

THE LONG ROAD HOME

THINKING OF
Home

MARYANN JORDAN

USA Today Bestselling Author

THINKING OF HOME

CROSSOVER NOVEL

THE LONG ROAD HOME AND LIGHTHOUSE SECURITY
INVESTIGATIONS WEST COAST

MARYANN JORDAN

A cursive signature of the author's name, 'Maryann Jordan', written in a dark purple or magenta ink. The signature is fluid and elegant, with a long, sweeping underline that extends to the right.

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

Thinking of Home (The Long Road Home) Copyright 2023

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system without the written permission of the author, except where permitted by law.

If you are reading this book and did not purchase it, then you are reading an illegal pirated copy. If you would be concerned about working for no pay, then please respect the author's work! Make sure that you are only reading a copy that has been officially released by the author.

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

Cover: Graphics by Stacy

ISBN ebook: 978-1-956588-27-9

ISBN print: 978-1-956588-29-3

 Created with Vellum

Author's Note

Please remember that this is a work of fiction. I have lived in numerous states as well as overseas, but for the last thirty years have called Virginia my home. I often choose to use fictional city names with some geographical accuracies.

These fictionally named cities allow me to use my creativity and not feel constricted by attempting to accurately portray the areas.

It is my hope that my readers will allow me this creative license and understand my fictional world.

I also do quite a bit of research on my books and try to write on subjects with accuracy. There will always be points where creative license will be used in order to create scenes or plots.

CONTENTS

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Also by Maryann Jordan](#)

[About the Author](#)

Ian Ridgeway made his way through the crowds at the Atlanta International Airport. He arrived early, made it through security with no problems, and sat at a bar while waiting to board his flight. The bartender looked over his shoulder toward the television on the wall, and Ian's gaze also lifted to watch the newscaster.

"The lake effects storm is creating havoc on the travel industry. Pileups on interstates, canceled trains, and delayed flights all across the country due to the sudden snowstorms that have hit the area."

He glanced over his shoulder toward the nearest flight arrivals and departure boards, where the words Delayed and Canceled began to flash. He groaned as he kept his eye on his flight. He had a nonstop flight to California, but the odds of his plane coming from who-knows-where was slim to none. Suddenly, his phone beeped, and he looked at his airline app, notifying him of the change in status. Delayed.

Sighing, he tossed the money for his drink onto the bar and grabbed his bag. When the bartender looked his way, he asked, "The USO?"

"You go outside of security, and it's on level three. If you've got bags, you'll have to claim 'em and recheck 'em before you can return for your flight."

"Thank you," he called out, dipping his chin.

As the doors slid open, he stepped into the reception area. A woman with a USO Volunteer badge stood behind the desk talking to a female in civilian clothes.

The volunteer smiled at him. "Hello, I'm Blessing. I'll be with you in just a moment."

He nodded her acknowledgment and stepped to the side so he wasn't hovering. Pulling out his phone, he sighed while texting his mom to let her know about his delayed flight. Shoving his phone back into his pocket, he glanced at the reception desk again.

The volunteer walked with the woman to the outer doors leading into the airport. "It was so lovely to meet you, and I'm thrilled your flight home wasn't delayed. William C. Faulkner said, 'How often have I lain beneath rain on a strange roof, thinking of home.'" Blessing patted the woman's arm. "I imagine you've spent a great deal of time thinking of home, haven't you?"

The USO volunteer smiled at the woman. *Her name is Blessing?* As his gaze moved to the back of the woman she was addressing, he wished his flight was leaving on time.

Then, as the woman moved underneath the lights, her auburn hair caught his attention. He shifted slightly to gain a better look.

Blessing mirrored his movement and shifted as well, causing the woman to turn slightly, keeping her back to him. He looked over at Blessing, whose gaze moved between him and the woman. She even walked in the opposite direction to come from behind the reception desk so that the woman's face remained hidden from him. Blessing patted the woman's shoulder and sent her on her way.

Without thinking, he started to walk out of the USO to follow the woman, but Blessing intercepted him with a hand on his arm.

"It is better to wait until you get the right thing, at the right time and in the right place, than to race for the wrong thing, at the wrong time and in the wrong place, for it yields nothing but disgrace."

He stared at her blankly before his gaze returned to the doors, having already lost sight of the woman.

"Sergeant, have you ever heard of Gift Gugu Mona?"

Blinking as his chin jerked down, he opened his mouth but snapped it closed without speaking. She continued to peer at him. He needed to say something but didn't know what she expected. "Excuse me, ma'am?"

She laughed, and her whole face brightened even more. "Oh, I am sorry. I didn't finish introducing myself. I'm one of the volunteers here at the USO. Welcome. I'm so sorry that your flight has been delayed. The weather has things so snarled, but we're always glad to be of service."

"Thank you." He started to offer his name, then it hit him that she'd called him sergeant. "I'm Ian Ridgeway. How did you know—"

She nodded toward the case sitting at his feet with his airline identification tag. Sergeant Ridgeway was written in small letters. He was no longer in the Army but hadn't changed the tag.

"About that poet. Gift Gugu Mona. She's from South Africa."

His brows lowered. "O... kay, ma'am."

"She's the one who wrote the quote about the right thing at the right time. I always find that timing is everything, don't you agree?"

He'd only been in Blessing's presence for a moment but was thoroughly confused. Wondering if she had been drinking, he went for the direct approach. "I thought I'd stay here for a little while until my flight is called."

"Absolutely! You sign in right here, and I'll take you back." A few minutes later, he followed her down the hall, and she pointed out the restrooms, showers, the large areas where service members and families gathered, and where food was served.

Looking over her shoulder, she said, "I have a special place. I call it the library. I think you'll be quite happy there."

At this point, he wasn't sure he wanted to follow her anywhere, but she stepped through the doorway and ushered him into a room with plush leather sofas facing each other and a recliner against the wall. Another man sat on one of the sofas. She started to introduce the two, but Ian smiled, already recognizing the man, and extended his hand.

"Damn, Bull Thompson, right?" Their paths had crossed years before.

"It's Alex, now. I'm out." Alex patted his leg, indicating he had a medical discharge, and Ian nodded. He knew many good soldiers who had left the service for those reasons.

As Blessing left the room, they both watched her walk back down the hall. Shaking his head, Ian thought of her bizarre behavior. "She's..."

"Strange?"

Laughing, Ian agreed. "Yeah, but nice, you know?" He stared down the hall again, rubbing his chin, wondering about the woman Blessing had assisted.

"Problems?" Alex asked.

"Huh?" He startled, embarrassed to get caught lost in thought. "Oh, no. It's... I could've sworn I saw someone I used to know, but... it couldn't be. One of those déjà vu moments. Hits you hard and leaves you feeling waxed."

Alex asked if it was because of a girl, and Ian laughed. "Yeah, it was a woman I thought I saw." They shared a chuckle and sat down, catching up.

Alex was joining a friend who ran a motorcycle shop. Ian was surprised that someone from the Deltas wasn't heading to a security job, but after Alex explained the hardware now in his leg, Ian understood.

"Where are you headed?" Alex asked.

"California. I have a job lined up. My grandfather is a Vietnam vet, and he's going into rehab at the VA out there. Still kicking it, you know, but he's gonna need some help. My job will allow me to check in on him." He talked about Lighthouse Security Investigations and, specifically the West Coast office they'd opened. "I don't know if you ever ran across Mace Hanover or Carson Dyer, but they're the two who started LSI."

Sharing phone numbers, he promised Alex that if he ever wanted to get in touch with Carson to let him know. Before they had a chance to talk further, Blessing arrived again, this time with another man in tow.

Before he could stand, Blessing smiled and waved her hands. "Keep your seats, please. This is Danny Donovan. He'll be hanging out with you for the time being. Danny is a SEAL. Both Ian and Alex have recently left the Army."

They all shook hands, joking among themselves.

"I think you three will be just fine together. Play nice, and I'll be back." Once again, all three men watched as she walked back down the hall before they settled into the leather chairs.

He discovered Danny was heading back to Northeastern Pennsylvania. Danny rolled his eyes and said, "Not exactly Hawaii or a tropical paradise, but I have some things to take care of."

"Home or on leave?" Ian asked.

"I'm out. Like I said, I need to address some issues. What about you?"

"Heading home to a new job and to take care of family."

Donovan was ready for some food, and they pointed him in the direction that Blessing had indicated. He laughed and said, "Speaking of that woman. She's got some woo-woo shit going on, am I right?"

Ian chuckled. "Yeah, something different about her, for sure. When I walked in, she literally stopped me from going after someone I thought I knew and then quoted some South African poet. Something about the right time and the right place."

The others laughed, then Ian decided to join Danny, figuring free food and drinks were just what he needed. When they walked into the kitchen, they found it well stocked with not only an area for making sandwiches but

also hot plates stacked with chicken wings and pizza. Another area contained salads, fruit, and desserts. He hated to be greedy, but he was hungry and had no idea if he'd get to eat before landing in California.

He and Danny made their way back to the library with full plates. Soon, Blessing returned with two more men in tow. Another SEAL, Quinn was heading to his parents for the holidays and Roan, a Marine Raider, who had served twenty years.

Ian settled back once his stomach was full and enjoyed the camaraderie of the five who Blessing had deemed just right for her library. In truth, he'd planned on sleeping until his flight was called, but having the other men to talk with made the time pass quicker.

By the time he said goodbye to catch his flight, he had almost forgotten about the woman he'd seen talking to Blessing when he arrived. Almost.

Ian settled into the expansive first-class seat, appreciating his decision to upgrade. The extra cost might seem trivial to some, but now that he was no longer in the military, he yearned to stretch his legs, recline with ease, and have ample space for his arms. Having a designated place to rest his elbows without bumping into the person sitting next to him added to the benefit. He'd stowed his carry-on luggage above without fighting for space and his smaller bag under the seat in front of him, relishing the privilege of early boarding.

In the military, boarding an aircraft involved a formation, orderly queues, and taking the next available seat. Creature comforts were the least of their concerns since their thoughts were firmly on the mission. Considering most of those military flights had been in the confines of a cargo aircraft, just having a seat that reclined and offered a headrest was a luxury.

He'd deliberately chosen the window seat, driven by the desire to look down on the landscape below. When in the belly of the beast of the military planes, he never saw anything until he landed. *Or jumped out.*

He glanced up as a well-dressed man offered a courteous nod before settling into the seat next to him. The passenger had promptly fastened his seat belt, ordered a gin and tonic, and then pulled the tray up and set his laptop in front of him. Inserting earbuds, he delved into his work, and Ian

grinned. The seat was comfortable. The view would be interesting. He'd soon be served a drink. And most importantly, he didn't have to worry about a chatty seatmate.

The flight from Atlanta to San Jose held the promise to be perfect. He even hoped to nap, but when he closed his eyes, his mind wandered down the path he'd attempted to forget. Despite keeping himself occupied during boarding and settling in for the flight, the memories he'd hoped to avoid after seeing the woman in the airport returned with a vengeance. Memories that swirled with soft colors before turning black. He grimaced and shook his head slightly as though the motion would dislodge the thoughts like a pebble stuck in his shoe.

"Sir, may I get you something to drink?"

He looked up at the smiling attendant, her expectant gaze waiting for him to reply before she could move to the next person. For a man who was always in control, he was tempted to say, "Get me the largest whiskey you can pour and keep it coming." But that wouldn't happen, and he didn't want it to. Nothing would keep the memories from slithering in like a snake waiting to strike.

"Shit happens! All you can do is wipe it off and keep going, just knowing it happens to everybody."

A rude snort threatened to erupt at the thoughts of the words from his master sergeant when he was in Boot Camp. Several of the recruits didn't make it. The first day he'd ever shown any emotion about those who didn't make it, the sergeant had thrown his head back and laughed, shaking his entire body. Then he'd stopped abruptly and turned his eagle-eyed glare straight onto Ian. "You better toughen up, soldier, if you plan on getting through. Don't waste any time thinking about those who didn't. Shit happens, and all you can do is wipe it off and keep going, just knowing that it happens to everybody."

Hell, he'd heard the same thing when in Special Forces school. By then, he'd learned to shake off most disappointments. But still, a few candidates were good men he'd become close to, and when they didn't make it through, it stung, but he knew they could never have his back when it counted if they couldn't graduate from the training. He'd understood that the friendships would change, and the camaraderie would never be the same.

Taking the soda he'd ordered from the attendant, he leaned back as the plane taxied to takeoff. Soon, they were wheels up, and he was on his way to

California. In a little over five hours, he'd land in San Jose. Staring out the window, he watched the Atlanta suburbs morph from houses, shopping centers, and high school football stadiums to tiny, unidentifiable specks. They soon disappeared when the plane rose into the clouds.

With nothing else to observe to take his mind off the memories pressing against the edges of his thoughts, he leaned his head against the window and closed his eyes. But the nap he'd planned to take during the flight was interrupted by the constant thoughts of the woman he'd seen in the airport. Or rather, who it reminded him of.

Vicki Bates. Lieutenant Victoria Bates.

It had been almost two years since he'd last seen her. Yet he remembered it as if it were yesterday.

TWO YEARS AGO

Writhing in pain worse than when he'd been shot a few years earlier, Ian lifted his gaze to meet the eyes of his teammates, witnessing a range of emotions from surprise to concern. Initially, when he'd become ill and continuously retched, they joked about eating a dubious local oxtail meal. As the pain intensified and his fever rose, the squad medic attempted to pump him full of antibiotics through an IV. When Ian couldn't drag his ass out of bed to stand without keeling over, the decision was made to call for a medevac. Christ, he didn't fucking have time for this. Whatever *this* was.

"Bingo? What the fuck is going on?" he managed to gasp between waves of nausea unlike any he'd ever experienced, his body convulsing with pain cutting him in half.

His teammate's face was pinched with frustration. "Possibly appendicitis. And if it is, and we don't get you to a hospital, you could die out here if it ruptures."

He blinked, shaking his head in disbelief. "You gotta... be... fucking... kidding me." He hissed his words through clenched teeth.

"Bird's here," another squad member called out.

Two of his teammates hoisted the stretcher and carried him outside the tent and down the path to where the helicopter landed. The excruciating pain would have blocked out everything for the average man suffering from appendicitis. But for Ian, trained to observe and focus on details, he heard the bird's blades as it approached, was aware of the rough terrain, and, more importantly, knew his squad would be down a person for the next mission. And he couldn't fucking believe that he was getting sidelined for appendicitis.

They handled him carefully, but each minuscule jolt of the hand-carried stretcher unleashed waves of pain and nausea blasting through his body. He'd had numerous injuries and always managed to fight through the pain. *But this?* Fucking hell. It was never-ending.

Finally, they lifted the stretcher into the medevac helicopter and transferred him onto a gurney. He tried to think of something amusing to say — a pithy comment to toss out to his teammates. But all he could do was roll his head to the side and hurl even though his stomach was empty. The movement sent new shock waves of pain through his abdomen.

The door slammed shut before he could say goodbye, and the bird lifted off the ground. Two medevac medics moved easily in the vibrating helicopter, one chatting to him the whole time they checked his IV and hung new bottles over him.

“Figure about now, you’d like straight scotch in your IV, right, Sergeant Ridgeway?”

A grunt was all he managed, but the medic wasn’t far from the truth. “Gonna give you something to make the pain a little easier. Once we land, they’ll get you in for a CT scan. If it’s appendicitis, they’ll immediately prep you for surgery.”

“ETA?” he groaned, hating the sound of his weak voice.

“We’ll be at the Kandahar hospital in seven minutes.”

Before he had a chance to wonder if he’d make it that long, the drugs kicked in, and he closed his eyes, relishing the blessed diminishing of pain. Movement roused him, and he blinked at the bright lights cutting through the pitch-dark night. His stretcher was now loading into the back of an ambulance. He was aware of being jostled but no longer felt each bump like a lightning bolt striking his body.

The lights grew brighter as they rolled him into the hospital. Surprised he wasn’t pushed to the side, he assumed it must be a slow night the way the flurry of activity began around him. *Or maybe they’re worried.* That thought caused his heart to pound as the idea that he might not make it hit him.

Two hours later, after a CAT scan confirmed appendicitis, he looked up into the eyes of the surgeon and offered a sloppy grin. “Catch you on the flip side, Doc,” he said. The surgeon chuckled, and the world faded into blissful anesthesia-induced sleep.

“You gonna wake up, soldier, or sleep all day?”

Ian blinked, squinting at the harsh lights stabbing into his eyes. Confusion reigned, but his training jumped into action as he fought through the fog to determine where he was and what was happening.

“You’re at the Kandahar military hospital. Coming out of surgery for appendicitis, Sergeant Ridgeway. You’re going to be fine.”

The calm, sweet voice called to him as his vision slowly cleared. He recognized that he was in a hospital bed. He recalled fragments of what brought him here... his teammates, the medic, and the medevac helicopter ride. But everything else was a blur. He ran his dry tongue over his even drier lips, then tried to speak, barely managing a croak. He heard the sound of a soft chuckle, but that only added to his confusion.

“Here you go, Frog Prince.”

He rolled his head to the side to locate the source of such a pleasant voice, and his gaze landed on a nurse in Army-green scrubs. Despite her jokingly calling *him* a prince, she reminded him of a Disney princess he’d seen at the park as a child. A redhead like him, her hair was more vibrant with strands of gold that highlighted the copper. Clear blue eyes peered back at him, and her smile held him captive. He could only stare in dumb silence as his heart beat faster. No longer sure he was awake, he didn’t mind sleeping if she was the star of his dream.

His grandpa Peterson used to tell him that a man should never discount feelings he might get when he meets a woman. Especially if those feelings include your heart jumping in your chest. His grandfather declared that was what happened the first time he’d seen his wife-to-be. When he was a teenager, Ian thought his grandfather had made up the heart-jumping story to appease his grandmother until she agreed. “*The first time I met your grandfather, I think I would’ve run off with him that very day! The heart just knows what it knows!*” And he couldn’t escape the fact that they’d been married for nearly fifty years before she died.

A movement caused his gaze to return to the pretty nurse as she picked up a plastic cup from the nearby small table and held the bendable straw to his lips. The cool liquid quenched his thirst, and his lips greedily tried to follow the straw when she pulled it away.

“Not too fast, Sergeant,” she said.

He liked the sound of her voice. Clear and strong while also feeling like a gentle caress over his skin. Muttering his thanks without croaking, he

managed to sound stronger. Taking stock of his numb body, he finally asked, “Did I come away with all my parts?”

“Almost,” she clipped, and his breath caught in his throat.

She patted his arm. “You did manage to leave one seriously ruptured and, from what I heard from the surgeon, a pretty gross appendix in the operating room. But you won’t miss it, and you’ll feel a hell of a lot better with it gone!”

“I already do,” he acknowledged as a sigh of relief escaped his lips.

“You feel better now because your appendix is out, but you’re also on morphine.” She inclined her head toward the IV inserted in his hand.

He jerked slightly. He was grateful not to be in pain but didn’t want to stay on opioids. “When can I come off those?”

She lifted a brow while shaking her head. “Hold your horses, Sergeant Ridgeway. I promise the doc won’t leave you on the pain meds one second more than you need. But for right now, you just had abdominal surgery, so slow your roll. The last thing you want to do is have a setback that keeps you from re-joining your squad.”

Her words settled any argument he’d geared up for. She might not know him personally, but she knew a Special Forces soldier wanted nothing more than to get back to their squad. He nodded. If that meant playing by the doctor’s rules, he’d agree.

As he stared up at the blue eyes peering down at him, he was struck with the thought that he wouldn’t mind playing by her rules, either. With still blurry vision, he struggled to read the name on her uniform. “Do you have a name? You’re so beautiful, and we gingers have to stick together.” He opted for a flirty tone but wondered if the words sounded as ridiculous to her ears as they did to his.

She leaned closer and smiled. With her now firmly in his vision, he could see her clear complexion, catching a few freckles that danced across her cheeks. Her hair was pulled back into a regulation bun, keeping the length hidden, but he could imagine it falling over her shoulders. But of everything, he was enraptured by her blue eyes that stayed riveted on him.

“I sure do,” she said, her lips curving. “It’s *Lieutenant* Bates.”

He knew the nurse would be an officer and groaned at his drug-induced lack of decorum. Normally, he would never try to flirt with an officer, but his mouth seemed to be running away with him right now.

“Duly noted, Lieutenant.” Blowing out his breath, he added, “And for

what it's worth, I'm sorry."

She laughed again, and he loved the sound. She was fresh, not already worn and hardened, and he wondered if this was her first tour. Laughter often seemed raucous or even jaded in a war zone.

"Don't worry about it, Sergeant. You wouldn't be the first soldier to wake up from surgery with your brain fuzzy and mouth saying what it wants instead of what it should."

He grinned. "That's a good way of putting it."

She wrote a few things down in his chart, then said, "In all honesty, Sergeant Ridgeway, you came through surgery fine. The doctor will make his post-op rounds in a little bit to go over things with you."

He shifted slightly, then winced. Even with the painkillers, his gut hurt. "Do you have any idea how long I'll be in here?"

"The doctor will have the specifics. Usually, though, it's the surgery recovery time for a couple of days in here, and then you'll be assigned to a bunk where you'll rehab until you regain your strength. How long he keeps you off active duty is his call."

All thoughts of flirting, mirth, and staring at the beautiful woman fled his mind when he thought about having to stay off duty. It wasn't in his nature to slack in any way, and it didn't matter whether it was his body's fault. If he couldn't join his squad, he was slacking.

She leaned over again, holding his gaze. "Shut those thoughts down. You're only as good as your body will let you be. So you need to rest, do what the surgeon says, and take your recuperation seriously. I promise you, he'll send you back out there the instant you're ready to go. But don't rush things and make them worse, or you could end up going home."

"God, as much as I miss the home farm in California, I gotta get back to my squad."

She tilted her head slightly, her gaze now roaming over his face. "California? Where?"

He snorted. "A tiny-ass place that I'm sure you've never heard of. Outside of San Juan. Bautista."

Her eyes widened, and the blue twinkle seared straight through him. "I know it."

"No way!"

"I'm from outside of San Jose. Alamos."

"So we're not only fellow gingers but we also share a common

homeplace.”

“We’re practically soulmates.” She laughed.

With those words ringing in his ears, she winked, turned, and walked away. *I think she winked. Maybe I imagined it.* The more he thought about it, the more he wished he could be sure. Sighing heavily, as the pain meds made his thoughts drift like clouds, he figured it must have been a figment of his imagination. Closing his eyes as he waited for the surgeon to make rounds, he couldn’t help but grin again. *I gotta see her again. Just once. Just to see if my heart jumps again.*

Two days later, she walked back into his life. His gaze found her the instant she entered the ward, and he sucked in a quick breath as his heart rate sped up. She was talking to another nurse, and then, much to his surprise, her gaze shot to him as well. Her lips quirked upward as she walked over and stood next to his bed. Her beauty shown through despite the green scrubs.

He grinned. “Did you get lost? I figured you were just assigned to post-op recovery.”

“I had a message to give to a friend. Plus, I just wanted to make sure you were behaving.”

“So you did come looking for me?”

Her lips twitched as she lifted an eyebrow. “I hate to see uncooperative soldiers fuck up the brilliant work of the surgeons.”

“You want to check my stitches? Or maybe get a look at anything else while you’re at it?”

“Easy there, Sergeant Ridgeway. You keep this up, and I might think you’re flirting with me.”

“And if I was?” He was pressing his luck and knew it but seemed helpless to stop. Something about the pretty nurse made him throw caution to the wind.

She glanced around to the other hospital beds, but with nurses and staff all around, no one paid attention to them.

“Then you could do something like ask me for coffee,” she replied. A small crinkle appeared between her brows.

His fingers twitched, fighting the urge to reach out and take her hand

resting on the rail of his bed. Without skipping a beat, he asked, “As soon as I get out of here, will you have a cup of coffee with me?”

The crinkled deepened, and she glanced around again. “I... I should say no—”

“Don’t tell me what you *should* do. Tell me what you *want* to do.” He waited, not blinking for fear of missing any nuance crossing her expression. He was stunned the conversation was actually taking place.

When he’d woken the second time in recovery as the surgeon came in, she was nowhere to be seen. He’d almost convinced himself she was a figment of his post-surgery imagination. What else could explain the instant attraction and the strange fear of her walking away before he could connect?

The surgeon had droned on about his appendix, which had just ruptured and was barely removed in time. Forcing his thoughts from the nurse he’d just met and back onto his recovery expectations, he’d held on to every word the surgeon said about the time he’d be grounded. After two days in the hospital, he’d be assigned to a recovery section where he could slowly build back his strength.

And when he’d had asked how long before he could rejoin his squad, the surgeon held his gaze and said, “Six weeks.”

Startled, he’d gasped. “Six weeks?”

“Your squad can’t afford to have a member who can’t carry their own weight, including *carrying* one of them if needed. Do what you need to do to recuperate and get back in shape. Six weeks. You’ll be on light duty after two weeks, and then I’ll evaluate you every week.”

Pissed at his situation, he’d waited to see if the beautiful lieutenant would come back around or if she truly only existed in his imagination. When another nurse had walked in, he’d sighed. “Was there a nurse in here earlier? One with red hair? I think her name was Lieutenant Bates?”

“Yeah, she works post-op and recovery. She’s gone off duty now.”

He’d lain back in bed and grinned. At least, with the shitty news the surgeon had just given him, he hadn’t imagined the beautiful nurse. Now, he’d discovered her again and waited, barely breathing, to see if she would accept his invitation.

Finally, when he thought he might pass out from holding his breath, she nodded.

“Okay. I’ll have coffee with you.”

He blinked, unsure the words she’d just said weren’t a joke. But she

simply stood at the side of his bed and stared down at him with clear blue eyes. “You just agreed to have coffee with me?” he asked, needing clarification.

She blinked, her smile slightly drooping. “Yes. Wasn’t that the answer you wanted?”

“Fuck yeah. Absolutely.” Then his heartbeat slowed down in his chest as the logistics failed. “How exactly, Lieutenant Bates, will we manage this? I can barely walk and can’t exactly escort you to a coffee shop, now can I?”

She leaned back and shook her head, pressing her lips together. “My, my, Sergeant Ridgeway. I thought Green Berets were supposed to be resourceful. I guess your reputation exaggerates the reality.”

Insulted, he quickly retorted, “I assure you that nothing is exaggerated.”

Her bright smile widened, quirking up on one side a little higher. “Well, that remains to be seen, doesn’t it? But when you figure out how to take me out for coffee, let me know. Until then, I’ll just get my own drink.”

She turned and walked toward the end of the bed, and just when he thought she would leave, she looked back over her shoulder and winked before she disappeared again. *She winked. This time, I know she fuckin’ winked!*

A few hours later, he thanked the aide who’d brought his meal tray. He had been up and walking with difficulty since yesterday and vowed this would be the last meal delivered to him. He caught the young man before he left. “Can I ask a question?”

“Sure. Fire away.”

“Do you know Lieutenant Bates? The nurse?”

“Yeah. This hospital is pretty big, but not so big that we don’t know almost everyone working here. What about her?”

“I was just wondering what she was like.”

The young aide’s chin jerked back slightly. “She’s cool. Nice. Friendly. Good with the patients. Hell, actually good with the staff, too.” His eyes narrowed. “Why are you asking?”

“Oh, no reason. She was really nice during my recovery, and I was just curious about her. Does she joke around a lot with the patients?”

“Not really. I mean, she’s friendly, but other than that, she keeps to herself.” He chuckled and shook his head. “Gotta tell you, though— if you’re looking to score, you’re going after the wrong one. I’ve never known her to even go out with anybody around here. And it’s not for lack of guys trying.”

He nodded but continued to turn the information over in his mind. He'd almost convinced himself that she was a natural flirt who might be interested in every guy who came near. Not that he judged, but he had to admit that he liked the feeling of being different.

He trudged to the dining facility for the next two days, fueled by a fervent hope of finding Nurse Bates in the DFAC tent. On the third day, arriving at breakfast time, he determined to seize the opportunity while the pain remained manageable and a noticeable limp didn't hinder his stride. She stood in line, surveying the offerings as though her very existence hinged upon her choice of bacon or sausage. With stealth he wasn't sure he possessed, he sidled beside her and leaned closer to whisper, "I'll buy you coffee to go with your breakfast. I hear having coffee with someone is a great way to start."

Her head slowly turned, and as soon as their eyes locked, the world disappeared into a vortex, leaving only the two of them. No words were spoken, yet a connection arced between them. He didn't dare take a breath for fear of breaking the connection. Suddenly, it snapped when somebody nearby cleared their throat.

Her attention shifted to the person behind him, and she inclined her head toward the food trays. "Sorry. I was just trying to decide what to get. You can go on ahead of me."

The interloper grunted their thanks and moved around her.

She redirected her full attention back to Ian. "A great way to start what?"

Start a day. Start a date. Start getting to know each other. Start a life. Blinking, he wondered what the hell had been in the meds he'd been given to have such thoughts. "Uh... just a nice thing to do when getting together with a friend."

"Oh, so this isn't flirting?"

He felt heat rising over his cheeks and, being a redhead, couldn't conceal

the blush. Hell, he also couldn't remember the last time that had happened. His lips curved. "If I'm not mistaken, you're the one flirting with me."

Her brow lifted as her gaze moved down his body. "I see you're walking around. I'm glad."

"Thanks to the medical team here, I'm on the mend."

"Is this your first time to the DFAC?"

"Absolutely not. I've been here every meal, every day."

She laughed. "That hungry? Or just tired of meals in the field?"

"Yes to both. But especially hungry to find a beautiful nurse to have coffee with."

"Lots of pretty nurses around here."

"Then let me amend my statement. I've been on the lookout for a beautiful redhead with blue eyes who made me believe I was in Disneyland rather than this shithole."

She threw her head back and laughed. "Wow, that was good."

"And this beautiful redhead wanted me to ask her for coffee, and when I did, she said yes."

Still smiling, she reached out and chose a plate with scrambled eggs and bacon, and he grabbed two coffees.

He hesitated, and she looked down at the cups in his hand. "One sweetener and flavored creamer."

Grinning, he grabbed a sweetener packet for her and then wavered again at various creamers. While he stared dumbly at the hazelnut, french vanilla, or chocolate caramel creamers, she leaned closer and whispered, "Surprise me."

She wandered toward the tables, and he grabbed the french vanilla, pouring a modest amount. He hastened to follow her, noticing she chose one with no other diners nearby. It wasn't private, and while regulations about enlisted and officers fraternizing were in place, there didn't seem to be a delineation in the DFAC.

As she sat at the empty table, he eased down into one of the hard chairs with only a slight wince, leaving only a few inches separating their knees. He placed the coffee cup in front of her. She reached for the cup, and after blowing on the hot beverage to cool it down, she took a sip. He held his breath, then grinned when her eyes twinkled.

Her tongue darted out to lick her bottom lip. "Mmm, that's perfect. How did you know?"

“I’d like to have a witty reply, but of my choices, I was afraid of hazelnut in case you had a nut allergy, and the chocolate caramel sounded good, but only if you like chocolate and caramel. I figured I couldn’t go wrong with vanilla.”

Her eyes sparkled even more when she laughed. “Good answer.”

She grabbed her fork and scooped up scrambled eggs. She’d just taken a bite when he asked, “Why me?”

Her eyes widened as she struggled to chew and then swallow before responding. “Honestly, I have no idea.”

“You don’t usually have coffee with emergency appendectomy surgery patients?”

He thought she’d smile, but instead, she simply held his gaze and slowly shook her head back and forth. “No. No patients at all.”

“Then I’ll ask again,” he pressed. “Why me?”

“You said it yourself... we’re gingers and homies.” Her gaze never wavered.

“And you said we were soulmates,” he countered.

“I was feeling nostalgic the other day. That must’ve been the reason.”

“Well, whatever the reason, I’m glad you accepted my offer of coffee.”

He sat at the end of the table, and with her right next to him, it only took the smallest shift of his leg for their knees to touch. He wouldn’t have been surprised if she jerked her leg back or dressed him down for the simple gesture. Instead, her gaze remained steady, and so did their knees. She ate with her right hand, keeping her left hand resting in her lap.

Taking a huge chance, a leap of faith, and a dash of insanity he usually didn’t exhibit outside of work, he reached under the table and allowed his fingertips to drift over her hand. His breath held in his throat as he waited. She continued to eat, but underneath the table, she turned her palm up so that her fingers could dance lightly along his hand.

It was such a simple act, almost innocent. It reminded him of his teenage years when he was still learning to be brave. Despite being a tough Special Forces soldier at thirty-three, he felt a sense of joy when their hands brushed against each other.

He wasn’t opposed to picking up a woman for a willing partner for a few hours. God knows they were prevalent among the bars around the bases back home. But staring at her profile as her head was bent while eating, he was hyperaware of everything about her. Her skin. Her hair. Her eyes. Her quick

wit. Her smile. Yet he didn't even know her full name.

"What's your first name?"

Her fork hesitated, then she glanced his way as her fingers twitched underneath the table. Instead of answering his question, she admitted, "I don't know what we're doing anymore."

"We're not doing anything other than getting to know each other while sharing a cup of coffee."

"And you know that's not supposed to happen," she said, holding his gaze.

"Yes, I do. It's a risk. But we take risks every day in our jobs."

"Then maybe I should ask you *why me?* Or is this something you do with everyone?"

He shook his head. "You're not like anyone else I've ever met."

They remained silent for a moment. He was lost in his thoughts and had no idea what she was thinking. Finally, she cleared her throat and said, "Victoria. But I go by Vicki."

His hand under the table squeezed hers, and he smiled. "It's nice to meet you, Vicki Bates from Alamitos, California. I'm Ian Ridgeway."

She laughed. "I think I know who you are."

He shook his head, smiling. "Nuh-uh. You learned my name from my medical chart, but that isn't an official introduction. And just because you peeked under my hospital gown doesn't mean we are truly acquainted."

A snort slipped out as her lips curved slowly until her smile was wide and warm. By now, she'd finished her breakfast and stifled a yawn. "Sorry, I usually work the night shift. I come here and have breakfast, then go back to my room and crash."

"I assume, even as a lieutenant, you don't have private quarters?"

She rolled her eyes. "You're not being very subtle."

"I'm not feeling very subtle."

She sucked in a deep breath and let it out slowly, her tongue dragging over her bottom lip. "I'm in a two-person CHU. I share it with another nurse, but she works the day shift. That way, we have the place to ourselves almost half the time." She hesitated, then continued. "And we each have a separate bedroom."

Her fingers twitched again, and then she let go of his hand to push her tray back. Resting her hands on the table, she sighed. "You know... regardless of all this delightful flirting and connection we have going on,

you're only a few days away from having had abdominal surgery. I hardly think you're in the condition to be thinking about my bunker and bed."

He threw both hands up in supplication. "Hey, I'm only thinking about getting to know you more. Nothing physical. Yet."

She rolled her eyes again and laughed. Scooting her chair back, she stood before snagging her tray. "It was nice to see you again, Ian. Thanks for the coffee."

He jumped to his feet but immediately felt the pull in his gut. Unable to hide the wince, he powered through. "You're welcome, Vicki. And I plan on seeing you again."

"Against my better judgment, I have to say I'm looking forward to it." She turned and carried her tray to the trash can, dumping the refuse and setting the tray on the counter. Glancing over her shoulder, she winked, then walked out of the large tent.

He grinned, knowing he was addicted to her wink. After she left, he had to acknowledge his aching abdomen and realized he couldn't linger. Despite the pain, he tried not to limp as he walked through the paths between the tents and small buildings. Suddenly changing his direction, he headed into the building for communications. When he opened his email, he was relieved to see several messages from his teammates. The comments ranged from checking how he was to joking about being a slacker. At least he felt like he was less separated from them. Firing off a few responses, he let them know he'd be back with them soon. Then he checked the ones from his family and grinned as he caught up on the farm news.

When he finally made it back to his tent and lay down on his bunk, exhaustion threatened to overtake him. It was a painful reminder that as physically strong as he usually was, the human body had to recuperate. He could easily see that in another week or two, he'd be able to start running, training, and lifting weights. The extra month of separation from his squad already weighed on him. *Six weeks? What the fuck will I do for six weeks?*

But hovering in the forefront of his mind for several days, he thought of Lieutenant Bates. Vicki. At first, he chalked up his infatuation with her as a beautiful woman who appeared when he was drugged and out of it. But since then, she rarely left his mind.

He'd had no idea what her reaction would be when they met in the dining facility, and for all he knew, she'd tell him to leave her alone or possibly report him. Instead, she'd been willing to sit and eat, share more about

herself, and seemed to enjoy his company.

But what struck him most was the tingle he'd felt from the simple touch of their knees and fingers. Scrubbing his hand over his face, he sighed heavily. He had never pursued a woman before. Not that he was so cocky he thought they needed to come onto him, but he'd never met one he felt such an instant desire to get to know.

Maybe I've just heard too many stories growing up. Not only did his grandparents talk about knowing right away that someone was the person they wanted to be with but his parents agreed. So while he might enjoy his bachelor life, he'd always hoped that someday he'd meet someone who would make him want to take their hand.

Closing his eyes, he thought about his squad. He had some team members in Special Forces who were married, but he knew it wasn't easy. And he figured as long as he was on active missions, he wouldn't look for someone. But now? The image of Vicki came to mind with her blue eyes and sparkling smile. He might not have been looking, but he sure as fuck found someone.

He knew the military's policy concerning fraternization between enlisted personnel and officers. Even if the two people involved were not in the same service, much less the same battalion or location, it was considered detrimental to the esprit de corps.

But it also happened. Though frowned upon and it could be grounds for dismissal, some servicemembers engaged in relationships that crossed the rank lines. And, of course, many others had relationships that may have only lasted for an encounter, a long friendship, or even a deeper relationship that led to marriage. Sighing heavily, he couldn't believe the path his thoughts had wandered down. *How the fuck did I even think about a relationship when I just met her?*

Yet he couldn't deny that he wanted to see her again. She'd have to eat before returning to her next shift, so he was determined to be back in the DFAC to see her again. Now, wondering if he had lost his mind, he sat up with some difficulty, grabbed his over-the-counter pain meds, and washed them down with water. As much as he loved the idea of having time to spend with Vicki and getting to know her better, he didn't figure anything would happen until he could walk without a limp, sit up without a grimace, and not have to rely on a nap in the middle of the day like a fucking toddler.

ONE WEEK LATER

Vicki's bunk wasn't the most comfortable, and his side hurt like a son of a bitch, but Ian didn't give a fuck. Technically, he was giving a fuck— or rather enjoying one. He and Vicki had met for a meal every day since that first breakfast in the DFAC. They'd grown bolder as they sat alone, their conversations slowly straying from casual to personal. No one paid attention to them as everyone came and left, eating on the run or having their own group to meet up with. He no longer limped and grew stronger each day.

Though he craved more alone time with her, he refused to push. Whatever happened, he needed to know it was what she wanted. After a week, they'd walked out of the DFAC together, and she walked a few steps away, then looked over her shoulder and winked. "Want to see my quarters?"

He'd nearly tripped over his feet in haste, eliciting a soft chuckle from her. She'd given directions, and he'd weaved among the buildings and tents. Coming to the long row of containerized housing units, he found hers and knocked.

The CHUs were shipping containers prefabricated into small apartments. They sported a common area in the middle with two bedrooms on each end. He ignored the contents of the combined space, following her directly to her bedroom. The word bedroom indicated it was separated from the rest of the common space and had a door. It contained only a bed and a wardrobe, with just enough room to walk between them.

All thoughts of finesse and taking things slow were swiftly abandoned as soon as they'd entered her room, and the door closed with a resounding click.

As they stood in the tiny space, their gazes locked for only a few seconds before they crashed together. Her arms snapped around his neck as his

banded about her waist, pulling her flush against his body. A fleeting wince of pain flickered across his face, but when their lips met, he felt nothing other than her body crushed to his.

The time he'd spent with her up to this moment had continued to spark his imagination and fire his senses. He'd wondered if he would get bored, find her silly, prickly, demanding, or uninteresting. But every moment leading up to this chance had only solidified the idea that she was undeniably unique.

If their paths had crossed in California, he would have asked her out to dinner, gone for drinks, and taken her for a drive along the coast. She was much more than just a fuck. But amid the backdrop of a war zone, there was no normal dating protocol.

