

THE JOURNEY HOME

by

Rebecca York, Catherine Asaro, Mallory Kane,
Mary Jo Putney, Patricia Rice, CB Scott, Candice Kohl,
Diane Chamberlain, Linda Madl, & Lucy Grijalva

Edited and Prefaced by Mary Kirk

Preface

What true-blue romance fan can resist a wounded hero?

None that I know. He holds a special place in our hearts, and nothing gives us greater satisfaction than seeing that brave man find happiness—and (of course) the love of his life, as well.

The Journey Home is about the wounded hero. The man who does what he must. The soldier who risks his life for his beliefs, his family, his country. It's about the man who goes to war and discovers, when it's over, he's a different man—and maybe he isn't certain who or what he's become.

It's also about the woman who loves such a hero: the one who waits at home, worrying, wondering. When her man finally returns, will her love be enough to heal the invisible wounds of combat? Will she even recognize the stranger sleeping alongside her at night?

Whether victors or vanquished, all survivors of a conflict must face the aftermath. But where do battle-scarred warriors go to lick their wounds and heal? Will they—can they—return to hearth and home? Or are they destined to live in isolation, unable to find a woman brave enough to love a man whose heart has been shattered?

The award-winning, best-selling authors of *The Journey Home* have created a wonderfully romantic collection of tales

about wounded heroes who find healing love in unexpected—even strangely uncanny—ways and places.

Patricia Rice captures the flavor of the tumultuous 1970s in “**Home Is Where the Heart Is.**” Thomas returns from Vietnam missing part of his foot, bringing with him the ghost of his best friend—and hardly daring to hope that his antiwar high-school sweetheart will still love him.

In “**Heart Crossings,**” **Linda Madl** takes us back to 1918, where Brian Mason must honor a promise he made to his twin sister, who died while he was fighting in The Great War. Thoroughly disbelieving, he asks psychic medium Amanda Sherman to contact his sister on “the other side.” But Amanda knows it’s Brian’s own grieving, cynical soul that needs to be brought back to the land of the living.

For **Rebecca York’s “A Hero’s Welcome,”** we take a leap into the future, where rebel Ben-Linkman has won a hero’s boon, helping his enslaved people take control of their Earth-colonized planet. But nobody except Kasi, daughter of his former master, can give him what he wants most: her heart.

Then it’s back to the States for **Mallory Kane’s “A Better Man.”** Lying ill in a Union prison, Jared is rescued by his Confederate officer brother. Rob leads Jared home, charging him to take care of Christianne, Rob’s wife, and leaving him on the doorstep, unconscious. But when Jared awakens, under Christianne’s care, he doesn’t know how he can honor his pledge to Rob when being with Christianne, whom he’s loved in silence since childhood, breaks his heart.

In the fantasy world of **CB Scott’s “The Sacrifice,”** Aedon McNair left his wife Kiara to fight for what he believed was a righteous cause. But after two years in an enemy prison, all he believes in is his love for Kiara—and he’ll go to any lengths to return to her. But will she ever forgive him for what he’s sacrificed to be with her again?

“**The Dreamer**” by **Diane Chamberlain** brings us back to the real present. Once, Brian Meyerson dreamed of being a

doctor. But for fourteen years he's dreamed only of the day in Kuwait, during Desert Storm, when a mistake he made cost him his leg, his peace of mind, and the woman he loved. The woman, Cindy Gold, has returned, but how can he dare hope she might help him exorcise the nightmare that haunts him?

Medieval romance lovers will revel in **Lucy Grijalva's "Shadow of the Rose."** Sir Thomas Kelham doesn't *mean* to skewer Lady Cecily Bowen with his sword. He was trying to *save* her life, not take it. He keeps watch at the young widow's deathbed despite that it postpones his mission: to avenge King Richard III's death by killing the usurper Henry Tudor. During the long night, Thomas learns that Cecily has no intention of giving up—and she has a plan to save her home that's in opposition to his own quest. He also learns there's far more to the lady than meets the eye.

Catherine Asaro gives us a glimpse of the universe of her award-winning Skolian saga in **"The Shadowed Heart."** Squadron leader Jason Harrick should be dead. The only one of four empathically linked pilots to survive a space battle, as well as the crash of his Jagfighter, he doesn't know how to go on living. But when Rhose Canterhaven finds him haunting the ruins of a technology park, Harrick wonders if he's found a woman with the courage, the compassion . . . and the special gift he most needs . . . to heal his shattered soul.

Candice Kohl's "Another Man's Shoes" takes us to the British colony of Georgia, where we meet two wounded men with nothing in common but their first names. Rebel Nicholas Gans dies in Redcoat Nicholas Sutcliffe's arms, but in passing, Gans bestows upon Sutcliffe a precious gift—if Sutcliffe can find the courage to claim the gift as his own.

Finally, in "The Stargazer's Familiar," **Mary Jo Putney** has created a hero who . . . well, actually, no, I don't think I'll tell you. I'll let you find out for yourself about the handsome and courageous Leo.

THE JOURNEY HOME

So grab a box of tissues and get comfortable. Be ready to cry for a few more wounded heroes. But, because romances are about happy endings, also be prepared to smile and cheer as these ten worthy men defeat their personal demons . . . and, in doing so, find the love and happiness they long for and deserve.

Mary Kirk
2004, 2011

“The Dreamer”

by

Diane Chamberlain

Saudia Arabian Desert, 1990

Brian Meyerson ran from his tent toward the chopper, adrenaline pumping. Heat rose from the Saudi Arabian desert, and he was sweating even before he pulled on his helmet.

The *whomp, whomp, whomp* of the chopper’s rotor was deafening by the time he reached the Huey. Standing outside its gaping door, he buckled the helmet beneath his chin.

“What is it?” he shouted into the microphone attached to his helmet.

Crazy Eddie, the Huey’s pilot, shouted back to him. “Road kill! In Kuwait.”

Brian looked toward the mess tent, where Jason McSweet stood idly near the entrance, his usual dazed expression on his face.

“Hold on, Eddie.” Brian took a few steps away from the roar of the chopper, cupped his hands around his mouth and shouted, “Hey, McSweet!” When he had the boy’s attention, he waved him over. “Into the Huey!”

Panic flashed across McSweet’s face, followed quickly by a look that said, “You don’t mean *me*, do you?”

“Yes, *you*, Private,” Brian ordered, then pointed to his helmet. “Put your Kevlar on.”

McSweet stumbled toward the chopper, climbing aboard like a kid walking into a dentist’s office.

Brian followed him in, the whirring of the helicopter thundering in his ears. Only then did he realize that Cindy Gold was the other medic on the flight.

She grabbed his arm and shook her head, shouting, "He shouldn't come with us. He's too green."

"He'll be fine," Brian shouted back.

Taking a seat across from Cindy and McSweet, he snapped on his safety belt. Brian watched Cindy chew her lower lip as she eyed the pale young private beside her, and he caught her eye, mouthing again *He'll be fine*. Cindy gave a one-shouldered shrug of acceptance.

Then, as the speed of the rotor increased above their heads and the helicopter lifted into the air, her expression softened, and she smiled at him. He grinned back, holding her gaze. The night before, they had made love for the first time. That secret hour hovered in the air between them.

