

When the Spirit Speaks

By Kimberly S. Brown

Chapter One

A Single Shot

Colt smelled his own sweat, the kind that comes from days unwashed spent in the heat, tinged with adrenalin and just a dash of fear. He stared out at the barren desert road. It was too hot, dry and deadly where he lay for even the lizards to venture out. The hills surrounding him were rough rock from the beginning of time that gradually wore out into the sand at their base. Sand that had absorbed the blood and tears of centuries of battles. War, and the type of men who made war, combined in this hostile land to make it as close to hell on Earth as the human mind could fathom. That was true for the natives as well as those who trod on the unfamiliar soil of Afghanistan.

The heat was ferocious, making breathing a task that almost required thought. The slight winds that the mind said would cool merely acted as a carrier for the small sand particles that seemed to attack the eyes and uncovered skin and sneak under clothing to make every part of the body uncomfortable all at once.

Colt's dirty, native clothing let him blend into his surroundings as he lay near the top of the hill among the rocks, rifle sighted. In the valley behind him were horses and companions, waiting for him to perform his task. He had lain thus for hours, knowing his quarry would come, yet not knowing when. His was a job of impatient patience, with death the period at the end of his sentence.

In the distance he finally saw the vehicles, or at least the dust they raised as they crawled over the rough road closer to his position. Sweat soaked through the dirty thin material of his native shirt and the headcloth wrapped around his head, then dripped into his eyes. He merely blinked it away, afraid any movement would bring attention to him and ruin his chances at one shot.

That was all Colt sought...one shot. That was what he was trained for, and what he did as easily and naturally as most men breathed or laughed.

Azul came closer, riding in the third car, as the reports said he always did. The scope of the high-powered rifle was trained on the vehicle, on the man, on the quarry. Colt knew this man was a terrorist leader. He had ordered the deaths of many of his own countrymen whom he said were not as faithful as they should be, and Azul was growing in his power and reach, masterminding terroristic plots in many other countries, including the United States. He was said to be well-funded, well-respected by the Muslim extremists, and without mercy. Colt had heard first-hand the accounts of what Azul himself did to the men, women, and children of those he deemed the enemies of his cause and his god.

Colt waited. No one watching him would see movement except for the rise and fall that his breathing caused, and that, too, seemed to be timed and regulated to draw no attention. One more hill to top on the undulating road and Azul would be close enough for a clean shot, yet far enough away to give Colt and his group a fighting chance of escape. Wait. Wait. Wait.

The shot seemed to ring forever, yet Colt was crawling backward down the slope as soon as his finger released the deadly missile. Then he was up and running down the hill toward the men and horses as soon as he was sure he couldn't be spotted. His companions jumped on the horses and whispered urgently for him to hurry. Hurry! He remembered the sound of his feet rasping through the rocks and sand and his heart pounding, knowing they were back there...knowing they would come...

Colt was jarred abruptly back to the present when a tornado of a young woman bounced off of his back, causing her to dump about half of the contents of her black leather computer bag on the jetway. He had turned quickly, regaining his composure in a single breath, then bent down to help her collect the pens, notebooks, and other sundry items rolling down the incline.

"Oops! 'scuse me!" Ellie said without looking up from gathering the contents from her bag. Then Ellie smiled at Colt as she glanced up to take her writer's tools that he had rescued and stuffed them with everything else into the case.

"Are you alright?" Colt asked.

"Yeah, just too much in a hurry, I guess," said Ellie with a warm smile to one of the military 'family.' "I almost missed this flight because I was helping this older woman to

her gate, which should have been right next to this flight. But then our flight changed concourses at the last minute, and Heathrow isn't known for being the easiest airport to get around."

"Yeah, I noticed that," responded Colt.

"Anyhow, I made it," Ellie said with a smile.

Ellie immediately recognized the uniform as Marine, and the smile as genuine, but reserved.

Ellie also recognized what she called "The Look." It was the eyes, she realized long ago, that gave it away. Men in uniform, the good ones who made service their lives, whether they were police officers or Army regulars or Marines, had "The Look." It was like a tattoo that said, "I know the rules. I live by the rules. Are you going to give me any trouble?"

She knew that look well because her father, after all, was a general, and her two brothers were in the Army and the Air Force. She loved them all madly. But she figured both sides—hers and the military's—were thankful that it wasn't her calling.

This Marine was at least six-one, with icy blue eyes and chiseled features with a strong jaw that had been shaved closely and carefully. No missed spots on this Marine. His hat was tucked neatly under his arm, his dark brown hair cropped short, and his khaki service uniform was spotless, without a wrinkle, and fit him perfectly. The broad shoulders bespoke of strength, and the way he held himself bespoke of honed discipline. And those shoulders were attached to a broad chest that tapered to a narrow waist that backed up her initial impression of disciplined fitness. He seemed to be dark of features, yet his lean face really wasn't very tan. Ellie filed that little tidbit away as a writer does with information that doesn't quite fit.

