

today
we go
home

a novel

KELLI ESTES

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Dedicated to all women, past or present,
who have served in the military.

Thank you.

“Home isn’t where our house is,
But wherever we are understood.”

—Christian Morgenstern in *Stages: A Development
in Aphorisms and Diary Notes*

Prologue

April 16, 1861: Wilson Family Farm, Stampers Creek, Indiana

The sounds of gunshots echoed across the field, each one making Emily clench her teeth tighter together until her jaw ached. For an hour, she'd listened as her menfolk shot at whatever they were shooting at, and she'd told herself to stay out of it. She knew they were doing more than hunting by the way they'd whispered among themselves when David arrived home from town and then grabbed their muskets and headed to the creek. With each shot, her imagination conjured an explanation that was worse than the one before. A rabid dog. A pack of wolves. Brutal Shawnee here to reclaim their land.

She moved the soup pot off the stove and yanked on her warm coat. She was through waiting. If no one saw fit to inform her of the danger, she'd discover what it was herself and help dispel it. She'd been shooting all her life alongside her brothers and often bagged game for dinner. Whatever was out there, she could handle it. Women weren't supposed to be the strong ones, but she did not always have to pretend to be weak.

She reached for a musket behind the door but found the men

had taken them all. Looking around, her gaze landed on the kitchen knife. Any weapon was better than none. Gripping it firmly in her fist, she set out across the fallow cornfield toward the creek. She couldn't see anyone, but the gunshots directed her to the wooded area where she and her brothers had spent countless hours playing as children, back before Mama died and Emily had become the woman of the house.

As she reached the trees, the sound of three shots firing almost simultaneously made her jump, and she realized she'd best announce her presence before one of them shot in her direction. "Pa, I'm coming your way. Don't shoot!"

Holding her knife firmly, ready to attack anything that might run toward her, she followed the path into the clearing, her heart pounding in her ears as loudly as the gunshots. But she was ready. She'd defend herself and her family against whatever threat awaited her.

What she saw made her stop short.

There was no danger.

Her brothers lay on the ground with muskets in hand, calmly listening to whatever Pa was telling them. Uncle Samuel stood behind them, puffing on his pipe and watching, his own musket resting in the crook of his elbow.

"No, not like that," Pa said to Ben. "You want to lie flat on your belly and only raise up as much as you must to fire. Make yourself into the smallest you can be so you're harder to hit."

Emily released her pent-up breath and watched as Ben straightened his legs so he was lying flat on his belly. Propping himself on his elbows, he sighted the shot.

"Now imagine there's a secesh hiding in those bushes," Pa coached. "Take a breath as you aim, and as you exhale, pull the trigger."

As the musket fired, a puff of smoke rose from the barrel. David, lying beside Ben, fired his weapon. Both of her brothers rolled to their backs to reload without sitting up.

Emily crossed the clearing and stopped next to Uncle Samuel. “What’s a secesh?”

He glanced at her before returning his gaze to her brothers. “It’s what they’re calling people from the seceding states.” He grunted. “Short for secessioner.”

“Why are we shooting at them?” She watched as her brothers fired again.

“Keep going,” Pa said to the boys. “Try to make your shots hit that beech tree there by the water.” He stepped over Ben’s legs and came to her with a sheepish smile. “Did we miss supper? Sorry, Em.”

Emily shrugged. “Why are you pretending to shoot at secesh?”

Pa sent a look to Uncle Samuel, who lifted one eyebrow and kept puffing on his pipe, and then he turned to her. “I don’t want to worry you, but word has come that we’re at war against the Southern states who have seceded from the Union. President Lincoln called for volunteers yesterday, and Governor Morton says we’re to gather in Indianapolis for training.”

She stared at him. “Who is to gather?”

Pa shuffled his feet and looked away. “The Indiana volunteers, of course.”

He didn’t need to say it for Emily to understand he would be one of them. She watched her brothers fire on the beech tree. Both missed. Calmly, she reached for the musket Uncle Samuel held, trading it for her knife. “Is it loaded?”

Samuel left the pipe clamped between his teeth and wordlessly handed her a paper cartridge from the pouch at his waist.

As the men watched, Emily expertly ripped the cartridge open with her teeth, poured the powder into the barrel and shoved the ball inside, pulled out the rammer, pushed down the shot, and replaced the rammer. Then, shoving her skirts out of the way, she settled onto her stomach on the ground between her brothers.

Without saying a word, she cocked the weapon, aimed, and

fired. A chunk of gray bark flew off the beech, right where she'd aimed.

Satisfied, she got back to her feet, handed the musket to her uncle, and faced her pa. "I'm coming with you."

Chapter One

Present day: Lakewood, Washington State

Larkin Bennett grabbed hold of the cold, steel handle and noticed her hands were shaking. She felt as vulnerable as if there were armed insurgents on the other side of the gray metal door, but it was only her best friend's storage unit. She blew out a breath and shoved the rolling door up so hard it rattled and banged. When the light flickered on, she saw only stacked cardboard boxes, a couple of lamps, and bulging black garbage bags. The innocuous objects might as well have been insurgents firing on her for the pain that swept through her entire body.

For several long moments, she could do nothing more than stare at Sarah's belongings. Mentally, she went through all the reasons why she had to do this now rather than run far, far away.

It was December. The rental contract on the unit would end at the close of the month, and there was no reason for Larkin to waste money renewing it.

The storage unit was an hour away from her hometown, two with traffic, and she had no plans to come back to this area anytime soon. She needed to deal with it while she was here.

There was no one else to take care of this, and besides, Sarah had wanted her to have these things.

The last one was the kicker.

Nausea rolled through Larkin as she reached for the nearest box and stacked it on the rolling cart she'd brought up in the elevator. She intended to load everything into her car and take it all to her grandmother's house, where she'd be living until she figured out what to do next. Once she got Sarah's stuff there, she could go through it another day, when it wouldn't hurt so badly.

Moving robotically, she stacked another box on the cart and reached for a third, trying her hardest not to think about Sarah or why she wasn't here to clean out her own storage unit.

This third box was heavier than the last two, and Larkin grunted as she lifted it. Pain shot through her legs and back, and she welcomed it.

Larkin's cell phone rang from where she'd stuck it in her back jeans pocket. "Damn it," she muttered as she lurched to the cart and bent her knees to set the box down. She misjudged the placement, though, and it tilted sideways and crashed onto the floor, the top seam bursting open and scattering Sarah's things.

