

ONE  
*More*  
TIME

MANDY  
MAGRO

FICTION



12 December 1974

Dearest Mr Charlie Wilson,

I am writing to thank you for your heartfelt letter. I wish it were under different circumstances that we are now in contact with one another.

It makes me so very proud to know that my darling Joey saved you from death on the battlefield of Vietnam. He is a compassionate man, my husband. I still find it hard to believe he's listed as missing in action. I cannot – and will not – accept that he's not coming home to the children and me. Every day, I wake trusting it will be the day he's found and returned home to us in Alabama, and every night, I get back onto my knees and pray it will be tomorrow that he will be at our door. I will not give up on him, not ever.

I know you said that you would hopefully be able to return to Vietnam to track him down and save him from a terrible fate as a possible POW. All I can say to that is that if you ever get the chance and you are his saviour, I would be forever grateful to you for bringing my one true love home to me, and our two beautiful children.

Bless you and yours,

Margaret Mary Baker

# PART I

## CHAPTER

# 1

### **17 September – modern day**

Holding her future in trembling hands, Grace Burrows took one last tear-blurred look at the results of her recent blood test. Her doctor had been gentle when delivering the shocking news, but that hadn't softened the blow. After thirty-odd years spent nursing people through sickness, she understood surviving this would take a miracle, and her long life had been fairly short on those. But she still believed in the power of prayer – unanswered or not – and the potency of positive thinking. That's what she needed, now more than ever.

Breathing in deeply, she folded up the document and tucked it into her safe spot – beneath her mattress. There were too many prying eyes in her house to risk such information being seen. Flattening the quilt and then straightening her weary bones, she rubbed her lower back. Arthritis was making her left hip achingly

tender, and her knees didn't have much suspension left. But even though her body was failing, getting older was still a wonderful gift, not least because it meant more time with her daughter and beloved grandchildren.

Taking unhurried steps toward the golden shafts of sunlight stretching across the oak floorboards, she pondered her next move. She had to tell her loved ones the news, but she didn't know quite how to put it into words. Besides, the timing was off—it would be selfish of her to break it to them now.

She drew a slow, steady breath, then sighed it away. After a day filled with a steady stream of out-of-town visitors, and with only an hour until her seventieth birthday celebrations began, she had sought to steal a few moments to herself before once again putting on a brave face.

Gone were the days where she yearned for companionship and conversation, although it had been lovely catching up with people she hadn't seen in years. With her deteriorating health, she was well aware it could be the last time, and it made every moment spent with her family and friends bittersweet. Tonight was going to be emotional. She just hoped she made it through without breaking down.

She parted the blackout curtains, passed through the French doors, then raised a hand to shield her eyes. Resting against the wrought-iron railings of her top-floor balcony, she blinked into the stunning view. The setting sun was stealing the warmth of the glorious spring day, and the cool sea breeze stirred the hem of her crimson cocktail dress and brushed the few wisps of silver hair she'd left loose from her chignon against her cheeks. Even after calling Waterside Estate home for the past forty years, she'd never tired of the view. How could she, when the only thing

separating her from the softly rolling hills of Moonflower Acres was the soothing lap of the turquoise ocean upon the white-sand shores of Sapphire Bay? Her hometown was heaven on earth.

Her thoughts drifted back. She'd quite often stood here, wondering what her life would've been like if she'd stayed at Moonflower Acres, with her first and – dare she say it? – only true love. She was fairly certain she wouldn't have ever been able to move past the hurt, after he'd broken her heart so categorically. She'd forgiven him for deserting her and their baby girl, but she'd never forgotten the pain of Charlie Wilson's hardheartedness.

As she gazed out at the myriad boats bobbing in the marina, her late husband's face came to mind. She smiled softly as she reflexively twisted her wedding band. She adored anything to do with the ocean, but Rodger Burrows had sadly not shared her passion, his predisposition to seasickness making it all too much. 'Opposites attract' had been the embodiment of their relationship, and the saying had proved to be both a blessing and a curse. They'd had so many contradictions – their taste in music, religious beliefs, even the way they each liked their steak cooked, and yet she'd loved him so. How could she not? Right from the start, when she'd been a broken, guarded young woman, he'd been gentle with her, simply content in her company, and had quickly proven to be a devoted stepfather. And in all their years together, he had never raised his voice to her, not even once. If only they'd been able to have children, maybe there would have been something to fill the many silences that had hung between them, especially in the later years.

Shifting her gaze closer to home, she admired the gardens she meticulously tended. What had been a row of tiny plants and

buried seedlings all those years ago was now a flourishing display of tropical trees and shrubs, bursting with differing shades of blooms, and her lemon, orange and limes trees were abundant with fruit. It was a haven for the birds, butterflies and bees she liked to capture in photos. As with anything in life, consistent love and attention could yield great things.

Gardening had always been one of her three greatest passions in life, along with dancing and baking. She pondered how much longer she had to enjoy such simple pleasures. A month? A year? Either way, she was going to fight until her very last breath. She still had lots of life to live.

