

# **The Wounded Warrior And The Colleen**

**A Love Story by  
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## **Chapter One**

### **Friday Afternoon and Evening Late Spring**

**It's About Time:** I finally located the small shop I was trying to find. I was worried that it might be closed since I'd spent most of the day just wandering around and enjoying my first day of freedom. Late in the afternoon the shopping swarms had mostly disappeared from the mall area for a while. I knew that the shop specialized in anything that measured time, like watches and clocks, and that I'd get the watch I wanted there. I also had a watch that, if it was real, needed cleaning and some repair.

I was about to get out of the car when a young woman came out of the door of the shop. She walked out to the edge of the portico into the sunlight, looked upward, and stretched. I couldn't move. All I could do was stare at her youthful perfection. She probably had no idea anyone was watching. I knew it had to be her. She fit the description perfectly. If anything, he had understated her beauty.

As he had told me, her long red hair was one of her most beautiful features. It wasn't bright red, more bronze red, and it was long and curly but somehow it arranged itself to frame her beautiful face. A gust of wind blew it into flying flames and she leaned her head to one side and let it fly. When the wind subsided, she tossed her head a couple of times and her hair settled around her shoulders and breasts. From this distance, I couldn't see the freckles on her forehead and cheeks.



I knew it was Colleen. I remembered the visit when the Senator had showed me a picture of his family. He and Michael were the book ends and Colleen and Margaret, the Senator's wife and the mother of the two children, were in the middle. I knew which one had to be Colleen and which one Margaret but I asked the Senator anyway. The two women were so much alike in every way that they could have been sisters instead of mother and daughter. Margaret's hair was the same color as Colleen's but hers was much shorter and neater. Colleen's was long and wild. I could almost picture Colleen on the rocky highlands of the Isle of Skye where her family originated.

Colleen surveyed her domain, looked at the parking lot from one side to the other, and probably didn't see me about to get out of the little rental car. I sat there waiting and watching. I felt something trying to enlarge in my shorts and I looked down and was glad to see that my buddy, after sleeping so much for the last few months, was interested in what I was seeing.

She stretched again, arms upraised this time, legs spread, leaned back, displaying maybe but to whom? She was wearing white socks and sneakers, white knee-length shorts like my khaki ones, and a dark shirt, not loose but not tight, just taut enough for me to see the mounds of her small breasts. I saw a tangle of gold-colored chains with small colored beads around her neck. She was beautiful, captivating, a tall slim gorgeous young woman. I knew she was nineteen, a year younger than me, but she could easily have been immortal and ageless.

I looked down at the middle of the little rental car, found the parking lever, and pulled it. I wasn't familiar with the car since I'd just rented it earlier that morning. It was an automatic and I wanted to drive a manual but I didn't trust my left leg yet to help me with a clutch.

The parking strip where I'd finally found a spot was slightly downhill from the row of small businesses, outliers around the big mall. The rental attendant had given me a temporary handicapped sticker but the handicapped spaces next to the businesses were all full. I had circled around and parked in the next area of the parking lot. I opened the door and got out of the car. I looked at her again and saw her watching me.

Cane or no cane? I decided to be safe, not sorry, reached back in, and found my cane. I remembered the small package on the passenger seat and grabbed that in my left hand. I wouldn't want to forget what I'd been carrying around for so long, the thing I'd been wondering about.

There was a little strip of vegetation, small trees and low bushes, between the area where I had parked and the parking area next to the businesses. I walked up to the curb, planted my cane securely on the grass on the other side, stepped over with my right leg, and started to bring my left leg forward.

That's when it happened again. My left leg vanished in an instant, disappeared, completely gone, none-functioning. My phantom leg was already in motion and my left foot didn't lift. It caught on the side of the curb and I fell. I saw the black plastic front bumper of a parked car coming up at me and my head hit it, a hard glancing blow. I fell face first into the grass and that's all I knew for a while. Lights out.

