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Living with a Hero

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LIVING WITH A HERO

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Master's Program in Creative Writing

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Dedication

To the men, specifically, who serve our country, to the military wives who inspired this story,
and all who understand the magnitude of living with a hero.

to

LIVING WITH A HERO

by

GRAYSON THOMAS EDDS, B.A.

THESIS

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of

The University of Texas at El Paso

in Partial Fulfillment

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Preface

*It is discouraging to leave the past behind only to see it coming like a thunderstorm which
drenched you yesterday – William Gass, The Tunnel*

The Reason for Writing This Story

If there is but one voice in each story in life, let me translate for those who cried on my shoulder, not understanding the person who came home to them after deployment. Just as no two people are identical, neither are two cases of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. In each of the stories within *Living With a Hero*, some version of myself tells a dramatized version of the stories and friendships I've held from the beginning of my own husband's enlistment in the United States Marine Corps. And as the symptoms of PTSD are never cured, only coped with, the endings of each story are open to multiple solutions.

As a young bartender in Jacksonville, North Carolina, a mere handful of years after 2001, I watched troops of men, young and old, come to the bar in preparation for an upcoming deployment – the one “last” hoorah – and the celebration of their survival when they returned or the loss of someone they grew to love didn't return. I watched wives cling to their husbands on both sides of the trip. I saw brotherhood in arms strengthen between them. I witnessed the aftermath of mental destruction as men sat along the bar, in booths or tables, drowning their problems in their drinks. I saw men – not much more than boys – in various states of disrepair: amputees, burn victims, and one lonely man who had no one and drank himself into a cab more often than not.

“Give me a task to do each day to fill my time while he's away”

– Military Wife's Prayer.

I began to see that throughout history's wars not much has changed stateside. Rosie the Riveter became mainstream to enlist women in to the workforce during WWII. Today, the service industry in

military towns employed by a vast majority of women, whether they're working to supplement income or working to keep their minds busy during their husband's long deployments. After my husband and I left the Marine Corps base for Temple, Texas, a town 30 miles from Fort Hood, the biggest Army base in the continental U.S., I met Army wife after Army wife, most who also dealt with husbands with PTSD.

The PTSD that I witnessed secondhand from horrifying and heartbreaking stories of my friends as Marine wives and Army wives reflected just that. The Marines and soldiers were burned, broken, amputated, and abusive, some of whom also psychologically damaged--neither story less important than the other, neither less damaged or damaging to their families, no one solution could be applied to all scenarios, and typically no medication was a one-size-fits-all, although every serviceman was treated as such at first. It was not uncommon, however, for the side effects of the drugs intended to help the serviceman to heighten his PTSD symptoms or to turn the man into a shell of his former self.

An Introduction of the Novel's Characters

This novel's parts are broken up into four stories, all telling of a 21-day period that starts a month after a troop of Marines returns from a deployment.

Marka:

Like me, Marka, a bartender in Jacksonville, North Carolina, watches from the sidelines as men come into her bar and often imagines what their story is and who they used to be. However, unlike me, she goes home to deal with her own husband, who suffers from blackouts in which he grows more and more violent until one morning when she tells him that he accused her of having an affair and choked her. After this incident he goes into a rehab program, but doesn't come out. This story is a tribute to my friends, the Marshalls, after seeing her come to work at the bar with black eyes, hair missing in clumps,

drag marks and finger prints on her skin. She never considered leaving him, and after several years of the abuse, he left the military and is undergoing treatment. They're still together.

Everett:

Everett, a character to whom I never introduced myself as a bartender, the most physically damaged of the group, with severe burns covering half his face, neck, and shoulder; however, he's the most normal psychologically. In addition to being the most physically traumatized, he also embodies the men who enlist but have no one to come home to. He has no family to speak of, no wife or girlfriend, no one to greet him as he steps off the bus in return from the deployment. He is alone and scarred, but kind, honest and introverted.

Janae:

Janae covers a story about a missing Marine's wife. The husband, Justin Martindale, plays a big role throughout the book but not from his point of view. Accused of killing his wife in a fit of PTSD-induced rage, he is never arrested, his wife never found. Janae's story is about her struggle to stay unbiased, while finding herself believing that Martindale is innocent only to find out something is amiss after it's too late.

Abigail:

Abigail, the wife of an alcoholic Marine, and her husband Jonathan, are dramatizations of the Fine family, a soldier and his wife I met after returning to Texas. Blown up overseas where his brother died, he turned to vodka as a remedy for physical and psychological pain. A master manipulator and alcoholic, he was later medically retired from the Army, and he fell off the wagon several times--the last time in a similar incident to the story written here. When they divorced, he resumed his drinking, has once-monthly supervised visits with his children, and is in a state of seemingly-permanent disrepair.

Abigail's story, a tribute to the Fines, depicts every wife who must asks herself, "What did I do to deserve this?"

The research

Since being associated with the military, I've moved away from the majority of servicemen and their wives as my husband and I transitioned into civilian life filled primarily with non-military people. However, my interest in PTSD and its causes and cures hasn't.

While PTSD wasn't formally recognized in the American Psychiatric Association's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders third edition (DSM-III) until 1980 (Friedman), the studies on the disorder go back to the 1940s, after World War II. Medical practices then were often experimental, using drugs that today we know of as harmful or lacking medicinal value. One such drug used on PTSD patients was LSD, or lysergic acid diethylamide, a potent hallucinogenic drug. Among PTSD patients, LSD was also trialed on children with autism, adult alcoholics, and cancer patients (Ellens & Roberts). A pioneer of this experiment was a Dutch psychiatrist Jan Basiaans, who grew up during the war, and experienced the German invasion of Holland, seeing traumatized people returning from Auschwitz ((Snelders, 1998) Ellens & Roberts). Bastiaans famously provided LSD treatment to the writer Yehiel De-Nur, the author of the book *Shivitti*, a survivor of Auschwitz ((Zetnik, 1989) (Ellens & Roberts).

During that time, in the 1950s, neuroscientist John C. Lilly invented the sensory deprivation tank, or the "Lilly Tank" (Floataway.com). In 1988, he was given authority to use LSD in conjunction with the Lilly Tank, where he examined the abilities of the mind, first, without any exterior influences, and, then in conjunction with the "mind-loosening" drug (Ellen & Roberts). While some took his work seriously, a majority found him to be a little "wackadoodle" (Oaklander).

After Vietnam and before 1980, when the APA recognized PTSD, many veterans turned against their country, outraged at their treatment after military service. *Born on the Fourth of July*, a book

written by Ron Kovic, tells the story of a paralyzed Vietnam War veteran who became an anti-war activist. In 1971, Vietnam Veterans Against the War began a five-day demonstration in Washington, D.C. in which 1,000 veterans threw their combat medals and ribbons at the Capitol steps. A day later, 200,000 demonstrated in the mall in D.C., and 156,000 demonstrators rallied in San Francisco (History.com).

In 1980, the APA formally defined PTSD, and since then it was given five subcategories: All patients with PTSD must meet the A criterion, or all patients must be

“Exposed to a catastrophic event involving actual or threatened death or injury, or a threat to the physical integrity of him/herself or others (such as sexual violence). Indirect exposure includes learning about the violent or accidental death or perpetration of sexual violence to a loved one. Exposure through electronic media (e.g. televised images the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center) is not considered a traumatic event. On the other hand, repeated, indirect exposure (usually as part of one's professional responsibilities) to the gruesome and horrific consequences of a traumatic event (e.g. police personnel, body handlers, etc.) is considered traumatic” (Friedman).

In addition to the A criterion, criterion B-E must be onset only after the traumatic event, and lasting more than a month, according to Friedman:

B: Intrusive recollection criterion includes symptoms that are perhaps the most distinctive and readily identifiable symptoms of PTSD. For individuals with PTSD, the traumatic event remains, sometimes for decades or a lifetime, a dominating psychological experience that retains its power to evoke panic, terror, dread, grief, or despair. These emotions manifest during intrusive daytime images

of the event, traumatic nightmares, and vivid reenactments known as PTSD flashbacks (which are dissociative episodes).

C: **Avoidance criterion** consists of behavioral strategies PTSD patients use in an attempt to reduce the likelihood that they will expose themselves to trauma-related stimuli. PTSD patients also use these strategies in an attempt to minimize the intensity of their psychological response if they are exposed to such stimuli. Behavioral strategies include avoiding any thought or situation which is likely to elicit distressing traumatic memories. In its extreme manifestation, avoidance behavior may superficially resemble agoraphobia because the PTSD individual is afraid to leave the house for fear of confronting reminders of the traumatic event(s).

D: **Negative cognitions and mood criterion** reflect persistent alterations in beliefs or mood that have developed after exposure to the traumatic event.... Dissociative psychogenic amnesia is included in this symptom cluster and involves cutting off the conscious experience of trauma-based memories and feelings.

E: **Alterations in arousal or reactivity criterion** most closely resemble those seen in panic and generalized anxiety disorders. While symptoms such as insomnia and cognitive impairment are generic anxiety symptoms, hypervigilance and startle are more characteristic of PTSD. DSM-IV's Criterion D2, irritability or outbursts of anger, has been separated into emotional (e.g., D4) and behavioral (e.g., E1) components in DSM-5. Irritable and angry outbursts may sometimes be expressed as aggressive behavior. Finally reckless and self-destructive behavior

such as impulsive acts, unsafe sex, reckless driving and suicidal behavior are newly included in DSM-5, as Criterion E2.

While WWII and Vietnam veterans were primarily left up to their own devices and methods of self medicating, now PTSD is openly discussed even though some forms of medication and alternative therapy, like medical cannabis, float pods, LSD and Ecstasy, are still under public scrutiny--some more than others--for lack of belief in their effectiveness.

It is important to divulge this information to see which forms of PTSD were shown in *Living with a Hero*. Marka's husband, Austin Jones, could be said to suffer from Criterion D and D4, specifically Dissociative Psychotic Amnesia, or blackouts, as well as Criterion B in the sense that his memories come back to him via nightmares and dissociative episodes while dreaming. His death could either be contributed to his PTSD or guilt. Marka herself could potentially be diagnosed with PTSD after being attacked by her husband, dealing with his sudden death, then learning what she does about him posthumously.

Jonathan Richards' case is seemingly less intense. As an alcoholic, he would possibly be diagnosed with Criterion E2, in the fact that he's prone to reckless and self-destructive behavior. Criterion B could also be applied in the sense that he's triggered to do these reckless acts by noise which evokes panic, after which he turns to alcohol to self-medicate.

Justin Martindale, the Marine whose wife goes missing, isn't given a form of PTSD from war, but would, like Marka Jones, suffer from PTSD from his spouse's disappearance. Like Austin Jones, he could also be said to suffer from Criterion D or the "negative cognitions and mood criterion", seeing his expectations of the future may be permanently altered, and has a wide variety of negative emotional states (Friedman).

After a longer period of time, Marka and Janae could arguably be diagnosed with work-related indirect PTSD. As Marka works in the service industry, she's exposed repeatedly to troops of Marines in the highest of highs and lowest of lows before and after deployments. As most bartenders are prone to be part-time therapists for patrons, she often sees men with amputations, scars, and hears stories of those who didn't come back. Everyone living and working in a military town endures loss in some form, directly or indirectly. Janae, on the other hand, if I were to end her piece by concluding her article in full about the events surrounding Martindale's wife, could be said to have work-related stress trauma because of the weight of the facts of the case in the form of Criterion D, or negative cognitions and mood.

Character Development:

Everett's physical deformity would typically signify to others that he has war-related PTSD, which is why I wrote him without it. He is also the character with the troubled past. His mother left him to be raised by his grandparents on a farm while she ran off to the big city with her new husband. He had no siblings. After his grandparents died, he had no one. A quiet introvert, he was handsome and generally uninterested in women before his looks were drastically changed for the worse. He finds himself repeatedly going to the aid of his friends, fulfilling his life helping others, not dissimilar to many military men like the famous Chris Kyle.

In contrast, the two who do not have physical deformities, Jonathan Richards and Austin Jones, have alcoholism and dissociative psychotic amnesia, respectively. We meet both in Everett's story. Jones describes his wife to Everett as being everything he's ever wanted, a woman he can't wait to get home to, and then assaults her during an episode he later doesn't remember. Richards' explanation for his alcoholism leads the reader into an understanding of his psyche, feeling sorry for him and

understanding that he truly wants to control his urge to drink and find another remedy for his stress triggers.

Justin Martindale isn't given war-related PTSD like Jones and Richards. He is seen introducing his wife and daughter to Everett. A man proud of his family, happy to be home, he meets a fresh, new hell only weeks later when he battles the stereotypes of Marines as he's questioned in his wife's disappearance.

Marka, even after her husband assaults her, refuses to leave his side. She is the most battered of the women in the story, and yet the strongest. Even after his death, she takes charge of his reputation posthumously. *Being deeply loved by someone gives you strength, while loving someone deeply gives you courage - Lao Tzu.*

Abigail is slow to decide on the outcome of her marriage, and while she's stubborn and unforgiving, she's gently pushed back into his life by a mother who at times scolds her like a child yet praises her for her strength. *Courage doesn't always roar. Sometimes courage is the quiet voice at the end of the day saying, "I will try again tomorrow" – Mary Anne Radmacher.*

Janae desires for a fulfilling career in journalism, but battles public opinion and staying unbiased. Staying unbiased proves difficult for her, however, as she digs up information to set Martindale free from public scrutiny, she later gets a hunch that something is amiss in the group of his friends, but proving guilt of any party becomes impossible without a body.

The Writing Process

The idea for this story occurred to me many years ago, even before enrolling in UTEP's Creative Writing program. It weighed on my heart as a story that needed to be told, points of view and struggles of the military wives needed to be shared. It was the quiet war found at home after a husband's deployment. The question was often asked, "Who is this man and where did my husband go?"

Undeniably, both parties change during a deployment, and the reuniting of the family and the melding of two new people in a changed relationship is rarely a simple one. Living with a hero is not always easy, and rarely as glamorous as the fairytale given to young girls.

So when I sat down to write each of their stories, I started with Everett. I wrote the lonely story of a man who came home to no welcome party, and I sent him home away from his troop and let him discover his old farm and relive his past. Advice was given to me that he needed something to do. But the character wasn't ready to do anything.

I started Marka's story. I gave her a burned man and let her react to him. I let her be courteous of his handicap and stunned by his appearance, then I gave her a husband and let him be terrible to her. But the fact still remained that Everett needed something to do and the burned man needed purpose besides to stun people with his appearance, which he can't change. That's when I melded the two, and the burned man became Everett, and I handed him a phone call of a friend in need.

That's when the story of Martindale and his missing wife came to life. How do you address the story of a broken-hearted man? The answer was to give him a friend who believed in him. As I wrote his story through the eyes of Everett, I discovered I needed to address the all-Marines-are-crazy stereotype, and that's when Janae's story was born. Together, Janae and Everett tell the majority of Martindale's story for him, showing two sides of the same coin. But what was to come of his wife? Did she run off with some Jody, which touched on the well-known accusation that military wives cheat? Did he really kill her? *"Ain't no use in lookin' back; Jody's got your Cadillac/Ain't no use in calling home; Jody's got your girl and gone/Ain't no use in feeling blue; Jody's got your sister, too"* – *Get On Back Home*.

While I struggled with what to do with their shared predicament, I began writing Abigail's story in tribute to my dear friend. I let her rage and cry as she discovered the numerous bottles hidden among his military gear in his closet, and let her leave him in the hospital out of anger. She embodied that sense

of “nope” that every wife comes to in their marriage when their husband is a serial-something. She was done. She was done with him and done with living the way she was. But how did that fit in with the rest of the stories? It seemed to be a spin-off, a singular story set apart from the group. Without an answer, I revisited the others and started drawing a timeline of events.

The timeline of events helped put everyone in their respectful places at the proper time, and showed me what I needed to see: there was a gap in time in the middle where the reader had no insight into the rehab facility. And there was the solution: Richards’ drunkenness held purpose to show the demise of Jones before his death. When Richards’ world collapsed around him—two deaths and a wife who was intent on leaving him—his wife found clarity: there was a much larger picture here and she knew it.

Hope, like the gleaming taper’s light,/Adorns and cheers our way;/And still, as darker grows the night,/Emits a brighter ray – Oliver Goldsmith. Where was this novel in stories going to land itself? Military marriage is not a tragedy, and so hope had to be offered, a saving grace had to be given, and the wife not defined as the strongest in the pack was given courage that every other character wanted.

Marka	Richards	Abigail	Janae	Everett	Austin Jones
					Kills Jess: Sex Dream
			Marka	Leaves Farm; Meets Janae	Vomit: Sand
	Bushes		Interviews		Cooler
	Hospital			Richards @ Hospital	Remote
Choked			Martindale cleared	Meets Marka	Chokes Marka
	Peaceful Pines			Peaceful Pines	Peaceful Pines
		Colorado			
			Bar	Bar	
Bar					
	Checkers	Checkers			
Episode	Episode				Episode
Suicide	Suicide	Does not go	Funeral	Funeral	Suicide
Funeral	Does not go	Funeral	Does not go	Does not go	Funeral
Spiral				Spiral	Spiral

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PART 1

Chapter 1: Marka Jones

Under the neon lights, I'm checking the volume of liquor in the bottles, lifting each one, then setting it back down in the stainless steel speed rail, when to my left, I see him pull out a worn, wooden stools from the bar and sit down.

"Hey, sugar. What can I get for you?" I ask, unable to make eye contact.

Not until I fill a beer from the tap for a waitress do our eyes meet. Everything stops. I can't look away, I can't refocus, and the room darkens except for the halo from the drop light above him at the bar. The clinks and clangs of plates fade and I overfill a beer, the icy foam overrunning the top of the glass, pouring down the frosty surface and across my knuckles. "Oh," I hear myself say in a tiny voice and avert my eyes, shutting off the tap and steadying my hand as I place the beer and ticket on the black rubber wait-stand mat.

I pull another ticket from the feeder.

"I'm still trying to decide," he says from his seat, scanning the menu.

I assure him I'm listening, but continue to make the drinks for the wait staff, scooping the ice from the well into glasses for mixed drinks, pulling bottles and pouring liquor, adding mixers and setting out drinks. Thankful that the rush of dinner hour is on us and my newest customer won't be the center of my attention, I know that when he decides his order, I'll need to make eye contact again.

I'm printing a check for a customer at the computer when I hear him say, when he says, "When you're ready, I'll have a Coke and a basket of fried pickles." I pull the ticket from the printer and tuck it in the sleeve of a black book, and turn my eyes up to the ceiling as I face him.

I smile and look into his green eyes.

"A Coke and an order of fried pickles? Is that all?"

"Yes, ma'am. For now." His voice smooth and drawn, he's quite young.

I give him an exaggerated grimace. "Yikes. Please don't call me ma'am. I'm Marka, and I'll answer to anything except ma'am." I wink at him to let him know I'm playing, and he smiles and nods back. What is it about Southern boys and their manners? Polite with green eyes. I wonder what happened to his face, but I know the answer. I imagine a cloud of dust kicked up by a tan Humvee in the desert, and the explosion that overturns it. He clutches his face, writhing as his fellow troops lay disfigured or dead beside him. Or maybe he was knocked out and skipped the torment of feeling his face burn. Somehow that seems to be the more humane version, and I hope he wasn't awake for whatever happened to his face. A part of me wants to stare, to look at the scar it up close, maybe even feel the smooth, bubbled skin with the tip of my finger, but I can't or shouldn't. Another part of me doesn't want to see it at all.

So I place his order and tend to my tables, busying myself with keeping the bar and waiting tables. Not until I round the corner from the kitchen with his fried pickles do I see his profile clearly. The skin on the left side of his face from just above his ear, where his sideburns should be, down through his cheek to his jawline and around to his mouth, is marbled, purple meat instead of skin. His t-shirt fitting, but not tight, rests on his tan biceps, no scars on his left forearm resting on the bar. He's not wearing a wedding ring. He thanks me, and I resist the urge to pat his shoulder on the way by.

As I work through the night and talk to customers, I find myself watching him sit alone. No one comes to meet him, but he's not glued to his cell phone like he's waiting for anything or anyone's phone call. The longer the evening drags on, the more customers I bring drinks to and clean up after, the more I find myself glancing up at the scarred man at the bar.

Eventually, I escape to the bathroom between customers. A mom in the bathroom changes her baby's diaper, and I walk past her and into a stall. I don't have to use the restroom, but I need a minute to myself. Sitting on the toilet, I smile at the sounds of her chattering with her baby while she changes the diaper. She's pretending the baby's feet stink to keep him happy while she changes his pants.

"Shoo-ey!" she says, and the baby laughs.

I pull up my pants and tuck my black, collared shirt back into the waist, then open the stall door just as the mom leaves the bathroom. Stopping to wash my hands, I scan myself in the mirror looking for anything out of the ordinary, the messy bun of deep red hair sits on my head, the curly ends escaping the ponytail keeper. I check the back of my heavy drop-tassel earrings, which tend to fall out. I lean across the granite countertop and examine my face in the mirror. My eyebrows need a wax and the sight of the little stray hairs on the bridge of my nose make me scrunch my eyebrows until a line appears between my eyebrows and I remind myself not to make that face. I dig a little peach-colored Chapstick out of my purse and smooth it on my lips, and see the purple shadows of my husband's fingerprints gripped on my forearm from last night.

Lynsy, the daytime bartender, walks into the restroom just as I'm finishing washing my hands.

"Thanks again for staying late on Tuesdays," I say. "I really owe you."

"Hey, no worries. How was it?"

"Fine, I guess. He didn't show up again. Maybe next time." I give her a half-hearted smile and she looks back at me with a little sorrow in her eyes.

"Yep. Meantime, you're looking smokin hot today." She smacks me on the butt as she walks by.

"Well, thank you, ma'am. A compliment of the highest respects." I bow in an exaggerated curtsy and laugh. She boosts my all-work, no-play spirits and I'm grateful.

One by one, two by two, the crowd dissipates from the bar, and I'm left with cleaning chores and a few stragglers, including the scarred man.