When Cindy shifted her gaze to the window, he turned to see what had caught her attention. In the distance, thick black smoke filled the air.

"Hey, Eddie," he yelled into his microphone. "Are we headed near the fires?"

"Not too close," Eddie called in reply.

Brian relaxed. The choking clouds of smoke from the oil fields could cause his MedEvac crew to miss injured soldiers lying on the sand. It had happened before. He didn't want it to happen today, especially with rookie McSweet as part of the team.

Eddie turned from his seat at the controls to glance at McSweet. "Kid's looking a little green around the gills," he said into his microphone.

McSweet's head rested against the wall of the chopper, bouncing a little from the vibration. His eyes were closed, and there was a deep crease between his eyebrows.

"Should we give him a thrill?" Eddie asked.

Brian knew the pilot—his best friend in this god-awful place—was itching to put the Huey through its paces, but this was not the time. “Chill, Eddie,” he said.

Cindy looked out the open side of the chopper. “You sure this is the right road, Eddie?” she called into her microphone.

Brian glanced through the window next to him, his gaze following the narrow road that dissected the desert in a straight line toward the horizon. Far to the west, rock formations rose from the earth, and to the east, oil fires filled the sky with smoke.

“Honey, I have supernatural powers,” Eddie called back to Cindy. “Don’t you know that? I could find the guys we’re looking for without a map, and I— *Whoa.*” Eddie’s sudden exclamation blasted through Brian’s earphones. “Looks like the shit hit the fan down there.”

Brian peered again through the window, this time looking directly at the road a few hundred feet below them. He sucked in his breath at the scene of utter devastation. Four vehicles—two army trucks, one of them an eighteen wheeler, and two civilian sedans—lay overturned in the sand. Smoke rose from the smaller truck, and the cars were charred to a crisp. From this high up, it was hard to tell the human beings from the supplies. He’d picked the wrong first mission for Jason McSweet.

“Shit,” he said under his breath, then louder, “We’re going to need backup.”

“I’m calling it in now,” Eddie said.

The Huey bucked a little as it started its descent. Cindy was already reaching for one of the aid bags. McSweet’s eyes were open, but the back of his helmet remained glued to the chopper wall.

“You okay?” Brian asked him.

The young private didn’t look at him, but he managed a nod.

Eddie landed the chopper with a soft *thud*. Cindy sprang out, one arm protecting her face from blowing sand. Brian grabbed a backboard and followed her.

"C'mon, McSweet," he called over his shoulder. He didn't wait to see if the boy was following as he ran toward the accident site.

"Over here!" someone called from behind one of the trucks.

"No, help me first, please!" another voice begged.

Words in Arabic mixed with pleas in English, and Brian felt pulled in a dozen directions, surrounded by broken bodies and groans of pain. He did the best he could, running from one injured man to another, determining who needed help most.

He quickly lost count of how many injured there were. Ten soldiers, maybe? Eight Kuwaiti civilians? He couldn't say. He smelled the charred remains of someone who hadn't escaped a burning vehicle in time, and the odor made his head spin. Perspiration ran down his face, stinging his eyes, making him want to rip off his heavy uniform. It was too goddamned hot!

He spotted Cindy kneeling next to a Kuwaiti man, a circle of blood staining the sand around the victim's head.

"Gold!" he hollered. "You need help?"

Without looking up from her patient, she called back, "Yeah, I do! I'm losing this guy. But someone's hurt behind that burned-out car, and I haven't had a chance to get over there."

"I'll check," Brian said.

He ran around the side of the sedan and found a Saudi woman clad in a black *abaya* and *burka*. She was sitting on the ground, her body rising from the sand like a small dark mountain. Only her eyes were visible as she raised her arm toward him, pleading for help. She said something in Arabic, her voice raspy, and he noticed the swaddled bundle she was holding in her other arm: a baby.

"Brian!" Cindy called. "Please hurry!"

Torn between helping the Saudi woman and returning to Cindy, he suddenly remembered McSweet. He looked over his shoulder to see the kid standing at the side of the road, helmet off, the sun beating down on his short, pale hair. He looked as shell-shocked as the survivors of the accident, clearly in no shape to deal with the worst of the injuries.

In a split-second, Brian assessed the options and made a decision.

“McSweet!” he barked. “Take care of her.” He nodded toward the Muslim woman, who didn’t appear to be badly hurt. If the baby was in worse shape, McSweet would just have to deal.

The boy didn’t move. “I don’t think I can, sir,” he mumbled, his face ashen.

“Get going, soldier!” Brian ordered.

Still, McSweet didn’t budge.

Fed up, Brian stormed over to him, grabbed his arm, and began dragging him across the sand. “*You’re* healthy,” he said. “These people aren’t, and it’s your job to help them.”

He let go of McSweet’s arm, and the boy continued walking toward the woman. Brian waited to be sure he actually reached her, and he watched as the young private bent low to examine the bundled baby. He was about to return to Cindy when he noticed a sudden change in the woman’s dark eyes.

Her expression sharpened with a look that said *Aha! Victory!* At the same time, she reached toward the infant with a hand that was decidedly masculine. The swaddling fell away, and from the layers of fabric, the “woman” drew a gun.

“Shit!” Brian yanked his own pistol from its holster, but he was too late. The man—an Iraqi soldier—barely took time to aim. A shot cracked the still desert air, and McSweet flew backward, landing in a lifeless heap in the sand.

Furious, Brian took aim at the disguised Iraqi soldier, but he didn't even have a chance to pull the trigger before the man tossed a grenade in his direction. In the next instant, searing pain—a thousand machetes—cut through his back and his leg, and the entire world went dark.

Brian woke up with a roar. Flinging off his covers, he sat up so quickly the bedroom spun around him, and he had to fight to catch his breath.

Damn it. He pounded his fist against the wall next to his bed. He was sick of this. Sick of having the same horrible dream night after night. Sick and tired of reliving the worst day of his life.

He looked at the clock on his night table. Three in the morning. Pressing his hands to his temples, he shut his eyes and wondered if he dared go back to sleep. He had to be at work by nine. A meeting with the boss at ten. An appointment with his social worker, Leslie Shipman, all the way over at the VA hospital, in the afternoon. He'd be wiped out by the time he got home if he didn't get some more sleep.

But he couldn't face the dream again.

Leaning over, he unlocked his wheelchair and pulled it toward him. He would get up. He'd read or watch TV or do some work on the computer. The truth was, he was more afraid of the dream than he was of being exhausted. He was more afraid of it than he was of dying.

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That afternoon, Brian wheeled his chair through the halls of the VA hospital on his way to Leslie Shipman's office. He'd spent more time in this place than he cared to remember. Fourteen years ago, it had been his home. In one of these rooms, they'd taken off what remained of his left leg. In

another room, a doctor told him he'd never be able to walk again.

And in yet another room, he'd told Cindy Gold to get out of his life forever.

If he hadn't known he loved her before that moment, he'd known it then. The last thing he'd wanted was for her to be saddled with a paraplegic amputee for the rest of her life. They'd only been involved for a few months, he told himself. It wasn't as if they were married or even committed to one another, although he'd known they were heading in that direction. Ending it had been his gift to her.

