

Ginny McBlain

A woman in a black dress and a man in a light blue shirt and white pants are walking hand-in-hand on a paved path. The background is filled with lush green trees and a black lamppost. The scene is bright and sunny.

F R E E D O M I S N O T F R E E

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Freedom Isn't Free

By

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Dedicated to those who defend and preserve freedom.

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Chapter One

“Hunk alert! Hunk alert!”

Megan Bradshaw gritted her teeth at the *sotto voce* signal. Stephie, her man-crazy flying partner, reminded Megan of her twin sisters. She could tolerate the thirteen-year-olds’ obsession—barely—but it ground on her nerves to be forced to work with a supposedly grown woman always on the prowl. She refused to pay attention to Stephie’s often-repeated refrain.

They completed the meal service. Returning to the galley, Megan glanced at the man seated in 4B as she passed by. Their eyes locked for a brief moment. Her heart skipped a beat and the breath whooshed from her lungs.

He winked.

Megan’s knees went weak. It was a good thing her hands gripped the cart handle. Gathering her wits, she continued pulling the cart to the front of the airplane.

“Have you ever seen such blue gorgeous eyes?” Stephie asked, as she emptied the service items off the cart. “So dark, like brand new jeans. Those lashes must be an inch long.”

Megan wasn’t about to let on she agreed. She pulled a wad of bills from her apron pocket and began counting the cash from the sale of boxed breakfasts. “Whose eyes are you talking about?”

“The guy in uniform in 4B.”

“I didn’t notice,” Megan fibbed. “You served him.”

Stephie picked up a fresh coffee pot and shoved it at Megan. “Go check him out.”

“Did I ever tell you remind me of my kid sisters?”

“Nope.” Stephie grinned.

“Don’t take it as a compliment. They’re thirteen and boy crazy.”

“Hey, there’s nothing wrong with noticing,” she huffed, tossing

her bleached hair over her shoulder. "I'm not planning to jump his bones."

"Don't tell me you wouldn't, given the opportunity. I've seen you in action."

Stephie bristled. "If you'd loosen up and have a little fun with the passengers, you wouldn't spend every night all by your lonesome self."

"Don't knock it. I'm not in danger of contracting a disease, breaking up a marriage or having my heart broken."

"One day, Miss Prudie, some guy is going to knock you for a loop. I hope I'm around to see it happen. You'd better pass through the cabin with that coffee one more time."

Megan grabbed a small tray with cream and sugar. When would she learn to keep her mouth shut? She had no business lecturing Stephie. This wasn't the first month she'd flown with her and it wouldn't be the last. Heartland Air was too small a carrier and the turnover rate was low. But they didn't work together all the time, thank goodness. A little Stephie went a long way. They were just too different.

She stopped at row four. "More coffee?" Was that her voice, all breathy and sexy? Nah. Totally out of character. Everyone knew a person didn't hear their own voice as others did.

"May I have a glass of ice water?"

His baritone voice sent tingles up her spine. She looked him straight in the eyes. *Oh, my. How can a simple look take my breath away?* "Ah... Certainly—" She read the nametag Velcroed above his shirt pocket. "Mr. Fraser. I'll be back with it shortly."

No wedding ring she thought, as she continued pouring coffee.

As if that meant anything. Why should she care? She wasn't in the market for a boyfriend, much less a husband.

Yet she couldn't shake the feeling that something monumental had happened the moment Mr. Fraser stepped onboard.

The pot ran dry and she walked quickly back to the galley. "I got through aisle fifteen," she said to Stephie. "Would you please finish the coffee? I have a couple requests to take out."

"Sure," Stephie said, picking up a fresh pot.

Megan filled three glasses with ice and set them on a tray with a can of tomato juice, a Coke and a bottle of water. She walked back down the aisle and stopped at 4B. "Your water, sir," she said, forcing herself to speak in a business-like manner as she held out the glass.

Suddenly the plane lurched.

She pitched sideways. The glass slipped from her fingers. She grabbed the back of the seat. Everything on the tray slid into the passenger's lap.

Megan caught her balance. "Oh!" She reached over, picking the melting ice off his lap. "I'm so sorry."

"Not as good as a cold shower, but it'll do."

She jerked her hand back. Heat suffused her face. "Ah— I'll get a som-something..."

Megan sped to the galley and grabbed a handful of paper towels. Dashing back to row four, she seized the cans and glasses from Mr. Fraser and practically threw the towels at him. "I'm really sorry," she repeated.

"Hey, no harm done." He mopped the water spots from his lap. His gaze caught hers, his eyes sparkling mischief.

That inexplicable feeling hit her again.

"It could've been hot coffee," he said.

She wanted to die on the spot. The ice was bad enough. But coffee? There? "Would you like my hair dryer? There's a plug in the lavatory."

"That's okay. I'll dry by the time we land. Besides" his grin wicked "no one will notice. The uniform camouflage hides a multitude of sins."

Her cheeks burned. "I'll get you another glass." She forced a smile and turned away. Why did that have to happen to the best-looking guy on the whole flight?

Fixing the tray again, she made her way down the aisle, serving the requested drinks. When she handed Mr. Fraser his glass, she kept moving. She continued strolling aft, checking on the passengers. Light flight today. Usually the Washington, DC/Omaha run was close to full. On the way back to the front, she picked up trash as she went.

“Ma’am,” Mr. Fraser called as she came abreast of row four.

Not emotionally ready for another encounter, Megan stopped anyway. She was here to see to her passengers. It was her job. “Yes, sir.”

“Are you familiar with Omaha?”

She nodded. “I’m based there.”

“How long will it going take me to drive to Offutt Air Force Base?”

“Once you’re on the road, about twenty-five minutes. That is if you take the freeway. If you go through downtown, it’ll take a little longer.” She paused, furrowing her brow, and glanced at the US Army tape on his uniform shirt. “You’re in the Army?”

He nodded. “Corps of Engineers.”

“Oh.” She stopped and thought a moment. “You’re the guys who control the rivers and dams.”

“The Corps does, but that’s not my job,” he said, a closed off look in his eyes.

“If you don’t mind my asking, why would someone in the Army be going to an Air Force base?”

“US Strategic Command is combined. They have people from all branches of the military assigned there.”

“What do you do?”

He grinned. “If I told you, I’d have to kill you.”

“Oh, one of those.” Her neighbor across the hall couldn’t talk about his work either. Quickly, she changed the subject. “Still damp? The offer for the hair dryer is still open.”

He patted a spot too close to his zipper for her comfort. “Not much. Don’t worry about it.”

“I still feel awful for dumping all that stuff on you.”

“You couldn’t help the bumpy air.”

“Well, enjoy your stay in my fair city.”

“Wish I could see some of it, but I’m going back tonight.”

An attendant call button chimed. “Excuse me,” Megan said. She moved down the aisle, grateful that duty called. This guy was way too attractive for her peace of mind.

On her way to catch the shuttle to the employee parking lot at Omaha's Eppley Airfield, Megan walked past the car rental counter. Passenger 4B—Mr. Fraser—stepped away from the counter looking disgusted.

"Is something wrong? May I help?"

He glanced her way.

Her breath caught. This reaction had gotten old two hours ago.

"Hello again. I reserved a car but they overbooked. Everybody's sold out. I'll have to get a cab to the base."

"Don't do that. I'll take you." The words were out of her mouth before her brain shifted into gear. Whatever possessed her? Still, after drenching him in an ice bath, she owed him a good turn. "I live practically next door to the base. I'm heading home and can drop you off on the way."

"Are you sure?"

"Positive. It's the least I can do after dumping ice all over you." Besides she needed to prove she could spend thirty minutes in his company and still breathe.

"I don't want to impose."

"No imposition," she insisted. *Oh geez, did I say that?*

"Well, if you really don't mind."

I mind all right but I can't back out now. "This way. My car's in employee parking."

Ten minutes later they were headed south.

"Which gate do you want, Mr. Fraser?" Megan asked as she pulled onto Abbott Drive. *I still can't believe I'm doing this. The man's a perfect stranger.* Yet she felt safe. Undoubtedly it was the uniform. After all, she'd learned in flight attendant training to go to a person in uniform for help if she had trouble on a flight.

"Please call me Duncan."

"Okay, Duncan, but only if you call me Megan. When you say ma'am, I look for my grandmother."

He opened his briefcase and checked a paper. "My instructions say to use the SAC gate and give directions to STRATCOM

headquarters.”

“I just thought of something. Can I get on the base?”

“As long as you’re with an authorized person. You’ve never been there before?”

“Once. I went to a wedding reception at the Patriot Club. It was a real hassle while the guard checked everyone on the guest list.”

“Mmm.” Before Megan could say another word, he had his cell phone in his hand and placed a call. “This is Captain Fraser. I’m arriving in an unregistered POV. Could someone meet me at the SAC gate?” He turned to Megan. “How much longer will it take to get there?”

“Fifteen minutes.”

Duncan repeated their ETA. “Got it.” He ended the call.

“What’s a POV? I’m driving a car.”

He chuckled. “Military alphabet soup. It means privately owned vehicle. By the way, I really appreciate the lift. I hate cabs.”

“Anything to keep the passengers happy.”

He arched an eyebrow. “Anything?”

Megan’s face grew hot. *Why am I so stupid? Uniform or not, I don’t know this guy from Adam.* “I’m not offering coffee, tea or me.”

“Too bad.”

She shot a quick glance at him. “Heartland Air appreciates your business,” she said, keeping her tone crisp.

“Sorry, I couldn’t resist.”

Uncomfortable with the direction the conversation had taken, despite the teasing she heard in his voice, Megan changed the subject. “Do you do a turn-around out here often?”

“A what?”

“Sorry—airline lingo. I mean coming out and going back the same day.”

“It’s my first trip in this job. I’m not sure yet how much I’ll have to travel.”

“I’m glad you’re going back tonight.” That sounded ungracious in the extreme. “Ah... The forecast is for snow tomorrow. You’ll freeze without a coat.”

He glanced at the clear sky. “It’s a lovely spring day. Hard to

believe snow's on the way."

"The weather can change in the blink of an eye out here. Some of the heaviest snow falls in March—even in April," she said. "Obviously, you're not a Midwesterner."

"Virginian, born and bred."

"That explains your accent. Not quite southern, but not northeast either."

"I can't place yours."

"I'm from California, but I've lived in the Midwest since I finished college." Megan gestured to a busy exit surrounded by shopping centers and restaurants. "This is Bellevue. We're almost there."

"The guys in the office said it was about twenty miles from the airport. In the DC area that's likely to be more than an hour's commute."

"Omaha traffic is nothing like DC's. I'm glad I don't have cope with it much. Washington is a great place to visit, but I'd rather not live there."

"I'm not crazy about the DC area either, but Uncle Sam says that's where I am for now. Of course, the powers that be can change their mind and order me elsewhere in a hurry."

"I'm sure your wife just loves the uncertainty," she said, tongue firmly tucked in her cheek.

"If I had a wife, she might complain. A lot of wives do, especially since we're at war."

"I can well imagine. I've seen the departures and reunions at any number of airports. It's got to be hard on families."

"It is. Those left behind support each other. The military is an extended family."

"That's good." Megan flipped on her turn signal, thinking how glad she was to have fifteen hundred plus miles between herself and her family. Exiting the Kennedy Freeway, she stopped at the light. "Where am I supposed to take you?"

"I'm being met at the Pass and Identification building. He said it's a right turn just before you get to the gate."

"Will you be able to get back to the airport okay?" She pulled

into a small parking lot.

"I'll bum a ride with someone. Thanks for the lift. I really appreciate it." He stuck out his hand. "Nice meeting you, Megan."

"Happy to help. Nice meeting you, too." Nice but scary, her confused heart said. Stupid as it sounded, she hated to see him go. "Have a good trip home."

Duncan got out of the car and strode toward the brick building.

It took a moment for Megan to figure out she didn't have to negotiate the barriers that slowed traffic entering and exiting the base. The airlines weren't the only ones that had undergone extensive security upgrades since 9/11.

* * * *

"Dunc! Over here!"

He turned to the voice. "Marty! You old son-of-gun. Whatcha doing here?"

"Picking you up."

"Man, it's been forever," Duncan said, clapping his old college friend on the back. "How are you?"

"Can't complain."

They climbed in a SUV. "Don't need to ask how you are," Marty said. "Your chauffeur was a gorgeous babe."

"Leave it to an intel weanie to notice. She didn't get out of the car."

Marty pulled into the traffic lane to enter the base. He stopped at the guard shack and showed his ID card. "So give. Who is she?"

"A flight attendant I met coming out."

"Flight attendant! Man, you have all the luck. The only attendants on my flights are old enough to be my mom."

"For all I know she's married with kids. It was no big deal. She was making nice after she spilled ice and drink cans all over me."

Marty raised an eyebrow. "The plot thickens."

"No plot to thicken. I don't even know her last name."

Marty turned into the parking lot and swiped his card at the security checkpoint. The arms rose. "All this security is a royal pain in the butt."

“Our world has changed, my friend,” Duncan said. “You think this is bad? Try Washington.”

Marty parked the car and they headed to a side entrance of the tan brick headquarters. “Have to get your visitor’s badge in here.”

They entered the building and were greeted with a large sign warning everyone to turn cell phones off or remove the batteries. Duncan reached for the phone clipped to his pocket. It wasn’t there. *What the...?*

They stepped to the window and he filled out paperwork. While he waited for the badge, he checked his briefcase. No phone. “I must’ve left my cell in Megan’s car.”

“You can call her from the office,” Marty said.

“I didn’t get her number.” They moved at a brisk pace through what seemed like endless hallways. “I’ll call the cell. Maybe she’ll answer.”

“No last name, no number. Man, you’re slipping. What happened to the guy with the thickest black book on the Virginia Military Institute campus?”

This was one time he fallen back into his old ways, not that he’d ever admit it. “That was a long time ago. So what’ve you been up to since we graduated?”

“I’ve got a wife and couple of crumb crunchers, both boys. They run us a merry chase.”

“Congratulations.” Duncan struggled to keep the envy from his voice. Ever since he’d lost his parents in an automobile accident, he’d felt the lack of family. It was even worse after Darrin, his best friend since sixth grade, was killed in the terrorist attack on the Pentagon on 9/11. Sometimes he ached with the need to find someone to call his own.

He followed Marty into an office.

“This is Duncan Fraser guys.”

“Pleased to meet you, sir,” replied a second lieutenant, Cooper, according to his nametape.

“Sir, welcome,” acknowledged a sergeant with more stripes than God on his sleeve.

“Use the phone on my desk,” Marty said, pointing to the corner.

Duncan placed the call.

“Romeo here—” Marty announced “—managed to hook up with a gorgeous flight attendant—”

“Hoo-ah!” Cooper sang out.

“—and he fails to get her phone number.”

“Six minutes in the penalty box for that one,” declared the sergeant.

No answer. Duncan hung up the phone and faced the music. He should’ve known Marty wouldn’t let his failure to live up to his college reputation go. “She was simply being nice.”

He’d never let on that this lady had tripped his trigger more than any female he’d met in years. Something happened the moment his gaze locked with hers. He couldn’t explain it and wasn’t about to try. Not in front of this crew.

“Nice! A babe makes a play for you and you don’t follow up? You got rocks in your head?”

Before Duncan could defend himself, an Air Force major stepped out of an adjoining office, a portfolio in his hand. Marty performed the introductions.

“I hate to break up the party gents,” the major said. “We can’t keep the general waiting.”

* * * *

After changing into comfortable sweats, Megan leafed through the mail, finding the electric bill, several annoying pieces of junk and a letter from Ellie, one of the twins. A familiar guilt surfaced as she tore open the envelope. She’d abandoned her family, no matter what kind of pretty spin she tried to put on leaving.

She scanned Ellie’s loopy handwriting and sighed. Mom’s alimnt *de jour* was a bad heart. Ellie went on to say Mom was short of breath because she’d put on at least thirty pounds in the last six months. Her sister was becoming a quite a diagnostician. No wonder, with a hypochondriac mother who shirked her duty to her husband and six children, citing every fad condition that popped up.

Megan’s culpability ballooned inside her. Maybe she should go back to California.

No. That would only make things worse. As long as Mom had Megan around to shoulder the responsibility, the situation would get worse. The person who needed to go home was her father. He escaped his obligation and duty driving long hauls in a snazzy Peterbilt eighteen-wheeler. His weekends with the family weren't enough to provide the attention his wife craved or the stability the kids needed.

As always, Megan's heart argued with her head. She'd done all she could, probably more than she should've done. She'd stayed around until the twins were in school, taking care of all the cleaning and laundry, doing most of the cooking and errands, while her mother became a couch potato with the TV remote glued to her hand.

Leaving had saved Megan's sanity. Her parents were forced to pay a modicum of attention to the other five kids. Now only the twins and their eighteen-year-old sister remained at home.

She laid Ellie's note on the end table and walked to the kitchen. It had been a long time since she'd grabbed a cup of yogurt at the airport this morning.

Letters from home called for comfort food. She grilled a cheese sandwich and heated a bowl of tomato soup. Instead of sitting at the table, she took her lunch to the curved sectional sofa that constituted her main seating. She resisted the temptation to read the letter again. No point in inviting indigestion.

Picking up the remote, she tuned in the Fox News Channel. The latest events in the war on terror filled the screen. The images on the screen reminded her of the soldier she'd dropped off at the base.

Duncan Fraser had made a big impression on her. By choice, Megan's dates were few, far between and of the most casual nature. It had been difficult to break free of the stranglehold her family had on her. While she loved people, she had no intention of becoming entangled in a confining relationship. Yet, her physical reaction to him made her... Well, uneasy was as good a word as any. Nothing like that had ever happened before. It was a darn good thing he was a chance-met passenger, one it was unlikely she'd meet again. As of right now she was putting him out of her mind.

