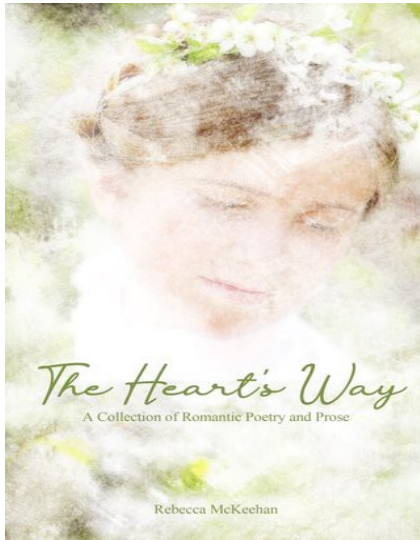




Windswept

"There's a certain nostalgia and romance in a place you left."
David Guterson

It was a pleasant September day, as the Aleutians went. The incessant wind was little more than a breeze, no moisture dripped from the brooding gray clouds, and the temperature was hovering in the upper forties. Of course, all of that would most likely change without a moment's notice.

Wrapped in her warm parka, Alice Kingsley stood on the narrow strip of beach looking out over Kuluk Bay, a gentle smile curving her lips as she watched the sea otters floating just off shore. They, in turn, were watching her as they cracked open clams upon rocks they'd placed on their chests and ate the contents with obvious relish. The cool air was brine-scented and water lapped gently upon the sand. Jagged mountains stood sentinel along one side of the bay while the volcanic peak of Great Sitkan Island twenty-five miles away was hidden by clouds. The view was unmistakably Alaskan.

Now in her sixties, Alice was still a pretty woman who was aging well. Her heart-shaped face wasn't heavily lined and what lines were there were born more from laughter than sorrow. Bright blue eyes still sparkled with intelligence and youthful vitality, while light brown hair highlighted to blend with the natural silver was cut into a simple, easy care bob. She was petite in height and her once firm body had grown comfortably soft over the years. There was such an air of contentment about her that no one unfamiliar with her life would believe chaos had once marred her girlhood. Those who were familiar with it marveled at how well she had overcome it with innate inner strength, and the loving presence of her husband of thirty-five

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years, Gunner.

A movement caught her eye and she watched as an orca breached just beyond Battleship Island, a rock formation about half a mile offshore. She had been told they were fairly common in these waters but she had seldom seen one. Though once, during a school trip to the skeet range on the sea wall, one had appeared close to where the students were target practicing. Alongside it had been its calf. Even now she could remember the awe that had filled her.

Her memories of that experience brought to mind that time in her life with vivid clarity. She had been sixteen. It was their sixth year on the island and the first in which she had enjoyed true inclusion with a group of like-minded, creatively inclined friends. Until that year, she had believed she had one friend, Carla. Someone who had ruthlessly cut her off from the rest of their classmates and, with her parents' blessing, controlled and isolated her from what they considered bad influences. Those first five years had been long and lonely, and had deepened her lifelong poor self image.

But then, a new girl, Christine, had arrived at school and Alice quickly learned they shared many interests, and Christine's personality was a perfect mesh with hers. From that moment on she grew further away from the toxic relationship that had bound her for so long and she discovered that there were many who had wanted to get to know her, but Carla had stood in their way. Unfortunately, her parents were not pleased with the new relationship, and it wouldn't be Alice's last transgression against them.

Heading away from the water, Alice found a place on the steep hill that led up to the road. There she sat with her knees folded and her chin resting on them. As an eagle flew above the beach, she allowed her mind to wonder back to that time of dramatic transition. When she had first unfurled her wings...

Alice and Christine were inseparable. Where one went, the other was sure to go along. There were many sleepovers, dreams shared on the sands of the beach, and those naughty times when they followed along behind the flight crews, admiring the uniformed view, as it were. They would occasionally spend an afternoon bowling and their weekends were nearly always spent at the pool inside the basement of the Bering Building atop Bering Hill.

Alice was inherently shy around boys so she was even more so around the young men who frequented the pool along with them. For the most part, she was ignored, which was fine with her. But Christine, on the other hand, was not shy. She was bold and worldly beyond her sixteen years. She was also enticingly built, which drew the young men like flies to honey, and she flirted outrageously as she encouraged their attention. Meanwhile, Alice remained on the periphery. Watching Christine in action made her feel backward and inadequate, though Christine did nothing to encourage those feelings. In fact, she was forever trying to make

Alice over into someone as outgoing as she was. Unfortunately, Alice was a lost cause there. She simply wasn't made of the same stuff.