Her damn phone was still ringing. Larkin yanked it from her pocket without looking to see who was calling. "What?"

"Larkin, is that you?"

Guilt shot through her, and she took a moment to draw a breath in through her nose to calm down, her eyes squeezed shut. Her grandmother didn't deserve her temper. When she trusted her voice to come out evenly, she opened her eyes and answered, "Yes, Grams, it's me. Sorry, I just dropped something."

"Where are you? I thought you'd be here by now."

Larkin eased herself down onto the edge of the flatbed cart and dropped her head into her free hand. "I'm sorry, Grams. I decided at the last minute to take care of something. I'm in Lakewood, down by Joint Base Lewis-McChord. Cleaning out Sarah's storage unit."

Silence greeted this announcement, and then Grams's voice

came softly through the line. “Lark, are you sure that’s a good idea? If you wait, one of us could drive down there to be with you.”

Larkin looked at the spilled contents of the box in front of her. A silver tube of lipstick, an old MP3 player, a silver bracelet, a brown leather book. “I was passing through and didn’t want to have to drive back down here, you know? It has to be cleaned out this month, and I know you are all going to be busy with the holidays.”

“If you’re sure.” Grams didn’t sound convinced, but she went on with the reason for her call. “How long will it take? Tomorrow is Sunday, and I was hoping to invite everyone over so we could welcome you home properly. Will you be here?”

By “everyone,” Larkin knew her grandma meant her entire extended family of parents, cousins, aunts, and uncles. Grams kept the family connected, and it was at her house where everyone gathered. All fourteen of them.

Even though Larkin had planned to load her car and finish her drive to Grams’s tonight, the idea of a family gathering sucked the energy from her. “I’m so sorry, Grams,” she lied. “I don’t think I’m going to make it tonight. Probably not even until late tomorrow night. Sarah has some furniture here that I need to get someone to pick up and too much stuff to fit into my car, which means I need to sort through it and donate what I don’t want to keep. It’ll take some time.”

The tiny closet of possessions stared back at her, mocking her lies. Larkin turned her back on it.

“I guess we can celebrate your return in a few weeks when everyone is here for Christmas anyway.” The disappointment in Grams’s voice made Larkin’s already raw heart ache even more. “But you’d better call your mom and tell her. They were excited to see you tomorrow.”

“Okay, I will.” Larkin pushed stiffly to her feet. “I’ll see you tomorrow night, Grams. Love you.”

“I love you, too, soldier girl,” Grams replied, using the nickname

Larkin's grandfather had given her years ago. Hearing it made tears come to her eyes. "I'm so happy you're finally coming home."

Larkin swallowed. "Me too." She hung up, wondering if that was a lie. She really had no idea.

She dialed her mother, then righted the box and started putting the spilled items back in as she waited for her to pick up. When she did, Larkin got straight to the point. "Hi, Mom, it's me. Grams told me to call you since I won't be home tonight after all. I won't be there in time for a party tomorrow either."

"Why not?"

Larkin explained about the storage unit and that she would rent a hotel room tonight. Her mother, already angry Larkin was moving in with Grams and not back into the house where she'd grown up, did not hold back from laying on the guilt. "Oh, Larkin, I am so disappointed. Your father will be, too. Can't you at least stop and see us on your way through town? It's been a year, and after all that's happened, we need to see you."

"I know, Mom. I'm sorry." Larkin was about to explain, yet again, how she needed the peace and quiet at Grams's house, and also that Grams didn't work and both of her parents did, which meant she'd have someone around to help her adjust to civilian life again. But she didn't say any of this because her mother already knew all of it, and really, Larkin just wanted to get off the phone. "I'll stop by on my way through Seattle tomorrow, okay? What time should I be there?"

"Oh, good. Your father will be happy. How about six?" Kathryn Bennett sounded smug. "We'll order some dinner."

Resigned, Larkin agreed and ended the call, feeling the last of her energy drain away. She stuffed the phone back in her pocket and picked up the book that had fallen out of the box, intending to toss it back.

It looked well used with a stiff, brown, extra-thick leather cover sporting an embossed floral design. A leather thong wrapped around the book and tied it closed.

Curious, for she'd never seen Sarah with the book, Larkin undid the thong and opened the first page. In an old-fashioned hand, someone had written *The diary of...* followed by something that had been scratched out, and written below that was the name *Jesse Wilson*. She looked closer at the scratched-out part and thought it looked like... Was it *Emily*?

Something nudged at the back of Larkin's brain, and she turned the page to the first diary entry, dated 1861. Flipping quickly through the rest of the book, she found it full of the same old-fashioned and difficult-to-read handwriting. Every now and then a word jumped out at her. *Union. Army. Battle. Musket.* The memory that had been poking at her burst forth.

It was the day she and Sarah had graduated from Norwich University and were commissioned as second lieutenants into the U.S. Army. Sarah's family hadn't been there, of course, and so Larkin had made her an honorary member of her own since her parents, grandparents, and two of her cousins had flown in for the ceremonies. After everyone had gone back to their hotels and Larkin and Sarah had returned to their dorm room for their last night as roommates, they'd gotten to talking about why they'd wanted to join the Army in the first place.

For Larkin, it had been because of her grandpa, who had fought in the Korean War, and because of the trip she'd taken with him to Washington, DC, in junior high when she'd learned that women were in the military, too. It wasn't only for boys. Sarah had an even better story, though. She'd told Larkin that night about an ancestor of hers who had disguised herself as a man and fought in the Civil War. The news that women had fought in the Civil War had blown Larkin's mind. Sarah's grandmother had given her the diary when she was a little girl, and Sarah had wanted to be like Emily Wilson ever since.

This had to be that diary.

Larkin's hands shook. When she'd learned that Sarah had left all of her possessions to her, she hadn't expected to find anything

so valuable. Surely there was someone in Sarah's family who should have this instead?

But Sarah hadn't been close to her family. They'd done nothing but hurt her, and ever since they were freshman rooks at Norwich, Sarah had said Larkin was her only family. Larkin had never had a sister, but she grew up with two cousins close to her age who were like sisters. She'd missed them terribly when she'd moved across the country for college, and Sarah had filled that hole. Now, there was a Sarah-shaped hole in her life that would never be filled.

