

BOOK ONE

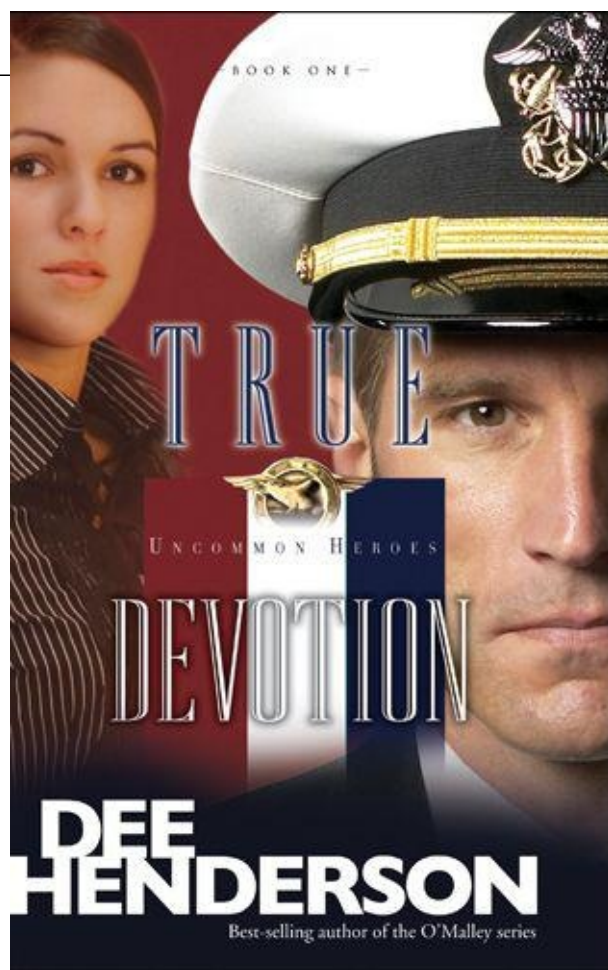
TRUE

UNCOMMON HEROES

DEVOTION

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Best-selling author of the O'Malley series



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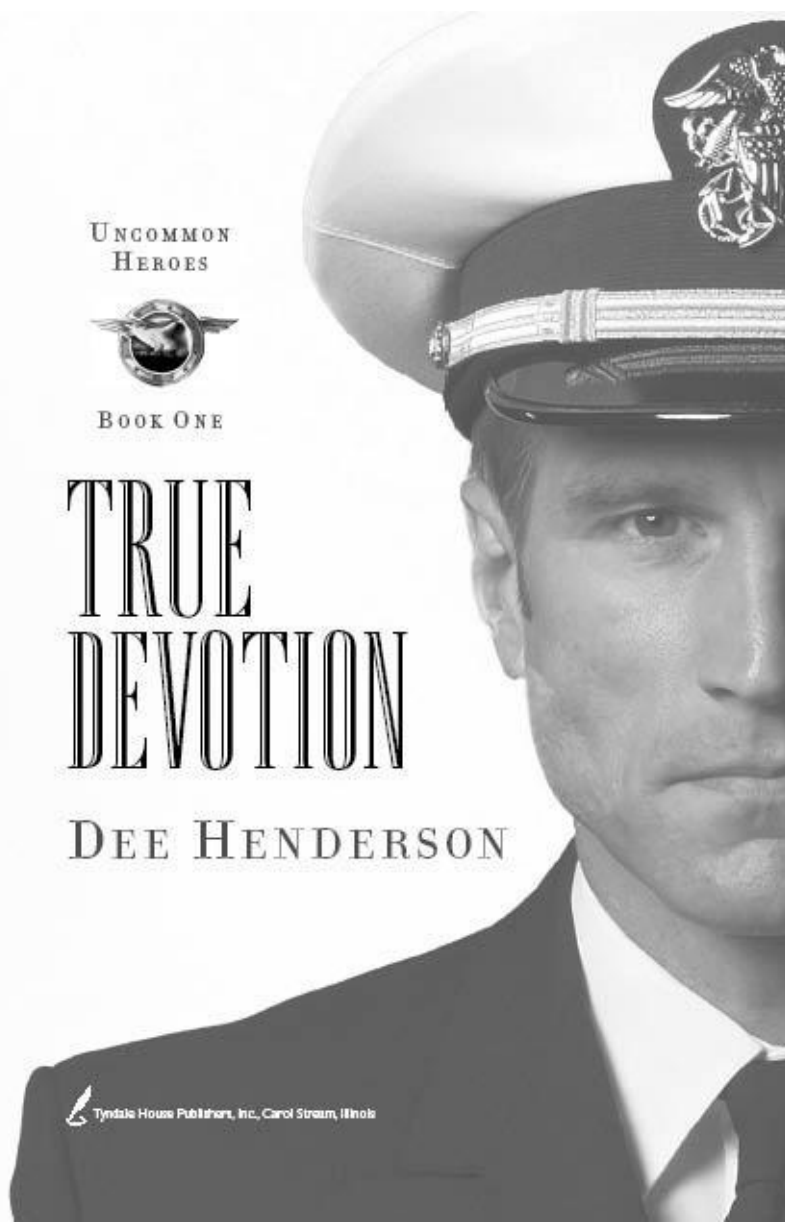


BOOK ONE

TRUE DEVOTION

DEE HENDERSON

 Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., Carol Stream, Illinois



Praise for Dee Henderson and *True Devotion*

“Dee Henderson has done a splendid job mixing romance with the fast-paced action of a Navy SEAL platoon.”

