

"Complex, captivating characters. A timely, dynamic plot. Gorgeous prose.  
Kristin Hannah's *Home Front* is a deeply emotional must-read  
you won't soon forget." —*USA Today*

# home front

A NOVEL

THE #1 *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLER

KRISTIN  
HANNAH

AUTHOR OF *NIGHT ROAD* AND *FIREFLY LANE*





*Home Front*



Kristin  
Hannah

St. Martin's Press  
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*This book is dedicated to the brave men and women of the American armed services and their families, who sacrifice so much to protect and preserve our way of life.*

*And, as always, to my own heroes, Benjamin and Tucker.*

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# *Part One*

## From a Distance

There are some things you learn best in calm, some in storm.

—WILLA CATHER



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# Prologue

1982

The way she saw it, some families were like well-tended parks, with pretty daffodil borders and big sprawling trees that offered respite from the summer sun. Others—and this she knew firsthand—were battlefields, bloody and dark, littered with shrapnel and body parts.

She might only be seventeen, but Jolene Larsen already knew about war. She'd grown up in the midst of a marriage gone bad.

Valentine's Day was the worst. The mood at home was always precarious, but on this day when the television ran ads for flowers and chocolates and red foil hearts, love became a weapon in her parents' careless hands. It started with their drinking, of course. Always. Glasses full of bourbon, refilled again and again. That was the beginning. Then came the screaming and the crying, the throwing of things. For years, Jolene had asked her mother why they didn't just leave him—her father—and steal away the night. Her mother's answer was always the same: *I can't. I love him.* Sometimes she would cry. When she said the terrible words, sometimes her bitterness would be palpable, but in the end it didn't matter how she sounded; what mattered was the tragic truth of her one-sided love.

Downstairs, someone screamed.

*That would be Mom.*

Then came a crash—something big had been thrown against the wall. A door slammed shut. That would be Dad.

He had left the house in a fury (was there any other way?), slamming the door shut behind him. He'd be back tomorrow or the next day, whenever he ran out of money. He'd come slinking into the kitchen, sober and remorseful, stinking of booze and cigarettes. Mom would rush to him, sobbing, and take him in her arms. *Oh, Ralph ... you scared me ... I'm sorry, give me one more chance, please, you know I love you so much ...*

Jolene made her way through her steeply pitched bedroom, ducking so she wouldn't konk her head on one of the rough timbered support beams. There was only one light in here, a bulb that hung from the rafters like the last tooth in an old man's mouth, loose and unreliable.

She opened the door, listening.

Was it over?

She crept down the narrow staircase, hearing the risers creak beneath her weight. She found her mother in the living room, sitting slumped on the sofa, a lit Camel cigarette dangling from her mouth. Ash rained downward, peppering her lap. Scattered across the floor were remnants of the fight: bottles and ashtrays and broken bits of glass.

Even a few years ago, Jolene would have tried to make her mother feel better. But too many nights like this had hardened her. Now she was impatient with all of it, wearied by the drama of her parents' marriage. Nothing ever changed, and Jolene was the one who had to clean up every mess. She picked her way through the broken pieces of glass and knelt at her mother's side.

"Let me have that," she said tiredly, taking the burning cigarette, putting it out in the ashtray on the floor beside her.

Mom looked up, sad-eyed, her cheeks streaked with tears. "How will I live without him?"

~~As if in answer, the back door cracked open. Cold night air swept into the room, bringing with it the~~  
smell of rain and pine trees.

"He's back!" Mom pushed Jolene aside and ran for the kitchen.

*I love you, baby, I'm sorry,* Jolene heard her mother say.

Jolene righted herself slowly and turned. Her parents were locked in one of those movie embraces the kind reserved for lovers reuniting after a war. Her mother clung to him desperately, grabbing the plaid wool of his shirt.

Her father swayed drunkenly, as if held up by her alone, but that was impossible. He was a huge man, tall and broad, with hands like turkey platters; Mom was as frail and white as an eggshell. It was from him that Jolene got her height.

"You can't leave me," her mother sobbed, slurring the words.

Her father looked away. For a split second, Jolene saw the pain in his eyes—pain, and worse, shame and loss and regret.

"I need a drink," he said in a voice roughened by years of smoking unfiltered cigarettes.

He took her mother's hand, dragged her through the kitchen. Looking dazed but grinning foolishly, her mother stumbled along behind him, heedless of the fact that she was barefooted.

It wasn't until he opened the back door that Jolene got it. "No!" she yelled, scrambling to her feet, running after them.

Outside, the February night was cold and dark. Rain hammered the roof and ran in rivulets over the edges of the eaves. Her father's leased logging truck, the only thing he really cared about, sat like some huge black insect in the driveway. She ran out onto the wooden porch, tripping over a chain saw, righting herself.

Her mother paused at the car's open passenger door, looked at her. Rain plastered the hair across her hollow cheeks, made her mascara run. She lifted a hand, pale and shaking, and waved.

"Get out of the rain, Karen," her father yelled, and her mother complied instantly. In a second, both doors slammed shut. The car backed up, turned onto the road, drove away.

And Jolene was alone again.

*Four months,* she thought dully. Only four more months and she would graduate from high school and be able to leave home.

Home. *Whatever that meant.*

But what would she do? Where would she go? There was no money for college, and what money Jolene saved from work her parents invariably found and "borrowed." She didn't even have enough for first month's rent.

She didn't know how long she stood there, thinking, worrying, watching rain turn the driveway to mud; all she really knew was that at some point she became aware of an impossible, unearthly flash of color in the night.

Red. The color of blood and fire and loss.

When the police car pulled up into her yard, she wasn't surprised. What surprised her was how she felt, hearing that her parents were dead.

What surprised her was how hard she cried.



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# One

April 2005

On her forty-first birthday, as on every other day, Jolene Zarkades woke before the dawn. Careful not to disturb her sleeping husband, she climbed out of bed, dressed in her running clothes, pulled her long blond hair into a ponytail, and went outside.

It was a beautiful, blue-skied spring day. The plum trees that lined her driveway were in full bloom. Tiny pink blossoms floated across the green, green field. Across the street, the Sound was a deep and vibrant blue. The soaring, snow-covered Olympic mountains rose majestically into the sky.

Perfect visibility.

She ran along the beach road for exactly three and a half miles and then turned for home. By the time she returned to her driveway, she was red-faced and breathing hard. On her porch, she picked her way past the mismatched wood and wicker furniture and went into the house, where the rich, tantalizing scent of French roast coffee mingled with the acrid tinge of wood smoke.

