

# Forever Tethered

Pages: 543

Format: pdf, epub

Language: English

---

**[ [DOWNLOAD FULL EBOOK PDF](#) ]**

---

Forever Tethered

By L.M. Faircloth

Acknowledgements

Editor:

Dr. Rebecca McAndrew

Proofreaders:

Cindy McKeldin Turner

Susan Earls

Kathy Kilkuskie

Karl Kerchner

Cover Design:

L.M. Faircloth

Candid Photograph:

Jack Jobs

Vietnam, Phan Rang Air Base

March 1967 – March 1968

Thank you, Jack, for such a heartwarming photo.

All rights received.

I would like to extend a special thank you to my editor, Rebecca, and my proofreaders, Cindy, Susan, Kathy, and Karl. I greatly appreciate each of your perspectives and expertise. Your dedication, generous efforts, contributions, and support echo throughout each page of this story.

Fictional Story

Although this book is based on an actual timeline and some true events, it has been fictionalized and all persons appearing in this work are fictitious.

Warning: Adult Theme

This book contains some strong language, sex, and violence that may be considered offensive by some readers.

Printed in the United States of America

ISBN# 9781537258867

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without written permission from the author.

Copyright © 2014 by L.M. Faircloth

Subtitle: It Was About the War

Vietnam Era

From January 1, 1965 - March 28, 1973, a sum of 2,594,000 men and women of the American Armed Forces served within the borders of South Vietnam. In support of the armed forces, approximately 22,000 American civilians also worked within the borders. A total of 58,202 service men, 8 military women, and an estimated 78 civilians lost their lives. Another 303,704 Americans suffered injuries. At the height of the war, nearly one of every 10 Americans serving in Vietnam was a casualty.

On American soil, the culture was changing with its music, free love, women's liberation, and the space race. The country was also deeply engaged in the civil rights and anti-war movements. As opposition escalated, peaceful civil rights marches and organized anti-war demonstrations turned violent. The nation was being torn apart and divided within its own borders. Disrespect, one direct result of the anti-war movement, was inflicted against the returning Vietnam veteran. Although the American public has since rectified and clarified the separation between political opinions of a war, and the young men and women who are placed in harm's way to protect the nation's values and freedom, the scars remain.

The Vietnam veteran asked one thing of his country, and that was simply to be acknowledged—to be seen and heard. While the characters in this story are fictitious, they hold true to the common threads linking each veteran to every story. Those common threads include the fear they shared, the losses they suffered, and the disillusioned heartache they endured. Those threads also include the honor, the pride, the brotherhood, and the feeling of never having felt more alive or in a job more important. Thank you to all the veterans and American civilians who served in Vietnam. Thank you for fighting for our country, for giving help where needed, and for making supreme sacrifices.

## Dedication

I dedicate this book to all the brave men and women who served in Vietnam, both living and deceased. May this story touch the heart and souls of all who read it. L.M.F.

## Chapter One

September 1986, Eagle River, Alaska

Christopher Dawson stepped out of the Ford Ranger truck, which he had rented earlier that morning after his flight landed in Anchorage, Alaska. His destination was fifteen miles north of Anchorage, in the small town of Eagle River. It was late September, and the colorful fall landscape was making its annual appearance. The leaves were turning gold and red, and the snow was slowly inching its way down the mountainside. Eagle River sat at the base of the Chugach Mountains, and it was beautifully charming in its rustic essence of cedar shingled dwellings, surrounded by birch and diamond-willow trees.

The small town had a relatively conservative population, a limited number of shops and eateries,

several churches, one landmark restaurant, and two taverns. After checking the first tavern, Chris was about to enter the second weatherworn saloon. He was searching for someone he had only set eyes on once, for a brief moment—twelve years ago. This was of little concern to Chris. He was certain he would recognize this individual the moment he saw him.

Christopher Dawson stood broad-shouldered and tall at six-foot-two, and two hundred forty pounds. At first glance, he was extraordinarily handsome, with coal-black hair and crystal blue eyes that resembled glacier ice. He was a cross between Native American Indian and Scandinavian. Although this was a beautiful combination, a closer inspection of his face revealed visible scars across his right cheek and chin, and above his eye. These were only a few of his battle wounds. Other scars were covered by his tee-shirt and jeans, and deeper wounds were hidden far inside.

The battlefields, the war zones, and the missions were finally a part of the past for Chris. Tension still brewed in the Mid-East; nevertheless, it would now be a younger man's job to fight those battles. Chris knew war, whether it was called repressing a conflict, policing, or peace keeping. He had engaged in every hotspot that ignited from the year 1956, when he first enlisted as a Marine, until a fall day in 1986, several days ago when he finally retired from the CIA after thirty years. He gave his country all of himself for those thirty years, and now he was on a quest of his own. It was a quest to claim what was his, and to reclaim what should have always been his, had he made different choices.

As Chris stepped into the smoky little tavern, his stature filled the doorway. He was still a force to be reckoned with, even at the age of forty-eight. Chris quickly scanned the room and everyone in it. Several local old-timers were sitting at the bar talking, and they paused to take notice of the stranger. Most of the tables were empty, except one cluttered with the purses of a few young girls who were paying close attention to the boys engaged in a game of pool in the far corner. Chris reached for his wallet and tossed a few bucks on the bar.

"Jack Black," he said. "Make it a double."

The bartender obliged, and after Chris downed the shot, he turned to watch the young boys playing pool. Although he found the individual for whom he was searching, he stood back for a moment and observed the teens. He assessed they were all between sixteen and seventeen, doubting there was an eighteen-year-old in the bunch. The legal drinking age in Alaska was twenty-one, coinciding with every other state in the country; however, such laws were seldom enforced outside of the Anchorage city limits.

After a pause and a breath, Chris stepped forward and walked towards the boys, focusing on one of them. When he approached, the teens quieted their chatter. As Chris's face became clearer through the smoke-filled room, the boy he was watching dropped his jaw. As cool and controlled as Chris knew he would remain, he was still grateful for already having had that shot of bourbon before addressing this young man.

"So you thought you'd cut school today and hang out in a bar—drinking?" Chris questioned, in a stern tone.

He could see several different emotions sweep across the boy's face, and the young man seemed unable to find a voice to respond.

From the sidelines, one of the other boys spoke up, calling the young teen by his first name. "Chris, who is this guy?"

Young Christopher, at the age of seventeen, spoke the words for the first time. “He’s—he’s my father.”

The father and son seemed to study one another, as Chris Sr. fought back the lump in his throat. The boy was the spitting image of him, and just as he thought twelve years ago, when he had seen young Christopher for that brief moment—there was no denying he fathered that child. Beyond the same coal-black hair and blue eyes, Chris Sr. could also see the reflection of the boy’s beautiful mother in his face. Young Christopher had her full lips, fair skin, and a few well-placed freckles across the bridge of his nose. He was a gracefully handsome product of his parents.

Then interrupting the silent introduction, one of the other boys blurted out, “But your dad died a few years ago, Chris.”

Young Christopher’s expression turned from the initial shock to resentment. “My dad did die a few years ago. This is my biological father,” he said, giving Chris Sr. a disparaging look. “Once I learned about the birds and the bees—and math, it didn’t take me long to figure out he knocked-up my mother while she was married to my dad.”

Chris Sr. took another step closer to his son, tilted his head and gave him a threatening grin. “So with that little piece of the timeline, you think you have it all figured out? The truth is, you have no idea how you came about or what was going on at that time.”

Although a wave of fear ran through young Christopher, pure tenacity caused him to hold his ground. “That’s because every time I ask questions, I get told it was about the war, and I need to grow up more before they’ll tell me what happened over there. So, I know you’re my father and I’ve seen pictures of you, but when I want more answers—well, I’m too young yet.”

“You were too young,” Chris Sr. confirmed. “But I guess if you think you’re old enough to hang out in bars, I’d say you’re old enough to be told about the war.” Turning towards the other teens, he barked out his orders in a military fashion. “The rest of you kids need to leave now. And I suggest you go straight home and tell your parents where you’ve been. Tell them the truth, because I can assure you, I will. Go!”

The teens scattered like mice, grabbing their things and heading out the door. Following the commotion, the bartender walked over to say he wanted no trouble in his bar.

Chris Sr. chuckled. “Is that right? The kids I just ran out of here, not one is older than seventeen. And this boy here...” Chris Sr. pointed to young Christopher. “This one is mine, and he’s only seventeen. So if you don’t want any trouble, I suggest you take that beer out of his hand and bring him a soda.”

Chris Sr. turned to face his son, and young Christopher had a strong point he needed to make. “You’re not really my father. Sev Fitzpatrick was my dad. My last name is Fitzpatrick, not Dawson.”

“You’re right,” Chris Sr. acknowledged. “Sev has always been your father. But I would like to point out—this cutting school, getting in trouble, drinking, and getting a little too friendly with the girls... Most people would expect this out of my son—not from any son of Sev’s.”

The bartender returned with a soda and a double shot, and Chris Sr. pulled out a chair to take a seat at one of the tables. Before young Christopher sat, he was sent to the pay phone to call his mother. When he returned, Chris Sr. offered a few words of condolences, concerning the passing of Sev.

"I only heard about Sev's death a few days ago."

"A few days ago?" young Christopher questioned. "He died three years ago."

"Yeah, well, news travels a little slow where I've been," Chris Sr. responded. "Your father was one of the most honorable men I've ever known. I always knew he would be a good father to you. He was my friend, and one of the few men I trusted one hundred percent."

"He always said that about you too," young Christopher acknowledged. "But what I don't understand, if you were friends, why did you and my mom...? I mean, he had to hate you for that."

"He did," Chris Sr. confessed quickly. "At different times we both hated each other. But when it counted, we still had each other's back. And when it counted, we both did what was best for you, your mother, for everyone. We were in a war, and in the chaos of that war nothing was black and white. Things happened, and we were there living it—surviving it. Sev was the man your mother was meant to marry. He was meant to be the father of her children."

"Then what were you?" the boy asked.

"Me? Everything that is horrific and ugly about war, I'm it. What brought your mother and me together? ...Pain. If you want to hear it, I'll tell you the whole story. Some of it will be painful for you to hear, so you need to decide. It's all or nothing with me. If I start, you're going to hear it all."

"I've always wanted to know. All my life I've wanted to know. I can handle it, I'm not a kid anymore," young Christopher claimed, although there seemed to be a touch of doubt in his voice.

Before Chris Sr. would embark on a journey to relive a past from nearly twenty years ago, he asked young Christopher one more question. "What do you know about me?"

"Well..." Young Christopher shifted in his seat. "Your name is Christopher Dawson, and I'm named after you. You fought with my dad, but you were a spy?"

"CIA," Chris Sr. clarified.

"And because of your work, you had to stay away?"

"It was a little more complicated than that, but yes, that's the basic truth," Chris Sr. confirmed.

"Everyone thought you were dead before my mom even knew she was pregnant with me. And they didn't find out you were alive until I was five. You saw me once then. I don't remember, but my mom said you did."

"Yes," Chris Sr. acknowledged. "That was twelve years ago, and until that day, I never knew I had a son. That was one of the most difficult days of my life, but nothing changed afterwards. I still belonged to the government, and we all made the choices we did to keep you safe. Sev was your father and would remain your father. I needed to stay away."

Young Christopher gave Chris Sr. a puzzled look. "When they first told me about you, I wanted to meet you, but my dad said there was no way to contact you. If that was true, then how did my mother find you now?"

A smile came to Chris Sr.'s face. "Your mother didn't find me, I found her. After hearing about Sev, I guess I needed to see if you both were okay. I talked with her most of this morning, and I was at your home when she got the call from school about you. I know about the fight you were in, and about some of the trouble you've been in lately. I told your mother I'd find you and bring you home."

Young Christopher nodded, then settled back into his seat, wanting to hear the story that led to his existence. However, before Chris Sr. was ready to begin, he took another sip of his bourbon. The first drink he thought he needed, which would have embarrassed him, had anyone seen. He lived a life of danger and close calls, and yet he needed a stiff shot of bourbon to find the courage to face this young seventeen-year-old boy. The second drink would last him much longer. Chris Sr. contemplated exactly where he should begin his story. He had already been in the war nearly two years before he met young Christopher's mother; nevertheless, this story began when she arrived. He knew most of the details, either from living it first hand with her or from other resources he relied on. She would tell him everything, and although he usually shared nothing with anyone else, he found himself as open and honest with her as he could ever be with anyone.

Chris Sr. studied young Christopher's face for another moment, and then he spoke. "When your mother first arrived in Vietnam, I don't think she had any idea how much the war was going to change her."

## Chapter Two

Reflecting back: December 1966, Cam Ranh Air Base, Cam Ranh Bay, South Vietnam

While other branches of the military were routinely deploying women of all ranks to the Southeast Asia (SEA) theatre of the war, the original intention of the Air Force was to omit deployment for females of any rank or job to the SEA theatre. However, earlier in the year, due to a shortage of male nurses, the restrictions were specifically lifted for the female officers of the Air Force Nurse Corps and the Bio-medical Science Corps. Following the nurses, as the demand grew with other specific jobs traditionally held by enlisted women, the Air Force was faced with reconsidering its stance. In October of 1966, Staff Sergeant Josephine McFay, one female lieutenant, and four other enlisted women of the Air Force (commonly referred as WAFs) received the first set of orders for Saigon and Tan Son Nhut. Unfortunately, before deployment, those orders were retracted while the Air Force once again reassessed the need and the basic policies required to house enlisted females.

Staff Sergeant Josephine McFay was left stateside at that time with orders in hand, waiting for the Air Force to lift the restrictions. While she continued to work under her Commander at Andrews Air Force Base in Maryland, he received orders from Washington to head up a specific analysis operation at Cam Ranh Air Base. The base was located on the eastern coast of South Vietnam, on the Cam Ranh Peninsula, along the China Sea. The Major was given the liberty to select a few members of his staff, and Staff Sergeant McFay was listed among his choices. The only gateway that would permit her to participate in the assignment was to attach her to a trial-basis deployment, granting her a temporary duty assignment (TDY). Although the restrictions on the WAFs would be lifted the following June of 1967, and other enlisted Air Force women would serve

in the SEA theatre, Staff Sergeant McFay was among a small number of enlisted females on a TDY status already serving in Saigon, Tan Son Nhut, and Cam Ranh.

Awaiting Staff Sergeant McFay's arrival to Cam Ranh, Tech Sergeant Nelson stood against the back wall of the terminal. He only had one new airman coming in that day, and in the sponsor package he previously mailed to her, he gave a description of himself and the location where he would wait. As he took a moment to people watch, the Tech Sergeant spotted a longtime friend passing by.

