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intense, gripping, and brilliantly written!”*

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GIRL LOST

THE KING LEGACY

KATE ANGELO

BESTSELLING AND AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR

THE KING LEGACY #1

GIRL LOST

KATE ANGELO



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For God,
who fills me daily with
unimaginable peace and joy.

For Jerry,
my prayer warrior, trusted adviser,
biggest supporter, and best friend.

And for the lost sheep.
I rejoice that you will be found
and carried back into the fold,
just as I have.

Then Jesus told them this parable: “Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Doesn’t he leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it? And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders and goes home. Then he calls his friends and neighbors together and says, ‘Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep.’ I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent.”

Luke 15:3–7

1

LUNA ROSATI COULD DISAPPEAR into any crowd, any city, any life. Except this one. This life. It had a way of pulling her back. Like a riptide dragging her under.

10:42 a.m. and the man who held the key to the life she'd left behind was twelve minutes late. She'd convinced herself she was ready for this moment. Now that it hovered before her, Luna wasn't so sure. Not about finding her daughter—that was nonnegotiable—but about facing everything she'd left behind.

She stared out the diner's picture window, her gaze fixed on the empty street, bracing for the moment her carefully constructed life would change.

The morning sun glinted off a passing car, and an elderly couple strolled by. Both moved without any hustle or bustle. Millie Beach was mostly locals. No surprise there. It wasn't exactly a popular vacation destination. The small beach town had all the crime of Miami and none of the beauty.

Eighteen years ago, she'd walked away from this place and vowed never to return. But vows made in storms weren't always kept in the calm. Which was why she was sitting in the back corner of the same

rundown diner from her childhood, watching the street through the glassy expanse up front.

The dumpy place hadn't changed a bit. Same faded tan linoleum. Same yellowed Formica tabletops. Same cracked red vinyl chairs. Everywhere she looked, same, same, same. Except the deepened lines etched into the faces of the waitsta .

Age and a two-pack-a-day habit had not been kind to Marge. The owner frowned from her perch in the kitchen. She'd never liked newcomers. Preferred to keep it to the regulars.

A younger version of Marge appeared at Luna's table. "What'll you have?" The square name tag on her grease-stained shirt said her name was Angie.

Wow, this was Marge's daughter? The woman had aged double time. Strands of gray laced her dark curls. Dark-brown sunspots speckled her weathered face. Indelible kisses from the unrelenting sun reflecting off the ocean in a town where sunblock was for tourists.

Luna picked up her plastic-covered menu, feigned a glance, and dropped it. "Lemonade for now. I'm waiting for a friend."

Angie narrowed her eyes. "You waitin' on Stryker?"

"You know him?"

"'Bout the only one who comes in this time a day. Tourists don't come in for a while yet, and you don't look like a tourist. I get a feelin' I seen you somewhere before."

Luna caught the lie before it slipped out. Years of deception and faking her identity were more natural than truth. But she didn't need a cover here. Not in the town where she grew up. Here she could be herself. Here she could be Luna Rosati. "Yeah, I'm waiting for—"

The bell over the entrance tinkled when a man pushed the glass door open.

Luna looked up, and something inside her fractured. She could hear it. The sound like stepping on a glass pane. A resounding crack that broke open everything she'd worked so hard to keep bottled up all these years.

“Spoke too soon about the tourists.” Angie knocked her swollen knuckles on the table. “Be right back with that lemonade.”

Angie’s words dri ed over her unabsorbed. She couldn’t take her eyes o the guy she used to know, now standing there all grown up. Hair shaved into a classic crew cut. A far cry from the boy with the unruly mop of sandy blond hair she’d remembered. The khaki-colored linen suit hung on his broad shoulders with a con dence that shouted law enforcement.

Funny, the last time she’d seen him in a suit was at his father’s murder trial.

Corbin King removed his sunglasses and scanned the room with intense brown eyes. His Adam’s apple rolled when his eyes met hers.

She didn’t dare move.

With nonchalance, he strolled over and snagged the vacant seat opposite her. His elbows found a comfortable spot on the table, ngers intertwining while still cradling his sunglasses.

Her tongue skimmed her dry lips, primed to seize the conversation rst if anything came to mind. There was nothing to say. But also, everything.

His dark eyes penetrated her. “What are you doing here?”

A dozen cutting remarks tumbled through her mind ranging from “How dare you?” to “Please go away so I never have to see you again.” The re exive restraint honed during her tenure at the CIA barred any of those from slipping past her lips.

