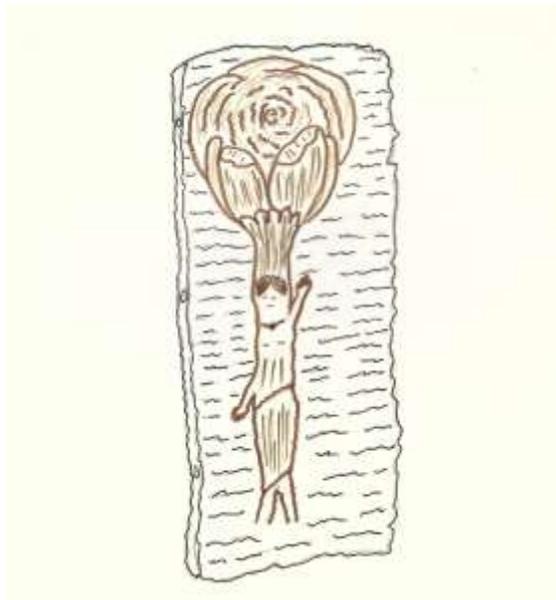




Last Tour of Duty

Serving their country is all Teddy and Gerome ever wanted to do, however, no one told them how hard it would be to be away from family. They have seen many things that they were not prepared to see and the people who could have helped him through it all were hundreds if not thousands of miles away. Now, with the latest letter from his sister, Teddy's desire to get home has increased tenfold. This is his last tour but his ending date, can't come soon enough.



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Tabatha is sitting on the front porch swing leaning to the right onto Big Bear, her eyes are staring out at nothing, her mind drifting to blank so she no longer has to think about her surroundings. One at a time, she pulls her legs up, her left one she holds on to with her left arm and the other she bends and tucks under her left leg so her foot lands near her bottom. Taking a few cleansing breaths, she finds herself drifting to nowhere, her only place of solace and clarity. The wind is blowing gently and her hair is feeling its affects like a gentle caress on her cheeks. Here she will stay, here she will try to see everything. Again.

Herman awakes suddenly when he hears the front door creak. He hasn't fixed that creak because it's the only alarm he has for when Tabatha goes outside on her own. He quickly grabs his robe and runs out of his bedroom, he makes a stop by Tabatha's room to grab her blanket, he knows she won't come in but at least she should be warm. Herman races to the living room then slows himself down before he gets to the door and she hears him rushing, that will startle her.

First, he looks out the window to make sure she is there and that he doesn't have to get his keys to go look for her. "Oh baby, I wish I could fix this for you." He whispers out loud. Then he opens the door to the porch slowly and brings over the blanket. She doesn't even hear or see him, he gently tucks the blanket around her, makes sure she is comfortable on her Big Bear, kisses her forehead and goes back inside to watch her from the couch. No sense in both of them being outside, it only breaks his heart further. This has been their routine for far too long. He doesn't remember the last night he slept in his own bed a whole night.

He turns to look over at her before he goes back inside, "Good night my love, Daddy's going to be right inside if you need me." Herman opens the door, grabs the afghan from the corner table and puts himself on the couch where he can watch her. And here he will stay the rest of the night, or at least until she gets up from her perch. "Come on Herman, you idiot, you know it's all night." He says annoyed at himself. This has been their nightly routine for weeks or months, he doesn't know anymore. Time goes by and drags him along.

~ ~ ~

Gerome receives his discharge papers from his superior officer and can't believe his eyes, the papers came early, six months early to be exact. Only he and his superior know why they came now, he hasn't even told his best friend. He can't admit the reason to himself yet, let alone share the news. Still, there is only one guy who will appreciate this as much as he is right now. He finds himself practically running to find his old friend, Teddy. They grew up together, went to school for years together, and signed on to the marines at the same time. Both Gerome and Teddy have now served for three tours of duty and together they decided that this is going to be their last tour. Getting to the point where they are closer to thirty than twenty has given them cause to think about moving on with their lives, settling down with someone and planting roots somewhere.

Gerome never stayed in one place as a young child, then his father decided it was time to stay put and that's when they moved to Finnegan Township. Here is where he met Teddy, and since then, they have been fast friends, almost brothers. They went through every teenage angst

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together and some pretty trying life events as well. However, nothing prepared them for what happened during this tour. Some they handled well, and some, well, it is said they are still working those out.

Seeing Teddy, Gerome slows down and calls to him, “Yo!! Teddy!!”

Teddy looks up to see his old pal and smiles. He puts down the equipment he is cleaning and walks over to him. “What’s going on? You’re smiling too big for it to be apple pie in the mess hall day.” He laughs, so does Gerome.

Gerome holds up his papers and grins from ear to ear. “What?!” Teddy yells as he lets the information sink in. “That’s amazing! You’ll be home for Ada’s wedding then. Did you tell them? I mean back home, did you tell them?” His words come out so fast he practically trips over them.

“You know that was my first thought too. I decided not to tell Ada. She doesn’t live at home anymore so for the first couple weeks that I’m home I probably won’t see her. I’ll work it out with Mom and Dad to try and keep things quiet. I assumed I was going to leave the same time as you considering we signed on together.” He says in a lower voice. “I wasn’t planning on this.” He holds up the papers again.

“Well, I suppose after you saved those children from the burning house, they want to give you time off for good behavior.” Teddy’s voice is a little shaky as he remembers that night out on the rural areas of no man’s land, watching all the people coming out of the shack they called home, needing everything from underwear to water. It was a typical thirty-six-hour day for them and when they came back to base, they were in the middle of storm season. This past week has been the first calm one in a very long time, weather and otherwise.

Gerome remembers the moment the spark hit his eye, he looks up though and watches as his friend goes from happy to forlorn. “Hey man, didn’t mean to upset you.” He puts his hand on Teddy’s shoulder.

“No, I’m good. Maybe a little jealous but happy nonetheless. Every time I give myself a moment to think of home, I think of Tabatha and what she must be going through. I tried to tell Dad I could get time off but Dad said he didn’t want me to extend my tour and asked me to simply stay safe and finish up, then he said to make sure I keep in touch.” Teddy sighs, his heart with his baby sister. Of all the times to be away, she asked him not to sign on for this last one but he and Gerome had their hearts set and the two of them are pretty stubborn in their decisions. Now he only feels regret for his selfishness, she knew something, sensed something maybe, but what? Damn him, he has to grow up and stop thinking of only himself.

“Have you heard from her at all? I mean, has she told you any details that she won’t tell anyone else? You guys have always been so connected it’s scary.” Gerome tries to bring in a positive moment.

“Her last letter practically killed me. She says she is doing ok now, no other words. On the back of her last letter is this.” He pulls out a folded piece of paper and tentatively hands the paper over to his friend. “Don’t tell her you’ve seen this. I think she is trying to tell me something, but I can’t put two and two together. Killing me, that’s what this is doing to me, killing me from the inside.”

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Gerome looks down and opens up the piece of paper, he reads the front where it only says “I’m doing fine” and then he turns it over where he is shocked by what he sees. His first reaction is to see the color yellow. Not a big deal for most but, because he knows her as well as he does, he knows she hates the color yellow. She once told Teddy that people who draw in yellow don’t want others to see their mistakes.

“Whoa, man this is bad.” Gerome says under his breath.

“Look closely, really close Ger,” Teddy says.

Gerome takes a second look and this time he is looking for details he may not have seen the first time. He scans the whole flower that is in front of him. Up and down and right to left his good eye roams all over the picture to uncover what his friend sees, when suddenly he sees something odd. Talking slowly, he says, “Ted, I see some slight orange in this picture too, it’s subtle but it’s there. Look here, towards the middle of this flower she has a broken heart in here and as I scan down I see that the stem of this rose is clearly a picture of a woman, with her hands as the thorns.”

Teddy looks up at his friend, “What woman? I didn’t see that part.” He grabs the paper back and stares at it deeply and, sure enough, its right there, plain as can be. Tabatha worked the veins of the stem into the perfect curvatures of a woman with one arm reaching above her head ending with the hand sticking out as the thorn and the other hand down at her side with that hand poking out as another thorn. It’s so easy to miss but once you see it, it’s so hard *not* to see. He looks up at Gerome.

“She is hurting really bad Ger, the next six months are going to feel like forever here.” Teddy sits back down by his car parts and busies himself again in cleaning them. Hard enough to be here since everything happened back home, but to be here without Gerome is only going to make him feel worse. Isolating in fact.

Gerome sits next to Teddy. Sometimes friends know when to talk and when not to, this is one of those non-talking moments. The two men sit there contemplating all that has happened back home in the last few months. First, Gerome’s sister became engaged, that, at least, was a positive event. Then, there is the car that Teddy’s dad refurbished, but that’s only two positives out of many negatives. The rest of the time it’s been downhill with crashing thunder.

The friends sit there for quite some time, Teddy keeps polishing and cleaning the parts in front of him and Gerome sits there with the picture in his hands. Finally, after he folds the paper back up and puts the page in his own pocket, Gerome speaks, “Look Ted. First place I’ll go when I get back is over to your place. You know I love Herman like he is my own dad. I’ll see what I can do for him. It might be a good place to hide out until Ada’s wedding anyway. My folks won’t mind. What do you say? Trust me around her?” He knows this has the potential to blow up in his face, or it could be the best decision of his life. The thought of Tabatha in this much pain is hurting his heart and while he can only see her with one eye now, he still can’t wait to see her beauty.

Teddy looks up, “You’d do that for me?”

“Wouldn’t you?” Gerome answers.

Teddy begins to smile because he knows he would do almost anything for Gerome and his sister Ada. Over the years, they have covered each other in a variety of scenarios both back home



and in service, however, this is definitely the biggest one. Teddy knows how Gerome feels about Tabatha even though Gerome has yet to admit anything to him or himself. This is going to be tough. Tabatha is everything to him and she has been through a lot since they've been on this tour. With his mind on Ada's wedding, it may take away from what Tabatha needs. Although, it's hard to say what she needs from here. Her lack of communication is worse than the communications themselves. Teddy sees himself rubbing his gears with all his might, he slows down and looks over at his best friend. "This won't be easy man. I don't know who needs you more, Dad or Tabs. We aren't even sure what took place, and no one is giving us any clues. Go in peace." Teddy puts his hand on his friend's shoulder and pats him.

Gerome gets up from his seat, "Ok, so it's set. I'll call my folks from the airport and get things set up. You, my friend, have only one thing to do for the next six months, and that's to stay safe. I'll see you in a few short months." He puts out his hand to shake Teddy's.

Teddy stands and shakes his best friend's hand. "Be in touch, ok? I need to know the real story as soon as you find out, no matter the time here." The two men shake heads towards each other to acknowledge the heaviness in between them right now, they would both like to pull each other in for a hug but are afraid how it will look because they aren't sure it will be a quick hug under the circumstances. As Gerome walks away he calls back to his Teddy, "I'm shipping out on the next flight, I should be home by 6:00am or so their time because I gain time back. Good luck with your next mission."