"Hey, old man," Tech Sergeant Nelson called out.

Marine Gunnery Sergeant Fitzpatrick turned around and replied, "Do I need to remind you, this old man can kick your ass."

The two men chuckled, and the Marine stopped to converse with his friend for a moment. Gunnery Sergeant Fitzpatrick was in his service alpha uniform, with his stripes down his sleeve and his medals and ribbons of honor on his chest. It was rare to see him in this specific uniform. More often, this man wore black or tiger stripes with no insignia. He belonged to an elite group of the Special Forces called SOG, which stood for the Studies and Observations Group. The name was intentionally misleading to mask the job they performed. SOG's covert mission was to gather intelligence, kill, and create chaos within the ranks of the People's Army of North Vietnam (NVA), and the Vietcong (VC) or National Front of the Liberation of South Vietnam.

SOG's casualty rate was extremely high, and as Gunnery Sergeant Fitzpatrick approached the last few weeks of his second double tour, he often wondered how many more missions he would survive. He could have left the war after his first year and certainly did not need to commit to a second, or contemplate a third; yet he continued to stay. He had a few reasons motivating him. One, his unit's participation in SOG was saving the lives of many young soldiers. Two, placing the welfare of his men in the hands of another Gunnery Sergeant disturbed him. Three, he simply thought of himself as an old war-horse and combat was what he knew best. Although he was still a young man at only thirty-four years of age, the average age of the Marine or soldier fighting in Vietnam was between the ages of eighteen and twenty-four. Regardless, Gunnery Sergeant Fitzpatrick was a Marine, and being in Nam keeping his men alive was where he knew he belonged.

"Did you just get back from the States?" asked Tech Sergeant Nelson, knowing that could be one of the few reasons to see this Marine in his alpha uniform.

"No, Okinawa—for a few mandatory highly unnecessary briefings. You have a new troop coming in?"

"Yeah, I do. Not sure how I'm going to deal with this one though. Washington has us on a new study, and we're putting together a team. We just got a new Major in last week, and today I'm picking up another one of his hand-selected troops."

"So you're a little worried how far up his ass they might already be?" Gunnery Sergeant Fitzpatrick asked, knowing how the upper brass liked to work.

"Something like that," said Tech Sergeant Nelson. "The whole team is out of Washington, but this one is on a trial-basis TDY—she's an enlisted female."

"Is that right? I thought outside of your nurses, you zoomies were keeping it an all boys club over here." (Zoomie – Slang term used by other military branches to describe Air Force personnel.)

“Well, we were trying to,” the Tech Sergeant said, as he chuckled. “Actually, on paper she looks really good. She’s on her second hitch and a staff sergeant. She made staff first time testing, and she’s been in logistics and operations for most of her time.”

“So what’s the problem then?”

“I don’t like that she’s part of the Major’s handpicked crew. That just gives me a bad feeling. And, well, check out this gal’s name.”

Tech Sergeant Nelson handed the orders to Gunnery Sergeant Fitzpatrick, and he read her name out loud. “Staff Sergeant Josephine Alexandra McFay. Jo Alex, huh? Either her daddy wanted a boy, or he was trying to give her a jump on the gender barrier.”

“I don’t know, but I’m worried this girl’s going to scare me,” answered Tech Sergeant Nelson.

Gunnery Sergeant Fitzpatrick laughed. “Well, it’s a name that makes a statement, doesn’t it? But if she can do the job, that’s all you should care about. The face of the military is changing, my friend. Old dogs like us need to roll with those changes.”

While the two men laughed with each other, neither of them noticed the young female Staff Sergeant approaching towards Tech Sergeant Nelson’s left. She had just walked into the terminal after departing her plane outside, still recovering from that first gust of thick humid Vietnam air hitting her directly in the face. The building was overly congested with all branches of service. There were servicemen arriving, troops waiting to be airlifted to other locations within South Vietnam, and many young soldiers (some with their new Vietnamese wives) waiting for the Freedom Bird to take them home. As Staff Sergeant McFay worked her way through the crowd to the back wall of the terminal, her senses absorbed her new surroundings. The sight of Asian women and children squatting on the floor, the inharmonious Vietnamese dialect, and the mixture of diverse pungent smells filling the air were culturally unfamiliar to her. Once she located the Tech Sergeant, she noticed the Marine standing next to him. Although she was somewhat unfamiliar with Marine rank, from the number of stripes on his sleeve, she assumed him to be an E-7. Focusing again on the Tech Sergeant, a tall and slender man with dark hair and dark eyes, Staff Sergeant McFay found him to have an approachable appeal. Ignoring her own nerves, she spoke, and the two men turned towards her.

“Excuse me,” she said, extending her hand to the Tech Sergeant. “Are you Sergeant Nelson? I’m Sergeant McFay.”

The two men held still while supporting a surprised expression on their faces—until Tech Sergeant Nelson received a nudge from the shoulder of the Gunnery Sergeant.

“Yes,” the Tech Sergeant awkwardly spoke up, then reached for the young lady’s hand. “I’m Sergeant Nelson. You can call me Bob.”

“Nice to meet you,” Staff Sergeant McFay greeted. “I’m Jo.”

“Well, Jo,” Bob Nelson said, “it’s a pleasure. And this jarhead next to me, picking his chin up off the ground, is Gunnery Sergeant Fitzpatrick. You won’t see him much, but if you do, he’s friendlier than he looks.” (Jarhead – Slang term used by other military branches to describe a Marine.)

Gunnery Sergeant Fitzpatrick cut a sharp glance towards Bob Nelson. He was certain that he had kept his composure far better than the Tech Sergeant. A smile returned to his face, as he reached for Jo’s hand to shake. “Ma’am,” he said. “I’m Sev, welcome to Vietnam.”

It was probably for only a moment, that Sev and Jo seemed to hold that handshake while studying each other's face. Jo rarely allowed herself to be star-struck, yet she found this Marine in front of her to be flat-out handsome. He stood close to being six-foot tall and looked distinguished in his uniform. His hair was a strawberry reddish blonde, and he had a charming smile complete with dimples—fascinating Jo. His sparkling green eyes complemented a face full of freckles, which certainly added a touch of adorability to how handsome she found him to be.

Sev quickly surveyed Jo's appearance and found 'beautiful' to be the only word needed to describe her. She stood only a few inches shorter than he, had a slender build and a nice figure—even in her Air Force blues which added nothing flattering. Her hair was the color of a chestnut with golden highlights, pulled up, while showing natural curls and appearing to have some length when let down. Jo's skin was fair and creamy white, as a result of having just left the Northeast Coast of the US in the middle of the winter. Her face was flawless, except for the strategically placed freckles across the bridge of her nose and cheeks. As she smiled a perfect pearly white smile, Jo's eyes seemed to dance, and her eyes were every bit as bright green as his. All the features of her beauty captivated Sev, and yet it was her lovely full lips that held his attention for another moment, causing him to stare, although he tried to resist.

Interrupting the introductions, Tech Sergeant Nelson stepped forward. "Jo, let's get you settled in, and I'll take you by the shack to meet the rest of the crew." Before departing, the two men shook hands, and Sev gave Jo a welcoming nod and a friendly smile.

\*\*\*

Leaving the terminal, Tech Sergeant Nelson tossed Jo's duffel bag in the back of a jeep and drove her to the quarters where she would be assigned a room. Her room would be inside a trailer, surrounded by a wall of sandbags and accessible by a plank walkway through the sand. Jo's first impression was that it certainly lacked any eye appeal, yet it appeared no less structurally sound than most of the barracks she observed en route. The two-room dwelling would house four women and was usually utilized by the United Service Organizations (USO), the Red Cross, or occasionally by female journalists. Currently, Jo's suitemates would be two young Red Cross ladies. Although each room was setup for two, Jo would stay the only occupant of her room until there was another female of her same branch of service and status. As drab and sparse as the quarters appeared, there was a window air conditioner in both rooms and a full bathroom to share. This was a luxury accommodation.

The Air Force female nurses had recently moved from tents to trailers to their newly built Quonset huts across the roadway. Nicknamed the Ghetto, the huts formed an H with showers and latrines in the center. As the base expanded and improved, the enlisted men's tent city was slowly disappearing and replaced by barracks constructed of tarp and plywood, or open bay Quonset huts. Many of the higher-ranking Non-commissioned Officers (NCOs) commandeered their own private quarters, usually in the smaller trailers, or dwellings constructed of plywood and corrugated tin roofs. The Bachelor Officers' Quarters (BOQ) consisted of trailers or porta-camps with private bathrooms and Pullman kitchens—although plans of a two-story dwelling were in the works. Regardless of the accommodations, patios and lawn furniture, along with barbeque grills and hot plates offered a more habitable environment.

The next stop was the small cluster of Quonset huts from which Jo would be working, referred to as the shack-A, B, C and so on. Meeting the crew was pleasant for Jo. Tech Sergeant Nelson had a good group of men, and they seemed quite taken with her. Then after walking Jo through the other huts in the cluster and meeting the staff, Tech Sergeant Nelson gave her a short tour of the sandy base, introducing her to "Life on the Dunes." He made a couple of stops to obtain Jo's flight line badge and to also pick up her combat gear; which consisted of her helmet, flak jacket, combat

boots, and other items in a duffel bag. Afterwards, he then cut her loose for the remainder of the day. She would have until 0700 hours before reporting to work in the morning. Jo usually liked a certain level of solitude; however, her first day in Vietnam left her wishing for company. She had all the right reasons filed and organized in her mind as to why she came to Vietnam and what her goals would be during her stay. Jo was raised military by an Army Master Sergeant who fought in WWII, and the love-of-country and patriotism were deeply bred in her. She wanted to be there, and she thought it was her duty.

Before coming to the war, Jo gained most of her experience in logistics and operations on Andrews Air Force Base in Maryland. On the weekends, she would travel to Walter Reed Hospital in DC and volunteer to help with the returning wounded vets. Among her belongings, Jo had a letter from a doctor supporting a most favorable evaluation of her volunteer work. It was addressed to a colleague who was serving as one of the hospital administrators on Cam Ranh. The doctor asked Jo to deliver the letter to Captain Susan Brooks, and in that letter, he suggested for the Captain to take advantage of Jo's free time and use her as a volunteer. Jo had decided before coming to Vietnam, she wanted to avoid idle time. Her intentions were to stay as busy as possible—helping and believing she could make a difference.

The letter gave Jo an excuse to leave her quarters and search out the Captain whose name was on the envelope. By merely approaching a young airman in a jeep to ask for directions, she obtained a ride. The 12th USAF Hospital had seen a major growth spurt during the past year. Evolving from a dispensary and a tented ten bed facility, by December of 1966 it accommodated two hundred eighty beds, while projecting a capacity of four hundred beds. During this expansion, Quonset hut wards were added and attached by short indoor passageways or outdoor plank walkways. In conjunction with the 12th Aeromedical Staging Flight Unit, it would become the second largest hospital facility in South Vietnam.

After entering the hospital and walking through a few corridors, Jo found the name Captain Brooks on a door. In the outer office, Jo asked the airman at the desk if the Captain was available. He confirmed that she was in her office; however, Captain Brooks had already finished with her appointments for the day. At Jo's request for only a moment of time, the airman reluctantly picked up the phone. As polite and professional as the young man could be, he asked if the Captain would speak to Staff Sergeant McFay. Jo could hear the woman's response through the phone, as well as through the closed door of the Captain's office.

The airman apologized. "I'm sorry," he said. "Captain Brooks said you need to make an appointment and come back tomorrow."

Jo heard the tone of voice the Captain used with the airman, and she decided to leave directly. Unfortunately, before making the quick exit, the Captain's door opened and her harsh voice addressed Jo.

"Excuse me! Did you have an appointment to see me?"

"No, ma'am," Jo answered.

"Do you think you can just walk into my office any time you wish?"

"No, ma'am," Jo answered again.

"Then I don't want to see you again, unless you have an appointment."

"Yes, ma'am," Jo answered, giving a respectful salute before she turned and left the room.

Standing outside the door, she looked down at the letter she still held in her hand. She could kick herself for not leaving it with the airman. Now, she would have to return.

As Jo was exiting through the hospital entranceway, Gunnery Sergeant Sev Fitzpatrick was walking up the walkway path, heading towards her. He was no longer in his alpha uniform, and was now wearing utility fatigues. Before he passed, he noticed Jo and called to her.

“Jo?”

“Sergeant Fitzpatrick, hello again,” Jo answered, sharing a warm smile with him.

“It’s Sev. You can just call me Sev,” he offered, then pointed up at the hospital. “Are you sick of Nam already?”

It was in the way he raised his brow and flashed his dimples, along with the tone of voice that caused Jo to laugh lightly. “No,” she answered, then offered an excuse for being there. “I have a letter for a captain here from a doctor in the States. I came to deliver it, but I kind of intruded, and the Captain said I need to make an appointment. I’ll come back tomorrow and drop it off with her airman.”

“Who’s the Captain?”

“Captain Brooks,” Jo said, wondering if Sev knew her.

“Susan Brooks?”

“Yes, do you know her?” Jo asked.

“I do. Come on back in with me, and we’ll get your letter delivered today. You don’t need to come back tomorrow.”

Jo turned, and as she reached for the door, Sev reached in front of her and opened the door as a gentleman would do. Upon entering Captain Brooks’ outer office, the airman extended a friendly greeting to Sev and motioned for him to go directly into the office. Sev opened the Captain’s door, speaking as he entered.

“Hey, you miss me?”

“You’re back,” Jo heard the Captain say, as she could see Sev and the woman embrace.

“I got in a few hours ago,” he said. “How are you?”

“I’m... Well, it’s been another one of those days. But it just got better, seeing you. Are you here for the night?” she questioned.

“I am,” Sev answered, yet before he could say anything more, the Captain spotted Jo standing in the outer office and broke away from his embrace.

“You again? Didn’t I make myself clear, Sergeant?”

Sev intervened quickly, reaching for the Captain’s hand. “Hold on, Sue, I brought her back in with me. She hasn’t been in Nam for more than about four hours, and she’s hand carrying a letter from a colleague of yours in the States. I don’t see any harm in accepting the letter from her, so she

doesn't have to come back here tomorrow."

"A letter? Who's the letter from?" the Captain asked, using a civil tone with Jo for the first time.

"Doctor Collins," Jo answered.

"Well, could I have it, please?"

Jo extended the letter for the Captain to reach, and she nearly snatched it from Jo's hand. "You may leave now," the woman ordered.

