

**Prologue**

**2013**

I hate musty, cluttered basements, especially my own. Unfortunately, they seem to end up that way. To be honest, my basement is more dusty than musty. I don't like coming down here and wouldn't without a good reason.

I scan the horde of boxes labeled "Rick's Military Stuff" that dominate the landscape, and frown. Finding one particular box is going to be daunting. It was Rick's idea to keep so much from his military life packed up in boxes. History, he called it.

I thought it would be a good idea to keep a few of the most important things, like his dress uniform. Rick kept a copy of all of his orders from his numerous deployments and moves, a uniform with each stripe he earned, decades worth of old Leave and Earning Statements (the military version of a pay stub), every Personal Information File made on him at each duty station we were assigned to, and the squadron coins he collected over the years.

I'm practical; if a coin can't be spent I don't see the point in keeping it, and old paper is for shredding once it's been saved for the obligatory seven years. It wasn't easy keeping all of it, considering the weight limits imposed on us by the military with each move. Rick insisted, so I gave in.

There is one good reason I didn't want to keep everything – there are some very dark days represented among these mementos. Leafing through and smiling about the good days doesn't make me want to revisit those memories that still carry a sting, even after all these years.

"Where is that box...?" I mutter, picking my way carefully toward the back of the room. The two bulbs that hang precariously from the ceiling cast enough light to elongate shadows, but not enough to illuminate.

Our daughter's wedding is coming up. I promised Elizabeth I would pull out my wedding gown for her by this weekend. She won't wear it as is; she's going to hand it over to a seamstress who will update it for her. When she asked my permission to make the alterations, I gladly gave it. It will save a ton of money not having to buy a new gown.

Through the corner of my eye, I spy a long shallow box poking out from under a stack of boxes. From the shape of it, it could very well hold a wedding gown.

"Aha!" Gingerly stepping over some boxes while moving others, I carefully make my way toward my goal. It takes five minutes to move twenty feet. Once I reach the

desired stack, I pluck the boxes off one by one to uncover what I hope is my final and victorious destination. Once its bottom is no longer supported, however, the last box I lift promptly dumps its contents onto the floor at my feet.

“Perfect!” I grind my teeth. Various papers and trinkets are splayed around me in a three foot diameter. With a sigh, I realize they’re some of Rick’s military things.

Swiveling from side to side, there’s no way I can pick up what I hope is the wedding gown box and walk safely across the floor with it. I have to clean up this mess first.

Resigning myself to the task, I squat down to gather it up. I proceed to stuff them back into the box. The papers flutter to my feet once again. Of course. I have to fix the box first.

Sighing impatiently, I examine the box in the shadowy light. The four bottom flaps hang limply from the useless cube. I interweave them to stabilize the bottom before realizing that was the problem in the first place. The box will need to be taped if it’s going to be useful.

I throw the wobbly box as hard as I can toward the doorway. Due to its weightlessness, it lands well short of my target. Sighing again, I turn my attention back to the mess at my feet and squat once again. There are a lot of papers, so I take care not to crush them. Eyeballing the stack, I know I’ll have to make at least two trips.

Once the contents have been gathered, I march up the stairs and pile the trinkets on one corner of the dining room table with the papers in a stack next to them. I repair the offending box and start the process of sifting through the papers to put them in some semblance of order before packing them away.

Most of the papers are typed in military jargon, which is gibberish to me. It always has been. I recognize most of them as orders for the various places that we not only lived as a couple and family, but also everywhere Rick went when the military took him away from me.

There are a lot of papers.

The date on one sheet catches my eye. It carries a sting – it’s from 1988 and has the name of the base my husband moved to two weeks after we got married. He had to leave me behind for a one year remote tour. Spouses are not allowed to accompany their military spouses on remote tours.

Technically, spouses *can* go on remote tours if they want to. But the military won’t pay for you to move, and won’t help you with housing or anything that you need to survive. You’re on your own. So unless you’re fabulously wealthy independent of military pay, it’s not possible.

My lips press together, remembering that year. That is one of the many memories that still carries a sting. We were so young. I was very immature, and it was really hard. I can still remember the knot that welled up from my stomach into my throat when we drove to the airport to say goodbye...