

FULL MOON & CHINA WHITE

PROLOGUE

“Samantha.”

She paused in the doorway of the bullpen and turned, absently pushing her hair behind her ear as she did so. “Yeah?”

“Want to go out for a drink? Or are you too tired?”

Martin stood at his desk, folders in hand and looking bit disheveled – his tie was loose and the top button of his shirt was undone. She couldn’t help but smile – he looked like she felt. They were the last to leave for the night after finally finishing overdue paperwork.

A drink sounded great. “Yeah,” she said with a tilt of her head. “It would be nice to know there’s real world out there, huh?”

His grin ignited a little life in his eyes. “And normal people,” he added. “Hang on a sec.” Martin dropped the files on his desk with a sound plop and grabbed his jacket all in one movement. “Let’s boogie!”

Samantha laughed as he threw the jacket over one shoulder and began tugging on his tie. “Let’s boogie?” she echoed in barely suppressed giggles.

With his tie sufficiently loosened, Martin took her elbow and guided her out of the doorway and down the hall. “Well, it’s better than ‘Let’s make like a tree and leaf this joint.’ “

“Oooh,” she groaned, wrinkling her nose. “Yeah, that is worse.”

With the mood considerably lightened the pair threw puns back and forth all the way to the elevator. Tension from their awful day drained away as they approached the parking garage. When they stepped from the elevator, Martin indicated his car with his chin. “Come on, I’ll drive. It’s not that far and you know parking’s going to be non-existent on a Friday night.”

“Good point,” Samantha conceded. “Okay then, let’s go.”

He opened the passenger door for her and she slid inside. “Hello weekend!” she sighed happily. Martin laughed and jogged to the driver side. After pulling his door open, he threw his jacket in the back seat and dropped in behind the wheel. “Where to?” he asked as he started the car. “Wait, there’s one caveat . . .”

Samantha raised her eyebrows in question.

FULL MOON & CHINA WHITE

“It has to be a place where I don’t have to wear this,” he said as he pulled off the offending tie and tossed it over his shoulder. It fluttered unceremoniously atop the discarded jacket as he unbuttoned his sleeves and rolled up the cuffs.

“Well, aren’t we wild tonight,” she joked. Samantha felt her weariness fade away with Martin’s enthusiasm. “How about The Longshot?”

Martin backed from the parking space and drove from the structure. “Sounds good. I have to make one stop first. That all right?”

“No problem. That means you get the first round.”

Martin’s amused snort lifted her spirits even more. She hadn’t seen him in this kind of mood before and she liked it; there was a tingle in her heart as she wondered what it would be like to get together with him; Danny teased her enough about it, so why not? He certainly was easy on the eyes . . .

They went a few blocks before Martin made a few quick turns and stopped at a corner market. She leaned forward and looked in the front windows. “This place is still open?”

“Yeah, he’ll close in a few minutes. I’ll be right back. Don’t worry if the lights go out . . .” he glanced at his watch. “. . . in about 3 minutes. They’re on a timer. The front door will automatically lock, too, but I’ll be right back.”

“Okay. Leave the keys so I can listen to the radio.”

Martin jumped out of the car and jogged to the glass front doors. He turned and threw Samantha a grin as he pushed the doors open and stepped inside the empty store. She saw him pause a moment to look around before heading toward the back of the store. Taking a deep, relaxing sigh and settling deeper into the soft leather seat, Samantha hummed along with the radio.

And then he vanished.

CHAPTER ONE: 2 Hours Missing

Samantha paced the sidewalk in front of the store, her thumb hitched on the waist of her pants and her fingers drumming impatiently on her hip. Her other hand gripped her cell phone.

Martin's car still sat where he'd parked it, but now it was flanked by NYPD black and whites and corralled in the tiny parking lot with yellow police barrier tape. When she saw Jack's dark sedan jerk to a stop at the curb, her shoulders sagged with relief. Now they would get somewhere; she turned to meet her boss.

"Samantha," Jack started as he strode toward her. "What happened?"

She swept her arm at the front door. "He walked in there and now he's gone. I couldn't get inside – the doors were locked . . ."

"Who locked them?"

"They were on automatic timers. Martin told me . . ." she dropped her eyes and pushed her gaze aside, trying to get her thoughts in some sort of order.

"Start over, Sam," Jack said calmly as he gripped her shoulders. "What were you doing here?"

"Martin and I were going out for drinks. He said we should ride together because parking would be bad but he had to make a stop first."

"What for?"

"He never said. We parked here," she pointed at the car, "and he told me the lights would go out and the doors would lock automatically in 3 minutes – so it must have been 8:57."

She took a breath and turned from Jack's hands, walking to the glass doors of the store. "When he didn't come out in fifteen minutes, I got out and tried to see inside. It was dark so I walked around to the alley in the back. That door was locked, too. I noticed that the alley light was broken; there's glass on the ground under it. I yelled and pounded on the door, but when no one answered I called the police, thinking that they would have a key to get in or at least have an emergency contact for the business." She could feel her heart start to race as she recalled her alarm at the time. She bit her lip to get back on track. "Um . . . after nearly an hour, police dispatch got a hold of the building owner and when he finally got here I went in with the

FULL MOON & CHINA WHITE

police. The place is empty, Jack. No one's there. There are signs of a struggle in the back . . .”

“Show me.”

Samantha slowly felt her collection return as she led Jack into the store and through the scene. By the time they reached the back storeroom, her mind was ticking again. She ignored the little voice telling her that her work mindset was only pushing aside her fear.

“When I saw these boxes on the floor I looked closer and saw what looks like blood. That's when I got everyone out and secured the scene and called you. I . . . I think Martin and the store owner were taken out by the back door. I was out front the whole time.”

“Jack?” Vivian's voice carried easily from the front doors.

“Back here!”

The cool calm of the experienced agent was like a balm to Samantha; she knew Jack too well, and as a result, could read the tenseness he was trying not to show. Samantha could see a shadow of concern in Vivian's eyes that belied the matter-of-fact tone to her voice.

“Any witnesses?”

Jack stood straighter. “We haven't canvassed the area yet. Danny should be here . . .”

“Now.” Agent Taylor's eyes darted around the scene as soon as he entered the storeroom. “Want me to start checking the adjoining buildings for witnesses?”

“Yeah,” Jack replied, “Sam and I will collect the evidence here and question the land lord. Vivian, go with Danny.”

The four of them split up, their concern palatable. Before he left, Danny's hand rested sympathetically for a moment on Samantha's shoulder. She gave him a weak smile as he left.

“Sam.” Jack's voice captured her full attention and as she faced him, she tried to keep the panic from her eyes. “Think. What else did you see? Any other cars? Pedestrians? Noises?”

Samantha's forehead furrowed in thought. “I had the radio on loud. I saw Martin open the door and stop for a moment just inside. He looked around, and then started to the back. He pulled something from his back pocket . . .”

“His wallet?” Jack asked.

“No,” Samantha said with authority. “No, he carries his wallet in his left back pocket. He took something from his right pocket . . .” She frowned. “It was white. A paper?”

Jack shrugged. “I don't know. Maybe we'll figure it out. That the land lord?” He pointed to a rotund man arguing with a uniformed officer just outside the storeroom. When she nodded, they approached and motioned the uniform away.

Jack showed his identification. “Who's on the lease?”



It was hot; too hot to breathe. Martin gasped in an effort to fill his lungs and was rewarded with a calliope of spinning starts and piercing pain in his skull. Quickly he clamped his mouth shut, grinding his teeth until the agony receded a little. Next, he opened his eyes a crack and saw only gauzy darkness. He jerked his hand to reach for his head, but found that his arms were pulled behind his back and wouldn't move. Puzzling over that for several confused moments as his senses cleared, Martin realized that he was partially sitting up and slumped to one side, making breathing difficult. When he tried to push himself upright with his shoulder, pain zinged again and took what little breath he had away as a groan.

Then he realized that there was something over his head making his breath hot against his face – a bag? And his hands were tied behind him?

A rush of panic was quickly squelched as he tried to think logically through the distracting agony. Martin forced himself to relax and concentrate on his breathing as he attempted to gather his scattered thoughts. When he tried to use his feet to scoot back and closer to the wall, he realized his feet were tied, too.

'What the hell?' he thought fuzzily.

"I have your gun, Agent Fitzgerald, so don't bother looking." A man's voice with some kind of accent.

Martin made the mistake of trying to shake his head; was difficult to think. He knew he must have a concussion. "They're looking for me, you know," he said, his voice sounding thick and slurred to his ears.

The man laughed lowly. "I know."

The agent heard movement and then someone grabbed his forearm in a vice-like grip. Even though his head felt as if it would explode with every movement, Martin automatically tried to fight back. When he started to yell, he found his face pressed painfully to the floor. There were at least two men holding him down and Martin knew he was going to black out again. His stomach rolled.

His felt a sting on his flesh; he jerked, and his face and chest were forced harder to the floor in response. At the same moment he felt the growing warmth from whatever they had injected him with, Martin realized he was in a moving vehicle.

Then all his aches and pains faded away in a glorious rush, the previous nausea vanishing as his body relaxed. Uncaring, Martin continued his ride to the unknown.

CHAPTER TWO: 4 hours missing

“The business owner’s name is Alex Sun. He’s had the market there for ten years, running it with his wife, who died six months ago.”

Samantha tried to concentrate on Jack’s words, but her gaze kept straying to the photograph of Martin stuck on the blank white board. It was the same photo that was on his ID card.

Vivian’s voice refocused her attention. “A woman that lives across the alley remembered seeing a dark van parked behind the business. She only noticed it because no one usually parks there – it’s a fire lane. She didn’t see it leave.”

“I’ve check for Martin’s cell, but it must be turned off. The last call from it was when he was here,” Danny added.

“Did you find any surveillance cameras in the area?” Jack asked. “ATMs, banks, parking lots?”

“There are six ATM machines in a four block radius of the store. I have calls in to get any video in the time frame.”

“You okay?” Danny’s voice was soft in her ear. Samantha jerked slightly in surprise, and felt her cheeks start to burn.

“Sam?” Jack said.

Samantha looked up to see the three members of her team looking at her.

“Can you do this?” Jack asked in a brusque tone.

“Yes, I’m fine,” Samantha snapped. “What about Sun? What’s his story?”

Jack handed her a file. “You tell us,” he replied. “There’s what we have so far.” He turned to the other two. “Get those videos.”

Mentally chastising herself, Samantha returned to her desk with the file firmly in her grasp. When she passed the whiteboard, she consciously kept her eyes forward and her mind focused. Finally settling at her desk, she flipped the folder open and started entering names into her computer.

She was well aware that Jack was watching her from his office.

Mee Liang was disgusted. He hated loose ends, and here was one splayed on the floor at his feet. *‘Loose ends end up hanging you if one isn’t careful,’* he thought. He looked again at the FBI flat badge in his hand. Liang didn’t like it when his minions made their own decisions; it usually lead to a downfall. *‘Then again, it’s a rich man that takes*

advantage of a downturn. He looked again at the drugged man on the floor and considered.

“How much did he see?” Liang asked, his voice deceptively soft.

The two men returned from securing Sun to a sturdy chair. The lead man ducked his head before responding to his boss. “We had Sun tied already. Jiu hit the other as soon as he stepped in the storeroom. I don’t know what he saw, but he never drew his gun so he was not alerted. I was going to leave him, but then I found his identification and thought he might be valuable. He also had this.” The man handed over a white paper.

Both men kept their eyes averted and waited. Liang flipped the wallet closed and tapped the leather against his palm as he regarded his underlings. Then he accepted the paper. “You do not make decisions. I do. If our new guest becomes a problem, you will pay also. Understand?”

“Yes.” The worker kept his head bowed as he replied.

Liang looked at Sun, now secured in the chair. The old man still had a black bag over his head and was breathing hard, obviously terrified; he was uttering an ancient prayer. *‘Sun is what I need to get Zhan.’* Liang thought. *‘Maybe this agent can help me later on.’* He nodded and turned again to the white man on the floor. His minions had used the man’s own shirt to cover his head. “How much did you give the agent?”

“Just enough to keep him quiet. He’s not unconscious, but I do not think he can communicate at the moment.”

Liang smiled. “Take off the cloth. It sounds like our guest is enjoying himself too much to be a problem.”

After a quick bow, the two men knelt and worked to loosen the shirt around their prisoner’s head. When it was finally pulled clear, Liang noted the dilated pupils and unfocused gaze. He clucked his tongue and smiled approvingly. “Ah, Special Agent Fitzgerald, welcome. I see you are enjoying my hospitality.”

Martin only blinked unfocused eyes and halfheartedly tried to pull his hands free.

“Put him in the holding room for now. He will be quiet for a while longer.”

The two men grabbed the agent and dragged him away as Liang watched thoughtfully and then unfolded the paper and read it. He smiled. *‘There is opportunity here. Maybe this loose end could actually be the start of a fine bolt of cloth,’* he thought, his mood lightening. *‘But first, Mr. Sun.’*

Tucking the wallet and paper away, the slender Asian adjusted his jacket and moved to stand in front of the subdued store owner.

Alex Sun trembled in his bonds.

CHAPTER THREE: 7 hours missing

Samantha let out an explosive sigh and arched backward in her chair. She took a moment for the luxury of a stretch and ran her fingers through her hair with her eyes closed. Tired people made mistakes, she knew.

A delicious smell touched her nose and her eyes snapped open. Danny's small grin did little to hide his own weariness, but the coffee cup he plunked on her desk was a step in the right direction. "Here. We both need it." He sipped from his own cup and nodded at the one in front of her.

"Thanks," she breathed, lifting the cup to her lips. It was a heavenly burn on her tongue.

"What do you have so far?" Danny asked.

"Well," Samantha started. "Alex Sun has a short and clean history. Too short." She glanced in Jack's direction and saw that he was coming toward her, so she waited until he arrived to continue. By then Vivian had parked herself on the neighboring desk. "It seems that Mr. Sun has had this name for twelve years. His passport number, however, shows that he's been in country longer than that – over fifteen years. All sorts of things don't match up. I'm waiting for the information on his paperwork before that; Visas, green cards, other passports. For the last twelve years he and his wife have been model citizens."

Danny pitched in. "Phone records for the past eight months show numerous calls to one particular set of numbers belonging to Full Moon Shipping. Before that, there were none to those numbers. We didn't find any reference to Full Moon Shipping in the store records. It looks like the calls started about the time Sun's wife became ill and continued up until two weeks ago."

Vivian's eyebrow rose skeptically. "Full Moon Shipping? Alex Sun? Coincidence?"

Jack snorted. "No such thing. What do we know about Full Moon Shipping?"

"Not much yet," Danny stated. "I was just starting to dig in."

"Keep it up. Samantha, help him out if you're done with Mr. Sun. Viv? What about those ATM videos?"

She grinned that cat-with-the-canary grin of hers and patted a folder in her hand. "Well, the ATM's turned out to be a bust, but I did find something on the red

light camera history.” She opened the folder. “You know that there are cameras in two intersections nearby that are set up to photograph anyone running the red lights. There were three detections in that timeframe, and I got the photos.”

Samantha craned her neck to see the photos. Two white cars and . . . “a black van.”

“Yup! At 2110 hours, a black van rolled around a corner on a right turn and got caught. There’s an excellent shot of the driver’s face and the license plate. The vehicle is registered to the Crane Corporation.” She pulled out the photos. “Both driver and passenger are Asian males.”

Samantha blinked. “That’s interesting.”

“Why?”

“Remember when I said I saw Martin pull a paper from his pocket? I figured the paper was something he was going to give Alex Sun, so out of curiosity I checked Martin’s computer search history.”

“And . . . ?” Vivian urged.

“Well,” Samantha started. “He’d visited the site for Crane Corporation. The first time was about two weeks ago. He ran several searches on the names listed, including passport searches and driver’s records.”

“Sounds like he was looking for someone,” Vivian concluded.

“You two find out more about that Corporation and check Martin’s phone records,” Jack ordered Vivian. “Danny and Sam, look into Full Moon Shipping.”

Invigorated with the information, Samantha returned to her work. In her periphery, she saw Jack add the information to the white board. Her jaw tightened in determination.



It seemed like his world was enveloped in fleece.

Martin managed to push himself into the corner of the small room and prop himself up, but that was as far as he cared to go. He was aware of his surroundings and knew it wasn’t a place he should be; he also knew that his hands were still tied behind him. He just didn’t really care. In fact, he felt pretty good right now.

He could feel his heart beating and his breathing seemed unusually loud – the combination fascinated him for a while and he was content to just listen and experience. Then his wrists started to sting a little, so he decided to make the effort to bring his hands to the front. It seemed to take a lot longer than it should, and he kept getting distracted by other sights and noises, but eventually he was able to work his arms around his legs and maneuver his hands to the front. The sight of his raw wrists was intriguing. He knew it should hurt more than it actually did.

And then he realized that the noises he’d been hearing off and on were of someone being hit. He also heard heated voices, but the words didn’t make sense. Martin’s euphoric feelings dipped and he started concentrating on getting his hands

FULL MOON & CHINA WHITE

free. After a frustrating few minutes without results, Martin managed to push himself to his feet using the wall as a brace. His legs wobbled weakly, but he stayed upright and made his way across the very small and dark room to the sole door. It was ajar.

Looking out through the slight opening he saw the profile of Sun tied in a chair. In the stark light of a single bare bulb that dangled from the ceiling he saw that the old man was crying. Blood dribbled from the corner of his mouth. His tormentor stood in front of him, ready to strike again. Another man, neatly dressed in black and completely out of context with the small, dingy room, spoke rapidly to the old man in another language. ‘*Chinese*,’ Martin realized through his foggy thoughts. ‘*That’s why I don’t understand it.*’

Just then, the man in black looked up and met Martin’s eyes across the small space. Without releasing his stare, the man spoke quickly and Sun’s tormentor turned to Martin. The agent’s mind screamed to run, but his feet refused to obey and he only managed to stumble back against the wall. The door squeaked open and two dark figures grabbed him from either side. The man in black’s eyes glistened in the yellow light as he stood, unmoving, next to Sun.

Martin struggled but found his motions uncoordinated. He was easily forced down to his knees and then pushed to his stomach on the floor. He felt a cold sting in his arm again followed by a hot rush and soon he was wrapped in glorious warmth once again. Martin’s mind told him this wasn’t a good thing, but the rest of him surrendered to the delightful high and everything became fuzzy. He groaned as he sank back into the abyss.

“Looks like our FBI man has acquired a taste for China White.”

Martin heard the words and the low laughter that followed, but didn’t care at the moment; he felt sinfully wonderful.

CHAPTER FOUR: 8 hours missing

Sam awoke with a start. She felt a line of drool at the corner of her mouth about the same time she realized her cheek was resting on her desk. Jerking up, she quickly wiped her mouth and looked around. Danny's back was to her and she was embarrassingly relieved. Her chair squeaked as she sat up, giving her away. Danny turned and gave her a tired smile.

"Sorry," she mumbled, smoothing her hair back from her face and blinking away the sleep.

"Don't worry about it. You caught me last time."

Samantha grinned sheepishly. "What did you find out?"

"I found out that shipping is a very lucrative business. Full Moon Shipping owns ten cargo ships registered in Panama and is the number one company for moving imports from China. And guess who owns a percentage of the company?"

"The Crane Corporation," she guessed. Danny nodded. "Do any owners match up?" she asked. "I mean, between Crane and Full Moon? Is there a common denominator?"

"I'm looking now, but it's a substantial list of mostly Chinese names. I already have about a dozen matches." Danny held her gaze for a moment and then added in a softer tone. "We'll find him."

The kind words caused her eyes to sting with repressed tears so she nodded quickly and ducked her head. Samantha realized her affection for Martin must be more obvious than she thought or her lack of sleep just made it harder to keep her emotions in check.

The pair was distracted by the sound of Jack's raised voice. Although they couldn't hear the words, they could see that their boss was not happy with someone on the other end of the phone line before he slammed the receiver down. Jack leaned back and rubbed his eyes.

"Think he just spoke to Daddy Director?" Danny quipped.

"Better him than me," Samantha replied.

Jack's phone rang again and he snatched it from the cradle before the noise ended. The conversation was short and Jack was on his feet before hanging up again.

FULL MOON & CHINA WHITE

Danny and Samantha looked at each other then turned toward Vivian, who caught the look and shrugged her shoulder. By the time Jack made it to his office door, a pair of scruffily dressed men stepped from the elevator followed by a tall, thin man in a gray suit.

Waving a hand to indicate the team should stay seated, Jack met the trio at the bullpen doorway. After a brief, unintelligible exchange of words the man in the suit followed Jack to his office while the scruffy pair stopped at the briefing table. One sat on the edge of the table while the other plopped down in a chair, both looking tiredly indifferent.

Danny leaned closer to Samantha's ear. "They have 'undercover' written all over 'em."

"Undercover with whom?" she replied.

"I have a feeling we're about to find out."

His mouth a hard, angry line, Jack stalked from his office to the bullpen with the visitor at heel.

Samantha, Vivian and Danny automatically took chairs at the conference table. The plainclothes pair just followed Jack with their eyes.

"It seems that we've crossed into a DEA investigation," Jack started. "This is agent Morse from DEA." Jack indicated the man in the suit. "And those two are agents Scott and Schuller. They will be taking lead on this case."

'No wonder Jack's pissed,' Samantha thought. Then she felt a tingle of fear in her veins. *'Martin must have walked into a real mess.'*

Jack continued. "Full Moon Shipping has been the subject of a two-year investigation by the DEA for bringing in heroin from China. They finally have someone that will testify against their lead suspect, Mee Liang. He's tied to the Chinese Triad, so getting him could bring down a sizeable piece of the Chinese gang empire here in the states."

"So how is Martin involved now?" Danny asked.

Agent Morse took the cue. "The man we have in protective custody is Tshu-dao Zhan. He is a bookkeeper for Full Moon Shipping and a member of the Chinese Triad. He came to this country fifteen years ago with his parents and quickly established himself at the Company. He's smart, shrewd and very, very good with numbers. Zhan is supposed to testify against Liang in three days. It's a good chance that Liang now knows he's missing and will do anything to find Zhan.

"The key here is Zhan's parents. Zhan knew fifteen years ago that his job choice was dangerous for his family. The Triad is known for using family to keep their gang in line. Zhan managed to make his parents disappear twelve years ago and walked out of their lives for their safety. He set his parents up in a business and broke all ties with them. He hasn't even told us their current names or locations, even though he demanded we guarantee their safety in exchange for his testimony. Since Zhan had done such a good job 'hiding' them, we thought that was a safe promise to make. We started noticing FBI hits on Crane Corporation's phone records because

the phones are tapped – the company is connected with Liang and Full Moon. It looks like Zhan’s parents – or father, at least – managed to find Zhan with your agent’s help. And Liang probably has found Zhan’s father from those same calls.”

Vivian spoke up. “But we just started checking into Full Moon tonight.”

“Not exactly,” Sam said. “Martin phone records show that he started calling early last week, probably as a favor for Sun.”

“Yes,” Morse confirmed. “And he said a Mr. Sun was trying to find Zhan. With that bit of information we’ve determined that Alex Sun is actually Soun-dai Zhan, our man’s father. It seems that after Sun’s wife died he felt the need to re-connect with his son. What he doesn’t realize is that he has now placed his own life in danger. Liang obviously has figured out who Sun is; that photo you have is of two of Liang’s underlings. We believe that Liang has Alex Sun and plans to use him to get to Zhan, and if we don’t keep our promise to keep his father safe, our deal is off and Zhan won’t testify. We have to get the old man back before Zhan finds out he’s been grabbed.

