

A Good Place To Land



Jaxine Daniels

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Other Works From The Pen of

Jaxine Daniels

A Soft Place to Fall

An Airman without a mission, a woman without a memory, a combination to die for.

Wings

A Good Place To Land

by

Jaxine Daniels

A Wings ePress, Inc.

Contemporary Romance Novel

Wings ePress, Inc.

Edited by: Lorraine Stephens
Copy Edited by: Karen Babcock
Senior Editor: Anita York
Executive Editor: Lorraine Stephens
Cover Artist: Christine Poe

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Dedication

This book is dedicated to both the SAR pilots and the base personnel. The pilots who risk their lives even in the best of conditions and who sometimes break the rules to save others risking their lives. Then to the base personnel who keep juggling long past exhaustion, who are the first to arrive and the last to leave.

I would like to thank Bill Leroy, a former SAR pilot himself, who patiently answers my questions and, though he's never actually crashed a Black Hawk, spent hours with me over numerous cups of coffee crashing this one. He is not only my technical advisor, but he's my friend.

Also, to Cory, Custer 901, who, once upon a time, was the inspiration for the relationship between Lily and Daniel.

Prologue

May 2002, 2:15 p.m.

The first commandment of aviation: Thou shalt maintain thy airspeed, lest the ground rise up and smite thee.

Colonel Rick MacIntyre had heard his para-jumpers attribute a sinister motivation to the mountain on occasion, sometimes even keeping score—Yosemite: Three; Humans: Zero. But he'd never really bought into it.

Now, as he watched the TV, as the Blackhawk tumbled down Mount Hood, he was beginning to reconsider.

Retirement, fishing to be exact, was looking pretty good right now.

He didn't know who the pilot was, but he felt for him. Rick had been in mid-sentence, leaning over the map-strewn table that took up over half of David Quillen's office. He still wore his coat, not having gotten warm yet from the walk inside. If he wanted to be this cold, he'd live in Colorado, or go home to Minnesota.

It was the tone of the voice, rather than the words, that reached in from the outer room and silenced him—made him listen.

“Sirs, get out here,” someone hollered again. On cue, both David and Rick moved—fast.

Not ten minutes earlier, Rick had passed the day room, saying hello to members of Bravo Element who lounged around the room, eating a late lunch and watching Fox News. Their lack of movement when he passed by made him smile. Yet, he fervently hoped, not for the first time, that, had a general walked in, the boys would have shown a bit more respect.

The fact was, it had taken him years to instill their casual disregard for his rank and, when it came right down to it, they never balked when he gave an order.

Now, as he entered the dayroom, there was no lounging. Nic D’Onofrio and Eric Cruz sat forward on the couch. Gabriel stood behind them. Joey Amonte and Will Pitkin flanked the television in raggedy, mismatched recliners, fully engaged with the drama that played out on the nineteen-inch screen.

“The chopper was hovering when it just seemed to dip its nose into the mountain, and then it just dropped and rolled,” said the stunned commentator. “This Air Force rescue helicopter is part of the Three Hundred and Fourth Rescue Squadron based in Portland...”

“Holy shit,” Quillen whispered beside him in a most un-Quillen-like way.

Rick’s stomach clenched as the ten-ton Jolly Green nosed into the snow and rolled obscenely, almost in slow motion, down the side of Mt. Hood. Its rotors splintered as

it tumbled and, about the third time they showed it, he could make out what he supposed was one of the crew members being ejected before the chopper rolled over him.

Every commander's nightmare—endangering the lives of your guys. Every pilot's nightmare—getting your crew, your patient or yourself killed. Never mind the high-dollar frown on the faces of the pencil pushers. And, in this case, never mind the complete humiliation of crashing your bird as the cameras rolled.

In this case, the crew had the foresight to release the hoist cable to the stokes litter that held the patient, dropping him to safety before the tumble.

For the next few weeks, every time he flew, that image played in his head. God only knew how the crew, several of whom, having been rolled over by the chopper on its slow descent, lived. The others, initially enmeshed in the wreckage, miraculously made it as well.

Wild ride.

Lucky bastards. It wasn't their day to die.

One

“I don’t think we’re in Kansas anymore, Toto,” Rick whispered into the swirling snow. He squeezed his eyes shut and focused on breathing in and breathing out.

So much to sort out.

Friday the thirteenth. Good grief. It wasn’t even noon yet, and this made it official. The mountain was closed for business. No one was going anywhere.

They’d gotten word of stranded climbers about nine last night. Daniel Fraser, the Search and Rescue commander for Yosemite, had scrambled a hasty team up in the dark and, this morning, they waited for the chopper for extraction. Weather was moving in fast, providing only a brief window to get PJ’s in there and get everyone out again.

Sergeant Bell had done a hurry-up preflight; Lieutenant Morrisett was waiting when Rick got to the bird. The kid would co-pilot. He was damn good for his age and flight time.

Rick had circled his gloved finger in the air as he jogged to the chopper, and the kid fired up the engines.

D'Onofrio and Wiley threw their packs in back and hopped on board. If he didn't know the way each man moved, he'd not have been able to differentiate between them—they were covered completely.

Rick's radio crackled. "Sir, you need to shave fifteen off this deal, your weather is moving faster than we first thought."

"Dandy. Head 'em up, move 'em out."

They'd hoisted Nick and Matt, along with the stokes litter, down to Daniel and his crew. The report was that one of the climbers had a broken ankle and the other was in good shape.

Rick let the lieutenant find a place to put down to wait for the ground crew to be ready for pickup. Everything seemed okay. Yeah, the snow was getting harder by the minute, but this wasn't some wimpy whirlybird used by the Flight for Life guys. The H-60 could handle anything. Within reason.

Glen lowered the collective and started the descent to the large flat spot he'd picked. Upslope, a wisp of snow swirled down the hill on the fickle mountain wind.

"Watch your rate of descent, Lieutenant. Looks like we have a downslope."

The lieutenant was on course. Angle looked right but the rate of descent was a little high. Rick began to feel uneasy. Something didn't feel right, didn't sound right.

Rick looked quickly at the power. It was taking too much to hold the approach. His ear picked up another ominous warning: the rotors were slowing down. Something was wrong and getting worse. Bad but not too bad yet.

“I have the aircraft,” Rick said, glancing to his left, smiling to reassure the kid. “Nothing personal.”

“Yes, sir, you got it.”

Rick needed to arrest the descent. He eased the nose down slightly, trying to trade a little of the remaining altitude for air speed. The lieutenant continued to call out the rate of descent every fifty feet.

Landing was the only option now. They were too low, too slow for another go around.

“Sink eight, we’re too fast,” Glen reported, his voice tense.

Fuck, fuck, fuck.

Normal decent rate at one hundred feet above the ground should be three hundred. That made their current eight hundred a shitload too fast.

Fifty feet above the ground, Rick tried to flare the helicopter and pick up any ground cushion, but it just wasn’t there today.

Fuck, fuck.

“Everyone brace.”

Slow motion...

The right main landing gear buckled under the initial impact, driving the nose deep into the powdery snow.

Wracked by spasms, the helicopter’s frame bowed beneath his feet.

The fuselage twisted violently to the right as the rotors bit into the snow pack. Instinctively, Rick ducked his head to avoid the rotors’ mad flex slicing through the cockpit.

Shattering glass was overwhelmed by the scream of metal on metal.

The entire aircraft wrenched savagely as the engines shattered from catastrophic failure of the high-speed compressor.

Red-hot shards of metal shot through the air and sizzled in the snow on impact.

The grinding of each small part gave way eventually to silence.

Fuck.

~ * ~

Tucked back in the radio room at the SAR building, Lily Atherton could tell something was wrong. She'd been running the SAR communications for long enough that she knew most of the voices by heart. With Daniel, she could pick up on the subtleties of his moods.

Everything was okay just a few minutes ago. The Colonel had dropped off two PJ's—Nic D'Onofrio and, she thought, Matt Wiley—along with a stokes litter. One of her guys had reported the chopper away after the drop.

Good.

Then there was chatter; they were talking to each other, not to her.

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~ * ~

"Copilot, Engineer, everyone okay?"

Sergeant Bell, flight engineer, was in the back, but the only sound he made was a half-assed moan. Not good.

"Master Sergeant Bell, talk to me," Rick shouted over the wind.

Another moan, maybe a slurred word.

Rick, then, made the mistake of looking to his left, to check on Glen. Once he looked, he had trouble looking away. His throat closed on the sight.

Glen sat upright, his hands still fisted on the seat in an attempt to lessen the impact. His head was down, as if he looked in wonder at the gash that rent his neck and left shoulder nearly in two. Blood no longer poured down his front, his heart no longer pumping.

“Aw, geez, kid.”

Rick squeezed his eyes shut and forced his head back to center.

The rotor blade had flexed, just after they hit the ground, and taken Glen out easily. Man was no match for that. He knew of pilots killed by being caught by the rotor. Now he'd seen it. He took a deep breath and began assessing the situation. No time for anything else.

Breathing was okay. Hurt a lot, but okay.

He flexed his arms. Arms okay.

Ahhh, shit, legs not okay. He looked down.

He tried to move his left foot. Ouch. His PJ's would have asked him to rate his pain on a scale of one to ten, one being very little pain, ten being the worst pain you've ever felt. Okay, moving his left foot—a two.

Trying the right.

If a man screamed in a snowstorm, with no one around to hear, did he really make any noise? Bell was around but he was, apparently, not conscious.

Right leg—on a scale of one to ten—a definite forty-three. Even now, he could see swelling in his knee. His flight suit was getting tight.

Odd, the blood was going up his uniform.

He glanced out the broken windshield to verify that they were, indeed upright.

So, what the hell...

Oh.

One would think that it would hurt to have a piece of plexiglass sticking out from just below the rib cage. It didn't. But that explained the blood.

One dead, one unconscious—presumably seriously injured—and one with an obvious plexiglass injury. No help on the way—he was the help.

Shit—that also left his men, and Daniel's, stranded.

He tried in vain to raise a voice on the other end of the radio. Either the radio had taken a shit on impact or they were somehow out of range. Likely it was the first.

Okay, he carried a hand-held radio in the lower right pocket of his survival vest. If he couldn't reach the RCC, maybe he could at least reach his PJ's on the mountain a few ridges over. For the life of him, at the moment he couldn't think who he'd just dropped off.

He keyed the mic. "PJ's on the ground, this is Scarecrow."

No reply. He repeated.

Another long pause, then a voice.

"Scarecrow, this is Search Base. How copy?"

Not his PJ's? Search Base? He scrambled his brain to make sense.

"Scarecrow, Search Base, how copy?"

Oh, Daniel's base. Oh. Okay.

"This is Scarecrow. I hear you fine."

~ * ~

Lily let out her breath. After listening to the edgy calls from the PJ's to their commander, both on the RCC frequency, then on hers, with no reply, she'd begun to panic.

Then Rick's voice. It was a voice she knew, a voice she always listened for.

She'd only been on the team for maybe two weeks when she'd first laid eyes on Colonel MacIntyre. He'd meandered into the SAR headquarters during a particularly ugly mission to toss ideas around with Daniel. He wore his flight suit. Even then his brown hair was starting to gray at the edges. Prematurely, no doubt. The guy couldn't have been much over forty.

The man was—well—beautiful. Not in a Hollywood glamour sort of way, though. He was well built, maybe six foot two. Lily was used to well built guys in SAR though. There was little middle age spread in guys who did this for a hobby, even if they were middle aged.

No, what made Colonel Rick MacIntyre beautiful was his personality. He struggled with seriousness, which was quite a contrast to Daniel Fraser, who rarely even neared frivolity. To Rick, everything had a humorous side, and he made good use of it. He tried Daniel's patience, but delighted Lily. The odd thing, though, was that he didn't smile much. The laughter was mostly in his eyes. Smiling, somewhere in his past, had worn deep lines in his face though.

She only met him that day, but had been watching—and listening—from afar, ever since.

For what it was worth, he wasn't married.

But, he was nearly old enough to be her father.

Lily keyed the mic. "Scarecrow, what's your status?"

~ * ~

Rick hesitated. Unlike the RCC frequencies, the MRA ones weren't secure. Anyone with a scanner from Radio

Shack could pick up traffic. That's why the SAR guys were always careful to talk in code when things were particularly snarky. But he hadn't listened in on their frequency enough to know the codes they used.

But, then again, if his guys couldn't hear him from a mile away and base could, it was likely that a low-power scanner couldn't pick up his end of the conversation. So he held his nose and jumped in.

"Base, we have one fatality, one serious injury and one less serious."

"Standby, Colonel while I relay to your team."

Rick listened as the voice—a very female voice—relayed what he'd said to Daniel, using code.

"Colonel, please give me details about the injuries."

"Stand by, Base," he answered.

Rick tried to turn around to see Bell. Instead he was left catching his breath from the screaming pain through his belly and leg. Okay, so glass in your belly did hurt. Big-time.

He could see nothing of Bell. But he could still hear him moan.

"Base, my FE—my flight engineer," better not speak military, "is alive but unconscious. I can hear him moan, but he's not answering me. He sounds like he's still in his seat. I'm afraid I can't turn around to check on him. How copy?"

"Go ahead, Colonel."

"I seem to have broken my right knee and I seem to be impaled on plexiglass. Right through my stomach. Other than that, I'm in one piece." Poor choice of words as poor Glen was nearly not. "Copy?"

~ * ~

Lily copied loud and clear. Rick was trapped in the cockpit with a dead man and one who soon could be. It didn't get much more awful than that.

"I copy, Colonel. Are we speaking on your chopper's radio or on the handheld?" Lily established that Rick was on his handheld, that he had a fresh battery, a backup battery and, if necessary, he could maybe reach another radio. She passed the information on to her team then asked Rick to hang on while she informed the RCC.

It was nearly one o'clock in the afternoon when Daniel reported that his team, including the two PJ's, were intent on making it down the mountain while they could. They'd splinted their patient's ankle and were en route down the mountain the hard way.

She informed the Colonel and assured him that she'd spoken to Lieutenant Quillen. A plan to get him and Bell assistance was in the works. The PJ's were on it, and if they needed help from any of her guys, they had it.

Rick reported that Bell was still moaning, he was still okay and it was snowing harder. He'd be conserving the radio battery by turning it off until the top of every hour. He'd set his watch to beep hourly.

By two o'clock—it seemed like a hundred phone calls later—Quillen had arranged another chopper to go get Scarecrow. PJ's Cruz and Gabriel were gearing up.

Daniel's team was making progress, though the snow was coming down harder.

Bell was making less noise; Rick had pulled out his space blanket and was trying to stay dry. The wind was up

a few knots, and he urged caution if that bird was, indeed, coming up to get them.

And by three o'clock, the window for a rescue tonight was closed. Daniel reported fifty mile per hour winds and blizzard conditions.

His team had found a place to hunker down for the night. They had seven men, two tents, and everything they needed to ride out the storm.

"Colonel, I'm afraid I have bad news," Lily said in as steady a voice as she could pull off.

"No in-flight movie?"

"Right, sir." When had she started calling him sir?

"And it'll be morning before I see a friendly face?"

"Yes. I'm sorry."

Two

Rick let out a sigh. Bell's breathing was beginning to sound wet. If he could have moved, Rick would have stuck something in the hole that let the wind and snow in. As it was, he was wrapped in his space blanket, could reach another one if he absolutely had to and had enough jerky and power bars to make it for a week.

The wind picked up, if that was possible, whistling through the cockpit. Sinister, almost. He tried to ignore it.

"Actually, Base—I can't call you base any more, what's your name?"

"Lily, sir."

"Well, actually, Lilysir, I'm relieved that no one else is going down in this storm because of me."

"Just Lily."

"Have we met, Lily?"

She had a lovely voice, alluring yet comforting. Over the last hours, he'd come to look forward to the obnoxious beep of his watch. It meant a connection with the outside world, with life, and with her.

"Once, sir."

“Okay, Lily, I don’t even encourage this sir stuff from my men, so, please call me Rick.”

There was no response for a moment. Had he offended her? *That wasn’t it, was it Lily? You have a team out in the field that can hear you, but not me.*

“Uh, Lily, how about Colonel, will that work?”

He could hear her smile in her reply. “Good, Colonel. We did meet here at the SAR building about two years ago, during a mission. You were conferring with Daniel at the time. Quite busy.”

Her implication was crystal clear. She didn’t think he remembered her. He searched his foggy brain. The only female he could think of that he’d met there at SAR HQ was the hot redhead. Lily? Maybe.

“The missions all run together, Lily, but I think I do remember meeting you.”

Okay, here you are trapped inside your chopper in a blinding snowstorm, with one dead, one badly injured and you yourself with a broken leg and the nagging impaled by glass thing. Yet, your body reacts to the memory of a strikingly hot female. Absurd.

When she didn’t answer, he changed the subject.

“It’s still snowing hard here and it’s getting dark. I did a little recon in my survival gear and I do have a flashlight. I’m pretty much warm enough for the moment. I’d appreciate you passing on my status to my men.”

“Will do, Colonel.”

~ * ~

That was the least she could do. During the time she’d run the radio for SAR, she’d had many times when she

felt helpless on this end of things. Tonight gave helpless new meaning.

“Lily?”

His voice had changed subtly.

“Yes?”

“Are you leaving for the night?”

Her heart wrenched at the question.

“No, Colonel, I’m not going anywhere.”

“Okay, talk to you in an hour.”

“Sir?”

“Yeah?”

“Let’s make it half an hour.”

“Will do.”

Something in Rick’s voice made her pick up the phone.

~ * ~

Up here, even in the midst of summer, when the sun went down, the temperature dropped significantly. Daniel was relieved beyond measure to have everyone settled in tents before it got dark. Crowded, yes. The better to conserve body heat. No one in his care was in any danger. Lord willing, they’d be able to walk out tomorrow.

Almost worth celebrating.

If you didn’t think about the situation due west.

Mac was stranded and injured, maybe badly. One could never tell with him. Daniel didn’t know Bell, and might have met the lieutenant once. Bell was in very bad shape judging from the radio report, and Morrisett was dead.

Nic and Matt had listened quietly to the radio traffic. They’d answered when Lily updated them and passed on both medical advice and hang-in-there messages to their commander. Other than that, both were very quiet. Not

unusual for Nic, but Daniel couldn't remember ever seeing Matt at a loss for jokes. He always insisted that he was only there for comic relief. Daniel knew better; Matt was highly qualified to be on the team.

Neither Nic nor Matt had suggested that they leave their patient here to climb over the ridges to get to the real patients. But Daniel knew they were thinking just that, comparing an unprepared fool with a broken ankle with his seriously injured rescuers. Daniel could only put his hand on their shoulders and let them know they weren't alone.

~ * ~

Lily dialed Daniel's cell and hoped for an answer. One never knew where or when they'd have service up on the mountain. Oddly, the bad weather often helped.

"This is Daniel."

How do you spell relief?

"Daniel, Lily. Listen I have a huge job for you."

"You do?"

She could just imagine what he was thinking. What the heck could she want him to do from a tent in a blinding snowstorm?

"Yes, I need you all to switch over to MRA2 until this is over."

"Why?"

Lily could just see Daniel's face when he said that. He'd be looking around as if the answer hung on the wall somewhere in the tent.

"Because I don't want the team hearing my conversation with the Colonel."

Anyone else might take that wrong. Daniel wouldn't. He might not agree with her reasons, but he'd understand and they were close enough that he'd trust her instincts.

"Okay, I'll take care of it."

"You guys are good, right?"

"Right. And Lily, would you mind calling..."

"The wives?" Traditionally, she was one or two steps ahead of him. "Done. Karen says to stay safe. I left a message at Buzz's house and Julie said to tell Nic to call as soon as he was down."

"Thanks, Lil. We'll be on MRA2 for the night, and I'll have my cell."

"Night, Daniel."

~ * ~

Over the next hours, Lily checked in on Rick every half hour. The first few times, things sounded pretty much the same. But this last time, at eight o'clock, she thought he sounded like he was shivering.

After she'd hung up with Daniel, she'd called Lt. Quillen with the same request. When she explained to him that it might be better for his men to not be privy to the Colonel when he wasn't at his best, Quillen caught on right away and said he'd make sure his men stayed off that frequency. Since she knew none of the team was listening, she had switched to calling him Rick.

"You warm enough, Rick?"

"Pretty much."

"Do you have more to cover up with?"

"Yeah."

"Then get it and use it."

"Yes, ma'am."

“Rick, what about Bell?”

“I think he moaned a while ago, but I can’t be sure.”

“Okay. You make sure you get bundled up and I’ll chat with you again in a little while.”

“Lily.”

“Yes.”

“You don’t have to stay, you know. I’ll be fine.”

“Well, I’m afraid there isn’t anyone else to take my place here.” Not even close to the truth. The fact was she’d run off all the help that had been there. And it would take dynamite to get her out of that chair. “I’m afraid you’re stuck with me until morning. Sorry.”

“I’m not.”

“Half an hour, Colonel.”

“Scarecrow out.”

“Mission base clear.”

~ * ~

At eight-thirty, Lily hailed him again.

“Scarecrow, Mission Base.”

There was no answer.

She tried again.

Nothing.

Maybe his radio was dead. But, hadn’t he said that he had an extra battery? Maybe he’d fallen asleep and didn’t hear his watch beep. Lily batted away the fear inside, took a deep breath and sat tight.

Nine and nine-thirty came and went, no response.

As did ten and ten thirty.

At ten ’til eleven, she heard the familiar click and was reaching for the radio before he even spoke.

“Lily? You there?”

She took a moment to compose her voice, "I'm here."

"Oh, good. I must have fallen asleep. For a minute there I thought I'd woken up dead. Pretty dark out here."

She laughed. "I'll bet. How you feeling, Colonel?"

"Did I just dream that you were calling me Rick?"

"No."

"I'm feeling slow, sleepy. But my guys will kill me if I fall asleep and freeze to death."

"Yes, they would."

"So you wanna... talk for a while?"

"Sure."

Good idea. Letting him talk would give her a good feel for his condition. If he was shocky, either from cold or from internal bleeding, his conversation would show it. She'd already noted with mild alarm that his speech was slow, even slurred at times.

Like there was anything anyone could do if he was shocky.

"So, Lily, you married? Have kids?"

"No to both, you?"

She knew part of the answer, but just went with the flow.

"Not married, two kids." He paused, then went on. "I guess I was a pretty crummy husband, at least that's what Barb tells me."

"Your ex?"

"Yeah. She has the girls. Twins. They're four... no, fifteen now."

"That's a handful, I'll bet."

Silence.

"What are their names?"

“Kate and Ally. Like the old tv show. You might be too young to remember it. They’re identical.” He stopped talking but kept the mic keyed so Lily couldn’t reply. When he spoke again, his voice was low, halting. “I must be a crummy father, too. I haven’t seen them for two years, Lily.”

She tried to counter his sudden mood dive. “Then you’ll have to put that on your to-do list.”

Lily caught herself feeling bad for him, then forced herself to remember that there were two sides to every story. Rick might, indeed, have been a crummy husband and father. After all, what did she know about the guy, save that he was a good commander—with hands she longed to touch?

“I need to sleep, Lily.”

“Okay. It’s a few minutes after eleven. Did your watch beep while we were talking here?”

“Yeah.”

“Did you ever reset it for every half hour?”

“I don’t... know.”

“That’s okay. You rest for a while. We’ll talk again at midnight.”

He never answered.

~ * ~

Rick woke with a start. Something was off. Again, the dark stole his breath as he struggled to remember where he was. The dull throb in his leg helped. He felt so danged slow. Groggy. He hadn’t been shitfaced—for many years—by the age of forty-five you should have learned better. But that’s how he felt now. Like he’d been on a five-day drunk.

His watch beeped.

Midnight. What was supposed to happen at midnight?

With his gloved hand, he reached for the flashlight. At least he remembered where it was. He flipped it on and was momentarily blinded.

What was left of the windshield was white, either covered or frozen. Before he caught himself, he glanced over to the co-pilot seat, only then remembering his resolution to not look over there again. His stomach rolled. Now there was a good two inches of snow covering Glen.

“Bell?”

He cleared his throat and tried again.

No answer. No moan. And in the stillness of the cockpit—the wind must have quit—he could hear nothing behind him.

His left hand held the radio.

Midnight.

Lily.

Geez.

“Mission...” what was it called?

Whatever they were called—there was no answer. Had Lily left, gone home to sleep? He couldn’t blame her if she had. God, he hoped not. Her voice... her presence... it was...

Geez, it might work better if he pressed the button.

“Lily?”

“Rick?”

“Yeah, my watch beeped. It must be midnight.” For a minute he stared at the radio and wondered why he wasn’t using the one in his helmet.

“Actually, it’s two, Colonel.”

“Okay.”

“How are you feeling?”

Was she talking really fast?

“Okay... it’s two ... in the morning?”

“Yes,” she laughed.

He loved the sound of her laugh. Was she an angel? He shook his head, trying to clear it. No, not an angel. Lily.

“Lily.”

“Yeah?”

“I think Bell’s dead.”

She didn’t answer for a minute. He wondered if he’d actually transmitted that.

“What makes you think so?”

“I can’t hear him breathing anymore. It’s really quiet in here. Is it still snowing out there?”

“Last time I checked with Daniel, he said it had slowed somewhat.”

“Danny boy. How’s Danny?”

“Danny?” she asked, obviously amused. “He’s okay. They’re in tents a few ridges over. Remember?”

He searched his brain for meaning, couldn’t quite come up with anything so just acted like he had.

“Right... Lily?”

“Yes.”

“What’s your favorite restaurant in Merced?”

“Carrino’s, I guess. What’s yours?”

“It doesn’t matter what mine is. I’m going to take you out to Carrino’s when I get down from here. Okay?”

“Okay.”

“That is if I’m not dead. If I’m dead, I can’t take you out for dinner.”

Again she laughed. “That’s true. So I guess you’d better not die.”

“Okay.”

Suddenly he felt that he couldn’t bring the radio to his mouth one more time. It was just too heavy. He keyed the mic.

“I need to sleep.”

“Okay. I’ll be here. Turn your radio off.”

~ * ~

“Stay with me, Rick,” Lily said to no one, without keying the mic.

Ironically, she had a dinner date with the most attractive man she knew. Maybe old enough to be her father. But that changed nothing.

If he wasn’t dead.

Three

Katey-did wrinkled her pert little nose at Rick's instructions at baiting her line. She glanced into the worm cup but wasn't about to comply. Ally-kazam, on the other hand, held her breath and plunged two fingers in, pulling out a whopper of a worm.

"Now carefully thread the worm onto the hook."

She gave him a look of sheer disbelief but held her breath again and started.

"Careful not to get your finger."

Everything in him wanted to reach over and do it for her. But that's not how they'd learn. And, contrary to what Barbara said, fishing was one skill every person should have.

Barbara was holed up in the tent, still sleeping. She might grace them with her presence by noon, stay outside in her bathing suit to work on her tan, then she'd be back in the tent, complaining about the bugs and reading another silly romance book.

If he wasn't very determined, Kate would be with her. Ally could go either way, depending on the pressure exerted from the enemy camp.

“Now toss your line out there and watch the bobber for movement.”

Ally did as she was told.

“C’mere Katy-did.” She stomped her foot at his use of the nickname.

“Dad, I’m almost eleven.”

“Right, sorry. C’mere and I’ll bait your hook.”

Soon both girls, so cute with their pigtails, were sitting not so patiently on the pier, waiting for a nibble.

~ * ~

The sky outside was starting to lighten when the radio clicked to life again. The clock said oh-four-twenty-seven.

“You like... fishing... Lily?”

His voice was even slower. Now he only got out a couple words at a time. Despite her best efforts, fear snaked through her.

At least he was still talking and still knew how to use the radio.

At least he still knew her name.

“I’ve never been fishing, Rick.”

“Well, then, if I’m not dead, I’ll take you fishing.”

Yeah, right. He sounded drunk. Of course, he wasn’t, just cold and shocky.

“How’s the leg, then?”

“Not too bad any more.”

No doubt, the cold was numbing everything, his leg, his stomach, his brain. But, if he had internal bleeding, then the cold was slowing that as well.

“So, tell me about Lily.”

“What do you want to know?”

The phone rang.

“Standby Rick, gotta get the phone.”

It was Lieutenant Quillen. He sounded like he’d been up all night as well.

