

PRAISE FOR DEE HENDERSON AND *True Valor*

“With its behind-the-scenes look at military deployments and a setting taken straight from the headlines, *True Valor* will have special appeal for military families and anyone searching for heroes in these uncertain times.”

BOOKPAGE

“The high-tension action scenes make a jarring counterpoint to the ‘easy’ pace of the romance. Ms. Henderson pulls off the seeming dichotomy with dispatch. . . . I honestly believe Ms. Henderson could make a grocery list interesting to read.”

SCRIBES WORLD REVIEWS

“Dee Henderson writes with the skill of an F/A-18 Hornet pilot!”

ROMANTIC TIMES

“Although *True Valor* is a very intense and beautiful relationship drama, it is also an action-packed military thriller with some stunning aerial scenes. Dee Henderson has written a novel that will appeal to both genders—especially those readers who relish a clever interweaving of action, adventure, and romance.”

BOOKBROWSER

“An awesome story about guts, silent glory, and determination. . . . The strong characters and tumultuous plot make this an outstanding story.”

ROMANCE COMMUNICATIONS

“Henderson’s military themes and her strong, career-minded female characters are fairly original for the CBA market, and this latest installment should help build steam for the series.”

PUBLISHERS WEEKLY

READERS' PRAISE

"I served in the U.S. Navy during Desert Storm, and your book is one of the best books I have read in a long time! Can't wait for the next Uncommon Heroes book!" —M. M.

"You have an amazing ability to weave a tale about Christians struggling to make sense out of their lives and the curveballs they're thrown. The Scripture verses used throughout the story are well placed and fit the story masterfully." —K. R.

"Thank you for sharing your gift and love of God." —S. H.



UNCOMMON
HEROES



BOOK TWO

TRUE VALOR

DEE HENDERSON



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True Valor

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GLOSSARY

AAA: AntiAircraft Artillery.

Afterburner: Extra fuel injected into the hot exhaust gas of an aircraft for added thrust.

Angels: Altitude in thousands of feet. "Angels 10" indicates 10,000 feet of altitude.

AWACS: Airborne Warning And Control System. Aircraft fitted with long-range radar that provides tactical and target information to air and ground control units.

Bingo fuel: Not enough fuel to return to a location.

C-130: Air Force transporter for a long haul.

Chaff: A small cloud of thin pieces of metal, such as tinsel, used to confuse enemy radar and divert a radar-guided missile away from the plane.

CO: Commanding Officer.

F/A-18 Hornet: Navy fighter aircraft used for air and ground offensive strikes.

FOD: Foreign Objects on the Deck of an aircraft carrier that can damage planes.

G: Gravitational force through acceleration.

GPS: Global Positioning System. Satellite guidance around earth used to precisely pinpoint aircraft, ships, vehicles, and ground troops.

HARM: High-speed, Anti-Radiation Missile. Missile whose seeker head homes in on radar-emitting sources.

IFF: Identification Friend or Foe. A coded message sent to a target's IFF transponder.

Jink: Erratic flight maneuver(s), dodge, slip, etc.

LSO: Landing Signal Officer.

MiGs: Russian-built fighter jet, used in many nations around the world.

Nugget: A new pilot in the air wing on his first sea cruise.

PJ: Pararescue Jumper.

PT: Physical Training.

EA-6B Prowler: Navy aircraft used to map enemy radar and suppress them.

Roger: A yes, an affirmative, a go answer to a command or statement.