Christine eventually became involved with a young man who worked as a lifeguard, Jerry. Many Saturday nights, after the pool had closed, she and Alice would remain after the doors were locked and visit with him and a buddy or two in the darkened bleacher seats that rose alongside the steps leading from the pool to the exit. While Christine held court, Alice would remain apart, her acute shyness making it impossible to join them in their banter. She often wondered why she was always allowing herself to be put in the position of fifth wheel.

One Saturday, Jerry arrived with his usual band of Marine buddies and as always gathered eagerly around Christine. Alice had decided that, for once, she wasn't going to hang around and had just started to walk away when one of the men separated himself from the group and approached her. She didn't know who he was as she had never seen him before. But he was attractive, with the requisite close cropped hair, a dark complexion and high cheekbones that hinted at Native American blood, while his vivid green eyes twinkled with Celtic good humor. His smile was both gentle and appreciative as she stood, waiting warily, in her bell-bottomed jeans and blue sweater.

"Hi," he greeted her warmly. She was charmed by the dimples that appeared on either side of his mouth and his baritone voice was soothing to her nerves, "My name is Gunner."

Alice smiled shyly in return.

"I'm Alice."

He glanced over his shoulder as laughter erupted behind him.

"Your friend is something else."

"Yes." Alice's smile grew wistful. "She's more of a party person than I am, I'm afraid."

Gunner cocked his head to one side.

"There's nothing wrong with that."

"Maybe not but it can make things difficult sometimes." She glanced toward the exit. "I'm sorry. I was just leaving..."

"Can I walk you out?"

Her eyes widened in surprise.

"Don't you want to stay here with everyone else?"

"Not particularly." He grimaced. "I was basically coerced into coming along."

Laughter reverberated between the walls around them and Gunner stepped closer, raising his voice to be heard.

"Can I buy you a Coke or something? The Pizzaria is still open. I was thinking of grabbing myself a slice or two."

Alice was tempted. Glancing at Christine who was basking as she held court, she realized she probably wouldn't be missed. And when she thought of what her parents would say she felt a spurt of rebellion.

"Thank you, I think that would be nice."

He smiled, pleased, and waited as she gathered up her coat and tote bag, then, with his hand resting lightly on her back, guided her up the steps and through the doors.

They were soon sharing a pizza that was half supreme and half Hawaiian. He had groaned teasingly each time she bit into a slice with its ham and pineapple topping and she found herself, for the first time in her life, comfortable enough to flirt by picking toppings off and popping them into her mouth as her eyes sparkled with fun. When the Pizzaria closed for the evening, they had stopped at the Game Room and played air hockey until nearly midnight. Only then did she realize how late it was and that she had missed the last "Gray Husky," the island's public transportation service.

"Oh no!" she moaned as thoughts of her parents waiting for her caused her stomach to clench in near panic. Gunner watched the dismay and dread chase across her pretty face.

"What's wrong?"

"My parents are going to kill me! I missed the bus and it's late, and, oh God!"

He caught her hand gently in his.

"Don't worry. I can take you home."

"You don't understand!"

"That your parents will be worried?"

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"No! That they'll be furious!"

"I'm sure it won't be all that bad."

"You don't know them!"

He tightened his hold on her hand.

"C'mon. My truck is behind the barracks."

His pickup was a typical Adak beater: old and physically battered by time and elements, but with an engine that ran well from his constant tinkering. The heater, however, was almost non-existent.

"Nice car," she commented wryly, her mind momentarily distracted from the trial ahead after he had helped her in then rounded the hood to climb into the driver seat. She shivered inside her down jacket as the cold wind whistled around them.

"Isn't it? I bought it off a guy for \$200 when he transferred out." He slid the heater control on then smiled apologetically at her, his face lit unevenly by the lights scattered around the gravel parking lot. "It should warm up by this time next year."

Alice's chuckle morphed into a giggle as she shivered against the cold air.

"Maybe." She sighed as he shifted and drove out of the lot. "I can't wait to learn to drive."

"You don't know how?" he asked, surprised.

"No. I keep asking but Mom and Dad say I'm not ready."

"But, you're sixteen!"

She nodded, "Yeah."

Leaning her head back against the ruined upholstery of the headrest, she closed her eyes.

