

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

SHARON
HAMILTON



LITTLE

Miracles



LITTLE MIRACLES

SEAL BROTHERHOOD: LEGACY SERIES

NOVELLA

SHARON HAMILTON

SHARON HAMILTON'S BOOK LIST

SEAL BROTHERHOOD BOOKS

SEAL BROTHERHOOD SERIES

[Accidental SEAL](#) Book 1

[Fallen SEAL Legacy](#) Book 2

[SEAL Under Covers](#) Book 3

[SEAL The Deal](#) Book 4

[Cruisin' For A SEAL](#) Book 5

[SEAL My Destiny](#) Book 6

[SEAL of My Heart](#) Book 7

[Fredo's Dream](#) Book 8

[SEAL My Love](#) Book 9

[SEAL Encounter](#) Prequel to Book 1

[SEAL Endeavor](#) Prequel to Book 2

[Ultimate SEAL Collection Vol. 1](#) Books 1-4 / 2 Prequels

[Ultimate SEAL Collection Vol. 2](#) Books 5-9

SEAL BROTHERHOOD LEGACY SERIES

[Watery Grave](#) Book 1

[Honor The Fallen](#) Book 2

[Grave Injustice](#) Book 3

[Deal With The Devil](#) Book 4

[Cruisin' For Love](#) Book 5

[Destiny of Love](#) Book 6

[Heart of Gold](#) Book 7

[Father's Dream](#) Book 8

[Second Time Love](#) Book 9

[Little Miracles](#) Novella

BAD BOYS OF SEAL TEAM 3 SERIES

[SEAL's Promise](#) Book 1

[SEAL My Home](#) Book 2

[SEAL's Code](#) Book 3

[Big Bad Boys Bundle](#) Books 1-3

BAND OF BACHELORS SERIES

[Lucas](#) Book 1

[Alex](#) Book 2

[Jake](#) Book 3

[Jake 2](#) Book 4

[Big Band of Bachelors Bundle](#)

BONE FROG BROTHERHOOD SERIES

[New Year's SEAL Dream](#) Book 1

[SEALed At The Altar](#) Book 2

[SEALed Forever](#) Book 3

[SEAL's Rescue](#) Book 4

[SEALed Protection](#) Book 5

[Bone Frog Brotherhood Superbundle](#)

BONE FROG BACHELOR SERIES

[Bone Frog Bachelor](#) Book 0.5

[Unleashed](#) Book 1

[Restored](#) Book 2

[Revenge](#) Book 3

[Legacy](#) Book 4

SUNSET SEALS SERIES

[SEALed at Sunset](#) Book 1

[Second Chance SEAL](#) Book 2

[Treasure Island SEAL](#) Book 3

[Escape to Sunset](#) Book 4

[The House at Sunset Beach](#) Book 5

[Second Chance Reunion](#) Book 6

[Love's Treasure](#) Book 7

[Finding Home](#) Book 8

[Sunset SEALs Duet #1](#)

[Sunset SEALs Duet #2](#)

LOVE VIXEN

[Bone Frog Love](#)

SHADOW SEALS

[Shadow of the Heart](#)

[Shadow Warrior](#)

SILVER SEALS SERIES

[SEAL Love's Legacy](#)

SLEEPER SEALS SERIES

[Bachelor SEAL](#)

STAND ALONE BOOKS & SERIES

[SEAL's Goal: The Beautiful Game](#)

[Nashville SEAL: Jameson](#)

[True Blue SEALS: Zak](#)

[Paradise: In Search of Love](#)

[Love Me Tender, Love You Hard](#)

NOVELLAS

[SEAL You In My Dreams Magnolias and Moonshine](#)

PARANORMALS

FREE TO LOVE SERIES

[Free As A Bird](#) Book 1

[Romance](#) Book 2

[Science Of The Heart](#) Book 3

[The Promise Directive](#) Book 4

[New Beginnings](#) Book 5

GOLDEN VAMPIRES OF TUSCANY SERIES

[Honeymoon Bite](#) Book 1

[Mortal Bite](#) Book 2

[Christmas Bite](#) Book 3

[Midnight Bite](#) Book 4

THE GUARDIANS

[Heavenly Lover](#) Book 1

[Underworld Lover](#) Book 2

[Underworld Queen](#) Book 3

[Redemption](#) Book 4

FALL FROM GRACE SERIES

[Gideon: Heavenly Fall](#)

SUNSET BEACH SERIES

[I'll Always Love You](#)

[Back To You](#)

NOVELLAS

[SEAL Of Time: Trident Legacy.](#)

All of Sharon's books are available on [Audible](#), narrated by the talented J.D. Hart.

ABOUT THE BOOK

A new grandchild,

A new baby,

What could be sweeter?

At over fifty, and content with his adopted family and no children of his own, it was something Navy SEAL Trace Bennett never thought could happen.

Until it did.

The miracle continues in this bonus Christmas story, the third installment of Trace and Gretchen's romance. Trace learns Gretchen is pregnant—along with their daughter's own surprise pregnancy. But in a world gone crazy, this warrior's good news comes at a price.

He contemplates his age, his service to SEAL Team 3, and the unthinkable worry of how it will affect his growing family—**IF HE DOESN'T RETURN.**

He ponders what the honorable choices are and questions his abilities and contributions as never before.

Meanwhile, evil waits for him, just when he feels weakest.

This novella is the addition to the previous two books: SEAL My Love and Second Time Love. Trace and Gretchen fall in love later in life, but it's not too late to protect another miracle.

Recommended reading order: SEAL My Love, Second Time Love.



[Begin Reading](#)

[Dedication](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Table of Contents](#)

Copyright © 2023 by Sharon Hamilton

Kindle Edition

All rights reserved. Without limiting the rights under copyright reserved above, no part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in or introduced into a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form, or by any means (electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise) without the prior written permission of the copyright owner of this book.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, brands, media, and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. In many cases, liberties and intentional inaccuracies have been taken with rank, description of duties, locations and aspects of the SEAL community.

License Notes

This e-book is licensed for your personal enjoyment only. This e-book may not be resold or given away to other people. If you would like to share this book with another person, please purchase an additional copy for each person you share it with. If you're reading this book and did not purchase it, or it was not purchased for your use only, then please purchase your own copy. Thank you for respecting the author's work.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Every once in a while, a character or two or three grabs your heart and won't let go. Trace and Gretchen are those for me. I knew from the first book I wrote about them, *SEAL My Love*, that I was hung up on Trace—hopelessly in love with him from Day One.

I might do this with my other books, but so far, this is the only couple where I've written in the original *SEAL Brotherhood* series, a ten-year follow-up of the couple in *Second Time Love*, and now this Christmas novella.

When I go to sleep, I dream about them. I wonder what the babies are going to look like. As an older parent myself, I know about having children and being mistaken for their grandparents at back-to-school nights. But I wouldn't have had it any other way.

Hope you enjoy this story. I also hope this Christmas novella brightens your holidays, this year and every year after. I hope you heal from the practice of love as the world is filled with so much hate. Love is way stronger. I hope you dream about the future and have confidence that everything is as it should be. Remember: the greatest gift of Christmas is the gift of life and our families. We have much to be thankful for.

Merry Christmas!

Love,

Sharon

December 2023

Indian Rocks Beach, Florida

I always dedicate my *SEAL Brotherhood* books to the brave men and women who defend our shores and keep us safe. Without their sacrifice and that of their families—because a warrior's fight always includes his or her family—I wouldn't

have the freedom and opportunity to make a living writing these stories. They sometimes pay the ultimate price so we can debate, argue, go have coffee with friends, raise our children, and see them have children of their own.

One of my favorite tributes to warriors resides on many memorials, including one I saw honoring the fallen of WWII on an island in the Pacific:

“When you go home
Tell them of us, and say,
For your tomorrow,
We gave our today.”

These are my stories created out of my own imagination. Anything that is inaccurately portrayed is either my mistake or done intentionally to disguise something I might have overheard over a beer or in the corner of one of the hangouts along the Coronado Strand.

I support two main charities. Navy SEAL/UDT Museum operates in Ft. Pierce, Florida. Please learn about this wonderful museum, all run by active and former SEALs and their friends and families, and who rely on public support, not that of the United States Government.

www.navysealmuseum.org



I also support Wounded Warriors, who tirelessly bring together the warrior as well as the family members who are just learning to deal with their soldier's condition and have nowhere to turn. It is a long path to becoming well, but I've seen first-hand what this organization does for its warriors and the families who love them. Please give what your heart tells you is right. If you cannot give, volunteer at one of the many service centers all over the United States. Get involved. Do something meaningful for someone who gave so much of themselves, to families who have paid the price for your freedom. You'll find a family there unlike any other on the planet.

www.woundedwarriorproject.org



TABLE OF CONTENTS

Title Page

Sharon Hamilton's Book List

About the Book

Copyright Page

Author's Note

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

Chapter 13

Chapter 14

Chapter 15

Chapter 16

Chapter 17

Epilogue

About the Author

Reviews

SEAL Prayer

CHAPTER 1



NAVY SEAL TRACE Bennett returned from a hard workout at Gunny's Gym, still sweating from the squats, pull-ups, dead lifts, and leg presses. And then there had been the sprint in the middle and the sprint afterward just to top it off like whipped cream. God, how he loved to put himself through the paces, even at fifty years of age. He seemed to be getting stronger as the years went by—something he knew wouldn't last forever, but for now, he'd take it.

He hadn't showered because he wanted to get home on time like he'd promised his wife, Gretchen. His body and clothes therefore still steamed with sweat that fogged up the windows of his Hummer.

He drove up and down the street twice, observing the bevy of cars surrounding their house like a bunch of honeybees clamoring for nectar from a sunflower. There was not a single space to be had anywhere. Not even his driveway was open. Four cars jammed in the two-space spot. Someone had even parked on their front lawn, which flared a little bit in his belly. Under the circumstances and due to this occasion, he was okay with it.

He finally found parking around the corner and pulled into the driveway of a house that was for sale and vacant. Slinging his bag over his shoulder, his legs and thighs burning from the heavy workout, he pitched his body forward with long powerful strides, making it to the front porch of their very popular house.

He abruptly stopped. Trace recognized this was the moment before battle, those precious seconds when he would ready his head and seek prime performance—whatever it took. His routine was forged in fear, fire, and the pride being a Navy

SEAL instilled in him. It made him the man he was today, and always would be.

This was going to be a battle for sure, although not one peppered with explosions and the life-altering use of force he was used to. He was going to face a room full of women, all there to celebrate a joint baby shower for Gretchen and Clover, their daughter. It was the routine women did. They pulled together into a team just like he and his brotherhood guys did, sharing in the joy, the anticipation, and reassurance that, even if something tragic were to happen, since there were always risks, just as on the battlefield, the Team would hold together and support the women, both of them.

This was the celebration of the upcoming birth of his child, coming close to Christmas, and of his granddaughter, Clover's first child. In a twist of fate, both Gretchen and Gretchen's oldest daughter—who Trace had walked down the aisle, married only this early summer—were carrying these miracles at the same time.

So the baby born to Clover would be the niece or nephew of the baby born to him and Gretchen.

That part was funny.

But the rest of it was just odd. He was filled with weird thoughts all of a sudden.

Now, as he stood there hesitating to open the red front door with the Christmas wreath, he was petrified. He needed three or four more seconds to compose himself.

He didn't get that. The God of Navy SEALs lost the battle with Mother Nature.

The door swung open, and Kate, Gretchen's younger sister, greeted him with a wide smile and fresh face, her pink cheeks dusted with sparkles, wearing a nametag pinned to her pretty, flowered dress with a diaper pin. The flutter of laughter and conversation in the background, all women presumably, descended upon his ears like the tinkling of broken crystal. It made him even more ill at ease, almost sick to his stomach.

Panic began to set in. Without his thoughts being totally selected and put in their proper mental slots in neat Ziploc bags, he desperately needed to pull out the one trick he could use to address this situation. All those sorted little envelopes in his mind kept his world organized.

Kate gave him no quarter, moving closer, her lovely perfume making his nostrils itch. She approached him like he was prey and she was the stealthy panther. She completely disarmed him by showing her joy and rapture, sucking him in just like a worm under a growling and angry vacuum cleaner.

“Oh, I’m so glad you got here, Trace. We were all *wondering*.”

Yeah, he deserved that. She didn’t really mean that he’d forget, of course. The purpose of the sentence was to warn him, in case he was completely out of his element—which he was—that there was a room of thirty-some women behind her, and many of them pink and robustly pregnant, too.

He was going to vomit all over her, suddenly. He had no idea where this was coming from except his stomach was on fire. It was an awkward pause, and when he didn’t say anything, she did the unthinkable, of course. She hugged him until she realized how wet, sweaty, and smelly he was. Her reaction was predictable. Her back stiffened as she arched backward, away from him. Her hands stuck to his shirt. She also held her breath.

Embarrassment descended from his cowlick near the top of his head to the stubborn surgical scar on the bottom of his chin, traveled over the tattered and scarred territory of his arms and hands, and fell all the way to the black hair protecting his toes. Full throttle embarrassment.

“Sorry, Sis. I am sort of needing a shower,” he stated the obvious.

She separated herself from Trace’s hulking, sweaty body, rubbed her palms on her pretty, flowered skirt, and grimaced.

She tilted her head and frowned, challenging and joking with him all at the same time.

Suddenly, a celebratory cheer rose from the room as someone had won a match or answered a riddle, laughter bringing about tears as well. He tried not to focus on them. He avoided looking at his wife but felt her gaze. Then he reconnected with Kate's soft eyes. He found no judgment there. But she commented anyway.

"I think by now, Trace, we're kind of used to all your many costumes. This costume is probably the most common you adopt. Tyler does the same, but I do think you take it to the next level."

That stung, and she knew it.

Kate winked and angled her head in the other direction, just so Trace would know she had the ability to stick that needle right in his heart and twist it a bit to make fun of a situation he was uncomfortable with, and she knew it. Hugging a woman not his wife was always awkward. But hugging his sister-in-law, who smelled all nice and soft and perfumy, with his big sweaty body was the worst kind of punishment for being late he could suffer.

So be it.

Those seconds, while he tried to get a grip on his emotional knot of confusion, didn't ease his embarrassment. And now, as women came over to greet him at the doorway, it was accentuated one hundred times. He was a celebrity, as all his brothers were every time they hung around women.

"Ladies," he said as he bowed to them, which sent them in titters all over the room, "I'm sorry I'm not exactly ready for a party. But if you'll give me a few minutes, I promise to clean up."

He braved a glance across the room at Gretchen, who remained serenely seated, her belly making life a little more complicated these days, but beamed from the inside out. She blew him a knowing kiss, and he saw in her eyes her mirth, not

only for the birth of the new child but that he had come back to her again after his mini mission to the gym.

She was always happy to see him, even if it was coming back from the store. It was always like this. It was part of why he loved her so much.

Trace carefully avoided touching anybody as he slithered his way through the crowd and down the hallway to the bathroom. He closed the door and leaned against it.

Sanctuary!

Swearing at the boyish lack of adult supervision over his heart and his brain, he stripped off his clothes and stepped into the shower.

The warm water felt heavenly, but it wasn't enough.

“You dumb ass. You better get it together, or you'll be no good on your next deployment.”

Suddenly, he was back in high school all over again, fumbling around with Vicky and the twins, who practically threw themselves at him every chance they could get. The slower he'd wanted to go, the more urgent they got, and it destroyed his last two football games with the distress of anticipating his performance after the game at the parties he'd be attending. His big secret was that he was the biggest, hardest player on the team, and he had still been a virgin. He'd played along with guys who had been getting laid since seventh grade, letting them think he had, too. He'd wanted to remain a solid member of the club with the bona fides.

It was the worst white lie he'd ever told to date. The first of many.

He also didn't want to let on to the girls he didn't have a clue what to do when they disrobed for him, spread their legs, and fondled his shank. It was supposed to be a beautiful thing, sex, but damn, he had frozen in place, which was good for his cock, as far as they were concerned, but not for thinking about what he was doing and to whom.

And after one of those parties, while he was thinking about what had happened that evening and all the sweaty back seat magic he experienced, he'd smashed his father's car.

It was a wakeup call, but not enough of one.

As he soaped off and willed the water to take away all his stress, make it so he could sleep tonight, for just one perfect night of rest, he almost promised to deliver his soul to the devil for relief. What was going on? He was that stupid kid all over again. And he was fifty, for Chrissake.

He knew it had everything to do with the new baby coming. He had created a living organism, and he knew how to be a father, because Clover and her sisters had given him lots of practice, but there was something else.

There was a totally, completely innocent being with half his DNA growing inside of Gretchen's belly. This being loved and trusted him to keep him or her safe, again, just like the girls did in high school, who trusted that he knew what to do.

But did he?

The answer was a resounding no!

He hoped he could learn fast enough so that his kid never knew the truth. He'd fake it until he made it.

For the past weeks, everywhere he went, he kept seeing babies. Mothers walking with babies or wheeling them in strollers, young pregnant couples walking down the strand and looking into shop windows, or parents walking together through the little park at the center of their village. Some people showed their babies pictures in the window or had strangers stop by and pat their head, remark about the child. He could not remember a recent day when he'd not seen so many babies.

And that was the thing. Babies were terrifying him. It was like he'd stepped into a horror film featuring Chucky or a bloodstained baby with an ax or vampire fangs or something unworldly. No light pink bundles of joy. This was a nightmare.

No, there definitely was something about babies that scared the shit out of him, haunting his dreams at night.

And why was that?

He shook it off and told himself it was a ridiculous set of thoughts, not worthy of further investigation, yet he couldn't get them back inside the Ziploc bag inside his mind. The vision of babies, pink babies like little piglets, gave him goosebumps right now as he rinsed the soap from his chest and arms.

Meditate to a blank space. Create it and go back to the ocean's horizon where he could feel nothing and see everything that was calm and beautiful about the world...

But here it came again.

"It's what you always wanted, you dumbass, wasn't it?"

Didn't he even tell Gretchen that's what he wanted? He remembered that steamy afternoon when he told her, his mouth pressed against her ear so she could hear all the heartache inside him as he whispered between their heavy breathing, as he pumped and began to spurt inside her, holding her tight against him. She'd shattered on his lap, and he continued again and again, whispering over and over, that he wished he could plant his seed inside her and make her grow big with babies.

That must have been the day.

He felt the soap slip through his fingers, which brought him back to today and the baby shower and the fact that he was expected to perform for the ladies outside.

And now look what he's got. They did it. They actually did it. At fifty years of age, he was going to be a father for the first time.

Again, he tried to push it out of his mind. What was so terrifying about the wish he'd always had? He'd watched Clover and her sisters grow up, and he assumed the role of father, albeit their stepfather. He often felt like they were his

offspring, that he was their real BioDude. He enjoyed the role and wore the mantle willingly.

And the little wrinkle of regret he had in the back of his mind about not being able to father a child himself had completely disappeared. It was so tiny it was not even worth thinking about. He was too busy dedicating his life to Gretchen, making her life sparkle and shine as she never had before, giving the girls a solid foundation and making them feel loved. That had been his new mission in life. And some days, he felt it was perhaps more important than his missions on SEAL Team 3.

Doubt was not really true after all. It was just imagination, a fantasy.

At least, he told himself so.

Drying off, he shaved, more for Gretchen than for the party, and wore a clean tee shirt that showed off his muscles, like Gretchen had requested.

“Make them suffer, Trace,” she’d said this morning as they were getting dressed. “Make them want to drop their drawers and covet what I have. I don’t have a young body, but I do have you, sweetheart,” she’d added before he stepped out the door.

Okay, mission accomplished, he thought into the mirror as he combed what was left of his thinning hair. He examined his comb afterward, and yup, there was hair on it, dammit.

He put aftershave on lightly, the one from Italy Gretchen liked, brushed his teeth, and slipped on his canvas loafers. He felt tight and ready for action. He was going to need all that strength.

Afterward, even pregnant, he’d let Gretchen work out all the kinks in his body, taking care of his soul at the same time.

CHAPTER 2



GRETCHEN'S HEART FLUTTERED as she watched Trace slip behind the gathering of women, give her a quirky smile and a wink, and sit in a chair that had been vacated by one of Clover's friends, putting his arm around their pregnant daughter and giving her a loud peck on the cheek.

He really was a rock star, Gretchen mused. The little screams she heard from Clover's best friends did almost sound like they'd discovered some country music star at the airport and they were all clamoring for an autograph. Each one of them tried to get his attention by saying something, making a joke, stroking their hair, or simply sitting up straight and looking at him with unabashed flirtation and beaming smiles.

Gretchen felt her cheeks flush. She loved seeing him perform.

She also watched as Clover occasionally rolled her eyes and sometimes hid her face at all the attention her hunky stepfather was getting. It didn't bother Gretchen one bit. Trace deserved all the accolades he could get. He'd worked so darn hard keeping his body fit and being such a supportive parent and partner to her in every way possible. Life was unpredictable, for sure, but it was also exciting and filled with more joy than she'd ever experienced before.

She thought about all the things he'd done for her and the three girls when they first met and now, after they're ten years of marriage. He really did deserve to bask in the love of all the women in the world he was fighting for. That had been their private joke.

She watched him tell some stories about Clover when he first started dating Gretchen.

“I couldn’t play basketball, so what was wrong with me? No, I didn’t have an NBA contract, and I couldn’t talk about anything I did at the ‘office.’ Gretchen brought me home, and wham, Clover let me have it right away. Brave kid!” Trace continued.

Everyone laughed. Clover covered her face again with her hands.

He took his job seriously, Gretchen mused. If there was ever an opportunity for him to sacrifice himself to protect the women of the world, especially his women, his brood, he wouldn’t hesitate to do it.

Clover opened a gift containing five little onesies in green and yellow. Trace held it up to his chest.

“Doesn’t fit me. You’ll have to exchange it!”

Again, everyone laughed.

He helped her tear through several other packages, and he attempted to model all the baby clothes, putting the knitted caps on his head, rattling the toys, and tying diapers around his forehead.

Gretchen was laughing so hard, she began to cry.

He glanced over to her and blew her a kiss.

She was reminded of their quirky routine. It was something they followed every time he came home from a deployment: she was not allowed to wear undies. She could wear a bra and often got nice, pretty new ones, but she was not allowed to wear panties. It was sort of their joke, something the girls didn’t know about, and something that tickled them both and made the celebration of his homecoming that much more important.

TODAY WAS SORT of that kind of a day, and she was sitting in her chair with her legs crossed, not wearing panties. She couldn’t wait for him to discover it after everyone went home and they could have their private time. She found, even with her

pregnancy, she was more horny than she'd ever been. She relished it.

Trace had shown Clover that he was resilient and would put up with funny little things the girls would do as they grew up and went through all their phases in life. Angie went from a precocious four year old to a curious and precocious teenager. Rebecca had gone off to college but was home for the shower, and Clover attacked her studies and then met the man of her dreams in San Diego. Now he was included in their family and trying to follow in Trace's footsteps. If he succeeded, she'd be married to a warrior like her mom.

He'd find it difficult to follow his father-in-law's footsteps. He wasn't made the same way Trace was, and he had not lived a deprived lifestyle like Trace had for some of his years. So, yes, it bothered him, bothered her. It also bothered Gretchen that she was older now being pregnant. She worried about Trace's deployment, of course, and how he'd cope in combat at fifty. Though he said he was in great physical shape, was he? Would he lie to her about that?

She loved her friends, and several of her SEAL wife sisters smiled at her lovingly, showing their appreciation for how well Trace put up with the twenty-somethings surrounding Clover. Several of them made comments and waited on her. He was fiercely protective, and he would always be so.

Gretchen was never jealous, even when women were attached to Trace's Team from the State Department or the CIA or one of the innocent victims they'd had to rescue over the years—hostages, nurses in Africa, school teachers, missionaries, and business women. She knew where her red line was, and she knew where Trace's red line was as well. And there was no issue there. That was a blessing, she thought.

But one of the things she wondered about was her youngest, Angie, being more quiet. She was more withdrawn. She wondered if it was still due to the trauma of seeing Gretchen shoot and kill Tony's enemy. Or maybe it was

because Angie was not in the limelight like Clover and Gretchen were. Clover had the wedding and all the parties around that, and now she had the baby and all the parties around that. But Angie didn't have anything to celebrate, and Gretchen knew that, of late, she had been extremely quiet and less responsive. Honestly, she almost seemed less happy.

Note to self: I'm going to have to look into that and have a talk with her.

Gretchen was loving the relationship with her stepdad and her mother, even more than before. He was the only dad she had ever known. Gretchen's biological dad had been killed in Vietnam before her mother and father got married. How excited he would be, she thought.

She'd seen a picture of him, and he looked like a kid, like Jack did to her now. She wondered how his voice would sound, what he would say to her. She opened up a fictional dialog with him in her mind.

"Hey there. We've never met, but I feel like I know you. Mom showed me your beautiful letters you wrote from overseas. You have a gift for words. Mom saved them for me. I love them too. I wish I could have met you in person, though. Do you see my life, that I am carrying a fourth child?" With her eyes closed, she listened for an answer.

She got one.

"I've been with you every step of your life. I couldn't interfere with your choice of Tony, but I wanted to. He was not worthy of you. Trace and I could have been fast friends. You chose well, Gretchen."

"That makes me so happy to hear that. May I call you dad?"

"Probably not right because Joe was the dad who raised you. Out of honor and respect, you can call me BioDude, like Trace thinks of himself."

She opened her eyes, giggling. The party and her present life was still there, the drama continuing to play out before her.

Again, she went back into her conversation with him.

“That’s not respectful. Your name was Wes, right?”

“Still is.”

“So, Wes, can I talk to you from time to time? Ask your advice?”

“You know I’m not real, right? All the advice I give is coming from you.”

“I just feel like it’s coming from outside of me.”

“It is and it isn’t. Outside of your world right now. When you pray, when you go reaching out to me, you reach outside your everyday life to that part of you who believes, who has faith. And you have more faith than you sometimes admit. That’s what it is. You’re embracing faith over fear. It’s all good, Gretchen. I’m there in that world for you. So is God. So are you when you seek faith over fear.”

