

HEARTWARMING INSPIRATIONAL ROMANCE

Love Inspired

A Soldier's Family
Cheryl Wyatt

Wings of Refuge



Cheryl Wyatt
A Soldier's Family

«HarperCollins»

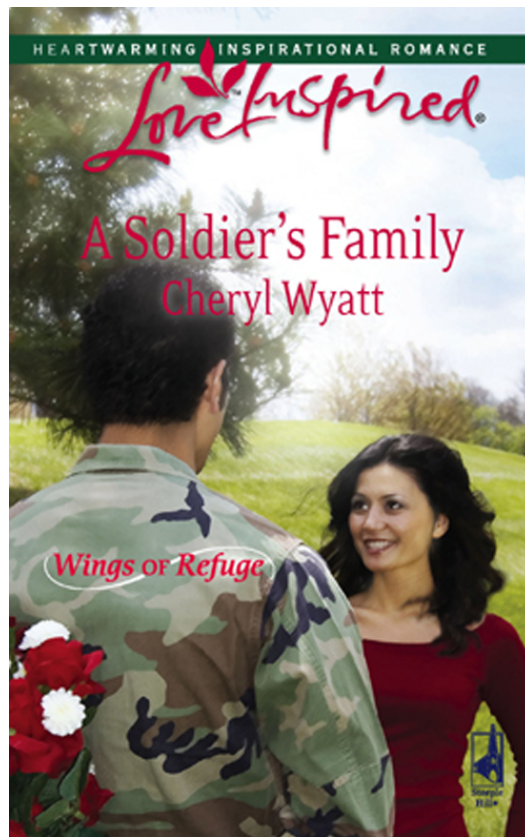
Wyatt C.

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On A Crash Course With Love She was the woman of pararescue jumper Manny Pena's dreams. But he'd stuck his foot in his mouth the last time he met Celia Munoz. Now, grounded after a parachuting accident, he was desperate to make amends with the beautiful widow. But Celia wasn't having it. The last thing she needed was another man with a dangerous job—even if he had given his life to God. Yet Manny's growing commitment to her and her troubled son began to convince her that perhaps she should take her own leap of faith.

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A Soldier's Family Cheryl Wyatt



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To Jesus: Thank You for the gift and the gumption to write. May every word pour over You as worship.

To Papaw's Patio Plotstormers who can leap over tall plot holes with a single clause.

To my grandmothers for sharing a part of each of yourselves with me. You are great and honorable women whom I admire greatly, and who have shaped my life in unspeakably wondrous ways.

Grandma Veda: for your sense of humor and a giving and selfless spirit.

Grandma Mary: for an unquenchable love for books and reading.

Grandma Alma: for modeling prayer and a life that honors God.

Grandma Nellie: for instilling in me love for family and faith in God's hand on our lives.

If I could thank every person who helped and encouraged me on this journey, the word count of this book would have doubled.

Special thanks to Pam and Bill for your advice, encouragement and support.

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Chapter One

This was not the smartest way to die.

U.S.A.F. Pararescue Jumper Manny Péna grunted, tensed his muscles and tried again to flare the canopy on his parachute.

No go.

Panic blew through him like the gust of crisp October wind that had whipped him laterally through Refuge's early morning sky moments ago, causing part of his chute to collapse.

Manny swallowed. Must keep his head or this could end badly. He glanced at the ground.

Still slamming up to meet him. Fast. Way too fast.

It could end badly anyway.

He pulled one steer cord, then the other. Ropes dug into his gloved hands, burning his palms. Something definitely didn't feel right. Manny tilted his head to peer at the underside of his canopy. Still one-third collapsed.

Not. Good.

Two lines had twisted near the top and he'd made the cardinal mistake of giving his knife to one of the students. Jumping without it was something he'd never done.

Except today.

The one jump he deviated from procedure, and now there was no way to cut away his main chute. Manny pulled the rip cord on the emergency reserve parachute. It bubbled open, but caught on his main chute, the worst possible scenario.

No ifs, ands or buts about it.

He was crashing.

A thousand yards from earth, wicked wind had blown him one way and his chute the other, winding them like a kid on a swing.

Manny brought his legs up. The upward thrust of air flapped loose material on his camo-clad arms and legs in rapid, violent clips. Manny kicked off the heavy field kit strapped to his thighs. It tumbled into the roaring Southern Illinois sky.

The position change and lightened load didn't straighten out his malfunctioning chute. Manny continued to fall through howling air at a dangerous pace. He flicked another glance to the ominous earth. His pulse spiked.

Treetops were about five hundred yards down. If he could veer sideways away from them, he may have a better chance. He steered left. His team had to be wiggling out. By now they'd know as well as he did it was too late to right himself enough to slow down for a safe landing. He fought hard to steer the wayward chute.

Three hundred yards. He tuned out fear-filled screams from skydiving patrons and directive shouts from his team that originated from both ground and air.

One hundred yards. He wished they didn't have to see this, hoped they'd close their eyes before he impacted.

Fifty yards.

Twenty. Manny clenched his eyes as the drop zone screamed up. Maybe he'd clear the trees after all.

A violent jerk informed him otherwise. He arced downward toward a tall spruce. Gravity thrust him forward, head down. Fear gnawed him like the wood, splintering his calm. He sprang both arms up to protect his head.

Lot of good that would do if he broke his neck.

He blurred through a downward vortex of browns and greens. Cracking and popping sounds ricocheted around him. Frenzied shrieks came from everywhere. Pinecones pounded. Leaves slapped. Fresh sap and pine smells hit him with nausea the same time a metallic taste entered his mouth.

If he was about to die, he hoped he'd go quick, 'cause it sure wasn't painless.

A deafening thud and white-hot pain snatched his hearing and vision.

Darkness cloaked Manny. His mind fumbled with rational thought. Peace enclosed him and whispered through this chaos that at least he was no longer on the outs with God.

And I didn't even tell them. Sorry. Give me 'nother chance.

"BP, ninety over fifty, and he's responsive to pain."

Nope. Not dead. Dead people didn't hurt like this. Manny groaned. More pain. A poke like a mad hornet sting, then burning in his forearm. He tried to pull his arm free. Hands tightened around his wrist.

"Manny, don't move," came from a soothing yet concerned voice. Team leader, Joel Montgomery. Manny then realized the pinprick had been Joel starting an intravenous infusion. A stream of deep cold traveled up his arm.

As more sensations returned, he realized the hard, frigid earth lay beneath him.

Manny forced open his eyes. His gaze trailed clear tubing up to bags of fluid that someone blurry suspended above him. Three bags became two, then one fuzzy bag. His eyes struggled for focus. He squinted to read letters on the transparent plastic.

Okay. Okay. Hydrating fluids. Not CPR fluids. So he might not be imminently dying.

"I crashed." Blinding pain hit Manny's eyes from a penlight aimed at his pupils. He clenched his eyes shut.

"We noticed," another voice spoke with grim inflection. Vince? A distant chorus of murmurs flowed in hushed tones around him. The hum of conjoined voices reminded him of a bee swarm, bringing with it a verbal collective buzzing.

A gloved finger that smelled of sterile latex and powder opened his eyelid. Nolan Briggs, wielding that wicked penlight. Manny grinded his teeth against mind-numbing discomfort in his head and on his backside.

"Equal and reactive to light," Nolan mumbled in Joel's direction. Manny'd never heard Nolan's voice that tight before. He sought out Nolan's face.

No way!

Was the dude about to cry? Nolan the softie. If Manny didn't feel like a grenade had just blown up in his back pocket, he'd put forth the effort to tease Nolan. Shards of jolting pain shot through every part of him.

"Aaah. Hurts." Maybe death would offer reprieve.

Joel moved into Manny's line of sight. "Where?"

"Where not?" Manny pushed the words through gritted teeth and blinked his eyes open as much as he could stand.

A circle of horrified faces stared down at him. Some he recognized, some not. His heart tumbled against his ribs at the grave concern on each. Darkness threatened to drag him back under. He fought for lucidity. If he closed his eyes he might never wake up.

"Tha-was close." He forced his eyes to stay open despite throbbing pain in his head.

Joel nodded, his face stern with a sort of tense concentration Manny had only seen him exhibit in life-or-death situations.

In the distance, coming closer, the rhythmic chopping of a helicopter echoed. No doubt to evacuate him.

At least they'd been on a training op and not a mission. Still, how embarrassing to crash in front of a class full of rookie PJ wannabes.

“By th-way, tha-was a near perfect dem-n-stration a throng wayda land.” Manny pinched out the words to them. His attempt at humor caused a few pallid faces to wash over with discernable relief. This day would definitely weed out the weak ones.

“If it’s any consolation, we saw that tree jump in your path, Péna.” Pale with worry lines Manny never noticed before, Chance squeezed his shoulder in a gentle grip.

Manny tried to smile at Chance’s attempt to keep his embarrassment minimal. Little late. His pride took a fatal hit when his body crashed through the only grove of trees for a twenty-mile radius at NASCAR speeds. What a clumsy landing. At least he was still here to sulk over it.

Thank You.