Gerome walks away slowly, he doesn't feel as exhilarated as he did when he was on his way there. He should have told Teddy the truth, he deserves to know. But he can't bring himself to talk about his own difficulties when Teddy and his family are going through so much. He has a lot of weight on his shoulders but he also knows he is up to the task because this is what you do for family, no questions asked. He is sure that his mother will understand, she may or may not know the exact story of what happened to Tabatha either, but he is confident she knows enough to understand his urgency for him be at their house and not hers. Besides, his house is probably going to be a bustle of crazy because of the wedding and Tabatha needs something, rather someone to give her what she needs, whatever that is. He hasn't even begun to think about what Herman needs.

Gerome touches his bad eye and then rubs his hands through his hair thinking about the man he has always considered his second father. He makes a fist with his right hand and taps on his chest where his heart is, in his mind he is sending strength and love to Herman. Gerome walks and thinks, packing will only take a few minutes, so he decides to use his leftover time to visit the doctor one more time and find out how long he can wait before he sees a doctor back home. He wants to wait until after the wedding, at least.

~ ~ ~

Herman stays up for the first couple hours watching his daughter in the dark. He no longer has power over her as a dad, fatherhood's love doesn't seem to be enough to bring her out of this. "*He* has a power over you that I can't penetrate. Damn that ignoramus, what happen baby? What really happened on that darkest afternoon of your life?" Herman talks out loud because he knows

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she can't hear him but he needs it to be heard, even if only by the walls of his house. There are so many questions about what happened to his baby girl, the police don't have answers, and the piece of garbage they locked up won't give any more information than is already known. As of right now, all Herman cares about is getting her help but she won't let him, she shuts him out and goes into this trance-like state. How he wishes that Teddy was home but he told him not to come. Herman thought he made the right decision at the time, now he is not so sure. There are only so many sleepless nights that he can handle and still continue to function. He has to work to pay bills.

Teddy and Tabatha have a connection like no other brother and sister he knows and they aren't even twins. The two of them know things about each other before anyone else in the family has been told. Herman remembers the moment his world turned upside-down, six months ago, when he got a phone call from Teddy overseas before the police showed up at his door. He was trying to tell Teddy that she was out with friends when they came to the door. Nothing ever prepares you for that. No one tells you how much of your insides will rip at once when you open the door to see the police standing there and you know very well that it's about one of your children since your wife is already gone. Ok, she isn't a child anymore but she is *his* child.

Teddy heard as the police asked him to come down to the hospital and identify his daughter because she is badly beaten, in shock and can't speak. One of the officers told him that they found her down by the riverfront in a car with the suspect whom they feel is the one who hurt her. The information was called in by a good samaritan who saw the car and followed them. She had her purse with her so they know it was not robbery but since she is not talking they don't know what happened.

Teddy stayed on the phone the whole drive to the hospital and wanted to hear what the doctor had to say. The doctor did not tell them much because all he could say was what he can see. Herman stayed with his daughter for hours, sitting in the emergency care room with her, going with her from one area of testing to the next. He held her hand while the rape test was done, he held her when they had to draw blood. This is when he knew something was really wrong because Tabatha didn't flinch, for the first time in her life. Her whole life she has had a fear of needles, and this one day, she allowed them in without a thought.

Memories like this are the ones Herman plays and replays in his mind on these nights of watching his daughter. Now the sun is starting to brighten the horizon and he doesn't even know how the night hours flew by. Herman walks around in a state of permanent exhaustion and worry. Not a moment goes by when one of his kids aren't on his mind. After losing Elizabeth to cancer two years ago, he never suspected that he would be watching another one of his loved ones suffer in silence like this. This is almost worse, there are no medicines that will help and no amount of love seems to bring her out of this state of mind.

The front door creaks and Herman looks up to see Tabatha looking right at him. Her eyes are so far away he wants to shake her and get her back. Suddenly, she collapses. Herman throws off his afghan and jumps to grab his daughter, he feels her cold face and takes her pulse, it's weak. He dials 911, "my daughter collapsed - her pulse is weak, her breathing shallow - come quickly!!"

"Ok sir, what is your address?" the operator asks



“Um, wait, oh yeah 456 Lowrly Court – we’re the end house before you turn left.” Herman’s voice is barely audible.

“Thank you sir, now that was 456 Lowrly Court I see you are close by so they will be there soon.” She informs him.

Soon feels like forever when you’re holding your daughter in your arms and she isn’t responding to your voice. Herman watches his phone, he knows that Teddy will call any minute. He notices it is almost 6:00am and he is trying to think of what time it is for Teddy. “Damn it Herman, you’re as bad as Tabatha, you could never get this whole time-zone thing right. Hang in there baby, Daddy’s right with you.” He whispers in her ear. The EMTs come running in because the door is still ajar. Herman slowly hands over his daughter to them and stands to let them assess the situation.

“We’re going to have to bring her in for observation. Her vitals aren’t terrible but she is in shock again. I recognize this sir and I’d like her to be seen.” Herman has no words in his mouth, he nods his head and grabs his keys. The EMT sees keys in Herman’s hand and puts his hand on top of Herman’s then he says, “Sir, you can ride with us, we’ll make sure you can get home later.” Again, he nods and climbs into the ambulance next to her.

Herman is a bit nervous but not for his daughter, he is wondering why Teddy hasn’t called yet. Then it hits him. ‘What if she is upset because something happened to Teddy? No!!!!!!!!!!!!!! That CAN’T happen.’ His head is shanking ‘no’ and his voice is screaming inside of him and he feels his heartbeat going at a rate that is probably unnatural. The EMT sees Herman and puts his hand on Herman’s knee, “Sir, she is out of danger now. You ok?” his voice is soft and caring. “Sir?” He stands as if he is about to check on Herman’s condition too.

Herman’s head swings around to see the EMT, no words come, not even a nod, Herman is frozen at the prospect, he is afraid he will scream. He grins over at the EMT. The EMT seems to understand what is going on and nods back. Herman may not recognize him but this EMT knows who Herman is and knows what happened six months ago, he was the one that picked her up at the riverfront. He thinks back to how this beautiful woman had been beaten so badly her eyes were practically swollen shut and the colors of the wounds on her neck and arms still haunt him to this day.

The rest of the ride is uneventful and in silence.

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Teddy walks back into his bunk and falls over. Since Gerome left, things have heated up a lot where he is. He has only been able to sleep three hours since last night. His day has been busy with activities due to insurgents and his night was filled with helping his mates recover from the day. Teddy has two specialties, first, he learned to become a medic and the second thing he learned was how to take apart and put together the engines of the cars they use. On days like this, he is called upon to do both. There is one other guy who does the same and one woman, both incredibly talented. They make one hell of a team. They are the first responders, after someone sees them, they get shipped out to a hospital.

This is the first time he has been able to sit down since after breakfast. It seems like a good time to take a nap. As he lays down, he sits up. The ache in his gut is incredible. “Damn! Tabatha!



Now what?!" he knows he has to call his father, but the last time he did that, his father's world came to an end.

Teddy gets off his bed and looks at the wall to see the clock. Gerome should be showing up right about now. He will wait a couple hours to call in the hope that he will reach Gerome first and not his father. Teddy forces himself to lay back down, exhaustion takes over and wins out, and he falls asleep easily, yet fitfully.

A couple hours' nap is all he needs. He looks to the sky after turning over again and again, he has only slept twenty minutes. The terror in his heart is unbearable, he shakes himself up and heads towards his superior's office. He can't stay here, it's time to go home. He walks to the main office.

He knocks on the door and is allowed to come in. Teddy looks around and sees a few people in the office besides his superior, one being the General. He gathers his strength and asks, "A word in private sir?"

The General looks around the room and easily says, "Dismissed" and points to the door. Everyone leaves, even Teddy's direct superior officer who shuts the door behind him. "At ease soldier, sit down and tell me what's on your mind. You've been working yourself to the bone these last twenty-four hours, all my medics have, and I thank you personally for that. I understand your good friend left yesterday, sorry about all that but you understand." He points to his eye to confirm what he is saying about his friend.

Teddy does not know what the General is talking about but when he calls Gerome he sure as hell is going to find out. Teddy finds he can't sit, he paces back and forth in front of his general and finally stops, takes a deep breath, looks him in the eye and says, "I have to go home sir, there are troubles beyond my ability to cope with anymore that my sister is going through and I can't be here for another six months."

The General stands and comes around to Teddy, he guides him over to the chair and sits him down, then he sits down next to him and says, "Spill your story, start at the beginning please."

Without knowing how or why, Teddy begins to mention how she was dumped by a longtime boyfriend she thought was going to marry her, then she found another guy who drank too much and their father had to kick him out of their house and finally the events of a few months ago, how she was saved by the guy at the gas station who saw that she looked in bad shape and called the cops and reported a woman who was beaten up in a car and gave the license plate number and where they were headed, he also followed them until he saw an unmarked police car wave him away, he knew they'd follow him and save the woman.

Since then, she has recovered from her physical injuries but not the mental ones, then he even went so far as to tell him how connected they are, what happened the last time and how his body is reacting now. Teddy finds it hard not to shed a few tears in front of this man that he holds in high regard. He has never broken down during any of his tours, no matter what he has seen and he has seen far too much for his liking now that he thinks about it.

The General puts a hand on his shoulder and says, "Whoa, I see this took a lot of courage for you to say this in front of me; in front of anyone for that matter. That's a lot of weight to carry for one man. You could have asked for leave you know."

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“My father said not to because it is close to my time of finishing this tour sir. My last tour in fact.” Teddy says matter-of-factly, trying to regain his composure and sit at attention.

“Under these circumstances, it would have been granted easily. I know you have only your father, this is all on his shoulders right now, is that right?” The General is now trying to show some compassion as a fellow man, not a high-ranking officer. Teddy shakes his head in the affirmative.

“Ok, First, go ahead and call your dad from here.” He hands him the phone from his desk. “Second, I’m going to check out how we can get you home sooner.” With that the General walks out and gives Teddy a few minutes of peace to make the call. Teddy keeps looking at the door because not only is this his superior officer’s desk phone but the General of the whole base intercepted the situation. He stares at the door a moment more, then he tries to call only he doesn’t call his father, he calls Gerome.

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Gerome’s cab pulls in front of Teddy’s house, seconds after the ambulance does. He saw they were following it but never in his life did he feel it was going to the same place. His heart is racing and he is quickly trying to find his wallet to pay the driver. He finds the biggest bill he has and throws it at him. However, as he is grabbing for the door the driver says, “Now that you’re home you can get a meaningful job.”

Gerome’s blood is already at boiling point looking at the ambulance, he turns to the driver and contemplates all the things he could say but he doesn’t have time for the argument, he makes a mental note of the cab’s number and he gets out with only one comment, “At least with my job in the military I make a difference in people’s lives, even saved a few dozen.” Then he grabs his duffle, slams the door shut and runs like hell towards the house. He is standing right in front of the porch to the left of the steps when they bring Tabatha down and Herman is following right after them looking spooked. No one even sees him. He runs up the porch and into the house, grabs the keys to Herman’s car, checks to make sure all the doors are locked, drops his duffle bag on the floor and heads out towards the car.

He follows the ambulance to the hospital, wondering whether or not he should call Teddy somehow. The only thing saving him from hitting a full-blown panic attack is that the event as the house looked to him that this is not life threatening. That, and the fact that driving with only one good eye, he has to be in full control. He has to park but he waits to see that they are taking her into the emergency room. As he pulls in to a prime spot, his phone rings.