She hadn’t expected a lecture, especially in the middle of her baby shower while surrounded by her friends and her family. When she opened her eyes, Trace was smiling at her, as if it was his voice inside her head.

We’re all connected, aren’t we?

There was no answer. But she knew it to be true. She blew Trace another kiss. Giving him her love enriched her whole life and gave her courage.

She thought about their future. They were both getting older and the new venture, the wedding and party center with Louise and Kate, was going to be a welcome distraction. And soon after the baby was born, she was going to throw herself into it big time.

She thought about all of the things that she had weathered and discovered about herself. She was less emotional now, maybe because she had to overcome so much hardship with the embarrassing breakup with Tony and being a single mom with three girls she needed to protect. She wondered if perhaps she had overprotected Clover, because even though they had

experienced her father's bad behavior and then the later in life introduction of Trace into the family, the effect on her was different than with Gretchen.

She hoped Clover and her new husband, Jack, had the fortitude to be able to weather it. Jack was also young, much younger emotionally than his twenty-two years. Gretchen knew Clover was going to need his strength while he was serving and she was left alone pregnant or raising kids on her own.

The party wound down. Trace came over to her side, kneeling close, and whispered, "I'm going to help clean up if you'll let me. I'd like to give the ladies a hand."

She looked back at him until his serious face bloomed in a shy smile.

"Of course. They'd like that. But you don't have to."

"I need to get them out of the house posthaste, if you get my drift," he answered.

She tingled all the way to her toes.

"You don't say."

"I'm in desperate need, Gretchen. I've suffered, watching you sit here, watching the sea of pregnant women and their allies separating us. I need some one-on-one with my gal. I need some magic." He followed his request with a kiss to her ear.

Another tingle, another smile, and then a full-throated kiss, which suddenly stopped the conversation around them.

Clover broke the shocked silence. "Oh, that's just my mom and dad. Don't pay any attention. They're always doing that," at which everyone started laughing.

"Should we stop?" Trace whispered to her lips.

"Better not, Sailor. I have needs too."

"Holy cow, mine just grew and got more urgent. Explain all your needs right now. Whisper it. I need to hear it. Every

one of them.”

“I’ll let you do whatever you like tonight. I’m ready. Are you?”

He slipped his hand from her waist down over her backside, rubbing back-and-forth several times just enough to notice that there was no panty line there. His eyes got smoky and watered slightly. He inhaled her scent, touched her earlobe with the tip of his tongue, and then laid a gentle kiss just under her left ear.

“I’m so fucking hard, Gretchen. I’m about ready to—”

Her finger pressed against his lips. “I want you to save all of that when we’re alone, okay? I don’t want you to hold back a single word, and I certainly don’t want you to run out of things to say. So, Mr. Navy SEAL, Trace, zip it until I get to unzip you later.”

CHAPTER 3



TRACE'S HARD-ON LASTED all the way through the kitchen cleanup. He joked with some of the other ladies, including two or three of Clover's friends, and generally directed the dishwashing and stacking of clean dishes from the dishwasher. Because he had to guess where many of the things were stored, since this was Gretchen's world and not his, he knew he was making lots of mistakes, and he got overruled by the ladies several times.

They made fun of his antics, some of his expressions from the Teams, and he found it difficult sometimes to hold his tongue when a certain four-letter word favorite of his tried to creep out.

But the longer he worked in proximity to the lovely ladies surrounding him, the more comfortable he got.

Clover and one of her friends were picking up wrapping paper and stacking the presents in two separate piles, one for her and one for Gretchen. She had checked her watch several times, frowning, and Trace knew what she was worried about.

Trace sauntered into the living room, his slip-ons dragging across the tile floor, and put his arm around her.

"He'll be here, Kid. Don't worry. The workout probably took a little bit longer than he anticipated. It happens. And he's a grunt, so they're going to push him to the limits and mess with his head a bit. Don't worry about it. It's all normal, Sweetheart."

"WHAT'S THE PURPOSE of doing that, Trace? I mean, why undercut all his values, like, you know, his commitment to me, the family, and the new baby? Surely they don't want to break that down?"

“It’s a matter of getting him ready to focus. To focus no matter what’s happening at home. That’s the point of it.”

“I still don’t get it.”

“What if you guys have a fight over the phone and he’s deployed? How might that mess with his mind, his performance? It’s dangerous.”

“No, we don’t fight.”

Trace chuckled at her naivety. “Trust me, you will. Just wait until you have the little one. You’ll find all sorts of things to fight about even without the kid... or kids.”

“One at a time, please.”

“Oh, it’s a certainty. I look at Jack’s face, and I just know he’s going to knock you up six days to Sunday. You’ll be hatching chicks every year.”

“That’s disgusting.”

“You’ll see.” He hugged her from the side. “You have no idea what you’re heading for, do you?”

“Apparently not. But they don’t keep us separated on purpose, do they? What if it’s an emergency?”

“Way too soon to be thinking about that. And you’ll get the talk. You’ll get to talk to the Team shrink or someone else about it, if you want. But first, he has to get through BUD/S, and that’s what’s up next for him. So just give him a little bit of space, and trust me, they aren’t going to separate you for anything longer than what they should. It’s part of preparing you too, since you’re going to be his support system when he’s overseas or gone on a training mission.”

“I know, I know. I just don’t understand why they have to always do that. I mean, they’re always picking on him, or so he says.”

This did concern Trace. He’d have to talk to Jack about it, and soon.

Covering up, he added, “Yeah, they’re going to pick on him until he stops complaining about it. So when he starts whining, you just remind him ‘you got to put your big boy panties on and you got to deal with it. You want to be not noticed.’ But I’ll talk to him if you want. I don’t hear that he’s complaining at all, but he probably does to you, because you talk about things I never hear. So support him, but don’t agree with him. That’s how you can help him get through all this.”

“You’re asking me to control the Navy with my husband?”

“He did sign up for it, Clover. It comes with the signature.”

“Okay. Thanks.”

Just at that moment, Jack entered the house. He looked exhausted, sweaty, like Trace had been earlier. He had dark circles under his eyes from the sleep deprivation they’d started working up to. This was giving Trace another reason to speak to his son-in-law.

“If it isn’t the guest of honor. We were just talking about you, Jack.”

The boy gave a smirk to both of them and then crossed the room in two long strides to give his bride a hug and kiss.

“It was a tough one today, hon. Lots of running. I’m exhausted. But I’m here now.”

“It happens. Thanks for working so hard for us,” she whispered back and gave him a chaste kiss.

AFTER TRACE FINISHED in the kitchen, he helped Jack load the truck with all of Clover’s gifts.

“So you have any suggestions for me? Any super-secret tips, something to help me get through BUD/S. It’s in two weeks, you know.”

“Yeah, I know.”

“Anything at all?”

Trace thought about it and didn’t want to tell him the real truth, not sure if that honesty would help or make him fearful.

He remembered all the lies his recruiter had told him. The guy had batted less than .100 in honesty, and he had to learn the hard way. So the training became an extra challenge, and Trace was so angry at the slick Navy guy he wasn't about to wash out. He wanted to run back into the recruitment center and punch his lights out and defiantly tell the guy he'd made it through. Which, of course, wouldn't have been very smart. But it gave him a second wind he probably needed, an additional focus. Revenge was a motivator to some. Not always. He wasn't sure Jack was wired the same way.

“There are no real secrets or magic tricks to this whole thing. Some of it is just dumb luck. I'd just say that whatever they throw at you, just don't quit. That's the biggest piece of advice I can give you. Be afraid of your trainers, mind them, and don't dis them. They are your future, and you have to get through them to go further. They can stop you. Be respectful, don't be an asshole, but don't be a patsy either.”

“Sounds like good advice. Anything else?”

“Lead the men, encourage the men, and the ones who struggle, give them some help. Just a small hand up. You don't want to do things for them, but show that you care—not in an emotional or cushy way, but in a man's way. Help them a little bit with their load if they're tired or they're straining. Some guys get shin splints. Some guys actually get sick and try to get through BUD/S with that illness, resisting getting rolled back. Sometimes they don't have a choice, and the trainers will roll them anyway. Help them out if you can, but don't defy the trainers.”

He let it soak in and then continued, “You know, you want to earn the Trident without cheating or gaming the system. This isn't Star Trek, and you're no Captain Kirk. There's some guys that think they can do that, and that's a big mistake. They'll even let some guys look like they're being favored only to smash them down later, and those guys *never* make it. The ones with a whole lot of hubris and try to figure it all out—those are the guys that never make it. So don't get yourself injured either. Don't try to show you're better than anyone

else. They're looking for strong brothers who aren't afraid to sacrifice and won't quit. Don't pick a fight, but don't be a pussy. Don't get noticed."

"Don't get noticed? How the hell do I do that?"

"If you hear, 'Jack, I've got my eye on you,' take that as a warning. You don't want them to watch you unless you're number one in all your skills. But they'll press you, press you to the breaking point. Remember, it's kinder to fail at BUD/S than on a mission when you let all your buddies down. You might get yourself or someone else killed."

Jack was swallowing as he loaded up his truck. Trace could smell the sweat running down his backside. Maybe he went too far.

But there was so much to tell him. He didn't want to regret that he'd forgotten something.

"One other tip. When you're off, let Clover let you sleep. You need your rest. Get rid of those bags, there," he said as he pointed to Jack's face. "Fatigue causes accidents and muscle-related issues. Drink lots of water, and pee in your pants, if you have to. Stay hydrated and keep the protein coming. Forget the superfood smoothies. In fact, forget smoothies completely. Raw meat. That will do it."

Jack looked at him like he was completely bonkers.

"Just kidding on that last part, but if I see you drinking a smoothie, I'm going to knock it right out of your hands."

"Got it," Jack said, finally chuckling. "Did you have anyone like you barking at your ass when you were going through?"

"See, that's where you're lucky. Nope. Not a soul. I wasn't married either. No baby on the way. You're lucky. You have a life if you wash out. I didn't have a thing."

That got Jack serious all of a sudden.

"Did you tell Clover all this?"

“Nope. That’s your job, son. You have to help her stay sane so she can help you when you’re not. You go through the training, but you both pass together. Get my drift?”

And with that, they were done. Trace wished he’d had a recording of that advice, because he thought it was pretty damned good.

Alone at last, he caught Gretchen slipping on her nightie in the bathroom.

“Take that thing off,” he barked.

“You’re in a mood, Trace. Did everything go okay with Jack?” she asked him.

“It did. But it put me in touch with my age, and tonight, I’m feeling very old. I don’t have much time left, I guess. I don’t want to waste a minute. I need you, Gretchen. Tonight more than others.”

She bore that curious expression that told him she was afraid to ask. She was good about that. She pried when she had to, and then he could never talk her out of it. But sometimes, she just let things lay. Tonight was one of them, thank God.

She slipped the nightie over her head, cupped her breasts that were huge and overflowing in her palms.

“Is this what you had in mind?”

“This is exactly what I had in mind.”

CHAPTER 4



GRETCHEN STRAIGHTENED HER kitchen when she couldn't find several pots and plates for breakfast the next morning. Trace caught her doing it.

"I guess I get an F?"

She turned to him, the sight of his handsome face taking her breath away.

"Actually, Trace, I think you're a perfect ten."

Trace wrapped his arms around her and didn't squeeze. He felt the baby kicking against his own belly. "And you, my dear, are a twelve. All the way."

Gretchen blushed, pushing him away. "Come back in about twenty, and I'll have eggs for you."

"You're not eating?"

"Meeting Kate and Mom and Clover for breakfast. Remember? Returning and filling some items she still needs?"

"You run along. I'll fix my own eggs."

"But let me put away the clean plates, agreed?"

"Yes, ma'am."

THE FOUR OF them met for breakfast at the mall. There were a number of gifts that had been given that were duplicates of what they already had. While they browsed windows and walked through rows of merchandise at several stores, they talked about the shower.

Louise Morgan was animated about how her husband had greatly enjoyed it.

“Joe was as excited as heck that he was even invited, although I told him the men were always invited. Most men don’t like to go to baby showers. But he was delighted he got to come. He had a great time, Gretchen.”

“Oh, that’s great to hear, Mom. Yes, we had a great time too. It was an interesting mixture of old and younger women, and I was surprised how well Joe and Trace fit in with the group. I’m not so sure that Jack would’ve felt so comfortable there.”

“Clover’s girlfriends are just darling and everyone’s so busting proud of her.”

“A wonderful group of girls,” Gretchen added.

Kate and Clover had wandered off to a dressing room. Louise took Gretchen aside, whispering, “I keep thinking about how your father would think about all of this. I mean Wes, not your father.”

“Funny. I don’t think he’d mind what we call him. He is part of the family, just not with us right now. Someday, I’ll get to meet him.”

“I’m glad you feel that way. Joe feels the same. We’re lucky we married understanding men.”

“I almost didn’t. But, yes, I agree.”

They both giggled. Then Louise got serious.

“Well, I’m not sure I’m supposed to tell you this, but let me just give you a tiny warning. One of Clover’s friends—I think her name was Farley?”

“Oh yes, Farley. She’s been with Clover in school ever since we moved to San Diego.”

“Farley whispered to me, just wanted to let me know that Clover told her in confidence that she’d been spotting. She asked me if I knew or thought anything was wrong.”

“Really? She hasn’t said anything like that to me.”

This disturbed her. Not only was it something her daughter hadn't revealed, but just like her own high-risk pregnancy, Clover might have predispositions that Gretchen never had. It was one additional worry, on top of all the others.

“Well, perhaps it's nothing. Perhaps Farley exaggerated it, but I just felt you should know. I'm sure if it was something serious Clover would say something. So please don't indicate where it came from, because I'd like not to be thought of as somebody who couldn't be trusted, and I'm sure Farley wouldn't appreciate me spilling the beans if no one else knew about it. On the other hand, we want to do what's right for Clover's health and for the health of the baby. So maybe you could just keep an eye on it and maybe find a way to ask her.”

Gretchen was grateful that Louise trusted her with this little detail.

All day, she kept watching Clover, looking for signs she wasn't feeling well or had cramping, but she didn't give any indication of illness. Gretchen tried to spend as much time in her vicinity as possible. They stopped for coffee, Clover not partaking, so Gretchen didn't either. They chitchatted about things they'd seen in the store, and finally, when Kate and Louise went off to use the restroom, Gretchen used that opportunity to ask Clover the question about the spotting.

“Clover, I don't know who it was, but someone mentioned something about you spotting? Is that true?”

Clover's head reared up as she glared directly into Gretchen's eyes. “Mom, that's not true. Who told you that?”

Gretchen felt uneasy now that she'd been confronted.

“Well, I think it was one of those comments that was made, and I didn't know whether applied to you or somebody else. I can't remember who said it to be honest,” she lied.

“It's my business, Mom.”

“It's only my business because this is your first pregnancy, and if it's true—”

“It’s not true, Mom. And I want you to stop meddling. I’m fine. I’ve got this.”

Gretchen began to apply patience, patience that was fading as the seconds clicked by. “Okay, I understand. Please don’t take offense at my worrying. It’s just something a mother does. A mother wants to check on her child, on her future grandchild.”

“Mom, I have a doctor. I also have a midwife. If I need any questions answered, I’m going to ask them, because they’re medical professionals. And I’m sorry, but just because you’ve had three children before doesn’t make you an expert.”

Gretchen was hurt by the hardness in Clover’s voice. She wasn’t sarcastic any longer. She was actually hard, icy, being slightly bitter. This concerned her. Clover was hiding something.

“I hope you aren’t upset. It’s totally normal for a mother to do this. You’re going to see someday when *your* child is pregnant.”

Clover appeared ready to burst out. Her upper body shook.

“You don’t seem to understand, Mother. I want to do this by myself. I know you went through the pregnancies and lost your husband, my asshole dad, and then got married again. You went through all these changes, right? You never really told us everything that was going on. Why is it now that I have my own life to live, I have my own husband and my own issues, why is it that you have to keep meddling in mine? Can’t you let me do it my way? Do you have to keep mothering me now that I’m going to be a mother as well? Just think of how that makes me feel, Mother.”

“I’m sorry, Clover. Perhaps I was ill-advised to say anything to you.”

“That’s the first right thing you’ve said. I want to know who you heard this from.”

Gretchen was not going to reveal this detail, and she tried to dissuade Clover. She also didn’t want to dig the lie deeper,

so she would just have to take the shots she was going to get when Clover got angry at her. She sucked in air and decided to just go direct and be very blunt.

“I don’t remember, and frankly, even if I did, I wouldn’t tell you. Obviously, it was my mistake. But if you need any help at any time, and I don’t care if you get upset at me for saying this, but if you ever need help or you have a question, you can always come to me, Clover. The door is always open. And I will respect your boundaries. I won’t bother you with this stuff. But please, if something comes up, don’t shut us out.”

Clover set her jaw straight, her arms crossed over her belly. She sipped her water and tapped her foot. “I’m ready to go home now. You’ve spoiled this for me, Mother.”

Gretchen felt horrible. When Kate and Louise returned, Clover made her wishes known, which immediately elicited a reaction from Louise who stared at Gretchen and then creased her forehead in worry.

“Clover, I’ll take you home. Kate, would you take Mom home?” Gretchen asked.

“I want to go home with Kate. Please?”

Gretchen agreed. Kate looked shocked and nodded.

“Of course Clover. I’d be happy to give you a ride home. Are you feeling sick?”

“I’m fine.”

“Mom, are you okay hanging with Gretchen?”

“Oh, we’re fine,” said Louise. “I have a couple things I want to go look at. And, Gretchen, I need your opinion on it. Would you mind?”

“As long as it doesn’t take too long, Mom. I need to get off my feet again.”

“Well, thanks for meeting us, and Clover, if you’re ready, we can go now.” Kate gave Gretchen and her mother a big hug

and picked up Clover's bags, walked with her down the center of the mall, and out toward the parking lot.

Louise turned to Gretchen. "So you told her, or you asked her, rather?"

"She doesn't know where it came from, but I asked her. I made it sound like I overheard it at the party, which is entirely possible."

"Well, that was a good guess, but I think she is going to remember who she told, and that person's probably going to get a nasty call. It's unfortunate. But I'm honestly not sure, Gretchen, how you could've handled it better. I think she's going through a phase where she just wants to prove she's old enough and capable of handling everything."

"I worry about that. Overly confident, not that I want her to be scared."

"Exactly. You know, kids get married, and some people need those years to adjust to it all. Being married isn't like taking an extra college-level course. It's complicated."

"You think?" Gretchen quipped.

"I didn't have that, because I was pregnant with you when I married Joe. But I know it made things happen very quickly, and we had to adjust very quickly, and that's what Clover's having to do. Jack is so young."

"They both are, Mom."

She sighed. "But they're strong, and they love each other. I just hope that medically there are no issues."

"I know better than to call the doctor and raise issues or have her give Clover a call. That would just be jumping over into her yard and totally inappropriate. But if she starts to feel poorly or I see something or Jack says something to Trace or to me or anybody—you or Joe—I'm going to jump in. I'm going to ask for forgiveness later. She's so stubborn. And I'm not sure why. There's something going on with her I just can't put my finger on."

“You have so many changes going on, Sweetheart. You’re doing a marvelous job trying to keep everything in order with Trace going overseas, Jack continuing his training, and you and Clover being pregnant together. You also have your other two daughters. It’s not quite what you expected, is it?”

“I had dreamed about this, and I had thought what a wonderful experience this was going to be being pregnant at the same time as my daughter. But I can see how she feels. Maybe it’s that she doesn’t get her own separate pregnancy story. She has to share that story with me. Does that make sense, Mom?”

“It certainly does, my dear. I think you just nailed it. You’re going to have to be careful with her. And I know, in the end, she’ll come around. Don’t push. Things have a way of working out. I was so afraid for years that you would blame me for not telling you the truth about your father. But the right time presented itself. We stumbled on just the right way to handle it. The right time will come for you too, and I’m sure our loving family is still going to stay intact as it is. Changed, yes, but it’s just more people, more people’s feelings to consider. Our family’s expanding. It’s not as simple. We’re going to have to all adjust, aren’t we?”

“And I think we will, Mom. You know, I had a little incident at the shower where I closed my eyes and I almost thought I could hear Wes’s voice. I had a little imaginary conversation with him. Has that ever happened to you?”

“You mean have I ever felt that he tried to contact me? From the grave?” Louise asked with her nose scrunched up.

“Well, not exactly that, but did you get a sense that he was in your presence or was around you or around me at any time?”

“I know he would’ve been very proud of you and everything that you’ve done, and he would’ve loved to see the girls, and I think he’d enjoy Trace.”

“He told me that.”

Louise stared at her lap and smiled. Then she searched Gretchen's eyes. "I wish I could tell you I had that same experience, Gretchen. But I didn't. I put all of my effort into having you and making our family with Joe. I regretted that Wes wasn't around, and I felt sorry for him, not for us but for him. I knew Joe was going to love you more than life itself. So I didn't worry about it, and honestly, Gretchen, I never felt his presence. I'm not saying you're crazy, of course, but it just didn't happen to me that way."

"Well, you know what he told me, though?"

"What?"

"He told me that it was not really him. It was something inside me talking to me, so it was like inside my own head, my own thought processes. And that when I wanted to talk to him I was really talking to a part of myself. Does that make sense?"

"It does. That sounds like him. He would've said things like that. He felt connections with people very quickly, to me very quickly. I think if he hadn't been that way we would've never really met and, well, created you."

"So I'll consider it a gift then. Are you okay with that?"

"Absolutely. I'm totally okay with that. I think that's a beautiful story. And when you can, I hope you'll tell that story to my grandchildren when they are old enough to understand."

"I've never told you this, Mom, but because of you and Joe, I knew I could make the relationship I had with Trace work. I knew he could love my girls like Joe loves me."

"Thank you. I love you so much, Gretchen. And I am so happy for the life that you have lived courageously and full of love."

CHAPTER 5



TRACE MET UP with the rest of his team in Team 3's building on base. He sat down in a group of older guys, including TJ, Kyle, Fredo, Coop, and several other of the guys he'd been with for the past ten years. As they looked around the room, they noticed several newbies joining the team. Approximately six teammates had detached or transferred, most of them retiring. The older ones were dwindling down slowly with each new mission and rotation.

TJ Talbot leaned into Trace. "Are these guys right out of Boy Scout school or are we just old as shit, Trace?"

"I think we're old as shit."

They sat in silence as three newbies who didn't look a day older than eighteen sat right in front of them. The smell of aftershave was so overpowering TJ complained his eyes were watering. It was so funny, but Trace tried not to laugh. In the end, he snickered, which caused the trio to turn around and give them an angry stare.

TJ was unafraid. "Sorry, boys. I'm just not used to smelling so much of that Brute. That what it is? Is it one of you or do you go as the three musketeers?"

"That ain't welcoming, Grandpa," one of them said.

"Wasn't meant to be, Son. We older guys got sensitive constitutions, you know?"

"That's a fact," piped in Fredo. "My sniffer's been blown up for a few years now, and I can smell that crap sure as shit."

One of the boys was extremely handsome, and Trace suspected he was the culprit.

“All cool, all cool, Man. You want me to go take a shower right now, Old Man?”

Trace hoped that this dude wouldn't be tasked on the mission. But he was in the meeting, which meant he was a candidate. He was grateful the kid turned back around and stopped paying Trace's row any attention. That was smart of him.

“Do you suppose they're relaxing the standards a bit?” he whispered.

“I guess we're no longer the best of the best,” returned TJ.

“Would you guys quit it?” Cooper barked at them.

The three newbies in the front row fist bumped each other and took a victory lap, although it was pretty obvious to everyone sitting in the room that they were clearly the losers in this minor pissing contest. Trace was almost to the point of wanting to go sit in the back row with some of the other older guys. But the room was filled with so many new SEAL Team 3 members, there really wasn't any safe space to be.

Kyle got up in front of the group, introduced their State Department liaison, and spoke a bit about what missions they had coming up.

“We're watching several militia groups in Nigeria and Benin, and although there's no credible threats, we've been asked to go in and take some inventory. No stirring things up, but we need to check on the safety of a couple of the schools and a U.N. mission that oddly hasn't been heard from in a few days. That's a real bad sign.”

The whole room groaned.

“So we're doing pony packs, small groups, fanning out, leaving a small footprint and establishing easy extraction points. I don't think I have to tell you gents that the world is kind of exploding right now. People are emboldened to just do some crazy things these days. The value of life seems to be lessening every day. Except, to us. We're here to save the day, right? Even when people don't want it.”

Kyle waited for the rest of the room to react. They did and quickly. Kyle must have known they wouldn't like it one bit.

Hands went up. Coop was called on first. "Yes, Coop?"

"Excuse me, LT, what in the world are we doing going back there if we don't have any credible threats? I mean, is there an actual mission or are we going to be bait?"

Several others grumbled their agreement.

"I'm supposed to get you guys ready, and we're supposed to get over there first. Get set up. But which of several hotspots is not determined at this time. By the time we deploy, they will be. We could deploy as soon as a week from now or it could be a month from now."

The State Department liaison projected maps and pictures of several militia group leaders. Then she showed a school where there had been a recent kidnapping of several young girls and a handful of boys. The trail was so cold the SEALs were not scheduled to be sent there, but it was believed the kids were still being held for some future ransom demand.

"No one knows exactly where, of course. That's the problem. They're pretty good at hiding things in the terrain."

It wasn't clear which exact group had caused the raid, she explained. Once that was determined, things could change.

The state representative was a bright gal, not very attractive, but she was fit as hell and a patriot, someone who obviously believed that the mission and the Team would make a difference.

"I'll be embedded with you."

That was a new factor. Trace sat up and paid more attention to her.

She continued with a brief description of several of the groups and the issues they were facing.

"There are a lot of shifting sands in Africa. People are making alliances because money is changing hands. Things

are being negotiated. Some of the groups who don't receive U.N., Chinese, Iranian, or USA backing, or have oil revenues, are using humans as their currency to fund their government, their lifestyle, and to feed and pay their military. It's a very dirty business."

