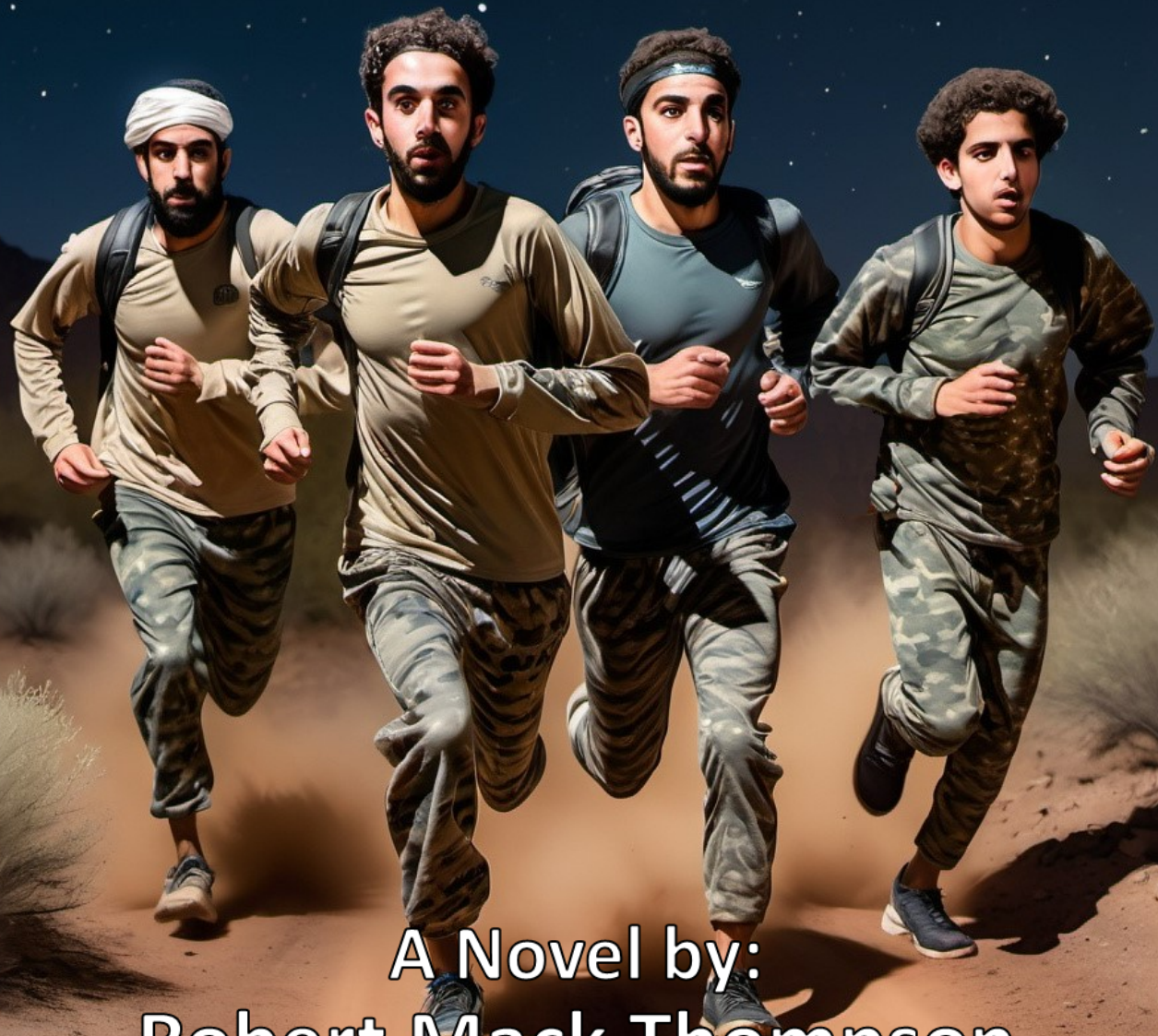


The Gotaways

And The Last Hug



A Novel by:
Robert Mack Thompson

The Gotaways

And The

Last Hug

Written and images by: Robert Mack Thompson

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This book is dedicated to the many millions of American citizens that have lost their lives or suffered immensely due to the criminality along the borders of the United States of America.

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A Word From The Author

It's scary and dangerous – a romantic love story – both heartbreaking and patriotic. In the shadows, organized domestic terrorists plot – and terrorism could happen to anyone – anywhere!

Starting in 2021 and lasting for a span of four years, the Southern border of the United States had been overrun by an illegal invasion of people, a mostly silent invasion numbering in the tens of millions! These illegal aliens had been coming from almost every country, from all around the world. The official United States border patrol classification, for illegal border crossers that were visually seen by border patrol, but escape apprehension, are counted and documented these days, as **Gotaways**. Simply put, they got...away. The vast majority of gotaways are either known criminals, individuals planning crimes, or the biggest threat of all, potential terrorists – all of which make them enemies of the American people. Beyond the gotaways themselves, this book focuses on their victims, the human aftermath of domestic terrorism, and the patriots prepared to counter this threat.

A wounded victim reaches out to a paramedic and conveys his dying wish, which has the potential to touch the victim's entire family as they deal with the loss. This is a story that exposes the dangers posed by these gotaways – how their victims meet their fate – the overwhelming emotional grief of a lost love, and the family and friends left behind in the terrorists wake – including one man's extraordinary dying wish.

During the four years of this invasion, the number of illegal aliens crossing into the United States, had been dramatically accelerated with help from the federal government of the United States. The promise of the federal government to provide benefits to illegal aliens, that exceed that of United States citizens on social security, had proven to be a powerful lure. At the same time, most of the news media had intentionally remained complicit, suppressing any information from the American public, that the borders were being over-run. Essentially, the illegals were being paid to come, cross the border, and surrender to border patrol. Once they were somewhat documented by border patrol, they were quickly released into the United States.

For years, the unlawful catch and release policies of the U.S. federal government, provided free transportation for the illegals to enter and travel throughout the United States, to anywhere they chose, complete with free housing, free medical care, and cash welfare payments every month.

The gotaways, had opted to forgo these benefits, worth-thousands of dollars each month for every individual. They would sneak into the country so that they could more easily act out their nefarious plans. **With over two million gotaways known to have entered the United States, over just the four years of this invasion, there could easily already be over 1,000 dedicated terrorists, purposely positioned within America right now! – Silently, waiting for orders that will trigger them to act.**

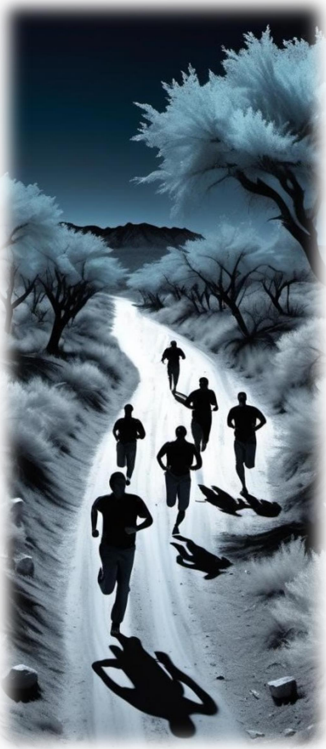
Consider that the border between America and Mexico is 1,954 miles long. A huge border, and impossible to completely control with the meager resources available. During this four year invasion, most border patrol agents had been consumed with managing millions of illegal border crossers that surrender, rather than guarding the border. Also Consider the likelihood that there could easily be just as many illegal border crossers that were never seen by border patrol, as there are gotaways. The border crossers that were never seen – they effectively gotaway too – without being counted.

Right now, the potential threat of terrorism within the United States, is greater than ever in history!

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Chapter 1

The Crossing

Along the unforgiving southern Texas border, night pressed down on the six figures moving briskly along a dirt path. Under a heavy cloak of inky blackness, punctuated only by the distant glimpse of a coyote's eyes, the men trek quickly through the wilderness. Sweat beaded on their foreheads despite the cool desert air, a testament to the physical exertion, and nervous tension that was shared between them. Their objective: To cross through an extreme desolate stretch of the US-Mexico border, a desert landscape unfit for humans.

Hours earlier, they'd meticulously planned their route, because this wasn't a casual stroll across a marked boundary. This was a clandestine operation, a calculated breach of international lines, with specific pre-planned nefarious objectives. Now, under the watchful eye of a half-moon, they waded chest-deep through the Rio Grande. The water, surprisingly cold, sent a jolt through their systems, a momentary distraction from their lawbreaking mission.

Splashing through the shallows, then emerging onto the damp riverbank on the US side, they paused for a moment to catch their breath, and assess their surroundings. The air was strong with the scent of mesquite and damp earth, and held a strange stillness, broken only by the gurgling of the river behind them. Then each man, clad head-to-toe in camouflage, seemed to melt into the surrounding brush, shouldering a heavy backpack, its contents a mystery even to some within



the group. A curt nod from their leader, a man whose face remained obscured by the darkness, was their only signal.

With practiced efficiency, they moved into the brush, bodies low and silent. The skeletal limbs of nearby trees clawed at the starlit sky, casting long, menacing shadows that danced across their path. Every rustle of leaves, every snap of a twig, sent a jolt of adrenaline through their veins. Were they the only ones stalking the night, or were unseen eyes watching their every move? The vast unfriendly emptiness of the landscape, offered a chilling sense of vulnerability.

They pressed on, their pace quickened by a shared sense of urgency. This desolate stretch of border, chosen for its remoteness, was their gateway – But to what? The answer, shrouded in secrecy lay ahead, waiting to be revealed in the unforgiving embrace of the Texas night.

Hundreds of feet above the desolate border landscape, a silent sentinel whirred through the night sky. A remote-controlled drone, its belly glowing with a faint infra-red pulse, scanned the terrain with an impartial, thermal gaze. Below, the flickering heat signatures of six figures emerged from the brush, their presence a stark contrast against the cool desert terrain. The drone operator, a seasoned border agent with steely focus, watched the scene unfold on his monitor.

His voice transmitted over the radio, sending an urgent message to his entire team, consisting of three Border Patrol trucks. Manned by both border control agents and local police, the trucks were positioned several miles away from the reach of his drone. His voice called out to his fellow agents, "Got something – heat signatures spotted – possible border crossers. Grid reference Alpha-Charlie-Seven. Subjects moving North at a brisk pace." The response was immediate. Engines roared as the trucks lurched forward, kicking up



plumes of dust in their wake. Tough veteran agents, patriotic and protective, gripped the sturdy roll bars as the vehicles bounced along the rough dirt track, every bump, a test of their determination.

Meanwhile, the drone continued its silent surveillance. The illegal border crossers below, oblivious to the watchful eye overhead, hurried through the treacherous terrain. Jagged rocks tore at their boots, thorny bushes snagged at their clothes, and their clothes, now cold and wet, sapped their energy. Yet, they pressed on, driven by an unseen urgency, and desperate not to be caught.

As the drone's visual on the agent's monitor drew closer to the heat signatures, the landscape abruptly shifted. The rolling hills gave way to a maze of steep ravines and loose rocks, a formidable barrier thrown up by nature itself. The trucks, straining to the limits of their off-road capabilities, were forced to a halt. The drone pilot made it known, saying, "The drone is low on electricity. You had better make this quick." With a grim nod exchanged between them, the agents dismounted, grabbing their gear and leaving behind the relative safety of their vehicles. Purposely left behind, the drone pilot and another man stayed with the vehicles.

But the drone's mission was far from over. A warning of dwindling battery power began to flicker on the controller. The agent at the controls cursed under his breath. He needed to maintain visual contact, to guide his colleagues on foot through the treacherous terrain. Without the overhead visual, the pursuit would become too dangerous. Every passing second was a gamble, a race against time and the fading battery life of their silent guardian in the sky.



The fleeing men pushed themselves further, lungs gasping, legs diminishing in protest. But the relentless beam of flashlights closing the distance, told a different story. The agents were gaining. A strangled gasp

escaped the leader's throat, as he barked an order in Arabic. One man, his face etched with a mixture of fear and resolve, stepped forward. His sacrifice, it was decided, would be the key to their escape.

"Head east," the leader demanded, pointing towards the horizon. "Draw their attention, then keep running. We'll continue North." The chosen man, shaken by the inevitability of his capture, he obediently shed his backpack, a silent farewell to his meager belongings. The leader grabbed his arm to get his attention for some final instructions. Still speaking in Arabic, he said, "Don't fight them, and don't speak any words to them – stay completely silent no matter what. If you don't fight them and they think you are ordinary, they will eventually let you go into America." With a nod and a final haunted look at his companions, he turned and sprinted back towards the approaching agents. As he left, the leader opened the backpack he left behind, removed a handgun and a plastic container, then tossing the backpack to the ground, the rest was to be abandoned.



It wasn't long before the powerful beams of flashlights, stabbing into the night, illuminated the lone figure of just this single man. At the same time, the drone pilot, his voice laced with urgency, crackled over the radio. "Drone's out of juice! Right now setting her down."

The agents knew they no longer had aerial support, so they reacted instinctively, sprinting after the lone man that they could see with their own eyes. The illegal was able to run faster without having to carry the extra weight of a backpack, and led his pursuers towards the East. He was fueled by the desperate hope of leading the agents astray, and the fearful desire to escape. In addition, the agents were tiring also. He was successfully able to lead them a great distance, over a couple of miles to the East as planned, before exhaustion, a cruel mistress, eventually claimed him. Now cornered, he stumbled to his knees, offering no

resistance as the agents swarmed him. Adding to the success of his misdirection, as a prisoner he became an anchor, preventing the agents from pursuing his accomplices.



One man was in custody, and 5 were still at large. The agents returned to their trucks, with frustration shown on their faces, and the drone pilot was eventually able to retrieve his silent sentinel. Back at the command post, a disappointing report summarized the night's events: one captured – five gotaways. A bittersweet victory – proof of the border patrol's vigilance, but a disappointing reminder of the losing battle against the tide of those who seek to breach the border, illegally.

In recent years, many millions of people have crossed the border illegally, and then surrendered voluntarily to border agents. These crossers are rewarded with benefits, which can be characterized as payment for coming into the US, and surrendering. However, it's the gotaways that are by far the most concerning. These crossers have forgone these free benefits, because of either their depraved criminal history, or their future nefarious plans. Numbering in the millions also, they are completely unidentified, as they secretly fan out across America.

After many hours of being constantly on the move, the gotaways had reached their first paved road. The five figures, clumsy and fatigued, emerged from the dense undergrowth onto the edge of a deserted 2-lane highway. But celebration would have to wait. They retreated back into the bushes alongside the road. After resting for a few minutes, the leader gave the order for everyone to change clothes. Each of the men removed their camo, abandoning this clothing within a clump of bushes. Then they pulled out of their backpacks, common street clothes, so as to blend into the anonymity of ordinary American citizens.

The group's leader discretely walked away from the others, then made a phone call. With the first attempted call going unanswered, he dialed again. This time he got through, a torrent of Arabic words flowed from the leader's lips, punctuated by nods and worried glances back at his companions. Relief flooded his face as he ended the call. As a prearranged signal, the leader walks out to the highway, and places a plastic blue reflector onto the side of the road. Then he settled back into the brush with his comrades, where they sat and waited. It wasn't long before a pair of headlights pierced through the night, momentarily blinding them. A pickup truck with a cap on the back, lumbered to a stop adjacent to the reflector. The leader walked out and approached the driver, a wary exchange of words passing between them in hushed tones. Then with a hand signal from the group's leader, the group emerged from the cover of the brush, and quickly piled into the back of the truck.

The truck turned around and drove down the road for about 11 miles, then pulls into a driveway of a small house, adjacent to a convenience store with gas pumps. It had been a long night for the illegal aliens, and they had a hard time not falling asleep to the rhythmic swaying of the truck. The driver emerged from the cab, and disappeared into the house. Moments later, the door opened and he waved his hand to signal the others. One-by-one, the men emptied the truck and came inside the house.

The men just stood in the living room, wondering what to do next. A nervous woman inside the house looked on, likely the wife of the man who had picked them up. The woman glared at the men with distain, and it was clear that she did not appreciate their arrival.

Finally, the man that drove the truck spoke to the group, "Welcome – my name is Diego – we need to talk." Assuming a command posture, he placed his hands on his hips, and then continued, "I was told that all of you, have spent at least a year in America on student visas, so you speak English fairly well. You must blend in again. So from now on, you will only speak English – no Arabic at all – ever."

Diego held up a hand full of envelopes, then fanned them out like playing cards, saying, "I have an envelope individually prepared for each one of you." Diego glanced inside each envelope, and then handed the

envelope to a specific person. After each man had an envelope, he continued speaking again, "Inside these envelopes, you will find your new name, on a forged Arizona driver's license. Each driver's license has your picture on it, the same picture that was received here in advance, over a month ago. Plus, there is also a sheet of paper with a few paragraphs outlining your new fake personal background." There was an extra left over envelope, due to the man that didn't make it.

The men studied the contents within their envelopes for a couple of minutes, comparing with each other, their new Arizona driver's license. Then Diego explained, "Your new names, were selected from a list of common Mexican names. As a part of your disguise and to avoid suspicion, you come from Mexico, not from anywhere in the middle-east. I want you to listen very closely, because this is a very important part of your disguise – never, ever, divulge that you don't speak Spanish." The men seemed to understand everything Diego was saying, and they didn't have any questions. The group's leader was given an envelope with the name, Carlos Mendoza on it. This name, would soon become historically infamous, a name that would soon be associated with pure unmitigated evil.

It was early morning and the sun was just coming up, while Diego continued his lecture, "You will not leave here until tomorrow at sunrise – today, you rest – you will hide inside this house, in a back room I have for you. I will be working at my store, right next door, all day today. I want you to take showers right away, because you smell really bad. Then after you are clean, my wife will feed you." With looks of content the men glanced at each other. "Tomorrow you will leave in the cars I have outside for you – only 2 people per car."

Diego pointed at the leader, "Carlos I think – do you have something for me?" Now, with a new tension in the room, the newly named Carlos, gave a slow affirmative nod, and then the two men slowly walked over to the kitchen table. The house went silent with all eyes on the kitchen. They hesitated for a moment, reading each other's eyes, and then Carlos slowly reached into his backpack – while Diego's right hand remained suspiciously in his pocket. Between the two men, there was definitely a degree of caution and distrust. Carlos pulled a black plastic container out of his backpack, then placed it on the table, saying, "Here you go... \$60,000 in

\$20 dollar bills.” Diego replied with a grin, “Good – I have to go to work now.” Picking up the plastic container, Diego made his way to the front door. From the doorway, he paused, and looked back at Carlos with a parting comment, “I’ll see you again around 8:00pm tonight.” Then he closed the door behind him as he left.

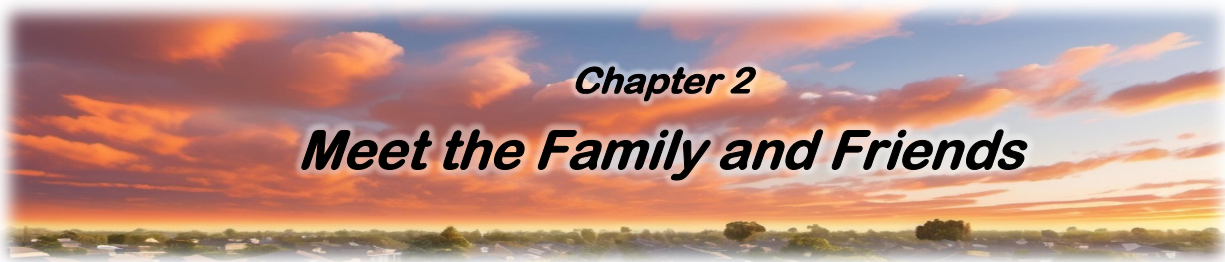
Diego’s wife turned towards the men, and orders them with an arrogant tone, “Nobody sits – Nobody touches anything, until after you have had a shower. All of you smell worse than a stray dog.” Unbeknownst to the wife, comparing Carlos to that of a stray dog was a seriously wrong move, especially when spoken by a woman. Carlos is very intolerant towards women, and shaming him in this way could be dangerous.

Apparently, the border crossing for these gotaways was extremely well funded, with substantial connections already present in America. Now hiding in the shadows, like many others, they had just become part of a sophisticated network, purposely positioned within and throughout the United States.

The American holiday of Thanksgiving dawned the next morning, a celebration of feasting and family that held no significance for the gotaways. Shortly before the first rays of sunlight pierced the horizon, the house stirred. Cars, strategically placed by their facilitator Diablo, awaited them in front of the house. Two-by-two, the men emerged, each departing with ten minutes between them to avoid attention. With a final glance back at their temporary haven, they pulled away, dissolving into the sparse early morning holiday traffic.

Carlos, the last to leave, found himself alone behind the wheel. Back inside the house, there was an eerie silence. Lying perfectly still in bed were Diablo and his wife, their bedding covered in blood – after a knife attack that sliced their throats during the night. It seems Carlos didn’t like or trust the wife, with whom he had several altercations with during their brief stay. He had decided not to leave behind any potentially hostile witnesses – even those that might provide future aid. Carlos is on a one-way path forward, and he has no problem with surrounding his journey with death. – It is clear, that Carlos Mendoza is the Monster. A monster that is now loose in America.

Traveling the highway, Carlos passes by a roadside information sign that read – "San Antonio, 126 miles." A silent destination on the horizon, and a road sign that whispered a promise and a threat, for more death.



Chapter 2

Meet the Family and Friends

The aroma of brewing coffee mingling with the crisp autumn air, served as a gentle nudge that Thanksgiving morning had arrived. Glowing red morning sunlight, had just peeked through the curtains of the Johnson household, rousing Dave and Julie from their slumber. A warmly spoken, "Happy Thanksgiving," exchanged between them set the tone for the day. They lingered in bed, enjoying the rare luxury of a slow start to their day. Soft conversation filled the air, as they chatted about the day's festivities, finalizing details for the incoming wave of family, and the culinary extravaganza to come.

The Savory Texan Diner, a beloved institution in the Canyon Creek Community for decades, has always been a hub for social and family gatherings for delicious meals. Owned and managed by Dave and Julie, the restaurant's kitchen was typically bustling with activity at this time. However, unlike most mornings at their restaurant, the enticing clatter of pots and pans, wouldn't emanate from the kitchen today.

On this day, Dave and Julie had chosen to keep closed, the restaurant's doors. It was a paid holiday for their entire staff, a tradition they held dear. For Dave and Julie, ensuring their employees had the chance to celebrate special occasions with loved ones, was an essential part of their business philosophy. Thanksgiving, a day of gratitude and togetherness, was a perfect example of that philosophy in action.

For the Johnsons, lying around in bed didn't last long, they had much to do. Before 9:00am they had placed a large turkey in the oven, and began preparations for the arrival of a sizable crowd of family and friends. Their spirited pet cocker spaniel, Bella, was intuitively extra excited this morning, as if she recognized that the change in routine meant an especially fun day – with hopefully lots of treats for her. The Johnsons home was nestled on the shores of Canyon Lake, a vast expansive lake, shimmering 40 miles north of San Antonio. Their backyard embraced the lake with a private dock, where Dave's pride and joy, a gleaming pontoon boat resided. Weekends for the Johnsons were a celebration of family,

often spent cruising the crystal-clear blue waters, and soaking up the warm Texas sun.

Determined to launch the festivities at his home with an early start, Dave hatched a plan with his son Davey, to arrive well before the others. Davey, Dave's eldest child, arrived around 10:00am with his wife Linda and their three children in tow: Lilly (age 13), David Jr. III (age 10), and the energetic Jimmy (age 6). The grandkids were especially excited, because for them, Thanksgiving wasn't just about a grand feast, for this crew, it was a full day of family fun. Eager to hit the water before the grand meal, the whole gang, a bunch of water sports enthusiasts, purposely arrived early for some lake time on the boat. Warm hugs and excited chatter filled the air, as the delicious aroma of turkey wafted from the kitchen, a promise of a joyous and good tasting Thanksgiving to come.



Dave announced to everyone that he was turning on his laptop so that Jen, his youngest daughter could log in and join the Thanksgiving festivities. Nestled in southwestern Germany, Ramstein Air Base is always pulsating with activity, even on Thanksgiving Day. As the headquarters for the US Air Forces in Europe, it's home to over 54,000 American service members, including Airman Jennifer Johnson. Stationed there for her first overseas deployment, Jennifer, known as Jen to her loved ones, serves as a dedicated air traffic controller. Though she enjoys the comradery with fellow airmen on base, staying connected to her family back in Texas, remains a priority for Jen, who is still single and without children.



Still in uniform, Jen's face lit up on the Skype screen as familiar voices filled her room. Back at home in Texas, a joyous commotion erupted at Dave's house, as the growing crowd of family eagerly greeted her. Even Jen's 10-year-old nephew got into the

act, putting on a puppet show with a Tyrannosaurus Rex puppet – a clear sign of their special bond. Despite the time difference (it was still morning in Texas, while evening had descended upon Jen's location), the miles between them couldn't dampen their spirits. With her shift complete, Jen was free for the rest of the evening, determined to celebrate Thanksgiving with her family, virtually.

After the flurry of greetings had concluded, Dave, his son Davey, and the kids escaped the house and piled into the boat, eager to kick off their Thanksgiving with some water thrills. This time of year the water was getting a bit cooler, so all the kids were wearing their wet suits – they were all well prepared for some fun. Bella was excited, but she was left behind at the patio glass sliding door, and she could see the boat with people onboard about to leave. While anxiously wagging her tail, she seemed to be saying, “What about me? I want to go too!” Just then, Dave came back into the house, and began to put a life preserver on Bella. She knew what that meant, she was going after all. It wasn't long before she was running across the backyard to jump on the boat. Meanwhile, Linda teamed up with Julie in the kitchen, ensuring a delicious feast awaited their return.



After getting underway on the boat, the plan was to start with knee boarding, each child taking turns carving up the water and catching air on the wake. They'd wrap up the adventure with a wild ride on the tube. Unlike the kneeboard's solo ride, the tube was all about chaos – all three kids would climb on to the tube at the same time, clinging tight as Dave repeatedly weaved the boat, sending them on a slingshot ride from side to side, launching them over the wake with laughter and shrieks. Davey even managed to connect with Jen via video call, sharing the excitement live. Witnessing the familiar scene of the family filled with such boating fun, gave Jen a warm sense of connection that was able to overcome the physical distance between them. It wasn't so long ago that she was out boating too.

The mouthwatering aroma of Thanksgiving filled the air by 2 pm, when all the boaters returned home. The previously peaceful chatter in the kitchen, transformed into noisy commotion, as the boaters recounted their adventures to Julie and Linda.

Linda, needing a hand with the children, enlisted Davey to get the kids prepped for dinner. Rounding up the kids, Davey got their attention, saying, “Okay, you dirty bunch of kids! – it’s time to come clean!” Showers were taken, faces scrubbed, and clothes changed. Adding to the excitement, shortly after the boaters' return back to the house, Dave and Julie's other daughter, Mary, arrived with her two children, Michael (age 9) and Nancy (age 6).

A divorced single mom, Mary juggled raising Michael and Nancy in Austin, an hour North, while teaching at the local high school. The cousins' reunion was joyous, filled with hugs and excitement. This close-knit family thrived on these gatherings. Dave, noticing Jen was engrossed with the activities from her view on the laptop, suggested Mary and her children say hello to Jen. The miracle of technology, continued to bridge the distance, enabling Dave and Julie's entire family to celebrate Thanksgiving together.



With the turkey out of the oven, and the family all in attendance, it was now time for Dave to carve the turkey, with Julie's assistance of course. Although it was tradition for Dave to do the carving, Julie had invested too much time into selecting, stuffing, and cooking the turkey, to leave it to just Dave.

Just arriving to the festivities, were longtime family friends, Mack and Abby Thompson. Dave had known Mack since their high school days, and they were the best of friends. Abby, renowned for being a pie maker extraordinaire, brought a delightful spread; cherry, apple, and of course, her famous pecan pie. Recognizing Jennifer on the laptop, Mack and Abby, who knew the entire

Johnson family well, expressed their surprise to see her. Mack said to Jen, "We are all very proud of you, you're my favorite airman – thanks for keeping our country safe." Mack even offered a salute as a token of his gratitude.



Next to arrive, were Dave and Julie's next-door neighbors, Juan and Maria Perez, joining the gathering with their son, Andre, a high school senior. Juan is a career police officer, and a respected Captain in the San Antonio Police Department. After dropping off a large serving dish full of mashed sweet potatoes, with toasted marshmallows on top in the kitchen, they warmly greeted everyone both young and old.

Not long after Juan had arrived, he pulled Dave and Mack aside revealing good news, he had snagged the tickets for the big game! Weeks prior, the guys had tasked Juan with securing three tickets to the upcoming Texan Bowl in San Antonio – a Christmas-time football showdown at the Alamo Sports Center, a domed indoor stadium. Juan proceeded to give Dave and Mack their tickets, “Put them in a safe place,” advised Juan. “There are no more to be had.” Mack carefully stashed his ticket in his wallet, while Dave placed his ticket in his home office, inside a desk drawer.

Launching a flurry of activity, the men swiftly moved the living room furniture out onto the back porch, then filled the room with rented tables, and fancy white folding chairs. With everyone pitching in, they had quickly created a spacious seating area to comfortably accommodate everyone’s family. Crisp white linens adorned the tables, and Julie brought out her elegant dishes and festive centerpieces with candles. The atmosphere was filled with anticipation, as the delicious aroma of the feast filled the house. Finally, the tables were set, the food piping hot, and everyone was called to find their seats.

As steaming platters of food were passed around, requests for favorite parts flew. Mack declared his love for a turkey leg, a sentiment likely shared by many. Davey’s youngest son, Jimmy, piped up with a more unique request, “I want a turkey hand!” Amidst chuckles and before anyone had a chance to tell Jimmy that turkeys don’t have hands, Dave was quick to reply, “Just a minute Jimmy, I’ll be right back with your turkey hand.” Disappearing into the kitchen, Dave emerged with a perfectly sliced piece of white meat, artfully shaped into a hand. Jimmy’s delight was contagious, and Dave, with a twinkle in his eye asked, “Jimmy, would you like any gravy on you turkey hand?” “No...” he replied, “I like to eat my turkey hands straight.” Likely, someday after Jimmy gets older, he’s going to wonder what happened to all the turkey hands.

Anticipation filled the air as platters circled the tables, and everyone loaded their plates. A shared understanding hung between them – Dave would offer a few words of reflection, and a blessing before they dug in. Patience reigned, with only a few, sly tastes taken, as a kind of testing of the food.

At last, Dave stood, summoning the room's attention, and then he began with an excited cheer, he yelled out, "Happy Thanksgiving everyone!" After a collective exchange of "Happy Thanksgiving", Dave continued his speech, saying, "Although we often give thanks throughout the year, this is the one day where we all stop everything were doing, we come together for a magnificent meal, and we share our appreciation for all the good favor that god has given to us. I'd like for you to take a moment, and look around the room at all the faces..." With everyone glancing around, Dave continued, "Today is the day we pause, and reflect, on everything in our lives that we are thankful for. You are all very special. The people in this room are united, and can always depend on each other through any adversity. Thank you all for being so special, and for coming. Being thankful means a lot more, when we openly share our appreciation together, side by side, as family and friends."

Dave began the prayer – "Dear God – thank you – for all the good favor that enabled all of us to be here together today. As we move forward in life, we pledge to you our loyalty – and as we strive to be our Max, we do so to honor you – amen." The room answered back with a unanimous, "Amen." With the amen, the feasting began – and oh what a feast it was!

Dave had a core philosophy that he instilled in his children – finding life's meaning comes from reaching your full potential. He called it "being your maximum." In any path you walk, or career you choose, student, nurse, lawyer, electrician, or teacher – give it your all. The same goes for your personal life – be the best spouse, friend, or Christian you can be. Strive to maximize everything you do, and avoid compromising distractions. Dave even encouraged his children to reflect on each day, evaluating how close they came to achieving their maximum that day. "Be the Max!" became their family motto.

Laughter mingled with the clinking of silverware against dishes, as warm memories filled the air, like the inviting aroma of roasted turkey. It wasn't just a meal – it was a time capsule, each dish a portal to Thanksgivings past. The sweet potato casserole with toasted marshmallows on top, transported them back to when they were all young, and strived to casually sneak extra marshmallows. A single bite of the tangy cranberry sauce, a family recipe passed down through the years, was like no other and could be found nowhere else. Even the fluffy mashed

potatoes, a seemingly simple dish, held a buttery memory. All the flavors combined to form a kind of emotional strength, a memory peg that grew stronger every year.

Meanwhile, Bella, the resident canine connoisseur, was orchestrating her own Thanksgiving feast. With eyes that could melt glaciers, and a paw that delivered a gentle yet insistent nudge on unsuspecting knees, she weaved her magic. A soulful whimper, strategically timed between bursts of conversation, tugged at the heartstrings of everyone in the room. A hopeful tilt of her head, punctuated by an intentionally placed paw, sent shivers of irresistible charm down everyone's spine. No turkey meat, no slice of ham, was safe from her relentless (and frankly, adorable) campaign. Bella was making out like a bandit.

As everyone ate their Thanksgiving meal, the flavors were all perfect and their taste buds were singing, just like they had remembered. There was lots of conversation, and reminiscing of previous Thanksgivings. The meal was composed of mostly traditional family dishes, and everyone was able to relive the memories of previous Thanksgivings. Bella was making out great also with those incredible begging skills, a talent she learned over years of success – once again she proved she knew how to capitalize on this day.

Later that afternoon, dusk was moving in on the Johnson house, the living room had been returned to its usual arrangement, and a football game played on the wide screen TV. The adults lingered around the tempting pies, while the children, with a mischievous glint in their eyes, approached Dave.

"Ice cream?" Jimmy piped up, the other kids echoing his request with eager nods and smiles. Dave chuckled, knowing exactly what they were after. He had a special set of miniature, one-person bowls for ice cream, bowls shaped like a classic toilet, complete with a cup handle. The kids all knew about them – it was a common tradition when they visited, to have a scoop of ice cream in these wacky bowls.

Dave asked, "Chocolate Bear Claw?" As he winked. "Gotta be chocolate for the full effect, right?"



The children erupted in excited chatter. Dave retrieved the toilet bowls from the cupboard, a perfect match for the number of eager faces. "I'm stuffed from pie," he declared, leaving the bowls for just the kids, who were practically bouncing with anticipation. One by one, Dave filled the bowls with chocolatey ice cream, each child taking theirs with a delighted grin.

Dave said to the kids, "Think of what you can tell your teachers next week," He teased. "They might ask what you did for Thanksgiving. You can honestly say you ate ice cream out of a toilet!"

The adults, catching sight of the whimsical scene, couldn't help but smile and share a few good-natured jokes. The playful spirit of the holiday was alive and well on this special day.

As the evening eventually came to a close, and completely unaware of the pivotal role the Texan Bowl would play...that it might soon alter everyone's life. Dave, Mack, and Juan were all now in possession of tickets to the game – the first step on a collision course with the evil monster that had just infiltrated the border. Inside Dave's desk, his ticket lay dormant, a silent skeleton key – to a future yet unseen. The future ahead remained shrouded, like a fireworks rocket soaring into the night sky, its implication kept secret, and only revealed with a sudden massive explosion, and blazing burst.

Chapter 3

Setting the Stage

Pulling up to a car dealership, in her sporty red SUV, was Violet Wheeler, an exceptionally attractive young 28 year old EMT, employed by the San Antonio Fire Department. She was picking up a fellow EMT that she works with, Sam Harris, having just dropped off his car for servicing. Sam is a muscular man and former collegiate football player, Iraq war veteran, and a more seasoned EMT than Violet in his 40s. They were both in uniform and on their way to the firehouse for their shift.



Having left the dealership with Sam, Violet pulled into a convenience store not far from their firehouse, and she asked, “Sam, are you coming in?” Sam replied, “No, I don’t think so. I’m well stocked at the firehouse.” Violet said that she would be quick as she got out of the car.

In front of the store were three young men, that appeared to be just hanging out. As Violet walked towards the front door of the store, one of the men took a particular interest in Violet. Showing off to his friends, he

stepped up in front of her and said to her, “If you aren’t the prettiest military girl I’ve ever seen!” His friends laughed. Violet just ignored him, and walked past him toward the front door. Then he added, “Girl, I love watching the way you walk! Very nice.” His friends cracked up laughing again.

Violet didn’t like being talked to that way, and she especially didn’t like to be laughed at. That was more than she could stand – she stopped just as she was reaching for the door handle, turned to the disrespectful guy, and walked back towards him. One of his friends said giggling, “Uh oh, you’re really in trouble now!”

“Listen you!” Violet angrily said, “This is not a military uniform!” Pointing to her shirt, Violet defiantly continued, “See this patch, it says EMT. That stands for Emergency Medical Technician. I rescue people and I save lives every – single – day!” As she began to poke him in the chest with her finger, he was caught off guard, and was backing down. But she didn’t let up, asking, “Seriously, what do you do every day? – nothing? – is it your job to just hang out at convenience stores?” Violet put him in his place, then began to turn away, but quickly went back into his face, “If you were bleeding-out laying on a sidewalk somewhere, I’d even rescue you, no matter how obnoxious you are – think about that!” Then she walked away, and disappeared into the store.

Sam saw what was going on, but was late getting out of the car to back Violet up. He walked up to the guy, and while looking him straight in the eye, he said, “You don’t wanna mess with her, she is bad-to-the-bone!” Then Sam continued into the store. One of the guy’s friends was quick to say, “Oh Man! – She sure put you in your place!” The guy was embarrassed and he said to his friend, “Shut-up before I slap you! Let’s get out of here.”

Late that evening, on a desolate highway, like a black ribbon swallowed by the inky embrace of a moonless night. Two headlights pierced through the darkness, and came to a stop off to the side of the deserted asphalt road. The night was still, and silent, as if holding its breath. In the car was Carlos, now a man on a mission, and sitting beside him, another man, his tall and thin frame coiled with nervous energy, tapping his foot as his eyes darted around the empty landscape.

From the rearview mirror, they saw a second car pull in behind them. Its engine rumbled ominously, a low growl that seemed to vibrate through the stillness. Carlos threw the car into park and turned off the lights, with energetic ease he hopped out, his boots crunching on the gravel shoulder. His passenger remained in the shadows, a silent observer. The second car silenced their lights as well, with the motor still running. After closing the door, Carlos strode purposefully towards the other vehicle, his silhouette swallowed by the darkness. The other driver's door swung open with a groan, revealing a man built like a bull, his face obscured by the wide brim of a Stetson hat.

They met in the no-man's land between the vehicles, and there was clearly an unspoken tension between them. A low murmur of conversation erupted, punctuated by emphatic hand gestures that seemed to carve through the still air. The urgency in their voices was obvious, even from a distance. Finally, Carlos reached into his inner pocket and produced a worn envelope, its edges softened by travel. As he handed it to the other driver, their facial expressions were that of serious acknowledgement.

The exchange that followed over the next few minutes, far exceeded the simple transfer of an envelope. It was a silent conversation, a story told in gestures and knowing glances. Carlos moved to the rear hatch of his SUV, popping the latch with a quick flick of his wrist. Inside, nestled amongst packing materials, lay a sizeable cardboard box. Together, the two men wrestled it out, its weight and their gentle care moving it, hinting at the precious cargo it held. The passenger in the other car, a wiry man with a nervous glint in his eyes, emerged from the shadows. He hurried around to the back seat of the car they came in, throwing open the door with a metallic creak. With a grunt and a bit of effort, they maneuvered the box into the vehicle, placing it gently on the back seat as if it held a sleeping infant. The care the other driver took with the box, said a lot about the likely sensitive nature of its contents.

With a curt nod, Carlos turned and walked back to his car, sliding into the driver's seat. His engine roared to life, then his wheels spit gravel as he sped away. Like a magician, Carlos disappeared into the endless darkness. The man with the Stetson hat watched him go, a solitary figure dwarfed by the immensity of the dark night and countryside. Then, with a sigh that

seemed to carry apprehension, he climbed back into his own vehicle. The taillights flickered to life, one much dimmer than the other, a silent testament to a vehicle that needed some maintenance. He hesitated for a moment, then threw the car into gear and peeled away, turning around, and heading back in the same direction from which he came. San Antonio, a beacon of light in the distance, beckoned him closer. But fate, it seemed, had other plans.

As the city lights grew brighter on the horizon, a flicker of blue light appeared in his rearview mirror, growing steadily closer. It was a police cruiser, likely attracted by the dysfunctional tail light. The two men looked at each other with panic in their eyes. Desperate not to be pulled over, the driver slammed his foot on the gas, lurching the car forward, while his passenger grasped for something to hang onto. What followed was a chaotic dance of screeching tires, mangled metal, and shattered glass. The high-speed chase tore through the outskirts of San Antonio, leaving a trail of scrapes and destruction in its wake. Sideswiped cars littered the roads. The two fleeing men, narrowly escaping disaster many times. More police sirens joined the pursuit, turning the night into a symphony of flashing lights and blaring alarms.

The inevitable finally happened, the car pushed beyond its limits, lost control. It spun out like a helpless metal top, before flipping spectacularly several times, and then slamming hard into a concrete telephone pole, with a sickening thud. Silence descended, broken only by the hiss of escaping steam, and the crackle of dying embers. The chase was over. The two men were pinned and unconscious within the wreckage, their fates hanging in the balance.

Violet and Sam were on duty at the fire station that night, when they received the call to proceed to the accident and render assistance. They were quick to get underway, while a fire truck was being dispatched from a different station. When Sam and Violet arrived there were several police cars in the vicinity, and the renegade car was substantially crushed into the concrete pole. They had arrived before the fire truck, so they parked their ambulance a short distance away from the wrecked car, so as to leave enough room for the fire truck to get in close. Violet and Sam quickly collected their medical kits, and rushed to the crushed car to assist.

They immediately realized that both men in the car were unconscious, and tightly pinned in place. The police had already tried to get into the car unsuccessfully. Knocking away shards of glass, Violet reached through the broken driver's window to assess the driver. With a grim expression, she looked over at Sam and said, "I got this." Then she asked, "Sam, can you find a way to get these guys out?" Sam replied, "I'm on it!" While Sam pulled and probed on the car to find a way to get inside, Violet noticed that the driver had, what looked like prayer beads, wrapped around his wrist. Shutting down its siren, the fire truck was just arriving. That's when Sam noticed the cardboard box on the back seat, which had been torn open during the crash. In an instant, Sam was shocked, because he recognized what was on the back seat.

From Sam's multiple tours of duty in the Middle East, on several occasions, his team raided homes and buildings, where they confiscated suicide vests. Sam knew for certain, that the people in the car were in possession of a suicide vest, and it was in clear view on their back seat. To make things worse, a small fire had just ignited near the back of the car, and flames were building.

A moment later, the entire back end of the car erupted on fire from gas leakage. Feeling the scorching heat on his face, Sam yelled BOMB as loud as he could. Turning away from the car, he picked up Violet over his shoulder, and ran. Sam also picked up a police officer that was also close by, and with both people over each of his shoulders, he ran as fast as he could to get away, yelling, "Bomb," over and over to sound the alarm. Just as they rounded past the front of the fire truck, the vest detonated, creating a huge ball of fire high into the sky, fueled by the combined explosives in the vest, and the gas from the car. The concussion from the explosion sent Sam, Violet, and the police officer flying onto the asphalt road. Luckily, the fire truck deflected most of the blast and debris. Prior to the explosion, the other police officers in the area acted quickly, ducking behind their cars, thanks to Sam's warnings.



As the fire raged and smoke filled the sky, the wail of approaching sirens intensified, and were punctuated by the rhythmic thump-thump-thump of helicopter blades overhead. More police cars swarmed the scene, and with them came a bomb squad vehicle. The officers' movements were precise and purposeful, as they cautiously assessed the wreckage. As a precaution, additional fire trucks continued to arrive, staying at a distance, but available in case they were needed. Thankfully, amidst the smoking debris and shattered glass, a wave of relief washed over the gathering of first responders. Sam, Violet, and the police officer that Sam had carried to safety, though shaken and a bit dirty, emerged relatively unscathed. Slowly, they pushed themselves to their feet, adrenaline receding and replaced by a dull ache in their limbs.

Their first instinct was to check on others – a primal urge to ensure they weren't the only ones spared. A quick scan of the surrounding area confirmed their initial hope. Bystanders, though visibly rattled, were unharmed. The only casualties seemed to be the two occupants of the car. What was left of their crumpled and charred forms, lay motionless within the twisted metal frame, a profound consequence for those responsible for the night's events.

As the initial bedlam subsided, a different kind of chaos erupted. News vans materialized like hungry vultures, their satellite dishes soaring into the night sky. Reporters, armed with microphones and insatiable curiosity, descended upon the scene, eager to capture every detail of the dramatic event. The presence of the Police Bomb Squad vehicle, kept the news media persistently engaged. Yellow police tape cordoned off a wider perimeter, pushing back the growing throng of onlookers. The once quiet night was now an uproar of flashing lights, whirring machinery, and shouted questions – a stark contrast to the peaceful evening, that had been shattered not long before.

Later that evening, Sam and Violet talked with a police detective about their involvement, and what they saw. Detective Frank Benson, of the San Antonio Police Department, was on site heading up the investigation, and he eventually debriefed Sam and Violet. Sam explained, that his experience and military background in the middle-east, enabled him to quickly recognize the vest. Violet pointed out, that she thought at first, due to his tan complexion, that the man driving the car may have been Hispanic. But it looked as if he had prayer beads wrapped around his wrist, which made her think that he may have been Muslim, and perhaps of Middle-Eastern descent.

At the conclusion of their interview, Detective Benson asked Sam and Violet for their contact information, and where they could be reached in the coming days. Violet replied, that she and Sam were scheduled to work the Texan Bowl game tomorrow. Sam added, “We’ll be stationed in the First Aid station, and hoping nobody needs us.” Violet was concerned about the explosion this evening, and suggested, saying, “Detective, with what happened here tonight, I strongly recommend that you talk with the stadium people, and put a lot of extra security in place – to be sure another suicide vest doesn’t show up there.” The detective agreed.

Meanwhile, in a dimly lit apartment on the outskirts of San Antonio, Carlos and another man watched the news broad cast on TV, detailing the car chase and explosion. But So far, there was no cause given by police to the news media for the explosion, other than the crash. There had been no mention of the suicide vest in the TV report. It seemed like there were still more questions about what happened, than answers. Carlos commented to

his associate, “We’re ok – those other guys won’t be talking – our plans, they will not change.”

Chapter 4

The Texan Bowl Game!

Finally, game day had arrived, and Dave, Juan, and Mack had been planning their Texan Bowl adventure for over a month. It was around noon, and Dave was just about to leave his house, when Julie reminded him to take his coat, because it was supposed to be cooler later that evening. As Dave closed his front door with his coat in hand, his neighbor, Juan, was already waiting by Dave's car in the driveway, with a big grin and sporting a University of Colorado cap on his head.

"I'm free!" Dave said with excitement and a big smile, then added, "Let's get out of here quick, before Julie finds another chore for me to do." Juan eagerly replied, "So let's hit the road, right now," as they climbed into the car and made their escape.

While they made their way driving out of the neighborhood, Dave was happy to proclaim, "I have my manager, Philip, heading things up at the restaurant today and tomorrow, so I'm on vacation for at least a couple of days."

"That's Great," Juan replied. "You work a lot of hours. It's important that give yourself time off to have fun." Then Juan added with a big smile, "I don't have to go back to the police station until Monday, after New Year's Day."

Dave said, "I called Mack just a little bit ago and he said he is ready, and set to go." Juan gave a nod and replied, "Good, there's nothing to stop us now."