She'd fought him, writing him letters, calling him. He'd sent the letters back and hadn't return the calls, and she'd finally given up. Still, whenever he came to the hospital, it wasn't the phantom pain of his missing leg he remembered or the months of grueling physical therapy. It was the expression on Cindy's face when he'd told her to move on with her life and forget about him. The tears in her huge blue eyes—tears of pity, he'd thought—were his last memory of her.

Yet he saw her every night in his nightmare. Crazy Eddie Carlucci was a little blurry in the dream, and McSweet was just a skinny pale-haired kid in a too-big uniform. But Cindy was there in detail. Her blond hair was so short, he couldn't even see it beneath her helmet. How many women could wear their hair that short and still look feminine? There was a calm self-confidence in her eyes as she sat across from him on the Huey. She was a good medic, and she knew it.

That was what initially had drawn him to her, and she'd told him she admired him for the same reason. They'd shared a common goal: they'd both planned to go to medical school and eventually work in a trauma unit. He often wondered if she'd succeeded. He hoped so.

Brian found Leslie Shipman’s office door open. The social worker was sitting at her desk, engrossed in something she was writing, and he watched her for a moment before knocking.

Odd, her asking him to come in. He was usually the one to call for an appointment. Leslie had been his sounding board for a decade. When the dreams got so bad he didn’t think he could stand one more night of them, he’d come in to talk to her. Sometimes, talking about his time in the Persian Gulf would make the nightmare go away for a day or two. But it always came back. Over the years, Leslie had sent him to a couple of psychiatrists, who tried fighting the dream with a variety of drugs, but no sleep seemed beyond the reach of the nightmare.

He knocked on the door jamb. “You ready for me?” he asked.

The social worker looked up and smiled.

“Hi Brian,” she said, putting down her pen and sitting back in her chair. “Come in.” She was a nice looking woman. He’d known her long enough to watch her hair go from brown to gray. She wore it short with deep bangs that, despite the gray, made her look very young.

He wheeled into the room and parked in front of her desk. “How’s it going?”

“Great,” she said. “How about you?”

“All right.” It was true—he was as all right as a one-legged man paralyzed from the waist down could expect to be.

Her phone rang, but she just rolled her eyes and ignored it. “This place is a circus.”

He laughed. “What else is new?”

“How’s work?”

“Good.” He worked for the Veterans Administration maintaining their website. He could have gotten disability and stayed home feeling sorry for himself, but that had never been his style. He liked the technical work he was doing, although it

was a far cry from his once-upon-a-time ambition of being a physician. For two or three years after the attack in Kuwait, he'd been deeply depressed about the loss of that dream. Gradually, he learned to accept his limitations—owing in no small part to the woman sitting across the desk from him. “So, why did you want to see me?”

Leslie tapped the thick folder on the desk in front of her, and he recognized it as his medical chart. “Dr. Welch asked me to talk to you about something,” she said. “She has an idea and wants me to see if you're psychologically ready for it. I've already told her, ‘hell, yes,’ but she insists I talk to you about it face to face.”

He was perplexed, but Leslie's demeanor made him smile. “What's the idea?” he asked.

“There's a study going on at Middleton Memorial in Wisconsin,” Leslie said. “They have a new intravenous drug that's showing some promise in reversing nerve damage in cases of paralysis. It's no cure, but the results so far have been encouraging. You're a perfect candidate, so she wanted to see if you'd like to participate.”

“Hell, yes,” Brian said.

Leslie laughed. “See how well I know you?” she said, then sobered. “The thing is, you'd have to be there about three months. I know it will screw up your work sched—”

“I'll manage.” He'd manage anything, rearrange his whole life, for the chance she was offering him: a potentially miraculous treatment that might allow him to walk again—with a prosthesis for his missing leg, of course.

“I can help you get temporary disability,” Leslie said, then went on to explain the particulars. He would spend a few days a week in the hospital and live in military housing the rest of the time while participating in the study.

When he questioned her about the science behind the new drug, she shook her head. "You'll have to talk to Dr. Welch about that end of it." Then she smiled. "You're still a medic at heart, aren't you?"

"You've got it," he said. He was a hungry sponge when it came to medical information. Always had been and probably always would be.

He started to wheel himself toward the door, and Leslie stood up.

"I'm glad you're going to do this," she said, folding her arms and leaning against her desk.

"Well, if it doesn't help me, maybe it'll help the next guy," he said, but in his heart, he knew he was hoping the drug would be his miracle. With his hand on the doorknob, he said, "Now we just need a drug that will put an end to nightmares."

Leslie grimaced. "I'm sorry we've failed on that one. When you get back, we'll try again."

Brian left her office and wheeled his chair down the corridor, the excitement he'd felt only moments ago overshadowed by his never-ending anxiety over the nightmare. Even now, when he was wide awake, images of that day ran through his mind.

He'd made poor choices. He'd made decisions that had cost Jason McSweet and many others their lives. McSweet had been in the Persian Gulf only two days, and he'd had a long way to go before becoming a man, much less a soldier and a medic. His baby face and skinny physique had earned him the nickname "Sweety" within twenty-four hours of his arrival. He had been so panicked by the threat of attack that he was pretty well useless. The road kill mission—an accident, rather than a combat situation—had seemed like a good way to give the boy some experience without his having to wear the bulky chemical suits and masks that seemed to freak him out.

Brian still saw McSweet's frightened face as he'd forced him toward the masked Iraqi. His own miscalculation—and his need to turn “Sweetie” into a real soldier—had killed not only McSweet but thirteen other soldiers and civilians, as well. They'd died either from injuries suffered in the grenade attack or because they hadn't been evacuated in time. The explosion had sent the chopper's co-pilot, Jim Dabrowski, flying through the air, and Brian could still hear the sickening thud as the man's body crashed on top of one of the burned-out sedans.

The dream was vivid, full of pale sand and a blue sky, marred by the smoky oil fires in the distance. Over and over again, he saw the black figure of the Saudi “woman” cradling her faceless baby. He should have known that a Saudi woman wouldn't be on that road in Kuwait, but being stationed in Saudi Arabia, he'd grown accustomed to seeing *abaya*-clad women. That, combined with the confusion and adrenaline rush of the moment, had sapped his judgment.

He couldn't forgive himself for his mistake. And his conscience made him relive it every single night.

Thank God, Cindy and Crazy Eddie had survived the attack.

Fun-loving and good-natured Eddie Carlucci had been the most popular guy in their encampment. He'd wanted to be a test pilot and had been in the Army's test pilot training program before being sent to the Gulf. He'd hated any routine mission behind the controls of the Huey. Brian knew Eddie would only be happy doing something that involved both flying and risking life and limb.

Smiling to himself, Brian remembered Eddie talking ad nauseam about having supernatural powers. He had sworn he could bend spoons with his mind, although he refused to do it in the mess tent because, he said, it took too much out of him, and a pilot should never do something that might reduce his concentration. He'd sworn he could read minds, too, and talk

to the dead and be in two places at once. But the only so-called supernatural powers Brian could remember seeing Eddie display involved reading Tarot Cards. At night, when there was little else to do except wait anxiously for a possible scud attack, he'd pull out his deck, and the other soldiers would gather around him.