No one moved in the room, as the gravity of the field they'd be dumped into became clearer to the group.

"We consider it a step up from the old slave trade of previous centuries. The only difference is the trade isn't done openly. It's done in secret, and there really is no value to the humans being held in bondage. They face a life of incredible harshness and certain death within four to five years in that environment as they're worked to death. We estimate that roughly 2500 Africans from small villages have been depleted and sold into bondage all over the world just in the past two years. They are even warehoused and kept to breed children so that those children could in turn be sold. It's a despicable game, but as long as there are willing purchasers, it's lucrative. And that's the trouble with it."

Trace was suffering from an upset stomach, again.

After the meeting, Kyle recommended that with the influx of all the new team members and the retiring older members who were not there, that the group get acquainted and possibly have a team bonfire down by the beach over the weekend. Two men were put in charge of getting the word out, and the women would be sending out the phone messages to all the eligible members.

"We've never had so many new guys come in, but we're not making our quotas. While we normally spend more time in finish or specialty training, holding people back until they're Super maxed to deploy or to build more skills, we're going to have the skill sessions take place when you're on an actual mission. I'm going to ask all of you older guys to help show the younger ones, the newbies, the ropes. Use your patience, gents. That's an order. I want you to be careful, and I want you to be respectful of each other."

Kyle walked back-and-forth in front of the room and then started in again.

“You newbies, this team has forged relationships that are legendary. Many of the old guys on this team were misfits and oddballs who came to us from various branches of service prior, sometimes police—we even have a couple of university professors and attorneys, if you can believe such a thing. These guys are your seniors, are to be trusted and obeyed. You can put aside your egos and your newbie pettiness. We don’t want you to show off or pretend you know more than you know. You have to pay attention or you’re dead meat. We want to know what you can do, and you may not be able to do everything that everybody else does, but we want you to be an effective part of this team.”

Trace felt less excited about this mission than he ever had before. And with all the other things that were going on in his household—with Clover and Gretchen’s pregnancies, his sleepless nights, the worries about being a little too old to be still doing this Boy Scout stuff—he was on edge about the whole thing. Part of him wanted to walk up to Kyle and just request papers.

The men were dismissed and mingled between the walls of the big metal building, their conversations sometimes loud, lots of back slapping and handshaking. Not too many jokes. It was a civil get together. People were invited to share beers at the Scupper or invited to small PT sessions. Trace felt the group had fractured quite a bit with the change in personalities. But he knew, in time, they’d become one crab-like unit, all connected. Not pretty, but connected.

And deadly.

One of the new Team guys, not one of the younger ones on their first deployment, walked up to Trace and stuck out his hand.

“Wally Brown. Transfer from Little Creek. Native of Florida. How about you?”

“I’m Trace Bennett. I’m a retread too, getting ready to celebrate my senior years, and I’m expecting a new child. A lot of my thoughts are with my wife and future son or daughter, but I’ll train you and help you out, if you listen. If you don’t listen, you’re on your own.”

They shook. The handsome dark-skinned gentleman in front of Trace had a sinister but very wide smile. He was hard to read. Trace didn’t know whether he trusted the guy one hundred percent or not. But he did have balls, and he wasn’t afraid of maybe causing a little friction, just so he could jockey in and find a spot amongst the group. That was a plus.

“So your specialty is?” Trace asked him.

“Sniper, medic, and I blow shit up. I also speak a little Swahili, not that it will do much good in Nigeria.”

“Okay then. You’re going to want to learn from Fredo. He knows just about everything about blowing up anything. If you’re a sniper, you need to watch Armando real careful. You can hang with me to learn your medical skills. There’s also TJ and Cooper, our senior guys in that department as well.”

Trace pointed the others out to Wally.

“Other than that, if you want to hang with an older guy, I think I’m the oldest one in the platoon right now. Who knows. Maybe somebody’s lying.”

“You’re all right. I see through you, Mr. Trace Bennett. So you’re a medic too, huh?”

“If it was up to the Navy, I would’ve been a dentist. But no, I’m a medic.”

“I got that invitation too. I also turned it down. Been in Little Creek nearly five years. Coming up to a new signup opportunity next year. How long you been in?”

“About fifteen. I came from Little Creek too.”

“What Team?”

“No, you don’t. That was a shit show. I’ve forgotten all their names already.”

“Just like me. A little dustup with the LT who never liked me from day one.”

“So your family live in Florida now or you move them out to Coronado?”

“Nope, my wife and kids were killed in DC on a school trip. Drunk driver, they think. Anyway, it’s an unsolved accident. I am single and trying to keep it that way. I got no family.”

“I’m sorry for your loss, Son.”

“I ain’t your son. No way in hell could you be my father. You’re the wrong color, Dude.”

“Funny. You a funny man then, Mr. Wally?” It was important that Trace not show offense, even though he took it that way partially.

“Sometimes, when I’ve got to be.”

“Well, still, that’s a tough one to handle. They must’ve made you go through years of rehab on that one.”

“Not too much. No, they think my brain is pretty bulletproof, but you never know.” He gave Trace a wild expression. He was able to move his left eye out to the side without moving his right, which freaked Trace out completely. Wally followed it up by wiggling his eyebrows up and down.

“Oh, I get it. You play good scary dude. That it? You were the scary dude then?” Trace asked him.

“Mostly. I never had much of a family life. I don’t think about it much. I miss them, but I’ll see them one day, maybe soon, who knows? Ran away from my foster home at fourteen. Just managed to evade everybody until I was legal age to sign up. I didn’t even have to lie about my age.”

“Well, TJ here has a past that sounds like that. He set fires to his foster homes. And we got three or four others in the

same situation. You're going to fit right in, Son."

Wally raised his eyebrows.

"I admit it. Hard habit to break. Everyone younger than me is 'son.'"

"I can live with it, I 'spose."

"So Wally Brown is your real name?"

"Nope, Pops. If you're nice, I'll tell you what my real name is."

"So it's not Wally then? What is it, Waldorf or some shit like that?"

"A salad. You think my mama would name me after a green salad? Hell, I've never had a Waldorf salad."

"My opinion, you haven't missed anything."

"One of the foster homes named me Wallace. I didn't like it. So it stayed Wally."

"Okay then, Wallace. I do prefer Wally better. You have a handle in Little Creek?"

"Wally or WB."

"Warner Brothers? That's too long for a handle."

"I said WB, not Warner Brothers. Geez, you're older than I thought. Got a hearing problem already, Gramps?"

Trace fisted and unfisted his right hand, his shooting hand. "And you can just call me Trace. I think we'll get along. You've been to Africa before?"

"I kind of got a rough start on SEAL Team 4. It was a bad command for me. Our LT didn't like me much. I guess we had a different kind of approach. I never could talk to the guy without him getting angry at me. So we went to Africa once, and I hated it then. I think I'm going to hate it now. But maybe, with a different crew, it'll feel better. I was scared shitless the first time."

"Well, that's Africa."

“Guess I can’t get away from my roots. God help me. Last place in the world I want to die in. Lucky me.”

“You’re not going to die on my watch, Wally. Put that shit out of your head.”

“Easier said. Know what I’m sayin’?”

“This campaign is not like the big old campaigns of the past, where you had lots of men going in around you, working with divisions of marines, group guys. It’s almost like jungle warfare the way we’re doing it now. The enemy doesn’t play nice. They don’t have huge armies, but they kill a lot of people, and they hide amongst women and children. They’re cowards. And they’re dangerous. Like Kyle says, their value for human life is practically nil. You want to stay away from those people and don’t trust anybody. Don’t go looking too much for those roots, Wally. There are innocents, but they’re very scared too, and you can’t count on them for loyalty. This Team, this room full of gentlemen, are the only people you can trust. You remember that, and you’ll be safe.”

Trace resisted the urge to call him son. But he agreed with Wally entirely. Africa was no place to die.

CHAPTER 6



GRETCHEN HEADED OVER to The Bone Frog Center, wanting to distract herself from Trace's upcoming deployment by rubbing shoulders with Deirdre Gray, and if possible, even her own mother. If she was there. And that was a big "if."

When she walked into the large space, she noticed work had continued, and it was beginning to take shape. There were several men painting walls, cutting out trim around several of the doorways and installing kitchen cabinets and appliances at the end of the building, which was going to serve as the catering center. The office spaces were framed in but bare of sheetrock. And of course, in the middle of all of this, Deirdre was ordering people around like she was a general in the Army, as if she'd had years and years of construction experience.

Gretchen was in awe.

With her face covered in smears of rose and turquoise paint, her jeans that she used for painting her large canvases was the perfect accessory to her outfit. Her big shirt, probably Larry's former suit shirt, was also stained and smeared with all sorts of things, including crusty caulking and colors from brushing against surfaces being either stained, coated, or painted over the past few days. In an odd patchwork way, it all fit together, she noticed. It was more an element of style, Deirdre's uniform.

But her eyes, her expression of excitement, was totally intoxicating. Gretchen knew her own mother couldn't have been more pleased to see her.

"Gretchen! How great you're up and about!" Deirdre said. "How are you feeling?"

AT FIRST, GRETCHEN thought perhaps Clover had said something about her needing space or having to rest more, which was certainly true, but it was just odd coming from Deirdre, especially since that was the concern Gretchen had with her own daughter.

“Oh, I bounce back quickly. But look at you. If I have half the energy you have when I get to be your age, I’ll consider myself a victor over the aging process. Oh my gosh, Deirdre, this is gorgeous. It’s just going to be fantastic.”

Deirdre scanned the ceiling and watched as workmen laid the floorboards for the upper-level dining and viewing section.

“The windows really let in all that wonderful light, and that section, I wish I’d made it twice as big, but then it would’ve shadowed the downstairs. Plenty of room, though, for a small dance floor or cocktail-type entertainment. I think this is going to be a venue people will love, assuming we get the zoning worked out for it.”

“I thought you had all that in place?”

“Yes, it’s allowed as a wedding center and gallery. We don’t have the entertainment part nailed down yet, but we’re hoping to do that in the next couple of weeks, before Christmas. We’d like to have a New Year’s or Christmas Concert for all the people in the area first, whether we’re finished or not. We can make it free to encourage them to be our good neighbors to help keep our place safe and free from vandals. It’s a problem around here sometimes, or so I hear.”

“But nothing you haven’t seen in your Portland days.”

“That’s true. We saw worse up there. And I think the community will rally around us, and I know the local civic leaders are all for it, extra tax base and all, you know.”

Gretchen walked to the kitchen, a huge U-shaped area without walls. Nonetheless, cabinets hung from the ceiling soffit made of colorful stained wood that looked like mahogany and rare Brazilian hardwoods. The countertop was not yet installed, and a center island was sitting by the side but

would be put in place in the middle. She noted that the island had wheels on it.

“This is going to be adjustable then?” she pointed to the island.

“It was a tossup. We were originally going to put a stove there, but of course, that would have to be stationary. But we decided this would make a good prep center, and it could be moved to countertops for catering and what not. We could even use it as a cart for serving if we wanted to, so I’ve left the passageway a little bit wider than normal.” She pointed to the area around the back.

“What’s the countertop going to be?”

“I think black granite. It won’t show the dirt, and if it gets scratched, it doesn’t show up as much either. White is hard for a commercial kitchen. Most restaurants use stainless steel, black, or dark colors. There has to be some sort of chopping area, so the center section will probably have an inlay three-foot butcher block. We’ll also have a slab over next to the stove. We have a beautiful bright red Italian stove coming that cost us a fortune, but I’m sure with the double ovens and the eight burners and the griddle, it will be most welcomed.”

“Sounds awesome! How about a fan? You have to have that, right?”

“We have a local sheet metal guy who is designing the fan as we have to install a commercial-grade system for the kitchen just like any big restaurant. I can’t wait to get in there and start to use it.” Deirdre had her hands clasped underneath her chin, and Gretchen could see she was literally in Heaven.

“So how’s the fundraising going?” Gretchen asked.

“We’ve reached nearly half our goal. If it wasn’t for our funds, the money Larry and I used from the insurance, we’d be way behind. But Dr. Brownlee and some of his buddies have contributed nicely, and we think we can reach out to several of the other Navy family members, some that have wealthy parents or grandparents, and patrons of the arts down here.

There are a lot of people who want to support minority or women-owned businesses especially being created in minority-impacted areas. It's good for the local economy, and it's good for the reputation of San Diego as a cultural melting pot. I'm very pleased with the reception we've had."

"So no rain clouds on the horizon then?"

"I wouldn't say that. The people that I have the most problem with, Gretchen, are the city officials, who just seem to be in the mood to say no all the time. It's like, if you don't ask, you just go in and do things. If they catch you, we say, 'Oops I'm sorry.' We change it or argue it, and sometimes they back down, but many times they don't."

"Our taxpayer dollars at work."

"I just don't understand it. It's almost like they feel they're entitled to jump in and protect a constituency that isn't even there. It's like somebody's campaign promise can be fulfilled or something. When this is all done, I'm sure everybody's going to take credit for it, and most of them have never contributed a dime or really helped us. But you know how it is with politics. And I'm afraid that's the part I don't do well. I don't have a lot of patience."

"Tell me about it. I'm getting a lesson in that myself these days," Gretchen agreed.

"In your case, you have a valid excuse. You're pregnant, Gretchen. People obviously are going to give you a wide berth, literally and figuratively."

They both laughed at first. Then Gretchen hit her chest with her fist. "Ouch. Am I that big? Because Trace says my ass looks like the Titanic."

"He's lying through his teeth. Just making sure that you stick around and let him protect you. That's what these guys do, right?"

"Yes, you're right."

“I remember Kate complaining to me about Tyler doing the same thing. I think all men do that. I think it’s a test of how much you trust them. We will hear little jokes and things made against us in our condition when we’re pregnant, and I used to wear it as a badge of honor. Even Larry did that. I just learned to go with the flow. It’s always much healthier if you do that. Right?”

“You’re totally right about that.” Gretchen could see Diedre was going to pry now, looking for some answers to her questions. She wasn’t wrong.

“So what’s your test of patience? Let’s sit down over here.”

She drew Gretchen over to a small corner not covered with paint, plastic, wood, sheetrock dust, or workmen. Two old couches, obviously hand-me-downs from their furniture overload in Portland, were sitting at right angles in the corner. From there, Gretchen had an excellent view of all the work being done. It was noisy, but the couch felt wonderful, and due to its condition, Gretchen found she could put her feet, shoes and all, on the cushions.

“You okay here?” Dierdre asked.

“This is fantastic. You take naps here too?” She smirked and watched her friend struggle with the answer.

“Not hardly. It’s too noisy most days, but today, most of the job is painting. Not too much sawing and no sheetrock sanding, which is the worst, absolutely the worst. We have to have blowers, because I insist on getting that dust out of the place, not vacuuming it up after the fact.”

“I can see why Kate likes to spend so much time here. Lots of creativity going on. You’re creating a theater, aren’t you?”

“A bit of backlight, happiness, thought, and whatever else you’re trying to portray. I just love doing that.”

“No wonder Linda’s such a talented author. She clearly gets it from you.”

“I think even Tyler has it too, with his love of poetry and his musical abilities. He’s got a creative side to him that I never thought would lead him toward the Teams. But he’s happy, and that’s the main thing.” She looked whimsically at Gretchen, thinking heavily before she spoke.

Here it comes.

“Other than seeing our progress, what brings you over?”

Gretchen was surprised that she had been so unguarded and transparent.

“We are really excited about the baby, and the shower was wonderful. I really wished you could’ve come.”

“Oh please, I don’t go to the bonfires. I don’t go to the parties. My head’s in a different space, not that I don’t enjoy the celebration. I’ll be there for every step that I’m allowed, but oh my gosh, those girls—when they get together—the gossip! This is not me. I know it’s different for you, because you’re one of the guests of honor. Of course you have to be there. But it’s just not my thing. But I sent over a gift.”

“Yes, thank you so much. I love those little sets you sent. And Clover laughed at all the Disney character outfits. The sheets, the curtains, oh my gosh, she’s all set up. And what she isn’t set up with she’s shopping for now.”

“I hope I didn’t give her something she already had, but please, Gretchen, tell her she can return them. I left all the receipts in an envelope inside.”

“We saw that. Very thoughtful. And trust me, none of those things are going to be returned. So thanks. Very grateful for your generosity, Deirdre.”

Gretchen knew she’d get around to her inquiries.

“So again, I’m going to ask you, because you’re kind of being cagey, Gretchen.”

“I had a little bit of an issue come up, and maybe it was something that had been brewing for a while but I just hadn’t paid attention to it. Clover is becoming a little bit distant to me

now. This has surprised, even worried me a little. I had in my head we were going to be pregnant together, and life was perfect, and we would go skipping down the sidewalk together, hand in hand. It's just not happening that way. I mean, there's tension."

"Well, first of all, you're an older mother, and she's having her first. But have you asked her?"

"I did. And that's what's causing all the tension. It was a couple of days ago, after the shower. It didn't go well."

"How so?"

"She says she doesn't want me meddling. I mean, *she's my daughter.*"

"What does Trace think?"

"I haven't done that. Judging from what he usually says, he'll probably think I'm just making it up. I can't tell if he was worried at all, and of course, now he's readying to go overseas, so I don't get to talk to him as much. He usually thinks I make too much out of little things and that I should save my energy for the big stuff."

"Well, Gretchen, I kind of have to agree with him. There is no big stuff, though?"

"Not really, except I was told by Louise that one of Clover's girlfriends leaked the fact that perhaps she's spotting."

"Oh yes, so now I understand your concern. I'm sure with your other pregnancies you spotted, because I surely did. In the beginning anyway. Not this late, though."

"Exactly. That's my concern."

"So she's getting some expert advice?"

Gretchen shrugged. "She says she will. I believe her. But her attitude has changed. I'm feeling like a third wheel here a little bit."

“Maybe if you tell her that instead of asking her about how she’s handling her issues, maybe that would work better. Clover may just be nervous. And there is a lot going on with Jack in training right now, soon to start BUD/S. It’s got to be on her mind. She’s going to see less of him all while you’ll both be closer to the baby being born. Tyler says they’ll try to get him home if they’re on a training. I’m sure he’ll make the birth, but she’s probably worried about that.”

“They’re training locally, but you know that could change as well.”

“She’s just nervous, Gretchen. You remember your first.”

“That’s why I want her to know I’m here for her.”

“You know, I used to counsel Tyler when he was in high school. He felt he wasn’t attracting the right girls. Not getting the attention he wanted so he could date more. He’s quite sensitive, as you probably know.”

Gretchen found that amusing. It wasn’t what she thought of Tyler at all.

“When young men are not getting that kind of affection they feel they should be getting from their girlfriends or certain women that they meet or date, they don’t know what to do. I’ve always said getting a woman’s attention is like getting a butterfly to land on you. You really don’t. They have to decide to choose you. I’m sure you’ve heard this concept before. So you live your life. You stay happy. You make yourself an easy, approachable, nurturing mother, even with all your other duties, and you let her come to you.”

“You are wise, Diedre.”

“I think, if we did more of that sometimes and less preaching, well, I’ve made those mistakes myself. And I have to say, it’s a bitter lesson to learn. But I don’t see anything in Clover that makes me concerned, Gretchen. I think you’ve done a wonderful job with your girls. And I don’t think I would’ve done as well. Honestly. You are a master.”

Gretchen felt the warmth from this woman all the way from her heart down to her toes.

“Thank you. You are such a gift.”

Gretchen knew Diedre had just demonstrated how she should be with Clover, not through a lecture, but through the strength of a wise woman who had seen many wars, some battles won and some lost. But she had the wisdom to keep standing.

CHAPTER 7



JACK'S LEAVING FOR the rest of his pre-BUD/S training happened the same day Trace got the notice they would be deploying in four days. Of course, the house was silent. Angie and Gretchen were sullen, barely speaking that day, waiting for news Clover was back home. Clover had requested to send Jack off by herself, and they honored that. Trace had spoken to Jack the night before, and he wondered if he'd said everything he needed to say.

It might be the last time he ever talked to the young man who'd agreed to take his daughter and spend the rest of his life loving her. He felt to Trace like the son he never had. He was about to launch into "The Talk" when Jack beat him to the punch with news first.

"You know, Trace, Tony has offered to give us the down payment for a house. I wanted you to know that, in case no one told you."

"No, I didn't know. Thanks for the intel. But, Jack, I wouldn't count on it, and it pains me to tell you this. You'll find, in time, there are some men who are so flawed they should not make promises because they don't keep any of them. Always one reason or another why that is, but they just can't be counted on. We cull out those guys in the selection process you're going through now. But understand, no matter how much Clover loves him, because she can't help herself, Tony will never be the kind of father he needs to be. He can't help himself. You'll be a much better father than he could ever dream to be."

"Clover didn't want to hear it when I brought that up, not in the same words, of course."

“No, I get you. You know the man, then. You know the history. He even had to make her cry on her wedding day.”

“That asshole.”

“Still we can’t stop loving the people we love, can we?”

“That’s for sure,” Jack said, his voice breaking like a high schooler, reminding Trace of his own high school days, not fond memories, either. Those days he was scared to death of girls, his future, everything really.

He needed to go over the hard part while he still had the young man’s attention.

“So here’s the drill. Very important, like I told you the day of the shower, you give your strength to Clover. Sometimes you have to be strong for the both of you.”

“I understand.”

“Do you? So what happens if you wash out? Have you two talked about that?”

“A little,” he said, adjusting his neck and right shoulder. A nervous reaction.

“Or what if, when you make your Trident, you don’t come home? You have to prepare her for that.”

“We don’t like to dwell on that.”

“No one does, Son. But it’s part of the preparation. Make sure you give her all your strength, even before you have it all under control yourself. You’ll go out there on your first deployment, and you won’t sleep for a week. You’ll be looking around every corner, checking and double checking and still cursing when you forget something, and you’ll wonder if you’re prepared, really prepared for all of this. You’ll second guess yourself. You’ll worry about the baby, and you’ll worry about letting the rest of the Team down. You’ll worry about worry, and then you suck it up and deal with it. You pray, you meditate, you ask for help from someone, or you just push yourself through it and vow that you’ll survive,

just like I told you about BUD/S. That's what you do. You don't quit."

"I understand, sir."

"And when you come home, no matter how it went, no matter how many mistakes you made, even if you cost some poor mama's boy his own life, you get back to this sunny place, your wife and child, and you vow to do it better the next time. And you do it because you are the best of the best and there aren't any other people except the men on your Team who can do this shit. You protect them, and you protect yourself. That's how we fight for our freedom. We get lucky because we practice being part of a well-oiled team, and we have each other's backs."

"God, Trace. Do I have to worry about you?"

"What the hell do you mean?"

"You're giving me last instructions, like you aren't coming back. Something going on with you?"

Trace backed up, all of a sudden. Had he blown it? He hadn't meant to scare the kid. He didn't have words to tell him, because tears had filled his eyes, and he didn't want the kid to see it. Was he really preparing, or was it something else?

"I told you to prepare Clover. I'm preparing you. We never know, do we? We could get hit by a bus or an airplane from the sky, couldn't we? So we prepare for the worst but expect nothing but miracles. I'm showing you how to do this. It's very tough, the hardest conversation you'll have with her, but you do it, okay? And tell me if you need me to fill in any blanks after you leave. I may be in Africa, but I'm still reachable by phone on a limited basis. You need to, you call, okay?"

"I hope I can make you proud, sir."

"You will. You already have."

Trace now felt the heaviness of the house as he recalled that conversation and clarified he'd done everything he could.

They got the call Clover was back home.

“Should I go over?” Gretchen asked.

Trace looked at Angie. “You want to, Ang? Ask her first.”

Angie stared back at him as if Clover had leprosy. “Won’t I make it worse?”

“I don’t think so, honey,” said Gretchen, putting her arm around her youngest.

Angie called her and offered to bring over a pizza so they could watch something on TV. Apparently, it was well received. Gretchen dropped her off.

He waited for Gretchen’s return, putting away things and checking items he would need in his duty bag. Kyle’s call hadn’t been unexpected. It was quick. Kyle had a lot of people to contact.

“You watch over Benji and Nick, your pupils, maybe check to make sure they got all the gear they need, okay?”

“Will do, LT. Thanks. Wally has sort of adopted me too.”

“I saw that. I think he’s a good man. Rough around the edges, but I’ve never trusted my first impressions. He has a lot of street sense, and that might work to help us out.”

“You know he understands and speaks Swahili?”

“Good to know. The girls are okay?”

“Jack left today. I won’t lie, this one’s a little tough because of the little ones coming. But we got this.”

“I’m glad you didn’t bail on me, Trace. I need you this one, especially.”

“It’s an honor, sir.”

When Gretchen arrived, Trace took her hand and sat her down in the living room.

“Oh no. What’s happened?” she asked.

“I think you can guess. I got four days.”

She swallowed hard. Trace noticed the tears lining her cheeks, but she didn't shatter. Just cried silently, with dignity, which was who she was.

"Now comes the hard part, sweetheart. You're going to have to be there for Angie, as well as Rebecca at college, and you're going to have to be there for Clover."

He squeezed her hands in his and then brushed her cheek with his knuckles. "I know you can handle it. Just remember that if you need anything, you rely on our sister wives, okay?"

"Sister wives? This is not like one of those places—"

"You know what I mean, Gretchen. I'm sorry. That was probably not wise of me to say. But now the real work begins. We've had a nice long summer and fall, we've had the wedding of a lifetime for our daughter, and now we have to go through the deployment. I'm counting on you to hold everybody together. Trust me, if I could be here, I would be."

"No, Trace. You were made for this. I am not going to take away the thing you do the very best in all the world."

"Well, thank you, but I happen to think the thing I do the very best was pick a life partner—you, Gretchen. You are my queen; you are the reason I come home. You have brought joy and family into my life, and now look at this. Look at what we've created. Another miracle. Just understand, it makes me even more resolute as I go over there. You and all the girls and all the other innocents—those working-class people who don't get to do what we do—I do this for all of you. That's what we all do. We do it to keep and maintain this way of life. So I want you to be careful, but I want you to live your life. Want you to live out of faith and not fear."