Her mouth opened under his, and his tongue slipped inside, gliding over her velvety sweetness. Forcing himself to slow down, he pulled her body close, angled his head, and allowed the kiss to override all other thoughts. He wanted more than a quick tumble between the sheets, and in case he never got another chance with her again, he desired to make this last. She was eager, sliding one hand over his shoulder and down his arm until she cupped his crotch, palming his erection.

A groan left his lips, and she immediately stilled, jerking slightly. "Did I hurt you?"

"Hell, no," he muttered against her lips.

"I couldn't tell if that was a groan of pleasure or pain."

Pulling her back against him, he grinned. "Then that's one of the things we'll do today. Besides everything else we learn about each other, you'll discover exactly what I sound like when I'm buried deep inside you. And I assure you, it won't be out of pain."

When she furrowed her brow, it was obvious that her nursing instincts were about to protest, but the last thing he wanted was for her to think about his injury. With his arm banded tightly, he thrust his tongue between her lips again, exploring every crevice, taste, and texture, committing all to memory. And when her tongue danced over his, all thoughts of taking it slow became lost in the sensations of lust.

As they pulled away from each other slightly, they both glanced down at the twin-size bed. Her brows lowered as she sighed, but staring at her kiss-swollen lips, he assured, "Stop overthinking. We'll make this work."

"Ian, I'm a nurse. If I ignore the fact that you had major surgery a little

over a week ago, I wouldn't be a very good one."

"Okay."

She blinked and tilted her head to the side. "Okay?"

He lifted his hands to the bottom of her Army green T-shirt. Gently gliding it over her breasts before pulling it over her head, he sucked in a quick breath at the sight of her pale blue satin bra. "Yeah. We're still going to have sex, but you'll have to use your nursing training to help figure out the best position for me."

He thought she might laugh or even be offended, but instead, she stepped back, seeming to ignore that she was half dressed, and looked at him carefully from head to toe. Then she glanced at the bed. She was taking his assignment seriously, and he couldn't wait to see what solution she came up with.

"We'll have to go with me on top."

Her expression was so somber that he burst out laughing. "You say that like it's a bad thing."

She rolled her eyes. "No, it's not a bad thing. But you'll have to let me do all the work. Being on the bottom, you might want to take over at some point, but that's not advisable. Right now, you don't have the abdominal strength for that."

As much as it galled him to hear her speak of his weakness, he knew she told the truth. The last thing he wanted to do was injure himself further. But with the sparkle in her eyes, it seemed she wasn't finished with her instructions.

"I'm smart enough to know I might get tired before you're ready to come, so I don't want to take that chance."

Thinking she would dismiss having sex completely, he started to protest, "But—"

She threw her hand out and shook her head. Leaning closer, she licked his lips, her tongue dancing along the seam. "I'm not calling a halt to the activities. I'm just going to alter them." She reached down to the waistband of his sweatpants and gently lowered them to the floor, snagging his boxers along the way. He caught her checking out the incision site, but that didn't stop her. Then she jerked off her pants and bra, leaving her in just panties.

When she dropped to her knees, his gaze devoured her full breasts and hard nipples. The air in the small room seemed to disappear as he realized her solution, and he worked to suck in oxygen. She took his cock gently in her

hands and stroked him from base to tip while cupping his balls. Then when she glided her lips over his thick erection, his eyes rolled back in his head, and he could have sworn angelic choirs sang. He had no idea what her final plan was, but at the moment, no way under heaven or earth would he turn down what she offered.

She bobbed up and down, her hands holding his ass. At first, he dropped his head back and stared up at the ceiling, uncertain he remembered how to breathe. It had been a long time since he'd had a blow job, and that was by an overeager one-night stand sometime last year when his unit was back in North Carolina at their base. At that time, all he'd cared about was the physical sensation of getting off. But now, not wanting to miss a second, he dropped his chin and stared at the beauty who should never be on her knees for anyone. She kneeled on the floor, giving him everything she had to make things easier. The realization made his legs weak.

He ran his hands through her hair, careful not to pull or tangle the silky tresses. Just when he thought he couldn't take another second before exploding, she gently slid her mouth from him and shoved her panties off. "Lie down," she ordered softly as his gaze raked over her gorgeous, naked body.

"Bossy much?" His quip fell short as he acquiesced as quickly as possible, proving he didn't mind her orders. As much as he missed her lips around his cock, he was eager for her body to surround him. She stretched toward the nightstand, and he cupped her full breasts hanging directly in front of him. Tantalized, he weighed them in his palm before lightly pinching her nipples.

Her breath hitched as she produced a condom packet held between her fingers. While he was surprised that she had one readily available, he didn't care since it was needed. He didn't even wonder if she used them often.

"Don't worry, I got these at the hospital just the other day in hopes we'd have the opportunity to use them."

"I can't tell you how glad I am you're prepared."

She laughed. "Yeah, I'm a fuckin' Boy Scout."

"Ain't nothing *boy* about you—"

The words died in his mouth as she straddled his thighs and rolled the condom on his cock. The air left his lips in a long hiss. "Shit, Vicki, I didn't get you ready—"

"I'm ready!" Lifting on her knees, she gently centered him at her sex

before lowering down until she sheathed him completely.

Leaning just far enough to place her hands on his shoulders, she rocked up and down. The blow job had primed him to the point where he wouldn't last long, and he desperately wanted her to come as well. Reaching to where their bodies were joined, he rolled her clit between his forefinger and thumb, and with his other hand, he palmed her breasts, tugging gently on each nipple.

She dropped her head back, closed her eyes, and appeared to give herself over to the sensations. But he desperately wanted her eyes on him. He wanted to know she had no doubt who she was with when she came.

"I'm almost there, babe. Look at me," he growled, now worried he'd find his release and she wouldn't. He felt like a fucking teenager trying to make all the moving parts work the way he'd heard they were supposed to. *Christ, I've never had to think so much during sex!*

She dropped her chin and smiled. "I can tell you're close because *now* I know the difference in the sounds of your groans."

If he could laugh, he would, but instead, he also gave himself over to the sensations of her body milking his cock. When he tweaked her sensitive nub again, she clenched around him and cried out her release.

He barely had time to watch her gorgeous face as she came before he grimaced, and his orgasm hit. Just as his cock was celebrating, his abdomen felt sliced in two. There was no way he could hide the fact that he was in ecstasy and agony at the same time. He wouldn't have traded having an orgasm for anything but had to admit his gut felt like it exploded. He continued to lay on his back, sweating and gasping for air. *Christ, what a fuckin' pussy I am!*

She jerked slightly and lifted off him, carefully pulling off the condom. "Jesus, Ian! This was a stupid idea! You're not healed enough!"

Rolling off the bed, she disposed of the used condom while worry lines marred her brow. She immediately checked his incision site, her gaze clinical and not romantic, and he hated the serious expression on her face.

Ignoring the pain, he didn't want her to have a second of doubt. "Stop," he said, still panting. "Yes, it hurt like hell, but I don't regret one second of what we did, and it would hurt worse if I thought you did."

She stood beside the bed, her hand on her hips and her long hair gloriously waving over her shoulders, barely skimming her pert nipples. Finally, she sighed and nodded. She lay beside him with extreme care, resting

her head on his shoulder as their sweaty bodies gently cooled. “Okay. I’ll stop being a nurse and just start being your... your... well, whatever we are.”

He looked down at her as the pain in his abdomen slowly ebbed. Running a finger over her cheek before cupping her face in his palm, he kissed her lightly. “What we are, is *us*.”

He wondered if she would argue, but instead, she simply smiled. And a naked and sated Vicki curled up against him was the most beautiful sight he’d ever seen.

One Week Later

“Did you ever go to that amusement park in San Jose?” Ian asked as they lay in her bed, the sheets tangled around their legs.

“California’s Great America park?” Vicki’s smile dropped slightly as she swiped a sweaty strand of hair from her forehead. When he nodded, she shook her head. “No. Amusement parks weren’t really my thing.”

One of his hands drifted down her arm, memorizing the feel of her petal-soft skin. “What was your thing?”

“Reading, mostly. I’d go to the library down the street, spend hours poring over the stacks, and then lug home an armload of books. Now, with my e-reader, I have a whole library at my fingertips.”

“What do you like to read?”

She laughed. “Why do you get to ask all the questions?”

“Ask away? I’m an open book!”

Her eyes narrowed, but a snort escaped, ruining her attempted glare. “Oh God, that was bad!”

“At least I got you to smile.”

She rolled over, plastering her delectable naked front to his as they lay side by side. “Hey, I’m smiling,” she said, kissing the underside of his jaw. “Especially a little while ago.”

He grinned, his cock twitching again. On Monday, he would be assigned to an office for light duty with an Army platoon while starting to work out to get back to full physical strength. His squad considered flying him back to the US or Germany for his month of recovery, but since he’d rejoin them

when they returned, he was assigned to temporary duty. Normally, clerking for a month would send him straight into a piss mood, but with Vicki's daily company, he didn't care what he was doing while waiting to return to his unit.

He'd only known her for a few weeks. Yet every moment gave him something else to learn about her. Christ... everything he learned just made him fall a little deeper.

They'd been careful not to flout their relationship. Her bunkmate knew she was seeing somebody but didn't care who. Sometimes, certain regulations were ignored in a war zone, and Special Forces were used to doing their own thing anyway. The military emphasized ensuring that important things were taken care of, and most people didn't go looking to bust someone over who they slept with unless it directly related to their job.

"My foster mom and I watched a lot of old TV and movies," she admitted.

She'd mentioned her foster mom several times but hadn't explained why she was in the system. He'd wanted to ask—he wanted to know every detail of her life, and it gutted him to think she'd been in a situation requiring foster care. But she hadn't volunteered the information about her birth family, and he wasn't willing to risk their limited time together to dredge up what could possibly be painful memories.

"We'd watch everything from *Mayberry* to the original *Hawaii Five-O*." She twisted around to look at him, her eyes sparkling. "She loved *Magnum, P.I.* We both had such a crush on Tom Selleck! Sometimes in high school, I'd hear other people talk about new shows that were on, and I had no idea what they were referring to."

"I know what you mean. When I was growing up, I had all four grandparents nearby. My parents had a farm, and there was always work to be done. We'd watch TV only after chores and homework were done."

She rested her chin on his chest, smiling up at him. "What made you join up? Were you escaping or just wanted to see the world?"

He thought about his answer, unwilling to give her a flippant one. "Farming is hard. I watched my grandparents and parents fret over things they couldn't control. Not enough rain. Too much rain. Pests. Farm equipment breaking down. Trying to get a new loan from the bank. Never knowing what the price would be for the crops." He sighed and shook his head. "I love my family and upbringing, but I never wanted to be a farmer."

“And what about them? What did they want for you?”

“Honest to God, as cliché as this might sound, they just wanted me to be happy. I joined the Army with no particular goal in mind. But it didn’t take long to realize I wanted something more. Earning that Green Beret was one of the proudest days of my life.”

“It should be!” She kissed his jaw again.

He started to ask her more, but the distraction of her lips on his skin had his cock standing at full mast. They’d had sex every day since the first time they’d been alone in her bunk. He’d never been a hard-core player, but he’d also never been in a long-term relationship. So right now, he was having more sex than ever and was addicted to her taste.

“You start clerking tomorrow?”

That topic was a mood killer. “I have an appointment to see the surgeon in the morning. I’ll head to the quartermaster and meet the captain if he clears me. At least it’s logistics, which is more interesting than grunt work in the mail room.”

She scrunched her mouth to the side. “You’ll work during the days, and I work at night.”

As the words left her mouth, his gut clenched, and it had nothing to do with his surgery site. “We’ll make this work, Vicki.”

She lifted a brow but said nothing.

He watched her expression carefully. “You can’t tell me you don’t feel what’s happening between us.”

She pressed her hips forward, and his cock dug into the soft mound of her stomach. Laughing, she said, “Oh, I can feel what’s between us.”

He playfully slapped her ass, and she squealed. “You know what I mean.” Sobering, he held her gaze. “At least, I hope you know what I mean.”

Her mirth dissipated, and she bit her bottom lip but could not keep her smile from spreading over her face. “Yeah, I know what you mean.” She snuggled closer. “I told you, I’ve never done this before, Ian. I haven’t slept with anyone since being assigned here. And certainly not a patient.”

“So why me?” This was not the first time he’d asked the question.

Her typical answer no longer seemed like a joke. It had slowly taken on new meaning. “Because we’re soulmates.”

He was beginning to think that it was true. Not just two soldiers in a war, throwing caution to the wind and starting something that would burn bright and fizzle. Not just the proverbial two ships passing in the night. Not just two

people taking advantage of a situation and filling it with meaningless sex.

But their time together was passing too quickly. “Like sands through the hourglass, so are the days of our lives.”

She blinked before bursting into laughter. “Did you just quote *Days of Our Lives* to me?”

“Hey, both my grandmothers used to watch that every day.” He laughed as he brushed her hair back from her face and added, “One had an egg timer hourglass that she kept on her counter. And when she would flip it over, I was amazed at how quickly the sand would fall through the tiny hole. I focused so much on that movement that the minutes passed before I realized it.”

“Don’t focus on the time passing right now,” she said, tracing his face with her forefinger. “If this is all we have together, then I don’t want to miss one single minute.”

“Agreed,” he vowed before rolling to his back and pulling her with him. He gently lifted her to straddle his hips. They had perfected a way to have sex without putting too much strain on his abdomen. Right now, it was still with her on top. She didn’t seem to mind what position, and he sure as hell didn’t care. The one thing he was sure of was that they weren’t just fucking.

Thinking of home used to be just thinking of the family farm. But now, it included thoughts of anywhere he could be with her. He’d never been in love before, but in two weeks, he knew he wanted to see her long after the sand had fallen to the bottom of the hourglass.

TWO WEEKS LATER

“I should be happy for you,” Vicki said, but her quivering chin gave away her true emotions.

With pillows propped behind him, Ian leaned against the headboard of her bed with Vicki curled on his lap, holding his gaze as her hands held his cheeks. He’d received the news that he’d have another eval in five days and probably be cleared to rejoin his unit.

“I should be fucking ecstatic, but I’m not,” he admitted. He’d never say those words to anybody on his squad because the Special Forces meant everything to him. Or at least almost everything. In the past month, with every free moment spent with Vicki, she’d come to mean more to him than she could imagine.

“Then we need to make every moment count,” she said.

“I know we’ve never talked about what happens next. You know... with us.” He swallowed deeply, certain of his next words but unsure how she would take them. “But I’d like more.”

She continued to hold his gaze, and the only movement was her chest as she breathed and the flutter of her heartbeat at the base of her neck. She nodded slowly, and tears welled in her eyes. “How?”

Her simple one-word question was exactly what he’d been thinking of for days. He’d just received word of his squad’s next mission... a long-term, six-month assignment allowing little contact to anyone outside their need-to-know mission. He’d told her he would be out of contact, and she understood what that meant.

How do we keep seeing each other when I would be all over the world, and she was in fucking Afghanistan? How do we keep a relationship going

when there isn't daily contact? How do we see if what we feel right now will last?

"I don't know, Ian. I have the same questions," she said, her chin still quivering.

"Fuck," he groaned, hating that he'd spoken his questions out loud. Dragging air into his lungs, he let it out slowly. "You've got six more months on your tour here, and then you're slated to have a year tour in Germany before returning to the States, right?"

"Yeah. What are you thinking?"

"You said your foster mother had you watch old movies. Did that include *An Affair to Remember*?"

She smiled but lifted a brow. "The Cary Grant and Deborah Kerr movie? Sure, we watched it." Her eyes narrowed slightly, but her smile stayed in place. "You've got my attention. But if you suggest I meet you at the top of the Empire State Building, that's a little scary."

His hand cupped her cheek. "I have this long assignment coming up. Little contact. Nothing I can do to make it fit with us." He sighed as thoughts swirled, but he couldn't find the words to explain.

Pressing her lips together, she whispered, "You want us to see if things are real with us when it's over." Time stood still as their gazes never wavered, and she continued, "Like the movie, no contact, and then we get together in a year and see if what we feel is the same?"

"Jesus, it made sense in my head until you said it aloud." The air left his lungs in a rush, and his chest tightened. "Fuck... a year?"

"Even if we stayed in contact, we probably wouldn't get to see each other before then," she said. "I have another eighteen months before I head back to the States." Her brows crinkled as she pressed her lips together. "But, Ian... a whole year without talking? I know how I feel about you, but that's a long time to hope our feelings can remain without feeding the relationship."

"How do you feel about me?" he asked, his chest tight as he awaited her reply.

"I've fallen in love with you," she said with no hesitation.

The air rushed out of his lungs. "Just like that?"

Her gaze never wavered as she nodded slowly. "Just like that." Hefting her shoulders, she added, "It's what I feel. I'm not some infatuated teenager."

I'm not some barfly trying to score a Green Beret. I'm not some lonely woman who bangs soldiers by habit or falls for the first one to show me attention. I know who I am, what I am, and what I feel."

"Fuck, Vicki," he groaned before cupping the back of her head and sealing his mouth over hers. They rolled over, and when her legs fell apart, his hips slid naturally to where his erection rested right against her core. Hating to separate, he shifted to his knees and reached for a condom, deftly rolling it over his cock. He slid back against her body, kissing a trail from each breast up to her mouth. Plunging into her warmth, all thoughts of separation left his mind as he gave over to the way her tight sex enveloped his cock.

Later, after the condom was dealt with, they lay tangled together again. He brushed a damp strand of hair behind her ear and whispered, "I love you too."

She lifted a brow and grinned. "You told me you've never been in love before."

"I haven't. You also said you'd never been in love before."

Her smile turned into a chuckle. "I haven't." Her mirth slowed after a moment, and she dragged in a shaky breath. "So we're going to wait a year? Then what?"

"Now that I think about it, I don't want to wait a year."

"Oh, thank God!" she rushed, relief flooding her face.

"I can't change that I'll be out of communication for six months."

"I head to Germany right about then. That'll be close to the holidays. We could do a New Year's Eve call."

He nodded, his enthusiasm returning.

"You call me, and we'll plan where to meet up at our first chance."

"You got it," he promised. Smiles filled their faces, but then her crinkled brow slowly returned, and his chest clenched again. He smoothed it with his finger. "What is it, Vicki? What are you thinking?"

Her mouth opened, but her lips trembled before she whispered, "And what if we change our minds? What if one of us no longer feels the same? What if you don't call? What if I don't answer?"

He sucked in a deep breath and let it out slowly. "Then we'll know it wasn't right. We'll know it was a wartime affair and not something more." Each word spoken dragged from deep in his gut, the sharp edges cutting as he uttered them.

Her eyes filled with pain, but she offered a tiny nod. “And as much as that hurts to even think about, much less say it, then I guess we’ll know.”

They remained quiet for a moment, then she shook her head. “No, this leaves too much to chance. What happens if you lose your phone... or have another secret mission... or one of us falls and is unconscious on New Year's Eve—”

“Whoa, sweetheart”—he placed his finger over her lips—“I get the picture.”

They were silent again, this time both thinking. Finally, he said, “Look, if something changes, I’ll get a message to you. And you make sure someone knows our agreement, and they can get a message to me, too. Deal?”

“Deal.” She kissed him lightly, causing his heart to leap.

Decision made, he didn’t want to watch another drop of sand fall through the hourglass. “And for the next week until I leave?”

“Every moment not spent at work will be spent together in this bunk.” Her declaration came without hesitation, and her smile again brightened his world.

With a grin, he nodded. “Perfect. Absolutely fucking perfect.” Sliding down on the bed, he pulled her into his arms.

Six months later - New Year’s Eve

The phone rang and rang and rang, but Vicki didn’t answer. Ian had called several times during the day, hoping she'd see that he had called if she was on duty and unable to get to her phone. With each call that went unanswered, his heart squeezed a little more. *Maybe she’s working? Maybe she lost her phone? Maybe something has happened, and she can’t get to the phone?* What was even more frustrating was that her phone wasn’t taking messages.

Not a day had gone by since he’d held her tightly before saying goodbye that he hadn’t thought about her. It had taken all of his willpower to focus on his career when he’d never had a problem before. And at night, whether under the stars or in a bed, he’d lain awake and wonder how she was. His soulmate.

During his long mission, they hadn’t been able to communicate. She

should have just moved to the military hospital in Germany. He knew her life would be busy, but his feelings hadn't changed, and he'd remained hopeful that hers hadn't either. He continued to call until it was almost midnight in Germany. Now, the idea of recreating *An Affair to Remember* seemed stupid. After all, in the movie, an accident kept them from meeting up, and more time was wasted in getting together.

"Hello?"

He almost dropped his phone when the call was finally answered, but it wasn't Vicki's voice. "Um... I'm trying to reach Vicki Bates."

"I'm Beth, her roommate."

"Oh... where's Vicki?"

"She left her phone here when she went out. I just got in from work and heard it ringing, so I decided to answer."

"She's out? Is she working?"

"No. She worked an earlier shift. She's out... you know... it's New Year's Eve! There's a big party at the officer's club."

Beth's words dropped on him, causing his knees to buckle. *Out. Big party. Officer's club.* He squeezed his eyes shut, trying to block out the vision of her at a party exclusively for the officers. *She's walking away.*

He had a million questions but wondered if the person on the other end of the line had answers. Somehow, he managed to mutter, "Thank you. Um... I don't suppose she mentioned anything about me? Ian Ridgeway calling on New Year's Eve?"

"I'm sorry... no, she didn't."

"Oh, okay. Well, would you tell her that Ian called? I just wanted to wish her a Happy New Year's."

"Sure thing," Beth responded before disconnecting.

The words they'd agreed upon came rushing back to the forefront of his mind. "*Then we'll know it wasn't right. We'll know it was a wartime affair and not something more.*"

He felt the tears sting the back of his eyes as he struggled to breathe, glad his friends were out somewhere celebrating, and he was alone. His fingers hovered over the buttons, wanting to talk to her. Ask her why. Change her mind. But the idea of her telling him she no longer loved him cut deep.

Wasn't this what we agreed upon? If either changed their minds and discovered their feelings didn't last, there'd be no long-drawn-out agony. No screaming or cussing. They would simply walk away, knowing they had a

special month to remember.

He stood and walked into his small apartment's kitchen, pulling the whiskey bottle down from the cabinet. Pouring a liberal amount in his tumbler, he leaned his hip against the counter and tossed it back. He felt the burn, but it didn't help the ache. Pouring another one, he lifted it into the air in a mock salute. "Here's to New Year's and forgetting!" He tossed that drink down as well. "I don't care if I get drunk, stay drunk, and never remember." In reality, he knew that wasn't true. He was always going to remember her. The first woman he'd truly ever been in love with. And honestly? He didn't plan on trying for it again if unrequited love hurt this much.

PRESENT DAY - CALIFORNIA

Ian had just showered after his morning run, and the scent of breakfast was calling. He swiped his hand through his wet hair as he stepped into the kitchen of his parents' house. Memories rushed back, mixing with the new images. The pale yellow walls that his mom always said made her feel like springtime had a fresh coat of paint, but the color was still the same. The oak cabinets were now painted white with new fixtures. The slightly scuffed oak kitchen table that had seen countless family meals was the same, but the surrounding chairs were all new and sported thick, bright yellow cushions on each seat.

The scent of coffee and bacon teased his stomach, but he smirked at the whole-bran muffins, definitely a different breakfast staple. He surmised it was his mom's attempt to battle his dad's high cholesterol.

His gaze turned toward the stove, and seeing his mom bustling around as she fixed the meal was not only familiar but welcome. He'd only been back on the farm for a few days, but with his new job starting today, he had burned off his nervous energy with an early run. Eyeing the piled-high plate of food his mom was fixing for him, he wondered if he should have logged a few more miles to combat the extra calories.

The noise of the others already at the table had him turn toward the dining room and smile. When he'd thought so often of home, the scenes of family meals filled his mind more than others. His parents still lived in their modest farmhouse. His sister, brother-in-law, and their two kids lived nearby in a house quickly becoming too small with their growing family. His mother's father was the only grandparent still living, and Grandpa Peterson lived in an attachment built onto his parents' house, giving him some privacy and one-

level living arrangements.

But when they could, they all ate together for at least one meal a day.

“How did you sleep?” his mom called over her shoulder.

“Like a baby,” he replied, taking the plate from her outstretched hand and then bending to kiss her cheek. Turning, he moved to the table where his dad, sister, brother-in-law, and their kids sat.

The truth was he'd slept poorly, something that rarely happened when he was home for a visit. But this trip was different. It wasn't for rest and relaxation, and the list of things he needed to do loomed heavily on his mind. Start his new job... the first one he'd had as an adult that was not with the military. Find a place to live... no longer dependent on a small rental near the base. Get used to being around family again... and their ability to ferret his thoughts. *Especially Mom!*

He allowed the conversation to flow around him as he ate, simply enjoying being home. His mom and sister chatted about their plans for the day while encouraging the children to eat so they wouldn't miss the school bus. His dad and brother-in-law talked about the crops. He didn't feel left out, and while he enjoyed being with them for now, he craved his privacy.

“When do you head out?” his dad asked.

Swallowing the sip of coffee he'd just taken, he replied, “I'll shower right after breakfast and then hit the road. It will take me about an hour to get to the compound.”

“Just the word compound makes me think of danger,” his mom said, shaking her head.

He hid another grin. If she thought the word compound sounded dangerous, it was best that she had no idea what he'd done while in Special Forces.

She smiled and patted his hand. “But I know it's what you want, and we're so proud of you.”

That had always been the way with his parents. Understanding that he chose his own life's path, and while it wasn't one they'd understood, they accepted how much it meant to him.

“Thanks, Mom.” Turning to his grandfather, he said, “I'll come by after work and spend some time with you when I get in today.”

His grandfather's eyes brightened. Ian knew the decision to leave the service was the right one to make. He wanted to enjoy the years he had left with his grandfather and assist with his upcoming rehabilitation after having a

hip replacement.

The meal quickly finished, and everybody was ready to continue their day. His niece and nephew rushed to meet the bus. His dad and brother-in-law shook his hand before they headed to the barn. And he kissed his mom before jogging to his vehicle.

An hour later, with anticipation high, he steered his vehicle into the Lighthouse Security Investigation West Coast compound and parked where he had months before when he'd interviewed with Carson Dyer, the formidable owner. Nerves ran through him, a sensation he wasn't used to. He was confident in his skills and experience but understood the level of work this company completed. Coming from the military Special Forces, where swaggering confidence bordered on arrogance, he was now in the private sector where a new team and camaraderie would need to be built.

"You must be Ian."

He jumped at the sound of a voice right at his window. Grimacing that he'd allowed someone to sneak up on him and hating that it made him look like a poor security employee before he got started, he whipped his head around to see an older, gray-haired, barrel-chested man with a wide smile on his face. He smiled in return as the man stepped back. Opening his door, he climbed out and lifted his hand. "You're right, sir. I'm Ian Ridgeway."

"I didn't have a chance to meet you when you were here before. I'm Theodore Bearski. I'm in charge of equipment, maintenance, and the all-around go-to person."

With a firm handshake, he nodded. "Then that makes you indispensable, sir, and I'm glad to make your acquaintance."

"Call me Teddy. We don't stand on ceremony around here. Let's head on in. Everybody's here and ready to meet you."

He'd met some of the other employees, known as Keepers, when he was here a few months ago, and a renewed excitement surged through his blood as he walked with Teddy into the building. Sitting behind a wide desk was Rachel, the efficient office manager he'd met on his previous visit. He'd completed all of his employment paperwork but wasn't surprised when she greeted him with a smile, then informed him she had more.

"I'll send these to your email," she said. "Carson will have your tablet with security and email set up. Welcome aboard!"

He readily agreed to return the forms to her as soon as possible and followed Teddy through the security doors, noting the retina scan, fingerprint

scan, and keypad.

“Carson will have Jeb set you up with compound security before the end of the day,” Teddy assured as they walked into the hall that led to the large workroom.

He’d already discovered that Carson had an office but rarely used it, preferring to spend his time in the workroom with the others who weren’t on an active mission out of the building.

There, he met the other Keepers, named after the old lighthouse keepers. Former Deltas, Leo and Natalie, and former Rangers, Dolby, Bennett, and Adam, were from the Army. Former SEALs were Rick, Poole, Jeb, and Chris. Hop was former Air Force Special Forces, and Carson, the boss, was like Ian, former Army Special Forces. He was introduced to Abbie, Rick’s fiancée, who was former Army and served as a CIA special op. Just standing in the room with these men and women, Ian felt a sense of awe, and that was after serving with an SF squad he’d considered the best.

Warm welcomes and greetings abounded, then they quickly settled around a large table. Jeb handed him his tablet and reviewed the security. Carson started with an official welcome before immediately jumping into a staff meeting. Ian focused to catch up on the new and ongoing missions, plus some that were upcoming.

Even though he had been well educated and prepped in their line of work, he was still excited at the variety of missions. Some were set up in advance, like security systems analysis. While LSIWC did not install the systems, they designed them and then oversaw and followed up with the clients using a few of their trusted installation companies. These were not run-of-the-mill security systems but were for government officials, billionaires, CEOs, and especially ones part of ongoing security missions. While they did not participate in typical bodyguard assignments, again, for special circumstances, LSIWC would accept them. And the investigations were wide range, often requested from the FBI or CIA.

And while he wouldn’t be involved in the same life-and-death battles as he had with Special Forces, he was more than ready to move into this next phase of his career.

“Hop and Dolby... you’ll fly to Oregon this week to meet with the representative from the Marshall Islands,” Carson began.

Dolby laughed. “Always good to see an old friend.”

Ian had read in a review of some of the past missions that Dolby and

LSIWC had taken on a rescue mission of a kidnapped woman who was taken to the Marshall Islands in the middle of the Pacific Ocean. And that the woman was now Dolby's fiancée.

"I've invited him to come here if his trip allows. You can keep me apprised of that." Carson continued looking down at his tablet. "Jeb, Leo, and Natalie... I need you to take on the Bargoni investigation. Landon with the FBI has asked for our assistance. Follow the money trail and hack into whatever systems you need to. Adam, I want you to take on the security detail for Professor Mendez, who is visiting from Columbia. He'll be speaking at the university on his research into global warming and its effects on the drug cartels."

Ian lifted a brow but remained silently impressed. He knew LSIWC had a stellar reputation and the missions were unique and eclectic, but seeing them in action sparked renewed excitement.

"Ian, I want you to work with Jeb. The case he and the others are working on for the FBI will allow you to see what tools and programs we use. Some missions will be completed here in our compound. We do the work and send the results to whoever our contract is with. It's a good place to start. Once we have another security evaluation to complete, I'll send you on that as well."

The meeting continued until the assignments had been passed out, and everyone moved to their stations. Teddy gave Ian a more thorough tour of the facilities, including the workout, locker, and equipment rooms. He finished the paperwork for Rachel, and by the time he returned to the workroom, Jeb was ready to jump into his training.

At the end of the day, he walked out with the others, then stopped when Carson invited him to join him in one of the Adirondack chairs overlooking the coast. He offered chin lifts to those heading to their vehicles, then lowered into one of the comfortable chairs and accepted the proffered beer.

"Helluva view," Carson said as they stared out over the low wall at the crest of the embankment extending to the shore below. The sun lowered in the sky, causing the crashing waves to shimmer with lights.

Ian nodded his agreement. "A view like this is priceless," he said. "We have great sunsets from our home farm, but this is spectacular."

"How's being back home?"

"It's good." He chuckled. "So far, I've been home three days and had three huge home-cooked breakfasts when I came in from my morning run. Not a bad way to start the day."

Carson grinned, nodding. “I know you want to find your own place, but I’d advise taking your time. Many of these guys rented until they found what they were looking for. Several bought houses they could work on, so they were able to get them cheaper. A few of the Keepers straight up bought a place that was move-in ready. Your family farm is about an hour away, but around here, that’s not a bad commute.”

“No, it’s good. I want my own space, but I’m not ready to purchase it. I’d like to find an apartment north of here that would make the commute a little less. Plus, it would give me a chance to know the area more before I decide to buy.”

“How’s your family?”

“They’re fine. My sister married a good man, and he runs the farm with my dad. That’s okay by me because farming was never in my blood. My grandpa Peterson was the main reason I got out of the Army when I did. He’s having a hip replacement soon and will rehab at a VA hospital. I want to help as much as possible. Plus... it was just time to leave the service.”

Carson’s expression turned serious and captured Ian’s attention. “One of the things I told you when you accepted my invitation to interview with me is vital, so I want to repeat it. Many people get out of the various special forces but don’t have a place as a Keeper. When I partnered with Mace Hanover, the original owner of LSI in Maine, he emphasized that just because someone has special skills and knowledge doesn’t make them a right fit. I demand professionalism and dedication, but my Keepers have earned that title because they also have hearts. So as your family has needs, you let me know, and you’re free to help take care of those.”

Nodding slowly, he felt satisfaction move through him, and his smile widened. “I appreciate that, Carson. I don’t see it as a conflict, but I know I’ll make trips to check on my grandfather. He’ll be at the VA Medical Center in San Jose, where he’ll stay as he rehabs immediately after surgery.”

“That’s a good facility. South of San Jose, isn’t it? Near Los Gatos and Alamos.”

Ian nodded, but his mind suddenly turned back to Vicki at the naming of her hometown. Keeping his expression blank, he finished his beer as he listened to Carson talk about the other Keepers and watched the sun lower over the ocean in the west.

Finally, they stood, and he thanked Carson as they shook hands. “I’ll see you tomorrow.” With that, he climbed inside his SUV and headed down the

road, satisfaction with his new job moving through him, pushing out old memories that were better left behind.

Vicki pulled the clothes from the dryer, loving the scent of the dryer sheet and the feel of the warmth, before dumping them into the old laundry basket. She padded barefoot through the kitchen, a smile on her face at the comforting surroundings. The green and blue curtains hanging on the window were faded but clean. They fluttered in the breeze when the window over the sink was open to let in fresh air. The kitchen smelled of cinnamon and apples, probably from all the sticky buns made over the years. She closed her eyes for a moment and could almost swear she was still a teenager coming in from school, and the buns would be cooling on the counter, ready to be devoured.

When she walked into the living room, her gaze landed on the older woman sitting on the sofa watching TV. She looked almost the same as when Vicki joined the military ten years ago— still trim, wearing a pastel blouse and blue jeans. Her long gray hair was pulled back in a loose bun, and silver earrings dangled from her ears. It wasn't hard to imagine her as a young woman in the 1970s. "Can I join you, Miss Betty?"

Betty McGillicuddy looked up and smiled, then patted the sofa next to her with a thin hand. "I'd be offended if you didn't."

Betty turned the sound down on the television, leaving it to play softly in the background. Once Vicki placed the basket between them, they worked in tandem to fold the clothes.

"You've only been home a few days, Vicki, yet it feels like old times."

Smiling, she nodded. "I used to think of home so often when I was gone. Now that I'm here, everything feels familiar, like I never left. But then, that's how it should be."

They worked silently for several more minutes before Betty finally asked,

“Are you nervous about tomorrow?”

She shrugged, her shoulders hefting slightly. “A little bit. I think starting a new job always has an element of anxiety surrounding it.”

“You’re an excellent nurse. You’ll be wonderful no matter where you are. It will be quite a change from your active-duty nursing, though. A VA rehab wing specializing in geriatrics is much different from a field hospital where life-threatening injuries roll through constantly.”

She nodded slowly, not surprised that Miss Betty knew exactly what she was talking about. Betty had served as an Army nurse in Vietnam. Once she’d returned stateside and was discharged, she’d married one of the soldiers she’d met, and the McGillicuddys settled in California. Listening to Miss Betty’s stories when she was growing up made Vicki want to become an Army nurse, as well.

“I’m ready for a change, so the pace to geriatrics will be welcome.”

“You know, my dear, you never really explained why you decided to leave the Army. Not that I mind, of course.” Her smile caused her face to wrinkle more, but it only made her more attractive to Vicki.

“*Our faces have a history written on them,*” Miss Betty used to say. And when Vicki looked at her now, she saw a beautiful history.

“I was just ready.” Vicki shrugged again. “I’d given the Army ten years of my life, and while I don’t regret it, I was ready for a change.”

Betty lifted her brow, sending a “don’t bullshit me” look toward Vicki. “And the fact that I have surgery coming up? Are you going to pretend that wasn’t part of your equation?”

“Of course, it was part of my decision. What’s the point of being a nurse if I can’t use it to help you after all the help you gave me?” Seeing that Betty was about to argue, she waved her hand in front of her. “But that’s not the only reason. I was ready to get out. I just needed... I wanted something with a little slower pace.”

Laughing, Betty said, “Working with geriatric veteran patients will certainly be a slower pace!”

Chuckling, she leaned back against the worn but comfortable sofa cushions. “Well, I start at the medical center tomorrow, and while I can’t be your direct nurse, I’ll be there for your surgical rehab. And since you’ll be at the rehab for at least a week, it will be easy to keep my eye on you.”

“Afraid I’ll have too much fun racing the others in our wheelchairs?”

Laughing, she replied, “Knowing you, Miss Betty, you probably will!”

With the basket of laundry now folded, Vicki set it on the floor. "I'm going to make a pot of tea. I'll be back in just a few minutes."

Standing in the small kitchen, she set out two teacups while letting her mind drift over her childhood memories and what brought her to Betty's door so many years ago.

Her parents' house had been just down the street, but she often played in the McGillicuddy's yard. They had a tree swing even though they had no children and allowed her to swing whenever she wanted. As she pumped her legs back and forth, making the swing go higher underneath the green leafy canopy of the tree, she was sure she'd discovered the secret hiding place of fairies.

Mrs. McGillicuddy would bring her cookies and lemonade, and Mr. Mac would teach her about the various flowers he was planting. He'd even given her some seeds and bulbs to plant. She'd had such trouble saying McGillicuddy with her two front teeth missing that they told her to call them Miss Betty and Mr. Mac, which became the term of endearment she still used.

The tea kettle sang out, jerking her thoughts back to the present. Pouring the water into the pot with the tea bags, she added sugar and a squeeze of fresh lemon into the cups before placing them on a tray with a platter of cookies. Carrying the tray into the living room, she set it on the coffee table and poured the tea into the cups. "Here you go."

Once again, they sat silently for a few minutes, sipping their tea and munching on the cookies.

"You don't talk much about your time in Afghanistan," Betty said, gazing at Vicki. "Knowing what I do about my time in the service, I can imagine it was something you don't like to think about."

Vicki sucked in her bottom lip, capturing it between her teeth, momentarily allowing her mind to drift back. "In many ways, I'm sure my time was much easier than yours. Wartime and field medicine has come a long way since you were serving in Vietnam. But I would have to say that probably the faces of the men and women who came through your wards weren't a whole lot different."

"You're right about that. The faces of those who still have hope, but you look at their injuries and know that there is none. The faces of those who have given up, knowing that their postwar days will be vastly different because of the injuries sustained. Faces of those in agonizing pain. The faces

of those who were just scared.”

As Betty shook her head slowly, Vicki stared at her face and recognized that those memories from fifty-five years ago were still fresh. And she winced, looking down at her shaking hands holding the teacup, wondering if that would be her in fifty years. Still haunted by the faces of those she'd seen. Yet Betty was one of the happiest people Vicki had ever met, and she wondered if her future could be that way also. Of course, Betty had married her wartime love, something that had eluded Vicki.

“Sweetheart?”

Swinging her gaze upward, she tried to wipe her face clean of all emotion other than the smile she plastered on. “Yes?”

Betty chuckled. “I asked you a question, but you were so lost in your thoughts, I wasn't sure where you'd gone.”

“Oh, I'm sorry. I guess I'm still having trouble getting used to being here in the civilian world.” Her words sounded stumbling even to her own ears. And she should've known that Betty would see straight through her.

“You have a look about you, sweet Vicki. One whose heart didn't return intact.”

She sucked in a quick breath, her eyes widening for a second before she once again tried to smooth her expression. Looking at Betty's face, it was obvious she hadn't succeeded. Setting her teacup down on the coffee table, she sighed heavily. The only person who knew what had happened was her roommate in Germany. At first, she wanted to hide that she was sleeping with an enlisted soldier. Even though she had friends and a bunkmate, the relationship with Ian was too personal to be shared. And, of course, later, it was too painful. Now, she was finally sitting with the one person who knew her the best.