While I clean the tables and deep leather booths that surround the bar, wiping the crumbs and small trash from the tabletops and seats to the floor, I imagine what he would have looked like without the scars. I try to picture his face with his toffee-colored skin replacing his scar, the dark soft stubble of his hair replacing the boiled reminder near his ear, but it's difficult.

I wonder if he had a girlfriend before he went into the service. Of course he did, I decide. He looks a high school athlete, but tall and lean like a basketball player, not square like a football player. I bet his girlfriend was pretty and smart. I try to picture him with a cheerleader, but, watching him sit at the bar alone, sure of himself, needless of other's attention, it doesn't quite fit. The bouncy cheerleaders annoyed to him - too needy, too insecure.

I clean the next booth with my spray bottle and rag, lugging the half-full black plastic dish bucket along with me. Where is his girlfriend now? I wonder. I imagine his departure from a tearful girlfriend as he leaves for boot camp and again when he leaves for war. He tucks a strand of hair behind her ear and kisses her wet cheek. She frowns when she receives the phone call that he's been injured on duty, her mouth dropping open as her knees hit the carpet. "Injured how? Is he going to be okay? Where is he? When can I see him?" Later, she waits for the elevator to reach his floor at the hospital, checking her watch. She covers her mouth when she sees her boyfriend's face when the nurse unwraps the gauze to change his bandage. She tries to be strong, tries to see past the scar and tell herself that it doesn't matter, that she wasn't in love

with his face, but for some reason she can't and eventually -- not right away, and not for such blunt reasons she breaks up with him. And here he is... alone.

I glance back up at him as I wipe off the menus stacked at the end of the bar, and he's just sitting there, watching the news, not paying any attention to me. From this side, I can't even see his scar. He looks like any other well-bred young man with a round head, strong cheekbones, and a square jaw to match his square shoulders. He's attractive with his dark hair cut short, his green eyes. His lips aren't full but not thin, his mouth heart-shaped, his jawline defined and angular, a little dimple in his right cheek. Was there one on his left?

My mind goes back to his scar. I've seen so many side effects from Afghanistan from behind the bar, but this one's just so blatant. My God. He wears it on his face.

I don't know if it's more for him or for me, but I pour us two tequila shots while he's concentrating on the TV. I slide the shot glass down the length of the highly glossed wood bar with just enough force that it taps his arm, and I wait. He looks down at the glass, and then back up at me.

"Um," he hesitates. "I'm not --"

"Old enough? I didn't ask."

"Much of a drinker. But thank you for the offer." He scoots the glass to the edge of the bar nearest me.

"All right then," I say. "Just thought I'd offer."

"Thanks for the gesture. You're not the only one. The scars get me lots of drinks."

"Oh, it wasn't about the scar --"

"Sure it was. You wouldn't've bought a shot for any other possibly underage man today, would you?" He grins at me and cocks one eyebrow up. I wink back.

"Only if they were as pretty as you, doll face," I say. He laughs for the first time. It's a hearty, soulful laugh. His smile is contagious.

"Okay then. Fair enough. Now don't let me keep you from closing up." He pulls his wallet out of his pocket and puts a debit card on his ticket in front of him.

"Can I ask you something? And you don't have to answer if you don't feel like it, but my husband has PTSD, and I assume you do, too, and I'm desperate for anything I can do to get through to him sometimes. Do you have any suggestions?"

As our conversation turns from playful to personal, so does his expression.

"I'm sorry," I say when he doesn't immediately answer, "I just assumed you have PTSD because of your face."

His arm on the bar, he leans closer to me.

"My scars are mostly on the outside," he says, "You just learn to accept that they're a part of you now." I pay out his order with his card and give him the slips to sign. He puts the pen down, scoots his barstool back and stands, putting his card in his wallet and his wallet back in his pocket.

"I could tell you you're beautiful every day until you believe me, but it's like I'm not even talking to the same man when he's having an episode. He was never a violent man before this last deployment, but he gets angry over the littlest things these days. Last night he threw the remote control so hard that it stuck in the drywall. I left it there, and this morning he asked me how it got there."

"Have patience with him," he tells me. "It won't be easy, and he will never be the same man he was before he enlisted, but if you can conquer this with him, it'll be worth it. The last

thing he needs is to be alone." I nod and he squeezes my arm. "Now, I'm sure you need to get home to him, so I'll be on my way."

I thank him and watch him leave then pick up his credit card receipt. Nice to meet you, Everett, I think when I read his name.

Only when I get a couple of blocks from the house do I realize I drove the entire way home in silence. I can't sigh enough.

My husband's car in the driveway, I pull up next to the curb. The lights down in the rest of the house, but the TV flickering in the living room through the blinds in the big window, I think maybe it'll be a good night. Maybe he's asleep on the couch. I gather my purse and take the keys from the ignition. I get out of the car, still hoping he's asleep, but not until after I hear the horn honk do I think that I probably should've locked it manually rather than use the key fob. If he was asleep, he certainly won't be now.

The front door unlocked, I push it open, into the sounds of gunfire and men talking -- some yelling -- at each other.

He's playing one of his war games.

"Pardon me," I say and move across the living room, across his line of sight with the TV.

"Move!" he yells at me.

"Sorry. I had to come inside."

"Had to come inside' she says. Where've you been, anyway?"

"At work, Austin. Remember? I told you this morning I worked the evening shift tonight. I even left you a note."

"Never got a note. It'd be nice to -- GODDAMMIT, SHOOT THAT MOTHERFUCKER! -- be nice to know where my woman is unless you're trying to hide something. You trying to hide where you've been?"

"No, Austin. I've been at work." In the dining room, I peel off the sticky note that I put on the table next to the bowl I asked him to put his keys and glasses in every night so he can find them the next day. "See, honey? Here's the note I left you -- by the key bowl. If you would try to remember to put your keys in the bowl every --"

"I don't need to put my keys in a fucking key bowl, okay? I'm fine. And how was I supposed to know you'd put the note there? How was I supposed to know you were at work? I think you were out running around on me. That's what I think. I think you've got some Jody on the side keeping you busy while I'm at work all day."

"I don't have a Jody, Austin. I have a job. And what have you been doing all day? You missed our marriage counseling appointment again. Did you go to the rest of your appointments today, or did you sit here playing video games all day?" I look around the living room, Mountain Dew bottles scattered across the coffee and end tables, three cigarette packs that I'm pretty sure weren't there yesterday squished between the cushions of the couch next to where he sits.

"I told you -- I'm not going to fucking therapy with you. If you don't like living here, then leave."

I perch down on the arm of the couch, about three feet from him. "Honey, I don't want to leave you. I just think maybe we need some help right now. Maybe this last deployment got in your head."

"Ha! What a fucking joke. 'Got in my head.' If you think I'm going to let some wizard get in my head, you're fucked, babe. And you still haven't answered the question. Where were you tonight?"

"I did answer the question. I told you I was --" But before I can finish, his hand's around my neck, his fingertips pressing against my spine, his thumb curving over my wind pipe, his face so close to mine I can smell the burnt ash on his hot breath, see the vein's path in intricate detail as it pops from his forehead, his grip the only thing holding me from tumbling backward off the couch. For a second, I think, I'd be grateful if he would drop me so I can catch my breath.

"Lie to me again."

"Austin!" I gasp. I try to stay still like the therapist told me, not to provoke him further. "Baby, please."

"Don't 'baby please' me. I want the truth, goddammit!" his voice hot on my face, his breath like burnt cigarettes.

"Okay, please, I can't breathe. I can't talk to you if I can't breathe."

"You seem to be doing just fine. Maybe I should tighten my grip." And he does. I wince against his grip, holding still against my will to thrash and beat him to let me go. Tears leak from my eyes into my hairline. I open my mouth but nothing comes out. The living room goes dark and as I raise my hand to him, he drops me onto the floor.

The jolt of the ground against my back shoves air out of my lungs. Austin goes back to his video game, ignoring my gasping as I scramble to my feet and run to the bathroom, keeping one eye on Austin, now leaning back against the couch with one foot up, unaware of where I am.

I slip around the corner into the hallway bathroom and lock the door, sinking into a sob on the tile floor, safe behind the door.

When my heart slows, I can hear him still playing his game in the living room. I decide it's safe to shower, so I turn on the hot water, strip out of my clothes and step into the steam behind the curtain. First, my hands feel the tingle of the hot water, still shaking, then my arms and body. I walk straight into the water, letting it pour over my head and down my back. I lean against the wall and cry again washing the mascara away from my eyes.

Going robotically through the motions of showering, washing the smell of the bar from my hair, running my fingers down my neck for tender spots, throat sore.

The water turns cold and I know I have to get out. I kill it and reach for a towel, patting dry and putting on lotion, knowing I'll have to step out of the bathroom. I wrap in my towel and with a deep breath, then turn the lock on the door. Lifting it a little so it doesn't squeak, I make my escape from the bathroom. I've made it from the bathroom to our bedroom in two large steps before, knowing where it's silent to step and where the floorboards creak, so I take that path. I get only one chance to glance at him between the two rooms, and a wave of relief rushes over me when I see him on the couch, head lolled back, snoring. Even so, I'm cautious shutting the bedroom door, locking it to put a barrier between us.

It doesn't take long for me to fall asleep, but I wake up with a startle, remembering the night before, and wondering where Austin is. The dawn lets enough light in to see the bedroom door is still closed. I flip the covers back, get out of bed, unlock it and lean my head out. He's laid out now on the couch, still asleep, and I exhale the breath I didn't know I was holding.

I use the restroom and go to the kitchen to get started for the day without having any idea what mood Austin will wake up in, without wanting to deal with it all, and left wondering what the right thing is to do here -- to stay with the Marine I married and pray, to force him to get the help he needs, or to cut my losses and go home before he gets worse and one of us ends up dead.

I'm standing at the coffee pot, lost in thought, listening to the water percolate, smelling the dark roast fill the air, doing nothing and everything I can to keep it together, when I feel him lean against me from behind, running a warm hand around my stomach, kissing the nape of my neck.

"Morning, beautiful," he says.

"Morning," I say.

"I never heard you come in last night. You have to work late, baby?"

Is he freaking serious?

When I turn around to look at him, I realize he's being genuine. He has no clue about last night.

Shit. Proceed with caution.

"No, I came home while you were still playing your game. You don't remember?"

"No...." I can see the gears of his mind grinding, working something out. His tone's insecure, but I don't think he knows why he's uncertain of his own answer if he doesn't think he saw me last night.

"Coffee?" I turn away to pull a cup from the cupboard.

"Thanks," he says and takes the cup from me.

"My neck's sore today; can you see anything on it?" I lift my chin to show it to him, wondering if seeing the marks -- or hell, even just seeing my throat -- will spark anything in his memory.

"You've got a red place there." He touches my neck with his fingertips. "You hit something?"

Oh, I hit something all right. I hit a nerve.

"Austin, we need to talk."

"Uh-oh." He kisses me on the cheek and looks down his nose at me, amusement in his eyes. "Nothing good ever comes from that statement." He walks past me and pulls one of the wooden chairs out from underneath the dining room table and motions for me to come sit on his lap. "Come here, babe. What's up?"

I pull the chair out next to him instead. He frowns. "You're serious," he says.

"Austin, do you remember me telling you in one of our therapy meetings that you sometimes blackout and do things you don't remember doing the next day?"

"Sure, but I just...can't believe that."

"Austin, you have to believe it. It's getting worse. You were up when I got home last night."

"No, I wasn't," he says. "I'd remember you coming in if I were awake. I must've been asleep on the couch."

"No, baby." How could he not remember the feel of my neck gripped in his hand? Wouldn't he have felt my veins throb in the palm of his hand? Is my pulse not memorable to him, when I could identify his heartbeat among others after so many nights listening to his heart while we lay in bed together? How much I missed it when he was on the other side of the world. I clear my throat to push back the lump.

"I came in right after I got off work and you were playing your video game."

"I was into my game. Maybe I didn't see you."

"Oh, you saw me all right. You accused me of having an affair, and snapped at me."

"How late were you?"

"That's just it. I wasn't late."

"Then why would I assume you were cheating if you weren't late?" He's trying to remember, to work it all out in his mind, his eyes searching mine to see if I'm lying or toying with him.

"Honey." I reach out for his hand. "The point here isn't that you accused me of cheating, which I'm not, but what you did to me while you were accusing me."

He drops his eyes and his hands to his lap. "That's why your neck's sore today?" he asks without looking up.

Tears fill my eyes and I nod at him, unable to answer him. He nods, and I know he knows my answer.

"I hurt you?"

A tear drops onto his arm where he wipes it on his athletic shorts.

Long, solemn moments go by without speaking, and I feel the weight of the situation lift off my shoulders as realization sinks down on him, and I wish I could take it back and carry the burden for him.

I tell him I have to go to work in an hour, without knowing what else to say, but I don't get up. He stares down at his folded hands in his lap.

I sit with him a few minutes longer. He's unceremonious about wiping off his tears.

I stand and linger in front of him. I run my hand through his short hair and along the side of his face. I don't pull his chin up to look at me or lean down for a kiss, but I feel him lean his head into my palm and I stroke his temple with my thumb, then walk down the hallway to get dressed.

"He went to this place called Peaceful Pines," I tell Lynsy, days later. "I still can't believe it. It all happened so fast."

"That's amazing, Marka. I'm really happy for you guys. When does he get to come home? Can you visit?"

I tell her he gets to come home in a couple of weeks, but says he doesn't want me to visit yet, and it's the first time Lynsy and I have had a good conversation about my husband, and if it's not the first, it certainly feels like it.

"I hate that he had to go through that - that you had to go through that," she says, "but I'm glad he's getting some help."

"Me, too. I hope they'll get his meds adjusted or under control or whatever before he gets out so he's even-keeled when he leaves there, you know?" She nods.

She leaves me to my shift. Tips are good, tables flow well, the cooks are on top of their game. Before I go home, I order some wings and pick up a six pack of Blue Moon for the house, making sure I'm there when he calls. And when he does I listen to every word. He's already been to a group therapy session, he tells me, and I wouldn't believe it, but a guy from his troop's there for alcohol. They've seen a lot together and it might be good to have a familiar face around. He tells me he's scheduled to see the resident doctor in a couple of days, but until then they have his medications and make sure he takes them.

"Did they look at the dosage to make sure these drugs didn't cause the blackouts?"

"The nurse didn't seem concerned when I turned them in. Babe, I'm sure they'll check everything in the next few days. Hell, it can't be the first time they've seen military-issued PTSD drugs. It's probably one-size-fits-all like the rest of the Marine Corps," he jokes, but it doesn't make me feel better.

"Okay, I love you." He says he loves me, too.

There's comfort in knowing he's cared for during the day, and my shift goes by smoothly again day after day. When we speak in the evenings, he tells me about his time in group or things he's been thinking about, although he won't tell me details about his previous deployments, and I don't ask. "I love you," he tells me again and again, like he did when I was his whole world before the destruction of war.

Chapter 2: Janae Lyon

Dropping my purse on the bar with a plunk, I pull out a wooden barstool and sit down with a loud sigh. "I need a beer," I tell my favorite bartender, who laughs. She's dressed in her usual black attire, hair piled up on top of her head, standing, facing away from me at the computer. She turns, slides open the stainless steel door to the cooler where the pint glasses are frosting, looks at me, raising an eyebrow.

"You just get off work?"

"Yeah, why else would I need a beer?"

"Was it a tall beer or short beer kind of day?"

"Tall. I think. It may be too early to tell, but let's go tall, just to be on the safe side."

"The usual?"

"Yep."

She pulls the wooden handle of the Yuengling Lager tap to fill the frosty glass.

"What's new and exciting today that may or may not rank a tall beer?"

She sets a bar napkin in front of me and pours salt on it to keep the glass from sticking to it.

"After I got to my first live location at 5, news broke that a military wife is missing, and guess who's in the spotlight."

She sets the beer in front of me.

"The husband?"

"Of course."

I nod and swirl my fingertip around the top of the head of the beer to get the foam to subside. The bubbles pop, and I slide my fingers down the frozen contours of the glass to lift it to my lips and take a good, long drink.

"What's his story?" she asks.

I swallow. "Marine, of course, so everyone assumes he's already off his rocker and unstable. Not great for him. He got back from deployment a few weeks ago -- also not great for him -- and he was supposed to go home for combat leave, but he called her in missing before they were supposed to leave."

"Hold that thought. Let me check this table."

She walks off. I lift my butt up off the chair to smooth down my cobalt dress.

Marka makes the corner back around behind the bar.

"Would you mind turning that up a bit?" I ask her and point to the center TV above the bar. "I want to see the national news."

CNN's reporter looks to be live from outside a police station -- I assume the police station in the couple's hometown. The lower third crawls "Olive Hill Police Department." In front of the red brick building, the camera focuses on the reporter. Marka turns up the volume. The CNN reporter nods as I presume the anchors ask him a question, the reporter mid-sentence he says, "...not naming him as a suspect as of yet, but as a person of interest in this investigation. Of course, her family and friends hope there's been some misunderstanding and she will be found alive and well."

The report ends and I unlock my phone and create a text to my news director, "Husband named POI. I'll call interviewee and put her on standby tomorrow in case we go live again." I put down the phone again.

"So -- I don't understand -- did they arrest the husband?" Marka asks, turning the TV back down.

"Not yet. They haven't charged him with anything or named him as a suspect. At this point, he's just on their watch list."

"Anyone spoken to her family?"

"That's just it, the family seems to like him. But there's one friend of hers that made comments on Facebook that, I think, led to the police looking into him."

"So now it's a matter of who knew him best," she says. And unfortunately it's not uncommon. These guys change over time. Who did his wife talk to honestly? A friend, a counselor, her mom, no one? I pull out a skinny reporter pad from my purse and jot down a few follow-up questions, drinking my beer.

On my phone again, I pull up Facebook and type his name in the search bar and see his face. His profile picture, a dusty background, standing on a dune, fully dressed in his cammies, flak jacket with extra magazines, and an M16 battle rifle slung over one shoulder. I look for details, his watch, his face, his sunglasses, his boots, but nothing stands out. I click photos, but everything's private except a few uninteresting profile pictures.

I click his About section. Married to Jessica Ray Martindale. I click his wife's name. Her picture albums not private, I scroll through her photos. I scroll to the bottom first and screenshot the page of thumbnails. They're young in the first picture I spot of them together. They're near water, both in bathing suits, both fit, both tan. In a white bikini that fits her athletic body well without being too skimpy, her sandy blonde hair pulled up in a ponytail, she has a blue headband on to hold down her bangs and flyaway strands of hair. She wears large, dark sunglasses to shield her eyes.

He's quite a bit taller than she is, standing shirtless behind her in the sun, his forearm across her upper chest, staking his claim, muscles are toned, but not huge. Her hand rests on his forearm. Neither looks at the camera, but out at the landscape. I can't tell where they are, except a lakeshore rather than a beach.

I minimize the photo and scroll through others. I find another from the same trip. She's walking away from him, holding a sunscreen bottle out to someone off camera with her left hand. Her right hand is still caught in his, his fingers curled around her open hand, stretching her out across the frame of the photo. Still tan, wearing a blue life jacket, her mouth open, she's talking or calling to someone. The backdrop in the photo shows tall green trees and rock jutting out over the water's edge.

I sip my beer and scroll through more of the thumbnails. In a picture from their wedding, he stands behind her, again with his arm across her chest, her hand on his forearm, but this time he leans down to kiss her cheek. She looks into the camera with a smile that reaches almost to her caramel-colored eyes. It's not a posed photo. Or if he was asked to kiss her cheek, I don't think she knew it. She has a few crow's feet near her eyes, her pink lips shine with gloss, her teeth white and straight with one slightly crooked one.

Another profile picture shows her in a hospital bed and gown holding a baby girl. He leans down to kiss his wife's forehead. They have a baby, I jot down in my notebook.

I scroll up to see her pictures since he's been deployed. There's not much posted, just a selfie with a friend over a glass of wine and a meal. Brunch, maybe? A picture of what could be a family photo of hers -- possibly her parents and a couple of brothers.

Another picture catches my eye, a side profile of the daughter, 2 or 3, sitting at a table with her mom's sandy blond hair, but brighter, blonder, disheveled. She looks at a laptop screen.

The man on the screen looks back at her with his hand up like he's waving. It's Martindale. Must've been while he was on deployment, I realize, and I wish I could see the little girl's face in the photo, but her hair covers most of it. I wonder what the little girl is thinking. Does she recognize him? Does she know him enough to miss him? How many times has he been deployed?

I take screenshots of the thumbnail pictures to have on file and glance up at my beer, the frost gone and only a few inches of my drink missing from the glass. I take a sip.

"Hey, do I know you?" I hear from my left. I look over. An older woman sits two chairs down.

"I don't think so."

"You look really familiar," she says. She has a smoker's voice and deep wrinkles. "It'll come to me. I know I've seen you somewhere before."

"Yes, ma'am," I say.

She turns to her drink, a something-and-Coke, so I turn back to mine when I see a younger woman join her on the other side. She greets her loudly and gets off the stool to hug her.

"Marka! This is the niece that I told you was coming to visit me. I'm her favorite aunt, you know," she says. I smile, knowing Marka isn't all that interested, but this is the life of a bartender.

"You're my only aunt, you know," the niece says, and I have to glance sideways to see if the niece is serious, but she's all smiles.

"Yeah, but even if I wasn't, you'd still like me the best, right?"

I hide my smile in my beer while I drink. Marka walks by me after she serves them and crosses her eyes at me. I wink back and she laughs silently, shaking her head. She goes to check on a table.

I flip open the menu in front of me and think about ordering something.

"That's the story I was telling you about, look!" I look over and see the nice pointing at the TV screen.

"What happened?" the aunt asks.

"Some douchebag Marine killed his wife or something. Now they're just trying to prove it. I heard about it on the radio driving in this morning."

They're not even talking to me and I'm annoyed.

"They found the body?" the aunt asks.

"I don't think so, but he probably did it," the nice says.

