

# Enduring Stories

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*To family and neighbors in places we've lived, (or who have lived  
with us), who have become family.*

*We are rich indeed!*

# One



Chad Kinkaid's phone jangled with the ringtone reserved for his Afghanistan combat buddies, a tune he hadn't heard in five years. He grabbed his phone, glanced at the Caller ID, and hit connect. "Ted? Ted Weldon? Is it really you?"

"Sure is." Ted's voice boomed across the airwaves with a half snort.

"How on earth are you?"

"Better, now that I hear you on the line."

Chad fished the antique Afghan coin he'd smuggled out as a souvenir from his desk and gripped it.

"I'm ready and able to accept your Montana tour."

"No kidding? Took you long enough."

"My bad," the voice on the other end sputtered. "But don't they say better late than never?"

"They do." But why now? Chad glanced at the mound of paperwork on his desk and his appointment book, every day filled. As much as he wanted to see Ted, how much juggling would it take to make it happen? He stood the coin on its edge and spun it. Would it be heads? Or tails? It slowed, stopped, and stood on its edge. Chad stared. That didn't happen often.

“We were a pair, weren’t we?” Ted said. “Me Lightning and you Thunder.”

“Those were the days.” They fell silent, Afghanistan intruding on Chad’s thoughts. “In some ways, it’s sad those days are over.”

“They’re not completely. I’m still lightning fast.”

“And some things make me thunder. When are you thinking timewise?”

“Mid-to-late August. Three to five days? Plus, I’m bringing someone.”

Chad’s head jerked. “You got married?”

“No, nothing that drastic.”

“Who are you bringing?”

“Glen Jr. You know, my brother Glen’s kid. I showed you photos way back.”

Ted had shared many photos years ago, but all the faces had blurred. Tall? Short? He couldn’t recall. “Remind me.”

“You remember my older brother?”

“Right. The hero who died saving his men in that rogue forest fire.”

“His wife died a year later, and Glen Jr. joined my folks and me.”

“Tough.” Age? Interests? Chad rose and stepped to the window where glittering mountain ranges defined the horizon. That view always gave him peace. But before Ted could answer, a call squawked through the inter-office field phone.

“Emergency to headquarters—marauding bear at Three Forks Camp.”

Chad groaned. “Sorry, Ted. A crisis got called in that I have to manage. Text me your arrival details. I’ll make it work.”

“Thanks. Can’t wait.”

“Same here.” He’d make this a good trip for Ted’s sake. He owed him that.

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Chad paced back and forth across the airport waiting room in his creaking leather boots—they needed oiling again. He glanced at the wall clock. It was past the time Ted had texted, but the arrivals board showed no incoming planes. He checked his messages again. Had Ted sent the wrong date? Chad headed to the smaller desk past the main counter as a young man put on ear protectors and rushed outside. He marked off a section of black tarmac and rolled orange traffic cones into place.

Was this a one-man airline? When the young man looked into the sky, Chad did, too, and spotted a silver dot approaching, buzzing like a diving mosquito. A passenger plane? Or a crop duster blown off course?

Shielding his eyes, Chad observed the silver dot drop lower to line up with the runway. Had Ted trusted his and his relatives' lives to a one-engine flying eggbeater?

Flaps down, the toy plane bounced and rolled to a stop beyond the airport's plateglass windows. When the attendant opened the outside door, Chad hurried through to get closer. Two passengers descended the folding stairs. As the man crossed the tarmac, his gait revealed him as the comrade Chad had shared so much blood, sweat, laughter, and tears with during their two duty tours. He appeared little changed except for one silver streak crossing his crew cut like a lightning bolt.

Chad's throat tightened. "Ted Weldon. Man, it's good to see you in the flesh."

Ted guffawed as they threw well-muscled arms around each other and thumped each other's backs. "You, too, big guy. I'd recognize you in any police lineup."

An attractive young woman emerged from behind Ted. She had his striking blue eyes and copper highlights in her dark hair.

Chad blinked. "Who's this?"

Ted pulled her forward. "My niece, Glen Jr. I told you I'd bring her."

"You did, but I didn't—" Now the pieces fell into place. He'd

forgotten the details, but during Afghanistan, Ted's brother's only kid had been a teenager. Chad leaned back, taking a second look. "There's a strong resemblance, but you're prettier than this guy."

Glen chuckled. "I'm glad to hear it."

When she linked her arm through her uncle's, Chad blinked. "Wow, when you stand side by side, you're two peas in a pod."

They laughed.

"That's what folks tell us," Ted said. "Strong genetics."

"I'll say." Chad stuck out a meaty paw. "Welcome to Montana's Big Sky Country."

"Thanks." Glen accepted his hand. "You're the Thunder Kinkaid I've heard about."

"That's me, but I guess it depends on what he said. My real name's Chad."

"All good. I can't wait to see if Montana lives up to its hype. And if you do."

Her voice carried the music of mountain streams bubbling over boulders. How did Ted have such a knockout niece? How come Chad hadn't heard more about her? He would have remembered, wouldn't he?

"You two were always 'Thunder and Lightning' over there?"

"That's what they called us. As solid as your uncle is, he could outrun us all."

She nodded. "Uncle Teddy's still fast."

Ted slapped Chad's back. "My buddy here's almost my equal, but he's 'Thunder' because when he gets riled, he builds up steam and rumbles like a thunderstorm. Believe me, he was good to have around."

