

# Excerpt from FINAL HOURS by N. L. Beishir, Copyright 2009

## PROLOGUE

The world as we know it will end within the next two days.

It's mind-boggling, I know. I've been monitoring the news broadcasts for months now, and I still can't process it all. It seems impossible. An asteroid made a close pass with the earth seven years ago. A very close pass. Closer than most of our satellites, in fact.

Now, that same asteroid has returned, and due to a run-in with our gravity the first time around, has altered its course and will collide with the earth, doing pretty much the same thing to humanity that a previous asteroid did to the dinosaurs millions of years ago. In spite of our alleged scientific advances, many of which I have personally funded, we have no recourse. All attempts to derail the impending impact have failed.

We're helpless to save ourselves. Hard to believe. Even harder to accept.

I have less than two days to live, and I have come to realize that in spite of my many successes, I have spent my forty-seven years living a lie. I have short-changed everyone I love, myself included.

An error I am about to correct.

"Jamie, we're going to have to leave soon," Liz says. "Are you ready?"

Liz is my wife of twenty-two years. Mother of my two sons, Noah and Ethan. A lovely woman, physically attractive, intelligent, cultured. The perfect wife for an ambitious man such as myself. She's a good woman, make no mistake about that. I know she loves me, and it makes me feel guilty because love was not an element in my choice of her as a wife.

"Jamie?"

"I'm not going," I tell her.

She doesn't seem surprised by my decision at all. She studies me for a moment, takes a breath, and nods. "You're going to her, aren't you?" she asks.

I'm unable to hide my surprise. I shouldn't be surprised at all, I suppose. "What do you mean?" I ask carefully.

"There's no point in trying to spare my feelings, Jamie," she says. "Not now."

So, she knows. I'm not as good an actor as I thought. "How long have you known?" I want to know. I *need* to know.

"All along, I think." Liz sits in a chair across from me, hands in her lap, legs crossed at the ankles. A very proper lady, my wife. But then, this is how she was brought up. Liz and I, we come from very different worlds. Kate and I, by contrast, have always been a good match in every respect.

"Tell me about her, about the two of you," Liz insists.

I shake my head. I know this hurts her, and even though I have never loved her as a husband should love his wife, I respect her. I care about her, as trite as that must sound. She's been an exemplary wife, a wonderful mother. She deserves better than I have ever been able to give her. I have no desire to humiliate her now.

"Please, Jamie," she says. "I need to know the truth. I want to know what kind of woman could make you love her, the kind of woman with whom you're willing to die."

I can't look her in the eye. "I didn't intend to fall in love with her, Liz." As if that will ease her pain somehow. I'm sure it doesn't, but I feel I have to say something, anything.

"I believe you." Calm. Liz has always been calm. A part of me wishes she would get angry. I wish she would show some real emotion. She rarely has, in all the years we've been married. Liz is an expert at maintaining appearances.

I used to be fairly adept at it myself. It can be an asset in business. Now, it's just one more source of frustration.

Does she understand? How? I don't understand it all myself. "How did you know?" I ask. Now I *have* to know. Did *he* tell her?

"You changed--after the earthquake," she recalls. "It's her, isn't it? The woman with whom you were trapped."

I can only nod. I see this is painful for her in spite of her insistence, in spite of her self-control.

"She was attractive," Kate remembers.

"She *is* beautiful," I say. "But that isn't why--" Why am I saying this? Why now? Why bother?

"Why you love her?" Liz asks. "What *does* make you love her, Jamie?"

I'm at a loss. I don't know exactly why I fell in love with Kate, what has made me love her, almost to the point of obsession, for the past fifteen years. There's no single thing about her that I love. There are countless things. I couldn't begin to explain.

I find it absurd that my wife and I sit here discussing my infidelity as the world stands on the brink of total destruction. I wish she would go, before it's too late. Before it's too late for her to take my sons to one of the few places on earth where humanity stands a good chance of survival. Before it's too late for me to leave here myself, to get to Kate. To spend these last precious hours where I've wanted to be for the past fifteen years.

"Liz, please. This is pointless," I tell her.

"What am I to tell Noah and Ethan?" she wants to know.

"I'll tell them," I say. "I want to say goodbye. I'll say I have something to do before I join you. Afterward, you'll tell them I didn't get back in time."

"You want me to lie to them?" Still, no emotion on her part.

"Do you want to tell them the truth?" I ask her.

She shakes her head.

"They'll be with you," I say. "I don't have to worry about them."

"I worry about you," she says. "Are you sure about this?"

"Yes." The truth is that I've been warring with my survival instincts for days now. I don't want to say goodbye to my sons. I want to live. But I can't imagine going on, even if there is a chance of that, without Kate.

Liz rises to her feet. "I wish you had loved me like that," she says wistfully.

I kiss her forehead. Not her lips. I haven't kissed Liz full on the lips since Rome. I haven't had sex with her since Rome. "The helicopter will be here soon." *Please go. Save yourself. Save Noah and Ethan. Let me go in peace.*

"How will you get--there?" she wants to know.