After picking up Mack, the car was filled with animated chatter and friendly banter, followed up by a lively mix of sports predictions. Their next destination, a local sports bar, a pre-game pit stop before heading to the stadium. From there, a quick ride-share would transport them to the heart of the action, the Alamo Sports Center, where the excitement of the game awaited.

A different kind of excitement was brewing for Julie back at the Johnson house. Juan's wife, Maria, and Mack's wife, Abby, were coming over for a "wives party," and to watch the Texan Bowl on TV. The house was already filled with the aroma of delicious food cooking, and Julie was making her final preparations, before the arrival of her friends. For sure, there would absolutely be plenty of wine on the menu as well.

At about the same time, Violet is working out in the gym at the fire station before her shift was to begin. After warming herself up by lifting weights, she put on boxing gloves and walked over to the heavy punching bags. Although, a lot of the other fireman frequently worked out on the punching bags, recognizing the limitations of the existing equipment, Violet had taken the initiative to install a second punching bag – a strategic addition that catered to her unique training style. Violet liked to work both punching bags at the same time.

She began with a series of lighter strikes, her feet finding their rhythm as she alternated between the targets. With each passing moment, her movements gained momentum, her punches growing harder, her kicks more powerful and precise. Her movements were like a choreographed dance, a symphony of punches and kicks, impacts that flowed seamlessly between the two bags. Gradually, she increased the speed and power of her punches, and began delivering a wide variety of kicks. Eventually she opened up, and she unleashed a massive barrage of kicks and punches, each one with carefully executed technique, a testament to her mastery of martial arts. With every strike, Violet's body danced a graceful ballet of violence.

Rocky, the station's captain, walked into the room and stood at the doorway watching. Rocky Thompson was in charge of the fire station. He was a well-seasoned fireman with over 32 years of experience. With grey hair, he was tall with a solid build, and conveyed authority. Many of the firemen thought, that he might eventually be promoted someday, to Fire Chief.

At this stage of her workout, Violet's pounding was shuttering each bag, wildly shaking the chains that held them in place – from spin-kicks, followed up by punches and elbows to each bag – she maintained her

flurry. After watching her ferociously maul the punching bags for a bit, Rocky interrupted, yelling out to get her attention, "Hey Violet." Breathing heavily, Violet stopped and stood there glaring at a bag, with a crazed wild look on her face. Rocky announced, "We have a staff meeting in the meeting room at 2:00 – that's a little over 30 minutes from now – be there." Violet slowly looked over at Rocky and nodded her head. The captain started to leave the room, but then turned back and said, "Violet, you can be scary sometimes, but I'm glad you're on our side." – Then he left the room.

Violet, now showered and refreshed from her intense workout, slipped into her uniform and made her way to the meeting room. As she entered, the meeting room was abuzz with conversations. Sam was entertaining a group of firefighters, describing tales of his explosive encounter the night before. The captain's voice cut through the chatter, "Alright everyone, let's settle down. We're starting this meeting promptly. The San Antonio Police Department, will be presenting to us via video conference. The police chief has some important information about the explosion last night, and he wants to share with all the fire stations in town. He'll be coming on the screen shortly."

A hush fell over the room, as everyone quickly found a seat. Sam and Violet sat next to each other, both of them, anxious to hear about what the police had to say about the explosion. The captain began the meeting, saying, "I'm sure you've all heard about the suspected suicide vest explosion that took place last night. If it weren't for Sam's experience and decisive action, we could have been dealing with a much more tragic situation. So, I want to give a special thank you, to Sam – let's all give Sam a round of applause for his exceptional bravery and decisive action." The room erupted in applause, a well-deserved tribute to Sam's heroism.

The captain continued, saying, "As we move forward, we need to be even more vigilant and observant. Police Chief Thompson will be joining us shortly. He hopes to provide crucial information that will help us protect ourselves, and the public, from these kinds of threats." As the captain spoke, the large screen TV in the room was on, but the online presentation had not started yet.

“So, while we wait for the police chief to join us...” Rocky said, turning his attention to Sam and Violet, he asked, “A couple of weeks ago, you two were assigned to the Alamo Sports Center for tonight’s game. Given the events of last night, if either of you feel uncomfortable with the assignment, I can find replacements if you need a break.” Sam was quick to respond, “No sir, I’m good to go.” Violet echoed his sentiment, saying, “I’m fine too, I have no problem with working the Alamo Center tonight – it should be an easy gig – I got this.” The captain gave an affirmative nod, and replied, “Okay then – and both of you also volunteered for the Military Service Bowl assignment on New Year’s Day. I assume that’s still a go?” Sam and Violet exchanged a glance before nodding in agreement. The captain responded with a grin, “Great! – that makes my life easy.” Sam’s and Violet’s commitment to serving their community remained unwavering, even in the face of a new potential danger, plus the overtime pay feels good too.

Just then, the TV went live with the police, the camera centered on a distinguished mature man, and he immediately began the video conference, “Hello everyone, my name is Ben Thompson, Chief of the San Antonio Police Department. To my right is Detective Frank Benson, and to my left is Detective Sophia Jones.” Sam and Violet recognized Frank and Sophia from the chaotic night before. After introductions were complete, the police chief proceeded with the purpose of the meeting, “I’m going to give you an update, regarding the explosion that took place on the East side of San Antonio last night.” Chief Thompson’s voice was strong and carried a sense of authority as he continued, “Frank and Sophia are heading up the investigation of this explosion. Based on the account of a San Antonio Fire Department EMT, available video footage, and an assessment of the San Antonio Bomb Squad, we believe the explosion was caused by what is commonly called, a suicide vest. Prior to the vest being detonated, it was being transported in a 2007 Nissan Altima, laying horizontally on the back seat of the vehicle – It was not, being worn at the time of detonation.”

The chief’s narrative painted a picture of a high-speed police chase, that ended in a car crash as he continued speaking, “Two men, unconscious and trapped inside the vehicle, were the focus of the emergency responders and the onsite police officers. Paramedic Samuel Harris spotted the vest on the back seat, and immediately recognized the deadly nature of the device.” Upon hearing Sam’s name mentioned by the

police chief, the firemen sharing the meeting room with Sam, acknowledged his new fame, along with a few thumbs up.

The police chief continued his narrative, adding, "As the paramedics and police scrambled to assess the situation, the car burst into flames. "EMT, Samuel Harris immediately issued a warning, alerting police and other emergency personnel in the area, to the imminent danger of the suicide vest. Thanks to the vigilance of Samuel Harris, everyone quickly evacuated the scene and took cover. Shortly after, the vest detonated." All the people in the meeting room with Sam, once again acknowledged his heroism with a shout-out, and applause.

The chief emphasized a crucial detail, saying, "It's important to note, that the vest was positioned horizontally on the back seat at the time of the explosion. This orientation significantly reduced the deadly force of the blast. Had it been worn and positioned vertically, the shrapnel would have been projected outward in all directions, likely causing serious injuries or fatalities."

As the police chief continued to speak, the display on the screen changed away from him, to high-resolution slide images, providing a visual aid to his explanations. A wave of interest rippled through the crowd, with everyone leaning forward in their chairs, attendees exchanged curious glances, eager to absorb the visual information being presented. The police chief's voice continued, providing narration to the slides, "This is what a suicide vest typically looks like. The concept is – there are numerous explosive charges and metal shrapnel, sewn in between 2 layers of fabric, similar to insulation being sewn into a winter coat.

The explosion is commonly triggered by the wearer holding a hand held trigger. For most suicide vests, the trigger utilized is a release trigger, which detonates when the wearer releases the trigger. A safety pin, inserted in the trigger mechanism, prevents detonation until after the pin is pulled out. Another type of trigger, referred to as a positive action trigger, has a button that the wearer pushes to instantly detonate, which also requires a safety pin to be pulled out. With both types of triggers, when a vest is detonated, steel shrapnel radiates out horizontally in all directions, with severe and deadly consequences." The slide show offered step-by-

step, detailed diagrams and animations, illustrating the functionality of what the police chief was describing.

The attendees watched with a mixture of fascination and horror, as the chief explained the device's inner workings. As emergency responders, the possibility of encountering a suicide vest on any call, was an unsettling realization.

The chief explained, "The vest that detonated last night, was fortunately, positioned horizontally. This meant that a lot of the blast force and shrapnel, were directed upwards into the sky, and downwards towards the ground. Had it been worn vertically, or even positioned on the back seat vertically, the consequences would have been far more devastating."

Sam leaned over toward Violet and whispered, "He's right – if either of those guys were wearing that vest, we might be dead."

The TV screen went back to a live view of the police chief speaking, "As an emergency responder, if you see a suicide vest, there are only three things you can do – one, get far away as fast as you can – two, hide behind something solid – three, sound the alarm for others to get away by yelling the word BOMB! – over and over. But, above all, get away as fast as you can. It is always best to put space between you and a bomber, and when you're at a safe distance, wait for a police officer to confront the bomber." For now, all I want you to do is be vigilant, if you see something, say something. Whatever you do – don't confront someone you think is a bomber! You might be wrong, and possibly cause harm to that person, or – you might wind up dead. Right now, we don't have much to go on, but the FBI is getting involved. We can only hope and pray, that the suicide vest that detonated last night, was the only vest in town. Thank you for attending this meeting – and be safe." The meeting concluded leaving a lasting impression on everyone, and a realization that their jobs may have just gotten a whole lot more dangerous.

After the meeting, Sam and Violet went out to the equipment bay to finish preparing their ambulance. Once they finished their prep work, they would be heading off to the stadium. They were scheduled to be on call at the stadium till 10:00pm that night, so they were bringing a cooler with food and drinks for themselves. The stadium had reserved parking for their

ambulance, which was just outside the onsite first aid station within the stadium. If they weren't transporting somebody to the hospital, they were expecting to be at the first aid station for the next 7 hours – and it was now time to head off to the stadium.

The trio of Dave, Mack, and Juan just stepped into the bustling sports bar, the air was filled with the aroma of sizzling food, and the sound of people having a good time. A friendly hostess greeted them, leading them to a table tucked away in a corner. As they settled into their seats, a pretty waitress with stunning red flowing hair approached, her smile was friendly and as bright as the neon lights that adorned the bar.

"Can I get you started with something to drink," she cheerfully asked. The guys knew each other well, and after exchanging glances, Dave replied, "A pitcher of dark beer please." His voice firm, and Juan and Mack nodded with agreement. The waitress jotted down their order, promising to return shortly. As a serving platter full of sizzling burgers and fries passed by their table, the sound and aroma was overwhelmingly inviting, inspiring the guys to immediately know what they wanted to eat.

Eventually, the guys had finished eating, and after downing several glasses of beer each, they were feeling festive, and having a good time watching sports on TV. Feeling inspired, Dave decided to do the French-fry on the shoulder game. Speaking softly, Dave said, "Watch this guys – I do this with my grandkids all the time." Holding his hand out towards Juan, he asked, "Juan can I have one of your left over French-fries? – make it a big one." Dave took one of Juan's largest leftover fries and placed it on his shoulder. Then he explained, "There's this thing I do – and I've done this with my grandkids a lot – for some reason, waitresses never say anything about me putting a French-fry on my shoulder. In fact, I'm so sure she won't say anything, if she mentions anything at all about the French-fry on my shoulder, I promise, I will double her tip." With mischievous smiles, Mack and Juan sat back and silently watched Dave play his game.

The waitress came back to the table, and asked if the men needed anything else. Juan and Mack noticed the waitress glancing at the French-fry – but she said nothing. Dave drew the waitress's attention to him by

answering, “I think we’re finished – we’ll take the bill now.” The waitress collected each of their plates, which took a few moments, prolonging the French-fry suspense. Then, as if nothing was out of the ordinary, she said that she would be back with the bill – but she still, had said nothing about the French-fry – she may have seen it, but she gave no hint that she noticed it.

As she walked away, it was all the guys could do to contain their laughter. Dave leaned forward and whispered, “See? – what did I tell you? – they never say anything about the French-fry on my shoulder – not ever, and I’ve played the French-fry game many times.” Just like his grandkids, Mack and Juan were utterly astonished and playfully entertained. Dave added, “You know she must have seen it, but for some reason she was afraid to mention it.”

As they prepared to leave, Dave asked Mack to call for a ride-share for the next leg of their adventure, to the Alamo Center, and Juan got up to make a trip to the restroom. But instead of going to the restroom, Juan discretely caught up with their waitress, just as she came out of the kitchen. He asked her, “Did you happen to notice the big French-fry on my friend’s shoulder?”

The waitress smiled, “I saw it, but I didn’t know what to say about it. I thought perhaps, one of you other guys put it there to play a joke on him.” Then she asked with a mischievous look, “So what’s up with the French fry.”

Juan told her all about Dave’s game. Then he asked, “Will you do me a favor? – when you bring the bill to the table, have a French-fry on your shoulder also – my friend will really get a kick out of that.”

She replied with a fun giggle, “Okay, sounds like fun.” With the plan for the French-fry game – counter attack – in place, Juan returned back to the table, and anxiously awaited her return.



Sure enough, when she came to the table with the bill, she had a really big French-fry on her shoulder. When Dave saw the waitress's French-fry, he was ecstatic. "I can't believe it! – you win!" He said to the waitress. "You are the first person, to literally – beat me at the French-fry game." They were all laughing, and so were the people at the table on the opposite side of the Isle, who had overheard the entire French-fry discussion. Dave proclaimed to the waitress, "For getting the best of me with my French-fry game, you'll be getting an extra big tip." Dave was true to his word, and their table was an extra good table for the waitress that day.

After the bill was paid, Dave and his friends exited the sports bar to catch their ride-share to the stadium. On their way out, Dave politely held the door open for several people coming in, one of them, was Carlos Mendoza. Like ships passing each other in the night, the chance meeting of these men as they passed through the same doorway, was a pure coincidence. While Dave and his friends were leaving for the stadium to watch the bowl game, Carlos and his associate, were entering that same restaurant, to watch the same bowl game on TV.

Carlos asked the hostess for a table that had a good view of a TV, one that was going to broadcast the bowl game. The hostess said, that starting 30 minutes prior to the game, all the TVs in the restaurant will have the game on, which fit Carlos's needs perfectly.

The United States of America, is regarded by the rest of the world as a safe haven, free from the dangers that plague many nations. American citizens live their lives with a kind-of – naive innocence – because they feel so historically safe. Notably, San Antonio is a very civilized and safe city, especially during the holiday season. When the city hosts major sporting events, there is always a strong police presence to ensure safety. However, adversaries of America now have an increased ability, and the radical desire and support of foreign governments, to penetrate into

America in greater numbers, and bring their chaos with them. Carlos Mendoza, represents just one such adversary, and is part of a larger coordinated effort, intended to purposely inflict extreme violence against American citizens, intentions that would soon, once again terrify a nation.

Now on station at the Alamo Center's First Aid station, Sam and Violet had familiarized themselves with the station, and the available resources. Their mission was clear: to provide immediate assistance to any fans or players who required medical attention, and if necessary, transport them to a nearby hospital.

The stadium was well-prepared to handle medical emergencies, with a dedicated in-house medical staff, and ample supplies at their disposal. In addition to Sam and Violet, a second ambulance crew was stationed at the first aid station, also ready to respond to critical situations. To help pass the time and alleviate the stress of their duties, the First Aid station featured a comfortable designated EMT waiting area, equipped with a television tuned to the game. For the ambulance crews, it was a small escape from the intensity of their work, a chance to unwind and catch a glimpse of the football action.

The in-house medical staff and EMTs were familiar faces to each other, having worked together at many previous events. While they hoped their services wouldn't be needed, they were prepared to provide the best possible care to anyone who required it.

At the Johnson home, it was around 3:30pm, and Julie was in the process of putting the finishing touches on a taco buffet, with festive music playing on the entertainment system. With the ring of the doorbell, Maria arrived at the front door bearing homemade avocado dip, chips and fancy crackers, and two bottles of fine wine.

Julie was quick to provide assistance to Maria, finding a place on the kitchen table for the food she had brought. Julie remarked with eager eyes, "Maria, your chunky avocado dip looks absolutely delicious! – like a work of art."

Maria replied, “I think you’ll really like it. It’s the best batch I’ve made in a long time, the avocados are extra tasty.” Then after breathing in a deep breath, Maria added, “Oh boy! Your tacos smell really good...I can hardly wait.”

Not long after, Abby arrived, her hands full of delectable desserts. In one hand she had a festively decorated football shaped bowl game cake, and in the other hand, a container of assorted homemade chocolate cookies. While Julie helped her place the desserts on the table, Maria was pouring a glass of wine for each of them. The wives party was about to get into full swing.

Spirits were high with anticipation, and the girls were all set for a cozy football party of their own, complete with more food than they could possibly consume. After Maria presented everyone with a glass of wine, she proposed a thrilled and delighted toast, “Here’s to the true meaning of football, a whole lot of good food, and of course...good wine!” With the clink of their glasses, their party had officially started.



After running the gauntlet of getting from the sports bar, to their seats in the Alamo Center, Dave, Juan, and Mack were settling in. Their vantage point was prime, a spot near the 50-yard line, midway up the stadium. Dave was thrilled and said to his friends, “Guys – today – right now in these seats – is the best place to be in the whole wide world! – and we get to do it together.” Everyone agreed and they shared a fist bump.



A couple of minutes later, Dave announced, “Hey Guys! It’s time for a group selfie to send to the wives.” They huddled together, and then with Dave’s direction, everyone gave a thumbs up. With a click of the phone, their football ecstasy moment was captured – along with the enthusiastic photobombs from the fans behind them.

It was perfect timing, the game was set to start soon, and the guys were in place. This year a team from Austin Texas, and a team from Florida made it to this bowl game. Although it was not a game that was going to lead to the national championship, for the guys, it was all about rooting for their favorite team from Texas, making this the biggest game of the year.

As the game unfolded, it was a captivating spectacle that kept the guys anything but quiet, and on the edge of their seats. Mack, in particular, was a fountain of witty remarks, his commentary was a constant source of amusement for those around them. Together, they formed an entertaining trio, their collective energy a welcome addition to the crowd. During the game the guys indulged in a classic stadium experience, eating delicious stadium food and drinking canned beer. With a hotdog in one hand, and a beer in the other, they fueled their passion for the game, and their spirits soared with every touchdown or defensive stop made by the Texas team.

Back at the Johnson residence, the women were enjoying a feast of their own, their glasses repeatedly clinking together, as they savored the delicious food and wine. As the TV cameras scanned the crowd, they were hoping to catch a glimpse of their husbands at the game, but were without luck. They knew about where their husbands would be seated, but the stadium was full, and with so many faces, seeing their husbands seemed impossible – like searching for a needle-in-a-haystack.

As the evening wore on, the wives began to slow down, with their appetites satisfied, and their bodies relaxing into the plush comfort of the reclining couch. The initial excitement of the party was replaced by a sense of contentment, and a quiet enjoyment of each other's company.

Midway into the third quarter, a Texas player suffered a serious leg injury, serious enough to require immediate advanced medical attention. A transport decision was made, necessitating an ambulance transport to the hospital. Sam and Violet received notification, and their roles as EMTs shifted into high gear.

The injured player was carefully transported to the ambulance station, via the stadium's medical cart, with his leg immobilized. Sam and Violet were waiting with their equipment ready. With precision and care, the player was strapped onto the ambulance stretcher, his extreme discomfort was evident. Their destination was the closest hospital, a mere four-mile drive away.

Sam and Violet's mission was clear – transport the injured player to the local hospital, and then return to the stadium. Accompanying Sam in the cab was a representative from the team, to ensure the player's well-being, and provide necessary updates back to the team. Violet would provide care for the player in the patient compartment. The ambulance departed with its emergency lights flashing, bound for University Hospital, a drive that would take approximately eight minutes.

However, what started out as a typical medical transport mission for Sam and Violet, was about to evolve into a national historic event, something nobody could have anticipated. Surprise, is an instrument often used by evil to avoid being stopped by good people. Tonight, evil would raise its head, and righteous people were about to be caught completely off guard – trusting and unaware, they never saw it coming.

Chapter 5

A Night of Carnage and Tears

Still at the restaurant, Carlos and his companion were immersed in the bowl game, their attention riveted on the TV closest to their table. While they occasionally ordered appetizers to justify their presence, they abstained from alcoholic drinks, their mission, a matter of utmost seriousness. As the third quarter drew to a close, Carlos settled the bill, and they exited the restaurant, leaving the parking lot in Carlos's grey SUV.

Their destination was a nearby public park, where they pulled into the parking lot and turned off the motor, then they quietly sat in the darkness together. The parking lot was completely empty, and mostly dark with just a couple of dimly lit street lights. After a few minutes, and with the interior lights off, the man accompanying Carlos took off his large, and loosely fitting coat. Then reaching around onto the back seat, the man removed a rather large item from a box. The item had significant weight to it, and was awkward to handle within the confining space of the SUV. Working in the dark, Carlos gave him a hand, delicately moving the item to the front seat.

As it turns out, the mysterious item had the shape and physical characteristics, of what could only be an explosive suicide vest. With what seemed to be a practiced procedure, the man partially reclined his seat, and with help from Carlos, put the vest on, and then his coat on overtop the vest. With the transformation complete, the man rested for a few moments. Next, the companion retrieved a string of prayer beads from his coat pocket, and began to pray fervently. Carlos, satisfied with their preparations, took out his phone and focused on the bowl game, paying particular attention to the remaining time, as if a deadly countdown had begun.

Back at the Alamo Center, Dave, Juan, and Mack leaped to their feet to celebrate once again. With less than 6 minutes to go in the 4th quarter, the Texas team scored another touchdown, and extended their already big lead. It was seemingly impossible for their team to lose at this point. Dave said with a big smile, "Hey guys – this game is in the bag!" Then he asked,

“How about if we bug out a little early to beat some of this crowd?” The guys were getting weary, and gave Dave’s suggestion a brief discussion. They all agreed, their desire was to avoid getting stuck within a sea of people, all trying to leave the Alamo Center at the same time. As the guys began to make their way out of the stadium, a lot of other people had the same thoughts, also eager to avoid the post-game rush out of the stadium.

Sam and Violet were just getting back to the stadium, and it was near the end of the game. The departing traffic was a formidable challenge to get through. Suddenly, Sam slammed on his brakes, narrowly avoiding a collision with a car that had cut them off. Sam angrily said, “That idiot in the gray SUV just cut me off. I saw him coming, and driving crazy in my rearview mirror. He's heading towards the stadium, the same as us. Why is he in such a hurry to get stuck in traffic?” Violet just shook her head, her expression a mix of disbelief and annoyance.

The traffic crawled along, a frustrating procession of stop-and-go. Sam and Violet found themselves trailing behind the same SUV that had so rudely cut them off. Abruptly, the SUV pulled off to the right into a no parking zone, close to one of the main entrances to the stadium. A man immediately got out on the front passenger side. Violet was watching the man closely, because he was in the wrong place, and he seemed a bit odd. He was wearing a peculiar large and long coat, and his face seemed to be too thin for his chest to be so broad. Then the man pulled back his sleeve, and he wrapped what looked like prayer beads around his wrist. Violet yelled out, “Sam! – did you see that guy that just got out of the SUV, the car that cut you off? Right after he got out of the car, he wrapped what looked like prayer beads around his wrist, as if he was just praying.” The man just stood there, looking toward the stadium entrance with the car door open, seemingly perhaps, reluctantly pondering his fate.

Violet rolled down her window, and as Sam drove slowly past the now close gray SUV, between the well-lit parking lot and the interior lighting in the SUV, Violet got a good, and long look at the driver, and he glared right back at her. The driver was wearing a dark long sleeve flannel shirt, and he gave a small subtle wave to Violet as she stared. Violet said, “He looks like he could be Middle Eastern – Sam, I’ve got a really bad feeling about this – I’m calling it in – stop the ambulance here!” Unknown to Violet, she was

staring directly at Carlos Mendosa, and him and his associate, were definitely targeting the Alamo Center.

Violet reached for the radio mic, her voice urgent, "This is EMT Violet Wheeler calling stadium security. We have an emergency!" Security responded promptly, "Go ahead, Violet."

Violet replied, "There are two highly suspicious men driving a gray SUV parked behind our ambulance, we're near the southwest entrance of the Alamo Center," She paused for a moment glancing at Sam, then asked, "Please dispatch officers to investigate immediately! Proceed with caution."

There were a few seconds of silence, then security responded, "Officers will be dispatched immediately." Violet provided more details, as she continued speaking into the mic, "Use our ambulance as a reference, and like I said, we are stopped, and the gray SUV is parked 40 feet behind us."

At the same time, Dave, Mack, and Juan had made their way from their seats, and were just coming out of the stadium. Feeling a sense of relief, that they were ahead of the big surge of people about to exit the stadium. Mack went ahead to the ride-share station to secure a ride, before the exiting crowd overwhelmed the service, while Dave and Juan stopped off at a T-shirt stand, to see if they could score a quick last minute deal on a shirt.

Stadium security swiftly contacted four nearby officers, directing them towards the ambulance, and instructing them to investigate the suspicious situation. Meanwhile, Carlos noticed that the ambulance had stopped for no apparent reason, sensing that their cover might be blown, he yelled at his associate to close the car door and get moving. The man, with stressful fear in his eyes, complied and began slowly walking towards the grand staircase, which led to an upper mezzanine level and the stadium entrance.

Carlos, reckless and desperate, dangerously sped away from the scene, weaving past the line of cars waiting to exit the parking lot. Violet noticed Carlos's hasty departure in her side mirror, so she jumped out of the ambulance, and waved frantically at the approaching officers. She shouted to the officers with her voice filled with urgency, "Over here – over

here – come quick – hurry!” The officers rushed towards Violet, their attention drawn to her frantic gestures.

With the officers near, Violet pointed up the stairs, saying, “That’s the guy – he’s the only guy going up the stairs – that’s him!” The officers began running toward the stairs, when Violet grabbed one officer’s arm stopping him. While pointing towards one of the exits, she said. “Wait, look out in the parking lot. That grey SUV heading to the exit, he dropped off the guy going up the stairs, and he is getting away. With this traffic you might be able to catch up to him on foot.” As the man wearing the vest reached the top of the stairs, he spotted the officers in pursuit. They were not far behind and running up the stairs toward him. The man panicked, then bolted toward the stadium entrance.

Both Sam and Violet, were standing behind the ambulance watching the pursuit of the officers. There were 2 officers in pursuit of the man wearing the vest, and 2 officers running across the parking lot, attempting to catch up with the grey SUV. Violet pointed up the stairs and said, “Sam, the guy that got out of the SUV, he’s running from the police – this is really bad – he’s guilty of something.” She was thinking about the explosion of the suicide vest, from just the night before. As she stared in Sam’s eyes with a frightened look on her face, she said, “Sam, I think something really terrible is about to happen.”

Dave and Juan were walking away from the stadium entrance, in the general direction of the grand staircase. With big smiles, they were pleased with their purchases of souvenir t-shirts. At the top of the stairs the officers pulled out their fire arms, and one of the officers yelled commands at the top of his voice, “Hey you – Police – guy running – Stop!” Unfortunately, the man with the vest was running directly towards Dave and Juan, and they were completely unaware of the events leading up to this moment. But Juan recognized a police chase when he saw it. As the guy ran past, Juan tripped him, and the guy took a hard fall onto the pavement.

As Juan stood over the guy he had just tripped, the guy pulled the pin out of a trigger device that he held in his hand. Juan immediately recognized that the guy he had tripped, was holding a bomb trigger. Juan jumped onto the guy, and began wrestling him for control of the trigger.

Dave stepped back as the 2 pursuing officers caught up. Juan yelled to the other officers, “Bomb! – He has a trigger in his hand!” The officers looked at each other, hesitating, not sure about what to do, while Dave took a few more steps further back. At the same time, the fans leaving the stadium were backing away, just far enough to give some space to the officers, and the struggle on the ground – but several stayed dangerously close, with their cell phones out, attempting to record the event.

What seemed like such a fun and perfect day, perfect in every way – a promising event that had been planned and eagerly anticipated for over a month – was about to go horribly wrong. While we may strive to understand the forces that guide our lives, fate often reveals itself in unexpected ways. The inherent unpredictability of life, serves as a constant reminder, that even the most carefully made plans, can be derailed by the twists and turns of luck, or bad luck in this case.

Although Juan initially was able to keep his grip over the guy’s hand, with an unfortunate twist of the wrist, he lost his grip in the struggle – the man released the trigger – and the vest instantly detonated. The explosion was huge, shrapnel sprayed the officers, the crowd, and Dave too.

Unfortunately, Juan, was instantly blown into pieces – everyone in the vicinity was knocked to the ground, and the devastation and carnage was immense.

From Sam’s and Violet’s point of view, from in the parking lot, they did not see the struggle for the detonator, or the people nearby, but they heard the explosion, and they saw the fire ball roar up the side of the stadium. Light from the fire lit up the sky outside of the stadium, and even at this distance away, they felt a flash of heat on their faces. They even felt the concussion from the blast wave. Sam knew from his military experience what had just happen, and he yelled out with horror in his face, “Violet, get the med kits – I’ll call it in – we got to get up there with the med kits and stretcher super-fast!”

The officers that were on foot pursuing Carlos in his car, narrowly missed him as he exited onto the main road and sped away. The sound of a huge explosion echoed through the air, drawing their attention back to the

stadium. They had failed to apprehend Carlos, but the explosion had created a new urgency, forcing them to abandon their pursuit and return to the stadium.

Mack had also heard the explosion while at the ride-share station – he quickly turned around to see the fire ball racing up the side of the stadium. “Oh my god!” he said to himself as he briskly began walking back to the stadium. He immediately recognized that this was a very dangerous explosion, and tried frantically to reach Dave by phone. When Dave didn’t answer, he began to run. He quickly arrived at the top of the grand staircase, and what he saw was beyond his worst imagination. There was blood and bodies everywhere, and the cries of the injured and the smell of explosives filled the air. What he saw was complete devastation of the people who had been anywhere near the blast. Mack called out for Dave and Juan, calling their names, over and over as he walked through the carnage looking for his friends. The mezzanine was filled with a smoky haze, and people lay everywhere. Then he spotted what looked like Juan – but just his upper torso. Juan had been blown apart – into pieces – with just his arms and shoulders connected to his head.

Mack was stunned, and didn’t know what to do. Emotionally dazed, he fell back and leaned against a wall. A lady splattered with blood and kneeling next to someone, reached up and grabbed Mack’s leg. Her face was horrified and full of tears, as she screamed with a crying and desperate plea, “Can you help my husband – he’s not moving – please, please help my husband!” She said, shaking with fear and looking up at Sam. The lady released her grip on Sam’s leg turning back to her husband, then she lovingly caressed her husband’s face, and kissed his cheek, almost as if kissing him goodbye. The shrill of everyone from the injured, and those trying to provide aid and comfort, roared as hundreds of people cried, screamed, and called for help.

Violet and Sam were the first medics on the scene – and it was worse than horrific! As all the fans screamed and cried for help, the entire area was engulfed in an ear piercing shrieking chaos, and the scent of blood and burnt explosives filled the air. Many people had huge wounds, blood was everywhere, and a lot of the injured people were motionless and silent. The smoky haze filtering the light, blanketed the mezzanine in a soft amber glow.

At a glance, it was clear that numerous people, had already lost their lives. The other police that had been working security around the stadium, and the medics from the first aid station began to arrive. A lot of the uninjured fans were frantically attempting to help the injured. Sam conducted a scene assessment, and began handing out medical supplies to people trying to render aid. Sam yelled out to everyone, "Look for people who are bleeding – we need to stop the bleeding first – ambulances are on the way. We've got to stabilize everyone for transport." Sam was attempting to direct efforts to stabilize the wounded, while Violet was focused on tending to a man with severe injuries to his legs.

Mack collected himself, then began searching for Dave again, stumbling about as he tried to get through the injured crowd. Finally, he spotted Dave lying on the ground, with his eyes closed – Violet was feverishly tending to his wounds trying to stop the bleeding. Mack knelt down next to Violet and Dave, saying, "This is my friend – we're here together."

Violet replied, "I'm sorry but your friend is not doing well – I need for you to stand back and let me work – I got this!" Mack moved back then sat on the ground and watched. His friend's legs had suffered a lot of damage and he was lying in a puddle of blood.

Dave gradually began to regain consciousness, as Violet continued to administer first aid to him. Recognizing he was waking up, she tried to converse with him, "Hi – my name is Violet...I'm going to patch you up and get you to the hospital – just don't move anything – try to stay completely motionless." Dave began to breathe heavily and frantically yelled out, "I can't feel my legs," he cried out over and over – "My legs – I can't feel them!" The shrapnel had torn through Dave's clothing, and had made deep wounds into his legs exposing bone. Violet had applied a series of bandages over his largest wounds, attempting to stop the blood loss.

Sam came close to see how Violet was doing and asked, "How is he?"

Violet looked at Sam with a distressed look, "I've stopped most of the bleeding but I can't see inside – he has already lost a lot of blood and his

pulse is weak – he’s saying he can’t feel his legs – he may have nerve damage or a spinal injury – he needs to get to a level 1 Trauma Center fast.”

Sam replied, “Ok – we’ll transport him to the hospital – right now!”

Back at the Johnson home, the women were having a good time with their football party, when a game announcer came on over the TV with an emergency announcement – stating that there had been an explosion at the Alamo Sports Center, and there were casualties. All the wives looked at each other in disbelief – Julie asked, “What did he say?” The announcer then repeated the news of the explosion. After a moment of silence, and the exchange of shocked staring glances, Julie urgently said, “Everybody – call our husbands – when you get through let everybody know.” The ladies frantically grabbed their phones and began calling.

As Sam brought a stretcher alongside Dave, Mack received a phone call from his wife Abby. Still not thinking clearly, he stood up, staring at the phone, not knowing if he should answer it. He knew Abby was with Julie and Maria at Dave’s house – Juan was for sure dead, and Dave was badly hurt. In his whole life, he had never had to give anyone such terrible news. As he slowly walked away, he was picturing Maria and Julie, and thinking, “how do I do this – how to tell my friend that her husband is dead, and another friend that her husband is badly hurt, and will be heading to the hospital – if I tell Abby what happened, she will have to tell Maria about Juan. Mack glanced around taking in the gruesome surroundings – for sure, I can’t answer the phone with all the screaming and crying in the background. How do I do this, I need a plan.” Just then, the phone stopped ringing – he had missed the call. He said to himself, “I just need some time to figure this out.”

With Mack distracted and struggling with Abby’s incoming phone call, with the assistance of 2 other medics, Violet and Sam lifted Dave onto the stretcher, and they had quickly left the area. Making their way down the ramps of the handicap walkway, they were on the move with Dave and heading towards their ambulance. As they hurried with their patient, they

could see that a couple more ambulances had just arrived, and there were more seen coming in the distance.

Mack turned around to check on Dave – but Dave was gone. After looking around, he spotted the paramedics wheeling Dave toward the ambulances. Mack was emotionally distraught and confused, he didn't know where to begin on how to deal with this unimaginable nightmare, and his thoughts were racing about what he should do. He knew that he couldn't help Dave – so his thoughts shifted to how to reach out to Maria and Julie, to tell them about what has happened. Mack decided that something like this needs to be said in person, but time was of the essence. “I got it.” He said to himself as a plan came to him. Mack quickly walked away from the scene, and then called the Canyon City Police Department. His plan was to explain the situation to the police, and then have them send officers to Julie's house. The officers could give the wives the bad news, and at the same time, provide some stability to their situation.

At the Johnson home, the ladies kept calling their husbands while nervously pacing around the living room, and they also kept an eye on the TV for more information. Although Dave was able to send texts with photos to all the wives early in the game, none of the ladies were getting through to their husbands now. Each wife could only get through to a digital voice, stating that the system was busy, and for them to try back later. It wasn't long before the sports announcer came on the TV, and announced that the game had been officially stopped and was over, due to an explosion near the stadium entrance. Abby suggested, “Perhaps with everyone trying to make phone calls, the phone system was just overloaded.”

With Sam driving, and Violet in the back tending to the patient, the ambulance made its way through San Antonio towards the hospital. Violet inserted an I-V into Dave's arm, and then she attached an EKG to monitor his heart.

In an attempt to learn more about her patient, and assess his state of mind, she asked, “What's your name?” he didn't respond and continued a

blank stare, but she persisted, “Can you tell me your name? Do you live in San Antonio?” but he gave no response.

Dave was very weak and barely able to speak, but finally managed to begin a conversation with Violet, saying, “Your name is Violet – right? “

“Yes Sir – Can you tell me YOUR name?” She asked.

“Thank you Violet – thank-you for being here for me – and trying to save me.” Dave’s mind was focused on assessing his perilous condition, and he seemed to have begun saying his goodbyes.

“You’ll be fine.” she replied. “We’ll get you to the hospital, and they will fix you up like new.”

He was struggling to talk, but he managed to continue speaking, “Thank-you Violet – but somehow – I can feel my life slipping away – I know the score here – I know I’m not going to make it.”

Violet looked over her instruments, then replied, “Just hang in there sir – we’ll be at the hospital shortly. Can you tell me your name?”

Violet was about to receive a unique and profound request from her patient, one that was about to change her life. She was about to be asked to do something that she had never considered during her years as an EMT. She was about to be asked, to fulfill a patient’s, seemingly, last request.

“Violet – may I hug you – I need a hug – please!” Dave desperately pleaded, and then reached up to Violet with outstretched arms, “Please!”. She ignored his request at first, but she also knew that he might not survive. He asked again, “Please...one last hug.”

His request touched Violet’s heart, and to accommodate her patient, she nervously, said ok. She hesitated for a moment, but then leaned over Dave, and he reached up, and pulled her in for a tight hug.

Dave began breathing heavily and struggled to speak, saying, “You live your entire life, taking hugs for granted, until it’s your last hug – this is

my last hug – promise me, that you will pass on this hug – to my wife, and my children.” Violet began to pull away, but Dave held on. “Please – you are the keeper, of my last hug – please, promise me, that you will pass this hug onto my family – tell them, to Be The MAX!” Dave’s voice was becoming increasingly frantic and louder, “This is my last hug, and I need for you to get it to them – Please! Only you can do this!” You’re the one, the only one.”

Reluctantly, she finally agreed to her patient’s wish. “Ok – I’ll do it!”.

Dave hugged her even tighter and became even more frenzied, “You promise – please promise me – tell them to Be The MAX!”

“YES! I PROMISE you! – I’ll do it!” She agreed.

Dave’s voice gradually began to soften and fade, he whispered saying, “Thank-you – thank-you Violet – thank-you so very much....”

As Dave began to release her from the hug, he slowly exhaled – and then a moment later, the heart monitor alarm sounded – Dave’s heart had stopped beating, and he went into cardiac arrest. Violet pulled out the defibrillator and placed the pads onto Dave’s chest, then applied a discharge. She looked over her monitors, and there was still no heartbeat. Violet quickly began a CPR protocol starting with chest compressions.

Violet yelled out to Sam through the intercom, “Sam – Cardiac arrest – starting CPR!” Sam yelled back, “We’re pulling into the hospital now!”

As they drove into the ambulance entrance, adjacent to the emergency room, Violet continued the CPR. At the ambulance entrance, already waiting outside were numerous members of the hospital staff. The hospital staff was poised for the arrival of mass casualties. As Dave was being unloaded, Violet informed the receiving staff of her patient’s situation, saying, “The guy coded, just as we pulled into the hospital – he has lost a lot of blood, and his blood pressure had been very low all the way here, till he coded. There are substantial lacerations to his legs, and his legs have no sense of feeling.”

As Dave was being removed from the ambulance, a lady that appeared to be in charge, carrying a tablet and small printer, took Dave's photo, then photographed both Sam's and Violets ID badges. The lady said, "You're just the first to arrive, and there are lots more coming." The receiving hospital staff transferred Dave from the ambulance stretcher onto a rolling trauma bed, then rushed him into the emergency room. As soon as the patient was being moved into the hospital, the lady said, "Samuel, load your stretcher right away, and get ready to move your ambulance out of here."

The lady in charge was attempting to document the patients as quickly as they arrived, "Violet, tell me about the patient – what's his name?"

"I don't know," Violet replied, "While he was conscious, I asked him for his name many times, but he never told me – with all the chaos I didn't get it, he probably still has a wallet in his pocket, I didn't search for it."

The lady asked, "Tell me about his family members, did he have any family there?"

Violet answered, "He had no family there that we saw. He was at the game with a friend who was uninjured by the explosion."

The lady a bit frustrated, saying, "Ok – so we don't have any information on this guy for now – Do you need to restock any supplies in your ambulance?"

"Yes, definitely," Violet was quick to say. Then she explained, "We used up a lot of bandages to stop his bleeding, and we also handed out a lot of bandages to others. There were a lot of people trying to help the wounded."

The lady printed out an identification bracelet, and waved over a nurse, then quickly spoke to both Violet and the nurse, "This is Cindy – Cindy, I want you to go inside and immediately tag the patient that just went inside. Violet, you go with Cindy, when Cindy finishes tagging the patient, tell her what you need and she'll get it for you." While Violet had been dealing with the hospital staff, Sam had secured the stretcher back inside the ambulance. The lady called out to him, "Samuel, move your ambulance

over to that other area of the parking lot. You can finish your preparations there.”

Immediately after Sam pulled away from the emergency room entrance, another ambulance was pulling in. Sam waited in the adjacent parking lot, where he readied the ambulance, then waited for Violet to return. Inside the hospital, Dave had been moved into the emergency trauma room, so Cindy told Violet to wait outside while she tagged the patient. While she waited, Violet caught a glimpse of Dave with the staff working feverishly to revive him. Eventually, Violet left the hospital with a bag of replacement gauze rolls, trauma dressings, and tourniquets. Once the supplies were secured in the ambulance, Violet and Sam raced back to the stadium.

As a trauma 1 rated facility, University Hospital was the most capable medical facility in San Antonio, and it was not far from the Alamo Center. Dave was in the best hands that a seriously injured patient could hope to be, and he got there fast. For now – Dave’s fate would be left up to the highly trained professionals of University Hospital, to work their magic.

Chapter 6

Telling The Families

At the Johnson home, Julie, Maria, and Abby were all panicking. They could not reach any of their husbands by phone, while more and more frightful information was being announced over the TV – It was reported that a bomb had been detonated, and there were mass casualties, with multiple deaths. Images of the blast site were not being displayed on TV, but only a distant view, which included the deluge of emergency vehicles and their flashing lights.

Julie was thinking the worst, with tears streaming and half crying, she grabbed her purse and said, “Something is not right, I know Dave would have called – I’ve got to go to him – I can’t stay here – I’ve got to go find Dave.”

As Julie moved toward the door, Abby jumped up and blocked the doorway, saying, “No! – you can’t go – you can’t drive right now!” Abby also began to cry, then added, “None of us should be driving right now.” Abby embraced Julie and said, “For now, all we can do is wait – the guys know where we are – they’ll call us when they can.”

Maria was hopeful and agreed saying, “We have to sit tight for now, and wait. It would take us 45 minutes just to drive to the stadium, and we might get a call at any time.”

Julie reluctantly sat back down on the couch, clinching her phone with Abby and Maria by her side. Just then, Julie's phone rang, and she was quick to answer, “Dave! – Dave is this you?”

“No Mom, it’s me, Davey”. It was their son Davey calling, to see if his mom had heard from his dad. He asked, “Have you heard from Dad – is he on his way home?”

Let down, Julie hesitated for a moment, then answered, “No Dear – I have not heard from your father at all. Have you been watching the news about the bomb blast at the Alamo Center?”

Davey replied, “Yes – It’s so crazy it’s hard to imagine. I’ve not heard anything from Dad either.” Then he asked, “How about Mack and Juan, has anyone there heard from them?”

“No Dear –” Julie replied, “I’m still here at my house with Maria and Abby, and we have not heard from any of the guys – I was thinking about going to the stadium to look for them.”

Davey emphatically replied, “No Mom – You stay put, and I’ll go – I’m a lot closer than you – I’ll keep you posted, and if you hear anything at all from Dad, call me.”

Julie relented, “Ok – but Davey, stay safe and drive careful.” She remained worried about the dangers and chaos at the Alamo Center. Davey understood her concerns, because he knew the traffic would be chaotic, and attempted to reassure her, saying, “Mom, I promise to be careful – I’ll find Dad, and you stay put. I’ll be sure to keep you posted – bye, for now.”

After a deep sigh, Julie looked at Maria and Abby and gave them an update, “Well – Davey is going to the stadium to look for the guys – he promised to keep us posted.” The wives felt so overwhelmed with helplessness, just sitting and waiting, but at least Davey was in route.

Calling from the Alamo Center parking lot, Mack spoke to the Canyon Lake police and explained the situation. They understood, and agreed to send officers to the Johnson home right away, to deliver the sad news. Mack’s next mission was to find out which hospital Dave was taken to, so he went back to the scene of the explosion, hoping for some answers. The police were preventing people from entering the area, so Mack approached a police officer standing guard for help. “My friend was hurt bad, and he was taken away in an ambulance, do you know what hospital they took him to?”

The police officer replied, “If he is hurt bad, they probably took him to University Hospital. People with less serious injuries are being sent to both the Baptist Medical Center, and the Methodist Hospital. We don’t have a list

here as to who is going to which hospital. Dispatch is trying to track where the injured are sent to.” Mack asked if he could talk to someone at dispatch. The officer replied, “Not likely – everyone is too busy. The hospitals are busy also. For now, I think you’ll just have to pick a hospital, and go to the emergency room to see if you can find you friend.”

For the time being, Dave remained lost somewhere in the hospital system. Mack left the stadium and started running in the general direction of University Hospital. He had in mind to call a ride-share once he was far enough away from the stadium. He glanced at his phone and saw that Abby had already called him many times, so Mack slowed down to respond to Abby with a text, typing, “Too busy to talk, I will call you when I can.”

At the Johnson house – Abby yelled out excited, “It’s Mack, – he just sent me a text!” Julie and Maria were super quick to race to Abby’s side, attempting to get a look at her phone, asking, “WHAT DID HE SAY!” as they tried to look on – Abby read the message out loud, “He said, Too busy to talk, I will call you when I can.”

With a sense of relief, Julie commented, “That’s a good sign, because the guys were together.” Then she asked, “What about Dave – did he say anything about Dave and Juan?”

“No –” Abby replied, “That’s it – no real news.”

Maria requested that Abby text Mack back, and ask Mack, to tell Juan and Dave to call or text us! As Abby messaged back, Julie said, “Girls – instead of calling, let’s try texting the guys – maybe the texts will get through.” But for Abby, she was immensely relieved by Mack’s text, knowing that he was well enough to send a text.

Mack was on the move and ignored Abby’s texts, focusing on making headway toward University Hospital. That’s when Mack identified a call coming in from Davey – he thought for a moment, but came to the conclusion that he didn’t think Davey was at the house with the wives – so Mack took the call and immediately asked, “Davey – do you know about the bomb at the Alamo Sports Center tonight?”

“Yes –” Davey replied, “I tried driving there in my truck, but I couldn’t get close – all the roads are blocked.”

Mack hesitated for a moment, then said, “Davey – your dad got hurt, and an ambulance took him to a hospital – I’m not sure, but I think they took him to University Hospital – I’m trying to get there right now.” Davey went silent, he was stunned hearing about his dad being hurt. Mack asked, “Davey – did you hear what I said?”

Davey finally replied, “Yeah – yeah I heard you said – Where are you Mack?”

Mack responded, “I’m on foot at the intersection of Houston St and Live Oak St, near a Hospitality Inn – can you pick me up?”

Davey agreed, “Yeah, I’ll pick you up.” Then added, “But first I’ve got to call my Mom.”

Mack quickly replied with an emphatic, “NO! – you can’t call your mom yet.” Mack explained, “Maria is at your mom’s house – Mack hesitated, then sadly continued – Juan was killed by the blast.” Mack paused again, just long enough to take in a deep breath. “If you call your mom, Maria is going to ask about Juan – hearing about Juan will terrify your mom – first we need to find your dad.”

