



DEADLY TIES

A Novel

VICKI
WINZE

Prologue

The child is not; and I, wither shall I go?
—GENESIS 37:30 (KJV)

July 1987

Seagrove Village, Florida

It was an ordinary day. Bad things aren't supposed to happen on ordinary days. Only normal things.

Annie Harper looked at her reflection in the entryway mirror. Her hair was a wreck. The dark circles under her eyes looked as if they'd been drawn on with markers and then smudged. And her nails were a disgrace. Haggard and beaten down. That's how she looked. And she felt worse.

"There should be universal rules about this," she told her reflection. "When a woman is body slammed, she can only take so much without breaking under the pressure."

Gathering a full head of steam, she frowned and jabbed her finger in the air. "Life should go easy on you then." That would be humane. Civil. "And if bad things have to happen, there should be warning signs so there's time to brace and prepare for them."

She dipped her chin and glared into her own eyes. "Especially if it's too horrific to wrap your mind around—and it happens not to you, but to someone you love."

Pain shot through her heart, leaving her chest hollow and empty. "But there aren't any rules and there weren't any signs." She shifted her gaze to the ceiling. "Why, God? Why didn't You send me at least one bad feeling? An intuitive flash? Couldn't You spare me even one piddling stomach flutter?" Tears stung her eyes. "I've been loyal, obedient. Why didn't I get *something*?"

No edgy nerves. No hitch in her chest. No whispered warning in her mind like, *Annie Harper, you listen to me, woman. Trouble's coming. Summon your faith and gird your loins because every mother's worst fear is about to knock on your door.*

Fisting her hand, she rested it on the gleaming wooden table beneath the mirror. *But did You? No.*

She glared at the vase of freshly cut white roses. The scent was heavy, cloying. "Women's intuition?" She picked up a bud, plucked a petal, and dropped it onto the spotless marble floor. "Failed."

Tore off another petal. "Mother's intuition?" Tossed it down. "Failed."

Jerked at another petal. "God?" Thrust it. "Failed."

Her breath caught in her throat. *“Everything failed.”*

She reached for more petals, but she had stripped the rose bare. All that remained was its stem and thorns.

Like me.

Outrage and agony ripped from her soul. *Oh, I resent this and I wish I had someone to blame. But You didn't even give me that. Why?*

She staggered into the living room and collapsed on the sofa, curling her knees to her chest to keep the pain bottled up inside. If she let it loose, she'd never recover and there was nowhere to dump it.

It was just an ordinary day.

“Take me back,” she cried out, her face tear soaked. Cradling herself, she rocked back and forth, seeking comfort where there was none. “Just twenty-four hours. Please, take me back.”

“Annie?” Miranda Kent came in from the kitchen, clipping an earring back onto her lobe. Not a strand of her auburn hair was out of place. Loose curls framed her face. Her nails, like the rest of her, were perfect.

She snagged a tissue and passed it to Annie. “I’ve put on a pot of coffee. The church ladies were meeting at the club, but I told Nora about Charles. She said they would be here in a flash.”

Annie nodded, pretending to care. She wanted two people in her house. Two. And neither of them would be coming. “Charles and I were at the club night before last.”

She and her beloved husband had dinner with the mayor and forty or so close friends at Somerset House on the Bay. They feasted on salad with baby artichoke hearts and spears of cucumber, then ate honeyed baby carrots and blackened grouper caught fresh that morning in the Gulf of Mexico. Grouper was Charles’s favorite. She swallowed hard. They’d never dine there again.

“We were with you, remember?” Miranda clutched her flat stomach. “I know better than to eat a heavy meal that late. I was up all night.”

Annie and Charles had slept like rocks. Then they’d gotten up, eaten breakfast, and Lisa and he had been on their way.

Miranda sat beside Annie and crossed her legs at the ankles. “Is Lisa seven or eight now? I can’t remember. After thirty, the years tend to run together.”

“Seven.” Annie’s voice cracked. Lisa was bright and beautiful inside and out—at times all sweetness and innocence, and at others wise beyond her years.

