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**C. G. COOPER**

**THE  
FOURTH**

A LONE PEAK HEROES NOVEL

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**THE FOURTH**

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**LONE PEAK HEROES**

**C. G. COOPER**



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## **“THE FOURTH”**

*Book 4 of the Lone Peak Heroes Series*  
*By C. G. Cooper*

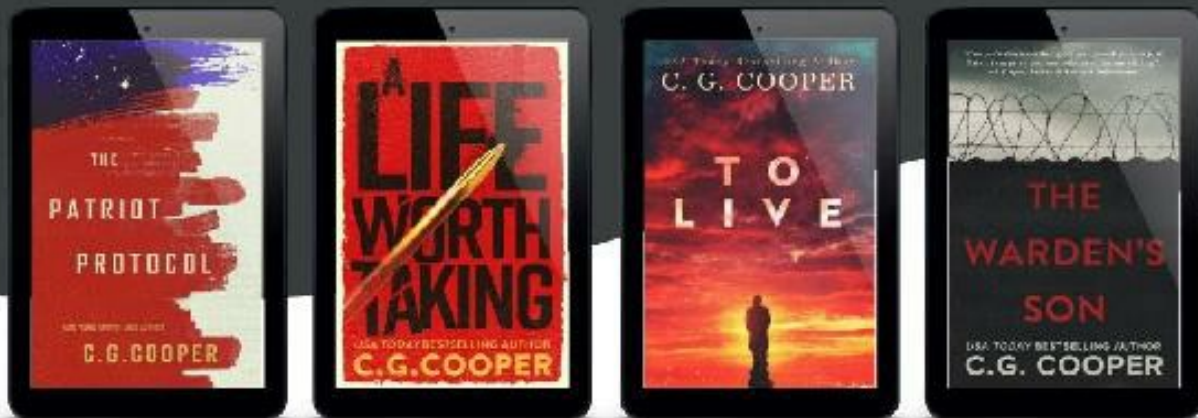
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## **DEDICATIONS**

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Thank you so much to all my wonderful beta readers. I appreciate you.

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## PROLOGUE

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The dream started the way it always did: peaceful, tranquil, devoid of shape and color. But as he took his first steps through that ethereal nothingness, the landscape began to take shape. Rolling hills and towering mountains with snowcapped peaks, thunder in the distance. But no, that wasn't thunder. Booming cannons and exploding ordnance. A shiver ran down his spine.

Day turned to night with a snap, and still his legs propelled him forward. He heard the familiar cries, the wails of wounded men, unintelligible at first. The rapid staccato of machine-gun fire. Then the smell hit his nose, burning rubber and burning flesh. Death and dying surrounded him like a horde of locusts. He felt the prickling creep of it over his scalp, down his arms, then his legs.

His heart pounded. He tried to say, "Please, no," but the words stuck in his mind. Cratered buildings appeared to his left and right, and debris littered the street. A pair of red-eyed dogs looked up from their dinner, a human corpse swarming with flies. The hellhounds returned to their meal, and he walked on.

*Boom, boom*, went the artillery. A distant crash, no doubt followed by a plume of unseen smoke and debris. He sensed the world shaking around him, but it did not deter his path, even as fear kept his eyes wide. The string of life bound to him was taut, pulling. There was no sense in fighting the unseen force.

More screams.

"Corpsman up. God, no!" someone said.

Bile rose in his throat as the familiar compound came into view. Jagged barbed wire and glass topped the wall, and a big black *X* was painted on the

double doors that led inside.

"No," he said, but his hand reached forward and pushed one of the doors open.

Inside, a pile of bodies and limbs writhed like worms. A face turned his way, and he winced at its moving lips, its unseeing eyes. Then, as always happened, every head in the pile, even the decapitated ones, turned his way. Eyes open, black as the void. Their mouths twisted into grins. Together, they said, "*Padre.*"

And all he could do was scream.

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# CHAPTER ONE

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## PETER CALLAHAN

"Ladies and gentlemen, my name is Mr. Callahan." He wrote his name in a swirling script on the whiteboard.

"What's your first name?" someone asked.

"Peter," he said, forcing a smile and ignoring his sour stomach, "but I go by Pete."

A couple of the sixth graders snickered. One pointed at him and whispered to his friend.

"Would anyone like to tell me what page you're on?" The tie around his neck itched. He wanted to remove it, but school policy required him to keep it on. *How old-fashioned*, he thought, but he needed the work.

"We're on page sixty-nine," one of the snickering boys said.

Pete ignored the quip and looked down at the notes from the teacher. Substituting could be a challenge.

"Ms. Blazack said that you're on page 112. If you could, please turn to that now."

Most of the kids flipped to the page they were supposed to.

He nodded at the smart aleck. "All right, young man. What's your name?"

"Ben," the boy said, still smiling.

"What's your last name, Ben?"

"Dover."

Pete grinned. "Ben Dover. Very clever. Tell me, Mr. Dover, would you like to come up here and teach the class?"

The kid's smile disappeared. "Oh, what?"

"I'm sorry. You seem to be the funny guy. Why don't you come up here? Tell the class a joke."

Pete moved away from the desk and pointed at where he'd been standing.

"Come on, Mr. Dover. I'm sure the class would love to hear one of your ticklers. What do you think?"

The boy shook his head, and his friends buttoned their lips.

"What about the rest of you?" Pete said to the class. "Any other jokes? I don't know about you, but I'd like to get through this period and then get some more coffee. Maybe take a walk outside in the brilliant sunshine."

He had their attention now. He'd found that being honest got to most kids. Not all, but most.

"Okay then. Can I get a volunteer to start reading at the top of page 112?"

In the front row, a girl with freckles cascading off each side of her nose raised her hand. "I can do it, Mr. Callahan."

Pete smiled and lifted the textbook. "Okay, then go ahead."

Later, as the students filed out of the classroom, Pete waved goodbye to Ben Dover and his crew. "Ben Dover," he mumbled to himself, chuckling. He went to his bag, rifled through the front pocket, and found a bottle of Tylenol. He popped two pills in his hand, threw both into his throat, and swallowed them dry. His head throbbed.

"How did it go?" a voice said from the door. "Anyone give you trouble?"

Pete turned and smiled at the principal, who'd given him the royal tour of the small school that morning. She looked young for her position, but he'd gotten the impression that she was more than capable.

"There was a Mr. Ben Dover," he said.

The principal's eyes twinkled. "Sixth graders are fun, particularly the ones who have older siblings. Have you done any substitute teaching at the middle-grade level?"

Pete shook his head. "I try to stick with the young ones. Third and fourth graders are my favorite."

"Well, we are pretty full in that department, but one of our fifth-grade teachers is about to go on maternity leave. Is the district going to keep you with us?"

"I don't know," Pete said, grabbing his coffee mug and heading for the door.

"How many of those have you had this morning?" the principal asked.

Pete searched her face for accusation. Finding none, he relaxed. "Too many, probably."

The principal glanced at the clock on the wall. "Well, you've got five minutes. I think they brewed a new pot in the break room. Would you like some company?"

He didn't see a wedding ring on her finger, but he figured she was just being kind. Despite the button-down shirt and tie, Pete Callahan knew he left much to be desired. If she could see inside him, she would run far, far away.

"Sure, that would be great. Maybe you can tell me if Ben Dover has a brother in the next class."

She laughed at that and walked him to the teachers' lounge, where she introduced him to some of the other staff. Most were kind and welcoming. A couple were gruff, worn by decades of stress. He did not blame them. Teaching was a demanding profession. Kids could be both kind and cruel, especially as they got older. By middle school, childhood curiosity changed, a harsh reality he had learned during one unfortunate subbing job as a seventh-grade math teacher. That's why he now stuck to the lower grades.

"Callahan. Callahan. Wait, are you related to Patty Callahan? Works down at the diner. Frizzy brown hair," asked the gym teacher, a man with a potbelly and an easy smile.

"No, sorry," Pete said.

"Oh. Where are you from originally?"

"Boston."

"Oh, Boston. You a Patriots fan?" Football. Every gym teacher he'd ever met had always asked about football. So rather than tell the man that he preferred the Celtics, he played along.

"Sure, I'm a Patriots fan, but I'm more of a Tom Brady fan."

The gym teacher shook his head. "You better not say that around here too much."

"Speak for yourself, Jim," another teacher said. She was eating a sandwich even though it was nine in the morning. "I wouldn't mind if Tom Brady came and visited us."

Rolling his eyes, Jim said, "Well, Pete, if you need anything, anything at all, you know where to find me."

"Let me guess, the gym?" Pete grinned like he knew the man expected him to. He was good at playing the game, at showing people what they wanted: someone polite, personable, normal. Inside, he was anything but, and really, all he wanted was to get in his car and drive away.

He glanced up at the clock. Well, only seven hours left to go.

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## **CHAPTER TWO**

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## PETE

Downing the dregs of his stale coffee, Pete reciprocated the waves of a couple of teachers and got into his car, a beat-up relic of the early nineties that most people assumed was a Pinto. He tossed his bag in the passenger seat, grabbed the steering wheel, and prayed the damn thing would start. After a couple of coughs, the engine caught, and he thanked his lucky stars.

Though tired and hungry, he had a stop to make before going home. But home wasn't really *home*. It was just another sojourn on what felt like the endless trail of his life. At least this town in rural North Carolina was starting to become familiar. Pete Callahan didn't know whether that was good or bad. Daring to hope it was good seemed risky.

The same cashier as last time stood at the checkout counter, head bent over his phone, when Pete entered the liquor store. The joint was empty apart from the two of them. He walked straight back to the vodka aisle, making a show of picking a beverage, even though he already knew which one. He snatched a fifth from the shelf and did a little more perusing, having no intention of buying anything else.

When he set the fifth on the counter, the man looked up from his phone, irritated at the interruption, and gave Pete a once-over.

*He remembers me, he thought. Best find a new store.*

The man took his time scanning the barcode, verifying the price, and then sliding the bottle into a paper bag.

"Cash or card?"

"Cash," Pete said, holding out a twenty-dollar bill.

The cashier accepted the bill, then held it up to the light and ran his fingers over it. "You never can be too careful these days," he said, like he worked for the Secret Service's counterfeiting department. Satisfied, he opened the register and extracted the change. "You need a receipt?"

"No thanks."

With a grunt, the cashier handed over the bag and change, then returned to his phone.

"Have a nice day," Pete said.

The man ignored him, so Pete left, holding the door open for a pregnant

woman who came inside pushing a stroller. She looked disheveled and exhausted. In a previous life, he would've said a prayer for her. Now he nodded and made sure the stroller didn't catch on the bottom of the doorjamb. When he turned back toward his car, he spotted someone sitting on the hood.

"Hello, Pete," the woman said, her dark-brown hair pulled to one side, cascading over her shoulder.

"Natalie?" He hadn't seen Natalie Andolini in how long? Years.

She got up from the hood, strode over, and hugged him. He returned the embrace, awkward and out of his element. She didn't seem to notice. A moment later, she let go and looked him over, her eyes catching on the paper bag in his hand. The reminder of what he held made him salivate.

"I like the beard," she said. "Goes with the tie."

"What are you doing here?" he asked, grimacing.

"Do you believe in happy coincidences?"

"Not really."

Natalie watched him with her head tilted. She was different somehow, he realized. Clear-eyed. Maybe because of the bind she'd gotten herself into—and then out of—with the air force. She was a brilliant pilot, but also a troublemaker. He'd helped her out of a few predicaments in the past, but he had no interest in doing so now. He wanted nothing more than to say goodbye, pack up his things, and head to the next town. Registering with a new school district was always a pain, but he considered it a small price to pay for anonymity. Besides, he had a spotless substituting record to ease the process along.

"Why are you here, Natalie?" he asked again.

"I need your help, Pete."

He sighed. "I don't think I'm the one you should be asking for help. Sorry, Natalie."

"Oh no. I think you're the only person I should ask for on this one."

He looked away. He couldn't meet her gaze. It felt like her eyes were dissecting him one layer at a time, and Pete knew if he stood there much longer, he'd either say or do something he would regret. Something that even the bottle in his hand couldn't clear his conscience of. He was tired of living with his sins. He didn't need to add another one to the pile.

Natalie pulled an envelope out of her pocket and held it out. "There's an airline voucher and a check in there."

"What? Natalie, I—"

She held up a hand. "I know you're scraping by. I know you've been here for five months. I know you took out a loan at nineteen percent for that car you're driving."

"What? How?" The anger started to rise in him.

"I think you need me as much as I need you." Natalie stepped forward, nudging the envelope closer to his empty hand.

"You don't know what you're talking about," he said, sounding harsher than he'd intended.

She did not back down. "I don't care what kind of car you drive, Pete. I just care about your wellbeing. And I want you to know that I've built a new life for myself. A new home. I met someone, and I want to introduce you to him. Come visit and see. It'll be good for us both."

"Natalie, look, I can't. I'm substituting. They're expecting me tomorrow."

"I'm not saying you have to come today," she said. "But I'd like you to come soon."

"Where, Natalie? Where do you want me to come?"

"Montana. It's beautiful. Have you ever been?"

"One time as a kid. My parents took us to Yellowstone. Beautiful country," he said.

"It is. It's a wonderful place." She folded her arms over her chest and raised an eyebrow at him. "Look, before you ask, no, I don't need you to do what you used to do. That's not what I'm asking."

Deep inside, he breathed a sigh of relief. The old hymn had died long gone, and he did not want to dig up its cadaver. Natalie sensed the shift in him and held out the envelope once more. Without thinking, he took it.

"Then what are you asking? I don't understand why you're here."

"I'm here as a friend, Pete. A friend who wants to show you something. Something I think you'll like. Hell, worst case, you get a nice vacation at Lone Peak Ranch. We've got a chef, comfortable beds, and plenty of fresh air."

"I don't think I can make it, Natalie." He handed back the envelope. She didn't take it.

"Do you remember what you told me long ago, back when we first met?"

Pete shook his head. He didn't want to open that door.

"You told me sometimes a person needs to have a little faith. So that's what I need, Pete. I need you to have a little faith in me. Can you do that?"

Pete Callahan didn't answer. He no longer had any faith to give, but

somehow, some way, he said, "I'll think about it."

Natalie smiled. "That's all I ask. I'll be in touch."

She did not hug him again, just walked away. He looked down at his hands, at the envelope in his palm, and curiosity got the best of him.

He opened the envelope and pulled out the airline voucher. It was a round-trip ticket to Bozeman, Montana. He pulled out the check, and his eyes went wide. It was made out to him—in the amount of \$25,000.

Upon returning to his sublet room, Pete set the check and the airline voucher on the tiny desk where he did his school prep. For the rest of the night, he took pulls straight from the fifth, staring at the check, letting his mind cast back in time until the booze told him to go to bed.

He didn't change. He didn't brush his teeth. He simply lay down and closed his eyes, hoping that he would have a dreamless sleep, that he'd consumed enough vodka to numb his mind.

The nightmare proved undeterred. When he woke up at three in the morning, he was screaming.

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## CHAPTER THREE

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## NATALIE ANDOLINI

Natalie double-checked that everything was turned off in the cockpit of the two-seater plane she'd recently purchased. She planned for the new aircraft to benefit not only Lone Peak Ranch, but the local community as well. When the time came, she would aid the fire department in their battle against forest fires, like she had months before during her harrowing introduction to Big Sky.

A police cruiser pulled up next to the hangar as Natalie stepped down from the plane. She smiled and waved at the broad-chested cop who exited the car. Luke Harlow smiled back and then settled in to wait, knowing it was her habit to do a once-over of the plane's exterior following each flight.

"I missed you," he said when she finally nestled into his warm embrace.

"I missed you, too." She kissed him on the lips, wanting nothing more than to spend the day with him. She suspected that this thing between them was turning into something more. Something big. "I see they gave you a uniform that fits."

He chuckled. "I had to get it tailored. Still, these shoulders don't sit well."

Luke was a handsome man with an easy smile and a strength that belied his tender heart and caring disposition. When they'd first met, the last thing she'd been looking for was a relationship. Her life had been rocky at the time, which was why her Navy SEAL friend, DJ Bannon, had invited her to come to Lone Peak Ranch. She'd arrived determined to regain her flight status and return to full duty in the air force. While the former part of that dream had come to fruition, the latter had passed her by. That was okay. She had a new dream now. She didn't know quite what it looked like yet, but she knew Luke was part of it.

"How'd she fly?" he asked, taking her hand.

"No issues. In fact, I was thinking about taking her up again this afternoon. Would you like to join me?"

Luke shook his head. "I'm still a little squeamish from last time. Give me another couple of months."

She elbowed him in the side. "You can't hide from me forever."

"Oh, I'm not hiding from you. I'm hiding from that." He pointed at the

sky. "I like my feet on terra firma. It gives me the TLC I need."

Natalie laughed and tapped his badge. *Big Sky Police Department*, it read. "How many bad guys did you catch today?"

Less than a year ago, Luke had been a policeman in Oregon—a good one, too. His record stood for itself. But when he'd taken a leave of absence and come to Montana, the two of them had unintentionally uncovered the corruption of Big Sky's police department, leaving the city in dire need of good cops. So, when the mayor had offered the vacant police chief position to Luke, he'd accepted.

"Just one," he said.

"Ooh, tell me all about it."

Luke leaned against the cruiser, his expression sobering. "It was a tough one. She was four years old. Blond hair. Cute as a button. Now hold on because this is going to be shocking. She took a lollipop without asking, without paying, from the grocery store."

"My God! What did you do?" Natalie said, giggling.

"Well, her mother wanted me to teach her a lesson." Luke tried to keep up his serious act, but a laugh escaped as he added, "I swear, if my mom was half the hard-ass that woman was, I probably would've run away at the age of five."

"But what happened?"

"The mother made her go inside and give a dollar to the manager, who, by the way, could barely stop himself from cracking up. Then I showed her the back seat of the cruiser where the criminals sit and had a little talk with her."

"Well, what did you tell her?"

"I told her that I'd let her off with a warning. I told her that as long as she paid attention in preschool and didn't do it again, we could be friends, and maybe one day, I could give her a ride in the car. Then I let her run the siren."

"Well, that was nice of you."

"Are you kidding? That girl made my day."

"I thought I made your day," Natalie teased.

Luke picked her up and twirled her around, taking the breath from her. "You always make my day. That's a given." He put her down and kissed her again. "Now, tell me about your trip. How was the priest?"

"I told you he's not a priest. Not anymore."

"Okay. Then how was your friend?"

She frowned. "What Olivia found doesn't do him justice. He's been through the wringer. I followed him to a liquor store, and I'm pretty sure he's a regular customer. He looks like he's aged twenty-five years."

"When was the last time you saw him?"

"Four, no, maybe six years ago."

Luke scratched his head. "You still think we got the right guy?"

That's what Natalie had been wondering for the duration of her return flights. But according to DJ, Jack, and most importantly, Olivia Northcutt, the widow of Brendan Northcutt, who'd founded Lone Peak Ranch with his fortune, there were no rules. Only instinct.

"You search your heart, Nat," DJ had told her. "Find that person you always wanted to help. For me, it was you. You give them an invitation. Either they show, or they don't. If they do, you make them feel welcome, give them a job to do, and then let this place work its magic."

"Okay. I get it," she'd said, understanding. She'd seen the magic of Lone Peak Ranch work in her own life and Luke's, in the lives of DJ and Alexis, Jack and Sadie. Still, Pete Callahan was another story. When she'd looked into his eyes outside that liquor store, she'd glimpsed a vast wasteland of despair. He'd tried to hide it, but she was an expert at identifying lost souls. She'd known within an instant of their reunion that Pete was walking without a map.

"Yeah, I think he's the right guy," she said at last. "Now we wait to see if he shows."

Luke grunted and opened the passenger door for her.

"You're not going to make me ride in the back?" she asked, a coy smile on her lips.

He swatted her behind. "Behave, or I really will put you back there."

Natalie's soft smile split into a grin, and she slid down onto the leather seat. It was good to be home. Nevertheless, anxiety turned her stomach. What if Pete Callahan chose not to get on that flight? Or what if he did, but the magic of this place wasn't enough for him?



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## CHAPTER FOUR

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## LIEUTENANT PETE CALLAHAN – FIVE YEARS EARLIER

Lieutenant Pete Callahan of the Navy Chaplain Corps yanked his backpack off the back seat and closed the door. "Thanks for the ride, Corporal."

"You got it, Lieutenant. Good luck."

The Humvee rumbled down the road. Callahan, who'd served three years as a civilian Catholic priest before deciding to become an officer in the navy, turned and faced his new assignment, the Eighth Marine Regiment in Camp Lejeune, North Carolina. He was in his summer whites, carrying his records in his left hand along with his backpack. On the way into headquarters, he returned salutes no fewer than five times.

"May I help you, sir?" a skinny lance corporal said when he approached the front desk.

"Lieutenant Pete Callahan reporting in, Lance Corporal."

The Marine's face brightened. He stood up from his chair and held out his hand. "We heard you were coming, sir. It's a pleasure to meet you. My wife and I go attend mass every Sunday at the base chapel."

"Well, that's good to know. Maybe you can show me around if you've got the time."

"Yes, sir. Anything you need." The lance corporal reached for his desk phone and pressed a button. Into the handset, he said, "Yes, sir. The chaplain's here. Yes, sir. I'll send him in." He hung up and smiled at Callahan. "The colonel's ready for you, sir."

"Do you mind if I leave my bag here?"

"No, sir. I'll make sure that no one messes with it."

"Thank you." He marched into the regimental commander's office, stepped before the colonel's desk, came to attention, and said, "Lieutenant Pete Callahan checking in, sir."

"At ease, Lieutenant," the colonel said.

When Callahan looked down, he saw that the colonel was wind-worn and suntanned, as if he'd spent decades in the desert. The colonel stood from his chair. Despite his shorter stature, the man was imposing. He walked around his desk and offered a hand to Callahan. It was warm and firm, like a Marine colonel's should be.

"Have you met your predecessor yet?"

"No, sir. I came straight here."

The colonel nodded. "I won't tell you what's what, but I will say that you come highly recommended."

That surprised Callahan. He'd done a short tour on a supply base in San Diego, but it had involved more Sunday masses and gin rummy than actual pastoring.

"Bishop O'Neill and I are old friends," the colonel said. "I was a baby lieutenant when he served in your current position."

Callahan's expression brightened. "Yes, sir. The bishop is a wonderful man."

"He's more than that, Fa—Lieutenant. Sorry, I'm having a hard time not calling you Father. I grew up in a Catholic family, though I'm loath to admit that I'm more of a recovering Catholic these days. But the good bishop, when he was Lieutenant O'Neill, used to outwork, out-hump, and out-PT most of my Marines."

Callahan chuckled. "Yes, sir. That sounds like the bishop. He was the one who got me ready for Officer Candidate School."

"Does he still run the Boston Marathon yearly?"

"Yes, sir."

"Impressive," the colonel said. "Well, when you speak to him next, please give him my best."

"Yes, sir. I will."

The colonel resumed his seat, then motioned for Callahan to take the chair in front of his desk. "I'm sure you know our deployment schedule, right, Lieutenant?"

"Yes, sir. They tell me it's a six-month workup, and then we'll be gone for six, maybe seven months."

"That's almost right," the colonel said. "We received word things are heating up in Afghanistan again, so they want us there in three months. I know you're not married, but will that give you enough time to get settled?"

"Yes, sir. I'm staying in the BOQ, so that shouldn't be a problem."

"Have any belongings that you need help with?"

"Not much, sir."

"Part of that whole vow-of-poverty thing?"

Callahan chuckled. "Not exactly, sir. I've been a bachelor for a long time. Don't have a lot of needs. Taking care of the Lord's flock keeps me busy. I

look forward to meeting your Marines and sailors, sir."

"Our Marines and sailors," the colonel echoed. "I want you to take their wellbeing to heart because your predecessor didn't. I won't speak ill of him, but I will say you have some ground to make up for the Almighty. If you need my assistance, I can step in, but as I'm sure you know by now, nobody wants the colonel coming in on their side if they don't have to."

"Yes, sir," Callahan said.

He'd found out early on that ringing the bell for higher help rarely worked in one's favor, especially when attempting to cater to the junior enlisted. They could be a wonderfully cynical group, but also fiercely loyal once their trust was earned.

"I'm sure I can handle it, sir. Is there anything else I should know about? Should I look in on the sergeant major?"

"As for your first question, no, you can figure it out. As for your second, yes, the sergeant major would like a visit. Now, if you would excuse me, I've got some battalion commanders to poke and prod."

Callahan stood up at attention and said, "Permission to be dismissed, sir."

"You are dismissed, Lieutenant." As Callahan turned away, the colonel added, "You bring that spit and polish to your job, and I'm sure the troops will be flocking to you in no time."

"Yes, sir. Thank you, sir."

Lieutenant Pete Callahan had every intention of doing just that.

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## CHAPTER FIVE

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## PETE

It took him three days to call the airline and book his flight to Bozeman, Montana. He could have blamed the delay on making the necessary arrangements for his substitute teaching position, but that would have been a lie. The job was flexible. He also could have blamed it on his fear of flying, or on his fear of opening old wounds from his military days. Those would have been lies, too. The truth was that he'd gone on a three-day bender, leaving his room only to buy more libations.

On the morning of his flight, Pete showed up at the Raleigh airport thirty minutes later than he'd planned, feeling haggard despite his recent shower and clean clothes. Luck was on his side, however, and he made it through security with time to spare. There was a Western Union kiosk that needed his attention. He'd forgotten to find one the day before. Usually, he was like clockwork.

He checked his account balance. Pitiful, even though the check from the military had come in. He instructed the Western Union cashier to send his limited funds to three separate accounts. She completed his request, then provided him with receipts. A quick glance at the last one told him his final balance. Precisely \$21.32.

*What the hell*, he thought, searching for the closest bar. Fortunately, he didn't have to go far. Even better, it was their happy hour. Buy one, get one free. He ordered two beers and two shots of tequila. *That should relax me for the trip.*

A man came on the intercom to commence boarding for the Bozeman flight. Shouldering his bag, Pete went to the designated gate, scanned his ticket, and walked onto the plane. Within seconds of settling into his seat, he passed out against the window.

Someone shook him awake. He opened his eyes and saw a flight attendant.

"Sir, you're the last one on board."

Pete looked around, and sure enough, no other passengers remained.

"I'm sorry," he said, embarrassed. He didn't like the way the flight attendant's eyes followed him. Had he done something in his sleep? Had he

said something? Perhaps screamed? No. She wanted to get home, and he was slowing that process.

"Thank you," he said as he walked toward the exit, bag in hand, head swimming from the waning alcohol.

He made a pit stop at the airport bathroom, then found baggage claim. His tattered suitcase rumbled out of the chute, and he snatched it up. Natalie had said someone would be waiting in arrivals with a car. Pete thought about running upstairs, finding a restaurant, and grabbing another drink before catching his ride. He somehow ignored the impulse, knowing he would likely regret his control later.

The first thing he noticed outside was the air. Despite numerous cars and planes, the breeze was crisp and fresh. Reviving. Pete took in a deep breath, shocked by how much he needed it. About ten yards away, a man stood holding a white piece of paper with his name on it. He wore boots, faded jeans, a sweat-stained Stetson hat, and an expression that could cut through a news anchor's bullshit.

"I'm Pete Callahan," he said, raising his hands and getting the cowboy's attention.

The man didn't respond. He just crumpled up the piece of paper, shoved it in his pocket, and opened the hatch of a black SUV. When Pete approached, the man collected his bags and tossed them into the cargo area. He then closed the hatch and went around to the driver's seat.

*Not one for small talk*, Pete thought. He took the front passenger seat instead of the back, hating the feeling of being chauffeured around. It didn't seem like the man minded.

"I didn't catch your name," Pete said, offering his hand.

"Buster," the man said.

"Nice to meet you, Buster."

Buster's hand had the crags and creases of a man who'd spent his life outdoors, probably wrestling bulls and chasing down grizzly bears.

"There's a cooler in the back seat with water," Buster said. "Snacks, too, if you want them."

"That sounds great. Thanks."

Pete grabbed a bottle from the cooler, then a granola bar from a canvas bag. They left the airport, driving away from Bozeman, toward the distant hills. Conway Twitty crooned on the radio as they passed through the Montana lowlands. Pete found himself thankful for the food and drink; they

soothed his uneasy stomach. He polished them off and reached for round two.

*Don't drink too much*, he cautioned himself. He didn't want to ask this gruff cowboy for a restroom stop.

Buster drove slow and steady, never going more than five miles over the speed limit. He kept his hands on the wheel at ten and two and his eyes straight ahead, only glancing left or right or into the rearview mirror when he changed lanes, which he rarely did.

Accepting that Buster would not be a source of conversation, Pete welcomed the silence and sat back to watch the scenery roll by. The serene countryside lulled him to sleep. For a good forty-five minutes, he was out. Then a bump in the road jerked him awake. Bleary-eyed, he looked around. Mountains towered over them now, and a river ran to their right. Fly fishermen were casting their lines into the water, chasing the day's catch.

"Do you fish?" Pete asked.

"I'm from Montana," Buster said.

"I see. Well, I've never been fly-fishing. Is it hard?"

Buster mumbled something to himself before saying, "Takes patience. If you've got it, you can learn."

"Thanks for the tip," Pete said. Then he shut his mouth, content to avoid another stern rebuke. He was anxious enough, and idle conversation would just dislodge more difficult feelings. What he needed was a drink.

When they reached Big Sky, Pete asked, "Do you think we could stop at a grocery store? I'd like to pick up a couple of things if that's okay."

"There's food at the ranch."

"Right," Pete said, fidgeting with his seat belt. "But I'd like to bring something for Natalie."

"We can get you anything you need when we get to the ranch."

His cheeks heated, but he doubled down on the half-lie. "Buster, I'm sorry. I don't mean to be rude, but I'd like to pick out something for her if that's okay. As a thank-you."

Buster didn't look at him, but he put on his right blinker. Soon they pulled into the parking lot of a grocery store.

"I'll be right back," Pete said.

The first thing he did was find a bathroom. He studied at himself in the mirror and splashed his face with cold water a few times. Refreshed, he dried his face, re-entered the store, and hunted down the wine aisle.

He'd cleared out his bank account at the airport bar, but he still had forty



bucks in cash. So, he selected two bottles, a twenty-dollar one for Natalie and a six-dollar one for himself. After checking out, he returned to the bathroom. All the stalls were vacant. He unscrewed the cap of the cheap wine bottle and proceeded to guzzle half its contents. The warmth seeped through him, and his mind cleared.

*Good, that's better.*

Pete stuck a hand in his pocket and touched the worn leather of his nearly empty wallet. He could have sworn he felt Natalie's check burning a hole through it. For the hundredth time since she'd handed him the envelope, he scolded himself for not cashing it. But the thought of accepting twenty-five grand he didn't deserve made him uncomfortable. He was not the man he used to be, but he wasn't a beggar or a thief, either. At least not yet.

There was no harm in keeping the check until he learned what Natalie wanted, he decided. Then he could either earn the money or give it back. In the meantime, however, he needed courage. The liquid version suited him fine, so he drank another quarter of the wine. The last quarter went into a toilet. He stashed the drained bottle under a couple of paper towels in the trash can and exited the bathroom.

As he ambled back down the grocery store aisle, he figured he should grab a pack of gum to freshen his breath. He paid, popped a piece in his mouth, and returned to Buster's idling SUV.

"I got it," Pete said, holding up the bottle.

Buster nodded, waiting for Pete to secure his seat belt. When the metal pieces clicked together, the cowboy shifted into drive and navigated out of the parking lot.

"I hope she likes red wine. Do you know if she does?"

"No idea," Buster said.

"How long until we get there?"

"Ten minutes. Fifteen if we hit traffic."

The two men fell quiet as they departed Big Sky's town center and weaved along a narrow highway. When Buster pulled onto a dirt road, Pete felt something wash through him. He shifted in his seat, attributing the feeling to nerves.

Buster looked at him, grinning for the first time, and said, "You feel it, don't you?"

"Sorry?" Pete asked.

"The magic." Buster turned back to face the road ahead. "If you don't feel

it now, you will soon."

Pete gulped, trying to force the dread from his heart.

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## **CHAPTER SIX**

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## NATALIE

Even though he was chewing gum, Natalie still smelled the alcohol on him when they hugged.

"Welcome to Lone Peak Ranch," she said, trying to sound cheery, but her heart sank at the sight of him. The brave face he put on did little to hide his fear.

"It's beautiful," Pete said. "You'll have to tell me how you found it."

She grabbed his arm and guided him inside while Buster took his bags to his room.

"Oh, here, I almost forgot." Pete handed her a bottle of wine. "A little thank-you. I didn't know what else to buy. What do you give the gal who gave you a twenty-five-thousand-dollar check?"

"Thanks, and you know you didn't need to do that."

"Yeah, I really did." He laughed, sounding a bit drunk, and spittle flew from his mouth.