Teddy starts talking, “Where the hell are they man, I tried to call the house right now and no one answered, it’s what 6:00am there now? Talk to me!! Damn it! Oh, and what the hells is going on with your eye, you idiot!” he yells at the end.

Gerome, knowing full well that Teddy felt something and that’s why he is calling, he chooses his words carefully. “The cab pulled up to the house seconds after the ambulance arrived. I watched them go in and then they were taking Tabatha out on the stretcher, I grabbed Herman’s keys and I parked right as you called. It doesn’t look bad, but your dad looks pretty dazed. I think this happened while she was outside because the blanket and Big Bear are on the swing. No one even saw me as they passed. How can I notify you when I know anything?”

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“How can you notify me? That’s all you have to say for yourself? Damn it man, too many years to pull this bullshit of avoidance. How can you notify me?!” Teddy repeats the words as the General walks back in. From behind he hears, “Give them my direct number.”

Teddy looks behind himself and sees the General shake his head as to say ‘go on, tell them’. He looks on the phone and tells Gerome the number even though he wants answers from his friend, both about his sister and him, “Got it Ted, ok, let me go in now. Hey man, take a rest you sound awful.” Gerome is very concerned about his friend, who knows what they have been doing since he left; things can change there as quickly as the wind. Gerome’s mind wanders at the possibilities.

Before he hangs up, the General takes the phone from Teddy and points to his couch – Teddy walks over to the couch and sits down. In his daze he lays down. The General speaks, “This is General Hatkins, please use my number to call and give us any information you can find out. I’ll be here waiting.”

Gerome has only spoken once or twice to their superior officer, let alone the General of the whole base. “Sir, this is Captain Lerner, I’m at the hospital now, it’s his sister.”

Silence for a second and then the General says, “Ok, good. I know she is in good hands then. I’ll watch things here.” With that he hangs up and looks over at Teddy. He brings him over a pillow and blanket out of a closet and watches as this tired soldier finds enough peace to let the exhaustion win him over.

~ ~ ~

Herman takes a few deep breaths as the doctors are checking Tabatha. One of them mentions a psychologist and Herman perks up really quickly. “What are you saying? That she didn’t pass out? I saw it happen in front of me. This is not a psychotic episode. Get the hell out of here and go find me a real doctor. One with experience in actual medicine. Not one who is still practicing at being a doctor. I’m not interested in having an intern check out my daughter!”

Herman’s tirade keeps up and he is getting louder and louder, which makes it easier for Gerome to find them. He rushes through the doors and grabs Herman by the shoulders and turns him around to face him. Herman takes a deep breath and is about to punch whoever grabbed him until he focuses and sees who it is. Then the tears start rolling down his cheeks, “They think it’s psychological” he points to the interns looking at Tabatha, then he leans his head onto Gerome’s shoulders, the burden is too much for him.

Gerome, gently sits him down next to Tabatha who is laying down on the hospital bed not reacting to anything around her. Gerome looks over at the doctors who are still standing there watching him as if he is a ghost. He stands to his full 6’6” attention and addresses the doctors in his most military voice. Wearing his dress blues when he travels has always been kind of a joke for him but today they will command the attention necessary. “The man asked for a doctor not an intern, go find one. It is his patient rights to have a full-fledged doctor look at his daughter since she cannot speak for herself right now – I’d advise you to listen. If this is too much for you, I’ll find one myself. Preferably a woman doctor while you’re at it.”

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The two doctors look at each other and without a word, they leave. Gerome turns back to the bed to see Tabatha laying there, her breathing is shallow he can see that and he looks at all the monitors to take in what they are telling him, her blood pressure is low however, thankfully her oxygen level is good. After taking all this in he approaches the bed and leans down to kiss Tabatha on the forehead as he has done a thousand times before. Only this time it rattles his insides deep down in places that should not be rattled right now.

This time, it's different. This time he is kissing a woman that he cares for more than he can admit to himself now. His heart is beating out of his chest and he has to find some composure as he stares at her eyes, willing them to notice him. He hasn't seen her in two years. He sits on the bed and picks up one of her hands and holds it to his chest. Wanting her to feel his heart beat, wanting her to connect to something. He leans over her face again and she blinks.

Herman jumps up as he sees her eyes move too. It's the most she has done since they have arrived. He holds her other hand and kisses her palm. Her head moves over to see Herman, really see him. She knows its him, Herman can feel their connection. She knows her daddy is here for her.

Slowly, she looks at her other arm and follows it to her own hand to see who is holding her. She connects with Gerome and stares; their eyes meet and he patiently waits for her recognition. "Teddy?" she questions.

"Teddy is good, I left him back at the base, I was discharged early. I'm home for good now my dear." Gerome says in a quiet voice because his real one is lost in his throat. Tabatha lifts her hand to touch Gerome's face and he leans forward to let her. "Your eye?" she questions. He shakes his head yes. Herman let's go of his daughter and walks over to the other side of the bed, he pulls Gerome's shoulder to make him turn. He stares at Gerome's eyes and sees a subtle difference in one of them. He looks at his daughter and wonders how she can see these things so quickly. "We'll address that later." Gerome simply says.

Tabatha shakes her head to indicate she understands. She looks back at her father, then again at Gerome and back at her father now. "I can see it now Daddy. The whole thing." Herman takes a minute to digest what she said to him. First of all, she hasn't said the word Daddy in months, second, she is telling him something he needs to understand. "Think damn it, think!!!" He yells inside his head.

Gerome looks at her and takes out the drawing he has. "Does it have to do with this?" He shows her the paper from Teddy. He is nervous that it will upset her again, but instead she smiles and shakes her head yes.

"That's the last part." She watches as Gerome hands the paper to her father. He stares at the picture knowing there is something to see. His first reaction is to say out loud, "yellow?" and as it came out he looks to her to make sure he didn't insult her.

"Yes, it's yellow Daddy." She smiles. With each smile she is gaining strength from inside. She pulls Gerome's hand closer to her and he scoots closer to the head of the bed. She releases her hand from his and places it on his thigh, then she pats his leg. "You're a good man Gerome, one of the best according to Teddy. Too bad you're married to the marines."



Both Herman and Gerome look at her with total confusion on their faces. Now is not the time to get into this. They need to know why they are here. Gerome breaks the silence, "How are you feeling now Tabs? Your heart? Breathing? Tell me what's going on, please. And don't lie, I can read all the monitors here."

Another voice from behind them says, "Actually, it will be nice if you tell me." Everyone looks around to see a woman doctor standing at the foot of the bed. "I was told I was requested by a giant of a soldier."

Gerome stands up and turns to her. "I apologize for that miss, but the interns were making a mess out of the situation. They saw a woman in shock and assumed she needed a shrink before examining her thoroughly. And before you ask, yes, I have military medic training."

The doctor smiles, "Well, they were right on one count, you are a giant Captain. If you could step aside though, I'd like to talk with the patient."

Both men step down to the foot of the bed and let the doctor do what she needs to do. Quietly she asks Tabatha a few questions. The men are still pondering about the conversation they had with her and trying to make sense of her words in their own brains. Herman looks down at the picture again and all of a sudden grabs Gerome's arm, who looks down at Herman and shakes his head yes, he realizes Herman found the woman as he is pointing to the stem.

The doctor clears her throat and they turn to her. "Well, for one thing, it sounds as if Tabatha has an irregular heartbeat, for that I'm going to call the cardiologist down to check. This could have been the reason for her passing out this morning. The second thing I'm assuming you all know about, she asked you to call Officer Bangle. I'm going to make my call, you can make yours." She says as she walks out.

Herman looks at his daughter, "Have you remembered something?"

"Yes Daddy, I finally saw the whole thing. Last night." She answers

Gerome looks at the two of them and thinks. He thinks about what he heard about and the questions that Teddy kept asking him when it first happened. One of them being, 'she had to have seen where he took her. Why can't she tell anyone? She had to have seen where she was going, right? It's not like her not to notice her surroundings.'

Gerome walks over to Tabatha and picks up her hand again, his heart begins to beat rapidly again. 'Damn' he thinks. He is questioning his own sanity right now but he asks anyway, "Did you not see what happened originally? Were you blindfolded?"

Tabatha looks down, then at her daddy who has been a rock throughout all of this. She looks back at Gerome and almost melts into his eyes, she tears herself away and with her other hand she reaches for Herman, and he comes quickly and holds her hand. "Let me call him now." While holding on to her hand, he calls the officer. "He said he will be here within the hour."

The three of them are about to engage in a conversation about what happened when the next doctor comes in. "Good morning gentlemen, do you mind if I check this patient. I know I am not a female doctor, however our female cardiologist Dr. White, is out of town right now, I can assure you I know as much as she does." He tries to joke, the other doctor filled him in on what has been going on with this patient.



Tabatha lets out a small laugh, music to Herman's ears. He hasn't heard that sound in months. Gerome realizes this and feels a moment of relief himself. The doctor continues, "I will most likely put you on a monitor for the next twenty-four hours but I want you to be watched here, not the kind you can wear at home. There will be a couple other simple, non-invasive tests that we will run along the way. Is everyone comfortable with that?" He looks from one to the other when really all he needs is the patient's approval.

Tabatha looks at the doctor, "I'm good with that, my captain is home, he will watch so I don't get up and dance today." She smiles and glances over at Gerome.

Gerome is beside himself with emotions he is not sure what to do with. Herman is elated to hear her voice not crack, it's been a long time since she found her inner strength. To hear her say a whole sentence without her voice dropping the ending. His baby is coming back, his "son" is home, and things are finally looking up. He tries to draw some strength from her and some solace from the little bit of peace in the room.

After the doctor's exam, he leaves Tabatha alone and says he will check back throughout the day to see how the monitor is doing. A nurse comes in right after he leaves with a cart that has many wires, Herman draws a gasp. The nurse explains what everything is and Herman and Gerome are shaking their heads as if they know anything. Bottom line is, they have to walk away right now so the nurse can put on the monitor. This, they can do.

Gerome puts his arm around Herman's shoulders and they step out of the room for a moment. Outside the room, Gerome allows himself to finally exhale loudly. "I know the feeling son. I haven't done that in months. Does Teddy know what's going on? He hasn't called me yet." Herman speaks to Gerome as he would his own son. He has always done that with this young man. Watched the two boys grow up before his eyes and become the men they are today.

Gerome looks over at Herman and shakes his head, he can't bring himself to speak though. His tongue is tied to the woman beyond that door. No longer is Tabatha (Tabs) his little sister, no longer is she a good friend, something changed in him and in her and he is trying to put words to the feelings he is having inside himself right now. He hears Herman speak to him but can't answer. Gerome is hoping his silence isn't misinterpreted.

Herman takes Gerome's phone out of his hand and scans through it. He sees an overseas number on the last incoming call and hits it to call that number, hoping it gets him to his son. The phone rings once, twice, three times, then he hears it fumble and fall on a desk or floor before he hears a gruff voice answer with, "General Hatkins speaking".

Herman takes a moment to speak, 'his general?' something must be wrong. "Um..He,.....Hello this is Herman, I'm..."

