his listener's heads as if he saw that woman punishing the dirt. The chuckle turned to a choking cough. "She was nearly naked. She wore a white shirt, but it didn't have sleeves and was cut so low in front I could see..." he paused. "Well, her drawers were even more of a disgrace. They were bright red and there wasn't enough material to make a handkerchief let alone cover a woman's private parts. We were both yelling at once. I wanted to know where she came from, and she wanted to know where she was, and where was the road and the town, and her car."

The quiet was thick as they compared the industrious, obedient woman they'd known as mother and aunt to this whirlwind woman being described.

"What happened then?" Joe prodded.

"I came to my senses right quick. We were standing next to cut fence under a blazing midnight sky. We had to get out of there before the hired guns arrived. I told her we had to leave. I told her we were in danger, but she refused to come and struggled when I tried to carry her to my horse. Well, my patience plumb wore out. I turned her over my thigh and painted her backside red. She was none too happy, but the spanking convinced her she better come

along peaceful like. I got her and what she called her backpack on my horse, and we got the hell out of there.”

“You spanked a woman you didn’t know?” Jeanette’s voice held a scold.

“I couldn’t leave her alone on the range, and she wouldn’t listen to reason.” Tom lifted his shoulders and let them fall. “I did what I thought would convince her to obey me. Our lives depended on it. When we got to the ranch, I gave her a nightgown that belonged to my ma. I felt better once she was covered neck to toe I can tell you that.” A giggle rippled through the gathered group. “Your ma was mighty upset. She insisted it was 1983, but I guess the outhouse and the lantern and the wood-burning stove brought her up short. I thought she was some hysterical woman making up a yarn, but I couldn’t figure where she’d come from, and that fact was a burr under my saddle.”

“She thought she was from the future?” Tommy’s question held disbelief.

“She did. She was. She said her name was Amanda Wyld,” Tom hesitated. “She had this backpack full of stuff I’d never seen or heard of – a plastic water bottle, a candy bar with an expiration date printed on it big as life, and a tape recorder.”

“What’s a tape recorder?” Jeanette wondered.

“It’s a little machine sort of thing that hears what you say and repeats it.” He shrugged. “I have all those things hidden away. I’ll show you sometime. Well, she had me mostly convinced, so I put her to bed. She was plumb tuckered out. The next morning Ray Manning shows up waving his rifle and yelling that he knew I cut his fence. I’d told Amanda to stay inside. The man was a danger, but she come busting out in that nightgown all angry and stomping feet. She gave that man an earful, but Ray only laughed. What could I do? She’d disobeyed me. She’d put herself in danger. She’d given everyone within fifty miles a good piece of gossip to jaw over. I picked her up and carried her inside. She was over my knee fast as fast can be, and I got rid of that little strip of red cloth she claimed were her underclothes and blistered her good. I

explained again my intent to protect her, and the consequences if she didn't listen."

"Oh, my," Jeanette said, her words carried like a sigh.

"After I'd comforted her some, we got to talking. I explained about the barbed wire, and Manning and the others. Turned out, she knew all about it. The times I lived in was studied in history at her school, and she knew how and when it ended. That went a long way to convince me her story was true. We got to talking about life in what she called the *olden days*. She was mad as a wet hen about the spanking, but I told her again a man had to protect his woman and keep her safe. I was already thinking of her as mine." He blinked tears away. "These times were more dangerous than what she'd described as her modern life, and she would have to obey me or be spanked. It didn't sit too well in the beginning, but she understood by and by. I might have been a mite harsh at times, but I loved her so damn much." He gulped. "It's my fault she died. Marcie told us she shouldn't get pregnant again, but I needed her, and she needed me. We tried to prevent it, but when she fell pregnant, she wanted the baby. We both did, but it cost her her life."

"Where is Abigail?" Tommy asked. It was her birth fourteen years ago that had taken their mother. At the time, trading their beautiful ma for the squalling, red-faced infant had seemed a mighty poor bargain, but they'd come to love and cherish her.

"John, Marcie, and me decided to tell anyone who might be affected that was over eighteen. I'll tell her when she comes of age, but until that time comes, I can keep her in the house when we have a dangerous night."