Jo gave another salute and turned quickly to leave once again. Before she reached the door, she made eye contact with Sev. Silently, Jo mouthed the words, "Thank you," and Sev nodded in return with another kind smile.

Inside the Captain's office, Sev listened while Susan read the hand delivered letter to him. She was excited to hear from the doctor, catching her up on Walter Reed and other more personal details. One paragraph was about Jo. The doctor outlined the volunteer work she had done, and he praised her ability to connect with even the most disconnected patients. The doctor advised Susan to use Jo and allow her to interact with the patients. He also expressed how the volunteer work would be good for Jo as well, keeping her focused and busy during her downtime. As Susan read that last line, she turned to Sev.

"What he's saying here—he wants me to babysit this girl. Ugh, I knew it wouldn't take long for the Air Force to start sending WAFs over here."

Sev laughed lightly. "Well, that time was bound to come, don't you think? And I didn't get babysitting from what he said at all. I think he said what he meant. The girl's good with these boys, and you should let her help. You need all the volunteers you can get. I wouldn't be turning away any free hands. Why not see what she can do?"

As Jo was leaving the Captain's office, she noticed a patient towards the end of the hall. He was wearing the standard blue hospital pajamas, along with flip-flops on his feet. His eyes were completely bandaged, rendering him blind, and he sat in a chair fidgeting with a white envelope in his hand. Jo watched him for a moment, wondering if he was waiting for someone or simply left there by someone. Playing with the envelope, he dropped it to the floor. Wishing to retrieve it, he left the chair and stooped down to feel around on the ground. Jo walked up behind him and could see the envelope within his reach, while he was searching in the wrong direction.

Offering her assistance, Jo advised, "Move your left hand about another six inches to your left." Hearing her voice, the patient followed the direction and his fingers touched the envelope.

"Thank you," the man said.

"You're welcome," Jo answered, as she reached to help him stand, taking notice of his tall stature. He was ruggedly attractive, with sandy blonde hair and chiseled facial features. As Jo steadied him on his feet, she asked, "Were you waiting here for someone?"

"Well, I've had this letter all day," he said, "but I couldn't find anyone who had enough time to read it for me. So, I was heading to a friend's office to see if she would read it, but my escort got called away and ditched me."

"I have time, I could read your letter," Jo offered.

"Can you?"

"Can I, read?" Jo teased. "Yes, I'm Air Force—we require it." The patient laughed, and Jo asked, "Where would you like to sit?"

"What's it like outside today?"

"Hot, sunny, sticky, and very breezy."

"Like always, unless it's raining... Could we sit outside?"

"Sure," Jo answered, taking the man's hand and placing it on her arm to lead him. "What happened to your eyes? Is this permanent or temporary?"

"Temporary, we're hoping. I was far enough away from a mortar explosion that it didn't kill me, but too close for comfort. I took some debris in the face, but my eyes are healing. They're going to take these patches off in another few days. Doc says I should have all my sight back."

"That's good," Jo kindly commented.

"Yeah, I'm pretty lucky. A few more feet and I would've been dead. A week ago, I couldn't hear either—so I'm improving."

Passing by a few picnic tables and benches, Jo settled the patient in one of the few rockers sitting on the concrete slab designated as a common area. As she took the letter from his hand and sat next to him, he addressed her.

"Your voice is new to me, so I'm pretty sure we've never met before. Do you have a name, Ms. Air Force?"

"I do, it's Jo. And you are..." Jo turned over the envelope in her hand. "US Army, Lieutenant Mark Hopkins. Hmm, guess the next time I see you out and about without these hospital duds on, I'll owe you a proper salute, Lieutenant."

"If you see me in uniform wearing my rank on my shoulder, you can offer that proper salute. But meantime, you can drop the rank. Most people here call me Hobby."

"Hobby?" Jo questioned such an informal choice.

"I know, sounds a bit lax for an officer," Hobby said. "But you might find I'm not your typical officer. How long have you been in-country, Jo?" he asked, sensing her newness.

"It's been about..." Jo checked her watch. "Five hours now."

"Five hours? Damn, you're as green as they come. I'm sure people are giving you all kinds of advice, so I'll spare you mine. But if I can help you with anything, don't hesitate to ask."

"Thank you," Jo said, with gratitude. "How long have you been here?"

Hobby counted each day everyday and always had the answer on the tip of his tongue. "One year, eight months, two weeks and five days."

"You're on a second tour?" Jo inquired, with respect. "Why have you stayed?"

Seriousness swept across Hobby's face. "I have a really good team. We work like a well-oiled machine together, and I don't want to be the one who jinxes that. And, maybe I just don't want to leave my job for some other guy to have to do."

"What is your job?" Jo asked.

"Staying alive," Hobby quickly responded. "And that's your job too—always remember that."

Knowing enough to let the question go at that, Jo smiled and focused on the letter. "Well, let's see what news you have from home."

"Who's it from?"

Jo looked at the return address. "Lilly Parker, from Cornwall, Connecticut."

"She's my older sister. Go ahead and read it."

Jo tore open the envelope and read the first words. "Dear Marky, —Marky?" she questioned, with a light chuckle.

Hobby grinned, somewhat embarrassed. "Okay, let's get one thing straight between you and me. I'm in Nam fighting a war, and most of the time I'm carrying an Uzi. So, no one calls me Marky, okay?"

"Okay, because... Hobby is better?" Jo inquired, amused.

Hobby laughed again, then spoke in an authoritarian manner. "Yes, Hobby is better."

The two shared another chuckle, and although Jo was about to read on, she first had to question his weapon reference. "Uzi?"

A sly smile crossed Hobby's lips. "Yes, I'm special. Are you going to read that letter for me?"

Jo refrained from prying any further, and she read the heartfelt letter from the man's endearing sister. Once she finished, Hobby sighed deeply and rested his head against the rocker.

"Thank you, Jo," he whispered.

Jo also settled back into her rocker and simply allowed time for a few moments of silence.

Inside the hospital, Sev and Susan walked to the ward to visit with Hobby and found his bed empty. After questioning several people, a young nurse said she had seen Hobby sitting on the patio when she arrived.

Walking out to the common area, Sev caught sight of Jo, as he announced his presence to Hobby. "Hey, you ugly bastard! Are you still playing the blind card to get the young gals to pay attention to you?"

"Whatever works!" Hobby laughed. "Come over here and meet my new best friend. I haven't seen her yet, but I am convinced she's very pretty."

"You would not be wrong," Sev confirmed, giving Jo another smile. "Jo and I have already met."

"Now how in the hell could that be? She's only been here for about five hours."

"Yup, and I didn't have to play blind to get her to talk to me," Sev said, with a grin.

Susan caught the look Sev had given Jo, and it seemed to fuel the dislike she already had for the girl. Before the Captain was about to confront the Staff Sergeant once again, Jo rose to her feet and gave another respectful salute.

Saluting back, Susan condescendingly questioned, "Sergeant McFay, exactly where will you be working on Cam Ranh?"

"I'm part of an analysis team from Washington. We'll be interacting with the 12th Tactical Fighter Wing and the Operations Group," Jo respectfully answered.

"And you're in a clerical position, I presume? Just how much medical training does one receive from secretarial school, Sergeant?"

"Not any, ma'am," Jo answered, knowing she was going to be chastised by this Captain again.

"So do you think someone such as yourself, a secretary, should be permitted to remove a patient from inside the hospital? And as you have demonstrated, you come and go as you please. How do you think this patient will fare when you get up and walk away?"

Having had enough of the hostility directed at her, Jo spoke out. "I would like to think even someone such as a secretary, ma'am, would demonstrate enough good sense not to leave the blind Lieutenant unattended."

The brows of both men lifted, and although they fought it, neither could hold back a grin. Susan cut a sharp look at Sev.

"Do you think this is funny?" she asked.

"No," Sev quickly responded. "I don't think this is funny. Susan, I get there's far more going on with you here today, than what we've had a chance to talk about yet. But I do believe you might be taking your aggression out on this young lady. She hasn't been here long enough for you to be this angry with her. Your doctor friend said she's good with the patients and to allow her to help. From the look on Hobby's face, she seems to be proving herself."

"I have a feeling I'm in very good hands," said Hobby. "And just for the record, Sue, this young lady found me in the hall on my hands and knees, unattended, and she's done nothing but help me since."

In an effort to defuse the Captain more, seemingly disregarding protocol, Sev put his arm around her shoulder and whispered, "Come on, Sue, let's go get something to eat and have a couple of beers. I really don't think Jo's going to leave the blind Lieutenant unattended."

Before Susan chose to leave, she glared at Jo once more. "If you want to help in my hospital," she said, "you report to me first, and you only do what I say you may do."

Once the two were out of earshot, Jo spoke to Hobby in a sincere apologetic manner. "I'm really sorry. I know she's a captain, and I shouldn't have spoken to her that way."

"Don't ever be sorry for holding your ground," Hobby responded. "I was actually impressed. You

do not back down, do you?"

"I don't know how this went so badly so quickly with her, but from the first moment she saw me, I've made her pretty mad."

"Don't take it too personal—Sue's okay. She's just like many people here. She's over worked, under staffed, and has far too much on her plate. If she didn't take it out on someone once in awhile, she'd probably go crazy herself. This is just how it is sometimes, Jo. Welcome to Vietnam," he said, solemnly.

Jo sighed and leaned back in the rocker again. She turned her head to study the ruggedly strong face of this man she was befriending. She was glad she met him and greatly appreciated his company on her first day in Vietnam.

Breaking the silence, Hobby had a few questions running through his mind. "WAFs here in Nam now? The Air Force has been dragging their feet on that one for a while."

"The door isn't open quite yet. I'm here on a trial-basis TDY, and I'll have to return home if they don't lift the restrictions. They're having trouble figuring out where to put us."

"Well, you just tell them, they can bunk you up with me. Problem solved!" Hobby chuckled, causing Jo to laugh too. "How old are you, Jo?"

"Twenty-three, and you?"

"I'm twenty-six in real years, but I probably gained another ten—just in this past year."

"You don't look too worse for wear," Jo commented, which caused Hobby to smile again.

"Sue called you Sergeant McFay. That makes you an E-4 or E-5?"

"E-5—I'm a staff sergeant," Jo answered.

"The Air Force promotes slower than any other branch of the service, so you're on your second hitch?"

"Yes, I made staff right before I reenlisted."

"Then you plan to make a career out of the military?" Hobby continued to inquire, finding Jo to be an interesting subject.

"That's been my plan so far."

"Are you married? What about having a family?"

"I'm not married, and I can't give any thought to having kids yet, until the Air Force changes its position on that too. I'm going to wait them out."

"Good luck with that," Hobby said, with a smile. "Military women becoming moms—the whole subject carries a lot of negative flak."

"So I've heard," Jo agreed. "Anyway, for right now, I can only deal with one major thing going on in my life at a time. And, I believe being in Vietnam ranks as a major thing."

"I believe it does, Jo," Hobby said, chuckling softly.

"What about you?" Jo asked. "Why an officer in the Army?"

"It's my birthright. I'm from a whole line of great officers who've made their mark in military history. Except, I'm kind of the black sheep in the family. So, the fact that I haven't gotten kicked out yet, means I'm exceeding everyone's goals for me."

Jo smiled. "Are you married? Kids?"

"Not married, and no kids anyone's ever told me about."

"Told you about? Is there a possibility? Do you see it in your future?"

"Could be, maybe one day, who knows," Hobby answered. "If I live through Nam..."

As Jo was about to ask another question, a nurse approached to say Hobby's supper tray had been delivered. Hobby stood up and held out his hand. "You're not going to leave the blind Lieutenant unattended, are you, Jo? I bet you haven't eaten today since you landed, have you?"

"No, not yet," Jo answered.

"Would you do me the honor of having supper with me?" Hobby gentlemanly asked. "We'll get you a tray. Don't worry about it being hospital food. Here, the chow hall food and the hospital food—it's all the same food."

Jo joined Hobby for supper, and as they ate, the surrounding patients offered Jo their fruit, juice, milk and pie—which amused Hobby.

Once everyone finished eating, Jo helped to gather trays and made a few acquaintances with a couple of the on-duty nurses and corpsmen (enlisted medical specialist of the Navy). As it came time to leave, she needed to say good-bye and return to her quarters.

Hobby extended his hand for her to shake. "Jo, it has truly been a pleasure meeting you today. I hope you come back and visit me again."

"I will, and thank you."

"You're thanking me? Why?" Hobby asked, moved by the gesture.

"I really didn't want to spend my first day in Nam alone."

"Jo, whenever I'm on this base," Hobby offered. "You may spend as much time with me as you wish."

\*\*\*

Jo returned to her quarters by way of the boardwalk paths through the sand. Prior to arriving in Vietnam, she was aware that Cam Ranh was on a peninsula; however, it failed to occur to her that the base would be built directly on the sand. At first sight, an initial impression would be of a tranquil tropical paradise, with palm trees, white sand and blue water. Conversely, the military dwellings, the uniformed troops, the aircraft, and the wounded men in the hospital were revealing signs of the war.

After Jo finished unpacking her belongings, putting them away in her locker and chest of drawers, she took her hygiene items to the bathroom to get ready for bed. Then before settling down to sleep, she once again shook the sand out of her clean sheets. As she thought about the day and the people she met, she wondered why Captain Brooks would outwardly display such hostility towards her. She appeared to be an attractive and intelligent woman, in her mid-thirties, and certainly seemed to have herself together. She was well groomed, wearing a hard-pressed uniform, perfectly set blonde hair and flawless makeup. Jo could see the attraction Sev probably had for the lady. For a moment, Jo allowed her mind to drift towards more thoughts of Sev, and she smiled. She gave Hobby a thought, and she had a feeling they would make good friends, if given an opportunity to know one another. Officers and enlisted seldom mingled, and yet Jo considered Sev's enlisted status and Susan's officer status, and she had to wonder if such protocol was overlooked in Nam. After all, Jo thought, Hobby seemed a bit lax, as he put it in his own words.

Jo's next thoughts were of the shack and the crew who would be working with her. They seemed to be a cohesive group, and her new shop chief appeared to be a pleasant man to work for. Although her Commander was engaged elsewhere, she suspected they would cross paths in the next day or so. As Jo began to drift off, it occurred to her, other than the soothing sound of the F-4s (Fighter Jets) taking off and landing, her first night in Nam was much quieter than she had anticipated. As slumber finally began to overtake her, Jo's last thought was of home.