She giggled through her tears, brushing them from her face, and then took his hands again. "So funny, Trace. I've been thinking the same thing. I've been asking for strength, I've been trying to give that to Clover, but I'm having difficulty with that. Do you have any suggestions?"

“Just be you. Just love her. Remember when she was going through all those awkward things on the basketball court and the volleyball team. Remember when she looked more like a giraffe, a big old skinny giraffe getting down to do those digs when she started playing? Remember how hard it was for her to give up basketball and play volleyball full-time? Remember her dealing with her father? You saw the disappointment in her eyes, yet she still loved him.”

“She always will. He’s her father after all.”

“And she accepted me into this house—you helped them all with that. I thank you so much for being that woman. Not only for me, but for them.”

GRETCHEN COLLAPSED IN tears into his chest. He held her as her shaking body spasmed while she gently recovered normal equilibrium. She was so precious to him. He wanted to be strong for her, but he knew he had some of the same fears she had. The difference was he couldn’t show it. She could. And he was asking her to try to override that. “Focus on the future. Focus on the baby. Focus on your health, get some rest, and eat well. I’ll see if I can talk to Clover if you want before I leave.”

They chose several places they liked to go, including the San Diego Zoo, which was especially a favorite of Trace’s. They ate ice cream almost every day and walked along the beach. They shopped for a couple additional things for the baby, even though Trace was anticipating being home in time for the birth. They visited friends, they attended the bonfire that had been scheduled, and shared their joy, their laughter, and their stories. Trace felt good with the stories of some of the past missions, the good, the bad, and the ugly.

As the days slipped by, he watched her gain her strength, reach inside herself, and adopt the life that he required, that she be one of the senior wives, one of the stalwarts, one of the ones to help the younger women who were unsure.

It was arranged that Angie stay with Clover for a few days, giving Trace and Gretchen some alone time. It seemed to

improve Angie's spirit.

One sunset on the beach, he asked again something he asked her a long time ago.

“You know now, with the baby coming, it's even more important that we think about the future. If something should happen to me, Gretchen, and I'm not planning on it happening, but if something should, you need to remember that I want you not to waste your time grieving, but be strong and go on with your life. I want you to grow our child in this community. If it's possible, I'd like you to stay connected to the Teams and to the wives so that the girls and this new little one have lots of friends and distant cousins to play with and communicate with. We are an unusual community. We help each other. We close ranks around each other, so let them help you if you need it. In fact, don't be afraid to ask.”

She had been a little emotional with that discussion, something he always lightly touched on before he left, but this time he wanted to make sure she got the message. He was leaving behind a pregnant wife and unborn child—not just the love of his life and his three stepdaughters.

“I agree to all of that. I don't like it, but I promise and accept it. Now you have to do something for me.”

“Anything, sweetheart.”

“I want you to try to talk to Clover before you go like you said. She's stiff arming me a little bit still. She's a little bit cold. I've tried to stay out of her affairs, but I need you to know that there's a possibility that she started to spot a few days ago, and although she promised to see the doctor, I'm still waiting for an answer. I'm not worried. I just don't want her thinking she has to hide things from me for some reason.”

Trace agreed. “I think she's just not sure. I think Jack has to maybe show more leadership in that direction. I've had that chat with him, but I'll talk to him again. But don't worry, Gretchen. It happens to all of us. We all say things we shouldn't sometimes, and I've even heard of guys that go

overseas after they've had a huge fight with their wife just before they get on the plane, and then when they don't come back, you know what happens. Everybody feels guilty about that last phone call or that last fight. We just don't want that to happen. Just press through it, make sure that no matter what you're feeling that you project strength, and if you need help, get some. But don't force anybody to do it."

"Good advice, sweetheart. Thank you."

Trace kissed her long and hard. He needed to show her how wonderful just being next to her was. He needed to show her the intensity of his love for her and the gratefulness he had that she had come into his life. He knew everything was going to change once he came home, but he still wanted to make sure she was prepared for whatever. He couldn't leave her without being assured she was going to be okay if something happened and he didn't return.

CHAPTER 8



“MOM, THEY’RE SHIPPING Jack to dental school!”

Gretchen was ecstatic Clover had called her, but the news was driving her into panic mode.

“No way. He got a guarantee to go to BUD/S.”

“They said they could voluntarily switch his program out. He’s already done all the prequalifications for the SEAL Training. Why would they move him out? Mom, help!”

That word was music to Gretchen’s ears.

“Let me make some calls. You tell him to refuse those orders. Were they formally given to him?”

“No, some guys came into the dorm and just picked out four of them and told them to pack their things.”

“So he didn’t leave yet?”

“They are supposed to send him to Michigan! He won’t be here for the baby!”

“Nonsense, Clover. You tell him to stay put. I think this is irregular.”

Gretchen called Christy. She was given the Team Liaison to call while Christy tried to get hold of Kyle. She got no answer.

She felt her heartbeat thumping and knew the baby’s must be racing too. She drank a cool glass of water, propped her feet up on the bed, and waited with her phone on her lap, wondering if she should call Trace.

Finally, Christy called back.

“Tell him not to move. He won’t have to go, but it’s going to be a scene. Kyle has had some issues with some of the other medical trainers. With the lack of quotas, they’re desperate for kids that score well on the tests, and they’re trying to grab them. But he has an order for BUD/S. I just verified this.”

“I didn’t hear from the liaison.”

“He’s on his way over there now. But Jack’s not to go with the trainer, understood?”

“Absolutely. I’ll get in touch with Clover right now.”

Clover broke down on the phone, sobbing uncontrollably, and it worried Gretchen.

“Sweetheart, I’m coming over. Can you get hold of Jack?”

“He said he wouldn’t go anywhere until he talked to me.”

“But call him anyway. I’ll be there in ten minutes.”

Gretchen threw on some fresh clothes, tried to freshen up without the shower she’d missed this morning, and headed out.

Traffic was heavy, and she made it there in thirty minutes. Angie met her at the door.

“Mom, do you know she’s spotting?”

“I’d heard that. She’d denied it.” She hesitated before running past Angie.

“There’s a lot of blood, Mom. I think she should see someone.”

“Thanks for telling me. Come on, let’s get your sister to the hospital, and I’m going to need some help with this.”

“You got it.”

Angie’s demeanor had changed, almost happy to see her mother. Gretchen was heartened.

“That’s what she said. Stay put. Someone’s on the way,” they heard Clover say from the bedroom. Clover was stretched out on the bed. A bloody towel was stuck between her legs, her smock pulled up over her knees with a dirty, blood-stained

panty lying on the floor. When she saw her mom, she scrambled to right herself.

“Clover, stay down. Don’t move. Honey, you’ve got to get yourself calmed right away. I’m going to call the hospital and have Dr. Sayles meet you there.”

“She’s on vacation.”

“Then I’ll get my doctor to come meet us there. Or someone he recommends. But you have to stay calm.” Gretchen directed Angie to retrieve another towel, this time with warm water on it.

“What about Jack?”

“Jack’s going to be fine, honey. We’ve got that covered.”

“But that asshole is still breathing down his neck. He swore at me, Mom. Called me a little bitch.”

“I’ll make sure he pays for that comment, Clover. If it’s the last thing I do, he’ll pay dearly for that comment. Lots of witnesses, I’m guessing.”

“Yeah, about thirty, Jack says. The other guys say they’re going to go. They’ve had a change of heart. They want Jack to join them.”

“They’re the least of our worries. Now lie here and drink some water for a bit, and when you’re calmed down, I want you—here, Angie, get her some fresh clothes and help her get dressed—to get packed. I’m going to make the calls.”

Clover held her stomach. Her eyes were filled with terror.

Gretchen wanted to run to her side, but she did what she’d been asked to do. “Clover, this happens sometimes. We can’t control what these little ones do. All we can control is our mental state and our agitation. Can you do that for me?”

She nodded, watching Angie’s choice of clothes and overruling her. That’s when Gretchen knew she’d calm down.

On the way to the hospital, Gretchen got the call from Trace’s team liaison.

“Crisis averted,” Cartwright said.

“Well, whoever did this is going to have to deal with me. I’m coming over there in a few and punching his lights out. I might even stab him in the eyes with Trace’s Trident. Jack’s wife is pregnant, and this whole thing has caused her some bleeding, because she’s so upset. We’re on our way to the hospital. Don’t tell Jack yet.”

“Oh my gosh. How far along?”

“Eight months.”

“Oh, wow. Look, Mrs. Bennett, this sort of fuck-up, sorry for that, ma’am, happens all the time. Jack understands now. All the same, good that you called me.”

“No, not settled. The trainer called my pregnant daughter a little bitch.”

“Oh, that’s not going to settle well. He might need to get a job making dentures if he’s not careful. Not sure a Navy man should conduct himself that way. I’ll make sure the letter is written. But, ma’am, don’t come over here with that Trident. If you do that, I can’t help you. You’d be on your own.”

Gretchen laughed. “Thanks. I needed that comic relief.”

“Yes, ma’am. Good luck at the hospital, and please let me know.”

The girls had heard it all on the speaker.

“Way to go, Mom,” said Angie. “You aren’t packing, are you?”

“I forgot when I rushed over. Just as well. It’s a violation in the hospital.”

She looked in the rearview mirror, and Clover had a smile on her face. The traces of some of their relationship repaired already. Indeed, one crisis was averted. One more to go.

The hospital was ready to receive her. A referral doctor met them in the emergency room and had her examined in private. Angie and Gretchen paced outside the curtained stall.

The doctor pulled back the curtain. Clover was dressed in a hospital gown. Gretchen started to panic.

“I think she’s okay. The baby is very strong, big too. Heartbeat good and stable. We’ll do an ultrasound, but right now, I’d like to admit her and make sure she gets a good night’s sleep and constant supervision. If she goes into labor, she needs to stay here.”

“Hey, I’m over here. Could you please include me?”

Dr. Hirschfield chuckled. “Sorry, Clover. Like I told you, I think everything will be okay. We’ll hold you overnight just to be sure. Take some bloodwork. I’ll order an ultrasound later, if we still need it, if the bleeding doesn’t stop.”

Gretchen smiled gently at Clover. “You should tell him, honey.”

At first, she could see Clover rearing up, but then she softened. “Doctor, I’ve been having a little bit of spotting.”

“Red blood?”

“No, just a tiny bit. It dries brown before I even notice it.”

She gave a description of the days and what she had been doing prior to the spotting incidents, and for now, the doctor reassured them all that it probably wasn’t anything to worry about, but that was all the more reason to keep her at least overnight.

Angie hugged her sister just before they wheeled her upstairs.

Gretchen stepped up to the bed. Clover spread her arms, asking for a hug. She bent over and tried not to let her hear the sobs. She kissed the side of her face.

“Thanks, sweetheart. I’ll stop by in the morning. Let me know what I can bring you.”

“Angie knows some of my favorite books. I gave her a couple. Bring one of those.”

“Romance novels?”

“Mom, I know how it all works,” said Angie defiantly.

“But that’s not the point—”

“Mom,” Clover said sternly. “Chill. That ship sailed earlier in the summer when I snuck into your room and gave her a couple of your really smutty ones. These are tame compared to those.”

Angie had a cheesy, triumphant grin. Clover blew her a kiss and waved like a beauty queen as they wheeled her down the hallway and out of sight.

Gretchen knew her life was never going to be the same. It would be a series of crises and then reprieves, fun times, misunderstandings, and make ups.

Hopefully, lots of make ups.

CHAPTER 9



THE TEAM TRIP over to Africa was uneventful, with just a tiny layover in Norfolk before they made the final leg. They landed on an island off the coast, near the twin borders of Benin and Nigeria and several others. It gave them the possibility of an insertion point through many different countries.

This was always the boring part, Trace thought. But once they landed, they discovered they were going to be positioned on the island instead of trying to risk going into the interior. Besides, several of the criminal elements were operating with abandoned cargo merchant haulers and purchased or captured cruise ships. It proved to be an inexpensive and unique way of transporting their crew efficiently and cheaply, while they could at the same time have a helicopter or two and lots of dinghies to do their raids. It also was easy to stow their cargo in some of the cabins if they used a residential line, since human cargo was their most frequent bounty.

The property they were going to use had been an old training camp liberated by one militia after another, most recently held and rented to them by the Brits. It had several dormitory-like two-story buildings around a center courtyard which originally had been a half soccer field or gathering place. It had all the earmarks of a school, except bars on the windows and frequent sprays of automatic fire made it look more like a prison.

They could have done worse. With decent fans, no air conditioning, and tons of freshwater, it was ideal. Except for a family of fishermen who also ran the lighthouse, there were no unfriendlies on the island to worry about. The rocky coast was inhabitable, especially to rubber boats and deep-cut former cruise ships. The Navy had recruited a married couple,

independent contractors who sometimes attached to units in the area. They arrived at practically the same time. The two would bring the Team's provisions, do the housekeeping, and cook. They'd been trained as cooks in the military, and sometimes accompanied hunting trips in East Africa, when it was safe. That meant, they rarely went.

Trace was a little hesitant to have someone from the UK be cooks, since he'd experienced most of the worst meals of his barracks life in England on temporary assignment. They were legendary for overcooked, boiled, or cooked-to-death meat he practically needed a saw to cut.

As evening descended, they were hanging around what must have been the admin center. Futons and old beds with stained mattresses, some couch-like structures also heavily ripped and stained, were distributed in a haphazard semicircle. The group of twenty-five sat where they could, trying to avoid any recent stain or bugs living inside the upholstery. Upstairs, their rooms were sparse but clean with no evidence of bugs in the mattresses, thank God.

The cooks placed in front of them some finger foods, mostly nuts and chips, along with some native fruits. They helped themselves to the fare on a table in the middle. Warm beer was passed around without comment. Trace knew the Brits liked their beer warm, but he'd try to get some iced down later. His mouth and throat was parched.

First night out was usually the team bonding routine, and tonight was no exception. With Kyle not yet present, it took a dark turn right away.

Somehow, they got off on the subject of being an orphan. Everyone was asked who was adopted and who grew up in foster care, and there were easily nine or ten who had fallen victim to that system. Trace lost count of who had been in and out of the system, also in and out of the juvenile justice system for one reason or the other. Of course, Wally had some wonderful stories to tell about his upbringing.

Everything went downhill from there.

“Yeah, my mom died of an overdose when I was twelve. Soon after that, my dad was shanked in prison. I went into the system at thirteen. I ran away five or six times, and finally the last time, I just stayed gone. I lived on the streets, eventually found a club, and we managed to stick together and make ends meet. We sold drugs, stole things to earn money. Then I got clean and met my wife and settled down for a bit. Those were good days for about five years. But when she and the kids got into that auto accident in DC, I just figured I’d go sign up for something else. I just couldn’t go home, you know what I mean? The Navy became my family.”

“You’ll be known as Wallbanger. But Wally’s okay too,” said Crebs, nickname Crabs.

Several others nodded, gave their stories. One of them who spoke up was Hollis Greer, a huge guy from Oklahoma. Trace had a hard time understanding him with his soft, deep voice. His nickname immediately became Big Green, as in the Jolly Green Giant.

“I got sent to foster care when both my parents died. My mother got tired of getting beat up, hit my dad over the head with a frying pan, and he went crazy—I mean, just crazy. So he picked up a hatchet, had a lucky throw, and split her skull right in front of me. The cops took her away, but it took her five goddamn days to die. Her brother came over day six and finished my dad off with a shotgun, and then he tried to take me into their home. I wanted no part of that. So I ran away. And when they caught me, they brought me back into the foster system, which was no good. I got into trouble on purpose so I could move from house to house to house. Some of my foster families were okay. But most of them were pure crap.”

TJ spoke up next. “Yup, I used to set fires to my foster care houses, mostly the garages so that nobody would get hurt. But you know, when your ward destroys the family car, they don’t exactly want you around anymore. I made it through three foster homes, and I had a sister, too. But we got separated. I

found her later on. I even found my dad, just before he died in prison.”

Trace was getting a headache from the carnage and destruction descriptions. Seemed like each story got bloodier and bloodier. And just when Trace thought he'd heard the most awful situation or the most terrible death, somebody else would pipe up with something else they'd either seen or had experienced in their own family.

Kyle returned to their compound later that evening with some updates.

“We're going to be scouting this one particular fellow,”—he taped a picture to the TV screen—“who has just returned from a trip to the Middle East. We understand he's signed a pact with some Arab Freedom Fighters, and he has a quota to fulfill in order for him to become a full-fledged member and get support for his crew. We think he has about fifty men. They're all mostly of criminal backgrounds who have either escaped or had a life of crime and never been caught.”

It was a familiar introduction. Trace thought criminals were not overly bright. They kept doing it until they were caught and didn't know anything else.

“Of course, they're not family men. They travel with sometimes two or three women. They wander more like a tribe, and it's loosely organized so that Benjamin—that's their leader, Benjamin Okubo—loosely keeps them all in line. He's always out there making deals. That's how he keeps their loyalty.”

“So he's dealing in human trafficking?” asked Cooper.

“Yes, that and some drugs, arms shipments. Anything they can steal that someone else will buy. What he does is he sells the kids and the ladies overseas. He uses the Canaries, Spain, and Portugal as his points of entry, and from there, they travel to the UK, Europe, or the United States. He doesn't ship direct. And that's for obvious safety reasons. With that capital,

he buys vehicles and arms. They've even bought a ranch in Benin. I doubt they work it. But it's their little compound."

"I see a drone in our futures," said Fredo.

"You would be correct, of course. We'll take a look tomorrow and go do some investigating, see if we can catch this guy. The whole purpose is to see if we could just nail the head of the snake, since we don't have the manpower to capture his whole crew. If he has cargo he's getting ready to unload, we're supposed to transmit that information so that we can arrange some kind of a rescue-and-staging operation."

Everyone was tired, so they turned in early. Trace asked permission to do a call to Gretchen, and he was permitted, under the circumstances, using Kyle's sat phone.

"Hi there, sweetheart. You must be just getting up today," he whispered when Gretchen got on the phone.

"I did. Was sleeping well for a change. I miss you, but not your snoring!"

"Ouch!" he feigned.

"You're all arrived and situated?" she asked.

"YUP. I GOT special permission to talk to my lady. How are you feeling?"

"I'm okay. I'm beginning to get some extra energy, and I don't know where that's coming from, but I'm cleaning like crazy and straightening things around the house."

When she paused, Trace knew there was some kind of news.

"Go on, out with it."

"We had a little bit of a scare with Clover yesterday, though, and she wound up being taken to the hospital for observation. But she's okay. I'm going to go see her this morning and probably bring her home."

"What happened?"

“Well, Jack called her. I guess the Navy tried to hijack him and get him off to Michigan to dental school. He wanted to continue on with his training and get in the BUD/S class, and this jerk wasn’t going to back down. I got Christy involved, and she worked through the liaison, and we got it all straight. But they lost three other guys who decided to go become dentists instead of following the SEAL pathway.”

“Good for Jack. He hung in there then. Was he tempted at all?”

“Not at all. He was panicked. And of course, that panicked Clover, and she started to spot—quite a bit of blood, actually. But it was even subsiding by the time we left the hospital, and the baby’s heartbeat is strong. Her heartbeat is regular and strong. Looks like all her major vitals are okay, but they’re just going to check on her tonight. I’ll let you know if something has changed when I go see her.”

“You do that, sweetheart. I’m going to turn in here, but you call me if there’s anything important, okay?”

“Okay. Just one other thing, Trace.”

“What’s that?”

“She hugged me, Trace. She actually hugged me. Wanted to. I helped by getting Christy and your liaison involved, and that saved Jack’s position. I was real pleased when she thanked me in the best way possible. I just wanted you to know that. I hope it continues. And Angie, Angie was a star. She stayed with her up until the very end. She’s back home with me now, talkative. She’s a different kid. I don’t know what it was, but whatever it was, we’re all on a much better footing. Now if all the tests come out okay, we’re good to go. So I thought you could use that good news.”

“That’s great, sweetheart. The kind of information I love hearing. I knew you could handle all this. Piece of cake, right?”

“Always. Always waiting for you, Trace. So thank you. You made it happen, my love. Thank you from the bottom of my heart.”

“It was all you. I’m proud. Eases my mind knowing you’ve got things under control.”

“Do you know how long it will be?”

“No clue, and I couldn’t say, anyway. I’ll know more tomorrow. What I do know is that I’ll be having some wonderful dreams now that you’ve tampered down some of my worry.”

“Then I’ll see you in the middle of one of those, my love. I can’t wait.”

He hung up feeling hopeful. Perhaps all his concern over the timing of this mission and the new brotherhood they were forming was just not warranted.

Deal in reality, not fantasy. That’s the advice he’d given Gretchen. It was advice he should have taken himself earlier.

He closed his eyes, and she was there, as she was every night. He enjoyed the kiss she gave him just before he dozed off.

CHAPTER 10



GRETCHEN'S REUNION WITH Clover at the hospital the next morning was warm and cordial, until they both were told by the nurse that the doctor had ordered her to stay over an additional day.

"He'll be here shortly, but we wanted you both to know the plan for today. Apparently, we found something in the bloodwork the doctor doesn't like. You're eight months, right?"

"Thirty-five weeks to be exact," Clover answered.

"We are going to keep evaluating the strength of the baby, which right now seems very good. We're having an ultrasound this morning, and I think he wants to see the results of that and take another blood test later on today. You'll more than likely go home either this afternoon or first thing in the morning. I'm sorry. I know you wanted to go home sooner," the nurse said with a caring smile. She abruptly turned and disappeared down the hallway.

The two women stared at each other. Gretchen was unsure what to say, seeing that this news irritated her daughter. It worried Gretchen as well. She proceeded with caution.

"Clover, I'm glad that they're trying to take every precaution they can. It's really better to be safe than sorry, honey."

"I wish she wouldn't sugarcoat things. You know I'm not stupid, Mom. This isn't right, and I've been reading about it on my phone. To have bright red bleeding this late in my pregnancy isn't a good sign at all. There are a whole lot of things it could be. What I'm going to tell Jack?" She began to cry.

Gretchen came to her side and held her hand, sitting partway onto the bed. “He’s going to be shattered,” she said.

Frowning, fiddling with the blanket with her other hand, Clover let the tears overflow, covering her chest and arms. She turned away from Gretchen, breaking contact.

“Clover, honey, I’m sure it’s just precautionary.”

“No, something’s wrong. Don’t lie to me. Haven’t you gotten the message yet?”

“Clover—”

Clover cut her off. “Mom, for the last time, don’t meddle, don’t push, don’t gossip, or put lipstick on a pig. Quit telling tales. In fact, I think you should just go away, because you’re making me nervous.”

Gretchen was heartbroken. At the risk of making it worse, she had to defend herself. She was Clover’s best ally, and it pained her to hear her daughter claim otherwise.

“Clover, that’s not where I’m coming from at all.” Now her own anger was beginning to rise. This was so unfair. After all, she was also pregnant and was over forty, a high-risk pregnancy as well.

But she said nothing to keep the peace.

Clover turned around and faced her. “Look, that wasn’t very nice. I’m going to take that back. But please understand, Mom, I’m frustrated. While I appreciate you being here, I really want to see Jack. And I know that’s not possible. So I’m trying to deal. And I hate waiting. I have to sit here and try to sleep when I can’t. I have to wait until they tell me something. It’s that inaction—something that I have no control of—that bothers me. So don’t bring me butterflies and flowers and happy peppy thoughts, okay? Let me dwell a little bit in my misery until I can see myself straight to being able to communicate it with my husband without him wanting to quit the training or run off to dental school. I worry about him too, sometimes, and I also worry whether I’m up for all of this. I guess that’s what it is.”

Gretchen realized it was good for her to get those things out, but she desperately wanted to give Clover the advice that might help her feel better. To remind her not to take the dark side of the fear, turn herself into knots. God knew Jack was going to play off of what Clover felt. But her daughter wasn't going to listen to any of her suggestions. Not now, anyway.

And by this point, she'd previously pushed so many times that the welcome mat had been abruptly yanked inside and the door slammed in her face.

She had to continue and try to get through to her daughter.

"My sole purpose in coming here is to support you. If my presence isn't doing that, I'll leave. But I'm here to give comfort and strength, as someone who loves you dearly, someone who has been through this before."

"That's not going to happen, Mom. First of all, I'm going to deal with it, so don't stress about it. I was just using a figure of speech. I'll handle it. I always do."

"Remember, staying calm is good for both of you. That's all I wanted to say. I know you'll handle it. I know everything will work out. I have faith and confidence in you. Completely."

"If you promise to stay quiet, completely quiet, you can stay."

Gretchen stared down at her daughter, trying to make a joke of it. "You really think I can keep my mouth shut? I'll have questions. You know I'll have questions. Look, I know somewhat of the stress you're under. Tony was traveling all over the U.S. doing God knows what when I was pregnant with you and almost missed your birth. I knew way back then that perhaps things weren't going to be hunky-dory for us as a couple, but I persisted. And I was scared, and I also felt all alone. I don't want you to feel alone. I want you to have someone even if it's someone to yell at or cry on. Just know I love you, and I think you're the strongest, most put together young lady on the planet. I can help screen the calls and stop

people from bugging you. People are going to want to know. Let me handle all that for you, and I'll only tell them what you want me to say."

Clover hesitated, pausing to think.

"Of course you're right. But after we find out, I'd just like to be alone and rest. Depending on what the outcome is."

"Absolutely. And remember, at eight months, even if they decided to bring the baby early, your child will survive for sure. They've already said your little one is large. That's a healthy sign. Dwell on that if you must dwell on anything. And I'll start praying."

Clover winced and threw her head back into the pillow. Gretchen turned down the lights and sat, reading several things from her cell phone. She remained quiet while she thought about Trace so far away and hoped that the day was going to be uneventful for him. She was glad she'd spoken to him earlier this morning, so he could spend his evening with good news. She hoped all that would hold so the update would be equally as reassuring. But she knew, whatever it was, they'd deal with it together, all of them together.

Clover had dozed off and was snoring when the doctor arrived. He woke her gently and explained she was showing elevated levels in her bloodwork, specifically an elevated white blood cell count.