"You must be Teddy's father, yes we've been waiting for you to call. Thankfully, your son is still sleeping on my couch. He has been out since he called the Captain before. Hasn't slept much recently, but most of my medics are in the same position. It's been rough around here lately. Teddy came in this afternoon and spoke to me about his sister. I spent the day working out how we can get him home sooner. Still working on that. I can wake him if you'd like or you can tell me the information and I'll relay it to him." The General fumbles with the phone because he ran into



his office and didn't want the phone to wake Teddy. They ended up needing to give him a sedative because he became inconsolable earlier.

"Oh, ok. No, don't wake him. The good news is that his sister may have an irregular heartbeat which caused her to pass out today. She is actually doing very well. She even asked to speak to the arresting officer from ...." Herman pauses because he is not sure how much the general knows.

"From the incident a few months ago, yes, he told me about that and I'm sorry to hear that things like this even happen. Good thing Teddy and Gerome weren't around at that time because I'm afraid they'd be in jail themselves with what they would have done to that guy. Myself included and probably half this platoon. We take respect of women very seriously around here, no tolerance for anything less. I assume that it's a good sign that she wants to speak to the police." The General received more details from Teddy when he was in his delirious state before. More details than he wanted to know about any of his soldiers and all he could think about is his own daughter around that age and what he would have done to the rat bastard that destroyed Tabatha.

He continues with, "I have a cousin out there who is a top-notch lawyer, I'll send you his number on this phone so you can call him and see what you may need."

"I appreciate that sir, I'm not sure we need him yet until Tabatha speaks to the police officer. Tell Teddy that his sister is really on the mend this time and she is so happy to see Gerome too, her whole face lit up. Tell him, well, tell him to be safe and we will see him sooner than he thinks." Herman can't believe he is talking to a General but he also hears what the man is not saying. He knows that his son is in a bad state of mind right now. His gut is telling him so. Knowing that this man is looking out for his son personally is making it easier to handle. This General must be an exceptional man, most superiors wouldn't trouble themselves like this, at least Herman thinks they wouldn't.

"Will do." With that the general hangs up.

Herman slides Gerome's phone back into his pocket and shakes his shoulder a second to get him out of his stupor. "It's a lot to watch and you only came home today. Do your parents even know you're back yet? How did you even know where we were?"

Gerome shakes his head out of his cloud as he hears Herman's voice being directed to him. "Yes, I called them from the airport and told them my intentions are to stay with you guys. I promised Teddy I'd come help you guys out and then surprise Ada by showing up at the wedding. Mom says it's a good idea because I'll only be in the way at the house. My cab pulled in as the EMTs were taking Tabs into the ambulance." He grins as he remembers her saying the last part. She meant what she said about him being *her* captain and he knows it.

Herman, knowing Gerome's mom, laughs too. He knows she probably meant every word. He would be too big of a distraction and she needs to give Ada all her focus. "I should call her and tell her what's going on though, no?"

"No son, she has enough on her mind. When things happened with Tabatha, she spent many nights at the hospital with her because sometimes when I touched her accidentally, she screamed more. A very tough time, let your mom celebrate now. Besides, at least this time the



doctors know what's going on and she is in a great mood right now. More so than I've seen her in months." Before Gerome can respond to Herman they hear a voice.

"Gentlemen, am I interrupting a family moment?" says the officer.

Herman recognizes him right away and shakes his hand. "This is Gerome, my *other* son." Herman introduces the two men. Gerome straightens up like the true soldier that he is, more out of habit than anything else, and shakes the officer's hand with marine strength.

"At ease soldier you're on civilian territory but I appreciate the sentiment and I completely respect the uniform don't worry. Herman, what's going on?" he asks

"I don't know, she came out of her trance and began talking about how she needs to speak to you and how she sees things clearly now. I don't know what that means do you?" Herman can't hide the worry in his voice.

The officer pauses for a moment and thinks about the meaning or possible meaning. After a moment or two, he begins to grin, "I was there when Tabatha was first brought in, and her eyes were swollen shut as you remember. I had asked her if she remembers seeing anything that could help us. At the time she wrote me a note that says her eyes were fuzzy. I wonder if she is remembering something from when she could actually see that day. Is it ok to go in now?" he asks.

"We're waiting for the nurse to come out, she is setting up a heart monitor on her. She came in from the porch and passed out early this morning. Hence the reason I told you to come here. She is doing ok though, they aren't too worried, cautious yes, but not worried." Herman feels the need to clarify, maybe for himself he is not sure.

The three men stand there for a moment looking at the door when thankfully it opens and the nurse walks out, "You can all go in now." As she passes Gerome she pauses and puts her hand on his arm and shakes her head in the affirmative. Gerome puts his hand on the same spot as he sees something in her hand. A note. He slides it into his pocket.

Gerome responds in kind. He follows the other two men in, not sure as to whether or not he should read the note yet. He decides to wait, positive the right time will show itself. Tabatha is now sitting up in bed and looking kind of radiant, not the look you'd expect in the hospital. Or, this could be Gerome seeing what he wants to see and not the reality. He blinks his eye a couple times. No, she is radiant, even with all the wires sticking out of her.

The officer walks over with a chair and shakes her hand. "I was told you wanted to speak to me. Is that true?"

Tabatha looks around and reaches her hand over to Gerome, he quickly shows up at the side of her bed and takes her hand. She squeezes gently, then a little harder, she takes a deep breath and begins to speak. "Daddy, you may want to sit down first." He grabs a chair and Gerome takes a step even closer to her.

Another deep breath, "Remember how you asked me to see things, to remember what I saw. Actually saw." The officer shakes his head yes. "Well, I've spent months putting myself in an almost comatose state staring out at the night sky as it was on that day, dark. I had to see in the dark, didn't I?"

Her breath is getting a little hard, Gerome squeezes her hand to give her strength. She looks up at him and smiles. She moves over on the bed and Gerome takes that to mean she wants



him to sit down next to her, which he gladly does, still holding her hand with one hand and puts his arm around her with the other.

Tabatha leans her head into Gerome and continues, “The day we went out, was supposed to be like a date. I apologize Daddy, I told you I was going out with friends. We had spent the night before talking all night at a party down by the pier. One of those singles parties that let everyone in as long as you register first.” The officer shows he understands and continues to write in his notebook, very official. Gerome likes this man.

“After he took me home he asked if I would be willing to spend the next day with him. I had no work that day so I agreed. He seemed like a nice person. Treated me well, made me laugh, and seemed to love life. He told me about how he went last year to that party and the girl he met there lead him on and left a bad taste in his mouth so he wanted to make sure I really wanted to go. I had said yes. A little worried why he would admit that but on the other hand I kind of understood.

We met at the pier and I left my car there, oh....you know that part don’t you, your guys found it there. Anyway, He drove me out to this open field, the one out by the art museum. It’s so pretty that time of year, lots of yellow flowers growing there.”

Gerome heard the word, yellow and tenses up. Something is very telling about that picture now. His mind begins to race to try and figure it out, he reaches into his pocket and pulls out the picture, he hands it over to the officer. He looks down at Tabatha and she nods.

The officer looks at the flower and doesn’t seem to understand what he is looking at, he looks up at everyone and they are waiting for something so he looks again. He finds the women in the stem of the chrysanthemum or is this a rose? What could that mean? “The field is covered with roses you said, but this is not a rose is it?” That much he could tell.

“We walked along the roses and talked. The weather was actually very nice. We were having a really nice time. He knows everything there is to know about flowers. He showed me the subtle differences between the varieties. I had no idea there were so many and was completely engaged in the conversation.

At one point he asked me if I was mocking him and I said no. I told him I was actually fascinated by his knowledge. He brought me over to the areas of the park that not too many people know about he said. The far end passed the buildings, passed the lilies and the flowering bushes, there all by itself sits a patch of yellow chrysanthemums. I remember seeing how they grew in a perfectly rectangular patch.

I even commented on the fact that it was so precise. He appreciated that I noticed that. He asked me if I noticed anything else about them. I could not and he shrugged and said, that’s ok, it’s very subtle, not many can see that the middle of them has a small tinge of orange. It’s a variety that he developed himself. I bent down to see them and sure enough there is a small tinge of orange but only at the very centers of the flowers.

I stood up to smile at him and he took my hand very gently. I had no idea what was coming next. There is no reason for me to think anything would. We were having a good time.” Tabatha looks over at the table near her and Gerome follows her eyes. He gets up to get her the glass of water sitting there, then resumes his roll next to her.

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The officer is mulling over the current information, “What’s under the flowers Tabatha? What is so significant about them?” he asks professionally.

Tabatha shakes in Gerome’s arms and he whispers into her ear, “It’s ok, tell him everything you can, you have the strength of ten men.” She looks up at him and grins, it’s the same phrase he told her whenever she felt she couldn’t get a project done or a public speaking activity in school.

“I’ll tell you in a minute, you need to see all that I saw first. He walks with me into the wooded area right passed that. I assumed he was going to talk to me about what we were seeing and when I asked him about a specific bush he stared at me in a way I did not recognize. We were maybe twenty feet into the trees when he went behind a tree, the tree is marked on the side I could see with a very strange mark – I don’t know what it is, but I have since looked it up. It’s a pagan symbol for truth.

Then he said to me in a voice that was gruff and unrecognizable, “Tell me the truth, why did you come out with me? Pity?” and I remember staring at him and said I came out with him because last night I found him to be entertaining and a real gentleman. He shines a red light at me, that he had taken from behind the tree, then he shines it around me in a circle. ‘ok, that looks like the truth’.

At this point I was getting nervous but I knew where we were and knew I could run towards the buildings and find a person to help me. He said, ‘follow me I’ll show you more flowers I created’. This, he said, back in his regular voice. I followed him thinking it was only a fluke and I misheard him. We went north for about a hundred trees.” She pauses

The officer asks, “How do you know that?”

“Because I was nervous, I always start to count things, it calms me down, so I counted a hundred trees and we walked in a straight line which I realize now is north. There we saw another perfect rectangle of flowers, these were blue and in a blue hue I don’t remember seeing on any other flower there before. I told him how impressed I was and asked him why he doesn’t introduce his flowers to the botanical garden.

This is when the first strike happened. Right across my face, I hadn’t expected it, I didn’t see it coming and didn’t get a chance to block him. With my hand on my now swollen cheek and eye I stared at him and simply asked, ‘why’. He said he was sorry and that he didn’t know what came over him. He gets full of rage when people mention the botanical garden management because they have laughed at him in the past and think he is a joke. I apologized, but I think that was his plan all along. To show me the flowers. Not just his flowers, these particular patches.

We walked some more, only this time he had my hand suddenly handcuffed to him and we went towards 10:00 from that patch of blue flowers. We walked about two hundred steps and I saw a green patch of a ground covering I had never seen before either. Also, in a perfect rectangle.” She looks at the officer, “I hope you’re writing down these measurements, it’s important and you’ll see why soon.” He nods.

Gerome, on the other hand has already made up his conclusions, under those flowers another woman is buried. It’s the small amount of remorse he has, he kills them then says he is sorry and gives them a proper burial. Hence the woman in the stem. They are all underground, as

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she would have been. His heart is racing right now, but this is the story that Teddy wants, this is what they all need. Closure.

