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Secrets In Friday Harbor
THREE



Reunited Again

Secrets In Friday Harbor Book 3

Grace Meyers



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Chapter 1

Faith



Faith was thankful Bruce was helping, and tending the fire but something in her gut told her he'd done something to cause that fire. She watched when the fire department came to access things. Captain Russell McGregor stood between her and Bruce.

“Well, you did a fine job, Bruce, keeping that fire from spreading and ensuring that we didn't have a full-blown brush fire. Without that, who knows what might've happened to this campground.” Russell patted Faith on the back.

“Yes, thank you, Bruce. I'm so glad you were here to help.” Faith kept her tone thoughtful, she wanted to sound appreciative but the feeling in her gut kept reminding her that he could be trouble.

“Mom, I'm cold, I'm going back to bed.” Hope stood shivering on her other side, a small blanket wrapped around her as they stood a reasonable distance away.

“Sure honey, go back to sleep. You didn't need to stay up at all.” Faith leaned over and gave her half-grown daughter a kiss on the cheek and smiled. “Good night.”

Hope smiled a little, her eyes darting to what was left of Cabin 4 where the remaining firefighters stood, and then to Bruce. “Thank you for doing that. I like having you around. Don't you like having Bruce around, Mom?”

“I do.” Faith half smiled at Bruce, her mind on other things. “Thank you, Bruce.”

“Good night, Bruce, Mom.” Hope hurried off, her blanket floating in the air behind her.

Faith watched until she disappeared, thankful that the few campers in residence got bored quickly and went back to their cabins. Her mind was racing, and she knew there was no way she would sleep the rest of the night.

“You’re welcome, as I said that’s why I’m here.” Bruce moved a bit closer, one step at a time.

Faith didn’t know whether she was excited or nervous but held her ground and looked at him. “Really? You came all this way from wherever you were to help take care of my campgrounds? If that’s the case, I have to wonder... why?”

She was on a roll now as her temper flared and Faith knew any moment she was going to be unnecessarily rude. “Why here?”

“I told you this before, Friday Harbor is home to me. And I’ve always cared about you.”

It couldn’t be that simple, Faith was not about to believe such nonsense. That got her into trouble with Hope’s father, having faith in men. “I can care about a camper that stays here, but I don’t follow them back to their home in New Mexico and help them tend their house or work.”

Bruce turned toward her, so Faith did the same. She saw the annoyance in his eyes. He was tired, he’d fought a fire for her and the other campers in the campground. He’d worked hard all day and finished it off like this and she was being rude.

“I came here for my own reasons which have nothing to do with you or this campground. But helping you and your daughter here gives me a purpose which I haven’t had in a long time. And it helps me clear my head so we both win.”

Faith sighed, looked at the ashes on the ground beside them, and then at him. His eyes were so mysterious, as they’d always been, dark and deep. She’d always wondered what ran around his troubled mind but now was not the time to ask. “Listen, I’m sorry, I was way off base. Thank you for what

you did. I appreciate everything you're doing around here. I just have a lot on my mind and it makes me think negatively all the time. I'm tired, you're tired, we should just call it a night now that the fire is taken care of and all is well."

She forced a little smile, determined that he was going to tell her what happened, how the fire started. She vowed to nag him until the cows came home and got her answer.

Bruce looked up at the sky, then back to her, his eyes revealed none of his thoughts or feelings. She knew why. *He has something to hide.*

"You're right, but I won't sleep a wink. My PTSD will flare up, but I should go lay down at least and rest. Thank you for noticing, Faith. And I know you're not interested but if you need to talk about anything, I can listen too. I don't always have to fix things if that's what you need."

He turned and walked away, his back rigid and stiff which she suspected was from all the work he'd done. She berated herself all the way back to her cabin and for the next few hours as she paced in the living room.

It was important that she protect herself and her daughter but Faith didn't want to always be cynical, in fact, she hated that side of herself the most. A product of a bad relationship, it popped up at unexpected moments.

Morning brought a bunch of work after Hope got on the bus. She was smiling and chatting with her friends about the fire in the middle of the night. Faith laughed, remembering how she'd been as a young girl.

Paperwork, phone calls, errands, questions from the campers, and a series of other activities kept her morning full. By the time she settled down for lunch, her feet hurt and Faith wanted nothing more than to disappear and take a hot bubble bath.

She sat on a picnic table beside the pond, nibbling a sandwich with her phone close by in case James decided to show up.

"Hey, do you mind if I join you?"

The sound of Bruce's voice behind her startled her out of her thoughts about his OTH. She whirled around. "What? Oh, geez. You scared me."

He smiled and walked a few steps closer, a brown bag in his hand. "May I sit?"

"Sure." Faith moved over an inch even though there was definitely enough room for them both on the one side of the picnic table.

"Thanks." He sat down and pulled out a sandwich loaded with vegetables.

Curious, Faith stopped and studied the sandwich he was eating closely. "Did you get that from Mabelle's Place?"

He smiled. "I did. I haven't been there in years. I needed to get out for a bit, and I wanted to find some work, whatever's available to me."

"It's been so long since I've been there. Hope was there two weeks ago with her friend but I don't eat out much. It looks really good, I forgot how much you like your mushrooms, onions, and peppers." She smiled, remembering a time when they'd gone there on a few dates.

"She gave me a part-time job, nothing crazy. I'll just be washing dishes but it's a start."

Faith felt a sudden pain in her chest, hoping it was heartburn so she sipped her water and set aside her sandwich. Her instincts were telling her it was something else but Faith ignored it. She had enough disappointment in her life already and allowing herself to feel more over Bruce taking a job wouldn't help.

"I'm happy for you." Faith choked the words out, as the disappointment which came out of nowhere for no reason bubbled up inside her. She wanted to cry and hated herself for not fully understanding why. *Goodness, you're such a mess!*

"Thanks." He smiled. "It will give me time away from here, and put me out of your hair sometimes. I realized last night I might be getting on your nerves. Don't worry though, I'm not going anywhere until you throw me off the property..."

I kind of like it here. I'm still going to fix things up and help out where I can but this will give me another outlet for my PTSD. A couple of nights a week cleaning dishes and helping out over there will be good."

Faith was upset, not something she'd planned. "Last night I didn't mean..."

"I know you didn't. Don't worry about it." Bruce put his arm around her shoulder and pulled her close, his face inches from hers, and smiled. "You really are a mess, aren't you? I'm not sure who's worse, you or me. That guy really messed you up?"

They were so close, it felt so nice to be there again and feel his warmth, their connection, and that chemistry. Faith couldn't breathe if she wanted to, her mouth felt dry as her eyes were drawn to his lips, and then she snapped out of it and looked back into his eyes.

Irritated with that weak side of herself, Faith saw mischief in his eyes. *He knows exactly what he's doing!* On a whim, she decided to test that theory and see if the chemistry between them was still there.

Without taking a moment to think, Faith leaned in, closed her eyes, and kissed him on the lips. Instantly, sparks flew. She felt that insane weakness and longing she'd felt so long ago as a young girl.

She pulled back immediately and looked away for a moment to gather her thoughts. "Well, I guess I should get back to work. I've been sitting here long enough."

His arm still held her, Faith tried to gently pull away but he didn't let her go. She was forced to look at him again which she didn't want to do. "I have to..."

His eyes were a sea of emotions. His hand came up and caressed her face and Faith didn't dare move a muscle. His touch felt so perfect, so right, all kinds of warning bells were going off in her head.

Bruce was the only man she'd ever really loved, it wasn't until Hope's father left that she realized it. With her husband,

she'd tried to make the best of it, and cared deeply for him but there was something about Bruce.

They shared something real, concrete, and deep, and it scared her to death that by coming back to Friday Harbor he was going to break her heart again one day. Faith knew she wouldn't survive it twice, and guarded her heart a bit more than she wanted to do.

Still, there was nowhere else that she wanted to be—it was a push and pull of emotions deep inside her that made it hard to focus on other things. A dangerous place to be, and judging by the look in his eyes, Bruce felt and knew that too.

He didn't kiss her, his eyes followed the shape and design of her face, as he caressed her skin, as if he was admiring a fine painting. Faith could almost feel his eyes like a gentle touch along her skin, her lips, her hair, her cheek.

She swallowed hard and tried her best to breathe deep but could only find shallow breaths.

“I know this is hard for you, it's hard for me too, but you and I will always have this.” He pointed between them. “No one ever held a candle to you... ever. And I bet it feels the same for you.”

He dropped his arm and hand then and turned back to his food as if shutting it off as instantly as she'd hoped to do. “Maybe one day we will both find the strength to openly admit it.”

