

A close-up photograph of a very muscular man's torso. He is shirtless, showing his chest and abdominal muscles. He has a short beard and is wearing a silver dog tag necklace. The background is a dark teal color.

GABE

SEAL SECURITY BOOK EIGHT

SHE NEEDS A PROTECTOR FROM THE DEADLY CARTEL.
BUT WHO WOULD PROTECT HIS HEART?

SUSIE MCIVER

GABE

SEAL SECURITY BOOK 8

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SEAL SECURITY BOOK 8

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GABE

“STOP FIGHTING!” I CLENCHED MY FISTS, STRUGGLING TO contain my anger. “Do you think Mom would want to see her boys like this?” I gazed at my three brothers, exhaustion and frustration etched onto their faces. Our family had no girls, and sometimes I wondered if things would have been calmer if we did.

I stepped closer, locking eyes with each of them. Their expressions were tense, and sadness lurked in their eyes. The tension in the air was thick, a cloud of emotions weighing us down. I took a deep breath, struggling to find the right words.

Looking at my brothers, my gaze lingered on their worried faces. The weight of the situation was sinking in, the reality of our mother’s vulnerability becoming undeniable.

Regret settled in my chest as I clenched my hands. I wished I had, spent more time by her side. But wishes wouldn’t alter the situation.

“It’s tough for all of us,” I continued, my voice softening. “I know it’s hard, but we have to stay together.” I reached out, placing a hand on my younger brother’s shoulder. I gestured toward the hospital building, its sterile exterior contrasting with the turmoil within. My brothers and I stood united by our concern for our mother.

Last month, we lost our father. His absence still felt fresh, like an open wound that hadn’t fully healed. And now, Mom was in the hospital after suffering a heart attack. Her condition was uncertain, and we all feared she might not return home.

The regret of not visiting her more often gnawed at me. But wishing for anything wouldn't change the situation. The thought of her not being around anymore was unbearable. She had always been the rock in our family. This was a wake-up call, reminding me of how fragile she was becoming.

My gaze shifted to the ground, guilt for missed opportunities weighing heavily on me. I loved my Mom. Danny's eyes were from tears, pain etched across his face. At twenty-six, he was scared of losing his mother.

"Last month, we lost our father," I repeated, my voice cracking. Memories of his laughter, guidance, and the void of him no longer being here hung heavy in the air. "We need to compose ourselves. We are grown men, you can't fight on the hospital grounds you'll get arrested."

Our parents had met in their forties and fallen deeply in love, never spending a day apart. Losing Dad hit us all hard, but seeing Mom's grief intensify day by day was even more agonizing.

A few days ago, while I was away on a job, Eddie called me. Mom had suffered a heart attack and hadn't regained consciousness. I ran a hand through my hair, the anxiety from that call still fresh. Eddie's worry had mirrored my own fears.

Our friend Lucy who was a nurse at the hospital called me at two in the morning, reporting that my brothers were fighting outside the hospital. I remembered the urgency in her voice, the concern that had propelled me to rush there. The scene outside had been chaotic, my brothers' anger boiling over.

Exhausted and frustrated, I rubbed my hands over my face. I was prepared to reprimand them for their fight, but Danny unexpectedly sucker-punched me in the gut. His blow caught me off guard, knocking the breath out of me. My vision blurred momentarily as I staggered back, my body reacting with a counterpunch. My blow sent him to the ground.

"Why did you do that?" Jake demanded, his voice laced with anger and confusion.

“He sucker-punched me, Danny is twenty-six. He has to learn when he sucker punches someone he’s going to get punched back.” I retorted my words sharp with the frustration that had been building within me. The situation had spiraled out of control, and I struggled to rein in my emotions.

Jake followed as I walked away, leaving Eddie with Danny. Jake’s presence beside me was reassuring, his silent support palpable.

“Carrie was here. She visited Mom,” Jake disclosed unexpectedly. His words hung in the air, catching me off guard. Carrie’s name hit me like a punch, summoning painful memories.

I froze, my body tensing at the mention of her name. Memories of our past surged back, a mix of anger, betrayal, and hurt.

“What? If you see her, tell her to stay away from my mother. She lost that right when she slept with that bastard, Paul Enos.”

“Calm down. Are you still letting that eat at you? It’s been seven years, and you were wrong about Carrie sleeping with that guy. I said it then and I’ll say again he drugged her,” Jake interjected.

“You’ve never loved someone so deeply that when they rip your heart out and crush it, leaving you utterly destroyed. Once you’ve been through that, then you can comment on the state of my heart, and only then! I hope she’s gone. I don’t want to see her.”

My voice cracked, raw emotions trembling in my words. The pain of those memories resurfaced, unhealed. That thought at the back of my mind tried to surface, and I pushed it back down.

“She hasn’t changed at all. She cut her hair short, but she’s still as beautiful as ever. Mom and Dad never believed she slept with Paul. They thought he must have drugged her too. I wasn’t the only one who thought that.”

“Can we please stop talking about her? My heart can only take so much before it breaks again,” I deflected, avoiding Jake’s gaze.

We reached Mom’s room on the cardiology floor, and I paused, observing the wires that were keeping her alive. “Mom, I love you. Please wake up,” I whispered.

The room was dimly lit, machines surrounding my mother casting an eerie glow. I stood by her bedside my heart heavy with worry. I reached out, my fingers trembling as they brushed against her hand. The coldness of her skin contrasted sharply with the warmth I remembered. Her hand moved, and I knew she had heard me. I turned to Jake. “Did you see that? Her hand moved.”

“Yeah, do you think she can hear us?”

“Yes, I think so. Mom, can you hear me? Please recover. There’s so much I want to share with you. I need to tell you about Jackson’s wife. It’s classified stuff, so you have to wake up for me to share.” I leaned closer, my voice a soft plea, a mix of desperation and love hanging in the air.

“I’ll inform the others that Mom is stirring.”

“Jake, I don’t think that’s necessary. Her hand moving doesn’t mean she’ll wake up immediately. It just shows she heard me. I’ll stay with Mom for a while.”

“Okay, I might head home and catch a nap. I haven’t slept yet.”

I remained with Mom for about an hour, before Danny walked in. I didn’t want to fight anymore, so I avoided looking at him.

“I’m sorry about earlier. I don’t know why I hit you. Everything’s been happening so fast this past month. I feel guilty for not being there for Mom. I should’ve stayed home more,” Danny’s words were sincere, carrying the weight of regret. His admission was a step toward healing the rift between us.

“Don’t worry about it, Danny. I’m sorry for knocking you down. I feel a bit guilty too, for not being there when Mom

needed me. I shouldn't have taken that job. The guys would've understood. Jake mentioned seeing Carrie. Did you see her too? I hope she's left. The last person I want to see is Carrie Bellmont." My tone was distant, a protective barrier formed over the years. The pain of our history echoed in every word.

"Remember when you used to call her Carrie Bell? You'd say, 'Here comes my Carrie Bell.

"Yeah, it's something I'd rather forget. I don't want to remember anything about Carrie," I lied, hoping Danny couldn't sense it. "I wish I'd never met her. She shattered my trust in women. I don't believe I could ever trust another woman."

"Brother, you need to move on. I'm surprised you're still hung up on Carrie. Do you still love her? Is that what this is about? You were together for two years and it's been seven years, since you broke up. You should confront her. It's the only way to find closure. As long as you avoid her, this will fester in your heart."

"Why didn't you give her a piece of your mind when you found her with Paul? Instead, you left. You never came back. You joined the Navy SEALs without confronting her, without asking why she shattered your heart."

"I know you're right. I realized it back then. I should've done something. I didn't get the satisfaction of yelling at her. I did beat up Paul, but I said nothing to Carrie. I talked to Mom earlier, and she moved her hand. She might be waking up. Wouldn't that be incredible?"

"I think she wants to be with Dad," Danny said, bending to kiss Mom's cheek. "She hasn't stopped crying since he passed away a month ago. Her heart is broken, just like yours. If she wants to go, we have to let her. We shouldn't hold her back when she longs to be with Dad. We'll never forget either of them. We love them both so much."

"Danny, you've always been the wisest among us. I think you're right. We, the boys, need to gather here and tell Mom it's okay to go. I wouldn't dream of stopping her from reuniting with Dad. I've never seen two people more in love

than Mom and Dad. We were fortunate to have them as parents. Even though she'd pretend otherwise, Mom secretly wished for a daughter."

Danny laughed. "You think so? Remember when she'd threaten to swap us for some girls if we didn't stop fighting?" Eddie would start crying until Mom reassured him she was only joking. She'd say, I'd never trade my boys. I love all of you dearly. Our parents were the best, and I hope to be as good a parent as they were," Danny said, holding Mom's hand.

"Danny, you're going to be a wonderful father. How could you not be? You had Mom and Dad showing you the way."

"You're right. We'll all make great dads. I'm going to talk to Jake and Eddie. Then we'll come back together and speak with Mom."

"Okay, I'll be right here." After he left, I sat with Mom. She had always been my confidante. "Mom, I'm sorry I didn't listen to you seven years ago. I should've confronted Carrie instead of running away. I don't even know where she lives now or what she does."

"I love you, Mom. If being with Dad is what you want, then that's what you should do. Just because we don't want to lose you doesn't mean you should stay if you long to be with Dad. We'll never forget either of you. We love you immensely."

My mother joined my father in heaven three days later, fulfilling her final wish. My brothers and I were adrift, unsure of our next steps. As pallbearers, we carried Mom to her resting place, just as we had for Dad. When I looked up, I noticed Carrie watching me.

I met her gaze, resisting the urge to engage. After the funeral, I left once again. This time, I escaped to the mountains with Jackson's new family. He understood the reason for my visit, being one of the friends who had encouraged me to face Carrie.

"So, did you talk to her?"

Baffled, I responded, "What are you talking about?"

Exasperated, he replied, “You’ve chopped enough wood to last three homes an entire winter. You know what I’m referring to. You should’ve talked to Carrie. You don’t even know what she does for a living. Leah did some digging.”

“That’s hardly surprising.”

“Don’t be sarcastic.”

“Alright, tell me what she does.”

Jackson smiled, “She’s a DEA agent who’s been in hiding because a powerful cartel is after her. She resurfaced upon learning about your mom. And it’s not just any cartel; it’s the top brass. Carrie works undercover, but someone within the organization betrayed them for ten million dollars. He was eliminated before he could collect, but he managed to tip off the DEA before his demise.”

I didn’t reply; I continued chopping wood in silence. Later, I showered at Jack’s cabin when I walked into the family room. Jack asked, “Are you ready to talk now?”

Finally, I opened up, sharing the entirety of my distressing history, starting from the day we first met in college. “When Carrie was a high school senior, her parents were killed in a bank robbery executed by the cartel. Since then, she’s vowed to dismantle the cartel. This is the second time I’ve uttered her name out loud. Mostly, it resides in my thoughts, often accusing her of betrayal.”

“I thought I’d convinced her to abandon that pursuit, of revenge on the cartel.”

Jack tipped his head frowning. “Do you still think she cheated?”

Without hesitation, I responded, “Why should I change my mind?”

Jack studied me. “Why haven’t you let go of that anger? Did Carrie ever give you a reason not to trust her before that? Who is this Paul anyway? Did he want Carrie so much that he would drug her? We can go on, but I think you get the point. Ask yourself this: who are you really angry at? Is it yourself

for leaping to conclusions about the woman you were supposed to love?”

“If she didn’t cheat, then I ruined our lives for nothing and failed to exact revenge on Paul Enos.” I took three deep breaths, to calm my heartbeats down. I never allowed this one thought that kept nagging at my mind, I never allowed it into the front of my mind, because to do so would make me the one who did Carrie wrong. But if that’s true I never deserved Carrie, for letting that bastard do what he did, and only thought about how I was hurt.

“Why don’t you ask Leah to investigate him on her computer?”

Determined, I rose and headed toward Jackson and Leah’s cabin. It puzzled me why they called them cabins when Jack’s home alone spanned five thousand square feet. All their homes were expansive. I changed course, heading for Lane’s cabin instead, where she sat on the porch reading.

“I wondered if you’d come here or to Leah’s,” she said, observing me like a spider watching its prey.

Intrigued, I asked, “Why would you wonder that?”

She clarified, “I was in Uncle Jack’s office when you spoke to him about Carrie and that jerk Paul. You know he drugged her. I wonder if he’s still causing her trouble. Damn, I’m so disappointed in you for not killing him.” Lane stood up, exclaiming, “Let’s find him.”

As I sat there with Lane, delving into every trace of Carrie’s past, a whirlwind of emotions churned within me. Anger at Paul for what he’d done to her, angrier at me for not killing him and regret for not confronting Carrie earlier, and an odd sense of duty to protect her now. Lane’s computer expertise proved invaluable as she unearthed Carrie’s history and undercover work.

Thankfully, Lane’s computer had a separate internet connection, ensuring her privacy. My emotions swirled as Paul’s face materialized on the screen. He looked sinister, and it was no surprise to discover he was wanted for murder and

human trafficking. His appearance aligned with a life dictated by drugs.

I looked at Lane, “Do you think he knows Carrie’s a top DEA agent? She was at my mom’s funeral. Do you think he showed up to see if she’d be there?”

Uncertain, Lane responded, “I’m not sure, but if he drugged her, as I’m convinced he did, he probably knows everything she’s been up to. My guess is that he was there. Hopefully, she’s covered her tracks well enough to evade him.”

Realizing the gravity of the situation, I concluded, “I’ll have to protect her, won’t I?”

Lane nodded, “Can you find her?”

I turned the question back, “Can you?”

Confidently, she replied, “Yes, I can. I’ll give you her address. Take her somewhere secure, a place where no one can find her. Stay with her until we deal with this guy. I’ll try to expedite things on my end.”

Curious about her plan, I asked, “What’s your plan?”

Lane revealed, “I’ll help spread the word about his whereabouts. There might be some unsavory characters out there who want him dead. Here’s Carrie’s address; this is where her safe house is. Oh, it’s just a few hours’ drive from here.”

“How did you get her address if it’s a safe house?”

“My computer can unearth almost anything.”

CARRIE

I WAS STRUCK BREATHLESS AT THE SIGHT OF GABE. HE appeared much larger than I remembered; I thought I had every detail of him etched in my memory. Tears welled up, but I restrained myself from calling out his name. Will my love for him persist until my last breath?

Our eyes met for a fleeting moment, a connection that cut deeper than any physical blow. The intensity of that gaze sent shivers down my spine. I clenched my fists, trying to fight back the tears. No, I won't let him see me cry. I won't let him have that satisfaction.

I tried to push aside my emotions, my anger at him for leaving me, for never letting me explain what truly happened. Why should I suffer for the past seven years? I refused to let Gabe Steller occupy my thoughts any longer. *I hate him. No, you don't. Yes, I do!*

Risking my life to attend his mother's funeral was a mistake. I cared deeply for her and his father, even though I only knew them for two years. I also knew how much Gabe and his brothers loved their parents. I wanted to support Gabe to show him I shared his pain. But his anger and coldness stung. When he glanced at me, he was a changed man, and I was still that same stupid girl.

His eyes brimmed with anger. He claimed to have loved me, always professing his love. Damn it, I was so foolish coming here, now that I was here I knew it was a mistake.

Now all I could do was weep like a baby. Come on, Carrie; you're a badass DEA agent; act like one! I could still see Gabe's gaze, filled with anger, flashing in my mind. He had claimed to love me, to cherish me, and yet, he had turned his back on me when I needed him the most.

The pain of that moment still resonated within me. He had accused me of betrayal, of sleeping with another man, and then he walked away without giving me a chance to explain. The bitterness welled up inside me, a mixture of hurt and frustration.

My fingers gripped the steering wheel as I drove, my mind a whirlwind of conflicting emotions. The car behind me had been tailing me for hours. I glanced at the rearview mirror, tension coursing through me. Was it Paul Enos or someone from the cartel?

Paul deserved to die. I was surprised he was still alive, considering he was wanted for three counts of murder and human trafficking.

"If I ever get the chance, I will kill him. I wish I had done it years ago when I woke up to find Gabe pummeling him mercilessly. We were both naked, entangled in my bed sheets. Gabe's voice resonated with agony as he bellowed his rage—I'll never forget the pain I heard in his voice."

Everything flashed through my mind for the millionth time. I remembered my head throbbed from the drug Paul Enos must have slipped into my soda. Trembling and terrified, I lay there. Not knowing what happened, as soon as Gabe left I started vomiting. I walked into the other room to get my bat. I was going to kill Paul Enos, but he was already gone. I went to the hospital, and they called the police for me.

I still remember Gabe's gaze held a profound hatred as he looked at me before he turned and walked away. Since then, he hasn't uttered a single word despite my numerous attempts to reach out to him. As the days passed, I grew angry because he believed I would betray him with another man. He had no faith or trust in me, the woman he claimed to love. Screw him!

I made a decision to pull over, my heart racing. The stranger's approach brought a surge of adrenaline. I gripped my gun, ready for whatever awaited me when the individual approached my window.

"Why the fuck did you pull over? I could have been from the cartel or that crazy Enos. Never pull over again. I'm surprised you are still alive if this is how you work."

"Fuck you!" I said before I pulled out, my tires squealing. I didn't give a damn. Why was he following me? I didn't understand anything; I needed answers. I pulled over once more. This time, I stepped out of my car and walked toward his vehicle. "I want to know why the hell you're following me."

"I'm watching over you because I believe Paul Enos is after you."

"Are you out of your frigging mind? Paul Enos has been after me for years. Why do you think he drugged me seven years ago? I should have killed him back then." I fell silent, gazing at the man who had torn my heart from my chest, leaving it shattered into a million pieces.

It took me a long time to put myself back together. I will never allow it to happen again. Now he claims he wants to protect me from Paul fucking Enos. "Listen to me. I don't want your protection. I've been taking care of myself for years," I said, my voice laced with determination. That gullible girl is gone. Fuck him!

The intensity of Gabe's gaze was something I couldn't ignore, even if I wanted to. His eyes held a depth of emotion that both drew me in and pushed me away.

"Please stop following me. I don't want you following me or doing anything for me. You haven't spoken to me in seven years. You believed I cheated on you. You wouldn't talk, wouldn't listen. I can't deal with you right now. I'm supposed to be hiding from the damn cartel. Let me go where I need to go, ALONE."

"No, I won't do that."

“What do you mean you won’t do that? If I want you to stay away, you will stay. You can’t follow me. If you keep it up, I’ll make a call.”

“Go ahead. I’ll make a call too.”

“You know what, fine, whatever. You never wanted me around you when I wanted to talk to you,” I said, turning around, getting back in my vehicle and driving back to the cabin where I was staying. I halted when I spotted a vehicle in my driveway. Stepping out of my car, I walked toward the front door, my gun at my side. Gabe was beside me, pushing me behind him. He pressed me against the wall. “Stay here.”

“Screw you,” I whispered defiantly. At that moment, I heard something near the side of the cabin, and Gabe reacted swiftly, raising his gun. A woman emerged from around the corner.

“Hi, I’m sorry for not calling you. But this requires immediate attention. I apologize again. My name is Lane James, previously Lane Nelson, but we were adopted by our uncle, so our name changed.”

“Lane, what’s going on?”

“Let’s go inside. The cartel is now collaborating with someone else. It would be best if you left immediately,” the woman said, looking at me. I have a place in Texas if you want to go there. Here are the keys and address, or you can go to one of Gabe’s safe houses.”

“Take Gabe’s vehicle and leave your phones and passports. Let me see your phone.” I watched as the stunning woman extended her hand to me. “I’m sorry, I can tell you are used to giving orders, but I’m not giving anyone my passport. My things are already tucked away somewhere safe. Wait, who are you, and what are you talking about?”

“I used to be in the Green Beret Special Ops, and now my sister, uncle, and I have a business together, James Investigations. We still retain our rights and computers, so I can dig up anything, including information on the man who used to be your partner, the one who betrayed you. You need

to get in the vehicle and leave before Enos and the cartel find you.”

“I’ll explain everything as we go. Thank you, Lane. I owe you once again,” Gabe said, as if he would tell me what to do, and I would do it. Did he actually believe I was so gullible?

“Don’t worry; I’m keeping track,” Lane commented.

“Stop right there. I will leave after you tell me how you know my partner betrayed me?”

“He’s dead.”

“That bastard, why would he trust the cartel? I looked at Gabe, “I don’t want you anywhere near me because you also betrayed me.”

GABE

I DIDN'T CARE IF I HAD TO FOLLOW CARRIE ALL THE WAY TO Texas or wherever she was going. Three days later, she turned off the freeway onto a dirt road. We traveled about seven miles before stumbling upon a cabin with an old, rickety-looking porch adorned with four wooden rockers that had seen better days.

Stepping out of the vehicle, I surveyed the surroundings, my curiosity piqued. "Why are you here? Who owns this place? Where in the world are we?" My questions went unanswered. "Carrie, I'm asking you something," I pressed, my confusion growing. We were deep within the Appalachian Mountains, and her purpose eluded me.

Unease gnawed at me as I trailed behind Carrie. She located a key beneath a decaying piece of wood on the porch. After unlocking the door, she hesitated, taking in the interior before stepping inside. She made her way to a back door, opening the wooden shutters on the four windows before moving into another room.

Suddenly, I heard voices outside, and to my surprise, six gun-toting men stood at the opened door. "About time you showed up. Took you long enough. Where have you been? They've been searching high and low for you," an elderly man stated.

"I know they are, Grandpa. That's why I'm here. I'm starving. Did you bring me anything?"

“Devon, fetch that food in here.” “Who’s he?” The older man’s inquiry caught my attention. *Did she just call him Grandpa?*

“His name doesn’t matter. He won’t be staying here.”

“The hell I won’t. I’m protecting you,” I heard myself saying, trying to assert my presence. The men at the doorway chuckled, and Carrie herself chuckled. I remembered that laugh, which stirred emotions I hadn’t had in a long time, seven years to be exact. I had to shift the way I stood because I was hard as hell for her.

What have I done? Assuming she had sex with Paul Enos was a grave mistake. I’ll kill him for what he’s done to her, but even then, I doubt she’ll forgive me. I wouldn’t have forgiven her if she thought I had sex with another woman, especially while I was drugged.

“Carrie has protectors. Her family will protect her,” one of the men said, trying to get rid of me.

“I thought you didn’t have any family,” I blurted out.

“Why would you think that?”

“You never mentioned them.”

“Sure I did. You didn’t listen to me when I talked. The best thing that happened to me was when you left me. You thought you loved me, but you didn’t. You just needed a reason to join the Navy Seals. I wouldn’t have held you back from pursuing your dreams. Instead, you accused me of being unfaithful.”

“That’s not true.”

“You didn’t trust me enough to listen. That’s not love. I don’t want you here. Please, go,” she stood before me, a determined look on her face. “Don’t you dare say you love me,” she growled under her breath, a message meant solely for me. My hands cupped her face, and I kissed her, feelings resurfacing, but she pulled away abruptly.

“You stay away from me. Or I’ll kill you,” she snarled.

“Fine, I’ll leave, but I’ll be at the end of the dirt road. That’s as far as I’m going,” I stated, walking outside and

getting into my truck. Moments later, one of the men walked out.

“You can’t take your vehicle. It’ll be spotted.”

“Tell me, who will spot it?”

“Whoever wants to harm Carrie.”

“What relation are you to Carrie?”

“I’m not blood-related to Carrie. As I said, you’ll have to walk.”

I laughed, and shook my head. “Tell me, are you a DEA agent?”

“How did you guess?”

“Did you know Carrie’s partner turned her over to the cartel?”

“Yes, Carrie called and told us. The bastard deserved to die. How was your friend able to find that out?”

“She has her ways. What’s your name?”

“Ben Wilder, what’s your name?”

“Gabe Steller,” I introduced myself.

“Gabe Steller, from Seal Security?” the man questioned.

“Yes, how do you know Seal Security?” I replied.

“My cousin is Blade Wilder,” he explained.

“No shit. Are you anything like Blade?” I asked.

“Who do you think taught Blade what he knows?” he retorted.

“Look, if Paul Enos shows up, he’s mine,” I asserted.

“I would think he’s Carrie’s. She was the one who was drugged,” he remarked.

“Nope, he’s all mine.”

I took a couple of things from my truck and began walking down the dirt road. Staying outdoors wasn’t something I looked forward to, but I had to respect Carrie’s wishes, even if

it meant keeping my distance and staying alert. The outdoors didn't bother me; I've slept outside lots of times.

"Hey, here's a sleeping bag. It might get cold out there," he offered.

"Thanks," I said, catching it as it flew through the air. I had walked probably five miles when I ran into another man off the dirt road. My gun was pushed up against his temple before the guy knew I was there.

"Who are you?" I demanded.

"I'm Carrie's brother, James Bellmont. Who are you?" he replied.

"Gabe Steller," I answered.

"What the fuck are you doing here?" he said as he sucker punched me and broke my nose. I didn't blame him, but when he swung again, I ducked and swung back. No matter how much right he had to whip my ass, I wasn't going down without a fight. We were knocking the hell out of each other before the fight was stopped.

"What are you two doing, for crying out loud?" Carrie shouted before we were pulled apart. "Why are you fighting my little brother," Carrie shouted, standing before me with her hands on her hips.

My heartbeat accelerated. I wanted to hold her in my arms. I had to force my arms to stay down at my sides. My feelings were so strong. I stepped away from her, I could smell her scent, and my memories were shouting at me to take her. I knew I screwed up big time.