"I'll drive."

"It won't be safe," she worries.

"I'll be armed." Then, as she starts for the door, I have to ask: "If you knew all this time, why didn't you ever say anything?"

She shakes her head, looking away from me. "If I had told you I knew, would you have left?" she wanted to know.

"Yes," I answer truthfully. No point in lying now.

She nods, sadness in her eyes. "That's why I never told you."

## 35 HOURS TO IMPACT

I watch from the window as she and my sons climb into the helicopter. I continue to watch as it lifts off and disappears in the distance.

Liz's father is a senator with close ties to the President of the United States. His status, not mine, has guaranteed our family a place in one of the numerous underground facilities around the world, designed to accommodate human beings, animals, plants and all they'll need to survive until the earth once again becomes inhabitable--which could be three to four years. Construction began on those bunkers seven years ago, when the threat of collision became a real possibility, however slim.

I wonder now why any government had the right to decide who could take refuge in those bunkers and who could not. How does one decide who lives and who dies? What gives them that right?

My sons will live. That's all that matters to me now. That, and the knowledge that I will spend the last hours of my life where I belong. Where I've always belonged. With Kate. On paper, I'm married to Liz. In my heart, Kate has always been my wife.

I try to call her, but the line is dead. My satellite phone is not working. Of course. Television and radio stations went off the air yesterday as everyone went home to spend these final hours with loved ones. No point in anyone staying on the job now.

I'll have to drive out to the Cape and hope she's there. It's a six-hour drive from our home in Connecticut. I wish I could get a helicopter, but that's not possible now. Driving is my only option.

As I prepare to leave, I pause a moment to survey the empire I've built. Money, properties, assets, vehicles, antiques and art objects, all of the symbols of success. It's not the objects themselves that matter, as Kate would say. It's what they represent.

That's all they've ever been, really. The physical evidence of a life dedicated to revenge.

I've spent my entire life in pursuit of success. No matter what I've achieved, it's never been enough. I've never been satisfied. Unlike my wife, I was not born to this lifestyle. My parents were poor. Honest, but dirt-poor. My father was a first-class auto mechanic until the day a jack failed and a Fiat landed on his pelvis, leaving him permanently disabled. After that, my mother cleaned houses for

minimum wage. They did the best they could under the worst of circumstances, but there was never enough--enough money, enough food, enough anything.

I never wore clothing that hadn't been worn by someone else first. I never had a new pair of shoes. As a kid, I was ridiculed and bullied and beaten up on more than one occasion. Today, kids who are treated so badly by classmates too often go ballistic and end up using those classmates for target practice. Not me. I've always believed success is the best revenge. Maybe that's why I was never satisfied.

Until I found Kate. Until we found each other.

### **34 HOURS TO IMPACT**

A part of me still can't accept the reality, the gravity of the situation. Somewhere deep within, I hold onto a slim thread of hope that Kate and I will somehow be spared, that we'll finally have the life we should have had years ago.

Regrets. I have so many.

I take two handguns, making sure they're both loaded. I stash extra ammunition in an overnight bag. I wonder, though, if the worst happens and I find myself in a situation requiring action, will I have the balls to use them? Ever since the impending asteroid collision was made public, chaos has erupted in major cities all over the world. There are riots in the streets. Looting. Carjackings. People trying to escape the inescapable.

Trying to escape reality.

Liz's father came to us early on to let us know we would have a place in the underground "ark." If I could have had Kate with me, I would have had no reservations about going.

The thought of going on without her was--is--unacceptable, as it always has been.

I take my bag and go to the garage, trying to decide which vehicle to take. No matter which I choose, I'm going to be a target. The silver Aston-Martin? That would be suicide. The Land Rover? A possibility. The Hummer? Even better. The damn thing's like a tank. If anyone were to manage to force their way inside, it would take them several minutes to do so, allowing me enough time to arm myself and take them out, if necessary.

I climb into the Hummer and secure the doors before opening

the garage doors....

### 33 HOURS TO IMPACT

The streets are deserted. Vehicles have been abandoned. Kids' bicycles lay askew on the lawns. There are no signs of life. Except at the local churches. Crowds have gathered at all of the churches to pray for a miracle.

I wish I could believe there could be a miracle.

I was raised in a Christian home. We went to church every Sunday and said grace before every meal. I suppose I always knew, somewhere deep inside, that God existed. I just never figured he was paying much attention to me. I wasn't high on his list of priorities.

Now, a part of me desperately wants to believe. I want to believe there's a world beyond this one, a life after this one. I want to believe that Kate and I will go on--if not here, then somewhere. But if there is a hereafter, I'm going to have to answer for my adultery, no doubt. Would God forgive me for cheating on Liz? Would he understand my love for Kate, my *need* for her? Would he punish us for being unable to stay away from each other?

The eerie calm is unsettling. Must keep my guard up....