Making her way back inside, she eased onto the seat at her mahogany duchess. Not one for lots of make-up, she applied some lipstick and blush, then brought her fingertips to the crinkles framing the corners of her sea-green eyes. Laugh lines, her darling daughter Hope preferred to call them. Grace liked to agree, even though she knew that though she'd laughed a lot throughout her seventy years, some of those lines were due to disappointments and heartbreak.

A knock at the door had her twisting to face it. 'Yes?'

'It's just me, Mum. Can I come in?' Hope's singsong voice carried through it.

'Yes, love, of course you can.'

Grace stood as the door swung open and Hope stepped in, her long cobalt dress whooshing around her ankles and her silky dark hair swishing around her shoulders. 'So, what do you think?' she asked, spinning, her arms wide and her blue eyes sparkling.

'Oh my, you look ...' Hope was, and had always been, the spitting image of her father. As emotions overcame her, Grace's

hand came to her mouth, and she blinked faster. ‘... absolutely beautiful.’

‘Aw, thanks Mum.’ Her eyes widening, Hope closed the distance, and took Grace’s hands in hers. ‘Like mother, like daughter.’ She stepped back, her fingers lacing with Grace’s at an arm’s length. ‘You seriously never age, Mum. You don’t look a year older than fifty.’

‘Oh, I don’t know about that, but thank you for being so nice, my darling.’ She patted Hope’s hand before letting it go.

‘I’m not just being nice, Mum, it’s the hand-on-heart truth. You’ve got an ageless elegance about you.’ Hope rested down on the edge of the bed, and watched as Grace slipped in her sapphire earrings. ‘Dad asked me to give you this.’ She held out a gold-wrapped parcel adorned with a blue ribbon.

A little taken aback, Grace tipped her head to the side as she cautiously took it. ‘Why didn’t he just give it to me tonight?’ A thought struck her – Charlie’s dependability had not been great over the years. ‘He *is* still coming, isn’t he?’

‘Yes, he is.’ Hope nodded enthusiastically. ‘I don’t think he’d be game not to, knowing how much Sharni and Rose are looking forward to dancing with their grandpa.’

Grace chuckled – they unquestionably were a bloodline of strong-minded women, and she was proud of it. ‘Ha, yes, I suppose, with three generations of us around to lecture him at the moment, your father would most certainly be in big trouble if he didn’t show up.’

‘You got that right.’ Hope smirked playfully. ‘To be honest, though, tonight has been the topic of conversation with him ever since we arrived last week.’ She rolled her eyes. ‘Anyone would



think the man's still madly in love with you,' she added, giving her mother a knowing look.

'Mm-hmm,' Grace replied, brows wrinkling. There was truth behind Hope's words, and an awareness in her daughter's gaze, all of which Grace had learnt to turn a blind eye to over the years. Charlie had had his chances – too many chances – all those years ago. And he'd blown them, good and proper.

'Right, well, on that tongue-tied note ...' Hope pointed to the present, still clutched in Grace's hands. 'I'm not sure what it is, exactly, but Dad was hoping you might like to wear it to the party.'

'Oh, okay.' After sitting down beside her one and only child, Grace carefully peeled the elaborate wrapping paper back, revealing a little velvet box. 'He's bought me jewellery?'

*How ... odd.*

She was almost too afraid to open it.

'Well, come on, Mum, the suspense is killing me.' Hope bounced on the spot.

Her heart thudding, Grace flipped the box open, and the sight of what was inside caught her breath. The sapphire and diamond brooch instantly dragged her back. She'd forgotten all about it, though the nostalgia it brought was raw and real and ever so powerful.

She went to speak, but her mouth was too dry to move, and her mind was too enfolded in the past to string a sensible sentence together.

Hope placed a gentle hand on Grace's knee. 'What is it, Mum?'

Grace felt a surge of emotions, born from days gone by – happier days, when all had seemed beautifully attainable, with

Charlie by her side. They'd had so many dreams for their future, had shared so many promises to be able reach those dreams.

Looking back, as she had many times over, they'd been so naïve to believe it was going to be achievable.

'Mum, are you okay?' Hope's voice was laced with concern.

Harnessing all of her inner strength, Grace cleared the emotion from her throat and found her voice. 'This is the brooch your father bought me in our second year together, a few weeks before he decided to go back to that dreadful place, on that hopeless mission.' She lifted it from the box, and looked at it as if for the very first time. 'All those years he was missing, spent hoping and praying he would be found alive, that he would come home to us ...' Overcome with resentment, she choked on her words, and had to take a moment to regather herself.

'Oh, Mum, I'm so sorry you had to go through all of that.' Hope's tone was soft, and her blue eyes were filled with compassion. 'Even though I was only a little girl, I still remember praying with you, asking god to bring him back to us.' She took a moment, sniffled, then smiled through her own heartache. 'But as I've said to you before, I don't believe Dad valued finding the missing American soldier who saved his life, or being in the army for that matter, more than he treasured you or me.' She half shrugged. 'He was just a desperate man living with a tonne of guilt that he didn't know how to deal with. Going back to Vietnam and trying to find that man, or his remains at the very least, so he could have a proper burial, was how he dealt with it.'