"Your girlfriend will cheat on you if you don't answer her letters," Eddie would tell one soldier as he studied the cards. "You should invest your savings wisely, or a friend might take advantage of your generosity," he'd tell another. He'd sounded like the insert in a fortune cookie to Brian. It had been a harmless enough pastime, though, and they'd certainly needed the diversion.

For the first few years after the incident, Brian had received a letter from Eddie every now and then. His old friend would reassure him that he was fine and send good wishes for his recovery, but he never visited despite numerous invitations. Gradually, their correspondence had faded away. Brian had made plenty of new friends over the years, especially among his fellow veterans, but he still missed the camaraderie he'd once shared with the irrepressible pilot.

As for women, there had been only a few since Cindy. He worried that a woman might agree to date him out of pity. Not many women could truly understand what he'd been through, nor were many willing to face the challenge of intimacy with a man who was paralyzed from the waist down. The few who'd tried to make a go of it with him had been frightened off by his violent dreams, and he didn't blame them.

He wished the study he was about to enter *was* designed to get rid of nightmares. A man could get by without a leg. He could even live a fairly decent life without any feeling below the waist. But how was he supposed to keep going when, every time

he closed his eyes, he was forced to relive the most horrific hour of his life?

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It took a month to get enrolled in the study and another couple of weeks before Brian flew to Wisconsin and checked into Middleton Memorial. The hospital room where he would spend four days out of every week had two beds in it, but he had it to himself when he arrived.

They gave him a hospital gown to change into, but he persuaded the cute young nurse to let him wear his one-legged jeans and T-shirt. He'd spent too much time in hospital gowns, and he could see no reason to wear one for this treatment. She agreed with him, and once he'd settled into the bed nearest the door, she started his IV.

"The only side effect of this drug that we're aware of so far is drowsiness," she told him.

Great, he thought. Just what he needed was more sleep. More chances for the nightmare to course through his brain. But once she'd left the room and he'd raised the head of his bed and settled back against the pillows, he felt pretty good. He'd brought a stack of books with him—novels he'd had no time to read over the past couple of years—and there was a nice-sized TV hanging from the ceiling near the foot of his bed. This was going to be a vacation. He even dared to wonder if the change of scenery and being away from the stress of work might make a difference in his sleep patterns. Had the nightmare followed him to Wisconsin?

That afternoon, he had a book open in his lap, a glass of iced tea in his hand, and the television tuned to Dr. Phil when he heard a knock on the door.

"Come in," he said.

A woman stepped into the room. She was dressed in dark pants and a white lab coat over a red blouse. Her blond hair

was loose around her shoulders, and she wore black, narrow-rimmed glasses. Her smile was familiar, but he couldn't quite place her.

"Hey, Sarge," she said softly. She took a step closer, and he could see the blue of her eyes behind her glasses.

"Cindy?"

"That's right." She walked to his bed and leaned over to give him a hug. Although the embrace was awkward and her body stiff, he felt momentarily lost in the scent of her hair; she pulled away, though, before he'd breathed in enough of it.

"I was so surprised to see your name on the patient admission list this afternoon," she said.

Oh, she did look beautiful. He liked the longer hair. He liked the glasses.

He even liked the tiny lines at the corners of her mouth. He wanted to reach out and touch one of them.

Get a grip, he told himself.

"You look great," he said.

"You, too."

"A little worse for wear," he admitted.

She shook her head. "I would have recognized you anywhere," she said, the words coming out in a rush. "You have those"—she raised her hands to her cheeks—"those high cheekbones that make you look like there's a little Native American blood in you. And those thick eyelashes. And you still have those beautiful dark eyes, and—" She opened her mouth as if she had more to say, then clamped down on the words. "I'd recognize you anywhere," she repeated. She suddenly shifted her gaze to the television as though the commercial for toothpaste was something she desperately wanted to see.

Brian saw patches of red forming on her neck. She was uncomfortable with her outburst.

Wanting to put her at ease, he lifted his arm to display the IV. “I’m here for the new nerve drug. Think this stuff will do anything?”

“Well, I understand it’s a step in the right direction.” She walked around the bed to read the information on the plastic bag hanging from the IV pole above him. “I think it’s great that you’re participating in a study,” she added.

Her glasses were cute, and they certainly altered her appearance, but in his eyes, she was still the girl he’d made love to in her tent in Saudi Arabia. The young woman he’d spent so many hours with. They’d talked endlessly about their plans for medical school, their love of old movies, their favorite books—anything they could think of to pass the time in the desert. He remembered observing her during her first MedEvac mission. She’d been in the Gulf all of one day, yet she handled the grisliest injuries with a composure and skill he couldn’t help but respect. He’d started loving her right then.

He wished he could touch her now. He dared to reach out and smooth his fingers over the hem of her white lab coat. “You became a doctor,” he said. “Just like you wanted.”

She nodded.

“I knew you could do it,” he said. “Emergency Room?”

“Yes,” she replied as she walked around the end of the bed again. “I was lucky. Everything fell into place for me.”

“Pull up a chair and stay a while.” He motioned toward the green vinyl-upholstered chair in the corner of the room.

She hesitated for just a moment before walking over to the chair and dragging it back to his bedside. “I only have a minute before I have to go to the ER,” she said, sitting down. She was in control of herself again, a serious, professional demeanor replacing the girlish exuberance of a few minutes earlier.

“How are you doing, Brian?” she asked, leaning forward. “How are you doing *really*?”

"I'm okay." He nodded toward his one leg. "I mean, after all this time, I've adjusted to it."

She looked down at her hands. Her fingers were laced tightly together in her lap, and for the first time, he noticed the simple gold band on her left ring finger. His chest tightened with disappointment. He knew he was being ridiculous. They'd had a few months together, followed by fourteen years of no contact. He'd told her to get out of his life. What the hell had he expected—that she'd still be waiting for him to come to his senses?

"I thought about not stopping in," she said. "Last time we spoke, you were pretty clear that you didn't want to see me again."

"I just wanted you to be able to . . ." It was his turn to feel awkward. "I wanted you to have a normal life, Cindy. Let's face it. You wouldn't have had one with me. Besides, that was a long time ago, and now I'm very glad you decided to come."

"Where are you living?" she asked.

"San Diego." He took a sip of his iced tea and felt a tremor in his hand as he gripped the glass. She was not the only one anxious about this visit. "I have a house near the beach. And I'm a techie. I work on the VA website."

"Ah," she said, smiling. "You found a niche for yourself. I bet you're really good at computers and the Internet and all that stuff that baffles me. You were so smart."

He started to tell her a little about his job when his gaze fell to the embroidered letters above the pocket of her lab coat.

Cynthia Carlucci, M.D.

"You married a *Carlucci*?" he exclaimed.

Her hand flew to the embroidery as if she'd forgotten it was there, and the flush returned to her neck, spreading upward to her cheeks. Hesitating for a moment or two, she said, "I married *the* Carlucci."