She maintained a straight face. "What can I get you? Are you hungry?"

"Why don't you give me a tour of the place?" he said, his voice controlled now. He stood tall and flashed her a charming smile. "Give me a rundown of what you'd like me to do. We'll take it from there."

Natalie nodded, trying to hide her surprise at his sudden composure. She wondered how long he'd been turning himself on and off. She couldn't imagine teaching children while fighting a hangover, but she knew there were people who did. Luke had once told her that a high percentage of drivers on the road were either on prescription medication, coming off a drink, or flat-out wasted. Natalie didn't like to think about such statistics. She hoped the numbers were opposite in the air. Most pilots kept their drinking off the clock, though they had a way of closing down a bar whenever they got the chance.

In any case, she wasn't one to judge. She'd had plenty of *fun* nights in her time. So, she dropped all thoughts of Pete Callahan's relationship with alcohol and gave him a tour. They explored the main lodge first, the modernized barracks next, and then the stables. After saying hello to all the horses, she led him around the property and pointed out sites where the ranch

was planning a pavilion, a kid's activity area, and even a swimming pool.

"You look tired, Pete," she said as they meandered down a short nature trail. "Would you like to take a nap?"

He chuckled. "I thought you'd never ask. I guess I'm not used to traveling anymore. I'm wiped out."

"Would you like some food before you sleep, or do you want me to wake you for dinner?"

"I don't want to be a bother," he said. "I think I remember where the kitchen is, and I'm sure I can scrounge something up if I need it. It might take me a day or so to get my bearings, if you know what I mean."

"Sure," she said.

Natalie escorted him back to the lodge and once again showed him where his room was. She wanted to ask him how he was doing. She wanted to reassure him that everything would be fine. But she couldn't. She had to let Lone Peak do its thing, let the magic flow. The rest would take care of itself.

She settled for giving him a warm smile and a hug. "It's so cool," she said. "Having you here, I mean. I'm so glad you came. In the morning, I'll show you what we thought you'd enjoy helping with. If that's okay."

"Sure, sure. Once I've got my head back, I'm all yours."

He went into his room and closed the door, and Natalie stood there for a good long moment. She wondered if he'd plop right down on the bed and knock out.

*Poor man*, she thought. Hopefully, Pete would manage to climb out of his dark hole. It was up to him to do the work. She had done her own not too long ago, and she'd been rewarded with a full life to live. Praying Pete would find the same, she went to ask the chef about dinner.

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## CHAPTER SEVEN

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## LIEUTENANT PETE CALLAHAN – FIVE YEARS EARLIER

Lieutenant Pete Callahan spent his first week at Camp Lejeune making the rounds. First Battalion, Eighth Marines was deployed, so that left Second Battalion and Third Battalion for him to seek out.

He kicked off his introductions with the battalion commanders, the sergeant majors, the company gunnery sergeants, the company commanders, the platoon commanders, and the platoon sergeants. He'd learned that starting from the top was a good way to establish himself at a new assignment. When he went right out and talked to the Marines and sailors first, their leaders often got peeved.

His outreach efforts encountered mild resistance. One lieutenant, a platoon commander, asserted he was an atheist. He then told the chaplain in no uncertain terms that his Marines were off-limits.

"There's training to be done, Lieutenant," the platoon commander said. He hadn't even gotten up from his desk to greet Callahan. His respect for the chaplain's higher rank only went so far, apparently. "I don't want my Marines thinking they can run to you with all their problems."

"You're a mustang," Callahan said.

A mustang was a prior-enlisted Marine officer who'd come up through the ranks and received a commission. They were considered more experienced upon hitting the fleet.

"Yes, sir," the platoon commander said.

"How do you think the men take to that?"

"They take it the way I want them to, Lieutenant."

"And how is that?" Callahan refused to rise to the challenge.

"They get up in the morning when I tell them to, put on their PT gear, and we go for a run. Then they go back to the barracks and get showered. They put on their uniforms for the day. Some days, we drill for half an hour in the quad. Other days, we go straight to the armory and clean the weapons. Some days, we go to the field and then eat lunch at the chow hall. Sometimes it's MREs in the field and more training. Then it's lights-out."

"I'm not your enemy, Lieutenant," Callahan said.

The platoon commander scowled. "No disrespect, but you're also not my

friend, sir."

"Very well. I'll leave you to it, but if you need me . . ."

"I won't."

Callahan walked away. It was far from his first time being rebuffed. He'd never been to combat, but he figured the Marine lieutenant had. Some came home bitter; others returned with renewed faith. Whatever their disposition, it was Callahan's job to see to their spiritual well-being. For each man and woman, that meant something different.

The following morning, he decided he had settled in enough to resume his daily routine. He entered the gym at 0500 hours and spent ninety minutes honing his body with heavy weights and a long run. Within days, word got out that the new chaplain was somewhat of a gym rat, and Marines and sailors began approaching him during his workouts to introduce themselves.

As the men and women of Camp Lejeune grew to accept Callahan, he found himself grateful again for his mentor, Bishop O'Neill. The man had prepared him right, and his advice continued to be spot-on.

"If you want to gain the respect of Marines, you can't walk in with a crucifix and start tossing holy water," O'Neill had cautioned him. "You must prove yourself to them. You must show them you can keep up. But don't ever think you're one of them. They're a special breed. And you? You are there to help them."

The other chaplains in the division needed no special coaxing to welcome Callahan into their fold. One of them, a portly man who radiated faith, invited him to help with the weekend services. He accepted, and through his volunteer work, he began to meet the families on base. For the most part, people were kind to him. But beneath their kindness, he sensed a current of unease. He reckoned it stemmed from his predecessor's mysterious mistakes.

It was a conversation with a private first class that ultimately convinced Callahan he belonged at Lejeune. He happened upon the young man while out on a stroll. The Marine was sweeping the driveway going up to the motor pool. They exchanged hellos and then struck up a conversation. The PFC admitted he used to be a sergeant, but that he'd been busted down multiple times.

"I'm not complaining, Lieutenant," the Marine said. "I did what I did, and I take responsibility for it, but I'm a good Marine and leader . . ."

"It's okay," Callahan said. "But would you happen to have another broom? Maybe I can help you so they don't think I'm keeping you distracted."



The chore took hours, and the chaplain got many stares, but it was the most pleasant afternoon he'd had since reporting in. While they worked, the Marine told him all about his hometown: a little place in Arkansas with a single drug store, two gas stations, and three cops on the police force.

"I wasn't much of nothing when I first enlisted. I had a bad attitude, and I'll admit that. But something happened to me on that first deployment. I found my purpose, you know? We went overseas, and the shit really hit the fan. Oops, I'm sorry. I don't mean to cuss in front of you."

"It's okay. God knows all the words, and you're not burning my ears."

The Marine grinned and looked at Callahan a little bit differently. "Well, like I was saying, the stuff really hit the fan, and I don't know, something just clicked. All the training, I guess. I'm not too proud to say I saved a couple of my buddies. They gave me a medal. They promoted me twice. I was good at it, you know. But then we came back here, and it's just not the same. Sure, I like to drink, but I'm no boozehound. It's just that every time I do, I get in trouble. I can't help it. What do you think God thinks about that?"

Callahan laughed. "I hate to burst your bubble, but I don't have a direct line to God. I don't know for sure what's going on in his head, but I can guess. You want to know what I think?"

The Marine nodded.

"I think God thinks that you're human. In fact, He made you, so anything you've done or anything you're going to do won't surprise Him. You know the cool part? No matter how many times you mess up—heck, no matter how many times I mess up—He is still going to be there. That's how I get through the bad days, the days when I feel like I'm a screwup and the world thinks I'm no good."

"You screw up?" the Marine asked, incredulous.

That made Callahan smile. "I don't know if you noticed, but I'm skin and bone, just like you. So yeah, I mess up all the time. I say the wrong thing. I do the wrong thing. I'm almost always thinking the wrong thing."

"I guess I never thought about it that way."

Callahan nodded. "Well, I think we should all think about that some more, you know? We can't be perfect because that's impossible. What we are supposed to be is the best version of ourselves. Look at you. You're sweeping this driveway the best way you can. This is the best version of yourself right here, this minute. Tomorrow, it's going to be something different. Maybe it's making your rack and helping out your buddies. Maybe it's saluting a little bit

crisper than you did today. Maybe it's reading a book instead of watching a movie. Heck, maybe it's watching a movie instead of reading a book. I don't know. I don't have all the answers."

The Marine laughed. "I haven't been to church since I was a kid, but I don't think I've ever met a preacher like you."

"I guess you could say I've been cut from a different cloth," Callahan said. "But I'm really no different from you."

"Yeah, you are." A hint of bitterness tinged the Marine's voice. "You know what you're doing. You know where you're going."

Callahan bent down, picked up a piece of trash, and put it in his pocket. "How about this? I tell you everything I'm scared of, the stuff I mess up daily, and you listen. If you want to tell me your side, great, but all I need is someone I can talk to who won't judge me. What do you think? Can you be that man?"

"Well, yes, sir, I guess," stuttered the Marine in surprise. "But I don't know if I'm qualified."

"You're more than qualified, I promise. Now come on, let's keep sweeping. I don't want that staff sergeant to give me another dirty look."

The Marine snickered and shook his head. "You're like no other man I ever met, *Padre*." Realizing what he had called the chaplain, the Marine's cheeks reddened. "I'm sorry, sir. Is it okay that I call you that?"

Callahan's heart swelled. He reached out and grabbed the young man's shoulder. "Son, you can call me *Padre* anytime you want, and I'll be here for whatever you need. Deal?"

"Deal."

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## CHAPTER EIGHT

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## PETE

A splitting headache and a desert-dry mouth greeted him when he woke up. It was too dark to see, and for thirty long seconds, he couldn't remember where he was.

*Natalie. Montana. Lone Peak Ranch.* The pieces tumbled into place.

Pete brought his wrist close to his face so he could make out the time on his watch. It was eleven at night. He hadn't meant to sleep long, and he certainly hadn't meant to wear shoes to bed. Rolling over, he rose from the plush mattress and kicked his boots off. He made his way to the bathroom, and his joints creaked their displeasure.

Someone had unpacked his toiletries and set them out in neat rows on the counter. He brushed his teeth and rinsed off his face, avoiding looking too long at his reflection. In another life, he had taken great pride in his appearance. He'd shaved twice a day, styled his hair with product, and pressed his clothes. The unkempt man he saw in the mirror now was a far cry from the distinguished figure he'd once cut. He sported grays along his temples, and his beard was a scraggly thing, like a raccoon that had been kicked around in the dust and glued to his face.

*You should shave,* Pete told himself, though he didn't have the energy for it. He would find time later. That's what he told himself about so many things: *I'll do it later.* Action and purpose were a thing of the past. Now, procrastination and excuses littered his soul's garden.

He was hungry, but not enough to risk running into anyone. His thirst was another story entirely; for a taste of liquor, he would risk being seen.

The lights in the hall were dim when he emerged, and he walked barefoot toward the kitchen. Struggling to remember the layout, he had to turn around twice. The place was big, and he suspected it could house twenty guests with ease.

A note waited for him on the kitchen counter. He turned up the lights so he could read it: *Pete, we left you a plate in the refrigerator. Take whatever you want.*

His stomach grumbled as he opened the fridge. There was a Saran-wrapped plate with grilled chicken, potatoes, and some green vegetables he

didn't recognize. He was so hungry he ate it cold, and it tasted good. Very good. Chewing the last bite, he returned to the fridge to search for a beer or some wine. Nothing. He looked through the cabinets. Still nothing.

*Damn.* He needed a drink.

After plucking a bunch of grapes from an overflowing bowl of fruit, he left the kitchen and went wandering. Surely this place had a bar, at least a small one. He came across a conference room, several offices, other bedrooms, and finally, either a study or a library. Pete couldn't tell which. A fire crackled in the stone hearth, and its light shone off an array of bottles on a cart near the opposite wall.

The tension in his shoulders eased, and he hurried to the makeshift bar. He tugged the lids from the crystal decanters one by one, sniffing each until he identified the bourbon. His blood hummed as he poured himself half a glass.

"That's a good one," someone said from the shadows. A man. "But you might want to try the one to the left. It's my favorite."

Pete turned, feigning nonchalance despite his racing heart. The man stood. He wore a police officer's shirt, half unbuttoned, and held a drink in his left hand.

"I didn't mean to scare you," the man said. "Just needed a little time to unwind from the day."

Pete nodded and took a sip of bourbon, relishing the taste on his tongue, the way it burned as it went down his throat.

"You must be Luke," Pete said, remembering the name Natalie had mentioned.

"Right, and you must be Pete Callahan."

They shook hands, and Pete could see why Natalie liked this man. He had gentle eyes and an easy demeanor. Even with his sturdy frame and police uniform, he didn't come off too imposing.

"Did you find your plate in the fridge?" Luke asked.

"I did. It was delicious. I was so hungry I didn't even warm it up. Thank you."

Luke chuckled. "Yeah, if you're not careful, the old chef will help you pack on the freshman fifteen. Her biscuits especially." He made a kissing sound. "*Magnifique.*"

"Natalie didn't say you were a cop," Pete said.

"Yeah, I'm trying it back on for size." Luke shrugged. "Don't know if this

is what I'll do for the long term, but it feels good for now, you know?"

Pete nodded, though he didn't know. It had been years since he'd felt comfortable in his own skin. Clearing his throat, he said, "So, where are you from?"

"Oregon."

"Ah, the Beaver State." He racked his brain for something else to ask, reluctant to endure an awkward silence. "How long have you and Natalie been seeing each other?"

"A few months."

Pete suppressed a frown. The man wasn't giving him much to work with. He tried again, this time broaching the question he'd been pondering since he'd arrived. "Now, don't laugh when I ask you this, but what is it about the magic of this place? I don't mean to sound all woo-woo and fantasy, but—"

"Let me guess, Buster got to you, didn't he?" Luke said.

"He did," Pete confirmed.

Luke nodded. "So, I'm a cop, right? A pretty practical guy. Sure, I believe there are things in this world that we can't explain, that we probably never will, but when I first heard about the magic of Lone Peak, it all sounded pretty 'woo-woo' and 'fantasy' to me, too. But Buster wasn't lying. This place is special. I came here, lost and alone, and you know what I found?"

"What did you find?" Pete asked, unable to help himself from leaning forward.

Luke grinned. "I can't tell you that yet, Pete. You've got to experience it for yourself. But if you stick around, I can promise you good things will happen. Besides, if the worst thing you walk away with is the memory of a few good meals and some good company, how could it be bad?"

Pete deflated. He'd wanted answers, but all he'd gotten were more riddles.

"You said the one on the left was your favorite?"

"Yeah. Single-barrel from Kentucky. It was a gift from a friend."

"Do you mind if I have some?"

"That's another thing you can learn about this place, Pete. You don't have to ask. Consider this your home. Anything you see is yours."

Pete refilled his glass. "If I didn't know better, I'd say Lone Peak Ranch sounds like a commune."

Luke turned away from him and stared into the fire. Then, voice quiet but firm, he said, "This place is the greatest gift God ever gave me."

Pete took a long swig of his drink to hide his surprise.

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## CHAPTER NINE

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## PETE

The next morning, he got out of bed bright and early. Hope tingled in his veins, and though he had a slight hangover, the hearty breakfast helped, along with three cups of coffee.

"I can have the chef make more biscuits if you'd like," Natalie said.

Pete rubbed his belly. "Are you kidding? I've had three already, along with eggs, bacon, sausage, and fruit. Luke wasn't kidding. I'm going to put on ten pounds this week."

"That's what you think." She laughed. "Once I put you to work, you'll more than burn off those calories."

His ears perked up. Finally, he would find out why he was here. Maybe she'd also tell him about this so-called magic everybody seemed so obsessed with. He was tired of the cryptic comments. He needed information, and he needed something to do. If there was one thing Pete Callahan knew about himself, it was that when he idled, he started thinking about the past. Nothing good ever came of that.

"So, what is it you want me to do around here, Nat? Muck the stalls? Sweep the floors? Because I've done both."

"When did you muck stalls?" she asked, surprised.

"There's a lot you don't know about me. You're looking at the blue-ribbon winner of my fifth-grade summer. My horse's trot was the smoothest of all the campers."

"You grew up with horses?"

Pete laughed. "No, just that one summer. Only fell off once, but it spooked me to death. It took two days for the counselors to get me back on a horse. Truth be told, everyone probably won a blue ribbon that day. But I choose to remember being crowned the grand champion."

"Well, I'm not going to challenge your riding crown. Not yet, anyway," Natalie said, grinning. "In all honesty, I don't have anything specific for you. I thought we'd take another walk around the ranch now that you've had a night to let everything sink in. I'll show you what we're working on and see if anything jumps out at you."

"Sounds fine by me," he agreed, though he wondered why she had sought



him out—and why she had given him so much money—if she had nothing specific for him to do.

Natalie chewed her lip, like she was debating her next words. Something that looked a lot like doubt flashed in her eyes. Pete tried to remember if he'd ever seen his friend look uncertain before. He couldn't come up with a single time. Unease lifted the hairs on his neck.

"Let me tell you what I'd really like, and then you tell me if you're uncomfortable with it," she said at last. "Remember when I mentioned that we're building this place as a haven for veterans and their families? So they can reconnect and find themselves? Well, what we need around here is someone with your expertise. Someone who can get to the heart of pain. Really connect."

Pete looked away. This was what he'd been afraid of. "I don't think I'm ready for that. I'm sorry."

"Hey, that's okay. No pressure. I only wanted to ask." She gave him a reassuring smile. "In that case, you don't happen to have a background in construction, do you?"

He let out the breath he'd been holding, but his hands remained clenched. "As a matter of fact, when I wasn't winning blue ribbons, I was working construction for my uncle. I did that for six summers, maybe seven. So, yeah, I'm handy with a hammer and table saw."

"Perfect," she said. "Why don't you get ready, and I'll do the dishes. Meet me out front in, say, fifteen minutes?"

"Deal."

Pete returned to his room, closed the door, and sat on the end of the bed. His hands were shaking. Breakfast had been wonderful until Natalie's question about his former area of expertise. At least she hadn't pressed the issue. At least she'd offered construction work instead. Manual labor was good for him. When you were thinking about hitting a nail straight, you weren't thinking about your next drink, your past pain.

It was time to put one foot in front of the other, he decided. No more dwelling about in bed. He went to the bathroom, brushed his teeth, and then walked outside to wait for Natalie. The morning breeze had a bite to it. He took a deep breath, savoring the chilly air in his lungs. He would need to buy a coat. Natalie confirmed as much when she came out on the front stoop.

"I'm sure Luke could pick one up for you on his way home tonight," she offered.

"That's very kind of you, but I thought I'd take a trip into town myself. After we're done, of course. If that's okay, do you have a vehicle you can loan me?"

"Sure," she said, motioning for him to follow her toward the back of the property. "All keys are in the kitchen and labeled by vehicle. Ask Buster before taking the pickup because sometimes he needs to go grab gear or supplies."

Pete glanced at the truck as they passed. "That Buster doesn't say much, does he?"

"No, he keeps it pretty close to the vest," she said. "But he's a good man, and if you ever have questions about the history of this place, he's the one to ask. That reminds me, I'd like to introduce you to Olivia. She's sort of the trustee of Lone Peak Ranch. She's eager to meet you."

"Sure," Pete said. He wanted to ask how much later she meant, but he refrained. Part of the reason he wanted to go into town was, yes, he needed a coat, but he also needed his own private stash for his bedroom. No sense in drinking down the local bar.

"Oh hey," Pete said. "I haven't cashed your check yet. I didn't think it was right until I'd had a chance to see this place and hear what you wanted. Can you loan me a few bucks?"

"Sure. We've got a petty cash safe in the lodge. Tell me how much you need, and I'll get it for you later."

The tour Natalie gave him was almost identical to the one the day before. This time, however, she gave him a detailed rundown of the renovation progress. What still needed to be done. The problems they'd had. Every once in a while, Pete chimed in with questions. Twice, he made suggestions, minor things that he'd had some experience with. He could see her making mental notes. Natalie was sharp.

"I've saved the best for last," she said.

They walked down a thin trail, bramble and tall bushes on either side. When they reached the end of the path, it opened onto a wide field.

"This is where we're going to build a runway."

"A runway?" Pete asked.

"Yep. We've already got approval from the city council. It'll be used as an emergency landing spot for local air traffic, but mostly we'll use it. Do you have any experience with heavy machinery?"

"I've spent some long, hot hours in dozers and diggers," Pete said.

"Great." Natalie shot him a wide smile. "We've got the surveyors coming out in the next couple of days. The first thing to do is level out the land. You think you might be able to help with that?"

Pete looked at the stretch of space and nodded. "I might be a little rusty, but if you don't mind me getting in a little practice, then sure. I think I can figure it out. Show me the plans, and I'll get to work."

"Every contractor we use knows that our people might chip in at any time. They're fine with it. Once you get to work, just let them know if you have a question. Okay?"

Pete nodded.

Natalie looked down at her watch. "Shoot, I'm late. You think you can find your way back?"

"No problem," he said. "But I'd like to spend some more time out here if that's okay."

"Sure, no worries. All right, I've got to run." She waved goodbye and hurried down the trail, leaving Pete alone in the clearing.

He strolled along its perimeter, imagining the future runway. It would require a lot of work, but he could handle it. In fact, he looked forward to the distraction. Hopefully, the project would keep him occupied for a long while.

Content, he returned to the lodge, thinking he should look for something else to do before heading into town.

He found the chef in the kitchen. She was whistling along with the radio.

"Oh, there he is," she said. "I heard you like my biscuits."

"They are delicious."

"Fantastic. As any good chef will tell you, it was my mama's recipe. Not really, but that's what people like to hear."

He smiled. "I don't have much to do, so I was wondering if you need any help. I'm fair with a blade. I can chop onions, peel some potatoes . . . Anything you need."

The chef considered his offer for a moment and then snapped her fingers.

"I was thinking about making some apple pie. How would you like to peel, core, and cut them up for me?"

"No problem," Pete said. He went to work, almost forgetting about his trip into town.

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## CHAPTER TEN

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## LEWIS WAKEFIELD

Lewis Wakefield shoved the seventy-five-dollar T-shirt down his pants and glanced around the store. No one was watching. He could have paid for the T-shirt many times over, but even as a kid, he'd always liked to take things. It was the game of it.

"Hey, Lewis, you ready to go?" Brad called out, signaling that the salesperson was looking his way.

"Yeah, give me a minute."

Lewis made a show of perusing the jean rack. He had more pairs of jeans than a cowboy, but he could always use more. However, a quick peek down his front told him there was no more room in his pants. *Next time*, he thought.

The pretty girl at the checkout counter gave him a sweet smile when he walked to the door. He smiled back. She was new.

"When did you start?" he asked.

"This week," she answered.

He grinned at her again, enjoying it when she blushed. He had that effect on women.

"Lewis, come on. I'm starving," his friend said.

"All right, all right, hold your horses."

He winked at the girl and left. When they were a fair distance away, they each pulled out their stolen goods.

"Oh man, I wanted to get that one," Brad said, trying to snatch a T-shirt out of Lewis's hands.

"You snooze, you lose, man."

He shoved the shirt back into his pants and pulled the vape pen out of his pocket. Putting it to his lips, he sucked in the strawberry flavor. It coated his lungs for a moment, then he opened his mouth and released a big white plume. A couple of old-timers passed by, and one of them gave him the stink eye. He smiled back, letting the rest of the smoke come out his nose.

Brad snickered. "Holy shit, did you see her face?"

"Screw them," Lewis said. "Come on. You want sushi or pizza?"

"Are you buying?"

"You cheap son of a bitch," Lewis said, laughing. "Of course I'm buying."

Technically, his father was buying. But the old man didn't know or care. As the founder of Wakefield Oil, Lewis's father was too busy to keep tabs on his son's activities, especially since he never stayed at their Montana residence for long. The Wakefield family owned four houses, the first in Houston, the second in Tulsa, the third in Deer Valley, and the fourth in Big Sky. Lewis liked Big Sky best. It was quiet, and there was a pocket of money here that kept things fresh. If he wanted to go wild, he could jet off to Vegas or Los Angeles or Cancún, all on Daddy's dime.

*Thank God for therapists,* he thought.

Lewis had acted up his entire life. Getting kicked out of the Marine Corps had been the last straw, though. Fed up, his father had sent him to therapy, only to be told his son's issues were the result of his perpetual absence. Craig Wakefield had responded the way he always did: by throwing money at the problem. He'd given Lewis an allowance, the one caveat being to stay out of trouble.

Lewis did, for the most part. Why risk his current lifestyle? He was enjoying an endless, lavish vacation, screwing whomever he wanted and buying whatever he wanted. His garage was full of toys, and his bank account never emptied. As the sole heir to the Wakefield Oil fortune, Lewis figured he was set for life if he played the game right.

They were arriving at the sushi restaurant when Lewis did a double take.

"You have got to be shitting me," he said, looking across the street.

"What?" Brad asked.

"Nothing. Don't look. Go inside."

"But—"

"I said, go inside. Get us a table, or you're paying for lunch."

It was closer to dinnertime, but they'd eaten breakfast at noon. His friend grumbled, though he did as he'd been told. Lewis pulled down his cap and sucked on his vape pen, watching the figure who'd caught his attention. The man walked into one of the cheaper establishments in the town center.

*It can't be him,* he thought.

Lewis threw open his door, slammed it closed behind him, and ran across the street, huffing from the small exertion. He'd put on some pounds since leaving the service. Such was the consequence of living the high life.

Slowing to a leisurely stroll, he entered the store. Inside, he spotted the man.

"Son of a bitch," he said again.

The man's eyes flicked up, and Lewis looked away. When he glanced back a few moments later, the man had resumed studying the liquor shelves. Scowling, Lewis turned and left the store.

Of all the states and all the towns, how had Lieutenant Pete Callahan ended up here?

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## CHAPTER ELEVEN

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## PETE

Somebody delivered the bulldozer to Lone Peak Ranch the next morning, so Pete spent the following days leveling the ground for the landing strip. He found the work to be peaceful in its monotony. When he stopped to eat, he shared lunch and dinner with whoever was at the lodge. On the fourth evening, that included Olivia Northcutt.

Over honey-glazed pork tenderloin and roasted vegetables, she told him about her late husband, Brendan, the billionaire who had died and left all his money to this place. Pete's heart swelled as she recounted the story of Brendan's final wish, but at the same time, he got the feeling that she was leaving something out. A key detail.

But he didn't know her, so he didn't press. Priesthood had taught him that most people would open up in their own time, and though he was no longer a priest, he still practiced the habit of passive listening.

Pete retired to his room early that night, then filled a single glass with his new favorite bourbon and sipped it as he read. The lodge had a fabulous assortment of books in its library, and he had collected a stack of them on his bedside table. When he finished his drink, he brushed his teeth, used the restroom, and went to sleep.

In the morning, he woke gently, recalling only the edges of a nightmare. Nothing too vivid. Surprised, he vowed to repeat the prior evening's activities after dinner. When he achieved the same serene sleep, he determined he had found a new routine.

About two weeks into his stay, he finished clearing the land for the runway. Natalie scheduled the surveyors to come check the site, and while Pete waited, he contemplated what to do with his free time.

*Why not go back into town?*

He still had a couple of bottles from his original stash—he was proud of how he'd limited himself—but he did need more work clothes. The ones Luke had loaned him were too big.

Pete rolled into town without the guide of the GPS, passing the liquor store. He found public parking near the clothing shop he'd visited before. Though he still hadn't deposited the check, he'd borrowed another fifty

dollars from the ranch's petty cash. That was enough for a couple of T-shirts, some wool socks, and two pairs of underwear.

It didn't take long to get what he needed. The store owner even threw in an extra T-shirt and suggested Pete come back next week for their sale.

"Thanks," Pete said. "Have a great day."

"You too, and please tell your friends about us."

Pete left the store and headed toward the center of town. A casual stroll sounded nice. Better yet, maybe he'd go order a coffee, sit at an outdoor table, and watch the world go by. He had a couple of bucks left.

His plan was thwarted when someone called out his name.

"Lieutenant Callahan?"

Pete froze and turned slowly. He didn't recognize the good-looking young man who waved at him. Nevertheless, he managed a tentative smile as he waited for the man to approach.

"Holy cow. I thought that was you," the man said. "You don't recognize me, do you?"

"No, I'm sorry. I—"

"Lewis Wakefield. The last time I saw you, it was Corporal Wakefield."

"Sure," Pete said, shaking Lewis's hand. He didn't really remember. "You were a machine gunner, right?"

"Mortarman, actually. Sixty millimeters with Three Eighths."

Pete nodded. "Right. How long has it been?"

"What's time, you know?" The way Lewis said it gave Pete pause, though he didn't know why.

"Are you visiting?" Pete asked.

"Kind of," Lewis said. "My dad has a place here, and I'm staying a while before heading back down to Houston."

"Houston? Is that where you're from?"

Lewis nodded. "That's where I grew up, but I've been all over the country. Hey, how about you? You live here now?"

"Passing through. I think."

"You don't sound so sure," Lewis said. "Let me guess, you're in town for some fun, eh?" He winked at Pete.

"No, just work."

"Well, hell, *Padre*, how about I buy you a beer? I know the head bartender right over there."

*What could it hurt?* Pete thought. "Sure, that sounds nice, but I've got to

run after one drink. Work to do."

"Sure, sure," Lewis said.

Pete crossed the street first, so he did not see the glare Lewis Wakefield directed at his back. He also did not stay for just one drink, nor did he leave after two. Or three. Or four. Or . . . He lost track.

When the former lieutenant finally left the bar, he was more than tipsy.

He was falling-down drunk.

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## CHAPTER TWELVE

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## PETE

"Rise and shine!"

The cheerful voice cut through Pete's muddled mind. He peeled open his eyes. A man stood over him.

"Well, there he is," the man said.

He clutched his mouth. "I'm going to be sick."

"The bathroom's that way."

Pete got up from the couch and stumbled to the bathroom. He almost didn't make it to the toilet before releasing the entire contents of his stomach. A thin layer of sweat slicked his face when he leaned away from the bowl, but he felt better now that the nausea had passed.

Where was he? Bit by bit, memories of his trip into town returned to him. He'd run into someone from his past. What was his name? Morris? No. Lewis? Yes. Lewis Wakefield. That sounded right. They'd gone to a bar. Or had it been a restaurant? All he knew was Lewis had offered to pay for each round. Pete had never said no, downing drink after drink, future consequences be damned.

The nausea reappeared in a flash, and he dry heaved some more.

When he felt confident that he'd finished, he rose from the cold tile floor, splashed water over his face, rinsed out his mouth, and looked at the gaunt wreck staring back at him in the mirror. He had blacked out this time. *Oh God, did I drive?*

He stepped out of the bathroom. Lewis was sitting on the couch, freshly showered, sipping a cup of coffee.

"There's yours right there," Lewis said, pointing at a steaming mug on an end table.

"Thanks, but I'm not sure I can keep it down right now," Pete said.

"Well, you sure as hell kept some drinks down last night, *Padre*."

"Please don't call me that," Pete said.

"Sorry. Right. That's what you said last night, too."

*I did?* Pete thought. He wanted to ask Lewis what they had talked about, what they'd done, but he was too embarrassed. He knew from experience that some memories would come back to him later. Most wouldn't.

"What time is it?" Pete asked, not thinking to look down at his watch.

"Just after nine in the morning."

"I need to go. Can you give me a ride back to my truck?"

"No need. I had the housekeeper pick it up on the way in. I hope you don't mind."

"No, that's very kind of you. Thanks. What do I owe you from last night?"

Lewis put up his hands, grinning. "That was on me, *Pa*—I mean, Pete."

Pete didn't like the way the man's eyes searched him. He wished he could remember how they knew each other.

Pulling his phone out of his pocket, he saw it had run out of juice. Had Natalie tried to call?

"Here's my number," Lewis said, handing Pete a piece of folded paper.

"Next time you want to hang out, give me a shout. My treat."

"Yes. Thank you. Could you show me the way out?"

"Sure thing," Lewis said, chuckling. At what, Pete didn't know, but he had no desire to ask. He needed to get the hell out of there.

If he hadn't felt so wretched, he might have enjoyed the walk to the front door. The house was massive, with ornate decorations and huge windows showcasing the mountains. His focus was consumed, however, by nausea—and the clawing feeling that he'd once again disappointed himself.

When they got to the truck, Lewis tossed him the keys. Pete snatched them out of the air.

"Thanks again for the chat," Lewis said, eyeing him like there was some deeper meaning behind his words.

Pete frowned. What had they discussed? Again, he couldn't remember.

Climbing into the cab, he breathed a sigh of relief. Lewis disappeared into the house, and Pete realized he'd forgotten to ask how to get home. Fortunately, his scrambled brain recalled that the truck had a GPS.