Steve Watkins, former Navy SEAL

“Action, adventure, and romance! *True Devotion* has everything a reader could want!”

Angela Hunt, *New York Times* best-selling author

“[Dee Henderson] has created a truly stunning tale of love and devotion to God, country, and to those left behind when the missions are done.”

Compuserve Reviews

“A wonderful story with real and entertaining characters. Ms. Henderson’s gift with words makes this book impossible to put down.”

Writer’s Club Romance Group on AOL

“*True Devotion* is the first in a new series called Uncommon Heroes and is definitely a must read for all lovers of suspense and military heroes!”

Romance Communications Online

“Dee Henderson and *True Devotion* earn my first platinum medal for excellence.”

Bridges magazine

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Romancejournal.com

Readers’ Praise

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

“My husband is in the Air Force, so it is nice to read military stories that are based in reality!” —R. C.

“I have just finished reading your book *True Devotion*. I thought it was one of the best Christian romance adventure books I have ever read. I look forward to reading more of your books.” —Royale

“I couldn’t put down *True Devotion*. I’ve read it twice already, and I have only had it a week. My husband was in the Navy for six years, and this book just touched my heart. I can’t wait for the next one.” —M. K.

* * *

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True Devotion

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Previously published in 2000, 2002 by Multnomah Publishers, Inc., under ISBN 1-57673-886-8

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ISBN-13: 978-1-4143-1062-6

ISBN-10: 1-4143-1062-5

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*This story is dedicated to the military heroes
of my immediate family:
my Grandfather Johnson
who rests at Arlington National Cemetery,
my Grandfather Hammer
decorated for campaigns through France,
my uncles who served in the Army and Navy,
and my brother
who served in the Air Force.
I'm proud of you.*

** * **

Preface

Navy SEAL Team Nine is a fictional entity with a few differences from an actual SEAL Team. A real SEAL Team would not deploy with the geographic diversity as shown in this story, nor would they serve together for such an extended period of time. These changes were made to accommodate a work of fiction. I have, however, endeavored to be accurate in both the terminology and tactics of an actual SEAL Team. To that end, former Navy SEAL Steve Watkins did me the honor of reviewing this manuscript. All remaining errors are mine.

Glossary

AOIC: Assistant Officer In Charge.

Attack board: Underwater guidance board used for long swims. The board has a bubble compass and depth gauge on it.

AWACS: Airborne Warning And Control System. Special aircraft with powerful radars to scan for planes at any altitude. Controls air-to-air engagements with enemy forces.

broken arrow: Any accident with nuclear weapons or nuclear material lost, shot down, crashed, stolen or hijacked.

BUD/S: Basic Underwater Demolition/SEAL. The name for the initial six-month training program at the facility in Coronado, California, which all men hoping to be SEALs must pass.

C-130: Cargo plane.

Chocolate Mountain: Land training center for SEALs in the California desert.

Draegar LAR V: Rebreather units that suppress bubbles under water.

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

HELO: Helicopter.

L-T: Lieutenant.

MP: Military Police.

NAB: U.S. Naval Amphibious Base, Coronado, California.

NATO Phonetic Alphabet: Alpha, Bravo, Charlie, Delta, Echo, Foxtrot, Golf, Hotel, India, Juliet, Kilo, Lima, Mike, November, Oscar, Papa, Quebec, Romeo, Sierra, Tango, Uniform, Victor, Whiskey, X-ray, Yankee, Zulu.

NEST: Nuclear Energy Search Team. Nonmilitary unit that reports at once to any spill, problem, or Broken Arrow to determine the extent of the radiation problem.

newbies: A new man in an established military unit.

NVGs: Night Vision Goggles give good night vision in the dark with a greenish view.

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

snaked: Slang for stepping through stuff you don't want to identify.

sneak and peek: Slang for stealthy reconnaissance.

tango(s): Terrorist.

TRIDENT: SEALs emblem. An eagle with talons clutching a Revolutionary War pistol, and Neptune trident superimposed on the Navy's traditional anchor.

XO: Executive Officer.

God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.

Psalm 46:1

* * *

They were going to drown.

Kelly Jacobs could already see the headline on the front page of the weekly *Coronado Eagle* newspaper: “Riptide Kills Teen and Lifeguard.” The cold water had her by the throat. Six minutes had passed since she’d last seen the boy bobbing in the swells, and they were being pulled out to sea at a horrifying clip.

