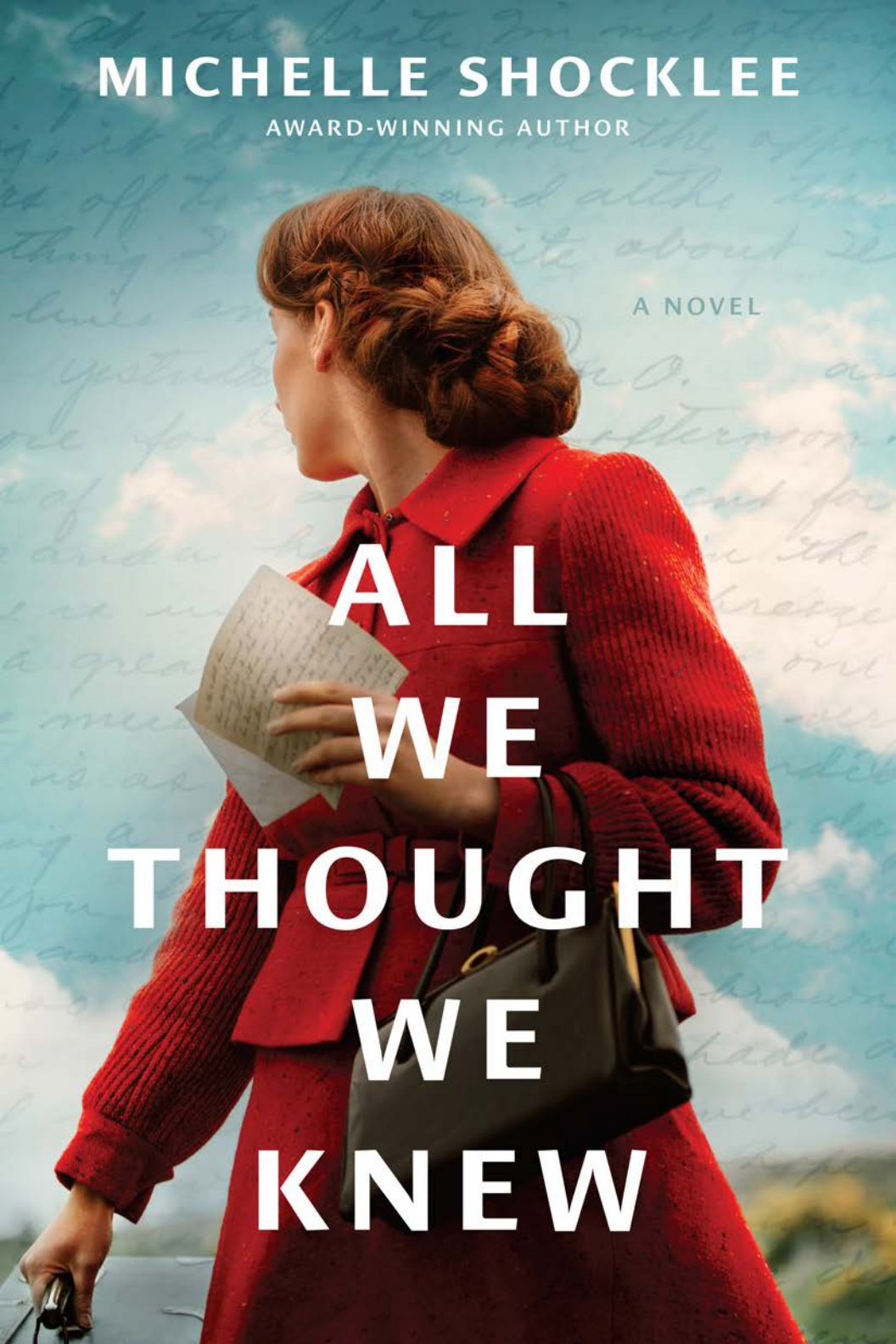


MICHELLE SHOCKLEE

AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR

A NOVEL



ALL
WE
THOUGHT
WE
KNEW

Praise for Michelle Shocklee

Writing with gut honesty and transparency, Michelle Shocklee has crafted a multifaceted story full of secrets and twists and turns that won't let you stop reading even as you don't want the story to end. A master at dual timeline novels, Shocklee delivers yet again. *All We Thought We Knew* is everything you want in this genre . . . and more!