"I can't wait until I turn eighteen," she said, her frustration evident in her tone, "Just two more years."

"What will you do then?"

"I'm not sure. I want to go to college but I'll need money to do that. Money I don't have yet."
She shook her head then turned to watch him as he drove down the steep road from the hill.
"Maybe I'll enlist and take advantage of the education benefits. I can save some money, too."

"Enlist in the Navy, like your dad?"

"No, the Coast Guard. I've already been checking into it."

"That's pretty smart. Have you told your parents yet?"

"No. I don't want to tell them anything until just before I leave."

Gunner was having a hard time believing that her relationship with her parents could be so bad. His own had been strict but there was never a shortage of love and support, and while he realized that there was plenty of dysfunction in the world, it was still difficult for him to believe that someone as sweet natured as Alice could be a product of any form of it.

They soon arrived at her house, a duplex in one of the newer housing areas, and as expected, the lights were still burning harshly in the living room. Her mother immediately shifted the curtain aside and though her face was in shadow, Alice could feel the anger awaiting her inside.

"Will you be alright?" Gunner asked and she smiled sadly.

"I'll be fine but I'll probably be grounded until I'm thirty."

"Can I call you tomorrow, to see how you're doing?"

"You better not." She sighed. "I'll be lucky if I can still go to church in the morning."

"Which service?"

"Protestant."

"Maybe I'll see you there."

Her expression was skeptical as her eyes met his.

"What?" he asked, "You don't think I go to church?"

She shook her head, "No, it's not that. I just didn't think about seeing you there."

"Well," he grinned sheepishly, "I don't usually go."

Alice blushed but before she could say anything the front door opened and her father took a step outside.

"I better go." She gently laid her hand on his arm. "Thank you for bringing me home."

"I'll look for you tomorrow."

With a last smile she climbed down from the truck and made her way toward the door, and her father standing rigidly beside it.

Alice kept her eyes down as she walked up the steps and into the house. Her father followed, slamming the door shut behind him. Trembling, she continued into the living room then came to an abrupt halt when her mother rushed at her, her eyes filled with rage and suspicion, and her hands clenched into fists.

"Where the hell have you been?" she demanded, her voice low and hissing.

Alice stepped back in fear only to come up against her father. His hands cruelly gripped her shoulders and she shuddered as she found herself trapped between the two.

"I-I went to the p-pool with Chri-Christine..."

The slap came out of nowhere, the sound of her mother's hand against her cheek easily heard over the easy listening music blaring incongruously from the stereo. Alice tasted blood as her teeth cut into the inside of her cheek.

"She called three hours ago looking for you! Now, where were you? And who was that driving that truck?"

"I-I-I went to-to the P-Pizzeria and-and the Game R-Room."

"With who?"

Her mother raised her hand again and Alice flinched, turning her face away and squeezing her eyes shut. Her father ruthlessly forced her to face her mother.

"Hi-his n-name is Gu-Gunner. I-I me-met him at-at the p-pool."

"Who's he?"

Alice licked her lips as tears coursed down her cheeks.

"Answer me, dammit!"

"He li-lives in the ba-ba-barracks."

"A Marine?" her father growled behind her, shaking her, as her mother nodded, her face filled with vicious satisfaction.

"I knew you were a sneaky little slut."

Alice shook her head frantically.

"No! I'm not!"

Another slap and she tasted blood again.

"Don't lie to me!" her mother shrieked. "You think I don't know what you and your friend are really doing when you say you go to the pool?"

Helpless fury rose in Alice and she glared, stiffening as she faced her tormentor.

"I'm not! I'm not like you!"

Suddenly, the older woman's hand was in her daughter's hair. Cruelly gripping a handful, she drug Alice mercilessly down the hall and threw her into a darkened bedroom where she landed heavily against the bed and fell to the floor. Standing in the doorway, her mother was an evil silhouette jabbing her finger in Alice's direction.

"You stay away from those men! I won't have you knocked up with a bastard I'd have to raise!"

"I wouldn't let you raise a dog of mine!" Alice cried in response and watched as her mother slammed the door shut, leaving her in darkness except for the light from the living room shining below it. For a moment she sat, stunned, then her breath began to hitch as she shuddered and pushed herself onto the bed. She worked desperately to keep the sobs from escaping. She refused to give them the satisfaction!

