

Starting Over

Starting Over

Chapter 1

Janet drove her Highlander alongside the shops and eateries of Lincoln City's Harbor Boulevard. The road running through town was quiet this time of year. The tourists had left, leaving the hardy coastal residents behind to hunker down for the approaching winter. Heading toward Fogarty, she glanced at the blue marble urn on the passenger seat. This year's pilgrimage to the beach where so much of her past had been defined marked yet another turning point in her life.

Her beloved husband, Neil, would be joining her father, their ashes comingling on the beach she loved. But as far as she was concerned, it was too soon. It was hard to believe he'd been gone almost a whole year. She thought about his last days at Hazelnut before his body gave up and finally quit. It had been a long haul for them the last two months before he passed and she'd been there for all of it, standing beside his bed, holding his hand, whispering how beautiful he was. But that was the price she'd paid for marrying a man twenty-five years older than her.

"Someday we'll be back together again," she muttered, because, yes, she'd come to believe there was something beyond this mortal life even though she didn't know what it was. All she knew was that he believed it, and that was all that mattered.

She came to a stoplight. Closed her eyes.

And then there was Megan.

It hadn't been easy to convince her fifty-four year old stepdaughter to agree with her plans for today. In the end, she prevailed. The hardest part was persuading Megan to hang back. She knew it wasn't fair, but she

Starting Over

couldn't share her final moments with him with anyone, not even his daughter. To make up for it, she gave Megan his journals revealing his hopes and dreams. Perhaps through his words he might reach out from beyond and bring about peace between his children. Maybe someday, she could convince Megan to forgive her brother Trevor from walking out on his father after their mother died. As matriarch of the family, she owed Neil that.

An hour later, she was walking barefoot on the cool, compacted sand as the ocean pounded the shoreline. This was home, the place where her heart had led her to the only man she'd ever loved. And it was also here where she'd made peace with a father she'd desperately sought acceptance from growing up. Carrying the canvas bag holding the remains of her husband, she followed the shoreline of the sprawling beach, contemplating the final letter she'd write to him. There was so much she wanted to say but didn't know how to put it into words.

The fine, watery mist of Fogarty spritzed her face and the wafting brine wrinkled her nose. She inhaled deeply. "I'm back, Dad," she said to no one, "and I brought someone with me. I'm sure you both have catching up to do. Nate's doing a second tour in Iraq and I'm scared. The world over there is crazy, people hating and killing each other. I wish you were here. If anything were to happen to him, I..." She broke off and fought to contain herself, then turned toward her Altar rock sitting on the bluff. "Anyway, I suppose I should let you two get reacquainted."

With her hair spraying out behind her, she strode to the grotto nestled in the face of the eroded rock wall buttressing the picturesque town from the sprawling beach. The jutting slab of weathered granite she called her Altar rock stood firm amidst the strewn rocks and boulders banked against the towering bluff. She stopped and looked up at it, felt the sacred rock's powerful draw on her heart then climbed up over the pile of jumbled stones and found her place on its outstretched palm.

Starting Over

Here, she stood with eyes closed and listened to the thrum of the waves and the distant echoes of her past. Right below her, she'd married Neil on a bright, sunny day, and down the beach they'd spent weekend afternoons with Nate building sandcastles and playing Frisbee. She drank the memories in, marinating in them until at last she reached down and drew the urn from the bag. Holding the marble vessel in front of her, she opened it and poured the ashes over the rocks to the sand below.

As she watched them tumble down, her throat tightened. There were no words to express how she felt so she placed the urn back in the bag and sat with her journal, trying to write words that wouldn't come. Finally, she closed the book and held it tight to her chest as the unreachable distance between her and Neil widened further than she thought possible. For the last two years, she'd immersed herself in her work and the running of the local Alzheimer's Association, trying to escape the suffocating loneliness stalking her day and night. Her body quaked and she buried her face in her hands. "It's so hard without you, baby. I know you want me to be happy, but I don't know how to do it. Please help me," she rasped, wiping her eyes.

She rocked back and forth under the brooding sky as the wind died and a faint scent of sandalwood danced in the air. She looked up startled and searching the waves, felt something warm on her shoulder. Setting her journal aside, she jumped up knowing it was crazy to believe he was somehow there with her, but she couldn't help wishing it were so. The scent grew stronger and the cover of her journal flipped back. The pages riffed and when she looked down, the book was open. On the page were the paraphrased words of Gibran she'd written shortly after he died.

If I am to hold the spirit of you my love, I must open my heart wide to the body of life.

Starting Over

A smile blossomed in the depths of her grief. The words she'd written to Neil reminded her what was important. To honor him was to embrace life and that was what she was going to do, but she had no idea where to start. She closed her eyes and imagined him beside her.