Davey went silent, as he took in the terrible news about Juan, and the possibility that his dad might also be hurt badly. Davey and Juan were good friends, and had shared a lot of good times together at his dad's house. In spite of the heart crushing news about Juan, finding his dad took on a new sense of urgency. Eventually, Mack asked, “Davey – did you hear everything I just said about Juan and your dad?”

Finally, Davey responded, “Yeah – I heard you – let’s go find my dad. I know where the Hospitality Inn is – I’ll be there in a few minutes. Keep an eye out for me – I’m driving my blue truck.” It wasn’t long before Davey had picked up Mack in front of the hotel, and they were heading toward University Hospital.

Meanwhile, Sam and Violet had returned to University Hospital, having just transported another patient to the emergency room. This time, Violet accompanied the transport patient into the emergency room. The woman had sustained a severe head injury with facial wounds. While Violet attended to the woman's medical needs, Sam ensured the ambulance was safely parked and out of the way.

After Violet had fully turned her patient over to the care of the hospital staff, she inquired about the fate of the man they had transported earlier. With a heavy heart, she learned that he had succumbed to his injuries, shortly after arriving. Apparently, the hospital staff was never able to revive him. The news was a harsh reminder of the gravity of their work, and the fragility of human life. She also pondered about the promise she made to a dying man, and that she was now the keeper of his last wish.

Exiting the hospital, Violet had just walked out of the door used by emergency room and ambulance personnel. A short distance away, Mack and Davey were approaching the emergency room entrance. Mack recognized her and was surprised. Pointing his finger at her, he said, "It's you – the paramedic that bandaged up my friend tonight. You transported him to the hospital too – right?"

Violet was also surprised, saying, "I remember you – You're his friend, and you went to the game together."

"Yes, you remember me," Mack replied as they approached each other, "This is Davey, my friend's son – Where's my friend Dave? – Is he here at this hospital?"

Davey quickly asked, "Can you tell us where my Dad is?"

With a deeply concerned look, Violet replied, "He is here at this hospital. Has anyone talked to you about your dad's medical condition yet?"

Mack quickly answered for Davey, "No – We're just getting here, we've not even seen Dave yet, or talked to anybody about him."

Violet hesitated for a moment, giving some thought to the situation. Then speaking to Davey, she said, “I brought him here, but I never got his name. What is your dad’s name?”

Mack cut in again, and answered for Davey, “The name on his driver’s license would be David Johnson. I call him Dave.”

Violet seemed to be stressed to hear his name. Knowing his name further humanized her patient, strengthening her compassion and empathy for the situation. It wasn’t her role to provide this kind of bad news to family members, but this was an unusual night. But she had to get this right, which meant she had to know for sure. After Violet gave it some thought she responded, “Wait right here! – I’ll go inside and see what I can find out – I’ll be right back.”

Violet bypassed the waiting room, and went directly inside into the emergency room area. Then she approached the Nurses station, hoping to collect more information. She inquired as to the identity of the person she brought in earlier. The nurse told her that they found his wallet, and that his name is David Johnson, but his identity has not been officially confirmed.

Violet asked, “Can I see his driver’s license?” The nurse showed Violet the driver’s license, and she took a photo of it with her phone. “Are you sure this guy died – I’ve got to know for sure.”

The nurse replied pointing her finger, “I’m absolutely certain – he is still in that staging room right over there.”

Violet followed the nurse's directions toward the room, her heart pounding in her chest as she peered through the glass window in the door. She needed to be certain, to confirm that the man she had transported earlier, was indeed the victim lying on one of these beds.

As she entered the room, she was confronted with a chilling scene. Two rolling trauma beds stood side by side, their occupants shrouded beneath bloody sheets. Her gaze lingered on the first bed, there was a moment of hesitation, before she could summon the courage to pull back the sheet. Beneath lay a woman's face, her features marred by injury, it was a very sad sight to witness, but this was clearly not David.

As Violet turned to the second bed, she wondered – could this be the man she had transported – she hoped with all her might that it wasn't. She approached cautiously, her hand hovering over the sheet. Gathering her strength, she pulled the sheet back, revealing the face of a lifeless man – it was him – the person she had transported in the ambulance – The man whose name and face, matched the driver's license – the same man who conveyed his dying wish to Violet.

Dave was dead. The realization struck Violet like a physical blow, leaving her numb and weak. Tears welled up in her eyes as she looked down at his lifeless form. She whispered with her voice barely audible, "David, I'm so sorry – I tried my best, but I failed – I'm so, so very sorry." Once again, she thought about the promise she made him – a seemingly incredible mission.

Violet gently covered Dave's face, her heart heavy with sorrow. As she slowly left the emergency room, a couple of nurses watched her depart, and they noticed her stress and sadness, their eyes were filled with compassion, it was indeed, a sadness they all shared on a night like tonight.

Reaching the door, Violet hesitated, her hand hovering over the knob. She took a moment to collect herself, wiping away the tears that streamed down her face. As she stepped outside, she knew the task she was about to be faced with, a conversation with Davey and Mack, that was going to be heartbreaking.

Davey and Sam were still waiting where she had left them. The guys saw her coming, and anxiously went over to meet her. With an optimistic voice, Davey was quick to ask, "Did you find my dad, is he ok?"

Violet opened her phone, and then showed them the photo of Dave's driver's license that she had taken, "Is this your dad?" Mack was looking onto the phone also, and Davey answered, "Yes – that's my dad, can you take me to him?" After a pause, and with Mack listening, Violet answered, "Your dad passed away – he didn't make it." Davey was speechless as a chill swept over him – he stumbled backwards, then slowly walked away and sat down on a nearby bench.

Mack turned away from Violet to hide his tears, and he cried out loud, "Oh my god! – oh my god – oh my god." Mack turned back to Violet with a tearful crying voice, "Maybe your wrong – with all this craziness tonight, maybe somebody else died, but not Dave – maybe it was somebody else. Mack was desperate for a different answer, one in which, his friend Dave was still alive."

Violet answered, trying to be as compassionate as she could, saying, "I just went inside and saw the guy that you said, at the Alamo Center, was your friend, the same guy that I brought here, this is his driver's license. He is still in a room adjacent to the emergency room's trauma center – I just saw him, and your friend Dave, is definitely, not alive anymore. I'm sorry, but he was hurt badly, and he went into cardiac arrest just as we arrived at the hospital." Violet slowly shook her head, then softly said, "He didn't survive."

She looked over at Davey sitting on the bench, then back at Mack. Violet asked, "What is your name?"

He replied, "My name is Mack – Mack Thompson..."

"Well Mack – your friend Dave needs something from you, RIGHT NOW! See the guy on that bench over there...that's Dave's son. Your friend Dave, needs for you to help his son get through this – starting, right this second."

Mack nodded, while wiping the tears from his face, "Ok – I understand – I can do this."

As Mack began to walk over to Davey, Violet grabbed his arm, and she said, "Go into the emergency room, there are counselors in there that will help you." Mack understood, and nodded his head. Then she added, "Mack, one more thing – When the time is right, Dave gave me something very special to give to his family." Clinching her phone, she said, "I'll reach out at a better time."

Mack went over to Davey, sat down next to him, and then put his arm around him. Violet had done all she could do here, and she needed to get back to the Alamo Center.

Violet made her way over to the ambulance and Sam. After she got into the ambulance, Sam pulled out of the parking lot and began their journey back to the stadium. Sam asked, “What took so long?” Violet didn’t answer, and sat quietly sobbing.

Violet was well experienced as a paramedic, and had participated rescuing people from tragedies for years. It was common for her to deal with the emotions of families in turmoil, through all types of injuries and catastrophes – but tonight was the first time she had to tell someone, that a loved one had died – that a son would never see his dad again. It had always been someone else’s job to talk to the family, and break the sad news. Tonight, Violet was cornered into going out of her comfort zone – but the circumstances were extraordinary. She was determined not to leave Dave’s son Davey, and Mack, hanging, left to figure things out on their own. She did what she could, and then she moved on.

Sam could clearly see that Violet was upset, so he asked, “Violet – what’s wrong?” Violet looked over at Sam and replied, “I don’t want to talk about it.” She turned away, staring out the window, and remained silent.

A minute later, dispatch came across the radio. Dispatch had informed them, that their rescue and transportation duties for the night, were complete. They were to proceed to the Alamo Center, and find detective Frank Benson, that he would be in a mobile command center near the scene of the explosion.

Amid the turmoil at the Johnson house, none of the wives were having any luck with contacting their husbands. Meanwhile, all the local TV stations and national news networks, were broadcasting continuous live coverage from the stadium. The latest update, claimed that the explosion was likely a terrorist attack, that there were dozens of casualties, and at least 7 deaths. Maria asked, “Julie, have you heard anything from Davey?” Julie sadly replied, “No – nothing.” Julie tried calling Davey again, but like before, there was no answer. Because Abby had heard from Mack, she

was doing better with the stress of waiting than the other ladies, her greatest concerns were now for Dave and Juan.

Out of the blue, the doorbell rang at the Johnson house! Julie, Maria, and Abby all jumped up and ran to the door, and opened it. At the door, was a uniformed police officer, along with a man and two women dressed in ordinary civilian clothes. In the driveway were a couple of City of Canyon Lake police cars. The wives instinctively knew that this was not good, and their hearts sank.

The police officer asked, “Is this the home of Julie Johnson?”

Fearful, Julie was slow to answer, “Yes – that’s me.”

The officer asked, “May we come inside and talk with you? Mack Thompson told us we could find all of you here.”

Abby stepped forward, “Yes – all of you, please come inside.”

Julie was quick to ask, “Are you hear to tell us news about our husbands?”

As the city’s representatives walked inside, the police officer inquired, “Have all of you been following the news about the explosion at the Alamo Center tonight?”

Sensing she was about to hear some really bad news, Julie was becoming increasingly distraught, with tears in her eyes, she angrily yelled, “Just TELL us about our husbands! RIGHT NOW! – why are you here!”

The man dressed in civilian clothes spoke up, “My name is Mike Weaver – I’m the pastor at the Canyon Lake Baptist Church, and this is my wife Cindy, and a friend of ours, Pattie.” Pointing at Abby while looking at some notes on a piece of paper, “You must be Abby.” Then pointing toward Maria, “and you must be Maria – do I have this right?” The wives nodded, then the pastor continued, “Abby, your husband Mack called the Canyon Lake Police Department and conveyed information, and asked for us to come here to speak with you in person, to tell you what Mack told the

police.” Abby was feeling somewhat at ease. knowing Mack was capable of talking to the police. was a good indication that he was fine.

Meanwhile, stress was building and boiling over in both Julie and Maria. So much so, that Julie was panicking, and interrupted the pastor, yelling again, “JUST TELL US! – What is going on with our husbands.”

Nodding his head, the pastor complied, and said, “Ok – Julie, your husband Dave, he was injured and taken to a hospital. At this time, we don't know what his condition is, and we don't know what hospital he was taken to.” Hearing the news, Julie became overwhelmed and weak, almost fainting. Abby quickly put her arm around her, and helped her sit down on the couch. “Abby, your husband Mack is unharmed, and is trying to locate what hospital Dave was taken to.” Both Julie and Abby compassionately looked over at Maria, as the pastor continued speaking, “Maria – I'm very sad to say, your husband Juan, was killed in the blast – he died immediately.”

Maria was speechless – she had an empty gaze, as she slowly sat down on the couch. Abby and others in the room tried to comfort her, but she gave no response – as if she was detached from her surroundings. Maria slowly put her head down on the couch, and closed her eyes. Her silent tears, falling onto the arm of the couch. Though, surrounded by her friends, she was withdrawing from everything – as if her life seemed to have stopped, and the world was passing her by.

Julie, with tears in her eyes, stood up and reached out to Pastor Mike with a crying plea, she demanded, “I need for you to take me to my husband – I have to be by his side – I'm sure he needs me...”

Mike replied, “I will – but first we need to find out where he is. It's possible that Mack may have already found him. I'll start calling around and see if I can find out which hospital Dave is at.”

Julie was dazed and not speaking so well, “Ok – my son Davey – out looking for Dad also – maybe we'll hear from Davey soon.”

Davey and Mack were still seated on the bench outside the hospital. They were just sitting there, surrounded by the silence of the night, and wiping away their tears – just thinking, and reliving memories. Mack looked over at Davey and asked, “Davey – do you want to go inside and see your dad.”

Davey slowly looked over at Mack, then replied, “I’m afraid – I’m afraid to go look – like – seeing my dad laying there, is going to be like a punch in my face – and somehow, I’ll hurt even more.” Tears were streaming down Davey’s face, “Mack, I’m feeling so empty and helpless just sitting here on this bench – I just want to go to sleep, and never wake up.” After pausing for a moment, he added, “If only I had gone to the game – maybe I could have saved him.”

Concerned that Davey might be blaming himself for his dad’s death, Mack replied, saying, “I was there. – I had just stepped away moments before to get us a ride-share. We had no clue, no warning that a terrorist was about to strike, and I’m sure this was a terrorist attack. There is nothing you could have done to save your dad.” After pausing for a moment, Mack added, “Don’t blame anyone but the terrorist – it’s what he did – he did it on purpose to all of us.”

“What about my mom?” Davey asked. “She knows I’m out here somewhere looking for Dad – I’m supposed to call her – she’s expecting me to call her – what do I say to my mom? – what should I do?”

Just then Mack received a text from Abby. The text read: “Have you found Dave? There are people here from the City and they told us about Dave and Juan. Julie is freaking out. She needs to find Dave. I hear you are ok. I love you!”

Mack explained to Davey, about how he had called the City of Canyon Lake police department, asking them to send people over to his mom’s house. The plan was for the police to let them know about Juan, and that your dad was taken to a hospital. Also, that he was looking for his dad, trying to find out what hospital they took him to. Feeling more confident about what to do next, Mack shared his thoughts, “Davey, we have to let you mom know. Right now, there are people from the city at your mom’s house. From here, it’s about a 45 minute drive to your parent’s

house, and we should get on the road immediately. But, we have to be sure that your mom doesn't go out looking for your dad. I think we should talk with one of these city people, so that they can tell her about your dad while everyone is still there."

Davey thought for a moment, then answered, "I have to get to my Mom right away – she's going to need me. But I think you're right. Tell Abby to have one of these city people call you – and you talk to them, and tell them about Dad."

Mack replied a text back to Abby that read, "Secretly have one of the city people go outside with your phone, and have them call me, I'll be standing by." Mack looked over at Davey, "It's sent – I should be getting a phone call any minute. After I finish this call, we'll head straight for your mom's house. I'll drive." Davey gave a silent nod of agreement.

Abby received Mack's text, then she discreetly signaled to Pastor Mike. He followed her tactfully into the kitchen to see what she wanted. Abby showed Mike her text message from Mack, her eyes filled with a mix of concern and curiosity. She whispered to Mike, "Go out on the back porch, use my phone, and call this number." After she pulled up Mack's phone number, she handed over her phone saying, "Go now," directing him with a commanding tone.

Mike nodded, taking the phone from Abby's hand. He exited the kitchen through a back door, disappearing into the night on the back patio. Abby casually kept an eye on everybody in the living room from the kitchen, ready to shield the pastor from intrusion.

A moment later, Mack's phone rang, startling him from his thoughts. He answered, "This is Mack Thompson."

The voice on the other end responded, "My name is Pastor Mike Weaver. I'm the pastor at Canyon Lake Baptist Church. Do you have information for me about Dave?"

"Yes, I do," Mack replied, stepping away from Davey to maintain some privacy. "I'm here with Davey, he's Dave and Julie's son. We found Dave at University Hospital."

"Excellent," Mike said, with his voice filled with hope.

"Not really..." Mack replied, his voice heavy with sorrow. "It's not good news." He paused, struggling to find the words, then said, "Dave passed away shortly after arriving here – Dave is gone."

"Oh my!" Mike gasped, his voice filled with shock and his hope dashed.

Mack continued, "Davey and I are going to leave University Hospital right now, and go directly to where you are, the Johnson's home. It'll take us about 45 minutes to get there. We both have decided, that we want you to tell Julie about Dave's death, and let her know that her son Davey and I are on our way there. We'll get there as quickly as we can – and please, don't let Julie leave the house. Can you handle this?"

"I'll do my best," Mike assured him. "There are several people here who can help out until you get here."

"Okay, we're on our way," Mack replied, hanging up the phone. He turned to Davey, his hand outstretched. "Give me your keys. We're heading for your parent's house." Davey's eyes pleaded for help, as he handed over his keys.

Although Mack tried his best to be discreet when talking to the pastor, Davey heard every word. Just hearing the words discussing his dad's death, were so incredibly profound and unwelcome, they added a fresh wave of heartache that swept over Davey. The sadness that came from referring to his dad in the past tense, was incomprehensible. Davey's dad had always been his hero, and his dad had been by his side his entire life. Unexpected, and in an instant, Davey's hero and role model, had been ripped away by an evil act. He also wondered, how his children would react to their grandfather being taken away forever, and taken so violently.

Sam and Violet made it back to the stadium, and were walking over to the mobile command center. Violet had remained completely silent, deep in thought since they left the hospital. It is common place for EMTs to deal with emotional situations. But what happened at the Alamo Center this evening, was over-the-top, dreadful. Sam recognized that Violet was having difficulty coping.

Finally, breaking the silence, Sam reached out to her, saying, “They are going to ask us a lot of questions. – They’re going to want to know everything we know.” Violet glanced over at Sam without saying a word, and she just kept walking. They stopped outside the command center before opening the door, and Sam added, “Violet, I’ll take the lead on answering questions, and I’ll do the best that I can, but I don’t know everything that happened here tonight. I realize you upset, but you need to keep it together when we go inside. At some point, you’ll have to open up.” Violet nodded, her resolve was hardening. After they both took a deep breath, they went into the command center.

The command center was busy with witnesses being interviewed, and people coming and going. Most of the officers in the command center were wearing plain clothes. As they walked in, Sam gave a small friendly wave, and said, “Hi everybody, I’m Sam Harris and this is Violet Wheeler – we’re Fire Department EMTs, and we are here to see Frank Benson.” An officer near the door pointed toward the end of the command center and said, “Go all the way down, it is the office at the end.” Sam and Violet made their way through the command center, and knocked on the door. Frank opened the door, and immediately recognized Sam and Violet from the previous night, and greeted them. You two again? Alright, come in and close the door.

Sam and Violet took a seat, then Frank began his questioning, “It’s my understanding that you two were the first people to spot the bombers. What made you think they were terrorists?”

Sam answered, “We took an injured player to the hospital, and we were just getting back to the stadium. People were beginning to leave because the game was almost over. With everyone trying to leave, the car with the bombers, was in a super big hurry to get to the stadium – they cut

us off, and I had to slam on the brakes to avoid a collision – that, got our attention.

After thinking for a few seconds, Sam continued, "They were driving a gray SUV. They were in front of us, and then pulled off to the side of the road and into a no parking or standing zone, near the sidewalk along the front of the stadium. In other words, they weren't supposed to be there. That's when a guy got out on the passenger side."

Violet chimed in, saying, "I noticed that when the guy got out, he wrapped something around his wrist. I thought it might have been prayer beads – same as the other guy that blew himself up last night in the car wreck."

Frank interrupted, "Violet, are you sure you saw him wrap prayer beads around his wrist?"

Violet replied, "I think so. He definitely wrapped something around his wrist. Especially in hindsight, it seems likely that he might have been praying just before he got out of the car. He just stood there, next to the car with the door open, like he was afraid to leave."

Frank asked, "Did you see his face?"

"Not really," Violet admitted. "I just saw the side and back of his head. But I did get a good look at the driver. As Sam drove past the SUV, we were moving slowly, and the driver looked straight at me. The lighting wasn't great, but we were eye-to-eye."

Frank was pleased and nodded with a smile, "Great!. I have a detective that's a forensic artist, who I want you to sit down with as soon as possible."

Violet agreed, "Sure – anyway, I didn't know anything for certain until the suspect made a run for it, he ran when the police officers tried to catch up with him."

"Just a moment..." Frank said while reaching for his phone. He dialed a number, and he said with an urgent voice, "Sophia, can you come into

my office right away? I've got a witness here I need you to talk to." He turned his attention back to Sam and Violet, and continued his questioning. "Have either of you seen these people before the bomb blast?" Both Sam and Violet shook their heads, with a no, their answers firm.

"On another subject," Frank began as he leaned forward with a concerned look, "I don't want either of you to talk to the press. Say nothing to anyone. All information about what happened tonight, must only be released through official press releases. It's important that we maintain control over what information is released, and when we release it. Can you do that?" Sam and Violet agreed with a clear understanding.

Just then, a woman entered the office, and Frank introduced her, "This is Detective Sophia Jones. She's also a forensic artist. Sophia, this is Violet Wheeler. Violet got a very good look at the suspect who escaped in the SUV tonight. Can you two put your heads together, and come up with an image of what this guy looks like?"

Sophia said with a smile, "Great, I can do that. Violet, please follow me."

As Violet was getting up to leave, Frank said, "Sam, I'd like to talk with you a bit longer."

Sam commented, "Violet and I are riding together. When we finish here, we have to go back to the fire station."

Frank nodded, saying, "No problem, we won't be long, and she'll be right outside. When you're done here with me, you can go hang out with her and Sophia until she's finished."

Back at the Johnson home, Mike returned to the kitchen, his face reflected his sad mission. Abby pulled him aside, her voice barely a whisper. "What did Mack say? Did he find Dave?"

Mike shook his head, "It's not good," he replied, his voice heavy with sorrow. Mike softly said, "Let's go into the living room. I'd like to talk to everyone at the same time." Being a seasoned pastor, Mike had a lot of

experience with families that have lost loved ones, but it's never easy. He handed Abby her phone back as they walked into the living room. Abby's demeanor was already becoming more distraught, as she anticipated what Mike was about to say to everyone in the room, and that it was likely to be the worst possible news.

Mike stood before the group, his voice calm and subdued, "Hey Everyone, give me your attention. I just spoke with Mack, Abby's husband – he is with Davey, Julie's son, and they found Dave at University Hospital." Julie stood up with her eyes fixed on Mike! her face pale and drawn. Mike took a deep breath, then continued, "Mack told me, that shortly after Dave arrived at the hospital, Dave passed away." Julie's knees slowly buckled, and she began to fall. Mike reached out to catch her, while Abby rushed to her side. Together, they gently lowered her back onto the couch.

Julie's crying screams filled the room. "No! Not Dave. Not my Dave!" she cried out, her voice raw with a shattered heart. The television was still on, and the news announcer about to provide an update on the Alamo Center bombing. In a fit of heartbroken rage, Julie leaned forward and hurled a bowl of chips at the TV, cracking the screen. She yelled at the TV, "Shut up, you stupid man! Just shut up!" Her voice was filled with crying anger.

With tears in her eyes, Abby held Julie tightly, her arms offering strength. "I got you Julie. I'm not going to leave your side. Just sit down." Julie's thoughts quickly shifted to Davey, and what he must be going through. She looked towards Mike, pleading with her voice filled with desperation, she said, "Davey – where's my son Davey? You said he was with Mack...where are they?"

Mike calmly replied, "Yes Julie, Davey is with Mack, and they're on their way here. Mack said they're about 45 minutes away, but they are coming straight here – there're traveling and on their way."

Mike's wife Cindy was attending to Maria, who was lying on the couch, sobbing into a pillow. When Maria heard what Pastor Mike had to say about Dave, Maria raised her head slightly and compassionately looked over at Julie, as if to reach out to her in some way. But then she

collapsed and closed her eyes again – Maria was completely helpless and broken.

Julie sat on the couch leaning forward, and she cried out loud, completely unhinged. The room was filled with such overwhelming sadness, that those that were there to provide comfort, were also having a hard time maintaining their self-control.

The damage set into motion by the terrorists was far reaching, much further than just the victims at the Alamo Sports Center. Countless family members and friends of all the victims, have been injured also, their lives forever altered. Like ripples caused from a stone that was tossed into a still pond, the ripples were continuing to grow.

At the same time, inside the police command center, Sophia sat down at a computer terminal with Violet next to her, starting from scratch, the forensic image process was about to begin. Sophia commented, "Thanks to AI, we should be able to put together a photorealistic image of the man you saw." She began by asking Violet questions about the suspect's appearance, her voice was gentle, yet probing and systematic. As Violet described the man's features, the forensic software quickly began to generate multiple images, each iteration refining the likeness.

Violet watched intently as the face of the terrorist, began to take shape on the screen. The software even presented him in a shirt similar to the one she had described. Eventually, Sam emerged out of Frank's office, and watched Sophia's progress as a silent observer, standing next to Violet.

After about 30 minutes, Violet turned and said to Sophia, "I think that's him." Her voice filled with a mixture of relief and disgust. Violet added, "The image you and the computer generated, definitely, looks a lot like the guy I saw, it's very close."



The man's face, seemed to angrily stare back at them, the same way it stared at Violet, just earlier that evening. Void of any compassion, it was the twisted face of pure evil, the product of a life time of hate driven propaganda. This man wasn't just a common suspect, he participated in the brutal injury and death of many innocent souls, people he had never even seen before – he just wanted to murder people.

Sam studied the image closely, then remarked, "So that's the guy – he looks like a really bad guy! – we can keep our eyes out for him."

Sophia added, saying, "Not only that, we can hand the image off to the news outlets, and his face will be everywhere. Plus, with all the cameras we have around town, our facial recognition AI might be able to identify him, and alert us to his whereabouts." But then she cautioned, "With everyone on the lookout for this guy, there may also be a lot of people around town that look similar to this image. We have to be careful to not falsely accuse or harm the innocent. I'm certain we're going to get a lot of leads from this image, but only one will be our terrorist."

Sophia printed the image on paper for Violet to take with her. As she held it, her thoughts went back to the harmless people that suffered so much carnage earlier that evening. Many of which, survived, but suffered huge life altering injuries. Violet angrily glared at the image with vengeance in her eyes – she remarked, "He's a Monster! Somehow, we have to take this monster out."

As Violet and Sam walked out of the command center, Violet grabbed Sam's arm to get his attention. With tears in her eyes she looked at Sam, with a whimpering plea Violet said, "Sam, I've got to go home. I can't take any more of this tonight. Let's get out of here before the FBI corners us."

Sam nodded, understanding her need to leave. "I hear you," he replied. "Let's get back to the fire station and go home – just keep walking."

With Mack at the wheel, the headlights of Davey's truck sliced through the night, relentlessly making headway as each minute ticked by. The intermittent illumination of passing streetlights served as a measurement of their progress. Inside the cab of the pickup truck, Mack and Davey were slumped in their seats, their faces weary with sorrow. Each man knew that there were no words that could make things better, so silence stretched heavy between them, punctuated only by the rhythmic rumble of the engine. They were caught in a holding pattern, counting the moments before this seemingly never ending journey was over, while their cheeks remained damp from the occasional tear.

As they pulled into the driveway of Davey's parents' home, there was the mutual feeling of – here we go again. Each of them knew that this was not going to be a good scene – a kind of heart breaking task that they had to deal with, head on.

Davey looked over and said, "Mack – I don't know how I'm going to be able to do this – there is nothing I can say, or nothing I can do, that is going to fix this – I'm completely broken, and I feel so helpless." With a deep sigh, Davey added, "I'm dreading going inside the house!"

With guiding words, Mack replied, "Davey – nobody can fix this – it's just something you have to get through – with time, and it will take a lot of time." Mack stared at the house, signaling with his eyes he said, "Right now – your mom is inside there, and she's broken too. Right this second, she needs you, more than anything else in this world – she just needs you to be with her – and together, you'll find a way to get through this." Davey nodded his head and replied, "Ok – let's go do this."

Davey quickly got out of the truck, then ran to the front door, and Mack followed behind. Davey threw open the door, and as he ran inside. He yelled, “MOM!” When Julie heard his voice she cried out, “DAVEY!” She jumped up and raced to her son, and as they embraced each other tightly, together, they cried. Mack stood outside on the walkway, and was waiting for things inside to settle down a bit. Suddenly Abby ran out the door into Mack’s waiting arms – they just cried together on the walkway, as they tightly held each other.

After a long embrace, Abby lovingly caressed Mack’s face with her hands, as she looked up into his eyes saying, “Oh Mack – I was afraid I’d never see you again.”

Mack wiped away his tears, and shaking his head he replied, “I love you Baby – I got real lucky tonight – I was almost with Dave and Juan.”

With a half-smile, Abby said, “I’m so – so very happy to see you!” But she explained, “At the same time, I feel so sad about losing our friends – it’s been a nightmare here all evening – ever since we heard about the explosion. Right this minute, I’ve never felt so relieved and sad at the same time.”

Sam replied, “I feel the same way too Baby. Dave was like a brother to me – and Juan was a good friend too. I’m alive, but right now, I’m not all here.” Again, they embraced each other tightly, and they continued to cry, over the loss of their friends.

Just then, Andre, Juan’s 17 year old son, walked up and curiously asked, “What’s going on with all the cop cars?” Mack and Abby were so wrapped up dealing head-on with every hurdle all evening, they had completely forgotten about Andre!

Completely oblivious of the events at the Alamo Center that evening, Andre had been home next door, playing video games on-line with friends all evening. Abby and Mack were



caught completely off guard – as they looked at each other, their eyes had a silent conversation, and with a nod – they slowly, compassionately looked back at Andre. Without a word, they acknowledged that they were going to have to break the news to Andre, about what happened to his dad. A dark sinister shadow hung in the air, and it was about to shatter Andre's youthful innocence – altering his life forever.

Although the bomb blast took place in an instant, the aftereffects were immense and far reaching, having been ongoing already for hours. The tragic shockwaves cascading through Dave's and Juan's family, have been unfathomable, with still much more to come. Dave's daughters, Mary, living in Austin, and Jennifer, an airman stationed in Germany, were still in the dark about what happened to their dad.

There were many more casualties at the Alamo Center that night than just Dave and Juan. For each life lost, and for every serious injury sustained at the Alamo Center, just like a web that connects people together, the damages are far reaching and profound. The suffering reached far beyond those directly physically impacted, or emotionally devastated by the explosion!

With each passing moment, the onset of outrage and anger was emerging across the entire nation. Everyone everywhere was following the news surrounding the Alamo Center terrorist attack. It was more than just grieving for those that were injured or killed. All Americans, especially football fans, recognized and felt a connection, that what happened at the Alamo Center could happen anywhere, at any time, and that every American was vulnerable.

In spite of the immense level of security of the Alamo Center, it happened anyway. In the face of this kind of diabolical evil, it was clear that the entire nation, not just San Antonio, was in peril, and together as one people – Americans felt a need, to fight back. What happened at the Alamo Center, would not be forgotten.

Chapter 7

Violet's Hero

In spite of all the chaos surrounding the Alamo Center terrorist attack, Violet made it home before midnight – her sanctuary – a second floor apartment located on the outskirts of San Antonio. As she walked from her car, the air was quiet and still, and the walkway was illuminated by soft landscape lighting. The familiar scent of jasmine from the neighboring building greeted her, a small comfort that seemed extra reassuring this evening. She had escaped all the mayhem from earlier, and she had made her way home – seemingly, just like any other calm quiet evening.

Violet fumbled her key slightly in the lock, a nightly ritual that never quite lost its edge when living alone. Stepping inside, she sighed with relief, the warm glow of her lamp dispelling the shadows, and welcomed her back into her solitary sanctuary. After turning on another light, she walked slowly across the room, her eyes were fixated on the wall – a wall filled with shelves, photos, and memorabilia. In the center was a large photo in an ornate frame, commanding the attention on the wall – it was a photo of Violet, on her wedding day with her husband. Their faces beamed with happiness – their eyes sparkled with the joy of their new union, and the intense love between them. Violet's natural beauty was accentuated by her flowing white gown – the groom stood tall and handsome, like a pillar of strength beside her – it must have been a perfect day.

The wedding photo occupied a central place of honor, surrounded by a gallery of memories. Some captured Violet and her husband together, while others showcased her husband solo. Notably, in more than half the pictures, both of them sported Air Force uniforms, a testament to their shared service in the United States Air Force. Apparently Violet had not always lived alone.

Four years ago, the Texas sun seemed to shine just a little brighter for Violet. It was at Joint Base San Antonio, amidst the comradery of fellow airman – that her story with John Wheeler began. They were both young, with laughter as bright as their love, and with hope for a future together. Between rigorous training schedules and late-night maneuvers, they carved

out moments of stolen joy. Weekends were spent exploring the vibrant tapestry of San Antonio – from the majestic River Walk to the historic Alamo, San Antonio was a magical place for fun and romance.

Violet, raised since a child beneath the gentle spires of a Baptist church, found a kindred spirit in John, whose observant Jewish upbringing, mirrored her own deep sense of integrity. Their differences, like the spices in a well-loved stew, deepened the flavor of their connection.

Romance blossomed amidst shared meals, whispered secrets under starry Texas skies, and adventures that stretched beyond city limits. They hiked the rugged beauty of Big Bend National Park, marveled at the otherworldly formations of Carlsbad Caverns, and even tried their hand at two-stepping in a honky-tonk bar in Austin. They had so much in common, and Violet believed she had finally found the love of her life, everything seemed so perfect.

But the rhythm of their hearts, would soon be interrupted. Eventually, new orders came down, a cruel twist of fate in the world of the military, and love. John was bound for a deployment in Afghanistan, while Violet's assignment would send her across the Atlantic to Germany. The prospect of a long distance relationship, threatened to compromise their happiness.

Both Violet and John, recognized that their Love and future together was at risk. Facing the uncertainty of separation, a decision was made. They would tie the knot, and get married. Their love would be a bridge spanning the continents, as well as the internet. Also, they understood that as a married couple, they could eventually be stationed together again, so their time apart would be short lived.

Their wedding plans unfolded with a joyous collaboration of faiths. Violet, with her pastor's blessing, incorporated elements of her Christian faith. John's family, steeped in tradition, shared the warmth of Jewish customs. The ceremony would be a beautiful symphony of their beliefs that would resonate with everyone present.

The wedding and reception buzzed with a vibrant energy, held within a single beautifully decorated expansive hall. The space teemed with family and friends – some who had journeyed across state lines, others stationed

nearby – all gathered to witness this momentous union. John's fellow airman, a distinguished crew from various squadrons, formed a supportive band of brothers, a testament to the comradery they shared.

On one end of the hall, showcased an elegant raised pavilion, adorned with a cascade of colorful flowers. Rows of neatly arranged chairs formed an aisle, ensuring everyone a clear view of the bridal procession. Round dining tables, prepped for the reception feast, filled the remaining expanse of the hall, each one boasting a beautiful touch of decorative flair.

As the guests assembled, a sense of familiarity and reunion filled the air. Many seemed to recognize each other, their greetings and conversations weaving a tapestry of anticipation, while they awaited the ceremony's start.



Finally, the pastor assumed his position within the adorned pavilion, and the first sounds of wedding music filled the room – the ceremony had begun. The festive chatter quieted as the guests found their seats. John, alongside his best man as loyal support, entered the hall from a side entrance, and they took their places at the base of the pavilion.

Then, with a measured pace, the bridal party made their entrance. The maid of honor and three bridesmaids, each adorned in their finery and matching dresses, walked slowly arm-in-arm with groomsmen down the aisle. The bridal party assumed their positions, flanking the pavilion. With all eyes fixed on the decorated archway entrance, a collective anticipation was building for the bride's grand entrance.

Finally, it was the moment of a lifetime, as the opening notes of the bridal march filled the air, the crowd rose to their feet, a collective gasp escaping their lips, as Violet emerged within the doorway. Heads turned, smiles bloomed, and a reverent silence descended. Violet, a vision in her flowing



white gown, captivated the room with her elegance and beauty. Unaccustomed to seeing her outside her air force uniform, the assembled guests were struck by her transformation.

Violet's beauty and radiance was breathtaking! She was the embodiment of a bride's dream, a picture of perfection as she walked unescorted down the aisle. Her eyes were enchanting and dreamy – her smile was captivating and its warmth spellbinding – her pristine white flowing gown was amazing, it was the perfect dress in every way. John, with the biggest grin imaginable, watched her approach, mesmerized by her beauty. In that moment, she wasn't just beautiful, she was the most exquisite bride he'd ever seen, and she was about to become, his bride. A surge of pride and joy washed over him, a silent self-declaration that he was the luckiest man alive. John's gaze briefly met his best man and groomsmen, his smile widening even further as if to say, "Look at my bride guys, it doesn't get any better than this."

As Violet slowly traversed the aisle, her eyes darted to and fro, acknowledging each guest with a heartfelt smile. This was the moment she'd dreamt of since childhood, and it was unfolding flawlessly. Happiness radiated from her, making this a memory she would forever cherish. It was everything she had ever hoped for.

Reaching the pavilion, her eyes met John's. The sight of him, handsome and strong in his tuxedo, stole her breath away. Marrying someone like John had been a lifelong aspiration, and now, it was becoming a reality. With a tender smile, John extended his arm. Violet slipped hers into his, and together they ascended the short staircase into the pavilion, ready to embark on their journey, as husband and wife.

Weaving their traditions together, Violet and John planned a symbolic exchange of religious gifts during their wedding ceremony. To honor John's Jewish heritage, Violet would present him with a necklace adorned with a Star of David pendant. Likewise, reflecting Violet's Christian upbringing, John had a necklace with a Christian cross pendant for her. Both gifts came with heartfelt words.

Violet, her eyes shining with love, turned to John after the maid of honor placed the necklace in her hand. "John," she began, her voice

trembling slightly with emotion, "this necklace is made of titanium, strong and enduring, just like you. Like my love for you, it will forever hold fast." With a gentle touch, she placed the necklace around his neck. John's gaze dropped to the pendant, a silent appreciation washing over his face.

John's turn – his best man presented him with the necklace for Violet. As he lovingly gazed at his bride, a deep tenderness reflected from within John's eyes. "Violet," he said, with his voice warm and caring, "This necklace is crafted from gold, beautiful and radiant, just like you. It will forever symbolize our love, a love that will endure forever." He carefully fastened the clasp around her neck, gently navigating her cascading hair with ease, which spoke volumes of their comfortable intimacy.

The exchange of rings and vows followed, culminating in the pastor's pronouncement that echoed through the hall, the most profound and wonderful words that Violet had ever heard: "I now pronounce you, husband and wife! You may kiss the bride!" As applause erupted, a wave



of pure joy washed over Violet. Those simple words, "I now pronounce you husband and wife," held momentous meaning, a dream realized, a love solidified. Even amidst the cheers, these profound words resonated within her, a cherished memory that would forever be everlasting in her heart.

The bittersweet reality of military life, settled in, a few weeks after their wedding. The joy of their union was eventually touched with their impending deployments. As ordered,

John departed first, bound for the volatile landscape of Afghanistan. A week later, it was Violet's turn, her assignment sent her to a new life in Germany. Their newly minted marriage, barely a month old, was about to face its first real test.

But John and Violet, were committed to get through this separation with strength. Their love, a flame ignited amidst shared adventures and mutual respect, burned brightly. They were determined to make the best of this forced separation. While the uncertainties of their schedules loomed large, they clung to the lifeline of technology. Skype and email became their virtual bridges, connecting them across great distance and time zones.

They also understood the limitations – missed calls on John's end due to the unpredictable nature of his deployment, unexpected changes in Violet's work hours. Yet, they faced these challenges with unwavering positivity. Each message received, each pixelated face on the screen, became a precious reminder of the love they shared. The distance only amplified their longing, their anticipation for the next online encounter, growing stronger with each passing day. Despite the challenges, their long-distance relationship thrived on a foundation of trust, constant communication, and the unwavering belief that they would soon be reunited. They were soldiers of love, fighting the battle of separation with unwavering determination, and the promise of a future, where they wouldn't have to say goodbye.

One afternoon, an unexpected knock at the door, shattered the afternoon quiet of Violet's apartment. Living on the second floor, she peered through the peephole to see an unexpected trio – a brigadier general, a sharply dressed female airman, and a chaplain in his military dress uniform. A knot of dread formed in her stomach. Having a general and chaplain at the door couldn't possibly spell good news.

Taking a deep breath, Violet hesitantly opened the door, "Hello, can I help you?" She asked with a meek voice. The general, a man with a kind but firm expression, stepped forward and asked, "Mrs. Wheeler? Are you, Violet Marie Wheeler?"

Violet swallowed, then nervously confessed, "Yes, that's me."

The general asked, "May we come in? We need to talk."

"Yes sir," Violet mumbled, ushering them inside. As they settled onto the couch, her breath was shallow and her heart beat quickened. Her mind flew to John, stationed in Afghanistan, a very dangerous conflict zone. A silent prayer escaped her lips, "Dear God, please..."

The general's face was etched with concern. "Mrs. Wheeler," he began gently, "there's no easy way to say this..."

In an instant, Violet's world collapsed, as if she had left reality, while being stranded in Germany. Sensation drained from her fingertips, replaced by a cold numbness. She locked eyes with the general, her voice barely a whisper, "John – Oh dear god...Please, Not John..." Shaking her head while the general continued to speak – she couldn't hear anything else – sound and sight was just a blur – her mind and ability to comprehend were completely stunned.

On Violet's memory wall in her San Antonio apartment, a single dedicated shelf held a solitary treasure. A triangular wooden and glass case, its clean lines hinting at the precious object within, nestled amongst cherished photographs. Inside, a folded American flag lay in silent repose, its vibrant colors muted by a veil of glass. A brass plaque on the case's façade, whispered a story of duty and sacrifice. It bore the inscription: John Francis Wheeler, United States Air Force, followed by the stark dates that marked the beginning, and end of his life. Similar to what happened to Dave, her husband John had been killed by a suicide bomber, while trying to give aid to Afghan civilians.

Violet knew all too well about grief, and what it meant to have death, unexpectedly take someone you love. She fell to her knees and cried out, "John! – What am I going to do – I can't take this!" Her gaze shot up at her wedding photo, "Tonight – I promised a guy I would pass his last hug on to his family – it was his dying wish – he hugged me, and then he died – What am I going to do." After pausing for a moment, with a crying voice she continued, "You're the Hero – not me – what would you do?" After several minutes of pondering her dilemma, it dawned on her – John wouldn't

crumble, he'd see it through – John would find a way to get the job done, because that was the kind of guy he was – whatever it took, he would not fail, she thought. Inspired by the memory of her husband's own determination, Violet answered herself, "Okay," she whispered, "I'll do it! I'll give it my best shot. To honor you, I will carry out this man's dying wish."

Beside the flag case, laid a silent testament to their love – the titanium necklace Violet had placed around his neck, on their wedding day. Its pendant, a Star of David catching the soft light, held a thousand whispered promises, and a lifetime of shared future dreams. It was a tangible reminder of John's warmth, his gentle smile and touch, and the strength that had anchored her so soundly. Now, in the face of tonight's gut-wrenching grief at the Alamo Center, Violet craved that strength more than ever.

With trembling fingers, she lifted the necklace, and then placed it on over her head. The weight of the chain was a grounding presence against her skin. Memories flooded back – the joy on his face, as she placed it on over his head at the wedding. The endurance of this necklace amplified the strength of John, her hero. He would never shy away from a promise made – and slowly, a fire of determination ignited within Violet.

All these years later, Violet still wore her wedding ring – too heartbroken to set it aside. A reminder of her happiest day, the ring would soothe her when she felt down – like tonight – she needed it. She lovingly caressed the ring, as if it were a source for strength.

Looking up at their wedding photo, the vibrant memories of their good times and adventures together, was a dramatic contrast to the hollowness she felt tonight. Violet spoke softly, "John," she began, her voice thick with emotion, "There's nothing I want more, than to hug you one last time. You were, and always will be my hero."

Violet rose to her feet. "I know what you would do. You'd deliver that hug, you'd bridge the gap between love and loss, as best you could – Just like me, the way I felt when you had just died, his wife and children must be drowning in grief and sadness, wishing for one more touch, from their husband and father."

With newfound resolve in her voice, she prayed to god, "God – I need your help – I'll do it, but I need your strength – please help me find a way to get this done – Please! And I'm going to need a little luck too." With a loving touch, Violet reached out to their wedding photo, "John, I promise," with her voice gaining strength, "I'll do my best. For you, for them – and for the love of family that binds us all." With a final gesture of love and resolve, Violet pressed a kiss to the cool metal pendant, then she held it out towards the photo, a silent salute to the man who would forever, be her guiding star.

As the night progressed, all of Texas settled into a quiet slumber, preparing for the dawn of a new day. Life can be so magical, and full of wonderful days and adventures, which seem never ending. Like a bird flying across the open sky, so high and vast, how wonderful it must be to soar through a realm that only flight provides. To the bird, the heavens must seem endless and forever. Then one day, the bird's life finishes. What seemed so endless for the bird, has an end after all.

People are no different, in our seemingly endless path through life, one might say that there is an expected time for all things – a time for school, a career, a time to get married and have children, and a time to someday, die. Often without notice, sometimes a life's path can be abruptly cut off, with no chance for a conversation with friends and family, or to say goodbyes. When a life is snatched away in such an instant, those left behind are robbed, injured, and victims themselves. Our lives are so intertwined, the more friends and loved ones left behind, the more numerous the victims.

For the victims left behind, there is no time to gradually re-think their own life path, no smooth transition. They become forced to confront a tragedy head-on, and hope they can make it through to the other side. Our humanity, and caring for each other, are intrinsic human assets we can lean on to find our way through a hardship. In various ways, victims, will unite.

Chapter 8

The Aftermath

The bright morning light peeked through the blinds, painting a pale stripe across the rumpled duvet. Violet stirred, the remnants of a deep and sound sleep, clinging to her like cobwebs. It was just before 9:00am the following morning, a Thursday, and Violet was beginning her usual wake up ritual. The stress from the night before had completely worn Violet out, and when her head hit her pillow, she had immediately fallen asleep, out like a light. Then without interruption, she had slept through the entire night.

Now well rested, she was adhering to her usual routine for starting the day. While still lying in bed, she repositioned her pillows so that she was more upright, to facilitate watching the TV sitting on a dresser on the opposite side of the room. Violet grabbed the TV remote, left laying on top of the bed, and a bottle of water left on her nightstand. Still resting in bed with the TV on, she searched to find out what the latest news was about the bombing from the night before. A clear testament as to how horrible the bombing was, every news outlet had full continuous coverage of the attack, and the whole nation was watching.

As Violet flipped through the channels, she came across a news station displaying the image of the suspect that had escaped, the same image she helped create. The announcer saying, “Be on the lookout for this man. He is suspected of being involved with the person that carried out the bombing at the Alamo Center last night. If you know this person, or you see him, please contact the police immediately – and do not confront this person, consider him armed and dangerous.” Overnight, this image of the bomber’s accomplice had been released to the press, and his face was being circulated on every news channel. – Needless to say, Violet was impressed, and pleased that she was able to contribute to this manhunt.

The news coverage was quickly redirected to a press release that had just started. The chief of police, was just stepping up to the mics arranged on a podium, located outside of the mobile police command center at the Alamo Center. This was the same police officer that Violet

heard from during the video conference at the fire station, just the day before. Violet sat up more alert, and listened closely.

With a more stressed, and serious look on his face this time, the officer began speaking, “My name is James Stiller, I am the San Antonio Chief of Police. Having spoken to witnesses, and reviewing the available video footage, it has been determined that last night, a terrorist wearing a suicide vest, detonated his vest outside the Alamo Center near the main entrance, just as people were beginning to leave the stadium.” Speaking strongly and clear, he continued, “This was, without a doubt – a terrorist attack! At this time, we do not know who or what organization is responsible for this attack – but we do believe more than one person was involved. I’m sure by now, many of you have seen the image of the man that we are searching for in connection with this bombing. If you see this man, or know who he is, contact the police or the FBI immediately.” Violet was proud to know, that her description of the accomplice had been taken seriously, and had become a major benefit to the investigation.