More than one throat was cleared, and more than one tear was wiped away. Every single person at that table had adored Amanda Wyld Thornton and missed her like an amputated limb.

"What did you do then?" Tommy fixed curious eyes on his father.

"Amanda put on some of ma's old clothes. My Amanda was hardly bigger than a child, and she looked like a young 'un playing dress-up. She cut some of those clothes down later, but I was in a

fired-up hurry to explain all this to Henry and Becky Blake.” Tom dipped his head toward Jacob. “Your folks are the only ones who know about Amanda and Marcie. They’ve kept our secret all these years. Good friends and honest folk that they are. Amanda had said if Henry and I could hold on a bit longer, the range wars would end, and they did. I fell hard in love with your ma, but I wasn’t sure she’d stay in what she regarded as the past. When she agreed to marry me, I was the happiest man alive. We had a few rules, and one was that she would stay inside during meteor showers. I couldn’t bear the thought of her slipping away from me.”

“Oh.” Tommy let out a long held breath. “That’s why we were never let outside on those nights. I could never figure it. The sky was so beautiful.”

“Yup, that’s why, and she was always good about not setting even a foot outside the door when the sky was lit up like day. Only once did I find her outside gazing up at the show. I carried her to the barn, and she knew what was coming. She’d broken a rule I clung to, and her bottom would pay the price. I was setting matters right when Marcie appeared.”

All heads snapped toward Marcie.

“You tell it from here,” Tom said.

“I was a doctor in the future, and I lived in Houston. When Amanda disappeared, I moved back to San Miguel. I wanted to be there if she returned. Her disappearance was a mystery, an unsolved crime, maybe a kidnapping—no one knew what to think. Our parents had passed, and I missed her something fierce. Anyway, she sent a photo and a letter to me,” Marcie began.

“How’d she do that?” Joe’s voice rose in amazement.

“I took her to the bend in the river on a meteor night,” Tom explained. “I stood there and watched as the packet Amanda had prepared faded away.”

Marcie continued with a sigh, “I was in the habit of riding to the river after my shift at the hospital. It relaxed me, and I felt a connection to Amanda there. Well, one night I found that package with the photo of Amanda and Tom. Jeanette stood by

Tom's side and Tommy was a baby in Amanda's arms. She explained about the meteor showers. She said she was happy. She loved Tom and her children, and I was not to worry. I was mighty relieved." A sweet smile graced her lovely face. "It got me to thinking. I wasn't married. Our folks were gone. I've always been the curious sort, so I decided to try it myself. I was going on purpose, so I prepared with the proper clothes. The undergarment Amanda was wearing when Tom found her is called a thong in the future. He's right. It doesn't cover much. I also took a satchel of medicine—pain killers, penicillin, and vaccinations mostly."

"I'm mighty glad you came, sweetheart," John dropped a kiss on the top of her head.

"Me, too," Marcie replied. "I met John, and we fell in love. We married. The twins were born, and I've loved my life." She laid her head on her husband's shoulder.

"That's why you always have more medical knowledge than other docs," Ava said. "I always wondered."

"Did anyone else ever slip through?" Jeanette asked.

"Our cousin, Ellen, did," Marcie began. "Tommy was eleven and you were thirteen. Like Amanda, she hadn't planned to come, and she didn't like it here. She yearned for real bathrooms, hot running water, ice cubes, cars, movie theatres, telephones, and, oh, just all of the modern world. She wanted to vote."

"Women vote in the future?" Joe's voice held disbelief.

"They vote. They hold office. They can do pretty much what men do," Marcie replied.

"Who protects them?" he asked.

"It is still more dangerous to be a woman, but the laws protect them, and their men, of course. They take classes in self-defense. It is not common for wives to be spanked, but I'm sure it happens occasionally," Marcie added.

"How are they punished then?" Joe's interest was clearly on the rise.

"Can we discuss marital relations another time? I'd like to get to

the main focus of this meeting first,” Marcie shot Joe an apologetic glance.

“I remember her.” Tommy brought his hand down on the table with a resounding slap. His eyebrows shot up high. “Where did she go?”

