

HARBORED SECRETS
BOOK THREE

SILENT SHADOWS

NATALIE
WALTERS



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Natalie Walters, *Silent Shadows*
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To the three who call me Mom—
you are the treasure I'm most proud of. I love you.

For I know the plans I have for you . . .
plans to give you hope and a future.
Jeremiah 29:11

ONE

PECCA GALLEGOS never thought she'd be turning down a marriage proposal—much less four of them. Of course, the average age of the men proposing was sixty-seven, but still. In her short time working as a rehabilitation nurse at Home for Heroes in Walton, Georgia, Pecca had found it impossible to resist the sweet affection of the military veterans in her care. And right now, the deep blue eyes of the octogenarian staring up at her held amused hope.

“I'm sorry, Sergeant Kinkaid.” Pecca wheeled the retired Army veteran down the hall and into his room. “But my heart belongs to another.”

As she set the brake on the wheelchair, a warm hand covered hers. She looked up into the veteran's wistful and wise eyes. “That little boy is lucky to have a sweet mama raising him.”

The kind sentiment turned her vision glassy. “Thank you, sir.”

After she situated “Sarge” in his room to watch Fox News, Pecca made her way back through the halls of the Georgian plantation-style home turned rehab facility. She loved that it wasn't a large, overcrowded place but rather the perfect size to offer the type of personalized assistance the veterans needed.

The bright-colored walls, lightly stained oak floors, and large picture windows in every room made the place feel more like a home than a medical facility. It didn't matter whether the veterans needed help dressing themselves or using their prosthetics—or, all too often, learning to cope with the anguish that sometimes followed them home from war—Home for Heroes was a place of acceptance and healing.

Passing the second-floor lounge, Pecca noted the time on her smartwatch and picked up her pace. She headed for the grand

stairway that led to the main floor, dividing the house in half and offering a dramatic welcome to anyone coming in for the first time. She took the steps down two at a time.

“Whoa, honey.” Shirley Perkins, a robust woman with dark skin, rose up from behind the wraparound desk anchoring one side of the foyer. She eyed Pecca with deep brown eyes that held all the authority of a no-nonsense woman. “You run down those steps like that and you’re going to end up with a broken ankle and leave me dealing with the ornery vets in D-Wing.”

Pecca’s foot hit the last step. “The guys in D-Wing love you.” She winked, thinking of the cantankerous veterans from all branches of the military who occupied the west wing rooms and filled the hallways with battle tales that grew more exaggerated with every retelling. “They like giving you a hard time because you react.”

Shirley arched an eyebrow and opened her mouth to respond, only to be interrupted when the phone at her desk rang. She reached across and answered it while Pecca picked up the clipboard that held her schedule. She needed to check on two patients to see how they were recovering from their therapy sessions before beginning the in-processing paperwork for the new arrival.

Captain Colton Crawford. US Army. Pecca’s cheeks pinched into a smile, as she was keenly aware that the dynamics in D-Wing were about to shift, giving the Army veterans a one-man advantage. She flipped the page and began scanning Captain Crawford’s information. Pecca liked having a general idea about her patients before they arrived to help make their transition as easy as possible. Her eye was immediately drawn to the picture in the corner. Chiseled jaw, straight nose, sharp hazel eyes that seemed to stare straight through her. *Hmm, good-looking too.*

Heat blossomed in her chest, and Pecca forced her eyes from his photo to take in the rest of the information. Thirty-two years old put him not much older than she was, yet if he was coming here it was likely he had the lifelong scars of war etched into his skin and bones—or perhaps his mind, except . . . *Hmm.* No physical

injuries indicated. Only PMD. Was it a mistake? A typo? Pecca was familiar with PTSD but had never heard of PMD.

Maybe Shirley would know, but the second Pecca's gaze caught sight of the grim look etching the receptionist's face, she forgot her question.

"It's Principal Webb." Shirley held out the phone.

Pecca's pulse jumped as her fingers closed around the receiver. Maceo? "Hello, Mrs. Webb, this is Pecca Gallegos. Is Maceo okay?"

"Oh, yes, Ms. Gallegos, he's fine." Principal Webb's voice was reassuring, though Pecca heard some hesitation. "I'm sorry to bother you at work, but Maceo's in my office. He's in a bit of trouble, and I'd like it if you could come over to discuss it further."

Trouble? Pecca checked the time. Her new patient was late and it was her job to check him in, but she had no one else she could call to pick up Maceo. Frustration turned into emptiness. This was yet another stinging realization that, even though her life was good here in Walton, she was still mostly alone. Her gaze traveled to Shirley, who took the clipboard from Pecca's hand and gave a nod of empathy.

"I'll be there shortly." Pecca handed the receiver back to Shirley. "I've gotta go. Maceo's gotten into some kind of trouble."

"Go on, honey. Your shift ends in half an hour anyway. I'll get your patient settled in and the paperwork started. You can take care of the rest in the morning."

Pecca's anxiety rocketed through her at the idea of leaving work early. She loved this job and didn't want to let anyone down—especially her patients. But the whole reason Pecca was here, working hard, was for Maceo. She had no choice—he came first.