“Our surveillance tells us that so far, Liang doesn’t know we have Zhan. We made it look like Zhan fled to Hong Kong, but Liang is a hard man to fool; he’ll check every lead possible here first. I’m sure he’s discovered some missing books and now he’ll see if Sun can lead him to Zhan. Once he discovers the old man doesn’t know a thing, Liang will have him killed or transport him to Hong Kong as insurance.

“We have to do everything we can to find Sun before Zhan finds out he’s been taken and make sure that Liang doesn’t flee before we can press charges on Monday.”

“At the expense of my agent?” Jack snapped.

“Yes, I’m afraid so,” Morse said levelly. “He’s probably the reason they found Sun in the first place.”

Samantha felt sick. Martin had unwittingly led Liang right to an innocent old man.



The effects of whatever they were injecting him with was both wonderful and frightful. Martin rode the initial rush from the last injection to a peak he’d never experienced before. The whisper on some inner voice, however, was always there, telling him that this high was exactly why heroin was so dangerous. It felt too good.

When the effect leveled out, he found he could get a little grip on his logical thoughts and held on to them with desperation – his deep-seated fear of losing control the sole thing forcing himself to try and think around the addictive sensation.

‘I have to get us out of here,’ he realized. The vision of the bloodied Sun hanging in his mind, Martin tried to make sense of all this. All he did was make a few inquiries for a lonely old man missing his son. Did he bring this down on the old man, or had he just suffered bad timing on something that was going to happen anyway? What did Sun have to do with drug dealers?

FULL MOON & CHINA WHITE

Something clicked – maybe it was the missing son that was involved. The small triumph of a completed, logical thought fortified Martin and inspired him to try and work around his artificial euphoria. It took some concentration, but he managed to get to his feet and wobble his way to the door again. This time it was closed, and he nearly cried in relief when he found it unlocked. Alarmed and taken aback at how out of control his emotions were, Martin swallowed hard and paused with his hand on the rusty knob.

‘Come on, Fitzgerald. Pull yourself together.’ A mental image of his father’s stern face usually helped him to turn his emotions to ice, but this time a rush of shame shrouded him. There was no doubt his father would be disappointed in his son’s current condition – he would see it as weakness, and Fitzgerald men were not weaklings. Martin blinked rapidly to quell the rising burn of tears that nearly overwhelmed him. ‘Stop it!’ he chastised himself. ‘That’s the drug talking. Get a grip!’

With a deep, bracing sigh, Martin’s survival instincts rose to the surface and he carefully turned the protesting knob. He felt oddly separate from his body; numb and disjointed. Panic sparked. ‘Don’t think about it now. Later . . . you can think about it later.’ He felt a tickle of sweat under his collar as he slowly pushed the door open.

The chair that Sun had been in was lying on the dirty floor, empty. Martin looked around and cautiously ventured out, drawn to the chair. When he got next to it he saw that the arm was stained with blood and a new battle began within.

‘I’ve got to find him,’ one voice said. ‘Get the hell out!’ another urged. His mind was a chaotic mess of thought, both logical and insane. He thought he was going mad. Martin stumbled to a dark corner and sank to the floor, head between his hands. It was while he sat there trying to become functional that a few details about his surroundings sunk in.

It smelled musty – like the ocean. The two rooms he’d been in were very small, very bare and very dark. The only light source was the bare bulb hanging down and the weak sunlight filtering through a dirty, partially painted over window the only other door. It must go outside, the agent realized. Although all he really wanted to do was lay down and simply exist, Martin knew if he did that he’d be dead. He couldn’t give up. ‘A captured agent always seeks escape,’ he recalled from a long ago lecture.

Then the deep, resonant sound of a horn caused him to jump and raced his heart. Working his way to his feet, his stomach rolled and he retched dryly. When his gut settled, Martin slid along the wall to the dirty window and tried to see outside through a bare spot where the paint had been scraped off. The outlines were fuzzy due to the dirt, but he recognized boats. Big ones. ‘Cargo ships.’

He was in a shed on a dock or a pier. And two Asian men were walking toward the shed.

Martin pushed away from the window in a panic and fell over the chair. His body seemed ungainly and out of control – he couldn’t get disentangled from the

chair. The door opened and the bright light blinded him. Martin threw his arm over his eyes.

“Looks like we got here just in time,” the first man said, pulling a syringe from his pocket.”

“It is a waste of a good product, don’t you think?” The second man asked the first. “He’s going to be dead soon anyway.”

“True,” the first man agreed as he nodded toward Martin. “Just think of it as field testing or even quality control.”

The second man easily snared Martin’s arm and forced him to his stomach. Martin felt a knee in his back as he gasped for breath. His head throbbed. His other arm was pulled painfully to the side. He started to struggle, but surrendered at the first prick of the needle. Instantly, he relaxed and waited for the familiar rush; he found that he looked forward to it and swore softly.

The two men released him. “Yes, I’d say he likes this a bit too much.”

And then he was alone again on his own joy ride. Through the growing euphoria, he heard one of them say, “Let’s go get the old man.”

CHAPTER FIVE: 11 hours missing

It was safer to let Jack drive, Samantha admitted. She was so tired she could hardly see straight. With a sigh, she rubbed her eyes as Jack's sedan pulled out to the street. She slipped her hand in her coat pocket and fingered the silk tie she'd removed from Martin's car. She'd grabbed it when the vehicle was released from the scene and she had driven it back to the parking garage; it had been a purely instinctive reaction at the time. Now, however, she realized that just knowing it was there helped her focus.

Jack glanced her way. "Why don't you try to sleep a few minutes? It'll take nearly an hour to get to the docks."

At first she wanted to protest, but her eyelids refused to stay open. "Okay," she mumbled, not sure she would actually be successful. With her fingers intertwined in the soft memento, she felt her body relax.

In what seemed like moments later, she felt a warm hand gently stroke her cheek. "Martin?" she mumbled, struggling to wake up.

"No, sorry."

She blinked in confusion and Jack's face came into focus. "Oh!" she said, momentarily flustered. She'd been dreaming about Martin, she realized instantly. She felt her cheeks burn and jerked her hand from her coat pocket, the item hidden there feeling heavy. "Oh, um, I was just dreaming . . ."

"I see that." Jack's smile had a tinge of sadness.

"I mean, I was . . . are we there?" Covering her embarrassment, she sat up and pushed her hair back. Outside, she saw a pier flanked by cargo ships. Cranes were noisily lowering shipping boxes into the hold. She could hear men shouting in the distance and the sound of machinery.

"Directly before you is the main pier for Full Moon Shipping. The ship they're loading now is the next one scheduled to depart in . . ." he looked at his watch. ". . . twenty-four hours. If they choose to get Sun away from here, that's their best bet. Those plain clothed guys are part of the loading crew so we should hear pretty quick if something goes down."

"What about Martin? Do you think he and Sun are still together?"

"I hope so," Jack replied.

“Are Danny and Viv set up?”

“Probably not. They’re probably just getting to Crane headquarters.”

Just then his cell phone rang. Samantha was glad for the distraction.

“Malone.” He listened for a few seconds. “Okay. Keep an eye on him.” He pocketed the phone. “Liang just arrived at his office. Morse is setting up on his house. The guy can’t breathe without us knowing.”

Still, Samantha was on edge. Liang owned lots of buildings in the city, but to set up teams on everyone was impossible, she knew. “I just hope Morse is right that Liang is a hands-on kind of guy and will want to be there when he does something with Sun.”

“I hope he’s right, too. We’ll have to trust what his team tells us.”

“We’ll have to trust that no one on his team is dirty and will help Liang escape.”

Jack let out a short laugh. “I’ve been a bad influence on you. That’s something I would say.”

For the first time since Martin’s disappearance, a ghost of a smile haunted Samantha’s lips.

‘Let’s go get the old man.’

The phrase bounced around in his mind until he thought he’d go crazy. Martin found it hard to motivate himself into action. He focused on that one thought and eventually got his limbs to function. Something wasn’t right, though, and it took the miniscule part left of his logical mind a while to realize that his hands were tied behind him again. This time, however, he didn’t have the energy or the heart to work them to the front.

‘Let’s go get the old man.’

Martin shook his head in an effort to clear it, but it just made him dizzier. The phrase pushed him into action and he struggled to his feet. Fixing his stare on the exit, he moved forward and tripped over the chair, falling hard on his knees and then toppling to the side. With his hands tied, he was unable to stop his fall and cracked his cheek on the cement floor. Stars spiraled before his eyes. *‘Damn it,’* he cursed, fighting to keep conscious. A shot of anger brought him around enough to move on. Now he felt throbbing in his knees as well as his head and cheek.

Martin felt detached from his body which made walking a disjointed affair. He used the wall as support and finally made it to the door and looked blearily outside – one eye was swelling shut, and it was difficult to see. Two men were talking, heads bowed together, their voices too soft to distinguish words. Martin recognized them as the two goons that kept him drugged and he felt a surge of panic. As he watched and tried to manage the upheaval of emotions, Martin saw the two men suddenly glance aside. They each pulled a weapon and stepped out of sight. Martin seized the opportunity and slipped clumsily outside.

The brightness of the sun blinded him and his eyes instantly began to tear up. Losing his equilibrium, Martin pressed his back against the shack to regain balance.

FULL MOON & CHINA WHITE

Once square on his feet – or so he thought – he ducked his head and stumbled around the corner of the shack and out of sight.

The world seemed – fuzzy. Dull and fuzzy. The euphoria from the drug had flattened out, leaving Martin feeling drained and wanting. His stomach lurched, his head and knees throbbed and his mind screamed that he needed distance from this shack. Sorting through all these mixed up sensory inputs and emotions was nearly impossible, but the mental picture of the bloody old man helped him to focus. He stumbled onward toward the collection of mammoth sized shipping crates and got lost among them.

CHAPTER SIX: 14 hours missing

Samantha worked every trick in the book to stay alert – jogging in place, coffee, conversation – it all worked for a short time. Her body begged for sleep, and she knew Jack had to feel the same. Her boss' eyes had obvious and huge bags under them. They had already bantered about his advantage of experiencing babies and small children in the house; they prepared you for sleepless nights and sleep deprived days.

Finally, she'd agreed to a cat nap. Twenty minutes had been more refreshing than she could imagine, probably because there were no dreams. Jack had agreed to his own cat nap and was reclined in the driver's seat of the sedan when she heard his phone ring. It was an amazing thing to witness – Jack was awake and alert by the second ring. Samantha wondered if she would ever get to that level.

“Malone,” he barked, not a touch of sleep to his tone. “Okay, we're on it.”

“What?” she asked, grateful for the spark of adrenalin.

“Liang just left his house and is headed here. Viv and Danny are following.”

Samantha snatched the binoculars from the seat and focused on the docks. “It looks like business as usual down there. I wonder if they are expecting him.”

“The phone calls for the past hour or so have been short – they may know they're being monitored.” Jack kicked the door open and got out, leaning on the frame of the open door as he studied the docks spread out before them. “There are a lot of places to hide someone in there. We'll have to rely on the DEA to narrow it down for us. I just hope their assumption is right that Sun is here.” His phone rang again. “Malone.”

Samantha could tell by Jack's one-sided conversation that it was Martin's father on the other end. She breathed a short prayer of thanks that she didn't have to deal with Victor Fitzgerald on top of all this; she was having problems enough of her own with it.

Jack snapped the phone closed. “I don't think I'd want to be the DEA agent whose phone number Director Fitzgerald has right now,” he grumbled. “At least he has the sense to stay outside the perimeter at the moment.”

“I think I see some motion,” Samantha said, her grip tightening on the field glasses. “Around the containers . . . where are Scott and Schuler are? By the ships?”

“Yeah.” Jack’s voice carried the edge that Samantha felt. It was pure torture being on the outside looking in.

“We need to move in closer. I can’t see anything around those containers,” Samantha growled. She lowered the glasses. “If Scott and Schuler are by the ship, then who’s watching the office? Those huge containers are between the ship and the office; they can’t possibly be watching both.”

Jack hunched his shoulders. “I was assured that DEA was on it.” It was obvious that he wasn’t satisfied with that information either, and after a second, he turned to her. When he did, Samantha was caught by his eyes – they spoke volumes on their own when he said, “The only way we can justify going in is if we’re in hot pursuit, understand?” Jack held her stare until she nodded. “So keep your eyes peeled.” Only then, he turned away

Samantha’s heart raced. “I have to stretch my legs.” She slipped from the vehicle and stood.

Jack opened his door to join her, but his phone rang again. He snatched it from his pocket and flipped it open. “Malone,” he said, turning to wave Samantha off. He spoke rapidly into the phone for a few seconds then closed it with a snap. “The Director wants me to meet him at the DEA command center. I’ll send Danny down when he gets here. Meanwhile, stay put, okay?”

“Okay,” Samantha agreed.

The shipyard was huge and was made up of numerous piers. Each pier was gated for security. They had been parked in the dockworkers’ parking lot among countless other cars. When he drove off, Samantha waited until he was out of sight and then wended her way through the vehicles to the edge of the lot. One hand fingered the silky tie in her pocket as she walked and studied the lay of the land.

When she reached the security fence that separated the docks from the lot area, Samantha walked along it and found a growing collection of barrels, boxes and junk as she got farther from the main gate. Finally, she spotted what she’d hoped to find: a small hole in the chain link, mostly hidden by the junk. Samantha immediately ducked down and worked the wires until she was able to slip through. She knew this was more than Jack would allow, but she had to do this for Martin.

Staying low and close to fence, she hesitated and tried to pick out a route that offered the most concealment. She’d just figured a path when her phone rang. The agent fumbled with the device, saw that it was Jack calling, and bit her lip guiltily.

“Sorry, Jack,” she whispered as she turned off the phone. “Let’s call it plausible deniability.” She slipped it into the same pocket that held Martin’s tie, and then pushed off the fence and headed toward the jungle of ship containers that surrounded the shipping office.



Mee Liang's driver slowed the dark sedan at the dock's security gate, and then was allowed through with a silent nod from the guard. Liang felt his jaws working in anger. None of his contacts here or overseas had been able to locate Zhan, and Zhan's father had proved to be worthless as a source of information. It was time to believe the worst – he'd been betrayed. That's the only thing that made sense with the presence of the FBI agent.

The last person that had betrayed Liang was at the bottom of the Pacific Ocean. Liang knew he had to make a decision; the agent was too hot to keep for long, but could be useful in the right situation. Sun was insurance for Zhan and would be moved to the ship immediately. All Liang had to do now is make a decision on the agent and get a clear message to Zhan about the consequences should he follow through with his betrayal to the Triad. The agent had to know where Zhan was; there was still a little time to get this job done. The last think Liang wanted to do was jet back to his homeland and leave the empire he'd built here.

The car stopped at Full Moon's shipping office. The driver jumped out, scanned the area, and smoothly opened the door for Liang. The office door opened at Liang's approach and the manager bowed respectfully and stepped back to allow his boss to enter. Pulling off his sunglasses, Liang looked around the office.

"Mr. Wang. Where's the agent?" Liang asked without preamble.

Manager Wang's hands were a study in nervous energy. Liang was instantly on alert and his eyes bore into the scared man before him.

"He's escaped," Mr. Wang finally admitted. "He couldn't have gotten far and we're looking for him now. It's only been a few minutes."

Liang's lips pressed into a thin line, and his hand was in motion before he even thought about it. The slap sent Wang reeling backward where he covered in response. "Move Sun to the ship. If that agent isn't found soon, you will be joining our guest on the ship, Mr. Wang. Understand?"



A small, constant voice nagged Martin through all his misery. Although his body was wracked in pain and begged for rest, he continued to push on, foot by foot, yard by yard. What his body begged for was to simply curl up in a dark cave and die, but the voice urged him on. Finally, through his fading vision and puffy eyes, Martin saw an open space beyond the crates and a perimeter fence.

It looked like an impossible chasm to cross and his determination faltered.

He sank to the ground and brought his knees to his chest in an effort to ease the cramps. Resting his forehead on his knees, Martin chewed his lip to keep from moaning out loud, eventually tasting blood on his tongue, but the pain there was barely noticeable. His hands were still secured behind his back – he didn't have the energy or inclination to do anything about it.

FULL MOON & CHINA WHITE

Martin's stomach twisted again and he broke out in a cold sweat. Tipping to the ground and trying to curl into a ball, nothing else mattered at the moment except riding the wave until it receded enough to move on.



Samantha moved along the crates with her gun drawn. She could hear moving feet and shouted commands, but didn't understand the words. Staying along the outside crates was the safest route at the moment. She crept along the back of one container and stopped at the corner, preparing to dash across the opening to the cover of the next container. Quickly, she peeked around to see if it was clear and immediately saw a crumpled form on the ground. Her heart clenched – it was Martin.

CHAPTER SEVEN: Found

If one had a practiced eye, one might be able to tell there was something amiss around the Full Moon offices on Pier 22. The dockworkers continued to load the ship and slowly reducing the number of crates stored on the pier without a clue that a search was in progress.

Liang knew that although many crates would eventually be gone, there were still a large number left to search. As his men roamed among them looking for the escaped FBI agent, Liang quickly weighed his options. If Zhan had, in fact turned – and that looked like a certainty at this point – what was left here? Always careful to keep his tracks covered, Mee Liang began to formulate his next possible steps in his mind.

Even if the agent was found, there would be some losses here today. He couldn't allow this scandal to scar him; he wouldn't allow it. Liang would walk away from this and live to deal again. With a plan finalized, the Triad chief was a picture of controlled calm as he waited for the deadline in his mind to arrive.



Quickly looking around, Samantha knew she had little time to act. Satisfied the area was clear for the moment she immediately moved to Martin's side and kneeled down. "Martin!" she whispered as she tucked her gun away to free her hands. His body jerked at the noise and he tried to push away. "It's Samantha, Martin. I'm here to help you." The first thing she did was begin to untie his hands. As she did so, she looked him over quickly and her stomach lurched at what she saw.

Martin was more than dirty and disheveled. His dress shirt was gone, and his white t-shirt was stained brown by sweat and dirt and possibly blood. One side of his face was puffy and bruised, the eye purple and swollen shut, and his unshaven skin was marked with bloody scrapes. His feet were bare, scraped and dirty, his pants torn at the knees. When she released his arms, he moaned in pain as he brought them forward to grip his stomach. Samantha saw raw, bloody wrists and swollen fingers. Dots of dried blood lined the inner part of his left arm – injection sites, she realized.

FULL MOON & CHINA WHITE

Samantha found her throat had suddenly closed and couldn't speak as her eyes burned with growing tears. The urgency of the situation was the only thing that kept her mind on track; she bent low and took his face in her hands, turning it toward her so he could see her with his uninjured eye. The misery she saw in the normally bright blue almost crumbled her resolve. Instead, she set her jaw and captured his attention and spoke with determination.

"We have to move, Martin, you hear me? We have to get out of sight. I'm here to help you."

"Sam?" The word was a bare whisper from his cracked lips. "God, it hurts!"

She helped him to sit. "I know, Marty, I know. Just a little longer, okay? Hang on for me just a little longer."

"Don't know . . . I'll try."

"Yes, Martin, you can do it. I have to look for a place to hole up. I'll be right back." When she released him he sank down into a pitiful huddle. Panic made her heart race, but she forced herself to proceed with caution. She drew her gun again and looked around with a more critical eye. One of the crates had to be open.

Darting back to the outer crates she studied the locking mechanism and gave the locking bar an experimental tug. It didn't move. With a silent curse she made her way back to her partner and squatted down. "Okay," she said firmly. "Let's go." She wrapped one of his arms around her shoulder and fought to stand. Dead weight would have been easier as he resisted straightening up. "Come on, move your feet," she urged.

With a low groan, Martin leaned into her and dragged one foot after another; Samantha could tell that all he wanted to do was double over. She pulled him around the corner and guided him to the next container. She tried that latch, again without luck. She swore softly and moved on. He hung heavily on her shoulder, panting rapidly. Samantha tried to ignore his pasty complexion and cold, clammy skin as well as the rising fear in her heart. "You're doing fine . . ." The next crate's door was already ajar and Samantha picked up the pace. She heard distant voices; they would be here soon.

The metal container door was stiff, the latch rusty in patches where the paint had peeled. It took some muscle – difficult with Martin hanging on one side – but she pried the door open enough to squeeze in and dragged the miserable agent inside. She propped him against the wall to secure the door.

"Stay on your feet, Martin," she ordered in a no-nonsense whisper. She put her gun away and pulled the door shut; it didn't move easily. When it was finally shut, they were shrouded in darkness and stale air. Small vents in the roof allowed a minimal of light, but even if it was dark, Samantha knew they were visible if the crate door was opened.

A soft moan from Martin caught her attention and she watched him slide slowly into a miserable slump. "No," she whispered, "not here." She glanced around

and saw the dark shapes of stacked boxes toward the back. Moving to him she unceremoniously grabbed the front of his shirt with both hands and hauled him up.

“Okay, okay,” he mumbled. Then he gasped and every muscle in his body contracted.

Samantha pulled him to the back and behind the boxes, deep in a corner. She heard the skitter of varmint feet and dust motes swirled above them in the feeble rays of light; she fought an urge to sneeze. Martin retched dryly. She let him down as gently as she could in the darkest spot she could find. Something crunched under their weight and the wall they were against felt sticky, but neither one cared at this moment.

“Oh, God,” Martin gasped as his body curled tightly on itself.

All Samantha could do was hold him close and watch his back. “Shhh,” she crooned with her eyes turned toward the front of the container. He quieted with her comfort, enabling her to again get her weapon in hand.

Samantha knew that there were frantic thoughts in her mind that she was ignoring. For now, it was a deadly game of hide and seek and their survival depended entirely on her. She had to keep her cool.

CHAPTER EIGHT: 1 Hour Found

The DEA command center was quiet at the moment. Jack knew that the surveillance had been set up rather quickly after Martin's disappearance, and the lead agent was not happy.

"We've been putting together a case for two years now. Two years!" The agent in charge was in Victor Fitzgerald's face on Jack's arrival. Jack knew immediately that his meeting with the Deputy Director was already in the toilet. He stood on the Director's right hand as the DEA man finished his tirade.

When the DEA representative stalked off, Fitzgerald grabbed Jack's elbow and steered him away from the surveillance team.

"What have you done to find my son? How did this happen? Can't you control your team better than this, Jack?" The man spoke through clenched teeth.

"It was something Martin did on his own. It was a fluke. He walked into it with no idea."

"My son was using FBI resources. You should have known."

Jack got in the Director's face. "I don't micromanage my team! There's no way any of us would have seen this coming." Jack took a step back and forced his voice to a level tone. "My concern right now is finding Martin and getting him back, which won't be too easy with DEA taking lead and my getting called to useless meetings. Now if you're through, I will get back to finding your son."

The Deputy Director's jaw worked furiously. Jack turned on his heel and pulled his cell phone from his jacket pocket. "Come on, Sam, pick up the damn phone," he grumbled as he walked to his car. When she didn't pick up, he slammed the phone shut. It immediately rang. "Malone."

"Jack, it's Viv. I found a vantage point where I can see the Full Moon office, but I need a telescope to see any detail. I can see that there's something going on. Liang's heading to the ship."