### 32 HOURS TO IMPACT

As I drive into the city--Providence, Rhode Island--everything looks so unfamiliar now. The calm vanishes. Chaos reigns in the streets. People, men and teenage boys mostly, are smashing windows, looting. Why? I wonder. What's the point? What will they do with it tomorrow? Fools, all of them. Don't they know tomorrow isn't coming?

Nothing matters. Not anymore.

No, that's not true. Kate matters to me. She's always mattered. I've given up my only chance at survival to be with her for whatever time we have left. She means more to me than my own life.

What if I've given up that last chance to live for nothing? What if she's not there? What if I can't find her before it's too late?

Desperate people run into the path of the Hummer. They beat on the doors, yelling to me. I can't help them. I can't help anyone, not now. There is no hope for any of us. I wave to them, I shout to them to get out of the way. Someone throws a rock. I think it's a rock. It

shatters the window on the passenger side. A young man who, in the single instant I glimpse his face, looks to be no more than seventeen, reaches through the shattered window and yanks open the locked door from inside. My hand instinctively goes to the gun in my right-hand pocket. He will not stop me. The boy shouts obscenities at me, demanding I give him my wallet and the Hummer.

I respond by pulling the gun from the pocket. Before he can climb into the passenger seat, I fire a single shot. It hits his forehead. Dead center. His dark eyes wide, he gasps as he falls backward onto the street.

The others back off, knowing now that I mean business. They look bewildered. As I drive off, I see them in the rear view mirror, some of them crowded around the young man's body.

I've killed a man. This is not me. I'm not a cold-blooded murderer. It was self-defense. Kill or be killed. Still, I feel numb. I tell myself he would have been dead by tomorrow anyway. I keep telling myself it was self-defense. He would have killed me. I'm shaking, barely able to keep the Hummer under control. Can't stop, not now. Have to keep going.

I can't let myself dwell on any of it. There isn't much time. I have to find Kate before it's too late. I worry about her. People have gone mad. What if someone has harmed her? Killed her?

I can't call her. I have no way to know if she's all right until I find her.

I pray to God she's safe. And I hope he's listening.

## **31 HOURS TO IMPACT**

Back on the open highway again, I can finally relax a bit. No signs of life as far as the eye can see, just abandoned vehicles along the shoulder. As I drive, I have nothing to do but think...and remember....

I met Elizabeth Harcourt when I was twenty-four. She was twenty-three. She was a slim, pretty blonde from a wealthy East Coast family. Her father was a politician. Back then, he'd been an ambassador. For years, he had the plum post of Ambassador to the Court of St. James. In other words, Great Britain. Liz went to some of the finest schools in Europe. I never even finished high school. She was an accomplished equestrian. The closest I had come to that world was one summer, when I was fourteen. I worked in private

stables near Boston. I mucked out stalls. It was dirty, smelly work, but I put in as many hours as I could at it and a succession of other jobs that mostly amounted to manual labor. I saved every dime and I bought stocks. Growth stocks, mostly. I had good instincts, and on those rare occasions when I did gamble, it almost always paid off spectacularly. Like that upstart software company near Seattle....

When I met Liz, I knew I was going to marry her. She was the kind of wife a successful man needed. She had the looks, the class, the pedigree. She was actively involved in a dozen charities. She was a patron of the arts. I swept her off her feet, spending more than I could realistically afford at that time in order to properly court her. I never even tried to get physical with her before the wedding night. Her father was suspicious of my motives at first, but I convinced him my intentions were strictly honorable.

When we announced our engagement, it made all of the society columns in every newspaper in the country. Her parents pulled out all the stops to give their only daughter the grandest wedding the world had seen since Prince Charles married Lady Diana Spencer. They gave us the Manhattan condo as a wedding gift, and Liz and her mother worked furiously with their decorator to have it ready by the time we returned from our honeymoon in Paris. Her daddy made sure I was indebted to him. Then he reminded me periodically that he expected me to be a faithful husband.

Our marriage opened doors for me that would otherwise have been closed. I did the best I could to play the role of the devoted husband. Did I feel any guilt? Yes. I wasn't the heartless bastard my business rivals imagined. I wasn't unfaithful sexually. Liz never refused me in the bedroom, and while she was less passionate than I would have liked, I was sufficiently satisfied most of the time.

When she became pregnant shortly after our first anniversary, she was thrilled. Her parents were ecstatic. I felt trapped. I hadn't planned to *stay* married to Liz. I figured a couple of years, three at the most, long enough to make things happen with the business, then I'd tell her I wasn't happy in the marriage and we'd go our separate ways. I'd never wanted children. They weren't part of my plans. I tried to show enthusiasm, but the truth was that I didn't feel anything but resentment until the day the twins were born and I held my sons for the first time.

"All babies are beautiful," my mother-in-law insisted. Not true. My boys were the ugliest little creatures I'd ever seen, but I loved

them with a devotion I had never imagined possible until that day.

I like to think I've been a good father, but I have to admit that I'm relieved children are not allowed to do performance assessments of parents every year. I've made mistakes, big ones. I'm not sure I'd get a stellar review from either of them. Especially now.