She had a lifetime of experience in the Pacific waters off San Diego, numerous rescues, but nothing like this. The water in early May, warmer than usual from La Niña, was still only sixty-seven degrees, cold enough to induce hypothermia. The swells dropped her four feet down in the troughs. If she didn’t find the boy soon she wouldn’t have the ability to get them back to shore. And this was a big ocean for a search party to cover in the dark—to her left the sun had already set and the twilight was fading fast.

The riptide created by the conflux of ocean currents and the outgoing tide had formed late in the day with an explosive suddenness. When conditions changed, the riptide would fade as abruptly as it had formed, but whether it lasted a few hours or a day would not matter in the end. It was already on the verge of becoming deadly.

The fear of what was coming overwhelmed her. This fight to reach the boy was turning into a personal life-and-death struggle. The salt water burned her throat and sent her gasping as another wave caught her in midbreath. To give up the attempted rescue to save herself, to let the boy drown— It had been years since she had cared about something this much. She wasn’t going to give up, and she wasn’t going to fail.

Kelly strained to find a way to work with the waves rather than against them. The boy was out there somewhere near, and she was going to reach him. She thought about her husband as she fought the cold of the sea. *Nick, did you die because you drowned?* The Navy had never told her.

She would have said it was impossible for her husband, a Navy SEAL, to drown. With all his training, with all his confidence and courage, she had dismissed it as even a consideration, but she was suddenly not sure anymore and the thought was agonizing.

Three years ago she had said good-bye to her husband at the gates of the U.S. Naval Amphibious Base, half a mile down Highway 75 from their home in the Coronado Shores subdivision. It was a typical good-bye—loving but rushed. Nick had been slipping away from her ever since his pager went off forty minutes before, his attention already on the upcoming mission.

She stole one last hug, burying her face against his uniform, wishing he wasn’t leaving but unwilling to put that wish into words. She never wanted to hold him back or give him reason to hesitate. She loved him and she would keep everything on the home front together and ready for his return. Nick lifted Kelly off her feet for his kiss good-bye and then strode with purpose through the security to join the other members of SEAL Team Nine gathering to hear why they had been paged to assemble at 8 p.m.

A confident man, her husband, serving in one of the elite branches of the U.S. special forces—Navy SEAL: from sea, air, or land, they would get the job done. Fluent in three languages, a competent backup medic, he was accustomed to being sent to deal with crises around the world when

force had to be brought to bear rapidly. They called him Eagle because he saw everything. A useful trait since he walked point for one of the two squads in Golf Platoon.

Kelly dropped him off at the base and returned home, knowing neither where he was going nor how long he would be gone. She trusted his confidence in himself, in the men around him, in their training. They were the best and the best didn't fail.

There had been no welcome home.

A training accident. That was what the Navy officially said as it buried her husband with full military honors and handed her the folded flag.

She knew they were lying. A training accident didn't bring her husband home in a sealed coffin and bring Nick's commanding officer, Lieutenant Joe Baker, home nursing a bullet wound through his shoulder. She never tried to break the understood code of silence to learn the truth. They were SEALs and she had been a SEAL's wife. The truth was classified.

She nearly dropped the flag when they handed it to her. She had not been able to see her husband in the coffin remained sealed. They handed her the flag he had fought to defend, folded neat and tight with no red showing. It had been prepared by the men in uniform with a solemnness of ritual that would allow no slackness in the fabric or imperfection in a fold. They gave her his flag because they could not give her back the man; they gave her his flag to stand in his place. Their salute honored the man, the flag his service, the taps his passing. And it hit her in that instant, the fact Nick was gone for good.

Looking into the eyes of the hurting men of SEAL Team Nine as the funeral concluded, looking into the solemn eyes of men who grieved with her, she was assured that her husband had done his job and not let them down. They were not able to share it in words, but they all shared that truth in their expressions. She clung to the fact Nick died doing what he loved. Under her own grief she was grateful for that.

And yet the pain that had come in the passing days and months ripped deeper than anything she had ever felt. Her life had changed forever. She missed Nick more than words could express. The men of SEAL Team Nine had replaced him because his was a profession that required another to stand in the gap of one fallen. They went on while they always remembered. But no one could replace him for her.

The medallion she wore, Nick's eagle, slapped against her in the waves. She reached for it with one hand, grabbing hold, grateful now she had secured the chain so she could wear it in the water. It had traveled with Nick through five years of missions. Now it was her closest reminder of him.

"People drown because they panic."

She clung to the words Nick had so often said. During SEAL training the instructors tied his hands and feet and dropped him into the deep end of the pool for thirty minutes doing various tasks—the drown-proof test. Nick knew what he was talking about. He just hadn't told her how hard it was not to panic.

Relax. Do your job.

Nick would wonder why she was panicking when she'd been trained for hard tasks such as this. She put her energy into judging the swells, riding them up to scan the surrounding water. The boy had been south of her the last time she had seen him.

There!

She surged toward him with a hard crawl, willing to use the last of her energy, knowing this might be her last chance before darkness fell.