She begins again, after scooting further into Gerome, “We walked further into the woods, now in the direction of 2:00, for another eighty-five steps then a quick direction change to 9:00 for another hundred and sixty-two steps. Here he put me down on a large rock and relocks me onto a ring that is screwed into the second rock. I am still sitting up at this time. In front of me I can see what looks like a cellar door, the kind people used for a storm shelter. The door said four, one, two and had a combination lock on the front. He went to the door and opened it and took out two long metal rods, he measured them against each other, then he came and measured it against my spine, I felt the top of one at the base of my head. I remember, that at that precise moment I froze, my voice was gone and my desire to fight too. I don’t know why but my head was so lost I could not imagine what he had in store for me so instead of panicking I chose to stay alert and keep looking for a way out.

Then he went back and put them both back, ‘damn’ he said, ‘neither of these fit. You’re obviously taller than the others. We’ll have to take you back home, I have more there.’ He wasn’t really talking with me - more like his words were at me. He unlocked me from behind and immediately grabbed my other hand and locked them together behind me. As we begin to walk right passed the door, we continue walking for almost three minutes, and suddenly we were out at the parking lot. It was then I realized why he parked where no other cars were. He knew where to park, he had to have planned this from the beginning.

He shoves me into his car and ties a rope around my neck to the back of the chair, ‘if you get any ideas of pulling forward to get out, you will only choke yourself’ he said with a smile. From here we drove out easily, no one suspected a thing as we drove by. I watched all I could watch, we passed the signs for Rammy’s Bar and Grill, passed the overpass, went as far as the exit to the piers. My eyes kept flashing from side to side to take in all I could. He got off the highway at #5 and drove past four traffic lights, going away from the piers. We pulled into a storage area, the kind with the rented lockers, he pulled into the third gate on the left and we drove down to aisle 17. He stopped here, took out the keys to the car and left me there. He was only gone a couple minutes, I didn’t see where he went because I couldn’t turn my head, but it was definitely to the left because I heard him walking, I think he took close to fifty-three steps but I’m not sure because on the way back I heard a few more.

When he got back into the car he threw a few metal items into the back seat. I heard them, not see them. He drove off, he was being very methodical. Clearly this was all part of the agenda. Daddy, remember when you told me that no matter what happened you would love me?” she looks at her dad.

Herman is in full horrified mode, he has heard some of this before, but not all, and neither has the officer. He is writing as fast as his hands can. He did not bring a recorder. He can only shake his head.

She looks up at Gerome, he shakes his head yes too. She looks at the officer, “Nothing you can say will change our minds about you Tabatha or how we feel, and I’m not even family.” The officer smiles.

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She gathers up her strength from Gerome and continues, “I said to him that I thought he was good looking but that I was not into kinky sex. That I preferred it the old fashion way. Hoping that maybe that’s all he wanted. He looked over at me and started to laugh though. He said, ‘you think I want to have sex with you?’ That’s absurd we’re not married. I would never do that unless I’m married. Do you want to marry me?’ he asked. I told him that I don’t know him well enough yet but that anything was possible.

He looked over at me and smiled, only this time it wasn’t a bad smile, it was his old smile, a kind one. I had hoped that I softened whatever he was thinking. We drove along highway eight going south, I noticed that we passed the exit to the amusement park and then we passed the exit to the waterway and then we passed the exit that said ‘farm county’. After that one we got off and took a left. This road was more gravel than road and we were on it for a good ten minutes before I saw anything noteworthy. We passed a sculpture of some kind of metal on the left and then we turned right. The roads were not marked. Twenty-seven trees on the right later he pulled into a driveway, the house is quaint with blue shutters.

He took me out and actually undid the handcuffs. We went into the house together and he said, ‘welcome to my home’ and then proceeded to take me to the bedroom. He slid over to his dresser and handed me a ring to put on. ‘now we can enjoy ourselves’ he said.

All of a sudden, he was being completely civil. Completely normal, I had no other option but to make sure he thought I enjoyed every bit of our time together. I’m sorry Daddy.” She looks at Herman because now his daughter is admitting that she is no longer a virgin in front of him, this was the beginning of the trouble unfortunately and the least of Herman’s concerns, thankfully he knows she did not get pregnant from this.

The officer suggested that she take a break but she shook her head and said, “If I don’t say this now, I don’t know that I can restart this. You need to know this. You need to save the others. You see, after he finished with me, he kissed me ever so tenderly on the cheek and turned into a new person. I was getting up to get dressed when he started beating me up. This came from nowhere. He was yelling at me that I dirtied his sheets and that his brother is going to kill him now. So many hands and other things were upon me at once I didn’t know what to do. I tried to defend myself only after a couple seconds my hands were held up by another man. He was much taller and stronger. As he held my hands up the man I was with stopped and stood there stunned in his tracks. The second man was very angry when he said to his brother, ‘you had a virgin in my bed?!! His anger was sincere. He literally threw me on the floor and I slid into the dresser. The bruises you saw on the man you think is my attacker were not from defensive wounds but from his brother.

You see, they started talking in front of me how he is only supposed to bring him the women, not take them for himself. How he is supposed to stick to his job, the one he was taught. Then he told him, he will have to do something different with me because I am not even pretty enough to be a flower. That’s when I realized that under all those perfect flower rectangles is a buried woman. You have to find them. You have to notify their parents. They deserve to know.”

Tears begin to fall off her face and Gerome wants her to stop, he looks at Herman who is ready to lose his lunch from the past year. Gerome’s military training is the only thing keeping him

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strong. The officer is looking kind of meek as well. Gerome is hoping she is almost done. She pats his arm that is around her and whispers, “just one more thing ok?” he shakes his head.

“What I’ve been trying to see is what that man looked like. You see, at this time, my eyes were already starting to swell and I was on the floor, but what I remember seeing now is his size, he is about the size of Gerome here, with a tattoo on the back of his neck that looks like a chalkboard with tally marks on it. He has as many marks as there are women in the park. I was to be the fifth one.

It’s like his own personal joke to the police; that they can’t find him and he is carrying around the evidence. Then he went to the drawer and held a gun to his brother. I couldn’t help myself I yelled at him to stop. He turned to me and laughed. He looked down at his brother and said, ‘look the little Philly actually likes them puny, you must have done a good enough job this time, I won’t kill you, but I can’t guarantee next time. He pulled me out from where I was and looked me over and told me I wasn’t worth his time, that he would go find a cow in the field that will satisfy him better. He threw me again. I think that is when my ribs cracked.

He went over to his brother, and this time I saw his face and I realized last night that I knew the face. I’ve been staring ever since to try and put that face to something, and I finally figured it out. It is not that everyone laughed at him at the botanical gardens, it is his brother. His brother is the curator over at the gardens, he is the one who has kept him down low. He must have endured years of abuse from him, I couldn’t have been the first one. Might night was no way the first time his brother beat him. Maybe, I’d like to think anyway, that maybe he really did like me because he was so gentle actually during *that* time. Sorry daddy.” She pauses to make sure Herman knows she didn’t mean to do what she did. His face is frozen watching her.

“I’ve seen the curator before because I used to go to the gardens all the time. Remember Daddy? We always would have our best walks there.” She is looking at her daddy again and he looks awful and part of him looks relieved at the same time. He stands and comes towards her.

At the foot of the bed he says, “All those nights outside, you were trying to remember what you saw? We could have used other methods, hypnosis maybe? It wouldn’t have taken as long. I could have driven you around, anything.” His voice sounds a little desperate and she hears it, everyone does.

“No, it wouldn’t have worked, I had to be bringing it up myself daddy. I wanted to, I needed to. You see, when the guy at the gas station knocked on my window and asked if I was ok, I could only turn my head slightly to say no, I was tied again. The man who saved me works at the gas station, he knew something was wrong, I saw it in his eyes. He also recognized the guy I was with. He knows more than he said at the beginning. I think he fears the brother as well but maybe he never saw the end results and didn’t want to do it anymore.” She looks over at the officer and says, “He may or may not still be around. If he is afraid, he could have left town out of fear. The guy is really big, but his DNA must be on all those other women, it has to be. Or maybe theirs is at the house or in the car, the car doesn’t look like it was cleaned in years. Check the trunk, the house everything. Please officer, make this right. Oh, and one more thing, check on him in jail. He is probably being abused there too. It’s not his fault. He is almost as much of a victim as I am.”

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Herman stands tall and sees his daughter for the beauty she is, sees her strength and courage and sees her sitting in the arms of the man he hopes will stay that way. Even though he knows he should be shaken to the core, he also knows that he is very prideful right now. All he can say is, “You’ve done your mother proud my dear. Teddy will be amazed at your bravery. All that military training must have been handed over to you via mind bending or however it is that you two communicate together. Part of me wants to cry, I do, really. Simply sit down and put my head in my hands and cry this all out which I haven’t been able to do, however, the other part of me wants to scream from the rooftops how much I love you right now and how proud I am of you. You, Gerome, Teddy, you all have given me so much.” At this, his voice chokes and he walks over to give his daughter the hug he has been longing to give her for months.

Gerome gets up and walks the officer out of the room. “Not what you were expecting huh?” he says.

“No, my friend, not at all. I’m going to call this in immediately and I will follow up with you guys in a few days. Please tell her this may take some time to get approval to exhume these bodies and to identify them along with coming up with the proof we need to get the brother. I’m happy she did this now and not years from now, because hopefully no one else has been targeted yet while the scared one is in jail.” The officer is set to go when Gerome stops him

“If she is right, he is most likely being abused on the inside. I think I can speak for the family when I say to see what you can find out and do for him, ok? Unless he is not as innocent as she is portraying him.” Gerome doesn’t want him to go unpunished but he doesn’t want him to be punished more than necessary either.

~ ~ ~

Officer Bangle has been a very busy man these past couple of days. With the exact directions from Tabatha, they found all the places she mentioned. The botanical gardens were closed and the curator furious. He has the tattoo she spoke of and based on that they have him in a holding cell until they exhume the bodies.

On the third day, the judge approves the exhumations, Officer Bangle has to be there for each one. With the first one, they find not only a woman, but a woman buried in what looks to be dirty sheets. The little brother did this to assuage his own involvement. This way the true culprit would be found. He is positive that there is some DNA on those sheets that will make his case so much easier. They find the second one, same thing, and the third and the fourth. Each time buried in the sheets they were wronged in. The women are also buried with their identifications, either a work ID or their driver’s license, making his job so much easier. First, he will look into all the most recent missing persons reports. He will have to speak to the little brother soon, however, he will speak to the district attorney first to see if this constitutes as turning in state’s evidence and what that can mean for the little shit. Because in the officer’s eyes, he still is a criminal, an unwilling one, but a criminal just the same. At the very least he is an accessory to each one of these.

With the forensics department working on warp speed they are waiting on final results before they have all they need for a quick conviction. After the day of digging, they found the house and not only search the house itself but the whole two acres of land as well as looking for any possible bodies missed. Thankfully, none were found. The locker turned out to be full of

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various metal pipes, ropes and other unmentionables. Plus, they found a couple of shovels in different heights and a bag full of jewelry.

The cellar that she talked about is exactly that. It turns out it was used as a bomb shelter back during the big war and because it is out in the wooded area, no one thought to dismantle it. The officers find at least three days’ worth of dried food, water and clothing at the bottom of the steps. All of which are being tested as well. His department head keeps complimenting him on finding out the information and the officer keeps pointing out the credit all belongs to Tabatha. His superior corrected him by saying that the only way she called him back specifically is because he left her feeling safe and for a woman traumatized by men, that’s a big compliment.

