

DISTANT SHORES,
SILENT THUNDER

by
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PROLOGUE

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*T*rauma alert STAT...trauma admitting. Trauma alert
STAT...trauma admitting. Trauma alert STAT...

Dr. KT O'Bannon sprinted down the crowded hall toward the trauma bay at Boston Hospital, dodging stretchers, visitors, and hospital personnel with the agility that had made her an All-American hurdler in college, one hand pressing the stethoscope draped around her neck against her chest to prevent it from flying off. The emergency call being broadcast through the overhead speakers was the sixth trauma alert of the day. That often happened on weekends in the summer, especially when the weather was as hot as it was this particular Saturday evening. Drivers were short-tempered and drove too quickly on roads that were too congested for even the normal speed limit. People partied too hard and too often in backyards and bars, becoming victims of accidents and assaults. And of course, there were always those individuals who chose to settle their disputes with knives and guns rather than fists. Regardless of the mechanism of injury—vehicular, blunt, or penetrating—KT handled them all. And she loved it. Loved the excitement of never knowing what challenge the next crisis might present, the rush of being on the firing line—of being the one making the life-and-death calls—and the incredible high of beating the odds one more time and snatching another life from the jaws of death.

Security STAT...trauma admitting. Security STAT...trauma admitting. Security STAT...trauma admitting.

KT hesitated for only a second, wondering at the unusual request, before she shouldered through the double doors of the

RADCLYFE

trauma admitting area. Unlike the emergency room proper, which was partitioned into multiple curtained cubicles for the treatment of patients with minor injuries or medical problems of all types, the trauma area was designed as a fully functioning operating room. As such, it consisted of a single forty-by-forty-foot room with several adjustable padded operating tables aligned in the middle of the space beneath huge circular overhead halogen lights. Every available inch along the walls was occupied by bins of supplies, including full surgical packs containing all the instruments required to perform any type of invasive surgery. There was even a power drill to perform a craniotomy—the removal of a section of the skull in the event that it was necessary to relieve acute pressure on the brain.

Even though KT did not know what life-threatening problem awaited her, the basic routine, repeated thousands of times over the past fifteen years, was so familiar that the natural surge of anxiety evoked by the disembodied voice over the hospital intercom system was softened to a distant thunder in the background of her consciousness. She *did* know with absolute certainty that the nurses, residents, EMTs, and trauma techs would already have the resuscitation well underway, functioning efficiently without her direction. Establishing the ABCs of resuscitation—airway, breathing, and circulation—was second nature to even rank beginners after a few days in the trauma unit. In all likelihood, an endotracheal tube would already have been placed into the trachea to deliver oxygen, IVs started to augment blood volume and support circulation, and drainage tubes inserted into the bladder and stomach to monitor output and control secretions. *Her* greatest contribution was going to be organizing and prioritizing treatment, including managing the often complicated drug therapy, and performing whatever urgent surgical intervention might be needed to control hemorrhage or maintain an airway.

Mentally gearing herself for battle, KT swept the room with a confident gaze and a split second later realized that something was terribly wrong. A patient *did* lie on the table in the center of the room—a middle-aged Asian male whose short-sleeved, checked shirt was soaked with blood—but the usual milling mass of individuals who made up the trauma team and who *should* have

Distant Shores, Silent Thunder

been surrounding him was absent. Instead, three women and two men huddled in a semicircle on the far side of the room facing the door that KT had just barreled through, and they all appeared to be staring at another man, who jittered from foot to foot at the base of the patient's bed, his back to KT.

"What's going on?" KT said abruptly as she started forward. She didn't even have time to flinch away when the man pivoted sharply and slashed her right cheek with a long, thin-bladed knife. Shocked more by the absurdity of the act than the pain, KT jerked to a halt. "What—"

Out of the corner of her eye she saw the knife arcing back—a glinting slice of deadly silver, and this time it was headed for her throat. She did the only thing she could. She blocked the weapon with her open hand. The blade, honed to a razor's edge, sliced with terrible efficiency across her palm. Someone screamed in the distance.

KT's vision wavered as blood splattered her face and chest. Her legs were suddenly so weak that she dropped to her knees. The sudden change in position probably saved her life, because the next thrust of the knife passed high over her left shoulder without touching her. Then as she hunched forward, cradling her injured hand against her chest in an attempt to stop the bleeding, the room exploded into pandemonium. Three security guards burst through the doors amidst chaotic shouts and the clatter of instrument trays being knocked to the floor. Kneeling in the center of the room, surrounded by the glittering stainless steel instruments and swatches of blood, KT was unaware of her assailant being subdued and dragged away, oblivious to the blood streaming steadily down her face, soaking into her scrub shirt, and pooling on the floor between her legs, unconscious of the frantic voices calling her name. Her attention was riveted to her hand. Her befuddled mind couldn't make sense of what she saw in the depths of the wound, but in the core of her being, she knew.