"Why do you say that?" her aunt asks.

"There's not a Marine out there without a screw loose. That's how they get them to join in the first place."

I tense my lips and butt in.

"I've been following this story all day," I tell them, leaning their direction. "It's crazy, you're right about that, but I don't think anyone knows what happened to her yet -- not even that she died. Even national news hasn't had anything new yet."

The two women look over at me, the older one turns in her chair.

"That's where I've seen you," she says to me. "You're on the news, right? In the mornings."

"Yes, ma'am."

"I knew you looked familiar. Skootch over here and fill us in on the details."

I laugh a little. Everyone always thinks I know more than I do or that I'll tell them information something besides public information.

"I don't know much else," I say, "just that they're still searching for the woman. He just got back from deployment, and she went missing. We were still waiting on the official timeline of her disappearance from the police department when I left work today, so I don't know how long he'd been home before she went missing."

"I mean, honestly, what are the options here?" the niece asks. "They probably got into a fight and he snapped on her. She either left scared and hasn't made it home yet or he killed her."

"Surely it's not that black and white," the older woman says.

"This happens too often," she tells her aunt, then leans around her aunt to speak to me. "Remember the Marine who killed his pregnant wife and tried to burn her body? Or the one who pushed her off a cliff?"

"Yes," I admit, "but other times --"

"See? The reporter knows how dangerous these men are," she tells her aunt.

"I didn't say they were dangerous," I say.

She looks at me like I just insulted her intelligence. "How are they not? They go overseas and do God-knows-what and come back to an innocent family and basically become terrorists themselves."

"I'm sorry? I must've misunderstood you. The families these men come home to are the ones they left behind to begin with. They're not strangers and the Marines don't come back with intent to terrorize their own families. They come back with more on their plate than they

bargained for sometimes." My neck is getting hot. I decide against ordering dinner and unhook my purse from underneath the bar. I set it on the barstool between us and get my wallet out.

"Oh, I see." She turns her body back to the bar. "Just another biased journalist."

I put a \$10 bill on the bar and stand up. My beer isn't empty, but I'm okay with that.

I walk out of the restaurant and across the hot parking lot. I flip my wrist to look at my watch. Seven o'clock. I should be in bed by now. I check my phone before I get to my little Jetta. My news director's text reads: "Reschedule tomorrow's interview. Sending you contact for Marine's sister."

"Oh, nice!" I unlock my car door and fling the door open. The hot air from the car boils out, so I stand off to the side long enough to call my boss.

"Hey, it's Janae. What if I told you I almost got into a bar fight over the missing Marine wife story?"

"What? Are you serious, Janae? Listen, if you can't --"

"Not really," I laugh. "But it's certainly the talk of the town, and apparently I'm biased for not immediately concluding that he's a murderous monster. So that's neat."

"Well, someone else would think you were bias for thinking he did axe his wife. That coin goes both ways. Don't let it bother you, okay?"

"Sure thing."

"Did you get my text about his sister?"

"Yes, how'd we find her? I Facebook stalked his wife and him after work."

"Someone in sales had him as a friend. The sister's stationed here with her husband."

"I'll call her and call you back when I confirm time and place." He agrees and I hang up.

I get in my car and turn the engine on and the air conditioner up full blast. I leave it in park, get out my notepad and pen and call the sister.

She answers so fast the line didn't ring on my end. She must've had the phone in her hand, and I feel sorry for her a little.

"Hi, is this Lori?"

"Lori Ann, yes." I write LORI ANN and underline it.

"Lori Ann, my name's Janae Lyon and I work for Channel 10 here in Jacksonville."

"I don't have anything to say to you people." And she hangs up on me.

"Well, shit."

I put the car in drive and my phone connects via the car's Bluetooth system, and I make another call.

"Hey boss, the sister just hung up on me -- "

He cuts me off. "Just get the interview."

"What we know so far about the sister?"

"Not much."

"Listen, I really want to get her side of the story about her brother before and after deployment."

"See what she has to say about the wife, too. See if they liked each other."

"Yeah, the wife's friend on social seemed to take sides. Maybe I can get her to talk about the rift. There has to be a story behind it."

"Let me know if you need anything."

I hang up and drive home thinking about how to get her on my side, how to get her to talk to me.

My small one-bedroom apartment is a mess. Moving through the apartment, gathering shoes and coffee cups, thinking about how to get Lori Ann to talk to me. I abandon my duties in the kitchen after an idea hits me. I decide on sending her a text message. Hopefully explaining myself will get her to relax and she'll agree to the interview. But first I need more information. And my phone.

"Boss, who at the station knew the Marine? I need to see what his profile says about his relationship with his sister so I can use it to convince her to talk to me."

"I'll call you back with it." And he hangs up.

I'm changing into my pajamas when my phone dings with a text.

"Good relationship," it reads. "He's older than she is. Pictures on his timeline show them as far back as the 90s as kids. Hope that helps."

I sit on my bed and compose a text to Lori Ann: "It's Janae, the reporter you hung up on earlier today. I have a brother, too, so I get it. I just want to help you tell his side of the story. If you're up for it, I'd like to interview you in the morning and talk about what happened, and about your brother and his wife. Would you be willing to do that for him?" I press send and wait, just stare at my phone, refreshing the screen so it stays lit.

"Come on....answer me."

Just staring, waiting for the blue bubble to move up in line, waiting for the grey bubbles to appear below my message, waiting for a read receipt, for something to send me an acknowledgment that she's at least considering my proposal without immediately shutting me out. Something. Even a maybe. Nothing. I stare at my phone for ten minutes.

"I can't just sit here," I say to the empty apartment, so I go back into the kitchen to finish the dishes and make myself a sandwich.

When my phone dings again, I jump and knock it to the floor. Cursing, I open it to read the text.

"What time?" the text reads.

"Can I call you?" I write.

Instead, she calls me.

"Thank you," I say, "for agreeing to sit down with me."

"I'm going against my better judgment, but I love my brother and I hate what everyone's saying about him. He's not an angry guy. He wouldn't do anything to hurt his wife."

"Let's hope we can shine some light on that and help bring out the details of the case. Helping your brother will make you feel better."

"I hope you're right."

"Me too. Journalism and Marines don't need a worse rep than they already have, am I right?" She laughs and we relax a little. "So, listen, the live shots are early in the morning, but I thought it would be cool to have a casual one-on-one interview with you and let the viewer get an intimate sit-down experience and connect with you. Could we do it at your house?"

"It's kind of a mess..." she says, so I tell her we won't be touring the house on camera.

"The camera will be stationary, and it'll just be me and you, unless you can convince your brother to join us," because that'd be freaking amazing for my career, I think.

"No, he can't," she says. "He's under orders." Figures.

"Can you tell me what you'll ask me? I'd feel better if I could prepare."

"It'll be pretty basic stuff about him, as far as you know."

"Oh..." she says.

"Unless you have something you'd like to talk about?"

"No, no. I just don't want to fumble tomorrow."

"You'll do great, okay? Relax. I'll see you about 5 in the morning then, okay? Text me your address so I can use my GPS, please. Thanks again for agreeing to speak with me."

I hang up with her and wait for her to send me her address. When it comes in, I open a new text message and forward the address to my boss. I walk to my bed, crawl in and stay awake long enough to check that my alarm is set for 2 a.m.

Putting my heels on, I flip my wristwatch over and check the time. Right on time.

I slip into my car on the driver's side and lean across to set my bags on the passenger seat, then straighten up to shut my car door.

"Ma'am." A man's comes from outside my car, making me jump and I drop my phone clunking to the floorboard between the seat and the console.

"Shit, you scared me! Who are you?"

"I just wanted to let you know he's innocent."

"Who's innocent? Who are you? I'm going to call the cops."

"Martindale's innocent. And no you aren't. You dropped your phone and you won't take your eyes off me."

I reach for the door handle again to slam the door shut, but he grabs onto the top of the doorframe and stops me.

"Let go of my door!" I shout to scare him into letting go. The car door still stands between us, gripped in his hands.

"I'm not going to hurt you. I just want you to know that he's innocent," he says in a calm, matter-of-fact tone. His ease gives me pause.

"Who are you?"

"Just another Marine who knows what happened -- or what didn't happen, rather. I'll be watching your story today. Drive safely." He shuts my door and walks off.

I'm too stunned to get out and pursue him, my hands shaking. I grab my keys off the seat and start the ignition. Pulling out of the parking spot, searching the dark lot for him, but I see no sign of him, so I pull out on the street and take a deep breath.

"God, that scared me," I say aloud to no one. My phone rings and I jump again, remembering it's in the depths of my seat. "Shit." I cram my hand between the seat and the console, but it's a tight fit and I can't get it out. "Shit, shit, shit." I see a brightly lit gas station at the end of the block. I check my rearview mirrors for anyone behind me, but the street's dark.

Under the lit canopy, I can't see anyone around, so I get out and crouch low enough to look underneath the seat and spot my phone. I grab it and sit down, close the door and lock it, hands still shaking when I unlock my phone. Missed call: Boss.

I send a text to Lori Ann: On my way.

And I call my boss back.

He answers the phone, "Everything set?" he asks without saying hello.

"I'm on my way there now, but something weird just happened. I was leaving my apartment and someone approached me out of nowhere. I tried to shut my door on him, but he grabbed it. He kept saying that this guy is innocent and that he knows what happened."

"You okay, Janae?"

"Yes, I'm fine. He never touched me. The door was between us. He just kept saying this guy is innocent and that he knows what happened. I kept asking him who he was but he wouldn't tell me. Then he just walked off and I never caught sight of him again."

"Was it the brother?"

"Not unless he's in the habit of talking in the third person."

"Did the guy say he killed her? Maybe he's the killer."

"Or the lover," I say.

"Or both," he says.

"I'm not loving this conversation anymore," I say.

"I'm sending someone to the sister's to be there with you."

"Send me a photographer. I told her last night it would just be me, but I'll tell her you wanted more dynamic shots or something. Thanks. I'm a little freaked out."

"Glad you're okay. Keep checking in with me and I'll send Steve to the address you sent me last night. Don't go in alone."

"Ha! Not a chance. I'll wait in my car until Steve gets here. I have a camera and all the gear I need, in case you want to leave his gear at the station."

"Okay, thanks." He hangs up. I feel better knowing that Steve will be with me inside. I tell my phone to navigate me to Lori Ann's address.

On the way over, I keep going over the incident with the guy in the parking lot. He was being very careful. It was dark outside. I could kick myself for not parking under a streetlight. I try to remember about what he looked like, but the dome light in my car made it hard to see him in the darkness looking down at me. He wasn't overly tall, maybe a white guy, not-so-clean-shaven. A terrible description. Like people I hate interviewing after an incident, I can't recall anything remarkable about the other person involved.

I pull up in front of Lori Ann's house, only one car in the driveway, but several parked along the street. I look around for another station vehicle, but don't see anything yet. I pull out my reporter's pad and go through yesterday's notes. I look at the clock. 4:42 a.m.

My head still down, there's a tap at my window. I flinch and see Steve and roll my window down.

"Don't sneak up on a girl in the dark like that. Sheesh."

He laughs. He's significantly older than I am, greying and balding, but tougher than he looks after being an experienced photog and lugging gear around all day. "I couldn't resist. You ready?"

"Yeah, yeah," and for some reason, I'm a little embarrassed for calling my boss.

I pop the trunk for Steve and while he unloads my equipment, I pack up my notes and check the mirror as I get out of the car.

Steve waits to accompany me to the door, and I'm grateful he's not making a show of not leaving my side, grateful he's here. I keep an eye on the dark streets, but don't see anyone. Steve looks at me and I can read the question in his eyes. I shake my head and we start up the driveway. The porch light is on. I ring the doorbell.

Lori Ann opened the door.

"Hi, Lori Ann, I'm Janae Lyon," I reach out and she shakes my hand with a firm grip, my hand still shaking a little still. I hope she doesn't notice. She opens the door wider to let us in.

"Steve's a station photographer," I tell her. "He'll run the camera for us today."

"I shouldn't be doing this," she says, and I stop. "I spoke to my brother and told him you were coming today. He's less than thrilled about it, to say the least. I just--" She breaks off and I see tears in her eyes. "I just don't know how to help him. He thinks I'll just make things worse."

I spot a box of Kleenex on the end table and pull one for her.

"I'm not here to hurt you or your family," I tell her, but she doesn't believe me. Journalists aren't known for keeping their word. She sits down on the couch and I sit next to her. "Let's set

up, and you and I can talk. If you're still not comfortable by time we go live, then we can cancel the shoot, fair enough?"

She wipes her nose and a tear drops onto her jeans. She looks up at me with big green eyes. She has a very girl-next-door look about her, her brunette hair is past her shoulders, a little more wavy than curly, a little blond at the ends of her hair, giving it a sun-kissed look. She wears a navy t-shirt that looks like it was made just for her without being too tight, a simple silver cross hanging around her neck. Her jeans fit well and cover the tops of her well-worn brown boots. She dabs her cheek, trying to save her makeup, her tissue folded neatly into a small square. I reach to pull another Kleenex from the box and notice the spotless wood and glass table and my eyes wander around the room.

The maple-colored hardwood floors shine like they've just been mopped. The sage green couch and loveseat have vacuum marks. There's not a single thing out of place. The books on the large bookshelf that encases the television are artfully disarranged, but the wood shines.

"Did you stay up all night cleaning?" I ask her.

She blushes. "I couldn't sleep after I got off the phone with Justin. We haven't fought in years. He's my favorite brother. He always liked me best, and I clung to him after our dad died. He's my best friend, and now he's mad at me."

Tears well up in her eyes again.

"I grew up in this town, the daughter of a civilian contractor," I tell her. "My dad worked on base a lot. I've met a lot of really good military men and women, and I've met a lot of ones who give servicemen a bad rep. I'm not here with an agenda, Lori Ann. I have no intention on casting poor light on your brother, but if he's guilty, I won't protect him, either. Can we agree on that?"

She pauses and nods. "Other journalists contacted me, harassed me. One even showed up on my doorstep with a camera. I don't know why I should trust you. I may regret it later, but okay. I want to help my brother."

Yes! "I'm going to step out and call my producer and tell him we're set up. You aren't expecting anyone else to join us this morning, are you?"

"It's just us. My husband's in the field," she says.

"What about your brother's friends? Any of them say anything about the interview?"

"I haven't told anyone except Justin. Why?"

"It's nothing. I just want to make sure there aren't any surprise visitors, that's all."

A few minutes later, Steve tells me we're 30 seconds out.

I pick up the mic of the table and smooth my dress and jacket down one final time. As I look up to Lori Ann, I see her hair stuck in her collar and quickly reach across and run my fingers along the side of her neck, she stiffens, and I use the back of my fingers to free her hair as I pull back. I wink at her.

Five. Four. Three. Two. One.

"Good morning, Angela. I'm here with Lori Ann, Justin Martindale's sister, in an exclusive interview, and she says she has no reason to believe her brother had anything to do with his wife's disappearance. Lori Ann, can you describe your brother for us, before his deployments?"

She looks at me, eyes searching mine, not answering. Then she takes a breath.

"He's my favorite brother," she started, "the one who helps you up when you fall, the one who hand makes birthday gifts."

"Tell me, did he change after his deployments at all?"

"Yes, but it's not like he came back a savage."

"Thank you," I tell her, and turn back to the camera. "Stay with us and we'll talk more about Justin Martindale."

We sit still until Steve turns the light off, indicating that the first live shot was over. I tell her how well she did, and thanked her for staying with me.

Fifteen minutes later, we're back. Three. Two. One.

"When we left off, Lori Ann, you were telling me how your brother was thoughtful growing up; is that right?"

She nods.

"And when we left off, you told us that he did, in fact, change after he enlisted and deployed, but you said he's not a savage. What does that mean to you?"

"Justin couldn't harm his wife. He loved her. They were high school sweethearts. He loved her." She speaks softly and smiles a little at the memory. Her gaze meets my eyes resolution in her voice. "He loved her even when we thought he shouldn't, but he told me that he's loved her since the moment he saw her. His deployments didn't change that. All the guys come back different somehow. They all have little spouts of anger or moments when they don't think clearly. Justin was no different, but he wouldn't harm her."

"You said at one point you thought he shouldn't be with her; why not?"

"They had troubles just like any marriage does. We thought she might've had an affair at one point. He called me upset about it after his first deployment, but how that turned out, I don't know. All I know is that he stayed with her."

"Do you think she was having another affair during his latest deployment, and perhaps he found out about it?"

"If she was, Justin's never mentioned it."

"Would an affair be something to spark one of his little 'spouts of anger' as you called it?"

"I guess...it would make anyone mad," she says.

Steve gives the wrap-it-up cue.

"Stay with us. We'll continue to talk with Lori Ann throughout the hour," I say into the camera. "Janae Lyon, reporting live from Jacksonville."

I stay still until Steve gives me the cue that we're disconnected.

"Are you serious right now?" Lori Ann says. "You made me say that on live TV!"

"I didn't make you say anything; I had no idea about the affair."

"This is a bad idea. Justin's going to kill me!"

"I wouldn't say that last part on live TV."

"This isn't a joke! This is my brother's life."

"Look, we can do two things: you can stop the interview and we can leave it up to public speculation, or we can clarify what you said. Which would you prefer?"

"I don't know, Janae!" Her elbows on her knees, her hands catch her head as she thinks. "This is a terrible position I've put myself in, that you put me in! And the jacked up part is that the only one in this house who I can talk to about it is you, and you just made me out my brother's wife for having an affair that she may or may not have had. Oh, crap. Crap! If she did, he has a motive!"

"I suggest we keep it open. We'll touch on the topic of the affair, and you can explain that you don't have any reason to believe that she had one, okay?"

"Shit, I guess." She's pacing the living room, talking with her hands.

"Once we touch on that, we'll move on to the next question so as to redirect the focus, okay?"

She nods at me, her lips tight. Her phone vibrates in her pocket. She pulls it out, and shows me the screen.

"It's Justin," she says. "Perfect."

"Before you answer--" She slides her finger across the screen to answer it anyway. "You've done enough to help, thank you," she tells me, then walks off with her phone, muttering apologies into the hallway.

Moments later she reappears, still on the phone.

"Look, I said I'm sorry. Just turn your TV back on and I'll try to fix it. Don't freak out," she says to him. "Talk to you soon."

She hangs up and drops her hand to shove her phone in her back pocket. "You better be right about this," she tells to me. "He may never forgive me if I up his stance to primary suspect."

"I promise that wasn't my intention."

She stands in front of me as I'm seated on the couch, but she's looking out the window with her arms crossed. My phone dings and it's a text from the boss. "An affair? You know social loves drama." Social loves drama? I open our station's Facebook page and grimace when I see what people are talking about this morning.

"Your station disgusts me! A woman's missing and you talk about is whether she had an affair? - Sarah M."

"Go figure Suzy would have an affair while he was deployed. Probably wasn't the first time, either. - Adam S"

"Why hasn't anyone found her body yet? She probably did have an affair and is too ashamed to show her face! Sluts like her give military wives a bad name! - Rhonda T"

"Well, hello. Motive. Guess the rest of the story writes itself, doesn't it? - Kendrick T."

"Oh my God," I mutter. So many of them.

"What's happening?" Lori Ann asks me. I don't answer. "Why did you say 'Oh my God', Janae? What's happening?"

I close the app and look up at her. "I hate to tell you this but, when I had hoped that no one picked up on the affair comment, I was wrong. Viewers are commenting on our Facebook page, and probably Twitter, too. You don't want to read it yet. Let's just focus on the next live and we'll look again after." I look at my watch. "It's 5:30. We have two minutes till we go live again. Are you going to be okay?"

"I can't just leave it like it is, now can I? I don't even want to know what everyone's saying about my brother now. I guarantee they all think he's a murderer, thanks to you."

"That's not much of a change, now is it?"

Her mouth drops open to my comment, but she says nothing.

Steve chimes in to tell us we're live in one minute. Lori Ann takes her place next to me, ice in her eyes and looks down at her before Steve counts us in.

"Good morning. I'm here with Lori Ann, the sister of Justin Martindale. She's here to tell us more about her family and why she doesn't believe this is anything more than a misunderstanding. Lori Ann, a moment ago you mentioned Jessica may have had an affair. What made you say that?"

She looks up at me, her eyes softer.

"My brother knew Jessica from back in school. They grew up together. When he went off to boot camp, they got engaged and married after he was done with training. They were 18, maybe 19. Some family and friends said they were too young, too foolish to handle military life, you know? Too young to handle being so far from family when he deploys. I was scared when he deployed. He's my big brother, you know? But he told me once that he'd always come home as long as she was there waiting for him. And he did. He came back to her. After the first deployment, he came to me one night and told me he thought she was having an affair. I told him he should find someone better, find someone who wouldn't do that to him."

"And did they separate or get divorced?"

"He never even considered it. I don't know if he could handle the thought of leaving her. He just said that if she did, they'd work it out, that they'd get through it, that he loved her more than that." She dabbed her cheek. "He really loved her. I just can't see how this could be a murder investigation, no matter what she's done."

"Thank you for speaking with us," I tell her and face the camera. "Stay tuned, and we'll continue to talk with Lori Ann throughout the hour. The full story tonight at 5."

"We're done here," she tells me when we're free to talk again.

She rushes out of the room, so Steve and I pack up the gear and head to our next interview.

"Ms. Lyon, you know you can't just show up and expect answers; there's protocol at the station. Visitors have to sign in."

"But we're not at the station, Sergeant."

"Because you know where I like to eat breakfast."

"I'm a good reporter," I lean up on the table in the booth across from Sergeant Brinks, the station's information officer. "There has to be another person of interest in this case, right?"

"No, not at this moment," he tells me.

"You have any leads on what happened to her then?"

"Not officially. We're checking a few things out, local places she frequented to see if anyone spotted her before she went missing."

"Go on record for me." He gives me a deadpan stare back. I smile my sweetest smile in return.

"For the record," he leans in over his plate and whispers, "you're not my favorite reporter."

"You and I both know that's a damned lie....sir." He laughs at my boldness.