First, he got an update on the Colonel. Then he updated her. At about nine this morning there was supposed to be a window of about two hours that he thought they might get another helicopter in to get the crew out of there. Since the unit’s other bird was waiting for parts, they were hoping to get another Blackhawk from Fresno. There was some question about Fresno’s weather being a problem so David was working on a backup plan to use a private helicopter.

Lily assured him that, last she knew, Daniel had planned on bringing his team down on foot. She’d check and get back to him if that wasn’t the plan. He’d keep her informed so she could update the Colonel.

“Sorry, Colonel. That was Lieutenant Quillen. He’s working on a plan to get you out of there. They’re shooting for around nine.”

“Sweet.”

“Where were we?”

He didn’t answer, so she reminded him

“You wanted to know about me.”

“Right. Where did you grow up?”

Not one of her favorite subjects. “L.A.” She didn’t give him a chance to go down that road. “I’m a massage therapist at the Rehab Center. Been there for six years.”

“Favorite food?”

“Pizza.”

“Good. Favorite sport.”

“Not much into sports, I’m afraid.”

He made a tsking sound then dissolved into a spasm of coughing. The sound was awful.

“Oh, God, it hurts to cough.” Long pause. “What time is it?”

“Five ten.”

“Should I leave a message for my girls?”

“Sir?”

“I thought we’d stopped the sir stuff.”

“Sorry.”

“I don’t think I can make it ’til nine, Lily.”

Lily shut her eyes, willing back the tears that threatened. She so didn’t want to hear his final words, didn’t want to listen to him die. Even more than that, though, she didn’t want to be in denial, didn’t want him to die alone.

“I’ll bet you can, Rick.”

She tried to keep her voice hopeful. She’d heard, time and again, from her own team medics, that if a person said they were dying, you should believe them.

“But, I’ll be glad to take a message for your girls if you like.”

The phone rang again, SAR HQ was starting to wake up, and she was the only one there. Maybe running everyone else off hadn’t been such a good idea. Once things started humming, the phone and the radio would likely be more than she could handle. They were definitely more than she *wanted* to handle. As she reached for the phone, she decided that this would be the last interruption she allowed.

This time it was Stan, the civilian captain of Search and Rescue—Daniel theoretically working for the forest

service. He'd been on the phone with David Quillen as well and was now calling in the team to put together plan C—in case neither chopper could get to Colonel McIntyre.

He wanted her to make the phone calls and was not thrilled to hear she was the only one there. She explained that she was pretty much tied up with the Colonel on the radio, at least tried to make it sound like that was taking all her time, and begged off making the calls. Stan said he understood, even though he still sounded peeved, told her his first call would be to get her some help and said he'd be in before six.

“Okay, Rick, I'm back.”

Rick was no longer there.

~ * ~

“Cruz, you're on deck.”

Eric pushed to his feet, relieved to finally have something to do. He followed Lt. Quillen into his office.

“What's the plan?” He glanced at his watch. A little after six.

“You and Gabe are going up in whichever bird we end up with and pulling the crew off the mountain.”

“Whatever bird?”

“Yeah, Fresno just called to say that the weather may preclude them from flying. The weather up there is worse than here.”

“Icing?”

“Yeah, so we have a private chopper lined up just in case. If you end up with it, you'll have to stay as light as you can, just a jump kit and two backboards. Weight and time will be working against us.”

“So we’ll leave Lt. Morrisett until later.”

“Looks like.”

“And if we get our bird?”

“Then you’ll have to pay as you go, let the pilot make that call.”

“Gabe’s on his way?”

“Yeah. We’re shooting for liftoff at oh-nine-hundred.”

“Got it.”

Cruz turned to leave, smiling at the oh-so-official tone that Yoda got when he was stressed. Since David left the enlisted ranks and became an officer, he and the Colonel had spent a lot more time together. He was, no doubt, closer to Mac than any of the other PJ’s were.

“Cruz.”

“Yeah, Lieutenant,” he replied without turning.

“Bring him back alive.”

“Yes, Sir.”

~ * ~

By seven, the SAR building was full of team members perched on chairs, discussing options. Sharon Burrows was there to help Lily in the comm room.

Lily was on the phone with the RCC when the radio crackled. Sharon reached for it but Lily got there first. She knew that the look she gave Sharon was nasty; at this point she didn’t care.

“Scarecrow, you awake?”

She held her breath waiting for an answer. The closer they got to a rescue, the more afraid she was that he wouldn’t hold on.

“Scarecrow, this is Lily, you copy?”

Now Sharon shot her a look that hinted at disapproval.

“Lily?”

Little more than a whisper but Lily grabbed hold.

“Yes, Rick. I’m here. You’re awake.”

“I’m cold.”

“I know.” It was all she could think of to say.

“...wish you were... here.”

Now Sharon really gave her a look. She waved it off.

“He’s delirious.”

Sharon’s eyebrows raised slightly.

Lily keyed the mic. “Me, too.”

When she tried to raise him again, she got nothing back.

Without regard for Sharon or Stan or anyone else, she put her head in her hands and cried.

~ * ~

Cruz had begun pacing about the same time the sun came up. In his head he understood the delay, but his gut told him they needed to get to the Colonel. Several members of Alpha Squad were there, doing pretty much the same thing. When he ventured as far as the Lieutenant’s office, Quillen would look up at him, usually phone in hand, and throw him an irritated look that sent him back to the dayroom to pace.

It was becoming more and more evident, as nine o’clock approached, that they weren’t taking a Blackhawk in to get the Colonel. That left Gabe quiet and Cruz cussing. They were stuck with a puddle jumper.

At least that’s what Cruz was calling it. The Major assured him that the pilot, Red Sheridan, was a very competent flier, even owned a school for pilots, and that

the Jet Ranger, though small, was perfect for what they needed it to do. Eric was not convinced.

Then Gabe wouldn't let him drive.

At ten 'til nine, said puddle jumper arrived and the pilot approached from the far side. Major Scott stepped forward and shook his hand, then escorted him in to meet the others.

"Sergeant Chris Gabriel, Sergeant Eric Cruz, this is your pilot."

At that point said pilot pulled off his light green helmet, marked with the nickname "Red" over the face shield, and shook out the most amazing mane of red hair Cruz had ever seen.

She reached a hand out.

"Kit Sheridan. Sergeant Gabriel, Sergeant Cruz."

Damned Gabe slobbered all over himself.

"Hi, Kit. Chris Gabriel and Eric Cruz."

"Chris. Eric. Good to meet you."

Cruz nodded but all he could think about was that they were flying into a blizzard in a chopper that had hardly earned the name, with a girl pilot. Okay so she was a very hot girl, filled out her jumpsuit with curves that he normally would have drooled over himself. But now was definitely not the time.

"So you actually think you can get us in there safely and get us and our patients out, huh?"

Her big green eyes flared just for an instant before she smiled and tipped her head.

"Ooh, blatant gender bias so early in the morning, and coming from a surfer-dude. Aren't you afraid you'll

destroy my fragile self esteem...” her eyes dipped to his name tag, “... Hollywood?”

“Listen, Sweetheart...” Cruz was in no mood...

“No, you listen, Sergeant. Both me and my bird are all you need today. Instead of you standing there insulting me while the window of opportunity closes, what say we get loaded and you brief me on what, exactly, you need me to do.”

Gabe stepped between them, cleared his throat, then herded them inside for the briefing.

With the exact coordinates of the downed aircraft, there was no problem finding it. Kit was good to her word and dropped Cruz and Gabe, along with backboards, head blocks, straps and a jump kit off within one hundred feet of the site, then left to circle the area until they gave her the word to come back and get them.

The chopper was covered with a good six inches of snow. They quickly cleared off the right side. The Colonel, wrapped in two space blankets, slumped in the rear seat. They used the crowbar—the only tool they brought—to force the door open.

Four

Cruz reached to feel for Mac's pulse even as he glanced past him to the co-pilot. The lieutenant was peacefully, oddly dead, covered with snow.

Mac roused a bit at the touch, thank God.

"Sir?"

Mac slowly lifted his head and looked at Cruz. There was only faint recognition in his eyes.

"Sir, it's Cruz and Gabriel. How ya feeling?"

"Take care of Bell."

"Yes, Sir, we will."

Cruz began peeling back the blankets to get a better look when Mac grabbed his wrist.

"No, Sarge, now. Take care of Bell."

By then, Gabe had the left door open and had climbed up, leaning across the co-pilot's body and feeling for a pulse on Bell in the back. Cruz watched him, waiting.

Gabe felt for long enough to make sure, then shook his head.

"Sir, Bell's dead. We need to get you out of here."

Mac muttered a curse but let go of Cruz.

"What hurts, Sir?"

He carefully started feeling down the Colonel's arms, shoulders, working his way down his rib cage.

"Tell Lily I owe her Italian."

"I will. Now, Sir, what hurts?"

"My knee did. It doesn't now. And I have this..."

"Yes, Sir, you do. Very impressive, Sir." A nasty looking slab of glass entered the Colonel's left upper quadrant just below his ribcage. Cruz slid his hand behind to see if the glass went clear through and into the seat.

It did.

Shit. They'd have to take the glass and the Colonel in one move, pulling him free from the seat. Moving the glass even a half inch could be deadly. Shit.

And they'd have to board him on his side, not the best option.

While Gabe lifted the Lieutenant's body from his seat, Cruz dug in the jump kit.

"Sir, we're going to get a line started on you, give you something for pain. Then we'll get you out of here. Hang in there."

Mac didn't answer as Cruz stared the line, hooking up warmed saline, then shooting in a decent dose of morphine.

"Talk to me, Mac."

The Colonel mumbled incoherently.

"Let's go, Gabe."

"Yup."

It took them about three minutes to get the Colonel strapped onto the backboard. By the time they were ready, Kit was back with their ride.

On the trip to the hospital, Cruz and Gabe started a second line and began rewarming their patient with hot packs. Mac was no longer responsive, but he was alive.

“Mission Base, we’ve got the Colonel and are inbound to the hospital. He’s alive.”

~ * ~

“Mission Base copies. Thank you.”

Lily was out of her seat before she’d fully released the mic.

“I’m outta here. Daniel and his team are about an hour out. My guess is they’ll just take their patient straight to the hospital. Stay here until everyone’s out of the field.”

Sharon nodded. “Got it.”

Lily grabbed her coat and headed for her car.

Mercy Medical Center was only a few blocks away. Ideally, Karen Fraser was working the ER this morning. Then, Lily could get what she needed—real information, and in to see Rick.

~ * ~

Karen was at work and already knew the situation, thanks to several phone conversations with Daniel.

“They just called in, Lily.” Karen answered. “He was responsive when they got there but isn’t now. His BP’s bottoming out. They should be in within about ten minutes.”

“Thanks, Karen. Daniel’s about an hour from the cars then they should be in with their patient. He’s only got a broken ankle.”

“Good.”

“Karen? You okay?”

“Yeah, just tired. Not sleeping well, I guess.”

Lily nodded.

“I’ll get you back there to see the colonel as soon as I can.”

“Thank you.”

“No problem. You were up all night?”

“I’m fine.”

Twenty-five minutes later, the colonel arrived. Lily could see the gurney through the glass doors, the two PJ’s still with him. Her stomach lurched when she realized that they were bagging him.

~ * ~

“As soon as he’s warmed up and stable, he’ll be going to surgery to take the glass out. It looks like it may have pierced his spleen. His right knee is badly swollen but, since it’s not life threatening, we’ll figure that out later. After surgery, which should take about two hours, he’ll go straight to the ICU.”

“He’s not breathing on his own?”

Karen smiled. “It’s not what you think, Lily. It’s protocol to intubate unresponsive patients to protect their airway. But they’ll keep him tubed until after surgery.”

It was another twenty minutes before Karen crooked her finger to Lily and escorted her back to the ER pod where Rick lay. The PJ’s stood, one at each side of him as if their mere presence would... what? Was she any better, thinking that her being there would make a difference somehow?

The dark haired one on the right turned when she entered.

“You must be Lily.”

His nametag said “Angel” and the other, the blonde one’s said “Hollywood.” These must be Gabe and Cruz.

“Yes. I’m Lily.”

Her gaze drifted to Rick, who didn’t really look like Rick. He was pale and, of course, attached to the ventilator. His eyes looked rather sunken. The angles of his face looked harder than normal. The only part of him that looked like Rick were his hands, which peeked out from the huge air-filled warming blanket that dwarfed him. She longed to reach over and touch him.

“He looks worse than he really is, Lily,” Cruz said, drawing up next to her. “He’s pretty stable at this point.”

“Karen said the glass ruptured his spleen.”

“Looks like, but they’re giving him blood, and they’ve got his pressure back up, so he’s holding his own.”

“He had a message for you,” Chris Gabriel said from across the bed.

“He did?”

He smiled. “Yeah, he said he owed you Italian.”

Tears clutched her throat suddenly, and she struggled not to show them. She couldn’t control the heat that raced to her face though.

Cruz reached over and squeezed her hand.

“Thanks for keeping him company all night, Lily. Your voice must have been a lifeline for him. You likely don’t know that he spent time in a POW prison. You kept it from being like that.” Cruz’s voice got husky.

Now the tears swam in her eyes, but Cruz was up for it.

“You must be exhausted.”

She shook her head and swiped the tear that snuck down her cheek. “I’m fine.”

It wasn't long before the staff shooed all three of them out of there. Karen assured them all that she'd pave the way for them to come up to ICU to visit once the colonel was settled.

Cruz and Gabriel pleaded extreme hunger and literally dragged Lily to the cafeteria, insisting that after being up all night she needed to eat. These were two very determined men.

Lily ate little. They both ate like there was no tomorrow.

~ * ~

By eleven they were ensconced in the surgical waiting room. Lieutenant Quillen was there when they arrived from the cafeteria and hadn't heard anything yet. The foursome sat, each wrapped in worry until the doctor came out. It was a long two hours.

At one-thirty the clichéd surgeon stepped in, dressed in his clichéd blue-green scrubs, mask down around his neck, and called them forth.

"He'll be fine," he said to Lily, clearly unaware of the lack of relationship. "Once the glass sliced his spleen, its presence there actually saved him by keeping him from bleeding out up on the mountain. We did have to remove the spleen but he's doing well now. His knee's going to need some surgery as well, but that will be a few days to a week from now."

Now he looked at the guys.

"You guys the ones that went up to get him?"

"Yes, Sir."

"You did a great job."

~ * ~

Karen must have done an amazing schmoozing job because Lily was allowed into the ICU right away. Quillen and the others had to take turns—only allowed in one at a time for five minutes at the top of every hour. Lily, though, was allowed to stay.

Before the nurse left the room, she briefed Lily. Rick would stay in ICU until either tomorrow or the next day. Then he'd be moved to the floor. When he was stable enough, they'd go in to repair his knee. He was being kept mildly sedated now to keep him from moving very much. He was breathing on his own; the tube was just a precaution until he was more alert. He could hear her so the nurse encouraged her to talk to him.

"When you run out of things to say, you can always read to him. Or just hold his hand."

Obviously, the nurse was under the same misconception as the surgeon...

"Oh, I ..." Not worth setting her straight. "Thank you."

"If he wakes up, the tube will scare him. Just reassure him and then press the button so we can take care of it."

With that, the nurse left her alone with Rick. Lily leaned against the wall, suddenly wondering if she could stay upright.

For the longest time, she just stood there watching the gentle rise and fall of his chest. They'd taken off the bear hugger air blanket, and now he was simply covered with a heavy blanket, his arms uncovered at his sides.

She pushed away from the wall and took two steps to the bed.

She took his hand. The power of touch was much more important than any hesitation she might feel—besides there was no one there to see her do it.

“Colonel, if you can hear me, it’s Lily. You’re going to be okay.” Her throat tightened. She took a deep breath and continued. “They have a tube in your throat helping you breathe but it’s just a precaution. Nothing to worry about.”

When she’d done her best to reassure him that all was well, and told him what would be happening next, she squeezed his hand.

“And you owe me dinner.”

For a moment, she thought he squeezed back.

~ * ~

Since they weren’t going to get to go in to see the Colonel for a while—the lieutenant was first in line as was only right—Cruz and Gabe went back downstairs to check on the other team’s arrival.

Matt and Nic—or as their nametags said, Cowboy and Batman—were standing in the hall outside the ER.

“Hey.”

“How’s the Colonel?” Nic asked immediately.

“Okay. He’s out of surgery and in the ICU. They had to remove his spleen.” Cruz paused to let that sink in.

Both Nic and Matt sucked in breath through gritted teeth.

“His knee is fucked up and will need surgery once he’s stable enough—maybe later in the week. Bell and Morrisett were both dead. We’ll have to go back up and get them when the weather clears.”

Nic didn't reply, just shook his head and ran his hand through his hair. Nic-speak for "shit." He was trying to clean up his language for Julie.

Matt had no such obligation and cursed openly.

"How's your guy?" Cruz asked.

"Broken ankle."

"Broken ankle," Gabe replied. They all were thinking the same thing—two dead and one severely injured for a broken ankle. No one said it though.

"So you guys have room to take us back with you?"

"Sure. You're not staying?"

"Nah, Lily's in with him and Yoda is up there waiting for his five minutes, so we can come back later."

"Lily?" Matt asked with a crook in his eyebrow.

"Yeah, the SAR gal who talked to him all night."

"I know who Lily is, dumbass. I was just..."

"Yeah, well she's concerned." Cruz wondered at the sudden instinct to protect Lily.

"Yeah, but is she *hot*?" Matt asked.

"Actually, she's very hot, kid."

Five

Lily was reading aloud when the nurse came in just before six to let Lily know that she would be letting another visitor in. Lily could stay or take a break.

“Pride and Prejudice?” she asked.

“Yes, it’s one of my favorites, and I happen to have it with me today.”

“I hope it doesn’t damage his testosterone.”

Lily looked up at her, not sure of her meaning.

The girl smiled. “I think his testosterone will be fine.”

“I hope so,” Lily responded, really without thinking.

The girl winked, hooked up another bag of saline and left.

Lieutenant Quillen came in a minute later.

“Lily, I’m David Quillen. We spoke on the phone.”

David was about five eleven and a bit more stocky than the other PJ’s she’d met. Dark hair and eyes, a friendly smile and a very soothing voice. He was immediately likable.

“Yes, David. Nice to meet you. Did the nurse update you on Colonel McIntyre’s condition?”

“Pretty much.”

“Well, then, I’ll leave you to your visit. I’m in search of a cup of coffee—or a nap in a bottle—whichever I find first.”

He smiled. “If you find the nap, bring me one back and I’ll pay you for it. I think we all could use some sleep.”

~ * ~

Lily found Daniel kissing Karen outside the ER.

“Ooh, sorry.”

Daniel blushed and pushed his glasses up.

“I gotta get back inside, babe.”

“You’re sure you feel okay?”

“Yes, Daniel. I’m fine. Go home and get some sleep.”

“I will.”

“Bye, Lily.”

“Bye, Karen.”

“Hi, Lil.”

Lily chuckled. “Daniel.”

Lily walked him back to the SAR vehicles and updated him on Rick’s condition.

“You did an amazing job, Lily. You headed home to sleep?”

“No, going in search of coffee, then back upstairs.”

Daniel turned a concerned glance her way, his eyebrows raised. “O... kay.”

“I’m fine, Daniel.”

She nudged him in the general direction of the group of SAR guys waiting in the parking lot, and he trudged away.

“Now, coffee.”

~ * ~

This time, when she took his hand, telling him that she was back, she was sure his hand had tightened on hers.

Her stomach clenched. She tried to ignore it, despite being very bad at ignoring her body's language.

Instead of saying what first sprang to her mind, she settled on a reassurance that she'd be there as long as they'd let her stay.

Once she'd decided to stay, she didn't leave at the top of every hour—except maybe to get a candy bar or another dose of caffeine. She'd told him she'd be there as long as she could.

There was a steady flow of visitors, who only stayed five minutes: PJ's from both Alpha and Bravo squad, some high mucky-muck major who was very formal in expressing his wishes for the colonel to get well—Lily smiled to herself as he spoke to the unconscious Rick.

At the nine o'clock visit, Cruz and Nic somehow schmoozed their way in at the same time—probably Cruz. They also smuggled in a cheeseburger for Lily. They'd left off the fries—Cruz said—because the smell would have given them away. Nic smiled sheepishly and admitted that he and Eric had eaten the fries on the way over.

~ * ~

Daniel managed two hours sleep before he forced himself to get up. He wanted to pick up Karen from work and take her out to dinner. No special occasion. Missions just made him want to spend time with her.

He got to Mercy about fifteen 'till eight but ended up having to wait until eight twenty before she could get away. If he'd known how much time he had, he'd have swung upstairs and seen Mac.

“So, where do you want to eat, babe?”

“Nothing sounds good, Daniel. Maybe we should just go home and try this tomorrow night.”

He reached over and pulled her hand to his lips. “You sure?”

“Yeah,” she said, trying to smile, “I’m just beat.”

“Tough day?” God, he hoped that was it. Lately, she hadn’t really been herself.

“No, not really.”

When they got home, he fixed her soup and brought it to her on the couch in front of the tv. She ate about half a bowl, thanked him and went to bed a little after nine. He followed soon after.

~ * ~

After the eleven o’clock visit, which passed without a visitor, Lily picked up the book again.

“Can you deny that you have done it,” she repeated.

With assumed tranquillity he then replied, “I have no wish of denying that I did everything in my power to separate my friend from your sister, or that I rejoice in my success. Towards him I have been kinder than toward myself.”

This book, which had no little effect on her philosophy of the huge gulfs between the haves and have-nots, had never made her feel more uncomfortable than it did right now.

She read on.

Over the course of the night, she snoozed in the chair, sometimes with her head on the edge of the bed. Every time a nurse came in, she roused, but not for long, the rhythmic sound of the respirator lulling her back to sleep.

A large cappuccino came in for her with Lt. Quillen at eight in the morning. Her angel of mercy. Had anything ever tasted quite so good?

But even cappuccino couldn't wake her up. Just before ten, the nurse came in and led her to an adjacent room, darkened by drawn curtains, crisp white sheets covering the hospital bed.

"You sleep here for a while, Lily. I'll come get you if there are any changes."

"You won't get in trouble."

"No, I won't. When you wake up, I'll get you a tray brought up from the cafeteria."

~ * ~

Once your clock was off, it was very hard to get your body to work correctly. The mind was even harder. At three forty-five, Lily pulled herself from oblivion, not even fully aware what it was that awakened her. Now, she approached the door to Rick's room still shaking off the cobwebs.

The first thing she noticed was that he was off the respirator, a huge improvement indeed. Other than that, he looked the same, except that, if anything his knee was even more swollen than before.

She'd overheard a conversation with the orthopedic surgeon. The damage to Rick's knee, though not life threatening, was perhaps life changing. Tears rushed to her throat at the enormity of the pain ahead for him. She'd seen men lose the battle with tears as they rehabbed such an injury. Some never walked with ease again.

For now, though, those thoughts could wait.

Watching the gentle rise and fall of his chest, without the overpowering whoosh-click of the machine, was comforting. As much as she wanted to see his smile, to hear his voice, she was completely content to watch him sleep.

Regrettably, thinking apparently didn't precede her hand reaching over to touch his, though. His felt warm to her cool one. With remorse, she pulled hers away. Somewhere in the dark of the next room, she'd become acutely aware that he was not hers. Not hers to help any more than she had already. Not hers to encourage as he worked to walk again after the next surgery.

And for so many reasons, not the least of which was their age difference, not hers to fall for.

~ * ~

For an instant, Rick thought he was dead. The creature that stood beside him, backlit by the florescent lights, could easily be an angel. Of course, that would presuppose that he was in heaven. And, while he *was* one of the good guys, he couldn't quite imagine that he was *that* good. The dull throb somewhere in his body contradicted the notion of death as well.

So, who was the angel?

He tried to get his mouth to function, to say hello to the radiant being, but all that came out was a ragged croak.

Her gaze flew to his, and a sweet smile followed the look of guilty surprise.

"Hi, Colonel," she whispered, stepping nearer.

He blinked.

"Voice a bit rusty? I guess that goes with the territory. You had that tube in for almost a day."

Okay, she smelled really good, like peaches or something. If he wasn't dead, and apparently he wasn't, then what? A hospital? She wasn't a nurse—nurses didn't wear brown flowered dresses. He'd be damned if he could make any sense of it.

Again, he blinked and tried to get his voice to work.

"Where am I?" At least that was what his brain had told his mouth to say. His ears reported that he'd gotten out the "where" and nothing else.

"Mercy Hospital, Colonel."

"How?"

Again she smiled, a smile that he thought was probably the sweetest thing he'd ever seen. Her reddish blond hair framed her face and fell to the tops of her breasts. She was soft looking, and a part of him wanted desperately to touch her.

He moved his hand trying to raise it to her.

She glanced down, then took it in hers.

She *was* soft.

"Your chopper went down, remember?"

It took a moment for the words to register. But when they did, he closed his eyes, slammed in the chest with regret.

Cold.

Quiet.

Blood.

Morrisett was dead.

Bell, too.

"Colonel?"

That voice...

"Lily?"

“Yes.” She squeezed his hand.

He held on as if falling.

Tears, hot and wet, escaped, rolling down into his hair, and there was absolutely nothing he could do about it.

~ * ~

Rick slept, never opening his eyes again, but not letting go of her hand.

Lily talked to him, telling him what had happened, assuring him that he wasn't to blame. She longed to touch his face, to erase the tears that escaped, even while he slept.

She should go, though. Rick was out of danger, and she couldn't think of an acceptable reason to stay.

When the door opened, she didn't look up, and by the time her brain warned her that nurses didn't wear heels, it was too late.

“Excuse me, who are you?”

Six

Daniel drummed his fingers on the counter in the ER and watched the chaos around him. It was hard to imagine being able to just walk out when your shift was over, but the staff did it all the time. On occasion, Karen got sucked in and lost track of time.

One ambulance crew rolled by with a twenty-something guy, one nearly too big for the gurney, who held a bloody towel to his nose and cursed a blue streak. The next came flying in with a frail little lady, the burly medic compressing her chest as they went, another squeezing the bag.

Karen barely gave them a glance as she passed, ran her ID through the pay clock and took his arm.

He kissed her quickly. How a woman could look so good dressed in plain old purple scrubs, after working a twelve-hour shift, always amazed him.

“Hi, babe. You up for dinner tonight?”

“Sure,” she said, “I guess.”

She'd perk up once he got her off her feet and into a booth at Pizza Mania, her very favorite place to eat. They'd split a salad, order bread sticks and beer and he'd listen while she poured over the craziness of the day. The pouring over part was ritual, Karen's way of defusing.

In the dim light of the restaurant, the dark circles under her eyes were even more pronounced. And while she did perk up some, she still looked haggard.

"Tough day?"

Please, God, let that be all it was.

"Eh, not too bad. The LOL"—ER-speak for little old lady—"that was coming in as we left was the worst."

Daniel chuckled. "I'd say it doesn't get a lot worse than that, does it?"

She smiled without twinkle, "Only if it's a kid."

They took home leftover pizza, something Daniel couldn't remember ever doing. He'd have eaten her other piece but she wasn't having any fun, so he asked for the bill, nodded when they asked if he wanted a box, and ushered her to the car.

"I think you should have one of the docs check you out, babe."

She shot him a you've-got-to-be-kidding look but didn't answer.

"I'm serious. You've been so tired lately. Maybe you need iron or something."

"I'm fine, Daniel."

He pulled into the driveway and slid the gearshift into park. Before he turned off the car, though, he reached over, hand on her neck and leaned in to kiss her.

Since they were first together, he'd always loved kissing her in the car. For some reason, it made him feel that she was his. And that still gave him an incredible thrill.

"Will you do it for me?"

She smiled, then kissed him again.

"For you, Daniel."

~ * ~

The woman that stood at the foot of Rick's bed had shoulder-length auburn hair, darker than Lily's, that feathered back as if on cue. She wore an off-white linen suit and pearls. Her sunglasses perched on the top of her head, more a fashion statement than anything. She carried a Gucci bag.

Lily stood, pulled her hand from Rick's and reached to shake the woman's hand. There was little else to be done.

"Lily Atherton," she whispered.

The woman merely blinked at her, her bronze lips dragged down with acute disapproval. Her hands tightened on her bag.

"Should that mean something to me?"

Her tone was honey smooth, with no inflection of superiority. Though this woman was night and day different from the man who lay sleeping beside her, she knew without hesitation who Ms. Pearls and Linen was.

And the message was loud and clear. Lily did not belong here.