Maybe Sarah really had meant for her to inherit this diary.

Larkin would much rather have Sarah back.

A splotch of water fell onto the open diary page, and Larkin realized she was crying. *Damn it.* She never cried.

She wiped away the tears and moved to shove the diary back into the box. But then she stopped. No. She wouldn't leave it crammed in some box. The diary would stay with her.

With her new plan to stay at a hotel overnight, she didn't want her car full of boxes that might tempt someone to break in. She returned the boxes to the storage unit, rolled the door back down, and fastened the lock. She had all day tomorrow to face this. For now, she'd get something to eat and a good night's rest.

Back in her car, she carefully placed the diary on the passenger seat, next to the urn that she had buckled in with the seat belt. Sarah's final requests had specified that she was to be cremated and her ashes placed into a biodegradable urn made out of pink Himalayan salt. Larkin was to scatter her ashes on the beaches of Sarah's home state of California, and when they were all gone, she was to throw the urn itself into the ocean where it would dissolve, leaving nothing behind for anyone to have to deal with in the years to come.

Larkin had driven from Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri, where she'd processed out of the Army, to San Diego, where she'd had every intention of following Sarah's instructions. But once

she got there, it was too soon to say goodbye. So, she'd driven north up the coast toward her final destination of Woodinville, Washington, intending to stop at another beach to scatter the ashes once she was stronger.

She'd stopped at ten different beaches, and each time, she hadn't been able to part with Sarah. She couldn't let her go yet.

"Look what I found," she said to her friend as she latched her seat belt and started the engine. "It's that diary you told me about. I'll start reading it tonight, as soon as I eat something." She hadn't eaten since Eugene, Oregon, over five hours ago.

As she pulled out of the storage facility, she saw a hotel next door and a Mexican restaurant across the street. Perfect.

She thought about taking her dinner to go, but a beer sounded too good to pass up. She drank a Corona with lime while she waited on her food and asked for another as a huge plate of cheese enchiladas was placed before her.

She didn't realize how hungry she was until her first bite made her salivate. Heaven on a plate, that's what this was, she decided, savoring another bite. She hadn't had good Mexican food for over a year. No surprise, of course, that she couldn't find any in Afghanistan, but even when she'd returned to the States, she hadn't found enchiladas like this in Memphis or Missouri.

She was so caught up in her food that it took a moment for the conversation at the table behind her to sink into her consciousness. But when it did, she found she could focus on nothing else.

"Yeah, she's hot," said a young male voice. "Just be warned. They say women in the military are either bitches, sluts, or dykes. I vote for the middle category."

The two men laughed and went on boasting about what they would do to the women in question, each claim filthier than the last. Larkin looked around to see who they might be talking about and found two women in Army combat uniforms paying for a take-out order at the bar. They had no idea the two perverts

were talking about them and, from the fatigue clearly weighing them down, had likely just ended a long day and wanted to go home and eat their meal in peace.

Larkin had dealt with men like them her whole military career—from JROTC in high school through her last deployment to Afghanistan. From civilians and military members alike. She'd learned to ignore the comments and to make sure her behavior was always above reproach.

But she wasn't in the military anymore, she realized. She no longer had to worry about jeopardizing her career.

Before she knew what she was doing, she picked up her full glass of beer and pushed to her feet to go stand beside the men's table. As she'd thought, they were college kids, full of their own importance and the erroneous belief that women existed only for their pleasure.

"Hey, boys." She greeted them with a smile. "I heard you talking about those women." She motioned to the two soldiers with her beer and then took a sip, acting like she wasn't pissed. "They are real pretty, aren't they?"

The blond kid, who had the look of a star athlete, smiled at her, his perfect teeth so white they had to have been bleached. He looked like he was going to agree with her, but his buddy, a more studious-looking guy with glasses, shot him a look and asked Larkin, "Can we help you?"

Larkin stopped pretending to be nice. She slammed her beer on the table and leaned on both palms so she was hovering over them. "Yes, you can help me. First, by apologizing to those women and paying for their meals. Second, you can thank them for volunteering to put their lives in danger for your freedom. And third, you can never let such sexist and shitheaded words leave your mouths again."

The blond sports star scowled, arrogance making his perfect face turn ugly. "Why would we do any of that?"

"Because," she told him, allowing the disgust she felt for them

to deepen her voice. “You disrespected members of the military who work hard every day so that shits like you have the freedom to jack off in your daddy’s basement and congratulate yourselves on being men.”

A clapping sound made her look over, and when she saw the two women watching her with huge grins on their faces, Larkin realized she’d been speaking louder than she thought.

She looked around and saw the entire restaurant watching her. Many of the customers were in uniform, as they were only a couple of miles from Joint Base Lewis-McChord, also known as JBLM. Most smiled and nodded at her. Some had already turned back to their meals.

Larkin looked back at the two men in the booth. “So? Are you going to apologize to these women, or do I need to teach you some manners?”

Sports Star laughed. “What are you gonna do? Pour your beer over us? I’m so scared.”

Larkin deliberately lifted her beer to her lips and downed the final few gulps. When her glass was empty, she gripped it tightly in her palm and raised her arm to smash it against the asshole’s head. As she began to swing, though, someone grabbed her wrist and the glass slipped out of her hand, crashing to the floor.

Furious, she looked to see who had stopped her and was surprised to see a familiar face.

“Don’t do this, Captain.”

She had to look at his name tape before she remembered who he was. Cohan. Tim Cohan. They’d been in training together at JBLM a couple of years ago, though they’d never really been friends. She was surprised he remembered her. “I’m not a captain anymore.”

He nodded curtly. “I’d heard. I’m sorry. But still, you don’t want to do this.” Before Larkin could say another word, he dropped her hand and turned to the men at the table. “I suggest you pay for your meals and get the hell out of here.”

Anger made her whole body feel like it was buzzing, but she held herself completely still as the two jerks dropped money on the table and slid from the booth, their faces smug as they brushed past her and disappeared out the door.

Larkin turned on Cohan. "I had it under control."

He stepped back with his hands held out to his sides. "I was only trying to help."

All the anger she'd felt when she'd heard the men's sexist comments earlier still boiled in her belly. It called forth the rage she'd always had to push aside over her years in the Army as she put up with such comments or men like Cohan, who thought every woman needed a man to save the day. Gritting her teeth, she stepped forward until she was right in his face. "Men like you need to back the hell off. You got that? We can't even have a fucking meal without being degraded, and then you step in and tell me I'm not allowed to demand a little common decency?"

