

**KIDNAPPED, A Romantic Suspense Novel**

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Something was in her mouth. Sami's tongue slid along the edges of something plastic. Flat, low ridges, holes—an adjustable strap. A baseball cap? Another taste. Hair spray. Gross. Someone had stuffed her baseball cap in her mouth, and from the feel of it they had taped it in place. Her arms were tied behind her and she lay face down on the floor—of what? Her car. The carpeting scraped her cheek every time they hit a bump.

Panic flooded Sami's senses. She came instantly awake. Inhaling deeply through her nose, she willed herself to calm down. Her working motto flashed through her brain, panic never accomplished anything. Of course she had never been kidnapped and tied up before.

In the dim light of passing cars, she glimpsed things—paper gum wrappers, an old straw, one whopper wrapper, a CD cover.

*That's where Sting went. Been looking for that for days. Man did she need to vacuum this car out.*

A metallic scent hit her nose. She'd recognize that smell until the day she died. Blood. And by the odor, someone had lost a great deal of it.

Panic welled inside her again. This time too much to dismiss. Her heart raced. *Breathe, dammit!* She couldn't. Oh God, who was this guy? Why did he pick her? Why hadn't she begged to stay and finish the shift, even if it was a slow night?

*Calm down, Samantha. Think about something peaceful. You can't do anything right now. Maybe there's a simple explanation.*

Get real. Nothing simple could explain away that much blood loss. She'd learned that the first time she'd stood by a gurney and watched her trauma victim's blood drip off the side to pool around her feet.

Even though she didn't do more than work, sleep and work some more, it was still her life. As much as she'd hated almost every waking moment since Aimee's death, she suddenly realized she wasn't ready to die. Not tonight. Certainly not like this.

A deep sigh bubbled out of her. Since the air rushed out her nose instead of her mouth, it sounded more like a snort. She scrunched her eyes and ignored the suddenly schizophrenic voices in her head.

She refused to panic. So far the only damage done was to her dignity. If she kept her wits about her, maybe she could escape. Isn't that what her brother had preached to her for years? They'd covered all the bases, from car-jackings, to floods, tornadoes and any other natural disaster. In a crisis situation, remain calm and watch for an opportunity to act.

That same out of body experience she felt during an emergency flowed over her, allowing her to see the entire situation, and act accordingly. When everyone around her flew at break neck speed on an adrenaline rush, Sami remained peacefully calm and organized.

Her body slumped into the carpeting. Quietly, she listened to the rhythm of the wheels beneath the floor. After a few minutes she almost fell asleep. Her near exhaustion, after working forty-eight of the last ninety-six hours, coupled with the mental and physical energy needed to fight her building hysteria, lulled her mind from the very real danger around her.

The car slowed, turned, then stopped.

Sami's eyes popped open.

"Damn, where does she keep the garage door opener?" the man in the driver's seat muttered. A chill crept up Sami's spine. That same deep baritone had rumbled over her ear earlier, just before something squeezed her throat and the lights went out.

A test swallow confirmed her tender throat. He'd cut off her air supply. This guy wasn't above controlling her by physical force.

A snap sounded above her head. Damn! He'd found the door opener's hiding place between the seats. A few minutes later, the Chevy inched forward. Motion sensor lights flooded the garage in a yellowish hue, casting eerie shadows inside the car. Sami thought she heard a moan. Then the garage door closed.

*Breathe. Calm, just stay calm. Fight the panic.*

The driver's door opened. The car's weight shifted, then rose. Heavy boots sounded on the cement garage floor. The front passenger door opened. A grunt and whoosh of air escaped the man. He sounded like an Olympic weight lifter going for the clean and jerk record. More boots thumping. Sami strained to lift her head, but couldn't see more than halfway up the seat in front of her. She rested her head on the floor once again, waiting.

Again, the boots thudded across the garage, drawing nearer.

*Breathe. Stay calm. Count.*

*One-one thousand, two-two thousand.*

The door swung open.

Sami clenched her eyes shut, pretending she was still out cold.

It seemed like minutes passed. Every second marked by the rapid beat of her pulse in her ears.

What was he waiting for?

Something soft and warm whispered across her cheek. The smell of cinnamon teased her nose.

She couldn't stand it.

Cautiously, she opened her eyes. Two clear blue eyes beneath the thickest black lashes this side of a movie star met her gaze—only upside down.

The rest of him was...shaggy. He reminded her of Robert Redford in that mountain man movie, Jeremiah something-or-other. Thick dishwater blonde hair hung to one side of his forehead and in layers down to his collar. A dark five-o'clock shadow covered the lower half of his face.

Her eyes traveled lower. Across the edge of his flannel shirt about an inch below his left collarbone, a circular pattern of dark crimson swirled outward from a hole, so full of old dried blood it bordered on black.

Whoever he was, he'd been shot tonight.

Her gaze flew to his.

He lifted his right eyebrow in a sardonic fashion. "Good, you're awake."

With both large hands he grasped her by the shoulders. Carefully, he eased her into a sitting position.

“Let me make something perfectly clear. You are here only because I need you to patch up my friend. Got it?”

Sami nodded.

With one hand on top of her head, he guided her out of her car. Sami waited for the dizziness to clear her mind before taking a step forward. The garage door button next to the inside house door caught her eye.

An escape idea popped into her head.

Grasping her arm firmly, her captor nearly dragged her over to the door. Unsteady on her feet, she played it to her advantage and stumbled against him a step or two.

Timing was everything.

Just as they both stepped onto the bottom step leading into the house, Sami threw all her weight sideways into her captor. He grunted, falling to the side. His wounded shoulder hit the side of the house. Sami stumbled backward to the button, pressing the side of her head against it. Above her the w-h-i-r of the garage door opening sounded.

The panic she'd been fighting throughout her car trip surged through her once more. Fight or flight. She chose flight and suddenly propelled herself past his grasping hands toward the lifting garage door. Footsteps pounded behind her as she gained the driveway.

One step.

Two.

Three...

"Ooomph." She hit the grassy bank to the driver's side with what felt like a ton of bricks on top of her.

He swore as his arms wrapped around her and he rolled with her to the side.

Immediately, Sami began to squirm—legs thrashing, torso bucking into his.

"Damn it. Hold still!"

"Mmmph mmph!" *Like hell!*

He increased the pressure of his arms on her ribs, slowly purposefully squeezing the air out of her lungs. At the same time he trapped her flailing legs between his own. Very quickly Sami decided to give in, for now, rather than lose consciousness again. With a

resigning snort she let her body go limp against him.

"Look!" He growled in her ear and Sami despised the shiver of fear that coursed down her spine. "I don't have time to play games with you, lady. I tried to be nice. Now we'll do it the hard way."