He stared at the spot of sky, previously blue, now gunmetal gray, visible through the circle of gawking faces. Would he ever air ski that vast expanse again, or fall through clouds at exhilarating speeds? Would he live through the end of this day?

Manny studied the people around him, creating a diversion from outlandish pain and fear that he’d never freefall again.

He began to feel like a caged zoo animal on display. Where’d all these people come from? His team flanked him on all sides, working, poking, prodding, bandaging, splinting, assessing injuries and vital function. They also elbowed people back continually, sparing Manny’s dignity.

As if picking up on his discomfort, PJ Vince lifted his face and shot the gawkers a lethal look. “Stay back. In fact, I want everyone not medical behind the line.” He jabbed his arm westward. “Over there.”

Team leader Joel eyed Vince then the drop zone crowd as they retreated with soft murmurs and parting words of comfort. Manny figured people were more concerned than curious but he appreciated the cove of privacy his team provided as they rallied around him. These guys were like family. He loved each of them like brothers.

Even Chance, the new guy who kneaded expert fingers around Manny’s ribs as Joel pressed a cold stethoscope against his chest and abdomen.

Manny licked dry lips. “Wha’d all I break?” Though he didn’t really want to know.

“Besides every branch off the south side of a pine tree and your reserve chute? Only X-rays will tell.” Nolan Briggs mouthed his assessment past a syringe clenched in his teeth. He flicked Manny’s arm below a tight tourniquet that pinched his skin.

“You know my blood type.” He’d been poked enough in the last five minutes. Manny was certain hundreds of pine needles splintered every square inch of him, including his tush, which felt like it had borne most of the crash impact. He imagined he looked like a battered porcupine. Had he actually landed on the ground? Or had they pulled him out of a tree?

Joel piggybacked a small bag of antibiotics into his main IV line. “The local hospital doesn’t, and procedure won’t allow them to take our word for it.”

Great.

His first significant skydiving accident and it had to happen in a Podunk town like Refuge.

“They want a type and cross-match for emergency surgery,” Joel finished.

Surgery. That’d be a first, too.

And just weeks after he’d given control of his life back to God. He should have told someone. Now they’d all think the change in him was due to this accident.

“Joel, dude. I need to tell you something,” Manny croaked.

Joel taped tubing across Manny’s arm. “Rest now. Talk later.”

“No, I need to—”

“Péna, tell me when we get you stable and in the chopper.” Joel sounded worried. He never sounded worried. And if Manny was being airlifted instead of ground transported, that meant he must be pretty bad off.

He couldn’t die without telling them. Manny reached up and grasped Joel’s collar. “Listen—”

He squeezed Manny's fist. "We're going to get you fixed up, bro. Don't worry." Joel ripped open supplies, unfurling more tubing. Oxygen? Manny tried to shake his head but his C-collar neck brace wouldn't allow it.

How long had he been out?

Nolan spread a warm blanket over Manny as Joel stuck an oxygen tube in his nose. It hissed air up the passages, making his eyes water. By the rattled look Nolan passed Joel, he wasn't out of the woods yet. Sweat beaded Manny's forehead despite the chilly temperature. He tugged Joel nose to nose. "No. I need to tell you now."

That got Joel's attention. He froze and studied Manny. Gaseous fuel vapors pushed through residual antiseptic fumes. A fog of dust wafted from the helicopter landing.

Manny swallowed, but dryness coated his throat. Or maybe it was actual sand. "I made a big decision last week."

Joel held Manny's gaze. "Yeah?"

"Yeah, and I need you to do something for me."

"Anything, buddy." Joel braced his arm around the back of Manny's shoulders. "On three."

Chance cradled Manny's head. "One. Two. Three."

Hands everywhere lifted him. Helicopter paramedics slid a hard orange board under him that smelled like melted plastic and floor polish.

The pressure on his hind end caused his breath to catch.

He exhaled slowly. "There's a stack of letters in my pack. I need you to find it and see they get mailed." Manny shuffled the words out quickly because it hurt like crazy to talk.

Joel shook his head and stared Manny down. "No. No. You get better and mail them yourself, Péna, and that's an order."

Manny realized by the stubborn jut to Joel's jaw and the glitter in his eyes that he probably thought these were the kind of letters a soldier writes to family when the soldier sensed he wasn't coming home.

Joel's nontypical emotional reaction stunned and touched him to the core. Manny no longer cared if everyone heard. They'd eventually find out anyway because when Manny made a decision of commitment, it was for real and for keeps.

God spared his life. No way could Manny be ashamed of Him.

And Joel had been a huge part of that, his open devotion to Jesus a huge catalyst for Manny's own hidden faith.

"I had a change of heart, Joel. All that praying you did musta worked on me."

Joel cut Manny's uniform top down the middle, starting below his neck brace. "How so?"

"I gave God control of my life last month."

Joel's cutting stuttered, then resumed as he flicked Manny a surprised look. "Seriously?"

"I wrote the letters in days following. I've done things I'm not proud of."

Joel shrugged. "We all have." A relieved grin peeked out both corners of his mouth, though.

Manny dropped his tone. "Most of those letters are to ladies I've, well, you know..."

"I Roger that." Joel leaned aside as a paramedic attached a cardiac monitor lead to Manny's chest.

"The top letter I wrote last. I didn't have the right address, or she refused it. It's to Celia. I know she's still mad that I propositioned her at your wedding. I don't blame her. Joel, I was so drunk, I don't even remember disrespecting her."

Joel actually laughed. "You have a nice scar on your lip as a monument to your indiscretion. You did proposition her, Péna. She clocked you good for it, too. Amber and I thought you two were going to throw down and brawl to the death right there on the reception-room floor."

Acute embarrassment hit Manny though Joel's kind smile never waned.

"And I haven't taken a drink since." Nor did he plan to.

Nolan leaned over Manny's face. "Joel's right. We're not letting you off that easy. You're gonna get better and apologize to Miss Hot Tamale, as you so called her, in person."

Hot Tamale? Oh, boy. For sure he needed to never drink again.

Manny understood what they were trying to do. He squeezed Joel's hand while being carried to the waiting chopper where they stood now, preparing to load him. Why couldn't he feel his feet? Did paralysis begin like that? He loved tamales. Had he really called her that? Probably that and more. He felt terrible for nearly ruining his best friend's wedding.

God, don't let me be paralyzed.

He should call his family. Talk to his mom.

What if he never skydived again? What if he never saw his team again? No. They'd never abandon him. Not as a friend. Ever.

Not even if that homicidal wind had ripped him from the arms of his team today.

He didn't want this to be happening. Didn't know at six this morning that by nine he could be a total goner. Doubt assailed him that if he did live to tell about this, Celia would ever speak to him, much less accept his apology and forgive his indiscreet actions. He hoped for the chance to tell her he really was sorry.

"Thanks, Joel." Manny knew he would see that Celia and the other women received their letters if Manny ended up unable to mail them himself.

"I'm not going anywhere." Joel released Manny's hand to hop in the helicopter and help lift him inside.

"I know, just... thanks."

Joel reached across Manny to tap Nolan Briggs on the shoulder. "You're in charge in my absence. Find the pack he kicked off. Bring it to me at Refuge Memorial."

Nolan nodded. Joel peered past Nolan's shoulder. "Brock, sit the rucksack search out and get that swollen ankle X-rayed when you guys come to the hospital."

Brockton Drake nodded from the opening, then limped aside while Vince Reardon, Ben Dillinger and Chance Garrison pressed in. Vince grasped Manny's hand, bringing it tight to his chest before relinquishing it slowly as Joel and the paramedic pulled Manny on in. Nolan swallowed when his gaze skittered across Manny's legs as they slid past.

Manny didn't miss the wince on Chance's face, either. He hadn't learned to control his facial reactions like the rest. From their expressions, he must have a compound fracture or two.

Manny wished he didn't have any medical knowledge to compound his fear. He focused on his team, looking in at him through the side hatch.

Maybe not such a good idea.

Faces didn't strain or squirm like that unless things were critical. His team could hide how bad things were, but the other skydivers approaching in waves behind them couldn't.

"What happened to Brockton's ankle?" Manny asked Joel.

"Hard landing." Joel grinned. "Though not as hard as yours."

"My fault. He probably got distracted watching me bite the dust."

"Actually, he held his cool pretty good. He hurt his ankle because his legs took off running after you in midair before his feet ever hit the ground. Once he landed, he was the first one to you, sprained ankle and all. He didn't even take time to click off his parachute, just dragged it behind him as he sprinted to where you'd crash landed."

The image Joel's vivid words created caused Manny to chuckle. "Ouch."

Maybe laughing wasn't such a good idea, either.

The hatch closed. Five noses and ten hands pressed against the outside of the glass, peering in at him.

Looking as if they feared they'd never see him again.

Manny lifted his hand, pressing his palm to the inside of the glass. Each teammate pressed their hand to his a moment before letting the next guy have a turn. Each mouthed something, most of which Manny couldn't make out because the threat of tears over feeling thoroughly loved and cared for clouded his vision.