Grace drew in a long, steady breath. 'Darling, I know more than anyone how it was for your father was when he came home from the war. But he promised me he was done with the fight,

and that my love was enough. So I will never understand how he could leave his wife and eighteen-month-old baby girl behind, and go back to the very place that ruined him.’ She brought her teary gaze to Hope’s. ‘Don’t get me wrong, I don’t regret marrying Rodger, but I do often wonder, if I hadn’t been so vulnerable at the time, desperate to somehow fill the void your father’s desertion had caused, and had waited that little bit longer, if your father and I would have made things work.’ She sniffed back her welling emotions, and smiled sadly. ‘Too little, too late, now, hey.’

‘I suppose we’ll never know, Mum.’ Hope regarded her with equally sad eyes. ‘So it’s no use beating yourself up.’

‘My sentiments exactly.’ Reining her emotions in, Grace stood and carefully pinned the brooch to her dress, admiring how it looked in the mirror of her duchess. ‘I can recall the day I gave it back to your father, too. The very day he boarded the plane for Vietnam. It feels like it was only yesterday ...’

Grace’s voice trailed off as she remembered Charlie at the front door, six years older and shocked to see she’d re-married, this very brooch in his hand. He’d desperately tried to explain why he’d gone MIA, his foolish belief that losing his leg when he’d stepped on the unexploded buried bomb meant he wasn’t man enough to return to her. She’d both loved and hated him so much in that moment.

‘You weren’t to know Dad was still alive, Mum. How could any of us have known he was living in some hut in the Vietnamese jungle while he searched for that lost soldier? Or that when he failed to find him, he’d come back to Australia and was in Sydney, basically on the streets, for two years?’ Hope sighed, and rose from the edge of the bed. ‘But all that aside, as much as you two

infuriate each other, I know you both still love each other very much.’ She slid her arms around Grace’s waist, and rested her chin on her shoulder, regarding her mother in their reflections. ‘And that means the world to me, knowing my parents had me out of pure, unconditional love.’

Grace turned and cupped her daughter’s rouged cheeks. ‘You, my darling, are the greatest accomplishment in both my life and your father’s and yes, when we had you, we were both very much in love.’

‘I know you were.’ Hope rested her hands over her mother’s. ‘And as much as you refuse to admit it, you still are.’ With Grace scowling, Hope’s sad smile gave way to a cheeky one. ‘On that note, I better get back downstairs and round up the girls and Kelvin.’ She groaned, rolling her eyes playfully. ‘I swear, I spend half my life telling them to hurry up, all three of them are highly trained side-trackers.’

‘And you do a very good job of running the ship, my darling.’ Grace leant in and brushed a kiss on Hope’s cheek. ‘I’ll be down in a few minutes, okay?’

‘Of course it is, take your time.’ She regarded Grace with tender adoration. ‘I love you so very much, Mum.’

‘Love you too, my sweet girl, with all my heart and soul.’

With one last meaningful look between the two women, Hope padded out. As the door clicked shut, Grace felt the urge to delve a little deeper into the past that was now at the forefront of her mind. She knew she didn’t have much time, but she walked over to the wardrobe, eased down to her knees on the sheepskin rug, and then dug behind her shoe rack. There, hidden away for all these years, sat the small suitcase she’d first used as her travel bag as an eighteen-year-old girl and which she’d eventually come to

store her keepsakes in. Pulling it toward her, she dusted the top off and unclipped the two latches. As she lifted the lid, wistfulness stole her breath. Time slowed, stalled and rewound. Sat atop everything were the two pairs of booties, ones she'd knitted while dreaming of what their twin boys would look like. She'd even picked names for them – Hudson and Bryn. Her heart squeezed tight as she lifted each bootie out and pressed them to her cheek.

She'd never got to meet her boys – her miscarriage at five months had robbed her of that chance – nor had she ever told anyone about them, not even Charlie. Nor would she ever. Some secrets were better kept.

Tired of staring at his bedroom ceiling, Charlie Wilson groaned as he rolled onto his side and gradually pushed himself up to a sitting position. Gazing out the bay windows to where the sun had all but vanished behind the mountain ranges that backdropped Moonflower Acres, he saw a crescent moon and the first star beginning to peek out of the darkening sky. Shifting his gaze across the water, first to the glowing lights of Grace's grandiose home and then to where tonight's festivities would be held, he gruffly rubbed a hand over his face, hoping to goodness Hope had made the right decision in holding the party at the very place his childhood sweetheart had long ago dreamt of turning into a seaside teashop. He knew he was partly responsible for the fact that she never had, and hated himself for it – but it was too late now to make it up to Grace. An entire lifetime had passed them by.