TAMERA ALEXANDER, *USA Today* bestselling author of *A Million Little Choices* and *Colors of Truth*

Michelle Shocklee is a master at capturing the heart of her characters and inviting readers right into their journey. In her latest work, she takes us into the Tennessee and North Dakota camps that imprisoned German internees during World War II. I was fascinated by her research even as I felt deeply the losses of the Taylor family. *All We Thought We Knew* is a poignant story about prejudice, family secrets, and both the sorrow and resilience of lives forever altered by war. A powerful time-slip novel.

MELANIE DOBSON, award-winning author of *The Curator's Daughter* and *Catching the Wind*

Memorable and moving, *All We Thought We Knew* is a novel of ordinary people who are tested by two wars that altered America. Through its pages, we journey with characters whose lives intertwine across decades—from a German medical student imprisoned in a Tennessee internment camp to a young woman facing her brother's death in Vietnam and her mother's devastating diagnosis. Michelle Shocklee has woven a poignant tapestry of revelations and restoration, heartbreak and hope.

AMANDA BARRATT, Christy Award-winning author of *Within These Walls of Sorrow* and *The Warsaw Sisters*

In *All We Thought We Knew*, Michelle Shocklee crafts a compelling family tale focused on faith, forgiveness, and self-discovery. Set in a small Tennessee town in 1969, this intriguing split-time novel will captivate readers and keep them up late, turning pages to discover how Mattie will resolve the issues that have burdened her heart and family for generations.

CARRIE TURANSKY, award-winning author of *The Legacy of Longdale Manor* and *A Token of Love*

All We Thought We Knew is a sweeping tale of generations deeply affected by war and violence and the beautiful way in which God can stitch the pieces back together (sometimes, even using animals to heal the deepest wounds.) Set against the backdrop of two wars and a beautiful horse ranch, this story has so much to grip the reader and hold tight as it wrestles with right and wrong, faith and heartache. This was a lovely, memorable tale with stirring romance to the very end.

NICOLE M. MILLER, author of *Until Our Time Comes: A Novel of World War II Poland*

When you stay up past midnight to finish reading a book, you know it's a winner. Mattie Taylor's journey shines a compelling light on letting go of hurt, healing old wounds, finding a godly purpose, and opening the heart to love. The result is mesmerizing. Michelle Shocklee's brilliance shines again!

PATRICIA RAYBON, Christy Award-winning author of the Annalee Spain Mystery Series, including *Truth Be Told*, on *All We Thought We Knew*

Michelle Shocklee is known by readers as a writer who isn't afraid to delve into the complexities of human relationships. She's brought us another such story in *All We Thought We Knew*. As I read, I found myself empathizing with Mattie as she pieced together the puzzle of her family's history. This deeply emotional novel will capture readers' hearts.

SUSIE FINKBEINER, author of *The All-American* and *All Manner of Things*

A riveting historical romance. . . . Shocklee masterfully weaves mystery and romance in this spellbinding study of the horrors of xenophobia and the bravery of those who stand up to it. This is a timely and expertly crafted tale.

PUBLISHERS WEEKLY on *Count the Nights by Stars*

Captivating. . . . Rich in history and mystery, *Count the Nights by Stars* is a novel that will teach and inspire.

HISTORICAL NOVEL SOCIETY

“That is our mission, dear. To *see* people for who they are beneath the pain. Beneath the sin. To see them as God sees them: a beautiful creation, with plans and purposes only he knows.” This is my favorite quote from *Count the Nights by Stars*, a moving historical fiction that explores darkness as well as the beauty that can emerge from it when the right person takes on the purpose of seeing people for who they are beneath the pain.