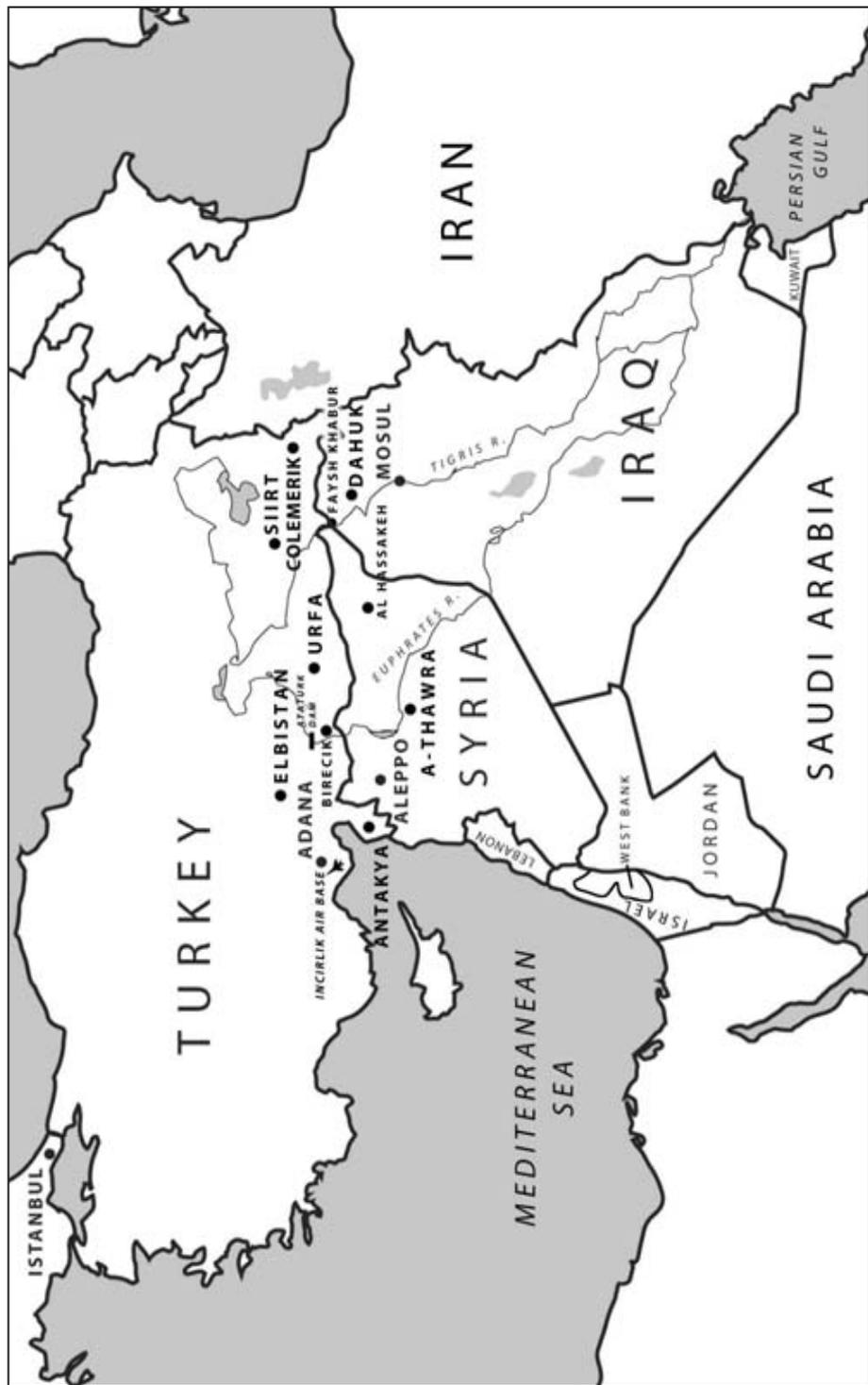
SAM: Surface-to-Air Missile.

SEAL: One of the elite branches of the U.S. Special Forces operating from the sea, air, or land.

Sidewinder: Heat-seeking (infrared) missile.

TDY: Temporary DutY assigned outside of normal job designation.

XO: eXecutive Officer.



*Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you;
not as the world gives do I give to you.
Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid.*

JOHN 14:27

PROLOGUE



It won't fly."

Grace rescued the airplane for her younger cousin from where it had crashed into the tile around the backyard pool, smoothing out the smashed nose of the plane. "It didn't have enough lift under its wings," she encouraged, seeing the problem. She carefully folded stabilizers on the wingtips. "Try again."

