



"A Lifetime Ago"

**A short story by
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**Prequel story to "The Phoenix Rebellion Book 1: Rising Up
.... How it all began**

*Saturday, February 21, 2043
Presidential Ballroom
Edward J. Holbrook Center for
Areth-Earth Alliance
Washington, Northern Hemisphere Capital City
Former United States of America*

Soft music, laced with subtle string melodies, echoed through the expansive ballroom as military leaders, political figures and scientific pioneers mingled with Areth dignitaries and ambassadors. Subdued conversation hummed just below the surface of the music, blending with the tinkle of crystal and china.

Doctor CJ Montgomery stood at the top of the sweeping staircase that led to the ballroom floor, taking in the crowd as a giddy excitement danced up her spine. She tightened her hold on the arm of the gentleman walking beside her. He patted her hand affectionately.

"I take it you've never attended a soiree on this grand a scale, Miss Montgomery?"

"No," she said on a breath, then blinked and turned to look at Professor Abernathy. "No, Professor." Her voice was stronger this time.

He smiled behind his full, white beard and took a step forward. CJ walked with him, the flared hem of her silk skirt whistling around her ankles as they took the stairs. "You are the next generation of Genetics Engineering geniuses, Miss Montgomery. It's high time you rub elbows with the men and women that will lead our world into a future full of promise and advancements like none we have ever imagined."

They reached the bottom of the stairs, and Professor Abernathy led her directly to a small crowd of people gathered together in conversation. She immediately recognized Warrick, High Commander of the Areth fleet, and her heart jumped into her throat. He was dressed in a long

robe of deep brown, five gold cubes on each shoulder the only indication of his rank within the Areth Chain of Command. He needed no insignia to set himself apart; there wasn't a person on Earth who didn't know Warrick by sight. She barely heard the exchange between Professor Abernathy and the Areth leader, until the saying of her own name snapped her out of her daze.

"I consider Doctor Montgomery my prodigy, and predict her contribution to the study of Theoretical Genetics will be groundbreaking. She is a brilliant doctor."

Heat rose in her cheeks and she glanced away from the professor and Warrick... and found herself looking into the most intense brown eyes she had ever seen.

"Doctor Montgomery, allow me to introduce Colonel Tanner," said a voice on the edges of her perception. "Colonel Tanner is one of our honorees this evening."

Colonel Tanner seemed to tower over her. CJ was five-foot-ten and had on heels and yet she still had to raise her chin to meet his gaze. He was at least six-foot-three, and the blue dress Earth Force uniform he wore accentuated broad shoulders and a trim physique. His brown hair was cut close in standard military fashion, with the slightest hint of gray at the temples. That, with his rank, told her he had to be in his late thirties at least. Slight lines bracketed his lips, which were thin and sculpted.

He extended his hand and CJ took it, his long fingers engulfing hers.

"Doctor?" he said, and his voice was like honey over gravel.

"Yes," she managed to say, her voice lost somewhere in her throat.

"I believe, Miss Montgomery, that Colonel Tanner is surprised by your age. And rightfully so. Yes, Colonel. CJ is young, but it certainly doesn't diminish her skill," Professor Abernathy said beside her.

CJ realized Colonel Tanner hadn't released her hand, and slowly withdrew it. The sense of loss that chilled her skin surprised her, and she slid her glance to him only to find him still watching her. A chill danced up her spine and the warmth that had settled into her cheeks spread down her throat, encompassing her.

The officiate for the evening made a general announcement that dinner and the presentation of awards would begin shortly. CJ followed a uniformed server to a small table with several other guests while Professor Abernathy joined his fellow honorees at a long table on one end of the room. She smiled pleasantly at the people she shared her table with, but found her gaze shifting back to Colonel Tanner. He stood back from the table, his hands tucked behind his back, as the other men and women found their seats. When everyone else had found their places, he pulled out a chair and linked his hands on the tabletop.

He was... handsome seemed inadequate. It was inappropriate for the rough edge that shrouded him. He was a gentleman and a soldier, honed and skilled, but there was something subdued about him that made her curious.

A steward walked along the front of the table, offering glasses of synthetic alcohol to the honorees, and she watched as he shook his head and nodded to the ice water the steward had in his other hand. He lifted the crystal glass to his lips, and as he sipped, his gaze met hers over the rim.

CJ sucked in a small breath, her heart pounding in her chest like a caged bird, as he slowly lowered the glass but never looked away. Someone stepped behind him and patted his shoulder, breaking the connection as he turned away. He spoke briefly to the older man in the uniform of an Earth Force General, and when the man walked away, he glanced back to her again.

CJ raised her glass of imitation merlot and wished for a real glass of alcohol to calm her rioting nerves. The awards ceremony began as a compliment of stewards brought each attendee their meal. The citrus-glazed salmon would have looked delicious at any other meal, and she would have enjoyed every bite, but her stomach flipped and fluttered like a mass of butterflies and she only managed to force down a few bites.