T. I. LOWE, author of *Under the Magnolias*

In her latest compelling novel, Michelle Shocklee brings to light the long history and hidden forces of human trafficking as well as our country’s treatment of immigrants, the poor, and those we view as different from ourselves. *Count the Nights by Stars* is a timely reminder that caring for our neighbor is a privilege that requires our time, patience, and resources, as well as the courage to step outside our comfort zones, freeing our hearts to leap in faith.

CATHY GOHLKE, Christy Award-winning author of *Night Bird Calling*

Shocklee’s masterful descriptions thoroughly transport the reader to this unique time and place while bringing to light an issue both historically troubling and heartbreakingly current. *Count the Nights by Stars* is a beautifully written reminder of our need to see—and be seen—by both God and others.

JENNIFER L. WRIGHT, author of *If It Rains*

Experience Tennessee's Centennial Exposition, presented by Michelle Shocklee as a sensuous feast in *Count the Nights by Stars*, then look deeper as two women, one in the late nineteenth century, the other in the 1960s, uncover the lavish celebration's dark, disturbing secret. The story's main setting, the Maxwell House Hotel, is a vivid character itself in its splendid heyday and decline, but it's the heroines who call it home, Audrey and Priscilla, who give this story its true shine, as each seeks to forge a life of purpose, integrity, and love, despite the obstacles she faces. With a mystery that unfolds with irresistible suspense, I predict late nights of page-turning for fans of Michelle Shocklee's books and new readers alike.

LORI BENTON, Christy Award-winning author of *Mountain Laurel* and *Shiloh*

Shocklee beautifully unveils Frankie's past while developing Lorena's awareness of inequality. Though set years ago, this title resonates today, and many struggle with the same issues and questions of racial reconciliation. With its haunting message of forgiveness, this is a must-buy for any Christian or historical fiction collection.

LIBRARY JOURNAL on *Under the Tulip Tree*

Shocklee elevates the redemptive power of remorse and the grace of forgiveness in this moving saga.

PUBLISHERS WEEKLY on *Under the Tulip Tree*

Under the Tulip Tree . . . is an inspiring story of incredible courage in horrific circumstances, of faith, forgiveness, redemption, love, and friendship.

CHRISTIAN NOVEL REVIEW

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PROLOGUE

*November 5, 1968
Western Union Telegram*

*Mr. and Mrs. Kurt Taylor
Delaney Horse Farm
Route 6
Tullahoma, Tennessee*

I deeply regret to confirm that your son Lance Corporal Mark James Taylor died in Vietnam 1 November 1968. He sustained fragmentation wounds to the head and body from hostile mortar fire while participating in a night operation against enemy forces. Please accept on behalf of the United States Marine Corps our sincere sympathy in your bereavement.

*L. F. Chapman Jr.,
General USMC Commandant of the Marine Corps*

ONE

MATTIE

TULLAHOMA, TENNESSEE

NOVEMBER 1969

The first telegram I ever read shattered my world.

The second arrived a year later and stole what little ground I'd gained over those long, mind-numbing months. It was the sole reason I'd sat on this grimy Greyhound bus for three straight days, terrified of what awaited me at the end of the line.

Your mama is dying. She needs you. Come home.

The brief message came from Dad.

It wasn't a request.

Cool evening air carried the stench of diesel fuel through the partially open, grit-coated window as the bus pulled into the depot, two hours late thanks to an accident on the narrow highway outside of Pulaski. A handful of people stood near the terminal building waiting for a loved one or friend, but an anxious sweep

of my eyes confirmed Dad was not among them. Disappointment fought to crowd out the apprehension I'd felt since receiving his telegram. He hadn't included any words of welcome or promise of reunion. The message simply said my mother wasn't long for this world and needed me home.

She needed me home.

Did he?

Passengers gathered their belongings and made their way down the aisle to the exit. I closed my eyes and leaned my forehead against the cool glass, the decision I'd struggled with since boarding in Los Angeles still unresolved.

Do I get off and face everything and everyone I'd tried to forget since Mark's death? Or do I stay in my seat and ride to the next city, effectively slamming the door on ever going home again?