"Fine. Set your camera up."

Two minutes later, I open the blinds where we sit to light the officer's face and we go through the interview about the possibilities of Mrs. Martindale's disappearance.

"What do you say to the citizens who believe Martindale may be guilty and attribute possible PTSD from deployments as motive?" I ask. He glares at me. He wasn't expecting this kind of interview, and probably wouldn't have agreed to the interview if he had.

"That's not a direct reason that the police have named him as a person of interest. But two out of three females killed in domestic violence cases are killed by their partners."

"Do you have any evidence that domestic violence occurred between the Martindales?"

"No, but it wouldn't surprise me if it were unreported because of his line of work."

"So you're saying that living with a hero is as dangerous as any deployment?"

"I never called him a hero."

"He's been deployed three times and earned a bronze star. Some people would call him a hero just for volunteering on the front lines, don't you?"

"Yes, that would probably classify him as a hero."

"So you're telling me that even though there's never been an instance of domestic violence reported between the Martindales he remains a person of interest because of nationwide statistics that may or may not be relevant to this case? And because of that, this case is still being treated as a murder investigation rather than a missing person's case?"

"Ms. Lyon, are you suggesting-- "

"That perhaps it would be more effective to evaluate this case based on the facts, rather than a hunch?"

"I didn't say that."

"So you don't have any facts, and you don't have a hunch, so what do you have?"

"What we have is a missing woman who deserves to have all the angles examined in an effort to find her."

"What other efforts have you made to find her, besides investigating her husband?"

"Ms. Lyon, the Jacksonville Police Department has been in contact with numerous persons and places of business that Mrs. Martindale frequented, but the last person so far to have seen her alive was her husband. Now if you'll excuse me--"

"What do you say to the idea that she may have had an affair while he was deployed not once, but twice?" He does his best to look stoic, a look I'm positive that officers practice in the mirror.

"By your lack of response, I conclude two things: first, you didn't know about the possibility of affairs, and, second, you now have another man to look for. Oh, wait, there's a third. You didn't watch the news this morning, and now you're wondering why the PD's PIO wasn't notified when that bomb dropped during my interview an hour ago."

"This interview is over."

I smile. "I'll be hearing from you first when you uncover something about her lover?"

He escapes my interview, and leaves the booth with a \$20 on the table to cover the bill.

Later that afternoon, while I'm sitting in the editing booth, clipping audio and video for today's piece, a press release comes in from the police department.

"After further review of the evidence of the case, and speaking with Mr. Martindale, the police, at this time, have no other suspects."

I nod, and add the information to my audio recording.

Chapter 3: Abigail Richards

The front door clicks shut and I wait on the plush couch, foot twitching on the coffee table in anticipation. One one-thousand, two one-thousand, three one-thousand, four one-thousand, and I'm off the couch, crossing the living room, and taking the carpeted stairs two at a time. I round the corner into our bedroom, marching through to the adjoining bathroom, and separate the wide white blinds with two fingers.

He's walking up the sidewalk toward the streetlight.

Where is it?

Hands on my hips, I turn around to survey our master suite, eyes scanning the bathroom, deciding to start in here. I have at least fifteen minutes until he gets home from the corner store since he's on foot.

Where would he hide it?

Squatting in front of the double vanity cabinets on my side, there's a Victoria's Secret bag with mini lotions and body sprays and pink tissue, an old gift box of bath soaps and salts that I rifle through, but it's bubble bath, a hair towel and bath salts so I close the lid. On the other side of my sink cabinet is cleaning supplies: toilet bowl and glass cleaners, a sponge that I see mold on when I pull it out. Letting go to pinch it with two fingernails and drop it to the trash. Gross.

Scooting back on my knees, rocking back on my heels, I use the countertop to help me up from the floor, and close the doors of my cabinet.

"Okay...think....hidden in plain sight?" I ask my reflection, and remember the time we laughed about drinking moonshine out of a Gatorade bottle on the crowded beach.

Moving to his side of the sink, I smell his cologne and the water bottle he uses for his hair, but his cologne smells rich and dark, and his water bottle smells like plastic and water so I screw the lid back on, and open the bottom cabinet doors under his sink.

"Ugh. Boys." Nothing is organized.

Dropping to my knees, leaning inside the cabinet, I see a box sitting behind a tub of electric razor guards, top flaps folded in. I pull the flaps and lean farther in the cabinet to look inside, but find magazines, an old calendar, a half-empty body wash bottle, a dirty towel and a rubber duck. "Have you seen it, ducky?" I ask, dropping duck behind me on the tile floor, thinking our daughter would probably like to have her toy back.

"Mommy, where's daddy?"

She startles me and I whack my head on the counter as I'm coming out.

"Sweetheart, you scared me. What'd you ask?"

"Where's daddy?"

"He went to the store. He said he needed a snack."

"Can I have a snack?"

Leaning down, picking up the yellow duck with her little chubby hands with chipped, pink glittery nail polish, she looks up at me with big hopeful brown eyes.

"Sure, honey. Let's see what kind of snacks daddy brings home today, and I'm sure he'll let you have one."

"Daddy goes to get snacks a lot," she says with a pout. "How come he gets more snacks than me?"

"He's the dad. He gets snacks whenever he wants them."

"When I'm a daddy, I'm going to eat lots of snacks, too."

I chuckle. "Yes, sweetheart, when you're a mom you can eat snacks, too. Now go finish your cartoon and let me know when daddy gets home, okay? Then we can have snacks."

"Yay!" she squeals, skips out of the room, long brown, tousled hair bouncing behind her, leaving me standing in the threshold between our bedroom and bathroom. I look around the bedroom for a place to start. Looking at the long dresser against the opposite wall, I think about the countless times I've opened those drawers putting away socks, underwear, folded t-shirts, workout clothes, pajama pants. There's not one drawer I haven't personally opened in the past few days or weeks.

I make quick work of the rest of the bedroom, opening his nightstand door, but finding nothing inside except an old phone charger, lifting the mattress on his side, but again find nothing, not even a dirty magazine.

Looking under the bed, I pull out a gym bag and a gun case, but both are empty.

Standing back upright, I call out to the living room, "Honey, is daddy home yet?"

"No," she says.

"Okay, honey. Just checking."

She doesn't know what's happening right now, but I do. It's just a matter of finding it.

Taking a deep breath, wiping a tear from my cheek, I know I need resolution so I can sleep at night and stop staring at the back of his head, knowing why he's snoring so loudly, knowing why he's so hard to rouse. But without really knowing, saying the words out loud to his face, I can't sleep, and I can't do this dance anymore.

I have to find it. It has to be here.

With a deep breath, I walk into our closet and, for the first time, I hate how big it is. My clothes line the left side with a chest of drawers full of my folded t-shirts, pajama pants, and unmentionables. My shoes line the top shelf.

His clothes take up the opposite side and the back. Under his uniforms, large Rubbermaid containers stack up, holding military gear. A long gun case sits on top of the tubs.

My head swirls with the thought of what's to come if I find what I'm looking for, but I have to keep searching or risk my own sanity for not knowing, for letting it slide more, for pretending like I don't hear him slur or see him wobble in his own shoes.

His shoes. The shoes he most commonly wears are by the front door, but his old boots, sneakers, fancy shoes that go with his uniform and the only suit he owns, those are all here, and I normally wouldn't have any reason to mess with them.

Standing in front of the line of shoes, I use my toes to tip his black leather loafer on its heel, knowing anything stuffed inside will slide into view, but nothing does, so I let it drop back into place. Next, I step on the toe box of his sneakers. Empty. I lean his boot back the same way I checked his loafer, but this time I feel a light thud from inside as something shifts from the toe to the heel of his boot. Picking it up, I cram my hand inside his worn, musky boot and feel something hard in my hand and pull it out.

A small, empty vodka is in my hand. I drop the boot.

My cheeks are flush as my heartbeat quickens, my pulse loud in my ears. Staring at the bottle in my hand, I consider my options. Do I present him with the bottle and demand he show me the rest? Do I trust him to do that? It doesn't take long to answer my own question, and I look around at the rest of his "secret" life that I'm not privy to, boxes and tubs of gear from the missions he won't talk about.

Vodka bottles hide like landmines in our closet. How many are there? Pandora's box has been cracked, and there's no way I can stop. Giving in, I pitch the bottle by my dresser, then grab the matching boot and stuff my hand inside.

I pull out another bottle of vodka.

"Is that right?" I say to his boot. "Hiding your booze, thinking I'm just some dumb wife that I wouldn't notice?"

With all the shoes empty, I pull the gun case off the top of the tubs, and put it down on his shoes. I start to ignore the case, but think twice now about leaving it unopened. Not until dropping down to my knees, finding all of the little latches along the long black case, and lifting the lid do I see his hunting rifle along with one, two, three, four, five, six, seven matching vodka bottles.

Without hesitation, I pitch them all in the same direction as the boot bottles, creating a clinking pile. I shut the lid on the gun case harder than I intend to, but the sound feels good in my ears, and I shove the case on top of shoes, no longer caring if I mess up the arrangement or if I scuff the toe of his loafers or collapse shaft of his boots, which he hates, but I hate his drinking, so it seems fair.

Grabbing the handle of the top Rubbermaid tub, I pull it down with a thunk, pop the tabs on both handles, and pitch the lid over my head. A pair of folded cami pants is the first thing I see, and when I pick them up, two more bottles roll out.

I snatch them up and throw them down onto the pile of others, finding satisfaction in the loud clang of bottles hitting each other.

Turning back to that damned tub, I pull out a green sweatshirt, a blouse, rolled PT shirts and running shorts, shaking each of them loose of their hidden bottles. Ten, eleven, twelve, thirteen, fourteen, and now tears are streaming down my cheeks.

I fold in half, weeping onto his pile of clothes for the man I fell in love with who's no longer here, the man who vowed to always do what's best for us, who failed our family for becoming so selfish.

I cry because I let him go on his walks alone every day, hoping he really wasn't going for a drink, but instead clearing his mind, and crying because this life we're in makes him think that he has to have a drink to handle it, to handle us.

My phone buzzes in my back pocket, and I consider ignoring it, but I pull it out anyway.

"Hello?"

"Abigail? It's Melanie. I don't know how to tell you this, but I just found Jonathan in my bushes. I think he may have tripped or something, but he's knocked out. Can you come over?"
How freaking awesome.

"He may have tripped," my voice quivers, "because he's drunk."

"He's what?"

"He'd drunk, I said! Okay? Drunk! I'm sitting in our closet with more than a dozen empty vodka bottles and I'm telling you that my husband is drunk out of his mind and I just..."

"Oh, honey, I had no idea," she says. "I'm coming to get you."

Feet kicked up and crossed on the edge of his hospital bed, I read my worn, wrinkled copy of Hotel Pastis, trying not to drown in this moment with him. The book takes me to a place far away with a stiff drink I've never tasted before. Both might be awful, I think, but anything has to be better than this.

The nurse walks in and takes his vitals.

"How long until he wakes up?" I ask without looking up from the pages of my escape.

"It's hard to know. His body is trying to detox," she says. Her gaze burns into the side of my head. I must look heartless, not crying over him, not filling the room with flowers and get-well-soon notes, but I don't care to meet her gaze, so I keep rereading the same sentence, focusing on anything except this dim room in this damned hospital.

Press the call button if I need anything, the nurse says.

"Sure will," I say, but I still don't look at her until she turns to leave and the movement catches my eyes, then they shift to him.

Then, anger rises and rage visions fill my mind. I want to whack him with his pillow. Just once really hard. I doubt the nurses would ever know. Just one good pillow pound straight to the face. I might do it twice because the first time will feel really good, I think. I could just--I could snap, I realize. I'm going to snap.

Instead of indulging myself by beating my unconscious husband with a fluffy pillow, I pick up my phone off my lap and open the contacts, scrolling through the names, trying to decide whom to call.

My thumb stops scrolling when I see Everett's name. I press call.

"Is this Everett?" I ask when he answers. "This is Abigail, Abigail Richards-- Jonathan's wife. I need your help."

I leave the room to talk to Everett and tell him how the last two stints on the wagon didn't stick, how sick and tired I am of raise our daughter by myself regardless of whether he's deployed or not, tired of having to babysit my grown-ass husband because he can't take care of himself, much less this family.

Just talk to him, I ask Everett, because Lord knows I've talked until I'm blue in the face, and I'm done with it. I'm not taking him home.

Everett tells me he's in town visiting a friend and says he'll come to the hospital.

I thank him and hang up the phone. Maybe it wasn't cool of me to call his sergeant. I know Jonathan is going to be pissed, but that gives us something in common.

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He apologizes again and sits still like a whooped puppy, accepting his scolding. Just like every time, waiting for the storm to blow over and then he'll be out of the doghouse and he's back in bed with mama.

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I get up, drop my book on the chair, gather my purse and leave without a goodbye.

"When are we going to grandmas, mommy?" Carly, who's now standing in my bedroom doorway, wants to know. I explain that tomorrow morning we are going to get on an airplane and tomorrow afternoon we will be all the way at grandma's.

"Daddy can come, too?"

I want to tell her when hell freezes over he can come, but I bite my tongue and force a smile. He's working, I lie.

"He goes to war again?" Her chin falls to her chest when she asks me, knowing that answer means it'll be a long time before he comes home to her again, ~~her own struggle with living with her hero.~~ No, no, baby girl, I tell her he's working on other stuff right now. Her defeated stance and sad voice make me go to her and get down on my knees. I pull her chin up gently, and that look in her eyes--the same look she gets when tell her that her dad is going to the field for a month or getting deployed for seven. How can he put us through this when we spent so much time counting down the M&Ms in the jar, eating one a day, watching the jar of dwindle down to just one, saving it for the day he came home?

"Mommy, don't cry because daddy can't come to grandma's. We're his big girls, remember?" I do. I remember him holding her before leaving last time, telling us to take care of each other for a little while and then he'll be back to take care of us. I nod and force back the angry thoughts that he's not taking care of us very well right now. "You want to have a tea party?" she asks. With all my heart, I tell her.

She skips off, hollering for grandma, asking if she wants to have a tea party with us, too, so I follow her downstairs into the sounds of dinner. Taking my mother's wine glass from her hand, sniffing the bouquet, she rolls her eyes at me, then opens two cabinets ~~before~~ spotting wine glasses, reaching for it.

"When I was pregnant with you," she says, "I drank a glass of wine whenever I needed one, and you turned out fine. You'll sleep better tonight." I tell her I can't sleep when I'm mad.

"There's no grand prize for being the most stubborn," she says. She should know. Letting go of the anger only means that you'll have less on your plate to deal with the next step, and you owe that to yourself, she tells me.

"Maybe," I admit, "but it won't happen tonight."

The front door clicks shut and I wait on the plush couch, foot twitching on the coffee table in anticipation. One one-thousand, two one-thousand, three one-thousand, four one-thousand, and I'm off the couch, crossing the living room, and taking the carpeted stairs two at a time. I round the corner into our bedroom, marching through to the adjoining bathroom, and separate the wide white blinds with two fingers.

He's walking up the sidewalk toward the streetlight.

Where is it?

Hands on my hips, I turn around to survey our master suite, eyes scanning the bathroom, deciding to start in here. I have at least fifteen minutes until he gets home from the corner store since he's on foot.

Where would he hide it?

Squatting in front of the double vanity cabinets on my side, there's a Victoria's Secret bag with mini lotions and body sprays and pink tissue, an old gift box of bath soaps and salts that I rifle through, but it's bubble bath, a hair towel and bath salts so I close the lid. On the other side of my sink cabinet is cleaning supplies: toilet bowl and glass cleaners, a sponge that I see mold on when I pull it out. Letting go to pinch it with two fingernails and drop it to the trash. Gross.

Scooting back on my knees, rocking back on my heels, I use the countertop to help me up from the floor, and close the doors of my cabinet.

"Okay...think....hidden in plain sight?" I ask my reflection, and remember the time we laughed about drinking moonshine out of a Gatorade bottle on the crowded beach.

Moving to his side of the sink, I smell his cologne and the water bottle he uses for his hair, but his cologne smells rich and dark, and his water bottle smells like plastic and water so I screw the lid back on, and open the bottom cabinet doors under his sink.

"Ugh. Boys." Nothing is organized.

Dropping to my knees, leaning inside the cabinet, I see a box sitting behind a tub of electric razor guards, top flaps folded in. I pull the flaps and lean farther in the cabinet to look inside, but find magazines, an old calendar, a half-empty body wash bottle, a dirty towel and a rubber duck. "Have you seen it, ducky?" I ask, dropping duck behind me on the tile floor, thinking our daughter would probably like to have her toy back.

"Mommy, where's daddy?"

She startles me and I whack my head on the counter as I'm coming out.

"Sweetheart, you scared me. What'd you ask?"

"Where's daddy?"

"He went to the store. He said he needed a snack."

"Can I have a snack?"

Leaning down, picking up the yellow duck with her little chubby hands with chipped, pink glittery nail polish, she looks up at me with big hopeful brown eyes.

"Sure, honey. Let's see what kind of snacks daddy brings home today, and I'm sure he'll let you have one."

"Daddy goes to get snacks a lot," she says with a pout. "How come he gets more snacks than me?"

"He's the dad. He gets snacks whenever he wants them."

"When I'm a daddy, I'm going to eat lots of snacks, too."

I chuckle. "Yes, sweetheart, when you're a mom you can eat snacks, too. Now go finish your cartoon and let me know when daddy gets home, okay? Then we can have snacks."

"Yay!" she squeals, skips out of the room, long brown, tousled hair bouncing behind her, leaving me standing in the threshold between our bedroom and bathroom. I look around the bedroom for a place to start. Looking at the long dresser against the opposite wall, I think about the countless times I've opened those drawers putting away socks, underwear, folded t-shirts, workout clothes, pajama pants. There's not one drawer I haven't personally opened in the past few days or weeks.

I make quick work of the rest of the bedroom, opening his nightstand door, but finding nothing inside except an old phone charger, lifting the mattress on his side, but again find nothing, not even a dirty magazine.

Looking under the bed, I pull out a gym bag and a gun case, but both are empty.

Standing back upright, I call out to the living room, "Honey, is daddy home yet?"

"No," she says.

"Okay, honey. Just checking."

She doesn't know what's happening right now, but I do. It's just a matter of finding it.

Taking a deep breath, wiping a tear from my cheek, I know I need resolution so I can sleep at night and stop staring at the back of his head, knowing why he's snoring so loudly,

knowing why he's so hard to rouse. But without really knowing, saying the words out loud to his face, I can't sleep, and I can't do this dance anymore.

I have to find it. It has to be here.

With a deep breath, I walk into our closet and, for the first time, I hate how big it is. My clothes line the left side with a chest of drawers full of my folded t-shirts, pajama pants, and unmentionables. My shoes line the top shelf.

His clothes take up the opposite side and the back. Under his uniforms, large Rubbermaid containers stack up, holding military gear. A long gun case sits on top of the tubs.

My head swirls with the thought of what's to come if I find what I'm looking for, but I have to keep searching or risk my own sanity for not knowing, for letting it slide more, for pretending like I don't hear him slur or see him wobble in his own shoes.

His shoes. The shoes he most commonly wears are by the front door, but his old boots, sneakers, fancy shoes that go with his uniform and the only suit he owns, those are all here, and I normally wouldn't have any reason to mess with them.

Standing in front of the line of shoes, I use my toes to tip his black leather loafer on its heel, knowing anything stuffed inside will slide into view, but nothing does, so I let it drop back into place. Next, I step on the toe box of his sneakers. Empty. I lean his boot back the same way I checked his loafer, but this time I feel a light thud from inside as something shifts from the toe to the heel of his boot. Picking it up, I cram my hand inside his worn, musky boot and feel something hard in my hand and pull it out.

A small, empty vodka is in my hand. I drop the boot.

My cheeks are flush as my heartbeat quickens, my pulse loud in my ears. Staring at the bottle in my hand, I consider my options. Do I present him with the bottle and demand he show

me the rest? Do I trust him to do that? It doesn't take long to answer my own question, and I look around at the rest of his "secret" life that I'm not privy to, boxes and tubs of gear from the missions he won't talk about.

Vodka bottles hide like landmines in our closet. How many are there? Pandora's box has been cracked, and there's no way I can stop. Giving in, I pitch the bottle by my dresser, then grab the matching boot and stuff my hand inside.

I pull out another bottle of vodka.

"Is that right?" I say to his boot. "Hiding your booze, thinking I'm just some dumb wife that I wouldn't notice?"

With all the shoes empty, I pull the gun case off the top of the tubs, and put it down on his shoes. I start to ignore the case, but think twice now about leaving it unopened. Not until dropping down to my knees, finding all of the little latches along the long black case, and lifting the lid do I see his hunting rifle along with one, two, three, four, five, six, seven matching vodka bottles.

Without hesitation, I pitch them all in the same direction as the boot bottles, creating a clinking pile. I shut the lid on the gun case harder than I intend to, but the sound feels good in my ears, and I shove the case on top of shoes, no longer caring if I mess up the arrangement or if I scuff the toe of his loafers or collapse shaft of his boots, which he hates, but I hate his drinking, so it seems fair.

Grabbing the handle of the top Rubbermaid tub, I pull it down with a thunk, pop the tabs on both handles, and pitch the lid over my head. A pair of folded cami pants is the first thing I see, and when I pick them up, two more bottles roll out.

I snatch them up and throw them down onto the pile of others, finding satisfaction in the loud clang of bottles hitting each other.

Turning back to that damned tub, I pull out a green sweatshirt, a blouse, rolled PT shirts and running shorts, shaking each of them loose of their hidden bottles. Ten, eleven, twelve, thirteen, fourteen, and now tears are streaming down my cheeks.

I fold in half, weeping onto his pile of clothes for the man I fell in love with who's no longer here, the man who vowed to always do what's best for us, who failed our family for becoming so selfish.

I cry because I let him go on his walks alone every day, hoping he really wasn't going for a drink, but instead clearing his mind, and crying because this life we're in makes him think that he has to have a drink to handle it, to handle us.