Tom took the plane. She bit her lip as he swung himself up into the old oak tree. Spring leaves hid him from sight. He reappeared straddling the big limb that held the rope swing. He was determined to get his plane to fly farther than hers. He tossed the plane with so much force it hurtled toward the ground until the aerodynamics took over and the plane lifted and suddenly soared. "Yes!"

Grace smiled as she turned on her heels to watch it fly. He'd been smart to launch it from high up. Hers had skimmed the swimming pool, just about landing in the shallows, and finally settled under the potted planter beside the patio table. Tom's plane rolled to the right as it neared the backyard fence. She frowned. She must have made one stabilizer longer than the other.

"Did your mom say yes to the lesson?"

Grace turned to look up at her cousin and tilted her head, as he was now hanging upside down like a monkey. "She said maybe."

He stopped his swinging and looked at her for a moment. "Better than a no."

It was better than a no. But it was still frustrating. She'd been trying to talk her mom into letting her have pilot lessons this summer. She was almost fourteen; she was eligible for the lessons. Her dad had said yes. But her mom was holding out.

Dad. Her favorite man. She had buried her nose in his burly chest in thanks when he said yes and she embarrassed him. He talked so often about flying, telling his war stories about his days in Vietnam flying off a carrier. He talked about the dogfights and nursing his plane back to the base with bullet holes in the wings, and he laughed at the risks and the belief he had been invincible.

She wanted to be like her dad. The Navy wouldn't let her fly the jets like she dreamed of doing, but they would let her fly the big cargo planes, the fortresses in the sky that would mean landing at interesting airfields—short, rough surfaces in Third World countries—giving her a chance to fly to where the action was happening in the world. She really wanted to learn to fly. And while she couldn't solo until she was sixteen, she had several friends who had already started lessons. She just had to convince her mom.

“You can have my allowance to pay for the lessons.”

“You give away your allowance too easily.”

Tom climbed down from the tree. “You'd enjoy them. Want to go watch the planes at the airport?”

“Sure.”

“I'll get us sandwiches. You tell your mom where we're going.”

Tom would probably make them peanut butter and banana sandwiches, but she liked him enough she'd eat hers without comment. Her cousin was the brother she didn't have.

She went to find her mom. On Friday afternoon the current class of pilots in training often practiced their landings. If she watched closely, she could figure out what the pilots did right and wrong as they landed. If she couldn't take lessons, she was still determined to learn what she could through careful observation.

Tom was lucky he had been born a boy. He constantly got himself in and out of scrapes as he tried anything that sounded fun. She longed to have that same freedom. He'd probably grow up to be a baseball player or a coach or a skydiver, something outdoors and fun. Even though he was two years younger, she was trying to be more like him. Tom had figured out how to enjoy life. She wanted a big bite of life too, even if she was a girl.

"Are you coming?" Tom shouted at her.

"Coming!"

"I dare you to try."

Bruce looked at his friend and then back at the water around the end of the pier. It was murky. The storm in the gulf last night had churned up the silt. To find the tackle box washed off the pier during the storm would mean holding his breath and searching by feel while the waves tried to knock him into the posts. "Why don't you try?"

Scott dropped a pebble into the water and watched it disappear. "The PJs do it all the time."

"Not all the time," Bruce muttered, wishing Scott would leave his heroes out of it. Living next to a military base had given him a chance to meet over eighteen of the men he admired. They trained to rescue shot-down pilots. He wanted to be a Pararescueman someday, but he didn't have to love water. He just had to figure out how not to be afraid of it.

The tackle box had probably popped open as it hit the bottom and spilled all their favorite lures across the seabed. The tides would have swept them around and the hooks would catch at his hands if he just felt around. Several years' worth of handmade lures had been in that tackle box. Recovering them mattered.

"I need a waterproof light," he decided. PJs went in prepared. He wasn't going into that swirling water without being prepared.

His friend looked disappointed. "I didn't say I wouldn't get it; I said I need a light." Their bikes were balanced at the end of the pier. "Come on. My dad will have one."

Scott turned back toward their bikes. Bruce paused to look one more time at the churning water. Scott was always pushing him to do hard things. He wanted to be able to do anything that had to be done, just like the PJs did. It just wasn't easy to be brave.