The teenager had been surfing with a friend; both boys got into trouble in the heavy surf. She went into the water to back up her partner. Alex reached them first, securing a hold on one boy bleeding from a gash on the forehead and pushing his float board to the other boy. As Alex headed toward the shore towing the injured boy, she went for the other teen, not surprised when in his panic he fought her. At the same instant she got hit in the eye, they hit the riptide. The sea tore them apart.

The sea helped her this time, tossing her the last few feet. She snagged the boy's arm as she slammed past him, spun into him, the wave breaking over her head and into her face. She coughed hard, struggling to clear her lungs as she held on for all she was worth. She was not going to lose him again.

The fight had gone out of the teen. The straps of the float board that had been pushed to him were around his left wrist, his right arm hugging it. Even though she desperately needed a few brief moments of rest, she was careful not to put any of her weight onto the float board. It had kept his head above water during the last long separation and been a factor in keeping him alive. It would never support them both.

Sandy blond hair, blue eyes, slim, younger than she originally thought, fourteen or fifteen, long skinny arms and lanky, still trying to fit into his sudden growth spurt. Both his fear and fatigue were obvious in his face. The waves sent them up and down and rocked them back and forth in a never-ending sensation of movement that made *seasickness* too calm a word for the reality. "What's your name?" She leaned close to him to be heard.

He was swallowing water, coughing, and his voice rasped. "Ryan."

"I'm Kelly." Fighting fingers that were stiff, that did not want to do as she asked, she unwrapped the nylon rope at her waist and maneuvered the buddy line around his waist, securely tying the line. She wasn't going to take a chance on the sea once again tearing them apart. She put her hands on his face, smiling at him, even as she studied his eyes and assessed his condition. "That was a pretty impressive wipeout you did on the surfboard."

He gave a glimmer of a smile back. "My dad is going to kill me. I wasn't supposed to be surfing."

Hypothermia. She could hear it in the dragging words and see it in his swollen eyes as he struggled to keep them open against the sting of the salt water and the cold-induced fatigue. She wasn't in much better shape herself.

She looked to the east. The twilight was almost gone; the shoreline appeared only by reflected light on the horizon. The distance was distorted by the dim twilight, but even by optimistic assessments was far away. Getting them back to shore was no longer possible. Even if she had the strength, she would not be able to judge the location of the beach and the dangerous rocks in the descending darkness. There was little she could do but keep the boy talking and hope help arrived soon. She knew the rescue crews would be out looking. As soon as Alex had reached shore, the call for help would have gone out.

"Who's your dad?" The conversation was as much to distract her as to distract him. Waiting was almost harder than searching. She had to figure out some way to get them through the coming ordeal while she still had the clarity to plan. The cold water was a deadly foe for it ruined the ability to think clearly.

"Charles Raines."

"You live here in Coronado?"

"Across the water on the Point Loma peninsula. Dad bought a place on Hill Street."

A wealthy man's son. The homes on Hill Street bordered Sunset Cliffs National Park. That stretch of shoreline had the most beautiful rock formations carved out by the sea she had ever seen. "Those are beautiful homes."

"The house is okay."

"Just okay?" she asked, amused at the perspective of youth.

"Our home in Hong Kong was more exotic, but we had to leave three years ago when the lease expired."

"On the house or the country?"

He laughed; it was weak but there. "The country actually. Dad's British. He had to move home."

company headquarters to San Diego when Hong Kong reverted back to China.”

Having never traveled outside of California, Kelly felt a little envious. Hong Kong sounded intriguing. “That must have been fun for your mom.”

“It’s just Dad and me.”

“I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay. I barely remember my mom, Amy. She died when I was little.”

Even though his words were matter-of-fact, she heard the wistfulness in his voice. He missed not having a mom. And in that simple brief exchange, Kelly felt like she took a step toward understanding him. He would hide the depth of his grief, hang out with friends, and wonder why they thought their moms were the worst when he thought their moms were pretty great. Kelly knew it was after the loss that you missed what had been taken for granted. “My mom died about five years ago. It’s rough.”

Ryan looked toward her. “Did she—” His hand slipped from the float, momentarily dropping his head below the surface. His panic was instantaneous.

Kelly suddenly found herself pulled down as Ryan tried to claw his way back to the surface using her, his hand pressing down painfully into the nerve in her shoulder, his knee catching her in the calf. She broke to the surface, grabbing him from behind and wrapping her forearm under his chin. “Easy!”

“We’re going to drown out here!”

She yanked the float board back by its rope. “Hug it across your chest and stop moving,” she ordered, treading water for both of them, knowing just how precarious their situation was.

Ryan went still but he was crying now, the sound of his sobs carrying across the water, the fear overwhelming him. Kelly’s heart broke at the sound, knowing for a boy his age, tears would be the last thing he wanted someone to see. She smoothed her hand over his hair trying to comfort without embarrassing him. “It’s going to be okay. Just relax. I won’t let you drown.”

His grip on her arm finally eased enough so circulation could return. “How can they find us in the dark?”

She looked around, deciphering in the flickering moonlight that the waves were increasing in size. There had been a low front coming through this evening and its front edge of wind was already reaching them. “Spotlights. Searchlights. The boats will be out, even helicopters.” She didn’t add what she knew and feared. Even with the resources, finding them before morning would be difficult if not impossible.