Knowing better than to turn on the light, she stood and pulled off her clothes before feeling her way to the dresser. Sliding a drawer open, she took out the first nightgown she touched and jerked it on before lying down and pulling the covers up to her neck. Her face ached and shudders continued to rack her body. Gunner's smiling face floated gently through her mind.

She'd see him at church in the morning and she would continue to see him no matter what her parents dictated. She liked him. He made her laugh and feel safe. Her swollen lip trembled as she hid her face in the pillow. She was so tired of being afraid.

Outside the ever present Aleutian wind moaned and whistled as it blew between the houses. It was a long time before she fell asleep.

~

The small, historic, clapboard chapel, with its attached annex, was a place of peace for Alice. There was something warm and comforting in its timelessness that seemed to wrap around her wounded soul. For all the time she had lived on the island, it had been her refuge. Even though her family would usually attend services as well, it was here where she had always felt the safest. Where she gained the strength needed to endure another week.

All through Sunday School she had been aware of the speculative looks when people saw her battered face. It wasn't the first time she had appeared in public that way. She was also known to occasionally bear evidence of soreness and bruising in other parts of her body. Her parents would bemoan her frequent "fights" with her brothers. Fights she always started only to have her ass kicked as a result. Because she never declared otherwise, and because her brothers often boasted of showing her once again not to mess with them, people were inclined to believe the charges. But there were a few who suspected otherwise, though they did nothing to interfere with what was considered a family's business.

This Sunday, Alice was serving as an acolyte for the worship service. Normally she would have been considered too old by now to perform the occasional role, but for some reason the chaplain had never removed her name from the volunteer list. Her small stature and gentle demeanor made her seem almost as childlike as the others who were much younger, and she cherished the times when her name rose to the top.

She had donned her robe and was now standing at the back of the chapel as the chaplain welcomed everyone that morning, thanking God with a twinkle in his eye for the "liquid sun" that was falling from the gray morning sky. People chuckled, for rain and fog were typical of the Aleutians with sunny days being the rare exceptions. Then the chaplain stepped aside as the organist began playing the introit, the congregation stood, and Alice walked slowly down the aisle, leading the singing choir on her way to light the candles on the altar. She kept her attention focused ahead, looking neither left nor right, though she wanted badly to see if Gunner was somewhere nearby. Once the candles were lit, she took her place at the side of the pulpit as the first hymn was sung.

Looking out over the congregation, she saw her family standing at their customary pew looking for all the world to be respectable, normal members of the community. She knew

they were well liked by most people they were acquainted with, one of the reasons she had never asked for help. Who would believe her accusations when hers was the epitome of a loving household?

When the hymn ended everyone took their seats and that is when her eyes met Gunner's. He was sitting toward the back at the far end of a pew, dressed in green fatigues. Rather than returning her shy smile, he was frowning at her and she realized that he was looking at her face. Shamed, she dropped her eyes and refused to look at him again.

The rest of the service continued as usual. The chaplain made announcements and recognized newcomers and those leaving the island before speaking of charity and performing good works. Prayers were said and hymns, including the Navy Hymn, were sung, then the organist played the extroit as Alice extinguished the candles and led the chaplain back down the aisle.

Stepping into a small room off the narthex, she extinguished the flame she had carried from the altar and began removing her robe. As she slid it off her shoulders, she glanced up and was startled to see Gunner standing in the door.

"Hi," she whispered with an uncertain smile.

"What happened to your face?" he demanded softly, his expression dark and suspicious.

"I, um, got in a fight with one of my brothers and..."

"Bullshit."

Horried, she glanced behind him to see if anyone heard, but no one seemed to have noticed over the cacophony of voices filling the chapel.

"Gunner!"

"Well?"

"Ju-Just let it go, Gunner."

He watched as she hung the robe on a hanger.

"Was it because you were late getting home last night?"

"Gunner, please, don't ask."

He opened his mouth to say something then decided against it. His gaze fell to the floor for a moment before rising once again to meet hers. Her expression was anguished, the bruising and swollen lip making it all the more heartbreaking to look at.

"I want to see you again."

She looked away and shook her head.

"I don't think that would be wise."

"Probably not," he agreed.

"We could both get in trouble if anyone found out," she whispered, fear and longing in her eyes as she raised them to meet his.

"I'm willing to risk it." He took a small step further into the room and his voice lowered.

"Please?"

She went with her pounding heart and asked, "O-Okay, where?"