"Your little brother broke my damn nose," I growled before a towel was tossed and hit me in the face. I had blood all over my face. There she went again, chuckling, and I had to shift so they wouldn't see what she did to me. "Your little brother is as big as I am."

"Come back to the cabin. How many people are here, for crying out loud? Why are all of you here?" Carrie asked.

“We came to keep the cartel away from you,” James said. “We heard your partner called someone before he died and said he snitched on you. How did you get hooked up with this bastard?” her brother asked, pointing his thumb at me. I tried straightening my nose, and it hurt like hell, but I managed to do it. I knew if I didn’t, it would stay crooked.

“I went to his mom’s funeral.”

“We were together for two years, and you never introduced me to your family. I can’t believe you. We were going to be married.”

“What are you talking about? You wouldn’t listen to me when I was drugged and raped.”

“Raped! That bastard raped you?” I roared so loud that everyone stopped and looked at me.

“Yes, and you did nothing to help me. What do you think he did to me? You walked out of my bedroom and left him there with me,” I could see the pain in her eyes as she stomped her foot before turning away. I forgot about her brother, James, until his left hook landed on the side of my temple, and I went down. I knew nothing after that.

I woke up in a clinic alone. Someone must have dropped me off and left.

“I see you’re awake. It looks like someone beat the hell out of you. Are you going to tell me I should see the other guy? Your nose is broken, and you have a hell of a knot on the side of your head.”

I thought she was done talking, but I soon realized I was mistaken.

“Let me give you some advice. These mountain folks stick together really closely. If you piss one of them off, you’re in for trouble. It would be better if you went home. Here are your keys. Your truck is outside. Stay away from my cousin; you wronged her once we won’t let you do it again.”

I didn’t respond. I stormed out front and paid an outrageous twelve-hundred-dollar bill along the way. Laughter followed me as I walked out of those doors. How many

relatives does she have? I decided I needed to get a room and shower before returning to Carrie. One thing was clear: I wasn't leaving until I knew she was safe.

As water cascaded over me in the shower, Carrie's words hit me like a punch to the gut. I didn't deserve her. I had been a foolish idiot. What was I thinking? Why didn't I check if she was okay? I had let my anger blind me instead of talking to her.

Everyone believed Carrie's side of the story. My dad told me to get my act together and talk to her. But I was consumed by images of them together, lost in a rage, ignoring the confusion in her eyes. I tuned out everyone. I refused to hear anything they had to say. All I could see was them together in bed, and it made my blood boil.

Shame washed over me. I didn't hold a grudge against Carrie or her family for hating me. Nevertheless, I was determined to protect her, regardless of their thoughts. I didn't care what she or her family said.

No longer the naive twenty-six-year-old, I was now a grown man who would fix this, regardless of the cost. Sunrise greeted me as I steered onto the dirt road. The place looked untouched, as if no one had ever been there.

I cautiously stepped out of the truck and walked toward the cabin, my gun by my side. I pushed the door open and saw James Bellmont lying on the floor in a pool of blood. I knew Carrie wouldn't leave him here, so she must not know he's here.

That means she left or was taken by someone. I noticed James's chest rise and fall, so he was alive. I turned him over; he was out cold. I checked the other room and was surprised to find a nice bedroom, but it was empty. Returning to James, I tried to wake him up; I found the source of the blood—it was from a gunshot wound in his lower back.

Where the hell was Carrie? She would never leave her brother like this; I knew that much about her. How did the cartel find out where Carrie lived? Did her partner tell them? I had to find her, but first, I needed to get James to the hospital.

James stirred. “Don’t move. You’ve been shot. Where’s Carrie?”

“Screw you.”

“Tell me where the hell she is,” I demanded.

“I don’t know. Grandpa brought me home to shower. When I came back, a bunch of guys—probably cartel—were here. They shot me on sight. One of them knocked me out. They were armed to the teeth.”

“I called an ambulance for you. Where does your grandfather live? Could she have gone there?”

“No, she’s probably far away by now. I want to go with you.”

“With a bullet in your back? Impossible.”

“I can show you the places she might have gone. Once they remove the bullet, I’m leaving the hospital and joining her wherever she is.”

“You’re talking like you’ve been shot before. You need to give me some addresses. I can take Carrie somewhere safe. We have safe houses everywhere. Where do you think she might be?”

“I’ve taken a few bullets here and there. Alright, I’ll tell you where I think she might be. But you’ll have to go on foot. Walk behind the cabin and head straight up the mountain. Be cautious; the locals up there don’t like outsiders, and they set traps.”

“Why would they set traps? Never mind, don’t answer that.”

“They’re not keen on visitors. Be prepared for danger. Let them know I sent you if you meet anyone, and try to do it before they harm you.” I heard sirens and an ambulance.

“You should leave before they arrest you. Oh, and don’t forget to sing ‘The Grand Old Flag’ the whole way up.”

“That song is a signal to the locals. When you’re encroaching on private property.”

“Alright, ‘The Grand Old Flag,’ got it.” I exited through the back as the police entered the front. I sprinted for the first two hours before the terrain became steeper, all the while singing the song.

Laughter interrupted me, and I stopped to see three men emerging from bushes. They scrutinized me for a moment. “What brings you to our mountain?”

“I’m looking for Carrie. Her brother, James, got shot by the cartel. He’s on his way to the hospital, and he told me she might be up here somewhere. I’ve been singing the song James told me to sing. Have you seen Carrie?”

“Did James tell you that you need to keep singing the song?”

“Yes, but I paused to talk to you. Have the cartel guys been this way?”

“No, we haven’t seen them. We won’t tell you if Carrie Bell passed through here.”

My anger flared, and I almost growled at the mountain man, damn, they were all as big as me or bigger. “Don’t ever call her that,” I said, my hand tightening around his neck.

“Release him, or I’ll shoot you right now,” another man threatened, his gun pressed to the back of my head.

“What’s your name?”

“Gabe Steller.”

“Gabe Steller, as in Carrie’s ex-boyfriend. Hey guys, this is the guy who broke Carrie’s heart and then pissed on it,” the man said, striking me on the head.

“Why did you hit him? Can’t you see he’s already been in a fight?” I reopened my eyes, and to my surprise, Carrie was in conversation with the mountain men.

“Why did you come back?”

“Can I have some water?” Someone handed me a container, and I took a sip before choking. “What is this?”

The man who handed me the container answered. “It’s moonshine, cures anything, and if we drink enough, we won’t notice how ugly your face is.”

“He said the cartel shot James?”

“What? What do you mean they shot James? Is he okay? Where is he?”

“I left when the police and ambulance arrived. James told me to hike up this mountain and keep singing that damn song. He said he’ll join us once they remove the bullet from his back.”

“What song are you talking about?” Carrie asked, her brow furrowed.

“‘The Grand Old Flag.’ There was more laughter; I realized it was a setup. So, you don’t actually have to sing the song aloud while hiking up the mountain. James tricked me again.” Carrie chuckled, and I surveyed the expansive surroundings. “Do you think the cartel might be looking for you around here?”

“No, they won’t dare come this high into these mountains. How did they find the cabin and no one saw them? They’ll wait for me to come to them. Why did you return? I told you I don’t want you near me. You’ll have to go back home or wherever you came from as soon as you’re strong enough.”

“I’m staying with you.”

“My cousins will take you down the mountain, and we’ll deal with the cartel. I already told you.”

“I’m not leaving.”

“Can I ask why you think I’d want to be around you? I don’t want you near me. You remind me of a time I’d rather forget.”

“I KNOW I treated you horribly. I have no excuses, except I lost control when I saw you lying naked with that guy. I don’t blame you for not wanting me around, but I’m staying. If I find that bastard Enos, he’s dead.”

“Remember, I’m a government official. You can’t say things like that. If he’s found dead, you might get arrested.”

“Are you going to have me arrested?”

“No, but my brother or cousins might report you.”

“So, you’re all DEA agents?”

“Hell no, we’re Marines, Force Reconnaissance units. If someone needs to be taken down, that’s our job.”

“What’s your name?”

“Spartan.”

“Damn, I know you. You saved one of my teammates in Iran. You carried him out while bullets were flying all around.”

“Yes, I thought I recognized you. We’ll protect Carrie. You can go.”

“I’m not leaving.”

“What if they followed you?”

“I’m sure they didn’t, even though James had me singing that song. Is he also a Marine Corps Force Recon?”

“Yep.”

“What’s his name in the Force?”

“Ghost.”

“James is Ghost. Impressive. Now, Carrie and I are leaving. The cartel is getting too close for comfort, in my opinion.”

“The cartel won’t get me here.”

“They got James.” I watched her scan the area until her gaze met her grandfather’s. “Did you call?”

“Yes, I convinced him to stay the night. He was laughing when we hung up.”

“Why was he laughing?”

“I told him about Gabe singing as he climbed the mountain.”

I was getting tired of everyone ignoring me. “Is there anyone watching these mountains? What if the cartel is lurking around right now? Nothing happened. They stared at me as if I were crazy. “Why are you all looking at me like that?”

“Because no one enters these mountains without us knowing. We’re well-informed.”

“You weren’t informed about James getting shot.”

“The mountain watch starts past Carrie’s cabin, that’s why she isn’t staying there right now. She didn’t want anyone watching her cabin.”

CARRIE

CARRIE'S HAND TREMBLED AS SHE CLENCHED AND unclenched her fist, her nails digging into her palms. Her gaze darted from the ceiling to the floor, mirroring the whirlwind of thoughts that raced through her mind. She bit her lip, a mixture of frustration and sadness bubbling up within her, the taste of salt from her unshed tears a bitter reminder of her unresolved feelings.

The weight of my feelings made it hard for me to breathe; my chest felt like an elephant sat on it like in those commercials. Every breath was an effort. I bit my lip, my teeth sinking into the tender flesh, a physical pain and sadness that bubbled up from my soul, demanding acknowledgment.

I wanted to strangle him. My thoughts kept whispering, a raw surge of anger surging through my veins. The mere presence of Gabe in my life felt like an intrusion, an unwelcome disruption to the fragile life I had painstakingly built over the years. Why had he suddenly chosen to play guardian after years of avoiding my existence? The questions swirled like a storm cloud, casting shadows over my thoughts.

The bitterness in my heart intensified as if to protect me from the pain I feared would resurface. If I have to sneak off in the middle of the night, I will. If he doesn't leave, then I will. I went to my room, needing time alone to think. I didn't know Grandpa had followed me until he pushed my door open behind me.

"I want to talk to you before you take off."

“I didn’t say I was going anywhere.”

“I know you. Why did you never tell Gabe about us?”

“I was a stupid college kid. I knew if I brought Gabe around here, my brother and cousins would never leave him alone. I was going to tell him that night, and then that fucker drugged my drink. I told you what happened after that.”

“No, you damn well didn’t. You didn’t tell me that bastard raped you.”

“That’s because I knew what you would do. I handled it the legal way, and he went to jail, but not long enough. I knew all of you would kill him. I didn’t want anyone locked up for killing that worthless bastard. Now I’ll kill him.”

“Tell me what you are going to do?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, what are you going to do about the cartel? You can’t stay hidden for the rest of your life.”

“I came up here so I could plan. What do you think I should do?”

“I’ve been giving it some thought. I think you should let your cousins take care of the cartel, and you should go away with Gabe.”

“That’s not going to happen. I’m a DEA agent. I will take care of this.”

“That’s what I wanted to hear. This is what we will do. You’ve been hidden away for weeks now. Let’s finish this. You will go down to the little cabin, and we will all hide in the trees and bushes. When they come after you, we’ll kill them. And if they send more, we will kill them. Even if they send more, we’ll kill them.”

“Grandpa, I hope you’re kidding.”

“You don’t like my plan.”

“No, I don’t.”

“I didn’t think you would. I’ll send Gabe on his way. I would never let him around to hurt again. I want you to get some sleep; the house is guarded for the night.”

“Thank you, Grandpa, for everything you do for all of us. I’m sorry you had to cut your retirement short and raise all of us.”

“I wouldn’t have it any other way. All of you have kept me young. I was turning into an old man sitting in his recliner. I would have died a lonely death before now. Look at me; I have another thirty years to live because I had you six living with me. You get some rest, and I put a sleeping pill in Gabe’s tea, so he’ll be asleep in no time.”

“Good, I’m sure he hasn’t slept in a week or more. Goodnight, Grandpa.”

“Good night, my Carrie Bell.”

“Gabe used to call me his Carrie Bell. Isn’t that strange that he would call me the same name you all called me?”

I took a shower and crawled into my bed. My mind was going a hundred miles an hour, thinking of a plan. I’m tired of hiding out. I need to finish this. I heard something outside my door and opened it. Gabe was sleeping in the hallway; the pill hit him, and he went down.

I got a blanket and a pillow for him. As I picked his head up to put the pillow under it, I allowed my fingers to run through his hair. He has always had great hair. A tear fell onto his cheek, and I realized it came from me. I covered him and went back to bed.

I remember when our parents were killed in that damn bank, along with my uncle and Aunt. We all moved in with Grandpa. Our homes were still on the mountain, but we still stayed with Grandpa. Once in a while, I would sleep in the little cabin where my parents lived when they first got married.

My Dad built that cabin for my mom, and even though they built a large home, they still kept the little cabin. They would sleep there on special occasions. Their love was so

strong. I remember them always kissing and my mom giggling as Dad whispered in her ear.

I thought Gabe and I had that same kind of love, but I was wrong. I still love him I will always love him. I tried to hate Gabe sometimes; I do hate him because he believed I would sleep with that bastard Paul Enos. I was so sick after what happened to me, I ran straight to Grandpa, and I told him everything. Well, almost everything.

I was so relieved when I got my period. I went looking for Paul Enos, but I couldn't find him. I would kill him if I ever saw him. I decided to change everything about myself. I worked my ass off to be a DEA agent. I wanted to get all the bad guys, and the biggest one was the one hunting for me. I would have had him if my partner hadn't become greedy. A lot of good it did him.

I finally fell asleep; something woke me up. I kept my eyes closed and listened, and I knew who it was. I shook my head and went back to sleep. I would let Gabe sleep in front of my door. When I woke up, he was gone. I can't remember the nights I lay awake wishing Gabe was lying beside me.

That was the old me. The new me knows better. I will never get into a relationship with a man who could cause me so much pain again. I don't understand why Gabe has been hanging around me, but today I had to stop Gabe thinking he could come around me. He lost that right seven years ago.

As I dressed, I could smell breakfast cooking. I realized I was starving. I'll tell everyone about my plans during breakfast. I couldn't keep everyone tied up here waiting for the bad guys to come for me. I would go to them. Alone. I stopped when I entered the kitchen; everyone was at the table eating breakfast while Gabe did the cooking.

I poured a cup of coffee and grabbed a piece of toast before I sat down. As soon as I sat at the table Gabe put a plate of hash brown potatoes, bacon, and eggs in front of me. I told myself I wouldn't eat it, but I had eaten the entire plate before I knew what I was doing.

I cleared my throat and looked at my cousins. “I’m going to the hospital to see James, and then I’m returning to work. I refuse to hide from this man any longer. I didn’t kill his brother, and I’m tired of running like a scared mouse. I’m going to confront him. I have to, or I’ll be running my entire life if he doesn’t kill me first.”

“Another thing I wanted to discuss is you,” I said, looking at Gabe. “You are finished hanging around me. I can’t help it if you feel guilty about how you treated me. But this is over. You go home today, and I will continue my life.”

“No.”

“What do you mean no? Grandpa, say something, please.”

“I was hoping you wouldn’t get me involved with your argument. I’m still enjoying my breakfast.”

“What? I frowned. I didn’t know why Grandpa wasn’t defending me, but I did not like it. I looked at my cousins, the tough Marines, and they wouldn’t even look at me. “Are any of you going to help me, or did you all have your talk before I got here?”

“We just think it’ll be good for you to have Gabe around you. What can it hurt? We’ll feel a lot better knowing he’s with you.”

Did my cousin actually say those words to me? He, at that moment, realized he’d said the wrong thing.

“I mean for your safety, not your heart. We have to leave in two days. James won’t be able to do anything for you, so keep Gabe around for a while.”

“I’m going to do this my way, I will confront my past, face my fears, and find the answers I need alone.”

I got up and went to my room. I packed my bag and snuck out the window. I always knew there would come a time when I would have to do this. That’s why I kept the motorcycle in the shed at Benny’s place. It took me a while to get there. I wished I had gotten a bottle of water.

When I walked onto her property, she and the rest of her family were there, waiting for me. “Are you running away?” Benny asked as she confronted me.

“Yep, I’m running away. If you see anyone, don’t say anything; they want me to let Gabe guard me. Can you believe that? Like I can’t protect myself,” I looked at Benny; she was beautiful. The two of us were always together growing up. She knew all about Gabe and what happened.

“I saw him, and he’s hot. Are you sure you don’t want to have him protect you?”

“Benny, you know what happened. Would you want him with you all the time?”

“I only want one man with me, and you know that.”

Benny has been in love with Spartan, whose real name was Liam since she was sixteen. He came to her sixteenth birthday party and kissed her, after that she wouldn’t have anything to do with any other man. Even in college, she wouldn’t date.

She had her own magazine, which had zillions of customers. It was about the Appalachian Mountains and the people who lived there. She would put the mountain people’s names in there with what they made and sold. So, everyone around here made extra money.

Benny was a very wealthy woman, with men worldwide wanting her. She took care of her family, who lived in that big sprawling house, with her.

“Please take my Jeep. It’ll be a hell of a lot safer than that old motorcycle.”

“What if I have to leave it somewhere?”

“Then leave it. We’ll get it back. Don’t worry about anything. I wish you weren’t going alone. Do you want me to go with you?”

“No, Lord, the last thing I want is for you to get hurt. My cousin would never forgive me.”

“Would he become angry if I was to get injured?”

“Umm, I’m not sure. Sometimes I see him watching you like he wants to rip your clothes off.”

“I hope he does it soon, and I want some kind of reaction from him. I’ve never had sex because I’m waiting for Liam to realize that we belong together. I’m going to grab a bag and go with you, follow me. I know this will be what gets him to admit he loves me.”

“Benny, I’m a DEA agent, I could get fired for taking you with me.”

“You won’t get fired. You know I need to do something. I’m thirty-one. I want children.”

I shook my head. “Okay, what the hell if anyone starts shooting? Stay down. You’re right you need to corner Liam and tell him to make love to you.”

“You’re right the next time I see him I will do just that.”

We had been gone for four hours when my phone rang. “I’m okay, Grandpa. I told you I had to take care of this,” I heard Gabe shouting before he took the phone away from Grandpa.

“Damn it, Carrie. Don’t you listen to anyone? Tell me where you are, and I’ll come to you.”

“Gabe, I don’t know why you are so concerned about what I do. We haven’t even seen each other in years. It would be best if you went home. I already have someone helping me.”

“Who is helping you?”

“My friend, Benny, is helping me.

“Who the hell is Benny,” Benny and I exchanged a glance as Liam snatched the phone from me.

“Put Benny on the phone.”

“Why would I do that?”

“Put her on the fucking phone,” he shouted in my ear, and I handed the phone to Benny.

“Why are you screaming, Liam? My God, you need to sit down and relax. What is wrong with me being with Carrie?”

“James is in the hospital with a gunshot wound in his back. The cartel did that, and if they get hold of you, they will do much worse. They’ll rape you and keep you for a while before killing you. Get your ass home.”

I looked at Benny as she hung up the phone, she didn’t say goodbye, she just hung up. “He loves me. Why hasn’t he taken me? I’m done with sitting back and letting him make the move. I’ll make the first move. But I have to agree with them. You need to let that hunk of a man help you.”

He hasn’t been around me for seven years, so why is he concerned with me now? I’ll get a room, take your car and go home. I’ll call Gabe and tell him where I am.”

“Take my credit card so they can’t trace you with your card.”

“Thanks, I will since I left mine in my dresser. You can drop me off at the Best Western.” I had no intention of sitting around waiting for Gabe Steller. I needed to talk to my boss and see what he was doing about this cartel and why he hadn’t sent me more men. As soon as Benny left, I returned to the motorcycle shop I spotted coming into town.

“I need a motorcycle, a fast one. I need it now.”

“We have some women’s bikes over here.”

“Why don’t I pick it out, and then I can pay for it?”

“If that’s what you want to do, I can follow you around and answer your questions,” I knew what I wanted and stopped in front of it. I’ll take this one.”

“This one has a lot of power for a woman. Maybe you want to look at these over here,” I rolled my eyes. Do you want to sell this to me or not?”

“Yes, we do. Carl I’ll take care of this. You can fill the bike up and take it outside for the lady.”

“Carrie, do you want to tell me what you are doing?”

“Did you move to the city?”

“Yes, it’s nice. Why are you buying this bike? What happened to your other one.”

“It’s still at Benny’s. The cartel is after me, so I need something that’s fast.”

“I can’t believe you are still working for the DEA.”

“How is your wife and son?”

“They’re fine. Okay, let’s get this done.”

“I handed him Benny’s credit card. I forgot to grab my card, so Benny gave me hers. You can call her if you want.”

“I believe you. Where are you going?”

“To my office. I need more DEA agents helping me.”

“I thought your cousins were helping you.”

“You live off the mountain, but you still know everything that goes on there. How is your family doing?”

“They’re all good. What about your grandpa? What does he think about you hanging out with the cartel?”

“I don’t hang out with them. I’m running from them,” I watched as Thomas picked out a helmet for me.

“This will cover your face, so they can’t see you. I want you to be careful. It would be best if you thought about settling down and starting a family. Consider how upset your grandpa is with you, your brother, and your cousins – all of you have these dangerous job.

You should put your grandpa first. He raised you. You should quit and move back to the mountain.”

“Have you been listening to your grandma?”

“Yes, and she makes a lot of sense.”

“I know she does. I’ve been thinking about quitting, but I have an angry cartel boss after me right now. So, I can’t quit just yet.”

GABE

I WAS SO ANGRY I COULD SPIT NAILS; I COULDN'T BELIEVE Carrie had left. I know she said she would, but to actually go, I didn't think she would. I looked at the guy who owned the motorcycle shop. "What do you mean she bought a motorcycle and took off? Where did she go?"

"She said she was going to her office and getting more DEA agents to help her. Who are you?"

"Gabe Steller."

"Gabe Steller, you should have said that earlier. I wouldn't have spoken to you?"

"How do you know who I am?"

"I grew up in those mountains and am one of them. My family live there, and I know everything that goes on there. I moved here a year ago. I know how you treated Carrie. We all know."

"Is there anything in those mountains that everyone doesn't know about? Look, I don't want to fight. I just want to know where Carrie went. Those people after her are killers and won't even blink before they kill you."

"You better hurry up and get to her office."

"I don't know where the damn office is."

"Call one of her family and ask them."

"Do you have the phone number?"

“Hang on,” I sat there while he got his phone. He scrolled down and gave me the number.

“One of the cousins picked up the phone. Can you tell me where Carrie’s office is? This guy says that’s where she said she was going.”

“Why would she go there? Carrie knows the cartel will be watching that building. Does she really want to confront the cartel?”

“She said she would get more DEA agents to help her. I really don’t know what’s going on in her mind. When we were dating, she was so quiet. She was nothing like she is now.”

“You know nothing about Carrie. She is strong and stubborn and the best friend anyone could have. You put her through hell and broke her heart into a million pieces. And now you’re saying she’s not the Carrie you knew. So, I guess that means you didn’t know Carrie at all. She has never been quiet.”

“I thought I knew her, I guess I didn’t because she never told me she had any family. She let me think she was an orphan. Tell me the damn address,” he gave me the address, and I hung up. I guess I didn’t know Carrie Belmont after all. Maybe she’ll let me in, and I can get to know her. *Yeah when pigs can fly.*

When I walked into the DEA building, she was standing there arguing with someone. She looked up and rolled her eyes. “Why are you here?”

“I came here because I want to protect you.”

“Are you frigging kidding me?” She chuckled as she turned around and kept talking with the men. Give me four men, and we’ll go after him. I can’t hide anymore I want my life back, Gabe, please, will you just go home? I don’t need you here.”

I saw her turn, and she looked at me. “Follow me,” We walked into an office, then she looked at me. “Why are you doing this?”

“I didn’t even know the real Carrie, did I?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, the Carrie I knew was quiet; she even waited for me to walk around and open her car door. I asked you once if you wanted to run with me, and you said no because you don’t like to sweat.”

She kept her eyes on me, and then she burst into laughter. She was laughing so hard she had to sit down. “What did you say when I said that?”

“I don’t think I said anything, I was surprised.”

“God, I was pathetic. Why did you date me as long as you did.”

“I loved you. I was going to marry you.”

“You never would have married me, even if Paul Enos hadn’t drugged me and raped me. If you had really loved me, you would have talked to me and believed me, you would have taken me to the hospital instead of having to drive myself. I was quiet and let you do everything for me because that’s what you wanted me to be. We weren’t meant to fall in love.”

“Maybe you weren’t meant to fall in love with me, but I loved you, and I wanted to spend the rest of my life with you.”

“You would have been bored with me in no time. Thank you for wanting to help me, but I don’t need your help. I’m not the same woman you knew back then, I could have never been that person. As soon as I came home, I knew that girl wasn’t me.”

“Why don’t you let me help you with this cartel stuff, and then we’ll say goodbye? I owe you this much for being a jerk.”

“Well, I agree you were a jerk. But I’m a DEA agent, so I can’t let a non-agent follow me. You might get shot, and then I would be in trouble.”

“Why would you think I would get shot?”

“I’m just saying my job is dangerous.”