“You know Mike Manning. He had a cousin named Skip. Ellen and Skip fell in love, and, like I said, she didn’t want to stay in our time. Skip never wanted to be a rancher, so he signed the ranch over to Mike and went with Ellen. That’s when we figured for certain that whatever you are holding goes with you through the time slip. Remember, Amanda brought her backpack. Marcie brought her medicine. Well, Ellen took Skip.”

John Wayne cleared his throat. “That brings us to why we called this family meeting. We’ve kept all of you indoors on meteor nights, but now you’re adults and we can’t keep you all inside like children, and we don’t know if the bend in our river is the only place the time slip exists. So far, only Wyld women have been affected, but we don’t know that Adam or Tommy or Joe won’t travel. If that were to happen, we want you to be prepared. Marcie wrote out a list for each of you. Her cousin, Brett, lives right here on Thornton land in the future. He knows about Amanda and Marcie. He’ll understand your predicament. Ellen and Skip live near Helena, Montana. Their addresses and phone numbers are on Marcie’s paper. If you slip through, you can go to either of them, and they will help you. Also, we have paper money from that time thanks to Marcie. We’ll give each of you five twenty dollar bills. Carry it with you. Keep it safe.”

“What’s a phone number?” Joe wanted to know.

“People talk to each other over distance in the future using what they call a phone. If you find yourself transported, ask where you could find a phone. Say you need to make a call. Everyone will know what you mean,” Marcie explained. “Don’t talk about coming from the past with anyone besides Brett, Skip, and Ellen. They won’t believe you, and you could wind up in trouble.”

“Jeanette doesn’t need the paper or the money. I’ll keep her safe

inside on meteor nights. Now that I know what could happen, she won't put a foot out the door. She knows what happens to disobedient wives," Jason declared.

"Same goes for Ava," Seth said. "She'll be at home with me."

"All right," John nodded, understanding. He handed an envelope to his son, Adam, and his two nephews, Tommy and Joe. "I hope you never have to use this, but Marcie, Tom, and I will rest easier knowing you're prepared."

"Amen to that," Tom added.

"I'll go hitch the wagon," John said and headed for the door. "Time to head for home."

The ride home was a quiet one. The Texas sky had always been a blanket of black velvet stretching overhead for miles and miles and miles. Stars twinkled and winked in a friendly sort of way. The vast expanse that had always been comfort now seemed a bit scary, even sinister. A person could slip through the very air.

Adam looked heavenward with new eyes. He loved his life. He was a happy man, but the idea of seeing the future sent a quiver from the top of his head to the soles of his feet and back again.

He wouldn't tempt fate, but he wouldn't hide either.

Damn. He'd like to ride in a car and talk on a phone.

He surely would.

CHAPTER 1



*O*ctober 2003

SAMANTHA OLIVIA SIMPSON opened one bleary eye and peered about. She knew going to Vegas for a bachelorette weekend was one fucking bad idea, and she'd been right. The four young women had started the escapade by getting drunk on the plane. They'd dropped their suitcases at the hotel, and continued drinking the rest of the day and into the night.

Her head was a ripe, aching melon, but she forced her brain into sluggish action. They'd seen Australian strippers. Prime male flesh, and that was a fact. They danced and drank up and down the strip. Samantha sat up so fast her head spun like a children's top, and her stomach joined in the merry action. She searched frantically for her purse and spotted it under the bench she'd been sprawled on. Leaning over was a Herculean task. Her head pounded and her gorge rose, but she hoped there was money in the small black bag. Vague memories of pushing chips around on the green felt and yelling, *'Let it ride'* swarmed into her uneasy memory.

Fingers trembling, eyes watering, and stomach swirling, she undid the tiny gold clasp.

Holy shit! It was a silent scream, but it reverberated around her alcohol soaked brain like the bouncing ball on the roulette wheel. She had, apparently, won. Crumpled green bills of various denominations were stuffed inside the compartment as well as a pile of brightly colored chips. She released a shaky breath. Well, thank the Lord, at least she wasn't broke.

Hell's bells! Where were Jessica, Sara, and Liz? Liz was the bride-to-be, and it had been her big idea to fly to Vegas for a final fling before marrying Allen. Sam would have to be pickled in gin before she marched down the aisle toward that twerp. Liz said if the marriage was miserable, at least she could get a generous settlement. Allen's family was the richest in town, and his mother suspected the shapely Liz was a gold digger, and that was too close to the truth for comfort.