Besides, Rodger Burrows had played his part too, steering Grace off what she'd believed to be her predestined path, though Charlie held little comfort in not being the only one to blame. As much as his beautiful daughter had asked him over the years, if not for

himself, than for her mother, he'd never been able to find it within himself to forgive Rodger for stealing his girl. Or, as Grace had once brought to his attention, maybe it was actually himself that he found impossible to forgive, for breaking her heart, for leaving her to believe she was widowed for all those years, for not initially being the father figure to Hope that he'd promised to be.

Grace had deserved better than either of them, and merited way more love than either he or Rodger had ever given her. Rodger may have believed that financial security was the way to a woman's heart – if that were the case, Grace would be the happiest woman in Sapphire Bay – but Charlie knew Grace better than she liked to admit, and had witnessed the loneliness that had lingered in her striking green eyes in all the years she'd been by Rodger's side.

As for himself, he'd been young and stupidly trusted that if he could go back to the place that had torn him apart, he could somehow put all his broken pieces together and finally be the man he believed Grace needed him to be. Yet, here he was, more broken than ever, mind, body and spirit. He now understood that all she'd ever wanted was for him to let her in, to love her like he meant it, to be there as a husband and as a father, to walk beside her, hand-in-hand, toward all of their dreams. That understanding came too little, and far too late.

Closing his eyes, he shook his head. It hadn't been a lot for her to ask of him. If only he could've seen this at the time, done things differently. If only he'd been less self-centred, if only he hadn't gone back to Vietnam because he felt he owed his life to Sergeant Joseph Baker and his war-widowed wife, if only they hadn't met with that long-buried IED in the derelict building, if only he hadn't gone into hiding while he'd tried to come to grips

with being an amputee ... then maybe they'd have been right where they'd envisaged being. Here. Together. Happily in love.

The if-quals were what ate away at him, as did the fact he'd never get a second chance to devoting himself to the one and only woman he'd ever truly loved with all his heart and soul. It was a regret he'd take to his grave as a lonely old man, a fate he truly believed he deserved.

His heart hurting with the agonising contemplations, he heaved an almighty sigh, as the weight of his past remained upon his shoulders. Regardless of his inner turmoil, he needed to snap to the present moment and get a damn grip. He'd tried to nap for the past couple of hours, unsuccessfully, and it was now time to put on his leg and his happy face, for Grace, Hope and his two beautiful grandchildren. So he grabbed his prosthesis from where he'd rested it up against the bedside table and placed it beside him on the mattress. Sliding the cotton sock over his stump, he skilfully eased the prosthetic leg on – more than half a lifetime of doing so had afforded him the experience to make it sit perfectly. He was grateful for the advances in the medical field over the years; this prosthesis was much more comfortable than his last few.

One single second.

One wrong move.

*Boom.*

The life he'd known was well and truly over.

Forty-three years on, and he could still recall every detail of the explosion that had taken the lives of his two friends, and half his leg. Many times, he'd thought of ending it all – he'd spent six long years with the barrel of a gun in his mouth and a bottle of whisky in his hand. Those had been his darkest of days. The only

reason he was still here had been at first for his darling Hope, and was now for his two beautiful granddaughters as well. The three of them brought him so much joy. He just wished they didn't live a four-hour drive away. How uncanny it was that his only daughter had gone and married an infantry soldier. Talk about history repeating. He just prayed Kelvin didn't go and break his daughter's heart, like he had his darling Grace's. PTSD had a way of making a man do things he'd never dream of. And boy oh boy did he know how the suffocating darkness could consume any possibility of a happy life.

Swinging his legs over the bed, he felt one foot hit the floor and heard the clomp of his other before he slowly eased up to standing. Making his way into the spare room, he methodically took the clothes he'd laid out on the bed this morning with Hope's help, and after stripping off his boxer shorts and shirt, got dressed in his finest suit, matching tie and gleaming Oxford shoes. Then, heading to the bathroom, he popped some brylcreem in his thick silver hair, combed it into position, cleaned his teeth and sprayed on his favourite cologne – this one had always been Grace's favourite too.

Popping two painkillers into his mouth, he bent to take a mouthful of water from the tap. Preferring not to take the prescription drugs after his years of addiction, and long-winded recovery thereafter, he'd resolved that he needed the relief of analgesics tonight. Because, if everything went to plan and she accepted his hand, he wanted to waltz Grace around the dance floor, just like they used to all those years ago. Dancing had been their solace. He sought to feel her near him. He craved to be able to breathe her in. Just one more precious time. But, as the title of the Rolling Stones song said, 'you can't always get what you want'.



In his case, contrary to what they'd affirmed in the very next line of the ballad, he'd barely been able to get what he needed either.

But a man could dream, especially when dreams were all he had left.

His hand sliding along the timber banister of the two-storey homestead, Charlie took his time descending the stairs. He knew he needed to seriously think about moving his bedroom to the ground floor, but he just wasn't ready to accept he'd reached that point in his life. Although his spirit still felt no more than thirty years young, his true age was defying him – his joints creaking and groaning almost as much as he did, or so Hope liked to teasingly tell him.