The first thing she did was to turn on the TV in the kitchen; it was already set on CNN. As she poured her coffee, she waited impatiently for news on the Iraq war.

No heavy fighting was being reported this morning. No soldiers—or friends—had been killed in the night.

“Thank God,” she said. Taking her coffee, she went upstairs, walking past her daughters’ bedrooms and toward her own. It was still early. Maybe she would wake Michael with a long, slow kiss. A invitation.

How long had it been since they made love in the morning? How long since they’d made love at all? She couldn’t remember. Her birthday seemed a perfect day to change all that. She opened the door. “Michael?”

Their king-sized bed was empty. Unmade. Michael’s black tee shirt—the one he slept in—lay in a rumpled heap on the floor. She picked it up and folded it in precise thirds and put it away. “Michael?” she said again, opening the bathroom door. Steam billowed out, clouded her view.

Everything was white—tile, toilet, countertops. The glass shower door was open, revealing the empty tile interior. A damp towel had been thrown carelessly across the tub to dry. Moisture beaded the mirror above the sink.

He must be downstairs already, probably in his office. Or maybe he was planning a little birthday surprise. That was the kind of thing he used to do ...

After a quick shower, she brushed out her long wet hair, then twisted it into a knot at the base of her neck as she stared into the mirror. Her face—like everything about her—was strong and angular: she had high cheekbones and heavy brown brows that accentuated wide-set green eyes and a mouth that was just the slightest bit too big. Most women her age wore makeup and colored their hair, but Jolene didn’t have time for any of that. She was fine with the ash-gold blond hair that darkened a shade or two every year and the small collection of lines that had begun to pleat the corners of her eyes.

She put on her flight suit and went to wake up the girls, but their rooms were empty, too.

They were already in the kitchen. Her twelve-year-old daughter, Betsy, was helping her four-year-old sister, Lulu, up to the table. Jolene kissed Lulu’s plump pink cheek.

“Happy birthday, Mom,” they said together.

Jolene felt a sudden, burning love for these girls and her life. She knew how rare such moments were. How could she not, raised the way she’d been? She turned to her daughters, smiling—beaming really. “Thanks, girls. It’s a beautiful day to turn forty-one.”

“That’s so *old*,” Lulu said. “Are you sure you’re that old?”

Laughing, Jolene opened the fridge. “Where’s your dad?”

“He left already,” Betsy said.

Jolene turned. “Really?”

“Really,” Betsy said, watching her closely.

Jolene forced a smile. “He’s probably planning a surprise for me after work. Well. I say we have party after school. Just the three of us. With cake. What do you say?”

“With cake!” Lulu yelled, clapping her plump hands together.

Jolene could let herself be upset about Michael’s forgetfulness, but what would be the point? Happiness was a choice she knew how to make. She chose not to think about the things that bothered her; that way, they disappeared. Besides, Michael’s dedication to work was one of the things she admired most about him.

“Mommy, Mommy, play patty-cake!” Lulu cried, bouncing in her seat.

Jolene looked down at her youngest. “Someone loves the word cake.”

Lulu raised her hand. “I do. Me!”

Jolene sat down next to Lulu and held out her hands. Her daughter immediately smacked her palm against Jolene’s. “Patty-cake, patty-cake, baker’s man, make me a…” Jolene paused, watching Lulu’s face light up with expectation.

“Pool!” Lulu said.

“Make me a pool as fast you can. Dig it and scrape it and fill it with blue, and I’ll go swimming with my Lu-lu.” Jolene gave her daughter one last pat of the hands and then got up to make breakfast. “Go get dressed, Betsy. We leave in thirty minutes.”

Precisely on time, Jolene ushered the girls into the car. She drove Lulu to preschool, dropped her off with a fierce kiss, and then drove to the middle school, which sat on the knoll of a huge, grassy hillside. Pulling into the carpool lane, she slowed and came to a stop.

“Do *not* get out of the car,” Betsy said sharply from the shadows of the backseat. “You’re wearing your *uniform*.”

“I guess I don’t get a pass on my birthday.” Jolene glanced at her daughter in the rearview mirror. In the past few months, her lovable, sweet-tempered tomboy had morphed into this hormonal preteen for whom everything was a potential embarrassment—especially a mom who was not sufficiently like the other moms. “Wednesday is career day,” she reminded her.

Betsy groaned. “Do you *have* to come?”

“Your teacher invited me. I promise not to drool or spit.”

“That is so not funny. No one cool has a mom in the military. You won’t wear your flight suit, will you?”

“It’s what I do, Betsy. I think you’d—”

“Whatever.” Betsy grabbed up her heavy backpack—not the right one, apparently; yesterday she demanded a new one—and climbed out of the car and rushed headlong toward the two girls standing beneath the flagpole. They were what mattered to Betsy these days, those girls, Sierra and Zoe. Betsy cared desperately about fitting in with them. Apparently, a mother who flew helicopters for the Army National Guard was *très* embarrassing.

As Betsy approached her old friends, they pointedly ignored her, turning their backs on her in unison, like a school of fish darting away from danger.

Jolene tightened her grip on the steering wheel, cursing under her breath.

~~Betsy looked crestfallen, embarrassed. Her shoulders fell, her chin dropped. She backed away quickly, as if to pretend she'd never really run up to her once-best friends in the first place. Alone, she walked into the school building.~~

Jolene sat there so long someone honked at her. She felt her daughter's pain keenly. If there was one thing Jolene understood, it was rejection. Hadn't she waited forever for her own parents to love her? She had to teach Betsy to be strong, to choose happiness. No one could hurt you if you didn't let them. A good offense was the best defense.

Finally, she drove away. Bypassing the town's morning traffic, she took the back roads down to Liberty Bay. At the driveway next to her own, she turned in, drove up to the neighboring house—small white manufactured home tucked next to a car-repair shop—and honked the horn.

Her best friend, Tami Flynn, came out of house, already dressed in her flight suit, with her long black hair coiled into a severe twist. Jolene would swear that not a single wrinkle creased the coffee-colored planes of Tami's broad face. Tami swore it was because of her Native American heritage.

Tami was the sister Jolene had never had. They'd been teenagers when they met—a pair of eighteen-year-old girls who had joined the army because they didn't know what else to do with their lives. Both had qualified for the high school to flight school helicopter-pilot training program.

A passion for flying had brought them together; a shared outlook on life had created a friendship so strong it never wavered. They'd spent ten years in the army together and then moved over to the Guard when marriage—and motherhood—made active duty difficult. Four years after Jolene and Michael moved into the house on Liberty Bay, Tami and Carl had bought the land next door.