After a pause and the shuffling of his notes, the police chief resumed the news release, “Now for the sad part – the explosion resulted in the deaths of 9 people, and the serious injury of 67 other people. All of the injured were transported to area hospitals. Of the injured, 8 of them are still in critical condition. Many of the injured have life altering physical damage. Of those that have perished, 6 were pronounced at the scene of the explosion, the youngest of which was a 10 year old boy, and 3 victims have passed away at area hospitals.”

As she listened to the chief talk, Violet was reliving the intense and horrible crime scene caused by the blast. It is unimaginable, for any civilized person to comprehend the suffering, and the heartbreak that the bomber caused – but she knew first hand, because she lived it. Having dealt personally with Davey and Mack, and witnessed the actions and emotions of the uninjured at the scene. She understood the depth of the suffering, and that it goes way beyond those physically cut down by the explosion.

Like a narrator telling a story, as the Chief spoke he was telling Violet’s story – his words were Violets actual memories, from just the night

before. The numerical details he presented, didn't come close to portraying how awful it was as it played out raw and unfiltered, but Violet knew.

As tears began streaming down Violets cheeks, the Chief continued speaking again, after another sorrow felt pause, "Three of the people that were pronounced at the scene were some of our own – San Antonio police officers. Officers James Spearman and Stephany Holt were on duty, and were actively in pursuit of the suspected bomber. They were very close to the bomber when the vest detonated. Captain Juan Perez, was off duty, and on his way out of the stadium. Captain Perez tackled the bomber, and wrestled for control of the detonator, when the vest exploded." Juan's heroism was a detail that Violet didn't know until just now – it was inspiring. The chief kept talking after wiping away a tear, "If it were not for the heroism of these police officers – the bomber may have made his way deeper into the stadium, if so – the number of casualties would have been several times greater." The chief raised his voice and shook his fist, while saying, "These officers risked, and gave their lives to save others – they are absolute Heroes! I promise you, we will, find all those responsible, and we will, bring them to justice!"

Although Chief Stiller wasn't finished, and others were yet to speak, Violet couldn't take any more news. She had heard all the bad news she could stand, for now, and turned off the TV. Still teary eyed, the heroism of the police officers inspired her. Violet was thinking, "What can I do to help – sitting around my apartment would be a waste of my time – Those officers gave up their lives to save others, perhaps, there is more she could do."

In spite of enduring all the violence and sadness from the night before, even though Violet was not scheduled to work today, she was determined to help if needed. She was motivated, and decided to head for the fire station. Drawn not just by the sense of duty, but also by the promise of friendly faces, and likely some good food – Most of the firemen at her firehouse are exceptional gourmets, and they really know how to eat. Plus, she couldn't bear the thought of being alone right now.

Committed to making the most of her day, Violet collected herself and was heading off. Pausing in the doorway, she cast a lingering look at her wedding photo. A soft smile played on her lips, as she blew a kiss towards John. Though touched with a hint of sadness, her expression held a spark

of determination, and hope that she could continue to make a difference. With a deep breath, she stepped out the door.

Meanwhile, In Austin Texas, there was a knock at the door at Mary's home, Dave's daughter, located on the Southeast side of Austin, in a neighborhood on Monarch Drive. Nine-year-old Michael, Mary's son, flung the door open with a joyous, "Hi Mack!" Mack shared a smile back, asking, "Hey Michael, is your mom around?" Mack was a very good friend to Mary and her children. They often shared special occasions and birthdays together with the rest of the family. Michael answered, "Yep, come on in." Leading the way, Michael called, "Hey Mom – Mack is here!"

Mack closed the door, scanning the room for any sign Mary knew about what happened at the Alamo Center, or the tragedy of her father. The TV, displaying a paused video game, hinted they might be out of the loop. Everything seemed normal, a stark contrast to the storm brewing inside him. He wanted to check on Mary, and if need be, he didn't want to break the bad news over the phone. Sleep-deprived but resolute, Mack was determined to deliver the sad news in person.

Mary, emerging from laundry duty, reading Mack's face, she froze, and she became concerned. "Hi Mack, is everything okay?" Michael was by her side, and he was excited about Mack's visit.

"Mary," Mack said with a somber voice, "I need to talk to you alone."

Mary's gaze dropped to Michael, strands of his hair escaping her grasp as she gently ran her fingers through it. "Honey, can you go play in your room for a bit? Mommy needs to talk to Mack privately."

Dismayed, Michael frowned. "Aw man," he mumbled, "Let me know when you're done talking." As he trudged towards his room, while the seriousness of why Mack was here filled the air. Michael was hoping to spend some time with Mack, and was disappointed.

Mary watched him go into his room, then turned back to Mack, with a tremor in her voice, she asked, "So, what's going on?"

Mack hesitated, then gestured towards the couch. "Let's sit down." He sank onto the cushions, inviting Mary beside him with a gesture of his hand.

As Mary slowly sat down next to Mack, her eyes were wide open with worry, a choked whisper, escaped her lips, "Mack, you're scaring me." She sensed that Mack's unplanned visit wasn't good.

Mack was having a hard time getting started, but finally, the dam broke. "Mary," he began, his voice thick with emotion, "I came here because – yesterday, your father and I went to the football game at the Alamo Center. That night, as we were leaving, a terrorist detonated a bomb. – It – it took your father's life."

A horrified look came to Mary's face, "What? – Are you telling me that my Dad is dead?" Her voice was just a whisper as she trembled. Tears welled up in her eyes, blurring her vision as her head dipped down. Mack reached out and held Mary's hand, then said, "I'm so very sorry. Your Mom and brother already know. – I came here first thing this morning, to tell you in person."

After a moment she looked back up at Mack, her voice raw and crying she asked, "How do you know my dad is dead?"

Tears welled up in Mack's eyes too, spilling down his cheeks. "I was there – I saw how badly he was hurt." Between Mack's fatigue and grief, he was finding it hard to speak, but he continued, "An ambulance took him to the hospital, and I went there – your brother Davey and I went to the hospital together." Mary began to openly cry out loud, with her face wet with tears. She covered her face with her hands, as if to hide from Mack's words. Mack added, "By the time we got to the hospital, your dad had already passed away."

Just then, Mary and Mack heard a child sobbing from the hallway. They both looked over and saw Michael standing in the doorway to his bedroom. He had been listening to the bad news Mack was giving to his mom. His face was wet with tears, and very sad. Michael whimpered to his mother, "Mom, can I come over there?" Sitting on the couch, Mary reached out with her arms, "Come here Baby!" Michael went running over to his

mother and they hugged each other tight. They cried together for a spell, and then Michael looked into his mom's eyes and asked, "Mom – does this mean that we are not going to see Grandpa again?" Mary hugged Michael tight again, and gazed with a blank stare, she replied, "Yes dear – Grandpa is gone from this world – he has gone to heaven."



Mary was just barely able to maintain her composure, as she held and tried to comfort Michael. She was struggling to keep it together, and was both heartbroken and angry. The sadness and grief being forced onto her son by a terrorist, was so sudden and unexpected, it left her at a loss for words. Mary knew Michael adored and loved his grandfather immensely – he was Michael's primary father figure – and they were so very tight.

A moment later, Nancy, Mary's younger child, walked into the room clutching a doll. Nancy had been playing in her bedroom since before Mack had arrived. Seeing and hearing everyone crying, and their faces wet with tears, she curiously asked, "Mommy, why is everyone crying?" Overwhelming responsibility settled on Mary's shoulders. How could she delicately explain the inexplicable to her youngest child? Mary was struggling fiercely to maintain her own self-control, an attempt to protect and shield her children, but it was a battle she was about to lose, and she was



going to need Mack's help.

In today's world, with advancements in medical science and preventative care, death has become less familiar, especially for children. In the past, death was a more common occurrence, leading to a greater acceptance of its inevitability. However, medical breakthroughs and safety measures, have significantly extended life expectancy, allowing society to delay the inevitable.

For Mary and Davey's children, this will be their first experience with the loss of a loved one. They are likely to have many questions about death, grappling with both their own mortality, and the loss of their grandfather. While the fear of death, is universal regardless of age. The circumstances surrounding Dave's death, will make it particularly difficult for his grandchildren to comprehend. The depravity of his murder, and the underlying prejudice that fueled it, will undoubtedly leave a lasting impact on those who loved him.

Dave's other daughter, Jennifer, stationed thousands of miles away at Ramstein Air Base in Germany, had just returned home from a long shift where she worked as an air traffic controller. Unaware of the tragedy unfolding back in Texas, she was enjoying a takeout meal, when a knock at her door shattered her quiet evening.

Looking through the peephole, she saw a group in military attire – a Colonel, a chaplain, and a female sergeant. Puzzled, she opened the door with curiosity, Jennifer stood in the doorway and greeted them, unaware of the news they carried.

The Colonel, clipboard in hand, introduced himself, the sergeant as a base counselor, and the chaplain. To confirm her identity, he asked, "Are you Jennifer Ella Johnson? With a suspicious tone, Jennifer answered with a yes sir. She was wondering how they knew her without her first stating it,



so it was apparent that they purposely were in search of her, and they weren't just going door-to-door. A touch of suspicion flickered in Jennifer's eyes as they requested to come in. Trusting her fellow airmen, she ushered them inside.

"Come in, and have a seat." Jennifer graciously said. Her first thought was that with the chaplain present, she thought perhaps, they were on a mission that had something to do with the base church. She asked, "What can I do for you?"

As Jennifer sat down, the chaplain remained standing near Jennifer, his posture, a hint of some need to stay close. As the Colonel began to speak, the chaplain knelt down beside her chair. He inquired if she'd heard about the events at the Alamo Sports Center last night.

Jennifer answered, with a hint of defensiveness in her voice, saying, "Of course, I'm familiar with the Alamo Center, I'm from Texas. It's not far from my family's home, where I used to live. But I'm not familiar with any of the events happening there this week." Then she added, "I've been on duty since early this morning and I just got home."

As Jennifer glanced at their faces, she noticed a growing sense of unease. They all seemed unhappy, their expressions serious and concerned, like they were holding something back. A knot of worry tightened in her stomach. She inquired, "Why are you asking me about the Alamo Center."

Taking a deep breath, the Colonel revealed the devastating news, saying, "A suicide bomber attacked the Alamo Center, at the end of a football game last night." Jennifer's breath froze. Jennifer remembered in an instant, that her dad was going to a football game at the Alamo Center. After a short pause, the Colonel added, "Jennifer, your father, David Johnson, was killed by the explosion."

After sitting silent for a moment, and just taking in what she had just heard, gradually, extreme sadness began to take over. Jennifer replied sobbing, "Maybe it was somebody else – San Antonio is a long way away, maybe you've got it wrong..." Tears welled in her eyes blurring her vision.

Jennifer's breathing was quickened, and her heart was racing. Feeling surrounded, Jennifer averted her eyes, looking away.

The Colonel offered his deepest condolences, while the Sargent moved closer to Jennifer. Consulting his clipboard, he continued, "A Mr. Mack Thompson contacted Lackland Air Force Base, requesting we find you, and deliver this news, and Lackland confirmed his story. Do you know Mack Thompson?"

With tears raining, Jennifer began to openly cry out loud, and was barely able to slowly answer, "Mack – is my dad's – best friend..." Feeling surrounded by the awful news from her fellow airmen, she wanted to escape. Jennifer stood up, turned away, and stumbled toward a wall. As she leaned on the wall, the chaplain stayed close. Crying profusely, and unable to see through the tears, she became dizzy, and slowly collapsed towards the floor. The chaplain, ever vigilant caught her fall, then gently guided her, along with the sergeant, into the bedroom.

Grief-stricken and disoriented, Jennifer cried out, "MY MOM – where's my mom – I need my Mom" She repeated her cries, over and over, "I want my Mom!" Jennifer's cries for her mother, was an attempt to reach out for some sense of stability. At some level, she was able to rationalize, that her mother needed her also. For hours, her fellow airmen offered solace, but she remained weak and utterly distraught. All this way from San Antonio, Jennifer had been struck down by the suicide bomber, with the extreme magnitude of Jennifer's heartache, threatening to consume her.

Eventually, Jennifer's fellow airmen huddled in the living room, strategizing Jennifer's return to the states. A commercial flight was deemed impossible in her fragile state. The sergeant, a professional counselor, recognized the urgency of reuniting Jennifer with her family.

The Colonel, resolute, issued a clear directive. A female airman was to be assigned to Jennifer around the clock. The sergeant, entrusted with this crucial decision, would also personally escort her back to San Antonio and into her family's care.

Aware of Ramstein 's bustling air traffic, the Colonel emphasized the need for swift military transport. Jennifer's emotional state demanded privacy, and a commercial flight could exacerbate her condition. The Colonel empowered the sergeant to overcome any obstacles, and he reiterated, saying, "We take care of our own. This airman just lost her father to a terrorist attack on American soil. She needs to be reunited with her mother, along with the rest of her family, as quickly as possible. We have to come through for her." They all agreed, and their voices were united with a profound sense of determination in the face of this tragedy.

Thousands of miles away, from the heart of Texas, Jennifer has been struck down by the bomber. The common methodology of counting the casualties, for a catastrophe of any size, is deceptive and grossly inaccurate. Such a simple count misses the grasp of the overall damage. It is human nature, that everyone is surrounded by a web of love and caring, a web constructed by the silk threads of humanity. Break any thread, and the entire web is injured, especially those connected close to the break.

For Jennifer, the compassion of her fellow airman will undoubtedly help. But, living alone and stationed so far from home, she felt like she was out on a limb, feeling exposed and especially vulnerable. Like a leaf clinging to a tree branch in a hurricane, that suddenly breaks loose, then blown aimlessly through the sky. Jennifer felt isolated and without support from home – She had been struck down, very hard. The best medicine for her to recover and truly heal, will be found with the unwavering love and support of her family – a compassionate truth that Jennifer's fellow airman also share.

Back at the fire station in San Antonio, Violet smiled big with satisfaction. She had just finished a delicious lunch with her colleagues. Violet enthusiastically declared, "Firefighters, sure know how to eat!" Echoing a well-established department saying, and signaling another one of their...exceptionally prepared in-house meals. One of the guys answered back, "You know that's right!" A chorus of agreement and laughter filled the room.

Just then, the captain entered the lunch room and was surprised to see Violet, remarking, "Whoa! – Violet – I didn't expect to see you here. Today's your day off."

Violet explained, "I know Captain, but I remembered that Pete was cooking a special lunch today, and I couldn't resist!"

The captain discreetly pulled Violet aside for a private conversation. With concern, and in a low voice he said, "Sam called me this morning. He was worried about you, and he told me about your difficult time last night." Violet listened intently. "Why not head home, relax while you can, and clear your head? You're back on duty tomorrow."

Violet assured him, "Thanks Captain, but I'm okay – I got this. Being here, surrounded by friends, helps more than staying at home, and dwelling on how awful things were last night."

The chief nodded, saying, "Alright, but if you need anything, even just to talk, don't hesitate to reach out to me." Violet smiled and replied, "Will do, thank you Rocky."

The lunchroom emptied, leaving Violet alone at the table. After clearing her dishes and wiping down the table, she settled back into her seat. Simply spending time with friends, and enjoying a good meal had a therapeutic effect on her. It was a welcome distraction from the drama of the previous night.

After checking her phone for messages, she decided to unwind by playing a familiar video game. As she immersed herself in the virtual world, she felt a sense of normalcy returning, a welcome relief from the chaos that had consumed her the night before.

Violet was focused on her game, when in walked a well-dressed and distinguished man, wearing a suit and carrying a brief case. He knocked on the doorway to announce himself. Violet glanced up looking across the table, and then went back to her game. Smiling, the man spoke, "Are you Violet Wheeler?" She paused her game, then gave the man her attention while setting the phone down, "That's me, can I help you?"

The man smiled, "Hi, I'm Duane Scott with the FBI." He extended a hand for a handshake. "Well, you found me, I'm Violet Wheeler," she confirmed while shaking his hand.

He sat down and began removing items from his briefcase, placing a folder with papers inside, and a tablet on the table. Meanwhile, Rocky protectively watched from the doorway.

"I figured I'd find you here," he remarked. Duane offered his card, "Here's my contact information." Violet scanned the card. With a raised eyebrow, she replied, "So – Mr. Scott, you're Special Agent In Charge – you're pretty high up the FBI ladder, to come here to talk with little ole me."

A bit surprised, he replied, "Sounds like you know something about the FBI. Call me Duane." Placing a hand on the folder and tapping his finger, he added, "After reviewing your file, I felt I had to speak with you directly." Seeing her name printed on the folder, Violet was impressed by the FBI's swift research on her.

Duane's expression turned serious, and he began to explain the nature of his visit, "Let me be blunt. Due to lax border policies, over just the past few years, we think over 1,000 especially dangerous people, have crossed the border into this country. I'm talking about people that may act out in ways very similar, to the bomber that detonated the suicide vest at the Alamo Center last night. We know for certain that the bomber's accomplice escaped, and potential terrorist chatter within Texas, is rapidly accelerating."

Duane's assessment raised Violet's eyebrows and got her attention, and even Rocky felt uneasy, shuffling his feet as he looked on with worry.

Violet clarified, stating, "Tell me if I understand you correctly, you believe that there are over 1,000 potential foreign terrorists in our country, right now!"

Duane nodded in agreement, "We know they're here."

"My immediate goal, is to apprehend those responsible for the Alamo Center bombing, and drag in as many accomplices as I can find. Our

country, our fellow Americans are in extreme danger, and I need to know if you will help me." Violet leaned forward, her gaze sincere as she answered, "Absolutely – How can I assist?"

Duane opened the folder. "It states here, you were a Colorado state champion swimmer in high school, went to college at Colorado State, joined the Air Force, and eventually served within Air Force Intelligence at Ramstein Air Base in Germany. I'm impressed with the number of commendations you received for someone so young. It seems like success follows you."

Violet gave a warm smile, "I guess so, apparently a lot of people like me."

Duane probed, "What was your role for Intelligence? What did you do there?"

Violet answered, "What I did there – is classified. Let's just say that I have – ***special talents*** – talents that they appreciated."

Duane nodded, saying, "The report I have, indicates you were the first person to alert stadium security, of a potential bomber at the stadium last night." Then he activated a recording app on his tablet, and placed it in the center of the table. "I'm recording now – In your own words, tell me everything about last night. Focus on anything related to the bomber, but include everything, even seemingly insignificant details."

Violet recounted the events of the previous night, with Duane occasionally interjecting questions. With her memories still so vivid, combined with Duane's inquiries, she was able to recall details she initially dismissed as unimportant. Duane then asked Violet about the car explosion the previous night, leading into another whole line of questioning.

Once he seemed finished drilling her with questions about the bombings, Duane retrieved from the folder, a sheet of paper, on it the image created by Sophia, the police department's detective and forensic artist. He asked as he slid it on the table towards Violet, "Does this resemble the bomber's accomplice that escaped?"

Violet was quick to confirm, "Yes, that's him – I helped the police detective create this image. I got a very good look at him." Duane then walked around the table and sat beside her. On his tablet, he opened a photo file, then handed his tablet to Violet, and asked, "Is that him?"

Violet's eyes widened...a moment later she answered, "It looks exactly like him! Where did you get this?" Duane had acquired a photo, that closely resembled the image Violet had helped create.

Duane replied, "Thanks to the forensic image you and the police created, and the news media, we received a valuable tip early this morning from his landlord. This image was taken a few weeks ago, during the day, by the landlord's security camera. We don't know if it's his real name, but the name he gave the landlord, was Carlos Mendoza. According to the landlord, he even has a driver's license with this name on it, and he drives a gray SUV."



Violet was impressed. "Wow, you guys work fast."

"Not fast enough," Duane regretted. "By the time we raided his apartment, he was already gone and..."

Duane was mid-sentence when his phone buzzed, a sudden interruption that drew his attention. After reading a text message he took a deep breath, his expression shifting dramatically. Rising abruptly from his seat, he began gathering his belongings. "Something pressing has come up." He explained bluntly, his voice laced with urgency. He quickly packed his belongings, his movements efficient and swift. Turning to Violet, he offered a hasty apology, "Sorry, but I have to rush out of here. Thank you for your time, you've been very helpful," Duane added, while pointing his finger at Violet, "You have my business card. If anything comes up, please don't hesitate to contact me." With that, he turned and quickly exited the room, walking past Rocky in the doorway, and leaving a trail of unspoken questions in his wake.

Violet exchanged a puzzled glance with Rocky. "Well, he sure left in a hurry." She curiously remarked.

Rocky nodded with a concerned expression on his face, saying, "Something definitely, caught his attention. He seemed urgent to get somewhere fast." With the interview over, Rocky turned and headed back to his office.

Violet carefully documented Duane's contact information in her phone, determined not to misplace the information. It was a habit she had developed over the years, one that had proven invaluable on countless occasions.

The accelerating chatter that Duane spoke of, is often the precursor of something bad to come, like a clue. It's a kind of digital dust, that's hard to piece together because it's typically in code and fragmented. When it accelerates, it's a sign that bad actors are on the move, and that a climax is coming.

At Mary's home, the afternoon sun was settling lower in the sky, casting ribbons of light through the blinds across the living room, where Mary and Mack, had earlier delivered the devastating news, of their grandfather's passing to Mary's children. Tears had flowed freely, a raw display of grief that left them all emotionally drained. Yet, amidst the sobs and sniffles, Mary had summoned her reserve strength, guiding her children through the storm of emotions, a storm that had threatened to consume them. Curled up together on the worn leather couch, they clung to each other in silence, finding solace in the quiet comfort of their shared grief. But for now, the initial shock had subsided, replaced by a quiet, tearful acceptance.

Mack, slumped deep in a nearby armchair, mirrored their exhaustion. The whirlwind of events over the past 24 hours had taken its toll. One moment, his life had been normal, and even filled with fun and excitement. Next, it had been ripped apart by tragedy. Still, he pushed through his own fatigue and sadness, determined to be a tower of strength for Mary and the

kids. He recognized that in the coming days, they would all need each other more than ever.

Eventually, a sliver of afternoon sunlight found Mary's face, stirring her from the tearful huddle. Rising to her feet, her voice thick with unshed tears, she addressed Mack, "I can't wait any longer," she declared. "I need to be with my Mom. There's no doubt she's crushed and heartbroken, all alone in that big house." Her gaze drifted to the children, a fresh wave of worry washing over her face, as she stirred her children, saying, "It's time to get up. We all need to go and be with Grandma, right away. We can't leave her to face this alone."

To assure Mary, Mack injected, "I'm pretty sure Davey is still there – he was there when I left. Your mom hasn't been alone."

Casting a concerned look at her children, she gently touched Michael rousing him, "Honey, why don't you go and pack a suitcase? We're heading to Grandma and Grandpa's as soon as we're ready. Pack enough clothes for a few days, alright?"

Nancy, her eyes red-rimmed from crying, piped up, a flicker of confusion crossing her face. "Will Grandpa be there?"

Mary's heart ached anew. "No sweetie," she replied gently, "not this time. But Grandma will be there. We're going there to spend time with Grandma, to hold her hand and give her hugs."

Committed to providing emotional support for Mary, Mack added, "I'll stay here until you're all packed up and ready to go. I need to head over there too. Abby's been with your mom all day also." Then he added, "Let me know if I can be of any assistance."

Mary nodded gratefully. Mack's unwavering presence was a source of immense comfort during this turbulent time. With a renewed sense of purpose, she turned to her children, ready to face the journey ahead together. They would navigate this storm as a family, drawing strength from their love for each other, and their shared memories of their beloved dad and grandfather. In future days, Mary would find times to cry when the

children were not present. For now, she was focused on protecting, and guiding her babies, through this tragedy. .

A little while later, as Mary pulled into her parent's driveway with Mack following behind, they were met with the sight of numerous cars, a contrast to the usual calm. Glancing next door, they saw a similar scene at Juan and Maria's house. Undoubtedly, Juan's family and friends had arrived, to offer support to Maria and Andre.

The act of driving from Austin, had served as a strange sort of therapy for Mary, diverting her attention, and at least part of her sorrow. Back home in Austin, the task of packing her suitcase, and helping the kids get ready to leave, had left her numb. Her mind, a whirlwind of emotions, had found relief in the focused act of navigating the roads.

Along the drive, the memories of her turbulent divorce, just a few years back, had surfaced again. Though a painful experience, it had fortified her emotions, sharpening her focus on her family and children. This newfound strength would prove invaluable, as she grappled with the loss of her father.

As Mary pulled in, Mack found a spot along the curb. Mary's brother Davey and his wife Linda had been there all day, and their cars were in the driveway. As Mary and her children stepped out of the car, they unloaded their suitcases. Mary reached out with her arms open, calling Michael and Nancy in for a hug, pulling them both in tight.

As a last attempt to prepare her children before going inside, Mary gently said. "Michael, Nancy – Grandma is going to be very sad, and not her usual self." Speaking softly with a calming voice, she added, "We need to try our best to comfort her, to make her feel better."

"What about me?" Nancy asked, with tears in her eyes and a tremor in her voice. "Who's going to make me feel better!" Her uncertainty was so stunning and innocent, unknowing at the time, her words and this moment, would linger in Mary's memory for the rest of Mary's life.

Mary squeezed her daughter's hand reassuringly. "I will always be here for you Honey," she promised. "We all will. We'll get through this together, as a family, and we will all be there for you." Another hug followed, Mary's words pacifying her children's anxieties. "It won't be easy," she added, "but with time, the sadness will become small."

Mack stood patiently beside them, his gaze filled with a silent understanding. Mary and Mack, shared a lingering moment of sadness, as their eyes met, sharing a silent conversation that seemed to say, "Here we go again." Then turning back to her children, Mary asked, "Are you two ready to go inside?" Michael and Nancy, eyes red-rimmed from tears, simply nodded.

Inside, the house was tranquil with quiet activities. Davey's three children, nestled on the living room couch, were engrossed in an animated movie. Davey sat nestled among them, a picture of subdued concern, with his arms around each of the two youngest children. In the kitchen, Abby and Davey's wife Linda, bustled around, preparing a simple meal. Down the hall, shrouded in the quiet of her bedroom, lay Grandma, taking a nap in her clothes.

As Mary's children walked in, Davey's children jumped up and ran over to them. They exchanged a flurry of compassionate hugs, and tearful embraces, without saying a word. In their childlike innocence, they understood their shared pain, a sadness that bound them together, and caringly, they sought to reassure one another.

Davey and Mary watched, as if standing guard over the children's reunion, with a mixture of sadness, and relief. Once it was determined that things were going well, Davey and Mary's eyes met. It was as if their eyes were silently telling a story, it was a story of heartbreak and sadness over the loss of their father, in a way that only siblings could relate to. Playing together all their lives as children, they shared so many of the same memories, all the same holidays, birthdays, vacations, graduations, and the births of their own children. Now, without any warning, they are forced share the loss of their Dad together.

Amid Davey's and Mary's personal sadness, a fierce protectiveness bloomed within them. Like a mama bear protecting their cubs, they needed

to help their children get through the death of their grandfather, with strength, and stability. This was their children's first encounter with the death of someone they loved, a harsh reality that mirrored their own internal struggles.

Finally, as if a balloon had just burst, Mary and Davey raced to each other, and they embraced tightly. Together they cried, trying their best to maintain some semblance of composure, in an attempt to not upset the children. But, the loss of their Dad, stolen from them by a terrorist, was overwhelming.

The bomb at the Alamo Center had ripped a chasm through whole families, far beyond the Johnsons. It had not only taken Dave, but had also injured his wife and children, and even his grandchildren, leaving a trail of generational devastation in its wake. The ripple effect of the blast, impacted not just Dave's immediate family, but also his restaurant employees, friends of all their family members, and extended relatives. The act, this barbaric projection of evil, had sent a wave of terror through the entire nation, a chilling reminder of the vulnerability we all share.

Chapter 9

Fulfilling A Promise

The late afternoon sun, cast an orange glow across the fire station, painting long shadows on the pristine kept vehicle bay. Violet, although a seasoned paramedic and accustom to handling seriously injured people, the extreme carnage from the night before, lingered heavy within her heart. Especially, the unusual promise she had made to one of the victims.

News of the horrific terrorist attack had dominated the airwaves all day, and Violet deliberately steered clear of any newscasts, seeking refuge in the quiet routines of the station. Yet, a nagging curiosity gnawed at her. Stepping into the deserted lunchroom, she flicked on the television, the sudden burst of light illuminating the room. The set was tuned to a local news channel, with the volume muted. With a click, she cranked it up, but was ready to quickly turn it off, if more unsettling bad news presented itself.

It wasn't long before a news report seized her attention. The footage depicted a reporter standing resolute alongside the imposing Southern border wall, its stark silhouette ending abruptly. Clearly, there was a substantial gap in the wall at this location. Behind him, a large crowd of hundreds of people milled about, with exhaustion and expectation on their faces. The reporter stated, "I'm here at Eagle Pass, and behind me, is just today's batch of Illegal aliens. Most of them, crossing the border here throughout the night, then surrendering themselves to the watchful eyes of Border Patrol agents."

The reporter's voice was laced with a touch of exasperation, as he explained, "Over the past few years alone," he declared, "Border Patrol, has documented a staggering record influx, of at least twelve million apprehensions of illegal border crossers, and that's just the tip of the iceberg." He elaborated on the federal government's catch-and-release policy, a system that was no secret to Texans like Violet, who had borne the brunt of this so-called invasion for years. He continued, saying, "Once taken into custody, these individuals are swiftly processed, often within a day, and then released into the United States."

The reporter went on to explain the effects of current immigration policies, "Thanks to the federal government, Illegal border crossers receive taxpayer funded air travel across the nation, free government housing, free medical care, and monthly welfare checks. Essentially, illegal immigration is a federally subsidized system, facilitating and incentivizing, an invasion, into and across America." The reporter added, "They can choose their destination at an airport, then board a plane with no identification, all courtesy of the federal government. Upon arrival at their destination, illegals will find themselves nestled in pre-arranged housing, all at the expense of the American public."

Dismay, settled on Violet's face. It was common knowledge that these "illegals," as the reporter phrased it, were granted free benefits, even surpassing those offered to America's elderly on Social Security. But, Violet was unaware of the extent in which the federal government was involved.

"Wow!" Violet exclaimed, with frustration across her face. Clearly, the extent of involvement of the federal government, to facilitate an invasion at taxpayer expense, seemed incredibly irresponsible, and unpatriotic.

The reporter concluded with a pointed remark. "The individuals, referred to as, 'gotaways', are a cause for significant concern. They've opted out of all the immediate free benefits offered by the federal government, so as to maintain their obscurity. Their likely nefarious past and future intentions, raises the likelihood, that the Alamo Center bombing, might be the work of one such individual."

Violet shook her head, frustrated by the senseless endangerment of innocent Americans, and the likelihood that the tragedy at the Alamo Center, could have potentially been averted with a more secure border. The memory of her husband, their love and their future together, stolen, by a terrorist attack in Afghanistan at Ka-bul Airport, intertwined with the recent grisly slaughter she witnessed at the Alamo Center – so similar, they made her heart cringe.

Frustrated with the TV news broadcast, and getting hungry again, Violet turned off the TV. She had decided to leave and head for home. As she was heading out, she heard a familiar voice call out to her, "Hey Violet!" The captain was surprised to see her, and he quickly got up from

his desk to catch her. He emerged from his office, his worn boots creaking softly on the tile floor. As he met Violet, he said, "I didn't realize you were still hanging around. You had a call – a fella named Davey Johnson, he wanted to speak with you."

Recognition sparked in Violet's eyes, thinking he must be Dave's son, from the hospital. She asked, with apprehension in her voice, "What did he want?"

Rocky's voice softened, "He said that you transported his dad to the hospital last night – and that his dad passed away. He just said that he wanted to talk to you." Rocky handed Violet a slip of paper with Davey's phone number written on it, then added, "He said that he would appreciate it if you would call him."

At first hesitating, Violet took the slip of paper, and then looked over the phone number, pondering its potential. She could read the hand written phone number just fine, thinking this could be an opportunity, an avenue of reaching out to Davey's family. On her mind was the promise she had made to his father.

Rocky began gently, "Violet, you're not obligated to call him back. It was a chaotic situation last night, you did your job – a lot of people were injured, and some – unfortunately, didn't make it. We all did our best, under immense pressure. Here at the department, we understand the emotional toll these situations can take. If you need it, we have resources available to help shield you, to help you deal with the emotional burden of the rescues you perform, as well as insulate you, from any unwelcome future involvement with patients."

Clutching the slip of paper, she paced, and thought hard about what to do, but with Rocky watching, she had to decide quickly. The phone number was a path towards fulfilling her oath to Davey's father, and without the oversight of the fire department. She asked herself, what would John do? She quickly decided, and her mind was made up.

With confidence, Violet said to the captain, "Thanks Rocky, I got this."

The captain added, "If you call this fella back, be sure you don't provide any unofficial pieces of information. Only talk about information, that has already been conveyed at the official press releases."

"Okay, I can do that." she answered, and with a nod she headed out to her car.

Twilight was settling in, while Violet sat in her car in the parking lot, pondering over what to do next. Violet gripped the steering wheel tight, her mind a tangled mess. The underlying theme of her next move, was to attempt to fulfill the promise she had made to Davey's dad. To accomplish this goal, she would have to meet with Davey's family. How should she begin such a conversation with Davey. Although, Violet felt a profound sadness for Davey, she wondered, would her voice be a source of solace, or would it be a painful reminder of his loss? She couldn't predict the storm of emotions he might be facing. Should she tell him about the hug Davey's father gave her over the phone, or wait until she meets him in person. Finally, after waging a battle in her mind, of what to do, and how to do it. – Violet had decided on a strategy, and reached for her phone – It was time to call Davey.

Violet clutched the phone in her hand, while the fire station lights cast a soft glow on her determined face. After a deep breath, she punched in the numbers, each digit echoing in the quiet car. The silence stretched on, punctuated only by the frantic beat of her heart. Then, after what felt like an eternity, a voice answered through the phone. "Hello, Davey Johnson here." The sound of his name sent a jolt through her, a mixture of trepidation, and resolve settling in her gut. This was it – the moment of truth.

"Hi, this is Violet Wheeler," she said. "I'm the EMT who took your dad to the hospital last night. We spoke briefly in the parking lot – your friend Mack was there too." Violet paused, but there was no response. She added, "I'm the one who went inside to check on your dad." After another pause she continued again, "Then I came back out to tell you – about your father, that he had passed away." Still, there was only silence on the other end. Violet just listened, waiting for a response.

Davey finally answered, "I'm sorry – hearing from you again is more startling than I was expecting."

Violet was trying to maintain her composure, and speak with a professional tone and demeanor, but her eyes began to tear. Trying to keep the conversation going, she replied, "I could tell that your friend Mack cares a lot about you and your dad."

Davey answered, "Yes, he does – he is my Dad's best friend. They've known each other since high school. Mack is like part of our family."

Violet, sensing a lack of hostility in Davey, hesitantly inquired, "I don't know much about your family life. Your dad mentioned he was married and had children..." Her voice trailed off, hoping a question might nudge him to open up.

Davey was quick to reply, "The family's pretty big actually. There's Mom of course, and my two sisters, Mary and Jennifer. Plus, Dad's got five grandkids, three of them being mine."

"That's wonderful." Violet said, genuinely happy for Davey's large family. "A house full of grandkids must be so fulfilling. By the way, what's your mom's name?"

Davey replied, "My mom's name is Julie," Then he added, "She has always been a great Mom, and she's a terrific grandma."

Violet inquired further, "Speaking of your dad," Violet began cautiously, thinking that Davey might be sensitive talking about his dad, she asked, "What name did he like to go by, David, or Dave?."

Another silence fell upon Davey. Talking specifically about his dad seemed to be sensitive. It wasn't just a name anymore, to Davey, it felt like a unique mark his father left on the world, and talking about his father in the past tense, was something new and difficult. After a thoughtful pause, Davey finally spoke, "People who knew him, called him Dave." After another short pause, he softly said, "I called him Dad of course – the grandkids – well, they knew him as Poppie, or Grandpa."

"Violet," Davey began with a somber voice, "Mack told me, that you told him at the hospital, my dad gave you something to give to me. Is that true?"

A wave of memories washed over Violet. The flashing lights, the sharp turns of the ambulance, the fading strength of a man desperate to connect with his family, one last time. Violet struggled to keep it together, knowing that the only thing on Dave's mind, as he was slipping away, was his family – clearly the most important thing in his life! Swallowing hard, she forced her voice to remain steady. "Yes, Davey," she managed. "Your dad entrusted me with something very special, something he wanted you to have. I promised him I'd give it to you in person."

After another silent pause, Davey came back with, "Would you be free to meet tonight?"

Violet's mind swiftly weighed her options, trying to think of a good place to meet. Meeting at the fire station, or at her home wouldn't work. Thinking that Davey might be at, or near his dad's house, she replied, "Actually, I'm just leaving work now. How about we meet at a neutral location, perhaps somewhere on the South side of Canyon Creek?"

Davey came back with, "We could meet in the Courtyard at my church, King Street Christian Center. It's on the South side of Canyon Creek."

"Perfect," Violet said with a firm voice. "I can be there in 35 minutes, 45 minutes tops."

Davey replied with directions, "The church has two main buildings, and there's a really nice open courtyard, right in between them." Just park out front, and it's a short walk into the courtyard to find me. I'll text you the exact address in a second."

Tension was mounting, as Violet pulled out of the fire station parking lot. This evening, she would be facing the daunting task of fulfilling a promise made to a dying man, delivering, and passing on, his last hug, a final symbolic gesture of love to his grieving family. The outcome of this unconventional act, remained shrouded in uncertainty. Will her gesture be

embraced, will it be met with confusion, or will it be denied altogether? In less than an hour, Violet will have her answer.

Gradually, as she tightened her grip on the steering wheel while traveling North, Violet's stress was mounting. Eventually, taking in a deep breath, she realized she had to relax. The highway stretched out before her, a blur of asphalt and passing scenery. But her mind was far from the road. She was consumed by the looming task at hand – delivering the hug entrusted to her by Davey's father.

A whirlwind of questions swirled in Violet's mind. How would she even begin to describe the frantic ambulance ride? Should she delve into the graphic details of his father's injuries? The image of his face, frantic and tense with smears of blood, flashed in her memory, a stark contrast to the vibrant man that Davey knew. Should she mention the terrifying heartbeat alarm? – A warning that loudly blared, as his father went into cardiac arrest, just as they arrived at the hospital.

The simple act of a hug, a gesture usually so spontaneous and natural, was now fraught with uncertainty. Should she be standing or sitting? What would seem more appropriate? And the most frightening question of all – what if he rejected it? The hug, intended to convey love and commitment to his family, could be met with a cold shoulder, a wall of grief, pushing her away.

There was no manual for this, no script to follow. Where should the line be drawn? How much detail was too much, and a possible cruel intrusion on Davey's grief? What words could possibly offer comfort, as opposed to harsh facts? Should she even try to articulate the emotions Dave had tried to express? – Or let the embrace speak for itself?

The longer she pondered, the more her anxiety gnawed at her. Each passing mile felt like an eternity, the worry of these unspoken words, growing with every tick of the clock. Violet began to question this mission she was on, saying to herself, "This is crazy! – What am I doing?" Then she thought about Dave's heartfelt plea, and the panic that was in his voice. This last hug, was extremely important to him. She recalled his desperation, to somehow reach out to his family, one more time. This hug was between Dave and his family, and just by chance, she was the only

one that could possibly convey this hug. At that moment, Violet realized there was no easy answer, no perfect approach. All she could do, was to walk in with open arms and an open heart, hoping that somehow, it would be enough.

Finally, Violet pulled into the church parking lot, the scene mirroring Davey's description. A dozen cars or so, were already parked, hinting at some ongoing evening event within the church. Violet parked strategically near the courtyard entrance, taking a deep, steadying breath, before whispering, "Here we go."

Stepping out of the car, she was greeted by an atmosphere far different from the commercial hospital setting. Soft lighting bathed the courtyard, casting a dreamlike glow on the meticulously maintained landscape. Mature plants, a vibrant orchestra of textures and colors, lined the walkways paved with decorative brick pavers. In the center stood a pavilion, its intricate details, partially veiled by a curtain of climbing vines. It was a picture of tranquility, a testament to the care and dedication that went into its upkeep. The courtyard, was an unmistakable contrast to the emotions swirling within Violet, the peaceful scene offered a moment of unexpected comfort, as she prepared to face the sensitive nature of her promise.

As Violet approached the pavilion, a lone figure emerged from beneath the intricate latticework, casting a shadow on the cobblestone path. It was Davey, his face fatigued, with a combination of grief and trepidation that mirrored her own anxieties. Beside him, barely visible in the gentle twilight, sat a woman.

Violet's steps faltered for a moment, while she braced herself, and then she continued forward. As she drew closer, the woman stood, revealing a kind but stressed face – it was Mary, Davey's sister.

A small smile flickered across Mary's lips as their eyes met. Violet offered a hand in greeting, "Hi, I'm Violet," she said, "Out of uniform of course." the informality, a deliberate attempt to ease the tension of the meetup.

Davey's acknowledgment was a nod, his voice raspy and strained when he introduced his sister. "Violet, this is Mary, my sister." Their handshake was brief, a silent exchange of understanding passing between them. Without mentioning it, Mary noticed that Violet wore a wedding ring. Violet was pleased that two of Dave's children had come. Meeting two family members at once presented an unexpected opportunity, a chance to potentially double the impact of her visit.

With a gesture toward the vacant bench, Violet invited them to sit. The curved design offered a semblance of intimacy. Violet settled next to Davey, their shoulders brushing ever so slightly. Mary took the seat on Davey's opposite side, her view able to glance between Violet and her brother.

Their greetings were polite, courteous even, but devoid of warmth. Smiles were absent, replaced by a shared seriousness that underscored the gravity of the situation. It was a meeting tinged with sadness and regret, their shared tragedy pressing down on them, in spite of the tranquil and lovely atmosphere of the courtyard.

Violet had formulated a plan during the drive, a carefully constructed narrative meant to unfold chronologically. After taking a deep breath, she began, "On the way here tonight, I realized it was important to provide some context about my involvement with your father last night."

Davey and Mary leaned forward – their faces expressed a mixture of curiosity and apprehension. Mary, her voice barely a whisper, prompted Violet to continue.

"My partner and I were the first emergency responders at the stadium last night," Violet gently explained. "We quickly assessed the situation, and determined your father needed immediate medical attention. He was chosen for the first transport to the hospital." She opted to omit graphic details unless specifically asked, allowing them to absorb the information at their own pace.

Violet continued with a steady voice, "He was unconscious at first, but regained awareness as I prepared him for transport. I introduced myself

as Violet, and instructed him to stay still, assuring him we'd get him to the hospital as quickly as possible."

While Violet was speaking, Mary had reached out and offered Davey a silent gesture of comfort, tenderly holding onto his arm. Mary's eyes welled up, a silent battle raging within her, as she attempted to maintain her self-control. Davey broke his silence when Violet paused, he asked, "How badly injured was he...how could you tell?"

Mindful of her words, Violet chose a measured response, "As an EMT, we're trained to recognize certain types of injuries," she explained. "He had suffered significant damage to his legs, and there were signs of considerable blood loss, but he was starting to come around. We were hopeful."

Violet pressed on, her voice thickening with emotion, "On the way to the hospital, I got him set up on an I-V and a heart monitor. He remembered my name, and we even managed a short conversation." Her eyes glanced between Davey and Mary, a silent plea for understanding. "But then..." As Violet's words trailed off mid-sentence.

A tremor ran through Violet's body, her words became a reflection of the events from just the night before, and she was reliving her experience again. Violet paused to regain her composure, and brushed away her tears. Then after collecting herself, she continued, "Your dad, he started shaking, struggling to stay conscious. The fear in his eyes..." Her voice caught again for a moment, and then she continued again, "He said he thought he was dying – somehow, he said he could sense it."

A choked sob escaped Mary's lips, tears glistening on her cheeks. Davey mirrored her reaction, his face crumpling in silent grief. The anguish from the past night, over took all three of them, causing an emotional disruption within the tranquility of the courtyard.

Eventually, after taking a shaky deep breath, Violet continued her story. "Your dad reached out – both arms outstretched. He wanted a hug – his last hug, he called it. He wanted me to find you, to pass it on. It was – immensely important to him. So I said okay – and then we hugged!"

Violet's voice dropped and she spoke the next part softly. "He was frantic and struggling – he didn't want to let me go until I promised to deliver this hug to you, to your whole family. I promised him I would. That's why I'm here tonight. To deliver to you, your father's last hug." Violet sadly looked down, then she continued speaking softly. "Moments later, his arms lost their grip – and he went into cardiac arrest, just as we pulled into the hospital." Violet was struggling, wiping away more tears from her eyes.

Mary and Davey, they clung to each other tightly, wracked with sobs and heartache. This encounter was far more profound, and far more emotionally charged than either of them could have anticipated. They'd expected an object, perhaps a memento, not something so deeply personal. Violet held an invisible treasure, something far more precious than any material possession.

With tear-filled eyes, Violet reached out to Davey, her arms open in a silent invitation. Davey hesitated, his gaze darting to Mary. A silent conversation passed between them, a shared understanding reflected in their eyes. Mary released him gently, with a silent nod of encouragement. He was desperate for anything at all – something that could connect him to his father again.

Davey leaned forward and wrapped his arms tightly around Violet. As they embraced, Violet leaned in and whispered into his ear, "Be the Max" The words were a complete surprise! – A perfect encapsulation of their father, a secret phrase, that only family, and those close to Dave would understand. This wasn't just a hug – it was a tangible bridge between past and present, a final act of love, from a father to his child.

Davey gushed with emotion out loud, with his voice half crying and sobbing, he said, "Thank-you Dad! – I miss you so much!" Davey sensed that this hug was something extraordinary – it wasn't just a physical touch, it was an actual connection – it was soothing and energized in some way, as if he were actually hugging his dad, one last time. Half crying he couldn't help but open up, "Thank you for everything – I love you so much – You have always been my hero. Everyone needs a hero, and you, were mine!"

Mary had witnessed the entire exchange. The authenticity of the hug, the shared secret whispered by Violet, left no doubt in her mind. This was real. Tears streamed down her face as Violet and Davey separated.

As Davey sat quietly, overcome with emotion, Violet wiped away her own tears, then stood up. She moved towards Mary and sat next to her, her eyes mirroring the silent question Davey had asked moments before, "Are you ready for this Mary," they seemed to say. Offering a gentle smile, Violet extended her arms once more.

Tears welled up even faster in Mary's eyes, as Violet's arms opened, an invitation for a hug. Relief, tinged with a bittersweet sorrow, washed over Mary. This hug, this powerful expression of her father's love, was more precious than anything she could have imagined. There was no hesitation – Mary knew she craved this connection, this final embrace from her dad.

As they came together, a crying sob escaped Mary's lips – The dam holding back her emotions finally broke, tears streamed down her face, and her voice cried out loud, "Oh my goodness!" Violet held her tight, acting as her silent pillar of strength. In a voice barely a whisper, Violet spoke the special phrase, the one that confirmed the authenticity of this gift, "Be the Max."

Mary clung to Violet, speaking to her father one last time, the words echoing from her heart. "Daddy!" she cried out, her voice piercing with grief, "Oh Daddy! You are the most wonderful dad I could have ever ask for!" Like with Davey, she sensed that this hug wasn't just an embrace from a stranger, but an actual bridge to her father, and they were together again, one last time. "I love you so much!" she said, over-and-over. In that moment, the years melted away. She was a little girl again, safe in her father's arms, and the simple, heartfelt gesture of his hug, brought a wave of fresh tears. It was a final goodbye, a promise, and a testament to a love that transcended even death.