"You were about to smash his head in, Bennett."

"Maybe he needed his head smashed in."

Cohan swallowed, his Adam's apple bobbing. "I see your PTSD treatment didn't work."

Larkin reared back. How the hell did he know? What had he heard? She opened her mouth to demand the answers but realized it didn't matter. He didn't matter. None of this mattered.

Deliberately, she turned away from him and reached for the rucksack that served as her purse, which she'd left on the bench seat at her table. Without another glance Cohan's way, she drew out enough money to pay for her meal, dropped it next to her plate, and walked out.

For several long moments, she sat in her car in the dark and battled back the sting behind her eyes.

"I wish you were here, Sarah," she said when she finally calmed down enough to speak. "You would've kicked their asses and been done with it. I looked like an out-of-control loser in there."

She imagined she heard Sarah laughing, and it made her smile. “I did manage to scare those shitheads at least a little, didn’t I? Maybe they’ll think twice before saying crap like that again.”

She started her engine and drove across the street to the U-shaped, one-level motel where she planned to spend the night.

Her room was a total dive. A bed was crammed into a corner with a piece of orange Naugahyde-wrapped plywood attached to the wall as a fake headboard. An old brown towel was thumb-tacked over the window where a curtain should be, and in the bathroom, a round toilet seat barely covered an oblong-shaped toilet bowl. Water dripped into the stained bathtub.

It was just one night. The door locked, and the bed looked clean enough.

She carefully placed Sarah’s urn on the middle of the tiny, scarred table and dropped her travel bag on the chair next to it. The floor looked too questionable to set anything on.

Soon, Larkin had her teeth brushed and her pajamas on, and she settled into bed with the diary.

She had no idea what to expect from the story other than what Sarah had told her, but all she really wanted was to feel close to Sarah.

And so, she unwrapped the leather thong and opened to the first entry.

April 18, 1861: Today, Pa and David answered Lincoln’s call for volunteers for the United States Army, where they will fight against the secessioners and make our country whole again. Pa says they’ll be home in three months, but I hope the Southern rebellion ends much sooner. Pa gave me this diary so I can write down and remember everything to tell him about the farm and Stampers Creek when he returns. I wish he had let me go with him instead. I can shoot a musket as well as, if not better than, David!

We got the beanpoles constructed and vegetables planted.

Ben plowed the north field. Uncle Samuel kept us busy until nearly dark, what with being shorthanded now. Being busy did not keep me from missing Pa and David. Three months is going to be a very long time.

Chapter Two

April 18, 1861: Wilson Family Farm, Stampers Creek, Indiana

You know I can shoot better than David,” Emily Wilson said to her father, not for the first time. She squeezed her hands into fists. Outside the kitchen window, birds filled the morning with song, but she ignored them. Her heart was too heavy. “I can do my duty as well as any man. Why can’t I go with you?”

“And me too,” chimed in her younger brother, Ben, as he handed Pa his satchel of extra clothing and food. “I’m almost eighteen. I can fight.”

Two days had passed since they’d learned of President Lincoln’s call for 75,000 volunteers, and both Emily and Ben had spent all of those days begging their father to let them go with him and David. They’d each expressed their loyalty to their country, but Emily had kept her true motivation—a deep, aching need for adventure—to herself. Pa wouldn’t understand why she would want anything more in life than a home and family.

Pa’s lips pressed together, and he seemed to be considering their arguments. He had taught all three of them a strong sense of patriotism. Pa had been proud to serve the United States of America in the Mexican War, and he often told them stories of

his own father who had served during the War of Independence. “Our family will always stand for what’s right,” he said now. “And the side of right in this uprising is to preserve our great Union. I’m proud you want to be part of that.”

He took a step closer and placed his bear paw of a hand on Ben’s shoulder. “Each of you would be an asset to our great nation’s cause, but soldiers must already be eighteen.” His eyes shifted to Emily. “And a battlefield is no place for a woman.”

“Besides,” he continued as he turned toward the rolltop desk in the adjoining sitting room where he kept the farm’s accounts, “I’m sure we’ll put this rebellion to rest in no time. David and I will be home before you know it.”

When he turned back to them, he held a book in his hands. Shyly, he held it out to Emily. “I, uh, I got this for you. It’s a diary. Keep record of all the goings-on around here so you can tell me all about them when I return.”

Emily took the book and inspected the leather thong wrapped around the stiff, thick book. The cover was carved with a floral design that reminded her of the flowers in Aunt Harriet’s garden. “Thank you, Pa.” She had to bite her tongue to stop herself from begging him yet again to take her with him.

As Ben went to help David fill his satchel with the leftover breakfast biscuits, Pa stepped closer and gently took the book from her. In a low voice so only she heard, he said, “It has a secret compartment built in right here.” With his pocketknife in hand, he pried the leather cover open to reveal a depression hidden inside, only about a quarter-inch deep and the size of Pa’s hand. “Look, there’s even a place to store a pen inside. Keep your treasures in here, and no one will find them.”

Emily knew Pa was referring to Uncle Samuel, who would be looking after them while Pa and David were gone. He was a miserly and sometimes mean old man who was never happy about anything. She pressed the lid back into place and carefully set the book on the kitchen table. “Thank you, Pa. I’ll write

in here every day. Just promise you'll hurry home so you can read it."

"I will." He kissed Emily's forehead before reaching for something behind the kitchen door. "Benjamin, I want you to have my Springfield rifle. You're the man of the house now, and I'm counting on you to protect your sister."

Ben solemnly took the weapon. "Don't you need it for fightin' the secesh?"

Pa shook his head. "The government will provide me with a weapon. This one is for you."

Too soon, it was time for them all to make their way across the potato field to Aunt Harriet and Uncle Samuel's house, where Pa bid farewell to his sister and brother-in-law and their two children.

Aunt Harriet was weeping, making it more difficult for Emily to keep her own tears in check. She swallowed hard, and as Pa turned back to her with another hug, she breathed him in, trying to imprint his scent of soap and leather onto her heart to carry her through the coming days. "You take good care of your brother now," Pa murmured into her ear, "and be helpful to Aunt Harriet and Uncle Samuel. They need you if they're to keep the farm going until we return."