"Our final honoree this evening, among our military personnel, is Colonel Nicholas Tanner of Earth Force. Colonel Tanner has shown exceptional skill and unwavering loyalty to the advancement of Earth security. His abilities are envied by every young pilot who must now follow his example, and his leadership is an example to us all. Colonel Tanner..."

He stood, shifting his chair back and moving to his feet with smooth agility, adjusting his jacket with a firm tug at the hem. The other honorees had each taken the opportunity to speak for several minutes at the podium, but Colonel Tanner only took the plaque offered him and shook the hand of the presenter with a restrained smile and a nod. He returned to his chair and set his plaque beside his plate.

She couldn't help but watch him, and scoffed her own foolishness for being awe-struck by a man she had just met. Every move he made was a practice in smooth restraint, no excess energy was wasted and nothing about him was clumsy.

The dinner ended, and the attendees moved en masse to the far side of the ballroom. A small orchestra played and several couples moved automatically to the floor. Despite her own chastising minutes before, CJ found herself scanning the crowd for a tall, handsome Colonel.

Damn.

No... *hot* damn.

How the hell had an old codger like Avril Abernathy managed to get a hot woman like that on his arm? And what the hell did she see in him?

Nick stood on the outskirts of the crowd, his jacket unbuttoned and his hands shoved into his trouser pockets, watching her through the horde of big wigs and fluff shirts milling around to name drop and play their angles. What Nick wouldn't do for a beer, but the chances of finding one around here was somewhere between slim and none.

Doctor Montgomery stood near a pristine white column, a glass of fake wine balanced in her hand. The deep blue silk of her form-fitting gown had his throat dry, and he wondered how long he'd go before he'd have to button his jacket again.

Damn.

Hot Damn.

Abernathy was nowhere around, and she looked lost and uncomfortable, her eyes shifting from group to group as she swirled the wine-wannabee in the glass. As Nick watched, three men approached her and – he assumed – asked her to dance. She declined each one with a reserved smile and a shake of her head. Blonde ringlets bounced off her cheek and dangled along the side of her throat, and he wondered how much hair she hid in the tight twist she wore.

She took a sip, and he caught the slight wince when she swallowed. She didn't like the crap they passed as 'social beverages' any more than he did. Nick wondered what she'd do with a beer, and grinned. Doctor Montgomery shifted and ran her hand over the silk covering her stomach, her hand pausing just below the puckered fabric over her breasts. Her gaze shifted, and caught him watching her.

Nick expected her to look away. She didn't. She stared at him, her lips parting slightly.

Damn.

Hot. Damn.

Nick broke the contact first, looking away as he rubbed his thumb across his lower lip. What the hell was he thinking and who the hell was he fooling? *One*, she was what... twenty-one? Twenty-two? So, she was legal but that was about it. She was in pre-school the last time Nick asked a woman to dance.

Crap. Had it *really* been that long?

There was a second point in there somewhere, but whatever it was went orbital when he glanced up to see her walking towards him. Dusky color stained her cheeks all the way down her throat to her bare shoulders. Even with the orchestra playing, he heard the soft swish of her skirt, and the sound heated his blood and sent it southward.

"Congratulations, Colonel," she said when she reached him, standing an arm's length away. "You must be very proud."

Nick winced, and bit back his true response. The award was a bunch of bull, and his 'loyalty' to the Areth-Earth alliance was a crock. "Would you like to dance?" The question was out of his mouth before he could figure out reason number three why it was a stupid idea, and was probably a hell of a lot smarter than actually commenting.

She nodded and set her glass down. Nick curled his fingers around her elbow and headed for an empty spot on the dance floor, buttoning his jacket with his other hand. The song changed and he turned to her, taking her in his arms, hoping like *hell* he remembered how this whole dancing thing worked.

Her hand slid into his, her other arm resting along his jacket sleeve with her fingers near his collar. She smelled of flowers and sweetness, and before his better judgment could override,

Nick slid his hand up her spine until he felt bare skin above the back of her dress. Her breath hitched.

Damn.

Damndamndamndamndamn.

"What does CJ stand for?"

CJ looked into the night, standing at a giant wall of glass that was so pure and clear it was almost like standing on a balcony over the city. She looked over her shoulder to see Nick standing a few feet away, his jacket unbuttoned again with his hands in his pockets as he leaned his shoulder against the wall. Her heart jumped and her skin flushed at the way he looked at her; appreciatively without leering like the sex-starved juveniles at the Academy.

"Why?" she asked with a smile.

He pushed away from the wall and strolled towards her, and with each step, her breathing shallowed and her body flushed. Nick stopped immediately behind her, so close she felt the heat of his body on her exposed skin. His buttons brushed against the silk of her dress and she couldn't fight the shiver when he barely touched the back of her shoulder with his fingertips.

"Just a question."

She smiled and turned to face him, the cold glass to her back. "Caitlin June."

One corner of his finely sculpted lips tipped up in a half-smile. "Doctor Caitlin June Montgomery."

CJ nodded. Nick's gaze shifted down as his fingers brushed across her shoulders. It was barely a touch, but a jumble of sensations rioted in her stomach anyway. Then he withdrew and pushed his hand back into his pocket, looking into her face.