“I heard shouting, and I automatically pulled Carrie behind me. I heard the gunshots, and the glass shattered. Men came running from the back of the building. I tried telling Carrie to stay down, but she was gone.”

The motorcycle flew around the building, and I ran outside, but she was long gone. I jumped in the vehicle of another agent, and he looked a little shocked. Go! They’ll kill her. We drove for a half hour when we saw her.

The motorcycle was in the ditch, and Carrie was climbing out of the gutter. She saw us, and then she fell. I ran to her and picked her up. “Where are you hurt?”

I need to get this helmet off,” I sat her down on the truck’s tailgate. “My head is killing me. It must have hit the curb or something it hurts so bad. I felt something hit me, and the bike flew off the road.

“Damn, Bell, did a bullet hit your helmet?” The DEA said, pushing the motorcycle up to us.

“It must have been the bullet that hit my new helmet. I’m glad I got the heavy-duty one.”

I couldn’t believe she was making a wisecrack about a bullet hitting her helmet. She was fucking shot in the head. “Why are you making a joke about this?”

“I’m not making a joke. I’m trying to get my mind off that damn bullet that slammed into my head.”

I carefully removed the helmet, not sure what I would find, her hair was matted in blood. I assumed it was because of the helmet hitting her head. Let me look closer at this injury. We should get you to a hospital and check this out,” she moved away from me, before I could get a better look.

“We’re not going to the hospital; we are going after them. You don’t have to look at my injury. It’ll be fine. I just have a headache. If you want to join us, you can, but you must listen to me and do what I say.”

“And get myself killed? I’ll go with you because I don’t want you to get killed.”

“Who the hell are you?” The other agent asked.

“Bill, this is Gabe.”

“I’m her fiancé, and I don’t like you calling her Bell.”

“You are my ex-fiancé. I haven’t seen you in seven years, and suddenly you show up and want to put your nose in my business,” Bill and I put the bike in the back of the truck, and we were off and speeding down the road.

I chuckled, and that set Carrie off. I was sitting in the back with her. She was holding her head in her hands. “Let me see your head, sweetheart?”

“Gabe, please don’t call me sweetheart.”

I carefully parted her hair to get a better look at her injury. “Bill, we’ll have to go by the hospital.”

“Why will we have to do that? I think I’m going to be sick.” Carrie said, moving her head away from me.

“Don’t move your head.”

“Why?”

“The tip of the bullet is in your skull.” Bill made a quick U-turn, and we were on our way to the hospital.

“Don’t touch it,” I said when she raised her hands. “We don’t want it going any further into your skull.”

“Gabe, can you hold onto it so it won’t slip deeper into my skull? What are we going to do? Do you think a doctor at the hospital will know what he’s doing? That helmet saved my life. Gabe, you’ll have to take it out. I don’t know if it’s my imagination, but I can feel it moving.”

“Crap, I can’t do that. It could cause your skull to crack more. Bill, can you call the hospital and let them know what is going on?”

“Don’t call my family; they would all start freaking out. Damn, why didn’t I know the damn bullet was in my skull. What if it falls into my brain, and I end up as a vegetable? She raised her eyes to mine. Damn you, Gabe, you hurt me, and don’t believe I could ever forgive you for that. No matter how

much I love you. When we get to the hospital, I want you to leave; having you around me is too painful.”

“Okay, sweetheart, don’t get yourself all worked up. I’ll leave when I know you’re going to be alright.” We pulled into the emergency room at the hospital; the doctors and nurses had already been alerted they were waiting for us. Carrie was placed on a gurney and rushed inside. I went to the waiting room with Bill, who called the other DEA agents and informed them about the situation.

We spent two hours there when the doctor came to talk to us. “It’s good that she came in when she did because the bullet was moving, and we barely caught it before it reached her brain. The damage to her skull was minimal, and she should be fine in a couple of weeks.”

“She’ll have a bad headache for a while. She must take at least a month off before returning to work. We’ll keep her here for a few days to make sure we’ve taken care of everything.”

“Well, I’ll head back to the office and update the others. When she wakes up, if you’re still here, which I imagine you will be, can you tell her that we’ll take care of the cartel? She can stay in hiding a while longer. I know she won’t like that, so you can remind her how close she came to dying.”

“I don’t know what happened between you and Carrie...”

“That’s right, you don’t,” I interrupted him, “and it’s none of your business. I’m not talking about Carrie to you or anyone else.”

An hour later, I heard footsteps before I saw them. The Marines have arrived. It sounded like a group of soldiers walking down the hall. When they entered the waiting room, I stood up; these guys looked like they were ready to fight. Some of them were even bigger than me. Then James, her brother, stepped forward.

“How is she?” That surprised me. He was supposed to be in a hospital room. I thought he was about to shout at me or start a fight.

“She’ll be fine. The bullet was partially inside and partially outside of her skull. So far, everything is looking good. The doctor said she couldn’t return to work for at least a month.” I looked around and saw her grandfather walk to a chair and sit down; he looked a little pale. I reached him just as the heart attack started. I quickly undid his shirt around his throat. One of his grandsons picked him up and rushed him to the emergency room, where they began working on him. Everyone started shouting at once. I raised my hand to silence them. These guys were Marines; they knew to quiet down when I held up my hand.

“QUIET DOWN. Let’s leave the ER and let them do their job,” I said, guiding everyone back to the waiting room. I said a prayer as I walked back. We were there for about half an hour when we all looked up, and Carrie stood there, tears streaming down her cheeks. Her head was wrapped in a large white bandage, her big beautiful brown eyes were all you noticed when you looked at her. She looked pale, standing there in her hospital gown. The back of her gown was open, and she had nothing on underneath.

“IT’S MY FAULT; I put too much stress on Grandpa’s heart.”

I caught her before she collapsed. She was unconscious in an instant. Her cousins and her brother jumped up. “Damn, she needs a blanket or a robe,” James said. I chuckled; I couldn’t help it. The nurse rushed into the room. “There she is. One of the other nurses told her about her grandpa. I’ll get someone, and we’ll take her back to her room.”

“If you can get her a blanket, we’ll keep her here with us, or she’ll end up back here when she wakes up.” The nurse hurried away and returned with a blanket. I carefully covered Carrie, and we sat there waiting for news about Grandpa. She woke up and looked at me.

“How’s Grandpa?”

“The boys are with him. He can’t have any excitement; he needs surgery, but they’re unsure if they should do it because of his age. I think when the boys get back in here, you all need to talk.” I looked down, and she was sleeping again. I must have dozed off because when I opened my eyes, some of the others were sleeping while others whispered to each other.

“How is he?” I asked, looking around, but I didn’t see Carrie.

“She’s taking a shower. She should be back any time,” Spartan said, rubbing his hands down his face. “We’ve all decided to retire. We’re going to start a business like the one you SEALs have. We’re going to spend our time with Grandpa. We don’t know how much time he has left.”

“We would appreciate any advice you can give,” Rebel said.

“Sure, I’ll write some things down for you.”

“We were thinking maybe you can spend some time with us for a few weeks.”

“I’m not sure if Carrie will like that.”

“We all agreed on it.”

“I can do that.”

“Good.”

“Really, Liam, this is what you got me?” Carrie said, standing in the doorway in a mini dress.

“The woman at the counter asked me a few questions, and then she picked out something for you to wear.”

“You didn’t buy any underwear.”

“Yeah, I felt kind of strange walking through the Panties and Bra section with all those women watching me.”

“Find me two hospital gowns to wear. Never mind, I’ll get them. How’s your back?” She asked, looking at James. “Shouldn’t you be in bed?”

“I’ll be fine; there wasn’t that much damage done. The beating is what caused most of the damage.”

“I think you look great,” I said, looking at Carrie. I might have licked my lips. She didn’t look happy. Her cousins laughed until she playfully hit a couple of them on the back of the head.

“I ordered us some pizza. We’ll close the door when it arrives so the nurses don’t yell at us for eating in the hospital.” Liam said, watching Carrie carefully. “I can’t believe you had a bullet sticking out of your skull. Shouldn’t you be in bed?”

“That’s right why are you out of bed? The doctor said you had to stay in bed for a few days,” I said, frowning. I was ready to march her back to bed, when she finally looked at me.

“Why?”

“Because of your injury?”

“My injury isn’t going to do anything with me standing, sitting, or lying down. This damn bandage is on so tight. Did they shave my head? I’ve been afraid to look for myself.” Carrie asked her family. I watched as all of them shook their head. They knew damn well the back and left side were shaved off.

“I’m so relieved. It’s bad enough I had to cut my hair after it caught on fire, and I’ve been trying to get it to grow back.”

“How did your hair catch on fire?”

“I was arresting a man dealing in stolen guns he grabbed a piece of wood from the bonfire they had going, and he stuck it to my braid. It burned all the way to my ears before I realized what that smell was.”

“What happened to the man?”

“He’s still in prison.”

“The pizza guy showed up and had a forty-ounce bottle of beer with enough cups that we all had some beer with our pizza.”

Benny came charging into the waiting room. “What is going on? Johnny Lee called and said you were shot in the head, and your grandpa had a heart attack.”

“Yes, he did. I swear I can picture Johnny Lee right now calling everyone on the mountain about us. I’m going to be fine. Grandpa is having more tests done right now. They say he needs surgery but he’s too old to have it.”

“That’s bull crap. He is stronger than most people I know. What else did they say?”

“He can’t have any excitement, so we have all retired and are staying home with Grandpa. We’re going to start our own business.”

“That’s great. What kind of business?” Benny asked.

“High Security,” Liam answered.

“Oh, that’s a great idea; let me know when you start. I know some people I can refer you to them.”

CARRIE

MY HEAD WAS STARTING TO POUND. THE DOCTOR GAVE ME some medicine, but I knew it would make me fall asleep. After ten more minutes, I took them, and when I woke up, Gabe was holding me.

“Will I have to lock myself in a cage for you to stop picking me up when I’m sleeping?”

“Sweetheart, look around.” I glanced around and saw other people in the waiting room. “

“I’m heading back to my room.”

“James is in there sleeping. His back started hurting.”

“Damn, my poor brother, did he check himself out of the hospital?”

“Yes, there was a doctor here who checked him.”

“He can sleep there. Are you tired?”

“I’m fine.”

“I’m hungry. Can we go to the cafeteria?”

“Yeah, that’s where your cousins went.”

“I’m sorry you should have gone with them.”

“I’m fine. Can you walk?”

“Where did Benny go?”

She had to leave. She said she had a Zoom call with some hotshot football player. What does she do?”

She owns a Magazine company, among other things. Benny is always busy. But she's ready to settle down and have children."

"Did she tell you that?" Liam demanded, walking back into the waiting room.

"Let me up," I said to Gabe. "Yes, she told me that. Let's get something to eat," I said, watching Gabe out of the corner of my eye. I still couldn't believe he was here.

As we entered the cafeteria, my cousins were leaving," Dash stopped me. "Get a salad and soup. That's the safest thing you can eat in here."

"Okay, if you hear anything about Grandpa, let me know."

"We will. After you eat, you need to go back to bed. Grandpa doesn't need any more stress from you collapsing due to not following the doctor's instructions."

"I know. I'm sorry I've been such an ass lately. It's because Gabe will not leave my side. After I eat, I'll go back to my room. I'll use the bed next to James."

Dash nodded and kissed my forehead. "you have to take care of yourself. We're going to be partners in a business pretty soon. You have to be strong and healthy."

"I will be."

"I'll see you later. Is Liam in the waiting room?"

"Yes."

Both Gabe and I ordered the soup and salad. I gave him most of mine after we finished eating, we returned to my room, and James was still sleeping, so I got in the other bed and quickly fell asleep. I woke up after what seemed like hours. Grandpa was sitting in the chair between James and me.

Grandpa, what are you doing here? You shouldn't be up."

I needed to see for myself that you were alright. The boys told me about the new business you all are starting. I'm going to be a partner, too. I'll handle all the scheduling. I have a lot

of work to do before our business starts. So I want you to get better so we can all go home.”

“I will, Grandpa. I’m so sorry for worrying you all this time; that was selfish of me. I’m going home and staying there.”

“Good. Gabe just left. He said to tell you he had a job he had to do. So he would get out of your way.”

“What?” *Why do I feel like I want to cry?*

“Isn’t that what you wanted?”

“Yeah, of course, that’s what I wanted.”

“Okay, I’ll get back to my room.”

Three days later, we were all home. I almost cried when I saw my hair. I ended up shaving my entire head. It felt pretty good not worrying about my hair all the time. I could take a shower and just wipe my head off.



“TWO MONTHS PASSED, and I would find myself wondering what Gabe was doing. We were all officially retired from our jobs, and our business started flourishing rapidly. Benny was right; she did know a lot of people who needed protection. The cartel that was after me has been taken care of, at least that was what I was told. The DEA killed their in a gunfight, and I took a deep breath, finally free from worrying about the cartel coming after me.

One day while running on the mountain, when I came upon Benny jogging. “Are you alright?”

“I’ve been a bit sick for a while. I thought it was over. How is your business going?”

Great. We’re so busy. Come on, I’ll walk home with you.”

“Thanks, I’ll be fine. It’s already passing.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, I’m sure. Have you heard from Gabe?”

“Not a word. You would think someone who wanted to stay near me and said he was sorry would at least call and check if my skull has healed. But then again, I’m not surprised. He left me for seven years without saying anything.”

“Are your feelings hurt?”

“Maybe a little. I’m so stupid. Why can’t I move on?”

“You’re asking the wrong person. I’m a complete mess. So I guess I’ll see you soon. I have to go overseas. So I’ll see you when I get back.”

“I hope you feel better.”

“Thank you. How is Liam doing?”

“He’s guarding Rena Barrington. He’s been there for a month. Rena says she doesn’t feel safe without Spartan there. That’s what she told Grandpa.”

“Rena Barrington, she goes through men like water down a sink. She had the gumption to tell me I talk like someone who lives in Arkansas. Those people would laugh her out of the holler if they knew how ignorant she was. Damn it, I don’t like Liam being with her.”

“You don’t have to worry about Liam having sex with her. He would never do that on a job; I’m not saying he won’t want to, but he won’t.”

“She’s very beautiful.”

“Benny, you are far more beautiful than she is.”

“I’m a hillbilly; most of the time I don’t even wear shoes. I swear to much. I eat too much chocolate, and now he’s mad at me.”

“Why is he mad?”

“Because when you were in the hospital, remember I came to see you and Grandpa. Liam walked me to my hotel room, and I seduced him.”

I laughed because I was sure Benny was joking. I looked at her. “Are you serious?”

“Yes, I threw my arms around him and told him I was tired of waiting for him to make a move. I kissed him, and he kissed me back. I was so happy I wanted to cry. Because I just knew he felt what I felt. We were together like I always dreamed, and then he realized I was a virgin. I had to plead with him not to stop. He didn’t stop; he was with me for hours before he left.”

“I’m sure he’s not angry at you?”

“He told me he didn’t want to talk to me again and left. I haven’t talked to him since that night. I tried calling him but he won’t answer his phone. What have I done? Have I ruined everything?”

“What the hell are you talking about? You haven’t done anything. Liam is the jackass here and only him.”

“Please don’t tell him I told you.”

“I want to call him up and scream in his stupid ear. But I won’t because you don’t want me to.”

“Thank you, I have to get going. I’ll talk to you when I get back.”

“Take care of yourself. You did nothing wrong. You wanted the man you love to make love to you. There is nothing wrong with that. I’m sure Liam is kicking his own ass for not being here where you are.”

“Good, I hope so.”

“Where are you going anyway?”

“Switzerland, they have some property there I might buy. It would be a good place to take the family for a long vacation. If I can get everyone on a plane, I swear they are such big chickens.”

“Wait, aren’t you the one I had to buy those little vodka bottles for before she would get on a plane.”

“Only the first few times. Now, it doesn’t bother me at all.”

I laughed, and then we hugged goodbye. *Why do we let men have control of our feelings? It's not fair.* No longer. From now on, I will take charge of everything that concerns me. When I entered our house, two men stood there talking to Grandpa. I had a bad feeling about them being here. They were big and muscular, and I knew they had to be Gabe's friends. I don't know how I knew I just knew.

"Carrie, these men are here looking for Gabe."

"I haven't seen Gabe in two months. Why would you think he was here? Let's go to the family room and sit down."

I jumped up when there was another knock on the door. I looked at Grandpa before we all walked to the front door. Gabe's brothers were standing there looking at me.

"I haven't seen him in two months," I said before they said anything.

"He left on a job after he got home and said he was coming here after that."

"Jake, what do you think is going on?" I asked and then I heard someone clear their throat and turned to the two men standing there. "Let's all sit down and figure this out."

"Carrie, these men are Gabe's buddies from Seal Security, Ryker Malone, and Lincoln Harper."

"Who wants to tell me what the hell is happening?" I said, looking at the two men and the brothers.

Ryker spoke up. "We haven't heard from Gabe in two weeks. Gabe said he was coming here. He was supposed to keep in touch in case we needed him. I've been calling his phone for two weeks. Gabe would never ignore a call from us."

I turned to Gabe's brothers. They all must be very concerned. "Jake, it's nice to see all of you again," I said, "Now talk."

"Gabe went on a job, and then when he got back, he was going to check on something."

"What was he checking on?"

“Where Paul Enos lived.”

“Did he find him?”

“I don’t know.”

“We’re going to assume he did. Do you know what he would do when he found him?”

“Kill him.”

“Fuck.”

I turned when one of Gabe’s buddies said what I was thinking. “Okay, let’s go find him. I’ll grab my bag.” I ran upstairs and grabbed my bag, without knowing what we would do.

“Why was he coming back here?”

“He didn’t tell me that.”

Ryker stepped up next to me, I knew what he was going to say before he said it. “Why don’t you stay here? Do you have Paul Enos’s address?”

“Why would I stay here?”

“Because you were injured.”

“That was two months ago, and besides, my hair is already growing back.

“I didn’t say anything about your hair. You’re beautiful with or without your hair. Even the pink color it is now.”

I looked at Ryker. “Thank you! But I’m still going with you.”

“Okay, but you need to follow my lead,” Ryker said. I’m sure he heard me chuckle as I walked away. We were driving, and I sat in the back seat. The rental was a big SUV to fit everyone. “Give me his address.”

“I don’t have his address. He’s in hiding because he’s wanted for murder and human trafficking. I know he’s in Tennessee, down the North Fork of the Smoky Mountains.”

“How do you know this?”

“Lane told me. She found it on her computer.”

“You’re friends with Lane and Leah?” Lincoln asked.

“No, I only know Lane. Gabe introduced us. She said I could call her anytime I needed help, so I called and asked. She couldn’t pinpoint where he was because the area was too large. We need motorcycles. They’ll get places that a car won’t. I called and ordered six bikes we will fly to Tennessee. Pick up the bikes and go from there. Can everyone ride a bike?”

Ryker nodded. “Yes, we can all ride a bike. That’s a great idea. We can get into places where it would be easy to have a stronghold. He might be waiting for you.”

“I hope he is. I know those mountains. I’ve been all over them. These are my people. They’ll tell me where he is if he’s there. I never turned them in for making their white lightning. Why is it so important that people who stay out of trouble get sent to jail or even prison for making booze?”

“I’ll tell you why. It is because they aren’t paying taxes on it. That’s the only reason. The President can give our hard-earned tax money to all these countries. I’m talking trillions and billions of dollars. They can keep a few million for themselves, but you make a hundred dollars and don’t report it, and you’ll be locked up?”

“I take it you don’t agree with the government on certain things?”

“I don’t agree with the government on lots of things. Sure, I worked for them, I’ll tell you the truth. Only a small handful of honest government officials are out there. As soon as they are elected, their title goes to their head, and they allow themselves to be lured to the wrong side with money.”

Lincoln’s phone rang, and then Ryker’s phone rang. “When was the last time they heard from her? Did they call the police?” Ryker pulled over and got out of the vehicle. He started pacing in front of the SUV while Lincoln walked in the back.

I looked at the brothers. “Listen, guys, this can get really dangerous. We have to have at least two people staying together. You can’t just take off on your bikes hunting for your brother. They didn’t say anything. They only stared at me. “Why are you looking at me like that?”

“We wanted to tell you we were always on your side.”

“Thank you, now are you listening to me? We are getting dirt bikes; they are easier to handle.”

“I forgot how pretty you were,” Eddie said. “You’re beautiful, and you have the prettiest eyes.”

“Thank you, but I’m not concerned with what I look like. We have to concentrate on finding Gabe. He could be in real danger.”

“He’s been in danger a lot of times. Gabe will get himself out. We are just going to help him,” Danny said, staring at me.

“Look, if you three are going to stare at me the entire time, I’ll kick you out right now. We are here on business. What do the three of you do for a living?”

“We have a boating business, we have seven fishing boats.”

“Seven, wow, that’s great. So I suppose you like where you live.”

“Yeah, we are going to move back into our parent’s house because we can’t handle selling it. Plus, it’s so big. We’ll rent our homes out that way if we ever decide to move back into them, then we can.”

“That’s smart. Does Gabe live there also?”

“No, Gabe can’t stand living with us. He has a house on the beach. He thinks we act like a bunch of teenagers. It’s only because he’s been through more things than us. He’s seen death, and we haven’t. Mom always told us to be calm when Gabe’s around because he’s grumpy.”

I couldn’t help it; I burst into laughter. “Is he?” I don’t remember him being like that. Maybe he turned that way after he saw that fucker Paul Enos in my bed. I’m going to kill that

fucker. I swear Gabe better not have killed him. I'm the one who should get to kill him.

I saw Ryker and Lincoln talking. I opened the door. "What's happened?"

"Our sister-in-law is missing. The family is going for the throat. If they don't find Isabella soon, whoever took her will die a very painful death. Apparently, there have been women and kids missing. A man told the police someone had taken his wife and their baby; he was hit over the head and kidnapped people were together. Will Gabe know who Isabella is?"

"They met at our wedding," Lincoln said.

GABE

I CAN'T BELIEVE I'M TIED UP IN A BUNKER IN THE GROUND with other people. I looked around and noticed most were kids and women. The little boy who asked for my help was working with Paul Enos. How did I let this happen? Oh, well, when they give you lemons, make lemonade. I chuckled—my Mom's favorite saying.

I sighed for the tenth time, observing the others tied up. We were in some kind of cellar way up in the mountains. Little kids were crying, teenagers, girls, and boys. These guys weren't being selective about who they took. I saw a woman watching me; they must have brought her in a few days ago. They threw me into another room, where I was beaten. She seemed familiar. I didn't start a conversation with her; I didn't want her to think I was trying to pick her up in this hellhole.

Instead, I counted the abducted victims. There were at least thirty people here. The young mother with a baby that looked to be around three months old had a wedding ring on; she fed the baby while crying the entire time. "You shouldn't cry while you feed the baby; it will agitate the baby."

"Are you a doctor?"

"No. My friends have babies, and they tell me everything even if I tell them I don't want to hear it."

"My husband was hit on the head, and I don't know if he's dead; I'm so scared. They tried taking my baby from my arms. I couldn't let them have my baby girl."

“Of course, you couldn’t let them have your baby. Stay close to me; I will not let them take your baby from you.

“Most of the time, a hit on the head won’t kill you. Look at me; I’ve been hit on the head lots of times.” I could feel that beautiful woman watching me again, so I turned back to her. “Do I know you?”

“Yes, I think so. Lincoln and Ryker are my brother-in-laws.”

“You’re Isa, Allie’s sister. How did they get you?”

“A little boy tricked me, and I’m still in shock at how good an actor he is.”

“He got me as well; the kid must be the best actor in the world. Unless he’s telling the truth, and his mother is one of these women. I looked around at the women, and one woman stood out. She looked like the boy might belong to her.

“Have any of you ladies got a little boy with hair the color of freshly picked cotton?”

“That’s my son Billy. Have you seen him?”

“They have him working for them. I don’t think the little guy knows what he’s doing. I saw him screaming for his mama and crying, and when I stopped to ask him what happened, they hit me over the head.”

“My poor baby, I’m going to kill those bastards; if they lay one finger on him, I’ll kill them. Wait until my brothers get hold of them; they’ll wish they never came to our mountain. They string them up and drag them behind a truck.”

“I told Billy to run; he’ll run the first chance he gets. No one can catch that boy when he starts running.”

“I hope he does get away,” No more had that come from my mouth than the boy was thrown down into the cellar with us. I grabbed him before he hit the floor; he was out cold, his body beaten and bruised. His mother rushed to him and held him close as I tried to see why he was knocked out.

He opened his eyes and let out a wail so loud I thought my eardrums were damaged for life. “Mama has you, sweetheart.

Your uncles will kill all these men.”

“Mama, I didn’t want to leave you; I was scared they would kill you.”

“Hush, it’s okay. We will get out of here together.”

More people started crying, and I looked at Isabella. “Can you fight like Allie?”

“Yes, I can. Can you fight like Lincoln?”

“Better, but don’t tell him I said that. My guess is they are going to start separating people. When they do that, they’ll force them to take drugs. We need to get out of here before that happens.”

Isabella looked at me. “Does anyone know where you are?”

“My brothers knew where I was going, but I just stopped by this town, so I don’t think they’ll know until my truck is spotted. What about you?”

“Yes, I told my parents where I was going. Believe me; there will be hell to pay because Ryker and Lincoln will be hunting for me. I think we will need to guard the younger people. Maybe we can put them behind us or something. Tell me what you think?”

I think unless we get help within the next day, they’ll start moving everyone.”

“Why did they grab you? You’re the only man here, and by your size, I’m surprised they got you.”

“I guess he recognized me, which gave him the chance to kill me before I killed him, and I was hit from behind like you.”