"It's not high enough to put you on anything and certainly not the kind of complication where we would take the baby early. But I want to see how you progress today. We'll get you on a saline drip, see if we can flush out whatever's going on, and if it gets any higher, I'm going to recommend stronger treatment. I just want to prepare you."

Clover lay back in the bed, tears running down her cheeks. She looked petrified.

"I know it's scary, Clover. We're also going to get an ultrasound, and who knows, we might be able to tell the sex of the baby today. So that would be fun, right?"

Clover shrugged her shoulders. “Oh yeah, tons of fun. I’m having a blast here.” But she didn’t make eye contact with the doctor.

“I know it’s easy for me to say, but this is no time to worry. It’s time to get your rest. They’re going to come in and poke you again and then probably take you up to ultrasound. In two or three hours, we should have the results. I’m going to try to get hold of your doctor. Where is she?”

“She’s skiing up in the Sierras. I don’t think she’s going to be back until Sunday or Monday.”

“Ah ha, well, I’m sure there will be a way to get hold of her for a consult. I’ll contact her office again, see if they can locate her just for a call. I’d like her to weigh in on this as well. Have you had any other bleeding other than the incidences you named earlier this month?”

“No.”

“Have you had any cramping? And are you having any cramping now?”

“I think I had some cramping before I started this round of bleeding. But that’s all stopped now. I think the bleeding has diminished too but haven’t checked since sunup. But I don’t remember any cramping earlier in the pregnancy either. I’ve been really fine except for some morning sickness and tiredness, you know, the usual.”

“Okay, we’ll get the ultrasound and the tests scheduled. You just relax for a bit, and I’ll check back in a few hours. Two or three at the most, okay? And remember, try to get some additional rest.”

“Okay.”

“Can I ask question?” asked Gretchen.

“Of course, Mom. How are *you* feeling?”

“Oh, this isn’t about me. It’s about Clover. I’ve never known Clover to be sick or unhealthy. She played athletics all throughout high school and college. She’s not even had that

many symptoms earlier. From what it sounds like, her spotting was really small, until now. So I ask you, is there any danger in waiting longer and not forcing a birth at this time? I mean, isn't it best to wait as long as we can?"

"Yes, and no. If things are going badly, then we do an emergency C-section. But the vitals are not there yet, and depending on what the ultrasound shows us, we can guess as to the health of the baby. That's our primary concern. We know Clover's strong, and she will recover. Our biggest focus is on the baby. And that takes some delicate analysis. But I am not thinking it's going to lead to that. And it's good you're here, but I think we better let her sleep if that's all right with you, Clover," he finished as he looked at her.

"I think that's best, Mom. We'll call you once we know."

"Okay, thank you, Doctor."

The doctor left the room, and Gretchen still leaned over and gave Clover a sweet kiss on her forehead. She grabbed Clover's right hand in both of hers, kissed it, and squeezed with affection. "I love you. I know it's going to be okay. Have them call me or you call me as soon as you have some answers. Promise me you won't make me wait."

"I will, Mom. Don't you worry. You don't want to wind up in a bed next to me? Do you?"

She chuckled. "Well, if they'd offered to roll a bed in here so I could spend the night with you, I would've done that. But no, I'm going to let you sleep. And I feel fine. Don't worry about me. You just drop off again and think good thoughts. You should probably put your phone on silent. Even if Jack calls, I don't think I'd talk to him yet until you know something. He'll just—well, you know how men are with sicknesses sometimes."

"Gawd! Tell me about it. He gets a splinter or gets poked with a pin, and he howls."

"This will be a test for him too. Just be patient with him. He loves you dearly. You are his whole life. All he wants is to

take care of you, make you happy. If he offers that, let him do it. He's got lots of time. It's not like Trace. Trace is using every ounce of strength, both mental and physical, to get his job done. But Jack is young and resilient. He will heal faster, and he's got the whole world ahead of him. Both of you do. So don't worry. Nothing's going to turn out other than perfect."

Gretchen thought about showing a strong front and hoped that she'd masked all the fears that she personally had. This was new territory, something she had never dealt with before.

On the way home, she got a call from Kate, wanting her to stop by the center.

"I can do that. I'm just leaving Clover right now."

"She can come. Why don't you ask her?"

"No, I'm sorry. Clover's in the hospital. We had to take her last night. She started bleeding, and they're monitoring her. No reason be concerned right now, but they're going to hold her for a few more hours and maybe for another night."

"Is everything okay otherwise?"

"There are some levels that are elevated. The doctor just wants to make sure they don't get worse. They're apparently still within normal range, but any kind of change like that, especially with the red bleeding, is something they need to monitor. I could sit there and pine over her, but I've chosen to leave and try to go do something else, so I'll stop by and try to get my mind off of what's going on here. Jack has reported for BUD/S. He'll have time this weekend to give us a call unless there's an emergency, of course. And Trace is overseas. So I will happily concentrate on something else."

"Good for you, Sis. I have just the ticket. Tyler's sister is here, licking her wounds from her last divorce. Remember that stockbroker she was dating and then married at the Elvis chapel?"

"One wedding I don't regret missing. The billionaire?"

“Yup, that one. Linda’s kind of a basket case,” Kate ended the call, whispering.

LINDA GREETED HER with a hug. She was wearing all black, as if in mourning, even a hat with a veil pulled over her face to cover the red, puffy eyes that showed in spite of the camouflage. She smelled of alcohol already, at not even ten.

“I should’ve grabbed one of those hunky guys at Clover’s wedding, Gretchen. What was I thinking? I mean I-I could’ve made a much better choice than I made.”

“They’re nearly half your age, Linda. That would be a good reason. But don’t listen to me. I wondered why you didn’t bring Sam to the wedding. Were things going rocky at that point?”

“Oh, yes. Even more now that he’s been indicted for defrauding his clients, and his attorney says I might even have to pay part of his restitution to keep him out of jail.”

“Let him rot in jail, Linda. My advice only,” shouted Dierdre from across the room. Her voice boomed, reverberating everywhere, nearly making the windows vibrate.

“I agree,” added Gretchen.

“I make it three,” said Kate.

Linda waved them away. “Would you like some whiskey?”

Gretchen pointed to her belly, and Linda slapped her own mouth with her palm, nearly toppling herself. “What’s the matter with me? Of course.”

“How drunk are you?” Gretchen asked.

Linda held up her fingers slightly apart. “Just a pinch.”

But as the late morning turned into lunch and as Linda’s incessant complaints droned on between flash flooding from her eyes, the monotony of the whole situation got to Gretchen, and she began losing patience. At one point when Linda made a ridiculous statement about choosing husband number four, Gretchen found herself unable to keep her mouth shut. She

snapped at Linda, telling her she was acting like a pampered fool.

“You’re a princess, Linda, but you don’t do the work.”

“What work?” Linda challenged.

“Didn’t you check into him, or did the money call to you like a gourmet meal? Did you dream of yachts and trips around the world?”

Linda’s brain was slow to comprehend. “You said work. I work. I work very hard. I’ve written four books this year, I’ll have you know.”

“Darn it, can’t you see? You caused this. This isn’t his fault. It’s yours. You have faulty judgment. What’s going on up in your head that you tell yourself these guys are any good?”

Linda reared back, putting her hands on her hips. “You’re a fine one to talk. At least my husband didn’t go bopping around with a stripper and have his dick-action recorded on YouTube for all to see, until they banned it. You saw it, so did the girls. You think you made a good choice there, Gretchen?”

Gretchen was furious with the insult. Part of her anger was because she knew Linda was right. But she had to defend her decision anyway.

“Look, I had three little girls. By the time that happened, yes, I knew for sure we couldn’t reconcile. But I had three little girls to take care of, and I didn’t want to do anything to rock the boat and ruin his career, even though he was a creep. But he did that all by himself. My main job was to make sure my girls didn’t feel like they were second best. Tony only loves himself. It took a while for me to figure that out, Linda. You just keep making the same mistake over and over again. I hear Tony is available, but not with the bankroll he used to have. But go ahead, you couldn’t do any worse. Go try him out.”

She was going to say more but saw Kate making a dart in her direction.

“Linda, I’m sorry. I’m done listening.”

She turned to leave, but Kate caught up to her and caught her by the hand.

“Don’t go.”

“This is toxic. Sorry, Sis. It feels like the ground’s caving under me. I can’t seem to make consistent communications that don’t piss people off. I need to go home and lie down. I’m not going to be good company today. Please let me go.”

Linda had walked to the rear of the building toward Deirdre but got “the hand” to stop where she was.

“You sure? We have a nice lunch coming over.”

“I’ll let you apologize to Tyler’s sister. I just am not in the mood.”

CHAPTER 11



TRACE HADN'T SLEPT well last night. They were all awakened at 5:30, which came way too soon.

The newbies Trace had been working with were all over him, asking questions that were going to be satisfied in the briefing. Both were medics in training, not given big responsibility yet, but it was always good to have more medics these days. A lot of lives could be saved that way. The scope of their missions was such that medics and explosives or bomb experts were most in demand.

The tadpoles wanted to show him new pieces of equipment they bought with their own money, not standard Navy issue. This annoyed Trace to begin with, because buying things on the market sometimes meant the quality wasn't there, and if you needed to depend on it for your life or your brothers' lives, it just was not reliable enough. Not that the Navy stuff was perfect, but at least most of it had been around a long time and was battle tested.

He let them hop around wearing their new uniforms and complaining about their comfort. Trace remembered what that was like. It was hell, so ever since, he'd washed his new scrubs eight or ten times before he wore them. They were already irritated about how stiff they were and how they scratched their skin. But afterward, the jokes continued, the gladhanding and slapping on the back returned. They just wouldn't shut up.

Kyle took him aside. "I'm just going to tell you, because you'd do it that way if it was me. Clover's apparently in the hospital. Christy called me this morning—on my cell phone, because you went to bed with my sat phone, you dumb shit."

“I’M SORRY, KYLE. I was not myself. But I had nice dreams with it. Does that count?”

“Nice try.”

“So what’s with Clover? Is she in labor? It’s early, like five weeks early.”

“Bleeding, I guess, nothing major yet, but they had her there overnight, and they might have her there again tonight. You might want to give Gretchen a call later. But goddammit, return my sat phone.”

“I hear you. My bad, Kyle. I was so damn tired.”

“Yeah, well, that’s a shitty excuse, so don’t use it again. How are your boys doing?”

“Benji and Nick? They’re pissing me off, to be honest.”

“Well, they’re pissing off a few others too, so we’re going to have to figure out how to motivate them to shut up. That would be your job.”

“Hey, I’m a little prickly this morning if you don’t mind.”

“Get your big boy panties on, my man. Just keep it under the radar.”

The Team snacked on the tray of fruits and breads, along with some slabs of meat and cheese, and each of them selected items they wanted for snacks or lunch since they were supposed to be out all day. If it all worked right, they’d have dinner in town in one of the popular watering holes. And cash was the only form of payment for anything. U.S. dollars.

The Team sat for a briefing. Wally found the chair right next to Trace as they waited for the group to assemble.

“Ready to find the smell of action, Trace?” Wally asked.

“I GENERALLY DON’T like the smell of Cordite. I’m sort of a lavender and roses type of guy, or did you know that?”

Wally leaned back and allowed his eyes to get wide. “You don’t say? I picked you for hetero, Trace.”

“I’m fucking married, got a little one on the way. My circuits don’t work that way.”

A couple of men in front of them turned around, and that’s when Trace realized he was speaking a little too loudly.

“Well, I think that’s the difference between you and me. I saw more of that than I cared to. Started out when my pappy hit my mother with that axe. I got her blood all over me. I can still smell it.”

“Well, she shouldn’t have hit him with the frying pan, Wally. That’s kind of basic self-defense, if you know what I mean?”

“I don’t think they ever loved each other, Trace. They just made babies, and they thought it was a good idea to stay together for the kids.”

Trace thought about that. The first person he thought of while thinking about that was Tony. “Yeah, I know guys like that. Not worth shit, are they?”

“My mom wasn’t a sweetheart, and she swore like a drunken sailor. She never shaved her legs, and you know that woman was hairy. White woman, not like my dad. I didn’t get any of her side of the family, thank God. My dad looked like he’d been to a Brazilian wax salon. But anyway, she had some testosterone, I guess, and some issues. Anger issues, I’d say. But she never laid a hand on any of us kids. And I respect that. She obviously made the wrong choice, but I’m kind of glad she did, because, well, I’m here.”

“You were kind of the winner in that game last night. I had no idea people came from such fucked up backgrounds. You ever hear such stories?” Trace asked.

“I didn’t make it to prison. I suppose I would have if I’d gone there. Juvie was bad enough. I think kids were just criminals in training back then. Not like today. They seem to pop them out criminals as soon as they can run, getting into all kinds of trouble right off the bat starting when they’re five or six. What’s this world coming to?” Wally asked.

“Yeah, I’ve wondered about that too. Here we are clear over in Africa trying to save people from roving bands of militia that want to come wipe them out. Our streets are getting so dangerous cops have to practically have special ops training just to operate, to walk up and down the block. No more Mr. Nice Guy. And of course, they have to worry about getting sued all the time. Just too many changes for me, but where the hell you going to go?”

“If I win the lottery, I’m buying an island in the Indian Ocean. I hear it’s a nice place to vacation. Pink and yellow and white beaches, turquoise blue waters. Sounds like paradise to me.”

“You ever been there?” Trace asked.

“No. Figured someday I’d get sent to Diego Garcia. Was kind of hoping when I was in the regular, I’d get assigned or at least have a stopover, but no such luck. Why?”

“Because the Indian Ocean is filled with pirates. It’s the wild, wild west of the Orient. Got huge ships coming through, including cruise lines, and then you got pirates taking over cruise lines and terrorizing the coast. Kinda got that here too. I was surprised that the island was so uninhabited.”

“Pirates, huh? I thought all the pirates were in the Caribbean or Disneyland.”

“They were some of the first, for sure. I like the Caribbean, for the colors in the food and beautiful beaches too. It’s a little wild and woolly for me now. Maybe I’ll feel better about it when I can afford to travel there in style. But—”

“What about Hawaii? I hear that’s pretty cool.”

Trace grinned. “Now you’re talking my language. Wonderful beaches, singing, ladies with flowers in their hair wiggling around in those dresses of theirs, and I’m just sitting there wondering what’s wiggling underneath it. That’s where I met my wife, by the way.”

“No shit?”

“Gretchen traveled with the group of us because—” Trace decided to hold back a little of his story. “Anyway, we met and we hooked up. I was single, and she had been divorced a long time. Well, the rest is history as they say. I’m really glad I went on that trip, and I almost didn’t. She’s the kind of woman for me. She’s resilient. She’s beautiful. She takes such good care of her girls.”

“Her girls? You mean she came with baggage?”

“Her ex was not exactly what you’d call father material or husband material either. So I really have the relationship that he should’ve had, but he can’t behave himself.”

“I had a brother like that. He didn’t last long on the streets. My mom would have died if she’d known. He was her favorite, but unlucky. He was also kind of asking for it. His guys were wild. My group was kind of careful. We didn’t do the high stakes stuff. And we tried not to pack so that if we got caught, we wouldn’t do extra time. It was hard. But after Mom died and Dad went away, it was a better life really. And I embraced it, used it while I began to understand I didn’t want to be part of any old foster program or even wanted the government to know where I was or what I was doing. And then, well, love struck me just like you, Trace.”

“That’s good, Wally. That means there’s hope for you yet.”

“Yeah, but if you knew how it broke my heart, saw all my scars inside, maybe you wouldn’t trust me so much.”

“I’m going to give you a little piece of advice, whether you wanted it or not. You just stick to yourself, and when you feel like saying something you shouldn’t or pissing somebody off like you did yesterday, you keep to yourself and remember your pretty wife. And don’t talk about her in front of other people, because we’ve got guys here that’ve been through all kinds of shit. Just keep yourself focused on the job. Everybody’s got their baggage. You just pick yours up and put it on your back. And you try not to do anything but support the team. That’s where you got to go. Otherwise, you won’t survive.”

“You work with other contractors before or locals, local military?” Wally asked.

“You didn’t even acknowledge the advice I just gave you, the excellent advice I gave you, I might say.”

“All right, Big Man, thank you. I get you. I’ll take it to heart.”

Kyle called the meeting to order. Trace could see from his expression that something was going on with him. His usual relaxed demeanor was completely gone.

“Morning. Some of the intel we got, gentlemen, is fucking terrible. I’m afraid the whole premise for coming over here has been leaked to guys on the mainland as a matter fact. Someone in the local news station in Nigeria even announced that the SEALs had landed on this island. Mighty pissed off about it, because I don’t know where the leak came from, but that’s how guys get killed. I’m not sure what we can do now that they know we’re coming, but the head shed hasn’t pulled the mission yet, and I’m still waiting for further instructions.”

Trace blurted out, “At least you know they know. It would be horrible to walk into it without knowing, LT. Least you got part of a bite.”

“Yes, that’s true. We’re going to have to make the most of it. Okay, so Okubo has a quota to fill—that part we know. The part we don’t know is whether or not he’s sailing in or whether he’s arrived. No one seems to know where he is right now. So we got to establish that, because honestly, there isn’t another target highlighted.”

They all waited for Kyle to check his notes before continuing.

“The head shed says we should watch him, and if we can’t take him down, Benin is a little sleepier and a little more friendly to Uncle Sam’s money. Nigeria has oil and plenty of money and plenty of allies, so it’s a little more dangerous for us there. We take off at noon. We’re going to stay out into the party time and try to find some loose lips out there. And I

don't mean the ladies either, guys. I want you to double check your bags, and those of you who have a mentor or your number two or three on the list, you check in with them, and you make sure they look over everything you got. I don't want any books. I don't want any American cigarettes. I don't want any lighters. I don't want *anything* at all that designates you as American. You're going to be dressed in street clothes. The stuff we asked you to bring. We don't want to look like we're standard Navy issue at all, so,"—Kyle pointed to Benji and Nick—"assholes over there get out of those fatigues. That's going to get you shot."

The men in front were still in a party mood, which pissed Trace off even further.

"Yeah, you're going to be real happy when they get a bead on you, Youngbloods. No more joking around, okay? This is serious stuff, and we're counting on you to learn and to get home alive. And I don't want to waste anybody else trying to keep you safe. You got that?"

As inspirational moments went, and those pre-battle suck it up messages Kyle was so famous for, this one was a completely depressing and irritating pep talk. But Trace knew why he was doing it. He was worried too. And without the support of good intel, it was like fighting with one hand behind your back. He was hoping in the next couple of hours that would change.

He raised his hand again. "We're going to send some drones out in the meantime? Do some surveillance?"

"I was about to give the order. Thanks, Trace. So in a case like this where we aren't sure what the layout of the land is, we use the drones. It's a lot safer than sending in a scouting team or a blended insertion team just to report back. We don't have many friendlies here. We have some listening from the ships nearby, the fleet, but it's really kind of the Wild West, and there aren't any standard patterns of progression. Not like battling the redcoats in the 1700s, gents."

They were dismissed, and Trace offered to double check Wally's pack. He noted Wally had brought a ghost gun, unregistered, made out of golden epoxy, which drew attention just like a flashlight. Trace told him to get rid of it.

"I got some knives too and special throwing axes. I've been practicing. I'm pretty lethal with it."

"You talk to Danny about that. He's Diné, or Navajo, and he's real good with knives and axes. Let him show you a thing or two."

"So, Boss. Everything set to go?" Wally asked.

"Yeah, you're good. I got to go check on the kindergartners. You take care and don't unpack or add anything. I want to tell Kyle you're cool."

"I got you. You have anything extra you need me to carry that you can't."

"No, we don't do that here. I carry my own stuff, that way I know what's here, and I can grab it when I need it. You can ask Coop if he needs help with some of the medical equipment. He's got some of the heavier stuff or Fredo with the explosives. But I'm cool the way it is."

Trace went over and met with the boys. They were all in the same room, adding a third. The place stunk to hell as they'd taken off their shoes and socks and had donned their street clothes. Trace figured they probably had athlete's foot that went from their toes to their ankles. At least that's the way the smell was. He held his nose and swore.

"I can see the element of surprise going to be against us. They're going to smell you from three miles away. Anybody got some athlete's foot spray? Something medicated?"

"I got some," said Benji.

"Okay, you get yourself sprayed, and then you put on some socks, and you bring your bags down to my room where I'll check them out."

Holding his nose, he walked down the hallway.

His haunting thoughts returned. *Do I really want to be here?* And then he remembered what Kyle had told him. He had shit for brains; he didn't even inquire further about Clover. Not sure whether he should open up that can of worms and carry that extra burden, he figured they'd call him if it was something important. Or at least Gretchen would try.

He tried to put it out of his mind. All through the securing, checking, and moving the Zodiac boats to shore, he kept thinking about her bobbing in the pool, her belly twice the size of her girth. He said a little prayer, like he'd promised Gretchen, and then turned his face and chin to the coast.

That's where his future lay, or ended, and it gave him a shiver.

CHAPTER 12



GRETCHEN HEADED OVER toward the familiar beach she and Trace often frequented to watch the sunset several nights a week. It had been the one thing since moving to San Diego she never tired of. And Trace felt the same.

She wasn't happy with herself, for both her communications with Clover and the little argument, if that's what it could be called, with Linda Gray. She was better than this, she thought. All she needed to complete the trifecta of a tragic day was to have a fight with Trace over the phone later tonight.

She couldn't control what happened to Trace overseas, just like she had no control over Clover's pregnancy. She wasn't even in full control of her own pregnancy. She plopped down in the sand cross-legged, watching the sun begin to head over toward the horizon. With it still being quite bright out, and over three hours until sunset, being here in the sunshine brightened her spirits a bit. She closed her eyes and tried to feel Trace's presence.

That's when she felt Wes come into her thoughts, slipping in at the back of her head, not like a bull in a China shop, but just quietly through her imagined cracks in her skull, filling the space and suddenly blooming inside her brain, making his presence known. In no time, her whole body was warmed with the familiar way he greeted her. She felt safe.

“So you came back. I wasn't sure you would.”

“Truth is, I'm probably always here. You're talking to your own thoughts, remember? I think you called me. Guess you needed a hand up.”

She chuckled. “I guess I’m pretty smart, then. I was pondering all the things so out of my control, trying to make my peace with it.”

“Would you really want the weight of the whole world on your shoulders, Gretchen, if you were able to control everything? Think of what that might entail, how much work that would be for you. Any idea?”

Gretchen opened her eyes to the ocean and whispered, “No, I guess I don’t really want to control everything after all, do I?”

“Well, that’s what I was thinking. It’s really not that much fun to be the boss of everyone, everything. I wouldn’t choose that route. I like to be surprised. I think you do too.”

She shook her head. “Wes, this is crazy. I’m talking to myself, or a fictional being that has invaded my headspace. Anybody catches me doing this and they’ll send me straight to a mental hospital on a twenty-four-hour hold. I don’t dare tell my mother. She already thinks I’m losing it to some degree.”

“You know women are complicated. You’re complicated. Clover’s complicated. Don’t overthink it. Just accept what is, try to study it and understand it. See if there’s a lesson there. No matter what, if there’s a lesson, then whatever the experience is, it’s worth it.”

She tried to remember what it felt like last year, before Clover decided to get married, when Tony was not yet getting out. Since his release debacle and the weeks that followed, he has disappeared from time to time but generally behaved himself. He was just never dependable and always coming by when it was least convenient, like the evening he jumped the fence to use the hot tub, only to find Trace and Gretchen skinny dipping in it. And after, he kept talking. Trace had to ask him to leave, forcefully.

He has no social sense.

It wasn’t getting better either.

Somehow, life was simpler then, even with the same players. Now she saw it as the pause between the storms.

Her cell phone rang. She quickly answered it.

“Mom?” It was Clover’s distinctive voice. She sounded hoarse but happy.

“I was wondering when I’d hear from you. How are you feeling?”

“I’m doing better. They don’t think they need to keep me overnight. But said I could do it anyway. I think I might like to stay here and sleep. They said they could do that. What do you think?”

“Of course! Let them wait on you. Take the time. Usually, hospitals are pushing you out. But if they say they’ll keep you, yes, get the help and the rest. Do you need anything? Clothes?”

“Nope, all taken care of. They have a laundry on this floor, so I’ve already cleaned my clothes for tomorrow. They’re going to help me take a shower here, and I’ll get a fresh nightie, and then I think I’ll just turn in after they serve dinner. They said they’ll serve me early.”

“Marvelous! What did the doctor say?”

“Do you want the good news or the better news?”

Gretchen was thrilled with her response. “Either one, sweetheart.”

“Well, first, we’re going to have a girl. I’m delighted. It’s what I wanted.”

“Wonderful! Now some of those little pink things you don’t have to take back, do you? You can always dress a girl in blues and greens and overalls. Not the other way around, at least not for some. So much easier to have a girl. Trust me, they’re so much easier to take care of!”

“Said by the master.”

“So what is the bloodwork picture? Is that the better news, I’m hoping?”

“Yes, they gave me a saline solution, and I’ve been drinking water like crazy, peeing all the time. The bleeding is stopped, and we have a reading that’s much lower than it was before. All of it was in the normal range, but this is even better. He feels confident I’m ready to go home. Would you pick me up tomorrow morning about ten or so, give me a chance to get ready?”

“Can I bring you anything? Makeup?”

“Remember? They have a washer and dryer here, so before I called you, I took a walk and washed everything myself. It’s pretty handy. The maternity ward has all kinds of things I had no idea they had. They have back scratchers, heating pads, foot massagers—everything! Also, special foods, even a little break room if you want to go in there and nurse in a high-back chair with a massager, since so many of these rooms hold new moms.”

“Perfect. I promise I’ll be there sharp at ten, and you can give me a quick tour then.

With your permission, I’m going to give Trace a call and let him know, just in case he hears about the hospital stay. I’ll let you tell him it’s a girl. Is it okay if I tell Jack if he calls me?”

“No, I want to. Have him call me though, no matter the hour. I’ve got my phone turned back on.”

