



Chapter Two

March 1970

After a month in a Tokyo hospital, MC Dunne soaked in the sights. The Pacific Ocean. The Rocky Mountains. The Great Plains. Finally, he began his trek home, traveling through Illinois to the Mississippi River and a six-hour bus ride to Clarksville, Tennessee, the closest station to Park Haven. Home.

He'd spent much of Illinois and Kentucky taking fitful naps borne of exhaustion and unrelenting pain. Now, familiar spring sights scrolled by the bus window.

The closer MC got, the more he perversely wanted to delay seeing the people he loved. After experiencing the disregard many Americans had for their veterans, MC wondered if it would be the same here in Tennessee.

Surely not. He remembered the send-off and prayer circle at church before he left. He'd received a few cards and letters. Grandpa Brendan wouldn't let anyone forget to pray for him.

Hopkinsville and the nearby Fort Campbell, home of the Army's 101st Airborne Division—Screaming Eagles—came into view. A flutter of excitement filled MC, as well as a gnawing of dread. The bus hit a

pothole, and a small child behind him screamed. His surroundings blurred, and he put his hand down to comfort Gunnar.

Nothing there. His scout dog was one of the thousands of military dogs sent to Vietnam, saving countless lives in combat.

He wasn't over the loss yet. After MC's injury and the decision to send him home for additional treatment, it was as if the dog had never existed. But he would always be with MC.

How do the powers that be think you can eat, sleep, train, play, and go into combat with a dog and the animal not become a part of you? While in a drug-induced haze, he overheard someone at the mobile hospital say that military dogs were classified as "equipment."

What would happen to that type of "equipment" after the war? Provided it ever ended.

Gunnar died saving his life. No question about him being deserted like so many other dogs who had done just as much.

MC shook the cobwebs out of his head and peered at the people gathering their things, preparing to exit the bus as if nothing had happened.

Nothing *did* happen. Not here, anyway.

Taking a deep breath as the bus slowed to a stop, he stood and waited for the passengers in front of him to exit the bus. His balance was still off, his left arm in a sling, and his ankle stiff after riding so long.

Why couldn't he just slide back into real life as if he'd never been gone? Why couldn't Rebecca be waiting for him at the bus station, a ring on her finger? Why couldn't he erase the last two years—two tours of duty minus pain and anxiety? Just make them disappear.

"Son!" Dad's voice boomed across the busy lobby.

MC and his dad stood taller than many of the people between them. MC raised his hand and met his father's tearful gaze.

Please, God, not that. Can't handle tears from Dad.

MC glanced around at the crowd. If he'd dreamed of Rebecca coming to meet him, he was disappointed. Just an invisible soldier getting off the bus. No fanfare, no welcome home. Along the way, he'd seen sideways glances at his fatigue jacket, upturned noses, and

mothers pulling their children closer to them, protecting them from the unwanted, unloved Vietnam veteran.

But his family, if not his country at large, loved him.

Was it his imagination that the crowd parted, enabling Dad to get to him quickly? Almost instantly, he was in his father's arms, and both of them cried. The pain in his shoulder was nothing compared to the pain he'd been through to get here.

They each stepped back, and MC had a hard time meeting his dad's eyes. But then, his dad wasn't faring any better.

In 1970, men were somewhat better at expressing their feelings than in the past, but crying in public? Not cool.

And yet, it was cathartic.

In the parking lot, MC's attention turned to an altercation.

The girl ... he recognized her, but he couldn't remember how. The guy she spoke to was no stranger, however. Bert Conway. MC's lifelong rival.

They'd always wound up in competition, whether it be for a position on the basketball team, a pretty girl, or class standing.

MC bit the inside of his cheek. The race for class valedictorian had been their last challenge—one MC won.

As if feeling MC looking at him, Bert glanced his way, and their eyes locked. The young lady followed his gaze but quickly turned back to Bert.

Bert was clean-cut and neat. A jolt of unwanted realization hit him. MC could feel the comparison between his scruffy self and Bert in the girl's eyes.

Competition lost.

Dad stopped at a strange vehicle, and MC put the irritation behind him.

"New truck?"

The shiny blue Ford F250 had the family's construction company logo on it. "Dunne and Morgan Construction: Get it Dunne Right."

He chuckled, remembering the family discussion to add the punchline.