The navigation system didn't recognize Lone Peak Ranch by name, so he routed himself to Big Sky's town center instead, thinking a drive down the main street would jog his memory. It didn't, but at least he knew he was driving in the right direction.

Almost an hour later, after an embarrassing amount of guessing and backtracking, he walked into the lodge. Everyone was gone except for the chef. She passed him a plate of biscuits and jam. He thanked her without making eye contact and brought the food to his room.

The curtains were drawn, and the dim lighting soothed his piercing

headache. Setting the plate on the bedside table, he went to the bathroom and hopped into the shower, where he retched twice. It took a long time under the spray before he felt anything close to normal.

When he emerged from the shower, he succeeded in drinking a whole glass of water and eating a few tentative bites of a biscuit. Both stayed down. He waited a few minutes, then finished the rest of the biscuit, rewrapping the other three. Any more food would send him rushing to the toilet, and there was no time for that. It was almost eleven; he had to get to work.

Pete tugged on his borrowed boots and trudged out to the airfield.

"What did I do?" he asked the clear blue sky, and the question lingered with him for the rest of the day.

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## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

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## LEWIS

The truck backed down the long, winding driveway, and Lewis smiled from his perch on the couch by the living room window.

If he had gleaned anything from the last twelve hours, it was that Pete Callahan had not come to Big Sky to snoop around. That had been Lewis's initial fear upon spotting Callahan weeks ago, though he wasn't sure why. It made no sense for the navy to send a former chaplain to Montana to investigate him.

Maybe his mother's paranoia was genetic. Or maybe he was still a bit agitated by how narrowly he'd skirted a jail sentence and a bad conduct discharge from the Marine Corps. The recanting of a witness's testimony—and the expensive lawyer his father had hired to advise his assigned military attorney—were all that had stood between him and serving time.

Despite avoiding the harshest punishments, he had still been stripped of rank and kicked to the curb as a Marine private. His father had taken the other-than-honorable discharge harder than Lewis had, probably because he was the one who'd pushed Lewis to join the Marine Corps in the first place.

From a young age, Lewis had excelled in academics and sports. Boot camp had proved no exception. Everything had come naturally to him: the learning, the running and jumping and pull-ups and push-ups, the shooting . . . Hell, Parris Island would have almost been fun if it hadn't been for those drill instructors constantly butting in on his business.

Recruits received lots of bumps and bruises, and they were more than willing to pay for a bit of relief. Well, Lewis had been more than happy to accommodate their needs. He hadn't wanted the money; he'd simply enjoyed the thrill of running and dealing. The drill instructions had come close to catching him smuggling in pain medication twice. Good thing he'd always stayed a step ahead. He was clever like that.

His father had been right there in the front row at graduation, crying throughout the ceremony. The man had never shown a lick of emotion toward Lewis before that moment, but something about seeing his son marching in formation had set him off. Ever the opportunist, Lewis had used his father's rare show of vulnerability to ask for an increase in his allowance. His father

had granted the request with a firm handshake and a slap on the back.

After boot camp, Lewis had focused on honing his clever manipulation of the military system. Using the money from his improved allowance, he'd bought a new console for the barracks, which had made him popular with his class. He'd been much smarter than most of them, and it had annoyed him to participate in their insipid chatter while spending hours playing brainless games, but the wide array of friendships he'd established during that time had come in handy on more than one occasion.

As for getting in good with leadership, Lewis had known that every platoon commander needed a capable radio operator. So, he had meticulously studied the radio he'd carried on his back, learning every conceivable detail about it. This knowledge had set him apart from his peers, grabbing the attention and favor of his platoon commander, just as he'd intended. Becoming a favorite had insulated Lewis from the crap slung by various corporals and sergeants, and it had also put him at the front of the line for promotion to lance corporal upon eligibility.

To the public eye, he'd been an upstanding and auspicious young Marine. But behind the scenes, he'd been the go-to guy for a reprieve from the drudgery of everyday Marine Corps life.

On the weekends, he'd dealt at a base park under the charade of hosting enlisted picnics. The attending Marines had chipped in ten bucks for a hot dog, chips, and a soda, and taped to the back of the soda bottles had been small bags of whatever each Marine had ordered: Ambien, Percocet, or sometimes a pinch of weed, though he'd preferred to avoid the latter. More than one of his customers had gotten busted for weed during random piss tests. That was why he'd mostly stuck to stuff the Marine Corps couldn't test for—or at least the stuff that didn't stay in your system long.

When not dealing, Lewis had used his connections to vie for a temporary assignment to the beach outside Camp Lejeune. Lifeguarding would have been a cushy duty, and it would have provided him with access to new customers. But when he'd officially submitted his paperwork, his elite reputation had backfired. Upon reviewing Lewis's request, the company commander had declared him indispensable, then sent him with the rest of his battalion to Afghanistan instead.

He now considered his time in the Middle East to be his great awakening. It had been a terrifying mission. Marines had died all around him. Civilian kids with guns and grenades had tried to kill him. Yet he'd survived.

And now here he was, in a position to enact some sweet revenge on the Marine Corps. All thanks to Pete Callahan.

Laughing, he rose from the couch and went to the kitchen to refill his coffee. He wondered how the Rohypnol hangover was treating the former chaplain. Administered via a drink at the bar, the drug had worked to perfection. Callahan would be wondering for days what had happened.

Lewis pulled his phone from his pocket and opened an internet browser to search for Lone Peak Ranch. Until last night, he'd been unaware of the place's existence. The information online was limited, but he confirmed that the ranch would serve as a rehabilitation joint for veterans and their families once construction concluded.

*For veterans and their families . . .*

The military needed to pay for how they'd embarrassed him, and he had no qualms about collecting the debt himself. Bringing Lone Peak Ranch down to its knees seemed like an excellent start.

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## **CHAPTER FOURTEEN**

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## LIEUTENANT PETE CALLAHAN – FIVE YEARS EARLIER

When Third Battalion, Eighth Marines boarded the ships that would take them to the Middle East, Lieutenant Callahan was with them.

There was already another navy chaplain on board, Lieutenant Commander Hughes, a Presbyterian minister who liked to keep to himself when not conducting service in the ship's chapel. He was kind enough, and he showed Callahan the ropes. Afterward, they mostly stayed out of each other's way, except for Sunday services, when they shared duties.

Callahan appreciated that Hughes was fiercely loyal to his sailors. They truly were his flock. The lieutenant commander could listen to a sailor for hours without saying a word, and when the sailor walked away, they were at complete peace, as if he or she had been blessed by God himself. Through observing these interactions, Callahan learned the art of silence.

It didn't take long for him to adjust to ship life. He wouldn't want to live aboard a ship for six months at a time, but for the most part, he found he enjoyed the passage across the Atlantic, the brief stop in the Mediterranean Sea along the Spanish coast, and then the final voyage through the Suez Canal and the Red Sea to the Persian Gulf.

Most mornings, he joined the junior enlisted in the mess hall. Those who knew him would wave and say, "Good morning, *Padre*." Others flat-out ignored him, as if he were some sort of pagan voodoo doll.

He took at least half of his dinners in the officers' mess. While most of the officers didn't treat him with outright disdain, they weren't as open as Callahan would have liked. But he needed to cater to everyone, so he tried his best to gain their trust. He figured their hesitation had something to do with him being their peer . . . and yet not.

He dressed like them. He went to the gym with them. He ran farther and faster than them. But he did not and could not carry a weapon. Lieutenant Pete Callahan was an enigma. One the Marine lieutenants, captains, and majors did not understand. Only the lieutenant colonels and colonels, with their broader experience, seemed to recognize the value of a good chaplain; how they could enhance a mission by boosting morale.

Callahan visited the chief's mess, which had better food than the officers'

mess and the enlisted mess, for the other half of his dinners. He'd received the invitation—a distinct honor—courtesy of a company gunnery sergeant who'd opened up to him about having trouble at home. The gunny was now fiercely protective of the chaplain, and he acted as the main conduit for Marines who came to see Callahan. If the gunny said you needed to see the chaplain, you went and saw the chaplain, even if you didn't want to.

For the most part, the Marines with whom Callahan spoke shared their stories readily. He valued each and every personal detail entrusted to him, although many were difficult to hear, especially those relating to abuse—physical, sexual, and mental. How these young men and women had survived to make it here, Callahan did not know.

Except . . . yes, he did. They had made it here because of God, who was now letting Callahan do his good work.

One night, he decided to go topside. The darkness was so absolute he could barely see. All lights were out, and he was peering up at the stars, praying, thanking God for this opportunity to help so many, when he heard sniffing. He followed the sound to one of the big exhaust vents that came up through the ship.

"Hello?" Callahan asked.

"Leave me alone," someone said.

For a few moments, Callahan stood still. He'd found that when he was presented with a situation that he had no experience with, it was best to stop, think, and say a prayer, asking for the right word, the right action, before deciding how to proceed.

Finally, he spoke. "It's Lieutenant Callahan, Marine."

He thought he knew who the Marine was, and when the huddled mass rose into the form of a young man, Callahan's suspicions were confirmed.

"I'm sorry, Lance Corporal Seager. I didn't mean to disturb you," Callahan said.

"No, *Padre*, it's okay. I just needed some time alone, you know?"

"I do know. It's a beautiful night, isn't it?"

"I hadn't really noticed," the Marine said with another sniff.

"Well, maybe you should. Just look." Callahan pointed to the stars. "There's Orion's Belt. It's the only one that I can remember."

To his surprise, the Marine pointed elsewhere and said, "That's the Big Dipper, and there is the Little Dipper. Cassiopeia's over that way, and . . ." Seager continued rattling off constellations.

"Where did you learn astronomy?" Callahan asked with a gentle smile.

"In school."

"High school?" He didn't know why, but he felt he needed to keep the Marine talking.

"No, I did a year at a community college. Dropped out when I couldn't keep up."

"Why couldn't you keep up?"

Seager sighed and kicked at the ground. "I was on ADHD meds for as long as I could remember. When I went to college, I thought I would stop taking them. It messed with my head, and I couldn't concentrate. So, my parents stopped paying and said I had to do something else."

"Ah. And then you raised your right hand, and here we are now, right?" Callahan asked.

"Well, I had to lose about seventy-five pounds first, but yes."

Callahan knew this particular Marine always stood last in the formation, huffing and puffing. Twice, he had stumbled across other Marines giving Seager a hard time. He suspected that he'd witnessed only a small sample of what this young man endured each day. Perhaps that was why Lance Corporal Seager now hid in the shadow of the exhaust vent.

"What's on your mind, Seager?" Callahan asked. "Anything I can help with?"

"No, sir. I just needed to clear my head."

Callahan wished there was more that he could say, more that he could do, but he couldn't help the unwilling. So, he fell back on military basics.

"Why don't we both get back belowdecks," Callahan said. "I hear we've got an early morning wake-up tomorrow."

"Yes, sir," Seager said.

Callahan escorted the Marine through the first hatch he could find, down the ladder wells, and along the skinny passages until they arrived at the enlisted berth.

He clapped a hand on the Marine's shoulder. "Come find me if you need to talk. Okay?"

Seager nodded and walked into the berth without a word. Callahan made a mental note to check on the Marine the next day, then tucked himself in to sleep.

When he looked for Seager in formation the following morning, he could not locate the young Marine.

*Seager, where the hell are you, damn it?*

A platoon sergeant took a head count and confirmed Callahan's worst fear: Seager was missing.

Everything stopped. The Marines searched high and low, but they never found the young man. Nor would they ever.

Because one hour after Callahan had dropped him off, Seager had snuck up on deck, whispered goodbye to the stars, hoisted himself onto the railing, and jumped into the frigid Atlantic.

Though Lance Corporal Seager was only the first of many losses Lieutenant Callahan would suffer, his grief and guilt were enough to cut a chink in his holy armor. A chink that would one day split wide open.



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## **CHAPTER FIFTEEN**

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## NATALIE

"You look worried," Luke said, stepping up behind her. He wrapped his arms around her midsection and kissed her on the side of the neck.

Natalie sighed, but she did not look away from the window. "How many bottles has he been through?"

On the other side of the glass, Pete disappeared down the trail leading to the new flight line.

"A couple," Luke said.

She'd asked him to inspect Pete's room. She knew the request violated her friend's trust, but she was worried. After vanishing overnight, the former chaplain had returned this morning either nursing a hangover or fighting one off.

"I don't know what to do," Natalie said, watching the quiet forest.

"There's not much we can do." He gave her a reassuring squeeze. "At least he's working."

"Yeah, but when I tried to call him last night and . . ."

"Hey," Luke interrupted. "I understand that you're concerned, but these things take time. It did for us, right?"

Freeing herself from his embrace, Natalie turned and faced the man she was falling deeper and deeper in love with.

"Tell me the truth," she said. "Do you think he'll get better?"

He shrugged. "It's not my place to tell."

"Then whose is it?"

Luke's eyes flickered to the sky.

"You really are a convert, aren't you?" she said, smiling. Oh, how she loved this man.

"It helped me and you, right?" He wrapped his arms around her again. "So, look, I've got to go over to Bozeman to get some signatures. I was wondering if you want to come with me."

Natalie chewed her lip, debating. "I don't know if I should leave him."

"You can't watch him every minute of every day," he said, pushing a stray hair behind her ear. "Besides, I took the liberty of booking a hotel room. Just you and me."

"What would our parents say?" she asked with a grin.

"I don't know. My parents are gone, and you still haven't introduced me to yours."

She kissed him on the cheek. "Well, if you behave, you just might meet them. Tell you what, I wouldn't mind getting some time in the air. How about I fly us to Bozeman?"

"I'm not sure I'm ready for that," Luke said, looking green.

"Oh, come on. No barrel rolls this time, I promise."

"Swear?"

"I swear."

"Okay, fine. However, if you make me puke, I'm telling the hotel concierge to nix the rose petals on the bed."

Laughing, Natalie playfully smacked Luke on the arm and then shoed him away to pack. When he left, she looked back out the window and hoped she'd done enough to help her friend.

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## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

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## PETE

The hangover funk held on for the morning, but Pete managed to push through it as he looked over the survey team's work. They had done a good job staking each corner of the runway and noting the proper elevations. He would spend another few days cleaning up the area and leveling it out, and then he'd have Natalie ask the survey team to return.

All in all, he was happy with the task he'd been dealt. Operating the heavy machine had come back to him quickly, and there was something satisfying about moving earth. It was rhythmic, and it required just enough concentration to prevent his mind from focusing too hard on anything else. Like the lost night with Lewis Wakefield.

After a few hours of digging, his stomach had settled enough to eat a full meal, so he decided to take a break. He shut off the machine, collected his packed lunch, and found a pretty spot overlooking a trickling creek. Butterflies fluttered down to touch the water's surface and then fluttered back to the sky time and time again.

Pete tried to appreciate their beauty, the elegance of nature itself, but his mind slipped back to the night before. How much had he had to drink? What had he told Lewis? How could he not remember the drive to Lewis's house?

*Pull yourself together*, he told himself.

Abandoning his attempt at sitting in peace, he decided he might as well get back to the runway. He gathered the trash from his lunch, balled the aluminum foil and the napkin, then deposited both into the brown paper bag. With one last swig of water, he returned to the bulldozer. Along the way, he thought about getting down on one knee, maybe even two, and saying a prayer. But his prayers hadn't worked in a long time; why would they now?

Pete climbed up onto the bulldozer and got back to digging. He was trying to dislodge an ornery rock when the clouds covered the sun. The diminished light did not slow his progress.

As he got the tip of his blade under the rock, a light mist rolled in. He didn't notice it at first, too busy wrestling the boulder, jockeying it from side to side with the blade, trying to loosen it from its perch. It was too big, however, and nothing he tried worked. He likely needed another piece of

machinery to excavate the thing.

Sweating, he shut off the bulldozer and wiped his brow. A glance up revealed the mist had turned into a fog, dense and dark, and shrouded the rest of the construction site.

"Well, no sense making it dangerous," he said to no one, exiting the cab.

Outside, it felt like the temperature had dropped thirty degrees. The fog was so thick that it muffled the world; even his footsteps sounded hushed. He looked up and then all around. He was no meteorologist, but he predicted the fog might stay a spell.

*Why not go back to the lodge, get some more water and maybe a snack?* Pete thought. The problem was, he couldn't get his bearings to find the trail.

"Damn fog."

He picked a direction and started walking. The fog was opaquer than seemed possible, and the cold made him shiver. As he continued on, he heard a steady chopping. Probably just Buster splitting firewood. The cowboy had a knack for the chore, as if born with an axe in his hand. He rarely took more than one whack to finish the job.

Pete followed the sound, blinded by the gloomy cloud. He half expected someone to jump from the billowing shadows, and he didn't know why. There was a creeping unease in his heart, born of some profound, primal instinct passed down by generations of humans who'd both hunted and been hunted. He sensed he was being watched, but that was impossible.

A sudden breeze kicked up and parted the fog before him. He could now see far enough to make out the contours of a structure. Not Lone Peak Ranch, but a small cabin. Smoke curled from the chimney, and there, in the front yard, was a man chopping wood. Not Buster.

*Might as well ask him for directions.*

The man stopped chopping when Pete got close. He looked up, and his eyes gleamed. Pete took a step back. When he blinked, the gleam in the man's eyes vanished.

"Afternoon," the man said pleasantly. "You look lost."

"The fog's got me turned all around."

The man smiled. "Beautiful, isn't it?"

"The fog? What? Oh, sure."

"All of this is natural, and nature is beautiful, I think." Using one hand, the man swung the axe down and chopped it into the thick stump he used to split logs. "Why are you worried?"

"What? I'm not worried. I just—"

"You just what?" There it was again, the twinkle in the man's eyes. He seemed amused by Pete's discomfort.

"I just got turned around."

"You already said that."

"I guess I did," Pete said, growing flustered. "Sorry, I just got—"

"Turned around," the man finished.

"The name's Pete Callahan." He stuck out his hand.

The man took it, and his grip was warm and strong. "Nice to meet you, Pete Callahan. You look thirsty. Can I get you some tea?"

Pete looked down at his watch.

"Got somewhere better to be?"

Pete didn't know why, but this stranger unnerved him.

"Come on, Pete. I'll make some tea. How about something to eat, too?"

"I don't want to impose," he said, eyeing the fog for a way out of this interaction.

"You're not imposing. I'm inviting."

The man still hadn't offered his name, Pete realized.

Recognizing Pete's hesitation, the man said, "Come on, I'm not going to bite you. Besides, you've been working all morning on that airfield. You deserve to take a rest."

"How do you know about that?" he asked, eyebrows lifting in surprise.

"There's a lot I know, Peter Callahan. Now come inside. Have some tea."

The man walked into the cabin, leaving Pete to stare.

*I must be dreaming*, he thought. But for some reason he would never untangle, he followed the man inside.

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## **CHAPTER SEVENTEEN**

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## PETE

Stepping over the threshold was like stepping into another world. The cabin was small but cozy, and its owner was equal parts tinkerer and apothecary. An array of clocks sat on a table off to one side of the room. On the other side were a mortar and pestle surrounded by glass jars filled to varying heights with bright-colored substances. Potted plants rested on every otherwise-free surface.

"How do you take your tea?" the man asked, using a thick mitt to remove the kettle from the fire. "I've got honey or sugar."

"Honey, please," Pete said.

He perused the main room. Sketches of birds and bees, trees and bushes littered the coffee table in front of the hearth. The intense eyes of a bear peered out from beneath the stack.

"You didn't tell me your name," Pete said.

"Didn't I?"

The man pinched tea leaves between his fingers, then placed them into two metal sieves that he clamped shut and put into a pair of mugs. They were earthen, mismatched, and might have been handmade.

Pete didn't press for a name. His thoughts were already lost again to the intrigue of this man's home. He saw a cracked door and the bedroom beyond. The bed was made with a colorful quilt tucked neatly around each corner.

"Here you go," the man said, handing Pete a mug and a jar of honey. "We'll let these steep for a couple of minutes. Then you can add as much or as little honey as you want. I never like to presume a man's taste."

Two well-worn chairs faced the hearth. The man took one and motioned for Pete to take the other. They were the kind of leather you smelled as you sat down. The familiar scent reminded him of the past.

"How long have you lived here?" he asked, careful not to spill his tea.

"For a time," the man said.

Pete pointed to the collection of clocks. "You seem to be in the business of time."

"Time's not really important, Pete, but sometimes I dabble in it."

Pete brought the steaming mug to his nose and sniffed the tea. He couldn't

place the blend.

"Glorious, isn't it?"

"It is," Pete agreed. "What is it?"

The man chuckled. "I could tell you the ingredients, but you wouldn't know them. Ancient strains, magnificent stuff. You know, it's a good thing the fog rolled in, or else we might not have had time to enjoy this afternoon together."

Right. The fog. Pete had almost forgotten all about it. "How long do you think it'll stay?"

The man shrugged as if the answer didn't matter. "It comes and goes."

Pete stared into the fire, hypnotized by the lapping flames.

"What do you see?" the man asked.

"Sorry?"

The man gestured toward the hearth. "What do you see?"

"I see a beautiful fire? Wood chopped by hand?"

Nodding, the man said, "The tea should be ready."

He showed Pete how to extract the metal sieve with a spoon, drain it into the mug as much as possible, and then set it on a saucer. Pete then took a healthy dollop of honey from the jar and swirled it into his tea with the spoon.

"I'll bet you've never had that kind of honey, either. Got it from Egypt," the man said. Then, with a quiet chuckle, he added, "They say it's the treasure of the gods."

Pete didn't understand the joke, but he didn't particularly care to, either. After checking that all the honey had dissolved from his spoon, he lifted the mug to his lips and took a tentative sip. An odd sensation passed through his head, like cool water washing over his brain. His thoughts cleared. The fogginess from the night before evaporated.

"Amazing," Pete said, wide-eyed.

"It is rather good, isn't it?"

Pete took another sip. He had few words to express the taste. He had even fewer to describe the feeling.

"Drink it slowly," the man said. "No sense wasting the moment."

For a time, they relaxed in their chairs and enjoyed the warmth of the fire. All the while, Pete reveled in the effects of the tea. He couldn't help but think of Buster's word: *magic*. He wanted to turn to the stranger and share his wonder, but he couldn't pull his eyes from the flames.

"Do you see it now?" the man asked.

Pete was about to say, "Do I see what?" when he spotted something. Squinting, he tried to make sense of it.

"You're not going crazy, Pete. Just let it show you."

For some reason, panic gripped him. Pete inhaled sharply.

"It's okay," the man said. "I promise."

Pete took another sip of tea and let himself go.

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## **CHAPTER EIGHTEEN**

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## PETE

Orange flames turned gold, then shimmering blue, then finally, gold again. With each color change, Pete's gaze sank deeper and deeper into the fire, until all of a sudden, his vision cut out. When it returned, he stood in white nothingness.

Slowly, bit by bit, a face came into focus. It radiated ethereal light.

"Hello, *Padre*," the face said.

Now Pete could see a neck and the outline of shoulders.

"Who are you?" he asked.

"You know me. Remember?"

The person's torso was forming, down to the hips and legs, and Pete did remember. Seager. Lance Corporal Seager.

Smiling the most glorious of smiles, Seager asked, "Do you know why you're here, *Padre*?"

"Why do you call me that?" he asked, shaking his head. "I'm not a priest anymore."

Seager ignored the question. "You live in regret, *Padre*. Tell me why."

Pete didn't have a response. He just gawked at Seager. When he found his voice, he asked, "Where did you come from?"

"I think you know. But that's beside the point. Look around. What do you see?"

At first, all he could see was the nothingness. Then he made out hints of gray within the shimmering white-gold light. Subtle silhouettes. Recognition dawned, and he knew exactly where they were.

"We're back on that damn ship," Pete said.

"That damn ship, you say. Why do you call it that?"

"Because it's where you died. Where I didn't try hard enough to help you."

Seager walked over and placed his hands on the railing. "You think my death was your fault?"

"Wasn't it?" he asked.

The lance corporal's smile softened. "I was alone and afraid, and you were kind to me. You tried to help me, but it wasn't your responsibility."

"How can you say that? I could have stopped you. I could have saved you."

"Are you sure?" Seager asked. "Mine was the first of your trials, *Padre*. It's why I get the honor of speaking with you first. Can you not feel it?"

"Feel what?"

"The love all around us. Does it seem like I'm angry about what you did or did not do? Does this place seem angry? Feel it."

Pete shook his head. "I don't know what this place is. It's probably something that old man put in my damn tea."

Seager laughed. "First it was the damn ship, and now it's the damn tea. Maybe we should talk about why you think everything is damned, *Padre*. Do you think you're damned?"

"I don't know what to think anymore," he said, shoulders slumping.

The urge to reach out and touch Seager, to see if he was real, overwhelmed Pete, but he was afraid that if his hand passed through the man's form, he would wake up. Right now, he was somewhere in the middle of hope and despair, and he didn't want this moment to end.

"Why did you jump from the ship?"

"I was in pain." Seager shrugged. "Humans in pain do the most confusing things to themselves and to other humans. You've seen it. You, of all people, know."

"But how could you leave your friends, your family? How could you do that to them?" Pete asked.

Seager let go of the railing and turned to face Pete head-on. "Would it make you angry if I told you that's what was supposed to happen? That the story had already been written? That my purpose in the mortal world was to be on that damn ship, jump off that railing, and leave my friends and family in pain and you casting doubt on your soul?"

"That doesn't make any sense," Pete said. "Everyone can change their fate. Can't they?"

"Well, of course. Tell me, *Padre*. Have you ever thought about taking your own life?"

Pete would've crumpled to his knees if this strange place weren't holding him up.

"I've thought about it a thousand times," he said, voice hoarse with the truth. "I think about it when I wake up. I think about it when I brush my teeth. I think about it when I go to bed. I think about it all day long."

"So why don't you just do it?" Seager patted the railing. "It's not that hard. All you do is climb up and jump. Gravity does the rest."

"I don't want to talk about this," Pete said, rubbing his eyes.

"I know. That's why I'm here. To start the conversation."

Anger swelled in Pete. "You can't just come into my life and stir up these feelings. What are you? The Ghost of Christmas Past?"

"Would you like me to be?" Seager asked, his smile wide and shining now.

"This is a dream. It's ridiculous, and I won't listen to it anymore." His eyes searched all around for a means of escape. There had to be a way out of here.

Seager simply watched him, calm, unwavering, unbending in his glow of happiness. After a few seconds, he said, "Ready or not, *Padre*, you're already part of the story. You know what you need. All you have to do is ask for it."

"What is it that I need?" Pete snapped. "A lobotomy, perhaps? I am talking to a ghost, after all."

"Help, *Padre*. You need help."

Then the scene blew away like dust in the wind, sending Pete tumbling with his doubts and confusion.

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## CHAPTER NINETEEN

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## PETE

"Quite a fire, isn't it?" the man asked.

Pete blinked and realized he was back in the cabin. Having no desire to revisit that otherworldly place, he avoided looking at the hearth.

"What did you put in my tea?"

"Why, all-natural herbs, of course," the man said. "I wish I could send you home with some, but it's a special blend meant for you alone at this time and this place."

He frowned. "What does that even mean?"

"There it is, Pete." The man closed his eyes and took a deep breath. "Can you feel it?"

"Feel what? Stop talking in riddles." His manners were gone. He wanted to leave, but he felt glued to the chair.

"Your anger. Your resentment. Your fear. Do you feel them? Because if I wanted to, I could reach out and touch all three right now. They're all around you. They veil your judgment and keep you running."

"Or maybe they just keep me alive," Pete said, tone harsh. He placed the teacup on the coffee table and rose from his chair. "I need to get back to work. If you can just point me in the right direction . . ."

The man finished the dregs of his tea, then stood. "I've enjoyed our time together, Pete. I won't keep you, but I have one last question to ask."

Pete crossed his arms over his chest. "Fine. What is it?"

"Do you prefer butterflies or dragonflies?"

"What—"

Before Pete knew what was happening, the man reached out and tapped him on the forehead with an index finger. Pete's head began to spin, like his mind was being sucked down a swirling tube.

When he opened his eyes, the clear blue sky greeted him. Something settled on his nose. A butterfly, its wings gold and black gloss. He went cross-eyed looking at it, and then it flew away. He turned his head to watch it leave, but the sight of the bulldozer looming a few feet away stole his attention.

*What the hell?*

He was lying in the clearing where they were building the runway. Except all the fog had receded. It was a beautiful day.

Climbing to his feet, he decided he'd attempt to remove that pesky boulder one more time. Only he couldn't find it. He walked around the bulldozer three times just to make sure. Sure enough, no boulder.

*Never mind, he thought. If I'm going crazy, so be it. I'm seeing things, having dreams—or hallucinations—so maybe I fell out of the dozer and hit my head.*

But his head didn't hurt. He felt fine. Great even, though some of his earlier anger still lingered.

Instead of dwelling on his confusion, he got back to work. Until dusk fell, he focused on the dirt he moved and the rocks he jostled from the earth. All the while, Seager's words tickled at the edges of his subconscious.

When he returned to the lodge, he found a note from Natalie and Luke saying they'd gone into Bozeman for a day or two. He ate his dinner alone and then hurried up to his room. Knowing it would be wiser to just go to sleep and start fresh tomorrow, he fished a fifth of cheap vodka from the closet.

He hadn't done anything wise in years, so why should he now?

Sinking onto a chair, he brought the bottle to his lips and drank the day's memories away.

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## CHAPTER TWENTY

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## LEWIS

As always, Lewis began the morning with a hit from his vape pen. When he was relaxed and ready, he went to the kitchen, made himself a cup of coffee, and thought about how he'd spend his day.

It came as a complete surprise when his father walked through the door.

"Make me one of those, will you?" his father said, pointing at Lewis's coffee.

"Dad, what are you doing in town? Aren't you supposed to be in California?"

His father shook his head. "Those idiots out there don't know how to run a damn thing. I gave them a generous deal, and they demanded an even bigger discount. That insult is getting them a call to my friends to stop their supply. We'll see how the bigwigs in Los Angeles like that. No more gas for their Lamborghinis and Ferraris."

"I think most of them are driving electric vehicles now, Dad."

The elder Wakefield laughed. "How do you think they get the parts for those electric vehicles, huh? Oil makes the world go round. Don't ever forget that, son."

He handed his father a mug.

"Besides, this is nice. Look at us sharing coffee together. By the way, isn't this a little early for you?"

Lewis shrugged. He could have delivered a snarky reply, but the THC in his veins, coupled with his scheming, kept him polite.

"It is nice. In fact, I was going to call you, so I'm glad you're here."

The normally stoic man brightened. "You just say the word, and I can saddle up some horses."

"Maybe later, Dad. I want to talk to you about the family business first."

His father gave him a rare smile. "You've finally come to your senses. Good. Let's sit down. We'll strategize."

"Hold on. I'm not talking about the oil business. I'm talking about real estate."

Lewis could see that his father was disappointed—but not crushed. The Wakefield family's real estate holdings were vast, and his father always took

interest in new opportunities.

"Don't tell me you're going to start buying and flipping houses like those stupid television shows."

"You taught me better than that, Dad. You taught me to think big."

Intrigued, his father nodded. "Okay, lay it on me, son. What do you have in mind?"

Lewis couldn't come off too eager. He needed to make it seem like he had done his homework. Due diligence, as his father called it. According to him, everything needed due diligence. Whether you were hiring a new maid, buying a car, or taking over a company—due diligence, due diligence, due diligence. He'd heard those two words on repeat his entire life.

"Have you ever heard of a place called Lone Peak Ranch?"

"I don't think so. Should I know what that is?"

"No, not necessarily. But what would you say if I told you that a competitor was trying to snatch up as much land as they could in Big Sky?"

He knew very well what his father's reaction would be. The elder Wakefield held a special love for Montana, particularly Big Sky, and so he took it as a matter of pride to own acres upon acres of land in the area. Lewis didn't know why. Maybe it was the majesty of the mountains or the fresh air. He really didn't care. All that mattered to him was how his father's narcissism would benefit his mission.

"Who is this competitor?" his father asked. "Because if you're talking about that pissant, Senator Charles—"

"No, Dad, this has nothing to do with Senator Charles. This has everything to do with a man named Brendan Northcutt. Do you remember him?"

It took a moment for recognition to register on his father's face. "Northcutt as in Northcutt Technologies. As in the company that tried to blackmail me into making a deal with the feds. Are you telling me that this guy is here?"

Lewis loved how his father's imagination ran parallel with his machinations.

He remembered his father, years earlier, talking about Northcutt Technologies. Railing, screaming about undercutting contracts and disreputable practices. But Lewis knew the truth. His father and Wakefield Oil had been in the wrong; Northcutt Technologies had been in the right. But as was the elder Wakefield's habit, his father had crafted his own narrative

about the situation, bolstered by the insidious whispers of his team of lawyers.

"I hate to tell you this, Dad, but Brendan Northcutt is dead."

His father looked relieved. "Then what does this have to do with me?"