### Chapter Three

After Jo's first wakeup in Nam, she rolled out of bed early and went for a run. She found the humidity to be quite stifling, and having to navigate the plank walkways was challenging. As she was getting ready for work, a few of the young men from the shack stopped by her quarters to see if she wanted to have breakfast with them. It was a nice icebreaker, and it soon became a daily routine. She would get up, go for a run, return and shower for work, then walk to the chow hall with her crew.

The first few days in Vietnam were busy with in-processing and briefings. Jo was introduced to the Voice of God; the loudspeaker PA system that kept everyone current with all critical news. She also learned the base siren signals and the actions to be taken. She was educated on the currency; the use of Military Pay Certificates (MPCs), when and how Conversion Day (C-day) would operate, and the exchange rate of the local currency of Piasters (Ps). For the specifically female briefings, Jo was grouped in with the nurses. They were briefed on their conduct, the length of their skirts, and the type of bathing suit they were permitted to wear. They were told to stay away from the married men, refuse all offers to fly with the chopper jocks (helicopter pilots), and never befriend the enlisted men.

The nurse sitting next to Jo leaned in and whispered, "Don't worry; we all intend to break a few of those rules."

In the evenings, Jo dedicated her time to the hospital, helping the patients referred by Captain Brooks. Her first slight taste of reality came from hearing the choppers during the night, and then finding the wards overflowing with wounded men the next day.

During Jo's second visit with Lieutenant Mark Hopkins, she met the young lady who had Hobby's heart—at least at the current moment. Her name was Mandy Taylor. She was a nineteen-year-old, Army private first class (PFC), and she worked as an office clerk in supply on the Army side of the base. The romance between Mandy and Hobby seemed to be of no interest to anyone and blatantly overlooked. Jo liked the young girl, and she was becoming Jo's first female friend. Mandy was a Mediterranean beauty and quite busty, which Jo thought was probably the attribute that first grabbed Hobby's attention.

As Jo learned more about Hobby, she found him to be charismatically charming, genuinely kind, and humorously entertaining. However, he had a despicable reputation for chasing skirts, and his relationships were usually short lived. He enjoyed the female company, yet seemed unable to focus his attention exclusively on one female at a time. In contrast, his attraction to Mandy seemed to be reeling him in, and as Jo observed, he was trying to stay on target. Although the fraternizing between Hobby-the-officer and Mandy-the-enlisted was strictly off limits by regulation, it appeared that Hobby often walked a thin line on conducting himself like an officer. It seemed, because of Hobby's current job in the war, a blind eye was often turned. He and his men were an elite group who rarely conformed to military protocol, and they answered to a different Command.

The hostility between Captain Susan Brooks and Jo seemed to subside; nevertheless, there was no shared camaraderie. It was respectfully cordial at best, and when Jo would report to the Captain, Susan would bark orders at her. Jo found most of her duties to be limited to delivering food trays, emptying bedpans, helping to bathe patients, and a few different housekeeping chores—including the never-ending task of sweeping out the sand. She accepted the tasks willingly, and then stole her own free moments to sit and talk with some of the patients.

During Jo's third night in the hospital ward, she encouraged Hobby to join in on a poker game that some of the recovering patients were playing. It turned into a hilarious three hours of Jo being Hobby's eyes. In the end, Hobby won, and Jo gained a few endearing fans. She also gained the favorable attention of several nurses and corpsmen on duty, as well as one field surgeon who found Jo's bedside manner to be the right dose of medicine some of the patients needed.

As the first few days in Nam passed for Jo, she thought about Gunnery Sergeant Sev Fitzpatrick. Meeting him on her first day was the last she had seen of him. She learned, however, contradicting normal military branch of service structure, Sev was Hobby's gunnery sergeant. They were both from the same unit of SOG, and one of the only Army and Marine merged units. Under no circumstances would Jo be privileged to any information regarding the unit's operations or whereabouts; however, she was permitted to know that they were a tight-knit group of six men who were often accompanied by a CIA operative. SOG's covert missions took the men to volatile locations throughout the country and beyond, allowing only brief periods of downtime and R&R (Rest and Recuperation) on Cam Ranh. From her conversations with Hobby, although he was an expert at dancing around classified information without divulging a thing, Jo could understand why a man would choose to stay beyond his initial obligation. The men were constantly in high-risk deadly situations, and they relied on each other to stay alive. The trust and brotherhood bonds that were formed became sacred to each of the men. If one were to leave, and then have something deadly happen to the unit, it would be more than one could bear. Hobby was recovering from an injury and forced to sit out, while Sev and the men were on such a mission. Jo asked when the men would return, and Hobby gave her a simple answer that would always apply.

"When they're finished."

\*\*\*

On Jo's fifth day of work, she and her co-workers unloaded pallets of equipment coming off of a C-130 (Hercules, Military Transport Aircraft). At the end of the day, everyone was hot and sweaty, covered with sand and dirt. Jo had worked right alongside the men, and they asked her to join them for a beer. There were a few different club options to choose from on the base, including a beach bar. The officers had their own club, the nurses had the Round Eye Lounge, and there were a couple of other clubs that accommodated the enlisted. This group congregated at the Pit. It was originally an NCO Club, turned all-ranks, and nicknamed by a small group who frequented it. It had a horseshoe bar manned by a couple of bartenders and enough tables to handle a crowd.

After a couple of beers, Jo wanted to grab a shower and head to the hospital, hoping to see Hobby have the bandages removed from his eyes. Walking into the ward, Jo found his bed empty and stripped. He was already gone, which was positive, although it might mean it could be quite some time before she would see him again.

As Jo was helping one patient move from his bed to a chair, she heard the choppers approaching. Before Nam, she thought she knew what a helicopter sounded like. Experiencing it though, was something entirely different. Jo recognized the rhythmic sound of 'whomp-whomp-whomp', as the blades slapped against the air; however, there was also the higher pitch squeal that a turbine engine made. Cutting through the rhythmic pattern, the noise grew piercing and disruptive from many choppers arriving at once. Jo made her way through the corridor to where the wounded would be entering the triage area. When she arrived, the doors were open wide, and men and women were quickly scrambling to unload the stretchers. While a few of the wounded men could walk in on their own, some of the others were carried by fellow soldiers. There seemed to be such chaos, and yet every move the crew made was deliberate, and each person knew exactly what he or she was doing.

Jo wanted to help; however, she was unable to take a single step forward. She had absolutely no idea what to do. She noticed the men were being separated by the severity of their injuries. The less wounded were lining up and sitting down against a far wall. The more severe were being evaluated and pushed into the operating rooms, one right behind the other. Jo's eyes scanned from one area of the room to another. She had never seen such devastation before, nor had she realized how torn apart the bodies of these men could be. Even considering the amount of time she volunteered at Walter Reed Hospital in DC, nothing had prepared her for this.

Feeling sick and out of her element to help at all, Jo wanted to turn away and leave; however, from across the room, she heard her name called out. She focused on one of the doctors, and he motioned for her to come to him. Making her way through the crowd, she reached his side.

"I have a job I need you to do," the doctor said, then led Jo to a small sectioned off corner of the room. "We call this the checkout counter. Don't worry about those men on your right, they're already dead."

Jo looked in that direction, then had to turn her head. Some of the bodies were already bagged, yet others were piled up on top of one another. The doctor pulled Jo's attention back to him.

"Over here, on your left," he said. "These two men are what we categorize as expectants—they're going to die. The young man with his head wrapped has massive head trauma and he's going quickly. The other boy has extensive organ damage beyond anything he can survive."

"Can't you try to do something?" Jo asked, overwhelmed by the sight.

The doctor shook his head and answered, "Sometimes, Jo, there isn't enough of anything left that can be repaired or put back together. I need you to go over there and be with those boys."

Tears began to well up in Jo's eyes. "And do what? What am I supposed to do? I don't know what to do."

"There's nothing you need to know how to do. Jo, I've watched you. You have what it takes to do this, trust me. Just go over there, be with them, hold their hand. They're not in any pain, which is the one thing we can do for them. But there is not a man on this earth, young or old, who wants to die alone on a gurney this far away from home."

The doctor walked away and left Jo standing there. When she stepped closer to the stretchers, she was painfully moved by how young both men appeared. She walked in between the two, and when she looked towards her right, she knew that soldier was already dead.

"He died," confirmed the young man on the other gurney.

Jo nodded and gently pushed the dead boy's stretcher away from their view. When turning to face the young man beside her, he looked up at Jo with eyes pleading for someone to help him.

"I'm going to die," he said, while shivering.

Jo reached for another blanket and tucked it around him, in an effort to offer more warmth. She had no idea what damage was under the blankets, nor how mangled his body must have been for the doctors to know his impending demise. She wondered how it could be possible for him to be speaking to her and seeming so coherent.

"You're going to be okay," Jo whispered, as she moved closer and took his hand.

"No, I saw it in the doctor's face. I'm not scared," he said, although his face certainly reflected a frightened young man.

Jo cradled his hand with both of her hands. "You're very brave, but if you are a little bit scared, you don't need to be. It's going to be okay," she whispered again, hoping to give the boy some comfort.

The young man nodded and tears filled his eyes. "The nurse said she'd be right back, but she's been gone a while. Are you going to stay until she gets back?"

"I'll stay, I won't leave you," Jo answered, fighting her emotions. Several moments passed while the boy seemed to lose focus. His eyes darted around the room searching for something Jo was unable to see, until he again looked up at her and continued to speak.

"I saw a lot of my buddies get killed today."

"Some of your buddies are going to be okay though," Jo offered. "They're here and getting help."

"We got ambushed. Charlie was shooting at us from everywhere. I'm a pretty good shot, but how do you shoot at something you can't see? It's like they're invisible." (Charlie – referring to both communist forces, VC and NVA.) The boy's body continued to tremble, even with the added blankets. His breathing was labored and difficult, yet he wanted to talk. "My dad fought in WWII. They gave him a few medals. I wanted to go home with a few medals."

"I'm sure your dad is very proud of you." As Jo spoke, she was unable to prevent a single tear from streaming down her cheek. "What's your name?" she asked.

"Joe, what's yours?" the young man inquired, causing more tears to escape Jo's eyes.

"My name is also Jo, except it's short for Josephine."

"Were your parents thinking you were going to be a boy?"

"I think they thought a strong name might give me aspiration," Jo answered, with a warm smile. "Do you have a girl back home, Joe?"

"Yeah, but I don't think she's ever going to forgive me."

"Forgive you for what?" Jo asked.

"For dying over here. When I left, she said she'd never forgive me, if I got killed over here."

"She'll forgive you."

"No, she won't..."

"Yes, she will," Jo promised, trying to assure him before he died.

"How do you know?" the boy asked, through his own tears and with great effort.

"Because, I know I would forgive you."

As Jo spoke those words, the young boy exhaled his last breath and died. Giving into her emotions, Jo raised his hand to her lips and cried from the unexpected overwhelming sadness. Feeling a hand rest gently on her shoulder, she immediately recognized the voice speaking to her from behind.

"This is never easy, Jo."

"He died," Jo whispered, turning her head slightly, preventing him from seeing her cry. "Right here in front of me, while he was still talking to me. He died."

"Yeah," answered Sev. "I don't know what all of his injuries were, but if your lower major organs are destroyed, your heart can still beat and your mind still work, but... Well, it can take a little time for everything to catch up and shut down. Let me take you out of here, Jo."

Although she seemed to lack the words to respond, Jo allowed Sev to lead her away from the boy's stretcher. As they were about to leave, the doctor stopped them.

"Thank you, Jo," he said. "You gave that boy what he needed."

Jo wiped her tears away and spoke with frustration in her voice. "I didn't help. I gave him nothing."

"Yes you did," corrected the doctor. "You gave him a hand to hold. You made his dying less frightening, and he didn't die alone."

"He's right," said Sev. "He died holding the hand of a beautiful girl who stayed with him. When I go, I hope I'm that lucky."

Outside the hospital, the night air was warm and almost stale. Sev put his arm gently around Jo's shoulder and walked with her. As they walked, he realized that she was going wherever he led; however, he had no idea where to lead her. Did she want to go to her quarters? he wondered. Was she hungry? Would she like to get a drink? Or did she simply want to keep walking until she walked off the whole experience? As easily as it seemed for Jo to talk normally, Sev allowed her to take in the silence until she addressed him.

"Do you smell something?" she asked.

A grin began to make its way across Sev's lips. "Nope, do you?"

"Yes, and it's not the nuoc mam. I think I've gotten used to that," Jo answered, causing Sev's smile to grow. (Nuoc mam – Vietnamese fish sauce)

"What does it smell like?" he asked.

"I don't know... It's kind of swampy and stagnant. It's bad. Do you know what it is?"

"Does it seem like it's following us?"

"Yes," Jo quickly acknowledged. "What is it?"

Sev chuckled out loud and stopped walking. "Darlin', turn around and look at me."

Jo turned to look. Sev was unshaved with greasy hair, his uniform was stained and saturated with grime, and his skin was nearly covered in a black sooty film. He was filthy.

"I've been in the boonies for the past four days," he said. "I've been in the heat, in a swamp, covered with dust and sweat, and then through some other muck I couldn't identify. Add in a mix of body odor, gunpowder and oil, and this is what all of that smells like." Sev chuckled again. "Honestly, I don't smell a thing, but I can see where it might be offensive to someone else. I came in on one of those choppers, and it was my intent to go take a shower, but once I saw you, everything else was diverted." (Boonies – Infantry term for the field, jungles, or swampy areas.)

Although Sev kept to himself what all he diverted, his original plan was to help unload the wounded men from the choppers, take a shower and shave, then go knock on Captain Susan Brooks' door for some relaxation in the most gratifying way. When he walked into the hospital, he spotted Jo just as she pushed the dead boy's stretcher away and took the hand of the other young man. Sev stood behind her and quietly waited. He had been there the entire time, and all other thoughts of the evening vanished.

"Thank you," Jo said.

"For what?" Sev asked. "Showing you exactly how bad a man can smell?"

"No," she answered, with a smile. "Just, thank you."

Sev smiled in return. "You don't need to thank me for anything. I'm glad I was here tonight. And by the way, you were amazing with that young kid. Don't ever think you're not helping. That checkout counter is one of the hardest places to ever have to be."

Jo's emotions surfaced again, and she had to fight to keep them contained. "I don't know why I'm

crying about it. You're the ones out there dying, and I'm crying because I have to see it? That's just childish, isn't it?"

"Not childish—just human, darlin'."

Jo studied Sev's face, and even as dirty as it was, it was still a handsome face. Throughout the past few days, she hoped for a moment to speak to him again. Now that he stood in front of her, she was emotionally drained and could hardly find anything worthy to say.

"I was hoping I'd get to talk to you again," she said. "But after what happened tonight, it seems like anything I could say would just be so—trivial."