"What if you don't?" Emily had heard his stories from the Mexican War. She knew that even short battles took lives. "What if you don't return?" She bit hard on her bottom lip to stop it from trembling.

Pa pulled back and held her at arm's length. His gray-blue eyes softened and his mustache twitched. "If I should die fighting to preserve our great Union, I'll consider my life well spent. I'll expect each of you to do your part, too." He released her and looked at Ben. "If it comes to that, you'll enlist, but not before your birthday, you hear?"

Ben nodded. His eyes shone with excitement at the prospect.

"And you, dear girl," Pa went on, giving Emily a stern look,

“are to sew socks and flags and roll bandages and help provide anything else our soldiers might need. Women’s work at home is equally as important as the men’s on the battlefield.”

Emily secretly believed she could do more good on the battlefield. “Come home to us, Pa. You too, David.”

“We’ll do our best.” Pa rested his palm on her cheek before turning again to Ben. He pulled him into his arms and pounded his back. “I’ll miss you. Both of you.”

As he stepped back, David took his place and gave them each a hug. “If you’ve a mind to, I’d be obliged if you called on Nancy from time to time. Tell her I’ll be home soon.”

David had confided to Emily just last evening after supper that he wanted to marry Nancy Polson, but he did not think it would be kind of him to propose until after he returned from the fighting. Emily reassured him, saying, “I’ll be sure she does not forget you, Brother.”

“We’d best be going,” Pa said. He tipped his hat to his sister and brother-in-law and turned toward the road, David at his side.

Emily followed them to Aunt Harriet’s garden gate but stayed on the inside when Pa and David stepped onto the road heading north. She dug her fingers into the top rail to stop herself from running after them. Pa didn’t look back at her. He turned his boots north toward Indianapolis where the Indiana regiments were to be formed and mustered into service, and he didn’t look back once. Every few yards, David cast a regretful grin back to her. Emily squeezed harder on the gate and silently willed Pa to turn back and call for her to join them.

But he didn’t. Nor did he turn to wave before he disappeared around the copse of trees marking the edge of their farm. Emily remained at the gate, barely breathing, waiting to see if they’d come back. Every muscle in her body strained to run after her father and older brother because they were her family and they all needed to be together. Even in war.

She had been irrational about losing one of them, or so Pa

told her, ever since Mama died along with the baby she was trying to bring into the world. That was eleven years ago, and to this day, Emily could remember every horrible cry and scream, and the even more horrible silence that followed. She had been seven at the time, and it had been her job to keep Ben, only a year younger, occupied and out of the house. He had gone off fishing with David so she'd crept back into the kitchen to be the first person to hold their new sibling.

Instead of a new sibling, she'd gotten a fear so strong and deep that it still controlled her in most decisions regarding her family. She worked hard every day to keep them healthy and together, and now two of them were walking away and she might never see them again.

"Emily!" Uncle Samuel's demanding voice ripped her from her thoughts. "Stop wasting daylight and do your chores. Your aunt is waiting for you to construct the beanpoles."

She looked toward her uncle and found that everyone, even Ben, had drifted away. Uncle Samuel pointed toward the garden and then, knowing she'd obey, turned and limped into the barn. Samuel had served in the Army during the Mexican War, where he'd met Pa. The story went that Pa had saved Samuel's life when an enemy musket ripped off a chunk of his leg and Pa pulled him to safety before Santa Anna's man could finish the job. After the war Samuel had accompanied Pa home, and that's where he met Harriet and decided to stay.

Samuel walked with a limp now and had to stop and rest often, which is why he wasn't marching off with Pa to join up. Emily secretly wondered which side of this war Samuel would join up with if he were able. He'd been raised in Virginia and still had kinfolk down there. Emily and her brothers knew not to talk to him about states' rights or abolition, and not to even mention the name Lincoln because that would set Samuel off on a tirade none of them wanted to hear.

Emily searched the road one last time for any sign of Pa coming

back for her, but the only thing moving was a cottontail hopping across to nibble young grass on the other side. She finally turned away and saw Ben leading the mule out of the barn to begin the day's plowing. He was as upset as she about being left behind, she knew, but he hid his emotions better than she did.

"Come on, Emily," a little voice said, interrupting her train of thought. "I'll help you."

Emily looked down at her six-year-old cousin just as Ada slipped her tiny hand into hers. Big blue eyes full of sympathy looked up at her. The little girl was the best thing about being left on the farm, Emily decided. She was like a little sister, and Emily had always felt protective of her, what with an angry father and a mother who worked herself to the bone. "Thank you, Ada. I'd like that."

Hand in hand, she and Ada walked to the vegetable garden and set to work constructing beanpoles and sowing seeds in the rows Aunt Harriet dug with her hoe. By the end of the day, they'd have spinach, peas, carrots, cabbage, beans, and onions tucked snug in the ground and covered with a thick layer of straw to ward off frost.

It was one of the longest days of Emily's life. Despite her aunt's and uncle's efforts, she could not stay focused on the tasks at hand, and she found herself constantly shifting her gaze between the close-up work of gardening and the long-distance work of watching the road for Pa and David.

With each passing hour, she grew more despondent. They were gone.

Later that night, after she'd helped Aunt Harriet wash the supper dishes, she and Ben walked the path through the potato field to their own house in the light of the quarter moon. "Do you really think the war will take the entire three months of their enlistment?" Emily asked her brother as she clenched her fingers into fists inside her pockets to make them warmer. The temperature had dropped with the sun, and she wore her father's

old work coat buttoned tight to her chin. Her back ached from stooping to plant seeds, but she dared not complain because Ben had struggled all day with the mule and plow. They'd both appreciate their beds this night.

"Nah. Folks say the secesh aren't serious. Once their men start dying on the battlefield, they'll rejoin the Union like that." He snapped his fingers.

"Do you think there will be a lot of battles?"

"There will be some, yes. But don't you worry. They'll keep each other safe."

They continued walking in silence until they reached their yard, where the house stood completely dark. It was a stark reminder that no one else was inside with a warm fire and welcoming drink. It was just the two of them now.

In unspoken agreement, they delayed going into the empty house and sat on the porch steps together. "Do you think you'll settle here when you find a wife someday?" Emily finally asked, more to break the silence than because she wanted to know.