The helicopter lifted. Dust swirled. Hands fell and faces faded away. Images entered the oblique. Sounds muted. Wind from spinning rotor blades ceased to roar through his ears. Sleep overtook him again. He figured someone stuck a sedative in his IV. Joel? Joel remained right beside him.

He would. Manny felt his prayers, his presence.

How could he even think for a blink that he'd be left alone or abandoned? Risking their lives together day in and day out had formed a brotherly bond stronger than Kevlar. He hadn't realized how deep it ran until today.

Thank You. I'll never take them for granted. Ever.

His pain eased. So did the anxiety. If he died today, he'd leave loved and he'd be okay. For all that, he was beyond glad.

Still—

My times are in Your hands, but I'd sure like the chance to live out my recovered faith. I'd also still love to be a PJ if You'd care to swing that in my favor.

Manny didn't want to ponder all the things that could snatch the dream away, paralysis being one. He fought despair. He'd lived in its murk before, right after his toddler son drowned and his marriage imploded over it. He didn't want to ever go back there. He'd rather die than never skydive with his team on rescue missions again.

Please don't take that from me. But if You do, help me be faithful to You, even if my worst nightmare slaughters my dream.

A warm hand on his shoulder soothed and calmed him. Joel? Was he still here? What was that flowery smell? Did Heaven have hairspray and roses? Manny forced heavy lids open a pinch.

A thick head of stylish black hair bowed beside him. Full, red lips moved silently as though in prayer. If those features hadn't given her away, the creamy caramel skin, courtesy of her Latin heritage, would have. His eyes saw, but his mind couldn't compute. He stared unblinking at the last person he ever expected to be here at his side.

Celia Munez?

He'd recognize those ebony curls and characteristic cherubic cheeks anywhere, he'd stared at them enough.

Confusion spun his thoughts around. How did Joel's wife's best friend and co-teacher get in the helicopter with him?

Furthermore, why?

Especially after the way he'd treated her at Joel and Amber's wedding reception? Celia and Manny's parting words to one another had been guard-dog vicious.

"Ello," he rasped. His throat felt like he'd swallowed razor wire.

Impossibly long lashes fluttered. Luminous almond eyes flickered open to stare at him. Startled first, then her face took on a look next that he could only interpret as expect no mercy.

Something like an anvil weighted his chest at the negative transformation.

"I knew Joel wouldn't let me ride with these pretty flight nurses sans chaperone," Manny slurred, attempting to break the ice with humor. The flight nurses had all been guys, except one who had to be his mother's age.

Her eyebrows squished together. "You're not only out of the helicopter, you're out of your mind. You're in the hospital. You had a great crash and a bad nap. Your nurse says it looks like you shattered your hip and your tailbone pretty good."

“I’m surprised you’re here.” Manny swallowed. He longed for some water but doubted they’d even clear him for an ice chip.

A smirk bracketed her mouth. “Yeah, well, someone has to keep you in line. I made Joel and Amber and the rest of the parachute pack go eat. They’ll be back soon.”

By her rigid stance, not soon enough.

“What are you doing here?”

She folded arms tightly across her chest. “They asked me to come pray for you, so I did.”

In other words, if she had a choice, she wouldn’t be here.

I’m sorry.

The words tickled his tongue to tell her but she turned to stand by the window, putting her back to him. She sniffed and flipped hair over her shoulder.

He could take a far-from-subtle hint. She wasn’t up for chatting. Fine. He had better things to do than stare at her stiff back. Manny faced the wall opposite of where she stood. He counted how many ugly orange flowers coated the wallpaper and lost track of how much time passed.

Anything to delay being first to speak into the silence stiling the room.

Not one word, not even a huff came out of her. When Joel and Amber returned, Celia left without a parting glance at him.

The metal side rail creaked as Joel leaned on it. “What’s up with the scowl, Péna? You two have another altercation?”

Manny cast a sour look at the door Celia blew through as though one more second in the room with him would inflict her with the plague. “She ignored me the entire time.”

But that wasn’t exactly true. She’d been praying with her hand on his shoulder when he’d awakened. He was sure of it.

She’d acted startled, embarrassed even. Snatched her hand away as though his skin had erupted in boils. Then she’d clammed up and closed herself off.

But she hadn’t been fast enough. He’d glimpsed all he needed to. Beneath that tough, street-smart exterior lived a human with feelings. Feelings he wanted to know. What kept that tempest brewing in her dark and alluring eyes?

Call him crazy, but Manny wanted to know her, everything about her. First he had to find a crack in her mortar, then figure out his mode of attack.

He may as well begin with prayer, because it would require the big guns to break that impenetrable shell and to convince her that, by God’s continued grace, he was not the same man who’d blatantly and tactlessly disrespected her at the Montgomery wedding.

“She’ll eventually cool off and warm up to you,” Joel said. “I asked her to put you on the prayer list at church and be in charge of updating it.”

If Manny could snicker painlessly, he would.

“She may put a notation of praise in the bulletin.”

Joel gave his head a firm shake. “No. Celia’s got a temper but she’d never celebrate an accident of this magnitude.” An unmistakable smirk saddled Joel’s mouth. “Even if he did proposition her at her best friend’s Christian wedding.”

Embarrassment assaulted Manny but he felt too sleepy from medications to defend himself. Joel knew Manny’s remorse or he wouldn’t tease. Manny had already apologized to Joel and Amber that he and others had drunk heavily before their worship-oriented wedding. The Montgomery couple had shown only grace toward the team in the aftermath. Manny was the only one as far as he knew who’d acted shamefully toward attending ladies, though. He only remembered waking up with a guilty conscience, a sore lip, a nasty hangover and severely wounded pride.

A horrible thought struck him. What if Celia didn’t forgive him? How would that adversely affect her faith? “I don’t know, Joel. She still seems pretty mad.”

Joel's expression deadpanned. "Maybe. But a young widow like Celia would never take even microscopic pleasure in another person nearly losing their life." Joel grinned. "Even if she did order you to drop dead at the punch fountain. Pun fully intended."

Chapter Two

“Serves him right.” Celia Munez planted freshly manicured hands on her hips, careful not to disturb her damp red nail polish.

“Celia!” Amber Montgomery’s face jutted out and her mouth popped open.

Guilt sucker-punched Celia. She flapped her arms and put resolve in her voice. “Well, fine! Okay. I’m glad he didn’t die. Otherwise, his dented rear bumper would be on fire right now in the devil’s place. Still, what a waste of a perfectly good pine tree.” Not that she meant any of the last part, but it amused her to watch Amber’s eyes bug out.

In addition, she had to put up a front of irritation and indifference toward Manny because she didn’t need anyone knowing she’d been stricken with feeling something totally opposite.

Or how her heart had tugged for intense, emotional moments watching him writhe in the hospital bed this morning. Seeing his body bruised and scraped from head to toe had rattled her then and still haunted her now.

The last person she’d seen in that sort of shape had been her husband in his casket. That day’s images branded her memory. She could still hear gut-wrenching sobs from a younger Javier as he’d clawed and clutched at his father’s police uniform.

Wake up. Please, Dad. Mom and I are so sad. Please, please wake up, get up and come back home with us.

Her son had grieved with open abandon for his father, begging words everyone else in the room only had courage to scream from their minds. Despite soulful pleading, Joseph had lain there cold and still. Four hours after the close of the graveside service, they’d had to literally drag a sobbing Javier away from his father for the last time.

Celia closed her eyes in a vain attempt to shut out images. A blue-silk pillow cradling the head of her soul mate. Funeral home walls obliterated by an onslaught of ornate flower arrangements. The cold of his hand. The unseeing eyes. No warmth. No response. All she’d wanted to do was to throw herself over that expensive box and wail for him like her son.

She shivered at the memories.

They’d assaulted her earlier at Manny’s bedside, and they took her mind hostage now.

Please let Manny be okay. Don’t make his team go through losing one of their own.

Prayers had bubbled out of her for Manny at the hospital, too. She couldn’t help touching his skin, reassuring herself the warmth of life still resided in him despite how bad he appeared.

Wake up. She’d whispered Javier’s words to Manny and begged God to make it so.

Then he had.

Embarrassment had caused her to act feisty toward him. Regret for harsh words seemed the story of her life. As hard as she wished to take it back, life didn’t provide do-overs.

“Actually, Celia—” Amber started then stopped when Celia jerked back to attention.

“Joel mentioned Manny gave his life to God a few weeks ago.” Amber pulled Psych the cat into her lap, and studied Celia.

Too carefully.

It alerted Celia that Amber may be on to her. Amber didn’t keep secrets from her, and she shouldn’t keep them from Amber. Guilt waylaid Celia. Still, she wasn’t ready to reveal what she couldn’t even explain to herself yet.

Better to keep up the front while she could until she managed to figure out these confusing emotions.

“Ha.” The music to the oldies song, “That’ll Be the Day,” played in Celia’s head. She wrestled the temptation to hum it out loud to elicit a reaction from Amber. She hated her immediate tendency

to doubt another person's faith. It wasn't for her to judge whether Manny was for real or not. Then why did she?

She knew why.