She blinked, stood up right away, realizing she'd been released from the mystical aura between them, and stepped back a few paces to put distance for her protection. “I have to go.” She got out of there and buried herself in her office for the next few hours before Hope came off the bus.

It was hard to focus on her work after that, and Faith spent a lot of time beating herself up for letting that moment happen.

Chapter 2

Bruce



Bruce was exhausted since the night of the fire and a few nights before he'd been sleeping horribly. He knew he had to do something but he hated when he took his medication. It knocked him out cold sometimes, and other times made him more anxious than usual. He never knew what he was going to get.

The job at Mabelle's Place was good. He was confident he could do something with that. There was a need deep inside him, a product of his past that required him to keep moving and stay busy. The last thing Bruce wanted was to annoy or irritate Faith.

Something was bothering her and coming between them, and he only wished she would talk to him about it. In truth, if he was honest with himself, they didn't know each other as well as they once had.

Life had changed them both and while they were getting to know each other, it would take time. Still, he wanted her to feel comfortable around him. It was clear she'd been through much, although different from him.

He was born into a difficult family with a rough upbringing that originally led him to Faith. Bruce knew he had what it took to handle the ups and downs of life, he suspected Faith's ability to deal with it was wearing thin. There was nowhere else he wanted to be in his heart than by her side, helping her.

When she left the picnic area, he knew he'd set her off balance a bit. It was going to take some getting used to for them both. The feelings that still lingered after so much time apart made it abundantly clear to them both that there was something that would forever be between them.

It scared her, that was clear and he understood that. Bruce, however, felt different about their connection. Knowing they had something that had stood the test of time when so many of his connections and friendships had faded away, gave him peace.

He spent a great deal of time sitting at that picnic table and thinking. He thought about everything he'd done in life, all the places he'd been and the people he'd met, Faith had always been with him.

She needed space but Bruce was eager to know Faith and Hope. He'd never had children of his own. He wished he had but accepted that he didn't. Still, Faith had a beautiful daughter to raise thanks to God's help. He hoped one day for the same, perhaps with her.

PTSD was a horrible thing to deal with and that night Bruce had to take his medication. He needed sleep and worried he wouldn't get up for twenty-four hours which sometimes happened. The medication sedated him enough so he slept and could deal with life. He hated it but saw the purpose.

What he dealt with in life wasn't about to just go away, and no amount of therapy, counseling, or doctors care to make him well again. He took it shortly after eating ravioli out of a cold can. He didn't want to suffocate Faith with his presence.

"Tomorrow... Tomorrow I will start making a fire again and hoping she and her daughter will join me."

As he lay down to rest, he felt the effects of the medication already taking effect. "I don't want to sleep." He spoke to no one in particular, the air around him still, quiet, and cool like he preferred it.

Soon, darkness came, and the next thing he knew he was up and it was morning. His backpack was moved along with a

few other things. Bruce thought and tried to recall if he'd woken up to do that, but knew it didn't matter.

Insomnia had always been a part of his life, and he knew his health issues, and the medication could cause him to do strange things. As he lay in bed trying to wake up and ignore the ache in his back and leg, he remembered a time when he woke to himself taking a shower.

Faith wasn't around after he'd cleaned up and grabbed some coffee. The office door was open, papers scattered all over her desk but she was nowhere to be found. Bruce busied himself with the cleanup of Cabin 4.

He cleaned up what he could, and did the best he could with what remained. It was a long process that would take a few days to tidy up. There was hope, Bruce could see it. Clearing this spot made an area for something new.

He had the ability to see the burning as a way of riding Faith and her campground of something not needed anymore so something new could replace it. He made it his purpose to ensure it was clean and tidy, while his mind continued to formulate his own plans.

The afternoon brought Hope home. When she came off the bus it was just in time for Bruce to see her. "Hey, how was your day, Hope?"

She stopped, smiled, and threw her backpack to the ground. "Awful, I failed my science test, Mom is going to be so mad."

He smiled. "Well, your mother wasn't the best at science either, which was a surprise for me considering she liked the outdoors, nature, and touching things my friends didn't even like."

"Yeah, what was the craziest thing she ever did?"

Bruce knew better than to take the bait on that one. Raising his hands in the air he stepped back a few paces and smiled. "Nope, you're not catching me in that one, your mother will kill me if I tell you. I will however give you a hint, and it has to do with something that doesn't have a backbone."

Hope groaned. “Ugh, I hate it when adults always play games with kids. Teasing, giving tiny tidbits of information that drive us nuts. First, you throw the bait and then tease me, give me just enough to keep my interest, and then abandon me when I want more. Mom is never going to tell me that story if I ask.”

Bruce laughed. “She will, just tell her that if she doesn’t tell you the story, Bruce said he will and I’ll tell you a few others that are supposed to be a secret. See how fast she starts talking then. I imagine she will be spilling her guts on that little adventure, fast and furious.”

“Okay. Are you going to come by and make a fire again tonight? You haven’t been doing it for the last few nights and I miss it.”

Bruce smiled. *At least someone around here is willing to admit they enjoy my company.* “I was thinking about it. I got a part-time job at Mabelle’s Place as the dishwasher so I will stop by after I’m done there.”

“Cool! I love their milkshakes, they have these cookies and cream milkshakes and they’re filled with crushed Oreos!”

Hope took off after their conversation. Bruce really enjoyed her company, it reminded him of when they were kids, he and Faith. He admired her carefree spirit just like her mom had been. It was humbling to admit to himself how much his childhood environment shaped his life, especially when he thought about his family and home.

After working for a bit, he stopped to talk to a few of the campers. They were friendly and curious, asking lots of questions, in particular, about the Cabin 4 fire.

“How did the fire start?” Mr. Rothstein said as he and his wife stood holding hands; their two kids running around behind them.

“We don’t know yet. I’m sure Faith is working with the Fire Chief to figure it out. I’d give it a few more days and then ask her.”

“Do you think it was arson? Or drugs? Maybe some crazy kids set it on fire accidentally? I’ve always loved coming here. We’ve been visiting every year for the past six, but things have changed. I know the electricity in our cabin is a bit bleepy, maybe it was an electrical fire?” Mrs. Rothstein was running wild with her thoughts.

The last thing Bruce wanted was for her patrons to feel negative about their experience. He smiled. “No, I doubt it’s any of those things. The Fire Chief would have said something if he thought that. I grew up here and spent much of my time at this campground as a kid. Faith and I are long-time friends. She takes really good care of these cabins, and I’m here keeping watch. You can rest assured there aren’t any kids setting fires or doing drugs. If you want, tomorrow morning I can take a look at your cabin, make sure the wiring is okay, and deal with that issue.”

Mrs. Rothstein smiled. “That would be lovely, right dear? This way we can focus on the kids. Our vacation is almost over. We homeschool our kids and are doing a lot more traveling this year for their schooling. I want to leave here on a high note and knowing we are safe would be great!”

“Works for me.” Mr. Rothstein turned away to manage the kids.

Bruce felt the need to interject himself further so neither of them stressed and Faith lost another patron. “Why don’t I come to take a look now before I go to work?”

Mrs. Rothstein smiled. “Oh, you have another job?”

“No, I have a job, this is a labor of love so there’s no pay in it for me other than I live here.” He looked around to see if Faith was anywhere in earshot. He’d gone out on a limb with that statement and didn’t want it to bite him in the backside later.

She smiled. “Lovely, then you and Faith are a matched pair.” She started walking so Bruce followed. “I have to tell you that no good husband of hers, leaving her and that poor little girl Hope behind and taking all the money, what an awful man. I get the feeling you’re so much better than that.”

Bruce did a thorough check, found one issue, and fixed it. “Well, the electrical in this cabin is much, much better than Cabin 4. You can rest easy that nothing is going to happen here. Faith was thinking of bulldozing Cabin 4 when Spring came because it was in bad condition. This cabin has everything updated, and all looks to be in good working order other than that one issue I dealt with.”

“Thank you so much, now my husband can sleep better at night.”

Bruce smiled to himself. *You mean now you can sleep better at night.* “I’m glad to hear it. If you or your family need anything else don’t hesitate to come find me or talk to Faith.” They shook hands and he took his leave.

Walking back to the cabin, he saw Faith rushing back to the office, she looked irritated, so he followed her. The screen door slammed once between them and then he pushed it open and quietly made his way to the coffee pot.

Bruce couldn’t stop himself from pushing her buttons. He wanted to know how mad she was, and with whom. Hopefully, it wasn’t him. So he rocked back on his heels and started whistling and irritating tunes while he stirred his coffee.

Peering sideways at her and keeping it quick, he waited. He heard her sigh, then she groaned, and when he peeked once she was throwing him an irritated look. He smiled into his coffee cup. “How’s your day?”