"I miss you so much."

With determination and renewed strength, she climbed down and started back to her car. Walking beside the souging, sweptback dunes, she watched a couple walking hand in hand near the surf. Her throat tightened and again, the tears came. This time they wouldn't stop. Her legs gave way and she collapsed to her knees, breaking into a heaving sob, until a little dog came running out from behind one of the dunes. He grabbed a stick and darted back out of sight. A moment later, the stick came whirling back and landed at her feet with the dog giving chase. She blinked. The little guy could've been her Barney's double. Barney was gone now and was buried behind her house. She rose to a knee and wiped her eyes. "Hey, puppy, what's your name?"

The dog barked as a man sporting a blue vested jacket and jeans called to him. "Jack, come here boy. Leave the lady alone."

"You better get back," she said to the dog, but the little guy stayed put. The man whistled and the dog jerked his head around then back at her. "Go on, now. Get back to your master."

The dog remained, looking up at her with dark brown eyes.

The man walked toward her. When he came near, he said, "I'm sorry. I don't know what's gotten into him."

Great, I must look like hell, she thought. She stood trying to collect herself. "It's okay, I used to have a dog that looked just like him." She averted her gaze toward the ocean and watched the tide roll in for a moment.

Finally, the man said, "Good day for a walk."

"Yes, it is," she said, and glanced toward the underpass.

Starting Over

“Well, it’s the last one I’ll be taking here for some time.” He grabbed the stick and hurled it down the beach. “You from around here?”

She shook her head as the dog chased after it. “No...the Valley.”

He arched his brow “The Valley? You mean the one west of Salem?”

She took a step back. “Yes.”

“There’s some digs up that way.” He paused as the dog came racing back with the stick. As Jack dropped it at their feet, he added, “Name’s Andy.”

She ignored his extended hand and an awkward moment of silence passed between them. Finally, she said, “Janet.”

Pulling his hand back, he pointed toward the dog looking up at her. “Nice to meet ya. Seems he’s decided you need a turn at fetch.”

She eyed Jack. The dog was wagging his tail and darting a glance back and forth between her and the stick. Setting her bag down, she picked the stick up and tossed it towards the surf.

Andy ran a thick hand through his mop of cinnamon hair. As he did so, she caught a fleeting glance of a tattoo below his elbow...an anchor or a harpoon piercing a globe or something like that. One of her son’s tattoos was similar to it. Obviously it was some rite of passage in the armed forces. She suppressed an urge to ask about it.

How do I get out of here without looking rude? “How old is the little guy?”

“About two,” he replied. “Keeps me on my feet.”

Raking a lock of hair from her face, she glanced up and found him staring out over the water and scuffing his feet in the sand.

Suddenly, he turned to her. “So, umm...the ‘Valley’...how long ya been there?”

She glanced back at the overpass. “About fifteen years. My husband built us a house there.”

“Nice. He a contractor?”

Starting Over

She looked off down the beach where she'd sown his ashes on the sand. "No, an architect."

"Cool...Nice bag."

Janet started then looked down at her canvas tote. "Oh thanks. My son got it for me. He's in the Army."

"I noticed that," he said, nudging the side of the bag with his foot. "The Army Seal sort of gives it away." He crossed his arms over his chest. "Deployed?"

"Yeah."

He glanced at her knowingly. "Where?"

"Iraq," she said as Jack bounded back with his stick. The dog dropped it at her feet and she bent over and picked it up. Handing it to Andy, she drew breath and pasted a smile on her face. "Well, I need to be getting along. You have a good day."

"Yeah, you, too."

Walking away, she felt his gaze on her back.

* * *

For the first time, the word 'widow' hit home for Janet. Until now, she'd avoided thinking of herself as one - but no more. She pulled off the highway cutting through the Corvallis countryside and headed for home. When she got there, Megan's car was gone. Her stepdaughter had gone north to Woodburn to see her boyfriend, Ben, for the weekend. For that, she was grateful because talking to Megan right now was the furthest thing from her mind.

She unloaded the car and strode to the front door. The house Neil built loomed before her desolate and empty save for the swaying hawthorns around the front stoop. She opened the front door, tossed her keys on the pedestal table and took a long look around the cavernous Great Room.

Removing her jacket, she tossed it on the recliner and went to the kitchen to let Cleo out of his crate and to get a drink of water. What she

Starting Over

ended up with was a bottle of wine. It was a bad idea, but at the moment, she didn't care. She poured herself a tall glass of Pinot and padded to the bookcase flanking the hearth. After turning the stereo on, she grabbed one of her family photo albums. A moment later, Jackson Browne's voice swept over her, saturating her with memory. She skipped to the CD's fourth track, 'Stay' and retreated to the couch.

