



Can six Vietnam vets put their skills to use again for the military? Will they be able or even allowed to find the redemption they have longed for all these years?

Blue Grey and Gone

by Renee W Peek

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A scenic landscape featuring a lake, a dirt path, and snow-capped mountains. The foreground shows a dirt path leading down to a wooden boardwalk that curves along the edge of a calm lake. The background is dominated by large, rugged mountains with significant snow cover under a clear blue sky.

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Renee W. Peek

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ISBN: 978-1-64438-926-3

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Published by BookLocker.com, Inc., St. Petersburg, Florida.

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Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data
Peek, Renee
Blue Grey and Gone by Renee Peek
FICTION: Action and Adventure | Suspense
Library of Congress Control Number: 2019909287

Printed on acid-free paper.

BookLocker.com, Inc.
2019

Chapter 1

“Well, are you just going to sit there?”

“I’m not the one that was thrown out of Physics, and this is my office I can sit here as long as I want.”

“So, what am I supposed to do? I don’t know why they sent me here?”

“Is there anything you want to talk about?”

“No.”

Marian Welles, a woman in her mid-sixties, guidance counselor at the local high school, sat silently looking at the papers on her desk, while Jasmine slouched in her chair absentmindedly typing on her phone. Finally, the silence was broken, Jasmine got up to leave asking, “Well can I go then?”

“Did you fix the problem?”

“I don’t have a problem. It’s that bitch Karen!”

“Language.”

“Well then what should I call her? She says she’s my friend, then texts everyone she knows, about my business. I have five classes with her, I can’t stand seeing her.”

Marian extended her hand, inviting Jasmine to sit back down. “Tell me.”

Marian has been advising students for over fifteen years, her greatest skill is her silence. She has found that people, as a rule, fear silence so much they will do whatever they can to fill it, often giving away more of themselves than they would if questioned. Her husband Garrett the principal, met Marian when he returned to college to obtain his administrative license, she was finishing her degree in psychiatry. They married later in life than most, and despite having challenges adjusting to sharing living space, their marriage has been very happy.

Living in a small town in northern Wisconsin, everyone knows your name and your business, but it is also a place where people help each other, sharing what they have, even when they barely have enough for themselves. It is hard to keep secrets there, but Marian’s past is just that. She doesn’t speak of it and Garrett respects that. One day, maybe, she will be able to share it with him. He considers it an honor that his wife reveals bits and pieces when she feels it is right. Their life together is filled with living now and planning for the future. The past is not a worry, that is not the case for all the residents of Grantsburg.

As Garrett approached the guidance office, he heard an unfortunately familiar sound, “What do you know, you’re just

an old woman who's lived her whole life in this crappy town.” At that moment, the door flew open and a student rushed out filled with the fury only a teenage girl can possess. He took a step back, clearing the way for the young woman. Opening the door to the office, he sees his wife leaning back in her chair with a hint of a smile on her face. He loved to see his wife's quiet Hopi nature assert itself. She had the ability to take in a conversation, letting all the emotion and attitude flow over her without judgement or rebuke. Then with that wonderful, knowing smile, gently pull out the real issues. Garrett said, “That sounded unpleasant.”

“Not at all, in fact, it's the most progress I've made with that one in weeks. I would much rather have the yelling than the monotone monosyllabic answers. Now I can shoot for some discussions with a bit diminished volume. How was your day?”

“I had a very good day, was able to clear my desk and I have no homework tonight. Let's get going, I'll help you with critter chores and maybe we can sit by a fire before dinner.”

Divergent schedules usually keep them from leaving work at the same time, requiring separate vehicles. Marian relishes her drive home. Living fifteen miles from town allows her the time she needs to pack away the day's problems, paperwork, and proper procedures, getting ready for life at home. Their hobby farm may be a ton of work but it's good work and there is a special joy in the exhaustion it brings.

There is always a welcoming committee waiting for them. The chickens and ducks run to greet all vehicles. And the commotion they create gets the llamas running to the fence to

see what's up. The dogs, not wanting to be left out start the barking chorus in the house. How more wanted can one feel?

After a quick check under the feeder to make sure there were no bears, letting the dogs out is the first order of business. It always puts a smile on Marian's face to see Lilly and Sandy run around the yard at full tilt.

Garrett's offer of help was always genuine, but he really did think of critter care as a chore. For Marian it was more therapeutic. A time to talk knowing there would be no insults, yelling, or door slamming. Llamas rarely insinuate you no longer have value in the world, and chickens almost never storm out of your office. Llamas tolerate your presence. They will walk over and give you a sniff, but they really are not affectionate creatures. For Marian, that is their allure, they ask nothing of you, they just are.

After all the livestock had been fed, watered, and cleaned, she found a comfortable spot to set herself down and enjoy the quiet. The dogs are the first to break the silence. They hear a car coming down the road. There aren't too many that travel down this dead-end road that the dogs don't know. This was a stranger for sure, so Marian encouraged the barking. As the truck pulled up to the pole barn, the dogs rushed to the driver side door, blocking the occupant from exiting the vehicle until Marian gave the OK. As the dogs came to sit next to her, she got her first good look at the driver. Suddenly her past was there in front of her about to stain the fabric of her new life.

A 6 foot 4-inch black man in military fatigues stepped from the truck. His greying hair gave an idea of his age, but his posture and gait showed he was still strong and fit. The smile he

flashed at Marian was one of recognition and a bit of fear. Marian stood motionless trying to make sense of the situation, sure she had to be wrong about the identity of the man standing in front of her.

“Don’t you recognize me?” He said.