“Don’t ask! The fire chief doesn’t have any idea what caused the fire yet. I think he’s lying but that’s just my cynical side. I got a bad review online for the campground, which means more sales will be down. Some patrons that stayed here back in July said the place is run down, old, and in need of serious updating...not worth ten dollars a night.”

Bruce wasn’t looking at her, he knew better. If he made eye contact while she was angry he was more likely to get a tongue lashing. Still, he had to annoy her just a little bit. “Sorry to hear all that but you’re smart, and I can help you. We can get this place straightened up by next spring, don’t sweat it.”

He should've known better, when he least expected it, a piece of candy came flying past his head, and the sound of laughter to his left followed. "Thanks for the vote of support, Mr. Positive, but I won't make it that long if I don't find a way to generate some funds between now and then."

Bruce thought, he drank one cup of coffee and another and stood staring at the coffee pot. "What about some kind of event?"

"What do you mean? Like a festival or something?"

He looked over and Faith had her booted feet on top of the desk, a stack of papers, and her computer in front of her. She looked a bit more relaxed than when he first came in. He smiled, he had an effect on her too.

"Well, I wouldn't say festival but maybe..." His leg was aching, his limp was getting the better of him these days and the arthritis was killing him. Soon it would be time for pain medication because the pain was getting worse. He limped slowly to the chair and sat.

"Is your leg aching?"

"Yeah, as much as I hate to admit it, it hurts all the time anymore. I can't sit idly because it drives me crazy, my mind races, and I start to overthink. So I move and do things, and then my leg hurts. I can't win without losing."

Faith stood up and came to sit beside him. "My mother taught me a few massage techniques that might help if you don't mind?"

Bruce smiled at the hands she held up in the air as if she was ready to attack him. "Not at all, you can rub my leg all you want. It hurts so much. Nothing you're going to do is make it worse unless you lay me down in the driveway and run me over." He chuckled.

She laid her hands atop his leg. "Well, that is a last option, if nothing else works. Now hold still, I should be doing this while you're wearing shorts or something so I can feel the muscles but this will have to do for now."

Bruce closed his eyes and Faith moved her hands over his jeaned leg. At first, he felt nothing other than the light brush of her hands, which he knew would do nothing to soothe the deep ache. Then her hands changed.

First, her fingers pressed deep into the muscles and areas of his leg where he felt the most pain. Unable to decipher how she knew exactly where to press, he closed his eyes and let her do the work.

His leg ached, at times her pressing seemed to make the pain worse, and he winced and groaned. He could handle a lot of pain, which meant what he was feeling, and what she was doing was worse than what most people could handle.

Her hands were smooth and swift and the process improved as she kept moving, easing her hands over the areas beyond the pain, loosening muscles. Bruce inhaled sharply when she hit a magic button at the back of his knee that sent pain shooting in all directions.

“Trigger point. Sometimes we think the pain we feel comes from one area but it comes from another known as a trigger point. That point can send pain, ache, and discomfort in many directions.”

He groaned and bit out his words. “I don’t care what it is, just stop the pain.” His eyes were wide open and he watched as her fingers continued to press in that spot and rub it away. When she finally let go, the pain subsided with it. “How did you do that?”

He felt like he could breathe again, and when he moved his leg it was completely free of all pain. “I’ve been taking medication for weeks now, hoping something would help and I wouldn’t have to go to the doctor. I thought it was just my injury, and some arthritis, but apparently not.”

Faith leaned back in her chair, wiped her hands, and leaned forward to grab her lotion bottle from the desk. “My mother studied massage therapy and when my dad got sick she started giving him daily massages. She taught me the process, how to find muscles, and other areas of the body that caused pain like trigger points. Is it feeling better?”

“It’s feeling better than better, I don’t think it’s felt this good in months. Thank you.” If they were in a different place he might have leaned in to kiss her but thought better of it at the moment.

She laughed. “You’re welcome. I’m glad I could help, at least I can feel productive sometimes. So you were saying something about hosting events here at the campground.”

Bruce snapped back into the moment and spoke of what he’d been thinking.

Chapter 3

Faith



“I think if you host some events like a haunted walk through the campground at night and perhaps a Thanksgiving dinner for the community, you can charge money and if you do the advertising right online you could pull in people from far away. You can use your email list to send out flyers and maybe make enough money to fix a few things around here. You’ve got your soap-making business on Etsy; you can sell your soaps, offer vendors tables to use for a small fee to sell their goods.”

Faith was astonished that Bruce knew so much about fundraising. Right away, she got into the spirit of things, grabbed a piece of paper off her desk, and started writing. “This is brilliant, I had no idea, Bruce! Okay, so vendor tables for maybe ten dollars. I could ask local businesses around the community to donate baskets for a raffle, a portion of the funds will go to repairing the campground, while the rest goes back to Friday Harbor for a community center or something else needed.”

“Exactly! Now you’re thinking. You’ve been sitting here feeling sorry for yourself while you’ve had the answer all along. It could be a weekend event. On Friday it’s a kids’ night where the haunted walk is easier and less scary. On Saturday night it’s a walk for teenagers and adults or whatever and a bit scarier than the other. You could host a trick or treat and there are endless possibilities for making money here. You could even do a Christmas festival with lights and more vendors.”

Faith couldn't stop her excitement. He'd opened up a can of worms and the ideas kept coming one after the other so fast she had a hard time keeping up. "Goodness, this is perfect! A New Year's Party with dancing under the stars, Valentine's Day, heaven help me... this could get crazy!"

Bruce was laughing, Faith barely heard him as she walked to her desk, sat down, and started typing on her computer. She organized her ideas based on holidays or seasons clear through until Spring in March/April.

"First, just focus on the Autumn Halloween event. We can all brainstorm the things you want to have. Games, refreshments, compliments of Mabelle's Place, whatever. We need to do this fast since we don't have a lot of time. You will want flyers to go out via mail, email, and to local businesses by the beginning of next week."

She nodded. "You're right, we don't have much time. So let's talk, tell me all your ideas, and later I will talk to Hope and see what she thinks from a kid's perspective. I will work on this tonight and then by tomorrow morning I will print something out for you and me to use to get this off the ground."

Forgotten was Bruce and his injured leg, forgotten was his OTH, her call to James, and the return call she was still waiting to receive. Gone were all the damages at the campground, the lousy online review, and all the other things she needed to address.

Faith submerged herself in her work. Bruce told his thoughts, and later Hope did the same when he had to leave for Mabelle's Place. She was sorry to see him go but understood he needed to work. Even though she was giving him a place to stay, it wouldn't be enough for a bright, happy future.

"Mom, this is the coolest idea I've ever heard. We can have so much fun. A pumpkin catapult, pumpkin carving contest, and so many other exciting things. My friends are going to go crazy when they hear this. Can I tell them?"

"Not yet, honey. You have to keep this secret until next week when we put the flyers out. Bruce had the idea, and we

ran with it together.” There was so much excitement and ideas running through her mind, that Faith could barely sit still at her desk.

“Aw Mom, come on. How am I supposed to keep this a secret?”

Faith tossed some paper in the trash can like a seasoned basketball player. “With your eye on the prize. You know that new movie you wanted to see at the theater? If you can keep this a secret until Sunday, I’ll take you to the movies to see it. How about that?”

“Alright!” Hope jumped up and down and did a little dance. “I think I can keep my mouth shut for that long, it’s worth it but once Monday comes, I am spilling the beans, Mom.”

Faith laughed. “Fine, now get out of here so I can get some work done. I have spaghetti in the refrigerator.”

“Bruce said he was going to make a fire and I hope he comes by later. If he does, can I give him some spaghetti if he hasn’t already eaten dinner?”

“Sure, honey.”

Faith watched her daughter leave, the worries about Bruce, and his OTH were tossed to the side with all this excitement. She thought about calling James and seeing how he was making out, but her mother’s favorite saying *No News Is Good News* popped into her head and she changed her mind.

She spent the evening typing all the ideas, a game plan for getting it done, and the flier they would send out. When she was done it was pretty late. She cleaned up her desk and printed out the flier so Bruce and her daughter could have a look.

The fresh cool air woke her tired mind as she walked back to their cabin. A fire was going but no one was around. Checking her watch, Faith knew Hope should be in bed or getting ready. When she heard the faint whispers of her daughter and Bruce, she followed it behind her cabin.

There they sat in two chairs, a beautiful deer standing a few feet from them. Both were quiet and unmoving, Faith held herself still and watched, wishing she had her camera.

It was fascinating to watch, as the deer slowly approached and nibbled on the food they'd placed on a rock. It was not typical for deer to eat vegetables and fruits, as it wasn't a part of their natural diet but from time to time even Faith pulled out some grains, like oats, and bits of fruit or veggies to share.