"Hold on." Jack jogged to where a DEA team was listening to the Full Moon office via a planted microphone. "What's going on? Liang's going to the ship."

An agent with headphones motioned for quiet. His partner took Jack aside and spoke quietly. "Nothing. We've heard nothing. Liang is staying outside the building and we can't monitor in that area. We have to rely on visual."

Just then, the man's phone rang and he flipped it open. "Dickenson." He nodded, and frowned. "It's too early. We don't have anything yet. We have to wait for the next ship to dock later tonight before we move, Schuler, it's too early." After a few 'uh-huhs', the agent hung up.

"Too early for what?" Jack asked, his eyes demanding an answer.

"To move. We can't move until a certain Full Moon ship docks later tonight. We suspect there's a shipment of China White heroin on it. It will wrap up this whole investigation. I'm sorry about your man, but we can't move too early."

Jack jabbed his finger in agent Dickenson's face. "Agent Fitzgerald is in this position due to no fault of his own. If I see a chance to get him, I will."

"You foul up this investigation, Agent Malone, and I'll have your head on a platter."

"You just try." Jack turned on his heel and stormed back to his car. The phone rang again and he opened it with a little more force than was necessary. "Malone!" he barked.

"Jack, it's Danny. I went to the parking lot but I can't find Samantha anywhere. I did find a hole in the fence . . ."

"That's just great!" he snapped. "I'll be right there." As he started the car, Jack wondered what the hell else could possibly go wrong today.



Samantha held Martin close to her in the darkness. She felt the spasms wrack his body and felt completely useless. He was wringing wet with cold sweat and making a valiant effort to keep quiet, but every once in a while his groans made her heart break.

She kept her eyes on the door and her gun in her hand for what seemed like an eternity. She could hear the sound of the search going on outside and prayed Martin would keep quiet. One time, the container door groaned as someone pulled it open a crack, but no further; it wouldn't go any further. After she heard some muttered discussion and a small flashlight poked in the darkness in a less than thorough manner, the door was pushed shut again. Then she heard a noise that made her stomach flip – they latched the crate door.

"Shit," she whispered.

Martin had finally relaxed a little, his latest spasms leaving him completely drained. Samantha moved out from under him and gently laid him down. Holstering her gun, she decided to check the door but instead, turned to her partner and friend and gently stroked his rough cheek.

Leaning in close, she whispered. "I have to look around, okay? You need to be quiet."

FULL MOON & CHINA WHITE

Martin's panting had become less frantic and his good eye fluttered open. He nodded once, his lips moving slightly as he breathed, "Okay," and then he closed his eye and lay still. She cringed at what he may be laying on.

Samantha softly brushed his temple with her lips and turned away. She got to the doors and, noticing it was quiet outside, pulled out her cell phone. In the light the phone face provided, she saw the words "NO SERVICE" and groaned. Looking around she realized that with the metal container sealed, she shouldn't be surprised. Her eyes found the ceiling vents – it was her only chance.

She pocketed the phone and fell on the boxes. The wooden crates were empty, the lids loose, but still in good shape. She started moving them around after she was sure no one was outside and stacked them under a vent. Climbing to the top she discovered that the vents were mostly rusted, some almost eaten through completely. She pulled her gun out and removed the magazine and chambered bullet, then frowned apologetically at the weapon. *'Not the best way to treat you, I know, but you're all I got,'* she thought as she grabbed the barrel and began tapping at the vents with the butt of the gun.

It didn't take long to break out enough vents to make a hole big enough for her slim body. She only hoped no one heard her; reloading the gun, she dragged up another box and stood on it. Her head and shoulders poked up into the sun.

All she saw was an expanse of container roofs and the office on the far side. *'A direct path,'* she smiled as she pulled herself out onto the roof. She only heard the distant noises of ship loading and wondered where the searchers went. Hesitant at first, she moved slowly along the roof and jumped to the next one. *'Where is everybody?'* she wondered. Carefully she stood up straighter and looked toward the office. There, she saw the dark form of Liang walking toward his sedan. His driver opened the door for him, and Liang got in. The sedan was soon in motion. It drove to the ship and stopped next to a loading ramp.

Activity at the office caught her attention again and she silently moved closer. Two men dragged a large wooden crate to a waiting fork lift. The box was loaded up and followed the path of the sedan. It veered off at the ship, however, and continued up the loading ramp and disappeared inside the ship. Soon, a golf cart with two men pulled up next to the sedan and paused. Then, it followed the forklift's path up the ramp.

The sedan drove away, heading to the pier exit. Samantha got as close to the office as she dared and jumped down. It was a long drop and it took a moment for her feet to stop stinging from the landing – she was glad she wore flat pumps. She pulled her gun and made it to the back of the office building, peeking in a small window into what looked like a break room. There was a table and a refrigerator, coffee maker and

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'Sugar.' Samantha recalled that jails and prisons used sugar and vitamins to ease the symptoms of heroin withdrawals for inmates. They called them *'kick packs.'* She

slipped around the corner and found an unlocked back door. When she reached the break room, Samantha loaded up her pocket with sugar and took two water bottles from the refrigerator before she heard voices from the front office. She darted into a small storage room and closed the door.

The voices she heard in the break room were speaking Chinese so she gave up trying to listen and looked around the closet. The door had a vented panel on the bottom portion that threw lines of light on the floor. Samantha noticed dark stains on the floor and wall. Using a tiny pocket flashlight, she looked at the stains – dried blood. She looked around the room with a more critical eye and saw that a bucket and most of the bottles were knocked over. Some of the bottles were on the floor. Someone had struggled in here. Martin? Sun? Holding the flashlight in her mouth, the agent pulled out a latex glove from her coat pocket and scraped some of the dried blood into it using her fingernail. Then she tied the glove shut and cringed. *‘Not the best method, but it will have to do,’* she thought.

It seemed like an eternity before the break room was quiet again so she could slip out. The office area was practically deserted, she realized. Part of her was relieved that they had stopped searching, but another part of her wondered why; that made her more nervous. Did they go to the ship?

She darted back among the boxes and worked her way to the back row. She was about to approach the container where Martin was, but at the last moment she noticed a golf cart driven by a pair of men checking the inside of the fence. *‘Damn,’* she thought as she watched them find the hole she had used. By their actions, however, it looked like they assumed Martin had used it to get out because they were studying the junk pile and parking lot beyond the fence.

Samantha knew it was time to make a call, because she wasn’t going to be able to get out now. The agent backed into a dark spot and pulled out her phone. Jack answered in two rings.

“Where the hell are you?” Jack demanded. His tone told Samantha that things outside the fence were not going well, either.

She spoke with a low voice. “I found Martin. We’re in a blue metal shipping container east of the Full Moon office.”

Jack’s voice softened. “How is he?”

“Not good. Look, I don’t think I can get him out right now. The fence line is being patrolled from the inside. Do either Scott or Schuler have any idea where Sun might be? I looked around in the office a little and found some blood.”

“No. They said less than an hour ago that it appears to be business as usual. Liang may suspect he’s been infiltrated. He’s being careful – not saying much, keeping off the phones. He just left the grounds.”

“I know, I saw,” Samantha said. “They took a crate from the office and loaded it on the ship.”

Jack hesitated. “What did the crate look like? How big?”

“Wood. I’d say about four-by-four . . .”

FULL MOON & CHINA WHITE

“Shit – big enough for a man. I think you may have found Sun.” Jack’s voice took on an urgent tone. “Sam, you get in that container and sit tight. Don’t move, you hear me?”

“Sure, but I can’t use the phone when I’m in there . . .”

“Then check in every half hour or when you hear the shit hit the fan.” The connection cut off and Samantha pocketed the phone. Her heart pumped stronger in anticipation – something was going down very soon.

She kept a sharp eye on the patrol and as soon as they were out of sight she moved to the container door. Her heart sank; a shiny, new lock hung from the latch.

CHAPTER NINE: 2 hours found

From the cover of the parking lot Jack called Vivian and told her to head for the command post. Danny raised his eyebrows questioningly in reaction to Jack's latest phone conversations.

"You know where Martin and Sun are?"

"I know where Martin and Sam are," Jack said sharply with a nod toward the lines of containers on the dock. "In a blue container."

Danny looked through the fence. "I hate to tell you, but there are a lot of blue containers in there."

"Yeah, I know. This one is on the outer edge and that's all I know. Samantha is near it and Martin is in it. As far as Sun goes, I think he just got loaded on the boat." Jack pulled out his phone and punched the buttons. "Now I've just got to convince DEA that their stakeout may be costing lives."

Jack asked for Dickenson, the DEA lead agent. When he was on the line Jack told him what Samantha had seen and his suspicion that Sun was in the crate. He listened for a moment and then said, "What? He just left?" Another pause. "I'm warning you, something's going down and I will get my agents out of there, you hear me?"

Snapping the phone shut with a little more force than necessary, Jack dropped the device in his coat pocket and ran his hands through his hair, letting out an explosive breath.

"What's up?" Danny ventured.

"Liang just left in his limo. I don't like this. I don't like this at all . . ."

Danny cocked his head, thinking. After a moment he straightened. "You think Liang's fleeing? Then that means Sun is probably dead."

"Or will be soon." Jack slipped into the car and Danny followed suit. They both watched the dock for a several minutes.

"Should we follow Liang?"

"He's DEA's problem. My interest is right here." Jack stared at the containers again, trying to figure Liang's next move. "We're going back to the command post," he finally said, starting the car.

"What if Samantha comes back here?" Danny asked.

FULL MOON & CHINA WHITE

“She’s pinned down for now. I think the next move involves the ship.” Dropping the sedan into gear, Jack sped from the parking lot.



Samantha circled the container and kept out of the patrolling guards’ sight. All the containers were uniform in size, and all at least ten feet high and smooth sided; there was no way she was getting to the roof without some kind of ladder.

As she slipped between the containers looking for something to stack and climb, she was also aware of the sun breaking out of the cloud cover. With the doors shut the container Martin was in would soon be uncomfortably hot and Samantha knew he couldn’t deal with much more; he was probably dangerously dehydrated already. The bottles of water in her jacket felt incredibly heavy as time passed.

The perimeter guards had just passed a small shack separate from the office building. Samantha eyed it, wondering if there could possibly be a ladder inside. She had just reached the door and put her hand on the doorknob when she heard gunshots – two of them coming from the direction of the ship. The shots were faint, only audible because of a lull in the working machinery on the docks, but definitely gunshots.

Samantha’s heart raced. She pulled her weapon and froze, listening. First there was some distant shouting, then louder voices, and then she heard a flurry of more gunfire and the sound of running feet.

Samantha dashed back among the cover of the shipping containers and wondered what was going on. Flattened against the warm metal of a container, she saw the security guards in the golf cart speed by, heading toward the ruckus near the loading area. Samantha knew she had a spare few minutes to act.

She wended her way back to the blue container and moved to the doors. Glancing around quickly, she took aim and shot the lock from the container and started to wrestle with the rusty bar that latched the door shut.

“Come on, you rotten thing,” she growled as she worked, her palms stinging from the effort. Finally, the latch gave and she used her body to pry the door open enough to slip in.

Her breathing sounded loud in the confines of the container. Samantha tugged the door mostly shut, and then turned and allowed a few seconds for her eyes to adjust to the dim inside. Sweat immediately percolated along her hairline – it was much hotter in here than when she left.

Wiping her forehead with the heel of her hand, Samantha carefully worked her way to the back of the container. “Martin?” she softly called. “It’s Sam. How are you . . .”

She didn’t finish her sentence. Martin was lying on the dirty floor and unresponsive. Samantha darted to him and dropped to her knees. “Martin!” she

urgently whispered as she gently laid her hand on his cheek - he was burning up and slick with sweat.

“Stay with me, Martin, you hear me?”

The firmness of Samantha’s voice belied the sick and scared jittering of her nerves. She pulled him up to a slumping sit against the wall and sat close, resting his head on her shoulder. She continued to speak nonstop, trying to lure her partner from the darkness where he dwelled. Twisting a water bottle open, she worked it between his lips.

“Here’s some water. You need to drink, Martin. You’re burning up. Come on . . .”

At first the trickle ran from the corner of Martin’s cracked, dry lips. She angled his head back a little more and the water mostly stayed in his mouth. Continuing to urge him to drink, she finally felt a surge of hope when he coughed and sputtered, and his eyes fluttered.

“Martin! That’s right, drink up. Please, you need to drink.”

The sounds outside the container grew louder. More shots in rapid succession made Samantha automatically hunch over. Her hand holding the bottle shook, but she kept her voice even and continued to urge Martin to swallow.

Shouting. Running feet. An order to stop. Then the earsplitting noise of bullets striking the container as pieces of the surrounding wooden crates exploded in splinters. Samantha threw her body over the injured agent as she heard bullets sizzle around them.

The pursuit moved on, the voices fading and gun fire waning.

Then it grew quiet. Intent on her task, Samantha sat up, and with trembling hands, continued to try and revive Martin. She felt helpless and she hated it. Tears began to sting her eyes as she determinedly ignored them and focused on Martin.

A welcome wash of relief instantly relaxed her when Samantha finally heard Danny calling her name; she didn’t even notice the tears that traced her cheek.

“Here!” She yelled. “Danny! In here!”

“Samantha! Keep talking!”

“Blue container! The door is open a little!”

Protesting creaks and the pop of forced metal as the doors were forced open never sounded so wonderful. The crate was flooded in light and Samantha felt a rush of fresh air. “In the back, Danny!” she called. “Get an ambulance . . .”

Danny and Jack stepped in the crate side by side and carefully made their way to the back. Jack arrived first and dropped to one knee. Samantha glanced at him with a grateful smile, and then returned to her efforts.

“He’s unconscious. I got a little water in him . . .” She knew her voice sounded desperate, but didn’t care.

Jack reached down and felt Martin’s forehead. Danny’s voice murmured in the background as he called for a medical team. Vivian worked her way around Jack and squatted down on the other side of Martin.

FULL MOON & CHINA WHITE

“We’ll help you now, Samantha. Here, let’s sit him up straighter . . .”

“I think they gave him something,” Samantha explained. “I think it was heroin . . . there’s injection marks in his arm.”

Vivian reached over and lifted Martin’s lax eyelid. The pupil was dilated and unnaturally wide in the available light. Jack looked grim.

“Paramedics are waiting for the scene to be secured before they’ll come in,” Danny said sharply.

“What’s happening out there, Jack?” Samantha snapped, her attention split between her boss and her partner. “Did you find Sun?” The brief silence caught her attention, and she turned back to Jack and held his gaze. His eyes burned.

“Sun’s dead,” Jack said flatly.

Samantha felt sick.

CHAPTER TEN: Five hours found

Something cool was on his upper lip, tickling his nose. His breathing sounded way too loud and he could sense motion around him. Martin forced his eyes open; everything was blurry. He tried to push up to a sit but hands held him down.

‘No...’ he thought as panic swelled. He began to fight.

“Hold still, Martin, you’ll pull out the I.V.”

He felt a familiar sting on his forearm and redoubled his efforts to get away. Something crashed to the floor.

“Martin!”

“Get security in here . . .”

Sudden nausea made him reel, and Martin rolled aside. He felt cold floor beneath his feet for a second before falling to his knees. Blinking rapidly, the agent’s mind began to catch up. He looked wildly around as medical personnel crowded him and tried to lift him to his feet.

“What . . .” His father’s face suddenly appeared in front of him.

“Stop, Martin, they are helping you! You’re in the hospital.”

The lights stung his eyes. They watered, blurring his vision. Martin could feel hands guiding him to a bed or a gurney – he couldn’t really tell. His legs refused to cooperate and he was physically lifted to the mattress. “Where’s Samantha?” he asked, the words hard to push out his dry throat. “She was here. My gun?”

“It’s all right, son,” his father said reassuringly – or as reassuring as Victor Fitzgerald could be. “You’re safe. You just need some fluids . . .”

Martin’s mind replayed very fuzzy and confused memories, but the memory of the injections was very clear. He turned his head and lifted his arm, the shiny silver of the needle suddenly clear to his eyes.

Immediately a clash of emotions rolled like a riptide through him – the knowledge of what was happening; the humiliation of being too weak to prevent it; and toward the end, the hunger for the feeling.

“No!” he growled as he ripped the I.V. from his arm. Then he pulled the mask from his face and tried to rise.

“Martin, stop it!”

FULL MOON & CHINA WHITE

Voices barked orders and security guards suddenly appeared. They easily kept him down as restraints were applied.

“No, you don’t understand!” he pleaded, struggling against the bonds. “I don’t need it!” A nurse began to reinsert the needle. “No, please . . .” he railed, not hearing what was being said to him.

A final burst of anguish washed through him as he felt his body relax and surrender to the sedative. His thoughts became fuzzy and distant.

‘They don’t understand,’ he thought as he drifted away.

By the time the team arrived at the hospital, Jack had notified DEA of the conclusion they had come to. Dickenson had come to the same conclusion, but it had taken every man he had available to secure the massive dock area; he told the agents that he’d back up them up when he could.

In the meantime, the DEA had lost Liang. Like Jack, they now assumed he’d try to either skip the country and leave a large business behind, or come looking for Martin. Dickenson said it was possible Liang would come, but more than likely, he’d send an assassin. There were plenty available on his payroll.

The agents located Martin in radiology in the midst of an MRI. While Jack and Samantha stood by with the technician and doctor, Danny and Viv made arrangements for a defensible room.

Samantha, her arms folded in front of her, watched as Martin’s gown-clad body moved slowly into the gigantic tube.

“Why are those boards on his arms?” she asked.

The doctor studied the screen in front of him as he spoke. “He was put in restraints because he pulled out the I.V. lines. I’m sure once he comes around, he’ll be fine.”

“Comes around?” Jack queried.

“He’s had two separate head wounds and an opiate injected into him. He’s not himself right now, I’d say.”

“How long until he can talk to us?”

The doctor glanced at the clock. “I think he’ll be alert again in about an hour. He may not remember much; people with head trauma rarely remember the incident, and he’s had two events. He’s got a blunt force trauma to the back of his head and an injury to his cheekbone from hitting the ground. We’re not sure yet if they happened at the same time or not.”

“Any other injuries?”

“Other than the damage to his wrists from being tied, no.” The doctor turned his full attention to the brain slice images that began to parade across his screen.

Samantha heard every word but didn’t have the energy to comment. She was tired. And her partner was in there getting his brain photographed. And she felt something more – some twinge of loss that she hadn’t expected. Without thinking, she slipped her hand into her coat and fingered the tie. Strangely, it made her feel a little better.

When Martin's father arrived, she felt out of place and quickly slipped from the observation room, leaving Jack to deal with him. After getting coffee from a vending machine that looked more like dirty motor oil, Samantha patrolled the hallways around radiology. *'Liang could send anyone here,'* she realized, suddenly feeling a bit nervous. To calm herself, she kept in motion.

When Martin was finally released from radiology, he was wheeled to intensive care with the three FBI agents keeping an eye out. Victor was on the phone trying to find the best neurologist in the city. Jack simply looked tired. Martin did not stir, and Samantha was glad. She didn't want to see him in pain again – not like that.

As they hooked up monitor after monitor, Samantha studied Martin's lax face. It was amazing that he looked that bad after less than a day. His face was a sickly pallor with charcoal bags hanging below his usually expressive eyes. One side of his face was swollen and nearly black from bruising – he surely had a broken cheekbone, she guessed. His hair was unkempt and wild; Sam fought the urge to reach over and smooth it down.

Dragging her eyes away from his face, she instead, turned to his wrists. The swelling in his hands had finally gone down, but it only revealed more of the raw circles of skin where he'd been tied. His arms were strapped to what looked like boards to keep his elbows from bending and prevent his removing the I.V.

And those needle marks . . . she shuddered.

"My wife's coming from D.C." Director Fitzgerald's voice at her shoulder made Samantha jump. "She should be here within the hour."

She nodded, but noticed that the Director's eyes were on his son. "I'm sure he'll be all right," she said softly, her gaze also returning to the recumbent form.

The Director didn't reply. Instead, his jaw worked silently and then after a minute, he left the room. Samantha could see him talking with the nursing staff. She pulled a metal and plastic chair from the corner of the room and set it next to the bed and settled in it with a tiny sigh. After a little adjusting, she found a bearable position with one hand resting on Martin's forearm and fell into a light doze.



It was a dream involving running – and an unexplained sense of fear. A monster was at his heels, nipping and snarling, but every time he looked back, all Martin saw was soul-sucking blackness.

The air thinned. Taking great gasps of air did little to calm the burn in his lungs. Martin turned right and found himself in a thick forest. The beast's snarl turned into a roar and Martin felt its leap as a sharp burn on his back. The woods smelled of burned wood and the darkness that followed him swirled around his body. He dared not look back and plunged between two massive trees. When he ran face first into a spider's web, panic exploded.

FULL MOON & CHINA WHITE

Martin awoke with a jerk which set his head pounding. He couldn't see much – just a white, speckled ceiling, and heard the fuzzy sound of far away voices and mechanical beeps. His heart raced and he caught his breath.

No spider webs. No one chasing him. He felt his heart slow.

Martin tried to sit up, but found his body oddly numb and unresponsive. He tried again, confused by the fact that he couldn't seem to get his arms to work right. The effort was exhausting, and once he realized he was in a hospital, he relaxed a little. Slowly, he turned his throbbing head to one side and was surprised, then relieved, to see Samantha sitting next to him, obviously asleep. His eye fell to her hand on his arm; he would have smiled, but it hurt too much at the moment.

His thoughts were annoyingly fuzzy. *'What happened?'* he wondered for a moment, but any effort to organize the vague pictures in his mind was tiring. It was easier just to relax and let his gaze linger on Samantha.

She must have felt his stare because it wasn't long before her eyes fluttered open. Samantha sat up straighter and rubbed her eyes, and then glanced quickly around before finding his face.

"Hey!" she called softly, putting both hands on his arm. "You're awake."

"Kinda," he croaked.

Her brown eyes shined with a sad smile – Martin realized her eyes looked sad often, but there was something else there that niggled his instincts.

"How do you feel?" she asked.

"Fuzzy." And drained. And totally numb, actually, he thought as he tried to figure out her expression. Martin could tell his mind wasn't working on all cylinders; his head throbbed and he realized he couldn't bend his arm. He tensed; his eyes flicked down and he tried to raise his arm. "What . . . ?"

"It's all right, Martin, you were a little upset when you came in. You tore out the I.V." Samantha's voice was soothing, but did little to ease his mind. "You remember?"

"I don't . . . my head hurts." He tried to touch his head again. "Get these off of me, will you?" Martin became irritated with the restraints, his pain and the confused muddle of memories – and something about Samantha's attitude was wrong. If only he could think . . . "Samantha. Get them off."

Martin knew his voice broadcast his growing anger. Samantha stood, her hands still pressed on his forearm and keeping him from raising it. "Calm down, Martin, or they won't do anything for you." She glanced up.

He turned to where she was looking and saw a nurse making a beeline to his room. He also saw Jack striding down the hall toward him; the form was blurry around the edges, but Martin recognized the gait and outline. Automatically, he tried to rise.

"Martin, I mean it," she whispered as the nurse entered. "You have to calm down."

The agent didn't reply, but did try to keep still. The anxiety he felt seemed to stall for the moment as he realized he needed more information – something was off. His eyes leveled on the nurse.

"I'm Rachel. How are you feeling, Agent Fitzgerald?" the nurse asked matter-of-factly as she checked the I.V.