“She told me she wanted to be a doctor like her dad. We were at Nora’s birthday party, I think.”

Pain twisted in Annie like hot wires coiled tight. “It’s what she’s always wanted.” Lisa idolized her father. “She has a stronger stomach for medical procedures than I do, and she never complains about Charles’s long hours at the office and hospital.” Annie sniffed and dabbed at her eyes. “His practice takes him away from us so much, but Lisa always defends him.” Oh, how Annie wished he were at the office now. That Lisa were here with her.

“They left early yesterday, didn’t they?”

Annie didn’t answer.

“Annie? They left early yesterday, right?”

“If this shows up in the *Village Log*, I’m going to cut off your fingers, Miranda.”

“Not a word without your express permission.” She crossed her heart.

Annie believed her. “Yesterday. At the crack of dawn.” Seagrove Village was up in the Florida panhandle, and getting down to Orlando for a trip to Disney World would take a solid eight hours. “Charles wanted to beat the tourist traffic.” She’d been so proud of him for finally taking a break from work to spend some quality time with Lisa. Charles was brilliant and committed to his patients, but he rarely took time off.

“Highway 98 is a nightmare during the season.” Miranda shifted on the white sofa. “I’m sure Lisa was excited.”

She was their only child, their miracle baby. “Beyond excited.”

“Why didn’t you go with them?”

“It’s my month to chair the charity function. I couldn’t beg off, and rescheduling would have been a nightmare for Charles’s staff and patients.” Now she wished she had gone. That she hadn’t, she’d regret forever.

“Just as well.” Miranda stood. “If Charles is anything like my Paul and you’d been there, he would have spent the entire week on the phone with his office.” She walked to the kitchen.

Dishes clanged in the distance, and Annie resented the racket almost as much as she resented Miranda being right. Charles would have used Annie as a buffer, and Lisa didn’t need him just being in the same room; she got enough of that already.

Miranda returned with a tea tray and the puzzle from *The New York Times*. “I saw this on the counter and thought you might want a diversion.”

“I don’t work the puzzles. I saved it for Lisa. She loves them.” Annie took a cup and saucer Miranda extended to her. “From the cradle, she couldn’t resist a mystery of any sort.” She was good at solving them too.

“Obviously that’s from Charles’s side of the family.”

Annie nodded. “They want to know and fix everything.” If they could fix this, Annie would never complain about that again.

But they couldn’t. God help her, no one could.

Miranda poured tea into her own cup. Steam lifted from it. “Interesting family dynamic. The Harpers are into everything and you avoid everything.”

“I don’t.” Annie took exception. “I face what I have to face to survive.”

“Exactly.” Miranda waved. “You only worry after you’ve prayed and done all you can do. I’ve always admired that about you.”

Annie didn’t want or need admiration. She wanted and needed her family.

She stared through the sheers out to the lawn. It was a glorious summer day, much like yesterday when Miranda and Annie had skipped the fashion show and played nine holes of golf. The club’s courses were the best in northwest Florida, and Miranda’s game was far better, but then it should be. Annie dabbled. Miranda hit the links nearly every day.

Ordinary.

The doorbell rang.

“I’ll get it.” Miranda set down her cup and got to her feet. “You just relax. Shall I bring the church ladies in here?”

“Yes.” Annie stood. “I’m going to my room for a few minutes to compose myself.”

Miranda nodded. “Good idea.” Pity shone in her eyes. “I’ll keep them busy until you’re ready to see them.”

Annie walked through to the master suite, shut the door, and then slung herself across her bed. If this were yesterday, she’d be in the hammock out back facing the cove, enjoying the salt-tanged breeze, lost in a good book. Even as night had fallen and the clock inched toward eight, she hadn’t been antsy.

Lisa had promised to phone every night at eight for a virtual tuck in. She’d outgrown it but indulged Annie because it was her favorite daily ritual, not that Annie ever dwelled on how much it meant to her. She learned early in life not to want or need anything too much. That could make you do crazy things. But the truth was, it was just too scary—the risks of wanting those things and not getting them. She’d worked hard on that, but life lessons instilled young were as hard to break as bad habits.