“I met someone. Someone I gave my heart to. It was almost two years ago, so I don't know why it still hurts so much.”

“Oh, Vicki. Don't you know that the heart has no clock? Love has no timeline? And pain certainly knows no boundaries.”

She snorted, then smiled. “You're right. As usual, you're exactly right.”

Betty waved her hand and huffed. “If I'm right, it's only because I've lived.” They were silent for another moment, then she asked, “Did he know you loved him? That you felt it was special?”

She opened her mouth to answer, but her heart squeezed in her chest. Lifting her hand, she rubbed her sternum gently, hating that the pain had not

dissipated over time. With her lips tightly pressed together, she inhaled deeply through her nose before letting it out, then nodded. “Yeah. It was special. I was in love. And, yes, I told him, and he told me that he loved me, too. But...”

“But what, sweetheart?”

Then like ripping off the Band-Aid, she blurted, “I guess it was just a wartime thing. Not destined to last.”

“Oh, I am so sorry.” Betty's face crumpled in sympathy, and she reached out to place her hand over Vicki's.

“Not all of us are as lucky in love as you, Miss Betty.”

“I know that I was fortunate to meet Mr. McGillicuddy and become his wife. And if this man did not see forever with you, then he's not worthy of my Vicki.”

“I thought it was real at the time. It certainly was for me. But he met someone else that meant more to him than me.” After all this time, thoughts of Ian still flooded her mind. Sitting up straighter, she pushed them to the side and let out a long breath. “Anyway, it's over and done with.”

The last thing she wanted was sympathy, but that wasn't what she got from Betty. She was glad she'd waited to tell the one person who would understand and offer quiet acceptance of her heartbreak. They continued to sit for several moments until the cookies were finished and the tea cups were drained.

“I know you're tired, Miss Betty, but you've been sitting for a while. Let's get your walker and start moving around before it gets too late.”

Betty nodded and, without too much difficulty, managed to stand. The two of them maneuvered onto the porch and down the ramp built for her by some men from the local veterans group. They walked slowly around the yard, both in the front and back, looking at the trees and shrubs Mr. McGillicuddy had planted years before. Betty pointed out the new flower beds that a Boy Scout troop had come by and planted.

*Boy Scout...*a memory of her calling herself a Boy Scout because she'd had a condom slammed into her. *I haven't thought of that in almost two years.* She winced at the ache in her chest. It was hard to swallow past the lump in her throat, but she focused on their walk.

After a while, Vicki could tell that Betty was tired. She would have her hip replacement surgery next week, and Vicki had every hope that Betty would again enjoy walking around her yard with less pain as soon as she

completed her rehab.

As they went back into the house, it struck her that there was a medical procedure to take care of almost every body part except a broken heart. That was one thing modern medicine couldn't do. And while she tried to play off the hurt when she'd talked about the soldier she'd fallen for, the reality was that her heart was just as broken as when she'd been told he was getting married.

Once inside, she busied herself with fixing supper and then settling in for some evening TV with Betty before helping her get ready for bed. Hours later, she lay in her own bed, in the room that had been hers when the McGillicuddys had taken her in. Betty didn't believe in holding on to the past and had re-decorated the room as an adult guest room. She was glad not to be looking at boy band posters on the wall. Instead, lovely floral paintings and fresh curtains surrounded her.

But just like every night for the past year and a half, the image of Ian moved through her mind. During the day, she could stay busy and relegate him to the deep recesses where she knew he belonged. But it was when she lay in the darkness that she wondered how long she'd be haunted by unrequited love.

Vicki walked down the hall of the geriatric rehab wing of the VA Medical Center, noting the holiday decorations adorning the doors. The complex housed a hospital, out-patient clinic, and rehab, complete with full physical therapy facilities. One floor of the rehab was exclusively for older veterans. Their needs greatly differed from the younger ones. She was excited about the change in nursing from active-duty younger military personnel to those more of Betty's age. For the past week, she'd gotten to know the staff and a number of the patients having their post-op rehab at the facility.

"Good morning, Mason," she greeted as she approached the nurses' station decorated with holiday greenery and stockings. "Hey, Noreen."

Mason Rutger and Noreen Poston were two nurses who usually shared the dayshift with her. Noreen had explained to Vicki that she would occasionally work nights, especially when she needed to pay for her son's college tuition. Other nurses were on the rotations, but she worked with Mason and Noreen the most.

Their greetings were strangely subdued, and their eyes darted back and forth. Noreen leaned over the desk and whispered, "I guess you haven't heard yet, have you?"

"Heard what?" she whispered in return, leaning closer also.

"Mr. Finley in room 213 died last night."

She blinked, her chin jerking back slightly. "He seemed fine yesterday. I wasn't his nurse but saw him in the hall."

Mason and Noreen shared a look, but before she could ask, one of the nurse's aides darted over. Rona Gomez's hands fluttered before she clutched them in front of her.

“Dr. Tolbert is in such a state today! It was bad enough that Mr. Portman died two weeks ago, but we lost Mr. Simon a month before that!”

“Rona,” Noreen chided. “This is the geriatric wing. You should know that by the very nature of the patients we see, we will have deaths occur.”

Rona pinched her lips together but could not stay quiet. “Yes, but I heard Dr. Baker and Dr. Tolbert talking. I don’t think they realized I was just inside a patient’s room and could hear them. They were saying that the number of deaths this year has increased, and that it might—”

Mason lifted his hand, palm out toward her. “Stop right there. We might all gossip about silly things that go on, but we won’t listen to doctors’ conversations and then repeat them. That’s a sure way to end up unemployed.”

As though duly chastised, Rona huffed and walked away.

But once it was the three nurses left standing, Vicki turned to the other two. “So I take it that the increased number of deaths is not the norm?”

Both Noreen and Mason shook their heads. “No, it’s definitely up,” Noreen said. “But let’s face it. Our society is becoming older. And obviously, our veteran population is, too. Anyway, I’m sure they’ll determine the cause of death to be natural.”

Vicki nodded, then glanced at the assignment board. “Well, I’m off to see my patients. I have a new one today. Ernest Peterson. He had hip arthroplasty yesterday and has now come to us from the hospital.”

“Yes, I checked him in since my shift started earlier,” Mason said. “He had some family with him when he transferred over, but I think they’ve all left now.”

“Good. I like to meet the family, but I always like to meet the patient first. Sometimes family can hover and start answering all the questions for the patient, and then I don’t get a good sense for how they really feel.”

“God, I know what you mean. I always feel sorry for those who don’t have a family like Mr. Finley. But on the other hand, if the family is here, I want them to visit and help, not jump in and make it harder for me to do my job,” Noreen said, her head bobbing.

“So Mr. Finley didn’t have any family?” Vicki asked, sad that the man died without loved ones around.

Mason nodded slowly. “He’d been my patient for the past week, but no one came in to see him.”

Sighing heavily, Vicki nodded. “Talk to you later, guys.” As she

approached Mr. Peterson's room, she pushed thoughts of Mr. Finley to the back of her mind. It was never easy to lose a patient, but she supposed it felt more normal for an older man who had a chance to live his life than for a young person during wartime.

Knocking on the door, she walked inside the four-bed room. Only three beds were occupied, and she smiled and greeted the patients inside. Walking to the bed next to the window, she found a smiling white-haired man with his bed angled up so that he was reclining and not lying flat.

"Hello, Mr. Peterson. I'm Vicki Bates, your nurse. For someone who's just had surgery, you look very well!"

"Life is good, Ms. Bates," he called out. "I confess that I didn't feel so good yesterday right after surgery. But then they make you wake up and start walking. I'm here to make the best of this excellent care!"

She smiled in return before checking his blood pressure and temperature. Then she examined the surgery site. "It looks like it should," she said. "And I have to say your blood pressure is really good."

"I was born and raised on a farm, and until my hip started giving me problems, I still helped out my daughter and her family. I've even got great-grandchildren now!"

"Good for you. And will you return to their house when you're discharged?"

"You betcha. I have a separate room on the first floor that my son-in-law built for me. I plan on having a few more years of working on the farm. Of course, I don't do as much as I did when I was a younger man, but I can still get out and walk around. We've got a small garden in the yard that I can attend."

"What do you grow in your garden?"

"I have tomatoes, beans, snap peas, cucumbers, and squash. I've also got a small area with some herbs. I'm a widower, but my daughter makes all my favorite foods."

She looked over as Rona walked in and smiled.

The sweet aide warmly greeted her and the patients, then assisted one of the men into his wheelchair. "Time to go to physical therapy!" Rona called out, her voice chipper.

"When do I start PT?" Mr. Peterson asked.

"I don't see that note in your chart, but it looks like your doctor is Dr. Tolbert. I'm new here, but I can tell you that his other patients speak very

highly of him. He'll set up your PT schedule when he comes around and evaluates you. I've also met the head physical therapist here, Rodney Masters. He seems very nice."

"Don't you worry about me. I don't necessarily need someone nice. I need someone good, efficient, and who will let me do the necessary work to get back to my family."

Laughing, she nodded. "Mr. Peterson, I can see that you and I will be good friends. I like your attitude."

"Well, don't be a stranger," he called out.

"I won't. I'll check in several times a day and follow up with the doctor to see when you can start PT."

With that, she left his room and finished her rounds with her other patients before settling at the nurses' station to type up her notes.

Ian raced up the dirt trail that weaved around the side of the mountain. He'd been at LSIWC for over a week and had found his place already. The uncertainties he'd felt when he first considered the position had disappeared. The camaraderie was as strong as he'd had in the Army, and everyone checked their egos at the door. That, in and of itself, was amazing, considering the professional talent that Carson cultivated.

He'd accompanied Adam on a one-day security escort and observed Rick and Poole evaluating the security system needs for a new CEO outside of Los Angeles. Jeb and Natalie introduced him to the computer program for following the money trail and the forensic accountant Carson worked with on investigations.

And now, he enjoyed the mountainous acres that Carson owned where they could train, and all the Keepers were racing to the top. He leaped over fallen logs, managed not to slide on the loose gravel path, and darted through prickly scrub brush. Sweat poured off his body, but he was determined to get to the top as fast as possible. Finally, coming out onto the clearing, he spied a few others who had arrived ahead of him, with more coming up behind.

All laughing and congratulating each other, Carson passed out water bottles and energy bars as they sat on the rocks overlooking the breathtaking vista. After they had hydrated, they hiked down at a slower pace, talking and

laughing as they went. Once they were back in the compound, he showered and changed clothes before heading out.

“Got a hot date tonight?” Hop asked.

Laughing, he nodded. “Yep, at the geriatric wing of the veterans hospital.”

Dolby chuckled and shook his head. “Watch out for those geriatric women! They’ll take one look at you and start pinching your butt.”

“Maybe I should warn my grandfather,” he said. “He just had a hip replacement, and I was letting the rest of the family visit when he was in the hospital and first got settled. Now I’ll head over there and see if I can keep him out of trouble.”

With a chin lift, he said goodbye to the others and climbed into his SUV. Soon he was on the road, heading north. The drive was over an hour before he pulled into the VA Medical Center. Once inside, he showed his ID, obtained his visitor's badge, and then was given directions to the second floor.

Having heard horror stories about some of the VA hospitals and medical centers, he was ecstatic to see the gleaming floors, fresh paint, and pleasant expressions on the employees' faces. Passing the nurses' station, he dipped his chin in greeting, then continued until he reached his grandfather's room.

Glancing in, he could see four beds in the large room, with the ability to pull curtains between the beds for privacy. A flash of the first time he’d been a patient in a military hospital hit him, but he quickly shook his head to dislodge that image.

Hearing his grandpa's voice, he grinned and waited to see what he would say.

“Mr. Peterson, I told you that Dr. Tolbert said you can start PT tomorrow. Until then, you’ll just have to be patient.”

“I am a patient!”

Female laughter rang out, and Ian rolled his eyes at his grandfather’s wit. He saw that the nurse had stepped behind the curtain of the patient in the bed next to his grandfather’s, and he slipped into the room.

“Are you causing trouble, Grandpa?”

“Hello!” His grandfather greeted. “I didn’t expect to see you today!”

“Well, I figured I’d let the family get you all settled in before I came to visit.”

“Well, you know how your mom can hover! Love my daughter, but I’m

glad to see you. Maybe you can even sneak in a little evening whiskey for me.” His grandfather looked over Ian's shoulder and called out, “What do you think, Nurse? Do you think my grandson can slip in a little nightcap for me? You could join us.”

Ian turned with his heart light and his smile wide as he reached his hand out to greet the approaching nurse. Then looking into the unblinking blue eyes staring at him from a beautiful face growing paler by the second, his mouth dropped open, struck dumb. Her red-blond hair was pulled back in the familiar bun, but he couldn't tell if the length was the same. No longer in olive green scrubs with her military insignia on display, she was in pale pink scrubs that made the color of her eyes even brighter.

“Ian?”

Hearing his name on her lips sent a kick-start to his stunned heart. “Vicki?”

Neither spoke, but the air between them became thick, filled with longing and regret, making it hard to breathe.

“I... um... hello,” she said, pink now flushing over her pale skin. Her gaze darted from his to his grandfather. “I'll see you tomorrow, Mr. Peterson. Good night.” With that, she turned and hastily walked out of the room.

Ian stared at her back until she was gone, then continued staring at the empty space, his mind not catching up to what had just occurred. A throat clearing behind him brought him back to his senses, and he sucked in a deep hissing breath through his teeth. Turning, he steeled himself for his grandfather's grin and witty comment, but instead, the sight that greeted him was his grandfather's deepened wrinkles as his face held concern.

Inhaling deeply again, he walked over and sat on the chair beside the hospital bed. Perched on the edge, he rested his hands in his lap, words leaving him.

“I take it you know the pretty Nurse Bates?”

He scoffed, nodding slowly. “Yeah. I know her.”

“Sounds like there's a story there, Ian. It might help if you unburdened whatever caused you to look like a weight just dropped onto your chest.”

He sat for a minute, unsure he wanted to speak about her. Ever since that fateful New Year's Eve, he'd done everything he could to push thoughts of her away. And he wasn't convinced that this moment was the right time to bring them back up. But it didn't seem right for his grandfather to have witnessed the emotions slamming into him without giving some explanation.

Shrugging, he propped his forearms on his thighs and sighed. “We met when I had my emergency appendectomy in Afghanistan. In truth, she was the first face I saw when I came out of surgery.”

“Not a bad face to wake up to, son.”

He chuckled. “You got that right, Grandpa.”

“And I take it you two became more than just nurse and patient.”

“What can I say? I fell for her. But we lived in a bubble for six weeks. She was an officer, and I was enlisted. She was a nurse, and I’d been her patient. But during that month, we became friends and uh... more.”

“You fell in love.”

He nodded slowly. “I fell in love.”

“Wartime is hard, boy. Emotions run high. Never knowing if you’re going to live through the next day makes you want to experience things that, in an ordinary world, you might not do. You have to face death, so you sure as hell want to face life and love, too. Nothing wrong with that.”

Ian cocked his head to the side, observing his grandfather’s faraway expression. And for a moment, he wondered if they were still talking about him. “You sound like that’s something you understand.”

His grandfather jerked his gaze back to Ian and offered a rueful smile. “I’ve lived a long time, son. There’s probably not a lot I haven’t experienced.”

“You served in Nam.”

His grandfather’s bushy white eyebrows darted upward. “You trying to tell me something I don’t know? My service is the reason I can sit in this veterans facility. What’s your point?”

He chuckled. “No reason to get prickly! I just wondered if maybe you understood a little bit more than you were letting on.”

“Yeah, well, I remember when I was a young soldier and met a sweet nurse. But she fell for someone else, and when I got home, I fell in love with your grandmother. Life has a way of working out. But...” his grandfather puffed as he crossed his thin arms over his chest. “We’re talking about you and that pretty nurse who was just in here.”

He stared at his grandfather for another moment, then nodded. He figured if his grandpa had secrets from many years ago, he had the right to keep them buried. But somehow, the idea that his grandfather might understand eased a little of the ache inside. “Like I said, we lived in that bubble for over a month, but then it was time for me to head back out. A six-month duty with virtually

no communication. It was hard on those who were married and had kids, and it was hell on me, too. I still felt the same at the end of six months, but she didn't."

"I'm real sorry, Ian. Now, I feel bad that I'm stuck in this rehab, and you have to come face-to-face with someone I guess you'd rather not see."

"No, no, it's all good. Seriously, Grandpa. I was just shocked to see her, that's all. It's been a long time, and I won't deny seeing her was a surprise. But water under the bridge and all that."

His grandfather held his gaze, and Ian battled the urge to squirm while praying his true feelings were buried enough that the older man wouldn't ferret them out. Finally, his grandfather nodded, and Ian released a long-held breath.

"Good. She seems like a nice girl, and there's no accounting for how the heart works. Sometimes it's just not the right person, and sometimes it's just not the right time." He shrugged his bony shoulders.

His grandfather began asking about his new job, and Ian relaxed and shared his first week's adventures, letting the excitement flow through him. When his grandfather yawned, he hugged him goodbye and slipped out of the room.

He looked around but didn't see Vicki. Instead of heading to the elevators, he moved to the stairs in the opposite direction so he wouldn't have to pass the nurses' station. It was cowardly, but until he could wrap his mind around the fact that Vicki would be working with his grandfather and seeing her again, he didn't mind admitting that being a coward protected his heart for the time being.

Vicki blinked as she pulled into Betty's driveway. She had made the twenty-minute drive on autopilot, barely aware of how she got there and grateful she had not had an accident on the way home. She climbed the front porch steps and let herself in the front door.

The house was quiet, and Betty was not in her usual place in front of the television. Concerned, she rushed through the kitchen to the small sitting room converted into a bedroom since Betty had difficulty climbing the stairs.

Betty lay in bed with her eyes closed, and her deep breathing indicated she rested comfortably. Slipping back out of the room, she noticed the note on the kitchen table.

RuthAnn came to visit today, and all her chattering wore me out! But she brought dinner, and I ate early. There are leftovers in the refrigerator, so help yourself. I'm going to lie down and rest. If I sleep all night, I'll see you in the morning. Love, Miss Betty.

She couldn't help but smile. Miss Betty was the name she had called her for as long as she could remember. Sometimes a name isn't just a moniker but a feeling of comfort, care, and love. And Miss Betty certainly embodied all those warm feelings.

Moving to the refrigerator, she pulled out the leftovers and microwaved them. She eagerly dug in as the scent of beef stroganoff filled the air. She'd microwaved it too long and burned her tongue on the first bite. After blowing over the top of her noodles to cool them, she could finally shovel the deliciousness in.

Once she'd cleaned the dishes, she poured a glass of wine and walked into the living room. Standing momentarily, she realized she had no desire to

sit without Miss Betty to keep her company. Taking the wine, she climbed the stairs to her bedroom.

Placing her drink on the bathroom counter, she stripped off her scrubs and showered in the hottest water she could stand. Once dried, she went through the rote tasks of getting ready for bed. Moisturizing. Dragging the wide-tooth comb through her wet hair. Pulling on her sleep shorts and T-shirt.

Finally, she stood, grabbed her wine, and took a long sip. Then she stared into the bathroom mirror, no longer able to hide from the memories assaulting her.

Ian. Ian Ridgeway. She snorted and shook her head. *Grandson to Ernest Peterson.* Sobering, she took another large sip of wine. *The love I thought I'd never lose.*

Her fingers gripped the wineglass stem until fear that she would break it set in, and she eased her clutch. Draining the remaining wine, she returned the empty glass to the counter and padded barefoot into her bedroom. No book would hold her interest tonight. No TV show would provide a distraction.

Without the pretense of trying to keep her mind off him, she lay down on her bed and stared at the ceiling, allowing the memories to flow over her until she thought she'd drown.

Two years ago

Vicki had worked ten hours of a twelve-hour shift while stationed in Afghanistan. She was assigned to post-op recovery and had seen her share of patients with gunshot wounds, burns, amputations, and orthopedic surgery. It had been a long day, but now in front of her was a man who'd just come out of an appendectomy. He was lucky, considering he'd been brought by medevac and made it into surgery just before his appendix ruptured. And while it was still major surgery, knowing he would be able to return to his squad made her smile.

She checked his vital signs, recorded them in his chart, and noted that he was Special Forces. Not that it mattered to her. As far as she was concerned, all men were the same regarding the human body. She'd seen plenty of

Special Forces come out of surgery, and for some of them, facing medical discharge from the service struck them harder.

But for this man, he'd be heading back. She looked at his face for a moment, smiling at his reddish-brown hair and russet beard. It was impossible to miss his level of physical fitness when she checked his abdominal surgery site. He was handsome in a little boy way as he slept, something she often noticed— so many rough-edged masculine features were eased into little boy looks when under anesthesia.

His eyes started to blink open, and she couldn't help but stare into their brown depths. She'd expected blue, so the handsome, warm chocolate eyes attracted her. And she held his gaze, knowing he hadn't focused on anything yet.

“You gonna wake up, soldier, or sleep all day?” she teased softly, smiling widely. He blinked several more times, and she recognized the instant he tried to remember where he was.

One of the first things patients asked when they came out of surgery was how things went. That was particularly difficult for those who'd lost a limb or whose injuries would require long recuperation and probable separation from the service. She hated that moment. A part of her always wished that the surgeon stood there to give them the information instead of her when they were in the post-op recovery. But then, she hoped she'd developed a way of softening the news with a smile, a word of encouragement, or a gentle touch.

But in this case, when he asked, “Did I come away with all my parts?” she offered a genuine smile. She'd heard from the surgeon that his appendix had already started to rupture and was partially gangrene. They hadn't wasted a minute getting the infected organ out of his body. And since he came through the surgery with flying colors, she laughed as she reported his status with levity to let him know he was truly all right.

As they chatted for a few more minutes, her gaze continually moved to his beautiful eyes. They finally focused on her and flared with interest. It wasn't unusual for that interest to be aimed her way. She didn't consider herself to be a great beauty, but in a male-dominated military world, just being a female was enough to turn heads. Sometimes it was a soldier uninhibited from the drugs running through their system. Sometimes it was a soldier who'd just discovered their life was changing, and they wanted to hold on to anything that felt real.

But in her years as an Army nurse, she'd never felt anything in return

except care, comfort, and sometimes pity when she stared into their eyes. But something in his gaze seemed to pierce the professional shell she'd built around herself. Her heart seemed to jump inside her chest.

She finished checking on him, glad another patient wasn't coming through, and remained by his bedside. They continued to chat, discovering they were from small towns in California that weren't far from each other. She even laughed when he said they were fellow gingers and shared a common homeplace. "Practically soulmates," she said in jest. Then she winked and walked away. As she left the ward, her actions shocked her. Her body felt heated, and she had to force her mind back to the tasks at hand.

She had the next day off and busied herself with laundry, cleaning her bunk, and checking email. Yet no matter what she did, the red-haired, brown-eyed Ian was never far from her mind.

Walking into the hospital ward before going on duty to pass along a message to one of her nursing friends, she looked over, and her eyes locked onto the ones that had been in her mind for two days. He aimed a gorgeous smile at her, and she could swear her heart leaped again. Walking closer, she was drawn to him like a magnet.

His color looked much better, and she had no doubt he was well on his way to recovery. They began to banter, and she found his quick wit to be as sexy as his looks. As their hands touched, she felt a spark that she assumed was from static electricity, yet the tingle remained.

When he requested she share a cup of coffee with him, she hesitated... they had stepped into dangerous territory. She was an officer, and he was a sergeant. She was a nurse, and he was a patient. A war battled inside as fierce as the war zone they were in. She agreed, but the words were spoken in a barely-there whisper.

Two more days passed, but she refused to return to the hospital ward. Whatever flirting had occurred, she couldn't keep it up. She wasn't his nurse now, so seeking him out would be wrong. Yet he was never far from her mind. She'd been asked out before but had never been interested, finding that cockiness often overshadowed any attractiveness. But Ian was different. He was funny without trying too hard. His eyes held hers as though he didn't want to look away.

She sighed, then headed to the DFAC tent. She'd worked all night, and some greasy breakfast food before crashing was just what she needed. As she stood in line, a voice came from right behind her.

She didn't have to see him to know the voice belonged to Ian. But turning slowly, she moved her eyes to meet his chocolate ones, and the entire world fell away, leaving only the two of them. It was the first time she'd seen him standing, and she had to lean her head back to hold his gaze. He wore sweatpants and an Army T-shirt that stretched tightly over his arms and chest. She let out a long breath, trying not to show that his appearance affected her.

As they fell into the familiar banter, she was uncertain if others would see them and wonder what was happening. But as they sat down, she glanced around, and no one in the room appeared to even look at them.

He reached under the table and wrapped his strong fingers around hers. She could barely breathe, much less eat. Her reaction seemed over the top. *How could something that simple make a thirty-year-old woman feel like she was fifteen again?* But the way her heart squeezed in her chest from just a simple touch of his hand made her realize she was at great risk of falling for him.

For the next week, he met her each morning for breakfast. And each day, she looked forward, almost breathless, as she wondered if that would be the day he didn't show. She kept waiting for the shoe to drop. For someone to notice and remind her of the military's regulations against fraternization between officers and enlisted personnel. But no one seemed to notice. Or at least, no one seemed to care.

She shared a bunk with another lieutenant nurse, and they worked opposite shifts. She got along great with Susan and considered her to be her closest friend in Afghanistan. But she loved that she often had their bunker to herself, valuing privacy, one of the most difficult things to give up when she joined the Army. But she had little to complain about, considering she only had one roommate and a bunker with air-conditioning.

And now, with Susan on shift, Vicki ran a brush through her hair and smoothed her hands over her pants. She stared in the mirror, wondering if she'd lost her mind when inviting Ian to come over. *I must be insane! I've asked a patient to come to my bunk. An enlisted soldier.* She dropped her chin to her chest, dragged in a shaky breath, and almost hoped he wouldn't come. Just then, a light knock kick-started her heart.

If a simple touch had created a tingle, the kiss flamed from sparks to wildfire. Every nerve in her body felt alive as their heads moved back and forth, and their tongues discovered and devoured each other. She knew in an instant they wouldn't stop at a kiss. And she no longer cared about rules,

regulations, or even if her heart would get broken. She wanted to feel this man, flesh against flesh. It had been a while since she'd had sex, but she was prepared. She'd snagged several condoms from the hospital and prayed she'd have the opportunity to use them right now.

And even though it took imaginative finagling because of his healing, they discovered creative ways to use every condom she had.

Afterward, as they curled up to sleep, and she confessed her uncertainty of what they were doing, he kissed her lightly and declared, "What we are, is *us*."

His words scored straight through her, slicing open the wall she had around her heart. She'd had a few relationships, but none lasted. And in truth, looking back, she couldn't say that she'd ever been truly part of an *us* before. And while it sounded wonderful, those words scared the shit out of her.

Over the next four weeks, they spent every moment together. And each time, she fell a little more for him, opened up to him, and finally admitted to herself that what they had was way beyond a wartime affair. He would soon return to his unit, and the idea she wouldn't see him for months caused an ache in her chest. But for once, she didn't wonder if love was worth the risk. As far as she was concerned, she'd risk it all just for time with him.

Now, lying in bed, tangled around each other, they'd come to the day of reckoning. He was returning to his unit, facing a six-month assignment with virtually no contact. She couldn't imagine how they could keep the relationship going without being able to see or speak to each other. She knew she loved him. She also didn't doubt that he loved her. She had the surety of knowing her love for him wouldn't wane, and she desperately wanted to believe he felt the same. *But only time will tell*. Facing the difficult subject, they finally agreed that he would call her on New Year's Eve in six months. It sounded risky, but then, so had falling in love.

They shared one last kiss on the day he left before he finally turned away from her and darted out the door. She stood for a long time, staring at where he'd been. There was a hole in her heart, but all she could hold on to was that in six months, he would call. Because she knew beyond a shadow of a doubt she would answer.

Her tour in Afghanistan was cut short by a month, and she settled into Germany at a base hospital, enjoying the change of pace. There were shops and restaurants, museums, and galleries to visit. She shared an apartment with two other nurses, but they each had their own small bedroom. At night,

she would lay awake and think of Ian. Wonder what he was doing. Whether he was safe. If he was still hers.

December rolled in, and she reveled in helping her roommates decorate for the holidays, something she hadn't bothered to do in Afghanistan. Only four more weeks until New Year's. She walked down the hospital hall from the cafeteria and entered the ER where she had been assigned for the day. Checking her board, she walked into a bay and smiled at the soldier treated for third-degree burns. His unit was nearing the end of a long mission, but he had been diverted to Germany for medical treatment. She recognized his battalion and asked, "Do you know Ian Ridgeway?"

The soldier nodded and laughed. "Yeah, I do. Used to serve with him."

He stared at her, his gaze assessing. Unable to hide her blush, she blurted, "I hope to hear from him soon. When his mission ends, I'll finally get to talk to him again." She had no idea why she admitted something to a stranger that she hadn't told anyone.

The young man looked down, then rubbed his chin, seeming to ponder. Finally, he said, "I heard Ian was getting married."

She blinked, then shook her head slightly. "We must not be talking about the same person."

"Ian Ridgeway. Redhead from California. From what I heard, he's got a girl back home, and once he gets back to the States, they're getting married."

Somehow she managed to check his burns, then walked away with a fake smile plastered on her face. Forcing one foot in front of the other, she wobbled once into the hall and reached out to grab the wall, uncertain she could stay upright as the world spun. Stepping into an empty bay, she leaned back against the wall and focused on her breathing. The air in the hospital felt thin, and no matter how much she dragged into her lungs, dark spots danced in front of her eyes. Dropping her chin, she closed her eyes, unable to keep the tears from falling.

A girlfriend back home.

She had no idea how long she stood there, but finally, the hustle and bustle of the ER brought her back to the present. Dragging in a shaky breath, she swiped at her eyes. Looking around, she grabbed a tissue, blew her nose, and sucked in several deep breaths. Somehow, she made it through the rest of her shift.

As soon as she trudged into her apartment, glad she was alone, she entered her bedroom before slipping to the floor and bursting into tears. A

sob wracked her body, and she could barely catch her breath. She crawled over to the trash can, where she threw up what little lunch she had eaten.

A girlfriend back home. So nothing we felt was real. Nothing he said to me was real. It wasn't just a wartime affair. It was a wartime lie.

Hours later, she crawled into bed with no more tears left in her dehydrated body. She eventually drifted off to sleep but woke with a heavy heart. Thankful she had the day off, she aimlessly wandered the streets of Germany, ignoring the lights and decorations, her thoughts a tangled mess.

Had he been with her when he was with me? Was this his modus operandi? Get lonely when on a mission and have an affair, then go home to his soon-to-be wife?

She couldn't reconcile the idea of Ian as a player with the man she'd been with. But she knew the type of men in the Special Forces. They would protect each other, which the man in the hospital had done. He was protecting Ian.

She blew out a long breath and pulled her phone from her purse. Staring down at the contacts, she swallowed back another sob. His picture looked back at her, his warm eyes and smile so familiar. *Or I thought they were.* With her forefinger, she traced over his face, having memorized every nuance. The eyes that held her captive. The lips that kissed her like no other. The way he made her feel.

A wartime lie.

She wished that anger would replace the pain, but perhaps it was too soon. Anger would come, but only when it had a chance to devastate her heart. Her finger hovered over the button, wondering if he would answer. Wondering what lies he would tell her to cover up that he had a girlfriend back home. Wondering if, in a few weeks, he would call on New Year's Eve. And if he did, what other lies would come out of his mouth.

She inhaled deeply, her chest aching with the movement. Then as she let the air out slowly, her finger moved to the delete contact button. She hesitated, not wanting to react in haste. But the truth was, she needed to protect her heart.

Weeks later, she accepted a shift on New Year's Eve. *I have no desire to go out with friends, so I might as well work.* She finally broke down and confessed the entire situation to one of her roommates, Beth. And on New Year's Eve, she left her phone on the kitchen counter before she went to the hospital.

Turning to Beth, she said, "I don't know if he'll call. He probably won't,

but if he does, I can't bear listening to him tell me it's over. Or giving me excuses why we can't be together. I can't stand listening to lies. And if he tells me the truth, it'll hurt too much to listen to him tell me about the woman he's going to marry. So I'm leaving my phone here."

"Are you sure?" Beth asked.

"If it rings, you can answer. Tell him that I'm out at a party." She swallowed past the lump in her throat and shook her head. "And that's if he even calls."

Beth nodded, and Vicki walked out of the apartment, her heart aching. She'd dreamed of this evening for so long and now hated the idea of New Year's Eve. Hours later, she glanced at the clock and heard the nurses celebrating midnight.

A sense of finality moved through her. It's over. Ian and I... are over.

PRESENT DAY

Vicki loved seeing Mr. Peterson but hated how she hesitated each day before entering his room. She'd steel her spine in case Ian was visiting. But, so far, it seemed his grandson only visited in the evenings. She had met Ian's mother when she came to sit with her father. Vicki's heart had pounded the first time, but they only treated her as a nurse, so she assumed Ian had not told them they'd met before.

Walking into the room, she smiled at Mr. Peterson, then noticed Rona helping Mr. Alston into a wheelchair. "Oh, did his PT schedule change?"

"Rodney had an opening today," Rona explained. "He asked me to come get Mr. Alston." She smiled and looked over at Mr. Peterson. "Then I'll come for you when I bring him back."

"I'll be looking forward to it!" Mr. Peterson called out with a wave.

After they left, she pursed her lips, placed her hands on her hips, and looked at him. "You're a flirt!"

He placed his hand over his heart and said, "Nurse Bates, I am the soul of discretion." He held her gaze, then said, "Mr. Peterson seems so formal. I'd much prefer it if you'd call me Ernest."

Pressing her lips together, she held his gaze, noting the warm brown eyes staring unwaveringly back at her. Eyes that reminded her of Ian's.

Finally nodding, she said, "Okay, Ernest."

"Thank goodness," he declared. "Now I feel less old around such a pretty nurse!"

She laughed, then reviewed his meds and checked his vitals. "How do you think your physical therapy is going?"

"It's amazing how much better I feel with a new hip," he said, then shook

his head. “Modern medicine is a wonder, isn’t it?”

“I think so.”

“Have you worked here long?” he asked.

“I only started shortly before you came to us.”

“You don’t say! Where were you before?”

“I was on active duty. Army nurse. I separated when I was needed back home.”

“Seems to be going around.”

She glanced at him, but he looked down at his hands clasped in his lap. She had no idea what he meant by his statement but wondered if he was talking about Ian. She thought Ian was just visiting since his grandfather was in the hospital, but maybe he was out of the military as well. *Perhaps Ian’s wife didn’t like her soldier being in the field.* Pushing that uncharitable thought to the side, she smiled and said, “In my case, I was ready. And just think... if I hadn’t, I wouldn’t have met you!”

“Now who’s flirting?” His wide grin was full of charm.

Laughing, she waved goodbye, stepped over to the other side of the room, and drew back the curtain. Martin Noble, a frail man in his late nineties, had recently undergone surgery necessitating rehabilitation before he could return home. “I see Dr. Baker has changed your medicine again. We’ll closely monitor it and assess how this works for you.”

Mr. Noble was mostly bald with just a little tuft of white hair around the back of his head. She could imagine that his blue eyes had once been vibrant but now were more cloudy gray. But he smiled despite his pain, and her heart warmed for him, captivated by his resilience. After checking his vital signs, she fluffed his pillow and sat beside him for a few minutes. His voice was weak, but he regaled her with stories of years gone by when he and his wife would go camping. She fell into his stories, loving how the wrinkles in his face eased when he reminisced about good memories. But today, his fatigue was palpable.

He became quiet after his last story, and just as she was leaving, he reached out and patted her hand. “I’m not afraid to die, you know.”

She remained quiet. Patients often talked about death, whether terrified of it, praying for it, asking about it, or fighting it.

“My Charlene will be there waiting for me,” he said. “I’m not rushing it, so you don’t need to worry. But when it comes, I’m not afraid.”

She reached out and held his hand, giving it a little squeeze. With a final

smile, she walked out, catching Ernest's nod. She wasn't surprised he heard... she suspected that very little got past him.

That evening, over dinner, she talked to Betty. "It seems sad yet somewhat prophetic."

Betty turned her gaze toward Vicki, her face full of concern. "You know, it never dawned on me that when you came back here to work, there would be a downside to it."

Tilting her head to the side, she asked, "What do you mean?"

"Working with geriatrics. You thought it would be much easier than working in a field hospital during wartime. In many ways, it is. But working with the aged isn't easy."

She thought about what Betty was saying. On one hand, it was nice not to have daily life-and-death situations with people in their twenties and thirties. Yet, now, every one of her patients had reached a point in their lives when they knew they had less life ahead than they'd already lived. Lifting her gaze, it struck her heart to realize the woman she loved so dearly was at that phase of her life, too.

"I don't know, Miss Betty. What used to rip at me was the desperation on the faces of so many young people. With geriatric patients, there's so much wisdom. They've learned so much from life, and their feeling of peace makes me feel calm."

Betty smiled and reached across the table to link her fingers with Vicki's. "I should've known, my dear, that you would thrive no matter where you were."

Standing, she bent and kissed Betty's cheek. "Go into the living room and find a good show. I'll clean the kitchen, then join you."

As Betty left the room, Vicki smiled. She had thrived when she first came into this house as a child. And she would prosper at her new job. *Especially if I can keep avoiding Ian!*

The evening started with a gathering at the lighthouse where Carson and his wife, Jeannie, lived. It was the first time Ian had met Jeannie, a nurse. He also met Hop's wife, Lori, who'd just given birth to twins; Dolby's wife, Marcia, and Bennett's fiancée, Diana. All the Keepers were there, including Teddy

and Rachel. It reminded him of squad parties they had when he was in the service—filled with good food, laughter, and great conversation—and he immediately felt like part of the group.

“How’s your grandfather doing?” Jeannie had asked when they’d been introduced.

“He’s good. He’s at the VA hospital’s rehab center now.”

Jeannie nodded, a smile on her pretty face. “I’ve heard good things about that facility. I’ve worked with elderly patients, so I understand that type of medicine. I was a private home care nurse for an older woman when I met Carson.”

He lifted his brows and chuckled. “Yeah, I’ve heard how the two of you met. Of course, I’ve heard other stories about these crazy guys and how they meet women. Sounds like a rather drastic way to get a date!”

She laughed and nodded. “I totally agree. Anyway, I haven’t heard any gossip to see if there’s anyone special in your life?”

“Don’t let her start trying to fix you up with anybody!” Adam yelled. “Run for your life!”

Jeannie shot him a narrow-eyed glare while everybody laughed. Ian threw his hand into the air. “I’m not looking!”

“Well, keep in mind that not just any woman will do,” Natalie said as she walked behind him and straight into Leo’s arms. “Keepers deserve an extraordinary kind of partner.”

“I’ll drink to that!” Dolby said, his arm wrapped around Marcia. Ian had been stunned to discover that Marcia was the author of one of his favorite mystery series. He’d always assumed the writer was a male, so finding out it was Marcia had been a surprise.

As the gathering slowly dispersed, some Keepers headed home, and others went to the local bar. Glad to join them, Ian sat at a large table. Looking around, it was just the type of place he liked. Clean, but not pretentious. Built for locals, not tourists. The beer was cold, and the nachos were crispy. And from the looks of it, the Keepers were well known to the staff. But unlike the bars near the military bases, this one only had a few women casting eyes toward the men sitting around the table. But then, probably because of the Keeper women with them, it inhibited those who just wanted to score.

He looked over to order another round of beer and spied the server hustling between tables. “I’ll go buy the next pitcher at the bar. No sense in

making her run off her feet.”

She darted over as he stood at the bar and placed the order. “I’m so sorry! We’re down a girl tonight.”

“No worries, I just ordered two more pitchers of beer. I’ll add your tip.”

She turned as her name was called to one of the other tables, and he nodded her on. “Don’t worry, I got this.”

Calling out her thanks, she hurried off, and he shifted his attention back to the bar. Two women sat nearby, smiling at him with expressions that appeared hungry for something other than what was found on the menu. He politely dipped his chin, which seemed to be exactly the entrance they sought.

“We couldn’t help but notice you and some of your friends,” the dark-haired one said.