Sometimes they would eat it, other times they'd pass, but this night it seemed to be exactly what this deer wanted, or the company was enough. The deer nibbled a little, looked around, and scratched its hoof across the ground.

Bruce and Hope continued their conversation, and when he saw her, Bruce smiled. Faith didn't want to ruin this moment for her daughter as it was something she greatly cherished, so she dared not move a muscle.

Watching Bruce and her daughter talk quietly and enjoy each other's company made her proud. It wasn't every day that children behaved and knew how to treat others, Hope had good character.

Before she got the chance to join them, her phone vibrated in her pocket. Glancing quietly, she saw it was an email from James. She wanted to read the document right away and didn't waste any time, waving her phone at Bruce and stepping back toward the cabin.

Once inside, she scanned the email and the attached document.

Well Faith, there isn't much to tell, I found out he had an Other Than Honorable Discharge because he had some criminal charges for burglary that appeared while he was in the service. Since he was injured while serving his country, he was discharged with the badge of identification. I'm not sure how severe the charges were but once he was discharged with the OTH he was required to serve time for the crimes committed. Aside from that, he had an assault charge on another soldier but that soldier was trouble from what I understand.

I made a few phone calls, and I talked to a few people, for the most part, Bruce was a perfectly decorated soldier other than the burglary charge and assault charge. The people I spoke to seemed surprised he was discharged the way he was and thought it was a mistake. Which I have to say does happen sometimes.

My guess is you might want to have a frank conversation with him, demanding that he be honest with you about it all if he is going to stay at the campgrounds. You have that little girl to think about. In my opinion, he's not a man to worry about, if you take a look at the reports I sent you. He was skilled, talented, and of good character except for those charges, and as I said the burglary could have been a mistake. The assault charges I'm getting were the product of one man, the other in this case provoking Bruce for some reason.

If you need anything else or want me to come visit I am happy to do it. Best of luck, Faith, your father would be so proud of the woman you are, he's always looking after you from above.

You should come out this way soon and see these pretty horses. Hope will want one for sure and I bet you will too. She would have no problem learning how to ride and I could take videos for social media. Imagine that, Faith, me posting stuff on social media!

Best of Luck,

James

Faith read through the document, there were a few, and each was detailed with descriptions of what the charges were and when. She was shocked by what she read but tried to keep what James told her in the front of her mind.

She scanned each document and saved them for later that night when Hope was asleep. It was getting late so she leaned out the window to call her. "Hope, it's time for bed."

The deer was gone, and they were folding up their chairs and setting them in the small shed. "Okay, Mom. Thank you, Bruce. Mom made the best dinner with the spaghetti. He took

some bread, crumbled it up, added garlic, threw it all in a pan, added more sauce, some cheese, and a few other things like spices, and cooked it on the fire.”

She hugged her daughter as Hope came to the door to slip by, waited until she was inside, and then went out to sit for a few minutes as Bruce was tending the fire. “How was your night at Mabelle’s?”

“Good, it was a piece of cake, actually. I thought I’d have a hard time, that they’d be too busy and I’d get lost in the mix with my bum leg but she made things real easy for me. Thankfully, it wasn’t too busy which gave me some time to create a system.”

He smiled and Faith debated having it out with him right away. The thought of hashing out what she knew of his past while sitting outside in front of a fire where anyone could see and hear, didn’t appeal to her.

She was thoughtful for a time as he stirred the ashes in the fire ring and kept it going on a slow burn. He sat down, and together they watched the fire burn.

“You seem quiet, almost like something is on your mind. I’m having a hard time keeping up, sometimes you seem fine, other times not. Did something happen? Is there anything you need to talk about or something I can do?”

Faith glanced sideways at Hope’s bedroom window and saw it was closed. The light was out, so it was a pretty good guess that Hope was either asleep or soon would be asleep. She sighed heavily. “Well yes, we need to talk. I just wanted to wait until Hope was asleep.”

She smiled and tried her best to gather her thoughts so she didn’t say something wrong when she spoke. “Something has been bothering me for a while now, and I haven’t known what to say about it since it’s none of my business.”

“Just ask me whatever you want to ask me, Faith. You know I’m an open book and while my past was painful at times, I will tell you anything you want to know. Don’t hold back.” He continued to stir the ashes.

“Okay. You know how untrusting I am, and I may or may not have told you why, but I’m sure you suspect why. Well because I’m very cautious and not so trusting I wanted to do some digging on you.”

Faith was swimming in uncharted territory and had the sinking suspicion she was failing miserably at it. She kicked a few rocks around and fussed with her chair a bit before continuing all in an effort to buy herself some time to say it right.

“Okay. Like you’d be the first one. I would like to say I was surprised since we’ve known each other forever, but I’m not.” He frowned but said nothing else. Faith didn’t read any annoyance or upset in his eyes so she continued.

“Well, I dug up some details I was confused about... you had an OTH when you left the military. I was curious to know why, or what happened?”

“You want to know what happened? First of all, it’s an Other Than Honorable Discharge. And yes, I had one. What do you want to know?”

His voice had the slightest hint of agitation but other than that she detected no other signs of annoyance or frustration with his having to explain himself, so she continued. “Well I have to confess, and you’re going to be mad at me I know, but I had someone in the military look into it for me.”

Faith waited, looking into the burning amber flames of the fire he was building up again. It was quiet for quite some time and she couldn’t resist looking at him. He looked mad. “You could have simply asked me.”

“How does someone ask something like that? Even if I did, how did I know that you were going to tell me the truth?”

Her words did nothing for their conversation. He turned away and stirred the fire more. Faith felt the tension in the air between them. When it got too hot to handle and he’d been too quiet for too long, she realized it was best to leave the conversation alone for the night.

When she got up, he stopped her. “I can’t even believe after everything I’ve done for you, our shared past and you knowing me as a person, that you would even say something like that.”

His words pulled on Faith’s heartstrings. “I’m sorry, we haven’t known each other for years. You left a long time ago and neither of us truly know each other now.”

He put out the fire with his bottle of water. “Still, I’ve done nothing but help you here and you think I would lie to you. You’re the only person I would share that information with, Faith. I would never, could never, tell anyone else my personal business... but you, I knew I could tell you anything. It disgusts me that our friendship is so shallow that you would say that, and do what you did.”

He sat down in his chair and kept his eyes on the fire. Faith felt sick to her stomach, she’d been wrong to go behind his back, not trusting him, and then throw that in his face. She’d been the one he couldn’t trust.

She sat back down, the last thing she wanted to do was lose his friendship. She was still confused by the OTH but hoped he would talk so she could hear what he had to say. “I’m sorry, Bruce. Can you forgive me?”

He looked irritated, his eyes filled with regret and something else as he looked at her. “I forgive you, but you’ll have to forgive me if I don’t feel like talking right now.”

He dismissed her just like that. Faith knew when it was time to leave and seeing that he was ignoring her now, she went inside. Their argument stayed with her all night. She barely slept, the image of his tormented features, knowing that she’d put that pain there, cut deep.

It still bothered her in the morning and something was still nagging at her but she didn’t know what to do about it. It felt like he was hiding something, and all the recent events that happened at the campground were not just some coincidence.

After breakfast, she wanted to show him the details of all the things they’d spoken about. The upcoming festival, the

flyers, and what her ideas were. She found him eating a can of Ravioli, cold while sitting on the porch.

“Morning, Bruce. Why are you eating that when you can cook something from the Camper’s Lodge?”

Bruce tossed the can aside. “What? And listen to you gripe that I took something. No thanks. Soon enough I’ll be getting paid from Mabelle’s Place and I can pay you a bit of rent or whatever for the use of the cabin. That should help you with keeping the campground.”

Faith could feel her blood boiling, he was taking things too far now. Standing in the dirt path in front of the cabin, she waved her paper in the air. “Stop being like this, I said I was sorry. We need to talk about it but I need to show you something first.”

She found her strength and marched up the stairs to where he sat and held out the flier. “Thanks to you this is going to be such an exciting event. The mayor is beyond thrilled. He said they are going to advertise it on their web page for tourists to see. Tomorrow, I have to go and put flyers everywhere and I will be putting it up on our website. I have a mass email I’m going to send to current, old, and potential campers and outdoor enthusiasts.”

He took the paper, studied it a second, and handed it back to her. “Glad to hear it’s working out for you. With any luck, you’ll have the money to keep this place and by spring I should be out of your hair.”

His words shocked the excitement right out of her. “What? Why? I thought this was your home. I thought you loved it here in Friday Harbor?”

“I do, but I don’t want to be a burden to anyone, or feel unwelcome anywhere. I’d rather just leave town and head north to Alaska where I can be left alone.”