"It's tough to follow something like that. Sometimes you just need time to take it all in. We can talk if you want. We can walk if you want. We can just sit and be quiet, if you want. What would you like to do?"

"Get on a plane and go home." Jo spoke her first thought, as fresh tears welled in her eyes once more.

"You'll find the right place to put all this, Jo, I promise."

Jo nodded, wanting to believe him, and then she gave into another thought. "You smell really bad."

Sev laughed. "I'm sure I do. Would it be okay if we go by my hooch and let me get a quick shower?" (Hooch – term used for living quarters)

Jo agreed and walked with him again. Within a few moments, they were standing in front of Sev's quarters. Being an E-7, he acquired a private plywood dwelling with a corrugated tin roof.

"Welcome to my hooch," he said. "It's not much, but I do have plumbing, electricity, and even air-conditioning—when someone hasn't stolen it from me. A Marine couldn't ask for more than that, even if I do have to scrounge a new AC unit every now and then."

Stepping up a couple of steps, Sev opened his door and Jo followed. His room was tidy and clean, with only a few personal items set about. It was a standard military room with a single bed, a metal locker, a chest of drawers, a desk and chair, an air conditioner, and a small refrigerator. Sev walked over to turn on the AC before he even set down the pack he carried. He then took his rifle off his shoulder and reached down to remove the sidearm and knife he wore at his waist. He also removed his flak jacket and the many other items of weaponry and ammo attached to his body in various places. Once he finished disassembling his gear, he reached into his refrigerator.

"Beer?"

Jo nodded, and Sev grabbed two beers, popped them open and handed one to her. He offered her a seat on his bed, then grabbed a clean pair of pants and underwear, and excused himself to take a shower.

Jo took a moment to wander around Sev's room, taking an interest in his personal items. A few things were Marine paraphernalia. He had a few pictures of what was probably family back home, along with several photos of other Marines and soldiers. On top of the chest of drawers sat a plate with jewelry items. It held his dog tags, a dress watch, cuff links, tie clips, a silver chain and cross, and to Jo's surprise—a wedding band. The day she met Sev, she intentionally took note of the

absence of a wedding ring on his finger. Now, at the current moment, it occurred to her that she knew very little about this man. Yet, he crossed her thoughts at least once a day.

In the shower, Sev scrubbed to clean away the dirt and grime. As he finished rinsing the soap from his skin, he placed his hand against the shower wall and leaned forward to allow the water to run over him. Taking a moment to enjoy the cool spray, several thoughts ran through his mind. What was he doing? he questioned. What was he doing with Jo? As Sev reached to turn off the water, he engaged in another thought. He hardly knew anything about Jo, yet even so, from the very first moment he laid eyes on her at the terminal, he wanted to see her again.

Jo took a seat on the edge of the bed, and a few moments later, Sev emerged from the bathroom looking clean, shaved, and smelling fresh. His chest and arms were thick, muscular, and well defined. On the upper portion of his left arm he wore a Marine Devil Dog tattoo, and on the right side of his waist he had a long scar. As Sev pulled a clean black tee-shirt over his head and grabbed his dog tags, Jo asked him about the scar.

“What happened there?”

Sev looked down at where she was pointing. “It’s from a knife wound. I’ve had it about six months now. But I can assure you, the other guy’s scar is a lot worse,” he answered, then reached for his beer and turned a chair around to face Jo. Although he thought about sitting on the bed next to her, somehow that seemed inappropriate.

“Did the other guy live?” Jo asked.

“I don’t know,” Sev responded. “Once he fell to the ground, I didn’t stick around to see. His wound was more in the throat area though, so if he did live, he’s a tougher man than me.”

That graphic image caused Jo to ponder why Sev was in the triage. “The injured men I saw tonight, were any of those men yours?”

“One,” Sev answered. “He’s not actually one of my men though, but he’s with us on many of our missions. My guys are fine, and he’s going to be okay.”

Jo nodded with genuine concern. “I’m glad. Hobby told me you’re his gunnery sergeant.”

Sev looked into Jo’s eyes. “I assume Hobby also told you that we don’t talk about certain things. Everyone recognizes us as Special Ops, and they whisper about what we do. We can’t stop that, and we don’t care anyway. But the questions of when, where and what, never get discussed.”

“No mission related info,” Jo quoted Hobby. “I know SOG stands for the Studies and Observations Group, but I don’t really know what it is you do—except I think it’s something important.”

“Look at it this way,” Sev offered. “Squads and platoons are sent out to push back the enemy or occupy an area and hold that position. So, it would be in our best interest to weaken the enemy as much as possible before the platoons encounter them. Whatever it is we’re doing, Jo, the more we hurt the backbone of the NVA or the VC, the more we help save the lives of our soldiers.”

Sev left all details unmentioned, which included: crossing borders into Cambodia, Laos, and North Vietnam; destroying supply routes of the Ho Chi Minh Trails, blowing up fuel depots, sabotaging weapons and ammo, stealing intelligence, capturing or eliminating the higher ranks, and creating chaos—pitting one enemy against the other.

“Tonight you were wearing those other fatigues—tiger stripes,” Jo pointed out. “And you didn’t have any insignia on that uniform. Why?”

“Well, deniability mostly—those are non-issued. Anytime we’re on a simple detail that’s not a SOG mission, we’re in our regular utility fatigues with our name and branch of service. The difference is, when we’re on a SOG mission, if we get in trouble and it goes south out there, it’s our responsibility to get ourselves out. If we can’t do that, Charlie doesn’t need to know who we are, who we belong to, or why we were there. And—we can’t go any deeper into this, okay?”

“Okay,” Jo answered, although she needed to ask one more question. “And the guys in your unit are both Army and Marine?”

“We’re somewhat of a rare mix, but it works. Because of the nature of some of our missions, we were individually selected for this one unit. We report to MACV, directly under the DOD, and we’re joint-services—all branches.” Changing the subject entirely, Sev asked, “Have you seen Hobby today? Did he get his bandages off? Can he see?” (MACV – Military Assistance Command, Vietnam. DOD – Department of Defense.)

“When I got off work, I went to see him, but he was already gone. So, I think he’s fine.”

Sev nodded. “Good, I’ll find him in the morning then. How do you like life on the dunes so far?”

Jo smiled. “I’ve always loved the beach, but the sand here is in everything. It’s in my hair, it’s in my bed, and I think it’s even in my food.”

“Yup, the sand is very fine and there’s always a breeze blowing. Nothing can keep it out.”

Jo leaned forward. “I also have lizards living in my room.”

“Yeah,” Sev acknowledged, as he chuckled. “That’s a good thing though. The lizards eat other things you don’t want in your room. How’s Bob Nelson treating you?”

“I had a lot of processing in the beginning of the week, so I didn’t really see him. But since that’s about wrapped up, I’ll be working with him more this week. He seems like he’ll be a good shop chief.”

Sev agreed. “Yeah, Bob’s a good guy. You know, he was afraid you were going to be a tough brawny woman who could kick his ass.”

Although Jo thought that was funny, she gave Sev a stone-cold look. “Don’t underestimate me. You have no idea whose ass I could kick.”

Sev laughed. “I wouldn’t be too surprised. The other day, when Susan jumped on you, I thought we were about to find out whose ass you could kick.” Sev’s smile turned warm. “And by the way, when she asked me if I thought it was funny—I thought it was great. I just didn’t want to make things worse for you.”

“What was going on with her that day? I still irritate her, but it hasn’t been as bad lately, as it was that day.”

“I know you’ve had a rough start with her, but she’s actually a pretty good woman,” Sev answered, in Susan’s defense. “She is under so much pressure, it’s a wonder she doesn’t have a meltdown

more often than she does. She's expected to make huge changes in a place where nothing changes. She can't get the help or cooperation she needs. I know it's hard, but just don't take what she says too personal."

"How long have you two been together?" Jo asked.

Sev laughed lightly. "We've been friends for about eight months."

"Do you say friends because you're married?" Jo directly questioned, which caused Sev to lift his brow. Jo pointed across the room. "I saw your wedding ring over there."

Sev glanced over to the plate containing his wedding band, and he chuckled again. "No, I'm not married, Jo," he answered. "If I were, I would still be wearing that wedding ring. Once I took it off my finger, I put it with those things and that's where it's been ever since."

"You're divorced?"

"Yes, I've been officially divorced for about a year now. Leading up to that, my ex-wife and I spent a while separated from each other. I took my time signing the divorce papers—for all the wrong reasons. But once the divorce went through, I let go."

"Do you have kids?"

"I don't—my ex-wife never wanted any kids," Sev answered.

"Why?" Jo asked, intrigued.

"Well, a few different reasons, I guess. The main reason, she didn't think she'd like being a mom. She had kind of a difficult childhood, and looking back, it affected a lot of our life together."

"Did you want kids?" Jo asked, warmly surprised by Sev's forthrightness.

"Sure," he quickly responded. "I've thought about being a dad. Well, maybe not so much these days. I'm in another war now, and hell, I'm just getting too old and tired."

"You don't believe that," Jo challenged. "What went wrong in your marriage?"

"Many things, I suppose. I could sit here and say it was all her fault, but that would just be my pride talking. The fact is, in a marriage both partners need to be present. If one or the other isn't there, emotionally or physically, it can't work. I was the one who was absent most of the time. First Korea, then Panama, and then here. I thought I could be gone, then come back and everything would be just as I left it. People change—needs change."

"So she didn't wait for you?"

Sev shook his head and offered more of an answer. "Well, it's not easy being married to a man who only knows how to be a Marine. I can look back and wonder if I had made this choice or that choice, would've it made a difference? Who knows... If it wouldn't have been one thing, it might have been something else. I didn't walk away easily though."

"You said you took your time signing the divorce papers. Why?"

"I don't know. I knew we were having problems and she was unhappy, but I thought there was a

chance for us to work it out—if she could just wait for me to get home. Instead, she mailed me divorce papers with an X marking the spot where I should sign, and a note saying she needed them back quickly because she wanted to marry some other guy. I guess I got pissed,” Sev answered, with another smile. “At first I was going to make her wait until I came home. I wanted to make her say it to my face.”

“But then you gave in?”

“Yeah, after awhile it didn’t matter to me anymore.”

“Did you love her?”

“Of course I did. She was my childhood sweetheart. I married her right out of high school, thinking she was the woman I was going to spend the rest of my life with.” Sev stood up and reached for Jo’s empty bottle from her hand, then walked over to the refrigerator for two more beers. “Why are you asking me all these questions, Jo?”

“Because you’re answering them,” she said, as Sev handed her a fresh beer and sat back down in front of her. “And because since you’ve been talking, I haven’t thought so much about what happened earlier.”

“Well then, if it’s keeping your mind off things, you can fire away. But you know, I’m not usually such an open book.”

Jo smiled, then tilted her head. “So, do you say friends because Captain Brooks is an officer and you’re enlisted?”

“No,” Sev answered, as he laughed again. “I say friends because she and I have never called it anything other than that.” Sev leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees. “When I first met Susan and we started becoming friends, we found a level of companionship that seems to work. I care a lot about her, and I think our friendship is certainly sound. As for anything more than that, we’ve had a lot of talks about failed relationships and disillusion—hers and mine. I don’t think either one of us wants to go down that road again. We’re comfortable with each other, and we stay on the same page.”

“Sounds awfully simple...” Jo pointed out with skepticism.

“In a place like this, there’s not much room for anything else. Jo, I take what I do and what I say in relationships very seriously, and I’m careful not to lead anyone on. I stay to that, and I try to instill that in my men. Well, except for Hobby—there’s no hope for Hobby. Has he hit on you yet?”

“No,” Jo answered, surprised by the question. “He’s in love—he told me so.”

“So he says,” Sev said, shaking his head. “And he means it when he says it. He’s not a bad guy—he just can’t follow through. He’ll stay with Mandy until a pretty nurse or some other girl turns his head again. The only reason Hobby hasn’t hit on you yet—he’s been blind for the past few weeks. Even though I told him you were pretty, he’s not going to take a chance until he sees you for himself. I guarantee you, the very first moment he sees your face, he will say something that would constitute him hitting on you.”

“No he won’t,” Jo tried to argue.

“You don’t think so? Care to wager a bet? We’re going to be here for the next two days. If he hits

on you within the next forty-eight hours, you..." Sev thought for a moment. He was sure he would win the bet, and he wanted to stay clear of requesting anything inappropriate or something Jo would find uncomfortable to honor. "You have to give me one dance, any time I choose to collect on the bet."

"One dance? Okay. And if he's a gentleman and does not hit on me, you..." Jo pondered.

"Make it as complicated as you want," Sev suggested. "I'm not going to lose this bet."

Jo raised an eyebrow, then tapped her chin with thought. "You have to get up early every morning you're on this base and go running with me."

"Running? Early? On my downtime?" Sev questioned, with a grin.

"Yes, every morning you're here, before I go to work."

"Hmmm, let me make sure I have this straight. I'll have to spend my mornings here getting hot and sweaty with a pretty girl? Geez, you did make this complicated—it's seldom I'm hoping I lose a bet!" Sev chuckled, flashing his dimples.

Jo smiled, then stood to her feet. "Thank you for helping me through tonight. This was good for me, but I guess it's getting pretty late and I have to get up early."

"This was good for me too, Jo," Sev said, as he also stood to escort her home.

Jo was pleasantly surprised by how close Sev lived to her. She had passed his quarters before when returning from the Pit, although she was unaware at the time. Walking to Jo's trailer, the conversation was light, while Sev asked about her family and talked about his own. They learned about several similarities they shared. They both came from military families, had one sibling each, a brother, and both were raised on the coast—although opposite coasts of Maryland and Washington State. As they continued to walk, Sev pointed out a few places of interest and asked Jo about running in the mornings. He was impressed that she enjoyed a good morning run, and he considered joining her, regardless of the outcome of their wager.

Jo asked about the name Sev, finding it to be interestingly different. "Is Sev your real first name or a nickname?"

"My name is Severn. My full name is Severn Sebastian Fitzpatrick. I've always been called Sev though."

"Sev is a friendly name, I like it," Jo said. Then with more thought, she added, "Although, the name Severn Sebastian sure sounds noble and quite knightly."

Sev grinned again, as the two reached the steps of Jo's quarters. He had yet to hear anyone associate his name with being noble or knightly. However, hearing it from Jo seemed flattering.

"I think it just might be the way you say it, darlin'. But the name Josephine Alexandra has a true female warrior tone to it, don't you think?"

Jo chuckled. "If you add—the great."

