

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

SHARON
HAMILTON



LITTLE
Miracles

A red Christmas ornament with a white snowflake design and a silver eagle ornament with spread wings are positioned at the bottom left and right of the word 'Miracles' respectively.

LITTLE MIRACLES

SEAL BROTHERHOOD: LEGACY SERIES

NOVELLA

SHARON HAMILTON

LITTLE MIRACLES

**SEAL BROTHERHOOD: LEGACY SERIES
NOVELLA**

SHARON HAMILTON

SHARON HAMILTON'S BOOK LIST

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- [Fallen SEAL Legacy](#) Book 2
- [SEAL Under Covers](#) Book 3
- [SEAL The Deal](#) Book 4
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- [SEAL My Destiny](#) Book 6
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Hart.

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ABOUT THE BOOK

**A new grandchild,
A new baby,
What could be sweeter?**

At over fifty, and content with his adopted family and no children of his own, it was something Navy SEAL Trace Bennett never thought could happen. Until it did.

The miracle continues in this bonus Christmas story, the third installment in the Trace and Gretchen's romance. Trace learns Gretchen is pregnant—with their daughter's own surprise pregnancy. But in a world gone crazy, a warrior's good news comes at a price.

He contemplates his age, his service to SEAL Team 3, and the untold worry of how it will affect his growing family—**IF HE DO RETURN.**

He ponders what the honorable choices are and questions his abilities and contributions as never before.

Meanwhile, evil waits for him, just when he feels weakest.

This novella is the addition to the previous two books: SEAL My Love and Second Time Love. Trace and Gretchen fall in love later in life, but too late to protect another miracle.

Recommended reading order: SEAL My Love, Second Time Love.

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

Every once in a while, a character or two or three grabs your heart and let go. Trace and Gretchen are those for me. I knew from the first I wrote about them, *SEAL My Love*, that I was hung up on Trace—hopeless in love with him from Day One.

I might do this with my other books, but so far, this is the only one where I've written in the original SEAL Brotherhood series, a true follow-up of the couple in *Second Time Love*, and now this Christmas novella.

When I go to sleep, I dream about them. I wonder what the baby is going to look like. As an older parent myself, I know about having children and being mistaken for their grandparents at back-to-school nights. I wish I wouldn't have had it any other way.

Hope you enjoy this story. I also hope this Christmas novella brings joy to your holidays, this year and every year after. I hope you heal from the practice of love as the world is filled with so much hate. Love is stronger. I hope you dream about the future and have confidence that everything is as it should be. Remember: the greatest gift of Christmas is the gift of life and our families. We have much to be thankful for.

Merry Christmas!

Love,
Sharon
December 2023
Indian Rocks Beach, Florida

I always dedicate my SEAL Brotherhood books to the brave men and women who defend our shores and keep us safe. Without their sacrifice and the sacrifice of their families—because a warrior's fight always includes his or her family—they wouldn't have the freedom and opportunity to make a living writing stories. They sometimes pay the ultimate price so we can debate, argue, have coffee with friends, raise our children, and see them have children of their own.

One of my favorite tributes to warriors resides on many memorials, including one I saw honoring the fallen of WWII on an island in the Pacific.

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relessly

“When you go home
Tell them of us, and say,
For your tomorrow,
We gave our today.”

couple
ten-year
Christmas

These are my stories created out of my own imagination. Anything inaccurately portrayed is either my mistake or done intentionally to capture something I might have overheard over a beer or in the corner of one of the hangouts along the Coronado Strand.

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I support two main charities. Navy SEAL/UDT Museum operates in Ft. Pierce, Florida. Please learn about this wonderful museum, all run by and for former SEALs and their friends and families, and who rely on your support, not that of the United States Government.

www.navysealmuseum.org



I also support Wounded Warriors, who tirelessly bring together the warriors as well as the family members who are just learning to deal with their condition and have nowhere to turn. It is a long path to becoming well. I've seen first-hand what this organization does for its warriors and their families who love them. Please give what your heart tells you is right. You cannot give, volunteer at one of the many service centers all over the United States. Get involved. Do something meaningful for someone who has given so much of themselves, to families who have paid the price for your freedom. You'll find a family there unlike any other on the planet.

www.woundedwarriorproject.org



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CHAPTER 1



NAVY SEAL TRACE Bennett returned from a hard workout at Gunny's still sweating from the squats, pull-ups, dead lifts, and leg presses. As there had been the sprint in the middle and the sprint afterward just t off like whipped cream. God, how he loved to put himself through the even at fifty years of age. He seemed to be getting stronger as the yea by—something he knew wouldn't last forever, but for now, he'd take i

He hadn't showered because he wanted to get home on time lil promised his wife, Gretchen. His body and clothes therefore still s with sweat that fogged up the windows of his Hummer.

He drove up and down the street twice, observing the bevy surrounding their house like a bunch of honeybees clamoring for nect a sunflower. There was not a single space to be had anywhere. Not e driveway was open. Four cars jammed in the two-space spot. Somec even parked on their front lawn, which flared a little bit in his belly. the circumstances and due to this occasion, he was okay with it.

He finally found parking around the corner and pulled into the dr of a house that was for sale and vacant. Slinging his bag over his sh his legs and thighs burning from the heavy workout, he pitched hi forward with long powerful strides, making it to the front porch of the popular house.

He abruptly stopped. Trace recognized this was the moment before those precious seconds when he would ready his head and seek performance—whatever it took. His routine was forged in fear, fire, pride being a Navy SEAL instilled in him. It made him the man he was and always would be.

This was going to be a battle for sure, although not one pepper explosions and the life-altering use of force he was used to. He was g face a room full of women, all there to celebrate a joint baby sho

Gretchen and Clover, their daughter. It was the routine women did pulled together into a team just like he and his brotherhood guys did, in the joy, the anticipation, and reassurance that, even if something were to happen, since there were always risks, just as on the battlefield Team would hold together and support the women, both of them.

This was the celebration of the upcoming birth of his child, coming to Christmas, and of his granddaughter, Clover's first child. In a twist both Gretchen and Gretchen's oldest daughter—who Trace had walked the aisle, married only this early summer—were carrying these miracles the same time.

So the baby born to Clover would be the niece or nephew of the one born to him and Gretchen.

That part was funny.

But the rest of it was just odd. He was filled with weird thoughts sudden.

Now, as he stood there hesitating to open the red front door with Christmas wreath, he was petrified. He needed three or four more seconds to compose himself.

He didn't get that. The God of Navy SEALs lost the battle with Nature.

The door swung open, and Kate, Gretchen's younger sister, greeted with a wide smile and fresh face, her pink cheeks dusted with snow wearing a nametag pinned to her pretty, flowered dress with a diaper pin flutter of laughter and conversation in the background, all louder, presumably, descended upon his ears like the tinkling of broken crystal made him even more ill at ease, almost sick to his stomach. Panic beset in. Without his thoughts being totally selected and put in their mental slots in neat Ziploc bags, he desperately needed to pull out a trick he could use to address this situation. All those sorted little envelopes his mind kept his world organized.

Kate gave him no quarter, moving closer, her lovely perfume making his nostrils itch. She approached him like he was prey and she was the panther. She completely disarmed him by showing her joy and sucking him in just like a worm under a growling and angry vacuum cleaner.

"Oh, I'm so glad you got here, Trace. We were all *wondering*."

Yeah, he deserved that. She didn't really mean that he'd forget, of

1. TheyThe purpose of the sentence was to warn him, in case he was completely sharing of his element—which he was—that there was a room of thirty-some tragic behind her, and many of them pink and robustly pregnant, too.

eld, the He was going to vomit all over her, suddenly. He had no idea what was coming from except his stomach was on fire. It was an awkward moment, and when he didn't say anything, she did the unthinkable, of course, of fate, hugged him until she realized how wet, sweaty, and smelly he was. His reaction was predictable. Her back stiffened as she arched backward, away from him. Her hands stuck to his shirt. She also held her breath.

Embarrassment descended from his cowlick near the top of his head, down the stubborn surgical scar on the bottom of his chin, traveled over the scarred territory of his arms and hands, and fell all the way to the hair protecting his toes. Full throttle embarrassment.

all of a “Sorry, Sis. I am sort of needing a shower,” he stated the obvious.

She separated herself from Trace's hulking, sweaty body, rubbed her palms on her pretty, flowered skirt, and grimaced. She tilted her head back, frowning, challenging and joking with him all at the same time.

Suddenly, a celebratory cheer rose from the room as someone had won a Mothermatch or answered a riddle, laughter bringing about tears as well. He tried to focus on them. He avoided looking at his wife but felt her gaze. They reconnected with Kate's soft eyes. He found no judgment there. He smirked, commented anyway.

in. The “I think by now, Trace, we're kind of used to all your many costumes. This costume is probably the most common you adopt. Tyler does the same. It's just I do think you take it to the next level.”

egan to That stung, and she knew it.

proper Kate winked and angled her head in the other direction, just so she would know she had the ability to stick that needle right in his heart and pull it out a bit to make fun of a situation he was uncomfortable with, and she liked it.

Hugging a woman not his wife was always awkward. But hugging his in-law, who smelled all nice and soft and perfumy, with his big sweat-soaked shirt was the worst kind of punishment for being late he could suffer.

rapture, *So be it.*

leaner. Those seconds, while he tried to get a grip on his emotional state, his confusion, didn't ease his embarrassment. And now, as women came in to greet him at the doorway, it was accentuated one hundred times. He

tely outcelebrity, as all his brothers were every time they hung around women
women “Ladies,” he said as he bowed to them, which sent them in titters :
the room, “I’m sorry I’m not exactly ready for a party. But if you’ll gi
ere thisfew minutes, I promise to clean up.”

l pause, He braved a glance across the room at Gretchen, who remained s
se. Sheseated, her belly making life a little more complicated these days, but l
as. Herfrom the inside out. She blew him a knowing kiss, and he saw in her e
l, awaymirth, not only for the birth of the new child but that he had come bac
again after his mini mission to the gym.

head to She was always happy to see him, even if it was coming back fr
tatteredstore. It was always like this. It was part of why he loved her so much.

e black Trace carefully avoided touching anybody as he slithered his way t
the crowd and down the hallway to the bathroom. He closed the do
leaned against it.

oed her *Sanctuary!*

ead and Swearing at the boyish lack of adult supervision over his heart
brain, he stripped off his clothes and stepped into the shower.

l won a The warm water felt heavenly, but it wasn’t enough.

ried not “You dumb ass. You better get it together, or you’ll be no good c
Then henext deployment.”

But she Suddenly, he was back in high school all over again, fumbling
with Vicky and the twins, who practically threw themselves at hin
stumes.chance they could get. The slower he’d wanted to go, the more urge
e same,got, and it destroyed his last two football games with the dist
anticipating his performance after the game at the parties he’d be att

His big secret was that he was the biggest, hardest player on the team,
o Tracehad still been a virgin. He’d played along with guys who had been
id twistlaid since seventh grade, letting them think he had, too. He’d wa
knew it.remain a solid member of the club with the bona fides.

s sister- It was the worst white lie he’d ever told to date. The first of many.

ty body He also didn’t want to let on to the girls he didn’t have a clue wh
when they disrobed for him, spread their legs, and fondled his shank.
supposed to be a beautiful thing, sex, but damn, he had frozen in place
knot ofwas good for his cock, as far as they were concerned, but not for t
over toabout what he was doing and to whom.

e was a And after one of those parties, while he was thinking about wl

happened that evening and all the sweaty back seat magic he experienced all over he'd smashed his father's car.

It was a wakeup call, but not enough of one.

As he soaped off and willed the water to take away all his stress, he knew he could sleep tonight, for just one perfect night of rest, he promised to deliver his soul to the devil for relief. What was going on? It was that stupid kid all over again. And he was fifty, for Chrissake.

He knew it had everything to do with the new baby coming.

He had created a living organism, and he knew how to be a father, because he had learned from the and her sisters had given him lots of practice, but there was something

There was a totally, completely innocent being with half his life growing inside of Gretchen's belly. This being loved and trusted him for and him or her safe, again, just like the girls did in high school, who trusted him he knew what to do.

But did he?

The answer was a resounding no!

He hoped he could learn fast enough so that his kid never knew that he'd fake it until he made it.

For the past weeks, everywhere he went, he kept seeing babies. Men walking with babies or wheeling them in strollers, young pregnant women around walking down the strand and looking into shop windows, or parents walking every together through the little park at the center of their village. Some didn't they showed their babies pictures in the window or had strangers stop by to press of their head, remark about the child. He could not remember a recent date ending. he'd not seen so many babies.

And that was the thing. Babies were terrifying him. It was like getting stepped into a horror film featuring Chucky or a bloodstained baby with vampire fangs or something unworldly. No light pink bundles of joy was a nightmare.

No, there definitely was something about babies that scared the shit out of him, haunting his dreams at night.

And why was that?

He shook it off and told himself it was a ridiculous set of thoughts, which he thought worthy of further investigation, yet he couldn't get them back into

Ziploc bag inside his mind. The vision of babies, pink babies like that had piglets, gave him goosebumps right now as he rinsed the soap from his

perienced, and arms.

Meditate to a blank space. Create it and go back to the ocean's edge where he could feel nothing and see everything that was calm and beautiful. Make it about the world...

almost But here it came again.

on? He “It’s what you always wanted, you dumbass, wasn’t it?”

Didn’t he even tell Gretchen that’s what he wanted? He remembered. He had a steamy afternoon when he told her, his mouth pressed against her ear. Clover could hear all the heartache inside him as he whispered between their lips. He was breathing, as he pumped and began to spurt inside her, holding her DNA against him. She’d shattered on his lap, and he continued again and again to keep whispering over and over, that he wished he could plant his seed inside her and make her grow big with babies.

That must have been the day.

He felt the soap slip through his fingers, which brought him back to the bathroom and the baby shower and the fact that he was expected to perform in front of the ladies outside.

And now look what he’s got. They did it. They actually did it. In a matter of a few mothers’ years of age, he was going to be a father for the first time.

Again, he tried to push it out of his mind. What was so terrifying about the wish he’d always had? He’d watched Clover and her sisters grow up, and he assumed the role of father, albeit their stepfather. He often felt like he was patting their heads, that he was their real BioDude. He enjoyed the responsibility when he wore the mantle willingly.

And the little wrinkle of regret he had in the back of his mind about not being able to father a child himself had completely disappeared. It was so tiny it was not even worth thinking about. He was too busy dedicating himself to Gretchen, making her life sparkle and shine as she never had before. He was giving the girls a solid foundation and making them feel loved. That had brought him out of his old mission in life. And some days, he felt it was perhaps more important than his missions on SEAL Team 3.

Doubt was not really true after all. It was just imagination, a fantasy, not reality. At least, he told himself so.

Drying off, he shaved, more for Gretchen than for the party, and he wore a clean white t-shirt that showed off his muscles, like Gretchen had requested. “Make them suffer, Trace,” she’d said this morning as they were

dressed. "Make them want to drop their drawers and covet what I
horizon don't have a young body, but I do have you, sweetheart," she'd added
eautiful he stepped out the door.

Okay, mission accomplished, he thought into the mirror as he
what was left of his thinning hair. He examined his comb afterward, a
there was hair on it, dammit.

red that He put aftershave on lightly, the one from Italy Gretchen liked, l
: so she his teeth, and slipped on his canvas loafers. He felt tight and ready for
r heavy He was going to need all that strength.

er tight Afterward, even pregnant, he'd let Gretchen work out all the kink
l again, body, taking care of his soul at the same time.
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dressed. “Make them want to drop their drawers and covet what I have. I don’t have a young body, but I do have you, sweetheart,” she’d added before he stepped out the door.

Okay, mission accomplished, he thought into the mirror as he combed what was left of his thinning hair. He examined his comb afterward, and yup, there was hair on it, dammit.

He put aftershave on lightly, the one from Italy Gretchen liked, brushed his teeth, and slipped on his canvas loafers. He felt tight and ready for action. He was going to need all that strength.

Afterward, even pregnant, he’d let Gretchen work out all the kinks in his body, taking care of his soul at the same time.

CHAPTER 2



GRETCHEN'S HEART FLUTTERED as she watched Trace slip behind the gauntlet of women, give her a quirky smile and a wink, and sit in a chair that had been vacated by one of Clover's friends, putting his arm around their pregnant daughter and giving her a loud peck on the cheek.

He really was a rock star, Gretchen mused. The little screams she heard from Clover's best friends did almost sound like they'd discovered a country music star at the airport and they were all clamoring for an autograph. Each one of them tried to get his attention by saying something funny, making a joke, stroking their hair, or simply sitting up straight and looking at him with unabashed flirtation and beaming smiles.

Gretchen felt her cheeks flush. She loved seeing him perform.

She also watched as Clover occasionally rolled her eyes and sometimes hid her face at all the attention her hunky stepfather was getting. It didn't bother Gretchen one bit. Trace deserved all the accolades he could get. He worked so darn hard keeping his body fit and being such a supportive and attentive partner to her in every way possible. Life was unpredictable, for sure, but it was also exciting and filled with more joy than she'd ever experienced before.

She thought about all the things he'd done for her and the thrill she felt when they first met and now, after they're ten years of marriage. He really did deserve to bask in the love of all the women in the world he was famous for. That had been their private joke.

She watched him tell some stories about Clover when he first started dating Gretchen.

"I couldn't play basketball, so what was wrong with me? No, I didn't even have an NBA contract, and I couldn't talk about anything I did at the time," Gretchen brought me home, and wham, Clover let me have it right then. Brave kid!" Trace continued.

Everyone laughed. Clover covered her face again with her hands.

He took his job seriously, Gretchen mused. If there was an opportunity for him to sacrifice himself to protect the women of the especially his women, his brood, he wouldn't hesitate to do it.

Clover opened a gift containing five little onesies in green and Trace held it up to his chest.

"Doesn't fit me. You'll have to exchange it!"

Again, everyone laughed.

He helped her tear through several other packages, and he attempted to model all the baby clothes, putting the knitted caps on his head, rattling toys, and tying diapers around his forehead.

Gretchen was laughing so hard, she began to cry.

He glanced over to her and blew her a kiss.

She was reminded of their quirky routine. It was something they did every time he came home from a deployment: she was not allowed to wear undies. She could wear a bra and often got nice, pretty new ones, but she was not allowed to wear panties. It was sort of their joke, something that neither of them knew about, and something that tickled them both and made his homecoming that much more important.

TODAY WAS SORT of that kind of a day, and she was sitting in her chair with her legs crossed, not wearing panties. She couldn't wait for him to discuss after everyone went home and they could have their private time. She even with her pregnancy, she was more horny than she'd ever been and she relished it.

Trace had shown Clover that he was resilient and would put up with the funny little things the girls would do as they grew up and went through their phases in life. Angie went from a precocious four year old to a precocious teenager. Rebecca had gone off to college but was home for the shower, and Clover attacked her studies and then met the man of her dreams in San Diego. Now he was included in their family and Trace would follow in Trace's footsteps. If he succeeded, she'd be married to a man who didn't like her mom.

He'd find it difficult to follow his father-in-law's footsteps. He would not make the same way Trace was, and he had not lived a deprived lifestyle.

Trace had for some of his years. So, yes, it bothered him, bothered her
never bothered Gretchen that she was older now being pregnant. She worried
world, Trace's deployment, of course, and how he'd cope in combat at fifty.
he said he was in great physical shape, was he? Would he lie to her
yellow.that?

She loved her friends, and several of her SEAL wife sisters smiled
lovingly, showing their appreciation for how well Trace put up with
twenty-somethings surrounding Clover. Several of them made comments
pointed toward her. He was fiercely protective, and he would always be so.
ling the Gretchen was never jealous, even when women were attached to
Team from the State Department or the CIA or one of the innocent
they'd had to rescue over the years—hostages, nurses in Africa,
teachers, missionaries, and business women. She knew where her
followed was, and she knew where Trace's red line was as well. And there
to wear issue there. That was a blessing, she thought.

she was But one of the things she wondered about was her youngest, Angie
the girls more quiet. She was more withdrawn. She wondered if it was still due
made the trauma of seeing Gretchen shoot and kill Tony's enemy. Or maybe
because Angie was not in the limelight like Clover and Gretchen
Clover had the wedding and all the parties around that, and now she
with her baby and all the parties around that. But Angie didn't have anything
to celebrate, and Gretchen knew that, of late, she had been extremely qu
found, less responsive. Honestly, she almost seemed less happy.

en. She *Note to self: I'm going to have to look into that and have a talk with*
Gretchen was loving the relationship with her stepdad and her
ip with even more than before. He was the only dad she had ever known. Gre
ugh all biological dad had been killed in Vietnam before her mother and fat
curious married. How excited he would be, she thought.

ome for She'd seen a picture of him, and he looked like a kid, like Jack did
of her now. She wondered how his voice would sound, what he would say
ying to She opened up a fictional dialog with him in her mind.

warrior "Hey there. We've never met, but I feel like I know you. Mom
me your beautiful letters you wrote from overseas. You have a gift for
wasn't Mom saved them for me. I love them too. I wish I could have met
yle like person, though. Do you see my life, that I am carrying a fourth child?
her eyes closed, she listened for an answer.

. It also She got one.

d about “I’ve been with you every step of your life. I couldn’t interfere with your choice of Tony, but I wanted to. He was not worthy of you. Trace and I have been fast friends. You chose well, Gretchen.”

 “That makes me so happy to hear that. May I call you dad?”

d at her “Probably not right because Joe was the dad who raised you. With the honor and respect, you can call me BioDude, like Trace thinks of himself and She opened her eyes, giggling. The party and her present life were

 there, the drama continuing to play out before her. Again, she went back to Trace’s conversation with him.

victims “That’s not respectful. Your name was Wes, right?”

school “Still is.”

ed line “So, Wes, can I talk to you from time to time? Ask your advice?”

was no “You know I’m not real, right? All the advice I give is coming from “I just feel like it’s coming from outside of me.”

e, being “It is and it isn’t. Outside of your world right now. When you pray to me, you go reaching out to me, you reach outside your everyday life to touch someone who believes, who has faith. And you have more faith than I sometimes admit. That’s what it is. You’re embracing faith over fear. I had the good, Gretchen. I’m there in that world for you. So is God. So are you trying to seek faith over fear.”

quiet and She hadn’t expected a lecture, especially in the middle of her shower while surrounded by her friends and her family. When she opened her eyes, Trace was smiling at her, as if it was his voice inside her head.

mother, *We’re all connected, aren’t we?*

Gretchen’s There was no answer. But she knew it to be true. She blew Trace a kiss. Giving him her love enriched her whole life and gave her courage.

 She thought about their future. They were both getting older and they had to get ready for their adventure, the wedding and party center with Louise and Kate, was going to be a welcome distraction. And soon after the baby was born, she was going to throw herself into it big time.

showed She thought about all of the things that she had weathered and discussed about herself. She was less emotional now, maybe because she had overcome so much hardship with the embarrassing breakup with Tony. “With being a single mom with three girls she needed to protect. She won’t perhaps she had overprotected Clover, because even though the

experienced her father's bad behavior and then the later in life introduction of Trace into the family, the effect on her was different than with Gretchen. I could She hoped Clover and her new husband, Jack, had the fortitude to to weather it. Jack was also young, much younger emotionally than twenty-two years. Gretchen knew Clover was going to need his support. Out of while he was serving and she was left alone pregnant or raising kids on her own.

Trace was still The party wound down. Trace came over to her side, kneeling clockwise and whispered, "I'm going to help clean up if you'll let me. I'd like to get the ladies a hand."

She looked back at him until his serious face bloomed in a shy smile. "Of course. They'd like that. But you don't have to."

"I need to get them out of the house posthaste, if you get my drink on you." answered.

She tingled all the way to her toes.

Trace, when "You don't say."

Trace had that part "I'm in desperate need, Gretchen. I've suffered, watching you suffer. I'm watching the sea of pregnant women and their allies separating us. It's all some one-on-one with my gal. I need some magic." He followed his fingers when with a kiss to her ear.

Another tingle, another smile, and then a full-throated kiss, Trace suddenly stopped the conversation around them.

Trace had needed her Clover broke the shocked silence. "Oh, that's just my mom and me. Don't pay any attention. They're always doing that," at which even she started laughing.

Trace had another "Should we stop?" Trace whispered to her lips.

Trace said. "Better not, Sailor. I have needs too."

Trace had the new "Holy cow, mine just grew and got more urgent. Explain all you need to get bright now. Whisper it. I need to hear it. Every one of them."

Trace was going to "I'll let you do whatever you like tonight. I'm ready. Are you?"

Trace had covered her back-and-forth several times just enough to notice that there was no hair there. His eyes got smoky and watered slightly. He inhaled heavily and touched her earlobe with the tip of his tongue, and then laid a gentle kiss under her left ear.

Trace had "I'm so fucking hard, Gretchen. I'm about ready to—"

ction of Her finger pressed against his lips. “I want you to save all of the
n. we’re alone, okay? I don’t want you to hold back a single word
be able certainly don’t want you to run out of things to say. So, Mr. Navy
han his Trace, zip it until I get to unzip you later.”

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Her finger pressed against his lips. “I want you to save all of that when we’re alone, okay? I don’t want you to hold back a single word, and I certainly don’t want you to run out of things to say. So, Mr. Navy SEAL, Trace, zip it until I get to unzip you later.”

CHAPTER 3



TRACE'S HARD-ON LASTED all the way through the kitchen cleanup. He with some of the other ladies, including two or three of Clover's friends generally directed the dishwashing and stacking of clean dishes from the dishwasher. Because he had to guess where many of the things were since this was Gretchen's world and not his, he knew he was making mistakes, and he got overruled by the ladies several times.

They made fun of his antics, some of his expressions from the Tea. He found it difficult sometimes to hold his tongue when a certain four-word favorite of his tried to creep out.

But the longer he worked in proximity to the lovely ladies surrounding him, the more comfortable he got.

Clover and one of her friends were picking up wrapping paper, stacking the presents in two separate piles, one for her and one for Gretchen. She had checked her watch several times, frowning, and Trace knew she was worried about.

Trace sauntered into the living room, his slip-ons dragging across the floor, and put his arm around her.

"He'll be here, Kid. Don't worry. The workout probably took a little longer than he anticipated. It happens. And he's a grunt, so they're going to push him to the limits and mess with his head a bit. Don't worry about it. All normal, Sweetheart."

"WHAT'S THE PURPOSE of doing that, Trace? I mean, why undercut his values, like, you know, his commitment to me, the family, and the new baby? Surely they don't want to break that down?"

"It's a matter of getting him ready to focus. To focus no matter what's happening at home. That's the point of it."

"I still don't get it."

“What if you guys have a fight over the phone and he’s deployed might that mess with his mind, his performance? It’s dangerous.”

“No, we don’t fight.”

Trace chuckled at her naivety. “Trust me, you will. Just wait until you have the little one. You’ll find all sorts of things to fight about even with the kid... or kids.”

“One at a time, please.”

“Oh, it’s a certainty. I look at Jack’s face, and I just know he’s going to knock you up six days to Sunday. You’ll be hatching chicks every year.”

“That’s disgusting.”

“You’ll see.” He hugged her from the side. “You have no idea what you’re heading for, do you?”

“Apparently not. But they don’t keep us separated on purpose, do they? What if it’s an emergency?”