Her hypocrite father, the deacon who'd lived one way at church and another at home. She'd lost count of her mother's bruises to prove it. Celia shook her head to rid herself of pity. She'd tried and tried to help her mother get away.

Amber dropped her arms. "You don't believe Manny?"

That's not why Celia shook her head, but now that Amber mentioned it, Manny's brazen actions at the reception zipped into sharp focus.

Fat chance he'd changed his tune all that much in so little time. Character took years to build, even with God at the helm. Right? Look how many years she'd been asking Him to help her control her tongue. Yet Celia's verbal assaults had only gotten marginally better over the years.

This so-called conversion could be a ploy.

She'd seen Manny's type before. And heard. And smelt. And felt. In the violent words, angry fists and abusive face of her father who reeked like a brewery gone bad. Except on Sunday when he smiled and smelled sickly sweet of Heaven's Glory cologne. A yearly gift from the congregation who adored him and had no idea the man he was at home.

How Celia abhorred that smell.

"Celia?" Amber set the cat down, brushing fur off her pants.

Celia lifted her chin. "How should I know his motives? Besides that, why should I care?" Or give him the benefit of the doubt? "This doesn't concern me whatsoever." Never mind that his half-sedated grin upon waking had thrown her pulse for a roller-coaster loop.

"We invited him to stay with us while he's recovering from surgery." Amber tickled Psych under his collar with her toe. "Refuge has one of the top rehabilitation centers in the nation. Manny is considering the doctor's suggestion that he recover here. They're looking at six months due to the reconstructive surgery his injuries require."

Six months? Would the nightmare of Manny never end?

Celia's arms flailed around again. "Whatever. I can't stand that guy and he can't stand me. It's a mutual dislike."

But she could hardly steer clear of Amber's home due to the fact they were deep in the throes of several large projects, including care packages for soldiers overseas and community programs. Amber's house was where all the supplies were mailed and stored. Celia would just have to find a way to steer clear of him. That, or perfect the art of ignoring.

"At least pray for him." Amber sighed. "He should be out of surgery by now, but Joel hasn't called. I'm concerned. I can't get any of the guys on their cells, and the nurse couldn't give an update over the phone. I'd like to ride back to the hospital to check on him but it's almost time for school to get out." Amber's voice cracked. She eyed her phone, then the wall clock.

Celia chewed her lip. "You should be there for Joel in case things aren't going well."

Amber ran a hand through her hair. "But I need to get Bradley off the bus."

Pings of remorse hit Celia. She should offer to go with Amber back to the hospital. Right now, she was still too embarrassed by what Manny had said to her brazenly in front of a room full of their friends. Not only that, he'd flirted with her all night before making it vocally clear how he'd like his evening to end. Guys like that she needed to steer clear of. She refused to be a cheap conquest in that PJ's bullet belt.

Not to mention shame had draped her like negligee-sheer curtains, giving away her secret attraction toward Manny. Drawn from the first day she'd met him year before last at the school, clad in camouflage. He'd stood behind Amber as Joel parachuted to the lawn to honor ill Bradley's wish. Celia flushed at the memory of the interested glances Manny'd tossed her way. Like two people

playing ball on a tennis court, he'd tossed some doozies to her, then watched to see if she'd throw the flirt ball back.

She hadn't.

Hoo-boy, how she'd wanted to.

But she hadn't. He wasn't the kind of guy to get involved with. He radiated danger in every way. To her faith. To her wild past. To her heart. To her promise to herself never to fall for guys packing heat again.

She needed a man with a desk job. One who brandished a protractor or a calculator or even a ruler. Not powerful guns and wicked-looking knives strapped to their person. Yeah. Bring on the geeky guys.

How boring.

She hadn't been prepared for how bad she'd feel facing Manny for the first time after the reception. Nor how seeing the battered scar on his lip would remind her how she'd lost control and acted hideously by striking him.

Just like her dad. The one person she'd sworn never to be like. To top it off, Javier had sauntered into the reception hall that moment, witnessing her slap Manny. Javier had been as angry as Manny. They'd both stalked out opposite doors. For the first time, Javier stayed gone all night.

Recalling the violated look and red splotch on Manny's face at the hospital this morning had spurred remorse and she'd rested her guilty hand on his arm. Celia's thoughts had zipped back to the present when Manny decided at that precise moment to awaken.

She'd never felt so uncomfortable in the presence of another human being as she did while Amber and Joel grabbed a bite to eat at the hospital cafeteria, leaving her alone with Manny. And her errant thoughts.

Better to avoid him completely. Never mind that inner voice nudging her to apologize. That scepter of conscience jabbed her to lay down her pride and forego the right to be offended by Manny's actions. Consider it an opportunity to extend grace. Fine. She still didn't have to be around the guy. Celia cringed at the memory of the horrible smacking sound and the sting of flesh against her hand the second it made contact with his face. How humiliating that must have been for Manny.

She grinned.

Conviction, sharp and pointed, speared her deep in that sensible place fighting for stable footing in her heart.

She put a sustaining hand on Amber's shoulder. "Tell you what, how about I stay here and get Bradley off the bus? Javier has detention after school again today. So after I pick him up the three of us will come to the hospital to support Joel." But not Manny. Other than her prayers, the creep was on his own.

Amber pulled her coat on. "I'm sorry, Celia. Is Javier still acting up?"

Celia straightened Amber's collar, getting whiffs of Amber's peach shampoo. "Sí. Smoking behind the high school. It's always something. I don't know what's gotten into him." Celia raised her shoulders. "But listen, you have better things to do than hear sob stories about my wayward teen. Go. Be with your husband and I'll wait here for Bradley." Celia heaved a breath and braced both hands on Amber's shoulders. "And...I'll pray for Manny. And Joel."

After receiving the call this morning, she and Amber had obtained emergency subs, and met Joel and his pararescue team at the hospital. Every one of the guys' forlorn faces slumped, relaying fear they were on the brink of losing the best friend they ever had. They obviously loved Manny, and he them. Maybe there was something to the guy she didn't see.

She'd be wise to keep it that way.

Amber smiled and hugged her. "I appreciate this, Celia. I'll call you when I know something. I'm praying for you and Javier."

“Gracias.” Celia walked Amber out of the house, then watched her pull away before heading to the corner of Haven Street to the bus stop. She glanced down at herself and groaned.

Paint splatters covered her clothes. Not only that, she sported a shiner from rolling her lawnmower down an embankment at midnight last night. She’d had a difficult time explaining that one to Amber as they’d painted her living room. Rather than go back to school or hang at the hospital, they’d returned here to combat Amber’s worry by tackling household projects.

Celia swiped fingers through her curls, brushing them over to the side so she wouldn’t appear so unkempt. Not that it would matter to the jovial school-bus driver or the special-needs students aboard.

She usually wouldn’t be caught dead out of the house unless immaculately groomed, but this kind of emergency called for a hobo day. She just hoped anyone who saw her realized she didn’t usually go out looking so sloppy.

After meeting Bradley at his bus, the two walked back to get in Celia’s car.

“Where’s Mom?” Bradley tossed his backpack on the seat beside him and buckled himself in the booster Celia borrowed from Amber.

“Sweetie, she’s with your dad. He’s having a pretty rough day.” Celia pulled away from the curb. Pudgy fingers pushed thick glasses up his freckled nose. “Whatsa matter?”

Celia drew in a quiet breath. How could she say this so Bradley wouldn’t worry about Joel jumping from now on? “Well, it seems Manny sort of ran into a tree today while skydiving.”

Bradley’s head jerked back. “Whoa, dude. Is the tree all right?”

She smiled. Bradley was the bravest person she knew. “The tree didn’t fare all that well, and it looks like Manny may have broken a limb or two.”

Bradley pulled a lunch box out of his backpack and opened it. Scents of juice, aged bananas and peanut butter swirled around the car. “Will Manny still get to be a PJ?”

Bradley’s words jarred her to the point her foot went lax on the gas. For the first time Celia held a glimpse of what Manny might be facing. According to Joel, being a PJ was Manny’s whole life. It would crush him if he couldn’t skydive again or rescue people.

She offered a tender response to Bradley, feeling the angst. “I don’t know, sweetie. Tell you what, that would be a really good thing to pray about. Shall we?”

Lunch box set aside, he nodded and bowed his head. “I’ll dial and you can hang up,” he said, then started the prayer for Manny.

When it was Celia’s turn, she could barely speak or see the road for her tears. His simple but heartfelt prayer had elicited something in her. Bradley didn’t see Manny in the same light she did. To Bradley, all the PJs were heroes. To her son, too.

Celia ended the prayer feeling even worse for hitting Manny. Maybe God had brought Manny into her life to show him grace. Why did she always make life about her?

In the school lot, a sulking Javier slouched on the curb.

“I hate detention.” Javier huffed out a dramatic breath and slid into the seat.

“Then stop misbehaving, Javier. Buckle up.”

“Don’t want to. It’s a dumb rule.”

Gravel protested beneath her tires as they stopped. “It’s not about rules. It’s about keeping your teeth out of the windshield. Buckle that seat belt and that mouth.”