When I swam up from the dark depths to consciousness again, I felt somebody holding my hands. I struggled to open my eyes and saw two people, the beautiful young woman, Colleen, on one side and a young kid, probably Michael, her brother, on the other. The kid had to be her brother; he fit the description perfectly as well: tall, skinny, brown hair like mine, a cute kid of fifteen.

She was holding something cold on my forehead with one hand and holding my hand with the other. He was holding my other hand with one of his and had the other on my shoulder, perhaps holding me still. I saw something up above me and looked back over my head. An older woman, grandmotherly, was standing there holding an umbrella, keeping me in the shade. That was Grandma for sure. She looked the part as if she'd been made for it. She had my cane in her other hand. I looked back at the young woman and frowned questioningly.

"Welcome back," she said.

"What happened?" I croaked.

"You fell. I think you tripped over the curb and fell. You hit your head on the bumper of the car in front of us. That's why I'm holding an ice bag on your forehead."

I became aware that my shorts were pushed down far enough for my pubic hair to show, my shirt was pulled up, and a large part of my chest and belly was exposed. She saw me looking down.

"You were clawing at your stomach," she said. "You pulled your shirt out of your shorts and were trying to do something just below your navel. You were trying to say something, mumbling, and I think I heard the word 'shot.'"

**“You saw?”**

**“Yes, I saw where you were shot and some fresh scars from operations.”**

**“Damn!”**

**“You were thrashing around so I don’t think you have a neck or spinal injury,” she said. “Do you want me to call an ambulance?”**

**“No!” I said, perhaps a little too loudly. “I was just released from the VA hospital this morning. I don’t want to go back.”**

**“Well, we should get you out of the sun,” she said. “Can you stand up?”**

**I looked at my left leg and saw my left knee was scraped and bleeding a little and my sock was red from another wound. I couldn’t feel either wound. I tried to lift my leg and barely succeeded. I knew it wasn’t trustworthy now and wouldn’t be for a while. After all the therapy, I thought it would be OK again. I sat up and put my hands down on the ground on each side of me.**

**“I’ve got something wrong with the nerves coming out of my spine and running down my left leg,” I said. “My leg just sort of disappears once in a while. It’s getting better. It hasn’t happened in the last few weeks. I can probably stand but I’ll need support. I don’t think I can walk on it for a while.”**

**“Michael, run get my rollator,” Grandma said.**

**“OK, Grandma,” he said. He ran to the shop, came out seconds later pushing a rollator, and positioned it with the seat toward where I was sitting. I had used one almost like it for months in the hospital.**

**“Michael, help Colleen lift him,” Grandma said.**

**Michael and Colleen pulled me up, put my arms on their shoulders, and we stood there for a moment. I took a tentative step with my left leg. It worked but barely. We shuffled toward the rollator, they turned me around, and I sat down in it. Michael unfolded the foot rest and I put my right foot on it. My left one didn’t want to cooperate. Colleen lifted that leg and positioned my foot on the rest.**

**Then I remembered. “I had something with me: a black velvet bag. Did you find it?”**

Grandma reached into the pocket of her apron. "Is this it? We didn't look inside."

I nodded. "Hold it for me, please."

She stuffed it back in her apron.

With Michael pushing and Colleen and Grandma following, we bumped across the parking lot and onto the portico in front of It's About Time. Colleen held the door open and Michael pushed me inside. Grandma didn't come in.

"Colleen, I'm going to get something," she said. "Clean his leg while I'm gone."

Inside, Michael and Colleen stood me up again and transferred me to an upholstered customer chair. She lifted my left leg, put my foot on the seat of the rollator, and looked at my leg. I looked too and saw that my knee was badly scraped and oozing blood and my ankle had a cut close to my sock. The cut was still running blood, it was dripping down my leg, and my sock was red with it at the top. As I watched, a drop of blood fell on the floor.

"It doesn't hurt?" Colleen asked.

"No. I can't feel it."

"Michael, get me a couple of wet washcloths," she said. "Use cold water."