“I was kind of hoping I didn’t. Why are you here?”

“Can’t an old friend stop by to say hello?”

“I’m not sure I would classify you as an old friend. You’re from a part of my life that I’ve put away, far away. And judging by the uniform you’re wearing you still live that life, and I want no part of it.”

“I was hoping I could talk with you. I need your very special skills.”

Marian took a small step back, her fists tightened, “And I’m sure there are lives at stake and I’m the only one that can help, and blah blah blah. I don’t want to have anything to do with you, just go, get out, leave me alone! I’m an old woman living in a small town, I know nothing about the real world and I’m happy about that.”

“Calm down can’t we just sit and talk?”

“Get out, get out, get out!!!” Marian realizes she is screaming at the man. The dogs position themselves between their human and the focus of her anger.

Garrett heard the commotion as the dogs barked at the foreign truck in the driveway. A military man got out and approached Marian. From her reaction, Garrett could tell she knew the man, but was not happy about his presence. The dogs obviously sensed their owner's ire and held their position ready to defend their master. Garrett rushed to get some shoes so he could find out who this man was and why he was upsetting his wife. But by the time he got outside, the truck was driving down the road.

“Lib, who was that guy? Are you OK?”

“We have to talk. Why don't I take the dogs for a walk down the road to calm them, if you build a fire, we can have a beer and I'll tell you what I can about that man.”

David lowered the motor into the water and told his nephew Greg to shove them off from shore.

“OK put the phones away and just enjoy the river.”

“Mom said we had to come with you she didn't say we had to enjoy it.”

“Come on guys, just give it a try, you used to love to come fishing with me.”

“That was before we knew we were alive. Fishing is boring and hot, and boring.” Anne's words dripped with attitude.

David realized it was not worth arguing, so he just cranked the motor up and they traveled in silence.

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The spring runoff had the river as high as David had ever seen it. Being a fishing guide, he needed to get out and see what the water was like in his go to spots, were there trees and debris filling the holes, how much sand had shifted, or were there new backwaters to explore?

David Lookstwic a Native American, Oglala Lakota from Pine Ridge in South Dakota, a lifetime fisherman, lives for his time on the water. His niece and nephew are another story entirely. They are happy sitting inside texting and tweeting and whatever else they do on those phone screen thingies. Anne is just 14, Greg is all of 16, and both are sure they know everything, just ask them.

When their dad left, David invited his sister Kara and her kids to come and live with him. He built them a house on the property he owns in northern Wisconsin. That way he could keep an eye on them and help his sister get back on her feet. They were much more willing to spend time outdoors with him when they were younger. But it seems they have outgrown that.

He slowed the motor as they came to what looked like a good hole on the St. Croix river just above the bridge. Greg dropped the anchor like he had done so many times before. Anne grabbed the rods, picking her favorite and handing the other two to the boys. David reached into the cooler for the worms and in a couple of minutes they all had bait in the water. They may claim they hate it, but their ease and skill with the tools is almost second nature. And the phones were safely stored away at the first tug on the line.

Anne was the first to land a big channel cat. Greg helped her get it in the boat while David got the camera ready.

“Just for the record, I now have first fish, biggest fish, and most fish. That’s right, a girl is beating you both.” Anne enjoyed rubbing it in.

When they were younger, it would have killed Greg to be out fished by his sister, but today he actually seemed kind of happy for her.

“Don’t get too cocky little sister, the day is just starting, and I haven’t even taken out my special bait.”

“Please don’t tell me you brought those old stinky chicken livers. They make me gag.”

As his niece and nephew teased each other and laughed, David just leaned back and smiled. The river could always slow things down and bring people closer, it was his refuge from a troubled world.

As Hunter drove down the road from Marians, he was having second thoughts about his approach. Maybe just showing up was not the best idea. Being a General he was used to telling people what to do and they did it, apparently that was not such a good move with these folks.

Marian was the key, if he could convince her to help, she could help him convince the others. But how? Maybe her husband, Garrett....

Jacob was walking through the woods. The sun was not quite up. He could smell the damp greenery and feel the moist warm

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air on his skin. For some reason, he quickened his pace and found himself running down the trail. Branches reached out and cut his cheek. He could feel the blood dripping off his chin. The air lost its sweet fresh smell. It was replaced with hot, acrid ash and smoke. He couldn't catch his breath, gasping for air he struggled to keep running. He knew there was someone ahead of him. They were running right into the fire. He called out trying to get them to stop. They wouldn't listen. He pushed himself through the smoke. Finally, he came to an opening in the forest. The air cleared and could see the burned bodies lying at his feet. He felt himself scream.

“Wake up, Jacob wake up it's just a bad dream, I'm here, you're home.” Maddie, Jacobs wife, struggled to calm her husband.

Sitting on the edge of the bed gasping for breath and covered in sweat, Jacob tried to come back to himself, and recover from this nightmare. Again.

Marian called out to the dogs “Lily, Sandy, come on girls, let's go!”

Garrett was worried as he watched the three walk down the road. This man had upset his wife in a way he had seen before, it was the pain of her past. Her desire to keep her secrets seem to weigh heavier on her every year. Maybe if she could just get it out in the open, she could finally deal with it, and find some kind of peace.

Her heart was pounding so hard she could hardly hear the dogs as they ran and sniffed their way down the deer trails. Her

thoughts were still screaming in her mind. How dare he show up here!!! What does he want from me?? What am I going to tell Garret? How am I going to stop shaking?

Marian arrived back home to find Garret already settled next to the fire, beer in hand. The walk didn't calm her down in the least, and knowing she had to tell Garret something got her heart racing again.