"I want to see you again." His voice was rough and smooth at the same time, like black velvet on her skin.

Her breath caught and she couldn't answer. As tangible as a touch, his posture shifted... a tensing and withdrawal even before he moved.

"Yes," she managed to force through her lips.

His gaze shifted over her face, and she felt the tingle as real as a caress as he settled on her mouth. She involuntarily pulled her lower lip between her teeth, and swore she heard a soft moan rumble deep in his chest. He raised his hands and laid his palms against her cheeks, his fingers slipping into the curls around her face. CJ held her breath, wondering if he could feel the thundering pound of her heart, as he leaned in.

His lips skimmed across hers, his breath caressing her skin. Her eyes fluttered closed and she slid her hands inside his open jacket, the trapped heat of his body warming her arms. She pressed her hands to his back as he shifted closer, sandwiching her body between his heat and the cold glass window. His muscles bunched and hardened beneath her hands as he covered her mouth fully, drawing a ragged purr from her throat when his tongue slipped past her lips and slid along her own.

Nick broke the kiss first, resting his forehead against hers as their rapid breath mingled in the space between them.

"Damn," he said, his voice rough.

All CJ could manage was a nod.

*Saturday, March 7, 2043
Parson's Point, Maine
Former United States of America*

"It's so beautiful here. I don't think I've ever been anywhere so beautiful."

Nick smiled as he sat down in the chair adjacent to Caitlin's, handing her a glass of iced water. The chairs faced the lake as the sun dipped below the far tree line, and the air smelled of hickory smoke from the fire in the cabin mixed with the fresh scent of pine and earth surrounding them.

"I get up here as often as I can," he answered.

She reached her hand across the space between them, and he wrapped his fingers around hers, holding them in the space between them.

"I can understand why. Your grandfather built it?"

"Great-grandfather. It's been passed down father to son."

He expected the weight in his chest, so he wasn't surprised when it hit him. Even after eighteen years, it hit him hard every time. She curled forward out of her chair moved to slide onto his lap. Nick rested his hand on her thigh, supporting her back with his other arm and rested his head on the back of the chair to look up at her. Caitlin ran her fingers through his hair, studying him in the dimming sunlight.

"That's the second time...", she said, her voice soft.

"Second time *what?*"

"The second time I've seen the shadows in your eyes, like you're remembering something you don't want to. What is it?"

Nick grinned. "You think you've got me figured out after two weeks?"

She pressed a kiss to his forehead. "Not completely, no. But enough. You don't have to tell me, but don't think you can't, either."

Nick drew a heavy breath, rubbing his hand over her jean-clad leg from knee to hip. Even after two weeks, he still couldn't quite accept the reality that this beautiful, young, sexy, *young* woman wanted to waste her time with him. He had asked her to the cabin on a whim, and had to plan fast to have the place open and ready for her when she surprised him by saying yes.

He looked past her to the water, watching a soft ripple dance across the surface to break against the shore. Streaks of orange and yellow shifted with each wave. Caitlin shifted in his lap to curl against his chest with her head on his shoulder. Her breath whispered across his throat, warming his blood. Nick curled his fingers around the back of her neck beneath her long, blonde hair.

"I had a son," he finally said, the words harder to say than he expected.

"Had?"

Nick nodded. "He died when he was born. Both he and my wife."

Caitlin lifted her head, her features hard to make out in the fading light of the day. "I'm so sorry, Nicky."

He still bristled at the nickname she had conjured up for him, but somehow he found it sexier now more than anything else. As he stared at her, his eyes adjusted to the darkness and he saw the soft lines of her profile and the glisten in her eyes.

"It was a long time ago."

She touched his mouth with her fingertips as he spoke, her touch seeking. Caitlin shifted closer and replaced her fingers with her lips, her kiss igniting a need in him he had buried for years; unwilling or unable to let them surface until her. The tempo and intent of the kiss shifted, arousal spiking through him. Her hand slipped inside the front of his shirt to rest on bare skin and he moaned against her lips.

Nick jerked back, laying his hand against her face. Her shallow breath was the only sound he heard.

"Caitlin," he said, trying to ignore his need long enough to speak. "I'm old."

She laughed, her voice carrying through the night. "What?"

"I'm old. Caitlin, I'm *seventeen* years older than you."

"So."

"So? That doesn't bother you?"

She leaned into him, nipping the skin along the side of his throat between her teeth as her hands unbuttoned his shirt, exposing his skin to the cool evening air. But he didn't feel the cold.

"If it bothered me, would I want you as much as I do?" she said close to his ear before she drew his earlobe between her lips.

Nick slid his arms beneath her knees and behind her back, taking her with him as he stood. Without another word, he carried her around to the front of the cabin and pushed the door open with his toe, kicking it shut behind him. The only bedroom in the cabin was just off the living room, a wide doorway connecting the two rooms with no door. He carried her through the room; his lips finding hers as he instinctively avoided the sparse furniture to bring them to the side of the bed.