If the predicted snow did materialize, she needed to stock up on groceries. She intended to spend her two days off finishing quilting Mrs. Conner's bedspread, not slipping and sliding to the store.

* * * *

Shopping bag in one hand and her keys in the other, Megan strode to her car. She popped the lock and opened the passenger door. There, in the crevice between the seat and the door was a cell phone. She set the bag down and picked it up. Where had it come from?

It wasn't hers. "Must be Duncan's," she muttered aloud. A pang shot through her at the thought of him. "I need to get it back to him."

But how? He was on the base, but she had no idea where or how to get in touch with him.

Wait a minute. He said he was flying back tonight. All she had to do was take the phone to the airport. The agent working his flight could return it to him. Piece of cake. Or she could take it to the gate herself. All she needed was her employee ID.

Bad idea, Megan. You don't need any entanglement. You're going to forget him. Remember?

Megan pocketed the phone and drove home.

She stored her groceries and settled in front of her quilting frame for the afternoon. With Phil Coulter's tranquil music playing in the background, she lost herself, rhythmically placing one careful stitch after another. The blue and tan print pieces in the shooting stars quilt pattern reminded her of Duncan's eyes and his combat boots. Good gracious! *I need to forget him.* To remember his eye color was sappy enough, but his boots? What was the matter with her? *Stop thinking about Duncan right now. That's an order.*

Unfortunately, the cell phone in her sweat pocket prevented her from obeying. She plugged on, her needle poking in and out, snippets of their conversation replaying in her mind.

She'd been working nearly two hours when reveille sounded from her pocket. She jumped and poked her finger with her needle. Duncan's cell phone. She dug it out and flipped it open. "Hello?"

"Is this Megan?"

"Yes."

"Good. You found my phone. It's Duncan."

"I gathered," she said. "I was going to bring it to the airport before your flight leaves."

"You don't need to do that. I'll see if my ride will swing by your place on the way."

"I have a better idea. Why don't I bring it to the same place I left you this morning?"

"That works, but only if you let me buy you an early dinner," he replied. "Bring your husband along."

"I would if I had one. I'll run you to the airport afterward." *What's with me? I don't do things like this. Never. And twice in one day. I must be coming down with something.*

"I can get a cab from the restaurant."

Relief flooded over her. He'd offered a way out. "Really, it's no problem. My car could drive itself out there."

Where had that come from? Her brain and her mouth were not communicating. *C'mon, Megan. Admit it. He's like a magnet and you're iron filings. You're attracted big time.*

"Twenty minutes?" he asked.

"Okay. Bye." Megan hung up and ran for her bedroom. Sweats wouldn't do, even for such a casual pseudo-date.

She rifled through her closet and selected a pair of tailored black slacks and magenta jacket with a matching cowl neck sweater. Changing clothes quickly, she gave her hair a quick brush and freshened her make-up. She found Duncan's phone in the living room, grabbed her purse and a coat and rushed to her car. In five minutes, she'd parked in the lot where she'd left Duncan hours ago.

He strode across the pavement and climbed in beside her. "Hello again. Thanks for doing this."

"You're welcome." She held out his phone. "Take this before I forget to give it to you."

"Thank you. I hope you don't mind eating so early."

He wiggled around, stuffing the cell phone in the cargo pocket of his pants, then reached for the seatbelt. His arm pulled the fabric

of his shirt, delineating a bulging bicep. Megan drew a deep breath. The shoulder harness rested across his deep chest. What would he look like without his shirt? Just the thought of his naked chest made her want to drool. She swallowed hard and started the engine.

“Not at all. I was up at four this morning and had lunch before noon. I’m hungry.”

“Good. Where shall we go that’s quick?” He twisted toward her within the confines of the seatbelt.

“Ruby Tuesday okay?”

Duncan shrugged. “Sure? So how was your day?”

“Fine. Lazy.” *You’ll never know I spent the afternoon seeing your eyes where stars should be.* “Yours?”

They were seated in the restaurant in a few minutes. After placing their orders, they filled their plates with salad.

Seated once again, Duncan smiled across the table at Megan. “How long have you been flying?”

“Eight years. I love it. I meet interesting people and see places I wouldn’t see if I’d stuck around home.” She sipped her iced tea.

“How long have you been in the Army?”

“Eight years, too. I intended to complete my obligation and get out, but my best friend, Darrin, was killed in the Pentagon attack on 9/11. I owe it to him to fight the war on terror.”

“Have you been in Iraq?”

“Afghanistan. I expect orders for Iraq soon.”

She shuddered. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. I’m serving by choice.” The waitress placed their meals on the table and left. “I owed Uncle Sam four years for my ROTC scholarship and another two for sending me to finish a master’s degree. I decided to stay in, even though I could help the war effort in the private sector.”

“I’d be scared to death.” The chicken, scrumptious one bite ago, suddenly tasted like cardboard. How could he sound so matter of fact about serving in a war zone as hostile as it’s cruel heat? He was perfectly relaxed, sipping tea as if nothing was wrong. His every word sent arrows of fear through her. *Don’t let on. He’ll be gone in a short time and you never see him again.* Still Duncan’s attitude gave her greater

appreciation for those who served in the armed forces.

“A little fear is a good thing,” he said, sounding almost nonchalant. “Keeps a soldier from doing something stupid. I’m well trained and I believe in the cause.”

She nodded and waited to speak until the waitress removed their empty plates. “I know what you mean about training. My mother hates my flying. She’s afraid the plane will crash or a hijacker will attack me. My training has taught me how to deal with emergencies. It’s my prime job.”

“But mom still worries.”

Megan rolled her eyes. “She’s the hand-wringer type. I’m concerned about my kid sisters. Dad’s a trucker, away from home five days a week. The oldest three of us are grown and gone. That leaves a sister in college and the twins. They’re only thirteen. Mom over-protects them one minute and ignores them the next. It’s a good thing they have good heads on their shoulders.”

“Can’t you work closer to home?”

“Not really. Jobs in the airline industry are scarce and highly competitive.” No matter how easy he was to talk to, she wasn’t about to tell him she stayed as far away from California as possible. It was time to change the subject.

“Tell me about your family,” Megan said while they waited for the bill. Glass in hand, she twisted the paper coaster in circles.

“They’re all dead now.”

She heard the sadness in his voice. “I’m sorry.”

“So am I.”

Not only sadness, but a definite *subject’s closed*. Megan searched for something else to talk about. “Do you do much sightseeing in Washington?”

“Not really. I saw a lot when I was young, but not much since. How ‘bout you? Do you have time to do anything when you’re in town?”

“Depends on the schedule. One month I had twenty-four-hour layovers. I went to the Smithsonian every trip and still didn’t see everything. My favorite is a toss up between the Air and Space Museum and the American History Museum. I love the First Ladies

collection and the commercial aviation exhibits. Someday, I'll go back and spend a week. Maybe I can see everything I'd like."

He drained his glass and grinned, his blue eyes sparkling like the Hope diamond. Leaning forward, he propped his chin in his fist. "You'll need more than a week. The Smithsonian has so many museums and they are always adding new exhibits."

She uncrossed her legs and nudged his foot in the process. Immediately she jerked her foot back as if she'd been stung. "I really want to witness the changing of the guard at the Tomb of the Unknowns sometime. With all the security regulations, how would I arrange it?"

"It's been years since I went, but I'll find out for you."

"Would you?" She rummaged in her purse and pulled out a folded leather case. "Here's my card."

He shoved it in his pocket. Pulling out his pen, he scribbled his phone number and email address on a napkin. "Let me know when you're in town next. It would be fun to go together."

"I'd like that." Where had that eagerness come from? She wanted to deliver him to the airport and never see him again.

Didn't she?

* * * *

Duncan settled in his seat on the plane, pleased with himself. Not only had the meeting with the general gone well, but he'd met a woman who interested him more than any he'd met in a long time. Pulling Megan's card from his pocket, he read: *Custom Quilting by Megan*, with her address, phone number and email. He programmed her number into his phone, and as he did so, noted her last name was Bradshaw.

Megan Bradshaw had a nice ring to it. Megan Fraser sounded even better.

Where the hell had that come from? This was no time to start a relationship. Despite the reputation he'd acquired in his carefree college days, he didn't chase women anymore. So what was up with jumping on every opportunity to be with the flight attendant?

He shook his head and dragged the briefcase from under the

seat, tucking the card inside for safekeeping. After he fastened his seatbelt, he reclined his chair enough to be comfortable without making the person behind him miserable. More exhilarated than tired, he closed his eyes. He wanted to savor the day rather than chat with the old lady in the seat beside him.

A radiant smile, shining green eyes and dark glossy hair filled the screen behind his lids. He hadn't wanted to dinner to end. She hadn't voiced her unease with his profession, but her expression had given her fear away. Megan was scared on his behalf. He'd missed having someone who cared, even in a casual way.

He still couldn't believe she'd gone to all that trouble on his behalf today. He wasn't sure why, but he had the impression Megan didn't make a habit of befriending perfect strangers.

He must send a proper thank you. Chocolates or flowers?

Chapter Two

Megan printed out the April bid sheet with the intention of deciding on her priorities for a flying line. The sooner the monthly chore was out of the way, the better. The computer dinged, signaling an incoming email. She glanced at the address. Another message from Duncan. The corners of her mouth curved into a smile, and her finger clicked the mouse. His words jumped off the screen.

Sergeant Docker did it again, Duncan wrote. Docker's our office prankster. Yesterday he started a slinky down one of the ramped corridors in the Pentagon, reenacting a stunt his grandfather pulled back in the 1950s. All went well until the darn thing landed on a general's shoe. The general was not amused.

She burst out laughing.

The telephone rang, and she picked up the portable handset. "This is Megan Bradshaw."

"Thank goodness, you're home!"

The hair on the back of her neck stood up at the sound of her mother's voice. The joy of Duncan's note vanished in a heartbeat. "Hello to you, too."

"I just don't know what to do with your sister."

Megan closed her eyes and drew a calming breath. "Which one and what did she do?"

"Which one? Lillie, of course. Her report card is terrible. Three Ds, two C minuses."

"What do you expect me to do about it, Mom?" Megan couldn't keep the exasperation from her voice.

"Don't take that tone with me. I am your mother. You owe me some respect—"

Respect has to be earned. You haven't even begun. A knot formed in her stomach. This conversation was a tape replayed over and over again.

"Talk to her," her mother went on, not giving Megan a chance

to respond. “Maybe she’ll listen to you.”

Megan’s hand curled into a fist. Even with all the miles between them, her family wouldn’t leave her alone. She sighed. “All right, Mom. Have her call me when she gets home from school. I have to go now.”

She disconnected before her mother could say another word. Nausea gripped her. If the problem wasn’t her baby sister, she would ignore her mother’s demand. *Learn to screen your calls*, an inner voice ordered.

Now where was she? Oh, yeah, the bid sheet. Just what she needed to settle her tummy down. She took the papers to the dining table. It was easier to see the possibilities when they were spread out.

Where did she want to go? New York, Boston, Atlanta? Did she want to be home every weekend? The best schedules, as always, would go to those far senior to her.

With every page she flipped Duncan’s face flashed before her eyes. She had allowed herself to be more comfortable with him than any man she’s met in years. She wanted Washington trips with a layover on Saturday night, plain and simple. That was the only way she could hope to see Duncan again. She leafed through the pages until she found every line that allowed her to spend part of Saturday in D.C., and marked her bid sheet accordingly.

On the way to the bedroom to email her choices to the office, she stopped to sniff the beautiful iris and tulip bouquet Duncan had sent and to snatch another piece of Godiva chocolate. Flowers and chocolate, two things guaranteed to go straight to her heart. For that alone she wanted to see him again.

They’d talked on the phone the other night, more than an hour before either of them realized the time. She wasn’t sure she wanted a boyfriend, but she enjoyed their communications. Besides he lived half the country away. That was far enough to keep their relationship casual. Most of all, she needed a friend to take her mind off her family.

* * * *

Duncan paced the hotel lobby with the eagerness of a child on

Christmas morning. He would rather have met her plane, but she'd wanted to change out of her uniform before sightseeing.

He watched from the front window as the hotel's shuttle pulled under the portico. A gentleman climbed out, followed by an entire Heartland Air crew. Even though the women flight attendants wore identical uniforms, he spotted Megan in an instant. She was taller and younger than the other lady. She turned toward the door, laughing at something.

His heart beat faster.

The automatic door opened and she stepped inside, pulling her suitcase. "Hi," she called as she strolled toward him.

"Did you have a good trip?" he asked, resisting—barely—the urge to kiss her.

"The usual. Let me check-in and change, then I'm yours for the day."

If only she were his. He'd dated for years and never experienced this kind of attraction. He thought about her all the time, even when he was supposed to be concentrating on work. At age thirty, he'd been burned enough times to warrant going slow. With Megan standing in front of him wearing a spellbinding smile, slow seemed impossible.

"I'll wait over there," he said, gesturing to a chair by the front window. He sounded normal, despite feeling anything but.

"I won't be long."

Megan was as good as her word. She wore a black knit sundress and carried a matching jacket over her arm.

He swallowed hard.

"I'm ready," she said.

"Let's go." He picked up his own jacket. "I thought we'd start with the Tomb of the Unknowns, since you wanted to see the changing of the guard. Then we can visit the Custis-Lee Mansion while we're at Arlington. From there we can go wherever you like."

"Sounds like a plan."

Duncan took her arm and steered her to his car. He popped the Mustang's lock and held the door.

"An officer and a gentleman," she said. "Thank you."

The twinkle in her eye fascinated him. "I try."

As he drove to Arlington National Cemetery, Duncan explained the arrangement for visitors. "We take the Tourmobile from the parking lot. It'll stop at both places we want to see."

He parked, paid the fee for the ride and they climbed aboard. The guide gave running commentary about the cemetery, created during the Civil War on the estate owned by General Lee's wife, and the well-known persons buried there. At the Tomb everyone got out and walked to the amphitheater overlooking the marble monument. A white-gloved soldier in full dress uniform marched back and forth on a black mat.

"The Unknown Soldiers of World Wars I and II and the Korean War are buried here. The other grave is empty. It's the crypt of the Unknown of Vietnam."

"I don't understand. Why isn't someone from Vietnam honored?"

"There was, but evidence surfaced suggesting the identity of the soldier. He was disinterred, and through advanced DNA testing his identity as an Air Force pilot was confirmed. His family had him reburied at the national cemetery in St. Louis."

"That must have been a heart wrenching decision for his family. I'm not sure I could have gone as far as to have the testing done when he was honored in this way," Megan said. "What about Desert Storm?"

"There will be no more unknowns," Duncan answered. "The military requires DNA records on all service members. Every soldier, sailor, airman, marine and coast guardsman who dies can be identified."

"As terrible as it seems to be prepared for death, it must be a comfort for families to know they won't be left wondering."

Duncan nodded. To a point, she had it right. There wasn't any reason to remind her that anyone missing in action still left loved ones in limbo.

"I did some research," he said. "The sentinel walks exactly twenty-one steps on the mat past the graves."

"Why twenty-one?"

“It represents a twenty-one gun salute.”

They watched the soldier complete the exact number of steps, crisply turn ninety degrees to face east. He held there, then turned again, performed a precise movement to change his rifle from one shoulder to the other, and again marched twenty-one steps.

“Look,” Duncan said. “Here come the relief commander and the next sentinel.”

The ceremony continued with the relief commander performing a slow white-glove inspection of the new sentinel’s weapon. Joined by the duty sentinel, all three soldiers stopped before the Tomb and saluted. Orders were exchanged, the new soldier began his walk and the other two passed out of the plaza.

Megan blinked back tears and seized Duncan’s hand. The expression in his eyes told her he shared the awe and pride that filled her. Her country honored those who had given their lives to protect the rest of the nation. Those interred here could be anyone’s husband, son, father or brother. The honoree from the Korean War might even be her own great uncle, still listed as missing in action. “Do they stand guard all the time?”

“Twenty-four/seven, every day of the year, in boiling sun, freezing rain and snow.

“During Hurricane Isabel the men were given the option of leaving the tomb unguarded, but the soldiers refused. They’re a special group of volunteers. The testing required is extensive and intense. Less than four hundred soldiers in the last forty-five years have earned the honor guard badge.”

Her tears overflowed. Hastily, she swiped them away. Why did she have to be a sentimental slob? When things touched her heart, she could no more hide her feelings than could fly without the trusty bird on which she worked.

Megan turned her attention back to the sentinel, mindful of his measured steps and the sun gleaming off his brass buttons. Today was beautiful, warm with a gentle breeze. Guarding the Tomb wouldn’t be difficult. Still, she could envision these soldiers in winter, performing their duty in wind-whipped snow, their uniforms flapping while icicles formed on the brims of their hats. Or soaked during a

sudden summer storm. Their dedication was remarkable.

“How did you learn all that stuff?”

Duncan laughed. “The Internet, where else? Shall we visit Arlington House? The view of Washington from the front porch is breathtaking. President Kennedy’s grave site is just down the hill from the house.”

A brief ride took them to the mansion. They stood on the porch and gazed across the Potomac River to the National Mall. In a line, Megan located the Lincoln Memorial, the Washington Monument and in the far distance, the Capitol. “Wow. Imagine seeing that—” She waved her hand toward the city. “—every day. I’d never get anything done for wandering back to the porch.”

“The novelty would wear off in time,” Duncan said.

“I doubt it. Let’s go inside.”

They wandered through the house, peeking into rooms as they came to them.

“Colonel Lee had central heating installed in the 1850s. The remnants are in the basement under this hall,” the Park Ranger guide explained.