“The friends without women,” the blonde corrected. She smiled brightly and added, “We wondered if any of you guys would like to dance?”

“You’re more than free to ask them.”

The blonde slid off her barstool. “I might as well see if anybody’s interested.”

She headed for the table, and when he glanced over his shoulder, he watched as Poole grinned and pulled her onto the dance floor.

“What about you?”

The dark-haired woman was pretty. Her jeans molded to her ass and long legs, and her top showcased impressive curves. He wasn’t conceited but knew what she was looking for, and it wasn’t just a dance.

He was tempted. Of course, he couldn’t take her back to his place, considering he still lived at his parents’ house. But if she was local or staying in a nearby hotel, he didn’t think it would be hard to break his long-held celibacy.

He could see in her eyes that she expected him to acquiesce. Her smile curved, and her hand wrapped around his arm. And that was when he knew. There was no warmth, no tingle. And while that wasn’t necessary for one night of pleasure, he just wasn’t feeling it. He sometimes wondered if Vicki hadn’t ruined him for all women.

The woman’s hand slid back, and her wide smile faltered. “I see.”

Brows lifted, he asked, “What?”

“You were thinking of how to turn me down. I assumed you were single
—”

“I am single,” he confirmed, then immediately wondered why he told her that when he was turning her down.

She shrugged, her lips quirking upward on one side. “You may be officially single, but somewhere out there is a woman who still has hold of your heart.” She leaned closer so that her lips were just by his ear and whispered, “I’m not opposed to having fun with a gorgeous man who’s officially single. But I don’t want to have sex with a man who will look at me with guilt in his eyes.” Leaning back, she winked. “And I definitely think you’d look at me that way.”

She slid down from her barstool and walked over to the dance floor, soon joined by another man from a different table. Ian sighed, then picked up the tray with the beer pitchers and carried it to the Keepers’ table. It wasn’t long before their group started to break up, and he offered his goodbyes before heading home.

He hadn’t seen Vicki since that first day he visited his grandfather and assumed she had been avoiding him as he had been avoiding her. Tomorrow, he had the day off and promised his grandfather he’d come to see him early. *So... I’ll probably run into her.* He lifted his hand and rubbed his chest, wincing at the pain he felt deep inside. It had been over a year and a half since that fateful New Year’s Eve. But the ache was just as prominent. And he wondered when it would ever ease.

Ernest Peterson shifted in bed and blinked in the dark room. Something felt strange, but the sleep fog made it difficult for him to process the differences.

Usually, a light came from the bathroom and beside each bed to illuminate the way if he or his roommates needed to see. Also, the door to the room was usually cracked to allow easy access for the night staff. But now, the door was closed completely. The only light came from the other side of the room and was so dim he couldn’t understand where it was coming from.

He blinked again and wished he had his glasses on, but unfortunately, the room was blurry without them. A slight shuffling sound came from the other side of the room. Squinting, he tried to bring the view into focus, but all he could see was the movement of a shadow. Then the door opened, and a dark figure was surrounded by the light coming from the hall before the door

closed behind them.

He didn't hear anything coming from the bed across the room from him, so he softly called out, "Mr. Noble? Martin? Are you awake?"

Again, no sound. *He's probably asleep, which is what I should be doing!* Closing his eyes, he drifted off again.

Ian used the stairs to avoid seeing Vicki on the way to his grandfather's room. Since he had the day off, he'd told his parents he would visit during the day. Grateful that his grandfather hadn't told them about Ian's previous relationship with Vicki, he'd been able to avoid embarrassing conversations with them.

Walking down the hall, he could see the holiday-decorated nurses' station and noted the somber atmosphere. Today, several nurses stood close together, their voices low as they seemed to be in deep discussion.

Walking into his grandfather's room, he quickly spied another empty bed, leaving just his grandfather and one roommate. Expecting to see his grandfather's smiling face, he was shocked to see his pale complexion with deep lines etched on his face and an almost painful expression. Rushing forward, he grabbed his grandfather's hand. "Grandpa, what's wrong? Are you okay?"

"Oh, I'm fine. Well, not fine, but okay."

He looked over his shoulder at the empty bed across the room with the divider curtains pulled back. "Did Mr. Noble leave?"

His grandfather sighed heavily. "You could say that. He died during the night."

"Oh, man, Grandpa, I'm so sorry."

"I know. It happens to all of us, and Martin was ninety. But, damn, he seemed better yesterday." He rubbed the whiskers on his chin. "It was tough on Nurse Bates. She's the one who discovered him when she came on duty this morning."

He startled, imagining Vicki discovering the deceased man. With her

experience, she had dealt with a lot of death, but he remembered how much she cared about her patients. His shoulders slumped, then he looked up to see his grandfather peering at him, his eyes sharp. Having no desire to discuss Vicki, he immediately jumped in and asked, “How is your physical therapy going?”

“It’s going. They say I’m doing great, but sometimes I wonder. Everything these days seems a little bit slower and a little bit harder than it used to.”

“What about the physical therapist?”

“Rodney seems to know his stuff. He’s former military, and I like him a lot. There’s an aide who works in there... Quinton.” His grandfather chuckled. “He’s a grouch if I ever met one.”

He couldn’t help but grin at hearing his grandfather’s description. “Well, I’ll pop down before I leave today and chat with them to see how they think you’re doing.”

“Sounds good to me, son. I don’t mind anyone checking up on me.” His brow furrowed. “Even in a place like this, you can never be too careful.”

When one of the aides came in to take the remaining patient for a walk, Ian decided to head down to the first floor to talk to the physical therapist. He slipped down the hall, taking the stairs instead of using the elevators.

He made it to the landing before hearing the sound of sniffles. At the bottom, he spied someone in bright blue scrubs with their back to him, their head bowed. He didn’t need to see their face to know who it was. The dark red hair with blond highlights pulled back in a bun was etched into his memory. He could’ve tiptoed up the stairs again to avoid her but immediately rushed forward. “Vicki?”

She whirled around and appeared surprised as she stared up at him through her wide blue eyes that were now puffy from crying.

“What’s wrong? I’ve just been in to see my grandfather. Is it Mr. Noble?”

Her face crumpled, and she nodded. Without thinking, he stepped closer and wrapped his arms around her body, pulling her tightly into his embrace. Instead of jerking back or becoming stiff, she melted into him, her face pressed against his chest. Her breathing hitched several times, and he began to rock back and forth very slowly, rubbing one hand up and down her back.

“Let’s go somewhere,” he said. “Are you still on duty?”

She swiped at her tears with a crumpled tissue. “I’m on my lunch break.”

“Then let’s get lunch.” He didn’t take the time to think about the

ramifications of his offer. He just knew that a woman he'd once loved was upset over someone's death. And if he could offer a modicum of comfort, he was a big enough man to do that.

She put pressure on his arms as she pushed back a little, and he thought she was stepping away. But instead, she simply leaned her head back to stare into his face. "Lunch?"

"Yeah. Lunch. You know, it's the meal between breakfast and supper."

He wondered if his attempted mirth would be met with disdain, considering why she was upset. She pressed her lips together, but a small smile curved them slightly.

"Come on," he encouraged. "The sandwich shop next door should be fine."

With his arm wrapped around her shoulders, he escorted her outside. He realized his error as she shivered in the cool air. Pulling off his jacket, he wrapped it around her shoulders.

"But you'll be cold," she protested.

"Puh-lease," he chided. "I've been in much colder weather."

It only took a few minutes to walk to the small sandwich shop. It wasn't the usual lunchtime, so the crowd was thin. He settled her at a table near the back and went to the counter to order. A few minutes later, he sat beside her, handing her a drink and a paper bag.

She opened it and pulled out a club sandwich on toasted bread and a bag of kettle chips. Her head snapped upward, and she gaped. "How... this sandwich and the chips... you remember?"

He'd ordered what she used to get at the DFAC. The look of incredulity on her face irritated him. *Just because she walked away and forgot about me doesn't mean I did the same!* "Yep," he curtly said.

Her brow furrowed, but she remained silent, taking a bite of her sandwich and chewing slowly. Wanting to return them to neutral territory, he said, "I'm sorry about Mr. Noble."

She took a sip of her drink and nodded. "It's always hard to lose a patient, regardless of age. And I think the fact he had no family made it even sadder to me." She winced and then shook her head. "I just don't understand it, though. Yesterday, he was doing better."

Her shoulders slumped, and he wanted to wrap his arm around her again. But assuming she might not want more comfort from him, he just listened.

"It's difficult because two deaths have occurred in the past several weeks.

And from what I understand, there was one several weeks before that.”

“Is that unusual?”

She lifted one hand and rubbed her forehead as though to ease the pain. Then she shrugged as she looked up and held his gaze. “To be honest, I don’t think so. But then, I haven’t been working here long.”

“You got out of the service.”

She nodded slowly. “Yeah, I’m civilian now.”

He remained quiet, wondering if she would continue to talk to him.

She took another sip, then said, “It was time. My foster mom is going in for a hip replacement, and I’m the only person she has to help. Honestly, I was tired of the Army and ready for a change. So I’ve moved back with her, got a job here, and she’ll have surgery in a few days.”

“She was a veteran?”

Another slight smile crossed her lips, and he remembered the gut punch he used to feel whenever she smiled.

“Yeah, she was a real pistol. She was a nurse during Vietnam.”

“My grandfather was, too. Well, not a nurse, but in Nam.”

“I know, he told me a few stories the other day. He’s very special.”

Ian nodded, unable to keep a smile away when talking about his grandfather. “You’re right about that.”

“So, um... he said you’re no longer in the service either.”

It was on the tip of his tongue to quip about how she must be checking up on him, but he caught himself. “Yeah. I separated from the service about a month ago.”

“Oh.” She opened her mouth, then shook her head and quickly took another bite.

He wondered if she had been ready to say something else but stopped. He remembered when they could talk about anything. He sighed. The situation was weird and uncomfortable, but at least they were conversing.

After they finished their sandwiches and drinks far too quickly, he walked her back to the hospital. Standing just outside, he said, “I think I’ll head to the physical therapy room to talk to my grandfather’s therapist. I just wanted to get his idea of how things were going.”

She nodded, then pulled his coat from around her shoulders and handed it to him. “Thank you. For the coat. For the comfort. And for lunch.”

“You’re welcome, Vicki. It was nice to see you again.”

She started to turn away, then stopped and lifted her gaze, hesitating. Her

polite smile stayed in place, although it slipped slightly. “Ian, I hope you’re happy. I really do. I hope you and your wife are very happy.” She turned and hurried toward the elevators.

He stood, staring at her back, his breath stuck in his lungs as his heartbeat pounded in his chest. *Wife? What the fuck is she talking about? Wife?* His feet came unglued, and he rushed through the lobby, seeing her step into the elevator. The doors were closing as he approached, but he wasn’t going to make it in time. She turned around and stared out toward him, a questioning expression on her face.

And just as the doors shut, he shouted, “I’m not married!”

“I’m not married!”

Vicki heard the shouted words, but it took a second for them to register. “What?” she yelled to the already closed doors. She tried to hit the door open button, but they were already moving. Twisting around, she looked at the young couple standing next to her, their eyes wide as they stared back.

“Is that what he said? Did you hear him say that? That he’s not married?” Her voice rose with each question until she screeched at the end.

The couple stepped back, their eyes widening even more, but both nodded.

“That’s what I thought he said.” The elevator doors opened, and she darted out. Stopping suddenly, she turned to race back in when she heard her name called from down the hall. Whirling around, she spied Ian at the stairwell door before he stalked toward her. Her chest heaved as she fought to catch her breath.

She glanced to the side, spying a small alcove with couches for families to visit with patients. Grateful it was empty, she waved as he neared, quickly moving into the private space.

“I’m not married.”

“You’re not married?”

They spoke at the same time. His voice was filled with confusion, and hers filled with incredulity.

“I’m not married,” he repeated once more. “Why would you think I was?”

“Because you were getting married to your hometown girlfriend.”

His head jerked back, and his fists landed on his hips. “Vicki, you’re not

making any sense.”

“I could say the same about you, Ian.”

He scrubbed his hand over his face, and she crossed her arms over her chest before turning to stare out the nearby window. There wasn't much of a view, considering they were overlooking the parking lot, but staring at his face as she tried to understand what was happening simply hurt too much.

After a moment, she felt his presence and glanced to the side where he stood next to her, staring out over the same boring parking lot.

“It appears we have some things to talk about,” he said.

She scoffed, thinking he'd made the understatement of the year. Instead, she sighed, and her body was hit with utter fatigue, feeling every ounce of her exhaustion. Her day had started horribly with Mr. Noble's death, and it was not getting any better.

She looked down the hall to see the nurses' station, and Mason stared at her. Her lunch break was over, and she was needed on the floor. Turning, she looked at Ian and said, “I'm really sorry... I have to get back to work. But I agree, we have things to talk about. I don't know what your schedule is like —”

“I'll make time. You just tell me when.”

“I get off at three thirty today—”

“I'll be here.”

She nodded slowly. “Okay. We can find someplace to go and talk.” She looked back at the nurses' station again. I have to go, but I'll see you at three thirty.”

She turned and hurried down the hall, surprised at how it hurt to walk away from him with so many unanswered questions swirling through her head. *I don't understand! He's not married?*

Once at the nurses' station, Mason said, “I'm so sorry, girl, but we've got two new patients coming in, and Noreen's car didn't start, so she won't be here for another hour.”

“No, that's fine,” she assured even though she wanted to race after Ian and talk now.

Mason glanced down the hall. “Mr. Peterson's grandson sure is a fine-looking man.”

“Yeah.” She agreed but didn't want to talk about Ian to anyone. She had no idea why he hadn't gotten married or what happened to his girlfriend, but there was no time to worry about that now. Looking over at the patient board,

she said, “Okay, show me who’s coming in.” With that, she returned to work, pushing all other thoughts aside.

At precisely three thirty, she was at the computer, her purse over her shoulder, her jacket slung over her arm, and her fingers hovering over the keyboard to sign off. With a barely-there wave to Mason, she rushed to the first floor. She and Ian hadn’t made specific plans for where they would meet, but she assumed the front door was as good a place as any. Sure enough, as she approached, he stood just inside the doors, the coat that had been wrapped around her body earlier was now spread over his broad shoulders.

Her heart leaped slightly when she saw him, but she tried to tell herself not to become excited. After all, just because he wasn’t already married didn’t mean he wasn’t getting married. *Or has he already married and divorced?* He appeared as nervous as she felt. Stepping straight to him, she was suddenly uncertain what to say.

Shoving his hands into his coat pockets, he said, “On my way back here, I found a little Italian restaurant. But then, I kept thinking that the conversation we were going to have just didn’t seem conducive to take place in a restaurant.”

She pressed her lips together, her heart falling slightly. He was already preparing to let her down, and she almost laughed, wondering how he thought he could ever let her down more than he already had. “It’s fine, Ian. We don’t need to go to a restaurant or anywhere.”

His chin jerked back slightly. “No, it’s not that. I just thought that maybe someplace quieter would be better.”

“Oh... um... okay.”

“Come on, I’ll show you what I’m thinking.”

He guided her to a large SUV, and she was impressed with his ride. It sure as hell was a lot nicer than her tiny-ass old car. He opened the back passenger door and offered his hand to help her up. *The back seat?* She climbed inside and settled against the deep, comfortable seat. She was immediately hit with the scent of tomatoes and spices and glanced to see a large bag between them. When he climbed in, she asked, “So we’re going to eat in here?”

He blushed as he nodded. “I just figured someplace where we could talk without interruption would be good, and it’s too chilly to sit outside.”

He opened the bag and handed her a heavy takeout container. Lifting the

lid, she found lasagna and a thick slice of toasted garlic bread, only slightly soggy from being in the container. He pulled out the same for himself. "I know it sucks that this isn't nicer, but it was the only place I could think where we could talk in private, and it wouldn't take you far away from your car if you decided that you wanted to leave at any time."

Strangely comforted that he had considered her convenience when whatever he was going to say might make her want to leave, she nodded. "This is fine, but I can't wait any longer. You said you're not married. Were you married?"

"Vicki, I'm not married. I've never been married."

"Did you and your girlfriend break up?"

He closed the top of his container, set it to the side, then shifted around to face her. "What girlfriend?"

His gaze held firm, and he seemed truly confused, but now she began losing her patience. "Ian, it's been a long-ass day, and I'm tired. And I really don't want to play games with you."

"I completely agree, but I'm not playing a game. I don't know what you're talking about. Not only have I never been married, I've never been engaged, and I've never had a long-term girlfriend who I even thought about marrying. Except one, and that was you."

They stared at each other, both breathing heavily, both confused.

"I was told you were getting married to your hometown girlfriend."

He blinked and shook his head slowly. "Who told you that?"

She grimaced, unable to remember the soldier's name. "He was part of your battalion. I left Afghanistan earlier than planned and was already in Germany. I remember it specifically. It was in early December. I was counting down the days until you called. He came in to be treated for minor burns. When I realized he was part of your battalion, I asked if he knew you. He said he did and that you two used to serve together. And then, like a fool, I told him I knew you, too, and that I was looking forward to hearing from you on New Year's Eve."

"Okay," Ian said, drawing out the word.

"Wait, now I remember his name. His last name was Leeper. Then he told me that you were getting married to your hometown girlfriend."

"Fuck," Ian said, his eyes slowly closing as he dropped his chin to his chest.

"So you do know him? And he was telling the truth?"

Ian shook his head. "Yes and no."

"Yes to which part and no to which part?" she snapped.

"Yes, I know him, and no, I was never getting married."

"Why would he tell me that? My heart broke at those words," she said, hating how her voice quivered.

"Because he's an asshole."

Now it was her turn to jerk, blinking as she stared at him. "I'm sorry?"

"Because he's an asshole. We'd once been assigned to the same squad. I've gotten along with almost every member of any squad I've been on, except for him. He was a competitive little shit and thought he was God's gift to women. He'd been written up a couple of times for sexual harassment. I witnessed one of the incidents and went with the female soldier to our commander. Craig Leeper was reassigned and had a black mark on his service record. His parting words to me were, "If I ever get a chance to fuck up your life, I'll do it."

She stared at him dumbfounded, her mind a whirl of thoughts and emotions, tripping and tangling over each other.

Ian held her gaze, anger and disappointment in their depths. "And it looks like he found a chance to fuck me over royally. And you believed him."

The air rushed from her lungs as guilt and anger stabbed at her. "Don't lay this all on me," she said. "You and I had one month together. One month. I knew what we had, but I also knew what the odds might be. So when this soldier, who said he knew you, told me you were marrying your hometown girlfriend, I... I..." She gasped, weakness overcoming her, unable to decide whether she could take another blow today. "I know the esprit de corps among Special Forces. I never thought it would be a lie. So, yes... I believed him," she whispered as tears slipped down her face.

"And New Year's Eve?"

"I had no reason to think you were even going to call," she said. "But if you did and were going to tell me that you'd hooked up with an old girlfriend or had been with her all along, I didn't think I could stand hearing it. I decided to protect myself, so I volunteered for a shift and left my phone with my roommate, who knew my heartache."

More guilt stabbed at her chest, and she sighed heavily. "You and I burned so bright, hard, and fast..."

"Those are the fires that burn out the quickest if they're not continually fed."

She stared into his beautiful face and nodded slowly. “Yes. I knew we were always a long shot. But I hoped... I thought that maybe...”

“Yeah.” A sigh left his lips, and his shoulders slumped. “I can’t lay all this on you, Vicki. When your roommate answered the phone and said you were going to an officer party, I should’ve known that unless you’d had a complete personality change, that was never something you wanted to do on New Year’s Eve anyway. So while you could’ve talked to me about what you heard, I could’ve fought harder to talk to you.”

“We were both easy to convince what we had wasn’t real.”

He winced, then dropped his head back and closed his eyes. His cheeks puffed out with a long-held breath.

Finally, she asked, “What now?”

He turned and looked at her, not speaking for a moment, then finally offered a little smile. “Vicki Bates... would you like to go on a date with me?”

Ian almost laughed at the expression on Vicki's face. But as they'd sat and talked, what she had said about burning strong and bright hit him. They'd had five weeks in Afghanistan to learn about each other, spend time together, and fall for each other.

But they'd been isolated in a tiny bubble. They didn't go outside and hang with friends. They didn't meet with other people. They met casually for a meal at the dining facility, then spent the rest of their time in her bunker, squeezing as much as they could in their alone time together.

Their affair was life-changing, but it didn't give them a chance to see what life was like for them outside that bubble. *Would we have lasted?* In truth, there was no way to know. But there was one thing for sure— as much as they cared for each other, they hadn't had enough time together to fight the demons that would arise six months later.

He didn't blame her. He didn't blame himself. It was just the way it was. So now, looking at her as he tried to keep from laughing at her wide-eyed expression, he watched as understanding dawned on her face.

"We never dated, did we?" Her soft voice rang loud and clear for him.

Shaking his head slowly, he replied, "No. We burned bright. We burned hot. And while we didn't burn out, we needed more time." A slow smile curved her lips, and he felt the tight band around his chest loosen. "What do you say, Vicki? Will you go out with me? Go out like a regular couple? Do things? See people? Discover more about each other, including trust."

Pressing her lips together, she nodded as another tear fell down her cheek. "I would love to go out with you, Ian." She looked down at her barely-touched meal and asked, "Does this count as our first date?"

Now it was his turn to chuckle. He bent and grabbed the plastic bag at his feet, then shoved his still-full container into it. Reaching for her container, he placed it in as well. Tying off the bag, he set it on the console between the front seats before climbing out and jogging to her side. She climbed down and leaned against the door. He walked straight up to her, stopping only when his feet were just in front of hers. With one hand on the doorframe right by her head, he leaned forward and caged her with his body. Bending until his face was directly in front of hers, he answered her question. "That was not our first date. But, if you'll do me the honor, we'll have our first date right now."

She grinned, and the smile struck him the way it had the first time he looked into her face.

"I'd love to go out with you now."

He assisted her into the front seat, then jogged around and climbed behind the wheel. "What are you in the mood for?"

She laughed. "To be honest, that lasagna looked and smelled really good. I guess I just wasn't in the mood for it with our conversation hanging over our heads."

"Then let's start over." It only took a few minutes to drive back to the Italian restaurant. On the way, he detoured to where he'd seen a homeless man standing on a corner. Rolling down his window, he stretched his arm out with the plastic bag in his grip. "Hey, man. I have a couple of meals here. We opened them but didn't eat any. Would you like them?"

The man's eyes widened, and he hurried over. Taking the bag, he thanked them, but Ian waved off his gratitude. Then he continued the drive and parked outside the restaurant.

Escorting Vicki inside, the server looked up in surprise. "Hello, again."

"The meal was perfect, but we gave it to someone and decided it would be best to eat inside."

The server shook her head and laughed, leading them to a table along the side wall. They ordered the same thing and soon were munching on thick, crunchy slices of garlic toast fresh from the oven and lasagna that was still bubbling. Suddenly uncertain about what to talk about, he felt a moment of panic. But as usual, Vicki filled the empty space.

"Tell me how you ended up back here. And who are you working for?"

His shoulders relaxed. It was a subject he could talk about that would be important if they were building a relationship.

“After I finished the long six-month tour and things didn’t go well for us —” He saw her expression fall and rushed past that part of his story. “I was back at base in North Carolina, and as much as I loved my squad, I wasn’t looking forward to the next mission as much.”

She tilted her head slightly to the side. “Was that because of us? Did we ruin your military career?”

“No!” Ian immediately answered. “You know as well as I do that it’s hard in my chosen field. Lots of people get hurt. Squads change due to injuries, retirements, personnel changes, and sometimes we just get to the point where our bodies start feeling the constant battle.”

“I never really thought about how long Special Forces stay in.”

“Some do the whole twenty or plus years. Some get out and then discover they still need an adrenaline rush. Some get out when they find there’s better money out there. The world is always looking for mercenaries or bodyguards. Some stay in and go on to teach at the various schools.”

She nodded, her gaze never wavering as though she was trying to peer inside him. “And for you? What did you want?”

“There was a guy I met several years back. He was in the Army, also, but was a Delta. We became friends, and when he got out, he told me about a security and investigations firm. It started in Maine and opened a second location in California with plans to open other locations. The men who started it were special forces from the various military branches, but he warned me they don’t take just anybody. They turn down way more than they ever accept. I had no idea if I had a shot, but it sounded like what I wanted to do. So I contacted the owner. I’m sure it helped that I had a reference from someone already working for him. I flew to California months ago and had an interview. I couldn’t believe it when he offered me the job. Last month, I separated from the Army. My grandfather had a hip replacement scheduled and would need some assistance. I suddenly realized that my parents were getting older, and my grandfather’s years were limited.” He shrugged. “It was just the right time.”

“I’m beginning to think that timing is everything,” she said, her gaze never wavering, giving him her full attention.

He tilted his head to the side and waited.

“I went into nursing because the woman who raised me was an Army nurse in Vietnam. I admired her so much and wanted to be like her.” Her smile was bright, and as the warmth penetrated deep inside, he wanted to

keep that feeling alive.

“And your parents? We never talked about them before. I didn’t want to ask because I hated ruining our short time together.”

Rolling her eyes, she quipped, “We barely got out of bed long enough to talk about anything.”

A deep chuckle rumbled within. “I guess you’re right. We really were mostly about the sex, weren’t we?”

“Nothing wrong with that,” she said. Then her brow furrowed as she shook her head. “You know, Ian, when I said we burned bright, it’s important for you to understand that I never saw us as just about sex. I really liked you. I fell... well, I fell in love with you. I don’t want you to think that all we had was sex.”

He reached over the table and took her hand, his thumb rubbing over her knuckles. “Me, too. The sex was great, and we were just getting to know each other. If we’d had more time together, we would’ve made it past the hurdle.” His desire to learn more about her burned fiercely within him. It was clear to both that they’d been gradually falling in love, yet he wanted to know so much more about her. And now they had the opportunity to start over. They were silent for a moment, then he jiggled her hand and encouraged, “So tell me about your family.”

“I refer to Mrs. McGillicuddy as my friend when talking to others because that’s easier. In reality, she was a neighbor, my foster mom, and my best friend.” She shook her head and added, “It’s weird, but when I first met you, I told you she was my foster mom. I guess I felt safe with you even then.”

She looked down at their connected hands. “My parents had problems. They were rarely sober. At the time, I didn’t realize that they were functioning alcoholics. My father worked at his job, and my mother managed to serve on several committees in our little town. To the world, they were a sweet couple who sometimes liked to drink a little heavily at parties. But what nobody saw was that they drank heavily at home.”

Her tongue darted out to moisten her bottom lip before she pressed her lips together. “My father wasn’t a mean drunk. He was just a sloppy drunk. He would eventually fall. If my mom was sober enough, she’d help him to bed. If not, then I did. Same with her. Neither were mean or abusive. But most nights, they were well on their way to being drunk by suppertime. The McGillicuddys lived right down the road and understood what was

happening. I could go over anytime I wanted. They were like grandparents who took me in and cared for me.”

As he listened to her story, he realized she was so used to her parents’ behavior and drinking that she didn’t even recognize she excused their neglect. But he was grateful she had this other couple there for her.

“I loved my parents but didn’t like them very much. And by the time I was eleven, I was doing most of the cooking, cleaning, and laundry. I became the parent, and they were the child. Of course, my cooking skills were relegated to heating canned goods and using the microwave and toaster. Not exactly a culinary expert.”

“Oh, babe, that breaks my heart for you.”

“It’s what I knew, Ian. It was just the way my family worked.” She looked down at her hands for a moment, then lifted her gaze to his face. “And then, one night when I was twelve, they were coming back from a party, had an accident, and were both killed. I’m just glad no one else was injured since Dad was driving drunk.”

His hand jerked involuntarily, squeezing her a little harder than he meant. Instantly loosening his grip, he continued to rub his thumb over her fingers. Her strength amazed him, and her story humbled him. Thinking of his own family, he knew he’d been so lucky.

“The McGillicuddys immediately wanted to take me in. CPS was overworked, but since the McGillicuddys had a wonderful reputation in our town, it didn’t take long for them to become certified foster parents for me. They raised me. Several years ago, Mr. Mac died, and by that time, I knew that I wanted to get out of the service and come back so that I could be around for Miss Betty.”

“Mr. Mac?”

“When I was little, I couldn’t say McGillicuddy. No matter how hard I tried, that word was too difficult. I could say McGilli, but then I couldn’t seem to get the ‘cuddy’ to go at the end. I think at one time, it came out like McGildudsy.” She laughed and shook her head as an adorable blush filled her cheeks. “He finally said, ‘just call her Miss Betty and call me Mr. Mac.’”

“And she’s the one who’s going to have a hip replacement?”

“Yes. It’s scheduled in a couple of days.”

“Then maybe she can meet my grandfather, and they can keep each other company.”

“Well, considering they were both in Nam, they’ll have something to talk

about.”

By the time they finished their delicious meal, he'd learned about the McGillicuddys, and she'd heard more stories about his family farm. His heart felt light, and while he hated they missed out on time together, he couldn't believe how fortunate he was to have a second chance.

“I know what you're thinking,” she said. His gaze jerked up to hers. “You're thinking about how lucky we are and how you wished we hadn't wasted time.”

“You always did know what I was thinking.”

She reached out with both hands, clutched his, and leaned forward so her intense gaze held him captive. “Ian, timing is everything. Just because we lost our chance of being together a year and a half ago doesn't mean we would have been getting together at the right time. So while I can waste time hating that we missed out on almost two years, I'd rather focus on the fact that we have now.”

“You really mean that?”

“You're in a different place in your life. I'm in a different place in my life. And everything that happened to bring us to right here, right now might've been exactly what was needed for us to become *us* again.”

His breath caught in his throat as his gaze roamed over her face. Pulling out his wallet, he grabbed a wad of cash and tossed it onto the table. It covered not only their meals but also a hefty tip. Standing, he guided her gently from the chair and led Vicki outside with a wave to the server. The wind had a chilly bite, and he hustled her to his SUV, climbing inside after assisting her. Turning to face each other, they only hesitated briefly as the electricity snapped around them, filling the cab with an energy he hadn't felt since the last time he'd been with her in her tiny bunker. Pulled toward each other by unseen forces, both leaned over the console simultaneously, their lips meeting in the middle.

At first, hers had a chill, but his kiss soon warmed them. She tasted of wine and spice, and he wanted to devour her. He hated that they had too many clothes and too little room to do what he wanted. His cock swelled behind his zipper, and he wanted to bury himself deep inside her. He felt a slight pressure against his chest and realized she was pushing back gently. Separating, he immediately missed the feel of her mouth on his.

“I know what we both want.” She pressed her lips together in a failed attempt to suppress her laughter. “God, it was always so good between us,

and my body hates me right now. But I really need to get back to Miss Betty.”

Reality cooled his ardor, and he nodded. “Absolutely. You’re right.” Then he chuckled as well. “Christ, I don’t even have my own place yet. I’m looking for a place, but I’m living with my family. I’ll move once Grandpa is more mobile.”

“Same... I’m living with Miss Betty.”

They held gazes for a moment, warmth swirling throughout his SUV, surrounding them, binding them together. “I’ll take you back to your car.”

It only took a few minutes to drive to the hospital, and he pulled up next to her car in the employee parking lot. Looking over, he was unhappy to see that it was an older model, and he wasn’t sure how reliable it was. His pay in the military had been decent, and he’d saved most of it. And while he’d only been with LSIWC for a few weeks, he’d received a signing bonus and knew what his first paycheck would be, allowing him to drive his new truck.

“Stop looking at my car as though it’s a piece of junk. I’ll have you know that it’s perfectly functional.”

“Babe, a ride should never just be functional. It should be exceptional.”

“Babe,” she added with emphasis. “A ride is to get me from point A to point B. I have other things in my life that should be exceptional.”

Laughing, he shook his head. “I can’t argue with that.”

He kissed her hard and long, then regretfully pulled away. “With the death of a patient, I know this started out as a shit day for you, Vicki.”

Her face sobered, and she nodded. “It did. But you’ve done a lot to make it better.”

“Good. And I want to keep doing that.” He glanced up at the medical center. “What’s your schedule like?”

“I work days, but remember, once Miss Betty gets here, I’ll spend some of my after-hours time here with her.”

“That’s a good place to meet because I can be here with my grandfather unless I’m out of town.”

He climbed out and walked her to her car, then delayed their goodbye with another long kiss. His gaze followed her until he could no longer see her taillights, feeling his heart once again connected to her and aching as she drove away. *But this is only until tomorrow.* And that thought caused a smile to spread over his face.

A solitary figure, cloaked in the dim evening shadows, stood at a hospital window, their gaze riveted downward to the couple kissing in the employee parking lot. The man was tall and well-built, his strength and vitality evident. And when he leaned back, the observer caught sight of the pretty woman who shared his embrace. Vicki Bates— the new nurse on the geriatric floor.

The observer's expression morphed into a grimace as jealousy sliced through them. They watched as Vicki disentangled herself from the man's arms with a smile. After another kiss, she walked to a small, well-worn car. Her departure was followed by the man who didn't move until she was out of sight.

The observer mused as a bitter pang of envy hit. *Why did life work out so well for some and not for others?*

Silence surrounded them as no answer came to their unspoken question. Turning from the window, they walked out of the room.

The scene had served as a reminder that sometimes it was necessary to take matters into their own hands. Take back control.

If not, they'd drown from the screams in their head.

Ian hustled back into the hospital. He'd become so involved in his time with Vicki that he'd barely visited with his grandfather and had no idea what the nighttime routine was. Peeking inside the room, he was glad the older man was still awake.

His grandfather raised his bed and smiled. "I wondered if you were coming back tonight."

"I'm sorry. I ran into someone, and well, I needed to..."

His grandfather's grin widened, deepening the crinkles near the corners of his eyes. "Oh, yeah? Did you run into Nurse Bates?"

Ian felt like a teenager who'd just gotten caught sneaking in late. "Yeah, I did."

"Did you two finally have a chance to talk about things that probably should've been hashed out long ago?"

Grabbing the back of his neck, he squeezed, unable to keep the smile from his face. "Yeah, we did. We had a lot of things we needed to say. Things that needed to be cleared up." His chest heaved with a sigh as he sat on the chair beside the bed. "And honestly, Grandpa, it's hard not to be angry that we lost so much time over something that could have been eliminated if she'd had more faith in us and I'd had more guts to fight for what I wanted."

"Sometimes in life, timing is everything, Ian."

He snorted. "That's what she said."

"It sounds like she's a smart woman. But then I could've already told you that just from what I've seen of her." His grandfather's brow furrowed as his gaze drifted to the other side of the room. "How is she? I know this morning shook her up. Hell, it shook all of us up."

“She seems to be doing okay. To be honest, we were mostly talking about our relationship. But when I found her earlier, she was crying, so I know she was affected.”

His grandfather's hands were clasped in his lap, and he looked down for a long moment, then winced as though in pain.

“Grandpa? Are you okay?”

His thin chest expanded with effort, then deflated as the air rushed out. “You know, one of the things about gettin’ old is that sometimes you can be so wise because you’ve lived, experienced, and loved. But then the body starts failing, and sometimes your mind does, too.”

Thinking he was talking about his hip, Ian cursed, “Dammit, I didn’t get in to talk to your physical therapist.”

His grandfather raised his head and held Ian’s gaze. “I’m not talking about that. I’m talking about last night.”

Ian glanced to the side, seeing that Mr. Alston was sound asleep, his light snores resounding throughout the room.

“What about last night, Grandpa?”

“It’s just a feeling I had. I woke up, but I felt confused. The room seemed darker, and it took me a moment to remember where I was and what I was doing here.”

Ian started to tell his grandfather that was normal but remained quiet, giving the older man a chance to collect his thoughts without interruption.

“I thought I heard a noise across the room. But I was disoriented because the room was darker than it normally is.” He pointed toward the bathroom. “See that light over there?”

Ian nodded. “I assume that’s to make it easier to find the bathroom if you need it at night. But I also assume you’re probably supposed to call for someone, aren’t you?”

“Yes, we are, but that’s only if it’s needed. But that light and a small night-light are still next to each bed. It just keeps the room from being quite so dark, and I’m sure it helps when people come in to check on us at night without having to turn on all the lights. They weren’t on last night when I woke up. But I was so disoriented that it took me a moment to figure out that’s what was different. And then I heard the noise and saw a shadow.”

Ian stared, wanting to understand what his grandfather was trying to tell him. “Do you think Mr. Noble was trying to get out of bed? Do you think he injured himself or overexerted himself, and that’s why he died?”

Huffing, his grandfather shook his head. “I don’t know, son. That’s why what I saw doesn’t make sense. I saw a shadow. I could hear some noises, and then the door opened, and I could see someone there before they left the room and closed the door partially behind them. But I didn’t have my glasses on, so I couldn’t see clearly. I couldn’t tell you who it was.” He shook his head slowly, then his chest moved as he released a long sigh.

“Maybe it was a dream, Grandpa.” Ian reached over to hold the older man’s wrinkled hand, feeling how the thin skin stretched over purple veins and fragile bones. He wanted to offer comfort, but cold fear moved through him as concern rose to the surface. His grandfather had always seemed so confident, and now uncertainty emanated from him. After a few minutes, his grandfather yawned, so Ian lowered the bed, then assisted him to the bathroom. It didn’t pass his notice that his grandfather didn’t complain about the help. Once back in bed, he kissed his cheek and said goodbye.

Driving home, he vowed to talk to Vicki about his grandfather. He wanted to see if she thought there was anything to his concerns or if it was just an old man’s confusion. Grimacing, he knew what he felt in his heart... his grandfather was not confused.

“The system we’ve designed in this house includes a safe room,” Poole said. “Not many houses have those, but they’re becoming more popular.”

“Why would a typical CEO need a safe room?” Ian mused aloud.

“For some whose overall wealth is high, there can always be the threat of home theft or even the possible kidnapping of a family member for ransom.” Poole shrugged, then added, “It’s not something I think happens often, but it certainly can happen.”

They walked along the upstairs hall with bedrooms coming off either side. “These two rooms are guest rooms, and these two rooms belong to his kids. We designed a room from the outside that would look like a basic linen closet.” Poole opened the door and revealed a small walk-in closet with shelves filled with sheets, towels, and various household items. Poole reached inside and pressed a button, allowing a wall to swing back. They entered a secure room with separate air and ventilation, food and water, and a chemical toilet behind the small curtain. Poole said, “We had included this in the plans,

but the installation company had the know-how to make this work for this family. I wanted to study it so I'll have a better understanding of how to design them in the future."

Ian appreciated that the Keepers were always learning, not assuming their skill set would fit every situation. Once they returned to LSIWC, Poole allowed Ian to review the group's installation and safe room.

Later, Leo asked, "How's your grandfather doing?"

Instead of tossing out the usual "oh, he's fine," Ian hesitated. Glancing around the workroom, he observed everyone's gaze on him. He quickly shook his head, saying, "Sorry, I didn't mean to be mysterious. It's just that another patient died yesterday. This one happened to be sharing a room with my grandfather. Everyone was pretty shaken up. And then my grandfather talked about waking up the night before, being confused because the safety lights were off, and then hearing noises from the man's bed and a shadow of someone over there."

He expected the other Keepers to return to their typical duties, but all eyes remained pinned on him instead. Carson turned to face Ian fully. "What does he think he heard or saw?"

"My grandfather has always been sharp as a tack, but he was frustrated because he said that the older he got, the more he felt confused. Basically, he woke in the middle of the night, but he didn't have his glasses on, so he couldn't see clearly. The usual night lights were off, and the room was dark. He said he saw someone over with Mr. Noble but assumed it was one of the staff. Then he saw the door open and could tell the person left. It's bothered him since Mr. Noble died sometime during the night."

"Do you think something is going on at the veterans hospital?"

"I can't imagine that someone had anything to do with his death, but maybe that's just because I don't want to imagine something so horrific occurring."

"I suppose if this is just a one-off, then it'll happen with that population," Abbie said. Then she quickly added, "I'm not making excuses. I'm just saying that in the elderly population, there will be deaths at medical facilities."

"Do you think it's worth looking into?" Carson continued, interest flaring in his sharp-eyed gaze. "With your grandfather there, or even if he wasn't, if you think something needs to be investigated, you just say the word."