Tami and Jolene had even gotten pregnant at the same time, sharing that magical nine months holding each other's fears in tender hands. Their husbands had nothing in common, so they hadn't become one of those best friends who traveled together with their families, but that was okay with Jolene. What mattered most was that she and Tami were always there for each other. And they were.

*I've got your six* literally meant that a helicopter was behind you, flying in the six o'clock position. What it really meant was *I'm here for you. I've got your back*. That was what Jolene had found in the army, and in the Guard, and in Tami. *I've got your six*.

The Guard had given them the best of both worlds—they got to be full-time moms who still served their country and stayed in the military and flew helicopters. They flew together at least two mornings a week, as well as during their drill weekends. It was the best part-time job on the planet.

Tami climbed into the passenger seat and slammed the door shut. "Happy birthday, flygirl."

"Thanks." Jolene grinned. "My day, my music." She cranked up the volume on the CD player and Prince's "Purple Rain" blared through the speakers.

They talked all the way to Tacoma, about everything and nothing; when they weren't talking, they were singing the songs of their youth—Prince, Madonna, Michael Jackson. They passed Cam Murray, home to the Guard, and drove onto Fort Lewis, where the Guard's aircraft were housed.

In the locker room, Jolene retrieved the heavy flight bag full of survival equipment. Slinging it over her shoulder, she followed Tami to the desk, confirmed her additional flight-training period, or AFTI, signed up to be paid; and then headed out to the tarmac, putting on her helmet as she walked.

The crew was already there, readying the Black Hawk for flight. The helicopter looked like a huge bird of prey against the clear blue sky. She nodded to the crew chief, did a quick preflight check of her aircraft, conducted a crew briefing, and then climbed into the left side of the cockpit and took her seat. Tami climbed into the right seat and put on her helmet.

"Overhead switches and circuit breakers, check," Jolene said, powering up the helicopter. The engines roared to life; the huge rotor blades began to move, slowly at first and then rotating fast, with a high-pitched whine.

“Guard ops. Raptor eight-nine, log us off,” Jolene said into her mic. Then she switched frequencies. “Tower. Raptor eight-nine, ready for departure.”

She began the exquisite balancing act it took to get a helicopter airborne. The aircraft climbed slowly into the air. She worked the controls expertly—her hands and feet in constant motion. The plane rose into the blue and cloudless sky, where heaven was all around her. Far below, the flowering trees were a spectacular palette of color. A rush of pure adrenaline coursed through her. God, she loved it up here.

“I hear it’s your birthday, Chief,” said the crew chief, through the comm.

“Damn right it is,” Tami said, grinning. “Why do you think she has the controls?”

Jolene grinned at her best friend, loving this feeling, needing it like she needed air to breathe. She didn’t care about getting older or getting wrinkles or slowing down. “Forty-one. I can’t think of a better way to spend it.”

\* \* \*

The small town of Poulsbo, Washington, sat like a pretty little girl along the shores of Liberty Bay. The original settlers had chosen this area because it reminded them of their Nordic homeland, with its cool blue waters, soaring mountains, and lush green hillsides. Years later, those same founding fathers had begun to build their shops along Front Street, embellishing them with Scandinavian touches. There were cutwork rooflines and scrolled decorations everywhere.

According to Zarkades family legend, the decorations had spoken to Michael’s mother instantly, who swore that once she walked down Front Street, she knew where she wanted to live. Dozens of quaint stores—including the one his mother owned—sold beautiful, handcrafted knickknacks for tourists.

It was less than ten miles from downtown Seattle, as a crow flew, although those few miles created a pain-in-the-ass commute. Sometime in the past few years, Michael had stopped seeing the Norwegian cuteness of the town and began to notice instead the long and winding drive from his house to the ferry terminal on Bainbridge Island and the stop-and-go midweek traffic.

There were two routes from Poulsbo to Seattle—over land and over water. The drive took two hours. The ferry ride was a thirty-five-minute crossing from the shores of Bainbridge Island to the terminal on Seattle’s wharf.

The problem with the ferry was the wait time. To drive your car onboard, you had to be in line early. In the summer, he often rode his bike to work; on rainy days like today—which were so plentiful in the Northwest—he drove. And this had been an especially long winter and a wet spring. Day after gray day, he sat in his Lexus in the parking lot, watching daylight crawl along the waxy surface of the Sound. Then he drove aboard, parked in the bowels of the boat, and went upstairs.

Today, Michael sat on the port side of the boat at a small formica table, with his work spread out in front of him; the Woerner deposition. Post-it notes ran like yellow piano keys along the edges, each one highlighting a statement of questionable veracity made by his client.

Lies. Michael sighed at the thought of undoing the damage. His idealism, once so shiny and bright, had been dulled by years of defending the guilty.

In the past, he would have talked to his dad about it, and his father would have put it all in perspective, reminding Michael that their job made a difference.

*We are the last bastion, Michael, you know that—the champions of freedom. Don’t let the bad guys break you. We protect the innocent by protecting the guilty. That’s how it works.*

*I could use a few more innocents, Dad.*

*Couldn’t we all? We’re all waiting for it ... that case, the one that matters. We know, more than most, how it feels to save someone’s life. To make a difference. That’s what we do, Michael. Don’t lose*

*the faith.*

He looked at the empty seat across from him.

It had been eleven months now that he'd ridden to work alone. One day his father had been beside him, hale and hearty and talking about the law he loved, and then he'd been sick. Dying.

He and his father had been partners for almost twenty years, working side by side, and losing his father had shaken Michael deeply. He grieved for the time they'd lost; most of all, he felt alone in a way that was new. The loss made him look at his own life, too, and he didn't like what he saw.

Until his father's death, Michael had always felt lucky, happy; now, he didn't.

He wanted to talk to someone about all this, share his loss. But with whom? He couldn't talk to his wife about it. Not Jolene, who believed that happiness was a choice to be made and a smile was a frown turned upside down. Her turbulent, ugly childhood had left her impatient with people who couldn't choose to be happy. Lately, it got on his nerves, all her buoyant it-will-get-better platitudes. Because she'd lost her parents, she thought she understood grief, but she had no idea how it felt to be drowning. How could she? She was Teflon strong.

He tapped his pen on the table and glanced out the window. The Sound was gunmetal gray today, desolate looking, mysterious. A seagull floated past on a current of invisible air, seemingly in suspended animation.