"Oh God," she whispered. "Oh God, oh God...I can't move my fingers."

CHAPTER ONE

Four Weeks Later, Provincetown, Massachusetts

Love? Come here and look at this,” Reese Conlon said with a note of wonder. “She’s following my finger.”

Tory King placed a hand on her lover’s back and looked over Reese’s shoulder at the baby cradled in her arms. Reese, seated in a rocking chair in front of the double glass doors that led out to the deck overlooking Provincetown Harbor, was feeding their infant daughter from a plastic bottle filled with the breast milk that Tory had pumped that morning. Regina’s deep blue eyes were open, and occasionally she blinked as she sucked on the soft plastic nipple in her mouth. Intermittently, Reese held her index finger in the air a few inches above the baby’s face and waved it. “See that? Just then.”

The excitement in Reese’s voice was so endearing that Tory had to catch her bottom lip between her teeth to stifle a laugh. “It’s still a little soon for her to be focusing, honey. It’ll probably be another month or so.”

“Well, she does *everything* early.” Reese’s tone was only slightly aggrieved. “She showed up almost two months early, then she was ready to come home from the hospital three weeks sooner than the pediatricians predicted, and she already sleeps through the night. Well, *most* nights. At the rate she’s going, she’ll probably be walking by the time she’s six months old.” Reese turned her head and glanced up at Tory, her generous mouth quirked into a grin that deepened the dimple low on her right cheek. “You have to admit she’s amazing.”

It was hard for Tory to decide which of the two was the more beautiful: Reese with her coal black hair, deep blue eyes, and heart-

stoppingly handsome features, or the baby whose eyes were as blue as Reese's, but whose dark brown hair held hints of red and gold like her own. Together, they stilled the breath in her chest. Afraid that Reese would see the tears that quickly rose to tremble dangerously on her lashes, Tory pressed her cheek to the top of Reese's head and wrapped both arms around her shoulders from behind. "I love you."

Reese tilted her head back again and kissed the side of Tory's neck. "You just love me because *I* got up at four o'clock the last two nights."

"Mmm, there is that, I suppose." Tory's tone was teasing, but she felt a twinge of guilt knowing that she'd been only dimly aware of the baby fussing and of Reese getting up to see to her. It was hard to admit that she was just recently beginning to regain her strength after the tumultuous emergency Cesarean section that had been necessary when she'd gone into labor prematurely. Precipitous labor and emergency surgery took a toll on anyone, but she was nearing forty, and her recovery had been slower than she would have liked. Although Reese would never complain, Tory knew that her lover had been shouldering more than her share of the household chores as well as the child care while still fulfilling her obligations as Provincetown's deputy sheriff. "Things should get easier next week when the tourist season is over and the activity quiets down in town. Then you won't be working quite so hard."

"I'm fine," Reese said quickly. And she was. She'd never been happier in her life. She had never expected to fall in love or to have a family. Not because she didn't believe in those things, but because all she had ever envisioned for herself was a career in the Marine Corps. She'd been raised in a military family, had trained from the time she was a teenager to follow in her father's footsteps, and had become an exemplary career Marine officer. It wasn't until four years earlier that she had grown restless, plagued by the persistent sensation that something in her life was missing—something that she could not name because she had never thought to seek it. It had taken leaving active duty and traveling across the country to a small fishing village on the very tip of Cape Cod for her to discover that what she longed for was a love of her own. She had that now, with Dr. Victoria King, Provincetown's resident physician, and

Distant Shores, Silent Thunder

their newborn daughter, Regina. “Everything is perfect.”

The words made Tory tremble because she believed them while still fearing, in the deepest recesses of her heart, that happiness might be a transient accident destined to disappear. There was a reason for that fear, but it lay in her past, and she would not allow the past to follow her here. Banishing old disappointments, she tightened her hold on her lover and kissed her neck. “Do you mind watching her while I run over to the clinic?”

“Uh-uh.” Reese turned in the chair and checked the wall clock that hung in the alcove between the large open living room and the adjoining kitchen-dining area. “I have to be at the *dojo* in two hours. Think you’ll be back by then?”

“Absolutely. I’m sure Dan is swamped. I’ll probably be lucky to catch him free for a few minutes between patients.”

Reese rose, shifting the baby into the crook of her arm, and crossed to the kitchen where she deposited the empty baby bottle on the counter. “Is he definitely leaving next week?”