I wonder if they'll ever be able to forgive me for leaving. I wonder if Liz will tell them the truth. I wonder if they'll resent me for what I've done. I wonder if one day, when each of them finds love, they will understand, finally, why I had to stay behind.

Kate. The love of my life. When I met her, I was thirty-two. She was twenty-five. I was a multimillionaire by then, a married man with six-year-old twins. She was a freelance photographer. We were both staying at a hotel I owned in Italy. No, I didn't charm her, seduce her. We didn't meet in the elegant restaurant or the piano bar or even the stunning Art Deco lobby.

We met in the frightening aftermath of an earthquake, struggling to stay alive.

## ROME, 15 YEARS EARLIER

I will never forget it. Everything changed for me that day. *I changed. Irrevocably.*

It was late morning. I'd had a room service breakfast in my suite, as I normally did when traveling on business. My business there concluded, I phoned Liz to let her know I would be flying home that day. The boys got on the phone to update me on their activities while I was away. The three of us laughed together and I told them I would see them soon. I went to the parking garage to get my car. To this day, I don't know why I did that. Normally, I would have had a bellman take my luggage to the lobby and the valet would bring the car around for me. I liked being served. I liked having subordinates cater to me. I'd worked hard for my present station in life, and I always enjoyed the benefits of that station.

Back then, I was a man who left nothing to chance. Every minute of every day was planned ahead. I even chose the clothes I would wear the next day before retiring for the night. That wasn't a difficult decision, now that I think about it. I had twenty tailored suits, black, gray or blue, never any other color; fifty shirts, always white; silk ties, solids or pinstripes; and fifteen pairs of black shoes, custom made, all identical. That was my uniform, and I never varied from it. I

never varied from my routines...until that day.

If I had believed in fate, I'd think it had guided me that day, that I was in that garage to meet Kate. If I could have done it all again, knowing what would happen, I would have still gone into the underground parking garage.

I remember walking toward the car when the ground started to vibrate beneath my feet. At first, it didn't register. I didn't even suspect an earthquake--until the building started to shudder violently. I tried to run, but didn't make it to the exit. I vaguely remember falling.

Then everything went dark.



"Can anybody hear me?" I shouted.

I was lying on the garage floor, surrounded by rubble. I couldn't move my right leg. There was something on top of it. A chunk of the ceiling, I think. The air was thick with dust. It was difficult to breathe.

I choked as I tried to call out again. "Can anybody hear me?"

"Hold on." A female voice. "I'm here, I'm trying to get to you."

I could hear scraping sounds. She was moving the debris to get through. "Are you hurt?" she called out.

"I think my leg is broken."

"Don't move."

"No chance of that," I assured her.

I'm not sure how long it took her to move the chunks of concrete enough to climb through, but my first glimpse of her was in the weak illumination of her flashlight. She was dirty and disheveled, a young woman wearing jeans and a T-shirt--and a very large backpack.

"Are you one of the rescuers?" I asked.

She gave a little laugh. "I wish." She climbed over more debris to where I lay trapped. She paused for a moment to assess my situation, then attempted to push the concrete off me.

She wasn't strong enough. She looked around. "I've got to find something to use as a lever," she said, more to herself than to me.

I tried to remember where I was before the garage collapsed, what might be close by. "I think I saw an iron rod come through the ceiling when it started to break apart," I told her. "I thought I was about to be impaled on the damn thing."

She nodded. "That might work."

It took her a while to locate it, moving chunks of concrete in the darkness. When she came back, she positioned the rod, then paused. "When I move this, you have to stay still," she instructed. "If your leg is broken, I'll have to put a splint on it."

"Are you a doctor?" I asked.

She laughed again. "Two strikes. Three and you're out," she warned. I wondered how she could be so cheerful, under the circumstances.

"You can't penalize me for being curious," I said. "It's not every day I'm trapped in an earthquake and rescued by a beautiful woman."

"You think I'm beautiful?" she asked, obviously finding my comment amusing. "Should I be looking for your guide dog, too?"

"I may not be able to see you well, under the circumstances," I offered in my own defense, "but the sight of you climbing through to me was the most beautiful sight I've ever seen."

"Right." She made a third attempt to move the concrete off my leg. This time, she succeeded. I let out a groan as it shifted. "Are you all right there?" she asked.

I nodded, then realized she couldn't see me from where she stood. "I think so," I gasped. The pain was excruciating.

She continued to work at moving the slab aside. Then she got on her knees and checked my leg, her fingers pressing along the bone. I winced. "It's broken, all right," she told me. "Let me see what I can find to make a temporary splint."

I waved her off. "That's not necessary."

"Yes, it is," she disagreed. "We don't know how long we're going to be down here. The flesh isn't broken, that's one good thing. But movement could cause blood clots. That could be fatal."

"Got any more good news for me?" I asked.