He set her on the edge of the bed, her hands already tugging his shirt free of the waistband of his jeans. Nick yanked the cotton free of his arms and tossed it to the floor, acting quickly so he could once again devour her mouth as he laid her back on the bed.

Tuesday September 18, 2043
Parson's Point

The smell of bacon and spring mornings filled the cabin, and through the open kitchen window came the music of a distant songbird. CJ picked up a warm slice of toast, hissing as it hurt the tips of her fingers, and spread soft butter across the surface. She barely managed to keep herself from whistling as she arranged the two plates of food and glasses of juice. Coffee was still a mystery to her, and she had decided to forego even trying.

“Breakfast is ready, Nicky,” she called out over her shoulder, but gasped as two long, strong arms circled her body from behind.

“Mmmmm, smells delicious.” His voice shimmied over her like a sweet caress, and she leaned back into his embrace.

“I didn’t burn the bacon this time,” she said with a smile and tilted her head so he could press a kiss just in front of her ear.

“I’m proud of you,” he whispered, his voice earnest. “But damn, woman. How am I supposed to think about food when I find you wearing nothing but my old flannel shirt?”

CJ’s body tingled as his long fingers expertly released the buttons of the oversized shirt and his hands slipped inside to skim over her skin. He slipped the collar away from her shoulder and buried his face into the curve of her neck, his tongue applying firm pressure to her skin before his lips sucked gently. CJ let her head fall back, supported by his chest, as his hands cupped her breasts and skimmed her stomach, plucking at the waistband of her panties.

“Nicky...” she whispered hoarsely.

He turned her around in the space between him and the counter, his hands coming up to cup her face. CJ looked up at him as his thumb stroked across her lower lip. He was bare from the waist up and the subtle flex of his arms and chest when he moved made her heart race and her blood heat. She reached up to lay her hands on his chest, enjoying the heat of his skin and

the beat of his heart beneath her palm. He tipped her face and covered her lips with a deep, open mouth kiss that made her insides dance and her knees shake. His fingertips laced into her hair and he pulled her closer, kissing her longer, until they both had to stop to breathe. Nicky rested his forehead against hers, their rapid breath mingling in the space between them, and licked his lips.

"I love you, Caitlin."

Her heart jumped, and she wrapped her arms around him, pulling him closer. "I love you, too, Nicky."

He smiled, a single corner of his lips tipping up. "Good," was his only answer as he swept her into his arms and carried her back to bed, leaving breakfast behind.

*Thursday, November 12, 2043
Sorentino's Café
Arlington, Virginia
Former United States of America*

"It's bullshit, Caitlin."

CJ glanced around the café, her nerves jumping at the thought that one of her colleagues – or *anyone* of power – might hear Nick's rant. "Nicky, please..."

"You don't think this is crazy? They're taking over everything and wiping out anything that resembles what we were. What we're supposed to be. Soon, there's going to be nothing left of *us*. The *Human* race."

"You're jumping to conclusions. President Camrin has not agreed to grant political power to any Areth official, and until he does..."

"*Until* he does. Even you think it's going to happen."

CJ set her fork down and rested her hands in her lap, drawing a slow breath to try and calm her nerves. "Why are we fighting about this?"

"We're not fighting," Nick said, jabbing at his chicken.

"It feels like we're fighting."

He finally raised his head and looked at her, his tense features relaxing when their gazes connected. With a huff and a shake of his head, he let his fork drop onto the plate with a clatter and reached his hand across the space of the table. CJ brought her hand from beneath the tablecloth and laid it in his, sighing when he gently squeezed her fingers. Nick raised her hand to his lips, kissing her knuckles.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I just get --"

"I know."

He smiled at her, and some of her tension eased. They finished their meal, and after Nick gave the waiter his payment card, they left the café. The winter air bit at her skin and she tucked her chin into the collar of her coat.

"I can't convince you to take the afternoon off?"

CJ smiled, moving closer to him so he could circle her shoulders with his arm and pull her against his side. "I'm sorry. But we're close to breaking the DNA code we've been studying. I'm surprised Jaidan let me go for lunch."

"He's a slave driver."

CJ laughed. "But he's also a genius."

"Have you ever met an Areth that wasn't?" he mumbled under his breath.

They reached the entrance to the tall glass and steel medical building where CJ's new office and staff were located. Nick turned her in his arms and kissed her, long and deep, and she

wished she really could take the afternoon off to be with him. They had given up on maintaining two apartments in the city, and Nick had moved in several weeks before. She loved waking up in his arms, and falling asleep to the sound of his heartbeat, but on days like today she wanted more. More time. More him. Just more.

"I'll see you tonight," he said against her lips.

"Okay. I love you."

"I love you." With one more kiss, he let her go so she could enter the sterile interior of the facility. She watched him walk away through the smoky glass that let her see out but didn't allow any pedestrians to see into the lobby. When he disappeared from sight, she walked to the elevator and rode to the top floor and her labs.

