

CHAPTER 1

Saturday, October 21, 2006
Annapolis, Maryland, USA

On a bright fall day with a slight nip in the air, leaves turning gold, red, and orange, Felicia Ramos responded to melodic doorbell chimes, saying “Frank!” hugging him, and allowing him to kiss her cheek as he handed her a lavish fresh flower bouquet. “So good to see you. They’re lovely! Please go on in. I’ll put these in a vase.”

She was hosting a reunion of persons who worked together recently at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base, Ohio, along with her husband, Navy Captain Peter Ramos, at senior officer quarters assigned to him at the U.S. Naval Academy.

She was wearing upscale blue jeans, a frilly red blouse, long red earrings, and casual red leather shoes with two-inch block heels to give more height to her five feet two inches and enhance her well-proportioned petite figure. Black wire-rimmed glasses complemented her bright brown almond-shaped eyes and straight black hair typical of her Filipino heritage. She was in her thirties.

A floor-length mirror on the wall called out to Marine Corps Major Frank Reynolds as he walked towards cheerful conversation sounds coming from the room at the end of the hallway. Instinctively he checked his “spit and polish” image of a Marine Corps officer, even in civilian clothes: polished cordovan loafers, perfectly pressed khaki pants, a green-striped long-sleeved Oxford cloth shirt with button down collar, and a navy blue blazer. He was in his mid-

thirties, five feet eleven, with military-trimmed brown hair and intense green eyes.

He thought, *Interesting being in Felicia's home, senior officer quarters at that. Worked with her a few years, but didn't socialize; didn't socialize with much of anyone in their homes and didn't invite them to mine. Mom and Dad never entertained at home. Mom wasn't up to it; always had a buzz sipping vodka tonics. Entertaining was at the officer's club, and I usually wasn't included.*

Sure was a warm greeting; seems she really does want to see me even though she had something to do with Doc taking Patrick's place, knows I know, but probably afraid to say anything like I am. Here to see Patrick again, and he doesn't have a clue. Because of Paco, now I have feelings. Never allowed to have feelings, much less express them. Maybe that's why I feel weird here.

Upon entering the large family room-parlor, Pete Ramos jumped to greet him. "Frank, welcome! Haven't seen you since our wedding. Really wanted to have you over now that we're settled and the kids are in school."

Pete Ramos was five feet nine and in his early fifties. He had graying black straight hair trimmed military style, brown eyes, and Asian features, being second generation Filipino-American.

"This is our receiving parlor," he said. "These quarters were built back when Academy officers lived grandly and entertained more formally than we do. Some of my ancestors may even have been servants here; maybe smiling in their graves knowing I live here now. What can I get you? We're having wine. Growing up in the Corps, you might be used to something stronger. We have most things."

Reflecting on his parents' hard drinking, Frank replied, "Wine's fine."

Patrick rushed to Frank, put his hand on Frank's shoulder, and shook hands, saying in a Southern accent, "Hey, Bud, great to see you."

U.S. Army Captain Patrick Ferris, first generation Lebanese-American, was in his very late twenties, five feet nine, and had closely trimmed brown-red hair and sparkling brown-green eyes.

Although physically fit, he couldn't be described as slim and trim. He too dressed casually. Like Frank, he had been an engineer in weapons system acquisition at Wright-Patterson, now assigned to NATO headquarters in Brussels.

Frank smiled broadly and stammered, "You too." He thought, *Really seems glad to see me. That time at his house in Ohio, he gave me a hug and three Lebanese kisses; thought it was intensity of the moment when I'd just come out to him.*

"After dinner, I need to ask you something, sorta private," Patrick said in a low voice. He kept his hand on Frank's shoulder and said, "Come sit with Elsie and me; tell us about your new job, where you're living, and all."

Elsbieta Stankowski stood and smiled as she took Frank's hand, moved her face close for him to kiss her cheek, and said, "Frank, so nice to see you again."

At five feet eight she had a well-proportioned figure, shoulder-length styled blonde hair, pleasant blue eyes, and her flight attendant's composure. She wore designer blue jeans, a light blue sweater that complemented her eyes, simple gold earrings, and casual shoes. She too was in her late twenties, only slightly younger than Patrick.

Frank thought, *Gee, they're really touchy-feely, like they're really glad to see me.*

They talked about Frank's settling into Maryland, living in a rented townhouse in Laurel until his house in Ohio sells. His job as commander of the Marine security guards at the National Security Agency located nearby at Fort Meade didn't present challenges.

Better not tell them about my other supposed job to visit gay places to find about homosexuality for DIA and impact on military intelligence, he thought. *Could tell Patrick. He's told Elsie, I'm sure; made a point that she works with gay men and some're good friends. Doubt Pete and Felicia know; now's not the time to tell 'em. Pete's Chief of Protocol for*