Officer Bangle comes into work on the fifth day after Tabatha’s case started moving in fast gear, to find Herman standing at his desk. He greets him warmly. “Good morning sir, how is Tabatha?” he asks in a professional tone.

“She is fine, thank you. Turns out her heart has been giving her problems for a long time and we’ve always attributed it to other issues and events in her life. The doctors apologized for missing something like this. Gerome has been amazing, as was expected. They haven’t left each other’s side since he got home. She came home yesterday with a new treatment plan. My son Teddy is getting discharged early, hopefully in a week or two. Apparently, family circumstances can alter your leaving time. Who knew?” He shrugs.

“That’s good to hear, but I doubt that’s why you are here, is it?” the officer responds

“Actually, Tabatha asked me to come by. She wants to check on the man in jail. The first one, and to tell you that the man from the gas station has a tattoo under his left ear that she thinks to be a snake. If that helps you.” Herman is still uncomfortable with all the details.

“Well, if it will ease her mind you can tell her that the district attorney, DA, has spoken with the man you are asking about a couple of times and that he sang like a canary as the saying goes. He is all too happy to get his brother behind bars. He even copped to what his brother had over him in the first place. Being that he is cooperating so well the DA is contemplating leniency, although he is not totally convinced he feared his life. His reputation yes, but not his life.

I’m sure he will get what he deserves in the end. I understand her hesitation though, so tell her the DA is on the case and let’s leave the details between us. The final DNA results will be here today or tomorrow. The curator has lawyered up but every time they are here to see him they leave frustrated. Which is good for us.

Oh, and one more thing. Please tell her that all the families have been notified and each one has expressed extreme gratitude to the unknown person who gave us the tip. We won’t be telling them any more than that. It’s not necessary. Although the news media is all over the digging and shutting down of the gardens, so if anyone asks her any funny questions tell her to stay quiet. Then apologize to her from us because no one here will say a word. We all believe in keeping tips anonymous. Otherwise no one would ever call in.” He finishes with a sigh.

“With Gerome in the house I don’t see it possible for anyone to ever approach her. Then, when her brother shows up you can rest assured she will never be alone the rest of her life.”

Herman finds the strength to laugh.

“Bangle! My office!” his chief calls to him.

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“Hold that thought, this should only be a moment.” He says to Herman and walks over to the chief's office.

The door closes behind him and the chief looks at him, “Getting personal is only going to hurt them. Be careful.” He starts with this and moves to sit behind his desk. “Sit down” he motions to the chair in front of his desk. The officer obliges.

The chief takes a breath and continues, “Just got word from uptown that our little man in jail was beaten half to death last night. One of the women we found was the convict's sister and he put two and two together on his own and a little street justice pursued. The guards had to pull him off, then accidentally let him go when they found out who he was beating. They pulled him off in time though. What did you tell the dad?” he asks

“I told him the DA is working with him so that the onus of what happens is not on us. Then I told him I'm sure he will get what he deserves. I think I agree with the guards. Sorry, my opinion doesn't matter I know.” He stands thinking the conversation is over.

“Stanley, listen. We're all of the same opinion. Don't let it be known to the family at all. Military people have connections sometimes and we don't want him finished off on our account. Let it be an accident like last night.” With the word accident he used quotations with his fingers. He continues as the officer reaches the door, “The DNA results are all in - we got him by the balls, no way can he bully his way out of this one. DA wants it to be done without a trial and I'm inclined to agree, Tabatha doesn't need to see him again. Attorneys want him to plea insanity and he threw a fit, our guards got in there right before the lawyer was knocked down. Tell him that things will all work out. We got this case covered.”

“Herman also mentioned that she remembered the guy at the gas station has a snake tattoo. Her eyes were slits but her mind was working overtime to see all she could see, it's taken her six months to remember all the fuzzy images and put them in clear pictorial memories. I'll send out James to visit the station again. Maybe now we'll find him.” He says and leaves before the chief could say more. Secretly he is dancing around right now.

“Herman, the chief confirmed what we mentioned already. The DNA results are conclusive and are on target with everything she said. Please send her my best for a speedy recovery. I think we should keep our contact strictly professional.” He puts out his hand to shake Herman's hand.

Herman takes the hand and pulls the officer in for a quick hug. “Screw professionalism with me, you can't say you weren't affected when she told that story. I'll take it to my grave as I'm sure you will too. Keep up the good work.” He pats the officer on the shoulder as he walks away.

Teddy gets off the phone with Tabatha and keeps shaking his head in disbelief. His General is sitting in the room with him again as Gerome requested. Gerome didn't want Teddy alone and now he understands why. Teddy doesn't know whether he should celebrate her strength or go jog off this anxiety. He looks over at the General who is sitting still, contemplating all he heard on the speaker call.

“News like this can destroy the strongest of men. But she is in good hands now. She sounds like she is in a good place. Not that that makes it easier to know what she went through, but



at least now you know. She used every trick in the book to help her jog her own memory, the counting the looking for small items like tattoos instead of the big picture. She’s done the force proud even if she isn’t a real part of us.” This the first thing he could think to say to Teddy. Part of him wants to respond like a father should, but the logical side of his brain wins out and keeps him distant as he should in his superior officer role.

Teddy paces a few more times than looks at the general, “Sir, the next two weeks will be long but if I had to stay six months after this I think I would go insane. If she can tough out these past months, I can tough out two more weeks. I’ll be home in time for Ada’s wedding and that will be a big surprise to everyone. The marines have taught me more than I could have imagined. My career here has been a rewarding one. In civilian life, I hope to make you proud too sir.” He stands looking at his General and salutes with a tear rolling down his cheek. He waits to be saluted back so he can wipe the tear away with a little dignity.

The general stands and comes around his desk. He has been with this young man for all three of his tours. He has shown nothing less than perfection in everything he has done and learned to do. Becoming a medic and a mechanic have brought out stellar performances. He noted also that he has received a number of accommodations as well. His decision made, he says, “I’m sending you home on tomorrow’s plane. Take a couple weeks of R&R and you’ll get your official papers in a couple weeks. I’ll make sure this happens. Good luck soldier and keep in touch.” With that he hands him a handkerchief and salutes at the same time.

Teddy takes the handkerchief and uses all his self-control not to hug the man. He looks him in the eye and sees that his superior is doing the same. It’s been a long road together and this is the end. Or maybe it’s the beginning. The beginning of new things. He will be home in days not weeks. He will call his dad tomorrow and let the surprise hit him first. He turns now to walk out and is stopped by a hand on his shoulder. The general is looking him in the eye, “You’ve already made me proud son.” With that Teddy turns to leave.

~ ~ ~

Gerome isn’t sure how Teddy is doing, but Tabatha insisted on telling Teddy the whole truth, he deserves to know she says. Although she gave him the abridged version and both of them know why. She held onto Gerome the whole time. In fact, she is still sitting on his lap now and holding his hands around her. She can’t move. She is using her meditation techniques the cardiologist taught her to calm herself down.

Slowly she gets up and faces Gerome. She walks across the room and back again, then she walks away again. Tabatha is not sure what to do with herself. Now that she has said it out loud for a second time the reality of what she went through is sinking in even harder. Her head is spinning, she looks at Gerome and freezes.

He is watching her with eyes that are meant for more than a sister. She takes in the whole of him. He is broad in stature and a giant on the inside as well. There is no way she could have spoken in front of her father without him. She begins to shake; her insides are crumbling and she starts to move down to the floor and begins to cry. A cry from the depths of her emotions, a cry she held back for the past six months. Her whole body is shaking.

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Within seconds, her whole body is being surrounded by legs that hold her together and arms that keep her from falling apart. Gerome sits down behind her, his legs around hers and his arms around her as well. No words are being spoken, none have to. She turns and crawls into his lap and grabs her arms around his neck. All she can think of right now is that she is glad that her father is not home. Her body is almost convulsing from the tears, her mouth opens and the screams are only muffled because her face is in Gerome’s shoulder.

Gerome holds her and holds her tighter still. She has been holding this in for months. Gerome feels the tears rolling down his own cheek that he can’t wipe off because he refuses to take an arm off of her. He holds on and lets her get out all of her anxiety that is in her system. His shirt is wet and he couldn’t imagine being any other place in the world than where he is right now.

No one knows how long it took before she became quiet again. No one cares either. Gerome sits, and waits. Tabatha’s breath becomes irregular now as she breathes in three quick breaths to catch up to herself then a long exhale. Gerome strokes her back to help her calm down. He continues to rub her back until she falls asleep from sheer exhaustion.

He hears the front door creek open and he calls softly to Herman to let him know they are in the office. Herman walks into the room and sees Gerome holding his daughter who looks like a spent rag doll. “We called, she reacted.” Is all he says. Herman looks at his daughter and then back again at Gerome, “Do you want me to help you up?” he asks.

“No sir, I’m good, can you bring me a pillow for my back though?” Gerome asks quietly. Herman nods and goes out into the hallway, he passes his wife’s picture. He stops to look at her smiling back at him, “Keep him safe doll, we need him home safe.” He continues to walk into the parlor to get a pillow off the couch. He walks quietly back to Gerome and Tabatha, Gerome sits up and he places the pillow behind him. Herman puts a hand on his shoulder, squeezes and leaves.

He knows his daughter is out of the woods for now. Her physical heart is under a doctor’s care, the rest of her is catching up and soon, soon she may be able to go to Ada’s wedding to celebrate as families should, together. Having Gerome here is giving him the strength to get back into his own groove. Tomorrow he will actually go back to the office to work, he no longer needs to work out of the house.

~ ~ ~

Teddy is on his way to the airport, his final trip. He said goodbye to the General yesterday, his direct superior and his crew this morning. Each of them wished him well and sent him on in a grand way. Hoots and hollers from each and every one of them. Back slaps and water thrown on him. He couldn’t have asked for a better send off.

The driver is chatting on and on and Teddy hasn’t heard a word yet. Until the man says, “Did you hear me? We’re here! You’re home.” Teddy laughs and shakes his head out of his stupor. He pulls out a few extra bills for the driver and gets out to grab his duffle from the trunk. This time it doesn’t feel so heavy as it has in the past. There are no burdens to carry now.

He finds himself walking with a happy stride towards his gate. This time, he decides to travel like Gerome does, in his dress blues. People all around are waving and saying thank you to



him. He waves and acknowledges their appreciation with a tip of his hat. Maybe they have done it in the past, but it sure feels like today is the first day he has noticed. He can’t wait to get home.

He had to turn in his military issued phone at the base, so, as he stands in the airport waiting for his plane, he walks into the nearest phone service store and purchases a new phone. Unlike Gerome, Teddy never kept a civilian phone with him, didn’t feel the need. His first call? Gerome’s mom.

“Hello?” she answers a little slurred. Teddy looks at his watch and realizes it’s the middle of the night back home.

“Sorry Momma, it’s me Teddy.” He says.

“Teddy!!!! Oh my stars!!!” she exclaims.

“I’m on my way home Momma - but no one knows. I know me and Gerome are getting good at the surprises huh? Is it possible for one of you to pick me up at the airport? I don’t want to call a cab, I need to get home fast.” He says quickly.