She absently walked through the lab where several of her subordinates worked, and opened to the door to her office, stopping short when she saw the two men waiting for her. Jairdan, the Areth scientist overseeing her studies, stood behind her desk and Professor Abernathy rested in one of her chairs. Both men looked up, whatever conversation they were having stopped short. Jairdan features were tight as he glanced at the photograph of herself and Nick she had set near her computer.

"Jairdan, Professor Abernathy, this is a surprise," she said, closing the door behind her. "Is there something I can help you with?"

Professor Abernathy stood, bracing his hands on the armrests for leverage. "Let's take a walk, Miss Montgomery. We haven't had a chance to talk in the last few months."

She glanced between Professor Abernathy and Jairdan, the tension and weight in the air tangible. Jairdan drew a slow breath through his nostrils and tucked his hands behind his back as he came from behind his desk.

"I'll leave you to talk," he said, his tone heavy on 'talk', and nodded at Professor Abernathy as he passed. "You and I will speak later, Doctor Montgomery."

Professor Abernathy took her hand as he reached her, and slid it into the bend of his arm just as he had at the awards ceremony months before. "Your life is about to change, Miss Montgomery," he said as they walked out of the office. "Like you never imagined."

"I'm in the kitchen," Nick called through the apartment when he heard the front door open and close. He slid the pan of seared salmon off the heating unit and wiped his fingers on the small towel draped over his shoulder as he walked to the front foyer.

It was empty, and he continued to the combined living-dining room where he found Caitlin standing beside the table he had already set for dinner. She toyed with the soft petals of the orchids he had placed in a vase. Nick stepped behind her and slid his arms around her body, resting his chin on the top of her head.

"I was beginning to wonder how long Jairdan was going to keep you."

"Busy day today," she answered, her voice distant.

Nick gently urged her to turn in his arms, and bent at the knee so he could look her straight in the eyes. "You look exhausted. Why don't you sit while I finish dinner?"

She smiled, but her features were still tight and strained. Nick leaned in and kissed her until he felt some of the tension ease and her hand lay against his chest. Pulling back, he moved to pull a chair out for her and she sat, immediately picking up the glass of wine he had poured for her. Not that synthetic crap, either. Tonight, the real stuff was in order. She hummed appreciatively at the first sip.

Nick returned to the kitchen to finish preparing their plates. Before he picked them up, he patted his pocket just to make sure the ring was still there.

This was it... He was going to do it again...

He paused in the doorway before entering the dining room, sighing when he saw Caitlin. Her elbow was on the table, her forehead supported by her hand with her eyes closed. A protective surge of annoyance hit him and he marched across the room, setting her plate down. She jerked back, obviously not hearing him.

"I don't know who the hell Jairdan thinks he is, abusing you the way he does. They work you until you're dead on your feet --"

"They don't abuse me, Nicky," she said softly, but he kept going.

"Christ, I know *they* don't have lives, but *you* do. Hell, Caitlin, there are nights I don't even hear you come in."

"Could we please not fight?"

"I'm not fighting." Nick paused, grinning. "Déjà vu." Her smile was weak, but there nonetheless. "Dig in," he said, pointing to her plate with the tines of his fork.

She poked at the food, pushing the salmon around more than eating it. After a few moments of her not eating, and him watching her not eat, Caitlin sighed and set her fork down.

"Nicky, we need to talk."

"Absolutely," he said around the bite of vegetables in his cheek. "I have something I want to talk to you about. I think we need to take a vacation."

"I can't right now, Nicky."

"Now, listen... I'm not talking a weekend away. I'm talking two weeks, at least. Get the hell away from the city and enjoy some fresh air. Do some stargazing, some fishing, whatever. Just you and me. I went eighteen years without taking any leave, so I've got plenty coming --"

"I can't."

"Why the hell not?"

Caitlin pushed her plate away and sat back in her chair, crossed her arms and avoided looking at him. "We're close to making a breakthrough, and I can't walk away from the study right now. It's too important."

"When it's done, then"

She shook her head. "No. Nicky, since I was eleven years old I've worked *hard* to get to where I am. I wanted to be a geneticist, and I made it. I can't just throw it away for..." She stumbled over her words, stopping herself short, her eyes shifting to him for a split moment as color rose in her cheeks.

A lead weight hit Nick's gut and he felt sick. Keeping a tight rein on his urge to snap, he drained the wine from his glass barely tasting the robust flavor. "For what, Caitlin," he said through tight lips.

"For an unplanned vacation." Her voice was weak and unconvincing.

They sat in silence for several moments as Nick poured himself another glass, downing it in two swallows. Caitlin worried the edge of her napkin, her fingertips tapping on the tabletop. Finally, she drew a deep breath.

"You knew what I was when you met me."

Nick raised his head and looked at her. "I knew you were a doctor, I didn't know you were the Areth's personal whipping girl."

"That's not fair, Nicky!"

He set his glass down with a thud and stood. "No, it's not."

Nick crossed the living room to stand at the wide glass door that looked out on Barcroft Park. It had started to rain some time after he got home from Langley. Rivulets of water ran down the glass, branching off and joining again like lines on a map. The park was dark, only two or three streetlamps visible in the gloom. He heard her chair slide across the tile floor, and saw her reflection muted in the glass as she walked towards him, her arms crossed over her body. Defensive. Protective.