Before Lily could answer, the nurse pushed through the door, coming up short as she saw Lily face to face with the newcomer.

She looked at Lily and mouthed "I'm sorry."

Lily smiled her best back to the nurse and then to the woman. "No, I should mean nothing to you. And I was just leaving."

If she hadn't been certain before, the presence of two mirror-image teen girls in the waiting room confirmed it. They were darling girls, with long, wavy, brown hair past their shoulders. They'd had highlights put in that caught the light from the window as they leaned close together and leafed through a People magazine. As she passed the doorway, they looked up in unison, their brown eyes smiling. If first impressions were accurate, they'd gotten their temperament from their father.

Lily smiled to herself as she pushed through the ICU doors. Their presence would help him heal. And that, after all, was the whole point.

~ * ~

Rick opened his eyes and struggled to focus. Movement to his left caught his eye and warmth surged through him until the movement became Barbara and not Lily. Confusion bombarded his befuddled brain making him wonder if he'd only dreamed the beauty who smelled of peaches.

“Hi, sleepyhead,” Barb crooned, smiling. “How you feeling?”

Barb was a good woman, always had been. It was Rick who was the schmuck, the one who didn’t do married well. It would have been easier had she been hateful or a bad mother. But she hadn’t. And she wasn’t now.

“Like I’m held down with pillows.”

She laughed. “Ah, better living through pharmacology.”

“When did you get here?”

“Just a little while ago. The girls are in the waiting room. I just wanted to make sure...”

“That I looked normal?”

“I guess.”

“Do I?”

She leaned down and kissed him on the cheek.

“You look great for a guy who crashed his helicopter on the side of a mountain.”

When she stood up, he could see tears in her eyes. No doubt, she’d been more scared for the girls than for herself. She was newly remarried to one of the richest real estate moguls in Southern California. At least Barb had always been classy enough to not remind him of all the things she had that he hadn’t given her.

“Can they come in?”

“Sure. I’ll go get them.”

A touch on his right hand woke him.

One on each side. Bookends. The older they got the less he could tell them apart. Right now, he slogged through his brain in vain for how to do that.

“Hi, girlies.”

They’d always hated it when he called them that. But the term had always fit. They were older now, more beautiful than he could have expected, but still they were his girlies.

“Hi, Daddy.”

Did they practice that unison thing or what?

He made it through them telling him how scared they’d been and into something else before he could no longer hold his eyes open and their words all slurred together before fading away.

~ * ~

On a nice February day, Lily could sit on her front stoop with just the heavy green shawl that hung by the front door expressly for that purpose. This evening, she had to wear a coat. At least it wasn’t raining.

This was her favorite place to sit.

She’d bought the old Victorian several years ago, lived in the lower level and rented out two upper apartments to amazingly responsible college students. They didn’t seem to have the same attachment to the stoop as she did.

A mug of steaming Earl Grey sat beside her, and she hugged her knees to keep out the chill. She’d already checked her schedule and had a full day tomorrow with some of the clients she’d had to move because of the SAR mission.

It would be really good to get back to reality.

~ * ~

In his new room on Four South, one sadistic nurse and her evil orderly sidekick insisted that not only could Rick sit up, they weren't leaving until he did.

Even when he turned aside to puke, they weren't deterred.

And there wasn't a weapon in sight. If there had been, the debate would have started: kill them, or kill himself.

He'd endured Barbara and the girls in the morning. Not that they weren't full of sweetness and light, but he'd have much preferred to have the nurse turn up the morphine drip so that he could remain oblivious.

At his insistence—the girls shouldn't be missing school and he was in no danger of dying—Barb agreed to fly back home. They could come back at Spring break if all went well.

David Quillen had been by just after they left, assuring Rick that he could handle the boss's absence.

"Concentrate on getting well, Sir," he'd said before leaving.

And now he was face to face with the first part of the process, getting out of bed and standing. His right leg was splinted at this point, but it wasn't his leg that was the problem, at least not yet.

His helpers cheered him on.

Pain made his head swim.

He puked again.

Note to self: next time you slam a helicopter into the ground, make sure you're the one that doesn't live through it.

That is, if you ever fly again.

~ * ~

On Tuesday, Daniel called to see how Lily was doing. They hadn't had a chance to talk since the mission.

"So, how are you really?"

Daniel knew her well enough that, when she answered "fine" the first time he asked, he needed to ask again.

"Really, Daniel. I'm fine. It was a tough night."

"I'm sorry I wasn't there for you."

Lily smiled. That was so Daniel. He wanted to be there for everyone. That's why he did what he did. Over the years working closely together—on either end of the radio—in sometimes highly emotional situations, they'd formed an intimate bond.

They knew each other's moods, knew how to zero in on what the other was thinking and, maybe most importantly, they knew how to communicate a lot with very few words. Daniel would know, without having listened in on her conversation with Rick that night, that she'd been "attached." It was risky getting attached to people in that business, but he knew that she couldn't help it.

She knew that he couldn't either.

"So, how are you really?" she echoed back to him.

"Okay."

"If I can't get away with it, neither can you, Daniel."

“Right. It’s Karen. I’m worried about her.”

He went on to explain how tired she’d been—something Lily had noticed herself—and that she’d gone in for some tests.

“It’s probably nothing.”

They talked for a few more minutes before Daniel begged off.

“Daniel?”

“Yeah.”

“Keep me informed.”

“I will.”

~ * ~

Cruz and Gabriel came to visit on Wednesday, giving Rick the chance to ask the question that had been haunting him since he woke up.

The sheepish look on their faces gave them away even before they pulled Gus from the paper bag.

Gus—the get well goose. Duck. Whatever. A hairy, formless, yellow bag of stuffed animal with a beak. A gift years ago for one of the PJ’s when he was hospitalized for a broken something-or-other. Gus had since become the revolving get well present. No one wanted him—ever—and if they got him, they were in a big hurry to get rid of him. Even if it meant someone else had to be injured.

All in good fun, but Rick would have preferred that they forget this tradition.

“Thanks so very much.”

“It’s the least we could do.”

“We also brought you chocolate, Sir.”

They had indeed. Hershey's kisses in every variety there was and one he had never tried. M&M's plain, peanut and almond. He didn't have the heart to tell them that peanuts and almonds were simply distractions from pure unadulterated chocolate. He'd give those to his torturers, maybe soften them up.

"Thanks, guys. Hey, who flew us out of there anyway?"

He hadn't anticipated that being a loaded question—and that wasn't even the important one—but the look that passed between the two was classic.

"Kit Sheridan, sir."

"Really, must have been old times for her."

"Sir?"

"She has more time flying rescue than I do. She flew Coast Guard rescue."

Gabe smiled, and Cruz scowled.

"Boys?"

"Cruz has the hots for her, sir."

"Fuck you."

Rick winced at laughing.

"Knock it off, you two, it hurts to laugh."

"Sorry, sir," Cruz said, taking up the appropriate remorseful look.

"It's okay. By the way, I have something else I need to ask you, just between us."

They both took a step back, fixing him with uncertainty.

"Was Lily here, or did I dream her?"

The question was out, he felt like an idiot asking, but both men smiled heartily.

“Yes, sir, she was.”

“Okay then. I didn’t think I’d been dreaming.”

“No, sir. She actually stayed with you until Saturday afternoon,” Gabe said. “But...”

He snapped his mouth shut, and Rick saw the slight shake of Cruz’s head.

“But, what?”

Neither would speak, nor even make eye contact with him.

“Look, guys, I’m unable to kick your asses at this point, but I can make a memo to do it at a later date. Spill. But, what.”

“Uh, well, sir, apparently she was chased away,” Gabriel explained. Cruz might have held out, even faced with bodily harm. He’d have spilled the story if ordered to do so. But Chris was an entirely different animal. He didn’t lie well. Probably because he never did it.

“Chased away?”

“Uh, yeah. By your ex-wife, sir.”

“Shit.”

“Yes, sir.”

They didn’t stay long and, on their way out, Cruz muttered under his breath, “Mr. Honesty-is-the-best-Policy strikes again.”

Seven

Surgery on Rick's knee was set for Monday the twenty-third at eight in the morning. Though she hadn't seen the paperwork yet, she knew he'd have a long rehab.

Rehab was something that Lily knew very well. It was a certainty that he'd rehab at Lily's office. Not only did Lily work there as a massage therapist, but she'd bought Rehab Specialists three years ago when the last owner retired. It was important to keep it open. She passionately believed in the mission statement of RS, and had pulled together a team of people who were very good at what they did.

The call came in about three thirty. Lily had been expecting it. The therapist from Mercy wanted to work with her office in putting together the plan for Colonel Rick McIntyre's rehab.

She advised the receptionist to have Paul call the hospital as soon as he had a free moment.

Paul Gentry was the best of the best, and she'd had to cut her own pay to get him. He was worth it. Though slight in stature, he had the will and heart of a lion.

Rick could be in no better hands than Paul's, though she knew that, before he was done, Rick wouldn't agree.

As far as the massage work went, she'd pass him off to Sandy. Lily suspected that Sandy wasn't quite as good at rehab massage as Lily was, but she wouldn't hinder his healing. Lily wasn't sure she could say the same about herself. Best to keep her distance.

~ * ~

Crutches sucked.

What sucked even more was having to rely on others.

And having to be chauffeured from the hospital was just plain embarrassing, especially when Rick wanted to make a stop on the way.

But, he'd thought of nothing else for two weeks and, by God, Lieutenant Driver or no Lieutenant Driver, he was stopping by her house. Her address was in the phone book.

When they turned the corner, Rick nearly chickened out and aborted the approach: first, because her front door was preceded by at least ten steps and he hadn't mastered stairs yet and second, because he could list at least ten reasons why he shouldn't be stopping. None of those reasons, though, were as important as what he had to say.

Besides, she was sitting out front on those same stairs and had seen them pull up. God, she was beautiful.

So, he bullied the fear back into its place and got, painfully, out of the car. She didn't get up to help him, thank God, just watched as he approached.

Luckily, he didn't have to climb the stairs, he just had to plop down beside her.

"Hi," he said between gulps of air.

"Hi."

Silence loomed large, fueling his fear.

"I owe you dinner."

Well, that came out well.

She chuckled uncomfortably. "You don't owe me anything. It's good to see you up, though."

"I wish it felt good, I could lay down right here and sleep for another week."

This time she laughed in earnest.

"It'll take a while."

"So they tell me. I start rehab tomorrow."

"So they tell me."

At his odd look, she continued.

"You don't remember me telling you that I work at Rehab Specialists?"

He just shook his head. So much of that conversation still lay in pieces, like a fresh jigsaw puzzle, for which you'd only found the border.

"I remember that you saved my life, Lily."

"You saved your own life, Colonel."

"I also remember that you agreed to call me Rick."

She smiled.

“Thanks for staying with me at the hospital. I’m sorry Barbara ran you off.”

She blushed furiously.

“I needed to leave anyway.”

“But you never came back. I thought you were a figment of my imagination until I asked.”

“Colonel...”

“Rick.”

Whatever objection she had intended to make, she hesitated. Rick pushed his advantage.

“So how does the book end?”

“Excuse me?”

“Do Lizzy and Jane get Darcy and what’s-his-name?”

Her quick glance told him that she was surprised he remembered what he’d heard as he slept.

“Yes.”

“Maybe you can read me the rest.”

Okay. Lame. But his brain was slow, muffled as if filled with packing peanuts. Percoset—another reason he couldn’t drive himself.

Her hesitation gave him his answer.

“Okay, well.” He pushed awkwardly to his feet, hopping on his good leg—which was only painful, not excruciating—until he had command of his crutches. “Thank you for staying with me, both on the mountain and later. I’d still love to take you to dinner, if you’ll allow me the indulgence.”

That sounded bitter.

She rose to stand, her skirt falling gently to her calves—very sexy calves as a matter of fact—and smiled.

“As soon as you’re walking with a cane, instead of those crutches, I’ll go to dinner with you.”

It was only on the way home that he picked apart her promise and realized that she’d meant it not as a slight but as a challenge.

Next time he saw her—and hell, that could be as soon as tomorrow—he knew both where she lived and where she worked—he planned on kissing her.

~ * ~

The last thing she’d meant to do was hurt him. When he’d suggested her reading him the rest of the book, she’d frozen. He’d obviously taken her hesitation as rejection. In reality, all she could think of was lying next to him, reading her favorite passages time and again, touching.

It was for the best though. Rick McIntyre was:

- A. Old enough to be her father—well almost.
- B. So far out of her league as to be laughable and
- C. Old enough to be her father...

It would save her a lot of heartbreak and a ton of embarrassment if she stuck with her rules. Some things simply could not be overcome, Jane Austin or no Jane Austin.

~ * ~

On Monday morning, March first, Rick reported, as ordered, to the rehab center. He was a few minutes early and Paul, who’d come to the hospital to work with him, was still with a patient. Never one to pass up a perfectly

good opportunity to make a fool of himself, Rick asked the receptionist if Lily Atherton was in yet.

“She’s a massage therapist,” he added, then, from the look she gave him, halfway expected the receptionist to say “here’s your sign.”

“She’s also the owner of the place, Colonel,” she said instead.

“Oh.”

The girl—who’s nameplate identified her as Suzanne—smiled and pointed him in the direction of Lily’s office.

~ * ~

“Hey, Princess,” the voice came from the doorway.

Lily knew who it was before looking up, and felt her face grow hot.

“Hi,” was as intelligent an answer as she could muster.

“You neglected to mention that you own the joint.”

She smiled back, totally unable to form a response.

He looked magnificent. It wasn’t his clothes—he was wearing a raggedy t-shirt and used-to-be-dark-blue sweat pants. It wasn’t his stance—he was leaning heavily on the crutches. But his ever-ready half-smile and self-deprecating aw-shucks attitude could win her over any time. Oh, and his hands.

“You here for your first appointment?”

“Here’s *your* sign?”

“Pardon?”

“Never mind. Yes, indeed, I’m signed up for a two-hour torture session this morning—all week in fact. Paul may do what he will, he will never break me!”

He was joking, of course. The sad truth was that rehab was a horrible, painful process and truly did resemble torture. Only a firm eye on the goal could get most people through it. And few got through without visible agony.

“Could you come over here for a second?” He looked from where he stood to where she sat. “I’m not all that good at negotiating around furniture yet.”

Curiosity moved her against her better judgment.

“Closer.”

One step brought her within about three feet of him.

“Closer.”

Another cut the distance in half. Their eyes locked. His gleamed with mischief.

“Closer.”

He leaned in and brought his lips to hers. Soft, warm. Then he leaned back and grinned.

“For luck.”

He pivoted on his good leg and moved back to the reception room leaving Lily speechless, admiring his backside.

Eight

For the last week, Lily had seen Rick every day. He stopped by her office on his way in to therapy.

“Hello, Princess,” he’d say.

His smile was always flirty, hopeful. She smiled back despite the fact that his nickname for her—Princess—reminded her daily that she was, in fact, closer to Cinderella than she was to any princess.

She couldn’t deny, though, that the way he said it spread a certain warmth through her, a warmth that left her wondering if fairy tales could, ever, really come true.

It was the warmest day they’d had as she turned the corner to her house. For the last three days, she’d had a guest sitting on her steps when she got home from work. Today she did too, but not the same one.

She and Rick had spent hours sitting on her steps, talking, laughing, sometimes just sharing the silence.

Rick told her about flying and shared his love for fishing.

“It’s the best. Sitting there, enjoying the quiet, feeling the sun on your face, catching an occasional fish.”

When Lily admitted that she’d never been camping or fishing, he was adamant that she join him on his next trip.

At that point in their conversation, he’d cleared his throat, she’d blushed—something very rare but becoming less so—and they’d allowed the silence to take over.

Another day, he’d asked her about her childhood, a subject she wasn’t about to broach. When she changed the subject, he glanced over at her, not masking the concern he felt, but let her move to something more comfortable.

They’d touched on favorite movies—Rick actually liked musicals, she preferred good suspense. Same with books for her, he basically read magazines, *Popular Mechanics* and the like. What floored her was when he admitted that his master’s degree was in music.

So much for the classic military guy stereotype.

Each time, his visit ended with him taking his leave before it got awkward. He’d use his crutches to push to his feet, so to speak, hop around until he’d attained equilibrium, then smile and wink.

“See you tomorrow, beautiful.”

Tonight, her visitor wasn’t Rick. It was Daniel. She marveled at how easily she’d become accustomed to the colonel’s evening visits, how much she looked forward to them. But she smiled as she got out of the car.

“Hi, Daniel.”

He sat, elbows on his knees, head down, the piece of paper he held flapping in the breeze. He didn't look up, so she put down her purse and lowered herself to sit beside him.

Raising his head, but not looking at her, he handed her the piece of paper.

It was a computer printout from some web doctor site. The bold print at the top said: Adult Acute Myeloid Leukemia.

Her stomach lurched as she skimmed the page.

"AML is a cancer of the blood and bone marrow. This type of cancer usually gets worse quickly if not treated."

The article went on to explain that AML was fast-moving and commonly landed people in chemotherapy within days of diagnosis. The survival rate for AML was fourteen percent.

"We found out yesterday—well, *she* found out yesterday. I knew you'd have my head if I didn't tell you."

His voice wavered at the end.

"Oh, God, Daniel." Lily reached over and took his hand.

He still looked away, off toward the horizon.

There really weren't any words. His hand trembled, and he obviously struggled for control. He took a ragged breath.

"She won't get the chemo. I don't understand, Lily."

"I'm sure you don't, Daniel." Lily did understand, though. In some cases, chemotherapy was a life saver,

adding years to cancer patient's lives, sometimes even a miracle. However, so often it made the last days even more miserable, the cure being worse than the disease.

"She said that she didn't want to spend what time she had throwing up, never having a good day. She won't fight it, Lily."

His voice gave way then, and he pushed to his feet, walking down the block as if he could escape the truth. Lily let him go. He'd be back.

It was Karen's decision to make, Daniel's to live with. Lily knew Karen well enough to know that she didn't make it lightly, that she understood Daniel's desperation to hang on to her.

He made it down to the corner before returning to sit beside her.

"Our life was perfect, Lily. She loves her job. I love mine. She always worried that I'd regret leaving the SEALs, but I never have. I'm better suited to this, I guess. We both love to climb and hike. We always joked that our kids would be climbing out of their crib before they could walk. Ironically, for the last few months, when she felt so tired, I often wondered if we were finally pregnant."

He paused, smiled sadly. He'd been talking in a sort of monotone, one that held the emotion of his words far away, keeping the story at arm's length.

"The doctor said..." He stopped, trying to regain control. "... she probably only has a month or two."

Tears streamed down Lily's face as she watched her friend, really her best friend, break before her eyes. If soul mates were for real, Daniel and Karen were it.

If something looks too good to be true...

Her mother's words echoed in her head.

But Daniel had always been the forever optimist to Lily's realist. Their discussions always ended when Daniel would get philosophical and she'd get frustrated.

"I can't lose her, Lily. What would I do?"

Lily scootched up close and slid her hand into the crook of his arm.

"You'll go on, Daniel. You have no choice."

They sat there, her head against his shoulder, his head against hers, until just after dark. The only evidence of his despair was the ragged breath he took now and then.

At last, he lifted his head and patted her hand.

"I gotta go."

With that, Daniel stood up and walked to his car, never looking back.

When Lily got into the house, there was a message from Rick on her voice mail.

"Hey, Princess. I, uh, talked to Daniel before you got home. Thought he needed you all to himself for now. I'll see you in the morning. Call if you need to talk."

Lily stood with the phone in her hand for what seemed an eternity before she dialed. It was nuts to be doing this, but the thought of sitting home alone contemplating Daniel and Karen's future—or lack thereof—was more painful than dialing the phone.

“Hi, Lily.”

He must have caller ID.

“Hi.”

“You okay?”

“Not really. Wanna go to dinner or something?” She knew the answer before she asked the question. Rick had been very open about his attraction. Yet, her stomach lurched as she asked. If he said yes, she knew she was heading down a road full of potholes, some big enough to swallow her whole. His no, though, would bring a quicker, but undoubtedly more merciful pain.

“Sure, but no dancing yet.”

He was trying really hard to be cheerful in the face of the day’s news. He didn’t quite pull it off but she gave him an A for effort.

~ * ~

As it turned out, she picked him up. Rick was in the process of trading cars with a friend—he could drive an automatic but not his standard. Her car, however was too small for him to get into, what with not being able to bend his right leg. They tried moving the seat all the way back, but it was no use.

“God, I’m sorry,” Lily said, her voice shaking.

The frustration of the situation, silly as it was, must have been just enough to push her over the edge because she stood in the driveway and dissolved into tears.

It’s really hard to hold someone, really hold someone the way he wanted to, when dependent on crutches for

balance. He did the best he could. And she pulled away too soon, embarrassed.

“Come inside. I’ve got wine and beer and we can order pizza.”

She just nodded, and he led the way.

They spent the evening sitting on the couch, sipping red wine, eating pizza and talking.

Apparently she and Daniel had formed a very close relationship over the years working with SAR. The hours from midnight to six in the morning, spent hovering over a radio, while teams in the field either caught some shut-eye or continued searching through the night, were conducive to intimate friendships.

He smiled at the thought. It was that same intimacy that had formed a bond between him and Lily as well.

Lily was a woman who felt deeply and didn’t mask her feelings. After you got past the incredible sexual energy she gave off—or was that just him?—you found a real lover. She took great care of those around her, and a man would be lucky to have her in his life.

As she talked about Daniel and Karen, Rick didn’t even try to fight the urge to touch her. He took her hand in both of his, determined to ease her pain if he could. He could see her frustration at not being able to really do anything to help the Fraser family. She didn’t realize that, by just being herself, she helped.

~ * ~

The arrival of the pizza provided the opportunity to move beyond the grief and Lily, while treasuring his

touch, treasuring his willingness for her to spill out her sadness, allowed Rick to change the tone.

“So, how in the world did you get the call sign Scarecrow?”

“Gosh, I don’t know if I want to share that,” he answered after swallowing.

She wasn’t sure if he was serious or not.

“Oh.”

He waved off her concern. “I got it at the Academy. My roommates gave it to me when I was a doolie—a freshman—because I’m not the sharpest crayon in the box.”

“Yeah, right.”

His eyebrows drew together and fixed her with a very serious look. “I’m not. They had to drag me kicking and screaming through chemistry. And quantum physics? Just sounds like blah, blah, blah, electrons, blah, blah to me. So, since the Scarecrow was sorely in need of a brain... well, you get the picture.”

“Yet you seem to be able to fly a ten million dollar chopper just fine.”

“Okay,” he said, sitting up as straight as he could with his right leg on the coffee table, “we need to get some things straight.”

His words directly contradicted the look on his face so the immediate reaction to being taken to task was softened.

“First, we do not call them ‘choppers.’ They are rotary wing aircraft. You can call them helicopters if you must, but not, if you’d be so kind, choppers.”

“Aye, Aye, sir.”

“Navy...”

“Check.”

“Second, it’s a twenty million dollar aircraft.”

“Check.”

“And third, it appears that I don’t fly said aircraft very well.”

His smile faded then.

“And, even if I ever really walk again, the Air Force may decide I’m not worthy to fly.”

Now it was her turn to take his hand.

“You *will* walk again, Rick. I won’t guarantee that you won’t limp, but you *will* walk. As for flying, that’s not in my control, but...”

He silenced her with his lips and she was pretty much lost.

Nine

Cruz hesitated to term the three of them anything. The three amigos were legendary. Joey was dead and Nic was now sinking beyond the reach of mortal men—something about finding his soul mate. Besides, what kinda moniker could you come up with for a bad boy from Beverly Hills, a boy scout from Boynton Beach and a kid that rode bulls for fun? It would be a waste of perfectly good brain cells to try to find a name.

The threesome was working on a hat trick—getting kicked out of three bars in one night. They were two for two, so far. The first one was clearly not the vaquero's fault. Someone had called him a Backstreet Boy—and not in a good way. There was minor pushing and shoving—hell, they coulda kicked some bigtime ass if they'd wanted to—but Gabe was always way too reasonable. It was after they got eighty-sixed from that bar that they decided to go for the goal.

Then, they had been minding their own business in bar number two when his least favorite former Coast Guard helicopter pilot showed up with friends. For a few minutes, Cruz considered toying with her, you know,

seeing how far he could get with her, but the team had a goal to be reached. There was serious drinking and revelry to be done.

She sauntered up to them and asked oh-so-innocently how the rescue business was going—and they were off to the races. Somewhere between her hello and her parting shot, the guy next door took offense.

Cruz could only remember part of the conversation...

“Contrary to what you may think, I’m not a superhero,” he’d said.

She smiled through gritted teeth and said, “I hate to disappoint you, Hollywood, but I don’t know of anyone who thought that.” Then, she picked up her beer and sashayed back to her friends, her long red hair swishing just above her ten-out-of-ten ass.

Next, the guy on the stool beside him said something about superheroes and flyboys and Cruz ended up with something very close to a broken nose. The bouncer had pointed to the door with his thumb and Gabe and Wiley had dragged him outside.

So, here they were, trying for number three.

But there were rules.

No throwing the first punch.

No spilling beer on someone—like anyone would abuse alcohol that way.

No “fuck yous.”

They had to wait for it. It was always better for the wait anyway. Except when it never came, as was the case this time. They closed down the third bar and left the hat trick for another time. Sad but true.

The next morning in the day room, through the fog caused by perhaps one or two more tequilas than was absolutely necessary, Cruz punched away fiercely on his laptop.

Through the back door and right to the information he was looking for: the skinny on Kit Sheridan and her company, Pegasus Air.

“Ha, serves her hot little ass right,” he muttered.

Nic looked up from where he sat on the couch repacking a medical kit.

“Whose ass?”

“Sheridan’s. Apparently she’s managed to drive a very successful business right into the ground—so to speak.”

Nic just nodded.

“She’s on the verge of bankruptcy.”

Now Will piped up. Always the one with the true gossip. He collected stories, and you could count on him to know something about everything. He was such a fucking girl. “That’s because her jerk of a husband ran off, took most of the money out of the business and headed for Mexico with a stewardess—er flight attendant—from Hooter’s Air. ’Course, Sheridan and the jerk weren’t really married.”

Of course.

Matt just laughed.

Cruz shut the hell up.

And Nic, bless his heart, reminded the entire room that Cruz had been looking for a business to invest in.

“Maybe she could give you flying lessons.”

“Maybe you could blow me.”

~ * ~

Lily drove to work through a fog of funk. Night before last, she'd driven home on auto-pilot. Never had she been kissed like that!

Never.

And, it had been years since she'd spent that long sitting on the couch, making out. Maybe even since high school.

It was very likely that, had he not been so hindered by his leg, they'd have ended up in bed. Gladly, they didn't. They'd have missed a lot. Though, the idea of making love to Rick left her throbbing with anticipation.

There was time.

That's when reality whispered in her ear, reminding her that there were insurmountable obstacles between here and some fantasy ending with the colonel. Fantasies were just that, and Lily Atherton didn't deal in fantasy.

She'd learned that lesson living in a one-bedroom trailer house far beyond the edge of acceptability in Los Angeles.

~ * ~

After having Monday off, Rick showed up early on Tuesday. Lily wasn't in her office when he stuck his head in. He checked his watch and stepped through the door. She'd be here in a minute.

Her office was very unlike her. The desk was elegantly plain and immaculately clean. No clutter anywhere in sight. Her bookshelf was full but not overflowing. Books on massage, on rehab therapy, but the majority were on business and finances. This was the office of the money-savvy business woman, not the soft, gentle, sensual woman that he found so damned attractive. Lily was

definitely efficient. He'd heard enough of her work on the radio at SAR, even before the fateful night, to know that you never had to repeat yourself with her, that she was usually one, or even two, steps ahead.

The contrast between her office and his was stark. He was the king of messy. It was a wonder he ever got anywhere on time, though he was picky about that. But memos had a way of leaving his hand, then doing a swan dive into the deep end, never to be seen again. His admin people had learned a long time ago to bring something in for a signature but never let go of it. The PJ section had once nearly missed out on vital funding because the lieutenant before Quillen had just left something on his desk for a signature.

His desktop was in another dimension. Chocolate, however, was in the top drawer.

Something on her desk caught his eye. A rock about the size of his fist. Okay, it wasn't just a rock, it was crystal something—maybe quartz—that glistened in the bath of sunlight in which it rested. He felt better, somehow, seeing something in her office that really did reflect her personality.