He shouldn't have given in to Jolene, all those years ago, when she'd begged for the house on Liberty Bay. He'd told her he didn't want to live so far from the city—or that close to his parents, but in the end he'd given in, swayed by her pretty pleas and the solid argument that they'd need his mother's help in babysitting. But if he hadn't given in, if he hadn't lost the where-we-live argument, he wouldn't be sitting here on the ferry every day, missing the man who used to meet him here ...

As the ferry slowed, Michael got up and collected his papers, putting the deposition back in the black lambskin briefcase. He hadn't even looked at it. Merging into the crowd, he made his way down the stairs to the car deck. In minutes, he was driving off the ferry and pulling up to the Smith Tower, once the tallest building west of New York and now an aging, gothic footnote to a city on the rise.

At Zarkades, Antham, and Zarkades, on the ninth floor, everything was old—floors, windows in need of repair, too many layers of paint—but, like the building itself, there was history here, and beauty. A wall of windows overlooked Elliott Bay and the great orange cranes that loaded containers onto tankers. Some of the biggest and most important criminal trials in the past twenty years had been defended by Theo Zarkades, from these very offices. At gatherings of the bar association, other lawyers still spoke of his father's ability to persuade a jury with something close to awe.

"Hey, Michael," the receptionist said, smiling up at him.

He waved and kept walking, past the earnest paralegals, tired legal secretaries, and ambitious young associates. Everyone smiled at him, and he smiled back. At the corner office—previously his father's and now his—he stopped to talk to his secretary. "Good morning, Ann."

"Good morning, Michael. Bill Antham wanted to see you."

"Okay. Tell him I'm in."

"You want some coffee?"

"Yes, thanks."

He went into his office, the largest one in the firm. A huge window looked out over Elliott Bay; that was really the star of the room, the view. Other than that, the office was ordinary—bookcases filled with law books, a wooden floor scarred by decades of wear, a pair of overstuffed chairs, a black suede sofa. A single family photo sat next to his computer, the only personal touch in the space.

He tossed his briefcase onto the desk and went to the window, staring out at the city his father had loved. In the glass, he saw a ghostly image of himself—wavy black hair, strong, squared jaw, dark eyes. The image of his father as a younger man. But had his father ever felt so tired and drained?

Behind him, there was a knock, and then the door opened. In walked Bill Antham, the only other partner in the firm, once his father's best friend. In the months since Dad's death, Bill had aged, to maybe they all had.

"Hey, Michael," he said, limping forward, reminding Michael with each step that he was well past retirement age. In the last year, he'd gotten two new knees.

"Have a seat, Bill," Michael said, indicating the chair closest to the desk.

"Thanks." He sat down. "I need a favor."

Michael returned to his desk. "Sure, Bill. What can I do for you?"

"I was in court yesterday, and I got tapped by Judge Runyon."

Michael sighed and sat down. It was common for criminal defense attorneys to be assigned cases by the court—it was the old *if you require an attorney and cannot afford one* bit. Judges often assigned a case to whatever lawyer happened to be there when it came up. "What's the case?"

"A man killed his wife. Allegedly. He barricaded himself in his house and shot her in the head. SWAT team dragged him out before he could kill himself. TV filmed a bunch of it."

A guilty client who had been caught on TV. Perfect. "And you want me to handle the case for you?"

"I wouldn't ask ... but Nancy and I are leaving for Mexico in two weeks."

"Of course," Michael said. "No problem."

Bill's gaze moved around the room. "I still expect to find him in here," he said softly.

"Yeah," Michael said.

They looked at each other for a moment, both remembering the man who had made such an impact on their lives. Then Bill stood, thanked Michael again, and left.

After that, Michael dove into his work, letting it consume him. He spent hours buried in depositions and police reports and briefs. He had always had a strong work ethic and an even stronger sense of duty. In the rising tide of grief, work had become his life ring.

At three o'clock, Ann buzzed him on the intercom. "Michael? Jolene is on line one."

"Thanks, Ann."

"You did remember that it's her birthday today, right?"

*Shit.*

He pushed back from his desk and grabbed the phone. "Hey, Jo. Happy birthday."

"Thanks."

She didn't scold him for forgetting, although she knew he had. Jolene had the tightest grip on the emotions of anyone he'd ever seen, and she never *ever* let herself get mad. He sometimes wondered if a good fight would help their marriage, but it took two to fight. "I'll make it up to you. How about dinner at that place above the marina? The new place?"

Before she could offer some resistance (which she always did if something wasn't her idea), Michael said, "Betsy is old enough to watch Lulu for two hours. We'll only be a mile away from home."

It was an argument that had been going on for almost a year now. Michael thought a twelve-year-old could babysit; Jolene disagreed. As with everything in their life, Jolene's vote was the one that counted. He was used to it ... and sick of it.

"I know how busy you are with the Woerner case," she said. "How about if I feed the girls early and settle them upstairs with a movie and then make us a nice dinner? Or I could pick up takeout from the bistro; we love their food."

"Are you sure?"

"What matters is that we're together," she said easily.

"Okay," Michael said. "I'll be home by eight."

Before he hung up the phone, he was thinking of something else.

That evening, Jolene chose her clothes carefully. She and Michael hadn't had dinner alone, just the two of them, in forever, and she wanted this evening to be perfect. Romantic. After feeding the girl, she bathed in scented water, shaved, slathered her skin with a citrus-scented lotion, and then slipped into a pair of comfortable jeans and a black boatnecked sweater.

Downstairs, she found Betsy seated at the coffee table, doing homework, while Lulu was on the sofa, wrapped up in her favorite yellow "blankee," watching *The Little Mermaid*. The remnants of their impromptu birthday party were still on the dining room table—the cake, with its candle hole, the pink journal Betsy had given Jolene; the sparkly barrette that had been Lulu's gift; and a pile of wrinkled paper and discarded bows.

"She's not the boss of me," Lulu said when Jolene walked into the room.

"Tell her to shut up, Mom. I'm trying to do homework," Betsy responded. "She's singing too loud." And it started. Their voices climbed up and over each other, rising in volume.

"She is *not* the boss of me," Lulu said again, more adamantly. "Tell her."

Betsy rolled her eyes and left the room, stomping up the stairs.

Jolene felt a wave of exhaustion. She hadn't known how *tiring* it could be to parent a preteen. How much eye rolling could one girl do? If Jolene had tried that, her father would have smacked her across the room.

Lulu ran over to the toy box in the corner of the room and rummaged around inside it. Finding the kitten-ears headband that had been a part of last year's Halloween costume, she put it on and turned around.