She tucked her bag under her arm and slung her laptop back over her shoulder. "Sorry that I plowed into you, Captain..." Ellie recognized the two bars, but paused to read his name tag, "Tovey." She also noted the sharpshooter school patch and the Expert marksmanship ribbons.

They were the last two boarding the flight as Ellie moved around him to join the shuffling line down the jetway, thinking in a very feminine way what a nice package he made. She guessed with his looks he was used to being given the once-over, probably

twice over. Not that he didn't deserve the attention. He had a body that filled the uniform in all the right places, especially across the chest and shoulders. Ellie had always been a sucker for strong shoulders and arms.

As Colt followed her to the plane door, he realized he wasn't annoyed as he often was at being sized-up by a female. His best friend once told him that Colt was like a prime piece of meat hung up before hungry dogs. His friend was envious. Colt was mortified.

But even as his reciprocal "once-over" from head to toe left him lingering on the long legs in front of him—she had to be at least 5' 8"—Colt knew now wasn't the time for complications in his life. And this one, he bet, would be complicated. There was no ring and no shadow of one—something he had learned about the hard way. That bouncy walk and the energy she exuded were up front and in your face sexy to someone like him who demanded honesty in all things, especially relationships. And while the ponytail of brown hair drawn back from her face made her look younger than she probably was, he noticed the unmistakable mature feminine swing to her hips.

She wasn't built like a model, but rather like a long-distance runner. Her movements were fluid, the type that one athlete recognizes in another. Colt appreciated fitness. No, he more than appreciated it. It was an important part of his life, and he had little use for people who didn't take care of their bodies.

Straight brown hair and hazel brown eyes were common, but her hair seemed to have a life of its own, bouncing and swinging like the last person in a "crack the whip" line. And her eyes had been open and honest, and for lack of a better term, merry. She seemed to be a person who enjoyed life.

Colt also recognized an underlying energy that seemed to radiate from her as she moved quickly to board, speaking in a friendly manner to the flight attendants. When she had looked at him through those hazel-brown eyes, for some reason they had sparkled with mischievous humor. He wondered just what the joke was, and whether it was on him. Then Colt reminded himself again that he wasn't in the market, so to speak, even though she intrigued him.

But, with a small smile, he admitted to himself, there was nothing wrong with admiring her quick walk in nicely fitting jeans.

Colt literally shook his head. He preferred his own rules, which didn't include being led on wild chases by women who wanted to be caught, or futile chases by the ones who didn't. He didn't know if this woman fit either category, but he wasn't going to put himself in a position to find out.

He'd been born into a military household, and he practically grew up in the military, so discipline and discretion became a way of life at an early age. Colt's serious manner around women got him the reputation as being a bit backward. Which, while not true, meant that his buddies constantly were trying to set him up with “the girl next door.” He was such a likable guy that some of his friends actually had tried to pair him up with their sisters!

That was exactly what Colt was trying to avoid. If he were being totally honest, which was another virtue that some found a flaw. Colt probably was a bit shy with a certain type of women—the wholesome ones who wanted you to settle down. Perhaps his whole outlook could better be labeled gun-shy rather than shy.

That “wholesome good looks” was a hard trait for most people to associate with a Marine special ops captain. Colt figured you didn't have to be married with a brood of kids to get set down by helicopter at night behind enemy lines and lead a successful mission. In fact, it helped if you didn't have any ties to home. With both of his folks dead, and no siblings, that left Colt pretty much in the select category when it came to volunteering for dangerous missions.

As Ellie waited for the people in front of her to stow luggage and take their seats, she pondered Capt. Tovey's voice. His was a mix of accents, or a lack of accent, that she couldn't quite place.

While standing and waiting, Ellie couldn't help her curious nature. “Did you play ball in college?” she tossed over her shoulder.

“Yes,” replied Colt as the aisle way finally cleared and he turned left to follow her down the narrow space toward First Class. “Football.”

Ellie turned in the aisle and stopped. Someone who loved sports as much as she did couldn't help it.

“Football? I would have pegged you for baseball. You've got the upper body strength for it.”

She stared at him intently and asked, "Were you any good?"

"I was," he said, the smile warming a bit. If she liked sports, she couldn't be all bad. "But you'd better move on so the flight attendants don't start screaming that we're holding up the flight."

"Oh, yeah," said Ellie as she nabbed a pillow and blanket and moved toward the window seat of the last row in first class. Being a frequent flier allowed her the luxury to upgrade with points or dollars on most occasions. Unfortunately, this flight's first class had been nearly full, but at least even in the last row she'd have leg room. She stowed her worn black leather carry-on in the overhead bin that Colt thought was full, then smashed the door shut and jumped into her seat by the window, sliding her computer bag under the seat in front of her.

Colt moved to take the seat beside her on the aisle, tucking his carry-on under the seat in front of him.

