



Chapter Three

Nancy Jean Baker paused her note transcription, rubbing her tired eyes with her fingers. It had been a busy day, even before her lunchtime encounter with Bert ended in disaster. They hadn't planned to meet—she hoped no one thought they had. He'd taken his mother to the bus station for a trip to Huntsville, and she'd been in Clarksville to pick up supplies for the clinic. They'd bumped into one another at the diner, where she went in for a quick bite before heading back to Park Haven.

Bert was way too happy to see her. For her own comfort, anyway. She'd waited until they got to the parking lot between the restaurant and the bus station before she tried to let him down easily that she didn't want to go out with him again. She'd hoped to nip the idea in the bud before he asked her again, but he was too quick for her.

Not a happy camper.

He had the nerve to tell her she should smile more, get out and have more fun.

From the moment she agreed to go out with Bert Conway a few months ago, she'd second-guessed herself. He was nice enough, but he wanted more than she was prepared to give, hence the attempted brush-off.

The clock read 6 p.m. An hour of daylight left. The ache that

crawled up her neck and into her head was getting worse. The only help, besides medication, was a change of scenery. She had to go home and get some fresh air. She reached down next to her, smiling gently at her trusty canine. Maybe run with Major. He needed the exercise as much as she did.

It had been a long winter.

Nancy felt the bun on her head. What started the day as a sleek, severe hairdo had relaxed, and she tucked a wayward strand behind her ear and covered the typewriter where she had been typing her notes.

In veterinary school, most of the experienced vets scribbled their notes by hand and passed them on to an assistant to record. She didn't want anyone to go through the agony of deciphering her hieroglyphics, so she developed her personal brand of shorthand.

She paused to straighten the picture hanging next to the clinic's front door. How long before it would be acceptable to take it down? It depicted her predecessor, Dr. Phillips, and a bright-eyed young man shaking his hand.

The first time she attempted to replace it with something educational, the receptionist threw a fit. No way would the folks coming to Doc Phillips' clinic stand for her removing the photo. The young man was not only the old man's ace in the hole in keeping the practice open, but now a decorated soldier. He'd joined the Army and gone to Vietnam, shocking everyone. He could have obtained an exemption.

After a heart attack sidelined the long-standing vet, Doc Phillips contacted some friends at Auburn to get replacement recommendations. Most students didn't want to go to a backwater town like Park Haven, but for Nancy, it was a nice reprieve from the intensity of her education. That, and she refused to move home. She'd have taken any opening anywhere from Alaska to the Everglades if it meant staying away from Decatur.

Rumor mill stated MC Dunne had arrived back this week to recover from his injury. What was it about someone who was considered "perfect" to an entire community that turned her off,

completely? Looking more closely, she admitted that, yes, he was good-looking. Maybe not *completely* turned off.

She never mentioned she remembered MC Dunne. A year behind her at Auburn University College of Veterinary Medicine, she'd never met him, but she had noticed the rising star. Popular, didn't get into any trouble, and admired by all, including professors.

The man she saw today in the municipal parking lot was a far cry from the fresh-faced young man in the picture.

Had he ruined his chances at a career in veterinary medicine?



"Mom, I love you. You know that."

MC expected his mom to want him to stay with her, but he hadn't expected tears. Pulling out the green-and-gold covered dinette chair, he sat next to her.

She mopped her face with the handkerchief she kept in her apron pocket. The fact that she still wore aprons to do her housework was cute. Most women deemed them old-fashioned, but not Mom. If it was good enough for her homemaker mother, it was good enough for her.

After a deep breath, she glanced up through damp eyelashes. "I know you do. I think it's just hitting me that I could have lost you." She sniffed loudly. "Remember Ted Simmons?"

MC nodded. Of course, he did. Ted was a year behind him in high school. MC talked the coach into trying him out as point guard senior year.

"He was in Tokyo ..." MC swallowed thickly. "I was gonna see him, but ... I found out after my surgery. He didn't make it." If only MC had known sooner, he could have given Ted a touch from home. There wasn't enough time.

Mom wrung her hanky in her hands. "Myra and Bob are devastated. Then we learned you'd been injured, and your dog—"

"Yeah. I know. It could have gone a lot differently." He had to interrupt. Talking about tragedy might be helpful for some people, but not for him. Not now.

There were days he wished he had died instead of Gunnar, but

people didn't understand—they would call him crazy. So, he kept those thoughts to himself.

Dad came in and poured a cup of coffee, gesturing to the pot. "Want a cup?"

MC nodded. "Thanks."

Dad sat the steaming mugs in front of them. MC paused, looking down, putting behind him the fleeting thought that the mugs matched the chair covers, exactly. "I'll stay a few days, but I need to get a place of my own. Figure some things out." He grinned. "Minimize the dog hair in your house."

Mom snorted. "You know I'd take any amount of Rusty's hair."