Instead, she said, “I’m meeting Stryker.”

Corbin looked over his shoulder at the empty restaurant. “Here?”

She didn’t respond.

Angie set a glass of lemonade on the table with a clink and smiled at Corbin. “Get you anything, doll?”

She hadn’t called Luna a doll.

Corbin dropped his sunglasses on the table and leaned back to look at Angie. “Co ee. And a few moments of your time, if you don’t mind.” He reached into his breast pocket and withdrew a

black wallet. A deputy revealed his credentials. Florida Department of Law Enforcement. "I have a few questions for you."

Impressive. Corbin had done well to work his way into Florida's version of the FBI.

Angie flicked her eyes between Luna and Corbin, and she coughed a phlegmy laugh. "Am I in trouble, Officer?"

"No, ma'am. Just have a few questions about a missing person. Can we chat in private when I'm done with my friend here?"

"Sure. I guess I ain't goin' nowhere." She sauntered back to the kitchen, shoulders squared and a touch of extra height in her stance.

"What are you doing here, Luna?" The honeyed tone he'd used on the waitress morphed to granite.

"Since when does the FDLE investigate missing persons?"

"Since when do you talk to Stryker? Or any of us, for that matter?"

"Why do you keep answering questions with another question?" Although she knew good and well she'd started it.

The squiggle of a blue vein bulged at Corbin's temple, and she kind of enjoyed it. "Since we gave our baby up for adoption. Since you cut me out of your life." His finger stabbed the table to punctuate each sentence. "Since you left town without a word and never looked back."

Another crack formed. His words knifed her heart. Images of a teen beggar girl on the streets of Pakistan played through her mind. The one with dark hair and eyes that mirrored her own. The girl's striking resemblance to herself had brought Luna back to the time when she held a tiny life in her arms. The baby girl she'd given up—not because she wanted to, but because she refused to let her child suffer the life she'd had.

The daughter she'd brought into being was somewhere out there in the world, and she needed Stryker to tell her where.

The pang cut deep, but Luna gathered her composure and locked her emotional armor down tight. She wasn't the only one who'd walked away. "You broke up with me, Corbin. You told me

you didn't want to be a father. You made that choice. I just made sure our daughter had a future."

The skin around his collar flushed crimson. She could see his neck straining. "I can't believe you—"

A sharp glint of light flashed through the storefront windows. Whatever Corbin was saying faded into nothingness. She watched Stryker emerge from his rusty old Jeep parked across the street. His hair, a blend of salt and pepper, hung in a knot at the nape of his neck. Aside from the silver strands, he looked like the same athletic man she'd known when she was a teenager.

Years melted away. She saw the man who'd seen the good in her, even when she was a mess of anger and bad choices. The man who'd taken a lost and confused girl and forged her into something stronger, something more. He'd pulled her back from the edge, shown her a different path. And somehow, against all odds, the rebellious girl who'd once cursed every cop in sight had become a government agent.

He'd challenged her, pushed her, never let her give up on herself. And she hadn't. Would he still recognize that girl in the woman she'd become?

A black SUV slammed to a halt outside. Doors flew open. Three dark figures jumped out, faces swallowed by masks, bodies muted by black tactical gear.

Guns. They had guns.

Luna was on her feet before she knew what was happening. Her brain put it together on the fly. *Outside. Help Stryker.*

Corbin's chair scraped back. Clattered over. He was on her heels.

Stryker wouldn't go down without a fight. With his reflexes, he could disarm a shooter and break a few bones faster than she could blink. His resistance would buy them the priceless seconds they needed to get outside.

One man pointed a Taser at Stryker and squeezed the trigger. Two barbed probes shot through the air and embedded into the back of Stryker's neck, sending fifty thousand volts of electricity

screaming through his body. The other two men caught him under the arms before he hit the sidewalk and hauled his limp body into the back seat.

Luna and Corbin burst outside. Shouts. A woman screamed. But Luna's eyes were laser focused on the dark vehicle. The doors slammed shut.

Corbin had his gun out. "Police! Stop or I'll shoot!"

The SUV's engine roared. The vehicle lurched forward, tires shrieking, grabbing traction. It shtailed, sideswiping two parked cars. Then it swerved back on course, speeding down the street. It blew through a stop sign and disappeared around the corner.

Bits of red and yellow confetti littered the street and sidewalk. Luna crouched and used her ngernail to scrape up a few of the tiny round dots.