Lily hadn't shown up by the time he was called into the dungeon. He shrugged and hobbled down the hall, but wondered for a moment if something had gone wrong...

~ * ~

The colonel's after shave gave him away. He'd been in her office. Lily bit down on the thought. The sanity she'd managed to salvage over the last thirty-six hours was hard won, and no random trace of his presence would steal it.

She'd come in late on purpose and had already informed Suzanne that she'd be starting her day a bit later for a while. The morning visits would stop if she wasn't there.

Without looking, she reached for her lab jacket and came up empty. Some efficient someone had decided to do laundry. Without thinking, she headed down the hall to get another one. And without meaning to, she stopped and glanced in on Paul just as Rick let out a very un-colonel-like yelp. Sweat poured down his colorless face and his breath came out in sharp gasps.

Lily ran for cover.

Pain was her entire reason for being here, but that didn't make it any easier to watch.

The horrors of her childhood were the direct result of her mother's pain. A back injury kept her on social security and in a bottle for the better part of her life. If Lily had known then what she knew now—and had any power—things could have been so different.

Rebellion against pain had driven her to become a massage therapist. Then, when Rehab Specialists had been weeks from closing, she'd stepped in to save it. All in her determination to hold pain at bay.

If only it were that easy.

At the moment, Rick was pushing himself, maybe too hard, enduring pain nearly past enduring, to fly again, to be whole.

Daniel and Karen would have to stand against overwhelming pain just to ransom moments of happiness and joy.

There were no weapons in her arsenal to deal with either.

She could only watch Daniel suffer, hold his hand through it. And Rick—Rick was a slippery slope. Holding his hand through the pain just put them down the road facing a different kind of pain. She wasn't sure she could right herself, even now.

Yet, when she turned the corner that evening and saw him sitting on her front steps, a certain euphoria surged up inside, making her smile.

And so it went.

~ * ~

Nine days later, a SAR mission—a search for eleven-year-old Charlie Goff, who wandered away from his boy scout troop during an ice fishing trip—gave Lily an opportunity to talk at length with Daniel.

He'd always done well with the subjects' families, but now there was a new tenderness in the way he talked with the boy's parents.

It was one in the morning and, because of the desperation of the situation, the teams in the field were not taking a break. Still, even when the mission went on, the radio took on a nighttime quiet that left Lily and Daniel with more than a little time to fill.

Karen was still working at the ER, something she was determined to do for another month at least.

Daniel had offered to take a leave of absence, but Karen wouldn't hear of it. So, for the moment, he worked.

"I'm thinking of Fiji."

"Fiji?"

“Yeah, we’ll go to Fiji and hang out on the beach, in the sun, until...”

His voice stayed steady but he didn’t finish. The only real evidence of raw emotion was the tap tap tap of the pencil he held.

“Will she go for that?”

“I don’t know,” he said, pushing his glasses up without thought.

The phone interrupted further discussion. It was the state SAR guy, calling to report back on the teams he had set up for morning.

“So,” Daniel said hanging up the phone, a goofy smile tipping up the corners of his mouth, “you and the Colonel?”

“No, Daniel.”

“No, what? No, you and the Colonel aren’t... whatever? Or no, you aren’t going to tell me about it?”

“We’re just friends.”

“Oh... right.”

“He’s old enough to be my father, Daniel.”

“Barely, but so what? You’re very mature for your age.”

“We’re friends.”

“No, Lily, *we’re* friends.”

Luckily, another interruption forestalled a continuation of that line of questioning.

At four twenty-five in the morning, Team Three hollered Charlie’s name and finally got a response. He’d curled up beside a log and slept until he heard his name. Cold, but uninjured.

Tonight’s score: Humans One, Mountain Zero.

At Daniel's insistence, Lily left shortly thereafter—before all the teams were safely back—to go home and catch a few z's before having to go to work. On her way out the door, Daniel took a parting shot.

"Take what you can, Sweetie. 'Cause you never know when fate is going to screw you."

~ * ~

Is it better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all? Lily would have paid a million bucks for the answer to that one.

She was quickly losing ground on her resolutions to not give her heart to the colonel. Funny, sometimes she still thought of him that way. It was becoming more and more apparent that she'd thought a lot about the colonel over the years. She'd just never really noticed.

His voice on the radio.

The mention of his name in a group of PJ's.

The rare visits he paid to the SAR building during missions and the way seeing him, even then, started her humming inside. His humor always lightened the mood. She'd watched him poring over maps with Stan or Daniel, his beautiful hands sending her thoughts reeling.

Daniel didn't think the age thing was even worthy of mention.

On the drive to work on a sleety Monday morning, Lily actually found herself considering just asking Rick what he thought. Every day for the next two weeks, in fact, she considered it.

But she never did ask him.

Ten

On Monday, April fifth, the girls arrived for Spring Break. They were in Merced for four days. Lily met them once. It wasn't evident if Rick had meant them to meet or if it was just coincidence.

Either way, it was uneventful.

Their visit didn't preclude his therapy sessions so she saw him every morning. Lily got the strangest sense that Rick welcomed the break from his kids.

"They're so different."

"How so?" Lily expected him to tell her how to tell them apart when they met.

"All they seem to want to do is hang out at the mall. But, at the same time, they can't say anything nice about the place. It doesn't have a Nordstrom's or any number of stores they listed. At least they still like ice cream—once I convinced them that they could stop counting carbs for one day."

He chuckled but it sounded forced.

"You being on crutches doesn't help either."

"Not really. They had to carry all their stuff into the house themselves."

“Gasp!”

He tipped his head and fixed her with an impatient look.

“Sorry. Have you suggested a picnic in the park?”

Surely no one could slight the beauty of Yosemite.

“Yeah. I think they gave me the same look I just gave you. I apologize, by the way.”

Lily walked to the doorway and patted his arm.

“They’re teenagers, Rick. I’m sure it’s nothing personal.”

He caught her hand and brought it to his lips, his eyes reflecting the warmth that she felt at the gesture.

“I hope you’re right. Maybe I should take them somewhere bigger.”

“Maybe you should just...” She stopped before finishing. It was really none of her business but she so wanted to remind him of his thoughts on the side of the mountain. He’d wanted nothing more than to spend time with his girlies, to get to know them, let them get to know him.

“What?”

“Nothing.”

“Lily.”

He blocked the doorway and wasn’t budging.

“I just wish you could sit and talk with them like you do with me.”

“You and me both, Princess,” he said, then brushed her lips with his. “I’m off to be tortured. I’ll call you later.”

He did call, and they talked for over an hour, time he could have been talking with Kate and Ally.

Rick had been dropped in enemy territory. Lily tried to encourage him that his girlies had not been possessed by demons. They were just exhibiting typical teenage attitude, she said. He would have liked to think that was true.

It wasn't easy.

What Lily didn't know was that they were simply incarnations of their mother.

He hadn't been able to impress her—ever—well, at least for a very long time. What made him think he could impress his girls?

The new husband, Tim—actually he and Barb had been married for three years, he wasn't so new—was, according to the girls, quite impressive. He didn't have any of Rick's failings.

Tim cleaned up well and actually liked going to fancy social events.

Tim knew and cared about the difference between a Renoir and a Monet.

Tim had an infinite credit limit.

But most of all, Tim wasn't owned by the US Air Force.

Lily reminded him, in her sweet and gentle way, that his mission wasn't to impress anyone. It was just to allow the girls to get to know him and for him to get to know them. It sounded so easy when it came out of her mouth.

Okay.

Tomorrow, after rehab, they'd pack a picnic and drive to a nice spot in the park, one where he wouldn't fall—thus rendering any effort beside the point.

~ * ~

When the team jumped on any given man's birthday, it could get very sporty. Pranksville.

In fact, since Nicky D' had fallen in love—gag—lucky bastard—he'd been even more fun to toy with. Almost as much fun as fucking with the Angel.

"So, Batman's birthday," Cruz had brought the impromptu meeting to order. Mayhem to be planned. People to be blamed. Even Alpha was up for it. Hoo-yah.

"Can Julie be trusted?" Matt asked.

"I don't know... I just don't know," Cruz said, stroking his chin.

"He's allergic to penicillin."

Cruz fixed Will with a glare. "Helpful, Clancy, very helpful."

Will just threw his hands up in a mock deflection of the praise.

"Just the facts."

"If only that were true," Gabe muttered.

"We could rig his chute to malfunction,"

They all turned to look at Steve, Alpha team, who offered that gem.

He huffed defensively. "We'd save him of course."

"Thank you. Thank you very much."

"We need another pitcher."

Eric was the keeper of the rubber chicken, the plastic cockroaches, the fake barf and the bugs embedded in ice cubes. Child's play. It was possible that he'd drag out the inflatable love sheep but since D' had actually found love—gag—lucky bastard—the sheep might have to wait for another birthday.

Will had arranged to get Viagra.

DQ had—bless his officer heart—come up with a letter revoking Nic’s paramedic license—complete with a corresponding reduction of rank.

“Sunday is Easter.”

Said so quietly by Gabe that no one really even took notice. Until at once all heads turned toward him, and he grinned.

“Peeps!”

It was decided then. All other ideas were off the table. And the strategy began forming.

Nic D’Onofrio hated Peeps. Detested. Nearly horrified. Perfect. Even better if Julie played along.

~ * ~

It was a perfect day for a picnic.

After rehab, Rick popped three Motrins and pulled into the KFC drive-thru. He expected the girls to balk at his choice of food, but they didn’t. They did insist on diet drinks.

Once into the park, he found a good picnic spot and they piled out of the car with their bucket of chicken and all the fixings.

The picnic table sat in dappled sunlight, enough but not too much. The views were worthy of *National Geo*, and the girls were relaxed.

The silence of eating hung on after they finished.

The things he’d planned to say felt stilted and awkward so he joined in on the quiet.

At last, Ally spoke.

“Dad, how’d you crash the helicopter?”

Her voice sounded small against the breeze.

"I didn't really. I just failed to pull us out in time. Gravity conspired against us."

"Mom said you almost died up there."

Rick reached over and squeezed her little hand.

He wanted to speak but nothing got past the lump in his throat.

She looked up at him, her eyes reflecting his thoughts. Kate was staring off toward the mountains.

By the time he could speak, both his girls had silently moved to flank him.

"Don't ever do that again," Kate said.

"I'll do my best."

The rest of the afternoon was spent in reminiscing.

The girls' fondest memories revolved around Disneyland and hotel swimming pools where they'd played Marco Polo and the three of them had ganged up against Mom, thoroughly soaking her hair when she was determined to stay dry.

"Good times," he said, laughing. "But what about the camping and fishing?" His fondest memories, despite Barbara's insistence that her idea of camping was staying at the Best Western instead of the Marriott.

Both girls wrinkled their noses.

"Fishing is gross, Dad," Kate said.

Ally followed up with, "And there are bugs."

"Fishing," he began in mock-lecture, "is the highest form of art."

"Boring..." Ally held up her hand as if she could negate his statement.

"Relaxing." Rick smiled. Ally smiled back at the challenge.

“Dreary.”

“Soothing.”

“Tedious.”

“Exhilarating?”

“Snoozeville.”

“You lose, Snoozeville’s not a word.”

“Well,” said Ally, pushing to her feet, “fishing is not a vacation!”

On the way back to the house, Rick swung through the base to make a quick stop at his office. Sergeant Dupre—Cowboy—was leaving the building as Rick pulled up.

“Afternoon, sir. How’s the leg?”

“I’m on the mend, Sergeant.”

“Good to hear, sir.”

Kate and Ally got out of the car, solicitously helping Rick with his crutches. Not obvious at all—no way to avoid an introduction.

“Matt, these are my daughters Kate and Ally.”

The girlies grinned and, like Valley Girl robots, tossed their heads.

“A pleasure.”

Matt blushed and the girls’ heads bobbed. Then, he quickly saluted and made his way to the Jeep.

“I’ll be right back,” Rick told two girls who were obviously not listening.

“Dad,” Kate said as they pulled into the driveway, “we’ll go fishing with you this summer if you bring Matt along.”

~ * ~

On the last day of their stay, Rick had the twins with him when he came to therapy.

“Come meet the girls, Lily.”

She hesitated.

“Please.”

“Girls, this is Lily Atherton.”

The twins rose in unison and placed the same polite smile on their faces.

“Glad to meet you. Your father has told me so much about you.”

They pointedly shook her hand, but said nothing.

“He didn’t, though, tell me how to tell you apart.”

They glanced at Rick, obviously waiting for him to speak.

Lily saved him.

“I think he said,” she looked to the twin with the curlier hair, “that you’re Kate.” Fifty-fifty chance of being right. Either way, she’d take the fall for any mistake.

“Yes, I’m Kate. This is Ally.”

Ally actually smiled then. Kate didn’t. Kate obviously knew that Ally’d been had. She tossed Rick an icy glance.

Kate stepped forward slightly. “You were at the hospital, weren’t you,” she accused.

“Yes, I was.”

Finally, Lily was rewarded with a smile from the girl. It was accompanied by an almost imperceptible snort. It was difficult not to back up. Wow, they did get a bit from Mom.

“Well, it’s lovely to meet you both. I look forward to seeing you again this summer.”

She excused herself, hoping, for Rick’s sake that the daggers she felt embedded in her back were only her imagination.

~ * ~

The rain began on his way home from the airport. Fitting. The windshield wipers slapped back and forth, clearing his view. Internal windshield wipers would be nice.

Before he'd even decided to go there, he found himself parked in front of Lily's house. The rain precluded his sitting out on her steps, as had become something of a ritual.

So he sat in the car, trying hard to ignore the ache in his leg and the even bigger one in his chest.

The drive to the airport had been uneventful. The girls chatted off and on as if he weren't there—who they'd call first when they got home, which outfit they'd wear first day back to school, if somebody named Dillon had called.

Since he wasn't ticketed, he couldn't see them to their gate, but they insisted that they were old enough to do that themselves. When it came time for the goodbyes, Kate just hugged him and held on and Ally kissed his cheek. Either they weren't given to words—neither was he if anyone was counting—or... damn it—you just couldn't make up for years of gone with one week of mall shopping and one picnic.

He watched them mount the escalator, watched until they disappeared around a corner, then went back to the counter to ask if someone would make sure they got where they were going. Cursing through gritted teeth, he'd reconsidered and headed for the car.

Now, here he was sitting in front of her house, idly trying to remember what it felt like to walk.

What had he expected?

Hell, he wasn't cut out for fatherhood any more than he was cut out for marriage.

Furthermore, he might not ever again get to do what he was cut out for.

Reality sucked.

Hope was a bitch whore.

And, what the hell was he doing here?

He turned the key, slammed the car into drive and pulled away from the curb.

~ * ~

Lily rounded the corner in time to see him pull away. She smiled. She'd missed him sitting there when she got home.

Inexplicably, today had been one of those days when she couldn't get her body to stop throbbing, aching with need and desire. Maybe it was because she knew the girls were leaving. Maybe it was just Thursday.

But, thoughts of touching him, of kissing him, of undressing him had been forefront today. Usually they just hung around the edges.

Not.

Okay, so they were always right up front there. Today, the volume was turned up.

So watching him drive away left her with a disappointment deep in her core, a feeling that was nearly palpable.

With grim determination, she climbed the stairs, never looking over her shoulder—just in case. She threw a salad together with a vengeance and struggled to think about anything else.

At nine, she flipped off the tv and headed toward the bedroom. Maybe she could read herself to sleep.

At nine fifteen, she gave up the effort, laid her book down and dialed his number.

“MacIntyre.”

“Atherton.”

He chuckled but sounded tired.

“I didn’t wake you did I?”

“No.”

“Did you get the girls off okay?”

Small talk—when had that started?

“Yup.”

He didn’t sound like he wanted to talk.

“Well, then, I’ll speak with you soon.”

She laid the phone back in its cradle. That had gone well. Back to her book.

Eleven

Two pages later, the phone rang.

“Atherton,” she said, trying for humor. It wasn’t her forte.

“Hey, sorry ’bout that.”

“It’s okay.”

“I’m just not great company tonight.”

“That why you didn’t stick around earlier?”

He laughed this time, sounding more like himself.

“You and your cut-to-the-chase. Most of the time I like that about you.”

Her turn to laugh.

“You want to talk about it?”

“Not particularly.” There was a long pause before he continued. “I’d like to make love to you.”

His words, his voice—holy cow. Like her brain and body needed that kind of encouragement tonight.

“Lily?”

“I’m here.”

“Should I not have said that?”

“Not tonight you shouldn’t have.” She hoped her tone conveyed the right message.

“God, I suck at this.”

“At what?”

“At anything having to do with anything that’s not Air Force.”

“You could’a fooled me.”

Lame. Lame. Lame. At least they were off the subject of sex.

“Lily? You want to go fishing?”

“Excuse me?”

“Fishing. You know, pitch a tent, start a campfire...”

“That sounds more like camping to me.”

“Don’t interrupt.”

“Sorry.”

“As I was saying, start a campfire, stick a worm on the hook, toss your line in the water...”

“That sounds like fishing.”

“You’re interrupting again.” He cleared his throat and continued, “Slip back into the tent and slip out of our clothes...”

So they weren’t off the subject.

“Oh, *fishing*. Would that be before or after Carrino’s?”

Silence. Complete and utter silence.

“Princess, I think I’d better hang up now.”

“That’ll solve everything.”

“Night, Lily.”

“Good night, Rick.”

~ * ~

Rick had never met a woman that so embodied sexy. Analyze it and you couldn’t come up with anything more than a gut feeling. But, God, what a gut feeling. The way

she walked, the way she moved, even the way she breathed.

Now, add to that the way she talked, or didn't talk as the case may be.

Her voice, not quite sultry but something... even on the phone—or on the radio now that he thought about it.

Tonight, she'd said just enough that he knew, beyond a doubt that she was thinking about making love to him. But she hadn't really said anything.

She flat out boggled his mind.

And left him shaky with wanting her.

If they ever got to it...

~ * ~

It had taken most of the night. They had to work in shifts because the locker wasn't very big. Bigger than those in high school—had to be—each guy had a lot of gear. But not big enough for a group.

On the Monday after Easter, they'd broken into teams, hitting every grocery, drug and discount store for thirty miles. A quarter a box, five boxes for a dollar, even ten for a dollar at one place—those people really wanted rid of theirs.

An investment of thirty-seven-twenty-two when all was said and done.

Very Cool.

Actually there was more. A cheapo glue gun and a ton of glue sticks. But who was counting...

When Nic arrived, everything looked quite normal. Cruz made sure to be in the locker room but the others were lounging in the dayroom if they'd arrived at all. Will and Gabe agreed to forego the anticipated festivities—

likely to be a bunch of cursing—in order to swing by the house and engage part two of the Peepattack. Cruz promised that he'd have the webcam set up and record Nic's reaction for posterity.

So Nic arrived on alert for anything. Cruz was brushing his boots.

"Morning," Cruz greeted him as he entered the locker room.

"Hey."

"So, what's on the schedule for the day?"

"What do you mean?" Nic looked at him with suspicion.

"I heard they cancelled the jump. You heard?"

"No. I just got here."

Confusion.

"You hear that Will wrecked his car this morning?"

A lie, of course, but it worked as a diversion. Nic looked over at Cruz as he stepped over to his locker and reached for the handle.

"He okay?"

"Yeah, Gabe went to get him. Said there was some paperwork he needed to fill out at the police station, and they had to arrange for a tow."

Kill two birds with one fib. Gabe wouldn't approve but screw Gabe.

And then, poor Nic opened the locker and just stood there, staring...

Every square inch of each inside surface was covered with a peep. They were glued to the walls and ceiling and even onto both the top and bottom of the shelf. In addition, they'd rigged it so that about a hundred of the

little yellow fellows tumbled out when he opened the door, covering his boots with a fine yellow and white powder.

Nic was speechless.

Score!

By now the rest of the guys stood in the doorway watching.

“Fuck you,” Nic said at last.

Non-politically correct birthday wishes were intermingled with enough laughter to bring the lieutenant in from his office.

“Happy Birthday, Nic,” he said after assessing the situation. “Now clean up that mess.”

By now the entire room smelled like Peeps—a sickly sugary scent that drove even Cruz from the room.

“Have fun, Batman,” he said on the way out.

Cruz’s cell phone rang about an hour later.

“Deed’s done,” Gabe said.

“Did you need more?”

“Nope, actually had some left over. Any idea what to do with them?”

“Elementary school on the way over?”

“Okay.”

When Nic got home tonight, he’d open his bedroom door to discover floor to ceiling boxes of his favorite Easter chickens. He’d have to unload it before he could get to his bed.

All in a day’s work.

~ * ~

Lily smiled to herself at the Colonel’s distress. He stood in the doorway to her office—when had she cleared

her calendar so she'd be here every day when he came in?—and fidgeted.

Fidgeting on crutches was almost pitiful.

He couldn't look at her for long, except when he'd just stop speaking and stare at her lips, or into her eyes, which she carefully averted before either of them burst into flame.

Paul had to walk down the hall and get Rick's attention to let him know it was time.

Fifteen minutes later, the sound of smashing glass pulled her to Paul's room.

"You're going to fucking undo all the work we've done if you don't chill out, Colonel!"

Lily had never heard Paul curse. On occasion, he got tough—had to, which was why she'd be no good at the job—but this was extraordinary.

She couldn't be sure what had happened. But the remnants of Paul's coffee cup lay scattered on the floor and Rick sat forward on the weight machine, panting.

Paul glanced up at her and gave an infinitesimal shake of his head warning her off.

She didn't take his suggestion.

"Paul, go get a broom," she ordered and strode toward the patient.

"Look, Colonel. I don't know what happened in here and frankly, I don't give a damn."

He raised his head and looked at her, lips tightened in a rebellious line, his jaw locked.

"But I have as much of an interest in you walking again as you do. And if you don't knock off the macho-hero shit, I'll knock it off for you."

Now he straightened, and what looked at first like a fight, suddenly melted into amazement.

She lowered her voice.

“Rick, there’s no rush, no expiration date.”

Thankfully, his expression softened in recognition of her meaning.

She turned to leave.

“I’m sorry, Princess.”

“Don’t be,” she replied without turning. “Just do what Paul tells you to do.”

“Yes, dear.”

“And you owe Paul a new coffee cup.”

~ * ~

Thirteen days later, Rick was waiting on her steps when she pulled up. He rose to his feet, and with only the aid of a cane, came around the car and opened her door.

She slid out, but his tall frame held her in place.

“You up for dinner, Princess?”

She gave him a once over. He was dressed all in black, black levis, black v-neck sweater. It set off the salty threads in his hair, making him look very distinguished and, frankly, very dangerous. It was a striking impression.

When her gaze lingered on his face, he smiled slightly and lowered his mouth to hers. His free hand, on the back of her head, pulled her in closer.

“Christ,” he muttered as he backed away.

“Dinner?”

“Yeah, Carrino’s.”

“To celebrate the burning of the crutches.”

“Naturally. Why else?” He tipped his head in mock-curiosity, a Rick grin, barely there, taking up residence on his perfect face.

“What time?”

He looked at his watch.

“I’ll pick you up at nineteen-thirty.”

“Check.”

He walked her to the front door, only hesitating slightly when they reached the steps. He’d done a bazillion steps in therapy. Hers were nothing.

Again he kissed her.

As he reached his car, she called to him, “Colonel?” She waited for his gaze to slide up to meet hers across the top of his car, “You look great.”

He just smiled before opening the door and climbing in.

~ * ~

Colonel Rick MacIntyre was nervous. Really nervous.

Correction, nervous was for wimps.

Real men, who were attempting to go out on a real date, after years with no practice, didn’t get nervous.

They got spooked, rattled, terror-stricken.

He couldn’t figure out what else he would change into, and Lily had said he looked good—no, great. Hot damn. So, he stayed in what he had on and just added the black leather jacket to the mix.

Hell.

He looked like he was going to—what did the girls call it—a Goth convention. Was Goth still in style?

“I’m too old for this shit,” he said in his best Danny Glover mutter.

When he pulled up in front of her house, his terror turned to—well, there really wasn't anything exceeding terror—but it sure as hell felt like it had cranked up big time. He was flying blind and hoping not to stall.

The rules of flying rescue helicopters—author unknown:

There's no approach that can't be salvaged.

Thinking ruins the team.

And it's better to die than be embarrassed.

What the hell was he thinking? If he had a brain cell left, he'd turn his stupid ass around and run away.

Well, shit.

He climbed the stairs—were there more than there had been this afternoon?—and, before he could chicken out completely, rang the doorbell.

The angel that opened the door left him breathless.

Actually, angel might have been the wrong word.

She-devil?

No that wasn't right either.

“God, you look... wow.”

She wore a perfect black dress—nothing Goth about that—with a simple strand of pearls. Her hair curled down her shoulders, teasing the curve of her breast.

If she was nervous, she sure as hell didn't show it. Her smile was just Lily, simple, sweet and sexy.

“Hi.”

“You, um, ready?”

“Yes, just let me get my sweater.”

She turned and walked back a few steps, no rush. His mouth got even drier.

She draped her sweater over her shoulders—damn, he should have done that—and took his arm, pulling her door closed behind them.

If anyone had asked him what he'd ordered, he couldn't have told them. Okay, he remembered dessert. And that he would never forget, mainly because Lily somehow turned it into foreplay.

Wasn't he supposed to be in charge of foreplay?

Loser.

Who knew that strawberry shortcake was that amazing?

Strawberries good.

Cake good.

Whipped cream. Very good.

Delivered on a fork that Lily held in her hand, her eyes dancing with unmasked desire, priceless.

He didn't know what they'd talked about either, except that he'd hogged the conversation and she'd listened, really listened. Whether he was coherent in anything he said was debatable, too. The way she sat, as if lost in what he said, all the while trailing her ring finger along her collarbone—well, it was distracting to say the least.

After all that, though, his only thought, as he drove her home, was of going to bed—alone. His leg throbbed like it hadn't in months and, if his forty-five wasn't too old for the young, vibrant woman who sat beside him—which was debatable—then certainly feeling eighty-five was not going to work.

~ * ~

Lily could see him wind down. Not unexpected.

He'd been aiming for this moment since he sat, still trapped, in the downed helicopter. Hard work had paid off. But he'd pushed too hard for today.

While still at the table, she could see his grimace—he probably didn't even notice—when he moved, the painful set to his jaw, heard his sharp breath as he stood.

The real giveaway, though, was the pronounced limp. With sudden dismay, she wondered if that would plague him for the rest of his life.

Continued therapy and more hard work just might allow him to walk normally.

But, when he was tired, or when the weather changed, the telltale evidence of his Friday the thirteenth battle with gravity might very well haunt his steps forever.

She hoped not for his sake.

For her, it didn't matter at all.

If she could have, she'd have followed him home and spent time working out the muscle spasms, using her hands to drive out the exhaustion.

But that would have been an entirely different form of torture.

For both of them.

Besides, there were such wonderful payoffs in waiting, in fueling the flame little by little until, at last, the explosion was inescapable. Even then, holding back at the end made it so much sweeter.

So she kissed him goodnight in the car, tracing her finger down the side of his face.

"I had a wonderful time," she said, barely above a whisper. "And I can't wait to go fishing..."

Twelve

It took three weeks to get Lily to go fishing. First it was her insistence that he have Paul's okay—right, like getting Paul to do anything remotely civilized or human or nice was a miracle. The man made Simon Legree look like a fairy godmother. Then she had an appointment on the first and third Sunday of the month—something he got the impression happened regularly—she wouldn't say what it was.

But finally, the weekend of his dreams had arrived. Lily even took off Friday.

Last night, he'd gotten a call from her after nine. Frantic was about the only way to describe her voice. At first, he actually thought something was wrong. Concern mixed with disappointment that maybe their trip was not going to happen.

How do you spell relief?

She didn't know what to pack. Silly girl.

It was then that he realized that he'd never seen her in jeans.

"You do have jeans don't you?"

Sounding quite indignant, she said she did.

“Okay, pack jeans, shirts, maybe a sweatshirt for the evening, a light jacket, girlie stuff.”

Humor replaced her earlier anxiety.

“Food?”

“Got it handled.”

A note of challenge snuck into her voice. “The weather?” It was raining, not unusual for the middle of May.

“I’ve taken care of everything.”

“Well, okay. I guess since I’m a camping virgin,” now she was back to Lily-flirt mode, “I’ll have to rely on your experience.”

“I look forward to it.”

“Me, too. See you at way too early in the morning, Colonel.”

