

GRACE
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Secrets In Friday Harbor
ONE



Reunited Again

Secrets In Friday Harbor Book 1

Grace Meyers



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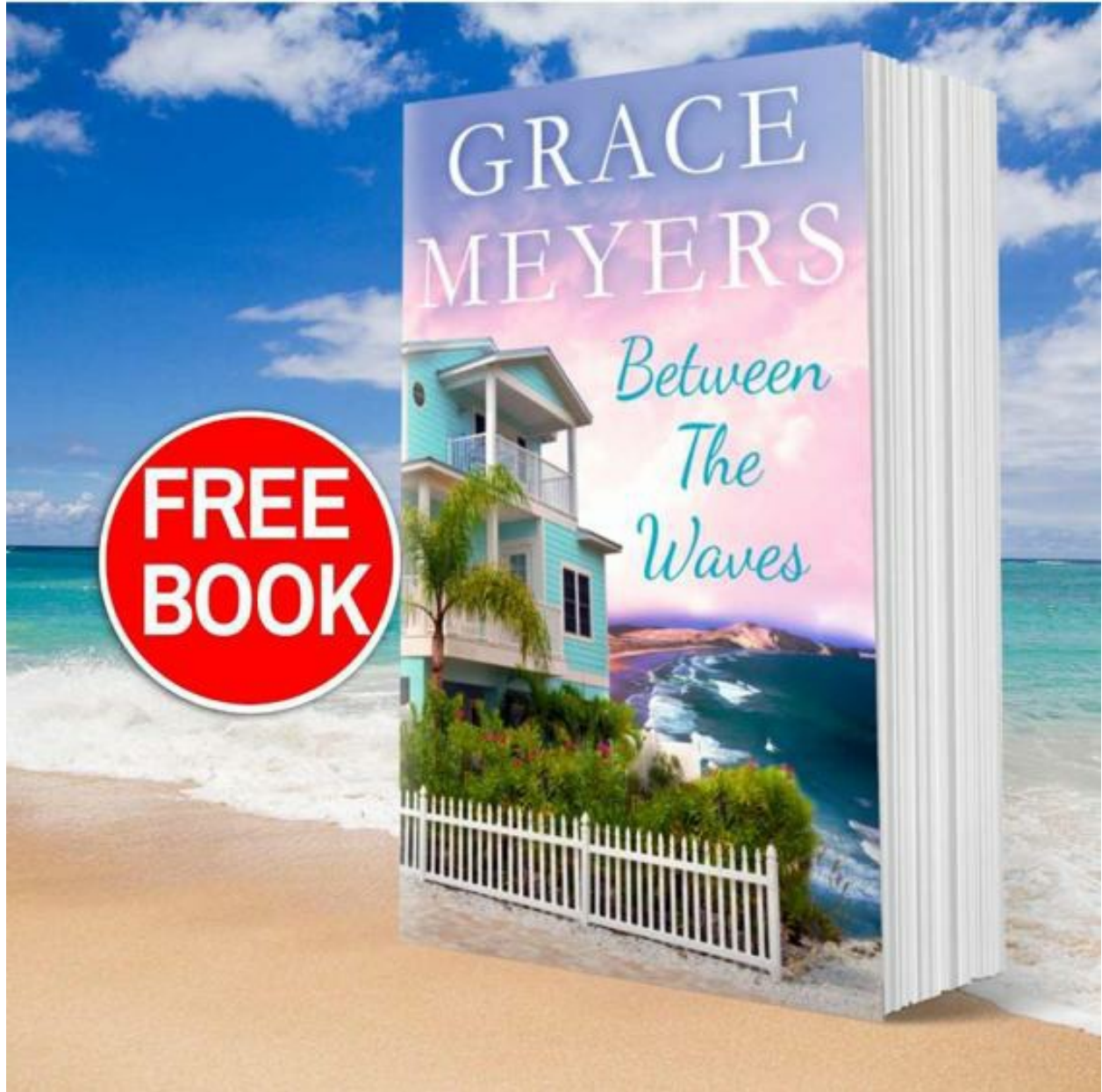
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Chapter 1

Faith



“**F**aith, the water in cabin two isn’t working again. Should I call Tyler to come and fix it later?” Heather stuffed mail in Faith’s box on her desk.

“Yes, but see if he is willing to work for some concert tickets I have instead. I just don’t have the money right now to pay for the repairs. Do you think he’ll go for that?” Faith had her head buried in her laptop to see if she could find some funding to do the large number of repairs the campground needed.

“I do, he’s 25, and he would love nothing more than tickets to a concert for him and his girlfriend.”

“Well, I hope so because, if not, he’ll have to wait until the week after next.” Faith had been at it for hours, figuring out which grants would have the best potential for her situation. She was running out of time, and sooner, rather than later, the sheriff was going to put the property up for sale. Faith couldn’t allow that to happen. She’d even gone so far as to search for a part-time job to help pay some of the bills.

The last thing she wanted to do was lose her family's campground. Her parents had purchased the campground many years ago when they wanted to spend more time together. They’d just married and found a run-down campground that was in horrible condition.

Faith remembered hearing the story numerous times every spring when they first opened. Her father had only one-thousand dollars and no credit at all. He hunted for weeks for a bank that would give them a loan to make this dream a reality. Two months later, they’d secured the loan and closed on the campground.

As the only daughter, Faith spent all her time making friends with the travelers that would show up and spend summers at the campgrounds. As she got older, she worked in every aspect, from kitchen help to check-in, and even tended to the kayaks that they rented.

When her father took ill a few years back and passed away, Faith helped her mother keep the place running, but there were so many things they didn't know and had to figure out after dad's passing.

After her mother passed away suddenly from what she believed was a broken heart, she was forced to go on with life and focus all her energy on keeping the family business alive. It had been hard work, but it gave Faith comfort, knowing she was the last of her family, since both her parents had been only children.

Life isn't always what we think it's going to be and Faith tried as hard as she could every day to keep things up and running, but after so many years things were falling apart and needed repairs.

She knew she was late on the taxes; she was paying what she could to the six-thousand dollars owed but it wasn't enough with rentals down year round and people visiting and renting more modern facilities instead.

Friday Harbor Campground still had its devotees, like long-time traveler and summer camper, Joe Darcy. Every summer for the last ten summers, he'd travel from Oklahoma and spend the summer with his wife enjoying nature and the beauty of Friday Harbor.

Without people like Joe and his wife, the campground would have been closed down a long time ago. Faith's dream was to update everything and make it more glamorous and adaptable for the younger travelers who preferred exotic amenities and modern facilities.

As she closed her computer, no more hopeful than the last time that she would secure a grant, Faith smiled envisioning tree house cabins and safari glamping tents filled with gorgeous decor that catered to young lovers and quaint families who preferred a bit of comfort with their camping adventure.

A few years back, she'd traveled to California to visit some friends and tried a safari tent, after that she'd been hooked. Now it was all she could think about. She headed over to the snack shack, a convenience store on site that catered to the needs of the campers.

While the campground was close to empty now as visitors were heading home in preparations for school and work since the summer season was over, she was excited to have some time to herself.

Daisy, the woman who worked the register, had left weeks ago, much to Faith's sorrow. She didn't know if she would be able to afford to bring her back next year. Unfortunately, everything was so up in the air and this place she called home might not be hers for too much longer.

As she walked the grounds, admiring the blue sky and felt the mild chill in the air, the first glimmers of autumn approaching she pushed all her worries aside. There was nothing like a good old-fashioned campfire to make her feel at home.

Her father had a fire going every night whether the campground was full or empty, whether it was winter or summer. The smell of wood burning, the cozy warmth of its heat, and a comfortable chair to sit in and enjoy it.

Those were her memories, the ones Faith would cherish forever—the smell of the smores her mother would help her make on the fire and the sounds of nature at night as darkness descended.

She slipped past the woodland maze with its overgrown trees, and the labyrinth her mother helped create that had long since disappeared into the weeds around it. The few visitors who still called the campgrounds their favorite place to visit for a vacation didn't care to use them.

Faith missed them very much, a symbol of her youth and teenage years, when she and her girlfriends would run and play, forgetting about all the annoying things of life like homework and chores.

She wouldn't have even been in this mess if her ex-husband Vince hadn't run up all kinds of bills and stolen all the money. She'd spent the last two years trying in vain to keep things up and survive with virtually no money but now, she and the campground were nearing the end of the line.