"Oh, unquestionably," Ben answered, warming to the subject. "David and I talked about this. Pa says we'll inherit his half of the farm, and we can split it between us unless one of us moves away. David says he'll stay, and I want to as well." Ben snatched a long blade of grass from beside the porch steps and set to work shredding it with his thumbnail.

Emily sighed and looked out across their fields. "I can't imagine leaving here, yet it's all I think about some days."

"I don't know why you turned down Teddy Hobson when he asked you to marry him. You could have your own farm on the other side of town right now and a baby on the way."

Emily's face grew hot at the embarrassing reminder. She hadn't even known Teddy was interested in her that way until he started coming around last summer, offering her pa help with the chores and lingering until she was forced to invite him to supper. After two weeks of this, he'd asked her one night to walk

him to the road, and she'd obliged. It was there that he'd asked her to be his bride. She had been so surprised that she'd failed to take his feelings into account and blurted out, "No!"

Poor Teddy. He'd started stammering and shuffling his feet, and she'd realized her mistake. "I'm sorry," she'd tried to explain. "It isn't that I don't want to marry you. I can't right now. My family needs me." When he still refused to look at anything but his worn boots, she tried again. "I'm all they have as far as cooking and cleaning and mending. They need me. Maybe once David brings a bride home, I can think about it. But not right now."

After that, Teddy had not returned to their farm, and whenever she saw him in town, he turned his back to her. Lately, he had Betsy Clayton hanging on his arm.

Emily tucked her skirts tighter under her legs to avoid the cold seeping from the steps. "I don't want to marry someone just so I can have my own farm," she finally said to Ben. "When I marry, it will be because I love him and he loves me."

"It sounds to me like you're going to be hanging around here for a good spell," Ben teased her. "That's fine by me. You can be a doting aunt to my children someday and teach them how to climb trees while their mother and I pretend not to see."

Emily burst out laughing, remembering when she'd taught Ben to climb and they'd taken turns dropping from the highest branch of the chestnut tree into the swimming hole. Mama had been furious with her, but that didn't keep them from repeating the adventure often.

Across the fields, down by the creek, a lone prairie wolf let out a howl. They fell silent as they waited to see if his pack would respond. Only the sound of a bullfrog answered. A feeling of intense loneliness came over Emily, so strong she had to move to keep it from overwhelming her.

She pushed to her feet. "Come on, little brother. I'm sure Uncle Samuel has a long list of chores for us tomorrow. We need our rest."

“You go on in. I’ll just be a moment.”

Emily knew Ben was as bothered as she was by being left at home. Maybe even more so, being a man and all. She laid her hand on his shoulder. “Thanks for watching out for me,” she told him. “I don’t know what I’d do without you.”

“I’ll always watch out for you.” Ben put his hand over hers and gave it a tender squeeze. “Good night, Sister. See you in the morning.”

“Good night, Ben.” With one last look up the darkened road for any signs of Pa, she finally turned and went into the empty house. In the distance, the prairie wolf howled again. Almost immediately it was joined by several others, all yapping together and setting Uncle Samuel’s coonhound to barking.

Emily changed into her nightgown and settled at Pa’s desk to write in the diary he had given her, relieved that the prairie wolf wasn’t all alone.

Chapter Three

Present day: Lakewood, Washington State

Larkin read several entries in the diary, until fatigue forced her to set it aside. The handwriting was difficult to decipher at times, and it forced her to go slowly. Plus, there was only so much a person could find interesting in the daily reports of a nineteenth-century farm woman. Sarah had said the diary had inspired her to join the military, but so far, the woman hadn't stepped foot off her farm.

The next morning, Larkin woke late to an overcast, drizzly day, which suited her mood perfectly. The storage unit awaited her, as did a dinner with her parents and the final drive to Grams's house. The only appealing part of any of that would be the very end, when she would see Grams and she would be home.

She didn't have to move in with anybody. She had enough savings stashed away to rent an apartment and support herself for a year or so before she had to worry about an income. With her disability rating, it might take that long to find a suitable job. But she wasn't ready to even think about a job yet, and she wasn't ready to live alone yet either. She needed safety, love, and, most of all, peace. She needed Grams.

Like a carrot at the end of a stick, the promised reward of

home pulled her through the emotional chore of loading her car with all of Sarah's belongings. All of Larkin's stuff had already been shipped to Grams's, so all she had with her was an overnight bag. There was plenty of room for Sarah's boxes and bags. When the car was full, Larkin stood beside it with the two lamps in her arms, trying to figure out where they might fit.

The only available space was on the passenger seat with the urn, but that felt wrong. Disrespectful. As though the urn were just another object and not holding the remnants of her best friend.

There simply wasn't room, she decided. The lamps most likely had held no sentimental value for Sarah anyway. And Larkin couldn't possibly hold on to everything, could she?

She left them next to the dumpster by the front office. If someone wanted them, they could help themselves.

With the sun already setting, Larkin steered out of the storage facility's gates and turned north on Interstate 5. She welcomed all the childhood memories that came to mind as she drove through Tacoma and into Seattle because they kept her from thinking about Sarah and Afghanistan.

As she drove past Boeing Field, she watched a small jet land in front of the Museum of Flight, where she'd gone on a field trip in fifth grade. All the other girls had been bored, but Larkin had been fascinated. She'd studied every inch of every fighter jet, military helicopter, and bomber there and was the last to board the bus back to the school. In one of her own storage boxes somewhere was a picture of her ten-year-old self smiling from the pilot seat of a McDonnell Douglas F/A-18A Hornet.

She'd spent eight years in the Army and the four years before that at college in Vermont, which meant she hadn't spent much time in Seattle in over a dozen years. As she drove through downtown, it seemed like a new city with all the new skyscrapers and dozens of lit-up cranes constructing even more.

By the time she pulled into her parents' driveway, she was tired of reminiscing and wanted only to eat and go to bed.

Unfortunately, she still had to spend a couple of hours talking and making her parents believe she was fine.

“Here I go,” she said to Sarah, even though she still had her hands wrapped around her steering wheel. “Wish me luck.”

She moved to open her door but paused as guilt nagged at her. Sarah had died estranged from her family. Maybe Larkin should try harder with her own mother. The curtains on the front window twitched, and she knew she’d been spotted. No backing out now. No doubt Mom was winding up for a scolding about Larkin taking too long. “She really brings out the worst in me. Always has,” Larkin muttered aloud, reaching again for her door handle.