She was on her second glass with the photo album splayed across her lap when the tears came again. She turned the page and gazed down through the years at the two cornerstones of her life: Neil sitting at his desk with Nate beside him in his little league uniform. Tipping the glass back, she drained it and poured another as night gathered outside the cathedral window. Cleo popped up on the couch beside her as she traced the outline of her husband's face in the photo with her finger.

Laying her head back on the couch, she closed her eyes and felt her body drift to the edge of a dream. From out of the fog, she heard a murmur of a ring tone. The sound grew louder, building into a wave until finally, it crashed in on her. Her eyes shot open and she bolted up. Groping around the couch she searched for her cell phone and found it on the end table.

"Hello?"

"Mom?"

She switched the phone to her other ear. Her son rarely called and when he did, it always alarmed her. "Nate? What's wrong? You all right?" She eyed her watch. 11:30 PM. That made it 'what' in Iraq?

There was a long pause. Finally, he said, "Yeah, I'm fine. Umm...I was just thinking about you and wanted to say, Hi."

Her gut tightened. This wasn't Nate's style, calling in the middle of the night to say hi. "Oh, how sweet of you, honey. I miss you."

"Yeah, I miss you, too."

As Cleo nuzzled her hand, she said, "Are you sure you're all right?" She didn't want to press her son, but she couldn't ignore the red flags waving in her face.

Starting Over

“Yeah, Mom, I’m fine. Really.” He paused and she heard people talking in the background...people talking in medical terms. “So, how are you doing?”

“I’m fine,” she said, homing in on what was being said in the offing. When she heard the word, radiology, she knew he was hiding something. Suddenly, her heart went into overdrive. “Nate, where are you,” she said, a little more forcefully than she intended.

There was another long pause. Finally, he said, “Germany.”

“Germany? I thought you-”

He cut her short. “Yeah...look, umm...” She heard him clear his throat. *Here it comes.* “Things are, well...in transition right now?”

She drew breath and snatching the pillow from beside her, clutched it to her chest. “Meaning?”

“Meaning, I’m being shipped home.”

“Home!” She was dumbfounded, but despite the joy of hearing it, she knew better. *He’s in Germany and he’s being discharged. Oh my God, he’s injured.* It took all her strength to keep her fears in check. “When?”

“In a couple weeks. Got to deal with paperwork.”

She closed her eyes. “Are you in the hospital?”

She waited in the stifling silence for an answer. Finally, he said, “Umm...yeah, but nothing to worry about...just got nicked is all.”

“Nicked! What do you mean nicked?” Her stomach flipped as visions of him lying in a hospital bed flashed before her. “Where?”

“My leg...and don’t wig out on me. It’s nothing,” he said. “I’ll be needing digs when I get home though. Hope you haven’t rented my room out.”

Right, like I’d do that. She shook her head, found herself cursing him under her breath. “No, I haven’t rented your room out.”

“Good...Say, look, chow’s here so I gotta skate. Like I said, don’t worry about me, okay? I’m fine.”

Starting Over

As if that's possible. "I'm your mother! Worrying goes with the territory."

She heard him sigh. "I guess... Anyway, I'll hit you up later."

"When?"

"Soon. Gotta go. Love you."

Chapter 2

Andy set his toolbox on the back seat of his Suburban and looked wearily at the old white colonial clapboard house. He'd worked all morning installing a new railing, and replacing an old basement window for the new owners. Once, it had been his and Brenda's home. No more. Now it was just an empty box they'd bumped around in. Why was it every relationship he'd ever had turned to sand, sliding through his fingers? Brenda had hung with him the longest; almost seven years, and he'd really believed he met someone who'd go the distance. What he didn't know was their marriage had fallen apart two years after it began. Looking back, he realized he'd been too wrapped up in the day-to-day emergencies of others to notice her drifting away from him. They'd been going through the motions, like an exercise at the fire station, never getting anywhere until one day, she'd had enough.

It was over an ice cream cone at Sammy's. She said she wanted out. She'd had enough of the *Job*, as she called it. Was tired of the *Job* tearing him away from her at all hours of the night. Tired of him taking care of everyone else but her. It stunned him and he didn't know how to answer for a long time. Finally, he'd said, 'So, you wanna go to a movie?' She'd looked at him as if he'd lost his mind. It wasn't far from the truth at that moment. Going out for ice cream had been their way of reconnecting after a long week of passing each other back and forth doing their jobs -- not ending a marriage. How did one throw in the towel on loving each other while eating an ice cream cone? It didn't make sense. Ending a marriage while eating ice cream was just wrong.