Lewis leaned forward and looked his father square in the eye. It was time to drop the sledgehammer. "Lone Peak Ranch. It's his legacy, Dad. He left all his money to that place."

He hadn't been able to believe his luck when he'd uncovered the connection. What were the odds that one unassuming little ranch could act as the conduit for both his and his father's revenge?

"I see," his father said with a growing smile. "Tell me what you had in mind, son."

For the first time in ages, father and son were on the same page.

The collective might of the Wakefield Empire shifted its gaze to Lone Peak Ranch.

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# CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

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## LIEUTENANT PETE CALLAHAN – FIVE YEARS EARLIER

Their arrival in Afghanistan was met with a whirlwind of activity. While the Marines got a lay of the land via turnover procedures with the prior unit, Lieutenant Callahan did the same with his fellow chaplains.

The battalion knew Callahan by sight now, and even those who didn't like what he represented called him *Padre* when they crossed paths. After most dinners, he sat with a handful of younger Marines, talking about where they had come from, where they had been, and where they were going.

While piss and vinegar on paper, they were still regular kids with fears about dying. Sure, there was the occasional young man who looked like someone had pulled him out of a recruiting poster, but the vast majority of Marines he encountered came from humble backgrounds. They were just scrawny teens who'd raised their right hand and volunteered to tackle the world's enemies.

Some had dropped out of college to enlist. For various reasons, they just hadn't been able to cut it in school. "I drank my way right out of that place," one young man had told him. Another had said that he'd seen right through the professor's bullshit.

Others had graduated college and enlisted after. One was a twenty-five-year-old PFC who had not only graduated from college, but also earned an MBA. Instead of getting a high-paying job at a big firm, she'd followed in the footsteps of her personal hero: her grandfather, who had served in the Vietnam War.

Callahan grew to love these men and women and their crass language, constant joking and wrestling, and hearts the size of Texas. Each and every one of them was a gift.

Soon, the welcome mat gave way to regular day-to-day duties, and the battalion took over patrols, reconnaissance missions, and playing out the show of force to dissuade the Taliban from waging violence on the civilian populace.

One of the things that struck Callahan right away was how Afghan culture seemed to move on despite the violence all around them. When bombs weren't exploding and machine-gun fire wasn't lancing the streets,



children came out to ask for American candy, sometimes trying out English words they'd learned on television, and dogs left their hiding spots to scrounge for bits of food, many of them three-legged.

Late each evening, Callahan capped off the day by sitting outside and gazing up at the stars. They were the same stars seen all over the world, yet in this foreign land, they seemed to offer fewer blessings. Perhaps because exploding ordnance often drowned out their light.

It was within the shadows of night that the Marines faced the most danger. They had to stay on constant guard for enemy infiltrators. Twice in those first weeks, the battalion hunkered down after receiving intelligence about some imminent threat. Nothing came of those two warnings, but there were whispers that a SEAL sniper team had flown in and taken care of both.

He didn't know whether the whispers were true. The rumors in a Marine battalion—the scuttlebutt—ran rampant. Anything or anyone could be a target. Some said the battalion commander was the descendant of Vikings, and that instead of sleeping, he lay awake in his bed, sharpening a hatchet under his blankets. Such were the wild imaginations of Marines.

Callahan's first opportunity to get a taste of combat came during a conversation at breakfast with one of the platoon commanders, Second Lieutenant Bridges. The Marine had a baby face that made him look no more than sixteen, but he was not one to be underestimated. The others called him a lion in the field, a natural leader.

"Would you mind if I join you tonight when you go on patrol?" Callahan asked as they finished their eggs.

"I don't know if that's a good idea," Bridges said. "Didn't the CO say you should stay on base?"

"He did. However, I think I should stay with the Marines. Don't you?"

"All right. Fine." Bridges shrugged, and that was that.

When the burning sun dropped beneath the horizon, Callahan donned his gear and stepped out on a foot patrol with the Second Platoon.

"You stay in the middle of the pack, *Padre*," Bridges told him. He gave the chaplain a kind smile, but his eyes remained serious. "You get your ass blown to kingdom come, and it's my ass, too." With a clap on Callahan's back, the platoon commander trotted off to find his point man.

The air was still and quiet, and the Marines moved without speaking. He could feel their tension. They were alert and cautious, but sure of their skills. Consummate professionals. Two hours into their patrol, Bridges ordered a

halt. Everybody got down, taking positions behind walls or blown-out cars.

Though he wasn't armed, Callahan felt secure with the Marines all around him. More than one had walked by and patted him on the arm as if to say, *Don't worry, Padre. We've got you.*

"Slight change of plans, *Padre*," said the staff sergeant, who always had a wad of tobacco in his cheek. "Heyer says there's an HVT around the corner. The lieutenant says somebody can take you back if you want."

*A high-value target.* Callahan considered for a moment, then said, "It's okay, Staff Sergeant. I'll stay with you guys if that's all right with you."

"No problem, *Padre*. Just keep your head down, okay?"

Callahan nodded.

Word made its way around the platoon, and the Marines started moving, even more alert and cautious now. Some minutes later, they came to a stop. Callahan saw the platoon leaders conferring ahead, pointing at a squat building next to a huge concrete compound. Word came around again, this time instructing the platoon to secure the perimeter. Marines positioned themselves at varying intervals, each paired up with a buddy.

Callahan watched Bridges and two Marines approach the squat building, backed up by a squad of others. The chaplain couldn't help himself; he crept forward. He needed to see what was happening.

One of the Marines beside Bridges, a man Callahan recognized as the biggest in the platoon, kicked down the door.

All hell broke loose. Muzzle flashes spotted the inky darkness, and Callahan couldn't peel his eyes away from the chaos, even as he lay flat on the concrete.

Bridges grabbed the two Marines at his side and threw them out of the way before rushing into the building. More muzzles flashed inside. There were loud bangs and muffled screams, and then Bridges reemerged, motioning to the others that the building was clear. The group went in.

Then the platoon commander crumpled to the ground.

"Corpsman up," someone cried.

Instinct took over, and the chaplain ran to the scene.

The corpsman was already working on Bridges, who was still grunting out orders, telling his Marines to secure the perimeter. He then described everything he had seen and everything he had done in succinct detail so his platoon could report back to Heyer. Even in the dull-red light shining over them, Callahan could see the waxing power of the platoon commander.

Suddenly, the baby-faced Marine stopped talking, like his power cord had been yanked from the socket.

The corpsman started doing chest compressions. "Somebody put pressure on his stomach."

One of the Marines did it without thinking.

"Come on, damn it," the corpsman said.

Somebody spoke on the radio. In the distance, engines revved closer. The Marines never stopped doing compressions, not when they loaded Bridges into the back of the Humvee, and not when they rolled onto base. Callahan stayed with them all the while, saying silent prayers, giving the poor boy his last rites.

In the coming days, the second lieutenant would be promoted to first lieutenant and given an award that his parents would receive at Arlington National Cemetery. But that night, beneath the solemn stars, Lieutenant Pete Callahan saw both the horror of war and the love of brothers, and he knew for the first time in his life that he was exactly where he needed to be.

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## **CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO**

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## PETE

Pete stood under the cold shower for a good five minutes, trying to regain his senses. It didn't work.

He'd slept straight through his alarm this morning, and when he'd finally grown conscious enough to turn it off, he'd stared at the clock, wishing it would rewind. If only he had that power.

Sleep had brought back a terrible memory. What disturbed him the most about it was how he could not remember the platoon commander's name. And yet he could visualize the man's face clear as day. He could see the determination in his eyes and the rounds he'd taken to the stomach. He could hear those last words slipping from his lips. He could smell the blood and the sweat. And he could feel the Humvee as it rolled through potholes and took bends at high speed.

Not for the first time, Callahan wondered how he'd ever found beauty in that horrible place. The rest of his deployment had been the stuff of nightmares. Or at least, that's how he remembered it now.

*Stop thinking about it. You can't change a thing.*

Redirecting his attention toward today's plan for the runway, he toweled off, dressed, and headed downstairs. The chef was setting breakfast when he entered the kitchen.

"I didn't know if I was going to see you today," she said. "You've been so busy out in that airfield; I thought you might like a little extra sustenance."

It was a meal fit for a king: bacon, sausage, eggs, and biscuits. But none of it looked appetizing to him. His stomach was still twisted from the vodka and fretful sleep.

"Do you think I can take this with me? I've got some catching up to do with the bulldozer."

"Well, sure," the chef said without batting an eye. She packed not one, but three to-go containers, like the ones they gave out at Chinese restaurants. Then she put them in a plastic bag and handed it over to him.

"There you go. There'll be plenty more if you decide to come back for lunch."

Pete didn't know how in the world he would eat all three, but he said a

quiet thank-you, grabbed a cup of coffee, and made to leave the kitchen.

"Oh, I almost forgot," the chef said, smacking her forehead. "How scatterbrained of me. You've got somebody waiting in the library."

"I do?" Pete asked.

"Yes. His name was . . . Well, I can't remember now. Young guy. Good-looking. Says you are friends from the service."

Pete froze. "Was his name Lewis?"

"Yes, that was it. Lewis Wakefield." The chef chuckled. "Silly me. How could I forget?"

Pete murmured another thank-you and gave serious consideration to ducking out the back door. The last thing he wanted to do was see Lewis. He'd had some time to think about those lost hours they'd spent together, and he'd concluded that he needed to stay far away from anyone who knew about his past. Except he couldn't be rude now, could he?

When he walked into the library, Lewis was perusing the book selection.

"You taking food to feed the homeless?" Lewis asked.

"No, it's just what they give me around here," he said, trying to sound nonchalant. "How did you know where to find me?"

Lewis slid a mystery novel back onto the shelf and looked Pete in the eye. "You told me, remember? You said you were helping out at Lone Peak Ranch. This place isn't a secret, is it?"

Something about the young man's tone nagged at Pete. Frowning, he said, "No, of course not. It's not a secret. But why are you here?"

A sly grin spread across Lewis's face. "You see, when you told me what you were doing in Montana, I got curious. I looked up this place and thought maybe I could help, too. Or I guess the truth of it is, I told my dad about what you guys are building here, and he wants to help."

That gave Pete some relief. "What is it that your father does again?"

Lewis launched into an explanation about his father, Craig Wakefield, and his father's company, Wakefield Oil and Holdings. "The oil business has been good to us, and I've convinced my dad that it's time to give back. I don't think it was a coincidence that you and I ran into each other here, Pete. So, what do you say? Do you think we can help you?"

Pete wasn't sure of the answer. He had no knowledge of how this place ran. However, if there was anything he had learned over the years, it was that if somebody volunteered to help, you were supposed to find space for them to do so.

"Sure, Lewis. I'm heading to the airfield in a second, but I can give you a quick tour first. You're welcome to come see the airfield as well, if you'd like."

"Sure. I'd really enjoy that," Lewis said, brimming with enthusiasm.

*Maybe this won't be so bad, Pete thought to himself. Perhaps this is a sign of good things to come.*

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## **CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE**

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## LEWIS

"Tell me all about it, son."

"It's a beautiful piece of land. You'll love it," Lewis said, pouring himself a drink from the well-stocked bar. There wasn't ever a bottle worth less than \$300 in the presence of the great Craig Wakefield.

His father eyed him. "Don't you think it's a little early for alcohol?"

Lewis poured a second drink and brought it to his father. "I thought we'd celebrate."

"Oh, did you now? It seems like you're getting a little ahead of yourself. You took one tour of this Lone Peak Ranch, and now you think you own it?"

"Give me some credit, Dad. I haven't always been the best listener, but on this, I get you. We're celebrating weakness. Weakness, and how we can exploit it."

His father's shrewd eyes narrowed. "Our attorneys are working on it, but the Northcutts have got that place pretty well buttoned-up. My gut tells me we should pack up and move on. Why don't you tell me why we shouldn't?"

Lewis tried not to let his inkling of panic show. As much as he hated his father, he couldn't accomplish his desired vengeance without the man's vast resources. He needed to get his father on board, or else he'd be shit out of luck.

"Look, this guy was a chaplain in the navy. I told you about him. Remember?"

"Sure," his father said. "Callahan, wasn't it?"

"That's right. Pete Callahan. Used to be a priest." Lewis sipped his drink and took a seat on the couch. "Look, I don't know the full story yet, but I can tell you the man's a drunk. He's barely holding it together. I went to see him this morning and could still smell the booze on him."

"Isn't that the pot calling the kettle black?" his father asked.

"Ha-ha, very funny, Dad." He leaned forward and stared his father down. "I'm serious. If we apply the right pressure, this place could be ours. We could take it for ourselves in one fell swoop."

His father sighed, unconvinced. "So why is this chaplain the key to us taking over Lone Peak Ranch?"

"Because he's a broken man, and you always taught me what you should do with broken men."

"Step on their necks and shove them off the cliff," his father said with a nod.

They clinked their glasses together and took a sip, each relishing the moment for different reasons.

And then Lewis detailed to his father exactly how he planned to move forward.

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## **CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR**

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## PETE

Pete was exhausted. His shoulders and arms ached. His lower back groaned. But for the first time in days, he didn't feel the desperate urge to hide in his room and have a drink. He needed a good dinner, a shower, and some sleep. Then he'd hit the field again tomorrow.

Olivia passed by as he was putting a pickaxe and shovel away in the shed. She had a camera in hand and was dressed for a long hike.

"Oh! I'm glad I caught you," she said. "How is the landing strip coming?"

"Slow but steady. You're welcome to come see it, if you'd like."

She laughed. "Even if I did, I wouldn't know what to think about it. I'll just wait until it's done and leave the rest to you experts."

"Well, I'm no expert, but it is good, hard work. Keeps my mind busy." Pete tapped his forehead and gave her an awkward smile. "Anyway, you said you were glad you caught me. Do I have something you need?"

"Yes, but why don't you get cleaned up? I've got some things to do first. You can come see me in my office when you're ready."

He tried to hide his discomfort. "Sure. Of course."

"It's not anything bad, I promise," she said, seeing right through him. "I only want to check in. I promised Natalie I'd give you any resources at our disposal."

"All right, then. I'll see you in a little bit."

Olivia nodded and walked off toward the lodge. He busied himself studying the variety of tools on the wall until she disappeared inside.

His tired body rejoiced when the hot water cascaded over him in the shower. But he didn't take long. It wouldn't be polite to keep Lone Peak Ranch's trustee waiting.

When he arrived at her office, she was arranging a stack of photographs on her desk.

"They're beautiful," he said. "All yours?"

For the first time since they'd met, her smile turned shy. "Yes. Just a little hobby I do on the side."

That's when it clicked for Pete. His jaw dropped in awe. "Those are all your pictures? The ones in the hallway?"

"You got me," she said.

"Wow. You have a wonderful eye. How did you start?"

"I dabbled in school, but my husband encouraged me to pick it back up a few years after we got married."

"Brendan, right?"

"That's right. He gave me a boost when I needed it most. But you're not here to talk about me." She scooped all the photos into a folder. When she looked back up at him, her entire countenance had changed. All business now. "You haven't cashed your check yet."

Oh. So that's what this was all about.

"Right," he said. "I guess I just haven't gotten around to it."

"You haven't gotten around to it . . . or you haven't wanted to?"

Pete tried to match her gaze, but he found he needed to look away. He didn't know how to respond.

"You don't think you deserve it, do you?" she said, cutting right to the chase.

Pete swallowed hard and forced himself to meet her eyes now. "No, I don't. Moreover, I'm not sure there's anything you can say to convince me otherwise."

Olivia sighed. "You still don't understand what this place is or why Natalie brought you here, do you?"

For a moment, he could only stare at her. Then, finding his voice, he said, "I don't know what she chose me for, but she made the wrong decision."

"I beg to disagree. I think she made the right decision."

"Well, that's nice of you to say, but what if I'm not worth the trouble? I'm definitely not worth the money." He shook his head vehemently. "Do you know how many times I've looked at that check and almost thrown it in the fire? Almost torn it up and tossed it in the trash? I don't want it, Olivia."

"That's fine," she said, unfazed. "The check is no more than a gesture, something to help. It was just a way to get you here and convince you we're serious."

"Serious about what?"

"Serious about helping you."

There it was again, that word. *Help*.

Anger surged in his belly, hot and sharp.

"What if I don't need help?" he asked, tone laced with bitterness.

Olivia laughed. "I don't know a person in this world who couldn't use

some support. Myself included. How do you think I survived the death of my husband? Do you think I got through that alone? No, I did not. There were a lot of people who stuck by my side. And Lone Peak Ranch? It helped me in ways I never could have imagined.

"But this place only worked for me because I let it. I'm not wired that way, but my husband taught me to keep an open mind. So, I guess what I'm saying, Pete, is you need to trust us. Trust that we know what we're doing. If you don't want that check, fine. The money doesn't matter. What matters is you."

Pete closed his eyes and breathed. When the rage subsided, he looked back at Olivia. "Why am I worth all this trouble?"

She smiled. "Natalie knows why, otherwise you wouldn't be standing here right now. You know why, too. You just don't want to admit it. You're too swaddled in your own pain and regret to understand. And for now, that's okay. I promise."

"What if I don't want to be helped? What if I want to leave?"

Olivia considered him, and he shifted uncomfortably on his feet. The air grew thick with tension as the seconds ticked by.

"I'm not going to try to convince you to stay," she said at last, her voice quiet but firm. "You're a grown man. You can make any decision you want. Feel free to return to that big, bad world and get knocked down a few more times. We can book you a flight home and have Buster take you to the airport. You can get off the plane in Raleigh and take a cab right to your favorite liquor store and then drink yourself unconscious. I won't lose a wink of sleep knowing you made the wrong decision."

"You see, Pete, it's not my job to make you better; it's yours. You need to choose your own fate. Either you've had enough, or you haven't. But know that we've given you a golden ticket here. Whether or not you can see that is irrelevant. All I ask is that you trust your friend. Natalie cares for you. She wants the best for you. If you don't believe in anything else, believe in her. The rest will fall into place when it's time."

"How do you know that?" he asked, shaking his head. There were tears in his eyes. "How do you know everything's going to work out?"

"Because it happened to me. And because I watched it happen to Jack and DJ and Natalie," Olivia said. "You need to have a little faith, Pete. And if you can't have faith in something bigger, then have faith in Natalie. Have faith in me. Or yell at me until you're blue in the face. I don't care. But you must deal

with your life. Because what you're doing right now is avoiding it. You're throwing away an opportunity to help not only yourself, but so many others, too. You have a gift. People need you to use it."

"That didn't work out so well in the past," he said, remembering all the times he'd failed. Remembering the horrible night that had landed him here.

Olivia gave him a gentle smile. "That's the beauty of life. Anyone can change. *You* can change."

Her words sounded profound in his ears, but still, Pete could not believe them. Because his nightmares were constant reminders that he was beyond fixing. He was damned.

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## **CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE**

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## LEWIS

The private club, a swanky spot frequented by the who's who of Washington, DC, held no appeal to Lewis. At least he didn't have to pay for anything. Wakefield Holdings owned half the establishment, so all his drinks and food were on dear ole Dad's dime.

Lewis could order as much as he wanted this evening, and his father wouldn't bat an eye. He knew as much because he'd run up a tab or two in the past just to get his father's attention. It had never worked. The one way to truly capture his father's interest was a show of power.

Fifteen minutes past the agreed-upon time, Congressman Hardy of Houston, Texas strolled up to the table, drink already in hand. Lewis rose to greet the politician.

"I'm sorry I'm late," the congressman said. "I can't remember the last time I was on time for anything."

"Such is the life of a politician," Lewis said, attempting to sound confident.

*Dammit, you're in charge here. Act like it.*

He resumed his seat, reminding himself that Wakefield Oil was the top contributor to Hardy's campaigns. When his father said jump, Hardy asked how high. Today, Lewis would establish the same dominance.

With a shrug, the congressman took the chair beside Lewis. He finished his drink, then motioned to the waitress for a refill. Less than a minute later, the waitress brought him one. Her speed left Lewis wondering if she'd had the refill waiting.

"Thank you, Samantha," Hardy said. His eyes lingered on the waitress as she walked away.

Lewis worked to keep a straight face. The congressman had been married for twenty-five years, and he had three children—two off at college and one still in high school.

"How's your father doing?" Hardy asked.

"He's good. Busy."

"No surprise there. Craig is always busy. And how about you? When was the last time we crossed paths? It must have been right about when you were

in the Marines."

"It's been a minute," Lewis agreed, taking a small sip of his drink.

He had to limit his consumption tonight so he could maintain a clear head. Hardy's lackadaisical attitude concealed a shrewd, calculating mind. If Lewis wasn't careful, the congressman would turn the tables on him.

"Did you bring the file?" he asked.

Hardy patted his coat pocket. "I've got it right here, but I thought we'd catch up a bit first."

"I don't really have time. I need to get back."

"Oh, I think you can make time," Hardy said, tone stern. "You see, I had to pull some strings to get this information. Some very important people want it covered up. They had questions for me, so I had to lie. I told them it's part of an ongoing investigation. That shut them up for the time being—nobody wants a congressional inquiry—but if anything in this file gets out, they'll come after me. Understand?"

"Nothing will get out," he said. "This matter is private."

The congressman sat back in his chair and appraised him. "Craig didn't tell me you're being groomed. When did that start?"

Lewis appraised Hardy right back. He saw skepticism in the other man's eyes, which made him believe the congressman knew about his past. Maybe even the finer details of his other-than-honorable discharge.

Of course. It was just like his father to talk about him. To embarrass him.

Not appreciating the conversation's direction, Lewis decided it was time to employ his father's teachings and switch to a more favorable topic.

He leaned forward, resting his forearms on the table. "How's your campaign going, Congressman?"

Hardy's expression chilled. "It's tight. That son of a bitch from El Paso won't let up."

Lewis kept a finger on the pulse of politics. He knew Congressman Hardy had never broken a sweat getting elected. Until now. A real threat had thrown his hat in the ring this time: a native-born Texan who was also an army veteran, Harvard grad, and father of five. He looked great on magazine covers and even better on television. Hardy had his work cut out for him.

"Why are you worried?" Lewis asked. "You should know from experience that if you have my father on your side, you will get reelected."

"This cycle is different. I've got a true contender. How can I be certain your father will get it done?"

*He's scared.*

Lewis's eyes widened at the realization, and he laughed out loud.

Composing himself, he said, "If you have to ask me that, then you don't know my father very well."

The congressman's face turned to stone. "So, this is all you want? The file in exchange for help with the election?"

"I didn't say that." Lewis's smile turned predatory. "But I will say it's in your best interest to keep my father happy."

Hardy sipped his drink, then nodded. "I understand."

"Good." Lewis stuck his hand out, palm up. "The file."

The congressman reached into his coat and pulled out a folded manila envelope. "I'd love to know what you're going to do with this."

Lewis ignored him and took the envelope. Shoving it in his own coat pocket, he stood. "It was a pleasure seeing you again, Congressman. We'll be in touch."

"Until then," Hardy said, scowling.

Lewis grinned. Oh, how he savored putting the powerful man in his place. He could just imagine what Hardy was thinking now. The Wakefields had him by the balls.

As soon as Lewis hit the street, he started laughing. If tonight was a taste of his father's world, he wanted more. Perhaps he would play along and learn a thing or two from the old man. Then he'd take everything for himself.

Not too bad for a spoiled rich kid who'd been kicked out of the Corps.

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## **CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX**

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## PETE

The days marched on, and Pete kept busy. He stayed away from town, and he didn't touch the alcohol in his closet or the check in his wallet. He considered throwing away both, but he hung onto them just in case.

Olivia came and went, but he managed to avoid her by taking meals outside or in his room. Natalie and Luke eventually returned, but they spent only a few hours in the lodge before flying off to Oregon. Something about a funeral for one of Luke's former Portland Police Bureau colleagues.

Pete worked long hours to fill his time. The harder the manual labor, the less he could think errant thoughts. So, whenever his mind started to get away from him, he ditched the dozer to dig by hand. Each night, when he trudged up the steps to the lodge, all he wanted to do was shower, eat, and sleep. Sometimes the nightmares found him. Sometimes they didn't.

On the seventh day following his conversation with Olivia, the afternoon sun blazed high and hot in the sky. As Pete hacked at a particularly persistent root, he stripped off his shirt and tossed it aside. When the axe cut through the final layer of wood, he grunted in relief. Now he could use the dozer to rip up the rest, giving his arms and back a break.

Sweat ran into his eyes as he straightened to his full height. He needed his shirt back so he could wipe his forehead dry. Turning to find it, he spotted a man standing at the edge of the field. The man wore a reflective vest and held a clipboard in his hands. They locked eyes, and the man started approaching.

"I'm sorry. I didn't see you there," Pete said.

"Do you work for Lone Peak Ranch?"

He wiped his brow with the back of a hand. "I guess you can say I kinda do."

"You do or you don't, sir." The man's voice was flat, like he was about to give Pete a citation.

"I'm only helping out."

"Do you have the necessary paperwork to do what you're doing?"

"I'm not sure I know what you mean. I thought—"

"That's what everybody says," the man interrupted, glaring at him. "Everybody says they think, but they don't *really* think now, do they?"

"I'm not sure I know what you mean." Bewildered, Pete looked around the field, as if he'd find answers in the trees.

The man unclipped a piece of paper from his board. "Since you're obviously not in charge of this operation, why don't you give this to the person who is?"

Pete didn't reach for the paper. "What is it?"

"It's a preliminary injunction. Consider this notice that each and every construction project on this land will now cease."

"Wait, but you can't . . . "

"Yes, I can," the man said. "If we don't hear back from you within forty-eight hours, arrest warrants will be issued, and you will be seen in federal court."

The man shoved the paper into Pete's hands. He looked down at it, but the sweat in his eyes and the shock muddling his brain prevented him from reading the words.

"Any questions?"

Pete couldn't think of a single thing to ask.

"Good. Now get this bulldozer and these tools off this land."

The man stomped away, leaving Pete open-mouthed and wondering what the hell had just happened.

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## **CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN**

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## PETE

"Assurances were made, Mr. White. I don't understand why this is happening." Olivia closed her eyes and gripped the phone tighter to her ear. "Well, you better think about the right thing to do, then."

She slammed the phone onto its cradle and looked at Pete. He could almost see the steam coming from her ears.

"That sure went well," she said.

He frowned. "What did they say? What's happening?"

"Somebody is trying to sabotage our project." Olivia sighed, then stood to pace behind her desk. "The environmental research was done, Pete. We had every approval we needed, and this bit about a tiny little fish in a tiny little creek . . . This is someone trying to stick their nose where it doesn't belong. Don't worry. I'll find out who it is, and we'll take care of it."

Pete wasn't so sure. The guy in the reflective vest had looked serious.

"Have you told Natalie yet?" he asked.

"She'll know soon enough. I don't want to disturb them now."

"When do they get back?"

"Natalie wasn't quite sure. Luke is showing her around Portland, introducing her to his old friends. It turns out he has a lot of them."

Pete gave her a weak smile. "I'm not surprised. He's a nice guy."

"He's a very nice guy," Olivia agreed.

"Well, what do you want me to do now?"

"I don't know. Why don't you give me a day or two to work on it? In the meantime, you can kick back, read a book, take a hike, enjoy the chef's food, and maybe stop avoiding me."

Pete's eyes widened, and his cheeks heated.

"I wasn't avoiding you," he said, sounding as flustered as he felt.

A smile brightened Olivia's face. "Weren't you, though?"

"Okay, maybe a little," he admitted, deflating. "But it wasn't because I didn't want to see you."

"It was the last conversation we had. I made you uncomfortable."

He shrugged. "Yes, I was uncomfortable. But being uncomfortable is my way of my life. All I get are uncomfortable conversations heaped on top of



uncomfortable situations."

"It doesn't have to be that way, Pete, but you already know that." She returned to her seat and picked up the phone. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I have some calls to make."

Pete left Olivia's office, hopeful that she would get things resolved. She seemed more than capable—and used to getting her way. But where did that leave him until then? With nothing to do?

Fear gripped his chest; he needed to stay busy.

When he went to the kitchen, the chef wasn't there. The usual plate of cookies, biscuits, and fruit sat on the island, but he wasn't hungry. He considered going to the library, choosing a book, sitting in a comfy chair, and enjoying the afternoon, but a quiet environment was the opposite of what he needed right now. His mind was starting to spin again.

*Fresh air. What I need is fresh air.*

He hurried outside and found the horses. They jostled to reach him, and their large eyes seemed to take him in as he stroked their faces. With each pass of his hand, his breathing steadied, and his racing mind slowed.

But then it started to wander.

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## **CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT**

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## LIEUTENANT PETE CALLAHAN – FIVE YEARS EARLIER

"I was wondering if you would accompany me to see one of the village elders," said Lieutenant Colonel Hernandez, the commander of Third Battalion, Eighth Marines.

Lieutenant Callahan gave a brisk nod. "Sir, I'd be happy to."

The invitation honored Callahan. He figured it signaled he was on the right path. More and more opportunities were being offered to him each day, and he filled his hours with the good works he was blessed to give. Still, this was the first summons he'd received from the battalion commander.

Hernandez had taken a liking to him over the previous weeks. The man respected how Callahan sat with the Marines at meals, listening without judgment and giving advice where warranted. It helped, too, that talk of *Padre* had climbed the ranks. The word *holy* was now being whispered alongside his name by many, including one gnarled and embittered first sergeant who'd somehow found God.

"When do we leave, sir?"

"Tomorrow at 1400 hours. Does that work for you?"

"Yes, sir," Callahan said.

"Oh, Lieutenant? While I appreciate you shepherding our flock, don't forget to get some sleep. You're no good to us if you're dead tired."

"Yes, sir."

Callahan left the battalion commander's hooch and started off on his stroll. One of the habits he'd picked up was walking the perimeter of the small base. It was well-guarded, and the walls were secure. Sometimes, he stopped to talk with the Marines on duty. Other times, he only nodded as he passed by, absorbed in his silent prayers for God to keep them safe.

His route ended at the fence line, the only area open to the public. There, Afghan children clustered outside, waiting for the patrols to come out so they could practice their English and ask for candy. Though gruff and tough, the Marines always gave them something. Perhaps the children reminded them of younger brothers and sisters left behind, or even their own kids. Whatever the reason, the Marines opened their hearts and their wallets to these children who'd known nothing but war.

There was one special girl who had large brown eyes and a recently chipped front tooth. She'd gotten it when she'd tripped and fallen while racing after a battalion vehicle. Callahan had scooped the girl up and taken her to the navy dentist. He was the first dentist she'd ever seen, and he'd given her a lollipop when they'd finished.

Now the little girl made it a point to find Callahan and pat him on the hand, as if she could not say enough thank-yous. The dentist had only made sure she wouldn't lose the tooth, but the chaplain didn't think that was all she was grateful for. He remembered how she'd stared at the computer screens in awe, like she'd been transported to some futuristic world.

Every time he encountered her now, he marveled at how special it was to see little girls playing in the streets. He'd heard this town had once been under the iron rule of the Taliban, and before the Americans had arrived, young girls had been locked away inside their homes. Now things were different, and Callahan was happy about that.

Coming to the end of his stroll, Callahan approached the fence line. He waved to the waiting children and scanned their eager faces. The girl was not among them. She was probably busy, maybe going to school, maybe helping her family, maybe figuring out a new way to chip her front tooth so she could get another lollipop. The thought made him chuckle.

Thinking he better heed Hernandez's parting words, Callahan went to bed. The next day, he was rested and ready when he met with the battalion commander. They set off into town, accompanied by one of the company gunnery sergeants and an interpreter.

The town elder was a man with a large paunch and a beard that cascaded over it. He greeted them each formally, but his eyes never left the battalion commander. Their small group participated in the traditional ceremony for entering the man's home, and the interpreter told them what was being said.

Callahan listened, but he grew distracted as he observed the elder. The man's left hand was scarred, and a bullet pockmarked his neck. He spoke with a rasp, and Callahan wondered if the man had been shot through the neck.

*Tough old bugger*, he thought.

A woman served them tea and then quietly slipped away. A moment later, a young girl entered the room, holding a platter of food.

It was her. The little girl with the chipped tooth.

She looked down and did not make eye contact. He was about to wave to

her when he noticed the bruise on her cheek and the trickle of blood on her earlobe. She set the food down and left the room.

Callahan waited for a pause in the conversation, then asked the translator, "Is that his daughter? The one who just came in with the food?"

The translator relayed his question to the elder, who made a face and responded.

"He says she's his niece."

Callahan frowned. The answer was innocent enough, but there'd been something in the exchange between the elder and the translator that he hadn't liked.

Hernandez leaned over and whispered to him, "Let it go, Lieutenant."

He followed the order and kept his mouth shut, but he knew in his heart that something was very wrong here. After gifts were exchanged and goodbyes were said, they emerged from the home and returned to their convoy.

"Who was the girl?" Hernandez asked him. The battalion commander's face was hard, though it had been kind and open a minute ago when they'd still been inside.

"Just a little girl who likes to visit the base," he said.

