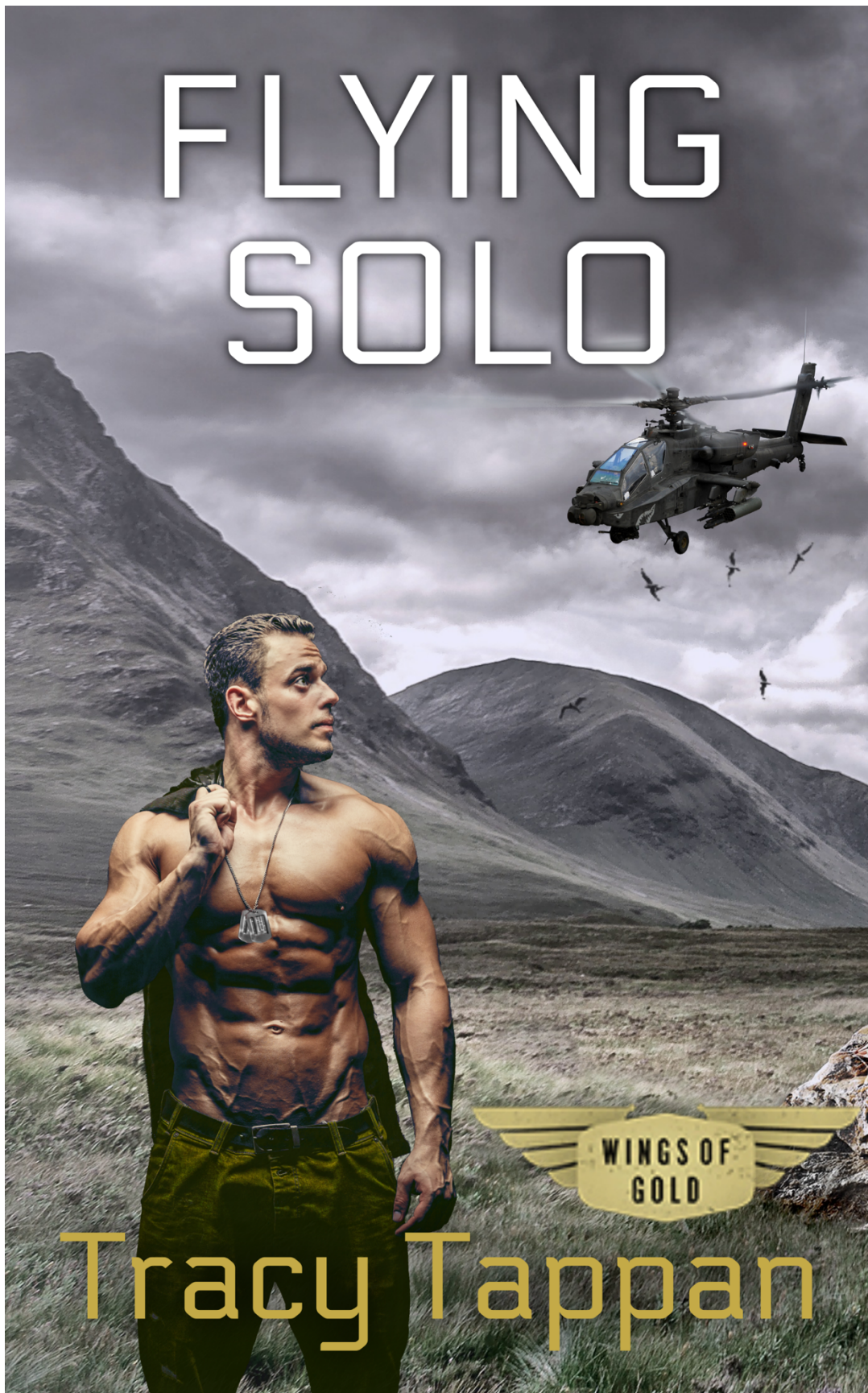


# FLYING SOLO



WINGS OF GOLD

Tracy Tappan

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## Flying Solo

Ensign Eric O'Dwyer is one solo hop away from finishing flight school. Fit, young, and full of confidence, he thinks his golden wings are a lock.

Fate has other plans.

When Eric's world is upended by a helicopter accident, he turns to an enigmatic older woman to help him back on his feet, never expecting to learn so much about life and women in the comfort of her arms.

During a single incredible night, the breathtaking Leslie shows Eric he's a mere shadow of the man he's destined to become, and with wisdom and care, she sets him on the right path toward his dreams.

Pensacola, Florida

“The Cradle of Naval Aviation”

McGuire’s Irish Pub

“Hey, guys, she’s here.”