One thing she was grateful for was that Vince was gone, he'd never loved her or cared about the campgrounds. He spent most of their marriage telling her to sell it so they could move to San Francisco or Hawaii, Faith was having none of that.

When he took off, the only thing he proved was that she should have listened to her father all those years ago when he told her not to marry a man who doesn't support her dreams because that's not love.

As she stirred the ambers in the fire beside her cottage, Faith remembered one man she'd loved who always seemed to come up whenever she was feeling low. Bruce Taylor had been every girl's dream in high school, but he'd chosen Faith.

They'd meet and it was love at first sight, or so she believed. They'd

dated for a while and all was perfect and when he proposed to her after graduation, Faith was beside herself. Unfortunately, love wasn't meant to be, and Bruce must've gotten cold feet because he disappeared a month before the wedding.

She'd loved him and believed he'd loved her, and her father had always loved him. She was surprised how they'd reacted when she found out he joined the military. Her father promised her one day he would be back, that he just needed to do many things and was too young for marriage. Her mother was more sympathetic but reminded her that men needed to sow their oats and live life a little bit before settling down.

All alone, the stillness of the night descending upon her with the darkness, Faith wondered if it would be better to look for a seller now who would buy the property. She believed it would give her more control if she demanded as part of the deal that the property forever be preserved and only used for certain things.

It was a good thought, but not one she was ready to accept yet. Faith couldn't easily accept defeat, like her parents who'd almost lost the campgrounds when she was a kid due to financial troubles; they kept pushing on in the face of disaster and never lost.

This would be her battle now, and even though she was alone, Faith knew she was never by herself, she had her adopted daughter, Hope, the child Vince hadn't wanted and left behind. Hope was the only reason she kept pushing so hard. Her pride and joy, Hope were everything to her, the sun, moon, and stars, would do it together.

She would succeed so that one day Hope could have a future she could be proud of with someone who truly loved her.

"Mom, are we having hot dogs and smores? I could eat this every night, but I want to try bananas on the s'mores this time." Hope danced around the fire, keeping a good distance from it, and set the supplies on the table beside the tent. Her long blonde hair was tied in a ponytail behind her back, almost touching her waist.

Faith smiled, she always kept a tent up beside her cottage on the off chance she or Hope or they both wanted to sleep outdoors. Even though there are any number of campers, cabins, and tent pads on the grounds, why take one down when you could always have one up?

"Just one hot dog for me, Mom. Beth says they are filled with garbage and they are going to make me fat. Do you want bananas on your smores?"

Faith made a face. “No thanks, I’ll stick with tradition... next thing you know you're going to put blueberries and apples on them.”

When Hope came to sit down beside her, Faith handed her the metal skewer with a hot dog on the end of it. “Let me tell you, I’ve eaten my share of hot dogs and I can think of a few better reasons to avoid them, but fat is not one of them.”

“Can I have a birthday party this year for my friends?”

Faith heard the hopefulness in her daughter's voice. She had almost a month to figure out how to fund a cute little party for Hope and a few of her friends to enjoy. Money was tight and the campgrounds really weren't the place to have a party anymore, she had to think.

“Let me see what I can figure out. Make a list of how many kids you want to come to this party, and give me three locations where you want to have it and I will see what I can do, sweetie. I love you, and that’s all I can promise right now.”

Faith kept her lips closed after that, determined to sell her left kidney if she couldn’t find a way to get some money and make her daughter's fourteenth birthday special.

“Okay, thank you, Mom.” Hope twirled her hot dog on its skewer over the fire.

Faith waited... it was coming. The hot dog was about to be a charcoal colored dog which she would be eating since Hope never ate those, but it didn't matter. She laughed two minutes later when exactly that happened and Hope moved on to the smores.

Their dinner was quiet and Faith always made sure to spend some time with her daughter, this night they played Monopoly.

“Mom, you are in jail, you can’t move yet, you have to wait another turn.” Hope pushed her silver piece back to the jail square and rolled the dice. “Ha! I got to Park Place, you’d better not land on it or it’s going to cost you!”

“Yeah, just wait until I get you on Virginia Avenue, look at all the condos I got on that baby.” Faith laughed, and pushed back the sadness she felt that her parents weren't around to spend this time. “A couple more minutes and then it’s shower and bedtime.”

“Okay.”

Faith knew she didn't have much time left with Hope, before she could blink, it would be boys, dating, driving, a job, graduation, and college. She pushed that aside, vowing that if she held it together here with the

campground for that long she'd retire to Tahiti and start over again.

Chapter 2

Bruce



Friday Harbor looked just the way Bruce remembered as he got off the boat he'd snagged a ride on. Down to his last hundred dollars, he knew he'd made the right choice coming home. It felt good to have his heels on his homeland soil again.

He'd spent a long time since his military service just floating around the country, trying to stay afloat and failing. Friday Harbor was his last hope, his last chance to pull his life together. He wasn't about to go back home to where he grew up, there was nothing left there for him.

When he saw the sign for Friday Harbor Campground, he knew he was home, and walked down the worn gravel and dirt driveway that led to the campgrounds he knew as his true home from years ago.

He'd done his research before returning to Friday Harbor. He had a vision and knew Faith would still be at the helm of the ship running her family's campground. He had been surprised a few years prior when both her parents had passed away within a year of each other.

Many times he'd thought about returning to Friday Harbor and to her, but he never found the courage. He was a broken man, half the man he once was back then.

Still, this vision ran through his mind, and he could see it clear as day and if anyone could help him get his life back on track, it was Faith. With any luck, she had forgiven him for the mistake he'd made a long time ago.

Bruce had heard through the grapevine via email with friends, that since leaving home, Faith had been married but divorced after her husband ran off two years back. The man, Vince had left his little girl Hope behind and never returned after robbing the family blind.

That broke Bruce's heart. He had hoped for so many years that Faith had found love again and was happy. He'd never forgotten her but he always wanted the best for her, no matter how much it might have hurt him back then.

As he walked the driveway, all was still. He listened to the croaking of frogs and the sound of insects and little creatures going about life, preparing for autumn and eventually winter.

It was September and he knew things would be dying down but it was a little too quiet for his liking. His backpack was getting too heavy or his back was simply tired, as the driveway opened up into a circle that led to the entire campground and its amenities.

His throat constricted as he looked around, seeing the sorry state the campgrounds were in. It was like a ghost town, and for a moment, he thought maybe Faith had finally lost the place after all she'd been through.

He scanned the expanse of the building and saw a vehicle parked next to the old office. Slowly, he put one foot in front of the other and covered the distance. His stomach grumbled, it had been a full day since he'd eaten. He'd traveled a lot.

Bruce heard the faint sound of rock music playing through the screened door and took a deep breath in and out, hoping to prepare himself for whatever was on the other side. He worried Faith would call the cops on him, he was only a quarter the man he'd been back then. At the very least... she might smack him and kick him off the property.

He didn't want either to happen, he needed her help desperately, and just maybe if he was lucky she needed his help too.

Slowly he stepped up the well-worn wooden steps and felt them creak and give with his weight. *Someone needs to fix those.*

When he walked inside the building, he saw her, her dark brown hair still just as curly as ever, her hair covering her face as she had her head buried in her computer screen. He took a moment to study her since the music was just loud enough. He cleared his throat.

She jumped up. "Oh my! What in the world? You scared...." Their eyes met and Bruce let everything sink in for a moment.

Her glimmering blue eyes are still just as gorgeous as the last time he'd seen her. She was shocked, stunned, and remained silent for a moment.

Bruce did the best he could and set down his backpack so his back stopped hurting for a minute. He thanked the heavens for the chair beside the

door and sat, seeing her pink toes peek out the front of her sandals under the desk.

“Bruce?” Her voice was barely a whisper, almost inaudible if he didn’t know her.

He smiled. “Yes, it’s me, Faith! I’ve missed you.” He had the urge to hug her, pull her into his arms, and rid himself of the lonely ache he’d felt for years. Life was rough when you lived like Bruce did after his military service.

He must have chosen the wrong words and realized it too late when he saw the red flash of anger in her eyes before she returned to what she was doing. “What can I do for you? Do you need a campsite or something? Are you finally visiting family and friends? It’s been forever.”

What could he say, he deserved her backlash, it had been a very long time, and he’d left abruptly and never looked back not for one second. In his heart he’d never forgotten but it didn’t do Faith or anyone in Friday Harbor any good.

He spotted a water cooler and decided he would endure whatever he needed to have one taste of that. He forgot where he was, debating whether it was too soon to ask if he could have some water.