He went to the back of the store and returned with the washcloths. Colleen put one over the cut and put the ice bag on top of that. Then she pushed my hair back off my forehead, looked closely, and gently pressed down on the center of my forehead with her fingers.

"There's some abrasion and slight bleeding here," she said. "That's how I knew you had hit your head. You're probably going to have a goose egg. Maybe you didn't knock your brains out."

With that, she bent over, put her fingers under my chin, lifted my head, and wiped my face with a washcloth. I shut my eyes and surrendered to her. When she stopped - I didn't want her to quit - I opened my eyes and looked at her. The top button of her shirt was unbuttoned and, bent over, the curves of her beautiful breasts were showing. Of course, I looked. She saw where I was looking, smiled, and quickly kissed me, just a little smack on my lips. I couldn't believe it.

**“You’re cute,” she said. I didn’t know what to say.**

**“Michael, go next door and tell Grandma to get him a pair of white socks,” she said. He ran out the door and was back in seconds.**

**“She’s checking out and she’s already got the socks,” he said.**

**Colleen grunted, stripped my sneaker and sock off, and stood looking at the cut on my shin. Blood was still running out of it. She doubled the washcloth, put it and the ice bag back on my shin, and then wiped the rest of my leg clean. I don’t know what she was looking at when she wiped half-way up my thigh but she grunted again. I looked down and saw that my penis and testicles were making a bulge in one leg of my shorts. I had worn boxer underwear as usual so everything could hang loose in the spring heat. I looked back up and saw she was smiling. She knew I knew where she had been looking.**

**Grandma returned and stood smiling at me too. She probably had looked like Colleen when she was young but her hair was now gray, her breasts were large, and she was more than a little chubby. She certainly looked the part of a grandmother: a beautiful loving and comforting older woman.**

**I sat there and enjoyed two nurses caring for me: first, cut on ankle wiped clean, antibiotic ointment and bandage applied; next, knee picked clean of sand with tweezers, gently wiped clean with cloth, ointment applied, and bandaged; and, last, forehead greased with ointment, no bandage.**

**“Michael, go next door and get him something to drink,” Colleen ordered and he ran out the door.**

**As soon as he was gone, Colleen put her hands in my armpits, lifted me easily and I stood up, wondering what now? She put her arms around my chest, one hand behind my head, and pushed down. I bent over and she kissed me: a quick smack on each cheek and a light touch of soft lips on mine.**

**She pulled back, looked inquisitively at me, and then kissed me again. I felt her tongue seeking entrance and I opened to her. My eyes were open and I saw hers were closed so I thought what the Hell, Grandma watching or not, and I closed my eyes and kissed her back.**

**Then she shocked me again. She put her hands on my butt and pulled me against her. Did I dare? I did. I put my hands on her soft behind and pulled too.**

**“Colleen, don’t you think you should at least ask his name before you bed him?” Grandma asked.**

**“Grandma, it’s just part of the therapy,” she said. “I was just trying to make him think of something other than his leg.”**

**“I’m Ryan MacEwen and you’ve succeeded,” I said.**

**“Another damned Irish mick,” Colleen said, grinning, dimples on both cheeks.**

**“Do you have a name?” I asked. I knew who she was. She had to be Colleen. She was undeniably a colleen.**

**“Yeah, Colleen Kelly,” she said and nodded at Grandma. “She’s Grandma Kelly. My brother is Michael Kelly. Caio, we’re all Italians.”**

**“Yeah, and I’m Chinese and I need to sit down.”**

**We both took our hands off the other’s butt. She helped me sit down in the chair and then put my left leg up in the rollator again. Michael returned carrying a big iced tea. He handed it to me, unwrapped the straw, and inserted it. I took a few sips. It was good: sweet and cold. Then I took a really big drink because I needed something cold after having Colleen’s hot tongue in my mouth.**

**I closed my eyes, breathed deeply a few times, relaxed for a moment, and then opened them again and looked around. Colleen and Grandma were both looking at me appraisingly.**