Was that just another latent gift of being orphaned and raised by a series of foster parents? Maybe so. Two were good people, but more than two should have been in jail. Yet more likely, she avoided those risks because until she’d married Charles, she had to claw her way through her whole life just to survive.

She scrunched her pillow and wadded it under her ear. The lavender smell reminded her of the roses. She tossed the pillow aside and tugged over Charles’s. His scent clung to the pillowcase. Gripping wads of the fine linen in both hands, she held on tight and buried her nose deep. Yesterday, those early days had faded from her life.

Yesterday, she had a good husband, an amazing daughter, a beautiful home in the village, and more stuff than anyone could want much less need.

Yesterday.

Yet even then, the fear of being hungry never went away. She could tell herself anything, go through all the therapy in the world, but down deep she still feared being hungry again.

Annie always had kept money stashed away for a rainy day. At least, she had until a month ago. Lisa came home from Sunday school and said an orphanage in Haiti needed a roof to get the kids out of the rain.

Images of those children soaked to the skin burned in Annie’s mind now as they had then. She hadn’t slept a wink. It’d been a fierce battle, but on the third day, she forfeited her stash. She wasn’t hungry and the kids were suffering. They needed to get dry.

Charles was indulgent and Lisa was ecstatic, lavish with grateful butterfly kisses and twinkling sparkles in her dancing blue eyes. She had no idea Annie had virtually been on her knees ever since, praying she hadn’t set herself up for starvation.

Ordinary.

“Take me back twenty-four hours,” she mumbled into the pillow. “Let me live them just once more.” She wept openly, begged without shame. “Just once more.”

The picture formed vividly in her mind. Twenty-four hours ago she had walked down the tiled east wing to Lisa’s room. Rex, her two-year-old yellow lab, lay parked right in the middle of her canopied bed. He seemed so sad that Annie lacked the heart to fuss at him. “You miss her too, eh, boy?”

Rex wagged his tail. She crawled up beside him and scratched his ears. Without Charles and Lisa, the house was far too big and empty. Rex felt it too. His bottom line was that he wanted Lisa and Annie in the same space. Anything less and he just wasn't happy. Truthfully, neither was she.

At straight-up eight, the phone rang. Rex barked and Annie snagged the receiver. "Hello."

"Mom?"

Lisa. "Hi, darling." Annie smiled. "Did you make it down okay?"

"We're not in Orlando. We went to Disney, but Daddy messed up the hotel reservation. He made it for tomorrow, not today."

"Oh no." She should have double-checked that. Charles was lousy with the mundane. One of the quirks Annie adored about him. "So where are you guys?"

"In a motel by a big hat. It's loud here, but the resort man couldn't find us anywhere to stay, so we drove around until Daddy found this place."

July Fourth weekend. Not an easy task to find a room with all the tourists in town for the holiday. An incredible amount of racket in the background hurt Annie's ear. She pulled the receiver away. "Where is Daddy, darling?"

"In the shower. Scrubbing off road grime."

Rex pawed at her thigh, nudging her to keep scratching his scruff. "So you guys are settling in for the night, eh?"

"Yes, but Daddy isn't happy about the music."

"Oh, that's not the TV?" Annie sank back against the pillows and scratched Rex's ears. The dog was nearly as spoiled as Lisa.

"It's off."

Annie frowned. "So what's making all the noise?"

"There's a place across the street that's got an orchestra."

A band. Hard rock, from the sounds of it. Charles would definitely hate that. Annie grinned. "Why do you sound winded?"

"Oh, that man's back, knocking on the door again." Lisa sounded more annoyed than scared. "Mom, he's got a spiderweb drawn on his hand."

"A tattoo?"

"Uh-huh."

Wait. The man was *back?* Alarmed, Annie sat straight up. "Lisa, do *not* open that door." She tried to keep panic out of her voice, but her throat was clenched-fist, white-knuckle tight. "Go get Daddy, darling."

"Just a second. The man is saying something to me through the window."