“Dear - dear!!! Wake up its Teddy!” she calls over to her husband.

She hands him the phone, “Hello” he says sleepily.

“Hello Pops, need a lift home - I’ll be landing around this time tomorrow, your time.” He says quietly.

“No problem, I’ll get you then I’ll get donuts for the rest of us for breakfast. Everyone will think it’s a treat. What’s the flight number?” he asks.

He signals to his wife for a pen and paper and writes down the number. “See you soon son.” He hangs up.

Gerome’s father looks at his wife, “This is going to be one hell of a wedding. Gerome, Teddy and as I hear, Tabatha may be there. Have you been over since she came home this time?”

“No, I’ve been busy with the wedding but you’re right, I should go over today. She’ll need a dress for the wedding in the right color. I’ll bring one over to her and fix it on the spot. That should cheer her up. Besides I think I could use a good Gerome hug.” They smile at each other. No sense in going back to sleep, the two of them get up and start preparing for their day, and there is a lot to prepare.

Teddy hangs up the phone in time to hear that his plane is boarding. He boards with a smile. The stewardess addresses him with a salute and this makes him sit a little taller in his seat. ‘Only a few hours to go and you’re home’ he says to himself.

~ ~ ~

Gerome and Tabatha spent a second night on the floor in the office only this time because they were up late playing catch up on each other’s lives. Gerome chose last night to finally tell her about his eye. While she was in the hospital, he told her, he went to see a doctor already. They aren’t hopeful he will regain much of what he lost and that is when she began to cry again. She spent five minutes kissing his eye, rubbing the area around his eye. Finally, she said to him, “I’m sorry, it’s,.....well.....sight is so important to me right now, you understand?” she asks quietly.

“Of course.” He replies only his gut is telling him that he may have lost the only woman he has ever loved. “Tabs, I will do what I can, but it was fire, you know?” his voice pleading with her.

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“Oh Ger, I didn’t mean to imply anything bad. You still are my one and only Captain, you always will be.” She says

He pushes the stray hairs away from her face and looks into her eyes the best he can. She suddenly notices that there is a blanket over them and she smiles knowing it was her father who put it on them. She sits up and rubs her eyes and stretches. As she brings down her arms from her stretch, they land on Gerome’s neck.

She stares into his eyes, “Best sleep I’ve had in years I think. With you by my side, the dreams are happy ones.”

Gerome looks back at her and smiles. “Happy to help you my dear. Now what? We’ve probably slept through breakfast and I smell food which means Herman is working on lunch right now. Should we go help him out?”

“Hmmm, food? Yeah, that sounds great.” She stands and holds out her hand to help Gerome up. This makes him smile. He takes her hand, although he does not need it. As he stands he pulls slightly on her hand and they end up right next to each other. She looks up at him and smiles again. “OK?” she jokes. “Better than ok.” He smiles back at her.

She runs out of the room to beat him to the kitchen. Gerome starts after her but not so quickly, he chooses this moment to read the note that has been in his pants for a week now.

*“Dearest Gerome, the only way I could endure being in that man’s bed is to picture you. As far as I’m concerned, I’ve given myself to you. For what it’s worth.” Signed with xoxo and then a p.s. “my strength isn’t of ten men, just one ☺, always one”* Gerome is stuck in his spot and doesn’t know how to move forward.

Meanwhile, Tabatha gets to the door of the kitchen and screams. This jars Gerome and he runs up to her, his first thought is Herman on the floor. He stands behind her and sees what she sees.

Teddy is at the stove making pancakes. He turns to see his sister. She is frozen in place and Gerome is behind her. Herman is at the table reading a paper as if nothing is unusual about this moment. “the math doesn’t work” Tabatha says.

“Time zones have never been your forte my dear. You called me yesterday, I was sent on the morning flight which gets me here this morning which is actually tomorrow by my time.” He jokes.

“Screw time zones and get over here and kiss me you idiot!!!” she calls to her brother. She takes one step forward and he takes two and meets her in the middle. Gerome goes over to the stove and continues where Teddy left off. Herman stands up and says, “Don’t burn mine.” Then he walks over to the refrigerator and gets the orange juice and the maple syrup.

Gerome finishes making lunch or dinner or possibly even breakfast depending on who you talk to. “How did you get home Ted, I know you hate cabs.” Gerome asks

“That’s simple, I called Pops.” The whole group laughs, even Herman. He couldn’t stay upset with his son that long anyway. Not now, probably not ever.

Gerome spends some time at the meal to explain to Tabatha how you can fly and gain time so that it’s really like going back in time but not really because you still have only been up for a certain amount of hours, your body doesn’t get seven hours more tired because you are in an



earlier time zone. Teddy tries after that to explain how it all works until finally Tabatha calls out in frustration, “AHHHH stop it you two. Can’t you accept the fact that I don’t understand how this works? Who cares anymore anyway? You’re both here, in this time zone with no intentions on leaving. Time starts here – and now. Right Daddy?” She looks over at her father for confirmation.

Herman smiles, “You’re right baby. No one is going anywhere. It’s time for everyone to set down some roots. Some recent events have thrown us all for a loop but I think that now that we are all here together, we can only move onward and upward. Gerome, pancakes are good – you can stay.” He laughs.

Always the biggest joke, Gerome and Teddy never liked anyone else’s pancakes except their own.

“Well, not everything is a happy ending – right Gerome?” Tabatha is looking at him longingly right now and he knows why. He has to tell Teddy and Herman about his vision loss and now is as good of a time as any. Teddy is giving Gerome an expression of ‘I knew something was up’. He crosses his arms and stares at his ‘brother’. “So, what gives?”

Gerome embarrassingly explains what happen the day he pulled the kids out of the fire. How there was one spark that happen to jump up and hit his eyeball. It was a fluke they all told him, but it was grounds for honorable discharge. “You’re a real jackass you know that? This!! This is what you hold from me? I could kill you!” Teddy exclaims.

Herman lays a hand on his son’s arm. He shakes his head no and looks over at Gerome, “He said he is getting it checked, and now we know, so now we will make sure he follows up. We’ve had enough drama for a while, yes?” Teddy sits back down but not before he throws a pancake at Gerome.

“Ada’s wedding is soon. How about if we all focus on that. Become the family we are meant to be?” Herman continues. “And now that everyone is home, I think I’ll actually go to work today. You guys work things out here. Tabatha you may have to cook a real meal for them later. I don’t think pancakes will last too long in the stomachs of these guys.” He stands and goes to grab his keys.

“Hey Dad, isn’t it a bit late to first go into the office?” Teddy approaches his father thinking there is somewhere else he is going.

“Son, I haven’t been there in months, even if I show up for an hour or two, it will feel good. I need to leave, I ...” He pauses and takes a deep breath. “I need to leave.” Herman feels a little guilty about leaving, but he needs to leave as much as his son needs to be home. Teddy walks over to his dad and gives him a hug. They hold each other for a moment and Herman releases his son and stands tall in front of him, “I’ll be home after dinner ok?” Teddy nods

He returns to the kitchen to see Gerome and Tabatha cleaning up together. “What are your plans for the rest of the day Tabby girl?”

Tabatha looks over at Teddy, she may not understand time zones but she understands tired. “Well, I think you should nap for one. Then I think I’ll start tackling the house that has been neglected for months. There is cleaning that could be done some re-sorting because Daddy doesn’t really know where things go.”



As Gerome finishes drying his hands the doorbell rings. The three of them look at each other confused. Tabatha heads for the door, Teddy grabs her and pulls her behind him. “Teddy, it’s my home!” she yells at him, he turns and stares her down in one quick glance. She stops in her tracks. “Damn” she whispers, remembering what the officer said about the media. Gerome is standing right next to her now, his body on high alert.

Teddy looks out the side window first and then he exhales. “Gerome! Momma is here!” he calls. Teddy opens the door and smiles at Momma. He didn’t see her this morning because Pops drove him straight home. He opens the door and then opens his arms; Gerome’s mother eagerly walks into his arms. Gerome guides Tabatha over to the door now that they know who is there.

Momma pushes past Teddy when Tabatha comes into view. She practically runs into her arms. Tabatha loves this woman with all her heart. Her hug is greatly appreciated. The two women begin to cry and hold on harder. “I’m sorry I didn’t come sooner, the wedding has been keeping me busy.” She whispers into Tabatha’s ear.

Tabatha pulls away from Momma and the two women look into each other’s eyes for a moment. Gerome clears his throat to get his own mother’s attention. The women both turn towards him. “As a biological son, do I get a hug?” he jokes.

Momma walks over to her big boy and wraps her arms around his middle. She reaches up and pats his cheek and says, “You don’t need my hugs when you have my heart dearie.” She says lovingly.

“Oh, where are my manners? Teddy grab those bags on the porch quick, quick we need all the time we can get and there isn’t much left. Come this way dearie, you too Tabatha.” She leads everyone over to the couch and Teddy brings in the four bags and sets them down on the recliner next to her. He is really dragging himself now, the time difference and all the adrenaline rushes are fading away fast. He plops himself down on the couch next to Tabatha and both figuratively and physically falls into her lap and into sleep. Gerome puts his finger on his lips and the ladies giggle.

Momma starts to open the first bag, she pulls out a wrinkled tuxedo. “Gerry, this is for the wedding. Ada picked out a nice green color for all the groom’s men and bride’s maids. I couldn’t take it out of the house in a suit bag because Ada would ask questions. She came home two days ago and is staying until the wedding now.

So, I grabbed them all and shoved them in bags. You’ll have to have it steamed or do it yourself, whichever you want. When Teddy called, I made sure to have one for him too. I’ll set his on the side here. I hope you two haven’t changed your suit size too much with all the working out you do in the marines.

Anyway, that’s the easy part. The real reason I came is this.” She walks over to the bag that Teddy put on the floor. She picks up her head and looks at Tabatha. Tabatha is looking at Gerome and he at her, ‘one day they will admit it to themselves’ Momma thinks to herself.

She opens the final bag and pulls out a beautifully made hunter green bride’s maid dress. Tabatha’s mouth drops open. “Who is that for?”

“Tabby” Gerome says, “Clearly that’s mine, you get to wear the tux.” He chuckles at the thought. She hits him in the shoulder and Teddy moves, she sticks out her tongue at him instead and makes sure Teddy is comfortable.

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Momma stands up and smiles at them both. “Ok you two behave. The hemline won’t work for you my dear son. Tabby, this one is for you. Ada wanted to ask you but all things considered she was afraid to, I’m sorry dear. Upset?” she watches as Tabatha takes this all in.

“Momma, Ada has known me most of my life as have you, and if you both felt you couldn’t ask me for this favor, I’m positive that I have to apologize to you for allowing all of this to affect my whole life and my family.” Tabatha puts her head down in shame. She watches Teddy in his sleeping state on her lap right now and marvels over how amazing it is to have him home.

Momma clears her throat, she speaks in a voice that is cracking, “Tabby, you’ve had to deal with more than picking out colors and flowers. But as I understand from Herman, you are ready to get back out there and what better way than to give the bride a run for attention in this. Ada picked the dress out a while ago hoping that things would change in time, and it looks like you have. Do you think you can pull off wearing this dress?” Momma finds her hands frozen holding up the dress and watching Tabatha contemplate what has been proposed to her.