“I think so.” Tory tried hard to keep the worry from her voice. Dan Riley was a general practitioner from Pennsylvania who had worked for the last few months in the East End Health Clinic, Tory’s medical facility. Tory hadn’t anticipated that Dan would need to shoulder the entire weight of her practice, but Regina’s early arrival had altered those plans. Since the baby’s birth in July, Dan had been doing the work of two doctors. During the summer, when Provincetown’s population swelled to thirty thousand or more, the clinic staff was constantly busy caring for tourists with minor injuries and medical problems in addition to providing routine healthcare to the three thousand year-round residents. Now, an emergency had arisen with Dan’s wife’s family, and *he* needed to return to Pittsburgh as soon as possible rather than in December, when he had expected to leave. “I managed to get an ad in the Boston papers yesterday, and I’ve got every contact I can think of putting out the word that I’m looking for someone to fill his spot right away.”

“You’ll find someone.”

“Of course.” Tory tried to sound optimistic, but they both knew that Provincetown in the off-season was not the kind of place that people flocked to. The winters were long and cold, and the

village was very quiet with almost nothing to offer in the way of entertainment from November to May. Even the cinema and many of the restaurants closed during the off-season. She would be very lucky to find someone to take Dan's place at this time of year. "I thought I'd talk to Kate later and see if she'd be available to watch Reggie a few more hours every day."

"I'm sure my mother would be delighted to watch Reggie all day, every day," Reese said quietly, leaning back against the waist-high breakfast counter and regarding Tory solemnly. "But you're not thinking about trying to handle the clinic yourself, are you?"

"I know it's soon, but babies younger than Reggie go to day care without any problems—"

"Tor. I'm not talking about Reggie. I'm talking about you." Reese crossed the room and lifted her free hand to Tory's cheek, trailing her fingers into the thick hair at the back of Tory's neck. "You've lost weight, you still tire easily, and—"

Tory turned her head and pressed her lips to Reese's palm, then wrapped her arm around Reese's waist. "I know. But I'm feeling much better every day."

Reese kissed Tory softly. "Let's wait and see what happens with the ads."

"All right," Tory relented, not wanting to worry Reese any further. She returned the kiss swiftly and forced a smile. "I'm sure something will work out."

"Me, too."

"I'll see you soon."

"Be careful," Reese called as Tory gathered her things and started out the door. She tried hard to keep the frustration from her voice, because she knew how seriously Tory took her responsibilities to the community. Still, the only thing that mattered to Reese was that Tory, and now Reggie, were safe and healthy. *Provincetown will just have to get along without a full-time doctor if Tory can't find a replacement.*



Tory walked into the busy waiting room at her clinic and felt instantly at home. Two months away, and despite the daily joy of

Distant Shores, Silent Thunder

her new daughter, she was starting to seriously miss her medical practice. Randy Schuyler—svelte, blond, and almost too pretty to be a man—looked up from behind the reception counter, a single frown line marring his otherwise flawless forehead. Beautiful long lashes that made many a woman weep lowered over his liquid brown eyes as he fixed her with a steely stare. “Go away. You’re on maternity leave, and Dan is far too busy to talk to you.”

“Hi, sweetie,” Tory said brightly in passing. She edged around the counter, sidling between the chairs crowded into every inch of floor space. *I’m going to need to put on an addition at this rate.*

“Tory,” Randy said, a pleading note in his voice now. “Look at the waiting room.”

She didn’t need to. Her practiced eye had already taken in the more than half dozen adults and children waiting to be seen. She stopped and picked up the top chart in the pile by Randy’s left hand.

“Martha?” Tory called.

“Hello, Dr. King,” an elderly woman responded from a seat in the corner. “How are you, dear?”

“I’m wonderful. Come on back, and let’s see how your blood pressure is doing.”

An hour and fifteen minutes later, she’d seen six patients and was sitting behind her desk charting when Dan Riley walked in. Tory smiled. “Hi. Let me just finish this note, and I’ll get out of your way.”

Dan, a solidly built forty-year-old with curly hair just beginning to gray, rimless glasses, and an angelic face, shook his head and flopped into one of the two chairs. “No problem. It’s your desk, after all.”

“How’s it going?” She hadn’t seen him for several days, and he looked thinner than she recalled. Certainly the circles under his eyes were darker. “How’s your wife’s dad?”

“He’s holding his own, but I think it’s going to be a long haul.”

“Listen, Dan, I know it’s hard for both you and your wife with you not being there. As soon as—”

“Ruth understands,” Dan said swiftly. “She knows I can’t just leave without someone to cover for me. I’ve talked to all my father-

in-law's doctors about his treatment, *and* I check in a couple times a day to make sure his condition hasn't changed."

"It's still not the same as being there." Tory made a decision, the one she should've made eight days earlier when Dan's father-in-law suffered an intracranial hemorrhage from a ruptured aneurysm. "If I don't have someone to replace you in a day or two, I'll take over myself so that you can join her. I'm sure the entire family will feel better if you're there in person to handle things."

"I thought your obstetrician said you couldn't go back to work for a full three months after your delivery."