A scowl darkened his eyes as he darted looks out the side window where a clump of kids huddled near the curb. “Wearing seat belts isn’t cool. I’ll buckle down the road.”

“You’ll buckle up now, hijo, or the car’s not moving.” Javier’s father would somersault in his grave if he heard the tone Javier used with her. Celia bit back an emotional lump.

Why did Joseph have to die young and leave me alone to raise a troubled son who won’t talk to me? At what point did Javier and I lose touch, Lord? Where did I slip up?

Maybe it’s because she’d loosened up on discipline for several months after Javier’s father had been shot while on duty during a DEA drug sting. At the time, it had taken everything she’d had just

to pull herself out of bed each day. She'd thought it best to go easy on Javier since he was grieving, as well. Then Javier resented her erecting those boundaries and enforcing discipline again. What could she do besides pray he'd eventually come around instead of continue his descent off the deep end?

Despite her inner turmoil, Celia put on her best "Mommy-Look" and stared Javier down through the rearview mirror.

His brows knit, but he finally shoved the metal into the clasp. He then jammed fingers through his long hair, flipping it off his forehead, revealing the only eyes she knew capable of sullen scowls comparable to her own.

Stringy strands fell back over his forehead.

Her fingers itched as she pulled into traffic. How badly she wanted to get hold of that mess with a pair of scissors. But she needed to pick her battles, and unruly hair ranked low on the totem pole these days.

"Where we going?" Javier asked, munching a bite of granola bar that Bradley had offered him.

"The hospital. Manny had a skydiving accident this morning and—"

The stricken look climbing Javier's face caused Celia to clench tight the steering wheel.

For a brief instant she saw the vulnerable little boy he used to be. Though his skin was a darker shade of brown than hers, he paled several degrees. Celia realized he waited for her to finish. Apprehension glittered in his eyes.

Choosing her words carefully she said, "He's alive, Javier. But he's busted up pretty good. A few hours ago, he was coherent and talking."

Just not to me.

"He's having major hip surgery. We're going by to see if there's anything we can do, and to support Joel and the team."

Javier stared at her. Uncertainty replaced apprehension. For a second, she felt a connection when he held her gaze and searched her eyes for reassurance. Just like he had the day she'd had to sit him down and tell him his father wasn't coming home. Why, Mom? Why do these terrible things have to happen?

The same question hovered in Javier's eyes now before he averted his gaze to the window, uneaten granola bar abandoned in his lap. The gangly teen with the monstrous appetite was gobbling her out of house and home. If he wasn't eating, this news had really rattled him. Celia's heart swelled with love, then compassion for her son. She hoped he'd be okay when he saw the kind of shape Manny was in.

The untouched granola bar rested in the same position on his lap fifteen minutes later when she pulled into the visitor parking at Refuge Memorial Hospital.

They stopped at the nurses' station to have their temperatures checked. Most of the staff recognized Bradley since he'd been there so often prior to his bone-marrow transplant for leukemia, which had thankfully gone into remission.

Once at Manny's doorway and peeking through a crack in the ugly cantaloupe curtains, Celia tried not to bite her lip. It tore at her heart to see anyone suffer.

The nurse escorted Bradley and Javier to a waiting room, and then returned to the hall outside Manny's door.

Though Celia knew doctors rarely gave recovering alcoholics narcotics, she knew from talking to Amber that Manny was only a social drinker. His team had assured her that his behavior at the wedding reception was highly unusual and out of character for Manny. Celia didn't know whether to buy that. Regardless, she couldn't stand to see the big oaf hurting.

Celia put a hand on the nurse's arm. "Can't you give the guy something to ease the pain a little?" Manny looked beyond miserable.

The nurse eyed Manny's door. "I've tried. He won't take it. The friend with him is trying to talk him into it. Go on in, if you like." She waved Celia in and swished on to another room.

Did Manny even want her in there? She doubted it. He'd sulked the entire time she'd been here earlier. She'd stared at water streaks on the glass and studied cars on the street below, trying to get up the nerve to apologize to him, only to have chickened out in the end.

Cluck. Cluck. Cluck. Suck it up, cupcake. Get in there and humble yourself like you know you should.

Celia's pep talk bolstered her courage a little. She drew in a breath, squared her shoulders and went for it.

Amber stood at Joel's side, holding one of Manny's hands. His eyes were clenched tight and his face looked pinched all over.

"Just a little to knock the edge off," Joel coaxed.

Manny shook his head emphatically, veins in his forehead and neck popping out. "No, dude. I don't want any narcotics. You know why I have a thing about taking drugs." Manny opened his eyes, then clamped them shut.

"His wife OD'd," Nolan whispered behind Celia. She nearly jumped out of her skin. How could these big, bulky guys move around so silently? Nolan must have read the curiosity in her face and felt the need to explain.

Celia removed her hand from her throat. "Pshew! You startled me. Were you lurking back there in the ugly curtains or what?" she whispered. But Nolan eyed Manny.

"Thanks for airing my dirty laundry, Briggs." Manny shot Nolan a heated glare then flicked an unfriendly glance Celia's way. She didn't know what to make of it. Pain could turn a person into a madman. Or it could simply be that he resented her being here. Maybe even hated her. And rightfully so. Who wouldn't, with all her shortcomings like a short fuse of a temper and an acid-spewing mouth she couldn't seem to control no matter how hard she tried? She hated herself, too, sometimes.

That verse about always doing what you don't want to do and not doing the things you know you should, yeah, that defined her. Where her mouth was concerned anyway. Half her sin would cease if she'd keep it shut.

It amazed her that Manny heard from across the spacious private room. Another thing that enthralled her about these Special Forces dudes. And no matter how hard she tried not to be intrigued, she was. By Manny especially. Maybe because they shared ethnicity. Or could be because those dark and probing eyes didn't miss a flip. He seemed to see all, hear all, feel all and know all.

By the narrowed assessing gaze crossing Manny's features now as he zeroed in on her, he sensed all, too. At least her thoughts. Her cheeks heated, and she rarely blushed.

Could he sense only what she wanted him to see?

Or what she desperately didn't?

Chapter Three

“Narcotics make me have nightmares I can’t wake up from,” Manny whispered to Joel so Celia wouldn’t hear. He couldn’t explain why he cared so much what she thought. He felt vulnerable enough without her seeing him in this state. Yet he’d experienced pleasant surprise that she’d returned to the hospital at all.

Under different circumstances, he’d appreciate her attempt to be humane. But in this much pain, he couldn’t get a hold of himself. He hurt so bad, his personality was uncontrollably altered. His leg felt like an Abrams tank had rolled over it.

Twice.

His entire body burned as though an RPG sheared the skin right off his bones.

As if sensing his self-consciousness, she stepped out. Funny thing. He felt her absence immediately.

And didn’t like it.

Celia was the kind of girl who changed the room when she walked in. Or, rather, bounced in. Always upbeat, feet moving, face nearly always grinning, bright teeth, big smile, just the kind he liked. Thick curls dancing around her overly expressive, ever-laughing face. Everything about her blared drama, and he usually loved it. Any day but today.

He wished they could bury the hatchet and become friends. He needed the cheering up that the sound of her laugh could accomplish.

Like at the rehearsal dinner the night before Joel and Amber’s wedding. He’d been the best man and Celia the maid of honor. He’d shown up in a horrid mood because he hated weddings since his own marriage had failed. Within minutes she’d had him laughing until tears rolled down his cheeks. Her sarcasm. Her cheeky humor. Her spit-fire comments and street-smart wit. As though she’d sensed his struggle to be happy for Joel more than sad for himself. The icing on the cake had been getting to know Javier, who’d hovered like his shadow. He really liked that kid.

Manny was happy for Joel, he really was—he just wished he had a relationship like that. God had entrusted him with one family and he’d dropped the ball in a big way. No matter how hard he ached for another family, he didn’t deserve it.

He hadn’t taken care of the first one.

Only with God’s help could he ever forgive himself. Or deal with this outlandish pain that challenged his control and his sanity and his hospitality to visitors and his...everything—just everything.

God, it hurts. I can’t do this by myself. Not another minute. The urge to screech out like a jungle animal bit at him, clawed at his mind. He seethed wet air through his teeth instead. Changing positions did. Not. Help.

How could something possibly hurt this bad?

Seven hours of torturous pain with not one second of relief and now he teetered on the brink of insanity. He should take the pain meds. No. He’d rather hurl off the edge of a mental cliff than have the nightmares. His team seeing him in this shape didn’t bother him so much, but pretty Celia? His male ego hated it. He didn’t expect her to understand, didn’t want her to know what a failure he’d been in his life, the horrible things he was responsible for. No one except his team knew how his past haunted him. For years they’d tried to convince him to run clear and free of cumbersome guilt.

He couldn’t.

Why should he? His mistake had cut his son’s life short. Manny should suffer.

Usually he could wake himself from the dreams. The one time he couldn’t was the last time he’d taken something for pain after a botched root canal. Images from the drug-induced dreams had stayed with him and refused to fade.