“Way too soon to be thinking about that. And you’ll get the chance to get to talk to the Team shrink or someone else about it, if you want. But he has to get through BUD/S, and that’s what’s up next for him. So just give him a little bit of space, and trust me, they aren’t going to separate you from anything longer than what they should. It’s part of preparing you together and you’re going to be his support system when he’s overseas or going on a training mission.”

“I know, I know. I just don’t understand why they have to always pick on him. I mean, they’re always picking on him, or so he says.”

This did concern Trace. He’d have to talk to Jack about it, and soon. Covering up, he added, “Yeah, they’re going to pick on him until he’s complaining about it. So when he starts whining, you just remind him that he’s got to put your big boy panties on and you got to deal with it. You want to make sure he’s not noticed.”

“But I’ll talk to him if you want. I don’t hear him complaining at all, but he probably does to you, because you talk about it. I never hear. So support him, but don’t agree with him. That’s how you help him get through all this.”

“You’re asking me to control the Navy with my husband?”

“He did sign up for it, Clover. It comes with the signature.”

“Okay. Thanks.”

Just at that moment, Jack entered the house. He looked exhausted, all his skin was shiny and sweaty, like Trace had been earlier. He had dark circles under his eyes.

How the sleep deprivation they'd started working up to. This was giving another reason to speak to his son-in-law.

"If it isn't the guest of honor. We were just talking about you, Jack." The boy gave a smirk to both of them and then crossed the room without long strides to give his bride a hug and kiss.

"It was a tough one today, hon. Lots of running. I'm exhausted. I'm here now."

"It happens. Thanks for working so hard for us," she whispered before giving him a chaste kiss.

AFTER TRACE FINISHED in the kitchen, he helped Jack load the truck with Clover's gifts.

"So you have any suggestions for me? Any super-secret tips, sort of to help me get through BUD/S. It's in two weeks, you know."

"Yeah, I know."

"Anything at all?"

Trace thought about it and didn't want to tell him the real truth, not that honesty would help or make him fearful. He remembered all the recruits, since the recruiter had told him. The guy had batted less than .100 in honesty, he had to learn the hard way. So the training became an extra challenge.

Trace was so angry at the slick Navy guy he wasn't about to wash his face. He wanted to run back into the recruitment center and punch his lights out, defiantly tell the guy he'd made it through. Which, of course, would have been very smart. But it gave him a second wind he probably needed additional focus. Revenge was a motivator to some. Not always. He was sure Jack was wired the same way.

"There are no real secrets or magic tricks to this whole thing. Sorry, it's just dumb luck. I'd just say that whatever they throw at you, just do it. That's the biggest piece of advice I can give you. Be afraid of your thoughts, you can't mind them, and don't dis them. They are your future, and you have to go through them to go further. They can stop you. Be respectful, don't be an asshole, but don't be a patsy either."

"Sounds like good advice. Anything else?"

"Lead the men, encourage the men, and the ones who struggle, give them some help. Just a small hand up. You don't want to do things for them from

Traceshow that you care—not in an emotional or cushy way, but in a man-
Help them a little bit with their load if they're tired or they're straining
.” guys get shin splints. Some guys actually get sick and try to get t
in two BUD/S with that illness, resisting getting rolled back. Sometimes the
have a choice, and the trainers will roll them anyway. Help them out
But I mean, but don't defy the trainers.”

He let it soak in and then continued, “You know, you want to e
ack and Trident without cheating or gaming the system. This isn't Star Tr
you're no Captain Kirk. There's some guys that think they can do th
that's a big mistake. They'll even let some guys look like they're
h all of favored only to smash them down later, and those guys *never* make
ones with a whole lot of hubris and try to figure it all out—those are th
nothing that never make it. So don't get yourself injured either. Don't try t
you're better than anyone else. They're looking for strong brothe
aren't afraid to sacrifice and won't quit. Don't pick a fight, but don't
pussy. Don't get noticed.”

t sure if “Don't get noticed? How the hell do I do that?”

lies his “If you hear, ‘Jack, I've got my eye on you,’ take that as a warnin
and he don't want them to watch you unless you're number one in all you
ge, and But they'll press you, press you to the breaking point. Remember, it's
out. He to fail at BUD/S than on a mission when you let all your buddies dow
out and might get yourself or someone else killed.”

i't have Jack was swallowing as he loaded up his truck. Trace could sn
ded, an sweat running down his backside. Maybe he went too far.

wasn't But there was so much to tell him. He didn't want to regret th
forgotten something.

ne of it “One other tip. When you're off, let Clover let you sleep. You ne
r't quit. rest. Get rid of those bags, there,” he said as he pointed to Jack's
rainers, “Fatigue causes accidents and muscle-related issues. Drink lots of wa
e to get pee in your pants, if you have to. Stay hydrated and keep the protein c
t be an Forget the superfood smoothies. In fact, forget smoothies completel
meat. That will do it.”

Jack looked at him like he was completely bonkers.

ve them “Just kidding on that last part, but if I see you drinking a smooth
em, but going to knock it right out of your hands.”

“Got it,” Jack said, finally chuckling. “Did you have anyone li

's way, barking at your ass when you were going through?"

Some "See, that's where you're lucky. Nope. Not a soul. I wasn't i
through either. No baby on the way. You're lucky. You have a life if you was
y don't didn't have a thing."

t if you That got Jack serious all of a sudden.

"Did you tell Clover all this?"

arn the "Nope. That's your job, son. You have to help her stay sane so :
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o show "Take that thing off," he barked.

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i't be ahim.

"It did. But it put me in touch with my age, and tonight, I'm feeli
old. I don't have much time left, I guess. I don't want to waste a m
ig. You need you, Gretchen. Tonight more than others."

r skills. She bore that curious expression that told him she was afraid to a
; kinder was good about that. She pried when she had to, and then he could ne
n. You her out of it. But sometimes, she just let things lay. Tonight was one c
thank God.

ell the She slipped the nightie over her head, cupped her breasts that we
and overflowing in her palms.

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"This is exactly what I had in mind."

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barking at your ass when you were going through?”

“See, that’s where you’re lucky. Nope. Not a soul. I wasn’t married either. No baby on the way. You’re lucky. You have a life if you wash out. I didn’t have a thing.”

That got Jack serious all of a sudden.

“Did you tell Clover all this?”

“Nope. That’s your job, son. You have to help her stay sane so she can help you when you’re not. You go through the training, but you both pass together. Get my drift?”

And with that, they were done. Trace wished he’d had a recording of that advice, because he thought it was pretty damned good.

Alone at last, he caught Gretchen slipping on her nightie in the bathroom.

“Take that thing off,” he barked.

“You’re in a mood, Trace. Did everything go okay with Jack?” she asked him.

“It did. But it put me in touch with my age, and tonight, I’m feeling very old. I don’t have much time left, I guess. I don’t want to waste a minute. I need you, Gretchen. Tonight more than others.”

She bore that curious expression that told him she was afraid to ask. She was good about that. She pried when she had to, and then he could never talk her out of it. But sometimes, she just let things lay. Tonight was one of them, thank God.

She slipped the nightie over her head, cupped her breasts that were huge and overflowing in her palms.

“Is this what you had in mind?”

“This is exactly what I had in mind.”

CHAPTER 4



GRETCHEN STRAIGHTENED HER kitchen when she couldn't find several plates for breakfast the next morning. Trace caught her doing it.

"I guess I get an F?"

She turned to him, the sight of his handsome face taking her breath

"Actually, Trace, I think you're a perfect ten."

Trace wrapped his arms around her and didn't squeeze. He felt the kicking against his own belly. "And you, my dear, are a twelve. All the

Gretchen blushed, pushing him away. "Come back in about two weeks. I'll have eggs for you."

"You're not eating?"

"Meeting Kate and Mom and Clover for breakfast. Remember? Remember and filling some items she still needs?"

"You run along. I'll fix my own eggs."

"But let me put away the clean plates, agreed?"

"Yes, ma'am."

THE FOUR OF them met for breakfast at the mall. There were a number of items that had been given that were duplicates of what they already had. When they browsed windows and walked through rows of merchandise at several stores, they talked about the shower.

Louise Morgan was animated about how her husband had greatly enjoyed it.

"Joe was as excited as heck that he was even invited, although I thought the men were always invited. Most men don't like to go to baby showers, but he was delighted he got to come. He had a great time, Gretchen."

"Oh, that's great to hear, Mom. Yes, we had a great time too. It was an interesting mixture of old and younger women, and I was surprised how Joe and Trace fit in with the group. I'm not so sure that Jack would've

comfortable there.”

“Clover’s girlfriends are just darling and everyone’s so busting p
her.”

“A wonderful group of girls,” Gretchen added.

Kate and Clover had wandered off to a dressing room. Louise
Gretchen aside, whispering, “I keep thinking about how your father
think about all of this. I mean Wes, not your father.”

ots and “Funny. I don’t think he’d mind what we call him. He is part
family, just not with us right now. Someday, I’ll get to meet him.”

away. “I’m glad you feel that way. Joe feels the same. We’re lucky we
understanding men.”

“I almost didn’t. But, yes, I agree.”

They both giggled. Then Louise got serious.

ie baby “Well, I’m not sure I’m supposed to tell you this, but let me just g
e way.” a tiny warning. One of Clover’s friends—I think her name was Farley?

ity, and “Oh yes, Farley. She’s been with Clover in school ever since we
to San Diego.”

turning. “Farley whispered to me, just wanted to let me know that Clover t
in confidence that she’d been spotting. She asked me if I knew or
anything was wrong.”

“Really? She hasn’t said anything like that to me.”

This disturbed her. Not only was it something her daughter
revealed, but just like her own high-risk pregnancy, Clover might
predispositions that Gretchen never had. It was one additional worry,
of gifts of all the others.

ile they “Well, perhaps it’s nothing. Perhaps Farley exaggerated it, but I j
l stores, you should know. I’m sure if it was something serious Clover wo
something. So please don’t indicate where it came from, because I’d
enjoyed to be thought of as somebody who couldn’t be trusted, and I’m sure
wouldn’t appreciate me spilling the beans if no one else knew about it.
old him other hand, we want to do what’s right for Clover’s health and for the
ers. But of the baby. So maybe you could just keep an eye on it and maybe find
to ask her.”

was an Gretchen was grateful that Louise trusted her with this little detail.

ow well All day, she kept watching Clover, looking for signs she wasn’t
e felt so well or had cramping, but she didn’t give any indication of illness. G

tried to spend as much time in her vicinity as possible. They stopped at a coffee shop, Clover not partaking, so Gretchen didn't either. They chatted about things they'd seen in the store, and finally, when Kate and Louise went off to use the restroom, Gretchen used that opportunity to ask Clover a question about the spotting.

"Clover, I don't know who it was, but someone mentioned something about you spotting? Is that true?"

Clover's head reared up as she glared directly into Gretchen's eyes. "Mom, that's not true. Who told you that?"

Gretchen felt uneasy now that she'd been confronted.

"Well, I think it was one of those comments that was made, and I don't know whether it applied to you or somebody else. I can't remember who it was, but to be honest," she lied.

"It's my business, Mom."

"It's only my business because this is your first pregnancy, and if it changes, I'll be moved—"

"It's not true, Mom. And I want you to stop meddling. I'm fine. I don't need you to tell me this."

Gretchen began to apply patience, patience that was fading as the seconds ticked by. "Okay, I understand. Please don't take offense at my worry."

"It's just something a mother does. A mother wants to check on her child. I hadn't had her future grandchild."

"Mom, I have a doctor. I also have a midwife. If I need any questions answered, I'm going to ask them, because they're medical professionals."

"I'm sorry, but just because you've had three children before doesn't make you an expert."

Gretchen was hurt by the hardness in Clover's voice. She wasn't so hard anymore. She was actually hard, icy, being slightly bitter. This could be Farley's. Clover was hiding something.

"I hope you aren't upset. It's totally normal for a mother to be concerned about her child's health. You're going to see someday when *your* child is pregnant."

Clover appeared ready to burst out. Her upper body shook.

"You don't seem to understand, Mother. I want to do this by myself. I know you went through the pregnancies and lost your husband, my father, and then got married again. You went through all these changes. You never really told us everything that was going on. Why is it now

ped for have my own life to live, I have my own husband and my own issues, chatted it that you have to keep meddling in mine? Can't you let me do it myself. se went Do you have to keep mothering me now that I'm going to be a mother ver the well? Just think of how that makes me feel, Mother."

"I'm sorry, Clover. Perhaps I was ill-advised to say anything to you nething "That's the first right thing you've said. I want to know who you this from."

s eyes. Gretchen was not going to reveal this detail, and she tried to d Clover. She also didn't want to dig the lie deeper, so she would just take the shots she was going to get when Clover got angry at her. She I didn't in air and decided to just go direct and be very blunt.

o said it "I don't remember, and frankly, even if I did, I wouldn't te Obviously, it was my mistake. But if you need any help at any time don't care if you get upset at me for saying this, but if you ever need it's true you have a question, you can always come to me, Clover. The door is open. And I will respect your boundaries. I won't bother you with thi 've got But please, if something comes up, don't shut us out."

Clover set her jaw straight, her arms crossed over her belly. She second she water and tapped her foot. "I'm ready to go home now. You'veorrying. this for me, Mother."

hild, on Gretchen felt horrible. When Kate and Louise returned, Clover m wishes known, which immediately elicited a reaction from Louise who uestions at Gretchen and then creased her forehead in worry.

ls. And "Clover, I'll take you home. Kate, would you take Mom I 't make Gretchen asked.

"I want to go home with Kate. Please?"

arcastic Gretchen agreed. Kate looked shocked and nodded.

icerned "Of course Clover. I'd be happy to give you a ride home. Are you sick?"

do this. "I'm fine."

"Mom, are you okay hanging with Gretchen?"

"Oh, we're fine," said Louise. "I have a couple things I want to y myself. I at. And, Gretchen, I need your opinion on it. Would you mind?"

asshole "As long as it doesn't take too long, Mom. I need to get off r , right? again."

o that I "Well, thanks for meeting us, and Clover, if you're ready, we

why is now.” Kate gave Gretchen and her mother a big hug and picked up Clover by way of bags, walked with her down the center of the mall, and out toward the parking lot.

Louise turned to Gretchen. “So you told her, or you asked her, rather?”
“She doesn’t know where it came from, but I asked her. I made it sound like I overheard it at the party, which is entirely possible.”

“Well, that was a good guess, but I think she is going to remember what she told, and that person’s probably going to get a nasty call. It’s unfortunate. But I’m honestly not sure, Gretchen, how you could’ve handled it better. I think she’s going through a phase where she just wants to prove she’s strong enough and capable of handling everything.”

“I worry about that. Overly confident, not that I want her to be scared, and I know she’ll be fine. Exactly. You know, kids get married, and some people need those few months to adjust to it all. Being married isn’t like taking an extra college course. It’s complicated.”

“You think?” Gretchen quipped.

“I didn’t have that, because I was pregnant with you when I married. But I know it made things happen very quickly, and we had to adjust very quickly, and that’s what Clover’s having to do. Jack is so young.”

“They both are, Mom.”

She sighed. “But they’re strong, and they love each other. I just hope they’ll be medically there are no issues.”

“I know better than to call the doctor and raise issues or have her come home?” Clover called. That would just be jumping over into her yard and being inappropriate. But if she starts to feel poorly or I see something or Jack says something to Trace or to me or anybody—you or Joe—I’m going to jump on her. I’m going to ask for forgiveness later. She’s so stubborn. And I’m really nervous about feeling why. There’s something going on with her I just can’t put my finger on.

“You have so many changes going on, Sweetheart. You’re doing a marvelous job trying to keep everything in order with Trace going on with Jack continuing his training, and you and Clover being pregnant together. You also have your other two daughters. It’s not quite what you expected, is it?”

“I had dreamed about this, and I had thought what a wonderful experience this was going to be being pregnant at the same time as my daughter. I can see how she feels. Maybe it’s that she doesn’t get her own space.”

lover's pregnancy story. She has to share that story with me. Does that make sense to you?
and the Mom?"

"It certainly does, my dear. I think you just nailed it. You're going to have to be careful with her. And I know, in the end, she'll come out sound. Don't push. Things have a way of working out. I was so afraid for you that you would blame me for not telling you the truth about your father. The right time presented itself. We stumbled on just the right way to handle it. The right time will come for you too, and I'm sure our loving family will get better. I'm going to stay intact as it is. Changed, yes, but it's just more people's old feelings to consider. Our family's expanding. It's not as if we're going to have to all adjust, aren't we?"

"I know." "And I think we will, Mom. You know, I had a little incident a few years ago in the shower where I closed my eyes and I almost thought I could hear his voice. I had a little imaginary conversation with him. Has that ever happened to you?"

"You mean have I ever felt that he tried to contact me? From the time I was a kid. Louise asked with her nose scrunched up.

"Well, not exactly that, but did you get a sense that he was present in your presence or was around you or around me at any time?"

"I know he would've been very proud of you and everything that you've done, and he would've loved to see the girls, and I think he'd enjoy them. He told me that."

Louise stared at her lap and smiled. Then she searched Gretchen's face. "I wish I could tell you I had that same experience, Gretchen. But I can't. Dad put all of my effort into having you and making our family with you. I regretted that Wes wasn't around, and I felt sorry for him, not for us. I'm not sure about him. I knew Joe was going to love you more than life itself. So I didn't tell you about it, and honestly, Gretchen, I never felt his presence. I'm not sure about it. You're crazy, of course, but it just didn't happen to me that way."

"Well, you know what he told me, though?"

"What?"

"He told me that it was not really him. It was something inside me that I felt. It was like inside my own head, my own thought process. I know that when I wanted to talk to him I was really talking to a part of me. But I know that doesn't make sense?"

"It does. That sounds like him. He would've said things like that."

the sense, connections with people very quickly, to me very quickly. I think if he
been that way we would've never really met and, well, created you."

going to "So I'll consider it a gift then. Are you okay with that?"

around. "Absolutely. I'm totally okay with that. I think that's a beautiful
years that And when you can, I hope you'll tell that story to my grandchildren.
But they are old enough to understand."

handle it. "I've never told you this, Mom, but because of you and Joe, I
it is still could make the relationship I had with Trace work. I knew he could love
me, more girls like Joe loves me."

simple. "Thank you. I love you so much, Gretchen. And I am so happy for
that you have lived courageously and full of love."

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"So I'll consider it a gift then. Are you okay with that?"

"Absolutely. I'm totally okay with that. I think that's a beautiful story. And when you can, I hope you'll tell that story to my grandchildren when they are old enough to understand."

"I've never told you this, Mom, but because of you and Joe, I knew I could make the relationship I had with Trace work. I knew he could love my girls like Joe loves me."

"Thank you. I love you so much, Gretchen. And I am so happy for the life that you have lived courageously and full of love."

CHAPTER 5



TRACE MET UP with the rest of his team in Team 3's building on base, down in a group of older guys, including TJ, Kyle, Fredo, Coop, and other of the guys he'd been with for the past ten years. As they looked the room, they noticed several newbies joining the team. Approximate teammates had detached or transferred, most of them retiring. The old were dwindling down slowly with each new mission and rotation.

TJ Talbot leaned into Trace. "Are these guys right out of Boy school or are we just old as shit, Trace?"

"I think we're old as shit."

They sat in silence as three newbies who didn't look a day old eighteen sat right in front of them. The smell of aftershave overpowering TJ complained his eyes were watering. It was so funny Trace tried not to laugh. In the end, he snickered, which caused the turn around and give them an angry stare.

TJ was unafraid. "Sorry, boys. I'm just not used to smelling so n that Brute. That what it is? Is it one of you or do you go as the musketeers?"

"That ain't welcoming, Grandpa," one of them said.

"Wasn't meant to be, Son. We older guys got sensitive constitutions know?"

"That's a fact," piped in Fredo. "My sniffer's been blown up for years now, and I can smell that crap sure as shit."

One of the boys was extremely handsome, and Trace suspected the culprit.

"All cool, all cool, Man. You want me to go take a shower right now Man?"

Trace hoped that this dude wouldn't be tasked on the mission. But in the meeting, which meant he was a candidate. He was grateful

turned back around and stopped paying Trace's row any attention. Tl smart of him.

"Do you suppose they're relaxing the standards a bit?" he whispered

"I guess we're no longer the best of the best," returned TJ.

"Would you guys quit it?" Cooper barked at them.

The three newbies in the front row fist bumped each other and victory lap, although it was pretty obvious to everyone sitting in th that they were clearly the losers in this minor pissing contest. Tra almost to the point of wanting to go sit in the back row with some of th several older guys. But the room was filled with so many new SEAL T around members, there really wasn't any safe space to be.

. He sat
several
around
tely six
er ones

Kyle got up in front of the group, introduced their State Dep liaison, and spoke a bit about what missions they had coming up.

7 Scout
er than
was so

"We're watching several militia groups in Nigeria and Beni although there's no credible threats, we've been asked to go in and tak inventory. No stirring things up, but we need to check on the safe couple of the schools and a U.N. mission that oddly hasn't been hear in a few days. That's a real bad sign."

ny, but
trio to

The whole room groaned.

nuch of
e three

"So we're doing pony packs, small groups, fanning out, leaving footprint and establishing easy extraction points. I don't think I have you gents that the world is kind of exploding right now. Peop emboldened to just do some crazy things these days. The value of life to be lessening every day. Except, to us. We're here to save the day Even when people don't want it."

ns, you

Kyle waited for the rest of the room to react. They did and quickl must have known they wouldn't like it one bit.

r a few

Hands went up. Coop was called on first. "Yes, Coop?"

he was

"Excuse me, LT, what in the world are we doing going back ther don't have any credible threats? I mean, is there an actual mission or going to be bait?"

ow, Old

Several others grumbled their agreement.

he was
the kid

"I'm supposed to get you guys ready, and we're supposed to g there first. Get set up. But which of several hotspots is not determinec time. By the time we deploy, they will be. We could deploy as so week from now or it could be a month from now."

hat was The State Department liaison projected maps and pictures of militia group leaders. Then she showed a school where there had ed. recent kidnapping of several young girls and a handful of boys. The tr so cold the SEALs were not scheduled to be sent there, but it was b the kids were still being held for some future ransom demand.

took a “No one knows exactly where, of course. That’s the problem. 5 e room pretty good at hiding things in the terrain.”

ice was It wasn’t clear which exact group had caused the raid, she exp ie other Once that was determined, things could change.

Team 3 The state representative was a bright gal, not very attractive, but s fit as hell and a patriot, someone who obviously believed that the miss artment the Team would make a difference.

“I’ll be embedded with you.”

in, and That was a new factor. Trace sat up and paid more attention to her. e some She continued with a brief description of several of the groups ty of a issues they were facing.

rd from “There are a lot of shifting sands in Africa. People are making a because money is changing hands. Things are being negotiated. Some groups who don’t receive U.N., Chinese, Iranian, or USA backing, a small oil revenues, are using humans as their currency to fund their gover e to tell their lifestyle, and to feed and pay their military. It’s a very dirty busin ple are No one moved in the room, as the gravity of the field they’d be c e seems into became clearer to the group.

, right? “We consider it a step up from the old slave trade of previous ce The only difference is the trade isn’t done openly. It’s done in secu y. Kyle there really is no value to the humans being held in bondage. They fac of incredible harshness and certain death within four to five years environment as they’re worked to death. We estimate that roughl e if we Africans from small villages have been depleted and sold into bond are we over the world just in the past two years. They are even warehoused a to breed children so that those children could in turn be sold. It’s a des game, but as long as there are willing purchasers, it’s lucrative. And th et over trouble with it.”

l at this Trace was suffering from an upset stomach, again.

on as a After the meeting, Kyle recommended that with the influx of all t team members and the retiring older members who were not there, t

several group get acquainted and possibly have a team bonfire down by the
been over the weekend. Two men were put in charge of getting the word c
ail was the women would be sending out the phone messages to all the
relieved members.

“We’ve never had so many new guys come in, but we’re not mak
They’re quotas. While we normally spend more time in finish or specialty t
holding people back until they’re Super maxed to deploy or to buil
blained skills, we’re going to have the skill sessions take place when you’re
actual mission. I’m going to ask all of you older guys to help sh
she was younger ones, the newbies, the ropes. Use your patience, gents. Th
ion and order. I want you to be careful, and I want you to be respectful of each

Kyle walked back-and-forth in front of the room and then started in
“You newbies, this team has forged relationships that are leg
Many of the old guys on this team were misfits and oddballs who can
and the from various branches of service prior, sometimes police—we even
couple of university professors and attorneys, if you can believe such
lliances These guys are your seniors, are to be trusted and obeyed. You can pr
e of the your egos and your newbie pettiness. We don’t want you to show
or have pretend you know more than you know. You have to pay attention or
riment, dead meat. We want to know what you can do, and you may not be ab
ess.” everything that everybody else does, but we want you to be an effecti
lumped of this team.”

Trace felt less excited about this mission than he ever had before
nturies. with all the other things that were going on in his household—with
ret, and and Gretchen’s pregnancies, his sleepless nights, the worries about
e a life little too old to be still doing this Boy Scout stuff—he was on edge at
in that whole thing. Part of him wanted to walk up to Kyle and just request pa
y 2500 The men were dismissed and mingled between the walls of the bi
lage all building, their conversations sometimes loud, lots of back slappi
nd kep handshaking. Not too many jokes. It was a civil get together. Peopl
picable invited to share beers at the Scupper or invited to small PT sessions
at’s the felt the group had fractured quite a bit with the change in personali
he knew, in time, they’d become one crab-like unit, all connected. Not
but connected.

he new And deadly.

that the One of the new Team guys, not one of the younger ones on the

the beach deployment, walked up to Trace and stuck out his hand.

out, and “Wally Brown. Transfer from Little Creek. Native of Florida. How eligible you?”

“I’m Trace Bennett. I’m a retread too, getting ready to celebrate our senior years, and I’m expecting a new child. A lot of my thoughts are raining, my wife and future son or daughter, but I’ll train you and help you out and more listen. If you don’t listen, you’re on your own.”

on an They shook. The handsome dark-skinned gentleman in front of Trace wore the sinister but very wide smile. He was hard to read. Trace didn’t know whether he trusted the guy one hundred percent or not. But he did have other.” and he wasn’t afraid of maybe causing a little friction, just so he could come again. in and find a spot amongst the group. That was a plus.

endary. “So your specialty is?” Trace asked him.

re to us “Sniper, medic, and I blow shit up. I also speak a little Swahili, no one will do much good in Nigeria.”

a thing. “Okay then. You’re going to want to learn from Fredo. He knows a lot about everything about blowing up anything. If you’re a sniper, you have to watch Armando real careful. You can hang with me to learn your own skills. There’s also TJ and Cooper, our senior guys in that department. I’ll do well.”

ive part Trace pointed the others out to Wally.

re. “Other than that, if you want to hang with an older guy, I think I’m the oldest one in the platoon right now. Who knows. Maybe somebody’s like me.”

Clover “You’re all right. I see through you, Mr. Trace Bennett. So you’re a medic too, huh?”

out the “If it was up to the Navy, I would’ve been a dentist. But no, I’m a medic.”

g metal “I got that invitation too. I also turned it down. Been in Little Creek and nearly five years. Coming up to a new signup opportunity next year. How long you been in?”

Trace “About fifteen. I came from Little Creek too.”

ies. But “What Team?”

pretty, “No, you don’t. That was a shit show. I’ve forgotten all their names already.”

“Just like me. A little dust up with the LT who never liked me from the first time.”