"I got you a beer, actually I got you several. The walk didn't help?"

"Not at all. This is hard my love, really hard."

"There's nothing that we can't work through together. You just have to let me in, trust me."

"There's no issue of me trusting you, it's more about me trusting me. I've spent a long time walling off this part of my life so I don't have to deal with it. If I let it out it will spill into what we have, and I don't know that I am capable of handling that. I'm old and tired, not as strong as I once was."

"Lib," in private Garrett often called his wife Lib or Libby, after the song about Marian the Librarian, "take a deep breath and just tell me as much as makes you comfortable and we will deal with things as we go."

"You're such a sweet man, I don't deserve you, but I have a legal contract that says you're stuck with me in sickness and in health. So here goes. You already know I served as a nurse in Vietnam."

Garrett nodded, quietly encouraging Marian to continue.

“There was a bit more to it than that. I actually worked with military intelligence. I was stationed in Saigon, and a member of a specialized intelligence and observation group. We were involved in many operations, and not all of them were successful, no matter what the records show. And none of them ended without pain for someone.”

Garrett just kept staring at the fire as Marian spoke, trying not to pressure her to reveal any more than she was capable of.

“I started out nursing, but my language skills, and my work in psychology made me valuable to them. Being young, I believed I could really do some good if I just had the chance. I had no idea what I was getting into. The strange thing is, I think I would do it again, I became so close to those people and the work we did was essential. But that way of thinking and working has no place here where you are not at war with everyone, where you don’t think every man, woman or child might be carrying a grenade. Where you can’t even trust the people you work with.” Marian stopped speaking, her hands were viably shaking as she tried to sip her beer.

They both just stared at the fire, listening to the snapping and popping, watching the flames dance and run along the logs.

Garrett waited until his wife seemed to relax a bit. “Can I ask some questions?”

“I can’t tell you much, but yes, ask away.”

“First, I thought women couldn’t serve in those kinds of rolls. And second, how does that guy we saw today fit in to all this?”

“Good questions love. You would be shocked at how many women served. There were more than anyone will ever admit. It was horrid coming home to a country that was less than welcoming and supportive for the men, but for the women, you have no idea. When I got home, I felt like I didn’t belong here. I tried to keep in touch with the people I worked with hoping I could find some comfort there. Hunter Burk was one of those men.”

“Did you say his name was Hunter?”

“Yes, why?”

“No reason, I just knew a guy with that name too. So tell me about your Hunter.”

“Well one of the other girls and I called him Military Issue. He was always shined, pressed and at attention. We figured he even slept at attention. He was good at his job, had his finger on everything that was going on, and seemed to know all about everyone working there. It was kind of scary and comforting at the same time. He had military in his blood, a career man for sure. He was demanding of himself and expected the same of us.”

“He doesn’t sound like a bad guy.”

“He’s not, and the other people I worked with were good people, but none of us came out the same people we went in. No one really ever comes home from a war, you are forever

changed. Some of us wall off the feelings and memories, some are haunted by them and others relive them every day.”

“Stephan?”

“Yes, Stephan. The first time I met him he was this well-built strapping kid. He had an infectious smile and laugh that made everyone’s day better. A sweet innocent farm boy that thought everything was “groovy”. Then the war got a hold of him, and well you have seen what’s left. A thin, shaky, nervous, chain smoker, that can’t handle being around people.”

“Was he really a patient of yours there, like you told me?”

“No, that was a bit of a lie, I’m sorry about that. We worked together, and I lost touch with him when he was discharged. Hunter was the one that let me know where he was staying. He knew I always had a soft spot for that boy. So I started coming up here ostensibly to “counsel” him but I think it was more about assuaging my conscience. It was just fortuitous that you found this piece of property so near to him.”

“Do you have any idea how this Hunter person tracked you down or what he wanted?”

“I don’t care how and I soooo don’t care why. This is my life now, you and all the critters. I love being discounted as ancient and irrelevant by my students. Not listened to by my doctor because I am old and decrepit. But more than anything, I love being here, sitting by the fire having a beer with my husband.”

“Lib, I can’t begin to imagine what you’ve seen and done. I don’t know what to say other than I am proud of you, not just

for the work you've done, but for how deeply you feel about the people you knew. It's obvious you've lived a lifetime I'll never understand, but I will do everything I can to make this life the best it can be."

"Thank you love. There is something you can do for me. Throw some wood on the fire, get me another beer, and call in for a pizza."

Chapter 2

Nick did his best to not cry out in pain, but his face told another story. Adrienne continued to bend his fingers back as far as she could. Nick was refusing to apologize for lude comments he had made to her. The stand-off had gone on for more than five minutes before Adrienne released him.

Nick couldn't resist poking the bear, "I knew you didn't have it in you. You don't have what it takes to stand up for yourself. Besides you probably secretly loved it."

Adrienne snatched his hand back and in one simple motion flipped the big man on his back. Grabbing her purse and turning to leave she gave him a warning, "Speak to me like that again and mission or no mission, you will not be able to get up for a week, I can promise you that."

Gil knelt down next to Nick to see if he was injured just as Lindsey entered the bar, "Boys, I never knew. I promise I won't ask, and I certainly won't tell."

Gil called after her, "No it's not like that."

As Nick got back to his feet, Gil admonished him, "Dude you have to rethink how you treat women. In one fell swoop you took us out of the running with both of them. We got through

training and now they probably won't ever talk to us again, even on the mission."

Nick was unaffected, "First you were never in the running with either of them. Second, they both still want me. And third I'm going to be put in charge of this mission, that will make them want me more."