No. She couldn’t let herself doubt.

Joe would find them.

“Kelly, I would like you to meet my new boss, Lieutenant Joe Baker.”

She turned at the touch of her husband’s hand on her shoulder. Standing beside Nick, Joe seemed dwarfed, a good four inches shorter, the same powerful muscles but less bulky. But then at six feet four Nick broke the rules for what made a good SEAL physique. Joe could have been the prototype. He was a triathlete if she’d ever seen one. He had the warm copper tan of a man who spent most of his days outside.

Joe had nice eyes. She always looked there first because nothing told her more about a soldier than his eyes. Joe’s were blue, like the sea she enjoyed watching at dawn, and they were calm. He held her gaze as she looked at him, doing his own study. She knew the man was brave. He was known in the SEAL community as one of the best, and that said a lot among men who didn’t give accolades until they were earned. He also looked kind. The fact he was taking time to come and meet the families of his men said a lot. She offered her hand with a smile. Her husband would be in good hands.

“Lieutenant. Thanks for coming to the cookout.” She felt the warmth as his hand closed around her and could feel the texture of calluses, the strength of a man who could fight hard and yet still touch with tenderness.

“I never turn down an invitation to good cooking, Mrs. Jacobs.”

Kelly was very happily married, but she wasn't immune to the man; she felt the impact of being the focus of his smile and the warmth in those eyes. Her single friends in Coronado would certainly take notice of the new boss. She was going to enjoy introducing him around. “Please, it's Kelly.”

“If you'll make it Joe.”

“I'll be glad to. No handle?”

The eyes she liked twinkled with his smile. “Occasionally I get called Bear, but that's only if I'm in a bad mood.”

A grizzly bear—oh, it was perfect. She laughed at the image. “I like it. Nick goes by Eagle, unless he doesn't see something, then the guys call him Buzzard.”

“Kelly . . .” Nick winced, but Joe just laughed.

Joe had been her husband's commanding officer, but he had also become her husband's best friend. The men had clicked that first afternoon, sharing a common bond that went deeper than work. They had similar perspectives and priorities in life. Nick had led Joe to Christ. She had often thought of Nick and Joe as her example of a modern-day David and Jonathan. Best friends. Warriors. Men passionate about their God.

Joe's grief over the loss of Nick was different than hers, but just as deep. The men had spent a lot of time together; now Joe spent large portions of his time alone. He'd lost a best friend and those were not easy to replace.

Since Nick's death Joe had been watching out for her.

He would find them.

* * *

The sea, for years his friend, was tonight his enemy.

Joe checked the compass on his wrist and then the GPS readout. The longitude reading as marked by the global positioning satellites made him frown; this current was moving him rapidly out to sea.

Almost an hour had passed since word had come that Kelly was in trouble. Neither he nor the other members of SEAL Team Nine's Golf Platoon had felt like leaving the search up to just the Coast Guard. Normally the Coast Guard asked for help, but in this case, who asked and who offered would get blurred in the reports. The Navy understood what made good public relations—and it didn't look good if a civilian lifeguard and a teen drowned within the immediate vicinity of one of the large naval bases in the country.

But even if there had been no formal protocol for the help, the military brass would still have backed their involvement. They understood taking care of their own. Not to help the widow of a SEAL who had gone down in combat would insult the honor of an entire SEAL community. For Joe it was much more personal. He had to find Kelly.

He had elected to become a human buoy, to find out firsthand where the riptide began and which way it moved. It had been easy to find and it was vicious. He had felt the sudden pull of the water about forty feet from shore.

Once in the riptide a swimmer could struggle to swim back into shore until his strength was gone and he would never get any closer. If he stopped to tread water he would be pulled out to sea at a rapid clip. The only way to break free was to turn and swim parallel to the shore until clear of the unpredictable current.

Finding the boy, pulling him with her—Kelly would never have been able to get out of this current. Joe prayed she had been smart enough not to try. If she had already burned through her energy . . .

Joe activated the waterproof microphone. “Boomer, I’m getting pulled into grid six.” Boomer, given name Chet Walker, was the AOIC—Assistant Officer In Charge—of Golf Platoon.

“The riptide is still holding together?”

“It’s still intact. They’ve been pulled out much farther than we assumed.”

“I’ll redirect the boats and come pick you up.”

Joe saw the spotlight of the search helicopter veer west, moving farther out to sea. Fifty minutes. It was an eternity. The search area expanded with every minute that passed. Kelly was out in the dark somewhere, unprotected from the cold, trying to save her life and the boy’s. They had to find them soon. The cold was already reaching through his wet suit, and he trained for these conditions. He could only imagine what it was doing to Kelly and the teen.