“That’s right. Is that why you came here, to kill him? Who is him?”

“Yes, him is the fucker I’m going to kill. I’m not going to say any more about him.”

“I see. Well, I’m glad you are here. Now, we might have a chance of escaping. Let’s tell everyone what we have to do.”

Before we could do anything, a bright light was turned on. It was so bright we had to guard our eyes. Then I heard laughter.

“Tell me, Gabe, did you come here to get me, or were you passing through town.”

“I’ll let you guess the answer.”

“Well, part of my plan worked that day many years ago; you believed your eyes and left Carrie lying where you found her. She was so drugged up she could barely get out of bed. You let your anger blind you from everything else. Tell me, did you pretend you were making love to her when you were with other women like I did?”

“I’m going to kill you,” I roared, jumping up and grabbing him around the throat. Someone shot me with a Taser so strong I fell to my knees. They hit the Taser gun again, and that’s all I remember.

When I came to, Isabella was bending over me. “Are you okay?”

“I will be. I have to close my eyes, my head is spinning like crazy. Was I hit over the head?”

“Yes, and then you were kicked all over your body until someone else came down here barking orders. I’m surprised that guy didn’t kill you right then. Is he the one you came to kill?”

“Yes, he’s the one. I’m also surprised he didn’t kill me. I wonder what stopped him.”

“It had to be the guy who came down here who shut him up. He held an AK47 to the man’s head. He sounded meaner than hell. But he did stop that guy from killing you, which I find strange. Maybe he’s mad because they took you and put you down here with the women and children.”

“Maybe. Did you see how many people were up there?”

“No, I only saw the three: your guy, the guy with the Taser, and the one with the gun. It will be hard to escape from this place.”

“I’m going to see if the door is locked; maybe in all the confusion, they forgot to lock it,” I had to hold my head as I stood. It was still spinning, and I felt like I might vomit. Taking three deep breaths, I walked up the steps. I pushed the door, and it opened. Holding my breath I peeked to see if I could see anything.

I didn’t see anything. I was about to push it open more when I heard someone talking; it was Paul Enos, and he was talking to someone else.” I’m going to kill that bastard, Gabe Steller. He’ll pay for what he did. I’m going to kill him slowly, cutting him piece by piece, starting with his dick.”

“You better watch yourself, or Mac will kill you before you kill anyone.”

“Mac won’t do shit to me; I’ll kill him before he can kill anyone.”

I slowly shut the door and crept down the stairs. I needed a plan. I sat down and held my head in my hands as I started spinning. Isabella handed me a bag just as I started vomiting. I must have blacked out again because almost everyone was sleeping when I opened my eyes.

Looking around I saw Isabella holding three kids on her lap, and one in her arms. A little boy crawled over to where I was.

“Do you want to use my phone?”

“Do you have a phone?”

“Yes, but it’s almost dead.”

“Let me see it. The first thing I did was call Ryker; I knew they would be searching for me.

“Hello.”

“Hey, I’m in a little town called Yoro. The damn cartel and that fucker Paul have us.

“Is Isabella there?”

“Yes, there are thirty-six people here. Don’t keep interrupting. I’m trying to tell you where Yoro is located.”

“We are in Yoro. Do you know where you are?”

“No, I was knocked out,” I could hear my brothers talking, and then I heard her voice. “Why the hell did you bring Carrie? Damn it. I don’t want her in the middle of a damn gunfight.”

“Don’t you worry about me? Why are you there? How did they get you?”

“I’ll explain it when you find us. I’m using a little boy’s phone, he got here yesterday and was so smart he hid his phone. I’m going to let him call his mom.”

“I don’t have a mom. I have a Dad. He’ll know where I am because he put it on my phone.”

“Did you hear that? What is your Dad’s phone number?”

“It’s on my phone,” I looked at his phone and told Ryker the number. I’m going to try blocking the door so they can’t use these kids as shields.

“If you hear gunshots, stay where you are. We will take care of everything on our end.” Ten minutes later, we heard gunshots. I removed my shirt, wrapped it around the door handle, and used all my strength to hold on to it; when the first bullet hit me, I moved over.

“Gabe,” I heard Isabella shout.

“Stay back and put the kids in the bathroom. Do not come near this door.” The wood started splintering. The bullets flew, and I refused to let go of my hold; I had to keep them, bastards, from using the kids as shields. I don’t recall how many bullets hit me. All I could hear was women and kids screaming.

“Gabe, look at me, don’t you dear die on me. That’s not going to happen do you hear me?” Carrie’s voice cut through the chaos. She was shouting at me while my body floated from death to life back and forth. I listened to my brothers shouting at each other. I wondered if they would get into a fight if I died.

“Gabe, focus on my voice, listen to me. Will you three shut the fuck up. How can he focus on me talking to him with his brothers fighting?”

“Excuse me, I need to check him,” I heard Ryker tell Carrie. “Here is the ambulance. I’ll ride to the hospital with you.”

“I’m sorry, there is no room for you in the ambulance for a passenger. You’re going to have to move out of the way.”

I felt myself slipping away, and I knew I was going to die. I heard Carrie scream at me. “Do it then, damn you die, you’re a coward. You can’t face me because I killed that fucker Paul Enos before you did. He was mine to kill! Not yours!”

“Can someone please get her out of here so we can leave?” The EMT asked.

“Come on, Carrie, we’ll follow behind the ambulance.”

“I’m riding in the front seat with the other EMT,” The guy started talking, and Carrie turned on him. “I will not argue about this. I am Lieutenant Carrie Belmont, DEA, and I will throw you in jail.”

“Just let her go with you. Fuck it’s easy. You let her have her way, and she doesn’t argue.”

CARRIE

GABE, MY HEART POUNDED AT THE THOUGHT OF HIM LEAVING me again, especially after he had returned to my side. Amidst the chaotic sirens and speeding ambulance, I found myself yelling at him, my voice a mix of fear and frustration. Ignoring the driver's frantic warnings, I unclasped my seat belt, scrambling over to Gabe's stretcher.

"Stay with me Gabe," I pleaded, my voice quivering as I leaned close to him. Tears welled up as our foreheads touched, and a sob escaped me before I pressed my lips to his. A complex swirl of emotions overwhelmed me – fear of losing him, anger at myself for still caring, and an undeniable love that refused to fade.

The ambulance jolted, and the EMT's voice pulled me away from Gabe. I reluctantly returned to my seat, my eyes still fixed on him as the EMT worked. "His pulse is faint, but it's there. Your tears might have brought him back," the EMT remarked before the heart monitor abruptly signaled trouble.

Each beep felt like a stab to my heart as he slipped away and returned multiple times during our frantic journey to the hospital. As we arrived, his brothers rushed to the ambulance, their faces a mix of desperation and anguish. Tears streamed down my face, mirroring the collective worry that gripped us all.

"Is he dead?" Danny's voice cracked with urgency as he and his brothers attempted to barge past me, their worry etched on their faces. The police held them back, creating a tense

standoff, while Gabe was whisked away inside. Amidst the commotion, Jake slipped his arm around me, offering a reassuring presence as we entered the building.

“Please, tell me how he’s doing,” Danny’s voice was a mix of desperation and anger, demanding an explanation that I knew I had to provide.

“He’s been through a lot,” I began, my words slow as I carefully chose how to convey the gravity of the situation. “Gabe... he’s fought through it. His heart stopped several times, but each time, it somehow started beating again. There are twelve bullet wounds on him. Twelve, can you believe it? Yet, he managed to protect all those innocent people even as bullets tore into his body. He’s an incredible person. I’d imagine he’s an amazing friend. I’ll have to ask Ryker about that. And as a brother...”

Jake interjected with a solemn nod, his voice carrying a mixture of admiration and regret. “He’s the best brother anyone could ask for. Sometimes, we forget just how much he’s done for us until moments like these remind us.”

I shifted my gaze, allowing the weight of my words to settle as I spoke of Gabe’s character. “And as a boyfriend... well, he was truly something special. Despite everything, before the last time...” I cut my word off because I would have told the truth, and it wasn’t what anyone needed to hear.

With a heavy heart, I turned away, only to collide with Joseph Menos, an unexpected encounter that set the stage for an unsettling exchange. His abrupt directive compelled me to follow him, the looming threat of chaos hanging in the air.

“Why are you dragging me into this?” I retorted, a mix of defiance and resignation in my voice. “You know I didn’t kill your brother.” Deep down, I knew this was a confrontation I couldn’t avoid, a confrontation that had to happen, or I would be looking behind me at every turn.

“Your top man, Tedo. You need to question him,” I responded, my words revealing a truth that couldn’t be denied. “I was there, I saw it happen. Tedo walked up behind your brother and took his life.”

His disbelief clashed with my unwavering assertion, the tension escalating. “He blamed it on you,” Joseph countered, his words a mixture of frustration and confusion.

“Of course, he did. But where is Tedo now? What’s his standing? I was a witness to it all,” I shot back, determined to reveal the facts as they were. “He took your brother’s life, and I watched him do it. His men had their guns pointed at my head. Before the DEA showed up and scared him away.”

“You won’t be bothered by us again,” he turned and walked away.

“Who was that?” Jake asked

“That was the leader of evil. He won’t be around anymore.” I paced the hospital halls for hours until my brother, cousins, and grandpa arrived. They were the best. I didn’t have to introduce them to Ryker and Lincoln because they already knew each other.

“I’ve gone through so many Kleenexes; as soon as I knew if he were going to live, I would leave, but not before then. I’m a grown-up. I didn’t run anymore; James walked around the corner. There you are. We’ve been hunting for you.”

“Why, did Gabe die? Did they find a surgeon?”

“Yes, Doctor Angel Davis is here. He was leaving, but I’m sure he will stay for this. He’s an ex-Army Ranger. Ryker said he is one of the best surgeons in the country. Gabe is awake and asking for you. You have to hurry.”

As I entered the operating room, I saw Gabe and ran over to him. “Is he going to die?”

I heard a chuckle, “Sweetheart, I wanted to tell you I love you; I know you’ll never forgive me for how I acted. I just wanted to let you know how sorry I am. As soon as I sobered up, that was about two weeks after it happened. I went to beg your forgiveness, but you had already left, and I was so ashamed I couldn’t face you. I wanted you to know in case something happens and I don’t make it.”

“What is this talk about not making it? Gabe Steller, I’ll be damn.” He looked at me. “Hello, I’m Angel Davis.”

“Gabe has twelve bullet holes; fix him,” I said, standing back so he could get started. He started barking out orders fast. I saw someone give Gabe a shot to put him to sleep. James took my hand, pulled me out of the room, and put his arm around me; I didn’t even realize I was crying.

“What is the matter with me? Here I am, crying over a guy who ripped my heart out and stomped on it. Why am I like this?”

“You still love him, and he loves you. I don’t know why he acted as he did. I guess Gabe was so hurt when he saw the two of you together, he didn’t think. People make mistakes, especially when emotions are involved.”

“Yeah, I guess that’s how it went. How long do you think it was before Gabe realized he was wrong?”

“That is something Gabe has to answer. He’s the only one who knows how long it took him to realize he blew it. Let’s get a coffee; this will be a long surgery.”

“You should have seen that bastard Paul’s face when he knew I was going to kill him. I swear, I’ve never wanted to take someone down like I did him. I bet he pooped his pants.” We walked into the cafeteria, and Gabe’s brothers were there eating. They waved us over, so I went to sit with them while James got us a coffee.

“Have you heard anything,” Jake asked.

I took a deep, calming breath because I didn’t want to cry again, and these guys looked like they might start crying. “I was in there with him briefly; Angel Davis is his surgeon. He’s the best in the country.”

“He’s pretty famous, plus he knew Gabe. I think he was an Army Ranger.”

“Did you have a chance to talk to Gabe?”

“Yes, he said he was sorry and knew what really happened as soon as he sobered up but was too ashamed to face me.”

“I knew it; I would see a look come over him like he was disgusted with himself. I asked him once if he still loved you.

It was about three years later, and he said to stop loving you would be like never breathing again,” Jake said, with tears in his eyes.

“I wished he would have told me,” I started crying again. James put my coffee and some soup in front of me. I took a deep breath and tried calming my emotions down.

“Eat, or you will make yourself sick between the crying and your nerves,” James said sternly.

“I will. I’m hungry.” I saw him eating his sandwich, so I started eating. Before I knew it, I was tipping the bowl to my mouth and drinking the last of my soup. I looked at the brothers, and they were smiling. “I guess I was hungrier than I thought.”

The surgery took seven hours before Angel walked in and spoke to us. “He won’t be able to do anything for a few months. I have had to repair some major organs in his body, so he’ll have to stay in bed for at least one month and complete bed rest for that month, and no work for at least three months after that. He was very lucky one of the bullets missed his heart by the width of my baby fingernail.”

“Who will take care of him when he gets out?” Angel asked.

“We will,” Jake said.

“I’ll go with them to their home and ensure he only does what you say,” I said, surprising everyone, including me.

“He’ll be in recovery for a month. They have a place in this hospital where he can stay. After you all see him, you might as well go home. He will be pretty grumpy the longer he has to stay in bed. I will hang around the hospital for a week or so while they hire another surgeon; any questions?”

“When can we see him,” Danny asked, wiping his eyes. These brothers loved their big brother and weren’t ashamed to show it. They have their parents to thank for always showing them love.

“Wait at least thirty minutes. Two of you can visit him, but be quiet; I don’t want Gabe waking up yet.”

“Okay, I’m going to call my wife,” Angel said, leaving the waiting room.

The brothers hugged each other and looked around. Danny looked at me. Will it be alright if I’m one of the first ones to see Gabe?”

“Of course, it’s alright. Are you kidding me? You are his brothers. When you see him, he’ll have all kinds of wires on him, but he needs those, so they are good. I think you can see him now. Jake, do you want to go in with Danny? Remember not to wake him up.”

James hugged me again, and I realized I was crying. “I’m going to call the hotel and get a room. I need some sleep. What are you going to do?”

“I’ll stay here with you for a few days. How long are you staying here?”

“I don’t know. I don’t even know what I’m supposed to do.”

“What do you want to do?”

“I don’t want to leave him here alone. But he left me alone with that damn Paul Enos. He’s right. I don’t think I can ever forgive him. I don’t know why I said I would help him when he goes home. I wish you could tell me what to do. I still love him after everything. Why am I so stupid?”

“You are not stupid; don’t say that again. Why don’t you stay here with him for a week and see if you can’t get over the pain he put you through? Just because you love him doesn’t mean you should be with him. Everything is up to you. Don’t let anyone put pressure on you to do what you don’t want to do. After a week, come home and see if you miss him.”

“That’s what I’ll do. I’ll stay a week and see what happens. Thank you. What would I do without you telling me what to do.”

“You’d be lost.”

“You’re right, I would be.”

GABE

I COULD HEAR THE SOFT MURMUR OF CARRIE'S VOICE AS SHE talked with the nurse. The tension in the room was palpable as I grappled with my own conflicted emotions. Why was she still here? I couldn't bring myself to face her after the way I had treated her. My eyelids remained shut, a flimsy shield against the reality unfolding beside me.

With a gentle creak, the weight of her presence settled on the edge of the bed. The hushed rustling of fabric reached my ears as she took her seat. And then, amidst the quiet, the timbre of Jake's voice entered my room.

"Is he still sleeping? The words held a mixture of surprise and concern. "Wow, he was awake this morning when I was here?"

"I've been here for over an hour," Carrie's voice wavered slightly, laden with a tinge of exhaustion. "And he's been sleeping. Every time I visit, he's sleeping."

A moment of pause hung in the air, followed by the gentle shift of the bed as she stood. "I'm going to grab some lunch. I'll be back soon."

As the echo of her footsteps faded, I sensed the tension in my muscles ease, and I kept my eyes closed, waiting so Jake wouldn't know what I was doing. Her presence remained a tangible force beside me.

"You can open your eyes now." Jake's voice, so close, tinged with a mixture of exasperation. "Why the fuck do you always pretend to be sleeping when Carrie comes to see you?"

She's staying here to help you. The least you can do is talk to her."

The emotions swelled within me, I had so much shame and regret. "I'm ashamed even to see her, I wronged her horribly. I don't understand what was wrong with me." My voice was a mere whisper, the vulnerability raw. "I knew a week later I was wrong, but she was gone when I went to see her."

"I guess she went to her family, which I didn't even know she had. Maybe she was right, and I did feel like I had to be single to join the Navy Seals."

A shiver ran through me as I revisited those horrible memories. "I was stupid, and I blew it. But when I saw them together in bed, both naked, I saw red. I went crazy. I didn't think, I just acted. I was drunk for a week; when I sobered up, she was gone. And you know the rest of it."

Jake's silence hung in the air, a poignant pause before he responded. "Dude, damn, you really did blow it. All I can say is you have to try and fix it. Ignoring her and pretending to be asleep isn't going to help you."

He continued. "I came to tell you I'm leaving, but Danny is staying here. I'll be back in a few days. Eddie is going with me; we are having problems with our busiest boat, so we have to see what's wrong with it."

I hope you get it to running again," I responded, the gratitude evident in my tone. Thanks for listening to me. I'll talk to Carrie when she comes back. It's going to be hard admitting how wrong I was."

"I wish you luck; I'll see you in a few days," Jake's departure was marked by a hug, a connection that transcended words.

There was a brief interlude, and then Carrie's voice softer now; my brother bent and hugged me again, then kissed the top of my head. Since I woke up, my brothers have hugged and kissed me. I didn't mean to scare them like I did. We've had too much death in our life these last few months. I can't believe I had twelve bullet holes and am still alive.

Carrie's presence remained, the air between us heavy with unspoken emotions. "Oh, you're awake; how are you feeling?" Her voice, a gentle caress, held a touch of nervousness. "Let me fix your pillow. Are you hungry? Here is some water. Would you like me to pour you some?"

An impulse overtook me, a mixture of longing and gratitude. My hand reached out, seeking her touch. "Carrie, please sit. I don't need anything. Why are you still here?"

The room seemed to hold its breath as Carrie's response hung in the air, laden with a delicate uncertainty. "Do you want me to leave?"

The vulnerability in her voice tore at me, shattering the walls I had erected. "No, I never want you to leave." I paused, my words gaining strength. "I want to talk to you. I want you to know that I knew you would never cheat on me. As soon as I sobered up, I knew. I was drunk for a week, and then I went looking for you, but you were gone. I was so ashamed of myself for leaving you there; I was out of my head."

"Why are you telling me this?" Her question was so simple, but it still made me nervous, she wanted the truth.

"Because I love you," I whispered, the weight of those words echoing through the room. "I will always love you. I don't know how to mend what I broke."

There was a pause in which our hearts seemed aware of each other, and her voice, softer, said, "Why don't we start over?"

And in that moment, the room seemed to hold its breath once more, a pregnant pause before the birth of something new. "Hi, I'm Carrie Belmont."

The words hung like a fragile thread, a bridge between past regrets and uncertain futures. "Hi Carrie, I'm Gabe Steller." The air felt charged, the promise of a second chance at love. "It's nice meeting you. You are beautiful. I love the pink hair."

The hint of a chuckle, a breath of levity amidst the weight of emotions. Thanks. I had my head shaved, so I thought I would add some color to it."

“What do you do?” The question, simple yet laden with curiosity, held the promise of understanding.

“I was a DEA agent, but I’m working with my cousins now. We have a high-security business.” Her voice, laced with determination, painted a picture of resilience.

As the conversation unfolded, the room seemed to shrink, cocooning us in a space where the past had no hold. A gentle haze began to settle, the weight of the moment lulling my senses.

“You get some rest, Gabe; I’ll sit here.”

“Okay, sweetheart,” I whispered, the tendrils of sleep already tugging at me.



DAYS PASSED, a rhythm of waiting and wondering. The absence of her presence left an ache that I couldn’t quite shake. Danny’s entrance into my room brought a sliver of distraction.

“Hey, why are you looking so down?” Danny asked, his voice held a touch of concern as he walked into my new room. I hated being so weak even if they let me walk. I didn’t know if I could walk.

“I’m trying to remember if I said something to make Carrie mad enough to leave and go home?”

Danny’s voice held a hint of amusement, a light amidst my turmoil. “Dude, don’t overthink it. She left to get more things from home,” Danny reassured, his voice carrying a touch of amusement. “She’ll be back today or tomorrow.”

Relief washed over me, a tide that ebbed away my worries.

And then, a presence, a figure that seemed to fill the room with warmth and possibility. “Carrie is here now,” Danny announced, and the atmosphere shifted, charged with anticipation.

“Nice room. How are you doing?” Her voice, a balm to my restless thoughts, held a touch of playfulness.

“I’m doing great. I’ll be able to get up in a few weeks.” My voice held a note of determination, a yearning for the independence I had lost. “It’s going to drive me crazy doing nothing. Did you get everything taken care of?”

“Yes, I did. Thank you for asking.”

“Sit down. Danny; get Carrie a chair, please.”

The shuffle of movement, the creak of a chair, and then a moment of quiet as we settled into looking at each other. “Here, take mine; I have some calls I have to make. I’ll see you this afternoon, Gabe.”

“Okay, I’ll see you then. I offered a smile, gratitude flowing between us. His departing hug carried a depth of unspoken understanding, that he wished me luck for the future.

“Don’t worry so much about me. I’m going to be fine,” I said, looking at Danny.

“Okay, I’ll try not to worry,” Danny said, patting my back; I inhaled sharply.

“Sorry, I forgot. Okay, I’m gone.”

I heard Carrie chuckle at the same time I did. I smiled at her after Danny left. My brothers have taken it upon themselves to become big worriers. They now hug and kiss me goodbye. I almost punched Jake the first time he did it, but then I remembered hearing Danny crying and telling me to hurry and get better.”

“Yes, your brothers love you very much.”

“Your family also loves you, so I guess we are both lucky. Tell me what you’ve been doing for seven years.”

“I was a DEA agent; I fell into this business because of all the drugs in our mountains. I was determined to rescue all those taking these opioids from over the border. My biggest bust surprise was when I had to bust my doctor, who I had since I was small.”

“I didn’t want to believe he was selling drugs to kids. Until I went to talk to him and he shot me. He would get the football players hooked, they would have injuries, and then they would sell to other kids. After that, I went after the cartel in America and Mexico. They were after me for a while; I’m glad all that is behind me.”

“It sounds pretty dangerous.”

“What have you been doing?”

“I was a Navy Seal, but when Ryker retired, I did too. At first, we worked on this Navy ship rescuing people, along with some other Seals. That’s where Ryker saved Gilly; she was on a burning oil rig way out at sea. They had already met years before that. Next thing I knew, they were married.”

“Wow, that’s amazing. What was she doing on an Oil rig out at sea.”

“She was an inspector; she worked for the guy who hired us to go check it out.”

“I bet that was scary for her.”

“Yeah, she quit after that. How do you think you’ll like your new job?”

“I know I’ll like it working with my cousins, plus I won’t have someone telling me what to do.”

“Sometimes those jobs can be dangerous.”

“I can take care of myself.”

“I know you can. Can I tell you I love you?”

The words hung in the air, a bridge between past pain and the promise of a new beginning. “Yes,” she answered, her voice a whisper, a fragile admission.

A surge of hope, a fresh chapter ready to be written. “Yes, we can do that.”

“Good.” I could sense her smile even though I couldn’t see it, the promise of us reflected in her eyes. I saw her smile, and I smiled back. As the weight of the moment settled around us, our hands found each other, fingers intertwining. “I love you,

sweetheart. I promise you I'm not that stupid boy from before."

She leaned down, her lips a whisper away from mine, and pressed a kiss that felt like a promise of tomorrows.

SHHH, let's not mention that anymore. Am I hurting you lying here?"

"No, the only thing I can feel is you next to me. Please don't leave."

"I'll stay here until they make me move. I guess you know I'm crawling under those blankets with you when you feel stronger."

"Do it now."

"No, they just put you in this private room, I don't want to hurt you."

"Baby, you're killing me by saying no."

She kissed me once more and then rolled out of bed. We talked for two hours, kissing after every other word. I felt my eyes starting to close.

"You get some sleep, and I will be right beside you."

CARRIE

AS I STEPPED OUT OF THE SHOWER, THE SOUND OF MY PHONE ringing reached my ears. I quickly wrapped a towel around myself and began searching for my phone. I recalled a conversation with Grandpa from the previous night. He had asked me if I'd be willing to guard two girls until their father was located. He assured me it would only be for a few days.

“Hello,” I answered as soon as I picked up the call. However, there was no response on the other end, so I ended the call and proceeded to get dressed. I had to hurry to the hospital to see Gabe. Today was the day they planned to help him start walking again. With daily therapy sessions, his muscles needed to stay strong. Being a partner in our family business meant fulfilling my responsibilities.

I packed my bag and checked the room to make sure I got everything. There was no use keeping the room if I would be staying with the girls. Thinking about the mother's death shook me up. She was gunned down outside her house while the two small girls stood beside her—those poor girls.

I arrived at the hospital parking lot and made my way to Gabe's room. Seeing him sitting in a chair brought a smile to my face, and I leaned down to kiss him. “Looks like they finally let you out of that bed.”

“Yeah, it's such a relief to be up,” he said with a grin, pulling me onto his lap. “You'll have to sneak into my bed tonight.”

A giggle escaped me, fueled by his touch tracing a path along my blouse. Our next kiss kindled a longing within me, and I shifted on his lap, feeling the warmth of his desire pressing against me. His hands ventured beneath my blouse and bra, cupping my breasts, igniting sensations so intense that my body quivered with anticipation. The allure of climax seemed tantalizingly.