Eric eased back in his chair so he could see the bar’s main door.

Barry “the Bear”—because he was huge as—Murdock, the one who’d just spoken those reverent words, already had his eyes on target.

The other three men at the table—Grant, Albert, and Frankie G—turned to look at the same time Eric did.

All five of them stopped drinking beer to watch her cross the room—the sway of her hips, how her long legs stretched out both gracefully and purposefully. How the chaotic buzz of voices, laughter, and rock music almost seemed to part for her as she made her way to an open stool at the bar.

Eric inhaled a slow breath through his nostrils. He’d seen her make this same trip a hundred times over the past year, maybe more, and he never tired of watching the unselfconscious way she moved.

A woman in her twenties could never have pulled off a walk like hers.

He was figuring the DreamMaker for her mid-thirties, a good ten years older than the rest of them.

Yeah, that was their nickname for Lady Legs, seeing as her power to turn a man into a man was the stuff of legends. Every male flight student she’d ever hooked up with—and the list contained a carefully vetted few—had graduated number one in his class.

She came into the bar every Friday night, always dressed more or less the same: low-heeled pumps, a knee-length skirt, a button-up

blouse, and a blazer left open over her breasts—although her cup size was difficult to determine because her blouses were always loose. She was slender in the waist but nicely rounded in the hips, had slim, pretty ankles, red-painted fingernails, though cut very short, shoulder-length brown hair, and she never wore a single piece of jewelry. Not a total knockout, but by no means unattractive.

She had the kind of beauty that grew on you—every time Eric saw her, she took on another layer of appeal.

Over the past year she'd become as much of an institution of Pensacola flight training as the bar itself—McGuire's Irish Pub, dark and cluttered-looking, with too many pictures on the walls, too much aviation paraphernalia overcrowding the shelves, and a shitload of glasses hanging from the ceiling, including a near mile-long line of beer steins. And every square inch of the dark wood posts and rafters was covered with one dollar bills.

McGuire's was home to two time-honored traditions. First, all pilots-in-training had to kiss the moose head on the wall for luck. Second, a newly winged aviator had to write his name on a dollar bill and tack it on the wall to leave his mark.

*I was here.*

And with any luck, the pilot *did* leave his mark.

“All right, ante up,” Frankie G said to them. “And call your drink.” He threw a dollar into the middle of the table. “White wine.”

“Fuck that noise,” Bear retorted. “Wine's *my* bet.”

“Too late, Murdock.”

“Yeah? Who put you in charge?”

Frankie G exhaled a harsh breath. “Shut the hell up and bet.”

Frankie G was Frank Gargani, an Italian from the Bronx with coal black hair, eyes the color of old oak, and a bold, Roman nose. Someone had nicknamed him Frankie G to make him sound like a wiseguy, even though Frank's old man had worked a lifetime with NYC DOT. Seemed

to Eric that if a guy had mob connections, he would've spent his days doing something other than resurfacing streets and repairing sidewalks, and lived somewhere fancier than a two-bedroom walkup.

Frankie G had gone to college on the GI bill, and was fiercely determined to prove he was as smart as the rest of them. He was neck and neck in a race with Eric for first in their flight class. They both studied like hell, but Frankie G was a bit better on procedures—the guy probably slept with the NATOPS manual under his pillow—while Eric had an edge when it came to natural ability.

Bear threw in a dollar with his big paw of a hand. “A tequila shot,” he grumped.

Albert's freckled brow creased at Bear. “DreamMaker's never ordered one of those before.”

“Exactly.” Bear glowered at Frankie G. “It's a screw-you bet.”

Frankie G snickered.

For such a large guy, Bear let himself get pushed around more than you'd think—at least about anything but his little sister.

She was territory no man dared tread upon.

You didn't talk about her; you didn't mention her; you didn't breath in the vicinity of her name; and you sure as hell didn't toss out a joke about her—a lesson Grant Wainwright learned one night with a fat lip.

“G&T.” Grant threw a dollar into the pot. “And she'll call a top-shelf gin. Classy-like, you know.”

If anyone knew classy, it would be Grant Wainwright. He came from a shit-ton of old money—like his name wasn't a dead giveaway—and probably hadn't worked a single hard day in his life. He'd brought his lazy-assed attitude with him to flight training, and the rest of them called Grant a waste of skin behind his back. His sun-bleached hair was also a dead giveaway. Dude spent *way* too much time at the beach. Yesterday Grant received his second “down” on a training hop, and

unless Daddy planned to buy the Navy a flock of new TH-57 Jet Ranger helicopters, Grant would be saying sayonara to the flight program soon.

Besides being lazy and not fitting in—Grant always wore a *tie*, no matter where they hung out—he wasn't a bad guy. They almost always made him pay the bill, and he went along without whining.