"I know one of the new nurses..." He rubbed his chin as he hesitated,

wondering how much to say. “Actually, it’s someone I met a couple of years ago, and we... well, anyway, we lost contact for various reasons and have just reconnected.”

Natalie cackled. “Damn, I wondered when you’d get hooked up with someone!” She glanced over, still grinning. “I thought Poole would be next, but I never expected it to be the new guy!”

“Fuck that,” Poole grouched, hiding his grin.

The others laughed, and Ian felt the tips of his ears burn but couldn’t deny what he felt. “Well”—he shrugged—“we’re still in a new relationship, but I think we’ve got a good shot at it now that we’re both in the same area. I know she was very upset yesterday about the death.”

Carson repeated, “The offer stands. If you need to investigate what’s happening or you want our help, just say the word. We support each other, not just in the missions we’re commissioned to do but also with whatever happens in our lives.”

“I appreciate that. When I go back over this evening, I’m going to talk to Vicki. She was an Army nurse in Afghanistan. That’s where we met a couple of years ago.”

As the others drifted off to their workstations, he spent the afternoon with Jeb and Natalie, continuing to review the embezzlement files, along with the forensic accountant Carson worked with. And while he remained focused, there was no denying that his mind was firmly on Vicki, his grandfather, and the veterans rehab center.

In the boring hospital's surgical waiting room, Vicki perched uncomfortably on a chair with thin padding that bore the signs of extensive use and neglect. While only a step better than plain plastic or cold metal, it offered little comfort.

Leaning back, she closed her eyes and allowed her mind to drift to Ian, and a smile curved her lips for the first time that day. Ever since the night they'd had their first official date, their relationship had rekindled, and he was everything she remembered and more. He was funny, caring, and attentive. And inquisitive.

He'd related his grandfather's remembrances from the night Mr. Noble died and asked if she was suspicious since the rehab had experienced several deaths. She'd been surprised at his question— more that it came from him instead of what he might be implying. Because secretly, she'd wondered the same thing. Now, she was even more concerned.

Sighing heavily, she leaned forward, placed her elbows on her knees, and rested her forehead against her hands. Right now, between her job, Miss Betty's surgery, upcoming recovery, and rehab, and her newfound blossoming relationship with Ian, thoughts of possible nefarious happenings at the VA rehab center were almost more than she could handle.

“Vicki?”

Her head jerked up as the orthopedic surgeon strode into the waiting room toward her, a wide smile on her face. She leaped to her feet and met her in the small room. “Is everything okay?”

The surgeon lifted her hands in a calming manner. “Mrs. McGillicuddy came through with flying colors. There were no complications, so once she

gets out of post-op and recovery, we'll send her to the rehab center tomorrow. As long as she does what I know she'll do, she'll be hard to stop with that new joint."

Smiling in relief, she pressed her hands against her chest, gratitude pouring from her. "Thank you so much!"

"As you know, normally, we don't let visitors in until the patient is fully in recovery, but since you're used to post-op, you can head on back. The nurses will be expecting you."

She rushed through her prep, scrubbed and gowned, and entered the room. Her feet stumbled to a halt for a second as she stared at Miss Betty lying on the hospital bed. She was pale, eyes closed, her thin hands lying on top of the sheet, purple bruising already started from the blood work she'd had. Blowing out a long breath, Vicki was certain she had made the right decision to separate from the Army when she did. Miss Betty had been there for her when she needed her most. And she planned on being there now as Miss Betty needed her.

She discovered long ago that family wasn't always who you were born into. It was who took you into their lives, and you took them into your heart.

Hastening over, she chatted with the post-op recovery nurse and smiled when Miss Betty blinked her eyes. She spoke gently to help Miss Betty slowly wake up. Her phone vibrated in her pants pocket, and pulling it out, she read a text from Ian.

How is Miss Betty doing? Is she out of surgery? Wish I was with you.

Ian had wanted to take the day off to be with her, but she insisted that he save his vacation days. "It makes no sense for you to sit in a waiting room," she argued. The only way she convinced him was to let him know that she'd probably need him to take a day off to help down the road when Miss Betty was back home. She didn't actually know if that was true, but it seemed to do the trick to get him to stay at work.

She's in post-op now. Doing great.

Betty offered a wobbly smile as Vicki shoved her phone back into her pocket. While the nurses checked on their other patients, Vicki reflected on the conversation after her first "date" with Ian.

She'd walked into the living room, taken one look at Miss Betty, and immediately blurted, "Oh God, I hope I'm not making a huge mistake!"

Betty had patted the sofa and exclaimed, "Well, darling, come over and tell me all about it!"

She'd plopped down next to Miss Betty, and after sucking in a deep breath, she spouted the whole story about Ian and her from start to finish. From the moment she'd looked down at him in surgery post-op when his warm brown eyes opened and stared up at her... through their fast-burning affair that stayed hidden from others due to regulations... to the anticlimactic breakup that was more of a disappearance act by both of them. And then to discover that the reason they'd separated was due to a stupid, idiotic reason. And if she'd only given Ian a chance to explain or if he'd tried harder to talk to her, they wouldn't have lost almost two years.

When she'd finished, Miss Betty pushed her wire-frame glasses up on her nose and shook her head slowly. "My, my, what a tale."

Vicki had slouched down against the worn, comfortable cushions and sighed. "So, do you think I'm crazy?"

"Crazy for what, Vicki? Crazy for having an affair that turned into special feelings during wartime? Crazy for giving each other the freedom to walk away after six months? Crazy for allowing someone to taint what you thought you had? Or crazy for reconnecting once you discovered that feelings were real? Hmm, my dear? Which is it?"

Laughter had bubbled up from deep inside until she wiped tears from her eyes as Miss Betty chuckled along with her. "Oh God, you always have the best way of making me see things more clearly."

"Do you still think you're crazy?"

As her laughter slowly subsided, she shook her head. "No. And that's what we just told each other... we just hadn't had enough time to solidify us as a couple, and at the first sign of trouble, I ran, and he didn't chase me."

They'd sat in silence for a moment, and Vicki's smile remained as she thought of the kiss she'd just shared with Ian.

"You know, I fell in love in Vietnam."

Vicki had rolled her head to the side, and her smile widened. "I know. That's when you and Mr. Mac got together."

"True, but that's not who I'm referring to. I fell in love before I met my husband."

Vicki's whole body had jerked at the revelation. She leaned forward as her mouth dropped open. "I've never heard you speak of anyone else before."

"Why would you?" Miss Betty had scoffed. "My love affair, like yours, burned hot and bright, but the timing was all wrong. It was in the middle of a military offense... he and I were assigned to different locations and lost track

of each other. Then I met Mr. McGillicuddy and fell head over heels for him. We got married and lived our lives. I never looked back with regrets.”

Vicki had opened her mouth, then closed it, pressing her lips together as she pondered Miss Betty's story. “That’s what you meant by timing the other day? Do you think that if the timing had been different, you might have stayed with the first man you fell for?”

“Perhaps... had we not been separated, we might have stayed together, and I would have never met Mr. McGillicuddy. But then, who knows? That first love might have burned out quickly.” She hefted her thin shoulders and huffed lightly. “All I know is that we take life as it comes to us. I had a great love and a great life with a great man. I have no regrets. In your case, you’ve been given a second chance, so take that opportunity, my sweet girl.”

Vicki had gone to bed that night with those words playing on a loop in her head.

Now, staring at the woman who had always given the best advice, she clutched her hand tighter. Once Betty was out of post-op recovery, the day became a blur. She walked along as the hospital bed was rolled to the rehab wing. The VA rehab currently only had male patients, so Betty was in a room by herself. Vicki could check on her all during the day, and when Ian came to see his grandfather in the evenings, they could all visit together.

She stopped at the nurses' station, filling everyone in on Betty's recovery. She wouldn't be her direct nurse, but Mason and Noreen assured her she'd get the best care.

Rona popped over, wearing a wide grin. “I just met Betty. She’s so cute!”

Vicki wasn't sure what Betty would think about being called cute, but she appreciated Rona's enthusiasm. Seeing Dr. Baker and Dr. Tolbert approaching Betty's room, she quickly followed them and entered just as they introduced themselves.

Dr. Baker looked over at Vicki and smiled. She and Vicki had gotten along very well since Vicki had started working. Vicki also felt comfortable around Dr. Tolbert, although she sometimes found his dominating personality a little grating. Dr. Baker seemed to always be in a hurry, but considering they were understaffed at the medical center, it wasn't surprising.

She had anticipated what they were saying to Betty, having heard much of it before with other patients. She knew they would get her up today, and she'd start physical therapy soon. It usually surprised patients to find out that they would start walking so soon, but that was best for recovery, and Vicki

was well-versed in what was needed.

Once assured that Betty was resting comfortably, she walked down the hall, then smiled as she spied Mr. Peterson using his walker in the hall.

“Oh, if it’s not the beautiful Nurse Bates.” He smiled. Then, as though just remembering, his smile morphed into an expression of concern. “How is your mother?”

“She’s resting comfortably now. Perhaps you can meet her soon.”

“I would be delighted!”

She patted his arm and started to walk away when he reached up and placed his hand over hers.

“I just want to say I’m rooting for you.”

She cocked her head to the side. “Rooting?”

“My grandson is a good man. But like all men, we can be idiots.”

A giggle slipped out. “Well, I’m also to blame for what happened to us.”

“I’m so glad you’ve given him another chance.”

She smiled, her heart warming. “I’m equally glad he’s giving me a second chance, too.”

“Well, if I know my daughter, she’ll be itching to invite you to dinner. In fact, you just missed her.”

“I’ve already met your family here with you,” she reminded.

“Yes, but not as Ian’s special friend.”

Heat infused her cheeks. “Well, perhaps we can all get together once Miss Betty recuperates. Ian will get to meet her tomorrow.”

“If it doesn’t tire her out too much, I’ll try to meet her then as well. If not, I’ll catch her when we’re in PT.”

“Since she’s the only female here right now, you may have to be her protector.” Vicki laughed.

He stood straighter and, holding his walker with one hand, lifted his other in the air. “I vow to be her knight in shining armor.”

Vicki threw her head back and laughed, feeling lighter than she had all day. Saying another goodbye, she hoped Ian would come by for dinner, and she wanted to be ready.

Ian pulled into the driveway of the modest house, anxious to see Vicki. As he stepped toward the front porch, he glanced down the road in either direction, suddenly curious about which house Vicki had lived in with her parents. It hadn't dawned on him before, but he wondered if living so close to her old house had been painful after her parents died.

Before he had time to ponder that, the door flung open, and all other thoughts left his mind. Vicki stood before him as beautiful as ever. Her hair was pulled back in a low ponytail, and black leggings and a bright kelly-green sweater showcased her perfect figure. His breath caught in his throat as he focused on her beautiful smile while taking in the whole picture.

He walked toward her, but before he could speak, she blurted, "Can you believe I'm nervous?"

He laughed as he joined her on the porch, his arms snaking around her. "Only if you can believe I was nervous, too." Planting his lips on hers, he kept the kiss PG since it was a family neighborhood. As satisfying as the kiss was, he wanted more. Leaning back, he asked, "Can we take this inside?"

Her eyes sparkled. "Oh yeah."

She had captured his attention, but when she turned to lead him into the living room, he allowed his gaze to move around the space. The small house was traditional in style. The living room was in the front, and another doorway led to the dining room. A hallway split the space with stairs going up along the right wall.

"This house was built at the same time as the others in this neighborhood. The first time I came into their house, I was surprised because it looked like my parents' house." She laughed and shook her head. "As a child, I found

that fascinating. Mr. Mac later told me that a developer had built the whole neighborhood with money he borrowed after World War II, and it was quickly filled with veterans coming home and their new families. As you can imagine, some homes have become really run down, but many others found a resurgence of life when young Californians started looking to flip houses.”

“Can I ask about the house your parents owned? Um... or is that...” He felt the tips of his ears burn, hoping he didn’t stick his foot in his mouth by bringing up an unpleasant subject.

“Of course,” she replied easily, and he exhaled in relief.

“It’s just three houses down the street. Honestly, when I look at it, I don’t even think about growing up in that house. It’s been flipped a couple of times, enlarged, and the outside is so different from when I lived there.” Her brows lowered, then she looked up. “Maybe that sounds weird.”

“What does?” He turned to fully face her, wanting to understand everything about her.

“That was the house I lived in with my *parents*. But it never felt like a good place. This house was the place of my happiness... my *home*. When my parents died and I came here to live, seeing my old house was painful at first. But eventually, I could drive by that house without feeling anything other than it had been a place in my past. This house was where I’d always felt loved. And by the time I’d joined the Army and came home less frequently, I just wanted to walk into this place to see Miss Betty and Mr. Mac, never thinking about the other house except as just part of my past.”

“I don’t think that sounds weird at all. I’m amazed at your coping skills, Vicki.”

“Well, that was from the McGillicuddy’s love and insistence I went to counseling when I was younger.”

“And the more you grew up in this house with good memories, it just became home to you.”

Her smile filled the room at the assurance he’d given.

“My parents have lived in their house for many years. They added onto it to make it larger, but I wonder if they’re not getting ready to move to something smaller.”

“Do you think your sister and her family would want to move in?”

“It would make sense. They’re younger, have kids, and need the room. Plus, they work the farm.”

A timer rang out. “Dinner is almost ready, so come on back.” She reached

out to take his hand and led him down the short hall to the kitchen.

They passed a small powder room, and he saw a small coat closet tucked underneath the staircase. “You’ve got a Harry Potter closet,” he exclaimed enthusiastically.

Her blue eyes twinkled as she laughed. “I used to play in there!”

He was surprised when they entered the kitchen because it was larger than he imagined. “Wow, this is really nice,” he noted as he looked to the left and saw another room with a bed and a chair.

“Mr. Mac expanded the first floor years ago. When it was first built, people only used living rooms. Eventually, family rooms and dens separate from formal living rooms became all the rage. I’m just glad we have the space so that when Miss Betty started having hip problems, she could use the den as a bedroom and not have to go up and down the stairs.”

Her mouth scrunched to the side, then she added, “She did have to go upstairs to shower, but she had a neighbor who would come over and help her with that.”

“I’m sure she’s glad to have you here again.”

Her shoulders slumped as she nodded. “I wish I’d known about her hip problems sooner, Ian. She hid a lot from me because she didn’t want me to worry. But honestly, I was ready to separate from the Army. I would’ve left a year ago if I had known.”

He gently tugged her hand and pulled her closer until he could wrap his arms around her. Kissing the top of her head, he said, “You’re here now. That’s all that matters.”

She leaned back and peered up at him. “Do you really think that?”

“Yes, because I have to face the same thing. I wanted to be out to help with my grandfather, but I often wish I’d gotten out sooner.”

“Timing is everything.” She sighed. “It seems like that theme keeps popping up.”

As she turned back to the stove, he remembered the woman from the Atlanta USO. Blessing. And her strange quotes, which now seemed to make more sense. “It is better to wait until you get the right thing, at the right time and in the right place, than to race for the wrong thing, at the wrong time and in the wrong place, for it yields nothing but disgrace.”

She peered over her shoulder at him. “Huh?”

“Sorry, just something someone told me.”

Vicki held a huge plate of nachos, liberally covered in cheese. So much

cheese that he had trouble seeing anything else but could smell the Mexican spices.

“I was in the mood for simple,” she said. “I hope this is okay. And I remembered that you liked cheese.”

Laughing, he took the platter from her. “Skip the plates. We’ll share.”

As their hands touched with the platter between them, they both froze, their gazes holding and memories flooding. On more than one occasion, she had gone to the DFAC, grabbed a huge plate of nachos, covered it with everything, and returned to her bunk. They would eat straight from the platter, often feeding each other. Once she discovered how much he liked cheese, she’d always added extra to the loaded nachos.

Finally coming unglued, he slid the platter from her hands and carried it to the table while she grabbed a couple of beers. Sitting next to each other, they dove in, and he wasn’t surprised to find the nachos covered in meat broiled in Mexican spices, diced tomatoes, lettuce, grilled onions, black beans, refried beans, and rice. All under the mixture of cheese.

While they ate, their easy conversation flowed. It was as though they were able to pick up where they’d left off back in Afghanistan.

When they finished, he leaned back and took a swig from his beer. “I want you to come to meet my family.”

She halted with the beer bottle halfway to her mouth. Her eyes narrowed as she scrunched her nose. “Your grandfather said the same thing, and I reminded him that I have met your family when they came to visit him.”

“They’ve met Vicki, the nurse. I want them to meet Vicki, my girlfriend.”

“That’s what he said!” She licked the drop of beer off her lip. “Why does that feel like such a big deal?”

“Because it is.”

“Okay, now you’ve made me nervous. Even more nervous than I was before you came over tonight.”

He leaned closer until their faces were a few inches apart. “Why does that make you nervous?”

“Do they know about us?” She shook her head. “I mean, do they know about the past us?”

He nodded his head slowly. “Yes. I told them about us. I didn’t go into much detail other than to say that the timing wasn’t right with us being in different locations. I hope that was okay.”

“Of course, Ian. Anything you decided to tell them would have been fine.

To be honest, I told Miss Betty everything the night that we had our first date. I sort of came in and blurted out the whole story from start to finish.”

“I pretty much did the same thing. I got in that night, and I was excited. It’s still kind of weird to live in my parents’ house, but they could pick up on my mood because they were right there.”

Laughing, Vicki said, “I’m sure Miss Betty would have also, but I didn’t give her a chance to pick up on anything. I just walked in the door and started blabbing.”

“Do I dare ask what she said?”

Suddenly, her eyes sparkled even more, and she glanced at the table. “She told me the most interesting story. Let me clear the table, and we can go into the living room.”

She picked up the empty platter, and he snagged the empty beer bottles from the table. It took almost no time to clean up, and she grabbed two more beers before they headed into the living room. They sat next to each other on the sofa, but she twisted and tucked one leg under the other so she could face him. His arm rested on the back of the sofa, bringing his body close to hers.

“So tell me about the story.”

“Well, she first assured me that timing makes a huge difference, as we know, and that I shouldn’t beat myself up over the time we’d spent apart. And then she told me she had fallen in love when she was an Army nurse in Vietnam. I assumed she was talking about Mr. McGillicuddy, but she said it was someone else! I love thinking of her as a young woman. I’ve seen pictures. She was hot! And when not in uniform, she had a real hippie style.”

“She sounds really amazing. It’s weird to think of my grandfather as a young man. Same with my parents.”

She crinkled her nose. “In her case, there was no second chance with the man once he left where she was stationed.”

He reached over and cupped her cheek. “It kills me to think that I could have lost you forever to someone else because of my stupid pride.”

She leaned into his palm. “Or you could have ended up with someone else because I didn’t have faith.”

He shifted closer until his mouth was only a whisper away from hers. “But we have now. And talking about the past won’t change it.”

“No,” she said, her breath puffing across his face. “We can only learn from it, grasp what we have now, and hope for the future.”

Her words scored straight through him. “God, yes,” he moaned as he

claimed her mouth.

A memory slammed into him of the first time they'd kissed. He could've sworn lightning had crashed through her small bunker, but it was nothing compared to what he felt now. Somehow, all the time they'd been separated had disappeared, leaving them open and bare to the sensations of her body pressed against his, their lips melded together, and the knowledge they were a little older, a little wiser, and a hell of a lot more ready to be together as a couple.

Their movements started slow and gentle but quickly became frantic. She flung one leg over his lap, straddling him with her core pressed close to his cock. He wanted more, but he'd be satisfied with her in his arms right now.

Her hands pressed flat against his shoulders and pushed back, separating them. He immediately missed the warmth. She was panting with kiss-swollen lips as she stared for a few seconds. "Come upstairs with me."

She didn't have to beg him again because he was ready to be with her in every way possible. Standing with one hand under her ass and the other around her back, he carried her easily up the stairs. At the top was a hall with two doors on the left and a bathroom at the end.

"I'm the second bedroom. The one that overlooks the backyard," she muttered, her lips pressed against the underside of his jaw. The light touch made it hard for him to focus on where he was going. Thankfully, he stumbled into the right room.

It only took a few more steps for him to carry her through that door, glad to discover a double bed in the room. While he'd be satisfied with any size mattress, and they'd certainly slept on her tiny, twin-size bed, having a bigger one was a dream come true.

She wiggled slightly in his arms, and he loosened his hold so she could slide her feet to the floor. As she stood in front of him, an impish smile crossed her face as she whipped her sweater off, draping it over the chair near the bed. She quickly stripped the rest of her clothes off and winked, comfortable in her nudity.

He stood enraptured, staring at the gift presented to him. "Christ," he managed to groan. "You are so beautiful."

"I've been dreaming of this moment for a really long time, Ian. There have been so many times over the past year and a half when I thought about if I only had a chance to be with you again. What would I do? What would I say?" She swallowed deeply, blinking at the moisture in her eyes as she

stepped closer and placed her palm over his chest. “Because the month I spent with you showed me what happiness could be. And I thought I’d lost my chance.”

He stepped closer and wrapped his arms around her naked body, pulling her tight as he kissed her gently. “No more lost chances. Not with us.”

He grinned as her hands found the bottom of his shirt and began to tug it out of his pants. Stepping back, he toed out of his shoes. He quickly divested himself of his clothes, and they ended up on the same chair as hers. Snagging a condom from his pants, he tossed it to the bed to be within easy reach.

Just as he was turning back to her, she dropped to her knees. Her tongue darted out and licked his long length. He hissed and had to lock his knees to keep from dropping to the floor with her. Her hands clutched his muscular ass, her fingernails digging in slightly as she slid his erection into her mouth, taking him deep.

“Jesus, Vicki...” They were the only words he got out before his eyes nearly rolled back in his head as she worked his cock. Licking and sucking, she provided just enough friction to drive him wild. His fingers dove into her tresses, the silky strands gliding through his fingers as he lightly fisted her hair.

He dropped his chin, stared at the most beautiful woman he’d ever seen, and knew he should be the one on his knees worshipping her. Just when he thought he couldn’t hold back any longer, he reached down and grabbed her under the arms, gently pulling her from his cock.

At the surprise on her face, he said, “You better believe that you give world-class head, and there’ll be a time that I want to take that all the way. Right now, though, when I come, I want to come buried deep inside as you come, too.”

She stood, her smile wide. He scooped her up, and she giggled. The sound made his already hard cock even harder. He wanted that always with her. The chance to hear her laughter every day.

For a second, he considered tossing her onto the bed before jumping and landing on top of her, discarding finesse. But as he held her in his arms, he knew some moments were meant to be savored. Some moments in life were meant to be experienced fully, memorizing details and nuances. And he wanted to do that with her right now. So he turned and slowly laid her on the bed, bending to place her gently on the mattress, then crawled over her body, covering hers with his.

He was surprised they were so quickly in sync after reuniting. All the emotions he'd felt before came rushing back when she looked up and moved her arms around his neck. A gentle smile on her face revealed she also understood what this moment meant. He slipped one hand down to her folds, finding her wet and ready. Grabbing the condom, he rolled it on in haste.

Her legs fell open, and his hips slid between her thighs. With his cock lined with her sex, he kissed her deeply, then nibbled down to her breasts, licking and sucking until she writhed underneath him. Her fingers dug into his shoulders, and she begged, "Please, Ian. I need you."

He loved her words. She didn't just say *I want you*, or even *fuck me*, which would've been fine. But to hear that she needed him sent warmth through him. He shifted his hips to spread her legs as far apart as possible and eased into her waiting sex. Kissing her at the same time, he swallowed her gasp.

Their bodies joined in tandem, thrust meeting thrust, tongues tangling in unison. Her breath hitched, and he remembered the little tells that she would soon be coming. Dragging his cock along her folds, he reached between them and pinched the bundle of nerves ever so slightly until she cried out, her body clenching around his.

Hearing his name on her lips, he plunged to the hilt, his own release pouring from him. Once every last drop left his cock, he rolled to his back, pulling her over until she was draped fully on his body. He groaned as he tried to breathe after coming so hard.

"I'm going to squish you," she mumbled but made no attempt to move.

Grinning, he managed to say, "No way. Not with as little as you are. It wouldn't matter because you're right where I want you to be."

"Kind of familiar, isn't it?"

Chuckling, he nodded. "You on top? Hell, yeah. Just like our first time, only this one doesn't feel like a knife in my gut."

"Oh God, we should never have had sex so soon after your surgery."

He tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. "Nah. You were worth the pain." Drawing his forefinger over her cheek, he added, "You're worth everything."

They lay until their breaths slowed, and their heartbeats sounded like one. His semi-hard cock had slid from her body, and he hated that he needed to get up. Rolling again so they were lying face-to-face, he kissed her lightly, then said, "Stay."

He dealt with a condom, then headed into the hall bathroom.

Walking back in, he observed her lifted eyebrow as she stared at him.

“You do realize you ordered me to *stay*?”

Crawling over her body, he kissed her deeply, his tongue exploring every crevice. Finally, he lifted his head and said, “I apologize. I should have said, ‘Please, beautiful woman, stay in bed so I can come back and worship your body,’ but honest to God, Vicki, I didn’t have enough breath to get out more than one word.”

She burst out laughing, and once again, the sound struck him straight through the heart. And he wanted to hear that sound every day.

Vicki sat in the staff meeting, listening to Dr. Tolbert discussing Mr. Noble's death.

"I know there are a lot of rumors starting to go around, but we must have absolute discretion and professionalism." He looked around at the nursing staff. "Dr. Baker and I have reviewed his case with the governing medical board, and nothing about his death is untoward."

Vicki had read the report but was surprised to find no autopsy report. Looking up, she asked, "When will the autopsy results come in?"

His gaze shot toward her, and he shook his head. "There's no need for an autopsy."

She blinked in surprise, but he continued before she could ask any more questions.

"Mr. Noble had no family, so no one requested an autopsy. His death was ruled to be natural causes and was not suspicious. Therefore, there was no legal reason for an autopsy."

She started to speak, but Mason, sitting next to her, bumped her leg. Looking to the side, she caught him giving a discreet shake of his head.

After Dr. Tolbert and Dr. Baker finished, they walked out of the staff room, and she looked over at Mason. "Why didn't you want me to ask more?"

"You don't wanna make an enemy of Dr. Tolbert."

"You're kidding, right?"

"I wish I was."

"Dr. Tolbert has his favorites and doesn't mind making that known. He can also make things difficult for anyone who disagrees with him."

“Noreen gets along well with him.” Her gaze followed Noreen walking out behind Dr. Tolbert and Dr. Baker.

“That’s what I mean.”

She jerked her head around, her brows lowered. “What is it that you’re not saying, Mason?”

He threw his hands up in defense. “I love Noreen like a sister and think she’s an excellent nurse. But I also know that she and Dr. Tolbert seem to get along very well. I don’t mean it in an unprofessional way. I just mean that he seems to trust her, and the few times I’ve said something about him, she’s snapped at me. I figure if they’re friendly, it works for her, so I just keep my opinion to myself.”

The meeting had lasted a little longer than anticipated, and Vicki needed to get back onto the floor. She made stops in each of her patient’s rooms, chatting while completing her rounds and making sure everyone had what they needed. When she finished, she hurried into Betty’s room, excited to see Rona assisting her into a wheelchair.

“Are you ready for PT?”

“Yes, I am.” Betty winked. “I’ve already met the physical therapist, but this will be my first trip there.”

Looking at Rona, she said, “Since I’m here, and I have some time, I’ll wheel her down.”

Rona pouted. “But she’s my favorite patient!”

“She’s a sweetie, I agree,” Vicki said, stepping behind the wheelchair and taking the handles. Looking down at Betty, she asked, “Are you ready?”

“Absolutely!”

It didn’t take long to arrive at the PT room, where Rodney greeted them.

He walked over. “I’ve been looking forward to seeing you here, Mrs. McGillicuddy. We’ll have you walking in no time!”

Vicki lingered for a moment, determined to ensure Betty’s well-being. She found solace in the fact that today, she was collaborating with the primary physical therapist rather than Quinton, who always seemed to harbor an unpleasant attitude. Mason had mentioned that Quinton aspired to become an athletic physical therapist, securing a coveted position at a prestigious university. That job never materialized, so to make ends meet, he accepted the job at the veterans center but often grumbled about spending his career with the elderly. She didn’t care how he felt about his job, but she hated for the patients to endure his surliness.

“I’ll be back in an hour.” She left the room with a wave and returned to the nurses' station. Dr. Baker was just stepping off the elevator when Vicki passed by. Throwing caution to the wind, she called out, “Dr. Baker? Have you got a moment?”

Dr. Baker’s smile fell slightly. “Not much more than a minute. What can I do for you?”

“I was just curious about the protocol for autopsies when a patient dies suddenly here in our facility?”

Dr. Baker huffed and pinched her lips. “As Dr. Tolbert said, if there isn’t a suspicious death or no family request, there’s no autopsy.” She stared at Vicki, then huffed again. “You came from the Army, so you should understand. This is a veterans facility. We do the best we can with the money that we have. We do an excellent job but aren’t as state-of-the-art as a private hospital. I assure you that the county medical examiner would require an autopsy for a suspicious death. But none of the deaths over the past few months have fit under those categories.” She glanced at her watch, and her lips pinched. “I really must go. I’m sure you have duties, also.”

Vicki made it to the nurses' station before rolling her eyes. Noreen looked up. “What’s going on?”

She thought about Mason's words but had always gotten along well with Noreen. “I’m just frustrated that we don’t know why Mr. Noble died.”

“I know it’s hard when we lose patients,” Noreen said. “We all feel it so strongly.” She tilted her head and laid her hand on Vicki’s arm. “Do you think it strikes you more because Mrs. McGillicuddy is here now?”

She startled, and her heart stuttered in her chest. “Oh God, don’t put those two things together! The idea that Miss Betty is close to passing away is not what I want to think about. Thank God she’s got her wits about her and her health, except for her hip.”

“I’m sorry. I just meant that you’re very close to the situation. And I know you spent extra time with Mr. Noble since he didn’t have family visiting.”

A heavy sigh left her lungs. “You’re right. He was such a sweet man, and the last time I saw him, he was fine.”

One of the call buttons sounded, and she looked up. “That’s Mr. Peterson. I’ll head down to see what he needs.”

It only took her a moment to step into his room and spied him shifting around in his bed, swinging his legs over the side.

“Did you call for me?”

He looked over his shoulder and smiled widely. “No, but it’s always nice to see your bright face.”

She glanced down and realized he was sitting on the call button. Chuckling, she reached for him. “Here, let me help you.” He was soon steady with her holding his walker as his feet landed on the floor.

“Where are you off to?”

“I thought I’d head down to PT. It’s not my regular time, but Rodney said I could come down whenever I wanted. The walk will do me good anyway.”

“Then you’ll get to meet Miss Betty, the lady who raised me.”

“I’d be delighted!”

They were almost to the PT room when Ian stepped into the hallway. She looked up in surprise as he walked over, bent closer, and greeted her with a kiss before turning to his grandfather. “Hey, Grandpa,” he said.

“That was some greeting you gave her, boy. Glad you didn’t kiss me that way.”

Vicki laughed and rolled her eyes before turning her gaze to Ian. “What are you doing here now?”

“I had a jobsite near here, so I drove separately to check in and see both of you at the same time. I didn’t know that I’d literally see you two at the same time.”

They walked into the PT room together, and she quickly scanned the room, smiling when she observed Miss Betty standing at the parallel bars, shuffling along.

Vicki hurried over, clapping her hands. “Miss Betty! Amazing to see you walking so well!”

Betty turned and smiled. “Well, Rodney is a wonder—” Her words stopped as her gaze slid to the doorway.

She became so still that Vicki was afraid she was having a stroke. She reached for her, but Betty shocked her when she gasped and cried out, “Ernest? Ernest Peterson?”

Vicki swung her gaze to Ernest, seeing wide-eyed shock on his face.

“Betty Cullen?”

Vicki sought Ian but found his eyes just as wide as his grandfather's.

Ernest pushed his walker in front of him at an alarming rate as he hurried into the room. Vicki barely had time to step out of the way before he leaned over one side of the parallel bars and clutched Betty’s hands.

“I would know you anywhere!” he exclaimed. “You’re as beautiful as I remembered.”

Betty laughed and nodded. “Well, obviously, I did too!”

Ian walked up behind Vicki and placed his hands on her shoulders. Leaning down, he whispered in her ear, “Did you have any idea they knew each other?”

She shook her head, then slowly, understanding dawned. “Oh my God. I think that’s who she was in love with before Mr. Mac. Back when they were in the military.”

“No way.” Ian’s hands gripped her shoulders tighter.

She leaned back so that she was pressed against his front, wanting to give Betty and Ernest a moment of privacy. But the two were chatting so loud that it was easy to see that she’d been right.

“Lieutenant Betty Cullen. Prettiest nurse I’d ever seen!”

“I was always so sorry when you got reassigned,” Betty said, her hand clasping his. “But back then, we didn’t have much way to keep up with people. Not like nowadays.”

“How long has it been?”

Betty laughed. “Well, I think the last time we saw each other was in 1971!”

Vicki could barely pull her gaze away from the two, fascinated at the reunion after over fifty years taking place right before her eyes.

Rodney stepped forward, a soft smile on his face. “Ms. McGillicuddy, let’s get you back in your chair so you can finish your chat without wearing yourself out.”

While holding his walker with one hand, Ernest reached out to take Betty’s arm as she settled back into her wheelchair. Jolting out of her stupor, Vicki rushed forward, her heart nearly bursting. “Miss Betty, would you and Ernest like to sit in the lounge for a while?”

The smile on Betty's face gave her all the answers she needed. Vicki looked over her shoulder and offered a little nod toward Ian. She rolled Betty slowly out of the PT room and down the hall at a speed that allowed Ernest to keep up with her as he pushed his walker in front of him, with Ian close by.

Deciding to give the older couple as much privacy as they wanted to catch up, she and Ian stepped out into the hall. She peered up at him, her face aching from the wide smile she wore. “Can you believe that? It’s crazy! How they’ve reunited after all this time? And here in a veterans hospital!”

“The right thing, at the right time and in the right place...”

Vicki’s chin dipped slightly as her brows lowered. “You said something like that the other night.”

“It was something a woman said to me in the Atlanta airport. She quoted from a South African poet. I thought she was just nuts, to be honest. But now, her words make more sense.”

Laughter slipped from Vicki as she nodded. “That’s so funny that you mention that. When I was in the USO at the Atlanta airport, there was a lady there named—”

“Blessing!”

She jerked, her eyes flying open wide. “Yes! You met her, too?”

“She’s the one who quoted the poem to me about the timing being right.” Suddenly, he jolted, and his eyes mirrored hers and widened. “I think I may have seen you. You were talking to her, and I thought I recognized your hair color. But she kept getting in the way whenever I tried to step closer to see if it was you. Then you walked out the door, and she got in my way again. She started spouting a quote about the right time and the right place.”

“Do you think she could’ve known anything about us?”

He shook his head slowly. “There’s no way. No one knew anything about us two years ago.”

She grinned and shrugged. “Well, other than my German roommate. But I had her sworn to secrecy!” She glanced at the clock on the wall and blew out a long breath. “I have to get back to work, but I really just want to spend time with you.”

His gaze held her eyes before he narrowed his. “Is everything okay?”

“Yeah... sure. ”

“Your reply doesn’t give a lot of confidence.” Looking down the hall, he grabbed her hand and started walking, leaving her no choice but to follow. He moved through the stairway door and down to the landing, where no one was around.

“What are you doing?” She laughed as he stopped and turned to face her.

“I wanted to find a place to kiss you the way I really want to.” His lips landed on hers as he pulled her flush against his body.

She didn’t care that she was at work or that anyone could stumble upon them. All she cared about was the way she felt safe with him. Once they separated after a long, wet kiss, her smile was wide. “That’s the way I like to be greeted!”

He laughed and nodded. “Hell, yeah.” He stared for a moment, his hands gripping hers. “I also wanted to ask how things were going here?”

“I assume you’re talking about the patient deaths?”

When he nodded, she shrugged. “There are no autopsies because nothing has been considered suspicious. Unless the medical examiner has a reason to think the death wasn’t natural or a family member asks for it, there isn’t an autopsy.” Saying the words aloud, she jolted slightly, then looked up. “Interesting that the two deaths that have occurred since I’ve been here had no family involved.”

“And you think that’s significant?”

Glancing over her shoulder, though she knew no one else was around, she chewed on her lip. “I don’t want to talk about this anymore here. I’ll check on a few things, and then we can talk at home.”

“I don’t like the idea of you snooping, Vicki.”

Scoffing, she said, “Don’t be silly. I have access to the records, and there’s no reason I can’t look. Anyway, are you coming over this evening?”

His jaw tightened. “I’m meeting with one of the Keepers and will be out of town until tomorrow evening. I’ll come over then.”

She pouted, then lifted on her toes and kissed him. “Then that will hold you until I see you again.”

“Believe me, babe, that only makes me want you more.”

“Good!” She winked, then turned and headed back upstairs as he went downstairs. Her mind was reeling with thoughts of Betty reuniting with an old love that happened to be Ian’s grandfather, the way Ian’s kisses made her feel, and the desire to dig deeper into the recent deaths.

Ian's anticipation surged at seeing Vicki again. It had been two days since his trip with Hop had been extended for an extra day. As he guided his vehicle into Betty's driveway, his heart leaped within his chest at the sight of Vicki emerging through the front door. Her hair fell in waves over her shoulders, the light catching on her reddish-blond highlights. She was bundled in an oversized cardigan with her arms crossed over her waist to ward off the chill. Her leggings showcased her legs, but he frowned at her bare feet on the porch.

Gripping a small gym bag, he wasted no time and made a beeline toward her. Their eyes locked, and a magnetic connection drew them closer until their bodies were entwined in an embrace. He lifted her feet off the ground and twirled her. She squealed, and he sealed his lips over hers, kissing her laughter.

"I missed you," he said when they finally came up for air. He walked back into the house without setting her feet on the ground.

He sat on the couch, twisted, and fell backward, allowing her body to drape over his like a blanket. Her curves pressed against the hard planes of his body, and their kiss flamed higher as their tongues tangled. She finally lifted her head, and he hated the loss of her lips on his.

"If we keep this up, we'll head straight to bed and miss dinner."

"You get no complaints from me," he quipped.

"I made a *pot roast*." Her singsong voice captured his attention.

Lifting a brow, he pretended to ponder. "You... or pot roast..."

She laughed. "Trying to make me jealous won't work. I know you want me most of all, but you need the pot roast for your stamina."

“You don’t need to worry about my stamina! I assure you, I have staying power.”

“Glad to hear it!”

They kissed for another long moment, then he released his grip, and she slid off. Standing, she reached her hands out, and he allowed her to pull him to his feet. Arms wrapped around each other, they walked into the kitchen, where the scent of pot roast simmering made his mouth water. She dished out the meat and covered it with the thick sauce, adding a generous helping of roasted new potatoes and carrots.

“Damn, sweetheart. I feel bad that you worked all day and spent time cooking.”

She waved her hand dismissively and laughed. “I had everything in the slow cooker while I was at work.”

Sitting down to eat, he’d barely taken a bite when she said, “Don’t you want to know the latest with your grandfather and Miss Betty?”

Brows shooting to his forehead, he set his fork down. “I think I’m afraid to ask.”

A smile spread across her face. “Don’t be. I think they’re adorable. Anyway, they’ve been together almost constantly ever since they met up with each other. He comes and sits in her room, and they’ve arranged their PT schedule so they have it at the same time.”

“I feel weird asking this, but they’re just friends, right? There’s not like some torrid hospital romance going on?”

“What if there is? They’re two consenting adults—”

“Whoa! Stop right there! It’s hard to think of my grandfather as a man doing anything to need someone’s consent!”

She laughed again, reaching over to take his hand. “I know what you mean. But now that I’ve had two days to see her and your grandfather chatting, I’m glad she has someone in her life. She deserves that.”

“You’re right. My grandfather deserves that, too. Does it seem weird to see her with someone else?”

She crinkled her nose as she pondered his question, then finally shook her head slowly. “I want Miss Betty to be happy. She’s only been a widow for a few years, but I know she’s been lonely. I never expected her to have another romance, but I want her to have friends. Some of her former friends have passed away, some have moved away, and others are physically unable to be near her. I’ve discovered that her world has shrunk, and with her not being

able to get out much, I think she's been very lonely."