Wandering down the hallway and into the lounge room, he took a seat in his reclining chair. With twenty-five minutes until he was meant to arrive, he still had fifteen minutes to kill. He'd become a master of killing time over the years. Somehow, somehow, one day to the next, year after year, his life had been an internal struggle of survival, of getting through a moment to then get through the next. Try as he might, he'd allowed himself to become a victim of his past, instead of the survivor he so longed to be – a characteristic he was none too proud of, but felt helpless to change.

Staring toward the blank screen of the television and then to the mantelpiece above – the ledge void of the happy family photos he wished with all his broken heart were there – he closed his eyes and heaved a weighty breath. There was only himself to blame for all the lack and the loss. Maybe, if there was an afterlife, he could make it up to Grace when they met there.

Precisely fifteen minutes later, he climbed behind the wheel of his fifteen-year-old sedan, wound his window down while

he waited for the roller door to slide up, popped the hand-shift into reverse and eased out of the carport. The salty scent of the sea drifted in and he breathed it in deep. Something about it always helped to ease a little of the ache from his heart and soul. Travelling down the winding driveway, past the line of macadamia and avocado trees his great-grandfather had planted, he reached the front gates of the five-acre coastal property he'd called home since he was twelve. He'd inherited the estate when his precious grandmother had passed away, and had been offered a pretty penny for the place over the years – Rodger had been the highest bidder – but he wasn't about to let go of the one place that still held a piece of his heart. Grace held the rest of it, and always had.

He turned toward the main street of town, his gaze occasionally drifting from the road, to where a few bike-riders and walkers with dogs in tow made their way along the palm-lined pathway. Gentle waves lapped at the horseshoe-shaped shoreline, seagulls swooping into sparkling blue-green water in search of their next meal. A little girl skipped along in front of her mother, a bucket in one hand as she bent to gather seashells so white they looked as if they had been bleached. That had been Hope, in days gone by, her smile like sunshine as she found magic in so many things with endearing childlike wonder. He missed those days more and more as time passed him by. If only his granddaughters lived nearby, he would relive such enchanting moments with them.

He stopped at the first pedestrian crossing. A young couple crossed in front of him arm in arm, their love evident, as was their happiness in each other's company. He wanted to call out and tell them not to take each other for granted, and to hold on tight to what they had, but zipped his lips shut – he'd just look like some silly old fool.

Easing along the cobblestone street of Romance Avenue, he passed the pretty-as-a-picture stores and cafes, some shopfronts retro, some colonial, some rustic – all distinctive in their own right. Side streets stretched upwards like capillaries from the main artery of the township to reach softly rolling hills, a place called home by the six and a half thousand residents—the majority of them retirees now that jobs were few and far between.

He pulled into the parking lot of the newly renovated Sapphire Bay Yacht Club, and switched off the engine. Fairy lights had been strung along the railings, and the new timber deck with waist-high glass panels provided the perfect place to admire the views over the sparkling harbour with a glass of wine, or three.

Taking a deep breath, Charlie reminded himself he could do this – he could be among all these people who knew how much he'd failed Grace over the years, especially the earlier ones. As he climbed from the car and made his way inside, he pondered the fact that the old building had gone through quite a few transformations over the years – from derelict shack to a council restoration project, to a dance hall, to a second-hand shop, to a failed seafood restaurant and finally to what it was now. Although all new and shiny-looking, the building had lost its lustre, in his opinion. It was a charmless shadow of its former glory. Like him, it had taken on a new identity over the years, and the potential Grace had seen in it now benefitted someone else.

It should have been her. And he should have been beside her, encouraging her dreams and making her happy.

If only he had the power to turn back the clock. He'd do everything in his power to make his life more about living and less about survival; less about loss, and more about love.

## CHAPTER

# 2

Grace felt like the luckiest woman alive. Eighty-five people had been invited, and almost all of them had come. It was now two hours into the festivities and the night was in full swing. The three-piece band was doing a fabulous job of drawing people onto the shimmering dance floor and, with the occasional slow song, into each other's arms. Elaborately decorated round tables had been placed to face the stage and the bi-fold doors had been pushed back, allowing the room to flow out onto the moonlit terrace overlooking the sea.

It was bittersweet for Grace. Even now, after all these years, she could still picture what her teashop would have looked like, if she'd had the chance to make her dream a reality. She would have called it Serendipity – she loved the enchanted meaning – and it would have been a place to eat delicious cakes, drink fine tea, to fall in love with the sweeping views and, possibly, even with another.

Making her way from one table to the next, wanting to make sure she thanked everyone who'd made an effort to be there, Grace regarded the long buffet tables lined with silver platters and delicacies galore. Above, draped from the ceiling, were hundreds of sparkling gold lights. It was exquisite, but certainly a far cry from how this old relic used to be. Gone were the rustic open-beam ceilings, striking stone walls and characteristic timber floors, replaced with all the modern conveniences and abstract art that made absolutely no sense to her. Although pleasant, the place had lost its heart, its soul.