"The chapel is open every afternoon for people to come for prayer. Can you meet me here one day?"

"Dad is working a mid shift this week and Mom works until after five. I can be here after school for a little while."

"I'm off on Wednesday."

There was a long silence, then she swallowed nervously and nodded. "Okay"

"What time?"

"Three thirty?"

He smiled, "Sounds good."

Her swollen lips curved tremulously in return. "Yes." Then she glanced anxiously behind him. "You better go."

Nodding, he turned then paused.

"Take care of yourself. I'll see you Wednesday."

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~

School on Wednesday seemed to last forever. Alice couldn't stop looking at the clock in each class as the day wore on. At lunch she was quiet and could only push the food around on her plate. Noticing that she wasn't eating her favorite dessert, Christine asked if she was feeling okay. Alice had shook her head and answered, truthfully, that she was feeling sick to her stomach.

But school finally ended and Alice hurried to catch her bus home. There she changed into an older pair of jeans and a faded orange t-shirt that bore the image of a fox that read "Foxy," then hurried to catch the Gray Husky to Bering Hill. At a little past three thirty she walked into the quiet chapel and found Gunner waiting at the far end of the last pew.

"Hi," she greeted him softly with a shy smile.

"Hi yourself," he replied and motioned for her to sit beside him, "Did you have any trouble meeting me today?"

"No. I hurried home and changed clothes then caught the Husky up."

He looked over her face in the dimmed lighting.

"How has your week gone? I notice your bruises are healing."

She raised a hand to her cheek and dropped her gaze, "Yes. I wish I could wear makeup then nobody would notice."

He smiled and gently took her hand, bringing it down between them.

"You don't need makeup. You're pretty enough without it."

Alice flushed and glanced up at him, seeing the warm look in his eyes and the smile that gave a charming lift to the corners of his mouth.

"Thank you."

"It's only the truth." He gave her hand a squeeze then dropped it when the chaplain walked in the side door and stepped up to the altar. "Tell me how school went today."

"The same. I didn't think it was ever going to end, though."

"I know. It was the same with me." He turned a little so that he could more easily see her.
"What grade are you in?"

"I'm a senior. I took some summer classes over the past couple of years and I'm carrying a full load so I can graduate early." She shook her head and watched her hands as she picked at the hem of her shirt. "I can't wait to get away."

"But you'll only be seventeen when you graduate. Will your parents let you leave?"

"My grand-aunt is letting me come live with her until I turn eighteen." Alice smiled affectionately. "She's wonderful. She gives every sign of being a rigid old curmudgeon but she's really an old softie. I adore her."

"I'm glad you have somewhere to go. You need to get away from your family."

She nodded but made no comment and there was silence between them for a few moments.

"So, what is your favorite class?" he finally asked.

"Oh, art definitely, and choir."

"Ah! You're a creative. What's your medium in art?"

"I love to water color and do pastels. I like to make my pictures look dreamy and soft."

"I was never an artistic person myself. I was more into sports, but I enjoyed history more than any other subject."

"I like history, too. Especially the late Victorian and Edwardian eras. There was so much going on during that time." She turned toward him. "What era did you like to study?"

"I don't think I had a specific one. I've always known that I wanted to be a Marine so, of course, I was interested in the history of the Corps. But I also liked the Middle Ages."

"Oh? Why?"

"I'm not sure. I liked the idea of chivalry and honor, I suppose."

"I know how rowdy you Marines can be," she assured him teasingly, "but I personally have never known anything less than respect and courtesy from you guys."

"What about sailors?"

"They've always seemed a little more...relaxed...with me."

He chuckled but declined to comment further.

They continued to talk for a while longer before she had to leave in order to be home by the time her mother got off from work.

"Will you and Christine be at the pool on Saturday?"

"Probably."

"Do you know what time?"

"About this time, I guess. We're supposed to have a sleepover at her house, and her parents let us stay out a little longer than mine do."

"Then I'll see you then. Maybe we can go to the Pizzeria again."

She smiled as he followed her to the narthex and opened the door for her.

"I'd like that."

"I wish I could walk you to the bus."

"I know. I do, too." Her smile grew a little sad. "Maybe someday."

~

The weeks passed. They were able to meet at least once a week in the chapel and, with Christine's help, almost as often at the pool. Yet for all that they were sneaking around, they were always careful not to be alone, even though they both longed to be. In mid-November, she was waiting in the chapel when Gunner arrived, and the expression on his face immediately caused her smile to fade.

