

Chapter One

It's a given. Most of us don't get to choose the timing of our own demise.

But if presented with the option when such time nears, would we step up, seize our last remaining privilege, and decide how graceful our final bow will be?

On this brilliant afternoon of the last summer of the millennium, I feel exhilarated and free, having reached my decision on this ponderous matter.

Life at Whispering Palms Senior Community carries on as before—a steady succession of leisure routines occasionally interrupted by nonevents. Laughter streams into the men's locker room from the swimming pool. I can hear bodies thrashing about in the water, followed by the patter of wet footsteps chasing one another down to the whirlpool, then the swooshing of the hot bath swirling on. Another day in paradise, as members of the mission-style clubhouse often remark with contented smiles, in between nodding off on lounge chairs in the hot, dry breeze of Southern California.

A shadow moves past my locker toward the exit. Glancing up, I rush after the old man before he stumbles, stark naked and dripping wet, into the harsh sunlight.

“Al, buddy,” I say, grasping his elbow.

“But I showered,” he protests.

“Your swim trunks. You need to put them on.”

He looks bewildered for a moment before a blush shows under his tanned wrinkles.

I let go of his elbow and he lumbers back to his locker. Poor Al, never quite the same since his wife died last year. After he is properly suited, we traipse out to the whirlpool in silence.

Long, airy corridors under red-tiled roofs encircle the pool courtyard. Above them rises the decorative bell tower, almost as tall as the swaying palms that give the neighborhood its name. Not a wisp of cloud threatens the sparkling sky, and aside from the mournful cries of a dove, time hangs still. Such an idyllic setting. A tranquil harbor for old ships, albeit one that can't keep out the undertows of life.

"Well, looky here!" A girlish voice greets us as we tiptoe into the bubbling bath. "Hello, Al. Hi, Doc. Where've you been?" My neighbor Margaret slides over, leaning against the man seated next to her. He stretches his arm around her ample shoulders and makes room, causing mini-waves of steamy water to bounce off my chest.

"This is my boyfriend, Buster."

The balding man half rises and reaches out with his big hand. A scar several inches long runs down the middle of his heavy chest. He must be a visitor; I haven't seen him around before.

"Buster didn't believe me when I said I live next door to Marcus Welby, M.D. See, hon? Isn't he Robert Young in person? And just as sweet, too. I'm sure he wouldn't mind if you chatted with him sometime about your bypass." Margaret smiles at me. "Would you, Doc?"

I smile back, shaking my head. Once a doctor, never a retired doctor. Nowhere is this truer than in a community like ours, where the "active adult" residents periodically drop out of commission, sometimes for good, due to any combination of ailments. Also true is the two-to-one ratio by which the ladies routinely outlast their counterparts, which makes single gents at Whispering Palms even more popular than in their heydays.

"Three months already since they fixed him up," Margaret chirps. "And he's doing better

every day. Lots of TLC, my Buster needs.” There is tenderness in Margaret’s little-girl voice as she snuggles closer to the stocky man. For a moment, they remind me of sweet young loves in high school. Here, away from teenage grandchildren and the need to project an exemplary air of propriety, the elderly couples are free to act as young as their hearts feel.

“Been out of town again, Doc?” She tilts her head coquettishly in my direction.

“Until today,” I say. “I went backpacking in the Sierra. Beautiful up there this time of year. It was like going home for me.”

It *was* a trip home. After taking leave of my doctor last week, I rushed back to my house with one intention: to gather my camping gear, get the hell out of there, and escape to the mountains—my secluded mountains. That was also what Dr. Graham recommended as we shook hands on my way out of his office.

“You should take some time and get away, think about what I proposed. Surgery can take care of most of the mass in your left lung. Then we’ll follow up with radiation. Maybe a little chemo to wrap up.”

He caught me off guard when he placed his free hand on my shoulder. “You recognize, of course, that we won’t know for certain until we operate. But it looks promising. Keep me apprised of your decision. Good day, Dr. Connors.”

For a full week I climbed rocks, hiked in the sun, pitched my tent, and cooked freeze-dried meals. When tired, I stopped by a stream to read or daydream. But I made my choice that first night in the mountains while I rested my sore back and stared out the screened roof of my tent at the shimmering skies above. Staring back were my wife’s eyes from years ago, hollow from exhaustion yet still questioning, as she’d slowly but steadily lost ground in her battle with breast cancer. Had it all been worthwhile, the disfiguring surgery followed by rounds of chemotherapy

that had left her retching her guts out, sobbing from depression? Not once had she complained, but toward the end it was all too clear she'd been hanging on solely for my sake. In the gray daybreak that highlighted the jagged peaks looming all around, I sat up in my one-man tent and realized, clear-eyed and with a surprising sense of detachment, that I didn't have a single person in this wide world to hang tough for.