“So your family live in Florida now or you move them out to Colorado about 100 miles north of here. My wife and kids were killed in DC on a school trip. Driver, they think. Anyway, it’s an unsolved accident. I am single and I want to keep it that way. I got no family.”

“I’m sorry for your loss, Son.”

“I ain’t your son. No way in hell could you be my father. You’re the wrong color, Dude.”

“Funny. You a funny man then, Mr. Wally?” It was important that Trace not show offense, even though he took it that way partially.

“Sometimes, when I’ve got to be.”

“Well, still, that’s a tough one to handle. They must’ve made it through years of rehab on that one.”

“Not too much. No, they think my brain is pretty bulletproof, but I don’t want them to know.” He gave Trace a wild expression. He was able to move his head to the side without moving his right shoulder, which freaked Trace out just completely. Wally followed it up by wiggling his eyebrows up and down.

“Oh, I get it. You play good scary dude. That it? You were the scary medical then?” Trace asked him.

“Mostly. I never had much of a family life. I don’t think about it and I miss them, but I’ll see them one day, maybe soon, who knows? Ran away from my foster home at fourteen. Just managed to evade everybody until I was legal age to sign up. I didn’t even have to lie about my age.”

“Well, TJ here has a past that sounds like that. He set fires to his house and he’s got a record. And we got three or four others in the same situation. You’re a good fit right in, Son.”

Wally raised his eyebrows.

“I admit it. Hard habit to break. Everyone younger than me is ‘son.’”

“I can live with it, I ’spose.”

“So Wally Brown is your real name?”

“Nope, Pops. If you’re nice, I’ll tell you what my real name is.”

“So it’s not Wally then? What is it, Waldorf or some shit like that?”

“A salad. You think my mama would name me after a green salad? I’ve never had a Waldorf salad.”

“My opinion, you haven’t missed anything.”

“One of the foster homes named me Wallace. I didn’t like it. So it’s Wally.”

nado?” “Okay then, Wallace. I do prefer Wally better. You have a handle i
DrunkCreek?”

l trying “Wally or WB.”

“Warner Brothers? That’s too long for a handle.”

“I said WB, not Warner Brothers. Geez, you’re older than I thoug
i’re thea hearing problem already, Gramps?”

Trace fisted and unfisted his right hand, his shooting hand. “And y
it Tracejust call me Trace. I think we’ll get along. You’ve been to Africa befor

“I kind of got a rough start on SEAL Team 4. It was a bad comm
me. Our LT didn’t like me much. I guess we had a different kind of ap
you goI never could talk to the guy without him getting angry at me. So we

Africa once, and I hated it then. I think I’m going to hate it now. But
out youwith a different crew, it’ll feel better. I was scared shitless the first tim
his left “Well, that’s Africa.”

ace out “Guess I can’t get away from my roots. God help me. Last place
wn. world I want to die in. Lucky me.”

ry dude “You’re not going to die on my watch, Wally. Put that shit out
head.”

much. I “Easier said. Know what I’m sayin’?”

n away “This campaign is not like the big old campaigns of the past, wh
until I had lots of men going in around you, working with divisions of n
group guys. It’s almost like jungle warfare the way we’re doing it no

s fosterenemy doesn’t play nice. They don’t have huge armies, but they kill
going topeople, and they hide amongst women and children. They’re coward
they’re dangerous. Like Kyle says, their value for human life is pra

nil. You want to stay away from those people and don’t trust anybody
.” go looking too much for those roots, Wally. There are innocents, but
very scared too, and you can’t count on them for loyalty. This Tea
room full of gentlemen, are the only people you can trust. You rer
that, and you’ll be safe.”

” Trace resisted the urge to call him son. But he agreed with Wally e
l? Hell, Africa was no place to die.

t stayed

“Okay then, Wallace. I do prefer Wally better. You have a handle in Little Creek?”

“Wally or WB.”

“Warner Brothers? That’s too long for a handle.”

“I said WB, not Warner Brothers. Geez, you’re older than I thought. Got a hearing problem already, Gramps?”

Trace fisted and unfisted his right hand, his shooting hand. “And you can just call me Trace. I think we’ll get along. You’ve been to Africa before?”

“I kind of got a rough start on SEAL Team 4. It was a bad command for me. Our LT didn’t like me much. I guess we had a different kind of approach. I never could talk to the guy without him getting angry at me. So we went to Africa once, and I hated it then. I think I’m going to hate it now. But maybe, with a different crew, it’ll feel better. I was scared shitless the first time.”

“Well, that’s Africa.”

“Guess I can’t get away from my roots. God help me. Last place in the world I want to die in. Lucky me.”

“You’re not going to die on my watch, Wally. Put that shit out of your head.”

“Easier said. Know what I’m sayin’?”

“This campaign is not like the big old campaigns of the past, where you had lots of men going in around you, working with divisions of marines, group guys. It’s almost like jungle warfare the way we’re doing it now. The enemy doesn’t play nice. They don’t have huge armies, but they kill a lot of people, and they hide amongst women and children. They’re cowards. And they’re dangerous. Like Kyle says, their value for human life is practically nil. You want to stay away from those people and don’t trust anybody. Don’t go looking too much for those roots, Wally. There are innocents, but they’re very scared too, and you can’t count on them for loyalty. This Team, this room full of gentlemen, are the only people you can trust. You remember that, and you’ll be safe.”

Trace resisted the urge to call him son. But he agreed with Wally entirely. Africa was no place to die.

CHAPTER 6



GRETCHEN HEADED OVER to The Bone Frog Center, wanting to distract from Trace’s upcoming deployment by rubbing shoulders with Deirdre and if possible, even her own mother. If she was there. And that was “if.”

When she walked into the large space, she noticed work had commenced and it was beginning to take shape. There were several men painting, cutting out trim around several of the doorways and installing cabinets and appliances at the end of the building, which was going to be the catering center. The office spaces were framed in but bare of sheetrock. And of course, in the middle of all of this, Deirdre was ordering things around like she was a general in the Army, as if she’d had years and years of construction experience.

Gretchen was in awe.

With her face covered in smears of rose and turquoise paint, her jeans, which she used for painting her large canvases, was the perfect accessory outfit. Her big shirt, probably Larry’s former suit shirt, was also stained and smeared with all sorts of things, including crusty caulking and color. The brushstrokes against surfaces being either stained, coated, or painted over in the few days. In an odd patchwork way, it all fit together, she noticed. It was more an element of style, Deirdre’s uniform.

But her eyes, her expression of excitement, was totally intoxicating. Gretchen knew her own mother couldn’t have been more pleased to see her.

“Gretchen! How great you’re up and about!” Deirdre said. “How are you feeling?”

AT FIRST, GRETCHEN thought perhaps Clover had said something about needing space or having to rest more, which was certainly true, but it was so odd coming from Deirdre, especially since that was the concern Gretchen

with her own daughter.

“Oh, I bounce back quickly. But look at you. If I have half the energy I have when I get to be your age, I’ll consider myself a victor over the process. Oh my gosh, Deirdre, this is gorgeous. It’s just going fantastic.”

Dierdre scanned the ceiling and watched as workmen laid the floor for the upper-level dining and viewing section.

herself
e Gray,
is a big
entertainment. I think this is going to be a venue people will love, as we get the zoning worked out for it.”

continued,
g walls,
kitchen
o serve
etrock.
people
years of
“I thought you had all that in place?”

“Yes, it’s allowed as a wedding center and gallery. We don’t have the entertainment part nailed down yet, but we’re hoping to do that in the next couple of weeks, before Christmas. We’d like to have a New Year’s Eve Christmas Concert for all the people in the area first, whether we’re for or not. We can make it free to encourage them to be our good neighbors. We’ll help keep our place safe and free from vandals. It’s a problem around here sometimes, or so I hear.”

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to her
ied and
rs from
the past
It was
icating,
e her.
are you
“But nothing you haven’t seen in your Portland days.”

“That’s true. We saw worse up there. And I think the community rally around us, and I know the local civic leaders are all for it, extra time and all, you know.”

Gretchen walked to the kitchen, a huge U-shaped area without cabinets. Nonetheless, cabinets hung from the ceiling soffit made of colorful wood that looked like mahogany and rare Brazilian hardwood. The countertop was not yet installed, and a center island was sitting by the wall but would be put in place in the middle. She noted that the island had a sink on it.

“This is going to be adjustable then?” she pointed to the island.

“It was a tossup. We were originally going to put a stove there, of course, that would have to be stationary. But we decided this would be a good prep center, and it could be moved to countertops for catering and serving if we wanted to, so I’ve had the passageway a little bit wider than normal.” She pointed to the area around the island.

back.

rgy you “What’s the countertop going to be?”

e aging “I think black granite. It won’t show the dirt, and if it gets scratched, it doesn’t show up as much either. White is hard for a commercial kitchen.

Most restaurants use stainless steel, black, or dark colors. There has to be some sort of chopping area, so the center section will probably have a three-foot butcher block. We’ll also have a slab over next to the stove. I have a beautiful bright red Italian stove coming that cost us a fortune, sure with the double ovens and the eight burners and the griddle, it’s most welcomed.”

suming “Sounds awesome! How about a fan? You have to have that, right?”

“We have a local sheet metal guy who is designing the fan as we install a commercial-grade system for the kitchen just like any big restaurant. I can’t wait to get in there and start to use it.” Deirdre had her hands tucked underneath her chin, and Gretchen could see she was literally in Heaven.

ar’s or “So how’s the fundraising going?” Gretchen asked.

inished “We’ve reached nearly half our goal. If it wasn’t for our funds, the donors to Larry and I used from the insurance, we’d be way behind. But Dr. Brand here and some of his buddies have contributed nicely, and we think we can get out to several of the other Navy family members, some that have grandparents or grandparents, and patrons of the arts down here. There are a lot of people who want to support minority or women-owned businesses especially being created in minority-impacted areas. It’s good for the local economy and it’s good for the reputation of San Diego as a cultural melting pot. I’m very pleased with the reception we’ve had.”

stained “So no rain clouds on the horizon then?”

s. The “I wouldn’t say that. The people that I have the most problems with, Gretchen, are the city officials, who just seem to be in the mood to say yes the time. It’s like, if you don’t ask, you just go in and do things. If they say no to you, we say, ‘Oops I’m sorry.’ We change it or argue it, and sometimes they back down, but many times they don’t.”

, but of “Our taxpayer dollars at work.”

make a “I just don’t understand it. It’s almost like they feel they’re entitled to jump in and protect a constituency that isn’t even there. It’s like some of the campaign promise can be fulfilled or something. When this is all done, I’m sure everybody’s going to take credit for it, and most of them have

contributed a dime or really helped us. But you know how it is with pregnancy. And I'm afraid that's the part I don't do well. I don't have a lot of patience. I've tried to do it, but it's just not my thing. Tell me about it. I'm getting a lesson in that myself these days. Gretchen agreed.

"In your case, you have a valid excuse. You're pregnant, Gretchen. People obviously are going to give you a wide berth, literally and figuratively."

They both laughed at first. Then Gretchen hit her chest with her fist. "Ouch. Am I that big? Because Trace says my ass looks like the Titanic."

"He's lying through his teeth. Just making sure that you stick around. Let him protect you. That's what these guys do, right?"

"Yes, you're right."

"I remember Kate complaining to me about Tyler doing the same thing. I think all men do that. I think it's a test of how much you trust them. I've heard little jokes and things made against us in our condition when pregnant, and I used to wear it as a badge of honor. Even Larry did that. I learned to go with the flow. It's always much healthier if you do that. I know."

"You're totally right about that." Gretchen could see Dierdre was getting pry now, looking for some answers to her questions. She wasn't wrong. "So what's your test of patience? Let's sit down over here."

She drew Gretchen over to a small corner not covered with paint, wood, sheetrock dust, or workmen. Two old couches, obviously hauled down from their furniture overload in Portland, were sitting at right angles in the corner. From there, Gretchen had an excellent view of all the work done. It was noisy, but the couch felt wonderful, and due to its corner position, Gretchen found she could put her feet, shoes and all, on the cushions.

"You okay here?" Dierdre asked.

"This is fantastic. You take naps here too?" She smirked and watched her friend struggle with the answer.

"Not hardly. It's too noisy most days, but today, most of the work is painting. Not too much sawing and no sheetrock sanding, which is the absolutely the worst. We have to have blowers, because I insist on getting that dust out of the place, not vacuuming it up after the fact."

"I can see why Kate likes to spend so much time here. Lots of creative energy, I'm going on. You're creating a theater, aren't you?"

"A bit of backlight, happiness, thought, and whatever else you're

politics to portray. I just love doing that.”

ence.” “No wonder Linda’s such a talented author. She clearly gets it from days,” “I think even Tyler has it too, with his love of poetry and his abilities. He’s got a creative side to him that I never thought would let her stretch toward the Teams. But he’s happy, and that’s the main thing.” She laughed and whimsically at Gretchen, thinking heavily before she spoke.

Here it comes.

her fist. “Other than seeing our progress, what brings you over?”

c.” Gretchen was surprised that she had been so unguarded and transparent and “We are really excited about the baby, and the shower was wonderful. I really wished you could’ve come.”

“Oh please, I don’t go to the bonfires. I don’t go to the parties. My thing. I’m in a different space, not that I don’t enjoy the celebration. I’ll be there every step that I’m allowed, but oh my gosh, those girls—when they’re together—the gossip! This is not me. I know it’s different for you, but it. I just you’re one of the guests of honor. Of course you have to be there. Right?” just not my thing. But I sent over a gift.”

going to “Yes, thank you so much. I love those little sets you sent. And she laughed at all the Disney character outfits. The sheets, the curtains, gosh, she’s all set up. And what she isn’t set up with she’s shopping plastic, now.”

and-me- “I hope I didn’t give her something she already had, but please, Gretchen let her she can return them. I left all the receipts in an envelope inside.

being “We saw that. Very thoughtful. And trust me, none of those things in condition, going to be returned. So thanks. Very grateful for your generosity, Dei Gretchen knew she’d get around to her inquiries.

“So again, I’m going to ask you, because you’re kind of being honest with Gretchen.”

“I had a little bit of an issue come up, and maybe it was something I had been brewing for a while but I just hadn’t paid attention to it. The worst, becoming a little bit distant to me now. This has surprised, even worrying me a little. I had in my head we were going to be pregnant together, and I was perfect, and we would go skipping down the sidewalk together, hand in hand. It’s just not happening that way. I mean, there’s tension.”

“Well, first of all, you’re an older mother, and she’s having her first. Have you asked her?”

“I did. And that’s what’s causing all the tension. It was a couple
ago, after the shower. It didn’t go well.”

musical “How so?”

had him “She says she doesn’t want me meddling. I mean, *she’s my daughter*

looked “What does Trace think?”

“I haven’t done that. Judging from what he usually says, he’ll probably
think I’m just making it up. I can’t tell if he was worried at all, and of
now he’s readying to go overseas, so I don’t get to talk to him as much
parent. usually thinks I make too much out of little things and that I should save
energetic energy for the big stuff.”

“Well, Gretchen, I kind of have to agree with him. There is no big
head’s though?”

here for “Not really, except I was told by Louise that one of Clover’s girls
they get leaked the fact that perhaps she’s spotting.”

because “Oh yes, so now I understand your concern. I’m sure with you
But it’s pregnancies you spotted, because I surely did. In the beginning anyway
this late, though.”

Clover “Exactly. That’s my concern.”

oh my “So she’s getting some expert advice?”

ing for Gretchen shrugged. “She says she will. I believe her. But her attitude
changed. I’m feeling like a third wheel here a little bit.”

etchen, “Maybe if you tell her that instead of asking her about how she’s handling
her issues, maybe that would work better. Clover may just be nervous
because there is a lot going on with Jack in training right now, soon to start
training.” It’s got to be on her mind. She’s going to see less of him all while you
be closer to the baby being born. Tyler says they’ll try to get him into
a cage, they’re on a training. I’m sure he’ll make the birth, but she’s probably
worried about that.”

ing that “They’re training locally, but you know that could change as well.”

lover is “She’s just nervous, Gretchen. You remember your first.”

ed me a “That’s why I want her to know I’m here for her.”

ife was “You know, I used to counsel Tyler when he was in high school.
in hand, he wasn’t attracting the right girls. Not getting the attention he wanted
could date more. He’s quite sensitive, as you probably know.”

rst. But Gretchen found that amusing. It wasn’t what she thought of Tyler as
“When young men are not getting that kind of affection they feel

of days should be getting from their girlfriends or certain women that they date, they don't know what to do. I've always said getting a woman's attention is like getting a butterfly to land on you. You really don't have to decide to choose you. I'm sure you've heard this concept before. You live your life. You stay happy. You make yourself an easy, approachably nurturing mother, even with all your other duties, and you let her course, you."

ich. He "You are wise, Diedre."

ave my "I think, if we did more of that sometimes and less preaching, we made those mistakes myself. And I have to say, it's a bitter lesson to learn. But I don't see anything in Clover that makes me concerned, Gretchen. I think you've done a wonderful job with your girls. And I don't think my girlfriends would've done as well. Honestly. You are a master."

Gretchen felt the warmth from this woman all the way from her head down to her toes.

ay. Not "Thank you. You are such a gift."

Gretchen knew Diedre had just demonstrated how she should handle Clover, not through a lecture, but through the strength of a wise woman who had seen many wars, some battles won and some lost. But she had the wisdom to keep standing.

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"You are wise, Diedre."

"I think, if we did more of that sometimes and less preaching, well, I've made those mistakes myself. And I have to say, it's a bitter lesson to learn. But I don't see anything in Clover that makes me concerned, Gretchen. I think you've done a wonderful job with your girls. And I don't think I would've done as well. Honestly. You are a master."

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"Thank you. You are such a gift."

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CHAPTER 7



JACK'S LEAVING FOR the rest of his pre-BUD/S training happened the day Trace got the notice they would be deploying in four days. Of course the house was silent. Angie and Gretchen were sullen, barely speaking to each other while waiting for news Clover was back home. Clover had requested to see Trace off by herself, and they honored that. Trace had spoken to Jack the night before, and he wondered if he'd said everything he needed to say.

It might be the last time he ever talked to the young man who'd agreed to take his daughter and spend the rest of his life loving her. He felt terrible for not like the son he never had. He was about to launch into "The Talk" when Tony beat him to the punch with news first.

"You know, Trace, Tony has offered to give us the down payment on a new house. I wanted you to know that, in case no one told you."

"No, I didn't know. Thanks for the intel. But, Jack, I wouldn't count on Tony and it pains me to tell you this. You'll find, in time, there are some men who are so flawed they should not make promises because they don't keep them. Always one reason or another why that is, but they just count on you. We cull out those guys in the selection process you're going through now. But understand, no matter how much Clover loves Tony because she can't help herself, Tony will never be the kind of father he wants to be. He can't help himself. You'll be a much better father than he will ever dream to be."

"Clover didn't want to hear it when I brought that up, not in those words, of course."

"No, I get you. You know the man, then. You know the history. I had to make her cry on her wedding day."

"That asshole."

"Still we can't stop loving the people we love, can we?"

"That's for sure," Jack said, his voice breaking like a high school

reminding Trace of his own high school days, not fond memories, Those days he was scared to death of girls, his future, everything really

He needed to go over the hard part while he still had the young attention.

“So here’s the drill. Very important, like I told you the day of the s you give your strength to Clover. Sometimes you have to be strong both of you.”

“I understand.”

“Do you? So what happens if you wash out? Have you two talked that?”

“A little,” he said, adjusting his neck and right shoulder. A reaction.

“Or what if, when you make your Trident, you don’t come home have to prepare her for that.”

“We don’t like to dwell on that.”

“No one does, Son. But it’s part of the preparation. Make sure you her all your strength, even before you have it all under control y

You’ll go out there on your first deployment, and you won’t sleep for . You’ll be looking around every corner, checking and double checki

still cursing when you forget something, and you’ll wonder if nt on it, prepared, really prepared for all of this. You’ll second guess yourself.

en who worry about the baby, and you’ll worry about letting the rest of the any of down. You’ll worry about worry, and then you suck it up and deal

an’t be You pray, you meditate, you ask for help from someone, or you ju e going yourself through it and vow that you’ll survive, just like I told you

as him, BUD/S. That’s what you do. You don’t quit.”

“I understand, sir.”

“And when you come home, no matter how it went, no matter how mistakes you made, even if you cost some poor mama’s boy his own l

get back to this sunny place, your wife and child, and you vow to do i the next time. And you do it because you are the best of the best an

le even aren’t any other people except the men on your Team who can do th You protect them, and you protect yourself. That’s how we fight

freedom. We get lucky because we practice being part of a well-oiled and we have each other’s backs.”

“God, Trace. Do I have to worry about you?”

either. “What the hell do you mean?”

7. “You’re giving me last instructions, like you aren’t coming
; man’s Something going on with you?”

Trace backed up, all of a sudden. Had he blown it? He hadn’t m
shower, scare the kid. He didn’t have words to tell him, because tears had fi
for the eyes, and he didn’t want the kid to see it. Was he really preparing, or
something else?

“I told you to prepare Clover. I’m preparing you. We never know,
d about We could get hit by a bus or an airplane from the sky, couldn’t we?
prepare for the worst but expect nothing but miracles. I’m showing y
nervous to do this. It’s very tough, the hardest conversation you’ll have with l
you do it, okay? And tell me if you need me to fill in any blanks af
e? You leave. I may be in Africa, but I’m still reachable by phone on a limite
You need to, you call, okay?”

“I hope I can make you proud, sir.”

ou give “You will. You already have.”

ourself. Trace now felt the heaviness of the house as he recalled that conve
a week, and clarified he’d done everything he could.

ing and They got the call Clover was back home.

you’re “Should I go over?” Gretchen asked.

You’ll Trace looked at Angie. “You want to, Ang? Ask her first.”

e Team Angie stared back at him as if Clover had leprosy. “Won’t I i
with it. worse?”

st push “I don’t think so, honey,” said Gretchen, putting her arm arou
1 about youngest.

Angie called her and offered to bring over a pizza so they could
something on TV. Apparently, it was well received. Gretchen drop
v many off.

ife, you He waited for Gretchen’s return, putting away things and checkin
it better he would need in his duty bag. Kyle’s call hadn’t been unexpected.
id there quick. Kyle had a lot of people to contact.

is shit. “You watch over Benji and Nick, your pupils, maybe check to ma
for our they got all the gear they need, okay?”

d team, “Will do, LT. Thanks. Wally has sort of adopted me too.”

“I saw that. I think he’s a good man. Rough around the edges, b
never trusted my first impressions. He has a lot of street sense, and tha

work to help us out.”

g back. “You know he understands and speaks Swahili?”

“Good to know. The girls are okay?”

meant to “Jack left today. I won’t lie, this one’s a little tough because of the
lled hisones coming. But we got this.”

r was it “I’m glad you didn’t bail on me, Trace. I need you this one, especi-

“It’s an honor, sir.”

do we? When Gretchen arrived, Trace took her hand and sat her down
’ So weliving room.

ou how “Oh no. What’s happened?” she asked.

her, but “I think you can guess. I got four days.”

ter you She swallowed hard. Trace noticed the tears lining her cheeks,
d basis. didn’t shatter. Just cried silently, with dignity, which was who she was

“Now comes the hard part, sweetheart. You’re going to have to take care
for Angie, as well as Rebecca at college, and you’re going to have to take care
for Clover.”

ersation He squeezed her hands in his and then brushed her cheek with
knuckles. “I know you can handle it. Just remember that if you need anything,
anything, you rely on our sister wives, okay?”

“Sister wives? This is not like one of those places—”

“You know what I mean, Gretchen. I’m sorry. That was probably a mistake
make itwise of me to say. But now the real work begins. We’ve had a nice
summer and fall, we’ve had the wedding of a lifetime for our daughter,
and now we have to go through the deployment. I’m counting on you and
everybody together. Trust me, if I could be here, I would be.”

l watch “No, Trace. You were made for this. I am not going to take anything
ped herthing you do the very best in all the world.”

“Well, thank you, but I happen to think the thing I do the very best at is
g itemspick a life partner—you, Gretchen. You are my queen; you are the reason
It wascome home. You have brought joy and family into my life, and now I
this. Look at what we’ve created. Another miracle. Just understand, it’s
ke sureme even more resolute as I go over there. You and all the girls and
other innocents—those working-class people who don’t get to do what I do
—I do this for all of you. That’s what we all do. We do it to keep our
out I’vemaintain this way of life. So I want you to be careful, but I want you to
it mightyour life. Want you to live out of faith and not fear.”

She giggled through her tears, brushing them from her face, and then his hands again. “So funny, Trace. I’ve been thinking the same thing. I’ve been asking for strength, I’ve been trying to give that to Clover, but she’s having difficulty with that. Do you have any suggestions?”

“Just be you. Just love her. Remember when she was going through those awkward things on the basketball court and the volleyball court? Remember when she looked more like a giraffe, a big old skinny girl? Remember when she started playing? Remember when she decided it was for her to give up basketball and play volleyball full-time? Remember when she started dealing with her father? You saw the disappointment in her eyes, but she still loved him.”

“She always will. He’s her father after all.”

“And she accepted me into this house—you helped them all with it. Thank you so much for being that woman. Not only for me, but for them too.”

GRETCHEN COLLAPSED IN tears into his chest. He held her as her shaking subsided while she gently recovered normal equilibrium. She was so physically exhausted that she needed to be strong for her, but he knew he had some of the same fears she had. The difference was he couldn’t show it. She could. And he was asking her to try to override that. “Focus on the future. Focus on the present. Focus on your health, get some rest, and eat well. I’ll see if I can get Clover if you want before I leave.”

They chose several places they liked to go, including the San Diego Zoo, which was especially a favorite of Trace’s. They ate ice cream almost every day and walked along the beach. They shopped for a couple additional things for the baby, even though Trace was anticipating being home in time for the birth. They visited friends, they attended the bonfire that had been scheduled and shared their joy, their laughter, and their stories. Trace felt good about the stories of some of the past missions, the good, the bad, and the ugly.

As the days slipped by, he watched her gain her strength, reach for herself, and adopt the life that he required, that she be one of the wives, one of the stalwarts, one of the ones to help the younger women who were unsure.

It was arranged that Angie stay with Clover for a few days, giving her and Gretchen some alone time. It seemed to improve Angie’s spirit.

en took One sunset on the beach, he asked again something he asked her
ig. I've time ago.

out I'm "You know now, with the baby coming, it's even more important
think about the future. If something should happen to me, Gretchen, a
ugh allnot planning on it happening, but if something should, you need to rer
l team.that I want you not to waste your time grieving, but be strong and go
giraffeyour life. I want you to grow our child in this community. If it's possi
ow hardlike you to stay connected to the Teams and to the wives so that the g
nemberthis new little one have lots of friends and distant cousins to play w
yet shecommunicate with. We are an unusual community. We help each oth
close ranks around each other, so let them help you if you need it.
don't be afraid to ask."