I'd sworn I would never come back to Tullahoma. To Tennessee, for that matter. When I stormed out of the house on a bitter November day one year ago, filled with wrath and grief, I didn't look back. Why would I? Mark was dead. My twin brother had been my world, even when he was on the other side of it fighting a war I refused to condone. Our country was committing a heinous crime keeping soldiers like Mark in Vietnam. How many of our boys had to die before someone put a stop to the madness?

"Miss?"

My eyes flew open.

The gray-haired man who'd taken over the wheel in Little Rock peered down at me from a few paces away. "This is your stop, ain't it?"

I looked past him. The other passengers who'd purchased tickets to Tullahoma were gone. The time to make my decision had arrived.

A glance out the window revealed the sleepy town where I'd grown up. A place I never thought to see again. But I couldn't let Mama down. Not now.

Not again.

“Yes, I’m getting off,” I said. “Let me get my things.”

The driver nodded and returned to his seat.

I stuffed my sweater and a half-eaten ham-and-cheese sandwich into my duffel while the middle-aged woman across the aisle glared at me, irritated my dawdling would make their arrival in Nashville even later. She hadn’t offered a hint of friendliness since boarding in Albuquerque. Her eyes traveled the length of me, taking in my ratty bell-bottom jeans, bohemian style blouse, and long hair in need of a good washing. “*Hippie,*” she’d muttered under her breath when she settled across from me. The bus wasn’t overly crowded, giving most of us a row to ourselves, but from the look of disdain she cast my way when our eyes met, neighborly conversation during the long journey was out of the question. It was just as well. I could tell by looking at her she’d voted for Nixon.

More glares were sent my way as I maneuvered the cramped walkway to the set of steep steps. No one offered to help with my bulky bag, not even the bus driver who ignored me as he studied a dog-eared map. My feet hardly touched the pavement when he closed the door behind me, put the bus in gear, and drove off, leaving me in a cloud of black exhaust.

With a cough and a choice word for the driver, I considered my next move. Dad knew I was coming. I’d made a collect call from Memphis to let him know when the bus was scheduled to arrive. It was the first time I’d spoken to him in twelve months. After a long pause he said he’d be at the depot and hung up.

Except he wasn’t.

I scanned the parking lot. Two sedans and an old pickup truck occupied spaces, but I didn’t recognize any of the vehicles.

Great.

There wasn’t anything to do but go inside and ask to use the office telephone since I’d spent the last of my money on the stale sandwich. For a split second I worried Dad had changed his mind.

Maybe he didn't want me here after all. Or maybe Mama had taken a turn for the worse and—

“Mattie?”

The male voice startled me.

I turned to find a tall, jeans-clad man standing near the pickup truck, the open driver's door evidence he'd been inside all this time. A ball cap sat low on his forehead, the bill shadowing his face, and I couldn't determine his identity. Probably someone from high school, but I had no interest in traveling down memory lane with anyone.

“I'm not who you're looking for,” I said and continued toward the terminal.

He gave a humorless laugh. “Same ol' stubborn Mattie Taylor.”

I faced him again, this time narrowing my eyes to study his features, before my mouth went slack. “Nash?”

“Didn't expect to see me here, did you?”

The question would have been laughable if it weren't for the sharp pain that crashed into my heart with his living, breathing presence in Tullahoma. Last I knew, he was a Marine sniper somewhere in a Vietnam jungle.

How had Nash McCallum returned home from war but Mark hadn't?

Slow steps brought him forward. When our eyes met, I saw the boy who'd been Mark's best friend for as long as I could remember.

“I hadn't heard you'd come home.”

A moment passed before he shrugged. “Yeah, well, they don't let you stay unless you have all your limbs intact.”

His words, low and grim, sent a chill racing down my spine. My eyes darted to take inventory. Clearly he had both legs and both—

My breath stilled.

The left sleeve of his denim shirt was tucked into his waistband. From a distance, I hadn't noticed it was empty.

