

*somebody
like you*

..... A NOVEL


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This conversation wasn't going to be easy.

Haley pulled off the faded fatigue-patterned ball cap, twisting it in her hands as she approached the front counter of the gun club. Thick arms crossed over his barrel chest, her boss chatted with Frank, a club regular.

"Wes, I need to talk to you—"

The man wrapped up his conversation with a gravelly laugh before clapping the guy on his back and focusing on her. "There a problem, Hal?"

A glass display case separated them, filled with two shelves of handguns—ranging from .32 caliber to 9mm—that members could rent for use on the range or purchase. "I need to talk to you about taking maternity leave."

"Now?" Wes stopped prepping to count up the day's take. "I thought the baby wasn't due for a few more months."

"Not until April." She scuffed the faded patch of carpet with the toe of her brown cowboy boot. "But I need to get off the range."

“What’s bothering you?” Wes dumped his unlit cigar in a spotless ceramic ashtray.

Haley twisted one of the strands of hair that had slipped free from her ponytail. “One of the women in the gun safety class asked if it was safe for a pregnant woman to be on the range.”

“Is that all?” He dismissed her concern with a wave of his beefy hand. “Of course it’s safe. We have the best ventilation system in town.”

“But what about the noise? I hadn’t even thought about that.” Repositioning the hat on her head, she rubbed the palms of her hands along the front of her sweatpants. “I wear stuff to protect my eyes and ears—but it’s not like I can soundproof my belly. I haven’t read a lot of the information online, but I do know unborn babies hear sounds.”

“So what are you telling me? You want to quit because your baby might be bothered by the noise?”

“I didn’t say quit. But maybe . . . a leave of absence? Just to be safe?”

“You know I’m short-staffed as it is, Hal. Who am I going to get to teach your classes?”

“How about I make a few phone calls? Maybe someone at the Olympic Training Center might know of a competitive shooter looking for part-time work. And maybe I can do some shifts behind the counter. Let’s both sleep on it and talk tomorrow or the next day, okay?”

A few moments later, Haley stuffed her gear bag into the backseat of her Subaru Forester, standing to stretch the ever-present ache in her lower back. One more decision to make—and no one to talk it over with. She couldn’t even ask someone to help her remember to make the phone calls—except for the virtual assistant on her iPhone.

Why couldn’t that woman in her class mind her own

business? Most people didn't even notice she was pregnant, especially when she wore one of Sam's baggy chamois shirts.

Once on the road, Haley shifted in the seat, one hand on the steering wheel, the other hand holding a Three Musketeers bar as she tore at the silver wrapper with her teeth. Even as she inhaled the first whiff of sugary chocolate, she promised herself something healthy for dinner when she got home. Like a banana. Wait. Did she have any bananas? Did she have any fresh fruit at all?

The Forester's in-dash clock declared it was nine thirty. "Sorry, buddy." She patted her rounded tummy underneath her cotton henley top. "But it's not like you're running on a regular schedule in there—not the way you like to roll around right when I want to go to sleep."

Only a few more miles and she'd be home. Was it only two months ago that she'd signed on the multiple dotted lines and bought a house? When she stared down the woman in the mirror brushing her teeth twice a day it took a few seconds before she recognized herself.

Owning a home was one thing.

Being pregnant . . . well, by the time she got used to that life-and-body-altering idea, the baby would be here and she'd be wrestling with the up-close-and-personal reality of motherhood.

And now, four and a half months later, she still shifted under the heaviness of the word *widow*. There was no dodging the truth. But when would the nightmare of Sam's death stop slapping her awake in the early hours of the morning?

Haley rolled her shoulders—backward, forward—in an attempt to ease the tautness that had settled right between her shoulder blades. Until tonight, work had given her a respite from thinking about the what-ifs and the what-nows stalking her. She usually got a kick out of teaching the weekly women's gun safety class.

But not tonight.

Doubt had followed her out to her car and settled in the passenger seat beside her. Some trained professional she was—she hadn't once thought about how being on the range might affect her unborn son. But then, hearing the “Mrs. Ames, we're sorry to inform you . . .” speech from the military representatives four months ago had muted every other reality in her life—even her pregnancy. What kind of mother didn't go to her first OB appointment until she was sixteen weeks pregnant? Had she been too relaxed about being on the range?