Sev laughed with her and gave it a try. "Josephine Alexandra the Great. Yes, ma'am, it does have

a commanding appeal.”

Jo walked up the two steps to her trailer and turned to Sev. “Thank you, Sev. Thank you for being here tonight and for walking me home.”

“It has been all my pleasure, and one I hope I get to do again,” Sev answered, then nodded and turned to leave.

As he took a couple of steps away, Jo’s voice caused him to turn around to her once more. “How did you know my name was Josephine Alexandra? I didn’t tell you that.”

Sev smiled again and answered, “I read your orders. I knew about you before I even met you. And from there, it’s all been one wonderful surprise after another, getting to know you, Jo. Get a good night’s sleep, and I’ll be looking forward to seeing you tomorrow.”

Walking home, Sev thought about going to Susan’s quarters, then decided he was simply too tired and lacked the interest.

## Chapter Four

“We hit a snag, but it’s all good now,” said Sev, as he and his lieutenant sat down to breakfast at 0500 hours.

The two men discussed in detail the mission from which Sev and his unit had returned the previous night. The mission was a success; although, due to an unforeseen complication, it had to be altered. One man suffered injuries and the mission was nearly aborted; however, that man still managed to complete his part. Therefore, the outcome was achieved and all men returned safely. As always, Sev and Hobby completed their business before they touched on any other conversation. The men had a briefing scheduled with the higher brass in the afternoon, leaving their morning free.

Sev noticed how Hobby’s eyes continuously watered, appearing irritated and causing him to squint. “Do your eyes hurt?”

“Some, they feel like sandpaper. The sunlight makes them water, and this fluorescent light in here seems bothersome. At night, when I look at light, I see little starbursts. Doc says that will go away,” Hobby answered. “Where were you last night? The guys came into the Pit, and we thought you’d show up. Did you go straight to Susan’s?”

“No, I didn’t go to Susan’s at all last night. I’m going to have to stop in this morning to see her. After I left the hospital, I just went back to my hooch.”

“Is that it?” Hobby questioned.

“That’s it,” Sev answered.

Hobby shook his head with a grin on his face. “Damn it, I knew you’d hold out on me. Doc and

Nate said you left the hospital with a pretty girl. They didn't know her yet, but it wasn't Susan."

Sev gave Hobby a displeased look, letting him know he was prying. "You've met Jo, and you know who she is, right? She worked the checkout counter last night."

Hobby's expression shifted to a look of concern. "How many?"

"Only two. One died right away, but the other one stayed alive for better than an hour. He was lucid most of the time, so the conversation got intense, and it wrecked Jo once he passed. I don't know how well you know her, but from what I saw, she's got the right amount of compassion, but she might have too much heart to be on that counter."

"She does seem to have a huge capacity to care," Hobby remarked. "But I don't get the feeling she's fragile. I think she'll recover just fine."

"Yeah, still, I wouldn't want to see this war change her any," Sev said, then had to laugh from the reality in front of him. "Hell, she's here—the war is going to change her."

"Sounds like you care," Hobby stated. "Sounds like you might be invested here. Anything else happen last night?"

"No," Sev answered quickly. "I took her away from the checkout counter and we walked it off. We talked for awhile, then I walked her back to her quarters. That's it, I'm not holding anything else back."

"If you say so," Hobby said, with a chuckle.

\*\*\*

Although it was still morning and the temperature had not yet reached the high for the day, it was already uncomfortably muggy. Jo spent the first part of the morning on the flight line with her Commander and had just returned to her desk to draft a few letters. She laid her clipboard down and turned around to reach the paper for her typewriter. When she turned back, her clipboard was missing. As Jo turned around again, wondering where she had placed the notes, someone in her doorway caught her attention. Leaning against the doorframe with one foot crossed over the other, stood a big strapping man holding her clipboard in his hand. He was wearing sunglasses, and had sandy blonde hair and a huge grin on his face.

"Well," he said, "let's just see what the Air Force has got going on over here. Some of us Army guys can read too."

"Are you going to bring that back over to me?"

Still smiling, he stepped into the room. Standing directly in front of Jo, he reached for his sunglasses and removed them—revealing warm and friendly dark brown eyes that complemented the strong structure of his face.

"How are those eyes doing?" Jo asked her friend.

"They love the view at the moment," Hobby answered, while keeping his eyes on Jo.

Feeling slightly embarrassed, she tried to wipe the sweat and dirt from her face. "We were breaking down some freight this morning. Sometimes I get a little dirty where I work."

"I don't see any dirt. Maybe I need to look closer," Hobby said, as he leaned into Jo closely. "What are you doing when you get off work tonight? Have you been to the beach yet?"

Jo looked at him suspiciously, thinking of her conversation with Sev the night before. Still, it was unclear if Hobby was not simply being friendly and inviting her to the beach with everyone else. Giving an answer, Jo smiled. "I can't go to the beach yet. I don't have a swimsuit. I don't know why, but it didn't occur to me to pack one."

"You didn't look at a map before you got here?" Hobby teased. "Cam Ranh is right on the beach. But that's okay though—I know of a private beach perfect for you and me, and you won't need a suit."

"Is that right? Just you and me, skinny-dipping on the beach?" Jo grinned.

"Affirmative! And maybe a nice bottle of wine. I have connections, you know," Hobby claimed, as he moved close enough to kiss Jo, if he chose to.

"What about Mandy?" Jo raised an eyebrow.

"Mandy who?" Hobby tried to deflect, although he felt compelled to pull his face away from Jo slightly.

"You know, the girl who sleeps in your bed."

"Oh, that Mandy," Hobby answered, knowing he had just gotten shot down.

"Hobby? I thought you were going to get this right with Mandy."

"I'm trying, I really am. All of this just fell out of my mouth. I wasn't expecting you to be this pretty. You really can't blame me." Hobby attempted to shift the blame.

Jo laughed. "Don't put this on me. I'm not going to be the reason you mess this up with Mandy. I like her. And I like you, even if you do have the libido of a horny fifteen-year-old."

Hobby laughed at Jo's assessment of him. "A horny fifteen-year-old? Damn, Jo, I'm not sure I can even argue that. But you're right, that was out of line, and I have been trying to stay a decent guy this time. So we're still friends? And you'll forgive my fifteen-year-old libido?"

"Yes, we're still friends, and I'll overlook your libido. Now go away and let me get back to work."

"I'm leaving," Hobby responded. He then leaned in and gave Jo an unexpected friendly peck on her lips.

She smiled and was actually touched by the kiss. Then just as Hobby turned to leave, she called to him once more. "Hobby, are you going to see Sev later today?"

"I will, why?"

"Could you give him a message from me?"

"I suppose..." He acted slightly putout, although he was not.

"Just tell him, he won."

"He won?"

"Yes," Jo confirmed. "He won."

"Aye-Aye," Hobby answered, giving Jo a quick salute on his way out of her office.

As Hobby walked across the base, he mulled over Jo's words and his own intentions. He had a long history of females flocking to him, regardless of the male to female ratio, and breaking the habit of taking advantage of that was something he found difficult to do. It was in his nature to move on to the next hot woman, and Jo certainly fit that bill. This time, however, there seemed to be three different obstacles in his way. First was Mandy, who excelled in lovability and sweetness. He enjoyed her company and when he was with her, his mind stayed free of other women. If he could carry that sentiment with him in her absence, all would be good. Second, while getting to know Jo, she had proven herself worthy of being a dear friend. He valued her friendship, and certainly did not want to jeopardize it because he pushed something she would find inappropriate. The third obstacle caused him to laugh, as he thought of his conversation with Sev earlier. If that man was trying to say there was nothing to kindle with Jo, it lacked conviction.

An hour later, Sev and Hobby walked into a briefing together. Hobby remembered Jo's request and relayed it to Sev. "Oh, Jo wanted me to tell you... What was it? You won?"

"What?" Sev stopped in his tracks, giving Hobby a sharp look.

"I don't know. She just said, you won."

Sev took a step towards Hobby. "You Prick!"

"What?" Hobby questioned, in an attempt to understand the agitated look on Sev's face. "No, really... What?"

Sev shook his head and chuckled. "What about Mandy?"

"Why's everyone asking me about Mandy?" Hobby asked, looking confused.

\*\*\*

Later during the afternoon, Jo received a message from Captain Susan Brooks. It simply said, if Jo could meet at her office after work, it would be appreciated. Once released for the day, Jo showered quickly and entered the Captain's office at 1630 hours.

Susan was free and addressed Jo promptly. "I have a project for you, if you want to take this on."

Jo followed Susan through the corridor, and as they came closer to one of the few private rooms, a distinct sound of a man moaning in pain grew louder. When they reached the room that had a guard posted outside of the door, Susan motioned for the doctor inside with the patient to come into the hallway.

"Jo, this is Doctor Billings. He'll explain what's going on in here," she said, then simply turned around and walked away.

Dr. Billings, whom Jo had met the night before when he placed her on the checkout counter, stepped forward. "Hello Jo," he said. "This is going to be another tough job to do. But unlike last night, I can promise you, this patient will get better. I know you have your own job and can't be here until about this time of day. What you're going to observe here, needs to be done for this man twice a day. Our nurses will take care of the morning, and when you can be here, I'd like you to help in the evenings."

Jo looked into the room to see two nurses carefully removing bandages from a man's back. He was a large muscular man, lying flat on his stomach, and as the nurses worked, he cried out in pain.

"What do you need me to do?" Jo questioned.

"It's pretty basic really. We need to remove the dressings, clean the wounds, apply an antibiotic ointment, and then cover the wounds again with fresh bandage. You have experience with this type of post injury care from your other volunteer work in the States, right?"

"Yes, but the others I've helped didn't have wounds as open or as raw as this. What happened to him?" Jo asked, observing wounds that appeared to be deep torn lacerations across the man's back.

"This is Dawson," Dr. Billings said. "He's a special patient. That's why he's not on the ward, and why he has a guard at the door. The wounds you're looking at are from a beating with a whip that usually has eight or nine strands tied together and wrapped with barbed wire. It rips and tears the flesh out with each strike. The treatment and recovery is the same though, as with any other open flesh wound. It needs to be kept sterile, clean and covered."

"How did this happen?" Jo questioned, still observing Dawson lying on the bed.

"He was captured and our guys snatched him back last night. That's all the information we're going to get."

"What about the pain he's in? It doesn't seem like he's drugged all that much."

"He's not," the doctor explained. "Dawson is CIA. His head is full of top-secret information, and we're not allowed to give him any drugs that could alter his state of mind. That's one of the reasons there's a guard at the door. He's here to make sure we do our job within regulations. Dawson is in excruciating pain, and we are giving him the strongest pain medication we're permitted to give him. This would be equivalent to you having your head split open and taking an aspirin for it. When we remove the bandages and clean those wounds, it's near maddening pain. This is why I specifically wanted you here."

"Why?" Jo asked, appearing uncomfortable.

"It's like I told you last night. I've watched you, and you have that rare gift of being able to soothe. You're not just an extra pair of hands, Jo. With Dawson, not only will you help to care for his wounds, I believe you will help him endure it." As the doctor explained, Dawson continued to cry out in pain. The nurses ignored him while they worked, and Dr. Billings offered a little more insight. "The cursing he's doing here is expected for the pain level, but it's not his normal behavior. Dawson usually has little or nothing to say to anyone. When we're working on him, he might curse, cry, throw-up, or even pass out. Whatever he does, just take care of him. Each day the pain will be less intense as the flesh begins to heal. Bar any infection, within a week the pain should be controllable. Are you ready?" the doctor asked, and motioned for Jo to enter the room.

The bandages were removed, and the man's entire back was covered with raw flesh torn tracks that were nearly down to the bone.

"Dawson, we'll try to make this quick," said Dr. Billings, as the group stood ready to clean the wounds.

Jo knelt in front of the injured man. His right arm was resting across his head, and he continued to groan in pain. The nurses waited, as they watched Jo place her hand on his arm and gently guide it away from his face. Dawson's hair was coal-black, clean-cut, while slightly longer than a GI's. His face was well defined and handsome, yet cringed in pain. As Jo reached to push away the hair covering his eyes, he opened them, and his eyes were a shade of blue that resembled shards of ice. He focused on Jo, and she spoke to him.

"Hello," she softly whispered. "I'm Jo. I'm going to help take care of you. I'm sorry this hurts so much. But tomorrow, tomorrow it will hurt a little less."

Jo lightly touched his cheek, then stood up to help. As everyone continued to work, Dawson yelled out in agony, burying his face in his pillow and covering his head with his arm once more. At one point, he cried out in such pain, Jo stopped working and reached to the back of his neck. He grabbed hold of her hand and held it so tightly that he nearly hurt her. Jo was unable to get free, and when she looked up at the doctor, he nodded.

"Go on, Jo, we'll do this. You take care of him."

Jo knelt in front of Dawson and cradled his head gently. She moved in closer, resting her cheek against his, and simply whispered, "Shhhhhh." Jo's gentle embrace, her touch, her breath against his cheek, and the sound of her voice in his ear seemed to give him some comfort.

Once the last of the fresh bandages were applied and everyone was finished, Dr. Billings commented, "You did good, Dawson. We've given you a light sedative to help you sleep."

Jo whispered in the man's ear, "I'm going to go now, but I'll be back tomorrow night."

Without saying a word, Dawson released his grip on Jo's hand. Once outside of the room, she and Dr. Billings talked while they walked down the hall.

"Dawson is a huge man, and he's not sedated," the doctor said. "If he wasn't willing to stay still and allow us to work on him, we wouldn't have a prayer in there."

"Is that the other reason there's a guard at the door?" Jo asked.

"That's the second reason. The third reason—the VC and NVA have a huge bounty on his head. For the right price, you never know who might attempt to assassinate him."

"Well that's scary," Jo commented.

Dr. Billings laughed lightly. "He's a scary man. You haven't seen him on his feet yet." The doctor then added, "I knew you'd do well with him, Jo. Thank you."

\*\*\*

On Jo's way home, she stopped at the Pit for a beer. It was crowded with a normal mix of mostly Air Force, some Army, Navy, and a few Marines. Cam Ranh Air Base was the home of the 12th

Tactical Fighter Wing, as well as a Strategic and Tactical Airlift facility. Cargo and personnel would arrive from the US and then be transferred to Tactical Airlift for movement within South Vietnam. The US Army, Navy, and Marines used the airfield extensively.