“Just what one would expect from an outstanding engineer,” Duncan replied. “An innovative thinker.”

They finished the interior and stepped outside to visit the gardens.

“Thank you,” Megan said. “I would never have gone on my own.”

“You’re welcome. I don’t know about you, but I’m starved.”

“Me, too.”

“Let’s grab something quick at the Exchange on Fort Myer and then see something else.” Duncan took her hand and they walked to the Tourmobile stop.

“Anything particular you’d like to visit?” Duncan asked when they reached his car. “We can drive down to Mount Vernon, go into town, or something else you’d like.”

“The Vietnam Wall.”

“Okay. Are you up to a lot of walking? We can do the Korean and World War II memorials while we’re on the Mall.”

Megan lifted her foot to show him comfortable fisherman's sandals. "I wore my walking shoes."

"Are you sure? You walked halfway across the country this morning."

Megan almost melted into a puddle. Not in her memory had anyone been concerned that she might not feel up to something. She could get used to being treated like she was special. If she wasn't careful, she would fall head over teacup for this man.

His expectant look reminded her he was waiting for an answer. "I'm sure."

She had intended to spend the day sightseeing with a friend. Now things had changed. She wasn't sure she could put her finger on what had been altered or why, but somehow her expectations and reality didn't quite jibe. Could she truly be falling for Duncan? Megan gave herself a mental shake.

How could she be falling for someone she barely knew? She didn't believe in love at first sight or even love at first date. That might happen in books and movies. It might even happen to other people, but it did not happen to her. An inner voice warned caution. Maybe it was time to throw caution to the winds and let what happened happen without her usual roadblocks.

* * * *

Megan stood before the wall of black granite, mesmerized by all the names inscribed in the stone. Indescribable emotions hit her as if she'd been punched in the gut. Tears welled in her eyes. She reached for Duncan's hand and held tight. "I don't understand. I didn't know anyone who died in Vietnam, although my father did a tour over there. Why am I so moved?"

"This place gets people—" He touched the center of his chest. "—right here. It's healed a lot of hurts."

She swiped a finger across her cheek, wiping away another moist trickle. "So many names..."

Megan stepped back to give someone else a closer look. The place was packed with tourists. "Let's go see the others."

Hand in hand they strolled to the World War II Memorial. She

couldn't remember a time a date had done something as corny as holding her hand. Old-fashioned as it was, she liked it. He didn't let go until they walked through the arch commemorating action in the Pacific theater. All those old war movies she'd seen flashed through her mind. *The Longest Day*, *Tora! Tora! Tora!*, *Saving Private Ryan*. So much death. The staggering losses... So sad.

They wandered around the edifice, and stopped to read the plaques. At the wall covered with gold stars representing those who died in battle, Megan expected a strong emotional response. It didn't happen.

"This whole monument is lovely. But... I'm not touched by the stars like I was by all the names at the Vietnam Wall," she said.

"Names are individual. I read each of these stars represents 1000 people. The stars are anonymous," Duncan replied. "There's a big difference in the representation."

"You're right. I suppose this place was intended to honor more than heal."

Duncan again took her hand, engulfing her with a sense of belonging. They ambled through the Atlantic arch and headed back down the other side of the Mall. "I think you'll like the Korean War Memorial better."

"How come?"

"Wait 'til you see it."

The wind kicked up. Megan noticed a bank of black clouds off in the distance. "Looks like a storm's coming in." She dropped his hand and stepped off the sidewalk jammed with Cherry Blossom Festival tourists. "Race you," she called over her shoulder, as she took off running.

Duncan outdistanced her before she'd gone five steps. By the time she reached the memorial grounds, he stood there, hands planted on his hips, not even breathing hard.

He grinned. "What took you so long?"

"I won't do that again." She shook her head. "You're in better shape than I am, that's for sure."

"Megan, I'm an active duty soldier. I darned well better be in shape."

The reality of his statement hit her hard. If he had to fight, he had to be able to run fast. His life could depend on it. "You work out regularly don't you?"

"Every day if possible."

He clasped her arm. Suddenly, her breath caught, the same as it had on the day they'd met. Whatever this electricity was between them, it was powerful. She wondered if he felt it too. He seemed perfectly at ease. She hoped she seemed as relaxed, the operative word being seemed.

They walked to a group of statues that represented a combat patrol. Each soldier wore a helmet and poncho and carried a huge pack on his back. They were exhausted, yet they trudged on. She noticed their faces. Weary faces. Careworn faces. Old-before-their-time faces. Their fatigue was palpable.

Pressing her fingers to her lips, she blinked back another onslaught of tears. This memorial was by far the most personal.

She read the inscription carved in stone: *"Our nation honors their sons and daughters who answered the call to defend a country they never knew and a people they never met. 1950 Korea 1953"*

"That's just as true today," she said, her throat tight.

Duncan moved beside her and slid his arm around her shoulders. "Yes."

She caught something she couldn't quite name in his voice. Patriotism, duty, whatever it was, she knew Duncan Fraser believed in the cause for which he had fought and would fight again.

He turned and pointed to the wall behind him. The words were simple. FREEDOM IS NOT FREE.

Megan stood in silence for a full minute. Finally she drew a deep breath. "That sums up everything we've seen today, doesn't it?"

He nodded, his body ramrod straight, as if standing at attention. The way he stood, she half expected a sharp salute. "I think so. No, I know it. Too many friends have paid the price of life or limb for the sake of freedom. Sorry, I didn't mean to get on my soapbox. It's just that civilians don't get it, at least many don't."

"No apology necessary. I understand your passion. In fact, I share it. Thank you for bringing me here today."

“You’re welcome.”

Thunder rumbled in the distance. A raindrop hit Megan’s nose. “We’d better get out of here before we get soaked.”

“The Lincoln Memorial,” Duncan said. “We’ll never make it to the car.”

They ran. Megan was out of breath before she reached the steps leading up to the statue of President Lincoln. She leaned over, and rested her hands on her knees, unsure if she could make up all those stairs.

Lightning forked. Thunder boomed. Suddenly her feet left the ground as Duncan swept her into his arms.

“Eek! I can walk.”

“This is better—ah, faster.”

Being held, cared for, was a different experience. It hit again that she could get used to his TLC. She savored the moment, nestling so close to his chest that she heard the thump of his heart.

Duncan set her down under the protection of the roof just as the heavens opened. So many people were taking shelter in the interior that she couldn’t see much of the enthroned likeness of the sixteenth president.

Her feet throbbed. Muscles she didn’t know she had ached, and she longed to sit down. Anyplace, even Honest Abe’s lap would do. Duncan, darn him, looked as fresh as he had this morning. She leaned against him, despite a cautionary voice in the back of her mind.

The rain came down in torrents. More people sought shelter inside. “It’s getting hot in here,” she said. “I think I’d rather be wet.”

“We’ll leave when the lightning stops,” Duncan replied. “Let’s hope it’s a quick spring shower.”

Fifteen minutes later, the sun shone again. Except for the puddles and dripping leaves, the storm might never have been.

He held her elbow going down the steps. “Are you ready for dinner?”

“Now that you mention it. But I’ve taken your whole day.”

Duncan slung his arm around her shoulders. “I’ve enjoyed every minute of it. I’m not ready for our time together to end.”

Her heart leapt.

“There’s a place in Alexandria by the river I like. Want to try it?”

Megan grinned. “Love it.”

He pulled his cell phone off his belt. “I’ll make reservations. Seven-thirty okay?”

* * * *

“I’m so full, I don’t think I can move any farther.” Duncan parked himself on a bench beside the Potomac and pulled Megan down beside him. “How’re the twins?”

She tore her gaze from a magnificent cabin cruiser in the river, turned to face him, and sighed. “About the same. Lillie called the other day and begged to come live with me.”

That simple inhale, exhale spoke volumes of her concern, frustration, even anger. He hurt for her.

“What happened to prompt that?”

“The usual. She’s embarrassed to have her friends over.” Megan paused.

He watched her expression play a tug of war with itself. Seconds ticked by. She straightened and squared her shoulders.

“My mother is a hypochondriac and uses her illness—” She made quotation marks in the air. “—as an excuse to do nothing around the house. Ellie’s a tough little cookie. She handles the situation pretty well. Lillie is the opposite—gentle and sensitive. She simply wants to escape.”

“There’s no way you can have a kid that age live with you, not and continue to fly.”

“I told her that. She asked me to quit.”

Duncan wrinkled his forehead. “Your sister has a lot of brass to ask that of you. Is changing jobs a viable solution?”

“Sure.” Megan’s shoulders slumped. “I have a degree. I could find other work, but I like what I do. That sounds selfish.”

He watched annoyance and something else—sadness maybe—flit in her expression. “Not to me. Family’s important, but your employment isn’t the issue.”

“Exactly. The real problem is my parents’ lack of responsibility. I

took care of things when I was home. From the time I could reach the knobs, I cooked for the other kids and did the housework.”

No wonder she liked the freedom flying provided. “What about the others? Can’t they help?”

“The boys are gone. Sam’s in the Coast Guard in Florida. Rob works on an oilrig in the Gulf of Mexico. Nobody hears much from either of them.”

“Your other sister?”

Megan chuckled.

He heard no humor or joy, only acceptance.

“Emily’s in college in Oregon.”

“Has your mother gotten medical help?”

“My goodness, yes. There’s nothing wrong that losing weight and behaving like a proper mother wouldn’t cure. She’s unwilling to do either. Her doctor doesn’t pay much attention to her constant complaints anymore.”

“Have the medics had her examined for mental illness?”

“A complete evaluation. The results, much to Mom’s dismay, were all negative. I think it’s all a plea for attention.”

Duncan picked up her hand and caressed the top. “It’s not your problem to fix, honey. I can tell it tears you up, but you can’t do anymore.”

His sympathy stirred Megan’s heart; his casual endearment touched her soul. She’d never had anyone interested in her problems, not ever. Before she could stop herself she continued. “I tried. I tried so hard. All I did was make it worse by enabling my parent’s neglect. I became ill trying to juggle the kids, all the chores and school. My doctor told me leave town and only go back for short visits.”

“Sounds like good advice.” He squeezed her fingers.

“Yes, but it doesn’t help the guilt.” Megan’s throat was tight and her voice came out in a whisper. “My little sisters deserve a better childhood than I had. I tell myself I did my part.”

“What about your dad? Can’t he do something?”

“I guess he could get a job close to home but he loves what he does. I’m not sure he would give it up.”

“Can you talk to him? He should know Lillie wants to leave

home. What if she takes matters into her hands and runs away?"

Megan waved a dismissive hand. "She'd never do that. Ellie might. She's the spunky one, but she's got more common sense. Lillie is scared of her own shadow. I can't imagine either one of them pulling such a crazy stunt."

"Just a thought. You know them better than I do."

"We've spent the whole evening talking about me and my family. Tell me about yours."

He leaned forward and rest his elbows on his knees. "Not much to tell. I had older parents. All my grandparents were dead before I was ten. Mom and Dad died in a car wreck a year after I graduated from college. Then the closest thing I had to a brother was killed on 9/11. I miss having a family."

Mimicking his earlier gesture, she took his hand and squeezed, wishing she dared give him a great big hug. "I'm so sorry."

"It's okay. I have lots of friends."

"Why haven't you married?" She slapped her fingers against her lips. "Sorry, that's none of my business."

"I never found the right lady."

"Oh." Her cheeks warmed. She glanced at her watch. "I really need to get back. I have to get up at three-thirty."

He rose and pulled her to her feet. They rode in companionable silence and listened to the classical music station on the radio. Once there, Duncan parked in a dark corner of the lot.

"I really had a great time today," she said. "Dinner was wonderful. Thank you for everything."

He leaned over and pulled her in a hug.

Megan snuggled close. Safe. Good heavens, his arms were like a protected harbor in the storm of her life.

"I did, too," he said. "I wish it didn't have to end, but I know you have to get some sleep."

She proved his statement with a yawn. "Sorry. It's not the company—"

"—but the hour," he finished in a teasing tone. "Will you be back this way soon?"

Her heart tripped at his wishful inflection. "I have Washington

layovers all month. Maybe you'll be free on one of my trips."

"I'll make sure of it." His arms tightened around her. Megan wrapped her arms around his neck. He lowered his head, and his lips touched hers. Megan melted into his hold. His mouth moved on hers, gently, tenderly. Her lips parted. His moved to the corner of her mouth, to her chin and trailed kisses down her neck to the base of her throat. Her breath caught on the sensation created by his meandering lips.

He raised his head. Her sense of loss caught her off guard. Before her thoughts went further, he moved back to her mouth, this time with more insistence. She kissed him back, her arms tightening around his neck.

Headlights flashed through the window. Duncan let her go and straightened up. "I'd better let you go while I still can," he muttered.

"Yes," she panted, and reached for the door handle.

Duncan walked her to the elevator door. Tilting her chin up with one finger, he dropped a quick kiss on her nose. "I'll call you tomorrow night."

"I'll look forward to it."

* * * * *

Duncan sprawled on the couch in his apartment, clicking through the TV channels. Today had been great. Megan was good company—softhearted, playful, and concerned for others. Her kiss convinced him theirs was a relationship worth developing. She had responded freely, kissing him back with as much eagerness as he'd kissed her.

Still, did he want to get involved with a woman with so many family problems? It seemed likely her guilt would force her to quit flying and bring the twins to live with her. She'd said she could find other work.

Where did that leave him? He'd be taking on a woman with two kids. His experience with children could be put on the head of a pin. As much as he wanted a home and family of his own, he sure didn't want to start with teenagers.

Slow down. He'd seen Megan all of three times. He wasn't in love

with her. Or was he?

Nah.

Sure, she aroused him. Good-looking females did that to a guy. But love? No way. He didn't believe in love a first sight, or second or third for that matter. Still he couldn't deny the strong attraction.

He'd promised to call. Should he keep his promise?

Why not? A telephone call, even another date, didn't mean he should go diamond shopping. He wasn't committed to anything.

* * * *

Won!

Duncan knew how to kiss. Megan tingled all over, thinking about those minutes held in his arms, their lips connected in a mutual tango. Never in her life had she let a man that close and yet, with Duncan it seemed so very right. She couldn't sleep. Her mind kept replaying every minute of their wonderful day.

Her legs ached and tomorrow would be long and grueling. She got up and took some aspirin. Instead of going back to bed, she sat down in the chair and pulled her knees to her chest.

Washington, D.C. was a great place to visit. Things to see and do were endless. The history of the nation bumped against the twenty-first century. There was plenty for every taste. Seeing the sights with Duncan was something she'd treasure always. Besides being an excellent tour guide, he was a delightful companion and good listener.

More than that, he was downright fun. Thinking about how he'd picked her up and run up the Lincoln Memorial steps, she laughed out loud. Never would she have dreamed he'd do anything as gallant as that.

He made her forget all the reasons she didn't date much. She couldn't wait to see him again. But was it wise to get involved with someone who would be sent into harm's way in the not-so-distant future? The twins were enough for her to worry about, without adding concern for Duncan getting blown up by a roadside bomb.

Then again, if she kept theirs an uncomplicated friendship, she could enjoy an occasional date until he deployed.

Yes. That's it. Uncomplicated.

She forced the memory of that bone-melting kiss to the deepest corner of her mind.

Chapter Three

Megan's plane landed the last time at ten o'clock on Sunday night. She was so grateful to be home at last. Her flying line was excellent for spending Saturdays with Duncan, but she paid for the easy day with a rotten schedule the next. Sundays were seventeen-hour duty days, puddle jumping to four different cities. Not all that time was actually flying, but hanging around airports waiting for the next flight was as wearing as working a trip.

She drove to her apartment, her head filled with thoughts of her nice comfortable bed. By the time she parked her car her eyelids drooped. She trudged to the front entry and stopped.

She blinked.

And stared.

Her jaw dropped.

Oh yes, she'd seen right. Her sisters were sitting on the sidewalk, playing cards in the light from the entry.

"What... What are you two doing here?" She wanted to stay calm, but her voice came out in a shout despite herself.

"Waiting for you." Ellie replied, as if it were perfectly natural to be camped on a doorstep far from home.

Megan punched in the security code with trembling fingers. "Inside now. Does Mom know where you are?"

Collecting her things, Lillie avoided looking at Megan. "No. We ran away."

Ellie jerked her thumb in her twin's direction. "She ran away. I just tagged along to make sure she got here okay."

Trying to gather her wits, Megan led the girls to her apartment on the third floor. "Before you do anything else, call Mom and let her know where you are. She must be frantic. Lillie, you make the call. This escapade appears to be your idea."

“Do I havta?”

Lillie’s whimper ground on Megan’s nerves. She pointed to the phone. “Yes. Now.”

The child trudged to kitchen counter. “You have messages.”

“I’ll listen to them later. Call Mom. Right this minute. I’ll talk to her when you’re done.”

Lillie picked up the receiver and dialed. “Mom... Megan said I had to call you. Ellie and me are at her house... Yeah, in Omaha... Talk to her.”

Bracing herself, Megan took the phone. “Hi Mom—”

“How dare you invite my children to visit you.”

“I did not invite them.” Megan fought to keep a civil tone. “I just got home and found them on my doorstep. I thought you’d better know they were here and safe first.”

“This wouldn’t happen if you didn’t encourage them.”

Hadn’t Mom begged her to talk to Lillie just the other day? No matter what Megan did, nothing pleased her mother. Megan counted to ten before she dared respond. “I most certainly did not encourage them. I’ll call you tomorrow after I find out what’s going on.”

“I will not allow them to stay with you and be spoiled rotten. Send them home. Tonight.”