Garrett always enjoyed the first rays of sunlight coming through the sliding glass doors in the kitchen. The knotty pine paneling seemed to glow, carrying the morning light through the house, easing in the new day. He could see Marian in the yard feeding and watering the critters. She seemed to linger longer in her conversations with the chickens and llamas this morning. Perhaps delaying her encounter with the rest of the world today. Her sleep last night was fitful, or non-existent. Yesterday's clash with Hunter opened a wound that is both deep and painful.

Conversing with llamas is more than a bit one sided, but Marian sometimes needed to get her thoughts out without being judged or having someone try to solve her problems. The beasties would occasionally look as if they understood she was speaking to them, come over, give her a sniff and a snort then go on their way. A llama nuzzle was just what she needed. There was no way to keep from smiling with those soft fuzzy lips in her face. It woke her from thoughts she would rather not have.

Garrett had breakfast ready for her, "Sit down I made you some eggs and extra strong coffee."

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“I’m sorry, it was a hard night for me, and I must have made it hard for you too.”

“Lib, why don’t you just take the day off today? Get the llamas out for a walk and just relax. It’s Friday, you can make it a long weekend for yourself.”

“Would you mind? I was kind of thinking the same thing. I thought maybe I might do some baking and bring bread over to Stephan. Would that be OK?”

“I figured he would be on your mind. Go ahead and do what you need to. I’ll be home late. I have an appointment to drop the car off at Jacob’s this morning. We are way overdue for an oil change.”

“Do we have anything going on this weekend?”

“Absolutely not, it’s just us here alone.”

“You have no idea how wonderful that sounds.”

Jacob’s auto shop was never at a loss for customers sitting at the counter talking, be it about weather, politics, or local gossip, it was not dull in the least. As the high school principal, Garrett was careful not to weigh in on any of the discussions, but he did enjoy being a spectator.

“I brought in the Focus for an oil change. Do you have a loaner?”

“Sorry, I just let the last one out, but Maddie can give you a ride to school.”

Jacob’s wife Maddie was the office manager, making sense of the chaos, as her husband popped in and out of the office constantly adding his own off the wall comments to whatever discussion was happening in front of his wife’s desk. There was always a good show at Jacob’s. He is involved in all kinds of groups in town, as well as the elementary school keeping up on all his grandkid’s activities and classes. Both he and his wife are like red squirrels, fast, full of energy, always on the move.

“That’s great, but I’ll need a ride back too, Marian is home sick today.”

Jacob laughed, “I know how hard it is to have your wife work for you. They just walk all over you, coming in whenever they please.”

Maddie didn’t miss a beat, “You better watch yourself mister or you’re going to be looking for a ride home tonight. I have both sets of keys. Garrett, I will be happy to give you a ride and I can pick you up, providing we leave now, before my husband makes me mad enough to take the day off myself.”

“Yes ma’am, I’ll be waiting outside.”

Marian put a couple dozen fresh eggs and a warm loaf a bread in the truck, “Come on girls lets go see Stephan.” The dogs always enjoyed a Stephan visit. He lives far from anyone, has three dogs of his own, and there is a small creek on his

property. The five of them spend hours getting soaked and covered in mud and sand.

The hour drive is usually an enjoyable one for Marian but this time not so much. She spent the entire trip trying to decide if she should tell Stephan about Hunters visit or not, they *were* good friends. But Stephan is so fragile, he lives on a razor edge, which way would that news push him. If she did tell him, how? How do I bring it up so it's just about seeing an old friend and not all of the bad memories? Is that even possible, it certainly wasn't for me, how could I even think it would be for him? Maybe I'm just looking for someone to share my pain. What am I doing? I shouldn't even be here. That revelation came too late, as she had just pulled into the driveway.

Three dogs rushed the car barking and jumping, their attitude changed from property guards to welcoming committee when they recognized the truck. Marian released Sandy and Lily, allowing them to join the pack, they all ran through the open pole barn door. Stephan must be inside working.

Marian followed the dogs in time to see them enter the open door leading to Stephan's shop. She could hear him laughing, the dogs must be licking him hello. Stephan emerged, surrounded by the jumping, barking pack. She so loved to see him smile. His slightly graying hair was flecked with wood dust and shavings. At just over six feet, his 140 pounds seemed stretched too far, but his wiry frame was well muscled and fit. His native and African American features combined to form a strong jaw and gentle eyes. He was a handsome man.

"Well this is a surprise. Have you come to check on my progress?"

“You mean you already started?”

“Sure did, you want to see?”

“Are you kidding? Let me in.”

Entering the shop Marian inhaled deeply. She so loved the smell of all the different woods. Sitting on the work bench were two carvings of bears. They were just roughed in but the shape was unmistakable. Each about a foot high, bears on their hind legs with paws outstretched.

Marian rushed over and picked the first one up, turning it over in her hands to take in the full image.

“It’s just as I imagined, when I tried to describe it for you. How do you do that?”

“So you’re happy?”

“It couldn’t be more perfect. What kind of wood is this, cedar?”

“Well done, it is cedar. I know it’s light weight, but I am going to attach it to a heavy base. They’ll make great book ends for Garrett’s office. I know we talked about painting them, but I saw the grain in these pieces and I hoped you’d be OK with just oiling it to bring out the natural beauty of the wood.”

“It would be a sin to cover up this color and pattern. I knew you’d make something even better than I could have envisioned. But I don’t need these until December, why did you start on them now?”

“I have lots of other jobs I should be doing but they aren’t fun, just work. It’s a treat to do things like this, so I kind of reward myself. If I do a day of boring work, I get to do a few hours of fun stuff.”