ONE



MARCH 4
NORFOLK, VIRGINIA

He stood out in his flannel shirt and jeans, but so far none of the sailors had made the mistake of assuming he was a civilian. Air Force Major Bruce “Striker” Stanton warily watched them continue to arrive and crowd into his sister’s backyard, and he wondered how many sailors Jill had invited from the aircraft carrier USS *George Washington* to come to the predeployment party. It would be like her to invite them all so as not to leave anyone out. All five thousand plus of them.

He felt like he had invaded enemy country. The sailors, the average age of which was twenty-one, looked like children. They got younger every year. And those for whom this was their first six-month sea tour tended to travel together in clusters like penguins. A few of his friends cut from Air Force cloth were here but had long ago been swallowed up in the sea of white.

Striker maneuvered through guests to the chair he had staked out on the patio, doing his best to ignore the stab of pain from his right knee at every step. His dog was curled up asleep under the chair. Bruce used his left foot to push the dog’s tail farther under the chair to protect it from being stepped on. A party, food, and many willing hands to offer treats, and what did his

dog do? Sleep. He had yet to figure out this yellow Labrador he had acquired two months ago from the pound.

Bruce nodded a greeting to one of the Navy SEALs he knew as he settled into the chair and prepared to stay put for a while. Sprinkled in the mix among the young sailors there were a few grown-ups. The ship's officers, SEALs, and naval aviators stood out by the self-assured way they staked out their space.

As far as parties went this one was living up to past history. The soda was cold to the point ice crystals formed when he opened the can, while the hot dogs were burnt because his sister had insisted on working the grill. People came for the tradition of it, not for the food.

He'd driven up from Pensacola, Florida, where he was based, to Norfolk, center of gravity for military operations in the state with nine military bases for Air Force, Navy, and Marines clustered within the Hampton Roads area. He'd come for the weekend because his sister had invited him. He had news to share that was best done in person. And he'd come to see Grace.

He didn't have to search to find her; he'd kept track of her in his peripheral vision throughout the afternoon, anchoring her as part of his frame of reference. Grace stood out in red. The sweater over jeans was a simple bold splash of color in a sea of white. His sister's best friend, the cohost of this party, had been in his sights for years. Jill had introduced them. Lieutenant Grace Yates was one of the self-assured naval aviators. She was going to spend the next six months hurtling off the deck of the USS *George Washington* in an F/A-18 Hornet.

He watched her mingle and chat with the other squadron pilots; she'd long ago been accepted into their exclusive ranks. Ever since the combat exclusion rules had eased in 1993 to allow women to fill combat flight roles, she'd been showing she had the right stuff. Not flashy, not pushy, just one of the best pilots he'd ever met. She exemplified grace under pressure.

He admired what she'd done and how she'd accomplished it. She loved to fly and she turned that passion into a single-minded focus to be the best. She'd picked up Gracie as her call sign. She rarely commented on the ground she broke in her profession but she'd done so about the handle. Grace thought it was too soft a call sign. Bruce thought it summed her up in one word. It suited her.

Grace was the deep waters while Jill was the clear shallows. Grace rarely talked about herself. How many layers were there to the mystery that made her who she was? He was determined to find out. He was on a mission. Grace was the objective. And his profession had taught him well the value of good reconnaissance. He had known her for years, but only in the last few months had he decided to do that digging.

He liked what he had found. She was loyal to her friends, was close to her family. She sang with her church choir, rather badly, he thought. She liked vanilla ice cream, scary movies, skiing, and anything related to flying. Competitive in sports, tall, slender, fast on her feet, she had the arm and wrist strength to play a tennis game that decimated opponents. She'd broken her arm skydiving, had crashed her car at age seventeen and had to be talked into driving again, and never had more than a goldfish as a pet. There was a tightness to her mouth when she was mad and a smile that came easy around friends. He'd enjoyed the reconnaissance.

She'd dated Ben Grossel for many years. Bruce had met Ben a couple times and he'd found the former Navy pilot turned astronaut an exceptionally nice guy. Ben had been killed in a car accident two years ago while Grace was on her second sea tour. Bruce suspected that had rocked her life pretty hard although she had never said much.