He thought about what she said, looking at his grandfather from a different optic. "I always saw my grandfather as a tough old bird. Even after my grandmother died."

"I think everyone needs companionship."

He leaned over and kissed her lightly. "Yeah... me, too."

Once they finished, they pushed their plates to the side and angled their bodies to face each other. "I can tell you're dying to tell me something, so go ahead."

She rolled her eyes but was unable to keep from blurting, "Do you want to know what I found out?"

"Found out?" Understanding dawned, and he wiped his lips. "You went digging, didn't you?"

"Don't act so surprised! I told you I would. Anyway, I looked at the records over the past several months. I compared the number of deaths to those for the past several years and the national average for VA hospitals."

Her eyes were bright with excitement mixed with concern. "Okay, you've got my attention." Nodding that he was ready, he leaned back in the seat.

"I've only been working for a month, but we've had two deaths. Both are male, which isn't surprising since that's most of our population. Both were elderly, also not surprising. And both with no immediate family visiting or living nearby. In the past six months, there have been two other deaths. One was not surprising, considering he came in with a heart condition. The other one was very much like Mr. Noble and the other person."

"Are these just in your wing? The rehab wing? And not the whole hospital?"

"Yes. I was looking at that because there will be more deaths in the entire hospital. The rehab typically shouldn't have many deaths because these are older patients who are in generally good enough health to have had hip or knee replacements, or they fell and need rehab, something like that."

"So there's been an increase in the past six months."

"Exactly!" she said, her head bobbing. "The problem is that I can't figure out how to determine any staff consistency."

His eyes narrowed. "By staff consistency, you're referring to the idea that a staff member was present on each day or night of death? And possibly assisted?"

Her expression pinched as though in pain.

“Vicki, you’re talking murder.”

She sighed heavily, and her shoulders drooped. “I don’t know. I’m just trying to keep an open mind.”

His grandfather’s memory of the night Martin Noble died slammed into him. Sucking in a deep breath, he leaned forward and placed his forearms on the table. “Okay, tell me about staff consistency.”

“There’s a lot of staff turnover. Sure, you have some people who stay for a while, but you have others who move between various departments in the hospital. Noreen used to work in post-op but has worked in the rehab wing for the past couple of years. Mason has been around a long time, too. A few others have been there, and some have moved in and out. As far as nurse’s aides, they also move around. Some don’t like the job, so they leave and take a position elsewhere. There are a few nursing homes in the area where people rotate in and out, as well.”

“It sounds like it’s hard to keep people in one place.”

“The medical profession is like many other places. It’s difficult to keep people staying in demanding jobs.”

“Anything else of interest?”

She scrunched her nose, then nodded. “Strangely, yes. Some studies show that the overall incidents of deaths in a VA hospital compared to private hospitals is the same, if not lower. But the longer the stay in a VA hospital, the higher the death incidents.”

“What does that mean?”

“In and of itself, nothing,” she replied, her cheeks puffing out as she heaved a sigh. “There’s no national correlation between the higher deaths at my hospital than others, which leads me to believe that something is strange where I work. All I know is I’m keeping my eyes and ears open.”

He stood and gently pulled her to her feet. “And all I know is that I want you to stay safe. If something is going on, the last thing you need to do is to be caught snooping. That’s the fastest way to get someone to go after you.”

“I’m not trying to be a hero, Ian. I just can’t help but feel like something may have happened, and if so, it was covered up, or no one else thinks anything is wrong.”

Pulling her against his chest, he banded his arms around her and held her until the tension in her body gradually eased. After a few minutes, he kissed the crown of her head, and they separated. It didn’t take long to clean up from dinner, and he grabbed his gym bag as he walked up the stairs. He’d enjoyed

dinner, but his mind was consumed by more. It was the depth of their conversations, the way their thoughts resonated together, and the relationship they were building. A mischievous grin tugged at the corners of his lips while his gaze strayed to her curves as she ascended the stairs ahead of him. Spending the night with her was an invaluable gift he would not take for granted.

Ian was immersed in the workroom with his fellow Keepers when his concentration was abruptly interrupted as Carson strode into the room, wearing a serious expression. All eyes were immediately drawn to their boss, and Ian shifted in his seat to better focus on Carson. It didn't miss his attention that Carson looked his way, holding his gaze for a few seconds longer than anyone else, and his stomach dropped as a sense of foreboding ensued.

“Rachel received a call this morning while I was out. She recorded the information, and I reviewed what she had when I got in. The call was from Samuel Bernstein, the senator from Colorado. He and his wife were recently out of the country and just arrived back two days ago.”

So far, nothing in Carson's delivery rang a bell with Ian, and he wondered if he hadn't imagined Carson's glance his way.

Carson continued, “It appears that his father-in-law is not someone they have a close relationship with. In his words, his father-in-law never wanted his daughter to marry... and I quote... ‘a bigmouth politician.’”

That statement brought chuckles from around the room, and even stoic Carson's lips quirked before he continued. “They've been somewhat estranged for the past fifteen years. But his wife keeps tabs on her father even though they rarely see each other. When they returned from their trip, they discovered that her father had died.”

Ian glanced around at the other Keepers, noting their rapt attention.

“Her father had fallen, and after a trip to the ER where it was determined he had a broken hip, he was sent to the VA rehab facility in San Jose, near where he lived. His daughter, the senator's wife, wasn't informed because he didn't have her listed as a contact. So when he died, initially, the hospital had no one to get in touch with. His body was sent to the local morgue. When his

wife could not locate her father, her husband had his private security check, and they discovered what had happened.”

Ian’s stomach dropped the instant he heard the words, *VA rehab facility in San Jose*. “Noble.”

Carson’s gaze shot toward him, and as he looked around the table again, he noticed that everyone else’s eyes were on him as well.

“Was his last name Noble?”

“Yes. Martin Noble.”

“Fucking hell,” Ian breathed.

“I take it this sounds familiar to you,” Carson stated. “I had a feeling it might. You’d better tell us what you know.”

“I told you that my grandfather had suspicions about the night Mr. Noble died. Since then, Vicki and I have gotten together. She’s the nurse I knew in Afghanistan and now works at the VA rehab wing of the hospital. She’s only been there a month, but this was the second death. So not only did my grandfather have suspicions about the death but Vicki did, too.”

“And no one knew that he was related to anyone powerful?” Hop asked.

“To be honest, it shouldn’t matter whether he was related to someone powerful or not,” Ian said, thinking of his own grandfather.

Hop lifted his hands and shook his head. “I completely agree, man. I didn’t mean that in a disparaging way. I just meant that if someone is engaging in suspicious activity, you’d think they would avoid someone with the means to find out what was going on.”

Ian nodded. “I’m sorry. I guess with my grandfather there, I’m extra sensitive about the possibility of someone purposely causing a death.”

“What would be the motive?” Dolby asked. “There’s no money to be gained. No notoriety.”

“A sense of accomplishment?” Leo asked.

“I think we’re getting the cart before the horse,” Carson said. “Senator Bernstein has contracted with LSIWC to look into the matter. He’d prefer that the investigation remain out of the public’s eye. I realize this may be a conflict for you, Ian, because of your grandfather and Vicki. If you need to recuse yourself, I’ll understand—”

“No! No way!” he all but shouted. “You may not want me on this because of a conflict, but I don’t want to consider stepping away.”

“We don’t work by the standard rules, so a conflict does not matter to me. In fact, you’ll have insight that we might not otherwise have. As long as

you're okay with it, I want you in."

Ian heaved a sigh of relief. The idea that he might not be part of the investigation involving people he loved had sent an anxious shock wave through him.

"Let's start with what your grandfather told you. And then, I'd like to send Poole in with you the next time you visit. Introduce him as a friend to anyone else, but let's get a second set of ears on exactly what your grandfather witnessed."

Nodding, he leaned forward and, with his forearms resting on the table, repeated what his grandfather had said to him. A surge of nerves slashed through his gut in anticipation of a mission being so close to his heart.

“Hey, Grandpa,” Ian greeted, stepping into his grandfather’s room.

Ernest looked up, pride evident on his smiling face as he tossed his hand up. “Ian!”

“I’d like to introduce you to a friend of mine. This is Frederick Poole.”

Poole grinned as he stepped forward with his hand extended. “My friends just call me Poole, sir.”

“Always nice to meet a friend of Ian’s. Call me Ernest.” His smile stayed in place, but he steadily held both men’s gazes. “I get the feeling that this is more than just checking on the old man.”

Ian sighed as he looked over his shoulder, then said, “How about we take a little stroll outside? It’s a nice day.”

“I’d like that just fine,” his grandfather said, a knowing look in his eye.

Aware of the precariousness of his grandfather’s balance, Ian refused to gamble with his safety, encouraging Ernest to use a wheelchair to ensure stability. Despite minor grumblings of dissent, he pushed the chair through the corridors and down the elevator. Once on the first floor, they soon moved into a hidden oasis—a courtyard garden near the employee parking lot. Even during December, the weather was mild enough to enjoy. A few ornamental trees and flowering shrubs surrounded them, creating a beauty that seemed in direct contrast to the topic to be discussed.

Ian and Poole sat on a weathered bench while Ernest held court in his chair facing them. “As pleased as I am to see you,” Ernest said, “I know you’re here for a reason besides just chatting with an old man. And I have a feeling it’s about Martin, isn’t it?”

Ian and Poole shared a look, then Poole grinned. “I like your directness,

Ernest, so I'll be just as direct. I have a small recorder here, and if it's okay with you, I'd like to get a record of your remembrances of the night Mr. Noble died."

Ian nodded, then said, "Grandpa, I'd like you to tell us again what you saw and heard. Go into as much detail as you can."

His grandfather's face tightened, and Ian recognized that his grandfather understood they wouldn't be asking the questions if something nefarious hadn't possibly occurred.

His grandfather nodded. "You can record this. That only makes sense." With his elbows resting on the arms of the wheelchair, he clasped his hands in front of him. Then he closed his eyes and stayed silent for a moment. Ian and Poole waited patiently as the older man gathered his thoughts.

"Nothing about the evening was untoward," Ernest began. "The nurses came by for their late round, and one of the aides came in to assist with whatever we needed. At my recovery point, I can put on my pajamas now and take care of my bathroom needs with a walker. Don... that's Mr. Alston, who's in the bed next to me, is the same way. Martin had not been with us long and was still weak, so the aide helped him."

"Do you remember the aide who came in?"

Ernest's brow furrowed with deep wrinkles. "It was the real friendly one. Rona is her name. There're a few others... Pearl comes at night, too, but she's not so friendly. Always grumbling about old men." He shook his head. "Once heard her fussing about hating to clean up after old men with wrinkly dicks!"

Ian's mouth dropped as his eyes shot open wide. "She... I..."

Ernest chuckled. "She's old enough to have some wrinkles on her privates, too, I reckon."

Ian felt the tips of his ears redden and, with Poole sitting next to him, just shook his head, not wanting to make eye contact with the other Keeper.

His grandfather's smile faded. "I shouldn't make a joke when we're talking about something so tragic."

Poole said softly, "I figure that laughter is sometimes the best way to get past something painful."

Ernest held his gaze, then nodded as he looked toward Ian. "Wise words."

"I know that Mr. Noble had fallen, and they suspected a broken hip," Ian said to encourage his grandfather to continue.

"He came over from the hospital and had no family with him."

“Okay, keep going about that night, Grandpa.”

“I remember that Vicki... um... Nurse Bates came in before she went off shift. She chatted with all of us and then left. Later, one of the aides came by, and the lights went out. There’s always a small light on in the bathroom and by each bed. The door is mostly closed, but they leave it cracked open just a bit. This gives enough light to move around if we need to go to the bathroom or easily find the call button if we need assistance.”

The door from the courtyard to the center opened, and Ian spied Vicki walking toward them. “Damn.”

Poole asked, “Looks like a nurse is wondering what we’re doing.”

“It’s *my* nurse,” Ian said. Catching Poole’s lifted brows and smile, he said, “Believe me, she’ll want in on this.”

Before Poole could respond, Vicki stepped closer, her smile wide as it rested on his grandfather, then narrowed as she turned to Ian.

“I see you’ve stolen one of my patients. Should I be concerned?”

“Vicki, I’d like to introduce you to Frederick Poole, one of my coworkers. Poole, this is Vicki Bates.”

Poole jumped to his feet. Her smile was bright as she reached out her hand. “It’s nice to meet you, Mr. Poole.”

“The pleasure is all mine. Please, my friends just call me Poole.”

Her smile was still in place, but Ian could easily see her eyes were full of suspicion as she cast her gaze over each one of them.

“Do I dare ask what you’re talking about?”

“Now, now, Vicki,” Ernest said, reaching over and patting her hand. “We’re just having a little chat.”

She turned her gaze back to Ian, and he read the indecision in her expression. He knew she didn’t want to interfere if she wasn’t supposed to, but she was also interested in discovering what happened. Being the newest Keeper and new to investigations, he glanced toward Poole to give control of the situation to him. Poole nodded slightly, his lips quirking on one side.

“Would you like to join us? Grandpa was just getting ready to tell us what he saw the night Mr. Noble passed away.”

Her eyes widened, and she immediately plopped down next to him on the end of the bench and leaned forward to grasp Ernest's arm. “Ernest, I want to find out what happened as much as anybody, but you’re also my patient, and I need to ensure you’re protected. I don’t want you stressed or upset, so I will take you back to your room if you want me to.”

“No, no, I’m here of my own free will. I’m sure what I saw wasn’t just my imagination, and I’m more than happy to offer my help.”

“We were just getting past the part of the nurses’ visits. So what happened after you went to sleep?” Ian asked.

His grandfather closed his eyes again, his hands still clasped. “I woke up. Interestingly, I didn’t wake up slowly but startled awake. I realized I heard a noise from the other side of the room, but what struck me more was that the room was in darkness. Of course, I didn’t have my glasses on, so I couldn’t see clearly. I started to call out.” Ernest sighed heavily and grimaced.

“What’s wrong, Grandpa?”

“I should have. I should have called out. But I didn’t want to wake anyone if the others were asleep. So I tried to make sense of what I was hearing.” He sighed heavily. “If I had been thinking straight, I might have stopped whatever was happening. I regret that so much.”

“You didn’t know what was happening, Grandpa. And what was happening might’ve been so far out of your realm of imagination that you couldn’t have possibly thought of it.”

He was silent for another minute, and Ian was glad Vicki and Poole would let him talk in his own time.

“As my eyes adjusted slightly to some of the moonlight coming through the blinds, I could tell that someone was bending over Martin’s bed. I assumed he might be having difficulty and someone was helping him. Don was snoring, so I knew he was asleep.”

He lifted a thin arm and scraped his fingers over the whiskers on his chin. “You know, thinking back on it... everything in the dark seems strange. The mind plays tricks. Not because I doubt what I saw. That’s very sure in my mind. But because we don’t naturally jump to thinking something is wrong. Maybe as a kid, we worry about the bogeyman. But as adults, we assume that things are going along normally.”

He looked at Ian, Vicki, and then Poole. “Does that make sense, or is it just the ramblings of an old man?”

Ian was already nodding, but Poole answered.

“Ernest, that makes perfect sense. We don’t generally conclude that someone is doing something wrong when we see or hear something unusual. We try to rationalize whatever we see or hear. You assumed that whoever was over with Mr. Noble was there because they were supposed to be there. That they were doing their job to assist him. So staying quiet and not

sounding an alarm makes sense.”

Ian picked it up. “Don’t feel guilty, Grandpa. You had no way of knowing if anything wrong was happening, and if you had said something, there’s a chance someone would’ve harmed you, as well.”

Ernest nodded slowly. “I know you’re right. It just feels a little strange to be a survivor.”

“Survivor’s guilt,” Vicki said softly. She hefted her shoulders when the three men’s gazes turned to her. “There’s a natural emotion of guilt when someone else dies, and we’re the ones who lived.”

“I reckon that’s it,” Ernest said.

After a moment, Ian prodded, “What happened after that?”

“I heard more noise and could definitely tell someone was walking around. Again, I thought that perhaps Martin had pushed the button for the nurse, and someone had come in to assist. Then I could hear footsteps going toward the door. The door opened, and the light from the hall poured in, but from my angle, all I could see was the dark shape of someone as they walked out, and then the door closed.”

A soft gasp escaped Vicki's lips, catching Ian's attention. He glanced to see Vicki’s concentration focus on his grandfather. Her widened eyes mirrored a sense of alarm while her complexion paled, giving evidence of her concern. He wanted to wrap his arms around her and tell her everything would be fine, but until they knew exactly what happened, she would know it was false pretenses. Turning back to his grandfather, he asked, “And the lights in the room?”

“I lay there for a little while, then could still hear Don snoring, and Martin was quiet, so I went back to sleep. When I woke up the next morning...” Ernest stopped and held Vicki’s gaze. “Well, you came in and found Martin was deceased. The lights were on that night as usual, as though nothing had changed.”

Ernest ducked his head. “I’m going to tell you something. I wondered if I’d seen... well, if I’d seen death standing over Martin’s bed. I know that might sound crazy, but once when I was in Nam, I held a buddy of mine who was dying, and I could have sworn that a light appeared just before he took his last breath.”

“Mr. Peterson, you’re not crazy,” Vicki assured as she grasped his arm again. “Many people, including medical personnel, have seen similar things when someone dies.” She chewed on her bottom lip as she looked toward Ian.

He had no idea what to say to her or his grandfather. There was a good chance he had seen death... only in human form.

Poole broke the silence. "Okay, you're doing great, Ernest. What I would like now is for you to think about the shadow that you saw when the door opened. Describe it. Any information at all. Tall, short, thin, large, long hair, bald... anything."

Closing his eyes again, Ernest was quiet for a moment, then said, "They weren't tall. The doors are probably seven feet in height. A lot of light was coming from the top of the door down to the person's head, so they were..." His face contorted into a grimace. "I guess not much more than five and a half feet tall. They weren't large because the shadow wasn't wide. But they weren't skinny either. I couldn't begin to tell you if they were male or female. Oh, and hair? It wasn't thick or bushy because their head was round. So it could've been someone with very short hair or long hair that was pulled back."

His grandfather's eyes opened, but Ian was struck with the exhaustion evident in the older man's slumped shoulders as though weary to his core. "Okay, Grandpa, I'll let Vicki wheel you back inside."

Poole stood and shook Ernest's hand again. "I appreciate everything you've given us."

Ernest nodded, then his gaze moved from Poole to Vicki to Ian. "You know, a lot of people would figure that it wouldn't matter if something happened to Martin. He made it to ninety years old and lived a full life, so if he passed away peacefully in the middle of the night, that's about as good as any of us could hope for. But if something happened to him... if someone interfered in his lifespan, then that's just wrong. Old people still have dreams and wishes. We can still make a difference in other people's lives. And if his was cut short on purpose, I want that person found."

"I couldn't agree more, Ernest," Vicki said, kneeling at his side, her gaze pinned directly on him. She stood, dipped her head toward Poole, then looked at Ian and said, "I'll take him in now."

"I'll see you this evening."

"Ms. Bates?" Poole said, stopping her as she moved behind Ernest's wheelchair.

She turned to look at him, her head tilted to the side.

"I know you're interested in what happened. And I know you're an inside person who can gain a lot of information. But please don't try to do anything

on your own. If someone here is assisting the elderly to their death, don't kid yourself and think that they wouldn't be dangerous to anyone else."

Ian's jaw tightened at the thought of Vicki in danger. "Please, babe, don't do anything."

She pinched her lips tightly together, then offered a short nod. She flipped the brake off his grandfather's wheelchair and rolled him back toward the building. He watched until they disappeared from sight, then turned toward Poole. "What are you thinking?"

"I believe everything your grandfather said. And I think this VA hospital may have someone killing some elderly patients in the rehab wing."

Even though it was what Ian also believed, hearing someone state it caused his heart to jolt. "I want to get my grandfather out of here as soon as possible."

"I don't blame you. Do you think you can get him to leave?"

"Fuck, no. His old sweetheart is the woman who raised Vicki and was just admitted a few days ago. There's no way he'll leave her."

Poole nodded slowly, then said, "Maybe that's good."

Ian's chin jerked downward. "How so?"

"Ernest has his wits about him, has a nurse interested in visiting him often since she's dating you, and now he has someone else to be with. I think he might also be in the best position to be eyes and ears there."

"I don't know how I feel about my grandfather trying to be a hero any more than I want Vicki to do so."

"Man, face it. Your grandfather is already a hero. You've just got to let him do his thing. Now, he's got something to really motivate him."

Ian's mind raced as the two men walked back to the parking lot. He was now embroiled in his first investigation as a Keeper, and all he could think about was keeping his loved ones safe.

The watchful observer scrutinized the gathering clustered in the courtyard from a window above. An affable patient, Mr. Peterson. The meddling Nurse Bates. Mr. Peterson's grandson, who was now dating Nurse Bates. And a new man had entered their group. An imposing figure, he was handsome with a dangerous air, noticeable even from the distance. He and Mr. Peterson's

grandson carried serious expressions— too grim for a casual conversation. Suspicion coursed through their veins, causing their breath to hitch painfully in their throat.

Who are they? Not law enforcement. So why are they here?

Continuing to stare, they focused on Nurse Bates again as she wheeled Mr. Peterson back inside, leaving the two men behind in the courtyard, both staring at her receding figure. God, she now has two men panting after her.

Once they finally left, the observer retreated, jealousy now flooding their being. It was an ugly emotion but served as a catalyst. *One day, it will be my turn to have everything.*

Vicki usually sat at the nurses' station to log onto her computer access. But today, after wheeling Ernest back to his room and chatting with him for a few minutes, she checked on Betty, who was resting. Then finding Noreen, Vicki told her she would take her lunch break.

“Are you going to the cafeteria? I still have a few more minutes before I can leave, but I can meet you there.”

“Oh, I’d take you up on that, but I brought my lunch and thought I’d run a few errands.”

“Sounds good.” With a smile and a little wave, Noreen headed down the hall.

Vicki’s heart raced with urgency as she retrieved her purse from the small locker, her fingers clutching it tightly. Darting through the stairwell door, she ascended to the fourth floor, her footsteps echoing in the confined space. An employee showed her a little-known secret during her initial orientation tour. Decades ago, a room had served as a staff lounge, primarily catering to employees who smoked when smoking was still allowed inside buildings. Most employees avoided the room, objecting to the lingering cigarette odor. It now housed supplies, a few abandoned lockers, and a few still operational computers. The older employee who’d provided the tour had shrugged and said, “Hardly anyone knows this is still here. I remember because I’ve been here forever!”

Uncertain if the older computers would offer the information she needed, Vicki wanted to try. Slipping inside, she exhaled a sigh of relief to find no one was around. Sitting at one of the tables, she powered on the computer, thrilled to see that she could log in and the program she needed was available.

Unfortunately, the ancient computer was slow. She munched on her sandwich as she slogged through the patient records. She had wanted to go back for specifics but only had time to re-look at the last six months' information she had initially given to Ian.

Taking hasty notes on everything she could, she quickly shut the computer down, shoved her empty sandwich bag into her purse, and slipped back out of the room. It wasn't the most efficient way to investigate, but she couldn't think of another way to get the information.

Back on her floor, she stored her purse and began her rounds. Her phone vibrated in her pocket, and she pulled it out to see a message from Ian and smiled as her heart skipped a beat.

Are you available to meet some friends of mine after work?

She felt sure he was referring to some of his coworkers since he had little time to meet friends outside of them. Excited, she typed, **yes!**

I will call with directions when you get off duty.

She hadn't had time to dig for more information and hated that she had little to show for her efforts. But with renewed excitement, she finished her rounds. Just before she left, she searched for Betty, finding Ernest and Ian's mother, Ellen, sitting in her room as they chatted. She was happy that Betty had visitors, but the sight of Ellen there caused her stomach to flip flop.

"Oh... hello," she stammered, forcing a smile onto her face.

"I hope you don't mind me visiting with Betty?" Ellen asked, jumping to her feet. "It's just that my dad and Ian talk about her, and I wanted to meet her as well."

Seeing Ellen's hand flutter in front of her, Vicki realized Ian's mom must have felt some of the same nervousness.

Her smile eased into heartfelt as she nodded. "Not at all. I'm glad she has visitors." Turning to see Betty's eyes sparkling, she said, "I'm ready to get off work and going to meet Ian."

Ernest held her gaze and nodded. "I plan on staying very close to Betty."

Kissing Betty, she looked at Ernest and smiled while mouthing, "*Thank you.*" As she turned to say goodbye to Ellen, Ian's mom hugged her, whispering, "I'm so glad you're in Ian's life. I want you to come to dinner as soon as we can arrange it. And bring Betty with you, of course."

She held Ellen's gaze and nodded. "We'd love to." Waving goodbye to everyone again, she headed out. When she got into her car, she looked at her phone. Ian had texted an address, asking her to go straight there. She entered

the address into her GPS with eager anticipation. Steering south on the highway, she tried to imagine who Ian would have her meet.

After an hour's drive, she turned off the highway toward the west. The road meandered before her, winding toward the ocean. She turned down a long driveway and was awed when she came to a beautiful home with a lighthouse in the distance. The view over the rugged cliffs with the ocean expanse in the background left her breathless.

Numerous vehicles dotted the wide gravel lane near the house, and she parked next to the last one in the row. Just as she alighted, Ian appeared at her side. She jumped in surprise, then laughed. "I was looking at the view and totally missed seeing you approach."

He grabbed his heart and groaned. "You wound me!"

Lifting onto her toes, she kissed him lightly. "Well, the ocean is beautiful. But you're my favorite scene to stare at."

He slung his arm around her shoulders and grinned. Guiding her toward the house, she licked her lips, suddenly nervous. "Is there anything I should be prepared for?"

"We just need your input, and I want to keep you out of things as much as possible."

She was about to protest that she couldn't possibly stay out of things, but then the front door swung open, and they were met by a beautiful woman also wearing nursing scrubs.

"You must be Vicki. I'm Jeannie Dyer. Welcome! I would apologize for my appearance, but I just got home, and my husband told me we had guests. But he also said you're a nurse, so I won't be embarrassed."

Shaking Jeannie's hand, she shook her head. "Never be embarrassed about what we wear to work!"

Jeannie's hand swept down her body. "One thing about nurses... we never have to worry about what we're going to wear!" Turning, she called over her shoulder, "Ian, bring Vicki on through. I think everybody is in the den."

"Your home is lovely!"

Jeannie turned and smiled. "Thank you. When Carson designed it, he wanted something large enough for our growing family and the Keepers to enjoy."

Ian linked fingers with her, and they followed Jeannie down a hall into a large family room with a massive wide-screen TV on the wall and several

sofas and chairs filled with large men. Her feet stumbled as they all stood as she entered, and every eye landed on her.

“Wow,” she muttered, “I didn’t expect such a greeting.”

One of the men moved forward, wrapped his left arm around Jeannie’s waist, and thrust his right hand toward her.

“Ms. Bates, welcome to my home. I’m Carson Dyer, Jeannie’s husband.”

She shook his hand and smiled. “And I assume you’re also Ian’s boss.”

He chuckled and nodded. “Yes, that’s also my good fortune, as well.”

They made quick introductions to the other men in the room, each of their names quickly falling from her memory as she tried to steady her nerves. Shooting a glance to the side toward Ian, he squeezed her shoulders.

“I’m sorry I couldn’t give you more of a warning, Vicki. But after Poole and I talked to Grandpa this morning, there are some things that you need to know.”

Seeing the seriousness on everyone’s faces, she nodded. “Absolutely.”

A few men brought kitchen chairs into the den, allowing her and Ian to have a place on the comfortable sofa. She perched on the edge, still tightly gripping Ian’s fingers, but turned her attention toward Carson.

“Ms. Bates—”

“Vicki, please.”

Carson inclined his head. “Vicki, we’ve been officially hired to investigate the death of Mr. Noble.”

Her eyes widened, but she remained quiet. She couldn’t imagine who had employed them since the hospital had no record of his family.

“Normally, we would never ask you questions or involve you in anything that Ian is working on, but he’s indicated that you’re not only aware of his grandfather’s concerns, but you’ve had some concerns of your own.”

“Yes, I have.” She nodded, letting out a long sigh. “I hadn’t been working very long when one of our other patients died suddenly. It was a patient that I had just met and started to get to know. A few weeks later, Mr. Noble died. He was a patient I’d helped care for, and I was concerned about his death.”

She licked her lips, then added, “I can’t imagine who hired you to look into his death. I’m sure that’s not my business, and since he’s deceased, I’m not breaking any rules in talking to you about him. I also know I can’t demand to be told anything by Ian or your organization, but I’d like to ask that if there’s anything you can tell me as the investigation goes on, please do. Plus, I should tell you that I’m also searching for information.”

The jerk on her hand from Ian reminded her that her search made him nervous.

He leaned closer and said, “Vicki, I really don’t want—”

His words were halted when Carson lifted his hand. “I think at this time, we should share what we know and then decide how to proceed forward.” Carson gave her a pointed stare. “How we should *all* proceed forward in a way that does not endanger you.”

She nodded slowly, then kept her mouth shut until she heard what they had to say before agreeing to anything.

“As to who hired us, I can inform you that Mr. Noble did have a family. They were not estranged, but they were reportedly not close. The family was unaware that he was at the VA hospital and rehab, and obviously, he didn’t give any contact information. The family has taken possession of the body from the county morgue and ordered a private autopsy.”

The air rushed from her lungs. “Oh, thank God!”

Once again, she found herself the object of everyone’s gaze. “I’m sorry, I just wanted to know what an autopsy would discover about his death. But I was thoroughly chastised when I tried to bring it up to the doctors in our wing. I was told that the medical examiner would not order an autopsy unless the death was ruled suspicious. And if family didn’t ask for one, it wouldn’t happen, either.”

“So you had suspicions from the beginning?” Carson asked.

All thoughts of hesitation with sharing flew out the window. “Yes. Mr. Noble had been in the hospital with a broken hip before he was transferred to the rehab wing. He’d only been with us for a few days, but he seemed to be getting along well. The PT came to see him in his room, and they would be transitioning him to the PT room soon. Besides taking medication for high blood pressure, he was in good health for his age. For him to die suddenly didn’t make sense to me.”

“And you said you’ve been investigating?” Carson asked.

She smiled, excited to be able to share. “Today, I snuck into a room that nobody uses, but I knew it had a computer—”

Ian cursed under his breath, and his hand flinched against hers again.

Looking down at their linked fingers, she said softly, “You’re going to squish my hand if you don’t chill out.”

Several chuckles were heard around the room, but she ignored them and looked into his eyes. “Honestly, Ian, I wasn’t taking unnecessary risks. No

one had any idea what I was doing.”

He sighed. “Keep going, sweetheart.”

The endearment fell off his lips so easily, and her heart warmed despite the dreaded subject they were discussing.

Turning back to the others, she proceeded. “The other day, I had looked to see the incidence of deaths in the hospital. Overall, they are less than you’d find in a private hospital, except in the rehabilitation wing. Where I work, it’s geriatric orthopedic patients. Their unique needs make it easier than having all orthopedic patients together. But, it also means that the population is *geriatric*,” she emphasized. “Obviously, there would be a higher risk of deaths although, with the surgeries our patients usually have— hip or knee replacements, or broken bones from falls, they aren’t at risk for death. Unless another underlying condition is the cause of death, such as heart failure or stroke.”

She looked back at Ian and gently rubbed her thumb over his fingers. “When researching the other day, I was just looking at data. Today, I wanted to dig a little deeper into the background of the ones who had passed away. I didn’t have much time, but I found a few things of interest.” Seeing everyone leaning closer, she blew out a breath. “All the deaths on the rehabilitation wing were at least eighty-five years old, and none had family on record. The probability of an autopsy was very low.”

“We only have a contract to investigate Martin Noble’s death,” Carson said. “If foul play is suspected when the autopsy results come in, then a case will be opened by the proper authorities.”

Her brow scrunched. “If you’re officially only concerned about Mr. Noble, I can understand that. But I want to know if something is going on at the medical center that affects more people than just him.”

Carson nodded. “Absolutely. And we have an FBI agent who works with us. If we find misconduct or criminal liability, he wants in on it. If there’s proof of what we suspect might be happening, we’ll turn our findings over to him. But because Ian’s grandfather is currently there, and we understand that your mother is there, also, we don’t want to leave things to chance.”

She grimaced. “But Ian’s grandfather and Miss Betty don’t match the criteria. Ian’s grandfather has family who visits often. And obviously, she’s a female, and I’m there with her during the day.”

“I agree,” Carson said. “But somebody might get desperate. Plus, I have concerns about you.”

Jerking slightly, she glanced toward Ian and spied his tight jaw before looking back at Carson. “Me?”

“I think it’s best if you don’t give in to the urge to do any investigating at work. The chance of coming across someone’s radar if they are doing anything is too great. Again, desperate people resort to desperate measures.”

She nodded slowly, chewing on her lip before one of the men stood and walked over to her. The others shifted their seats, and he sat beside her with a laptop on his knees.

“Hey, Vicki. I’m Jeb. I do a lot of the computer and technical work for the Keepers.” His eyes darted from her to Ian and back again. “Keep in mind that we’re not regular law enforcement, so... um... we can sometimes find out things quickly without the red tape getting in the way.”

She nodded, although she was uncertain exactly what he meant. She looked toward Ian and, catching his nod, turned back to Jeb. “I trust Ian and have no reason not to trust the rest of you, too.”

“Good,” Jeb said. “I was going to show this to Jeannie since she had the medical knowledge, but when I found out you would be here tonight, it made more sense to go through you.”

“Okay. I’ll help with anything I can.”

“Take a look at this.”

She looked at his screen and blinked several times to be sure she was looking at the right information. She gasped to see Jeb had pulled up the VA hospital’s records. The screen looked like what she had access to at work. A strange barking laugh erupted, and she shook her head. “I’m sorry. It’s just that I realize that if you can do all this, I could’ve eaten my sandwich in peace and not tried to go to a creepy, smelly old room to get the information.”

The others chuckled as Ian groaned. Turning to him, she asked, “Did you think I would be upset about what your security company had access to?”

“If I thought it would bother you, I would’ve told Carson we needed to do something that didn’t involve you. I knew it wouldn’t be something you’d expect, but I was certain you wanted the answers.”

She thought for a second about privacy acts, HIPAA laws, and even her medical oath. Finally, shrugging, she said, “There’s nothing you probably have access to that other law enforcement doesn’t have. If the FBI had this case right now, they’d be looking at the same information.”

The others nodded, and from their expressions, she felt as though she’d passed a test. And from the sigh of relief from Ian, she figured she passed it

with flying colors.

Ian watched as she stared at Jeb's computer with great interest. She immediately pointed him to the screen that would pull up the various records on Mr. Noble. "This will have every medication prescribed to him while he was with us." Her brow scrunched, then she looked up. "I've never been involved in an autopsy, although I've had many patients where I know it was a matter of routine. I'm unfamiliar with private autopsies and have never participated in a possible criminal case or investigation."

"A board-certified clinical pathologist in Los Angeles has received Mr. Noble's body and will conduct the autopsy. We'll provide a list of the drugs so he can compare them to what he finds in the body," Carson said.

Vicki pressed her lips together, her shoulders slumping. "I can't imagine..." She shook her head and sighed heavily. "I started to say that I can't imagine how this could happen... or rather, if I'm specific, how somebody could kill a patient on purpose."

Ian squeezed her fingers, hoping to send strength to her, and hated that he didn't have the words to give to her. Until now, he'd been a career soldier. And while many of his skills translated perfectly to being a Keeper, the criminal investigation aspect was new to him. He found the job fascinating but never felt more frustrated than seeing Vicki struggle with what may have transpired.

Jeannie walked from the kitchen with a glass of water in her hand. She sat on the coffee table and handed the glass to Vicki, who took a long sip, then nodded her thanks.

Ian expected Jeannie to retreat, but she stayed seated close to Vicki, holding her gaze.

“You and I are trained to save lives,” Jeannie said softly. “These wonderful men in this room, including our men, were trained in the military to sometimes take lives. And while they always did it for their country, you and I have different experiences. I was also a nurse in Afghanistan.”

Vicki’s body jerked slightly, and she gasped. “Really?”

“Yes.” Jeannie’s eyes sparkled as she smiled at her husband. “From what I understand, our stories aren’t that different. Carson and I met there briefly and not as a couple.”

Vicki grinned, then cast her gaze to the side. Ian admitted, “They know we were a couple for a while over there.”

Turning back to Jeannie, she nodded. “You’re right about our training being different. It’s hard for me to imagine anyone taking a life. And while a hospital setting certainly provides opportunities for someone to harm a patient, I just can’t imagine why someone would want to.”

“If you ever want to talk, I’ll give you my phone number before you leave,” Jeannie said. Standing, she added, “And we’ll see a lot of each other. Carson and I believe in building a tight unit with the Keepers and their significant others.”

A baby’s cry sounded out, and Vicki noted the baby monitor on the table. Jeannie laughed and said, “Duty calls,” before walking down the hall.

Looking around the room, Ian thought about what Vicki had just said. “I know I’m new to investigations, but when it comes to motive, if Mr. Noble was the only victim, we could assume that perhaps someone knew who his son-in-law was. But since this has happened to others, is the assumption that Mr. Noble just fits a particular profile?”

“We may not know the answer to that until we discover if he was killed and by what,” Carson said.

Vicki swung her head around to look at Ian. “Who was his son-in-law?”

“Samuel Bernstein, the senator from Colorado.”

Her eyes widened. “I don’t follow politics, but even I’ve heard of him! He touts family values over everything.” Her voice raised. “And he was estranged from his father-in-law?”

Ian snorted, nodding. “Yeah. His wife feels guilty for not staying closer to her dad, and the senator demands answers. He’ll probably turn it into a political show no matter what.”

Vicki growled, then turned back to the computer. “What if we looked at the nights that these deaths occurred and what personnel was working for

each one?”

Ian grinned because he knew Jeb had already been thinking along those lines.

“That was going to be my next line of inquiry.”

“I haven’t been able to look at that because it’s not part of a program I have access to,” Vicki admitted. She opened her purse and pulled out the information she had gathered.

Ian unfolded the papers and called out the significant dates while Jeb moved through the various screens of the hospital staffing program. Vicki wrote down the list of the names. The list was long because even with a reduced staff at night, numerous employees were still in the rehab wing. He thought about the others he’d seen while visiting his grandfather. “What about some of the typical day staff? Such as physical therapists, occupational therapists, and even administrative staff. Even if they weren’t supposed to be there at night, they would have access, right?”

Vicki twisted to look at him and nodded. “That’s true.”

“If, for example, someone who normally works days, like a therapist, wanted to come in at night, their presence might not be questioned since they have access to the hospital. There’d be no record if they’re there and don’t have to sign in for a shift.”

“You’re right. If I was a nurse on the night shift and saw one of the therapists, I might wonder why they were there, but if I was busy, I might not pay any attention to it. For that matter, when I stay to visit with Miss Betty, I clock out at my regular shift end, and then I’m there, but not on the official hospital record.”

Poole leaned forward. “What if they said they were just there because they forgot something, or what if they said they were there to check on records? Or what if they said they returned because they forgot their phone?”

She nodded slowly. “Honestly, if a hospital employee I knew came onto the floor, I wouldn’t think they were there for any nefarious reason. If they gave me a reason, such as they were looking for something, forgot something, or needed to check on something, I wouldn’t have thought anything about it.”

She slumped backward, falling heavily into Ian, and he wrapped his arm around her shoulders, feeling the tension in her body. He moved his hand to her neck and gently massaged the tight muscles.

“So even if we cross-referenced the personnel working in the rehab wing

on the nights that these men died, we still might not have the complete pool of people who could have caused their deaths?" Ian asked.

Carson nodded. "Welcome to the world of Investigations 101. Nothing is easy. You can't take anything for granted, and you can't assume."

Ian looked down at the list. "The people on official duty each night that one of these men died in the last six months is Dr. Sara Baker and Noreen Poston, a nurse. Also, Rona Gomez, Darlene Moore, and Charlie Sanderson, nurse's aides." He ran his finger down a few more names he didn't recognize from visiting his grandfather. "What about these?"

Vicki peered at the list. "Those two nurses usually work night shifts, but I don't know them well. Rona works a combination of nights and days. Noreen works rotating shifts, and Dr. Baker could be there any time, depending on when a patient is admitted. She usually gets that task since Dr. Tolbert considers himself above that duty." Her eyes narrowed. "Hmm, that's weird."

