

Chapter 1

Keith

Seven years ago

Before I deployed to Iraq for the third time, my wife and I threw a barbecue for our friends and family on Rose Island. The evening was perfect as I manned the grill and watched the kids race through the sprinklers, laughing.

Despite the fact our rental house didn't have a view of the ocean, my wife Jillian loved our tree-lined street and close proximity to the boys' school and the assisted living facility where she worked as a nurse. Her parents owned a small hobby ranch a short, ten-minute drive up the mountain, and both her sisters lived within walking distance.

In other words, Jillian couldn't have been happier when I received orders to return to Fort Xavier on the island where she'd grown up. Finding out I was immediately deploying hadn't pleased her, but at least this time she'd be close to family.

Taking a sip of my Dr. Pepper, I flipped the burgers and admired my wife working the crowd. The fading sun shone on her long, honey-brown hair as she offered our guests drinks, appetizers, and encouragement. When she looked up and smiled at me, I knew I was the luckiest man in the world.

After ten years of marriage, two healthy kids, several deployments, and five moves, I could honestly say I loved Jillian and our life together more today than the day we married.

Later that evening, after the barbecue ended and the boys were tucked into bed, I found Jillian in the kitchen washing dishes. Walking up behind her, I wrapped my arms around her waist and held her tight. "Come on, baby, let's go to bed."

She leaned against me, and I inhaled her sweet scent of vanilla and strawberries. Sweeping back her hair, I trailed kisses down her neck. Without warning, her shoulders began to shake, followed by tears streaming down her face. She thrust a hand to her mouth to stifle a cry, but it managed to escape.

My stomach dropped. "Jills, what's wrong?"

She swiped at her eyes. "I don't want you to go."

"Oh, baby." I pulled her close, rocking her against me. She was such a strong, independent woman that her vulnerability caught me off guard. "This is just a short trip. I'll be back before you know it."

"You're going to be gone six months," she protested. "You'll miss Matty's birthday and Drew's first baseball game."

"I know." Guilt swept through me as if I'd been personally responsible for my orders. Most deployments these days were eighteen months, so relatively speaking, this mission was short. Still, being separated was never easy.

I turned her in my arms so I could see her face. "I love you, Jills."

She smiled sadly. "I know you do, and I love you, too. I'm proud of what you do, but it's really hard sometimes."

I cupped her face with my hands. "When I return, I'll take you anywhere you want to go. Just you and me. Or we can bring the boys if you want. We'll get away, spend a ton of money, and just be together."

She swallowed and shook her head. "I just want you here on the island with me."

"Okay. Whatever you want."

My words calmed her, and she rubbed a hand over my whiskers. "What about Marcus? Is he going to be okay?"

Jillian's younger brother, Marcus, was deploying with my unit for the first time in his army career. Tonight, I'd promised his wife, Anna, that I'd keep him safe. Making a promise like that wasn't the smartest thing to do, but I'd wanted to ease Anna's fears. I wanted to give her the strength to be strong so she could take care of their son as she waited for her husband's return.

Of course, I couldn't make that same vow of Marcus's safety to Jillian. As a long-time army wife, she knew there were no guarantees in the military.

"Jills." I brushed my thumb across her bottom lip. "Your brother has a family who loves and prays for him. He's smart and has been well trained. He's prepared for this."

"I know." The sadness in her eyes grew so deep I couldn't stand it.

Clueless as to what else to do, I drew her toward me and kissed her. Although she returned my kiss, I sensed her hesitation. She pulled away and looked at me intensely.

"What?" I asked.

Looking down, she placed a hand on her flat belly. "I wasn't going to say anything, but I'm pregnant."

"Seriously?" A mixture of confusion, joy, and fear filled me. We'd always wanted more children, but Jillian had suffered several miscarriages, and she'd struggled with both boys' pregnancies. The idea of another child—completely unplanned and unexpected—shocked me.

"I haven't been to the doctor yet, but I took a test this morning and it was positive."

My throat tightened, and I covered her stomach with my hands, wanting to protect both her and our unborn child. I started to speak, but my voice caught and I swallowed hard.

Jillian smiled. "I thought I was just late and gaining weight from stress, but I guess not."

"I'm speechless."

"Just be happy."

I pulled her into my arms. "I am happy. Thrilled. But I won't be here to help you. I'm going to miss your entire pregnancy—the first time he kicks, your sonogram—"

"How do you know it's a boy?" she teased.

My chest clenched. We both longed for a daughter. "If you find out it's a girl on the sonogram, and I'm not here—"

She placed her fingertips on my mouth to silence me. "It'll be okay. You'll be home in time for the birth, right?"

Suddenly, the months stretched out like miles before me. What initially seemed like a short mission, felt interminable. "When I return, Matty and Drew will be done with baseball season and you'll be as big as a house."

Her eyes gleamed with mischief. "So, Captain Foster, you better take advantage of me now before I get all fat and grumpy."

Laughing, I scooped her up and carried her down the hall to our bedroom. "I'll love you forever, Jills."

She wrapped her arms around my neck. "I'm counting on it."