A young boy in a blue sweatshirt slammed into the back of Grace's knees, enveloping her in hug. She turned with a laugh to rescue him and haul him up to perch on her hip. She was often

being tailed by her own fan club at parties such as this one. She'd started a kids' flying club last year with some help from his sister and had become a bit of a hero to the kids. She had the rare touch of not only being a good pilot but also a good teacher.

His dog moved and Bruce reached under the chair to ruffle the dog's ears. Today was going to be his last chance to see Grace for six months. He was a patient man. This gathering was scheduled to go until seven. His plan was simple, and he needed to accomplish only one thing with her today. He had the luxury to choose the right moment.

"Have you told Jill the news?"

Bruce looked over at the Navy SEAL trying to relax beside him in a patio chair too small for his frame. Life itself often seemed too small for Grace's cousin, Tom "Wolf" Yates. They were rivals and competitors in the best Air Force versus Navy tradition. The women in their lives had been best friends for years, and on that common ground they had long ago forged an amicable friendship. "Coward that I am, I was hoping you would mention it first."

Wolf grimaced. "We're a sorry lot."

"Have you heard how long you're going to be gone?"

"Twelve weeks. You?"

"Sixteen."

Silence stretched as the implications set in. They were both going to miss Jilly's birthday on May 19. And not just any birthday—her thirtieth birthday. Bruce watched his sister turn hamburgers on the grill and laugh with the sailor keeping her company. The young man stood at relaxed attention, hands behind his back, being friendly in a very polite way. He wasn't a fool. Jill was dating Wolf. It was dangerous territory to tread on.

"We need to do something special." Bruce had planned to

arrange another weekend like this one, come up and take Jill out for dinner, probably buy her a nice necklace since she loved jewelry. Rushing to do that before he deployed would just not be the same. Jill would be having her birthday without family, without her best friend Grace, without her boyfriend Wolf. She was getting a raw deal.

“I got her that inlaid jewelry box she fell in love with, but I’m doomed before I even wrap it. She’s going to feel like the gift is compensation.”

“She’ll cry,” Bruce predicted, knowing his sister. She’d cry, get over the disappointment, then put on a smile to tell them good-bye. But the initial news would hurt. Big days mattered, and through the years she’d been asked to spend so many of them alone.

Jill had a love-hate relationship with dating someone who put her third in his life behind God and the Navy. Bruce understood where she was coming from. It was one thing to pay that price of separation when you held up your hand and volunteered to take the oath of service; it was another when you had no choice but to accept it.

“To top it off, I’ll probably be somewhere that doesn’t have a phone.”

“She likes you too much to dump you over this.”

Wolf growled at him for suggesting it. Bruce laughed and wondered not for the first time how he’d handle having Wolf for a brother-in-law. Wolf was good for his sister. He was a solid man with a strong faith who didn’t get troubled by events; he simply solved the problem. Like most SEALs he was addicted to adrenaline rushes and was intensely competitive. But he also had a maturity well beyond his years, and Bruce knew the man’s heart. He could trust the man to be gentle with his sister. Jill was high energy and laughter, a lady who loved making sure people had a great time and who would go the second and third miles to help a friend.

He hoped it worked out for the two of them. Jill dated Wolf because she admired him and what he did; she just hadn't escaped the hurt that went back to childhood with their dad always putting the Air Force before family.

It was hard being a big brother. It wasn't until their parents died three years ago that he realized it had been four months since he'd last seen his sister, and a month since he had talked with her. He'd been ashamed of that. He wasn't going to miss events in Jill's life unless it was truly unavoidable. His focus had changed, but this deployment was coming at a vulnerable time. He wished he had another six months stateside before he had to do another TDY.

Her birthday party would be disrupted, her vacation plans forced to change as she had been planning to come down to see the house he was remodeling. And he'd have to reschedule the date he could come up and help her fix up the new offices she was in the process of leasing. *Lord, how do I tell her?* He wished he had the right words. She didn't adjust too well to the long absences. And Bruce knew part of that was his fault for how he'd handled the past ones.