My phone buzzes in my back pocket, and I consider ignoring it, but I pull it out anyway.

"Hello?"

"Abigail? It's Melanie. I don't know how to tell you this, but I just found Jonathan in my bushes. I think he may have tripped or something, but he's knocked out. Can you come over?"
How freaking awesome.

"He may have tripped," my voice quivers, "because he's drunk."

"He's what?"

"He'd drunk, I said! Okay? Drunk! I'm sitting in our closet with more than a dozen empty vodka bottles and I'm telling you that my husband is drunk out of his mind and I just..."

"Oh, honey, I had no idea," she says. "I'm coming to get you."

Feet kicked up and crossed on the edge of his hospital bed, I read my worn, wrinkled copy of Hotel Pastis, trying not to drown in this moment with him. The book takes me to a place far away with a stiff drink I've never tasted before. Both might be awful, I think, but anything has to be better than this.

The nurse walks in and takes his vitals.

"How long until he wakes up?" I ask without looking up from the pages of my escape.

"It's hard to know. His body is trying to detox," she says. Her gaze burns into the side of my head. I must look heartless, not crying over him, not filling the room with flowers and get-well-soon notes, but I don't care to meet her gaze, so I keep rereading the same sentence, focusing on anything except this dim room in this damned hospital.

Press the call button if I need anything, the nurse says.

"Sure will," I say, but I still don't look at her until she turns to leave and the movement catches my eyes, then they shift to him.

Then, anger rises and rage visions fill my mind. I want to whack him with his pillow. Just once really hard. I doubt the nurses would ever know. Just one good pillow pound straight to the face. I might do it twice because the first time will feel really good, I think. I could just--I could snap, I realize. I'm going to snap.

Instead of indulging myself by beating my unconscious husband with a fluffy pillow, I pick up my phone off my lap and open the contacts, scrolling through the names, trying to decide whom to call.

My thumb stops scrolling when I see Everett's name. I press call.

"Is this Everett?" I ask when he answers. "This is Abigail, Abigail Richards-- Jonathan's wife. I need your help."

I leave the room to talk to Everett and tell him how the last two stints on the wagon didn't stick, how sick and tired I am of raise our daughter by myself regardless of whether he's deployed or not, tired of having to babysit my grown-ass husband because he can't take care of himself, much less this family.

Just talk to him, I ask Everett, because Lord knows I've talked until I'm blue in the face, and I'm done with it. I'm not taking him home.

Everett tells me he's in town visiting a friend and says he'll come to the hospital.

I thank him and hang up the phone. Maybe it wasn't cool of me to call his sergeant. I know Jonathan is going to be pissed, but that gives us something in common.

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PART 2

Chapter 4: Everett Quint

"Quint, where are you going after we get off this God forsaken bus?" Jones asks me.

"Back home," I say.

The truth is, I don't know what to do when I get off the bus, except get on another one and head west. Now that the deployment's over, those of us who are left are tired and worn from seven months of commands, mortars and gunfire.

Jones talks about his favorite bar where the wooden stools are worn, the beer ice cold, the musky smell of spilled alcohol on the floor and tobacco smoke in the walls, the hottest bartender in town, he says, then and now. He tells us how he went back night after night until she finally agreed to go out with him.

"I knew eventually she couldn't resist me, no matter how hard she tried," he says. She finally gave in, and they were married a couple of months later. "Every time I walk in that bar, I remember that feeling I got the first time I put eyes on her. Man, I can't wait to get home!"

by He would probably go home and pick up where he left off, except this time without Shank. The story goes that Jones was just a kid when his family moved to that small town in Wyoming when he walked to check the mail and Shank ran over him with his bicycle--on accident, of course, but the subject always came up when the two got sideways.

"If you would've learned how to ride your bike, you wouldn't've hit me and we'd've never met, and that'd been just fine by me!" Jones teased Shank one day. "You were always running into mailboxes and through the neighbor's flowers. That bike whooped your ass," Jones laughed.

Truth was, though, that those two were inseparable. I don't think they ever stayed mad at each other more than a couple of days since they met. More like brothers than friends, Shank waited a year to enlist so Jones could turn 18 and go with him.

That's why the memory of Jones when heard about his friend's death stuck with me. I couldn't hear what was said, but I never saw him respond. He didn't move at all. He just stood there for a long time, so long, in fact, that the sun went down behind him. A couple of guys talked to him to get him to do something, say something, anything, but he just stood there. Shell shock, I guess. It was after dark when he did move, but a couple of days before he finally slept.

Eventually he spoke to us, but he's not the same. Maybe he was always short tempered, but now he doesn't have Shank to balance him out. Hell, I don't think they knew themselves without the other.

I watched him a lot, but he isn't the only one who changed. I'm as ready for them to be home as they are.

The guys keep time by listening to music, several of them singing along to the chorus while others snore, slumping against the windows of the bus. Eyes tingling, I shift in my seat to lean my head back, drifting in and out of wakefulness.

"Hey! HEY! Get the fuck off of him!" I wake up to and get to my feet. I pull Jones off Brandt, sprawled in the floor between the seats. "Man, what the fuck is wrong with you?" Brandt asks. "It was a joke!"

Gripping the back of Jones's collar, another helps Brandt to his feet as he spits and rubs his jaw. "He's a fucking problem," Brandt says.

"You're a fucking joke," Jones says. "Say some shit like that again, I fucking dare you." Jones, pushing against my arm, makes all effort to get back to making his point on Brandt's face.

Someone stands to give Brandt his seat near the back of the bus, and I talk in a voice low enough for only Jones to hear.

"Hey, man, it's all right," I say. "We're almost home. Whatever it is, it's almost done. Calm down. He's not the bad guy. Just shrug it off, okay?" He stops straining and I put him in my seat next to the window, several rows in front of the fuming fellow Marine he apparently just punched.

Turning to the front of the bus, my new seatmate scoots in, then stares out the window. Following his lead, I scoot in next to him, fold my hands in my lap and relax my head back.

It takes a little bit, but after the pulse in the bus slows back down, I nudge Jones in the ribs. "Wanna tell me a bad joke?"

He looks at me as though he just realized I was still sitting next to him.

"I don't know any," he says, and takes his eyes back to the passing landscape.

"Ah, come on. You know at least one from what I can tell."

He looks at me and raises an eyebrow, "What makes you say that?"

"Oh, I dunno, the fact that you just damn near knocked out Brandt for his joke makes me think you might remember that one."

Hm, he says, and looks over the back of the seat toward Brandt. He shrugs. "Guess I don't remember it now."

As we get closer to base, the fence along the highway becomes thick with painted signs and sheets, welcoming home their brothers, sons, fathers, uncles, aunts, moms and daughters.

"Welcome home, Daddy", "We're so proud of you", "Thank God you're alive", "Let's go fishing Dad". It must be nice, I think, to be so anticipated, to have your absence be so loud.

"Do you have one of those?" I ask Jones, pointing to the sheets hung near the road. He tells me he doesn't know, but his wife told him that she's worn his t-shirt to bed every night since he left. You know how chicks do, he says, just your t-shirt and hot little panties. "Now that's something to come home to and those are the sheets I want to get wrapped up in," he says and I laugh.

The bus rumbles through the gates and we step out on to the base terminal. It's August in North Carolina where even at night you can feel the dense air part as you walk through it, and sweat beads on your upper lip.

Hot night air filled my lungs as I looked around.

The lights bright on the tarmac, welcome home parties line facing the buses, cheering, waving, holding up sheets and signs they spent hours painting. During formation, wives wipe tears from their cheeks, a little boy jumps up and down, pointing at his dad. When we're released, they rush into the arms of their brothers, husbands, sons, friends. A lump catches in my throat for them, but I watch anyway.

"Quint! Get over here! Meet my wife and daughter."

I smile and head toward Martindale, who's arm drapes over his wife's shoulder, holding her close while he holds his daughter with his other arm.

"This guy right here, babe," Martindale tells his wife, "I owe this one my life. Quint, this is my wife Jessica and daughter Brianna, who just turned three years old, yes, she did! She went and grew a foot while I was gone, didn't you, baby girl?"

He let go of his wife to hold Brianna high in the air ~~before~~ bringing her down and kissing her cheeks. She smiles at her daddy, wraps her arms around his neck and buries her face in his

shoulder. Her hair falls over her face and across the shoulder of his cami blouse. He's wearing a smile I've never seen on him before.

"You have a beautiful family, Martindale," I say. "It was nice to meet you, ma'am. You should be proud of your husband."

I shake both of their hands, then make my way to the pile of bags being pulled from underneath the bus. I help unpile the big green duffel bags and line them up on the tarmac, setting mine aside when I find it, then finish laying out the others.

A little more than a week since later, I'm staring out of the Greyhound bus window as the "Welcome to Lockney, Texas" sign passes. Rhythmic fields of cotton line the road, anticipating the next phase of planting. I can see the earth curve on the horizon.

I remember my grandpa leaning down, pointing across the horizon, his voice soft and deep, "Now, son, you can see for 50 miles in any direction, but if you stand on a tuna can, you can see 500."

His farm was nice back then, sections of red soil plowed in even, square fields of wheat or cotton.

Everyone always says I'm just him, that I have his heart. I didn't know about his heart back then. All I knew is that we were both quiet. He was the kind of man that made everyone listen when he spoke, which was rarely.

After dad left, I went to the farm every day after school until Mom got off work from the cotton gin.

Shortly after I started going to the farm, Granny helped him drag an old bench under the big apricot tree in the front yard so he could wait in the shade for me when I got off the bus. I'd just drop my backpack and sit down next to him on that old bench and he'd pull out an apple. One day, he brought two. Every day after that, we both ate an apple at 3 o'clock under that tree.

And so it went.

I went with him wherever the farm took us that day: under a tractor, to the barn, in the fields, fixing an irrigation pipe or to the hardware store. It was quiet on the farm, Grandpa unobtrusive, and I was grateful for all of it, especially not having to go back to my house after school.

Never happy in Lockney, Mom married Mr. Blight from the insurance agency and moved to Dallas.

I love the farm, but as I grew up, there something stirred inside me, and I couldn't shake it. The tractor never fast enough, fields I once thought so vast end too soon, and the town small and I knew everyone. One day, I found the only way out I knew would take me to the other side of the earth.

And now I'm back.

The bus rumbles to a stop near the old downtown square. Off the bus, gravel crunches underfoot. Turning east, I head for the farm. I wonder if the old house still stands or if a tornado took it out, if the pump seized up or well ran dry, if the roof started leaking, or if the generations of barn cats still took residence back there.

Walking up the lane makes me feel the years, and I remember leaning over the back of the tractor as Grandpa dragged the blade over the rocks to scrape the road after a big rain...or when Granny complained. The brown brick home looks exactly as before, nothing a little paint and water won't fix.

Under the heavy, mature branches of the green canopy, I test the wooden slats of the old bench, and take a seat, looking at the land, at the house, at the line of tall, hardy evergreen trees that shield the house from the wind on the north side of the property. I wish I had an apple.

When the sun gets low enough to peak underneath my shade tree, I decide it's time to go inside, make a list of repairs, and knock the dust off the old place.

I don't know what I expected the inside to smell like after all those years, but somehow, even though it was dusty and stale, the place still smelled like a mix of tractor oil and perfume. I suspect it was that old soft blue Lazy Boy recliner that smells like that, and I remember Granny

getting on to Grandpa for sitting down in it with his work clothes on. He'd sigh a big sigh and cackle at himself for pushing her buttons before she'd shoo him away to the bathroom to wash up for supper. When she got real sick, Grandpa would lead her from her sponge bath into the living room to his chair. I was sitting at the bar the first time he told her to sit there so he could make her some broth.

"I'm not sittin' in that old dirty chair," she said. "A lady's got her place, you know."

"Yes, ma'am, and your place is the best seat in the house. Plus, how's it ever going to smell any better 'less you sit in it?" That got her to sit down.

She sat in that chair every day after that while he made her breakfast, lunch and dinner. Right up until the day she died, when he found a sharecropper, and died of a broken heart not long after.

Over the next couple of weeks, I make the necessary repairs on the house. Clive from the hardware store remembers me well and we reminisce about my grandparents when I stop in for shingles and roofing nails, a fresh bucket of white paint for the trim, and a new mailbox. I buy a bag of apples from Mrs. Lee at the farmer's market on Saturdays and resume the 3 o'clock ritual under the apricot tree. She and I make small talk about the farm and the next series of crops going in and I promise to stop in at the Senior Center and see Mr. Lee soon, as he was always so fond of my grandpa and me.

But it's just after noon one day that I'm making lunch, standing on the worn linoleum floor at the wrap-around bar of my grandmother's kitchen, chopping an onion when the news on the TV catches my ear, a national report about a missing woman.

The reporter says the Marine in question, whose face is now on the screen with his name in big white print, is not "a suspect as of yet, but a person of interest in this investigation. Of

course, her family and friends are hoping that there has been some kind of misunderstanding and that she will be found alive and well."

I turn it back down when the news moves on to the next story and dig out my phone from my jeans pocket.

"Tell me I don't have THE Martindale from the news, man. Tell me it's not you," I say to Martindale when he answers the phone, but he can't. Shit. "I just saw you guys a few weeks ago, what the hell happened?"

"I don't know, Quint, honestly," he says. "I didn't hurt her, but they all think I'm this crazy fucking Marine who offed his wife. This is a fucking nightmare, man," he says.

"If I come out there, you got a couch for me to stay on?" Of course he does, he says, and it's settled.

I have just enough time to get to Dallas for the next flight out, so I call the airline and buy a ticket while I throw a handful of clothes in a bag, and drop what would have been lunch in the trash on the way out the door.

Martindale opens his car door as soon as he sees me walk outside the terminal and sticks out his hand. I pull him in closer, gripping his bicep. "You look worse for wear," I say.

On the drive to his house, he fills me in on everything that's happened.

"No clue where she went?" I ask.

"No, I swear to God. I wish I did. The police have asked me every question imaginable in about 254 different ways to try and trip me up, but I swear, Quint, I just don't know what happened."

What about since then, I ask him?

"A reporter got my sister agree to an interview in the morning."

An interview about what, I ask, and he tells me that because he won't go on camera, the media's contacting his family to get interviews. His mom said she's heard from no less than seven different stations. "They probably want to know if I've always been crazy, or murdering my loved ones is new."

After I've exhausted the obvious questions, to which he has little or no answer to, a lot of the two-hour drive from Raleigh to Jacksonville is in silence. I keep an eye on him while he drives, partially to make sure he's staying awake, as is my duty as passenger and friend to a man who can't have slept much lately. His eyes scan the road back and forth, back and forth, his eyebrows pushed together.

Pulling into his driveway, he tells the couch is folded out for me, and I can use his car, that he'll take his Harley to work.

Without much else to do, he goes off to his room. The details of our conversation play over and over in my head as I lay back on the sleeper sofa, flipping through the channels on the TV. A promotion airs for the morning crew of Channel 10, including their morning reporter in

the lineup, Janae Lyon. I Google her and within a few clicks, I have her address. Public information can be glorious if you know how to use it to your advantage.

I put the address in my phone and find the number for the station. I ask the receptionist what time interviewees need to report for morning interviews.

A couple of hours later, I pick up Martindale's keys off the table, and slip quietly out the door. Across town, I find a parking spot on the main road next to Janae's apartment complex and out from underneath the halo of light shone by the street lamps. It's just after 3 a.m. when I get out of my car. Walking around the bushes that line the complex, I find a seat on the stone retaining wall where I can see down the row of three-story apartments, but still hide in shadows from the overhead lights. From this viewpoint, I'll can see anyone coming or going from the complex.

After a few silent minutes, locusts and grasshoppers determine I'm not a threat to them and begin to chirp in the bushes around me as I wait.

Condensation bubbles on the cars in front of me, reflecting the light.

I'm reminded of all the nights I spent on watch, little movements, the natural awakening of the earth around you, crossing and uncrossing my feet, steady breathing, quiet waiting.

A door gets pulled shut, and my eyes search the complex until I spot a woman coming down the stairs. I recognize her from the station commercials. As she comes down the stairs, I walk along the bumpers of the parked vehicles to intersect her. I'm only a few yards away when she opens her car door. She doesn't see me as she slips inside, leaning over the center console to arrange her bags. But when she straightens up to grab the door handle, my hands grab the door frame before she can shut it.

"Ma'am," I say.

She jumps and drops her phone in the depths below her seat.

"Shit, you scared me! Who are you?"

"I just wanted to let you know that he's innocent."

"Who's innocent? Who are you? I'm going to call the cops."

"Martindale's innocent. And no you aren't. You dropped your phone and you won't take your eyes off of me."

She reaches for the door and tries to pull it out of my grip. "Let go of my door!" she shouts.

"I'm not going to hurt you. I just want you to know that he's innocent."

"Who are you?"

"Just another Marine who knows what happened--or what didn't happen, rather. I'll be watching your story today. Drive safely." I shut her door for her, then turn and walk away. She wastes no time getting her engine started and getting out of the parking lot, tires chirping as she makes the corner out onto the main road.

I get to my car and head back to Martindale's.

I let myself back in and make a pot of coffee. Martindale comes around the corner into the living room, and sees me, cup in hand, TV on mute, reading the news on my phone.

"You're up early, farm boy," he says.

"Waiting for your sister's live television appearance with Ms. Janae Lyon. You know, she's a lot shorter in person than she looks on TV."

"And how would you know that?"

"I met her this morning."

His look of shock makes me laugh. I tell him to get some coffee and fill him in on my visit with her this morning.

"You probably looked psychotic, you know," he tells me as he takes a seat on the loveseat.

"Yeah, probably, but I bet it made her doubt your guilt," I say.

"I keep thinking that any minute now she's just going to walk in the door, you know? That she'll just come running in apologizing with some crazy story about helping a homeless guy or something. She's always doing stuff like that. I keep telling her it's not safe, but she doesn't always listen. I mean who picks up hitchhikers anymore? She did! Like a month ago! I chewed her ass for it, too. She said he was 'just the sweetest old man' and it was raining and she wanted to give him a lift to the church." He chuckles and shakes his head, but then frowns and sorrow fills his eyes. "She'll come back, right? She's fine, right?" he asks.

His eyes leave mine and he looks for answers in his coffee cup and I don't interrupt. We sit together in silence, sipping our coffee, waiting for the news to come on.

At 5 o'clock, the station turns to the local news segment, and, within minutes, they cut to their "exclusive interview with the family of the Marine".

Janae and Martindale's sister stare back at us through the screen.

"Hey, hey, hey, is your sister single?" I ask, and Martindale shoots me a glare, making me laugh.

Janae asks Lori Ann if she thought her brother had anything to do with her disappearance and we're both hanging on every word.

"Justin couldn't harm his wife," Lori tells her. "They were high school sweethearts. He loved her. He loved her even when we thought that he shouldn't, but he told me that he's loved

her since the moment he saw her. His deployments didn't change that. All the guys come back different somehow, they all have little spouts of anger or moments where they don't think clearly. Justin was no different, but he wouldn't harm her."

"You said at one point you thought he shouldn't be with her; why not?" the reporter asks Lori Ann.

"They had troubles just like any marriage does at times. We thought she might be having an affair at one point, but whatever that turned out to be we don't know. All we know is that he stayed with her."

"She cheated on you?" I ask Martindale. He shakes his head.

"Do you think she was having an affair during his latest deployment, and perhaps he found out about it?" the reporter asks.

"Oh shit," Martindale says, standing up and pacing the living room, repeating the phrase. Oh shit, oh shit. Don't I get it, he asks me?

"If the police think she cheated," he says, "that would be a motive. He grabs his phone and makes a call.

"Are you fucking kidding me, Lori? Why the hell did you say that?" His pacing takes him into the other room, and when he comes back, throws the phone against the back of the couch. I ask if she's backing out of the rest of the interview.

"Oh, no, now she thinks she can fix it!"

He snatches his coffee cup off the table and storms into the kitchen. I hear the refrigerator door and a drawer slam. When he marches back into the living room, he stands, listening to the news as come back to his sister's interview.

Finally, after a long ten minutes, it does.

"Lori Ann," the reporter says, "a moment ago you mentioned Jessica may have had an affair. What made you say that?"

Lori explains when she heard about Jessica's possible affair, she told her brother he should leave his wife.

Martindale grunts in frustration at his sister through the TV screen.

"And did they separate or get divorced?" the reporter asks.

"He never even considered it. I don't know if he could handle the thought of not having her by his side. He just said that if she did, that they would work it out, that they could get through it, that he loved her more than that." She dabbed a tear as it rolled down her cheek. "He really loved her. I just can't see how this could be a murder investigation, no matter what she's done."

He finally exhales when the report is done. That was good of her, I tell him, she really came back from it.

A couple of hours later, he got a call to go into the station for further questioning.

When the front door opened and slammed, he didn't say anything, eyes bloodshot, grabbing a beer from the fridge, slamming the door shut, and walking back out front.

"You need a minute?" I say as I close the same door behind me.

"I need my wife. Right now. I need her to come home right now." He's standing facing the road, leaned up against the post on the front porch. "And the more time that passes the more I think maybe she's not going to. What am I going to tell my daughter?" His look could break a thousand hearts. He slumps onto the concrete step, and by the time he starts sobbing, I'm seated next to him with nothing to say.

There's nothing to be said to comfort him: condolences don't seem to be enough, and false hope doesn't seem to fair. No part of this is okay and it'll be a long time coming before he feels like it will be unless she comes home. So I just sit close and let him have my time.

His sorrow softens a little and before long, we're just sitting side by side on the concrete step.

"You know what you need?" I ask him.

"Do you want a list?"

I chuckle, "Among other, more important things, of course, you need a damn bench on this front porch. I mean, really. Who the hell sits on the ground? We're too old for this shit."

He gives in to a smile and nods, arms resting on his knees. "I have some chairs in the garage."

"That'll do," and we both get up and head for the single car garage to get the lawn chairs.

Sitting back in the chairs on the front porch, we watch the cars pass by. The woman across the street looks at us when she gets out of the car, and hurries her children inside, shutting the van door quickly as they get out of the car.