“I . . . I didn’t know.”

“No, you wouldn’t have.”

Our gazes met again. Was that judgement in his green eyes?

“Your dad was going to pick you up himself, but when we found out the bus was running late he asked me to come.” He reached for the duffel bag. “I’m sure you’re anxious to get home.”

I couldn’t miss the sarcasm in his voice.

Was this a huge mistake? Did I really want to face everyone I’d turned my back on at the lowest moment of our lives? Nash’s cool greeting was probably the warmest I could expect, considering how I’d shaken the dust of Tullahoma from my shoes a year ago.

He tossed my bag in the bed of the truck, then opened the passenger door and waited. I couldn’t see his eyes once again, but I didn’t need to. He and Mark joined the Marines on the same day. They’d boarded the same military transport airplane that took them to Vietnam. He and my brother believed in what they were doing. Mark tolerated my liberal views of the war, but they never sat well with Nash.

Now he was home, and Mark was dead.

I didn’t say another word and climbed onto the bench seat. Nash closed the door and came around to the driver’s side. The engine roared to life, and we headed north. My family’s horse farm was ten miles outside of town, a distance I’d covered a zillion times going to school, to a friend’s house, or to one of Mark’s football games. Today, the miles seemed heavy and endless.

In the fading autumn light, everything out the window seemed oddly foreign yet reassuringly familiar. Homes occupied by people who’d known me my whole life. Pastures dotted with horses or Black Angus cattle. After living in California’s big, overcrowded cities for a year, the serene pastoral sight stirred something deep inside me. A longing I’d ignored since running away from everything and everyone.

A longing I knew could never be satisfied in Tullahoma.

I stole a look at Nash.

I hadn't seen him in four years. He'd been a lanky teenager when he and Mark left for Vietnam. War had filled him out with muscle and a hardness to his boyish features. Although he'd always been on the quiet side, his chilly silence gave evidence he had nothing to say to me. I, however, couldn't help but wonder about his presence at the bus depot.

"Why did Dad ask you to pick me up?"

His fingers tightened on the steering wheel as a car whizzed past on the two-lane road. With a jolt, I remembered he only had one hand to drive with. I hadn't noticed a thing different as he shifted gears and steered us toward the farm.

"I work for your parents," he said, his eyes on the road ahead.

"You work for my folks? But you're a—"

I clamped my mouth shut too late.

"A mechanic." He glanced over at me, then back to the road.

"Not too many people are anxious to hire a one-armed mechanic. Dale wouldn't even give me back my old job at the auto shop."

I didn't know what to say. I'd heard some soldiers returning from the war weren't welcomed home with open arms. Like a lot of people, I didn't believe they should have been in Vietnam in the first place, but I wouldn't've wanted Mark ill-treated had he returned. Since both gloating that I'd been right about the war or speaking words of sympathy over his injury seemed out of place, silence once again became the best response.

We passed the Allyns' neat farm. I wondered if Paula, Mark's girlfriend, still lived there with her parents. Mama hadn't mentioned her in the handful of letters I'd received since leaving Tennessee. I'd stayed in so many different houses, parks, and communes over the last twelve months, receiving mail wasn't easy. But I knew Mama would worry if she didn't hear from me from time to time, so I'd ask a shop owner or friendly neighbor if I could temporarily use their address. That's how Dad's telegram found me.

Nash slowed the truck and turned off the main road onto a private drive. Tires bumped over gravel and potholes, stirring up a trail of dust behind us and a jumble of nerves in the pit of my stomach. As stars began to dot the sky, gentle hills and autumn green pastures awash in the colors of dusk filled my view. I didn't realize I held my breath until it expelled from my lungs when the whitewashed, two-story farmhouse appeared over a rise.

Home.

Yet it wasn't. Not anymore.

Nash stopped the truck next to the house and cut the engine. Neither of us moved to exit the vehicle. I glanced up to the second-floor window over the porch. Mama's. Muted yellow light shone through the curtain.

Is she truly dying?