Haley crumbled the candy bar wrapper and stuffed it beneath her seat. She hadn't enjoyed a single bite. After months of spending her days staring into the bottom of a bucket—or worse, the toilet—she could eat again, and she wasn't even paying attention.

As if a Three Musketeers bar would give her anything more than—what?—two minutes of enjoyment. Not that something as temporary as a sugar rush mattered anymore. She needed to take care of, well, *everything*—and that included the baby. Her son. Sam's son. And if it meant starting to act as though she was pregnant and taking a leave from her job, then that's what she'd do.

But first she'd grab a banana or a bowl of cereal—something—to eat when she got home. And she needed to surf some of the pregnancy websites she'd found when she first realized she was pregnant. Her friends with kids said there was lots of good information available on the sites. But had they meant the slideshow labeled “Poppy seed to pumpkin: How big is your baby”? Imagining her unborn child as an ear of corn was odd enough. But would she ever get used to the thought that by the end of this pregnancy, she'd be carrying around something—*someone*—the size of a small pumpkin?

Sam would have laughed at the entire fruits-and-veggies slideshow, probably juggled a few of the oranges and apples in the fruit bowl—if they had any—to make Haley laugh, and then suggested they go out to eat.

Haley pulled the car in front of the house—her home—put the vehicle in park, and cut the engine, closing her eyes and tilting her head as if to catch the echo of Sam’s laugh. Yes. She still remembered her husband’s low, rumbling chuckle that created a crooked half smile and warmed his chicory-brown eyes.

She needed to remember Sam’s laugh.

Half in and half out of the car, Haley froze. Why was a Mustang parked in her driveway? Had one of Sam’s army friends come to check up on her? But none of them drove a Mustang—Sam’s dream car.

She reached over to grab her gun case from the backseat, stilling when a movement on her front porch caught her eye. Who was that backlit by her porch light? Most likely a man, based on the width of the shoulders. She left the gun case where it was, bringing her hand back to check the SIG Sauer 9mm holstered on her belt, hidden by her shirt. Was she overreacting? Probably. But better armed and safe than caught unaware and sorry.

She stepped out of her car, keeping the Forester’s front end between her and the house. The heels of her boots tapped on the cul-de-sac’s asphalt, and she forced herself to steady her breathing, small white puffs of air appearing with each exhale. A man stood in the pale yellow halo cast by her front porch light. His face was hidden by the darkness . . . but the set of his shoulders, his height, reminded her of . . .

“Sam?” Even as she whispered his name, Haley strained to see past the shadows. It wasn’t possible . . . was it? She’d been confronted by a Bereavement Team. Endured alone the rain

on the tarmac at Dover, Delaware, when Sam's body came off a plane in a flag-draped coffin. Stood beside his grave surrounded by her family, Sam's mother clinging to her hand, while an army chaplain she barely knew talked about God's grace being sufficient . . .

Haley moved around the car and stumbled toward the specter of her husband as he stepped off the porch.

"Haley—Haley Ames? I'm—"

She would know her husband's voice anywhere.

With a strangled cry, Haley launched herself into the shelter of Sam's arms. "Sam . . . Sam . . . how—"

She'd told herself to wait . . . to not think during the funeral, or about the future without Sam. She hadn't taken a true, complete breath in months. If she sifted through and measured everything she'd lost, she'd become nothing more than one unending, keening wail. She inhaled. Exhaled. The brittleness around her heart began to splinter. Sam was home. *Home*. His heart beat against the palm of her hand, which she'd pressed against his chest. Maybe now her heart would find the right rhythm again.

She didn't know.

Even as Haley Ames threw herself into his arms, Stephen staggered back under the weight of realizing she didn't know he existed. Neither his brother nor his mother had told her that Sam had an identical twin brother.

They'd left that job for him.

For a moment, she clung to him, her body shaking—the silence more painful than if she'd sobbed so that the neighbors came running out of their houses. Stephen's arms hung at his

sides. He didn't dare comfort this woman—not when the first words he spoke would rend her wound open again.

He cleared his throat. Tried to step back, to put some space between them. “Haley, I'm sorry . . . I'm not Sam. I'm his brother, Stephen.”

No response. He tried again. “Haley—I'm Sam's brother, Stephen.”