Megan’s hand clenched the receiver until her knuckles turned white. “I don’t spoil them as much as you think. Besides, I can’t arrange to get them back to California tonight. Is Dad home?”

“He’s working this weekend. I’m here all alone.”

Her mother’s whine grated on Megan’s already frayed nerves. “I’m exhausted. We’re all going to bed. I’ll call in the morning. Good-bye.”

“I’m hungry,” Ellie said. “What’ve you got to eat?”

“Peanut butter and jelly, or a grilled cheese sandwich. I wasn’t expecting company.”

The phone rang. Megan picked it up praying it wasn’t her mother. “Bread’s in the freezer.” She left the girls poking into the refrigerator and carried the phone into the bedroom. “Hello.”

“Hi. Sounds like you have company.”

Megan shut the door. “Oh, Duncan, I’m glad it’s you. They’re

here. Both of them.”

“They, meaning Ellie and Lillie?”

“Yes. The brats were playing cards at my apartment door when I got home a few minutes ago. I’m so mad I could spit.”

Duncan chuckled. “Haven’t heard that expression before. I’d better let you go attend to the girls. Promise you won’t beat them?”

Megan sighed. “I’d sure like to, but I won’t. I’m too tired, for one thing.”

“I wish I was there to help you. I’ll call back tomorrow. You can tell me about it then. Call me later if you need to talk.”

“But it’s already nearly midnight back there.”

“If you need me, call. I mean it. It doesn’t matter what time it is.”

His words wrapped her in a warm quilt of reassurance. One person cared about her. “I promise. Thanks again for a wonderful time yesterday. Good night.”

“Bye, honey.”

Megan disconnected and strode back to the living room. Simply hearing Duncan’s voice had calmed her down. She’d much rather talk to him than face her sisters, but she had no choice but find out why the kids were here.

She returned the phone to its base station and stepped around to block the kitchen door. Hands braced on her hips, she glared at the girls. “I want to know what this is all about.”

“Mom’s mean to me,” Lillie said.

“Lillie Anne, you sound like a three-year-old. How did you get here?”

“We took a bus to Omaha, then a cab here.”

“Where did you get the money?” Megan knew she sounded like a prosecutor but she didn’t care.

“I didn’t steal it.”

Megan tapped her foot and scowled.

“I’ve been saving my allowance.”

“If your allowance covers bus and cab fare for two, then our parents are giving you too much,” Megan snapped. “Where did you get that much?”

“...borrowed from our savings account,” Lillie whispered.

“That was supposed to be for college. I call that stealing, young lady.”

Lillie burst into tears. Ellie put her arm around her twin. “She was desperate, Meggie. Lillie’s so unhappy, her grades are falling. Mom won’t let her do anything anymore. She can’t go to the movies with her boyfriend or even talk to her friends on the phone. She’s grounded until her grades improve.”

Lillie struggled to keep up with Ellie in school, Megan knew.

“What about you, Ellie? Are you grounded, too?”

“I might as well be. Mom makes us do all the cleaning and won’t drive us anywhere. She says she’s too tired.”

Lillie quivered like a terrified child, tears running down her face. “Please don’t send me back, Meggie. It’s like I’m a prisoner.”

“Let’s sit down,” Megan suggested, pointing to the table. She forced herself to sound calmer than she felt. “Eat your sandwiches. I’ll make hot chocolate.”

She put the kettle on to heat. “What’s going on with Mom?” she said over her shoulder. “Is she worse?”

“Yeah,” Ellie answered. “I mean she doesn’t do *anything* anymore but sit around getting fat.”

Ellie bumped her elbow on the counter’s corner. The plate and sandwich flew from her hand and crashed to the floor.

Megan stooped and to pick up the mess and noticed Ellie’s shoes. They were whimsical, woven straw with a daisy on the toe.

“Why are you wearing Mom’s shoes?” They had been Megan’s Mother’s Day gift a couple of years ago.

“Oh, her feet’re so chubby she can’t wear them. She had to buy all new shoes, and gave us her old ones. She can’t wear her wedding rings either. Her fingers are too big.”

It had been over a year since Megan had been home. How could her mother have changed that much? “How much weight has she gained?”

“I don’t know,” Ellie replied. “A lot. You should see her face. Her eyelids are puffy and her face is all round. It looks like a marshmallow. The weird thing is she’s wearing the same clothes.”

“You should see her mouth.” Lillie added. “Looks like a bee stung her or something. She’s got all these moley things on her neck, too. They’re really gross. And snore. Man, she shakes the roof. We have to keep our door closed and we still need earplugs.”

Megan frowned and her stomach rolled. Last time she’d been home Mom had been heavy but she still retained her pretty face. “Did either of you talk to Dad about this?”

Ellie sighed. “I tried, but he wasn’t paying attention. He was too busy working on Mom’s car.”

“Lillie, what about you?”

She shook her head. “What good would it do? He never pays any attention to anything we say. Please, please, let me stay. I’ll be good. I promise.”

Megan brought three steaming mugs to the table. “You can’t stay here, sweetie. I’m gone more than I’m home. I’ll see what I can do to make things better. I’m not sure how, but this can’t go on. Let’s drink our chocolate and get some sleep. Tomorrow we’ll figure out something.”

Megan went to the linen closet and found sheets and blankets. She set them on the couch and located a key in her desk drawer. “I’ll be back in a minute. I’m going to get the air bed from the storage closet.”

In moments she returned. “Girls, move the coffee table over by the sliding glass door.”

Once the table was out of the way, Megan inflated the mattress and made up the queen-size bed. “One of you take your shower.”

Megan cleared the table and put the dishes in the dishwasher. The hands of the clock crept close to midnight. She wanted to talk to Duncan, but she needed to speak to her father.

She stepped into the living room. “Where’s Dad tonight?” she asked Ellie.

The girl shrugged. “All I know is he took a haul for somebody and didn’t come home Friday. That’s when Lillie decided to split. She’d never’ve done it if Dad was home.”

“I’m going to unpack. Holler when you finish in the bathroom.”

“Okay.”

Megan went to the bedroom and shut the door. She shed her uniform and donned a fleece robe. Then she stretched out on the bed and reached for the phone, punching in her father's cell number. If she woke him up, it was too darned bad.

"Big Jim," a grumpy voice came over the line.

"Dad, this is Megan. Did Mom call you about the twins?"

"Yeah, after they turned up at your place. I'll give them a piece of my mind when I get home next week."

"There's a problem that's more than running away and won't be solved by a piece of your mind, I'm afraid. Can you arrange to get home ASAP? Where are you, by the way?"

"Spokane."

"I'll bring the girls home on Wednesday if I can get tickets and time off. I want you there. Mom can't or won't deal with them."

"Don't you go telling me what to do young lady."

Megan saw red. "Sir, these are your daughters. I'm not their parent. Do you want me to call in child welfare?"

"Are you threatening me?"

"No. Like you, I travel for a living. I can't keep the girls here. Obviously there's a problem at home between them and Mom. Their father needs to take care of it."

He heaved a big sigh. "I guess you're right. I'll see what I can do."

"Thank you. We'll see you on Wednesday. Bye."

* * * *

Duncan balled his sandwich wrappings, lobbed them in the trash and headed to the parking lot. He had just enough time left to call Megan before his next meeting. Cell phones weren't permitted in his office at the Pentagon. He'd call from his car. She most likely needed a shoulder to lean on right about now.

He grabbed the phone from the console, and hit the speed dial. She answered on the first ring.

"Hi. It's Duncan. I wanted to make sure you were okay."

"I'm okay, but really worried."

He didn't like the strain in her voice. "It would surprise me if

you weren't. Anything could've happened to your sisters on their way to Nebraska."

"That, too, but what the kids told me about Mom doesn't sound right."

"I thought she was a complainer."

"She is, but the girls are wearing her shoes because Mom can't wear them anymore." Megan went on to tell him the rest of the girls' report. "Maybe there really is something wrong. They say her face is really puffy. She could be storing fluid or taking steroids."

Alarm bells went off in his head. He exited the hot car and leaned against the fender. "Megan, that sounds like the symptoms my boss's wife had last fall. If I remember right her problem was a hormone disorder."

"You mean there really could be something wrong?" There was something in her tone. If he had to put a name to it, he'd say it was hope.

"I don't know. I recall they were blindsided by the diagnosis. She didn't feel well and hadn't for a long time, but had no idea something was seriously wrong. Let me ask him about it."

"I'd appreciate that."

"So, what are you going to do about the girls?"

"Take them home Wednesday. Dad is supposed to meet me there. I hope he shows. He was not a happy camper when I called him."

Duncan wanted to pound something. What was the matter with the man? Didn't he have a clue about anything? With effort, he kept his anger to himself. "I wish I could go with you, honey."

"Thanks, Sir Galahad, but I can manage," she said. "Not that I wouldn't love back-up."

"I'm sure you can manage, but that doesn't change the fact that I'd like to be there to support you." She'd never know how much he wanted to protect her from her parents. Crazy thought. She wasn't to blame for anything. She didn't need protection, but that didn't change how he felt.

"It's enough knowing I have someone talk to about this mess."

"Any time. Now I have to get back to work. I'll find out what I

can from the colonel and let you know tonight.”

“Thanks for calling. Bye.”

“Bye, hon.”

Megan disconnected and pressed her fingers to her lips. What if Duncan was right? Suppose her mother really was sick? Shame filled her. All this time she had assumed Mom was lazy and invented ailments as an excuse.

Sighing, she stared at the phone. More than anything, she wanted to hear Duncan’s voice. It didn’t matter that she’d talked to him a minute ago. He was like a port in a storm, a safe harbor where she could unload some of the burden on her shoulders. He’d call back tonight.

Right now the girls needed lunch. After that, they might as well go do something. She really didn’t care what they did to fill the hours until she heard from Duncan again.

* * * *

The girls watched a rented movie while Megan hid out in the bedroom and folded laundry. She’d arranged a week’s vacation to take her sisters back to California. Seven days wasn’t much time to fix things, but she could make a start. Arrangements made, she had talked to her mother. Their conversation was riddled with the same old accusatory stuff. Why did she allow her mother to hurt her so badly and often?

There were times when she wanted to divorce her parents. That being impossible, all she could do was keep them at arms length. *Good idea, but easier said than done.*

A ring broke the silence. Megan’s heart skipped a beat. She grabbed the phone. “Hello.”

“Hi. It’s Duncan.”

“I recognized your voice.”

“How was your afternoon? You sound tired.”

“I am. We went to the mall. My sisters are little snobs. Everything they saw is passé in California. It’s a good thing they didn’t see a thing they wanted to buy. I’m not in a charitable mood right now.”

"I bet you aren't. I have some information for you. Got a pencil?"

"In my hand. Go ahead."

"Let me spell the name of the disorder for you. A-C-R-O-M-E-G-A-L-Y. The word means enlarged extremities, in Greek. It's rare and hard to diagnose. The symptoms are caused by excessive growth hormone produced by the pituitary gland. The colonel said the best thing would be to look it up on the web. Just type in the key word and do a search. He said it was nothing to ignore and if you suspect that's your mom's problem, you should get her to see an endocrinologist."

Megan's stomach did a flip-flop. What if this were her mother's difficulty? "Thank you. And thank your boss, too. We'll check this out."

"You're welcome. When did you say you leaving?"

"Wednesday morning. We have to be at the airport at nine."

"I'm coming out for another meeting Wednesday. I could take the early afternoon flight tomorrow and we could spend the evening together."

For the first time since Sunday night, Megan felt a smile tugging at the corners of her mouth. "That would be wonderful. I'd love for you to meet the girls."

"What time?"

"Come as soon as you can. I can't wait to see you."

He chuckled. "I can't wait to see you either. I'll get a room at the base, and drop off my stuff. I should be there before five, unless the plane is late."

"See you then. Good night."

"Night. Sleep well."

Megan went straight to the computer and did a search. The number of articles on acromegaly surprised her. With all this information available, why hadn't she ever heard of the disorder? She read two articles. The information scared her to death. If her mother did have a pituitary adenoma, she was in big trouble. Even a surgical cure would only stop the disease. Permanent damage was done and the effects might or might not lead to other serious conditions later

in life.

Sweat formed on her palms and her heart pounded. She had no choice but to tell her parents. Oh, how she wished Duncan could be with her. On the other hand, she didn't want to draw him into her family problems. As much as she hated to admit it, her parents embarrassed her.

Her thoughts came to a screeching halt. Her relationship with Duncan was developing at warp speed. She wanted— *No. Be truthful with yourself, Megan*. She needed his support, his strength. She was so tired of being the strong one. If only she could let him make all her difficulties smoother, just this once. Even though she realized he was very willing to do that, it wouldn't be fair. He had enough on his plate, knowing he had orders pending for Iraq.

Given all her tangled emotions, she was happy there were two impressionable girls to chaperone tomorrow.

* * * *

Duncan buzzed Megan's apartment from the front entry.

"Who is it?" a young voice answered.

"Duncan Fraser. I'm expected."

He heard the girl yell. "Megan! Your boyfriend's here." There was a pause, and then the door clicked, indicating it was unlatched.

He took the stairs two at a time, excited to see Megan, even though having her kid sisters around wasn't exactly his idea of a fun evening. He knocked, balancing two pizza boxes and reminded himself not to be disappointed. This evening was stolen time. It was worth sharing with two young people if it meant he could see Megan at all.

The door opened. Identical brown-haired girls, who looked enough like Megan that their relationship would be hard to deny, filled the doorway.

"Ellie and Lillie, I presume?"

They looked him over and nodded. "Come in. Megan's in the kitchen."

Megan stepped around the corner and into the circle of his free arm.

He kissed her cheek.

“This is Captain Fraser, girls. Duncan, these are my sisters, Ellie, in the yellow shirt, and Lillie, in the lavender shirt.”

Megan took the boxes and set them on the counter.

He hoped he remembered. “Nice to meet you both,” he said and shook their hands. “Call me Duncan.”

“You didn’t have to bring supper,” Megan said. “I intended to fix something.”

“Another time. I wanted to keep things simple tonight.” That was true as far as it went. In truth he wanted as much of her attention as possible. A cozy private room would be great. *Not doable, Fraser. Cool your jets.*

“Let’s sit in here,” Megan suggested, indicating the dining table. “It’s too bad it’s so chilly or we could use the balcony.”

He pulled out her chair. “Good thought, but this will do.”

The girls settled in front of the TV to finish the program they were watching.

The look on her face was priceless, a combination of aggravation and come hither. Man, was he glad his lap covered by at the tabletop. He reveled in the fact that she wanted to be alone with him as much as he wanted the same with her.

“How’re you holding up?” he asked.

“Okay I guess. I’m dreading tomorrow. I’m sure the discussion with my folks won’t be pleasant.”

“Just remember you haven’t done anything wrong. Don’t let them get to you.”

“I know. Still, I can’t shake this feeling that this whole mess is my fault.”

He shook his head. “It’s that overactive sense of responsibility of yours working overtime.”

“Guilty as charged. I’m trying to overcome that, but I don’t do a good job of it. I keep thinking if Mom is really sick, I’ve made things worse by leaving home.”

“Megan, Megan.” He laid his hand on top of hers and shook his head. “Even if you did worsen the situation, which I doubt, you can’t undo it. Parents are supposed to raise their children to leave the nest

and fend for themselves. You grew up. You should make your own life.”

“I know that in my head. My heart’s the problem. Let’s talk about something else. Tell me about your meeting tomorrow.”

“It’s interesting stuff if you enjoy current events. I wish I could tell you about it.”

Megan laughed. “But you don’t want to kill me.”

“Something like that,” he agreed.

“I know you can’t give me any specifics about your job, but tell me about the Army. Do you like it?”

“Well enough, I guess. I’m good at what I do. I expected to be out of the service by now, but like I told you before, 9/11 changed my plans.”

“You mean the Army won’t let you leave?” She sounded puzzled.

“It’s not that as much as I felt I need to stay. We’re fighting a war on terror. Those s.o.b.s attacked our country. They killed thousands of our citizens, including my best friend.”

She closed her eyes and turned her hand, making them palm to palm and squeezed. That small gesture warmed him more than he thought possible. He realized how lonely he was, despite a large number of friends scattered around the world.

“How soon do you expect to leave for Iraq?” she said, a crack in her voice.

“August, if the rumor mill is right. One thing you learn in the Army is not to believe anything until you see it in writing, and then it’s still subject to change.”

“That makes things difficult.”

“Yeah. Flexibility is a good trait for military families. It saves a lot of frustration.”

“Let’s get the food on the table.” She shoved back and stood, catching her foot on the table leg. Off balance, she landed in his lap. “Oops!”

He wrapped his arm around her middle and twirled an imaginary moustache with his free hand. “Welcome to my lair. Say the magic word before I let you go.”

“And what would that be, you miserable beast?”

He’d never seen her in a playful mood before. He liked it. “What kind of beast would I be if I told you?”

Megan contemplated her hands. “Take pity on me, sir. I have a hungry family to feed.”

“Miserable beasts haven’t a kind bone in their bodies. Magic word or else you stay right where you are.”

“Oh, all right.” She lowered her head and placed her fingers on her brow. A moment later her head popped up. “Supper!”

Duncan’s stomach growled. He kissed her hair above her ear and let her go. “Let’s eat.”

She stood and headed to the refrigerator. He glanced at the twins, sprawled on the couch. Why weren’t they helping? If they were his kids...

* * * *

Megan reached for Duncan’s empty plate. He grabbed her hand and looked from Ellie to Lillie. “How ‘bout you two give your sister a break and clean up the kitchen?”

Megan couldn’t believe he’d make such a suggestion. And yet she admitted she spoiled the girls when she could. Living in their home had never been easy. She tried to compensate for their parents indifference and, well, sometimes she went overboard.