Corbin sprinted half a block chasing a er the vehicle before he stopped. Feet set shoulder width apart. Knees exed. Arms extended and ready to re.

She marched over and slapped her palm on the muzzle of his gun to shove the barrel down. "Put that away. You can't shoot into a busy street at a eeing vehicle."

He was breathing hard. "No plates. They wore masks. Should be able to get surveillance footage and interview witnesses." Like her, Corbin was already thinking of the next steps.

She had her phone out, thumb hovering over the screen. The secret code used to send secure cables to the Agency wouldn't work on this plain smartphone. The only person whose number was stored in this one had just been kidnapped.

Corbin muttered something Luna couldn't hear. He had a hand on his waist. The tail of his blazer was pushed back, showing the gun in its holster on his hip. He rattled his name, badge number, and their location into his phone. "I'm reporting a con rmed kidnapping in progress. Requesting immediate backup and notify detectives."

With Stryker gone, she had no reason to stay. Time to start searching for him. She did an about-face and went back inside.

Angie was on the phone in hysterics. It'd be a wonder if the dispatcher could make sense of the gibberish behind her sobs. Luna marched to the table and picked up her purse. Paused long enough to drain her lemonade and toss a twenty on the table before heading back outside.

Corbin fell into step beside her, phone still pressed to his ear. "Where are you going?"

She kept walking.

"Hey, you can't leave a crime scene." He grabbed her shoulder and spun her around.

She caught his hand in a wrist lock and rotated his forearm until his knees buckled. "You've gotten slow in your old age." She flashed a thin smile and shoved him, releasing her hold.

Corbin stumbled a few steps. The look on his face was almost worth the agony of seeing him again. She turned and headed for her car.

The last person she'd ever wanted to see was Corbin King. Not here. Not now. Not ever.

"Luna! You can't just walk away. Luna!"

Stryker was not only her mentor but a father figure. She wouldn't stand by and let someone hurt him. Besides, he was the one who'd arranged the adoption. Handled everything himself, outside the system when she was too young and emotionally wrecked to question the details. Back then, she hadn't wanted to know. Convinced it was better that way. But that had changed.

Now, without Stryker, she had no way to find the only blood relative she had left. And after everything she'd lost in Pakistan, she could not afford to lose anything else.

The weight of it all didn't matter.

She would save Stryker.

She would find her daughter.

And she would do it without Corbin King.

2

THAT STUBBORN, stubborn woman. Obstinate as ever after all these years.

A light breeze caught Luna's dark hair, and the long strands fanned out like an ebony banner as she marched away. The tendons in Corbin's neck vibrated. Why couldn't she stay and talk to him for once?

He shook his head. That woman had serious walls up.

No, not just walls—she was fortified better than Fort Knox. He shouldn't be surprised. Rather than face pain and work through the messy stuff, Luna always cut and ran. They'd done everything wrong, and they'd paid for it.

Apparently, he was still paying for it.

Back then, he'd thought their bond was elastic enough to always bring her back. But now it was painfully clear she would always run.

Even from him.

The wail of distant sirens snapped him back to the present. Backup was approaching fast, and if he wanted to maintain his involvement in the case, he had to insert himself as the first responder.

Using his phone, he photographed the scene in wide shots first to document the layout. The street. The diner. The few cars lining

the street. Next, details. Stryker's Jeep. The skid marks where the SUV had peeled away. The gash in the side of the cars.

His eyes fell on the sidewalk, where paper dots lay scattered. Those telltale markers from a Taser could be critical evidence linking the kidnapping to the suspects. He crouched and snapped photos, ensuring he captured the placement of each.

With no witnesses and the evidence secured as best as he could manage alone, he turned and stepped inside the diner. The air around him seemed to shiver, just for a heartbeat. This was Stryker's place, but Corbin avoided coming here. Every corner, every worn booth, reminded him of Luna—of how empty it felt when she'd left.

He pushed past the feeling and crossed the worn linoleum in a few long strides and found Marge cradling a bawling Angie in her arms.

"They shot Stryker! Right in the street! They just . . . shot him!" The waitress had her head buried in Marge's shoulder, muttering her words.

Crying women. He'd never been great with them. Whatever came out of his mouth always made things worse. "Look, they didn't shoot him. Not with a gun, okay?" He tried to soften his tone. "Taser. It was a Taser. He'll be fine."