The front door opened, spilling light onto the wet flagstone steps winding through the professionally landscaped yard. Larkin’s mom stood in the doorway, wearing slacks and a blue sweater, looking as if she’d spent the day at her office rather than at home like everyone else on a Sunday. Sighing, Larkin pushed open her car door and got out. A blast of cold air hit her, carrying raindrops that pelted her skin. She should have put on her coat, but figuring she was already wet and cold, she decided to run to the front door, ignoring the pain in her bad knee.

“Hi, Mom,” she said, reaching for a hug.

Kat Bennett took a step back. “You’re all wet! Come in. I’ll get you a towel.”

Larkin’s arms dropped to her sides, and she followed her mom into the grand entry hall where a curving staircase led to the bedrooms upstairs. Larkin remembered feeling like a princess floating down those stairs on prom night as her date gaped from where she stood now.

“Here.” Her mom shoved a fluffy bath towel into her hands. “You can leave your shoes on the tile in the powder room. I don’t want water staining the hardwoods.”

Larkin did as she was told, taking a moment to rub the towel over her wet hair and arms before leaving it folded on

the powder-room sink. When she emerged, she followed the sound of instrumental music into the kitchen, where her mother poured a glass of wine and her father sat at the granite island in front of his laptop. When he saw her, he closed it, slid off his barstool, and came to her with open arms that he wrapped around her in a hug that took her back to her childhood and all the nights when he'd gotten home from work at his brokerage office. "How's my girl?" he asked, giving her a squeeze.

Larkin smiled as the hug ended and she got a good look at her father. His hair had turned whiter over the last year. She hadn't noticed during their Skype video chats. "I'm good," she answered. "How are you? Work keeping you busy?"

"You know it." He motioned toward the couches in the adjoining great room. "Here, come sit. Want a glass of wine? Dinner should arrive any minute."

Larkin took the glass and settled cross-legged into the corner of the couch where she'd always sat as a teenager. This spot on the leather sectional had the best view of the TV, and she'd spent countless hours stretched out here with her friends and cousins. On the side wall hung an unfamiliar painting with demure splashes of pale color. "Is that new?" she asked, searching for something to talk about.

"It is," Mom answered as she took the armchair by the fireplace and primly crossed her legs. She was still wearing heels. She went on to tell Larkin everything she knew about the artist and the gallery where she'd bought the painting. It was all Larkin could do to feign interest.

The doorbell rang, and Kat gracefully got to her feet to answer it. She returned carrying a huge paper shopping bag full of boxes emitting a delicious aroma. "I hope you like dumplings. This place makes the best outside of Taiwan."

Larkin didn't care what she ate, so she agreed that she did, even though she doubted she'd ever eaten dumplings. The three of them sat at the dining room table, where candles had already

been lit and linen napkins waited at each place setting, making Larkin mentally roll her eyes. Would it kill her mother to eat straight from a cardboard box for once?

“Try this one first,” her dad said, pointing with his chopsticks to a white pocket of dough on her plate that was artfully crimped along one side. “It’s pork and vegetable. My favorite.” He expertly picked the dumpling up and placed it on a spoon he held in his left hand and then poked it open with his chopstick so the juices spilled out onto the spoon. After carefully blowing on it, he popped the dumpling and juice into his mouth and moaned in delight.

Larkin copied him, realizing as she did that if she’d stuck the dumpling straight into her mouth, the hot juices inside would have burned her. She, too, moaned in appreciation. Dad had not been exaggerating. It was delicious.

“I’m glad you were able to stop by today, Larkin,” her mother said as she used a knife to cut her dumpling in half on her plate rather than follow the messy process her husband had performed. “I know you wanted to go straight to Grams’s house, but what would people think if they knew my daughter drove right past without stopping to see us after all she’s been through this year? It’s bad enough that you don’t want to live here.” She placed a bite in her mouth and chewed.

Larkin had to force her own bite down her throat, which had threatened to close up at her mother’s words. *What would people think?* That was the problem. That was always the problem with her mother. What would people think of her? Larkin knew her mother didn’t really care about Larkin herself. She only cared about how *she* looked to anyone who might be watching and judging, and a daughter who came home from war and didn’t stop to do the whole my-daughter-is-finally-home routine was asking for criticism.

Maybe that was a side effect of her mother’s profession. Kat McKinnon Bennett had founded and ran a successful skin-care

and cosmetics business. Her entire identity was wrapped up in how she looked.

Kat had always hated that her only daughter didn't care one tiny bit about wearing makeup or painting her nails or wearing the latest fashions. Except for on prom night and a few other times in her life, Larkin had never been interested in that stuff. She clipped her nails short, kept her boring brown hair in a style requiring the least amount of upkeep and satisfying Army regulation, and usually wore nothing more on her face than lip balm. A fancy night out might warrant a swipe of mascara and lipstick, but that was it.

And to make matters even worse, she'd chosen a dirty, smelly, and dangerous career. To her mother, she might as well be an alien.

Her dad tried to change the subject. "We've been so worried about you, Lark."

Larkin swallowed a retort and plastered on a smile. "I'm still in one piece, despite what they might have told you."

Her mother let out an unladylike snort of disgust. "They told us you nearly died in the blast and that at Landstuhl you tried to kill yourself. We were all set to fly over to see you, but they said you refused."

A stab of regret shot through Larkin as she saw the hurt in her mother's eyes. She looked away and sipped her wine, trying to come up with a response that wouldn't ignite more pain nor reveal too much. Outside the wall of windows, she could see the lights of Kirkland shining across Lake Washington, as they always had. The view calmed her, and she was able to turn back toward her mom. "I knew they were sending me stateside. There was no reason for you to go all the way to Germany. And then, when I got back, I went straight into inpatient treatment for six months. There wasn't time."

Mom leaned over and laid a hand on top of Larkin's. Kat's hand was pale and unlined, her nails gently rounded and

lacquered in the red color she'd always favored. Larkin's hand, though thirty-one years younger, was marred with scars, sunspots, and the beginnings of wrinkles from all her time in the sun. She slowly pulled her hand away and hid it under the table on her lap.

Dad tried to say something, but his voice failed him and he covered it with a cough. He averted his eyes from Larkin and stared out the windows.