"What?" Rex perked his ears, lifted his head from her lap—a terrible sign. "What's he saying?" Was there a fire in the building or something?

"It's time for you to become a shrub." Lisa sounded baffled. "What does *that* mean?"

Become a shrub? Definitely a nut case. Whatever was going on sounded bad and felt worse. "Go get your dad. Do it right now, Lisa Marie!"

A loud crackle ripped through the phone. Something cracked. Splintered. Scuffled. Shattered.

Lisa screamed.

“Lisa!” Annie jumped out of bed. Growling and baring his teeth, Rex barked. “Lisa, answer me. Lisa!”

The line went dead.

Annie’s blood ran cold.

Yesterday was no longer an ordinary day.

July 2007

Iraq

Mark Taylor hated sand.

He'd hated it before coming to the desert for the tenth time in three years, but now buried in it, he really hated it. It got into everything, everywhere—in his boots, along with the scorpions; in his eyes; in his ears. Its grit was always clinging, chafing his skin.

As irritating as it was to his team, the sand was even harder on their equipment. Every man in his unit and Jane, the lone female attached as mission essential because she was a subject-matter expert, protected their weapons as best they could. Their lives depended on it.

Sensitive equipment repairs were left to other experts. When they had their heat source-detecting equipment and it worked, they ruled the night. Unfortunately they had arrived, the equipment had not, and the honchos had classified immediate action critical. Under direct orders, they'd left the Green Zone without it to do the impossible on sheer guts, determination, and a wing and a prayer.

They'd succeeded at taking out the terrorist cell and gathered data that could help Intel save lives. Overall, execution of their plan had gone smoothly. But five clicks from their rendezvous exit point, they hit a snag. A big one.

Two Humvees of hostiles sped toward each other down the road the team was to follow.

"I thought this road was abandoned," Joe said.

"Obviously not," Tim whispered. "Gentlemen, scatter."

Mark tapped his lip mic. "Six, where are you?"

"Three-Point Charlie," she said. "On point, sir."

Jane was on schedule, the other men had disappeared from his sight, but Mark's luck ran out. The hostiles halted about fifty meters in front of him.

He dropped back, well out of the beam of their headlights, dug in, and prayed they hadn't seen him. Even his breathing seemed magnified, echoing across the desert floor. Stealth movement when digging in yourself and a sixty-pound pack didn't go hand in hand.

He waited, shallowing his breath, watching... Noting no signs that they were aware of him, he stilled, his heart thumping against his ribs.

Long minutes later, Mark adjusted his lip mic and whispered, "Delta Three, you read me?"

"Loud and clear, bud," Sam responded. "Where are you?"

Seven minutes and two clicks short of where he should be. "Detained." Mark craned his neck and squinted to see. Weak moonlight was to his advantage, and he was grateful for it. Both Humvees had .50 cal's mounted on them. Outgunned, his team needed all the help it could wrangle to get out of this alive.

“Two vehicles. Parked fifty meters off the tip of my nose.” He didn’t dare check his watch for the GPS coordinates. The Humvees faced each other on the road. One man inside each vehicle stood and they talked back and forth between them. He couldn’t make out their words, but they didn’t seem anxious or excited.

“Window’s closing, bud.”

“Routine patrol. Eight hostiles. Dug in.” Mark was out of position and late. The chopper would arrive in minutes. It couldn’t linger; it’d be spotted for sure. “Is Six clear?”

He’d met Jane in advanced intelligence training four years earlier, and she’d become the little sister Mark never had, a spitfire with attitude and the smarts to back it up. He loved her, pure and simple, not that he’d ever told her. She loved him too as a brother, not that she’d ever told him. They’d just drifted into a makeshift family. Natural, considering her birth family ranked about as low on the lousy scale as his.

“Not yet,” Sam said. “Everyone else is still on the move.”

Worry streaked up Mark’s backbone, stung the roof of his mouth. “Last report?”