Jolene couldn't help smiling. There stood her four-year-old daughter, wearing gray cat ears that were beginning to look worn in places, with her hands on her hips. The sharp little gray triangle framed Lulu's flushed face and made her look even more elfin than usual. For no reason that anyone could explain, Lulu thought she was invisible when she wore the headband. She made a mewling sound.

Jolene frowned dramatically and looked around. "Oh, no ... what happened to my Lucy Lou? Where did she go?" She made a great show of looking around the room, behind the television, under the overstuffed yellow chair, behind the door.

"Here I am, Mommy!" Lulu said with a flourish, giggling.

"There you are," Jolene said with a sigh. "I was worried." She picked up Lulu and carried her upstairs. It took Lulu forever to brush her teeth and get into her pajamas, and Jolene waited patiently, knowing her youngest had a strong independent streak. When Lulu was finally ready, Jolene climbed into bed beside her, pulled her close, and reached for *Where the Wild Things Are*. By the time she said "the end," Lulu was almost asleep.

She kissed Lulu's cheek. "'Night, Kitten."

"'Night, Mommy," Lulu murmured sleepily.

Then Jolene walked down the hall to Betsy's room, knocked, and went inside.

Betsy was sitting up in bed, with her social studies book open in her lap. Her corn silk blond hair fell in fusilli curls along her bare, skinny arms. Someday Betsy would prize her porcelain skin and blond hair and brown eyes, but not now, when straight hair was all the rage and pimples had ruined her complexion.

Jolene went to her daughter's bed and sat down on the edge. "You could be nicer to your sister."

"She's a pain."

"So are you." Jolene saw how Betsy's eyes widened, and she smiled gently. "And so am I. Families are like that. And besides, I know what this is really about."

"You do?"

"I saw how Sierra and Zoe treated you this morning at school."

"You're always spying on me," she said, but her voice broke.

"I watched you walk into school. That's hardly spying. You three were best friends last year. What happened?"

"Nothing," she said mulishly, pressing her lips together, hiding her braces.

"I can help, you know. I was twelve once, too."

Betsy gave her the you-must-be-crazy look that had become familiar in the last year. "Doubtful."

"Maybe you should hang out with Seth after school tomorrow. Remember how much fun you used to have?"

"Seth's weird. Everyone thinks so."

"Elizabeth Andrea, don't you dare act like a mean girl. Seth Flynn is not weird. He's my best friend's son. So what if he likes to wear his hair long and if he's ... quiet. He's your friend. You should remember that. You might need him one day."

"Whatever."

Jolene sighed. She'd seen this movie before; no matter how often she asked, Betsy wouldn't say anything more. *Whatever* meant *the end*. "Okay." She leaned forward and kissed Betsy's forehead. "I love you to the moon and back."

The words were the slogan of this family, their love distilled into a single sentence. *Say it back to me, Bets.*

Jolene waited a moment longer than she intended and was immediately mad at herself for hoping. Again. Motherhood in the preteen years was a series of paper-cut disappointments. "Okay," she said at last, standing up.

"How come Dad's not home yet? It's your birthday."

"He'll be here any minute. You know how busy he is these days."

"Will he come up to say good night to me?"

"Of course."

Betsy nodded and went back to reading. When Jolene was to the door, she said, "Happy birthday to Mom."

Jolene smiled. "Thanks, Bets. And I love the journal you gave me. It's perfect."

Betsy actually smiled.

Downstairs, Jolene went into the kitchen and put the last of the dishes away. Her dinner—a rich, savory pot of beef short ribs braised in red wine and garlic and thyme—bubbled softly on the stove, scenting the whole house. The girls hadn't loved it, but it was Michael's favorite.

Wrapping a soft pink blanket around her shoulders, she poured herself a glass of soda water and went outside. She sat down in one of the worn bent-twig chairs on the porch and put her bare feet on the weathered coffee table, staring out at the familiar view.

*Home.*

It had begun with meeting Michael.

She remembered it all so clearly.

For days after her parents' deaths, she had waited for *someone* to help her. Police, counselors, teachers. It hadn't taken long for her to realize that in her parents' deaths, as in their lives, she was on her own. On a snowy Wednesday morning, she'd wakened early, ignoring the cold that seeped through



the thin walls of her bedroom, and dressed in her best clothes—a plaid woolen skirt, Shetland sweaters, kneesocks, and penny loafers. A wide blue headband kept the hair out of her eyes.

She took the last of her babysitting money and set off for downtown Seattle. At the legal-aid office she'd met Michael.

His dark good looks and easy smile had literally taken her breath away. She'd followed him to a shabby little office and told him her problem. "I'm seventeen—eighteen in two months. My parents died this week. Car accident. A social worker came by and said I would have to live with foster parents until I turned eighteen. But I don't need anyone. Certainly not some fake family. I can live in my own house until June—that's when the bank is repossessing it—and then I'll be done with high school and I can do ... whatever. Can you make it so I don't need to go to a foster family?"

Michael had studied her closely, his eyes narrowed. "You'd be alone then."

"I *am* alone. It's a fact, not a choice."

When he'd finally said, "I'll help you, Jolene," she'd wanted to cry.

In the next hour, she'd told him a tidied-up version of her life. He'd said something about attorney-client privilege and how she could tell him anything, but she knew better. She'd learned a long time ago to keep the truth secret. When people knew she'd grown up with alcoholic parents, they invariably felt sorry for her. She hated that, hated to be pitied.

When they were done and the paperwork was filled out, Michael had said, "Come back and see me in a few years, Jolene. I'll take you out to dinner."

It had taken her six years to find her way back to him. By then, she'd been a pilot in the army and he'd been a lawyer in partnership with his father, and they'd had almost nothing in common. But she'd seen something in him that first day, an idealism that spoke deeply to her and a sense of morality that matched her own. Like her, Michael was a hard worker and had a keen sense of duty. True to his word, Michael had taken her out to dinner ... and that had been the beginning.

She smiled at the memory.

In the distance, lights came on along the shore, golden dots that indicated houses in the darkness. Gauzy clouds wafted across the moon; in their absence, it shone more brightly. It was full night now, and dark. She glanced at her watch. Eight thirty.

She felt a pinch of disappointment and pushed it away. Something important must have come up. Life was like that sometimes. Things were rarely perfect. He would show up.

But ...

Lately, it seemed that their differences were more pronounced than the things they shared. Michael had always hated her commitment to the military. She'd left active duty for him and gone into the Guard instead, but that hadn't been good enough for Michael. He didn't want to hear about her flying or her drill weekends or her friends who served. He'd always been antimilitary, but since the war in Iraq had started, his opinions had grown stronger, more negative. Their once-companionable silences had become awkward. It was pretty lonely when you couldn't talk to your husband about the things that mattered to you. Normally, she looked away from these truths, but tonight they were all that occupied the chair beside her.