"Do you know her?"

"As much as you can know one of these little kids. She chipped a tooth, and I took her to get checked out."

"Best to put her out of your head."

"Why is that, sir?"

The battalion commander studied him. "You haven't figured it out?"

He shook his head. "No, sir. Figured what out?"

"The elder bought her. She's his property now. Do not get involved. Am I understood?"

Lieutenant Callahan did not understand.

The next time he saw the girl, dried blood trailed down the inside of her leg. She did not smile and did not wave because she was hand in hand with a little boy, and they were walking back into the home of the town elder.

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## **CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE**

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## PETE

As the memory faded from his vision, the little girl's big brown eyes were replaced with the knowing gaze of the horse before him.

Pete shook his head and looked around, trying to bring his mind back to the present.

He was at Lone Peak Ranch. In the stable. Petting the horses.

And the little girl was long gone.

"I'm going crazy," he said.

The horse only stared at him.

"I am not crazy," he said louder, trying to convince himself.

First, he'd had a vision of a man in a cabin and illusions in a hearth. Then, he'd seen the little girl, whom he knew was dead. It all seemed pretty crazy to him.

If he still believed in God, he would have raised his face to the heavens and begged for his curse to be lifted. But he didn't.

Pete patted the horses once more on their heads, then picked a trail and walked into the forest. When he reached the edge of a cliff overlooking the valley, he stared down at the rushing river, wondering how it would feel to hurl himself off the edge. It wasn't far of a fall, but there were plenty of rocks along the way to crack your bones and split your skull.

He didn't jump. He was too tired to jump. He was too tired to think of anything except sleep. So he turned around and backtracked toward home. Except it wasn't his home, and he figured it never would be. A man in his position, who had done what he had done, did not deserve a home, did not deserve peace, did not deserve true rest.

Pete did not notice the chipmunks chattering and scurrying away. He did not notice the moose looking up from its afternoon meal. He did not hear the eagles screech overhead. He only felt a deep, despondent darkness that consumed his heart and soul.

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## CHAPTER THIRTY

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## LEWIS

"Tell me why I should waste my time with this?" asked Walter Barton.

The *Washington Post* editor tapped on the file folder he had yet to open.

The waiter appeared at their table, pad in hand. "Gentlemen, can I get you some drinks?"

"I'll have a martini, please," Lewis said. "Extra dirty."

"And for you, sir?"

Barton hesitated, itching his neck. "Water, please. Sparkling. A large bottle if you have it."

"Yes, sir. Is San Pellegrino okay?"

"Yes, please. With a small plate of sliced limes."

"Yes, sir. Coming right up." The waiter hopped to and disappeared.

"How is sobriety treating you?" Lewis asked, enjoying the man's discomfort.

"It has its perks." Barton cleared his throat. "You didn't answer my question."

"The file speaks for itself," Lewis said. "I think you'll enjoy the story you find there."

"There are plenty of stories that I enjoy, Mr. Wakefield."

Lewis sat up taller. He liked the way Barton called him Mr. Wakefield.

"But why this story, and why now? And why are we sitting in a dim booth shrouded in mystery?"

"You want to write another book," Lewis said. "We can fund it for you."

The editor scoffed. "I've already had four offers. What makes yours different?"

"The amount. I know your top offer was two hundred fifty grand. A small cry from your first book deal. How much was it? Two million?" Lewis shook his head and tsk-tsked. "What happened to that two million, Walter? You don't hold any significant assets. You don't have a car. You don't go on vacation. You must have pissed it away. Am I right?"

Barton shriveled.

Lewis knew the editor had clawed his way up from the mail room, just like every other Hallmark hero, except along the way, he'd adopted the

expensive habits of his wealthy new friends. He drank their alcohol and snorted their cocaine. He slept with their hookers and attempted to live their high life. Only Barton, who strove to do things the honest way and wanted to win a Pulitzer, could never keep up. In the blink of an eye, he'd drained his bank account and flipped it upside down, racking up well over a million in debt and interest.

"Now listen here," Barton said, leaning forward on his elbows. "I've been in this business for close to thirty years. I've made some mistakes, but I don't get strong-armed into anything. Do you understand?"

"Who said you were getting strong-armed?" Lewis asked. "I'm only presenting the facts and offering you a hell of a good deal."

"There are always strings attached, Mr. Wakefield. So, tell me what those strings are going to be."

"No strings, I promise. We only request that you publish the story in that file with one of your top three writers. You get it on the front page, then we'll give you every exclusive follow-up."

"How about the book deal?" Barton asked, practically salivating.

Lewis smiled. He had him.

"As soon as you say yes, half a million dollars will be deposited into your account. Once the story hits the front page, another million comes your way. For each subsequent front-page hit, another half million. You max out at five. How's that sound?"

The wheels turned in the editor's head. "I still don't see the catch. What is it?"

"No catch," Lewis said. "We just want the world to know the story. Why don't you take a look at it?"

The waiter returned with their drinks. Lewis sipped his martini, licking his lips at the taste of olives and high-priced vodka as the waiter poured Barton's sparkling water. When the young man left their table, the editor dropped a lime slice into his glass and reached for the file.

"I assume you don't want to be named."

"Never," Lewis confirmed.

"What will I find when I try to corroborate the details?"

"Everything you read in that file is true. There are names; there are dates." Lewis grinned and snapped his fingers. "I do have one additional request. The title of the article—make it punchy. Something that really grabs you by the balls, you know?"

"You want clickbait," the editor said, brow pinched.

"Clickbait, schmick-bait. Call it what you please. I just want people to read the story. I want them to be outraged."

Barton opened the file and began flipping through the pages. Lewis expected some display of emotion from the man—shock, horror, anger—but he found himself disappointed. The editor shut the file, took a sip of his sparkling water, and sat back in his chair.

"Are you an evil man, Mr. Wakefield?"

"I'm a man who wants the world to know the truth," Lewis said. "Ask yourself this, Walter, is there really a difference between good and evil these days?"

"This file . . ." Barton jabbed the papers with his index finger. "It could be trouble. It could dredge up all sorts of nasty business. Are you prepared for that?"

"I wouldn't be here if I weren't," Lewis said.

He knew very well that Barton was only saying these things to make himself feel better. To place blame on Lewis's unscrupulous morals and not his own ambition.

"I've got three more meetings lined up this afternoon," Lewis warned. "You've got thirty seconds to say yes or no."

The editor did not ask who the other meetings were with. He had his mind squarely set on one thing: the money.

"Seven fifty per front page," Barton said, "for a max of seven point five."

"Six hundred each for a max of six," he countered. "That's my final offer."

The editor nodded. "Fine. Where would you like me to send my routing information?"

Lewis downed the rest of his martini and stood up from his chair. "Don't worry about that. We already have it. I need to go now. I've got a plane to catch."

Without another word, Lewis walked away. He imagined Barton didn't mind. The editor was probably busy counting those future zeros, maybe planning his next bender. He'd had at least four stints in rehab. It wouldn't be long before he blew through the funds. A year, maybe two. Lewis hoped for the former. The sooner the poor fool spent all his pennies, the sooner he'd come groveling for more. Lewis would be waiting.

See, he was learning. You didn't need a gun to persuade anyone. You

simply needed a world-class private investigator and enough cash. Now that Lewis had both, he figured there was no stopping him, and that made the rising Wakefield very content with his new life. Very content indeed.

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## **CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE**

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## PETE

He did not go home, after all. Why? Because he knew the moment he stepped into his room, he would hurry to the closet, pull out the small duffel, and unfurl his treasure. Taking comfort in the bottle was the last thing he should be doing, so he meandered along the trail instead. For hours.

As hunger and thirst set in, Pete thought about taking off. Just walking to the road, hitching a ride to the nearest bus station, begging for a ticket, and abandoning this strange place.

But he couldn't do that to Natalie, could he? To Olivia? What would come of Lone Peak Ranch? What would come of their fight with whoever had put the brakes on their expansion plans? Pete had turned into many things these last few years, but not a coward. At least, not when it came to standing up for his friends. His need to serve trumped all else.

It was what had brought him to substitute teaching. Working with students provided an outlet for his innate desire to help others. He could have returned to his order instead—Bishop O'Neill had offered his old spot back—but he'd known their continued faith in him was misplaced. He didn't merit the fresh start they'd wanted to give him. Pete had already used up chances two, three, four, and five.

But most importantly, he hadn't wanted his presence to taint their faith. He felt like a contagious disease spreading to everyone he touched, and his short time at Lone Peak Ranch had all but confirmed it. Natalie, Olivia, and even Luke had welcomed him with open arms, and look at what he'd brought them. All their progress had come to a screeching halt.

Pete was a bad luck talisman that needed to be chucked into the ocean and forgotten. However, until Natalie or Olivia sent him packing, he would stick by them, even if it took everything he had. He would fight to put one foot in front of the other and fulfill his promise to Lone Peak Ranch.

The scrape of footsteps sounded from somewhere up the path. A man with a blond ponytail appeared around the bend. He had a beautiful German shorthaired pointer at his side, who perked up when she saw Pete. She had intelligent eyes that seemed to look right through him. The man said something to her, and she did not bark. She didn't even move from his side,

though she had no leash.

"Good afternoon," the man said with a wave.

Pete waved back out of habit. "That's a beautiful dog. What's her name?"

"Liberty."

They were close now, maybe five feet apart. Pete took another step forward and an odd sensation passed through him, like he'd bumped against a force field. The former chaplain stopped dead in his tracks, stunned by the blond man's tangible aura.

"You're staying at Lone Peak Ranch, aren't you?" the man asked.

Pete contemplated lying. Maybe this man was one of Lewis Wakefield's friends. But no. He was the opposite of Lewis Wakefield. There was a welcoming warmth about him, and he had a familiar worldliness in his eyes.

"I am," he said, choosing honesty. "Is it okay if I pet your dog?"

"Of course."

Pete took a knee, and the dog looked up at her owner.

"Go ahead," the man said.

Liberty's tail began wagging with joy, and she wiggled her way straight up to Pete, licking him square on the face.

"There's a good girl," he said, laughing. "You are beautiful."

She kept licking his face, as if thanking him, and Pete kept laughing. Then she nuzzled next to him, and he stroked her beautiful coat.

"Be careful, otherwise she'll be stuck to you like glue."

"I don't think I'd mind that," Pete said, marveling at the animal's unconditional love. "I'm sorry, but I didn't catch your name. I'm Pete Callahan."

"Daniel Briggs," the man said.

They shook hands, and Pete felt that electric aura tingle through their connection.

"Pete Callahan," Daniel repeated. "Chaplain, right?"

"A long time ago, yes," Pete admitted. He couldn't pinpoint why, but he was happy to tell this man the truth.

"You spend any time with us Marines?"

Ah, so that was it. That was the worldliness he'd seen in the man's eyes.

"I did a little bit of time in San Diego and a lot of time at Lejeune and Afghanistan."

Daniel nodded. "Now I remember you. You were after my time, but I've still got friends in the green machine. Eighth Marines, wasn't it?"

"That's right," Pete said, surprised.

"Who did you deploy with?"

"Three Eighths. Do you spend a lot of time at Lone Peak?"

"When I'm passing through. This is Liberty's first time here, so I wanted to show her around. Hey, we were about to turn around and see what the chef has on for dinner. Will you join us?"

"Sure, of course," Pete said. "Maybe if you and Liberty are there, I won't eat so much."

Daniel grinned. "I'm pretty sure I pack on five pounds every time I have a meal here, but that's what the walking's for, right?"

Pete laughed, and they strolled side by side toward the lodge, Liberty running ahead, sniffing under logs, pointing at birds, and generally having a fantastic time. After a few peaceful minutes, Pete gave in to the question that had been gnawing at him since he'd first felt the man's presence. He suspected Daniel Briggs would have some insight.

"Can I ask you a crazy question?"

"The crazier, the better," Daniel said. "Go ahead."

Pete searched for the right words. He didn't want to sound stupid or naive. In the end, though, he just came out and said it. "I keep hearing that this place is magic. What's that all about?"

Daniel smiled. "Haven't you felt it?"

He started to nod, but then he shook his head. "I don't know."

"You don't know, or you won't tell?"

"I think I've seen some things, but then I think I'm going crazy."

"I don't know about crazy, but I know all about being confused," Daniel said. "I won't pretend to understand who you are, Pete. Not yet. But I'm a good listener. I would love to learn what brought you here. And if you'd like, I can tell you my story. I can tell you how I spent years chasing my own tail and why places like Lone Peak Ranch center me—reconnect me to, well, you-know-who." He glanced skyward.

"I'm not sure I believe in that anymore," Pete said.

Daniel's lack of reaction surprised him. The man didn't frown, and he didn't shake his head. He just smiled all the wider and said, "Then it's a good thing he believes in you, Pete Callahan, because that's what makes this place magic."



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## **CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO**

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## DANIEL BRIGGS

Daniel had taken an instant liking to Pete Callahan. He recognized the brokenness in the man. The indecision. The pain. He could feel the floundering, like Pete was too confused to make even a simple decision. Daniel knew very well how that felt.

When they reached the lodge, they found fried chicken, stewed okra, the ever-present biscuits, homemade butter, homemade jam, and a pecan pie waiting to be served. The chef dished them both up, then produced steak scraps from tomorrow's meal prep for Liberty.

"There you go, girl," she said.

Liberty gave the woman a happy growl, then wolfed down her food, tail wagging.

Over dinner, Pete talked about his childhood and how he'd always wanted to be a priest. Daniel listened in fascination. His friends always joked that he was a celibate monk, but their assumptions were far from the truth. That's why men like Pete Callahan intrigued him. Giving up so much, including the love of a woman and children, to serve God and others was a huge sacrifice. Rewarding for sure, but a sacrifice, nonetheless.

"I used to take my blanket and wear it like a robe, grab a stick from the yard, and pretend like I was blessing my cousins," Pete said. "I would dip the stick into a puddle and sprinkle 'holy water' on them. The girls would giggle, and the boys would pretend the water was poison and fall to the ground gagging, and then they'd jump to their feet, laughing and asking me to do it again. I knew they were making fun of me, but I didn't care."

Pete shook his head, a small smile on his lips. "I did okay in school, but if I wasn't paying attention in class, it was usually because I was reading the Bible. I found so many answers in those pages. Are you a scholar?"

"I couldn't recite a line from the Bible if you put a gun to my head," Daniel said. He put a hand over his heart, then reached across the table to grab another fried chicken leg. "Everything I have is in here."

"Your heart or your stomach?" Pete joked.

Daniel laughed in surprise and took a large bite of chicken.

"Anyway," Pete continued, "I had a genuine curiosity for God's voice, for

the words that Jesus spoke. My parents didn't make me go to church; I made them. And that was because I needed a ride. I didn't care if they were there or not. I would sit in the front pew and pick apart the priest's words. When I got older, I took notes and came up with my own sermons. I begged my mother and father to let me go speak to the priest, and when they gave in, I became an altar boy.

"I was lucky. The priests who shepherded me were good men. Men of faith. Men who understood their weaknesses and shared their fears and their hopes with me. They encouraged me to do whatever I wanted, whatever interested me. They told me I should play sports, so I did. They told me I should do better in school, so I did. They told me there were many paths to faith, and that theirs was just one.

"They really tried to push me into a more normal life, but I kept returning. Even when my resolve was tested. In ninth grade, a girl tried to kiss me. We'd gone to the theater to see a reshooting of *The Sound of Music*. I thought we were just friends. She was pretty, and I was attracted to her in a roundabout way, but definitely too shy to make a move. She tried to kiss me, and with all the earnestness in my heart, I pushed her away gently and said, 'I'm saving myself for God.'

"Again, I was lucky. An immature girl would have pointed at me and laughed, or maybe run away to tell all her friends. But this girl just nodded, asked me if I wanted any more popcorn, and went back to watching the movie. We became best friends that day, and even when she left for Notre Dame on an ROTC scholarship, we continued to stay in touch. I loved visiting her there. The Catholic presence on campus was enchanting to a young man looking to be a priest. Then she was killed in action at twenty-four."

Daniel dabbed a napkin over his mouth but said nothing. He wouldn't apologize for the former chaplain's loss. Such words never consoled the bereaved. In his experience, listening with an empathetic ear often provided more comfort.

Pete put his fork down and sighed. "It was her sacrifice—and her passion—that convinced me to go into the service. She'd always wanted to be a naval aviator, so she used to make me watch *Top Gun* over and over. She would say that she was Maverick, and I was Goose. I was fine with that. I didn't really care."

Liberty rose to her feet and trotted over to Pete's side, placing her head on

the arm of his chair. The former chaplain gave her a small smile and began rubbing her ears.

"There's not a day that goes by that I don't wish she was here. She would tell me what I'm supposed to do, where I'm supposed to go." Pete looked up and met Daniel's eyes. "There are so many things I wish I could change. Do you understand that?"

"More than you know," he said. "But we can't turn back time."

"I know that, of course," Pete said. His hands shook as he resumed petting Liberty. "But I've lost everything. I keep trying to do the right thing, trying to make the right decisions, but every turn I take is the wrong one. Tell me what I'm supposed to do, Daniel. What is the solution to all this?"

Before he could answer, Olivia Northcutt walked into the dining room, clutching an open laptop in her hands. Her face was pale, her eyes haunted.

She looked at Pete. "There's something you have to see."

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## **CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE**

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## PETE

He locked the bathroom door behind him and fell to his knees in front of the toilet. Over and over again, he emptied his stomach into the bowl. When the heaving subsided, he splashed water over his face and rinsed out his mouth, avoiding looking in the mirror.

Pete knew what he had to do.

Quiet as a mouse, he snuck from the lodge. His thoughts were still, his disposition dead calm. Despair had turned to ice-cold desolation in his veins. It would be easy to walk into town, saddle up at a bar, and drink himself into oblivion. But he had no desire for alcohol at the moment.

Instead of walking toward the road, he walked away from it. Night was falling, and if he'd been of sound enough mind to recognize such things, he would've smelled the rain coming, heard the storm gathering in the west.

Numb to the world, he hiked on.

An hour passed before Pete realized he didn't know where he was. The last rays of sunlight had faded, and the looming forest now bathed him in shadows. Luckily, the moon's glow filtered through the trees, showing him the way to his destination: Lone Mountain.

There, he would have one final confrontation with God. If God existed at all.

Millions would soon know Pete's secret. And then the world would no longer need him. Nor would it want him. He'd be kicked out of Lone Peak Ranch. He'd lose his job as a substitute teacher. And he'd wind up even lonelier than before.

For the last five years, his life had been a delicate balancing act. The very middle of the beam he stood upon had once been so vast—wide enough for ten men to walk—but now it was barely the width of a thread. His narrow perch did not matter, however, because he no longer cared if he fell one way or the other.

But something happened as Pete walked up the mountain. The hopelessness fell away, replaced by a deep, burning resentment. His mind swam with all the broken promises that had been made to him. The lies told by his order, the chain of command, and God himself.

His steps grew sure, his heartbeat steadied, and his eyes adjusted to the dim moonlight. Somewhere up ahead, a reckoning waited.  
One long in the making.

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## **CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR**

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## OLIVIA NORTHCUTT

"Do you think Pete's all right?" she asked with a frown. "He's been in the bathroom for quite some time."

"I'll check on him," Daniel said, heading for the door.

Olivia sank down onto an unclaimed chair and placed her laptop on the table. Less than thirty seconds later, Daniel returned.

"He left. We'll go looking for him. Liberty, come."

The man and his dog ran from the lodge.

While she waited, Olivia reread the article twice. The facts did not surprise her. Natalie had told her Pete's whole story long ago. But the insinuations chilled her bones. At least there was no mention of Lone Peak Ranch. Yet. Not that she would try to deny Pete's involvement here—she wasn't that type of woman—but she certainly did not need more trouble on her plate after dealing with the EPA's preliminary injunction.

Sighing, she opened a new browser window and typed Pete's full name into the search bar. She needed to know how far this story was bleeding. To her dismay, she discovered it had been picked up by every major news network and paper. Reporters were hot on the trail, sniffing around Pentagon contacts and poking around political heads. But what was the end game? Shock and awe?

*You can't do anything about the leak now. Focus on what you can do.*

She needed to find their whistleblower. Whatever the reason, someone was out to get them.

Daniel strode into the dining room, and Liberty made a beeline for her water bowl in the kitchen.

"We couldn't find him."

"Did you have enough light? I could lend you some flashlights."

"No. I found his trail, and Liberty was all over it."

Olivia frowned. Then she gasped, clutching a hand to her mouth. "Oh God, he's not dead, is he?"

"No, Olivia." Daniel shook his head and gave her a meaningful look. "It's happening again."

"What is?"

"He disappeared."

"I don't understand."

Daniel rounded the table and grabbed her hands. His face was grim, but his eyes shone. "Olivia, listen to me. It's happening again."

*The magic of Lone Peak*, she realized. That's what he meant. The jolt of recognition woke her.

"All right, then. I've got work to do." Olivia stood and brushed the wrinkles from her skirt.

"What can I do to help?" Daniel asked.

"If you're right about this, then there is nothing you can do. The mountain will take care of him. In the meantime, I think you should stay here just in case."

He nodded. "I can do that."

"Perfect. Now I need to figure out who planted this story. My gut is telling me the next article won't just be about Lieutenant Pete Callahan. No, it will mention Lone Peak Ranch, and it will insinuate whatever lies this mastermind is trying to sow."

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## **CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE**

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## KIM CANTON

She finished wiping down the last piece of gym equipment with disinfectant and glanced up at the clock. She was late. The others would be home by now. Fortunately, her husband was making dinner, not her.

Kim's phone buzzed in her pocket. A quick glance at the screen revealed a text from her husband.

*Would you mind picking up milk and a loaf of bread on your way home, honey?*

*Sure, love you. See you soon.*

After putting the cleaning supplies back in the janitor's closet, Kim shoved the dirty towels inside a plastic bag that she would take home and wash overnight. The gym was a rinky-dink thing, a place that the locals frequented because it was cheap. It didn't make much money, but a friend owned it, so Kim chipped in to help when needed. She didn't mind, especially if the reason was good.

Take this week, for instance. Her friend was recovering from knee replacement surgery. No sense getting down on the ground to scrub the floors while healing from that.

Kim turned off all the lights, set the alarm, and locked the front door. Outside, the heat and humidity of a Tampa Bay evening had sweat dripping down her spine. She walked to her van, a Toyota Sienna with 100,000 miles on it. The beast revved to life, and she relished the AC as it kicked on.

Checking the time again, Kim determined she could still make it home for dinner if she hurried. The whole family was coming tonight, both the kids and all the grandkids. Oh, how excited she was to spoil the little ones with gifts. Thank goodness her son and daughter didn't mind her pampering their children.

Instead of going to the grocery store, she stopped at a 7-Eleven for the bread and milk. She thought about getting a Snickers, too, but she was trying to be healthier these days.

There were two people in line to check out, so Kim joined the queue. As she waited for her turn, her eyes drifted over to the newspapers and magazines. Sometimes, she'd pick up a copy of *People* because she liked the

celebrity gossip and the pretty dresses. But tonight, nothing caught her interest. Until her eyes settled on the *Washington Post*.

She did a double take.

The front-page story included two photos. The first showed a man in uniform, and the second showed a concrete compound. According to their captions, the man was Lieutenant Peter Callahan, a former navy chaplain, and the compound was somewhere in Afghanistan.

Kim skimmed the article, and her heart began pounding.

"Ma'am?" the cashier said.

She looked up. The other two customers were gone.

"Oh, I'm sorry," she said, shoving the bread and milk on the counter.

While the cashier rang up her two items, she snagged a copy of the newspaper and added it to her purchase. She tried to be patient as the cashier took the twenty from her hand, then counted out her change one dollar at a time.

*He must be the slowest cashier in Tampa.*

Kim drove ten miles over the speed limit on the way home, which was very unlike her. When she turned the final corner leading to her house, she saw that the driveway was full. She hastily parked across the street and rushed inside.

"There she is," her husband said. His smile cut out when he noticed the look on her face. "Honey, what is it?"

"Where's John?"

"In the back bedroom with the girls."

Kim strode down the hallway.

"Hey, what's wrong?" her husband called out.

She ignored him and opened the door to the guest bedroom. Her son was sitting on the floor. His left leg was bent at the knee, and his two-year-old daughter was leaning up against it. His right leg, the prosthetic, was lying flat on the ground.

"Hey, Mom," John said, looking up.

"Grandma!" Both little girls flew over to wrap her legs in tight hugs.

"Hi, sweet ones," she said, hugging them back. "Is it okay if I talk to your dad for a minute?"

"Is it dinnertime?" the elder girl asked.

"Almost. Why don't you go see Grandpa? Ask him if he'll give you a cookie."

"Cookies!" they cried, running from the room.

Kim closed the door.

"Mom, what's wrong?" John asked, pushing himself up onto the bed. Despite his disability, he was fitter than most.

"Honey, there's something I need to show you."

Rolling up in her hand was the newspaper. She handed it over. John flattened it, and his eyes widened as he took in the photos.

"Holy shit," he said.

Normally, she didn't allow profanity in the house—well, unless the Bucs game was on and the grandkids weren't around—but given the circumstances, she'd make an exception.

John devoured the article. He'd always been a fast reader. It was a skill that she'd feared she'd never witness again when she'd cried and prayed over his comatose body at Walter Reed.

Those days had been bleak. But her son was tough. The Marine in him refused to quit. One step at a time, he'd come off life support, endured ten surgeries, and learned to walk again through painful physical therapy. Not once had he given up. She'd stayed by his side throughout it all, and she honestly believed she'd given him a piece of herself during that time. A piece she would gladly give him again.

He looked up from the paper, and his eyes were damp. "Mom."

"I know, honey," she said, sitting down and putting an arm around him.

"What do you think we should do?" John asked.

Just like that, he was her little boy again. The one she'd raised with every ounce of love in her soul. The one she'd nursed to health after the surgeons had put him back together like Humpty Dumpty. She would protect him at all costs. He deserved the world after how hard he'd worked to rebuild his life.

"I don't know the answer to that, honey," she said, kissing his forehead. "But I know how we can find out."

She gazed into her son's eyes and couldn't imagine what he was thinking. The article had dislodged painful memories, but she'd had to show him. If there was one hard truth they'd learned together, it was that you couldn't pretend bad things weren't happening. The best way to deal with a difficult situation was to face it together, head-on.

"How, Mom?"

She smiled and stroked his tear-stained cheek. "We'll pray."

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## **CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX**

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## PETE

The pitter-patter of raindrops did not register in Pete's mind as he continued up the mountain trail. Nor did the cold breeze. The fact that he wore only a T-shirt did not matter. He trudged onward, seething, warmed by his white-hot rage.

Slowly, the pitter-patter became a steady rain, and then a heavy downpour. Lightning flashed and thunder rumbled in the distance. Each strike moved a little closer. Pete didn't notice any of it. He was too focused on the ominous shadow of Lone Mountain. If it took days to reach the peak, so be it. He had all the time in the world.

On he walked, consumed by his tumultuous emotions. They swelled within him, expanding until his soul could no longer stand the pressure. It erupted, tearing open a kaleidoscope between worlds. Pete walked right through it, none the wiser. The world he entered looked like the one he'd left behind, but it was not a firm reality. Not as the human eye saw it.

A lightning bolt struck a tree fifty yards ahead, shocking Pete to clarity. He stared at the tree, which had been cleaved in half, then changed course to avoid its burning limbs and sizzling trunk. Another lightning bolt struck a bush on his new path, closer this time. He felt the tingle of electricity, saw the air go pink and orange, smelled the ozone—but none of it frightened him. Back the other way he went.

A third lightning strike stopped his progress again.

"Damn you! Let me pass!" he screamed in frustration.

A fourth lightning strike trapped him.

Fire licked the land in all directions. There was no escape.

Pete threw his head back and roared. Rain pelted his eyes as he released his resentment and fury and fear upon the massive cloud hanging overhead. It was so large and dark it could have swallowed the earth whole.

All of a sudden, the hairs on his head and arms lifted.

With a tremendous crack, a bolt of lightning took him full in the face. As it hit the ground and splintered outward, it split stone, burned leaves, and scattered any animals that had been hiding.

When the rumble settled, Pete Callahan was gone, cast into another



dimension.

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## **CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN**

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## TOMMY CHAN

"I'm telling you that's not going to fit," Tommy Chan said, pointing at the nook where the freestanding bathtub was supposed to go.

"And I'm telling you to trust me," Quentin Nix said, elbowing his best friend in the side.

The two men made an unlikely pair. Tommy's family had immigrated from China and settled in Daytona Beach, Florida, of all places. Quentin was a burly black man who'd been born and raised in Atlanta, Georgia. They never would have crossed paths if not for the Marine Corps.

When they'd first met at boot camp, they'd hated each other. Not because either one of them was a racist, and not because one of them was stronger. It had just been a competitive thing. Their rivalry would have remained if the Corps hadn't made them rack mates, then put them through infantry training together, then assigned both riflemen to the same unit. Against their wills—in the beginning, at least—they'd been inseparable.

The horrors of war had changed their relationship, making them fast friends. Every time they'd had a chance to go home on leave, they'd gone together. Quentin's family now considered Tommy their second son, and Tommy's parents, even though they were divorced, welcomed Quentin into both their homes.

After leaving the Corps, Tommy and Quentin had tried to pursue separate career paths, but bonds bred from boot camp to blood were not easily broken. So, over a few too many beers at a seedy bar in Daytona Beach, they'd come up with a plan.

Quentin had always wanted to be an architect one day. Even in the Corps, he'd had a funny habit of watching those home improvement shows, hogging the television when Tommy had wanted to play video games. Tommy, on the other hand, loved to get his hands dirty. He loved to build. He was more comfortable with a hammer and nails than an ordinary man was with a sandwich.

The natural conclusion had been to start a company together. They'd kicked off their partnership with handyman tasks like repairing and resealing decks, pressure washing, and replacing windows. Later, they'd advanced to

remodeling. Now here they were, standing in a million-dollar home in Savannah, Georgia.

They'd promised the homeowner that she would have her bathroom back tomorrow. They were working late tonight, right up against their deadline, through no fault of their own. Supplies were getting harder and harder to come by, and the tub had arrived only five minutes prior to their current debate.

A casual observer might have called it an argument, but bickering was the flavor of Tommy and Quentin's friendship. They griped and moaned as much as they pleased, always meeting halfway in the end.

"Okay," Tommy said. "What will you give me if it doesn't fit?"

"Burger and fries on me," Quentin said, grinning.

They shook on it and then carefully lifted the heavy tub across the brand-new tile floor.

"Easy," Quentin warned.

He scoffed. "What do you think I'm doing?"

"I don't want you to sabotage my perfect measurements."

"Whatever. Okay, we're close. Watch your fingers."

Inch by inch, they maneuvered the tub until it settled right into the nook, just like Quentin had planned.

"See, I told you it would fit."

"I still think there should be a little more room," Tommy grumbled.

"Whatever. Give me a hand. Let's get this thing hooked up so we can eat dinner. I'm starving."

They connected the drain and water lines, then verified that everything worked. After double-checking for leaks, they cleaned the bathroom from top to bottom. When they finished, every surface in the room was shining.

"You think she's going to like it?" Quentin asked as they slipped off their shoe covers.

"I think she's going to love it," he said, clapping his friend on the back. "I think this is my favorite one yet."

"Damn straight. All right, let's get out of here. You owe me a burger and fries."

They packed up their things and headed out to the truck.

"Wendy's or Mickey D's?" Tommy asked as they slid onto the bench seat.

One of the promises they'd made at the start of their partnership was to live lean. Accordingly, they'd terminated their leases and moved into a one-

bedroom in the cheaper part of the city. To this day, even though their business was booming, they still slept on twin mattresses in that same dinky apartment and stuck to their penny-pinching routine.

"Let's do Wendy's. Maybe that girl's working tonight," Quentin said.

"Are you kidding me?" He rolled his eyes. "You don't have a chance with that chick. She's way too smart for you."

Quentin snorted. "Bet you a milkshake that you're wrong."

"Deal."

Tommy backed the truck out of their client's driveway before asking, "You mind if I stop at the gas station and get some dip real quick?"

"Are you serious?" Quentin frowned. "When will you kick that nasty habit?"

"Hey, it's your fault that I even have the habit. Remember the first time you gave me some?"

"Yeah," Quentin said. "Damn foxhole was a quarter deep with water. You were shivering like you had pneumonia. I saved your life, son."

Tommy laughed. "I don't know about saving my life, but the nasty feeling in my stomach definitely got me thinking about something other than being cold. Now, how about you stop giving me a hard time and let me hit the gas station. You need anything?"

"No, I'm good."

The Shell was empty except for a sleepy woman behind the register. Tommy snagged her attention and pointed at the can of dip he wanted in the display. He half expected her to ask for his ID, but he was far too old for that now. Even though he couldn't grow a beard to save his life, the gray hair atop his head gave him away.