“Holy . . .” His voice trailed off, his chest aching again. “Well, congratulations,” he said, but the smile he gave her was forced.

“Thank you,” Cindy said. “We’ve been married ten years.”

“How the hell did that happen?” he asked.

Cindy let out a sigh. “I think . . . you know . . . what Eddie and I went through just pulled us together. The grenade attack and all.” She looked apologetic for bringing it up. “We really were just friends for a long time. Then we became best friends.” Her tone was flat, as if she’d given the same explanation many times before. “Then we decided friendship was a pretty good foundation for a marriage, so . . .” She ended with a shrug.

Brian frowned, searching for the real meaning behind her words. “What about . . . passion? Fireworks?” *Like what we had.*

“That’s personal, Brian.” She gave him a smile that told him to shut up. “Eddie’s a great guy.”

He guessed he’d insulted her. At the very least, he’d put her on the defensive. “I know that,” he said. “He was my best friend at one time, too. But I didn’t *marry* him.”

She laughed.

“Do you have kids?” he asked.

“No. We would have liked to, but . . .” She shrugged again. “Too much going on.”

“You and Crazy Eddie.” Brian shook his head, still struggling with the idea of the woman he’d loved marrying a man he’d once considered his best friend. He had no right at all to be jealous. “I’ve always been glad you two came through that mess unscathed,” he said. “It was a miracle, don’t you think?”

Cindy looked down at her hands again, where she was twirling her wedding ring on her finger. “We were lucky,” she said.

Brian shifted a little on the bed, getting more comfortable. "So how is Crazy Eddie doing? Did he become a test pilot like he wanted?"

She laughed. "You're not going to believe it. He's a psychologist."

"No way!" Brian laughed. "Crazy Eddie's a *shrink*?"

Cindy smiled again. "I know it doesn't quite fit the man you knew," she said.

"It sure doesn't." Brian raised an eyebrow at her. "That guy was born to fly. *Recklessly*."

"People change," Cindy said, "and he's actually very good at what he does. He works here, at the hospital."

"You're kidding! Call him up right now, and get him over here."

She gave her head a quick shake. "He's incredibly busy."

"Well, I'm not going anyplace," Brian said. "I'll be here four days a week. Tell him I want to see him. I need my Tarot cards read. Does he still mouth off about his supernatural powers?"

"No," she replied. "He's quieter about them now."

"Remember how he told everyone he could bend spoons with his mind?"

"That's the least of what he can do." Abruptly, Cindy stood up and pushed the chair back into the corner. "I'll tell him you're here. Maybe he can give you a call some day soon."

Brian frowned. "I'm going to be here for three months, and the best he can do is give me a call? Is he mad at me or something? Is it . . . you know, because you and I had something going before—"

"No, don't be silly," she said quickly. "It's nothing at all." She looked at her watch. "I've got to run, Brian, but I'll tell Eddie you're here the first chance I get, okay?"

"Does he blame me for what happened?" Brian asked. "Do *you* blame me?"

Her lips parted in a look of surprise. “Of course I don’t blame you, and neither does Eddie. Any one of us could have made the same mistake.”

“You didn’t want me to bring McSweet on that mission.”

“I didn’t?” she said. “I don’t even remember. It’s ancient history, Brian.”

He watched her walk to the door, the lab coat clinging lightly to her hips.

“Wait a sec, Cin,” he said, and she turned to look at him.

“Do you have nightmares?” he asked.

She looked confused, but only for a second. “You mean . . . about that day?”

He nodded, wondering if she could see the guilt that rested heavily on his shoulders. Wondering, too, if that day still haunted her as it did him.

She slipped her hands into the pockets of her lab coat. “I did at first,” she admitted. “I’d see . . . blood . . . blood everywhere . . . and the explosion and . . . things flying around. It faded over time, though.” Her brow drew together in a concerned frown. “You don’t still have them, do you?”

“Every night,” he said. “Every time I go to sleep. I relive the whole thing, from start to finish.”

“Oh, Brian,” she said. “How terrible for you. Have you talked to anyone about it? A therapist or someone?”

“Dozens,” he said.

She folded her arms across her chest again, her brow still furrowed as she studied him. “Your life is really a challenge, isn’t it.”

He had never cried over all he’d lost, so the sudden threat of tears took him by surprise, and he had to swallow hard to speak. “It has been. Sometimes. But I’m okay.”

The look on her face let him know she wasn’t fooled.

"I'll see you later," she said. Then, with a quick smile, she turned and left.

He fought sleep all afternoon. At first, it was easy because his mind was on Cindy. She looked fantastic. She'd found the career she always wanted and undoubtedly excelled at. But her marriage to Eddie sounded . . . what? Empty? Maybe she'd made it sound that way to keep from hurting him.

What would have happened, Brian allowed himself to wonder, if he hadn't pushed her away? Surely, the past decade would have been much better for him—and far worse for her. She might never have been able to fulfill her own dreams.

No, he'd done the right thing letting her go. His life *was* challenging. She would be trapped with a man whose physical and psychological handicaps created daily hurdles. A man who couldn't satisfy her sexually—at least not in the way he once had. He groaned with the memory of their one night of lovemaking, when the future stretched out before them, a field of limitless opportunities.

Even thoughts of Cindy couldn't fend off sleep for long. Before he knew what was happening, he was in the Kuwaiti desert, pushing Jason McSweet toward the woman in the *abaya*. He watched the swaddling fall away from the infant in her arms and saw the black mouth of the pistol emerge from the fabric.

"McSweet!" he shouted.

"Brian!" Cindy called from somewhere nearby.

The blast exploded from the gun, and McSweet flew backward onto the sand.

"McSweet!" Brian shouted again. He tried to run toward the young private, but someone grasped his arms, holding him back. He thrashed furiously at his assailant.

"Brian, it's me!"

Cindy.

He opened his eyes. She was sitting on his bed, her hands on his shoulders as if she'd been trying to hold him down. He tried vainly to move his legs—often the only way he knew the dream had been just that, a dream. “Where am I?” He struggled to sit up. “I don’t—”

“Shh.” Cindy ran her palms up and down his arms. “You’re safe, Brian. It’s 2004. It’s early Tuesday morning. Do you hear me? You’re okay. You’re at Middleton. You’re not in the Gulf.”

“Oh, God.” He raised a tremulous hand to cover his face. How long had she been in his room? What had he said in his sleep?

Cindy leaned forward and wrapped her arms around him. “You’re okay now, Bri.”

“Damn,” he said, embarrassed. “I must look like an idiot.”

“No.” She pressed her cheek against his, and he raised one arm, cautiously returning the embrace. “I’m so sorry you’re still struggling with this,” she said. “I’m so, so sorry.”

He shook his head, reluctantly extracting himself from her arms to offer her a weak smile. “I’m okay,” he assured her. “Once I wake up, it’s fine. It’s no big deal.”

“Don’t make light of it,” she said. “Tell me the truth. Is this what it’s always like? Are the dreams always this bad?”

He started to deny it, to offer her some bull about it being worse when he wasn’t at home. But he couldn’t do it. He couldn’t lie to her.