He heard the Zodiac slow as it approached his coordinates. The boat appeared abruptly from the darkness. He reached up with his right hand and was pulled aboard by Boomer. Joe perched on the side of the craft, the taut, thick rubber familiar to his touch. There were no lights on board the six-by-fifteen-foot Zodiac. They were accustomed to working in the darkness, and a light would only destroy the distance they could see naturally and with the aid of their night vision goggles. “Take me to grid nine.” The SEAL manning the muffled outboard motor nodded and turned the craft west.

Boomer handed over a pair of NVGs. “We’ll find them.”

Joe accepted the night vision goggles and simply nodded. Sixteen volunteer SEALs plus the Coast Guard—not finding them was inconceivable. Whether they would find them in time remained to be seen. They could already be too late.

It was his job that was supposed to be life-threatening, not hers. He had to force himself to relax and unclench his jaw—something he didn’t have to do in combat. He was lousy at accepting a civilian in danger, especially a friend. Feeling helpless was an emotion he worked hard to avoid and getting flung at him tonight was hard to take.

Kelly was going to be embarrassed when they found her. It would sting her pride a bit, knowing Alex had been able to get back to shore with one of the surfers and she had not. Joe held on to the image of the small laugh and the flushed cheeks that were hallmarks of Kelly when she was the center of the attention; it was better than the alternative.

He prayed she lived long enough to be embarrassed.

* * *

“Ryan?” Kelly grabbed for the float board as it slipped from Ryan’s hand.

He didn’t answer.

“Ryan, wake up.” She shook him hard, trying to rouse him. “Ryan!”

She couldn’t bring him around. The cold had finally won. She felt for his pulse and found it slow but steady. How long before that changed? Twenty minutes? Thirty? She struggled to secure the float board against his chest with the straps, using it to ensure Ryan would float on his back.

His slow, steady kicks had been helping in the fight to keep them steady against the current. The effort to keep treading water for them both was exhausting. The muscles in her legs burned from the strain, adding a painful agony to the mix as her skin grew icy. It felt like she was trying to kick through thick cement; there was nothing gentle about the water now. She wanted so desperately to talk

a break.

How had Nick ever made it through Hell Week? She had always known her husband downplayed the effort required by his job. She had never realized how much he downplayed it.

Anyone who wanted to be a SEAL had to first get through six months of training known as BUD/ and the basic underwater demolition/SEAL training routinely eliminated most of the candidates. The fifth week had earned being called Hell Week. After four weeks of pushing the men in intense physical training, the instructors for those who would be SEALs set out to find out who in the class *intended* to be a SEAL and who only *wanted* to be one.

For five days and nights, with only four hours of sleep, the men were pushed to the limits—coastal ocean swims, constantly lugging a telephone pole or carrying their rubber boats over their heads, conducting explosive ordinance drills, night landings in the pounding surf through the rocks off the historic Hotel del Coronado—all the while the instructors pushing, encouraging them to quit.

By the end of Hell Week, 70 percent of Nick's class had voluntarily withdrawn.

Nick had made it. Kelly could still vividly remember him walking through the door that Friday given forty-eight hours of liberty. He had collapsed on the bed—sand, grit, grime, and all, and had not moved for twenty-two hours. Blisters, torn muscles, sunburn, exhaustion—her husband had survived the first step to becoming an elite warrior. She had been so proud of him.

She wished she had better understood then what it felt like to be pushed to the limits of your endurance. Her appreciation for what Nick had accomplished had just escalated, and she would never be able to tell him. She was hitting the wall of what she could endure. *Nick, how did you do it?*

SEALs never give up. There is no secret. SEALs simply never quit.

She would love to give up. Closing her eyes, taking a deep breath, Kelly forced herself to find a rhythm for her kicks. SEALs trained to be able to take this kind of physical punishment. That had to be part of their secret. All the mornings she had blown off running, all the days she had ignored her normal exercise routine, were delivering their revenge without mercy. She would never tease a SEAL again about the constant workouts.

"I thought you were going shopping with Liz."

Kelly looked up from the clothes she was putting away to see Nick leaning against the doorjamb of the master bedroom. She smiled. "We're going later. I thought you and Joe were going running."

Nick didn't move out of the doorway as she joined him. She slid under his arm and wrapped her arms around his waist, taking him with her, enjoying the closeness. She loved this man. It wasn't often he got a few free hours on a weekday. The guys were going out to the Chocolate Mountain Test Range later in the day for a nighttime training op. Nick didn't have to report until 1300 hours.

Her husband chuckled. "Honey, we've already been. I left two hours ago." His arm dropped across her shoulders as they headed toward the kitchen.

"I can tell. You're wet." She said it with a grin, for it was more salt water than sweat. Joe and Nick must have been doing their five-mile run on the beach down at the surf line—SEALs trained, played, and lived in the sand and sea like it was their second home. From the lifeguard tower she would often see the men in the early morning silently challenging each other, racing up the sand, turning everything into a competition—the best friends among them were the worst. "Who won?" She picked up a clean T-shirt from the laundry basket of folded clothes on the counter and tossed it to him.

Nick's grin was quick. "I let him." Nick stripped off the wet shirt, then took one step back into the hall and tossed it into the laundry room. He pulled on the clean one. "We're heading to the gym to work the weights. You want to come spot for me?"