“Rum and Coke,” Albert said, adding his dollar.

Not rum and *Diet* Coke. No way. *Go big or go home* was how DreamMaker operated.

Albert Bobcheck was Eric's roommate. He was pale and freckle-faced, and the back of his hair tended to stick up like Alfalfa's from *Little Rascals*. He wore short-sleeved, thin-striped shirts like an engineer from the 60s. The Ward Cleaver look gave him a lot of luck with the ladies, which he used to his full advantage. Albert banged chicks so fast, it was as if they came with a shelf life. One vodka-soused night, Albert garbled out some story about getting his heart broken in high school. But beyond that one slip, he never talked about it. Just kept cycling chicks at top speed through his bedroom's revolving door.

“C'mon, O'Dwyer,” Frankie G called to Eric. “Ante up before she orders.”

Eric pulled a dollar out of his wallet. “Cosmo.”

Albert pointed his creased forehead at Eric. “She's never ordered one of those, either.”

“I got a feeling about tonight. She—ah, hey! My FNG just walked in.” Eric waved down the HT-8 squadron's Fucking New Guy.

“Your sandbag for tomorrow's solo flight?” Albert asked.

“Yep.”

Fresh out of fixed-wing training from the VT-6 *Shooters*, new guy Kyle Hammond would know the basics of aerodynamics and radio operations, but not a thing about flying a helo. In the cockpit tomorrow as Eric's copilot, Hammond wouldn't be much more than dead weight—a sandbag.

Kyle caught Eric's wave through the dim lighting and started over. He had sandy hair, blue eyes, and moved with the kind of easy stride that made it look like the joints in his hips had been freshly oiled.

A line of women at the bar turned their heads in unison to watch Kyle walk, probably wondering if all his slick hip action translated to the sack.

"Well, I'll be," Bear murmured. "We might have a contender for the DreamMaker here."

Frankie G contradicted Bear with a disdainful snort. "*She's* not checking out the sandbag."

Grant nodded his approval. "Pure class."

Hammond stopped at their table, and Eric introduced him around. Hammond reached for the one empty chair, but Frankie G stopped him.

"You gotta go kiss the moose first."

Hammond's brows rose. "I gotta do what?"

Frankie G pointed at the huge moose head bolted onto a stone wall. "For luck."

Hammond glanced at the moose, then looked back at Frankie G. "Think I'll pass."

Frankie G sneered. "It's tradition, nugget."

"You're two bricks shy of a full load if you think I'm going to kiss some dead animal that thousands of other guys have already put their mouths on."

Funny thing was, one day in the future Hammond would end up earning his call sign for being not-at-all picky about where he put his mouth.

"If any lip action is going to happen tonight," Hammond went on, "it'll be with one of those darlin' Southern belles over there." He aimed his chin toward a pair of blondes at the far end of the bar.

Albert leaned forward to see. "I'll be your wingman on that."



Frankie G hissed. “If you think you— Holy *shit*,” he bit out. “She ordered a Cosmo.”



The five of them swiveled their heads toward the DreamMaker. Looking confused, Hammond turned, too, but slower.

The DreamMaker was sitting with her long, sleek legs crossed, one shoe heel hooked inside a brass foot rail in a way that showed off the nice shape of her calf, and sure enough—a cranberry-colored cocktail in a martini glass was on the bar in front of her.

Grant straightened from a lazy slouch to give Eric an astounded look. “How the hell did you know?”

*Something about an extra sway in her hips tonight.* “Just did.” Eric scooped up his winnings, a tingling blood-rush of satisfaction sweeping through him. He’d pegged her.

“What’s with the chick?” Hammond asked.

Frankie G’s eyes narrowed. “*DreamMaker* to you, nugget.”

Bear Murdock chopped his hand at the moose head. “You don’t kiss the moose, FNG, then you gotta take a shot at *her*.” Bear switched his chop-hand toward DreamMaker. “She’ll give you the luck you need to graduate from the program.”

“We’ve all put the moves on her,” Albert piped in.

*Frankie G going for her extra hard.*

“We all crashed and burned.” Albert aimed a thumb at Eric. “Except for O’Dwyer.”

Hammond arched an eyebrow at Eric. “You bagged her?”

Eric shook his head. “Never tried.”

“Why not?”

Frankie G’s upper lip curled. “He knew she wouldn’t go Irish.”

“Gimme a break,” Albert scoffed. “O’Dwyer doesn’t even look Irish. Hell, he looks more Italian than you do.”

Frankie G made a dismissive noise in his throat.