She'd be busy while he was gone. Her business was thriving—Stateside Support, Inc., had over a hundred clients. While the sailors were deployed overseas defending U.S. interests, Jill would be doing everything that needed to be done back on the home front from watering plants and caring for pets to paying bills and supervising yard work. Those lucky enough to be a Stateside, Inc., client got gold-plated care. Grace and Wolf were both clients. He'd be one just as soon as his sister opened an office in Pensacola.

Bruce could send Jill roses for her birthday, tickets to a concert, something he could arrange before he left. For Jill, being remembered on the correct date mattered as much as the gift.

The options were depressing. He needed to have the day with Jill as much as she did.

Bruce jolted as a hand slid across the top of his right shoulder. Grace moved past him and leaned over the back of Wolf's chair. "We need more ice."

Tom tipped his head back to look up at her. "I brought four bags."

She smiled down at him. "Cougar wants to make homemade ice cream. He's found the hand turn freezer and the rock salt, and he's got some concoction on the stove. Go corral your partner before he gets in over his head."

"Yes, ma'am."

Wolf got to his feet and towered above her. They were cousins but closer than most.

Gracie handed him her empty glass. "And Jill is getting lonely."

"Is she?"

"Shoo."

"You want your favorite chair back?"

"And you normally catch on faster. My feet are killing me. We've got too many friends."

Wolf laughed. "I'll bring you some ice cream if it turns out to be edible."

"Appreciate it." Grace settled with a comfortable sigh in the chair Wolf had vacated. "I'm glad you could make it, Bruce."

An odd tension settled in his gut to replace the relaxation of moments before. Early thirties, brunette, a smile that flirted with the camera, and blue eyes that were alive—she was a photogenic dream. He'd borrowed one of Wolf's wallet pictures months ago. "Good party."

"Enjoying yourself?" She held down her hand and his dog emerged to say hello.

"I always do," he replied truthfully.

“Jill mentioned you had acquired a pet. She’s beautiful.”

“Timid.”

“She’s old,” Grace corrected, smiling at the animal.

Bruce watched her focus on his dog, her voice softening as she murmured a welcome. It shouldn’t be so hard to get to know her. He’d worked around pilots for over a decade. Everything he knew about her suggested he was talking with the person likely to become the first female squadron commander. The problem was basic—just under that smile and friendly welcome was an impenetrable wall guarding her thoughts. What went on behind those blue eyes? Was she content with her life? Lonely? Having a good year? A hard one? She tended to deflect questions and it suggested a deep reservoir inside. Finding answers was a challenge, but he liked a challenge.

“So where are you going?” she asked as she scanned the crowd.

She’d kept her ear to the ground, or else she cornered his partner Rich, who was wandering around this party somewhere. “Turkey.” Operation Northern Watch over northern Iraq had its headquarters at Incirlik Air Base, Turkey, and the no-fly zone had been a low-grade constant conflict for years. The Twenty-third Special Tactics Squadron would be replacing PJs who were stationed there for the last three months.

She turned to give him her full attention. “The *GW* is heading to the Med for part of this deployment.”

“I know.” The USS *George Washington* would be handling some of Operation Northern Watch’s flight assignments. “I’ll be playing catch on the ground if you get in trouble,” he teased her. He had been pulling pilots and Special Forces soldiers from behind enemy lines for twelve years. If she got in trouble, his unit would be the one getting the call.

“It’s interesting flying, but please,” she teased back, “anti-aircraft artillery and surface-to-air missiles? I can fly my way

through that clutter in my sleep. I'm more curious about what Wolf will be doing over there."

There were only 313 PJs and a few thousand SEALs on active duty. They trained in similar ways: to fight behind enemy lines, to be experts in night insertions by air or water, to be the best at unconventional warfare. But in roles they were very different. The SEALs went out to accomplish their mission at all costs, were often sent into situations where military muscle had to be exercised just short of war. The PJs deployed for only one mission: rescue. Bruce knew his friend. Wolf would downplay the assignment, but a rotation to Turkey meant the SEALs would probably be doing some work inside Iraq.