Their eyes met and held. Faith didn’t want to look away, she only hoped the painful feelings that came up at the thought of him leaving would be reflected in her eyes because she couldn’t even speak them.

“I’m sorry you feel that way.”

“Me too.” He turned away. “Listen, I forgive you for last night. I had a chance overnight to think about it and you had every right to question me. That should have been the first thing I discussed with you considering you have a daughter. I shouldn’t have expected you to just take me in and give me a place to stay and not have to tell you about my past. When you’re ready, we can discuss it.”

His honesty humbled her, and for a moment she thought to debate the topic with him and get all the details she wanted about his OTH and anything else she was curious about. She couldn’t do it though, now was not the time.

She smiled. “Not now, but maybe in a few days. We don’t have much time to get all this going and I need every ounce of help I can get. Will you help me?”

He laughed. “You’re quite the saleswoman when you want to be, Faith.”

Butterflies started fluttering inside her stomach and she felt that familiar teenage giddiness she’d once felt as a young woman. “Thank you, I guess.”

“Sure, I’ll help you and we can discuss my life in the military later. Just promise me that if you start to feel like you can’t trust me or question my character or morals ask me, don’t go running off again and look on the internet and have someone else do the digging for you. Friends don’t do that.”

Faith nodded. “Okay.”

Chapter 4

Bruce



Bruce was still annoyed with Faith for going behind his back and digging up details about his life in the military.

It was a simple matter she could have discussed with him directly and gotten all the answers she wanted from the horse's mouth.

He was annoyed but also understood that her past with her ex made her that way and it was going to take a lot to earn her trust. Still, he didn't want that to happen again, so he tried to maintain a bit of distance between them for a little while in hopes she'd feel some remorse.

When Faith asked him to help with planning the Halloween Festival he'd been thrilled. He knew this was a way for her to make extra money to keep the campground. She'd left him on the porch that morning and headed to her office with the idea that he would join her shortly.

After a shower, Bruce strolled over to the office and stopped just short of going inside.

"I don't know why you do this to yourself, Faith. You know Bruce is a good man, he's kind-hearted and still the man you knew. Whatever happened in the military he will explain it when he's ready and you don't need to act all cynical about it or him staying at the campgrounds."

Bruce smiled as he quietly watched her through the open window. Her head was pointing to the screen as she worked on her computer. Her eyes were intent as she focused her energy on what she was doing.

The one-sided conversation she was having with herself was amusing to say the least and Bruce couldn't bring himself to walk up the stairs and let her know he was there. He watched quietly for a time and eavesdropped.

"You know you like him. He's still just as cute and handsome as he was all those years ago. Too bad you're so damaged in the head that you'll never be able to get past everything that happened to you. Hope could use a father figure in her life, and you a man, but you'd only push him away or make him grab his running shoes."

She smiled at the computer and laughed. "Wouldn't that be funny, Bruce running as fast as he could for the nearest ride out of town so he could get away from you!"

She started laughing and leaned over to turn on the music. "Attention everyone, there's a guy with running shoes, he's running fast and furious out of town and said something about the owner of the infamous Friday Harbor campgrounds, and how crazy she is."

Bruce had to stifle his laughter so she wouldn't know he was there, bit his tongue but continued to watch the very animated antics as she went about her work for a few minutes more.

"The headlines in the local news... *Local man swims away from Friday Harbor to get away from the woman who was once his old girlfriend because she was too much to handle... swims across the water at lightning speed even though he has a limp.*" She laughed again.

"God, I love that man. I don't think anyone could ever compare to him. I just hope he doesn't go to Alaska, that would break Hope's heart." She quieted down, the music seemed to tone down her crazy excitement and Bruce sobered up too, listening to her words. "I'd miss him more than anyone, again."

He took a step back then, his chest was tight, and he felt like he couldn't breathe. In only a few moments she'd revealed more to him than he could've ever imagined. He stepped on

the wooden plank porch and cleared his throat when he opened the screen door to her office.

“Hey.” She was still sitting despite hearing noises when he opened the door.

Faith smiled. “Hey, how’s it going? I didn’t think you were ever going to get here. I thought you’d changed your mind and headed for the Canadian border.”

“Nope, I’m still here. Not planning on going anywhere till spring.” He felt so much in that moment. Looking at her after what he’d just witnessed, it changed things between them. He knew it wasn’t an admission of falling in love or anything like that but it was still surprising to hear her say what she did.

The coffee was still hot so Bruce grabbed a cup and sat down. “So what do you need me to do?”

“I was thinking you could take a bunch of flyers into town for the general store and then set a few up on the checkout counter at Mabelle’s Place when you go to work tonight. All the campers are checking out tomorrow and there aren’t any more checking in unless this festival brings some in. It’s going to get pretty quiet around here for the next few weeks. I thought maybe tomorrow after everyone leaves we could put some around town together.”

“Sure.” We spent the next few days handing out flyers, posting them in various places around town, and basically spreading the word. The responses were positive as people commented on how excited they were. Faith was smiling the whole time.

The bathroom in Cabin 1 broke and Bruce had to fix it early in the morning. There were no visitors staying in that cabin but it gave him something to do. By the time he went to work as the dishwasher at Mabelle’s Place, he was tired and aching.

“Bruce, I didn’t know you came back to town. Where have you been hiding? I hope not back here in the kitchen?” His old high school buddy Donnie caught him as Bruce was grabbing dishes from behind the counter.

“Heck no, I’ve been staying at Faith’s place, the campgrounds. She’s been really good to me, letting me stay and I help her out and fix things in return.”

They exchanged hugs. Bruce felt embarrassed by his limp and tried his hardest to make his leg behave. Donnie looked just the same, with the exception of a few wrinkles and some extra pounds. “It’s good to see you!”

“I know! Hey, come on over here. Come meet my wife Lynn and my son Ryan.”

Bruce didn’t want to meet anyone, while he didn’t mind being a little social he was so tired and the last thing he felt like doing was being polite. Still, he walked over and said hello.

“Lynn, this is my good friend, Bruce. He went into the service after graduation. He’s been gone a long time, I never thought to see him again but he’s back in town. Bruce, this is my wife Lynn and our son Ryan.”

Bruce shook hands. “Nice to meet you both. Yeah, Donnie and I used to get in a lot of trouble back then. How long have you been married?” Both Lynn and Ryan smiled, shook his hand, and said hello.

“Fifteen years. I met her when I was traveling through Georgia. I got myself a Southern Belle. We had Ryan not long after. Can you sit down for a minute?” Donnie pulled out the spare chair.

Bruce looked around and saw Mabelle waving at him to take his time with a smile, so he sat. “Sure, but only for a minute.”

“So what about you? What have you been doing with your life? Do you have a wife, and kids? I bet you traveled all over the place while in the military.” Donnie smacked him lightly on the back and Bruce ignored it and the irritation he felt building inside him.

He and Donnie had been good friends but he had always been the kid you could only take in small doses because he was so in your face. “No wife, no kids, I did do some

traveling, a lot actually, but now I'm home. Not sure if I'm planning on staying yet or eventually moving on to Alaska, time will tell I guess."

"Alaska, well you'd better take Faith with you. That girl has been a mess since you left." He turned to his wife then and spoke. "Bruce was always so in love with Faith and Faith was madly in love with him, everyone saw it. For whatever reason he left to join the service and she was never the same. I'm hoping you'll take her with you when you go, the poor woman is beside herself with worry over trying to save that campground. The bank and a few other businesses want it because it's prime property, but she always refuses their offers."

Bruce listened intently as Donnie shared all the details he knew about Faith's business and the deals she was refusing. He was astonished by the time he said his goodbyes and left them to get back to work.

Hours later it was still running through his mind that Faith was willing to give up an offer of half a million dollars so she could save her family's campground. It made him smile inside to know she was as dedicated to her heritage and the memory of her family and Friday Harbor, as he was too.

He spent the night formulating his plans. It was almost time for him to share the details so she could decide if it was a good idea for them both. He couldn't do anything yet and he wanted her on board but time was running out.

Whether or not they worked together or she refused his offer and the plans he'd very thoughtfully put together was anyone's guess, but it was his hope they could work together and both be successful.

That night it was hard to sleep. His leg ached, his body felt weighted down from fatigue and he woke but didn't know it, screaming from his PTSD. The only evidence of his activity in the morning was the things he'd moved around while he was still sleeping and the door to the cabin was wide open.

Frustrated with himself and the past, he vowed to start therapy again to help him with his issues since it was unlikely

they would ever go away. The things he'd done and been through in his life may be a part of him but he didn't want them to shape the rest of his life.