Faith must have been staring at him, and when she spoke, it was much to his relief. “Help yourself, it’s water.”

He glanced her way, smiled, and watched her shrug her delicate shoulders. “Thanks.” He quickly made fast work of drinking a couple of cups full before settling back in the chair. “No, I’m not here to camp or see anyone. This is going to sound strange and I am trying to figure out how to ask you.”

She rolled her eyes at him and Bruce smiled, remembering the gorgeous young woman he wanted very much to marry and share a life. “Well have at it, ‘cause I’m not getting any younger, and sorry to say, neither are you.”

Just as sassy as I remember! “I came here today looking for a place to stay and work if you have any. I can do anything, anything around here as you probably know and I really need the work.”

His throat hurt from those few words he spoke, embarrassed at his current situation in the face of the woman he’d always held in the highest regard. Thankfully, Faith said nothing, she looked around and then back at her computer, then leaned back in her chair and put her feet on the desk just like she’d done so many times as a teenager when her parents weren’t looking.

“Well, considering this place is a ghost town, in case you didn’t notice, I

can't do anything in the way of work unless you want to work for free. And I am not so sure I want to give you work, my luck has been really bad lately and I am struggling here. Not to mention, you are not that dependable."

She let that hang in the air between them and Bruce swallowed it whole, if that was all he got for running away from their wedding years ago he would consider himself lucky. He nodded his head. "Understood. What happened around here?" He glanced out the screened window and back to her.

Faith's eye bore into his. "A man. A man is what happened. A no good, deceitful, heartbreaking man that didn't deserve the dirt this campground rests on for a burial ground. With any luck, karma is catching up with him right now and he's getting his just dues."

Bruce blinked. *Clearly, she's jilted and bitter, maybe I can use this to my advantage.* "Well then, good riddance to trash."

She smiled, and he knew she was going to have a wicked retort. "Yeah, and just as fast I get rid of one, another pile of trash shows up."

Bruce couldn't help it, he laughed and kept laughing. "You know in all these years, no one has ever called me trash, but I guess you're right. I deserve it considering I practically left you at the altar." The memory and the pain still visible in her eyes humbled him. "I'm sorry, Faith."

He watched, fascinated as her hands were back on the keyboard. "What are you doing?"

"Looking for grant money so I don't lose this place. After Vince took everything, I have been making this place survive on a shoestring. Business is down, and sadly that shoestring is breaking. If I don't do something soon, the tax man is going to own this place. I can't let that happen to me or Hope."

"Hope?"

"My stepdaughter, she's thirteen, going to be fourteen soon. Her father didn't want her, he never wanted her, the lousy no good man he is, so I kept her here as my own. I love that girl to death. She's the only reason I haven't stopped fighting, well that and Mom and Dad's memory."

"Oh. I'm sorry, Faith. He sounded like a terrible man, you deserved better."

"Maybe so, but you don't always get what you deserve, right Bruce?"

"Right." He could attest to that running the last few years through his mind. "So, can I stay for a while? I won't get in the way and at the very least I can help you with some things around here, fix some stuff up. I don't mind

saying it looks God-awful around here.”

Again Bruce was gifted with red eyes. She was angry and he just couldn't seem to find the right words to express what he thought and felt.

She threw a ball up in the air, at one time the campground had a tennis court in one far corner of the property. Bruce wondered if it was still there and what condition it was in, watching her toss the ball, very close to hitting the wood ceiling.

“Listen, I have to be honest, I don't like you as far as I can throw this ball. That said, I can't turn you away, and maybe that's why you came here. I don't know why you're here but giving you a place to stay after all you did for our country *as a soldier* is the very least I can do. Since we don't have any reservations for the cabins over by the pond you can have your pick of one of those. The coming weeks are pretty slow but we do have a few guests coming so stay out of the way. Whatever you want or need beyond that you'll have to figure it out just not guns and shooting nothing on the property if you remember.”

Bruce sighed heavily, feeling a weight lifted off his shoulders. “Thank you, Faith. I can't tell you how much I appreciate this, it means more to me than you know.”

She waved him away and Bruce ignored the heaviness he felt in his bones. “I will find some way to pay you back. Just give me a couple of days.”

“You can pay me back by staying out of my way and business and not pulling any funny stuff. It's been years since we've seen each other and I don't really know you, and you don't know me. Don't make me regret this decision and we will be good.” She gave him a smile and then got serious. “And one more thing... don't burn the cabin down or you're paying for it.”

“Understood.” Bruce smiled. “Do I need a key?”

“Yes, you do. Over there on the wall. Cabin numbers 5, 6, 7, 8. Take our pick.”

Quickly Bruce picked one. “I think I will choose Cabin 7.” He laughed, grabbed his backpack, threw it over his shoulder, and kicked the screen door open with his boot. “Thanks, Faith.”

“You're welcome.”

Bruce got out of there before he collapsed from exhaustion.

Chapter 3

Faith



Faith was shocked when she watched Bruce leave out the door. Her mouth was dry, her skin tingled from seeing him still looking so handsome and strong. But she could tell he wasn't the same man that left her years ago.

Time had taken its toll on him, she saw it in his tired eyes and heard it in his deep, hoarse voice. His limp surprised her as she watched him leave, life had indeed changed him and she pitied him for a moment.

The limp wasn't so bad that it would affect his life and as she watched him walk toward the cabins through the screen door. She wondered if that was why he'd shown up. Her mind lingered on that thought long after he'd disappeared. *I thought they had programs for servicemen and women, programs that helped them find housing, work, and live life after they came home.*

His face stayed with her for quite some time. It was early in the day and she was at it again, determined to secure a few grants so she could keep the campgrounds going for another year. The only problem was Bruce's reappearance felt like a doom cloud that she was going to regret acknowledging.

Still, he looked more handsome than he had years ago, more mature, more seasoned just like she could remember her father being. Life had affected him, but judging by the way he looked in both good and bad ways.

His dark hair was a shaggy mess, his eyes reserved as if accessing everything around him which Faith was certain came from his time in the military. The more she thought about him, the more she worried.

Bruce's clothing was raggy, not ripped and torn but definitely well-worn

and out of fashion; she wondered what he'd been doing since leaving the military a few years back. Faith kept tabs on him over the years when she was able.

Somewhere in that place called her heart, there was a hole where a piece was missing; he'd taken it with him when he'd left that day. Vince had sealed the deal, and after that nightmare, she'd caged her heart so no one could ever hurt her again.

Before Vince, she'd kept tabs, hopeful to one day see him again. She smiled to herself as she sipped her coffee after giving up again on the grant application, realizing the universe had answered her prayers, just not how she thought it would.

The screen door slammed as Hope came inside and threw her bookbag on the chair where Bruce had just sat.

"Hey, Mom, are you sure you should be drinking so much coffee? I remember that time it kept you up all night and then the next morning you were dead to the world."

"Hey, love. Yeah, I probably should cut back but I am under so much stress right now a bit of lost sleep isn't going to do anything to my body." Faith felt the warmth of her daughter's hug and sunk into the feel of her silky hair against her lips as she kissed her head. "I love you. How was school?"

"Okay, I had a math quiz, I think I did okay but I didn't study." Hope grabbed one of the last sodas in the refrigerator and a few pieces of candy from the candy jar that sat on Faith's desk. "How was your day?"

"Well, uneventful until a little while ago. It's a long story but we have a guest, he's bunking in Cabin 7 for a while. His name is Bruce. We dated in high school." That was all she wanted to say to her adopted daughter. Her back was turned and Faith hoped that would be the end of it, but no such luck.

"Ooooh, Mom, are you two going to go out again? Does he still have feelings for you? Has he loved you all these years and now he's back to tell you?"

Faith rolled her eyes and turned her head. Hope was smiling so Faith snagged the Twizzlers from her hand, and missed the one in her mouth. "You know, those Twizzlers might be too old for you, stale, and not for naughty girls who talk nonsense. I think I'll have to eat the rest."

Hope smiled and raced for the jar on her desk and grabbed it before Faith could and it didn't take long before Faith caught her and they ended up on the

floor laughing, the contents of the jar landing on the wood floor.

“Ten-second rule!” Hope snagged the candies before Faith and ran for the chair now a good distance away.

Faith couldn't stop laughing. “You know, you need to enroll in track, my girl, you got a set of legs on you. Oh, and it's a three-second rule, not ten.” She stared at the ceiling.

“I believe it's actually a thirty-second rule, at least that's what I remember, Faith.” Bruce's voice broke through her laughter, and Faith turned her head. There stood Bruce, his eyes glimmering with humor.