The cashier pulled the can from the case, rang it up, and announced the total. Tommy paid with some of the change they kept in a cup in the work truck. She gave him an incredulous look, but he didn't let it bother him.

Frugality had served him and Quentin well. Once the check from this job came through, they'd have almost \$100 thousand in the bank. They still hadn't decided what to do with it, though. Maybe they'd buy a new truck or some new equipment.

After the cashier counted out his exact change, Tommy said thanks and turned to leave. On his way to the door, the front page of *USA Today* slapped him in the face. The headline read, *No More Mass. Just Murder*.

He didn't know why he picked it up. He never read the newspaper. He

could give a flying fuck about the news. He'd once *been* the news. But something in his gut urged him to take a closer look.

Tommy froze when he unfolded the newspaper and saw a familiar face featured on the front.

"How much for the paper?" he asked the cashier.

"Don't worry about it. They're going to bring the new ones in a couple of hours."

"Thanks," he said, running from the store. When he reached the truck, he ripped open the front passenger door.

"What the hell?" Quentin shouted over the thumping bass coming from the speakers. He turned the volume down. "You scared the shit out of me."

Tommy shoved the newspaper in his friend's face.

"What—" Quentin cut off as he studied the front page. "'No More Mass. Just Murder.' Are you kidding me? Jesus, man."

"I know," he said, feeling sick. "What do you think? I mean, should we —?"

"I don't know. Maybe we take the night to sleep on it." Quentin sighed. "You still want to get dinner?"

"I'm not hungry anymore."

"Yeah, me neither," Quentin said, still skimming the article. "I thought they buried this, man."

"Me too," Tommy said. "Me too."

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## **CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT**

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## LEWIS

Sandwiched between a sweaty Sasquatch and a retiree who kept asking about his mother, Lewis grumbled for the duration of his flight back to Montana. His father should have let him fly the corporate jet. Instead, he'd made him fly coach. Luckily, the flight attendant took pity on him, and she never cut off the booze.

Lewis sported a healthy buzz when he stepped off the plane. The retiree waved goodbye to him. He returned the gesture, then gave her the middle finger when she turned away. One of the gate attendants gave him a dirty look. Searching for the exit signs, he paid the man no mind.

Another perk his father had withheld on this trip? A driver. Lewis had to make the trip back to Big Sky all on his own. Still grumbling, he checked the time. Too late for any coffee shops to be open. He had one piece of gum left, so he popped it in his mouth. Twenty minutes later, he was in his car, zooming along the highway.

As he turned up the radio, he noticed the weather app on his dashboard said a heavy rain was coming. He peered up at the sky, seeing no trace of the impending storm.

*Weathermen are just a bunch of liars*, he thought, drumming his hands on the steering wheel.

Halfway through the drive, he dozed off. The tires thrumming on the side of the road woke him up. He swerved back into the lane.

"Holy crap," he said, reaching for a cup of coffee that didn't exist. He rolled down his window for some fresh air, but that only lasted a few moments because the rain was hitting hard now, and he would get soaked if he left it open.

When he pulled into the garage, he was tired, hungry, and in no mood to talk. He figured his father was asleep upstairs. Normally, Lewis stayed up hours later than the old man, but the day had worn him out. A quick snack, a glass of water, and he'd be in bed. He wouldn't even touch the weed. He didn't need it to sleep tonight.

*Crack*, went the lightning, followed by hollow booms. Lewis closed the garage door, shutting out the spattering rain and muting the thunder. He



walked up the steps, opened the door to the house, kicked off his shoes, and headed for the kitchen. All the lights were off. Too lazy to find the switch, he felt around with his hands. When he reached the fridge and opened it, the interior light illuminated a figure on the other side of the room. Lewis jerked back, shutting the fridge, and grabbed his chest.

"Dad. Holy shit. You scared the crap out of me."

"How was your drive?"

"Fine," Lewis said, reopening the fridge. He grabbed a block of cheese and some cold cuts, then took them to the island.

"How was Washington?"

"Look, Dad, I don't want to be rude, but I'm exhausted. Do you mind if we talk about this in the morning?"

His father reached over and turned on the lights. Lewis squinted against the brightness, blinded.

"Your plan is working," his father said. "The story's all over the news. I hear Fox is doing a feature on their morning show."

"Good," Lewis said, shoving some meat and cheese in his mouth. He retrieved a glass from the cabinet, filled it with water, and then drank half in one gulp. "Why are you still up, Dad? You have bad dreams or something?"

"Congressman Hardy didn't like the way he was treated," his father said, ignoring the question.

"Congressman Hardy can go fuck himself."

Craig Wakefield slammed his hand down on the counter. "You need to watch your language."

"And you need to stop pretending like that man doesn't work for us," Lewis said, bits of cheese flying from his mouth.

"Let's get this straight," his father said. "Congressman Hardy works for me. And Walter Barton? He works for me, too. They all work for me. Do you understand?"

"Sure, Dad. Sure. I know I've got to pay my dues. I've got to kiss up to you and your friends before you'll let me in your little club, right?"

"Dammit, son. You don't get it. Do you know how hard I've worked to reach my position? How much money I've paid? Do you know how many deals I've made? How many promises? You have no idea. You think it's yours by birthright."

"Well, isn't it?" Lewis challenged, raising an eyebrow.

He knew his father's weakness: Craig Wakefield wanted very much to

give everything he had to his son.

So, with all the earnestness he could muster, he said, "Look, Dad. I'm sorry. I'm tired, and I'm hungry. I promise I'm listening to everything you're saying, and I want you to know I will work my ass off to prove myself. I've been a disappointment in the past. I'll admit that, and I won't even blame you. It's on me. But what I need right now is for you to give me a break. Lay into me tomorrow if you want. I'll stand here and take it. I won't even say a word. But right now, I want to eat this food, I want to drink this water, and I want to go get some sleep. Tomorrow, I'll be fresh for whatever plans we make together."

"Fine," his father said. "I've got meetings starting at eight, so we're having breakfast right here at seven o'clock sharp. You got that?"

"Sure thing, Dad," he said, trying to sound enthused.

His father left the kitchen, and Lewis watched him go.

"Son of a bitch," he said under his breath once the coast was clear.

He did not appreciate being ambushed. He'd had enough of that bullshit in the Marine Corps. Some of that crap still gave him shivers.

Thunder clapped in the distance, pulling his eyes to the windows. He entered the living room, enthralled by the light show. It looked as if heaven and hell were battling for mortal dominion. He did not root for either side because he believed in nothing except the right here and now. And right here and now, he had to stay calm, cool, and collected, because his plan was proving effective.

He'd show Pete Callahan. He'd show the Marine Corps. He'd show the entire damn world that Lewis Wakefield was something, someone, to watch out for. His day was coming.

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## **CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE**

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## PETE

Brilliant puffs of gold and silver filled Pete's vision. Other colors came, too, but slower. Blues and greens, pinks and purples. When he tried to move, he discovered he couldn't control his limbs. For some reason, he didn't mind.

As the images in his head coalesced, he realized he was lying on a kind of slab. To his amazement, it was not hard or uncomfortable.

"You can get up now," a peculiar voice said.

Pete rose from the slab and looked around. He couldn't describe the sensations of this place. Not cold or hot or bright or dark or anything in between. He'd never encountered something like it. No, that was wrong. He had. Once. In the cabin, when he'd gazed into that fire.

"Are you ready to continue your journey?"

Pete turned to the right. A nebulous form seemed to be watching him. It morphed between shape, size, and color, just as its voice morphed between pitch, rhythm, and accent.

"Who are you?" Pete asked.

The form stepped closer, emitting an aura of understanding and love. Pete found himself wanting to put his hand out and touch the form.

"Are you ready to see?"

"See what?" Pete asked.

"You'll understand."

Pete thought he detected mirth in the voice, but he did not press. Instead, he asked, "What is this place?"

The form didn't answer as it moved away.

"Hey, wait," Pete called, hurrying after it.

That's when he noticed the trees, some as tall as him and some taller than skyscrapers. His eyes climbed the length of one to where it touched the sky, and he saw flocks of birds flying in perfect formations to and from the canopy. He gaped at their grace, the sheer beauty of the scene.

"We are close now," the form said. "Watch your step."

Pete's gaze lowered to the ground, and he saw a trio of baby foxes tumbling around on the path. Pausing to consider him, they almost seemed to

smile. Then, in unison, the foxes got to their feet, shook themselves off, and pranced away.

*How strange*, Pete thought, and yet they weren't strange. They were perfectly normal in this place. Nothing was sensationalized or overblown. Everything just was.

"This way," the form said.

Down the hill, they walked. Or did they float? Pete couldn't quite tell.

The tree trunks here were as wide as the length of a school bus. Pete reached out and touched one. The bark hummed against his skin, as though the tree were alive. Something like electricity traveled through his palm and up his arm. It didn't hurt or tingle.

"Here we are," the form said.

They'd arrived at a small pool of deep blue water. The form bent down and touched the water with a finger—or what might have been a finger. Again, Pete couldn't tell. The touch sent perfect ripples across the pond, making the surface resemble a kaleidoscope.

"It's time," the form said.

"Time for what?"

The form pointed at the pond. "Look."

Pete didn't see anything, so he approached the water, stopping right at the edge. Studying the surface, he saw only the uniform ripples. They began moving in patterns—pinwheels, spirals, circles, and ovals. He inched closer. Closer.

"What is—"

He didn't finish his question. Something tugged him forward, and Pete fell straight into the pond without a splash.

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## CHAPTER FORTY

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## LIEUTENANT PETE CALLAHAN – FIVE YEARS EARLIER

"Are you coming with us today, *Padre*?" Lance Corporal Anderson asked, checking the lieutenant's gear unprompted.

"I am, and I promise I'll stay out of the way," Lieutenant Callahan said.

Anderson gave him a once-over, front and back, then shook his head. "I don't know how you walk out there without a gun, *Padre*. Gives me goosebumps just thinking about it."

"What better shield from bullets than the Lord?" he asked, smiling.

The lance corporal laughed. "You mean us grunts? Best bullet shields Uncle Sam ever made!"

Callahan had gotten used to dark humor. Marines thrived on macabre jokes.

"Keep your head down and don't worry, *Padre*. I got you," Anderson said, already walking off to find his platoon.

The last few weeks had been quiet, but that didn't mean Marines hadn't died. Body parts liked to show up at the gates unannounced, grim tidings sent by the Taliban. Consequently, someone up high had decided now was a good time to conduct a show of force in the area. Hence the company-wide patrol tonight.

Callahan could feel the company's tension as he joined them. The Marines had fostered a good relationship with the surrounding community, so tonight's patrol was supposed to be a cakewalk. But no matter how many acts of kindness and respect passed between the Americans and the Afghans, trust remained hard to come by on either side. After all, they were in a war zone—regardless of what the people in Washington said.

As he took his place in the center of the formation, Callahan heard the nearby Marines griping about the patrol.

"Total goat rope, if you ask me," said one.

"I thought we got rid of dog and pony shows when we left CONUS," said another.

"We're sitting freaking ducks," said a third.

A platoon sergeant shot the young men a deadly glare. "You shut your traps and get ready."

It was a loose formation, and everybody knew where they were supposed to go. Even so, the squad leaders and platoon sergeants barked commands and made sure weapons were locked and loaded. Whether you were on the drill deck or the battlefield, it was the Marine way: inspect and then inspect again.

Callahan looked up when the creak of the gates opening signaled it was time to go. No orders were passed back, but the long column started moving.

"This is batshit crazy," a PFC whispered.

"Yeah. It's a good thing *Padre* is with us," someone responded. "He's our good luck charm."

Callahan grinned. Oh, how he loved these Marines. Their faith filled his heart with a special kind of joy.

An hour into the open patrol, some of the Marines started telling jokes. Still, their gazes never stopped sweeping the area, and they stayed hyper-vigilant of the locals, who silently watched them pass from windows, stoops, and rooftops.

Callahan's nerves had finally settled when an Apache helicopter scorched in from behind, so low it almost skimmed a rooftop, and brought his anxiety right back.

"Fucking army," a corporal said. "I swear they do that just to see us jump."

Murmurs of agreement echoed throughout the company.

The Marines' incessant complaining about the other services was yet another thing Callahan had gotten used to. They were on the same side as the army, the air force, and the navy, but the brotherly love between the branches of the United States armed forces had hard boundaries.

The company turned onto a wider street. Callahan saw one Marine—and then another—make the sign of the cross. He followed their gazes to a large compound. The walls were topped with barbed wire and cemented glass shards. Massive double doors marked with a big black X served as the lone entrance.

A normally implacable Marine said something in Spanish under his breath, maybe a prayer.

Callahan caught the Marine's eye. "What is that place?"

"That place is *no bueno, Padre. No bueno.*"

"Yeah," another Marine chimed in. "Rumor has it that the spooks are using the place."



"Using it how?" Callahan asked, wondering whether the spies in question—the spooks—were part of the Central Intelligence Agency or the Taliban.

"For some crazy shit—sorry for the language, *Padre*. For some crazy stuff."

"What kind of crazy stuff?"

"Beats me. I don't trust a spook as far as I can shoot him. You know what I mean?"

Callahan's eyes lingered on the compound. He couldn't be sure because all manner of smells permeated the streets of Afghanistan, but he thought he detected the scent of death as they walked by.

*You're just being paranoid*, he told himself.

The image of the big black *X* stayed with him for the rest of the patrol, as if it had been burned into his retinas. When they returned to base, Callahan figured he should put an end to his paranoia and ask one of the officers about the foreboding compound. But not right away. He needed to bide his time and choose the right person.

The last thing he wanted was for anyone to think he was poking his nose where it didn't belong. He'd gained the Marines' respect, but he still had to take care not to lose it. So, he decided to put the compound out of his mind for a time, just like he had done with the little girl.

Later that night, as he prepared his weekly sermon, he thought to visit Lieutenant Colonel Hernandez to see if the battalion commander had any insight that he wanted the chaplain to include.

Hernandez's clerk, a redheaded Marine with more freckles than there were grains of sand on the beach, looked up when Callahan walked into the command post.

"Sorry, sir, he's in there with the Ops-O."

"That's okay. I can wait," he said. "You mind if I sit down?"

"Sure. Can I get you any coffee?"

"No, thanks. I think I've had my fill today."

As soon as Callahan sat down, he heard raised voices coming from inside Hernandez's office. It was hard not to. The walls and doors were paper-thin, and Marines knew how to project their voices.

"This is complete bullshit, and you know it," shouted Major Sawyer. Clear as day, Callahan recognized the voice of the operations officer.

The Marine had just pinned the gold oak leaves on his uniform and relinquished command of his company to take over the operations unit. The

previous operations officer had been sent home because of his wife's complications with her fourth childbirth.

"I told you the place is off-limits," Hernandez said.

Callahan's ears perked up. What place were they talking about? The compound?

He steeped his hands on his lap and studied them, thoughts running rampant as he pretended not to listen to the private conversation.

"The spooks are up to no good, sir," Sawyer said. "We can't trust them, especially Carl. I know he's snooping around. He's talking to the Marines, giving them packs of cigarettes and other stuff to be nice. I caught him giving nudie mags to some of the guys. I told him I'd beat the shit out of him if I caught him doing it again."

"He's on our side," Hernandez said, sounding impatient.

"You know what's going on in there, sir. If you give me my company back—hell, if you give me a platoon—I will take care of the problem."

"Negative, Major. Unless you want to be brought up on charges, I suggest that you get back to your office and revise your plan."

Callahan didn't hear a response, but he imagined the operations officer popping to attention and saying, "Yes, sir."

A second later, Sawyer came out the door. His eyes flicked to the chaplain, and with a sneer, he said, "This world is fucked, *Padre*."

The clerk nodded at Callahan as the operations officer left the command post. "You can go in now, sir."

He got up from the chair, took a deep breath, and then reported in.

"Ah, Lieutenant Callahan, what can I do for you today?"

He almost asked about the conversation. He almost asked about the compound with the *X* on it. Almost.

Instead, he said, "Sir, I'd like to know if you have any input for my sermon on Sunday. Anything you think the Marines might like to hear."

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## **CHAPTER FORTY-ONE**

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## LIEUTENANT GENERAL CHARLIE STERLING

Lieutenant General Charlie Sterling walked smartly into the four-star general's office, planted his feet together, held his arms stiff against his sides and his thumbs at his seams, and said, "You wanted to see me, sir?"

General Lawrence Day tore his focus from the stack of newspapers on his desk and glanced at the wall clock. It was late, but anyone who worked at the Pentagon and had a star on their collar spent more time at the office than at home.

"Oh, cut the crap, Charlie," Lawrence said, leaning back in his chair. "We're not on a parade deck. Have a seat. And since we're technically off duty, pour me a drink, will you?"

Charlie walked to the cabinet in the corner, punched in the five-digit code from memory, and extracted a bottle of Jack Daniel's. Plucking two glasses from a nearby shelf, he filled each halfway, then replaced the bottle, locked the door, and brought one of the drinks to his former Naval Academy classmate.

"I see you have a sudden fascination with the news," he said, pointing at his superior's desk.

Lawrence took a long sip of his drink. "How the hell did this get out?"

He shrugged. "You knew it wouldn't stay quiet forever."

"Yeah, but you know how this makes us look."

"It doesn't have to be that way."

Lawrence shook his head. "Now, you listen to me, Charlie. I know I've got one more star on my collar, but I also know that you're three times smarter than I am. Remember the summer you spent teaching me calculus?"

He tapped his temple. "I remember it like it was yesterday, sir."

"You are still so full of shit, you know that?"

"Guilty as charged," he said, giving a little bow.

Lawrence stared at him. Then his eyes narrowed. "You've figured it out, haven't you?"

"Figured what out?"

"Well, you haven't figured out how to play politics, that's for sure."

Lawrence was right. He didn't like to play politics, and that preference

had bitten him in the rear on more than one occasion. The two friends had been equals until Charlie had gotten stuck at the rank of colonel. He liked to get work done, not schmooze. While his peers had padded their resumes, met all the right people, and gotten all the right billets, he had put his effort into becoming one of the most preeminent leaders in the entire Marine Corps. But good work only got you so far; networking mattered.

Given he'd earned his promotion to three-star general by the skin of his teeth, Charlie doubted he'd ever get a fourth star. That was okay with him. He knew he'd make a hell of a director somewhere. Maybe even the CIA. He understood the intelligence world better than most grunts ever would.

"That's why I've got you," he said, smirking. "You'll pull me up as I hold on to your coattails, right?"

Lawrence laughed, but as his humor faded, his expression sobered. "You think the spooks are behind this?"

"Could be . . . but it doesn't smell like them. If the world knows, then we won't keep our mouths shut, and then this will all come back to them. They don't want that. Heads will roll and careers will suffer. So, no, I don't think it was the spooks."

Lawrence sipped his whiskey. "Who do you think leaked the news, then?"

"I'd say it's either a disgruntled Marine, maybe one looking to make some money, or a politician. Maybe both."

"I thought we plugged all those holes."

Charlie snorted. "You were an enlisted man, Lawrence. You know if a Marine gets it in his head that he's being fucked, he will do some fucking back."

"Yeah, but it's been five years. Why now?"

"That, I definitely don't know."

Lawrence tapped his Naval Academy ring against his crystal glass. *Ting, ting, ting*. When he stopped, he met Charlie's gaze. "You still fit in your old suit?"

"Better than you do," he said.

It was true. While he hit the gym every single day, sometimes twice, his friend hit cocktail parties and receptions.

"Good," Lawrence said, ignoring the quip. "I need you to put on your suit and do what you do best."

"And what's that?" he asked, raising an eyebrow.

"I need you to find answers. I don't care how, but I needed them

yesterday."

"Lawrence, that's not really my job. You know that."

His friend rubbed his eyes and sighed. "You know I wouldn't ask if it wasn't important, and you know this is important."

Charlie shifted from one foot to the other. "Okay, then I need to fly to Montana."

"Montana? Why Montana?"

"Oh, so you haven't read all those articles on your desk?" He tsk-tsked. "As it turns out, our fallen chaplain is in Montana. Don't worry, I already booked a flight. I leave in five hours."

Lawrence rose from his chair and held out his glass. "Okay, then. I won't pretend to understand how you knew. Just that genius brain of yours, I guess."

They clinked their glasses together and laughed.

"What are we toasting?" he asked.

"We're toasting our careers, Charlie. And we're praying that this week doesn't mark our final year in service."

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## **CHAPTER FORTY-TWO**

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## WALTER BARTON

Twirling a single poker chip between his fingers, Walter Barton fought a rising wave of nausea. The chip was the last vestige of the money he'd taken to the game tonight. A reminder that he should be more careful.

Five thousand dollars had gone down the drain, just like that. Five thousand dollars he did not have. Five thousand dollars he'd borrowed from a swanky loan shark. Fuck it. He'd have plenty of cash soon. At least he hadn't taken a drink.

Walter entered his modest townhome, flicked on the lights—and almost jumped out of his skin.

"What the hell are you doing here?" he demanded, trying to sound tough.

"You did good," said the man sitting at his dining table, drinking a glass of milk.

"I should warn you that I had cameras installed."

"Oh, don't worry about those. I took care of them. Wouldn't want you to get the wrong idea about this conversation."

"Just tell me why you're here, Carl." He marched into the dining room and made a show of putting his briefcase on the table, then crossed his arms over his chest to hide the trembling of his hands. "What do you want?"

Carl was one of his least favorite people in the world. Sure, he'd gotten a few good stories from the man, but every encounter between them always preceded trouble.

When he'd first learned Carl's true identity, he'd been shocked, to say the least. Stupid as it might seem, he'd always believed in the Hollywood archetype of spies: They had wonderful teeth and shining hair. Broad shoulders and sharp chins. They were sexy and charismatic and bold.

Well, if you took the opposite of all that, you would get Carl. He was nondescript in a way that let him fade into any background, any crowd. The only thing that set him apart was his weird hankering for milk.

But Walter had heard stories. He knew Carl had been places. Done things.

"The boys at the office are getting antsy," Carl said, tossing a newspaper onto the table. It was the *New York Times*.

Walter hated the *New York Times*. They'd reneged on a deal two years



before; he was supposed to be their editor in chief right now. Instead, they'd gone with someone younger and less experienced. She'd been his protégé.

"I don't see why they're getting antsy. Nothing in here mentions the agency," he said.

"You've read the article?" Carl asked, tone conversational.

"Of course. It's my job."

Carl nodded and sipped his milk.

Even though Walter was a drunk and a compulsive gambler, he did his job well. He was a thorough investigator who believed in telling the truth. While fact-checking his latest article, the one about the chaplain, he'd had to call Carl for corroboration. Carl had been kind enough to fill in some of the gaps . . . though now that Walter was thinking about it more, he wondered if those extra details were accurate.

What if Carl had a reason to fudge the truth regarding this story? What if he'd played an active role in the Afghanistan massacre?

"I heard about your book deal."

The blood drained from Walter's face.

"Oh, I didn't know it was a secret," Carl said, smiling. He downed the rest of his milk, then set the glass on the table and stood. "I'll shoot straight with you, Walter. This is a matter of national security. So, you are going to hammer home this story about the chaplain. Is that understood?"

Walter would have laughed if he weren't so scared. He was within grabbing distance, and Carl was looking at him like he was a specimen prepared for dissection.

Managing to find his voice, he said, "Yes, of course. But I would never . . ."

Carl held up a finger. "Let me finish. You see, I want you to get that book deal. I know you won't write about me, but maybe you will in a roundabout way. I can't wait to read it. I do love to read. But you know, it could easily come out that you, the one-day editor in chief of the *Washington Post*, made a deal with a certain prominent businessman to plant a story, however truthful, in exchange for a very lucrative book deal."

"What do you want from me?" he asked, tasting the metallic tang of blood as he spoke. He hadn't realized he'd been biting his tongue.

"I want you to stick to your job. I want you to get your book deal." Carl stepped closer. So close that Walter could smell his milky breath. "And the next time someone wants you to run a story, if you have an inkling that

maybe, just maybe, it involves the agency, I want you to run it by me first."

"But I did," he blurted. "You corroborated the facts."

"I corroborated the facts after you wrote the first draft. Am I right?"

"Yes," he whispered.

Because it was true. He'd written the article but given another writer credit, not that the other writer minded. She was receiving critical acclaim for his work.

"So, next time, you ask me before you touch a single key on your keyboard. Do you understand?"

Walter nodded with a little too much enthusiasm.

Carl beamed. "Fantastic. I'll be off now. I'm sure you want to get some sleep and lick your wounds. Try not to think about the five grand you lost tonight. Oh, and when you get a minute, call your security company. I think there's a shortage in your system. See to it, will you?"

When the front door clicked closed behind the spy, Walter ran to the kitchen sink and vomited. The retching subsided after a minute. He fell to the ground, leaning his damp forehead against the counter and replaying the last fifteen minutes in his mind.

Money was not the worst thing he'd lost tonight, Walter realized. No, that would be something much more precious.

His freedom.

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## **CHAPTER FORTY-THREE**

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## NELSON SAWYER

One set of crunches left, Nelson Sawyer thought to himself as he completed his fifth set of push-ups.

It was 7:00 a.m. Normally, he'd be in the office by now, but his wife was out of town on business, and today their dog needed to be taken to the vet for a check-up. The twelve-year-old Australian Shepherd, Bandit, lay in the corner, watching Nelson sweat through his morning workout.

"You know, it wouldn't kill you to do a couple of reps yourself," he said to the dog.

Bandit raised his head, cocked it to one side, and then settled back down.

"Figures," Nelson said, flipping over and ripping through fifty more crunches.

When he finished those, he thought about texting his son, Drew, who was a sophomore at Arizona State. He decided against it. Too early.

Drew was living the high life. During his first year, he'd figured out how to schedule every class so that he never had to wake up before eight o'clock in the morning. He was still getting straight As, so Nelson had managed to keep his inner Marine from coming out and telling the kid to get his shit together.

Launching into a series of stretches, he decided to call Drew after the vet. He wasn't too proud to admit he missed his son. When they'd dropped him off at college last year, Nelson had been the one to break down in blubbering sobs. His wife had cried, too, but not as hard. The men of the Sawyer family had formed a special bond after Nelson had left the Marine Corps.

He'd always thought himself a career man, especially since progressing through the ranks had come easy to him. He'd been on a clear upward trajectory. But then his marriage had gotten tough. Not because they'd stopped loving each other, but because he'd gone to war three times, leaving his family behind to live life without him.

His peers had told him he was crazy for leaving the Corps after thirteen years of service. If he'd served seven more, he would've had a nice little retirement. But spending those seven years with his family had been worth more to him than money. He'd be lying, however, if he said his decision

hadn't also been motivated by that damned thing in Afghanistan. There wasn't a day that he didn't think about it.

Nelson hopped to his feet, proud to be fit in his advancing age.

"Come on, bud. We're going for a walk before we go to the vet."

The dog stood up with great reluctance, stretching one limb at a time. Nelson sighed, remembering when Bandit used to scratch at the door, begging to be let out. Now the dog was showing the aches and pains of old age.

"Come on," he coaxed, leashing Bandit.

To his disappointment, the newspaper wasn't on the front porch when they stepped outside. Frowning, he walked Bandit to the grass. While the dog relieved himself, Nelson examined his neighbors' porches. They were still waiting for the newspaper, too. What a shame. He would've already been through the entire paper by now if he were at work.

*Relax and enjoy the morning, Nelson,* he told himself.

For the next twenty minutes, they walked around their neighborhood. By the time they returned home, the dog was panting, and the newspaper was on the doormat. He let Bandit inside, grabbed the newspaper, and sat in the rocking chair on the front porch.

As was their habit on Sundays, he and his wife had disconnected from their phones and spent the day together yesterday. He'd taken her shopping; she'd taken him to get a massage. Then they'd ended up back in bed at home, their love once again rekindled. That meant Nelson was eager to get back in the news pipeline.

Though much of the news disturbed and even disgusted him, he liked to stay informed. As the chief operating officer of a San Bernardino start-up, it benefited him to be well-read and well-informed. Nelson took pride in his work. Although he was the oldest man in the company by at least ten years, he was more worldly, experienced, efficient, and focused than even the most eager of the kids.

It was hard not to think of them as kids. They were so young, only slightly older than his son, and they bitched and moaned when times were right and times were wrong. But they also worked their asses off. They reminded him of his Marines.

Nelson unfolded the paper and eyed the front page. Shock turned his mind blank. It took a moment for him to regain his wits and start reading. The details in the article were correct, but the insinuations were wrong. Very

wrong.

He rushed inside the house, grabbed his laptop, and went online. There was a slew of headlines from the day before that he'd missed. He ran through them one by one, trying to piece them all together.

*Why now?* he thought, drowning in old pain and anger.

"Screw this," he said, so loud that Bandit looked up from his nap.

Nelson Sawyer marched to the phone and dialed a number from memory. When the other end picked up, he said, "What the hell are you doing about the chaplain?"

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## **CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR**

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## PETE

The strange world rematerialized around him. He stared down at the small pond. The ripples were gone, replaced by calm blue water.

“Why are you showing me this?” he asked.

The form watched Pete from across the pond. A pair of cardinals, one a brilliant red, the other a magnificent brown, swooped down and circled the form’s head. Then they flew off.

“It’s your past, Pete. Why do you run from it?”

“You know why,” he said. “It’s not something I want to remember.”

“Whether you want to remember or not, it is still your past. It is still the road that you have taken. The road that led you here.”

“But why did it lead me here? I wanted it to lead me anywhere else but here.”

Pete’s consciousness was intact enough for him to recognize that this beautiful place was a kind of in-between. Either he was having a near-death experience, or he was already dead. Given the form’s line of questioning, he assumed he was still alive.

“There comes an event, Pete, a time when a man must decide whether to accept himself as he is or cast himself as another.”

“You’re saying I should accept who I am?” he asked.

“I’m saying, who you are is who you are. Whether you pretend otherwise is inconsequential.”

Pete closed his eyes, trying to find the inner peace he’d once had. In those days, he’d been so sure of himself, so sure of his faith. Beyond a shadow of a doubt, he’d believed God was with him. Which was why it had felt like being expelled from heaven when his world had shattered.

“You choose to be an outcast, though you’ve never been labeled one.”

“You have no idea what you’re talking about,” Pete said. “No one wanted me. I didn’t want me.”

But that wasn’t true, and he knew it as soon as the words came out of his mouth. So, the form didn’t argue. It could read his mind, after all.

“One of the most important gifts given to you is free will,” the form said. “This is but a brief stop on your journey. What you do with the lessons you



learn here is your will.”

“You mean, I can choose to go on the way I have, or I can choose to change?”

“If that's the way you see it.”

“I don't understand,” he said, growing frustrated. “What do you want from me?”

“What do you want from yourself, Pete?”

He didn't want to run to a bottle for solace. He wanted there to be a purpose. He wanted there to be life and love. He wanted to find a home. A real home. When was the last time he'd truly belonged somewhere? With the Marines? Yes, that was it. He'd had to prove himself, of course. He'd worked hard at that. He'd listened, and he'd prayed. Then they'd built a home for him out of their love and support.

Without a word, the form reached down and touched the pond. The water rippled inward and up, as if it hoped to touch the sky. Then it fell back down with a gentle splash. The ripples began swirling, slowly at first, then faster and faster, and Pete couldn't tear his eyes away. Before he knew what was happening, he was falling.

Once again, Pete dissolved into the past.

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## **CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE**

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## LEWIS

Throughout breakfast, he nodded and said, "Yes, sir," even though all he wanted to do was reach across the table and punch his father in the face. At least the old man was flying to Chicago soon. That meant Lewis would be blissfully alone for at least two days.

"You have to have patience," his father kept saying. "You have to hold your temper."

*Yeah, yeah. Have patience. Whatever.*

When his father got in the SUV and drove away, Lewis stood on the front porch and waved goodbye, smiling as if he cared. Deep inside, however, he wished that his father's small plane would get struck by lightning. Or that the winds would cause a tornado and suck it into oblivion.

*No, that would be too easy, he thought as he walked into the house. Craig Wakefield doesn't deserve easy. Not like I do.*

His path in life had always seemed so damn hard. He needed someone to give him a break for once.

If only Lewis could have seen he was his own worst enemy. His desire for immediate gratification, for everything to be stress-free and simple, led him to cut corners. Sometimes that worked. But in the long run, cut corners created an incomplete map, and an incomplete map meant no real way forward.

Whistling to himself, Lewis considered going to the gym. Sure, there was equipment in the house, but the private gym in town had a key advantage: women. The girls there, especially the older ones and the married ones, liked to watch him lift because he was much fitter than their husbands.

But the storm dissuaded him from leaving the house. And without women to ogle him, there was no point in working out, so he didn't go downstairs to the home gym, either. Instead, he went to the kitchen for another cup of coffee.

"Hello, Lewis," a familiar voice said. A man was waiting at the dining room table. In front of him sat Lewis's laptop and a glass of milk. "You really should lay off the porn, my man. You know we can see everything you're looking at, right?"