"What's wrong?" she asked, her voice barely above a whisper as dread filled her, "What's happened?"

He sat for a moment before taking a deep breath and turning to face her.

"The chaplain called me in today, asking about our relationship."

Alice felt her stomach drop.

“What did you tell him? We haven't done anything wrong!”

“I told him the truth. I told him that we were in love but that we weren't acting on it except as friends.”

“Did he believe you?”

Gunner sighed and took her hand.

“I don't know. He did warn me of the repercussions if any suspicion was to come up about us.”

“Oh, Gunner.”

He gave her a small, mirthless smile. “Yeah.”

They sat in silence for a while, holding hands as they grappled with this increased danger to their relationship. Alice decided it was her turn to go to the chaplain, but she didn't say anything to Gunner about it. Eventually, as they always did, they spoke quietly of their time since they had last seen one another and, never letting go of their hands, of how much they missed each other when they were apart. It was a somber meeting.

When the time came for her to leave, he touched her face with a gentle finger.

“Maybe we shouldn't see each other for a while.”

“No!” Alice was adamant as fear and anger warred within her. “Don't say that!” She clasped his hand, her eyes filling as her nails bit into it in her distress. “Don't!”

“Your parents could make a lot of trouble for us. Especially your dad since he outranks me.”

Tears traced down her cheeks. Yes, she would suffer at their hands, but Gunner would be facing possible statutory rape charges. And even if he were found innocent it would have a disastrous impact on his career.

“Then we'll meet only here,” she whispered, “Surely we'd be safe here.”

He felt helpless as he stared into her eyes. He didn't think he could bear not seeing her, either. So, finally he took a deep breath and slowly nodded.

"Okay. I'm off again on Monday. Are you coming to church on Sunday?"

"Yes."

"Then I'll see you here."

Leaving the pew, he walked her to the door and, as always, watched her leave without him.

The next day, Alice contacted the chaplain and made an appointment to see him after school. There was no need for her to go home first so she walked quickly up Bering Hill, her parka protecting her from the wind and mist. When she arrived, she was immediately shown into the chaplain's office and he closed the door behind her as she unzipped the parka and took a seat in one of the aged chairs before his desk.

"What can I do for you, Alice?" he asked kindly after settling his burly body into the second chair.

"I-I needed to talk to you about me and Gu-Gunner."

After a moment he nodded, "I see."

"No, I don't think you do see," she replied softly. "Gunner told me that you'd talked to him. Chaplain, we've done nothing wrong, nothing to warrant any kind of ugliness."

"But, Alice, that's exactly what would happen if it became open knowledge. He's twenty-one and you're still sixteen. The law is definitely against you in this."

"We know, and I swear he's never even kissed me even though we both want to."

The chaplain sighed, "Do you realize what damage even a suspicion of statutory rape could do to him?"

She nodded helplessly, "Yes, but..."

"Is it worth it to see his career damaged, perhaps even ended? Or, even worse, to see him go to jail?"

Tears filled her eyes again.

"But we love each other."

"I realize that, believe me I do. But, Alice, the law exists for a reason. It's there to protect the victim."

"But what if there is no victim?"

"It doesn't matter. It's pretty clear when it comes to the ages of the parties involved."

After a moment, as tears traced down her cheeks, she entreated him, "Can we still meet in the chapel? Just the chapel? Nowhere else?"

"I can't stop you from coming to the chapel to pray," was all he said and she nodded.

"I-I understand."

Rising to her feet, she used a tissue from the box on his desk to wipe her eyes then held out her hand.

"Thank you, chaplain, for seeing me. And for understanding."

He took her hand between both of us, "You're very welcome. Would you like to join me in a prayer?"

The prayer was short but sincere as he asked the Lord to protect and guide Alice and Gunner in their relationship. Then Alice zipped up her parka and left.

~

From then on, they met only in the chapel and saw each other on Sundays if he didn't have to work. As the months passed, Alice concentrated on her studies, determined that she would graduate and be able to go live with her grand-aunt. Then, three weeks before graduation, he told her he was being transferred to another duty station.

"When?" she asked, her voice barely heard.

"I'll be leaving in two weeks."

"Two weeks?"

He nodded sadly, "Yeah. I won't be here for your graduation, but I do have a graduation gift for you."

"I'd rather have you."