"Getting into trouble," he predicted.

"I think he was just born to do difficult things," she agreed. "I saw you on the news." The lightness in her voice had turned to subtle concern.

Bruce didn't have to ask what the clip had shown; it had been running in the national news spot. The rescue in the Gulf last week had been interesting but not as much of a crisis as the media made it out to be. A sudden storm had floundered more than a few boats; the PJs routinely helped out the Coast Guard in such situations. Bruce reached over and patted Grace's arm. If he let her worry about him, it would change the entire tenor of their relationship. He was the one who got to worry about her. The Air Force paid him to do so. "It wasn't that big a deal."

"You were limping. And you've been keeping station in that chair all day."

Trust her to notice. He had a bruise on his thigh the size of a melon where the sailboat mast had struck him. "I'm old. I get tired now," he replied with a slight laugh.

"I should have told Wolf to get you the ice."

"Let it be, Grace. Jill will just hover."

"How's the boy you rescued?"

“They sent him home from the hospital this morning.”

“I’m glad to hear it.”

Silence settled between them. Bruce didn’t try to break it. Words were at times overrated. Life was a gift and he was done rushing through it. Shoot at him a few times, make him realize still being alive was a blessing, and his perspective changed. There was no hurry. Besides, he liked looking at her. She was easy on the eyes.

This party had been a lot of work, and behind the smile were signs of her tiredness. The wind had been blowing her hair. The short haircut was new, a practical step given fresh water on an aircraft carrier was one of the most carefully conserved resources: showers were short. He recognized the necklace; he’d bought the gold pendant of an opening rosebud when he’d been in France. Grace and Jill had been sharing jewelry again. It looked good on her.

“I just realized I set the Bear Cubs loose in the kitchen. I suppose I should go supervise,” Grace remarked but made no move to do so.

“I can’t believe they let you get away with that handle.” Wolf’s boss was Navy SEAL Joe “Bear” Baker. Grace had long ago tagged Wolf and his partner as the Bear Cubs.

“Joe thinks it’s cute. He’s taken to calling them that.”

Cute. Bruce winced. The call sign had stuck. He sympathized with Wolf, but it was a pretty good tag to have considering what it implied. Bear was a legend among the SEALs.

Grace shifted and ran her hand through her hair. “I got your letter.”

He stilled.

“Did you think it had been lost?”

He forced himself to breathe. “Hoped it.”

“It trailed me around the world for eight months and showed up two weeks ago.”

Two weeks ago. It coincided with his weekend remodeling his house and his long talk with the Lord about his future. He was a man who made plans and executed them. It was hard to wait indefinitely for open doors and new directions. He'd been hurting because the answer to his prayer had been silence, but the resurrection of the letter written when he expected to be dead by nightfall— *Lord, this is not the answer I had in mind.*

He'd sent it from the jungle of Ecuador, handing it to a fellow PJ leaving the area. "The helicopter went down. I didn't realize the letter had been recovered and sent on." He'd buried a friend when he thought he would be the one in that coffin.

"The letter for Jill is still sealed."

Left unsaid was that the letter to her wasn't. "I didn't have anyone else to deliver it since Wolf was with me, and I wasn't in a position to call up and ask if you would be willing to handle it."

"Bruce. I understand."

Letters were words that could haunt a man when written under stress. Had those fatal two words been in it or had he marked them out? He'd changed his mind so many times on what to say, grabbing moments to write the letter under utterly chaotic circumstances. He felt a bone deep weariness settle inside as he looked at her. "Do you?"

She just looked at him. Wise eyes. He'd started to think of them as that ages ago. "You write a nice letter. It's a lost art."

"Grace—"

"You had few regrets when you looked back on your life. If I ever tried to write that letter, I couldn't say the same."

His eyes narrowed. When she swung open a door, she swung open a big one. "What regrets?"

She shook her head and focused her attention on his dog, stroking the warm fur. "It looks like you've been correcting the few regrets you had. You got your dog; Jill said you were remodeling a house."