“Before I forget I have some eggs and fresh baked bread in the truck.”

“What do you say we go down to the creek, check on the dogs, then go back to the house and I make us some sandwiches on your bread.”

“That sounds great.”

Stephan had over 50 wooded acres in a very small community away from any development or businesses. Most of the land around his was owned by either hunters or the state. A perfect place for someone wanting to be left alone. Cushioned from the outside world, Stephan had created a world of his own. A wonderful maze of trails all of which had a purpose. Some lead to blueberry patches, some to small openings in the woods for his gardens. The one they were on now got them to the creek where Stephan had built a small bridge.

Marian was appalled at the state of the dogs, “How could they get that muddy already?”

“Let me go down and throw them in some deeper water so they are more wet than mud.”

As Stephan got lunch ready, Marian tried to get the dogs to sit still long enough to towel them off. She chatted about the wet

spring and how that was going to affect planting and getting spring chores done.

As Stephan set the plates on the table, he questioned her, "Why are you really here? It's not to talk about the weather."

"I just came for a visit."

"Don't play with me woman. You were just here a few days ago. It's a school day but you aren't at school. You've been 'acting' normal since you got here. Not being normal, just acting normal. There's something on your mind, and you best get it out because I'm all out of small talk."

"I'm so sorry, I should just go. It was a mistake to come here."

"Please, I'm OK, stop worrying about me and just tell me what's going on."

"Hunter Burk came to the house yesterday."

Stephan sat down, put his hand on Marians, "What did he say?"

"He said he wanted to talk, and he needed me to do something."

"What?"

"I have no idea, I told him to get out. Then I set the dogs on him."

Stephan threw his head back and laughed, “Quiet, sweet, mild mannered Marian told a four-star General to get out and siced the dogs on him?”

“Well, as much as you can sic these two lick machines on anyone. Wait, what do you mean four-star general, how do you know that?”

“You know I keep an eye on things.”

“I know you are perfect at staying off grid so no one can find you. But I didn’t know you were still a watcher.”

“Not a watcher, not a watcher. I just keep an eye on things. The internet makes it so easy there’s no stealth or skill involved. Plus, I can get anything I want delivered right to my door. I love the internet. So, I just google Hunter and I can keep up on all his stars and medals and crap. He got his last star years ago and has been shuffling papers and shaking hands for the last few years. He’s kind of a nobody. His daughter is some big deal, but not him.”

“Wait he has a daughter?”

“Boy, who would have thought I was more up on things in the world than you?”

“Now you sound like my students, telling me I don’t know anything about real life.”

“God, I forgot what it was like to be a teenager, being sure, that no one knows more about life than you. I really don’t know how you do it. Wait, yes I do, you just sit there. don’t say

anything, and eventually they tell you everything. Someone should tell those kids that they don't have a chance."

"This is why I came here. You make me smile."

"How is Garrett in all this? You must have had to tell him something."

"He's so great. I told him what I could, and he took it all in, didn't push, and just let me be. I'm a lucky woman."

"He's a lucky man, and so am I. You're a good friend, and you make good bread. Eat up and I'll show you all I have about Hunter and his daughter. Then you might be able to figure out what he wants."

Garrett climbed out of the car, "Thanks for coming to get me Maddie. I just want to get home and start a quiet weekend with my wife. No visitors, no errands, just enjoying our place and each other."

"I know what you mean. I love seeing the kids and grandkids, but they wear me out. Every year I gain a greater appreciation for doing nothing. This is my weekend of peace and quiet. Jacob's already gone, teaching a gun safety class. I have the shop and the house to myself. I can organize everything here, without interruption, and watch my shows at home without argument."

As they enter the shop there are, as usual, two men sitting in the waiting room having an animated discussion. Garrett is focused on paying his bill and getting home, he barely glances

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at the men. It takes a moment to register, but one of them is familiar, familiar in a way that makes his gut tighten. He catches the man's eye, flashing a sign of recognition. The man ends his conversation and follows Garrett out.

Garrett turns and confronts the man, "What the hell do you think you're doing, Hunter!"

"I know you're angry, I know you have questions, please just hear me out."

Chapter 3

Rose entered Della's office, "Your appointment didn't show?"

Della was packing her things to leave, "No, it was just supposed to be some guidance counselor who wanted to visit and see what we have to offer. She contacted the office and I was supposed to show her around. It happens a lot, no big deal. But since she didn't show, I am free to take off early. Are you ready to go?"

"I have some filing to do and I'll be right behind you."

Della is a job placement coordinator at a state jobs office. A small woman, 62 years old, of Japanese and African American decent. Her silver hair still has one jet black streak. She is a ball of energy and has a passion for helping people find success and jobs they are not only good at, but they love. She shares a house with a co-worker, Rose, a job training teacher.

Della enjoyed the drive home through town. It is spring so the tourists haven't invaded yet. She liked being in a small town with big town amenities. But in the summer the traffic can get to be big city traffic. That is a small price to pay for living in the north woods with lakes and rivers everywhere. She started to look forward to that first Kayak paddle when the water warms up.

Franklin hollered into the next room, “Are you going to play pool tonight or just watch?”

He girlfriend Johnnie replied, “I think I want to play, if you promise not to give me any *advice*.”

“I just point out shots for you.”

“Your shots are not my shots. So please keep them to yourself.”

“I’ll do my best., but I can’t promise anything. I tell you what, I’ll make dinner as an apology for pissing you off later this evening”

“I could laugh like you were making a joke, but it’s more likely than not, exactly what will happen. So you better make dinner.”