"Jessica knew the whole block, it seemed like," he tells me. "I'm sure they all think there's some rabid devil dog on the loose, just waiting for them. I can't say that I blame them. What would I think if I heard the same about one of them? I would tell Jessica to keep the doors locked, don't answer it, always be cautious. They're just doing the same."

"Do you want to move to the back porch?"

"Nah," he says. "Let 'em see me sitting out here with you. That way they know I'm not butchering my next victim."

We sit out there making small talk, watching the neighbors as they come home, joggers move to the other side of the street "coincidentally" just before they reach the house, moving back a few houses past.

Around sunset I convince him to eat something, and we move inside to cook, but he apologizes for the lack of options in his pantry, and we settle on grilled chicken and mac'n' cheese. I tell him I'll go to the store tomorrow, and he readily accepts my offer. People don't love him right now, the commissary is always busy, and for a man in question, it's probably easier not to have to face them in crowds.

So that's what I do the next day: stop at a grocery store and farmer's market on the little road between the neighborhood and town for a bag of apples, fresh onions, and peaches.

When I get back to Martindale's, I sit on the porch and wait for him. Eventually, he pulls in on his bike, sees me on the porch and sits heavily on the chair. The look he gives me tells me he did not have a good day, if one was even possible. I hand him an apple from the bag.

The next day is more of the same, but his sister comes by mid-afternoon and offers to make dinner. When Martindale pulls in, I'm on the porch. By the time he sits down, I have an apple resting on the cup holder of the lawn chair. He snatches it up and crunches into it when he sits down.

Lori Ann opens the door beside us, and hands me my phone. It's the same number twice now, she tells me, so I answer.

"I'm sorry, but who is this?" The caller tells me her name and apologizes for calling out of the blue. She tells me an abbreviated version of a story in what feels like one long run-on sentence, ending on the fact that she needs my help with her husband.

Martindale looks up at me quizzically, so I answer both him and the caller. "Mrs. Richards, I'm actually in town visiting a friend right now. I can come, but I'm not sure how I'll be able to help." The name catches Martindale's ear and he mouths it back to me in quiet question. I nod to confirm it's the same Richards that we both know.

"Go with me," I tell him after I hang up with her. "Come on. Bring your apple." And with that, he pops his head into the house to apologize for having to leave before dinner is ready. Of course she understands, and we get in his car and drive to the county hospital.

"I don't understand. He ended up in the bushes?" Martindale asks me on the way.

"Said she'd suspected him drinking for a while. Then right as she found a stash of his bottles, the neighbor called and said he was in her bushes. In the middle of the day. She said she's not taking him home, and I don't think she meant today. I think she meant ever."

When we walked through the double doors of the hospital, the front desk clerk tells us what room he's in, and we head for the elevators. Inside, Martindale asks me if I think she was serious about leaving him over his drinking, and I tell him that she didn't sound very forgiving about it. It must have been embarrassing for her, he says, to have her problems blasted out in the open like that. He would know. I'm glad he's with me, for her sake. But when we open the door to Room 243, there's no one in there except Richards ~~lay~~ing on the bed.

I toss him the apple I brought for him. He looks surprised to see me.

"Hey, brother," I greet him.

"Hey," he says and drops his eyes to the apple he's rolling in his hands. "I guess my wife called you."

"Yeah, but lucky for you I brought this guy. He was up to no good at his house, either."

"I just got stressed out one day, you know?" Richards says. "It wasn't even anything big, now that I think about it. I had to take the dog to the vet and Abby asked me to pick up some groceries, but the dog wouldn't do anything except bark and piss on the seats of the car and the grocery store was packed and I panicked. I just wanted one drink to calm down. I don't even remember it getting so out of hand."

We talk about the farm and how there's nothing going on there, and sometimes that's nice and sometimes it's lonely, but it's not worth complaining about because it's a far cry from the battle field, which is exactly where I want to be. If I were going to be anywhere but here with them, I'd be there. They say they don't understand being alone so much, but I know they are alone more than they realize; it's just that their solitude is louder than mine.

When he asks me what brought me back out to the coast, I tell him he really has been out of it. Martindale takes a long slow breath before talking about it. Richards silent as he listens to his story, listens to his voice crack when he says the cops don't have any other clues to go on, listens to him pray out loud, "Please God" that somehow his wife makes it back home tonight or tomorrow night or any night.

"You have to do everything you can to keep your wife," Martindale tells him. "Whatever it is, do it. Because one day she might not be able to come home and you'll sit there thinking about all the things that you could have done to keep her from leaving. Even if it's something stupid that will just make her laugh, do it. If it doesn't work, do something else. Try everything, you hear me? Everything."

Richards tells us about his last two visits to rehab, both no more than weekend stays filled with group therapy and dominos.

"At first, I really just did it to get Abby off my back," he admits. "I didn't even think I needed to go. That was a couple of years ago. She got it in her head that it was getting out of hand, but I kept telling her it was because she was pregnant and couldn't drink at all. If she could drink with me, she wouldn't feel that way. She's pregnant again, you know. Just found out."

He thinks this time he may need to look into a longer program. I tell him I'll help him find one that will work for him, and that I'll be back to check on him. He gives me his address so I can go by and check on his wife and tells me where his alcohol is hidden in his house, and that he's afraid to go home, but I'm not sure if it's because his wife is there or if it's because temptation is.

That afternoon, the three of us - Martindale, Abby and I - go through the house, and find bottles of vodka hidden exactly where he said they would be. Eighteen more of them, to be exact.

"I swear, if I could drink right now..." Abby says as she bags up the bottles to take to the garbage.

"Kind of ironic. You want to drink and can't, and he doesn't want to drink and can't stop," Martindale says back.

"You really believe he doesn't want to drink? Because I don't. Every time he picks up that first drink it's because he wants it. After that, maybe I'll believe that it's slightly more out of his control. Maybe. But he has to start taking some responsibility for his life and ours, and until he does that, we're done. You tell him that. I've told him until I'm blue in the face."

"Yes, ma'am," I say. I tell her that her husband asked me to help him find a long term rehab, and by the look on her face, I can tell it was the first time she's heard the news. "I found one, by the way. If you'd be interested in checking it out, we can go later today." No thanks, she says, she's done getting her hopes up.

I'm out in town the next afternoon when Martindale calls me with a little cheer in his voice for a change.

"You at the house?" he asks.

"Not currently, why?"

"Find a TV. Turn on the news. Finally, a bit of good news. It should be your favorite reporter."

"~~Ummm~~, okay," I say. I look around and spot a bar and grill.

When I sit down, I order an appetizer and a drink to justify my seat at the bar, and notice the bartender keeping an eye on me. I know I haven't met her before, and I'm sure it's just my face that keeps her looking at me. I'm used to women staring at me for one reason or another. In high school, I was always strong and sturdy. The farm put muscles on my shoulders and a tan on my skin. I knew I was good looking, I just didn't have much interest in the local girls except one - Madison Brooks. She was the only one who didn't misunderstand my quiet nature for something petty like narcissism. That was the rumor other girls started when I turned down invitations to dances, dates, and any other social event. They thought I was too good to associate with them. Madison didn't though, she understood because she was just like me. We just didn't have any interest in it because we knew that high school was just something we had to do to get out of there, so we studied together for finals and the SATs, watched movies together when we were both avoiding whichever party was going on at the time, and became inseparable. Then, after high school, I kissed her for the first and last time, long and meaningful, and told her she would always have me on her side. With that, she left for college in Colorado, and I boarded a plane for San Diego.

It was during the first deployment that I was riding in the convoy of Hummers outside the wire. We were headed to make contact with an asset. Jones was driving, I was in the passenger seat. My job was to help watch the road for anything that could be explosive. Bombs were made out of everything - coke bottles, boxes, children's toys, everything was suspect. Sometimes they were buried, so you had to train your eye to look for recently overturned dirt. Shank was gunner. When the first artillery round came in, it hit the first truck. Shank took his post on the gun, returning fire, but the bigger problem wasn't the bullets flying toward us, it was the heavy RGB round that struck the first truck. In the confusion, dust, smoke, yelling, and gunfire, Jones drove us around the left of the first vehicle. No one saw the IED that the first truck missed, which exploded between us when we got close, and flipped us while Shank was standing out of the gun port. He was lucky then to have been thrown or fallen out, but the explosion melted my face and part of my chest and right shoulder, but I didn't know that until weeks later when I woke up in the hospital.

Madison was my emergency contact, and the Corps notified her when it happened. It was the only time I have stepped off a plane to anyone waiting on me. I didn't know what she would do, but she didn't even hesitate wrapping her arms around me, carefully avoiding the still-tender and bandaged portions of me, but aggressively kissing what she could - my lips, my unburnt cheek, my neck, she even kissed my ear.

"Wouldn't be fair to all the other men in the world for you to go on through life being that good looking," she said. "Well, then again, chicks dig scars, so maybe now you're going to have to fight off even more broads. I mean, what bad luck you have, pal. Too many chicks, not enough time." I knew she was just being kind, and I knew that she'd always be my best friend, no

matter what I looked like. And since the explosion, I've learned that people look at me a lot now, too, but just for different reasons than I grew up with.

So, I just let her stare at me and watch the news until I finally see what it is I've been waiting for. Janae Lyon shows up on screen with an update about the Martindale missing persons case, and the bold white letters across the screen reads "husband no longer person of interest." And there it was. It wasn't a victory. It wasn't a win. It was just a little bit of justice on our side. Feeling more relaxed, I decide to order a burger and stay a while longer.

"She's really not coming?" he asks me. I'm afraid not, I tell him. I focus on the drive and navigate the roads while my two friends fall silent, watching the scenery change as we climb higher into the mountain terrain.

When we get to the facility, we check in with the front desk, and are eventually allowed to tour the grounds together. As we walk along the trees on the rocky paths through the gardens, he asks me about his wife and daughter.

"I can't believe I did this to them again," he says. "I just got home after seven months, and don't even make it two months before we're lying to our daughter about why I'm gone again. What kind of shitty father does that?"

"No," I correct him, "A shitty father wouldn't be here right now. A shitty father would have kept drinking, and completely lost everyone who meant the most to him out of selfishness. Trust me. I'm speaking from experience. You may have stumbled, and you might not get your wife back, but at least you'll get the chance to be in your kid's life again."

We talk about Martindale, how the police haven't found any sign of his wife yet, Martindale tells him there's a funeral of sorts being planned for her, and he offers to go with me

if he's out by then. He asks about the farm and why I'm not back home yet. I tell him that old farm has been there without me before, but really I can't go back until I know where he will land when he gets out of seclusion. He says he understands how I lived on the farm by myself now, and that makes me smile. "It's peaceful. Sometimes all the therapy you need is under a big shade tree, eating an apple," I say.

When our walk leads us back to the entrance of the building, something familiar about the man standing at the counter catches my eye. I can't see clearly through the glass window, but I keep an eye on him.

"Does he look familiar to you?" I ask them, but the man at the counter has his head down, filling out paperwork, and none of us can see his face clearly until he looks up at the receptionist.

"Oh my God," Richards says. "It's Jones."

"No way that's Jones," I say as I lean in for a better view of his face. The man at the counter is out of sight, bending over to pick up his bags off the floor. When he stands again, he walks around the bar as the receptionist guides him where to go. He looks through the large glass windows scanning the landscape, then directly at me. He does a double-take to both of our faces. "What the..." he says on the other side of the glass.

Leaving his bags where they fall, he finds a side door and comes out to us.

"What are you guys doing here?" We shake hands when he gets close enough. The receptionist follows Jones out to us.

"Richards here got too boozy on leave and ended up in a ditch or something," I say as I jab Richards in the ribs with my elbow and wink. "What are you doing here?"

"Blackouts," he says. "Lost it on the wife, apparently."

"You okay?" I ask him seriously. He shrugs.

"Which program are you here for then?" Jones asks Martindale, but before he can answer, the receptionist catches up and interrupts.

"You all know each other?" the receptionist asks.

"Yes, ma'am," I tell her we were all recently brought back home from deployment together.

She asks if we'd all like to go to a group session together.

I tell her that Martindale and I are just visiting, but she suggests it might be nice for them if there is another friendly face or two in the group, so we concede. There's a session that just started a few minutes ago, she says as she looks at her watch, and we can sneak in together.

"That's just perfect, isn't it guys?" I respond with mocked enthusiasm, "Who doesn't love a good therapy session?"

But when the receptionist opens the door to a classroom, there were only a handful of people in the room, all sitting at desks formed in a square. Every face turned to us.

"It's like walking in late to church," Richards says under his breath and the receptionist squeezes in between us.

"I'm sorry for the interruption, but we have a new resident and it came to light that another resident and his guests all just came back from deployment together. They thought a group class might be a good way to end the day. This is Austin Jones, he's in our PTSD program as of today; this is Jonathan Richards, a resident in our alcohol program; and I'm sorry, I didn't catch your names."

"Quint--Everett Quint," I tell her and the group.

"You sure you aren't the one who's supposed to be in here for PTSD, man?" someone in the group asks me. I tell him I'm just visiting. The man who appears to be leading the class has everyone open up the square enough to let us sit in.

Since we're new to the group, the leader says, why don't we tell everyone a little about ourselves and how we wound up here together.

Richards starts us off, telling the group about his wife and daughter, who may not be there for him when he gets out of here because he'd unfortunately been here before. "Not this facility, mind you," he says, "but rehab." A man in the group tells him that this is his second trip to rehab. Another says it's his fourth over twelve years. A older woman tells him that she was sober for 17 years, and then got divorced and fell off the wagon again. She says she's on wagon number three now. "Third time's the charm," she says with a smoker's laugh.

He looks at us and continues his testimony, telling the group that his wife got pregnant again right after he came home from this deployment, but that's not what set him to drinking again. There was all this noise, he says. There's always noise. Mickey Mouse on the TV, the Elsa doll, a sing-a-long with Tinkerbelle, the dog barking, pots and pans clanging, water running, his wife always asking what he'd like for dinner, grocery baskets that run into each other, bleeps at the checkout line, a high pitched squeal from the backseat when his daughter sees the same horse she sees every time we go to the store.

"So one day," he says, "I was coming back from taking the dog to the vet, and the damned thing just wouldn't stop barking in the back seat. I had to get out of the car, so I pulled in the gas station and went inside. The next thing I knew I was having a drink. I wasn't even a mile from my house; I could've just gone home and none of this would've got started in the first place."

He shakes his head and tells them that after that day he started going on walks alone to get some peace and quiet, but then the walks turned into trips to the gas station. Buying one bottle for right then turned into taking another home for later. Not until he and his wife stop into that same gas station to get a pregnancy test that he began worry the checker would tell his wife about his trips, so he befriended the checker, and bribed him with \$50 to keep his secret.

He confesses that he lost track of how many were hidden at his house over time.

"Eighteen," I say. Everyone looks at me then, so I say it a little louder. "There were eighteen bottles."

We listen as he tells us with his head hung how he'd drink at home by putting the alcohol in whatever he was drinking - coffee, Gatorade, water, or he'd drink one on the way to the grocery store or sneak one when he was getting dressed in the morning. Every morning, he admits.

"Then I woke up in a hospital bed, not remembering how I got there," he admits to the group.

"What about you? Did you check in today?" I look up to see who the group leader is talking to and realize he's looking at me.

"No, Martindale and I brought Richards here," I say.

"So whatever happened to your face didn't give you PTSD?"

"Does it have to?" I retort.

"No, but it's atypical for a scar like that to not have some accompanying stress," the man says.

"It stressed me out," Jones interrupts.

"I'm sorry?" he's asked.

"I was with him when it happened," Jones explains. "I was driving. We ran over the IED after some assholes started shooting at the truck in front of us. The next thing I knew, I was crawling out of the broken window, searching for my men. I thought for sure everyone was dead. I thought for sure Shank was. He was gunner, inside the turret. Somehow, and I have no clue how, he fell out when the truck flipped and was almost completely unscathed. Then I saw Quint. He was motionless. His face was on fire. I didn't know what else to do except use my sleeve to stop it from spreading, but I didn't know skin would stick to my clothes like that. I was taking off more of his face. I did that to him. I didn't see the bomb. I should've stopped in our tracks and returned fire from our position in the convoy instead of trying to go around them to get a better vantage point. I'm really sorry, man."

I put my hand on the back of his neck and tell him to look at me. "I'm fine, ok?" But he shakes his head and moves out of my grasp.

"You could've gotten out then," he tells me, anger and resentment in his tone. "But, no, you came back like a dumb farm boy. I was so damned paranoid about you because I melted your face the first go-round that I wasn't watching Shank's back and now he's dead. He's dead because of me, and he's dead because of you. I was supposed to protect him, not you!" And there it is: the big camouflaged elephant in the room. When he stands, I take my cue and apologize to the group.

"I'll go. You stay. I'm only intruding here." Martindale follows me out.

PART 3

Chapter 5: Marka Jones

My phone wakes me up and the number is a blur. I blink at the clock on the TV console to try and see what time it is as I answer the phone.

"Mrs. Jones?" Yes, I answer. "This is Nicole, I'm a nurse at Peaceful Pines, I'm afraid there's been an incident with your husband."

"What happened?" I ask. She tells me she's sorry to have to tell me he attacked a faculty member.

"Is my husband okay?"

"Yes, he's currently in isolation until he can calm down."

"He's still not calm? How long ago did this happen?"

She tells me the incident happened about thirty minutes ago when he was wandering the halls after curfew, a security guard approached him, but wasn't able to restrain Austin.

"Let me talk to him. Is there a phone in that room? Can I call him? I can talk to him, I can calm him down, please, let me call him." It was a lie. I couldn't calm him down any more than they could, but I thought if he was lost and confused about where he was, maybe, just maybe, he would hear my voice and listen to my reality.

"No, ma'am. I'm afraid there's not a phone in that room. And even if there were, there's protocol --"

"I don't care about your protocol! I care about my husband, who is out of his mind right now, and you've only locked him in a room by himself."

"Ma'am, I can assure you that it's the safest way to handle the situation until he's able to calm down," she says.

"Let me talk to him. I'm begging you."

She pauses on the line and finally agrees to at least talk to the on-call doctor on my behalf and says she'll call me back.

But in ten minutes, I can't stand the silence and I call the number for the facility, only to get a recording that I've reached the facility after normal business hours, and take a stab at guessing the extension line, but the recording tells me my entry is invalid and disconnects me. Ugh! I pace the hallway, clicking the screen of my phone on again, off again, and end up with a beer to calm my nerves, then open my laptop to the facility webpage in hopes of finding an emergency contact number under contact information, but find nothing.

The phone rings and my fingers fumble to answer it, "Hello? Hello?"

"Baby? Where are you?" The sound of Austin's voice rushes relief over me.

"Oh, honey, I'm so glad to talk to you. I'm at home," I say and try to erase the waver of worry out of my voice. "Do you know where you are?"

"Baby, I'm scared. Where are you?"

"Austin, there's nothing to be scared of, okay? You're safe. A couple of days ago you checked yourself into a rehab facility for PTSD. A nurse called me a little bit earlier and said you had an episode, but you're in an isolation room now. Are you alone?"

"Yes," he tells me.

"Is there a couch or a bed you can rest on? Maybe close your eyes for a little bit until things clear up?"

"I don't want to have any more nightmares. Can you come here?"

"I can be there first thing in the morning."

"Okay," he says. "I didn't believe them when they said my wife wanted to talk to me. I didn't believe we were together. I didn't know where I was. I don't know what happened."

The sound of his voice cracking on the line makes my voice catch in my throat and my eyes well with tears. All I can say is that it's okay, that I'm not leaving him, that we're going to get it worked out.

"Don't hang up with me," he begs, and I tell him I won't. Eventually, the line goes quiet and by the time I hear the door in his room click open and a nurse pick up the line, I'm just as tired as he is. He's asleep now, she says. They're going to leave him in that room with a monitor until he wakes up on his own.

The sun rises on my drive to see Austin, and he's watching the television in his room when I walk in.

"We've given him something to calm him," the nurse tells me in a low voice.

The bed sinks as I sit on the edge, beige walls adorned with simple art.

"Fancy place, huh?" I ask. "You feel like going for a walk with me?"

He gets up and finds his shoes, but speak.

"What exactly did you give him?" I ask the nurse. A sedative, but dosage and name are in his charts, but she'd have to check the computer because he was given it before she came on duty this morning. I tell her I'd like a meeting with the physician before I leave today, and she leaves. Slow and deliberate, he puts his shoes on and walks with me out through the pool area to the gardens where we stroll along the paths.

When I look at Austin, he's listening to the sounds in the trees, his eyes moving from one chirp to the next. Every once and a while he bends down to pick up a small rock from the path, making a collection in the pocket of his pajama pants. Our quiet walk leads us to a bench under a

tree and sit. For a while, he sits stroking a smooth rock in his hand until he looks at me and breaks the silence.

His hand moves from the rock to my shoulder, then face, knuckles brushing my cheek. "I love you," he says, looking in my eyes. "You'll always know that, right?" I grasp his hand and press my cheek into his warm palm.

"I'll always love you, too." It seems his mental fog is lifting, so I tell him I'm going to talk to his doctor before I leave to see what we can do about his medications.

"It won't help," he says.

"We don't know that, and it can't hurt to try, right?" He breaks my stare and looks at his lap. "Hey," I say, picking his chin back up. "Hey, everyone has a bad day, okay? We can fix this."

"But every time I have a bad day, I hurt someone: you before I got here, and they told me this morning I hurt someone last night. And I keep having these nightmares--"

"Hey, sh, sh, sh," I interrupt him. "I know it seems impossible, but we will fix it." Pulling his hand, I encourage him to stand and together we walk back along the paths to the facility.

His nurse catches my attention and tells me that the doctor will see me now, if I have time. We leave Austin on his bed, and she walks me down to the doctor's office. The doctor stands, shakes my hand, thanking me for coming. I apologize for the altercation, and ask how his medications changed.