Sighing, he nodded. “It’s like I’m there. Like it’s happening all over again.”

Cindy gnawed on her lower lip as she looked hard into his eyes. “You need to talk to Eddie,” she said suddenly, firmly. “He’s really good at helping people with . . . well . . . guilt or whatever it is that’s making you have that dream every night.”

Brian scowled. "From what you said before, I got the feeling he wouldn't be all that interested in seeing me. And I *don't* want to see him as a shrink."

"I called him, and he's very excited about your being here," she said. "That's why I stopped in. I wanted to let you know that he wants to see you. But there's something else I have to tell you."

Her expression was so serious that he was afraid to hear what she had to say. "What?" he asked, wary.

She lifted his hand and held it in both of hers. "I know he told you that he wasn't injured in the attack in Kuwait."

"Right," Brian said. "You and Eddie were the only two who weren't. I was so glad of that."

"But Eddie *was* injured," she said. "He didn't want you to know. That's why he never came to see you. He knew you already felt guilty enough and didn't want to—"

"Injured how?" Brian interrupted her.

"It's not too bad," she said quickly. "It's his eyes. No one was sure what happened. Pieces of flying metal or something. So he has scars around his eyes, and I just wanted to warn you so you didn't . . . so you knew."

"What about his vision?" Brian asked.

"It's . . . well, it's not twenty-twenty, but you can talk to him about it when he sees you."

She was hedging. There was more—more that he wasn't going to like. Brian was sure of it.

But she waved off any further question he might have asked. "Eddie can explain it better than I can." She smiled and gave his arm a little punch. "He's still the same old Eddie. You don't need that long face."

"I wish he'd told me," Brian muttered.

"You had way too much to deal with without worrying about him, too." She let go of his hand and stood up, and the bed felt

suddenly very empty. “Let’s turn on your TV and get your mind focused on something other than that dream.” She picked up the remote and clicked the power button. An advertisement for a cell phone company popped onto the screen.

Brian leaned back against his pillow. “This stuff”—he looked up at the bag of liquid hanging above him—“makes me so tired. Would you ask someone to bring me a cup of coffee, please?”

“Okay.” She leaned over to examine the IV in his arm, the touch of her fingers warm against his skin. “They’ll probably give you a sleeping pill tonight,” she said. “Will that keep you from dreaming?”

“It hasn’t in the past.”

“Then listen to me.” She sat down on his bed again and gripped his hand. “I want you to stay awake tonight, okay? Don’t sleep.”

Brian laughed. “What kind of medical advice is that?”

“Eddie can’t get in to see you today, but he can come tomorrow morning,” she said. “I don’t want you to go to sleep until he’s had a chance to talk to you.”

“Cindy . . .” He leveled a look at her. “Please, don’t kid yourself. Talking with a shrink for ten minutes isn’t going to fix fourteen years’ worth of nightmares.”

“Promise me.” She pressed his hand between hers.

“Promise me, you’ll at least try to stay awake.”

“All right,” he said, persuaded by her ardor. “I promise.”

He refused the sleeping pill he was offered that evening, and he watched the “Late Show” and half of an old movie before he dozed off. The nightmare came and went, and he woke up at five a.m. with a shout that brought two nurses running. He apologized for disturbing them and asked for more coffee.

He’d had three cups by eight o’clock, when Cindy appeared in his doorway, her hand on the arm of a man wearing jeans

and a navy blue cotton sweater. The man's tinted glasses were rimless, his hair silver, and the upper half of his face was crisscrossed with scars.

"Hey, dude!" The man broke into a grin as he crossed the room. Leaning over, he pulled Brian into a bear hug.

Brian's breath caught in his throat. "Eddie," he whispered.

Eddie let go and straightened. "I can't believe you're really here!"

Brian noticed instantly that Eddie's gaze did not quite meet his—and that his vision was a far cry from twenty-twenty.

"You should have told me, Eddie," he said.

"Told you what? You mean about stealing your girl?" Eddie held one arm out to his side, and Cindy slipped into the curve of his elbow, her own arm going around her husband's waist. "I figured you'd want me to look out for her."

"You should have told me about your *injuries*," Brian said. "How bad is it? How much can you see?"

"It's very manageable," Eddie said.

"How *bad*?" Brian pressed him.

"I know there's a bed in front of me, and I know you're sitting in it," Eddie said. "I see shadows."

"He's had seventeen surgeries," Cindy interjected.

Brian pictured their life together: Eddie being wheeled seventeen times into an operating room. Cindy waiting outside, praying for results that would leave her husband better off than he'd been before.

"That's why he couldn't fly," she added.

"Shh, Cin," Eddie said.

Brian felt the guilt pressing down on him. "I'm so sorry, man," he said.

"Cindy"—Eddie squeezed his wife's shoulder—"how about you give Meyerson and me some time to catch up?"

Cindy didn't move. Instead, she pressed closer to him, her forehead against his chin, and Eddie touched her cheek. The gesture was tender, loving. Brian felt like a voyeur.

"Are you okay?" Eddie asked her softly.

She hesitated a moment, then nodded.

"Are you sure about. . . ?" His voice trailed off.

She nodded again, her eyes on her husband and a small smile on her face. "Very," she said. "You?"

Eddie bent down to kiss her. "You know it, honey," he said.

"Will we . . . remember?"

"Don't know for sure," Eddie said, "but I think we might. Would that be okay with you?"

"Yes," she said. "I think I'd like it that way."

"What's going on with you two?" Brian asked, but they didn't seem to hear him.

Cindy walked toward the door. "Love you," she called over her shoulder to Eddie. Then she waved. "See you later, Bri."

The two men watched her leave the room, the door closing quietly behind her.

Then Eddie asked, "Is there a chair in here?"

"In the corner," Brian said. "To your right."

Eddie found the chair and dragged it to the bedside.

"Do you have your Tarot cards with you?" Brian joked, trying to ease the tension that had crept into the room.

Eddie smiled his old smile, one side of his mouth higher than the other, and Brian felt relieved to see that at least one thing had not changed about Crazy Eddie Carlucci.

"I haven't used my Tarot cards since the war," Eddie said, sitting down. "I don't even know where they are."

Brian reached toward the rolling tray table at the side of his bed, where the plate and utensils from his breakfast still sat. He picked up a spoon and held it toward Eddie.

"Here's a spoon for you to bend," he said.

Eddie didn't seem to see it. "I *could* bend it, you know," he said, "but I'm saving my strength for something bigger right now."

Brian laughed. "You always were a bullshitter." He put the spoon back on the tray.

Eddie leaned forward in the chair, his hands clasped together in front of him. "You know," he said, "sometimes when something crappy happens to you, you can look back on it and see that it helped you in some way. That you grew from the experience or that it changed you in a good way."

Brian winced at his friend's transparent attempt to counsel him. "Don't play shrink with me, Carlucci," he said.

"I'm not," Eddie insisted. "This is a conversation between old friends. I mean . . . I lost a lot of my sight and"—he chuckled—"even more of my looks." The smile faded from his face, though, as he added, "I also lost the ability to fly, and you know better than anyone how big a loss that was for me. Flying was everything to me."