Faith came through his open door moments after he woke up carrying a plate of food. "Good morning. I have to tell you, you have some set of lungs. That screaming you were doing in the middle of the night was something."

Bruce blinked. "What? I was screaming again?"

"Yes, I was out for a walk because I couldn't sleep, I heard your screaming and came over. You had the door swung wide open and you were fumbling through your bag. I asked if you were okay and you looked at me, smiled, and mumbled something, then climbed back into bed and started to snore."

Bruce felt embarrassed, he hated that everyone else around him knew what he was doing when he was suffering an episode of his PTSD and he didn't. "Sorry." He sat up, still dressed in the clothes he wore last night. "What did you bring me?"

She smiled. "Well, I made some breakfast, not my strength, but it's bacon, sausage and some eggs with toast. The toast is burnt, the bacon is a bit crisp, the sausage is pretty good, but the eggs are a bit dry. Sorry."

Bruce devoured half of it before realizing it was as bad as she mentioned. He laughed. "You know it's a good thing you have so many other good qualities and skills because with you cooking breakfast lacks that special something, what do they call it?"

She waved a piece of bacon at him from across the room, then threw it at him. "Fine. Make fun of me and you'll see how many cookies you get at Christmas. No gingerbread for you. I can bake and you're not getting any. I'm going to be a Scrooge for that comment."

Bruce dodged it, then tossed it out the open door for some unsuspecting but delighted animal. "Well, you might not be able to cook breakfast but I can, if you're still hungry it will give me something to do and we can talk. We have to think

about reorganizing things around here for the upcoming event and make sure there is room for parking and the vendors. Later today, I'm going to draw a map of the campgrounds so we can sit down and figure it all out."

Faith surprised him, turned the music on her phone, and started dancing around. "I love this song." It was a catchy tune, something from when they were young, fast, and upbeat."

It was a strange morning, Bruce sat back against the wall, still in his bed watching Faith dance around like he'd done so many times years ago. "I always loved watching you dance."

Chapter 5

Faith



Faith was feeling strange that day. She'd woken up feeling energetic after worrying for quite a while that Bruce wasn't okay. She thought about him until she fell asleep and when she dreamed it was of him, them together, the memories of that dream stayed with her when she got up and cooked them breakfast after Hope left for school.

"Thank you. Why don't you come and dance with me?" She danced in circles in the open space of the small cabin and then out onto the front porch and back.

"The campers are all gone?"

"There is one family packing up now as we speak, but they've checked out early and are almost ready to go. I hate it when this happens. It makes me sad when they're gone. I know I have other things to do, the festival and my soaps, but I hate it when it's quiet here."

She continued to dance, feeling daring, and spun in circles right beside the bed, laughing and staying just out of Bruce's reach when he tried to touch her. Her heartbeat was thumping in her chest for more reasons than one, and his eyes following her every move added to the excitement.

"Well, you have your daughter and I'm here."

The music took her away and out the door she went again, spinning and moving like she'd done on so many starry nights as a teenager at this campground. The music changed, she moved and slowed to follow its slower tempo and came back through the door when strong arms caught her.

Bruce held her tight in his strong arms. Faith was momentarily taken off guard, feeling the soft strength of his hold as he spun her around. “I remember taking you to a dance once, we danced like this a few times. You looked so pretty... a purple dress I believe, with lilac in your hair.” He smiled.

Faith’s mind went back to that night. “I remember. I was so crazy for you, my mother liked you but I think she was afraid she didn’t want us getting too serious too soon. She would sometimes tell me I should date other boys but I would always laugh and tell her no.”

What could she say, Faith wasn’t one to be dishonest with anyone, and she believed in admitting how she felt to the people she cared about. Thanks to her parents passing early in life, she knew that time was never a guarantee. It was important to always let those you loved know you loved them.

“I felt the same, Faith. I know I’ve never been a man to say too much about how I feel, back then and now, but I always loved you. I carried you with me everywhere I went, not that it did that good for you back here, but I’m sorry I left you behind. I can’t change it now... but I’m sorry.”

It was a morning filled with many difficult emotions, feelings that his words stirred up, and physical feelings their closeness during the dance caused. Faith stared into his eyes, there was nothing else to say.

After a moment, she laid her head against his shoulder and sunk into the feel of their closeness, and enjoyed the dance. It was one of the most beautiful moments she’d had in a long time. It was as if she’d been waiting for this dance for so many years and now that it was here. She was determined to enjoy every moment of it.

Bruce’s hands were pressed to her back, one at the small of her back, the other a bit higher. His touch was strong, but soft, like a tender caress from someone who loved you. His head was pressed to hers as they danced; his body was strong and secure against her so she could relax and just enjoy the song.

They swayed slowly back and forth in a small circle; the music floated around them in the air, it was mystical. Faith

didn't want it to ever end. She wrapped her arms around his body, her face pressed lightly to his shoulder.

On legs that were weak, she kept moving and let him lead. Later she would realize she didn't remember the song, but she'd remember every thought and feeling she had then. The way he felt, the things Bruce said to her, the way the music floated through the air.

When the song ended, Faith pulled back a little to look at him but still in Bruce's arms. "Thank you, Bruce, that was lovely." She tried to pull back a little but he didn't let go.

"I missed this when we used to dance under the stars sometimes out here even before we started dating. You were my girl then, and I was your guy. I was a fool to just walk away and leave you behind. I don't know what I was thinking, just running I guess."

His lips were soft when he kissed Faith, and it took her breath away. Before she had a chance to think or react, he pulled back. Let her go and finish the bacon and sausage on the plate. "You really are a horrible cook, honey, your father would be laughing right about now."

Dance or no dance, kiss or no kiss his words snapped Faith out of her musings and the moment—he saw it too. Bruce cracked a smile, started laughing, tossed a piece of food at her, and hit the ground running.

Faith was amazed he could still run so fast with his leg. She had a hard time catching up to him when he jumped off the porch and hit the dirt at a run. She was right behind him as they ran straight for the pond.

"I'm gonna get you for that, Bruce!" Faith was laughing, the first carefree moment she'd had in a while, and kept laughing at the water's edge when he ran straight into the pond with his shoes and clothes from the night before. "Whew! If that wasn't a bold move!"

She couldn't stop laughing and watched delightedly as he walked out of the pond soaking wet, and muddy. He was smiling. "I bet you find this really funny, Faith."

“I do.”

Those were the wrong words because the next thing she knew he was picking her up and tossing her in the water with him. They both laughed hysterically and came out of the water muddy and soaked from head to toe.

“Oh, my goodness. I don’t believe you did that to me!” Faith stood at the water’s edge catching her breath and admiring his completely soaked work boots.

“Yeah, well if you’re dumb enough to chase me you should know where I’m going to go. Next time think twice and neither one of us will end up there.” He took her hand and they walked, uncaring of how they looked or where they were going.

There were a thousand things to do that day for the festival; the campground, her daughter, and herself but Faith didn’t get much done. She spent the afternoon walking and looking around in the woods with Bruce.

They tracked animals, took pictures, and talked about their lives in the time they were apart. Eventually, they settled by the water on a bench and shared a water bottle.

“I suppose you want to know about my OTH.”

“I do, but if you’re not ready to tell me I will wait. I had no right to do that, sometimes I’m impulsive.”

“It’s okay. The burglary... well, was a charge I had right before joining the service. I don’t know how they didn’t know but it took a long time or was buried for a while. I was down on my luck and did some things I shouldn’t have done. Eventually, it caught up to me years later. The assault charges were a mistake. The guy was baiting me, trying to get me to do something and he said some things that he shouldn’t have. Everyone knew it, all the other soldiers, since he did the same thing to them. We were out one night on an officer’s break, if you will, and he was disrespecting one of the women. He called her some nasty names and tried to force her to do things, so I stuck my two cents in and then it got worse, before you knew it I was laying him out for being so disrespectful to

her and her friends. He'd done this before and a few of the guys mentioned he shouldn't be allowed to do this at all. It was very disrespectful to women."

Faith listened intently to the story, frustrated that such a man could get away with something like that and Bruce was the one who got into trouble.

"By the time everything came to light no one said a thing, not even the women he'd mistreated, but they were all quick to chime in and blame me when he ended up in the infirmary for a broken nose, broken ribs, and a few other things."

"Wow, that's crazy, I can't believe no one stood up for you."

"I think they were afraid, his father was a sergeant and he thought that meant he could get away with murder. Apparently, they believed it too and I suffered. It's okay though. I knew my skills as a soldier and who I was, I wasn't about to let those women be mistreated by him no matter what that meant."

Faith was humbled by his story and understood how something like that could happen. She was still curious about the burglary but didn't ask any more questions when he didn't offer to expand on it. The last thing she wanted to do was ruin a perfectly good day with him.