Colt had been last on board because he had been inactive enough in the past couple of months to still be stiff, and airplanes weren't designed to make that any better. The flight had been pretty full, but since 9/11, Colt knew that military personnel were treated to as much consideration as possible, whether on the airlines or in a restaurant. So he had been upgraded to first class to give him a bit more leg room. What he didn't know was that this seat had been chosen for him by his superiors to ensure he had a relaxing trip after his last mission. Colt stretched his long legs to the room allowed, appreciating the few extra inches and the goodwill, even though his mental thanks went to the wrong folks.

Colt glanced over at Ellie. Since the fates had decided that he'd share space with this bundle of energy for the next six hours, he might as well make the most of it. And, he thought as his seatmate got herself situated, it might be fun. This one didn't look like the settling down type; he doubted she'd have the patience for the mundane life of housewife with a brood of kids. And, after all, they would go their separate ways shortly.

Heaven knew he could stand a mild distraction in his life right now, he thought as he rolled his neck and stretched his stiff shoulder. His last mission had taken its toll, mentally and physically.

As Ellie settled into her seat, she warred with herself. However intrigued she had been at first, she hoped this military poster boy...no, she stopped, editing her own thoughts, he certainly was a full-grown man...would let her sleep.

Ellie traveled extensively in her job as a writer. While she mostly worked for the upscale "Pulse" travel magazine, she was, in reality, a free-lance travel reporter. She often focused on beautiful places and the people who frequented them to pay the bills and keep her on the move, but she specialized in finding the unusual and out-of-the-way 'gems in the rough' and bringing light—and often fame—to them in places around the world.

Sometimes she worried that by revealing those places that they'd never be the same again, but, then, she often reminded herself, nothing life touches goes by unchanged. And those places loved having her visit them and bring them the fame and fortune they figured they deserved.

But, back to the matter at hand. She wondered just how little polite conversation she could get away with before she could zonk out. She'd been on what she considered a tough assignment at a resort spa in London, reporting how the beautiful people stayed that way.

It wasn't always beautiful, she thought with a mental grimace.

As the passengers finished stowing luggage and taking their seats and the doors were shut, no one looking out the small windows on the plane or in the terminal noticed the man dressed in jeans and a nice polo shirt glaring out the window at the departing flight. Donovan Murphy raised his fisted right hand slowly and gently placed it on the glass. It wasn't a violent gesture, and his face was calm as a lake at sunrise, so no one except himself knew how angry he was.

While his plans hadn't gone as he wanted, there was nothing he could do now but accept and adapt without drawing attention to himself. That was why he had been chosen for this assignment. He was an American citizen, born and raised in Texas, although of Middle Eastern descent. He was well-educated in American schools and had a good cover job as an engineer working in the oil industry, which allowed him to travel to various points across the country and around the world with little notice. His education was genuine, and he had spent years in the oil and gas industry so that he

could hold a conversation with a fellow industry professional and raise no alarms about his cover.

His mother had been brought to the United States when she was nearly 12 and had been adopted by a family in Texas. She had bridled against the strict Christian upbringing that her new family forced on her, and had married the first young man who promised to take her away from the wretched life she lived.

Her new life was much worse. She was saddled with a drunk cowboy who followed the rodeo circuit. She and he were constantly criticized by his redneck friends because he had picked a foreigner as a wife. When she produced him a son, she thought he would be happy, but his drunkenness and abuse became more frequent, and focused on both of the helpless people in his life. She had won in naming the boy Donovan, which meant Dark Warrior, but the boy was abused as badly as his mother until a renegade bucking horse had ended the abuse. But that had meant returning to her adopted family and subjecting herself and her son to their strict moral codes.

But in private she taught Donovan. She taught him to show people what they wanted to see, but to trust no one. She taught him the true faith of Islam while taking him to church every Sunday and having him baptized in the Christian faith.

When he had been 19 and in college, his mother had died in an accident on the ranch. The ranch that she had hated. The life that she had used to teach her son to hate.

But college offered Donovan the opportunity to quietly learn more about his ancestry. Those who watch for disillusioned youth noted him, and Donovan was recruited by those who sought out the dissatisfied Americans who could be turned to the True Cause. And they tutored him well, with lessons along the same lines his mother had taught him as a young boy. To hate. To blame. To seek change in whatever manner offered itself. Those “friends” ensured he got scholarships, a good job, and trips to specific locations where he could take a “few days off” from his job to quietly travel and receive more training.

Donovan was trained well, then he began to have a few “side trips” to help his brothers solve problems. And Donovan found he not only had a skill for tracking urban targets, but had a liking for it, especially if the targets were Americans.

His latest assignment, and the one that would probably end his life in America, was one he took pride in being selected for. And any missteps were looked at as failure by Donovan.

Usually, his information sources were superb, but sometimes fate took a hand. When that happened, there was nothing you could do but accept the will of Allah and adapt. That was something else he had been taught, and taught well.

Donovan turned from the window to see about getting on a flight to Denver, Colorado. His information had come late, but he did have information. Plans worked one step at a time. He was a step behind now, but he could, and would, catch up.