When his rank rolled off her tongue... Geez, Louise. What that woman did to him. He picked up his list and reviewed it, making sure he’d covered all the bases.

Way-too-early didn’t come soon enough for him. At least her lights were on when he pulled up in front. When she opened the door, he turned to mush.

She wore her hair in a ponytail that reached her shoulders. She wore jeans—holy shit—she should wear jeans more often—and a pinkish t-shirt with a v-neck that drew his eyes to her center.

Okay, he’d already conceded that she was the hottest woman alive—not so much a physical-looks thing, it was more that she oozed a sexuality that stroked his libido twenty-four-seven. But this morning, with her fresh-out-of-bed look and her casual clothes, he was done for.

Screw the fishing trip, he wanted her now.

Without considering anything whatsoever, he reached for her and tugged her into his lips.

And then there was the way she kissed—the way she responded.

Maybe he should just push the door closed with his cane, take her to her bed and stay there until Monday morning.

Tempting....

She pulled back and looked up at him.

“Fishing. We’re going fishing.”

“Right. Check. Fishing.”

“Come on in and pour yourself a cup of coffee. I’m not quite ready yet.”

Could’a fooled him.

She waltzed past the living room and into one of the back rooms, closing the door behind her, leaving Rick standing there, looking around.

If Lily’s office, with the exception of the crystal rock thing, was all business, then her living room was all sensation.

There were candles everywhere, unlit at this ungodly hour, but still, their scent filled the room. He couldn’t imagine what it was like if they were lit.

Her couch was a light, buttery leather, and was filled with shiny pillows. One wall overflowed with prints of flowers small and large, some in yellow and white and light blue, some in stark red and black. Another wall had glass shelves that held a collection of rocks in an amazing array of colors, interspersed with erotic statues.

Rick resisted the urge to walk over and take a closer look and turned for the kitchen for that cup of coffee.

Her kitchen was equally Lily. No country roosters or cow canisters. Everything was either silver, black or royal blue. Okay, the curtains were striped, with lighter blues as well. Intense was the only word he could come up with to describe this kitchen.

He opened the cupboard above the coffee maker, for a moment expecting to find brooding but shiny black or purple coffee mugs. What he discovered was anything but. Try Tweetie Bird, Road Runner, Sylvester and all their friends. He grabbed the Taz one and poured himself the rich, dark, brew from the carafe.

~ * ~

Lily sat on her bed. Just sat.

The promise in that kiss, and the intense look he'd given her beneath the bill of his Air Force cap, was about the only thing that kept her going, had kept her going for weeks. His eyes were so dark...

She'd never been shy about that sort of thing and she wasn't inclined to start now—even if she could. But the terror of going away with Rick nearly overshadowed the mounting needs and desires that had been escalating for months.

Precarious terrain.

The domain of intimacy.

Not the intimacy of lips and breasts and hands and hidden places.

These were the hidden places that were much more dangerous, those that required uncovering one's true private parts, the secrets that you told no one.

She couldn't go there. Not now, not ever.

She'd agreed to go fishing with a man who she could never have for keeps. An invitation to agony.

Pushing to her feet, she turned and zipped up the duffle bag that held her clothes and a few allowances to vanity.

Tomorrow didn't matter anyway. The commitment to living in the present had gotten her further than anyone had expected her to go. Except for the rain, today was a great day to go fishing.

~ * ~

Rick had to make a quick stop on base to take care of some paperwork before they left. He was restricted to duty not to include flying, DNIF, he said. This left him grounded, missing the thing he loved about his job but still with paperwork, his least favorite part.

"Why do it then?" Lily asked.

"To keep from being completely expendable," he said as he climbed out of the car.

Lily watched the raindrops cling tenaciously to the windshield. An occasional rebel broke ranks, made a run for it, and joined his compatriots somewhere south, under the hood.

If the sun had been shining, the droplets would have sparkled like diamonds. If the sun had been shining, the drops wouldn't have existed at all.

Cold seeped into the car, and Lily reached for her coat, debating whether to just drape it over her shoulders or to actually put it on.

Vanity—and the unwillingness to make the concession won out.

Her hands remained cold.

If she reached over and turned the key—then within seconds, no doubt, Rick would appear and she'd be left explaining why she'd done it.

So what?

Yet the debate raged on and she remained chilled.

It was so quiet in the car that, had the incessant drip of the rain not been present, she could probably hear the electricity running in the lines overhead.

Rick tried to force a smile as he climbed back into the car.

He knew it was coming, but actually seeing the letter pissed him off. Was the Air Force really going to force him out? He'd think about it later—right now he was headed into the park with Lily.

El Cap upstaged by clouds. In the weird out-of-body way you thought sometimes, you could easily wonder if the big honkin' rocks were even still there.

Lily was so quiet.

He'd reassured her that the rain would give way soon to strong sunshine and that their early start wasn't in vain.

Either she didn't believe him and was afraid that their trip would be rained out, or she was afraid it wouldn't. Either way, he'd win her over. He had to.

Lily should have brought a heavier coat.

Rick whistled as he drove.

Lily should have just said no.

This was such a mistake. Not only was it raining, but she'd practically promised him that they'd finally consummate things. What had she been thinking?

Not thinking, obviously.

Forty-five minutes and thirty miles later, Rick turned his I-told-you-so smile her way as the clouds parted and the sun poked through. He reached over and patted her hand.

“I’d’a kept you warm, Princess.”

That grin, those warm chocolate-brown eyes, his strong, beautiful hands... How could anyone pull away from him?

By the time the tent was up—which was a bit more struggle than he’d anticipated—the sun was shining brightly, the clouds only a memory. Rick silently saluted his weather buddies at dispatch. They’d made him look damned good.

Rick hauled the black trash bags and the Rubbermaid boxes inside the tent, telling Lily she couldn’t come in until he was finished. She could start a fire.

The look on her face told him that wasn’t a good choice.

“Never mind. You can look through the coolers and find us a snack, then.”

She nodded but didn’t smile.

Ten minutes later, though, he exited the tent and took her hand.

“Close your eyes, Gorgeous.”

He led her to the zippered door, the flaps tied back.

Lily opened her eyes and gazed inside.

Wow.

There was a bed, complete with a purple and blue comforter and a pile of pillows. The plastic boxes sat on either side of the bed, each decorated with Coleman lamps.

She glanced back at him. He watched her with the look of a little boy who had just brought his folks breakfast in bed. His hands were tucked in his pockets.

“It’s beautiful, Rick.”

His face broke out into relief and pride.

“Nothing’s too good for your first fishing trip.”

Then he turned around and walked to the picnic table.

“Snacks?”

She followed him out. “Oreos, graham crackers, Cheetos, or granola bars.”

He grabbed a handful of cookies and held out his hand for hers.

“C’mon, I’ll show you around.”

To the east of their campsite the stream fed a small pond that Rick assured her teemed with fish. Down the road a bit, around the bend, were the bathrooms and showers. Here and there, other campsites, other campers.

Lily was a trooper. It was evident within minutes. She was definitely in adventure mode, and it was sexy as hell. Whatever misgivings she’d had, even as recently as on the trip up here, she’d tossed them over her shoulder and changed her attitude. No evidence of hesitation or reluctance.

It was as if, once she’d committed to the hand, she shoved all her chips into the pot.

Admirable.

He should learn to do that.

They ate an early lunch—bologna sandwiches—during which Rick regaled Lily with stories from his childhood in Minneapolis and his very first bologna “sammich.” She didn’t tell him that her first was at a picnic with friends

when she was twenty-four. Bologna was not a budget item when she was a kid.

The man could tell a story.

“My family had gone skiing in New Mexico. My aunt brought bologna.”

Lily liked this Rick. Not that she didn’t like the Rick she’d known before. But this Rick smiled more, was markedly more relaxed. That surprised her. She would have described Rick as laid-back before. Now she saw that he really did have a Colonel stance that only now was overshadowed by the fun nature inside.

“So, the first night I took the leap and tasted my cousin’s sandwich. Well, it changed my life. For the rest of the trip, I couldn’t get enough—even when we went out to eat, I smuggled in contraband.”

He stuffed the last bite into his mouth and chewed with relish.

“I think that might have been the beginning of an addictive personality.”

Again, the peer from beneath the brim of the hat. She nearly choked. His voice matched the serious look.

“Seems when I find something I really like, I can’t get enough.” He reached across the picnic table and traced across her hand. “Okay,” he pushed to his feet and picked up his cane, “time to fish.”

The look on her face belied the serene way she threaded the worm onto the hook. Again, he was impressed. He’d showed her once and she’d taken over.

So now they sat on lawn chairs—completely quiet—feet propped on the beer cooler, and watched the bobber on her line. It wasn’t just anyone that could pull the

sitting-quietly thing off—especially one of the female variety. God, what a turn-on...

Hours passed, sitting in silence, drinking beer, listening to the birds and the bees, thinking about the birds and the bees, and no one caught a thing.

Ecstasy.

The sun beat down on Lily until, finally, she relented, excused herself with a raised index finger, walked back to the tent and changed into shorts. She hadn't thought about the consequences but didn't mind the once over Rick gave her when she returned.

The thoughts simmered within her for hours and she longed for dark.

When dark finally came, Rick started a campfire.

No hurry, it seemed.

Lily was normally the one who teased the experience.

Rick had turned the tables.

Thirteen

The fire crackled and gave off the great smoke that only campfires do. Rick sat next to Lily, legs stretched out toward the warmth.

It wasn't cold, but the fire felt good.

He'd lit the lamps in the tent, tempted to just pull Lily inside and kiss her senseless.

Chicken-shit—he'd never been afraid before, never had the ugly scars he had now. Horse-shit. He'd never had a girl like Lily before. That was the truth of the matter.

What was an old guy—uh, middle-aged guy—like him doing with a hot, luscious babe like her? Rather, what the hell was she doing with him?

The firelight danced off her auburn hair, which she'd loosed from the confines of the ponytail she wore all day. It fell in soft curls around her face and down...

"Ready for s'mores?"

Either that came out wrong or her mind was in the same gutter his was.

"S'mores?" The provocative look was chased away by curiosity.

"You *have* had s'mores, haven't you?"

“Colonel?”

“Hmmm?”

“Can a campfire virgin have ever had s’mores?”

He grinned.

“Ahh, so many new experiences for you.”

He handed her a long stick, slid a marshmallow on it, his eyes meeting hers, “Try not to start it on fire.”

If he’d been asked before coming out here whether loading marshmallows on a stick was a sensual experience, he’d have said no.

Wrong.

“Right.”

Four s’mores later, he’d told her about his childhood growing up in Minnesota, the son of an aerospace engineer.

“He was way smarter than me. I had to have help getting through math and science in the Academy.”

“I know. Scarecrow.”

“Oh, yeah, I told you that already. Anyway, the best I could do was to fly. Dad nearly burst at my graduation.”

Then he told her about his first wedding, his girls, and finally his divorce.

“Between being away so much—hell, I almost missed my girls’ birth.”

He got really quiet for a moment and just stared into the fire, his thumb absently rubbing the back of Lily’s hand.

Lily squeezed his hand.

“Anyway, between all the time I was gone and my overwhelming lack of enthusiasm for social climbing, our

marriage was doomed. She did the right thing to dump me.”

Lily let him sit in silence for a minute before leaning over and kissing his neck. She’d have continued had he not spoken.

“So, where did you grow up, Princess?”

“L.A.”

“Really? A big city girl then.”

Distraction.

Please, God.

Again, she leaned over, this time capturing his lips with hers. She ran her hand down his face, down his neck, settling on his chest.

He’d stopped breathing.

Pulling her in, he took over, plunging his tongue inside, one hand holding her chin.

All talk was done.

He got painfully to his feet and held his hand out to pull her up.

Then, he led her inside the tent.

Rick paced himself, to keep from exploding. Nothing good could come from that—pardon the pun. He turned down the lamps to their lowest and, with steely determination, he stood beside this gorgeous girl and slid off her jacket.

Her hands on his chest, then on his ass, pulling his hips in to hers.

He took her hands in his and brought them to his lips.

“If you continue like that, I’ll be done for.”

She smiled.

“I want to savor you.”

She understood and dropped her hands to her sides.

Had she worn a button up shirt on purpose? Way to go Lily.

Despite the obnoxious way his hands shook, one by one, he unbuttoned all seven of them, until her shirt hung open, giving him an excruciating look inside.

A light blue bra. Lace.

He leaned over and kissed just above the lace.

She sucked in her breath.

Nice.

He slid the shirt off her shoulders.

Okay, Ecstasy just got better. This was Ecstasy Plus.

Right before his eyes, this girl became a goddess.

With a groan, he unzipped her jeans and slid them down.

Light blue lace panties.

Good God.

With more self control than he knew he had, he lowered her to the bed. Starting at her lips, he worked his way down and, inch by divine inch, he savored her.

Thank God she came. Boy howdy did she ever, complete with writhing and panting and the most amazing girl-growl he'd ever heard.

And then, he crawled back up the bed and slid inside.

Ecstasy Plus? Ecstasy Extreme.

Okay, he could die now. Delirious. If there was nothing more in his life, that would be okay, 'cause topping this day was inconceivable.

~ * ~

If there was that kind of difference between guys at thirty and guys at forty-five—well, did that mean sixty...?

Lily was no stranger to orgasm. She'd grown up believing that sexuality was a completely natural, absolutely wonderful, totally under-respected part of humanity. She'd actually taken classes in human sexuality. She knew well the power of touch.

What she didn't know until now was that there were heights she'd never reached before.

And, if she ever got the use of her body again, she was going to reach them again.

Tonight.

~ * ~

Coffee and bacon.

Lily cracked open one eye to take in the odd blue light that made it through the filter of the tent. The flap was open enough that she could see Rick, leaning over the fire, pushing around the bacon.

He had his hat on backwards and the early sun softened the trees in the background. The air was pure.

Lily lay curled on her side and enjoyed watching him.

Ambushed by contentment.

Contentment was followed closely by the voice of reality, and she knew, before she even threw the blankets back and tugged on her clothes, that she'd sleep in her own bed tonight.

Alone.

~ * ~

What the hell had happened?

Lily had arrived at the campfire looking for all the world like the same goddess he'd left sleeping.

She was quiet.

That should have been his first warning.

Too quiet.

Then, as they finished up the dishes, she'd said it.

"I need you to take me home, Rick."

No further explanation.

But the goddess was gone, replaced with a mere mortal, one who wouldn't make eye contact with him. One who, when he tried to touch her, moved away.

He got back to the campsite—at her insistence—just after noon, back to Ecstasy Light—if even that.

The same birds chattered in the trees, the same lapping of the water against the shore, same fishing pole, same cooler of beer.

His knee throbbed as if to remind him of his age.

He suddenly didn't need a reminder.

Lesson one: baring your soul to a woman—crushingly painful—extremely difficult—and no guarantee. It certainly didn't make up for lack in the sack, did it?

Lesson two: playing outside your league—just plain stupid.

Lesson three: there wasn't another physical therapist in Merced. Damn it.

~ * ~

Monday morning torture—in more ways than one.

By God, he'd make the torture count for something. After all, he wasn't about to let the Air Force do him in. He had two months until his O-6 Boards and before that, he had to get clearance to fly again.

Lily be damned.

He would stick to the things he knew he could do—fly helicopters and run a rescue unit. And maybe one he only

hoped he could do—be a great father. The reality was that his goose was cooked either way on the first one.

If he aced the boards, and got his full bird, he'd never fly again. The Air Force would move him to an even bigger desk. And if he didn't get cleared to fly, and bombed the boards, hell, he'd be in charge of the cafeteria in someplace as appealing as Minot.

Yeehaw.

"Rick," Paul said as he stepped into the waiting room, "you ready?"

"As I'll ever be..."

~ * ~

If Lily thought that getting in to work at twenty after nine would keep her from a face to face with Rick, she was sorely mistaken.

"Lily," Paul said from Rick's usual spot in her doorway, "you need to have another word with your colonel. He's on overdrive and, if he doesn't knock it off, he'll be in a wheelchair instead of a chopper."

"Helicopter," said as she pushed to her feet.

"Huh?"

"And he's not my colonel. Where is he?"

Paul skittered out of her way. "In the rehab room."

Rick was bent over at the waist, hands on his knees, sucking air.

She took a deep breath, stuck on a grim smile and walked over.

"Colonel?" She'd meant that to come out business-like, but it sounded seductive instead. She cleared her throat and tried again.

"Colonel."

“Yeah,” he said without moving.

“Either you have a self-destructive streak hiding somewhere in there,” that didn’t come out right either, “or you’re in some kind of sprint to get rid of the cane.”

He didn’t bother to answer.

“It doesn’t matter which. What does matter is that, if you continue to overstress that knee, you’ll end up flying a wheelchair. So, knock it off.”

She made it back to her office before her own knees buckled, landing her hard in her office chair. Head in hands, she cursed silently.

She was unquestionably too stupid to live.

Fourteen

The phone's double ring interrupted her I-suck session.

"This is Lily,"

"Lily, Daniel. Can you get away later for coffee?"

She glanced at her schedule.

"You okay?"

"Yeah,"

The unspoken part of that was, *Yeah, I'm fine, but I need to talk.*

"Um, looks like I can't get away until about five-fifteen. Is that doable or do I need to move things around?"

Both of them knew that their friendship was a priority. When he called her for a mission, she dropped everything and came. That had, over the years, become the way things were between them, mission or no mission.

"Nope, that's fine. Five-thirty at the Lodge."

~ * ~

The Lodge. The full name was Black Bear Coffee and Tea Lodge. But to the locals, it was the Lodge.

Even if their coffee hadn't been the best, the atmosphere was. It was decorated in bears and moose—statues and stuffed animals, not the real thing—and all things related, with forest greens and browns. They had one wall filled with pictures of the Black Bear travel mug taken in spots around the world. If you took their exorbitantly priced travel mug along on vacation and took its picture along the way, you got a free fill-up. There were pictures of the mug in the Oval office, in Iraq, in a helicopter, even at Everest base camp. Clever idea.

By this time in May, you could sit out on the patio in the shadow of the mountains. In the winter, you could sit in front of a gas fire.

Lily liked this place a lot.

Daniel adored it. In fact, he couldn't go more than a few hours without a latte. If he did, he got crusty. Not a pretty sight.

By the time Daniel arrived, Lily sat at one of the tables outside with lattes for both of them.

"Hey," Daniel said and eased into a chair as if he were eighty.

He'd lost weight, and his hair was longer than she'd ever seen it.

"New look?" she asked, tapping the top of her head.

He didn't have any idea what she was talking about.

"Never mind."

"So, how's the colonel?"

She paused, making him look up at her.

"Hi, Daniel. How are you?"

He didn't acknowledge her backing up the conversation, just slid his glasses up on top of his head and pressed his thumb and forefinger to the bridge of his nose. "I have a headache, you?"

"I'm okay."

"And the colonel?"

"I guess he's fine."

Now he opened his eyes, replaced his glasses and really looked at her.

"Speak, child. What's up?"

She peeled the lid from her coffee and raised it to her lips, blowing on it before taking a sip. Now she was the one looking away.

"Nothing's up."

"Then you're together?"

"No."

Now he shook his head, fixing her with a disapproving stare.

"I thought you went away for the weekend."

"We did. Rick is a wonderful man. We had a good day."

"But..."

"But nothing."

"Ahh... a rare Lily-won't-talk-about-it moment." He tried to smile but it came off half-hearted. He pulled a napkin over. "Got a pen, I want to write this down."

"Suffice it to say we have nothing in common."

"Not even great sex?"

"Shut up, Daniel."

He nodded, then let his gaze wander to the mountain. His face softened a bit as his blue eyes took in every detail.

“How are you?”

“My head feels like my eyeballs are going to explode.”

“All the time or just right this moment?”

“You know the answer to that, Lily.”

She did. When Daniel was stressed, he got whopper sinus headaches. Lily had seen him nearly blinded by them in the middle of a mission. But he never wavered in efficiency or in dedication—at least not that she could tell. It was likely that they were pretty much constant at this point.

“Karen?”

“She’s given her notice for the end of next month.”

“And then Fiji?”

“Nope. She vetoed Fiji. We’re going to go up on the mountain.”

Now his eyes dropped to his cup again, as if thinking about the mountain in that context was more than he could do. Lily wondered if Karen realized that Daniel would never be able to look at the mountain the same again because of her decision.

“Is she up to it?”

“At this point she is. She’s in a lot of pain. Losing weight. Getting more and more withdrawn. Maybe the mountain will help her smile again.”

Karen was normally such a happy person. She always had a slightly sarcastic comment, usually mixed with a big grin.

“That must be hard.”

“Yeah,” Daniel said, his voice nearly breaking on just the one word.

“You know, Daniel...”

“How’s work?”

“Fine, I guess.”

He was silent for a time, like a statue sitting beside her, the only evidence of life the slow, steady pulse in his neck.

“It better be good, Lily,” he said at last.

“What better be good?”

“Whatever reason you’re using for not seeing Rick anymore.”

Her turn to play statue.

Daniel finished his coffee and stood up. He tossed his empty cup in a nearby trash can, bent over her and kissed the top of her head.

Then, without any more words of wisdom, he walked to his car and drove away.

The sun peeked from behind a cloud, spilling fresh light over her shoulder, warm, soft, sweet. Tears spilled down her cheek for no reason whatsoever.

A mile or so beyond her view, and over to the north just a touch, lay the fractured metal husk of a Blackhawk, testimony to the twists of fate. Daniel didn’t need a reminder. Rick didn’t either.

And Lily shouldn't have.

The breeze stirred the small hairs around her face, her skin felt warm, traffic quieted for a moment.

Life *was* too short.

And her reasons *weren't* all that good.

She squeezed her eyes shut for a minute. When she opened them, she reached for her cell phone and dialed.

"Colonel MacIntyre."

Answering his own phone?

Her watch said six thirteen. He'd sent everyone else home.

"You up for dinner, Colonel?"

Her throat closed on the long pause.

"Not really, Lily. Sorry."

Fifteen

Rick returned the phone to its cradle and dropped his head into his hands.

Way to burn a bridge, asshole.

He shoved his chair back and stood, taking two steps before remembering not to.

Then gravity got the best of him—again—and he ended up on the floor. He rolled to his side, sucking in air to keep from yelping.

He had thirty-five days 'till he'd either pass a flight physical and perhaps the oh-six boards or not, and he'd tender his letter of resignation from the Air Force.

He had a lot of work to do, both mentally and physically—especially now that he'd likely torn something loose in his knee.

He had no inclination to be abused any further by that woman.

And yet, all he could think about was picking up the phone, saying yes to dinner, yes to sex, yes to anything she wanted. The hurt be damned.

Good thing he couldn't reach the phone.

~ * ~

The next morning brought him, once again, face to face with her in the hallway outside the rehab room. She side-stepped to let him by, her gaze glued to the floor.

The hallway was not designed for avoidance, though.

She turned to the side. He did the same.

And they still came within inches of each other.

Neither was able to resist the urge and they ended up looking into each other's eyes, locked there for a moment.

Her eyes held apology and hope and something soft and hot and he nearly choked.

Paul saved him by stepping out into the hallway and clearing his throat.

"Morning, Colonel."

~ * ~

That had gone well, hadn't it? Not that she'd planned it, but she certainly had the answer to her unspoken, unwanted question. There was no "budge" in his face or in his body language. Maybe it really was too late.

Lily had never bought into too-lates. If she had, she'd be back in L.A., stuck in a run-down trailer park with no hope, no life, no nothing. Or worse. She could be where Lucy was.

Nope. Not too late.

Sitting at her desk, pen in hand, yellow pad in front of her, she brainstormed possible strategies. It wasn't until her first client of the day complained that she realized that her desperation had made it into her hands. She apologized profusely and decided to just let synchronicity do its work.

~ * ~

On his way to his office, Rick's sergeant-clerk announced that General Houston was on the line. Rick hurried to his desk and picked up the phone.

"General, sir. Hello."

"Rick, just wanted to see how you were progressing on your paperwork for your Oh-Six board."

Had he missed more than a month or was the general way ahead of schedule? It was the end of May, and the paperwork wasn't officially due until the twenty-fifth of July. Even if he weren't fighting the knee thing, Rick wouldn't be worried about paperwork until a week before it was due. No sense in getting ahead of yourself.

"Fine, sir," he lied.

"Then I can expect it on my desk well before the deadline."

Yes sir, yes sir, three bags full, sir.

"Affirmative, sir."

"Good. How's the knee?"

"Better every day." Not exactly a lie.

"You'll be ready for a flight physical?"

"Doin' my best, sir."

Was he?

After ending pleasantries, Rick hung up.

Was he doing his best?

He wanted to fly again, needed to fly again, certainly didn't want to be stuck doing some god-awful job miles from the flight line. But, every time he thought about flying again, he forced himself to ignore the knot of misgiving and faithlessness in his gut.

That same knot appeared whenever he thought of Lily, too.

So, basically, the only break his gut got was when he was asleep. Correction, when he was asleep and wasn't dreaming.

Every belief he'd ever had was up for grabs.

Uncomfortable? Mild understatement.

~ * ~

After lunch, Gabriel found Cruz in the parachute room, surrounded by stuff.

"What are you doing?"

Cruz straightened from his bent over position.

"Reorganizing."

"Why?"

"Why not?"

"Want help?"

"Nope."

Cruz had been brooding of late, and he wasn't a brooder. Gabe suspected that their inability to go anywhere without running into a certain Mary Katherine Sheridan was the reason.

Last Friday night, five sixths of Bravo Element—even the lieutenant joined them—Nic was the holdout, something about lasagna at home—pussy—went out on the town. They didn't even change out of their jumpsuits, just tossed a roll of quarters in each lower pocket—a trick that made even a pudgy guy look good. Not that there were any of those in this unit.

They'd ended up at McGee's dancing with fine looking women, bullshitting with each other, and drinking beer. Guys night out.

Up until Kit showed up.

“Iceberg, dead ahead,” Will whispered in his best Brit accent.

Then, Cruz got all pissy. Despite their warnings, he sauntered over and asked Kit’s companion to dance. When she threw her hands up and shook her head, they all watched in horror as he turned to Kit and took her hand, dragging her onto the dance floor.

They looked great for a while. Even when the faster music gave way to something slower and he pulled her into his arms. The stragglers at the table lifted their glasses to toast their mistake.

The toast was premature by only seconds.

Cruz whispered something in her ear. She stopped dancing, her eyes cold. He looked for a moment like he’d been falsely accused, then closed off, turned and walked off the dance floor, leaving her there alone.

He never did tell anyone what had happened.

“So, movie tonight?”

“Sure, whatever.”

“Okay, I need to stop in the mall first. My boots are in.”

Cruz waived his dismissal, and Gabe left him to his mess.

Six hours and a change of clothes later, they worked their way toward the sporting goods store.

It was an unmistakable sound, and the duo was off in a sprint before the scream ended. They had to push their way through the crowd of bystanders—bygawkers as Eric called them—to get to the center of the commotion.

A glass elevator in the center of the food court.

Great place to have a baby.

The mother to be was maybe eighteen, and one had to give her credit for endurance. How in hell she'd made it this far into the process without getting a clue that the birth was imminent was anybody's guess. As far as Gabe could tell, the little girl was alone.

After assurances that they were both paramedics and barked orders to call an ambulance, the crowd stepped back and allowed them full access.

Cruz sat down against the back wall of the elevator and pulled the little gal between his legs so that she could use him for a backstop.

"*Me llamo Eric Cruz,*" he said to the frightened girl. "*Como se llama?*"

"Teresa Avilar."

Even as Gabe was arranging for a curtain of bodies to protect Mom's privacy, he heard Cruz begin soothing the girl in soft Spanish.

It wasn't the first baby either of them had delivered.

Cruz stayed busy coaching in Spanish, Teresa did all the hard work, and Gabe played catcher. There was no telling when the ambulance crew arrived, but Gabe hadn't seen them until the baby's head emerged and one of them handed him a bulb syringe to suction the mouth and nose.

"It's a boy," Gabe said, and the crowd let out a somewhat restrained cheer. Teresa laughed through tears, even as Cruz smoothed her sweat soaked hair back from her face.

"*Nina buena!*"

Good girl.

The baby nearly fit in Gabe's big hands, and left no doubt about how he felt about things. A screaming baby

was a breathing baby. The slimy little guy had a head full of black hair and wide black eyes.

Again, a hand from behind him appeared, this time with scissors to cut the cord.

Then a blanket, with which he wrapped the kid.

“Does he have a name?”