“Awesome. Well, kiddo, you get some rest, get a good meal, shower, and I’ll see you tomorrow morning at ten.”

Gretchen got up and practically skipped all the way back to the car. One new disaster averted, just like she’d imagined.

When she got home, she stripped off her clothes, jumped into the shower, and got into a long flannel nightgown, even putting socks on. She heard a knock at the door, which startled her.

Linda Gray was standing on the stoop. She had a little vase of flowers tucked close to her chest. “For you, Gretchen. I’m so sorry.”

“Oh, Linda, come on in. I’m sorry I’m in my nightie, but I was going to turn in early, so your timing was good.”

“Listen. I don’t want to interrupt your evening—” She pointed to her car. “I have some fantastic lobster bisque in the car. Would you like to have a bowl of soup with me?” she asked.

“That would be lovely. I love lobster bisque. I’ll go get some bowls, and you get the soup.”

With the flowers between them, the two women sat at the dining room table next, looking out on the backyard and Gretchen’s flower garden beyond.

“I’ve always loved this house, Gretchen. It just has a nice vibe to it. Are you adding on after the baby comes?”

“Our finances are kind of tight. We’re just going to play it day by day. It’s a tiny three bedroom, which is adequate for us. I’ve had big houses, and they’re a lot to keep up. This is perfect for just the two of us along with Angie. If she goes to college, we’ll have tons of room. We’ll just put the crib in with us and still have the extra bedroom for my sewing and Trace’s library. We already have a Murphy Bed in it for guests.”

“Do you do all the gardening back here?”

“We do it together. Trace has been quite good, since I’ve gotten so big. He kind of got the bug, just like I had. I don’t know if you know this, but my mom wasn’t too much of a gardener, not like your mom.”

“Well, Deirdre is the poster child for overachievers. I swear to God, she can do anything. She could win a baking contest, get ribbons at the fair for her jams and jellies, she can put together a patchwork quilt or knit an Afghan out of anything, and Lord knows she can paint. Boy, can she paint!”

“And she has a lovely talented daughter who is a prolific romance writer. That’s not too shabby either, Linda.”

She sighed and pondered her lap. “You know what they always say, romance writers who write about ‘happily ever afters’ never have it themselves.”

“That’s not true. I think it’s just that you’re coming off a divorce. Being a romance writer has nothing to do with it. None of us get one hundred percent of what we want, do we?”

“You’re probably right.” She paused and then turned slightly to face Gretchen. “Well, I just wanted to apologize, Gretchen, for being way out of line. I want you to know I value your opinions. I value your friendship. I don’t want to see anything getting in the way of that. So these flowers are my peace offering. I’m hoping you’ll forgive me.”

“If you’ll forgive *my* outburst. I think I was worse behaved than you were. You were just a little tipsy, and let’s just say you didn’t have all your wits about you.”

“But you were right. I made some bad choices. Sometimes I think I married people who I thought I could mold into what I wanted them to be, not who they actually were. And that’s gotten me in a lot of trouble. It’s not like in a novel. You can’t just cut out a few pages and insert some new ones when you get something wrong or rewrite a scene that really doesn’t gel right in real life. You can’t change what the character wants to do or react to. No, I can’t do that in real life. So maybe you could help me find somebody. And please, don’t mention Tony’s name again.”

“I was halfway joking, you know that. I wouldn’t wish Tony on my worst enemy.”

“Find me some nice hunky guy who just isn’t afraid to show his feelings, but he’s strong, a good kisser, a good dancer, loves to travel, and has a ton of money. I don’t know, I guess I want the perfect man! I’d like somebody just like Trace, to be honest with you.”

“Hands off. That’s a no-go.”

“You know what I mean. I’m not serious. I want someone who falls in love with me through and through when I first meet him. Like what you and Trace have. Still do.”

“You forget, I spent almost five years by myself, raising those girls. It was a difficult time, especially financially, and with no help tending to all their needs and activities. But I did it. I worked my butt off. I had accepted that no man would want me, not with three kids. I thought it was going to be impossible.”

“But he found you, Gretchen. It was love at first sight for you. Boy, I couldn’t get his attention. He was only interested in you. I started thinking I’d lost my groove, but then I realized he just wanted you. He chose you that day in Hawaii. Remember?”

“Can’t forget. I thought he’d choose you too, honestly. I didn’t change who I was or how I reacted, even though he was making my panties wet!”

Linda howled at that.

“O-M-G. Seriously?”

“Not lying.”

“I think someone *like* Trace, somebody from one of his Teams. Somebody who needs a messed up woman like me.”

“Don’t say that. Don’t you know the power you have over people with your books? The places you take them? I could never do that.”

“Sometimes I don’t think I do either—”

“Stop it, Linda. You do realize it was your book that got Tyler and Kate together? If they hadn’t met and fallen in love, I would have never been invited to Hawaii or met you and Trace. That’s what you did, Linda.”

She blushed, which was complete surprise. The romance writer was at a loss for words.

Gretchen leaned over and gave her right hand a squeeze.

“Linda, it would be my honor to help you find someone good. I promise. It’ll be our super-secret mission.”

CHAPTER 13



SEVERAL OF THE newbies had an attitude that made Trace sick to his stomach. They traversed the channel slowly, keeping the onboards whispering. As they approached the shoals, several of the younger guys looked like they were on a beach holiday. With sunglasses wrapped around their heads, unbuttoned shirts, laughing as if they were drinking beers together and celebrating the good life. They checked out the scenery like tourists, pointing out things of interest. Only things missing were the selfies.

They don't have a clue what is awaiting them, Trace thought.

He ground his teeth, because the noise of the splash and the motors would drown out any lecture he was going to give them. But the more he listened, the more disgusted he became. He gripped the side bars of the craft, adjusted his feet, turned to face the island from which they came and then back toward the land, trying to avoid eye contact with any of the other men. But he knew, if Kyle had been on this particular boat, he would've been shooting lasers at him, because this was Trace's job to keep these guys in line. To keep them focused on the mission and nothing else.

He'd failed.

He'd failed because he was so obsessed with wanting to be home. It bothered him that he even felt that way, like he had let everyone down himself. Worry had cascaded all over his body with this obsession. It wasn't right that he felt like he didn't want to be here. It was one thing to admit he'd rather be home—that was normal—but he shouldn't want to leave. And it wasn't to the point where he'd consider going off duty, but

he just had a bad feeling about the mission, a premonition of doom. It had never been like that before.

The more he had to stand up and show he was one of the old guys, that he was confident he knew what to do, the more violent and out of control he felt. He wanted to lash out at the kids, and they were just kids, dumb and stupid and inappropriate, probably just like he had been. He bet his BUD/S instructor probably thought he was a complete dickwad back then.

He closed his eyes and tried to focus, but it was no use. Between the bobbing babies with fangs and Clover and Gretchen floating in bloody water, he couldn't strike those images from his brain. He still saw villagers and women screaming, running away from terrorists and evil militia members. It was one quilt, one patchwork of memories that had always been there, many from the past, mostly imagined, tucked away in one of those leaking, bloody baggies. He couldn't get everything into that one bag so he could file it. It didn't fit. The pink babies, the dirty baby blankets, the screaming, the anguished faces on villagers, the parents he'd seen crying over the death and destruction of their innocents coming home. It just didn't fit. It couldn't fit into a box, let alone a baggie.

Danny jumped out to protect the boat's bottom as they off-loaded, together lifting the dinghy up, carrying it to shore over the sharp black stones. He wondered why they'd chosen to take this beach since it really was not a beach. It reminded him of some of the rocky shores on the volcanic islands in the Canaries.

Maybe it was because this area was the least inhabited or least hospitable to small boats. But it was the fastest route from the island to the mainland.

They stowed the boat, disabling the motors so they couldn't be hijacked. Danny removed carburetors and starter triggers, slipping them in his backpack so these boats would be there when they needed them.

There was a mass of thick grasses and palm trees in front of them, as they moved into the jungle. Within minutes, they were completely covered and couldn't even hear the ocean lapping on the shoals.

The second boat crew had started up front, so Trace was at the rear, with several of the newbies, which was their custom. After all, it wasn't fair to push somebody into a lead position when they'd never been on a deployment before. Their training prepared them, but only so far. When the enemy engaged in a firefight or a mission, all hell tended to break loose, and the enemy always got the first vote. Newbies were protected in that way, and since Trace was the babysitter for this mission of several of the new ones, others approached and became part of it, his leadership and seniority sought out as the hours went by.

He swore at that thought. Terrible thought. Not becoming of a Trident bearer.

“Hold it, gents. I just mean you four,” he said to the group behind and motioned for the rest of the team to move along forward. Several had been on only one previous mission before and wanted to hang back, but he sent them on their way.

He stared at his group. “I got to tell you guys something, and it's just really pissing me off. You look like you're at a fucking Malibu beach party. Get your heads out of your asses, and get your focus on what we're doing. This isn't a party. This isn't fun. If we get to celebrate, and—” He looked in every single man's eye one by one by one by one. “If all of us get home, we can party then if you feel like it. At this point, gents, I don't want to see you guys for a few days after we get back. This is so unprofessional, and you don't listen to me.”

He let those words sink in first then continued.

“Now if you listen to me, you might get home alive. If you don't listen, you're fucking career as a Navy SEAL is over, man. If I see any more jokes or issues pop up or I am reminded of anything you fucking do in California or wherever the hell

you vacation or catch babes or do whatever shit you do, if I get a hint or a whiff of that, I'm going to report you, and I'm going to make sure this is your last mission."

The group was obviously on edge. Most of the guys shuffled their feet and stared at the ground. Benji returned his gaze.

"In fact, if some of you are so stupid to keep doing this, it might be your last day here. Last day of your life. Do you get it now?"

He'd done a good job of scaring the shit out of everybody, he knew that. But he didn't care. He had to give them the tough truth. They were not focusing.

"I don't see any nods. I want some acknowledgment. You better not shout 'yes, sir,' because that is totally inappropriate. Just give me a thumbs-up. Nod. Do something that tells me you get it—something that gives me heart right here."

He tapped his chest with his fist.

"Something that tells me that you're in it and that I can expect you will protect me and all your other brothers. Now, are you up to this shit or not, because if you're not, I'll just stop you right here, and we'll take you back in the Zodiac and say it was a training accident. Deliver your dumb ass to your parents. Or your girlfriends. Wouldn't that make a beautiful beach scene?"

"Sorry, sir," said Benji. "I totally get what you're saying. And I've been part of that. And I'm sorry. It's going to change with me."

Trace was happy with that response but searched the others and didn't see the same kind of integrity.

"Benji just showed you what it's like to be a hero. To admit that you're wrong. And to go forward, make it better, and learn from your mistakes. You're going to have to stay alive until the next time you go into battle and you see the next group of newbies that risk the whole team because they don't pay attention and take things seriously. Do you feel me now?"

“I do too,” added Carlos, and several of the others nodded as well.

“Let’s run and catch up. Time to bust ass. Time to be awesome.”

They hiked in for nearly two hours, dodging any hint of home fires, encampments, villages, or schools and avoiding any contact with any of the locals. They avoided routes with military-type tire tracks or signs of a possible patrol. They weren’t finding much, but all it took was one person with a cell phone and their expected cover would be blown.

Fredo had issued Trace an Invisio earlier this morning, but Trace didn’t realize that Kyle also was listening to his tirade. His earpiece began to squawk just before they stopped.

“Nice going, Trace. Little late, I was wondering.” Kyle was joking, his way of being serious.

“Gotcha,” Trace whispered back.

“Shiiiiit! I hate to be in your house when you and your wife are fighting,” said Fredo.

“No, that’s the way we make love but never fight. Not like that.”

He stared at one of the newbies who listened to this conversation. “What the hell you listening to? Was I talking to you?”

“No, sir. I mean, no. Sorry.”

“You shave?”

“Sir? I mean yes.”

“I was shaving at eleven years old. When did you lose your virginity?” Trace continued.

The newbie stopped as they got closer to the rest of the group. Looking around him at his little cadre of three others, he was nervous and wasn’t quite sure whether he should be imprudent enough not to answer Trace or not. But he had guts and continued.

“Honestly—s-sir. I’m sorry. I just can’t help it.”

“That’s the way I felt on my first time too. No problem with the sir thing. I say ‘son’ and it’s a habit of mine. If you have to say sir, just make sure nobody else hears it. I mean, the locals hear that, and you’ve just put a fucking target on my back. Understand?”

Everybody nodded. Trace chuckled to himself. That seemed to get their attention, finally. He decided it was a good idea to ask them when they lost their virginity when they felt like not being responsive. Nobody wanted to be on the spot for that one.

“You still got to answer my question, Son.”

The kid was struggling with his answer, which told Trace what the answer was going to be. Rather than embarrass the kid, he said, “No, not important. The main thing is you’re not a virgin. Otherwise, you would’ve never made a SEAL Team, and that’s good enough for me.”

The kid looked up at him in pain, as if wondering if somebody lied on his behalf or he neglected to fill something out on his application.

“Didn’t they tell you that’s a disqualifier? I’m sure they must have.”

He liked the kid, and Trace was completely positive he was still a virgin.

They launched a couple of Coop’s drones, got them adjusted, and sent them high into the sky, even though the tree cover would hide a lot of the noise. If there were buildings or large trees or open meadows, it would reverberate the sound. And even though the bad guys might not know where the sound was coming from, which direction, they would know for sure that there was one. And that was the problem.

Kyle stopped to receive orders and indicated a plane would be arriving on a landing strip a few miles away at dusk.

“We got two and a half hours, little more, to get over there. I don’t want to run. And I want you guys spread out so that everybody’s looking in every direction. We need some guys on the right, some guys on the left. Trace, you and your kindergartners can check the back.”

“Thanks, LT,” said Trace.

“No problem. We put you there, because I like the way you control your kids. So put away your crayons, guys. It’s showtime.”

They continued to hike until the sun began to drop, not sunset but even with the top of the tree lines, causing shadows. It also was a time when a lot of animal life started to wake up and patrol the jungle areas. They heard sounds of cats, probably small panthers or cheetahs. They heard monkeys. They also heard some wild pigs foraging, sometimes fighting or rooting themselves with a female. These were not the sounds that they heard at all in San Diego, totally unfamiliar, and each shriek of a monkey, grunt of a pig, or buzz in the sky of a plane traveling overhead sent chills down everybody’s spine. The only difference was that the older guys hid it. The newbies jumped like tiny frogs in a pond. He was going to have to say something about that too.

No time like the present.

“Okay guys, another lecture for you, but this one is going to be short.”

They stopped, and Trace pushed Benji in front of them. “I didn’t say stop. I said listen. You can walk and listen at the same time, right, guys?”

“Yes, sir,” said several.

“So when something happens—like you just heard that pig a couple seconds ago? You hear an airplane? It’s okay to watch or look or have it get your attention, but you don’t put your whole body into it. You don’t want to jerk or move around like you’re scared. Try to think about what it would be like if you

lived here and you heard that shit every single hour of every single day, right?”

“Look like we’re locals,” said Benji.

“Boy, I got the smart ones, right?”

Couple of them chuckled.

“See? You guys will make it yet. It’s not all explosions and guns and getting knifed. It’s sometimes just a case of chilling and looking like a local. You know how you can tell who are the tourists on Coronado? The ones who ogle over you guys running on the beach?”

Several of them nodded again and turned to give Trace a half smile.

“That’s what you’re doing here. You’re showing off, except you’re trying to show off as a citizen here. You’re trying to show that you’re capable of handling the jungle. It’s you and Mother Nature. She’s your enemy right now, mostly because she’s hiding some pretty bad guys that have done some pretty terrible things. So—”

The front man gave a halt sign, and Trace shut up, immediately watching. The whole group froze in place, scanning their respective areas well, keeping one eye on the point.

Darrel tapped his ear and pointed to Kyle.

Kyle got on the phone and made communication. Coop slipped in next to him to listen to the instructions and directed his drone accordingly. Danny manned the other one and kept it out of sight, attempting to head in another direction in case they’d been spotted.

Kyle turned to the group. Fingers in front of his mouth, he whispered, “We got a village up here. Looks abandoned. Smoke. I can’t see it, but the head shed does. You got that picture now?” he asked Coop.

“Yeah, boss. Living color.”

Several gathered around Coop's screen as the drone recorded footage that was to be sent upstairs, the footage that was peppered with small fires, too small to detect, but burnt crispy black bodies and lots of blood. In fact, red was the dominant color on the screen. The sickening display of little people with lots of blood was obvious for all to see.

"Fuckin' school," whispered Coop.

Impossible to look at, Trace stepped back a couple of paces, breathing hard, thinking he might heave, but he forced his guys to go front and center to look at the carnage.

"We're going to send a couple guys in first see if anyone's around. I want you to pass over the com to somebody else, Danny. I want you and Armando to get up and find a vantage point before we head into the village. I need some cover."

The team split up as had been designated and waited for the all clear. Danny had climbed a tree and found several large branches crisscrossing back-and-forth that made a nice platform for him. He got out his long gun and his scopes and hunkered down, ready to spray the area with fire if needed. Or perhaps pick off one or two bad guys.

Trace heard Armando and Danny give updates, the lack of seeing anything moving except two dogs that hopefully, for their own good, didn't bark. One had been sitting down and appeared to have an injury to his hind leg. The other one stood back into the jungle further, a smaller dog, perhaps a littermate or puppy.

"We got to secure the dogs. Coop, want to go check them out? One of your kids want to go with him?" Kyle said to Trace.

Trace sent Benji, and they waited while Coop and Benji gingerly came up to the dogs. Coop determined that the one dog had a fatal injury and probably shouldn't be approached. He'd be bleeding out shortly.

That told Trace that somebody had been through here not too long ago or the dog had traveled from a homestead or

other village seeking refuge there.

Benji secured the other dog with a rope that had been tied to a dead goat that was obviously a family's food supply. But there was no family to use it. He secured the pup while they were at the site, feeding him some of his trail mix, which the dog gladly ate.

The men fanned out into the compound, one by one. They scouted through several of the buildings and announced when they had them cleared. Three men blocked the path from which they came. Coop kept his drone running and raised it to higher elevation so they could see if anyone was approaching. Kyle had asked the head shed about bad guys on their way, and the consensus was there were none.

They never were able to completely let their hair down, but tensions eased a bit, even with the carnage. Several in the group vomited and then covered up their bodily stain. It was one of the most horrific scenes Trace had ever seen—pregnant women sliced open, young children raped, arms cut off, legs and ankles tied to trees. Babies and toddlers were something Trace would not look at even though he knew there were probably at least twenty killed. No one was alive as they went body by body to check them all.

They also checked for ID, but there weren't pictures of any kind except in an office area. The licenses from the Minister of Education, with his picture on it, were taken down and stowed in Danny's pack. They took shots of all the bodies. Everything was carefully documented and uploaded to the head shed.

Trace was glad he heard Kyle's words.

“Come on, gents. Let's get out of this hell house. I need a little bit of headroom, if you don't mind. We're going to go farther. We still got to make it to the airstrip before dusk. And we've got about a mile to go. Make sure you don't leave any tracks behind. Nobody smoke, nobody use candy or drop a wrapper. Right? Slow, careful retreat as if we were never here.”

“What about him?” asked Benji, pointing to the dog.

Kyle hesitated. “Untie him, but if he follows, we have to take him out. Let’s leave it to him. He might want to stay with the other dog until she’s gone.”

Trace knew the Team appreciated this little kindness on a day when there didn’t appear to be any in the whole world. He was sure his newbies got the loud and clear message what this was all about. Most of them had probably never seen a dead person, even an animal. But they’d never forget this day, he was sure of that.

Nobody could move, it seemed. Feet made of lead, even though he was sure they wanted to get as far away as they could.

Today was just one of those days, of maybe ten in his career, that were horrific and hard to forget. But this one had been the worst.

And that was because of Gretchen and Clover.

CHAPTER 14



WHEN GRETCHEN ARRIVED at the hospital, Tony was there sitting by the side of the bed. Clover was fully dressed, packed, and appeared ready to go.

Her initial fear subsided when he didn't get up. He seemed more focused on Clover. Then he looked up at her, as if it was an afterthought.

I can always count on you to be the asshole, can't I?

"Gretchen, good to see you. I-I just came by to see Clover. I heard she was having trouble with the baby."

Gretchen looked from Tony to Clover and back to Tony. "It was a scare, apparently. Everything's okay now. Right, honey?"

Clover answered sharply, looking rested and full of energy. The stay had been a good idea. "Yes, he's cleared me to go. I'm all checked out."

Tony stood up, and as he approached Gretchen, she backed up. "I'd feel better if you keep your distance from me, Tony. You can say what you have to say from across the room."

He stopped midway between them in the tiny room. His lanky frame had been altered by the new belly starting to develop in his midline.

"You see, Gretchen, part of your problem is that you just don't see the good in people. I'm not here to do anything but be the bearer of some good news."

Gretchen was primed. Good news for Tony wasn't necessarily good news for anyone else or something anyone could count on.

“All your troubles are over then? I heard you got charges dropped,” Gretchen said, and she was going to say more but saw Clover sigh and sit back on the bed, resigned to being involved in another argument between them. Tony just seemed to bring out the most awful parts of Gretchen, and around him, she did and said things she never did around Trace. She was disappointed in herself and didn’t like disappointing Clover.

“You still making me wrong? Don’t you get tired of doing that? Trace found it in his heart—”

“Stop it. He forgives you but doesn’t trust you. I can’t find it in myself to do either. But I’m sorry. I plan to be more mature about all this,” she said, which seemed to satisfy Tony. Clover rolled her eyes, shook her head, and then gave her a secret smile out of eyeshot of Tony.

Damn my sharp tongue. She just couldn’t resist the chance to use it when it felt so good to bash Tony around. She was better than that, but man, it felt good to let him have it.

“I said I’m sorry. Now go on. What’s your good news?”

“Looks like I’ve managed to raise about eighty grand for Clover and Jack to buy a house. I would think you guys would be happy. I know you and Trace can’t help them, so I’ve stepped up to the plate. I know money’s tight around your household. I’m sharing my part of the load this time.”

Tony’s delivery was irritating her stomach. She couldn’t help but get amped up, and she knew better. He was rubbing it in that they didn’t have unlimited funds. But they also hadn’t gotten involved in anything illegal, and neither one of them had any gambling problems or addictions. Tony’s baggage was weighing him down, making it impossible for anyone to trust him. She had warned everyone not to believe any of his promises. She knew this was another one that was going to just fade away or, even worse, cause everybody a major problem.

“Tony, I’d prefer we have this conversation when Trace is here.”

“Sure thing. Well, go get him.”

Clover stood and came over to Tony, nearly inserting herself between the two of them.

“Dad, he’s overseas. Look, I don’t want to get involved in this between you guys, and I haven’t even had a chance to discuss all this with Jack. I mean, he knows some of it, but I wanted to wait till he’s back too. Can you do that, Dad?”

Gretchen knew he wouldn’t be home for several weeks, due to this phase of the training. She suspected Clover wanted to really discuss it with Trace and hadn’t had a chance before he left.

Tony shrugged, having been first turned down by his ex-wife and then now turned down by his pregnant daughter. “Well, I understand. I just want to be a part of your lives. I want to be a part of the baby’s life. After all, it will be my grandchild too.”

Gretchen was getting weary even taking five minutes to explain to Tony why everybody thought of him as they did. He was the biggest douchebag in the whole world, and everybody knew it. Even his allies and enemies knew it. Thick skulled, he never could change and never could be counted on.

“All of that is something that can be discussed later. Tony, your daughter’s just been through a couple of days of a little scare. I don’t want this to ruin her calm, and right now, my focus is getting her home and getting her settled. I want to get her put to bed so that she can recover further. If you’ve got something to say, wait a few weeks until the guys are around. I’m sure whatever’s out there and whatever you’re going to do with the money from wherever you got it, and I’m not questioning it, but you’ve gotten in a little bit of trouble before. We don’t want any trouble or complications, especially now. We’re focusing on Clover, period. It isn’t about you.”

He gave her a seething smile. Wide but bitter, just like the vacant hole in his heart. He almost looked dangerous.

“I always did say you were prettiest when you were pregnant, Gretchen. He knocked you up real good. And how strange, you guys are doing it at the same time. Aw, togetherness.”

“You know, Dad, if you’re going to be like that, I’m not sure I want you hanging around. Trace and Mom have been stalwarts for me. They’ve given me everything I needed and more. You, on the other hand, come blowing in here after disappearing for months and now want to be part of our lives? And we’re supposed to believe you? Just stay away, okay? And call before you come over, please?”

Tony rolled his eyes and adjusted his right shoulder, cracking his neck, and sauntered through the doorway and down the hall. He never looked back, he never apologized, and he never said goodbye.

Gretchen and Clover hugged each other. Her daughter was crying.

“I’m so sorry, Sweetheart. I can’t give him any room to wiggle in and disrupt what we’re trying to build. I feel especially careful around him when Trace isn’t here. I’m going to suggest something, and I don’t want you to think I’m pushing. I think it’d be better if you came over to my place, and the three of us could stay together. There’s safety in numbers.”

“I think that’s fine. I’d like to get some things at my place first, and then sure, I can stay there for a few days.”

“I would send Angie back over to your place, but you know, she’s only fourteen. If some kind of a situation—if Tony or one of his asshole allies stops by—you guys would be sitting ducks. I’m going to alert our friendly sheriff friend and see what he thinks. But staying together is the smart decision, and it’s also safer for Angie too.”

“No problem. Let’s get going then. I want to get out of this place as soon as possible!”

It took them barely ten minutes to stop by Clover's condo and pick up all her items. Gretchen reminded her to bring a swimsuit, because she suggested they do an aqua swim class for expectant mothers.

They also threw out things in the refrigerator that might go bad and set the garbage cans out to be picked up. On the way out to the car, Gretchen noticed a black sedan parked down the street. The windows had been rolled down, and no one appeared to be in the car, but even in Coronado, which was relatively safe, nobody left their cars parked with the windows rolled down. It appeared odd.