"If and when the rescue teams find us, they may not be able to bring in a gurney. You may have to be lifted upward. A splint will keep the bones stable until they can get you proper medical treatment," she told me.

She found a smaller rod in the rubble and checked to make sure it wasn't too long, then positioned it under my throbbing leg. She started looking around again.

"What do you need?" I asked.

"Tape, anything to secure it." She paused, then dug into that backpack again. "Can you sit up?"

"I'll try." I made an effort, but couldn't get upright on my own, so

she helped me.

“We need this out of the way,” she said, tugging my coat off.

“Why?” I asked.

“I need your shirt.” She took out a large knife and bent over me. At least I knew she wasn’t going to kill me--she’d been trying too hard to save my life up to this point. Still, I was startled when she reached down and began cutting my shirt off.

“Really,” I said, “we just met.”

She shook her head, not amused. “I need this to tie the splint.”

“Use yours,” I suggested.

She made a face that I could discern, even in the semi-darkness. “Right. I’m not taking my shirt off,” she said. “But even if I did, you wouldn’t be able to do anything out of line.”

I managed a grin. “You might be surprised.”

Then she cut the leg of my pants off.

“If you want me, all you have to do is say so,” I told her. “No need to resort to this kinky shit.”

She ignored me, too busy tying the splint to my leg. She rocked back on her heels and took a deep breath, wiping her brow with the back of her hand. “I think that’ll do for now,” she told me.

“Thank you,” I said, not knowing what else to say. It occurred to me now that this woman didn’t know who I was or anything about me. It didn’t matter. She had come to my rescue simply because I was another human being in trouble.

She was digging into that enormous backpack again. This time, she withdrew two bottles of water. She uncapped both and gave me one. I drank greedily, now realizing how thirsty I was.

“Careful there,” she warned. “I’ve got six bottles. That’s three apiece. But we could be here a long time.”

“They’ll be looking for me,” I said confidently. “I own this hotel.”

She leaned back and laughed. “So you’re the cheap bastard who hired the lowest bidder to build this death trap with substandard materials.”

“When you put it that way....”

She was pragmatic about my revelation. “At least I have the good fortune to be trapped with a man everyone will be trying to find.” She raised her water bottle in a mock toast.

I raised my bottle to hers. “Here’s to the positive side of greed,” I said. “So we’re not complete strangers, I’m Jamie Randall.”

She shook my hand. “Kate McAllister,” she introduced herself.

I gestured toward the backpack. "I don't suppose you have any food in there," I said hopefully.

"Actually, I do. A couple of brown bag meals and some energy bars," she said. "It could probably sustain the two of us for a couple of days, if we ration it."

"You certainly came prepared," I observed.

"Not for this," she assured me with a dismissive wave of her hand. "I was headed out on a hike. I have a sleeping bag here somewhere. I was planning to spend tonight under the stars, not underground."

"I was planning to be on a flight to New York," I said. "What do you do when you're not saving lives?"

"I'm a photographer," she answered. "I was hoping to get some good nature shots. I doubt I even have any cameras left now, though. They were in the trunk of my rental. I saw it smashed just before I heard you calling for help."

The only light in our concrete prison was that of her small flashlight. I tried to get a better look at her, but under the dirt and bruises, I could distinguish very little.

She rolled up my coat to serve as a pillow. I had a splitting headache and guessed I'd hit my head in the fall. She used her flashlight to check my pupils for dilation. "I'm no expert, but it looks okay," she said, positioning the makeshift pillow behind my head. "You may have a concussion. Does that make you comfortable?"

"A little. Thanks." I was impressed. She was certainly resourceful. "Where'd you learn these impressive survival skills?"

"I've been in some difficult situations in my work," she told me. "This is not my first earthquake."

"It's my first, and I hope it's my last," I grumbled.

I noticed the absence of a wedding ring on her finger. She wasn't married. Men didn't always wear a ring; women did. "I think I'm lying on a rock," I complained, feeling a stab in my back.

"Let me see." She bent over to reach under me, and our bodies were pressed together for a moment. I could see her eyes in the light. They were green, the dark green of a pine tree. Errant strands of dark auburn hair framed her face.

She pulled out a two-inch piece of concrete. "Here's the culprit," she said, tossing it over her shoulder.

I felt myself start to nod off. She nudged my shoulder. "Not a good idea," she cautioned. "In case you do have a concussion, you

have to stay awake.”

For how long? I wondered.



“Kate,” I said. “Is that short for Katherine or Kathleen?”

“It’s Kathleen, but nobody’s called me Kathleen in years.” She passed me the water bottle and watched me as I sipped. Then she took it back, recapped it, and set it aside. “What about you? You’re what--thirty-five?”

“Thirty-two.”

“And you still go by Jamie?”

“What’s wrong with that?” I wanted to know.

“It makes you sound like a kid,” she said. “That would be fine if you were an actor or a rock star or something like that, but you’re Mr. Big Shot Tycoon. Shouldn’t you be James?”

“I should be whatever I want to be, *Kitty*.”