Cruz translated.

“Cruz,” the girl said, smiling, looking up at Cruz with wide brown eyes.

“Nice,” Cruz said and kissed the top of her head.

“Yeah, nice.”

“Jealous?”

“You know it,” But Gabe couldn’t help but grin as he handed baby Cruz over his shoulder to the waiting medic.

They got Teresa loaded on the gurney and into the ambulance before waving goodbye and letting the crew deliver the afterbirth.

When they came back inside the mall, they were greeted with a huge ovation, and every girl in the place wanting to take them out for drinks.

Chicks dig guys who can deliver babies.

The next morning, Cruz and Gabe walked into the Section together, having arrived at the same time. Alpha team was there, along with Bravo, to welcome Cruz with lewd comments. At his confusion, they punched up the voice mail and put it on speaker.

“This message is for Eric Cruz. This is Kit Sheridan. Just thought I’d congratulate you on your triumphant evening. You were awesome.”

Instead of correcting his jeering teammates, he winked at Gabe. Then, whistling the Simpsons theme, he wandered off to the day room.

Later, he pulled Gabe aside with a warning.

“If you play Mr. Honesty, I’ll deck ya.”

“Then they better not ask,” Gabe replied.

“Just a tiny fib?” Cruz held his thumb and forefinger up, indicating small.

“No such thing, amigo.”

“You suck.”

Sixteen

For the next week the Fates hung out somewhere between annoying and just plain mean. At every turn, they brought Rick face to face with Lily.

Geez-oh-pete. It was getting ridiculous.

At first they'd ignore each other—yeah, right—except for that nagging woody he'd get every time he smelled her perfume. Then, they'd speak politely. Hello, how are you. Nice weather.

Now, they'd just stop, all locked up in each other's eyes.

At the gas station it happened.

At the coffee shop—okay, so he'd seen the Black Bear cup on her desk.

At physical therapy.

Now, they were stalled one on each side of a mountain of peaches on the produce aisle. His mouth watered. He'd never smell a peach again...

“Fine,” he said, way more snarky than he’d intended, “eight o’clock at the Oasis.”

She just looked at him for a moment, then smiled as if he’d just told her she’d won the Publisher’s Clearinghouse.

Before turning away, he snagged a peach and put it in his basket.

~ * ~

Bad choice, the Oasis on a Friday night. First place that came to mind. It was crowded, teeming even. Though he found a table in a dark corner, he didn’t get there without half a dozen PJ’s seeing him.

“Hey, Colonel, good to see you out and about, sir.”

Jason, one of the Alpha team guys who snuggled with a slightly plump brunette.

Cruz, D’Onofrio and his blonde fiancée—or were they married—no matter—sat by the dance floor but didn’t see Rick. Maybe he should just turn around and wait out front for Lily. Then they could go somewhere quiet.

Stuck in indecision. Not a good thing for a commander.

Her perfume alerted him before her voice, right behind him.

“Plan on dancing, Colonel?”

He turned.

“Hi, Princess.”

Her hair down, she wore a bright blue sweater that hugged her body. It had a peek hole of sorts that showed cleavage. His eyes didn’t make it down far enough in that moment to tell what she had on below the waist.

“I forgot it was Friday.”

“That’s okay, lead the way.”

The quiet table in the dark corner where they could talk... in reality was a table in the dark corner where they could yell.

He pulled her stool over close to his before she sat down.

“What’ll you have?” A blonde that looked a bit like his girls, with hip huggers—did they still call them that—a crop top—okay so he might ought to update his vocabulary—and a belly button ring. God, he needed to arrange for the girls to go to a convent.

He looked to Lily for her order.

“Merlot, please.”

“And you, sir?”

Was she even old enough to serve liquor? And did she call all the men sir? This might have been a bigger mistake than at first indicated.

“Fat Tire, please. Economy size.”

Nic had pulled his Julie out onto the dance floor and there were now not one, but two hot girls vying for Cruz. Tough work but somebody had to do it.

Lily drew his attention back with her hand on his.

She leaned close, her breath on his neck.

“I’m sorry.”

He backed up and looked at her.

“For the fishing trip.”

Clear as mud.

“For running away.”

Now he moved his mouth near her ear.

“Why did you, then?”

“Cause you freaked me out.”

What did that mean?

“Because it felt so good.”

Oh. Sweet.

“So, you ran off because it was good?”

“I’m sorry. Will you forgive me?”

Woody was back. So was the little voice that reminded him that he sucked at relationships.

He liked Woody better.

“I’ll think about it.”

Now her hand moved to his thigh, and her eyes sparkled with amusement-slash-lust.

How fast could one drink an economy sized draft?

~ * ~

Her place.

He walked her to her car but had to stop for gas.

So by the time he got to her front door, she met him wearing her underwear. Well, sort of.

He searched his memory for what the top was called—camisole maybe? White. On the bottom, satiny panty things, loose, also white.

There weren’t words.

She reached out her hand and pulled him inside.

They made it to the living room.

He watched from the couch while she slipped around the room, lighting candles, then knelt at his feet and began with his shoes.

Not a word spoken—not out loud anyway—until he was down to his briefs.

The things this girl—woman—could do.

Still she knelt on the floor and began running her hands up his legs, up his calves, firm hands, not exactly a massage.

Her eyes locked with his.

Her lips parted.

Up his calves, over his knees, stopping briefly at the ugly scar on his right knee, leaning down to kiss it, her hair grazing his thigh.

Oh, God.

Her hands on his thighs.

Her lips.

Her breath.

Moving up.

Her hands on his belly, again hesitating at the jagged scar just under his lowest rib.

The world could stop now. He'd seen heaven.

And the stars. And the moon.

They made it to her bedroom. Later. Much later.

If the tent sex was good, this was off the charts.

Heartstopping.

On top of what she could do to him, Lord have mercy, the way she responded! The first time, she came as he circled her nipple with his tongue. The second, while she straddled him on the couch. It was like all she had to do was close her eyes, and wham.

In her bed, she let him bring her to climax, let him bring her close and then delay, let him please her. Pleasing her, watching her arch into his hand, feeling her throb, he was hard again, as hard as he'd ever been in his life. The bed squeaked when he moved on top of her, thrusting inside.

Lord...
have...
mercy.

Seventeen

Yogurt. Not on the top of his list of things edible.
But when a naked vixen straddled him and spooned it
into his mouth—well, much better than he'd remembered.
Okay, he could change.
Old dogs could learn new tricks—or something.
“So, Colonel, what would you like to do today?”
Silly question.
“You mean something that involves clothes?”
She laughed, causing strange vibrations against him,
then licked the spoon.
“Not necessarily, let's brainstorm...”
Now she set the empty yogurt cup on the bedside table,
began rocking her pelvis back and forth.
Brainstorming?
He pulled her down and rolled her onto her back.
She purred.
He kissed her hard.
She moaned.
He parted her knees with his leg.
She growled and wrapped herself around him.

They both peaked at once, as if they'd been deprived, and collapsed in a twist of sheets.

"Now we can brainstorm," he whispered when he could breathe again, and rolled carefully to his side. She just lay there limp, a Cheshire grin on her face.

"Shower first," she muttered at last. "Then, brainstorm."

He nearly followed her into the shower; he wanted to. The groaning ache in his knee reminded him why that was a bad idea.

So, he waited, showered when she was done, threw on his clothes—she'd brought them into the bedroom while he was in the bathroom—and joined her in the kitchen.

She leaned against the counter, wearing a shiny, flowered robe, the belt loose at her waist, barely closed enough to cover her breasts. It begged to be touched. He waited.

"Coffee?"

"Sure."

"Black?"

"How'd you know?"

"You seem like a no-nonsense kinda coffee drinker," she said as she pulled her hair up, twisting it, clipping it in place—which made the robe pucker—then turning to pour them each a cup.

"And you're not?"

"Not when it comes to eating and drinking I'm not."

"So when are you no-nonsense, Princess?"

"Money." She set both cups at the table. "Have a seat."

"Money?" He joined her at the table.

"I, uh, grew up without any."

He could see her retreat, suddenly uncomfortable with the direction of the conversation. She'd done that before. Actually, this was the first time she'd ever said anything about her past. It was obviously forbidden territory. The last thing he wanted to do, at this point, was push. So he said nothing.

She stood up and hurried to the refrigerator. "You hungry?" she asked, opening the door to peer inside.

"Lily,"

She looked at him over the top of the door with a cornered rabbit expression.

"We'll eat later. Come, drink your coffee and we'll decide what to do today."

"Okay," she said, returning as quickly as she left, looking relieved. "List three things you'd like to do today," she said, and took a sip of her coffee.

"Make love to you."

She nodded, "Uh-huh."

"Eat."

"Is that number two or just part of number one?"

If he hadn't been swallowing coffee when she said that, he'd have been okay—well, maybe not—as it was, he choked and sputtered for a few minutes leaving her to alternate between concern and laughter.

Finally, he was able to finish, "and maybe take you to this great piano bar I know."

"Piano bar?"

"Yeah, the guy plays some great jazz. Someday, I'd love to be as good as he is."

"You play piano." Statement, not a question.

His turn to be uncomfortable. Air Force officers had degrees in military history and warfare strategy, even business administration. His was in music theory, a fact that had earned him more than his share of ribbing over the years.

“Not jazz.” Change the subject. “Now, your list, Princess.”

“Okay. Three things. I’d like to eat peaches and whipped cream on the patio—or in bed.”

Now he’d really never be able to smell a peach again...

“Sit in the hot tub and drink fake champagne.”

“You have a hot tub?”

“No, but you do.”

How’d she know that?

“And listen to you play the piano.”

Geez-oh-pete.

Change the subject.

“How did you know I have a hot tub?”

She smiled, obviously aware that he was avoiding the subject.

“I’ve been to your house, remember. I’ve also seen the baby grand in your living room, but somehow I figured it was just for decoration.”

“Oh. Peaches and whipped cream?”

She licked her lips then stood up.

“Yes, more coffee?”

“Sure.”

She poured. “There’s nothing better, especially... I’ll show you later.”

~ * ~

It was a combining thing. They stopped to buy peaches and whipping cream on the way to his place. Once inside, Lily glanced at the piano, then back at him and did the little hum thing that nearly put him through the roof.

Hot tubs aren't great for making love, contrary to popular thought, but they are pretty damned good for eating peaches and whipped cream.

Lily was right.

And, it wasn't just the eating. Naked in the hot tub helped. And then she fed him the peach slice, slippery with whipped cream, and kissed the leftover cream from his lips.

Well, she was right.

Peaches and whipped cream were amazing.

The girl did everything with a sensuality that left him stunned.

The way she walked.

The way she talked.

The way she loved tasting and touching.

It was like there'd always been a filter between him and life that she'd suddenly shredded, leaving colors more intense, sunshine warmer, water wetter.

He never wanted it to end.

Yet sitting at a small table, listening to jazz piano, eating buffalo wings and drinking beer, he found himself headed in a decidedly dangerous direction.

"So, Princess, you grew up in L.A. with no money,"

Her face lost all color even before he finished the question. But, the words were already out the door.

"...so, how'd you get where you are?"

The rise and fall of her chest became frantic, as if he'd told her a huge viper was coiled around her.

She stared at her hands, folded on the table. He reached over. They were cold, clammy.

"Sweetie, look at me."

She didn't.

"Lily."

Her lower lip trembled.

As if fired from the chair, she stood and raced for the ladies room.

Eight and a half minutes later—he'd planned on going after her at the ten-minute mark—she came back to the table.

"Can we go?" she asked without sitting down.

She was still pale, but now her eyes were rimmed with red.

What could possibly be that bad?

Okay, bad question.

He stood and reached for her sweater, still slung over the back of her chair. Carefully, as if she'd break, he draped it over her shoulders then moved his hand to the small of her back and leaned close.

"Whatever it is, Lily..."

She shook her head and began making her way to the front door.

He drove her home.

"Can I see you tomorrow?"

She looked out her side window as he pulled up in front of her house.

"No. I, uh, have to be somewhere tomorrow."

"When will you be home?"

“Late.”

“Late afternoon or late evening.”

It wasn’t that hard a question. She seemed confused.

“Afternoon,” she replied, then slowly looked over at him, then slowly away, “Why?”

“I’ll be waiting.”

“There’s stuff you should know.” Her voice was flat.

“Okay.” He reached for the key and turned off the car.

“I... stuff nobody knows.”

He wanted to say that nothing could be that bad. But some things could be, couldn’t they? And even if they weren’t to him, they certainly were to her.

He wanted to say that nothing she could say would scare him away. But how could anyone promise that? Some promises just shouldn’t be made.

He wanted to hold her, to tell her that everything would be okay. Again, some promises just shouldn’t be made.

Instead, he reached over and traced the vein on the back of her left hand.

“Lily, when you’re ready, I’ll listen.”

Now she looked over at him, her gaze not straying again.

“Rick, I know you can’t promise that nothing will change between us, but promise me that once I start, you won’t say anything until I’m done.”

Such fear in her eyes. Fear and hurt.

That he could do.

“I promise.”

She reached for the door handle. “I’ll see you about four tomorrow.”

He started to get out, to walk her to the front door.

She leaned over and kissed his cheek.

“No need, Colonel. But I love you for wanting to.”

With that, she got out and went inside.

Rick was halfway home before it clicked what she’d said.

Eighteen

Rick sat down on her front steps at three-forty two. The sun shone brightly, heating up the denim of his jeans. He should have worn shorts.

Right, like he'd ever do that again in his life.

The single lavender rose lay wrapped on the step above. The florist had pointed this one out. She said it was the right color to communicate "I think I'm falling in love with you."

He felt like he was eighteen again, felt a bit like he had when he was first dating Barbara. Except way better. More grounded and yet with wings.

Hokey.

Four o'clock came and went.

At least the sun snuck behind a fairly sizable cloud, giving his thighs a chance to cool off.

Four fifteen.

No Lily.

Had she chickened out? Whatever she was determined to tell him—"stuff nobody knows"—was significant. At least to her. The question had been how she'd come from

L.A. and no money to where she was today, the owner of a successful physical therapy and massage business.

The answer had made her go all pasty, driven her to tears and sent her running for safety.

He didn't want to think about what the answer could be.

More than that, he didn't want to think about the implications. Were there things in this girl's past—for some reason she felt like a girl to him, yet she was most definitely a woman—that could throw him into a tailspin?

He wasn't a snob. Never had been. Barbara was a snob. Well, at least a social climber. An unbridgeable gulf for them as it turned out. He could see in his girls a tendency toward haughty self-importance, but they were teenagers, after all.

Could a person recover, truly recover from an unspeakable past?

He'd always thought the measure of a man—or woman—was who they were now. Character was built, sometimes by the very things one most wanted to leave behind.

No, there really wasn't anything she could tell him that would destroy how he felt about her. She was an amazing woman, who had overcome obstacles to become successful, funny, sweet, caring...

Settled.

Now where the heck was she?

~ * ~

A near two-hour drive for an hour visit, then another two-hour drive home. It always felt worth it on the way

there—well, almost always—but often, on the way home, it didn't feel worth it at all.

She'd gone today with renewed hope.

Maybe it was because she herself was on the verge of something big. Hope drove her to Stockton this morning.

Hope that she could actually go through with it and tell Rick everything. Hope that he wouldn't reject her when he knew the truth. Hope that maybe this time, something she said to Lucy would open a door for her.

Even a window.

The routine of the Northern California Women's Facility—NCWF—hadn't changed much over the years. Maybe a bit tighter security since nine-eleven but not much. Apparently women's prisons weren't high on the terror watch list.

Lucy sported a new black eye since Lily had seen her last. Not new to Lucy though—it was yellow with age.

"What happened?"

"Nothing."

Lily let it go.

Lucy'd been in for five years but still wore the street on her face—used hard. Lily had thought at first that the look would fade once Lucy was off the streets, safe.

Early on, distress at her sister's plight warred with relief that at least Lucy would be safe in prison. She'd get off drugs by necessity, stop hooking by lack of opportunity and use this time as a chance to turn her life around.

Maybe she'd get her degree. Study law. Psychology. Return to life changed, able to help others, skilled in something admirable, legal.

Odd, Lily wasn't given to flights of fantasy. Reality had branded her early in life.

Lucy had never caught the vision.

She'd always maintained her innocence, even in the face of overwhelming evidence to the contrary. Every time Lily would bring her a self-help book, Lucy would pointedly give it away—or throw it away—before Lily even left the room. She'd gotten clean, technically, but all forward progress stopped there.

There was always someone else's face on Lucy's failures.

First it was their parents.

When that wouldn't fly with Lily—she was a product of those same parents—then it became the face of the high school guidance counselor, or her French teacher, or her boss at MacDonald's.

Her johns were responsible, the cops, society, finally her pimp—who she killed with a well-placed blow to the back of the head.

Nothing was ever Lucy's fault.

Nothing.

So, Lily shouldn't have been surprised today, when she brought her another book—this time the biographies of the wives of the resistance heroes of Nazi Germany—that Lucy didn't let her armor down.

All Lily'd gotten for her trouble was a screaming hissy fit that ended with name calling and Lucy spitting on her.

Lily had only been there ten minutes.

The knowledge that Rick waited for her, that she'd planned on spilling her life story, made her drag her feet getting home. She stopped at a coffee shop in Manteca,

where she had a latte and read a tattered copy of *Popular Mechanics*.

Then, she'd stopped at another in Turlock and had a breve—decaf—and a long conversation with a total stranger about the pleasure of restoring his 1965 Mustang.

Thrilling.

At last, when she could avoid it no longer, she pointed her car toward home and wondered how she could ever have been hopeful.

~ * ~

At four twenty, Lily pulled up in front. She didn't look at him before getting out of the car.

She wore black slacks and a brown and tan striped shirt, buttoned up to the collar. Her hair was pulled back in a braid—he'd never seen her wear it that way—he liked it. No jewelry—unusual for her, she always wore necklaces and earrings, sometimes bracelets, that he could only term funky. They were great on her.

Dark circles clung beneath her eyes, like she'd smudged her mascara or something. Her shoulders slumped and it looked like a huge effort for her to walk around the car and join him on the steps.

She hadn't spoken and he didn't really know what to say, so he just reached for the rose and held it out to her. It was possible that she teared up for a moment. She brought the flower to her nose, then gazed at the bloom.

"Thank you. It's perfect."

"As are you, Princess."

Wow, that sounded gallant. Sweet.

"You want to go inside?" Totally obligatory question.

"Nope, I'm fine. Let's just sit here."

He had no intention of pushing her. If she wanted to talk, she would.

“Your knee hurt?”

He’d been rubbing it, hadn’t he?

“Always.”

“Still?”

“Not as bad as a month ago, so I’m not complaining.”

She laughed.

She laughed?

“I haven’t heard you complain ever. You didn’t even complain while you were on the mountain with glass through your spleen.”

“I’m sure that was an oversight.”

She smiled. He’d really wanted another laugh.

“Every other Sunday I visit my older sister in prison in Stockton.”

Okay, she’d jumped in.

He leaned back on his elbows. He was going for casual.

“That can’t be easy.”

And sensitive.

“Sometimes it’s not so bad. Today wasn’t one of those days.”

This might be a good time to just shut up.

“She’s in there for killing her pimp.”

Nineteen

The perfect response escaped him. Nothing came to mind. Well, nothing non-moronic.

“What’s your sister’s name?”

“Lucy.”

“What happened?”

Lily laughed humorlessly.

“Premeditated self-defense.”

Rick couldn’t conjure up much caring for this Lucy person—maybe further down the road he could, but not now. However, he sure as hell cared about her sister.

“So how are you with her there, with visiting her?”

Lily was quiet for a minute, but then scooted a bit closer to him. Good sign, he thought.

“She thinks I’m a high and mighty, know-it-all bitch.”

“Because you made better choices?”

“I almost didn’t.”

She pushed to her feet and held out her hand.

“C’mon, there’s beer and wine inside.”

He took her hand and allowed her to tug him up. Before he reached for his cane, though, he pulled her to him and kissed her.

“You don’t have to do this.”

“Yes,” she said, leaning over to retrieve the rose, “I do.”

Once inside, she spent the next fifteen minutes slicing cheese and beef summer sausage, arranging it precisely on a plate and setting it on the coffee table before him.

Stalling. He’d probably be stalling too.

When she returned once again from the kitchen she brought a beer for him and a glass of merlot for her. She sat on the couch as far as she could get from him.

At her insistence—he really wasn’t particularly hungry—he nibbled on a slab of cheddar. She didn’t join him. Again, he waited.

“My mother broke her back on the job when I was eight. Lucy was ten. Our father left for less needy territory. We lived in a trailer in Van Nuys. She never returned to work. So we survived on social security and aid for dependent children. Mother drank most of that. It was the only way she could dull the pain—both in her back and in her heart.”

Lily took a sip of wine and, as he’d promised, he let her continue uninterrupted.

“Lucy dropped out of school when she was sixteen and was working the streets by the time she was seventeen. At fifteen or twenty bucks per john, she didn’t make much. But it didn’t take much either. I wasn’t any smarter, just luckier. You want another beer?”

Rick picked up the bottle showing her it was still half full, then just nodded for her to go on.

“I had a math teacher who sort of took me under his wing, mentored me. He was determined that anyone could rise to great levels if they had a strategy.”

She smiled at the memory, then got up, walked to a desk in the corner and brought back a book—a very tattered book. She handed it to him.

“Mr. Weaver gave me this, told me that if I followed this strategy, I could have anything I wanted. That was before my drunk mother accused him of molesting me and got him transferred to another high school.”

The book, *The Richest Man in Babylon*, was dog-eared in a dozen spots and held a number of sticky notes.

“So the short version of the life of Lily Atherton is that I saved every penny I could over the years and invested wisely. Now I’m the high and mighty know-it-all bitch who owns her own business and visits her loser sister every two weeks in prison.”

She stood up and took her glass to the kitchen, coming back with it full and the bottle in hand.

“So, any questions?”

Fragile. She could break at any moment, shatter into a hundred pieces, nothing left. Her matter-of-fact sarcasm came nowhere close to hiding the little girl trying to overcome the shame of it all.

Psychology. He should have gotten his degree in psychology. He could lecture on Bach and Beethoven and Brahms but somehow those didn’t help him in the least at the moment. He had questions, but didn’t have a clue if, or how, he should ask. But when she didn’t continue, he threw caution to the wind, so to speak.

“So you said that you almost didn’t make better choices. You want to talk about that?”

He hoped that sounded open ended and non-judgmental and all things good. He held his breath.

She sighed deeply and leaned back on the couch, allowing her head to loll back. Her pulse thumped away in her neck, slow and steady.

Better than frantic, he supposed.

“I was eighteen, waiting tables in a so-so restaurant, squirreling away as much of my tip money as I could, still living at home. Lucy had her own place, such as it was, which looked pretty good from my vantage point. By now she was making fairly decent money hooking. I suspect she was dealing as well, but she’s never admitted to that.”

Lily still sat, head back, eyes closed. She held her glass in both hands on her lap. The only evidence of stress was the constant drumming of her index finger against the glass.

“Misery loves company; it didn’t take much encouragement to get her to set me up. I’d sworn that I’d never sell my body, but there I was, walking up the stairs to room two-oh-three of the oh-so-luxurious Easy Does It motel. Not so Easy Does It, as it turned out. I got all the way up to the door, fist poised to knock...”

He didn’t know if she paused for effect or simply because she needed to breathe. Either way, the effect worked. Rick sat forward.

“...when I turned and ran. Lucky for me Lucy wasn’t busy. She took my place.”

Obvious misplaced guilt. No need for a degree in psychology to see that.

“I ended up just a few rungs higher on the food chain by taking a job as an exotic dancer a week later. I did that until I was twenty three and finished with massage therapy school.”

Okay, so she wasn't a prostitute. That was good, wasn't it? But she did dance naked for men. Better? Not much. Or a hell of a lot. He was back to the debate of character and a person's past and what was or was not a deal breaker, so he missed the beginning of her next statement.

She was walking to the window when he caught up.

“...so you see, Colonel, you are way out of my league.”

Huh?

“What did you say?”

“I said that guys like you don't end up with girls like me and that you're way out of my league.” Her voice quavered.

“Whoa, back that train up, Princess.”

He grabbed for his cane, wishing he could just toss the damned thing and joined her at the window.

“This is a class issue? You've got to be kidding. Hell, I'm the poster boy for crass and immature.”

He approached her from behind, sliding a hand around her waist. She stiffened.

“My turn to talk. Your turn to listen.”

Outside, a girl in bike shorts and a loose-fitting t-shirt jogged by, golden retriever attached to her by a red leash.

“I grew up in Minnesota. My father was an aeronautical engineer.”

He knew he'd told her some of this, but he needed the beginning of the story so that he could develop what he'd say next.

"My mom stayed at home, raised me and my sisters. It was all very Father Knows Best."

She probably wasn't even old enough to know that show. God, he felt old.

"Boy scouts for me, girl scouts for my sisters. I played hockey on frozen ponds and got whipped for getting into fights. My dad got home five minutes before dinner. We ate as a family, talking about all of our days. And then, we did our homework, Mom did dishes and Dad worked in his office."

He was on a roll now, still didn't know where he was going.

"I grew up wanting to be my father. But I wasn't smart enough. So, between his connections and my B average, we got me into the Academy. I worked my ass off and barely passed my chemistry and physics classes and was lucky enough to just graduate. A year later, I got my wings."

"I met Barbara my junior year at the Academy and we had a storybook romance—at least that's what she called it—and a wedding the day after graduation at the Academy chapel, complete with swords and dress blues. All very impressive."

"Barbara wanted a normal officer husband. She didn't get it. I was gone all the time. When I was home, I wasn't interested in the things that she was. I wasn't even home when our son died in utero and they had to induce labor. I got there two hours after she gave birth to him."

He'd never forget walking into the room, seeing Barbara sitting in the rocker, rocking their son—their dead son. Somehow, she hadn't blamed anyone and by sheer will had managed to convince him to hold the child once.

It took a while before Rick could talk again.

"Before I knew it, we had the twins, and she had had enough."

Now he needed another beer, but it wasn't the time to go get one.

"I sucked as a husband. I sucked as a father. The only thing I've ever been good at was flying. Unfortunately I didn't get out of the Air Force before gravity got me and now I'll probably never fly again and I'll be passed over at the oh-six boards and either my next command will be over a cafeteria in Bum-Fuck-Egypt or I'll retire as a washed up flier."

Now he knew where he was going.

"So, a girl who had a horrible childhood, who developed and executed a strategy that led to her becoming an amazing healer and owner of her own business looks pretty impressive from where I stand—and that not even on my own. If anybody is out of anybody's league, Princess, it's you."

He pulled his arm free from the statue he held and turned toward the kitchen.

"I need another beer."

Twenty

Ordinarily, Lily would have followed him to the kitchen, would have comforted him, told him that he was a good man.

It was a girl thing, comforting men who hurt, and a healer thing as well.

Right now, though, she stood frozen to the spot, watching the sun slip behind the horizon as if it weren't just the day that was over.

Wasn't this what she'd wanted? He hadn't rejected her. So why did she still feel so lost, so afraid? Was there more that she hadn't told him—maybe something that she hadn't even admitted to herself? Or was it just that she was so accustomed to the weight of her past that she didn't know how to act now that it was all out in the open?

~ * ~

Rick twisted off the cap to his brew. His stomach growled.

He took a mouthful then held the bottle away.

Beer had food value—food didn't have beer value. Good deal.

He wandered back out to the living room. Tomorrow, when he saw Paul, he was going to insist on losing the damned cane.

“So what now?” he asked to Lily’s back.

“What do you want to do?”

He moved to the couch and lowered himself.

“Where’s your father?”

“I don’t have a clue.”

“And your mom?”

“Still in Van Nuys. Still in the rat trap of a trailer. She just mutters incoherently when I suggest that she move up here.”

“What I’d like to do, Princess, is to take you into the bedroom and undress you. Then I’d like very much to make you scream with pleasure. Then, in a few weeks, I’d like you to go with me to La Jolla to take the girls camping. On the way, we could stop and see your mother, try to convince her to let us move her.”

He felt her hands on his neck, her thumbs easing away any tension she found there.

“I say yes to part A. But part B seems a bit psycho to me.”

“Why?”

“Because I love it when you make me come,” she said, her voice husky.

He took her left hand and brought it to his lips.

“Me too, but why do you think part B won’t work.”

“Well, I didn’t say it wouldn’t work,” now she trailed her lips along the side of his neck. “I said it was psycho.”