Had she run into trouble at Three-Point Charlie? Mark unclenched his muscles, forcing them to relax. Fear had a distinct smell. It carried on the wind, and anyone who’d been in combat conditions longer than a week recognized the scent. Jane knew how to take care of herself. She was capable and competent.

Please, let her be all right.

No answer from Sam.

He was worried too. It’d been too long since her last report. She was overdue verifying clearance, and Sam didn’t want to tell Mark. But his silence said it all.

Mark’s worry grew more urgent. He diverted his focus to calm down. Not staying calm under any kind of pressure wasn’t an option; it invited mistakes. Mistakes on covert missions infiltrating enemy territory assured death—your own if you were lucky. Your own and others if you weren’t.

Mark inhaled the night air, blessedly cool compared to the day’s scorching hundred-twenty degrees and relentless sun. He was supposed to meet Jane at Three-Point Charlie ten minutes ago, then they were to make the rendezvous point and join the others for their ride home.

He glared at the men in the Humvees. *For pity’s sake, move it.*

The hostiles had become adept at spotting men in the night desert. Mark had become better at evading them. On his stomach, buried in sand, they’d have to be hunting him to see him. They still weren’t. That was good news.

He and the team had managed to avoid detection the entire mission and execute their orders. While they all had been trained to kill, whenever possible they avoided it. Just slipped in and out under the radar, and often under the hostiles’ noses.

“Six reporting in,” Jane’s voice sounded through his earpod. Her tone was shrill, rushed. “One, what’s your ETA? Company could be coming.”

Mark checked the Humvees. No movement yet. “Dug in. Need a diversion.”

No response.

Mark tried another. “Four?” He waited but Tim didn’t respond. “Five?” Where was Joe?

“Off point,” Joe said. “Heading to Three-Point Charlie.”

“Two,” Mark tried Nick, then Tim again, “Four, I need a diversion—now.”

No answer.

Mark’s skin crawled. “Three, where is everybody?”

“Communications are up, bud,” Sam said. “Two and Four activated radio silence. I’m out of reach. Five’s hauling it to back up Six. Diversion presently impossible.”

If communications were up and a diversion was impossible because Nick and Tim weren’t in a position to speak, then they were either hiding or dead. With the bean counters giving the team a forty percent success-and-survival rating on this mission—with the right equipment—and them being without it, they could be either.

“One, they’re closing in on me.” Jane’s breathing sped up, turned tinny and crackled static. “Closing in—fast. Digging in. Not going to make it. Oh God, help me.”

If Mark didn’t move, Jane would die. If he did move, they both would die. Yet this was Jane. *Jane*. Mark had to try. Every muscle in his body tensed, preparing to move. He lifted an arm, cleared the sand.

“Stay put, One,” Sam ordered, knowing Mark well. “You hear me, bud?”

Gunfire erupted in Mark’s earpod.

“Aw, no. No.” Joe’s voice cracked.

Sam cursed.

And then came silence.

Mark’s throat went tight, his chest tighter. “Six?” He forced his voice to work. Tears streaked down his face. “Six?”

Jane didn’t answer. Please, please, please.

“Think steel, bro,” Joe said. “Nothing we can do to help her now.”

No. Joe had to be wrong. “You sure?”

“I’d give everything I’ve got not to be.”

Mark swallowed hard. *Oh, Jane*.

“Lousy shots.” Joe grunted. “Gunfire pattern was random.”

“You mean they were just shooting to be shooting?” Sam sounded as galled as Mark felt.

“No rhythm or rhyme, bro.”

Sam cut loose a string of curses.

Mark interrupted. “Are they coming after her?” If targeted, they would definitely verify whether or not she was dead.

“No. The rats are departing the fix. I don’t think they even saw her.”

Jane. Killed by a random shot. It took everything in Mark to hold his position. But Joe was right. It was too late to move. Only God could help Jane now. Mark mourned. *Think steel. Think steel. Think—*

“It’s not your fault, One.” Joe’s deep voice sounded cool and controlled.

It was his fault. His mother’s death, for which his father and brother blamed Mark his whole life, hadn’t been his fault. She died giving birth to him. But this...*this* was Mark’s fault. He wasn’t where he was supposed to be. Random or deliberate, Jane suffered the consequences. It was that simple.