She got up and went back inside.

8:50.

She opened the heavy yellow pot lid and stared into the meal she'd made. The rich sauce had reduced too far; it looked a little black around the edges. Behind her, the phone rang. She lunged for it. "Hello?"

"Hey, Jo. I'm sorry I'm late."

"Late was an hour ago, Michael. What happened?"

"I'm sorry. What can I say? I got into work and forgot."

“You forgot,” she said, wishing it didn’t hurt.

“I’ll make it up to you.”

She almost said *how?* but what was the point? Why make it worse? He hadn’t meant to hurt her feelings. “Okay.”

“I’ll try to get home quickly, but...”

Jolene was glad they were on the phone; at least she didn’t have to smile. The thought came to her that he hadn’t been trying hard enough lately, that his family—and his wife—seemed not to matter to him. And yet she still loved him as deeply as the day he’d first kissed her, all those years ago.

*Time*, she thought. *It will be okay next week or next month.* He was still grieving over the loss of her father. She just needed to be understanding.

“Happy birthday,” he said.

“Thanks.” She hung up the phone and sat down at the kitchen table. In the shadowy room, decorated with her family photos and mementos and the furniture she had salvaged and restored herself, she felt alone suddenly. All dressed up, sitting in this darkened room. Lonely.

Then there was a knock at the door. Before Jolene even stood up, the kitchen door opened. Tami walked into the house, holding a bottle of champagne. “You’re alone,” she said quietly.

“He got caught up at work,” Jolene said.

“I was afraid of that.” Sadness passed through Tami’s eyes, and Jolene hated how it made her feel. Then Tami smiled. “Well. It’s no good to turn forty-one without an audience,” she said, kicking the door shut behind her. “Besides, I’m dying to know if you’ll start wrinkling up right in front of me, like Gary Oldman in *Dracula*.”

“I am not going to start wrinkling up.”

“You never know.”

“Champagne?” Jolene said, arching one eyebrow.

“That’s for me. *I* don’t have alcoholic parents. You can guzzle soda water, as usual.”

Tami popped the champagne bottle effortlessly, poured herself a glass and headed into the family room, where she plopped down on the overstuffed sofa and raised a glass. “To you, my rapidly aging best friend.”

Jolene followed Tami into the family room. “You’re only a few months younger than I am.”

“We Native Americans don’t age. It’s a scientific fact. Look at my mom. She still gets carded.”

Jolene sat down in an overstuffed chair and curled her bare feet up underneath her.

They looked at each other. What swirled between them then, floating like champagne bubbles, were memories of other nights like this, meals Michael had missed, events he’d been too busy to attend. Jolene often told people, especially Tami, how proud she was of her brilliant, successful husband, and it was all true, but lately he seemed unhappy. His father’s death had capsized him. She knew how unhappy he was, she just didn’t know how to help.

“It must hurt your feelings,” Tami said.

“It hurts,” Jolene said quietly.

“You should talk to him about it, tell him how you feel.”

“What’s the point? Why make him feel worse than he already does? Shit happens, Tami. You know Michael’s work ethic. It’s one of the things I love about him. He never walks away from responsibility.”

“Unless it’s a family obligation,” Tami said softly.

“He’s just really busy right now. Since his father’s death...”

“I know,” Tami said, “and you two don’t talk about that, either. In fact, you don’t talk.”

“We talk.”

Tami gave her an assessing look. “Marriages go through hard times. Sometimes you have to get

there and fight for your love. That's the only way for it to get better."

Jolene couldn't help thinking of her parents, and the way her mother had fought for a man's love and never gotten it. "Look, Tami. Michael and I are fine. We love each other. Now, can we please please talk about something else?"

Tami lifted her half-full glass. "To you, my friend. You look fabulous for being so freakishly old."

"I look fabulous, period."

Tami laughed at that and launched into a funny story about her family.

It was ten forty before they knew it, and Tami put her empty glass down on the table. "I have to go home. I told Carl I'd be home for *Letterman*."

Jolene got to her feet. "Thanks for coming, Tam. I needed it."

Tami hugged her fiercely. Together, they walked to the back door.

Jolene watched her friend cut across the driveway and head toward the adjoining property. At last she closed the door.

In the quiet, she was alone with her thoughts, and she didn't like their company.

\* \* \*

It was midnight when Michael pulled into the garage and parked next to Jolene's SUV. On the seat beside him lay a dozen pink roses bound in cellophane. He'd been on the ferry, already on his way home, when he remembered that Jolene preferred red roses. Of course. Soft and girly wasn't her style. It never had been, not even on that first, sad day when she walked into his life.

She'd been seventeen. A kid, dressed in thrift-store clothes, with her long blond hair a mess and her beautiful green eyes puffy from crying, and yet, with all of that, she'd walked into the legal-aid office with her back straight, clutching a ratty vinyl purse. He'd been an intern then, in his first year of law school.

She had seemed impossibly brave to him, a girl refusing help even in the worst days of her life. He'd fallen a little in love with her right then, enough to ask her to come back and see him when she was older. It had been her boldness that spoke to him from the beginning, the courage she'd worn so easily as that cheap acrylic sweater.

Six years later she'd walked back into his life, an army helicopter pilot, of all things. He'd been young enough to still believe in love at first sight and old enough to know it didn't happen every day. He'd told himself it didn't matter that he was blue state and she was military, that they had nothing in common. He'd felt so loved by her, so adored, that he couldn't breathe. And their lovemaking had been amazing. In sex, as in everything, Jo had been all in.

He picked up the roses and the small Tiffany's box beside it, wondering if the expensive gift would redeem him. She would see that he'd bought it before—that he'd remembered her birthday in time to have her gift engraved—but would that be enough? He'd missed her birthday dinner—forgotten.

It exhausted him, just thinking of the scene that was coming. He would use his charm to make her smile, beg for her forgiveness, and she would grant it with a grace and ease that would make short work of the whole thing, but he would see the hurt in her green eyes, in the way her smile wouldn't quite bloom, and he would know that he'd disappointed her again. He was the bad guy here; there was no doubt about that, and she would remind him of it in a million tiny ways until he could hardly look at her, until he rolled away from her in bed and stared at the wall and imagined a different life.

He got out of the car and went into the house. In the shadowy kitchen, he found a vase and put the roses in it, then carried them up the stairs.