She pushed away from him, her movements jerky. “What?” Her expression twisted around the question. “Sam? What are you saying? You don't have a brother—”

“Yes, I do—I mean, yes, he does. I'm Sam's twin brother. My mother—our mother told me that Sam was killed in Afghanistan. That's why I decided to contact you—”

She backed away from him, her steps unsteady, her eyes wide in the moonlit darkness. “Who are you . . . you look exactly like . . . like . . .” Her voice was high. Frail.

“I know this is a shock. I didn't know Sam hadn't told you about me—”

“Stop talking. Now.” She reached behind her back and then positioned her arm beside her right leg. “I don't know who you are or why you look like Sam, but I'm telling you this: I have a gun and I know how to use it. Get out of here.”

“Let me explain.” A sharp metallic click stopped Stephen before he could find a way to unravel who he was from who Haley thought he was.

“I've released the safety on my gun.” Haley took another step back, raising her arms so he could see the gun pointed halfway between his feet and his knees. “Leave. Now.”

She was either bluffing or ready to put a hole in him.

Stephen lifted his hands in the universal sign of surrender. “I'm going.” He shifted his position in the direction of his Mustang, her eyes tracking him. “Just one thing.”

She turned, her aim straight and sure, as he moved right, one slow step at a time, giving her a wide berth. But she didn't respond to his statement.

"I left my, uh, business card tucked in your screen door. Will you at least think about calling me so we can talk?"

Silence followed him as he rounded the front of his car. Opened the driver's-side door. Ducked his head and climbed inside, the chill of the Colorado night air following him into the car. He knew Sam's widow watched him, could almost feel the heat of her eyes trained on him through the car windows—could almost hear the measured pace of her breathing, until he slid behind the wheel and shut the door. Locked it. She remained still as he started the engine and backed out of the driveway. In the rearview mirror as he pulled away, Stephen saw her walk toward the house, shoulders hunched, arms crossed over her waist.

Wait a minute.

There was something eluding him . . . something not right, beyond the fact that Sam's widow had just threatened to shoot him. He hadn't expected a warm "Where have you been all these years?" welcome, but he hadn't imagined being threatened by a pistol-packing mama either.

Mama.

Sam's widow was pregnant.

The few moments that Haley Ames clung to him something had felt . . . *odd* about their one-sided embrace. She was tall. Slender. And yet the woman had a belly. There was no other way to say it. Not a "What have you been eating since Sam died?" kind of weight gain . . . but a firm tummy that indicated pregnancy. Not that Stephen knew a lot about pregnant women. But holding Haley reminded him of hugging his stepmother, Gina, when she'd been pregnant with his half brother, Pete.

What do I do now, God?

Stephen's hand clenched and unclenched around the cool steering wheel. He resisted the urge to slow down, pull the car into the next driveway, turn around, and head back to Haley's house. And then what? Knock on the door, wait for her to answer, and hope she didn't shoot him before he asked her—what? *When is the baby due?*

He'd get settled in his hotel room. Regroup. Pray. And maybe figure out a way to approach his armed and angry sister-in-law tomorrow.

Sam did not have a brother.

He didn't. He would have told her. Husbands and wives told each other things like that, didn't they?

As if she had any right to hold Sam to a standard of honesty.

Haley curled up under a white and gray rugby-stripped blanket in the middle of the faded blue corduroy couch that she and Sam had bought off Craigslist, clutching her cell phone to her chest. In the background, John Wayne discovered Maureen O'Hara hiding in his family's cottage. How many hours of movies had filled the backdrop of her life since Sam had died? What had once helped her deal with Sam's back-to-back deployments—fill the empty apartment with a movie . . . and another . . . and another—was now a daily ritual. Anything for background noise—even life in black and white, with a disgraced boxer who escaped his demons by traveling home to Ireland.

She needed to call her mother-in-law.

Right.

She'd call Miriam at ten thirty at night—eleven thirty in Oklahoma, where she lived—wake her up, and ask, "You don't

have another child that you and Sam forgot to tell me about, do you? A son who looks just like Sam?”

Absurd.

Gathering the edges of the blanket closer, she closed her eyes—and stared down the image of a man who walked like her husband. Sounded like her husband. Who had her husband’s face.

In all the months since a trio of somber men in military uniform had shown up at her door to inform her that Sam had been killed, she’d never once dreamed of him—no matter how many nights she lay in bed and begged God for a glimpse of her husband. And now, when she was wide awake, he had walked toward her.

But he wasn’t Sam.