Finally the Humvees sped off. One went in the direction it had been facing, away from the Green Zone. The other looped a U-turn on the road and fell in line behind the first one.

Mark shoved at the sand. “Moving out.” He ran full speed toward Three-Point Charlie, adrenaline pumping through his veins, screams boiling deep in the back of his throat. Sweat dripped from his brow and stung his eyes. His lungs burned, his side stitched and settled into an ache. He buried the pain deep and kept running.

“Four.” Tim reported in. “Quarter klick from rendezvous point.”

“Two. Arrived at rendezvous,” Nick said. “Chopper is two minutes out.”

Tim and Nick were on point. A stream of half-formed phrases and stilted, shuddered words said all that needed saying about Jane. Mark checked the GPS on his watch. Another minute.

It was the longest minute of his life. But finally he arrived at Three-Point Charlie. Joe and Sam heard him approach and spun toward him, their weapons raised. When they recognized Mark, they lowered their barrels.

Jane lay between them at their feet.

Sam wept.

Regret burned deep in Joe’s eyes. “I’m sorry, bro. I tried but I couldn’t get here in time.”

“My fault. I should have been here.” Mark dropped to his knees beside her, huffing, struggling to even out his breathing. He pressed his fingertips to her throat, checking her carotid for a pulse.

“There isn’t one.” Joe swiped at his face with his sleeve.

Mark knew it, but he had to check anyway. Gunshot wounds peppered her entire chest, soaked it in blood. Jane had died before she hit the ground. Mark’s heart split in two. He lifted her into his arms. “Let’s go.”

“You can’t take her, bud.” Sam touched his arm. “Despite what Joe said, they had to know she was here. They’re suffering a bullet shortage. They’re not going to burn thirty rounds just for kicks. They’re just lousy shots. If they don’t find her body, they’ll come after—”

“I am not leaving her.” Mark glared at Sam.

Calm as always, Joe stepped between them. “She’s coming home. Move it—now.”

They started running across the desert floor, made it to the rendezvous point, and met up with Tim and Nick. Within seconds, the thump of chopper blades split the dark silence, then the craft hovered just beyond them, kicking up sand that salted bare skin and even through camo stung like fire. A shadowy soldier stood in the side-door opening, scanning the area with his weapon.

The team jumped onboard and the chopper lifted.

“Let me have her, sir. Maybe it’s not too late.” A medic took Jane to the open area behind them, and Mark started to follow.

A second medic stepped between them. “Take a seat, sir. We’ve got her now.”

Mark sat, keeping an eye on the medics. They both worked hard to revive her, and they did it knowing as well as Mark that their efforts were a lost cause. Did they try for Jane or for her team?

Either way, it was too late. Jane had bled out in seconds. She hadn’t had a chance.

Tears stung Mark's eyes. The back of his nose burned, and an ache cinched his heart in a tight fist. He'd never hear her laugh again. Never hear her introduce him to her friends as her favorite big brother. Never look into her eyes and see her looking back at him with affection.

I can't stand this. God, why did You let me love her and fail to protect her? I can't take—

"You okay, bro?"

Mark glanced from Jane to Joe. Of all the guys, Joe and Mark were closest. Sam, Nick, and Tim all sat staring at them. They too had red-rimmed eyes. "No, Joe, I'm not okay." Jane was gone. Dead. He'd killed her. "I'm not okay, and I am never doing this again."

Barely thirty, Tim swiped a hand at his temple, ruffling the premature gray salting his brown hair, and leaned forward. "Don't make rash decisions. We're all hurting right now. Give it time."

No amount of time would fix this. "I wasn't there and she's dead." His throat thickened. He swallowed hard. "When the chopper hits the ground, I'm putting in my papers."

The guys studied each other, and then Sam shoved off his helmet and hung it on his knee. "You realize that leaves our team two short. The brass isn't going to drop a guy in, bud."