Of course, her daughter laughed. “Looks like your boyfriend is here, Mom.” She stuffed the candy in her mouth.

“The name is Bruce Taylor, and you must be Hope.” Faith watched in fascination as he held out his hand to her daughter.

Of course, Hope, being a silly girl, giggled and shook his hand. “Nice to meet you.”

Faith sobered up, somewhat embarrassed Bruce witnessed a very affectionate moment between her and her daughter. “What can I do for you, Bruce?”

“Nothing, I was wondering why the plumbing isn't working in the cabin. Is the water turned off for the season?”

Faith threw him a look but didn't get to answer. “That cabin does not have working plumbing, Mom needs to get it fixed, the only one over there that has working plumbing is Cabin 6.”

Faith wanted to steal the last Twizzler from her daughter's lips for that comment, so what if she wanted to exact a bit of punishment for the way he'd left her years ago by not giving him running water.

Bruce smiled. “Oh, I guess your mother forgot.”

“No, I just chose not to tell you, I wanted you to have a bit of punishment for the way you abandoned me back then. Can you blame me?” Faith was not ashamed at all by that, she was helping him, so what if she wanted to make him work for it?

He surprised her. “Well I guess I deserve at least that, and if that's all I get I will be thankful. Well, then I guess I will be on my way so I can switch cabins.” He reached for the other key and stopped at the screen door. “Next time you're having a battle over candy, you'll win if you tickle her underarms. She's very ticklish under her arms, just so you know.”

Faith glanced over at Hope, seeing the humor in Bruce's eyes, and

groaned. Hope was laughing and plotting her next war.

Chapter 4

Bruce



Bruce walked back to the cabins, not at all angry, and sort of relieved that this was the only thing Faith thought to do to make him pay for what he'd done. He could handle that but he was surprised by how affectionate and loving she was with her daughter.

He'd been taken off guard by how she really enjoyed the time with Hope, it made him smile, happy she had at least that happiness in her life. He was interested to see more of that and all the fun those two shared, but immediately got to work moving his stuff from one cabin to another.

A few hours later he was done and he'd showered. He was hungry and even though he didn't have any funds, he had a few special things from his mother he could sell for food if he needed to do that.

Energized from his shower, he headed back to the office to return the other key, enjoying the peace and quiet, and was surprised Faith didn't lock the door because the lock was broken. While that didn't matter with no one around, Bruce knew anything was possible, and leaving it that way, even in Friday Harbor, was not a smart thing to do.

He made a mental note to fix that as he walked back and stopped short when he heard the faint sound of laughter. He walked a few paces to his left and saw Hope dancing around a fire, Faith sitting in a chair cooking hamburgers over the open fire.

Bruce was starving, he didn't want to interrupt them but he was really hungry. He would never beg for anything and didn't want to take anything but his stomach was rumbling. He could go fishing, that is if the pond still had any fish in it and he could find his portable fishing rod. It was too late for that.

He turned, prepared to ignore his grumbling stomach when he heard his name called. It was Faith, he turned to see her waving at him but he didn't move, this was family time for her and Hope.

Hope came running over with a smile. "Mom wants to invite you for a hamburger if you want, she made extra, and we can't eat them all. We have beans to go with them if you like?"

Bruce smiled as he watched the young girl twirl around in a circle much like her mother had done long ago beneath the twinkling stars. "I don't know if that..."

"No, you have to come, please. Mom won't take no for an answer and you might find one on your nose when you sleep, she likes to feed everyone."

Bruce laughed and let Hope tug him along by the arm. "Mom said you guys dated in high school but she says I can't have a boyfriend until I'm twenty-one."

"Well, I guess..."

"She said you didn't marry her, that you went into the military instead. Why did you do that?"

Bruce was at a loss for what to say. "I'm not sure, it was a stupid idea really and I never should have left Friday Harbor."

The young girl smiled as they reached the fire and Faith held out a hamburger to him. "I want to go to Egypt one day and Mom says I can't go without her."

"Sit down, Bruce, take a load off and enjoy the fire. I remember sitting by the fire often with you. Do you still play guitar?"

Bruce sat down and watched Hope dance, thanking the heavens for this food and the woman who'd offered it before he took a bite. "I do but I sold my guitar, I have to get another guitar, a better one, and keep up on it. My fingers aren't what they used to be."

"Why do you walk with a limp?"

Bruce wasn't surprised by Hope's question, he wondered why Faith had yet to ask him that question. He accepted the coffee mug Faith offered. "I have a military injury. It's a long story and not something I want to share right now."

He gave Faith a pleading look, hoping she would take the message and help her little girl move on to another topic. "Honey, why don't you go get the marshmallows so we can roast them after?"

"Okay, Mom." Off she went into the cottage.

Bruce sighed. “Thanks, I will tell you the story later, but it’s not for young ears I’m sure.”

He spent an hour with Faith and her daughter until they were ready to go inside. Faith stirred the fire and poured a bit of water over the top of it. “I have to go inside, Hope has homework already and she needs to get ready for school tomorrow.”

He watched as she fussed with the fire again... it refused to die down. “Here” He took the water from her, the hands brushed against each other lightly and he felt the intense connection. “Let me do this for you. Go take care of Hope. I will put it out and make sure it’s good, then I am headed back to Cabin 6.”

Faith looked as though she had something to say, nodded her head, and turned to the house. “Thanks, Bruce. It’s kind of nice to have you back. I won’t lie to you, I’m a little bit nervous the sky is going to open up and God is going to tell us it’s all time because I never thought to see you again. It makes me worried about what my life has planned for me now after everything I’ve been through.”

Bruce said nothing, listened to the hitch in her throat, and felt that same worry in his heart. When she closed the door to the cottage, he spoke. “Me too, that’s been the story of my life forever. Welcome to my nightmare Faith but don’t worry, now that I’m here, I will protect you... I promise.”

He crushed the fire and buried it under a flood of water, sat for a few minutes to make sure it was out, and listened to the sounds of the night. All was peaceful, something he hadn’t felt in so long. He was fed, he’d laughed a little, and had a comfortable place to rest his head. *It was a good day, Bruce, you can relax for a moment.*

When he tired of listening to the night and the faint sounds of Hope and Faith talking, he walked to his cabin, admiring the wreckage on the outer edges of the campgrounds. The pond was lower than he’d ever seen it, if any fish resided there it would be a miracle. The pool was empty, the makeshift cover he could remember from when he was a kid was torn in places.

The cabin was more than he could hope for, a large double bed stood in one spot, and a set of bunk beds in the other. The tiny kitchen with a small refrigerator and mini stove, microwave, and refrigerator was more than enough for him if he ever acquired some decent food beyond canned food.

In the far end stood a small table with two chairs. He remembered sneaking to these cabins late at night once with Faith to make her his version

of a romantic dinner with a tiny candle between them. He'd made tuna sandwiches and had bags of chips and her favorite brownies for dessert.

As he lay in bed that night staring at the wood-peaked ceiling, he smiled to himself. *You were a wonderful sport back then, you really did love me, what a food I was back then.*

He closed his eyes, and rested, unable to sleep but content to rest as the sounds of nature at night whispered in the wind. He felt his first modicum of peace in many years and didn't want it to end and was slightly frightened he would wake up to a nightmare.

When he finally passed out, the sun was rising up in the sky and Bruce wondered what he was going to tackle first to make himself useful. The last thing he wanted to be was useless wherever he was staying. Faith was helping him in the most perfect way, providing him shelter from the storm and a new beginning. The least he could do was something to make the campgrounds look better for the few guests she might have.

If nothing else, he wanted to give her hope as she had given him. Hope for today and tomorrow and the rest of her days. He woke at some point and grabbed a bucket to wash himself by the sink. He could have easily dunked his head in the pond but knew she might not appreciate it.

The sun was up, shining in his eyes as he limped off the porch and decided to have a walk around. He walked the property from one end to the other and made notes. There were so many things that needed to be done.

When he was done he started on the labyrinth and ripped weeds, leaving them in a pile on the side. He worked and worked until his belly reminded him to eat and he got up for a break. The office wasn't far away so he headed that way eager to see Faith again.

"Morning." He pushed the screen door open and there she sat looking at her computer again. "Does anybody do any work around here?" He laughed, teasing but saw her warning look.

"I have been known to throw people off the property real fast for rude comments but other than that I just sit around here looking at my computer all day killing time."