He let his head fall back and she moved to kiss him, upside down. Then she came around and sat beside him.

“I think the culture shock going from my mother’s place on to La Jolla might do you in.”

“I’m pretty tough. You said so yourself.”

“No one’s that tough.”

“Okay. So will you go camping with us?”

“Well, Captain Jump-before-Looking, I want you to think about it first, weigh your options, make damn sure that’s what you really want. Then, if you ask again, I’ll consider it.”

“It’s Colonel, missy. And I’m sure.”

“Well, it’s Princess, not missy, Colonel and I’ll think about it. Now, about that naked screaming thing you mentioned...”

She slid her hand up under his shirt, drawing lazy circles around his nipples. Then she stood up, unzipped her slacks and let them slide to the floor.

With a hint of wickedness playing around her lips, she let down her hair, unbuttoned her blouse, then turned and slowly led the way to the bedroom.

~ * ~

“So, Colonel, how did plan A work for you?” She lay on top of him where she’d collapsed after a second orgasm. The man was good to his word. Having him deep inside her touched something unexplainable.

“Fast neat average friendly good good.”

She raised her head, pushed her hair from her eyes and looked at him. He didn’t open his eyes.

“Excuse me?”

He rolled her off, settling her in the crook of his arm, bending his right knee gingerly.

“Fast neat average friendly good good.”

“Might you elaborate?”

“It’s an Academy thing. Loosely translated, it means I have no complaints.”

“Oh. Well, then, ditto.”

~ * ~

First Monday of the month: SAR meeting, 6:30 p.m. at SAR HQ—June training: knots. Lily didn’t need to know a figure eight knot from a fisherman’s knot. She didn’t need to know about carabineers and gear racks and belay devices. She didn’t need to know about Prusik cord, or rope strength or how a cam worked.

She ran the radios and the phones and Daniel, sort of.

But when a climber on the other end of the radio needed something, she wanted to speak the same language.

So she attended every monthly meeting and even went on field trainings when she could.

Tonight, she tied knots. She knew how to get the Prusik cords to slide along the rope and how to get them to brake. More than that, she knew the men and women who made up the SAR team. And they knew her.

At eight, when Stan was just finishing up making the rounds, checking each person’s work, Daniel and Karen arrived. The hush that fell over the room was deafening.

“Carry on,” Daniel said, blushing.

“Hi, guys,” Karen said waving.

Daniel hadn’t exaggerated her weight loss. Her clothes hung on her, sizes too big. Lily caught herself wondering why she’d hadn’t bought something that fit.

Why indeed.

~ * ~

Daniel deposited Karen in the front row of chairs, leaning down to whisper something that made her smile sadly, and moved to the large oak table that headed the room. He slid his butt onto it and gave Stan a nod.

“Okay, folks, please take your seats.”

Stan’s eyebrows drew together and his shoulders hunched a bit.

When everyone was seated—much more quickly and quietly than usual—Daniel began.

“I need to talk to you guys,” he said, looking at his hands.

“I’m going to be taking a leave of absence for a little while.”

No one said a word, some nodded. Secrets didn’t stay secret long in this group.

“Stan’s going to take the helm for a while, and you all have worked before with Ryan Bellows, who’s coming in from Oregon to help out.”

There was a long pause. Daniel looked around the room at all the faces, then cleared his throat.

“Here’s the situation...” His voice cracked on the last word.

Again, silence.

Karen stood and moved to Daniel’s side.

“You may or may not know that I have leukemia,” she said, squeezing his hand. “I am done working at the end of the month, and Daniel and I will be going up into the mountains.”

She smiled, then looked from face to face, taking a moment with nearly every person in the crowd.

“You guys know how much I love it up there. We’ve spent some wonderful time up there together. So, Daniel wanted Fiji, and I wanted Yosemite.” Now she patted his cheek.

Daniel was stuck, completely frozen in place. What had made him think that he could do this? He couldn’t have spoken if he tried. And if he tried, he’d blubber.

“I won.”

She moved back and sat beside him on the table.

“Here’s the deal, though. Once I’m gone, I hope that a few of you will volunteer to help him haul my sorry ass out of there.”

How could she talk like that? She’d moved to the acceptance stage faster than he had, all right—hell, he was still back in the angry most of the time stage—but the way she talked...

“I don’t want anyone to say anything tonight, ’cause if you do, I’ll probably cry and it will get really ugly. We’ll do that Saturday night.”

Oh, God.

“Just give Lily your name if you want to be on this morbid team. I’ll appreciate you helping my Daniel out on this one.”

His chest was going to explode.

“On Saturday night, let’s have a big bash at our house. We can reminisce and hug and cry and dance and celebrate. Then, early next month, we’ll take off.”

~ * ~

Lily watched as Daniel finally came to life, sliding off the desk and rushing from the room. Karen watched him go, until the outside door slammed.

“He’ll need you guys. All of you. If he tries to go it alone, please don’t let him.”

When she reached the door, she paused.

“Thanks, guys.”

~ * ~

“Seventeen, eighteen, nineteen...”

“Hey, asshole,” Cruz interrupted. “Whatcha doin’?”

So close, too. This box of eighteen gauge IV catheters and a box of sixteens and he was done.

“What does it look like?”

Gabe had been at this for hours. Cruz had been terribly busy anywhere but here for those same hours. One, two, three...

“Looks like you’re jacking off.”

“...four, five, six...”

“What’re we doin’ tonight?”

“...seven, eight, nine, ten...”

“Fine, I’ll be in the dayroom when you’re done.”

He was. With his feet up. As were Wiley and Pitkin and D’.

“Thanks for all your help, guys.”

“No problem. So what are we all doing tonight?”

“I’m home with a hot blonde,” Nic said.

“Shine your ass on someone else’s time,” Cruz said with a chuckle.

“I’m busy,” Gabe said, hoping they wouldn’t press the issue. Who was he kidding?

“What’s her name?” Wiley asked.

“It’s not a girl,” Pitkin answered before Gabe could.

“He’s playing tonight.”

“Clancy, god-damn it.”

The last thing he needed was Cruz with a new bone to chew.

“Really, bro?”

“Yes, really.”

“Playing what?” Always clueless Wiley.

Clancy looked up from his book. “He plays jazz guitar.”

“And you’re a fucking gossip, Will, worse than a girl.”

“I’m in,” Cruz said, getting up and slapping Gabe on the back.

“Me, too.” Wiley was always in.

“Hey, maybe Jules would like that...”

Correction. The last thing he needed was for these guys to show up.

“The new phone books are in, the new phone books are in,” Randy, Alpha team, hollered as he and the rest of Alpha came into the building from parts unknown.

“Hey, Alpha, Angel’s playing jazz guitar tonight at...”

“Club 14, eight o’clock,” Clancy provided.

“Club 14, eight o’clock. Drinks are on Gabe.”

Gabe raised his voice to match. “Drinks are not on Gabe.”

The consensus from out in the hall was that they’d be there.

“Glad I could be of service,” Cruz said, grinning.

Just what he needed.

~ * ~

Why *had* he agreed to do this? There had to be either massive quantities of alcohol involved or a hot babe.

Hot babe as he recalled.

And only moderate quantities of alcohol.

Said hot babe bartended here and, if memory served, had brought up the idea as Gabe rounded first...

That was wrong on so many levels.

But here he was, long since cooled off—as was she apparently as she barely looked up when he came in—committed to playing one set.

One and only one.

Then, he'd either get completely toasted or slip out the back door and make a run for it.

Anticipation of pain is worse than pain itself. As it turned out, it wasn't nearly as bad as he'd feared. Either his slow jazz guitar had tamed the beasts within, or the presence of the fairer sex had. It would be nice to think he was that good but he sorta doubted it.

When his set was done, he packed up the guitar, left it in a corner and joined the guys at the table.

"Sorry about that," Will said and set a beer before him.

"No problem. Revenge is sweet."

Twenty-one

The Fraser house was overflowing. Out onto the front porch, out onto the back patio.

Lily had been there since four-thirty, making food, getting things laid out. She wanted Karen to rest, so she'd have as much energy as possible for the party.

Party.

Wake? To watch over the body of the deceased, often with festivities.

Pre-death wake?

Farewell party.

Rick had told her there was a military thing called a hail and farewell—a party held when someone was leaving the unit or retiring. Sounded like the right term.

Retirement party.

Never mind.

She concentrated on cooking.

Folks started arriving at about six-thirty. Some brought covered dishes but many brought liquor.

Everyone wore the same smiling facade, the same dismay in their eyes.

PJ's showed up. Bunches of them, actually.

Rick came in about seven. They'd decided that, for tonight, they'd not be a couple.

Daniel looked hollow, brittle.

"This is hideous," he'd said earlier.

Karen had taken him by the hand, led him out back, and when they returned, he took up his duties as host as if things were normal.

The hostess was the only person truly smiling. She greeted people with warm hugs, laughter and good humor.

It was awful.

Lily spent the evening refreshing the food and scurrying around making sure everyone had what they needed. She could barely speak, so she tried not to.

There weren't any speeches—apparently the one at the SAR meeting would have to do. But Karen spent time with small groups of people retelling stories, joking about getting soaked on missions, getting lost on others. The ER staff traded war stories with her as well.

Later, Karen turned up the music with a joke that if the neighbors called the cops, she'd be glad to explain the situation.

As people left, they exchanged hugs and tears flowed. By nine, Karen was pretty much done and made a blanket goodbye to the rest of the folks there. Daniel led her back to their bedroom, and when he came out, Lily and Rick were the only ones left, quietly cleaning up.

"Thanks, guys. You can take off and I'll finish up."

When Lily balked, Daniel insisted. He needed to do something.

"When do you guys leave?" Rick asked him.

"Couple days."

"If you need anything from us..."

"Thank, Mac. We won't."

Lily hugged Daniel, clinging for a moment as she fought for control to get out the door.

He took her face in his hands and kissed her forehead.

"Thank you so much."

All she could do was nod.

~ * ~

The Oasis was normally just a place to get a beer, meet chicks, maybe the first step in getting laid, especially in the summertime.

Tonight it was both diversion and sanctuary.

Nic and Julie had gone home after the wake. They'd arrived at Daniel's two people—as two people as they ever were—and left entwined. High emotion and the face of loss made them clingy.

Some of the other guys had left earlier—all very quietly. Cruz didn't know if they'd be here or not. He hoped so. But when he didn't see any of their cars in the lot, he went inside anyway.

He ordered a shot of tequila with a beer chaser and found a table.

"Dance, Hollywood?"

He hadn't seen her approach—radar must have been offline.

"Kit."

She slid onto the stool across from him.

"I heard about the wake. You just coming from there?"

"Yeah. You weren't there."

"I don't know either of them. Wasn't invited. How was it?"

At his look she waved off the question.

“Stupid question. Sorry. Dance?”

“Why not?” he said, downing the tequila.

It wasn’t until they were out on the floor, until he had swung her into his arms that he realized it was a slow dance. More than just his radar was fucked up.

And more was due to be fucked up if he could just get back to his beer.

Kit’s long hair grazed the back of his hand. His chin fit perfectly against the top of her head. Her hard athletic body felt soft against him—felt so damned good, truth be told.

The idea of spending the night with a soft, sexy female felt right—typical response to the grim reaper—but the idea of that female being this female just pissed him off. No way in hell would he put himself in that position.

He pulled back from her, continued moving to the music.

“How’s business?”

He knew the answer but it might be entertaining to hear her version.

“I haven’t hit the bottom yet.”

Interesting.

“You need a business partner, an infusion of capital.”

Now she looked up at him, eyebrows drawn together a wry smile on her face.

“Oh, yeah, that’s just what I need.”

“I’m serious, Red.”

“Don’t get your checkbook out, Cruz. I’m not interested in having another partner, especially one like you. I may be a slow learner but I do get it eventually.”

“Ouch.”

“Ooh, the Golden Boy feels pain?”

Now he just looked at her.

“Sorry, guess tonight’s not the time to say that, is it? Besides, you don’t fly helicopters. And I don’t own a fixed wing.”

“You could teach me to fly rotary, and I *do* own a fixed wing.”

“Tell you what, Cruz. You can pay me to teach you to fly rotary—I am a certified instructor, you know—and you can keep your fixed wing.”

The music ended, leaving them standing in the middle of the dance floor.

“I’ll see if I can fit it into my schedule,” Cruz said and turned away.

“Yeah, you do that, hotshot.”

Luckily, she returned to wherever she’d come from and Gabe showed up minutes later. By nine-thirty, Will and Matt joined the table and the lieutenant shortly thereafter. Even Alpha was represented a few tables over.

Home boys at the Oasis.

~ * ~

No way would they make their target destination. Karen didn’t have the strength or the endurance. Nor would she allow him to carry her. Daniel wasn’t sure the terrain would have allowed it either.

So, after walking—one couldn’t really call it hiking, plodding along was a better term—for six hours off and on—more off than on—they settled on a plan B.

Plan B consisted of spending one night on the trail and walking a bit more in the morning to get to another pretty

spot, a basin surrounded on three sides with towering rock. There'd be more people camping there, but it couldn't be helped.

Karen was shaking by the time he got her fed and zipped into their sleeping bag. It was only six-fifteen.

He didn't leave her for more than long enough to make sure their campsite was secure. Then he lay beside her, trying to read, listening to her breathe.

They didn't make it the next day either.

The third morning, she seemed more ready, but by eleven was showing the strain.

"You want to stop for the day, Sweetie?"

"No!"

Her frustration was showing as well. He couldn't blame her. This was a girl who could outrun him on any given day. In their years together—six years and eight months—he'd never once beaten her to the target. She'd never let him forget it.

He let her forget it now, except he knew she didn't.

"Okay, then, lets sit on this great rock here, have a power bar and drink. I arranged for the shade. Nice, huh?" He unzipped his fanny pack. "Chocolate or berry?"

She hated chocolate power bars. He loved them. But at least she sorta smiled at the question. They sat together, her head on his shoulder for almost an hour.

The birds sang in the trees. A gentle summer breeze lifted her hair every now and then. There was water nearby. A perfect, horrible day.

They were almost into the basin, with her leading the way, when she excused herself and went into the bushes to puke. When she reemerged, she was pale and clammy.

She shook her head to his question before it was out of his mouth and headed off again up the trail.

It was a little after noon when they stopped. They'd entered the basin about twenty minutes earlier and Karen stopped, turning a full three-sixty and, after careful consideration, she'd headed for a spot along side the creek. The lake was further up, maybe too far for her to climb.

"It's perfect," she said as she unclipped her water belt.

Daniel had carried everything in his pack, the tent, food for a week or so, the cooking utensils, the sleeping bag. Karen had carried her water.

Not knowing how long they'd be there, and knowing they'd need more supplies, Daniel had made arrangements for someone to hike in every week. Another long list of volunteers, including Nic D'Onofrio and his fiancée Julie. Several of the other PJ's had volunteered as well. Daniel had kept it in-house. No offense.

Daniel made lunch, called in their coordinates to Stan, and then, while Karen sat by the stream, he pitched their tent. The clawing grief stopped him several times, leaving him to catch his breath.

"Come sit with me," Karen called.

"I will when I'm done getting things ready."

"Daniel."

"Karen."

"Now, Daniel."

He relented, but was sorry the moment he sat down.

She reached up and started playing with the hair at the nape of his neck.

“Thank you, Daniel.”

He couldn’t answer.

“For bringing me here. For loving me.”

When the tears started they wouldn’t stop. She pulled him down to lie on her lap, stroking his hair, letting him fall apart.

Twenty-two

“I can’t go with you to La Jolla, Rick.”

It had sounded great: they’d drive down to Palomar Mountain and set up camp, have a couple days alone, then go get the girls to join them. Lily kept her misgivings to herself and Rick dreamed out loud.

The girls would have a ball fishing. They’d love Lily. They’d toast marshmallows and make s’mores and laugh. He’d tell ghost stories.

Lily hoped so, for his sake. But teenage girls, especially girls raised in affluence, might not value his way of showing love.

But she couldn’t leave now. Not with Daniel and Karen on the mountain.

“I know. Have you heard from him?”

“Not since he called in their coordinates. A few of the guys are going up this weekend to haul in supplies.”

“How far in are they?”

“About a six-hour hike.”

“Daniel is lucky to have you, Princess.”

“I’m lucky to have him.”

The next morning, he stood in her office doorway, grinning.

“What’s up, Colonel?”

“Well, Paul has cleared me to start walking without the cane.”

“Congratulations.”

Rick was always conscious of protocol—no PDA’s—public displays of affection. It went back, he said, to his days at the Academy. But that didn’t preclude him from saying all sorts of wonderful things with his eyes.

She returned the unspoken communication.

“And I’ve arranged for the girls to come here. I know you still can’t go camping with us, but maybe you can do dinner?”

“I’d like that.”

“Sweet. They’ll be here on Monday. So, we’ll leave Tuesday morning. If they survive five days out there, I’ll take it as a victory.”

Five days on the lake with Rick sounded perfect to her.

“We’ll leave dinner for when we get back?”

“Sure.”

“I’ll call you later.”

“Colonel.”

He turned.

“Take it easy at first on that knee.”

“Yes, ma’am,” he said with a salute and walked away with only a slight limp.

Lily closed her eyes and breathed a prayer that things wouldn’t crash around him.

~ * ~

Rick didn't know what was wrong with the girls—they weren't talking. He'd picked them up at the Merced airport and taken them out for pizza. He'd refrained from mentioning that they probably didn't need three suitcases apiece for a fishing trip. He'd refrained from taking them to the pizza place with the clowns and slides. He'd even refrained from taking them by to meet Lily.

Lily. God, he missed her—after only thirty-six hours. Setting up the girls' tent for them, making sure they had all the comforts he could give them, just made him miss Lily more. The way she'd smiled in amazement at the bed.

The girls, on the other hand, were less than thrilled with the accommodations. No matter. They'd come around.

~ * ~

Daniel watched Karen sleep from outside the tent. Earlier, he'd rolled up all the windows and doors to let in the sunshine and warmth. When she woke up, she'd like that.

For the last few days, she'd been in and out of consciousness. Even from where he sat now, though, he could see the slow steady beat of the pulse in her neck and the even rise and fall of her chest.

He opened his book—he'd finish this one before lunchtime—and tried hard to ignore the nagging question that hung in his head.

Two hours later, he read the last paragraph then shut the book and got up to get a drink of water.

Karen still slept, and he suddenly carried a lead weight around inside his belly. Maybe he could rouse her for a bite to eat.

It worked yesterday. She's actually asked him to prop her up, had eaten almost half a peanut butter and jelly sandwich, and they'd laughed together.

"Do you remember our first time up here, Daniel?"

"Yeah, I'd just started this job."

She chuckled weakly. "And you were so anxious to make a good impression."

"I forgot to bring water."

"Yes, you did. And you made me swear never to tell anyone."

"Yes, I did."

"You never forgot water again. But I think you forgot TP once."

"Thanks so much for reminding me."

"No problem."

Then she'd lain back down and just stared at him as if trying to memorize his every feature. He waited until she slept to do the same. He'd been doing that for days—actually, for months.

As long as he remembered her, she'd always be there.

Daniel slipped inside and laid his hand on her shoulder.

"Karen, it's lunchtime."

He tried again.

"Honey, you want to wake up and eat something?"

Finally, he settled for just laying down beside her, head propped on the palm of his hand.

Hours might well have passed as he battled with the weight inside. He knew there was only one way to rid himself of it, but didn't have a clue how to get there.

"Karen, sweetie," he said at last, "I know you're tired of fighting. It's okay, babe."

Jesus Christ. He was a Navy SEAL. He was strong enough for anything.

Not this.

No choice.

He reached over and drew his finger down her cheek. Then he leaned over and kissed her forehead.

"I'll be okay, Karen. You can..."

He blew out a breath.

"You can go."

Daniel's growling stomach drove him from the tent just before six that evening. Karen still hung on.

~ * ~

"Hi, Princess."

"Hi, you calling from the lake?"

"Well, no. Just thought you might like to join us for dinner tonight. Anthony's at six-thirty?"

It was only Friday. "You're back early."

"Yeah."

He didn't elaborate. Didn't have to. His voice dripped disappointment.

"So, can you make it?"

"Of course."

"Pick you up at six?"

"Actually, let me meet you there. I have a late appointment."

"Okay. And, Lily?"

"Colonel?"

"I missed you."

"Me, too. See you tonight."

Anthony's. Ugh. The place screamed extravagant. She'd only been there once and, from the moment she

walked in, she'd felt like she carried a huge stone in her stomach.

And that didn't even involve teenage children.

Couldn't be any worse than some of the stuff she'd had to do growing up. Right?

At 6:02, she walked into Anthony's and was escorted to the table by a very stuffy maitre-d. Rick stood as she approached, his eyes smiling a welcome that made her a bit giddy.

"Sorry I'm late."

He stepped around the table, kissed her cheek and pulled out her chair.

"Girls, this is Lily Atherton. Lily, this is Kate and Ally."

Had he said the girls were fifteen? They looked older.

Each nodded and smiled stiffly.

"Rick, we've met at the office."

"Right."

This was going well.

"Lily had a late patient," he explained as he sat back down.

"Oh," the girl on her right, Kate, said, "are you a doctor?"

Right, like she didn't know the answer to that question.

"She's a massage therapist."

In unison, both girls heads snapped toward their father; neither bothered to hide their feelings.

"A massage therapist?" Kate again.

Rick smiled proudly—clearly not getting it.

"Yes, she owns her own business."

The girls looked at each other, then at her. Ally blushed. Kate smirked.

The waiter arrived at that moment and handed each of them a menu. Nice huge menus, behind which Lily hoped to gather her wits.

Okay, not a great start. After they ordered, she'd engage them in talk about their life.

It was then that she actually started reading the menu behind which she hid.

Growing up, she'd not eaten out often. But once, in seventh grade, her class had gone on a field trip that ended up at a restaurant. She'd known about the field trip, but not about the eating part afterwards. She had a little over three dollars in her pocket. Actually she had a little over three dollars period. Was there anything on the menu for under three dollars? Not on the entire list. A small side salad was two twenty five. Sodas were a dollar. So she ordered a salad, delivered before the entrees, drank water and watched the other kids eat.

That day, she'd learned to read the menu from right to left. It was a lesson she'd never forgotten. That's why she didn't come to places like this.

The high dollar prices blurred momentarily as she fought for control. It didn't matter that she wasn't paying. It didn't matter that she could easily pay. She was back in seventh grade with three dollars and no choices.

"I'll have the filet mignon." Ally.

"Smoked salmon." Kate.

Obviously the girls had no such hang-up. She was being silly. Even so, the lump was still firmly lodged in her throat.

“Lily?”

She lowered the massive menu and closed her eyes. At last she thought her voice might work.

“You know, I think the small chef salad sounds great.”

“You sure?”

“Yes, thank you.”

“We’ll have a bottle of merlot too, please. And I’ll have the prime rib.”

The waiter retrieved the menus, bowed slightly and hurried away.

“So, girls, how was the fishing trip? Did you catch anything?”

“Lice.”

Rick’s turn to look shocked.

Kate laughed humorlessly at her own remark.

Ally spoke up. “We caught some fish, but threw them back.”

“Oh, that’s too bad. You father is a great cook.”

They rolled their eyes.

“Did you have s’mores?”

Kate let out a tortured sigh.

“Yes.”

Lily looked from the girls to Rick. He was busy studying his wine glass, his eyes clouded with chagrin, his lips tight.

These girls had taken their father’s love and thrown it in his face. Now they were going on and on about missing some party thrown by a girl named Missy.

Fury surged up in her as they actually bitched about having their hair smell like wood smoke.

“Excuse me,” Lily interrupted. “Your father went to a great deal of trouble to make this trip fun for you guys.”

“Lily.”

“Rick.”

“It’s not important.”

“It *is* important.”

The girls stared at her now, horrified—maybe at being corrected, maybe at being corrected in public by a massage therapist.

“Your father nearly died on that mountain. All he could talk about was you guys, wishing he could see you, tell you how much he loved you.”

“Lily, please stop.”

“He talked about how much fun you used to have as a family. For weeks, he’s talked of nothing else. Fishing, camping, roasting marshmallows, telling ghost stories. Showing you girls how much he loves you. Then, not only do you not stay out there with him, you complain because you’re missing some ridiculous party? You guys don’t know...”

“Lily. Shut up.”

She stopped all right, more to catch her breath from the sharp pain that cut through her. It was a moment before she could look up at him.

“We don’t need you to...”

She didn’t give him a chance to finish. She’d been right all along, hadn’t she?

“Excuse me.”

She slid her chair back and stood. Then, without another word—truth be told, she’d couldn’t think of anything remotely intelligent to say—she turned and

walked out of Anthony's with no intention of ever looking back.

The evening that started at Anthony's ended with a low calorie, low excitement TV dinner and flipping through the latest Oprah magazine. Not in the least bit tired, yet thoroughly exhausted, she went to bed just as Leno was starting.

Twenty-three

It was still dark in the tent, but there was a feel of morning. The birds chirped—nature’s alarm clock.

Daniel knew she was gone even without looking. Her head still rested on his shoulder, her hair falling over his hand.

She wasn’t breathing.

Nor was she any longer in pain.

But he wasn’t quite ready to move. He’d savor the feel of her with him just a little longer.

He kissed the top of her head, held onto the hand that reposed on his chest.

~ * ~

“I’m so sorry I couldn’t fix it, Sweetheart.”

Daniel knelt beside the sleeping bag. The sky lightened outside the tent, lending a surreal feel inside.

“I love you, Karen.”

He zipped up the bag, fished his glasses from his jacket pocket, then slipped outside just as the sun broke the horizon.

Over the last one hundred eleven days, he'd cried all the tears he had. There were none left for today. Only a bone-weary ache that made his hands shake.

Eight days ago—he thought they'd have longer—when they staked their claim to this spot, they'd made sure he had a good signal. So now, he didn't even look, he just dialed.

"Hello." Lily's voice.

Over the years, he'd lost count of the times he'd called this number and pulled Lily from sleep. Usually, he gave her three minutes to wake up, throw on a robe and grab her notebook. This time there was nothing to write, and the message was brief.

"Lily, Daniel."

He could hear her sit up.

"Send the team."

"Okay." Her voice was thick with emotion. "Daniel?"

"Yeah."

"You okay?"

"Yeah."

He flipped the phone closed and lowered himself onto a nearby rock, there to wait for his team to arrive and his life to be over.

~ * ~

Lily had a list of ten people to call. After the last SAR meeting, she'd had a list of sixty-two. Daniel had whittled it down to ten. That was a good number to handle the litter and wheel. She started with Stan, not that he was on the list, but he was the head honcho at the moment. He'd need to get official authorization for the mission.

After a long discussion before they left, Daniel, Stan and Lily had decided that they'd play dumb and not pre-notify the Sheriff. It gave him deniability and didn't get them in hot water either. It was an iffy subject.

So, now, Stan would call the Sheriff and tell him that they had a body recovery. Happened all the time.

After calling Stan, she went down the list, informing the team to be at SAR headquarters at seven. She showered, drank three cups of coffee as she got dressed, called in and left a message at work to reschedule her day, then headed in herself.

She shouldn't have been surprised that there were a whole lot more than ten people at headquarters getting ready to head up to help. More like thirty.

Stan had to insist that some of them volunteer to stay behind just in case he needed them for another mission. It was like pulling teeth—a testimony to their respect and love for Daniel Fraser.

~ * ~

The coffee pot called it quits.

The girls left for LaJolla.

The day went from bad to worse.

At eight fifteen, Rick got a phone call from some sergeant checking to see if he was scheduled for a flight physical. The deadline for getting that done was the end of the week, and the kid wanted to make sure the colonel's packet was complete for the boards.

When he'd called for one last week, he'd been informed that he couldn't get the appointment until he had a letter of release from the physical therapist.

Paul had put him off.

He'd go in this afternoon and let Paul know that time was up. Paul had some fucking useless notion that one had to be one hundred percent before being cleared to fly. He'd never heard of gritting one's teeth, and playing through the pain.

Asshole.

"I'll get back to you, Sergeant," Rick said and hung up the phone.

"Sir," a knock at the door, followed immediately by David Quillen sticking his head in.

"Come in, Lieutenant. What's up?"

"Just got the word, sir, that SAR's headed up to bring down the body of Daniel Fraser's wife. A few of the guys would like to go up and help if they can."

Shit.