"Contractor Special. Beaut, isn't she?" Dad patted the bed of the

truck much as MC had attempted to pat his invisible dog on the head. With love and affection.

"Very nice." MC took in the bumper sticker. "We Support Our Boys in Vietnam." Dad never approved of what he considered tacky decorations on his vehicles. He'd made an exception.

Dad nodded quietly. He was a mind-reader.

"It's the only sticker I'd put on my truck, just so you know."

MC nodded, unable to say anything. He'd seen a few stickers on the bus ride from St. Louis to Clarksville, but few were in support of the Vietnam troops. Most were blatantly against the war. Some blamed the government, but many blasted the soldiers who were there doing their job, standing up for people who had no one to stand up for them.



THE SCREEN DOOR SLAPPED CLOSED, alerting the crowd assembled in the living room. All eyes focused on him, whether he liked it or not.

Everyone spoke at once. MC's ears roared, more from stress than noise.

"Didn't anybody ever teach you people not to get between a mama and her only chick?"

So much for a quiet entry. Mom had invited the whole family to welcome him home.

His sweet mama, at a solid five-foot, one-inch tall, reached him before anyone else. For a moment, MC was six, with Mom hugging away his hurts. Now, he had to lean down to hug her, and he could protect her more than she could him.

The aroma of boiled ham and a spread that would put a church potluck to shame enticed him. He'd eaten since landing on US soil, but this? This was what he imagined the banquet in Heaven would be like.

While Mom tried to gather everyone in one place, he turned to see his cousin's hand on his arm.

"Welcome home, cuz!" Will Morgan grabbed him into a hug before MC had a chance to say anything more, patting him on the back.

He winced at sharp pain in his partially healed shoulder, but Will's excitement surprised him the most. As kids, they were inseparable, but

as the teen years came along, MC sensed a rivalry on Will's part that he never understood.

"How are you, Will?" His tone was forced, awkward.

"Good. Doing good." Will shook his head, appearing reluctant to look MC in the eye. "The minute I got word you were hurt, it hit me hard."

"Yeah, me too. Literally."

They chuckled, and the atmosphere cleared.

"My number came up." He spoke quietly, his gaze finally capturing MC's. "Dad got me a deferment for law school."

MC swallowed. He understood. How could he make Will understand?

"It's okay, man." He choked the words out.

"I was pretty upset at Dad, but he'd done it before I had a chance to think about it." Will glanced over his shoulder at his Dad on the other side of the room. "I told Dad if anything happened to you, I would go over there, whether he liked it or not."

MC gave Will what he hoped was a smile, not a grimace. "I'm glad you didn't go. If everybody went, there would be a lot more messed up people around. We need guys like you here, taking care of things."

Will nodded and held out his hand, which MC took without hesitation. "Welcome home, MC. I missed you."

Before he could answer, Mom pulled on his good arm. "We need to ask the blessing so everyone can eat. You can visit while you eat."

As if that would happen. He grinned at her, then winked at Will. "Where's Grandpa?" He should have been here.

"Coming in the door right now." Mom pointed to the entry. "And it looks like he brought a friend."

A bundle of reddish-golden fur rushed him, and every bit of anxiety and fear of what would happen next left. For the moment, anyway.

"Rusty." The older red Border Collie licked his face as MC knelt and hugged the dog with his good arm.

"I kinda thought you might like to see this fella." Grandpa Brendan reached down to help MC up, then hugged him fiercely. "I missed you, boy."

"I missed you, too, Grandpa." Warm tears burned MC's cheek, and he feared it would worsen since his grandfather was also smiling through tears.

"Looks like you've had your wing clipped," Grandpa said, gesturing toward his arm.

"Just temporarily. I have physical therapy a couple of times a week, and I go back to the VA hospital in a month for a checkup."

"We'll make sure you get in a little activity." The older man winked.

He and Grandpa. They had an understanding.

Mom shook her head sternly. "Not too much, mind you."

"Yes, ma'am."

She held up a spatula to get everyone's attention. "You'll all get a chance to visit with MC, but let's eat this ham while it's still hot." She gestured to Dad. "Connor?"

"Will you all bow with me as we give thanks?"

Everyone's head bowed, their eyes closed. But not MC. He'd learned if you close your eyes, things changed. Or worse ... you might not open them at all.