Bruce laughed, grabbed a cup of water, then another and another. Before he had the fourth, a thermos was pushed into his stomach, and Faith's hand rested on it. "Here, use this so you stop using all the paper cups and cost me more money." She smiled and for a moment neither of them moved.

He had the oddest urge to kiss her, lean in, and touch his lips to hers like

he'd done so many times years ago. He found his voice and spoke, ignoring the way the muscles in his jaw flexed as he felt that familiar sensation they'd always had between them. "Thanks."

Before she moved, he lifted his hand to touch her curly hair, feeling its softness against his fingers. He'd forgotten himself for a moment. "You always had the softest hair I'd ever felt, like silk. I missed running my hands through it."

Their eyes met, and he noticed a storm of emotions reflected back to him. "Don't do that, Bruce. I know we have a past, but we are virtually strangers now and that was then and this is now."

She stepped back, Bruce caught the thermos just in time and filled it, unable to take his eyes off her. He didn't think about that, the emotions between them. He'd come to Friday Harbor thinking of his future and knew he could find refuge with her, but think for one minute about that spark between them.

What was he supposed to do with that? He was a broken man and from the looks of things she had her own baggage to deal with, but it was still there. He stepped back and made a mental note that he would have to physically keep his distance from her to keep a level head and not get them both into trouble neither could handle right now.

"Sorry, I forgot myself I guess. Thank you for the thermos, I can give it back to you when I'm done. I've been weeding the labyrinth and it's hot out there today, even though it's September."

Her eyes softened, from where he stood he could see the interest and intrigue in her eyes now. She's put enough distance between them for both their sanity and felt comfortable again. She smiled. "Thank you. Keep the thermos. It was my dad's. He would want you to have it and I have tons of them in the cottage."

"Thank you." Bruce felt uneasy, the feelings he'd thought were long dead for her, were back and just as potent now as they were back then. He'd been a broken man when he'd left back then, now he was even more broken. *It was a mistake that I came here.*

Still, as he walked away, he realized he had nowhere else to go. On top of that, it was evident she needed help and since he had nothing better to do, he would make it his mission to help her while he helped himself.

The day was long, he weeded that labyrinth until it was as good as new and made sure everything looked perfect like it did so long ago. Faith showed

up around dinner time. “Hope made lasagna with her friends at their house so she’s eating dinner with them. If you are hungry, I have leftover hamburgers and hot dogs. Come eat, I got the fire going.”

She eyed the labyrinth with a smile. “This looks wonderful! I can’t thank you enough for doing it. My father always thought my mother was nuts for wanting one but she said some people found it helpful to quiet the mind. You remember how she was all into that yoga and alternative medicine.”

Bruce smiled, stood back, and admired his handiwork. “I do, she was a lot of fun. I’m sorry she passed away, they were both great people. You were lucky to have them as your parents, not like mine.”

There was a long silence, Bruce knew what Faith was thinking. She knew some of his family drama back then, and she’d been a source of great support to him during that time.

“I guess you didn't come back for the funeral?”

“No way. Dad never cared about me, and he treated Mom horribly. When he passed, there was no way I was going to come back for the funeral. I let the attorney handle everything and take what he wanted, there was nothing for me, no love, and certainly no memories.”

Faith surprised him by taking his hand in hers. “Come on, we're friends and let's sit together and eat. It gets lonely when Hope is with her friends, but what can I say, she is getting older and spending more time out in the world.”

Chapter 5

Faith



Faith didn't know what to say. What could she say after that? Bruce's father had passed away a few years back, right before her parents died. There had been no funeral, no nothing as Burton Taylor was not liked by many people in the town.

She took his hand and led him to the fire where she had a bucket so he could wash his hands like she always did and drop his hand the second they were there. It was an odd sensation, feeling his hand in hers. It had been a long time, and after Vince, she didn't even want to think about romance, love or anything close to that. She was damaged goods and the only thing on her mind was raising Hope right and keeping the campgrounds going as long as she could.

She got comfortable and let him wash up, handed him a stick, a hot dog, and a plate with a hamburger. "Do you remember when we used to sit like this all night? My parents would go to sleep and we'd just sit here and watch the fire, keep it going and listen to the night creatures?"

"I do, those were some of the best times in my life. I loved it here, everyone that stayed here was always so kind and friendly. I remember when those bikers showed up here for a week. They came in with their motorcycles and took over the entire campground, every tent site, cabin and trailer, it was insane."

"Yeah, I was so scared to go to sleep. I thought for sure one of them was going to kidnap me, the thoughts we have as kids, our fears."

"How did you and Vince meet?"

"He was a truck driver, he came with some friends one year for the summer and never left. We hit it off instantly, it was good at first, he was

kind, caring and loving but then his true colors appeared almost right after we got married. His daughter was living with her mother on the East Coast and when she got sick and passed, she came to live with us. After we started having troubles, I demanded a divorce.”

Faith felt like she couldn't breathe, reliving that time over again with a man who was the first to break her heart, it hurt more than she admitted. She fought back the tears that threatened to break through her tough exterior. The hiccups came on like they always did and she turned away and handed her hot dog to Bruce. “I'm sorry, I can't eat right now. I don't want to talk about this anymore, Bruce. My love life has always been riddled with drama and sorrow, and it all started with you. You are the last person I want to talk to about this. No man ever loves a girl or woman as much as her father does I guess.”

She bit back the urge to cry and went inside the cottage to grab a wine cooler and beer. Her daughter wasn't home so she could indulge a bit. “Here.” She shoved the beer into this hand and sat down again. “So, why don't you tell me about your love life, certainly it must be better than mine. No wife, no kids? Girlfriend?”

“Nothing. I dated here and there but no one important, I just never found love. I think they loved me, but I just couldn't love them like that, not like I loved you back then. After being in the service and my injury I wasn't the same person and won't burden anyone with that. I suffer from PTSD. It comes on without warning, but you shouldn't have to worry as I plan on keeping my distance.”

Faith listened intently, unsure what all that meant but it seemed like he had a lot of issues to deal with in his life. She pitied him, whatever he'd been through he didn't deserve to suffer as he was suffering. “I'm sorry, it seems like you've had your fair share of challenges. Well, at least it's peaceful here for you. I won't say I like it, I prefer it when there is a bit more noise and people around to keep me busy. Is that why you came back here?”

“Yes and no. I came back because I truly had nowhere to go. I had some issues when I was discharged from the service. And I have some plans for my future. I need a quiet, safe and comfortable place to sort it all out and plan. It's going to take time and maybe you can help me with it down the road.”

A car pulled up then. “Oh that's Hope, she's just getting home. Tomorrow is Saturday so she will be home. I want to spend some time with her and catch up. If you want to keep the fire going and hang out, I don't

mind. If not would you mind putting it out again for me? It was nice to have someone around to do that so I didn't have to worry.”

Faith smiled, hoping Bruce would hang around long enough so she could hang out with Hope and get her comfortable for bed, then she could join him outside again. She worried where all this was going to end up, but on the same token, it felt good to have another adult around that she could talk to; someone she shared a past with, even if it stirred up some wicked intense physical chemistry.

She definitely had to keep an eye on him, especially since he didn't share with her what these big plans were. Who knew what it meant and what it could mean for her and Hope? Faith wasn't stupid.

“Sure, I can do that for you. Hey Hope, how was your lasagna?”

“Hi Bruce, it was good. Mom, can I talk to you?”

“Sure, honey. See you later Bruce, thanks.” Faith followed her daughter into the house. She looked about ready to cry... something was wrong. She followed Hope into her bedroom and sat on the bed next to her.

Hope leaned into her mother and cried, Faith held her daughter tight and didn't dare to ask what was wrong. She rocked her and held her tight hoping to absorb some of her pain and wash it away.

Faith kissed her head, and rubbed her fingers through her hair, trying to give as much comfort as she possibly could. When Hope finally raised her head, her eyes and nose were red. “What's the matter, honey?”

“Ellie told me I was ugly, she said my hair is awful and I'm fat. We were having fun and then she showed up at the house and started picking on me. Everyone was laughing and making jokes saying my mother is poor and we live in a dirty, run-down campground because we can't afford a real house.”

“Oh, honey. I'm so sorry. That's awful. You are not ugly, they shouldn't have said that. Your hair is beautiful, Bruce was commenting on it today, he said if he had a daughter he would want her to look just like you. And I've seen Ellie, you're skinnier than she is, so I'm not even sure where that came from. As far as these campgrounds, this campground might be old but the land it sits on is worth a fortune.”