The master bedroom lights were off except for a small, decorative lamp on the desk by the window. He set the flowers on the antique dresser and went into the bathroom, where he undressed and got ready for bed. Climbing in, he pulled the heavy down comforter up to his chest and lay there in the

dark.

~~It used to soothe him, listening to his wife's breathing, but now every sound she made kept him awake.~~

He closed his eyes and hoped for the best, knowing before he even tried that it would be hours before he fell asleep and that, once found, his slumber would be haphazard at best, plagued by dreams of a life unlived, a path unchosen.

When he woke, hours later, he felt as if he hadn't slept at all. Watery light came through the windowpanes, making the sage-colored walls look gray as driftwood. The dark wood floors swallowed whatever sunlight came their way.

He pushed up to his elbows, felt the coverlet fall away from his chest.

Jolene lay awake beside him, her blond hair tangled to one side, her pale face turned slightly toward him.

The hurt was already in her eyes.

"I'm sorry, Jo." He leaned down and kissed her quickly, then drew back. "I'll make it up to you."

"I know. It's just a birthday. Maybe I made too much of it."

He got out of bed and got the Tiffany's box off the dresser and brought it back to her.

It occurred to him that she'd asked for something for her birthday, something special. Not a gift either; that wasn't Jolene's way. She wanted ... something. He couldn't remember what it was, but he saw the slight frown dart across her face as she saw the box; then it was gone, and she smiled up at him.

"Tiffany, huh?" She sat up in bed, positioned her pillows behind her, and then opened the box. Inside, a sparkling platinum and gold watch was curled around a white leather band. A single small diamond took the place of the number twelve.

"It's beautiful." She turned it over, to the back, on which *Jolene, happy 41st* was engraved. "Forty-one," she said. "Wow. Time is going fast. Betsy will be in high school in no time."

He wished she hadn't said that. Time wasn't his friend lately. He was forty-five—middle-aged by any standard. Soon he'd be fifty, and whatever chance he'd had to become another version of himself would be gone. And he still had no idea what that other version would look like; he just knew that the color had gone out of who he was.

He sat down on the bed beside Jolene. He looked at her, needing her suddenly, wanting to feel about her the way he used to. "How did you get through ... their deaths? I mean, really get through it? You had to change your life in an instant."

He saw her flinch, turn slightly away. The question was like a blow that glanced off her shoulder, bruised her. When she looked at him again, she was smiling. "What doesn't kill you makes you stronger. I chose happiness, I guess."

He sighed. More platitudes. Suddenly he was tired again. "I'll make you breakfast in bed, and then maybe we can all go for a bike ride."

She set the watch, still in its box, on the nightstand. "Tonight's my birthday party at Captain Lomand's house. You said you might come."

And there it was: the thing she'd asked for. No wonder he'd forgotten. "I have nothing in common with those people. You know that." He stood up and walked over to the dresser, opening his top drawer.

"I am those people," she said, and just like that they stumbled onto the familiar and rocky terrain. "It's a party for me. You could come just this once."

He turned to face her. "We'll go out to dinner tomorrow night. How's that? All four of us. We'll go to that Italian place you like."

Jolene sighed. He knew she was considering another volley across the net of this old argument. She

wanted him to be a part of her military life—she'd always wanted it, but he couldn't do it, couldn't stand that rigid world of one for all and all for one. "Okay," she finally said. "Thanks for the watch. It's beautiful."

"You're welcome."

They stared at each other. Silence gathered in the air, as bitter and rich as the scent of coffee. There were things to be said, he knew, words that had been withheld too long, hoarded in the dark and spoiled. Once he gave them voice, said what he really felt, there would be no going back.

\* \* \*

Later that afternoon, carrying a foil-covered casserole dish, Tami walked into Jolene's kitchen. "Well?" she asked, kicking the door shut behind her.

Jolene glanced back into the family room, making sure her kids weren't around. "He's really sorry," she said. "He brought me roses and a beautiful watch."

"He's the one that needs the watch," Tami said. At Jolene's look, she shrugged. "Just sayin'."

"Yeah," Jolene said. "I asked him to come to the party. He doesn't want to."

"I'm sorry," Tami said.

Jolene managed a smile. She couldn't help thinking how different life was for Tami. Although Cameron wasn't in the military, he supported Tami fully, came to every event, and often told her how proud he was of her service. Tami's military pictures decorated the walls of their house, were hung alongside Seth's school pictures and shots from their family gatherings. All the pictures of Jolene in uniform were hidden away in drawers somewhere.

She turned away from the disappointed look in Tami's eyes and walked to the bottom of the stairs. "Girls!" she yelled up. "Come on down. It's time for the party."

Lulu came down the stairs, grinning, dragging her blanket. She was dressed for the party in a pink princess dress, complete with a tiara. Betsy appeared at the top of the stairs with her arms crossed.

"Pleeease don't make me go," Betsy pleaded.

"Ticktock, ticktock."

"Dad doesn't have to go."

"He's working," Jolene said. "You're not."

Betsy stomped her foot and spun around. "Fine," she said, marching back to her room.

"I remember how much I wanted a daughter," Tami said, coming up beside Jolene. "Lately I'm not so sure."

"Nothing I do or say is right. Honestly, she breaks a little piece of my heart every day. She swears she'll skip school if I go to career day. Apparently a mother in the military is only slightly less humiliating than one in prison."

Tami leaned against her. "You were raised by wolves, so you don't know this: it's normal. My mom swore she tried to sell me to gypsies at twelve. No takers."

"Is Seth coming today?"

"Of course. He's a boy. They're like puppies; girls are like cats. He just wants to make me happy and play video games. Drama has not yet made an appearance at our house. Although, he does miss Betsy."

Jolene glanced up the stairs. "I hope she's nicer to him."

Tami nodded. "My son is a fashion disaster. He's a geek boy who gets excited to answer a question in biology. Betsy wants to hang with the popular girls. I get it. I do. He's social suicide, and the fact that they used to be best friends does not help her any. Still, *he* doesn't get it. He wonders why she quit skateboarding and doesn't like to look for sand crabs anymore. He still has the birthday poster she made him tacked up on his wall."

Jolene didn't know what to say to that. Before she'd thought of anything, Lulu came to the last step and hurled herself forward. Jolene scooped up her youngest daughter and settled her on her hip, carrying her out to the SUV. After Jolene strapped Lulu into her car seat, she went back into the house. "Come on, Betsy!"

Betsy stomped down the stairs, looking mutinous, with her iPod's earbuds firmly in place. The message was clear: *I'm coming, but I won't like it.* Jolene let the little defiance pass, and followed her daughter to the SUV.

"Where's Seth?" Betsy yelled, opening the passenger door.