At least he should be until the kidnappers got Stryker to wherever they were taking him. Then . . . well, he didn't want to chase that rabbit trail. One problem at a time.

Angie lifted her head and shuddered a breath. Dark trails of mascara cut through the tears on her face. "What'd they want with him?"

"I don't know." But he'd found out. "Listen, I need to ask you a few quick questions. Anything you can remember could be vital."

Angie's hand trembled as she wiped her nose with a palm. "It . . . it all happened so . . . so fast. I . . . I don't know if I seen anything good or not."

"That's normal to feel that way. You might remember more once the adrenaline wears off."

She sni ed. “Yeah, maybe.”

Marge held her daughter with one arm. Decades of cigarette smoking showed in her sagging skin and nicotine-stained teeth.

The boys in the neighborhood used to steal smokes from her unattended pack on the counter. He’d tried one once. A feeble attempt to impress Luna. To prove he was one of the cool guys. The smoke had caught in his lungs and sent him into a coughing t. When the tears cleared from his eyes, he’d found Stryker hovering over him, arms folded, shaking his head. That little stunt had earned him a ten-mile beach run with Stryker by his side, lecturing him all the way.

He looked again at the women sitting at a table, hands clasped together, clinging to each other for support. The incident had hit them hard. Not because they’d witnessed the crime. They’d seen their fair share of violence living in Millie Beach. But they knew Stryker. Everyone did. These women loved him because he made the world a better place. A safer place. And now, maybe the world wasn’t so safe a er all.

“Either of you notice any unusual people hanging around or strange vehicles parked nearby?”

“I was back in the kitchen.” Marge sounded like she gargled with gravel every morning. “Didn’t see nothing but the backs of yer heads runnin’ out the door. Thought you’d outgrown them dine and dash days, though.”

“Wait.” Angie straightened. Her pu y eyes widened, and she pulsed a nger in his direction. “I remember you. Yeah. You and . . . and that girl who was in here. Luna and Corbin. You’re them Warrior kids, right?”

Small towns. You either loved them or hated them, and right now he was leaning heavily toward the latter. In this town, everyone knew everyone else’s business. Or thought they did. It came in handy during investigations. Not so much when your own life was on display for the busybody gossips.

He didn’t want to talk about Luna. Wasn’t sure he *could* talk about her without betraying the storm of emotions that raged in-

side. Every question they might ask would be one he'd tortured himself with over the years.

Like why the very thought of her name still sent a jolt through his system.

Forget it. Get the conversation back on track.

"That's right. I'm Special Agent Corbin King. Police are on the way to take your official statements about the kidnapping. In the meantime, do you have security cameras? Any surveillance I can take a look at?"

"That one there." Marge nodded toward a dome camera perched above the register. "Plus, we got one out back to keep an eye on deliveries."

"Nothing out front?"

"Nope." Marge pulled a napkin out of the dispenser and dabbed at a dark streak on Angie's cheek. "We ain't that tech savvy."

Of course not. That would be too easy. They'd have to check the other businesses lining the street. Find witnesses. "The register camera. Does it cover the dining area?"

"Lil bit." Marge shrugged. "Not out to the street, though."

"Okay, I'll still need access to it."

Angie leaned to her left, craning to see around him. Through the massive plate glass windows dominating the front of the diner, he saw the police cruisers. A green and white Silverado with the Broward County Sheriff's logo on the side pulled up, and the driver's door swung open. Detective Blade St. James unfolded himself from the vehicle.

"Hang tight. I'll be right back," he said, heading up front.

Blade towered over the uniformed officers gathered around him. He motioned up and down the street, issuing rapid-fire commands. No doubt ordering them to secure the area, pull video, and interview witnesses.

The door chimed, and Blade filled the doorway.

"Well, if it isn't the world's tallest garden gnome." Corbin had used that insult before, but Blade still grinned at him.

“And hello to you, Mr. Discount Miami Vice Wannabe.” Blade met him with a handshake.

Blade was nothing like his hard-edged name suggested. As a kid, he’d been bullied for his tenderheartedness and doughy physique. But time in Stryker’s court-ordered Warrior program at the Kingdom MMA Gym had transformed him. Transformed them both, really. Blade had shot up like a weed, stretching his brawny frame to six-foot-four. The program had given him the confidence to own his size. Corbin . . . well, Corbin was still figuring that part out.