Davey, sensing his sister's grief, reached out, and placed a comforting hand on Mary's shoulder. As Mary's sobs subsided, Davey softly spoke to Violet, "Dad always told us, 'Be the Max.' It was his way of

saying we should live life to the fullest, always striving to be our best selves."

Violet, touched by the sentiment, replied, "That's a beautiful philosophy. I'll hold onto those words." With a gentle squeeze of Mary's hand, Violet excused herself, saying, "I'll be back in a few minutes."

Knowing they needed space, Violet wandered the courtyard. Its serenity soothed her own churning emotions. Meanwhile, Mary and Davey shared a private moment, one that only a brother and sister could comprehend.

When Violet returned to the pavilion, a quiet understanding had settled between Davey and Mary. "Ready to head home?" Violet asked softly.

Davey, with his voice still thick with emotion, replied, "Thank you for coming tonight. It meant the world to both of us. Knowing Dad was thinking of us in his final moments – it brings a special kind of comfort."

Mary added, her voice low and subdued, "I know we'll see him again someday, but tonight, – tonight it felt like he was here with us."

Davey continued, "I know that my mom and other sister, Jennifer, would love to meet you. We'll tell them about you and the promise you made to Dad."

Violet replied, "I'd like to meet them too. Does Jennifer live nearby?"

Davey answered, "No, but she'll be here tomorrow morning, from Germany."

Violet's eyes widened, she asked, "Germany? Is she stationed at Ramstein Air Base by any chance?"

A glimmer of surprise crossed Davey's face, "Yes, she's living in Germany for a while. She's an air traffic controller in the Air Force."

"Amazing!" Violet exclaimed. "I was stationed there too. Perhaps we have something in common."

With a handshake that spoke volumes, they said their goodbyes. Though the evening had been filled with heartache, it ended well, and Violet had begun to fulfill her promise. Looking ahead, she felt newfound resolve. It might take time, but she was determined to be a tower of strength for Dave's family. Perhaps she could help them find their own strength, their own resilience to get them through their sadness. There, amidst the grief, bloomed a seed of hope, a family's connection forged in shared loss was finding their way forward – together.

An hour later, the apartment door clicked shut behind Violet, the silence welcomed, after the day's several emotional rollercoaster rides. She sank onto the couch, the remote triggering the TV to life. She was looking for the latest news of the bombing. The local news channels, continued to blare a relentless loop of the tragedy that had shattered her city.

Suddenly, a TV news alert flashed onto the screen. A remote field reporter, his face serious but excited with something new to report, took center stage. "Breaking news," he announced. "Police have identified and located the vehicle used to transport the bomber to the Alamo Center."

The camera panned to a nondescript gray SUV, and Violet immediately recognized the vehicle. "That's it!" Violet yelled out. It was definitely the vehicle that dropped off the bomber. – Just the site of the car made her angry.

"This vehicle," continued the reporter, his voice amplified as Violet raised the volume on the TV, "...was found abandoned 250 miles northwest of San Antonio, near I-10. The driver, identified as, Carlos Mendoza, remains at large."

The screen changed, showing again the now-familiar forensic image of Carlos. The phantom face stared back at Violet, igniting a fury within her. After spending time with Dave's family, seeing his face again, served as a reminder of the horrific acts he had committed, and amplify the disgust she

had for this man. The cold-blooded nature of his crimes, filled Violet with a burning desire for vengeance. She longed to inflict her own brand of justice upon this villain, to make him pay for his atrocities.

The reporter added, "Authorities believe Carlos Mendoza, fled west last night, possibly crossing state lines. If you see this man, do not approach him. He is considered armed and dangerous! Instead, contact your local police immediately."

A white-hot fury ignited within Violet. This sadistic man, had unleashed a torrent of pain and suffering, and she, more than most, understood the devastation he'd left in his wake. Since the attack, she has lived with the constant sting of devastating loss, a searing reminder of the lives shattered by his actions. But beneath it all, a primal urge for justice simmered. Violet understood the Texans' desire for vengeance, the need to take matters into their own hands, validated by the reporter asking Texans to just call the authorities.

Exhaustion was finally taking its toll, and quickly crashed over Violet. Tomorrow would bring a new sunrise, and with it, the need to return to some semblance of normalcy, and another day at work. There was some comfort knowing that Carlos Mendoza, probably was no longer in the San Antonio area, and she knew the FBI and police were hot on his trail. Finally lying in bed, and still wearing her husband's necklace, she caressed it, gave it a kiss, and then proudly went to sleep – she would sleep well tonight.

Chapter 10

A Change of Plan

The next morning, though well rested and feeling strong, Violet couldn't shake the mental stress she had endured the past few days. The news stations, still broadcast almost continuous updates surrounding the bombing at the Alamo Center, each report, re-enforcing her anxiety. Though her shift didn't begin until 2:00 pm, Violet found herself arriving to work early, drawn by a primal need to expel her pent-up mental stress. At the firehouse, even the familiar routines felt off-kilter, as if the attack at the Alamo Center was affecting everyone.

The gym at the firehouse, normally a place of comradery and friendly banter, was about to become her personal battlefield. Taking a deep breath to release her pent-up stress, she approached the heavy punching bags, their worn leather surfaces, a testament to her countless workouts. With her hands and feet wrapped, and wearing her EMT work boots, a familiar focus settled over her.

Starting off slow, then gradually increasing her onslaught, Violet began the process of unleashing a torrent of pent-up energy. As her pace gradually sped up, the heavy bags shuddered with each Powerful blow, the rhythmic thwack echoing through the gym. She danced around the bags, landing a whirlwind of fists and kicks! One roundhouse kick sent a punching bag swinging wildly, followed by a flurry of jabs aimed at the other. Sweat beaded on her forehead, her breath coming in ragged gasps! – but she didn't stop. Each blow released a bit of tension, a physical manifestation, countering the emotional turmoil that was gnawing at her. It wasn't just exercise, it was a brutal ballet, a dance of rage and grief, disguised by controlled fury. It was a way to reclaim some semblance of her control in the world, a world that felt dangerously victimized.

On the other side of the gym, a trio of firefighters huddled near the weight rack, their barbells momentarily forgotten. Wide-eyed and slack-jawed, they watched Violet unleash a relentless assault on the punching bags. Sweat slicked her brow, each strand of hair plastered to her forehead, a testament to her exertion. Her movements were a blur of

controlled fury, a whirlwind of fists and kicks, sending the heavy bags swaying precariously.

Every so often, a particularly devastating kick would connect, the resounding powerful SMACK echoed through the room, it was a sound that elicited startled glances from the other firefighters. A flash of surprise would cross their faces, then quickly replaced by grudging respect, as they witnessed Violet's raw power and intensity! Here, in the familiar sanctuary of the gym, she wasn't just an EMT, she was a WARRIOR!

The watching firefighters, one of them, a burly man named Hank, finally found his voice, "Damn Violet!" his voice was tinged with awe. "You hit like a freight train!"

Another firefighter, a wiry young man named Jake, shook his head in disbelief, saying, "I don't know where you get all that power and endurance," he marveled. "I'm exhausted just watching you!"

One can only wonder, how did Violet come to be so skilled in the art of combat? All firemen, make it a goal to remain strong and healthy, and to that end, they exercise on a regular basis. The job they do is inherently dangerous, so their strength and endurance, can sometimes be the difference between life and death. However, Violet's combat skills are extraordinary! and likely a strong hint of her backstory, a story that may be equally amazing.

"Excuse me everyone!" Commander Rocky announced, his imposing presence filling the doorway.

Violet, mid-strike, froze with a raised fist hovering inches from the worn leather. With a wild animal like look on her face, she slowly lowered her arms, her chest heaving with exertion. Sweat beaded on her forehead, catching the glow from the bright gym lights, and her muscles thrummed with a pleasant ache. All eyes in the room turned towards the commander. Violet, dropping her hands to her hips, then she took in a deep, steady breath, while slowly turning her head, to hear what the commander had to say.

"Just a heads-up," continued Rocky, his gaze sweeping across the room before settling on Violet, "We've got an important staff meeting in the lunchroom at 2pm sharp. That gives us about forty minutes, so make sure you are in attendance, and on time."

About to leave, Rocky paused in the doorway, a playful glint in his eye as he looked back at the firefighters, still lingering by the weight rack. "Don't worry boys," he chuckled, saying with a wide grin on his face, "We'll be safe as long as Violet's around." His lighthearted comment, elicited a ripple of laughter through the room, the tension momentarily broken.

Violet, briefly surprised by the commander's lighthearted comment, couldn't help but crack a smile. A blush crept up her neck as she lowered her gaze, a touch of humility, replacing the fierce warrior energy, that had just moments ago, consumed her.

Freshly showered and back in uniform, Violet entered the lunchroom for the staff meeting. Sam was already there, deep in conversation with a couple of firefighters. She slid into the seat beside him, silent greetings were shared.

They hadn't seen each other since that harrowing night at the Alamo Center – the tension, of their shared experience was in the air between them. After a moment, Sam leaned over, saying with his voice low and with concern, "Hey, Violet, how have you been holding up? What did you do yesterday?"

Violet offered a smile, thankful for his concern, she replied, "Just taking it one day at a time. Yesterday I spent half the day here at the firehouse, just hanging around." She didn't want to disclose to Sam about her meeting with Davey last night. For now, Dave's dying wish was to remain a secret, even from Sam.

Sam raised an eyebrow, and asked, "Rocky said that an FBI agent came by and talked with you – how did that go?"

"It was no big deal," Violet said casually, though her concerned expression betrayed her. "I didn't have much to say that he didn't already know." Briefly looking around to make sure nobody was listening over her

shoulder, she then added, “However, he showed me a photo of the man that dropped off the bomber – It was him – an actual photo.”

The other firefighters seated nearby, couldn't help but eavesdrop, their expressions, a mix of curiosity and unease.

Sam replied, “Interesting! From what I’ve seen in the news, the police may be close to catching that guy – I sure hope so.” After a pause he added, “Yesterday I received a phone call from a lady at the FBI, she wanted to ask me some questions. But I told her that I wasn’t going to provide any information over the phone. Maybe she’ll show up here today.”

Violet agreed, saying, “I wouldn’t have answered any questions over the phone either – it could have been a news reporter fishing for information.”

The fireman seated on the other side of Sam, chimed in on the conversation, saying, “By now, the guy that escaped could be in California.” Another nearby fireman agreed with a nod.

Commander Rocky loudly cleared his throat, a way of getting the attention of everyone in the room, and that he was calling the meeting to order. Because of the increasing threats over the past few days, with a serious understanding of their roles, and the dangers as first responders, everyone quickly turned their attention towards the commander, and the room went quiet. – Then Rocky began, “Alright everybody – due to the bombing a couple of days ago, it’s warranted that we have another video conference.” With a nod, he gestured with his hand towards the mounted television on the wall. Rocky used a remote to adjust the settings, and the screen switched away from the home screen, to a video conference interface.

“It’s meeting time!” Rocky announced, his voice carrying a tone of formality. Providing more details, he added, “Today’s meeting will be a city-wide Fire Department video conference. We’ll be joining Fire Chief Jeffery Simmons, and all the firehouses in the San Antonio area will be participating. Now, the Chief likely won’t be taking questions this time around, so let’s all make sure we pay close attention to what he has to

say." After looking around the room he added, "Essentially, the city has been under attack the past few days, so this could be important."

The Fire Chief was well liked, known for his cheery and friendly disposition, and was respected by all the firemen. City-wide firehouse meetings were rare occurrences, typically reserved for major announcements or operational shifts. With such a meeting, called only a handful of times a year, all the firemen were alert and focused. With their eyes glued to the television screen, they all sat in hushed silence. Unfortunately, this was a second such meeting, in just a few days. On the TV screen, an empty podium stood sharply against the backdrop, flanked on one side by the Texas flag, and on the other side by the American flag.

Finally, there was movement on the screen. The Fire Chief emerged, his face serious and out of his usual character. His expression mirrored the same concerns that were on the minds of all the firemen. With practiced ease, he placed his notes onto the podium, and prepared to begin. All eyes in the room narrowed in, and focused on the man who held the key to whatever news awaited them. This wasn't just another meeting, this was a potential turning point, a chance for answers and perhaps, a renewed sense of direction in the aftermath of tragedy. Any new policies set forth by the Chief, would likely include a crucial role for the Fire Department to play.

Rocky's voice cut through the silence of the room, his tone leaving no room for argument, "Alright everyone, this is a big one. Give Chief Simmons your complete attention." A collective nod rippled through the room, all eyes stayed glued to the screen.

"Hello everyone," the Chief began, with his voice grave and serious. "For those of you I haven't had the pleasure of meeting, I'm Fire Chief Jeffery Simmons, and this is a city-wide Fire Department meeting. Before we dive into the heart of today's discussion, I want to take a moment to express my deepest sympathy, to the victims of the Alamo Sports Center bombing, their families, and their friends, all left reeling in the aftermath of this tragedy. Our prayers are with you, and know that you have the unwavering support, of not only this department, but the entire San Antonio community, and indeed, our entire nation."

Chief Simmons took a long pause, letting the weight of his words sink in. The firefighters in the room exchanged solemn glances, a shared sense of purpose hardening their resolve. This wasn't just another briefing – it was a call to action, a chance to unite the fire department and the entire city, in the face of this deadly tragedy.

At the Alamo Center the other night, Sam and Violet, along with the entire throng of EMTs, firefighters, and police officers who rushed into danger to save lives, shared a perspective seared into their very souls! The bombing wasn't just a horrifying story on the evening news, for them, it was a living nightmare they had experienced firsthand. The sights, sounds, and smells of the devastation replayed in their minds, a relentless loop of trauma.

Chief Simmons' expression remained grim as he continued, "Now, the information I'm about to share with you, will be released publicly in a press conference within the next twenty minutes. While both the police and the FBI, believe the bomber's accomplice has fled far west of San Antonio, and I want you to know, that this likelihood has been taken into consideration. After careful deliberation and assessments, city leaders have unanimously made a difficult decision. They have decided to cancel all official public firework displays. In addition, they have cancelled all other planned large public events. These aren't decisions taken lightly. Furthermore, The City of San Antonio will also be strongly recommending, that all citizens, avoid large gatherings for their New Year's festivities. It's a precaution, a way to ensure the safety of our community." Let this news settle in for a moment." Then he added, "Because I'm afraid there's more."

Concerned talk rippled through the lunchroom, as the implications of the Chief's announcement sunk in. Everyone, from the most seasoned firemen, to the newest recruits, began voicing their worries. Staff scheduling, particularly over the holidays, was a sensitive topic, and the cancellation of public New Year's festivities, threatened to disrupt those carefully planned arrangements with friends and family – as well as plans for those seeking extra work hours, and overtime pay.

Sam and Violet exchanged a hesitant glance. Their minds raced, already calculating the impact on their own schedules. Unlike many of their colleagues, they weren't worried about missing New Year's Eve

celebrations. They'd been assigned to work the Military Service Bowl on New Year's Day, a coveted event that guaranteed overtime pay. But even for them, the broader implications were troubling. A city-wide cancellation of festivities was a serious matter, a sign of the deep fear that had gripped San Antonio, and the potential, that the city was still, not safe.

Just as the whispers threatened to escalate into a full-blown discussion, Rocky's voice boomed through the room, cutting through the growing anxiety, "Alright everyone, hold on a second." He interjected. His voice got everyone's attention, then he said with a commanding calmness, "Let's not jump to conclusions here. We need to hear the full story from the Chief before we start reading between the lines!"

A moment later, the room went silent again, and attention was given back onto Chief Simmons as he continued speaking, "Alright everyone, gather your attention to the screen again," his voice carrying a hint of urgency. "I have an additional important announcement to make. The Military Service Bowl, originally scheduled for New Year's Day at the Alamo Center, has been postponed until further notice."

This news hit the firefighters like a punch to the gut. A collective gasp echoed through the lunchroom, followed by the grumbling of disbelief. San Antonio is a prominent military town, and the Military Service Bowl was a major city event, a prestigious game that brought in both revenue and football excitement. Postponing it was a significant decision, another reminder of the lingering impact of the bombing.

With disappointment in her eyes, Violet leaned over towards Sam, her voice, just barely a whisper, "Well, that makes sense, doesn't it?"

Sam replied, nodding solemnly, "Yeah," he agreed, his voice a mixture of disappointment and relief. Speaking softly, he added, "It's too soon to go back to the Alamo Center. The wounds to the community, they are still way too fresh." For whatever the reason, Sam and Violet would not be working the bowl game on Sunday.

Chief Simmons' expression remained grim as he concluded the video conference, saying, "I understand these cancellations may disrupt your holiday plans, and for that, I sincerely apologize. However, during these

extraordinary times, the safety and well-being of the public, must remain our top priority. Reports indicate cities as far west as El Paso, are considering similar measures for their New Year's Eve celebrations. So, we're not alone in this." Then he added, "I urge all firehouse commanders to immediately reassess staff scheduling in light of these changes. Thank you for your attendance." Then the Chief abruptly ended the meeting, without his usual friendly banter and firehouse pep talk.

Violet leaned towards Sam, a cynical smile on her lips. "Well, guess our babysitting gig on New Year's Day just went out the window."

Sam chuckled softly. "Looks that way," he agreed, with the sound of disappointment in his voice.

The murmur of conversation rose as firefighters began to stand and stretch, ready to leave the lunchroom. Just as a few reached the door, Rocky's voice boomed through the room, "Hold on a second everyone, nobody's dismissed yet!"

There was a collective pause, as everyone turned their attention back to the commander. Rocky scanned the room to make sure he had everyone's attention.

"Alright," he began, "With the cancellation of the Military Service Bowl, and all other major city-wide celebrations also canceled, there are going to be some significant adjustments to everyone's schedules. Especially, considering tomorrow is New Year's Eve. I'm confident I can have things sorted by the end of the day, but I'll need everyone to be available for a quick chat to discuss the changes. I want to speak with each of you individually to finalize things. – So don't leave the firehouse without talking with me!" Rocky waved his hand with a dismissive gesture. "Alright, you're all dismissed."

Meanwhile, far away from the firehouse, a young East Asian man, impeccably dressed in a well-tailored suit, entered an office supplies store in Houston Texas. Standing near the entrance, he scanned the store, as if he was lost, and deciding which way to go to find what he needed. Eventually, he settled on the business service counter, where printing and

copying was done. He approached the counter and stood expectantly for a moment, his demeanor, betraying a subtle nervousness, seemingly odd, considering his polished exterior.

A friendly female store associate named Mindy, with a BRIGHT smile and a nametag that matched her chipper personality, greeted him, "Hi, how can I help you today?"

"Hello," the young man replied, his voice laced with a hint of anxiety. "I need some architectural drawings printed as soon as possible!" He produced a flash drive from his pocket and extended it towards her.

Mindy took the flash drive, her smile faltering slightly as she noticed the man's nervousness, and the way his eyes darted around the store. Certainly, let's take a look," she said reassuringly, as she inserted the drive into her computer.

As the computer came to life and the file began to load, the man's apprehension became more pronounced. He fidgeted constantly, his fingers drumming a restless rhythm on the counter. He said to Mindy, "There's just one file on there," speaking low, he added, "It's in PDF format, and I need the prints to be on large sheets, 24 by 36 inches specifically."

Mindy, having opened the file on her screen and reviewed the contents, inquired, "How many copies would you like?"

The man replied, "Just 1 copy, but I need the full set of drawings. There are multiple pages."

Mindy tapped away at the computer, calculating the cost. Then she presented an estimate, "For the entire set, including binding, it would come out to \$39.90 plus tax. I can have it ready for pickup in about 30 minutes."

The man seemed relieved, and replied, "That sounds good. I'll wait here in the store for it." He paused for a moment, then asked, "Do you sell those cylindrical carrying cases, specifically designed to carry large drawings?"

Mindy gestured with her hand towards the back of the store. "Absolutely," she replied. "We have a whole selection of containers and briefcases along the back wall. You're sure to find what you need there."

The man wasted no time in heading towards the back of the store, his movements brisk and purposeful. He quickly selected a sturdy round plastic case, equipped with a convenient shoulder strap, a practical choice for transporting the large drawings. Returning to the vicinity of the business service counter, he settled into a chair intended for people waiting. Taking a deep breath, with the diversion of shopping for a case over, he was growing nervous again. He was behaving oddly, as if there was something incriminating contained within the drawings he was having printed. Perhaps, the set of drawings contained an element or subject matter, that was nefarious in some way. He realized that he was not acting as his usual self. To distract himself, he retrieved his cell phone, and engrossed himself in a video game. The virtual world provided a temporary escape from his restlessness.

It wasn't long before his printing project was complete, and Mindy's voice broke through his concentration as she announced, "Your drawings are ready! I can ring you up right here at my counter." Seeing that the young man had found a case, she added, "We can roll the plan set up and slide it into your case, right here on the counter."

Mindy rang him up, and then rolled up and slid the plan set into the case. Relieved to be getting out of the store, with his flash drive in his pocket and carrying his now full case, the man briskly left.

Mindy watched him go, thinking that his behavior was a bit odd. His behavior throughout the interaction had struck her as peculiar, which was unlike her usual customers. Shrugging off his unease, she returned to her computer, closed the file that she used to print the drawings, and then she turned her attention to her next task. Unbeknownst to the man, the store retained a permanent record of what she printed, as well as the identification details of the young man, embedded within his credit card purchase.

For Mindy it was just another routine transaction. Blind to the significance of the drawings she had just printed, Mindy continued her day,

unaware that she might have unknowingly, played a part in yet another brewing terrorist plot.

In San Antonio, the late-afternoon sun, was casting long shadows across the firehouse floor. After responding to a traffic accident, Sam and Violet had just arrived back at the firehouse, pulling the ambulance back into its designated bay. With practiced efficiency, they began securing the vehicle, checking equipment, and documenting the call.

Just as they were finishing up, Rocky's voice thundered from the office doorway. " Sam, Violet...a minute in my office when you're free!"

"Sure thing Rocky!" Violet yelled back, glancing at Sam, who offered a quick nod and wave in acknowledgment.

It wasn't long before the ambulance was prepped for its next call. Talking to Sam, Violet asked with a hint of curiosity in her voice, "Are you ready to see what Rocky wants?"

Sam shrugged, with a seemingly disinterested look, he replied, "Could be anything with all the rescheduling going on. But hey..." He added with a wink, "...maybe it's good news about those extra hours we were talking about."

Pushing open the office door, they found Rocky bent over his desk busy working, with paperwork scattered across the surface. He looked up, with a sly grin on his face, " I've been waiting for you two...come on in." He gestured towards two chairs pulled close to his desk, saying, "Have a seat."

As Violet and Sam settled in, Rocky leaned back, with a glint in his eye, he said, "I've been busy on the phone with our colleagues over at the Houston Fire Department." With a smile, he added, "Seems they're not following suit with the cancellations. Instead, they're ramping up security and staffing for their New Year's Day events."

Sam's eyebrows shot up. He seemed to know where this conversation was going, and asked, "Mutual aid, is that right?"

Rocky chuckled. "That's right Sam. San Antonio has a mutual aid agreement with Houston, and they put in a request – seems they're short on EMTs. With the San Antonio agreement in place..." He trailed off, letting the implication hang in the air.

Violet exchanged an excited glance with Sam. "This could be interesting," she suggested. "I've never done mutual aid."

A slow smile spread across Sam's face. "I've done these out-of-town gigs before," he said with his voice directed at Rocky. "Travel time is paid, right?"

"Right you are," Rocky confirmed. "Even though it's just a three-hour drive, you'll get paid travel time for eight hours each way, on top of at least a full day's pay for New Year's Day."

Violet leaned forward, her interest piqued, she asked, "So to clarify, it's a three-day trip – We leave on Saturday and come back Monday – Do I have that right?"

Rocky nodded, "Exactly. You'll take our ambulance in the bay, and the church will handle your hotel arrangements in Houston."

Violet's brow raised slightly. "The church? Did you mean to say the City of Houston?"

"No, I did mean to say church, but not just any church." Rocky clarified, "The Calvary Christian Center of Houston. It's a massive place – it used to be a sports arena years ago. They expect a full house on Sunday, the New Year's Day crowd, and they have multiple sermons that happen throughout the day. You'll be on duty from 8:00am in the morning till 5:00pm in the evening – your role will be similar to that of a bowl game."

"Wow, a church that big!" Violet exclaimed. "I've seen it on TV – It must seat thousands."

Sam chuckled, and added, "Over fifteen thousand, actually. I've done duty there before."

Rocky continued explaining, while handing Sam a small stack of papers, including a map with an address to the church. "You need to be at the church tomorrow by 3 PM – on the dot. The church director will meet you there, to show you the ropes, and get you settled in at your hotel." His gaze swept between them, "So, what do you say...are you two up for this expedition to Houston?"

A wide grin spread across Violet's face, mirroring Sam's as they glanced at each other. "Absolutely," they replied in unison, their voices brimming with excitement. "We'll be there."

Rocky clapped his hands together, and said with a satisfied smile on his face. "Excellent! Just call me if you have any problems, alright?"

"You got it Rocky," Sam replied, saluting smartly.

With a final, "Yes sir!" from Violet, they exited the office, the promise of a new adventure and a hefty paycheck energizing their steps.

Just then, Violet's phone buzzed in her pocket, shattering the easy comradery between her and Sam. A concerned look crossed her face as she glanced at the caller ID – it read, Davey Johnson. She couldn't ignore it completely, but work came first. Tapping out a quick text, she promised, "I'll call you back in 1hr after I get off work." Slipping the phone back into her pocket, her stress level just ratcheted up. Keeping her secret promise to Dave, and her growing involvement with his family, felt like she was walking a tightrope across a chasm. It was a burden she couldn't share with anyone at the firehouse, not yet.

With a forced smile, Violet turned back to Sam and suggested, "Alright, let's make it a 10:00am sharp arrival time tomorrow, here at the firehouse?" Sam agreed, finalizing their plans to embark on their journey to Houston. Tomorrow would be a fresh start with a change of scenery – something they both needed. Yet, despite the exciting promise of adventure, Davey's call lingered in her mind, a dark cloud threatening to rain on their upcoming trip.

Chapter 11

Return To King Street Christian Center

The last rays of sunlight dipped below the horizon, as Violet climbed into her car, about to leave the fire station. Out of uniform now and wearing her street clothes, tomorrow's trip to Houston was swirling in her mind. Before pulling out of the firehouse parking lot, she tapped on her phone, finally returning Davey's call.

Davey quickly answered, saying with relief in his voice, "Hi Violet, I'm glad you called me back."

"Hi Davey, what's going on?" she gently asked.

Davey took a deep breath, then said, "First, I wanted to thank you again, for meeting with Mary and me last night at the church." Then he added, "That hug from Dad – it meant more than words can say. I know fulfilling his last wish, couldn't have been easy for you, and I truly appreciate you doing that for us."

Violet felt pleased and proud, saying, "I'm happy to help you and your family in any way I can. I feel like we are all in this together."

Davey replied, softly explaining his feelings in more detail, "Knowing Dad was thinking of us that night, means something special. For him to be so determined to reach out to us in some way, makes sense – that's the kind of person he was." Davey continued with his voice strengthening, "today, I feel a little stronger – a little better equipped to deal with all this. Violet, you really made a difference."

"That's good to hear," Violet softly said. "I think that's what your father intended. Maybe, somehow, he knew that a small inspirational connection, would help you and your whole family move forward." A thoughtful silent consensus, fell between them.

Davey had more on his mind, and his voice grew hesitant, "There's something else." He said. This morning, my sister Jennifer arrived home

from Germany. Mary and I told Mom and Jennifer about our meeting with you last night." After another short pause, he continued, "Well, Jennifer is eager to meet you also. Is there any chance we could gather at the church again tonight?"

Violet had to give it some thought, because going to the church tonight might interfere with her travel plans. The Houston trip loomed tomorrow, demanding preparation and a decent night's sleep. But she would be gone for a few days, and away from Dave's family. She didn't want to miss the chance to meet Jennifer, and perhaps even Julie. Violet felt that it was an opportunity, one that she couldn't easily pass up.

Taking a deep breath, Violet made her decision. "Yes," she said with a firm voice. "I can be there in forty-five minutes."

Ending the call, Violet sat back in her car for a moment, once again, a mix of excitement and apprehension swirling within her. The detour this evening, would mean a later than expected night. Also, tomorrow morning, her schedule would be tighter, but the chance to offer support to this grieving family, was an attraction she couldn't resist.

Far to the East of San Antonio, the Texas sun had already set, and darkness ruled. A lone white cargo van, a rental by its utilitarian appearance, hummed along Interstate 10, moving east with light traffic toward Houston. Every few miles, the monotony of endless fields was broken by a commercial strip – a gas station oasis or a cluster of fast-food restaurants, beckoning weary travelers. A brightly lit information sign loomed ahead, its pronounced white letters against a green background announcing, "Houston 31 miles."

Not long after, the van's driver flicked on the turn signal, then exited off the interstate onto a two-lane cross road. The only sign of civilization, a convenience store with a bank of gas pumps out front. As the pavement stretched north through the lonely expanse, the headlights of the van carved a path through the darkness. A sense of isolation settled over the scenery. Finally, a silhouette lit by starlight emerged – a lone unassuming metal warehouse materialized in the distance. Its exterior was weathered

and dented, a testament to years of service. Out front was a single dimly lit parking lot, occupied by a handful of vehicles that sat parked.

A chain-link fence, secured a gated paved yard along one side of the building. With the rattling of the chain-link fencing, as if by an invisible hand, the gate rolled open as the van approached. The van slowly glided past the open gate and into the fenced area. At the same time, one of the massive overhead doors of the warehouse rumbled open, with the inside being well lit. Then a man exited, signaling with his hand, beckoning the van to come inside. Once the van was completely inside, the door rumbled closed again.

Now, inside the building, the van door creaked open, and the driver emerged. He exchanged greetings with a man that had been waiting for his arrival, both sharing dark hair and complexions that hinted at Middle Eastern descent. "I have the goods!" said the driver. They admired the van with unspoken respect, as if it held some precious treasure.

Suddenly, the office door burst open and slammed against the wall. A figure emerged, striding with a forceful purpose – it was Carlos Mendoza! Apparently, his westward trek was a ruse. Ditching his car hundreds of miles West of San Antonio, seemed to be a deliberate attempt to shake pursuit. He wasn't alone. Following close behind, was a well-dressed young East Asian man, the same man, that obtained a printed copy of a set of drawings earlier that day, with the same cylindrical case, clutched in his hand.

"Show me!" Carlos yelled, rudely commanding his subordinates, his voice tight with urgency. He gestured towards the back of the van, with a sharp flick of his hand he commanded, "Open it!"

The driver scrambled to obey, fumbling with the locks before throwing the doors wide. A wave of his hand offered a silent invitation: "Here you go," Said the driver.

The van's interior was near full with a jumble of cardboard boxes and a few small wooden crates. Stenciled lettering on some boxes left no room for interpretation – "AMMO" . Carlos barked another order. "Unload it! Group like items together in stacks. I need an accurate inventory."

The two men, their fear of Carlos evident, jumped to obey. They unloaded the van with hurried efficiency, while Carlos and the Asian man observed. Carlos occasionally barked out instructions, and kept a running count on the inventory.

The contents of the van became terrifyingly clear, as the unloaded boxes were grouped by their contents. Graphic illustrations on the cardboard proclaimed their deadly cargo – assault rifles, pistols, mountains of ammunition, and enough military tactical body armor to transform a sizable team of men, into a walking indestructible arsenal. Another stack overflowed with gun modifications – scopes, sights, and a sea of additional gun magazines. It was definitely clear, Carlos had significant resources available to him, resources, from within America.

Only the wooden crates remained a mystery. Sealed tight with screws and devoid of markings, they held an unknown threat. Carlos grabbed a cordless drill from a nearby table, his face hinted a dangerous mix of anticipation and paranoia. He thrust the tool into the hands of one of the workers. "Open it!" he yelled, his voice leaving no room for argument.

The man, visibly tense under Carlos's scrutiny, and fearful as to what might be inside, approached the crate with trepidation. The worker hesitated, eyeing the crate with a tremor of fear. Carlos and the Asian man retreated, maintaining a safe distance as the man began his task. Half a dozen screws held the lid shut, and one by one, he methodically removed them. As if they feared a booby trap, each removed screw echoed in the tense silence, like a countdown. Finally, with a deep breath, he lifted the lid, revealing the crate's contents. His eyebrows shot up, with a look something akin to satisfaction crossing his face. He gestured towards the crate, his eyes locked on Carlos, saying, "Come see!"

Carlos shoved past him with a rude, "Move back!" He reached into the crate with a predatory crazed look in his eyes, and a sinister grin – then withdrew a hand grenade. He brandished the weapon towards the Asian man, a triumphant smirk twisting his lips, "We have the POWER!" he declared, his voice laced with a maniac's energy. Carlos raised the grenade symbolically over his head, while clutched tightly in his hand. It

became a twisted symbol of their deadly arsenal, and they had dozens of these explosive anti-personnel weapons.

The van had transported a chilling arsenal, weaponry that could transform at least ten men, into a heavily armed unit. Carlos had the capability of creating a miniature unstoppable force, with the ability of inflicting devastating damage, especially to innocent civilians. With this kind of weaponry in the hands of someone like Carlos, this guaranteed that something immensely sinister was about to happen!

Carlos walked over to a large shipping table, and asked the Asian man to roll out the drawings onto the table. The young Asian man opened the tube shaped container that he had been carrying, then pulled out a set of architectural drawings for a large building. A closer look at the plan set revealed that this was the design plans for the mega church, Calvary Christian Center of Houston! – The same church that Sam and Violet had been assigned to on New Year's Day.

The Asian man, his finger gliding across the plans, seemed to somehow possess an intimate knowledge of the layout. Carlos just listened and concentrated, and absorbed every detail provided by the Asian man, with few questions. This intel lesson on the Calvary Christian Center, went on into the night.

On the highway North of San Antonio, the headlights of Violet's car sliced through the night, lighting up each mile marker bringing her closer to Davey's Church, and Jennifer, the woman she thought might be more like herself. Like the night before, her anxiety was building as she got closer.

Violet knew, Jennifer is in the Air Force, just like she had been – Stationed at the same German airbase, no less. It was at this base where Violet received the news that shattered her world – John – the love of her life. – Killed in Afghanistan! Jennifer's grief and circumstances, may likely mirror Violet's own life shattering experience, uncomfortably close – perhaps too close. Just traveling in her car, already, the faces, the words, the crushing vulnerability and details of her own horrific experience, were all threatening to come flooding back. Violet worried that she might have difficulty maintaining, her own composure.

Understanding that Jennifer, unlike Mary, had been alone and without family support for days, ever since hearing that her father had died. Violet was concerned, that Jennifer's state of mind might be quite different than Mary's. In contrast, Mary had the immediate support of being surrounded by family and friends. Violet understood, with a chilling clarity, how differently grief manifests in solitude. Jennifer's grief would likely be more raw, a close reflection of Violet's own wounds – something Violet feared might be more than she could handle. Tonight's time spent with Jennifer, would likely be a test as to how well Violet has healed.

As Violet pulled into the parking lot, everything looked pretty much the same as the night before. There was a church event of some sort underway, with numerous cars in the parking lot. As Violet got out of her car, she said to herself, "Here we go again." Not sure how things would play out, she was determined and as ready as she could be, to navigate this uncharted territory.

The soft glow of the pavilion beckoned Violet forward. She recognized Davey sitting on the curved bench in the pavilion, his kind face showing signs of worry. However, the others that came with him were strangers, and numbered more than she had expected. There was a calm silence in the night air, broken only by the distant murmur of conversation from inside the church. No smiles graced these unfamiliar faces, only a deep well of sadness and stress. The sight of Violet, was a distressing reminder of the grief they were all engulfed in.

As Violet entered the pavilion, Davey rose to greet her. A small smile played on his lips, tinged with a hint of worry, "Violet, thank you for coming," his voice was warm, but with a touch of subtle tension. Gesturing with his hand, he began introductions, "This is..." He paused for a beat, then continued, "...Jennifer, my sister."

"Hi Jennifer, I'm Violet." Violet reached out for a handshake, but Jennifer was hesitant and slow to reach out with her hand. Violet continued, "I hear you are in the Air Force, stationed at Ramstein Air Base in Germany."

While shaking hands, Jennifer softly answered, "Yes I am."

Davey continued, "This is my daughter, Lilly – she's 13 years old."

Violet shook Lilly's hand, saying, "Hi Lilly, nice to meet you." Lilly just nodded.

Davey continued with an uncertain look on his face, "And this is my Mom, Julie."

Violet could see that Julie was very stressed, even trembling. She was having a hard time making eye contact with Violet. Violet hesitated for a moment, then began to reach out with her hand. Julie quickly turned her head away, got up, and then began to leave the pavilion.

Davey moved to his mother's side, "Are you okay Mom?"

Julie answered softly, "I'm just going to walk around the courtyard." Then she continued on her way.

Davey turned to Violet and spoke discretely, "My Mom is having a really hard time."

Violet acknowledged, "it's okay, I understand."

Violet looked over at Jennifer, and then went and sat down beside her. Prepared to divulge something she had left out from the night before, Violet began, saying, "Jennifer, I have to tell you something about me." Looking over at Davey, she added, "Davey, you should hear this too."

Violet took a moment to wipe tears from her eyes, and then she tenderly touched her wedding band. Davey and Jennifer glanced at each other, wondering what was about to come. Lilly was watching everything.

Violet looked back into Jennifer's eyes, then continued, "Jennifer, in more ways than you know, I'm a lot like you. A few years ago I was also in the Air Force, and stationed at Ramstein. I have no children – but I was very happily married." Violet closed her eyes and took a deep breath. "My husband John, was also in the Air Force, and was stationed in Afghanistan. "We would see each other online when we could, and John and I were

looking forward to our next assignments, so that we could be stationed together again.”

Jennifer could see where this conversation was going, and it didn't sound good. She reached out and placed her hand on Violet's hand.

Violet continued, “Then one evening, I came home from work to my apartment – and I wasn't home long, before a General with a military chaplain showed up at my door.”

Jennifer was about to burst, with tears streaming down her face, she cried out, “Me too! – Me too! – It happened to me the same way!” Violet gripped onto Jennifer's hand with her other hand.

Violet continued, with tears rolling down her cheeks, “They told me my John was killed! – Killed by a suicide bomber!” Then speaking softly she said, “Just like your Dad.”

By now Lilly was crying also, so Davey slid closer to her, and held her.

Unable to contain herself, Jennifer cried out, “I felt so alone in the world! – So far from home...” She also recognized how Violet must have felt losing her husband – unfortunately, they did have a lot in common.

Violet continued, “Your Dad – somehow, he said to me that he sensed he was dying, and he was desperate to reach out to you! and your whole family one more time. In this moment, you and your family were the only thing on his mind. He hugged me, and he made me promise that I would carry his last hug to his family – and then he was gone.” Violet paused, looking down with sadness. A heavy silence descended upon the pavilion, punctuated only by the distant strains of music from within the church. Finally, Violet looked back up and met Jennifer's gaze, her own eyes brimming with unshed tears. “This last hug of his was very important to him – that's why I'm here tonight, I'm here because your father asked me to be here – to give you his last hug.”

Violet compassionately extended her eyes and arms, inviting a hug from Jennifer. But Jennifer hesitated, her mind racing – she wanted this

hug more than anything in the world, but once she received this hug, what could be next, would her dad be over? – Would a sense of finality wash over her, forcing her to confront the terrifying prospect of moving on without him? – Would this embrace be the final goodbye? But her heart was saying she had to have this hug no matter what! – She could not walk away from it.

With a nod, Jennifer slowly reached out to Violet, pouting with her lips quivering, and tears rolling down her cheeks. In Jennifer's mind, she tried to imagine her father reaching out to her, reaching out from thousands of miles away. For two days, Jennifer suffered without the support of her family, so sad that she was numb. She couldn't think or function without the counselor that traveled with her, the counselor, became her lifeline. She was so helpless, it would have been impossible for her to make it home on her own. Then just this morning, when she arrived home to her mother's house, with the support of her family, she began to come back to life.

Lilly watched closely, wiping away her own tears as they embraced. Violet whispered softly, "Be the Max." Jennifer's eyes opened wide, soothed with the warm love and words sent by her father, as if he was reaching out one last time to comfort her. This touch, was somehow much more powerful than she had expected!

Her father's special words, seemed to extend a life line to Jennifer, and she passionately cried out, "Oh Daddy, I miss you so much! – How do I live without you – I love you, so very much!" Jennifer openly cried, which lasted for some time. Then when she seemed cried out, she softly spoke again, "Thank you Daddy for being there for me all those years." Somehow, she had made an unexplainable connection with her father – this one last hug, was so incredibly special. – It was much more than she had anticipated – way more soothing than a simple touch from a stranger.

As Jennifer and Violet separated from their embrace, they continued to hold hands, a promise filled between them. Violet spoke, attempting to share some of her wisdom. "Know that he will always live within you. He is, and always will be, a part of who you are. Understanding this, is how you will find the strength to move forward, you will be carrying your dad within you, forever."

Jennifer wiped away her tears, a hint of stability replacing the raw grief in her eyes. "Thank you," she said to Violet, her voice thick with emotion. "And please, call me Jen. That's what everyone close to me calls me."

A genuine smile touched Violet's lips. "It would be my honor, Jen." A newfound sense of kinship was blooming between them.

A tear escaped Lilly's eye, tracing a glistening path down her cheek. Lilly, unable to contain herself any longer, sprang to her feet. Her voice, thick with barely suppressed tears, cutting through the tender moment between Violet and Jennifer, Lilly said, "I want Grandpa's last hug too!" Looking over at her father with a frown, "That's why I came," she explained, her young sweet voice desperate to not miss out. "I'm his family too, and I need his hug – really bad!"

Violet looked over at Davey, with her eyes asking if it was okay, silently, seeking his permission. A subtle nod from him was all she needed. Turning back to Lilly, Violet offered a gentle smile. "Come sit here next to me sweetheart," she said patting the empty space beside her.

Lilly wasted no time scooting in, her lower lip quivering slightly. Violet took Lilly's hand, her touch warm and comforting. Violet's eyes softened as they met Lilly's. She understood that grief was universal, and how it could touch hearts, regardless of age or experience. Violet softly asked, "Is this the first time someone you loved dearly, has passed away?"

For a fleeting moment, Lilly's eyes darted towards her father, before returning to Violet. "Yes," she whispered, with another tear tracing a path down her cheek.

The memories of Violet, losing her own father when she was a young teenager, flashed in her mind, stirring up a new wave of emotions that threatened to engulf her. Determined to hold her emotions in check, Violet continued, saying, "Lilly, I'm certain your grandfather loved you very much." She assured her with her voice steady, despite her own turmoil within. "Your grandfather must be incredibly proud of you, and I have no doubt, his last hug was meant for you as well."

A new flood of tears welled up in Lilly's eyes, as she nodded vigorously. With her voice half crying, she said, "I know he would hug me if he could – he hugged me every time he saw me."

Without another word, Violet pulled Lilly into a warm embrace. As they held each other, Violet murmured those powerful magical words, "Be the Max, Lilly."

The warmth of the embrace seemed to soothe Lilly's aching heart, yet tears continued to stream down her cheeks. "Thank you, Poppie!" she cried out. "Thank you for all the fun times. You're the greatest grandpa anyone could ever ask for!"

As Violet listened to Lilly's heartfelt words, a wave of anger washed over her. How could anyone purposely hurt this child, to take the life of her grandfather, her Poppie. Lilly was evidence, that the bomber had injured a lot of children, by taking and hurting the people they loved. He had unleashed a ripple effect of pain and sadness, an attack on children that spread far beyond the immediate blast.

As their embrace loosened, Violet gently placed her hands on Lilly's shoulders and looked her in the eye. "Lilly, your grandpa isn't truly gone," she said softly. Glancing over towards Davey and Jennifer, silently acknowledging their shared grief, Violet was talking to all of them. "He still lives on within you, just like within everyone else in your family. He's a part of who you are, and as you make your way through life, being the Max, he'll be on the journey with you, every step of the way."

Lilly sniffled, wiping her tears with the back of her hand she said, "Thank you." Her grief hadn't vanished, but Violet's words offered a glimmer of hope, a reminder that the love she shared with her grandpa would forever be a part of her.

Violet rose, then gravitated towards the edge of the pavilion, her gaze drawn to Julie's solitary figure on a faraway bench. Julie had maintained a curious distance since leaving the gathering, her steps tracing a silent path around the courtyard's perimeter, lingering over plants and ornaments, as if seeking solace in their quiet beauty. "I should say goodbye to your mom before I leave," Violet announced turning to address Davey and Jennifer.

With a skeptical look, Davey replied, "I don't know Violet. She has been completely withdrawn. Maybe she's not quite ready for – well, for Dad's hug tonight."

Violet considered this, then offered, "Not likely. But I'd still like to say my farewells. Would it be alright if I spoke with her privately for a moment?"

Violet's actions so far had been measured and insightful, and Davey's trust in her was evident. He looked over at Jennifer, seeking her input, saying, "I think it would be okay for Violet to talk with Mom alone – are you okay with that Jen?"

Jennifer nodded with a concerned look on her face, "Sure, I trust her."

Davey looked over to Violet, "Go ahead, we'll wait here."

Violet walked over towards Julie, and as she approached, she was able to sense Julie's tension and nervousness building, especially when she came close. Reaching the bench, Violet sat down beside Julie, both women gazing out at the star-strewn expanse above. "Your church has a lovely courtyard," Violet began, her voice gentle. Then she added, "Especially tonight, with the stars so bright."

Julie offered a hesitant, and short reply, "Yes it is."

Violet kept her gaze fixed on the glittering expanse above, with her voice low and measured, she continued, "I can only imagine the life you've built with Dave over the decades. A lifetime of shared experiences, a family raised together, and now, the joy of grandchildren." Julie remained silent, her body a statue of grief, but Violet sensed a hint of acknowledgement in her manor.

Then suddenly, something triggered within Julie, like the flood gates just opened, with tears in her eyes and half crying, she opened up on Violet, "I don't want anyone telling me that they are sorry for me! I don't want their pity, or trays of food brought to my house! I don't want sympathy cards, or people calling me on the phone making me talk and relive it all!" She turned to Violet, and said, "...or LAST hugs! I know they're meant well,

all these gestures, and I try to be polite. But for me, they're more like a slap in my face, and they hurt! – To me, they are all symbols of 'no Dave', and they keep hitting me, over-and over!" Violet kept her stare into the courtyard and just listened.

Hinting at a reluctance to accept her loss, Julie continued, "All I want is my Dave back. I keep hoping he'll surprise me and come back to me, and that somehow, everybody has it all wrong. I even keep seeing him out of the corner of my eye, or hear him speaking, only to realize it's somebody else, or nothing at all." Julie finally went silent sadly looking down, exhausted from her gush of emotion.

Violet silently absorbed Julie's outburst, her gaze fixed on the twinkling expanse above. After a thoughtful pause, Violet finally replied with a soft yet firm voice, "It's only been three days... This is all so sudden, and it's still so very new – it's going to take time to adjust."

Violet gestured with her hand towards the pavilion, saying, "Those people over there are your family. They love you, and they are here for you – Together, as a family, you can sort through all this. They may not have said it, but they need your help too – They need your support, right now! They are all hurting a lot – a lot more than you probably know." Violet turned her head and looked Julie in the eye, saying "Like it or not, you're the leader of this family now – the momma bear who holds this family together, and protects it. Somehow, you need to find the strength to lead your family, to guide them through all of this."