She blinked the present into her focus. All around her, the champagne was flowing as easily as the conversation and laughter – it was a wonderful distraction from her failing health. Fleeting, she wondered if she'd see her next birthday, or her grandbabies' Holy Communion, or Christmas for that matter, but she quickly shrugged the melancholy off as Hope approached her. Living in the moment was all she had, and she was going to make the most of every single breath.

'There you are, Mum.' With a delighted smile, Hope clasped her hands beneath her chin. 'It's almost time for your surprise.'

'It is, is it? Grace placed a tender hand on Hope's arm. 'You're looking very mischievous, sweetheart.' She tipped her head to the side. 'Should I be worried?'

'Of course not.' Hope gave an angelic smile. 'It's not like I've gone and gotten you a stripper. Or have I?' She wriggled her brows teasingly.

Grace lightly slapped her. 'Oh, stop it, or you'll give me a heart attack.'

The band stopped playing, and the singer asked everyone to kindly take a seat, and to turn their attention to the stage.

The room hushed as Hope grabbed Grace's hand, and tugged her forward. 'Come on, the girls have made a spot for you to sit between them.'

Grace positioned herself between her granddaughters, both looking tickled pink. 'So, tell me, you two munchkins, what's this all about, then?' she whispered.

Flashing her legendary cheeky smile, Sharni laced her fingers in between Grace's. 'It's a slideshow of your life, Nanna.'

Rose did the same as her twin sister, squeezing Grace's hand tightly. 'We helped Mum make it.'

Before Grace got a chance to respond, a screen dropped down from the ceiling, the lights dimmed and Sarah McLachlan's voice sang out 'I Will Remember You'. The room hushed as all eyes fell upon a black-and-white image of Grace's dear mother admiring her as a giggling baby, then to a toddler looking up at her father with such wonder, to a teenage girl playing ball with her golden retriever, Holly, to an image of her on the beach in her very first bikini with wind-whipped platinum blonde hair, a smile as wide as the ocean behind her and a handsome man's arm slung around her shoulder.

Caught up in the recollection, Grace's hand went to the brooch resting above her heart. Charlie looked so young, and so happy; a man head-over-heels in love. That had been the day he'd proposed to her. The nostalgia was so intense, it made her soul ache. Feeling eyes upon her, she glanced to the left and came to meet Charlie's gaze. They shared a lifetime of emotion in those few short seconds, the profound bond between them

overwhelming her so much that she had to look away or risk bursting into unstoppable tears.

The trip down memory lane continued, and Grace blinked faster as she looked toward the screen. As each clip flashed before her eyes, she felt herself transported back to each captured moment and flickers of a life gone by. For the next minute, the fragments in time caught her breath, made her laugh, and brought tears of both joy and sadness. Then came snippets of her life as a single mother, and she wondered if everyone else could see the ghosts hidden within her eyes, the sadness behind her smiles. Next, there she was, with her dear Rodger – short, wiry and serious, he'd been the polar opposite to Charlie. He'd proven to be exactly what she'd thought she'd needed at the time – a man she could rely on to always be there, for her and for Hope. Sadly, their relationship had become more of a friendship over the years, and that could be seen in the photos – not one picture showed the look of love that she and Charlie had so evidently shared and, according to Hope and her lack of better judgement, still did.

Before Grace knew it, the show was over, to the cheers and claps of her family and friends. The band started up again, to the familiar tune of 'Macarena'. Squealing with glee, Sharni and Rose kissed her on the cheek, and then headed over to the dance floor to join their father who was giving the moves his best shot. Grace wanted to thank Hope for the moving tribute, but it appeared her daughter had found herself cornered by two of the township's gossips. It would take her a little while to pry herself away from Jacob and Christine Jones, so Grace took the chance to step outside and get a minute to herself. She quickly realised she wasn't alone; Charlie was leaning against the railing, his gaze

fixed on the glittering lights of the harbour. She almost turned around and headed back inside, but thought better of it.

‘Hey, you,’ she said, easing in beside him. ‘That was a lovely slideshow, don’t you think?’ She drew in a quick breath and then added, ‘It was crazy seeing us both so young.’

‘Yes, it was, and a little overwhelming, to be honest.’ His voice a little quivery, Charlie didn’t turn to look at her. ‘I needed a moment out here to regroup, before dancing with the girls.’

Grace nodded. ‘Great minds think alike.’ The sea breeze was a little chilly, and she pulled her shawl over her shoulders.

‘It’s such a pretty spot, isn’t it, Grace?’ His voice steady, it became low and husky, almost dreamy.

‘It sure is.’ She looked to where bobbing boats lapped the water against the mooring. ‘It always brings me peace, this view.’

With neither of them feeling the need to fill it, they remained in a comfortable silence.

‘Thanks again for my gift, Charlie,’ Grace finally said, bringing her hand to the brooch. ‘I’d forgotten just how beautiful it is.’

‘You’re very welcome.’ Charlie turned to her now, his smile heartfelt. ‘I’m glad you like it, and that you decided to wear it tonight. It means a lot that you did.’

‘Of course.’ Her heart pitter-pattering a little faster, she offered him a delicate smile. ‘I had no idea you’d kept it all these years.’