“You just wish you could look this good in a suit. But hey, thanks for coming.” His caseload had kept him buried, leaving little time for anything—or anyone—else lately.

“Soon as I heard Stryker’s name on the box, I hauled it over here.” Blade’s massive hand found Corbin’s shoulder and gave it a firm squeeze. “How you holdin’ up, brother?”

“I’m hanging in there.” Something loosened in his chest at the sight of Blade, the only person who truly got it. The only one who’d walked through the same fire and come out the other side. No one else understood what they’d survived together.

Juvie had been inevitable. Corbin, for a string of stupid mistakes fueled by anger and resentment. Blade, for the noble act of defending a stranger with a knife. But Stryker had intervened. He’d rescued them from the system, offered them a home at the Kingdom MMA Gym, and given them something no one else had. Hope.

Stryker had seen something worth saving where everyone else saw trouble. For Corbin, whose only experience with family had been the sting of his father’s fists and a mother too lost in her bottles of cheap vodka to notice the bruises, the Warrior program had been his salvation. Years of sweat, sacrifice, and shared pain on those mats had forged a connection deeper than any blood tie. They’d bled together, learned to trust each other, and become the family Corbin never knew he craved. So yeah, they were brothers. Not by blood or court documents, but in every way that mattered.

“Except all this.” He circled a finger. “They took Stryker. In broad daylight.”

“You saw it?”

“Right through that window. A dark SUV—black, maybe blue—pulled up. Three masked dudes dressed in black hopped out, tased Stryker, dragged him in the back, then hauled off. Happened in a matter of seconds. I’d dropped in to interview the sta about Carlie Tinch.”

“The commissioner’s daughter? That’s your missing person case?”

“Runaway, most likely. She’s got a history of it. Not to mention shoplifting, drugs, you know.” Corbin scratched the stubble on his jaw. “But bad things happen to runaways, especially young girls. I wanted to take another shot at interviews. See if any new leads materialized.”

“How long has she been missing?”

“Six weeks. The commissioner’s breathing down my neck. Wants me to find her and convince her to join Stryker’s Warrior program.”

“That’s actually a great idea. Could really help her.”

“Come on, man. I’m not a babysitter. Tracking a runaway feels like a punishment, not an assignment.”

“Hey, remember where we came from? This girl needs help, just like we did.”

Blade was right, but it didn’t make the assignment any less frustrating. “I just don’t see why he stuck me in charge when the local PD can handle it. I’m overloaded as it is. *Was* overloaded. This morning, Tinch pulled me off every other case and said this was priority.”

“Maybe he wants the best.” Blade jingled the coins in his pocket. “Think about it. You find Carlie, get her into the program . . . you could change her life. Just like Stryker changed ours. Who’s going to be better than you?”

“You.”

“True.” Blade flattened his lips and nodded. “I am a better detec-

tive.” Then he smiled. “But he didn’t ask me. He asked you. He’s got his reasons.”

“Well, I’m worried. Six weeks and not a trace.”

“You think she’s . . .”

“I don’t know. I just know I have to find this kid. Alive.” To tell the head of the FDLE that the top law enforcement agency couldn’t find his daughter was one thing. To tell a father his child was hurt or dead . . . the thought stuck in his throat. “Anyway, I’m working on it. My guess is she’s holed up with a friend, avoiding the cops. I’m on it, but we have an active crime scene here. We need to find out who took Stryker and why.”

“Got it. Let’s keep the lunch crowd out.” Blade stuck his head outside and ordered an officer to guard the door. He flipped the sign over to closed and gestured. “Lead the way.”

As they made their way to Marge and Angie, Corbin righted the chair he’d knocked over and pocketed the sunglasses he’d left on the table. Angie’s tears had dried up, and she scrubbed at the mascara trail with a napkin.

“I believe you ladies know Detective St. James.”

“Yeah,” Marge said. “You’re ’nother one of them Warrior kids, ain’t you?”

“Oh, right.” Angie pointed the wadded napkin at Blade. “Now I remember. Y’all were Stryker’s first students in the, uh, what’s it called? Intervention program. Six of you, right?”

There used to be six. Then things with Luna exploded. And she’d left. Because of him.

Corbin detected the question and told Blade, “There’s a camera over the register and another out back. Nothing that can see the street.”

“That’s a good start.” Blade withdrew his notebook and scratched a few words. Old school. Always with the notebook and pencil. He claimed the act of writing helped him think. “You two able to come down to the station and look at a few photos? See if you recognize

anyone who's been hanging around here lately?" He spoke in that deep, smooth way that reminded Corbin of a radio psychologist.