"They haven't changed, Mrs. Jones. I reviewed the list of medications provided to me upon his check-in and everything seems standard. I don't know what I would do differently, except to substitute one medication for another of the same genre, which may work differently or

may not, but at this point in your husband's care, I don't think it's wise to mess with two variables at the same time. We've given him a sedative today that's calmed him down," he says.

"No, you've given him a tranquilizer. He's barely even there. He doesn't talk, he's just going through the motions of life without the light bulb on. How is that helping?"

"Because with him in a calm nature, he's not a threat to others, and we believe that his blackouts may be a short-lived side effect of his medications, so we're hoping that it eases him over the transitional period while his body gets used to the medications."

"But before the sedatives, the blackouts were getting worse, closer together, but he didn't have them at all until he got on the meds," I argue.

"He told us--let's see here...," he flips through the file on his desk, "He told us he began getting help because of inability to sleep; is that correct?"

I tell Austin's story about coming home from the last deployment, staying up for days, thinking it was a jet lag problem at first or difference in coming back to civilian life. Eventually, he'd snap at me over little things that I didn't do, I tell the doctor, like moving his car keys or wallet. In one of his clear moments, Austin told me that he didn't sleep because of nightmares, and that he wanted to go get help, so we went together. It seemed to work for a little while, and then the blackouts started, and after the last one, where he choked me over something that I didn't do, he checked himself in here.

"But now your answer is to sedate him instead of fixing it," I say.

"Mrs. Jones, these things take time. We will try and isolate the problem."

A knock on the door interrupts our conversation, and a nurse peeps her head in, apologizing for the inconvenience, says he has patients waiting.

"I'm sure you understand," he says and I take my cue to leave.

Across the hall from his office is a restroom, so I stop in there, taking my time and replaying the doctor's conversation in my head about giving it time before adjusting his medications more, weighing the options in my head to trust him that the blackouts may just be a phase. I wash up before returning back to Austin's room, only to find it empty. Back in the hallway, the nurse's station is empty also. Racing to the front of the building where the receptionist sits at her computer, I interrupt her.

"I'm Austin Jones' wife. He was supposed to be in his room when I got out of a meeting with the doctor, but he's not there. Do you know where he is?" She says she can check his daily schedule for me, but I tell her that he wasn't on a schedule today because of his episode last night. Try room 103, she says, it's where his group therapy is held. Down the hallway on my left.

Jogging down the hallway, reading door numbers as they pass by, at 103, I open the door. Everyone turns to look at me.

"Is Austin Jones in here?"

A man stands up from the far side of the room, "I'm sorry, but who are you?"

"I'm his wife," I say, "he was supposed to be in his room or here, is he here?"

"No, I'm sorry, I was told he wouldn't be joining us today," the man says. I fling the door shut behind me as I start down the hallway, calling his name. I open every door in the hallway, "Austin?" Half of the rooms are empty, and the ones that aren't have a handful of people in them looking at me as though I've lost it. "Who is she looking for?" they ask each other.

I spot a nurse at the station, "Oh, thank God. Where'd my husband go?"

"Mr. Jones is in his room," she says, but I open the door to his room and look inside and discover it empty.

"No, he's not," I say. "I came here after my meeting with the doctor, but he was gone and so were you. The receptionist told me he might be in group therapy, but he wasn't there either. I've looked in every room in this hallway."

"You can't just open every door you come across, ma'am, there are privacy issues --"

"I'm not worried about your precious privacy issues! Where is my husband?"

"I'm sure there's just been some kind of misunderstanding," she tells me, but by this time a man in a lab coat has come to investigate the situation and there are a dozen people in the hallways or looking out of doorways.

"What's going on here?" he asks, and I immediately answer that my husband, Austin Jones, is missing from his room and isn't in any of the classrooms. "He was supposed to be under 24-hour watch, where were you?" he asks the nurse.

"He must've slipped out while the groups were changing, or while I was in the stock room," she says, "I didn't know he was missing until she came up to me in a panic."

The man takes off in a run to the end of the hallway and grabs a walkie talkie off of his desk, calling for all eyes to find the missing resident when on his way back, he double-takes through a pane glass window.

"Oh, no," he says and breaks into a run for the door. I push past the nurse to follow him into the door the man disappeared behind.

"Austin?" I call on my way through the door, but the man I'm following stops suddenly, making me slam into the back him "What? What is it?" Not until I get around him do I follow his stare and see a person face down in the bottom of the pool.

"Austin? Austin! Call for help!" He lifts his radio and I splash into the pool, take a breath and submerge under. Swimming to the bottom, I recognize the pants he's wearing. I pull under

his armpits to get him to the surface, but he won't budge. I feel the water move next to me and through the bubbles see another man at my side, helping me, but I have to come up for air.

Diving back down, I grab one of Austin's arms while he grabs the other and we both push off the bottom of the pool. A large rock rolls out from the cradle of Austin's robe and he floats to the surface. Hands from everywhere grab us and pull us out, the man and I gasping for air.

"Austin, please," crawling over to him and rolling him on his back, touch his neck for a pulse. "No, no, no, no, no, Austin, please don't do this." His wet skin is still. I pump his chest with my fists in all effort to clear his lungs, to get him to breathe again. One, two, three, four, five, I blow into his mouth and pump again, one, two, three, four, five, "No! Austin, please, no." Again I blow into his mouth and again I pump the water in his lungs, but he doesn't move. "Somebody help me!"

A hand touches my shoulder and I shake it off, but another grabs me more firmly and lifts me to my feet. I don't care who it is, I just throw my wet body against it to keep from collapsing.

I let out a wail, "That's my husband!" and whoever it is that got me to my feet is now sitting with me on a lounge chair by the pool, soaking wet from consoling a stranger whose husband just drowned himself in a pool.

Chapter 6: Janae Lyon

A few days after the police interview, Lori Ann sent a text asking if I would like to join her for a drink sometime. She says she wants to thank me for my coverage of the case, and her brother has been dropped as a person of interest.

"How about now?" I ask with nothing pressing on my agenda. "I know a great bartender." With that, she agreed to meet me at Marka's bar.

I sit in my usual place when she walks in. A hand on my shoulder directs my attention behind me.

"I hope you don't mind," she says, "but I brought a couple of people with me." Walking in behind her was her brother--a man I recognize from the case, but hadn't officially met. She introduces us, and tells me man with them is Everett, a good friend of her brother's.

He shakes my hand, "Ma'am."

It's that one word that takes me back to the dark parking lot. He'd said it then, too.

"Oh," I stutter. "You're the--the guy who scared the daylights out of me in the parking lot, aren't you?"

"I'm real sorry about that, but I just wanted you to know that he was innocent."

I would've figured that out for myself, I told him, but he said he just had to be sure I wouldn't further incriminate him because of his career as an infantryman...and mine as a journalist. It's fine, I lie.

They fall in along the bar with me, Lori Ann taking the seat closest to me. "Did you know about that?" I whisper to her. "Did you know he bombarded me in the parking lot before our interview?" She looks at me, and look for any hint in her eyes beyond her controlled stare.

"No," she says she didn't know he was in town until after the interview, but he's helping her brother and a couple of others.

When she goes back to talking to the others, I shoot a text off to Marka, trying to look nonchalant and sip my beer. "Meet me in the bathroom in 2" I tell her, and excuse myself for the restroom.

When Marka walks in, I'm pacing by the sink. "What's happening?" she asks.

"What's happening is that the guy with Martindale is the same guy who scared me in my parking lot before my interview with his sister," I explain.

"Yeah, so? You figured it was one of his friends."

"Why do you think he was so sure that Martindale is innocent? Even if Martindale is truly innocent and has no clue where his wife is, someone knows what happened, and I think it's him."

Marka laughs and puts her hands on my shoulders. "I think you're giving yourself too much credit. Come on, you need a beer."

"Maybe you're right," I say.

She opens the door and asks if I'm coming back to the bar. I tell her I'll be right there.

I wash my hands and take a few deep breaths before swinging open the big bathroom door.

Martindale stands between the men's room and the women's, leaning back against the wall.

"Oh, hey," I say when I see him, but I don't really feel like talking to him.

"Hey, I wanted to personally thank you for your work on the case," he says. I tell him it was no problem and ask if there's been any news from the police.

"No, but I don't think they will have anything else unless they find her body. Anyway, thanks," he says and dips into the restroom.

Back at the bar, I finish my beer, making small talk when I'm spoken too, but I can't shake the feeling that something isn't right. Considering the police department isn't happy with my abrupt interview, I doubt that they'll be interested in hearing now that I have nothing more than a hunch that the husband's friend may have had a hand in his wife's disappearance. And considering the pretty picture we painted for the public of the love story between the Martindales, thanks to my interview with Lori Ann, I doubt my director will want to hear my theory either, but I decide I have to tell someone.

The next morning I go to the news station and sit in with the director to tell him what I found out about the friend who scared me in the parking lot.

"Listen, Janae, it's strange that he would do something like that, but it's not evidence. Is it possible that you're too involved with this case and you're just seeking resolution for them?"

Is it possible? I wonder.

"Boss, I really don't feel right about this."

"If there's a body to be found," he says, "they'll find it and we can go from there. Until then, it's probably best to move on."

And so I do.

Every news organization dutifully follows up with the police departments and official agencies listed as a part of the investigation. Follow-up segments aired about domestic violence in the military, tearful interviews shown from every angle.

But the truth is it's been a week since the police interview, and no progress has been made on the case: no further suspects or leads, no clues or evidence found. It seems Jessica Martindale vanished.

Her story soon lost amongst the hundreds of other news stories airing, though her family says they will never quit looking.

I receive a Thank You card in the mail from the Lundin family, who tell me they're pleased their hearts and prayers can be focus solely on finding 'their beloved Jessica' rather than defending Justin's innocence, now that the spotlight is rightfully on her disappearance, they said. As I place the card on my kitchen windowsill, it's a shallow victory.

Justin's daughter soon returns so the little girl, who they say was once bubbly and vibrant, can mourn the loss of her mother by her father's side. The final report on the story was the Celebration of Life ceremony held on the beach where Jessica used to surf, where her family and friends gather "in an effort to gain closure" on a life that they didn't really know was finished. Both hope and despair swirl in the salty sea air, I report.

Chapter 7: Abigail Richards

My best friend is waiting in the driveway when mom and I pull up. Stepping out of the car, I'm greeted with crisp Colorado air and a deep hug. She introduces herself to Carly and tells her she was just a baby last time she saw her, but my little girl couldn't care less if she were a complete and total stranger.

"Look at my pretty princess dress! It twirls!" and she twirls and runs in circles with a squeal.

"And you have snow boots on, just in case, huh?" my friend says.

"I'll buy you a bottle of wine if you can get her out of them," I say under my breath.

"Nope. I think they're perfect. Besides, I brought wine."

Mom takes Carly inside "so the big girls can catch up", and Carly protests that she's a big girl, too.

"So....when is he getting released?" she asks me and I tell her that I still don't know, and don't know that I care. I'm too mad to talk to him and tell her how embarrassing it is seeing my neighbors, hearing their whispers in the breeze, seeing the pity in their eyes as I walk past them to the mailbox.

"They all act like I'm the only one with an embarrassing husband while one of theirs is known for not keeping his trunk in his trousers and another one is on wife, like, number four so you know he's some kind of freak," I say.

She suggests that perhaps it's just time to come back home, and I don't disagree, but tell her that my mom only whisked me away for the promise of ten days of sanity before she's going to make me go deal with my own 'mess', as she called it.

"Well, honey, she can't make you go back if you don't want to. You are an adult, you know."

"Yeah, I realize I'm an adult, but, on one hand, I'm an adult with a kid and Carly's whole world is there, in that house, at her pre-school, and, unfortunately for me, with her dad. On the other hand, even if I wanted to separate, I have to go back and deal with the house, with our belongings, and it's the military so there's a slow process about everything, including divorce."

"So how are you going to spend your ten days of freedom?"

I clink the bottle she's holding with my wedding ring as we lean against the car.

"Well, I'd say drunk sounds good--"

"And fairly poetic, I think. Let's go pop the cork."

"--but I'm pregnant again." Her jaw slacks. "I'm sorry. We hadn't told anyone yet. We just found out. I was planning this super cute announcement with his boots or something, you know? And I was looking at nursery decorations and thinking about what if this one is a boy, which it would make Jon so happy. But right as I'm about to show him everything I've been thinking, about he comes in from a walk and loses his balance when he takes off his shoes. And not like kind of loses it and has to put a hand on the ground, I mean he fell the fuck over." She chuckles at the image of him tipping over like a drunken tea pot. "I would probably laugh, too, except I'd already been suspecting he'd been drinking, but that sealed it. The next day I went through everything and found all the bottles. And here we are."

"Damn, Abby, I'm sorry. I'm here for you, no matter what you decide, okay? Even though I would selfishly love for you to unhitch from his hooch-hiding ass and get back here."

She makes me laugh and I snatch her around the neck and hug her quick, then link arms with her and walk inside to see what my family is doing.

But it's while I sit on a barstool watching my daughter stand on a stool and help cook dinner, while I listen to my mother catch up with my lifelong friend over the dinner table about work and if she's ever really going to settle down and find a nice boy that I get that familiar tinker in my chest, that feeling that makes you not count the heads in the room, but count the ones that aren't. Their conversation has me hanging on every sentence with all the intensity I have in order to drown out my own thoughts. Slicing Carly's ham and cutting up her carrots keeps my focus in this room, rather than imagining a room half way across the nation that I haven't been inside, having a conversation I don't know if I'm ready to have.

Later, during Carly's bath time, I read her my old books, making all the silly noises and voices at the appropriate times, and when bath time is over, her hair is brushed, her pajamas on, I give in and crawl in next to her.

"Mommy," she says with her fingers laced and hands folded on her chest, "tonight I pray for daddy to come home soon."

"That's a good prayer," I say and brush a damp strand from her forehead, "What if we lived here and he lived there?"

She frowns.

"But how would we have a tea party? He's supposed to be my prince. If he's not, then I have to use my Care Bear and that's no fun."

"He's supposed to be my prince, too, you know." She scoots in and rests her head on my shoulder.

"I know, mommy."

And with that, she stirs until she settles into sleep, leaving me to wander inside my own head with my tinker of loneliness in my chest. He was supposed to be my prince first.

Sometime after midnight I wake up. My arm dead from the weight of her head, I scoot up on the bed cautiously to free my arm but not disturb her. My dry mouth gets me out of bed and I use my phone's flashlight in the darkened hallways into the kitchen for a glass of water.

Sitting at the granite kitchen counter, wondering how my life got so turned around, I press play on the voicemail I've been ignoring for days.

"Ms. Richards, it's Everett. I got Jonathan all checked in to Peaceful Pines like we talked about. I know he'd love to hear from you. They allow visitors on certain days. If you're interested, I could bring you up here to see him. I know it's not my place, but he just isn't the same without you and I think it would do some good for him to know you haven't given up on him. Just think about it, okay?"

I play it again and Google Peaceful Pines on my phone. It looks more like a resort than a rehab, nestled in the mountains, big windows, manicured gardens surround the large white building, pictures on the website show recreational pools for resident use and a doctor's office for specialized care. A 21-day program, it says, to break and rebuild the habit cycle with natural elements that can be found and utilized outside facility walls to help ensure the program has a sustaining life with our residents.

Twenty-one days. I close Google and open my calendar to see when twenty-one days would end. I count the days on my calendar. I have nine days left here, including today, and he gets home in seventeen. What was it that made him drink and wonder how this is my fault, because I know I haven't done something right for him to pick up a drink to deal with us.

But before I can wallow in self-pity in the darkness of the night, I take my water and go back to bed with nine days left to figure it out.

In the morning, I send a text to Everett to let him know I came to Colorado with my mom and can't visit, but thank him for keeping me posted, then take my coffee cup outside and meander down to the mailbox to give myself something to do.

"Abigail!" The neighbor calls and starts my way. "Your mom didn't tell me you were coming home, how nice to see you! Are you home for long?"

I tell her that I'm here for about a week, and she asks me how "that husband of mine is doing" and I lie straight to her face. Fine, he's doing fine. No, he didn't come with me this trip. A girls' trip, yes.

"Well, I'm sure he's missing you," she says and wishes me a good visit.

Back inside the kitchen I set down yesterday's mail and my coffee cup with a clunk.

"Everything okay?" my mom wants to know.

"No, everything is not okay. I just talked to the neighbor, and she wished me a good visit."

"What's wrong with that?"

"A good visit, Mom, wouldn't be one where I'm trying to decide to leave my husband or not because I'm always wondering if he's drunk or not. A good visit wouldn't be one where I'm halfway across the nation to hide from nosy, judgmental neighbors only to realize that my mess isn't secluded to the eastern seaboard, but extends way the hell over here because nosy neighbors are everywhere, apparently!"

"Honey, I don't think she was trying to be nosy, she was just--"

"I know what she was! And even in nice conversations, someone's always going to ask me what happened in some way or another and it's always going to be embarrassing, it's always going to end up with them looking at me that same way that you're looking at me right now, and

I hate it! I absolutely hate it! Because I didn't do it! I did what I was supposed to do, I married the hero, I stood by him while he was deployed, I had his babies, and what did I get?"

"It looks to me like you got what you wanted," she says. "You got married to a serviceman, and I'm afraid this is just part of it. Did you not think that he would change over time, and especially after deployment, when you did? You grew up and stood on your own two feet, without any of your support system, with fear in your heart that he might not come home, and you did it well, as we all knew that you would. But it's damned selfish of you to think that you can change and he cannot, just because you don't like the way that he did it. Well, darling, he probably isn't in love with his changes either. So, from where I stand, you can either try to hide from your problems, which will never work, or you can go home and face them."

"I know, okay! I know. You're right," and I fold into her arms and let her hug me, "I know you love being right anyway."

"Oh, honey, it's not about being right," she says as she strokes my hair, "but it's definitely a perk." She holds me for a minute longer and then stands me up by my shoulders. "Now that we have that settled, how about we plan our week?"

And so we do. Dinner plans turn into grocery lists, long afternoons are spent in the porch swing, broken up by walks to feed the ducks or the occasional trip to town because if this is going to be a girls' trip, after all, we might as well indulge ourselves, Mom says, and I perk up thinking about the things I love about coming home: a stop by my favorite boutique in old downtown for a new shirt, the nail salon on 23rd for an overdo wax and mani-pedis for all of us, including Carly, which makes her clap with excitement. But no matter where the lazy days take us, we wind the mountain roads back home in time to cook without rush, and eat with only enjoyment for the time spent together.

After ignoring a handful of phone calls from him over the last couple of days, I can't come up with any more excuses not to answer, and Carly wants so badly to talk to him. So I answer without saying hello to him myself, call out for our daughter, and immediately hear rapid tiny footsteps in return.

I watch in amusement as she paces the kitchen floor talking to her dad, telling him about her oh-so-important days of nails, tea parties and shopping, her socked feet landing precisely in each square tile and she listens to his responses. She's just like him: can't sit still on the phone. I wonder if he's pacing as he talks to her.

"Here ya go," she says when she's done. "Daddy says he loves us and he wants to talk to you." Well played, sir, I think.

"Hey," I say to him.

"Abby, I know you probably don't want to talk to me, but I just wanted to let you know that I'm really trying to fix it--to fix me this time for good," he says.

"That's good," I say.

"I know you're mad," he says.

"Yep." Carly is coloring at the kitchen table within earshot, so I keep my answers short.

"I should've been better at this the first time."

"Or the second time," I remind him.

"But I can't change those times now, and I really think we can work this out, if you'll just give me one more chance."

"That's asking a lot, considering,"

His patient tone makes me wonder if he's had all of this prepared since he checked in.

"I know it is. I know I've put you through a lot, but, baby, I've been through a lot, too. Did I tell you that I know some other people here?" That sparks my interest, and my stubbornness gives way to my curiosity and I ask him about it. He tells me about Everett and what happened to his face, a story I'd never heard. He tells me Jones is in there with him, and about how their group therapy session didn't end so well because Jones blames Everett for his best friend's death.

"Oh my gosh, that's terrible," I tell him.

"It is, but when Everett and Martindale dropped me off, Martindale made me promise that I would do anything to get you back because his wife is missing," he says.

"What do you mean she's missing?"

"You haven't seen it on the news? His wife went missing, and they thought for a while that he might have had something to do with it."

"I have heard that story, I just didn't know that's a guy you know."

"It's beyond crazy. She just disappeared," he says. "The worst part is, they have a daughter." The weight of that presses down on me as I watch our daughter-- a little, happy military brat. What if I had to tell her that he went missing, that I just didn't know where he was, that I couldn't find him, that she may never see him again...but then again maybe she could. She'd never understand.

I ask him how they're all getting along, and he clarifies Martindale is still out looking for his wife, and he and Jones are in separate programs. He tells me about Jones' blackouts, that he checked himself in after choking his wife at home one night.

"What the hell? Are you serious?" I ask, and Carly tells me not to use swear words. He is serious, and I feel sorry for his wife. I wonder if she has intentions on divorcing him or if she's

staying, but I don't ask because I don't want him to think it will influence my decision one way or another on what I decide to do with our marriage.

As our conversation winds down, he asks if I would keep talking to him while he's in rehab, or if I would please let him talk to Carly, even if I don't want to talk to him. That, I tell him, I can agree to.

The next day when he calls, I answer the phone without first handing it to our daughter. After the niceties of a conversation between a struggling husband and wife, I ask him what I've been needing to know: how the drinking started again this time. His story makes too much sense, and I kick myself for being so selfish and not considering what he had been through and asking him how I could help him before the situation got to this point. I apologize for crying, and try to tell him that it's just the hormones.

"I should have talked to you about it," he says. "You've always been there for me, and it wasn't fair for me to treat you like you wouldn't understand, but I wasn't ready to tell you about my deployments and what happened. I wanted to protect you from the terrible things I had to do, the things that I saw, the sounds that I can't quit hearing. But now that we are here, and now that you do know, please let me fix it."

A long pause becomes awkward silence as I weigh both sides of my heart in an attempt to find justice in our situation.