A voice, clear and abrupt, punctured the charged air. I inhaled deeply, collecting myself as Gabe pulled my clothes back into place, a blush tinging my cheeks. The nurse's arrival to deliver Gabe's breakfast was both an interruption and a reprieve.

"Apologies for the interruption, but I've brought Gabe's breakfast," the nurse announced, momentarily pausing before she started cleaning the room. With a final kiss, I reluctantly untangled myself from Gabe's embrace.

"It's alright; I have a matter to attend to anyway," I offered, glancing between Gabe and the untouched breakfast. "I'll be away for a few days, but I'll make sure everything's sorted before I leave."

Curiosity tinged his voice as he inquired, "Where are you headed?"

"I'll be watching over two young girls until they find their father. It's in Nashville, not far away. I promise to call you twice a day."

Gabe's concern lingered, evident in his voice. "Just make sure you keep that promise, or I'll come looking for you. And give me the address before you go."

I wrote down the address and handed it to Gabe. He looked at it, and I knew he put it in his memory.

"Tell me why these little girls need someone to watch them until they find their father. Is he missing?"

"I'm not sure where he is; their mother was gunned down in front of the girls yesterday."

"Why the hell are you going there? Where is James? Where are your cousins? Who decided to send you to these

girls? Let me call someone to go with you. Damn it, I'm going with you."

"Gabe, please listen to me. Grandpa has received assurances that no harm will come to me or the girls. Once their father is found, my role ends. I don't want you to worry. Focus on getting better. I love you, and I'll return in a few days."

"I love you too, but I don't like the idea of you going alone. There should always be two people; I've told your grandfather, James, and your cousins that a job should involve a pair. Did they even listen?"

"Please stop worrying. I'm going to be fine. Remember, I was a DEA agent; I know how to take care of myself."

"But you will have two children with you, which means you will have to keep them safe also. Who killed the mother?"

"I don't know who shot her, Grandpa said, the police were investigating it."

"If it's someone driving by and shooting, why didn't they shoot the girls too? You should see if they are getting a divorce. Don't trust anyone if the husband comes there, then you leave."

"What if he had something to do with the murder, I need to investigate it."

"No, you do not! Damn, I don't like this."

"I'll be okay. If I need help, I'll reach out. I won't take any risks with the girls' safety. Now, I have to go. I'll call you after I've assessed the situation."

"I want hourly updates on what's happening."

"I'll try to call you hourly."

"Okay, I love you."

"I love you too," I kissed him again and left.

While I was driving, I called James. "Hello, what's going on?"

“I’m almost at the house. I’ll keep you informed about what is going on here. You might get a call from Gabe; he’s upset because I’m on my own with this one. He said you never send one person; it must always be two.”

“I know he’s called all of us. If anything looks suspicious, put the girls in your vehicle and leave.”

“I will.”

“Gabe was right. There should never be just one. Now I’m worried, this is what you are going to do. Get the girls and bring them to the hotel.”

“I’ll tell you like I told Gabe; I’ll leave if we need to.”

“So, how are you and Gabe getting along?”

“We love each other. I’ve forgiven him, and I’m not saying anymore about it.”

“Call me. I’ll be waiting to hear from you.”

“I thought you were in California.”

“I am in California, but I can get there quickly. Call me.”

I parked my vehicle in front of the imposing gate that obstructed my path. Seeking access, I pressed the intercom button. “Hello, I’m here to watch over the girls.” The gate responded by gradually swinging open, granting me passage. The driveway unfurled ahead of me, stretching toward the heart of the property.

My thoughts churned as I considered the possibilities. If the mother had fallen victim to the assailant on this very driveway, it indicated a familiarity with the layout. While it was unwise to leap to conclusions, an inkling surfaced that led me to believe the husband might not be involved. Yet, suspicions lingered, urging me to delve deeper into the situation. Who stood to gain from the mother’s tragic demise?

As I pulled up and emerged from my car, a woman materialized from within the premises. She halted her steps, her gaze trained on me as I began surveying the surroundings. An unspoken exchange transpired between us, her presence laden with silent questions.

I recognized the telltale signs that the mother had met her tragic end right here. The faint remnants of blood still lingered on the driveway, a poignant reminder of the violence that had unfolded.

Curiosity compelled me to inquire, “Why is this still here?”

Her response was tinged with an air of resignation. “No one has tended to it.”

“Is there a gardener who maintains the property?” I inquired further, seeking a rationale.

“He comes on Mondays and Wednesdays. He missed Monday tomorrow is Wednesday. He’ll be here tomorrow,” she explained, her tone indicating the lack of action.

Taking matters into my own hands, I retrieved a hose and began washing away the traces of blood. “Fetch some bleach, please. This needs to be cleaned. It’s for the sake of the girls,” I directed, focusing on eliminating the disturbing evidence. An hour’s effort sufficed to ensure the driveway was free from the haunting stain. With that task complete, I entered the sprawling mansion, keen to examine the interior.

“I’ll show you to your room.”

“Where are the girls?”

“They are in their room. Their rooms are in the family wing.”

“That’s where I will be. I’m here for the girls. Take me to them.”

“That’s not necessary. The girls are safe where they are.”

“Listen, I don’t need you to show me around. I’m here to keep the girls safe and investigate their mother’s death.”

“That was the grandmother’s idea. We’ll manage fine as it is. I’ll stay with the girls until their father arrives. Your presence isn’t necessary.”

“Allow me to introduce myself. My name is Agent Carrie Bellmont, DEA. I will guard the girls and keep them safe. I

need you to back off, or you have to leave,” *She didn’t need to know I quit the DEA.*

“I won’t be cooking for you. You can get your own food.”

The tension between us was palpable as I asserted my role. “I won’t require your cooking. I’ll handle meals for the girls and myself.”

Acknowledging her stance, I proceeded, “Now, please take me to the girls’ room. My focus is on their security and resolving the circumstances of their mother’s death.”

A spark of annoyance flickered in her expression, but I remained undeterred. She led the way, a mixture of reluctance and curiosity in her steps. Finally, we arrived at a door, and she swung it open to reveal two young girls, huddled together on a bed, their tears a testament to their grief.

Seating myself beside them, I addressed them softly. “Hello, my name is Carrie. What are your names?” Drawing them onto my lap, I held them close, enveloping them in a comforting embrace. My attention shifted to the housekeeper. “Could you please close the door?”

Though her frown conveyed disapproval, I understood her sentiments. With the room enclosed, I turned my focus back to the girls. “Who wants to tell me their name first?”

“My name is Penny,” she began I could hear the sadness in her voice, “and my sister’s name is Charlie. Our Mommy is dead; he shot her.”

My heart ached for Penny and Charlie as I absorbed their words. I was young when those bank robbers shot and killed my parents. “I know. I’m sorry that happened,” I murmured, a pang of sympathy twisting in my chest. It struck me that Penny referred to the shooter as “he” with a sense of familiarity. “Did you see who shot your Mommy?” I asked gently, aware of their tender ages.

Penny’s eyes held a mixture of fear and innocence as she nodded, her small voice quivering. “Uncle Tony, he was hiding, in the bushes. I got up and opened the door to see if the

housekeeper was listening to us talking. I locked it before returning to bed and bringing both girls close to me.

“Did you tell anyone else you saw Uncle Tony?”

“No.”

“Who is Uncle Tony?”

“My Mommy’s friend.”

“Did he see you?” Penny’s gaze remained fixed on mine.

“Yes, he put his fingers to his lips, and then he put the gun to his head,” she explained, a chill ran down my spine. The implication that Uncle Tony had threatened her life weighed heavily on my mind. It seemed he knew the gate code, too, and that was something I needed to address immediately. “Let’s go outside, girls?”

“Will he shoot us?” Charlie’s voice trembled with fear.

“No, I’ll keep you safe. From now on, I don’t want you girls out of my sight. We will do everything together. Let’s go outside; I have something I need to do. I saw the girls holding each other’s hands as we walked outside. As we strolled around the house, I scoured the area for the electrical box, my thoughts racing.

I couldn’t see the electrical box anywhere, the absence of that box puzzled me. Nearby, I spotted some outbuildings and decided to investigate. Among them was the gardener’s shed. Moving on, I discovered a building that resembled a woodshed. Guiding the girls to a playground at the back of the house, I discreetly called the police on my phone.

I gave the officer the address and walked over to where the two girls sat on the swings. I heard a vehicle, so I walked around the side of the house. I saw Jake when he walked around the car and opened the passenger door. Gabe got out of the passenger seat.

I hurried to where he was, “What are you doing? Jake, I can’t believe you brought him here. Gabe you are supposed to be in bed.”

Jake hurriedly explained his side of things. “He gave me no choice; he was going to take a taxi.”

“I couldn’t shake this feeling that something bad was about to happen, and you didn’t call,” Gabe said, I couldn’t shake that feeling. That’s why I’m here.

I exchanged a kiss with Gabe before directing my attention back to the matter at hand. “There has been so much going on here; first of all, the police will be here any minute, and there is a dead body in the woodshed. The housekeeper doesn’t want me here. Penny saw Uncle Tony shoot her mother, and I bet you a million bucks that’s their daddy’s body in the shed.”

“Damn, I’m glad I came here when I did. What if Uncle Tony was to show up here while you were outside with the girls? We should get them inside, and I’ll check the woodshed out. Which one is it?”

“It’s the green one, but the stench is nauseating. You can’t start vomiting with those inside stitches. You could rip them open.”

Gabe was determined as he reassured me. “Sweetheart, I won’t vomit; I’ve been around corpses before.”

Acknowledging his bravery, I instructed Jake, “You go with him.”

Jake hesitated, his unease evident. “I can’t look at a dead body.”

“You don’t have to. Just stay by Gabe in case he feels sick.”

“I won’t vomit,” Gabe asserted, his determination strong.

“You haven’t been eating much, so your body is weaker than it’s used to. I’ll take the girls inside, and then I’ll come back out. I need to talk to the housekeeper,” No sooner than I said that, she came running outside crying, looking at Gabe.

“Why are you looking at me and crying?”

My granddaughter was one of the kidnapped children you saved. I heard you had sixteen bullets in you; let me help you inside.”

Gabe clarified, “It was twelve bullets, not sixteen. I’m here because Carrie is here. But first, I need to check something out. The police are on their way. There’s a body in the shed, and Carrie suspects it might be the girls’ father. Could you take the girls inside?”

“Oh no. No wonder he hasn’t answered his phone. Who would have done this to John?”

This is another thing, the girls have to be where I can see them or know they are with someone like you,” *I thought I would make her feel needed, especially now that I know her granddaughter was one of the victims of the kidnapping.* “Penny said Uncle Tony shot her mother. Do you know Tony?” I asked.

“Yes, I know him. I have always thought he was evil. I told John about him. I saw him slap Charlie. Then she looked at me. “You are the woman who shot and killed those men who took my baby.”

“The police will be here any minute; can you take the girls inside and keep them with you? Maybe you can give them some milk and cookies. That’s a wonderful idea.

“Come along, girls, we are going to have Milk and cookies.”

Gabe looked at me and shook his head as he retched and held his side. “I should have listened to you. There are two men in there. It looks like he took the saw to them. I’m glad you didn’t look at them.” A car pulled to a stop next to my car, and two men got out. The same detectives I talked to about shooting Paul Enos and two cartel men.

“Hi, so you are the one who called. He looked at Gabe, I’m glad to see you survived all those bullets in your body. So, who found the body?”

“I did. Gabe looked at the bodies. I’ll let him tell you what he found.”

“There are two bodies in the green shed. I’m going to assume that it is the husband and the gardener. The girls saw who shot their mom,” Gabe said, looking at the guy strangely.

“What?” He took out his notes. “Why didn’t anyone question her? Who did she say shot her mother.”

I was about to tell him who the killer was when the housekeeper called me. “Carrie, can you please come here? It will only be a moment of your time. Can you please hurry? This is very important.”

“I’ll be right back,” I hurried to where the housekeeper awaited me.

Her words sent a shiver down my spine. “That is Uncle Tony,” the chills went through me, and I almost fell over. “Fuck,”

“Exactly,” The housekeeper said. I checked my gun for bullets and turned, “Take the girls somewhere safe. I have to get back out there to Gabe.”

“I’ll take care of the girls. You take care of that man who shot their Mommy.”

“And daddy and the gardener.”

“Oh no, my poor babies. I’m calling their grandma and grandpa.”

I walked up to Gabe, and then I turned to the detectives. “Now, what was that question?”

“Did Penny say who shot her mom?”

I never told him it was Penny, “She said it was her daddy,” I felt Gabe and Jake look at me. “But if one of these dead men is her daddy, then she didn’t see the killer after all.”

“Well, I guess we better see what’s in there,” I called the police as soon as he walked away. I told them the chief needed to come here also.

“He is Uncle Tony,” I said, looking at Gabe, “Jake, walk with your brother and get inside the house.”

“Are you crazy,” Gabe whispered. “Give me your gun and get in there with the girls. They are the ones you were hired to protect.”

“No, I would die this time if I didn’t have you; I love you so much.”

“Get in the house before he returns; I will be fine, I promise. At least give me your gun.” I took my gun out and handed it to Gabe. Only because I didn’t want him to die.”

“Go inside.”

“No, here they come.” They were almost to us when Tony took out his gun and shot the other detective. When he smiled at me and raised his weapon, Gabe shot him. I walked over to him. “He’s dead.”

“Good, who will take care of the kids?”

“The grandparents, I imagine. They are the ones who hired us. Here comes the police.”

We were there two days before we could leave; I felt so bad for the little girls to lose both of their parents. James showed up before we left. Jake had already left for home. I didn’t know where Gabe was going until we were ready to leave. “What are you going to do?”

“I’m going home with you. I can’t work for three months. I have nothing else to do. Is that okay?”

“Yes, that’s what I was hoping you would say.”

GABE

I TOOK A DEEP BREATH, THE ADRENALINE FROM THE EVENTS OF the past days still coursing through my veins. Carrie's near brush with death had shaken me to my core, and now as we headed back to the mountain, I couldn't help but reflect on how close we had come to losing her. The truck's rhythmic hum and the gentle sway of the ride did little to ease the tension that still gripped my chest.

Beside me, James broke the silence, his voice a mix of concern and curiosity, "I still can't believe you had a hunch that Carrie needed you; thank God for hunches. So you're going home with us?"

My exhaustion pulled at my eyelids, and I responded, "Yes, but I'm sleeping right now, so can you question me after I wake up."

A small smile tugged at the corners of his lips as he nodded, "Sure thing. Just wanted to know if you two were staying at the cabin."

Carrie's voice interjected, her tone soft yet commanding, "Yes, we will both stay at the cabin. Now be quiet."

With the decision made, I managed to doze off in the backseat. The soft cadence of Carrie's voice, a soothing murmur in the background, lulled me into a fitful slumber. I was aware of her speaking with her brother, a mixture of emotions swirling in her words. The sense that he didn't quite want me around her lingered, but I brushed it aside. I wasn't

going anywhere; Carrie was a part of me, and I wouldn't let her slip away again.

Suddenly, a jolt startled me awake. The truck had hit something, and I sat up, rubbing the sleep from my eyes. "What did we hit?" I inquired, my voice tinged with grogginess.

"Stay in the car," James ordered his door opening. I still couldn't believe James Bellmont was Ghost, Marine Corps Force.

My curiosity got the better of me, and I cautiously stepped out of the truck to see what had caused the impact. My eyes widened at the sight before me. A large dog lay in the road, surrounded by nine puppies. Yet, it wasn't the animals that captured my attention; it was the lifeless form of a man nearby, his body showing signs of days gone by.

Carrie moved gracefully around the scene, a mix of determination and concern on her face as she scanned the area. Meanwhile, James spoke to the authorities on the phone, the urgency in his voice evident. "I don't understand; this is a busy road. Why has no one seen him here? Do you think someone dropped him off?"

My mind raced as I connected the dots, "I think they must have brought the dog and her puppies, too. Do you recognize him? Do you think he lives around here?"

Carrie's attention turned to me as I approached, my flashlight casting a revealing light over the grim scene. "Look at this," I said, holding up a shawl I had found nearby. Its presence puzzled me, as if it held a hidden clue. "Do you think this might belong to someone who brought him here?"

Recognition dawned in her eyes, a mixture of sorrow and realization. "Hmmm, this is interesting; I recognize that shawl. I hope this isn't what I think it is."

My curiosity deepened, and I turned to James, "What do you think it is?"

He joined us, examining the shawl in my hand, "Does that shawl belong to Mary Jane McDonald? But how could she get

Buster out here on her own? She would never leave Sybil out here, especially with new puppies.”

My flashlight revealed the dog, and Carrie’s expression softened as she knelt beside Sybil, wrapping her arms around the loyal companion. “Yes, this is Sybil,” she confirmed, her voice gentle.

I watched as she took her phone out and called one of her cousins. She told him to pick up Mary Jane and take her to Grandpa’s house.

“Why are you telling him to take her to your grandfathers if she’s involved in a cover-up?”

“Mary Jane is ninety-four, and Buster is ninety-six. Someone had to have brought him here. I’m sure Mary Jane didn’t want him to be alone, so she had them bring Sybil and the puppies to stay with him. I’m sure she was scared to death when he wouldn’t wake up. Poor Mary Jane. Can we put Sybil and the puppies in your truck? We’ll have to take them to Grandpa’s.”

“Why can’t we take them to Mary Jane?”

“She’ll be at Grandpa’s house. I wonder who moved Buster here. It had to be Barney she must have had someone get him from up the mountain. Here is Jason.”

“What the hell happened here? Damn, who is that?”

“We think it’s Buster McDonald.”

“Buster, it looks like he’s been dead for a while. Poor old man. Is this how it ends? I’ll have someone come out and get him. I guess Mary Jane didn’t know what to do with him. Did you have someone pick her up and take her to your Grandpa’s?”

Yes, she brought Sybil and the puppies to keep Buster company. We’ll bury him with her shawl. I’ll pay for the funeral. We’ll be on our way. Do you need us for anything?”

“Nope, I’ll call the morgue, and they can come pick him up. I’ll tell Ed to get him ready for his funeral. I’ll talk to Mary

Jane in a couple of days. Find out what day she wants the funeral. Are you going to introduce me to your man friend?"

"Gabe Steller, this is Jason Rangler. He's the law on the mountain."

"Hello, Jason, it's nice meeting you."

"I can't say the same," then he turned and looked at Carrie. "Is this the same guy you cried on my shoulder about one drunken night years ago?"

"That's me," I said. I knew I needed to sit down; my body was about to give out on me. "Sorry, I can't stay and talk, but I need to sit down."

Carrie rushed over and took my arm like I needed her to walk me five feet. "I told you to stay in the truck," she said. I chuckled.

"That's right, didn't you get like twenty bullets in your body?"

"Twelve bullets and I'm almost completely healed. My insides are taking longer than I thought it would to heal."

Well, I think what you did to save all those people was amazing. I will be glad to call you my friend."

"Thank you. Jason, I'm glad to be your friend also."

"So what are we going to do about Buster?" James demanded to know.

"I'm going to take care of Buster. You can see how Mary Jane is doing. I'm worried about her."

I was so shocked no one thought anything about Buster being dumped in the street. They were concerned about Mary Jane, who apparently didn't have money for Buster's funeral, so she wanted someone else to take charge. I guess the mountains were different and had their own way of doing things.

We finally made it to Grandpa's house, and when we got out, Mary Jane came out of the house crying. She was so tiny

she spotted Sybil and the puppies and cried more. Carrie put her arm around her and walked back into the house.

Mary Jane, I don't want you worrying. Jason is making sure Buster is taken care of. You don't have to do anything. Now let's go inside, you can stay with us tonight. Sybil and her puppies can sleep on the front porch. Have you eaten anything?"

"Yes, your granddad made me a sandwich and some soup. He's getting bossy. Can you believe he lectured me because I took Buster where someone would find him. What was I supposed to do, hide him in the woods? I couldn't keep him any longer his color was getting grayer, and he was beginning to smell. What else could I do?"

"You did the only thing you could do. How else would anyone know you needed help? How is Barney doing nowadays?"

"He's the same as he was all those years ago before he became a hermit. I was surprised he helped me, but he was the only help I could get since he's my closest neighbor. I barely made it up that mountain; it took me two days walking to his shack. He lectured me for an hour for walking up that mountain. He wasn't happy, but he helped me anyway. Now, are you going to introduce me to your man?"

"Gabe Steller, this is Mary Jane McDonald. Mary Jane, this is the only man I have ever loved."

"And Carrie is the only woman I have ever loved."

"If you love birds are through talking, we can go inside," James said, chuckling.

Mary Jane also chuckled. "We all walked inside. Carrie walked Mary Jane to the guest room, she said she was plum tuckered out and wanted to go to bed."

Come with me I'll show you our room for the night, tomorrow we will move to the cabin. I took my bag and followed her up the stairs. The room, thankfully, had its own bathroom. I'll be back as soon as I talk to Grandpa. I'll bring up some food."

“Thanks.” My stomach decided to growl at that time; we chuckled simultaneously. I showered and took some sweats from my bag before sitting on the bed, where I leaned back on the pillow and fell asleep.

The sun was shining bright when I opened my eyes. I raised and grunted at the pain inside my body. I stood and almost fell on my face. I landed on my knees. Someone knocked and then opened the door. I was still on my knees.

“What happened,” Spartan asked, rushing over to me. Damn, it would have to be one of the cousins coming in here.”

“I might have a bug. My head is spinning, and my legs don’t want to stand. My insides are on fire. Can you get me a tee shirt from my bag?”

He grabbed a tee shirt out and helped me put it on. “Dude, you’re burning up. You’ll have to go back to the hospital.”

“Fuck, can you call Angel Davis and ask if I can take some medicine? I don’t want to go to the hospital.”

“Are you whining right now?”

“What happened? Are you hurt?” Carrie asked, sitting next to me on the bed. “You’re so hot. I’m going to call Angel right now.” We watched as she got up and paced. “I’m sorry to bother you. Sorry, I forgot about the time change, but can you shut up? He wants to talk to you,” Carrie said, handing me the phone.

I put it on speaker. “Tell me how you feel?” Angel said.

“My inside is on fire. I couldn’t stand, and my head is spinning. I feel like I’m in a small boat at sea, like I’m going to vomit,” Someone handed me a garbage can, I looked up, and it was Grandpa.

“Okay, I’m going to tell you what to do. You get your ass to the hospital. I have a friend there. I’ll call him to meet you there. Somehow, you managed to... never mind. Leave right now I’ll call him.”

“What were you going to say?” Carrie demanded to know.

“I was going to say somehow an infection has entered his insides and is moving to his head. Now go!”

“This is all my fault,” Carrie cried. “Liam, pick him up. Did you hear the doctor?”

“I think I can walk with Spartan’s help.”

“No, I told him to carry you. From this moment on, you do everything I say. Oh my God, I can’t lose you. I’ve waited so long for you to come back to me.”

“Sweetheart, stop getting yourself worked up. I’m going to be fine,” that’s when I looked at Spartan, or Liam, as his family called him. He set me down, and I started vomiting in the garbage can Grandpa thrust into my hands. James pressed a pillow against my stomach, which was a huge relief. James ran out and started the truck, and we all jumped inside. I sat in the back with Carrie.

“Do you want to put your head on my lap?”

“No, sweetheart, it makes my head spin lying down. Carrie, none of this is your fault, and don’t say it is. I love you, and I want you to stop worrying about me. I’m strong. I’ll be alright. Please don’t call my brothers. They’ll worry themselves sick.”

“I won’t call them.”

CARRIE

“JAKE, WHAT ARE YOU DOING HERE?” CARRIE ASKED AS SHE ran into Jake in the hallway.

Jake’s face was etched with concern as he replied. “When I called Gabe, an older woman answered, and she told me he was dying in the hospital. I’ve been trying to reach you, but there was no answer.”

“Gabe isn’t dying,” Carrie bit her lip, trying to find the right words to explain. I forgot my phone when we left. “He was burning up with fever, he has an infection in his body that traveled throughout his insides. They are giving him antibiotics. We had some CAT scans and MRIs done, and nothing was torn inside. But the infection was moving up to his brain.”

Carrie could see the disbelief in Jake’s eyes. He’ll have to see Gabe before he believes me. “Why didn’t you call me?”

“Because I promised Gabe I wouldn’t say anything. He didn’t want you worrying about him.” I looked up as Danny and Eddie walked into the hospital.

Jake turned toward them. “Gabe will be fine; he has an infection and is taking antibiotics. We’ll visit him today and head home early in the morning.”

Eddie asked he frown deepening. “Why did that woman say he was dying?”

“She’s ninety-four, and her ninety-six-year-old husband has just died. She’s very upset with what is happening in her

life. So please excuse her.” Carrie replied, forcing a smile.

Eddie relaxed. “I’m just happy it’s not true.”

Danny chimed in. “So, can we visit him?”

Carrie nodded. “Yeah, he’s not very happy right now. He wants out of the hospital, so I hope he doesn’t try talking you three into breaking him out of here. I will tie him down if he even thinks about leaving. Why don’t you all visit with him and I’ll get me something to eat. He’s in room five-six-three.

I was eating a sandwich at the cute little café on the ground floor at the hospital when Danny sat down with two sandwiches and a large soda. “Did he already chase you off?”

“Yeah, he’s angry we don’t help him escape. He actually wanted us to get a wheelchair and wheel him out of the hospital,” I chuckled at the look on Danny’s face like he couldn’t believe his brother would suggest such a thing.