**“I’ve got a little bit of a headache,” I said. “Do you have something for pain, something mild?”**

**“Michael, get him some acetaminophen,” Grandma said.**

**Poor Michael, getting ordered around all the time. He was back in seconds and shook a couple in my hand. I swallowed them and a few big gulps of cold sweet tea. Then I looked at Colleen and smiled my biggest.**

**“Well, what do you think, Grandma?” Colleen asked. “Is he a keeper?”**

**“I think he’s exactly the kind of man you like,” Grandma answered. “He wears pants. Well, short ones, but pants.”**



**“Oh, Grandma, I like what I see: cute face, damned good smile, tall, sort of skinny, wide shoulders, narrow waist, tight little butt, long legs. He’s probably a ten in bed. He’s beautiful, Grandma.”**

**“I’m not a ten,” I said, determined to give as good as I got. “It’s a little over seven inches; is that enough?”**

**“That’ll do nicely,” Colleen said, dimpling again. Grandma threw up her hands, shook her head, and walked away. Michael just laughed at us and our dueling with words. I sat there in the chair. I needed to sit for a while after Coleen’s therapy.**

**“I was just coming here,” I said, trying to change the subject. “I want a watch.”**

**I pulled my billfold out of my shorts, fumbled for the card, and handed it to Colleen. It was a business card from the It’s About Time shop and had been given to me by Grandpa’s and Grandma’s son, Senator Kelly, a member of the Senate Veterans’ Affairs Committee. The Senator had visited me lots of times when I was in the VA hospital and we had talked long and honestly about my life and about combat. On his last visit, he had given me the card and on it he had written “Grandpa, Ryan needs a watch. I think we can help him. What do you think?”**

**“You must have impressed him somehow,” Colleen said. “He doesn’t give out many of these.”**

**“He said I had potential,” I said. “I don’t know what he saw in me.”**

**Michael went behind the display case, pulled out a watch, and showed it to me. It was a Seiko solar day/date watch with Arabic numerals in stainless steel with a matching bracelet: a practical utilitarian watch and a damned nice one. I held out my left arm and he fastened the watch around my wrist. It fit perfectly.**

**“Dad says we can always swap the card for one of these,” he said. “It never needs winding or a battery, just light.”**

**“It’s exactly what I wanted,” I said. “Where’s Grandpa?”**

**“He should be here any minute,” Grandma said. “He takes off on Friday afternoons because he stays at the shop all day Saturday. He likes to cook and, when we close, he’ll take us all home for dinner. I don’t know what we’re having but he’s a good cook. Can you come home with us for dinner?”**

**“Yes, but I need to talk to Grandpa about something,” I said. “I’ve got a problem, at least, I think I do, and I need his advice on it.”**

**“Well, wait ‘til after we’ve eaten,” Grandma said. “I’m sure Michael is hungry. He always is. You can talk to Grandpa later.”**

**A few minutes later, Grandpa walked in and I was introduced. I didn’t try to get up from the chair. I held out my arm to show him the watch.**

**“Your son visited me in the hospital and we exchanged war stories,” I said. “He gave me a card for your shop and said I could swap it for this watch.”**

**“I’ve been wondering when you were going to show up,” Grandpa said. “He told me about you and said we should help you if we can and to let him know if you needed his help.”**

**“Grandma says you can wait until after we’ve eaten,” Michael said. “Let’s go. I’m hungry.”**

**I watched as they quickly closed down the shop. It was evident that the four of them were used to doing this together. They all did different tasks without being told.**

**“Grandpa, Ryan has a rental car that we need to return,” Colleen said. “He fell and injured his leg and now he can’t drive it. The rental place is not far out of the way. Let me drive it back and you take Grandma and Michael and Ryan in your car and then pick me up.”**

**Nobody asked me what I wanted to do but I dug in my pocket and handed her the keys. “I’ve got some luggage in the trunk. Can you put it in Grandpa’s car?”**