"What the hell are you doing here?" he asked.

Carl grinned. "Is that your version of a warm welcome for an old friend? I thought we'd hug it out."

Lewis clenched his fists at his sides. The dangerous man's drop-in was a wrinkle he hadn't foreseen. His thoughts turned to damage control—the little lies he liked to tell, the cover-ups that came so easily to his lips.

"If you're here about the articles, it's not what you think," Lewis said.

Carl rose, closed the laptop, and perched his rear on the edge of the table. He picked up his glass and took a hefty swallow. Lewis cringed. As far as he was concerned, only total weirdos salivated over whole glasses of plain milk as adults.

Wiping his mouth, Carl said, "You know why I love milk, Lewis? Because it reminds me of my childhood. When I was three, my grandfather took me to a dairy farm. He let me milk a cow. He put boots on me, and we walked through cow shit for an hour. Yeah, it sounds quaint, but that was my grandfather. The funny thing is, I loved it. Afterward, we got ice cream. Then we ate lunch. Steak and eggs and milk. Not one percent, not two percent, but whole milk with all the creamy goodness that Mother Earth offers."

"I don't care about your stupid milk," Lewis snapped. Then he saw the look on Carl's face. It was the same look he'd seen right before *it* had happened. Gulping, he said, "I'm sorry."

Carl smiled at him, but behind that smile was a lethal threat. "What I want you to do right now is sit there and listen to my story. Okay, Lewis?"

"Okay," he said, chastened.

"Good. Now where was I? Oh, I know. When I was nine, my father died. My mother was a no-good, two-bit piece of white trailer trash, so she wasn't in the picture. My grandfather took me in. We drank milk together every meal: breakfast, lunch, and dinner. He told me about going to war. He taught me how to be a man. We worked the farm together when I wasn't in school, and he made me promise that if I were ever to make something of myself, I would remember one simple lesson. You want to know what that lesson was?"

Lewis tried to respond, but when he opened his mouth, nothing came out. Fear had stolen his voice. Carl didn't bother waiting for him to find it.

"I'm so glad you asked," the spook said, a predatory gleam in his eyes. He raised his milk in a toast and looked up at the ceiling. "My grandfather said that the second you let a friend screw you is the second you let the wolves in

the back door."

Frowning, Lewis let the words sink in. He tried to search them for meaning but came up empty.

"You look confused. Do you need me to explain?"

Lewis didn't answer—intentionally, this time. He didn't want to look stupid, not in front of anyone, but definitely not in front of *him*. The man he'd met in Afghanistan. The man who'd promised he could secure Lewis's future.

"You lied to me," Lewis said. "You're the friend who's screwing me."

Carl shook his head. In a somber tone, he said, "No, Lewis, that wasn't the point of the story. The point of the story is that when you hold all the power, you don't let anyone take it from you. Now let me be clear. I hold all the power, and you're the one trying to screw me."

His heart started racing. He wanted to sit down. He wanted to catch his breath.

"You opened up a can of worms, Lewis. Pandora's box is gaping wide, and I'm afraid of what will fly out."

Gathering every ounce of courage within him, Lewis said, "Are you not reading the news? This is good for us. Good for you. I'm sure you can twist it any way you want."

Again, Carl shook his head. "You're still so shortsighted. I thought your other-than-honorable discharge would've woken you up. You got off easy, you know. Don't forget you would've received the big chicken dinner if it weren't for me."

The "big chicken dinner" was what some called a bad conduct discharge. It had the ability to hang around your neck for life.

"I'm sure I can make a few phone calls and order you that dinner, if you'd like. I'll serve it with a nice warm glass of milk. How about that, Lewis?"

"You know I don't want that," he said.

"Of course. I just want you to know we're on the same team. Pals again?"

Lewis nodded. What else could he do?

"So, here's the thing, ole pal. This little visit can't get back to my place of employment, do you understand?"

Lewis nodded again.

"I'm hearing whispers of sympathy for the man who killed all those people. We can't let that happen. It would be a crime. What we need to do, what you're going to help me do, is make sure the world knows the truth."

"I thought that's what I was doing," Lewis said.

"Let me finish, please. That's only step one. Step two is making sure Lieutenant Peter Callahan never talks to the media. Because if he does . . ."

Carl let the threat hang in the air, and Lewis knew exactly what he meant this time.

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## **CHAPTER FORTY-SIX**

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## TOMMY

With a gasp, Tommy lurched upright in bed. On the small mattress across the room, Quentin jerked awake, too.

"Holy crap, dude. You scared the shit out of me," Quentin said.

He looked at his friend. "What?"

"You bolted straight up like a vampire rising from the dead! What the hell's wrong with you? I told you the Tarleton job is all taken care of."

Tommy was the worrier of the two. He'd lost a lot of sleep since they'd started their small business together. He often tossed and turned all night, thinking of ways they could improve their systems, pinch a few more pennies, and secure their next deal.

"I had a dream," he explained. "God, that was one hell of a dream."

Leaning against the wall, Quentin said, "Tell me about it."

"I can't get that story out of my head. You know, the one in the paper."

"Me too," Quentin agreed. "How about them just dredging up our past and throwing it into headlines all these years later?"

Tommy nodded and rubbed a hand down his face. "I think we need to do something."

"Like what?"

Tommy didn't want to tell Quentin the truth—that something, or someone, had come to him in his sleep and spoken to him—even though his friend would probably understand. Back in Afghanistan, they'd witnessed things that made more sense in fiction novels than real life, both miracles and the worst of humankind.

"You think we can put today's job off? Maybe tomorrow's, too?" he asked.

Quentin's eyes widened. "What? Are you crazy? We put those jobs off, everything else gets backlogged, and I know how you feel about a backlog. Do I need to remind you where your attitude goes when we get behind?"

Getting behind was the furthest thing from Tommy's mind right now.

"We need to go to Montana," he said.

"Montana? What's in Montana?" Quentin asked.

He looked his friend dead in the eye. "Do you trust me?"



"Of course, man. You know that. Till death do us part and all that shit."

Tommy laughed. He couldn't believe they'd once been enemies. Quentin was now his best friend, the brother he'd never had. They would do anything for each other. This moment in time, right here and right now, proved it. Asking his friend to drop everything and follow him across the country on faith alone . . . It was a lot.

"You call Mrs. Tarleton, and I'll call Mr. Reed," Tommy said, going into planning mode. "We'll tell them we have a family emergency."

"A family emergency? Are you kidding?" Quentin shook his head. But then he must have seen the look on Tommy's face, because he said, "Okay, yeah, I'll call her. But tell me one thing, man. This is legit, right? This Montana thing?"

He nodded. "Yeah, man, it's legit, and we need to get there quick."

Tommy knew they had to hurry because the form in his dreams had told him so.

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## **CHAPTER FORTY-SEVEN**

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## CHARLIE

Thanking the pilot for the ride, Charlie stepped off the plane. The landing in Bozeman had been choppy, and even the pilot looked a little queasy. Not as queasy as the passengers, though. Many looked ashen, and some were still murmuring prayers.

The three-star general had been through too many close calls to count, so today's turbulence hadn't fazed him. Still, he felt for the other travelers. Airborne troubles were always the most frightening because everyone except the pilot had zero control. All their trust had to be placed in a stranger.

Charlie descended the metal steps to the tarmac. It was morning, but it looked like night. The sky was dark, and lightning flashed on the horizon. When he went to pick up his rental car, the attendant asked if he wanted extra insurance.

"No, thank you," he said with a smile.

"Are you sure? Where are you driving?" the attendant asked skeptically.

"Big Sky."

She whistled. "Good thing you're going to have a full tank of gas, because that's gonna be quite the trek. Might take hours. Traffic's pretty bad."

"Because of the storm?"

"Have you looked outside, sir? All that is even worse where you're going. So, are you sure you don't want extra insurance? Because I don't want you to come back here and yell at me if you get charged for dings in your car."

"I'll be just fine, thank you," Charlie said, taking the key.

He'd booked this trip at the last minute, so the only vehicle available had been an antiquated little number that sounded like a toy car when it revved. He would have preferred a four-by-four truck, but he was not one to complain.

Charlie plugged Lone Peak Ranch's coordinates into his GPS, then exited the parking garage. Instantly, heavy rain pelted the windshield. He put the wipers on high to maintain his field of vision, but they struggled to keep up.

Squinting to read the road signs, he pulled onto the highway and headed for Big Sky. As the miles ticked by, the unease crawling up his spine strengthened. He couldn't shake the feeling that he was driving into a

dangerous situation—one that might just get people killed.

Charlie sighed. He couldn't think about the potential fallout of this mission right now. Besides, it didn't matter. He had to set things right. So, he decided it was time to make a call. Hopefully, his contact hadn't left Montana quite yet.

Crossing his fingers, he dialed the number the senator had provided. Three rings later, the man picked up.

“Yes?”

“Good morning, sir,” Charlie said. Then he introduced himself, got down to business with a quick recap of his mission, and asked, “Have you left Montana yet?”

“No,” the man said. “My pilot thinks it's inadvisable to fly in this soup.”

“I have a car, sir. Can I come meet you?”

There was a pause as the man considered his request. At last, he said, “If what you say is true, Lieutenant General, then I'm the one who should be asking you for a favor. Where can we meet?”

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## **CHAPTER FORTY-EIGHT**

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## LIEUTENANT PETE CALLAHAN – FIVE YEARS EARLIER

Weeks passed, and Lieutenant Callahan did his best to stick to his routine and dispel the compound from his mind. But slowly, a restless kind of apprehension began seeping through the camp. At first, the chaplain only noticed it in whispers. Then, one day, a young man requested confession.

Sometimes, the Marines who came to him needed to be coaxed into speaking. Whether it was because their emotions were running high, they couldn't find the words, or they were intimidated, Callahan always knew what to say. But the lance corporal standing before him needed no prodding. He never did.

"Father, forgive me for I have sinned," the young man said, clasping his hands and closing his eyes. "I've sinned, and I swear I'm going to go to hell for this one."

The lance corporal was a regular confessor. He couldn't seem to keep himself out of trouble. Since arriving in Afghanistan, he had received non-judicial punishment—NJP for short—twice already.

"Go ahead and tell me," Callahan said.

"I took someone's money. But it's not what you think, Father. It's that damn spook, Carl. He gets in your head, makes you say and think things you don't want to think, you don't want to say."

The lance corporal's words caught Callahan's interest. He'd heard the scuttlebutt about Carl. He'd also spotted him around the base, of course. The man had the run of the place, but he'd always avoided the chaplain. Maybe now Callahan would find out why.

"Carl said he needed to sneak out because a contact in town needed buttering up. Those were his words, Father: *buttering up*. Oh, hell. What am I going to do?"

"Is that the whole story?" Callahan asked.

The lance corporal shook his head forcefully, like he was trying to expel the memories. "No. The next day, we found that pile of kids. You remember?"

Callahan felt the blood drain from his face. He remembered. How could he not? They'd been out on a routine patrol, no threats in sight, when they'd

discovered four children lying in the street, dead and discarded like yesterday's trash.

"But you didn't do that," Callahan said.

"Of course I didn't do it, Father, but I'm pretty damn sure Carl's part of it."

Callahan was here to absolve this young man of his sins, not make guesses about who was responsible for a heinous crime. But if Carl truly had been involved in the children's murders, then the implications were terrible. Callahan could not and would not risk the safety of his Marines, so he determined then and there that he would investigate the lance corporal's allegation.

"Why do you think Carl was part of that?" he asked.

"Carl's bad juju, Father. Bad, bad juju."

He asked the Marine to explain further, and the young man complied. Afterward, Callahan knew what he had to do.

The next morning, he found Carl chatting with some Navy Seabees who'd come to shore up the camp's defenses. Whenever you wanted something built quick and right in the military, you called up the Navy Seabees.

Carl smiled as Callahan approached. "Well, good morning, *Padre*. Out for a stroll?"

He did not like Carl calling him *Padre*. The term of endearment sounded more like a curse coming from Carl's lips.

Nonetheless, he gave the man a warm smile. "Actually, I was wondering if I could have a word."

Carl hid his emotions well, but Callahan still sensed his annoyance.

Nodding to the Navy Seabees, Carl said, "If you gentlemen will excuse me, the chaplain would like a word."

They found a quiet spot out of earshot, and Carl pulled a single Afghan cigarette from his pocket.

"Do you want one?" he asked.

"No, thank you, but you go ahead."

Carl lit the cigarette. The pungent smoke filled the space between them.

"What did you want to talk to me about, *Padre*?"

Callahan had taken the night to think about how he would play this. Could he outfox the fox? No, definitely not. Carl was too slippery. So, he figured it would be best to go right to the truth. He would not name names; if anybody took the blame, it would be him.

"There have been concerns about your mission here," Callahan said.

Carl's eyebrows rose. "Have there, now? Who, may I ask, voiced these concerns?"

"That doesn't matter," he said quickly. "What concerns me is the effect on the battalion's morale."

"Well, I appreciate your concern, *Padre*, but I don't know that it's any of your business." Carl sucked in a lungful of smoke and blew it up into the air.

Some force within Callahan rose to the surface. Steeling himself, he said, "What if I told you I was making it my business?"

Carl looked at him with . . . what? Respect? That couldn't be right. His wry grin said otherwise. In any case, Callahan held his head high, refusing to be intimidated.

The spook laughed. "Why don't you stick to mass and absolution of sins, *Padre*? I'll stick to what I do best."

"And what is that?"

"You don't have the need to know," Carl said, no longer smiling.

"What if I take this up the chain of command?" Callahan asked.

"Then you'll find out what a long line of do-gooders before you have found out. Here in this place, I'm untouchable. What I do is a matter of national security. So, go ahead. Run it up the flag pole. Tell them your concerns. But don't think you're untouchable, too. The Navy Chaplain Corps may have a hard time recruiting guys like you these days, but it would still be easy to get you sent home. A replacement would arrive before you could say, 'Our Father.' Now, if you'll excuse me, I've got work to do."

Carl threw the spent cigarette on the ground, snubbed it out with the heel of his boot, and strolled off. Callahan watched him go, knowing this was only the start of their standoff.

His Marines needed him, and he would do everything in his power to help them. Consequences be damned.



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## **CHAPTER FORTY-NINE**

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## PETE

For the third time, Pete found himself standing next to the pond.

"You made the right decision," the form said. "You went with your heart."

"How can you say that?" he asked. "You know what happened next."

"Not everything is as it seems. You could never know the whole picture. But you knew instinctively what the man is, and you proceeded despite the danger."

"Yes, he's evil," Pete agreed. "That doesn't mean I had the right to do what I did."

"It's easy to confuse what is right with what is proper. You must remember that your actions precipitated change, Pete."

"But nothing changed," he said. "Those children are still dead. Bad people still roam the earth. Men like Carl do whatever they want because they're allowed to—encouraged to. So, even if I pretend my actions did any good at all, I don't see how that good could have possibly made a dent in such a cruel world."

"How can we send men off to kill and be killed in war and still bless them with grace? How can a person commit a crime and be forgiven by whom they harmed? How can mortal enemies one day become friends?" The form floated closer to the water. "Those are the questions that mankind has a hard time understanding because the answers are difficult to discern."

"You're speaking in riddles," Pete said. "Just tell it to me plain, please. Help me understand why I'm here."

The form's glow brightened, and for some reason, Pete got the distinct impression that it was smiling. Then, without acknowledging his request, it bent down and touched the pond again.

This time, the ripples thrummed like a heartbeat as he was sucked into the past.

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## **CHAPTER FIFTY**

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## LEWIS

He stood beneath a tree, sheltering from the worst of the rain. The waterproof jacket he wore kept him dry but not warm, and his teeth clacked as violent shivers racked his frame.

Two hundred yards away, lightning struck the earth. Lewis startled, tightening his grip on the shotgun in his hands.

Carl's instructions had been clear. If Lewis wanted to stay on the spook's good side, then he needed to take care of the chaplain as soon as possible. Which was why he now stood outside in the middle of a storm, tucked within the forest overlooking Lone Peak Ranch.

Lights were on in the main lodge, and one small sedan sat parked in the driveway. A half hour into his surveillance, a woman dressed like a chef emerged from the front door, put on her hood, and rushed to her car. She left, and Lewis waited another ten minutes, watching for any signs of life inside. There were none.

In all likelihood, Pete Callahan was either drinking or passed out from drinking. Lewis hoped for the latter. It would make this whole affair a lot easier if the chaplain couldn't put up a fight. Carl was going to help out tonight, but not until after Lewis apprehended Pete. Then he would "swoop in for the pickup."

When Lewis had asked Carl whether he should expect a car or a helicopter, the man had just laughed and said it was a surprise. Lewis didn't like surprises, especially not when they involved spooks.

Thinking the time was right, Lewis crept toward the lodge, scanning back and forth. When he reached the door, he slipped the shotgun under his jacket and knocked. He waited a few seconds, listening, but he didn't hear footsteps. That didn't mean much, however, since hearing anything was difficult at the moment, what with the incessant rain and booming thunder.

Lewis was about to knock again when a voice behind him said, "Can I help you?"

He pivoted so fast he almost let the shotgun show. There was a blond man standing in the driveway with a dog at his side. Lewis half expected the beast to run at him.

"I'm looking for Pete Callahan," he said. "I'm an old friend."

The man walked onto the porch, never once breaking eye contact. He didn't appear hostile, but Lewis didn't like how he moved. There was something predatory about his serene stillness, his quiet grace.

"Pete's not here right now."

"Do you know when he'll be back?"

The man cocked his head and studied Lewis. "Can I ask what this is about?"

"I, uh . . . We . . ." He fumbled for the right words. Clearing his throat, he tried again. "Pete promised me we'd get a drink together. You see, I live down the road, and we served together. Old friends."

Lewis knew he sounded ridiculous, but he couldn't calm his nerves. What was it about this man that got under his skin?

"I can tell him you came by," the man said. "What did you say your name was?"

"Oh, I didn't. Ha-ha." Before he could think of something better, he said, "Carl. My name's Carl."

Despite the cold, he was sweating. And because his waterproof jacket had no vents, all his body heat and perspiration were trapped inside. More than anything, he wanted to rip off the jacket and get the hell away from this man who seemed to look right through him.

"I'll tell him you came by, Carl."

"Okay. Well, thanks. And I'm sorry if I bothered you," Lewis said.

"No bother."

Lewis took care walking down the steps. His legs were shaking, and the wind kept threatening to blow up his jacket and reveal the gun. At the bottom, he turned to wave goodbye. The man did not wave back. He and the dog simply watched him, and their stares made Lewis want to run.

When he got back to his truck, he called Carl.

"Do you have him?"

"No," he said, trying not to gulp. "He wasn't there."

"What do you mean, he wasn't there?"

"I don't know. I talked to a guy, and he said he wasn't there."

"I swear, do I always have to spell things out for you, Lewis? You want to take over your daddy's empire, but you can't even do this one thing."

"Hey, man, I don't know what you want me to do. You told me to come here and get him. Callahan isn't here."

"Then you wait, Lewis. You wait, and you pick him up the second he gets there."

"I'm not waiting in this rain. Besides, the guy I met creeped me out."

"Creeped you out?" Carl said, and Lewis could practically see his sneer.

He wanted to explain how the blond man had looked at him, how he'd seemed to know the truth behind the visit. But trying to justify himself to the spook would only dig his grave deeper.

"Fine," Carl said. "You know what? Go home. Take a hot bath."

"But you said . . ."

"I said, go home, Lewis. Maybe I don't need your help after all."

Lewis imagined waking up to Carl looming over his bed and slitting his throat.

Panicking, he said, "No, hey, I'm here to help."

The line went quiet. Had Carl hung up?

"Are you still there?" he asked.

"Yes, I'm still here," Carl snapped, clearly fed up. "Fine. Go home, Lewis. Take a hot shower, but don't drink, smoke, or do anything until I tell you. Do you understand me?"

"Yeah, I understand," he said. "What are we going to do about Callahan?"

Carl chuckled. "Oh, you let me take care of the chaplain."

Lewis released a deep breath and smiled.

"But don't think you're out of the woods yet, Lewis Wakefield," Carl said. "Your work has only just begun."

The call ended, and Lewis mourned his short-lived relief. Looking at the rain beating down on his windshield, he thought about driving away, disappearing for a while, living on whatever he could get from the ATM. But no matter where he went, Carl would find him.

So, he'd go along with whatever the spook asked of him. Maybe he'd prove himself and come out of this with Carl on his side. If he could do that, then his future would be bright. Maybe Carl would even help him with his father.

On the drive home, Lewis convinced himself that the day's events had happened for a reason. Then, as always, he convinced himself that he held all the power.

But he didn't. He never really had.

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## **CHAPTER FIFTY-ONE**

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## NELSON

E yeing the gloomy sky, Nelson shook his head and wondered how the hell he'd wound up here. His memories of the last few hours—speeding to and from the vet, calling a dog sitter, booking a last-minute flight, racing to the airport, arriving in Bozeman, and driving to Big Sky—were a bit hazy, like all his thoughts and actions had been driven by mania.

Who was he kidding? They'd definitely been driven by mania. He hadn't even told his wife about his spontaneous trip yet. Jeez, what would she say?

For years, his wife had warned him about how obsessive he became when he felt like something had been half-assed or done wrong. Whether it was the laundry or a mission, he couldn't let any details slide. Every task had to be sealed up with a bow, no loose ends allowed. Whenever someone called him out on his meticulousness, he said he was just taking responsibility for the tasks assigned to him.

Had this task been assigned to him, though? No. He'd taken it upon himself. Something beyond responsibility had pulled him to Montana. He couldn't explain it. All he knew was the article had flipped a switch in him.

Maybe if he'd paused to breathe this morning, to think, he would have called his trusted therapist and scheduled an emergency appointment, not flown halfway across the country on a whim. Too late now.

For better or worse, he was heading into a literal and figurative storm with zero idea of what he was up against. He'd made calls all morning, but no one seemed to know what was happening, and no one seemed to be doing anything about it.

Well, soon both those things would change.

"Will there be anything else?" the cashier asked, ringing up his energy drink, trail mix, and bottled water.

*I could really use some chew*, he thought, looking over her shoulder at the locked case of cigarettes and tobacco.

With great reluctance, he said, "No, thank you. That'll be all."

He paid for the items and turned to go right as two familiar men walked into the convenience store. Their eyes met.

"Major Sawyer? Is that you?"



Just like that, Nelson remembered the Marines' names.

"Chan and Nix. Well, I'll be damned."

The three of them shook hands.

"Do you two live in Montana?"

"No, sir," Nix said, falling back into the old Marine routine.

"Please, it's Nelson. Call me Nelson."

Chan and Nix looked at each other and shrugged like twins.

"I'm Tommy, and this is Quentin."

They all shook hands again.

"Well, look at us. Three civilians on a first-name basis," Nelson said. He didn't know why, but he had a feeling this run-in wasn't a coincidence. So, he asked the obvious question. "Why are you two here?"

The friends exchanged a glance.

"Go ahead and tell him," Quentin said.

Tommy looked at Nelson. "It's about the chaplain. Have you seen the news?"

"How could I miss it?" A shiver ran up his spine, but he smiled through it. "Hey, I'll tell you what. Why don't you two go pick out whatever you were coming in to get? It's on me."

"We can't do that," Quentin said.

"You can, and you will," Nelson said. "I can't remember the last time I ran into two of my Marines. I'm happy to see you both, and I think there are some things we need to discuss."

Both men nodded as if they'd just been told they were going on an important mission.

Nelson pulled his wallet from his pocket, slipped a fifty out, and handed it to Tommy. "Here, bring me the change. I'll be waiting outside."

He pushed through the glass doors as Tommy and Quentin hurried around the store. Finding a dry spot under an awning, he stood and looked out into the hammering rain. Customers huddled near gas pumps, and a line of cars and trucks eased along the congested road. Overhead, the storm raged, putting on a show for its captive audience.

And standing right there in the middle of the chaos, for the first time in a long time, Nelson felt at home.

*Bring it on, he thought. Bring it on.*

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## **CHAPTER FIFTY-TWO**

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## DANIEL

Liberty snored softly in front of the fire. Daniel sat on the couch across from her, watching the flames, sipping on a steaming cup of coffee, and replaying his earlier interaction with Carl.

He didn't know who Carl was, but he didn't believe a thing the man had told him. What kind of friend came knocking for a drink in the middle of a major storm? Not a normal one, that was for sure. Everything about Carl, from his expression to his tone to his body language, had said he was hiding something.

Liberty's head perked up, and a moment later, Daniel heard a car door close. He went to the window and saw three men striding up the front steps. His hand went to the pistol at his waist.

The doorbell rang, and Liberty followed him to the entryway. Through the peephole, he saw the men were dripping wet. None of them had visible weapons. They didn't look like a threat, and they didn't feel like a threat, so Daniel opened the door.

The man in the lead had dirty blond hair styled in a crew cut. Behind him stood a burly black man and a lean Asian man.

"Can I help you?" Daniel asked.

"We're looking for Pete Callahan. Is he here?"

At times like these, most men would hesitate, but not Daniel Briggs. Through him, truth flowed.

"Are you Carl's friends?" he asked.

The three men froze, but not like they'd been caught. They froze like Daniel had just told them their future. He now knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that these men were not a threat.

"Please come inside," he said. "Pete's not here right now, but he'll be back at some point."

Liberty must have sensed their goodness, too, because she went to each of them and offered her nose.

"Beautiful dog," the man with the crew cut said, bending down to pet her. "What's her name?"

"Liberty. Can I get you all something to drink? Coffee? Tea? Water?"

"We just loaded up, but thank you . . ."

"The name's Daniel," he said, offering his hand.

They introduced themselves. Nelson Sawyer was the man with the crew cut. Quentin Nix was the black man, and Tommy Chan was the Asian man.

"Well, why don't we sit by the fire?" Daniel asked. "Does anyone need a towel?"

No one did, so he walked them straight to the living room.

"This is a beautiful place," Quentin said, eyes wide as he took everything in.

"Yeah, I'll say." Tommy pointed up at a ceiling beam. "You know how much that thing cost?"

"I have no idea," Daniel said. "Are you guys in construction?"

Tommy and Quentin shrugged in unison. He could tell they were very good friends, probably the kind that finished one another's thoughts. They seemed closer than brothers, close like—

Recognition clicked into place.

"The three of you, you're Marines, too, aren't you?"

Tommy and Quentin looked over at Nelson and waited for him to respond.

"Who did you say you were?" Nelson asked, brow furrowing.

Daniel studied Nelson Sawyer, seeing him in a new light. He concluded that the man had been an officer. Likely an exemplary one. It was evident in the way Tommy and Quentin deferred to him. In how he spoke and carried himself.

"My name's Daniel Briggs," he said. "I'm sure the four of us have worn out our boot soles on much of the same earth. Now, why don't we settle in so you can tell me why you're here?"

"I'll be honest, Daniel. I don't really know why we're here," Nelson admitted as they took seats on the couches. "The three of us knew each other as Marines in Afghanistan and haven't contacted each other since. We aren't sure why or how, but something drew us here, and we happened to run into each other at a gas station down the road. Just luck, I guess."

Daniel nodded, knowing it had been anything but luck; the wheels of the universe were moving faster now.

"When I asked you guys if you were with Carl, you seemed shocked. Tell me why."

Quentin and Tommy exchanged a look, and he worried they were about

to clam up. Thankfully, they didn't.

"You've seen all that stuff in the news," Quentin said. "Well, the guy at the center of this disaster is named Carl, and I'm pretty sure he is a CIA spook."

"But there are a lot of men named Carl in the world," Nelson said. "It's probably just a coincidence."

"I don't think it is," Daniel said. "Tell me, what does this Carl look like?"

Tommy described the alleged CIA spook in precise detail.

"You have a real talent for description," Daniel said, amazed. "Have you ever thought about being a writer?"

Tommy laughed. "I'm better with a handsaw than Microsoft Word. Besides, I don't think you'd want to read what I would write."

"You might be surprised." Daniel turned to face Nelson. "I don't think the guy who stopped by was your Carl. This guy was younger, probably Tommy and Quentin's age."

"Who do you think he was, then?" Quentin asked.

"I don't know," Daniel said. "Is anyone else involved in the incident with the chaplain?"

Nelson made a face.

"What are you thinking?" Daniel asked him.

"The word *incident* makes it sound like an international affair. Like the Gulf of Tonkin incident or the sinking of the *Lusitania*."

He nodded. "Okay. Well, if it wasn't an incident, what was it?"

"It was an accident," Tommy blurted.

Quentin shook his head and said, "No, it wasn't, Tommy. You know that. What happened had to happen."

Apparently, they all had conflicting views of the matter at hand.

"Why don't you tell me exactly what happened in Afghanistan?" Daniel proposed. "Then I promise we'll get this figured out."

The living room windows exploded into shards of flying glass.

Just as they'd done so many times in the past, the four Marines dropped to the ground and began calculating how to escape the kill zone.

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## **CHAPTER FIFTY-THREE**

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## LIEUTENANT PETE CALLAHAN – FIVE YEARS EARLIER

They were shelled by mortars for three nights straight. The Marines and their army counterparts tracked down the origination point of each firing, but the attackers moved whenever the Americans got a bead on them. They were ducking and hiding with obvious help from the local populace.

During that time, Carl was nowhere to be found. Lieutenant Callahan was too preoccupied to care, though. The strikes had shifted the camp's mood, turning quiet into war, and the chaplain could not shake the feeling that something else was coming. Something terrible. Maybe it was premonition—or maybe it was fear. He believed in the afterlife, so he was not afraid of death, but he *was* afraid of dying. Like all men, he didn't know what it would feel like.

The morning after the third night, Callahan observed the evidence of the Marines' rising fatigue at breakfast: bloodshot eyes, pallid cheeks, hard-set jaws. They'd been minors a couple of years before, and now they were warriors. Not bred, but built. They'd been trained, honed, and made into one of the finest weapons the United States bore. If only the generational naysayers back home could see these men and women today.

Callahan grabbed his food and looked around. Everyone seemed to be in their own conversations. When nobody invited him to join them, he found a seat by himself. He dug into his eggs, passively listening to the animated discussion taking place next to him. Everyone was speaking rapid-fire, talking over each other, and no one was getting a chance to be heard twice.

"We're going to get that squirrely bastard."

"Yeah, but we haven't seen him in three days."

"You know where he went, don't you?"

"I mean, I think I know where he went, but—"

"What if he's the reason we're getting shelled?"

"He might be a spook, but isn't he supposed to be on our side?"

"Nah, hell. Spooks are on the side of spooks. I don't trust them."

Callahan perked up. They were talking about Carl, and they were talking about him like he was a character in an old wives' tale or a medieval superstition. If he continued listening, he might learn the truth about the

spook's corruption. Keeping his eyes on his plate, he pretended he wasn't paying attention.

Another Marine rushed over to join the group. He looked excited, and Callahan thought he heard him say, "X marks the spot, motherfuckers."

Anticipation rippled through the group, and they hushed their voices.

"You're sure?"

The newcomer nodded. "Yeah, I just talked to Corporal Belt Buckle at the CP."

"His name isn't Belt Buckle, stupid. It's Russell."

"Whatever, man. Are you giving me a manners lesson, or do you want to hear what I have to say?" The newcomer paused, giving the others a chance to protest. When no one did, he continued, "Russell said he was talking to a SEAL, who said he saw Carl walking into the compound with the X on the doors."

"You sure?"

"Man, if anyone asks me that again, I'll slap them upside the head."

No one asked him that again.

"What are we going to do about it?"

"I'll tell you what we're going to do about it." The newcomer paused once more, this time to glance around and check for eavesdroppers. Satisfied, he lowered his voice further and said something that sounded a lot like, "We go out tonight."

Callahan's ears could have been mistaken, but the way the Marines' body language changed from curiosity to cold business told him otherwise.

After the group left with their trays, he stared at his remaining breakfast and considered what to do. He should notify someone. Maybe Lieutenant Colonel Hernandez. Or maybe Major Sawyer. The operations officer sure seemed to know a lot about what was happening behind that big black X.

But Callahan wasn't a tattletale.

He threw his trash away and hurried in the direction the Marines had gone, counting himself lucky when he caught sight of them. Following at a safe distance, he marked exactly where they called home.

For the rest of the day, he debated his plan. Eventually, he decided he would keep an eye on the Marines and confront them if they tried to leave.

When night fell, he took up watch. The hours ticked by one second at a time, and nothing happened. He began having doubts. They'd probably wised up and changed their minds. Or perhaps he'd heard wrong, and this



unauthorized mission was all in his head.

Just when he was about to call it and go to bed, he saw a line of Marines emerge, geared up, weapons in hand.

*Maybe they are going out on patrol. Maybe they told the battalion, he rationalized.*

But the eight Marines didn't go to the normal staging area. They didn't go to the gate. They went the opposite way, and the chaplain trailed them, all thoughts of a confrontation forgotten in the wake of his curiosity.