Sam shook her head. If she ever married, it would be for love not money. Her parents had spent thirty-five happy years together before that drunk driver stole them from her. Another surge of nausea forced her to lean against the wall and close her eyes. Her head spun. She swallowed hard against her rising gorge. She shrank further into the dark corner and inhaled slowly through her mouth.

She took the risk and opened her eyes. Better. The world did not dance or swirl in nausea inducing circles. Her stomach still revolted, but some hot food and sleep would set that to rights.

But shit! Where were her friends? Anger shot a hot flare straight to her muddled brain. They'd left her. Left her alone and passed out on this bench in a dark corner of some casino. What the fuck! She could have been robbed, or raped, or kidnapped. She stopped adding to this dastardly list. None of those things had happened, but they could have. Yes, indeed, they could have. The very thought was gasoline to her fury.

What should she do? Sam pondered this question as if the answer held the solution to world peace. Okay. She should go to

the hotel, take a shower, and order room service. After she ripped those three friends of hers a new one, of course. Sam straightened her shoulders and pulled her very short skirt toward her knees.

She scanned her brain for the name of their hotel. Liz had made all the arrangements, and she'd not paid much attention to the details. They'd taken a taxi from the airport and left their luggage at the front desk. The fellow there assured them their bags would be delivered to their room, and he'd given Liz a key. Then the four girls had stormed out like Marines on a mission. Their goal was to drink, party, and drink some more. Well, mission accomplished.

A single tear streaked down her face leaving a trail of mascara in its wake. She'd been abandoned, and she couldn't remember the name of their hotel. Shit.

She wanted her dad. He'd named her Samantha Olivia Simpson because her initials were SOS. If she ever needed him, he'd explained, she only needed to call. He would come to her rescue, and he always had. If she'd been lost, scared, sick, or in trouble, a whispered 'SOS' brought him running.

The single tear morphed into a torrent. She wiped at her face with the sleeve of her slinky, white blouse leaving a trail of black. Shit! She'd borrowed the shirt from Liz. Lord knows she couldn't afford it on what she made waitressing at the deli.

She gave herself a serious mental shake. If she had called her dad to rescue her, what would he tell her to do? First, he'd scold. It was dangerous to get drunk, especially in Vegas, for God's sake. Her lips curled into the shadow of a smile as his voice echoed in her head. Second, he would lay out the facts. Her friends had left her. With friends like that, who needs enemies? He would shake his head like a big dog emerging from the water. She didn't know the name of her hotel—another sad shake—she didn't have a key where the name of the hotel would certainly be printed. When the facts were laid bare, he would come up with a plan. Her SOS.

Here's the plan, Sam. You have a bag full of money, and your driver's license. Find a restroom and wash that muck off your face. Stop in one of the many restaurants that never close and eat a hot

meal. Cash in the chips. Ask the doorman to flag a taxi and tell the driver to take you to the airport. Use some of that money you won and buy a plane ticket home. Yes, buying a ticket at the airport will be expensive, but just do it. One last thing, Sam. Throw that skirt away. It's no bigger than a handkerchief.

Sam ran her tongue over her teeth. Yuck. Had she been kissing a dog last night? Is that where the fur on her teeth came from? She hoped she hadn't kissed anyone or anything, but her memory was a blank slate. She'd seen a movie where a girl awoke after a night on the Vegas strip married to a stranger. The plot had seemed far-fetched to her. How could you get married and not know it? Well, now she knew how. You simply drank until your common sense and your inhibitions joined hands and disappeared over the horizon.

The pressing urgency radiating from her bladder jolted Sam back to the here and now. The bathroom. She needed to find one now, as in right now. Hooking her black bag securely over her arm, she scooted to the edge of the bench and waited for her stomach to settle. Up we go, Sam, she encouraged herself. She rose and balanced on the thin spikes attached to the bottom of her shoes. The heels had been another of Liz's big, bright ideas. Sam tottered to the corner and scanned the horizon for a sign that proclaimed Women's Restroom. Across the smoky room, she spied salvation. She wandered through rows of gray faced people sprawled in front of slot machines where whirling rows of fruit spun in a dizzying display. Tokens clattered into the trays of the lucky ones. The unlucky simply fed another coin into the insatiable machine and pulled its metal arm.