Starting Over

Jack popped his head over the front seat and nuzzled his hand. He'd gotten the little beagle pup to fill the empty moments when he was home alone. To a point the little dog did. It was the utter silence of the nights that were the hardest, when dark memories of the accident and his past came roaring back. Yes, it was time to move on like Brenda had said when they met for lunch last week. He looked down at Jack and saw the excitement in the dog's eyes about the impending road trip. Jack loved riding shotgun with his head out the window.

"Yeah, I know, hurry it up and let's get on with it." He shut the back door, got in the car and pulled out of the driveway. A few minutes later, he was in town, driving past the shops, cafés and stores that had been woven into the fabric of his life. As the car rolled along under the bright sunshine, he suddenly felt abandoned; ejected into a new life he had no control over. It'd happened before, a long time ago when he was a toddler. One day, Mom and Dad were there and the next, gone. He passed the First Baptist church where he and Brenda had been married in the summer of '99, tightened his grip on the steering wheel and pushed down on the accelerator.

Fifteen minutes later, he turned onto the Salmon River Parkway, heading for Salem. As he drove along the rural road passing open fields and woods, he settled in for the hour-long ride. Dialing to his favorite radio station, KOAC out of Corvallis, he turned the volume up. Click and Clack, the Tappet Brothers were on. It didn't take long until they had him smiling and laughing along with them as they diagnosed a problem that had nothing to do with cars. A young lady was trying to figure out how to get her handsome mechanic to ask her out for a date.

He turned to Jack. "Maybe I should open a service station. What'd'ya think boy?" The dog barked and he reached over and patted him on the head. "Yeah, I know, get on with it." Truth was, dating was the furthest thing from his mind. Besides, he had lots of things to keep him busy; a fledgling bookstore he'd started a year ago for one.

Starting Over

He'd always been an avid reader and a bit of a history buff since his discharge from the Marines in '72, and had, from time to time over the years, toyed with the idea of retiring from the Fire Department and giving his dream a shot. But there never seemed to be the right time to roll the dice. The real reason, of course, was there were men who'd depended on him down at the station, along with a steady paycheck to pay the bills. But that was all in the past now. A life he could never go back to.

And then there was the VA where he volunteered on Mondays and Thursdays in the Physical Therapy department. With a strong medical background along with a history of service in Viet Nam, the therapists were glad to have him. Returning soldiers who were injured needed someone who understood; someone they could trust and bond with. Nothing sped the healing process up like having someone helping you who'd been in the trenches.

When he pulled into his driveway on Aspen Street, it was nearing dusk. His small one-story Tudor sat in shadow on the pie shaped lot at the end of the cul-de-sac. A large semi-arched picture window looked out over a front lawn in need of mowing. Flanking the house was a stout Gary Oak that had shed most of its orange and yellow leaves. A swath of mountain laurel and rhododendron backed up against a raised slate porch. He opened the car door and got out with Jack bounding behind him. The street was quiet tonight. *Must be the neighbors are at the jazz festival downtown.*

He grabbed his toolbox from the rear seat and headed to the detached one-car garage, still loaded with boxes waiting to be unpacked. They'd been sitting there since he moved in a year ago. Maybe he'd get to them next weekend. Right now, he had a more pressing matter at hand. He looked down at Jack. "Yes, I know, dinner-time."

Setting the toolbox on the workbench, he set off through the garage for the back door as Jack followed close behind. The Long galley-style kitchen was cluttered. Dirty dishes were scattered on the counter, empty pizza boxes and beer cans on the table. He set a bowl of chow down then

Starting Over

went to the fridge and pulled out a bottle of beer and a leftover sandwich. As he stood munching on it, his cell phone vibrated.

“Hey, Matt. This is a surprise.” He hadn’t heard from Matt Fuller in over two months. For him to call out of the blue was out of character.

“Sorry I’ve been so out of touch. How’s things?”

“They’re good. Finished the last of the repairs at the house. Closing this Tuesday. What’s up?” Andy said.

The Lincoln City Fire Marshall cleared his throat. “Umm . . . a problem’s come up that we need to deal with. You know me. Never been one to candy-coat things.” He paused and for a minute Andy thought the call had been dropped. Finally, Matt came back on and said, “Anyway . . . Leonard’s parents have brought a civil suit against the department and you’re named in it. Some ambulance-chasing lawyer must’ve gotten in their ear. Sorry about this, big guy, but I think you’re gonna need to get a lawyer involved.”