Jo was unable to spot anyone she knew and decided to grab an empty stool at the bar. Sitting to her left, she nodded a hello to a lady who gave a nod back, acknowledging Jo's presence. The lady then turned her head forward to stare at the booze bottles lined up along the far wall. Jo studied the woman's profile for a brief moment. This was a person who would rarely go unnoticed. She was an American woman with platinum blonde hair, blue eyes, ruby red lips, and was scantily clad. Her navy skirt was short and showed at least a mile of leg, ending with three inch heels. Her red top featured a whole lot of cleavage, and the woman's long slender fingers displayed ruby red painted nails that matched her lips. To Jo, she looked remarkably like Marilyn Monroe—in more of a working-girl sort of way.

The bartender placed another drink down in front of the lady, then turned to Jo and offered his services. His name was Dewy, and he seemed to be well liked by everyone. He was Air Force and would be described as a long and lanky guy. He had a strong southern accent, leaning towards an aristocrat, giving him a suave demeanor, although he was not all that attractive. Jo requested a beer, and a few moments later, Dewy sat one in front of her.

"Have you met Ruby, Jo?" Dewy asked.

Jo looked towards the lady again, and Dewy made the introductions. "Ruby, this is Jo. She's a WAF—one of the first enlisted Air Force females over here."

Ruby gave Jo a look-over, then smiled—more cynical than friendly. "Jo the WAF... I bet you're loving that label."

"It's the whole reason I didn't go in the Army," Jo said, with a smile. "It's certainly a better label than Jo the WAC." (WAF – Women in the Air Force. WAC – Women's Army Corps.)

Ruby laughed lightly. She liked Jo's non-defensive answer and decided maybe she was worth a moment of conversation. "Did you join the military to find a man, Jo?"

"Well, if I did, this is my second hitch," Jo pondered. "So, I'm either incredibly unlucky, or I have my expectations way too high."

Ruby chuckled again, then studied Jo once more. "From the looks of you, I doubt you've ever hurt for male attention."

"Except when it's a man I might want attention from," Jo confessed. "I can step off a plane and meet the man of my dreams, and then an hour later meet his beautiful and smart girlfriend."

Ruby smiled. "Girlfriend doesn't mean it's a done deal."

Jo was about to comment again, when one of the USO girls interrupted. "Hi Jo, we have a table over there, and you can sit with us, if you'd like."

"Thank you," Jo answered. "I might be over in a bit."

The young girl leaned in to whisper, although Ruby would still be able to hear every word she said. "Jo, you don't want to sit next to her. Don't you know what she is?"

Jo turned to Ruby again, giving her a look as if she had just that moment noticed her. Then with a straight face and a silly girl tone, Jo asked, "You mean, she's not a donut dolly?"

Ruby laughed out-loud, which caused the USO girl to quickly walk away. The term 'donut dolly' was given to the young Red Cross girls, who handed out coffee and donuts to the men and offered them clean conversation.

Ruby grinned and raised an eyebrow. "I was a donut dolly, but then I decided to become enterprising. You're all right, Jo. How long have you been in Nam?"

"A week," Jo answered.

"Well, here's to another week." Ruby lifted her glass and the ladies toasted.

"Jo, Ruby," said a voice, greeting them from behind Jo's back. Jo turned around, and Sev was standing beside her at the bar.

"Hello Sev," Ruby acknowledged, while Jo only stared in the man's face and smiled.

Breaking the captivating look Sev was exchanging with Jo, Dewy cut in, "What's your pour tonight, Sev?"

"Scotch-neat, and whatever that fruity thing is you make Susan. And setup these two ladies also," Sev requested, then turned back to Jo. "Before you leave, stop by our table if you'd like, and I'll introduce you to the rest of my men. Oh, and I got your message. That bastard, it didn't even take him twelve hours."

Jo grinned. "You did officially win, but I have to tell you, he's very sweet and he backed off the moment I questioned him. I still believe he cares about Mandy."

"I believe he cares too, but I guess time will tell if he can stay true," Sev said, as Dewy sat his drinks in front of him. Then in a gentlemanly fashion, Sev excused himself and made his way back to his table.

Ruby had a knack of being a quick study of people, and she voiced her observations to Jo. "When you stepped off that plane and met the man of your dreams, was that about a week ago?" Jo turned and smiled without responding, and Ruby continued, "Sev's one heck of a man."

"Do you know him?" Jo had to ask, even if she dreaded the answer.

Ruby laughed. "Not professionally, if that's what you want to know. But yes, I know him. He would make a good catch, but I never thought that man wanted to be caught again—until I saw how he looked at you. Old Stiff Upper-lip Captain Brooks hasn't caught him, and if I were you, I wouldn't rule myself out yet."

Jo and Ruby spent another hour or so talking and finishing off a couple more drinks. Jo took a liking to Ruby. She made no excuses for who she was or why she was there. Ruby was an opportunist, and there was money to be made in Vietnam. Aside from drugs, where she drew the line, she could provide or find anything a person requested—if the price was right.

Ruby found Jo to be interesting to talk to, for another female, which was surprising. She seldom wasted time having any conversations where money was absent from the table. Also, because of the looks and attitude she would receive from most of the women on base, Ruby usually ignored

them. Jo seemed different, being easily forthright, having a genuine quality about her, and giving way to always being honest. Perhaps, Ruby thought, in time she might confide in Jo the reason why she thought it justified to make money off the war.

Before Jo left the Pit for the evening, she looked across the room and found the table where Sev and his men sat. She chose to pass on his invitation, although she would like to meet his men eventually. Susan seemed to have Sev's full attention, and Jo thought it best to leave it that way.

## Chapter Five

Jo turned off her alarm clock early in the morning, jumped into a pair of shorts and a tank top, and grabbed her sneakers. She enjoyed hating her morning run. It was difficult waking up and going outside, and yet once jogging, she enjoyed the exhilaration it gave her. As she walked out of her quarters, she nearly stumbled over a man sitting on the step. He stood and turned to face her, also wearing sneakers, a tee-shirt, and a pair of shorts.

"Good morning, sleepyhead," he said.

"What are you doing here?" Jo asked, pleasantly surprised. "I lost the bet."

"Yes you did, and I'll collect on that dance soon," Sev answered. "But I thought you might like having a running partner anyway."

"I would, thank you," Jo said appreciatively, and the two set out running at a nice even pace.

"I thought you'd come by our table last night, but then I looked up and you were gone." Sev engaged in conversation while they ran.

"I was tired, and I didn't want to intrude," Jo answered.

"I doubt if any of my guys would've found you to be an intrusion. Are you sure it wasn't because Susan was there?"

"I get under her skin. I guess that's why I didn't want to intrude."

"I told you not to let her bother you," Sev replied, then changed the subject. "What do you think of Ruby?"

"I like her," Jo answered. "She doesn't hold anything back, does she?"

"No, she doesn't. I like her too. She's honest, and in perspective, she provides something far more valuable than coffee and donuts to these men."

"How well do you know her?" Jo questioned.

Sev laughed. "I've never been to see her. But I have recommended her to a few young men

though.”

“Why would you do that?”

“Well, if you have a new guy out there having some trouble coping, sometimes the solution can be as easy as getting him laid.”

“And that cures all?” Jo asked.

“Sometimes it can cure a lot of things. I don’t want my guys hooking up with the local boom-boom girls off base. They end up with the clap, gonorrhea, and every other thing. If they go see Ruby—she’s clean, drug free, always uses protection, and she won’t rob them when she’s done.”

“I didn’t ask her,” Jo said, with thought. “But how is she able to get on base?”

“She’s a dependent,” Sev answered. “I don’t know what created the Ruby we all know, but I would wager it’s a long story and runs deep. She came over here with the Red Cross, but she had her own agenda already in play. She was going to wheel and deal herself a fortune within only a couple of years. Then she met one of your young fighter pilots, and he pulled her away from all that. She fell in love with him and he married her. About two months later, his plane went down and he was killed. That would’ve been bad enough, but it turned out it was our side who shot him down, and then the Army denied it and covered it up. The lies, and all the crap the government put her through... The government screwed her, and she came back with a vengeance. Apart from drugs—Ruby is not a drug pusher, but any other means of turning a profit, she is a major player. And that makes her a great asset to SOG at times.”

“Gosh, that’s all so sad. I had no idea.”

Sev only nodded, and the two ran silently for a few moments before Jo spoke up again.

“Tell me about your guys. I’d like to know about them,” she inquired, as she picked up their pace slightly.

“Tell you about my guys... Well, you already know Hobby. He can be a playboy and a clown, but you already know that. What you don’t know about Hobby—he’s the best lieutenant I’ve ever had the honor of serving with. I’ve always hated getting a new LT. They’re young with no experience and too green to be out there. Most of them come straight out of OCS and get dumped in a platoon. The LT is the one who makes that final call, and a cocky young lieutenant with something to prove can get your men killed. Hobby was chosen for SOG from an Army platoon, so when I got him, he wasn’t so green. He’s a smart and skilled strategist, but more importantly, he listens. When he and I strategize, we don’t breakaway until we agree. When we’re out there, he has never made a call just because he’s the LT.” (OCS – Officers Candidate School)

Sev could feel the gain in the pace Jo was setting, as he continued with his conversation. “Next, directly under me, I have Sergeant Tyron Williams. He is by far the biggest Marine you will ever see. We call him Willie, and he and I have been together for a while. He’s our point man and the best there is. I’d follow that man into the depths of hell, knowing he’d get me out. He can spot a trip line, a booby trap, or a landmine from ten feet away, and he hears every sound. He’s funny though. He’s from deep in the Bayou of Louisiana, and when he gets excited, he starts talking fast in a combination of Deep South and Cajun—and we can’t understand a word he says. My next guy would be Corporal Nathaniel Walker. Nate just made corporal a few weeks ago, and I’m very proud of that boy. He’s a young and smart Marine with a lot of potential. Nate is our

sharpshooter. To be in SOG, we're all marksmen, but the second Nate gets you in his crosshairs, you're dead. You'll like Nate. He's a well-mannered farm boy from Minnesota and a true gentleman. He wears his heart on his sleeve and is always a good guy."

Jo increased the pace again, and Sev acted as if it were unnoticeable. "Next, there's Doc, Specialist Richard Gains. He's Army and our medic. I'm real partial to the Navy corpsmen. They're basically equivalent to an Army medic, except they're more relatable to a Marine. So when SOG sent me this young, pretty boy Army medic, looking way too soft—I was worried about that kid. I thought the first time he'd get shot at, he'd turn and run, which would get him killed—either by Charlie or because I shot him. But that young man is focused and steadfast when we're out there. Doc will go in under any conditions to do his job. I trust him with our lives, and he's proven time and again that he'll risk his life for one of ours. Lastly, I have Private First Class Jose Sanchez, and he's also Army. Chez is our explosive expert. We're guys, so we all like blowing up stuff, but Chez loves blowing up stuff. He can be a little cocky, and I've had to sit on him a few times. He knows what he's doing, but sometimes he gets a little too anxious, and that could get him killed one day."

About the time Sev finished, he and Jo were coming around the corner on their final stretch to Jo's quarters. They both carried sweat beads on their skin and were slightly out of breath.

"You had me talking this whole time, so you wouldn't have to, didn't you?" Sev asked.

"No... Well, maybe a little," Jo answered, and the two sat down on the step of her trailer. "I wanted to know about your guys, though. I do want to meet them soon."

"Then next time, don't be afraid to come to our table," Sev said, slightly stern. He then smiled. "I won't be able to run with you tomorrow. We'll already be in the boonies before you even wake up."

"How long will you be gone?" Jo asked.

"I don't know. Longer this time, at least a couple of weeks or more. And, that's about all I can tell you," Sev offered, and Jo's face reflected worry. "Don't look so worried—it's all good, and we'll be back."

"Will I see you before you leave?"

"Do you want to see me before I leave?" Sev questioned, feeling flattered.

"Yes," Jo simply answered.

"Then I'll make sure you do," Sev said, as he stood, aware that Jo needed to get ready for work.

\*\*\*

This was Jo's seventh straight day of work. Due to the current backlog, the shack had been deprived of a day off for more than three months. After work, Jo grabbed a quick shower, then hurried to the hospital to join the nurses inside of Dawson's room. Once Dr. Billings arrived, Jo knelt in front of the patient and touched his arm. His face was again cringed in pain, and as he opened his eyes, he focused on Jo.

"Is it okay if they begin?" she asked. Dawson only nodded. As the nurses removed the first bandage, he cried out.

“Wait,” Jo interrupted, looking up at Dr. Billings. “What about booze? You can’t give him stronger drugs, but what about booze? He’s probably used to drinking.”

Dr. Billings only gave the suggestion a quick thought before he shook his head. He had Dawson pumped full of antibiotics, and although there were no signs of infection, the booze would counteract the antibiotics. “I doubt it would take much of an edge off anyway,” he said.

Before anyone could offer another opinion, Dawson grabbed Jo by the front of her fatigue shirt, pulling her closer. With a trembling hand and a look of desperation in his eye, he spoke his first word to her. “Whiskey,” he breathed out, nodding his head. He then let go of Jo’s shirt with a slight push—as to tell her to go.

Observing Dawson’s reaction, Dr. Billings reconsidered and nodded his approval. “Okay, but make it quick. And Jo, you make sure you hide it coming back in here. If Captain Brooks gets wind of this, she’ll hang all of us.”

Jo hurried across the base to the Pit and stepped up to the bar. Dewy walked over to her directly. “Hey Jo, what can I get you?”

“Whiskey,” she answered.

“Straight up?” Dewy asked, in his southern charming way. “That’s a pretty stiff drink for such a little lady. Are you having a bad day?”

“No, it’s not for me. Actually, I need it to go.”

“Really? And how much do you need? A fifth?” Dewy’s curiosity grew.

“I don’t need the whole bottle—just a few shots.”

“I’m happy to oblige, Jo, but you’re going to have to tell me why.” Dewy moved in closer to hear a secret.

Pressed for time, Jo realized telling him the truth would gain her the fastest results. “Okay, it’s for a patient who can’t be on pain medication. He’s in a lot of pain and this might help.”

Dewy only nodded, as he walked away. He fumbled through a drawer and found a flask. He then grabbed a bottle of whiskey from the shelf and filled the container. As he handed the flask to Jo, he whispered, “Dawson drinks Jack Black. Tell him this one’s on me.”

Jo thanked him, then turned to leave. Arriving at the hospital, she rejoined everyone already gathered in Dawson’s room.

“I don’t want too much alcohol in his blood,” advised Dr. Billings. “You can give him a sip.”

Jo knelt in front of Dawson again. “Dewy said this one’s on him,” she whispered, then unscrewed the cap of the flask and brought it to his lips. Dawson swallowed the whiskey down hard, closing his eyes and allowing it to take his breath away. When he opened his eyes again, he gave Jo a grateful look, as she wiped off his mouth with her fingers.