Faith smiled at her daughter wishing there was some way she could take her pain away. She held her close and continued to rock in the silence of the night until Hope felt a little better and lifted her head again.

“Mom, can I dye my hair?”

Faith was caught, she knew for a fact some of the other girls were already

dying their hair but at thirteen, she didn't think Hope should be doing that. She shook her head. "Not yet, honey, maybe for your birthday next month, how's that?"

Faith prayed that over time, Hope would forget about it and think of something else, it was her only salvation.

"Yes, for my birthday, then if you can have my party somewhere really cool and I can dye my hair a really hot color like bright pink that will shut her up."

Faith knew firsthand how cruel kids could be, she'd suffered her own anguish as a kid until she blossomed in high school and then met Bruce. She would find a solution between this moment and Hope's birthday. "We will talk about it when we get closer. What do you want to do now? Do you want to watch TV or something?"

"No. I just want to go to sleep. My stomach hurts and I feel sick." Faith helped her daughter get comfortable and sat beside her with soft music playing as she fell asleep. These moments were growing few and far between, she didn't want to miss any one of them.

When Hope finally fell asleep, Faith was too tired to go back outside, she had an early day since a couple of guests had come in for some tent camping the day before. All was quiet now as most people kept to themselves but the morning was always busy.

As she laid her head on the pillow that night Faith thought of Bruce, unable to get him out of her mind. The sensations she'd felt in her body when she'd handed him the thermos and he touched her hair.

She'd missed that so much, his touch, the way he had loved to run his hands through her hair late at night back then while they watched the stars and talked the night away. They'd dream of their future together and talk about all the things they wanted to do, where they wanted to go, everything.

Holding his hand felt comfortable, easy, and right to do. It was an odd sensation when she'd done it, felt right in the moment but unnerving when she let go. Letting go of his hand left an emptiness with just that simple gesture and she wanted to hold his hand again just like they did when they were together as boyfriend and girlfriend.

She still struggled with letting her emotions take over so soon, with all that happened in the past, but her emotions were real.

Chapter 6

Bruce



Bruce couldn't sleep that night. He'd let the fire die down and listened to a young girl's tears over things other kids said and the comforting words only a mother could speak. He fell a little in love with Faith that night, the woman she'd become was strong, and a force to be reckoned with like his own mother whom he still missed very much.

He was thankful for the food and spent a few moments collecting wildflowers so he could press them in a book she once gave him that he still carried with him... Shakespeare.

When the nightmares came, he woke with a start, still in the world he'd left behind, guns shooting, fires blazing and people yelling. He screamed over and over again, it was all so real until he felt a cool hand pressed to his forehead.

He cried out then, seeing the memories of his military past, started crying to be woken from this nightmare that had been his life until he heard soft words spoken to him. "You're okay, Bruce, it's okay. You are just fine, it's a nightmare but not your reality. Wake up, Bruce."

The soft voice was oddly familiar, one he knew well and he clung to it. He thought at first it was his mother—her dead soul coming to save him from the nightmare of being a soldier. Then he blinked his eyes open, sat up, and started swinging when he saw the enemy.

"Bruce!" The feminine voice woke him from his vision and nightmare. He struggled to figure out where he was, tears running down his face and saw her... Faith.

She looked frightened, fear in her eyes but she held her hand out and spoke again. "You're okay, Bruce. It's okay. You are just fine. It was a

nightmare and not reality. You're awake with me Bruce. Do you understand?’

Her voice was soft, cautious, and yet firm enough to let him know it wasn't a dream. He wiped his eyes of the tears, let the pain and fear subside and felt a rush of embarrassment as he closed his eyes to lay back on the bed. “I'm sorry. I told you. What are you doing here?”

“I heard you across the night air, it woke me and Hope. I told her you were having a nightmare and I would take care of it, but if we can hear you other people can too. I didn't want to make matters worse, I don't know much about PTSD but I couldn't leave you this way. I'm sorry.”

Bruce swallowed hard and choked down the bile coming into his throat. The last thing he wanted to do was scare anyone, least of all, Faith and Hope. “I'm sorry, I have no control over it. I used to see a therapist but I swear it made it worse.”

He felt the bed give and looked up to see her sitting on the edge, her back to him, her head in her hands. “It's okay, you don't need to be sorry. What I heard was frightening to me, I can only imagine how it felt for you if it seemed so real.”

“It's okay, it's not something I want you to worry about. Thank you for being here and helping me. I don't want to cause you, Hope, or anyone else, stress. I feel bad enough already without ruining other people's lives.”

Bruce felt so much anguish, torment and stress, PTSD would haunt him forever but there were some moments in his life when he had it worse. The medications he took helped as much as they possibly could but it wasn't always enough.

He had to do something, say something so he got up and sat beside her. “I'm sorry you had to witness that. It must have been horrifying having to listen to my screaming and carrying on, I will keep the windows closed at night next time, it just gets a little hot in here.”

He saw the pain in her eyes when she finally looked over at him—it broke his heart. Forgetting himself, he put his arm around her and pulled her close. She didn't pull away and rested her head on his shoulder, both of them caught up in the moment.

“It wasn't awful to see you thrashing around that way, it was horrible because I couldn't help you and I really want to help you.” She was quiet after that so he held her that way for a long time. They sat like that seeking comfort in the silence of the night as it washed away the pain of his past on the breeze.

“It’s getting late, I should get back, Hope is probably wondering where I am. If you’re good Bruce, I need to sleep.”

Bruce smiled, let her go when she pulled away to get up, and felt the void of her when she moved. “I’m good. Thank you again. Get some sleep, we will talk in the morning.”

“Are you going to sleep?”

“No, when I have an episode like that I can’t sleep sometimes for days. It’s awful, I’m being haunted by the trauma of my past and the thought of finding peace in sleep again is elusive after.”

Bruce reached for his camera. “I got things I can do, don’t worry, just consider me a protector to watch over the campgrounds in the night.”

She smiled. “Who on earth would even want to come to this campground in the middle of the night and what for?”

“One never knows, so don’t ask questions like that.”

She nodded and closed the cabin door behind her. Bruce took his camera and walked outside to find some inspiration. A stray flower still blooming by the moonlight, a frog lost on his way to the pond. A pile of sticks that made an odd pattern under the stars were all things he found to photograph and amuse himself.

He was awake when the sun’s first light graced the land, soaking up the warm rays, happier than ever to have a place to call home for a while. He contemplated telling Faith about his plans but realized he had to wait for the right time.

Hope was the first out the door, she headed straight for him with a smile and held out a muffin. “Are you feeling better? I heard you screaming last night. I have nightmares too but I don’t scream that loud. Are you afraid of monsters?”

He smiled, her innocence was surprising for a young girl her age, he loved that she was still so youthful and clinging to the last vestiges of her childhood. Bruce imagined Faith had something to do with that.

“I am feeling better, sometimes I think I’m not supposed to sleep and the monsters wake me up to remind me. Thank you for this. Did you make it?” Bruce never had kids, nor did he experience that much interacting with them but what he had in the past he enjoyed.

“I did, I like baking, they have walnuts and apples in them.” She looked around as if waiting for something to do. “I’m glad that you’re here, Mom was pretty lonely and bored. Don’t get me wrong, people come and go, the

campground guests, but it's not the same somehow. She's smiling more now that you're here, I hope you don't leave."

Bruce was reminded of her past, the loss of a man that should have been very important and prominent in her life, her father, and not to mention the loss of her mother. This young girl had suffered much already in her life and he was thankful she still had a contagious smile.

"Well I'm not planning on leaving any time soon unless your mother decides to kick me out, one never knows where she is."

"Oh, she won't kick you out. Not yet, anyway." She laughed.

Bruce felt a sense of kinship with this young lady. He thought, and ran a few ideas through his mind. "If you're not doing any more baking right now maybe you could help me with something if you want, or you could just watch. I could certainly use the company."

Her eyes lit up. "Yes, I can help. What are we going to do?"

He started to walk and she kept pace. "We are going to clean up that maze over there. Yesterday, I cleared out the labyrinth over there, see?"

"I do. How does it work? Mom always wanted to show me but it's been that way for so long she couldn't. My dad never did anything around here, he was so lazy. I don't get it. Did my mom tell you about him?"

Bruce didn't know what to say, he didn't want to upset her but she brought up the topic so he thought it okay to talk. "She told me a little. My father was abusive when I grew up, but I know it's rough when someone you love goes away no matter what the reason. My mother died when I was young, about your age."