Julie looked across at the pavilion, and she could see the faces of Davey, Jennifer, and Lilly looking back, watching with their faces filled with worry, and with a silent plea. – What she saw, were her babies, no matter how big they had become, they were still her babies. Julie looked over at Violet with tears rolling down her cheeks, nodding with agreement she said, "I've got to go to my family." Her reaction to Violet's words was instinctive.

Violet offered a warm smile, "I thought so." She said. "Go on. I'll see myself out."

Julie rose to her feet, and briskly walked with newfound purpose towards the pavilion. As if drawn by an invisible force, her family rushed to

meet her. They collided in a tearful embrace, their cries echoing through the courtyard. It was an unfiltered, heartbreaking display of grief, but also, a symbol of a new beginning – a family united in their sorrow, ready to face the future together.

Only after a long embrace, did they begin to separate. Davey's gaze swept across the courtyard, searching. He noticed the empty space where Violet had been minutes ago. With a silent farewell, she had vanished into the night, leaving behind a trail of comfort, and a glimmer of hope for Julie and her family.

In less than an hour, Violet finally reached her apartment, the exhaustion of the day settling in, as the door once again clicked shut behind her. She paused by the door in the dimly lit living room, giving a deep sigh of relief. Before allowing herself to succumb to her fatigue, she made her way to the framed wedding photograph hanging on the wall, and John's smiling face.

"John," she began, "thanks for being my strength, for inspiring me to fulfill the promise I made to Dave." Taking a deep breath, she reached for the shelf below the picture where John's folded flag lay. Gently, she picked up the titanium necklace she had gifted him on their wedding day, the Star of David pendant, catching the soft light filtering through the window.



"I think you'd be proud of me." Violet whispered. While tracing the intricate star design with her finger tip, she added, "It seemed like such an impossible task just days ago, but somehow, it's working out." She paused for a moment, then said with a smile and satisfied expression, "I have only one more person that I need to give Dave's last hug to, his wife Julie. Dave's whole family are very nice people. You would have enjoyed being friends with them." After imagining John shaking hands with Davey, she continued, saying, "It's interesting how each family member is dealing with Dave's death differently." Giving it

some thought, she took a moment to assess how she had dealt, and is still dealing with, John's death.

About to finalize her conversation with John, Violet placed John's necklace on over her head, just feeling its weight against her was comforting. Lovingly, she gently kissed the pendent, then tucked it inside her shirt. Violet whispered, "I miss you John, more than words can say."

With a final lingering glance at her late husband's photo, Violet turned away, her exhaustion settling in. With a grateful sigh, Violet crawled into bed, the soft sheets were a welcoming embrace. Tomorrow would bring another early start, another journey alongside Sam, and this time to Houston. Little did she know, their paths might possibly collide again with Carlos Mendoza, and his sinister plans. What seemed like a "Getting away from it all assignment" in Houston, may likely, be putting them directly in harm's way. But for tonight, Violet allowed her much deserved rest and her dreams, to claim her.

Chapter 12

Road Trip To Houston

It was a clear blue sky Saturday morning, and the bright sunshine lit up the inside of the firehouse bays, as Violet arrived just before ten o'clock. She wasn't surprised to find Sam already here, his usual boundless energy charged the air. They both had small rolling suitcases, modestly packed for their two-night stay in Houston, and Violet was also bringing her laptop. It was an exciting morning, and they were anxiously looking forward to their adventurous assignment, at the Calvary Christian Center of Houston.

"Are you ready to escape to Houston for a few days," roared Sam with a big smile and excited eyes.

Violet mirrored his enthusiasm, "Oh yeah! More than you know Sam!"

The prospect of a change of scenery, coupled with the promise of good pay, ignited a spark of comradery within them, reminiscent of their college road trip days – but duty came first. Before hitting the open road, they had a crucial task – ensuring their ambulance was fully stocked with vital supplies. Meticulously, they worked their way through the inventory list, their movements, a practiced ballet honed from over a year of working together. It was a familiar routine, yet today held a subtle undercurrent of the adventures to come. Inside the cab taped to the steering wheel was a note from Captain Rocky, asking them to come into his office when they were ready to leave, and they were about ready to go.

A playful grin spread across Violet's face, as she peeked into Captain Rocky's office. Finding him looking up from his desk, she gave a theatrical wave before entering, Sam following close behind.

Violet announced with cheer, "Captain, we're ready to roll!" The infectious enthusiasm in her voice, mirrored the big smiles on both their faces.

Captain Rocky returned their smiles with a nod of approval. "Excellent," he said. "You're making good time getting ready."

Sam, ever the logistical one, added, "I just did some calculations, and we should get there with plenty of time to spare."

Rocky leaned back in his chair, and his expression turned serious, saying, "I want your undivided attention, and listen closely – because this isn't just another call." He began his code of conduct lecture, "While you're in Houston, consider yourselves ambassadors for the City of San Antonio. I wouldn't have recommended you for this assignment, if I didn't have the utmost confidence that you'd represent us well."

A chorus of, "Thank you, sir," echoed from Violet and Sam, their faces reflecting the importance of Rocky's words.

Rocky inquired, "Any questions before you head out?"

After giving it some thought, Sam asked, "Do you have a name for the director we'll be meeting with?"

Rocky reached for a note on his desk and passed it to Sam, saying, "Dr. James Stafford – Like I said yesterday, he's expecting you at 3:00 pm sharp. However, I suggest arriving a bit early. The Calvary Christian Center is a large complex, and finding him might take some extra time." Both Sam and Violet nodded in agreement.

"Alrighty then..." Rocky concluded waving his hand in dismissal, "If you have no more questions, you're good to go. But remember," He added, his voice turning serious once more, "If you encounter any difficulties at all, don't hesitate to call me. I'll keep an extra close eye on my phone while you're out of town." As Rocky watched them leave, thoughts of concern crossed his mind. With the attack at the Alamo Center still very fresh in his mind, he wondered if he was sending them into harm's way.

With Sam confidently at the wheel of the ambulance, they pulled away from the fire station, and embarked on their three-hour journey east. It didn't take them long to make their way through town, then get onto Interstate 10, the primary corridor stretching across central Texas. The landscape heading east, a tapestry of rolling prairies and farmland, punctuated by the occasional speck of a town, promised a smooth and

easy ride. With a comfortable buffer of an hour before their meeting with Dr. Stafford, the trip offered a welcome calmness, especially in light of the previous chaotic few days.

Anticipation was in the air as they left San Antonio behind, and the promise of good tunes as they traveled. Both Sam and Violet, armed with music libraries on their phones, were eager to get lost in the rhythm of the open road. Their musical tastes, while diverse, found common ground on most genres. Yet, Sam harbored a deep-seated love for the unparalleled artistry of music from the 80s, while Violet's heart belonged to the electrifying energy of more recent hits. As the civilization of town thinned and the sky opened up, Sam declared, "Alright, it's time to turn this adventure into a concert – time for some traveling music!"

Sam had already linked his phone up to the ambulance's sound system before they departed, and with ease, he hit the play button. The first notes of a hard driving classic surged through the speakers, instantly transforming the sterile cabin into a vibrant soundscape. Violet, with a big smile looked over at Sam and gave an enthusiastic thumbs-up in approval.

However, Violet wasn't one to be easily outdone in the music department. Anxious to share her own musical treasures, she proposed a compromise, "How about this, Sam," she suggested, "we conquer the first half of the journey with your playlist, and then I get to unleash the fury of mine for the second half – deal?"

Sam's eyes lit up, impressed with Violet's musical determination. "Sounds like a perfect plan, partner," he replied, already picturing the diverse musical tapestry that would unfold over the next few hours. With the promise of a shared concert adventure on the horizon, they settled back in their seats, ready to let the music and the open road carry them towards Houston.

Eventually, as the sprawl of Houston crept into view, a network of freeways and skyscrapers could be seen in the distance, and the urban sprawl was gradually replacing the endless Texan prairie. They decided to pull into a conveniently located truck stop. Their priority was twofold – ensuring the ambulance had a totally full tank of gas, and satisfy the hunger that had begun to gnaw at their stomachs.

The pit stop was swift and efficient, and it wasn't long before they were back on the road, navigating their way towards Houston with renewed energy, each of them clutching a well-deserved sandwich. The stark contrast between the open prairie they had left behind, and the urban sprawl that now engulfed them, was a reminder of Houston's vastness. The city traffic, though heavier than the open highway, didn't slow them down. Their destination awaited, and the promise of a successful mission, fueled by both duty and their delicious sandwiches, propelled them forward.

Finally, relief washed over Sam and Violet as they pulled into the sprawling complex of the Calvary Christian Center, with still a comfortable 35 minutes to spare before their meeting. Sam, his memory still sharp from a previous assignment here a few years back, pointed out a gated area to Violet. "Right there, in that fenced in area," he explained, "is where we'll park tomorrow. It's reserved specifically for staff, support vehicles like ours, and commercial deliveries. For today, we'll just find a spot in the main lot out front."

Violet climbed out of the ambulance, her eyes widening in surprise. "Wow!" she was amazed, gazing at the immensity of the complex. "This place is massive! It dwarfs what they show on TV."

Indeed, the Calvary Christian Center wasn't simply a church, it was a sprawling Christian community center, with many different facilities. The inside of the sanctuary, commonly shown on TV, though undeniably impressive, was just one facet of the entire facility. Violet estimated the sanctuary occupied roughly just a third of the Christian center. The televised sanctuary, she recalled, boasted a seating capacity exceeding 15,000 – a staggering number, but only a hint of the center's true scale.

Stepping out to join Violet, Sam agreed, saying, "Yeah, it's enormous, and the inside is just as grand. There's no doubt this is a well-funded church." He surveyed the complex with a mix of awe and professional curiosity. Their mission here, promised to be unlike any they'd encountered back in San Antonio.

Sam, with his trusty notebook tucked under his arm, led the way as they entered the main entrance of the Calvary Christian Center. The sheer

volume of the place hit them immediately. A vast, expansive lobby stretched before them, dwarfing even the grand entrance of the Alamo Center back in San Antonio. In the center, a large circular information counter served as the central hub, its design clearly intended to manage the flow of potentially, thousands of visitors.

Several staff members stood behind the counter, their vantage point offering a near-360-degree view of the bustling lobby, thanks to the counter's circular form. The counter itself, was a tasteful blend of modern and traditional. It was crafted from warm natural wood with an elegant finish, and accented with a soft blue LED lighting system, that cast an angelic glow. The effect was both functional and aesthetically pleasing, creating a welcoming atmosphere, despite the center's immense size.

Sam and Violet approached the information counter. A friendly woman with a nametag that read, 'Alice', greeted them with a warm smile. Sam cleared his throat and said to Alice, "Hi, we're here to see Dr. James Stafford, the director."

Alice's smile faltered slightly as she recognized their uniforms. Emergency Medical Technicians, in uniform, weren't typical visitors at the Calvary Christian Center. With concern creeping into her voice, she asked, "Is everything alright? Is there an emergency?"

Sam quickly reassured her. "No, everything's fine," he replied. "We're actually going to be on duty here tomorrow, and Dr. Stafford is supposed to give us an orientation on the facility. We have a three o'clock appointment."

With a sense of relief in Alice's face, her smile returned. "Oh, okay," she chuckled with a touch of embarrassment. "You had me worried for a moment there. Let me just give Dr. Stafford a call, and I'll let him know you're here." Conveniently positioned beside her, she reached towards a sleek desk phone with a speed dial directory. Picking it up, Alice pushed the button for Dr. Stafford.

A brief phone conversation ensued. "Hello Dr. Stafford, this is Alice at the information station in the main entry way. I have a couple of EMTs here, they say they have an appointment to meet with you for an

orientation." She listened for a moment, then she spoke again, "Alright, I'll let them know." Then she hung up the phone.

"I spoke to Dr. Stafford," Alice explained to Sam. "He seems to be a bit tied up at the moment, but he's expecting you. He said he needs to find his assistant first, then they'll both be down here in about fifteen minutes."

"Sounds good." Sam said while glancing at Violet. "We'll be happy to wait."

Violet always appreciative added, "Thank you so much. By the way, this is a very beautiful place."

Alice's smile widened. "Thank you," she replied. "I'm glad you think so, and it's a wonderful place to work. When I see Dr. Stafford and his assistant come in, I'll be sure to send them your way."

Sam and Violet, happy to wait, spent their time waiting taking a tour of the grand lobby, the brief encounter with Alice, leaving them with a newfound appreciation for the welcoming atmosphere of the church.

As Sam and Violet strolled through the expansive entry room, their gazes were drawn to the displays lining the perimeter of the lobby. These weren't your typical church bulletin boards, filled only with announcements and upcoming events. Instead, they showcased full color photos and exhibits, professionally on display inside glass cases. Collectively, they presented a vibrant tapestry of the church's various groups and initiatives. Many of the displays, pulsed with the lifeblood of the Calvary Christian Center's community outreach.

Violet, always the sentimentalist, stopped to study a lot of the displays with genuine interest. "This church is a real cornerstone for the community," she remarked, with a hint of admiration in her voice. "It seems like they have an active group dedicated to every cause imaginable, all working to make the community, and even the world, a better place."

Sam, nodding in agreement, he added, "You're absolutely right. It's clear, they must generate a significant amount of income from their church members, and also their television evangelism. As I look at these church

projects, it's apparent they're putting that money to good use. Look at the sheer variety and size of these programs. From after-school mentoring for at risk youths, to operating a massive food bank for the poor, the work they do is truly impressive."

"Absolutely!" agreed Violet, her enthusiasm piqued. She added, "They should definitely showcase more of these initiatives on TV. It would be a great way to inspire others, and demonstrate the true scope of their charitable work. Plus, I think it would inspire other churches to do more of the same."

"I agree," Sam replied. "They certainly seem to embody what a church should be – a catalyst for positive change and support for their community. It's clear that their mission extends far beyond the walls of the sanctuary."

Suddenly, a gentle voice from behind them broke through their conversation, startling them slightly. "Money is only as good, as the goodness it can do." it said. Turning around, Sam and Violet, found themselves face-to-face with the very man they had come to see, Dr. James Stafford, as the name tag on his impeccably tailored suit proclaimed. He was an elderly gentleman, but his eyes sparkled with youthful warmth. His smile, both kind and distinguished, instantly put them at ease.

"Hello," he greeted them with a welcoming tone. "I'm Dr. Stafford, and I'm delighted to see you both taking such an interest in our church's work." Sam, ever the picture of professionalism, extended a hand for a handshake, saying, "Your church is impressive Dr. Stafford. It's a pleasure to meet you." Sam began introductions, "This is Violet Wheeler, and my name, is Sam Harris." The three of them exchanged handshakes, the brief exchange setting the stage for what promised to be a fruitful orientation.

Dr. Stafford inquired, with a curious look on his face, "Is this your first time here?" His voice carrying a hint of anticipation, perhaps to show them something special for the first time.

Sam stepped forward, his mind remembering back to a previous assignment, "Actually, I was here a few years ago," he replied. "I worked here as an EMT during the aftermath of Hurricane Larry."

Violet, eager to contribute to the conversation, joined in, "This is my first visit, but I've watched your pastor, Darrel Donovan, on television quite a bit. He's very inspirational."

Dr. Stafford's face lit up with pride, saying, "Yes, Mr. Donovan is definitely inspirational! – we like him a lot." Dr. Stafford took a moment to scan the lobby, as if he was looking for someone, with a concerned frown he said, "I was hoping my assistant would join us," his voice reflecting disappointment. "Perhaps he'll catch up." With a welcoming gesture, he continued, "Let's head into the sanctuary. I want to give you a proper tour."

As they approached one of the grand entrances to the sanctuary, its imposing extra-large doorway stood closed. However, a desk positioned beside the doorway was occupied by a staff member. Dr. Stafford, ever the consummate host, introduced everyone, "This is Bob...he's been with our church for a very, long time." Invitingly gesturing with his hands, "Bob, I'd like for you to meet Sam and Violet, EMTs on loan from San Antonio. They're here today for an orientation, and they will be on duty here tomorrow."

The three of them exchanged a firm handshake and greeting, a brief but efficient introduction. Bob, dressed in a sharp black suit and a blue tie, bore a badge around his neck that marked him as a member of the facility's staff. Dr. Stafford explained, "This attire is quite common around here. Even on a relatively quiet day like today, there are likely at least eight attendants dressed like Bob stationed throughout the complex. It's important for you to know that, because in case of an emergency, and you need help to find your way, look for someone dressed like Bob. Staff members dressed like Bob, can help you get to any place on the property, quickly."

Both Sam and Violet gave a nod of understanding, with the information sinking in. Dr. Stafford turned back to the attendant. "Bob, would you be so kind as to open the sanctuary doors for us?"

With a yes sir, Bob removed his badge from around his neck, and then held it up to the digital lock on the door. A second later, with a click, the door was unlocked, and Bob opened the door.

Dr. Stafford, a passionate and expressive guide, led the way down a wide corridor...that eventually, opened into the breathtaking expanse of the sanctuary. The sheer scale of the space, took Violet's and Sam's breath away. Rows upon rows of stadium seating, stretched out before them, creating a visual symphony of order and grandeur. Even with the majority of the lights dimmed, the sanctuary was bathed in a soft celestial glow, illuminating its vastness.

"Wow!" Violet exclaimed, with her voice totally filled with awe. She stood for a moment, her eyes wide with wonder, just taking in the sheer magnitude of the space. She felt as though, she had been whisked away, magically transported to the heart of a famous colossal cathedral, the towering heights and expansive layout, evoking a sense of both reverence, and splendor. The cushioned seats were both inviting and plush, seats that promised both comfort, and a sense of intimacy, amidst the overwhelming scale of the room.

Sam, despite his previous assignment here, also found himself equally captivated by the sanctuary's majesty. The memory of his earlier experience had faded, but was now renewed. The profound visual impact, of seeing the space once again was emotional. As they walked further into the heart of the sanctuary, a sense of its immensity continued to overwhelm them.

Finally, reaching the center of the sanctuary! Standing in front of the imposing pulpit, Dr. Stafford turned to face Sam and Violet! With his arms outstretched in a gesture of welcome, and a broad smile spread across his face, he proudly proclaimed. "And here it is my friends – the heart of the Calvary Christian Center!"

Violet and Sam stood in silent awe, their eyes drinking in the immensity of the sanctuary. This church, familiar from the television broadcasts, now unfolded before them in tangible reality. Violet spun slowly on her heel, taking in a full 360° view. "Wow!" She said, pausing to take in

a deep breath, "So this is the view Darrel Donovan has when he delivers his sermons."

Dr. Stafford, appreciated their fascination, but then he began to provide a practical overview of the facility, "In case of an emergency," he explained, "If you have to rescue a person from their seat, the only stairs you may need to negotiate, are those you see leading upward from the upper entryways into the stadium seating. Those upper entryways, have no stairs leading to them. You can access those upper entryways along ramps. There are ramps and smooth rolling surfaces everywhere else in the church." Sam and Violet nodded, absorbing the information. Dr. Stafford continued, "Typically, if you receive a call for assistance, you'll bring your stretcher to the nearest accessible rolling point, and park it there, before assessing the patient's situation. At that point of the rescue, you would make a decision, as to whether or not to perform a stair chair evacuation."

Violet nodded in understanding, "That makes sense," she replied.

Dr. Stafford pointed upwards at a booth, a kind of office with large windows, situated on the perimeter near the top of the sanctuary. "That's the sanctuary's control room," he explained. "If someone in the control room notices a person in distress, they'll radio our in-house first aid station. Occasionally, a guest might dial 911 directly. In that case, the emergency operator will initially contact our first aid station." Pausing with a warm smile spreading across his face, he asked, "Do you have any questions before we head over to the first aid station?"

Violet raised her hand, "How often do you typically need to use a stretcher, or an ambulance for medical emergencies?"

Dr. Stafford considered her question for a moment, then answered, "Most people who require first aid, are able to walk to the first aid station on their own, it's rare that we have to rescue them from their seat." Then he added, "However, given our congregation has a substantial elderly demographic, we sometimes have to use an ambulance to transport someone to the hospital, perhaps about once every couple of months. Regardless of the situation, our priority is to provide swift medical attention. That's why your presence here is so crucial – it enables us to respond to

emergencies much more quickly, than if we had to wait for an ambulance to be dispatched from somewhere else across town."

With their questions answered, Violet and Sam stood ready to follow Dr. Stafford, as he turned to lead the way. However, Violet hesitated, a wishful expression crossing her face. "Dr. Stafford," she began, her voice soft but determined, "Would you mind if I said a quick prayer before we continue?"

Dr. Stafford's face broke into a warm smile. "Sure, absolutely," he replied, his voice filled with genuine respect. "Please, take all the time you need."

Facing the imposing pulpit, Violet placed a gentle hand on the raised platform. Sam and Dr. Stafford stood beside her, their presence a silent affirmation of support. With a deep breath, she began her prayer, "Dear God – Thank you for your abundant blessings and guidance." She paused for a moment, and then continued with her voice filled with heartfelt compassion, "Please watch over Dave and his family during this difficult time, and grant Julie the strength to navigate her challenging journey. Also, please tell my husband John, that I love him, and miss him very much." After another short pause, she continued, "As I strive to live my life to the fullest, to Be the Max – I do so with gratitude, and to honor your presence in my life – Amen."

Sam and Dr. Stafford had joined her in prayer, offering their silent approval. When Violet finished, a sense of peace and unity filled her heart. Dr. Stafford, clearly moved by Violet's heartfelt prayer, broke the silence. "Thank you Violet," he said, with his voice filled with warmth. "That was beautiful. When you pray for others, those are the most noble prayers."

A moment passed before Dr. Stafford continued the orientation, "Now, if you're ready, let's proceed to the first aid station."

As they left the sanctuary, Sam and Violet paused to cast one final glance at the breathtaking space. The magnitude of its scale and purpose left a profound impression. Following Dr. Stafford down another short corridor, they approached another set of expansive doors.

As they walked, Dr. Stafford explained, "The first aid station is just beyond these doors. If an emergency arises on the main floor, you'll likely pass through these doors to reach it." Sam and Violet understood, they also focused on the details of their surroundings as they walked.

With a firm push, Dr. Stafford opened the door, revealing another corridor that ran perpendicular to the one they just exited. "This hallway runs behind the seating, along the entire perimeter of the sanctuary," he described, "and all the entrances to the main worship area branch off from this corridor."

Almost immediately, they came upon a door marked with a bright red and white, 'First Aid' sign. Dr. Stafford reached into his pocket, pulling out a key and said, "This door is secured with a keyed lock to restrict the access." As he inserted the key into the lock, he added, "On Sundays, typically, there are two or three medical staff members on duty here, but nobody is here today."

As the door swung open, a young East Asian man wearing a suit, came running down the hallway, his face flushed with exertion. Dr. Stafford remarked, "It's about time!" With a chuckle he inquired, "Where have you been?"

The young man, clearly apologetic, explained, "I'm so sorry for being late. I completely lost track of the time."

Surprisingly, this young man, was the same man that was going over construction drawings, the drawings for the Calvary Christian Center, with Carlos the terrorist! – Just the previous night. His seemingly innocent and young face, was somehow connected with some sort of future terrorist plot, likely a plot directed by Carlos. His role, assisting Dr. Stafford, gave him intimate inside knowledge of the church, the churches layout, and its operational routines. But for now, nobody else had a clue as to his hidden agenda, or what evil was about to come.

Dr. Stafford introduced the young man with a smile and with pride in his voice, "This is Cheng, a student at the University of Houston, here on a student visa from China. Cheng is my assistant." Then he elaborated, "Our church currently employs six people from the University, all of them here on

student visas. It's just one of the many ways that the church reaches out, creating international bridges, and better global relationships with the rest of the world."

With a friendly smile, Cheng presented a bag to Sam and Violet, a small cloth carry bag with the church's logo on the side. "Here's some helpful information," he said. "Inside, you'll find a booklet containing a map of the Calvary Christian Center, with a directory. It should help you navigate the complex. There's also a map with the address of the Memorial Texas Medical Center, which is our preferred hospital for patient transport." He hesitated, then remembering something important, he reached into the bag and pulled out two hotel keycards. "And most important, these are your room keys, two rooms at the Houston Inn Express. Finding accommodations so close to New Year's was challenging, but I managed to secure a hotel about fifteen miles west of here."

Sam took the bag from Cheng. "Thank you," he replied, a note of appreciation in his voice. "We'll be sure to familiarize ourselves with this information."

Dr. Stafford, sensing a momentum shift, turned to Cheng. "Cheng, I have some matters to attend to in my office," he explained. "Would you be able to continue the tour on your own? They've already seen the sanctuary, and we were just about to explore the first aid station."

Cheng nodded in understanding, "Of course," he replied, his voice confident. "I'll take it from here."

Sam and Violet exchanged a brief handshake with Dr. Stafford, expressing their gratitude for his time and guidance. With a warm smile, Dr. Stafford wished them well and handed each of them his business card. "Don't hesitate to contact me if you need anything." With a final nod, he turned and walked away, disappearing down the corridor. As usual, Violet took a moment to save Dr. Stafford's contact information in her phone.

As Violet put her phone away, Cheng ushered them into the first aid station. "During our regular Sunday services," he began, "we typically have two or three registered nurses on duty to handle any medical concerns." He paused, his gaze shifting to a new calendar on the wall. "Tomorrow, like

almost every holiday that falls on a Sunday, we're expecting near-capacity crowds for the morning services.

Violet commented, "Wow! That's going to be a lot of people."

Cheng continued, "We'll be hosting a total of four services throughout the day, with attendance gradually decreasing as the day progresses. The first service starts at 9:00 AM, with probably over 15,000 people in attendance, and the last service concludes around 5:00 PM."

The first aid station was a compact yet well-equipped space, reminiscent of the medical facilities they had encountered at the Alamo Center. A couple of hospital beds flanked the room, surrounded by an array of medical equipment, and an abundance of supplies. There was also a designated waiting room for EMTs, with comfortable seating and a TV. The First Aid station seemed to be ideal, a comfortable space designed for efficiency and preparedness.

Next, they walked outside through a rear exit door, to view where to park the ambulance. Just outside the first aid station, was a reserved covered parking area within a fenced and gated parking lot. "That gate way over there is automated," Cheng said, pointing at a large chain-link gate. "If you're arriving from outside the complex, a security guard will see you on camera, and will open it remotely. If you're exiting, the gate will open automatically, triggered by an electric eye."

Violet and Sam exchanged satisfied glances. Having a designated, weather protected parking space was a definite advantage. "This is all very familiar," Sam remarked. "We don't anticipate any issues."

Cheng concluded the tour with a summary. "Remember, be here by 8:30 tomorrow morning," he said. "Pull up to the gate, and a guard will let you in. Park in the designated spot, and then come inside to the waiting area. You can watch TV unless you're needed. Our regular medical staff will handle the rest." He raised his hand in a questioning gesture. "That's it! Any last questions?"

"No questions," Sam and Violet replied in unison. Sam added, "We've got it covered. We'll be here on time in the morning."

With the orientation officially concluded, Sam and Violet returned to their ambulance. As they climbed into the cab, Violet suggested, "We should probably go to the hotel next, and make sure these keys work. I don't want to be looking for a hotel room, especially this weekend."

Sam nodded in agreement, pulling out his phone, saying, "I'll send Rocky a quick text to let him know we finished the meeting, and that all is well."

Unfortunately, all was not well, and Sam and Violet had no idea. Unbeknownst to them, a storm was brewing in the shadows! Carlos Mendoza, the mastermind behind this impending chaos, was lurking in the vicinity, his sinister plans likely having something to do with the Calvary Christian Center. Cheng, his accomplice, had played his acting role flawlessly, maintaining the facade of a dedicated and loyal employee. Even Dr. Stafford, a wise and respected leader within the congregation, remained oblivious to the darkness concealed within his organization. His pride in Cheng's accomplishments, a stark contrast to the young man's true intentions. One potentially scary detail, something Cheng mentioned, the church was expecting a full house tomorrow morning – a staggering 15,000 people in attendance at 9:00am!

Chapter 13

Celebrating a New Year

As Sam and Violet drove away from the imposing facilities of the Calvary Christian Center, a sense of relief washed over them, as the requirements of their work day were complete. Traveling back west on Interstate-10, they both sat quietly, listening only to the GPS providing navigation directions.

As good luck would have it, the hotel was not far from the interstate exit, and it was like Cheng said, about a 15 minute drive. As they pulled into the parking lot, they were relieved to find plenty of available spaces. Their rooms, conveniently located on the lower floor, were only a few doors apart, offering a sense of security and proximity. Sam expertly maneuvered the ambulance into a parking spot on the far side of the lot. Parking away from the building was a kind of, non-verbal signal to others, that they were not there on official business.

"Let's check these rooms out," Sam said, as he handed Violet her room key. "I want to make sure everything is in order before we relax."

Violet commented, "It says no smoking on the doors – but I sure hope it doesn't smell like smoke anyway." Violet was easily annoyed by hotel rooms that smell like cigarettes.

As they entered their respective rooms, a wave of relief washed over them. The accommodations were clean, modern, and inviting, offering a much-needed time-out from the day's travel. Violet's attention was immediately drawn to the television, a beacon of potential entertainment in the quiet solitude of her room. To her delight, the TV boasted a wide array of channels, promising hours of distraction. With a sense of satisfaction, she moved to the small desk, eager to set up her laptop, finding she was easily able to connect to the hotel's Wi-Fi.

Just then, there was a knock on Violet's door. When she opened the door it was Sam. Sam asked, "How is your room, smell any smoke?" Sam walked in and looked around. "Your room looks the same as my room."

Violet nodded in agreement, "I imagine most of the rooms are the same, mine's perfect!" she replied. "No lingering smells, and the TV works great with a lot of channels."

A comfortable silence settled over the room as they both absorbed their surroundings. Breaking the silence, Sam said, "I know it's only 5:30, but I'm starting to get hungry." Patting his stomach he asked, "Are you down for some dinner at that Mexican place across the street?"

Violet answered, "Yes, I would definitely, be down for some dinner." Then she added, "I was thinking, we came all this way to Houston, perhaps we could check out one of the fireworks displays at midnight. I know we have to be up early. But we could go eat dinner, then come back to our rooms and rest for a while. Then later, catch a ride-share to see a fireworks display."

Sam replied nodding his head, "Yeah, sounds like a great plan...I'm in!"

Violet added, "I know that the Houston area has several different locations for fireworks. After we get back from dinner, I could go online with my laptop, and research where fireworks are being launched."

Sam gave a thumbs up and said, "Let's get out of these uniforms and put on some street clothes. We'll plan on heading over to the restaurant in about twenty minutes."

"Okay," Violet answered, "I'll be ready when you are." Then Sam left to get ready.

The entire city of Houston, buzzed with the positive excitement and energy of New Year's Eve! The hotel, the restaurant, and even the Calvary Christian Center, like countless other venues across the city, were immersed in the upcoming festivities. Each passing moment was meticulously planned, a carefully orchestrated series of events unfolding as expected. Yet, glimmering in the underworld, a sinister plot was taking shape, a dramatic contrast to the city's holiday spirit – a sinister plot, yet to reveal itself.

History has a chilling habit of repeating itself. Time and again, acts of terror have struck, and always without warning, their devastating impact reverberating through communities and nations. The element of surprise is a hallmark of such attacks, a cruel twist of fate that leaves victims and survivors alike, reeling from the shock. Once unleashed, the consequences of these diabolical acts are irreversible, casting long shadows of pain and suffering, for years to come.

Tonight, the city of Houston will transform into a bustling metropolis of celebration, as tens of thousands of people congregate at various venues, ushering in the New Year. Undoubtedly, the city has bolstered security measures in anticipation of the large crowds. However, the sheer number and size of potential targets, raises concerns about the feasibility of complete protection. This is especially true when facing synchronized and well planned attacks, from predators, also planning to die.

As the time neared 10:00pm, Sam and Violet were just arriving at the Houston Veteran Memorial Park. As they got out of the car, they each had an umbrella chair that they had purchased near the hotel. The sprawling park, illuminated by countless twinkling lights, promised an evening of entertainment and excitement. With its reputation for hosting one of Houston's premier New Year's Eve fireworks displays, the park had drawn a massive crowd, transforming the expansive green space into a vibrant, and bustling city of celebration.

Sam turned to Violet, his voice filled with both caution and the desire to have some fun. "Like we discussed earlier," he began, "let's explore the area, but if either of us feels uneasy or unsafe, we head back to the hotel without hesitation." Violet nodded in agreement, her eyes scanning the crowd.

The festive atmosphere was dampened somewhat, by the imposing presence of concrete barriers, strategically placed to cordon off and protect the crowd. These formidable structures, effectively prevented vehicular access to the densely populated areas. Collectively, they created a secure perimeter around the event. A single heavily guarded entry point, that could be traversed only by foot traffic, served as the sole access to these protected zones. In addition, a large security team was checking all

coolers, bags and backpacks, and coats brought in by the public. The heightened security measures were a proactive reminder of potential threats, the kind of threats that had plagued San Antonio this past week.

The Veteran Memorial Park, a sprawling green oasis in the heart of the city, was renowned for its ability to accommodate large-scale events. Violet, whose meticulous research, had uncovered the park's reputation for hosting Houston's premier New Year's Eve fireworks display. As veterans themselves, both Sam and Violet held a deep-rooted respect for the park's dedication to honoring those who served.

The park, hosted a captivating museum, showcasing countless artifacts, many of them dating back to the Revolutionary War. However, the centerpiece of the park was an impressive collection of large military equipment, including helicopters, tanks, fighter jets, and artillery cannons. The park's artifacts served as a powerful reminder of technological achievements, and the sacrifices made by those who served. Beyond its historical significance, the park was also home to a modest nature preserve.

As they made their way into the park, the huge scale of the gathering became apparent. A sea of people stretched out before them, a diverse crowd from all walks of life. Families and friends mingled amidst the festive atmosphere, their faces illuminated by twinkling lights. Many of the lights were being worn by a lot of those in attendance. Tens of thousands of people, had gathered here to celebrate the start of a new year, their festive enthusiasm filled the air.

A myriad of vendors had set up shop, offering everything from brightly colored T-shirts, to glowing light-up hats. Food trucks were lined up to form a rectangular shaped food court, surrounding a large cluster of picnic tables. Their enticing aromas, mingling with the sounds of laughter and conversation. A large stage, hosted a live band that pumped out energetic tunes, adding to the vibrant atmosphere.

"This New Year's Eve party is incredible!" Violet exclaimed, her eyes wide with wonder. "I can already tell this is going to be an amazing night."

Sam couldn't agree more, saying, "This place is way better than Time Square!" As he scanned the crowd, he remarked, "Look at all the people having a great time! There's people here of every age, whole families. This is definitely the place to be!"

Carrying their chairs, Sam and Violet took their time, casually strolling through the celebration, surveying all the activities, and simply taking in the scenery. The energy of the crowd was infectious, and the anticipation of the fireworks display added an extra layer of excitement, yet to come.

Finally, Sam admitted, "I know we ate earlier, but I'm hungry again." With a tilt of his head, he added, "I saw a food truck over there that had some amazing-looking barbecue. Are you hungry?"

Violet replied, "Not really." Pointing toward a group of vendors, she suggested, "I saw a vendor over by the helicopter, they looked like they have a lot of good looking light-up hats. How about you go get something to eat, and I'll go do a little shopping, and we'll meet back here in 30 minutes."

"Sounds perfect!" Replied Sam. Then he pointed at the ground, "I'll meet you right here, in say, 45 minutes." With a shared smile, they split up and went on their individual quests.

Now without Sam by her side, as Violet navigated through the bustling crowd, a sense of unease gradually began to creep into her consciousness. The overwhelming sea of people, coupled with the heightened awareness of her surroundings, triggered a surge of paranoia. Her gaze began darting from person to person, scanning the crowd for any potential threat. A fleeting moment of fear gripped her, as she fixated on a group of strangers, their actions seeming oddly suspicious in her heightened state of anxiety.

Then, a heartwarming sight caught her attention. Several families with young children, stood out amidst the chaos, their laughter and play creating a small oasis of happiness. Adorned with glowing hats and necklaces, they seemed oblivious to the world around them. Their innocence, a clear contrast to Violet's growing apprehension. For the children, tonight's fun will likely be a great memory that will last a lifetime. The image of their carefree enjoyment, served as a much-needed reminder

for Violet, to let go of her fears. Determined to regain control of her emotions, Violet made a conscious decision to focus on the positive.

With renewed purpose, she approached the hat vendor, her attention drawn to the amazing array of headwear. The vendor had clearly spared no expense in creating a truly festive selection. As she browsed through the colorful options, her mind gradually shifted away from her anxieties. The simple act of choosing a hat provided a welcome distraction, allowing her to momentarily forget her fears.

Finally, her eyes landed on the perfect hat – a dazzling creation adorned with countless twinkling lights. The price tag was steep, but the sheer joy it promised outweighed the cost. A mischievous grin spread across her face, as she imagined Sam's reaction to such an extravagant purchase.

Eventually, Sam emerged from the food court battleground victorious, his stomach pleasantly full and carrying two bottles of water, one to share with Violet. Having arrived at their rendezvous point a few minutes early, he just hung loose and soaked in the vibrant atmosphere of the festival – just watching the people. As he scanned the crowd, his attention was drawn to a particularly gleaming spectacle off in the distance – a person adorned with a light-up headpiece that seemed to defy description, and the lights were walking his way. As the person came close, Sam realized with astonishment, that it was Violet, transformed into a radiant extravaganza of festive attire. The headdress, a sparkling cascade of feathers and lights, was a sight to behold.

"Wow!" he exclaimed, his voice filled with genuine awe. "That is the most incredible hat I've ever seen! Where did you find it? Or maybe I should ask, How much did it cost?"

Violet twirled gracefully, allowing Sam a full view of her extraordinary headpiece. "Never mind the price," she laughed, her eyes sparkling with amusement. "It was Love at first sight, and I had to have it." Violet tossed Sam a light up necklace. "Here, put that on! I can't be seen hanging out with somebody that's not lit up."

Violet held up a large bag of kettle corn, showing it to Sam, she said, "I can't pass up a good bag of kettle corn!" She shook her head showing off her well-lit adornment, saying, "By the way, it's not a hat. It's an Indian headdress."

Sam put the necklace on, and admired his own glowing lights. "Cool!" he said with a smile. Sam couldn't resist the urge to capture this unforgettable moment on camera. "Hold on," he said to Violet pulling out his phone. "I have to get a picture of this. Put your chair and popcorn down." Violet struck a series of playful poses, with her laughter mingling with the music, and the general hubbub of the crowd.

"Let me return the favor," Violet said, taking the phone from Sam's hands. She snapped a few photos of him, her fingers dancing across the touchscreen. "You're officially documented," she declared, handing the phone back, "Be sure to send me those photos."

Sam looked at his watch, and the arrival of the New Year was getting close. "We should find a good spot to watch the fireworks," Sam suggested, a sense of excitement building within him. "Let's set up over there, near the entrance so we can make a quick exit when it's over."

Violet replied, "That looks like a really good spot to me, and don't worry," she added, "I'll share my popcorn."

Sam raised his 2 bottles of water in the air and declared, "I got us something to drink to go with the popcorn!"

Sam and Violet settled into their chairs, where they sat comfortably awaiting the fireworks display. Violet draped her stunning headdress over the back of her chair, a testament to the evening's enchantment. Passing the bag between them, they shared the kettle corn, the salty sweet crunch providing a taste-bud stimulation, adding to the flashy excitement of the celebration.

As they relaxed and enjoyed the festive atmosphere, a group of teenage girls approached, their eyes drawn to Violet's extraordinary headpiece. One of them said, "Wow! I think that's the coolest hat here!" her

voice filled with admiration. "It's the prettiest one we've seen all night." Violet beamed with pride, her spirits lifted by the unexpected compliment.

However, as the minutes ticked by, a shadow of sadness began to creep into Violet's behavior, previously bright and cheerful, her expression had taken a somber turn. As Sam handed the kettle corn bag back to Violet, he noticed a solitary tear escape Violet's eye. Sam, ever observant, noticed the unhappy shift in her expression. "Is everything okay?" he asked, his voice filled with concern.

Violet quickly wiped away the tear, her cheeks flushing with embarrassment, "It's nothing," she insisted, her voice trembling slightly as she looked away from Sam. She didn't want to dampen Sam's enjoyment of the evening with her personal sorrows.

Sam's concern deepened, "Violet, I can tell something is wrong," he said gently, placing a comforting hand on her shoulder. "Don't be afraid to talk to me, I've got your back."

Violet gazed down at her wedding ring as she gently fondled it. Then she looked over at Sam, with a distressed look on her face, she said, "This is the first time I've been to a New Year's Eve event – since my husband died." Just speaking those words seemed to upset her even more as she quickly turned her head away, attempting to hide her tears.

Sam squeezed her shoulder gently, offering silent comfort. "I'm so sorry Violet," he said, his voice filled with empathy. "I know this must be incredibly difficult for you. But I also know that John would want you to enjoy yourself tonight. He would want you to be here, celebrating the beginning of a new year – right?"

Violet nodded, her eyes still glistening with unshed tears. "You're right," she said, her voice gaining strength. "He would definitely want me to be here. He loved going to see the fireworks."

Just then, the countdown began, each number echoing through the crowd like a heartbeat. Six – Five – Four – Three – Two – One – and then, cheers filled the air as the clock struck midnight! A colossal digital display, positioned prominently above the stage, announced the birth of a new year

in blazing lights. The crowd erupted in a frenzy of celebration, their cheers and whistles blending with the chaotic symphony of honking horns!

Amidst the chaos, Sam stood tall, his arms raised in celebration as he joined in the collective outpouring of fun. For Violet, however, the moment was tinged with bittersweet nostalgia. As she stared into the sky, her mind drifted back to a time, to a precious moment when she had shared this special occasion with her beloved husband, John. The memory of their first New Year's Eve kiss, a tender moment frozen in time, brought a confused smile to her lips. As the fireworks exploded in a dazzling display overhead, she found herself caught in a heartfelt interplay, of past and present, joy, and sorrow.

Captivated in thought from five years earlier, Violet found herself newly stationed at Lackland Air Force Base in San Antonio, a city that promised a dynamic blend of military life, and civilian adventure. A lifelong firearms enthusiast, and former president of her high school shooting club, Violet was eager to explore the local shooting scene. Her research led her to the San Antonio Rifle and Pistol Club, a renowned establishment with a reputation for fostering competitive shooting. Shooting steel is a facet of the sport that particularly appealed to Violet. So she came up with a plan to investigate the club further.

Luckily, Violet was fortunate to have already made friends with fellow airman, Lisa Bowman, a passionate competitive shooter, and a club member. Lisa, tempting Violet to experience the club firsthand, invited her for an adventure that included target practice and a steel shooting class.

The San Antonio Rifle and Pistol Club was a sprawling outdoor complex, located on the outskirts of the city. The expansive facility catered to a diverse range of shooting enthusiasts, from pistol marksmanship, to long-range rifle precision, and the club boasted a thriving membership. The club's calendar was brimming with competitive events, a testament to its popularity among the local shooting community.

Their shooting excursion was on a Saturday, that also coincided with New Year's Eve morning, a time when many firearms enthusiasts sought to indulge their passion. Despite the holiday, the range was bustling with

activity, a testament to the enduring appeal of firearms among those who shared this passion. The rhythmic cadence of gunfire filled the air, a torrent of controlled explosions, echoing the excitement of the upcoming celebrations later that night.

Both Lisa and Violet were in uniform, and as the women settled into their respective shooting stations at the pistol target range, Violet carefully removed her firearm from its case. A collective gasp rippled through the surrounding shooters as they caught sight of her weapon. Lisa's eyes widened in astonishment, "Wow!" Lisa said loudly, her eyes wide with admiration. "Your gun is absolutely stunning, a work of art!" The gun, adorned with exquisite gold-plated accents and accessories, was a testament to its owner's dedication to both functionality, and aesthetics.

Violet smiled proudly, "I call her Goldie," she replied, stroking the gun's sleek surface as if it were a living creature. "She's my go-to for steel shooting. She started off as a Ruger Mark IV, it's a 9 millimeter, then over time, I added a few modifications." The affection in her eyes and voice was evident, revealing a deep bond between the woman and her weapon.

Upon seeing Violet's gun, Lisa's expectation for Violet's shooting expertise grew exponentially. It was clear, that her friend probably possessed more shooting skill than she originally thought. Lisa and Violet finished shooting their first magazine at about the same time. Lisa looked over at Violet's target, and based on the hole pattern on Violet's target, at first she thought Violet had completely missed her target a lot. Then she thought, nobody with a gun like Goldie is going to shoot that bad, so she took a closer look. "Wow..." she said softly. Almost all of Violet's shots were within the bullseye, and the rest of her pattern was remarkably tight, within the area close to the bullseye.

While Lisa's shots were very competent with an occasional bullseye, Violet's performance continued to be absolutely astounding! As they continued, magazine after magazine, Violet's bullets found their mark with uncanny precision, drawing the attention of other shooters at the range.

Word of Violet's exceptional marksmanship spread among the other shooters at the pistol range, and a small crowd began to gather. Each time she reloaded, the spectators would exchange impressed glances, their

conversations of admiration growing louder with each successive bullseye on multiple targets, and with no shot missing the bullseye by much. Violet, initially flattered by the attention, remained focused on her targets, her demeanor a perfect blend of confidence and humility.

When it was time to pack up, a sense of accomplishment filled both women. Lisa, though proud of her own performance, couldn't help but feel a profound respect for Violet's talent. "I've never seen anyone shoot that accurate," Lisa said, her voice filled with admiration. "Your precision is amazing!"

Violet accepted the compliment graciously, saying with a smile, "Well, when you've trained as much as I have, you get pretty good." Her modesty attempting to conceal her exceptional talent. "But thank you for the kind words." With their equipment packed and their spirits high, the two friends made their way to the action steel shooting range, eager to embark on the next phase of their shooting adventure.

Arriving a few minutes late, Lisa and Violet joined the other students already seated around a couple of picnic tables, under a pavilion. The instructor, a young Air Force officer named John Wheeler, began their orientation. A seasoned marksman and long-time club member, Wheeler exuded authority and expertise. His passion for firearms was evident as he described the upcoming challenge, and the importance of safety.

To begin with, the instructor said to the group, "Around any outdoor shooting range, always wear eye protection at all times! – As soon as you get out of your car, it is very important to be wearing eye protection." John stressed the importance of safety, and that the handling of any firearm had strict protocols, and best management practices. Then he added, saying, "You don't want to be that guy, that person that people talk about, because you were unsafe and got hurt, or injured somebody else."

The steel shooting range itself, a simple, but impressive feat of engineering, that has gradually been refined over time. Tall towering dirt berms formed a protective barrier on three sides, while a 4th side, the open end, served as an entryway and the firing line. Today's design and layout, provides a safe and challenging environment for firearm enthusiasts. The instructor continued to emphasize the critical importance of safety, detailing

the specific procedures for loading, unloading, and the handling of firearms within the range.

The sport of shooting steel, commonly known as the Steel Challenge, is a timed competition, that has the objective of hitting five steel targets in the quickest time possible. If you miss a target, you keep shooting until all five targets are hit. A specialized electronic timer would add the element of competition, making it a timed and exciting contest.

Holding up a steel plate to the group, the instructor introduced the ten-inch diameter round steel targets, emphasizing their role as stand-ins, for human-head sized adversaries. The focus on accuracy and speed was made clear, as he outlined the competition's format – a challenging task, with some of the students worried about not being able to hit the steel plates at all.

Violet knew everything about shooting steel, so she didn't need a lesson. What the instructor was saying – was of no interest to her. She was much more interested in the handsome instructor himself, and that he had no apparent wedding ring. Not only was he really good looking, he was strong and tough, and into guns – just her type of guy.