1 that. I She had been a little emotional with that discussion, something he
n." lightly touched on before he left, but this time he wanted to make sure
the message. He was leaving behind a pregnant wife and unborn child
ig bodyjust the love of his life and his three stepdaughters.

recious "I agree to all of that. I don't like it, but I promise and accept it. N
ie samehave to do something for me."

he was "Anything, sweetheart."

e baby. "I want you to try to talk to Clover before you go like you said. She
talk toarming me a little bit still. She's a little bit cold. I've tried to stay ou
affairs, but I need you to know that there's a possibility that she sta
go Zoo,spot a few days ago, and although she promised to see the doctor, I
it everywaiting for an answer. I'm not worried. I just don't want her thinking
I things to hide things from me for some reason."

for the Trace agreed. "I think she's just not sure. I think Jack has to mayb
eduled,more leadership in that direction. I've had that chat with him, but I'll
with thehim again. But don't worry, Gretchen. It happens to all of us. We
things we shouldn't sometimes, and I've even heard of guys that go o
1 insideafter they've had a huge fight with their wife just before they get
1 seniorplane, and then when they don't come back, you know what h
en whoEverybody feels guilty about that last phone call or that last fight. V
don't want that to happen. Just press through it, make sure that no
g Tracewhat you're feeling that you project strength, and if you need help, ge
But don't force anybody to do it."

"Good advice, sweetheart. Thank you."

Trace kissed her long and hard. He needed to show her how wo
just being next to her was. He needed to show her the intensity of his l
that weher and the gratefulness he had that she had come into his life. H
and I'meverything was going to change once he came home, but he still wa
nembermake sure she was prepared for whatever. He couldn't leave her
on withbeing assured she was going to be okay if something happened and he
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Trace kissed her long and hard. He needed to show her how wonderful just being next to her was. He needed to show her the intensity of his love for her and the gratefulness he had that she had come into his life. He knew everything was going to change once he came home, but he still wanted to make sure she was prepared for whatever. He couldn't leave her without being assured she was going to be okay if something happened and he didn't return.

CHAPTER 8



“MOM, THEY’RE SHIPPING Jack to dental school!”

Gretchen was ecstatic Clover had called her, but the news was driving her into panic mode.

“No way. He got a guarantee to go to BUD/S.”

“They said they could voluntarily switch his program out. He’s done all the prequalifications for the SEAL Training. Why would they kick him out? Mom, help!”

That word was music to Gretchen’s ears.

“Let me make some calls. You tell him to refuse those orders. Were they formally given to him?”

“No, some guys came into the dorm and just picked out four of them and told them to pack their things.”

“So he didn’t leave yet?”

“They are supposed to send him to Michigan! He won’t be here baby!”

“Nonsense, Clover. You tell him to stay put. I think this is irregular.”

Gretchen called Christy. She was given the Team Liaison to call. Christy tried to get hold of Kyle. She got no answer.

She felt her heartbeat thumping and knew the baby’s must be racing. She drank a cool glass of water, propped her feet up on the bed, and held her phone on her lap, wondering if she should call Trace.

Finally, Christy called back.

“Tell him not to move. He won’t have to go, but it’s going to be a pain. Kyle has had some issues with some of the other medical trainers. With a lack of quotas, they’re desperate for kids that score well on the tests, so they’re trying to grab them. But he has an order for BUD/S. I just can’t do this.”

“I didn’t hear from the liaison.”

“He’s on his way over there now. But Jack’s not to go with the understood?”

“Absolutely. I’ll get in touch with Clover right now.”

Clover broke down on the phone, sobbing uncontrollably, and it was Gretchen.

“Sweetheart, I’m coming over. Can you get hold of Jack?”

“He said he wouldn’t go anywhere until he talked to me.”

“But call him anyway. I’ll be there in ten minutes.”

Gretchen threw on some fresh clothes, tried to freshen up with a shower she’d missed this morning, and headed out.

Traffic was heavy, and she made it there in thirty minutes. Angie was already at the door.

“Mom, do you know she’s spotting?”

“I’d heard that. She’d denied it.” She hesitated before running past

“There’s a lot of blood, Mom. I think she should see someone.”

“Thanks for telling me. Come on, let’s get your sister to the hospital. I’m going to need some help with this.”

“You got it.”

Angie’s demeanor had changed, almost happy to see her sister. Gretchen was heartened.

“That’s what she said. Stay put. Someone’s on the way,” they heard Clover say from the bedroom. Clover was stretched out on the bed. A towel was stuck between her legs, her smock pulled up over her knees. The floor was dirty, blood-stained panty lying on the floor. When she saw her mother, she scrambled to right herself.

“Clover, stay down. Don’t move. Honey, you’ve got to get your head calmed right away. I’m going to call the hospital and have Dr. Sayler wait for you there.”

“She’s on vacation.”

“Then I’ll get my doctor to come meet us there. Or someone I recommend. But you have to stay calm.” Gretchen directed Angie to use another towel, this time with warm water on it.

“What about Jack?”

“Jack’s going to be fine, honey. We’ve got that covered.”

“But that asshole is still breathing down his neck. He swore at me. Called me a little bitch.”

trainer, “I’ll make sure he pays for that comment, Clover. If it’s the last do, he’ll pay dearly for that comment. Lots of witnesses, I’m guessing.

“Yeah, about thirty, Jack says. The other guys say they’re going worried. They’ve had a change of heart. They want Jack to join them.”

“They’re the least of our worries. Now lie here and drink some water a bit, and when you’re calmed down, I want you—here, Angie, get her fresh clothes and help her get dressed—to get packed. I’m going to make calls.”

out the Clover held her stomach. Her eyes were filled with terror.

Gretchen wanted to run to her side, but she did what she’d been a met her do. “Clover, this happens sometimes. We can’t control what these little do. All we can control is our mental state and our agitation. Can you help for me?”

Angie. She nodded, watching Angie’s choice of clothes and overrule. That’s when Gretchen knew she’d calm down.

tal, and On the way to the hospital, Gretchen got the call from Trace’s liaison.

“Crisis averted,” Cartwright said.

mother. “Well, whoever did this is going to have to deal with me. I’m over there in a few and punching his lights out. I might even stab him in the eyes with Trace’s Trident. Jack’s wife is pregnant, and this whole thing bloody caused her some bleeding, because she’s so upset. We’re on our way to a hospital. Don’t tell Jack yet.”

om, she “Oh my gosh. How far along?”

“Eight months.”

yourself “Oh, wow. Look, Mrs. Bennett, this sort of fuck-up, sorry for what happened, ma’am, happens all the time. Jack understands now. All the same, go home, you called me.”

one he “No, not settled. The trainer called my pregnant daughter a little bit of a troublemaker. “Oh, that’s not going to settle well. He might need to get a job retrieved if he’s not careful. Not sure a Navy man should conduct himself that way. I’ll make sure the letter is written. But, ma’am, don’t come over with that Trident. If you do that, I can’t help you. You’d be on your own.”

Gretchen laughed. “Thanks. I needed that comic relief.”

, Mom. “Yes, ma’am. Good luck at the hospital, and please let me know.”

The girls had heard it all on the speaker.

thing I “Way to go, Mom,” said Angie. “You aren’t packing, are you?”
” “I forgot when I rushed over. Just as well. It’s a violation in the ho:
; to go. She looked in the rearview mirror, and Clover had a smile on h

The traces of some of their relationship repaired already. Indeed, on
ater forwas averted. One more to go.

er some The hospital was ready to receive her. A referral doctor met then
ake theemergency room and had her examined in private. Angie and Gretchen
outside the curtained stall.

The doctor pulled back the curtain. Clover was dressed in a l
sked togown. Gretchen started to panic.

le ones “I think she’s okay. The baby is very strong, big too. Heartbeat go
do thatstable. We’ll do an ultrasound, but right now, I’d like to admit her an
sure she gets a good night’s sleep and constant supervision. If she go
ng her.labor, she needs to stay here.”

“Hey, I’m over here. Could you please include me?”

’s team Dr. Hirschfield chuckled. “Sorry, Clover. Like I told you, I
everything will be okay. We’ll hold you overnight just to be sure. Tak
bloodwork. I’ll order an ultrasound later, if we still need it, if the b
comingdoesn’t stop.”

n in the Gretchen smiled gently at Clover. “You should tell him, honey.”

ing has At first, she could see Clover rearing up, but then she softened. “
y to theI’ve been having a little bit of spotting.”

“Red blood?”

“No, just a tiny bit. It dries brown before I even notice it.”

She gave a description of the days and what she had been doing
or that,the spotting incidents, and for now, the doctor reassured them all
od thatprobably wasn’t anything to worry about, but that was all the more re
keep her at least overnight.

tch.” Angie hugged her sister just before they wheeled her upstairs.

making Gretchen stepped up to the bed. Clover spread her arms, asking for
self thatShe bent over and tried not to let her hear the sobs. She kissed the side
er hereface.

vn.” “Thanks, sweetheart. I’ll stop by in the morning. Let me know wh
bring you.”

“Angie knows some of my favorite books. I gave her a couple. Br
of those.”

“Romance novels?”

spital.” “Mom, I know how it all works,” said Angie defiantly.

er face. “But that’s not the point—”

e crisis “Mom,” Clover said sternly. “Chill. That ship sailed earlier in the s
when I snuck into your room and gave her a couple of your really
n in theones. These are tame compared to those.”

n paced Angie had a cheesy, triumphant grin. Clover blew her a kiss and
like a beauty queen as they wheeled her down the hallway and out of s

ospital Gretchen knew her life was never going to be the same. It wou
series of crises and then reprieves, fun times, misunderstandings, an
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d make Hopefully, lots of make ups.

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ing one

“Romance novels?”

“Mom, I know how it all works,” said Angie defiantly.

“But that’s not the point—”

“Mom,” Clover said sternly. “Chill. That ship sailed earlier in the summer when I snuck into your room and gave her a couple of your really smutty ones. These are tame compared to those.”

Angie had a cheesy, triumphant grin. Clover blew her a kiss and waved like a beauty queen as they wheeled her down the hallway and out of sight.

Gretchen knew her life was never going to be the same. It would be a series of crises and then reprieves, fun times, misunderstandings, and make ups.

Hopefully, lots of make ups.

CHAPTER 9



THE TEAM TRIP over to Africa was uneventful, with just a tiny layover in Norfolk before they made the final leg. They landed on an island on the west coast, near the twin borders of Benin and Nigeria and several others. They considered the possibility of an insertion point through many different countries.

This was always the boring part, Trace thought. But once they got there, they discovered they were going to be positioned on the island instead of trying to risk going into the interior. Besides, several of the criminal elements were operating with abandoned cargo merchant haulers and purchased captured cruise ships. It proved to be an inexpensive and unique way of transporting their crew efficiently and cheaply, while they could at the same time have a helicopter or two and lots of dinghies to do their raids. It was easy to stow their cargo in some of the cabins if they used a resident as a guide since human cargo was their most frequent bounty.

The property they were going to use had been an old training camp, liberated by one militia after another, most recently held and rented temporarily by the Brits. It had several dormitory-like two-story buildings around a central courtyard which originally had been a half soccer field or gathering place. It had all the earmarks of a school, except bars on the windows and fire extinguishers and sprays of automatic fire made it look more like a prison.

They could have done worse. With decent fans, no air conditioning, and plenty of tons of freshwater, it was ideal. Except for a family of fishermen who lived near the lighthouse, there were no unfriendlies on the island to worry about. The rocky coast was inhabitable, especially to rubber boats and deep-cutters and captured cruise ships. The Navy had recruited a married couple, independent contractors who sometimes attached to units in the area. They arrived at the same time. The two would bring the Team's provisions, handle housekeeping, and cook. They'd been trained as cooks in the militia. They sometimes accompanied hunting trips in East Africa, when it was safe.

meant, they rarely went.

Trace was a little hesitant to have someone from the UK be cook he'd experienced most of the worst meals of his barracks life in Eng temporary assignment. They were legendary for overcooked, boi cooked-to-death meat he practically needed a saw to cut.

As evening descended, they were hanging around what must have the admin center. Futons and old beds with stained mattresses, some like structures also heavily ripped and stained, were distributed over in haphazard semicircle. The group of twenty-five sat where they could off the to avoid any recent stain or bugs living inside the upholstery. Upstair It gave rooms were sparse but clean with no evidence of bugs in the mat ries. thank God.

landed, The cooks placed in front of them some finger foods, mostly n tead of chips, along with some native fruits. They helped themselves to the fa lements table in the middle. Warm beer was passed around without comment ased or knew the Brits liked their beer warm, but he'd try to get some icee way of later. His mouth and throat was parched.

ie same First night out was usually the team bonding routine, and tonight lso was exception. With Kyle not yet present, it took a dark turn right away.

ial line, Somehow, they got off on the subject of being an orphan. Everyc asked who was adopted and who grew up in foster care, and there wer 3 camp nine or ten who had fallen victim to that system. Trace lost count of w to them been in and out of the system, also in and out of the juvenile justice a center for one reason or the other. Of course, Wally had some wonderful st place. It tell about his upbringing.

requent Everything went downhill from there.

ng, and "Yeah, my mom died of an overdose when I was twelve. Soon aft also ran my dad was shanked in prison. I went into the system at thirteen. I ra ut. The five or six times, and finally the last time, I just stayed gone. I lived former streets, eventually found a club, and we managed to stick together an pendent ends meet. We sold drugs, stole things to earn money. Then I got cle ived at met my wife and settled down for a bit. Those were good days for ab , do the years. But when she and the kids got into that auto accident in DC ry, and figured I'd go sign up for something else. I just couldn't go home, yo e. That what I mean? The Navy became my family."

"You'll be known as Wallbanger. But Wally's okay too," said

nickname Crabs.

Several others nodded, gave their stories. One of them who spoke
land on Hollis Greer, a huge guy from Oklahoma. Trace had a hard
led, or understanding him with his soft, deep voice. His nickname imme-
became Big Green, as in the Jolly Green Giant.

“I got sent to foster care when both my parents died. My mother got
couch-of getting beat up, hit my dad over the head with a frying pan, and I
d in a crazy—I mean, just crazy. So he picked up a hatchet, had a lucky thro-
, trying to split her skull right in front of me. The cops took her away, but it to-
s, their five goddamn days to die. Her brother came over day six and finished
tresses, off with a shotgun, and then he tried to take me into their home. I was
part of that. So I ran away. And when they caught me, they brought me
into the foster system, which was no good. I got into trouble on purpose
re on a could move from house to house to house. Some of my foster families
: Trace okay. But most of them were pure crap.”

TJ spoke up next. “Yup, I used to set fires to my foster care
mostly the garages so that nobody would get hurt. But you know, when
was noward destroys the family car, they don’t exactly want you around any-
made it through three foster homes, and I had a sister, too. But
me was separated. I found her later on. I even found my dad, just before he
e easily prison.”

Trace was getting a headache from the carnage and des-
system descriptions. Seemed like each story got bloodier and bloodier. A-
ories to when Trace thought he’d heard the most awful situation or the most
death, somebody else would pipe up with something else they’d either
or had experienced in their own family.

Kyle returned to their compound later that evening with some upda-
n away “We’re going to be scouting this one particular fellow,”—he
l on the picture to the TV screen—“who has just returned from a trip to the
d make East. We understand he’s signed a pact with some Arab Freedom F-
ean and he has a quota to fulfill in order for him to become a full-fledged r-
out five and get support for his crew. We think he has about fifty men. The-
, I just mostly of criminal backgrounds who have either escaped or had a
u know crime and never been caught.”

It was a familiar introduction. Trace thought criminals were not
Crebs, bright. They kept doing it until they were caught and didn’t know a

else.

up was “Of course, they’re not family men. They travel with sometimes
d timethree women. They wander more like a tribe, and it’s loosely organ
mediatelythat Benjamin—that’s their leader, Benjamin Okubo—loosely keeps t
in line. He’s always out there making deals. That’s how he keep
ot tiredloyalty.”

ie went “So he’s dealing in human trafficking?” asked Cooper.

ow, and “Yes, that and some drugs, arms shipments. Anything they can st
ook hersomeone else will buy. What he does is he sells the kids and the
my dadoverseas. He uses the Canaries, Spain, and Portugal as his points of en
nted nofrom there, they travel to the UK, Europe, or the United States. He
ne backship direct. And that’s for obvious safety reasons. With that capital, I
ose so Ivehicles and arms. They’ve even bought a ranch in Benin. I doubt the
es wereit. But it’s their little compound.”

“I see a drone in our futures,” said Fredo.

houses, “You would be correct, of course. We’ll take a look tomorrow and
en yoursome investigating, see if we can catch this guy. The whole purpose i
more. Iif we could just nail the head of the snake, since we don’t have the ma
we gotto capture his whole crew. If he has cargo he’s getting ready to unloa
died insupposed to transmit that information so that we can arrange some ki
rescue-and-staging operation.”

truction Everyone was tired, so they turned in early. Trace asked permissio
nd justa call to Gretchen, and he was permitted, under the circumstances
terribleKyle’s sat phone.

er seen “Hi there, sweetheart. You must be just getting up today,” he wh
when Gretchen got on the phone.

ites. “I did. Was sleeping well for a change. I miss you, but not your sn

taped a “Ouch!” he feigned.

Middle “You’re all arrived and situated?” she asked.

ighters,

member“YUP. I GOT special permission to talk to my lady. How are you feeling

y’re all “I’m okay. I’m beginning to get some extra energy, and I don’
life ofwhere that’s coming from, but I’m cleaning like crazy and straig
things around the house.”

overly When she paused, Trace knew there was some kind of news.
nything

“Go on, out with it.”

two or “We had a little bit of a scare with Clover yesterday, though, a
ized sowound up being taken to the hospital for observation. But she’s ok
hem allgoing to go see her this morning and probably bring her home.”

as their “What happened?”

“Well, Jack called her. I guess the Navy tried to hijack him and
off to Michigan to dental school. He wanted to continue on with his t
eal thatand get in the BUD/S class, and this jerk wasn’t going to back down
e ladiesChristy involved, and she worked through the liaison, and we go
try, andstraight. But they lost three other guys who decided to go become
doesn’tinstead of following the SEAL pathway.”

re buys “Good for Jack. He hung in there then. Was he tempted at all?”

y work “Not at all. He was panicked. And of course, that panicked Clov
she started to spot—quite a bit of blood, actually. But it was even su
by the time we left the hospital, and the baby’s heartbeat is stron
d go doheartbeat is regular and strong. Looks like all her major vitals are ok
s to see they’re just going to check on her tonight. I’ll let you know if someth
npowerchanged when I go see her.”

l, we’re “You do that, sweetheart. I’m going to turn in here, but you cal
nd of athere’s anything important, okay?”

“Okay. Just one other thing, Trace.”

n to do “What’s that?”

, using “She hugged me, Trace. She actually hugged me. Wanted to. I he
getting Christy and your liaison involved, and that saved Jack’s pos
isperedwas real pleased when she thanked me in the best way possible. I just
you to know that. I hope it continues. And Angie, Angie was a st
oring!” stayed with her up until the very end. She’s back home with m
talkative. She’s a different kid. I don’t know what it was, but whatever
we’re all on a much better footing. Now if all the tests come out okay
good to go. So I thought you could use that good news.”

?” “That’s great, sweetheart. The kind of information I love hearing.
t know you could handle all this. Piece of cake, right?

htening “Always. Always waiting for you, Trace. So thank you. You r
happen, my love. Thank you from the bottom of my heart.”

“It was all you. I’m proud. Eases my mind knowing you’ve got
under control.”

“Do you know how long it will be?”

and she “No clue, and I couldn’t say, anyway. I’ll know more tomorrow. I do know is that I’ll be having some wonderful dreams now that I’ve tampered down some of my worry.”

“Then I’ll see you in the middle of one of those, my love. I can’t wait to get him.” He hung up feeling hopeful. Perhaps all his concern over the tiring training this mission and the new brotherhood they were forming was justified. I got warranted.

It it all *Deal in reality, not fantasy.* That’s the advice he’d given Gretchen. He should have taken himself earlier.

He closed his eyes, and she was there, as she was every night. He remembered the kiss she gave him just before he dozed off.

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“Do you know how long it will be?”

“No clue, and I couldn’t say, anyway. I’ll know more tomorrow. What I do know is that I’ll be having some wonderful dreams now that you’ve tampered down some of my worry.”

“Then I’ll see you in the middle of one of those, my love. I can’t wait.”

He hung up feeling hopeful. Perhaps all his concern over the timing of this mission and the new brotherhood they were forming was just not warranted.

Deal in reality, not fantasy. That’s the advice he’d given Gretchen. It was advice he should have taken himself earlier.

He closed his eyes, and she was there, as she was every night. He enjoyed the kiss she gave him just before he dozed off.

CHAPTER 10



GRETCHEN'S REUNION WITH Clover at the hospital the next morning was warm and cordial, until they both were told by the nurse that the doctor had asked her to stay over an additional day.

"He'll be here shortly, but we wanted you both to know the p today. Apparently, we found something in the bloodwork the doctor like. You're eight months, right?"

"Thirty-five weeks to be exact," Clover answered.

"We are going to keep evaluating the strength of the baby, which now seems very good. We're having an ultrasound this morning, and he wants to see the results of that and take another blood test later on. You'll more than likely go home either this afternoon or first thing morning. I'm sorry. I know you wanted to go home sooner," the nurse said with a caring smile. She abruptly turned and disappeared down the hallway.

The two women stared at each other. Gretchen was unsure what to do, seeing that this news irritated her daughter. It worried Gretchen as well, so she proceeded with caution.

"Clover, I'm glad that they're trying to take every precaution that they can. It's really better to be safe than sorry, honey."

"I wish she wouldn't sugarcoat things. You know I'm not stupid. This isn't right, and I've been reading about it on my phone. To have red bleeding this late in my pregnancy isn't a good sign at all. There's a whole lot of things it could be. What I'm going to tell Jack?" She began to cry.

Gretchen came to her side and held her hand, sitting partway on the bed. "He's going to be shattered," she said.

Frowning, fiddling with the blanket with her other hand, Clover began to cry, tears overflow, covering her chest and arms. She turned away from Gretchen, breaking contact.

“Clover, honey, I’m sure it’s just precautionary.”

“No, something’s wrong. Don’t lie to me. Haven’t you got message yet?”

“Clover—”

Clover cut her off. “Mom, for the last time, don’t meddle, don’t gossip, or put lipstick on a pig. Quit telling tales. In fact, I think you should just go away, because you’re making me nervous.”

Gretchen was heartbroken. At the risk of making it worse, she defended herself. She was Clover’s best ally, and it pained her to hear her daughter claim otherwise.

“Clover, that’s not where I’m coming from at all.” Now her own anxiety was beginning to rise. This was so unfair. After all, she was also pregnant, and she was over forty, a high-risk pregnancy as well.

But she said nothing to keep the peace.

Clover turned around and faced her. “Look, that wasn’t very nice of me, but I’m going to take that back. But please understand, Mom, I’m frustrated. I appreciate you being here, I really want to see Jack. And I know that’s not always possible. So I’m trying to deal. And I hate waiting. I have to sit here and do nothing to sleep when I can’t. I have to wait until they tell me something. I have to do inaction—something that I have no control of—that bothers me. So please bring me butterflies and flowers and happy peppy thoughts, okay? I don’t want to dwell a little bit in my misery until I can see myself straight to being able to communicate it with my husband without him wanting to quit the training and run off to dental school. I worry about him too, sometimes, and I also wonder whether I’m up for all of this. I guess that’s what it is.”

Gretchen realized it was good for her to get those things out, and she desperately wanted to give Clover the advice that might help her feel better. To remind her not to take the dark side of the fear, turn herself into a bright light. God knew Jack was going to play off of what Clover felt. But her daughter wasn’t going to listen to any of her suggestions. Not now, anyway.

And by this point, she’d previously pushed so many times that the welcome mat had been abruptly yanked inside and the door slammed in her face.

She had to continue and try to get through to her daughter.

“My sole purpose in coming here is to support you. If my presence is not helping, I’ll leave. But I’m here to give comfort and strength, as so

who loves you dearly, someone who has been through this before.”

ten the “That’s not going to happen, Mom. First of all, I’m going to deal so don’t stress about it. I was just using a figure of speech. I’ll handle it always do.”

’t push, “Remember, staying calm is good for both of you. That’s all I want you to say. I know you’ll handle it. I know everything will work out. I have faith and confidence in you. Completely.”

had to “If you promise to stay quiet, completely quiet, you can stay.”
ear her Gretchen stared down at her daughter, trying to make a joke of it. “Do you really think I can keep my mouth shut? I’ll have questions. You know I have questions. Look, I know somewhat of the stress you’re under. To be honest, traveling all over the U.S. doing God knows what when I was pregnant with you and almost missed your birth. I knew way back then that perhaps we weren’t going to be hunky-dory for us as a couple, but I persisted. And now I’m scared, and I also felt all alone. I don’t want you to feel alone. I want you to have someone even if it’s someone to yell at or cry on. Just know I love you and I think you’re the strongest, most put together young lady on the planet, and you can help screen the calls and stop people from bugging you. People are curious about it, so let me handle all that for you, and I’ll only tell the doctor what you want me to say.”

Let me Clover hesitated, pausing to think.

able to “Of course you’re right. But after we find out, I’d just like to be able to handle the situation on my own. Depending on what the outcome is.”

’d worry “Absolutely. And remember, at eight months, even if they decide to bring the baby early, your child will survive for sure. They’ve already had your little one is large. That’s a healthy sign. Dwell on that if you must, but don’t worry on anything. And I’ll start praying.”

’d knots. Clover winced and threw her head back into the pillow. Gretchen looked down the lights and sat, reading several things from her cell phone. She remained quiet while she thought about Trace so far away and hoped that the day was going to be uneventful for him. She was glad she’d spoken to him earlier this morning, so he could spend his evening with good news. She hoped all that would hold so the update would be equally as reassuring. She knew, whatever it was, they’d deal with it together, all of them together.

ce isn’t Clover had dozed off and was snoring when the doctor arrived. He came in quietly and gently and explained she was showing elevated levels in her blood

specifically an elevated white blood cell count.

with it, “It’s not high enough to put you on anything and certainly not the
dle it. I complication where we would take the baby early. But I want to see h
progress today. We’ll get you on a saline drip, see if we can flu
nted to whatever’s going on, and if it gets any higher, I’m going to reco
ve faith stronger treatment. I just want to prepare you.”

Clover lay back in the bed, tears running down her cheeks. She
petrified.

t. “You “I know it’s scary, Clover. We’re also going to get an ultrasou
low I’ll who knows, we might be able to tell the sex of the baby today. So tha
ny was be fun, right?”

nt with Clover shrugged her shoulders. “Oh yeah, tons of fun. I’m having
s things here.” But she didn’t make eye contact with the doctor.

d I was “I know it’s easy for me to say, but this is no time to worry. It’s
: you to get your rest. They’re going to come in and poke you again and then p
ve you, take you up to ultrasound. In two or three hours, we should have the
lanet. II’m going to try to get hold of your doctor. Where is she?”

e going “She’s skiing up in the Sierras. I don’t think she’s going to be ba
m what Sunday or Monday.”

“Ah ha, well, I’m sure there will be a way to get hold of her for a c

I’ll contact her office again, see if they can locate her just for a call.
one and her to weigh in on this as well. Have you had any other bleeding oth
the incidences you named earlier this month?”

ided to “No.”

dy said “Have you had any cramping? And are you having any cramping n

st dwell “I think I had some cramping before I started this round of bleedi
that’s all stopped now. I think the bleeding has diminished too but
turned checked since sunup. But I don’t remember any cramping earlier
ne. She pregnancy either. I’ve been really fine except for some morning sickn
that the tiredness, you know, the usual.”

to him “Okay, we’ll get the ultrasound and the tests scheduled. You just r
vs. Shea bit, and I’ll check back in a few hours. Two or three at the most, oka
ng. But remember, try to get some additional rest.”

ether. “Okay.”

e woke “Can I ask question?” asked Gretchen.

rdwork, “Of course, Mom. How are *you* feeling?”