"What is?"

"Quinton Washington. He's an aide currently working in the physical therapy section but was there for two of the evening shifts."

He looked up to see Vicki's pinched expression. Recognizing she probably hated to talk about any of these people, he knew Carson would want to know. "Okay, what else can you tell us about these people?"

"Ugh," she groaned. "This feels so wrong. Ian, what if my opinion makes you suspect somebody who is innocent? Or what if I think somebody is great, but they're not? This is so subjective."

He hated not having a good answer to give her and turned his gaze to his fellow Keepers. He wasn't sure who might respond but was surprised when Abbie leaned forward to catch Vicki's eye.

"I know it's hard to remember all our names, but I'm Abbie." She grinned and jerked her head to the side toward Rick. "I've been right where you are. I was in the Army, worked for the CIA, and was stationed in Egypt. Rick had to come over to help me when I was threatened by a crime that involved someone I worked with. I couldn't imagine that it was someone I saw every day. So believe me when I tell you that I do understand."

Vicki nodded slowly. "I just want to make sure my opinions are registered as that... just opinions."

"Duly noted, babe," Ian assured.

"Okay." She sighed. "Dr. Baker appears to be an excellent doctor. She seems to care about the patients but feels overwhelmed with understaffing

issues. She's often in a hurry and very frazzled at times. Noreen is a nurse and is a friend." She winced and looked over at Ian. "This is weird."

"How so, sweetheart?"

"To analyze people you know. I just called her a friend. In truth, we are friendly coworkers but don't get together outside of work and don't share a lot of personal information. I know she has a son in college and other adult children."

He nodded, understanding what she meant. He'd been working for the Keepers for about the same time as she'd been working at the hospital, but the relationships he'd formed were tighter. Running his hand up and down her back, he whispered, "It's okay, babe. There's no judgment here."

She looked back at the others. "I've never really had a lot of friends. I'm not a loner. It's just that I'm not overly social. So I guess when I have a coworker, like Noreen, who is friendly to me, I tend to think of them as friends. But the reality is we truly are just friendly coworkers." Scrunching her nose, she sighed again. "God, I'm rambling. Sorry. Anyway... she's been around a long time, and I think she's worked for VA hospitals her entire career."

"Rona Gomez is a nurse's aide, and once again, I know very little about her. We've never talked much, but she's nice to the patients. I know she's chatted with Ian's grandfather and has become very friendly with Miss Betty."

She gave the information about the others on the list but admittedly didn't know them very well either.

"Okay, and the last one? Quentin Washington?"

"He's a PT aide assigned to the physical therapy department. Again, I don't know much about him other than he's rather surly. And that's not just my opinion. That comes from the patients. But just because he isn't friendly doesn't mean anything bad."

"If the autopsy toxicology results come back that something was administered to Mr. Noble that shouldn't have been, which of those people have access to medications?" Carson asked.

"Dr. Baker and any of the nurses working. As aides, Rona, Darlene, Charlie, and Quinton wouldn't have access to medication." Her voice was strong, but Ian heard the thread of anxiety that laced through the words.

Once home, Ian felt Vicki's shoulders bow, heavy with exhaustion from the day's demanding events. He attempted to keep the conversations light

during dinner, and the somber mood dissipated as they stepped into the bedroom. Quickly stripping, they showered together in the small tub shower, finally laughing at the contortions required to ensure she wasn't splashed in the face. Eventually, they fell side by side onto the comfort of her bed.

Sweet whispers and gentle caresses spoke volumes, silently affirming their affection. Their eyes met in the dimly lit room as he rolled on top. Making love, they found respite from the chaos of the outside world, and when she finally surrendered to sleep, he lay awake, holding her tightly as though his arms could protect her from all harm.

The following day found Ian back in the compound workroom. He looked up as Carson walked toward him, then noticed the other Keepers in the room did the same.

Carson sat down at the workstation table and pulled up his tablet. With a few taps, he flashed a report on the widescreen mounted on the wall. “The private autopsy on Mr. Noble is in.”

Ian's gaze shot immediately to the words on the screen, but it was mostly medical jargon. Frustrated, he called out, “Sorry, boss, what are we looking at?”

With a few more taps on his tablet, Carson highlighted the cause of death. Heart failure. Secondary cause. Overdose of insulin.

“Can that occur naturally?” Ian asked.

“No,” Carson replied. “I talked to the physician, and the only way he would've had these levels was if someone had injected him with insulin.”

Jeb immediately searched for Mr. Noble's medication. “Nothing in here mentioned he had diabetes. And insulin is not one of the drugs he was administered.”

“Exactly,” Carson growled.

“So we're looking at murder. Fucking hell!” Ian cursed. “What happens now?”

“We call Landon with the FBI and work with him,” Carson replied.

Ian frowned, thinking of his grandfather, Miss Betty, and Vicki at the VA facility.

“Don't worry, you'll get used to it.”

Looking over at Dolby, he cocked his head to the side. “Get used to

what?”

“We often do the work, but we never get the glory. That will go to law enforcement.”

Waving his hand dismissively, he said, “Sorry, man, but you misunderstand my frustration. I’ve never cared about the glory. I’m thinking of how long it will take the feds to figure out who’s done something while Vicki, my grandfather, and Vicki’s foster mom are still there with someone who is a murderer.”

He looked around, and the expressions of sympathy were on all the Keepers' faces. Many of them had been involved in missions with their own loved ones, so he knew they understood. “Should I consider getting them out even though they don’t fit the profile?”

Carson grimaced as he pondered Ian’s question. “Landon Sommer is our FBI agent liaison. Good man. Former military. Works well with us. Believe me, he’ll want to find this person with the least amount of bureaucratic bullshit possible. He’ll have insight into what you should do.”

Before Carson had a chance to speak, Rachel walked in. “You’ve got Landon on the line.”

“Damn, he’s fast,” Ian said, impressed.

Poole laughed. “Landon is practically on speed dial with LSI.”

A dark-haired man with a military haircut came onto the screen. His white button-up shirt and navy tie screamed FBI agent. Carson quickly introduced Ian to Landon Sommers and noted the agent’s demeanor appeared less rigid than he’d assumed.

“Good to put a face to a name,” Landon said easily. “Carson has brought me up to speed on the case, and I’ve already gotten an earful from Senator Bernstein. I’ve convinced him to keep things under wraps because we don’t want to tip off anybody at the hospital. Of course, he doesn’t want the press to start questioning why his father-in-law was estranged from them, so staying quiet won’t be a problem for him. The last thing we want is to endanger anyone else or let them get away.”

“Go over what we have on the people who were present in the wing the night of each death,” Carson requested, looking at Ian and Jeb.

Ian looked down at the information he and Jeb had compiled. “Dr. Sara Baker. Internist. Forty-two years old. Never married. No kids. She worked for a private practice out of medical school, then began working at the veterans hospital about five years ago. She’s petitioned the VA to hire more

staff, but there is a lot of turnover. I suppose younger doctors want to make more money than the VA can pay. Her parents lived in New Jersey until her mother died. Her father moved in with her a couple of years ago.”

Jeb took over next. “Noreen Posten, nurse. Fifty-three years old. Married. Four adult children all live nearby, the youngest in college. Looking to retire in a few years. Worked mostly with VA hospitals. Been at this one for the past fifteen years, the last few in geriatric rehab. Decent bank account for a nurse and electrician, but her parents left her with a nice investment nest egg when they died.”

“Quentin Washington. Physical therapy assistant. Thirty-nine. Married. Two kids. He is also a certified nurse aide, or CNA, and occasionally works a night shift to assist patients who need to be moved during the night. He works part-time as a high school football coach. He’s applied numerous times for a university football PT assistant position but has never even made it to the interview phase. By all accounts, he’s unhappy with his job and lets it be known.”

“Sounds like someone who might have a grudge,” Poole said. “Although I can’t see why he’d have anything against elderly men who never had anything to do with him not getting the job he wants.”

Ian looked down at the last name. “Rona Gomez. CNA. She’s fifty-seven years old. Divorced. Two adult kids. Not a lot on her. Born in El Paso, Texas. She’s worked a variety of jobs from the time she was a teenager, finally becoming a nursing aide when she was in her late twenties. Her mother died when she was a teenager. It looks like her father was never in the picture after leaving them when she was a child.”

Leaning his head side to side, Ian cracked his neck. “Based on what my grandfather said about the size of the person he saw leaving the room the night Martin Noble died, it would rule out some of the people who normally might be around, such as Dr. Tolbert and Mason Rutger, one of the other nurses.”

“Unless, of course, more than one person is involved,” Landon said. “One to call the shots and one to do the dirty work.”

“Fuck,” Ian cursed under his breath, having never thought of that.

Poole clapped Ian on the shoulder in a show of sympathy. “Think of investigations like chasing down terrorists who attempt to escape by running and diving into shitholes. There’s always another shithole to look into.”

Ian chuckled, although he found the spot-on analogy disturbing. “Well,

it'd be much easier if security cameras were in each hall.”

Carson snorted. “Unfortunately, many VA hospitals and clinics have limited budgets and not nearly the bells and whistles for extras that private hospitals have. The main entrances will have security cameras, so we can comb through those to see if anyone was leaving as a way to eliminate them.”

“I’ll pull those up,” Jeb said, and several Keepers volunteered to survey the footage to make the job faster.

“Thanks for that,” Landon said. “The official investigation is now open with the autopsy results, but Senator Bernstein has requested to keep it quiet. Your preliminary work will save us time as we continue working with you.”

Ian scrubbed his hand over his face as he thought of his grandfather, Betty, and Vicki being around any of the people who may have killed Martin Noble. He had no idea what Carson’s thoughts were, but no way could he leave them unprotected.

“Can I tell Vicki about the autopsy results since she’s in the middle of this goddamn mess?”

“Yes,” Landon and Carson said simultaneously.

With a nod, he pulled out his phone. Standing, he moved to the side of the room, praying Vicki would answer.

“Hey, handsome,” she greeted.

“Hey, babe. I need to tell you something, and it can’t wait. The autopsy results came in.”

His gut clenched at the gasp she emitted.

With a mixture of relief and curiosity, Vicki swiftly retrieved her phone from her pocket, grateful she wasn’t with a patient requiring her immediate attention. Her eyes darted to the caller ID, her heart skipping a beat when she recognized the name displayed—Ian. A surge of anticipation tinged with apprehension coursed through her veins.

When he uttered the five words "the autopsy results came in," her breath hitched in her throat. The weight of those words reverberated within her, causing her hand to land over her racing heart. Anticipation mixed with anxiety. Her mind raced, swiftly noting her surroundings and the need to be where no one else could hear her. With a tremor in her voice, she responded,

“Autopsy! On Mr. Noble? Oh God. Okay... hang on, Ian. No one is around, but let me find somewhere more private.”

Vicki's eyes darted frantically from side to side, and her senses heightened as she hurried down the hall. She maneuvered past Rona, who emerged from a patient's room, offering a quick nod when their eyes met. Continuing her evasive path, she skirted past the nurses' station, where Mason and Noreen were deep in a conversation with Dr. Tolbert. Still looking for the elusive privacy, she bypassed Dr. Baker, who waited outside the elevator doors.

Reaching the family waiting area, she grimaced at visitors scattered about the room. Frustrated, she darted into an unoccupied patient room. She walked to the window, and her voice trembled with anticipation when she finally said, "Okay, Ian. Talk. What did the autopsy say?" The air in the room seemed to disappear as she waited to hear the results.

“Death by heart failure due to insulin overdose.”

It took a few seconds for her brain to catch up to the words he'd just said. *Huh?* “Wait... did you say insulin overdose?”

“Yes, that's what the autopsy report states.”

“But Mr. Noble wasn't on insulin,” she declared, her heart beating faster. “Oh God, that means he was given insulin. But it must have been a mistake —”

“Babe, think about what Grandpa saw... It was the middle of the night...”

“Oh shit, Ian.” She panted, trying to suck in oxygen as lightheadedness threatened. “Mr. Noble was murdered.” She shuffled through the room, walking back and forth before stopping at the window and looking out at the parking lot. Below, people moved about their daily activities while her world had just been rocked. Squinting her eyes closed to block out other distractions, she stilled her resolve. “What do you need me to do?”

“Nothing. There's nothing we need you to do.”

“But I can help, right? I mean, I'm here and can—”

“The FBI will open a case, and we're assisting. But that means you shouldn't do anything. You need to let them tell us what they need, and then you just do your job.”

“You know from the news that this kind of case can take forever. What if the person gets away or does it again?”

“How soon can my grandfather be discharged and finish his rehab at home? And what about Miss Betty? I'd feel better if they weren't there.”

“Um... well, your grandfather could go home anytime, especially since he can get care from your family.”

“And Miss Betty?”

She sighed, her finger tracing a pattern on the windowsill. “She’s got a great start on PT, and maybe I can find out if she can do her PT as an outpatient if I bring her in to work with me. But I need to work out transportation and home health. Maybe I can hire a nurse to stay at the house when I’m not there... or I can—”

“What about my family? My mom wouldn’t mind if she came and recuperated at their house.”

She dropped her head back and stared at the ceiling, her mind swirling with too many thoughts rushing in. “I don’t know, Ian. I can’t think right now. But we need to get them out of here, don’t we?”

“Yes, we need to do something without alerting anyone there to our suspicions.”

“I want to protect the ones who are here at night. We can’t just leave them —”

“Easy, sweetheart. Remember that it’s not all up to just us. The FBI will want to protect the others, too.”

“How do we make all the working parts fit, Ian, without tipping someone off or putting someone at risk?”

“I have no idea, but we’ll think of something together.”

“Together... I like that.”

A little grin curved the corners of her lips, warming her heart at the sound of his deep voice reverberating through the phone. The growl coursed through her, reminding her of the times he spoke while they lay naked together, his chest pressed to hers. Knowing she needed to return to work, she sighed as she pushed thoughts of a naked Ian to the back of her mind. The memory lingered, but the reality of her responsibilities forced her back to the present. “Okay,” she said, her voice tinged with a combination of resignation and commitment. “I’ll see what I can arrange for Miss Betty, and you need to talk to your family about your grandfather.”

She heard shuffling in the background. “Are you still there?”

“Yeah, sorry, but I wanted some privacy.”

She waited, uncertain what he needed privacy for.

“Vicki, I know this timing probably sucks, and you can blame it on me being a guy, but I don’t want to get off the phone without telling you that I

love you.”

Her whole body jerked before her eyes widened, her brows shooting to her hairline. She opened and closed her mouth several times before croaking, “You... you love me?”

“I know it’s not the romantic time to say it. Fuck, I should have said it when we were dining out... or in bed... or—”

“Shut up,” she ordered and almost laughed when he acquiesced. Sucking in a deep breath, she closed her eyes. “Ian?”

“Yeah, babe?”

“I love you, too.”

“Seriously?”

Laughing out loud, she nodded even though he couldn’t see her. “Yes, I love you, too.”

“Thank fuck,” he groaned.

Still laughing, she said, “The only thing wrong with your timing is that you told me when I can’t kiss you. But we’ll fix that tonight.”

“I’ll take you out to dinner. Somewhere special as soon as this is all over.”

“Ian? I just need you.”

“How the hell did I get so lucky?”

“Same way I did, sweetheart. Right time and right place.” His voice carried both affection and confidence.

Her heart swelled, but she realized how bittersweet the sentiment was as it came when a time of uncertainty surrounded them. Offering a reluctant goodbye, she hastened out of the empty patient room, her footsteps muted on the tiled floor. Her buoyant exuberance at knowing Ian loved her slowly diminished as her gaze swept over the people she passed. Every glance exchanged and every passing conversation became tinged with suspicion, and she felt the weight of her newfound knowledge. *A killer walks these halls.*

Vicki stepped into Betty's room, her eyes scanning the familiar surroundings, not surprised to find Ernest settled comfortably in the chair next to her. The room was designed for up to four patients, each allotted a specialized reclining hospital chair to encourage mobility and independence, as well as health. With the absence of another female geriatric patient, Ernest had someone push a chair next to Betty's, allowing them to sit close together.

"I had a feeling I'd find you two together." She laughed, hoping her voice didn't hold the worry and distress eating away at her gut. At one time, Betty possessed the ability to decipher Vicki's moods, but years spent away in the military had hopefully given her the ability to mask her inner turmoil.

"What's up, my dear?" Betty asked, pushing her eyeglasses on her nose as she peered at Vicki.

"I was talking to Ian earlier, and while this is up to you and your family, he thought that you should soon be ready to be discharged home since you have family to help you."

Ian's grandfather huffed, his face scrunched into a grimace. "Normally, I wouldn't want to stay any longer than I had to, but I like being here with Betty."

Unable to think of what to say without tipping her hand, she said, "Well, with me helping when I'm at home, we can probably get Betty out of here soon, too."

"What are you not telling us?" Betty narrowed her gaze on Vicki, drawing Ernest's gaze as well.

Her attempt to deflect their curiosity fell short, and she realized she could no longer keep them from wondering what was happening. "Nothing!" she

blurted, hoping to brush off their concerns. Looking at her watch, she waved her hand dismissively, projecting a sense of urgency. "I just stopped to chat for a moment. I have to check on other patients, so I'll see you later." She hustled out of the room, chastising herself for not handling things as she should.

An hour later, she was still in turmoil. Suspicion crept into her interactions, keeping her on edge. She snapped at Rona and rolled her eyes at Noreen's innocuous comment. She hovered over the other nurses' shoulders when the medication cart was delivered. She stood near Mason as he entered patient medication information into the computer. When Quinton rolled a patient back onto the floor, she followed him with an inexplicable urge to watch what he was doing.

Finally, needing a respite, she slipped back into Betty's room, relieved to see her alone. She loved Ernest and felt safer when he was around Betty, but she needed alone time with the woman who knew her best. "Did Ernest go back to his room?"

"I sent him away, telling him that I needed a nap. In reality, I hoped we'd have a chance to chat."

Plopping down into the chair Ernest had abandoned, Vicki asked, "What's wrong?"

"That's what I hope you'll tell me."

She dropped her chin to her chest as waves of anxiety crashed upon her. A familiar hand rested on her arm, the slender fingers wrapping around her wrist. Opening her eyes, she looked over at Betty and smiled. "You always had the most comforting touch."

Betty smiled with her whole face. "With you, my sweet girl, it was easy."

They were silent for a moment, then she inhaled deeply before letting all the air rush out. "How did you know what my parents were like long before I came to live with you?"

Her question appeared to catch Betty by surprise, and she startled slightly. A faraway look filled her eyes for a moment, then she sighed. "I had an uncle who was an alcoholic. But I never realized it as a child. It certainly wasn't discussed in the 1950s. And my memories of him at family gatherings was that he was just jolly and had such a loud, infectious laugh." A little smile crossed her face. "As I grew older, it was apparent that his drinking overtook his life. And in nursing school, I learned about addictions." She snorted. "In those times, the same people horrified at someone using marijuana would put

up with someone abusing alcohol.”

Vicki chuckled, grateful for Betty’s relief.

“Anyway,” Betty continued, “it didn’t take long to see that your parents were alcoholics. And while you were used to your life with them, it broke our hearts knowing you carried such a burden. Living so close, once you discovered our backyard, we loved offering you a place of respite and loved having you around.”

“You saved me,” Vicki whispered, tears stinging her eyes.

“Oh, my precious. You were our greatest joy.”

The two women held gazes, and Vicki remembered many years ago when she came over to the McGillicuddy’s house after a particularly bad time with her parents. She rarely had to say anything because Betty could look at her and know something wasn’t right. She thanked God for that ability then and for her to still have the ability to do so now.

The two women sat in silence, holding hands for several minutes. Finally, Betty leaned over and grabbed tissues, handing one to Vicki. After wiping their eyes, Betty sucked in a deep breath, sat straight, and said, “Okay, now tell me what’s happening in this hospital.”

“I don’t want to say too much, Miss Betty, because I shouldn’t. And I don’t want to do anything to hurt your recovery. But some investigations will start at the rehab, and I’d feel better if you weren’t here.”

Betty held her gaze for a long moment, then slowly nodded. “Mr. Noble, right?”

Vicki hesitated, unsure what to say, how much, or if she should say anything. “As soon as you’re strong enough to be at home and we get home help, that will be the safest place to finish your rehab and recuperation.”

“Then I will work very hard with my physical therapy to make sure I can get out of here as soon as possible.”

“I wish someone else was in here with you at night.”

Betty chuckled, and Vicki rolled her eyes. “Somebody besides Ernest!”

It felt good to laugh, and for a moment, they shared giggles. “I can look at hiring someone privately to stay with you in the evenings here.”

“Don’t you think that would raise questions?”

She sighed and nodded. “Yes, it would.”

“And if you start acting differently, then that could also raise suspicions,” Betty surmised.

“I know. I just don’t know what to do, Miss Betty.”

“Well, maybe something will happen soon, and we won’t have to worry about it.”

A faint sound drew their attention toward the door. Vicki’s eyes widened as Ernest pushed his walker into the room, with Ian following his grandfather. She and Ian arranged two additional chairs, pulling them close together to form a small circle. Once seated, the four sat in Betty’s room, a comforting gathering amid the storm swirling around.

As Ian filled them in on the latest information, his details caused Vicki’s gut to clench in apprehension. Any passerby who glanced into the room would see smiles plastered on their faces and laughter occasionally ringing out to mask the seriousness of their conversation. But beneath the facade, Vicki’s nerves were frayed. Looking over, she was stunned at the unwavering strength Betty and Ernest presented while taking in the news of Mr. Noble’s suspected murder.

“That’s all we know right now,” Ian finished. “We have no particular suspects, but Grandpa, everyone believes you saw something that night when you woke up.”

“Damn straight, I did!”

“What do we do now?” Vicki asked, her hands clasped in her lap.

“I’ve already talked to my parents, and they’ll approach the orthopedic surgeon tomorrow morning. Grandpa can check himself out anytime, but I want to ensure that things are in place so his recovery isn’t hindered. Grandpa will move back in with us, and Mom and my sister will help care for him and get him back and forth to outpatient PT.”

“Son, that sounds good, except I’m not leaving Betty here,” Ernest stated emphatically, his head shaking back and forth.

“We’ve got a plan for that, too.”

Vicki was startled and looked at him, unaware of the plan.

“Natalie, one of the women I work with, will come here soon and pretend to be good friends with Vicki.” He looked over at Betty. “She’ll pretend to be one of the foster children you raised and stay during the nights.”

“But I only ever fostered Vicki— oh, how ridiculous of me.” Betty offered a sheepish smile, waving her hand in the air. “I totally forgot about the other girl that I had!” They all chuckled, and Betty added, “You’ll have to forgive me. This is my first time doing anything undercover. I rather like it!”

“Everything okay in here?” They turned toward the door to see Rona standing at the threshold, uncertainty on her face. “I heard a lot of laughing

and didn't know what was happening.”

“We're just having a good time visiting,” Vicki said, keeping a smile on her face.

“Well, a woman out here says that she knows Mrs. McGillicuddy. I wasn't sure if I should let her back.”

Just then, Natalie popped around the corner, pushed past Rona, and entered the room. Her smile widened at the sight of Vicki before jumping over to Betty. “Vicki! Miss Betty!”

Getting into the play-acting, Vicki jumped up and flung her arms around Natalie, giving her a tight hug. Discovering that she didn't have to fake the emotions coursing through her, she whispered, “Thank you so much for this!”

“Don't mention it,” Natalie whispered in return.

Natalie greeted Betty with the same exuberance before being introduced to Ernest and Ian. Rona continued to hover around the doorway, and Natalie said, “I don't have very long in town, but I thought I'd hang out here tonight with you. We can chat and talk, and I can sleep in the hospital chair.”

“Oh, my dear, that would be lovely,” Betty said, patting Natalie's hand. “We have so much to catch up on.”

Rona finally left the room, and Vicki let out a long sigh of relief. “She tends to be a gossip, so soon everybody at the nurses' station will know that Betty has a visitor staying tonight.”

“Good,” Ernest said, rubbing his hands together. “Otherwise, I would stay, and I knew that would really get the gossips talking!” He looked over at Betty and winked. “After all, we might have to get married to save your honor!”

Betty's joyous laughter filled the room, easing the tense atmosphere. Ian playfully rolled his eyes, and Vicki's shoulders relaxed as she allowed humor to ease a little of the trepidation. The brief respite bolstered her spirits. With a newfound sense of protection for Miss Betty in place, she and Ian said their goodbyes and headed home.

Later that night, they were once again at Miss Betty's house. Their routine had quickly become familiar. She showered as soon as she got home while he checked his emails and calls for any updates. After they finished dinner, they finally climbed into bed, still poring through all possible evidence.

“Carson had Jeannie talk about insulin overdose, but to be honest, my focus was on Grandpa still being there. What happens with that type of

overdose?”

“Essentially, too much insulin in the body causes the cells to absorb too much glucose from the blood. In simplest terms, it reduces the heart’s ability to pump, leading to heart failure. In Mr. Noble’s case, his age and fragility would make him more susceptible to added stress on the heart.”

After a moment, she scrunched her mouth to the side, wondering what he would say to her idea. “So, um... Ian?”

“Yeah, babe?”

“I know the Keepers are assisting the FBI investigation, but I read an article about an FBI investigation into problems in hospitals and was struck with how it can take months, if not years, to come up with enough evidence to arrest and get someone convicted.”

He nodded, then shrugged. “Maybe. But, babe, we can circumvent the formal investigation if we’re careful. The FBI has ways of obtaining evidence that can be admissible in court. Working together, we can make the investigation go faster.”

She huffed, her frustration evident as she lowered her gaze, her fingers finding a loose string on the bedspread to occupy her restless hands. “So... what if we draw them out?”

Ian’s brow furrowed in confusion, and his voice held disbelief. “Draw them out?”

“Yes.” She lifted her head and locked her gaze with his, anticipation thrumming through her body. “What if we let it be known that we know something happened and tried to force someone to show their hand.”

His body jerked in response, and his surprise transformed into incredulity. “What the fuck are you thinking?”

Anger ignited, now replacing her anticipation. “I think I’d like not to have a murderer working where I work! I’d like to not be afraid for our patients, including *your* grandfather and Miss Betty.” She slapped her hands down on the mattress. “I want this done soon and not in a couple of years when the FBI gets around to it!”

She held her breath to see what he would say as the weight of her words hung in the air between them.

Ian's thumb and forefinger pinched the bridge of his nose as a deep sigh filled the space between them. His eyebrows knit together as tension creased furrows in his forehead. He tried to control the rage at the thought of her being in danger. "Babe, so many things are wrong with that scenario. I don't even know where to start."

His stormy eyes locked onto hers as she opened her mouth to protest. Jumping in before she had a chance to speak, he continued, "It's like a minefield, every step a possible disaster. You could tip them off, and they could get away. You could tip them off, and they get desperate and hurt somebody. You could tip them off, and they cover up the evidence so the FBI can't find it when they start looking."

Her nose scrunched again as she dropped her chin. "I get it. I guess it was a dumb idea."

He wrapped his arms around her and drew her into the warm cradle of his body as they lay on the bed. Loving the feel of her tucked safely next to him, he breathed her in. The familiar scent of her shampoo and body wash flooded his senses, creating comfort against the unease of their conversation. "Nothing is wrong with wanting justice. And nothing is wrong with brainstorming ways to figure out how to get it. But believe me, it's been very apparent that I have a lot of learning to do before I can call myself an investigator. Security? Yes. Investigator? I'm far from a seasoned pro."

"Well, considering that my investigative knowledge comes from watching TV shows and movies, I'd say I'm not the right one to do this, anyway."

"Tell you what? You keep being the beautiful woman and nurse that you

are. I'll promise to keep you safe while we try to figure out what's happening."

"That sounds perfect." Yawning, she said, "I'm exhausted, but I have no idea if my mind will quit racing enough for me to sleep."

With a gentle caress, he tipped her chin up with his knuckle, bringing her mouth closer to his. "Then lucky for you, I have just the thing to ensure a restful sleep."

A playful hum escaped her as she molded her body to his, holding him close.

Desire sparked in him at her touch, the heat pulsating through his blood. A wolfish grin spread over his face, and he bent slightly to seal his lips over hers. Lust flamed as his tongue tangled with hers. He grunted as they rolled over with difficulty. "We need a bigger bed."

Her laughter bubbled up between them as they wiggled until she was on top. The hard press of his arousal against her core elicited a shared shiver of desire.

"We need our own place," she whispered, her lips dancing over his mouth.

Her words struck a chord within, offering a vivid image of a place shared with the woman he loved. Then as she tossed her T-shirt to the side, all thoughts flew from his mind other than getting them both naked. With more writhing, grunting, laughing, and wiggling, they managed to divest their clothes while not falling off the bed.

Then he proved just how he would help her sleep. Finally, when they lay sated, and exhaustion threatened to take over, Ian tucked her close with his arms still wrapped around her. "Sleep tight, babe."

She murmured, "Love you," before she fell asleep. And with the woman he loved in his arms, ideas of moving into their own place filled his thoughts.

The following day at work, Ian sat beside Poole as they focused on the primary suspects' social media footprint and phone records. Used to the military's fast-paced tempo once he was boots on the ground during a mission, he found this investigative work akin to wading through molasses.

Allowing his head to fall back, he stared at the ceiling to stretch his tense

neck and relieve the tedium. Facing Carson, he shook his head. "I swear, I'm trying, boss. I'm the new guy, and I don't want this to get fucked up, but Jesus, this is killing me to think of how long the FBI investigation might take." Casting a glance around the room, he discovered he was on the receiving end of understanding nods and smiles. Pausing for a moment, he sighed as uncertainty filled his gut. "I almost hate to bring this up, but Vicki asked me last night about forcing the murderer's hand."

Everybody's gazes shot to him, but no one seemed surprised.

Poole clapped him on the shoulder and grinned. "Damn, I knew I liked her."

Abbie nodded slowly, glanced toward her fiancé, Rick, and then said, "She has to be very special to be with a Keeper. I had no doubt she was, but that sounds exactly like something one of us would say."

"I told her absolutely not. The idea of her being in danger scares the shit out of me. But then, so does the idea of a long-drawn-out investigation."

"I'm not in favor of her doing anything," Carson said. "Right now, there are too many variables. Just because we've narrowed our focus to four individuals who were all on duty does not mean it's one of them, or they were acting alone."

Ian nodded his agreement. "I told her to stand down and just do her job."

Poole suddenly leaned forward, uttering a low curse. Ian's gaze jumped to the screen in front of them, searching for the cause of the reaction.

Seeing the word *jail*, he blinked, then focused on the information again to ensure he understood what he was looking at.

"Rona Gomez," Poole called out, gaining everyone's attention. "She's been making calls to a guy in the county jail. Bobby Rodriguez."

"A relative? Friend? Neighbor? Fuck buddy?" Hop asked.

Jeb shook his head as his fingers fast-tapped on the keyboard. "Doesn't look like it. He's in for possession and distribution, evading arrest, just to name a few. He's been in for a year and has four more years to go unless he gets out early."

Carson called Landon and filled him in. Disconnecting, the Keepers continued to work while waiting to see what the FBI agent would find out. Anticipation crackled around the room, and Ian discovered the impossibility of focusing until they learned more about Rona and her inmate friend. The minutes dragged on before Landon finally called back, and Carson put him on speaker.

“I just talked to the warden at the prison. She’s not on the visitor list, but the two have weekly calls. The prison monitors the calls but doesn’t stop them unless something is suspicious. He just talked to one of the employees who records the calls, and we have a transcript.”

Landon was quiet for a moment, most likely reading the transcript. Then he said, “Going back to the beginning, it seems she got his name and address from her church that sends letters to prisoners. From there, she began writing. She asks him how he’s doing. He complains about everything at the prison. She sometimes complains about her job, saying she wishes she could do more and gets tired of caring for the older men who come in if they’re grumpy. He complains that his family never visits, and she complains that the cost of living is so high.” He looked up and shook his head. “Seems more like a mutual complaining than a relationship.” Blowing out a long breath, he added, “I’ll get someone to go through these call transcripts and see what else we can find. And I’m meeting today with the doctor who performed the autopsy. The report has been sent to a medical examiner, so as soon as it’s declared a suspicious death, which I hope is later today, I’ll go to the clinic tomorrow to start interviews.”

“What drugs was he convicted of selling?”

“Coke, and... well, well. Seems like he distributed some prescription drugs. I don’t have a full list, so I’ll get back to you on that.”

After Landon disconnected, Carson looked over at the others, nodding slowly. “Landon has to go slowly.” Then he grinned. “Who’s in the mood to visit the jail?”

When the “hell yeahs,” rang out, he chuckled. “Okay, Dolby... you take Ian.”

After a two-hour drive, they arrived at the long, low, brick jail that served the prison needs of two counties. It was Ian’s first time inside a jail, and he absorbed every detail around him. He had no doubt this would not be the only case where he would visit someone incarcerated.

Following Dolby’s lead, they navigated through the reception area, signed the visitor’s log, and traded their IDs for visitor badges. A guard gave them a cursory glance, his gaze shifting between them before instructing, “Follow me. The warden has granted permission for you to be in an interview room.”

Dolby and Ian dipped their chins in silent acknowledgment, then followed him down the hall. The waxed tile floor gleamed in contrast to the gray walls. The freshly painted cinderblock was clean but dull.

The guard led them through another security checkpoint before ushering them into a small room. A table sat in the middle, but no glass partition separated the interrogators from the prisoners. Taking their seats in the metal chairs, they waited. After a few minutes, a guard walked in with a prisoner. His hand was cuffed to the table before the guard retreated to stand in the corner.

The prisoner's gaze darted all around, confusion etched on his face. He was average height, slight in build, with short dark hair and dark eyes. Nervousness poured off him.

"Bobby Rodriguez?" Dolby began.

"Yes, sir. That's me." His voice shook slightly.

Ian was immediately struck with the nonabrasive response and the prisoner. He hadn't thought about Bobby's reaction to visitors, but the polite man sitting in front of him didn't fit his expectations.

Dolby introduced himself and Ian, then got straight down to business. "Mr. Rodriguez, you are under no obligation to answer our questions. But we are looking for some information and see where you have received calls and letters from a woman who is a nursing aide at a veteran's hospital. Rona Gomez."

He blinked, and his head jerked slightly to the side. "Rona? Yeah, she writes to me. Sometimes calls."

"Can you tell us how you met her?"

"I've never met her... not in person. Her church started a befriend-a-prisoner program, and I guess she got my name." He snorted and shrugged. "She seems like a nice lady... sometimes she'll send care packages of cookies. She sends letters. I'm not much for writing, but she'll call every few weeks."

Dolby smiled widely, his expression easygoing. Ian inwardly chuckled, knowing how dangerous the former SEAL could be. But Dolby was a master at adopting a good ole boy persona that built trust.

"We're just checking on a few things at the hospital, and her name came up with someone from the jail."

"Oh." Bobby nodded. "I see. You probably think she must be bad if she talks to someone here. But she's nice."

"Can you tell me what she talks about?" Dolby asked.

A crease cut across Bobby's brow. "Um... mostly she just asks if I've read the material she sends from her church." He shrugged, then sighed, his

thin shoulders hefting with the movement. “I guess it doesn’t make sense why we keep talking, but I ain’t got no other family. The first time I got a letter from her, I laughed and threw it away.” He looked down at his hand resting on the table, his fingers twitching. “But she kept writing. Stopped trying to preach at me and just... I don’t know... she just talked. Told me about her job. Her kids. Her family. Then she sent a box of cookies. I stopped seeing her as some kind of soul-saver who thought she was better than me, and she just seemed like a nice lady.”

“What does she say about her job?”

His face scrunched in thought again. “Uh... she says she works with veterans. Older ones who need help with stuff when they’re in the hospital. She said she likes doing things for them but that it’s sometimes hard work.” His face contorted as he looked up at them. “She seems like she just wants to help.”

“Did she ever ask you about drugs?”

“Yeah...” Bobby let out a long sigh. “She wanted to know how I got into selling. Wanted to know if I would keep doing it when I got out. You know... that kind of thing.”

“Ever asked for any information on how to get drugs?”

Bobby blinked as another snort came out. “Her? Nah, no way.”

After several more inquiries, Dolby and Ian thanked Bobby and retraced their steps through the jail’s procedures. After swapping their visitor badges for their IDs, Ian felt a sense of freedom just stepping outside and into the sunshine.

The journey back to the compound was contemplative as Ian stared out the window, his gaze fixed on the passing scenery without really seeing its details. Dolby was uncommonly quiet, seeming to be lost in his thoughts. Finally, Ian broke the silence. “I didn’t get the impression he was lying, did you?”

Dolby shook his head. “No. But then, how well does he know her? I think he’s spooked now and probably won’t take any more calls from her.” He scrubbed his hand over his face. “Only so many people had access to all those men on the nights they died. It’s not a situation where the suspects are almost endless.”

“But who had the motive? That’s what I can’t figure out,” Ian said. “And Vicki has been thinking the same thing, although she’s probably too close to the situation to be unbiased.”

“Yes, but the key words are *she’s close to the situation*. That means—”

“She could be a target,” Ian finished, tension radiating throughout his body.

Vicki stood, staring at the pharmaceutical dispensary cart, and tried to ascertain how someone could get insulin without authorization. It was filled at the hospital pharmacy and delivered to the floor with each tray locked. It was checked when it was returned to the hospital's pharmacy. *I just don't see how anyone could have taken insulin from the cart, especially not on the night that it would've been administered to someone illegally.*

"But that doesn't mean they didn't get it from somewhere else," she murmured aloud. She wondered where someone might get insulin illegally, knowing it had flooded the market when the price went sky high.

Exhausted from spending her energy on her patients while also questioning everything going on around her on the floor, she was grateful when lunchtime rolled around. Sitting alone at a table, she called Ian.

"Hey, babe," he greeted.

His voice grounded her scattered thoughts. "I've been thinking about it, and—"

"Is this about the case?"

"Yes... um... is this not a good time?"

"It's fine, but can I put you on speaker? I've just gotten back into the compound."

"Oh... sure."

"Okay, you're up."

"Um... hi?" She immediately blushed, feeling stupid but not knowing exactly what to say.

"You can just talk, Vicki," Ian said. "It's fine."

Shaking her head, she plunged forward. "Okay. Well, I can't figure out

how someone would've got the insulin from the pharmaceutical dispensary cart that's taken around to administer medication to the patients. It's filled at the pharmacy, and each drawer is locked. Then brought to the nurses' station, the nurse has to use their ID keypad to open each drawer. So there's a record. At the end of the shift, it's taken back to the pharmacy for its check to ensure everything was distributed."

"So chances are it wasn't taken straight from the cart."

"My thought is that one of the nurses who was supposed to give insulin to someone didn't and saved it up to use illegally. But then, that means it had to be a nurse, and I just can't believe that. Or rather, I don't want to believe that."

"And the common nurse in the cases was Noreen." He spoke in a statement, not a question.

Her stomach fell, and she whispered, "Ian, I hate this."

"I know, babe. I'm so sorry. Are you okay?"

"No. No, I'm not. This is eating me up inside. I can't believe it could have been Noreen. This stupid case is making me look at everyone with suspicion. While it's necessary, it feels wrong. But then, it's horrible to have someone killing patients."

She could hear shuffling in the background and grimaced that she was so emotional in the presence of his co-workers.

"Vicki, honey, I'm sorry. I wish you weren't anywhere near any of this."

She inhaled deeply, filling her lungs. As she held it for a moment, the world seemed to pause. Then as though letting go of a heavy burden, she exhaled slowly. The desired result occurred when her mind cleared from its tumultuous thoughts. Sitting up straighter, she said, "I'm fine. I'm being ridiculous and need to look at all possibilities."

"Vicki, this is Natalie."

"You should be home sleeping since you spent the night in Miss Betty's room!"

"I got some sleep, and I'll be back there tonight. But I wanted to let you know that you're doing amazing."

A rueful chuckle slipped out. "Thanks."

Ian said, "We're looking deeper into a few possibilities. Could it be an aide?"

"Well, I guess an aide working with a patient when the nurse comes in to administer medication could possibly take something if the nurse was

distracted. But no way could that be planned in advance.” She squeezed her eyes closed for a moment. “There’s always the black market for insulin.”