She was silent, Bruce decided to stop by the labyrinth so she could try it out and perhaps rid her mind of her father so he didn't ruin the day. "Okay, so you walk this as you contemplate things, it's supposed to help you remove stress and feel more peaceful."

He watched for a few minutes and gave her time to walk and think. "I am just over here when you're ready to help. It's going to take a bit of time for me to get situated, gather the tools, and get ready."

He kept his eyes on her as he walked and got everything together. It was nice to have someone around, someone who was there but not bothering you, and he liked Hope already. For a moment, he felt depressed, that he'd never found a woman to love and have a family.

Sure, at his age, he could still have a family but he had yet to find a woman, and with his PTSD it was probably best he didn't at this point.

“That was kind of weird, it actually worked. I thought about everything that came into my mind as I walked the path, I focused on each stone as I did and by the time I reached the center I felt better. I like it. Mom said Grandma insisted Grandpa design it.”

“Maybe I’ll have to try it to get rid of those monsters. Come on, I need you to hold this for me.”

They worked together for a few hours. He was surprised by how helpful and easy Hope was to work with. She was eager to learn, happy to help, and strong. By the time we took a break when Faith showed up with some lemonade, I was exhausted.

“Your daughter is quite the helper, she did a great job here helping me.”

Faith smiled. “Yes well, she is a wondrous help to me too in the office. Speaking of which, Hope, when you're done here you can do some filing for me. Now that all the guests are just about gone we can sort everything out for the end of year.”

“Sure, Mom.”

“I made lunch, nothing special, just tuna sandwiches and some chips.” Bruce noticed the way she looked at him, a twinkle in her eyes as she said it.

“I think I’m hungry, what about you, Hope?”

“Definitely, I love tuna. Mom makes it every weekend. She said she once had this dinner by candlelight with this boy and that’s what they ate, she never forgot.” Hope jumped in the air and went running back to the office.

Chapter 7

Faith



“**Y**eah, about that. I never forgot about that meal or some of the other times we shared. It’s nothing really, I love sharing stories with her, and I want to inspire her to find happiness in her life in the simple things, not all the sorrow, and challenges. Those things can drag a person down.”

Faith felt awkward. The last thing she needed was for Hope to divulge all her secret thoughts and feelings about Bruce. They’d shared a lot of memories, some of the best ones of her life, even in all the years of her marriage.

Bruce nodded, he was soaking up every word and Faith knew the wheels were turning but kept quiet about it. They started to walk side by side. “I saw you showing Hope how to use the Labyrinth, thank you for that.”

“You’re welcome. She started talking about her father and I didn’t want her to be upset so the diversion was perfect. Your mother must have been right, she walked that entire thing and said she actually felt better when she was done.”

“Well, thanks. Her dad leaving her was hard, but apparently, he’d done it before. She didn’t really get along well with him, from the moment she arrived, she was in my pocket, and her mother’s passing didn’t make it easier. I was more than happy to be her mom, and when he left, I was thrilled to be both mother and father.”

“Thank you for working with her on the maze, I haven’t seen it look this good in years. I just feel like your work is all in vain. If I can’t come up with the money to save this place all your work will be for nothing.”

“That’s not true.” She stopped when he did, and turned to him. “It’s not

for nothing. Consider it a gift for that little girl, something for her to do until you both have to leave if it comes to that. But somehow I think you are going to find a way to pay for everything and keep this place. I remember you telling me how your parents almost lost the campground.”

“They did.” Faith laughed, her heart melted a tiny bit when she heard his response. No one ever thought of Hope, she was just the child that lived at the campgrounds. No one was ever mean to her, but no one went out of their way to engage her.

“I like your daughter, and if it puts a smile on her face, I am happy to do it. It’s the least I can do when you’re letting me stay here, *and* she’s making me chocolate chip muffins.”

Bruce took a step closer to her. Faith knew she should move but she didn’t want to, something inside her wanted to be close to him to feel all those warm fuzzy feelings she’d felt the night before when he’d wrapped his arm around her to comfort her after the nightmare.

He looked at her, his eyes reflecting what she felt back to her, it was mesmerizing. Faith reached out her hand, touched his arm, ran her fingers down his shirt to his hand, and touched it.

She couldn’t move if she wanted to, his eyes held her spellbound as he pulled her gently to him and wrapped his strong arms around her back. “I’ve missed you, Faith.”

“I’ve missed you, too. I don’t know why you’re here or what it all means, but I’ve missed you very much.”

The feel of his strong arms holding her, the beat of his heart against her ear, the warmth of his breath fanning across her cheek as he looked down at her, it felt so perfect, so right. She breathed in his clean, earthy scent, touched his cheek with her fingers and felt his five o’clock stubble.

Then the moment was gone, she felt awkward, pulled back into herself as if remembering all that happened so long ago between them. *What in the world are you doing? He left you! Did you forget that?*

Faith stepped back and his arms fell from her, his eyes were unreadable but she knew what he was thinking as they walked to the office silently side by side. Hope had three place settings ready with tuna sandwiches on each one.

She smiled as she lit a small tealight candle. “I thought maybe we could make a new tradition with the tuna sandwiches. I wonder who this guy was that mom loved so much, *and* if I will ever be that happy.”

Faith smiled at her daughter, shared a quick hug and they all sat down to eat. It felt weird sitting in the breakroom style kitchen in the office together. She didn't look at Bruce, her eyes would reveal everything. Not to mention, she would see things she didn't want to see in his eyes.

The remains of the day went by fast. The three families that were staying took an interest in the newly cleaned-up labyrinth and maze when it was done. Bruce promised to work on something else the first chance he got to do it.

It was a bit unsettling that he was in Friday Harbor at her campground and helping her. When she least expected it Faith worried something bad was going to happen, that his return was a bad omen of some sort.

She spent the next few days shoving that aside as he continued to clean things up and work. He fixed the stairs to the office and all the plumbing, she hated to admit it but having Bruce around was a godsend. She kept herself in check constantly reminding herself that he would one day leave again and it would just be her and Hope. It was always that way with men.

When she caught herself admiring him working one afternoon with his shirt off, she spent the rest of the day being mad about it. Each night, Hope insisted he come to dinner so he didn't have to eat alone, and Faith secretly enjoyed every moment of it.

She couldn't stop thinking how handsome he was, limping, bulky muscles, shaggy hair, five o'clock shadow, and raggy clothing. Once the first week was over, he'd gotten more done at the campground than her volunteer help had done in four summer seasons.

All the free work he was doing—just because she gave him a place to stay—left her more time to apply for grants and get other things done. The second Faith started to relax and enjoy it and getting used to him being around, the red flags that would go off in her head, warning her to be careful with her heart this time.

At times she wasn't so sure she could trust him. The things he said and his health issues—the PTSD worried her. She didn't know much about those issues other than that they were complex and could make people behave oddly and act out in strange ways like she'd seen the other night.

No matter what she didn't want to see Bruce suffer, but she also felt restless after that night. It was an odd mix of contentment and concern. Late one night after Hope had gone to bed, she couldn't sleep and started a fire again in the pit.

“Hey, can’t sleep?” Faith glanced sideways and Bruce stood not far away, his camera in his hands.

Faith smiled. “If you take my picture, it will be your last.”

Bruce snapped a picture anyway, and Faith groaned. “I look like a crazy woman, my wild hair all over the place, these ripped jeans, no makeup on, and you decide to take my picture. I guess I should be happy it's dark out so hopefully I look like a shadow against the light of the moon.”

He came and sat down. “You're beautiful.” He snapped another picture. “I always loved your hair, it was just like your mother’s curly hair and all over the place in this adorable careless way. Most women couldn’t pass it off as lovely and to you it's stunning.”

Faith felt her cheeks warm and thanked the heavens it was dark except for the moon and the firelight. “Are you fishing for something with all those compliments?”

“Not sure, but if I am, I promise, you my dear lady, will be the first to know.”

“How are you feeling? Any more nightmares or PTSD?”

“Not right now. It comes and it goes of its own will. Whenever my mind wants to relive it, it does. It used to scare the hell out of me, now I’m just numb to it until I’m in the moment.”

Faith didn't miss it when he pulled his chair closer to hers and sat. Her insides were doing somersaults of joy, her mind was begging her heart to not be stupid again.

Chapter 8

Bruce



Bruce sat close to Faith, he wanted to be near her, and the urge to touch her and feel that spark between them was too hard to ignore. Still, he wanted to respect her because they were virtually strangers now and even though they'd been talking for days, they'd barely scratched the surface of each other's lives.