The targets, five ten-inch diameter round steel plates, would be placed atop poles at varying distances and angles, challenging shooters to demonstrate speed, accuracy, and tactical strategy. The use of a timer would add the element of competition, a timed race, rewarding those who could combine skill with efficiency. The objective, hit all 5 targets, the fastest time wins.

The prospect of Violet testing her skills against the clock, while targeting the steel plates, was especially exciting, because it had been a while since she last shot steel, something she had missed doing. With her trusty firearm, Goldie, securely holstered at her side, she was ready to



embrace the challenge. As she moved among the other participants, her distinctive holstered weapon drew admiring glances, a testament to her potential skill as a marksman, even her holster was well decorated.

As the instructor called upon each participant to step up to the firing line, one at a time, a nervous sense of eagerness filled the air. One after another, the shooters struggled to meet the challenge, their best times hovering around the eight-second mark, with varying degrees of accuracy. For some of the least experienced shooters, times exceeded 20 seconds, with a lot of missed shots. The peer pressure was obviously strong, and the realization that they were competing against both the clock, and their own limitations, became evident.

As the instructor looked for a next shooter to invite to the firing line, he saw Lisa standing behind Violet, comically pointing at her. The instructor smiled, then signaled Violet to come forward. Violet's turn had arrived, and as she approached the firing line, all eyes were drawn to her, and her distinctive firearm that she carried. The custom gold plating gleamed in the sunlight, her style, a testament to her potential shooting skills.

Now up close, John was captivated with how pretty she was, making him hesitate. "What's your name," He asked.

Pleased that he had asked, she simply replied with a sweet smile, "You can call me Violet."

He looked at her gun and holster, commenting, "Well Violet – That's quite a gun you have, and I see you have a speed holster. Have you shot steel before?"

"It's a girl's gun." Replied Violet, tilting her head slightly and looking deep into John's eyes, "I have shot steel a few times." She was trying her best to flirt with John, and it seemed to be working by the look on his face.

John took another look at her gun, saying, "It looks like your gun started off as a Ruger, and it's a 9 millimeter." Violet gave a nod with a smile, then he continued, "So far everyone out here has been shooting 22s."

She replied, “Whenever I shoot, I train like it’s for real. I want stopping power, and I wouldn’t want to be caught in a gun fight, holding just a child’s weapon!”

Violet’s strong analogy raised John’s eyebrow, and with a big smile he continued, “Okay, let’s do this – shooter make ready.”

Violet took her shooting stance while the other students looked on, anxious to see if the girl with the fancy gun had something special.

John proceeded, “Shooter ready?” Violet nodded, a moment later the timer beeped, starting its internal clock. With lightning-fast reflexes, and what seemed like a single motion with her arm, she engaged all 5 targets, dispatching them with just 5 shots. The crowd erupted in applause, their astonishment evident in all their faces. One guy yelled, “That was incredible!” Lisa just smiled, because she was certain that Violet would do great.

John looked at the digital display on the timer and his jaw dropped. “Whoa! 3.47 seconds. That was really amazing, I guess you have shot steel before.”

“Not too bad.” Violet replied. “It’s been a while since I shot steel. Let’s go again.”

John got back into position behind Violet, saying, “Shooter make ready.” Determined to improve on her initial success, Violet was eager to push her limits further. Her second attempt resulted in an even more impressive time.

John held his timer in the air yelling back to the other students, “2.14 seconds!” Everybody was just in awe, a feat that elicited gasps of astonishment from all the onlookers.

“I’m speeding up!” Violet declared. “Let’s go one more time.”

Once again John got in position behind Violet, “Shooter make ready.” When the start timer beeped, once again, Violet just seemed to wave her arm across the shooting range, and all the targets chimed in rapid

succession when they were hit. Everybody was holding their applause waiting to hear the new time, but they knew it was going to be good.

John looked at Violet with amazement! Then softly spoke, "I don't know what to say, other than – 1.98 seconds." Then he yelled the time to the others, "Hey everybody, 1.98 seconds!"

The crowd erupted in cheers, their admiration for Violet's skill reaching a fever pitch. Even John Wheeler, a man accustomed to exceptional marksmanship, was visibly stunned. Violet, flattered by the attention, smiled warmly waving to everyone, and then took a bow.

They all had just witnessed, a super star performance by the new girl in town, and Lisa made sure that everyone knew that she was Violet's friend, and that she had brought her. "She's my friend," Lisa announced. Then she stretched the truth a bit, "I brought her here today because I knew everyone would be impressed." So, it was a good morning for Lisa too.

John, clearly captivated by Violet's exceptional skills, extended an invitation. "I'd really like to get to know you better," he said, his voice filled with genuine interest. With puppy dog eyes he asked, "Would you like to grab something to eat after we finish here?" Violet, pleased by his attention, accepted his invitation. Her heart filled with a sense of excitement, because she also wanted to spend more time with John – and perhaps, she would have a date for this evening as well.

John and Violet's lunch date was a resounding success! Setting the stage for a romantic evening together in San Antonio's River Walk. A legendary and beloved oasis in the heart of the city, the River Walk was teeming with New Year's Eve activity! Couples strolled hand-in-hand, families shared joyful moments, and friends reunited. – Everyone's faces, illuminated with festive spirit and party lights. The constant flow of tour boats on the waterways, with their passengers captivated by the enchanting scenery, added to the lively ambiance.

After a delicious shared dinner, John and Violet casually strolled along the romantic San Antonio River Walk. The anticipation of the

impending New Year's Eve celebration, added another layer of excitement, to the already magical atmosphere. The city's iconic waterway, a labyrinth of canals, adorned with twinkling lights and lush greenery, was a breathtaking spectacle. A symphony of life and fun filled the air, a harmonious blend of laughter, music, and the gentle lapping of water against the riverbanks.

John was fascinated by Violet's charm and intelligence, and he wished for a physical connection! The desire to take her hand was a constant temptation, but he hesitated, unsure of the appropriate moment to make his move. Violet, too, felt a magnetic pull towards John, her heart longing for the comfort of physical intimacy. This unspoken tension between them created a subtle energy, a silent dialogue filled with longing and hope.

Finally, unable to resist his desires any longer, John halted in his tracks, and he looked into Violet's eyes. "May I hold your hand?" he asked, his voice filled with a mixture of respect and confidence. Violet's heart skipped as her wish was about to happen. With a radiant smile, she replied, "Yes you may." As their fingers intertwined, a surge of electricity coursed through them, a testament to the growing connection between their souls. It was a feeling, that could only be described as, Love, at first touch! The world seemed to fade away as they continued their walk, their hearts filled with a sense of wonder and possibility.

As they strolled along the vibrant River Walk, a captivating display caught John's attention. A vendor's booth, adorned with a dazzling array of illuminated headwear, beckoned them closer. "We should definitely get one of those hats," John suggested, his eyes sparkling with excitement. The couple had been admiring the festive attire of other revelers throughout the evening, and this was their chance to fully immerse themselves in the New Year's Eve spirit.

Violet was also eager to embrace the festive atmosphere, suggesting, "Let's go take a look and see what he has." As they approached the vendor, they were greeted by a glittering spectacle of illuminated headwear. Trying on the various hats became a source of amusement and laughter, as they experimented with different styles.

"Look at me!" Violet comically said, her FACE framed by a pair of oversized light-up glasses. John couldn't help but chuckle at her amusing appearance. "Check this out!" he replied, donning a reggae-inspired headpiece, complete with an array of colorful lights and dreadlocks!

"I Love this!" Violet declared, which raised John's eyebrows. As he watched her browsing through the festive headwear, he sensed their evening together was going amazingly well. Violet declared, "We definitely need something to complete our look." Then she spotted a collection of cowboy hats, and she immediately gravitated towards one. "Howdy partner," She joked, trying on the hat with a playful grin.

John really liked the western-themed headwear and said, "Oh yeah! – I like that one! – I want one too!" As he selected a matching cowboy hat. He added, "It's not too weird – and any Texan would be proud to wear it." The couple stood side by side, their new found attire matched, and was a perfect complement to the festive atmosphere. As they continued their stroll along the River Walk, they felt a surge of comradery with passersby, their synchronized outfits, a testament to their shared spirit of fun and adventure.

As the clock crept towards midnight, a sense of anticipation filled the air. John and Violet, eager to witness the fireworks spectacle, decided to escape the bustling crowds on the sidewalks, and find a more secluded vantage point. A stone bridge arching over the canal, seemed like the ideal escape. As they reached its center, a panoramic view of the City Walk below, unfolded before them.

Glancing around, John declared, "Violet, this spot is absolutely perfect!" His voice was filled with excitement. "We'll have a great view of the fireworks, and we're alone up here. Everyone else is crammed together down there along the sidewalks." He gently put his arm around her as they admired their view.

Violet's breath shuddered with the touch of John's arm. As she smiled and her eyes sparkled, she commented with a soft and dreamy voice. "The Riverwalk looks enchanting from this height. And we can see everything from here." The city lights, reflected in the glassy still waters below, created a shimmering tapestry.

An unspoken understanding passed between them. They both knew the age-old tradition – a kiss at midnight, to usher in the New Year. With a shared knowing look, Violet removed her hat and placed it gently on the bridge's stone wall. John followed suit, their movements slow and deliberate. As the seconds ticked away, the sound within the city began to intensify, and their possible first kiss was growing near.

From below on the sidewalks, the crowd's countdown was underway, a rhythmic chant rose into the sky. "Six – Five – Four," The city seemed to hold its breath, while the final seconds ticked away. "Three – Two – One," The crowd cried out, with a frenzied – HAPPY NEW YEAR! The city exploded with cheers, horns blew, and then came the thunderous roar of fireworks overhead. The sky was quickly transformed into a canvas of blazing colors, a breathtaking spectacle that mirrored the emotions surging through John and Violet. In that magical moment, time seemed to stand still.

John and Violet drew closer, their bodies trembling with a mixture of anticipation and exhilaration. And then, for a blessing that felt suspended in time, their lips met – it was a kiss filled with promise, a tender declaration of something profound. The fireworks continued to explode above them, a brilliant complement, to the fireworks that were igniting within their hearts. In that magical instant, Violet felt a rush of emotion, a feeling she had never experienced before. John was much more than just a boyfriend – he was the missing piece to her heart's puzzle. She gave in to this feeling with all her might! – wishing that this perfect moment would never end. It was their very first kiss – a kiss, and a moment in time, that she would never forget.



Returning to the present...Sitting comfortably in his chair, Sam crunched contentedly on kettle corn, his eyes fixed on the dazzling Houston fireworks display. Violet, however, seemed absent in a world of her own, she just stared into the sky, lost in thought. Each burst of color and light ignited cheers and applause from the exhilarated crowd. Then, with a suddenly change in the kind of rockets being launched, an extra-loud and deafening barrage of rockets, erupted overhead! Instead of the expected brilliant display, these rockets filled the night with thunderous booms that seemed to shake the ground! The abrupt, intense noise shattered the moment, jolting Violet from her daydream and bringing her abruptly back to the present, and then there was silence. Gradually, a final cheer rose from the crowd – the show was over!

"Alright, let's get out of here," Sam announced, a note of urgency in his voice. With that, both he and Violet sprang to their feet, hastily folding their chairs. The once-packed crowd was beginning to disperse, a slow-moving tide of people, finding their way into the parking areas. As they hurried towards the exit, Sam turned to Violet with a grin, saying, "That was incredible, wasn't it?"

Violet, still adorned with her brightly lit headdress, replied with dreamy eyes, "You have no idea! – It was truly spectacular!" Thinking of her daydream she added, "Even better than I had hoped for." Her eyes held a trace of contentment. She had been able to relive one of the most happy moments in her life, and at the same time, conquered her reluctance to celebrate New Year's Eve.

Their plan was simple: escape the immediate crowds, walk fifteen minutes, then hail a ride-share back to the hotel. Given the number of people attending the event, they anticipated a big surge in ride-sharing demand. Fortunately, their wait was relatively short, and soon they were in route to their accommodations.

Back in her hotel room, Violet felt a growing concern about the safety of other events around the country that night. She turned on the television and began scanning the news channels, looking for any reports of terrorism. She felt a sense of relief as she confirmed the absence of any major incidents, at least between Texas and the east coast. With a long sigh, signaling closure for a long day, she prepared for bed.

As she slipped beneath the covers, her fingers found the familiar cool metal of John's necklace. Gently, she traced the Star of David pendant with her finger tip. "Thank you, John," she whispered softly, "I'll always love you – but I went out and played tonight – for the first time in a long time." She softly kissed the pendant, and then added, "By the way, I bought something tonight...an incredible light-up Indian headdress. If you saw it, I know you would be impressed with it." Then with a pleased smile, she drifted off to sleep.

Chapter 14

The Terrorists Make Their Move

Violet and Sam had agreed to meet in the hotel lobby, for the complimentary free breakfast, a leisurely start to their day. As Violet stepped into the bustling space, she spotted Sam already seated at a table, a cloud of steam rising from his coffee cup. A generous helping of food was piled on his plate, suggesting he had been in the lobby for at least a few minutes. He glanced up, his face breaking into a welcoming smile. With a silent gesture of his hand towards the empty chair opposite him, he invited Violet to join him.

It was just after 7:00 AM, and the breakfast area was abuzz with activity. Guests of all ages and multiple nationalities mingled, their conversations, creating a lively backdrop to the clinking of silverware. The morning was well underway, and guests were busy replenishing their energy stores, before embarking on their day's adventures.

While Sam was clearly a coffee enthusiast, Violet preferred the flavor of tea in the morning. She had brought a bottle of her favorite flavor from her room, a small indulgence that she cherished. Placing her bottle of tea on the table, she greeted Sam with a bright smile, "Good morning Sam!" she said. "You seem to have found plenty of food."

Sam chuckled, taking another sip of his coffee. "Good morning Violet," he replied. "And yes, there's plenty to choose from." He pointed out the buffet with a sweep of his hand, saying, "Looks like a good spread, doesn't it?"

As Violet scanned the various food options, she nodded in agreement, saying, "It certainly looks better than most, Cheng did good finding this place." With a renewed sense of purpose, she turned her attention to assembling her own breakfast, as she walked along the buffet and filled her plate.

After they finished their breakfasts, Violet and Sam left the lobby and headed back towards their rooms. Sam suggested, "We should leave right

away. I'm confident we can get to the church with plenty of time to spare, but we don't know for sure what the traffic will be like."

Violet nodded in agreement and said, "Sounds like a plan. I just need to grab something from my room."

Sam replied, "Alright – I'm ready to go, so I'll meet you at the ambulance."

Sam and Violet parted ways. Sam started walking through the parking lot towards the ambulance, and Violet went down the side walk, straight to her room. At a distance, Sam noticed a couple of men dressed in casual business attire, they were getting into their car right next to the ambulance. He glanced back over his shoulder, just in time to see Violet disappear into her room. As Sam got close to the ambulance, he reached into his pocket and pressed the button on his key fob, unlocking all the doors of the ambulance.

Sam climbed into the ambulance and just sat there patiently waiting, with the driver's door left wide open. Up to that moment everything seemed like a perfectly normal morning. Just then, one of the men from the car next to him approached Sam sitting there, and said with a foreign accent, "Sir, can I ask you a question?"

Sam braced himself, anticipating the inevitable questions about his ambulance. It was a common occurrence, a predictable curiosity that had become almost routine. "Sure, what's on your mind?" he replied with his voice steady and prepared to answer questions.

The man approached with his associate not far behind, their eyes meeting for a brief, tense moment before a chilling transformation took place. With a swift and coordinated motion, both men produced handguns, their weapons glinting menacing in the morning light. "Don't move – don't try anything!" The first man demanded with a heavy accent, his voice was abrupt with deadly seriousness. Sam was caught completely off guard and froze, his mind swirling to comprehend the sudden turn of events. The man's voice was laced with danger as he made his intentions clear, "We only want the ambulance. There are two others taking care of your partner."

If you don't cooperate, she's a dead woman!" Their ultimatum demanded immediate compliance.

Panic surged through Sam as he looked across the parking lot, witnessing the horrifying scene of two figures forcing their way into Violet's room. His gaze snapped back to the gunman, with a silent plea on his face.

Sam was quick to say, "I'll do whatever you want!" his voice trembling slightly, "Please, just don't hurt her!"

The gunman's response was cold and calculated, "Follow orders, and we'll make sure you live to see another day. Once we're out of town, we'll let you go." Then he asked, "Are all the ambulance doors unlocked?" Sam answered, "Yes." with a nod. The man turned to his accomplice, and ordered him to check the back door. The other man, with his gun discreetly tucked into his coat, moved around to the rear of the ambulance and pulled open the back door. With a silent nod, he confirmed the vehicle was accessible.

Violet had gone back to her room to get another bottle of tea to take with her, and to retrieve John's necklace that she had left on the bathroom vanity, a sentimental piece she kept close. She went to the vanity where she picked up the necklace, put it on over her head, then tucked it in beneath the collar and under her coat. A final glance in the mirror, a silent assessment of her appearance, was abruptly interrupted by the electronic click of the door lock being activated. A fleeting thought crossed Violet's mind – the maid, undoubtedly arriving early to service the room.

That assumption was shattered as two men, their attire consistent with the casual atmosphere of the hotel, burst into the room, their figures silhouetted against the doorway. Guns drawn, they moved with predatory efficiency, their eyes fixed on Violet. The first man, his accent thick and menacing, leveled his weapon at her. "Don't move! We just want the ambulance."

Totally surprised, Violet raised her hands in a gesture of surrender. "Take the ambulance...it's yours!" she replied, her voice steady despite the churning fear within. Then she realized that she had seen these men earlier

that morning in the hotel lobby, enjoying breakfast right alongside her and Sam.

The gunman's response was abrupt and chilling. "Your partner is with two of our guys right now! They've got guns on him. Do exactly as we say, or he's a dead man!" The threat was clear and the stakes were completely out of Violet's control!

The gunman outlined their plan to Violet with ruthless efficiency, "You're going to walk out to the ambulance, and get in the back. I'll be right behind you, and my gun will be in my coat pocket, aimed directly at your head! Any funny business, any sign of trouble, and you're both dead!...Understand?" His eyes held a cold, aggressive gleam. Then he added, "When we are safely out of town, we will let you go."

Violet was consumed with worry, her primary concern was Sam's safety, and she feared what her partner might be going through. She understood the stakes and replied along with a nod, "I understand."

"Let's go!" Commanded the gunman, with a tone that left no room for argument, and a gesture from the barrel of his gun. Together, they all walked out of the room and into the parking lot. As she crossed the parking lot, Both Violet's and Sam's eyes connected as if to silently say, "Stay safe – we'll get through this somehow." Their faces showed deep concern over the welfare of the other. They both realized that any attempt to prevent these men from taking the ambulance, was not worth dying over. For now, they were both content with playing along and doing exactly what they were told, with the hope of being released as promised.

One of the assailants, slid into the front passenger seat of the ambulance, his body language exuding aggressive confidence. With the gun still leveled at Sam, it was an unmistakable reminder of their precarious situation. "Close the door, right now!" The gunman ordered with a harsh tone in his voice. As Sam complied, the man continued, "I'll be navigating. You just drive and obey my orders." A simple command, but it carried the weight of a life-or-death ultimatum. Sam understood and nodded, his mind searching for a glimmer of hope.

Violet and two of the gunmen, entered the back of the ambulance. With brutal planned efficiency, Violet was forced onto the floor, her face pressed against the cold hard metal. The door slammed shut, isolating her from the world. A fourth accomplice slid behind the wheel of the car next to the ambulance, his role clear, to shadow the ambulance.

The ambulance pulled out of the hotel parking lot, and then merged west onto the interstate, its destination unknown. Both Violet and Sam clung to a wishful hope, that their assailants would do as they promised, and that they would be released unharmed.

As Violet lay on the ambulance floor, fearful that Sam would be hurt, she adhered to the gunman's chilling commands. However, a test of defiance ignited within her, as she risked a glance at her captors. As she looked up, her gaze fell upon a peculiar detail, a string of prayer beads wrapped around one man's wrist. The implications of this seemingly insignificant observation, sent a shiver down her spine. It dawned on her, that these weren't just typical bad guys, they were likely Muslim terrorists.

Why would Muslim terrorists want an ambulance? This question echoed in her mind. Then pieces of the puzzle began to fall into place. A bomb, concealed within the ambulance, was the only logical explanation. Panic began to gnaw at her, as she contemplated their potential target. The grand celebrations of New Year's Eve were over, and she couldn't recall any significant gatherings planned for New Year's Day. Then, a horrifying possibility struck her, the Christian Calvary Center. The New Year's Day morning service, scheduled to begin at nine o'clock, would draw a full house congregation.

A wave of dread washed over her, as she recalled Cheng's mention of the church's automatic gate, and how it would open for ambulances. Details of a potential impending attack remained shrouded in uncertainty, but the consequences could be catastrophic! The clock was ticking, and the time before this potential disaster could take place, was growing short. She had to find a way to warn someone, to stop this horrific plan before it was too late.

The abrupt exiting of the ambulance from the interstate, shattered Violet's train of thought. A cold, hard realization settled upon her, if these

were indeed Muslim terrorists, the likelihood of her and Sam surviving this ordeal was slim to none. It seemed unlikely that terrorists would be motivated to set them free, at least not alive.

After the ambulance veered off the interstate, it headed North on a desolate cross road. A few miles later, they were approaching the same solitary metal building where Carlos, the terrorist, had met with Cheng just a couple of nights before.

They pulled into the building's parking lot, then drove up to the gate that led into the fenced outdoor area. After blowing the horn, a moment later the gate automatically creaked open. At the same time, one of the metal bay doors of the building also began to open. The ambulance drove through the gate and a man clad in black body armor came walking out. He aided with directing the ambulance, as it backed into the building through the open bay door. Once inside, the man wearing body armor pushed an electric button to the right of the doorway, and the door automatically closed.

Once the ambulance motor was turned off, the gunmen in the back of the ambulance exited the vehicle, and with a hand gun openly pointed at Violet, the man said, "Get out and come with me!" As Violet climbed out of the ambulance she began assessing the situation, visually scanning the layout inside the building. Then abruptly, the gunman grabbed Violet and shoved her hard, and into a wall over next to a large table. Another gunman brought Sam over next to Violet. As the 2 gunmen kept their guns trained on Sam and Violet, one of them said, "You move, you die!"

Violet's scan continued to sweep across the room, taking in the chilling scene before her. A group of ten men, most of them wearing full body armor, were busy preparing for a terrorist assault. Each man was a walking arsenal, their tactical military grade body armor bulged with an array of weapons – multiple gun magazines, what looked like four deadly hand grenades apiece, a holstered handgun, and a large knife. In addition, each of the men had a long rifle, with some equipped with scopes.

Her eyes fell upon the worktable next to her, where the building plans for the Calvary Christian Center remained spread out in clear view, a damning piece of evidence. The same drawings previously reviewed by

Cheng and Carlos, now held imminent sinister implications. The pieces of the puzzle were falling into place, forming a terrifying picture of their intended target, and how the attack was to be carried out.

Violet leaned over towards Sam, her voice barely a whisper, she said, "They're going to attack the Calvary Christian Center." Her eyes were wide with fear, as she added, "They'll use the ambulance to get in, then attack and open fire on the congregation." This realization was horrific! But the evidence was irrefutable. Not only were their lives in imminent danger, but so were the lives of many thousands of other innocent people.

The two gunmen assigned to guard Sam and Violet, found their attention divided between their prisoners, and the activity unfolding around them. The anticipation of joining their comrades in the impending attack, was a potent mix of anxiety, and distraction.

Sam had noticed the drawings also, and whispered to Violet, "Fifteen thousand people will be there soon. Look over there," he indicated with a tilt of his head, directing toward a worktable on the opposite side of the room. On it was another suicide vest, a reminder of the tragedy that took place at the Alamo Center.

Violet whispered back to Sam, "They're not going to let us go, they plan to kill us."

Without saying a word, Sam knew what that meant, and with a sad nod, he agreed. Against what seemed like insurmountable odds, they were going to have to fight for their lives. It was either that, or die without a fight, and that would be unacceptable for Sam. He also felt compelled to protect Violet. Sam turned to Violet, looked her in the eyes then said with a sad and stressed face, "I'm sorry Violet," then he vowed, "I'll try my best to do what I can to get us out of here."

Closing his eyes for a brief moment, he gathered his strength, and said a silent prayer. Then, with explosive force, he launched himself at the nearest gunman, his fist connecting with the man's face with a powerful impact, knocking the gunman to the floor! Sam grabbed the arm of the second gunman, redirecting the man's aim and causing a shot to be fired into the floor. A powerful head-butt from Sam followed, sending the

gunman reeling! But in that split second of distraction, the first downed gunman managed to retaliate, firing his hand gun from the floor. A bullet tore through Sam's leg, entering one side and exiting the other.

Sam collapsed to the floor, as a wave of unbearable pain overwhelmed him. The bullet, tearing through his leg had effectively neutralized him. As he thrashed in agony on the floor, he helplessly watched as the gunman struggled to his feet, his weapon leveled at Violet. She raised her hands in a futile attempt at self-preservation, her voice desperate with anger, she yelled, "You said you were going to let us go!"

The gunman's response was chilling. "I lied!" he stated coldly, his finger tightening on the trigger. With the gunman standing well out of Violet's reach, fear gripped her as she braced herself for the inevitable.

In the chaos of the moment, a loud voice cut through the tension. "You Idiots!" The sharp reprimand caused the gunman to hesitate, his focus, nervously shifting towards the source of the interruption. A figure emerged from the shadows, another man also clad in full body armor – It was Carlos! He came storming across the room, and with a swift and powerful movement, he slapped the gunman on the back of the head, his anger obvious.

A stunned silence fell over the room, and all eyes turned towards Carlos yelling at the man, saying, "You moron idiots! We need their uniforms and you just put a hole in the pants!" His voice echoed through the cavernous space. The gunman cowered under Carlos's wrath, his demeanor shifting from arrogant to abject fear. It was clear that Carlos was the leader of the group, his words carrying the weight of unquestionable power.

Violet hurried to give assistance to Sam, while Carlos was busy berating the gunman. With experienced skill, she swiftly removed her belt and fashioned a makeshift tourniquet, then she synched it tight, applying pressure to Sam's bleeding wounds. Carlos shouted, "Just get their uniforms! What you do with them after that...I don't care – but no more holes in the uniforms!" Apparently, the terrorists were planning to use the EMT uniforms as part of their disguise. Turning toward the room full of

men, Carlos announced to the room, “We leave in thirty minutes! I want all of you ready and loaded in the ambulance in twenty-five!”

As Carlos began to walk away, one of the gunmen grabbed Violet by the arm and yanked her away from Sam. “Take off your jacket, now!” he yelled. Violet reluctantly began to take off her coat. When she unzipped her jacket, John’s necklace with the Star of David was clearly visible on top of her shirt. The gunman yelled out, “Jew girl!” Carlos paused and looked back. Another man seeing the necklace, also referred to Violet as Jew girl. Radical Islamic terrorists have a long-standing intolerance toward any other religions, and an especially strong hatred of anyone Jewish. So hearing they had a Jewish prisoner, this caught Carlos’s attention. For Violet, things just went from really bad, to a whole lot worse.

Carlos reacted, and aggressively returned, to face-off with Violet and her star of David necklace. Glaring at Violet and giving her a hateful look, he ordered one of the men to take her necklace. At first the man tried to remove her necklace by yanking on it several times, thinking it would just break, but it was much too strong. Finally, he lifted it off over her head and then handed the necklace to Carlos. Clinching the necklace inside his fist, Carlos smacked Violet hard across her face with his other hand, then he walked away. Violet was boiling inside, but somehow, she kept her cool.

Just then, one of the men yelled out, “He’s here!” Another man pushed the electric button that opened the massive bay door, and the door began its slow ascent, revealing the world beyond. The arrival of this new figure, diverted everyone’s attention away from Violet and Sam for a moment, as most of the men scrutinized the new arrival.

Once the door was high enough, a man on a high-powered street racer style motor cycle, roared into the building. The bike, a sleek menacing machine, was expertly maneuvered into the building by its rider, and then parked. The new arrival seemed to be of some significance. Violet watched closely as the rider removed their helmet, revealing the identity of this newcomer. Violet’s heart sank, as she recognized who it was – It was someone they thought they could trust, it was Cheng!...from the church. The same young man who had posed as a helpful ally at the Calvary Christian Center, had actually orchestrated their capture. This realization

was a bitter pill to swallow, she and Sam had been simply pawns in his elaborate scheme.

Cheng had meticulously planned every step, from obtaining spare keys to their hotel rooms, to infiltrating the church with his accomplices. A trusted insider, was actually a traitor in their midst. He had facilitated their desperate and dangerous situation. As Cheng approached the worktable next to Violet, he coldly ignored her, and showed no concern for Sam lying on the floor in pain. No longer a friend, he began to roll up the building plans on the table, his actions insensitive to the chaos surrounding him. Violet, unable to contain her anger and disbelief, spoke out. "Cheng, what about your friends at the church! How could you do such a thing?" Her voice trembled with a mix of outrage and despair.

Still trying his best to ignore Violet, he finally replied as he shoved the drawings into the plastic case, "All I care about is my mission."

Violet angrily asked, "What mission? What do you mean you have a mission?"

Realizing he had already said too much, Cheng turned to Violet and said, "Tough luck! Soon you will be dead, but I will still be with Dr. Stafford." Then he turned away, with his helmet under one arm and the building plans under the other, he walked away, leaving Violet and Sam to grapple with the grim reality of their situation.

Desperately trying to come up with a plan of action, Violet continued to scan the building to assess where everybody was located, and what weapons she might be able to gain access to. She noticed that Carlos was distracted on the far side of the room, engrossed with talking to somebody on the phone. She knelt down next to Sam and whispered, "I have a plan, it's crazy, but it's all I can think of – you stay down – I got this!"

Just then, one of the gunmen growing impatient, gave Violet a swift kick with his foot to get her attention, "Hey, give me your uniform, right now!" he demanded.

Sam saw Violet's face transform, into that crazy look she gets when she's pounding on the punching bags at the fire house. He thought, "Uh-

oh...This is it...Here it comes." Violet slowly stood back up, then surprisingly, she let her hair down and began to sway – swaying in a kind of sexy way. She gave a friendly inviting smile to the gunman that was closest to her. The gunman was confused at first, but he began to really enjoy what he was seeing. She gradually increased her sexually provocative behavior, as she slowly unzipped her pants. It became clear that Violet was engaged in a strip-tease show, and she was naturally good at it. At least part of her plan included distracting the bad guys with her good looks.

With her pants unzipped, and after an inviting wink followed by a seductive smile, she turned around and began to slowly slide her pants down, with cute wiggles as she bent way over reaching with her hands down to her ankles. With her skin-tight underwear in full view, her very sexy and attractive shape was hypnotizing the gunmen. By now several more of the men had spotted the action. They had come over to watch the show and to get a closer look. Violet's sexuality was irresistible to the guys, and she apparently knew how to put on an alluring performance. With her hands near her ankles, she managed to slip out of her pants while leaving her work boots on, but the men weren't watching her feet.

Violet turned towards them with a big captivating smile, intensifying her passion and she accelerated her sexually suggestive dance. As she tossed her pants into the air, she gave a little hop that ended with a well-endowed bounce of what was to come. She had closely surrounded herself with five men, and they were all smiling. They had been charmed and seduced, but there was much more to come. Next, she began to unbutton her shirt. Each button was slowly opened one-by-one. Starting at the top she worked her way down, continuously beckoning and flirting with the men, enticing them all the way. As more and more of her sheer bra was exposed, the more the men became fascinated, hoping for a glimpse of something extra. The gunman that had been holding his gun aimed at Violet, was more relaxed with his gun now lowered at his side. She winked at him and blew him a kiss. Continuing her siren call, just as Violet unbuttoned her last button, she flew open her shirt, and all the men gasped! – That was the moment – when things got crazy!

In an instant, there was an explosion within Violet, she spun around like a top and went airborne, and violently striking the man that had been holding the gun on her, with one of her signature roundhouse kicks. With a

full windup and striking him to the side of his head with all her might, still wearing her work boots for added impact – his head made a loud cracking sound, and he was bashed unconscious instantly. The crushing impact of Violet's powerful kick, sent him flying head-over-heels, and into a steel garbage can.

Her plan, was to use her charm and seduction, to lure a lot of the men in close where she could reach them quickly. Then, using the element of surprise – her ambush attack was now on! Violet's seemingly innocent and harmless appeal, hid an extreme danger, an imminent trap that the men didn't see coming!

As Violet returned to the ground after delivering her opening first kick, she possessed a combat knife in her hand. In the confusion, she had lifted the knife from one of the other men as she landed. Then, from a crouched position and with blistering speed, she shoved the knife upward into the man's groin. As another man reached in to grab her, she turned with the knife, and shoved it hard through his eye, penetrating deep into his brain. With what seemed like a single motion, Violet quickly pulled the knife out of the man's eye, turned back to the other man she had just stabbed in his groin, then thrust the knife hard, straight down into the top of his head, penetrating his skull all the way to the knife handle. Evidently, it's a really bad thing to lose your combat knife to Violet, especially in the middle of a fight!

Another man had managed to draw his hand gun, but just as he aimed it at Violet, she kicked his arm, causing him to fire a shot wide! The gunfire got the attention of Carlos, who up till now, had been preoccupied on his phone. Violet grabbed the guy's arm and leaned hard into him pushing him backwards. They continued to wrestle for control of the gun, causing the guy to randomly fire off several more rounds. While grappling for control of the gun, Violet managed to aim the gun at another man who was about to stab her! – The gun fired again, shooting him in the forehead, causing blood and brain-matter to blow out the backside of his head! After a couple of elbows to the man's face, Violet managed to twist the gun out of the guy's hand, dropping it to the floor. Now without his gun, he shoved Violet onto the work table, where she was able to reach out, and just barely pick up an electric drill with a long drill bit in it. Violet yanked the man's head pulling it close, squeezed the trigger on the drill spinning it up, and

then forced the drill bit in through the man's ear and deep into his skull! A moment later the man went limp, then fell to the floor.

In less than 25 seconds, Violet had either killed or critically damaged five of Carlos's gunmen! At the other end of the bay near Carlos, were five more gunmen, all of them dressed in full body armor. They were either unsure as to what to do, or afraid to take action. They looked over at Carlos for direction. Carlos angrily screamed, "Kill her! All of you, Kill her now!" he commanded, wildly waving his arms.

Just as this new group of terrorists made their move towards Violet, she leaped across the floor, did a shoulder roll, and came up on one knee with a handgun that had been dropped. From her crouched position, it was just like shooting steel at the gun range, something she had done so many times before. Only this time, the targets were real threats, and moving! With a single wave of her arm, firing round after round, each round found its target, head shot after head shot! Although a couple of the men managed to get a shot off at Violet, they missed, but Violet didn't miss. In just seconds, five more men lay dying on the floor, and Violet had her gun pointed at Carlos. In almost no time, Violet had completely wiped out his entire small army.

His face said it all...Carlos was in utter disbelief! How could a single woman, destroy his entire heavily armed terrorist force. They had been completely wiped out, in less than a minute! His well-funded terrorist mission against the Calvary Christian Center, was now impossible, and a complete failure. He was in charge of this assignment, so he knew that he would be blamed. In his radical Islamic terrorist mind, this woman, had shamed him to the infinite degree.

"It's just you and me Carlos!" Violet said as she walked towards him. Stopping a short distance away she added, "I want my necklace back... Now!" She gestured with her hand to the floor filled with dead and dying men, then said, "As you can see, your body armor won't be able to save you from me."

Carlos thought for a moment, and then answered, "It's in my pocket." Keeping his eyes glued on Violet, he slowly reached into his pocket and pulled out the necklace. He held it up for Violet to see, dangling it with a

sinister sneer on his face, as if teasing her. Then surprisingly, he put it on over his head, then he removed his knife out of its sheath. Holding the knife as if he was ready for a fight, he yelled with a hateful insane look on his face, “Come get it – Jew girl!” gesturing with his hand to come on. It seemed as though he would rather die, than give the necklace back.

Violet had no reservations about ending Carlos, Texas vengeance was about to be served. She simply said, “Okay, have it your way.” that’s when she pulled her trigger. – But the gun didn’t fire...it was jammed! In an instant, Violet was now on the defensive, and without a working gun. She knew from her training that not only could Carlos’s body armor stop a bullet, it would also dissipate the impact of her kicks and punches. She had to stay focused on attacking his head, and gaps around the armor.

Carlos instantly recognized Violet’s gun jamming, then with a big grin on his face, he immediately rushed at her, slashing with his knife. Violet quickly backed off, stumbling over the bodies littered on the floor. But she stayed close enough to Carlos to strike back, and hopefully prevent him from picking up one of the many guns on the floor. Violet managed to block or deflect several of Carlos’s attacks, but was only able to respond with just minor retaliatory strikes of her own. She quickly recognized that Carlos had significant skill with using a blade as a weapon, and that he was still very dangerous. His lunges and slicing swings at her, had Violet backed up all the way to the ambulance.

Violet spotted Carlos repeatedly glancing at a gun on the floor, and she thought that if he were to try to pick it up, it could be an opportunity for her to go on the offensive. He launched another series of wild slices at Violet, then immediately made his move to pick up the gun. Now with the gun in his hand, as he turned back towards Violet he was met with a very hard kick, straight into his face! Violet’s kick sent him flying backwards landing him flat on his back, where on impact, he dropped both the gun and the knife. He was dazed and struggling to get up.

Carlos, now trying to get away from Violet, and still wearing John’s necklace, she jumped on his back and grabbed onto the necklace. Violet wrapped the necklace around her hand, and then pulled it tight, an attempt to choke him out! With Violet riding on his back, Carlos managed to get to his feet. Desperate to free himself from Violet’s choke hold, he ran

backwards, slamming Violet into the wall next to the overhead door, triggering the switch to open the door. The impact against the wall hit hard against Violet's head, and also knocked the breath out of her, but she managed to maintain her choke hold. Carlos stumbled forward, and then ran backwards again, crashing Violet into the rising door this time. Violet took another hard blow, but she didn't relinquish her grip on the necklace.

Carlos was beginning to succumb to Violet's choke hold, with the Star of David pendent in full view, and clearly pressed against the front of Carlos's throat! It was ironic, after enduring a lifetime of propaganda promoting Jewish hatred, a Jewish symbol, was about to bring an end to Carlos! He was leaning backwards against the door as the door kept rising, frantic to get his fingers under the necklace. Just then, Violet spotted an opportunity. She saw a metal hook built into the door rising behind her. She pulled with all her might, slipping the back of the necklace over the hook. Once again, she had gained a considerable advantage – letting the rising door and hook, finish choking Carlos out!

Carlos tried desperately to slide his fingers between the necklace and his throat, but the necklace was already very tight. With the hook now in control of the necklace, and Violet sandwiched between the door and Carlos, she reached around to the front side of Carlos's body armor, pulling a grenade out of a front pocket. Then she pulled out a second grenade. The door's progress slowed and almost stopped, as it struggled to continue going up with the added weight of both Carlos and Violet hanging from it. Carlos's toes were just slightly touching the floor. Finally, Carlos had managed to just barely get his fingers between the necklace and his throat, but he couldn't make any headway against the choke hold of the necklace. It was a kind-of, choke out stalemate.

Carlos felt Violet remove the grenades, but he had to stay focused on the necklace. One-by-one, Violet pulled the pins on the grenades and quickly shoved them down the backside of Carlos's body armor. Carlos knew exactly what she was doing, and he was able to feel the grenades pressed against his back. He undoubtedly knew what was about to happen!

Violet yelled loud into Carlos's ear, "Remember the Alamo Center!" Then she jumped down and calmly walked away, her shirt still unbuttoned,

with no pants and wearing her work boots – she didn't even bother to look back as she tossed aside the grenade pins.

There was nothing Carlos could do as the door continued to rise. Without Violet's weight hanging on the door, the door had sped back up, and John's titanium necklace wasn't going to break. – It was a divine necklace that was meant to be. So many years later, long after their wedding, this necklace would save Violet – The Love of John's life, and end the life of an extreme terrorist that threatened her. In his final desperate act of hatred, Carlos yelled out at Violet with a wheezing voice, "Jew Girl!" intended to be an insult. – But on this day, this Christian girl accepted these words with pride, and just smiled. A moment later the first grenade exploded! – In an instant, Carlos went limp, with his wide open eyes, a blank stare into oblivion. The body armor flexed, but contained the blast force and shrapnel within. Another moment later, the second grenade exploded! Just like the first grenade, the body armor prevented the blast from expanding beyond the armor. However, much of the force of the second blast was directed downward, and blew Carlos completely in half! His pelvis with his legs attached were blasted to the floor, sent splashing into a pool of blood! Carlos was forever gone from this world, and would never get a chance to kill innocent people again.

Chapter 15

The Rundown!

With Carlos out of the picture, Violet's attention was turned to Sam who was still laying on the floor. She quickly retrieved a medical kit from the ambulance, and returned to his side. As she began to take a closer look and assess the extent of his injuries, Sam's grip tightened on her arm, a-kind-of one handed hug, as if to let her know he was proud of her. "Thank you Violet," he finally managed to say, his voice laced with pain. Their ordeal seemed to be over, and getting Sam to a hospital was now the highest priority.

Violet nodded with a reassuring smile, then replied, "You're going to be ok – the bleeding seems to have stopped." Looking around, she noticed her pants on the floor, partially underneath a dead terrorist – her pants were covered in blood. With a grim look she said, "Oh man! My pants are ruined. I wonder where my coat is..."

With all that had just transpired, Sam thinking about Violet fretting over her pants, made him laugh. He replied, "I think your coat is on the table next to us." His voice was weak but steady.

Violet stood up and found her coat on the table. As she gingerly picked up her blood spattered coat, using just her finger tips, she said, "Oh no – yuck! My coat is also ruined." From pockets in her coat, she carefully removed her phone and sunglasses, trying her best to not touch any of the gross stuff. Then she asked her phone, "Hey Siri – what address am I at." The artificial voice responded promptly, 1023 Prairie Road, Houston, Texas." Now armed with an address she could call for help.

Violet dialed 911, then said to Sam, "I'm calling 911 first so we can get an ambulance on the way. Then I have one more call to make."

Sam replied, "Great! Get me out of here."

With the 911 operator on the phone, Violet explained her situation, saying, "Listen close, because I can't stay on the phone, and I know this

call is recorded anyway. My name is Violet Wheeler, and I'm an EMT. I'm located at ten twenty-three Prairie Road in Houston Texas. This is a terrorist situation! Send all the police you can muster." Violet looked around the room, then said, "I'm in a room surrounded by a whole bunch of dead terrorists." She looked up at Carlos then added with a chuckle, "And one terrorist hanging from an overhead door." She paused for a moment looking over at Sam with a mischievous smile, "By the looks of things, I only need one ambulance. My partner has been shot in the leg and he has a perforated wound." Violet was anxiously pacing back-and-forth as she spoke to the 911 operator. She added, "At the moment, all the terrorists seem to have been terminated. Tell all your responders to get here as fast as they can!"

Violet looked over at Sam and said, "They're on their way. Once the police get here, we can be sure no other terrorists will show-up." Sam gave her a nod. As she continued with her pacing, Violet turned her attention back to her phone, "Hey Siri, call Duane Scott."

After a few seconds, Duane Scott answered, "Hello. Duane Scott here, FBI."

Violet replied, "Hi Duane – my name is Violet Wheeler – You came and interviewed me at my firehouse a couple of days ago. You told me to call you if I had any more information on Carlos Mendoza."

Duane asked, "Well, what have you got?"

Violet said, "How can I put this..." She sighed then continued, "I'm in a warehouse just outside of Houston. Carlos is here too, only he's dead now, along with about 10 of his fellow terrorists." Violet looked over at Sam with an unsure facial expression while shrugging her shoulders. She wondered how Duane was going to take what she just told him, because it sounded so extreme.

After a pause, Duane responded, "What did you say?"

Violet replied, "I'll make this as simple as I can – I'm in a building – with a whole bunch of dead terrorists. I know, it sounds crazy, but you should get here as fast as you can! All of this just happened!"

Waving his hand, Duane urgently signaled to a group of other agents in the room with him, to come close so they could listen in on his conversation. Sounding puzzled he responded, "I just put you on speaker phone – where are you?"

Violet answered, "The address I'm at is ten twenty-three Prairie Road, I think somewhere on the west side of Houston Texas, and I'm in a metal warehouse. Duane wrote the address down on a piece of paper, and said to the agent next to him, "Look it up."

Duane disclosed to Violet, "I'm at the Houston Executive Airport with my team. We've been in the Houston area since yesterday chasing down terrorist chatter."

Violet replied, "Well, I think I found your chatter, only they won't be chattering anymore."

Duane asked, "What would you be doing in a room with a whole bunch of dead terrorists?"

Violet answered, "They kidnapped my partner and me, and brought us to this warehouse." After hesitating for a moment she added, "Well, one thing led to another, so now they're all dead, including Carlos." Violet recognized that her story sounded incredibly far-fetched, and she just hoped that Duane would believe her.

Using his phone, an agent showed a map to Duane locating where Violet was, then with a hand signal, Duane signaled his team that they were moving out. Duane asked, "What did you mean by, one thing led to another – what happened?"

Violet didn't want to go into detail over the phone, so she simply answered, "Don't worry, they were all very people." Then she added, "On the positive side, you won't have to put any of them on trial. Just get here fast, I've already called 911 so the cops should be getting here soon."

As he opened a door exiting an airport hanger's office, Duane replied, "We'll be there in about 15 minutes." Then he hung up. Duane and his team

ran out of the hanger that they were in, and toward a waiting FBI helicopter that was just spinning up its rotor. He and his team quickly got on board, and Duane said to everyone, "I'll fill you in once we get airborne."

Violet turned off her phone and knelt down next to Sam. Still on the floor, Sam was now sitting upright with his back against the wall. Trying to look on the positive side, Violet said, "We're still alive, and we stopped all the bad guys – what more could we ask for? With a smile and a deep sigh of relief, her tensions ebbed away. All they had to do now, was sit calmly and wait for help to arrive.

A moment later, Sam and Violet heard the approach of footsteps. Violet smiled at Sam, impressed with how quickly the police had arrived, and just as she stood up – she was just in time to take a flying kick to the chest, sending her airborne against the back door of the ambulance – it was Cheng!

Both Sam and Violet had completely forgotten about Cheng, who had disappeared into an office shortly after he arrived. Violet was hurt with the wind knocked out of her, and she was dazed and unable to get up off the floor. Cheng saw Violet's condition, and hurriedly picked up a knife from the floor to finish her off. With one knee on her back, Cheng raised the knife, set to plunge it into her. It was at that moment, when someone grabbed Cheng's wrist – it was Sam! Somehow, Sam had fought through the pain of his bullet wound to rescue Violet. Sam gripped Cheng's wrist with one hand, and wrapped his other arm around Cheng's neck, lifting him off of Violet. Sam said to Cheng, "Not going to happen! You're in trouble now Cheng."

As Sam began to tighten his choke hold around Cheng's neck, Cheng dropped the knife so he could use both hands to try to break free. Kicking several times at Sam's wounded leg, Cheng began to wiggle loose. Though in a lot of pain, Sam was still much stronger than Cheng. Sam lifted Cheng over his head, and then threw him across the room against the edge of a work table. Sam stood there, standing guard between Violet and Cheng. Shaking his head and finger, Sam defiantly said, "I'm not going to let you hurt my partner." Trying to discourage Chang and protect Violet, Sam added, "The cops are on their way and will be here any minute. You should rim away while you can."