She laughed aloud. “Kitty?”

“From now on, I am going to call you Kitty,” I decided.

“From now on--meaning until we’re rescued and go or separate ways, or until they find our remains?” she asked. She rubbed her arms vigorously. “Is it just me, or is it getting cold in here?”

“It’s getting cold, all right,” I told her. “Take my jacket.”

“No. Keep that under your head,” she said. She went to the backpack again, searching for the aforementioned sleeping bag.

“What don’t you have in that backpack?” I asked, amused.

“A way out of here,” she said, producing the sleeping bag. She went to my feet and worked the bag over my legs slowly, trying not to move my broken leg more than was necessary. “Raise up if you can.”

I managed to lift my body enough for her to draw the bag all the way up.

“Can’t have you going into shock, lying there shirtless in this cold.”

“Take my coat,” I told her again.

She shook her head. “I’m all right. My injuries are minor. You’re the one at risk.”

I reconsidered. “We’ll keep each other warm. Get in here with me,” I told her.

She gave me a suspicious look. “Can I trust you to behave yourself?”

“No.” I grabbed her wrist. “I’m joking. I’m a married man.”

“That doesn’t always mean anything.”

“I have never cheated on my wife,” I assured her. “*Ever.*”

“But then, she’s not here to verify that.”

I had enough strength to pull her down to me. She reluctantly surrendered and crawled into the sleeping bag with me. She was tense at first, but finally relaxed, resting her head against my bare chest. I wrapped my arms around her. “Better?” I asked.

“Much,” she admitted. “Definitely warmer.”

“If we make it out of here, I’ll replace your cameras,” I promised.

“You bet your ass you will.” Her tone was serious, but with her face pressed against me like that, I could feel the gentle vibration that told me she was giggling.

“Just in case you’re wondering, that’s not a rock,” I told her. “I am happy to see you.”

“Shut up, Randall, and get your hand off my butt.”

“That’s not your butt. Is it?”

“It is, and you’re getting a little too familiar with it.”

I smiled and moved my hand up to the small of her back. Under normal circumstances, I would never have done such a thing. But there we were, in a life-and-death situation, and for a moment, having that young woman lying there with me made me forget the danger we were facing.

It made me forget a lot of things.



It seemed to me we’d been trapped there for an eternity. I’m not sure which was more painful--my broken leg or my head. Kate had two sandwiches in each brown bag. She cut them into small portions and gave me a piece, as well as a slice of apple. I can’t remember when a plain tuna sandwich and an apple tasted so good.

We couldn’t distinguish day from night down there. My watch would have told us the date, had it not been broken in the collapse. To kill time, we talked. She told me she lived on Cape Cod. She had the ocean at her back door. I told her about my sons and managed to get my wallet from my pocket to show her a photograph.

“They look like you,” she observed, training the flashlight on the photo. “Do you also have a photo of your wife?”

I didn’t. I carried a dozen credit cards, my New York driver’s

license and my international driver's license, but only one photograph. "You're not married?" I asked casually, wondering if, in the absence of a husband, she might have at least had a significant other.

"No husband, no boyfriend, not even a dog," she answered. "I'd really like to have the dog, but I travel too much. The poor thing would starve in my absence."

"So let me get this straight. You'd like to have a dog, but not a husband?" I asked.

She snorted. "Men are nothing but trouble," she said, capping her water bottle.

I was pretty sure I was included in that statement.

She put her hand on my forehead. "No fever. That's good."

"Why would I have a fever?" I asked.

"You've got some nasty cuts there. They could become infected. You could also have internal injuries," she said. She took a small packet from her pocket and tore it open. "It's just a wet wipe," she said as she started wiping my face. "You're really dirty."

"So much for making a good first impression," I groaned.

"Yeah, you can give up trying to play Studly Do-Right," she joked.

"You're pretty grimy yourself," I told her.

"I'm used to it," she said. "I get dirty all the time. This is probably a first for you."

"You make me sound like a real wuss."

"Not a wuss, just not used to getting dirty," she said. "That shirt I cut to ribbons probably cost you a few hundred dollars. Tailored, I'll bet."

"Yeah."

"A few thousand for the suit?"

"Right again."

"And your car, wherever it is now, is probably a Mercedes or a BMW."

"Ferrari," I said.

She shrugged. "I was close." She looked upward. "I wonder how long it's going to take them to find us?"

"I was on the ground level in the garage when it happened," I recalled. "This is a ten-story hotel with three levels of parking."

"It's going to be a long wait," she concluded.



I don't know how she managed it, but Kate kept me going while we waited to be rescued. When we got cold, she'd get into the sleeping bag with me, pressing our bodies together for warmth. From time to time, she would stick the flashlight in my face, checking my pupils. "How's that headache?" she asked.

"Not so bad anymore."

She stifled a yawn.

"You should get some sleep," I urged her. "I'll be all right."

She nodded. "Maybe an hour or so."

"I'll be all right," I repeated for emphasis.

"Promise me you won't die and leave me alone down here," she said.