“Do we have to?” Ellie said. “We’re guests.”

That brat! Megan noticed a vein in Duncan’s temple throb. “*Uninvited* guests. This is *not* your vacation. You will clean up the kitchen. When you’re done, go to my bedroom and pack your stuff.”

Ellie’s glare could’ve started a fire. “But—but—”

“Don’t push it.”

Duncan rose to his feet and gave Megan a hand up. “Let’s get out of the way.”

“Before one of us commits murder,” Megan muttered and strode to the couch. “You looked as angry as I am.”

“I had to remind myself I’m neither their father, big brother or commanding officer. I just about bit my tongue in two.” He kept his voice low.

"I tend to do too much for them." She looked into his deep blue eyes and saw an understanding she hadn't expected. "They're little kids, who've had too much responsibility. Been there, done that and paid the price."

"Let's hope your visit with your parents will improve things."

Duncan nestled her under his arm and brushed a wisp of her hair from her cheek. "That's better."

"Mmm," Megan all but purred.

"I can think of a whole lot we could do if we were alone," he whispered.

"But we aren't. Keep it PG, please."

He stuck out his lower lip. "If I must."

"We must."

"Okay... Were you able to find any information on acromegaly?" he asked.

"Yes, a lot. The things the girls mentioned are listed among the symptoms. What scares me are the consequences. Diabetes, colon cancer, hypertension, cardiovascular disease."

"Don't borrow trouble. She may not have it. Many of the indications can be attributed to something else."

"I just want tomorrow over with. The sooner I've done my duty, the sooner I can leave. That sounds awful, but it's the truth."

"Confrontations are never fun. How do the girls feel about going home?"

"Lillie is *not* happy, to put it mildly," Megan said. "She spent the time we were in the car this afternoon, begging me to let her stay."

"That must've been fun."

"Not! The worst of it is I understand her need to escape all too well."

"Stick to your guns, sweetheart." Duncan looked at the clock. "I'd better go and let you pack, unless there's something I can do to help."

"No. I have a few last minute things to throw in my bag in the morning."

"In that case, I'll go on back to the base. You look like an early night would be a good thing." In fact she looked worn to the bone.

He could only imagine the emotional toll the last few days had taken. The possibility her mother had a serious medical disorder was enough on her plate, without having the twins show up. He had to admire the way she'd kept her cool and hadn't fallen apart. That was a good quality, especially for an Army wife. Once again, he reined in that thought.

He picked up the jacket he'd left on the back of her desk chair. "Good night Ellie and Lillie. Nice meeting you."

"Bye."

"G'night."

"I'll walk out with you," Megan said, and grabbed a windbreaker from the closet. "Be right back girls."

As they stepped into the hall, Duncan reached for Megan's hand. "Call me after you've talked to your folks."

"All right."

Their steps were muffled on the rubberized stair tread. Outside, Duncan stopped in the shadows. He thought he wouldn't make it if he had to wait one more second to kiss her. Holding her hard against him, he lowered his lips to hers. She tasted so good, like the strawberry pie she'd served for dessert. Then he was lost in the wonder of her mouth. Her fingers cupped his head and all he could do was feel.

Reluctantly, he let her go. "I'd better leave before this gets to the point of no return."

"Thanks for coming tonight. I needed a friendly face."

"My pleasure. Take care, my Megan. Don't forget to call and let me know how tomorrow goes."

"I will."

A gust of cold wind ruffled her hair. "Better go inside before you freeze. Good night."

Megan hugged him once and did as he asked. He walked to the car, opened the door and turned to look back. She stood peering out the glass. He waved and climbed into his rental, not glancing at the apartment door again. If he did he wouldn't leave.

* * * *

Megan faced her parents across the scuffed coffee table. The girls had described her mother's appearance well. Josie face was puffed up, her jaw line was more pronounced. Her once lovely mother looked different, like an over stuffed animal or something.

Megan had listened, saying nothing while both parents scolded Ellie and Lillie. Then her father had sent the girls to unpack. Now it was her turn. How she wished Duncan was holding her hand.

"Well, what do you have to say for yourself?" her mother demanded.

"What am I supposed to say? Your daughters arrived uninvited. I had to take off work to escort them home."

"They wouldn't have pulled such a stunt without your encouragement." Her mother punched a throw pillow. "They idolize their big sister with her glamorous job."

"I *did not* encourage either one of them. What they did was dangerous in the extreme. More to the point, why is Lillie is so unhappy she ran away? Ellie says she only tagged along to keep her sister safe."

Her mother folded her arms across her chest. "How should I know?"

"I want to know what's going on," Megan said. "Lillie claims she's a prisoner. You won't let her see her friends or do anything but housework."

"Don't you talk to your mother that way," her father said.

"This isn't getting us anywhere." Megan stood and paced the room. "There's a problem here. Let's see if we can fix it."

"Those kids are just too much to handle," her mother sniveled. "They want this and they want that and I'm too tired for any of it."

Megan looked at her dad. "If that's the case, maybe it's time you found at job around here?"

"I can't, Megan. Trucking pays better than anything else I can find with my education. Plus it has good benefits. Josie's got so many doctor appointments, I gotta have good insurance."

Megan's shoulders slumped under an invisible weight. A long sigh escaped her lips. Maybe he hadn't been running away like she'd always thought. Still, that didn't let him off the hook as far as Ellie

and Lillie were concerned. “Dad, you have to do something. The situation is out of control.”

“Can’t you take them to live with you?” Josie said.

Her mother’s whine grated like chalk on a blackboard. Megan counted ten before she dared speak. “No. I’m away from home half the time. Thirteen-year-olds need supervision every day.”

“But they’re a handful. I can’t cope with them anymore.” She swiped a tear from her eye. “You don’t have to fly.”

“My career isn’t the issue here, Mom. Your underage children are *your* responsibility. Yours and Dad’s. I’m not going to allow you to use guilt to force me into doing *your* job anymore.” Megan bit her lip to keep from bursting out with a catalogue of all the hurt and anger she had stored up inside.

She glanced at her father. His jaw had dropped and eyes looked like they’d bug out of his head. Had he never seen the situation this way before?

“If you aren’t willing to make the sacrifices necessary, then... Then—” Megan stared at the floor, noticing the crumbs and lint that should’ve been vacuumed a week ago. She couldn’t make threats. That only raised her parents’ hackles. No diplomatic words came to mind.

“You’re being hateful,” Josie accused. “And selfish.”

“No, she’s not,” Jim said. “We’ve always leaned way too much on Megan. She deserves a life of her own. She’s right, Josie. Ellie and Lillie are our problem. I guess I’ll have to see what kind of work I can get around here.”

“There must be trucking companies that need local drivers, Dad.”

“I’ll find out. I just hope there’s something with good medical insurance.”

“That’s something else I wanted to talk to you about. I heard about a hormone disorder that you might have, Mom. If you do, it could explain a lot of things that have been bothering you.”

Josie beamed. “See. I told you I was sick.”

“Maybe, maybe not.” Megan said, handing her mother several printed pages. “I highlighted the symptoms the girls mentioned.

Would you both look it over and see what you think? I'm going to check on them."

"Megan?"

She turned. "Yes, Dad."

"Thanks for riding herd on the twins and bringing them home."

"You're welcome." Megan walked out of the room, shaking inside.

She looked in on the girls and found them absorbed in a TV program. They should be doing homework, but she wasn't going to remind them. She went to the room she had shared with her younger sister. Stretching out on the bed, she choked back tears.

At least Dad seemed to understand a little. It was obvious Mom cared nothing about the girls' welfare. Her whole being remained focused on herself. She'd been gleeful at the prospect of having a serious medical condition. How sick was that?

She wondered if they would punish the kids. That scolding hadn't made any impression on Ellie and Lillie if the shrugs and rolling eyes had been any indication.

The tears Megan had tried to stem overflowed. She loved those little sisters of hers. She was half tempted to relent and quit flying so they could live with her. But that would be giving in and most likely putting her own health at risk.

A knock sounded on the door. "Come in," she said.

Her father entered and dropped to the edge of the bed. He patted her shoulder and handed her a tissue. "I'm sorry for that scene downstairs. You've always taken on so much, we've taken you for granted." He squirmed against the footboard. "I appreciate your efforts."

Megan nodded, and cried harder.

"I—ah...read that stuff you brought. It looks like we need to have Josie tested. I can't change jobs right now unless we wait for new insurance to kick in."

"I hadn't thought of that. But, Dad, the situation can't stay like it is now. Do you comprehend the desperation that drove Lillie to run away? Ellie simply went to protect her sister. What they did was downright dangerous. If things don't change here, they'll do it again.

We might not be so lucky next time.” Megan blew her nose and wiped her eyes.

“If you want my opinion, I think you need to be upfront with Ellie and Lillie. I always thought you preferred to stay away, that Mom’s constant complaints made being on the road a great escape.”

“No, never that. It was the only way I could provide for her. I love your mother.”

Megan sat up and hugged her father. “Tell the girls that. Set some rules. Tell them you’ll come home to stay as soon as you can. They need you, Dad, as much as Mom does. I bet they’ll be a whole lot more cooperative if they understand the situation.”

“How did you find out about acro...whatever you call it?”

“A friend knows someone who has it. When I mentioned what the girls told me, he found out the name and suggested I look it up on the Internet.”

“We’ll make an appointment tomorrow.”

As soon as her father left, Megan headed for the shower. It had been a long day. Tomorrow she’d clean the house. She hoped the doctor could see her mother while she was here. Dad was being reasonable. If her mother were ill, that was one thing. If not, then there were some things Megan intended to get off her chest. She wasn’t going to put up with being used any longer.

She crawled into bed and closed her eyes. As sleep overtook her, she remembered she hadn’t called Duncan.

Chapter Four

Megan's cell jarred her awake the next morning. She rolled over and stared at the clock. Eight-thirty. How could she have slept so long? She reached for the phone and knocked it to the floor. By the time she tumbled out of bed and picked it up, Beethoven's Ninth had stopped playing. *Darn*. She staggered to the bathroom and splashed the sleep from her eyes.

A little more alert, she returned to the bedroom and checked the call log. Duncan! She punched in his number and waited. His recorded voice asked her to leave a message.

Well, shoot. He wasn't available. She waited for the beep. "I'm sorry I forgot to call last night. Call me when you can and I'll fill you in."

She dressed and spent the next few hours cleaning the kitchen and bathrooms. At three o'clock, she wondered how much longer she'd have to wait. By six, she was annoyed. It being three hours later on the East Coast, surely Duncan was home from work. She phoned his apartment and got the answering machine. Her stomach knotted. Could a forgotten promise make him angry enough to ignore her?

If that were the case, he wasn't the man she thought he was. She cautioned herself not to jump to conclusions.

The next afternoon, Megan's patience ran out. She used his Pentagon office number, despite not liking to interrupt people at work. "This is Megan Bradshaw. May I speak to Captain Fraser?" she asked the sergeant who answered.

"I'm sorry. Captain Fraser is TDY."

"TDY? What's that?"

"Temporary duty, ma'am."

"Where has he gone?"

"I can't say, ma'am."

“Do you know when he’ll be back?”

“No, ma’am.”

“Oh. Thank you anyway.”

She hung up, not knowing what to think. He hadn’t said anything about another trip. He was at Offutt and she was out here. She wished she could go home right away.

She frowned. If he was in Omaha, why hadn’t he returned her call? The whole thing was odd. She hoped he was okay.

No time to worry about it now. She had to take her mother to see another specialist.

* * * *

Megan reclined her seat on the plane and closed her eyes. The past five days had passed in a blur of doctor’s appointments and tests. Dad had returned to work, saving his vacation in case Mom required surgery.

So far everything pointed to acromegaly. Mom’s growth hormone levels were elevated and an MRI showed an adenoma—a benign tumor—on the pituitary. Next week Dad would return home to take Mom to see a neurosurgeon.

The twins, grounded for two months for their trek to Omaha, promised Megan to behave and be helpful. Fortunately, Emily’s spring term at college ended in three weeks. She’d be home for the summer.

Only one issue hadn’t been resolved. Megan hadn’t managed to talk to Duncan. He’d phoned once when she was out and spoken to Ellie, saying that he was out of the country and would call her when he could.

The message left Megan dissatisfied, frustrated and worried. She had no idea where “out of the country” was. He could be anywhere from Antigua to Zambia. What if he was in the war zone? It didn’t bear thinking about.

* * * *

“I’m tired of phone tag,” Megan grumbled. “When he calls, I’m in the air or in the shower. This has been going on for two weeks. I

don't know where he is or when he'll be back."

The co-pilot sitting across from her in the crew lounge grinned. "You may never know."

"You're kidding? Surely, after he gets home he'll tell me."

"Not necessarily. I could tell you stories about my time in the navy—"

"Later," the captain said, tapping his watch face. "It's show time."

With a collective groan, the crew gathered their bags.

On the drive home from the airport that night, Megan wondered if trying to build a relationship with a man who lived halfway across the country and was subject to the whims of the military, was worth the effort. Duncan was everything she could want in a husband, at least she thought he was. Still, his job drove her crazy. How did wives stand it?

Where was he? Was he all right? The uncertainty tore at their fragile bond. How could they build any sort of relationship when they couldn't communicate?

The longer he was gone, the more she questioned the effort to try to stay together.

* * * *

Duncan dropped his duffle bag in the living room and headed for the shower. It was damn good to be home. May found Washington garbed in splashes of vibrant color, a sharp contrast to the shades of brown he'd left behind. After three weeks in the desert, his first priority was to clean the grit from his pores.

The hot shower spray was a priceless luxury. Billows of lather softened his skin, leathered by the blazing sun, blistering sand and grit-filled wind. Best of all, when he stepped from his steamy bathroom into air conditioned comfort, he'd stay clean for more than five minutes. He rinsed off and contemplated contacting Megan.

He'd tried and she'd tried, but they hadn't managed to connect the whole time he was gone. First of all, his orders had given him no lead time. He hadn't been able to buy a cell phone that handled calls from Iraq. When he had been able to get to a phone, she wasn't

available. Then to top it all off, the email system had crashed. About that time, he'd been ready to throw the computer out the window.

A weird feeling in his stomach filled him with dread. He'd let her down during a stressful time through no fault of his own, but would she accept that? There was only one way to find out. He wished he didn't have to talk to her on the phone. Apologizing in person would be much better.

He shut off the water and rubbed down with a large fluffy towel, another sign he'd returned to civilization. Once he was dressed in jeans and a tee shirt, he reached for the phone.

She answered on the third ring.

He breathed a sigh of relief. "Thank God you're home."

"Duncan! *Where* are you?"

He heard accusation in her voice. "Washington. I just got in."

"Where've you been?" Reproach came through stronger with each word. "I've called and called."

"I had to see a man about a camel. Beyond that, I can't say."

"Oh."

He could picture her nonchalant shrug. The censure in her voice tore at his heart. She didn't sound the least bit forgiving.

"I'm sorry I missed you when I had a chance to phone. The difference in time zones didn't help. Next time I hope we can coordinate before I leave."

"Then you expect to go again?"

Reproach changed to something else. Perhaps fear. Better get off the subject as quickly as he could. "Not until the orders I told you about come through, but I never know. How did things go with your folks?"

"The initial confrontation was tense."

Not very forthcoming, Megan. "Tell me about it," he said, forcing a conversational tone.

"Dad did see my point about the girls."

"And?" He plowed his hand through what there was of his hair. Was he going to have to drag every word from her?

"Mom jumped on the idea that she could have a serious condition."

From what she'd told him earlier, that didn't surprise him. "Has she been to the doctor?"

"Yes."

Silence.

"Look, if you don't want to tell me about the situation, say so. I'm too tired to play this silly game."

"I wanted to tell you about it more than three weeks ago."

She sounded waspish. "I know. I'm sorry things worked out the way they did. I received immediate orders. They said go. I had no choice."

"I know."

But did she understand?

"All Mom's tests were conclusive," Megan said.

At last she volunteered something. Still, she sounded hesitant to tell him.

"She's scheduled for surgery on Friday, the twenty-sixth."

"I hope it goes well." He tried to think of something—anything—to add. Nothing came to mind.

"Me, too."

"Wait a minute. That's the Friday before Memorial Day weekend," he said.

"It was the first slot the surgeons had open. Look, I have to go. I need to check on things at home."

"Okay. Bye." Duncan hung up, shaking his head.

What was that about? The longer they'd talked, the icier Megan had become. Couldn't she cut him some slack? It wasn't like he'd avoided her on purpose. He didn't need this grief.

He wandered to the window and gazed from the Pentagon across the river to the Washington Monument. His thoughts settled on his friend, Pete. His wife had whined and complained about everything military until Pete had to resign his commission or get a divorce. With two small kids, he hadn't much choice. He'd given up a promising career he loved for civilian life.

Was that where he and Megan were headed? If so, better to know it now. He'd been ambivalent about the Army until this spring. He'd stayed in out of a sense of duty, maybe even a need to avenge

Darrin's death. But all that had changed on this last assignment. He'd come to realize his skills were needed, and most of all, he loved what he did. As an Army engineer he had the opportunity to help people who required his particular expertise. In the process, he played a part in establishing freedom for a downtrodden nation. He'd never get the same satisfaction in a civilian job.

So where did that leave them?

He hadn't a clue.

Maybe Megan was having a bad day. Maybe she was ticked off enough to never want to see him again. If that were true, why hadn't she said so? Maybe nothing was wrong but worry about her mother.

Somehow he had to see her. But when?

* * * *

Megan's hand shook so hard she could barely cradle the telephone. She had been cold to the point of rudeness. It wasn't fair to take out her stress on him.