The most important thing to him was that she and Hope felt comfortable with him being around. At first, he'd regretted coming back, he didn't want to upset her life but since she was alone with no one to watch over her and her daughter he thought it perfect.

He wanted them to feel comfortable because he was around, and comfortable with him around. He hoped his presence made a difference for her and even though his PTSD could easily get in the way he was willing to work hard to keep it in check with his medication and the other tricks he had up his sleeve that seemed to help him, like avoiding sleep.

“So, I still don't understand, how come you don't get the same benefits that other military vets do?”

“It's too long of a story to tell right now, but one day I will tell you. Honestly, that's not the only reason, I'm just not ready to discuss it with anyone yet.” He sipped the beer she handed him while in thought.

Sooner or later he would have to tell her everything, how he'd left the army and what his real purpose for coming back to Friday Harbor was in truth. He needed time, he needed a bit more time to think and plan before he told her everything.

She sounded mad when she spoke. “Fair enough, but it better not be anything criminal. If any criminal activity happens on this campground or

around my daughter I will have to throw you off the property and tell you to never come back again.”

“Fair enough, and I understand. I would do the same thing. Not to change the subject, but have you ever considered an online web page for advertising and reservations?” He saw her eyes roll in the dim light and laughed.

“I have one of those, it does not generate much business.”

“Okay. Well, then what's the problem? Why is no one renting cabins and trailers or tent sites here?”

She sighed and Bruce felt the weight of that sigh in his bones. She was tired, tired of fighting everything much like he was in life. The only difference was, he knew he could make a difference for her and help both of them at the same time when the time was right.

She waved her hands in the air as she spoke, animated and very passionate, her voice carrying in the wind. “It's all the other places around here, they are so updated and new. No one wants to stay in these run-down cabins. The amenities aren't luxurious, the atmosphere is too rustic, and there isn't enough to do for everyone. Camping isn't what it was when you and I were young. They want air conditioning and gauzy curtains with bright colors and passionate artwork, all while being surrounded by nature. They want city life or life at a luxurious villa right here in Friday Harbor. I know because I stayed in one once and I fell in love with it. This is like being in the military compared to those glamping-style tents and cabins. No offense. But that is what I want here, I just don't have funds for that.”

She sat down after pacing back and forth as she spoke. Her passion was evident in the way she'd spoken about what she wanted to do. He wasn't about to debate the topic with her that there were many people who still loved an old-fashioned campground with its rustic appeal. That wouldn't matter with the bottom line. You had to go with the mainstream to sell to the masses. That's where the money came from that would keep her campgrounds afloat.

“I understand what you're saying and I agree with you, but there are grants that can help with that.”

“I know I've been trying to secure them but I was already denied for two. I don't know how to word them the right way so I win the funds. Plus there is always so much competition.” She was frustrated, up again and pacing back and forth, her hands fisted together.

As she walked past, Bruce stopped her with his hand and held hers. “Stop, sit down. I wasn't trying to upset you so late at night. You need your

rest so you can get those grants and figure all this out. We can talk about it tomorrow, just sit down and relax for now. Here, have a sip.”

Faith made a face making Bruce laugh. He pushed the beer bottle to her lips. “Just a sip. I know you don’t like beer, but have a sip.”

She did as he asked and made an even worse face. “Ugh, that’s horrible. Why did you make me take a sip of that?”

He laughed. “So, you would taste how horrible it is and focus on that instead of what we were talking about. It gives you something else to do.”

She sat back down in her chair and they both fell silent for a while. Bruce could only imagine the chaos of thoughts running through her mind as she sat there thinking. He thought about tomorrow and the next day, what his next moves were, and what his plans were going to be for success.

Faith yawned. “I gotta go inside, Bruce, I’m tired. I need sleep. If you want to keep the fire going please do, but if you leave, put it out.”

He wanted to touch her and thoughtlessly reached out his hand to hold hers. “I always make sure the fire is out for you. I know you’ve been messed up, and part of it is my fault but you can rest easy now. I know we don’t know each other that well since we’ve been apart so long but you can trust me.”

Bruce gave her hand a gentle squeeze and let her go. “Sleep well, princess. You and that little girl in there need anything, you just give me a shout, and I will come. I will keep watch on the campers too.”

She nodded her head and went inside. Bruce sat there for a long time, studying the flames of the fire as if they would provide answers to his most complex problems. When they didn't, he eventually decided to go for a walk and check on everything.

He heard a rustling sound beside the camper lodge, a small food candy and gift store on the campgrounds. Camping guests were allowed to use it when they needed supplies but since he’d been back, he’d never seen it open.

Bruce walked over and found the door locked. He looked and walked around the lodge and found nothing out of the ordinary except a few sets of tiny footprints like that of a skunk or raccoon.

He followed them and found nothing but a pile of garbage in a corner of the property where a skunk probably stored their goods. Traveling back, he heard the sound again.

Bruce hunted for a while, searched everywhere he thought the sound could be coming from, and found nothing. He was exhausted from searching

and a lack of sleep from his PTSD and ended up in his cabin.

He didn't want to lie down, and pulled out an old photo album that he still had from when he and Faith were together. The photo album had helped him through many difficult times in his life when he would have lost his mind.

At times it was hard for Bruce to believe he was back home in Friday Harbor, and that he was living at the campgrounds where he spent much of his time in high school. Faith was more lovely than ever and he was thankful she was still the same kind-hearted, generous woman he remembered.

He closed his eyes and leaned back his head for a moment to rest, determined to stay awake. He pressed the photo album to his heart, knowing this would be all he could have with Faith, they were both broken. Bruce knew he was more broken than Faith.

The last thing he remembered was her smile, and then he was awake again, he heard banging on the cabin door. Confused that he'd fallen asleep, the sunlight was shining through the window. He blinked, rubbed his eyes, and picked up the photo album off the floor.

He swallowed to clear his dry throat, heard the birds chirping outside, and for a moment thought the banging and sound of Faith's voice had been part of his dream. He smiled to himself, feeling a sense of relief that maybe his PTSD was gone again at least for a little while.

Bruce sipped the water at his side, thankful for everything Faith was doing, including feeding him. Too many times in his past, Bruce had suffered severe backlash from other people who were cruel and disrespectful to soldiers and those who served their country.

"Open up, Bruce! Open up now!" Faith sounded mad. He heard the hitch in her voice. She was yelling and banging again on his cabin door. He couldn't remember making her mad unless something happened overnight that he didn't know about.

Bruce cleared his throat. "Give me a moment, Faith." He shoved the photo album back in its place in his backpack. He straightened himself up as best he could, and pushed his hair away from his face.

He took a moment to clear his head. The last thing he wanted to do was open the door emotionally or unprepared for whatever was going on outside.

He let his breath out and tried a second to focus his energy and center it so he could deal with Faith. When he was ready, he walked to the door, unlocked it, and slowly swung it open. "What is it, beautiful?" He smiled.

Murder was in her eyes. "You are what's up. Why would you do this?"

Why? I don't understand!" She marched away and Bruce kept pace, following her toward the campers' lodge.

When they turned the corner, the door was wide open and everything was in shambles. Shelves were turned over, and things were thrown on the floor, but everything, food, treats, and drinks were all gone.

Bruce was stunned. "My goodness, who...."

Whoever had done this needed food and drinks badly. He could easily relate to that as he'd been there himself a few times in his life and learned to adjust. Sadly he felt sorry for both sides. He felt Faith's pain as this would ruin things for her and her guests. He also felt pity for those in need, as they were either starving or in need of money for something.

He reached out to touch Faith and ran his hand along her back hoping to offer her a little comfort, but she pulled away. Oddly, he could relate and let his hand fall from her back, determined to let her feel and do what she must.

"Don't play dumb with me, Bruce, if you were hungry and needed food or drinks you could have just asked me! Why would you do this? Now I have nothing for the few campers here now or the new ones coming in for the next week!"

She started crying. Bruce felt her pain and felt his own pain. She thought he did this to her. "I wouldn't have done this, Faith. He spoke as softly as possible, controlling his own emotions. "I would never do this to you or anyone and it's very hurtful that you would think that of me."

Faith lashed out. "Yeah, well that's not all, mister high-and-mighty Bruce! Come with me." She marched over the few pieces of stuff lying on the tiled floor and Bruce followed. He felt his disappointment and hers, how quickly life could be turned upside down.

"You didn't do the other, and I suppose you didn't do this either!"

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