MC smiled. "You'd just increase the vacuuming." He stared down at the cup between his hands. "I just need some time."

Dad put a hand on Mom's shoulder and squeezed. "I know, son. We'll try to give you some space. Any thoughts about what you're going to do? Are you going to call Rebecca?"

MC shook his head. He'd neglected to tell his parents about the "Dear John" letter he received while he was overseas. "No, I'm not. She made her choice, and it wasn't me." He shrugged. Rebecca. Her shallowness devastated him for a while, then it irritated him. She'd done the right thing to break it off. Some guys were crazy to get back home to their girl only to find they'd changed. Was the girl different, or was the soldier?

"Oh, sweetie." Mom's tears gathered again.

"I'm okay, Mom." He reached over and squeezed her hand, smiling at her.

"As for work ... until this arm heals, I can't do a lot. I'm still on Uncle Sam's dime until the doc releases me."

"Speaking of doctors, what about your doctorate? I figure you could get a little money from the GI Bill." The crease between Dad's eyes made MC scoff.

"Not as much as they used to. I guess they've spent too much on this war. Not much left to take care of the ones who fought it."

The questions. The suggestions. They were just beginning. He may as well get used to well-intended comments.



MC WAS TWELVE AGAIN, following Grandpa around the farm, Rusty at his heels, trotting along like a pup. The farm had always been MC's favorite place—a bit of heaven that had been in the family since the early 1900s. Daffodils, or “March flowers,” as he called them, dotted the edge of the woods and down the lane.

Grandpa Brendan had built the big white farmhouse for Grandma Evangeline, hoping to fill it with children. That never happened, but once a young Connor Dunne, MC's dad, came into their lives, they never turned back. The tragedy of Brendan's brother James's death changed their lives. Brendan's nephew became his and Evangeline's son, both legally and emotionally.

“What's happening with Uncle Patrick's cabin?” A thought formed in MC's mind. Could he repair it with a bum arm? Could the old cabin be a safe haven for him? Give him some privacy? The nightmares and flashbacks would come. No question about that.

MC wished the place had the power to take him back to a time before Rebecca. Before Vietnam.

A fresh start.

Grandpa chuckled. “Not much. Your Grandma used to get after me to either tear it down or restore it.” He shook his head sadly. “I couldn't bear the thought of demolishing it. The cabin and your Great-Uncle Patrick were there for us from the start.” A hint of Chicago slipped into his grandfather's accent that hadn't been covered over by his years in Tennessee.

“Do you think it's still livable?”

“Well, it's full of junk, but I've tried to keep the roof intact. Maybe some critters in there, but I think, overall, it would be worth restoring.” He shrugged. “Power's still on. I haven't had the time, nor the energy, to take it on, especially since I started working on the chapel.”

MC nodded, taking in the small structure. “Grandpa Morgan always laughed about us holding on to it. Said he wouldn't waste good carpentry skills on bad construction.”

Why did Grandpa Brendan insist on working on the chapel? MC wasn't going to ask. What good would it do for anybody? Maybe a

little of Grandpa Morgan's practicality made its way into his DNA after all.

A run-down chapel. The house of God. MC smirked.

If the deity was supposed to be everywhere, why rely on a broken-down shell of a chapel to meet God—if He even existed?

Grandpa smiled, shaking his head. "Your mama's daddy taught me everything I know about carpentry, but he didn't suffer fools, did he?"

"He did not. I'm glad I got to work with him and with you over the summers during high school. Hey, if you hadn't connected with Grandpa Morgan, Dad might not have met Mom." MC stood, head tilted, thinking. Bad arm or not, would renovating the cabin be worth his time?

"Those were good times." Grandpa's piercing gaze caught MC's. "Are you saying you'd like to take it on?"

"Maybe." He considered his grandfather. At nearly seventy, he could still do a day's work. Would he be willing to help?

"I may be retired, but I think, between you and your bad arm, and me with my 'advanced age,' we could do something with it. Nothing pressing at the chapel. Are you thinking you'd like to live in it?"

Grandpa might be old-school in a lot of ways, but, unlike his late Grandpa Morgan, he had a compassion that trumped the acceptable in polite society. For many people, it was a sign of weakness to admit to combat fatigue or what they were now calling "Vietnam syndrome." One must accept what's happened and move on.

MC hadn't talked to anyone about his experiences in the war, but he imagined Grandpa Brendan would be there for him if he needed him. If anyone in the family understood trauma, it was him. Based on little things that were said and the random sad look crossing Grandpa Brendan's face from time to time, he suspected there were things he never talked about, to anyone.

He took a deep breath. Rusty pushed his soft head under his hand, quietly asking for a scratch, which he received. "I think it would be a good place for Rusty and me."

"I agree." Grandpa put an arm across MC's shoulders. "And after we get that done, you can help me with the chapel."