But her distress was more than just her concern for her mother. As far as she knew, he'd simply disappeared off the face of the earth. For three weeks she'd waited and wondered where he was and if he was all right. His failed attempts to contact her had only made the situation worse. And all the answer he'd given was a flippant "...had to see a man about a camel." She understood he couldn't tell her a lot of work-related stuff, but did he have to brush off her anxiety as if she had no right to be concerned?

Why did she care?

Because she loved him, that's why.

Or did she?

If she really loved him, wouldn't she be sure beyond all doubt? They hadn't known each other long enough to fall in love.

On top of her own doubt, there was the not-so-minor matter of his job. She had enough stress in her life without having to worry about him all the time. He traveled and she traveled. How could they build any kind of relationship when they were rarely in the same place at the same time?

What should she do?

Megan sank to the edge of the couch and hung her head in her hands. Deep down, she realized there was only one answer. She must break off the relationship.

Her heart ached. Her head felt stuffy with the need to cry. If only there were some other way. She just couldn't go on trying make a long distance romance work. His unexplained absence had been proof positive she wasn't cut out to live with the quirks of the military.

Breaking up before they made any promises seemed only fair to both of them.

So why was her heart breaking?

Before she could talk herself out of it, she stood and walked to the phone. She hit each digit of his number with special care. This was no time to reach the wrong number.

"Duncan Fraser," he answered.

Her heart tripped at he sound of his voice. She sucked in a deep breath. "This is Megan. I called to apologize."

"Okay."

His indifferent reply only confirmed her decision about what she was going to do.

"I—I wasn't very friendly." Her hand hurt from her tight grip on the receiver. "The truth is, I don't think a long distance relationship is working for us."

"It's not ideal."

That wasn't what she wanted to hear. Did she want him to talk her out of it? No. No, she didn't. "What I mean is...I can't do it."

"Are you saying you aren't willing to make it work?" He sounded both angry and puzzled.

"I guess I am. I'm sorry. With everything else happening right now..." She took another deep breath. "I-I think it best if we call it quits."

"Megan, I can't do that. I care about you."

"Don't say that. I don't want this—this, relationship, for lack of a better word, to go on." She heard a signal on her end of the line. "I'm being beeped. Thanks for everything. Good-bye."

As she reached over to disconnect the call she heard him shout,

“Megan! Megan?”

She connected the new call. “Megan Bradshaw.”

“It’s me, Ellie.”

The child’s sobs were heart wrenching. Megan wanted to bawl right along with her sister. “What’s the matter, sweetie?”

“I-I’m scared. I just heard Mom talking to Dad on the phone. She said she had to spend at least one night in intensive care after her surgery. Isn’t that for really, really sick people?”

Omigod! Maybe this surgery was more dangerous than all her research had led her to believe. She’d thought special tools indicated something similar to arthroscopic surgery.

Could Mom die?

Megan’s knees buckled. She dropped to the floor and leaned against the wall.

“Megan, d-did you h-hear me?”

The fear in Ellie’s voice shook Megan to the core. But she couldn’t let on. That would only scare the child more.

“Calm down, honey. I’m sure a night in ICU is only a precaution.” She prayed she was right. “A wise man told me once not to borrow trouble.”

“But Mom could die!”

“Anytime a person has surgery, complications can arise. Do you think the doctor would recommend surgery if he didn’t think she’d make it through?” The reassurance was directed to herself as well as her sister.

“I guess not.”

“Now dry your eyes and go wash your face. It won’t help Mom to know you’ve been crying.”

“Can you come home, Meggie? Please? Everything will be better if you’re here.”

Ellie’s words stabbed her in the heart. There wasn’t a thing Megan could really do out there, and yet she knew without a doubt she must be with her family.

“I can’t promise anything, but I’ll try. Don’t say anything until I see what I can do. It may take a few days.”

“Okay.”

“Don’t worry anymore. I’ll talk to you later. Bye.”

Quaking inside, she cradled the phone, and vowed not to answer it again until she calmed down. Two major blows in the last ten minutes were more than she could absorb in an instant. What she needed was a cup of tea. She went to the kitchen and put the kettle on to boil.

The tea made, she collapsed at the table. At the moment she needed to be held and comforted. Not only was she alone, she couldn’t call Duncan for encouragement. Why had she been so hasty? If only she’d given herself a chance to think things through another day.

What was done was done. She’d get through this crisis on her own, like always.

Still, she couldn’t chase memories of Duncan from her mind. Their first date, that whole precious day, in which she’d come to understand the sacrifices the military had made for freedom. The memory of the wall that declared FREEDOM IS NOT FREE would haunt her the rest of her days.

She rubbed a tear from her cheek.

She’d found freedom in her career far from home. No matter how she tried to deny it, the ties to her family remained strong. Her freedom had a price and it was time to pay the piper.

Of primary importance right now was to figure out a way to get home for her mother’s surgery.

Who would want to give up their holiday weekend? No one.

All she could do was go through the flying lines and beg, on bended knee if necessary, someone with the days she needed to trade with her.

* * * *

Duncan slammed his fist on his desk, swearing like the seasoned soldier he was. In the process, he knocked the phone into a cup of coffee and, sloshed the liquid over a stack of papers. He let out another string of expletives and cleaned up the mess.

No point in eating lunch and risk severe indigestion. He wanted to pound something into oblivion. He picked up his bag and headed

for the gym. A good workout might, if he was lucky, calm him down enough to get through his briefing to the general this afternoon.

After thirty minutes of a punishing round on the fitness equipment, he'd come to the conclusion he wasn't willing to allow Megan to walk away without a fight. Of all the women he'd dated, she was the one who brought sunshine into his life. He liked how she handled her sisters, firmly and with love and care. She allowed him to share in her problems without dumping them on him. She had those special qualities that made for a good military wife.

He moved to the punching bag and spent ten minutes hammering the man-sized stuffed canvass as if it were Osama himself. By the time his breath came in gulping pants, he was ready to brief the general without snarling. He slung a towel around his neck and strode to the locker room.

Calmer now, memories of Megan filled his thoughts while he showered away the sweat rolling off his body. Yeah, she could make him wonderful wife and be a good military wife in the process. Okay, he was jumping way ahead here. He knew damn well he was tired of being alone. There was a good possibility he saw only what he wanted to see, not reality. On the other hand, just her smile sent his heart racing. He'd missed her so damned much while he was gone. No matter what, they had to talk.

Still, right now wasn't the best time for a confrontation. He'd wait until after her mother's surgery. That decided, he finished his shower, dressed and headed back to work.

* * * *

The television was too loud, but nobody in the hospital waiting room moved to turn it down or change the channel. In a room filled with anxious faces, no one seemed to care. Megan picked at a dry cuticle, then stared off into space. Her father returned from the coffee pot and handed her a cup.

"I didn't expect you to come," he said.

"I wasn't sure I could. I traded trips with another flight attendant."

Jim patted her knee. "I'm glad you're here. I wasn't looking

forward to waiting all by my lonesome. So tell me about this boyfriend that's got you all starry-eyed."

"Ellie and Lillie have big mouths." She shrugged. "There's nothing to tell. I broke up with him." She wanted to cry out her heartache on her father's shoulder. She wouldn't. Things may have changed between them but not enough for that.

"Ellie's description led me to believe he was a great guy."

"He is. He's in the Army and headed to Iraq soon. It's not a good time to get involved."

"I don't believe you, sweetie. There's pain in your eyes. Tell me the truth."

"Oh, Daddy, I like him a lot—more than a lot. It's just...just...I'm scared." She stared at the floor. "I don't think I'd make a good wife, especially an Army wife. Soldiers aren't around much."

"Whatever makes you say you wouldn't be a good wife? Any man would be lucky to have you, especially someone who travels. You're strong and independent. You love kids and know how to take care of them and a home. You can cook and sew and hold down a decent job. And you're downright pretty to boot. What else can a guy want?"

Megan shook her head. "Someone who can give her whole self to a relationship. I don't mean to hurt your feelings, but I haven't seen many good marriages to emulate, especially yours."

He jerked as if she'd slapped him. "I'll have you know your mother and I have a better marriage than you think. So what if it's not traditional? We love each other. That's all that matters."

Her father sure sounded defensive. She hadn't meant to tick him off. "I'm sorry. I would've never guessed from outward appearances."

"She takes care of me and I take care of her. Nobody can ask for more than that. We're proof that love holds through separation if given a chance. You gotta work at it."

"I don't need taking care of," she snapped. "I do very well on my own, thank you very much. I need...someone to rely on, someone to be there, someone to share with. Constant separations aren't going to give me any of that."

Jim pursed his lips. “You’re not in love then. When his needs come before yours, you’ll have found the right partner. Then it won’t matter if he’s gone serving the country or at home warming his toes in front of your fire.”

Megan swallowed around a boulder in her throat. Maybe she loved Duncan, despite what her father said. Even if didn’t, she liked him, liked him a great deal. She’d never forget how he winked at her or the instant connection that drew her to him.

“Our being together long term seems impossible. Tell me how you make it work, Dad. Neither you nor Mom ever shares much with us kids. How can she take care of you when you’re never home? Or the other way around for that matter?”

He looked affronted at first. After a long pause, he spoke. “We talk on the phone every single day. I call Josie before I hit the road in the morning and again when I stop for lunch. She calls me every night unless I’m on the east coast, then I call her. She tucks little notes in my socks—one for every day I’ll be gone. We read each other poetry at night.”

Megan’s eyes filled with tears. *Please not now.* “I had no idea. I wish I’d known. I always looked on your marriage as held together by six kids.”

“Not a chance. Six kids are the result of loving each other.”

Megan’s jaw dropped.

“Close your mouth before you catch a fly.” Her father grinned. “You know what I mean.”

“I’m beginning to.”

A pink-smocked volunteer approached. “Mr. Bradshaw?”

Jim shot to his feet. “Yes.”

“The doctor will be right out.”

A few minutes later, the neurosurgeon still clad in blue scrubs, sweat-damp around the neck, sat down beside Jim. “Your wife is doing well. I think I got all the adenoma. We’ll know for sure after another MRI tomorrow.”

Jim relaxed. “Good news. Thank you.”

“She’ll be in recovery about an hour. You can see her after they move her to ICU.”

The men shook hands. "Thanks, again, Doctor."

The doctor left.

Megan picked up her father's left hand. She gazed at his wedding ring. How could she have missed her parents' love for each other? They weren't demonstrative in front of others, that was for sure. And she'd certainly been busy between school and the household chores when she lived at home. Besides it never occurred to her to look below the surface. She'd thought they had retreated to their bedroom in search of peace and quiet. Dad's revelation put a whole new spin on things. There must've been a lot more going on behind that locked door.

"Thank you for telling me about you and Mom. You've given me a lot to think about."

Jim steepled his fingers and looked at her over the top of his glasses. "I've watched you turn down dates since you were sixteen years old. Believe me, you don't want to spend your life alone. I live for the weekends when I'm home with Josie. Give this guy a chance, Megan. Ellie said he was a hottie. I assume in teen talk that's good."

"High praise, Dad."

"Lillie was impressed that he brought supper and helped you get it on the table."

A warm fuzzy feeling blossomed inside Megan. "Duncan's wonderful. He likes the girls, too. He made me promise not to beat them for showing up in Nebraska unannounced. I was sorely tempted."

"Think about what I said. I'm preaching to you right."

They sat in silence, lost in their own thoughts. Megan couldn't get Duncan out of hers. Regret filled her. Dad was right. She didn't want to spend the rest of her life alone. She missed Duncan, more than she ever imagined she would. And yet, all her reasons to breaking up with him were still valid.

"Mr. Bradshaw?" a volunteer said. "You may visit your wife now. ICU is on the third floor. Take the elevator around the corner."

The nurse at the desk directed them to the small room. "You both may go in but only for ten minutes."

Her mother had a thick gaze pad held with elastic under her

nose. It was red with blood. Megan reached for the hand free of IV lines. "Hi Mom."

"Megan? What are you doing here?" She sounded tired.

"I traded trips."

"I'm glad you came."

"Me, too." Megan squeezed her mother's hand. "I love you. Get well. I'll let Dad talk to you now. They won't let us stay long."

Megan backed away from the bed. "I'm going to call the kids and let them know Mom's doing well."

"Do that. "

* * * *

Ten days after he had spoken to Megan last, Duncan boarded yet another Heartland Air flight. He recognized one of the flight attendants as the flirt who'd worked the trip on which he'd met Megan.

Halfway to Omaha, Stephie, according to the name badge on her uniform, offered a coffee refill. He set his cup on her tray. "Is Megan Bradshaw on the Omaha-Washington run this month?"

Stephie eyed him curiously. "I'm not sure."

"I'll have to call again when we land. We keep missing each other."

A twinkle brightened Stephie's eye. "You're seeing Megan?"

"When we can arrange it. Our schedules keep getting in the way." It was the truth, even if there was a strain between them at the moment.

"Let me see what I can find out when we get to Eppley."

Duncan smiled. "I'd appreciate that."

"I'll meet you in baggage claim." She moved on to the next passenger.

The plane landed and Duncan picked up the keys for his rental car. Then he headed to baggage claim. Soon Stephie arrived, all smiles. "You're in luck. Megan's coming in tonight from Atlanta and working the late trip to D.C. tomorrow."

"Couldn't be better. Thanks."

"You didn't hear this from me, if you get my drift."

Duncan nodded.

"If anything comes of this, you can name your first child after me."

He laughed. "We're not that far yet."

"One can always hope. If you've gone out with Miss Prudie, you're a better man than anyone else who has tried. She doesn't date."

Miss Prudie? Duncan raised an eyebrow. "Thanks for your help."

"Good luck." Stephie walked away.

He headed straight for the ticket counter and made a reservation on Flight 590 tomorrow.

On the way to the base, he decided to try to see her for dinner the next evening. They had to talk and while she worked wasn't the time or place.

* * * *

Megan removed the dirty clothes from her suitcase and replaced them with a clean set in preparation for tonight's flight. She shut the case and wished she could shut off her thoughts as easily. Unable to bring herself to contact Duncan since she returned from California a week ago, she'd mulled over their friendship again and again, as she'd her promised to her father.

She remembered the young couple she'd seen in the airport last week, he in uniform and she in an eye-popping outfit that shouted, "just wait until we get home". The love shining on their faces was a delight to behold.

In her mind's eye she could see Duncan and herself in that picture. The strange part was she didn't envision the pain of separation as much as she saw the bliss of reunion. She had honed in on the naked longing on the young man's face. Was that a sign that being apart wasn't the main issue?

She'd admitted she was scared of being an Army wife. That was only half true. She was afraid of being a wife, period. She had never thought of her parent's marriage as anything wonderful. Reading poetry to each other over the phone. The thought boggled her mind.

Megan had worked hard to establish her independence, and in

the process had created a lonely prison. She needed someone in her life, someone to call her own.

And that person was Duncan, despite the problems. Could they resolve their issues?

The buzz from the security door startled her. She ran to the living room and punched the talk button. "Yes?"

"It's Duncan. May I come up?"

Megan's heart pounded. Had her thoughts conjured him in person? Was she ready to face him with her new-found knowledge?

Ready or not, he was here. "Yes," she said and released the door.

She ran to the bathroom and combed her hair. The doorbell rang before she had a chance to put on lipstick. Oh, well. He'd dropped by without warning. He would have to take her as she was.

Her stomach tied in knots, she raced to the living room. She gave her uniform jacket a yank and let him in. "Hi."

He looked terrific. His deep blue eyes were enhanced by the tan he'd acquired in the desert.

"We need to talk," he said.

"Yes, we do, but I don't have long. I'm working tonight."

"I'm flying back as well." Duncan ran his hand through his short hair. "How's your mother?"

"Doing well. Thanks for asking." What was she supposed to say now? Talk about awkward moments. Ah... Megan waved her hand in the direction of the couch.

"I'm...I don't know how to tiptoe around this," he said. "I know I let you down. I apologized. That's all I can do." He twisted his class ring as if he didn't know what to do with his hands. "Megan, I care about you too much to let you walk away without a fight. Please give me a chance."

Megan seized an oversized pillow and held it against her stomach. Too bad it wasn't a more substantial barrier. "I'm sorry I made that call when I did. It wasn't fair. You mean a lot to me. My only excuse is..." She gulped. "I...I'm scared."

"Oh, honey..." Duncan picked up her hand, and stroked his thumb across her knuckles.

She took a deep breath and forged on before she lost her nerve.

“I had a long talk with Dad while Mom was in surgery. Our conversation was eye opening. My assumptions about his job and their marriage were way off base. My parents found a way to stay close despite their separations.”

“Can you accept that I have to go on a moment’s notice? There’ll be times like in April when I won’t be able to let you know I’m leaving. All I can do is promise to get in touch as soon as I can.”

“Do sudden orders happen often?”

“Not often—at least not so far. That trip was only the second time in my career that I’ve had no notice. But it can happen at any time.”

She plucked a loose thread on the pillow’s cording. It was easier than looking him in the eye. “I don’t like it. I can face almost anything as long as I know what it is. The not knowing sends my over-active imagination into orbit.”

“Nobody likes immediate orders, but they’re a fact of life for a soldier. I’ve come to the conclusion I’m doing what I’m good at and want to make the military a career. I can’t always say where I’m going and when I’ll back. With that in mind, the question is, can you live with it?”

“Honest answer. I don’t know.”

“So where does that leave us?”

“I care too much to give up without trying.” She tossed the pillow to the floor and shot him as bright a smile as she could muster.

Duncan pulled her in his arms. His lips clung to hers. His embrace tightened. The wonder of his mouth sent her reeling from sensations she’d never experienced before. He stole her breath. Her bones turned to jelly, and she clung to him for support.