She didn't mention the third item in the list. He wondered if he'd crossed the words out or if she was just being kind. "I'm trying to." His life had reoriented itself since Ecuador. There had been only one focus in his life before then; now there were four priorities.

"The letter to your sister is at my place. I'll get it back to you."

"Thanks."

"Gracie, we need an opinion."

She turned around in her chair at Wolf's call. "Coming!"

Bruce touched her hand as she rose, pausing her. "If I don't see you again before I have to head out—be sure to catch the third wire."

She turned her hand around and tightened it on his. "I will." Her smile was kind. "I'll pray you have a boring deployment." She slipped her hand from his and turned toward the house.

"Hey, Grace."

She glanced over her shoulder.

"You like getting letters?"

She turned to walk backward toward the house. "Wolf writes me what turns out to be dated weather reports—faithfully—every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday."

"Maybe I'll write you sometime."

"Maybe the military mail will find me."

"Can you read my handwriting?"

She laughed. "It's awful. But mine is worse." She disappeared into the house.

Bruce pulled a peppermint from his pocket and unwrapped it.

Six months. He was going to miss her. A six-month deployment was 27 weeks, 182 days, an exhausting 4,368 hours. He'd figured it up on the back of an envelope during the trip here. He

closed his eyes and every bruise from the recent rescue was suddenly and forcibly felt.

Grace was the first lady he had met who he thought could handle his profession. She just kept heading halfway around the world. Service came first. Duty. Honor. Country. He watched Jill and Wolf struggle to make a civilian and military relationship work. A relationship where both were military— He'd been doing hard things all his life, but this one was definitely going to be a challenge.

The Ecuador letter was a serious problem. He couldn't change that first impression; he could only try to recover from it. She'd had the letter for two weeks. His profession taught him to know the terrain, to eliminate variables, to minimize surprises. Bruce sighed, feeling his emotions that had knotted at the news unwrap.

Lord, was it really necessary to hand her that letter first? It was raw emotion from a foxhole, meant to be read only if I died there. If I died, it meant Wolf would likely also die there, and Grace needed to hear what Wolf had done. He was a hero that day. Now—the letter just confuses the situation and enormously complicates it.

But the letter had been delivered. It was going to take some time to figure out how to adjust his plan. It established a first impression far different than the one he had desired to convey.

Bruce reached for his empty glass and got up. It was time to find his sister, time to break his bad news. He owed it to Wolf to be the one to do it. The way things stood, he was going to need Wolf's help with Grace.

ECUADOR

Grace ~

Wolf's with me. We've been pinned down about six hours and ammo is low. We came in after a downed

helicopter only to get caught by weather and rebels. Only one more rescue flight can be attempted before night-fall. I've watched Wolf save three Marines. He's a hero. It's going to come down to one of us going out with the injured while the other covers in order for any of us to make it out alive. I'm sending out Wolf. Force him to get over the grief.

I apologize for asking this of you. Jill's letter is enclosed. Tell her I love her. She needs words in person, not writing. It hurts to think of leaving her with no family left. But there's not much I can change about that now. On the whole, I've got few regrets. Not having a dog. A house. A wife.

I want to live.

I may not get what I want.

God bless, Gracie. I'll see you in heaven.

Dear Reader,

Thank you for reading this book. The military is a demanding world that forges wonderful heroes: friendships go deep, loyalties are strong, jobs are tough, families are close. I couldn't ask for a better background for a love story. I hope I was able to take you into Bruce's and Gracie's lives to show what it is like to take on one of the toughest jobs in the world.

I wrote this book to remind us our God is sufficient no matter what the circumstances. Relationships matter—the military teaches it like no other profession. And in Bruce and Gracie I got to explore a love story unlike any other I have written.

There are real men like Bruce “Striker” Stanton wearing the uniform today. This is my tribute and thanks to them. They are indeed heroes.

As always, I love to hear from my readers. Feel free to write me at:

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Carol Stream, IL 60188
E-mail: dee@deehenderson.com

or stop by online at www.deehenderson.com

Thanks again for letting me share Bruce and Gracie's story.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Dee Henderson". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.