Andy looked up at the ceiling and sighed. A lawyer was one thing, but going over all the details of the accident again wasn’t what he needed right now. “It’s all right, Matt. Not your fault.” But it wasn’t all right and never would be. The events that happened on a sweeping bend of highway leading out of Lincoln City had haunted him relentlessly over the last year and a half. And now, he was going to be put through that wringer all over again.

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Andy woke up in a cold sweat as the sounds of shrieking metal and shattering glass faded from his mind. Another dream about the accident! Would the nightly terror ever leave him alone? He flipped the sheet off and sat up rubbing his temples. Bending forward, he pinned his hands on the mattress, drew breath and looked at the alarm clock. 6:30 AM. In four hours, he and his partner Bob Lightfoot would be sitting across a table from a lawyer representing the Stewart family, giving yet another deposition regarding the accident.

Starting Over

Right now, he had to pull himself together, shower and shave. After that, he'd start going over his transcript of the previous deposition testimony he'd given during the initial investigation. Unpleasant business, but necessary. He trudged to the bathroom at the end of the hall with Jack following.

Twenty minutes later, he was slurping coffee at the kitchen table with the file in front of him. Fingering the manila folder, he peered through the rain-spattered sliding-glass doors next to him and thought of Brenda. Even though she'd been on her way to a new life, she'd put her interests aside to take care of him during the hellish six months that followed the accident. Now, there was no one left except Jack to quiet the inner demons, and there were many.

At length, he opened the file and stared at the field report. Flipping the page, he read Bob Lightfoot's account of what happened. A diagram of the accident followed showing how he'd valiantly tried to miss the eight-year-old boy, who had chased a ball out onto the highway. The report indicated the weather had been clear and cool. A slight southeast wind had been blowing across the two-lane highway. The siren and emergency running lights were in full operation. His speed: just a hair over fifty-five. Ten miles per hour over the posted state speed limit. Well within the parameters of rushing to an emergency situation. The only problem was he hadn't seen the 'Deaf Child' sign that had recently been posted a hundred yards from the bend in the road. That was the omission that haunted him.

The next seven pages documented the accident in pictures. Those, he flipped through. The memory of Bob pulling him through the jumbled disarray of fallen medical equipment and oxygen bottles in the overturned truck was plenty. He shook his head and was about to turn the page when his sister called. He flipped his phone open and yawned. "Hey, Panda."

"Hi Bruddy. I just wanted to let you know I'll be there in spirit with you today," his sister, Amanda, said. "Sure you don't want me to come with you?"

Starting Over

"I'll be okay. Bob'll be there. 'Sides, who'd open up the store?"

"Well, Jonah could," she said.

He cocked his brow as he thought of the grizzled Viet Nam war veteran he'd hired six months ago. While Jonah was competent and could easily manage it, he didn't want to push flying solo on the man so soon. Finally, he said, "I know he could, but I don't think he'd be comfortable with that just yet."

"Okay, I was just throwing it out there," she said. "Anyway, I'm here for you and so are Tom and Tuck."

"Thanks, I'll be okay," he said, trying to convince himself of it.

"I worry about you sometimes. By the way, have you told Brenda what's going on?"

"No. Didn't see the need," he replied, knowing his sister hadn't approved of Brenda's coming back to take care of him after the accident.

"Good idea." She paused. "You're not gonna lose the store. You did everything right. It's just a horrible thing that dear child ran out in front of you."

"Yeah, maybe . . . but doing everything right didn't change a damned thing did it? The boy died and I was behind the wheel, so that makes me a part of it."

He heard her sigh on the other end. "Bruddy, you need to stop beating yourself up." She paused and added, "Maybe you should get back in touch with your therapist."

He shook his head. "Mark's retired. I'll be all right."

"You need to talk to someone," she said. "I know of someone who --"

"Panda, please," he said a little harsher than he intended. He sat back and rubbed his eyes. "I'm fine."

"Okay, okay," she replied with a huff. She was quiet a moment then spoke up. "Look, why don't you and Jack join us for dinner tonight?"

Starting Over

We'll throw some steaks on the grille and I'll put a tater salad together with something sweet for dessert."

"Now, you're talking! By the way, I scheduled Tyler to come in at four today."

"Good, and he better be on time," she said. "I have to get to the bank to make deposits before it closes. So, when should I expect you?"

Andy paused. "Six-thirty?"

"Don't be late. Love you."

"Ditto." He flipped the phone shut. But getting back at it was the last thing he wanted to do and his expanded vision wasn't helping. He sat back, closed his eyes a moment then turned the page to read the statement he'd written a year ago for the inquiry. The passage of time did little to change how he felt about his role in the accident. He should've seen the 'Deaf Child' sign and been a little easy on the pedal. If he'd only been more careful.