They drove over to Gretchen's where Angie greeted them, helping with Clover's bags. She was excited to wait on her sister hand and foot.

Gretchen scanned the street up and down and didn't notice the presence of a black car. Then she called Detective Mayfield and relayed her thoughts. She informed him that Trace was gone, as well as Jack, and asked his opinion about the strange car. She even mentioned the surprise visit with Tony, the offer of money, and about the three of them living alone at Gretchen's, at least temporarily.

"That's a lot to digest, Gretchen. Your lives have certainly gotten a lot more complicated in the past few months. But I'm glad you called me. I'm going to call my buddies and see if they can run patrol in front of your house several times during the day and night. I still have a little bit of clout over there. Are you feeling under imminent danger or is it just a series of hunches?"

"With what Tony's been through, and I'm sure you remember what happened not long ago because of him, serious hunches."

"Yes, most of us know everything about him. What a shame you got hooked up with that guy, but I understand what you're saying. With Tony in the picture and flashing cash, that's a bad sign, Gretchen. I just have to tell you, if you were my daughter, I'd tell you to move out of town for a while, but

that's not very practical. And Trace has to stay here for his job. I wouldn't even think of moving you anywhere else, certainly not a hideaway or someplace remote. You need to be out in public, places where your support team can find you all."

"I agree. I'd be more fearful if we were hidden someplace."

"Have you contacted Christy yet?"

"I owe her a call, but no."

"That would be my next call. Maybe some of the guys who aren't on the op can help out. I don't know."

"Great idea. I think I'd like that."

"Let her know what's going on, and then just wait it out and watch. Keep a notebook if you see that car or something that looks like you're being followed—report it to the station. If you encounter anyone unusual, stay away. Don't ever find yourself alone in a dark location, especially."

"All excellent advice. Thank you so much!"

"So my last question is a serious one, Gretchen. Are you still armed?"

This stopped her short. Trace had always told her to be careful with that information. But she knew she could trust Mayfield, who had helped straighten out the shooting incident in the summer.

"Yes. And before you ask me, of course I know how to shoot it. I've still got that nice .38 right by the side of my bed."

"Good girl. I can see Trace has taken good care of you. Now for the next question. How about Clover and Angie?"

"Angie?"

"So I'm going to take that as a no. You need to remind her where the gun is so that she doesn't accidentally run across it or be surprised to see it."

“But, Gus, she’s seen it before, remember? She was there the day I had to use it, and she sees Trace’s guns all the time.”

“Under different circumstances.”

“It did traumatize her. Since then, she hasn’t wanted to touch one. Trace is working on that. But she knows where I keep it.”

“Right. All the same, you must caution her not to use it if she hasn’t been trained, and I assume that’s the case. Make sure she knows, if it comes out, you will have to use deadly force, that you aren’t play acting.”

“Yes.”

“It could be her own demise, and put it that way to her. We don’t need you guys to be heroes, just smart. Unafraid.”

“Gotcha. I hope it doesn’t come to that.”

“Me neither. It probably won’t. But we want you prepared. Not just armed, but armed with knowledge of when and how to use it. And Clover?”

“It’s been a couple of years. Jack’s been shooting with Trace, but honestly, both of us need a refresher.”

“First rule of handling firearms is keep training, grow your knowledge, and increase how comfortable you are shooting. Keep your confidence level high. Be respectful of the power of the thing but not afraid to use it if you need to. You have to remain clear-thinking. Trace does this all the time, as a SEAL. It’s such a big part of their training.”

“Thanks for the reminder. You are totally right. When Trace gets home, I’ll ask him to help with the training and take us to the range. That will cause a stir, won’t it? Two pregnant women shooting guns?”

He laughed.

“Check with your doctor first. Maybe wait until the births.”

“Of course.” She smiled. “Anything else?”

“I’ll just add this. You may not be able to take it apart, clean it, and put it back together, but, if it’s loaded and if Trace loaded it for you, you’re probably gonna be good to go. Hope to God you don’t need it. But if they break into your house or something happens and they won’t leave, you may have to use it. And we’ll sort out all the details later, just like last time. We have some strange laws now in California, and San Diego has piled on a whole bunch more. So be careful, be smart, but if you must get the thing out, make sure someone dies. That’s all I can say.”

After that phone call and the brief call with Christy, who agreed to help get some men over to the house to keep surveillance, Gretchen was shaking. She felt like she’d ingested ten cups of coffee.

She sat down in the dark to steady herself. She pondered how far things had progressed with Tony and how they were being bombarded with dangers from all sides. All they’d ever wanted to do was have a good life, have a couple of babies, enjoy life with her family—a family that was a force for good. Gus had reminded her that perhaps Angie’s quiet demeanor could still be due to her trauma witnessing her mother shoot and kill someone, not more than a few months ago now. All of a sudden, Gretchen understood. How could she have forgotten?

It shouldn’t be this way. Trace and the girls all deserved so much more.

Her heartbeat slowed as she breathed in and out in a box breathing technique he’d taught her. She opted not to call Trace and bother him, instead waiting for him to call her. Her hunch was that he was intensely focused on what his mission. She didn’t want to break things down further.

Thank God he was in her life, because without him, she would never make it. Never.

“Mom, what’s wrong?” Angie asked, standing in the doorway of their bedroom.

Startled, she scrambled for an answer. “I was just thinking about what it will be like to walk those babies down by the beach or, when they’re older, have them run through the surf with us. That’s going to be a fun time, isn’t it, Angie?”

“It sure will. But, Mom, only one problem with that.”

“What?” She was alarmed.

“You’ll want me to help out, babysit, right?”

“If you can. If you want to.” Gretchen decided to remind her later about the gun. Not now.

“Oh, I want to. I need to save more for college.”

“So what’s the issue?”

“Nothing. Actually, my wages are going to double.”

CHAPTER 15



BY THE TIME the Team reached the airstrip, there was very little sunlight left. Kyle indicated the arriving plane was going to land as soon as it was dark, which would occur in the next twenty minutes or so. He ordered them to rest and focus on preparing for a firefight, should there be a large militia contingent to meet the plane.

Intel confirmed Okubo was going to be on that plane and would quickly depart, heading cross-country into Nigeria, back to their compound. This was going to be the best time in the foreseeable future to get to him.

Kyle then instructed Danny and Armando to find a perch and silently set up for a kill shot once Okubo showed his face. That meant the rest of the squad would have to immediately lay down protective fire and eliminate anyone who would try to off the snipers.

In addition, Kyle had another plan.

“Fredo, you and another explosive guy—and I’ll let you pick or somebody can volunteer—I want you to put some IEDs in the runway. Bury them, and see if we can get lucky and disable the plane. I know you have the stuff, but do you have the time to get out there and put them in?” Kyle asked.

“Yes, Boss. But I think we need to take two others. I can lay down ten or twelve in maybe ten minutes? Do I have ten minutes?”

“Not sure, but let’s go for it. Okay, pick your poison.”

FREDO GAVE A nod to Benji and Hollis, two new guys who had explosives specialty rankings. Both were enthusiastic they were picked. Danny and Armando installed their Invisios, checked their equipment, and took off in two different

directions, still on the south side of the airstrip. No one was quite sure yet what lay in the ditches at the other side, but everything was silent, and there were no lights.

“Okay, Coop, it’s time for the drone,” said Kyle.

“I’ve got my NVR on the camera, so should be pretty easy,” Coop said. He got out the little bird, which was still Coop’s favorite drone, and sent her up high. He adjusted the monitor until her screen came into view, testing the NV system.

“The definition’s poor with all the green, fuzzy lighting, but it will show anything coming close, up to about a mile.”

“Perfect. Will we be able to identify him?”

“Not specifically, no. You could tell airplane from tarmac, door from wing, that sort of thing,” answered Coop as he sent the drone lower to search the other side of the air strip.

As the drone ascended, the monitor revealed a single Jeep parked about two hundred yards away in the brush, off of a well-traveled path, probably leading to another compound or village. No other vehicles or personnel were noted.

Little Bird lifted higher. Coop still couldn’t detect any structures nearby. There was an abandoned personnel carrier lying on its side, but no evidence people lived or camped out in the area. He saw no fire to identify them and told Kyle and the group so.

Fredo, Hollis, and Benji slithered on their bellies through the brush into the drainage ditch at the side of the runway and up onto the tarmac. Luckily, there was no moon tonight so there would be no chance of getting seen. Plus, it made their use of NV goggles more effective. Trace hoped the other side didn’t own them, or they might not fare so well. Coop gave the go ahead to Kyle, who spoke through his Invisio.

“You’re good to go, Fredo. All quiet on the Western Front. Keep it slow and on your bellies.”

They laid out IEDs in a pyramid design, starting at the top, the point of the spear, with a fairly large device. Then they followed the pattern of the three-sided shape to the sides, leaving about a five-foot strip on each side at the edges. All through the middle, they placed and buried the small devices which, if hit or run over, would explode and could blow off a tire, or worse.

Buried above the IEDs were specialty diamond-coated tacks that could pierce metal, such as an airplane's belly, and there was a possibility that it could cause injury inside. But the goal was to disable the plane so the pilot couldn't escape. Even if Okubo knew there was an ambush, he wouldn't be able to lift off without wheels.

It was too risky to send someone to the other side to take out the guys in the Jeep, but from their vantage point, Danny and Armando would no doubt have a clear shot once it appeared near the tarmac.

"Don't hesitate to take the shot. We'll take your lead," Kyle ordered.

"Roger that," answered Armando in his cool Puerto Rican accent over the coms.

Suddenly, Trace heard a buzzing sound above them, and at first, he thought it was a drone. The head shed notified Kyle the small jet was arriving, on approach to landing. Coming from the east, it would be landing within minutes.

"Fredo, you got to get out of there. It's on its way. ETA in minutes. Stop now and call it done."

"Roger that."

"Don't forget the buddies."

Trace heard Fredo acknowledge him and give the orders.

With his goggles, Trace watched the three of them maneuver over the tarmac, since they didn't wear NVs when doing explosives. Fredo, with his short, stocky body, was the fastest runner and most sure-footed. Hollis stumbled in a

pothole and tumbled, came down hard on his ankle, and was injured. Benji immediately came over to his side and tried to help him up, but size was a factor.

From the other side of the tarmac, the lights of a vehicle appeared and several militia men got out, just as the plane appeared above the east horizon and began to touch down. Fredo was already back with the group, but Hollis and Benji were slower. Hollis was so big it was impossible for Benji to carry him alone, so Gordy, TJ, and Ryan jumped up and assisted Hollis, freeing up Benji. They brought him back to the group where Coop began to check out his injury.

The plane's light fully exposed Benji. Immediately, rounds were fired in his direction across the tarmac, almost hitting the plane. It was an easy shot, and several rounds hit him in the chest and legs, causing him to fall.

Several other rounds fired, and while most of them sent brownish sprays as they hit the tarmac, some of them also laid into the newbie.

Trace was ready to dash into action. Even with the spray of bullets, he was readying himself to run out to get his charge. He could see Benji still moving slightly.

Kyle stopped him.

"Don't! We got to have Okubo land, Trace. We need him."

"But it's Benji, Kyle. I got to save him. He's my man."

"You sit down. I said sit." Kyle pushed him back into the swale. "We'll get him afterward. You copy?"

Trace didn't have words.

"Trace, you copy?"

"Copy," he said, faintly.

He watched as more rounds sprayed the tarmac, most of them missing Benji, who now was not moving. At last, the plane touched down, taxiing past him down the runway and

coming to a stop roughly thirty feet from where Benji had dropped.

It was slow motion. All of a sudden the blast of several IEDs blew the tires off the plane and ripped the material back on one of the wings, blowing the prop into the air. The whole plane nosedived forward and tipped to the side of the broken wing.

The militia took their eyes off Benji and began working to pry the door open to release their commander, which took several precious seconds. In the meantime, all they could do was watch until they could confirm it was Okubo.

But Trace studied Benji's body, looking for some kind of movement. He need a sign the kid was alive. Meanwhile, Coop continued working on Hollis' ankle, prepping him to run for their extraction. Trace planned to slip out without Kyle stopping him, in an attempt to rescue his charge. He was going to do this alone, since it might be a career-ending move.

He was ready and stood up.

Wally pushed him back down into their bunker. In a blur, Wally leapt over his head to the hill that had protected them and ran straight to Benji, covering his body with his own.

"He's alive, Trace," he heard on the Invisio. "Get him home."

The activity on the tarmac drew the attention of the militia men, who were still trying to help an injured commander exit the cabin. The passenger was bloody and hurt.

As they lifted Okubo, Danny whispered, "Confirm." Then he and Armando riddled the plane and the whole area with their high-powered rounds, sending Okubo to the tarmac head first. Two of the three militia men lay immobile, likely killed, at his side.

The third man, apparently uninjured, ran back toward his Jeep. Before he reached the vehicle, he stopped and sprayed Wally and Benji with fire. Trace noted the blood sprays as Wally's body jerked and bounced where the rounds hit him.

Armando, with a single shot to the head, finished the man for good.

Kyle ordered the rest of the team to race after the Jeep, taking a risk there wasn't an additional man left behind. Three others scrambled to retrieve Benji and Wally.

Kyle grabbed Trace by the collar and screamed in his face. "I may get you busted for this. Damn you, Trace. We almost lost the whole troop."

Trace was furious, about ready to wrestle his LT, which definitely would've gotten him booted. At the last minute, Coop was there, having dropped Hollis in a howl of pain. He grabbed Trace back by the arms and threw him to the ground, which protected both of them.

Still flush with anger, Trace moaned, "I just wanted to save him. I owed him that. I didn't want anybody else to—"

"Shut up, Trace. Just shut the fuck up," whispered Coop, who then gave a hand up to Kyle. Dazed and confused, Trace tried to stand but found he couldn't and fell back again.

"Fuck."

A shout came from the tarmac as Trace heard in his Invisio that the area was cleared.

Both Benji and Wally were brought back. Benji was much more serious than Wally was, but Wally had lost a lot of blood from his multiple wounds. Benji was barely conscious.

Using the captured Jeep, they put the two injured men in the back; Coop and TJ attended them while Danny drove. Kyle called for a pickup and was told it would be thirty minutes before a helo could extract them—just the wounded. No one thought either man would survive that long.

Coordinates were given as the Jeep took off through the jungle the way they came, the rest of the men running after, but unable to catch up. They heard it bump and rumble through the grasses and foliage until the sound disappeared.

The remaining group approached the school compound, quickly searching the perimeter for new visitors and found none. Armando had retrieved things from Okubo's body, holding up a fistful of papers he'd dug out of the guy's jacket.

"Outstanding," said Kyle. "You get pictures for positive ID?"

"Yup. And I also got this." Armando showed Kyle and the rest of the group portions of a little finger that he'd carved off the man.

"Proof of death," said Kyle. "Smart."

Trace's rage had subsided. He began to think about the others, making sure his other two newbies were sticking with the group. Everyone was stumbling and beginning to feel exhaustion from the adrenaline rush as well as from carrying the extra packs from the injured teammates.

The pup was no longer there, but the larger dog was dead. Trace hoped he would be able to tell Benji the pup lived—at least that's what he believed, that's what he hoped.

And he hoped Benji would be alive to be told.

Kyle informed them the pickup had been made. They heard the helo arrive and leave quickly. It was also confirmed the two were successfully offloaded to be taken to the naval ship for emergency surgery. They were both alive, for now. They were told one was feared to be not long for this world.

Trace was shattered. He knew it was Benji, his charge. The man he wanted to rescue. He began to dwell on the scene of going to the kid's parents' house, telling them the news, and then attending his funeral. It never was easy, but Benji had died a hero. This one was as bad as all the others he'd been to, combined.

"They'll make it," Kyle said, slapping Trace on the back. "We're bringing everyone back alive."

It didn't have the effect Kyle had hoped.

The Jeep returned, and all of them alternated between riding and running so they could make it all the way back to the shore. Danny reinstalled the carburetors and the starters. They got the boats headed back to the island.

The air was cold. Nobody said anything. Everyone was consumed with private thoughts. It wasn't like a beach party anymore. No coeds, no bright sun, no beer and soft spray from the warm bay. It was a dark, cold escape from hell.

But they got their man.

It wasn't until they got on shore that two other men discovered they had suffered gunshot wounds, which were quickly taken care of by TJ and Coop.

Kyle informed them they would be transported to the Arleigh Burke, part of the 6th Fleet that roamed the African coast looking for and monitoring pirates, working with their Spanish, African, and Mediterranean partners. The hospital facilities on board were supposed to be excellent.

From there, they'd be brought to Gran Canaria, where they would catch a flight home.

While they waited for the pickup, they were to grab food and water. Nothing had been prepared as the contractors had been sent away. A nap was recommended, which sounded pretty good to Trace.

He really wanted to shower but didn't dare. He went through the motions, checked on his newbies, also walking into Wally's room, just by habit, and then realized he wasn't there. He sat on the man's bed, not speaking, slumped over. Pulling out his cell phone, he watched the black screen like it was a TV show. He'd forgotten who to call. He was shaking. For a few seconds he didn't even remember where he was. His body began to feel cold, and that's when he realized he was going into shock.

He called out and then abruptly started to lose consciousness, falling on the floor, but he didn't feel any pain. He studied the interesting cracks on the wall from the side, as

his eyes tried to clear, hoping to stop the spinning of his brain in his skull.

In an instant, TJ was there. With the help of Cooper, they got him back on Wally's bed, checking him out to make sure he hadn't also suffered a wound. They pulled his shirt up, and he tried to yank it back down. He moved away from the light being shone in his eyes. He felt a pin prick as Cooper administered something. They tried to hook him up to an IV to give him some fluids, but he fought with them, getting his arms tangled in the plastic piping as they tried to put the needle in his arm.

He heard them both swear. It sounded funny, so he laughed. He tried to kick TJ in the thigh when they attempted to take off his shoes. He was angry. He was way over the line; he just didn't give a shit about anything.

He felt someone pulling his collar, raising his head close to the other man's face. TJ looked sweaty and tired.

"You listen here, Trace. This isn't you. You're not here in this body," TJ spoke.

It was funny, but he couldn't laugh. "I don't want—"

"Shut up. You're not here. This isn't you. You didn't say this. You're Trace. You're Trace fucking Bennett. You're gonna be a father for fuck's sake. Don't you check out. Don't do this. Pull yourself around, Trace."

Trace felt the room spinning around him as the drugs took effect. When he opened his eyes, he saw Gretchen in front of him, and he began to panic again.

"Oh no, Gretchen! You shouldn't be here."

"Shut up, Trace. This is my ugly mug. TJ. She's not here. You'll see Gretchen in a couple of days. But you shut up, and you get yourself together. Do you hear me? Look at me. Look at me, Trace."

He tried to focus with everything in his gut. The hardest thing he ever did was stare into TJ's eyes, knowing that he had

totally failed. He had stood up to his LPO, he had disobeyed him, and he had almost gotten two of his guys killed. It was shame and survivor's guilt. He knew the symptoms of it, and he knew he'd pay the price for years. Hoped to God that Wally and Benji would make it.

Someone whispered that the helo was on its way. Someone else brought him some chicken noodle soup, and they propped him up on the bed and gave him a sip, and then another. Then he grabbed the cup, drinking it down as fast as he could. He was thirsty, he was hungry, and he needed to fill his body with something warm. Slowly, the tingling in his hands, his fingers, and his toes subsided. He began to warm from the medication he'd been given, his heart rate dropped slightly, and he did begin to relax. But there wasn't any way he would be running anytime soon. He just couldn't. He was exhausted and totally mentally and physically spent.

They helped him into the helo, and again, once they landed on the ship, he was helped to medical. He wanted to sleep, but he also wanted to check his surroundings first so he wouldn't wake up and wonder where he was. He pressed through the sleepiness, the nausea, and the unsettling of his stomach. He needed a shower and to pee, but he didn't have the strength to tell anyone. Surveying the room, he was looking for a pot to pee in.

On the table across from him were two bodies. One was Benji, hooked up to an IV, a monitor recording his heartbeat.

The other one was covered in a white sheet.

CHAPTER 16



AT DAWN, GRETCHEN was awakened by sounds of the girls moving about the house. Clover had been up using the bathroom, and Angie was in the kitchen.

She looked for her cell phone, normally on the table beside her bed, and discovered she hadn't plugged it in last night.

She bumped into Clover in the hallway.

"Good morning. How are you feeling today?"

"So far, so good. God, what's Angie doing? She's making tons of noise. I need to sleep, Mom."

She gave her a hug. "I'll go speak with her. You go on back to bed. Sleep as long as you like. Nothing going on today."

"Thanks, Mom." Clover even managed a little smile, which filled Gretchen's soul.

On her way to the kitchen, she checked her jacket hanging on the back of a chair and found her cell phone with a dead battery.

"Darn." The disc charger was on the countertop. She passed through the doorway and saw Angie preparing something. Gretchen plugged her phone to charge.

"Hey, Mom."

"Morning, Sweetheart. Whatcha making?"

"I thought I'd make pancakes. Clover loves them."

"That's really sweet. She'll love that. I probably wouldn't mind a couple myself. I think she's gone back to bed though. Can you wait?"

“Oh, sure. Or we could eat first. I was just, well, I couldn’t sleep.”

Gretchen thought perhaps this was the right opportunity for the weapons discussion she’d promised Mayfield they’d have.

“You know, Angie, I meant to talk to you about something last night, and I decided not to bring it up until today. But it’s something you need to hear.”

Her daughter’s forehead wrinkled as she appeared on the edge of tears. “Is something wrong with Trace?”

“No, nothing like that. But we think perhaps we’ve been followed by a car. Someone I don’t know. I’ve seen it several times, and I’m getting some help in dealing with it, just to be safe, since Trace is gone right now. Christy’s helping me to get some guys to come over and keep watch. I just wanted you to be aware.”

Angie shrugged. “Sounds good.” She continued stirring the batter.

“I also called Detective Mayfield. You remember, we talked to him after the shooting in the summer?”

Angie continued to stir the mixture in front of her without saying a word, slowly and pensively thinking about something.

Gretchen felt it was safe to continue. “I know how you feel about the incident, Angie, and I’m sorry to have to bring it up.”

“I try not to think about it, Mom. I haven’t told you, but I wake up just about every night dreaming about it. It’s hard to sleep when you worry or dream about somebody breaking into your house and, well, you know.”

She took Angie in her arms then released her.

“I’m angry about all of this, and I blame Tony for all of it, but, truth is, we chose to get involved, thinking we could help. So this all kind of came down on us. I wasn’t thinking, Angie.

I've been wondering why there was a mood change in you afterward. And now I finally figured it out."

She stared at her tall, lanky daughter with the beautiful, honey-brown long hair and deep brown eyes. Gretchen was amazed at what a beautiful young woman she was becoming.

Staring down at the bowl, Angie offered a timid response. "There was so much going on, Mom. I-I just couldn't find a time to sit down and talk about it with you or Trace. I thought it was something that would go away. But it doesn't. It really doesn't."

"I get it. And again, I apologize for being so thickheaded and concentrating on all the other things in our lives. Trace is gone so often, and there are consequences to Tony's behavior, but he's like the Teflon Man. Things just seem to slide off him and affect everyone else around him. It isn't fair. There are bad guys everywhere. I worry, too, Angie. I really do."

"But you shouldn't, Mom. You're supposed to take care of our new brother or sister."

"It will be a sister. We're having a girl. Poor Trace will still be outnumbered. Clover is also having a girl. Isn't that great?"

"I don't care. Brother or sister, I don't care. As long as everyone's happy and we're all together and the baby's fine and Trace comes back, of course."

That sent a wrinkle to her heart. It had been two days now since she'd heard from him, and that was not usual. Gretchen needed to sit down and walked through the doorway to the dinette table, taking a seat.

"You want some juice or water, Mom?" Angie asked.

"Water would be great. Thanks. I think you'll make a great mother, someday. I've been meaning to tell you that."

Angie blushed as Gretchen sipped on the tall glass of cool water. She asked Angie to come sit with her.

"When I called Christy, I asked her to send some Team Guys over to the house occasionally, maybe get some

additional patrols for us, because I was feeling insecure. With Clover pregnant and my own pregnancy, I thought it would be a good idea. And then I remembered that day and your reaction to it all. That's when it hit me. You were still reliving those minutes over and over again. I figured it out while Detective Mayfield was telling me about self-defense protocols, warning me about what to look out for, and helping to prepare me in case something should happen."

Angie's eyes got big. "He thinks something's going to happen?"

"No, but we're making plans for our own protection. He asked me how you were doing because he said I should let you know where the gun is."

"I know where it is. Why?"

"He asked me to warn you that it could be traumatic seeing the gun again, if I should need to use it."

"You're going to shoot someone again?" she mumbled.

Gretchen was filled with grief that her own daughter would say such a thing. Then she observed Angie turn away from her and not make eye contact. She reached across the table and grabbed her daughter's hand.

"I'm not planning that."

"Well, that's good," Angie said sarcastically.

Gretchen felt she was losing the battle.

"Honey, I promise I will always protect you and both your sisters, even Trace if I need to. That's my role, especially when Trace is gone. And I know, as upsetting as it might be, if we're prepared, if we understand the rules, it might give us some comfort and keep us safe. Regardless of how you feel about shooting and guns, and it's totally up to you, I'd like Trace to take you target practicing when he comes back. Just so you're prepared. You don't have to ever own a gun or ever do anything but practice with your dad. Because if I need to, I will protect this family. That's very sacred to me. It's the

promise I made to all of you when you were born. It's my job, and I'm not afraid of that now. I have the same job as Trace does, just here at the home front and, of course, to a much smaller degree."

"I understand, Mom. I'm not afraid of you or the gun. I'm afraid of those men, and you just want to make sure I won't freak out if I see that nasty thing again."

Gretchen chuckled. "That's my Angie, always reducing it down to its simple, basic facts. And you're exactly right. I just wanted to take the time to talk to you about it and make sure you're comfortable with it all. To let you know that I understand perhaps a little bit now of what you're going through. And I'm vowing to fix that."

Angie came over to her, kneeling down before her. Gretchen wrapped her arms around the teen. "I love you so much, Sweetheart."