“You should tell him you’ll get Liam to carry him out; that shuts him up. I’m going home to shower while you three are here. I have to take Mary Jane home and take care of her husband’s funeral. I will be back after dinner.”

“Okay, we will keep him here. You don’t have to worry. You take care of what you need to do. We’ll keep Gabe where he’s supposed to be. Who will be helping Mary Jane when she moves back home?”

“Mary Jane has many friends who will be helping her. You just have to make it look like she is helping you.”

“How are you getting home?”

“My vehicle is here. So I will see you later.”

“Yep, we’ll be right here.”

Nine days later, Gabe was released. He was back to his old self. He still couldn’t do a lot, but he was here with me, and he was alive. It feels so good for him to be out of that hospital.

“So, where are we staying?” Gabe asked as we drove away from the hospital.

“We are staying at the cabin. I’ve been fixing it up for us.”

“So tonight is our night. After all this time, I’ll be ready to hit the hay when we get to the cabin.” he chuckled.

“Yes, I am a little tired myself. My dad built that cabin for my Mom when they got married. Now, it’s ours for as long as we need it.”

“Sweetheart, wherever you are is where I’ll be. Forever. I love you, Carrie. Will you marry me? I want to spend my life with you.”

I wasn’t prepared for that question, my mind racing with memories. “Gabe, I want to marry you, really I do. I just don’t want to be engaged. When we decide to get married, we will do it. I could never go through that again. It would kill me.”

“It’s okay, Sugar, we’ll do whatever you want.”

“Thank you for that, Gabe.” I took a deep breath and relaxed.

As we pulled up in front of the cabin, Gabe, looked around surprised to see the large garden surrounding the cabin. Flowers were planted everywhere. Some I grew, but my Mom planted most of them.

Gabe stepped out of the vehicle and whistled. “It’s beautiful here, and the sun shines on everything just enough to help them grow.”

“Yes, that’s why my Dad picked this spot. He knew how much my mom loved gardening.”

Gabe opened the door, and we walked inside; I took us to the back, where the bedroom was. “I had a king-size bed installed while were in the hospital.”

He looked at it and smiled. “I wondered if I would fit on that full-size bed. This is perfect.”

Pointing to the dresser, she continued. “This is your dresser. Your brothers brought you some clothes, so you won’t have to wear the same ones all the time.”

Gabe sniffed and inquired, “What smells so good?”

“I have a roast and vegetables cooking in the slow cooker for dinner.”

“So, you learned to cook?”

“No, James showed me how to cook in the slow cooker. He’s a great cook; I just never got the hang of it. But I promise to learn before we have children. I can’t have you cooking everything.”

He walked in front of me and picked me up, and then he kissed me like he was going to make me feel things I hadn’t felt in years. I wrapped my arms around him and kissed him back, my legs wrapped him as he pulled my tee shirt over my head. Then he sat me down as he undressed me and then himself. Clothes fell to the floor.

Why are you crying sweetheart? He whispered in my ear.

“Because I’m so happy we get to make love.”

With a groan, he lifted his head. “Tell me what you want.”

“I want all of you.”

The warm glint in his eyes made her shiver. His mouth swept across her lower lip. “You taste good, you know that?”

“Like sugar.”

“Even better,” he growled.



I WAS SUDDENLY eager and hot, as though it was my first time. I knew how to please a woman—God knows I’d perfected my technique over the years—but this was different. This was Carrie the woman I’ve always loved. The need to be with her made me ache.

Carrie wasn’t shy with me or hesitant. She stroked my back, my shoulders, my arms. I could feel her heart pounding, and when I touched her breast, she arched against me and moaned softly.

Her legs moved restlessly against mine. I kissed the side of her neck and slowly moved lower, taking my time, teasing and tormenting her the entire time. My tongue gently tickled her collar bone, and at last, when I reached her breast, I felt her tighten around me.

I began to slowly drive her out of her mind, I had no idea her breast was so sensitive, but she lost a bit more control with each stroke of my tongue.

I was losing control as well. I took a deep, shuddering breath and passionately kissed her. My hands actually trembled. I kissed her again, hard, quick, and then pulled away. Do you have any condoms?"

"Yes, I got us some they're on the nightstand," she whispered quietly. "I got lots of them."

I chuckled as I reached over her for the condom.

She rolled onto her back, her gaze locked with mine. My hands moved to her waist as I rolled her closer to me. I moved between her thighs and stretched. The feel of her made me to forget to breathe.

Her hands caressed my back, her touch feather-light until I kissed her again. Her touch quickly became more frantic. She clutched my shoulders, demanding I stop tormenting her.

"Gabe." I didn't know if she shouted my name or sighed it. My hands had moved between her thighs, and I was driving her out of her mind. She kept saying my name, and that made me harder. I knew just where to touch exactly how much pressure to exert. She writhed in my arms, pleading with me to come to her.

She was desperate to feel every inch of me, and I knew this woman was the woman I loved. I knew everything about her. She wrapped herself around me, begging for release. My breathing became more labored, which seemed to excite her even more. She cried out that she would die if I continued to torment her.

I delayed as long as I could to give her as much pleasure as she gave me. Her response made it impossible to wait any

longer. I knew she was ready. My mouth covered hers, and I moved between her thighs and slowly sank into her liquid heat. She was so tight, so hot, I groaned from the sheer bliss. I stayed completely still inside her, panting as I whispered her name.

When I came to her, she cried out. The ecstasy was overwhelming.

“Ah, Carrie.” I breathe her name. “Damn.”

She wasn't content to let me catch my breath. I knew every nerve in her body was clamoring for release. She lifted her knees to take me deeper and began to move. Oh, how she pleased me; I wanted to make her as crazed as I was. She bit my shoulder, kissed my mouth, and moved to my neck. She was panting now.

I pulled back and thrust deep, and tears came to her eyes. I was staggered by the intensity of the feelings gathering inside me. My movements became more powerful, more all-consuming, more demanding. It was exquisite.

Even in the throes of raw passion, I had always been able to control my actions to set my own pace. But I couldn't control anything right now. I thrust into her again and again, powerless to slow down.

She was every bit as passionate as me. I felt tension build within her, ready to burst with the need for release. My movements were powerful. I gave her everything her body begged for and more.

Wave after wave of sensation poured over us. I watched as her eyes glazed over, and she licked her lips. We let it sweep us away like a roller coaster plunging to the ground and jolting every nerve; the waves of pleasure coursing through us were magical. When she opened her eyes tears flowed from them. I kissed her, then buried my face in the crook of her neck, slow to recover, “Damn,” I whispered.

“A curse word...and yet, I felt as though I'd just been caressed,” she said, smiling.

I was still panting against her ear. Or was that her panting? I was so shaken I couldn't hold a thought. The woman had turned me into a blithering idiot.

I didn't want to let go of her. Not ever.

I rolled to my side and pulled her with me. I held her and stroked her, my touch tender now. Neither one of us spoke, both content for the moment. The minutes ticked by, and she fell asleep in my arms. I closed my eyes and we both slept.

GABE

THREE MONTHS HAD PASSED SINCE MY RELEASE FROM THE hospital, and the restlessness was gnawing at me. It was high time I returned to work, and I couldn't help but wonder what my buddies were thinking about my prolonged absence. Countless times, I had explained to them that I was occupied with building a new room onto the cabin. Plus I my doctor hadn't released me to go back to work.

Our need for an additional room was undeniable. The cabin's main living area and kitchen were currently fused into one, and it was becoming increasingly impractical. My friends had grown impatient, and their calls started to reflect their frustration, urging me to shake off my idleness. I couldn't afford to lose my job, so I finally dialed Ryker's number.

"Hey, I've been wondering when you'd give me a ring," Ryker greeted me. "We're swamped with work over here. I'm glad you called when you did. You are calling to get back to work, right?"

"Yes," I replied with determination, "it's high time I got busy again. I've made up my mind to live here from now on. I hope that won't pose any problems."

"I don't see why it would be a problem, Ryker reassured me, "Do you have your weapon?"

"Yes, my brothers brought me everything I needed," I confirmed. "Let me know when you're ready for me to head over."

“You’ll have to call Sofie,” Ryker advised, “she’ll set you up with something. The rest of us are away on jobs. By the way, do you think the Marines have any openings?” “I’ll look into that,” I responded. “Then, they can get back with Sofie. I’ll also let her know about my availability, and we’ll catch up later.” After ending my call with Ryker, I promptly reached out to Sofie, who genuinely seemed relieved that I had made contact.

“I’m so glad to hear you’re doing better. We were all really worried about you,” Sofie said. “Now, I need you to go to Iran and rescue a teenager. His family believes his grandfather had him kidnapped and taken to Iran, where the wife hails from.”

“Damn,” I muttered, concern etching my voice. “Has the boy ever been to Iran?”

“No,” Sofie replied. “He’s never been there. The boy’s father is going out of his mind. The wife assured her husband we would bring their son back; she needed to calm him down because he was about to head over there himself. You and I know they’d kill him and leave him to rot on the streets.”

“Damn, Sofie,” I exclaimed, “where did you learn about how the Iranians treat people?”

“Just from listening to all of you talking,” she explained. “The grandfather mentioned that he intended to teach the boy how to fight and kill his enemies.”

“Oh hell,” I sighed, my worry deepening. “How old is the boy?”

“He’s fifteen,” Sofie informed me. “I’ll send you all the necessary information. What’s your fax number?”

“I don’t have a fax here,” I replied. “I’ll head over to Grandpa’s place and call you from there.”

“Alright, I’ll check for available flights. Hutch will accompany you, though he might be a bit grumpy since he just got back from a job yesterday.”

“It’ll be nice to see him, even if he is in a bad mood.”

I drove the truck up the mountain, heading to Grandpa's place. Carrie was there working in her Grandpa's garden. As I arrived, she walked up to me, wrapping her arms around me and planting a kiss on my lips.

"What brings you here?"

"I need to use your grandpa's fax machine. We really should get one ourselves. Do you happen to know his number?"

"Come inside. Why do you need the fax machine?"

I hesitated, knowing she wouldn't like what I was about to say. "I have a job, and Sofie is faxing me the necessary documents."

"You're going back to work?"

"Sweetheart, it's been almost five months since I last went to work. It's time for me to return."

"Where are you going?"

"Iran. Hutch is coming with me. We're rescuing a teenage boy whose grandfather had him kidnapped. He swears he'll teach him to kill or get killed."

"I don't think you should take this job. You're not ready for that kind of work yet."

I stopped walking and locked eyes with her. "I'm going to be fine. I have to save this boy. He's fifteen and has never been out of America. He doesn't know his grandfather is a mean son-of-a bitch. His father is ready to go over there and get himself killed if I don't do this."

Grandpa walked up to them, "I think you will save that boy. Come inside, and I'll hook you up with the fax machine."

"Sofie wants me to have you call her. We are swamped with work, and she wants to discuss it with you."

"Okay, that's great. We could use more work. Maybe I can get some advice from Sofie. Here is my fax number," I watched Carrie as she paced back and forth.

“Carrie, what do you want me to do? You know this is my job. You are in the same business. I promise I’ll be safe, and we’ll get that boy and bring him home to his family.”

“I know it’s just that Iran is so far away. I’m sorry,” she shook her head, “Ignore me. I’m just used to having you around. I’ll probably be going somewhere as well. When do you leave?”

Hutch is picking me up at the airport. I sent Sofie the fax information, and she faxed me everything I needed to know. I’m going to pack my bag, how about keeping me company while I do that?” I said, putting my arm around Carrie.

“I wouldn’t want to be anywhere except where you are. Ignore me. I’m being silly worrying about you. I know you can take care of yourself.

I pulled her into my arms and kissed her right in front of Grandpa. We were like two hot teenagers when we got home. I had her clothes off before she knew what I had planned. We made love, and I held her before I had to leave. I hate leaving you here, but we know I must do this. I kissed her goodbye and left.



I MAN-HUGGED Hutch before I entered the jet. “Wow, this is nice; where did we get it?”

“The boy’s other grandfather. He is the one paying for everything. He wanted the kid’s mom to come with us, but her husband put his foot down. He knows they would kill her if she went back to that country. The boy’s name is Troy. His Dad said he’s smart and can rock climb and hike for days.”

“But I’m sure he’s never rock climbed or hiked anywhere like Iran. This is really tough on the mother; her name is Helda, Mark is the dad, and his family blames Helda for this happening because her mother called and warned her that her father was planning something.”

I sat in the copilot seat and got comfortable. Did she know what he was planning? I'm sure she would have done something if she knew he was going to kidnap her son.

So, how are you doing?" Hutch asked.

"I'm doing great; I'm fitter than I have been in a while. I run up the mountain; it's a great workout. I live with the woman I love more than anything in the world. What more can I want? But I must admit I was ready to return to work."

Hutch laughed out loud for longer than he should have, while I watched him frowning, "You sound like a commercial."

I chuckled. "Sofie is sending the Marines to do some of the jobs. We need to get more help."

"Did she call the Green Berets? River might have some openings."

"I'll text her and have her call him. She says he's always grumpy when she talks to him. I told her that's just the way he is."

"They were in Texas, putting out an oil fire."

"Are they still doing that?"

"Only the ones that no one can put out. River is in his element the more dangerous the job is."

"I've heard stories about him that would curl your toes."

"Curl your toes. Did you just make that up?"

"I don't think so, but I might have," he laughed. So are you going to live on the mountain? Your brothers are driving us crazy, asking us to tell you to come home. Danny said it feels like they lost your Dad, Mom, and you at the same time. He wants us to order you to come home."

"I know he calls me, too, but Danny needs to realize that Carrie needs to be with her Grandpa. He almost died a while back, and that scared all of them. She could never leave her grandfather, and I will never leave her. So for now we live in the boonies."

“How are we going to do this?”

“We are going to go walk over the border through the rocky terrain. I’ve brought everything you’ll need, including camouflage clothes. We need to be cautious about our water supply; there won’t be any places to refill the canteens. I talked to Hilda, and she mentioned that rescuing Troy might be nearly impossible due to the numerous possible locations they could have taken him.”

“Do we have a map or something resembling one? We can’t just take walking and hope to stumble upon them. Do you think there might be border patrol? They are most likely watching the border closely, don’t you think?”

“Check the bag behind your seat. There’s a map Helda drew, marking the area where she believes he was taken. Her cousin, who now lives in America will meet us. He’s very close to the boy, and wants to help. I’ve also packed plenty of ammunition, two AK47s, plus a couple of other fire arms. These people won’t hesitate to us without asking questions. Helda mentioned her father is a notorious killer responsible for numerous deaths and entire families murdered.”

“Did you bring any food?”

“Of course, Beatrice packed enough jerky and granola bars to last a year. There should be a couple of sandwiches in there. Hopefully, we won’t need them to last a year. I’m hoping we get in and out of there in a week or less.”

I grabbed a sandwich and closed my eyes. “These are delicious. Please thank Bea for the food when you get home.”

“It wouldn’t hurt for you to visit everyone once in a while. What are you going to do with your beach house?”

“I don’t have any immediate plans for it. I’ll bring Carrie to visit everyone when we return. My brothers are staying at my parent’s home and renting out their homes. I should have visited them. I don’t want my brothers to feel like I’m pushing them out of my life now that Carrie’s is a part of it.”

“I saw Eddie out with Kayla Daniel’s. You know how crazy her brothers can be. I hope they won’t attempt anything

like what they did to Harold Ford back in college.”

“That would be the last guy they jumped. If they lay one hand on my brother, I will kill every one of her brothers. Those bastards better not even think about harming Eddie.”

“I warned Eddie to watch his back. Don’t forget, Eddie is well-versed in martial arts. Beatrice once told me he and Griffin stayed in class, when we dropped out.”

“You have to admit Beatrice is an incredible fighter. I always had a feeling the two of you would end up together. You would stare over at her house and ignore the rest of us.”

Hutch chuckled, “I didn’t know how obvious I was until you all pointed it out. We’re coming in for landing. After we refuel, I get some sleep while you take over flying, and then we’ll switch off.”

GABE

TWELVE HOURS LATER, WE LANDED ON A SMALL AIRSTRIP, AND a man ran up to us, asking us if we were ready to move?

“Yes,” I replied, and we were off running before I even comprehended the situation. We ran for miles in silence. Five hours later, we stopped. I took out the water, took a sip, and returned it to my bag.

“Where are we now?” I asked.

“We’re close to where my father’s soldiers practice hunting men down and killing them. They select a few individuals and set them loose and they run for their lives. I pray that bastard hasn’t forced Troy into this brutal ordeal yet. Given Troy’s outspoken nature, it would provide the commanders with a reason to beat him, I hope they haven’t chosen him as one of their targets.

“Do you think he can escape them if he tried to?”

“His Commanders would seize the opportunity to punish him simply because of who he is. They got me when I was thirteen, and my father wanted me to kill innocent people. I refused and was nearly beaten to death. My mother sent me away to her sister, in America.”

“He sounds like a loving parent,” I said sarcastically.

“When he found me, he was going to kill me. But my mom got me away before he had a chance. He mutilated her right hand off for helping me.”

“Damn, we need to move quickly. I will not let those bastards take a teenager who I was sent to rescue.”

“I’m glad you said that; we share the same goal. Encountering any of those ruthless killers would be a nightmare. You need to be fast. I had a feeling I might end up back here. My aunt had me training, just in case something like this ever happened.”

Now I was genuinely worried. I glanced over at Hutch, wondering if he was thinking about Beatrice and their baby, who would arrive in a few months. “Let’s move,” I said, standing. We ran until three in the morning and managed to get two hours of sleep. When we woke up, we planned our next moves while eating granola bars.

We had been traversing over a sand hill, which was what I called them. I couldn’t help but worry about venomous snakes, and scorpions lurking in this desert.

“Someone’s approaching,” I whispered, loud enough for Hasham and Hutch to hear.

“My friend is supposed to meet us here,” Hasham explained.

“What the fuck did you say? You told someone about us our mission?”

“Yes, my friend is here to help us.”

“Get down,” I growled.

“It’s okay,” he reassured me, “My friend would never betray us.”

“Get the fuck down!” I shouted, and just as I did, bullets sprayed where Hasham had been standing. “Never trust anyone besides your teammate,” I warned before we scrambled for cover. We hid behind some rocks, and took cover. As soon as the jeep came over the sand dune, we opened fire. I aimed for the driver and hit the driver between the eyes, causing the jeep to swerve out of control. Two men jumped from the vehicle, and I ran toward them before they could rise. They were dead within seconds.

“We have to get out of here. More will be coming. Let’s get the hell out of here!” I yelled. Hasham move it,” Finally, he got up. I wondered why he believed his old friend wouldn’t betray us. They might have been friends, but that’s been years ago, and circumstances change. I tossed the body out of the jeep, and we jumped in.

It engine wouldn’t start. I jumped out and checked under the hood. I could see that the battery cable had been disconnected, but just as I reached for it, a hand slapped it back onto the battery. Hutch turned it over, and we got in and took off, leaving a trail of dust behind us. We hoped we had put enough distance between us and our pursuers.

We drove until the jeep ran out of gas and then continued on foot. Hasham seemed to be in a daze, still in shock that his old friend from years ago would turn on him. He didn’t seem to grasp the reality of the situation. If his friend were to help him, it would likely lead to the death of him and his family.

“Get down,” I hissed as I crawled like a snake on my stomach to peer over the sand dune; Hutch and Hasham followed suit. They had a roaring fire burning, and we spotted a group of around eight men and a woman they had thrown to the ground; she screamed for help as one of the men began to rape her. Hasham jumped up, and I forcibly pull him back down.

“IF YOU GET UP AGAIN, I will have to kill you. I won’t allow you to jeopardize this boy’s life with your actions. You are not to speak or do anything until we’re on the plane home.”

Hasham nodded and lay low again. “I couldn’t focus with that woman screaming, I admitted, to Hutch and we slid back down the dune. “I’m going check the tents for Troy after dealing with those men.”

“Be careful. If you get caught, they’ll subject you to unspeakable horrors,” Hasham whispered, handing me a knife. Take this with you. If you have to silence someone, this will come in handy.

“Thanks,” I said, pushing the knife down in my boot. With my AK47 slung over my shoulder, I took off while Hutch covered my rear. I moved stealthily down the hill, my weapon trained on the men raping the woman. As I squeezed the trigger, they crumpled to the ground.

The woman wasted no time, she sprinted away, stopped briefly, and pointed toward a tent at the back. I spun around just as more men rushed out from the tents. I dropped to the ground firing my weapon. More men ran from the other tents. Meanwhile, I noticed other women fleeing, unclothed, through the camp. Hutch joined the fray, his gun blazing.

“WE CAN’T LET anyone escape, or the entire Iranian army will descend upon us,” I said, lying in wait for more men to emerge. I spotted the back of the tent pushed up, so I sprinted around. Men were scrambling into jeeps, trying to get away. I opened fire, my weapon, and they fired back; I heard Hutch grunt and knew by the sound he had been hit.

I sprang to my feet and raced forward. The jeep couldn’t get away, or we’d be dead. I took aim and fired my bullets struck the gas tank, causing the jeep to explode in a fiery burst. Shrapnel scattered in all directions. I hurried back to Hutch while Hasham checked the tents for other occupants.

“Where are you hit?”

It went through my shoulder. I’ll be fine. See if Troy is here.”

I rushed from tent to tent, at the last one Hasham, was freeing two women who had been tied up. “Have you seen a teenage boy anywhere?” I asked, praying they had information about his whereabouts.

One of the women pointed behind the third tent. I ran to the back and I saw a body. I turned him over, it wasn’t Troy, it was a boy about twelve. I lifted him and carried him to where the others were, that’s when I heard a faint breath. I gently placed him down, and a tear rolled from Hasham’s cheek as he examined the boy.

“Is he dead?” Hutch inquired.

“No, but he’s barely hanging on. What should we do with him?”

“I’m taking him home with me,” Hasham declared as he continued tending to the boy. He opened a bag, and that’s when I realized it was a doctor’s bag.

“Are you a doctor? I asked.

“Yes, I’m still doing my residency at the hospital. They granted me some time off to find Troy.”

“How is the boy? You can check Hutch’s shoulder once you’re done with him,” I said, he glancing at Hasham.

He looked up at Hutch. “You were shot?”

“Only one bullet. Gabe once had twelve bullets in his body at once,” Hutch replied.

Hasham shot me a quick look as he worked on the boy. “Are you the man who saved all of those women and children?”

“Yes, but my sweetheart Carrie, killed the top two men.”

The boy started making noises, and Hasham began speaking to him in his native language. The boy could barely speak; his breathing was faint, as if there were a hole somewhere in his chest. We all gasped when Hasham lifted the filthy torn t-shirt. There we saw three nails hammered into the boy’s chest.

Hasham prayed out loud, and then he got up, walked away, shouted, and screamed until his throat was hoarse. Suddenly we heard someone approaching.

I aimed my gun at the approaching figure, his lips were busted, and he limped, but he ran into Hasham’s arms. “I knew that roar belonged to you. We need to leave quickly an entire army is heading our way.”

I picked up the boy with the nails in his chest, and we piled into a jeep and sped away. Hasham struggled to keep the boy

breathing. Troy sat next to Hutch, who had a sling on his arm to support his injured shoulder.

“Did my Mom hire you to find me?” Troy asked.

“Your parents and your grandparents are deeply concerned about you. We had to act fast to keep your father from coming here. Where are you injured?” Hutch asked, examining the boy.

“I think my fingers are broken,” Troy replied glancing at his hand. And my back has been burned. My shirt is stuck to my back. I was lucky I could get away when I did because they were planning to hammer five nails into my chest, like they did Johnny. He’s only ten and those fuckers told him if he survives, he can join their army.

“Have you see your grandfather?” I asked.

“He’s not my grandfather; he’s the devil. He burned my back so I’d act like a man. I told him I was a teenager. I hate him.”

“Was he there, at the camp?” I inquired.

“He’s the one bringing the army.”

“Fuck, if he comes near us, I’ll kill him,” I declared, looking at Troy.

“Why are they so brutal here? It’s like they’re animals. He killed my grandma because she tried to get me out of the country.”

“He’s a despicable bastard; I wish I would have killed him when I was five.” Hasham roared.

“I told Johnny he could live with us and be my brother. Do you think Mom and Dad would like that?” Troy wondered aloud.

Hasham turned and glanced at Troy. “I think they would love to have another son. I’ll examine your back as soon as we’re out of here. How did he burn your back?” Hasham asked.

“He tied me down and put burning coals on my back; he’s insane. I don’t know why someone didn’t kill him years ago. His men hate him”

“Yes, he is. I’m sorry you ever had to meet up with him.”

“Yeah, me too.”

We took a break to allow everyone to stretch their muscles. I held the boy while Hasham examined Troy’s back. I watched Hasham expression as he tried to assess the injury without removing Troy’s shirt. There was no way he was getting that shirt off until the shirt was soaked in water on his back. It turned out his fingers were broken.

“How did your fingers get broken?” I asked.

“He used a hammer,” Troy replied. The same thing he hit my knee with.”

“Bastard. I was hoping to get the chance to kill him. Maybe I’ll still get that chance,” I muttered.

As we resumed our journey, we noticed lights in the distance, and we all knew they belonged Troy’s grandfather’s army. I placed my gun across my lap, aware of Troy fear. “Troy, I get down. We’ll lay Johnny on the seat next to Hutch and Hasham can take Hutch’s AK47. Hasham can you shoot someone if you have to?”