Even now. Images of his toddler son floating face up, eyes frozen in death and fear. Mouth open from screams that had pulled water into his lungs instead of alerting his mom and dad for help.

All unnoticed by the two people who should have been watching over him instead of arguing. Oblivious that on the other side of the glass, mere feet away, the child they'd made in happier days had found a way outside and was drowning in the family pool.

Once they'd noticed Seth wasn't in his toddler bed, they scoured the house and yard and found him. Manny had performed CPR but it had been too late. He'd wanted them to pull together to get through it but their marriage had melted under the heat of bitter, burning accusations. It hadn't made a difference in Theresa's mind that Manny had just come off a several-month-long mission and had no way of knowing the yard gate had broken or that Seth knew how to unlock a dead bolt.

Then his wife had died shortly after divorcing him the same year. Authorities had never determined whether her overdose had been intentional or accidental. Regardless, it haunted Manny to this day that he hadn't prevented it.

He'd failed—as a father, as a Christian. As a husband.

This morning he'd failed as a PJ. He hadn't gauged the wind right when he'd flared his canopy. The jump before, Manny had a tandem diver strapped to him. The person could have died, leaving Manny responsible for yet another person's death.

At the hospital, he'd failed Joel as a friend by not trying harder to get along with his wife's best friend. Everyone sensed the tension. Joel and Amber should be spending their time delirious in love, not playing referee between him and Celia. They should at least try to be civil.

Seemed every time they came in contact with one another, it was like a match strike to gasoline-soaked flint. Anger flared. It had to stop. Surely they could learn to be mature about this for Joel and Amber, because like it or not, he and Celia would be in each other's lives from now on.

He was willing to try. Was Celia? Would he get a second chance to forge a friendship? Or at the very least, put on a pretense of tolerating one another for their friends' sake? Maybe with God's help and his newfound faith, he and Celia could truly get past their personality issues.

Please don't let me fail again.

Whether she responded maturely or repelled his efforts was up to her. He'd throw the ball. What she did with it, he couldn't be responsible for. For Joel and Amber's sakes, he hoped she'd play like a good sport.

Celia paced the hall outside Manny's door, breathing in the antiseptic smells. What should she do? Go wait with Javier and Bradley? Take them home? She certainly couldn't go back inside that room, knowing how much she'd obviously added to Manny's discomfort.

No one wanted to be hovered over or seen at their worst. She of all people knew that.

She regretted traipsing in there in the first place.

Then Nolan, oh, man, she could just shake him. How could he betray Manny's confidence like that? Okay, so she'd give the guy a break. Obviously it had just been nervous chatter. She'd picked up that Nolan was the tenderhearted one on the team. He'd been worried close to physically sick about Manny. He obviously wasn't thinking clearly when he'd mindlessly blabbed.

"Miss Munez?" A nurse stepped from the room, followed by Joel and Amber.

Celia whirled, noting immediately the peculiar expressions coating Amber and Joel's faces. Celia cleared her throat and faced the nurse. "Yes?"

"Mr. Péna would like a word with you."

"Excuse me?" Celia craned her neck at the woman and pushed curls behind her ear. She couldn't possibly have heard right.

"Mr. Péna?" The nurse hiked a thumb at his door. "Would like. To speak. With you." She pointed a finger at Celia as if Celia didn't know who or what "you" meant.

Celia scowled and fought the urge to mimic the nurse's slowly enunciated speech pattern. Like she couldn't understand English or something. The kind of technique she and Amber used when teaching letter blends and phonics to students. Celia had a masters in English, for crying out loud.

Though it practically killed her to be humble, Celia nodded and folded her hands in a gesture of gratitude. "Gracias." Okay, so she still had a little mean streak.

Headed for Manny's door, Celia slanted her eyes at two newlywed grins on smug faces as she passed by on her way to—what?

World War Three?

Or a peace talk?

Doom music sounded in Celia's mind while she shuffled one foot in front of the other, as if headed for the guillotine. She drew in a fortifying breath, hopefully not her last, and pushed open Manny's door.

Ready or not, here it comes.

"Hey." He shot her a sheepish grin above covers that went nearly to his scraped chin.

"Hay? That's the first stage of horse poop," she countered.

By the confusion sifting across his face, Celia wondered if he'd taken a pain shot, after all. Then his expression righted itself. An uncomfortable tension drew the walls too close together, causing the air to get stuffy. She guessed the guy wasn't one for jokes.

Her shoulders stiffened under his scrutiny. "So..."

"So. Why don't you have a seat?" Manny gestured to the chair. Not the farthest chair from him, but not the closest, either. Okay. This was progress, right?

Meeting in the middle. Coming to a compromise.

Mechanical creaks sounded as he raised the head of his bed by pushing a button on the rail before looking back at her. "I wrote you a letter. I must not have got the right address because it came back to me."

She dipped her head. "Uh, no. Actually, I sent it back."

He nodded as if he already knew. "I wanted you to read it." He stared intently at her. Dark, searching eyes. Ones she wouldn't want to mess with in a deserted alley in a dangerous neighborhood. Like the one she'd grown up in.

She flipped curls behind her ear. "Yeah, well, I didn't."

This conversation was going nowhere.

Why did he stare at her all serious like that? Did the doctor find a tumor in his MRI or something? The guy wasn't cracking a smile for nothing.

"I wrote another letter. Joel has it."

"And you want me to read it."

"It explains a lot."

"Like why you pawed me at the wedding?" She flashed a cheeky grin, but he didn't laugh.

Manny spread dark hands over the white blanket. "Look, no matter how we feel about each other, we have to put Joel's and Amber's feelings above our own." His dark face set in consternation with the words. Like he'd rehearsed them almost.

Wait. What had he said?

No matter how we feel? Then that meant he still couldn't stand her, right? He hadn't respected her at the wedding. Thought she was easy. Well, fine. That worked both ways.

Or could he just be feeling her out? Seeing if she could be someone he could thaw to and build a friendship with?

He braced one hand on the side rail; with the other he adjusted a lumpy pillow behind his back. Wishing to spare his independence and dignity, she fought the urge to assist him. He finally managed.

The pillow made a shushing sound when he leaned back against it. "So, let's try to get along. At least pretend to when they're around if we can't manage it."

Pretend? Who's pretending? Now, that ticked her off. "Fine."

But it wasn't. Why did his words crush her so? Somehow she'd let herself hope friendship with Manny could be real and that she could mean something to him. Something more than a frivolous ending to a drunken evening. Someone he didn't have to work so hard to try and be civil to. Absolutely no respect.

Zero.

Why had she hoped there would be? Because she'd grown to respect him through Joel's stories. Admiration had grown through what contact they'd had since that day at the school year before last. The team had shown up to surprise leukemia-laden Bradley, who'd wished to meet a real Special Forces soldier face-to-face.

Now one of them had become his dad, making Manny like an uncle to Bradley and a brother-in-law to her best friend, Amber. Joel's team had a brotherly bond she'd never seen before. It was special and unbreachable, yet the entire team had pulled her and Amber into the circle with open arms and hearts.

Except she and Manny had ruined that, strained the camaraderie by acting like a couple of junior-high kids at what was supposed to be a joyous celebration of Joel and Amber's life together. It had jarred Celia's confidence when Manny had shattered her hope of being his friend by suggesting she leave with him to his hotel—alone. Clearly, a friend is not how he saw her. How cheap that had made her feel.

It stung worse than he could ever know.

"I'd like to know what you're thinking," he surprised her by asking. She surprised herself by stepping backward, running into the chair she'd never sat in. It screeched just like her nerves at how he didn't take his eyes off her, and seemed to notice every microscopic move. Manny eyed the displaced chair, then her. Those eyes. Like they saw right through her.

And maybe cared about the turmoil? Her throat tightened.

No. He wouldn't like to know what she was thinking. Celia took another step back. And another, clutching her handbag against her stomach to stop the quiver.

In fact, she didn't want to know what she was thinking, either.

"Why don't you sit down?" Manny glanced at the chair in the middle again. "You're making me nervous."

Him? She was making herself nervous.

Rather than flee and make a fool of herself, she promptly sat. She was not good in this type of situation. Her mouth got her in trouble so often she was afraid to open it in front of Manny and lose her footing with this friendship. If it could be salvaged. This was important to Amber, so Celia would push through it. Speaking of...

She eyed the door, where Joel and Amber's mingled voices and conjoined laughter bounced off corridor walls.

Manny must have heard it, too. He smiled. "I think we've been sabotaged."

For the first time since walking in, she grinned and it felt genuine. "I think so."

Manny targeted his gaze at her black eye, which she knew makeup did little to hide. "You look awful."

Celia grinned. "Thanks. So you do you."

He tilted his head and pinched the corners of his eyes a little. "What happened?"

She lowered her face at his soft, interested tone. "I had a scuffle with the lawn mower and lost." She didn't want anyone knowing about that. So why'd she just blab to Manny?

"I have a hard time believing you could lose a fight." He rubbed fingers across his lip for emphasis. Then grinned as big as she'd ever seen him.

Ouch. She resented that remark.