Visibly shaken, Cheng was slow to get up. just then, the sound of approaching sirens could be heard in the distance, and Cheng went from attack mode, to escape mode. The table next to Cheng still had a suicide vest on top of it. He snatched the vest off the table and moved toward Sam. Holding the detonator and vest in front of him like a shield, Cheng yelled, “Back away or I’ll detonate it!” Sam began backing off, eventually giving Cheng clear access to the back of the ambulance. With the back doors already open, he tossed the vest into the ambulance, and then quickly closed the doors. Cheng ran and jumped into the cab of the ambulance. Sam tried to give chase, but his leg was in too much pain to move fast. The ambulance started, and with Cheng at the wheel, he sped out of the warehouse with Sam limping behind.

The gate had never been closed after Cheng had arrived earlier, so Cheng was able to make a speedy and clean get away. After Cheng had driven through the gate, he found the button for the ambulance’s emergency lights. With the flashing lights of the ambulance turned on, he sped back towards the interstate highway. The ambulance and its flashing lights would be Cheng’s ticket to run the police gauntlet.

Sam watched Cheng drive away, and then limped back inside the warehouse just as Violet was getting to her feet.

“Violet, are you alright?” Sam asked.

Still a bit sluggish, and feeling the backside of her head with her hand, Violet replied, “Yeah – Yeah, I’m okay – just a headache.” Then she asked, “Where is Cheng – where is the ambulance?”

Sam answered, “He heard the sirens from the police cars coming, so he got out of here as fast as he could. But he grabbed the suicide vest from the table, and threw it into the back of the ambulance onto the floor. Then he took the ambulance – he’s gone.”

With a terrified expression on Violet's face, she said, “Oh no! – He’s going to use that suicide vest to kill people!” Violet was frantic to do something to stop Cheng, as the sirens were getting closer. That’s when she spotted Cheng’s motorcycle with the keys still in it, which gave her an

idea. “Sam, I’ve got to stop him. I can’t let that vest get away, people will die!”

Without a helmet, she quickly put on Cheng’s motorcycle jacket and gloves that he left behind on his motorcycle. All of the dead terrorists had long rifles, and some of them had scopes. Violet swiftly picked up a gun with a scope and an extra magazine – then she put her head through the gun’s shoulder strap so that the gun was positioned on her back.

As Violet climbed onto the motorcycle and fired it up, Sam limped over to her and pleaded, “Violet, let this one go – let the police get him – you’ve done so much already!”

Putting on her sunglasses, she replied, “I can’t take that chance, there’s way too much at stake – I’ve got to try to stop him myself, when the cops get here – tell them about Cheng and that I’m after him. – thank you, for saving me again Sam – I got this!” With a twist of the throttle, she smoked her rear tire and peeled out of the building, and then she passed through the open gate, just as the first police car arrived.

Cheng’s motorcycle was exceptionally fast, and as she got onto the open road, she accelerated to a very high speed heading toward the interstate. Violet could see a whole line of flashing police cars coming toward her in the distance. She knew that she would not be able to outrun their radios, and it was going to be tough to get past them all, so she began looking for an escape route.

As far as the police knew, she was a suspect trying to escape. Unfortunately, Cheng had a big head start on her. To catch up to Cheng, she was going to have to push the speed of the motorcycle, to its limits. At the same time, Violet was in no-way dressed for a motor cycle ride, she was without a helmet, and still with no pants. The chill of the morning air was sharp and intense, and the stinging cold of her pursuit would be numbing. Traveling at dangerous speeds, she also realized it was possible that the police might even use deadly force, to stop her!

Violet had easily sped past the first few police cars, but then she spotted two police cars ahead of her, positioning their cars to block the road. She also noticed a dirt road just beyond the roadblock that was

heading east, and also parallel to the interstate. On each side of the road was a sizable dry and deep drainage swale, and the only way past the roadblock was to run off the road through the swale. Violet was traveling at high speed, and closing on the roadblock fast. The police officers had just positioned themselves, but did not have time to get out of their cars, so they braced for impact.



At the last second, Violet drove off the road to the right, and down through the swale. As she passed by the roadblock she saw yet another police cruiser approaching. Turning the motorcycle sharp to the left she was able to use the slope of the swale like a ramp, launcher herself high into the air, and over top the approaching police cruiser. She skipped her tires on the roof of the cruiser, and when she came back down to the ground, she slammed on her brakes and slid sideways, lining the motorcycle up with the dirt road. Then, with another burst of speed and a rooster tail of dirt behind her, she launched herself

again, rocketing down the dirt road that cut through the farmland and parallel with the interstate. About a half mile off to the right and far ahead of her, she could see the flashing lights of the ambulance heading east on the interstate.

Cheng seemed to be heading back towards Houston, which was also in the same direction of the Calvary Christian Center. It dawned on Violet, that if he wanted to escape, he would have probably turned west on the interstate, traveling away from Houston. She remembered what Cheng said, "All I care about is my mission." His mission, at that time, was to facilitate an attack on the Calvary Christian Center, and with Carlos out of the picture, it seemed probable that he was going to personally carry out the mission.

In Violet's mirror she spotted a police car giving chase. The rough terrain of the dirt road limited her speed, while the police car was pressuring her from behind, but she stayed focused on finding an on-ramp to the interstate. As she approached Houston's urban sprawl, she could see that the dirt road she was on was ending, but it intersected with another paved crossroad. She thought...that there was a good chance that this crossroad also intersected with the interstate. She decided to turn onto the crossroad, and speed south toward the interstate.

As she approached the crossroad, she braked hard, power-sliding so that her motorcycle rotated, lining up the motorcycle so that she was aimed toward the interstate. As she slid onto the paved street, she accelerated so rapidly, that the front tire of the motorcycle lifted off the ground, each time she shifted gears! Violet was putting substantial distance between her and the police car in pursuit, focusing only on what was ahead of her. She had to weave around several cars at dangerously high speed, and as she approached the interstate, she could see that the interstate crossed above the road she was on. Luckily, there was also an on-ramp that she could take toward Houston.

Turning sharp toward the on-ramp, she leaned the motorcycle heavy into the turn, cutting off an oncoming car that narrowly missed her. Now on I-10, Violet accelerated to over 140 miles per hour. Fortunately, it was early on Sunday, the day after the city's late night celebration of the New Year, and there was not much traffic out yet. The sound of the motorcycle's engine was singing as she stayed low on the bike, surgically weaving through the traffic heading into the city, passing vehicles like they were standing still. Ahead of her, in the distance, she was catching glimpses of the flashing lights from the ambulance she was pursuing, but she still had a lot of distance to close in order to catch up.

Finally, the Calvary Christian Center came into Violet's view on the North side of the interstate. At the same time she could see the off-ramp to the road that would lead to the church, and the ambulance was nowhere in view. Violet assumed that the ambulance had by now left the interstate, and was probably already approaching the church.

In the downtown area of the city, the interstate is elevated with off-ramps dropping down to street level. Violet decided that if she continued to

follow the ambulance to the church, she would not get there in time to intercept. She had to do something drastic!

Pulling onto the left shoulder of the east bound lanes, Violet slammed on her brakes and came to a smoking stop!. Jumping off the motorcycle, she dropped it to the ground, and then scrambled over the concrete divider between traffic lanes. Now facing west bound traffic, Violet ran out into oncoming traffic, crossing through 6 lanes to get to the north side of the interstate. Cars were slamming on their brakes with several just barely missing her.

Violet had made her way to the north side of the interstate, next to a concrete wall, where she had a good view looking down on the church's parking lots, including the gated entrance, where the ambulance was scheduled to report. Luckily, Cheng was just pulling up to the gate with the ambulance, now with the emergency lights off, and she knew by its markings, it was definitely her ambulance.

She had arrived just in time. But, the back side of the ambulance was facing Violet, which meant that she did not have a view of Cheng. From here, up high along the interstate, was going to be her last chance to stop Cheng, and spare the church.

Tossing the gloves she was wearing to the ground, Violet took the rifle she had brought, and cocked it, chambering a round into the firing chamber, and then she took aim. Looking through the scope, she said to herself, "I sure hope this scope has been calibrated." She fired a first shot! It hit the back of the ambulance, but just barely. It hit near the top of the ambulance and far to the right of her aim. "Oh no!" She cried out. She recognized that the scope was never calibrated to the gun, a standard procedure for setting up any new rifle, resulting with the gun's aim being far off from the crosshairs of the scope. Stopping Cheng with this gun just got a whole lot more difficult.

"Aim low and to the left." She said to herself. Drawing on her experience, she was going to have to estimate the aim of the gun. She fired another shot, and then another. Violet continued to fire round-after-round. She was working a pattern, trying to target the suicide vest in the back of the ambulance, shooting through the back doors.

Meanwhile, Cheng heard the bullets hitting the ambulance. He couldn't see Violet, but knew something was up, and he began to panic. In an attempt to get the attention of security, he leaned on the horn and blew it several times. Just then the gate began to open, rolling on a rail off to the right.

Violet could see the gate opening, just as she emptied the gun's magazine. Time was running out for Violet, and she knew it. She quickly inserted a second and last magazine into the gun, then she resumed firing while the gate continued to slowly open. After many more shots, she estimated she was almost out of ammunition, when the ambulance began to proceed through the gate.

Violet paused for a moment, and thought about what she was doing. She was puzzled, because her shooting pattern wasn't working. She thought about the ride getting here from the warehouse. She remembered that Sam said that Cheng tossed the vest into the back, onto the floor. On the way here, the ambulance likely took several high speed left hand turns. Perhaps, she thought, the vest had slid during these turns, and was on the floor along the far right side of the ambulance.

With the ambulance pulling forward, and already through the gate, Violet took aim knowing she was almost out of time and ammo – these last few shots would be it. Targeting a new area, she fired a shot – nothing. She took a deep breath, then fired another shot – This time, in an instant, there was a huge explosion blowing the ambulance apart! Another massive secondary explosion followed, when the gas tank was ripped open, and ignited. A mushroom shaped fire ball over 200 feet high burned into the sky! – Finally, a bullet had found its target. The radiant heat from the fire ball was so intense, it forced Violet to quickly take cover behind the concrete wall.



With a big sigh of relief, Violet sat down and leaned against the wall – it was over – all the threats were terminated. She was certain that the explosion would immediately initiate the church to lock-down – all the good people were safe. With a vengeful smile, Violet said aloud, “Cheng, you picked a bad day to be a traitor – you can kiss your mission goodbye!”

It wasn't long before Violet heard the siren of a police car approaching. She said to herself, “Violet, time to assume the position.” She tossed the gun a good distance away from her, then stretched out face down on the road with her legs and arms spread wide. She wanted to make sure that she signaled to the police, that she was not a threat, while waiting for the police to arrive and arrest her – plus, it felt good just laying there – still just wearing a coat with no pants and her work boots, but she was done. Violet had wiped out an entire terror cell, and saved the lives of thousands of innocent people. She was a hero! Something she was going to have to explain to the police somehow. But for now – it felt good just resting – even on a cold road.

Chapter 16

The FBI Takes Charge

The interstate, normally a bustling artery through Houston, was now a macabre cluster of flashing lights and paralyzed traffic. Amidst the chaos, Violet found herself adorned with handcuffs, and wearing a blanket around her waist. Her world had been turned upside-down, but she was safe and sound, and Sam had also likely been rescued. As she stood beside a police cruiser, she began to recount the extraordinary events that had transpired that morning. A captive audience of uniformed officers listened intently. The officer's faces, showing a mixture of fascination and skepticism, listened with a blend of awe and disbelief.

Meanwhile, back at the warehouse on Prairie Road, a storm of activity was brewing. News of what had taken place there, had swept through Houston's Police and Fire Departments like wildfire. A formidable contingent of officers had already descended upon the warehouse, accompanied by specialized SWAT and forensic teams, with more detectives in route. In addition, Duane Scott and his FBI team had also arrived in their helicopter. The results of what happened there was evident, but how it happened was still a mystery.

In the shadow of the Alamo Center bombing, law enforcement agencies across Texas had been on high alert, extra sensitive to potential threats. Consequently, Violet's seemingly fantastical account was granted a degree of credibility, which might otherwise have been dismissed as the ravings of a distraught woman.

Attempting to reason with the officers, Violet began again, saying, "Listen carefully everyone. I want you to think about what I'm saying. That ambulance down there in that parking lot...was blown to smithereens!" Her voice was steady, and with her eyes fixed on the faces of the officers as she explained, "It's not because I hit the gas tank with a bullet – because a bullet hitting a gas tank would not explode like that." Some of the officers nodded with agreement as she continued, "The ambulance had a suicide vest inside, a vest that detonated when I put a bullet into it. Essentially, the vest was a bomb!" What Violet was saying was making sense. Gradually,

the officers began to think, that perhaps, Violet's story may have some credibility to it. Then she added, "That bomb was put into the ambulance at a warehouse on Prairie Road, where I was being held captive." Given the rapid and chaotic unfolding of events that morning, the officers on the interstate, were largely in the dark about the catastrophe at the Prairie Road warehouse.

Just as the officers were about to place Violet in a squad car, a senior officer approached the group. His authoritative presence immediately commanded everyone's attention. He announced, "We have orders to transport Violet Wheeler to 1023 Prairie Road, that's in west Houston," his voice carrying a tone of finality. The orders gave credibility to Violet's story, and the officers exchanged puzzled glances. The senior officer, anticipating their questions, elaborated, "She is to remain securely handcuffed, with her feet additionally restrained with flex cuffs. She is to be placed between two officers in the backseat of a squad car. Furthermore, I want another squad car with two officers, to follow closely behind as an escort. Until we receive further instructions, she is to be considered a high-risk suspect." A brief pause followed, and then he added, "There's a mobile command center already established at this address on Prairie Road. Your objective is to take her to the command center."

It was very unusual for the police to transport a suspect, to anywhere other than to the holding facility at a police station. Clearly, someone of considerable influence had intervened, to have Violet transported back to the Prairie Road warehouse.

On the way to the warehouse, Violet began to worry about Sam, and said to the other officers, "There's a warehouse at that address we're heading to. I left my partner there, another EMT, and he had a perforated gunshot wound in his leg. Do any of you know if he's been taken to the hospital?" Nobody in the police car knew anything specifically about Sam. But one officer replied, "We don't know for sure why we are taking you to Prairie Road, we're just following orders." Then he added, "What I do know, is that I heard on the radio that there are a lot of officers already there – and apparently a mobile command center too. Something really big must have happened there."

As they approached the warehouse, they could see a news helicopter circling overhead, and the road leading to the building had been transformed into a staging ground. Along the sides of the road, were all types of emergency response personnel and their vehicles. Collectively, they formed a kaleidoscope of flashing lights. Some of the police on site had set up a road block to isolate the warehouse from any traffic, and all civilian cars and news media were being turned around.

The officer driving the police car excitedly said, "Wow! Something really big, did happen here." The two officers sitting next to Violet gave her a funny look, as if to say, her story might be true, and here we are sitting here next to a potentially, very dangerous woman. Violet just shrugged her shoulders and smiled. Only the police car with Violet inside, was permitted to proceed past the roadblock to the warehouse.

After Violet's 911 call, it didn't take long for the warehouse to be swarming with police personnel, and the FBI too. Already in the building's parking lot, along with numerous police cruisers were large support vehicles, the Houston Police Bomb Squad, Houston's SWAT team vehicle, and the mobile police command center. In an open field adjacent to the building, sat an FBI helicopter. The entire area was alive with people on the move.

With Violet still restrained wearing cuffs, she was escorted to the command center by the officers she was traveling with. Just as they were about to enter the command center, FBI special agent Duane Scott came walking out, flanked by a couple of other FBI agents.

Surprised to see Violet so soon, with a big smile Duane jokingly said, "Hey Violet, I'm glad you could make it!"

Violet replied, "Well Duane, I thought it would be nice to come here, and we could all hang-out together for a while. As you can see, I'm ready to do cartwheels."

Duane showed his identification to the officers escorting Violet, and said, "I'm FBI special agent Duane Scott – Violet is one of us – one of the good guys. You can remove these handcuffs. I'll take charge of her from here." The officers were reluctant to release her, so Duane added, "I'm the

one who directed her to be brought here, that's why you're here, to bring her here to me." The officers shared glances with each other, and then with a nod, they relented and freed Violet. Duane thanked the officers as they walked back to their squad car.

Violet was quick to ask, "Where is my partner, Samuel Harris. Has he been taken to a hospital?"

"Yes he has," Duane answered, "Sam is ok, and he has been taken to the Houston Healthcare Center, about a 20 minute drive from here. He's in good hands." Then he added, "But before he left, he gave me a quick rundown on everything that happened here, including your fancy dance, that got things moving. He also told me about Cheng and the Calvary Christian Center."

Violet was a little embarrassed about Duane's dance comment, but relieved and replied, "Good, I've been worried about him."

Duane continued, "I don't understand how you did it, but somehow, you single handedly took on an entire heavily armed terror cell." With a serious and profound look on his face, he reached out to shake Violet's hand. "Violet, I think you saved thousands of lives here today – Thank-you – Thank you so very much, you're a hero!"

Violet humbly replied with a smile, "I think god was looking out for his children today."

"That's for sure," agreed Duane.

After pausing for a moment to let his complement to Violet sink in, Duane didn't waste any more time with pleasantries. He turned to the other FBI agents and said, "Sara, Henry – I need for you two to wait right here. I've got to go talk with Violet in private." Turning to Violet, Duane was now serious and back to business, "Violet, please come with me, we've got to talk." Duane hurried Violet off toward a secluded corner of the parking lot, where they could talk in private.

As they walked, Duane glanced at Violet, and the blanket wrapped around her waist and legs, and he asked, "What happened to your pants?"

Violet replied, “The terrorists took them from me. I saw them inside earlier when I was tending to Sam, and – well – my pants are covered in blood.”

With a sense of protectiveness, Duane stopped and yelled back to his fellow agents, waving with his hand to come, “Sara! Just Sara, come here.” Once Sara got there Duane issued his orders, “Sara, I need for you to find Violet a pair of pants. I don’t care what it takes, but she needs a pair of pants – fast!”

Sara asked Violet, “What size do you wear?” Violet glanced over at Duane, then went over to Sara, and discretely whispered her pants size into her ear. Violet was too modest to say her pants size in front of Duane. Sara smiled and gave Duane a nod then remarked, “I’m on it Sir.” As Sara hurried away Duane and Violet continued walking toward the corner of the parking lot.

Violet commented, “Thank you Duane, I appreciate that.” There was a brief moment of levity with her modesty, amid the seriousness of the situation that caught Duane off guard. He chuckled then remarked, “So, you don’t have a problem with wiping out an entire terror cell, but you’re shy about divulging your pants size.” Both of them laughed a little.

Once they stopped walking, Duane turned to Violet, saying, “Violet, I’ve got a problem.” She listened close as he continued, “Actually, we both have a problem. What happened here at this warehouse this morning, and the explosion at the Calvary Christian Center, are going to make big news! – Not just here in America, but all over the world. It’s going to be a very big deal! The FBI is already in charge of this investigation, with the added help of the Houston police.” Duane paused for a moment, trying to find the right words to say. Then he added, “If it comes out that Violet Wheeler wiped out 11 terrorists, every bad guy in the world is going to know who you are, find out where you live, and they will likely try to take revenge against you – and possibly, anyone else that is close to you.”

Violet interrupted, “Well Duane, it’s not like I’m keeping score, but if you count the guy that I blew-up at the church, I think that makes 12 terrorists.”

“Okay!” Duane replied with a chuckle, “12 terrorists – What I’m getting at, if you worked for me at the FBI, I could report you as an undercover agent, and we could keep your identity a secret.”

Then Duane revealed, “Since I talked to you at the firehouse, I have had a long conversation with Colonel Robinson, your former direct supervisor at Ramstein Air Base. He told me all about your so called – special talents.” Duane paused for a moment with a smile, then continued, “Violet, those are exactly the kind of special talents I need on my team.”

Violet replied with an inquisitive raised eyebrow, “Are you offering me a job?”

“Yes I am.” Duane precisely answered, then he added, “I hunt terrorists, that’s all my team does. Hopefully, we can stop them before they act. Today you save the lives of thousands of people, because you stopped the terrorists from being able to carry out their terror plots. You didn’t just save lives, think of the heartbreak you spared all their families.”

Violet paused to consider what Duane was saying. It’s possible that joining Duane’s team could be her calling. What Duane said about the families left behind, deeply touched Violet. She had intimate experience with helping Dave’s family get through his death – their grieving, that she had witnessed first-hand, and all the generational suffering within his family – all of it caused by a vicious suicide bomber. Remembering the sights and sounds of that night at the Alamo Center, all of these memories, had been haunting Violet everyday – over and over. The sound of the continuous high pitched whine of hundreds of people crying and calling for help, and the distinct smell of burned explosives in the air.

It was too late to save Dave and spare his family. But she was thinking, joining Duane’s team could prevent other fellow Americans from suffering Dave’s fate, and the possibility of preventing the agony and heartache, suffered by countless loved ones and friends left behind. Joining Duane’s team seemed to be a golden opportunity for her to make a very positive difference, and also, put her special talents to maximum use.

Violet turned to Duane and asked, “Can you do something for me, like right now!” She turned and pointed to Carlos still hanging from the

overhead door. “That’s all that’s left of Carlos. I hung him from that door using my husband’s necklace. I need that necklace back. That necklace means the world to me.”

Just then, the FBI helicopter took off and Duane was puzzled. He wondered and said out loud, “Where’s my helicopter going!” as he watched it fly away. Duane turned back to Violet and compassionately said, “I know about your husband, and how he died. He was a patriot and a hero, and I stand with patriot heroes.”

Duane knew what Violet wanted, and she didn’t have to ask further. Duane looked over at the other agent still waiting by the command center, and yelled out, “Hey Henry! Come here.” waving him over. After Henry came over, Duane pointed to Carlos, saying, “See what’s left of that guy. He’s hanging there, from Violet’s necklace. I need for you to get that necklace, clean it off, put it in a plastic bag, and give it to Violet – right away!”

With an unsure look, Henry asked, “Won’t it be a problem, if I take him down before the entire crime scene is fully investigated?”

Duane answered, “I know for certain, that we already have hundreds of photos of that man hanging from the door. He has already been exceptionally well documented, so don’t worry about it. Plus, that guy hanging from the door, won’t be going to trial. Feel free to take more photos as you pull him down. I’m authorizing you to go get that necklace and give it to Violet. Then Duane gestured with a sweeping wave of his arm, and added, “This entire area is full of people that can help you. Get whatever help you need, and get the job done. – trust me, it’s important.”

Henry was apprehensive, but he relented, “Yes Sir, I’ll get right on it.”

Duane turned back to Violet, “Well, what do you say, will you join my team?”

Violet was impressed with Duane and his sense of loyalty, so she answered with an optimistic smile, “It would be my honor Sir.” She reached out and offered her hand, and they shook. Duane was very pleased and replied, “Great! – welcome aboard.” They continued talking and discussing

the crime scene, and the details of what had taken place, needless to say, there was a lot to talk about.

Meanwhile, Henry had solicited the help of another FBI agent, and they were pondering what to do to get Violet's necklace. The entire lower half of Carlos was on the ground, surrounded in a pool of blood and entrails. Henry said out loud, "Man, somehow I wind up with all the crappy jobs!" The other agent replied, "Oh yeah – Its grody – super grody!"

Minutes later, Duane's FBI helicopter was landing in a mostly empty parking lot, adjacent to a large department store. This store was commonly known to be open on New Year's Day, and not too far from the warehouse. After it landed, Sara got out of the helicopter and walked quickly away, then went inside the store. She was just following her boss's orders, he said, "No matter what it takes!" Apparently, she was in pursuit of a pair of pants for Violet – the perfect excuse to go shopping in a helicopter.



Chapter 17

Celebrating A Life

Beginning on New Year's Day, from across the nation and around the world, the news media frenzy began descending on the Houston area. What became known as the Texan Stand, the New Year's Day Texan battle to defeat terrorism, was the top story on everyone's lips. The Texan Stand would eventually become an historic event in league with the 9/11 attack on New York City. Only this time, the attack was just barely thwarted.

On the following Wednesday, Violet made it back home to San Antonio, only now she worked for the FBI. To avoid conversations with the other fireman at her firehouse, Violet had a private meeting with Rocky at a local park. After apologizing to Rocky for blowing-up his ambulance, she let him know that she would be leaving the fire department. Apparently, an FBI agent had visited Rocky earlier in the week, imparting the critical importance of protecting Violet's identity from the public eye. The reasons were complex, tied to a much larger and still unseen future battle. Although Rocky didn't know all the details from the previous weekend, he knew enough about what Sam and Violet had been through to understand the gravity of the situation, and that he would be proud to cover for her.

Rocky gave Violet a ride to the firehouse, where she quickly and silently placed her suitcase on the back seat of her car, and then climbed in behind the wheel. With a sense of fondness, she paused, gazing at the firehouse with a warm smile. She was going to miss her fellow fireman, especially the good food. Violet said to herself, "I'll be back some other time." Then she drove away. For now, Violet needed to lay low. At some point, after things calm down, she could come back and say her goodbyes.

When Violet arrived home at her apartment with her luggage, she hesitated before opening the door. It was good to be home, but she knew when she opened the door, she would immediately see her memorabilia for John. After a weekend full of emotion and drama, she was about to be reminded again, about the loss of her husband. Although it was soothing to be home, her living room would also likely be a minefield for emotions.

Violet entered her apartment, and then slowly closed the door. As the door clicked shut behind her, she stood rooted near the doorway for a moment, just staring across the room at her wedding photo with John. He was still here like always, his smile a reminder of enduring love, and the happiest day of her life. Her eyes filled with tears as she connected with his eyes, almost crying. She wiped away her tears then placed her suitcase onto the couch.

After opening the suitcase, Violet pulled out a small red velvet bag, and then slowly moved towards her wedding photo. After a deep sigh, she removed John's necklace from the bag, and lovingly kissed the Star of David pendent. The necklace was still in good shape, except for a small bend in the chain. The bend, would forever be a testament to its unintended role in her survival. With gentle care, she placed the necklace on the shelf alongside John's burial flag. The necklace, had always been a powerful memento of her husband, it was now also a reminder of a struggle, for Violet's own life.

She closed her eyes, and had a conversation with her husband, "John, sorry about the bend," she said. "But I had to use your necklace to stop a really bad guy! – your necklace saved my life." It took Violet a moment to regain her composure. Sometimes, just speaking certain words, can trigger strong feelings. Then she continued, saying, "I had a crazy weekend! – I stopped a lot of evil men from hurting a whole bunch of innocent people – I'm certain you would have been proud of me."

Then Violet changed the topic, saying, "Since I've been meeting with Dave's family, I've been feeling stronger about losing you – helping them has been helping me." She reached out and softly touched John in the photo. "I didn't realize how lost I was – until Dave gave me that last hug to give to his family. I've passed his hug to all of them, except for his wife Julie. She's been in denial, like it's all just a bad dream for her." For a second time, the words that Violet just spoke touched an emotion deep within her. Her eyes began to fill with tears, and she was half-crying as she whispered, "Kind of – like me!..." In that instant, Violet recognized her own denial – and how she had been lingering ever since she lost John.

After John had died, Violet had resigned from the Air Force, and then moved back to San Antonio – in search of something that she couldn't

explain – perhaps, she was looking for a connection, searching for any kind of connection at all, to her lost love. She couldn't save her husband, it was too late. But working as an EMT, she was saving others, every single day!

Just then, her phone vibrated with a text coming through, breaking Violet's train of thought. She wiped away her tears again, and read the text was from Davey. In the text Davey said that they were having a funeral for his father on Saturday evening, at the King Street Christian Center, the same church where she had been meeting with Dave's family. Violet knew she had to go. She had formed an unexpected relationship with Dave's family, and she thought perhaps, that it might be an opportunity for her to reconnect with Julie. She laughed softly, and then with a smile she looked back up at her photo of John, and asked, "Did you have something to do with this text?"

It was Saturday evening, and the darkness of the night had descended upon the City of Canyon Creek, as Violet traveled to Dave's church for the funeral, and with her...was Sam. The day before, Violet had finally opened up to Sam. She confessed to him all about Dave's last hug, and her involvement and rendezvous with Dave's family. So Sam had offered to attend the funeral with her. As they approached the church, the parking lot was mostly full. In addition, there were several; news trucks parked out along the street, a reminder of Dave's tragic end that brought Violet and him together. This was not to be a typical funeral. Because of the way Dave had lost his life, the whole nation was watching. His funeral was news-worthy, and his community was heartbroken. There was sure to be a strong showing of sympathy and support, from the entire community, as well as people from across the state.

As Violet scanned the parking lot, she said to Sam, "It's a good thing we got here early. Dave apparently has a lot of people that are going to miss him."

Sam agreed and replied, "Yes indeed! I'm impressed, and the funeral is not scheduled to start for another 45 minutes. I hope we can find a seat inside." Sam was on crutches and his leg injury wrapped in a protective brace, which made mobility a challenge.

Violet said, “I’ll drop you off up close, then I’ll go find a place to park. you go inside and find us a seat, and I’ll find you.” Then she added jokingly, “If you act helpless enough, I’m sure they’ll help the guy on crutches find a seat.”

Sam replied, “Yeah – Right – Well, I at least hope so.” Violet added with a smile, “If they give you a hard time about holding a seat for me, tell them it’s for your grandma, and she’s parking the car.” Sam chuckled and came back with, “Just don’t be long Grandma.”

After Violet parked, she found her way into the church and then spotted Sam inside. Fortunately, Sam had managed to secure a seat near the back, and he also had a seat waiting for her. Violet squeezed through the crowd standing near the back of the church, then sat down next to Sam. She remarked, “It’s a good thing I dropped you off. We were lucky to get these seats.”

The interior of the church was a breathtaking spectacle of faith and artistry. Along each side of the sanctuary were ornate stained-glass windows, and behind the altar, a magnificent ensemble of more stained-glass creations, forming a stunning centerpiece – a testament to the enduring power of religious symbolism. Tonight however, the traditional focus of the church had been transformed to that of a funeral, a celebration of Dave’s life.

A massive television screen elevated above the pulpit, dominated the space. Strategically placed midway along the sides of the sanctuary, were two smaller screens, giving those in attendance further back a good view of a possible digital presentation. Anticipating an overwhelming turnout, the church had thoughtfully arranged large outdoor screens, to accommodate those who couldn’t find a place inside. The abundance of video equipment, hinted at a multimedia presentation, a digital tribute to Davey’s life, complete with photos, and perhaps even video footage.

Alongside the large TV and behind the pulpit, the altar area was completely filled and overflowing with flowers, many of them sent from around the nation by companionate citizens. The flowers created a spectacular tapestry of color and fragrance. At the heart of this floral masterpiece rested a closed mahogany casket, its polished brass accents

gleamed in the soft light. A single photograph of Dave, placed atop the casket, served as a reminder of the man they were gathered to honor.

Violet scanned the crowd and spotted Dave's family in the front rows, and she also saw Mack, Dave's good friend that she met on that fateful night. Then she noticed Dave's wife Julie as she rose from her seat. With a delicate reverence, Julie placed a single white rose upon the polished mahogany casket, a gesture infused with a profound symbolism of love and loss. With her hand tenderly on the coffin, Julie said a few silent words of prayer, and then returned to her seat. Violet wondered, was she truly beginning to come to terms with Dave's passing, or was she simply going through the motions of a funeral. But she seemed to be steadier than the night she met her in the church's courtyard.

There is an unspoken hope and desire, common to all funerals. It is a wish as old-as time, a testament to the enduring power of the human connection. Those in attendance are longing, for just one-more word or touch, with the friend or loved one that just departed this world. The hope is, that the afterlife allows those that have departed, opportunities to visit with those that have been left behind, to possibly watch over and safeguard loved ones. Maybe the departed could visit on holiday and birthday. Perhaps love is an unbreakable bond, a force capable of defying even the ultimate separation of death. If there is ever a moment in time for a loved one to visit, their funeral would be a golden opportunity. Everyone they loved and cherished, and all their best friends would be there, in one place at the same time – in a room filled with love and longing – it would be their best-last-chance to connect!

The funeral service began with a meaningful and comforting sermon. The pastor's words were wise and gentle, and they soothed the raw wounds of grief that had overtaken the congregation. With eloquence and passion, he painted a picture of a world beyond our own, a realm where Dave's spirit now resided. The pastor assured them, that while Dave was no longer a physical presence among them, his essence would continue to live on eternally in God's kingdom. It was a message of hope, a reminder that their beloved and friend was not truly lost, but merely journeying on a path that those in attendance could not follow at this time, a path that would ultimately lead to a joyous reunion.

As Mack went up to the pulpit, his demeanor shifted from that of being a grieving friend, to a proud and eloquent storyteller. Tasked with delivering Dave's eulogy, he embarked on a heartfelt journey through Dave's life. He would showcase a vibrant array of cherished memories, both traditional and extraordinary. With the aid of the large television screens, and backed by the soundtracks of Dave's favorite music – Mack painted a vivid portrait of a fine and wonderful man, whose spirit was as energetic, as the music that accompanied him through his life.

From the tender innocence of infancy, to the boundless energy of youth, Mack meticulously chronicled Dave's life. Their shared high school days from when Mack first met Dave, formed a cornerstone of their enduring friendship. Dave's story took a romantic turn, as Mack delved into the chapter of Dave's life when he met Julie, the love of his life – a love story that blossomed into their marriage, having children, and eventually grandchildren. There were so many great heartwarming photographs capturing birthdays, holidays, and countless shared adventures. All of them, painting a picture of a life well spent, and with family love. There were even a few photos of the grandchildren, enjoying their chocolate ice cream in Dave's special toilet shaped bowls!

Mack expertly traced the evolution of Dave's life's work, The Savory Texan Diner – from its humble beginnings, to its current status as a beloved community hub. The diner was more than just a restaurant to the community, it was a place where countless memories were made and bonds were forged. Losing Dave was akin to losing the diner, a cherished home-away-from-home, and a touching loss felt by the entire community.

Dave's story took a heart-wrenching turn, as the screen displayed images of both Dave and Juan, sharing numerous good times together. Their friendship was priceless and something to be celebrated. But their lives were also tragically intertwined, as they both lost their lives that same night.

As the almost 60 minute tribute drew to a close, the visual presentation displayed a family portrait, showing Dave and Julie, surrounded by all their children and grandchildren. This photo of his family, represents the highlights of the most important accomplishments in Dave's life – his family! Mack paused, wiping tears from his eyes as he braced

himself for his finale. It was another very heartfelt moment as Mack continued, saying, "If Dave could be here today, I know exactly what he would say. First, he would say thank-you, to all of you, for being there for him all these years. – He would also thank his mom and dad for having him, and enabling him to have such a wonderful life! – And I know what else he would say..." Mack raised his fist into the air, and then yelled out, "Be the Max!" – A chorus of voices from those in attendance, strong and united, responded with the same rallying cry, a testament to Dave's enduring legacy. His philosophy of living life to the fullest, a mantra encapsulated with the phrase, "Be the Max," had become an enduring inspiration among those who knew him well.

Mack's eulogy was a masterpiece of Dave's life, unfolding before everyone's eyes – the story of Dave. It was as if, they were all rediscovering Dave, layer by layer. Each memory was a chapter, with a fresh coat of paint on the portrait of a beloved man, and they all learned something new that they didn't know prior.

The comforting pastor, with his kind presence provided a closing prayer. His words would strengthen the wounded hearts gathered at the church. As the final amen echoed through the sanctuary, the pastor made the announcement of Dave's interment at Canyon Creek Memorial Cemetery, and it would take place the following day. With a delicate touch of diplomacy, he indicated that the ceremony would be a private affair for the family only, a subtle yet firm message to the media gathered outside.

As the church gradually emptied, Violet observed that Dave's family stayed seated. Mack's presentation was both enjoyed and touching to everyone, and surely took an emotional toll on the family. Each event of the funeral brought forth a sense of finality, with no possibility of turning the clock backwards. A steady stream of friends approached the family, offering condolences and words of comfort. Davey, captivated by his sadness, paced aimlessly, his hand returning repeatedly to the casket as if seeking a touch from his departed father!

Violet watched the unfolding scene with a mix of empathy and respect. She recognized the family's desire for privacy, their need to shield themselves from the prying eyes of the public, and the relentless scrutiny of the news media. Yet, she felt a compelling urge to offer her own

condolences, and a silent prayer for Dave and his loved ones. Turning to Sam, she whispered, "Let's stay seated for a bit longer. I'd like to approach the altar, and offer a private prayer with just Dave's family near." Sam nodded in understanding, and they settled back into their pews, patient observers of the unfolding drama.

Eventually, Violet finally whispered, "Wait here Sam...I'll be back in a few minutes...Please keep an eye on my purse and coat." With a deep breath, she rose from her seat and made her way towards the casket, she was nervous and her heart was pounding in her chest. Davey saw Violet coming and he got a little nervous, he didn't know how this was going to play out. The emotional resilience of his mother had been stressed to the limit with Mack's eulogy. Violet's presence and what she represented, even with the best intentions, could prove overwhelming.

Violet positioned herself facing the casket, with her eyes fixed on the polished mahogany surface. She offered a silent prayer, as she purposely averted her eyes from the family. However, the family members who had met her in the church's courtyard, recognized her immediately, uncertain about whether to greet her, or stay silent. Davey slowly walked over, and stood next to Violet facing the casket. He whispered, "My mother has been doing much better since that night in the courtyard." Violet softly answered back, "I'm glad to hear that."

Jenifer was nervously sitting next to her mother on the front row. Taking a cue-from Davey, she nudged her mother whispering, "Look, it's Violet."

When Julie saw Violet unexpectedly standing there, she was shocked and surprised, placing her hand over her mouth. It was a moment that seemed frozen in time – it was the moment of truth! – How was Julie going to react? – The next move was left up to Julie. Violet was fully prepared to walk away if her presence upset Julie. A few seconds later, Julie reached out...

"Violet!" Julie called out. Violet turned and looked into Julie's eyes. Julie was trembling as she continued, "Please come here and sit next to me," as she patted the seat next to her in an inviting way.

Violet walked over and slid into the seat next to Julie, then said, “Hi Julie – I learned a lot about Dave this evening.”

Julie replied, “I was so worried that I would never see you again!” Then she broke down into tears crying openly. Violet remained silent, placing her hand on Julie’s hand, to comfort her. Slowly, Julie managed to compose herself, wiping away her tears she said, “I’m ready for Dave’s hug now.” Hearing that, the family backed away, giving their mom some space for privacy.

Julie’s tears were contagious, bringing tears to her whole family, and Violet as well. Violet picked up and gently cradled Julie’s hand, then softly spoke, “Julie – this hug is meant especially – for you!” Both of them leaned forward, and embraced tightly. In an instant, Julie felt the powerful soothing warmth of Dave’s love in her heart. Julie had discretely overheard her children talking, attempting to describe what they had experienced in the courtyard, but this feeling, this hug, was much more than she expected. She opened and cried out loud, “Oh Dave! I miss you so much.” Julie continued to passionately cry, with streams of tears flowing down her cheeks.

What nobody there could see, was that Dave’s spirit was also there – right next to them both – he had come to his funeral, and gently placed his transcendent hands, onto both Julie’s and Violet’s shoulder. Seemingly, Violet had become a kind-of portal – perhaps, due to Dave passing away during his last hug with Violet, amid his extreme emotional stress. Dave was passing the energy of his boundless love through Violet and into Julie. For Julie, this hug was genuine, she sensed without doubt, it was absolutely Dave’s last hug – something she was wanting more than anything in the world – to at least, hug her husband one more time!



As Violet whispered into Julie's ear, the emotions of the moment were running high within all of Dave's children. They had all experienced the power of this last hug in the courtyard, and they knew it was real – a final desperate grasp, from a man they adored, and who returned his love unconditionally. With tears in their eyes and crying, one by one, they joined the embrace. As they held each other tightly, it became a group hug – with the strength of Dave's love, rushing through the entire family!

Like a protector of this family, the pastor silently watched and stood guard. He knew first hand, the sadness that had swallowed Dave's family, and he recognized that they were healing each other. It would be the strength of their family...that was going to get them through this tragedy, with a little help from Violet.

Christians have a strong understanding and belief that when they leave this world, that their Journey is not over. Dave being a strong Christian, surely found his way to heaven. However, all the details and guidelines of the afterlife remain unclear. The presence of Dave's spirit at his church for his final farewell, serves as a reminder that we don't know everything about death. To date, Jesus is the only known person to have returned from heaven, to openly participate with the living world, and that was a long time ago.

Consider the possibility, that divine intervention, had brought about Violet's involvement with the Johnson's family tragedy. Although Violet had functioned well as an EMT for over a couple of years, emotionally she was broken, and unable on her own to get over the loss of her husband. John was her whole family, and when he was killed by a terrorist, in an instant, her entire family was wiped out. Since then, she remained broken and emotionally alone in the world – she was lost. When put together, Violet and the Johnson family were able to heal each other – unknowingly, they needed each other – to ***Be The MAX!***

Chapter 18

A New Beginning

In light of the revelation ignited by the Texas Stand, in the shadow of the terrorist attack at the Alamo Center – it was clearly recognized, that this latest terrorist threat could have been far worse, than even the attack on the World Trade Centers in New York City. The whole country was shocked with how close this attack almost came to be. This extraordinary event would spark a national discussion and call for quick action, propelling the United States towards fortifying its borders, and adopting policies to actively purge potential threats, already within the nation. America was irrevocably changed, and **gotaways** would no longer be tolerated – legal immigration only, would once again – become the law of the land.

The following Monday morning at the San Antonio Community College, amid the familiar bustle of students hurrying to class, the same young man that Violet and Sam briefly encountered at the convenience store, a couple of weeks earlier, was standing in front of the Student Union building. He was nicely dressed, as if going to an interview, and on a mission to meet with a guidance counselor. The college campus was intimidating, but gathering his resolve, he pressed on to take the first steps towards a better future.

After doing some searching, he found his way into a guidance counselor's office. Standing in the doorway, he greeted the counselor to get her attention. A lady behind the desk said, "Hi, how can I help you?"

He answered, "I need to speak to a guidance counselor, about coming to school here."

She recognized that he seemed somewhat lost and uneasy. She got up from her desk, and greeted him at the door with a smile, "Hi, I'm Michelle Taylor, and I'm a guidance counselor. You're in the right place."

They shook hands and he returned a smile, "My name is Derrick Brooks, and I want to become an EMT."

Michelle gestured with her hand towards a chair in front of her desk, saying, “Hi Derrick, please come in and have a seat. Let’s talk about how we can make this happen.”

After they both sat down, Derrick was quick to be upfront with Michelle, saying, “To begin with, let me tell you about my situation. I graduated from high school last spring, and I have pretty good grades. But ever since I graduated, I’ve just been wasting my time. I have no money and no job – but a friend of mine said, that there are special programs for people like me, programs that can help to pay my way through school.”

Lisa replied, “Your friend is right, especially for those that are interested in the medical field, or specifically, an EMT in your case.”

Just then, Sam of all people, showed up in the doorway on his crutches, “Excuse me for interrupting. I just wanted to say hi to Michelle before heading off to a class.”

Michelle knew Sam well, and was very happy to see him. She excitedly said with a big smile, “It’s great to see you Sam!...It’s been a while.” She went over and gave him a hug and asked, “So, what did you do to your leg?”

Sam replied, “I got hurt on the job, so I’m on light duty for a couple of months. To keep me busy, I’m volunteering here at the college.”

Michelle was pleased to be able to introduce Sam and Derrick to each other. “Derrick, this is Sam, who just so happens to be a superstar EMT – and Sam, this is Derrick, he’s going to start taking classes here, so that he can become a great EMT also. I’m so glad you two could meet. Sam, you showing up here is perfect timing.”

Sam looked at Derrick with curiosity, “You look familiar, have we met before?”

Derrick recognized Sam, and nervously stood up to confess, “Sir, we met a couple of weeks ago out in front of a store. The EMT lady you were with talked some sense into me, and well – that’s why I’m here today. I want to become an EMT, like you and her.”

Fate sometimes has a funny way of making things work out. Derrick has needed direction in his life for a while now. His chance encounter with Violet impressed him to such an extent, that it had inspired him to choose a career path.

Sam smiled big and shook Derrick's hand. "Oh yeah, – I remember you now – you look good dressed up. Welcome to EMT world, and trust me when I say – it can be an exciting world." Then Sam added, "I'm on my way to speak at an orientation class, to tell people what it's like being an EMT." He looked over at Michelle and asked, "If it's okay with Michelle, would you like to sit in on my class? After the class, you could come back here, and fill out a bunch of forms for Michelle." She nodded as if to say that it would be fine.

Derrick answered with optimistic excitement, "Yes, that would be great!"

So together they left Michelle's office, and with Sam hobbling on his crutches, they walked down a hallway on their way to Sam's class. Derrick asked, "How did you hurt your leg?" Sam answered, "I wish I could tell you – but I can't – it's top-secret." They both laughed.

At the same time, on the opposite side of San Antonio, a different story was unfolding within the imposing structure of FBI headquarters. A dozen federal agents, wearing utilitarian garb for physical training, stood in a line watching a combat demonstration, their attention riveted on a spectacle of speed, and raw power! The sounds of someone pounding a heavy punching bag in rapid succession filled the room. The looks in their faces said everything – their eyes wide with disbelief, with an occasional involuntary flinch reaction by all, when a bag was smacked extra hard, causing the chains holding the bag to rattle. The agents, hardened professionals accustomed to the rigors of their profession, were visibly taken back by the ferocity of the demonstration.

"How is she able to kick so hard?" one agent whispered, his voice filled with wonder. Another agent commented, "I'm not sure, but I think this might be the Prairie Road girl." A third agent simply stated, "Boy, I'm sure

glad she's on our side!" A sentiment that Violet had heard many times before.

The agents watched in awe, as Violet transformed herself into a whirlwind of motion, her body was a blur of speed and power! She had elevated her performance to a new level of intensity – her kicks were now aimed at a trio of heavy punching bags, surrounding herself with a human driven force-field. Every time she delivered one of her signature, extra powerful round house kicks, she made the onlookers moan, startled by her remarkable power. After one such kick, an onlooker whispered, "I read in a report, that one of the Prairie road terrorists was killed by a kick to the side of his head, a kick that crushed his skull."

At the conclusion of the demonstration, Violet was just standing there, breathing heavy and gripping onto one of the punching bags. She had that same crazy wild animal look on her face, the same wild look that ignited whenever she unleashed her inner warrior. Violet had found a home and a purpose, where her special talents, would be appreciated and do the greatest good. Her new boss, Duane, was true to his word. Violet's identity was never revealed to the news media, and a new chapter in Violet's life was just beginning.

Propaganda, when combined with technology, is an incredibly potent tool, commonly wielded by governments, corporations, and individuals alike. It can shape human minds and public opinion with remarkable efficiency, and convince people to act out in horrific uncivilized ways! The attack at the Alamo Center, and the attack that almost took place on the Calvary Christian Center, startled America. This awakening, renewed the realization that there were many millions of people in the world, that have been subjected to an entire lifetime of hateful propaganda! – Propaganda, calling for the death of Americans.

The Calvary Christian Center, with all its TV evangelism, is probably the most well-known church in America. Such fame has made this church an American symbol, known throughout the world, as well as a high priority soft target for terrorists. As a result of the Texan Stand, churches of many faiths, implemented security protocols to better protect their congregations.

New leadership within the United States changed federal policies, enacting new policies that dramatically slowed the flow of illegal aliens into America. With patriotic leaders in charge, no longer would a corrupt government be allowed to fund an invasion into the United States. However, although in greatly diminished numbers, every night, a seemingly never ending flow of illegals continue to cross America's borders, more **gotaways**, along with many that were never detected! In spite of government reforms that defend and protect Americans, these types of dangers continue to persist, with no end in sight. Intertwined with this threat, America has an endless array of soft targets to protect. – so this epic saga, is far from over!