The restroom was an Egyptian fantasy. The handles were writhing snakes. The wallpaper was a montage of pyramids. The sinks imitated pounded gold. Well, that was Vegas—fantasy and imitation—an adult playground. The famous slogan ran through her alcohol riddled brain. "What happens in Vegas, stays in Vegas." Yes, this was a city made for mistakes to be made and forgotten. Sin City, indeed.

Sam rushed into a stall and gave silent thanks for the short skirt. She emerged to find two women giggling at the sink. They turned bleary eyes her way.

"Hey, sweetie," one mumbled, "having a good time?"

"I think I had too much fun," she answered.

"No such thing," the other woman declared with a knowing nod.

"Do you know the time?" Sam asked. That was another thing about casinos. Time ceased to have relevance. There were no windows, and the scene never changed. Waitresses with breasts squeezed over the top of their barely-there costumes offered free drinks that enticed gamblers to gamble. People slumped in front of slots or perched on chairs around green felt tables, and waited for their lucky ship to come in. A shout of jubilation arose now and again, and it was enough to refuel their gambling engines.

"It's two o'clock, honey," the first woman replied.

"Two in the afternoon or in the morning?" Sam asked.

The two women grabbed each other and dissolved into alcohol fueled gaiety.

"Lord have mercy, aren't you a card," one of them gasped.

"I know what you mean, though," the other one nodded knowingly. "It's easy to lose track. It's two in the morning. The night's still young."

With that declaration, the two leaned against each other like supporting tent poles and managed to find their way out the door. When it swung shut, Sam was confronted with a large mural of Cleopatra leaning on one elbow as she surveyed her domain from a gilded throne. Snake bracelets wound their way up her arms. Jeez. What was it with Egyptians and snakes?

"Right, Cleo," Sam muttered. "Time to return to reality."

Red rimmed eyes and long trails of black mascara greeted her in the mirror. She twisted the coiled snake knobs and waited for warm water. When all traces of makeup were removed, she dried her face on a paper towel.

Next stop, food. Sam entered the café located adjacent to the

gambling floor. She snorted. There was never a reason to leave the building. The casino saw to that.

“What’ll you have?” a scantily clad woman enquired.

“Scrambled eggs, bacon, toast, and coffee,” she replied.

With a nod the woman turned. Goodness sakes, that skirt didn’t even cover her bottom. Sam cast a baleful glance at her own skirt. Hers wasn’t much better. Her dad was right. She’d throw it away first thing. Her breakfast arrived, and Sam ate with gusto. Each bite sent a shot of energy into her blood stream.

Next stop, cash in the chips. She didn’t plan to return any time soon, maybe never, and she’d be damned if she left money behind. Feeling generous, she left a blue and a red chip for a tip. She couldn’t afford it, but she was happy to add a little jolt of happy to the waitress’ night.

Sam left the café and searched the rectangular room for the cage where she could exchange her chips for cash. These spots were hidden in shadowy corners. After all, the casino wasn’t in the business of handing out cash. They only wanted to rake it in.

Ha! In the far corner of the room, adjacent to a dim corridor, was a sign indicating that one could make financial transactions. She strode with as much purpose as those damn shoes allowed through the room of gamblers testing their luck and turned down the murky hallway.

Three men stood outside the metal cage. Two of the men crowded the third one until his back pressed against the counter. The fella inside the cage shrank away from the scene until his fearful face was barely visible.

Sam hesitated. Something was happening, but she didn’t know exactly what. The man with his back to the wall looked scared. No, he looked truly terrified. His face was ghostly white and a sheen of perspiration coated his forehead. He held his arms up in surrender. His lips quivered as he spoke. He’s begging. The reality flashed through her mind with crystal clarity.

Sam took a hesitant step forward. What should she do? What would her dad do? Well, what he would do and what he’d tell her to

do were not the same thing. Her dad would intervene, defuse the anger, lower the tension, but he'd tell her to run. Running in spiked heels wasn't an option, but she could totter away and leave the man to whatever fate awaited him.