"Fine," he snapped. "Get these things off me."

Rachel took a step back and collected a chart, and then began writing on it without meeting his eyes. "I'm afraid the doctor will make that decision. He's on his way. You feeling any pain?"

At the question, Martin's stomach did a twist. Caught by surprise, he tried to bring his knees up and gasped. The fact that his legs wouldn't move didn't register at first; the sharpness of the pain was overwhelming.

"The cramps should lessen soon. We're hydrating you and using something to flush out the drugs."

Martin could see Jack entering the room behind Rachel, so instead of yelling at the nurse like he wanted, he managed to grind his teeth and keep his mouth shut. The cramp faded, and he relaxed, wet with sweat.

"Here comes the doctor now." Rachel stepped aside as an older man stepped through the door.

Then something odd happened. Both Jack and Samantha stepped to the end of the bed and blocked the doctor, not letting him by until Rachel and Jack exchanged a few, quiet words. As the doctor approached, Martin knew something was definitely wrong.

"What is it?" he croaked, staring at Jack in defiance. "What's going on?"

CHAPTER ELEVEN: Six hours found

When he turned aside to let the doctor by Jack met Martin's gaze and held it. Samantha stood by his side.

"As soon as the doctor is finished, Martin, we'll talk."

The doctor checked Martin's eyes, and the agent shook off the doctor's hand. He could feel the cold sweat and telltale tremble of his muscles begin - soon the cramps would start again. He didn't have the time or patience to wait. "Tell me, damn it," he demanded, his voice hoarse.

"Mr. Fitzgerald," the doctor interrupted. "I'm Dr. Temple and I need to examine you. Lie still." The doctor's touch on Martin's face painfully surprised him, as his eye was so swollen he never saw the man reach for him.

Martin felt as if nothing was in his control - he felt like he did in that shed.

He turned to Dr. Temple. "The only thing you can do for me is get these things off me," he barked, jerking his restrained leg and lifting his bound hand. "You hear me?"

"Agent Fitzgerald!" Jack's sharp order caught both Martin's and the doctor's attention. Martin glared at him and Samantha also turned to their boss, but her eyes were wide with surprise. "You will let this doctor examine you, and then we'll talk. Understand?"

Everyone was still for tense, long seconds as Martin and Jack's gazes locked. For a fleeting second, Martin considered telling his boss to fuck off, but instead, he held his tongue. His head hurt too much to argue. Besides, soon it would be too hard to discuss anything if the expected pain returned.

The injured agent laid back and focused on the ceiling, the flexing of his hands and his tattered breathing the only indications of his stress. Dr. Temple started again.

Quickly checking Martin's eyes, he began to talk softly. "The bones around your eye socket cracked in two spots, but should heal in time. The damage to your wrists is superficial. We just have to keep the area clean. You also have a concussion - between that and the fractures you're in for a painful few days." He checked reflexes in the agent's arms and legs. "It takes about seven days to detox from the heroin, but you'll be feeling better before that."

At the mention of the drug, Martin's stomach flipped. He continued to stare at the ceiling, humiliated, and wishing that neither Jack nor Samantha were here. Finally, the doctor brought up the restraints.

"I'll release you from the leg restraints now, and if you are calm, I'll take the ones off your arms in a couple of hours. I don't want you hurting yourself anymore because you can't control yourself."

"Take them off now," Martin demanded. He could feel the twisting in his gut starting. All he wanted to do was curl up in a ball.

"I don't think . . ."

"Take them off now! I'm not going anywhere!"

Samantha appeared at his side and he felt her soft hands on his arm. The human contact was the elixir he needed to physically relax; he felt his body do just that without any conscious thought. "Martin," she said levelly. "He's here to help you. We all are."

Martin turned to her. He studied Samantha's face and eyes - she would tell him what he wanted to know. "What happened?" he asked in a reasonable tone. "I saw Mr. Sun being tortured . . ." The memory came in a flash - walking in Sun's store; being tied up; a shack that smelled like brine; blood on an overturned chair. And then there were the needles . . . "Tell me," he pleaded. "What happened to Sun?"

Samantha held his eyes as she chewed her lower lip in thought. Martin felt himself tense up with each passing second of silence. She absently rubbed his forearm with one hand, and then quickly glanced at Jack. Martin saw him give her a tiny nod when the doctor made his final notes on the chart and finally left.

"Martin," Samantha said. "Alex Sun is dead."

Martin stared, not comprehending the words for a moment. *'Dead? He was just a lonely old man that missed his son. How could he be dead?'* The words finally sank in and the next word fell from his mouth. "How?"

"He was executed, Martin." The words were jarring. Jack moved to his side and demanded his attention with a pointed stare. "His son is testifying against the Triad here in New York. He's in hiding until the trial."

The words were not making complete sense to Martin. Something was missing; something didn't connect. "So they killed Sun to . . . what? Scare his son into not testifying?" Unbridled anger rose alarmingly fast. "He hadn't seen his son in 10 years!"

"Because his son made sure his father couldn't be found by the Triad." Jack explained. "Soun-dai Zhan - his son - knew what kind of business he was getting involved in. Zhan gave his parents new identities and new lives twelve years ago. They were safe." Jack stopped. Martin narrowed his eyes, trying to put the pieces together.

Then it hit him. Martin groaned and sank back into the pillow in the horrid realization. "Oh my God. I lead them right to him didn't I?"

FULL MOON & CHINA WHITE

"You couldn't have known, Martin," Samantha added quickly. "You couldn't have known because Sun didn't know."

"You were just helping someone, Martin. It was all a remarkable fluke in timing." Jack paused again.

Guilt crept in around his mental defenses; Martin tried to focus on some other facet of the facts, some other way to deflect the rising tide of shame, but it would not be denied. It was all his fault that an innocent man had died. "Who was it?" he finally asked. "Who killed Sun?"

"We don't know who pulled the trigger but the man that ordered it was Mee Liang. He runs Full Moon shipping, which is on the dock where we found you. We can't physically connect Liang to Sun yet." Jack's silence caught Martin's attention and he glanced at his boss. "Do you remember seeing this man with Sun?" Jack pulled a black and white photo from his coat pocket and held it in front of Martin.

Martin's stomach lurched at the sight of the man in black. "Yes," he choked. "He was with Sun when he was being . . . tortured." Martin's throat clenched shut at the full realization of what he'd done. He felt sick and his head throbbed. The tightness in his gut intensified; his thoughts fell into a jumble and the world around him faded into the background as knives of pain pierced his stomach.

"Martin!" Samantha's voice sounded far away.



Samantha watched helplessly as Martin's eyes glazed over and he drifted away from them; then, he doubled over and trembled. She knew it was hopeless to continue. The monitors attached to Martin went crazy, which resulted in the instantaneous appearance of the nurse.

"He's in so much pain." Samantha felt stupid stating the obvious, but there was nothing she could do and hated the feeling of helplessness.

"We can't give him anything for it," the nurse replied, busying herself with the I.V. "He's being hydrated and monitored. It will just take time for the withdrawals to fade. In the meantime, these other injuries will have time to heal, too."

Samantha turned to Jack, unable to watch any longer. He indicated with a tilt of his head that they should leave the room.

"I need to check with DEA and see if they've found Liang. Viv and Danny should be here soon, so we can set up a schedule to keep an eye on things. Nobody comes in here without escort and referrals until Liang is found. I'll be back in a few minutes."

Jack pulled out his phone and stepped out of the ICU to contact Dickenson. Samantha turned back toward Martin's room and studied the figure trying to curl up under sheet, the arm restraints making it impossible. After jotting some notes the nurse returned to the main nurse's station. Samantha watched Martin's struggle to get in a comfortable position; she felt so bad for him.

Finding her way back in his room, she stood by the bed and looked down on him. It took a little time, but the worst of the spasms seemed to abate and his eyes flicked open and immediately found hers. Martin's breathing evened out; she picked up a washcloth and ran it over his forehead. Intense blue eyes stayed locked with hers.

"Samantha," Martin's voice sounded weak and hoarse. "Take off the restraints. I can't get comfortable."

"I can't, Martin," she replied, running the soft cloth over his temple.

Martin issued a short, mirthless laugh. "I can't go anywhere like . . . this. Please. One arm." She saw that his breathing was becoming strained again and the monitors began to dance. Martin tried, unsuccessfully, to wrap his arm around his stomach. He groaned, and spoke through gritted teeth. "It would help with the cramps . . . please."

Samantha could see that the narrow bed already made it difficult for Martin to curl up; it was obvious that he wanted to do just that. He groaned again and squeezed his eyes shut, his stare finally cut off. She shook her head, and then reached for the restraint. It came away easily, and Martin immediately wrapped the arm around his stomach.

"Thank you," he whispered.

Ashamed that that was all she could do and unable to watch him suffer, Samantha left the room and posted herself outside with her back to him. It took all her concentration to keep her stinging eyes from overflowing.

CHAPTER TWELVE: 7 hours found

By the time all of Martin's tox screen and films came back the doctor had determined that the agent could be moved to a private room. This news helped Samantha to relax; the comings and goings of the staff were more easily monitored in private quarters and any confrontations, even low-key ones like had been with the doctor, could be done in the hallway and out from Martin's view. The ICU had been much too open and the recovering agent didn't need any more grief.

Martin appeared to sleep through the change in rooms. Samantha wasn't completely convinced that he was, in fact, asleep. For some reason, she had the feeling that he was playing opossum. Why, she couldn't say, but she didn't blame him; he had a lot to contend with right now. She hoped that Martin would eventually realize that he was safe with this friends and cohorts watching over him and get some real rest.

Jack was in and out of the scene touching bases with both DEA and FBI sources, as well as Director Fitzgerald's contacts. Mee Liang seemed to have simply disappeared from the city of New York. Jack schooled the team to not let their guard down, however. Liang was known as being both shrewd and calculating – if he saw Martin as a loose end, he wouldn't be obvious about his attack. The man had enough money, contacts and influence to get the job done right.

Samantha rubbed her eyes. The chair outside of Martin's room was unforgiving. Her shift would end in about an hour when Danny would relieve her and she was guiltily pleased at the timing – Martin's mother was due in about that time and she wasn't sure she wanted to deal with that. Danny would be much better at it. He had a way with mothers; they always wanted to take him home and feed him cookies or whatever it was that mothers did with wayward strays. She snorted a short laugh at the thought. Somehow she knew that whoever was married to Victor Fitzgerald wouldn't fall in that mold and it made her wonder what kind of woman Martin's mother was. Her curiosity, however, wasn't strong enough to entice her to stick around.

Samantha checked her watch and considered looking in on Martin again. Standing from the molded plastic that claimed to be a chair, she stretched, nodded a greeting to a passing nurse, and turned to the door beside her. Pushing it open,

Samantha poked her head in and caught Martin picking at the board restraint still on the arm that held the I.V.

“Keep fiddling with that and you’re gonna be in trouble with Nurse Ratchet,” she teased, slipping into the room. She was rewarded with a tight grin, the closest thing she’d seen to a smile in way too long. Martin looked down, but not defeated. She smiled in return and stood beside him. “How are you doing?”

“Better, I think.” Martin’s voice sounded wispy. “Straps hurt.”

Martin turned his head slightly sideways, breaking eye contact. Samantha thought she saw a tinge of pink appear on his cheeks and realized he must be embarrassed by the restraints. She cleared her throat and also looked aside.

“They’ll take those off soon, I’m sure,” Samantha offered.

“Where are my clothes?” Martin asked, his voice gruff. He looked back at her and issued a weak smile. “I’m gettin’ a chill, here.” He picked at the hospital gown with his little fingers.

“I think they’re under the bed,” Samantha said, glad for the distraction. Bending over, she glanced at the metal basket attached to the bed’s underside. “Yup, that’s where they are. Not that they are worth saving.” She stood again and patted Martin’s shoulder. “Maybe your mom will bring you something.”

Wide blue eyes regarded her blankly. “My mom?”

“Yeah. Your dad said she was on her way. She should be here any time now.” Martin continued to stare at her, clearly confused. “Your dad’s already here. Don’t you remember?”

“No, not really.” Martin raised his hand and tried to run it through his hair but the restraint didn’t allow it. With a scowl, he dropped his arm. “Things are kind of a blur,” he mumbled. Then he winced.

“I bet.” A wayward lock of hair hung down across his forehead in an unruly manner and Samantha had to keep herself from brushing it aside with her fingers. She was sure he wouldn’t take that well. Martin looked so helpless at this moment; she wanted to reassure him that none of this was his fault and that it could have happened to any of them. She wanted to sit beside him and hold his hand. Before she could do any of these things, he suddenly tensed up.

“What’s wrong?” Samantha watched as Martin rolled to one side and tried to curl up. “Cramps again, huh?”

All he could do was nod and groan. After a moment, he she heard him plead, “Please, Sam, one arm? Give me one arm.”

Samantha could see that Martin was trying to wrap his arm around his stomach but the restraints made it impossible. She chewed her lip for a moment, and then made a decision. Quickly, she released the arm without the I.V. Martin immediately held himself tightly and hissed his thanks. For the next several minutes she stood helplessly, rubbing his back as he rode out the pain.

When the worst seemed to pass and Martin slowly unfolded, she could feel his trembling under her hand. Carefully, he rolled to his back; his face was pale and

damp. She took his hand, ignoring the clammy feel and forced him to meet her eyes. “Look,” Samantha said. “I’m here for another hour. Is there anything I can get or do for you, Martin?”

He smiled weakly at her. “Thanks,” he said, dropping his eyes. “But I don’t . . . wait.” He looked at her and all she saw was a lost soul. His voice was a hoarse whisper. “Maybe some socks? My feet are cold.”

She smiled. “Sure. I’ll get you fixed up.” She gently squeezed his hand just before she turned and left the room.



‘I should feel like a heel, using her like that,’ Martin thought as he watched his partner and friend leave the room. *‘But I’ve got to get out of here before Mom arrives. It’s my last chance.’*

Fumbling fingers finally released his other arm from the board restraint. Martin eyed the I.V. but decided to leave it for the time being. It would be the last thing to go. He slipped from the bed and stood, taking a moment to find his balance before bending down and retrieving his clothes – balancing was difficult, but he finally dragged the items to the bed. He shook out the pants. *‘Damn,’* he thought as he noticed the ripped knees generally filthy appearance. *‘That may be a problem.’* Shakily, he still slipped on the pants and quickly examined the similarly soiled t-shirt. Martin turned the shirt inside out. *‘It’ll have to do,’* he thought as he started to slip out of the hospital gown. It was then that I.V. became a problem.

Carefully, he pulled out the needle and bent his arm to stop the spot of blood from growing. Then, he reached over and stopped the flow of the liquid with a turn of the adjustment wheel. Next, he slipped off the gown, put on the soiled shirt and draped the hospital gown over his street clothes. Martin looked down at himself. *‘It’ll have to do,’* he reassured himself as he slipped back into the bed. His head pounded but his resolve was strong – he had to clean up the mess he’d made of Sun’s life.

Lying back on the bed, Martin rethought his flimsy plan. After a few moments he remembered the I.V. and used the tape to stick the needle to his inner arm. Then he fiddled with the board so it looked attached, and twisted his arm sideways so the needle wasn’t visible. Next, he tugged the pant legs up to his knees and pulled the sheet and blanket over him. Satisfied, he laid back and awaited Samantha’s return. The next step would be trickier; his partner was not easily fooled.

But he was running out of time.

Within minutes, Samantha returned, her eyes dancing. “Mission accomplished!” she bragged as she pulled a pair of . . . something . . . from her pocket. Holding them aloft, her smile reduced to a frown. “Okay, so they aren’t real socks,” she said as she moved to the foot of Martin’s bed and lifted the blanket. “They are surgical booties and the best I could do for the moment. “She slipped the green

booties on each foot. “I’ll bring you some real socks after my break.” She tucked the blankets snugly over his legs and feet.

Martin chuckled, pushing down the rising guilt. “That’s fine. Thanks.” He settled back into the pillows and put on a tired face. “Could you get me some ice chips? For my throat?” He rubbed his neck and felt the artery racing under his fingertips.

Samantha smiled again, but there was still that annoying trace of sadness. “Sure. The ice machine is just behind the nurse’s station down the hall. I’ll have the nurse get it.” She picked up the cup. “I’ll be right back.”

When Samantha slipped from the room, Martin moved automatically. By the time the door clicked shut he was at the knob, pulling it open. A quick glance showed him Samantha’s back as she approached the nurses’ station and got the attention of the sole nurse behind the counter. When Samantha had the woman’s attention, Martin seized the opportunity and slipped from the room. As he stole down the hall, he felt a stab of betrayal. It was hard to ignore, but not impossible.

The only thing he could think of was to get far away before the next round of cramps hit – and he knew that wouldn’t be long. He could feel the shakiness of his gut even now; all he needed was distance and a little time before contacting Liang. He also knew that as soon as Samantha discovered him missing, the hospital would be locked up tight.

Martin had figured out what hospital he was in during the move from ICU to the room. The layout appeared in his mind as he moved down the hallway. This was on the third floor. Surgery was on the fourth floor, and with it, locker rooms and clothes. To get out of this place, he first needed to clean up.

Martin took the stairs to the fourth floor and was alarmed at his weakness in tackling steps. When he reached the top he stopped and slumped against the wall until his breathing and heart rate were normal. The nausea, however, would not be dispelled. Once again in control Martin slipped from the doors and followed the signs to surgery. Luckily, he found it crowded with waiting families and easily weaved his way through the crowd until he found a door that said “Hospital Staff Only”. Without even slowing, he pushed the door open and saw an entrance to the surgeons’ locker room.

Entering the room like he belonged there and relieved there was no one in sight, Martin quickly found several open lockers and changed into clean, borrowed street clothes. He also borrowed some cash and a clip-on identification tag. Before leaving, he glanced in a mirror and was momentarily shocked.

The left side of his face was bruised and swollen; his left eye nearly closed. No wonder his headache was so persistent. Returning to the lockers, he plucked a baseball cap from one of them and pulled off the tie he’d donned. With the top shirt buttons undone, he looked far more casual and the ball cap, when pulled down, covered most of the damage to his face. Again, it would have to do. Martin paused to

FULL MOON & CHINA WHITE

take a breath and try to settle his stomach. He also felt the tendrils of the impending cramps and knew he had to find a quiet place, fast. His palms broke into a cold sweat.

Standing up straight against the growing discomfort, Martin stepped from the locker room and made his way through the waiting area, hoping the cramps held off for just a few minutes longer. He punched the elevator 'down' button, and was momentarily pleased when an immediate 'ding' announced the arrival of a car. When the doors parted, though, he was taken aback for a fleeting second at the crowd inside. Setting his jaw, Martin stepped inside and ducked his head. The agent knew he had little time before he was in trouble and hoped to be off the elevator before the first physical assault hit him.

Luckily, he made it to the first floor. When the doors opened, he was relieved to find the hallway very busy. Martin stepped into the crowd and headed for a less-used set of doors by the employee's parking lot. There was a security guard standing by the exit, talking on a cell phone. Walking with a sure stride Martin overtook two nurses heading out the door and exchanged pleasantries with a ducked head. He could feel the eyes of the security guard on them but kept up a light hearted conversation with the nurses. The ruse worked, and they breezed right past the guard.

Once outside, Martin parted ways with the nurses and turned toward the busy street. Trying to control his breathing to hold off the cramps, he made a list in his mind.

First he needed a quiet place to ride out the cramps. Then he needed a gun. Lastly, he needed a phone to contact Liang. Martin knew where he could find all three.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN: 45 minutes missing

The rapid and frantic tapping of her finger against her bicep was the only outward sign of Samantha's anger and worry. As she stood with her arms snugly wrapped around herself, the agent felt as if her own embrace was the only thing keeping her from screaming in frustration.

She'd been gone for less than a minute. When Samantha had returned to Martin's room with the requested ice and found the bed empty, she'd stood, frozen, for several seconds. It wasn't possible; her back had been turned to the door for about fifteen seconds. Frantically, she'd searched the room, closet, and hallway before notifying hospital security and then calling in the cavalry.

Danny was the first to arrive. Since he had the next shift to watch the room, he'd been on his way anyway. Leaving Samantha to keep searching on foot, he'd headed to the security office to view the security tapes and cameras.

Viv and Jack had arrived together, both wearing grim expressions. Samantha hadn't heard much, but she knew that Martin's father wasn't making this investigation any easier in the first place. And now this; somehow, she'd dodged a dressing down by her boss for the time being because Jack was so busy with the DEA and the Director.

Samantha didn't know if she should be mad or afraid. Had Martin taken off on his own or was he kidnapped? A search of the hospital had, so far, yielded no clues either way. Jack assigned Viv oversee the search and Samantha was sent to view tapes with Danny.

"Luckily, all the exits are covered," Danny commented as he pointed out one screen that was split into six sections. "But I don't see anything suspicious yet."

Samantha chewed her lip in thought as her eyes scanned multiple screens. "I checked the stairs and elevator right away," she said out loud as she went over the steps she'd taken in those first minutes. "And put security on all exits. I mean, he had to be noticeable, wouldn't you think?"

"Not in the Emergency Room," Danny said. "Everyone's bloody in there and it's busy."

Samantha focused on the ER views for a minute. "There was plenty of security there. No one saw a thing." She didn't see anything on the tapes, either. "It was mere

seconds that he – or they – went down the stairs or elevator. Security was informed in time.”

In her periphery, she saw Danny turn toward her. “Not if they – or he – went *up* the stairs.” She cocked her head sideways and met his gaze. Danny pointed at the screen and spoke to the security officer. “Show me the film for the next floor up.”

It took a few moments. The guard punched a few buttons and a screen flickered to a new view. “There,” Samantha barked, jabbing her finger at the screen. “Coming from the stairs.” The guard paused the tape and in fuzzy black and white the two agents saw a hunched over figure emerge from the door. Samantha could tell by the pants alone that it was Martin – the holes in the knees gave him away. “What the hell is he doing?” she snapped.

Danny remained quiet as they watched the on screen figure jump to life again when the guard punched a button. They watched as the figure, obviously in pain, straighten up and start down the hall directly into a busy hallway. “No one is giving him a second look,” Danny commented. “It’s the surgery floor. Everyone is occupied with their own thoughts.” Amazed, they watched as Martin ducked into a doorway.

“What is that?” Samantha asked. “Where does that go?”

“The surgeons’ locker room,” the guard replied. He picked up a phone. “I’ll send someone in.”

The two agents continued to watch the tape. When the baseball-capped figure stepped from the locker room, both of them let out an explosive breath of frustration.

“Our prep boy is sneakier than I gave him credit for,” Danny chuckled as he ran his hand through his hair.

“But what’s he doing? What’s his plan now?” Samantha rolled her head back in frustration. “When we find him, I’ll kill him,” she mumbled.

“Get in line,” Danny replied. They watched the tape until their wayward partner disappeared inside the elevator. “Show me all exits again, just after this time frame,” he asked the security guard. Now that they knew what to look for, Martin’s escape was easily found. The guard paused the frame. “The employee’s exit. Genius.”

“It looks like he turned toward the street when he got outside,” Samantha noted. “I’ll update Jack and you check the cab companies and subway routes.”

“Where is he going? He knows we’ll be watching his place,” Danny mused at the frozen figure on the screen. Martin’s profile was now easily recognizable under the bill of the pulled-down hat.