Franklin smiled as he packed up both his pool cue and his girlfriend, Janell’s, or Johnnie as everyone called her. They have been together for years. She’s personable and independent, actually both of them are intensely independent.

Built like a voyageur, Franklin looks powerful enough to paddle and drag canoes over land for days on end. The grey beard and hair still show signs of the rich black they were in youth. Johnnie’s affable, open nature is equal to Franklins quiet, reserved manor. His feelings run deep and rarely surface, at least in front of others. His smiles are infrequent, but that slight grin lights up his whole face. He is respectful of his friends and expects the same in return.

“NO STOP, IT’S TOO SOON!” Marian cried out in her sleep.

“Lib, Lib you’re here, it’s OK. Wake up, it’s OK.”

It took a few minutes, but Marian realized she was in her own bed and Garret was holding her, it was just a dream. She took Garrett’s hand, “I’m sorry to wake you love. Go back to sleep. I need to move around for a bit.”

“Why don’t you grab a blanket and sit out on the porch. I’ll make some hot chocolate and join you.”

“You’re a dear, I don’t deserve you.”

Garrett had come to expect nights like this. They were becoming a common occurrence after her visits with Stephan. It seemed the wall she had built to encase her past was crumbling. Maybe it was time she confronted these things. He was reluctant to push her, but he hated seeing her suffer. Her wrath was nothing to mess with, but perhaps it was worth the risk. He knew he’d better have more than hot chocolate in hand for this.

Marian, still shaken from her nightmare, took refuge in staring at the stars. The cool spring evening allowed her to let the nightmare slip away.

Garrett joined his wife on the porch handing her a steaming cup, “I put some Baileys in there.”

“Thanks, that’s always a treat.”

“Not so much a treat as a preemptive peace offering.”

“You’re going to have to explain that.”

“You remember how I said I knew someone named Hunter too?”

Marian took a deep breath and thought for a moment, before uttering a slow, drawn out “yes?”

“Well, as it turns out, it’s the same Hunter you know.”

Marian was silent, her breathing slow and rhythmic, her hands gripping the arms of the chair. Garrett sipped from his mug and waited. After a few minutes, he handed her the hot chocolate. She took a long draw from the steaming cup.

“I’m assuming you brought the bottle with you. You’d better fill it up.”

Garrett pulled the Baileys from the floor beside him and topped off her mug.

“Continue.”

“I bought this property from him.”

“You said it was a woman that owned this.”

“He put it in his daughter’s name, Quinn, but he was the one that did the sale at the realtors. He was a nice guy, said his parents had passed down several pieces of land and he was selling a couple off. He never mentioned he knew you, or he

was military or any of that. We got along and had a great conversation while we signed all the papers and such. I really haven't thought about it at all since that day."

"I know you well enough to know there's more to this."

"Yes, he came to see me today. And we talked about you."

"Just exactly how did that happen?"

When I walked into Jacob's to pick up the car, he was sitting in there, chatting away with folks. He followed me out and asked me to give him a chance to explain."

"And you did? Why would you do that. You know how I feel about having him around, you know I don't want to see him. You know how hard it was bringing all that up again!"

"Yes, I DO know, that's exactly why I talked to him. I've seen firsthand how hard this is for you. And I don't think it's about seeing him now. It's not about dealing with him in the present, but about not facing how you dealt with him in the past. There's something unfinished that you need to face head on. If you were treating someone that had unresolved issues in the past, what would you tell them to do?"

"I would tell them they needed to face it, deal with it, and move on. I have to say being on the receiving end of that treatment makes me understand why patient's response is more often than not, bite me."

"Are you willing to meet with him?"

Blue Grey and Gone

“You’ve already arranged a meeting haven’t you.”

“Tomorrow, or I guess it’s today.”

“Can we at least wait until the sun comes up?”

Animals do sense emotion. Marian could see how her trepidation at the upcoming encounter affected the critters as she fed and watered them all. Her anxiety was their anxiety. Even the dogs were off their morning routine. Calm was not on the schedule today.

Garrett was busy in the kitchen when she came back in, “Did you take the dogs down to the river?”

“I did.”

“Is the skunk cabbage up yet?”

“I have no idea, I may have physically been there, but my brain was somewhere else. I don’t know why I agreed to this. You know, I don’t think I did.”

“No, you didn’t, but you’re going to do it anyway, because you know it’s the right thing.”

Marian paused and looked around the room, “Did you clean? And you baked?”

“I had to do something.”

Lily and Sandy alerted them to Hunter's arrival. The truck drove right up to the house this time. Marian put the dogs inside fearing her emotional state may inadvertently cause them to attack the target of her dread. She hoped a few deep breaths would take the tremor out of her voice.

"Welcome, I think."

Hunter managed a smile and a nervous laugh. "I am grateful you agreed to see me."

"I *didn't* agree, you should be grateful my husband agreed for me."

"Please Lib, give him a chance."

"Sorry, you're right, come up and have a seat, I hope you don't mind sitting on the porch."

"I prefer it."

Marian went in the house to get coffee and her husband's fresh baked scones. Garrett and Hunter sat quietly taking account of each other. Returning with a tray both men stood and reached out to help. Marian pulled away, letting them know she required no assistance. She poured coffee, first for Garrett, black with sugar, then Hunter, cream and sugar.

"You remembered."

"Remembering seems to be my curse."

Hunter handed the last cup to Marian.

“Tea, Earl Grey, if I’m not mistaken. Remembering the past helps us not repeat mistakes.”