He lifted his head and gazed into her eyes. “Ah, Megan, sweetheart. You make me crazy wanting you. A long distance relationship won’t be easy. Our jobs will make it all the harder.”

Nestled against his chest, she sighed. “Nobody said life was easy.”

“You’ve got that right.”

An alarm clock buzzed in the bedroom. Megan broke from his

hold. "My ten minute warning," she explained, heading to turn off the noise.

"It's time to leave already?" He sounded thwarted.

She glanced at the wall clock. "Not quite. I need to fix a sandwich or something before I go."

"Then let's grab a quick burger on the way to the airport. Do you have time?"

"I think so. Are you on my flight?"

A devil danced in Duncan's eye. "Yes, ma'am."

"By chance?"

"Not exactly."

He'd made sure he'd have an opportunity to talk to her one way or the other. Thrilled, Megan looked into his eyes and saw something she didn't dare name. Her heart skipped a beat. If she doubted her decision to try to make their relationship work, he'd destroyed her qualms with one look. Now the question was could she be what he needed?

Chapter Five

Megan passed through the cabin collecting the last of the trash. She glanced out the window. The lights of Northern Virginia twinkled below. Soon she'd spend precious time with Duncan. Her heart sang at the prospect.

The first officer's voice came from the PA. "Flight attendants, prepare for landing,"

After making sure everything was stowed and all seatbelts were fastened, she settled on the forward jump seat and strapped the lap belt over her middle and safety harness across her chest. This plane couldn't get on the ground fast enough for her.

Suddenly the plane took a nosedive. She jerked her head toward the right side windows. "What the...?"

Seconds later the roar of the jet engines ceased. Terrified voices filled the cabin.

An alarm blared in the cockpit.

Dear Lord, keep these people safe.

The "brace for emergency landing" announcement came over the PA from the cockpit.

She grabbed the microphone. "Everyone grab your ankles! Grab your ankles! Stay seated until we come to a complete stop."

Her own brace position differed from the passengers. Her jump seat faced the rear and she remained sitting upright.

Two wheelchairs. Child alone. Pregnant lady.

Seconds later the plane plunged into the Potomac River. Water splashed on the windows. Before her thoughts registered the procedure for a water evacuation, the aircraft bounced and slid onto the runway.

Metal screeched. She felt the airplane plow through the landing lights. Something tore under her.

Passengers shrieked.

The overhead bins popped open. Personal belongings bounced off seats, bulkheads and passengers and fell with a thud.

The terrifying racket seemed to go on forever. She forgot to breathe.

How many were hurt already?

Please, Lord, stop this plane and let us get these people to safety.

Heart pounding, Megan forced herself to stay calm. Emergency procedures flashed through her mind.

The plane skidded right and convulsed to a stop. Her chest slammed into the shoulder harness. Her head snapped forward.

“Evacuate,” came the order from the cockpit PA.

Ninety seconds. Only ninety ticks of the clock to get the people out.

She released her safety straps, dashed across the aisle and threw open the galley door. The emergency slide inflated as it was supposed to, much to her relief. She hoped her flying partner, Jackie, had been able to open the aft door. Megan spun around and opened the main cabin door. “Leave everything,” she shouted. She barely heard the order echoed in the back.

Thank God. Jackie is alive.

“Follow the floor lights to the closest exit,” she shouted in her most authoritative voice.

A masculine bellow, more commanding than her own, repeated her order.

Duncan! Thank God.

“Jump and sit. Run,” Megan instructed again and again, as she shoved passengers toward the doors.

She stepped to the front row. Scattered luggage and other belongings impeded everyone’s progress to the exits. She grabbed the elderly wheelchair passenger around the waist and hefted with all her might to lift him out of the seat, then dragged him to the door.

A teenage boy crowded behind her, shoved by the surge of screaming people behind him. “Help this man,” she ordered. She didn’t wait to see if he obeyed or not.

Sirens wailed in the distance.

She moved back into the cabin, elbowing her way through the

people swarming in the aisle.

Precious seconds had already ticked by. "Leave everything. Go to the closest exit," she bellowed.

Duncan thrust a child into her arms. "Take him, I'll get the woman with the broken leg."

She managed to get to an exit. "Run," she yelled, pushing the child down the slide.

"Move, move! Leave everything," she hollered, aware fire could ignite at any second.

As if the thought became fact, she smelled smoked.

Seconds just became more precious. How many were left?

The pregnant woman was close to the over-the-wing window exit. Megan forced her way through the passengers toward where the fuselage had split in two at the row ahead of the wing. The woman, trapped by a fallen bag, struggled to get free. Megan grabbed the carry-on and pitched it over the seat. She caught the woman's hand. Smoke and flames erupted from the wing. "Front door," she croaked, thrusting the woman ahead of her. "Go!"

Coughing, eyes watering, she battled her way through the duel enemies, smoke and debris. Heat seared her arm. "Move to the exits," she gasped.

Please Lord, let the folks in the back get out.

She fumbled in the limited light, groping for bodies trapped in the seats. "Is anyone here? Please? Is anyone here?"

She heard nothing but the fire's crackle. "Is anyone here?" Her voice was rough and weak.

Again no answer. She lurched up the aisle and tripped. She staggered to her feet, and stumbled to the slide. With the last of her strength, she jumped and kicked her legs straight out.

With help from the slick fabric of her pants, she zoomed to the tarmac. Her foot caught at the bottom. Her ankle turned and twisted. Pain shot up her leg. She gasped and coughed. Somehow she managed to struggle to her feet. At a stumble-run, she made her way toward the flashing lights of an ambulance.

Megan leaned against the vehicle, the surge of adrenalin that had gotten her through the last three minutes suddenly gone. Before her

eyes flames engulfed the airliner. Even from this distance she felt the heat. The stench of burning rubber, foam seats and plastics turned her stomach. She prayed the smell wasn't human flesh.

Never in her whole life had she witnessed a more horrendous sight. The tears she'd held in check spilled down her cheeks.

Had she done her job? Was anyone left onboard?

Her ankle gave way and she pitched to the concrete.

Dear God, where is Duncan?

"Duncan," she whimpered around a cough.

Her arm throbbed. She stared at her burned sleeve. In the eerie glow cast by rotating lights on the emergency vehicles, she saw blisters. But they didn't matter. *Where is Duncan?*

"Please." She coughed. "Please, have you seen a tall soldier in uniform?"

"No, ma'am," a nearby emergency worker replied, not looking up from the person he was treating. "But that doesn't mean anything. There's a bunch of people on the other side of the plane."

She twisted around, searching for Duncan among the crowd. The people were nothing but shadows. Another spate of coughing sent more tears rolling down her cheeks. She had to find him.

What if he hadn't made it off the plane? It would be all her fault. Why hadn't she insisted he evacuate with the little boy? She had to find Duncan.

Now.

She couldn't go on without him. It was as simple as that. If he hadn't gotten off the aircraft she might as well have died with him.

Don't go there. He's here somewhere. Keep looking.

She attempted to stand but her foot turned under her. Grasping the bumper, she caught her balance, then staggered toward the first cluster of passengers.

No broad-shouldered soldier in sight. She kept moving from one group to the next. "Duncan," she called again and again, in a voice so hoarse she knew no one had heard her.

Was he over by the mangled approach lights?

Was he all right?

She tried to run but her ankle wouldn't hold her weight. She

crumpled in a heap on the rough concrete.

* * * *

Duncan knelt beside the woman with the broken leg, she clutched one of his hands while he brushed her hair from her face with his other one. He'd carried her off the plane and down the slide over his shoulder. With her added weight they'd hit the runway hard. Hopefully her leg hadn't suffered further damage.

At least she was alive.

Nothing was left of the airliner but a charred skeleton. He visually searched the milling clusters of shell-shocked survivors, looking for Megan. A frisson of fear crawled up his spine. What if she hadn't evacuated in time?

He couldn't bear the thought. How, in such a short time, had she come to mean as much to him as the very air he breathed?

How didn't matter. The fact that he'd fallen totally and completely in love did.

He couldn't find her in the ghostly shadows created by the flashing lights amid the general chaos of the crash scene. The woman wouldn't let go of his hand. He couldn't leave her no matter what he wanted.

At last an EMT arrived. Duncan left his charge in professional hands and ran toward the closest knot of passengers. Halfway there, he almost stumbled on a body on the tarmac. He recognized the Heartland Air uniform. His breath caught in his throat. He knelt and felt for a pulse.

Yes!

She didn't move. He brushed her hair aside "Ma'am? Ma'am?"

Megan.

Dread gripped him. What if she was seriously hurt? Forcing himself to follow first aid procedures, he examined her body for broken bones. One ankle was swollen.

She moaned when he touched her arm. It was too dark to see well, but something was wrong there. He couldn't tell the extent of her injuries. Hating to leave her, yet knowing he must, he raced to the ambulance parked nearby.

A paramedic had just finished treating an injured passenger. "One of the flight attendants is unconscious over there," Duncan said, gesturing toward Megan. "She has something wrong with her arm and a swollen ankle. That's all I could determine."

The paramedic snapped his kit closed. "Lead the way," he replied and followed Duncan.

Megan strained to sit up when they found her. "Dunc—" Her hoarse whisper was cut off by a prolonged coughing spell.

"I'm here," he said, kneeling behind her to support her back. He kissed her hair.

She relaxed, leaning against his chest, and clasped his hand.

The paramedic handed Duncan a flashlight. "Hold this so I can examine her arm and ankle.

"Are you hurt anywhere else, ma'am?"

"Back—" she coughed so hard Duncan thought she'd break a rib. "—chest, knees."

The paramedic eased her away from Duncan and lifted her jacket and blouse to the middle of her back.

"I lifted a large man from his seat," she said. "I—" she coughed again "must've—" more coughing "pulled something."

He hollered to a colleague. "I need a backboard over here." More quietly he said, "Just a precaution, ma'am."

While they waited, he applied a dressing to Megan's burned arm and immobilized her foot. "We have to transport her to an ER. As soon as I get her on the backboard, let's get her to the squad. I suspect on top of her injuries, she has smoke inhalation. She needs oxygen."

Duncan let the experts secure her to the board, even though it went against his every instinct. He should be the one caring for his Megan. It killed him to admit she was better off in the hands of those trained to help her without doing more harm. He held her hand while the men lifted the board and carried her to the rescue squad.

The EMT placed a mask over her nose and mouth before he pushed the wheeled cot into the ambulance. Her eyes, framed by her soot smudged skin, looked huge. Duncan longed to hold her close.

"What hospital?"

When the driver told him, he nodded and leaned inside. "I'll

meet you at the hospital, my Megan.”

He took off at a sprint, thankful he’d been late this morning and had parked in the closest garage. Still, it took too many precious minutes. Between dodging vehicles and people, he was a basket case by the time he reached his car.

The emergency room was as chaotic as the crash scene. Duncan shoved his way to the desk. “I’m looking for Megan Bradshaw. She was brought in from the plane crash.”

“Are you a relative?”

“A close friend.”

“Your name?”

“Duncan Fraser.”

“I’ll let her know you’re here.”

“May I see her?”

“I’ll let her know you’re here,” the receptionist repeated, focused on her computer screen.

Duncan wanted to smack that self-important smirk off the woman’s face. “Thank you,” he said. “I’ll wait over there.”

He settled into a chair and wiggled to find a comfortable position. There wasn’t one. He’d bet he had a whooping bruise on his backside. Picking up a magazine, he tried to concentrate on the war news. No dice. He knew more about what was really happening than the reporter.

“Sir? Weren’t you on flight 590?”

The woman was dressed in a smoke-smudged Heartland Air uniform. Her nametag read Jackie.

“Yes, I was.”

“Are you okay?”

“Yeah. Are you?” He patted the chair seat beside him. “Sit. You look ready to fall on your face.”

She collapsed onto the hard plastic seat. “I’m fine.” She coughed long and hard. “I’m looking for my flying partner.”

“If that’s Megan, she’s being treated, I think.” He nodded toward the admission desk. “She wouldn’t tell me anything. Last time I saw Megan they were loading her in an ambulance.”

“How is she?” Jackie coughed again.

“You need to see the doc. That cough doesn’t sound so good.”

“I’m checked in. Just waiting to be called.” She leaned back and rested her head against the wall.

“In answer to your question, Megan’s bunged up. It was impossible to tell how badly in the dark. I’m not leaving until I see her.”

“Duncan Fraser?” A nurse called.

He stood. “I’m Fraser.”

“Come with me, please.”

He followed her to a treatment cubicle.

Megan lay on the table, the oxygen mask covering the lower half of her face. She was black with smoke from head to toe. The legs of her uniform slacks were split to mid thigh and the right sleeves of her jacket and blouse were cut off. Bandages covered her arm and knees.

He stepped close, grasped her hand and kissed her forehead.

“We’re treating her for smoke inhalation,” the doctor said. “She has a second degree burn on her arm and a badly sprained ankle. Her back injury isn’t as much of a concern as I originally thought. The lower back muscles are strained, not torn. She can leave in about an hour.”

“What about her chest,” Duncan asked.

“Contusions from the shoulder straps. All we do for them is let them heal. She has abrasions on her knees. The bandages can come off in the morning.”

Megan yanked the mask from her face. “Please call my parents. Mom’ll be frantic when she hears the news. Tell them I’m all right.”

“I’ll will.” He squeezed her hand. “Jackie’s here. Want to see her?”

“Yes. Did we get everyone out?”

He closed his eyes, reliving the harrowing moments after the plane hit the runway. “I-I don’t know.”

“Oh, God, I hope so.” Tears leaked from the corners of her eyes.

“I’ll send Jackie in and make that phone call,” Duncan said. He cleared his throat and reached for his cell. It wasn’t there. Probably gone up in flames with the rest of his things. “What’s their number?”

Megan repeated it and pulled the mask back in place.

“Back in a few.”

Jackie was still in the waiting area. “She wants to see you,” he told her. “Room five.”

“Thanks. Is she okay?”

He nodded.

He found a phone in a nearby corridor. Before he dialed, he checked his watch and discovered the crystal was cracked. It was past two in the morning. His hand shook as he punched in the numbers. Mr. Bradshaw answered on the first ring.

After identifying himself, Duncan continued. “Megan’s flight crashed on landing tonight—”

“We saw the crash on the news. Is she—?”

“Her injuries aren’t serious. She has a sprained ankle, strained back and a burn on her arm. Scrapes and bruises. Right now they’re treating her for smoke inhalation. The doctor said they would release her shortly.”

“Where will she go?”

“I’m taking her home with me. She’ll be better off there than in a hotel room.”

“Thank you for that. It relieves our minds. Josie’s worried.”

“You’re welcome. She’ll call you tomorrow.” He hung up and returned to Megan.

* * * *

Duncan bumped his apartment door closed with his hip. Nestled as she was in his arms, even that small movement sent an arrow of pain up Megan’s leg. He flipped the wall switch, and a table lamp came on. Groggy, she only noted cushy black leather furniture and a large flat screen TV.

He laid her on his king sized bed. She’d never been so filthy in her life and hated messing up the blue bedspread. Not that she had the strength to anything about it.

“You’ll rest better out of those clothes,” he said. He pulled a tee shirt from a drawer. Gently he raised her to a sitting position. Unbuttoning her blouse, he slipped it and her jacket off, being careful of her bandaged arm.

“I need a shower.”

“I know, but you can’t stand on that leg. I’ll get a washcloth. In the morning, I’ll figure a way for you to have a shower. Promise.”

He left the room and returned with a basin of warm water and a soapy cloth. Tenderly he scrubbed the soot that had penetrated her clothes from her upper body.

“That feels good,” she said. Her head seemed stuffed with cotton.

He slipped the clean shirt over her head and, reaching under it, unhooked her bra and eased the straps over her arms. Carefully maneuvering her arms into the sleeves, he pulled the soft cotton down to her waist. He unfastened her slacks and wiggled them off. “Someday we’re going to laugh about this.”

“You’ve done this before.” Somewhere in the back of her mind niggled the thought that she should be bothered by his expertise. At the moment, she didn’t care.

He washed her legs and feet. “Not like this, I haven’t. Do you need help getting your panties off?”

“I can manage.”

“Then I’ll leave you to it and grab a shower.” He leaned over and kissed her. “I’m sleeping on the couch. Yell if you need anything. Don’t try to get up with out help.”

He took something from another drawer and left. Megan finished undressing and washing, then slipped under the covers. At least his shirt hit her mid thigh. What would she wear tomorrow?

Duncan stood under a hot shower and reveled in the cleansing power of soap. His clothes, from underwear to uniform, were ruined, good for nothing but the trash. He thought of Megan’s scraps of lingerie, her only intact garments. As soon as the stores opened, he’d have to go shopping.

The whole idea daunted him. What did one buy for a woman with nothing? He was too tired to figure it out tonight.

Shopping was one thing, but seeing her next-to-naked body had been something else again. Her long legs had stirred his senses. He’d longed to cup her breasts in his hands. She’d been too drugged on painkillers and muscle relaxants to know or care what helping her

undress and clean up had done to him. The memory sent his hormones skyrocketing.

He turned the water to cold and rinsed. Once dry, he realized he was sore all over. Twisting in front of the mirror, he saw what he'd expected—one humongous bruise on his butt. Sitting wouldn't be comfortable for a few days.

He dressed in a pair of Army-issue jogging shorts, checked on Megan and headed for the linen closet. Armed with his spare bedding, he made up the hide-a-bed. Sleep came the minute his head hit the pillow.

The next thing he knew, a shaft of sunlight hit his eyes. Seemed like he'd just gone to sleep, which wasn't too far from the truth.

He sat up and shook his head. Coffee. He started a pot, then peeked in the bedroom. Megan was restless.