“Oh, this isn’t about me. It’s about Clover. I’ve never known Clover kind of sick or unhealthy. She played athletics all throughout high school and college. She’s not even had that many symptoms earlier. From what it looks like, her spotting was really small, until now. So I ask you, is there any danger in waiting longer and not forcing a birth at this time? I mean, best to wait as long as we can?”

“Yes, and no. If things are going badly, then we do an emergency section. But the vitals are not there yet, and depending on what the ultrasound shows us, we can guess as to the health of the baby. That’s our first concern. We know Clover’s strong, and she will recover. Our biggest concern is on the baby. And that takes some delicate analysis. But I am not thinking a blast going to lead to that. And it’s good you’re here, but I think we better sleep if that’s all right with you, Clover,” he finished as he looked at her.

“I think that’s best, Mom. We’ll call you once we know.”

“Okay, thank you, Doctor.”

The doctor left the room, and Gretchen still leaned over and gave Clover a sweet kiss on her forehead. She grabbed Clover’s right hand in both hands and kissed it, and squeezed with affection. “I love you. I know it’s going to be okay. Have them call me or you call me as soon as you have some actual results. Promise me you won’t make me wait.”

“I will, Mom. Don’t you worry. You don’t want to wind up in a hospital, do you?”

She chuckled. “Well, if they’d offered to roll a bed in here so I could spend the night with you, I would’ve done that. But no, I’m going to sleep. And I feel fine. Don’t worry about me. You just drop off and get some rest. But think good thoughts. You should probably put your phone on silent. If Jack calls, I don’t think I’d talk to him yet until you know something in the just—well, you know how men are with sicknesses sometimes.”

“Gawd! Tell me about it. He gets a splinter or gets poked with a pin, and he howls.”

“This will be a test for him too. Just be patient with him. He loves you, doesn’t he? And he’s your whole life. All he wants is to take care of you, make you happy. If he offers that, let him do it. He’s got lots of time. It’s not like Trace is using every ounce of strength, both mental and physical, to get the job done. But Jack is young and resilient. He will heal faster, and he’s got the whole world ahead of him. Both of you do. So don’t worry. Nothing’

er to beto turn out other than perfect.”

ol and Gretchen thought about showing a strong front and hoped that soundsmasked all the fears that she personally had. This was new to her are anything she had never dealt with before.

isn't it On the way home, she got a call from Kate, wanting her to stop center.

ncy C- “I can do that. I'm just leaving Clover right now.”

asound “She can come. Why don't you ask her?”

primary “No, I'm sorry. Clover's in the hospital. We had to take her last focus isShe started bleeding, and they're monitoring her. No reason be coming it'sright now, but they're going to hold her for a few more hours and ma let heranother night.”

er. “Is everything okay otherwise?”

“There are some levels that are elevated. The doctor just wants to sure they don't get worse. They're apparently still within normal range. Cloverany kind of change like that, especially with the red bleeding, is sort of hers,they need to monitor. I could sit there and pine over her, but I've chosen to believe and try to go do something else, so I'll stop by and try to get more answers.off of what's going on here. Jack has reported for BUD/S. He'll have this weekend to give us a call unless there's an emergency, of course. ed nextTrace is overseas. So I will happily concentrate on something else.”

“Good for you, Sis. I have just the ticket. Tyler's sister is here, lick I couldwounds from her last divorce. Remember that stockbroker she was dating let youthen married at the Elvis chapel?”

ain and “One wedding I don't regret missing. The billionaire?”

Even if “Yup, that one. Linda's kind of a basket case,” Kate ended the g. He'llwhispering.

in, andLINDA GREETED HER with a hug. She was wearing all black, as if in mourning even a hat with a veil pulled over her face to cover the red, puffy eyes you showed in spite of the camouflage. She smelled of alcohol already, like you even ten.

Trace. “I should've grabbed one of those hunky guys at Clover's wedding get hisGretchen. What was I thinking? I mean I-I could've made a much better got thechoice than I made.”
s going

“They’re nearly half your age, Linda. That would be a good reason she shouldn’t listen to me. I wondered why you didn’t bring Sam to the territory. Were things going rocky at that point?”

“Oh, yes. Even more now that he’s been indicted for defrauding the clients, and his attorney says I might even have to pay part of his res to keep him out of jail.”

“Let him rot in jail, Linda. My advice only,” shouted Dierdre from the room. Her voice boomed, reverberating everywhere, nearly making windows vibrate.

“I agree,” added Gretchen.

“I make it three,” said Kate.

Linda waved them away. “Would you like some whiskey?”

Gretchen pointed to her belly, and Linda slapped her own mouth to make palm, nearly toppling herself. “What’s the matter with me? Of course.”

“How drunk are you?” Gretchen asked.

Linda held up her fingers slightly apart. “Just a pinch.”

But as the late morning turned into lunch and as Linda’s incessant complaints droned on between flash flooding from her eyes, the monotony of the whole situation got to Gretchen, and she began losing patience.

And point when Linda made a ridiculous statement about choosing her number four, Gretchen found herself unable to keep her mouth shut. She snapped at Linda, telling her she was acting like a pampered fool.

“You’re a princess, Linda, but you don’t do the work.”

“What work?” Linda challenged.

“Didn’t you check into him, or did the money call to you like a good meal? Did you dream of yachts and trips around the world?”

Linda’s brain was slow to comprehend. “You said work. I work very hard. I’ve written four books this year, I’ll have you know.”

“Darn it, can’t you see? You caused this. This isn’t his fault. It’s your fault. You have faulty judgment. What’s going on up in your head that you think yourself these guys are any good?”

Linda reared back, putting her hands on her hips. “You’re a fine talk. At least my husband didn’t go bopping around with a stripper and his dick-action recorded on YouTube for all to see, until they banned it, so did the girls. You think you made a good choice there, Gretchen.”

Gretchen was furious with the insult. Part of her anger was because

on. Butknew Linda was right. But she had to defend her decision anyway.
edding. “Look, I had three little girls. By the time that happened, yes, I k
sure we couldn’t reconcile. But I had three little girls to take care o
ing hisdidn’t want to do anything to rock the boat and ruin his career, even
stitutionhe was a creep. But he did that all by himself. My main job was to ma
my girls didn’t feel like they were second best. Tony only loves hin
1 across took a while for me to figure that out, Linda. You just keep making th
ing themistake over and over again. I hear Tony is available, but not w
bankroll he used to have. But go ahead, you couldn’t do any worse.
him out.”

She was going to say more but saw Kate making a dart in her direc
“Linda, I’m sorry. I’m done listening.”
with her She turned to leave, but Kate caught up to her and caught her by th
, “Don’t go.”

“This is toxic. Sorry, Sis. It feels like the ground’s caving unde
can’t seem to make consistent communications that don’t piss peopl
cessantneed to go home and lie down. I’m not going to be good company
tony ofPlease let me go.”

At one Linda had walked to the rear of the building toward Deirdre but g
usbandhand” to stop where she was.

ut. She “You sure? We have a nice lunch coming over.”
“I’ll let you apologize to Tyler’s sister. I just am not in the mood.”

gourmet

I work

s yours.

you tell

one to

nd have

it. You

hen?”

use she

knew Linda was right. But she had to defend her decision anyway.

“Look, I had three little girls. By the time that happened, yes, I knew for sure we couldn’t reconcile. But I had three little girls to take care of, and I didn’t want to do anything to rock the boat and ruin his career, even though he was a creep. But he did that all by himself. My main job was to make sure my girls didn’t feel like they were second best. Tony only loves himself. It took a while for me to figure that out, Linda. You just keep making the same mistake over and over again. I hear Tony is available, but not with the bankroll he used to have. But go ahead, you couldn’t do any worse. Go try him out.”

She was going to say more but saw Kate making a dart in her direction.

“Linda, I’m sorry. I’m done listening.”

She turned to leave, but Kate caught up to her and caught her by the hand.

“Don’t go.”

“This is toxic. Sorry, Sis. It feels like the ground’s caving under me. I can’t seem to make consistent communications that don’t piss people off. I need to go home and lie down. I’m not going to be good company today. Please let me go.”

Linda had walked to the rear of the building toward Deirdre but got “the hand” to stop where she was.

“You sure? We have a nice lunch coming over.”

“I’ll let you apologize to Tyler’s sister. I just am not in the mood.”

CHAPTER 11



TRACE HADN'T SLEPT well last night. They were all awakened at 5:30 came way too soon.

The newbies Trace had been working with were all over him, questions that were going to be satisfied in the briefing. Both were new training, not given big responsibility yet, but it was always good to have medics these days. A lot of lives could be saved that way. The scope of missions was such that medics and explosives or bomb experts were in demand.

The tadpoles wanted to show him new pieces of equipment they bought with their own money, not standard Navy issue. This annoyed Trace a little, because buying things on the market sometimes meant the quality wasn't there, and if you needed to depend on it for your life or your buddies' lives, it just was not reliable enough. Not that the Navy stuff was perfect, at least most of it had been around a long time and was battle tested.

He let them hop around wearing their new uniforms and complained about their comfort. Trace remembered what that was like. It was never since, he'd washed his new scrubs eight or ten times before he wore them. They were already irritated about how stiff they were and how they scratched their skin. But afterward, the jokes continued, the gladhand slapping on the back returned. They just wouldn't shut up.

Kyle took him aside. "I'm just going to tell you, because you'd do the same way if it was me. Clover's apparently in the hospital. Christy called me this morning—on my cell phone, because you went to bed with my satellite phone you dumb shit."

"I'M SORRY, KYLE. I was not myself. But I had nice dreams with it. Do you count?"

"Nice try."

“So what’s with Clover? Is she in labor? It’s early, like five weeks

“Bleeding, I guess, nothing major yet, but they had her there over
and they might have her there again tonight. You might want to
Gretchen a call later. But goddammit, return my sat phone.”

“I hear you. My bad, Kyle. I was so damn tired.”

“Yeah, well, that’s a shitty excuse, so don’t use it again. How are
boys doing?”

, which “Benji and Nick? They’re pissing me off, to be honest.”

“Well, they’re pissing off a few others too, so we’re going to
figure out how to motivate them to shut up. That would be your job.”

asking “Hey, I’m a little prickly this morning if you don’t mind.”

edics in “Get your big boy panties on, my man. Just keep it under the radar

re more The Team snacked on the tray of fruits and breads, along with some
of their of meat and cheese, and each of them selected items they wanted for
most in or lunch since they were supposed to be out all day. If it all worked
they’d have dinner in town in one of the popular watering holes. And
bought was the only form of payment for anything. U.S. dollars.

o begin The Team sat for a briefing. Wally found the chair right next to Trace
quality they waited for the group to assemble.

others’ “Ready to find the smell of action, Trace?” Wally asked.

ect, but

blaming “I GENERALLY DON’T like the smell of Cordite. I’m sort of a lavender and
hell, so type of guy, or did you know that?”

ie wore Wally leaned back and allowed his eyes to get wide. “You don’t
w they picked you for hetero, Trace.”

ing and “I’m fucking married, got a little one on the way. My circuits don’t
that way.”

o it that A couple of men in front of them turned around, and that’s when
me this realized he was speaking a little too loudly.

phone, “Well, I think that’s the difference between you and me. I saw more
that than I cared to. Started out when my pappy hit my mother with the
got her blood all over me. I can still smell it.”

oes that “Well, she shouldn’t have hit him with the frying pan, Wally. That’s
of basic self-defense, if you know what I mean?”

“I don’t think they ever loved each other, Trace. They just made

early.” and they thought it was a good idea to stay together for the kids.”

ernight, Trace thought about that. The first person he thought of while trying to give about that was Tony. “Yeah, I know guys like that. Not worth shit, are

“My mom wasn’t a sweetheart, and she swore like a drunken sailor never shaved her legs, and you know that woman was hairy. White men are your not like my dad. I didn’t get any of her side of the family, thank God. I looked like he’d been to a Brazilian wax salon. But anyway, she had testosterone, I guess, and some issues. Anger issues, I’d say. But she would have to laid a hand on any of us kids. And I respect that. She obviously made a wrong choice, but I’m kind of glad she did, because, well, I’m here.”

“You were kind of the winner in that game last night. I had a couple people come from such fucked up backgrounds. You ever hear such stories slabs Trace asked.

snacks “I didn’t make it to prison. I suppose I would have if I’d gone there and right, was bad enough. I think kids were just criminals in training back then and cash like today. They seem to pop them out criminals as soon as they’re getting into all kinds of trouble right off the bat starting when they’re in Trace assix. What’s this world coming to?” Wally asked.

“Yeah, I’ve wondered about that too. Here we are clear over in trying to save people from roving bands of militia that want to control them out. Our streets are getting so dangerous cops have to practical special ops training just to operate, to walk up and down the block. Not Mr. Nice Guy. And of course, they have to worry about getting sued at any time. Just too many changes for me, but where the hell you going to go

“If I win the lottery, I’m buying an island in the Indian Ocean. I had a nice place to vacation. Pink and yellow and white beaches, turquoise waters. Sounds like paradise to me.”

n Trace “You ever been there?” Trace asked.

“No. Figured someday I’d get sent to Diego Garcia. Was kind of more of when I was in the regular, I’d get assigned or at least have a stopover. It was such luck. Why?”

“Because the Indian Ocean is filled with pirates. It’s the wild, wild west of the Orient. Got huge ships coming through, including cruise lines, and you got pirates taking over cruise lines and terrorizing the coast. Kids and babies, that here too. I was surprised that the island was so uninhabited.”

“Pirates, huh? I thought all the pirates were in the Caribb

Disneyland.”

hinking “They were some of the first, for sure. I like the Caribbean, for the they?” in the food and beautiful beaches too. It’s a little wild and woolly or. Shenow. Maybe I’ll feel better about it when I can afford to travel there i woman, But—”

My dad “What about Hawaii? I hear that’s pretty cool.”

d some Trace grinned. “Now you’re talking my language. Wonderful b e neversinging, ladies with flowers in their hair wiggling around in those dre ade thetheirs, and I’m just sitting there wondering what’s wiggling undern

That’s where I met my wife, by the way.”

no idea “No shit?”

ories?” “Gretchen traveled with the group of us because—” Trace decided back a little of his story. “Anyway, we met and we hooked up. I was e. Juvieand she had been divorced a long time. Well, the rest is history as th en. NotI’m really glad I went on that trip, and I almost didn’t. She’s the an run, woman for me. She’s resilient. She’s beautiful. She takes such good five orher girls.”

“Her girls? You mean she came with baggage?”

Africa “Her ex was not exactly what you’d call father material or h ie wipematerial either. So I really have the relationship that he should’ve had ly havecan’t behave himself.”

o more “I had a brother like that. He didn’t last long on the streets. M l all thewould have died if she’d known. He was her favorite, but unlucky. o?” also kind of asking for it. His guys were wild. My group was kind of ear it’sWe didn’t do the high stakes stuff. And we tried not to pack so that if se bluecaught, we wouldn’t do extra time. It was hard. But after Mom died a went away, it was a better life really. And I embraced it, used it while to understand I didn’t want to be part of any old foster program o hopingwanted the government to know where I was or what I was doing. Ar , but nowell, love struck me just like you, Trace.”

“That’s good, Wally. That means there’s hope for you yet.”

ld west “Yeah, but if you knew how it broke my heart, saw all my scars nd thenmaybe you wouldn’t trust me so much.”

nda got “I’m going to give you a little piece of advice, whether you want not. You just stick to yourself, and when you feel like saying somethi ean orshouldn’t or pissing somebody off like you did yesterday, you l

yourself and remember your pretty wife. And don't talk about her in front of other people, because we've got guys here that've been through all kinds of shit. Just keep yourself focused on the job. Everybody's got their own style. You just pick yours up and put it on your back. And you try not to do anything but support the team. That's where you got to go. Otherwise you won't survive."

He asked, "You work with other contractors before or locals, local military?"

Trace said, "You didn't even acknowledge the advice I just gave you, the exact advice I gave you, I might say."

"All right, Big Man, thank you. I get you. I'll take it to heart."

Trace called the meeting to order. Trace could see from his expression that something was going on with him. His usual relaxed demeanor was completely gone.

"Morning. Some of the intel we got, gentlemen, is fucking terrible. I'm afraid the whole premise for coming over here has been leaked to guys on the mainland as a matter of fact. Someone in the local news station in Niger announced that the SEALs had landed on this island. Might be a little bit of a leak, but he killed. I'm not sure what we can do now that they know we're coming, but the head shed hasn't pulled the mission yet, and I'm still waiting for your instructions."

Trace blurted out, "At least you know they know. It would be horrible to walk into it without knowing, LT. Least you got part of a bite."

"Yes, that's true. We're going to have to make the most of it. Okubo has a quota to fill—that part we know. The part we don't know is whether or not he's sailing in or whether he's arrived. No one seems to know or even where he is right now. So we got to establish that, because honestly, if he isn't another target highlighted."

They all waited for Kyle to check his notes before continuing.

"The head shed says we should watch him, and if we can't take him inside, down, Benin is a little sleepier and a little more friendly to Uncle Sam's money. Nigeria has oil and plenty of money and plenty of allies, so it's a little more dangerous for us there. We take off at noon. We're going to spend the day into the party time and try to find some loose lips out there. And I don't want to keep the ladies either, guys. I want you to double check your bags, and then"

front of you who have a mentor or your number two or three on the list, you can
kind of with them, and you make sure they look over everything you got.
aggave. want any books. I don't want any American cigarettes. I don't want
t to dolighters. I don't want *anything* at all that designates you as American.
se, you going to be dressed in street clothes. The stuff we asked you to bring
don't want to look like we're standard Navy issue at all, so,"—Kyle
' Wally to Benji and Nick—"assholes over there get out of those fatigues.
going to get you shot."

xcellent The men in front were still in a party mood, which pissed Trace off
further.

"Yeah, you're going to be real happy when they get a bead on
ion that Youngbloods. No more joking around, okay? This is serious stuff, and
or was counting on you to learn and to get home alive. And I don't want to
anybody else trying to keep you safe. You got that?"

le. I'm As inspirational moments went, and those pre-battle suck it up moments
s on the Kyle was so famous for, this one was a completely depressing and in
ia even pep talk. But Trace knew why he was doing it. He was worried to
f about without the support of good intel, it was like fighting with one hand
uys get your back. He was hoping in the next couple of hours that would change
ng, but He raised his hand again. "We're going to send some drones out
further meantime? Do some surveillance?"

"I was about to give the order. Thanks, Trace. So in a case like this
rible to we aren't sure what the layout of the land is, we use the drones. It's a lot
than sending in a scouting team or a blended insertion team just to
kay, so back. We don't have many friendlies here. We have some listening fi
now is ships nearby, the fleet, but it's really kind of the Wild West, and there
o know any standard patterns of progression. Not like battling the redcoats
y, there 1700s, gents."

They were dismissed, and Trace offered to double check Wally's

He noted Wally had brought a ghost gun, unregistered, made out of
ke him epoxy, which drew attention just like a flashlight. Trace told him to get
Sam's sit.

s a little "I got some knives too and special throwing axes. I've been pra
stay out I'm pretty lethal with it."

't mean "You talk to Danny about that. He's Diné, or Navajo, and he's re
hose of with knives and axes. Let him show you a thing or two."

heck in “So, Boss. Everything set to go?” Wally asked.

I don’t “Yeah, you’re good. I got to go check on the kindergartners. You want any care and don’t unpack or add anything. I want to tell Kyle you’re cool.

You’re “I got you. You have anything extra you need me to carry that you’re bringing. We

“No, we don’t do that here. I carry my own stuff, that way I know where it’s pointed here, and I can grab it when I need it. You can ask Coop if he needs help. That’s some of the medical equipment. He’s got some of the heavier stuff off with the explosives. But I’m cool the way it is.”

Trace went over and met with the boys. They were all in the same room, adding a third. The place stunk to hell as they’d taken off their shoes, socks and had donned their street clothes. Trace figured they probably had a we’re athlete’s foot that went from their toes to their ankles. At least that’s the worst waste the smell was. He held his nose and swore.

“I can see the element of surprise going to be against us. They’re going to smell you from three miles away. Anybody got some athlete’s foot? Something medicated?”

“I got some,” said Benji.

“Okay, you get yourself sprayed, and then you put on some socks. You bring your bags down to my room where I’ll check them out.”

Holding his nose, he walked down the hallway.

His haunting thoughts returned. *Do I really want to be here?* And he remembered what Kyle had told him. He had shit for brains; he didn’t want to inquire further about Clover. Not sure whether he should open up that report worms and carry that extra burden, he figured they’d call him if something important. Or at least Gretchen would try.

He tried to put it out of his mind. All through the securing, checking in themoving the Zodiac boats to shore, he kept thinking about her bobbing pool, her belly twice the size of her girth. He said a little prayer, lit his pack, promised Gretchen, and then turned his face and chin to the coast.

That’s where his future lay, or ended, and it gave him a shiver.

cticing.

al good

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CHAPTER 12



GRETCHEN HEADED OVER toward the familiar beach she and Trace frequented to watch the sunset several nights a week. It had been a long time since moving to San Diego she never tired of. And Trace felt the same way.

She wasn't happy with herself, for both her communications with Trace and the little argument, if that's what it could be called, with Linda. Gretchen was better than this, she thought. All she needed to complete the trifecta of a tragic day was to have a fight with Trace over the phone later tonight.

She couldn't control what happened to Trace overseas, just like she had no control over Clover's pregnancy. She wasn't even in full control of her own pregnancy. She plopped down in the sand cross-legged, watching the sun begin to head over toward the horizon. With it still being quite bright and over three hours until sunset, being here in the sunshine brightened her spirits a bit. She closed her eyes and tried to feel Trace's presence.

That's when she felt Wes come into her thoughts, slipping in at the back of her head, not like a bull in a China shop, but just quietly through the imagined cracks in her skull, filling the space and suddenly blooming in her brain, making his presence known. In no time, her whole body warmed with the familiar way he greeted her. She felt safe.

"So you came back. I wasn't sure you would."

"Truth is, I'm probably always here. You're talking to your own thoughts, remember? I think you called me. Guess you needed a hand."

She chuckled. "I guess I'm pretty smart, then. I was pondering things so out of my control, trying to make my peace with it."

"Would you really want the weight of the whole world on your shoulders, Gretchen, if you were able to control everything? Think of what that would entail, how much work that would be for you. Any idea?"

Gretchen opened her eyes to the ocean and whispered, "No, I don't really want to control everything after all, do I?"

“Well, that’s what I was thinking. It’s really not that much fun to be boss of everyone, everything. I wouldn’t choose that route. I like to be surprised. I think you do too.”

She shook her head. “Wes, this is crazy. I’m talking to myself, a fictional being that has invaded my headspace. Anybody catches me doing this and they’ll send me straight to a mental hospital on a twenty-four-hour hold. I don’t dare tell my mother. She already thinks I’m losing it to a certain degree.”

“You know women are complicated. You’re complicated. Complicated. Don’t overthink it. Just accept what is, try to study it, understand it. See if there’s a lesson there. No matter what, if there’s a lesson, then whatever the experience is, it’s worth it.”

She tried to remember what it felt like last year, before Clover decided to get married, when Tony was not yet getting out. Since his release during the weeks that followed, he has disappeared from time to time but generally behaved himself. He was just never dependable and always coming back when it was least convenient, like the evening he jumped the fence to use the hot tub, only to find Trace and Gretchen skinny dipping in it. And after that, talking. Trace had to ask him to leave, forcefully.

He has no social sense.

It wasn’t getting better either.

Somehow, life was simpler then, even with the same players. Now she saw it as the pause between the storms.

Her cell phone rang. She quickly answered it.

“Mom?” It was Clover’s distinctive voice. She sounded hoarse but calm. “I was wondering when I’d hear from you. How are you feeling?”

“I’m doing better. They don’t think they need to keep me overnight. I said I could do it anyway. I think I might like to stay here and sleep in my own room. They said they could do that. What do you think?”

“Of course! Let them wait on you. Take the time. Usually, hospitals are pushing you out. But if they say they’ll keep you, yes, get the help you need. Rest. Do you need anything? Clothes?”

“Nope, all taken care of. They have a laundry on this floor, and they’ve already cleaned my clothes for tomorrow. They’re going to help me take a shower here, and I’ll get a fresh nightie, and then I think I’ll just turn in. They’ll serve dinner. They said they’ll serve me early.”

to be the “Marvelous! What did the doctor say?”
to be “Do you want the good news or the better news?”
Gretchen was thrilled with her response. “Either one, sweetheart.”
lf, or a “Well, first, we’re going to have a girl. I’m delighted. It’s what I w
e doing “Wonderful! Now some of those little pink things you don’t have
ur-hourback, do you? You can always dress a girl in blues and greens and o
o someNot the other way around, at least not for some. So much easier to hav
Trust me, they’re so much easier to take care of!”
lover’s “Said by the master.”
it and “So what is the bloodwork picture? Is that the better news, I’m hop
lesson, “Yes, they gave me a saline solution, and I’ve been drinking wa
crazy, peeing all the time. The bleeding is stopped, and we have a
ided tothat’s much lower than it was before. All of it was in the normal rar
icle andthis is even better. He feels confident I’m ready to go home. Would y
enerallyme up tomorrow morning about ten or so, give me a chance to get read
y when “Can I bring you anything? Makeup?”
the hot “Remember? They have a washer and dryer here, so before I calle
he kepttook a walk and washed everything myself. It’s pretty handy. The m
ward has all kinds of things I had no idea they had. They hav
scratchers, heating pads, foot massagers—everything! Also, special
even a little break room if you want to go in there and nurse in a hig
ow shechair with a massager, since so many of these rooms hold new moms.”
“Perfect. I promise I’ll be there sharp at ten, and you can give me
tour then.
happy. With your permission, I’m going to give Trace a call and let him
just in case he hears about the hospital stay. I’ll let you tell him it’s a g
ght. Butokay if I tell Jack if he calls me?”
). They “No, I want to. Have him call me though, no matter the hour. I’ve
phone turned back on.”
tals are “Awesome. Well, kiddo, you get some rest, get a good meal, show
and theI’ll see you tomorrow morning at ten.”
Gretchen got up and practically skipped all the way back to the c
so I’ve new disaster averted, just like she’d imagined.
: take a When she got home, she stripped off her clothes, jumped into the s
in afterand got into a long flannel nightgown, even putting socks on. She l
knock at the door, which startled her.

Linda Gray was standing on the stoop. She had a little vase of flowers tucked close to her chest. "For you, Gretchen. I'm so sorry."

"Oh, Linda, come on in. I'm sorry I'm in my nightie, but I was glad you wanted to turn in early, so your timing was good."

"Listen. I don't want to interrupt your evening—" She pointed to the car. "I have some fantastic lobster bisque in the car. Would you like to come and have a bowl of soup with me?" she asked.

"That would be lovely. I love lobster bisque. I'll go get some bowls for you get the soup."

With the flowers between them, the two women sat at the dining table next to each other, looking out on the backyard and Gretchen's flower bed beyond.

"I've always loved this house, Gretchen. It just has a nice vibe to it, but you adding on after the baby comes?"

"Our finances are kind of tight. We're just going to play it day by day."