"I'll do my best," I promised.

She wriggled her way into the sleeping bag and went to sleep almost immediately, her head resting on my chest. I watched her sleep. She intrigued me. I was accustomed to people who wanted something from me. She wanted nothing except to keep me alive.

I liked holding her like that. She was soft and warm, and I was cold. I'd been cold for a long time, now that I thought about it. I couldn't remember the last time I'd held a woman that way. Liz and I had never been an overly affectionate couple. I suppose it had much to do with our situation, but I felt a sudden, overwhelming need for affection, anywhere I could get it.

I wanted to know this woman. I wanted to know everything about her. She was my lifeline, and for now, I was totally dependent upon her. Who was she in the real world? I suspected she would, in the best of circumstances, be unimpressed by wealth, success or social position. In fact, in that real world she probably had nothing but disdain for my kind.

*My kind.* I was a poor kid from Boston who would have ended up a mechanic like my dad, had pure hatred not fueled my ambition. The expensive clothes, cars, homes...it was all a façade. Facing death had made me see with startling clarity what a phony I had become.

My thoughts were interrupted by the unmistakable sound of a jackhammer. The rescue crews were close. Very close. I shook her gently. "Kate," I said in a low, hoarse voice. "Kate, wake up. I think our secret's out. They're coming!"

She opened her eyes, groggy. "What?"  
"Listen. Jackhammers," I told her. "They're coming for us."  
She pulled herself upright. "Thank God."



Kate insisted the emergency techs take me out first. They lowered a stretcher into the opening they'd made, and she helped me onto it, making sure I was secure. I looked back at her as I was lifted upward, and saw her give me the thumbs-up sign.

When I emerged into the daylight, I had to close my eyes tightly at first. I'd been in darkness for so long, the brilliant midday was hard to take. Liz was there, waiting. She'd flown to Rome immediately when she heard about the quake. She ran alongside the stretcher now as they took me to a waiting ambulance. "I was so afraid," she told me, clutching my hand. "If anything had happened to you--"

I wasn't listening. I craned my neck, looking back, trying to make sure Kate had gotten out safely. I got a glimpse of her emerging from the hole and breathed a sigh of relief. I would not have survived down there without her.

She was my lifeline, and I didn't want to let her go, even now that we'd been rescued.



I spent three days in a hospital in Rome. I had more visitors than I wanted--Liz was there as often as allowed. My father-in-law, who had come to Italy with her, visited every day as well. There was a steady stream of business associates, there to protect their investments. Reporters had to be chased away by the hospital staff. The American ambassador to Italy also paid me a visit.

"My doctors tell me I would have died, had I been alone down there," I said, grateful to be alive.

"We're all grateful to that young woman who was with you, darling," Liz assured me. I wondered what my very proper wife would have thought if she'd seen us down there, zipped up together in Kate's sleeping bag, me without a shirt. Would she have felt jealousy, anger, anything at all?

"How did you manage to avoid hypothermia, Jamie?" my father-in-law asked.

“Kate--the woman who was with me--was an experienced camper,” I said. “She gave me her sleeping bag.” In my mind, I saw Kate snuggled against me, sleeping. I saw myself gently stroking her back.

“If there’s anything I can do for you, Jamie,” the ambassador was saying, “just let me know.”

Liz, exhausted, excused herself. She and her parents went to find a place to get coffee. As soon as they were out of earshot, I turned to the ambassador.

“There is something you can do for me, Mitchell,” I told him. “The woman who was with me--she’s an American. A photographer. I want to make sure she’s all right.”

“Ms. McAllister?” Mitchell Price already knew who she was. “She had only minor injuries. I heard she returned to the States yesterday.”

I tried to hide my disappointment. I’d hoped to see her again. The woman had saved my life. I owed her. I’d expected her to at least call to say goodbye.

“I need to locate her, Mitchell,” I said aloud. “I want to properly thank her.”

The ambassador smiled. “The doctors here say she did a damn good job on that makeshift splint,” he said. “Your leg will be good as new when the cast comes off.”

“Did anyone get her address?” I persisted.

“I believe we have it at the embassy. I’ll see what I can do for you,” Price said.

“Thanks.” I couldn’t tell him how grateful I really was.

I had to find her.



I wore a cast on my right leg for six weeks. I felt like a prisoner in my own home, frustrated and helpless. The only bright spot was that I had that uninterrupted time with my sons, who took delight in breaking out the crayons to decorate my cast. They took care of their injured dad, bringing me candy pills and taking my oral temperature with a rectal thermometer.

I nearly choked on it, but didn’t have the heart to tell them they had the wrong one. It’s the thought that counts, after all.

The three of us took naps together, watched DVDs and ate

Jello and ice cream. I needed that to regain my strength, after all. There's nothing like Jello to cure what ails you, according to Dr. Ethan. Dr. Noah, however, strongly favored ice cream.