**She nodded, kissed me on the forehead, said “Yuck,” wiped the antibiotic off her lips, and left.**

**With my arms on Grandpa’s and Michael’s shoulders, I hobbled outside to a big Buick. Grandma insisted I ride upfront in the passenger side and I finally managed to stuff my left leg in it. At the car rental place, Colleen was waiting out front and she stuffed her butt in the back seat with poor Michael scrunched in the middle between her and Grandma.**

**Grandpa drove the five of us through quiet residential streets to their house, a nice brick ranch set back under big oak trees. From talking to Senator Kelly, I knew the grandparents now lived alone and the rest of the family lived somewhere else.**

I couldn't help it. I couldn't remember the last time I'd had home-cooked food, especially food as good as Grandpa's. Perhaps it was simple food to them but, to me, it was unbelievably good: meatloaf in a tangy tomato gravy, cornbread muffins, mashed potatoes with a chunk of butter melting on top, fried yellow squash, green beans cooked with ham, and a salad of vine-ripened tomatoes and cucumbers and onions. Perhaps I should have entered into the conversation and laughter more but my mouth was usually full. They all just grinned and excused me.

Colleen and Michael cleared the table while Grandma and Grandpa sat with me and we talked. I told them about all the times Senator Kelly had visited me in the hospital, the first when I was still bedridden and hooked up to monitors and tubes, the others when I was finally able to walk with a rollator but dragging my left leg, and the last visit when he gave me the card.

Officially I was no longer on active duty but all I had to do now was to report for therapy sessions as ordered. I held back on telling about my wound, how I got it, and how I had spent six months recuperating before I was finally released.

"Grandpa, I have a problem, at least, I think I have, and I don't know what I should do," I finally said. "Could I talk with you in private?"

He sat and looked at me for a moment. "Ryan, you're not the first young man we've helped. There have been others. Grandma knows if she reveals anything you want kept secret, I'll spank her butt. Michael's mother can spank his. You can spank Colleen's. She likes it. Now, let's trust them to know when not to talk."

I looked at Grandma. "Have you still got the black bag?"

She reached in her apron and held it out to me.

"Let Colleen unwrap it," I said.

Colleen took the bag, reached inside, and brought out the plastic bag containing the aluminum-foil-wrapped object. She looked at me quizzically and I nodded. She took the object out of the plastic bag, peeled back the foil, and held up the watch so the others could see. Grandpa took it and looked at it closely.

"Damn! This is a Sky Dweller Rolex," he said.

"Is it real or is it fake?" I asked.

**“At first glance, I think it’s real,” he said. “Colleen, can you look it up on that infernal phone of yours?” He read her the serial number.**

**She could and did. Within a minute or so she was giving us a description of the watch.**

**“Sky Dwellers are Rolex’s super premium watches. This one was priced originally at \$46,000. The case and bracelet are both yellow gold. It’s described on the Champagne-colored dial as a Sky Dweller, Oyster Perpetual, Superlative Chronometer, and Officially Certified. It has an automatic movement and is self-winding with movement of the wearer’s wrist or with a winding stem. It shows hours, minutes, seconds, GMT, and date. It has a fluted rotating bezel and is water resistant to 100 meters or 300 feet.”**

**Michael held out his hand for the watch and Grandpa let him look at it.**

**“Where did you get it?” he asked. “It’s all dirty and muddy and the bracelet is broken.”**

**“The dark stuff is blood and the mud is from Afghanistan,” I started, and they all sat silently while I told them the story.**

**“I was an Army grunt, one of seven soldiers and one officer, assigned to protect another soldier who was some sort of wizard. We were all on a mountain side looking down in a narrow valley at a Taliban compound of decrepit buildings.**

**The wizard was doing his magic and feeding the coordinates of the compound back to a command center which guided drones. The first drone released its missile and it struck near the entry to the walled compound. Taliban ants staggered out of hiding and swarmed around the crater.**

**The wizard reported to the command center and, about ten minutes later, a second drone missile struck and all holy hell erupted. The missile had evidently struck a storage facility for explosives and the pyrotechnics lasted for a while. When the fireworks finally stopped and most of the smoke cleared, we could see the compound again. There wasn’t a single building still standing and there were no ants running around.**

**We went down to the site to reconnoiter for anything of informational value and to look for survivors. The lieutenant in charge said there**

were to be no survivors unless they could walk out with us and we all knew what that meant: we had to kill the wounded ones.