It's a tiny three bedroom, which is adequate for us. I've had big houses and they're a lot to keep up. This is perfect for just the two of us alone. Angie. If she goes to college, we'll have tons of room. We'll just put her back in with us and still have the extra bedroom for my sewing and Trace's projects. We already have a Murphy Bed in it for guests."

"Do you do all the gardening back here?"

"We do it together. Trace has been quite good, since I've gotten a quick He kind of got the bug, just like I had. I don't know if you know this, but my mom wasn't too much of a gardener, not like your mom."

"Well, Deirdre is the poster child for overachievers. I swear to God, she can do anything. She could win a baking contest, get ribbons at the fair for her jams and jellies, she can put together a patchwork quilt or knit anything she got my out of anything, and Lord knows she can paint. Boy, can she paint!"

"And she has a lovely talented daughter who is a prolific romance writer, and that's not too shabby either, Linda."

She sighed and pondered her lap. "You know what they always say. Romance writers who write about 'happily ever afters' never live themselves."

"That's not true. I think it's just that you're coming off a divorce. I've heard a romance writer has nothing to do with it. None of us get one hundred percent of what we want, do we?"

flowers “You’re probably right.” She paused and then turned slightly
Gretchen. “Well, I just wanted to apologize, Gretchen, for being way
joining toline. I want you to know I value your opinions. I value your friend
don’t want to see anything getting in the way of that. So these flowers
her car. peace offering. I’m hoping you’ll forgive me.”

have a “If you’ll forgive *my* outburst. I think I was worse behaved than
were. You were just a little tipsy, and let’s just say you didn’t have a
vls, and wits about you.”

“But you were right. I made some bad choices. Sometimes I
g room married people who I thought I could mold into what I wanted then
garden not who they actually were. And that’s gotten me in a lot of trouble.

like in a novel. You can’t just cut out a few pages and insert some new
it. Are when you get something wrong or rewrite a scene that really doesn’t g
in real life. You can’t change what the character wants to do or react to
by day. can’t do that in real life. So maybe you could help me find somebod
es, and please, don’t mention Tony’s name again.”

ing with “I was halfway joking, you know that. I wouldn’t wish Tony on me
the crib enemy.”

library. “Find me some nice hunky guy who just isn’t afraid to show his f
but he’s strong, a good kisser, a good dancer, loves to travel, and has a
money. I don’t know, I guess I want the perfect man! I’d like somebod
so big. like Trace, to be honest with you.”

but my “Hands off. That’s a no-go.”

“You know what I mean. I’m not serious. I want someone who
od, she love with me through and through when I first meet him. Like what y
fair for Trace have. Still do.”

Afghan “You forget, I spent almost five years by myself, raising those
was a difficult time, especially financially, and with no help tendin
writer. their needs and activities. But I did it. I worked my butt off. I had a
that no man would want me, not with three kids. I thought it was goin
ys say, impossible.”

have it “But he found you, Gretchen. It was love at first sight for you.
couldn’t get his attention. He was only interested in you. I started think
Being a lost my groove, but then I realized he just wanted you. He chose you t
percent in Hawaii. Remember?”

“Can’t forget. I thought he’d choose you too, honestly. I didn’t

to face who I was or how I reacted, even though he was making my panties w
r out of Linda howled at that.

lship. I “O-M-G. Seriously?”

are my “Not lying.”

“I think someone *like* Trace, somebody from one of his
an you Somebody who needs a messed up woman like me.”

all your “Don’t say that. Don’t you know the power you have over peop
your books? The places you take them? I could never do that.”

think I “Sometimes I don’t think I do either—”

n to be, “Stop it, Linda. You do realize it was your book that got Tyler ar
It’s not together? If they hadn’t met and fallen in love, I would have neve
w ones invited to Hawaii or met you and Trace. That’s what you did, Linda.”

el right She blushed, which was complete surprise. The romance writer v
o. No, loss for words.

ly. And Gretchen leaned over and gave her right hand a squeeze.

“Linda, it would be my honor to help you find someone good. I p
y worst It’ll be our super-secret mission.”

eelings,
a ton of
ody just

falls in
ou and

girls. It
g to all
ccepted
ig to be

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king I’d
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Linda howled at that.

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“Not lying.”

“I think someone *like* Trace, somebody from one of his Teams. Somebody who needs a messed up woman like me.”

“Don’t say that. Don’t you know the power you have over people with your books? The places you take them? I could never do that.”

“Sometimes I don’t think I do either—”

“Stop it, Linda. You do realize it was your book that got Tyler and Kate together? If they hadn’t met and fallen in love, I would have never been invited to Hawaii or met you and Trace. That’s what you did, Linda.”

She blushed, which was complete surprise. The romance writer was at a loss for words.

Gretchen leaned over and gave her right hand a squeeze.

“Linda, it would be my honor to help you find someone good. I promise. It’ll be our super-secret mission.”

CHAPTER 13



SEVERAL OF THE newbies had an attitude that made Trace sick to his stomach. They traversed the channel slowly, keeping the onboards whispering. As they approached the shoals, several of the younger guys looked like they were on a beach holiday. With sunglasses wrapped around their heads, unbuttoned shirts, laughing as if they were drinking beers together and celebrating a good life. They checked out the scenery like tourists, pointing out things of interest. Only things missing were the selfies.

They don't have a clue what is awaiting them, Trace thought.

He ground his teeth, because the noise of the splash and the motors drowned out any lecture he was going to give them. But the more he listened, the more disgusted he became. He gripped the side bars of the craft, a hand on his feet, turned to face the island from which they came and then back to the land, trying to avoid eye contact with any of the other men. But he knew if Kyle had been on this particular boat, he would've been shooting at him, because this was Trace's job to keep these guys in line. To keep them focused on the mission and nothing else.

He'd failed.

He'd failed because he was so obsessed with wanting to be here that it bothered him that he even felt that way, like he had let everyone else down himself. Worry had cascaded all over his body with this obsession. It was right that he felt like he didn't want to be here. It was one thing to admit he'd rather be home—that was normal—but he shouldn't want to leave. He wasn't to the point where he'd consider going off duty, but he just had a bad feeling about the mission, a premonition of doom. It had never been like this before.

The more he had to stand up and show he was one of the old guys, the more confident he knew what to do, the more violent and out of control he became. He wanted to lash out at the kids, and they were just kids, dumb and

and inappropriate, probably just like he had been. He bet his instructor probably thought he was a complete dickwad back then.

He closed his eyes and tried to focus, but it was no use. Between bobbing babies with fangs and Clover and Gretchen floating in bloody water he couldn't strike those images from his brain. He still saw villagers, women screaming, running away from terrorists and evil militia members. It was one quilt, one patchwork of memories that had always been there from the past, mostly imagined, tucked away in one of those leaking, soggy baggies. He couldn't get everything into that one bag so he couldn't fit it. The pink babies, the dirty baby blankets, the screaming, anguished faces on villagers, the parents he'd seen crying over the destruction of their innocents coming home. It just didn't fit. It couldn't fit into a box, let alone a baggie.

Danny jumped out to protect the boat's bottom as they off-together lifting the dinghy up, carrying it to shore over the sharp black sand beach. He wondered why they'd chosen to take this beach since it really wasn't a beach. It reminded him of some of the rocky shores on the volcanic islands of the Canaries.

Maybe it was because this area was the least inhabited or least hospitable to small boats. But it was the fastest route from the island to the mainland.

They stowed the boat, disabling the motors so they couldn't be hijacked. Danny removed carburetors and starter triggers, slipping them into his backpack so these boats would be there when they needed them.

There was a mass of thick grasses and palm trees in front of them, which they moved into the jungle. Within minutes, they were completely covered. They couldn't even hear the ocean lapping on the shoals.

The second boat crew had started up front, so Trace was at the rear. Several of the newbies, which was their custom. After all, it wasn't his job to push somebody into a lead position when they'd never been on a deployment before. Their training prepared them, but only so far. When they were engaged in a firefight or a mission, all hell tended to break loose, and the enemy always got the first vote. Newbies were protected in that way since Trace was the babysitter for this mission of several of the newbies. As others approached and became part of it, his leadership and seniority came out as the hours went by.

He swore at that thought. Terrible thought. Not becoming of a

BUD/Sbearer.

“Hold it, gents. I just mean you four,” he said to the group behind themotioned for the rest of the team to move along forward. Several had l / water, only one previous mission before and wanted to hang back, but he se ers andon their way.

bers. It He stared at his group. “I got to tell you guys something, and i e, manyreally pissing me off. You look like you’re at a fucking Malibu beach bloodyGet your heads out of your asses, and get your focus on what we’re le it. ItThis isn’t a party. This isn’t fun. If we get to celebrate, and–” He lo ng, theevery single man’s eye one by one by one. “If all of us get ho ath andcan party then if you feel like it. At this point, gents, I don’t want to : dn’t fitguys for a few days after we get back. This is so unprofessional, a don’t listen to me.”

loaded, He let those words sink in first then continued.

stones. “Now if you listen to me, you might get home alive. If you don’ is not ayou’re fucking career as a Navy SEAL is over, man. If I see any mor ands inor issues pop up or I am reminded of anything you fucking do in Calif wherever the hell you vacation or catch babes or do whatever shit you spitableget a hint or a whiff of that, I’m going to report you, and I’m going t and. sure this is your last mission.”

jacke. The group was obviously on edge. Most of the guys shuffled th in hisand stared at the ground. Benji returned his gaze.

“In fact, if some of you are so stupid to keep doing this, it might l as theylast day here. Last day of your life. Do you get it now?”

red and He’d done a good job of scaring the shit out of everybody, he kne

But he didn’t care. He had to give them the tough truth. They w ar, withfocusing.

fair to “I don’t see any nods. I want some acknowledgment. You better no yment‘yes, sir,’ because that is totally inappropriate. Just give me a thur enemyNod. Do something that tells me you get it—something that gives m and theright here.”

ay, and He tapped his chest with his fist.

w ones, “Something that tells me that you’re in it and that I can expect y soughtprotect me and all your other brothers. Now, are you up to this shit

because if you’re not, I’ll just stop you right here, and we’ll take you Tridentthe Zodiac and say it was a training accident. Deliver your dumb ass

parents. Or your girlfriends. Wouldn't that make a beautiful beach scene and
"Sorry, sir," said Benji. "I totally get what you're saying. And I've been on part of that. And I'm sorry. It's going to change with me."

Trace was happy with that response but searched the others and did the same kind of integrity.

"Benji just showed you what it's like to be a hero. To admit that you're wrong. And to go forward, make it better, and learn from your mistakes. You're going to have to stay alive until the next time you go into battle. You see the next group of newbies that risk the whole team because we don't pay attention and take things seriously. Do you feel me now?"

"I do too," added Carlos, and several of the others nodded as well.

"Let's run and catch up. Time to bust ass. Time to be awesome."

They hiked in for nearly two hours, dodging any hint of homestead encampments, villages, or schools and avoiding any contact with any locals. They avoided routes with military-type tire tracks or signs of possible patrol. They weren't finding much, but all it took was one person with a cell phone and their expected cover would be blown.

Fredo had issued Trace an Invisio earlier this morning, but Trace didn't realize that Kyle also was listening to his tirade. His earpiece beeped just before they stopped.

"Nice going, Trace. Little late, I was wondering." Kyle was joking in a way of being serious.

"Gotcha," Trace whispered back.

"Shiiiiit! I hate to be in your house when you and your wife are fighting that," said Fredo.

"No, that's the way we make love but never fight. Not like that."

He stared at one of the newbies who listened to this conversation.
"the hell you listening to? Was I talking to you?"

"No, sir. I mean, no. Sorry."

"You shave?"

"Sir? I mean yes."

"I was shaving at eleven years old. When did you lose your virginity?" Trace continued.

The newbie stopped as they got closer to the rest of the group. Looking back around him at his little cadre of three others, he was nervous and wasn't sure whether he should be imprudent enough not to answer Trace or not.

ne?” he had guts and continued.

ve been “Honestly—s-sir. I’m sorry. I just can’t help it.”

“That’s the way I felt on my first time too. No problem with the si
dn’t seeI say ‘son’ and it’s a habit of mine. If you have to say sir, just ma
nobody else hears it. I mean, the locals hear that, and you’ve jus
you’re fucking target on my back. Understand?”

istakes. Everybody nodded. Trace chuckled to himself. That seemed to g
ttle and attention, finally. He decided it was a good idea to ask them when th
se they their virginity when they felt like not being responsive. Nobody want
on the spot for that one.

“You still got to answer my question, Son.”

The kid was struggling with his answer, which told Trace w
e fires, answer was going to be. Rather than embarrass the kid, he said, “I
/ of the important. The main thing is you’re not a virgin. Otherwise, you w
is of a never made a SEAL Team, and that’s good enough for me.”

person The kid looked up at him in pain, as if wondering if somebody liec
behalf or he neglected to fill something out on his application.

e didn’t “Didn’t they tell you that’s a disqualifier? I’m sure they must have.
egan to He liked the kid, and Trace was completely positive he was still a v

They launched a couple of Coop’s drones, got them adjusted, a
ing, his them high into the sky, even though the tree cover would hide a lot
noise. If there were buildings or large trees or open meadows, it
reverberate the sound. And even though the bad guys might not know
ghting,” the sound was coming from, which direction, they would know for si
there was one. And that was the problem.

Kyle stopped to receive orders and indicated a plane would be arri
“Whata landing strip a few miles away at dusk.

“We got two and a half hours, little more, to get over there. I don
to run. And I want you guys spread out so that everybody’s looking i
direction. We need some guys on the right, some guys on the left. Tra
and your kindergartners can check the back.”

ginity?” “Thanks, LT,” said Trace.

“No problem. We put you there, because I like the way you contr
.looking kids. So put away your crayons, guys. It’s showtime.”

’t quite They continued to hike until the sun began to drop, not sunset b
not. But with the top of the tree lines, causing shadows. It also was a time wh

of animal life started to wake up and patrol the jungle areas. They heard the sounds of cats, probably small panthers or cheetahs. They heard more things. They also heard some wild pigs foraging, sometimes fighting or kicking themselves with a female. These were not the sounds that they heard in San Diego, totally unfamiliar, and each shriek of a monkey, grunt of a plane, or buzz in the sky of a plane traveling overhead sent chills down every man's spine. The only difference was that the older guys hid it. The newbies, they lost like tiny frogs in a pond. He was going to have to say something about it to be too.

No time like the present.

“Okay guys, another lecture for you, but this one is going to be short. What the hell. They stopped, and Trace pushed Benji in front of them. “I didn’t say No, not I said listen. You can walk and listen at the same time, right, guys?” would’ve

“Yes, sir,” said several.

“So when something happens—like you just heard that pig attack on his seconds ago? You hear an airplane? It’s okay to watch or look or have your attention, but you don’t put your whole body into it. You don’t jerk or move around like you’re scared. Try to think about what it would be like if you lived here and you heard that shit every single hour of every day, right?”

“Look like we’re locals,” said Benji.

“Boy, I got the smart ones, right?”

Couple of them chuckled.

“See? You guys will make it yet. It’s not all explosions and getting knifed. It’s sometimes just a case of chilling and looking like you know how you can tell who are the tourists on Coronado? The orange over you guys running on the beach?”

Several of them nodded again and turned to give Trace a half smile.

“That’s what you’re doing here. You’re showing off, except you’re not showing off as a citizen here. You’re trying to show that you’re capable of handling the jungle. It’s you and Mother Nature. She’s your enemy now, mostly because she’s hiding some pretty bad guys that have done your pretty terrible things. So—”

The front man gave a halt sign, and Trace shut up, immediately waiting. The whole group froze in place, scanning their respective areas well, then a lot of eyes on the point.

heard Darrel tapped his ear and pointed to Kyle.

onkeys. Kyle got on the phone and made communication. Coop slipped in rooting him to listen to the instructions and directed his drone accordingly. at all in manned the other one and kept it out of sight, attempting to head in . pig, or direction in case they'd been spotted.

body's Kyle turned to the group. Fingers in front of his mouth, he whi jumped "We got a village up here. Looks abandoned. Smoke. I can't see it, out that head shed does. You got that picture now?" he asked Coop.

"Yeah, boss. Living color."

Several gathered around Coop's screen as the drone recorded foota rt." was to be sent upstairs, the footage that was peppered with small fi ay stop. small to detect, but burnt crispy black bodies and lots of blood. In f was the dominant color on the screen. The sickening display of little with lots of blood was obvious for all to see.

couple "Fuckin' school," whispered Coop.

re it get Impossible to look at, Trace stepped back a couple of paces, br want to hard, thinking he might heave, but he forced his guys to go front and c ould be look at the carnage.

y single "We're going to send a couple guys in first see if anyone's around. you to pass over the com to somebody else, Danny. I want you and A to get up and find a vantage point before we head into the village. some cover."

The team split up as had been designated and waited for the al ins and Danny had climbed a tree and found several large branches crissc a local. back-and-forth that made a nice platform for him. He got out his lo es who and his scopes and hunkered down, ready to spray the area with needed. Or perhaps pick off one or two bad guys.

. Trace heard Armando and Danny give updates, the lack of e trying anything moving except two dogs that hopefully, for their own good able of bark. One had been sitting down and appeared to have an injury to h y right leg. The other one stood back into the jungle further, a smaller dog, pe ie some littermate or puppy.

"We got to secure the dogs. Coop, want to go check them out? itching. your kids want to go with him?" Kyle said to Trace.

keeping Trace sent Benji, and they waited while Coop and Benji gingerly c to the dogs. Coop determined that the one dog had a fatal injury and pi

shouldn't be approached. He'd be bleeding out shortly.

That told Trace that somebody had been through here not too long ago. The dog had traveled from a homestead or other village seeking refuge from the war. Benji secured the other dog with a rope that had been tied to a dead animal that was obviously a family's food supply. But there was no family to be seen. He secured the pup while they were at the site, feeding him some of the mix, which the dog gladly ate.

The men fanned out into the compound, one by one. They scouted several of the buildings and announced when they had them cleared. They blocked the path from which they came. Coop kept his drone aloft, and raised it to higher elevation so they could see if anyone was approaching. Kyle had asked the head shed about bad guys on their way, and the only people there were none.

They never were able to completely let their hair down, but they relaxed a bit, even with the carnage. Several in the group vomited and wiped it up with their hands. It was one of the most horrific scenes Trace had ever seen—pregnant women sliced open, young children raped, arms and legs and ankles tied to trees. Babies and toddlers were something he would not look at even though he knew there were probably at least a few still alive as they went body by body to check them all.

They also checked for ID, but there weren't pictures of any kind except for an office area. The licenses from the Minister of Education, with his name on it, were taken down and stowed in Danny's pack. They took photos of the bodies. Everything was carefully documented and uploaded to the server.

Trace was glad he heard Kyle's words.

"Come on, gents. Let's get out of this hell house. I need a little fresh air, if you don't mind. We're going to go farther. We still got to get to the airstrip before dusk. And we've got about a mile to go. Make sure you don't leave any tracks behind. Nobody smoke, nobody use candy wrappers. Right? Slow, careful retreat as if we were never here."

"What about him?" asked Benji, pointing to the dog.

Kyle hesitated. "Untie him, but if he follows, we have to take him with us. Let's leave it to him. He might want to stay with the other dog until we're gone."

Trace knew the Team appreciated this little kindness on a day when

didn't appear to be any in the whole world. He was sure his newbies
ago or loud and clear message what this was all about. Most of them had p
there. never seen a dead person, even an animal. But they'd never forget th
ad goat he was sure of that.

o use it. Nobody could move, it seemed. Feet made of lead, even though
his trailsure they wanted to get as far away as they could.

Today was just one of those days, of maybe ten in his career, th
hrough horrific and hard to forget. But this one had been the worst.

. Three And that was because of Gretchen and Clover.

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Today was just one of those days, of maybe ten in his career, that were horrific and hard to forget. But this one had been the worst.

And that was because of Gretchen and Clover.

CHAPTER 14



WHEN GRETCHEN ARRIVED at the hospital, Tony was there sitting by the foot of the bed. Clover was fully dressed, packed, and appeared ready to go. Her initial fear subsided when he didn't get up. He seemed more interested in Clover. Then he looked up at her, as if it was an afterthought.

I can always count on you to be the asshole, can't I?

"Gretchen, good to see you. I-I just came by to see Clover. I he was having trouble with the baby."

Gretchen looked from Tony to Clover and back to Tony. "It was apparently. Everything's okay now. Right, honey?"

Clover answered sharply, looking rested and full of energy. The s been a good idea. "Yes, he's cleared me to go. I'm all checked out."

Tony stood up, and as he approached Gretchen, she backed up. "better if you keep your distance from me, Tony. You can say what yo to say from across the room."

He stopped midway between them in the tiny room. His lanky fra been altered by the new belly starting to develop in his midline.

"You see, Gretchen, part of your problem is that you just don't good in people. I'm not here to do anything but be the bearer of som news."

Gretchen was primed. Good news for Tony wasn't necessarily goo for anyone else or something anyone could count on.

"All your troubles are over then? I heard you got charges dro Gretchen said, and she was going to say more but saw Clover sigh back on the bed, resigned to being involved in another argument b them. Tony just seemed to bring out the most awful parts of Gretch around him, she did and said things she never did around Trace. S disappointed in herself and didn't like disappointing Clover.

"You still making me wrong? Don't you get tired of doing that'

found it in his heart—”

“Stop it. He forgives you but doesn’t trust you. I can’t find it in me to do either. But I’m sorry. I plan to be more mature about all this,” she said which seemed to satisfy Tony. Clover rolled her eyes, shook her head, and then gave her a secret smile out of the corner of her eye.

Damn my sharp tongue. She just couldn’t resist the chance to use it. It felt so good to bash Tony around. She was better than that, but marriage was good to let him have it.

“I said I’m sorry. Now go on. What’s your good news?”

“Looks like I’ve managed to raise about eighty grand for Clover and Trace to buy a house. I would think you guys would be happy. I know you guys Trace can’t help them, so I’ve stepped up to the plate. I know money around your household. I’m sharing my part of the load this time.”

Tony’s delivery was irritating her stomach. She couldn’t help but get amped up, and she knew better. He was rubbing it in that they didn’t have unlimited funds. But they also hadn’t gotten involved in anything illegal, neither one of them had any gambling problems or addictions. Her baggage was weighing him down, making it impossible for anyone to help him. She had warned everyone not to believe any of his promises. She knew this was another one that was going to just fade away or, even worse, become everybody a major problem.

“Tony, I’d prefer we have this conversation when Trace is here.”

“Sure thing. Well, go get him.”

Clover stood and came over to Tony, nearly inserting herself between the two of them.

“Dad, he’s overseas. Look, I don’t want to get involved in this business with you guys, and I haven’t even had a chance to discuss all this with you. I mean, he knows some of it, but I wanted to wait till he’s back too. Can you do that, Dad?”

Gretchen knew he wouldn’t be home for several weeks, due to the length of the training. She suspected Clover wanted to really discuss it with him and hadn’t had a chance before he left.

Tony shrugged, having been first turned down by his ex-wife and now turned down by his pregnant daughter. “Well, I understand. I just want to be a part of your lives. I want to be a part of the baby’s life. After Trace is born, he’ll be my grandchild too.”

Gretchen was getting weary even taking five minutes to explain to herself why everybody thought of him as they did. He was the biggest douchebag she said, the whole world, and everybody knew it. Even his allies and enemies knew he was a dick, and Thick skulled, he never could change and never could be counted on.

“All of that is something that can be discussed later. Tony’s daughter’s just been through a couple of days of a little scare. I don’t want to ruin her calm, and right now, my focus is getting her home and her settled. I want to get her put to bed so that she can recover from what you’ve got something to say, wait a few weeks until the guys are around Jack sure whatever’s out there and whatever you’re going to do with the house and from wherever you got it, and I’m not questioning it, but you’ve got a little bit of trouble before. We don’t want any trouble or complications especially now. We’re focusing on Clover, period. It isn’t about you.”

He gave her a seething smile. Wide but bitter, just like the vacant look he had in his eyes. He almost looked dangerous.

“I always did say you were prettiest when you were pregnant, Gretchen. Tony’s He knocked you up real good. And how strange, you guys are doing it at the same time. Aw, togetherness.”

“You know, Dad, if you’re going to be like that, I’m not sure I want to hang around. Trace and Mom have been stalwarts for me. They’ve given me everything I needed and more. You, on the other hand, come blowing back here after disappearing for months and now want to be part of our lives? We’re supposed to believe you? Just stay away, okay? And call before you come over, please?”

Tony rolled his eyes and adjusted his right shoulder, cracking his neck, and sauntered through the doorway and down the hall. He never looked back. He never apologized, and he never said goodbye.

Gretchen and Clover hugged each other. Her daughter was crying.

“I’m so sorry, Sweetheart. I can’t give him any room to wiggle his fingers to disrupt what we’re trying to build. I feel especially careful around him. Trace isn’t here. I’m going to suggest something, and I don’t want to think I’m pushing. I think it’d be better if you came over to my place, and then three of us could stay together. There’s safety in numbers.”

“I think that’s fine. I’d like to get some things at my place first, and then, of course, I can stay there for a few days.”

“I would send Angie back over to your place, but you know, she

o Tonyfourteen. If some kind of a situation—if Tony or one of his assholebag instops by—you guys would be sitting ducks. I’m going to alert our friend and see what he thinks. But staying together is the decision, and it’s also safer for Angie too.”

7, your “No problem. Let’s get going then. I want to get out of this place as fast as possible!”

getting It took them barely ten minutes to stop by Clover’s condo and pick up their items. Gretchen reminded her to bring a swimsuit, because she said they do an aqua swim class for expectant mothers.

money They also threw out things in the refrigerator that might go bad and then in the garbage cans out to be picked up. On the way out to the car, Gretchen noticed a black sedan parked down the street. The windows had been rolled down, and no one appeared to be in the car, but even in Coronado, which is relatively safe, nobody left their cars parked with the windows rolled down. It appeared odd.

Gretchen. They drove over to Gretchen’s where Angie greeted them, helping her with the Clover’s bags. She was excited to wait on her sister hand and foot.

Gretchen scanned the street up and down and didn’t notice the presence of a black car. Then she called Detective Mayfield and relayed her thoughts. She informed him that Trace was gone, as well as Jack, and asked him to look into the strange car. She even mentioned the surprise visit with Tony and offer of money, and about the three of them living alone at Gretchen’s for at least temporarily.

“That’s a lot to digest, Gretchen. Your lives have certainly gotten a lot more complicated in the past few months. But I’m glad you called me back, going to call my buddies and see if they can run patrol in front of your house several times during the day and night. I still have a little bit of clover leaves there. Are you feeling under imminent danger or is it just a sense of uneasiness and hunches?”

When “With what Tony’s been through, and I’m sure you remember what happened not long ago because of him, serious hunches.”

and the “Yes, most of us know everything about him. What a shame you got hooked up with that guy, but I understand what you’re saying. With the picture and flashing cash, that’s a bad sign, Gretchen. I just have to tell you, if you were my daughter, I’d tell you to move out of town for a while, but that’s not very practical. And Trace has to stay here for his

the allies wouldn't even think of moving you anywhere else, certainly not a hideout friendly or someplace remote. You need to be out in public, places where the smart support team can find you all."

"I agree. I'd be more fearful if we were hidden someplace."

as soon as "Have you contacted Christy yet?"

"I owe her a call, but no."

pick up all "That would be my next call. Maybe some of the guys who aren't suggested can help out. I don't know."