The attorney who'd been coaching him on how to handle certain questions, told him to speak to 'just the facts' and avoid emotional responses. The term, 'I don't recall,' was to be a stock answer for dealing with difficult questions. It was 'cover-your-ass' mentality. He didn't like it. Except this was about money. Where the dollar was concerned, the lines between fact and fiction were blurred. A decision against the department would affect their ability to provide needed services to the community, to say nothing of what the suit was asking from him. Three hundred-fifty thousand! Where was he going to get that kind of cash? It would wipe him out financially. And the award to the family; that would do... what?

How do people put a price on a human life? It was blood money. The only winners as far as he could tell were the lawyers. He shook his head and closed the file. It was like trying to wash his hands and leave the water clean. No matter what he said, it wouldn't set things right.

Chapter 3

Janet stepped out of the shower and wrapped herself in a towel. In four hours, she'd be in Portland to pick Nate up and bring him home. Since she'd found out her son was up for a Distinguished Service Cross Medal for extraordinary heroism, there'd hardly been a moment's rest. The local press was calling non-stop. There was even talk of a parade and a meeting with the governor. Everyone was getting into the act. She hastily dried herself off, pulled on a sweater and a pair of jeans, then headed to the kitchen where she heard Megan taking out plates and silverware. The smell of fresh brewed coffee and a broccoli-cheddar quiche wafted in the air. James Taylor's 'Fire and Rain' murmured from the CD player.

As she walked into the sunlit breakfast nook, Megan dragged a slice of quiche onto her plate. "Morning!"

"That for me?" Janet said, nodding at the entree while heading for the coffee pot.

"Not really," Megan said with a crooked smile, "but sure, you can have it."

Janet poured herself a cup. "Thanks, you ready to go?"

"Other than throwing on my face and a pair of boots, yeah."

When it came to putting on make-up, nothing was quick with Megan, especially since they were going to be the center of attention with the media. "You're sure you have a ride back from Kyle's? After we drop you off, Nate and I are coming straight back."

Starting Over

“Positive,” Megan said. “You know, I wish my son would move the wedding down here. It’d be so much easier.”

And keep it on your turf, Janet mused. She knew how uncomfortable it was going to be for Megan with her ex around. But Kyle’s fiancé’s family lived in South Burlingame, and so did a lot of Kyle’s friends. And then there were nieces and nephews who were close to Kyle. “Have they booked a place for their reception yet?”

“Not yet. I keep telling him August is on the way. But you know kids... Speaking of which, I wonder how Nate’s gonna like being ‘man of the hour’. You know how he is. ‘Mr. Avoidance’.”

“I’m sure he’ll do fine,” Janet said, not believing it for a moment.

Megan rolled her eyes. “Yeaah, right. We’ll see how that goes.” She paused. “And Trevor? I take it he’s driving up separately?”

Janet ignored Megan’s sarcasm. “Yes, he and Nadia are meeting us at the airport. After we have lunch, they’re going to the mountains for the weekend.”

Megan’s face tightened then relaxed. “You really think we’re gonna be able to have a private lunch with all the hoopla?”

“I’m hoping,” Janet said. She sipped her coffee and sat down. “Surely, they’ll be sympathetic to us wanting our privacy.”

“Good luck with that,” Megan said. “Anyways, it’ll be great seeing Nate. Your heart must be doing cartwheels right now.”

“You have no idea,” Janet said, digging into her breakfast. The truth was, her heart was doing anything but cartwheels. Instead, she was battling an ominous feeling things weren’t as good as Nate would have her believe. She knew her son well. Like his father, he downplayed everything. But downplaying a medal? Even that was a stretch for him. “I’m glad he’s out of that damned war. It’s taken too much from him.”

“I know what you mean,” Megan agreed. “But he’s coming back with his head held high!” She nibbled a piece of toast and sat back. “You know, he acted weird when I asked him about Tracy.”

Starting Over

“Yeah, I know,” Janet said. She liked Nate’s fiancé. She was good for her son.

“What’d’ya think’s going on?” Megan said.

Janet set her fork down. Sipped her coffee. “Don’t know, and I wouldn’t pester him about it, okay?”

Megan cocked her brow. “Excuse me.”

“Sorry. I guess I’m a bit uptight.” She sighed, forced a smile and eyed Megan’s pale green denim blouse. “So, new shirt?”

“Yep. Forty bucks at Abercrombie and Fitch. On sale.”

“I like it. Brings out the red in your hair. Looks great with my jeans, too.”

Megan laughed. “All mine are in the wash right now. Hope you don’t mind.”