We wandered through the building debris looking for survivors among the bodies and body parts and for anything with writing on it. I was walking in the mud – it had rained during the night – when I saw something shiny. I picked it up and stuck it in my pocket. It was the watch.

There were wounded, perhaps ten of them, some barely alive. I put two of them out of their misery with a single shot to the head and I heard shots as the other guys did the same. Finally there was only one survivor and I knew I was expected to finish him.”

“You mean the watch came from a Taliban compound somewhere?” Michael asked.

“Yes, from Helmand Province in Afghanistan,” I said. “We called it Hell Man Province because that’s what it was.”

I looked at Grandpa. “Can you fix it?”

“What do you think is wrong with it?”

“It won’t keep good time. It runs for a while and then stops. And the bracelet is broken.”

He held the watch up to his ear and shook it up and down for a minute.

“Ryan, there’s nothing wrong with the watch,” he said. “It’s an automatic watch. The movement of your wrist moves a rotor which winds a spring that powers the hands. It’s simple and elegant. The bracelet just needs a pin. Is it OK if I clean it and fix the bracelet?”

“Sure, I don’t know anything about watches. You do.”

He took the watch, went somewhere, and was back in a few minutes. He held out the watch to me. The time was correct. The watch was gleaming and pristine and beautiful. He picked up my left wrist and started to take the other watch off.

“Don’t,” I said. “I want to keep this one.”

He picked up my right wrist, put the watch on it, took it off, adjusted the bracelet, and put it back on.

**“I looked inside. It’s real,” he said. “Wear it for a while and compare the time on the two. I don’t think you’ll see any difference.”**

**I needed time to think. Should I tell them the rest of what happened? I also needed to pee. The big sweet tea at the shop and more at dinner was demanding to be recycled.**

**“Could I use the bathroom?” I asked. “I need some tea relief.”**

**I looked at Michael. “I can use Grandma’s rollator if she doesn’t mind. I’m used to using one at the hospital.”**

**Michael brought it, held it for me, and I easily shifted to it. He led the way out of the kitchen to a little half-bath near the front door. I stood up, held the door jambs, and went in and pissed in blessed relief. When I can out, Michael was waiting for me in the hallway, holding the rollator.**

**“I want to be a soldier too, like Dad and Grandpa and you,” he said.**

**Maybe that settled it in my mind. I was going to tell the rest of the story even if I wasn’t welcome in their house afterward. Michael should understand that war is hell.**

**Back at the kitchen table, I shifted over to the arm chair, the only one of six with arms. Grandma had insisted I take it.**

**“Michael says he wants to be a soldier too,” I said. “Well, I’m going to tell him what I did before we left the Taliban site. You may want to kick me out of the house afterwards.”**

**I looked at Grandma, Grandpa, and Colleen. All three nodded.**

**“I was the new guy in the squad and I knew what I was expected to do. I was already filled with hatred for the Taliban and I didn’t think of them as humans, just religious idiots who wanted to kill everybody not like them. I would feel nothing but relief if all of them were wiped off the face of the earth.**

**I stood there over the lone survivor, me looking down at him, him looking back up at me, and we both probably had hatred on our faces. He looked intact except for the odd angles of both his lower legs. We all gathered around, the Lieutenant looked at me, turned his back, and looked at the sky. Two guys knelt and held the survivor’s hands above his head. I was ready. I took out my knife, cut the survivor’s clothing away from his genitals, and looked at his face. Fear? Hatred? No matter.**

I cut his penis off, held it over his head, and let the last few drops of blood fall in his face. Then I dropped it and stomped and twisted it into the mud with my boot. I looked back at his face and now it was clearly contorted in horror. Then I cut his testicles off, pried his mouth open, shoved his testicles in, and pushed them down his throat. All of us except the Lieutenant watched as he choked to death.