Mom waited a beat. "Why did you try to kill yourself?"

A sudden, familiar rage engulfed Larkin, and she wanted nothing more than to leave. Every muscle in her body strained to stand and walk out of this house, far away from this conversation and every reminder of what had happened. Far away from her mother's questions and judgments.

But the look on her mother's face told her that if she did, her mother would march after her and harass her until she got some answers.

Larkin shot a look at her dad, hoping he might help, but he looked like he was about to cry. His watery eyes were a punch to her gut.

She studied the crown molding as she searched her brain for words to explain the one thing she didn't want to talk about at all.

Her dad prompted, "Maybe you could tell us about the day of the bombing?"

Larkin snapped her gaze to meet her father's. "No. I won't discuss that."

Surprise flashed across his face. He nodded. "Okay. What can you talk about?"

"For heaven's sake, Christian. She's not a baby." Mom set aside her fork and leaned toward Larkin, staring her down. "We know they sent you to Landstuhl, Germany, for surgery and that you were supposed to return to your unit in Kandahar once you healed, but that something happened and they instead put you

on psych watch and eventually gave you a medical discharge. What did you do?"

The question—*what did you do?*—echoed in Larkin's brain. Her parents knew she'd tried to kill herself. They knew how she'd tried to do it. So the only thing her mother could be asking, she figured, was what had she messed up so badly that it led her to take such drastic action. Mom didn't ask what happened to her; she asked what Larkin had done, as though there were no other explanations. The only possible reason, in Mom's mind, for Larkin trying to kill herself was because she'd messed up in a big way.

And, of course, her mother was right.

They deserved the truth. As much as she could voice.

For several moments, Larkin concentrated on drawing air into her lungs and releasing it along with the tension in her body, as her therapist had taught her to do. When her heartbeat had slowed to a pace that no longer made her feel like throwing up, she started talking, directing her words to the food on her plate to avoid the emotions she knew she'd see in her parents' eyes. "Like I said, I won't talk about the...the bombing. But like you said, I was injured, and I was flown to Germany where I was patched up. They said I could return to my company once I'd healed enough, but then they told me about Sarah and the others, and I started having nightmares and things."

"Things? What sorts of things?"

Another deep breath. "Visions. Hallucinations. Outbursts."

Mom must have heard the anger in Larkin's voice because she didn't ask anything else. The silence stretched over them.

"Go on, Lark," Dad urged. "You're safe."

Unexpected tears surged up her throat, and she looked down at her lap to hide them. The only sound in the room was the music on the sound system. She cleared her throat. "I managed to get my hands on some drugs. I don't even know what they were, but I figured if I took the whole bottle, they'd do the job."

Mom gasped. Dad made an anguished sound.

“The nurse found me right away, and they pumped my stomach. A few days later, I was informed that I would not be returning to Afghanistan and would instead be flying to Memphis for PTSD treatment.” Relieved she was finally near the end of the story, Larkin lifted her chin. “After the six-month inpatient program, I returned to Fort Leonard Wood where I was outprocessed and officially given a medical discharge.”

“Did they give you a pension or any benefits for all your years of service?”

Larkin’s mouth dropped open. “Seriously, Mom? That’s your question?”

Mom sputtered an explanation, but Larkin cut her off. “Don’t worry about me. I’ll be fine.” She started eating again to signal the end of their conversation, though she no longer tasted the food.

“Are you in counseling?”

Larkin avoided looking at her mother. “Yes, I have a therapist I call once a week until I find someone local.” They didn’t need to know she hadn’t called her therapist in two weeks and she had no plans to look for a local doctor. She was tired of talking about her problems and ready to be normal for a change. Ready for a fresh start.

“Do we need to worry you’re going to commit suicide? Because that would kill Grams to find you, you know.”

Larkin gritted her teeth. Was her mother really more worried about Grams finding Larkin’s body than about Larkin herself? “No, Mom. I’m not going to kill myself.” She folded her napkin and placed it on the table next to her plate, no longer hungry.

“What about—”

Larkin held up her hand to cut off her mother’s next asinine question. “I should have let you guys come see me, or at the very least called you more often. I’m sorry I didn’t, and I thank you for worrying about me. I needed time. I still need time to

figure out what to do with the rest of my life. I thought I was going to be in the Army forever. I loved my job. It gave me purpose. Now I don't have any purpose, and all I seem to be good at is disappointing people. But I'm trying, okay? I'm trying."

She refused to break down. Already, she'd opened herself up more than was comfortable. Without giving them a chance to respond, she pushed back from the table and carried her plate to the kitchen where she dumped the food in the trash and stood over the sink taking several deep breaths. Her chest still felt hot, so she grabbed a glass from the cupboard, filled it from the tap, and drank the whole thing without pause.

"We have sparkling water in the fridge if you'd prefer."

Larkin carefully placed her glass and plate in the dishwasher. "No, I'm fine." Forcing a wide smile, she looked at her mother, who had propped one hip against the kitchen island, wineglass in hand. "Thank you for dinner, Mom. I really appreciate it. I'd better get going, though. It's been a long trip, and I'm tired."

"Already?" Mom left her half-full wineglass on the counter. "I have something for you. You'll be looking for a job, and I found a website that has all kinds of ideas for people with psychology degrees—"

"No." Larkin cut her off and put a hand on her arm. "I'm not ready. Please. I just need time."

Mom's face filled with such confusion that it would have been comical had Larkin not been so emotional already. She was in a place where most mornings it took all of her energy to get out of bed. Someone like her mother—who had been driven toward success her whole life and for whom everything had fallen into place—could not comprehend what this was like.

Her father came into the kitchen, and Larkin went to him. "I'm heading out, Dad." She stepped into his embrace. "I'll see you later," she said, not willing to commit to anything more concrete.

When she stepped away from her dad, her mom was there, and this time, she opened her arms to Larkin. Larkin hugged her

and felt like the little girl she'd been who'd wanted so badly for her mother to love her, but who could never figure out how to make that happen. "Bye, Mom. Thanks again."

In the car, she backed out of the driveway and murmured sarcastically to Sarah, "That was fun." As she turned onto the main road, she added, "Grams's house will be different."

A sense of peace filled the car, and Larkin knew Sarah understood. Anytime they'd talked of home while on deployment, Larkin had always talked about her grandparents' house in Woodinville. Finally, she was going home.