"Great idea. I think I'd like that."

and set "Let her know what's going on, and then just wait it out and watch her. If you see that car or something that looks like you're rolled followed—report it to the station. If you encounter anyone unusual, get away. Don't ever find yourself alone in a dark location, especially."

down. It "All excellent advice. Thank you so much!"

"So my last question is a serious one, Gretchen. Are you still armed?"

ing with "This stopped her short. Trace had always told her to be careful with information. But she knew she could trust Mayfield, who had resence straighten out the shooting incident in the summer."

oughts. "Yes. And before you ask me, of course I know how to shoot it. I opinion got that nice .38 right by the side of my bed."

my, the "Good girl. I can see Trace has taken good care of you. Now for the question. How about Clover and Angie?"

"Angie?"

en a lot "So I'm going to take that as a no. You need to remind her where the gun is. I'm just so that she doesn't accidentally run across it or be surprised to see it in her house."

r house "But, Gus, she's seen it before, remember? She was there the day I put overuse it, and she sees Trace's guns all the time."

ries of "Under different circumstances."

r what is working on that. But she knows where I keep it."

"Right. All the same, you must caution her not to use it if she hasn't been trained, and I assume that's the case. Make sure she knows, if it comes to you, you will have to use deadly force, that you aren't play acting."

to tell "Yes."

while, "It could be her own demise, and put it that way to her. We don't have a job. You guys to be heroes, just smart. Unafraid."

deaway “Gotcha. I hope it doesn’t come to that.”

re your “Me neither. It probably won’t. But we want you prepared. Not armed, but armed with knowledge of when and how to use it. And Clo

“It’s been a couple of years. Jack’s been shooting with Trace honestly, both of us need a refresher.”

“First rule of handling firearms is keep training, grow your knowledge and increase how comfortable you are shooting. Keep your confidence high. Be respectful of the power of the thing but not afraid to use it when you need to. You have to remain clear-thinking. Trace does this all the time. 1. Keep SEAL. It’s such a big part of their training.”

“Thanks for the reminder. You are totally right. When Trace gets home, I’ll ask him to help with the training and take us to the range. That will be a stir, won’t it? Two pregnant women shooting guns?”

He laughed.

“Check with your doctor first. Maybe wait until the births.”

“Of course.” She smiled. “Anything else?”

“I’ll just add this. You may not be able to take it apart, clean it, and put it back together, but, if it’s loaded and if Trace loaded it for you, you’ve still probably gonna be good to go. Hope to God you don’t need it. But if you ever break into your house or something happens and they won’t leave, you’ll have to use it. And we’ll sort out all the details later, just like last time. There are some strange laws now in California, and San Diego has piled up a whole bunch more. So be careful, be smart, but if you must get the thing, make sure someone dies. That’s all I can say.”

After that phone call and the brief call with Christy, who agreed to have some men over to the house to keep surveillance, Gretchen was surprised. She felt like she’d ingested ten cups of coffee.

She sat down in the dark to steady herself. She pondered how far Trace had progressed with Tony and how they were being bombarded with information from all sides. All they’d ever wanted to do was have a good life, have a couple of babies, enjoy life with her family—a family that was a focus on good. Gus had reminded her that perhaps Angie’s quiet demeanor could be due to her trauma witnessing her mother shoot and kill someone, not just a few months ago now. All of a sudden, Gretchen understood what she hadn’t needed could she have forgotten?

It shouldn’t be this way. Trace and the girls all deserved so much more

Her heartbeat slowed as she breathed in and out in a box breathing technique he'd taught her. She opted not to call Trace and bother him, but was waiting for him to call her. Her hunch was that he was intensely focused, but what his mission. She didn't want to break things down further.

Thank God he was in her life, because without him, she would not have made it. Never.

"Mom, what's wrong?" Angie asked, standing in the doorway of her bedroom.

Startled, she scrambled for an answer. "I was just thinking about how it will be like to walk those babies down by the beach or, when they're home, have them run through the surf with us. That's going to be a fun time, isn't it? All cause Angie?"

"It sure will. But, Mom, only one problem with that."

"What?" She was alarmed.

"You'll want me to help out, babysit, right?"

"If you can. If you want to." Gretchen decided to remind her later that she had put in the gun. Not now.

"Oh, I want to. I need to save more for college."

"So what's the issue?"

"Nothing. Actually, my wages are going to double."

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CHAPTER 15



BY THE TIME the Team reached the airstrip, there was very little sunlight. Kyle indicated the arriving plane was going to land as soon as it was visible, which would occur in the next twenty minutes or so. He ordered them to stay alert and focus on preparing for a firefight, should there be a large contingent to meet the plane.

Intel confirmed Okubo was going to be on that plane and would depart, heading cross-country into Nigeria, back to their compound. That was going to be the best time in the foreseeable future to get to him.

Kyle then instructed Danny and Armando to find a perch and set up for a kill shot once Okubo showed his face. That meant the rest of the squad would have to immediately lay down protective fire and eliminate anyone who would try to off the snipers.

In addition, Kyle had another plan.

“Fredo, you and another explosive guy—and I’ll let you pick if somebody can volunteer—I want you to put some IEDs in the runway, set them, and see if we can get lucky and disable the plane. I know you handle that stuff, but do you have the time to get out there and put them in?” Kyle

“Yes, Boss. But I think we need to take two others. I can lay down twelve in maybe ten minutes? Do I have ten minutes?”

“Not sure, but let’s go for it. Okay, pick your poison.”

FREDO GAVE A nod to Benji and Hollis, two new guys who had expert specialty rankings. Both were enthusiastic they were picked. Dan and Armando installed their Invisios, checked their equipment, and took off in two different directions, still on the south side of the airstrip. No one was quite sure yet what lay in the ditches at the other side, but everything was silent, and there were no lights.

“Okay, Coop, it’s time for the drone,” said Kyle.

“I’ve got my NVR on the camera, so should be pretty easy,” Coop said. He got out the little bird, which was still Coop’s favorite drone, and sent it up high. He adjusted the monitor until her screen came into view, testing the NV system.

“The definition’s poor with all the green, fuzzy lighting, but it will show anything coming close, up to about a mile.”

“Perfect. Will we be able to identify him?”

“Not specifically, no. You could tell airplane from tarmac, dog from wing, that sort of thing,” answered Coop as he sent the drone lower to the other side of the air strip.

As the drone ascended, the monitor revealed a single Jeep parked two hundred yards away in the brush, off of a well-traveled path, possibly leading to another compound or village. No other vehicles or personnel were noted.

Little Bird lifted higher. Coop still couldn’t detect any structures. There was an abandoned personnel carrier lying on its side, but no evidence that people lived or camped out in the area. He saw no fire to identify the group, he told Kyle and the group so.

Fredo, Hollis, and Benji slithered on their bellies through the brush, following the drainage ditch at the side of the runway and up onto the tarmac. It was dark there was no moon tonight so there would be no chance of getting seen. Coop’s use of NV goggles made their use of NV goggles more effective. Trace hoped the others didn’t own them, or they might not fare so well. Coop gave the go-ahead to Kyle, who spoke through his Invisio.

“You’re good to go, Fredo. All quiet on the Western Front. Keep moving and on your bellies.”

They laid out IEDs in a pyramid design, starting at the top, the point of the spear, with a fairly large device. Then they followed the pattern of a three-sided shape to the sides, leaving about a five-foot strip on each side of the edges. All through the middle, they placed and buried the small IEDs which, if hit or run over, would explode and could blow off a tire, or worse. Buried above the IEDs were specialty diamond-coated tacks that could pierce metal, such as an airplane’s belly, and there was a possibility they could cause injury inside. But the goal was to disable the plane so that it couldn’t escape. Even if Okubo knew there was an ambush, he would not be able to lift off without wheels.

op said. It was too risky to send someone to the other side to take out the sent herthe Jeep, but from their vantage point, Danny and Armando would noting thehave a clear shot once it appeared near the tarmac.

“Don’t hesitate to take the shot. We’ll take your lead,” Kyle ordered
ll show “Roger that,” answered Armando in his cool Puerto Rican accent c
coms.

Suddenly, Trace heard a buzzing sound above them, and at f
or fromthought it was a drone. The head shed notified Kyle the small
searcharriving, on approach to landing. Coming from the east, it would be
within minutes.

d about “Fredo, you got to get out of there. It’s on its way. ETA in minute
robablynow and call it done.”

el were “Roger that.”

“Don’t forget the buddies.”

nearby. Trace heard Fredo acknowledge him and give the orders.

vidence With his goggles, Trace watched the three of them maneuver o
em andtarmac, since they didn’t wear NVs when doing explosives. Fredo, v
short, stocky body, was the fastest runner and most sure-footed.
ish into stumbled in a pothole and tumbled, came down hard on his ankle, a
luckily, injured. Benji immediately came over to his side and tried to help him
n. Plus, size was a factor.

er side From the other side of the tarmac, the lights of a vehicle appear
head to several militia men got out, just as the plane appeared above the east l
and began to touch down. Fredo was already back with the group, bu
it slow and Benji were slower. Hollis was so big it was impossible for Benji t
him alone, so Gordy, TJ, and Ryan jumped up and assisted Hollis, fre
oint of Benji. They brought him back to the group where Coop began to ch
1 of the his injury.

side at The plane’s light fully exposed Benji. Immediately, rounds were
deviceshis direction across the tarmac, almost hitting the plane. It was an eas
orse. and several rounds hit him in the chest and legs, causing him to fall.

it could Several other rounds fired, and while most of them sent brownish
7 that itas they hit the tarmac, some of them also laid into the newbie.

he pilot Trace was ready to dash into action. Even with the spray of bul
ldn’t bewas readying himself to run out to get his charge. He could see Be
moving slightly.

guy in Kyle stopped him.
no doubt “Don’t! We got to have Okubo land, Trace. We need him.”
 “But it’s Benji, Kyle. I got to save him. He’s my man.”
d. “You sit down. I said sit.” Kyle pushed him back into the swale.
over the get him afterward. You copy?”

 Trace didn’t have words.
irst, he “Trace, you copy?”
jet was “Copy,” he said, faintly.
landing He watched as more rounds sprayed the tarmac, most of them
 Benji, who now was not moving. At last, the plane touched down,
s. Stoppast him down the runway and coming to a stop roughly thirty feet
 where Benji had dropped.

 It was slow motion. All of a sudden the blast of several IEDs bit
 tires off the plane and ripped the material back on one of the wings, bit
 the prop into the air. The whole plane nosedived forward and tipped
ver the side of the broken wing.

with his The militia took their eyes off Benji and began working to pry the
 Hollis open to release their commander, which took several precious seconds
nd was meantime, all they could do was watch until they could confirm
up, but Okubo.

 But Trace studied Benji’s body, looking for some kind of movement
red and needed a sign the kid was alive. Meanwhile, Coop continued work
horizon Hollis’ ankle, prepping him to run for their extraction. Trace planned
t Hollis out without Kyle stopping him, in an attempt to rescue his charge. I
to carry going to do this alone, since it might be a career-ending move.

eing up He was ready and stood up.
eck out Wally pushed him back down into their bunker. In a blur, Wally
 over his head to the hill that had protected them and ran straight to
fired in covering his body with his own.

sy shot, “He’s alive, Trace,” he heard on the Invisio. “Get him home.”

 The activity on the tarmac drew the attention of the militia members
s sprays were still trying to help an injured commander exit the cabin. The plane
was bloody and hurt.

lets, he As they lifted Okubo, Danny whispered, “Confirm.” Then
nji still Armando riddled the plane and the whole area with their high-power
 rounds, sending Okubo to the tarmac head first. Two of the three mili

lay immobile, likely killed, at his side.

The third man, apparently uninjured, ran back toward his Jeep. Before he reached the vehicle, he stopped and sprayed Wally and Benji with fire. “We’ll note the blood sprays as Wally’s body jerked and bounced where the bullet hit him.

Armando, with a single shot to the head, finished the man for good. Kyle ordered the rest of the team to race after the Jeep, taking a risk that wasn’t an additional man left behind. Three others scrambled to catch up, missing Benji and Wally.

Kyle grabbed Trace by the collar and screamed in his face. “I’m not at fault from you busted for this. Damn you, Trace. We almost lost the whole troop.

Trace was furious, about ready to wrestle his LT, which drew a few glances that would’ve gotten him booted. At the last minute, Coop was there, slowing down and dropping Hollis in a howl of pain. He grabbed Trace back by the arm and threw him to the ground, which protected both of them.

Still flush with anger, Trace moaned, “I just wanted to save him. I’m not the door to him that. I didn’t want anybody else to—”

“Shut up, Trace. Just shut the fuck up,” whispered Coop, who then turned it wash and up to Kyle. Dazed and confused, Trace tried to stand but failed and couldn’t and fell back again.

“Fuck.”

A shout came from the tarmac as Trace heard in his Invisio that the area to slip was cleared.

Both Benji and Wally were brought back. Benji was much more conscious than Wally was, but Wally had lost a lot of blood from his multiple wounds. Benji was barely conscious.

Using the captured Jeep, they put the two injured men in the back. Benji and TJ attended them while Danny drove. Kyle called for a pickup and was told it would be thirty minutes before a helo could extract them—just in case they were wounded. No one thought either man would survive that long.

Coordinates were given as the Jeep took off through the jungle toward the messengers they came, the rest of the men running after, but unable to catch up. Kyle heard it bump and rumble through the grasses and foliage until the Jeep disappeared.

The remaining group approached the school compound, quickly searching the perimeter for new visitors and found none. Armando had retrieved

from Okubo's body, holding up a fistful of papers he'd dug out of the forehejacket.

Trace "Outstanding," said Kyle. "You get pictures for positive ID?"

Armando "Yup. And I also got this." Armando showed Kyle and the rest of the group portions of a little finger that he'd carved off the man.

"Proof of death," said Kyle. "Smart."

Trace's rage had subsided. He began to think about the others, how his other two newbies were sticking with the group. Everyone was stumbling and beginning to feel exhaustion from the adrenaline rush they'd get from carrying the extra packs from the injured teammates.

The pup was no longer there, but the larger dog was dead. Trace hoped he'd be able to tell Benji the pup lived—at least that's what he'd be hoping for that's what he hoped.

And he hoped Benji would be alive to be told.

Kyle informed them the pickup had been made. They heard the plane would arrive and leave quickly. It was also confirmed the two were successfully offloaded to be taken to the naval ship for emergency surgery. They'd give both a chance, for now. They were told one was feared to be not long for this world.

Trace was shattered. He knew it was Benji, his charge. The man he'd wanted to rescue. He began to dwell on the scene of going to the man's parents' house, telling them the news, and then attending his funeral. It wasn't easy, but Benji had died a hero. This one was as bad as all the other serious he'd been to, combined.

"They'll make it," Kyle said, slapping Trace on the back. "We're bringing everyone back alive."

It didn't have the effect Kyle had hoped.

The Jeep returned, and all of them alternated between riding and driving just so they could make it all the way back to the shore. Danny reinstalled the carburetors and the starters. They got the boats headed back to the island the way

The air was cold. Nobody said anything. Everyone was consumed by their private thoughts. It wasn't like a beach party anymore. No coeds, no loud sounds, no beer and soft spray from the warm bay. It was a dark, cold night from hell.

But they got their man.

It wasn't until they got on shore that two other men discovered the

the guy's suffered gunshot wounds, which were quickly taken care of by TJ and Kyle informed them they would be transported to the Arleigh Burke of the 6th Fleet that roamed the African coast looking for and more of the pirates, working with their Spanish, African, and Mediterranean partners. The hospital facilities on board were supposed to be excellent.

From there, they'd be brought to Gran Canaria, where they would be making flight home.

Trace was While they waited for the pickup, they were to grab food and as well. Nothing had been prepared as the contractors had been sent away. A recommendation was recommended, which sounded pretty good to Trace.

Trace hoped he He really wanted to shower but didn't dare. He went through the normal routine, relieved, checked on his newbies, also walking into Wally's room, just by half an hour, then realized he wasn't there. He sat on the man's bed, not speaking, slowly over. Pulling out his cell phone, he watched the black screen like it was a movie. He'd forgotten who to call. He was shaking. For a few seconds, he successfully didn't even remember where he was. His body began to feel cold, and his eyes were when he realized he was going into shock.

Trace for this He called out and then abruptly started to lose consciousness, falling on the floor, but he didn't feel any pain. He studied the interesting cracks in the wall from the side, as his eyes tried to clear, hoping to stop the spinning. The kid's brain in his skull.

Trace It never In an instant, TJ was there. With the help of Cooper, they got him lying on Wally's bed, checking him out to make sure he hadn't also suffered a concussion.

Trace They pulled his shirt up, and he tried to yank it back down. He moved, ringing from the light being shone in his eyes. He felt a pin prick as they administered something. They tried to hook him up to an IV to give him some fluids, but he fought with them, getting his arms tangled in the running piping as they tried to put the needle in his arm.

Trace lled the He heard them both swear. It sounded funny, so he laughed. He tried to kick TJ in the thigh when they attempted to take off his shoes. He was angry. He was way over the line; he just didn't give a shit about anything.

Trace o bright He felt someone pulling his collar, raising his head close to the escapeman's face. TJ looked sweaty and tired.

Trace "You listen here, Trace. This isn't you. You're not here in this boat," he spoke.

Trace they had

Coop. It was funny, but he couldn't laugh. "I don't want—"

ke, part "Shut up. You're not here. This isn't you. You didn't say this. Monitoring Trace. You're Trace fucking Bennett. You're gonna be a father for Mrs. Thesake. Don't you check out. Don't do this. Pull yourself around, Trace."

Trace felt the room spinning around him as the drugs took effect. When he opened his eyes, he saw Gretchen in front of him, and he began to cry again.

water. "Oh no, Gretchen! You shouldn't be here."

nap was "Shut up, Trace. This is my ugly mug. TJ. She's not here. You're looking at Gretchen in a couple of days. But you shut up, and you get yourself together. Do you hear me? Look at me. Look at me, Trace."

bit, and He tried to focus with everything in his gut. The hardest thing he could do was stare into TJ's eyes, knowing that he had totally failed. He had signed up as a TV to his LPO, he had disobeyed him, and he had almost gotten two of his hands killed. It was shame and survivor's guilt. He knew the symptoms of it, and that's what he'd pay the price for years. Hoped to God that Wally and Benji would make it.

ling on Someone whispered that the helo was on its way. Someone else brought him some chicken noodle soup, and they propped him up on the bed and gave him a sip, and then another. Then he grabbed the cup, drinking it down as he could. He was thirsty, he was hungry, and he needed to fill his stomach back on with something warm. Slowly, the tingling in his hands, his fingers, his feet, his toes subsided. He began to warm from the medication he'd been given. His heart rate dropped slightly, and he did begin to relax. But there was no way Cooperway he would be running anytime soon. He just couldn't. He was exhausted and totally mentally and physically spent.

plastic They helped him into the helo, and again, once they landed on the ground, he was helped to medical. He wanted to sleep, but he also wanted to look at his surroundings first so he wouldn't wake up and wonder where he was. He pressed through the sleepiness, the nausea, and the unsettling of his stomach.

He needed a shower and to pee, but he didn't have the strength to tell anyone. Surveying the room, he was looking for a pot to pee in.

On the table across from him were two bodies. One was Benji, hooded, "TJ to an IV, a monitor recording his heartbeat.

The other one was covered in a white sheet.

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CHAPTER 16



AT DAWN, GRETCHEN was awakened by sounds of the girls moving at house. Clover had been up using the bathroom, and Angie was in the kitchen. She looked for her cell phone, normally on the table beside her bed, but discovered she hadn't plugged it in last night.

She bumped into Clover in the hallway.

"Good morning. How are you feeling today?"

"So far, so good. God, what's Angie doing? She's making tons of pancakes. I need to sleep, Mom."

She gave her a hug. "I'll go speak with her. You go on back to bed as long as you like. Nothing going on today."

"Thanks, Mom." Clover even managed a little smile, which brightened Gretchen's soul.

On her way to the kitchen, she checked her jacket hanging on the back of a chair and found her cell phone with a dead battery.

"Darn." The disc charger was on the countertop. She passed through the doorway and saw Angie preparing something. Gretchen plugged her phone in to charge.

"Hey, Mom."

"Morning, Sweetheart. Whatcha making?"

"I thought I'd make pancakes. Clover loves them."

"That's really sweet. She'll love that. I probably wouldn't mind a little myself. I think she's gone back to bed though. Can you wait?"

"Oh, sure. Or we could eat first. I was just, well, I couldn't sleep."

Gretchen thought perhaps this was the right opportunity for the conversation she'd promised Mayfield they'd have.

"You know, Angie, I meant to talk to you about something last night. I decided not to bring it up until today. But it's something you need to know."

Her daughter's forehead wrinkled as she appeared on the edge of the doorway.

“Is something wrong with Trace?”

“No, nothing like that. But we think perhaps we’ve been following a car. Someone I don’t know. I’ve seen it several times, and I’m getting help in dealing with it, just to be safe, since Trace is gone right now. Christy’s helping me to get some guys to come over and keep watch. I wanted you to be aware.”

Angie shrugged. “Sounds good.” She continued stirring the batter.

“I also called Detective Mayfield. You remember, we talked to him about the shooting in the summer?”

Angie continued to stir the mixture in front of her without saying a word, slowly and pensively thinking about something.

Gretchen felt it was safe to continue. “I know how you feel about the incident, Angie, and I’m sorry to have to bring it up.”

“I try not to think about it, Mom. I haven’t told you, but I wake up about every night dreaming about it. It’s hard to sleep when you wake up and dream about somebody breaking into your house and, well, you know.”

She took Angie in her arms then released her.

“I’m angry about all of this, and I blame Tony for all of it, but, I think we chose to get involved, thinking we could help. So this all kind of came down on us. I wasn’t thinking, Angie. I’ve been wondering why there was a mood change in you afterward. And now I finally figured it out.”

She stared at her tall, lanky daughter with the beautiful, honey-colored long hair and deep brown eyes. Gretchen was amazed at what a beautiful young woman she was becoming.

Staring down at the bowl, Angie offered a timid response. “There’s a lot of things going on, Mom. I-I just couldn’t find a time to sit down and talk it with you or Trace. I thought it was something that would go away on its own. It doesn’t. It really doesn’t.”

“I get it. And again, I apologize for being so thickheaded. I’ve been concentrating on all the other things in our lives. Trace is gone so often, and there are consequences to Tony’s behavior, but he’s like the Teflon man. Things just seem to slide off him and affect everyone else around him. It’s not fair. There are bad guys everywhere. I worry, too, Angie. I really do.”

“But you shouldn’t, Mom. You’re supposed to take care of our children, not hear.”

“It will be a sister. We’re having a girl. Poor Trace will be a brother or sister.”

outnumbered. Clover is also having a girl. Isn't that great?"

ed by a "I don't care. Brother or sister, I don't care. As long as everyone's
g someand we're all together and the baby's fine and Trace comes back, of co
it now. That sent a wrinkle to her heart. It had been two days now sinc
1. I justheard from him, and that was not usual. Gretchen needed to sit do
walked through the doorway to the dinette table, taking a seat.

"You want some juice or water, Mom?" Angie asked.

m after "Water would be great. Thanks. I think you'll make a great
someday. I've been meaning to tell you that."

a word, Angie blushed as Gretchen sipped on the tall glass of cool wat
asked Angie to come sit with her.

out the "When I called Christy, I asked her to send some Team Guys ove
house occasionally, maybe get some additional patrols for us, becaus
up justfeeling insecure. With Clover pregnant and my own pregnancy, I tho
orry orwould be a good idea. And then I remembered that day and your reacti
" all. That's when it hit me. You were still reliving those minutes over a
again. I figured it out while Detective Mayfield was telling me abo
ruth is,defense protocols, warning me about what to look out for, and hel
f cameprepare me in case something should happen."

e was a Angie's eyes got big. "He thinks something's going to happen?"

"No, but we're making plans for our own protection. He asked r
-brownyou were doing because he said I should let you know where the gun is

autiful "I know where it is. Why?"

"He asked me to warn you that it could be traumatic seeing the gun
was soif I should need to use it."

k about "You're going to shoot someone again?" she mumbled.

. But it Gretchen was filled with grief that her own daughter would say
thing. Then she observed Angie turn away from her and not ma
ed andcontact. She reached across the table and grabbed her daughter's hand.

en, and "I'm not planning that."

n Man. "Well, that's good," Angie said sarcastically.

It isn't Gretchen felt she was losing the battle.

"Honey, I promise I will always protect you and both your sister
ur newTrace if I need to. That's my role, especially when Trace is gone.

know, as upsetting as it might be, if we're prepared, if we underst
still berules, it might give us some comfort and keep us safe. Regardless of h

feel about shooting and guns, and it's totally up to you, I'd like Trace to be happy you target practicing when he comes back. Just so you're prepared for the worst. You don't have to ever own a gun or ever do anything but practice with your target. Because if I need to, I will protect this family. That's very sacred to me and the promise I made to all of you when you were born. It's my job, and I'm not afraid of that now. I have the same job as Trace does, just here at the home front and, of course, to a much smaller degree."

"I understand, Mom. I'm not afraid of you or the gun. I'm afraid of the men, and you just want to make sure I won't freak out if I see that nasty one again."

Gretchen chuckled. "That's my Angie, always reducing it down to the simple, basic facts. And you're exactly right. I just wanted to take the time I was talking to you about it and make sure you're comfortable with it all. Tonight I thought I'd know that I understand perhaps a little bit now of what you're going through with it. And I'm vowing to fix that."

Angie came over to her, kneeling down before her. Gretchen wrapped her arms around the teen. "I love you so much, Sweetheart."

As Angie stood up, Gretchen's cell phone rang. She ran to the kitchen to answer it and noticed there had been a call from Christy late last night when she'd gone to bed.

This was Christy again.

"Christy!"

"Just letting you know they're coming home. Should be here again, afternoon."

"That's wonderful news. Oh my gosh, that's wonderful news!" Gretchen put her hand over the speaker and leaned toward Angie. "He's coming home today, Sweetheart."

Angie returned a huge smile.

"Gretchen, a couple of things. Since I found out about their return, I didn't ask the Team Guys to come over. I started, but then I postponed. Kyle also wanted me to inform you that it has been a difficult mission, especially on Trace."

Gretchen put her hand to her mouth, inhaling, and then closing her eyes. And while she listened to whatever news Christy was going to give her. Listening and then, she was ready for it.

"Go on."

to take “Trace is fine. You don’t need to worry about that. They did lose
d. You and they’ve got some injuries. But Trace is fine. What Kyle says is
our dad had an ‘incident.’”

me. It’s “Incident? What does that mean?” She was beginning to shak
and I’m Trace coming home in a wheelchair? Did he have some sort of menta
e at theor did he panic? None of that was anything she ever had considered.

“He wanted to prepare you. All I know is that he had a tough
of those guess one of his guys is the one who passed. A young guy. And he
ty thing very hard. He’s been difficult to console, and Kyle wanted you to kn
he’s fragile. He might not show it, so that’s why Kyle wanted me to tel

n to its Gretchen composed herself. Her youngest daughter was study
time to face, trying to read into her expression some clue as to what was go
let you What was she going to tell her daughters if Trace came back a change
hrough. Was this going to involve hospitalization, drug therapy? Was this the
their happily ever after?

ped her But she refused to give up. She straightened her back, adjust
shoulders, and lifted her chin, looking straight ahead into her b
chen to garden. The flowers were blooming, even this late in the year. The gra
ht after green. She even saw a couple of butterflies wave on their way p
window. Life was for the living. Life was about growing families,
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She took another deep breath and felt Wes standing behind her.