Margaret's voice rises over the rumbling hot bath as she playfully wags her finger at me, "Dottie tried to call you, but your answering machine wasn't on, mister." Bless her heart. No one keeps abreast of the goings-on the way Margaret does, even now with her busy social calendar.

"I must've forgotten to set it. Was it something urgent, did she say?"

I sometimes wonder if I am doing a disservice to the single ladies at Whispering Palms, including Dottie, my neighbor on the other side, by responding to their frequent pleas for assistance. Their lonely struggles with the aggravations of daily existence must be disconcerting, I reckon, from a stopped-up sink to a dead car battery or a stuck closet door. Far worse, however, are the times they're startled awake at night, alone in bed, dead convinced that some prowlers are scratching at their back doors or that their own thumping hearts are under imminent attack. But loneliness is a devious intruder with multiple disguises they'd do best to confront on their own. Often, though, their phone calls for help are mere pretenses to invite me over for coffee and homemade pie on their patios overlooking the communal green, yet they still send me home later with a steamy casserole as a token of their appreciation for my "trouble." Margaret was as guilty as the rest until she began dating her new boyfriend recently.

"Someone's been wanting to get hold of you, Doc. All week long." There's an inquisitive note in Margaret's voice she does not bother to conceal. "*A man.*"

Her excitement is understandable, given that my wife and I led a quiet life, which has grown

even quieter for me after she passed. I no longer claim any living relations, at least none who stays in touch, and the few couples we knew have drifted away since her death.

“He left word for you, with Dottie,” Margaret says. Then, with a discreet glance in Al’s direction, she whispers, “Is everything okay, Doc?”

“Must be the IRS catching up with me.” I wink at my well-meaning neighbor and wade toward the steps. “If you’ll excuse me now, lady and gentlemen. Time to get back into the swing of things.”

A man? Someone from Doctor Graham’s office?

* * *

Dottie looks pleased when she opens her door and finds me standing in the shade of her covered patio. “My, my. To what do I owe this nice surprise?”

She points me to a wicker chair on the patio before disappearing inside to bring us back some iced tea. Health-conscious thin, fastidiously coiffed and made up, she moves with the brisk efficiency of a former doctor’s office nurse. We exchange pleasantries, then I bring up the main reason for my visit.

“I saw Margaret earlier. She mentioned I missed some mysterious visitor?”

“Indeed you did.” Dottie leans in closer and lowers her voice. “He must have stopped by every day while you were gone—kept circling the place and knocking on your door. I also caught him peeking inside your windows. Your car was gone, but I called to alert you anyway.”

“And I had my answering machine turned off. Sorry, Dottie.”

She reaches and pats my arm. “We neighbors have to watch out for each other, you know. Especially Margaret staying out with her boyfriend all hours . . .” She falls quiet, seeming to pursue a private thought.

I drink my iced tea and wait.

“Ah, yes. Your friend. Sometimes he’d stop back later in the day. I was very concerned, so I kept an eye on him the best I could. I was all set to call nine-one-one. In case.”

“What did he look like?”

“He was a big man. Six feet or taller, quite robust looking. I imagined he’d have no trouble kicking in your door if he chose to. Short-cropped silver hair. A catch in his step—more like a limp, actually. I was an absolute ball of nerves.”

The warm Santa Ana winds have died down and the sun has dipped behind the hills, the dwindling twilight now a balmy evening.

Her eyes bright with excitement, Dottie continues, “And Doc, he came knocking on my door yesterday! I got a good look at him. There was a ruggedness about him, but he sure was easy on the eye, if I dare say so myself. And what a smile. A charmer.” Her hand moves to her heart. “He said he’d noticed me watching, and he apologized if he had caused me concern.”

Dottie leans back in her chair and sighs wistfully, while I rack my brains to recall any acquaintance who may fit that description.

“He asked when you would be back. I was so rattled I could barely get a sentence out. Then he reached in his pocket and handed me an envelope.”