"You don't have to answer right now," he tells me, and I thank him for giving me time to process it all. In an attempt to change the subject, I ask him how his friend Jones is handling his program, but he tells me an answer I wasn't expecting. He's not sure how Jones is handling it, or what he's trying to handle. He tells me that often times during their free time, they'll sit together

and play checkers. Jones sits in silence except for when he's asking profound questions about the meaning of his actions during his blackouts.

"He's concerned his actions during an episode reflect the true devil inside him," my husband says. "He thinks he's dangerous because now he's hurting people he doesn't want to, compared himself to poison."

Jonathan says he tried to rationalize with him and explain how they had both hurt their wives, albeit in different ways, and that hurting someone we love weighs more than firing at an enemy who is firing back at us.

"And what did he say?" I ask.

"It was strange. He sat there thinking about it and finally just said it's more than that, but he couldn't tell me why when I asked what he meant."

That is strange, I agree, but I offer the solution that perhaps he's still processing it all and needs more time.

Three days later, I'm having a late lunch when my phone rings, but when I answer it, Jonathan is frantic on the other end. I excuse myself from the table and step outside on the restaurant patio, asking him what's wrong.

"He killed himself, Abby," he says.

"What? Who?"

"Jones, just now. I'm still soaking wet. I tried to help her get him out but it was too late," his run-on sentence only broke up by a sound that I couldn't tell was him trying to catch his breath or him crying.

"Oh my God, are you ok?"

"No, I'm not okay! Everything is falling apart! Shank is dead, now Jones, Martindale's wife's funeral was today, I'm in rehab, and there's a chance I won't be married much longer. How is that okay? It's so fucked!"

My mouth falls open and my free hand moves to catch it. He's right. What greater things in the world are going on around us, and suddenly his drinking becomes less detrimental and my pride more fatal.

Sinking into a chair at an empty table on the patio, the sounds of my husband's heart breaking on the other end of the line make me curse myself for not being able to go to him, not being able to wrap my arms around his neck, but instead we have the line between us, and I can feel every inch in the 1,500 miles that separate us.

"Jonathan, I love you," I say.

"Fuck that. Fuck you for telling me that right now. I don't need a pity I love you. You haven't told me that in weeks, and you think now is the time? I don't want you staying with me because you feel sorry for me." But his words don't hurt, and I know I need to say more.

"It's not a pity I love you. I do love you. I know it wasn't probably good timing for me to tell you this right now, I just thought perhaps you might need a little hope in your day. I'm sorry, Jonathan, for everything: for not being more understanding, for pushing you too hard to normalize after your deployments, for pushing you away when you needed me most, for being too stubborn to see past my own pride."

Slowly but surely, calmness presides over panic, and he tells me more about Jones' death, that he woke up last night to a disturbance in the halls and heard Jones yelling that he hurt someone.

"The guards wouldn't let me through to talk to Jones," he says. The same guards later told him that Jones yelling that he needed to talk to the psychiatrist to tell him what he had done, but when he punched a guard to get there, the nurses rushed in and sedated him. This morning, his wife came after she heard about it, and Jones must have gone to the garden, tied a big rock in his robe, and drowned himself.

The last couple of days pass slowly, and I change my return flight. I see the grief of a woman who doesn't understand her husband's death, and my daughter clings to my side, watching the woman she doesn't know receive a folded flag in exchange for a heart-piercing sob. This can't be us, I decide, not now, and resolution finds my heart and swells my chest. And just as they call Austin Jones home for final formation, I lean down and whisper in my daughter's ear.

"Let's go home."

PART 4

Chapter 8: Marka Jones

When I get home, I dump my bags in the laundry room, take the lid off the trashcan and start cleaning, throwing out take-out boxes, dumping Tupperware full of old food in the trash and stacking the dirty containers by the sink to return to after I finish the trash. I wash the dishes with vigor, splashing water on my shirt, on the floor, and let it drip from the laminate countertops. Arm-deep in soapy water, I see my bags lying by the washer, and my neck gets hot. The thought that the bag's contents probably smell like the funeral home makes my stomach churn. Popping the lid on the washer, I'm greeted with the stink of mildewed clothes that sat in the washer for who-knows-how-long.

"Dammit!" I curse myself and pour in a large splash of vinegar and soap, not even taking the time to use a measuring cup and set it on speed wash. "I just want to wash the death off my clothes!" I yell at the washer as I slam the lid and walk out.

The water on the floor in the kitchen prompts me to get the bucket from under the sink and a dishrag and, down on all fours, I start drying the floor with circular scrubbing motions. But, sitting back on my haunches, the floor shines where I stood doing dishes, and now nowhere else, so I fill the bucket halfway with more water, get back on my hands and knees, knowing damn good and well I own a mop, and clean the floor with the vigor of a beaten Cinderella.

I've only just finished the floors when the washing machines stops, but it isn't until that dry load of clothes is out of the machine and I sort through the pile of shirts and put them on hangars that I realize that half of those clothes are Austin's. And not only are they his, but his side of the closet is full, and has always bled onto my side. So I lay them down at the foot of the closet instead of hanging them, and then pull a few more shirts out of his side of the closet that

were on my side and drop them down on the first pile, and then another handful of hangars and toss them down on them until I finally wrap my arms around his neatly lined, plastic-shrouded uniforms, pressed cami blouses and pants, casual t-shirts and hoodies, and throw them on the bed.

"How could you do this to me?!" I scream again as I throw another armful of it from the closet to the bed, missing it mostly, and watch it fall heavy in a pool of cotton, nylon and polyester on the floor.

Looking at the mess I made on the floor, the mess he made of me and our life together, breathing hard from screaming at the laundry he left me to do by myself when he knew how much I hate doing laundry, I kick the clothes, throw his boots against the wall, one of which misses. Instead, the heavy brown boot strikes the grey porcelain nightstand lamp, breaking at the impact of his heavy brown boot, the almost white lampshade falls to the floor with shards of the lamp. The shatter is satisfying to my ears and for a moment I consider wrecking more, but the moment gives me pause and I look around at the chaos I've made and my instant gratification is replaced by remorse.

"I'm sorry," I say to the laundry, as though it were going to get up and become my husband, standing there laughing at me like he would when I would snap at something as silly as laundry. I pick up the green and khaki shrapnel of his enlistment off the floor and put them with the others on the bed. With everything off the floor, and no clue what else to do with it, I crawl in the middle of his clothes on the bed, slip on one of his pressed khaki shirts, desperate for some small bit of him to comfort me in our bed like he used to when he would play with my hair or stroke my arm, desperate to drown my sorrows and worries in his warmth, of which now there is none.

It's barely bright when I wake up. I swallow and my tongue feels dry, throat sore. My eyes burn as I blink and it's possible, for now, that I'm completely out of tears, so I close them again.

The orange evening light is shining through the blinds when I wake up again. The edges of my soul feel raw, and I'm pretty sure this is what dying of a broken heart feels like. Laying there sideways, my head is at the edge of his side of the bed and I spot a glimmer of silver metal poking out between the mattress and box spring.

My eyes focus around it and I realize it's small coil. Curiously, I roll over on my chest to pull it, but it doesn't freely come out. And then I realize what it is: a notebook.

Still wearing his shirt, I swing my legs around and crouch between the bed and the wall to pull it out. Nothing is written on the front, but inside, I recognize Austin's handwriting.

"I had a dream about a bright light. It was strong like the sun, but right in my face. Something was wrong. There was too much light and I couldn't get away from it. I put my arm up to shield my eyes, but somehow it never helped. I couldn't get away from it and it started freaking me out. I woke up in a panic. I feel dumb panicking over light. It wasn't hot. I wasn't burning. It was just bright."

That's all that the first page said. He dreamed about a bright light. I turn the page.

"I had a dream that I went on a run - but something was wrong. I kept looking around like someone was following me, but no one was behind me. I just kept running in one direction, looking around, checking behind me, but I couldn't see anything, nothing, except myself. I could see my arms and legs and body. I was squinting against the bright light, but I can't see where I was. Something was following me or I was running away from someone, but I wasn't yelling for help. I was afraid of being found."

I thumbed through the pages and there were only a half dozen or so entries.

"What else are you dreaming about?" I ask my husband's ghost. As I turn the next page and fold the cover back, the coffee pot beckons me. Dumping the old grounds, rinsing the copper filter, replacing and refilling it all gets done with one eye on the notebook, cautious not to spill anything on the pages of black ink. Leaning on the counter, waiting on the coffee to percolate, I search for a date on any of the pages, but find none.

"I had a hottest dream last night about this girl on the beach. I was running and there was this girl coming out of the ocean. She was carrying a surfboard and had on a tight blue water shirt with her bikini bottoms. God, she was perfectly built. Somehow we ended up in the ocean together with the surfboard. Maybe she offered to teach me? Or I asked her? Anyway, next thing I know we were out in the water with the surfboard between us, just floating. I couldn't tell who she was, but she was so damn hot. I don't even think the hot girl had a name. I just knew I had every intention on sinking into her. I wanted to pull her hair out of her ponytail and see how long it was. But right about the time I reached for her she swam away. When I moved to chase her, I bumped into Marka in real life. She had her back turned to me so I ran my hand under her tank top and had my way with her instead."

I gasp, remembering that night. "Oh, really. Pervy bastard," but the truth is I don't know if I'm offended or turned on. "...had my way with her instead,' he says. Glad to know I was your 'instead' that night," I say to the notebook, and flip the page.

Knowing I should resist the urge, but unable to, just like any other book I've read, I find the last page and read it out of order.

"Wait. What?" I say. It makes no sense, but no sooner do I find the page with the fourth entry and get the cover of the spiral turned back, the knock of knuckles on my front door interrupts me.

I consider ignoring it, but whoever it is knocks again.

"Coming!" I say, although it's really not what I want to be doing. I close the notebook and toss it on top of the refrigerator when I walk by to answer the door.

It would be impossible to forget that face, even though it had been weeks since I'd seen him. "Um, hi," I say, and he answers my unspoken question.

"I'm sorry I didn't call first, but I don't have your number. Austin was with me overseas when our convoy blew up, and Gunny gave me your address. I just wanted to come by and make sure you were okay." With that he holds up a bag of what smells like fried chicken, and his eyes scan down to my toes. Following his gaze, I look down at my clothes. Shit. I'm still wearing his shirt that comes down to almost mid-thigh over my really faded navy blue pajama pants.

"Oh, ummm," I start, but it is exactly what it looks like. I just got out of bed. I slept all day. It's almost dark out again. And I'm wearing my dead husband's uniform shirt. "Wait--did you say Austin was with you when your convoy blew up?"

"That's right."

In all the assumptions I'd made about the explosion that melted his face, it never occurred to me Austin could've been with him. "Really? Oh my God. I'm sorry--I just--well, he never talked about his deployments. Please come in," I open the door so he can come in, and a small part of me is glad that I went on the rage-cleaning spree.

"I'm sorry about the way I look," I tell him as he sits down and unpacks the bags of chicken and biscuits and little Styrofoam containers of sides onto the coffee table.

"Don't apologize," he says. "It's kind of sweet."

In the kitchen, pulling the stack of paper plates from on top of the refrigerator, the notebook slides down with them. With both the plates and the spiral in my hands, I return to the living room.

"I want to apologize to you," he says when I return, "for missing Austin's funeral."

Plates on the table, I wave off his apology, "It's okay. I probably wouldn't have known you were there anyway."

His silence makes me look at him, his eyebrow cocked at me, lips in a smirk.

"Okay," I concede. "I probably would've recognized you."

"I'm pretty easy to pick out in a crowd," he jokes, "but I apologize for missing it. I don't know if he told you, but the day he checked into Peaceful Pines, I was there with another Marine from our troop."

"No, he didn't," I say, "I didn't even know he was going. He was in therapy here for a little while, and his episodes just seemed to be getting worse, more and more violent until one night he choked me," Everett's jaw was clenched tight. "But you have to understand, it wasn't him that choked me. When he had a blackout, he was a different person. They just sedated him when he had an episode there and you know the rest."

He nods and crunches into his chicken leg, so I spear some green beans with a fork and with that first salty taste, realize I haven't eaten in a long time. Pulling a piece of chicken from the box, we eat together in silence.

"Did you ever kill any women?" I ask, and my question makes him stop chewing and wipe his mouth. "I mean, when you and Austin were deployed together, did you ever have to kill any women?"

Shifting in his seat, turning toward me a little, finishing his bite slowly, he considers his answer. "Sometimes, Marka, women would shoot at us, or be strapped with bombs, or pop out of alleys with rocket launchers. You have to understand that it's not something any one of us wanted to do, and children were the hardest to have to shoot. Why do you ask?"

"Well, when I woke up a little bit ago, I found a notebook wedged under the bed - like Austin was recording his nightmares or something. I didn't finish the entire thing, but the last entry makes me think that maybe he hurt a woman. I was just trying to figure out if it was a memory or a dream."

After rubbing my greasy fingertips on a paper napkin, putting the notebook on the table between us, I open it to the first page. "Like I said, I didn't get very far because dinner showed up," I say. He smiles and I tell him what I know so far. "The first two aren't much, but he says he woke up scared, like they were a nightmare to him. One he says it was too bright, and the other he says he was running from something but didn't know what." So I flip past those pages, and past his dirty dream encounter, but he catches my hand.

"What does that one say?"

"Ummmm," I blush and look down at my hands. I shouldn't be embarrassed about having sex with my husband, but talking to a near stranger about having sex with my husband who was having a wet dream about another woman is another story. Looking back up at his tortured war-worn face, I look in his eyes, genuine, green and kind. After a deep breath, I answer him." He had a dirty dream about a girl on a beach, and then we had sex after he woke up."

"Did he know the girl?"

"I don't think so. And that's the last I've read in it, except the last page that said he thinks he may have hurt a woman."

"The one from the beach?"

"I don't know." The fourth entry sits between us, and we both read while we eat. It says he only remembered tiny snapshots of being on his hands and knees on the sand, gasping for air, throwing up and when he woke up with a sickening, salty taste in his mouth, he vomited.

"But what I can't understand,' he wrote, 'is why when I went to go get dressed after I puked, there was sand in my shoes.'"

"You remember the night he woke you up to have sex; was it the next day that he puked?" Everett asks.

"I could've been asleep when he went to the bathroom and didn't hear him," I say. "I don't remember him telling me he'd gone to the beach, though."

"Hm," he says, and turns the page.

"I had another dream about the hot girl on the beach,' he wrote, 'but I can't figure out what it means. We were wet and talking in the shade of the pier. We had the beach to ourselves, she was flirting with me, sitting Indian-style across from me. God, she was hot. Her hair was long and she was sitting there with a towel, drying it. I couldn't resist the urge to kiss her, but she pushed me off. She stood up and got mad. I tried to apologize, but she kept backing away from me until she tripped over her cooler, which is when I saw the name written on the white lid. I can't remember what it said, but something about the name made my heart race. I tried to apologize again but she was panicking and yelling for help. I remember thinking I had to get her to stop. That's when I woke up. It was so real. I can't shake it. I wish I could see her face or see the name on the cooler. Do I know her? What if I know her?"

"What the hell?" I ask, then turn the page and read while he picks up the grease-stained paper plates, and bags up the leftovers, taking them to the kitchen trash.

"Here's something," I say as I read, and Everett comes around the corner. "This one talks about the night he choked me. I was sitting on something, holding it down, but I was having a hard time. I was mad, very mad, and frustrated that I couldn't get whatever it was to stay down. I had to use both hands. Marka says I blacked out the other night and choked her. Maybe I'm dreaming about that? I can't believe I did that to my own wife. But I just can't shake the feeling that I did something bad, and now I can't decide if that's what I feel bad about, or if it's something else. I want to think it's just my guilty conscience about hurting Marka, but something in my gut tells me it's not. What if I hurt someone else? What if I hurt Marka again? I could never live with myself."

"When did have the first dream about the girl, when y'all had sex?" he asks.

"Ummm, that would've been a little before I met you. Come to think of it, Janae came to the bar the day the story broke, which was the day after we had sex in the middle of the night."

"And you told me when I met you he'd been growing more violent during his blackouts, that he'd thrown something at you."

"Yeah, then he choked me the night I met you, actually. That's why he checked himself into Peaceful Pines. He was really screwed up over it. I went to work the next day, and I came home to find out he'd driven himself up there."

He nods and tells he and Martindale took Richards to Peaceful Pines for alcohol rehab after he met me at the bar.

"Austin told me that he ended up seeing someone he was deployed with. He just didn't tell me who."

"Yeah, it was us. Then we came back here to hopefully find Jessica, but it'd been more than two weeks, so her family came down and held a ceremony for her on the beach where she

used to surf. It was strange to have a funeral for someone you don't know if they're really dead or not. The news covered it and everything. Anyway, it was right after that that we found out about Austin's death."

"You don't think...." I start, but I could tell he did. His face solemn, eyebrows raised. "No," I declare and snap the spiral shut. "No."

"Marka, just listen. It could be nothing, right? It's just a thought."

"How dare you come in here and accuse my dead husband of killing some girl! What gives you the fucking right to walk in here and say that? Is that why you're here? Is that why you brought food, to schmooze your way in here so you could spit on his grave? Get out!"

"Marka, no, listen--"

"No, you listen! Get out of my house NOW! Maybe you killed the poor girl, you ever think about that? Where were you the night she died?"

"On my farm 1,000 miles from here."

"Likely fucking story," I snap, rage flushing my cheeks. I pushed against his arms and chest, but it was like moving a refrigerator in bursts. "Get OUT!" He wasn't budging.

"I just think we should piece it together. Maybe it's nothing," but his calm tone just pisses me off more.

"Fine, you stay. I'll leave." I shove him one last time before half-running down the hallway toward the bedroom.

I have every intention on grabbing my shoes and leaving until I spot the old wood-grain shotgun standing in the corner closet. Just as I come out of the shadows of the hallway into the light of the living room, the sound of the slide pumping a round into the chamber startles him into dropping Austin's notebook on the floor and putting his arms up.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa! Don't shoot me, Marka. I'm leaving. Please. I didn't mean to upset you," he was backing toward the door now. "I just came to say I was sorry for missing the funeral, nothing more. I didn't know anything about his dreams until you brought it up. I promise." I point the gun from his chest to the door and back, and he takes another step backward, following my silent instruction. "Marka, you don't want to do this. I know you're mad and scared and hurting, but shooting me won't bring him back or make it better." I click off the safety. " Alright, alright," he takes another slow step. "What if we make a deal? What if you put the gun down, and we talk about this?"

"That's a shit deal, where's my benefit in doing that?"

"Your part is that I promise I won't tell anyone about this, ever," he says. "I promise."

Shit. He has a point.

"I decide what happens," I tell him.

Hands raised, he nods, "Deal."

My finger curves around the trigger housing and I click the safety back on and let the barrel fall toward the ground.

"Thank you," he says, and I nestle the gun between the last couch cushion and the arm of the love seat and take my place next to it. "You're not going to put that away?" he asks.

"Why? You think it's going to go off on its own? It's fine here with me." I cross my feet on the coffee table and lean back. "Let's go back. You said the funeral for the girl was held on the beach because she was a surfer?"

"Yes."

"So what? Lots of people surf here."

"But not a lot of people have dreams about killing a surfer, and then a surfer goes missing at the same time."

"We don't know if it was her, though. She didn't have a name or a face in his dreams. He just said she was hot."

"No, he said she was hot with long blond hair and a blue surfer shirt," he corrects me while he's looking at his phone.

"Yeah, because that narrows it down," my eyes roll in tune with my sarcastic tone.

"It does when this is what Jessica looks like," with that, my focus is on the phone screen he's showing me from the other side of the coffee table.

"Oh shit," I stand up and snatch the phone from him to look at it closer. "Where'd you get this?"

"Her Facebook page."

There she was, my dead husband's mistress in a blue Hurley rash guard over her bikini. Her beach blond hair piled up on top of her head with a thin black headband holding down her flyaways, pretty smile shining white in the sun, Ray Bans shading her eyes. She has her arm pulling another girl close to her as they stand cheek to cheek, a little silver cross hanging around her neck.

I abandon my post near the gun and drop down on the couch next to him. "Holy shit," I say.

"It just..."

"...fits," I finish for him, and my chin quivers. I clear my throat, force my chin to stop, but my voice cracks a little when open my mouth to ask, "What are the options here? He's already dead."

Everett nods. "It's just a nightmare, not a confession. With a good lawyer...." He trails off.

"Even with a good lawyer, his name will be tarnished as a suspect in a murder case," I say.

"Yes, but her family--" he says.

"--her family has already begun to mourn her loss, just like me losing my husband."

"Marka," he says, the warmth of his hand on my shoulder makes me look in his eyes.

"Marka, they're suffering because they don't know if she's ever coming back. Isn't there some sort of peace in resolution?"

"Yes, but we don't have resolution, because the only person who can answer this question is already dead, so who is gaining what, exactly?"

His nod told me he knew I was right, too.

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Grayson Thomas Edds

Before I began the Master's of Fine Arts in Creative Writing program online at The University of Texas at El Paso, I earned a Bachelor's of Arts in English from the University of Maryland University College and a high school diploma from Randall High School in Amarillo, Texas.

After bartending my way through the majority of my undergraduate degree, I began my professional degree as an editor in the marketing department of First National Bank Texas in Killeen, Texas. Two years later, I realized I was better fit for journalism. I accepted a position at The Belton Journal, Texas' oldest continuously published newspaper in Texas, as a freelance reporter, but it wasn't long before I was promoted to news editor and then managing editor. I wrote an average of seven articles a week for the next two years, totaling more than 700 articles. I also designed the A and B sections of the paper each week.

Returning to Amarillo, I was hired as the interactive managing editor of ABC 7 Amarillo. There, I wrote an average of seven articles a day for sixteen months, totaling more than 2,000 articles.

Just before the birth of my youngest son, I returned to Temple, Texas, and returned part-time to The Belton Journal as a consultant and designer. I also began to work at Temple College as a consultant in the college's writing center and an integrated reading and writing instructor.

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