Okay, out with it. She draped her jacket across her arm, then crossed the other arm over it. “Oh. Yeah. About that. I’m sorry I smacked you. It was inexcusable.”

His smile faded and his eyes softened even more. “To be fair, how I acted was more inexcusable. That’s what I wrote in the letter.”

“I know.”

His grin returned. “You really read it?”

She flashed him a grin of her own. “You really wrote it? You’re pretty eloquent with words—when you’re not drinking that is.” She stared at her squared-toe pump to keep the snicker down. What could a little sarcastic jab hurt?

“A month ago.”

She looked up. “What?”

“I wrote the letter a month ago. It’s in my PDA. I can prove it.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Never mind. Doesn’t matter.” But it did. She could plainly see by the disappointment caving his chest and dropping his shoulders, massive shoulders she might add, that it did matter to Manny. Maybe he really had turned over a new leaf. Otherwise, why would he obsess about the letter and when he wrote it?

A soft groan came from him as he pushed himself up in the bed. His face looked strained and weary. Typical alpha guy—hurting and trying to act as if it wasn’t. Joseph did that when his kidney stones acted up, and Celia hadn’t been very sympathetic.

“Manny, I’m sorry you crashed, and I’m glad you didn’t get hurt worse, or maybe even killed and I’m glad you gave your life to God, if you really did.” The words tumbled out so fast, they felt forced though she’d meant them sincerely.

His brows rose slowly. “If I really did?”

Ugh. Had she said that out loud? Why couldn’t she be better at this sort of thing? Learn how to think before speaking? Her mouth ran way ahead of her brain, and that was a fact. How could she stop this automatic, inherent suspicion of him?

Judging by the look on Manny’s face, he picked up on it, too. Celia hated that she doubted him, but there it was again. Would she never be free of it?

He tipped his chin at her. “Who messed you up, Celia?”

Her back hit the spindles on the chair. She’d likely have a bruise on the skin over her spine. “What?”

He dipped his head in a curt nod. “You heard me.”

“That’s just weird.”

“Your expressive face hides nothing, Cel.”

Cel. No one had called her that since—

The lump returned to her throat. Joseph.

Fine. If Manny wanted the ugly truth, she’d let him have it. “I lived under the same roof with a man who acted one way on Sunday then a different way the rest of the week.”

“Your late husband?”

How’d he know about Joseph? She didn’t want him to assume he had a mean bone in his body.

“No. My father. I have a tough time trusting and gauging if most Christians are for real. I was forced to attend a church oblivious that it was possessed by an evil deacon.”

His brows rose. “Deacon possessed?”

“Yes. No. My father was—never mind.” She just wanted to leave. How’d they shuttle down this road anyway?

He folded bulky arms loosely over his chest and tilted his head to one side. “But you’re a Christian.”

“Yeah, and I know how hard I struggle. I know that I’d fall flat on my face if He didn’t help me every step. I know what I’m capable of when left to my own devices. I pose a danger to myself and others, as you well know.”

She meant the smack-down at the reception. Whether he picked up on that, she didn’t know because his expression gave nothing away.

Then his face drooped with sadness. “I know the feeling.” He searched her face, her eyes, as if deciding whether to say more. That told her there was more on his mind than words conveyed. But what? What put that extra depth of dark in his eyes? What hid there? She aimed to find out. Only to understand him if they were to try and build a friendship. For Joel and Amber’s sakes, of course.

“So, friends?” He uncrossed his arms and reached out his hand to her.

Did he want her to actually shake on it? What if he put the moves on her again? Don’t be ridiculous, Celia.

She tried hard not to judge. God knew she battled gladiators of doubt in that arena. It took a lot to convince her so she mostly kept church people at bay. Like right now.

Manny’s hand dropped to the bed with a dull thud and he looked...dejected. Regret singed her stomach lining. She had no right pointing out other people’s faults when she stumbled over plenty of her own. Still, trust didn’t come easy to her and when it finally did, discernment of men’s ongoing motives ate at her constantly. Especially dangerous and powerful men like Manny who possessed charm and who reminded her so much of her father.

A knock outside Manny’s door drew their attention.

“Hello?” Joel poked his head in. “I’ve got two guys out here anxious to see Manny and his killer bruises.”

Manny grinned and eyed Celia. “Bradley and Javier?”

He remembered her son’s name? Her heart thawed a degree.

Manny situated his covers. “Let ’em in.”

“Dude! That musta hurt.” Javier gaped at the swelling and bruises on Manny’s face and arms. Bradley just stared. Celia hoped it wouldn’t strike fear in his heart about Joel.

“Slightly.” Manny grinned.

“What’s gonna happen now?” Javier asked.

“According to the doctors, intense physical therapy for up to a year. I had to have reconstructive surgery on my hip.”

“When will you get to jump again?” Javier asked.

Manny didn’t answer for the longest time. It tore at her heart to watch his throat constrict like that but she knew he tried to be brave.

“I’m not sure,” Manny finally answered.

“Ah, dude, you will get to jump again, right?” Javier asked.

Again, the Adam’s apple in Manny’s throat gave him away. “I hope so. The next six months will tell.”

“Six months? That stinks. Bradley said you might do rehab here.”

For some reason Manny flicked a glance Celia’s way and held it there, almost like a question. “I might.”

“Dude, I hope you do. I mean, you’re a PJ. An American hero. If you ever wanna use Dad’s weight room in our basement, dude, feel free. Mom could never get rid of it, ’cause she used to walk the treadmill while Dad and I pumped iron. If you ever need a workout buddy, I’m game.”

Manny’s eyes glittered with something Celia couldn’t discern. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

Wait. Manny working out in her house? Getting all sweaty and buff just a floor beneath her?

Nuh-uh. Nope. That wouldn’t be good. What if she ended up falling for the guy or something crazy? She didn’t like that idea.

She decided against scolding Javier in front of Manny. That might damage her relationship with Javier further. But as soon as she got him alone, he needed to know not to make suggestions like that without consulting her first. She caught Javier's eye and tossed him "The Mommy Look" instead, which he pretended not to see.

Unease cinched her stomach tight at the look of hero worship coming from her son's eyes every time he looked at Airman Péna. Maybe she should keep space between the two of them. She'd worked all these years to steer Javier toward choosing a sensible career, not dangerous ones. Javier didn't seem at all fazed by Manny's injuries.

She worked three jobs and scraped every penny to send him to college. She planned to surprise Javier by prepaying tuition at the local university. That would give him a good start. A better one than she'd had. Hopefully, Javier would appreciate her sacrifice and do well. She could see him behind a fancy executive desk. Certainly not stuffed in some tank or chopper.

Javier cracked his knuckles. "Dude, I hope you get to go back to the military. That's the coolest job in the world."

All right. That's it. Celia snapped fingers at her son. "Javier, we need to go. Gotta get crackin' on that homework."

Javier half faced her, his shoulders slumped. "But I have all weekend to—"

"Please don't argue with your mom, Javier," Manny said in gentle but firm tones.

Celia, Javier and Bradley turned to the bed. Javier started to open his mouth. Manny cast a no-contest expression his way that bordered on stern.

Oh, boy, here we go. Her son unfortunately had been cursed with her short fuse of a temper and had inherited her inability to control her tongue.

Which is why it surprised her when Javier's stance softened instead of hardened into his typical defensive posture.

Javier bounced on his heels. "Yeah. I need to split and plow through that homework, dude. So, we'll see you later."

Manny waved at Javier and Bradley, and winked at her. "Later."

Winked. At her?

What on earth was she supposed to make of that? The last thing Celia wanted for her or Javier was a flirt with danger.

Celia straightened her spine and ushered the boys into the hall without a backward glance. The quiet chuckle following from inside the room made her want to trot right back in there and assault him with his IV pole. A conk right between the eyes should do it.

She let out a long, unladylike groan. This was going to be the longest six months of her life.

Chapter Four

Manny hated this. Six months couldn't get here fast enough. He absolutely despised, loathed and abhorred having to depend on other people.

He gave his bedside table a little shove. Maybe too hard. It bumped his crutches propped up against the wall at the head of his bed. They slid sideways and clattered to the floor.

He lay back and groaned. Where was that reacher thing that came in his hip kit? His precautions wouldn't allow him to bend or squat to get the crutches. He scanned the room.

Great. His hip kit sat near his closet... across the room.

Manny eyed the call light. Nah, he'd figure a way to do this himself. He was sick and tired of having to call for help every time he needed to blow his nose, brush his teeth or blink.

Why couldn't he remember to leave stuff within reach?

He'd spent five days post-op in the hospital, then five days in the short-term rehab center where he was now. Nurses and physical therapists waited on him hand and foot. Even to the humiliating point of having to help him use the bedpan.

He'd been subjected to daily bed baths with sticky soap and stinky lotion and towels that were never big enough. Not to mention hard beds and lumpy pillows that squeaked every time he moved, then drenched his head with sweat once sleep did come. When he had finally gotten to shower, the water had been tepid.

He loathed the line-over, the grove of trees and the gust of wind that had reduced him to this. Hated that he wasn't up in the sky with his team where he belonged. He knew he should be thankful, but today he only felt like sulking. He hadn't had a meltdown the entire time since the accident.