“I’ll be happy to escort you if you’re looking for a date.” Gerome says quietly. She turns to look at him and his face is shining to her. His eyes are sparkling, even the bad one and his grin is showing enough teeth that she can see how white they are. ‘Damn him and his teeth. How does he always do that to her? How can she not love him, how can he love her at all? Tabatha finds her heart beating faster again and the butterflies that are permanently in her stomach are now floating around in tornado fashion. “I’d love to be seen on your arm Ger, are you sure you want to be on mine?” she asks nervously.

“Tabs, I would seriously wear that dress myself if it meant I could be with you in public. That dress is only icing on the cake.” He looks over at his mother who is teary eyed at his admission. Teddy starts stirring and sits up, he rubs the sleep out from his eyes. “I know I’ve only been sleeping for a few minutes, but you know how it is in the military, we learn to take quality naps not long ones. Ger, Tabby, if you two don’t simply say ‘I love you’ to each other right now I’m going to personally kill you both. You hear me?”

Momma starts laughing first, everyone watches her, Tabatha joins in next as she turns to Gerome and gets on her knees to lean into him for their first ever real kiss. Momma starts hooting and everyone laughs even more. She brings the dress over to Tabatha and pulls her off the couch to hold it up in front of her.

Teddy, stands up and hugs his sister, with a peck on her cheek he whispers in her ear, “You’re *my* hero”. Then he sits back down next to Gerome on the couch and the two of them push into each other’s shoulders to show their affection to each other, like brothers always do.

“So, green huh?” Teddy says. “What are you wearing Momma?”

“I’ll be wearing a white dress that Ada picked out that has green accents, she said she wants nothing less than for me to shine. That’s when she found this dress too and insisted that these be the dresses we wear. Her future mother in law she is wearing a caramel brown dress. But in this my dear Tabby, you will certainly draw many eyes.” She says happily.

“Whoa, hold on a minute Momma, we don’t want people paying attention to her so much. No offense sis.” His protective voice comes out instantly.



Tabatha reaches out to her brother and holds his arm. Gerome is standing up next to Teddy now too. Both men are watching Momma right now with concern in their eyes. “Boys, it’s a wedding. But if it makes you feel better, you can hire undercover cops to watch her as long as no one else knows they are there ok?” Momma answers them seriously because she knows they mean business when protection is involved, she can feel their nerves are heightened right now. The tidal wave of testosterone almost knocked her down.

Tabatha turns to both men now and takes yet another deep breath. “I wouldn’t mind having someone else watch me so you two can enjoy the day. It’s a family thing and we should focus on that for Ada. Ok?” The men agree and both lean over to give her a kiss on the cheek.

Teddy’s phone rings and he grabs it off the couch and walks out of the room to answer it. The only one he has called from this number is Gerome’s dad so he is a bit nervous about answering it. “Hello? Pops?”

“Yeah, Teddy, it’s me. Look, Herman is here with me. He went to work for an hour and he has been over here ever since. I think the whole of the past few months has caught up with him. Herman has finally broken down and I’m going to let him hang out here until he feels he can go home. Everything ok there?” he says fatherly.

“Here? Yeah, Ger and Tabby finally admitted to each other they love each other past being a brother and sister. Momma showed her a gorgeous dress to wear to the wedding. She was stunned. I think Momma has her trying it on right now. Do you need me to come over?” he asks.

“No, that will ruin the surprise for Ada, she saw him come in but he doesn’t know it and I’d like to keep it that way. I want to let you know where he is, is all. I think he needs this. Been a long time coming. He rambled a lot of information about what Tabatha revealed and then he lost control of himself, I stood there and watched him roll to the ground. I was there with him for a long time but now, I’m giving him some breathing room.” He takes a breath and lets it out.

“I’ll hold down the fort here. Momma will probably be on her way soon as she makes some adjustments to the dress. Should I send her sooner? No, wait, then she will get nervous.” He takes a deep breath and sighs, “Listen Pops, you do what you know to be the best. Tell him we will be here and that things here are running on positive energy.” Teddy hangs up with that because he needs to.

He comes back into the room and sees his sister standing in a dress that looks like it was made for her. “Wow! My baby girl is all grown up. Mom would have been so proud Tabby.” Teddy cannot think of any other words.

Gerome is standing at attention more out of fear of his reaction as he sees the love of his life dressed like the queen he believes her to be. Momma is having her turn this way and that to see how each part fits and where it needs to be fixed. “Tabatha, Ada has always had great taste in clothes, she knew this would fit you and the color is amazing on you. What do you think? How do you feel?” Momma asks

Everyone watches Tabatha as she walks back towards the full-length mirror in the hallway. She stands there and looks at her reflection. She stands there and stares and stares, “Who are you?” she whispers. Gerome steps up behind her and puts his hands on her waist. “Who do you think she is?” he whispers back to her. She looks up a moment and then back in the mirror. She is



biting her lip now to try and not cry. She doesn’t want tears on this dress. The wedding is in two weeks and there may not be enough time to get tear stains fixed. Her breath is getting more rapid again, she puts her hand on her heart to make sure its ok. Momma and Teddy have joined them at the mirror, she sees them in the background. “I feel like a woman again,.....no a lady, yes, I feel like a lady in this dress.” She says in a very demur voice.

Momma puts her hands to her mouth, she did not expect such an affect from the dress. Tabatha is her second daughter, and now she is positive she will be her daughter in law someday soon, her heart opens even more than she thought possible. “Oh baby.” She whispers

Tabatha turns around to see Momma in tears. Teddy is holding himself in military fashion so he doesn’t have to show his emotions. He lifts his hand out of his pocket and takes a picture of his sister in the arms of his best friend/brother. He sends it to Pops with a tag line of ‘show this to Daddy’, and he waits for a response. Tabatha walks back to Momma and says, “I’m ready for my fitting now.” They all walk back into the living room where Tabatha stands on the coffee table so that Momma can get down and pin the hemline properly. Gerome is holding her hands so she stays steady.

Teddy’s phone buzzes, he looks at it. ‘We’re on our way. All of us.’ Teddy knows that means Ada is coming too. He shows the message to Gerome and all he can do is smile. He misses his sister and hasn’t had a chance to say congratulations yet except for one two-minute phone call from overseas.

Momma busies herself with all the pins and measuring needed to make Tabatha look even better. Teddy watches the front door to see Ada. He keeps looking back to see Gerome holding onto his sister and Momma working efficiently on the dress that already looks custom made for Tabatha.

Teddy hears Ada before he sees her. She is screaming and running to the door, Tabatha jumps down from the coffee table and runs to her oldest friend. There are shrieks of all kinds being made as Ada takes in that not only Tabatha is in the room but her brother and Teddy are here as well. From one to the other she jumps and screams, then screams some more.

Herman watches this all happen and then he catches a front view of his daughter as she swings around from being twirled by Ada. She stops quickly and watches her father as he almost falls over, Pops is there to catch him, and he walks him over to her. “You sure do make me proud, I am in awe of you. Come here and give your old man a squeeze.” Tabatha runs into his arms, something she hasn’t done since she was a child. Something she needed to do months ago but only now has the strength to do.

Teddy joins his father and sister in a group hug and the three of them lean on each other for an untold amount of time. Things are whole now.

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Everyone looks fantastic today, Ada is shining from head to toe. Momma and Pops are walking on clouds watching all their children and the groom’s family get along as if they’ve known each other all their lives. Teddy has been pacing most of the night though, his military radar on high alert.

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Herman hired Officer Bangle and a couple of his friends to surf the crowd all day and make sure no one is there that doesn't belong. Teddy has spoken to him a few times already to make sure everything is good. Finally, the officer told him that if he keeps talking to him, he won't be under cover any more. Gerome has had to stop Teddy from lurking around certain people too. Teddy can't stop, the last time Tabatha was in a public gathering, her whole world changed. He knows she is ok from the outside but what if Gerome walks away? What if someone gets him first and then grabs his sister? It could happen in a matter of moments not minutes. He is not going to be calm until they are all back home and safe. His anxiety is high even though he is trying to keep his composure.

Tabatha taps him on the shoulder and he nearly jumps out of his skin. Even though it isn't totally true she speaks to him softly, "I'm kind of tired. What do you say we blow this party and make our way home?" Teddy would like nothing more than to do that, he looks into her eyes though and sees the truth. The truth being he has to calm down. "I can't turn off Tabs, I can't" he says to her honestly.

"I know. Gerome told me how hard it is for him too. I get that. I love Ada and all and I know you do too but I think everyone will relax and have a better time if we go home. Gerome will come over when the wedding is over. They're serving dessert soon anyway. Come on, let's get Daddy." She slides her arm in his and they walk off to look for their dad.

They pass Gerome and tell him they are going home, he smiles and kisses Tabatha, "I'll see you at home." He simply says. Another couple feet and they find Herman. He gladly follows them out the door, where they meet Officer Bangle. He walks up to them with an outstretched arm, "It's been a lovely night, you look quite well Ms. Tabatha and I'm happy you were able to come out for this happy occasion. I wanted to wait until the end of the night to tell you that our curator is going to be in jail for quite some time. The DA told me today, this won't need to go to a public trial, the evidence keeps stacking up and it's all irrefutable. You look like you're in good hands now, Teddy, if you want to hook up with us, give me a call, we can always use good men."

Teddy responds with, "I've seen enough guns in my lifetime already, but thank you anyway. What happened to the other guy? If I'm allowed to ask."

"Yeah, well, I'm not really at liberty to say. But he will get his justice, not to worry." He looks over at Tabatha and realizes that she was hoping for a more positive outcome. She smiles at him and curls her arms into Teddy's a little stronger. Herman speaks for everyone now, "You've been good to our family sir and we thank you. Don't take this the wrong way though, but I think I'd like to end this relationship." He reaches over to the officer to shake his hand and the man obliges.

The three of them start walking to their car arm in arm. Suddenly, Gerome is there linked in as well. "Sorry, I can't stay a minute without you, Ada understands." They laugh as they head to Herman's car. Teddy and Herman sit in the front, while Gerome and Tabatha slide into the back.

Herman starts to drive and before he even gets on the highway, he calls to the couple in the back, "Guess we should start planning yours next." Gerome squeezes Tabatha's hand a little tighter and she looks him in the eye and says, "Yes". Teddy and Herman laugh all the way home.



Before they get all the way home, Gerome slides his hand in his pocket and pulls out a piece of paper, he hands it to Tabatha. He shakes his head yes, for her to go ahead and read it. She slowly opens it, *"Tabby, Tabs Tabatha, my long lost love, the one I hold so deep in my heart there is no way out. I wanted to send you a blessing.....may you be blessed with a long and healthy life, may I be there along the way and may our second time together be like nothing either of us has ever experienced. If you can't tell, in my own awkward way, I'm trying to ask you to marry me."* OxoXoXo

Tabatha faces Gerome in the car, she tucks the note inside the bosom of her dress, she reaches over to him slowly and pulls lightly on his tie, she pulls him closer hand over hand, as their foreheads meet she pulls him in for a kiss for the memory books.

Herman and Teddy give each other a high five. 'Thank you my dear' Herman thinks about his wife as they continue the drive home.

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