The shroud of guilt tightened around Brian's shoulders. "I'm sorry, Eddie."

"I've never blamed you, all right?" Eddie said. "Let's get that clear. Never blamed you. The reason Cindy and I never looked you up in all these years was not because we thought it might bother you to see us together, but because we didn't want you to know how bad it was for me. We didn't want to add to your problems. But now you're here, and it's time you knew everything."

"What do you mean by 'everything?'" Brian asked, not at all sure he wanted to hear the answer.

"I wanted to fly more than anything in the universe," Eddie said.

"I know that. I'm as sorry as I can be that you can't. I know what it's like to—"

“I loved flying more than I love Cindy.”

Brian recoiled. “Shit, Eddie, I do *not* want to hear this! What’s with you, anyway? I think the shrink needs a shrink.”

“Cindy knows. She understands me. And I . . . well, let’s face, it, Meyerson—from the moment she and I started dating, I understood that I was her second choice. I knew it was you she really wanted.”

Shifting uncomfortably on the bed, Brian growled, “I don’t see how this conversation is helping either of us.”

“I think you will later,” Eddie said.

“I doubt it.”

“Tell me about the nightmares.”

“No, thanks.”

“Cindy says they’re pretty bad,” Eddie persisted. “What are they like?”

“I don’t need another therapist,” Brian said. “Besides, you were there. You know *exactly* what it was like.”

“Is there anything good that’s come out of what happened to you?” Eddie probed again. “I mean, are you grateful for what happened in some way? The way it’s changed you or—”

“Are you out of your mind?” Brian cut him off. “If you mean do I appreciate being alive, being able to make a living, etcetera, etcetera, then sure. I have a different sort of appreciation for life and a different perspective on things. But if you mean, am I *glad* it happened, then, hell no, I’m not. I’d be crazy to think that losing a leg and my chance at a medical career was a *good* thing.”

Eddie nodded thoughtfully. “Yeah, I guess you’re right.” Then, suddenly, he pointed to the IV bag hanging from the post above the bed. “Is that an IV bag up there?”

Blinking a little at the abrupt shift in Eddie’s attention, Brian looked up at the bulging plastic bag. “Uh-huh.”

Eddie started to laugh. "You know what that reminds me of?"

"What?"

"That time we sneaked vodka into our encampment in the IV bags."

Still confused by the sudden change in topic, Brian had to think a moment. Then, remembering the incident, he smiled. "I'd forgotten that."

"Remember that Saudi restaurant with the camel vomit?" Eddie asked.

"Oh, man." Brian shook his head with a laugh. "That stuff was good, though." They'd spread the pasty green dip on pita bread. It was a lot better than the food in the mess tent.

He and Eddie reminisced for a while, and Brian nearly forgot his discomfort over the previous conversation. It felt good to talk with his old friend, good to recall the few pleasant memories from their time together in Kuwait. He'd had no one else to share them with. When a man showed up at a shrink's office paralyzed from the waist down, he wasn't likely to be asked about the positive aspects of being in a war—the funny things that had happened, the camaraderie that had gotten him through the fear and the boredom.

After a while, though, Eddie lifted the crystal on his wrist watch and ran his fingertips over the face. "I've got an appointment," he said, getting to his feet, then pushing the chair back into the corner.

"Thanks for stopping in," Brian said.

"Glad to do it." Eddie approached his bed again. "You know," he said, "There's one thing about me that hasn't changed."

"What's that?"

He held out his hand, and Brian reached to shake it.

"I still really love taking risks."

Eddie's fingers wrapped around his like a vice, and Brian nearly yelped with the bone-crushing pain. Eddie's eyes were closed, his mouth open a little, and Brian thought he might be having some sort of attack.

"Eddie . . ." he said, alarmed. "Eddie! Are you all right?" He tried to pull his hand away, but the other man held it fast. "Hey! *Eddie!*" Shit, was he having a seizure or something?

Fumbling with his free hand for the call button, Brian was stopped short, his breath catching in his throat, as a sudden jolt of electricity raced up his arm. His hand burned with pins and needles. "*Eddie!*" he shouted again.

Just as suddenly as it had begun, the incident ended. Eddie let go of his hand and opened his eyes. His cockeyed smile was back as though nothing the least bit odd had transpired.

"It was good to see you, Meyerson," he said. "I'm sure it won't be the last time."

Brain cradled his tingling hand in his lap as he watched Eddie leave the room. He stared at the closed door for a good five minutes, trying to calm his breathing and clear his head. He thought of calling Cindy in the ER to tell her that he was worried about Eddie, and he might have done so if he hadn't suddenly been consumed by exhaustion. Exhaustion like nothing he could remember, sweeping over him like a tidal wave.

He managed to find the button on the side rail to lower the head of his bed. As his upper body slowly drifted downward, he felt as if he were falling miles rather than inches, and he was asleep before he'd even closed his eyes.

Whomp, whomp, whomp.

The Huey bucked a little as it started its descent. He saw Cindy reach for one of the aid bags. McSweet opened his eyes. He looked sick.

"You okay, McSweet?" he asked.

The chopper hit the sand with a soft *thud*. Cindy sprang out of the Huey, and Brian grabbed a backboard and followed her. Sand blew into his face, and for just a moment, he couldn't see.

"Over here!" someone shouted.

"Help *me!*" someone else begged.

It was so hot! The smell of fire and death seared his nostrils, and sweat ran into his eyes as he ran from one injured soldier to another.

"Someone's hurt behind that burned-out car!" Cindy shouted to him.

"I'll check," he replied.

He ran around the side of the sedan and found a Saudi woman clad in a black *abaya* and *burka*. Her body rose from the sand like a small dark mountain. She raised her hand toward him, and he saw that she cradled a swaddled infant in her other arm.

Catching sight of McSweet standing at the side of the road, he barked, "McSweet! Take care of this woman!"

"I don't think I can, sir," McSweet mumbled.

"Get going, soldier!" Brian stormed over, grabbed the kid's arm, and forced him in the woman's direction.

After a few yards, he let go but waited to make sure McSweet continued walking. He watched as the kid reached the woman, then bent over to take the bundled baby. He was about to leave the scene when he noticed a swift change in the woman's dark eyes. *Victory!* her expression said as she reached inside the baby's swaddling. The skin of her hand was very dark, her fingers thick and masculine.

A wave of dizziness washed over him. The woman tugged at the swaddling in slow motion, the layers of fabric floating in the air in front of her, forming a black pile on the sand. Vertigo forced Brian to his knees, his vision clouding over.

“Sergeant?” McSweet asked. “What’s wrong?”

What was a Saudi woman doing on this road in Kuwait?

Something dark and metallic lay hidden in the unfurling fabric. Brian knew without a doubt what it was.

Leaping to his feet, he pulled McSweet behind him with one hand and drew his Beretta with the other, aiming it at the woman.

“What are you *doing?*” McSweet asked him.

“Get back!” Brian shouted, waiting only a split second to be absolutely sure of what he’d seen. His vision seemed clearer than it had ever been, and when the masquerading Iraqi man pulled a gun from the remaining yards of swaddling, Brian fired his Beretta, before the man had a chance to shoot.