Sam had died last August. And what had happened tonight didn’t alter that reality.

Four people had answers. One, she had buried. One, she had chased away at gunpoint. Then there was Sam’s father—whom she’d never even talked to. That left her mother-in-law.

She needed to make the call. Get it over with.

As the shrill sound of the phone rang in her ear, Haley prayed that Sam’s mother would answer the phone. If not, what would she do? Leave a message? *Hi, Miriam. This is Haley. I wanted to ask you if Sam had a twin brother?*

Miriam Ames’s half-asleep “Hello?” interrupted Haley’s practice conversation.

“Miriam, it’s Haley. I’m sorry to call so late.”

“Oh, Haley.” It sounded as if her mother-in-law was moving around in bed—maybe sitting up. “Honey, you know you can call me anytime. Is the baby keeping you awake?”

More like an unwanted apparition.

“I’m sleeping okay.” She was—when she was able to fall asleep. She shoved her hair back from her face. “I don’t know how to ask this. I mean, you’re going to think I’m certifiable—”

Miriam's sharp inhale should have warned her, told her to tuck her heart away. Prepare for the blow of the unwanted but expected truth. "Did he call you?"

"Did who call me?"

"Sam's twin brother, Stephen."

She'd read about how people felt as if they'd been verbally punched in the gut. But Miriam's statement felt more like something—someone—had strangled the breath from her throat.

Was she the only person speaking truth tonight? "Sam doesn't have a twin brother."

As if she should have been telling Sam's *mother* any such thing.

The silence between them dissolved into muffled sobs.

"Does he?" Her whispered question couldn't pierce the woman's grief. She tried again, reining in her emotions and raising her voice. "Sam has a twin brother?"

"Yes. Sam never talked about Stephen—" Miriam broke off again, any attempt to talk lost in her tears, forcing Haley to wait. "—and it wasn't my place to tell you if he didn't."

Dear God, help me, help me.

Since Sam's death, all of her prayers had been reduced to that one-sentence plea. God was all-knowing. All-powerful. His thoughts were higher than hers—he could decipher all the hidden meanings in six words. Six syllables.

"Why wouldn't Sam tell me about . . . Stephen?"

"They haven't spoken to each other in years—since they were eighteen. It's as if they erased each other from their lives. I kept hoping and praying they'd figure out a way to reconcile . . . but it never happened."

"Why would brothers—twins—refuse to speak to each other?" Haley pushed off the couch, the blanket puddling at her feet. She needed to walk. Think. She needed answers.

Miriam's reply escaped as a sigh. "Haley, it's such a long, convoluted story. What did Stephen tell you?"

"Nothing." Her crack of laughter brought her up short. "I threatened to shoot him."

"What?"

"I didn't know who he was. How could I?" Haley paced between the living room and the kitchen. She wouldn't find what she was looking for in either place. "Sam didn't tell me that he had a twin brother. I just wanted him . . . gone."

"Oh, Haley, I'm so sorry. This is my fault. I called and told Stephen that Sam was killed. I thought he had a right to know, even if they were estranged. Stephen refused to come to the funeral—said it would shock too many people if he walked into the church."

He'd been right about that. The strength that enabled Haley to stand, to not shed a tear, would have shattered if the man she saw tonight had walked into the church and stood beside Sam's casket.

"And then . . . well, it's been four months. I thought Stephen decided to leave things be."

"You haven't talked to him since then?"

"No. We're . . . not close. And I didn't call him during the holidays—I just couldn't."

Twilight Zone. That was it. She'd been transported to a present-day *Twilight Zone*. There was no other way to explain the fact that she was widowed and pregnant, and that her husband's twin brother had shown up on her doorstep tonight, unknown and unannounced. And now her mother-in-law stated, "We're not close," as if she were talking about the mail carrier.

Miriam's voice pulled her back to the harsh glare of reality. "The divorce—it did awful things to our family."

"I have to go." Haley walked over to where she'd left the blanket, picking it up and clutching it to her chest.

“Haley, let me explain—”

“Not tonight. Please.” Haley curled into the corner of the couch. “We’ll talk tomorrow.”

“I’m so, so sorry.”

She disconnected without saying good-bye, but not before cutting off the sound of tears in Miriam’s voice.

Miriam was sorry. Would Sam be sorry that the secret he’d kept from her had walked into her life, a living, breathing reflection of him?

Secrets. How she hated them.