That was a cowardly choice, but perhaps 'restraint is the better part of valor'. Her literature professor would be proud of her. Conjuring Falstaff in a moment of panic. That Shakespeare character who was anything but restrained.

While thoughts spun like cotton candy through her hung-over brain, she took a step back. Yup, restraint was the winner, but Sam froze statue-still. The two men had each pulled a gun from beneath their jackets. Both lethal weapons were pointed at the trembling man.

"Please," the man pleaded. "I'll make it right. I swear. I'll come up with the cash. I just need a little time."

The larger of the two aggressors snorted. "You've had enough time and enough warnings. Nobody makes fools of the Moroni family. Nobody."

"I can get the dough. I can. Just a little time..."

The gun must have fired because blood bloomed like a scarlet flower on the man's chest. His hand covered the spot as if he could stop his blood from pouring through his fingers. Disbelief was replaced by despair. His face crumpled into pain. His body slid down the wall and lay like a discarded doll on the floor.

Sam's extensive television knowledge supplied the answer. A silencer. The gun had been silenced.

The bigger of the two shooters nodded at the man huddled behind the wire cage. "Take care of him. No witnesses."

The cashier turned to the door at the back of the enclosure and fumbled at the knob. A second silent shot sliced between the wire and hit the man in the back. His body jolted and spun to face his attacker. A second shot hit the man where his heart had once pumped blood through a healthy body. He dropped from sight behind the counter.

The men slipped their weapons into the shoulder harnesses

hidden beneath their jackets. The one in charge, the bigger one who issued the orders, prodded the man on the floor with the toe of his shiny shoe. When he got no response, he nodded satisfaction and tilted his head toward the casino.

Shock at the brutal murders had rendered Sam into a temporary paralysis, but it was fading fast. She had to get the hell out of here. 'No witnesses' the guy had muttered. Shit. She took another step back as the gangster turned.

He was thirty-five, maybe forty, and of average height. His body was thick and muscled. He obviously put in hours at the gym, lifting weights, pumping iron, running on the treadmill. That body was a weapon all on its own. Slate gray eyes considered her for a moment before his hand slipped beneath his coat. In that second the image of his face was burned like a brand into her memory.

Sam had a slight advantage. She was closer to where the dingy hallway merged into the congestion of the casino floor. The man would not shoot her in front of a hundred witnesses. Of this, she was sure. She bolted into the room and slithered along the wall toward the exit. If she got out on the strip, she could disappear into the constant crush of humanity. Moving as quickly as the damn shoes allowed, she reached the door, pushed with all her might against another handle shaped like a snake, and shot into the moving crowd on the sidewalk.

"Hey, baby, what's the hurry?" A drunken man draped an unwelcome arm over her shoulders. She pushed him away and moved in mincing steps away from the casino. Sam discovered that if she ran on the balls of her feet and avoided the stiletto heels, she could make much better time. Legs pumping, she fixed her sights on the entrance to the next casino. This one had a bridge on the second floor that would carry her over the street into another crowd and another casino. Her heart pounded in her ears, and her legs trembled. Maybe she'd lose those two goons, and they'd forget about her.

A man materialized in front of her like some phantom from a Greek myth. Her path had been clear. Now it was filled with a large

man wearing a cowboy hat and a face full of surprise. Sam ran headlong into a solid wall of male muscle. The man placed strong hands on her shoulders and held firm until her balance was restored.

“Who the fuck are you?” Sam screeched. “Where the hell did you come from?”

The man’s brown eyes flickered disapproval. “Don’t swear, miss. It’s not ladylike.”

“I don’t give a shit about ladies,” Sam choked. “I have to run.”

The man’s gaze swept the street behind her. “He chasing you?”

Sam glanced over her shoulder. The shooter was making his way up the busy sidewalk, peering left and right. She managed a desperate nod. The stranger picked her up under one arm and carried her into a narrow alley. It smelled of vomit and excess. The man pressed her into the wall and covered her body with his own blocking her from view.

He tilted his cowboy hat until their heads disappeared behind its brim.

“Kiss me,” he commanded.

And she did.