She disappears into the house, soon reemerging with a letter. She gives it to me with an apologetic frown. “Your friend was out of here before I could glean more information for you. I’m sorry, Doc. He got me all flustered.”

It’s an ivory-colored envelope with the name of a nationwide hotel chain printed in gold letters in the upper left-hand corner. In the center, my name is scrawled in blue ink in strong handwriting. Sealed, the envelope feels light, almost empty.

“You did fine, Dottie,” I say. “Thank you so much.”

She beams, and as I rise to leave she places a hand on my arm.

“Hang on. You probably don’t have time to cook, just getting back today and all. I have some fresh lasagna I want to send home with you.”

* * *

The handwriting on the envelope looks bold and masculine but otherwise unfamiliar. Seeing no markings indicative of its content’s importance or urgency, I decide it can wait until later, and so I toss it in the tray by my chair the minute I get home. There it remains for the rest of the evening while I sample Dottie’s home cooking and unpack. It’s ten o’clock when I finally plop down in the chair, shoes still on and teeth unbrushed, thinking how wonderful it will be to sleep in my soft bed again. Then, out of the corner of my eye, I spot the letter.

Exhausted, but now well fed and caught up, I feel my curiosity piqued. A stranger took the trouble to seek me out. Every single day for a week, according to Dottie. Must have been for something important, at least to him.

Reluctantly, I pick up the envelope, tear it open, and pull out a single sheet of paper folded in thirds. Putting on my reading glasses, I unfold the flimsy note and adjust its distance until the few lines of scribbling come into focus before my tired eyes.

When I next blink, the note is lying face up on the carpeted floor, the writing on it no longer legible at this new distance. How or when it has slipped through my fingers I do not know, as I’m only aware of a floating sensation in my head accompanied by a pounding in my eardrums. Then, the skin on my neck and shoulders starts to crawl with goose bumps that quickly spread down my arms like icy breaths.

Dropping my head back against the headrest, I shut my eyes, and breathe deeply.

As the shockwaves gradually ebb, the short message replays itself in my mind, word by stunning word, and its extraordinary content begins to sink in.

Chapter Two

Every once in a while, you experience a rough night like this:

In the dead of night you rise from deep sleep, not jolted awake by a terrifying nightmare, but rather emerging softly from the mist of your dreams. Straddling the fault line between reality and the subconscious world, you wander space and time, reconnecting with people and places of your past. When you least suspect it, a magical door opens on a treacherous landing that lures you down a trail best left unexplored—one that trespasses on secret dead ends strewn with pieces of your own broken heart and shattered dreams from days gone by. Trapped in this time warp, an unwitting prisoner of the past, you find yourself sinking in the quicksand of nostalgia and regret, reliving heartaches and disenchantments of younger years.

I am wading through this waking nightmare as I bend to pick up the innocuous-looking letter from the floor. With just a few written words, the bottle has been shattered and the genie set free, and with it, years of suppression and denial. Old memories shut away for decades are tumbling forth faster than I can catch my breath. His handwriting has looked unfamiliar because we ceased corresponding ages ago. Yet I can still recall his voice, even his rare laughter, as if we had parted ways only yesterday. And burned forever in my mind is a clear picture of his face, surrounded by other young faces. Some more grubby or weary than others, but all still glowing with youthful vitality and innocence.

It was another lifetime. Another country.

Sunday, Aug 22, 1999

Hello kiddo,

Surprise! I finally got hold of your contact info.

Just so happens I'm in town this week, so I thought I'd take my chances and look you up in person. Lousy timing as always: no one answered the phone or the door.

Acquaintance from Việt-Nam would like to speak with you. If/when you get this, call me at the hotel and we'll make arrangements to swing by again.

Hope to hear from you soon.

Dean Hunter

It's not unlike Dean Hunter to be laconic in his message, which reads more like a riddle to me. Yet his cryptic intimation has torn open a forbidden past, one I have attempted—clearly in vain—to put behind me.

An acquaintance from Việt-Nam.

Can it possibly be *her*?

It's been thirty years or more since I've seen either of them. Funny how the passage of time burnishes certain memories while dulling others, and not necessarily in accordance with our wishes. As diligently as I have strived to keep that compartment of my life clasped shut, my subconscious mind sometimes escapes and tiptoes back. In my half-awakened dreams she returns, frozen in time, looking the same as she did that afternoon, forever captive to her grief. This lovely ghost I struggled all these years to bury—has she now returned among the living?