The group was on high alert, eyes shifting from side to side, so Callahan had to stay hidden. So hidden that he almost lost them. When he looked out from behind the last temporary building before the far barricade, he worried he'd strayed too far to keep up. But then he saw a flash of pale skin.

He counted to fifty before crossing the distance in a sprint. Reaching the location where he'd seen the last Marine disappear, he felt all around. His hand caught a latch. He pulled the plywood door open, revealing a dim tunnel, and ducked his head inside. After a moment, he thought he heard the crunch of a boot on gravel. Then he thought he saw a flicker of light.

The right thing to do was go back and tell someone, if for no other reason than to inform them there was a hole in their defenses. But Callahan didn't make that decision. He didn't use his head. He used his gut, and instead of turning back, he walked into the darkness and followed the rogue Marines.

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## **CHAPTER FIFTY-FOUR**

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## LIEUTENANT PETE CALLAHAN – FIVE YEARS EARLIER

The narrow tunnel wasn't long; before Callahan knew it, he was peering out the other side, stars twinkling overhead. He'd almost lost the Marines again, and he had to hurry to catch up.

As fate would have it, due to the heightened safety measures at the camp these last few days, he'd suited up in his helmet, flak jacket, and other gear this morning, as if preparing to go out on patrol. If he hadn't, he never would have been able to follow the Marines on their excursion.

They walked endlessly, turning this way and that down wide streets. Twice, stray dogs had the chaplain nearly jumping out of his skin. The second one growled so loud before sulking off that he feared it would alert the Marines. By some miracle, however, Callahan remained invisible to them.

He wasn't sure how long it took him to stalk all the way to the compound, but the Marines were already inside when he got there. How they'd entered, he didn't know. Had they just slipped through the front gate? Sure enough, it opened with a low groan when he tested his theory.

Inside, he heard shouting in both English and Pashto. Callahan closed the gate, leaving any concerns for his own safety behind, and followed the commotion.

The compound elicited the creeping disquiet of a place unholy, like the devil himself had consecrated it, and Callahan half expected demons to rise from the shadows as he rushed into the guardhouse, passing an unconscious man lying on the ground.

On the far side of the room, a row of windows with blown-out glass overlooked a courtyard. He crept up to one and flattened himself against the wall, then peeked his head past the edge to look.

Eight Marines stood on one side of the courtyard, and four enemy combatants stood on the other. They were all armed.

"Put down your weapons! Lie down on the ground!" the Marines were yelling.

The Afghans yelled right back, but Callahan could not interpret their words.

*What did I miss?* he wondered.

A man strolled into the courtyard and walked right down the imaginary line separating the two parties. He lifted his hands up and turned, giving Callahan a good view of his face. It was Carl, the spook.

"Quiet now," he told the Marines. Then he said something in Pashto to the Afghans.

Both sides shut their mouths.

Carl lowered his hands to his sides, putting them in his pockets, and looked at the Marines again. "I'm not going to ask what you're doing here."

"You know why we're here," one of the Marines said.

"Let me guess, you're playing vigilante. Well, let me tell you something, son. You're way out of your depth. You have no idea what's going on here."

Subtle movement at the courtyard's back entrance caught Callahan's eye. He strained to see through the gloom, but he couldn't make anything out. Perhaps his nerves were causing him to see things. He refocused on Carl.

"I'm going to give you one chance to pack up and go home, boys. What do you say?"

"Screw you, spook," one of the Marines spat.

"Do not forget who I am," Carl said, voice calm and commanding. "I came here by order of the president. Any actions you take against me will allow me to haul you out behind this building and see you shot by a firing squad."

"Bullshit," said another Marine, but there was fear in his eyes.

Carl had gotten their attention. Callahan could feel their hesitation.

"Fine," Carl said, shaking his head. "To show you that I'm an aboveboard guy, I'll tell you something I really shouldn't. This compound is controlled by an ally of the United States government. His safety is my concern. So, anything you do to the detriment of that safety is an illegal act."

Some of the Marines shifted on their feet. They seemed to be struggling to decide whether Carl was telling the truth or not.

Then Callahan saw it again. Another flicker of movement at the back entrance. What was it? Someone watching?

"They're killing kids, man," one of the Marines said.

"Yeah," another Marine agreed. "Our government wouldn't condone that."

Carl grinned. "You have no idea, son. You don't know what good ole Uncle Sam will do to get his way. Now, I'm giving you five seconds to put

down your weapons, or I will personally go to Hernandez and give him your names. Kaczynski's got the red hair, and Tommy Chan is best friends with Quentin Nix . . ."

The eight Marines exchanged nervous glances.

"Don't look so alarmed. Of course I know all about you guys. You see, a man in my profession does two things very well: observe and listen. I knew you would come here before you knew it yourself." Carl checked his watch. "Well, would you look at that? Your five seconds are up. What's it going to be, boys?"

Half of the Marines lowered their weapons; the other half didn't move.

"Fine," he said. "I tried."

Carl turned away from the Marines, so they didn't see his next move. But Callahan did. The spook made a quick gesture—a thumb across his throat—and a squad of armed men materialized from the gloom at the back entrance.

Time slowed for the chaplain as the Marines began shouting and cursing. He could feel their panic. They'd walked right into the viper's pit.

Without thinking, he strode to a large metal cabinet and grabbed the handles, turning them. The rusty hinges squeaked as he pulled open the doors and exposed the inside of the weapons locker. Pistols, rifles, and two medium machine guns.

It felt like someone else was controlling his body as he fed an ammunition belt through one of the machine guns and threw the remainder over his shoulder.

The first gunshot went off in the courtyard. He rushed back to the window.

Raising the weapon, Callahan did not think of his vows. He did not think of the rules. He thought of one thing and one thing only: his Marines.

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## **CHAPTER FIFTY-FIVE**

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## PETE

“You saved your Marines,” the form said, glowing brighter than ever before.

Pete hardly registered the words. His mind remained stuck on that scene. He’d watched it unfold thousands of times in his head, but it still affected him the same way every time. He would be somewhere mundane, like the cereal aisle of a grocery store, and something would trigger the memories. Then he would freeze, mind tumbling back to the moment when he’d made the fateful choice to pick up the gun and lay waste to the men trying to kill his Marines.

“What else could you have done?” the form asked. “Let them die while you watched?”

Pete didn't know, so instead of answering, he said, "But I broke my vow."

"What vow?"

Again, he didn't know.

"What if I said you were supposed to be in that place, at that time, to do exactly what you did?"

Pete shook his head. "Then I'd say I don't understand."

"Were you ever promised answers? Did anyone ever tell you that life's secrets would be laid plain?"

"No . . ." Pete said, forehead pinching as he considered the form's questions. All of a sudden, a spark of clarity burned away the fog in his brain—the fog he'd lived with for years—and illuminated the truth. Eyes wide, he admitted, "I was blinded."

"Blinded by what?" the form asked.

"Stubbornness, righteousness . . . you name it. I didn't want to see the world as it really is."

"And how does the world look to you now, Pete?"

"Imperfect and perfect at the same time. Pain and love coexist in the same space. Right and wrong and good and evil all intermingle."

"And what does that mean to you?"

Pete searched his thoughts, his feelings, and found no insight. Shrugging, he said, "I don't know."

"What if that's the correct answer?"

His eyebrows rose in surprise. "Are you saying I passed the test?"

The form's colors warmed and shimmered, like it was amused. "There is still much you have to learn, Pete, and there is still much you will never learn. All the events throughout your life led you to those Marines and that courtyard. Do you regret saving them?"

Pete shook his head, and for the first time, he truly believed it when he said, "No, I don't regret it."

The form began to pulse, and then a brilliant golden light that felt like love—pure, unconditional love—exploded out from its center, enveloping Pete, the pond, and the entire meadow.

"What's happening?" he asked in awe.

"You're going home, Pete. You're going to continue your work."

"But what is my work?"

As the light faded away and no answer came, Pete understood that he would have to figure it out for himself.



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## **CHAPTER FIFTY-SIX**

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## QUENTIN NIX

Cuts covered his torso, arms, and legs. Ignoring the stinging pain, Quentin grabbed Tommy, and they crawled after Daniel and Major Sawyer. The firing didn't let up. By the time they got to the kitchen, Quentin knew they were in deep shit.

"Is everyone okay?" Daniel asked.

Quentin turned to respond, and his jaw dropped. The man was clean. Not a single cut marred his skin. Glancing at Tommy and Sawyer, he saw they were staring at Daniel, too, probably noticing the same thing.

Liberty barked, snapping the three men out of their bewilderment. Gunfire continued cracking over their heads.

Daniel reached into his waistband, pulling out a pistol and two magazines. He handed them to Sawyer. "Nelson, Quentin, take these. Tommy, you come with me."

"What are you two going to do?" Sawyer asked.

"We're going to have some fun," Daniel said, grinning like a rebellious teenager who was about to sneak out of the house, climb over government fencing, run down the train tracks, and jump into the rushing river. The one everybody said you weren't supposed to go in.

*Damn, he's enjoying this,* Quentin thought.

Daniel reached up and pulled a block of knives off the counter.

"Take one," he said to Tommy.

Tommy grabbed one, and Quentin did, too. Daniel grabbed four, including a cleaver the size of Quentin's hand.

"You ready?" Daniel asked Tommy.

Tommy nodded, then faced Quentin. "You be careful, now."

"You too," he said.

Daniel, Tommy, and the dog crept through the back door, disappearing outside.

Quentin and Sawyer looked at each other.

"We're back in the shit again, aren't we, Quentin?" Sawyer asked over the cacophonous gunfire.

Quentin gave the major a grim smile. "Damn straight, sir. How do you

want to do this?"

"Real quiet-like," Sawyer said, and they crawled off to see what they could find.

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## **CHAPTER FIFTY-SEVEN**

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## PETE

When Pete came to, his bare feet were buried in mud, and his skin was chilled by the cold sheets of rain falling down upon him. He smiled. The sensations of being alive were the most marvelous things in the world.

He studied his hands, turning them over, and knew they were his. On his left thumb was the scar from when he'd fallen off his bicycle as a child, and on his right palm was the road rash he'd received from a night training operation in the Marine Corps.

Lightning flashed nearby, tearing his gaze from his hands. In the sudden brightness, he saw that his clothes were singed, and he realized he was standing in the airfield. The downpour had caused gullies to form in the dirt, messing up some of his work, but he didn't mind.

Pete closed his eyes and whispered his thanks, his all-enveloping gratitude, to the heavens. It was the first real prayer he'd uttered in years. Even so, he sensed his healing journey was far from over.

The *crack, crack, crack* of distant gunfire met his ears. Knowing exactly where the attack was coming from, he took off, running faster through the mud than a barefoot man possibly could.

As Pete approached Lone Peak Ranch, his heart was full, his soul was mended, and his focus was fixed firmly on what he must do next.

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## **CHAPTER FIFTY-EIGHT**

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## TOMMY

The only reason they escaped being mowed down when they stepped outside was the dog, Liberty. With unbelievable speed and agility, she advanced on the gunman, weaving left and right so as not to give him a straight shot. Moments later, Tommy heard a scream. Through the thick curtain of rain, he saw Liberty with her jaws clenched around the firing hand of the man trying to kill them.

Daniel flew forward, bringing one of his knives down in a sweeping arc as his feet hit the ground. The gunman staggered back, weapon and dog forgotten. His free hand went to his throat, which gushed blood, and then he fell to the ground.

More gunfire erupted on the side of the lodge. Daniel and Liberty sprinted toward the noise, and Tommy followed behind. There was no cover, but somehow, impossibly, Daniel made it around the perimeter unharmed. This guy was something else.

Still catching up, Tommy watched Daniel reach down, grab Liberty by her collar, and haul her back.

"Stay," Daniel told the dog, raising his hands into the air.

*Oh no*, Tommy thought.

A man emerged from the trees with a gun pointed at Daniel.

As lightning crashed and rain spattered, Daniel stared down the threat walking toward him. There was no fear in his eyes.

Liberty growled, and once again, Daniel said, "Stay."

"The man in the back, where is he?" the gunman asked, stepping closer.

"Dead," Daniel said.

The gunman whipped his head around to look at Tommy. "Do not take another step."

Tommy stopped dead in his tracks, ten feet away. His hand twitched around the knife. He wanted to do something. He needed to do something. But Daniel glanced at him and shook his head as if to say, *No. Don't try anything.*

Gunfire sounded from inside the lodge. Tommy hoped that Quentin and Major Sawyer were okay.

"Put your hands in the air," the gunman said.

Tommy put his hands up.

"Drop the knife."

Tommy dropped the knife.

"You too," the gunman said to Daniel.

Daniel did not comply.

"I said, drop—"

Almost too fast to see, Daniel's right hand came down. For a split second, Tommy assumed Daniel had dropped one of the knives to the ground, but then he saw the unmistakable flash of a silver blade soaring through the air. The gunman had no time to dive out of the way. The cleaver took him in the left eye, burying itself halfway to the hilt, at the same moment he squeezed the trigger.

In perfect harmony, Daniel bolted to the left and Liberty to the right, dodging the bullet on either side. The gunman collapsed onto the ground, obviously dead, but his finger never got the memo. It continued to squeeze the trigger, so the gun kept firing straight up in the air until the magazine emptied.

In the deafening silence following the final shot, Daniel strolled over to the dead man, pulled the gun out of his hands, and checked for a pulse. Upon confirming the kill, the knife-slinging warrior looked up. Tommy met his gaze and stumbled backward in shock. Daniel's eyes were *blazing*.

He had heard of bloodlust, but he'd never seen it in real life. Not until today. For years, he would replay this night over and over in his head, trying to come to grips with what he'd seen, trying to come to grips with who this Daniel Briggs guy was.

"Let's go help your friends," Daniel said, snapping Tommy out of his thoughts.

The men and the dog ran toward the lodge, hoping they weren't too late.



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## **CHAPTER FIFTY-NINE**

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## NELSON

He was a good shot with a pistol, but that didn't help much when going up against semiautomatic weapons with more and bigger ammunition. After evaluating their odds, he encouraged Quentin to go out the back door and follow his friend.

"Nope. I'm staying with you, Major."

Nelson was no longer a major in the Marine Corps, but he didn't correct Quentin. As they were assailed by bits of drywall, shards of splintered wood, and speeding bullets, it seemed right to be called Major once more.

"Okay. I guess I can't stop you," Nelson said. "Stay smart, Marine."

Nelson understood the rhythm of battle better than most, but he had to hand it to whoever was staging the assault on Lone Peak Ranch. They knew what they were doing. So far, they'd succeeded in keeping Nelson's and Quentin's heads down. There'd been no lulls in the disciplined and continuous fire, but Nelson figured they had two intruders, not more. He also figured exactly where they were: one in the front hall and one creeping around to their flank.

Pulling Quentin close, Nelson hissed in his ear, "I'm going to do something really stupid. Now, you stay down. You got me?"

"Major, I thought you just said to stay sm—"

"I said, stay down. I'll be right back."

He scrambled over to a side hall without checking it first and got lucky. It was clear. He figured the faster, the better, so he stood and dashed down the length of it. At the other end, he found one source of the firing. The angle was perfect, so he lined up his shot.

The gunman turned and fired. A bullet took Nelson in the side, but he held his ground and squeezed the pistol's trigger. He saw the muzzle flashes, the look in the opposing gunman's eyes, as he put four rounds in the man's chest and a fifth clean through his neck.

Nelson didn't let up, even though the man had stopped firing and dropped to the ground. Five more shots and the pistol clicked empty. He changed the magazine and then verified that the gunman was dead. After picking up the semiautomatic weapon and searching for any spare magazines, he returned to

the kitchen.

Quentin had taken up a better position behind the island and the thick dishwasher. Nelson slid down onto the floor beside him.

"I got one of them," he said, grimacing at the rising pain in his side.

"Shit, Major, you get shot?"

Nelson looked down at his torso and saw blood blossoming through his clothes. "My wife is going to kill me. She gave me this shirt for my birthday. Dammit."

Both Marines laughed.

"Here. Give me that one," Quentin said, grabbing the rifle.

Nelson was glad to be free of it. All of a sudden, everything felt so heavy.

"You know where the second one is?" Nelson asked, breath hitching. "I don't like how quiet it is right now."

"I've got him, Major."

"Good man," Nelson said, clumsily patting Quentin on the shoulder. He tried to bring his hand back to his lap, but it drooped to the floor instead.

"Are you okay?" Quentin asked.

"I'm fine. Don't worry about me."

Two shots sounded from the living room. A pause. Then two more.

"Holy shit," Quentin said, looking toward the back of the lodge rather than the living room.

Nelson's vision was blurry, but he tracked Quentin's gaze nonetheless.

A man with wild, stark-white hair stood in the kitchen doorway. He wore disheveled clothes that looked like they'd been torn off at the calves and forearms, and his feet were bare. His face seemed familiar . . . but Nelson was probably just hallucinating.

When the peculiar man approached them and smiled, Nelson could have sworn he felt a low thrumming start up beneath him, like the earth was vibrating.

"*Padre*," Quentin whispered.

*It can't be*, Nelson thought.

The man nodded at them and then walked toward the living room.

Gunfire echoed in Nelson's ears, but he almost didn't care. Everything was fading, and as he slipped entirely to the ground, he thought he heard Quentin saying, "Hold on, Major. Hold on."

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## CHAPTER SIXTY

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## THE FINAL GUNMAN

He knew he had them. He also knew that his partner was dead. Not that he cared. Fewer survivors meant more money for him. This attack was a paid gig and an easy one at that.

Or it should have been an easy gig. They hadn't expected anyone to fight back. When his partner had radioed to say a man was approaching him with a pistol, he'd been amused. Now, knowing that the pistol had won their duel, he was baffled.

His radio scratched to life with an incoming signal.

"Is it done?" asked Carl, the man who'd commissioned this operation. He was one slimy son of a bitch, but he sure compensated well.

"Not yet," he said simply. Now was not the time for an in-depth discussion.

"Kill them already, dammit. This has gone on long enough."

"Roger."

He checked his ammunition and saw it was low. Loading a fresh magazine into his weapon, he considered how he wanted to approach the kitchen. That was where the targets had holed up.

A wisp of intuition caused him to lift his head and scan the room. In the doorway, a man with stark-white hair and tattered clothing watched him. Dammit, how had he not heard him coming?

He raised his weapon, the trigger already holding the weight of his finger.

"No," the man said, coming closer. The fool had bare feet, but he didn't seem to notice the broken glass and bits of debris on the ground. He just walked right over the wreckage.

For the first time in forever, the gunman felt dread. He attempted to pull the trigger, but his finger refused to move when the man repeated, "No." Alarmed by his body's betrayal, he gritted his teeth and tried again. This time, he succeeded.

The gunman was a great shot. He had to be. Killing was his career—his life—and it had been for the last twenty years. The number of body bags he'd filled was the stuff of legends. But the rounds he fired at the man did nothing. They did not hurt him. They did not even slow his approach.

The air around the gunman began to vibrate. His eyes went wide, and he emptied the magazine straight at the man. Still, nothing happened. The rounds might as well have stayed in the barrel. He was no match for this man's ethereal power.

*It's time to get out of here,* he thought, but he couldn't move. His feet were glued to the floor.

Closing the distance between them, the white-haired man reached out and grabbed his face with both hands. Once more, he said, "No."

Then the gunman's life force drained from his body.

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## **CHAPTER SIXTY-ONE**

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## CARL

This assault should have been a cakewalk, an easy way to button up his annoying little problem. Instead, it had been a humiliating catastrophe. He cared nothing for the deaths of the hired guns. He cared everything for his reputation.

"Screw it," he grumbled, checking his weapon and steeling his jaw. "Sometimes you just got to do it yourself."

Carl would walk straight into the lodge and kill everybody or go down trying. He feared nothing and no one. Not even death.

He marched toward Lone Peak Ranch, infuriated that all his careful plans had boiled down to this. When he was twenty yards away, a barefoot man with white hair and torn clothes stepped out onto the porch. At that moment, the rain stopped. The white-haired man's eyes cut straight through the shadows, and their gazes locked.

For the first time in his career, Carl dropped his weapon and ran.



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## **CHAPTER SIXTY-TWO**

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## DANIEL

Back in the kitchen, they found Quentin cradling Nelson's unnaturally pale head.

"What happened?" Tommy asked, quick to fall to his knees.

Quentin looked up at his friend, tears streaming down his cheeks. "He got shot."

Daniel took a step forward, preparing to triage Nelson's wound, but an electric charge entered the air and froze him in place.

He looked down the hall, searching for the source of the energy. At first, all he could see in the darkness was a shock of white. Then Pete Callahan came into full view. His hair had gone white, and his scruffy beard, too. Myriad colors shined in his eyes. He was a changed man, and not just in appearance. Daniel could feel the power emanating from within the former chaplain.

Pete went straight to the man dying in Quentin's arms. He lifted Nelson from the ground with impossible ease and laid him on the kitchen island. His right hand went under Nelson's shirt, settling atop the gunshot wound, and his left went on Nelson's forehead. He closed his eyes, and his lips started moving. The electric charge in the air began to thrum faster and faster until it hit a crescendo.

Daniel watched in amazement as Nelson's color returned and his eyes shot open.

"*Padre*," Nelson said, looking up at the man who had saved his life.

Pete nodded and helped him sit up.

Quentin and Tommy jumped to their feet and rushed over to the island. They each gave Nelson a long, tight hug. Their love and concern brought tears to Daniel's eyes.

Pete stepped aside, letting the three men have their moment. For some reason, Daniel wanted to reach out and touch the former chaplain, feel whatever power was flowing through him. He resisted, but Liberty did not. She nuzzled up to Pete and offered her face.

"It's going to be okay," Pete said to Liberty, stroking her head.

Then he looked at Daniel, and Daniel saw wonder in the man's eyes, as if

a whole new world had just opened up for him.

Daniel was grateful he had witnessed, once again, the miracle of Lone Mountain's magic.

"There's something else I must do," Pete said. He placed a hand on Daniel's shoulder, nodded, and left through the back door.

"Hey, *Padre*, wait," Tommy said.

"Let him go," Daniel said. "He'll be fine."

And he knew it was true.

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## **CHAPTER SIXTY-THREE**

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## LEWIS

Someone pounded at the front door, but Lewis didn't care enough to go see what they wanted. When the pounding didn't stop after a few minutes, though, he relented with great reluctance. The noise was giving him a headache.

He put down his drink and took his time walking over. As soon as he unlocked the door, Carl burst in, leading with a fist that caught Lewis in the face. He fell back, dazed but not beaten.

Shaking off his surprise, Lewis returned the swing and connected with the spook's jaw, stunning him momentarily. He used the opportunity to stomp on the man's foot and then knee him in the gut.

"You think you can come into my house and—"

Carl tackled Lewis, and soon they were rolling around on the floor, each man trying to get the upper hand.

"You set me up, you son of a bitch!" Carl shouted, a mix of anger and despair in his voice.

"I don't know what the fuck you're talking about," Lewis said, panting.

"Liar!"

Carl slammed the back of Lewis's head onto the tile floor until he saw stars at the edges of his vision. If he didn't fight his way out of the man's hold, he was going to pass out. Using a trick he remembered from jujitsu class, he flipped Carl onto his side and came out on top.

"You crazy son of a bitch," Lewis said.

He rained his fists down upon Carl, and blood gushed from the spook's nose. At that moment, he felt no pain. He was having too much fun.

*I'm going to kill him,* Lewis thought, and he would have if not for the interruption.

"That's enough," said an authoritative voice.

Lewis's fists paused in the air. Both men were breathing hard, and the cut above Carl's left eye was spewing blood onto the floor in rhythmic spurts.

"Get off the ground, both of you."

Lewis looked up and saw two men in the doorway. The one who'd barked at them had piercing gray eyes. He wore a suit, and he was not armed, at least

not as far as Lewis could see. The other was his father, Craig Wakefield.

Lewis rose, adrenaline still coursing through his veins, and pointed at Carl. "This son of a bitch tried to kill me."

Slowly, Carl clambered to his feet. His face looked terrible, but his tone was casual as he asked, "Lieutenant General Sterling, to what do we owe the honor?"

Then he heaved with a wet cough, expelling a glob of blood onto the floor.

Seeing his father's expression, Lewis said, "Dad, this guy broke up—"

"Shut up, Lewis."

"Dad—"

"I said, shut up."

Carl smiled sweetly. "If someone would be so kind as to give me a bag of ice, I'm sure we can talk through this."

"That's not going to happen, Carl," Lieutenant General Sterling said. "Or should I call you Freddy Cahill?"

Carl's eyes sparked with anger.

*I'll be damned*, Lewis thought.

"Fine, you win. Take me back to my superiors, and I'll explain my way out. I promise."

"That's not going to happen."

"Oh? And why not?"

"We figure we've got you on breaking and entering."

Shaking his head, Carl said, "You're no murderer, Lieutenant General. In fact, why don't we go into the other room and—"

"He's no murderer," his father interrupted, "but this is my house and I get to defend it."

Craig Wakefield pulled a revolver from his pocket, smooth and steady. The weapon boomed once, twice, three times. When Lewis looked down, Carl was on the ground, and there were three holes in his chest. A split second later, blood.

"Dad, what the fuck?"

"Lewis, shut up." His father turned to the lieutenant general. "He's all yours, Lieutenant General."

"What? But, Dad—"

"Don't ever call me Dad again. You're no son of mine after what you did. I know the truth, Lewis. I know you and Carl were the masterminds behind

that compound in Afghanistan. You may have escaped punishment back then, but you won't now. And in case you're wondering, I'm leaving every penny I have to Lone Peak Ranch when I die. Think about that while you're rotting in a cell."

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## **CHAPTER SIXTY-FOUR**

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## CHARLIE

He zip-tied Lewis's hands together and then nudged him into the back seat of his teeny-tiny rental car. He couldn't wait for the Department of Defense representatives to take the evil young man off his plate.

Craig would wait to call the cops until Charlie and Lewis had gotten a good head start. Fortunately, the agency had agreed to let Carl—also known as Freddy Cahill—disappear into nothingness hours before Craig had shot him, so there was no bureaucratic drama to worry about. In fact, their agents would see to his body's disposal after the local authorities processed the crime scene, did the documentation they needed, and confirmed that Craig Wakefield had very much been within his rights as a homeowner to defend himself from an intruder.

When the cops ran Carl's fingerprints, they would identify him as Steve Treadly, an unemployed used-car salesman from Reno, Nevada. The man's rap sheet was long and included stints in federal prison for charges of assault and breaking and entering. Nobody would think twice about the dead man's culpability.

Rounding the car to the driver's side, Charlie saw a figure emerge from the trees. The man was barefoot and looked like he'd just survived six months in the jungle. His hair was white as snow, but Charlie recognized him immediately.

"Lieutenant Callahan," he said.

The former chaplain nodded. He walked over and peered through the car windows. "Goodbye, Lewis."

Lewis only stared down at his legs.

Callahan faced the lieutenant general. "What happens now?"

"We do what we should have done long ago," Charlie said with a shrug.

"And what's that?"

"We tell the world about what really happened. About the lives you saved. We'll get you back on active duty, if you'd like."

Callahan smiled. "Thanks for the offer, but I think I'll pass."

"All right. Well, if there's anything we can do, anything at all, Mr. Wakefield knows how to get ahold of me."

"Thank you, Lieutenant General Sterling," Callahan said, offering his hand.

Charlie accepted it and marveled at the sense of calm the man exuded. It was contagious.

*He's at complete peace*, he thought.

"Wait, how do you know who I am?" Charlie asked, realizing he'd never introduced himself.

"We've met before, sir. You once took pity on a poor navy chaplain. You told me that my first duty was to God, and that if I did that, I would also take care of my Marines. I understand that now, more than you'll ever know."

Charlie grunted as the memory returned to him. After the killings at the compound, he'd been sent in to investigate. There hadn't been much to find, especially since the CIA had tucked tail and run, so he'd thought to get Callahan's account of events. But the man had been nearly comatose with guilt. Charlie had tried to lift his spirits by telling him he was a hero, but Callahan had been too wrapped up in religion to listen. Charlie was happy to know that even if his words hadn't meant anything to Callahan back then, they did now.

"It was a pleasure seeing you again, *Padre*. Stay out of trouble, will you?"

Callahan nodded.

The lieutenant general drove away with his prisoner in tow, smiling as he thought about how lucky this magnificent place was to have the gift of Pete Callahan's full faith and purpose.

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## EPILOGUE

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Natalie and Luke returned the next day. By then, the cleanup at Lone Peak Ranch was already well underway. Any skids that couldn't be greased by Lieutenant General Sterling, the Department of Defense, or the agency were greased by Craig Wakefield. Even as Natalie and Luke pulled into an empty spot in the driveway, Wakefield was helping Quentin pull out the busted windows. He looked very much in his element, and that made Pete smile.

Whatever power had filled him the day before was waning, but for now, he could still sense the energy surrounding him. If he closed his eyes, he could pinpoint the exact locations of his friends simply by thinking of them. Even the earth spoke to him now, but he knew intuitively that privilege would also soon pass.

Natalie ran over and enveloped him in a hug.

"My God, I'm glad you're okay," she said. Then she looked up at him. "What happened to your hair?"

"There's a lot to explain," he said with a laugh.

Luke walked up and offered his hand. "It's good to see you, Pete."

The two men shook, then Luke ambled off to help with the repairs.

"You look different," Natalie said. There were tears in her eyes. "It happened, didn't it?"

Pete nodded. "I have something to say to you, Natalie. If you'll listen."

"Of course. Anything," she said.

"I want to thank you. I want to thank you for having faith in me. For inviting me to this place. And I want to ask you if it's okay if I stay and live here and help you implement Brendan and Olivia's vision."

Natalie grabbed his hands and squeezed. "You have no idea how happy

that makes me."

She began crying, and he wrapped her in his arms, thanking God once again for this brave woman and for the faith she'd given him. He'd been a broken thing, licking the dregs of self-pity when she'd found him. Pete knew now that he wouldn't have come to this new awakening if he hadn't first taken the steep fall.

His new disposition was that of a child who could suddenly see the wonder of the world all around him. He prayed that it would stay with him. He prayed that he would not forget the lessons he'd learned. He prayed that he could pass the gift on to others.

"Now," Natalie said, pulling away and wiping her eyes with her sleeve, "where can I help?"

Before Pete could answer, far-off honking got everyone's attention. Crowbars stopped prying and wheelbarrows stopped hauling as all eyes turned to the long line of vehicles coming down the dirt road. Since the place was a mess, they parked right there in the middle of the driveway. He counted five . . . ten . . . fifteen . . . twenty.

A passenger door opened, and out stepped John Canton.

One by one, more familiar faces emerged from the vehicles, and Pete realized what was happening.

His Marines had come.

"*Padre*," they said, introducing him to their wives and children, their parents and grandparents. They shared tears, hugs, and laughs. Each and every one had traveled to Montana because they'd heard their *Padre* was hurting.

They wanted to help, so he would let them. As they rebuilt, they would work through their pain, share their joy, and experience the miracles of Lone Mountain together. It would be beautiful and wonderful and only the start.

Because these Marines and their families were but the first of many who would come to visit Pete Callahan in Big Sky. Their *Padre* was the one who would open Lone Peak Ranch to the world, helping countless lost souls experience the healing magic of this mystical place.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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C. G. Cooper is the USA TODAY and AMAZON BESTSELLING author of the CORPS JUSTICE novels, several spinoffs and a growing number of standalone novels.

### WHY C. G. COOPER MATTERS

Fiction has the power to change lives.

Pay a visit to Cooper Country and you'll understand why. With his unique voice and flair for creating characters you'd love to hang out with, C. G. Cooper imparts every one of his novels with messages that perfectly illuminate what Faulkner called, "the human heart in conflict with itself." In them, characters confront hard truths about life, the necessity of war, the military industrial complex, and why and how good men and women die.

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## THE LOWDOWN

Drawing on his days as an infantry officer in the United States Marine Corps—a stint that came on the heels of a degree in foreign affairs from UVA—Cooper sifted his experience through his vivid imagination and created *Corps Justice*, the first novel in the beloved Corps Justice series. Thus, a band of characters was born that would go on to enthrall readers throughout over twenty novels. With nearly 300 million pages read in Kindle Unlimited and multiple appearances in the Amazon Top 100, C. G. Cooper remains one of the most successful USA TODAY and Amazon bestselling authors.

In 2020, he won the prestigious James Webb Award presented by the Marine Corps Heritage Foundation for his novel *Chain of Command*.

In addition to bouncing around the country in search of the perfect vacation (turns out, it is anywhere with his family), Cooper has called Nashville home ever since his final Marine duty station. When not enjoying the laid-back lifestyle of Music City, he's doing his best to add more novels to the growing list at [www.cg-cooper.com](http://www.cg-cooper.com).

Cooper loves hearing from readers and responds to every email personally.

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