‘Yes, and I’m so glad that I did.’ Reaching out, Charlie gently brushed his fingers over the sapphire, his smile widening. ‘It’s been my lucky charm on more than one occasion.’

‘It has?’ Grace peered into his calm blue eyes, like an ocean without waves – the depth in them had been what had drawn her to him, like a bee to honey, all those years ago.

Charlie nodded. ‘Yes, I like to think so.’



‘How so?’ Grace tipped her head to the side.

There was a short silence before Charlie answered. ‘I took it with me everywhere in Vietnam, and the day of the explosion ...’ He stumbled over the word, and cleared his throat. ‘I realised at the last second that it wasn’t in my pocket, and that I must have dropped it outside the building we were meant to be bunkering down in for the night, so I left the others to get settled and went back out to see if I could find it. That’s when the bomb went off.’

‘Oh my goodness, Charlie! Why haven’t you told me this before?’ Grace’s throat ached with rising emotion – if he hadn’t have gone looking for it, he’d likely have died too.

Nodding, Charlie sucked in a breath. ‘Maybe I should have, but, at the very least, I’m telling you now.’

‘Indeed you are.’ Blinking back tears, she reached out and gave his hand resting on the railings a gentle pat. ‘I know how it broke you, losing your friends like that, and I know how guilty you’ve felt, being the only survivor of that mission, but I’m pleased to know I played a part in saving you that day.’

‘Oh, believe me, Grace, you’ve saved me a hundred times over, and when I least deserved it, too.’

Grace left her hand over his and gave it a gentle squeeze. ‘You’re the father of my child, Charlie, and were my very first love. Of course I’m going to try and take care of you when and where I can.’

‘You’re a beautiful soul, Grace, in every single way.’ Charlie blinked faster. ‘I know I’ve said it before, but I hope you believe me when I say how sorry I am, for all the hurt I’ve caused you over the years.’ For a few short moments, he closed his eyes, and when he opened them again, they were wet with unshed tears.

‘Just know, that if I could take it all back, and do things over again, I would do everything so differently.’

Unable to witness his anguish, and not sure what to make of the emotions swirling within her heart, Grace lowered her gaze, drawing in a slow, steady breath. ‘I do believe you, Charlie, but let’s just enjoy every moment for what it is, and be content in the fact we’ve remained friends over the years.’

‘Yes.’ With a sharp inhalation, he nodded. ‘You’re right.’

‘Come on then.’ She forced cheerfulness she was far from feeling. ‘Why don’t you come back inside and dance with your beautiful granddaughters?’

He cleared his throat. ‘Of course. Just give me a few minutes.’

‘Okay.’ She leant in and kissed his cheek. ‘Be kind to yourself, won’t you? You’re a good man, Charlie Wilson. Just broken, that’s all.’

‘You’re too good to me, Grace.’ He shifted from foot to foot, and then looked her in the eyes with deep intent. ‘God certainly sent me an angel, the day you skated into my life, and for that, I’ll be eternally grateful.’

‘I don’t regret having loved you, Charlie, not ever.’ Holding his powerful gaze, she offered him a small smile. ‘I’ll see you inside, okay?’

He nodded and she walked away, each step feeling heavier than the last.

Ten minutes later, Charlie was on the dance floor, waltzing both girls around. Grace took absolute delight in watching them out of the corner of her eye, as she caught up with her oldest and dearest friends, Jenny and Marty Lovell.

‘This next song is a request for the birthday girl,’ the singer said in his smooth drawl, catching Grace’s attention, and also half of the room’s.

As the band began to play Joe Cocker's 'You Are So Beautiful', Grace's pulse quickened as she watched Charlie make his way toward her. When he reached the table, her friends fell silent and all eyes fell upon him.

'Hi Charlie,' Jenny said with her customary cheeky smile.

'Hi Jenny, Marty. Nice to see you two.' He smiled that same charming smile that had won Grace over all those years ago. 'May I have this dance, please, Grace?' he asked, his gaze locking onto hers.

Almost declining his offer, but thinking better of it – she didn't want to embarrass him in front of everyone – she smiled and said. 'Of course you can.' Then she stood before she changed her mind. 'Excuse me, ladies.'

Reaching the dance floor, Charlie took her hand and she swayed into him as they found their little space amid the crowd. Sticking with tradition, Charlie led, and Grace was happy to follow. Dancing near them, Hope flashed her mother a meaningful glance over Kelvin's shoulder. Grace gave her daughter a don't-start look back, along with a playful smile. Although, not having been this close to Charlie for many years, she silently admitted how well they still fitted together and how nice it felt to be back within his arms again, if only for this dance. With his hand resting in the small of her back, they all but floated around the dance floor, lit by the large disco ball above. The glittering fragments evoked so many memories.

Her gaze met with his chest, and she released a contented sigh as she looked up and into his eyes. 'This song brings back some sweet recollections, Charlie.'

'It sure does,' he said. 'Those were the days, weren't they?'

'Some of them, yes.' She caught a whiff of his aftershave, and couldn't help but smile. 'You're wearing my favourite.'