"It's been two—and I'm doing fine." In truth, it would be difficult, because she still couldn't make it through the entire day without a nap in the afternoon. Nevertheless, she could split up the patients between morning and evening hours if she needed to take a break in the middle of the day. At least her leg had improved to the point where she no longer used her cane and only occasionally fell back on the lightweight ankle cast for support. The muscles in her damaged calf would never regenerate, but with steady, persistent training she'd regained enough strength in the surrounding musculature to support her damaged ankle without the heavy, hinged metal brace. Standing all day wouldn't be as difficult as it had been in the years just after her accident. "I can handle it, especially now that the season is almost over."

Dan looked skeptical. "Most of the patients I'm seeing every day are regulars. This isn't a very big town, but you're the main primary care doctor. The patient load's not going to get that much lighter, even without the tourists."

"I'll manage," Tory said firmly. She glanced at her watch. "I need to get home so Reese can get to class. Tell your wife that Saturday morning, you'll be on your way to Pittsburgh."

"It's Labor Day weekend! I can't leave you then."

Tory simply shook her head. "I mean it, Dan. It's time for you to go home." *And for me to come back to work.*



Reese tied the belt of her *hakama* over her *gi*, bowed to the *kamiza*—the ceremonial altar which consisted of a simple

Distant Shores, Silent Thunder

shelf of hand-carved wood on which stood a small vase of dried wildflowers—and stepped barefoot onto the tatami mats that covered three quarters of the main floor in the Provincetown Martial Arts Center, the *dojo* that she ran out of a converted garage on the far east end of Bradford Street. Her senior student was already present, sitting on the far end of the mat in *seiza*—knees bent, weight back on her heels, hands resting palms down on her thighs. Bri Parker’s eyes were closed as she readied herself for training. Reese crossed quickly to the center of the room and assumed the same position, facing Bri and the other students who were beginning to line up silently side by side. Reese also closed her eyes, cleared her mind, and slowed her breathing until she was in a state of relaxed readiness. Her mind and body were united, and from that place of harmony, she was prepared to do battle.

Expelling her breath slowly, Reese opened her eyes, bent her forehead to the mat between her steeped hands, and greeted her class in Japanese. The ten students returned her bow and her greeting, and for the next hour, the men and women trained in the art of jujitsu. Reese moved silently between the partners, observing and occasionally stepping in to demonstrate a technique before moving off again. Her classes were traditional in the sense that the students learned by performing and by watching Reese and Bri. Before Tory’s pregnancy had become too advanced, *she’d* been one of the senior students, although her formal training had been in hapkido, a Korean style similar to the Japanese martial art of aikido. All three styles, however, bore similarities in their use of joint locks, shoulder throws, and defensive blocks and kicks.

After Reese dismissed the class, Bri approached and waited a few feet away. Other than the fact that Reese was an inch taller and thirty pounds of muscle heavier, they were so close in appearance, with the same thick black hair and cobalt blue eyes, that strangers often mistook Bri for Reese’s younger sister. Reese removed her *hakama* and held it out to Bri. “Thank you.”

“It is an honor, *sensei*,” Bri replied as she always did, for it was customary for the senior student to fold the *sensei*’s ceremonial outer garment.

Reese nodded in acknowledgment and glanced toward the door, where a petite brunette with whiskey-colored eyes waited,

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her gaze focused intently on Bri. Allie Tremont was Reese's newest student as well as the newest member of the sheriff's department, having just transferred from nearby Wellfleet. The look of unguarded appreciation on Allie's face took Reese by surprise. Surely Allie knew that Bri was involved. Reese turned at the sound of Bri's voice.

"Here you are, *sensei*."

Reese took the folded garment, and the two women walked together to the end of the mat, bowed, and then stepped off.

"The second Sunday in October," Reese said. "I've asked a test board to convene for your black belt test."

"I...oh wow...I..." Bri's voice caught and she swallowed. "Yes, *sensei*. Thank you."

For the first time, Reese smiled. "No need for thanks."

"Oh, man. Wait until I tell Carre." Then, remembering that *telling* her lover about one of the biggest events in her life was the only way that she would be able to share it with her, a cloud passed across Bri's face and the light in her eyes dimmed.

"I'm sure she's going to think it's great," Reese said as she clapped Bri on the shoulder.

"Yeah. She will." Subdued, Bri looked over to where Allie still waited and forced a smile. "Hey," she said as she started toward the brunette, "guess what?"

Reese waited for them to change and followed them to the door. As she locked up, she watched Allie climb onto the back of Bri's motorcycle and wrap her arms around the rangy youth's midsection. A few seconds later, Bri gunned the motorcycle down the driveway and onto the road with Allie pressed tightly to her back.

"Perfect," Reese muttered to herself as she walked toward her Blazer.