When Hope came home off of the bus, Faith had moved to the office and Bruce went off to put out some flyers before he went to work.

Chapter 6

Bruce



The day had been perfect, the kind of time Bruce hoped to spend with Faith. When he left for work to drop off some flyers, he felt a sense of peace in himself he'd never felt before. It felt like everything in his life was going to go exactly as planned, which had never happened before.

He passed Hope on the way out, she was smiling from ear to ear. "Everyone at school knows about the festival, they are so excited. I can't believe this, it's so cool. Where are you going?"

If Bruce could have a child, he'd have wanted it to be someone like Hope. She was sweet and smart, funny and beautiful. Someday she was going to be a wonderful grown woman like her mother, even though they weren't biologically related.

"I have to go to work, silly. Plus I need to put more flyers out. Your mother is in the office. Can you tell me what kind of flowers she likes?"

She smiled. "Are you going to give her flowers? She likes all kinds but especially roses and orchids."

"I don't know yet, but maybe, but you have to keep a secret if I do, okay?"

"I will!" Hope jumped up and down. "I don't think my mother has ever gotten flowers."

"Well maybe one day she will, and I'm sure you will too sometime." Bruce left eager to get things done before he got to

work. He had a special stop to make on his way to work and there was no time to delay.

Five hours later he was packing it in, smiling to himself that he'd succeeded with his agenda. He closed his eyes that night after taking his medication and rested easy, with the knowledge that some good things were going to happen over the course of the next few days.

Morning came and he hurried to the office. There sat Faith at her desk, a smile on her face as she stared at a large vase filled with flowers. "Good morning. Who are the flowers from?"

"I'm not sure, they didn't come with a card but whoever sent them knows what I like, which is weird."

He sat down smiling on the inside as he watched her admiring them, every now and then she would sniff one or touch another. "Well, they're beautiful. I guess you have a secret admirer then."

Her eyes were soft and dreamy when she looked at Bruce. "I guess so. I wonder who though. I know a while back the fill-in mailman had a crush on me. He confessed it to me when he delivered mail and handed me a Valentine's Day card. It was so sweet, but I had to tell him I wasn't interested."

"Whatever happened to him? Was he struck by a cupid's arrow pointing to someone else?"

She laughed. "No, he still works on the other side of town and fills in for my mail carrier from time to time. He never said anything about it afterward but he's still very sweet to me. Maybe this is his way of reminding me he is thinking of me."

"And you don't have any other secret admirers?"

She cracked up. "Me? No. Nobody wants a woman who walks around in jeans and t-shirts all day, one who can build a fire just as well as they can and recite a list of the native plants, wild animals, and mushrooms in this area."

"Well then, at least someone is thinking of you. What are you going to do about it?" Bruce was baiting her, he wanted to see her reaction. He wanted to get a feel for how she felt, even

though what he saw and heard a few days ago was already a good induction.

“Nothing. If they don’t do anything, I won’t do anything. The flowers are lovely but that’s all. It’s not like I’m looking for romance, anyway. I’m too old for that kind of thing. I have a daughter to think about and a campground. Maybe when I’m in my sixties or something, a nice *before-the-grave-romance* to end my life happily.”

Bruce laughed, what else could he do?” Faith was one of those women you had to take as she was, and he was happy to take her as she was and they were as friends for now. *One day Faith. One day, in due time we will finish what we started a long time ago.*

He went about his business for the next few days. Everyone in town seemed to be excited about the festival, and when Bruce thought about it, they’d never had a Halloween Festival in town. It made him wonder why.

He worked at Mabelle’s Place and busied himself with fixing up little things at the campground now that things were quiet. In a few short days, their time together at the campgrounds took on an interesting routine.

Every morning, Faith would bring him coffee, sometimes something else like muffins she baked or a granola bar, but never anything she cooked. They’d sit and talk on his porch about the past, and all the time they’d missed in each other’s lives.

It cut him deep to learn of all the awful things her ex-husband did, how he treated her and his own flesh-and-blood child. For a man who’d spent his life running away from family and those types of commitments, he knew he wouldn’t have left that little girl or Faith behind when he left, ever.

They went for walks, looked at things to be fixed in each cabin, and Faith made notes of all the expenses these things would incur. Bruce even tried to learn soap making.

“Put this on, kind sir.” Faith smiled. “This gets hot and it’s dangerous. We have to heat it up, mix in everything that we

want to add, and put the mixture in the molds.”

“What’s this bottle for?” Bruce picked up a dark brown bottle with an eye dropper top.

Faith pulled up the stopper to show him. “These are the oils I want to add to this batch of soap. It’s going to be less floral, this is rosemary and then we’re going to add some spearmint. It’s going to awaken the senses for those who need some extra energy in their morning shower. I love rosemary.”

Bruce was impressed, he watched and did exactly what Faith told him to do. “Wow, I didn’t realize how much detail you put into soap making, right down to the scent, the flowers, and what they do for the person using them.”

She smiled. “My mother was a firm believer that if you create the right scent and the right mix of herbs, flowers, and oils, you’ll create the perfect shower or bath experience for them. For instance, tea tree oil is great for acne, poison ivy, athlete’s foot, and other skin conditions. Sometimes you have to mix it with other things for each of those conditions. Imagine coming down with a case of athlete’s foot after visiting a public shower somewhere and being able to use a bar of soap to cure it without all those nasty chemicals.”

By the time they were done, they’d made three dozen bars of soap and he was tired. He still had work to do that night at Mabelle’s. “Well... I have to go. I don’t want to but I saw Hope heading for the cabin and you probably have tons of things to do.”

Everything was almost all cleaned up. The tables were folded up, the supplies stored in the shed along with their gear and she was standing beside him, a smile on her lips. Bruce felt the tightness in his chest, looking at her with her hair glistening in the afternoon sun reminded him so much of yesterday.

“Standing there like that, you look ageless... It’s like yesterday and we’re kids again. It’s weird.” He laughed, caught off guard by his own reminiscing.

She looked at the ground, a pink stain on her cheeks, and smiled back at him. “Thank you, I’m glad I look like I’m twelve again.”

“I didn’t mean it like that.”

“I know. Get on out of here, Bruce. I know you have to go. Thanks for spending some more time with me. It’s great having someone around to keep my company at this time of year. Last year while Hope was in school it got a bit lonely and I played hooky quite a bit.”

“No problem.”

“Mom! Mom! There’s a package here for you.”

Bruce watched as Hope shoved a small brown box at her, curious. “Well, I wonder if your mailman friend left you another package.”

“What? Those flowers were from that mailman that used to ask Mom out on a date all the time?” Hope was smiling from ear to ear. “Mom’s got a secret admirer. Open it!”

Bruce wasn’t surprised when Faith made a face at her daughter. “Why don’t you open it.” She handed it back to Hope.

Amused, Bruce watched as Hope tore open the small box. Inside was an even smaller box, and when she popped it down, an adorable set of tiny earrings was inside. “Wow! Aren’t they beautiful?”

Hope held up the koala bear earrings—the koala bear’s paws held onto tiny crystals. “They are so cute. You love koala bears, Mom! Aren’t they your favorite?”

“I do but I can’t wear earrings in case they get caught on something while I work around here. I don’t make a habit of wearing any kind of jewelry. Any man who really knew me would know that. It must be from the mailman.”

Bruce studied her hands, her wrists, her neck, and ears. He was shocked to see she wore no jewelry. “You don’t even wear jewelry when you go out somewhere?”

She made a face again. “Not really, I love jewelry for those occasions but honestly, I never go anywhere. I’m pretty much here all the time.”

“Well, you could wear them to the Halloween Festival.” Bruce smiled, looking at Hope, quietly asking for her support, and then back to Faith.

Faith shook her head. “Nah, I’m good. Hope, you can have them. That kind of stuff doesn’t mean so much to me. It’s just jewelry.” She walked away, Hope on her coattails.

“These are so cool, I’m going to wear them to school tomorrow, Mom.”

Bruce frowned, gathered his thoughts, and got ready for work.

Chapter 7

Faith



The gifts just kept coming. The next day it was chocolate candy, which Faith happily ate before anyone saw her and tossed the tiny box in the trash.

When Bruce showed up, Faith was all smiles. “Hey partner, sorry I didn’t get to bring coffee but I had a ton of paperwork to do.”

He looked miserable as if he’d slept horribly again, but when Faith thought about it, she couldn’t recall hearing him screaming late at night or that anything was off. “Did you sleep okay?”

He grabbed himself a cup of coffee. “Yeah, but not enough. It was quite busy at Mabelle’s last night so I stayed late. When I got back my leg was hurting and I had a hard time getting comfortable.” He sat down across from her.