One afternoon, I was about to drift off, Ethan asleep on one side and Noah snoring softly on the other, when I looked up to see Liz standing in the doorway. The look on her face, that of an outsider looking in, gave me a pang of guilt. From the day we married, she'd been the giver and I'd been the taker. It was always the same. She deserved better.

Instead of being grateful for a devoted wife, my thoughts were on the woman with whom I'd been trapped in the parking garage. In the face of danger, a bond had formed between us. I can't explain it, but I felt a connection to her that I'd never had with anyone else in my life. I knew I had to maintain that connection.

I placed a call to Mitchell Price in Rome. "Did you get that address for me, Mitchell?"

"I did." He gave it to me.

As soon as I got my orthopedist's blessing to drive again, I went to see her.

Her house sat on the beach, alone, no neighbors for at least a half-mile. It looked like a converted barn. It was painted gray with white trim. There was a large covered porch with a porch swing and several potted plants. I parked in the driveway, got out and went up the flagstone walk to the front door and knocked. There was no answer at first. I turned and started to walk away when the door opened.

I turned back and was face-to-face with the woman who, until that moment, I had only seen in darkness. She was petite, with unruly auburn hair and a warm smile. "Hi, stranger," I greeted her. "Lame, I know, but I felt pretty awkward at that moment."

"Jamie?" She was surprised to see me.

"I'm surprised you recognize me without a layer of dirt on my face," I said.

"You clean up pretty good," she said.

"You clean up damn good," I told her.

"I wanted to come thank you for saving my ass," I went on.

"You thanked me already," she reminded me.

"I did," I acknowledged, "but as you'll recall, I'm the cheap bastard who hired the lowest bidder to build a death trap with substandard materials--and you lost your cameras in the garage

collapse.”

She nodded, suppressing a grin.

“So,” I said, taking a deep breath as I plunged forward like an awkward schoolboy trying to impress the head cheerleader, “I’m here to replace your equipment.”

She raised an eyebrow. “I expected a check from your insurance company.”

“Not for the woman who saved my life,” I said. “You get my personal attention. One moment.”

I went back to my car and returned with a large box. “Could we go inside?” I asked.

“Where are my manners? Of course.” She opened the door for me.

I carried the box inside and put it on the overstuffed couch. “If these aren’t to your satisfaction, I’ll return them and get you something better,” I told her.

She opened the box and let out a low whistle. “You can’t do that,” she said, openly impressed. “There *are* no better cameras than these.”

“Then you like them?”

“Of course, but my cameras weren’t worth near what these cost,” she said. “I can’t accept them.”

“You can and you will,” I insisted.

She opened her mouth to protest, but I’m guessing the look on my face told her that would be a waste of time. I didn’t get where I am by taking no for an answer. “Thank you,” she said.

“You’re quite welcome.”

She looked down at my leg. “I see you’re mobile again,” she commented.

I nodded. “My doctors tell me you did a damn good job on that makeshift splint.”

“I’m glad it was a clean break. I don’t know what I could have done if there had been multiple fractures, or if the skin had been broken,” she admitted. Then she asked, “Have you had lunch?”

“No. I was going to stop on the way up here, but I missed my exit, so I figured I’d just keep driving.”

“I was just about to delve into the leftovers,” she said. “Want to join me?”

“I’d like that very much,” I answered honestly.

I followed her into the kitchen. It was bright and airy. Her home

was exactly what I'd expected: comfortable, welcoming, uncluttered. It reflected her personality. The furniture was made for comfort rather than design. She'd favored light colors, yellow, peach, ivory, with turquoise accents. The windows had an unobstructed view of the beach and the Atlantic Ocean. The kitchen was large, with a country feel to it.

Mentally, I compared it to my Manhattan condo, which had been done by one of the country's top decorators but lacked a personal signature. Kate's signature was all over this house. I thought of the overstuffed couch in the living room with a patchwork quilt thrown casually over the back, and remembered lying with her in that collapsed parking garage. Now, I imagined lying with her on that couch.

I know, I shouldn't have been having those thoughts, but I couldn't shake them.

I was also thinking how much Ethan and Noah would love that house. Growing up in a Manhattan condo wasn't the best place for two energetic six-year-old boys. I started thinking about living in a place like Kate's.

She poured two glasses of lemonade and set one in front of me. "Are there any homes for sale around here?" I asked.

She looked surprised. "Sure, but you'd probably want something closer to Hyannisport--"

I shook my head. "I think this area would be perfect," I said. "My sons are at an age where they need some wide open spaces."

"I can check around and see what's available," she offered. "You and your wife can see if there's anything you like."

I don't know why, but I didn't want to talk to Kate about Liz. It was as if I were trying to compartmentalize the two women. It made no sense. On one hand, there was Kate, a woman I barely knew in spite of our shared experience, a woman with whom I felt a powerful bond--and on the other, Liz, the wife I saw as a partner in a business contract.

Kate put a loaf of bread on the table and took a plastic container from the refrigerator. She started to laugh. "It's tuna."

I smiled. "As I recall, you make a damn good tuna sandwich."