As Samantha pulled out her phone and dialed, her feelings went from anger and worry to complete frustration. She wished she knew Martin better; she’d thought that before, but for more personal reasons. Maybe if she’d followed through on that idea earlier . . .

She shook her head to clear her thoughts and put the phone to her ear. The guard was replaying her missing team partner’s seemingly casual stroll out the exit. As the phone call connected, her eyes studied the black and white figure. Martin’s stroll wasn’t so casual after all, she noted. He was in pain, his easy gait forced.

'He needs a place to hide for a little while,' she realized. But where?

Just when she thought they had a grip on the situation, Danny tapped her on the shoulder. Samantha turned, the phone still pressed to her ear. To her dismay she saw Victor Martin striding down the hall with his arm resting lightly on the shoulders of a slim, well-dressed and neatly coiffed woman. They both walked as if the world would part before them.

"Looks like trouble," Danny whispered as the Fitzgeralds headed directly to the security room.

Samantha was glad she had the lesser of two evils to talk to; at least Jack would focus on finding their missing teammate as opposed to tasking her for letting Martin slip out from under her nose. And Jack didn't hold a grudge. She couldn't say the same for Martin's father.



Martin stepped from the cab feeling icy sweat trickle down his chest. When he peeled off the cab fare he tried to focus – unsuccessfully – on keeping the tremble from his hands. Even though his head was downcast to avoid the cabby's eyes, the agent still felt the curious stare. He mumbled a thanks and the cab pulled away.

He stuffed his hands deep in his pant pockets to hide the tremor, hunched his shoulders and walked straight across the small neighborhood park with his head bowed. He wound around, following the narrow path, until he found the secluded bench he'd remembered and dropped onto it. Martin was thankful no one else was sitting there – this is where he planned to ride out the next wave of discomfort he felt building for the last minutes.

When the cramps hit, they hit hard. Martin wrapped his arms around his stomach and leaned as far forward as he could and stifled a groan behind clenched teeth. He had no idea how long he sat there; it just seemed forever. When the attack finally released him, all Martin cared about was that no one had seen him. He was relieved.

Finally, he was able to straighten and let out a sharp breath. Lifting his chin, Martin looked carefully around, the slight breeze feeling cold on his damp skin. He was still well hidden behind the opulent shrubs, which helped him to relax. The ever so slight trembling of his limbs, however, would not abate along with a dogged feeling of nausea and throbbing headache.

Martin stood on watery legs. His goal wasn't far from here. Wishing he had a watch, the agent wondered for a moment where his team mates were. *'Ex-teammates, more than likely,'* he thought bitterly. There was no way he could do what he had in mind and be allowed back in the FBI; not that there was much of a chance anyway. He'd used FBI resources for a personal matter - that offence in itself was bad enough, but a man had died because of it. Martin saw no future. He did, however, know that he couldn't let Liang win on this one.

FULL MOON & CHINA WHITE

Martin found himself at the edge of the park and quickly crossed the street. He had to move fast now. The team would be checking the cab companies and figure out his destination. He stepped from the curb and worked his way through the light traffic and crossed the street, figuring his path in his head. Two more blocks.

Taking the most direct route, he was there within minutes. He found he was out of breath and wobbly, and took a moment outside of the apartment building to gather himself. Then, taking a deep breath to steady his jumbled nerves, Martin mounted the steps and rang for the manager at the entry door.

“Can I help you?” a man’s voice asked, sounding scratchy through the speaker.

“Mr. Flanagan? May I speak with you?” Martin tried to sound cheery.

“Who are ya?”

“Martin Fitzgerald. I met you a few times? Samantha Spade’s friend?”

There was a slight pause then the speaker barked again. “Come in.” A buzz indicated the front door was unlocked and Martin pushed his way in. From the foyer, he located the manager’s apartment and tapped on the door. It opened slowly and a short, pudgy man regarded him. “What happened to you?” he asked immediately.

Martin smiled and touched his cheek self-consciously. “Ah, work. You know. I work with Samantha at the FBI?”

“I know that. So?”

“Um, I’m on light duty because of, you know, this, so Sam . . . Miss Spade . . . asked me to pick up a couple of files in her apartment. She said you’d let me in?” Martin kept a small, polite smile on his lips.

“I don’t usually do stuff like that without a call first . . .”

“I know. Sh . . . she knows, too, but she’s undercover at the moment and can’t call. She really needs the information in those files . . .”

Mr. Flanagan eyed him a moment longer then nodded. “Okay, okay. Just a minute. Lemme get my slippers on.”

Martin waited nervously, feeling like time was running out. Finally, the manager shuffled out with a ring of keys. He sorted through them as they climbed the stairs to the second floor. Martin felt like collapsing once the finally reached the top.

The older man gave him a sideways look. “You should be at home, not on light duty,” he commented as he slipped the master key in Samantha’s lock.

“Well, I was,” Martin said. “But I got tired of staring’ at the walls.”

“I hear ya.” Flanagan pushed the door open. “There ya go.”

“Thanks. I’ll only be a minute.” Martin slipped by him and turned. “I’ll lock up again. She told me where her extra key is. Thanks.”

Before Flanagan could protest, Martin closed the door in his face and immediately headed back to her bedroom. He stopped just inside and looked around. “I know it’s here,” he said out loud. In his mind, he replayed the conversation.

‘I used to carry a backup gun. I still do sometimes.’

It was shortly after Martin had arrived at the unit and they were searching a wooded area for a missing boy. They were discussing ambushes and self-defense. Martin had asked if she carried a second gun on duty.

'When?' he asked. 'On undercover assignments?'

'Yeah, and when I know I'll be far from a command center. It's a small gun – a revolver. Five shot. I bought it as a gift to myself after I graduated from Quantico. I used to wear it all the time on an ankle holster but that limited my shoe buying options.'

Then they'd laughed.

Martin had been to Sam's apartment a couple of times, but hadn't been beyond the living room and kitchen area. Her bedroom was pretty much as he imagined it would be – feminine and practical without any extra fluff.

Practical. The gun would be easy to get to.

He moved to the bedside stand that held the alarm clock and pulled out the drawer. The small gun was in a soft leather holster and nestled amongst Chap Stick, a hand lotion bottle and tissue packets. Martin picked it up, checked that it was loaded, and tucked it in his waistband with a flash of guilt.

The next step would be more difficult. Martin had to get a message to Liang to meet him; where to meet him was the dicey part.

Martin returned to the living room and dropped on the sofa. His head hurt, his stomach felt like shit and this damned shakiness made accurate shooting problematic. Extending his right arm, Martin unfastened the cuff button and rolled up the sleeve of the purloined shirt. The numerous injections sites presented as a scattering of tiny bruises up his arm. He ran the flat of his hand up the path, feeling the tiny bumps that marked each spot. The hospital's I.V. point was the biggest bruise. His anger re-ignited at the sight of the damage and he yanked the sleeve back in place.

Then he reached for the phone next to the sofa.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN: 3 hours missing

Samantha didn't have to say much to Jack on the phone – Director Fitzgerald's raised voice in the background had been enough to bring him storming to the security office. Admirably, both men remembered where they were and kept their voices down to a tolerable level. That lasted until Viv was able to secure an empty conference room in the administrative part of the hospital.

"What have you done to find Martin? He walked out of here right under your noses!"

"It was hardly under our noses, Victor. Martin is a smart man – he knew what he was doing."

"And what, pray tell, is that? Where is he going? Do you at least know that?"

Victor and Jack were toe to toe, neither one relinquishing eye contact. Samantha was reminded of two rams preparing to butt heads. She had to turn away to keep herself from inappropriately laughing and blamed the stress of the situation. Quickly, she refocused her thoughts to get back on track over the din of the quarreling men.

Martin had been sneaky; she had to give him credit for that. Those puppy-dog eyes wouldn't fool on her a second time, she swore to herself. Samantha's train of thought came to a halt when she glanced at Mrs. Fitzgerald. The woman sat rigidly in her chair, her eyes wide and slightly glazed looking. They shone with a quivering light and Samantha realized that she was on the edge of tears. The stiff, formal posture which reeked of aristocracy and station was all a front. The woman was on the edge.

'I don't even know her first name,' Samantha thought as her previous judgments of Mrs. Fitzgerald went out the window. *'She's the reason Martin isn't like his father.'* She was human. She loved her son. And her son was now missing in dire circumstances.

Samantha sobered immediately and she looked to her team.

Danny sat with his phone to his ear, waiting on information from the cab companies. Samantha moved and sat with Vivian, the subway map between them, trying to figure out Martin's direction of travel. At the same time, they began brainstorming on their missing teammate's possible plans. Samantha fought the urge to look again to Martin's mother; the memory of the woman's eyes haunted her. Tuning in to Vivian's voice helped her to concentrate.

'Put it in a box in your mind, and put it away,' Viv had told her once. *'Good advice,'* Samantha mentally agreed, finding that telling yourself to do it and actually doing it were two vastly different things.

The moment things were starting to fall back into a working pattern, Jack's phone rang. He yanked the device from his pocket and snapped it open.

"Malone," he barked. He listened a minute, and Samantha saw his eyes flick to the director before Jack turned away from him. "Uh, huh," he said. She knew it wasn't good news. "Thanks," Jack said, sounding tired as he closed the phone. He rubbed his cheek as he put the phone back in his pocket.

"What is it?" Vivian asked instantly.

"That was Dickenson at DEA," Jack said tiredly. "The message got through. Zhang's changed his mind and refuses to testify."

"Message?" Victor roared. "You mean Sun's finger? How? Zhang was in protective custody!"

Jack shook his head. "I don't know the details. The finger showed up Zhang's room somehow."

"So they've lost their case against Liang," Samantha reasoned.

"More than that. They've lost their case against the Triad base in New York."

"But they still have that shipment coming in tonight," Samantha added.

"Not yet. Dickenson says the boat is staying off shore in international waters, just out of DEA reach and claiming mechanical problems. They're probably dumping the shipment as we speak."

"So, that still means Martin's in Liang's sights. He's the only one left that has anything against Liang." Vivian sat back, clearly unhappy.

"The last loose end," Samantha mused.

Suddenly, Danny sat up straighter and began writing rapidly. "Uh, huh," he said in the phone. "Okay, got it. Thanks." He snapped the phone closed and stood, walking to the city map hastily tacked to the wall. "The only cab in the area of the hospital when Martin left picked up a fare on the same block. He dropped off the fare here," he pointed at an intersection.

Samantha blinked. "That's only two blocks from my place," she said, puzzled. "Why there?" She was pulled from her thoughts when her phone rang. "Spade," she answered. Then her eyes grew wide and she glanced at Jack. "Martin?" she said in surprise. "Where are you?"

As soon as she mentioned Martin's name, Jack was in action. He whipped out his phone and quickly dialed a number while making a motion telling Samantha to stretch out the call. "This is Malone. Agent Spade is on a call I need traced, right now . . ."

Even as she concentrated on the sound of Martin's voice, Samantha couldn't help but notice the spark of hope in the eyes of Martin's mother.



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The wall was cool against his forehead, the phone's receiver hard and sticky against his ear. Martin pressed his eyes closed as he leaned against the public phone call box in an attempt to relax and reduce the pounding in his head. He missed his cell phone. It had been difficult to put the coins in the public phone and punch in the numbers with his hands shaking so much.

She'd answered after the second ring. "Samantha."

"Martin?"

Martin could see her in his mind's eye – her brown eyes going wide and her lips parted in surprise. When she turned to signal Jack about the call, her hair would swing just so . . . "Yeah. It's me." He smiled.

"Where are you?"

He imagined her face; it helped distract him from his discomfort. "Waiting for Liang."

"Martin, why did you take off like that? We were watching over you." Samantha's voice softened. Martin knew her job was to draw out their conversation and he was happy to oblige.

"I couldn't put more innocent people at risk. I know Liang's coming after me. I'd rather pick the place he did it. I don't want any other lives on my conscious, Samantha. The hospital is too public."

"I understand."

And Martin knew she did. He also knew she'd still be angry. "I got a message to Liang. I'm waiting for him to contact me. What does Jack think? Will Liang come or will he send someone?"

"I don't know, Martin." There was a tremor in her voice that pulled at his heart and Martin was surprised at her emotion. He heard her repeat his question to Jack, and then she replied in a soft tone. "Um, he seems to think it could go either way." She paused. Martin was envisioning her lips moving to the words and found the distraction enchanting. "Where are you?" she asked gently. "We can help."

Martin winced as his gut twinged, bringing him back to reality. The pains were getting difficult to ignore. "I figure Liang's getting ready to leave the city, either temporarily or permanently depending on what happens in the next few hours . . . if he gets connected to Alex Sun. If he can stop Zhan from testifying . . ."

"Zhan's not testifying anymore." Her voice was tinged in sadness. "Liang got to him."

Martin squeezed his eyes tighter and pounded a fist against the phone box. "By using Sun. Samantha, this is all my fault . . ."

"Martin, stop. It's not. You know this would have come down eventually."

"Maybe, but probably not before Zhang testified. My timing stinks." Martin straightened and forced his eyes open and his thoughts away from his blonde teammate. It was time to get down to business "I have to make sure it's Liang and not an underling that comes for me. It's the only way to save this whole thing. As soon as I know he'll come, I'll let you know. I have to be sure."

“You can’t do this alone.” Samantha’s voice had taken on a firm edge. “We’ll do this together. We’re a team. Tell me where you are.”

“I will. As soon as he’s on his way, I’ll let you know. I promise.”

“Don’t do this, Martin. You’re putting yourself in unnecessary danger!”

He felt his face twitch in response to a sudden, sharp stab in his gut. “Oh, on that note, I borrowed your backup gun.”

“What?”

He knew he’d thrown her off with that comment. He could imagine the surprise on her face and it made him chuckle in spite of it all. “I’m sorry, but I needed to. You’ll get it back. I’ll call you soon. And tell my mom hi for me, would you, please?” He hung up knowing that he’d talked just long enough for the team to locate his general area but not a specific phone box. *They’ll be close, but not too close*, he thought, comforted with that idea, and with the idea that his family was away from him and safe. It was probably the same way Zhang felt twelve years ago . . .

Samantha was right – he couldn’t do this alone, but he couldn’t let his team get to him too soon. Martin knew he’d be sent back to the hospital in a heartbeat if they got to him too early. It had to be this way; as soon as he was sure Liang was in the area he’d call for backup. Until then, he’d dangle himself as bait for as long as it took and do it in an area where no one else could get hurt.

He thought of the Sun and how desperate he was to find his boy. The aged grocer had confided in Martin about his fear of being alone and it had struck a chord with the agent. All the old man had wanted was to see his son again and now he was dead. Martin shook off the rising melancholy and tried to think logically around his various aches and pains.

Eyeing the peaceful park across the street he fought the urge to get lost in the trees. Instead, he waved down a cab and instructed the driver where to take him. He hunkered down in the back seat and determinedly ignored his stomach’s growing discomfort. Martin knew he had to get close to the executive airport where Full Moon’s company jet was based. If Liang wasn’t there right now waiting to leave the country, it was where he’d be soon. Liang knew he had to lay low for a while and Hong Kong was just the place to do that.

Martin knew he was the Liang’s sole interest at the moment and that the gang boss wouldn’t leave until he was sure Martin was taken care of. When he’d called Full Moon’s main office from Samantha’s apartment, he was assured Liang would get the message. Martin said he’d call back in an hour to speak with Liang and only Liang. The man would never be able to return to New York with Martin still alive – that’s why Martin was reasonably sure Liang would speak with him as well as do the job himself.

But he had to be one hundred percent sure before he could call in the team. It all came down to timing, and Martin couldn’t afford to be wrong on that point. His life depended on it.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN: 4 hours missing

Jack slapped his phone closed. “Wasn’t long enough,” he sighed. He rubbed his eyes with a sigh. “I’m sure none of you are surprised.”

“How close did you get?” Victor asked. His attitude seemed to have cooled some to Samantha.

“He’s south of where he was dropped off by the cab.” Jack hooked Samantha with his eyes. “Do you know why he went there, Sam?”

She looked at him with her mouth open for a second. “Um,” she started, shoving her hair behind her ear. “He, ah, has my backup gun.” Her cheeks started to feel hot as all eyes turned toward her.

“He got it from your apartment.” Jack didn’t sound surprised as much as frustrated.

“My apartment manager has met him a couple of times and I guess Martin talked his way in.” She held his gaze to prove her innocence. Finally, he nodded. Samantha turned away in relief returned to the city map on the table – she certainly didn’t want to get into voicing any feelings she possibly had with her teammate at the moment.

“So, why is he headed north? What’s up there?” Jack pitched. “What exactly did he say, Sam?”

Samantha shifted her aching feet, glad for the change in questioning. “Well, he said he wanted to make sure Liang showed up to meet him and not an underling. He said he’d call us in when he knows for sure the when and where.”

“So he wants us close for now.” Jack stared at the map, Victor at his shoulder and unusually quiet.

“There are several private airports in that direction,” Danny said as he approached the table. “If Liang was to leave, he’d go that way by corporate jet, I would think.”

“DEA already has the aircraft covered. Full Moon keeps it at this field.” Jack tapped the easternmost of the fields. “This is the area where Martin was when he called.” He indicated an area near a collection of airfields that covered dozens of city blocks.

"I'm getting a SWAT team assembled in the area just in case," Victor said as he pulled out his cell and dialed. "I'll notify DEA that they are coming on my orders."

Jack glanced sharply at Victor. "DEA does not have enough to arrest Liang, let alone shoot him, and neither do we."

"I realize that, Jack," Victor snapped as he flipped open his phone. "But it's necessary, especially for my son's safety."

"Keep them reined in or you're putting him in more danger, understand?"

An exchange of glares ended the discussion.

Samantha noticed the bags under Jack's eyes and the heaviness of her own eyes. If they were this tired, then Martin must be exhausted, she reasoned. Anxiety made her stomach flutter. She was never very good at waiting and didn't like the feeling of having no control. "I'll check the tenants' listings at the bigger airfields," she said. "A jet would need some runway."

"No, Viv and Danny will do that. You and I are going out there." He turned to go and Samantha fell in behind. "When you get the list, cross reference with all of Full Moon's holdings. See if anything matches up," he said to Danny over his shoulder. "And get the public phones in that area monitored."

"Sure," Danny said. Both he and Vivian immediately got on their phones.

"I'm going to meet SWAT after I take Katherine to the office," Victor said, pointing a finger at Jack. "You will keep me informed."

Jack nodded brusquely. As they left the room, Samantha glanced back at Mrs. Fitzgerald as her husband helped her to her feet. The woman hadn't said one word – Samantha felt that maybe she should have voiced her condolences, but really didn't know what to say. Instead, she followed Jack down the hall to the elevators and focused on Martin.

Samantha found herself dozing in Jack's car on the way to the airfields. Her head had inadvertently nodded forward a couple of times, causing her to jerk awake. After a few minutes she gave up trying to stay awake. *Just a few seconds,* she reasoned as she let her eyes slip closed and leaned her head against the cold window. Her body relaxed.

All she could see was Martin's bruised and swollen face in the darkness. His lips moved as if he were trying to say something – she was so engrossed in trying to hear the message that when a gunshot exploded, she jumped in surprise, her heart leaping in her chest.

Her eyes snapped open and her heart still raced. Then she realized she was still in Jack's car.

"You okay?" Jack asked as he gave her a sideways glance. "You were sleeping."

Quickly, she rubbed her eyes and sat up straight. "Yeah," she mumbled. "Yeah, I'm fine. A little tired, I guess."

"I hear you," he said softly.

"So, you think Liang will show?" she asked, trying to get the gory vision from her mind.

“It’s possible. He knows he’s safe for the moment, at least. DEA can’t touch him yet, not without Martin’s statement. It depends on how much control he thinks he has.”

“Control? Over whom?”

“Over everything. The man’s not afraid to get his hands dirty – he had to do that to get to where he is in the organization. Liang’s at a point now where others can do his dirty work for him. He’s got the power and control over them. Look at how those guys at the dock committed suicide for him rather than risk getting caught. This guy has a lot of power.”

“That would be difficult to walk away from,” she noted.

“Exactly. If Liang leaves New York, it’s like admitting he’s lost control. He won’t do that unless he absolutely has no choice. Martin’s the only one left that can hurt him. It’s a good possibility Liang won’t trust this job to anyone else – the loss of control if someone messes up would put him at the bottom of the organization again, if not get him killed for it.”

“Martin pegged him, huh?”

“He sure did. I hope he did, anyway.”

Samantha tilted her head toward her boss and frowned. “Otherwise it’s about guilt and revenge, right?”

“Right. And if he’s thinking that way, what he does next could land him in prison if he’s not careful.”

“Prison.” Samantha hadn’t allowed herself to think about that scenario; if Martin pulled an out-and-out ambush, prison was a probability. *‘Just when I thought I had enough to worry about,’* she thought wearily.

“When you spoke with him on the phone, could you figure out his motives? What did he sound like?”

Samantha bit her lip for a moment as she replayed the conversation in her mind. “He sounded calm. He felt bad about Sun; he is guilty about that. He was concerned about hurting more people – he didn’t sound angry, he sounded worn out. He was definitely hurting. I don’t know.” Samantha searched her feelings and tried to sum up what she knew about her lost partner. “I can’t see him acting out of revenge. Maybe that’s what he started with, but I think he’ll do the right thing in the end.”

The corner of Jack’s mouth quirked up in a lopsided grin. “I happen to be the one with the psychology degree,” he chastised playfully. “And I think you’re right.”

She gave him a tiny smile in return, but wasn’t reassured.



After what seemed like hours of walking, Martin finally settled on the place to put his cobbled together plan in action. Snuggling the ball cap down tighter on his head, he surveyed the area from the corner of his eye. Martin found he had to keep his head ducked forward or he received too many curious looks due to the shape of his

face. It was already hard enough to stand straight against his protesting stomach, but so far he'd been able to not attract any attention.

Working through the chaos that jumbled his mind, he thought hard about what he'd learned while looking for Zhan. Martin had thought the old man was nuts at first – Sun didn't even know if Zhan was even in New York. All Sun had for a lead was that Zhan had worked for a shipping company in Hong Kong before bringing his parents to New York. It had taken months, in his spare time, for Martin to finally get a lead.

Sun had been so happy at the possibility of speaking with his son and this is how it ended up. Martin sighed, again forcing his disturbingly fractured thoughts from the emotional to the factual. What had he learned during his investigation? The names of the seemingly endless companies, corporations and businesses that were tied in with Full Moon Shipping paraded through his mind again. Liang had built this empire. He wouldn't want to leave and Martin was counting on that.

Martin knew where the company jet was housed. He also figured Liang to be too smart to use it, as well as either JFK or LaGuardia. The docks were closed and a ship wasn't fast enough anyway. There were smaller, private airports around here and Martin was sure that Liang had an escape plan that involved one of them – it made sense, but he had no proof of it. Maybe somewhere in his memory there was a clue, but it eluded him at the moment because it was so difficult to focus.

The bolt of pain came without warning, nearly sending him to his knees. Martin fought the urge to double over until he was able to duck between some buildings. There, he bent over, his back sliding down the rough brick wall until he was a sorry lump on the ground. Cursing softly and breaking into a cold sweat, all he could do was wait, panting like a sick dog, until the attack passed.