What had he ever done to make her feel that way?

"I'm leaving, Nicky."

He spun around. "What?"

"I've been offered a position at the Alliance Labs in Geneva. I can continue my research there. I can form my own team, and it's important work." She hitched up her chin and finally met his gaze for the first time since she came home. "I want to take it, Nicky."

Nick scrubbed a palm over his face, sucking in air. He looked past her for a minute, regrouping, before setting his hands at his hips and meeting her eyes again. "How long?"

"Two years, maybe longer."

He closed his eyes. "I can't relocate, Caitlin. I'm stuck here until I retire."

"I know..." she said softly. "The Areth are accomplishing amazing breakthroughs, and I'm going to be part of it."

"Areth," he hissed, storming past her. "It always comes back to the damn Areth. It's all I hear...*The Areth* are making our lives better, *The Areth* are accomplishing amazing breakthroughs, *The Areth* are our salvation. It's crap!"

"You know, they said you wouldn't understand --"

Nick spun around. "They? Who the *hell* are 'they'? Jaidan? Who the hell are *they* to say *anything* about you and me?"

"They're looking out for my best interests. My career--"

"And I don't..."

"I didn't say that."

"Sure as hell sounded like it."

"Don't put words in my mouth."

"Why the hell not? The Areth already are."

She snapped her mouth shut so hard, her teeth clanked together, and she glared at him. A tremor shifted through her body, and he knew she was either on the verge of crying or hitting him...which one, he wasn't sure. Nick marched around the end of the couch and headed for the foyer.

"I'm going to go out for awhile." He stopped in the archway of the hall, turning to look at her as he drew a slow, steadying breath. "Maybe when I come back, we'll both be calm enough to figure this out." She swiped her fingers across her cheeks, nodding. "Caitlin..." He waited until she looked up, her glistening eyes looking at him. "I *want* to figure this out."

She nodded again, and Nick grabbed his coat before leaving the apartment.

The vast blackness of space spread out on all sides of Nick's O2 glider, broken only by the distant twinkle of dying stars. He kept his boosters pointed at Earth, floating in the vacuum to try and clear his head.

That was the advantage of being a Colonel, he supposed. If he wanted to take a quick jaunt around the moon, no one was going to say no. And there was no better way to find his balance than to catapult himself into nothingness.

Space had been his net after Kathleen and Michael died. He couldn't function on Earth, the air smothered him and his life was nothing but a pile of rubble. Everything he thought he had was gone in a handful of minutes. His wife... his son... gone. He had buried himself in his glider, taking every training mission and volunteering for every flight schedule he could until his skills were second to none.

So it had been... for eighteen years.

Until Caitlin.

He didn't care what he had to do, he would make it work. If he had to resign his commission tomorrow, he would. Geneva wasn't so bad, after all.

Static whistled in his ear before a voice carried over the line. *"Freebird One, this is Base."*

"Base, this is Freebird."

"Global weather net indicates some nasty weather in this part of the world. Suggest you return to the roost."

"Roger, Base. Back in seven."

"Roger, Freebird. Base clear."

Nick flipped the switch that engaged his O2 boosters, and the glider hummed to life around him. With a sharp yank of his joystick, the glider flipped back in a full one-hundred-eighty degree twist, pressing him into his seat despite the inertial dampeners. Earth loomed in front of him, swirling shades of blue, white and green. He glanced at his navigational controls

and manually calculated his rate and angle of descent. With a punch of his thumb on his red initiator button, the glider shot forward, heading once again for Langley. And home.

An hour later, he stood once again outside the door of their apartment. He pushed his hand into his pocket, his fingers curling reassuringly around the platinum and diamond ring inside. The metal was warm against his palm.

This would work. It would.

He opened the door and darkness greeted him. The same heavy weight that had hit his gut at dinner slammed into him again. Dropping his coat on the back of the couch, he walked into the living room.

"Lights," he commanded, and the ambient lighting slowly increased until the room was as bright as midday.

Dinner sat on the table, just as they had left it. Leaning against the bottle of wine was a folded note, his name written on the front. Swallowing hard, Nick picked it up and opened the fold.

I wish this would work. More than you know.

Nick huffed a breath and closed his eyes.

CJ stared into the dark night as her jet, bound for Switzerland, cut through the rain and weather. Her tears fell as fast as the rain, despite the exhaustion that pulled at her.

The door to her private chamber opened, and she quickly wiped her fingers over her cheeks before Jairdan saw how devastated she really was.

He sat down, his back stiff and his expression stiffer. Emotionless brown eyes, so unlike Nick's, stared at her as she attempted to compose herself.

"You have made a wise decision, Doctor Montgomery. Your skill deserves to be appreciated."

Sadness exploded in her chest and she looked into the night sky again.

Eight years later...