Jolene climbed into the driver's seat. "He and Carl are meeting us there. They went fishing this morning. Be nice to him."

Betsy already wasn't listening. She put on her seat belt and started fiddling with her iPod.

"Music?" Jolene asked Tami.

"The queen today, I think. In your honor."

"Madonna it is." Jolene popped a CD into the player and drove off to the familiar beat of "Material Girl."

She and Tami alternately talked and sang; Lulu talked nonstop; Betsy didn't say a word.

In no time, they were pulling into the Gig Harbor subdivision called Ravenwood, which was about forty minutes from the post. The Guard crew came from all over this part of the state—some of the people would have driven hours to get here.

The captain lived in a pretty Wedgwood-blue tract house with white trim and a wraparound porch. Kids ran around the yard, their voices raised into a single, echoing squeal. The house and yard were a reflection of the family—of the man—who lived here. Everything was trimmed and well cared for. Fifty-year-old Captain Benjamin Lomand was one of the best men Jolene had ever met.

Most of the flight crew and their families were already here; Jolene could tell by the multicolored snake of cars parked in the cul-de-sac. Though she couldn't see the backyard from here, she knew that the men—and the female soldiers—would be gathered around the barbecue, holding bottles of domestic beer or cans of Coke, while the wives stood in groups, talking to one another and herding children. Everyone would be smiling.

Jolene pulled up to the side of the driveway and parked. Tami's husband, Carl, and her son, Seth, were standing outside the garage. Waving, they strode down the driveway toward the car. Dressed in baggy jeans and a Seahawks jersey, with a baseball cap down low to conceal his thinning hair, Carl looked like one of those slightly heavy, solidly built men who'd been a high school football star and gone on to work on the line at Boeing. That image was surprisingly accurate, except that he was a mechanic who owned his own garage.

Seth looked nothing like his dad. At twelve, he was a strange and gawky kid, with a pronounced case of acne, eyes that seemed just a little too big for his narrow face, and jet-black hair that fell almost to the middle of his back. Today he was wearing tight Levi's (everyone knew that baggy pants were "in") and a huge Nine Inch Nails tee shirt that accentuated the thinness of his arms.

Tami got out of the car at her husband's approach, taking a foil-covered casserole dish with her.

"And here's the love of my life," Carl said, opening his arms. Tami grinned and handed him the dish. No doubt it was her famous seven-layer dip.

"Happy belated birthday," Carl said to Jolene when she got out of the car.

"Thanks, Carl." She opened the back door and unhooked Lulu's car seat. It was like loosing the Kraken. Lulu skipped off, squealing in delight, looking for someone to play with.

Betsy stepped out of the car slowly, her earbuds still in place. When she saw Seth, her eyes widened in shock at what he was wearing; her mouth compressed. Jolene knew her daughter was terrified to be seen talking to her childhood best friend. So she gave her a little push.

Betsy stumbled forward, almost fell into Seth. He reached out, steadied her, saying, “Whoa...” The single word cracked, came in two volumes.

“I hope no one saw that,” Betsy said, pulling away from him, walking off. Seth stared after her for a long moment, then shrugged and headed over to a place in the grass. There, he sat down cross-legged and played some electronic game.

Jolene made a mental note to talk to Betsy again about being nice to Seth. Honestly, she didn't understand how her daughter could be so mean.

Carrying the foil-covered glass bowl full of coleslaw she'd made, Jolene followed Carl and Tamara into the backyard. They stepped around the corner of the house, and there they were: the flight crew—her friends. They gathered together often, this group that had trained together for so many years. In the “outside” world, they were from all different walks of life—dentists and loggers and teachers and mechanics. But for one weekend a month and two weeks a summer, they were soldiers, training side by side, serving their country with pride. Although Michael would roll his eyes at it, the truth was that Jolene loved these people. They were like her; they'd joined the military because they believed in serving their country, in being patriots, in keeping America safe. They *believed*. There wasn't a member of this crew who wouldn't give his life for Jolene's, and vice versa.

At her arrival, everyone started singing “Happy Birthday.”

Jolene laughed, feeling a rush of pure, sweet joy. There was only the smallest of nicks in her happiness; she wished Michael were here with her. She would have loved to turn to him right now and tell him how much these friendships meant to her. How much this moment meant to her. God knew her birthdays had never mattered to her parents.

When the song ended, she made the rounds, thanking everyone, talking. As she put her coleslaw down on a table already groaning under the weight of salads, casseroles, desserts, and condiments, Owen “Smitty” Smith offered her a glass of lemonade. He was the newest member of their crew—freckle-faced twenty-year-old kid who had joined the Guard to pay for college.

“Thanks, Smitty,” she said.

He grinned, showing off a full set of braces. “Happy birthday, Chief,” he said. “You're the same age as my mom.”

“Thanks,” she said, laughing, and then he was gone, hurrying off to catch up with his late girlfriend.

“Warrant Officer Zarkades,” Jamie Hix said, sidling up to her at the table, tilting a Corona at her. He was the other gunner on her crew. Twenty-nine and newly divorced, Jamie was trying to get joint custody of his eight-year-old son from his ex-wife, Gina. Their recent divorce was becoming increasingly contentious. “Forty-one, huh?”

She plucked a raw carrot from the vegetable tray in front of her, swiping it in ranch dressing. “Happy to believe.”

“Too bad Michael couldn't make it today.”

She wasn't surprised by the sentiment; she knew that most of her friends here wondered why Michael rarely made an appearance at their functions. They were protective of her. They'd all drilled together so long there weren't many secrets between them. “He works hard, and his job is important.”

“Yeah. Gina didn't come around much either.”

She didn't like the comparison between their spouses, however subtle. She was going to say so, but the compassion in Jamie's eyes made her feel suddenly lonely. Saying something—she wasn't quite sure what—she moved away, made her way past the barbecue, where everyone seemed to be laughing and came to the captain's rose garden. She looked down at the bright, tightly coiled pink buds. Pink. Her favorite was red. Michael used to know that.

“Are you okay?” Tami said, sidling up to her, bumping her hip to hip.

“Of course,” she answered too quickly.

~~“I’m here for you,” Tami said softly, as if she knew everything that was turning through Jolene’s mind. “We all are.”~~

“I know,” Jolene said, looking around at the people who mattered so much to her. Everyone she looked at smiled and waved. They loved her, cared about her; these people were as much her family as Michael and the girls. She had so many blessings in her life.

It was okay that Michael wasn’t here; they were married people, not conjoined twins. They didn’t have to share every aspect of their lives.



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