The episodes seemed to be getting shorter and they left him as shaky as a brittle leaf in a breeze. Martin also noticed that he was getting weaker. He needed water and food, but the idea made him nauseated. After a few minutes, the fit eased, and he rose on wobbly legs. He sniffed and ran his hand under his nose, feeling the roughness of his face. The agent knew he must look like hell warmed over – sweaty, shaky, unshaven. *'Can't be helped,'* he reasoned.

He peeked toward the street and saw his goal: a phone stand. Figuring that he'd given his team enough time to get in the area, he walked unevenly to the phone and lifted the receiver. *'Showtime,'* he thought grimly.



Mee Liang had excused everyone except his driver and bodyguard from the small office where he (and he disliked this phrase) was 'poised to flee'. The news that Zhan had now refused to testify because of the 'message' he'd received caused Liang to pause in these small quarters near the airfield.

FULL MOON & CHINA WHITE

No one knew about this place; it was off the books and off the record and designed to be a last refuge before leaving New York. Liang had never had to use it before and he was both pleased of its existence and angered that he was forced to use it. All he had to wait for was Zhang to become available and Agent Fitzgerald to raise his head.

The phone rang. He knew it was forwarded from his main office because they were the only ones to have the number – he knew who was calling, too. He plucked the phone from its cradle.

“Agent Fitzgerald,” he said smoothly. “What can I do for you?”

“You can make me a rich man,” Martin replied. “I’ll shut up for a price. I figure a guy like you has quite a stash somewhere close – escape money?”

Liang’s mouth quirked at the audacity and lack of finesse of the agent; this would be easy.

“Perhaps,” Liang replied slowly. “You are a businessman, then?”

“Sure,” Martin said, “Yeah, businessman. I figure about 3 million in diamonds ought to get me where I need to go for the duration. You know, out of your hair? I know what you did to Zhan’s father and I don’t want any part of that for my family; we aren’t close, but I don’t want them to die. I can disappear – Australia or even Africa sound good this time of year. What do you think? Can we deal?”

Liang listened not only to the words, but the voice, too. Fitzgerald’s breath was a bit too fast and a bit too sharp. He spoke quickly – the man was in pain. Liang smiled and spoke slowly. “You sound a little stressed, Agent Fitzgerald. Perhaps you need something to ease your pain while I gather the diamonds? A sample of my product? I know you have become familiar with it.”

Ragged breathing sounded in the receiver – Fitzgerald was thinking about it.

“You must be in some pain about now. Cramps? Body aches? I can fix that. Tell you what – I’ll have my driver pick you up and help you out with that. I need a little time to . . .”

“No. No one else. If you don’t come, I’ll rabbit right to the DEA. This is you and me, Liang, and I know what you look like, remember? I saw you with Alex Sun. I saw what you were doing to him. I know, Liang, and I can tell the DEA in no time at all. So, we have a deal?”

Liang regarded his watch – he could be off the ground and en route to Hong Kong in 10 minutes or he could get rid of this pest and be done with it. The thought of taking care of this bothersome agent himself was tempting; it would also show those around him that he could still – what was the charming term? “Take Care of Business”? And if he made this agent simply disappear, his abilities to keep control wouldn’t be questioned again.

He already had minions ready to grab Zhan when he surfaced. First one, then the other. It would be an impressive feat and a clear message to all.

Get Fitzgerald on his private jet, kill him, and take the body out of country where it would never be found – it would be like that mobster Hoffa, another legend. He smiled – fear would keep him firmly in charge.

“Where do I meet you?” Liang asked confidently.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN: 4 hours 15 minutes missing

Walking swiftly from Jack's parked car, Samantha had to smile tightly. *'We may not know where we're going, but we sure look like we do,'* she thought as she lengthened her stride to keep abreast of her boss. She could tell by the way he held his shoulders that Jack was tense – he wasn't entirely in control of this operation and he didn't like that. Unexpected events were never good in any stake out.

"Where should we set up?" she asked as they continued down an empty sidewalk.

"Near the public phone centered in the area where of Martin's call. Should be right around here." He stopped and looked around, and then began walking a little slower.

Samantha felt the adrenalin beginning to pump in her system. Her fingers began to tingle, her heart sped up and her eyes were everywhere behind her dark sunglasses; every sense was on alert.

When Jack's phone rang, he snatched it from his pocket and pulled her to a stop. "Keep your eyes open," he said lowly as he flipped the phone open. "Malone," he said quietly.

Samantha scanned the area. Nothing – they would do better waiting in the car. At least it would be a faster get away when the call came, but she also knew how obvious two people sitting in a plain sedan looked to those that knew what to look for. In these empty streets, the two of them sitting there fairly screamed 'STAKEOUT!' So instead, here she stood, trying to look casual as her nerves grew taut.

This area was old and dilapidated, a mix of small businesses turned into warehouses and storage units. Trash blew along the gutter in a weak breeze that felt as dirty as old secrets. She kept her eyes moving as Jack spoke on the phone. Suddenly, his head snapped up and he looked around.

"That's across the bridge from here." He turned back to the car and signaled Samantha to follow. Jack broke into a jog. "Just one office?" He listened a little longer. "We're in route. Good work." The phone clicked shut as they reached the car. "Viv found a possible office space rented by Liang. It's not in his name, but there's a string

of companies that eventually go to him and it's in the area where we traced Martin's call."

They slipped in the car. "What's the business?"

"It's called Samson Imports. It's on 35th Street."

"That's quite a way from here," Samantha noted.

Tires squeaked as the car pulled quickly from the curb. It was several minutes before Jack's phone rang again. He tossed it to Sam and kept driving.

"Malone," Sam said, holding tight to the armrest to keep from sliding in her seat from her boss's aggressive maneuvers. "Got it, hold on." She raised her chin to Jack. "Martin called in directly to Mac's station. Liang's meeting him in fifteen minutes."

"Where?"

"Martin didn't say, but he left the phone line open and walked away. Mac's tracing it now. He hears traffic on the open line."

"Martin doesn't want us there ahead of time. I'm going to kill him for taking such a stupid risk!" He accelerated onto the main highway, his hands gripping the wheel hard. "Did he say anything else?"

"He said 'it's the only way,' and apologized." Samantha turned back to the phone, aware of the emotional huskiness of her voice. Turning away from him, she looked down at the East River below them and blinked hard to control pooling tears. 'Get a grip, Spade,' she ordered herself. The phone came alive again in her ear. "What? Okay, I'll hold on." She cleared her throat before turning to Jack and speaking again. "Mac said it shouldn't take long to find the phone Martin used."

Angry fingers drummed the steering wheel as their car hummed over the highway bridge. "Martin thinks that the only way Liang will show himself is if he's exposed, too. Unfortunately, he's right." The finger drumming ceased as they exited the bridge and entered smaller streets around Astoria Park.

Samantha covered the phone's mouthpiece with her hand. "You also hate not being in control, and so do I." Jack gave her a wry grin and slight nod in agreement. She pulled her hand away from the mouthpiece as Viv started to speak again. "Where?" She paused. "Near La Guardia? Jack, Danny found a possible hangar rental for Liang at a private field adjacent to La Guardia airport. It's a small strip east of . . ."

". . . the Edison building. I know it. Have Victor send SWAT there." Jack weaved around the scattered, slower traffic he encountered at a saner speed. Sam was glad it was a weekend in a somewhat deserted business district – traffic was practically non-existent and pedestrians scarce. It was just the scenario Martin wanted. She felt a rush of fear for him and forced her mind to concentrate on the now. A voice sounded in her ear. "Between 24th and 20th? The Edison power plant?"

Apparently reacting to her words, Jack swung the car toward 20th Avenue. Samantha's shoulder bumped the window next to her, and she was rocked sharply side to side as Jack pushed the car to its limits. Suddenly, he pulled to the curb and

threw the vehicle in park. "It's the around the corner," Jack said, indicating the intersection just ahead. "Let's go."

Samantha leaped from the car and sprinted after Jack. They slowed as they came to the corner, and then Jack motioned her to stop. He peered cautiously around the building's edge, gun drawn.

"There's a bus stop by the power plant's main entry gate. The public phone is between the gate and the bus bench." He paused. "I can see the receiver swinging from the booth."

"Do you see Martin?" She asked, resisting the urge to look around Jack's shoulders.

"No," he said slowly. "But he has to be close. Let's separate. You cross the street and I'll cover you from here. I'll tell the others where we are. I don't think we'll be able to count on them for back up. There's no time."

"I understand." Samantha drew her weapon and moved around her boss. Hiding her gun in the fold of her coat, she checked for traffic and began to cross the street. There was no other foot traffic on the streets, only a bicyclist that had passed them moments before. As she crossed the center median, Sam saw a dark sedan pull onto the main road and cruise slowly from the east toward the power plant.

Just before the vehicle reached the phone stand, a figure stepped to the sidewalk from the thick shrubbery that lined the perimeter fence of the plant.

Samantha easily recognized Martin's slumped profile and her every nerve was instantly ready for action; all she needed was a clue as to what her next move should be.



All Martin wanted to do was lay down and give in – give in to the weariness, give in to the pain and just simply let go. He was incredibly tired. Letting go of the phone receiver and allowing it dangle there left him a feeling of connectivity to his real life. On the other end of that phone was a place where he was happy. It convinced him to hold on to. The team would be here very soon, he knew, but he had to wonder at what they would find when they arrived.

Now that he knew he'd be facing Liang within minutes, doubt began to creep into his mind. What assurance did he have that the Triad member wouldn't simply shoot him on sight? Martin snorted a short laugh at the thought; being shot may be a less painful that what he'd been going through these past hours. *'How long has it been, exactly?'* he thought, realizing he really had no idea what day it was and that he didn't really care. He had to get this job done, and that was all he could think about at the moment.

If Liang didn't kill him, the pain just might. He wasn't sure how much more his gut could take. Martin spent a few minutes trying to convince himself that the wrenching cramps were fewer and farther between as he took cover in the lush

landscaping near the phone. Finding the fence line behind a thick hedge, he leaned back against it and slid down to the ground. With his knees pulled to his chest, he had a place to rest his dully throbbing head and, regretfully, he became aware of fine tremor of his arms as they encircled his legs as well as the raggedness of his breathing.

“Come on, Fitzgerald,” he whispered between breaths. “Just a little longer.” The pep-talk did little to lift the exhaustion. Instead, he turned his thoughts outward and found himself seeing Samantha in his mind’s eye. Martin imagined her giving him some sort of encouragement and found words that gave him the focus he needed to go on. Then he thought of her eyes and the need to see them again grew strong enough for him to get in motion again.

Martin pushed stiffly to his feet and felt for the small gun tucked in his waistband under the borrowed shirt. Its solidness gave him some strength and resolve. He even took a moment to brush off the debris that clung to his clothes which made him chuckle at the absurdness of worrying how he looked. He looked like hell, and there wasn’t much he could do about it now.

Moving to the edge of the landscaped area Martin could just see the street for about a block in both directions. He wondered if any of his partners were out there yet – since he’d lost complete track of time he had no idea if they should even be here yet. He clutched at his stomach as it fluttered in warning and he impatiently chewed the inside of his cheek.

It was at that moment he saw the dark sedan turn a corner and come into his sight. It moved slowly down street toward him. Martin’s training came alive in an instant and he scanned the street like the professional observer he was: Traffic blessedly light, no children in sight, although he could hear them in the distance, one bicyclist leaving the area and a pair of people a half-block away that just separated, one crossing the street.

Martin immediately recognized Samantha by her hair which was pulled back in a ponytail. It swished back and forth as she checked for traffic before jogging across the street.

He felt his heart beat a little faster – and then the sedan was next to him.

The window rolled halfway down on the front passenger’s side. “Agent Fitzgerald,” Liang said smoothly from the driver’s seat. He wore a small grin. “Get in. We have things to discuss.”

In that split second Martin knew that Samantha and Jack were too far away. His stomach twisted, taking his breath away as he went for his weapon. Instead, he clawed at the pain and glanced toward Samantha, realizing that he’d just given her away to Liang. He fumbled at his waistband but instead found the barrel of another gun pointed at his head. There had been a man keeping low and hidden in the back seat of the sedan.

“Get in now,” Liang ordered sharply. He glanced at what had caught Martin’s attention, and his smile turned predatory. “Get in or she dies.”

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The gun was still pointed at Martin, but the agent knew the car was just as deadly and Samantha was right in its path.

“No!” he pleaded, reaching for the door handle, his hands uncoordinated and clumsy. “Don’t . . .”

“MARTIN! NO!” Samantha shouted.

But he couldn’t get someone else killed and especially not her. He fell into the seat and the car shot away from the curb. Martin vaguely heard the popping of gunfire and a shattered window rained down on him. Trying valiantly to ignore the debilitating fire in his gut, he fumbled for the hidden gun.

His search was cut short in a blinding flash of stars and sudden darkness.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN: 4 ½ hours missing

Samantha managed to shoot out the rear window on the right side as the car completed an erratic U – turn and sped away. “Damn!” She spat when the sedan disappeared around a corner. As she holstered her weapon, she turned to run back to the car but the roar of an engine and the squeal of tires announced Jack’s arrival. She jumped in as the vehicle still rolled.

“What’s he doing?” Jack snapped as he accelerated. “Was he forced into the car?”

“I didn’t see any weapon,” Samantha panted. “The windows were so tinted I couldn’t see in and all I saw was the driver’s shadow. Maybe it wasn’t Liang. Maybe that’s why Martin got in.”

“I’ve called to see if a chopper is in the area.” Jack stomped on the accelerator and sped up to beat a red light, which he did – barely. “I’m not sure I can catch him. Get Danny on the line.”

As they approached the center of town, traffic became heavier. They saw the sedan take a corner several blocks ahead. “Looks like he’s heading to the airstrip after all,” Samantha noted, hanging on tight and trying to dial the phone at the same time.

“Good. Victor’s got that S.W.A.T. team over there. See if they’re set up.”

“Danny – any news on the chopper? Uh, huh . . . Okay, and see if Director Fitzgerald got the S.W.A.T team set up at the airstrip. We think that’s where they’re headed . . . Martin’s in a black sedan with a right side window shot out.”

They rode in silence, Jack concentrating on his driving and Samantha vividly recalling the look Martin had given her before getting in the car. Even with the ball cap on and half of his face swollen, she could read the pain and fear in his face. Still, she hadn’t seen any weapons and no one had returned fire; why did he get in? Was there someone else in the car, hidden in the back? Danny’s voice recaptured her attention. “Okay, good,” she replied, then to Jack, said, “S.W.A.T.’s assembling as we speak, Victor’s on his way and Danny’s checking on the chopper with the locals. None of ours are in the air.”

“Have him and Viv meet us at the S.W.A.T. command post,” Jack ordered sharply, finally flipping on the flashing red light on the dashboard. “Bring anything they have on that airstrip for S.W.A.T.” She repeated the message and hung up just as

her boss slammed on the brakes and swore under his breath. Traffic and shopping pedestrians had finally stopped them and they lost sight of the sedan. “Call Victor and get the command post location,” he said as he carefully used the sidewalk to pass the stalled traffic. “We can’t storm in there blind. We need to get their exact location. Get LaGuardia on the line – maybe someone there knows the layout.”

Glad for something to distract her from the haunting vision of Martin’s glance, Samantha began to work the phone in earnest.



Martin was forced into consciousness by the shock of cold water thrown in his face. Jerking his head in surprise caused exquisite pain that made him gasp and sputter. Blinking wildly and careful not to move too abruptly, it took a moment for him to remember what happened. The next thing he felt was a towel hitting his chest.

“Dry off, Agent Fitzgerald. You have a part to play.”

With a shaky hand he picked up the towel and gently patted his face dry before rubbing his hair and trying to gather his wits. There had been gunfire . . .

His hand instantly went to his waistband.

“Quang has your gun.”

Martin focused on the voice and when his vision cleared he saw Liang sitting behind a desk and tapping on a keyboard.

“Wh . . . what happened?” Martin asked in a hoarse voice.

“It seems your partners tried to kill me. My attorneys are not happy about that.”

It seemed to take a painfully long time for the agent to organize his thoughts. His body screamed for rest and his gut clamped down hard. “Attorneys?” his mind was fighting to work through his throbbing head.

“Your fellow agents will no doubt be here in a very short time. I have legal representation ready to go via web conference to protect my rights, which have been severely violated.”

“Your *rights*?” Martin snapped, rising to his feet. “What about Sun’s rights? I’ll put you away for so long . . .” A heavy hand on his shoulder forced him to sit. He tilted his head painfully to see a stern face glowering at him.

Liang waved a hand. “You will sit still and you will listen. If you don’t, your fellow agents – including the lovely Miss Spade, I believe it is? – will die. Do you understand?”

Martin’s heart raced. Die? What did he mean?

Liang tapped the keyboard and then turned the small webcam away from him. He folded his hands together and settled back in the leather chair to regard Martin with steely eyes. Suddenly, he was all business.

“This is what is happening,” he said firmly. “Mr. Quang is not only my bodyguard, but an extremely skilled sniper. He is setting himself across the tarmac as we speak.”

A motion outside caught Martin’s eye. A man with a long case jogged across the narrow tarmac to a building across from them. It was then that Martin noticed the enormous glass window behind Liang.

“He will have a very clear shot of this office, as well as the airfield entry gate and all the areas in between. The back door is steel and bolted. The only way in is through that door,” he nodded to the door behind him, also made of glass. “You will convince your boss that you came with me willingly. I have offered you a job, and we are leaving for Hong Kong. You will convince them that you did not see me with the unfortunate Mr. Sun. They will have nothing to hold me.”

“But I saw you.”

“Agent Fitzgerald. Please. My jet is warming up at this very moment. I need fifteen minutes, that is all. I plan on walking out of here with you at my side and getting on that jet. Mr. Quang will have a bead on whoever comes in this office. Oh, and did I mention that this office is fitted with audio? He will hear all that is said. If Quang is not convinced, he will shoot to kill. It is your job to protect your fellow agents, Mr. Fitzgerald. If you do not leave this room with me, Quang will shoot. If you try to warn them, Quang will shoot. Do I make myself clear?”

Martin had watched Quang’s progress as Liang spoke. The man melted into the building rooftop, becoming completely invisible. Martin’s heart pounded – he couldn’t think.

“And to prove it, here’s a small demonstration.”

As soon as Liang stopped speaking a red laser dot appeared right over Martin’s heart. It was a perfect shot and there was no place to hide in this office.

“Ah, I think our company is here.” Liang positioned the computer’s monitor and web camera on the edge of the desk and walked around to stand behind it, hands clasped in front of him. He looked as calm as a sleeping snake.

Jack burst in the door, his gun drawn. Samantha and Dickenson followed on his heels. “Hands up Liang!” he ordered.

Liang did as he was asked with a smug smirk.

“Do you have a warrant?” the talking head on the computer screen asked.

“I don’t need a warrant,” Jack snapped, motioning Samantha to check the rest of the small office. She did so, and then moved to stand by Martin, her gun still drawn.

She leaned down and caught his attention. “Martin? You okay?”

“Mr. Fitzgerald is just fine,” Liang said smoothly. “What is your business here?”

“Kidnapping a Federal agent, torture, conspiracy, you name it,” Jack barked. “Agent Dickenson, cuff him.”

“Gladly!” Dickenson snarled, pulling out his handcuff.

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“You have no evidence of those claims, agent,” the lawyer sternly said. “You touch Mr. Liang, and you will lose your job. He’s already considering action against you for shooting at him without provocation!”

“Shut up,” Jack yelled. “Cuff him, Dickenson.”

“Wait!” The sharpness of Martin’s voice caused a sting of pain, but he ignored it. Everyone paused. “Wait. He’s right, Jack. I . . . he didn’t kidnap me.” Jack glanced at him, eyes narrowed. “I . . . I came here on my own.”

Martin could feel Sam’s eyes on him, but he focused on Jack as he slowly stood.

“What?” Sam said, confused.

Dickenson paused next to Liang. Martin couldn’t help but notice how Liang managed to stay completely out of the line of Quang’s fire whereas Sam, Jack and Dickenson were open targets.

“I . . . I was mistaken. It wasn’t Liang I saw with Sun.” Jack was now frowning, but his gun still pointed at Liang, who looked cool and in control. “I realized that when I saw him in the car. That’s why I got in. I didn’t want anyone to get hurt.”

Martin could feel the sweat breaking out along his hairline, his nerves waiting for the bullet to strike. His head pounded and it took all his resolve to hold Jack’s glare. *‘He’s not buying it,’* Martin thought for a panicked moment.

“I suggest you leave my client alone and leave the premises. You have no reason to arrest him or be in this building. If you cooperate now, Mr. Liang will consider – and I strongly emphasize *consider* – not pressing charges for the earlier incident involving his car.”

Jack looked at the computer screen, aghast. “He’ll *consider* not pressing charges? He’s the murderer!”

“Where’s your evidence? Where’s your warrant? Tread lightly, gentlemen. Your jobs are at stake.” The attorney returned Jack’s glare.

Slowly, Jack turned to face Martin. “What are you doing, Martin?” he asked evenly.

Martin felt like vomiting. On the outside, however, he managed to look somewhat in control. “I made a mistake, Jack. We have nothing.”

“And I have offered Mr. Fitzgerald a position in my company with a substantial raise compared to his current salary. Apparently, without my knowledge, this agent was injured by unscrupulous employees of mine that are now deceased. I feel that Mr. Fitzgerald has been wronged and I have the ways and means to make it right. We have talked and he understands.”

“What? Is that true, Martin?” Samantha’s voice was almost Martin’s undoing. He could hear the hurt and betrayal in her voice. He dared not look at her for fear of giving himself away. Instead, he stared at Jack, whose face was expressionless. Martin knew that his mind was working hard to put the pieces together.

“Yes. It’s a lucrative offer. I can’t pass it up, Jack.” Martin was amazed at the even tone of his voice. His throat was so dry it was an effort to speak. He could also

feel that his body was on the verge of rebellion – he couldn't stay on his feet much longer.

Jack continued to stare at him, trying to read him. Martin noticed a slight tilt to his head – as if he was listening to something . . .

Then his boss abruptly turned to Dickenson, straightened, and holstered his gun. “Agent Dickenson ?” Jack asked gruffly. “Do you have anything?”

“You know I don't,” the DEA agent growled, putting away his cuffs.

“Martin?” Samantha's breath was soft on his neck as she leaned in, her hands gentle as she took his arm. “This can't be true. What's going on?”

A motion outside the window caught their attention. Liang's jet had taxied to the side of the building.

“Ah, here is our ride. I'm sure you will see yourselves out? We must prepare to go.” He began to shut down the computer as Dickenson, swearing under his breath, stormed outside.

Jack holstered his weapon and motioned for Samantha to do the same.

“You can't just leave him here, Jack!” Samantha argued, gun still in hand. “You and I both know something's not right!” After a moment, she roughly holstered her gun and stood, fuming.

Martin turned to her and found that keeping up this charade was the most difficult thing he'd ever done. As he took her hands in his and he met her eyes, all he could envision was a blood red laser dot right between her eyes. He swallowed hard.

“Samantha,” he said in the calmest voice he could muster. “It's for the best. Really.”

She looked at their entwined hands. He could feel the ever present tremor in his grip, and knew she felt it too. She raised her eyes back up to meet his. “I don't believe you, Martin,” she whispered fiercely. “This isn't right. We never had a chance . . .” She clamped her mouth shut, her jaws grinding, and then she spoke through clenched teeth. “This isn't right . . .”

Martin fought the urge to hold her in his arms. Instead he ducked his head and turned her toward the door. “Go,” he said. “Please. I know what I'm doing.”