“Black market?”

She heard more than one Keeper say the word at the same time. “Yes. With the high cost of insulin, people began selling extra if they had it. And that doesn’t include anyone buying larger quantities and then selling it just under what they could get it legally. Someone could easily buy it.”

Hearing noises as more people sat down at nearby tables, she blurted, “I have to go. I’ll talk to you tonight. Love you!”

As she disconnected, it dawned on her that she had been on speaker, and the other Keepers could hear her declaration of love. Blushing, she giggled at the image of Ian’s ears turning pink with his own embarrassment.

A broad grin gradually spread across Ian’s face as the echo of Vicki’s words resounded in his head. He tore his gaze away from his computer screen and looked at the other Keepers. Amused chuckles greeted him, but he didn’t care that his cheeks and ears heated. Forcing his mind back to the task at hand, he focused his attention on Carson.

“I had Landon check, but Bobby wasn’t selling insulin. Of course, that doesn’t mean Rona didn’t get her hands on some.”

“Boss, I keep trying to look at motive,” Ian said.

The others quickly nodded as their attention rested on him. He hesitated and shook his head. “Jesus, sorry. I’m probably fucking things up.”

Carson shook his head, as did several of the other Keepers. “Get that thought out of your head, Ian. All ideas... all brainstorming on a case is encouraged and necessary.”

“Go for it,” Poole said.

Nodding, he forged ahead. “I’ve been trying to find a *normal* motive. Greed. Money. Love. Anger. But none of those fit. We looked at Rona... money is tight with her son starting college, and I can’t see her trying to buy insulin off the black market. It’s not cheap. Maybe it’s cheaper than some pharmaceutical companies selling it, but not cheap. And her relationship with Bobby may be exactly what it seems like on the surface. She’s trying to reach out to him because of her church, or she’s lonely. There’s nothing to gain

from the death of the older men. Nothing ties money to any of the suspects.”

“Noreen?” Poole asked.

“Same thing. She’s nearing retirement. Married. Got kids and a grandkid. Bank account is normal. Nothing suspicious... absolutely nothing. And from what Vicki said, Quentin doesn’t have a way to get hold of the drugs at the hospital, at least not by himself.”

“What are you thinking?” Dolby asked.

He scrubbed his hand down his face. “When I was in Special Ops training, we had a guy who was one of the best the instructors had seen. Smart. Intuitive. Quick. Fuckin’ best marksman we had.” He held the gazes of the others around the table. “He cracked one day and started firing into the sky and then swung his weapon around to the rest of us. They had to take him down, then take him out in a straitjacket.” He shook his head and winced at the memory.

“Nutjob?” Poole asked.

He shrugged. “Later, we heard that he’d been raised rough. Abused. And something inside him just snapped.”

“You’re thinking...?” Carson prodded.

“Maybe we need to consider a mental or emotional issue as the motive. Someone with a problem with older men who have no family.”

“Could be daddy issues,” Natalie said, leaning forward. “I know a little about that myself, but thank God I was in the Army, or I might have popped my old man off.”

Leo rolled his eyes at his wife, but several others snickered. Ian had already figured out that Natalie kept everyone smiling and sane with her honest commentary.

“Check the women again,” Carson said, looking at Jeb. “Dig deep. They match the physical build that Ian’s grandfather described walking out the door.”

Jeb began clicking. “Noreen’s father was married to her mother for over sixty years before he died. Her mother died soon after. They had money and left a nice chunk of it to Noreen, giving the rest to various charities.”

“Maybe she wanted it all,” Dolby said.

“We know Rona’s dad left when she was about two, so she never had a father figure. She’s also divorced and involved in a prison friendship. Maybe she has men issues,” Leo posed.

“What about Dr. Baker?” Ian asked. “She’s got her eighty-nine-year-old

dad living with her.”

“Her bank account is decent,” Jeb said. “But her dad’s social security and retirement would be sucked away by the home health nurse.” He leaned closer and tapped on his keyboard. “Hmm.”

While Jeb searched, Ian continued, “Vicki says Dr. Baker complains a lot. She works weekdays and has most weekends off, but with less staffing at the hospital, she has more on-call time. Maybe with taking care of her dad, she’s overstressed.”

“I’m not getting it,” Rick said, leaning back in his seat. “If Dr. Baker is tired of her dad living so long, why not bump him off? She could do it easily, and no one would know with it looking like heart failure. Why kill other men who have nothing to do with her?”

“You’re looking for a rational answer, sweetie,” Abbie said, shaking her head at Rick. “Remember... someone who is mentally ill might not fall within the boundaries of what makes sense to us.”

“Holy shit,” Jeb said. His eyes were wide as he whirled around in his chair and looked first at the others before settling his gaze onto Ian. “Dr. Baker’s father died about six months ago. The same time as the first suspicious killing.”

“How’d we not know that?” Carson barked.

“Different last names. She had him listed as a dependent on her taxes for the year. But I realized she stopped paying the home health nurse six months ago. And I then cross-referenced his social security number with death certificates. Cause of death... heart failure. No autopsy.”

“Calling Landon,” Carson said as he grabbed his phone.

“I’m heading to the hospital,” Ian growled, jumping to his feet.

“I’m driving,” Poole said, then looked toward the others.

“If you need backup, call it in,” Carson directed. “Hop, Dolby... you’re on standby.”

“Fuck yeah,” Hop and Dolby said in unison as they nodded.

Ian dipped his chin in appreciation before hustling outside. Climbing into the passenger seat of one of LSIWC’s SUVs, he exhaled an uncharacteristic shaky breath. He only wanted to get to Vicki and ensure she and his grandfather stayed safe.

ERNEST

Ernest maneuvered his walker out of Miss Betty's room, a quiet sense of relief filling him that Vicki was there to watch over her. The late afternoon sun slipped through the window in the hall, and while tired, he was too anxious to consider taking a nap. Tomorrow promised to be a whirlwind of a day, filled with his hospital discharge, the drive home, and then being settled back in his place. And hope filled his chest that Betty would also be discharged tomorrow.

While ready to return to the farm, he hated leaving unresolved matters behind. He chuckled as he neared his room. *Face it... I hate to leave Betty. Betty Cullen... well, Betty Cullen McGillicuddy now.* He hadn't lied when he said she was the prettiest nurse he'd ever seen. He felt no guilt about the depth of his feelings for her when he was a young twenty-year-old Army grunt. A whirlwind affair had swept them off their feet when their passion deepened into genuine affection.

Pausing in the middle of the hall, he drew in a deep sigh. Time, age, and experience had taught him there was no turning back the clock. And in truth, he had no desire to. If his unit hadn't been sent to the front, he would have never met his beautiful wife or had the family that was the center of his world. And Betty would never have met Mr. McGillicuddy and become the savior Vicki needed as an innocent little girl.

Yes, indeed. Life unfolds the way it should. And that included finding Betty again half a century later. Continuing down the hall, he came to his room. Walking inside, he observed Don sitting in his chair, his gentle snores resounding in the room. Ernest's eyes widened to see another patient in the bed across from him where Mr. Noble had been. Smiling, he lifted his hand

in a wave. “Welcome. I’m Ernest Peterson.”

“Fred Solinski,” the other man called out, his smile wide.

Ernest grinned and nodded. “I hope to be leaving soon. I’m ready to get back home.”

The two men chatted for a while, but with Fred’s slightly slurred words, Ernest assumed he was still on post-op pain medicine. Rona hustled into the room, her gaze sweeping to everyone before moving over to check on Fred. Forgoing the chair, Ernest needed to stretch out and lay on his bed. He rolled his head to the side and looked out the window, trying to settle the thoughts swirling through his mind.

Ian had given him some information, and Ernest desired to connect the dots. Or at least, the dots he knew about. Whoever had come into the room that night had access to the area, plus had access to drugs. He snorted. This was a hospital, so probably everyone had that.

He looked back over at Rona caring for Fred and allowed his memories to shift through his mind. His gaze followed her as she walked out the door, but his thoughts were pushed to the side as Dr. Tolbert and Dr. Baker walked in and headed directly to Fred. They pulled the privacy curtain, and while their voices were low, their discussion appeared heated. They only spent a moment with Fred before the curtain was whipped back, and Dr. Tolbert walked out of the room. Dr. Baker stared after Dr. Tolbert’s retreat for a minute, then shook her head, a grimace on her face.

Ernest piped up, “It’s always the ones who work the hardest that end up being given all the work.”

Dr. Baker looked over, her heavy sigh filling the room. “You’re right about that, Mr. Peterson. I always feel like I’m rushing around and then others... well, anyway, how are you doing? I understand that you’ll be discharged tomorrow. Your family will assist, and you’ll attend outpatient physical therapy.”

“Yes, I think it’ll be easier to heal at home. Hell, having my own bed will be nice.”

“I’ve always thought patients with a supportive place to go to would heal faster.”

Relief washed over him as he processed her words. He was going home, and so was Betty. Dr. Baker redirected her attention to Fred, and Ernest allowed his gaze to drift back to the window as the sun set. San Jose had mild winters, and while he looked forward to the upcoming holidays with his

family, he preferred the longer spring days.

A deep sigh left his chest, and his body shifted restlessly. Gazing across the room as Dr. Baker finished talking to Fred, a flash of light moved across his line of vision. Suddenly struck with a hidden memory, his body stiffened. He fervently searched his mind for the night Martin Noble died, and a gasp left his lips. *I can't believe I didn't remember that earlier!*

Dr. Baker waved goodbye before she left the room. Twisting awkwardly, he fumbled for his phone tucked in a pouch beside his bed. He started to call Ian but hesitated. Even though Fred was medicated and Don was snoring, what he needed to say required a private conversation where prying ears couldn't hear.

Getting out of bed, he again pushed his walker into the hall. Turning, he headed toward Betty's room. At the nurses' station, he passed Mason and Noreen, both swinging their heads in his direction.

"Whoa, speed demon." Mason laughed.

"You look like a man on a mission," Noreen added. "Where are you off to in such a hurry?"

"I'm going down to Betty's room. I'm hoping to find Vicki there, also."

"They walked out to the courtyard, I believe." Noreen smiled and cocked her head to the side, her gaze boring into him.

He offered a chin lift but didn't reply, simply pushing his walker with great haste down the hall, glancing over his shoulder a few times to see if anyone was following. At the alcove where visitors' chairs were located, he stopped to dial Ian's number, but the voicemail was all he received. Inwardly grumbling, he left a message. "Ian, boy, I remembered something important. I need to tell you that I know who did it. I'm going to find Vicki. Come as soon as you can."

He hustled as fast as he could move, surprising himself with his speed. When he came to the door leading to the courtyard, he pushed it open and maneuvered through, spying Vicki and Betty sitting on a bench. Both looked up and smiled in greeting. "We were just getting ready to come in. Now that the sun has started to set, it's chilly," Vicki said.

Excitement surged as he came closer and announced, "I know who did it! I remembered something, but I can't get ahold of Ian!"

Vicki and Betty's gazes jumped to his face, and their simultaneous gasps rang out in the small courtyard.

"What? What are you talking about?" Vicki's confusion and incredulity

laced her words.

He moved closer, glanced back and forth between Betty and Vicki, and repeated, "I know who did it." Winded, he sat down on the bench facing theirs. His chest heaved with excitement and not a little exertion. Catching his breath, he leaned forward. "I was in bed, and a flash of light caught my eye. It was so quick that I completely forgot about it. But that's all it took for the memory to bounce right back to the forefront of my mind!"

Before he could speak more, Vicki's gaze shifted over his shoulder to something beyond him. He twisted his head and spied Dr. Baker standing at the gate leading from the employee parking lot to the courtyard, no longer wearing a smile.

Realizing his error too late, he hoisted upright. He spun his walker around to face her, deliberately positioning himself as a barrier between her and the two women he cared for.

"You." His voice was strong, although his hand shook slightly as he pointed toward her. "You were the one leaning over Martin's bed that night he died."

Her eyes widened slightly, a flash of surprise rushing through them, but she quickly shuttered her emotions behind a blank expression. "Mr. Peterson, you're confused, and everything is all tangled in your memory."

"Don't pull that elderly confusion crap on me," he rebuffed sharply. "I know it was you."

She turned her irate gaze toward him. "What led you to this conclusion?"

"Your eyeglasses. A glint from the hallway light reflected off them. It was so dark for me to realize it then, but when you were leaning over the new patient in my room, that same flash hit me. And I remembered. As you left the room, your profile is exactly what I saw that night."

Sensing a shift nearby, he glanced sideways to see that Vicki had silently moved to stand beside him.

"Dr. Baker?" Vicki said, her voice gentle but firm. "You need to step back. Let us get help for you."

Dr. Baker threw her head back with a scornful, guttural laugh. "You must be crazy."

"Not as crazy as you," Ernest muttered under his breath.

Betty shushed him, and he clamped his mouth shut and swiveled his gaze toward Betty. Anger filled her face as she locked eyes with the doctor, and her hand slid into the little bag, slung crosswise over her body.

“I wouldn’t do that if I were you, Mrs. McGillicuddy,” Dr. Baker warned. “If your fingers get close to your phone, I’ll decide that Mr. Peterson might need my special attention.”

A sharp intake of breath from Vicki drew his attention back to Dr. Baker. Cold fear ran through his blood as he noted the small handgun pulled from her lab coat pocket. Before he had a chance to speak, Dr. Baker said, “I would advise all three of you not to do anything foolish.”

“You don’t need them,” Ernest said, jerking his head to the side where Vicki stood and Betty sat. “All you need is one hostage, and you’ve got me.”

Vicki stepped closer, her hand laying across his as he steadied his stance by holding his walker. She shook her head. “No, Dr. Baker. You need me. Ernest and Miss Betty can’t move fast enough to give you a hostage that allows you a quick getaway. If anyone sees you leaving with one of them, that would alert the other staff. If you’re leaving with me, you have more of a chance.”

Dr. Baker snorted, her hard gaze firing lasers at the trio. “Move toward the gate.”

Ernest glanced at Vicki, but she simply nodded before turning to assist Betty to stand. He maneuvered his walker to stay right with Betty as she grasped her walker.

“Okay, Vicki. Do exactly what I say, or what happens to them will be your fault. Go through the gate and head to the black sedan on the right.”

Vicki walked out of the courtyard garden and looked around before catching Ernest’s eye. He’d hoped to see someone... anyone, but the employee parking lot was devoid of people at the moment.

“This isn’t what I wanted to do,” Dr. Baker murmured.

“Sara, you’re a doctor. You don’t need to do this,” Vicki said, her hands lifted in surrender. “Please.”

“I don’t have a choice!”

“Why? Why are you doing this?”

“I have to get away,” Sara muttered, her eyes darting around. “Stop here. This is my car.” She circled around where she could keep all three of them in her line of sight.

“Just take me. But leave them here,” Vicki persistently begged.

“I’m not stupid enough to leave them here! I need a chance to get away, and I can’t do that by leaving somebody here.” With her weapon still trained on them, she reached into her pocket with her free hand, pulled out her key

fob, and clicked open the locks. “Perks of being one of the doctors is that I get to park close to the building.” She snorted in derision. “Like that’s a fucking perk!”

Vicki begged once again for Sara only to take her, and once again, she was rebuffed. “Stop wasting my time! I’m taking all three of you!”

With the car doors opened, Ernest vibrated angrily as he glared at Sara. Not willing to give her a reason to hurt either of the women, he stood as tall as he could and looked at Vicki. Then with a quick dip of his chin, hoping he offered support, he assisted Betty into the back seat. He folded her walker and set it in front of her before walking around the vehicle and repeating the actions for himself.

Sara ordered Vicki to get into the driver's seat as she slid into the passenger side, keeping the weapon trained on him and Betty in the back seat.

“Where to?” Vicki asked.

“We’ll go to my house. I’ll take care of you there, and that’ll give me a chance to get away.”

As Poole drove, Ian pulled his phone from his pocket and scrolled through his texts, surprised that Vicki hadn't sent a message when she finished work. She was staying in Miss Betty's room tonight and taking tomorrow off to get her home while he helped get his grandfather settled at home. Next, checking his missed calls, seeing one from his grandfather and another from his mom, he muttered, "Grandpa almost never calls." He listened to the first voice message, his heart rate increasing with each word. "Oh fuck, Grandpa!"

When Poole whipped his attention to him, Ian hit play with the message on speaker. *"I remembered something important. I need to tell you that I know who did it. I'm going to go find Vicki. Come as soon as you can."*

Poole hit the SUV's direct radio into LSIWC. As soon as it connected, he said, "Ian got a message from his grandfather." He looked at Ian. "Play it again."

Ian repeated the message for the benefit of those in the compound. Then he played the second message from his parents, not caring if it was personal.

His mom's message said, "Honey, do you know where Vicki is? We came to visit your grandfather, but no one has seen him since he went out to the courtyard to find Vicki and Betty. We wondered if she went somewhere with them."

"They'll get on it," Poole said. "Grab your tablet so you can follow what they see."

"On the door cameras," Jeb radioed.

Jeb flashed the outdoor cameras from the hospital onto the screens of the tablets everyone had. "What time did your grandfather call?"

Looking down, Ian hated that his hands shook as he checked his phone.

“It was 3:57. And he would’ve been going to the courtyard garden near the employee parking lot.”

Jeb backed up the feed, and Ian watched carefully. “There’s Vicki and Betty.” The two women walked out of the building and sat on one of the benches in the small courtyard.

A few minutes later, Jeb called out over the radio. “A female in a white lab coat is going to a black sedan close to the courtyard.”

As Poole raced toward the hospital, Ian watched as the woman opened her passenger door, leaned in, and then stepped away from her car.

“There’s Grandpa,” Ian said, watching his grandfather walk over to Vicki and Miss Betty. Ian could tell he was talking to them before sitting on a bench.

Carson interrupted. “I’m sending Hop and Dolby to head your way in the helicopter. They’ll coordinate with you as they get closer.”

Jeb said, “Looks like that hospital employee is going to go through the courtyard to get back inside. Once she gets close to the camera, we should be able to see who it is—”

“Fuck! That’s Dr. Baker!” Ian growled as she approached the trio in the courtyard, then pulled a gun from her pocket. His heart dropped, and he barely heard the curses from the other Keepers in the compound. “Crazy bitch has a gun.” He watched as they all left the courtyard and walked over to the sedan.

Leo cut in. “Poole, we’re going to track them—”

Just then, Ian’s phone rang, and he looked down at the caller ID. His breath rushed from his lungs. “It’s my grandpa.” He hit connect and then speaker so that he would be heard by all the Keepers regardless of where they were. They listened to the muffled sounds, and then Vicki asked where they would go.

“We’ll go to my house. I’ll take care of you there, and that’ll give me a chance to get away.”

“Holy shit! Grandpa is letting us listen in by calling me!”

Natalie called out Dr. Baker’s address, and Abbie added, “Her house is about twenty miles southeast of the hospital. That puts your ETA about fifteen minutes from where you are now.”

“I need a place to land the bird when we get there,” Hop radioed.

Carson called out, “Landon now has the information. He’d been talking to the admins at the hospital and is leaving now. He’ll head to Dr. Baker’s

house.”

Of the numerous missions Ian had been on, none had ever struck him with the fear he experienced at this moment. The air seemed to thicken, catching in his lungs. His skin felt stretched taut over his muscles, and he was sure Poole could hear his heartbeat pounding.

Poole glanced at him, and Ian couldn't pretend he wasn't affected. In the short time he'd been a Keeper, he'd been paired with Poole more than the others. While he felt camaraderie with them, he'd become closer to the former SEAL. Yet Poole was one of the single men, and Ian questioned if his friend could possibly understand his turmoil.

“This isn't our first rodeo, you know,” Poole said, his hands tightening on the steering wheel. “You've heard the stories. Every one of the Keepers seems to get with somebody in an extreme situation. Hop swears that it's because boring just isn't going to cut it with a Keeper.”

Ian didn't reply, but right now, he'd take boring with Vicki over the fear tearing through his gut.

Hop radioed, “Landon has received permission for us to land in an empty parking lot two blocks away from Sara Baker's house. He's got a local agent who'll meet us. We should arrive about ten minutes after you do.”

He stared at the SUV's specialized console map and watched as they approached their target.

“She lives in the Wesley Acres subdivision. Mid-priced houses with third-acre-sized yards. Neighbors on either side. An alley runs behind the houses so the garbage cans can be discreetly picked up,” Natalie reported. “I guess seeing a garbage can offends some people's sensibilities.”

“Is the parking from the street or the alley?” Poole asked.

Abbie answered, “Both, but there's no way she'll want to take them through the front door. Two people with walkers would attract attention.”

“What the fuck is her plan?” Ian wondered aloud.

“She said that she would take care of them. My guess is that she'll restrain them there so that she can get what she needs to get away. She may already have a plan if she's been killing patients for a while,” Leo said.

Ian heard Leo's explanation but knew there was another possibility... taking care of them could mean killing them. The air rushed out as he locked his body to stay still.

“Don't go there,” Poole said. “She won't do anything in the car, and we're right behind her.” He radioed, “We'll park down the street in the alley.”

We can—”

“Hang on!” Abbie called out. “The house next door is for sale and is empty. Park in the driveway of that house from the alley. The privacy fence between the two properties will prevent her from seeing you.”

“Fuckin’ perfect,” Poole said, turning at the landscaped corner with the brick sign displaying Wesley Acres. Following the directions, they turned onto a paved lane behind a row of houses. Finding the one next to Dr. Baker’s house, he pulled in and cut the engine. The privacy fence gave them the perfect cover.

They climbed from the SUV, and Poole hustled to the fence, making no sound despite his large size and boots. With an angled scope, he peered into Dr. Baker’s backyard. Turning, he jogged back, reporting, “They just went into the house. Do you still have a connection to your grandfather?”

“Yeah... Keepers listening in, also—” Ian said. He and Poole swiftly retrieved their body armor and weapons from the arsenal in the back, preparing for any danger that awaited. By now, the evening’s darkness shrouded the area, offering a cloak of shadows and making it easier for them to slip into Dr. Baker’s yard. Checking their ear radios, they confirmed that Landon was arriving. Hop and Dolby were also on their way, but Ian wasn’t willing to delay moving forward.

They spied Dr. Baker’s black sedan at the back of her yard. Desperation gnawed at his gut as he prayed he’d be able to get his grandfather, Betty, and Vicki out safely. Driven by a sense of urgency, he raced toward the back door.

Abbie radioed, “I have the floor plan for the house. Two-story colonial. Kitchen in the back. Dining room and living room in the front. The family room is next to the kitchen in the back, with a sliding glass door leading outside. Small powder room and laundry room. Upstairs bedrooms.”

Poole dropped to a crouch and skirted alongside the house. With a compact scope, he peered through the bottom corner of the dining room window. A subtle hand signal conveyed the room was empty. Ian promptly did the same through the back door window, providing a view into the kitchen. It was also empty. As Poole stealthily made his way to the next window that gave a view into the living room, Ian detected voices nearby.

He cautiously approached the curtained sliding glass doors. His pulse quickened as he continued to the side of the house, nearing a family room window. Manipulating his camera scope, he was astonished to see the room

still contained a hospital bed, an IV stand, and a small table with prescription bottles lining it. A chair was nearby, and Vicki was perched on the edge with her hands behind her back. Betty and his grandfather sat on a small settee in the middle of the room, creating a barrier between the family room and the kitchen.

Since the Keepers could view what he observed through the camera scope, Ian wasn't surprised when he heard one of them say, "Fuck. She hasn't changed things since her father died."

Dr. Baker wasn't present in his view, and he nodded as Poole used hand signals indicating lights were on in one of the bedrooms upstairs. Assuming that was where she had gone, he wondered if she was still armed.

A faint rustling behind caused Ian to swivel around, catching sight of Landon maneuvering through the yard. Close behind was Hop and Dolby, their support welcome.

"I want to get inside," Ian said as they approached. "The sooner, the better. If she's upstairs in the bedroom, then we've got a chance at getting them out with less threat involved."

"Abbie," Dolby radioed. "What is the position of the staircase to the second floor?"

"Straight stairs, no landing. Ten feet from the front door along the right outer wall."

Dolby turned to the others. "I'm going in the front."

"I'm going straight into the kitchen," Ian said.

"Going through the front with Dolby," Poole radioed from the side of the house.

Hop indicated he would stay outside and watch the second floor, ensuring she did not have an escape route from another direction.

Landon looked at Ian and said, "I'm with you. Unofficially. So do what you need to do to get in."

Ian nodded his understanding of Landon's unspoken directive. He retrieved his lock-picking kit from his gear and deftly manipulated the lock. He swiftly entered, moving with stealth into the room.

Vicki's gaze darted up to him, and she gasped. Reacting instinctively, he shook his head, and she closed her mouth, offering a quick nod. Leaning toward Betty and Ernest, she mouthed, "Stay quiet. Help is here."

Her gaze jumped up to meet Ian's again, and electricity arced through the room, just like he'd felt the first time he'd seen her. A surge of emotion hit

him, causing his heart to swell in his chest. The yearning to hold her in his arms threatened to consume his thoughts.

Footsteps descending the stairs pushed his desires aside. He hurried to the pantry and slipped inside with the door almost closed. Checking his weapon for readiness, he tapped the radio on his shoulder to activate the recording function, knowing it would capture every crucial moment.

The footsteps entering the room were accompanied by a loud huff as a suitcase landed on the floor with a thud. Dr. Baker looked at the trio. “Well, I see you’ve stayed put, which is good.”

“Sara? What happened to your father?” Vicki asked. “Where is he?”

“He died.”

Vicki’s body jerked lightly. “I’m sorry, I didn’t realize.”

“Nobody did.”

“Then why does this room look like he was just here?” Ernest asked, his bushy eyebrows drawn down.

Sara’s gaze shifted toward the hospital bed, her features contorting into a disapproving frown as she slowly shook her head. Her voice was laced with bitterness. “I had to transform this room when he needed help. Christ, if I’d only known.”

“Known what?” Vicki asked, her voice still cautious.

“He paid for my medical degree... completely. So I would have no student loans. But the agreement was that I’d never put him in a nursing home. I had no idea how long he might last at the end. I was so tired of having his needs take over my house. Coming home exhausted at the end of the day. Drained after taking care of older patients all day and then dealing with his needs and demands when I got home. I had to get the hospital bed on the first floor and hire help.”

She heaved a great sigh, appearing as though weighed down by an unknown force. “I hated the way this room smelled. I’d try to cook, but it smelled like medicine and a bedpan. God, it stunk! Nothing I could do made it seem like my home anymore. I kept thinking when he finally died, I could turn this room back into its original purpose... a family room.”

“Then why didn’t you?” Vicki asked softly. Her gaze darted between the doctor and the kitchen.

Ian sensed Vicki was trying to keep Dr. Baker talking so they’d know her actions and motivations.

Dr. Baker’s scoff carried bitter resignation. “Why didn’t I reclaim it as a

family room? Because I have no fucking family, Vicki!” Her words dripped with raw emotion. “I have no one to come home to. No loving mom or even a friend like you have. No man to impress or to help take my mind off the stress! Oh, I know you do. You waltz in and have time for a man in your life.”

She paced to the side of the hospital bed, her face contorted. “God knows, my dad was cold as ice and never satisfied with anything I did. Believe me, he might have funded my education, but he wielded it as a weapon, constantly reminding me that I owed him. He pulled the strings, and I had to dance to his tune! I despised hearing the home health nurse gush about what a good day he’d had while I was utterly worn out and frustrated with my own job. Then she’d leave, and I had to deal with him all night. I just kept thinking that if he would just die, everything would be so much easier.”

“And so you took care of that,” Vicki whispered, her voice filled with shock and sadness.

“He just wouldn’t die,” Sara wailed, her shoulders slumping.

Ian detected the despair in her voice. Keeping his gaze fixed on her, he couldn’t ascertain if she held the weapon but didn’t want to take a chance on her firing in the confined space with everyone so close together.

“So you...” Vicki prodded, her whisper barely audible.

“Jesus, Vicki, you can’t even say it, can you? Yes, I killed my father,” Dr. Baker affirmed. “After a horrid day, I came home to deal with him. I saw that his new insulin prescription had been delivered, and the nurse left it on the table. It was so easy. Just the right amount of insulin to still his heart. It was so peaceful.” She released a long sigh, her lips curving slightly. “I slept through the night for the first time in a long time. The following morning, I called the ambulance. I knew the medical examiner. No autopsy... heart failure. Easy.”

A chilling silence settled over the room as Sara’s admission hung heavy in the air. Vicki dragged in an audible breath. “And the men in the hospital?”

A choking snort escaped Sara’s lips as she smirked. “Yes, I *helped them on their way to the afterlife.*” She laughed and shook her head. “Right after I took care of my father, a new patient was admitted. No family. No visitors. No one to help him. And I was examining him, and he snapped at me. I don’t even remember why, but I thought, who the hell are you to treat me like that? It was easy enough to have a little insulin, and adding it into his IV, I took care of the problem.”

“And the others?”

“I found that it’s not hard to handle the problem. They had no one to care. I made it easy on them and easy on us.” Sara shrugged, seemingly undisturbed by her actions. “I wish I’d discovered that solution a couple of years ago. It would’ve saved me a lot of hassle with my dad.”

Betty and Ernest sat on the sofa, both completely still, saying nothing. Vicki’s gaze shifted slightly to the kitchen but then looked away.

Poole had slipped through the front door and radioed that he was in the living room, right at the hall leading to the family room. He, too, waited to see what she would confess.

Seemingly lost in thought, Sara suddenly jerked as though jolted back to the reality before her. “Well, I took care of those problems, and now all that’s left is to take care of you three. Her forehead crinkled as confusion crossed her face. “I can’t shoot you. To be honest, I’ve never even fired a gun. My dad had this one in his house from years before. But I can make sure you won’t say anything to anyone.” She stepped to the table by the hospital bed and reached for a prescription vial, pulling a hypodermic out of the drawer.

Instantly reacting as he understood her intent, Ian threw open the pantry door, stepped out with his raised weapon, and commanded, “Stop. Put your hands up where I can see them!”

His peripheral vision allowed him to see his grandfather and Miss Betty’s heads snap around at the commotion, and Poole approached from the hall. Vicki’s gaze bore into him, a silent connection between them, but his gaze never left the target.

She let out a piercing scream as she lifted her hands, the hypodermic needle still clenched tightly in her fingers.

“Drop it,” Ian ordered as Poole appeared around the corner, his gun trained on her.

She slowly lowered the hand with the hypodermic but didn’t drop it. Tension hung in the air as all eyes stayed on her. Lifting her hand suddenly, she aimed the needle toward herself.

Before Ian could react to incapacitate her, his grandfather swiftly flung his walker toward her, knocking her arm away from her body. Poole darted forward and grabbed her arm with enough force that she dropped the hypodermic onto the floor. Landon rushed through the back with Hop and Poole restrained her with her arms behind her back as she screamed and cried, “Just let me die! Just let me die!”

Landon stepped in to take charge of Dr. Baker, calling for the agent who had arrived.

Ian rushed toward Vicki since she was still bound, but she shook her head. "See to them first, please!"

"Don't worry, Vicki, I have them," Dolby said, moving directly to Ernest and Betty.

Ian looked over at his grandfather, catching the chin lift. "You okay, Grandpa?"

"As long as I know these two ladies are good, then I am, too," Ernest said.

"Miss Betty?"

She looked over at Ernest and lifted a brow. "You told me you wanted to take me on a date when we left the hospital. I hope this doesn't count as our first date."

The Keepers in the den began to chuckle. Dolby and Hop quickly checked Ernest and Betty. Vicki shifted around so Ian could cut through the tape binding her arms behind her. It wasn't until she leaped to her feet and threw her arms around him that he finally allowed himself to feel the agony and the ecstasy of rescuing the woman he loved.

She held his gaze and whispered, "I love you."

"I love you, too, babe."

Holding her gaze, she finally let out a sigh of relief and turned to hug Betty. She went into nurse mode, demanding Ernest and Betty be taken straight to the hospital to be checked out.

Dolby sidled up next to him and inclined his head toward Vicki. "I like her, man."

Chuckling, glad his heartbeat had finally returned to normal, he nodded. "I do, too."

"And your grandfather is kick-ass." Poole laughed, slapping him on the shoulder.

Ernest looked over and grinned as he slid his arm around Betty.

"Best there is," Ian agreed, his heart full. His arm wrapped around Vicki and held her gaze, repeating, "Best there is."

The farmhouse was filled as the large gathering sat around the massive dining room table that had been expanded with a smaller table for the children. Ian's grandfather sat at one end, with Betty next to him. His father sat at the other, with his mother close by. His sister, brother-in-law, and Vicki next to him rounded out the gathering.

The Ridgeway annual holiday meal was in full swing. The blessing had been said. The turkey and ham were carved. The dishes passed, and the desserts sat on the kitchen counter, awaiting the end of the meal.

It had been several years since he'd been home for the holidays, and he was grateful that Carson didn't schedule any missions or accept any assignments that would hinder the Keepers from celebrating. His mother had decorated the house more than he'd even remembered as a child. It seemed after his military absences and the close call Vicki, Betty, and her father had at the hands of a killer, Ellen Ridgeway was determined to outdo all previous holidays.

He glanced to the side and smiled at Vicki, seeing her gaze on him as well. Leaning closer, he kissed her lightly before returning his attention to the others and his meal. Ernest and Betty had continued their outpatient physical therapy, moving very well with canes and no longer needing walkers. Vicki had reported that the ramifications of Dr. Baker's confession and arrest had rocked the hospital. The gossip mill had run rampant, but most importantly, the hospital administrators were cooperating with the FBI to determine the scope of her involvement in the patients' deaths.

It seemed that her attorneys were already throwing out the defense of insanity, which Ian figured might not be far from the truth. At least, Dr.

Baker would receive a psych eval from the jail, and he had no doubt it would take a while for her case to ever go to trial.

So far, the senator had managed to keep his and his wife's names out of the press, but Ian had no doubt that a reporter would dig up the connection at some point. In truth, he couldn't care less about the senator. He was just glad that Mr. Noble had received justice in the end.

Vicki had managed to maintain her professionalism and go to work each day, determined to provide the care necessary for the geriatric veterans who came through her ward.

Now, he and Vicki were looking for a place of their own, but they weren't in a rush. Maybe a rental to start with before buying. It didn't matter to him as long as they were together... with a king-sized bed.

Vicki hated leaving Miss Betty by herself, but he'd seen how his grandfather stared lovingly at his former love and had a feeling that she wouldn't be alone for long. Vicki had even mentioned that Betty would give up her longtime home to find a place with Ernest. "When I think of home, I think of being with the ones I love," she'd been quoted.

He smiled, agreeing with that sentiment.

His mind drifted to Blessing, wondering if she was at the Atlanta USO during the holidays. Somehow, he had a feeling that it was home to her. That reminded him that he would text Danny, Quinn, Roan, and Alex to wish them happy holidays. As Vicki leaned against him, his arm snaked around her, and his heart leaped as it always did when she was near. Kissing her lightly, he knew he'd found his home.

A week later, Vicki and Ian sat on the sofa near midnight in Miss Betty's house. Betty had long gone to bed, declaring that ringing in the new year was something she wasn't willing to give up her beauty rest for.

Ian excused himself just before midnight, and Vicki watched him disappear down the hall. Assuming he went to the bathroom, she softly called out, "Don't take long. It's almost midnight."

A few seconds later, her phone rang, and she looked down to see his name on the caller ID. Grinning, she answered. "Hello?"

"Hey, Vicki. It's Ian. We said I'd call on New Year's Eve, remember?"

She giggled. “Yeah, I remember. I’m glad you called.”

“It might be two years later, but I got the right thing, at the right time, and in the right place. Just wanted to make sure you knew how much I love you as we start the new year.”

She looked up to see him walk back into the room, his phone clapped to his ear. “Well, thank goodness I answered this time because I want to tell you that I love you, too.”

They stood in the middle of the small living room, the darkness only broken by the twinkling lights decorating the small tree in the corner. The colorful lights danced over their faces as both lowered their phones while the electricity arced between them. Slowly, she smiled and moved into his open arms. As he enveloped her in his embrace, she knew she’d found home.

Don’t miss the next the next Long Road Home book!

[Too Close to Home \(Abbie Zanders\)](#)

[Home Coming \(Cat Johnson\)](#)

[Home at Last \(Caitlyn O’Leary\)](#)

[A Home for Love \(Kris Michaels\)](#)

[For Maryann Jordan’s Lighthouse Security Series West Coast](#)

ALSO BY MARYANN JORDAN

Don't miss other [Maryann Jordan books!](#)

Baytown Boys (small town, military romantic suspense)

[Coming Home](#)

[Just One More Chance](#)

[Clues of the Heart](#)

[Finding Peace](#)

[Picking Up the Pieces](#)

[Sunset Flames](#)

[Waiting for Sunrise](#)

[Hear My Heart](#)

[Guarding Your Heart](#)

[Sweet Rose](#)

[Our Time](#)

[Count On Me](#)

[Shielding You](#)

[To Love Someone](#)

[Sea Glass Hearts](#)

[Protecting Her Heart](#)

[Sunset Kiss](#)

Baytown Heroes - A Baytown Boys subseries

[A Hero's Chance](#)

[Finding a Hero](#)

[A Hero for Her](#)

[Needing A Hero](#)

[Hopeful Hero](#)

For all of Miss Ethel's boys:

Heroes at Heart (Military Romance)

[Zander](#)

Rafe

Cael

Jaxon

Jayden

Asher

Zeke

Cas

Lighthouse Security Investigations

Mace

Rank

Walker

Drew

Blake

Tate

Levi

Clay

Cobb

Bray

Josh

Knox

Lighthouse Security Investigations West Coast

Carson

Leo

Rick

Hop

Dolby

Bennett

Poole

Hope City (romantic suspense series co-developed with Kris Michaels)

Brock book 1

Sean book 2

Carter book 3

[Brody](#) book 4

[Kyle](#) book 5

[Ryker](#) book 6

[Rory](#) book 7

[Killian](#) book 8

[Torin](#) book 9

[Blayze](#) book 10

[Griffin](#) book 11

Saints Protection & Investigations

(an elite group, assigned to the cases no one else wants...or can solve)

[Serial Love](#)

[Healing Love](#)

[Revealing Love](#)

[Seeing Love](#)

[Honor Love](#)

[Sacrifice Love](#)

[Protecting Love](#)

[Remember Love](#)

[Discover Love](#)

[Surviving Love](#)

[Celebrating Love](#)

[Searching Love](#)

Follow the exciting spin-off series:

Alvarez Security (military romantic suspense)

[Gabe](#)

[Tony](#)

[Vinny](#)

[Jobe](#)

SEALs

[Thin Ice \(Sleeper SEAL\)](#)

[SEAL Together \(Silver SEAL\)](#)

[Undercover Groom \(Hot SEAL\)](#)

Also for a Hope City Crossover Novel / Hot SEAL...

[A Forever Dad](#)

Long Road Home

Military Romantic Suspense

[Home to Stay](#) (a Lighthouse Security Investigation crossover novel)

[Home Port](#) (an LSI West Coast crossover novel)

Letters From Home (military romance)

[Class of Love](#)

[Freedom of Love](#)

[Bond of Love](#)

The Love's Series (detectives)

[Love's Taming](#)

[Love's Tempting](#)

[Love's Trusting](#)

The Fairfield Series (small town detectives)

[Emma's Home](#)

[Laurie's Time](#)

[Carol's Image](#)

[Fireworks Over Fairfield](#)

Please take the time to leave a review of this book. Feel free to contact me, especially if you enjoyed my book. I love to hear from readers!

[Facebook](#)

[Email](#)

[Website](#)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

I am an avid reader of romance novels, often joking that I cut my teeth on the historical romances. I have been reading and reviewing for years. In 2013, I finally gave into the characters in my head, screaming for their story to be told. From these musings, my first novel, Emma's Home, The Fairfield Series was born.

I was a high school counselor having worked in education for thirty years. I live in Virginia, having also lived in four states and two foreign countries. I have been married to a wonderfully patient man for forty-one years. When writing, my dog or one of my four cats can generally be found in the same room if not on my lap.

Please take the time to leave a review of this book. Feel free to contact me, especially if you enjoyed my book. I love to hear from readers!

[Facebook](#)

[Email](#)

[Website](#)