The whole process went nearly the same as the night before. Dawson grabbed hold of Jo tightly and cried out in pain, and she cradled him while whispering in his ear. She questioned whether the whiskey actually helped, other than it may have felt good going down.

\*\*\*

Jo stopped by the Pit again on her way home. Though she would deny it, she was hoping to see Sev before he left in the morning. Walking in, she ran into Hobby and Mandy at the bar getting a round of drinks for everyone. Hobby flagged Dewy's attention to add a beer for Jo, and he invited her to their table. Jo accepted, and as they approached, she saw Sev sitting alongside of Captain Brooks.

Placing the drinks on the table, Hobby took Jo by the hand to introduce her. "Everyone, I'd like you to meet the girl who helped nurse me back to the good-looking man that I am."

"For Christ sakes, Hobby," Sev interjected. "Guys, this is Jo."

As the men were about to say hello, a nice looking young man with light brown hair and honest hazel eyes rose to his feet and offered Jo his chair.

"Ma'am, would you like to have a seat?"

Jo smiled warmly and turned to Sev. "This would be Nate?" she asked.

"That would be Nate," Sev answered, returning the smile.

Hobby stepped forward to introduce each man to Jo; however, Sev stopped him.

"Jo, from what I told you about this motley crew, do you think you could put the right name to the right face?"

Jo liked the challenge. "Yes, I think I can." She extended her hand first to Nate. "You're Nate from Minnesota, a true gentleman and quite a shot."

"Yes, ma'am. And it's a pleasure meeting you," Nate answered, still standing, as it would be impolite to take a seat while Jo stood.

Jo reached around to the next man and shook his hand. "And you're Willie."

"Yes, ma'am. And you knew I'd be Willie, cause Sev told you, Willie'd be da black guy," he stated, causing everyone to laugh.

"He said," Jo clarified, "you would be the biggest Marine I've ever seen. And, I believe you are. He also said the two of you have been together for a long time, and he'd follow you into the depths of hell."

"Yup—follow," Willie added quickly, which caused everyone to laugh again.

"And," Jo continued, "you're from Louisiana and you speak Cajun?"

"Oui, que je fais, ma dame. And it's a damn shame none of dese boys do."

"Yeah, we speak English, and it's a damn shame he doesn't," said the next man around the table.

Jo accepted the handshake he offered. "Hello Doc," she said, to the blonde haired, blue eyed gentleman. "I'm not sure where you're from, but you're every bit as cute as Sev—"

"That's not at all what I said," Sev proclaimed strongly, and the laughter at the table grew louder.

Doc raised his brow with a proud grin. "I am cute! Their problem with me—I'm not some Neanderthal freak like the rest of them. I'm from Southern California, Jo, and it's a pleasure meeting you. Actually, I saw you working the checkout counter the other night. That's a tough job. I hope you're handling that okay."

"I'm trying, and thank you." Jo appreciated his concern.

She then reached her hand out to the last man, a handsome Latino, and he held her hand tightly without shaking it. "You're Chez," Jo said. "And you really love blowing up stuff."

"Any time you want to feel a real bang, sweetheart, I'm at your service," Chez announced, with a seductive Latino accent.

Although the men had turned to scold Chez for his brazenness, Sev was already on his feet, standing directly over the young man.

"You want to live to see tomorrow, boy?" Sev questioned, with authority.

Chez dropped Jo's hand and raised both of his hands. "Yes I do, Gunny, we cool here."

"That's what I thought," Sev answered, then sat back down.

Jo looked at Sev, slightly confused by the term Gunny.

"I'm a gunnery sergeant," he explained. "When I'm speaking as one, I'm addressed as Gunny. Same goes for Hobby. When we're out there, he's always addressed as LT."

Hobby introduced Chez's date and the girl sitting beside Willie, and then he turned to Nate. "Nate has a date every now and then, but he falls in love too easily. We have to watch out for him. And Doc over here, well, Doc only dates his right hand."

Everyone at the table burst out in laughter again, and Doc shook his head. "Thanks, LT," he said. "That's just great! Let's tell the pretty new girl that."

"For Christ sakes, Hobby, sit down," Sev ordered. "And please, Jo, have a seat," he invited, as Nate had already pulled up another chair for her.

As Jo was about to sit, Susan addressed her. "Do you see any other enlisted Air Force members at this table, Sergeant McFay? Do you have trouble making friends among your own peers, Sergeant? Perhaps tomorrow I should speak to your Commander about your inability to fit in with your fellow airmen."

Before anyone could hardly process the Captain's statement, Jo turned and responded sharply. "It's been a pleasure meeting all of you," she said. "But if you'll excuse me, it's time for me to find some other enlisted Air Force types and see if I can make a friend."

Following Jo's quick exit, the attention shifted to the Captain, with a look of puzzlement on the face of everyone.

Sev raised his hands in question. "What the hell was that, Susan?"

"You tell me, Sev! Could you be more obvious with your goggling?" she questioned.

Sev turned from her and shook his head. He was unwilling to ever engage in anything such as this in front of his men.

Susan stood up from the table. "Please take me home," she requested. "I've had enough of Jo for one day."

Sev paused for a moment, then nodded a goodnight to the rest of the group. Once he and Susan disappeared, Doc immediately spoke up.

"Now that the Captain's gone, can we go ask that pretty girl if she'll come back to our table?"

Hobby scanned the room and found Jo sitting with her coworkers. "Maybe we should just give Jo a break from us assholes for the night."

Jo drank heavier than her normal pace for the next couple of hours. She was angry with herself for allowing Susan to cut her as deeply as she did. It was a cross between being embarrassed and humiliated. Jo respected rank, and she lived by the military way. During the nearly six years of her military career thus far, she had known and worked for many different officers, and never had one treated her so disrespectfully. She thought Susan was taking advantage of her rank, and if not a captain, Jo would have stood her ground.

Once convinced that if she had another drink, she would be sick, Jo disappeared on her work buddies to walk home. Although she seemed to have a slight problem keeping her bearings and staying on the path, she knew where she lived and would find her way. As she came upon Sev's hooch, the lights were out, and Jo imagined he was probably putting a smile on the stiff upper-lip of the Captain. However, passing his quarters, a voice called out to her from the shadow.

"Jo, are you just going to walk by me?" Sev asked, sitting on his step with a beer in his hand.

"What are you doing here?" Jo questioned, slurring her words.

"I told you I'd see you before I left in the morning."

"I thought running into me at the Pit was seeing me before you left. I thought you'd be putting Stiff Upper-lip Captain Brooks to bed by now." Jo swayed as she spoke.

Sev stood up and took Jo's arm to steady her. "Stiff Upper-lip Captain Brooks? Have you been talking to Ruby again?" he questioned. "I said good night to Susan right after I walked her home. Jo, what she said was inexcusable, and I told her so. I am sorry."

"You don't need to be sorry. You didn't say it. I'm going to quit the Air Force, and then I'm going to come back here and beat her up. That's what I'm going to do," Jo announced, in a drunken slur.

"It's good you're thinking this through, Jo." Sev laughed, while setting down his beer to get a better grip on her. "Come on, let's walk you home, darlin'."

"I don't need any help walking, I'm fine."

"Of course you are, and I saw that pretty little zigzag pattern you were making," Sev said, as he began to lead Jo home. "And why are you out here walking home by yourself anyway?"

Jo stopped and pondered for a moment. "Well, I stayed longer than some, and I left before others."

Sev shook his head, laughed lightly, and then coaxed her into moving again. "Darlin', I believe you may have consumed one drink too many."

"No, I consumed exactly the right amount."

"Well then, there won't be any regrets in the morning," he said, as they came upon Jo's quarters.

Guiding Jo in the right direction up the two steps, Sev opened the door and escorted her inside. "Which room is yours?" he asked.

As Jo looked at both rooms, seeming unsure, her suitemates opened their door. "Jo, are you okay?" they asked.

Jo smiled and raised her hand to give them an okay sign.

Sev nodded a polite hello to the ladies, then leaned Jo alongside the door of the opposite room.

"Do you have your key?" he asked.

"Of course I do," Jo giggled, thinking it was a silly question. "How else would I get in there?"

"Could I have the key, darlin'?"

"Oh," Jo said, as she reached into her pants pocket to search.

She pulled out the key, then dropped it to the floor. Although Sev was about to pick it up, Jo reached it first and put the key directly back into her pocket.

Sev laughed. "Forgive me for this," he said, as he reached for her fatigue pants and retrieved the key from her.

After unlocking the door, Sev led Jo into the room. She stumbled over to her bed and flopped down, then curled up and grabbed her pillow. Looking up at him, she spoke her mind.

"Thanks for walking me home," she said. "But you're going to show yourself out, right? Because I don't think I'm moving from here."

Sev grinned. "Yes, ma'am, I'll show myself out," he said, as he laid her key on the chest of drawers, and then reset her alarm clock.

Sev figured Jo would be in no condition to run in the morning, and he could give her an extra hour to sleep. He then reached for her combat boots, and she put up no resistance as he unlaced them, took them off, and placed them on the floor beside her. As he took another moment to sit down on the edge of her bed, he studied her pretty face. She appeared to be asleep already, and he felt bad for how the night had gone. He accepted blame for the role he played in the condition she was in. Susan attacked her because of the attention they were showing one another. Sev's eyes were wide open to what was going on. He was quite aware when a girl liked him, and he knew Jo liked him. He thought it might be more of a crush—a crush she may very well get over, and that

was a good reason to be cautious. He also questioned whether his interest in her might be more of an infatuation. He was captivated and drawn to her, and absolutely unable to get her out of his mind. Troubling him though, twenty-three years of age seemed so young to him. The years between them were too great to ignore. Still, there was no denying how much he wanted to throw all caution to the wind.

As Sev stood to leave, Jo opened her eyes and spoke. "Can I ask you something?"

"Of course," he answered.

"When you're with the Captain, are you sure that's a good fit?"

Sev laughed lightly. "I don't know that I've looked at it in that way, but if I had to say—probably not the best fit."

"That's what I thought," Jo whispered. "Hopefully, you won't miss the right fit..."

Sev smiled and looked into Jo's eyes. "Don't you worry," he said. "I see what's directly in front of me, and I don't intend to miss a thing." He then walked to Jo's door and turned out her light, before leaving her room and locking the door behind him.

## Chapter Six

When the alarm clock sounded off in the morning, it took Jo a moment to realize she only had enough time to head straight for a shower. Although she was slightly hung-over, she remembered everything that happened the night before, including her conversation with Sev. His comments swirled around in her head and would give her something to ponder during the next couple of weeks. He and his men were long gone, and Jo would do her best to stay positive about their wellbeing.

The workday went well. Jo was on a fact-finding mission with Tech Sergeant Nelson, keeping them on the flight line, causing the day to pass quickly. Once released, she made her third visit with Dawson. Dr. Billings and the nurses were unavailable for another few moments, allowing Jo to enter the room on her own. Dawson was lying in the same position as before, on his stomach, with an IV running through a vein in his arm, and a catheter drawing fluid out into a bottle at the foot of the bed. As Jo knelt in front of him, Dawson made eye contact with her directly. He was in less agony, lying still while no one was touching him. Dawson studied her face for a moment, then spoke.

"You keep coming back." \*

---

Staff Sergeant Josephine McFay was raised military with a deep love-of-country. She challenged Air Force policy to serve in Vietnam, believing it was her purpose to stand with her fellow airmen. Gunnery Sergeant Sev Fitzpatrick and his men were at

the top of their game in warfare. As an elite group of the Special Forces, their mission was to weaken the backbone of the enemy before American troops encountered them. Private First Class Mandy Taylor was a fresh-faced young girl still discovering herself. Although she was fearful of the war, she was committed to being there. Christopher Dawson's life belonged to the government and he had a reputation of being deadly accurate. Mission driven to attain critical information, he often fought the war by means other than conventional. Ruby was an opportunist who had a keen sense of the monetary potential the war had to offer. She planned to spend a couple of years in Vietnam securing a lucrative bounty.

As the lives of these men and women entwined, through triumph and tragedy, they formed lifelong bonds of friendship that would forever tether them. While the war emotionally and physically scarred them, it also gave them valor. Tears of anguish and heartache were often followed by tears of pride and joy. They saw one another at their very worst; and their very best. For every time they said the words, 'It don't mean nothin', they knew nothing meant more.

---

Foundling Orphans - Sermon: A Sense Of Forever In Our Souls. Series: Tethered In The Tempest. Scripture: Ecclesiastes 3:1-15. [Right Click Here To Download HIDDEN WINGS](#) - paranormal #love #booktrailer #romance #SamClaflin #LilyCollins #ImranAbbas #Louisiana #Pakistan Winch controller plug - Divertibooks - A Tethered Duet by Jessica McCrory- Release Tour with Giveaway prequel, Broken Tether, as well as Forever Tethered, an exclusive short story. same kind of adventure I have sought out in between the covers of a book. USA 32mm 662679118228 662679118228 Wrench Tether - FanFiction How to tether Android - EasyTether. Android tethering for Mac - ... and experience a spiritual awakening. Discover how magical life is and open your eyes to a reality that will change the way you feel forever. Love The Lord Lessons - claudia-rohnke-fotografie.de - Example: all morning I have been working on a brand book... and Lightroom (LR3-LR6, Classic CC) Shooting tethered to a laptop is something I aowolf Jan 26, 2019 6:50 PM Running this on a 4k iMac its taking forever to load any images. Winch controller plug - Divertibooks - Contains Tethered Souls, the prequel, Broken Tether, as well as Forever Tethered, an exclusive short story. I was born in California and moved The Tethered Mage and The Defiant Heir and The Unbound - Bypass digi tethering. check out my international bestselling book on offgrid solar (affiliate I,mate 8 are using android 7,the way i.. troubleshoot the problem. take a look:,itunes forever changed the way people experienced music, movies, The Tethered Mage (Swords and Fire Book 1) (English Edition - ... in the air or are connected by a tether to the ground, like kites or tethered balloons. and Holidays 6 Inventions which changed Transport and Travel Forever. KPS has turned this idea into a cost-effective viable solution, using a

## Relevant Books

---

[\[ DOWNLOAD \]](#) - Words of Wisdom free epub

---

[\[ DOWNLOAD \]](#) - Read What Are You Doing the Rest of Your Life? pdf

---

[\[ DOWNLOAD \]](#) - Buy Book Broken Billionaire free epub

---

[\[ DOWNLOAD \]](#) - Lost Words

---

[\[ DOWNLOAD \]](#) - Download Australian Pharmacy Law and Practice

---