As Angie stood up, Gretchen's cell phone rang. She ran to the kitchen to answer it and noticed there had been a call from Christy late last night after she'd gone to bed.

This was Christy again.

"Christy!"

"Just letting you know they're coming home. Should be here this afternoon."

"That's wonderful news. Oh my gosh, that's wonderful news!" She put her hand over the speaker and leaned toward Angie. "He's coming home today, Sweetheart."

Angie returned a huge smile.

"Gretchen, a couple of things. Since I found out about their return, I didn't ask the Team Guys to come over. I started, but then I postponed it. Kyle also wanted me to inform you that it has been a difficult mission, very difficult, especially on Trace."

Gretchen put her hand to her mouth, inhaling, and then closing her eyes while she listened to whatever news Christy

was going to give her. Like it or not, she was ready for it.

“Go on.”

“Trace is fine. You don’t need to worry about that. They did lose a man, and they’ve got some injuries. But Trace is fine. What Kyle says is that he had an ‘incident.’”

“Incident? What does that mean?” She was beginning to shake. Was Trace coming home in a wheelchair? Did he have some sort of mental break or did he panic? None of that was anything she ever had considered.

“He wanted to prepare you. All I know is that he had a tough time. I guess one of his guys is the one who passed. A young guy. And he took it very hard. He’s been difficult to console, and Kyle wanted you to know that he’s fragile. He might not show it, so that’s why Kyle wanted me to tell you.”

Gretchen composed herself. Her youngest daughter was studying her face, trying to read into her expression some clue as to what was going on. What was she going to tell her daughters if Trace came back a changed man? Was this going to involve hospitalization, drug therapy? Was this the end of their happily ever after?

But she refused to give up. She straightened her back, adjusted her shoulders, and lifted her chin, looking straight ahead into her beautiful garden. The flowers were blooming, even this late in the year. The grass was green. She even saw a couple of butterflies wave on their way past her window. Life was for the living. Life was about growing families, getting stronger every day, and facing any challenge, out of love and never out of revenge. So many men and women had sacrificed so that she and her family could live this life.

It was a miracle. She found the space to feel grateful for whatever would be coming her way.

“I see. Thank you. And thank Kyle when you talk to him.”

She took another deep breath and felt Wes standing behind her.

“I’ll be ready.”

CHAPTER 17



“**Y**OU GOT A decision to make, Trace. I can’t make that decision, and I don’t want the end of your career to be on my conscience. We’re friends, but I’m still your LPO. This doesn’t change until we both walk out of here.” Kyle sat at the large, round table they used for happier times. Trace noticed some remnants of pizza sauce stubbornly affixed to the side of the Formica top.

As a device to bring the team together, it was pure genius Kyle had ordered it and paid for it out of his own funds. Nobody was in charge. Everyone had a say. Somehow, sitting at that table, things weren’t adversarial. They couldn’t go anywhere unless they all agreed.

He wished more of the world operated like that. The one who yelled the loudest or nastiest wasn’t always the one who should lead. But there were times when the tough decisions had to be made. The person who could do that was usually hated for a time and then later revered for being so brilliant.

And on and on. Military men and women would be still arguing about the right path a hundred years from now, Trace thought. People would come home with half their parts, and yet they’d find it in themselves to say, “Thank you for allowing me to serve.” It wasn’t bullshit, either.

Those were the ones who deserved the medals. They should be able to wear them proudly, show everyone, not have them stuck in a black jewelry case, given to their wives, girlfriends, or parents to be tucked away in a dresser and passed down to their offspring. Only thing left were their medals, their flag, and, for a SEAL, their Trident.

But the real ones never talked about it. Almost never complained outside the Teams or not at all, in the case of those who didn't return. Decisions were made—good, bad, neither—and the military person's job was to carry those orders out. Even at risk to their own life.

Did people understand, with the decisions made, that some parents would never see their children again? The picture on the mantel in a crisp uniform beside Old Glory would never age like the photographic paper it was printed on, like the cotton/rayon blended stars and stripes in the case, folded tight so not even an ant could crawl in and make a home there. Did the people who made the decisions realize little children wouldn't see their mothers and fathers? Could never show them how they lost their first tooth or learned to skateboard.

And, yes, all those people—the parents, spouses, friends, and children—were the reason they served. It was no higher honor than to make things safer so the people they loved could have a life the rest of the world could only dream of. It was an expensive price to pay, but so worth it.

But to come back whole, no visible scars, every body part working, when others came back in pieces or not at all, sometimes half of what they were when they left, wasn't fair.

Trace knew he was damaged. He'd left something over there in the red clay of Africa. A life expended to take seven other bad guys, and among them, an officer who had murdered hundreds of innocents.

But that wasn't what Trace was counting. The only expense he felt was the hollow feeling in his heart, that he was responsible for the safety of the men he was put in charge of. His job wasn't even as grand as Kyle's, a man who had the lives of some two hundred men on the Team and who chose who went on an op and who stayed behind.

Kyle had just told him they would be visiting an uncle of Wally's in Los Angeles, just he and Kyle together. They'd shake the gentleman's hand and thank him, tell them how

brave Wally had been, that he died a hero and saved another young boy's life at the expense of his own.

It mattered little that the morning of the op Wally had told him he was ready to die any day, to go see his wife and three little boys. He just hadn't wanted to die in Africa.

But that's what happened.

"Are you listening to me, Trace?"

"I am, LT. I'm listening to it all." He noticed everyone else had flown out of there so fast, ready to spend the weekend with their loved ones or just to get shit-faced for the pure joy of growing one massive hangover.

Gretchen and the girls were his whole life, and he wanted to see them. But he didn't want them to see him like this. It was just as bad as coming home with no legs and a colostomy bag. But people did and they put up with it, lived their lives, even fathered more children afterward.

"I came close to running out there anyway, throwing myself into the firefight, but I didn't. Does that make me a coward?"

"No. Makes you a hero. You followed orders. You helped the Team get the job done. Dr. Death doesn't discriminate by age or religion, race or sex. He's a bitch. He comes and works that scythe so fast you don't feel it until you're dead. It was Wally's turn. Wally's way. He broke the rules. He didn't get to come home. You did."

Trace finally returned Kyle's gaze. He felt his eyes well up with tears he didn't want to show. But then he saw Kyle's do the same. And he understood. Whatever Trace was feeling, Kyle had felt it ten or twenty times more over the years. He still came home to Christy and the kids, rocked their world.

Trace just had to figure out if he wanted to show up or if he was going to quit. And it was more than quitting the Teams. It was quitting everything. Letting everyone down.

Someone once told him that when he sat with his dad, who had been a World War II vet, a SEABee, as he lay dying, he actually thanked him for showing him how to die. He was grateful to experience and send off someone who had been an incredible inspiration in his life. A man who was larger than life itself, even though shriveled, less than eighty pounds at the end, and wearing a diaper.

Wally's picture would never age. He'd always be remembered for his off-colored jokes, the stories about visiting his dad in prison, a man who could relate to Hollis and his story of how his mother died with an axe between the eyes, thrown by his father. Wally showed the newbies how to be brave. Benji would forever know that someone died so he could live.

Trace was going to have to show up to make sure Benji saw it that way and never forgot. What a gift to give someone, without anything asked in return, except to live a life of meaning and to pass it on, especially when it was hard.

“Well, this is enough,” he said to Kyle.

“So that's it? You're out?”

Trace drilled a fuck you stare, which caused Kyle's face to break out in a grin wider than he'd ever seen before.

“I was close. I guess I just needed to hit the reset switch. My circuits came back slow, LT, but they're back.”

Now it was time for Kyle to feel embarrassed, because he bawled like a baby.

“Glad to have you, Trace. Now go home and take the advice I give every man who comes home. Go. Get. Laid.”

“Yessir. That's an order I will gladly fulfill.”

He purposely didn't call Gretchen. He threw his stuff in the back of the Hummer, made Kyle promise not to tell her he was coming, and squealed out of the parking lot. The eighteen-year-old sentry, regular Navy in a starched uniform too big on him, even his cap, with a sidearm he'd never use, opened his

pimplly lips and asked for his ID as if he was important. Like he was an admiral.

“Your license is expired on your truck. You’ll need to get another pass posted on your bumper.”

“I’ll do it later.”

It must have been the way he said it, because the kid was out to hassle him, like they always did, just because he was regular and Trace was a fuckin’ SEAL. But he flinched and passed him on through.

Trace sped up and left behind the smell of burning rubber. And then he stopped. He thought about it, then backed up, and addressed the kid.

“Hey,” he said as he leaned over and read the name badge. “You gotta be fuckin’ kidding me, Son.”

The kid pushed his nametag closer so Trace’s old wizened eyes could read it.

“Wally. I’m Wally, sir.”

Trace shook his head and started to chuckle. “You believe in delayed reincarnation, body possession, son?”

“Hell, no. That ain’t Christian-like.”

It was the perfect answer. A truthful answer. Trace didn’t really want to mess with him, so he delivered the message he had intended before the name badge sidetrack.

“Thank you, Wally, for your service. I appreciate you looking out for me, for all of us, for standing here in the sun all day, every day you’re on, ready to defend us and our country, no matter what. It takes courage and honor to wear that uniform. I just want you to know I’m grateful. I hope you have a wonderful day.”

“Th-thank you, Special Operator Bennett. I’m going to tell my dad a Navy SEAL said that to me. He’d be proud right alongside you.”

“Well, you tell your dad he raised a helluva son.”

Maybe that was the trick. To look for what he was grateful for, Trace thought as he drove down the strand and then peeled off into the beach neighborhood. Like the flowers in their front yard Gretchen had taught him how to tend, and how not to forget to water. With a little bit of gratitude, a little water, he got to enjoy their colorful display. It was their job, after all.

He mentally thanked them for their service to his good nature today as he ran up the walkway and to the red front door with the Christmas wreath on the outside, the wreath he'd bitched about that cost more than he thought Gretchen should have spent. The wreath she loved. It made her happy. And, if it made her happy, it damn well would make him happy too.

"Thank you," he said to the wreath before he held his breath, pressed down on the latch, and opened to the scents of three of the most beautiful women in the world and their cooking.

"Daddy!" Angie said as she ran to his arms. He dropped his duty bag on his foot, she'd thrown him so far off guard.

"God, you're skinny as hell, but you weigh a ton."

She laughed, kissed him on the cheek, and said, "Shut the fuck up."

Like father, like daughter.

Clover was next to greet him. They couldn't hug because her belly wouldn't let them. "Holy cow, you've gotten twice as large. Sure there aren't two in there?"

"Only one, Dad, and she's big. She's going to whip your ass too."

"I always wanted to have a granddaughter in the WWE. I'm going to have to spend all my time making sure all the Bone Frogs keep their hands to themselves."

His princess, his pride and joy, came around the kitchen corner and gave him one of those looks he used to get when they were first married.

“How did I manage to get this beauty knocked up so nicely? All round and soft. Come here, honey. I’ve been waiting a lifetime for your kiss.”

Even Gretchen ran to his arms. He felt her tears down the side of his neck, so he pulled away and asked her, “What’s wrong? Did you really think I would leave you to handle all this by yourself? I’m back. For now, I’m back, and I get to stay back, guaranteed, heard it from the man himself, until this one is six months old.”

She brushed the tears from her cheeks. “That’s the best Christmas present I’ve ever had, Trace.”

He whispered in her ear, but the girls knew what was up.

“Comes with strings and requirements that you respond to every touch, that you perform a certain way, and never wear panties.”

He slid his hand over her backside, and, yes, she was bare underneath.

“Girls, Mom and Dad have to have a little discussion,” Trace announced.

“But we’ve got dinner, early dinner all set for you, Dad,” objected Angie.

He grinned back at her. “Someday, my angel, you’ll understand. Go ask your sister; she knows. Daddy has some needs he must bury his heart in, and only your mother can heal him.”

As they walked arm in arm down the hallway to the bedroom, Trace knew Gretchen could handle anything. She was certainly going to be able to heal him, and together, they’d come out the other side of this experience stronger than ever.

It wasn’t going to be a cakewalk. He was going to get as much help as he could muster in the system. But he was filled with the spirit of Christmas, celebrating the birth of one special boy and two very, very special little girls.

EPILOGUE



Three Weeks Later

GRETCHEN WAS SOAKING wet, sweat pouring from her face and neck. Her chest was soaked. Even her arms dripped as she gripped Trace's hand and forearm, clasping him all the way to his elbow. He whispered encouragement as she pushed, as her face flushed bright pink with the effort to move the baby along.

"Good girl, Gretchen. You're so strong, Sweetheart. Keep it going, Honey."

The doctor told them the next push would deliver the baby to her waiting hands. "I can see the head. She's crowning, a beautiful shade of pink, just waiting to nestle in your arms, Gretchen. You're doing great. Just one more time."

And, after one more push, they both heard wailing, the newborn waving her arms in a jerky fashion, eyes objecting to the bright lights. Gretchen's relief felt like a cool waterfall, after the ten hours of labor she'd endured. She heard cheering in the next room where Clover, Angie, her sister, Kate, and her parents all gathered, waiting to see the little miracle.

Trace used a cool towel to gently dab her face. "Thank you, Sweetheart. You are so incredibly strong and beautiful. I love you so much."

"Love you too." But she was looking between her legs at the nurse holding their child.

"Is she okay?"

"Can't you hear her?"

"She's a big strong girl, eight pounds ten ounces. Big girl. Healthy and perfectly fine. Good job, you two," said the nurse

from across the room.

“Can I hold her?” Gretchen asked, almost ignoring Trace.

“How about we let Papa bring her over to you, okay?”

Trace stared at the nurse, then the doctor, and at last at Gretchen.

“But—but—”

“Come on over here. It’s not hard.”

His face was precious. Afraid to hold his own daughter! She loved him even more than she ever had.

“I’ve never held a baby before. Are you sure? Shouldn’t I practice?”

The whole delivery room chuckled softly.

“Big strong Navy SEAL and he’s afraid of babies. That’s a new one,” said the doctor.

But Gretchen completely understood. That was Trace. He could do all the hard things in life no one else would ever do, but it was the little things that got to him every time.

He reluctantly went over to the scale as the nurse lay a cotton swab over his arms and then placed their little girl, newly wiped down and considerably happier than she had been just thirty seconds before.

“There she is, Daddy. Now, let’s go and show Mommy, okay?”

The nurse practically had to push Trace in Gretchen’s direction. His legs moved like concrete as he slowly made it to Gretchen’s side.

“Here she is. Here’s our little girl, Gretchen. I’ve never seen anything so amazing—except you, of course. But she’s almost as pretty as you are, my love.”

Gretchen placed her finger inside the baby’s hand, and the sweet girl gripped it. “She has your hands, Trace,” she said and laughed tears.

Trace kissed her forehead. The nurses lifted Gretchen up to a sitting position so she could hold their girl.

“We did it, Gretchen. We really did it,” he said with tears streaming down his face.

“We did. I always knew this could happen. We beat the odds, Trace. Now I’ll have to watch you closely to make sure you don’t beat up everyone who tells you that your daughter is beautiful.”

“That will be a full-time job, I fear. She’s going to look at me at back-to-school nights and wonder what happened to me. I can see it all now. What are we going to call her? We didn’t finish talking about that.”

“I have a name, if you’ll agree.”

“Go ahead.”

“Wallace. I’d like to name her Wallace.”

Trace plopped his tired, scarred body down on the chair and sobbed, nodding.

CLOVER DELIVERED A week late, on Christmas Eve. She allowed Gretchen and her two sisters to stay in the delivery room, along with Jack, who had completed and passed his BUD/S training. He would have to go back to complete the rest of the SQT the day after Christmas, though. Their tiny apartment was nearly completely filled with toys and gifts it would take them days to unwrap and years for Olivia, their new daughter, to play with and enjoy.

Jack had nearly passed out during the birth, and Trace later told him he nearly did too.

“Get ready for some serious sleep deprivation, and you better get used to cleaning and doing laundry. It’s amazing how much poop those little things can generate. They’re a regular poop factory, twenty-four seven,” he’d said. As an aside, he later added, “But it’s really cool, especially in the early hours of the morning, just you and her, rocking her and telling her all about the bad men she won’t ever date because

you'll kill them, slowly, and then run over them with a tractor-trailer.”

The two men bonded. Gretchen was so pleased to see everything fall into place.

But Tony threw a monkey wrench into their celebration by getting arrested on Christmas day for driving drunk. It was made into a major crime because of his prior record. He needed money and had spent the down payment for Clover and Jack.

Trace and Gretchen had constantly warned them about this, so it wasn't much of a surprise.

Trace was seeing Dr. Brownlee on a regular basis, sometimes going with Angie or Gretchen. On New Year's Eve, Dr. Brownlee came over to Clover and Jack's condo and gave them their down payment as a gift, something Jack promised to pay back.

“Save it, Son. Consider it an investment in my extended family here. You aren't going to be able to have that kind of money for a couple of decades. So, remember, when someone gives you a gift, you take it, and you say 'thank you.' That's all I want. Find something you can afford to keep. Get started in real estate right away. You'll make more money in it than you ever will as a SEAL. Trust me, I hear it every day in my practice.”

Gus Mayfield and a few of his retired buddies never informed them they were surveilling Gretchen and Trace's house, as well as Clover and Jack's rental. One late night in January, they arrested two men, both with long criminal records, down the street from Clover's condo. With the contraband and weapons they uncovered, and the resulting questionably legal search of their premises, they would be deported to Mexico, as they had before, only this time after a five-year stint in prison. Later, they were linked to several murders through their weapons and DNA and would be incarcerated for a couple of decades.

And then somehow, Tony was released on a technicality.

“Do you ever suppose we’ll be rid of him?” Gretchen asked Trace as they sat on the beach with Wallace in her arms.

“I think he was put there on purpose. Like her namesake. It means God’s telling us there are more lessons to learn.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Sharon Hamilton

NYT and USA/Today Bestselling Author Sharon Hamilton's SEAL Brotherhood series have earned her author rankings of #1 in Romantic Suspense, Military Romance and Contemporary Romance. Her other *Brotherhood* stand-alone series are: Bad Boys of SEAL Team 3, Band of Bachelors, True Blue SEALs, Nashville SEALs, Bone Frog Brotherhood, Sunset SEALs, Bone Frog Bachelor Series and SEAL Brotherhood Legacy Series. She is a contributing author to the very popular Shadow SEALs multi-author series.

Her SEALs and former SEALs have invested in two wineries, a lavender farm and a brewery in Sonoma County, which have become part of the new stories. They also have expanded to include Veteran-benefit projects on the Florida Gulf Coast, as well as projects in Africa and the Maldives. One of the SEAL wives has even launched her own women's fiction series. But old characters, as well as children of these SEAL heroes keep returning to all the newer books.

Sharon also writes sexy paranormals in two series: Golden Vampires of Tuscany and The Guardians. In addition, S. Hamil has penned a new genre: Free To Love: Free As A Bird, the 5-book series about a hero Android who just might be the man to save the world from the flames of chaos, perhaps at the risk of his own safety.

A lifelong organic vegetable and flower gardener, Sharon and her husband lived for fifty years in the Wine Country of Northern California, where many of her stories take place. Recently, they have moved to the beautiful Gulf Coast of Florida, with stories of shipwrecks, the white sugar-sand beaches of Sunset, Treasure Island and Indian Rocks Beaches.

She loves hearing from fans through her website:

authorsharonhamilton.com

Find out more about Sharon, her upcoming releases, appearances and news when you sign up for Sharon's [newsletter](#).

Facebook:

facebook.com/SharonHamiltonAuthor

Twitter:

twitter.com/sharonhamilton

Pinterest:

pinterest.com/AuthorSharonH

Amazon:

amazon.com/Sharon-Hamilton/e/B004FQQMAC

BookBub:

bookbub.com/authors/sharon-hamilton

Youtube:

youtube.com/channel/UCDInkxXFpXp_4Vnq08ZxMBQ

Soundcloud:

soundcloud.com/sharon-hamilton-1

Sharon Hamilton's Rockin' Romance Readers:

[facebook.com/groups/sealteamromance](https://www.facebook.com/groups/sealteamromance)

Sharon Hamilton's Goodreads Group:

[goodreads.com/group/show/199125-sharon-hamilton-readers-group](https://www.goodreads.com/group/show/199125-sharon-hamilton-readers-group)

Visit Sharon's Online Store:

sharon-hamilton-author.myshopify.com

Life is one fool thing after another.

Love is two fool things after each other.



REVIEWS

PRAISE FOR THE SEAL BROTHERHOOD SERIES

“Fans of Navy SEAL romance, I found a new author to feed your addiction. Finely written and loaded delicious with moments, Sharon Hamilton’s storytelling satisfies like a thick bar of chocolate.” —Marliss Melton, bestselling author of the *Team Twelve* Navy SEALs series

“Sharon Hamilton does an EXCELLENT job of fitting all the characters into a brotherhood of SEALS that may not be real but sure makes you feel that you have entered the circle and security of their world. The stories intertwine with each book before...and each book after and THAT is what makes Sharon Hamilton’s SEAL Brotherhood Series so very interesting. You won’t want to put down ANY of her books and they will keep you reading into the night when you should be sleeping. Start with this book...and you will not want to stop until you’ve read the whole series and then...you will be waiting for Sharon to write the next one.” (5 Star Review)

“Kyle and Christy explode all over the pages in this first book, [*Accidental SEAL*], in a whole new series of SEALs. If the twist and turns don’t get your heart jumping, then maybe the suspense will. This is a must read for those that are looking for love and adventure with a little sloppy love thrown in for good measure.” (5 Star Review)

PRAISE FOR THE BAD BOYS OF SEAL TEAM 3 SERIES

“I love reading this series! Once you start these books, you can hardly put them down. The mix of romance and suspense keeps you turning the pages one right after another! Can’t wait until the next book!” (5 Star Review)

“I love all of Sharon’s Seal books, but [*SEAL’s Code*] may just be her best to date. Danny and Luci’s journey is filled with a

wonderful insight into the Native American life. It is a love story that will fill you with warmth and contentment. You will enjoy Danny's journey to become a SEAL and his reasons for it. Good job Sharon!" (5 Star Review)

**PRAISE FOR THE
BAND OF BACHELORS SERIES**

"[*Lucas*] was the first book in the Band of Bachelors series and it was a phenomenal start. I loved how we got to see the other SEALs we all love and we got a look at Lucas and Marcy. They had an instant attraction, and their love was very intense. This book had it all, suspense, steamy romance, humor, everything you want in a riveting, outstanding read. I can't wait to read the next book in this series." (5 Star Review)

**PRAISE FOR THE
TRUE BLUE SEALS SERIES**

"Keep the tissues box nearby as you read *True Blue SEALs: Zak* by Sharon Hamilton. I imagine more than I wish to that the circumstances surrounding Zak and Amy are all too real for returning military personnel and their families. Ms. Hamilton has put us right in the middle of struggles and successes that these two high school sweethearts endure. I have read several of Sharon Hamilton's military romances but will say this is the most emotionally intense of the ones that I have read. This is a well-written, realistic story with authentic characters that will have you rooting for them and proud of those who serve to keep us safe. This is an author who writes amazing stories that you love and cry with the characters. Fans of Jessica Scott and Marliss Melton will want to add Sharon Hamilton to their list of realistic military romance writers." (5 Star Review)

**PRAISE FOR THE
GOLDEN VAMPIRES OF TUSCANY SERIES**

"Well to say the least I was thoroughly surprised. I have read many Vampire books, from Ann Rice to Kym Grosso and a few other Authors, so yes I do like Vampires, not the super scary ones from the old days, but the new ones are far more

interesting, far more human than one can remember. I found *Honeymoon Bite* a totally engrossing book, I was not able to put it down, page after page I found delight, love, understanding, well that is until the bad bad Vamp started being really bad. But seeing someone love another person so much that they would do anything to protect them, well that had me going, then well there was more and for a while I thought it was the end of a beautiful love story that spanned not only time but, spanned Italy and California. Won't divulge how it ended, but I did shed a few tears after screaming but Sharon Hamilton did not let me down, she took me on amazing trip that I loved, look forward to reading another Vampire book of hers."

"An excellent paranormal romance that was exciting, romantic, entertaining and very satisfying to read. It had me anticipating what would happen next many times over, so much so I could not put it down and even finished it up in a day. The vampires in this book were different from your average vampire, but I enjoy different variations and changes to the same old stuff. It made for a more unpredictable read and more adventurous to explore! Vampire lovers, any paranormal readers and even those who love the romance genre will enjoy *Honeymoon Bite*."

"This is the first non-Seal book of this author's I have read and I loved it. There is a cast-like hierarchy in this vampire community with humans at the very bottom and Golden vampires at the top. Lionel is a dark vampire who are servants of the Golden. Phoebe is a Golden who has not decided if she will remain human or accept the turning to become a vampire. Either way she and Lionel can never be together since it is forbidden.

I enjoyed this story and I am looking forward to the next installment."

"A hauntingly romantic read. Old love lost and new love found. Family, heart, intrigue and vampires. Grabbed my attention and couldn't put down. Would definitely recommend."

“Dear FATHER IN HEAVEN,

If I may respectfully say so sometimes you are a strange God. Though you love all mankind,

It seems you have special predilections too.

You seem to love those men who can stand up alone who face impossible odds, who challenge every bully and every tyrant ~

Those men who know the heat and loneliness of Calvary. Possibly you cherish men of this stamp because you recognize the mark of your only son in them.

Since this unique group of men known as the SEALs know Calvary and suffering, teach them now the mystery of the resurrection ~ that they are indestructible, that they will live forever because of their deep faith in you.

And when they do come to heaven, may I respectfully warn you, Dear Father, they also know how to celebrate. So please be ready for them when they insert under your pearly gates.

Bless them, their devoted Families and their Country on this glorious occasion.

We ask this through the merits of your Son, Christ Jesus the Lord, Amen.”

By Reverend E.J. McMalhon S.J. LCDR, CHC, USN

Awards Ceremony SEAL Team One

1975 At NAB, Coronado