I'd avoided that question for four days. Refused to think about it. Even went so far as to accuse my father of lying just to get me home. But here in the yard, gazing up at her bedroom window, I could no longer pretend I didn't know what was happening.

"How bad is she?" I didn't look at Nash, not wanting to see the answer in his eyes I feared would cross his lips soon enough.

He didn't respond right away. A heavy sigh came first, then he said, "Doc doesn't think she'll make it to Christmas."

I sucked in a breath at the sobering truth. I covered my mouth to hold in the cry that rose in my throat.

Christmas was only seven weeks away.

"She's a fighter though," he continued. "She didn't want your dad to tell you about the diagnosis. Not until, well, until it was close to the end."

I turned to him. "Why? I would have come home sooner. How long has she been sick?"

"They found cancer three months ago, but it was already advanced."

I sat, stunned. Three months? Didn't cancer take years to get

to the point of death? “Can’t they do something about it? Remove tumors. Treat it somehow.”

“They tried, but like I said, it was already bad. Chemotherapy might buy a couple months at the most, but there were no guarantees. With the cost and traveling to the hospital in Nashville . . .” He paused. “She wouldn’t do it.”

I stared at him. “So she chose to die right before Christmas?”

His expression hardened. “Your mom didn’t choose cancer, Mattie. She’s not choosing death over life. Your father and she discussed their options and settled on the one that seemed best for them.”

Anger began to build inside me. “Just like he discussed *options* with Mark about going to Vietnam. Look how that turned out.”

The muscle in Nash’s jaw ticked. “I know you and Kurt didn’t see eye to eye before you left—”

“And I doubt we will now.”

He shook his head, exasperation in the movement. “Mattie, his wife is dying. He lost his son. You disappeared. Kurt isn’t the same man he was before.”

I scoffed. “I’ve only been gone a year, Nash. No one can change that much.”

He gave me a long study. “You’re wrong about that.” Without another word, he exited the truck and slammed the door behind him. He jerked my bag out of the bed and stomped toward the house.

I blew out a breath.

I sure didn’t need Nash McCallum telling me how to feel about my father. He and his own dad hadn’t gotten along. Mr. McCallum drank too much and couldn’t keep a job. Mark once told me Nash was willing to go to Vietnam just to get away from his old man. I’d adamantly pointed out that wasn’t a good reason to throw away one’s liberty, but Mark said I didn’t get it and walked away.

Heavy dread weighed me down as I climbed from the vehicle and stared at the house. I took in the green shutters, wrap-around porch, and Mama's rosebushes, while bittersweet memories flooded my mind. How many hours had Mark and I spent on that porch, playing games, reading books, or dreaming dreams as we sat side by side on the wooden swing? Mama declared us two peas in a pod, but Mark always called us *wombmates*, making me laugh every time.

The remembrance brought a soul-crushing hollowness with it. A deep void I'd endured since the day the telegram arrived, telling us my brother was never coming home. Nothing I'd tried the past year filled it. Drugs and free love masked it for a while. Yoga and Buddhist meditations hinted at peace, but the emptiness was always there. Dark. Dangerous. Pulling me toward a quick end to the pain.

Flashes from the night I'd given in to the darkness sent a shudder through me. If Clay hadn't come into our room and found me . . .

I took a shaky breath.

Someone peered out the kitchen window. I couldn't tell who it was, but they probably wondered if I intended to stand in the yard all night.

Rusty hinges on the back door squealed, announcing my decision. The warmth of the kitchen enveloped me, the welcome hug I had yet to receive. For a moment I felt like a kid again, coming in from feeding the horses with Mark. Mama would be busy baking cookies, canning vegetables from the garden, or preparing dinner, but she always stopped whatever she was doing to fix us a cup of hot chocolate or Kool-Aid, depending on the season. Mark would tell funny stories, making Mama and me laugh, as we snacked on oatmeal raisin cookies.

But it wasn't Mama who greeted me.