Until today.

On top of everything, his caboose still hurt like mad. He couldn't sleep in this place, couldn't get comfortable, couldn't switch positions period. Exhaustion overtook him to the point he'd turned twitchy. Irritation gnawed every corner of his previously rational mind to scattered shreds. C.O. Petrowski needed to know about this place.

Why send potential SEALs to train at Coronado when they could come right here to Refuge Rehab? Only his military training had pushed him to these edge-of-human-endurance limits. Going on three weeks with ten total hours of sleep wore on him. His skin zinged with discontent and his eyes burned with fatigue. He'd caved one night and had taken a sleeping pill.

Which had caused the nightmares.

His only reprieve from this place was Javier's daily visits. The kid stopped in on his break from his driver's ed class across the street. He made Manny laugh with stories of his teacher who showed up with boxes of doughnuts, which he offered student drivers. Every time they took a doughnut, the teacher would knock points off. Apparently, Javier had taken driver's ed twice and not passed. He was on his third try.

Manny realized early on Javier was the same age his son would have been, had he lived. That had both renewed his grief and awed him with wonder about what Seth would have been like. Would he be the kind of kid who shunned hugging, like Javier, who preferred some fancy teen handshake?

Somehow, having Javier around wrought healing. Manny didn't understand it, didn't try to. He just took it as a gift from God for this hard season in his life when he was grounded from the sky and all he held dear.

Manny maneuvered his table to try and hook the crutch and drag it back. Then how would he pick it up?

Thankfully, Joel returned that moment with coffee.

"Hey, grab the twins, will ya?" Manny eyed the crutches.

Joel set the two steaming cups down then picked up the metal devices. He propped them between the wall and the head of Manny's bed. "Did you think about my offer?"

He had. It had been kind and generous. "Joel, you're still technically a newlywed, man. I can't stay with you and your wife." Manny shook his head. "No."

Joel pocketed his hands. "Don't be obstinate. We have a huge house. Plenty of space for our privacy and yours."

"Okay, to be fair, though I could do without the squeaky pillows, I'm extremely impressed with this rehab center and its staff. But I can't intrude on your new family."

"It was Amber's idea. Bradley'd love it, and so would I."

"I understand but, dude, I'd feel uncomfortable. I'm a total jerk when I hurt and no one should have to be around me. Sure, I'd like to stay in Refuge to recoup, but I don't know if staying with you is such a good idea. I'd be all depressed and stuff when you'd get to skydive and I didn't."

Joel nodded in an understanding manner.

"I'm really trying to keep things in proper perspective, and just be thankful I'm alive. It's a real struggle losing my mobility and the ability to do what I want when I want." Manny sighed. "I want back in that sky—with you guys."

Keys jangled in Joel's pocket. "All the more reason to stay in Refuge for rehab. Your surgeons have said this is the place to be with your kind of injury. I checked it out. The facility has held the number-two spot in the nation for five years."

Manny flexed and extended his feet to circulate blood in his calf muscles. "I know. Okay, listen. Maybe I could rent a room at that B and B place you used to stay when dating Amber."

"They're closed this season. Amber sort of crashed into it last year. The owner decided to add some rooms since they had to remodel the damaged area anyway. So the B and B's out. Seriously, Manny, we have a guest room that has its own bathroom. It's big enough we can stick a portable table in there and set up a little kitchenette."

"That seems like so much trouble." Manny chewed his lip thinking about it, though.

"No trouble for a brother. 'Sides, if the situation were reversed, you'd do the same for me. Right?"

Manny certainly couldn't refute that. "Maybe I could look into an apartment."

"Waste of money when you could have free room and board. Besides, your surgeons said they'd prefer you stay with someone in case you need help the first few months."

"I know." Manny hated the thought of needing assistance for so long, but there was no help for it. Not like he could rewind time and erase the crash. He had a new respect for disabled people.

Joel leaned his elbows on the table. "So what do you say? At least come by and look at it."

Manny drew a slow breath. "No, dude, I don't need to look at it. All right. If you're sure Amber's cool with it, I guess you have yourself a deal. I'd like you to let me help out with bills and stuff though."

"Not necessary. I want you to focus on getting better so you can rejoin the team. We need you, Péna. I don't want you to even think about paying us a dime. Amber would feel bad if you felt indebted to us over this."

"Hard not to." Manny's cell phone rang. Caller ID read his mom, who'd called daily since the accident. He decided to let voice mail pick it up and call her later.

Joel braced his hands on the back of the wooden spindle chair, which creaked with his weight. Though Manny compared to Joel in muscle mass, Joel stood about six-foot-four while Manny barely hit five-eleven. He was the stocky one of the team.

"There's only one foreseeable problem with you staying at my place."

Manny scratched stubble on his chin. "Yeah, what's that?"

"I know you and Celia don't exactly get along. She and Amber are working on a school project a few days a week at our house. That gonna be a problem?"

Manny knew Celia and Javier had moved a few blocks down from Joel and Amber's house. Javier had mentioned them selling their home after Celia's husband died. Manny wondered if it had to do with financial struggle or because her old home held too many hard memories. Either way, he felt bad for Celia. He certainly didn't want to add turmoil to her life. "Never mind me, how's Celia gonna feel about me being there?"

Warning bells sounded in Manny's head when Joel took a little too long to answer. "Honestly, I'm not sure. If it becomes a problem, we'll cross that bridge when we get there. As long as you can deal with it on your end, Amber and I will try to buffer it from Celia's end."

Manny shrugged, but inside, Joel's words scraped his stomach like sandpaper. Celia'd flipped out when she'd discovered Javier had been visiting Manny every day.

What was up with that?

She'd been spiteful in her words ever since, or avoiding him altogether. When Manny would ask Javier if his mother knew he was here, Javier would shrug and change the subject. Maybe Celia hadn't believed Manny about his conversion. Sure, Manny was far from perfect, but he knew inside his core that he'd given his heart to God. He trusted God would help him overcome his struggles. Why couldn't she trust God with it, too?

The only thing he could think that would make sense of her rude behavior was that maybe she feared Manny would be a bad influence on Javier.

"You and Amber don't need to worry about anything except getting used to each other and raising a son who's not yet in the best of health. If Celia and I have differences, we'll work them out." Even if that meant avoiding one another.

Carving out time with Javier would become a challenge, though. Hopefully, Celia wouldn't think he was placing himself in her path deliberately.

Manny needed to secure his future with the team. That included time to heal and to get his reconstructed hip and quad muscles back in shape within a few months or he'd likely get an involuntary medical discharge from the military. They might as well shoot him and put him out of his misery if that happened. He couldn't imagine life without being a PJ, rescuing people or being part of the team. He'd find a way to put up with Ms. Munez to keep his dream of staying a PJ alive.

For sure, these could be the most grueling months of his life. He had to push through it. He'd mind his own business and she'd do the same and they'd be fine.

Except he knew Javier would want to come hang out. Something in that kid tugged at Manny's heartstrings. Yanked, really. A bond was quickly forming between them that he knew Javier felt, too, because of how he opened up. It was more than Javier being the age his son would be had he lived, more than the fact that Javier didn't have a strong father figure in his life. Not only that, Javier would likely visit Bradley often as the two had a brotherly bond, though there was an age gap there.

Manny got the impression from Javier that his maternal grandfather was absent from their lives. Javier's paternal grandfather had died. Manny thought how his own parents lamented over no longer having a grandson. The rest of the grandchildren were girls.

Sharp pains of missing Seth mowed Manny over. He willed them to fade.

His son had died and he'd been the reason for it.

So, if God put Javier in Manny's path, it had to be for a reason. Manny refused to turn his back even if it meant dealing with his mother.

"I'd like to stay with you if your family's okay with that," he told Joel. He'd deal with Celia as problems arose.

Never mind that his pulse did ridiculous things the few times before their latest blowout that she'd shown up after getting off work at the school. Celia'd even brought him a stuffed animal with a camouflage vest.

Dumb bear. Every time he stared at it he thought of her. It even smelled like her perfume.

Manny shook off his delusions. He snatched up a bag of socks from the table, smashed the package in his fist and hurled it at the bear, knocking it off the window ledge. It tumbled behind the chair. Good. No more reminders of Miss Hot Tamale.

Except then he remembered she was the one who'd brought the socks after hearing him complain the hospital-issued booties made him feel like a maternity patient.

Joel, previously silent, stared at the spot the bear used to be, then the lump of socks that now resided on the window ledge. He cast Manny a peculiar glance, but didn't ask.

Manny's surgeon knocked briefly before breezing into the room. He stood at the foot of the bed, perusing his daily progress chart, then assessed his hip bandage. "I know you're anxious to get out of here, Airman Péna. You're eligible for discharge in a couple of days. We need to decide where you are going for the remainder of your physical therapy."

"No offense, Doc, but I'm beyond ready to make like lettuce and head out." Manny cast a look of gratitude toward Joel. "I'll be staying with my buddy here if I decide to finish out my rehab in Refuge. I'll get back to you about it."

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