Samantha hesitated, her back to him. Jack waited quietly by the door. Martin gave her a little push and turned his gaze to Jack, pleading with his eyes.

“Samantha,” Jack said, “Let's go. We can't tell him what to do with his life.” Disgust was clear in his voice and for a moment, Martin felt shame. But as she moved past Jack and stepped outside, Martin noticed Jack's hovering gaze and they momentarily locked eyes. In that fleeting second, he realized the disappointment didn't reach his boss's eyes; there was . . . something . . . there. The expression didn't match words he uttered.

Then he turned as was gone. Martin collapsed in the chair, bile rising in his throat. He swallowed bitterly, feeling sick.

“Do not get comfortable, Mr. Fitzgerald,” Liang said, picking up a valise. “It is time to go.”

FULL MOON & CHINA WHITE

With enormous effort, Martin rose again. Liang took his elbow and steered him to the door and out into the brightness of the day.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN: 5 hours missing

"Jack!" Samantha slowed just outside the office and turned to confront her boss. She hated these conflicting feelings of anger, hurt and concern. "He can't just go like that! He's . . ."

Jack's firm grasp on her elbow stopped the tirade. He pulled her in close and turned her away from the building, forcing her to walk at the same time. He whispered fiercely. "Listen hard. When you hear a shot, we're going in to get Liang."

"Shot?" she echoed, managing to keep her voice down. Focus came instantly, the conflict of feelings pushed aside to get to business.

"There's a sniper trained on us. S.W.A.T.'s going to take him out when they have a shot, and only when they have a shot. There's just one chance at this."

"A sniper." Suddenly, Martin's actions were understandable - he'd been put in an impossible position. "How did you . . .?"

"I'm wired." He tapped his ear once. "So is Dickenson. S.W.A.T. informed me just a few seconds ago when their spotter picked him out."

The next steps seemed to take an eternity; the anticipation of that signal shot worried at her nerves, but her focus was total. *'Wait for it,'* she said to herself. The world seemed to slow and her senses intensify. She could hear her breathing and her heartbeat. Jack's grip on her elbow felt warm. She relaxed physically, finding her center and ready to act. Jack's hand fell away.

Samantha glanced back over her shoulder as she walked away. Liang stepped from the building with Martin appearing a moment later. The set of his face made her heart twist now that she knew where he stood. The slump of his shoulders and the pained expression was borne of physical as well as mental pressure. The two men turned toward the waiting jet. Martin glanced in her direction and for a fraction of a moment, their eyes met.

She broke the connection, not wanting to give away the game. Instead, she counted her steps.

'One . . . two . . . three.' Nervous sweat tickled her temple.

' . . . four . . . five . . . six.' Her hand drifted to her holstered gun and rested on the butt.

FULL MOON & CHINA WHITE

She saw Danny and Viv walking toward them, each step as slow and loud as her own. *'Shoot, damn it!'* her mind raged, the waiting becoming unbearable.

Samantha could see the plan in her mind now: After S.W.A.T took out the sniper the hidden force would contain the perimeter and close in. Her team - Jack, Danny, Viv, Dickenson and herself would be first in for the players - Liang and whoever was on that jet. All they needed was that starting gun. A small spot in her back itched with the burn of an imaginary sniper's bullet. Or would it be her chest? The idea of it was distracting.

When they met Danny and Viv, Samantha fought the urge to look back at Martin. Instead, she was glad when Viv said in a low voice, "They're at the steps, Jack. If they get on the jet, it's going to be trickier."

"I know," Jack replied. "Just hang on."

Dickenson moved over to join them. "Jack . . ." he started.

Then the shot finally came and it sounded like thunder.



When Martin stepped outside he felt as if he was in a living nightmare, his control over the situation tenuous and fragile if there was any control at all. Dread made his feet heavy adding to the overall fatigue of his body and spirit. He wondered vaguely if he would throw up before he passed out, or if his legs would even support him for the next few steps.

Liang turned toward the jet and Martin followed, trying to think clearly through his pounding headache. He turned to see his two teammates retreating, Jack firmly guiding Samantha with his hand on her elbow. A strange relief fell over him knowing she was taken care of; when she turned and found his gaze and he realized that this may be the last time he would see her, a sense of rage replaced the sorrow. Before he died - and he knew with certainty that he was going to die - Liang would pay.

From somewhere very deep inside Martin found a tiny pool of determination and tapped into it. He would make it to the jet and he would climb aboard. When he knew everyone was safe, he would do what was needed to hurt Liang in any way he could.

The shuffle of his step picked up and he focused solely on Liang's back, following it with focused determination in his newfound mission. The aches and pains of his body fell away from conscious thought as he drove himself on.

They reached the jet's short stairway and Liang glanced back with the smug eyes of an evil conqueror. Martin stared back, his eyes boring deep. Liang simply smiled and mounted the steps. As he reached the top of the final step, Martin began to climb, the three steps seeming much taller than they actually were. Liang paused at the open hatch and verbally greeted someone just inside.

Martin was on the second step and Liang just entering the jet when the sound of a rifle shot cracked in the air.

In that moment, he knew Samantha was dead. Anger exploded, blinding all reason; he launched himself at Liang's back less than a step ahead seeing nothing but red.



Samantha spun and ran, Jack a half-step ahead of her with Danny and Viv on her heels. In her peripheral vision she saw camouflage and black clad figures seemingly appear out of nowhere to make a perimeter around the jet.

As soon as she'd turned, she saw Martin disappear inside the jet. "NO!" she screamed as she lost the visual connection. Running faster she pulled her weapon without conscious thought. The steps seemed to be miles away but they finally reached them. Jack, weapon leading the way, leaped up to the platform.

"HOLD IT! FBI!" he yelled, coming to an abrupt stop just inside the fuselage as Samantha backed him. A man in a uniform raised his hands. Her back felt exposed, but she knew Danny was right behind her.

"I'm not armed!" the man announced, eyes wide with terror. Jack spun him around and shoved him to the wall of the jet.

Danny brushed by her, gun raised, to clear the small area.

"Martin!" she heard him yell. "Stop, Martin!"

Samantha twisted around. Her eyes quickly told her the rest of the small jet was empty except for Martin and Liang down in the narrow space between a couch and a chair.

Martin straddled the Triad's boss's chest, his back to them, hitting Liang in the face over and over with bloodied fists. Each strike made a sickening sound and each time he struck, Martin uttered a strange, guttural noise as if each punch was coming from some deep, dark place inside. She saw a spray of blood paint the furnishings each time his fist connected.

"Stop it, Martin! You're killing him!" As Danny fumbled holstering his weapon, he used his free hand to try and pull Martin away. In a deep frenzy, Martin didn't seem to hear him or even realize Danny was there. Instead, Martin flung off Danny's hand and returned to the merciless pummeling.

"Martin!" Danny staggered momentarily, regaining his balance enough to bounce back and wrap both of his arms around his teammate and struggling to keep his grip. "Stop! That's enough!"

Viv boarded the jet and Samantha motioned her to cover Jack, then holstered her gun and ran to help Danny.

"Martin!" Samantha called, dropping in a small space between Martin and the wall. "Martin, look at me!"

FULL MOON & CHINA WHITE

Instead of trying to pull him away from Liang, Samantha instead put her hands on either side of Martin's face and forced him to look at her. He resisted at first and Samantha's hands nearly slipped off because of the slickness of the blood covering his face, but she persisted and held him more firmly. Finally, she was able to turn his head enough to meet his eyes, one still swollen nearly shut and the other wide and dark, the pupil dilated to the extreme. "Martin!" she called again. "Martin! You can stop now! Stop, Martin!" Her last plea was a near sob. "Please stop!"

His fists slowed and he finally came to rest, panting heavily. She felt his body relax under her hands and Danny was finally able to pull him away. Both of them fell back to the floor with a muffled thud; the jet shook.

Martin was still, the fight in him completely gone. Danny untangled himself and rolled Martin on to his back. "Martin? You okay?" Danny asked, breathing hard. "Hey, you okay?"

Samantha crawled over the still form of Liang and kneeled next to Danny, immediately placing her hand on Martin's cheek. "Martin?" she called, softly. "Look at me, Martin. Can you look at me?"

His eyes fluttered for a moment and she thought she saw him smile just before his eyes rolled back in his head and he went frighteningly limp.

CHAPTER NINETEEN: 6 hours missing

The next hours were a blur of activity to Samantha. After Martin had collapsed under her hands there had been a brief moment of absolute silence where time seemed to stop. Then Danny's voice calling for paramedics trickled in and the world exploded back into noisy action.

S.W.A.T. secured the perimeter and preserved the scene while Dickenson and DEA conducted a search of the plane and obtained a warrant for the office. With the pilot taken away, Liang in custody at the hospital wing and Martin swept away in the ambulance the rest of her team was finally free to catch their breath.

Victor Fitzgerald had been the first person in after the scene was secured. He had commanded Samantha's place by Martin's side and dogged the paramedics all the way onto the ambulance. Samantha was taken aback; she'd always pictured the Deputy Director as being aloof and his staying by Martin's side was a surprise.

Danny and Viv followed Jack's car to the hospital. Samantha rode along in the heavy silence next to Jack when a chill rippled through her. She stuffed her hands in her pockets and hunched down in an effort to banish the feeling which elicited a concerned glance from her boss. She gave him a tentative smile and pushed to straightened up; in doing so she found the forgotten silk tie jammed in the corner of her coat pocket. She discovered that entwining her fingers in the material brought her comforting warmth, enabling her to relax a bit. *'He'll be fine, I'm sure,'* she told herself.

The four of them met up on the sidewalk outside the hospital and entered as a team. When Jack identified himself, the receptionist smiled sympathetically. "Agent Fitzgerald is still being evaluated. His father is with him and his mother is en route. Wait here and I'll let the doctor know you're here."

The four of them stood together in a quiet huddle, unwilling to separate. Samantha felt drained and dreadfully tired now that the adrenalin had faded from her system. She wanted to close her eyes for a few minutes but couldn't bar the vision of Martin's battered face. First, she needed to know he was all right, and, apparently, so did the rest of the team because they all had the same tired-yet-hanging-on expression.

Danny was the first to claim a seat and drop into it. Viv followed a few seconds behind, and then Jack and Samantha sat simultaneously.

FULL MOON & CHINA WHITE

“Do you think the trial will go on Monday?” Viv asked.

“Dickenson said yes, he plans on being there. It starts in the afternoon. Two o’clock.” Jack sat with his forearms on his thighs, head bowed slightly as he consulted his wrist watch.

“Sun’s kid gonna testify now that Liang’s in custody?” Danny asked.

“Not sure yet. Dickenson hadn’t spoken to him the last I heard.”

Viv, tiredly leaning back in her chair, said, “Are they going to need Martin if Zhan testifies?”

“I don’t know,” Jack mumbled rubbing his eyes. Then he dropped his hand and quirked a lopsided grin. “But if I know my Fitzgeralds, Martin will be chomping on the bit to get on the stand, needed or not.” They all laughed shortly and nodded in agreement. “I doubt the doctor will let him, though. Depends on what shape he’s in.”

None of them could think of anything to add. Each of them withdrew into their own thoughts. Samantha rubbed her temples, recognizing the signs of lack of sleep.

After a lengthy silence where Samantha noted in agonizing detail the ugly pattern of the linoleum on the floor, the staccato sound of heels against said flooring caused her to raise her head.

Jack rose and quietly greeted Martin’s mother. The rest of them also stood in staggered order while Jack announced her arrival to the receptionist. A nurse opened a door and showed her in while the team regrouped once again. Viv sighed.

Samantha’s fingers furiously twirled the silk tie hidden away as she tried to ignore the growing desire to pace the floor. There were only two other people in the waiting room, so there was plenty of space . . .

“If we don’t hear anything soon . . .” Danny started.

Just then, the door opened and Victor emerged.

“How is he?” Jack asked.

“Exhausted, dehydrated and still withdrawing. He broke some bones in one hand. He’s not in great shape, but he should be able to testify on Monday.”

“Testify?” Jack said, shocked. “He’s in no shape for that!”

The elder Fitzgerald held Jack with a cold stare. “He can and he will. There’s no way that scum’s going to get away with what he’s done to my son.”

Jack opened his mouth again, but Samantha saw him glance around at the others in the waiting room and pause. Instead of speaking, he took the deputy director’s elbow and guided him out into the hall. She could hear him speaking rapidly and Victor responding, but the words were unclear.

Samantha looked to Danny and saw that he had the same wide eyed look as Viv, and probably herself, too. The three of them edged closer to the doorway to hear but not close enough to get caught eavesdropping. Sam caught Danny’s eye and motioned with her head for him to get even closer. He shook his head and turned to Viv, tapping her on the shoulder. The smaller woman turned a scathing eye on him.

“Don’t even ask,” she warned. Danny pouted for a moment then turned to Samantha with raised eyebrows, the question in his eyes.

She shook her head and backed away. “No, no. Not me,” she said lowly. Wandering to the closed door of the emergency room, Samantha stopped and crossed her arms. “We’ll just have to be patient and wait,” she grumbled.

Suddenly there was silence from the hallway and the two men strode into the room. Victor continued directly to the emergency room door and went through without hesitation. Jack, tight-lipped and looking furious, stopped next to her and unconsciously copied her arms-crossed stance.

What she read on his face put her immediately on edge. “What?” she blurted, her pulse quickening. Danny and Viv closed ranks.

“They’re putting Martin into a drug induced coma and initiating rapid detox,” Jack stated flatly. “He should be clean by tomorrow afternoon.”

“Isn’t he in rather bad shape for a procedure like that?” Viv asked. “I mean, there are heart risks in that procedure for a healthy person.”

“And Martin has other injuries – concussion, fractures . . . what is he thinking?” As Samantha spoke she could feel her anxiety rising. Without even thinking, she reached for the silken cloth in her pocket and worried it with her fingertips.

Danny snorted. “Sounds like Fitzgerald pride running things.”

Jack cocked his head sideways to regard Danny. He didn’t have to say anything for Samantha to know the same thing was in his mind. Again, she felt a race of fear. “When can we see him?” she asked. “Can we talk to him before the procedure?”

“He’s in X-ray right now, and then he’s getting an MRI on his skull.” Jack pinched the bridge of his nose and grimaced. “We’ll be able to see him for few moments in between. He’s going right to the procedure from there.”

“Was this Martin’s idea?” Viv asked softly.

Jack’s arm fell to his side. He looked defeated, frustrated and simply pissed. “As far as I know, he’s still unconscious. Victor has the rights to medical decisions at this moment.”

Samantha turned away, the look on Jack’s face not helping her own anxiety level one bit. Finally, she gave in to the desire to pace. The only thing that would help her at all, she realized, would be to see and touch Martin herself. The warmth of his skin under her fingertips would be enough to make it through the night.



Awareness came as sharply as pulsating pain; accompanying it were alarming flashes of blood red and shocking yellow backed by inky blackness.

Martin snapped his eyes open with a gasp and an immediate groan. All he saw was sharp silver and blinding white – his eyes watered immediately and he slammed his eyes shut again and tried to sit up.

“Don’t move! You have to keep still!” a disembodied voice sharply commanded. It interrupted the rhythmic red-and-yellow in a disturbing way. His head felt thick

FULL MOON & CHINA WHITE

and throbbed mercilessly. The attempt to sit increased the pain, as did the mechanical voice. Instead, he tried to raise his hands to his head but found he was frozen in place.

Panic sparked. With each second of not being able to move, the panic blossomed.

“Don’t move, Martin! Stop moving!”

The voice was insistent but did little to calm. There was a loud click and his body vibrated causing him to again snap open his eyes – the bright silver - white slipped from his line of sight. He felt a hand press against his chest.

“Stop, Martin. We have you out now. Relax.”

‘Relax? Out?’ He tried to move an arm. “I can’t move . . .” he said hoarsely.

The hand pressed a little harder. “You’re in restraints for the MRI. Relax and I’ll release you. You’re going to hurt yourself.”

Although the word ‘restraint’ fed the panic, he managed to make his body relax a little by taking several deep breaths and, instead, concentrate on the antagonizing throbbing that was his head at the moment. Martin realized that an acoustical ceiling hung over his eyes . . . where was he?

“Where am I? What happened?” he mumbled, feeling the restraints fall away. Now that he was free, he felt incredibly tired and had no desire to move. Any motion set of the hammering in his head and his hands felt like cement.

“You’re in the hospital MRI room. You’ve been unconscious for a little while. How do you feel?” The disembodied voice was finally joined with a face that hovered before his eyes.

“Like shit,” he whispered, closing his eyes again. He heard the attendant chuckle and felt his bed begin to move. Martin raised his hands and placed his fingertips against his temples, which sparked pins of pain in hands that felt thick and heavy. He dropped his arms again. Suddenly his stomach lurched. “I feel sick.”

The gurney stopped instantly and invisible hands helped him turn to his side. He clutched at his stomach and felt a basin thrust against his chin just in time. He vomited until he was reduced to dry heaves. Martin felt hot and sweaty and absolutely miserable. Every part of him either hurt or ached.

“Not much in there,” the attendant said sympathetically. “I’ll get you a wet cloth once we’re outside.” The slight breeze of an opening door felt good for the second it lasted.

Martin felt the bed jerk to a stop and the basin was whisked away. He didn’t dare open his eyes or move, afraid any little motion would inflame the headache or provoke his stomach again. So there he lay, curled on his side as much as the gurney would allow, holding his stomach in with throbbing hands and trying to ignore the furious, chronic pain in his head.

Unexpectedly, he felt a cool cloth trail along his temple and down his cheek. It felt like heaven. After another gentle stroke, he cracked his eyes open to find the angel wielding it.

“Hi sweetie,” his mother said softly. Her head was tilted aside so she could meet his gaze.

Martin smiled a little, feeling the motion tug on his swollen cheek. “Hi,” he breathed, not wanting to break the spell of the washcloth. He knew the expression his mother’s face held; it was always comforting and always there whenever he’d been sick as a kid, and only his mom was around. It made him relax a little more even though he felt his body starting to rebel against him again. Soon, he’d be shaking, sweating and probably dry heaving, but for now, this moment was good and he slowly shut his eyes to relish it.

The cloth slowly traced the side of his face again. “I must look bad,” he apologized softly. The headache seemed to be calming in intensity.

“It’s all right, honey.” In the same slow speed, the washcloth trailed along his cheek. “You’ll be all right soon enough.”

Martin was suspended in the moment, his aches tolerable and the pains at bay. This kind of moment with his mother was a rare thing as an adult and the thought saddened him. “I’m sorry,” he whispered, not knowing if she realized what he meant by it.

“Shhh,” he heard her utter quietly. “Everything will be okay.”

Not wanting to break the spell that seemed to calm his body, Martin did not move or try to speak. Instead, he just wrapped himself in the comfort she gave. It was like being hypnotized – Martin could hear everything around him in perfect clarity but he was paralyzed and floating in limbo in some peaceful place. He hoped the feeling would last forever; it was way too soon before the dreaded tightness in his gut began again.

The touch on his face changed. It wasn’t unpleasant, but definitely different. Martin slowly cracked his lids and was surprised to find Samantha’s dark, brown eyes looking into his. “Hey,” he whispered, his throat dry.

“Hey yourself,” she answered, running the cloth’s pattern again. “We’ve missed you.”

He tried to smile, but failed miserably as the pains started to make themselves known once again. “S . . . sorry for the trouble,” he said. “No choice.”

“We’ll talk about that later,” she softly answered. Her eyes sparkled with pooling tears. “Your job now is to get better, okay?”

“Sure,” he answered, closing his eyes to her distress. And just before the growing discomfort became borderline unbearable, he felt a soft kiss on his bruised cheek. Samantha’s lips were warm and velvety.

It felt much better than the washcloth.

CHAPTER TWENTY: 2 hours found

Resting her hands on Martin's shoulder, Samantha felt him slip away from her once again, either asleep or unconscious. At least this time she knew he was for the most part, safe. Carefully wiping down his damp temple one more time she made note of his pale skin and sunken cheeks beneath the glaring bruises that surrounded the broken bones of his face.

The voices of her friends became indistinguishable background chatter as her hand gently traced the rough surface of Martin's face. She was tired, very tired, and because of that she rationalized it to be reason her emotions seemed so close to the surface.

She felt connected to him in some way she couldn't define.

Samantha toyed with that new born thought as she caught and worried her lip with her teeth. When she felt a warm hand alight softly on hers, she glanced up and was surprised to find Martin's mother regarding her. The woman's eyes were wide and knowing. The agent felt as if her thoughts were being read. She blinked, and stepped back.

"Oh, I'm sorry," Samantha apologized, handing back the damp cloth. "I . . . I lost track . . . I mean," she paused and let out a breath, then smiled nervously. "I'm pretty tired, Mrs. Fitzgerald. I guess I kinda zoned out." She handed back the washcloth.

"He means a lot to you, too," the older woman said quietly. "I can tell. Thank you for looking out for him." Martin's mother held Samantha's look for a moment.

Flustered, Samantha didn't know how to respond. This was the first time she'd heard the woman's voice and it wasn't at all what she'd expected. She was . . . human. Samantha mentally scolded herself; of course she was human! Then it occurred to her that she never really thought much about what Martin's mother would be like – the force of his father's personality was enough to reckon with.

"You're welcome," Samantha finally replied, feeling stupidly out of sync with the exchange. She blinked and shoved her hair back over her ear. "Um, he's going to be, all right, then?"

A flash of something crossed the woman's eyes just before she turned back to her son. "That's what they tell me." She uttered the words so quietly Samantha had to

concentrate on the words. Mrs. Fitzgerald then threw her an apologetic smile that emanated sadness. "I'm sorry. I don't mean to be negative."

Before Samantha could reassure her, Victor Fitzgerald strode up to the gurney with a scrubs-clad doctor by his side. The doctor began directing an orderly and a nurse to move Martin down the hall. She glanced at Martin's mother and immediately saw the same aloof woman she'd seen previously in the conference and emergency rooms. It was clear that Victor was the dominate spouse, but what Samantha had seen between Martin and his mother for just those short moments showed her that the family was far from dysfunctional. Katherine Fitzgerald loved her son, and the two of them had their own special bond.

Samantha felt a pang of regret and a longing wish for a similar connection. As the gurney was pushed down the hall, she became aware that Martin's tie was a tight ball in the grip of her fist. Quickly, she released it and withdrew her hand from her coat pocket.

"Well, I guess that's it for now for us," Jack said, rubbing his eyes.

"I'm going home," Vivian said. "I don't know about the rest of you, but I'm certainly tired. I'll see you all on Monday?"

They all nodded and began moving to the exit together.

"So the doctor's agreed to do this rapid detox thing?" Samantha asked. "Without consulting Martin?"

"I guess so." The sharpness of Jack's voice made clear his thoughts on the subject. "I'll keep in touch with Victor by phone and keep you all posted, if you want. Go home. The paperwork can wait until Monday."

'But I can't,' Samantha immediately thought as Sunday dawned outside.



Samantha made it home and collapsed on her bed, the morning light sharp to her eyes. She'd managed to peel off most of her clothes before giving in to the irresistible call of her bed and left them in a heap on the floor. Just before her eyes slid shut and sleep came, Samantha's fingers groped her coat and pulled the silk tie free of the pocket.

With it clutched against her chest, she fell asleep.