“Mistakes? Mistakes? A mistake is taking a wrong turn, a mistake is forgetting where you put your keys, a mistake is burning dinner! What happened to us, to all those people, was no mistake!” Marian realized she was standing over Hunter, her throat stinging because she had been shouting. She felt Garrett’s hand gently easing her back in her chair. “I’m sorry.”

Hunter pulled his chair closer to hers. “Don’t be sorry, it’s important to get it out, and I think the louder the better. We never got to do that, shout and rail and rant. I think that made it even worse somehow if that was possible. That ending that horrible awful ending, destroyed all the good we had, we did, and we saw. I’m hoping I can change that. I have another mission for you, for us all.”

Chapter 4

It was difficult to tell if she was more shocked or angry, likely an explosive combination of both. Marian was visibly trying to formulate a response to the bomb Hunter just dropped while sipping coffee on her porch.

Garrett was the first to speak, “What do you mean by all of us?”

Hunter leaned back in his chair and faced Garrett directly. “There were five others. We worked together on several operations. The last was one that, well, it took a part of each of us, and we’ve all been trying to get it back ever since.”

“Are you saying you’ve kept in touch with everyone?”

“In a manner of speaking. I’m sure Garrett told you how I ‘kept in touch’ with you. I’ve done the same with the rest. In fact, they’re closer to you than you might think.”

Marian pulled her chair up to the table re-entering the conversation, “Jacob, he is Minnie, isn’t he?”

“He is.”

Blue Grey and Gone

Garrett was trying to follow, but they weren't making any sense. "I'm sorry, but you're losing me here. Are you talking about Jacob McGrath at the car shop?"

Marian answered, "That's right. You know I've always felt uncomfortable around him, the hair on the back of my neck jumps to attention every time I see him. I guess I knew somewhere in the back of my mind it was him. But time has changed us all. Less hair, gone grey, long beard and more than a few extra pounds are a pretty good disguise."

"What is this Minie business?"

"There were two of us girls working with four men. We took to calling them Eenie, Meanie, Minie, and Mo. Hunter you say you know where they all are?"

"Well you know where Eenie is, Stephan. Jacob is Minie, Mo is the uncle of a student at your school, and Meanie lives just a few miles from here. And Della, well if you hadn't taken Friday off you would've met her. She works at the State Job Placement office you were scheduled to visit."

"How do you know I was suppose... you... you arranged that? You're manipulating all of us! You expect me to trust you when you're controlling me?"

"I'm sorry. I'm good at giving orders to subordinates, and pretty good at taking them from superiors, but no good at asking friends. I need your help, I need to do one good thing, and I think you do too. I may have stumbled around and messed this up, but here we both are, at the same table, will

you just listen to what I have to say? After you've heard me out, if you want me to go, I'll go."

Marian got up and started inside, "Let me get some more coffee, and make some sandwiches. I have a feeling this is going to take more than a few minutes,"

"Colonel Markus are you seriously considering this training lunacy your father is planning?"

Quinn Markus leaned forward at her desk making sure she had the full attention of the Major sitting in front of her. "I trust that a four-star General knows what he is doing, and I am going to follow orders, as are you, and your team. Does that answer your question?"

"Yes ma'am."

"If I understand correctly, this team is fully prepared for the mission. They're simply waiting to deploy. This training should not only pull them together but identify the individual we're looking for."

"I hope so ma'am."

After her subordinate exited the office, Quinn plopped down in her chair and exhaled deeply, blowing out the frustration at having to hold in her actual response to the Major's concerns. She was more than worried about this 'scheme' her father had come up with. She loved her father deeply, but times have changed, this is a different Army from the one he knew. He was great, once, but now, she felt uneasy.

Blue Grey and Gone

Nick sat on the edge of the weight bench toweeling the sweat off his face admiring his own well-defined physique. His spotter, Gil, chatted while he added more weight to the bar.

“Do you know where they’re sending us? I heard it was some back water ‘village’ in the Midwest.”

“I don’t know where it is, but there’s ‘some over the hill hasn’t been out of the office in forever’ General, that thinks we need more training. I bet he thinks a drone is a kind of bee.”

“You and those things, I don’t know why you spend so much time lifting weights. When you work, all you do is sit in a chair with your joystick. How hard can that be? You just want to look pretty.”

“Jealous.”

They both just laughed.

Marian set a half-eaten sandwich back on her plate, “If I understand you correctly, you expect me to contact these people.”

“I was kind of hoping you would, as you can see, it’s not my strong suit.”

“I haven’t spoken to these people in, what, forty years? This is going to take some serious preparation. And I **absolutely** refuse to make first contact with Franklin, there was a reason we called him Meanie. And Mo is yours too.”

“But you and David were so close then, I was sure you’d want to talk to him.”

“Oh, I do want to talk to him, and we were close. So who better than me to remember how he loved torturing commanding officers. I would never rob him of having a four-star General at his mercy.”

“There it is, that’s unfortunately the Marian I remember.”

Garrett had mixed feelings about his wife jumping in so whole heartedly with this proposition. He could see her mind whirling with plans, organizing and coordinating, what a few hours ago she wanted nothing to do with. She was usually so deliberate and thoughtful about big decisions. She usually involved him before she acted, this time it’s as though he’s not there. But then, he really isn’t a part of this.

As Garrett started to clear the dishes, Marian reached for a notebook and pen, “I think it better that we give only the minimum information until we can get everyone in one place.”

“I’ll let you coordinate that then. I’ll contact Franklin, and David. And you contact Della, Jacob, and of course, Stephan. Then we set a meeting. Where do you want to do that?”