“If I have to shoot someone to save Troy’s life and Johnny’s, I will do what needs to be done,” Hasham declared. The jeep was going at a speed that I knew the other jeeps couldn’t catch us given our head start. After driving for a mile across the border I turned to Hutch. “I want you to take them to the plane, if I’m not there in an hour then leave. I have to eliminate this man, or he will never leave Troy alone. We have to keep him safe, and the only way to do that is to kill the bastard.

“I agree. You be careful I don’t want you brothers and Carrie coming for my head.”

I’ll be careful,” I assured him.

Troy shook his head as he stepped out of the jeep. “You don’t know what he looks like, I’m staying here.”

“I have his face etched into my memory. You go and help take care of your little brother.” The lights were getting close, and I positioned myself behind a boulder when I heard a noise. Come on out Troy. I had a feeling you’d be back.”

“I have to make sure he dies. If I didn’t see it for myself I would be watching over my shoulder for the rest of my life.”

“Stay behind the rocks,” I instructed him. When the Iranians reached the border, they slowed down but kept coming.

“That’s him sitting in the front with that ugly hat on,” Troy whispered, his voice shaking.

“Stay here, and I mean it. Do not move from this spot.” I waited for him to nod before proceeding. I planned to finish this quickly and then leave. As the jeep came to a stop, I lifted my gun and fired; everyone in the jeep died. I watched to see what the others would do and saw them turning back. Troy shouted for joy, wiping tears from his eyes as he climbed down. We began walking; we didn’t have far to go as the jeep was nearby.

“Does anyone listen to me?” I grumbled.

Hutch chuckled and replied, “No.”

We made our way to the plane. After settling in, I climbed into the cockpit, and Troy called his family. They would meet us in Germany because three people needed to see a doctor. Johnny and Troy would be admitted, and Hutch’s shoulder would be checked out.

“Less than a week, we did well on this rescue, Hutch,” I commented.

“Yep, why don’t you bring Carrie to the Fourth of July barbecue.”

“Alright, I’ll see you in a couple of weeks. Hopefully, we aren’t all working that weekend.

“Bring her anytime so that everyone can meet her. Bring the entire family.”

“Don’t get carried away. I’ll bring Carrie with me and maybe a couple more.”

CARRIE

YOU'D THINK IT'S BEEN LONGER THAN A FEW MONTHS. However, Gabe wasn't pleased when he arrived home after rescuing Troy, mainly because I was away on a job. Truth be told it wasn't a long assignment, nor was it particularly dangerous.

My task was to drive an elderly woman across the country to visit her terminally ill sister. She was a wealthy woman, but she adamantly refused to fly. It turned out that when she was thirty-seven, her husband had been on a plane that tragically crashed, and she'd sworn off flying since that day.

She was a kind-hearted woman with two grown children, and six grandchildren, but she didn't want to burden them with such a long journey, so she called Sofie, and Sofie called me.

"What's your name, dear?" she asked.

"My name is Carrie Bellmont."

"You sound like you have a southern accent. Do you live in the Appalachian Mountains?"

"Yes," I replied, grateful she had decided to talk to me. She seemed so sad because of her sister's condition.

"I knew someone with the last name Bellmont who lived high up in those mountains. His name was James Bellmont, and I had once loved that man with all my heart. However, I had already promised to marry my husband, and the wedding plans were set. There seemed to be no other choice; I had to

marry Johnathan, or my family would have faced disgrace in our small town.

“My grandfather is James Bellmont.”

“What? Oh my God, this feels like destiny. Meeting you was meant to be. After we visit my sister, we must go see James. I want to see him one last time before I pass.”

“All right, umm, I’m sure Grandpa will be thrilled to see you again,” I replied, already anticipating the call I would make to Grandfather and telling him about this remarkable conversation I had with Adeline Monroe. I dreaded calling him. I happen to know Grandfather was quite the catch back in the day. My Grandmother died when my father was eight, and I know he had women coming around all the time.

Adeline spoke again, and her voice sounded far away. “He pleaded with me to marry him. I don’t think he understood why I couldn’t. I probably shouldn’t confess this,” she said, as my mind didn’t want to hear anything about Grandpa in his wild days, “I made love to James the night before my wedding. My Son is his child. Please promise me you won’t tell anyone about this secret. I’ve carried it for all these years, and my love for James Bellmont has never wavered.”

“It’s clear he loved you deeply,” *Grandfather, what were you thinking?*

“Oh he did, and I loved him. I’m sure he loved your grandmother just as passionately. Maybe I shouldn’t see him. I wouldn’t want to cause him any distress or a heart attack.”

“Grandpa had a heart attack six months ago. He thought I was about to lose my life, and it really scared him.”

“What’s he up to these days? I can’t picture him sitting in a rocking chair and letting life pass him by.”

“No, Grandpa is quite active. He’s actually running our family’s high-security business.”

We chatted for a while until she dozed off in the back seat. I was trying to wrap my head around her son being Grandpa’s son. *Does that mean I have more cousins?*

Throughout the drive, my phone kept buzzing in my handbag. I couldn't answer it while I was driving, especially while on a job, but I couldn't help but wonder who was calling. Perhaps it was Gabe, and maybe he was home.

When we stopped for the night, I checked my phone in the privacy of my room. It was indeed Gabe, who had left me eleven messages telling me how much he loved me. I called him right away, his sleepy voice answered.

"Hey, sweetheart, when are you coming home? I miss you."

"I miss you too. I'm currently driving an elderly woman to Palm Springs to visit her dying sister. And guess what?"

"What?"

"This woman was once in love with my Grandpa. She said her love has never wavered. She claims that he loved her too, but she was about to marry someone else. She confessed that she made love to Grandpa the night before her wedding, and her son is Grandpa's child. Whoops, I wasn't supposed to tell anyone that. She wants us to visit Grandpa after she says goodbye to her sister. Her name is Adeline Monroe."

"Wow, is she okay? She doesn't sound delusional or anything, does she?"

"She initially asked if I was from the South. I told her where I lived, and that's when she told me about the man she loved, James Bellmont, who had lived in the Appalachian Mountains. I revealed that James Bellmont was my grandfather. I'm not sure it's a good idea for Grandpa to see an old flame. What if he has a heart attack?"

"Do you want me to give him a heads-up about her visit?"

"Yes, but let's keep the son a secret for now. That has to be investigated before we breathe a word of it. I could have cousins living down the street from us."

"When are you coming home? How about I fly to Palm Springs and meet you there? While Adeline Monroe visits her sister, I can spend time with you. We can make love all night long."

“I’ll be staying at her sister’s home with her because she’s scared to see her sister’s final moments alone.”

“Tell me about Iran.”

Hutch was shot in the shoulder, and we found this boy who was almost dead. Troy took him home; he had already told him he would do that. Troy had his fingers broken, and his back was burned; his grandfather tied him down and put burning coals on his back. He broke Troy’s hand with a hammer and busted his kneecap.

“I went there once, and it was a living nightmare,” I said, “I’ll never forget the woman I had to find. She was a drug dealer who was deeply involved with opium drugs, bringing them into the United States. That’s why she went to Iran; she thought they were cheating her out of her drugs.”

“I guess you can guess what happened to her. She contacted me to hurry and rescue her. She said those men in Iran treated her like she was a stupid woman. I went there to bring her in, and when I finally found her, she was tied down in the burning sand, and scorpions were all over her body.”

“She had been dead for a while. I paid someone to bury her and left before they tied me down. They treat women worse than they do their animals. I don’t want you going back over there. It’s way too dangerous. I wish you were here with me. I love you.”

“I love you too, sweetheart. I want to spend the rest of my life with you. I want to hold you in my arms all night, every night. Please marry me.”

“You don’t have to marry me for me to spend every night with you; I want to be with you forever. I’m not going anywhere without you. We will get married, but we just got together a few months ago. I want you to be sure I’m who you want.”

“Do not go there, Carrie; you are the only woman I want, the only woman I have ever loved. We will have beautiful children and grandchildren; we need to be married. I want

children. I'm not getting any younger, and I want my children to know how much I love their mother."

"I know, Gabe, we'll get married soon. Goodnight, I love you. I'll see you in a few days."

"Okay, sweetheart, call me tomorrow night. I love you, goodnight."

I laid in bed for hours before falling asleep, thinking of Gabe; I loved him so much. Why was I putting Gabe off? I wanted to marry him, so why don't I just do it?

I heard my alarm go off and stretched, and then I smiled I had decided to marry Gabe I would let him choose the day. I would tell him when I called him tonight. I showered and knocked on Adeline's door."

"Come in."

"Good morning, Adeline. How are you doing this morning?"

"I am doing wonderful. Thank you for asking. I am so excited to see James again. I hope he doesn't mind me visiting him. My heart is racing like a teenager, isn't that silly?"

"Not at all. It's been years since you've seen each other," *Lordy, I hope Gabe told Grandpa what to expect.*

We drove for hours before we stopped for dinner. Now Adeline rides up front with me. I swear it's like she's twenty years younger. She has makeup on, her long hair is twisted in a beautiful braid, and she put it on top of her head. Not only does she look more youthful, but she also acts younger.

I wondered if Grandpa would feel rejuvenated when he saw Adeline. Maybe this was a good thing. When we stopped for dinner, I went into the bathroom and called Gabe, but there was no answer. That's when I saw that I had a voicemail.

"Hey, sweetheart, I was called away to guard a family. I didn't have time to talk to your grandpa, so you might want to give him a heads-up before surprising him. I'm not sure how long this will take; I love you, and I'll talk to you later."

“Well, darn,” I mumbled to myself. “Now, I’ll have to wait until I tell him we can marry whenever he wants us to. Thinking about having a baby thrilled me, and I couldn’t wait to marry Gabe. Of course, when I have children, I will no longer work. *Will that bother me? Not at all.*”

We drove for two more days before we pulled into her sister’s driveway, a man stood there smoking a cigarette, and he approached us as I opened Adeline’s door. I acted like I didn’t see anything different, but I remembered who he was.

“Aunt Addy, it’s so good to see you again. It’s been a long time.” I felt Adeline stiffen beside me.

“Hello Steven, I didn’t know you were out of prison. I came to tell my sister goodbye, and I’m not getting into family discussions about what I need to do.”

I took Adeline’s arm, and we walked inside the house. “Mom’s room is this way. Do I know you?” He said, looking at me.

I squeezed Adeline’s arm just enough to tell her not to say anything. I put on my most Southern drawl. “I don’t believe I’ve had the pleasure. My name is Katherine Steller.”

“I’ll remember. I never forget a face, especially one as beautiful as yours. If Aunt Addie is visiting Mom tonight, why don’t we go out on the town?”

“I’m Afraid my husband won’t like that, and he tends to get a little jealous if he sees men trying to pick up his wife. You don’t ever want to anger, Gabe.”

“Do you know my aunt?”

“I met her a few days ago; she hired me to drive her to tell her sister goodbye.”

“Mom’s in there; why don’t we let them have some time alone? I’ll make you a drink.”

“Oh lordy, I can’t drink. I’m going to have a baby. Now, if you will excuse us, I’ll take Mrs. Monroe to see her sister,” *Lord, how many lies have I told? I have to get out of here before he remembers who I am.*

“Do you know him?” Adeline whispered.

“When we return to our rooms, I’ll fill you in. I may have to change with someone else to drive you home.”

“We’ll discuss this later.”

We both turned when we heard a voice clear itself. “Get over here,” the woman in the bed whispered.

“Oh, Alice, I can’t believe you are dying. Please tell me what happened,” Adeline cried.

“Oh, Adeline, I’m so happy you came to tell me goodbye,” she was making all kinds of signs with her hands. “Cry loudly,” she whispered to her sister. While Adeline cried loudly, Alice grabbed my wrist and pulled me close to her. That’s when I looked at her. Why, she wasn’t that old, maybe in her sixties.

“He’s trying to kill me; he wants my money. You have to get me out of here,” I nodded and looked at Adeline to see if she heard her sister.

I had to tell them I knew all about Steven Burk. He was the scum of the earth. I sent him to prison five years ago for human trafficking. He was supposed to be in for forty years. Why the hell was he out of prison? I was glad I wore a disguise when we busted him and his buddies.

“This is my first job in our family’s business; I was a DEA agent before this. I’m the one who put Steven away. He got forty years; why is he out?”

“He is out because the D.A. let him out, along with hundreds of other prisoners. I started getting sick a month after he was released. He is putting something in my food. I found out when I overheard him laughing about it to someone on the phone. I never did like him. He was always evil.”

Adeline gazed at us with wide eyes, her fear obvious. “Now you both know I can’t run, so if we try to make a run for it, just leave me behind; I don’t have many years left anyway. Although I did want to see James Bellmont again.”

“James Bellmont, I’m sure he’s dead by now,” Alice said, shaking her head. “He is the only man Adeline has ever loved, and instead of running off with him, like she should have she married a man she didn’t love.”

“No, he’s not dead; we’ve been having lots of good karma lately. I knew if I were good, it would return to me one day.”

“Adeline, what are you talking about?” Alice demanded.

“Let me introduce you to Carrie Bellmont, who is James Bellmont’s granddaughter.”

“Wow, you wear a lot of hats, Carrie Bellmont.”

“I will put my DEA hat on until we are safe,” I checked my concealed shoulder holster beneath my jacket. I patted my gun, just to reassure me it was still there.

“I wondered why you wore a jacket in the summer,” Adeline remarked.

“This is what we are going to do. When do you think Steven will leave the house?”

“He moved in here with me. I was too scared to tell him he couldn’t live here. He has a terrible temper,” she looked at me. “Steven is my stepson. He is evil, and I always knew that. I was so surprised he showed up here last month. He forced his way in, and that’s when I started getting sick. I thought it was my nerves but it got worse, I figured out what was happening, so I told him the doctor said I was dying.”

“You can tell us everything when we are in the car and far away from here,” Adeline said.

They both looked at me and waiting for my response. “Get dressed; we are going to get our nails done. You don’t want to be buried where all your friends can see your unkempt fingernails and toenails.” She threw back the blanket and was fully dressed; she even had shoes on.

I had her sit in the wheelchair, and we headed outside, where Steven was smoking another cigarette.

“What are you doing?” he walked up to me and tried pushing me out of the way.

“Excuse me, your dear mother wants her nails done before she is buried. We are going to the nail salon.”

“My mother isn’t well enough to have anything done, and she goes straight back to bed. I’m making her dinner. You can come back tomorrow.”

“It’s one in the afternoon. Please get out of my way.”

“Yes, Steven, why wouldn’t you let your dear mother have one last wish? Come along, Alice, I’ll put you in the car,” Adeline said, positioning herself between him and her sister.

“I’ll drive you.”

“No, you will not! Why they would fire me if I let you drive the company’s vehicle,” *I lied again. The car belongs to Adeline.*

“So don’t tell them?” Steven smirked.

“There are three cameras in the vehicle,” I continued to lie.

“Then we’ll take mine.”

Adeline shook her head. “No, we will take the vehicle I came in, so move out of my way. How am I supposed to put my sister in with you blocking the door?”

Adeline, why don’t you get inside and I’ll help Alice? Excuse me,” I said as I pushed the wheelchair up to the opened back door. Then I helped Alice inside the car, and she slammed the door shut. She wanted to escape this man who was trying to kill her, and I didn’t blame her one bit.

I walked around and got in the driver’s seat while he stood watching us drive away. “Don’t count us out of it yet. We are getting another vehicle. Oh, crap, here he comes, damn, how are we going to get away from him,” I have to lose this jerk. I could see the look on his face and knew he recognized me.

“Buckle up, ladies, we’re going for a ride,” I drove toward the distant mountains. I could see in the distance. I didn’t know this area, so I was more or less lost. “Alice, could you tell me where to go?”

“Why don’t we go to your place in the mountains?”

“That’s way too far to go without stopping. Besides, he’ll see us. We have to find another vehicle—one with tinted windows. I’m calling Grandpa, don’t talk while I’m on the phone.”

“Are you going to talk and drive at the same time? I think that’s against the law,” Adeline said sternly.

“Adeline, a killer, is after us; let Carrie talk to her grandfather without any noise.”

“Hello, sweetheart, what’s up?”

“Grandpa, we’re in trouble.”

“Hello James, oh James, I have missed you so much,” Adeline cried from the back seat. Alice started laughing, and it got me to laughing.

“Carrie, what is going on there?”

“It’s me, James, Adeline.”

“My Adeline, did she say Adeline?”

“Adeline, can I please tell Grandpa about our trouble?”

“I’m sorry, of course you can,” and then she started crying.

“Grandpa, Adeline’s sister, was dying because her evil stepson was poisoning her. She figured it out and only pretended to eat the food he gave her. I recognized him as a human trafficker I had put in prison. The D.A. let so many those dangerous prisoners out of prison in California, remember? He’s after us. I saw on his face he recognized me. What should I do?”

“Put Adeline on the phone.”

GABE

“WAIT, START OVER, I WANT YOU THREE TO SHUT THE FUCK up, Grandpa, tell me again what happened,” I demanded.

Carrie called, and I heard this voice calling out to me. It was Adeline Monroe. She’s coming to see me, and I wish I wasn’t so damn old,” Grandpa replied.

“Can you please get back to Carrie?” I pressed.

“Yes, I will. Anyway, Carrie said something about a prisoner from California being set free. You know how Cali is. She said he was trying to kill Alice, his stepmom, and Adeline’s sister. All Carrie had to do was take Adeline to see her dying sister. There was not supposed to have and danger in this job.”

Apparently, the stepson who hates Carrie because she imprisoned him was there, and he recognized Carrie. She said she saw it on his face, that he remembered her. They had a hard time getting away from him because he didn’t want them to take Alice; he wasn’t finished killing her.”

“Did Carrie say that?” I inquired.

“No, Adeline did. Once I realized Adeline was there, I had Carrie put her on the phone, and it’s been sixty years since I saw my Adeline. She has loved me all these years.”

“I don’t give a fuck about Adeline; it was your job to take care of Carrie. I picked up the phone and told Sofie what I needed, and then I called the DEA, where she worked. Sofie

said she needed more information about the man. I answered the phone when it rang; the DEA called me back.

“We are already on this case. Carrie called us three days ago, but we haven’t heard anything since. It’s never a good sign when they don’t answer their phones. But with Carrie, she has probably gone somewhere that has no bars. I walked to the window and saw her driving up the driveway.

“Thank you. She’s here. I’ll get back to you later,” I said, then I turned to her family. “Here she is,” I said, walking outside. I looked at my lady, and she smiled and stepped toward me until she remembered she had the two ladies with her, and she turned to the car. I watched as Grandpa ran past her, and he reached in and helped an older woman out of the vehicle.

Right before us, he wrapped his arms around her and kissed her as if they were twenty again. I saw Carrie wipe her eyes, and then the other woman got out. Carrie rushed to her side and walked her to where I was.

“Gabe, this is Alice Burk. She’s a Pastor, and she’s going to marry us. Alice, this is Gabe Steller, the man I love.”

“Hello, Alice; if you will excuse me, I want to talk to Carrie,” I said. I took her hand, and we walked to the side of the house as James walked Alice inside. I pulled Carrie into my arms and kissed her. I didn’t want to let her go.

“I was so scared. Never leave me a message that says ‘help,’ and never not call me back,” I said.

“I couldn’t call back because I didn’t have my phone and called Gabe, I didn’t know your phone number. It was on my phone. I tried calling Grandpa’s house, but no one answered.”

“We figured it out that your grandpa’s phone was off the hook. What happened to your phone?” I asked.

“I threw it at the bear.”

“What bear?”

“The bear who was chasing me.”

“Let’s go inside. I want to ask Alice to marry us tonight. I want you as my wife for the rest of my life. I love you. I will not wait another night. Please marry me tonight.”

“Yes, yes, yes, I’m so happy. Let’s get married, and then I’m going to bed.”

“We’ll both go to bed.”

When we walked inside, everyone was laughing. “What so funny?” I asked.

“Alice was telling us about the bear that chased Carrie, and she threw her phone at him. She was running, and the bear came upon her while she walked around to get some bars on her phone. As soon as Alice laid on the horn, the bear took off. When Carrie returned to get the phone, the bear had stepped on it and broke it into pieces.”

‘Alice, can you marry Carrie and me? I can’t wait for another night,” Grandpa clapped his hands.

“Let’s get ready kids, we are having a wedding! Boys, help me clear a spot. Let’s push the furniture back. Carrie, do you want to ask Benny over to be your Maid of honor?” I watched Carrie’s grandpa; you would think he was the one getting married with as excited as he was. I looked at Carrie, and she hadn’t moved. Grandpa clapped his hands. “Come on, girl, we have work to do.”

“Yes, I’ll call Benny, and then I’m changing clothes. I’m wearing a dress to my wedding. Gabe, don’t you run off while I get dressed.”

“I’m not going to run off, sweetheart; I’m going to help you change,” I replied. She laughed as we ran up the stairs. I didn’t want her out of my sight long enough for her to change her mind. When we got upstairs, I pulled her into my arms. I held her close, and I kissed her. I unbuttoned her pants and was pulling her top off when she grabbed my hands.

“We don’t have time for that right now; everyone is downstairs waiting for us. I’m getting married within the next hour. You make me so happy. We’re going to have a wonderful life. You just wait and see. You might have to add a couple of

rooms onto the cabin for our babies when they come,” Carrie said.

Carrie stopped and looked at me. “Did you see how Grandpa pulled Adeline out of the car and kissed her like they were twenty instead of eighty? I was in shock. But he does love her. All this time, he has been in love with Adeline Monroe. It makes me wanna cry when I see how much they love each other. They didn’t even look to see that they had aged. Just think, you pine away for someone for all this time, and sixty years later, they show up.

I agreed with Carrie. “Yeah, I was pretty surprised myself. In fact, I wouldn’t be surprised if they weren’t down there right now getting married,”

“Do you think they would marry without me being there?” Before I knew what she was doing, she was running downstairs with just a T-shirt and underwear on. I followed behind her. Everyone stopped and looked over at her. Sure enough, Grandpa and Adeline were getting married.

“I can’t believe you were getting married without me. You are waiting for me so I can get my clothes on.” She ran back upstairs, and the grin never left my face. I was one lucky man.

When we came back downstairs, Benny was there, and she was fixing Adeline’s hair. Carrie had tears running down her face. She hugged everyone in the room. James and his cousins stood against the wall, looking like they couldn’t believe that man was their Grandfather. He spoke softly to Adeline, but his voice was still grumpy when he turned and talked to them.

My phone kept ringing, so I handed it to Spartan, or as his family calls him, Liam. We stood and watched as Grandpa married Adeline, and then it was our turn. I stood next to Alice as James walked Carrie to me while Rebel, or as his family calls him Dash, sang for us. Everything was in slow motion as Alice married us, and Benny threw rose petals over us.

Liam walked over and handed over my phone. “You have to call Jackson right now.”

“I’m going with you if you have to go somewhere,” Carrie said. Then she walked to where Alice sat and sat next to her. I walked outside and called.

“Congratulations to you and Carrie. I hate telling you this, but you have to leave for the airport. Lincoln is picking you up there.”

“Is there anyone else who can take my place? How about if I have Ghost take my place? I know he’ll do it.”

“Humm, I guess that will be okay. Have him meet Lincoln at the airport in an hour,” I hung up the phone and looked at James, he raised his eyebrows. I walked over to him.

“What’s up, Gabe? Do you have to go to work?”

“I was hoping you would go instead of me.”

“Hell, yes, I’ll go. I don’t want to hang around here watching Grandpa making out with Adeline, or do I call her Grandma? When do I leave?”

“You have to meet Lincoln in an hour at the airport. Thanks for this; I’ll owe you one. I want to take Carrie away for a honeymoon.”

“Great, I don’t have time to talk right now. I have to get my bag and go.”

“Where is James going?” That’s when James stopped and came back to where I stood.

“Where am I going?”

“Afghanistan, you are rescuing more Americans who were left behind.”

I turned to Carrie. “We are going on a honeymoon, sweetheart. Where do you want to go?”

“I want to see our house in Oregon and see your brothers. But let’s hide in the Cabin for the rest of the day and night,” When we stopped at the cabin, I carried Carrie inside and straight to the bedroom. Our clothes were off before we knew it. Both of us looked at each other and laughed. I picked her up and plopped her on the bed.

“You have made me very happy. You’re my wife, the woman I love more than anything in this world. We are going to have a beautiful life together. I leaned over her, and kissed her neck.

“My life is where it is supposed to be. Right here with you. You’re my husband, and I will never be happier than I am right now; even if I’m crying, they are tears of joy. Now I can have my babies.”

“I agree, sweetheart; I pulled her on me. Let’s make those babies,” she chuckled. I felt the shivers cascade down her arms, when I began to nozzle the side of her neck. Her breath was sweet and warm against my skin, and when she kissed my ear, I felt the shivers cascade on my skin.

“This was a great idea, getting married,” she whispered as she tilted her head to give me better access. She reached up, caressed my neck, and tugged on my hair. I knew she wanted me to kiss her. She loved kissing, and so did I.

“Want me to stop?”

“No.” She reached up and kissed my chin. “No, I want you to kiss me.”

I knew she wished she would have kept quiet because now she was worried I’d stop touching her. When she tightened her hold on me, I knew she wanted me to make love to her.

“Carrie.” My voice was a rough whisper against her skin.

She swallowed. “Yes.”

“We are going to make love every chance we get.”

“Good, I was going to tell you the same thing,” Carrie said as she kissed me. I chuckled. It was all the encouragement I needed.

My mouth settled on hers in a kiss that was warm and undemanding. But soon, it wasn’t enough for either of us. My tongue swept inside and rubbed against hers. I tightened my hold on her, and the kiss deepened.