It was just past noon when she startled awake, confused at first as to where she was. Lifting her hand when it felt oddly numb, she found the tie entwined with her fingers; then memory came rushing back. She saw Martin's sorry face in her mind's eye. It was disturbing on its own, but there was more she couldn't pin point. Something pressed her to get up and get moving. Samantha hit the shower and was dressed in jeans and a comfortable sweater a half hour later and calling for a cab.

She arrived at the hospital and jogged inside. When she asked for Martin's room, she was taken aback when she was directed to the Intensive Care Unit. When

FULL MOON & CHINA WHITE

she arrived slightly out of breath Samantha reined herself in enough to catch her wind and orient herself.

Martin's mother was behind the glass walls of a room set off to one side and sitting next to her son. A nurse was close by, monitoring the readings of several machines. Victor was nowhere around.

Samantha approached slowly, taking in the set up. Martin's hands were heavily bandaged and what she could see of his arms were spattered with dark, circular bruises that were the same hue as the one side of his face and the semicircle under the other eye. An I.V. trailed from one forearm to a hanging bag of clear liquid and a tube was inserted in the corner of his mouth and taped down. An oxygen line was secured below his nose and snaked over his shoulder, disappearing off the edge of the mattress. Martin looked completely relaxed and sound asleep.

After a few moments, his mother looked up and smiled wanly. Samantha's feet moved forward on their own as the older woman rose. She looked incredibly tired to Samantha.

"You can't go in," the nurse ordered. "One at a time in the unit, please."

Samantha stopped. Martin's mother must have figured out what the nurse said because she pushed open the door and stepped out.

"Don't leave on my account, Mrs. Fitzgerald," Samantha said.

"Katherine," the older woman responded tiredly. "Please call me Katherine."

Samantha nodded. "I'm Samantha," she said, her eyes wandering back to Martin.

"I know. Martin has talked about you."

Surprised, Samantha looked back to the woman. "He has? Here?"

Katherine laughed shortly and reached over to squeeze her arm. "No, not here. Martin's been – asleep – since you left. I mean, before that. When he visits. He's very fond of you and I'm sure he'll be glad you're here."

"He's okay? I mean, he's doing all right?"

Katherine dropped her hand and smiled tiredly. "I think so. They don't tell me much, but that nurse hasn't left him alone. The doctor checks in often, too, and the anesthesiologist is always nearby. They tell me that they have to keep a close eye on his blood pressure and heart. Victor knows more of the details. I don't think he wants to scare me, but I know there's a risk in this."

Samantha shuddered, remembering Viv's earlier concern: '*... there are heart risks in that procedure for a healthy person.*' She swallowed hard and tried to smile. "I'm sure he'll be all right. May I see him? Talk to him?"

"Sure. I need some coffee. May I get you some?"

"No, no," Samantha said. "I'm fine. Thanks."

"I'll be right back, Samantha."

Samantha slipped into the room. It was filled with soft noise – the *shush* of the respirator, the beep of the heart monitor and the hum of something she couldn't locate. Sitting in the only chair, she automatically took Martin's thickly wrapped

hand. His fingertips poked from the gauzy mass so she gently rubbed the tips of her fingers against his with one hand. With the other, she traced his brow.

“Hi,” she whispered, not sure what else to say. Instead she let her fingers trail along his cheek and let her mind relax. “I hope you’re having good dreams. I . . . I had to see you. I had to know you’re all right. Martin, I’m sorry I didn’t see anything. I found you as soon as I could but I shouldn’t have let you get out of my sight. Sounds silly, doesn’t it? I mean, there was really nothing I could do but I felt so guilty . . . and angry. I, um, I guess I was angry because I was afraid I wouldn’t get the chance to, you know, get to know you better. I swear, Martin, when you are over this . . .”

Her prattling was cut off by a sudden and loud beeping. Alarmed, Samantha looked up and saw the nurse shoot to her feet. “Get the doctor!” the nurse barked to another nurse just before she burst into the room. “Out, now.” The nurse inserted herself between Samantha and the bed, pushing the agent away.

Samantha stepped back, her heart fluttering like a trapped bird. “What’s wrong? What happened?”

The nurse was busy adjusting the I.V. drip then began tilting the bed so Martin’s feet were higher. “Get out, miss.”

Within seconds there were more people in the room and Samantha was forced out. “BP’s dropped to 85 over 55,” she heard someone say over the incessant beeping. Another fixed a syringe as the doctor snapped orders.

Samantha felt rooted, unable to move, her heartbeat loud in her ears as the muted drama unfolded behind the glass walls. A motion in the corner of her eye caught her attention and she turned to find Katherine staring open-mouthed at the scene before them. With a small gasp, a Styrofoam cup slipped from the woman’s grip and hit the floor with a muted thump. The noise jarred Samantha to her senses and she wrapped a protective arm around Katherine’s shoulders, pulling her back from the mess on the floor. Samantha could feel her trembling. The agent was about to utter words of assurance, but before she could find her voice a crash cart rattled by and was shoved into the room.

Inside the unit, the doctor yanked the heart paddles from their berth and they were instantly slathered with lubricant.

“Clear!” he ordered sharply, holding the iron-like devices over Martin’s bare chest.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE: 5 hours found

It was an oddly muted dance that played out before the frozen pair. Samantha clung to Katherine's trembling form, each of them using the other to keep their feet. Each time Martin's body twitched and arched with the heart paddles, a little chunk of Samantha's work-hardened emotional wall chipped away.

She could hear the frantic orders shooting from the mouth of the doctor in measured time, running down the well-rehearsed list of actions needed when a patient's heart stopped. Strangely, Samantha's mind clicked on that point; she and her team also ran down a list of motions that needed to be checked off in an investigation. What struck her was the term '*suspects*'. The doctor had his kind of suspects and she had another, flesh-and-blood kind.

Samantha couldn't kick the thought.

Behind the glass, the doctor resorted to manual CPR pumps on Martin's chest. Even from where she stood, the red marks of the defibrillation units were bright and defined against his mottled pale-and-bruised torso. So focused on the pattern of coloring, when the doctor slammed the needle and syringe directly into Martin's heart, Samantha was incapable of stopping the gasp of horror that escaped her. Her grip on Katherine's shoulders clamped down – they flinched in unison.

"Oh my God," Katherine whispered in a quivering voice. Her hand rose and covered her lips as if trying to hold back a flood of emotion. Glistening tears traced her cheeks.

'*Suspects*.' The word bounced around in her mind. Samantha tore her eyes from the room and gripped Katherine's shoulders with both hands and forced the older woman to face her.

"Katherine!" she demanded, trying to get the distraught blue eyes to focus. "Katherine! Look at me. Who was in with Martin before I came? Katherine?"

Something in her tone finally caused Martin's mother to drag her eyes from her son. The agony reflected there momentarily pierced Samantha's heart, but she persevered. "Think! A nurse? A doctor? Is that person in the room?"

Katherine blinked rapidly. "Um," she stammered. "I . . . I don't know!"

Samantha got in close and demanded Katherine's attention. "Katherine. Think. Male? Female?"

“F . . . female. A nurse, I thought.”

“What was she wearing?” Samantha prodded. “What pattern on her uniform? Blue? Purple? Green?”

“Greens and browns,” the woman answered, her voice becoming more controlled. “I remember because something reminded me of Rocket . . .”

“Rocket?”

Katherine smiled sadly. “Martin’s dog when he was a boy. A German shepherd.”

“Were there animals in the pattern? Dogs?”

The lines on the woman’s forehead deepened as she frowned in thought. “No, not dogs. Leaves. Fall colors; Rocket used to run through the leaf piles when Martin raked them. He’d get so mad; then he’d laugh.” She swiped at her eyes. “Why?”

Samantha released her and strode to the glass separating her and the dance trying to save Martin. The doctor had returned to the paddles, using them one more time. Martin arched again and everyone froze. In that moment, Samantha scanned the room. No leaves, no fall colors. Then her gaze drifted to the heart monitor, where a steady pattern seemed to assert itself.

Her mind raced. She didn’t even ask if Liang was in this hospital – she assumed not, as prisoners were usually held at another facility. Samantha quickly moved to the nurse’s station, startling the woman behind the desk. “Call security, now,” she ordered, flashing her FBI identification. At the same time she pulled out her phone and stabbed the keys. “Come on,” she breathed as the ring tone hit her ear. Three rings later, Jack picked up.

“Malone,” he muttered, obviously just waking up.

“Jack, it’s Sam. Where’s Liang? Is he at County?”

“Yeah, yeah. Under guard.” There was a pause, and when he spoke again, he was wide awake. “Why?”

“I think someone just tried to eliminate Martin. I still need to confirm . . .”

“You round up security?” He interrupted.

“Yeah. Mrs. Fitzgerald may have seen them.”

“I’ll get an artist down there,” Jack said. “You stay by Martin and his mother, Sam. Keep your eyes open. I’ll get our guys down there ASAP. And pull any security tapes.”

“Okay.” Samantha closed the phone and studied the area with security in mind. Katherine was at the windows of the room, waiting for enough of the hospital staff to trickle out to make room for her. She noted that the doctor was one of three left in the room. He had been writing on Martin’s chart, but was now holding it, forgotten in his hands as he studied his patient. Samantha took advantage of the moment to contact security and isolate the tapes. Finally, the last two nurses left, one stopping to direct Katherine back into the small room before taking up the room’s observation station.

By the time the doctor spoke to Katherine and stepped from the room, Samantha was waiting for him. “I’m with the FBI . . .”

“I know. I’ve known Victor Fitzgerald for years.”

“So, you know what’s going on, then? Why Martin’s here?”

“Yes, most of it, anyway,” the man ran his hand through his hair. Sam placed him somewhere in his forties, but the tired lines on his face made him appear older. “If Victor hadn’t briefed me, I probably wouldn’t have checked his blood and picked it up.”

“Picked what up?” Samantha felt the hairs on the back of her neck tingle, instinctively knowing what he was going to say.

“The potassium level in Martin’s blood just now. Someone tried to kill him.”

Just as she’d suspected, it wasn’t over yet. Samantha was instantly thrust into a precarious position between emotion and professionalism; focusing on the latter was difficult due to the former. Suddenly, every worst case scenario she’d ever concocted about a ‘work place romance’ came to this point. Oddly, though, she found it easier to prioritize than she’d imagined.

Ignoring the station nurse, she entered the ICU cubicle and stood firmly behind Katherine. Hospital rules be damned; she wasn’t leaving Martin’s side until this was over. Then after that . . . well, she’d think about that tomorrow after Liang’s trial began.



Humming dominated his consciousness. It was the only thing he heard in the blackness that was this moment. Humming and an occasional stab of . . . what?

Pain, he realized in an instant. A scattered level of pain everywhere. Martin fought to piece it all together. It was all a jumble of feeling, reality and confusion. With a gasp, he forced his eyes open and pins of pain struck both in his chest and his eyes, which propelled him into abrupt consciousness.

“Martin? Sweetheart? Are you with us, honey?”

His mother’s voice became an anchor. He turned toward it, sorting out her face from the fog that hung before his eyes.”

“Mom?” he croaked, not sure he actually verbalized the word.

“Yes, it’s me. I’m right here. You should be feeling better now.”

Better? Better than what, road kill? The idea struck him funny and he tried to laugh but it brought shots of pain from, well, just about everywhere. Martin decided his head, though, was the main event. He worked his mouth, trying to drum up something to ease the dryness. His lips felt cracked.

“Here.”

Blessed fingers rubbed his lips with ointment then offered him a straw. He sucked greedily to ease his shriveled tongue and rough throat. The cool water was withdrawn too soon.

“Slowly, Martin. You don’t want to overdo.”

With his mouth somewhat satiated, he concentrated on his clearing vision. His mother's face was in the forefront but there was another there. "Sam?" he whispered. The gold-crowned form behind leaned in. The familiar brown eyes of his teammate immediately warmed him.

"Hey there, Martin. It's about time you joined us again."

Other sounds of motion, the beeping of monitors and the smell of antiseptic all came together as he began to recall the events that brought him here. Martin also recalled the former pains that centered around his gut, but that area seemed to be quiet now. He moved his limbs and felt his own hand's pressure on his abdomen. It wasn't quite right.

"You should be feeling much better, son."

His father's voice sliced the atmosphere just before his face came into view.

"The drugs are out of your system. All you should feel now are the bruises. Do you understand?"

Drugs? Flashes of scenes where he was completely helpless crossed his mind. Yes, he remembered. "Sun's dead?"

"Yes. And the man responsible is in custody. Remember?"

Martin nodded once, the effort bringing on a headache. "Yeah, I do. Where's Sam?" A vague feeling of anxiety sprouted in his mind.

"I'm here." Samantha's face came into crystal clarity and he suddenly felt at ease.

"Thought you were dead," he mumbled. It sounded better in his head.

"Not yet, I'm not."

Martin felt the pressure of someone's hand on his. He tried to squeeze her hand but his own hand felt oddly thick and numb.

"I've got you," she said softly. Her face grew larger and clearer as she leaned in. He could feel her breath tickle his cheek. "I'm not going anywhere, Martin." Her lashes were incredibly long and clear; the darker speckles of her eyes vivid against the brown. Samantha smiled and he felt warm all over. "All you need to do now is get better. Everything will be all right now. Trust me?"

When he smiled Martin felt the thickness of his cheek and remembered the bruising. Her closeness made it easy to ignore. "Yeah," he breathed, feeling safe and relaxed for the first time in a long time. "I trust you. Watch my family, too?"

"Sure." Samantha kissed him lightly on his undamaged cheek. "You can rest assured."

And he did.

EPILOGUE

The routine of following up leads and gathering evidence helped the time to pass for Samantha. Now awake from the forced detox, Martin was moved to a private room that was easier to keep secured. Samantha and the deputy director arranged and oversaw the move.

By the time Danny, Viv and Jack arrived Agent Spade had already isolated the security videos and called for a list of female employees to match against Mrs. Fitzgerald's description. As Samantha briefed the team, Jack stood back with an amused tilt to his mouth. When Samantha sent Viv and Danny to look at the videos, Danny gave her a smart salute before setting off. She glared at his retreating back and Jack laughed.

"What?" Samantha demanded of Jack after the other two agents departed.

Jack just shook his head and laid a hand on her shoulder. "Nothing," he said. "You've taken this by the horns and done a good job, Samantha."

She could feel the heat rise in her cheeks. "Thanks," she said shortly. "I . . . ah . . . appreciate the distraction." With that, she ran her hands through her hair and sighed. "It's been a long couple of days . . ."

"Well we have it from here, so go put your feet up. You deserve it. After the arraignment tomorrow things should calm down."

"Are they really going to put Martin on the stand?" she asked, glancing back toward Martin's room. "Don't they have enough to arraign Liang without him?"

Jack tilted his head. "Well, according to the D.A., Martin's testifying is only intended as a strategy to convince Zhang to cooperate. He's scared; his father's been killed and he knows he's next. They have to convince him that with Liang in custody, it will be safe to testify. He has to be convinced that the Triad has basically washed their hands of Liang and he's out there on his own."

Samantha studied Jack for a moment as she thought. "Is that true? Have they shunned Liang?"

Jack gave her a cryptic smile. "I said Zhan has to be convinced of that."

"So Martin's testimony isn't directly relevant?"

"All Martin can do is put Liang in bad company. He didn't see Liang actually touch Sun or order anyone to touch him and everyone else is dead. Martin's statement

is circumstantial; the D.A., though, says it's enough to get Zhan in there and convince him to testify."

"A house of cards."

"In essence, yes." Jack squeezed her shoulder reassuringly and dropped his arm. "But it's important he be there. The D.A. is counting on him."

Samantha's lips compressed into a disapproving line. "Is anyone thinking of Martin's welfare? He's still in a lot of pain."

"Having experienced the Fitzgerald stubbornness firsthand, I think he'll pull through especially if he gets some rest between now and tomorrow."

She glanced back toward Martin's room and rubbed her eyes. "I don't see why he shouldn't."

"And so should you," Jack added gently.

Smiling weakly, Samantha straightened. "I will as soon as the artist gets a sketch and I compare it to . . ."

"I'll take care of that," Jack interrupted. "You need to focus on Martin's room and keeping it secure. Stay with him. There will be a couple of agents posted outside his door to share the load. I'll wait here for the artist."

"Okay." She had to admit to herself that Jack was right – she was tired. She smiled again and retreated to Martin's room.

When she pushed open the door she saw Katherine sitting near the head of Martin's bed, a book lying forgotten in her lap. The woman's elbow was propped on the chair's arm, her chin resting on her palm. Katherine's eyes were looking in Martin's direction but Samantha could see that her thoughts were actually far, far away. It was several seconds before Mrs. Fitzgerald turned and acknowledged the agent's presence.

"How's he doing?" Samantha asked softly as she moved forward.

"Sleeping on and off. I think he's comfortable."

Samantha reached her side. "Well, that's something. Where's Mr. Fitzgerald?"

"Arranging a ride to the court tomorrow and talking to the D.A."

"Oh. Um, the artist should be here soon. I'll stay with Martin while you work with him. Or her." Samantha rubbed her eyes in disgust knowing she sounded like an idiot, but she was so tired.

Katherine smiled. "All right. I'm sure he'd like that."

The two women stood in companionable silence for several minutes. The sounds of the hospital were dull and far away beyond the closed door which gave the room a sense of peace. Samantha let her gaze drift over the bruised and bandaged form on the bed. Martin was breathing softly, his eyes twitching behind closed lids. The rest of his face seemed relaxed, the deeply etched lines of pain from the previous day smoothed away in sleep. He looked younger.

Their quiet reverie was broken with the arrival of the artist. Katherine stood immediately and motioned for the new arrival to step outside. "I don't want to disturb him," she explained in a whisper. Clutching her book close and giving

Samantha a comforting backward glance, Katherine followed the artist through the door.

Samantha moved the chair closer to the bed before settling into it with a sigh. She hadn't realized her feet hurt so much. She took a moment to stretch to try and chase away the dogged weariness. Her sleep at home hadn't been the restful kind. Samantha leaned forward and rested her crossed forearms on the edge of Martin's bed, snug against his thickly bandaged forearm. She wanted to take his hand but the only parts visible were about half of each finger. Instead, she had to be content with rubbing the exposed skin with her fingertips.

"Looks like you'll be saved from writing reports for a while, or at least until you learn to type with a cast on. Two-fingered typing for the time being, I guess." She didn't know if he could hear her voice or not, but she talked anyway finding it oddly comforting to herself. "I think Jack's going to probably chew you out for some of your decisions. Friendly warning." She smiled and studied his face. The sight of it brought a well of repressed feeling to the edge and her eyes watered. "I was so scared, Martin. I was sure we were going to find you dead somewhere." She swallowed hard. "I . . . I felt so cheated."

Instinctively her free hand drifted toward Martin's face. Her fingertips trailed lightly across his forehead and down across the obscenely bruised cheek. She *tsk'd* and shook her head. "That's going to hurt for a while, I'm afraid. I think the swelling's down a bit, though." Samantha's throat constricted, choking off the last of the comment. Wordlessly and with burning eyes, she allowed her hand to trail down his cheek and neck where she found the reassuring pulse of life against her fingertips. She bit her lip - the memory of hearing the steady, flat-lined heart monitor loud in her mind. Tears pooled and her sight became fuzzy.

Unable to speak, her hand continued its path down his neck to his chest. Through the thin material of the hospital gown she felt the lumpy monitor leads and the lines of his ribs as she found the rhythm she sought. Letting her palm rest flat over his heart, Samantha allowed its strength to comfort her. Although the silk of his tie had been an acceptable alternative, it couldn't equal the warmth and reassurance she felt now.

The strength of these feelings scared her. She blamed the feelings on fatigue and worry. She blamed circumstance for the depth of what she felt, but somewhere inside a voice told her otherwise. She knew she was too tired to face this now. Instead, Samantha edged closer and laid her head on his chest, her cheek resting on her hand. She could feel the power of the life-sustaining organ's tempo through her palm and it unintentionally lulled her to sleep.



Breathing is what he clearly heard first. He knew it was own breathing because he could feel the warmth of his exhale in his nose. It tickled, but a steady beeping

distracted him from scratching it. Martin's brain scrambled to identify the mechanical noise and then it all came back to him.

'Hospital,' he vaguely recalled. Then the all-over body aches made themselves know. It wasn't unbearable as much as simply uncomfortable; there wasn't a part of his body that didn't hurt. And his chest felt so . . . heavy.

Trying to move his arms to his sticky, blurry eyes he found he could only raise one and found it to be strangely heavy and uncoordinated. Forcing his eye lids apart, he saw a white bundle hovering in front of his eyes. His hand was bandaged. Accepting that fact, he used his exposed fingertips to rub his eyes clear and then dropped his hand to his side. It took too much effort to hold it up.

That's when he noticed the faint smell of flowers and immediately pictured Samantha – it smelled like her shampoo. His hand searched the weight on his chest and he discovered the softness of her hair. Martin twisted his head just enough so he could see her head resting against him. His smile antagonized the pain in his cheek but he found he could ignore it. The bandages on his arm and hand made stroking her hair awkward, but the reward of feeling the silky softness trickling through his fingertips was enough sustain him as the rest of his senses came alive.

Martin could tell by her breathing that she was asleep. He looked around the room and realized they were alone. He knew he shouldn't be surprised – Samantha wouldn't be in this position with others in the room. Realizing this probably wouldn't last long he reveled in the moment; her hair flared out across his chest, the softness of her cheek, the warmth of her breath through the thin gown he wore. His aches faded and he closed his eyes, not wanting to ruin the moment by waking her.

They were suspended in time together, uncaring about schedules, events and duties - just the two of them drawing comfort from each other. Martin felt himself sink into a pleasurable abyss, hoping to lodge there just a bit longer away from any outside influences. He recalled his despair and anger the second he thought she'd been shot.

Martin recalled the first time he saw her. It was his first day at work and he had to admit, he was more than a bit nervous about walking into the bullpen. Samantha, with that breathtaking blonde hair and rosy red lips, was the first person he'd noticed. Martin recalled being momentarily stunned and a bit embarrassed when he finally turned to Danny and noted his now familiar smirk; he realized at that moment that Samantha probably had that effect on every male that walked in the room and Danny Taylor knew it. Martin made the decision then and there to ignore her looks and prove to Taylor that he could work with this group as a team and nothing more. That all-knowing Taylor smirk wouldn't be turned on him again.

He'd had no idea how difficult that decision would be to follow. Everything about her intrigued him even more but the demands of learning his new job gave him what he needed to work around the feelings. When he finally began to feel like a member of the team Martin found the desire to get to know her better grow stronger. Still, he'd been able to be professional. A few times he'd asked her out for drinks after

FULL MOON & CHINA WHITE

work to test the waters but she'd shot him down each time and he'd again work around the feelings.

Then his Aunt Bonnie went missing. Martin vividly remembered when she was found and when he had to tell his uncle that she was dying. Never had Martin felt so devastated and alone; but Samantha was there, and she'd willingly given of herself to console him. Ever since then, he knew he was lost to her.

He'd sworn he wouldn't make the first move and embarrass not only himself, but her, too. He'd hoped her signals would change. He'd hoped she'd give him a sign. He'd hoped it wasn't a hopeless situation.

But for now, this felt perfect and he wanted it to last as long as possible. After this was over he would make a move, but he had to make sure he was reading this sign correctly. Martin closed his eyes and inhaled her essence as he gently stroked her hair.

Maybe this was a beginning. And for now, it was enough.

THE END