He glanced at the phone, wondering if he could—or should—call her. She'd be at SAR HQ by now, maybe on the radio, holding it together by sheer force of her magnificent will. He was tempted to retrieve a radio and turn it on.

Just to hear her voice.

"Sir?"

"Yeah, sorry. Make the call, David. Send them if you can."

"Yes, sir."

"David?"

"Sir?"

"When did she die?"

"This morning, before dawn."

"Who called you?"

David looked down.

“Lily did, sir.”

“Okay. Dismissed, Lieutenant.”

Rick scrubbed his hands through his hair and squeezed his stinging eyes.

“Sergeant.”

“Yes, sir,” came the reply from the doorway.

“Find out when and where the funeral will be and send flowers from the unit.”

“The funeral?”

“Sorry. Karen Fraser died on the mountain this morning. SAR’s going up to bring her down. Some of the PJ’s are going as well. I guess you’ll have to talk to someone at SAR headquarters.”

“Right. Will do.”

“Oh, and Sarge, let me know the details as well so I can attend.” Rick would let his lieutenants know.

Someone at SAR HQ.

Lily.

How had things gone to hell so damned fast?

One minute he was smiling at her across the table, wanting to reach over and touch her, wanting to say things he’d never thought of saying again.

The next he was telling her to shut up and she was walking out.

She was right, though. There really was nothing else to say. He’d fucked up—again. Par for the course.

He got up and walked to the window, just to prove he could do it. It didn’t hurt any less without the cane. Well, it didn’t hurt the knee any less.

Please God, let Paul cooperate.

If he didn't have that flight physical by the end of the week then he'd strike out.

Relationships—swing and a miss.

Fatherhood—strike two.

Air Force career.

Way to go, Scarecrow.

Twenty-four

“SAR base, this is Air Force Ground Team Nine.”

“Air Force Nine, go ahead,” Lily said. She’d gotten a phone call from David Quillen about an hour ago telling her that he had a team that was going up to provide extra muscle and moral support. She’d given David the coordinates.

“We have a team of four departing the trail head now. Team leader is Hollywood. Members are Batman, Cowboy and Angel.”

“A motley crew indeed,” Lily countered, trying to inject some levity, falling flat. “Thank you, Air Force. I’m logging you out of the trail head at oh-nine-seventeen. My team should be about two hours ahead of you.”

“Air Force Ground Niner copies.”

Lily rechecked the list.

Hollywood: Eric Cruz—the blonde who had gone up for Rick.

Batman: Nic D’Onofrio—she knew him fairly well.

Cowboy: Matt Wiley—never met him in person.

Angel: Chris Gabriel—the dark haired, tall one who’d plucked Rick from the mountain. Fitting name.

Her hands shook as she picked up her coffee cup. She took a sip—flat cold coffee, damn-it—and made a mental note to call to set up a stress debriefing for the team. It almost always helped for everyone to get together and talk and cry and support each other. Daniel hadn't requested one, but he'd just have to suffer.

Freudian-damn-slip.

Maybe the funeral would be debriefing enough.

She'd see how the guys were holding up once they got home.

~ * ~

The phone rang beside the couch, pulling Rick from SportsCenter.

"MacIntyre."

"Hi, Mac." Barbara, sounding peeved.

"Hey, what's up?"

"We need to talk."

Is that ever a good statement? She meant she needed to talk. Resistance was futile.

"Go ahead."

"The girls told me a bit about your dinner the other night."

Here it came. Barb would now point out what a shitty father he was—again.

"It sounds like you dropped the ball, Dad."

"Don't I always?"

"Knock off the pity party, Rick. I'm concerned that you allowed the girls to be completely rude to your friend."

Proof positive that he didn't understand women *at all*.

Since he said nothing, she continued.

"And apparently you didn't step in."

She was right. Holy Hanna, the woman was not only right, but she was standing up for Lily—against their daughters.

“Let me see if I’ve got this straight. You’re defending Lily against our daughters.”

“Well, not exactly. What I’m doing is insisting that when you have the girls, you take charge. I don’t care about Lily so much as I care that our daughters grow up to be decent human beings.”

“Right. So you think I need to grow some balls.”

“Delicately said, Mac.”

“Right. Sorry. So, is it too late?”

“For what?”

“For me to make them apologize to Lily.”

“Not if you handle it right.”

“And that means what, exactly?”

“I don’t know, Rick. You’ll have to figure out that one on your own. I know that you want to be more involved with them. I want that, too. Believe it or not, you’re not just a child support check to me. I don’t need your money. But the girls need you to give them clear-cut boundaries. And rudeness is not acceptable. I told them that. If you want something more from them, then you’ll have to work that out on your own.”

“Thanks, Barb.”

“You’re welcome. Night, Rick.”

With only a moment’s hesitation, he picked up the phone again and dialed.

“This is Nic.”

“Nic, Mac.”

“Colonel.”

“No, not this time. It’s Mac.”

“Okay, what can I do for you, sir?”

Hard to train. Harder to untrain.

“Is Cruz around?”

“Yes, sir, he’s right here.”

Obvious handing off of the phone, complete with identification.

“Sir?”

“Cruz, I’m calling on purely non-military business.”

“Okay.”

Cruz might be easier to get to relax than Nic. Gabe would have been impossible.

“I need a ride to La Jolla.”

“I’m assuming you’d like to fly rather than drive?”

“Sharp boy. I just need a couple hours there, something I need to say to my girls in person. You up for dinner there?”

“You bet. When?”

“As soon as I can get us cleared—tomorrow if possible. I’ll let you know.”

“Alright.”

“Thanks, Eric.”

“No problem, Mac.”

~ * ~

The flight from Merced to La Jolla took two and a half hours. Cruz was good company in civilian clothes. The kid was kicking around the idea of learning to fly helicopters, so he couldn’t be all bad. They spent the time discussing the limitations of fixed wing aircraft. Rick had heard that Cruz had money. He sure as hell had a very nice plane.

Once on the ground, Rick took a taxi to the house to speak with the girls. He agreed to meet Cruz at a randomly selected Mexican food place in two hours. What he had to say wouldn't take long.

The girls were waiting—Barbara had seen to it. She and Tim greeted Rick, instructed the girls to finish their homework and reminded them that they were still on phone restriction before leaving to have dinner.

“So, what's up, Dad?” Ally asked as the door closed behind the parents.

“Let's sit down.”

The girls exchanged looks, but Kate didn't seem in the least concerned. Ally had the decency to appear nervous. Rick joined her in that, but hoped that his face didn't let on.

The battle was to take place at the kitchen table, it seemed.

“Girls,” Rick said as he sat down, “you owe Lily an apology.”

Ally couldn't make eye contact with him but Kate raised her chin in defiance.

“I mean it. You, especially you, Kate, were rude beyond measure to Lily and to me. Rude to me is one thing—we'll chat about that in a second—but rude to someone I care about is completely unacceptable.”

“Sorry, Dad.” Ally.

“Kate?”

She started to get up.

He reached for her arm. “Sit down.”

Her eyes flared momentarily, but she did what she was told.

“Lily isn’t good enough for you.”

“What?”

“She isn’t, Daddy.”

So, it wasn’t so much elitist as it was jealousy. What a dumb shit he was.

“Kate, you couldn’t be more wrong.”

She stiffened. Okay, he definitely needed to get out of commander mode.

“Katey, Ally, I love you guys so much. Lily was right when she told you that you were all I could think of up on that mountain. With all my heart, I want to be a dad to you guys.”

Ally smiled a bit, tears gathering. Kate was a rock.

“Lily is a wonderful person. I wish you’d gotten a chance to get to know her. But even if we were together, and even if that were for the long term, I’m still your dad.”

“You aren’t together?”

“Not since the restaurant.”

Katey sat up straight and looked him dead in the eyes.

“Then go get her back, Dad.”

If adult females were unpredictable, then teenage ones were off the chart. It took him a moment to switch gears.

“Okay, let’s not get off track here. First of all, I want you each to send Lily a card or give her a call. I want you to apologize for the way you treated her.”

“Dad...”

“No discussion. Next, from now on, you will not cop an attitude with me, either. And finally, I’m not going to discuss my relationships with you. I promise not to ever get involved with someone who will treat you badly. In

return, anyone I date will be off limits for snide remarks from the peanut gallery. Understood?”

“Yes, sir.” Ally.

“Okay.” Kate.

“Questions? Comments?”

“I love you, daddy.” Katey.

He stood and before he could tug her to her feet, she flew into his arms. Ally stood back waiting her turn.

Hugs all around. And before he joined them in tears, he made his egress, leaving Lily’s address and phone number on the table.

Twenty-five

Lily dragged herself up the steps—empty steps. She hated it that she noticed.

Every time.

Henry Higgins had said it well—I’ve grown accustomed to your face.

This time it was more than great sex. It was “accustomed.” Rick MacIntyre felt like home. Comfortable. Be yourself kind of comfortable. Great sex was icing.

Never mind.

She dropped her keys on the kitchen counter and sorted through the mail. Ads, the electric bill, and a card. The return address said “K & A MacIntyre, La Jolla, CA.”

Hmmm.

On the front of the card sat a very sad looking teddy bear.

The inside inscription said, “Sorry.”

The note, written in a typical teenage hand—very flowery—said “Lily, we’re so sorry that we treated you so rudely. We’re very sorry and hope to be able to try again next time we’re there. Dad says that we should have

gotten to know you. He's right. We're sorry. Kate and Ally."

By the time she got to the signatures at the bottom, Lily's stomach was knotted.

This wasn't just an apology from the girls. This was an apology—an admission of fairly decent proportions—from the father.

God, she missed him.

The words "shut up" shouldn't even be in the language. They were as cutting as any. They said you don't matter, aren't worthy of hearing out.

Said in the tone he'd said them, he might as well have spit in her face.

He was clearly sorry.

Did that help?

Lily was too weary to think about it, but she didn't think so.

Tomorrow was the funeral, and all she could think about was sleeping.

As if that was going to happen.

~ * ~

Rain came down in a dismal outpouring of lamentation.

The people who filled Grace Church either loved Karen or were there to support Daniel.

Lily had never seen Daniel in a suit. The SAR team had attended funerals before—as a team—but they'd always worn dark slacks and their bright yellow SAR shirts.

They did so now as well, but not Daniel. His suit was dark blue. His shirt only a slightly lighter blue. His tie was

silver. When he'd greeted her, she'd been hard-pressed not to notice the blazing blue of his eyes.

He was in complete control. Noble. Dignified. Frigid.

Even his hands were cold.

He looked so handsome.

So sad.

So completely alone.

Wasn't it the vampire Lestat who said that immortality seemed like a good idea, until you realized you're going to spend it alone?

Lily watched the PJ's file into the back pews of the church. All wore their dress blues. She turned away before Rick could look up and catch her watching them.

~ * ~

Rick and his men weren't the last into the church. Far from it. But he led them into the back two rows out of deference to those who knew Karen.

He never entered a church but what he thought it might fall down on him. It wasn't like he was the devil incarnate or anything. But he sure as hell—sure as shootin'—wasn't a saint. There was likely a God—the fact was that he should have died on that mountain—but still...

For a church, it was a nice one. Nothing too ornate or fancy. Big. Nice wood. Nice windows.

Or they would have been had the sun shone through them.

Even now the rain pattered against them. God must be sympathizing.

Lily wore black well. Now was probably not the time to say that, but it was true.

Her hair was pulled back with a gold clasp and hung in soft waves down her back. She leaned close to the man next to her—someone he hadn't met—to talk quietly.

Daniel looked like hell—who could blame him?

Up near the altar, amid an avalanche of flowers, Karen lay in an open casket.

Stupid tradition.

The crowd quieted as the preacher stood and walked to the dais. A lady preacher as a matter of fact.

She went through all the usual funeral crap. That the deceased was in a better place and that she was in the arms of the Lord. That stuff never failed to make people sniff and hold hands.

There were even a few cleared throats amongst his men. No holding hands. Except for the guys who were there with their wives or girlfriends.

Nic and Julie sat right behind him.

Guys always thought it was dangerous to go to weddings with a chick. Funerals were worse.

Slowly, though, the tone of the sermon shifted.

Make the most of every moment.

Commit yourself to your mission in life.

Take a stand.

A steady stream of people got up and talked about how they loved and would miss Karen Fraser.

One family—a mother, father and two kids, maybe eight and ten—spoke of their experiences in the emergency room, watching the staff fight a losing battle on behalf of their oldest child. Karen had been there for them then and for weeks afterwards.

So not fair. That story had even his tough-guy airmen fighting for control.

All bets were off, though, when Daniel stood and mounted the steps.

The former Navy SEAL didn't flinch.

"Thank you all for coming today to pay your respects to Karen and to support me. I can't tell you how much it means to me."

Rick watched Lily lower her head. Her shoulders shook, the only evidence that she'd come undone.

"Karen always got to the top of the mountain ahead of me. Used to kinda tick me off. She had such stamina, such determination. Even when she found out she was dying, she outdistanced me by a long shot. I'll never be that brave."

He paused, looked up at the ceiling for a moment, pulled in a steadying breath, then continued without missing another beat.

"I would hope that each of you would be as lucky as I was to have had even this long with a person who loved me completely. If you are that lucky, don't waste it."

With that, he stopped and returned to his seat.

In a moment, he returned to the bottom of the stairs and turned around, smiling slightly.

"I apologize for this next part. I assure you it wasn't my idea."

He nodded to someone in the back, then returned to his seat.

Garth Brooks' voice filled the church.

"If tomorrow never comes..."

On cue, the folks up front stood and began filing past the open casket, then down the side aisles and out into the rain.

When Lily passed the casket, she slid her hand along the wood but never looked down. When she passed him on her way out, she never looked up.

He wanted to stand up and catch her. Shout to her. Tell her that his life sucked without her. That he knew now.

But shouting at a funeral was poor form.

And he didn't have the right words anyway. No such thing.

By the time Rick got out of the church, she was nowhere to be seen. Just as well.

The program stated that there would be no burial service. Rumor had it Daniel would spread her ashes on the mountain in a private moment.

"Sir?"

Rick turned. Matt Wiley stood behind him.

"The teams are headed over to the Oasis if you'd like to join us."

"At three in the afternoon?"

Wiley looked a little embarrassed.

"Perfect. I'll be there."

Relieved, Matt walked away to join Gabe and Cruz at the curb.

On his way to the car, his pocket began vibrating.

"McIntyre."

"Sir, Sergeant Riley."

"Go ahead, Sarge."

"Well, sir, I just got off the phone with General Houston."

Here it came.

“Yup.”

“He wanted to make sure that your packet was on his desk by close of business today.”

Rick was trying real hard not to remember that fact.

“Sir?”

“Don’t worry about it, Kevin.”

“You sure, Mac?”

“I’m sure.”

~ * ~

“Pegasus Air,”

Cruz smiled, despite his best intentions. Hell, he was calling her despite his best intentions.

“Can I buy you a drink?”

She didn’t answer right away. Either she was trying to place his voice, or she knew damned well who it was.

“Close up shop and I’ll be by for you in ten.”

“You’re a presumptuous asshole, Cruz.”

Okay, so she knew who it was.

“And?”

“Make it fifteen.”

Eric stopped himself from grinning. Actually the yawning emptiness that the funeral had opened, the bereft feeling of futility, stopped him. He wanted to make love to Kit Sheridan tonight. That wasn’t true; he wanted to fuck Kit Sheridan tonight.

Mostly, he just didn’t want to be alone.

Fucking Kit Sheridan would be a mistake. A huge mistake.

She'd, no doubt, think it was something way more than it was, and she was the last person he wanted dogging his every step.

His cell phone burned in his hand. He should just call her back and say, "Never mind."

If there was one woman he'd ever had the displeasure of knowing—one woman who thought the world revolved around her—it was Kit Sheridan.

So why the hell was he headed to the airstrip?

Twenty-six

Daniel disentangled himself from the last well-wishers and drove himself home. He pushed the button to raise the garage door, drove inside and pushed the button again, sitting for a moment before turning off the car.

Karen would kick his ass if he killed himself.

If there was a hereafter and if she was waiting for him, both debatable at this point, he really didn't want her to greet him with a baseball bat in her hands.

On the other hand...

He opened the car door and dragged himself out of the car. Before going inside, he pulled the mail from the box. The dozen or so sympathy cards in this batch could join the others—still unopened—on the coffee table—right beside the half-empty bottle of Scotch.

Pouring himself a glass—neat, as James Bond would say, if James Bond drank Scotch—he slammed the shot and sat back to stare at the ceiling.

God, he hated Scotch. Now he remembered why. Of course, good Scotch might not burn like that all the way down.

Who was he kidding. He was just not a drinker.

That could change.

~ * ~

Kit stepped outside as he pulled up. She still wore a dark blue jumpsuit.

“Nice car,” she said as he got out and walked around to open her door. “Wow, I’m underdressed.”

“Just came from the funeral. I can lose the tie if you like.”

“That explains a lot. And, no, you look great.”

“You do, too.”

“This old thing. Seriously, if you want to swing by my house, I can change into something more...”

“You’re fine. It won’t take long for any of us to lose the jackets and ties.”

“Am I to assume we’re joining the rest of your group?”

“Yeah, sorry, didn’t I tell you?”

Now she laughed. “Not really. You kinda just ordered me to come along.”

“It worked, didn’t it?” He took the opportunity to flash her the patented Hollywood smile. When she was unimpressed, he wished he could retract it.

Either girls had a radar thing going where men in uniform were concerned—reasonable—or they’d never been at the Oasis at three o’clock in the afternoon—doubtful. Either way, what started out with twenty Air Force guys in every stage of dress blues and two girls—Kit and Julie—soon became much better odds.

Either way, the booze flowed and the music blared.

A step in the right direction.

Mac sat in a far corner, drinking beer and shooting the breeze with DQ. He was one of the few in the room that remained morose.

He didn't dance either.

Good therapy.

Kit danced with everyone—like Cruz could stop that—and before too long, they were all laughing and carrying on as if they'd never stopped.

“Okay, hot shot,” Kit said dragging him onto the dance floor once again, “either you're going to have to feed me or you'll have to stop plying me with liquor.”

“We can order wings.”

She stopped moving—man could that girl move, too—put her hands on her hips and tilted her head.

“Real food.”

He put his hands up in mock self-defense.

“Okay, what sounds good?”

She licked her lips and closed her eyes.

Damn.

“Red meat.”

“Baked potato or fries?” Expensive or cheap? Not that it mattered to him.

Her eyebrows shot up, challenging him. “Baked.”

“You got it, Sheridan.”

She tipped her head toward the door.

“Let's go.”

On the way to the restaurant, Eric pulled out his cell phone and dialed information. He had them put the call through.

“Hello.”

Maybe not the brightest of ideas.

“Lily. Eric Cruz here.”

But what the hell.

“Yes?”

“Your colonel is sitting in the back corner at the Oasis looking like he just lost his last friend. I thought you might like to go pick up the pieces.”

“He’s not my colonel, Eric.”

“Maybe he should be. Seems a shame for me and Gabe and Red here to risk our lives to bring him back so that he can self-destruct.”

“Eric.” There was a decided edge to her normally sultry voice. “I’m going to hang up now.”

“Okay, but think about it.”

True to her word, the line went dead.

“Don’t quit your day job,” Sheridan said without looking over.

“I won’t.”

~ * ~

Lily stood with the receiver in one hand, while she held down the switch hook with the other.

Rick was at the Oasis—self destructing.

Not her problem.

So much her problem.

God.

Had he come back from the dead only to spend the rest of his life alone? Had he come back from the dead only for her to spend the rest of hers alone?

Shut up, Lily.

He’d tried to apologize afterward, and she hadn’t let him.

But those words hurt. And apologizing after the fact didn't guarantee that they wouldn't be said again, or at least thought.

Lily replaced the receiver and flopped down on the couch.

She should get a cat.

No, maybe a dog. Dogs never rejected you, did they?

Or maybe, just maybe she should give Rick another chance.

~ * ~

Cruz didn't know how it happened. Maybe Anthony's was in another dimension. You went in. Did shit you'd never do in a million years and then walk out having agreed to letting a hot redhead teach you to fly a helicopter.

"Where to now?" he asked, distracted by his own idiocy.

"My place."

Holy shit.

He glanced over. The look she was giving him was definitely in keeping with the suggestive way she'd said it. Okay, so maybe you came out of the restaurant in that same other dimension. He tried to remind himself of the earlier conversation: the one where he'd been dead certain that sleeping with this woman was a really bad idea.

He started the engine and pointed the turbo in the direction of utter devastation.

"I won't even ask how you know where I live, Cruz."

What the hell.

He tossed her a killer smile as he pulled up in front of her house. She lived in a three-story house that had been turned into apartments.

“Three-oh-one?”

“Is there anything you don’t know about me?”

“Oh, honey, there’s a lot I don’t know about you.”

“Good, then c’mon.”

They weren’t in the door before she turned, giving him the look. The look. She tossed her hair over her shoulder and took a step closer.

Then, all bets were off.

With his foot, he pushed the door closed. Then in one step, he had her up against the wall, her hands pinned above her head with one of his. His other hand on her breast.

Her nipples hardened under her sweater. She moaned his name, and then he claimed her mouth. He kissed her hard; she returned the fire. Her body writhed against his, straining against his hard cock, begging, urgent.

His hand moved lower. She gasped and plunged her tongue into his mouth.

She pushed against his hand in the primal rhythm.

Reason crashed hard into him.

He’d stopped himself before. No was no. But never when the girl was saying yes so loud. Never when he wanted inside like he did now. Insanity would have felt so fucking good.

But morning would have been grim. He didn’t know why, but it would have been worse than the normal morning after. Way worse.

Fucking Kit Sheridan was not an option.

He pulled back so fast that he had to steady her on her feet.

“I gotta go, Kit.”

She just blinked those big green eyes. Damned beautiful green eyes.

Eric Cruz was never at a loss for words with a woman. Never. And he never turned down a hot, gorgeous, willing one. And the last time he headed home at eight o'clock was before he turned sixteen.

With a wave of his hand, though, he took another step back and then exited the twilight zone before he changed his mind.

Twenty-seven

Rick took a deep breath of fresh air. The Oasis had gone politically correct some time ago, outlawing smoking inside. Only a slight improvement somehow. It still got stuffy in there, and it still felt damned good when you stepped outside.

The rotating sign on the bank down the street said it was seventy-four degrees. Sweet. Did warm nights make everyone horny or just him?

Actually he wasn't horny.

Well, of course he was horny. But he wasn't primarily horny. He was primarily lonely.

He'd gone years without feeling like this. Yet he'd been no less alone. Getting a glimpse of something better sucked.

~ * ~

Lily didn't know what she'd say when she got there. He had to know that she wouldn't allow the girls to treat him—or her for that matter—with disdain. Maybe he'd come to the same conclusion. They *had* written the note.

He had to know that she wouldn't stand for being abused. Rick McIntyre was not an abuser. He'd said the wrong thing at the wrong moment. But the idea that he could abuse a woman was preposterous. Cancel that thought.

The Oasis snuck up on her.

She still didn't have a plan.

But she parked her car and went inside, searching the dark room even as her eyes acclimated.

No Rick.

Cruz had said he was sitting in the corner.

No Rick at any corner table.

"Lily?"

She turned. It was David Quillen.

"He just left."

Did everyone in the entire world know?

Geez-oh-pete! She thanked David and turned for the door. She'd try Rick's house next.

~ * ~

She wasn't home.

He could either park here and watch the sun set from her front steps or he could cut his losses and go home.

It took three times around the block before he decided.

~ * ~

Well, his car was not in its usual place in the driveway. Maybe he'd pulled it into the garage.

She pulled in and turned off the ignition.

Still no thought of what to say, she walked to the front door and rang the bell.

No answer.

Maybe she should have asked David if Rick had left alone. Of course, she'd never do that. Too embarrassing for David, too desperate coming from her.

If he'd left with another girl, David wouldn't have said anything at all, would he?

God, she was pathetic. Why did she suddenly decide that she was tired of being alone? Alone was fine. Alone was even easier in some ways. And she could get a dog. Really she could.

Yet it felt suspiciously like she'd made up her mind to be with Rick. Come what may. The fact was that she'd fallen for the guy years ago—from a distance.

And on that horrible night with him dying on the mountain, she'd given up her heart to him.

Everything since then had been just opening the amazing gift that the universe had given them.

She could turn back. But even if she never saw him again, he was her other half. Nothing trite about “you complete me.” Clichéd, maybe. But clichés were simply well-worn truths.

Either way she was his.

The rest was up to him.

But where in God's name had he gone? She fished her cell phone from her purse and dialed his cell.

“McIntyre.”

“Where are you?”

He was quiet for a moment.

“On your front steps.”

“Will you still be on my front steps when I get there?”

“Only if you make it before midnight.”

~ * ~

Cruz knew that Sheridan would be pissed. She'd probably see his leaving as rejection. Women were like that. Hell, how would he know that? He'd never walked out *before* sex in his life. So maybe she wouldn't be pissed.

No, she'd be pissed. The fact was she spent most of her time being pissed with him.

It was mutual.

He'd made the right decision. Even with her scent clinging to his shirt, with the feel of her heat still lingering on his hands, on his lips, he knew. He would not go there.

As a matter of fact, he should call tomorrow and cancel their flying plans.

However, the idea of a hostile takeover of her business still had potential.

Other than that, he'd stay the hell away from her.

Period.

End of story.

Now if he could just get his other brain to agree.

~ * ~

Rick closed his eyes and let the last of the day's sunshine seep into his body. The rain had cleared within an hour of leaving the church, and now the gods made up for it.

He wasn't going to make the deadline for the flight physical. Paul was sympathetic but simply wouldn't give him the green flag.

So, in three weeks the board would meet and, without a doubt, pass him over. Rick would never fly a Blackhawk again. *C'est la guerre*. If he'd retired before the ill-fated Friday the thirteenth, he'd have saved himself a lot of

pain. And the result—never flying again—would have been the same.

But his life wouldn't have been.

Please, God.

A soft breeze tickled his face, as if God actually answered. If only.

Lily's arrival roused him.

When had she become so very precious to him? His heart felt near to bursting just seeing her. He smiled, remembering how hard it had been that night to get her to call him Rick. She'd ended up being somewhat comfortable with just "Colonel." Even now she called him that, but now the way she said it sent electricity to his groin.

"Hi," she said, sitting down.

He reached over, slid his hand behind her neck and pulled her to kiss him.

Damn if he knew what to say, though.

Either she had the same problem or she was waiting for something profound from him.

And he had nothin'.

Maybe the words didn't have to be perfect.

"I'm tired of being alone, Lily."

Still she said nothing.

"They say you can't teach an old dog new tricks. But, with you, I'd sure like to try."

She reached for his hand.

Sweet.

"I don't want to be alone anymore either. I've been thinking about getting a dog."

Okay, what did that mean?

“Thinking of going to the shelter and finding one that needs me as much as I need him.”

A flicker of hope.

“Maybe an old dog?”

“Maybe.”

She was just staring at their hands as she ran her thumb over his.

“In my favor, I am housebroken.”

She brought his hand up. He felt her breath warm on his palm before her lips made contact.

Geez-oh-pete.

“Excuse me, but what are we talking about here?”

No more silly code. He had to know.

“I have a lot of baggage, Colonel.”

“We both have a lot of baggage.”

“I’m just a massage therapist.”

“No, ‘just’, Lily. And you maybe need to know that I won’t be a colonel for long.”

She sucked in her breath and smiled before she realized what he wasn’t saying.

“I’ll be sending in my letter of resignation before the boards meet. No need wasting their time.”

She squeezed his hand.

“I’m so sorry, Rick.”

“Yeah, well, it’s amazingly unimportant suddenly.”

“Can I still call you Colonel?”

“Only in bed.”

She let out a huge sigh.

“Well, all right.”

Now she leaned over, putting her hands on his face, her brandy colored eyes locked with his.

“I love you, Colonel.”

“I love you too, Princess.”

Then he kissed her, sliding the clip from her hair,
tangling both hands in the soft waves.

He’d never fly again.

And he’d never touch the ground either.

Meet Jaxine Daniels

Jaxine Daniels lives with her husband on the Emerald Coast of Florida, after years living in the high mountains of Colorado. She is an emergency medical technician and has spent years working both on an ambulance and on Search and Rescue. Aside from writing and helping in emergencies, her passions include watching and playing hockey and reading both romance and adventure fiction. *A Good Place to Land* is her fifth book and second in her para-rescue series.

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