Dad stood near the sink, wearing his usual faded blue-jean overalls, yet I barely recognized him. He'd lost weight, and he looked as though he'd aged ten or more years, with grayer hair and a haggardness to his features I didn't remember. As a young girl, I'd thought him the handsomest man in the world, but this gaunt, worn-down version held little resemblance to his former self. I wasn't sure what to make of it.

"Guess you've had a long day."

The stiff words were apparently all the greeting he intended to offer.

I responded in kind. "Three long days."

After a beat, he nodded toward the stove. "We've already eaten, but there's a plate for you."

I shifted my gaze to see the foil-covered dish he indicated. "Thanks."

We stared at each other in silent standoff, just as we'd done dozens of times in the past. I braced myself for the reprimand he'd undoubtedly been itching to give me for a year. I couldn't blame him. I knew I deserved it. I'd abandoned my family in their greatest sorrow. Despite being right about the war and the need to keep Mark safe, I'd done a ghastly thing by leaving home one week after my brother's funeral. Mama's desperate pleas and anguished wails that followed me out the door would haunt me the rest of my life.

Yet the stern words I anticipated never came. His shoulders drooped, as though a heavy weight bore down on him. As I watched my father seemingly struggle for something to say, Nash's statement about him surfaced. *Kurt isn't the same man he was before*. Had he been right?

"Your mama—" His voice cracked, and he pressed his lips tight while his chin trembled. Several ticks from the wall clock above the sink passed before he spoke again. "Your mama's sleeping. Nash told you what the doctors said?"

I nodded, my emotions too raw and confused for anything more.

After another stretch of silence, he said, "I'm sure you're tired. We'll talk in the morning." He moved toward the door to the hallway. "Your room is just as you left it."

In a blink, I was alone.

I wasn't certain what had just happened, but I was glad for it. My brain couldn't have tolerated a lecture, deserved or not. I was disappointed not to see Mama tonight, but that might be for the best too. The changes in my father's appearance were startling. I could only imagine what I would find in the morning when I saw Mama.

I glanced around the kitchen, with its pale-yellow walls and white cupboards. It was odd being in this house again. I felt more like a stranger rather than someone who once belonged. I didn't know what was expected of me. Without Mama's warm embrace and Mark's joyful presence, everything seemed wrong.

Exhaustion stole over me. Sleep was the only thing I craved. Despite having eaten very little the past four days, I had no appetite. Without lifting the foil to discover what was hidden beneath, I placed the plate in the refrigerator, noting it was well stocked, with milk, cheese, and fresh vegetables. I couldn't recall my father ever going into town to shop for groceries, but clearly his appearance wasn't the only thing that had changed.

I turned out the kitchen light and followed the same path I'd taken to my upstairs bedroom from as far back as I could remember. When I came to the closed door to Mark's room at the base of the stairs, however, my feet refused to go any further.

My heart raced as I stared at the wood, the white paint chipped in places. Flickers of memories sped across my mind. I could almost hear Mark on the other side of the door, strumming his guitar or laughing with Nash as they jawed over the football game they'd played that night.

Without thinking it through, I reached for the doorknob.

Faint light from the hallway illuminated the familiar space. A musty odor met my nose, as though the door hadn't been opened in a long time. After my eyes adjusted to the dimness, I found a handful of football trophies and a half dozen favorite books on a shelf in what looked like an ordinary bedroom. Everything that once declared the space as Mark's—his clothes, his record albums, him—was gone.

I took a tentative step inside. Then another. I had almost convinced myself I could do this when I turned to my right. There on the wall above his desk hung a new, large portrait of Mark in his marine uniform. Crisp, dark jacket. Brilliant white hat. Serious, handsome face. Exactly how he looked the day he walked out of this room four years ago.

My undoing came when my eyes fell on the folded United States flag below it, encased in wood and glass. Two medals lay next to it.

My knees gave way then, and I crumpled to the floor, the pain in my heart as piercing as the day the hateful telegram arrived. As excruciating as the moment I understood, with unbearable clarity, I would never see my brother again.

I lay on the hard floor and wept until I had nothing left inside me.