It was an appealing offer, for her husband working out was a sight to enjoy. He tended to show off just a bit if only with a wink before he lifted a loaded barbell off the bar. She could appreciate late in the results as he easily swept her off her feet, but she couldn't totally forget the reason he was so

diligent about the workouts. They were preparations for battle.

~~It wasn't something to tease him about on a day when he had just lost in a footrace at the beach~~
Joe. There were priorities, and then there were priorities. "Thanks, but I'd be invading a guy's domain." She joined him and rested her hands against his biceps, leaning into him to share a kiss.
"Go get back to work. And don't come home till you out-rep him or something."

He grinned. "Yes, ma'am."

Kelly forced herself back to the present. She couldn't afford to let herself drift down memory lane. Hypothermia-induced sleep would overtake her too. And it did her no good to remember, for the memories were too bittersweet to enjoy. Nick would never again be around to flirt with, to tease, and that realization cut inside every time she had to face that fact.

Taking a deep breath, she forced herself to get a stronger grip on Ryan. If she timed the swells, she could make two strong kicks and ride a crest down, giving herself a pause before she needed to make the third kick. It helped, but not enough; she could feel her kicks growing weaker, no matter how hard she tried to keep them steady. She needed help to come soon.

She didn't realize at first that it was a rescue light. It came from the east, traveling west toward her so slow it appeared almost not to move. Then the sound of the helicopter rotors reached her, forming a deep heartbeat that grew and pounded the air in a welcome beat. She frantically searched for something to signal with. She had nothing shiny. She untied the float board and took on Ryan's full weight, keeping him out of the water with one arm while doing her best to wave the float board with her free hand, using all the strength she had left in a desperate attempt to get noticed.

She watched the light trace over the water.

They were drifting away from where the light would pass over.

With that realization came fear. If the helicopter crew didn't see them, it could be hours before the grid was searched again. Ryan would never make it, and it was doubtful she would either. She struggled to swim against the current into the path of the light, pulling Ryan with her. The spotlight passed five yards beyond them, the helicopter moving steadily on. Kelly lowered the float board when it became obvious they had not been seen. The sound faded.

She started crying.

Two

* * *

Joe went back into the water at the east edge of grid nine, absorbing the shock of the cold water, the cold ignoring it. The rubber of his wet suit sealed a layer of water against his skin where it warmed, creating a blanket of protection around him, but it could not prevent his fingers from turning to ice or his face from feeling the sting of the waves. The equipment vest and gear felt heavy now, but it was comfortable, for they were familiar weights. In an odd way it was better to be in the water than the boat, for it clarified matters, added urgency. Kelly was going to freeze.

He let himself drift, watching the GPS and calculating his speed.

The riptide had ended. “Boomer, head north. The current has changed.”

“It will put us out of radio range.” The answer came back through broken static. Joe had sent the boat on to cover the western edge of the grid.

“I’ll use a flare if I need you. Come back on a parallel track to these coordinates in thirty minutes.”

He began a steady swim with the current, pausing often to scan the ocean. Kelly was comfortable in the water, wasn’t the type to panic, but he could feel the pressing reality. Anything could happen in this cold sea.

Lord, where is she?

He had never learned to pray as eloquently as Nick or as knowledgeably as Kelly. They had both been Christians a long time. They had a comfortable knowledge of God, and it showed in their actions and their prayers. His own prayers were heartfelt but short.

He wished he had been a Christian longer. After Nick died he hadn’t been much help to Kelly when the grief hit, and that still troubled him. Other than Liz she hadn’t let many people near her, had put up a protective front, and it had left him struggling to help her out. He’d failed at that somewhere along the way, for she had gone quiet, noticeably quiet in the last few months, when normally she talked easily about God.

Now this. She needed him and the idea that he would let her down at a time like this . . . he’d never be able to live with himself if they didn’t find her in time.

Please, Jesus. Keep her safe. Help us find her. She’s the most important person I have left in my life. I can’t face the idea of losing her.

* * *

The stars were bright overhead. In the dark ocean expanse, no city lights anywhere nearby, the stars shone in their full glory. “*The heavens declare the glory of God . . .*” Kelly knew she ought to be praying. The words were not there. She was so tired now. Three years of wandering away—a prodigal, a hypocrite, she could think of numerous labels that applied—had diminished a vital relationship with one with few words. However she looked at her life in the last three years, God had not been in the center of it. It made her ashamed.

Oh, people who met her didn’t know. She had been more active in the church than ever, almost

frantic in keeping herself busy with all her good works. But her Bible had only been opened in public. ~~her trust in God had changed to doing for herself. She hated people who pretended yet she had done~~ beautifully. God had taken away Nick and she had walked away from Him, blaming Him for her pain.

She had already apologized.

There was peace now but not words. Prayer had once been as easy as breathing, now she didn't know how to begin. It made her want to cry to realize what she had lost.

A wave slammed over her face and she tried to shake off the water without releasing her hold on Ryan.

It's not too late to change.