The shot cracked the still desert air, the bullet cutting cleanly through the black fabric above the imposter’s heart. A look of surprise filled the man’s dark eyes as he fell backward onto the sand.

Brian turned to see McSweet, Eddie, Dabrowski, and Cindy standing nearby, all staring at the body of the Iraqi, their mouths open in stunned silence.

“Let’s get to work,” he said as he walked past them, his hand rock steady as he replaced the pistol in its holster.

~ ~ ~

Brian awakened in the darkness, a small headache pressing against his temples. He could hear doctors being paged over the hospital loudspeaker and the sound of an ambulance siren in the distance. A door opened and closed near his head, and in another moment, someone shook him by the shoulder.

“Time to get up,” a woman said. “Didn’t you hear your page? Motorcycle accident coming in. ETA two minutes.”

“What?” Brian asked, his voice muffled by sleep and confusion. The pain in his head receded as he propped himself up on his elbows.

"Nap time's over, Doc." The woman walked away, and the bright light of a hallway poured into the room as she slipped out the door.

He blinked his eyes, frowning.

"Paging Dr. Meyerson." The voice came from somewhere behind him. "ER. ETA one minute."

Shit, what was going on? He sat up on the bed, swinging his feet to the floor. . . .

His *feet*.

He ran his hands over his thighs—*thighs, plural*—and pinched one of them, instantly wincing at the pain. *He had two legs. And he could feel both of them.*

He stood up, his legs holding him with ease, and realized he was in blue scrubs rather than the pajamas he'd been wearing. He walked into the brightly lit hallway, his gait sure and steady. He was not even limping.

A nurse rushed past him. "Your wife's already in with the patient," she said.

He nodded. His feet knew the way to the treatment room, even if his brain hadn't quite caught up with his body. He swung open the door to see Cindy helping the paramedics transfer a teenaged boy to the examining table. Vague images sped through his memory: a wedding, Cindy at his side. A house with a yard filled with trees. The birth of twin daughters.

The boy on the examining table groaned. Above the patient, Brian faced his wife. "What's his status?" he asked her.

"Head injury," she said. "Never lost consciousness. We need to evaluate him for internal injuries and get a scan."

The nurse at Brian's side attached EKG leads to the boy's chest while he palpated his belly. It was hard to concentrate on what he was doing, though, because his eyes were tearing up. Glancing across the table at Cindy, he saw that she was battling tears, as well. But she also wore a smile.

Catching her gaze, he asked quietly, “What the hell just happened?”

The nurse heard him. “What?” she asked, glancing at the monitor against the wall. “Aren’t the leads attached right?”

“They’re fine,” Cindy told her. Then to him, she whispered, “Later.”

He couldn’t wait. There were too many questions streaming through his head.

“Where’s Eddie?” he asked.

“In Florida,” she said. “He has perfect vision, and he’s married to a saintly woman who puts up with him. He has three amazing kids.” She gave him a devilish grin. “And he’s an astronaut.”

Brian let out a laugh so loud the nurse stopped her task of spreading instruments on a tray and looked at him.

“How about the co-pilot?” Brian asked. “Dabrowski?”

“Back in the Middle East,” she said. “He’s General Dabrowski now.”

“And McSweet?” he asked.

“I don’t know,” Cindy said. “We’ll have to look him up and see.”

“*What* are you two talking about?” the nurse asked them.

Her name was Sandra, he remembered suddenly. He could name every person who worked in the ER. His mind was growing sharper by the second.

“We’re just talking about old friends,” Cindy said to her.

“Well, maybe we should be talking about the *patient*,” Sandra snapped. She could be a real bitch.

“You’re right,” he said. “We can play catch-up later.”

“Catch-up?” Sandra looked both baffled and annoyed. “You two live *and* work together. What can you possibly have to catch up about?”

“You have no idea,” Cindy said.

~ ~ ~

Two hours and ten patients later, he and Cindy were able to take a break at the same time. In the hallway, he caught her hand and pulled her with him into the physician's sleeping room, where he'd awakened a new man that morning. The light was off, and he didn't bother turning it on as he locked the door behind him.

He leaned down to kiss her.

"You look so sexy in these scrubs," he said.

"You always say that," she laughed.

"Do I?" He smiled at her.

He turned on the little reading lamp at the head of the bed, swiveling it toward the wall so that the room filled with a soft, filtered light. Then he undressed his wife. She held very still, seeming at ease with her nudity, letting the pale light wash over her as though she knew he needed to look at every inch of her.

Sitting down on the narrow bed, he studied her as if examining a painting in a museum. Her breasts were small and round and beautiful. He reached up to run a finger across one taut nipple and heard her breath catch in her throat. He was perplexed by the scar across her belly until he remembered she'd had a C-section. He ran his fingertips over the thin line. The babies had been placed, one at a time, into his waiting arms.

"I want to see my daughters," he said, his voice thick.

"They're eight, right?"

"Yes," Cindy replied. "Joanna and Molly."

"After our mothers," he said. "And they're identical. Except Joanna's hair is shorter."

"Right, baby," she said. She pressed his head to her belly, leaning over to kiss his hair.

Brian shut his eyes. "It was the handshake, wasn't it?" he asked.

“Yes.” She chuckled. “He told me he was afraid he might have broken some bones.”

Brian flexed his fingers. They were fine. “Why now?” he asked. “Why didn’t he fix his vision before?”

“He wasn’t sure he could,” she said. “He . . . Brian, Eddie’s powers were just beginning back when we knew him in Saudi. They increased over the years, and lately he’s been talking about trying to . . . you know . . . make things right. I think he was afraid of what would happen, though. That it might go haywire—that his life would have taken a very different course, and I’d be left alone. But then you showed up here and . . . well, he knew it was time.”

“Unreal,” Brian whispered. He looked up at her. “Thank you,” he said. “For everything.”

Cindy knelt on the floor in front of him and loosened the ties of his pants. He helped her tug them off, and in a moment, he was undressed, as well. He lowered her to the bed, lay down next to her, and kissed her, taking pleasure in the familiar scent of her, the familiar taste of her tongue. She was an impatient lover, though. She stroked his chest only briefly before sliding her hand down his belly. Finding his erection, she circled it with her fingers.

The sensations were so strong they were nearly unbearable. It was already difficult for him to remember what it had been like to feel nothing down there. More difficult still with every exquisite stroke of her fingers. When he entered her, it seemed like both the first time and the millionth time. She wrapped her legs around him, rocking with him, gripping his shoulders with her hands. He struggled to hold back. It had been so long . . . so long . . . She cried out when she came, her body shuddering beneath his, and he allowed his own orgasm to explode, letting out a shout that surprised even him.

They giggled together afterward, whispering, wondering if they might have been heard in the hallway. He didn't really care, and he doubted that Cindy did either. There was too much joy in them to care what anyone else thought.

Brian wrapped his arms gently around her. Lifting her hand to his lips, he kissed her palm. He felt a contentment that had eluded him for more than a decade. Soon, someone would come looking for them, or they would hear one of their names paged over the intercom. For now, though, he would just hold his wife and revel in the feeling of life in her body and in his.

It was more than he'd ever dared to dream.