“I think it would be best to meet here. But before we do anything more, I need to have some time to discuss this with Garrett. He has a way of making me see things more clearly. And I can’t move forward if he’s not on board. He’s a part of this, or I guess he’s a part of me.”

“I understand. Call me tomorrow and let me know if you want to proceed. I appreciate you considering this. And no matter what, I would like to keep in touch with you. It’s hard to find people of like mind. The older I get the more I cherish time spent with friends.”

“Indeed.”

Marian and the dogs saw Hunter down the road. Garrett stayed inside straightening up the kitchen, heating up more coffee and tea for the two of them. He was relieved that his wife wanted his opinion of their plan, but at the same time he didn’t want to be responsible for pushing her into danger or keeping her from a life altering adventure. He would endeavor to keep an open mind at the same time a tight rein on his heart.

Marian opened the door letting the dogs in. She stood quietly studying her husband’s face, “Well?”

“That was quite an afternoon. I’m not sure what to think about any of it. I’m really not even sure of you right now.”

“That’s fair, I’m not sure of me either. There was something wonderful about talking with him. I felt valuable again, like I mattered, not just an old woman that doesn’t know anything. I had forgotten how that feels. It was exciting. Adrenaline is a drug that provides a very subtle, but amazingly real high. I’m hoping you will help me get my feet back on the ground before I determine how to continue.”

“I *am* a high school principal, who better to kill your buzz and harsh your mellow.”

“I’ve heard that’s one of your greatest skills.”

Garrett smiled, pulling a chair out for Marian to join him at the kitchen table. She gently touched his hand as she sat down. They both sipped from their mugs and relaxed for a moment.

Marian spoke softly and deliberately, “I would like to tell you the story of that last operation. I think it’s time, and I know I’m ready.”

“Please, but only if you feel comfortable.”

“We’d been working together for several months. Our team had become close in a way that happens not just out of necessity, but out of trust. Each of us had our own skill our own expertise but we were somehow strikingly better when we worked together. There was an energy there, I felt it again when Hunter was here.”

“I could see it. Your eyes lit up.”

“Just thinking about all of them brought it back in a way I never expected. We did lots of different things and we were good. Our group worked, well, let’s just say sometimes outside the boundaries of the rest of the military.

Della, that tiny little girl, was a martial arts virtuoso. And David, the jokester, was amazing in the jungle. He could disappear in the blink of an eye, and he was deadly with a bow. Stephan acted like a big kid, but that boy was a radio genius. He could discern patterns and plans no one else could. Jacob and Franklin were combat and weapons wizards; they could blow up or take down anything. Often we trained and worked

with locals. I was most involved with behavior analysis and Della and I were able to speak the language fluently.

For this operation our goal seemed simple, but we knew it was important. There was a village close to a Vietcong supply line station. The villagers had been providing intel on movement, and patterns. That, along with other info, was analyzed and determined that destroying that station was essential. It would take out a large contingent of personnel as well as ammunition, food and medical supplies. Our job was to go in and clear the village because they were too close to the station. They would be in the line of fire. We had two days to explain what was going on and prepare them to leave.”

Marian stopped her narrative, inhaling deeply, releasing the breath purposefully. Garrett refilled her mug with tea, and sipped his coffee, allowing her time to continue.

“It seems so simple saying it. Go in, get them out, and go home. The reality of it was so different. There were 26 people, eight of them children. We got to know them, in just a day. Della and I spent time with all of them explaining what was going on. Stephan was a hit with the kids. They thought he was a giant. David spent his day on the river with the men learning how to catch some kind of big catfish. And every time I saw Franklin or Jacob they were eating.

The plan was to take one more day keeping an eye on movements and radio chatter, making sure everything seemed normal as we verified the target. That first night we spent about a half mile outside the village.

The next morning, I got up. Stephan was already listening on the radio. Franklin grunted at me over his cup of coffee. I think Della and Jacob were still in their tents. David was down on the river. The sun was not up yet, but the sky had that dim dawn light that outlines the treetops. I was getting ready to sit down and have a cup of coffee, when all hell broke loose.

Stephan jumped up and started shouting, “NO, NO, NO!!!! They’re a day early they’re coming a day early!” He started running toward the village. Just then we heard the helicopters, and unmistakable sound of an M60. And we knew.

All of us were running, the sound ringing in my ears, I still can’t describe it, this distorted cacophony of guns and explosions and screaming. The screaming was coming from all of us. As if anyone could hear us telling them to stop.

I felt as if I was moving in slow motion, like I was running through water. When I finally got there, I saw Jacob on his knees crying. Franklin was trying to drag Stephan from the flames. They were both badly burned, making sounds I can’t describe. Stephan was holding the limp body of one of the children. David and Della were digging through the debris trying to find anyone that may still be alive. Jacob and I joined the search, but we were too late. We found their bodies, most had still been asleep. Some of the women had been cooking breakfast. They believed they were safe, because we promised them they were.”

Garrett pulled Marian’s chair close and held her. “Lib, I don’t know what to say.”

Blue Grey and Gone

“That isn’t the end of the story, it gets worse. The decision to move early, was a communication SNAFU. The supplies they hoped to stop weren’t there, and we were in a place we shouldn’t have been, so there needed to be a good spin put on this mess. It was recorded as a huge success. If you can believe it, they gave us medals. My god we got medals for killing those people, those sweet innocent people.

I have to get a better ending here love. I have to do this thing with Hunter.”

“Yes you do, and I will be here for you, whatever you need. I’ll even clean the llamas if I have to.”

“Brave man, it’s easy to see why I married you.”



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