It was a reassuring, profound reminder. If she survived and had a chance to try again, to restore what she had allowed to decay and pick up her dreams again. She had never been happier than when she was a wife dreaming about being a mother.

For years she'd let herself drift rather than accept that she was going to have to fight for a future again, that she would have to pour herself back into life if she wanted something more than the grief.

She'd given up for years. It was time to stop giving up.

Finding energy she didn't have, Kelly strengthened her kick.

* * *

She was swallowing too much water. Kelly knew it in a clinically detached kind of way. Part of her mind was screaming for her to kick harder, to keep her head farther out of the water, but she couldn't. The cold had crept deep into her muscles.

She was going to die of hypothermia. She knew it, could feel her heart rate slowing down, could feel herself drifting off to sleep, and couldn't rouse herself to fight, even for Ryan's sake. At least it didn't hurt. Her eyes closed as she sighed.

Don't.

She got shoved by a wave and rolled over. She blinked and tightened her arm around Ryan, instinctively righting herself, the panic startling her body back into motion.

Of all the stupid . . . She wanted to swear at herself as she realized what had happened. She forced her hands to lock together, gritted her teeth, and strained to rhythmically kick her legs again.

How she would die was now painfully clear. Hers wouldn't be a peaceful ending, but rather a series of adrenaline-induced scares until she finally didn't recover in time and she drowned.

Her breathing slowly came back to normal. For the moment she was awake, wide-awake. *Lord, thanks for the shove.* She would have chuckled if she could have done it without swallowing more salt water. It had been quite an effective wake-up order.

She was not going to die in the middle of the ocean.

The decision settled firmly inside, and it resonated the same way the decision *I'm going to marry Nick* had once resonated. No matter how cold she got, how tired she became, she was going to survive.

It was going to be a long night.

She blocked out the cold and thought about the future, determined to keep her mind active. When she got out of this mess, what in her life was she going to change first? Where did she start rebuilding?

It wasn't a simple question or an easy one. She knew what she wanted most to change. She missed being a wife, being part of someone's life. She had married Nick when she was nineteen and she didn't

enjoy being alone.

~~There was no longer any reason to wake at the crack of dawn. In the past she had groused good-naturedly at Nick's cheerfulness as she fixed him breakfast. But she missed the few minutes of beauty that had been the compensation: sitting with Nick on the front stoop watching the dawn come up, leaning against his shoulder as she covered a yawn and sipped her coffee.~~

She missed watching soccer games with him, fixing him chocolate chip cookies, going what she would have called "watching"—Nick's one intense hobby. She really missed the way the house felt alive when he was home. Now it was just a place to stay. She had not yet found ways to fill the voids in her days in more than piecemeal ways. Being alone was the pits.

When she had been the wife of a military man on deployment, she had been part of a close-knit support club. The wives of men who were deployed had common things to talk about and practical help to offer each other. Military widows didn't have a comfortable home anywhere. Not in the civilian world, which didn't understand that *training accident* probably didn't mean what it implied, or in the military family gatherings, where her presence was a painful reminder of the risks.

Out of a sense of kindness her friends avoided talking about their husbands coming home, about the way they were counting down the days, and about the welcome home celebrations that were being planned.

Kelly knew her friends worried more about their husbands now. Nick's death had robbed the entire unit of a sense of safety. The risks hadn't changed, but the false sense of confidence had been stripped away. She had shed tears about the loneliness in private.

Joe's been there.

The reminder made her smile. Yes, Joe had been there. He came by because he was a good friend. When she wanted to remember and reminisce, he was one of the few people in her life who was good at comfortable listening. He had almost as many stories about Nick as she did—and the shared laughter had deepened their friendship.

They had always been friends through Nick; without him it had been distinctly awkward at first.

"Come on, Joe, five more to go. You can do it."

His arms were quivering, sweat rolling off him as he lay on his back on the weight bench. Kelly had watched with every grimace, every flinch of pain, he gave. His healing shoulder was fighting every step of the recovery. She was spotting for him on the weights because she was one of the few people he didn't want to have the heart to throw out of the rehab center. It had been six weeks since Nick's death and Joe's injury, and she had pushed aside her own pain to make sure Joe recovered. She wasn't going to let him quit, even though in the early days she had read in his eyes the reality that he wanted to do just that.

He had come back shot, with his best friend dead. She didn't need details of what had happened to know Joe felt responsible for Nick's death and was pretty depressed. It would pass.

Already she could see the fight coming back in his eyes—another couple weeks and he wouldn't need her badgering him anymore. She was going to feel the loss when that day came. She needed someone else to focus on, to divert her from her own pain.

"Ten more reps instead of five."

Too much, she thought, but she only nodded. She had watched Nick push himself beyond what was possible too: It was the SEAL way of facing an obstacle.

Joe didn't need her now. She began to understand that as she spotted him through another set of reps. He was letting her be part of this because it gave her something else to think about, gave him an excuse to see her while he was trapped in this hospital rehab.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing." She rested her hands on the bar, burying the sadness. "Ready for me to change the weights?"

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