October 15, 2051

Parson's Point, Maine

Former United States of America

CJ stood at the corner of Nick's porch and inhaled deeply. The air was heavy with the scent of leaves, pine and earth, and the sky was a brilliant blue softened with long wisps of cirrus clouds. It had been a long time since she had been outside a city, or anywhere *green* like this.

A long time since she had been here.

She closed her eyes and reached out her hand to lay it on the rough birch log, enjoying the tactile sensation beneath her fingertips. CJ leaned into the wall, inhaling slowly to let the scent of the wood fill her head. With the smell came more memories than she could ever count or categorize, and she smiled.

Opening her eyes, she dropped her hand away from the side of the cabin and stepped down onto the ground. Stone and dirt crunched beneath her shoes as she walked along the side of the house toward the lake. Nick wasn't inside, but he might be down at the dock. The sound of a low voice carried on the breeze, accompanied by the scraping of wood against wood. Her heart skipped, and she paused at the corner of the cabin.

Nick was on the dock, crouched down on the edge as he tied a small boat to the mooring, his long, sure fingers knotting the rope. A soft breeze blew in off the water, swirling fallen leaves from the ground and stirring his hair. Last she saw him, his hair still had been mostly

brown with just the slightest touches of gray at the temples. Now, he was almost completely silver with brown showing through to indicate what it once had been. Dear god, he was still the most beautiful man she had ever seen.

And she knew he'd hate her choice of words.

A small dog, not much more than a mass of white and brown fur, sat on the dock beside Nick, its tail swishing back and forth. Nick said something, and the dog's tail went faster. He stood, and CJ swallowed the hitch in her breath.

Eight years ago, Nick Tanner had made her heart skip a beat with a glance and turned her body to molten heat with a touch. Seventeen years her senior, she never once saw him as anything but absolutely virile and masculine. Now, so many years later, the effect was the same. He wasn't perfection, wasn't the ideal in the eyes of most, but CJ thought any woman whose heart didn't skip when they looked at him just had to be dead. A square jaw and chiseled features gave him the look of strength, and his dark eyes were shadowed reflections of his soul. His lips were finely sculpted, thin and straight, and the lines on his cheeks only brought out his features.

He ruffled the shaggy fur that hid the dog's face, and stood to his full height. The first time she saw him, he had been wearing his Earth Force Dress Blues and it had accentuated his six-foot three-inch lanky frame. But not nearly as much as faded denims and the blue plaid shirt he wore now. The breeze caught the open shirt, pulling away from his chest, letting her see the gray tee shirt beneath, and she knew he was as strong and lean as he had ever been. The silver hair added time to his forty-seven years, but everything else defied it.

CJ closed her eyes for a moment, steeling her resolve. She wasn't here to relive past love affairs. Nothing about this visit was for her. It didn't matter how seeing him made her feel. She was here *for* him, and to convince him of the truth.

Her heart knew there was no chance of anything else. She had hurt him far too badly for that.

"Come on, Dog. Let's go get some lunch."

CJ's eyes snapped open at the clear sound of his voice, and she watched him move off the dock toward her. She knew she should speak, but the ability was lost to her as he smiled at the antics of the mutt hopping along beside him. Then the dog stopped mid-stride and turned in her direction, sniffing the air. CJ held her breath, and thought momentarily about disappearing around the corner of the cabin and running.

No. She couldn't. This was too important.

The dog started yapping and bolted toward her, and CJ held out her hand, wondering whether she would lose a finger or just end up with a slobbered palm.

"What's your problem...?" Nick called after the animal, but the question trailed off as he looked up and their gazes connected.

CJ reached out her hand to find strength in the wall of the cabin. The smile on his lips dropped away in an instant, and his eyes darkened. Nick squared his shoulders a degree and shifted his stance, setting one foot uphill with his knee bent. He stared at her, showing no sign of surprise, but absolutely no sign of pleasure. If anything, the cold steel in his eyes almost frightened her.

"Hello, Nick," she finally managed to say, petting the dog who had chosen to sniff and lick over any kind of attack.

“Leave. Now.” His voice was flat, emotionless, despite the demand.

“I have to tell you something—”

“No.”

He strode toward her with purpose, and CJ held her breath as he brushed past her. She turned and reached for his arm to draw him back, but the fury in his eyes when he spun around to glare at her made her drop her hand away. CJ retreated, bumping the wall of the cabin.

“Do you hate me so much you can’t even listen to what I have to say?”

“Hate,” he forced through clenched teeth, and the cold levelness of his voice made CJ swallow her breath. He took the one step needed to close the space between them, stepping so close she had to hitch her chin up to hold his stare. “Now, *there’s* a word.”

Then he was gone, storming off to the front of the cabin, leaving CJ swaying in the space he left behind. She drew a breath, blinking rapidly, and leaned back against the wall. Perhaps General Castleton had been right; she wasn’t the person to do this. They should have waited until the mission was done, the task accomplished, and then Nick Tanner could have been told the truth. If they failed, he never would have known.

But she couldn’t let things go. Couldn’t let him go another day without knowing the reality. She owed him that much.