"Thank you, Shirley." After grabbing her keys and purse, Pecca hurried out the large front door and down the steps of the wrap-around porch. The large limbs of the live oaks stretching over the small parking lot did little to smother the warm September day. The heat brought with it the memory of Texas in the fall. And with that, a pang of longing.

Pecca climbed into her car and adjusted the air-conditioning to full blast. She refused to allow herself to reflect on everything she'd left behind. Instead, her focus turned to her son and getting to the school as quickly as possible. *What could Maceo possibly have done to warrant a visit to the principal's office?*

She was so focused on leaving that she didn't see the figure that had stepped out of the brush and in front of her car until she was already pressing the gas. Pecca screamed and stomped on her brakes just as the man jumped back. The man's dark gaze speared her, his shadowed expression partially hidden behind a thick beard. *What in the world?*

Heart pounding, she pressed the button to roll down her window. Before she could apologize, the man stepped back into the copse of live oaks bordering the back half of the Home for Heroes property. The next moment he was gone.

Releasing a shaky sigh, Pecca flexed her knuckles, which had whitened over the steering wheel. Who was that guy? His sudden appearance had rattled her nerves. She needed to get a grip. There was nothing to be afraid of here. She gingerly pressed on the gas and steered toward the elementary school. Annoyance replaced the fear trying to root itself within her. She hated that any variance in her life sent her mind careening to her past. Coming to Walton was supposed to be a fresh start. One Pecca had to make out of necessity rather than desire. Necessity driven by the fierce instinct to protect Maceo at all costs.

The shrill ring of her phone startled her, sending her pulse racing all over again. She glanced at the screen. Adrian? Why would her brother be calling in the middle of the day? He worked nights and should be sleeping. Unless . . .

There was only one reason he would be calling at this time—South Side Barrio. Adrian worked undercover in the gang unit in southern New Mexico but kept tabs on the gang activity in El Paso, especially when it related to Javier Torres, her ex and Maceo's father.

The road blurred ahead as a sickening wave of panic paralyzed

her. She blinked quickly to clear her vision, forcing herself to focus on the road. Pecca bit her lip as she flicked the screen, then she spoke into the air as Bluetooth projected the conversation through the vehicle's speaker.

"Adrian?" Her voice sounded small, wounded. And yet, wasn't that the truth? She had been wounded, but not as badly as Maceo. "What is it?"

"Hey, *Pequeña*, I didn't want to bother you, but I've been hearing some things out in the field and think you should know." Adrian's voice held no emotion. "Javier is up for early parole. He has to go before the board, but the chatter out on the streets is that the SSB is very interested in his release. They're looking for you and Maceo."

Pecca felt dizzy and considered pulling the car over. "What do you mean they're looking for us?"

"What better reason to release a prisoner than hearing from his girlfriend and child who need him?"

"I'm not his girlfriend, and we don't need him." It had taken Pecca too long to come to that conclusion, to realize her mistake, but by then it was too late. Javier was already facing jail time and she was already pregnant. Maceo was the only good thing to come from her mistake.

Suddenly, the road ahead was too dark. She peeked over her shoulder to the line of trees that marked the edge of the road. Shadows held imaginary faces staring back at her, and her mind flashed to the scruffy face of the man she almost hit in the parking lot. A shudder ran down her spine. She flicked on her turn signal and pulled onto the shoulder, hitting the locks as an instinctive precaution.

"Do you think they know where we are?"

"I don't think so. I spoke with a friend in El Paso's gang unit, and he said Javier's cousin, Felix, is leading the charge. Seems the SSB isn't as strong as it was with Javier in control."

"What should I do?" Panic threatened to strangle her. Felix's

gang nickname, “Spider,” fit him well. He trapped people in a web of lies until they were forced to do his bidding.

“Nothing. You aren’t thinking about going to the parole hearing, are you?”

“What? No.” Pecca thought back to her last conversation with Javier. “I don’t want Maceo anywhere near the SSB. That’s why I left El Paso.”

“Good. Because I’ve been in the job long enough to know that it’s hard for any prisoner to maintain a clean record when they’re released from prison, but it’s even harder for gang members.”

“Do you think they’re going to let him out?”

“Hard to say. My commanding officer is doing what he can to get some details from the prison, but getting through the bureaucracy hasn’t been easy. The information we’ve got so far is off the street and through back channels, but I’ll let you know as soon as we can confirm anything.”

“Okay.” Pecca rubbed her eyes as her car purred in idle. “I’ve gotten close to the sheriff here, and a few of the deputies. Do you think I should let them know?”

“Can’t hurt.”

That admission made Pecca’s gut churn. Adrian didn’t exaggerate.

“Stay safe, sis. And give Mac a fist bump from his *tio*.”

“I will.”

Pecca ended the call and let the phone sit in her cold hands. *Javier might get out and the SSB was looking for her and—*

A horn blasted from behind her. Pecca jumped and sent visual daggers at the car speeding past hers. Heart pounding, she checked her mirrors and pulled back into the road. Fear curdled around her shoulders as she resumed her journey to the school.

She’d left everything behind to protect Maceo and would do it again if necessary. How desperate was the South Side Barrio? Or Felix? What would they do if they found her? She shuddered, already knowing the answer. They’d do whatever it took.