'I am.' He flicked his gaze down at her, looking at her as if from the depths of his soul.

Lost in that moment, Grace found herself at a loss for words. Before she knew it, the song had changed, and Willie Nelson's hit song 'Always On My Mind' began. How uncanny, or had Charlie requested this song too? What was he playing at, making her feel so much?

She stepped back a little, in a bid to catch her breath. Charlie seized her eyes with his again, his gaze begging her not to walk away ... and just like that, the earth tilted beneath her feet and she was tumbling into their past. It was as if a lost piece of her had suddenly returned and clicked back into place. The sensation was both sweet and heartbreakingly bitter.

Maybe, if she weren't about to bid her life farewell thanks to the cancer riddling her, she'd allow her heart to connect with his again, but she couldn't. Wouldn't.

And she couldn't let him know the news. Not tonight, and certainly not before she'd told Hope.

Tomorrow.

There was always tomorrow.

She blinked a few times, trying to right the world around her, but despite her efforts, everything began to spin like a kaleidoscope.

'Are you okay, Grace?' Charlie's voice sounded as if it were under water.

She nodded, blinking fast.

'Here, let me walk you back to the table,' Charlie said gently as he took her arm in his. 'You look like you need to have a rest.'

A few hours later, after bidding all of the guests goodnight, Charlie was driving Grace home, as Hope had left a little earlier to tuck her two incredibly tired girls into bed.

Halfway to Waterside Estate, the sky opened and heavy raindrops pelted the windshield. Slowing, Charlie flicked the wipers on, and they bounced in rhythm to the Frank Sinatra song playing from the radio. Grace hummed beside him, her gaze transfixed out the window.

Charlie's heart swelled to bursting as he snuck glances at her. She was still as beautiful as ever. Caught up in the tender moment, he decided it was time to come clean with her, and say what had been on the tip of his tongue all these years.

'I'm still very much in love with you, Grace,' he said with his eyes still glued to the road.

It took a few long moments for Grace to respond, and when she did, it was with a heavy sigh. 'Maybe you are, Charlie, but I don't know what you want me to say to that.' She sniffled and fidgeted in her seat. 'Letting you go was the hardest thing I've ever had to do, as was moving on with my life without you by my side, after you'd promised me you always would be.'

After witnessing the undeniable love in her eyes when he was dancing with her, this was not the response he was expecting, but it *was* one he deserved. Seeing her dismayed, because of him, again, tore at his heart.

He was a silly old fool.

'I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said that.' He turned to show the sincerity behind his apology, but the sudden glare of blinding lights had him staring at the front of an incoming truck.

He went to swerve, but it was too late.

The truck struck with violent, jarring force. The airbags exploded. Time seemed to slow. The sounds of Grace's screams combined with the crunching of metal, the screech of tyres and the explosion of the windshield. Shards of glass pierced Charlie's face as the car spun, once, twice, three times, and then flipped, before toppling over and over and over along the bitumen road. All sound seemed to vanish for a split second – the rain, the wipers and his very own heartbeat. Then, just as suddenly as it had tumbled, the sedan hit a guardrail, the bonnet crumpling like a concertina as it came to an abrupt halt in a ditch, upturned on the roof.

Charlie was still gripping the steering wheel that was now pressing painfully into his chest. With no room to move, he fought to breathe. Something was digging into his side, the pain of it close to unbearable, but he didn't care about himself.

He was almost too afraid to turn and look for Grace, and when he did, every bit of air left his lungs. Suspended by her seatbelt, Grace's body hung limp, blood dripping from a deep gash along her forehead. Strangled noises came from her parted lips. Another onslaught of fear pounded Charlie as he fought off the possibility that she was dying right before his very eyes. And there was nothing he could do about it.

Desperate to free himself so he could get to her, so he could free her from the wreck, he yanked at his seatbelt, but it locked tighter. 'Oh god, no. Please, not my Grace. Take me instead. I beg of you. Please.'

Running footsteps neared, and a man dropped down beside him. 'I've rung the ambulance. They're coming, just hold tight, okay.'

‘Please, help me, my Grace, she’s badly hurt. I need to get her out.’ Charlie’s voice was raspy and frantic. ‘Please.’

Hunching down further still, the man peered in, his expression grim. ‘I’m sorry sir, but I really think you should wait for the paramedics to get here.’

Dread ripped through Charlie as he heard Grace’s breathing grow shallower, her murmurs became more smothered, while the smell of fuel grew stronger.

Voices rang out in the night. The man at his side disappeared and more hurried footsteps sounded. Chilling seconds slipped by. All Charlie could think of was the car exploding with them in it. Grace didn’t deserve to die like this, and all because of him.

*You silly old fool.*

He should have stayed away from her.

Taking her hand in his, he heard the distant wail of sirens and breathed a sigh of relief. ‘Help is coming, Grace, so you hang in there, you hear me? I can’t lose you, not like this.’

Then, while he desperately tried to blink away the blurriness, everything started to spin as Charlie’s world went suffocatingly black.