"I tol' Agent King here, I was in the kitchen. Didn't see nothin'." Marge squeezed Angie's shoulders. "But sure, darlin'. Ang and I'll give a look."

"Thank you, ma'am." Blade flashed a high-wattage smile. "That'd be helpful."

Angie's seat creaked. She flashed a look at Marge. "I don't know if I wanna go down and waste hours lookin' at books. Them guys had masks. And besides, the two of them saw more than me." Angie flicked her hand in Corbin's direction. "They ran out in the street and everything. Maybe they ought to be the ones going."

Blade's eyebrows shot up. The pencil pointed at Corbin. "You . . . and . . . ?"

"Luna. Luna was here."

"Luna? Like, Luna-Luna? Our Luna?"

"Yes." Why did he have to keep saying her name? "Said she was waiting to talk to Stryker."

"Scuse us a moment, ladies." Blade caught Corbin by the elbow and steered him to a table by the front door. "You're saying Luna Rosati was here. Today. In this diner?"

"For the last time, yes."

Blade tucked his pencil and notebook into his breast pocket. "Did you know—"

"I had no idea."

"Wow, I can't believe Stryker didn't say anything. I haven't seen her in forever." Blade cut his eyes to Corbin's. "I know you've missed her, but so have we."

"I know. Stryker should've told us." At least him. But no. He had to stumble into this . . . this hornet's nest of his past by accident.

"So . . ." Blade folded his arms over his chest. "How'd she look?"

An image of Luna flashed unbidden in his mind. The first time he saw her at the Kingdom Gym, small and fierce, knuckles raw from hitting the heavy bag and eyes mirroring the same defiance

he felt inside. A lost girl finding her light. The woman he saw today had grown. Changed. But the same fire still flickered in her depths. He could see it smoldering beneath a polished surface. All her teenage sharpness was gone, replaced by soft curves and full lips. Lips he used to savor. He felt a smile creep up. “Amazing,” was all he could manage.

“Where is she now?”

“No idea. After they took Stryker, she leapt so fast there was practically a Luna-shaped hole in the door.” It certainly wasn’t how he’d wanted their reunion to go. Not that he thought they’d ever have one after all this time.

Blade tucked his hands into his pockets. The change rattled around. “I can’t believe she’d just show up and not tell us.”

“Yeah, tell me about it. I tried to detain her for questioning, but . . . well, I couldn’t force her.” His wrist still throbbed from her grip. And she’d called him old.

“So Luna shows up after I don’t know how many years, and that’s the day a bunch of thugs kidnapped Stryker.” Blade shook his head. “You know I don’t like coincidences.”

“You think it’s connected?”

Blade pulled his hands from his pockets. “I don’t know, but I’ll find out. I won’t stop until we find Stryker.”

“And neither will I, but you take over here. I have to find Luna. Talk to her.” He turned to leave.

Blade caught him by the bicep. “Hold up. You came here to do a job.” He jutted his chin at Marge and Angie.

Corbin pulled his arm back. “Look. The only woman I’ve ever truly loved showed up today. I pushed her away once, and it broke me. I’m not letting her go again. Not this time.”

“I get it, but Stryker needs you.” Blade’s expression softened. “Carlie needs you more.”

Carlie had vanished seemingly into thin air. Every day that passed was a day her parents went out of their minds with worry, torturing themselves with the what-ifs.

Boy, did he know that feeling. The gut-wrenching angst of not knowing what'd happened to Luna all these years. And he'd searched too. Used all his authority. But after she joined the Marines, it was as if she ceased to exist.

Blade let him standing there but stopped halfway and turned. "Hey, God brought her back for a purpose . . ."

He didn't finish the sentence. Didn't have to. Stryker had etched those words into his heart over a lifetime. Stryker always said God revealed his purpose in his own timing. It was up to each person to remain obedient, so he was standing right where he was supposed to be when God's timing lined up.

Blade took the seat across the table from the women. Their worried faces brightened into small, tentative smiles. Blade was doing his thing. Working his magic. Setting them at ease with that tender heart of his.

One thing was certain, time was running out. For Carlie, for Stryker, and maybe even for his chance to make things right with Luna.

But, yeah. Okay. He'd do what he came here to do. He'd find the answers.

Even if it meant Luna might slip out of his life and disappear again forever.