He sat on the edge of the bed and stroked her cheek. "Hon, how you doing? Do you need another pain pill?"

"Please," she said around a cough. "My foot and arm are throbbing. Even my scraped knees hurt."

"Back in a sec." He filled a glass with water and shook a tablet from the prescription bottle she'd been given at the hospital.

He helped her sit up to swallow her medication. Megan's eyes welled with tears. "Thank you. I don't know what I'd do without you."

"Shall I help you to the bathroom, or do you want to try your crutches?"

"I have to learn to use them sometime. It might as well be now." She swung her legs over the side of the bed, tugged her tee shirt down and reached for the crutches.

Duncan gazed at her legs and sucked in his breath. *Don't go there.*

Her progress across the room could only be described as clumsy, but he let her manage on her own. When she returned a few minutes later, he noticed beads of sweat on her brow.

"I think that's enough moving around. Would you like something to eat?"

"Not right now. I can barely keep my eyes open."

"Then sleep." He selected clothes for the day. "I have a couple

of things to do, but I'll be back as soon as I can."

"Okay." She snuggled down.

Duncan kissed her, careful not to brush her arm. After propping her injured foot on a pillow, he smiled and straightened the sheet. She was already asleep.

Once he was shaved and dressed, he reported to his boss by phone and received permission to take the day off.

He started a list of what he needed to buy. Sizes? He checked the labels on her slacks and jacket. Her panties and bra were in the laundry hamper. It seemed an intrusion of her privacy to inspect them, but seeing them in the light of day, he realized she couldn't wear them again.

He headed for Macy's, a few blocks away. Within minutes, he had located women's sportswear.

"May I help you, sir?"

"I need to get some clothes for a friend who was on the plane that crashed last night. I don't know what she needs, but she has nothing."

"I'd suggest shorts or slacks and top."

"She'll need more than that. I don't think she'll be able to travel for a few days."

He told her the size and what colors he'd seen Megan wearing. The clerk made several suggestions. By the time they made their way to the register, he was loaded down with two pairs of shorts, a pair of wide-legged cotton slacks and a denim skirt and matching jacket with tops for each.

"You're in luck," the woman said. "Everything you selected is on sale."

He handed her his credit card. "I still have to get underwear. Where do I go?"

"Upstairs."

Duncan headed to the escalator. Finding a gray-haired clerk, he explained his predicament. "I don't have a clue."

"Okay. If it were me, I'd want three changes and something to sleep in. Do you know what style of bra she had?"

"All I remember is a front hook." Feeling more awkward than

ever in his whole life, he thrust the list with the sizes into her hand.

“That helps.” The lady picked several choices. “Which do you like?”

“I have no idea. You decide.” He showed her the sportswear he’d bought. “Just make sure whatever you pick goes with these.”

The woman nodded. He meandered to sleepwear and fingered a red gown with black lace and ribbon straps. The mental image of Megan wearing it would have him in trouble in no time. Grabbing the robe that matched, he took them to the register before he talked himself into something less sexy. He paid for everything, made a couple more stops and drove home.

* * * *

The door lock tumbled, waking Megan.

“Duncan. Is that you?” she croaked.

He appeared in the doorway loaded with packages. “You’re awake.”

She stared at the bags he held. “What have you been up to?”

“A little shopping.” He grinned. “You can’t go far with nothing to wear but my tee shirt.” He dumped everything on the bed. “Look through these while I get you something to eat. Eggs okay?”

“Fine. I’d love some coffee, too.”

He left her to sort through the treasure trove.

Megan opened the first bag and found a pretty pink lipstick, a blush and a bottle of moisturizing lotion. Fighting back tears, she pulled out a hairbrush and comb, shampoo and a toothbrush. The second bag contained underwear and a nightgown and robe. She sniffed and rubbed the soft satin gown over her cheek. There was even a pair of slippers in the sack. The things she’d opened so far must have cost a mint and there were still two more packages. A tear dripped off the end of her nose.

Peeking inside the largest parcel, Megan sobbed. What had he done? One by one, she lifted out the garments. Four complete outfits! And sandals.

Duncan appeared in the doorway. “What’s wrong? If you don’t like the clothes we can exchange them something else.” He set a tray

with scrambled eggs, toast and coffee on the dresser. A newspaper was tucked under his arm.

"I like. Whoever waited on you must've seen a sucker coming. This is way too much. One pair of shorts would do."

"No way. You aren't going home for a few days. You need more than one outfit."

"Duncan, I can't take all this. Nor will my budget stand this kind of expense. Flight attendants don't make big bucks. Some of it has to go back."

He shook his head. "Nope."

"But—but—"

"I'm heading into a combat zone in two months. I won't be paying rent or gas for my car. My expenses will be minimal. I can afford what I bought. It gives me pleasure to do this little thing for you." He sank down on the bed and reached for her hand. "Please let me help. If you hadn't made it out of that airplane, I'm not sure what I would've done. You're the most special woman I've ever met."

She sniffled. "You treat me like a princess."

"You are my princess, my Megan."

The warmth of his gaze branded her heart. She bit her lip and fought a losing battle with tears. He'd been different from the beginning. Her father had told her to give Duncan a chance. She was glad she'd listened to Dad.

Duncan snatched a Kleenex from the nightstand and held it as if she was a child.

She blew and he tossed the tissue in the trash. "I've never known anyone like you," she said, her voice thick and raspy.

"I have another surprise for you. Ready for a shower?"

"Really? A real shower?"

"I bought a tall stool for you to sit on. We'll cover your arm with plastic. I think that'll work."

She kissed him long and hard. "I love you!"

Duncan pulled back and looked her straight in the eyes. "Do you mean that? Or are you just elated over the prospect of a shower?"

Megan didn't blink. "I mean it with all my heart. I love you."

He held her close. "I love you, too. I was so scared you hadn't

made it off the plane. I need you more than you'll ever know."

His kiss was as electric as his touch on the day they'd met.

"Let's get you in the bathroom," Duncan said, bringing the moment back to a practical level.

"I'd better eat those eggs before they get any colder," she said, grinning.

He slapped his forehead with the palm of his hand. "I forgot."

"That's okay. We had something more important on our minds than food."

He rose and retrieved the tray and newspaper. "Eat. I'll read the crash story to you."

Thirteen people lost their lives when Heartland Air flight 590 crashed on landing at Reagan Washington National Airport last night. Eighty-four passengers and a crew of four were on board. The airliner nose-dived into the Potomac River, bounced and skidded onto the runway. The plane ripped in half before bursting into flames. The number of injured has yet to be determined. No names will be released until all the next-of-kin are notified.

The company's station manager said in an interview that a laser on final approach blinded the co-pilot. By the time he could see again, the captain had slumped on the yoke causing the plane to nosedive. They were so close to the ground, the co-pilot couldn't pull up in time. The co-pilot was able to get the captain out of the aircraft. He was pronounced dead at the scene. An autopsy will be performed to determine cause of death. Law enforcement, including the FBI, is investigating the laser incident. The National Transportation and Safety Board has recovered both black box recorders.

"Thirteen deaths," Megan said in a choked up voice. She reached

for a tissue. "I'm so sorry."

He gathered her in his arms. "You and Jackie did the best you could. Concentrate on the seventy-one you saved."

"It hurts that we lost so many." Her voice cracked. "I wonder what happened to the captain?"

"It sounds like he had a heart attack."

"It's possible, although the pilots have regular flight physicals."

Duncan shrugged. "It could've been an aneurysm or something like that."

"I guess we'll know soon enough. I hope it wasn't pilot error. That tears everyone up, family and the crews." She pushed the tray aside, her appetite gone.

"You ready to get cleaned up?" he asked. "I'll get the stool and plastic bags."

He left the room and returned with everything including a roll of duct tape. Megan burst out laughing. "Are you one of those guys who can't do anything without duct tape?"

"I wouldn't go that far, but it's one of the handiest items in my tool box." He proceeded to cover the bandage, securing the plastic bag with tape. He picked up her new robe and the shampoo. "I'll put the stool in while you're on your way."

"Thanks."

Megan couldn't believe Duncan was taking care of her like this. No one ever had before. Now she knew the meaning of cherished.

He lifted her over the shower sill, placing the shampoo and soap within her reach. "Holler when you're ready to get out. Don't try it by yourself."

"Yes, sir."

Alone, Megan stripped off the makeshift sleeping attire and threw it over the shower door. She adjusted the water and reveled in the warm spray. The last few minutes replayed in her mind. She'd admitted she loved him. The words had slipped out but weren't any less true.

She did love him. And he loved her. Even if he hadn't said it, she would be dense not to recognize it, not after the last twenty-some hours. Now things were more complicated than before.

He would be leaving soon. True, the main fighting in Iraq was over, but keeping the peace was as dangerous as the battle to oust Saddam had been. The enemy was just as vicious and determined. She was faced with a difficult choice. Did she have the courage to live with the fear, the separations, and all the unknowns? Could she be a good Army wife?

Wife? She was leaping way ahead of things, yet she must be sure in her own mind. If he asked, could she say yes? At the moment, she wasn't clearheaded enough to decide.

She finished her shower and grabbed the towel he'd left in easy reach. "Duncan! I'm ready to get out."

* * * *

By Saturday Megan had received the doctor's permission to travel. She packed her things in a carry-on she'd borrowed from Duncan. A wave of anxiety washed over her. Would she panic on the plane, especially on landing? How would she manage at home without him there to make things easy? He'd pampered her like a queen since he'd brought her to his apartment from the hospital.

"You about ready?" he asked from the doorway.

She zipped the bag shut. "All set. You don't have go all the way to Omaha with me."

"I thought we'd settled that yesterday." He sounded a tad testy.

"I really can manage."

"I know you can. Makes no difference. I'm going with you."

She picked up the jacket that matched her skirt. "I'm glad. I don't want our time together to end."

"I don't either. Besides, I'll sleep a whole lot better if I see for myself that you arrive safely. I wish you could stay here to recuperate."

"Me, too. But I need to go get back to base. There's a lot to do before I can return to flying status. I'll be back before you know it."

"My patience will be worn thin by the time you come back for the Fourth of July."

She hugged his waist. "Mine, as well. Let's go."

* * * *

The afternoon of July Fourth, Duncan paced the baggage claim area at Reagan National. The three weeks since he'd left Megan in Omaha had crawled by. In moments he'd hold her again. Glancing down the concourse, he spotted her in a wheelchair pushed by a man in a Heartland Air uniform. Running to meet her, he scooped her up and kissed her. "I missed you," he murmured in her ear.

"I missed you more."

"I doubt that."

The sound of a cleared throat broke them apart. "If you want to bring your car around, I'll bring her outside," said the airline employee.

Duncan frowned at Megan. "I thought you were off the crutches."

"I am, but my ankle isn't strong enough to walk long distances."

He nodded. "I'll be right back. Thanks."

Fifteen minutes later, he pulled away from the airport, Megan seated beside him.

"I brought rib eyes for dinner tonight," she said.

"Ah, good Nebraska beef. The grill's on the balcony, ready to go." He reached over and patted her thigh. "How are you?"

"Fine."

He shook his head. "Define fine."

"My ankle still hurts, but it's much better. My arm has a scar. The doctor told me yesterday he thinks it will fade in time. My back screams if I overdo it."

"I hope he didn't sign off on your working yet?"

"No. My ankle and back have to get a lot stronger than they are now. I'm not up to snuff to perform emergency procedures."

"Good. Don't push it. You'll only pay for it later."

He pulled up to the front door of his building and handed her a key. "Go on up. I'll park and bring in your things."

"Okay."

He walked around and helped her out. He couldn't resist the opportunity to drop a kiss on the tip of her nose. He glanced down and noticed her swollen foot. "Prop that foot up. Would you leave door unlocked? I'll be right up."

She limped into the lobby and rode the elevator to the top floor.

Entering the apartment, she was overwhelmed by a sense of homecoming. Certainly the sparsely furnished bachelor pad had nothing to recommend it decorating-wise. The only reason for the welcome feeling could be that Duncan lived here. She flopped onto the couch and rested her foot on the coffee table.

He arrived, plunked a Styrofoam box in the kitchen and took her bag to the bedroom.

Megan started to get up.

“Stay put. What do you need?”

“The steaks are packed in dry ice. We need to defrost them.”

“I’ll do it.” He dropped the vacuumed wrapped meat in the sink full of with cold water and came to sit beside her. “I have my orders.”

She swallowed a lump in her throat and put on a brave face. “When do you leave?”

“August fifth.”

“That’s not much time.”

“No.”

“I hate the idea of your going over there.” Her voice quivered. “I know it’s better than it was but soldiers are still getting killed.”

“I know. But I must. My job will be a challenge. I’ll be helping to rebuild a nation, making it better for a people too long oppressed.”

“You sound excited.”

His eyes sparkled. “I am. I realize you look at it very differently from me, but I wouldn’t be honest if I said I wished I didn’t have to go. This is what I’m trained to do.”

“I understand, I think. It’s just that...that it’s hard enough with us half the country apart. Half the world will be that much worse.”

“Will you wait for me?”

“Of course. I may not like it, but I’ve known you were leaving from the beginning.” She tried to stifle a yawn and failed. “Your going overseas doesn’t change my feelings for you.”

“Thank you for that. Why don’t you take a nap while I fix dinner? We can talk about this later.”

Such a tempting suggestion. “I hate be a party pooper.”

“You don’t want to fall asleep during the fireworks, do you?”

“No. I don’t know why I’m so tired.”

“You’ve been through a lot in the last month. You need to rest.”

His commanding tone would’ve irritated her if she didn’t know he was right. “All right, but it seems all I do is rest.”

He helped her up and walked with her to the bed. Pulling back the covers, he tucked her in. His kiss left her in no doubt how he felt. She wanted to pull him under the sheet with her, but she could barely keep her eyes open.

“Should I ask for my teddy bear and a drink of water?”

He laughed and stepped to the door. “Sleep well, my Megan. I’ll wake you when dinner’s ready.”

* * * *

They’d enjoyed their Independence Day cookout on the balcony. It amused him that Megan had insisted on using placemats on their trays and setting the utensils properly. He’d dredged up the best of his repertoire of stories and kept her laughing while they cleaned up the kitchen.

Just before the twilight faded into full darkness he rearranged their chairs outside, arm touching arm. He wished he had one of those two-seat jobs. He stuck his hand in his shorts pocket and checked once again for the box he’d stashed there while she napped. Yup, still there. He poured them each a glass of wine.

“C’mon, hon. The fireworks will start any minute.”

They had settled comfortably when the first shower of color burst in the sky from across the river.

“Ooh, that’s pretty,” Megan said.

He took a gulp of his wine. Butterflies flapped in his stomach. Another spectacular cascade of green and blue fell over the Washington Monument grounds. What if she said no? The next rocket featured red hearts. Duncan took them as a sign. He screwed up his courage and reached into his pocket.

“Megan?”

“Mmm?”

“Will you marry me?”

She twisted toward him. “What did you say?”

“Will you marry me?” He held the ring box in his hand.

Her mouth dropped open. She stared at the box, her hand hovered over his, but she didn’t pick it up.

He wet his dry lips with his tongue. “Please,” he said.

Why was she hesitant? She loved him, she’d told him so many times in the last month.

She closed her eyes.

He held his breath. What was going on in her head?

“Yes!”

He jumped up and pulled her to her feet. Opening the box, he slid the diamond ring on her finger. “I love you, Megan, heart and soul. I want to spend the rest of my life with you.”

“I love you just as much.” She slid her arms around his waist. “Do you want to get married before you leave?”

“I would, but that doesn’t give us much time. Wouldn’t your folks want to have the ceremony in California?”

“I know they would, but Mom isn’t up to a big wedding yet. Even if we had a small ceremony here, or in Omaha, I doubt I could get her on an airplane right now. The crash spooked her.”

A cloud crossed her face. Before he could say anything, she went on.

“Are you sure you want to take on my family? You know the problems but I’m not sure you understand them.”

“I’m sure. Your mother will complain about her health. The twins will be a handful for years to come. I know the family depends on you even when you’re far away. That won’t change. There is the other side of your question. I miss having a family. Yours will become mine. We’ll deal with their troubles together.”

“Oh, Duncan. I do love you.”

He held her, tilting her chin with his finger and smiling. “Let’s plan the wedding for my R and R leave. What I need most is to know you’re waiting for me.”

The sky filled with thousands of fiery lights. “Always, darling. Always.”

The End

About the Author

Ginny McBlain is a pioneer in the electronic publishing field. *Heart Broken, Heart Whole* was first published by Renlow Publishing in 1996 and re-released in 2002. Other titles include *Where the Heart Leads*, *Solemn Vows*, nominated for the 2000 Frankfurt Award, *BEAR HUGS*, an EPPIE finalist and an Independent E-book Award nominee in 2002, and *Faith, Hope and Charity* an EPPIE finalist in 2005. *Freedom Isn't Free* is her first Uncial Press release.

A born romantic, Ginny became hooked on romance at an early age. She began writing seriously in 1987 when she joined the Romance Writers of America.

Ginny is a Virginian transplanted to Nebraska by way of Texas. She and her husband of 40 years have a son, married to one of her critique partners, and three precious grandchildren. She's a keen observer of people, places and things, a skill she honed around the country in her days as an airline stewardess. Her elephant collection thrives on dust while her thimbles are protected by display cases. She loves to entertain, decorate her home and take photographs of sunsets and the children.

Ginny has served in many industry board and committee positions; including two terms as President of the Romance Authors of the Heartland. A founding member of EPIC, the Electronically Published Internet Connection, she was the first President and first conference committee chair. EPIC honored her with Florence Moyer Service Award in 2001. Visit Ginny's website: www.ginnymcblain.com.

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