“Not at all,” Janet said. She sliced into her quiche. After taking a bite, she added, “You ever call Logan’s? My camera’s in there for repair and I need it back if I decide to take the Merced River gig.”

“It’s done. You can pick it up tomorrow. So, you’re still thinking on going?”

“Depends,” Janet said. “Nate comes first.”

Megan took a sip of coffee. “The invitations for the Alzheimer’s Gala are in. I set the box on your desk.”

“Great. You check quantities and dates?” Janet said.

“Three hundred...January 10th, right?”

“Yep, good...We need to set up a meeting with the board for decorations and food. Can you make some phone calls?”

“Sure,” Megan said. She bit into her piece of toast and put her finger up. “Oh, I meant to tell you, Don called yesterday.”

Janet set her fork down. *Pain in my ass publisher!* “He can wait. I’ve got a wounded son coming home.” She took a couple more bites of her breakfast. “And my galley, did you go over it?”

Starting Over

Megan downed the last bite of her quiche, picked up her plate and took it to the sink. “It’s all good.” Over her shoulder, she added, “By the way, there’s an invitation on the counter from the guild. Apparently, they want you at some trade show as a guest speaker regarding your books.”

“I’ll look it over later,” Janet said, knowing Megan had probably been chatting with Don. Her stepdaughter probably thought she was helping by mentioning the guild to Don, but it was the last thing she needed.

* * *

The ride north to Portland dragged despite Megan’s prattling on about Ben. And if it wasn’t Ben she was talking about, it was Kyle’s wedding. But Janet’s mind was on Nate. She pulled into the terminal parking garage and parked. Turning the engine off, she pulled the key out of the ignition with trembling hands.

She took a deep breath, and turned to her stepdaughter. “I’m scared, Meg. What if--“

Megan clasped her fingers around Janet’s hand and squeezed. “He’s gonna be okay, Jan, don’t worry.”

Janet sat back, wiped her eyes and tried to steady her nerves. “I’ve waited so long for him to come home, but I never wanted it this way.”

“I know. But the important thing is, he’s back.”

“Yes,” Janet said, wanting to believe it. “I just wish I knew what to expect. He was so cryptic about his injury. What if he...”

Megan held Janet with a defiant gaze. “Stop! I refuse to believe the worst. And you need to as well. Now come on, let’s go get him.”

Janet looked at her stepdaughter, loving her more than she thought possible. For over thirty years they’d been tied together. They were best friends before Megan’s father came and changed everything. Falling in love with Megan’s father had happened so gradually she hadn’t seen it coming. By the time it finally hit her, it was too late to turn back. Suddenly, the tight bond between her and Megan unraveled and for the

Starting Over

next twenty-seven years they circled each other like a pair of Tom Cats. In the end though, they built a bridge back to each other and laid a new foundation of trust, putting the past hurts behind them. If for no other reason, Janet trusted Megan to keep her pointed in the right direction. Nobody knew her better than Megan.

Finally, she said, “Yes, you’re right. Let’s go get him!”

Janet swept through the front doors of the terminal and panned the expansive Travelport Hall for the incoming arrival’s screen. It was shortly after twelve noon and the lines at the ticketing counters were short. She tapped Megan on the arm and pointed to an electronic bulletin board to their left and headed toward it.

“Nate’s flight’s due to land in ten minutes,” she said then turned and hoofed it to the escalators leading to the security checkpoint. With every step, her heart raced and her hands dampened. Normally, she would’ve looked up at the barrel vaulted skylight and space frame steel rods -- a habit she’d picked up from twenty-five years with her architect husband – but not today. She stepped off the escalator into a sea of reporters. Signs of “WELCOME HOME NATE” and “SALEM’S HERO’S BACK” bobbed up and down in the throng gathered near the TSA exit point. Off to the side, stood Trevor and Nadia. Megan, who was trailing behind her, steered clear of them and immersed herself in the crowd.

Janet pushed through the crowd and joined Trevor, her gaze darting to the exit aisle beside the checkpoint.

Trevor said, “Hey Janet. Hell of a crowd, huh? There must be a hundred people here.”

“He’s not gonna like this,” Janet said.

“No, I don’t expect he will. Anyway, I’m going for a cup of coffee.” He turned to Nadia. “What about you, hon? Want anything?”

Starting Over

“I’m quite all right for the moment,” Nadia said in her exacting German accent. “Janet, why don’t you come sit with me?”

“I couldn’t if I tried,” Janet said. She checked her watch and tried to contain herself. *He should be here by now. Where are you, Nate?*

The overhead intercom squawked, announcing a flight arrival from Chicago. A few minutes later, a stream of incoming travelers poured through the exit aisle. Breathlessly, Janet watched them walk past her on their way to unknown destinations until at last there he was in his army fatigues, hobbling along with another soldier. When he saw her, he waved.