Faith didn’t wait to be asked twice. She could have rubbed his leg again but that was dangerous territory—touching him physically stirred up emotions she wasn’t ready to examine.

She did the next best thing... she grabbed her bottle of muscle rub and tossed it in the air at him. “Heads up.”

He caught it. “Thanks. So any more packages from your secret admirer?”

Faith smiled. “Maybe?” She buried her head in her computer and kept working, avoiding the topic altogether. “I have tons of orders for that new soap we made. I can’t wait to make more, I’m thinking of sandalwood and bergamot. I’m

thinking of making gift baskets for Christmas. I can make lotions, bath bombs, and things like that.”

Bruce was up and moving around. Faith did her best to focus her energy, the money was coming in quickly and she needed to keep her eye on the prize. That’s why she didn’t see him kick her wastebasket one way and reach in to pull something out.

“Looks like someone got a box of chocolates!” He laughed. “And they ate it all already.”

Guilty as sin, Faith giggled. “Of course, I ate it all. I love chocolate and I’ve been pretty busy this morning. They were delicious. I have to give the mailman that! He picked the right chocolates! I ate them all while working, I wasn’t paying attention. When I realized I’d eaten the last one, guilt never crossed my mind.”

He smiled. “Well then, he does have good taste after all.”

Faith snapped out of her silliness right away and peered at Bruce, squinting her eyes at him. She knew it wasn’t Bruce. That ship had sailed and sunk a long time ago, still the thought for a moment was nice until that reality from the past smacked her in the face.

“What?”

“Nothing, I was just thinking, but never mind. Listen, I have a ton of work to do today. Do you have a computer?”

“No, why?” He sat down across from her desk again.

“I need you to do some research if you have time. I need to research other grants and see if I can get other funding. Even if I secure enough money to keep this place for spring, I need money to do repairs and bring it up to date.”

Within thirty minutes, Faith set up a computer at another desk in the office and put Bruce to work. The music played in the background as they both worked side by side. She had to admit they worked well together, no matter what they were doing. It felt good to be doing it with someone else by her side but she didn’t want to get too comfortable with that thought.

Hope had come home from school all excited. Her friends loved the earrings from the mailman and she had a boy with her. Things were moving way too fast for Faith but she knew she couldn't control everything, so when Hope asked if he could stay for a while, she was at a loss for an excuse to get rid of him. *You're too young! It's too soon! I'm not ready for this! You're not ready for this! God, help me, please!*

"I think it's a good idea, as long as they stay out of all the cabins, they are under repair for the winter." Bruce threw his two cents in, Faith wanted to strangle him at that moment and glared at him.

"Sure. But only for a little bit, check back with me in an hour, Hope. Grab some snacks from the cabinet before you go." She smiled at Hope and her friend Jeremy before they left the office.

As soon as they were out of earshot she whirled on Bruce. "What in the world did you do that for?"

"So I can watch them for you. I know it's too soon for you, and probably her but this is what's happening today. You can't change it, and the more you try to push it away, it will get worse. So you let them be friends, invite him over, set ground rules like no inside any buildings where you can't see them and we can keep an eye on them so no funny stuff goes on."

Faith was taken aback by his matter-of-fact attitude toward the situation. After a few deep breaths and some thinking, she smiled as he was standing at the screen door, his eyes watchful. "You're right. Thanks. Can you keep an eye on them for me until I finish?"

"Absolutely. Already doing it. They headed for the pond. Excuse me, I might have some things to check out over there." He smiled and saluted Faith before walking out the door, holding his body rigid so his limp was less obvious.

Jeremy left an hour later after taking a walk with Hope and doing silly stuff. Bruce thankfully kept a close eye on them, reporting via text message what was happening every few minutes. Her insides felt all soft and fuzzy every time she

thought of how much Bruce seemed to care about her daughter.

Before she blinked, Hopes' friend Sandy from school showed up asking if Hope could have a sleepover.

“Please, Mom, can I please sleep over at her house?”

It was Friday, what could she say? She had to let the reins out a little bit so Hope could grow up happy and have some fun. Besides, she'd always loved sleepovers and all the fun stuff she and her girlfriends did back then. “Sure. It's Friday. But you have to be home no later than dinner time tomorrow.”

“Okay!”

Faith watched Hope and Sandy run off, and before she blinked Sandy's mother showed up to pick them up. “Thank goodness for modern technology. It was hard to get any type of service in the campground, and cell phone use was spotty at best. Somehow, the kids had found a spot where cell service worked and sent a message to Sandy's mother.

Faith waved them off from the office porch with a smile and saw Bruce headed her way. “Well, it looks like it's just you and me tonight. Hope went for a sleepover.”

“It looks like it should be an interesting night, look at those clouds over there.” Bruce hopped up on the porch pretending he didn't have an issue with his leg and smiled. Faith saw the concern in his eyes before she looked where Bruce had pointed.

“Wow! It looks like we're going to have one heck of a storm.” Faith loved storms, the loud thunder, the sharp lightning, and all she could think about was watching the storm as they sat on a porch somewhere safe and dry.

“Yes, it does.”

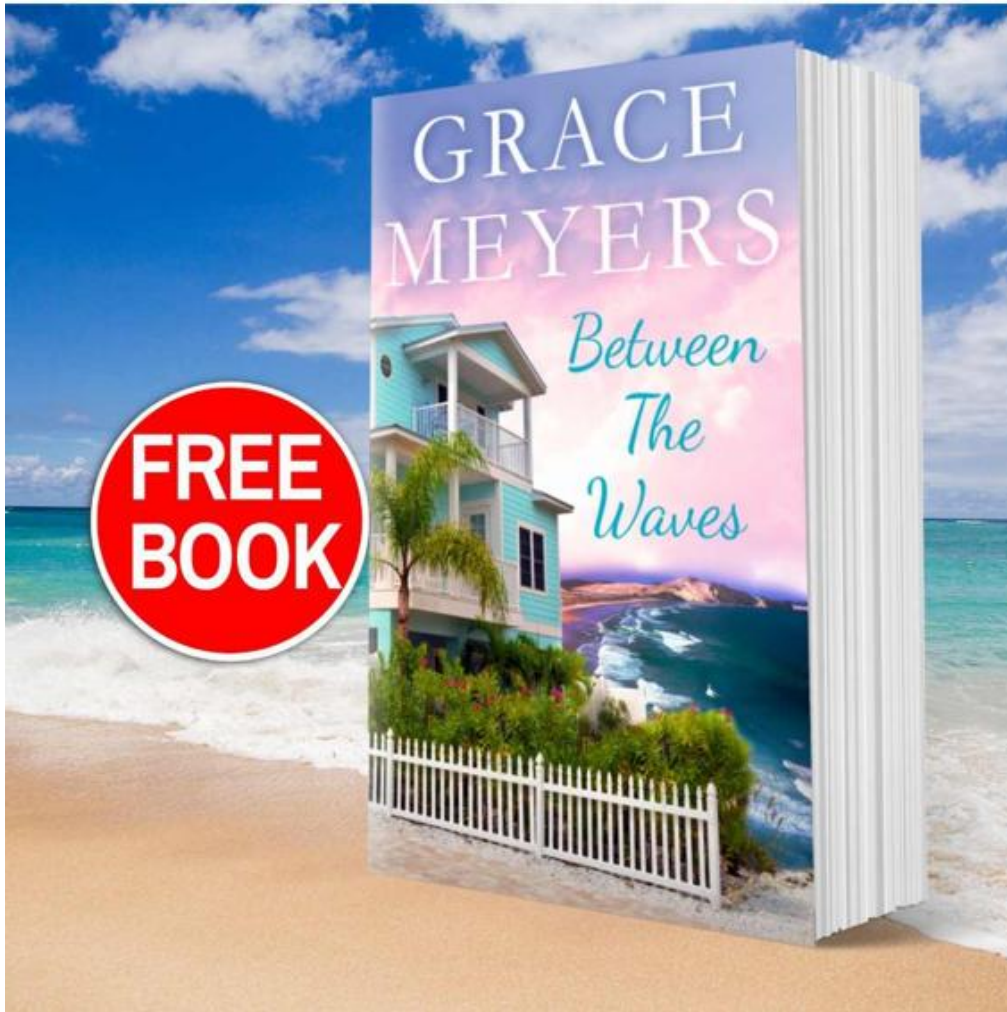
Two hours later, they were sitting on her porch. Bruce had taken up the chore of cooking in her kitchen while she waited and watched the show as a crackling sound followed by a loud bang sounded not far away.

Faith jumped up. “Oh, my goodness... Bruce!” Everything around them went dark.

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