CJ steeled her nerves and pushed clear of the wall, walking back to the porch. The dog had already forgotten her, and was sprawled out in a spot of sunshine, not bothering to lift his head when she approached. The front door was closed, but she hedged her bet that Nick never fixed the lock. The knob turned and she stepped inside. The cabin was dark, and slightly warmer than outside from the glowing embers still in the fieldstone hearth. Very little had changed in eight years. The flat monitor on the wall had been upgraded, and the rug in front of

the fireplace might be different, but everything else was just the same as she remembered. From the soft leather couch with the red and blue woven blanket on the back to the handcrafted wood cabinets, she could see in the kitchen. The air smelled of burning hickory and bacon, with an underlying aroma of the soap she knew he used.

Her eyes burned and she blinked hard to keep the tears back. She refused to let this turn into *anything* to do with her. Nothing she felt, nothing she wanted, would come into play. Tonight, she would condemn herself for being stupid and naïve, but not now.

She closed the door and stepped inside, her shoes muffled by the braided rug that covered the wide plank floor. CJ walked past the end of the couch and looked to her right to the archway leading to the joining bedroom. There was no door, nothing blocking her view to the large wrought iron bed that sat against the far wall. Or to keep her from seeing Nick where he sat on its edge, his elbows resting on his knees with his head down.

CJ swallowed the lump in her throat and forced herself to enter the room, unprepared for the onslaught of memories that bombarded her when she curled her fingers around the cool metal framework of the footboard. Nights of lovemaking, mornings of waking in his arms... they all came back in a vicious wave.

“What part of *leave* was confusing?”

CJ closed her eyes against the hate and anger in his voice. “I will leave—”

“Yes, you will.”

“You have to hear this first, Nicky.”

His head snapped up and he glared at her. “There is *nothing* you can tell me that I want to hear.”

CJ released the footboard and slipped a trembling hand into the hip pocket of her dress, her fingers curling around the data chip sleeve she had tucked away there. She extended her hand, palm up, and unfurled her fingers. Nick sat up, staring at the chip, his dark brown eyes darting up to meet hers momentarily. She nodded, jutting her chin toward it.

“Go ahead. See for yourself. Then, if you want me to leave, I will.”

Nick stood, the old bed creaking at the loss of his weight. His fingertips brushed her palm as he took the chip and strode past her into the main living space. CJ took a moment to breathe deeply, closing her eyes. Her skin tingled where his fingers had touched. Clearing her throat, she turned and followed him. As she stepped into the main room, Nick opened the data receptacle on the monitor and placed the disk inside. He didn’t spare her a glance as she moved beside him, punching in the command codes to open the file and run the program.

The screen flickered and a video began to play. CJ was far too familiar with the contents, having watched it again and again. The image spanned a large common room filled with men and women of all ages, dressed in loose, white clothing. Some sat together in small groups, some curled into themselves near the wall, rocking to the rhythm of an unheard beat. Orderlies and nurses stood on the outskirts, distributing medications to some, removing one or two for experiments that CJ hadn’t yet been able to define or determine.

“What am I looking at?”

She pointed to the far right corner near the bank of bar-covered windows. A single man stood, facing out into the sun, with his feet set apart and his hands linked behind his back in a stance all too familiar to CJ. He was tall and lanky in build, even that was obvious through the baggy clothing he wore. His hair was dark although the exact color was hard to determine with

the black and white video. Even now, looking at him, CJ's heart skipped. The reality excited her, yet broke her heart in the same instant.

"Here," she said. "Magnify and enhance."

Nick touched the screen and the image paused. He tapped with his pinky and a menu appeared. With deft fingers, he relayed the commands and the video shifted, magnifying the image two-hundred percent so the single man filled the screen. His back was still to the camera.

"Resume."

Nick tapped again and the video restarted. CJ's pulse quickened as she knew the moment she wanted approached. She stepped closer to Nick, her shoulder brushing his arm. He didn't move away, his interest on the screen, and she wondered if he felt the same niggling sense of familiarity she had the first time she saw it. She glanced quickly up at him, his gaze was intent on the monitor, a deep crease digging in above his nose as he focused.

Another man entered the view dressed in a white lab coat with his hands pushed into the large front pockets. He had dark hair and Latin features, and the two men stood nearly at the same height, the doctor only being slightly shorter. He looked to be about CJ's age, around thirty, but if he was Areth as she suspected his appearance meant nothing. Her own supervisor at the lab didn't look much older than Nick, and she knew he was nearly four hundred years old.

"Get ready to pause again," she said softly.

He held his hand over the monitor, not touching it.

The doctor stopped and spoke, and the focus of their attention shifted. For one brief moment, he looked straight at the camera.

"Now."

Nick tapped the screen.

“What the hell...”

His words mirrored CJ’s own reaction the first time she saw the young man’s face. It was like seeing Nick Tanner twenty years before. The same eyes, the same angled features, the same lips.

“Who is this?” he demanded, only briefly looking at her before focusing again on the screen.

CJ cleared her throat to try and push through the thick emotions that threatened to choke her. “His name is Michael Tanner. Your son.”

The story continues...

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