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"I know, and I would rather have you. But, maybe this will serve until we see each other again."

He took a small, simple box from a pocket of his fatigues and placed it into her hand. With trembling fingers, she lifted the lid and a quiet sob escaped her as she saw the necklace. The Marine Corps emblem was surrounded with dainty diamonds and suspended from an equally dainty gold chain. Taking the box from her, he lifted the necklace out and set the box aside. After opening the clasp, he carefully placed the necklace around her neck and lifted her hair so that the pendant lay on her ivory sweater, just above her breasts. The diamonds twinkled in the dimmed chapel lighting.

"On the back it says *Semper Fi*. Always faithful."

"Oh, Gunner! Oh, it's so beautiful!"

"As beautiful as the woman who wears it." He lifted her chin with a tender finger. "And I will always be faithful to you."

And he sealed his promise with their first kiss.

~

Graduation day finally arrived and Alice walked across the stage to claim the case that would soon hold her diploma, feeling both pride and relief, and wishing that Gunner could have been there. She wore his necklace hidden beneath her blouse as she had done since he had given it to her, being careful that no one else saw it. Afterward there was a celebratory reception where she gathered with her classmates and thanked everyone who wished her luck in her future. She watched as her mother and father posed once more as proud, loving parents, but her thoughts were on the gift she had received from her grand-aunt: airline tickets to her home in Virginia. She was leaving tomorrow.

Once she was settled in her grand-aunt's home, she made her way to the Coast Guard recruiter and enlisted, but it was only after her eighteenth birthday, nine months later, that she arrived at boot camp in Cape May, New Jersey. From his deployment aboard ship, Gunner encouraged her through his letters. They hadn't seen each other since the day before he had left Adak, but even though thousands of miles separated them, they remained as close as ever, looking forward to the day when they would at last be together.

Alice became a Coast Guard photojournalist covering all facets of Coast Guard life, and took college courses in photography and social work in her spare time. She was thriving on life,

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filled with hope and joy as the future stretched before her.

Then came the day of the attack.

On Sunday, October 23, 1983, explosions destroyed buildings housing US and French servicemembers serving on a UN peacekeeping mission in Beirut. Knowing that Gunner was there somewhere, Alice frantically tried without success to locate him before finally calling his mother, only to be told that she hadn't received word of him either. From her base in Oregon, Alice waited fearfully to learn of his fate by talking to his mother in Minnesota every day. Nearly a week passed before he was finally able to call from Germany. He had been injured and airlifted there for treatment of burns and broken bones, but he was alive. Alice celebrated by breaking down into tears.

His recovery was long and arduous. Pins and plates repaired his broken bones while surgeries and grafts repaired his burns. Afterward, he returned home to Minnesota to finish his rehabilitation. During that time, Alice took extended leave to be with him and for several weeks, they were finally able to be together for more than a few days here and there. Their love, which had never wavered, deepened as they became reacquainted and shared the challenges he met and overcame through physical therapy, as well as his mother's good food and coddling.

Finally, he was cleared to return to duty, with a promotion. But before traveling to his new post, he first made a trip to Oregon to present Alice with a two carat diamond ring. They were married in the base chapel two days later.

Now all these years and three kids later, Alice once again stood on the island where it had all begun. After her grand-aunt's death several years after she left for boot camp, she had lost all contact with her family and was content to leave it that way. Gunner, their kids, and his family were the cornerstones of her life and she had achieved the happiness that had eluded her during her childhood years.

An eagle soared above the beach as a small boat steamed into the bay, and Alice smiled as she stood up, brushing the sand from her jeans. Life was good.

About the Author

Entering the world one dark and stormy night in June 1962, Rebecca McKeehan was born to be a writer. Her first twenty years of life saw her living on Navy bases all around the U.S., which introduced her to people of all races, cultures, and creeds. Her life after her father retired was no less adventurous. Forever curious, she spent several years eating at the "academic smorgasbord" known as college, and worked at a variety of jobs that included stints as a long haul trucker, a veterinary

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assistant, and two exciting years in a number of positions inside Yellowstone National Park. She's been in nearly every state of the union at least once, lived in several, and dreams of returning to those that still hold pieces of her heart. All of those people, places, and experiences are fertile fodder for her creative spirit. Her dreams are the wings beneath it. And her readers are what make it all worthwhile.

Rebecca loves to hear from readers and can be contacted at reborn19622015@outlook.com .