

THREE SMALL BONE by Jennifer Chase

EXCERPT

PROLOGUE

Four Years Ago

The heat was even more scorching than usual. It wasn't a surprise to the special army team whose mission it was to find bombs and insurgents in Afghanistan while keeping civilians safe. It was late afternoon, barely 1700 hours. Still, the temperature raged at one hundred ten degrees and wasn't showing any remorse.

The assignment was to enter a small village, search it, and maintain a presence while waiting for further orders. They had intelligence information that the enemy had possibly used the village for storing bomb-making paraphernalia. The inhabitants were not known hostiles, merely farmers, and would not pose any type of danger.

Katie Scott took point, which meant she was holding the most exposed position leading her unit. She trudged forward, feeling every muscle ache in her body. Her gear seemed heavier than it had only two hours ago. She adjusted her helmet and, keeping her weapon poised and ready, watched the black German shepherd pad along the roadway. The dog's posture was almost regal and he was on high alert, ears perked forward as his head moved from side to side catching scents from the open area. Cisco was Katie's constant companion and partner, one who had alerted her team to danger on several occasions. The dog was invaluable in so many ways, thwarting multiple potential dangers and keeping the team safe.

They finally entered the village. A couple of elderly townspeople acknowledged the American soldiers with a subtle nod but stopped what they were doing immediately to take refuge in their small, makeshift homes. There were supposed to be families with children in the village, but now Katie could only see two young men out and about.

It seemed strange.

Something was out of place.

Katie slowed her pace and her sergeant caught up with her.

“What’s up, Scotty?” he said quietly, still keeping his eyes on any movement around the village.

“I don’t know...” she said softly. “But something is wrong.”

They stopped.

The rest of the team spread out and kept a watchful eye around them.

Cisco stopped too. He stood completely still, taking in the sights and sounds as the hot breeze ruffled his black fur. He growled and turned his attention ahead toward a group of buildings.

“He senses something,” she whispered to her sergeant.

The sergeant gestured for the rest to follow in that direction.

The company moved out. Each soldier had their position, watching for any movement as they covered each other’s backs.

Katie could feel her heart beating hard. She shivered even though the temperature was blistering. Moving cautiously in the direction that Cisco had headed, she brought the dog close by her side. She was ready to return fire or take cover. She took a deep breath to steady her nerves and keep focus. They continued to advance.

A building made of mud bricks and concrete with blocked up windows sat silent. It didn’t appear to be the same structure type as the family homes around it. On one side of the dwelling the windows were crumbling, appearing more ancient than the rest.

Katie watched Cisco slow his pace. His fur bristled down his spine.

The team stopped just before the entrance. There was no visibility as to what was inside.

Under the direction of the sergeant, two team members opened the door and then cleared the entrance, heading farther inside.

Katie heard gasps from her group. She cautiously entered behind them, directing her weapon in front of her. The musty stench hit her first—it was an unmistakable odor. As her vision slowly became accustomed to the dim, dusty lighting, she saw what her teammates had seen. Death.

At first, it appeared to be a large pile of clothes. Katie saw shoes and various materials, but she then realized that the clothes were covering bodies that were by now mostly bones but there were some that were in the first stages of decomposition. There were smaller bones that had been children.

She gulped and took a few steps back. Her mouth went dry and her heart hammered. Her team searched and cleared the building before moving out in formation.

Cisco kept close to her side as Katie tried hard to erase the horrific spectacle from her mind. It had been a massacre. Parents had still had their arms wrapped around their children. She had seen tiny shoes and part of a toy.

Without warning, gunfire bombarded them, peppering off the old clay walls. Smoke filled the air. The team took their positions and returned fire. Katie tucked into a safe place with Cisco next to her. She began to help hold off the ambush attack by firing in the direction of the threat.

Later on, Katie realized that it had been the longest gun battle she had been in, lasting nearly thirty minutes. But the worst part wasn't the shooting. It was that now she could never forget the image of the town whose inhabitants had been systematically murdered just to keep the enemy's weapons safe. Something had changed in her perspective that day. The incident fused into her soul, and she would always now carry it with her.