One of the other guys said: "Lieutenant." He turned around, looked at me, nodded, and said, "What are you guys waiting for? We've got another mountain to climb."

I looked around at the others, Colleen, Grandma, Grandpa, and finally, Michael. I saw slight frowns on faces but no real shock or disgust.

"Ryan, how did you like your dinner?" Grandma asked.

"It was great, best I've had in years."

"Well, just wait 'til tomorrow night," she said. "I'm cooking. Grandpa's a good cook but I'm better."

Acceptance? Kindness? They wanted me to stay with them? To have dinner with them again? My throat froze and I couldn't talk and I felt tears flood my eyes. I hung my head and sniffed a few times.

I felt somebody pushing my legs apart. It was Colleen. She stood over me, pulled my head against her soft breasts, held me against her with one hand, and stroked my long hair with the other. I put my arms around her, sobbed a few times, and tried my best to bury myself in her. I felt somebody else's hands kneading my shoulders and looked up. It was Michael. He was looking at me and smiling. I looked up at Colleen.

"You still want me to stay with you?" I asked. "After I told you what I did?"

"Yes," she said. "I know that's what Dad, the Senator, I mean, I know that's what he wants. We all want you to stay with us for a while."

I looked around at the others. Grandpa, Grandma, and Michael were all smiling at me and nodding.

"When were you wounded?" Colleen asked.

"Five days later," I said.

For a moment I couldn't go on. I closed my eyes and buried my face in her softness again. When I finally let her go, I wiped my eyes with my fingers. She sat down in front of me and held my hands. I took a deep breath and told them how I was wounded.

"I was on patrol with some other guys, just walking through a small village, just winning the hearts and minds of the natives. Shit! Pardon my French. We'd been warned, never trust them, don't give them anything but smiles, but I was stupid.

The only ones who came out to the street were old men and young boys. Females stayed inside. A young kid, maybe twelve or thirteen, held out his hand, begging, and said something. I carried little peppermints to moisten my mouth because of the dirt and dust and I reached in my pocket for one for him. That's when he pulled a big pistol out of his clothes.

I was carrying my M4 carbine on my right arm as usual with my finger curved around the trigger. The carbine could be operated in four modes: safe, one round, three-burst, or fully automatic. I was more than a little scared and apprehensive and mine was on automatic.

The kid shot me in the stomach and at the same time I shot him and some others with my rifle on automatic. His bullet penetrated my intestines and lodged against my spine and I fell, unconscious. I was wearing body armor but he shot me at an angle and somehow it missed the armor.

The next time I was barely conscious I was in a hospital somewhere and people were scrambling and doing things to me. They put my lights out again and I finally woke up in another hospital in Turkey. I had tubes running in and out of me and monitors attached to me. They had repaired my intestines. A few days later I was flown to the VA hospital in Washington. They removed the bullet and transferred me here to this VA hospital for recovery.

I eventually learned what happened in the village in Afghanistan. We had walked into a Taliban ambush. I had taken out some of them with my rifle and the other guys killed a bunch more. We killed over twenty of them and didn't lose a single man."

"That was over six months ago," I said. "My intestines became infected and I fought that for over a month. Rumor says they dipped their bullets in shit to cause infections and I don't doubt it. They finally removed all the tubes and monitors and I've been in therapy for months, trying to regain my strength and to walk again."