Mark wouldn't be replaced. The team would be expected to function short. The Shadow Watchers were an elite, highly specialized unit and its members' skills were cumulative. It'd take at least two years to get a new man qualified to take on their kind of missions and cleared by Intel to do them. And that's if they put the new recruit on the fast track learning the systems they created and destroyed.

"Sorry. I'm done. I won't risk killing another one of you."

The chopper blades steady *whap, whap, whap* filled the silence.

Tim stared beyond the group to Jane, paused a long time, and then swerved his gaze back to Mark. "It could have been any of us. Nick and I weren't in a position to help her either."

"I was her primary backup." Mark dangled his helmet between his spread knees, swung it by its strap.

"We're a team, bud," Sam said. "We all watch each other's backs."

"I failed."

"Yeah, you did." Joe cut through the clutter. "Due to circumstances beyond your control, you failed. So did the rest of us. We all risk failing each other every time we go out. You know it. Jane knew it. We all know it. She's gone, and we have to live with it." Joe softened his voice. "She was like your little sister. I get that. But you don't get exclusive rights on the guilt, bro. There's plenty to go around."

Mark opened his mouth to object.

Joe lifted a hand to halt it. "We're sorry we lost her, Mark. If we could change it, we would. But we can't."

"Dang right." Sam shoved his fist into their inner circle.

One by one they all bumped knuckles, then Tim said, "You had to hunker down. That's how these missions go. Stuff comes up. We deal with it as best we can. Sometimes we get lucky. Sometimes we don't. Jane's regular team goes through the same thing."

“We’ll have to tell them.” Mark hated the thought of it, but he couldn’t let them find out through official channels, especially Omega One. They were close.

“When we get to the Pentagon, we’ll tell them together.” Joe stared at the back of the guy manning the side door. The dread on his face was as fierce as Mark’s.

Tim stared at Jane a long minute, then resolve slid down his lean face. “I’ve had enough of this too. We’ve done our share and then some.”

Nick mumbled, agreeing and disagreeing. Sam and Nick went back and forth a bit and then they all fell silent.

Mark had no idea what position Nick had taken, but Mark had his own problems to worry about. He slumped back, doing his best to absorb what had happened.

Deep inside the Green Zone, the chopper started its descent at headquarters. Tim glanced from man to man. “Gentlemen, it’s time for us to go home and get ourselves lives.”

Seated beside Joe, Sam jerked. “Whoa, bud.” He had helmet head. His hair was smashed in places, ruffled and on end in others. “Two short, we no longer have a viable team. Mission selection will be the pits.” He rounded on Nick. “Figured out your final call yet?”

Nick shrugged, then his body tensed. “I don’t like the way things are shaping up. They’ll never let us run two short, much less three. They’ll disband the unit.” He leaned back, crossed his outstretched legs at the ankles. Sand sprinkled off his boot. “The team’s the only reason I’ve hung in here. If you’re gone, it’s gone, so I’m gone.”

“That’s it then.” Sam rolled his shoulders. “We’re just moving up the timetable on them before they move it up on us.”

There’d been high-level talks of breaking up the unit. The work would continue to be essential, but the political climate didn’t currently welcome it. So the unit would be formally disbanded and informally reformed elsewhere by others under a different covert umbrella.

Joe crossed his arms over his chest, seemingly at peace with their decision. “None of us planned to make this a career. Duty called with 9/11. We answered. Now we’re done.”

One by one, they all nodded. But none returned Mark’s gaze. All eyes were on the medics. Both pulled back from Jane’s body, and one made the sign of the cross. “Sorry, sirs. Nothing more we could do.”

Mark moved and squatted beside Jane. Her pasty skin was cool to the touch, but without her warm expressions, her vibrancy, she didn’t much look like herself. That should have helped. She was at peace now. But it didn’t.

I already miss you, Jane. You needed me and I wasn’t there. I won’t ask for forgiveness—I haven’t earned it. But I’ll regret failing you every day of my life. Tears washed down his face. *I’ll never forget you.*

With a trembling hand, he closed her sightless eyes and then lifted the sheet over her beloved face.

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