“Tell me what you want,” I whispered into her ear.

“I want all of you.”

I was eager and hot, as though it was my first time. I knew how to please a woman—but this was different. This was Carrie, my wife; I loved saying that one word, wife; it seems like forever that I’ve wanted her to be my wife. The need to be with her made me ache. I’d never felt this way before.

Her legs moved restlessly against mine. I kissed her neck and slowly moved lower, taking my time, teasing. My tongue gently tickled her collarbone, and when I finally reached her breast, I felt her tighten around me.

She shouted my name over and over as she orgasmed again and again. My hand was buried between her thighs. My fingers slipped inside where the hot, slick wetness was. All I could think was to please my lady. I couldn’t last much longer. My erection was painful. It needed release. I crawled back up her hot body, licking her nipple on the way.

Carrie cried out as she orgasmed over and over. I was losing control as well. I took a deep, shuddering breath and passionately kissed her. My hands actually trembled. I kissed her again—hard, quick, and I pushed inside her.

She gazed into my eyes, her gaze locked on mine. “I love you I whispered, kissing her eyelids and mouth, and then I whispered in her ear, you are all mine until the day I take my last breath.”

My hands caressed her back, my touch feather-light until I kissed her again. Her touch quickly became more frantic. She clutched my shoulders, demanding I stop tormenting her.

“Gabe.” I wasn’t sure if she shouted my name or sighed it. My hands had moved between her thighs, and I was driving her out of her mind. I knew just where to touch exactly how much pressure to exert. She writhed in my arms, pleading for me to come to her.

I was desperate to feel every inch of her, to wrap myself in her warmth. Her breathing became more labored, and that excited me even more. I knew she wanted me to finish and stop tormenting her.

I delayed as long as I could to give her as much pleasure as she was giving me. Her response made it impossible to wait any longer. I knew she was ready. My mouth covered hers, and I moved between her thighs and slowly sank into her liquid heat. She was so tight, so hot, I groaned from the sheer bliss. I stayed completely still inside her, panting as I whispered her name.

She cried out my name. The ecstasy was overwhelming. Each time we made love was like the first time.

“Ah, Carrie,” I breathed her name.” She wasn’t content to let me catch my breath. I knew she wanted me to give her release again. She lifted her knees to take me in deeper and wrapped her legs around my waist.

I pulled back and thrust deep, and tears came to her eyes. I was staggered by the intensity of the feelings gathering inside me. We slept, and when I woke up Carrie watched me. “Was I snoring?”

“No.”

“Are you ready to make love again?”

“Yes,” before I knew what she was doing, she straddled me, and we made love repeatedly. We slept late, but something woke me up. I threw back the covers and put on my pants before entering the other room. I opened the door, and someone had picked a huge bunch of flowers and put them at our door.”

“What’s that?” Carrie asked behind me.

“Flowers,” I picked them up and carried them to the table, “there’s a card here. It says congratulations from your mountain family.”

“That is so sweet. The people on the mountain always do things together when there is something to celebrate.”

“It’s six in the morning. How did they have time to do this?”

“They have their way. Now come back to bed.”

“I can’t believe this is your home,” I walked out back, and the ocean was right there. The steps ran down around the rocks so you could walk on the sandy beach. His home was huge, with five bedrooms. Most of them were empty, with only two being furnished. We walked down the beach holding hands.

“I’ve always loved being here when I would visit your family. Let’s go see your brothers. Do you think they are home yet? Do you think they’ll be surprised that we are married?”

“They might be angry that we didn’t invite them, but they’ll be happy for us. They should be home by now. Let’s stop and get some Chinese food.”

They were playing basketball out on the street with Beatrice watching them holding a small bundle. She smiled when she saw us stop. “I’m sure glad you showed up; my voice was getting sore cheering them on.”

“What are you two doing here? Do I smell food.”

“Yes, Bea, this is my wife, Carrie.”

“Your wife, you got married,” the brothers shouted. “it’s about time.”

After hugging us, they stepped back; Jake slapped me on the shoulder. Carrie turned to Bea, “I’m so happy to meet you, Bea said. “I live down the street from these three. They always bring me fish, so I play their fourth player in trade for fish, but since I just had this sweet little girl, I’m their cheerleader.

“That sounds like a great trade, as long as they don’t knock you down. All of them are huge, like Gabe. Come inside and eat dinner with us. We stopped, got Chinese food, and bought enough for twelve people.”

“Congratulations on getting married. Are you two moving here?”

“I’m not sure yet; my grandpa is getting up there in age. Oh, my God, I almost forgot. My grandfather got married yesterday, the same day we got married. Come inside, and I’ll tell all of you the story. A bear even chased me.”

I watched Carrie take Bea's arm and walk her into the house like they were old friends. Beatrice gave me a thumbs-up, saying I did the right thing. I didn't need any thumbs-up to know that.

Danny walked next to me. "Please move here, we miss you. It feels like our family isn't connected the right way with you gone. I sound like a baby, but I've been cleaning out Mom and Dad's room, and it's hard. I swear she has saved everything we've made since we were born."

I saw Carrie turn around and knew she heard Danny talking. We set the table, and all of us sat around it eating.

"Bea, have you always lived in town?" Carrie asked.

Bea, smiled and nodded. "Yes, I was born right down the street. My mom had a home birth, so I mean it when I say I was born down the street. Hutch lived across the street. I bought my parent's home and remodeled it. I love my home. I'm one of those people who never wants to move. Hutch's mom still lives across the street."

"What about you? Have you always lived in the mountains?"

"Yes, I live in the same cabin my father built for my mother when they married. But life moves on for the good. Gabe and I will be moving here to start our new life. When we go back, I'll tell Grandpa and the others."

"Yes!" Danny said.

"Carrie, we don't have to move here."

I'm going to help Danny clean out his parent's room. I was sixteen when my parents died; I wouldn't allow anyone to touch their clothes or anything else that belonged to them. When I left for college, Grandpa went over and cleaned it out himself. James and I lived at Grandpa's with Grandpa and our cousins."

"What happened to your parents?"

"They were killed in a bank robbery with my Aunt and Uncle."

“I’m sorry,” Bea said, reaching over and squeezing Carrie’s hand.”

“Thank you. I’m so glad we met. I know Hutch, sometimes he seems grumpy,” Everyone at the table laughed.

“What did I say wrong?” Carrie asked.

“Nothing, you hit it right on the head. Hutch didn’t talk to me from the third grade until we got married.”

“What?” Carrie said, laughing along with the rest of us. “He must have loved you all those years.”

Bea nodded. “Yes, he did. He was stubborn and miserable because he didn’t talk to me and explain that he was sorry for yelling at me in the third grade.”

Carrie chuckled, “He’s worse than I thought.”

“Carrie, after you get settled, we’ll have a girl get-together, and everyone can meet you. Do you work?”

“Umm, yes, I work with my brother and my cousins. We have a high-security business, but when I get pregnant, I’m no longer working, at least not on those jobs. I was a DNA agent, but I retired from that.”

“Wow, you must have seen a lot of unpleasant stuff.

“Yes, I did.”

“I’m glad you quit,” Danny said, and I’m happy I will have help cleaning my parent’s room.”

Later, as we walked on the beach, I pulled her into my arms, “Thank you for forgiving me; I will make you the happiest woman in the world. And since I don’t want you working with the Marines anymore. We are getting pregnant tonight.”

“That is the best sentence I’ve ever heard. Let’s go make our baby.”

THE END

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WESTON

IN THE DIM, SQUALID STINKY CELL, I STOOD BEFORE THE filthy mirror, a grotesque reflection staring back at me. The man in the glass, bearing the scars of war, was a far cry from the one I used to be. The desire to shatter the repulsive mirror coursed through me, but I couldn't bring myself to do it, not after Viper had saved my life. The four long years in this hellhole felt like an eternity. Would I ever return home? Thoughts of Shannon O'Grady were my only lifeline, keeping me from contemplating ending it all.

My body bore the scars of war – a lost leg, a scar running down the side of my face, and a nonfunctional left hand. But it was my eyes that had changed the most; they harbored a deep, unshakable hatred. I didn't recognize the man in the mirror. I needed to escape this place, to find my way home, I to be there for Christmas. It had been four long years since he had seen his family, who believed him to be dead.

Would she still want me if she could see me now? My body was a testament to the horrors of war, with a missing leg, a scar tracing down my face, and a nonfunctional left hand. But it was my eyes that had changed the most; they harbored a deep, unrelenting hatred. I no longer recognized the man staring back at me. I yearned to escape this place, to make it home for Christmas. It had been four agonizing years since I had last seen my family, who believed me to be dead.

“I'm sorry, Viper. It's just... I can't stand the sight of myself anymore. How can I face Shannon like this?”

“I know it’s tough, Wes, but we’ll find a way out of here. We’ve been through hell, and we’ll make it home.”

That’s Viper, my hero. Instead of leaving with the others, he stayed with me. They found me lying in the ditch, where I crawled after I stepped on the mine that wasn’t supposed to be there. “Do you think we’ll ever get out of here?”

“I’m surprised we have been here as long as we have. I thought my team would have extracted us four years ago. We are lucky they gave us everything we needed for me to finish the amputation of your leg; you had lost so much blood.”

“Do you ever think about getting married and having children?”

“Hell, no. I’d never want a serious relationship or a wife. They want too much from you. They are always complaining about something.”

“So I take it you’ve never seen a happy marriage.”

“No, I guess my parents had an okay marriage. They didn’t argue at least not in front of us. But I have no interest in joining anyone in any wedlock. Now I know what the ‘lock’ part means: you’re shackled, and they throw away the key,” Viper chuckled at his dark humor.

“I know many happily married people.”

“Let me guess: your Army Ranger Team is happily married to their women.”

“Yes, they are. I haven’t seen them much since they retired, but when I did see them, I can tell they love their wives.”

“More power to them. How are you doing?”

“I would be doing better if they wouldn’t always throw me in that damn hole. Why do you think they do it.”

“Maybe they hear some chatter about someone looking for an Army Ranger. I’ll see if I can find something out. Don’t work out today. I think that pisses them off when they see you gaining muscles everywhere.”

“Screw them, I won’t spend my life pleasing the fucking Taliban. You never try pleasing them; and they don’t throw you down the hole.”

“I would kill the bastard that tried,” Viper growled.

“Yeah, and they think because my body is broken, they can do what they want, whenever they want.” I picked up my wooden crutch, a makeshift tool from one of my fellow prisoners. “Yeah, they underestimate us. We need to stay strong.”

As I continued my daily exercises, I contemplated our situation. Viper, a former Marine Corp Force Recon, found me and he wouldn’t leave without me. He had intentionally allowed us to be captured to save my life. He is the real hero. Until my dying day Viper would be my friend, he more than saved my life he saved my sanity. I was Weston Evans, an Army Rangers Special Ops Lieutenant, I’ve been through hell but was determined to survive.

Our existence was marked by confinement to a dismal cell on the lower floor, isolated from the other prisoners on the upper levels. The guards offered only meager substance, sometimes infested with insects. But I kept my eyes closed and ate anyway, unwilling to show weakness.

When the guards extinguished the lights at night, I seized the opportunity to worked out. I devised a way to exercise using the pipes above my head. I had to stay in peak physical condition, always anticipating the day we would make our escape. I had to be ready to run alongside Viper.

One night, as I hung from the pipes, performing one-handed chin-ups, a soft but urgent voice penetrated the darkness. It was Viper, entering the cell with a hushed tone.

“Wes, we’re getting out of here in three days. Don’t jeopardize it. Stay out of the hole; I don’t want to leave you here alone,” Viper whispered before disappearing into the shadows.

I gently lowered myself to the ground, quietly on my foot and dropped down to my blanket. What the hell is he talking

about? “Getting out of here in three days.” I muttered to myself. How was that even possible? My mind raced with questions about the rescue. I wanted to know how and who was going to rescue us, and how they intended to breach this impenetrable fortress. Could there be other Americans here?

I laid back on my blanket and closed my eyes. I was dreaming of running down the beach with Shannon, laughter in the air, and a little red-headed girl who looked like her mother ran with us. I felt free, with two legs, and both hands working in harmony. But my peaceful reverie was abruptly shattered by the guards kicking me awake.

“Why the fuck are you kicking him? He was sleeping. He hasn’t done anything wrong. I’m going to report you to the Alliance of Prison Rights,” a prisoner nearby shouted.

I seized the foot that came at me again and yanked hard. If I was going to the hole this time, there would be a reason. The guard landed beside me, and I grabbed his throat. Another guard attempted to intervene with a kick, but I had forgotten that only one of my hands was functional. Viper, ever vigilant, reached down and grabbed the second guard by the throat, saving me from my own recklessness.

“No,” I said, leaping to my feet. “I won’t take another beating. They’ve underestimated us for too long.” I could hear the other prisoners shouting and approaching. “I’ll tell them to get back to their cells if you leave me the fuck alone.”

Both guards nodded, but I remained skeptical. So, I did what was necessary. I squeezed until they blacked out, tore strips from their shirts to gag them, and bound them with more fabric. When I looked up, I found the other prisoners had gathered in front of my cell. I placed my finger to my lips and they fell silent.

I looked at Viper, who had his left eyebrow raised. “It’s had been six since you mentioned the rescue,” I began. Maybe they did hear something about it. How long do we have before they exchange guards?”

“Maybe a couple of hours. Do you have a plan?”

“No.”

“No, you told me you’ve been devising an escape plan since we arrived.”

“I have, but I haven’t come up with anything,” I turned toward the thirty other prisoners. “Do any of you know a way out of here?”

“That door over there will get us outside, but if there is a full moon, we’ll be seen,” one of them said.

“Humm, let me think.”

“How do you go to the level above us?”

“Behind that door, down at that end, are the stairs that go to the other floors. They only have one guard, but he’s trigger happy.”

“How many floors does this prison have?”

“Four floors, the top floor, are the worst prisoners. You don’t want to help them escape; they’ll kill you.”

I looked at Viper leaning against the wall. “What do you want to bet they are Americans on the top floor?”

“That’s what I was thinking,” Viper said. Then we heard a noise, not a loud noise, but loud enough to hear it. Everyone squeezed into my cell behind Viper and me. When I raised my head, Kash stood in front of me. He looked like he saw a ghost, then he looked down at the men tied up.

“Are you kidding me, Lieutenant? You couldn’t wait ten more minutes? It’s good to see you’re alive. We get to rescue more than three Army Rangers I see.”

“Viper saved my life. We are going to the top floor. We believe there are more Americans there. It’s good to see you, Kash. Who else is here?” Viper handed me my crutch, and that’s when Kash looked down at my leg. “Don’t worry about me keeping up; I’ve been exercising. Let’s go.” I looked at the guys around us. “These men helped the Americans. They are going with us. Do you want to follow us or wait here?”

“We’ll follow you,” One of them said, smiling. We ran through the prison. We knew we didn’t have long. First, we went to the top floor. I had a feeling that the men would be there. I held my hand up for silence when we got to the top floor.

I suppose they have two guards also, so I’ll go in first.”

Why the hell would you go in first?” Viper demanded.

Because I said, let’s go,” I stepped into the room and spotted Conner Murphy and Owen Sanger. They saw me, and their eyes widened in disbelief. I saw Owen hold his hand to his heart; Conner walked to the Guards, and they were down with only a punch to each of them. Then they were where I was. Conner picked me up and swung me around.

Owen hugged me and pounded my back. Let’s get out of here,” I said, looking around for my crutch. Viper handed it to me. The other prisoners had already walked out. No one asked questions; they already knew to wait until we were out of here. We stopped at the other floors and tied those guards up, also. There were no more Americans.

We were out of there an hour later, flying down the road in their jeeps. Shannon was going to be surprised when she saw me. Hopefully she wasn’t married, or he would be one very unhappy man, because I knew she loved me.

SHANNON

HOLLY'S LITTLE VOICE ECHOED THROUGH THE HOUSE. "HOLLY, where are you hiding?" I followed the sound of her voice, finding her behind the bedroom door, clutching a faded photograph of her father, Wes. She never let that picture go.

"What were you talking about, sweetie?" I asked, kneeling down to her eye level.

"I told Daddy you won't let me go to work with you because you were taking me to strangers."

"They're not strangers, honey," I reassured her. They're going to be your friends; I'll stay all day, and help you make new friends. Once you start playing with them, you'll want to go every day."

"But Grandma, said I can stay home with her."

"I'm your mommy, and I'm the boss," I said gently, reaching for her tiny hand. "Let's get your backpack and put Daddy's picture back in your room," I said walking to Holly's room.

"But Daddy wants to go to school with me. I'm his little girl. When is my Daddy coming home?"

"Come here sweetheart," I said, settling in the rocking chair. "I told you, Daddy is in heaven. But he's right here in your heart," I said putting my hand over her heart. "he watching while you play and he hears your prayers. Daddy watches over you because he loves you. And he wants you to mind your mommy."

“Why?”

“Because he does,” I said softly, wiping away a tear. “Now put his picture back on the nightstand. We need to leave, or we will be late on your first day,”

Holly reluctantly complied, her eyes filled with longing. “Daddy wants to go to school with me,” she whispered.

As we arrived at the preschool, the scene tugged at my heart. Some kids were crying, not wanting to be separated from their moms. Holly started crying too, because she didn’t like to see anyone crying. Even if cartoons characters.

In her own tender way she approached the other kids, offering hugs and kind words. Don’t be scared. I’m here, and we can be friends. My daddy is watching us in heaven; he wouldn’t want to see us crying.”

Then she saw a father there with his child, and Holly being Holly reached and pinched him. I was about to intervene when I heard her speaking to him.

“Are you a real daddy? You’re not in heaven.”

“Yes, I’m a real daddy.”

“My daddy is in heaven. Something blew him up. Can I feel how strong you are?” She walked over and felt his arms. “Daddies have to be strong so that they can take care of their babies. My daddy was strong. He would pick me up and swing me around if he were here. He loves me.”

“I bet he loves you more than anything. I’m sorry he’s in heaven, but he’s watching over you,” the man replied, his voice quivering. I glanced around around, noticing two helpers discreetly wiping their eyes.

“Yeah, I wish he was here instead,” she said, I I lifted Holly into my arms and held her close. “Your daddy wishes he was here with you too. Now, let’s play with the kids, okay? We’ll go outside and have some fun.”

By the end of the day, exhaustion had settled in. I had never worked so hard, trying to help Holly to play with the other children.

Holly fell asleep on the way home, because she wouldn't take a nap. She just lay on her little mat staring at me. I decided to let her go to preschool three days a week. Five days was too much for my baby to be away from grandma and me.

Grandma was at our house when we got home. I carried Holly to her room put her to bed. Then I went and sat down where my mom was. "I'm only going to put her in for three days a week.

She isn't like most three-year-olds. She'll be four on Christmas day. She talks like a grown-up to those kids. She cried because they cried. I feel like I've been working for forty hours."

It pained me to see her so obsessed with Wes. I couldn't help but blame myself for giving her that photograph. "She talks to him as if he were right there," I confided in my mom about my worries. "What am I going to do?"

"You're not going to do anything. This will run its course like everything else does," my mom reassured me. "Are you sending her tomorrow?"

"If I don't, she'll think she's getting her way by staying home."

"I'll go with her tomorrow," I started to talk, but my mom held up her hand. "Let me finish. On the third day, she can go alone."

"I don't know if that's a good idea. It feels cruel, sending her alone."

"Listen, Shannon, it'll be fine. You're doing great. And you know we're here for you."

"Mama, have I told you how much I appreciate you helping me? I don't know what we would have done without you."

"Grandma, you're here. Let me go get Daddy, and we'll tell you about school," I looked at my Mom, and she shrugged as if to say everything would work out.

“Grandma, my school was awful; little kids were crying,” Holly began. “I saw a daddy holding his little boy. I wish my daddy were there. Mommy wouldn’t let me bring Daddy with me.”

“You mean the photo of your daddy,” My mom clarified.

“Whatever.”

“Holly, don’t talk like that to Grandma,” I gently reprimanded her.

“I’m sorry, she said sheepishly.”

“I’m going to school with you tomorrow. We’ll have so much fun,” my mom told her. “We will show them how much fun they can have.”

“Can I take Daddy?” Holly asked, her eyes hopeful.

“Of course, dear,” my mom replied.

“Mom, really?” I asked surprised my mom said yes.

“Holly will keep her daddy’s photo in her backpack.”

“Mom, why don’t you stay the night? We’ll order pizza and watch a movie?” I suggested.

“I’m going to the movies with Shirley, and then we are going out to dinner. I would much rather stay here with you and Holly. How about tomorrow night? how does that sound?”

“Tomorrow would be great. Bring your bag with you in the morning.”

“I will. Holly, hug Grandma goodbye.” My mom said.

“Goodbye, Grandma. I love you,” Holly said hugging her tightly.

“I love you so much, sweetie. The best gift your dad gave us was you.”

Later that night, I lay in bed, tears silently streaming down my face, remembering when I was with the only man I have ever loved. I knew I was pregnant before Wes went overseas, but I hadn’t told him. I didn’t want him thinking about the baby and me; I wanted his mind to be focused on staying alive.

It's strange sometimes I can feel Weston talking to me. My mom says that's hopeful thinking. She thinks I should find a good man for Holly and me. I don't want to do that, and I have no interest in finding another man.

By the third week, Holly was enjoying school more. She made some friends, but she treated them as if she was the grown-up and they were the children. I blame myself for that, because I have never talked baby talk with Holly, and none of my workers did either. Being pregnant with Holly was the only thing that got me through Wes's death.

I own a bakery shop called The Buttery Cup. I serve cupcakes in cupcake holders that look like antique cups. I need to expand because I've been getting large orders lately. I rent my shop now, but a building at the edge of town will be for sale, and I plan on buying it.

Life moves on no matter how tragic life is life moves on. My phone rang, and I answered. "Hello."

"Hey, Shannon, this is Louise from preschool. Holly is very upset. She brought the photo of her daddy, and another kid wanted to see it. He grabbed it from her hand, and it fell and broke. She's very upset because she thinks her Daddy is broken.

"I'll be right there," I told the others I'd be right back I had to pick up Holly.,

"I hope everything is alright," Burt said, looking anxious.

"Yes, her daddy's picture got broken. I didn't know she took it to school. I'll try and hurry. I'm sure I will have to buy a new frame."

"You don't have to hurry. We are all caught up." Burt declared.

I knew I had two more orders to do before we were caught up, I would stay late again tonight. At least Holly could be with me.

When I arrived at the school to pick up Holly, I was surprised to see how upset she was. "Holly honey, look at me."

“I broke Daddy,” Holly said, wiping her eyes. “Now I can’t carry him around because he’s broken. I wanted to kiss his booboo, but the teacher won’t let me,” Holly whimpered.

“We will get a new frame for him right now, and he will be all better,” I explained, my heart breaking for my baby.

“He will,” she sniffed. “Does he hurt?”

“No, it’s only a picture. Let’s go find a new frame,” It took longer than I thought it would because Holly couldn’t make up her mind what frame she wanted until she spotted a Superman frame. I was happy it was all plastic.

By the time we got back to the bakery, Burt had the other two orders started. “What would I do without you?”

“You would do fine,” He picked Holly up and looked into her red, swollen eyes. Tell Uncle Burt why your eyes are red and swollen?”

“I thought I broke my Daddy, and he hurt, and the teacher wouldn’t let me kiss his booboo.”

“I’m trying to help her realize she is holding a photo, and he feels nothing.”

“Let me see that picture of your daddy.” Holly ran to her backpack and handed Burt the picture of Wes. I saw the shock on his face. “Weston Evans,” he said so low it was like he was talking to himself.

“Do you know Weston?”

“What? I need to sit down,” I hurriedly pulled a chair for him to sit on. He looked at me, and then Holly he pinched the bridge of his nose. I knew it was because he didn’t want to cry in front of us. What the heck is going on?

“So Holly is Wes’s daughter?”

“Yes, do you know him?”

“I’m his uncle. His mother is my sister. I haven’t seen her in years. I disappeared from the family six years ago. I still kept up with Weston. I imagine he met you when he came over

to visit me. I heard about Wes from one of the Army Rangers buddies.”

“Tell me what happened to him.”

“He stepped on a mine that wasn’t supposed to be there. They were being chased at the time by the Taliban. Kash said there was another outfit there they were The Marine Corps Force Reconnaissance. They are a deadly group, the Taliban don’t want to mess with them. I heard a couple of months ago the Rangers were going to go over there and rescue some Americans who were held prisoner.”

“Do you think Wes might be one of the prisoners?” *My heart was beating so fast; maybe this is why I felt like I heard him talking to me at night.*

He looked at me and sadly shook his head,” They saw the mine throw him in the air, and when someone looked at him, his leg was off, he had a huge gash down his face, and blood was everywhere. When they went back later, he was gone.”

“So he could still be alive.”

“Now, don’t get your hopes up. He didn’t make it. We would know if he did. You have to tell who they are holding inside their prisons. Wes has never been on that list.”

I nodded I couldn’t help the tear that fell down my cheek. “Shannon, did you ever meet Wes’s family?”

“No, we were only together for six months before he was shipped out. Do you think they might want to meet Holly?”

“Who wouldn’t want to meet Holly? They’re out of the country right now. They have a place in Paris. I guess that’s where they went, I’m not sure. I’ll let you know when they come back and we’ll talk about how we will go about telling them they have a granddaughter.”

“How come you are on outs with them?”

“It was a stupid fight, and I don’t know how to fix it.”

“So you really are Holly’s Uncle, her great uncle.”

“Yes, it would appear that I am.”

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