"It sounds like you two were a great pair."

"We were." Chad released her hand. "And still might be—we should test it. But I can't believe he lets you call him Teddy. He's flattened guys for less."

She laughed. "Those near and dear to him have privileges."

“Apparently.”

She was giving him the once-over too. “How tall are you? I’m tall for a girl, but you’ve got me beat.”

“About six foot three. Six foot four on a good day.”

“In all of Uncle Teddy’s stories, I never pictured you this tall or this civilized.”

“Wow. What did Ted say? Should I defend myself?”

“No. Most of it was good.” Her smile revealed perfect white teeth. “But I’ll try not to cross you.”

“That won’t be hard. I don’t rile as easily as I used to.” Was that true? Chad grabbed both duffel bags as the pilot unloaded them from the plane’s belly. He lugged them into the building and glanced back through the airport’s plateglass windows. “What do you call that bird you flew in on? Is it a wind-up toy? Or a real plane?”

“It’s genuine, all right. A single-engine Pratt & Whitney Cessna Caravan turboprop. It reminds me of some of our rides in Afghanistan.”

“The ones with bullet holes for air conditioning?”

“Yes, those.”

Chad blinked as the pilot turned the prop until it caught before he climbed into the cockpit and taxied down the runway. “That’s not a commercial plane. How did you work that?”

“He’s a friend who flies up for guided whitewater rafting and fishing. He says the trout dance on top of the water here.”

“It’s true. I’ll show you that Montana’s wonderful.” He rubbed his day-old stubble. He should have taken the time to shave this morning, but he’d had so much to do. He didn’t know he would be meeting an attractive young lady. “How long can you stay?”

“Five days if you can handle us that long.”

“No problem. Stay longer if you can. Will you two fly back with your friend?”

“Not sure yet. Glen won’t. She’s here for her new job.”

Chad faced Ted's niece again. Reconnecting with Ted was proving interesting. "I guess I missed that part. Doing what?"

"Didn't I tell you?" Ted leaned forward. "She followed her dad and me into forestry. She's been Arkansas's best lady forest ranger for the past three years, and now she's hired on in your neck of the woods to bless Montana."

"Uncle Teddy." The young woman's face reddened. "Don't praise me so much. Let people draw their own conclusions."

"They will soon enough." Ted patted her shoulder. "I can't help being proud, and this guy's like a brother."

Chad nodded. "For better or for worse. Where will you be based?"

"In Kalispell for Flathead National Forest. I'll mainly teach forestry and outdoor programs in schools and community centers."

"Awesome. I do some of that myself." He took a longer look. A bright smile framed Glen's sky-blue eyes. Freckles sprinkled her nose. "Are you old enough to be a real ranger? Maybe you're a junior level."

"No, I'm the real thing."

He couldn't get enough of her laugh.

"I didn't find my degree in a Corn Flakes box. I earned it at the University of Arkansas. Trust me, my male classmates have put me through my paces since I was a girl."

"I'm sure."

"What's more"—Ted elbowed Chad's ribs—"she's younger than the rest by a year, but she still won the senior prize."

"Outstanding." Chad beamed his admiration.

Glen's head tipped in her uncle's direction. "Uncle Teddy, stop."

"Why? It's true." He waved a hand. "Chad should know."

"I think I want your autograph." Chad smiled. "I can tell you're not someone to mess with."

She shook her head. "Don't worry, you're fine. Any friend of Uncle Teddy is a friend of mine."

Ted's niece—all grown up? Chad needed to readjust every picture in his mind. She must be twenty-four or twenty-five now. He'd just turned thirty-two. He tried to swallow, but his throat had gone dry. This might be tricky. He wasn't shopping, but if he did find someone, he wouldn't rob the cradle. He had no room in his life for complications.

Chad gripped Ted's arm. "We've cheated death together. Nothing joins men more."

"Agreed." Chad reached for both duffel bags, but Glen grabbed hers.

"I'll carry mine."

"Nope." Chad already had it. "Not today. You're my guest." He held tight while Glen tugged once and let go.

"You win this time, but I'm Kalispell's newest resident, not a guest." She nursed her hand.

Chad laughed. "Humor me." He led them through the small airport to the street exit on the other side. He put down the luggage and spread his arms. "Welcome to Kalispell. Breathe in that high-mountain, clean-forest air."

Ted spread his arms too. "Magnificent. I'm impressed."

Glen snapped several pictures. "I can tell I'll be doing a lot of this."

"I'm sure you will." Chad loaded their things into the back of his Jeep. "Tell me if you need anything before we leave town and head to Glacier National Park."

"We're going there right away?" Glen practically stood on tiptoe. "I can't think of anything except seeing more mountains. We glimpsed some from the plane, but we're closer, and these are majestic."

"You'll see plenty. We'll head out as soon as we grab some gear from my folks' place. Have you guys eaten?"

"Sort of." Ted patted his flat stomach. "Ate a sandwich in Little Rock before we flew."

"Fine. We'll gather gear and groceries at my folks' and head north."

Glen kicked something hard and shiny on the ground near his Jeep. She bent, picked it up, and slid it into her pocket.

“Did you lose something?” Chad asked.

“No. I found something.” She smiled and followed Chad to the Jeep doors.