As she ran to him, the crowd surged behind her. Cameras flashed as Nate put his hand up, sheltering his eyes from the lights. The soldier beside him bolted forward and held the crowd at bay as Janet threw her arms around her son. He let her hold him a moment then stepped out of her grasp. The separation stung. She wanted more. Wanted to keep touching his face, inhale the citrus scent of his cologne and inspect him like a newborn baby.

“You must be exhausted,” she said, glancing at the brace that went the full length of his leg. She fought the urge to drag him back into her arms and forced herself to smile. That’s what she had to do when it came to public affection with Nate. He said it made him feel like a child. Well, he was her child and always would be. Again, not for the first time, she wondered how they’d come to this fencing of emotions. Where did she lose her baby and when? Was it the war or was it the Montgomery family curse, which demanded utmost decorum in all things?

“I’m whipped, but I’ll manage,” he admitted. He nodded toward his companion. “That’s PFC Jennings. We met up in Germany. He lives in Salem so we caught a ride together.”

The tall, dark-haired man glanced back from holding the crowd away and put his hand out to Janet. “Nice to meet you ma’am.”

Starting Over

She looked back into his transparent blue eyes. Ma'am wasn't a name she was accustomed to hearing herself called. She shook his hand. "Nice to meet you, too. So, were you in Nate's unit?"

The private glanced at Nate. "Umm..."

"No, he was in Alpha company," Nate said, cutting in emphatically. He winked at Jennings. "Careful, she'll put you under a light and interrogate the hell outta you."

"Nathan James Porter, I would do no such thing," she said, aghast.

Just then, Megan popped out of the crowd and ran to them. She hugged Nate and when she pulled away, the questions came from the crowd in a torrent about his heroic deeds and what he had planned for the future. Nate panned the crowd and looked away. Finally, he said, "Thanks for coming everyone. But, hey, it's been a long ride so I'm pretty tired right now. Maybe we can do this another time." To Megan, he said, "Can we get the hell out of here?"

They managed to escape and found a small Italian restaurant on the east side of town. After they ate, Janet dropped Megan off at Kyle's and settled in for the two-hour drive home. As she drove along Interstate 5 under a slate sky, she watched her son from the corner of her eye. His gaze was fixed straight ahead at the passing fields of winter wheat and rye. Whatever was on his mind, it had his complete attention. *Should I say anything? Would it push him further away? The last time I pressed him, he shut down. How long should I wait? Is there ever a right time?*

"So, I assume Tracy knows you're home," she said at last.

He shivered and glanced back at her. "What?"

"Tracy. She knows you've been discharged, right?" She held her breath hoping he wouldn't erect one of his famous barricades around his heart.

He shifted in his seat. "Yeah, she knows," he said, brushing the question away like crumbs off a cheap suit.

Starting Over

“She must be worried.”

He averted his attention to his passenger-side window. “I guess.”

There it was. Her heart had guessed right. Tracy was no longer part of Nate’s future. She ached for him. All she ever wanted was for him to be happy and safe, insulated from the deep bitterness the world was dishing out like breath-mints at a funeral. She blamed herself. Somehow she’d failed him.

For the next twenty minutes, they said nothing until finally, he turned to her. “I’ve been thinking about getting an apartment. I’d like to do it as soon as possible. You wouldn’t mind would you?”

His words slammed into her like a sucker punch, taking her breath away. For a moment she didn’t know what to say. The thought of him living on his own so soon after getting home hadn’t occurred to her. Sure, he’d want his own place at some point...but so quickly? She swallowed her surprise and buried her disappointment in a smile. “No, of course not, honey. But I think you’re gonna be busy with this medal stuff for a bit. And, you’ll need a job at some point and what about your leg? Won’t you need--”

“Mom!” His tone was firm, leaving no room for argument. “I don’t want talk about it, okay?” He shifted in his seat. “Don’t look at me like that. I’m fine.”

No, you’re not, Nate. She saw his jaw tighten and his shoulder flex. Her grip on the wheel increased. It was taking all her strength to keep from stopping the car and pulling him into her. “I know you are. I just want you to remember you have a home for as long as you want.”

“I know.”

He turned his face toward her, and for a moment she saw his father’s determined frown when he wanted something and nothing was going to get in the way. And now he’d become a sterner version of his father. Rigid and unbendable; his beautiful endearing spirit crammed way

Starting Over

deep down, like tattered photos in attic boxes that fade under the dust of years.

Starting Over