“I’ll be ready.”

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“Trace is fine. You don’t need to worry about that. They did lose a man, and they’ve got some injuries. But Trace is fine. What Kyle says is that he had an ‘incident.’”

“Incident? What does that mean?” She was beginning to shake. Was Trace coming home in a wheelchair? Did he have some sort of mental break or did he panic? None of that was anything she ever had considered.

“He wanted to prepare you. All I know is that he had a tough time. I guess one of his guys is the one who passed. A young guy. And he took it very hard. He’s been difficult to console, and Kyle wanted you to know that he’s fragile. He might not show it, so that’s why Kyle wanted me to tell you.”

Gretchen composed herself. Her youngest daughter was studying her face, trying to read into her expression some clue as to what was going on. What was she going to tell her daughters if Trace came back a changed man? Was this going to involve hospitalization, drug therapy? Was this the end of their happily ever after?

But she refused to give up. She straightened her back, adjusted her shoulders, and lifted her chin, looking straight ahead into her beautiful garden. The flowers were blooming, even this late in the year. The grass was green. She even saw a couple of butterflies wave on their way past her window. Life was for the living. Life was about growing families, getting stronger every day, and facing any challenge, out of love and never out of revenge. So many men and women had sacrificed so that she and her family could live this life.

It was a miracle. She found the space to feel grateful for whatever would be coming her way.

“I see. Thank you. And thank Kyle when you talk to him.”

She took another deep breath and felt Wes standing behind her.

“I’ll be ready.”

CHAPTER 17



“**Y**OU GOT A decision to make, Trace. I can’t make that decision, and I want the end of your career to be on my conscience. We’re friends, I’m still your LPO. This doesn’t change until we both walk out of here.” For the next hour, they sat at the large, round table they used for happier times. Trace noticed the remnants of pizza sauce stubbornly affixed to the side of the Formica table.

As a device to bring the team together, it was pure genius. Kyle ordered it and paid for it out of his own funds. Nobody was in charge. Everyone had a say. Somehow, sitting at that table, things weren’t adversarial. They couldn’t go anywhere unless they all agreed.

He wished more of the world operated like that. The one who yelled the loudest or nastiest wasn’t always the one who should lead. But there were times when the tough decisions had to be made. The person who carried the burden that was usually hated for a time and then later revered for being so brave.

And on and on. Military men and women would be still arguing about the right path a hundred years from now, Trace thought. People would come home with half their parts, and yet they’d find it in themselves to say, “Thank you for allowing me to serve.” It wasn’t bullshit, either.

Those were the ones who deserved the medals. They should be able to wear them proudly, show everyone, not have them stuck in a black box, given to their wives, girlfriends, or parents to be tucked away in a dresser and passed down to their offspring. Only thing left were their dog tags, their flag, and, for a SEAL, their Trident.

But the real ones never talked about it. Almost never complained about the Teams or not at all, in the case of those who didn’t return. Decisions were made—good, bad, neither—and the military person’s job was to carry out the orders. Even at risk to their own life.

Did people understand, with the decisions made, that some parents would never see their children again? The picture on the mantel in a crisp u

beside Old Glory would never age like the photographic paper it was on, like the cotton/rayon blended stars and stripes in the case, folded not even an ant could crawl in and make a home there. Did the people who made the decisions realize little children wouldn't see their mothers and fathers? Could never show them how they lost their first tooth or learned to skateboard.

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And, yes, all those people—the parents, spouses, friends, and children—were the reason they served. It was no higher honor than to make things so the people they loved could have a life the rest of the world could dream of. It was an expensive price to pay, but so worth it.

But to come back whole, no visible scars, every body part working like the others came back in pieces or not at all, sometimes half of what they had when they left, wasn't fair.

Trace knew he was damaged. He'd left something over there in the clay of Africa. A life expended to take seven other bad guys, and he wasn't them, an officer who had murdered hundreds of innocents.

But that wasn't what Trace was counting. The only expense he felt was the hollow feeling in his heart, that he was responsible for the safety of the men he was put in charge of. His job wasn't even as grand as Kyle's, who had the lives of some two hundred men on the Team and who chose to go on an op and who stayed behind.

Kyle had just told him they would be visiting an uncle of Wally's in Los Angeles, just he and Kyle together. They'd shake the gentleman's hand, thank him, tell them how brave Wally had been, that he died a hero and saved another young boy's life at the expense of his own.

It mattered little that the morning of the op Wally had told him he was ready to die any day, to go see his wife and three little boys. He just wanted to die in Africa.

But that's what happened.

"Are you listening to me, Trace?"

"I am, LT. I'm listening to it all." He noticed everyone else had fled the party so fast, ready to spend the weekend with their loved ones or to get shit-faced for the pure joy of growing one massive hangover.

Gretchen and the girls were his whole life, and he wanted to see them. But he didn't want them to see him like this. It was just as bad as being home with no legs and a colostomy bag. But people did and they put

printed it, lived their lives, even fathered more children afterward.

tight so “I came close to running out there anyway, throwing myself in the line of fire during the firefight, but I didn’t. Does that make me a coward?”

ers and “No. Makes you a hero. You followed orders. You helped the Team get the job done. Dr. Death doesn’t discriminate by age or religion, race or gender.”

He’s a bitch. He comes and works that scythe so fast you don’t feel it. You’re dead. It was Wally’s turn. Wally’s way. He broke the rules. He made it safer for you to come home. You did.”

ld only Trace finally returned Kyle’s gaze. He felt his eyes well up with tears, but he didn’t want to show. But then he saw Kyle’s do the same. And he understood. Whatever Trace was feeling, Kyle had felt it ten or twenty times more over the years. He still came home to Christy and the kids, rocked their world, and they were safe.

Trace just had to figure out if he wanted to show up or if he was going to let the red quit. And it was more than quitting the Teams. It was quitting everything. Letting everyone down.

Someone once told him that when he sat with his dad, who had just returned from World War II, a SEABee, as he lay dying, he actually thanked his father for showing him how to die. He was grateful to experience and send off someone like that, a man who had been an incredible inspiration in his life. A man who was larger than life itself, even though shriveled, less than eighty pounds at the end, wearing a diaper.

is in Los Wally’s picture would never age. He’d always be remembered for his sense of humor and colorful jokes, the stories about visiting his dad in prison, a man who had saved his life. He related to Hollis and his story of how his mother died with an axe between her eyes, thrown by his father. Wally showed the newbies how to be brave. He would forever know that someone died so he could live.

hadn’t Trace was going to have to show up to make sure Benji saw it through and never forgot. What a gift to give someone, without anything in return, except to live a life of meaning and to pass it on, especially when it was hard.

own out “Well, this is enough,” he said to Kyle.

just to “So that’s it? You’re out?”

Trace drilled a fuck you stare, which caused Kyle’s face to break into a grin wider than he’d ever seen before.

coming “I was close. I guess I just needed to hit the reset switch. My life came back slow, LT, but they’re back.”

Now it was time for Kyle to feel embarrassed, because he bawled into the baby.

“Glad to have you, Trace. Now go home and take the advice I give you. I am a getman who comes home. Go. Get. Laid.”

Trace said, “Yessir. That’s an order I will gladly fulfill.”

Trace didn’t call Gretchen. He threw his stuff in the back of the Hummer, made Kyle promise not to tell her he was coming, and squeaked out of the parking lot.

The eighteen-year-old sentry, regular Navy in a sea uniform too big on him, even his cap, with a sidearm he’d never use, looked at Trace’s pimply lips and asked for his ID as if he was important. Like he was an over admiral.

“Your license is expired on your truck. You’ll need to get another one posted on your bumper.”

Trace said, “I’ll do it later.”

It must have been the way he said it, because the kid was out to prove himself, like they always did, just because he was regular and Trace was a fuckin’ SEAL. But he flinched and passed him on through.

Trace sped up and left behind the smell of burning rubber. And he never stopped. He thought about it, then backed up, and addressed the kid.

“Hey,” he said as he leaned over and read the name badge. “You’re fuckin’ kidding me, Son.”

The kid pushed his name tag closer so Trace’s old wizened eyes could read it.

“Wally. I’m Wally, sir.”

Trace shook his head and started to chuckle. “You believe in reincarnation, body possession, son?”

“Hell, no. That ain’t Christian-like.”

It was the perfect answer. A truthful answer. Trace didn’t really mess with him, so he delivered the message he had intended before the badge sidetrack.

“Thank you, Wally, for your service. I appreciate you looking out for all of us, for standing here in the sun all day, every day you’re out in to defend us and our country, no matter what. It takes courage and hard work to wear that uniform. I just want you to know I’m grateful. I hope you have a wonderful day.”

“Thank you, Special Operator Bennett. I’m going to tell my

d like a Navy SEAL said that to me. He'd be proud right alongside you."

"Well, you tell your dad he raised a helluva son."

Every thought as he drove down the strand and then peeled off into the neighborhood. Like the flowers in their front yard Gretchen had taught him how to tend, and how not to forget to water. With a little bit of gratitude, he got to enjoy their colorful display. It was their job, after all, to water. He mentally thanked them for their service to his good nature today. He opened the door and ran up the walkway and to the red front door with the Christmas wreath hanging outside, the wreath he'd bitched about that cost more than he thought Gretchen should have spent. The wreath she loved. It made her happy, and if it made her happy, it damn well would make him happy too.

"Thank you," he said to the wreath before he held his breath, and then he opened the door to the scents of three of the most beautiful and most troublesome women in the world and their cooking.

It was a "Daddy!" Angie said as she ran to his arms. He dropped his duty and his foot, she'd thrown him so far off guard.

Then he "God, you're skinny as hell, but you weigh a ton."

She laughed, kissed him on the cheek, and said, "Shut the fuck up. You gotta be like father, like daughter."

Clover was next to greet him. They couldn't hug because he was so big, she couldn't let them. "Holy cow, you've gotten twice as large. Sure there's two in there?"

"Only one, Dad, and she's big. She's going to whip your ass too." "I always wanted to have a granddaughter in the WWE. I'm going to have to spend all my time making sure all the Bone Frogs keep their heads on themselves."

His princess, his pride and joy, came around the kitchen corner and gave him one of those looks he used to get when they were first married.

"How did I manage to get this beauty knocked up so nicely? All for me, and soft. Come here, honey. I've been waiting a lifetime for your kiss. I'm ready." Even Gretchen ran to his arms. He felt her tears down the side of his neck, so he pulled away and asked her, "What's wrong? Did you really think I would leave you to handle all this by yourself? I'm back. For now. I'm back, and I get to stay back, guaranteed, heard it from the man himself." "Dad, this one is six months old."

She brushed the tears from her cheeks. "That's the best Christmas I've ever had, Trace."

Trace He whispered in her ear, but the girls knew what was up.
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She brushed the tears from her cheeks. “That’s the best Christmas present I’ve ever had, Trace.”

He whispered in her ear, but the girls knew what was up.

“Comes with strings and requirements that you respond to every touch, that you perform a certain way, and never wear panties.”

He slid his hand over her backside, and, yes, she was bare underneath.

“Girls, Mom and Dad have to have a little discussion,” Trace announced.

“But we’ve got dinner, early dinner all set for you, Dad,” objected Angie.

He grinned back at her. “Someday, my angel, you’ll understand. Go ask your sister; she knows. Daddy has some needs he must bury his heart in, and only your mother can heal him.”

As they walked arm in arm down the hallway to the bedroom, Trace knew Gretchen could handle anything. She was certainly going to be able to heal him, and together, they’d come out the other side of this experience stronger than ever.

It wasn’t going to be a cakewalk. He was going to get as much help as he could muster in the system. But he was filled with the spirit of Christmas, celebrating the birth of one special boy and two very, very special little girls.

EPILOGUE



Three Weeks Later

GRETCHEN WAS SOAKING wet, sweat pouring from her face and neck. Her chest was soaked. Even her arms dripped as she gripped Trace's hand on her forearm, clasping him all the way to his elbow. He whispered encouragement as she pushed, as her face flushed bright pink with the effort to move the baby along.

"Good girl, Gretchen. You're so strong, Sweetheart. Keep it up, Honey."

The doctor told them the next push would deliver the baby to her hands. "I can see the head. She's crowning, a beautiful shade of pink. Just waiting to nestle in your arms, Gretchen. You're doing great. Just on time."

And, after one more push, they both heard wailing, the newborn baby held in her arms in a jerky fashion, eyes objecting to the bright lights. Gretchen's relief felt like a cool waterfall, after the ten hours of labor she'd endured. She heard cheering in the next room where Clover, Angie, her sister, Kate, and her parents all gathered, waiting to see the little miracle.

Trace used a cool towel to gently dab her face. "Thank you, Sweetheart. You are so incredibly strong and beautiful. I love you so much."

"Love you too." But she was looking between her legs at the doctor who was holding their child.

"Is she okay?"

"Can't you hear her?"

"She's a big strong girl, eight pounds ten ounces. Big girl. Healthy and perfectly fine. Good job, you two," said the nurse from across the room.

"Can I hold her?" Gretchen asked, almost ignoring Trace.

"How about we let Papa bring her over to you, okay?"

Trace stared at the nurse, then the doctor, and at last at Gretchen.

“But—but—”

“Come on over here. It’s not hard.”

His face was precious. Afraid to hold his own daughter! She loved even more than she ever had.

“I’ve never held a baby before. Are you sure? Shouldn’t I practice?”

The whole delivery room chuckled softly.

“Big strong Navy SEAL and he’s afraid of babies. That’s a new record,” said the doctor.

But Gretchen completely understood. That was Trace. He could do the hard things in life no one else would ever do, but it was the little things that got to him every time.

He reluctantly went over to the scale as the nurse lay a cotton swab over his arms and then placed their little girl, newly wiped down and considerably happier than she had been just thirty seconds before.

“There she is, Daddy. Now, let’s go and show Mommy, okay?”

The nurse practically had to push Trace in Gretchen’s direction. He moved like concrete as he slowly made it to Gretchen’s side.

“Here she is. Here’s our little girl, Gretchen. I’ve never seen anything more amazing—except you, of course. But she’s almost as pretty as you are in my love.”

Gretchen placed her finger inside the baby’s hand, and the swab gripped it. “She has your hands, Trace,” she said and laughed tears.

Trace kissed her forehead. The nurses lifted Gretchen up to a position so she could hold their girl.

“We did it, Gretchen. We really did it,” he said with tears streaming down his face.

“We did. I always knew this could happen. We beat the odds, Trace. I’ll have to watch you closely to make sure you don’t beat up everyone I tell you that your daughter is beautiful.”

“That will be a full-time job, I fear. She’s going to look at me at school nights and wonder what happened to me. I can see it all now. Why are we going to call her? We didn’t finish talking about that.”

“I have a name, if you’ll agree.”

“Go ahead.”

“Wallace. I’d like to name her Wallace.”

Trace plopped his tired, scarred body down on the chair and :

nodding.

ed him CLOVER DELIVERED A week late, on Christmas Eve. She allowed Gretchen her two sisters to stay in the delivery room, along with Jack, who completed and passed his BUD/S training. He would have to go to complete the rest of the SQT the day after Christmas, though. The apartment was nearly completely filled with toys and gifts it would take days to unwrap and years for Olivia, their new daughter, to play with all the enjoy.

igs that Jack had nearly passed out during the birth, and Trace later told nearly did too.

ab over “Get ready for some serious sleep deprivation, and you better get derably cleaning and doing laundry. It’s amazing how much poop those little can generate. They’re a regular poop factory, twenty-four seven,” he

As an aside, he later added, “But it’s really cool, especially in the early his legs of the morning, just you and her, rocking her and telling her all about men she won’t ever date because you’ll kill them, slowly, and then nothing so them with a tractor-trailer.”

are, my The two men bonded. Gretchen was so pleased to see everything in place.

reet girl But Tony threw a monkey wrench into their celebration by arrested on Christmas day for driving drunk. It was made into a major sitting because of his prior record. He needed money and had spent the payment for Clover and Jack.

g down Trace and Gretchen had constantly warned them about this, so it much of a surprise.

e. Now Trace was seeing Dr. Brownlee on a regular basis, sometimes going ne who Angie or Gretchen. On New Year’s Eve, Dr. Brownlee came over to and Jack’s condo and gave them their down payment as a gift, so Jack-to-Jack promised to pay back.

What are “Save it, Son. Consider it an investment in my extended family here aren’t going to be able to have that kind of money for a couple of days. So, remember, when someone gives you a gift, you take it, and you ‘thank you.’ That’s all I want. Find something you can afford to keep started in real estate right away. You’ll make more money in it than you sobbed,

will as a SEAL. Trust me, I hear it every day in my practice.”

Gus Mayfield and a few of his retired buddies never informed the men and were surveilling Gretchen and Trace’s house, as well as Clover and who had rental. One late night in January, they arrested two men, both with back to criminal records, down the street from Clover’s condo. With the couple and their tiny and weapons they uncovered, and the resulting questionably legal seizure of their premises, they would be deported to Mexico, as they had before with and this time after a five-year stint in prison. Later, they were linked to murders through their weapons and DNA and would be incarcerated with him for a couple of decades.

And then somehow, Tony was released on a technicality.

used to “Do you ever suppose we’ll be rid of him?” Gretchen asked Trace as they sat on the beach with Wallace in her arms.

’d said. “I think he was put there on purpose. Like her namesake. It means they’re telling us there are more lessons to learn.”

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Gus Mayfield and a few of his retired buddies never informed them they were surveilling Gretchen and Trace’s house, as well as Clover and Jack’s rental. One late night in January, they arrested two men, both with long criminal records, down the street from Clover’s condo. With the contraband and weapons they uncovered, and the resulting questionably legal search of their premises, they would be deported to Mexico, as they had before, only this time after a five-year stint in prison. Later, they were linked to several murders through their weapons and DNA and would be incarcerated for a couple of decades.

And then somehow, Tony was released on a technicality.

“Do you ever suppose we’ll be rid of him?” Gretchen asked Trace as they sat on the beach with Wallace in her arms.

“I think he was put there on purpose. Like her namesake. It means God’s telling us there are more lessons to learn.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Sharon Hamilton

NYT and USA/Today Bestselling Author Sharon Hamilton's Brotherhood series have earned her author rankings of #1 in Romance Suspense, Military Romance and Contemporary Romance. Her *Brotherhood* stand-alone series are: Bad Boys of SEAL Team 3, E Bachelors, True Blue SEALs, Nashville SEALs, Bone Frog Brotherhood Sunset SEALs, Bone Frog Bachelor Series and SEAL Brotherhood Series. She is a contributing author to the very popular Shadow SEALs author series.

Her SEALs and former SEALs have invested in two wineries, a large farm and a brewery in Sonoma County, which have become part of their stories. They also have expanded to include Veteran-benefit projects on the Florida Gulf Coast, as well as projects in Africa and the Maldives. One of her SEAL wives has even launched her own women's fiction series. Her characters, as well as children of these SEAL heroes keep returning to her newer books.

Sharon also writes sexy paranormals in two series: Golden Vampire

Tuscany and The Guardians. In addition, S. Hamil has penned a new Free To Love: Free As A Bird, the 5-book series about a hero Andre just might be the man to save the world from the flames of chaos, per the risk of his own safety.

A lifelong organic vegetable and flower gardener, Sharon a husband lived for fifty years in the Wine Country of Northern Cal where many of her stories take place. Recently, they have moved beautiful Gulf Coast of Florida, with stories of shipwrecks, the white sand beaches of Sunset, Treasure Island and Indian Rocks Beaches.

She loves hearing from fans through her website:

authorsharonhamilton.com

Find out more about Sharon, her upcoming releases, appearances and when you sign up for Sharon's [newsletter](#).

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REVIEWS

PRAISE FOR THE SEAL BROTHERHOOD SERIES

“Fans of Navy SEAL romance, I found a new author to feed your ad. Finely written and loaded delicious with moments, Sharon Hamilton’s storytelling satisfies like a thick bar of chocolate.” —Marliss M. Johnson, bestselling author of the *Team Twelve* Navy SEALs series

“Sharon Hamilton does an EXCELLENT job of fitting all the characters into a brotherhood of SEALs that may not be real but sure makes you feel like you have entered the circle and security of their world. The stories introduced in each book before...and each book after and THAT is what makes Sharon Hamilton’s SEAL Brotherhood Series so very interesting. You don’t want to put down ANY of her books and they will keep you reading all night when you should be sleeping. Start with this book...and you won’t want to stop until you’ve read the whole series and then...you will be begging for Sharon to write the next one.” (5 Star Review)

“Kyle and Christy explode all over the pages in this first book, [*Accident at SEAL*], in a whole new series of SEALs. If the twist and turns don’t give you a heart jumping, then maybe the suspense will. This is a must read for those that are looking for love and adventure with a little sloppy love thrown in for good measure.” (5 Star Review)

PRAISE FOR THE BAD BOYS OF SEAL TEAM 3 SERIES

“I love reading this series! Once you start these books, you can hardly put them down. The mix of romance and suspense keeps you turning the pages one right after another! Can’t wait until the next book!” (5 Star Review)

“I love all of Sharon’s Seal books, but [*SEAL’s Code*] may just be her best yet. Danny and Luci’s journey is filled with a wonderful insight into Native American life. It is a love story that will fill you with warmth and contentment. You will enjoy Danny’s journey to become a SEAL .

reasons for it. Good job Sharon!" (5 Star Review)

PRAISE FOR THE BAND OF BACHELORS SERIES

"[*Lucas*] was the first book in the Band of Bachelors series and it phenomenal start. I loved how we got to see the other SEALs we all love we got a look at Lucas and Marcy. They had an instant attraction, and love was very intense. This book had it all, suspense, steamy romance, humor, everything you want in a riveting, outstanding read. I can't read the next book in this series." (5 Star Review)

PRAISE FOR THE TRUE BLUE SEALS SERIES

"Keep the tissues box nearby as you read *True Blue SEALs: Zak* by Sharon Hamilton. I imagine more than I wish to that the circumstances surrounding Zak and Amy are all too real for returning military personnel and their families. Ms. Hamilton has put us right in the middle of struggles and successes that these two high school sweethearts endure. I have read many of Sharon Hamilton's military romances but will say this is the most emotionally intense of the ones that I have read. This is a well-written realistic story with authentic characters that will have you rooting for and proud of those who serve to keep us safe. This is an author who writes amazing stories that you love and cry with the characters. Fans of Scott and Marliiss Melton will want to add Sharon Hamilton to their list of realistic military romance writers." (5 Star Review)

PRAISE FOR THE GOLDEN VAMPIRES OF TUSCANY SERIES

"Well to say the least I was thoroughly surprised. I have read many Vampire books, from Ann Rice to Kym Grosso and a few other Authors, so you like Vampires, not the super scary ones from the old days, but the new ones are far more interesting, far more human than one can remember. I loved *Honeymoon Bite* a totally engrossing book, I was not able to put it down page after page I found delight, love, understanding, well that is until the bad Vamp started being really bad. But seeing someone love another so much that they would do anything to protect them, well that had me

then well there was more and for a while I thought it was the er beautiful love story that spanned not only time but, spanned Ita California. Won't divulge how it ended, but I did shed a few tea screaming but Sharon Hamilton did not let me down, she took t was amazing trip that I loved, look forward to reading another Vampire l ove andhers."

nd their "An excellent paranormal romance that was exciting, romantic, ente mance, and very satisfying to read. It had me anticipating what would happ wait to many times over, so much so I could not put it down and even finish in a day. The vampires in this book were different from your a vampire, but I enjoy different variations and changes to the same old made for a more unpredictable read and more adventurous to e Vampire lovers, any paranormal readers and even those who lo Sharon romance genre will enjoy Honeymoon Bite."

ounding "This is the first non-Seal book of this author's I have read and I lo id their There is a cast-like hierarchy in this vampire community with human les and very bottom and Golden vampires at the top. Lionel is a dark vampi several are servants of the Golden. Phoebe is a Golden who has not decide e most will remain human or accept the turning to become a vampire. Either v written, and Lionel can never be together since it is forbidden. or them

o writes I enjoyed this story and I am looking forward to the next installment."

Jessica "A hauntingly romantic read. Old love lost and new love found. I t list of heart, intrigue and vampires. Grabbed my attention and couldn't put Would definitely recommend."

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then well there was more and for a while I thought it was the end of a beautiful love story that spanned not only time but, spanned Italy and California. Won't divulge how it ended, but I did shed a few tears after screaming but Sharon Hamilton did not let me down, she took me on amazing trip that I loved, look forward to reading another Vampire book of hers."

"An excellent paranormal romance that was exciting, romantic, entertaining and very satisfying to read. It had me anticipating what would happen next many times over, so much so I could not put it down and even finished it up in a day. The vampires in this book were different from your average vampire, but I enjoy different variations and changes to the same old stuff. It made for a more unpredictable read and more adventurous to explore! Vampire lovers, any paranormal readers and even those who love the romance genre will enjoy Honeymoon Bite."

"This is the first non-Seal book of this author's I have read and I loved it. There is a cast-like hierarchy in this vampire community with humans at the very bottom and Golden vampires at the top. Lionel is a dark vampire who are servants of the Golden. Phoebe is a Golden who has not decided if she will remain human or accept the turning to become a vampire. Either way she and Lionel can never be together since it is forbidden.

I enjoyed this story and I am looking forward to the next installment."

"A hauntingly romantic read. Old love lost and new love found. Family, heart, intrigue and vampires. Grabbed my attention and couldn't put down. Would definitely recommend."

“Dear FATHER IN HEAVEN,

If I may respectfully say so sometimes you are a strange God. If you love all mankind,

It seems you have special predilections too.

You seem to love those men who can stand up alone who face impossible odds, who challenge every bully and every tyrant ~

Those men who know the heat and loneliness of Calvary. Possibly cherish men of this stamp because you recognize the mark of your own in them.

Since this unique group of men known as the SEALs know Calvary suffering, teach them now the mystery of the resurrection ~ that they are indestructible, that they will live forever because of their deep faith in you.

And when they do come to heaven, may I respectfully warn you Father, they also know how to celebrate. So please be ready for them when they insert under your pearly gates.

Bless them, their devoted Families and their Country on this great occasion.

We ask this through the merits of your Son, Christ Jesus the Amen.”

By Reverend E.J. McMalhon S.J. LCDR, CHC
Awards Ceremony SEAL Team 3
1975 At NAB, Co

“Dear FATHER IN HEAVEN,

If I may respectfully say so sometimes you are a strange God. Though you love all mankind,

It seems you have special predilections too.

You seem to love those men who can stand up alone who face impossible odds, who challenge every bully and every tyrant ~

Those men who know the heat and loneliness of Calvary. Possibly you cherish men of this stamp because you recognize the mark of your only son in them.

Since this unique group of men known as the SEALs know Calvary and suffering, teach them now the mystery of the resurrection ~ that they are indestructible, that they will live forever because of their deep faith in you.

And when they do come to heaven, may I respectfully warn you, Dear Father, they also know how to celebrate. So please be ready for them when they insert under your pearly gates.

Bless them, their devoted Families and their Country on this glorious occasion.

We ask this through the merits of your Son, Christ Jesus the Lord, Amen.”

By Reverend E.J. McMalhon S.J. LCDR, CHC, USN
Awards Ceremony SEAL Team One
1975 At NAB, Coronado