**“War is hell, Michael,” Grandpa whispered. “Don’t ever forget that.”**

**“I may have done something wrong, Grandpa,” I said. “I thought the watch might be real and maybe I could sell it and go back to college. I’ve been discharged but I’m not sure what sort of benefits or disability I’ll get yet. At our base in Afghanistan, I knew I shouldn’t show the watch around so I stuffed it down one of my other boots and stuffed socks on top of it. I was trying to decide what to do when I was shot five days later. I had been in the VA hospital here for months when my personal stuff from Afghanistan was delivered to me. I looked in the toe of my boot and the watch was still there.”**

**“Why do you think you might have done something wrong?” he asked.**

**“We weren’t supposed to take anything off the bad guys,” I said. “I’d heard of guys who collected penises, others ears. I didn’t take it off one of them but I suppose that’s where it came from.”**

**“Well, I don’t think what you did is wrong, picking it up out of the mud. You just found it,” he said. “I’ll tell my son, the Senator, and we’ll let him worry about it. Just don’t tell anybody outside the family.”**

**Outside the family? Did he mean he already felt I was part of their family? I finally whispered, “Yes, sir.”**

**He took my hand in his. “Ryan, don’t call me sir. I’m not your superior. Call me Grandpa. That’s what I am now.”**

**“OK, Grandpa.”**

**“Now, do you really want our help,” he said. “If you do, I want to hear you say it. Look me in the eyes and say it.”**

**I looked him in the eyes, swallowed, and waited until I could speak. “I want your help. I need it.”**

**“You’ve got to talk to me and the others about what you’re feeling, Ryan,” he said. “We’re not mind readers. We’ll do our best to help you but you’ve got to help us understand you. I don’t want to hear any more talk about you trying to commit suicide. Do you understand?”**

**“Yes, si...Grandpa. He told you?”**

**“Yes, you were lucky. He said you vomited up most of the painkillers you’d saved. I don’t want any nonsense like that again.”**

**“I won’t but...I was so damned depressed and nothing worked right. I couldn’t use my leg and I couldn’t even get a har...an erection. I wasn’t a man. I was just a damned invalid and I couldn’t see any way for me to live with that.”**

**“The Senator told me you have no family,” Grandpa said. “Is that right?”**

**“Yes, I was just in my freshman year in college when my father was mugged and killed in New Orleans. He worked on off-shore oil rigs. Then my mother died less than a year later of cancer. That’s when I dropped out of college and enlisted. My sister and I were very close but she’s disappeared and nobody knows where she is.”**

**“You say you were in college,” Colleen said. “Were you a good student? Do you want to go back?”**

**“Yeah, I was pretty good. I made As and Bs and a C or two. I sort of want to go back but I don’t have any help and it costs an arm and a leg now. I’ll have some veteran’s benefits but they haven’t been decided yet. I don’t want to mortgage my future with student loans. That’s why I wanted the watch, to sell it and use the money to go back.”**

**“Ryan, you said you couldn’t even get a hard on,” Colleen said, smiling at me. She pulled her blouse down so at least half of her breasts were showing. “Does it work OK now?”**

**“Colleen!” Grandma said.**

**“I caught him looking at my breasts in the shop, Grandma,” she said. “At least he’s interested.”**

**“Colleen, maybe you can see if it works now,” Michael said.**

**“Maybe I will,” she said, and stuck her tongue out at him.**

**“It works better now,” I said. “I haven’t been with a woman in about a year. I don’t know if it can keep its head up long enough to do its job.”**

**“Well, you kids just don’t do it right here in my kitchen,” Grandma said. “You’ll give Grandpa a heart attack.”**

**“Shit, I still have hard attacks without watching them,” Grandpa said. “You cause them.”**

**I looked around, hardly believing what I was hearing. I yawned once, took a couple of deep breaths, and then yawned again.**

**“Collen, are your father and mother staying in Washington this weekend?” Grandma asked.**

**“Yes, Grandma,” Colleen said. “They’re going to a couple of fancy things tomorrow night and Sunday. Dad’s speaking at the Sunday one. He wants me to write him a ten minute speech. I’ve outlined it with the usual and I need to finish it tomorrow. He wants it before noon.”**

**“Well, maybe you and Michael had better take Ryan home and put him to bed,” she said. “I think he’s tired and sleepy.”**

**“OK, maybe I’ll see if it works,” she said, looking at me and smiling wickedly.**

**TO BE CONTINUED:**