Although it was strangely true. Eric was the only one in his fair-haired, blue-eyed, and pale-complexioned family with black hair, green eyes, and olive skin. He'd spent a good portion of his life being referred to as the mailman's kid. On any given day, Eric's dad didn't run extra heavy on sense of humor—that joke made him laugh even less.

Eric shrugged at Hammond. "Too busy hitting the books." *And also, you know, the DreamMaker scares the crap out of me.* As an older woman, she'd lived a lot more of life than he had, and so could be counted on to have juggled dozens more relationships than he'd ever managed, and tucked experiences under her belt that Eric couldn't remotely fathom.

With the type of wisdom she probably wielded, she'd be able to see right through his bravado and bullshit. *No, thanks.*

Hammond glanced over at DreamMaker again. "Not really my type."

The group laughed.

The Bear gave his head a forlorn shake over the extreme stupidity of the FNG.

"And I don't fucking need luck," Kyle kept on.

The group laughed harder.

The two blonde Southern belles wedged past Hammond on their way to the bathroom. He followed their progress for a bit, then looked back at the men. "You boys ever hear of a little something called *talent?*"

Bear started shaking his head again. "You might as well pack your bags now, new guy."

"They're already packed," Hammond returned in a smirky tone. "I'm going over to your sister's tonight. I hear she takes it in the ass."

Hammond was on the ground, skidding across the floorboards on his back before any of them even had a chance to blink.

One of the women seated at the bar yelled as Hammond slewed to a stop by her stool.

*Shit!* Eric leapt up from his chair.

Hammond had both hands clutched to his chest, his mouth gawping open and closed like he was trying to pop his ears.

Bear—on his feet, red-faced, and with a pair of fearsome eyebrows stabbed together—had walloped Hammond a good one right to the solar plexus.

Holding up an *it's-okay* palm to the frowning bartender, Eric hustled over to help Hammond to his feet.

FNG came swaying upright, still not breathing altogether correctly, flecks of dirt stuck all over his shirt, and in his hair and face.

“Dammit, Bear,” Eric growled as he brought Hammond staggering back over to the table. “He doesn’t know the rules yet.”

Bear just set his hands on his waist and kept his brows down low.

Eric jabbed a forefinger in Bear’s direction. “If you ruined my second-seater for tomorrow, I’m knocking your head off.”

No one scoffed at the threat, even though Bear outweighed Eric by half a Lexus. Eric had spent a lifetime rolling in the dirt with three scrappy brothers, and the men at the table knew it. Eric was also no pussyweight when it came to muscles.

Frankie G slung an arm around the back of his chair and smiled darkly. “Guess we know who’s buying the next round.”

Rolling his eyes, Eric rotated Hammond and steered him toward the bar to order a pitcher—and let everyone cool off.

“What happened?” Hammond wheezed.

“You fucked with Murdock’s sister.”

“He has a...?” Wincing, Hammond rubbed his sternum. “I didn’t even know he has a sister.”

“Well, he does.”

“It was a joke,” Hammond defended.

“Never mention Bear’s little sister,” Eric clipped out. “It’s a cardinal fucking sin around here. Another pitcher of Michelob,” he said to the bartender, then turned back to Hammond. “You good?”

“Yeah, I guess.”

“Anything broken?”

Hammond explored his sternum some more. “No.”

“You sure? I need you sharp in the cockpit tomorrow.” Tomorrow’s flight was Eric’s final solo: the last ticket he needed to punch to earn his wings—so an important damned hop.

“Yeah, yeah, I’m good.”

The bartender set a pitcher of frothing beer in front of them. “Fifteen bucks.”

Hammond reached for his wallet. “And send a couple of Mai Tais over to those two blondes at the end of the bar.”

They were re-seated, and giving Hammond the eye.

“Belay that order,” Eric interjected, narrowing his eyes on Hammond. “You’ve having one beer with us, then you’re going home to run procedures.”

Hammond just stared at him.

Eric aimed a rigid gesture at Hammond’s body. “Go hit the head and clean up. You’re covered with shit.”

Heaving a breath, Hammond strode off.

Without paying for the beer.

“Fucking new guy,” Eric muttered, reaching for his own wallet.

“You were a mite hard on him, weren’t you?”

Eric looked up to see who’d spoken to him in that smoky Southern voice. He checked right. He checked left.

“Hello.” The DreamMaker waved at him with her fingers.

He looked down and left—DreamMaker had shifted over two stools and was now seated directly next to him, and...he tried not to gape. This close, he could see the color of her eyes. They were pure

honey gold.

She arched an inquisitive brow at him, waiting for an answer to her question.

*Um...* He cleared his throat. “You don’t get to be the best by sitting on your ass.”

“Haven’t you heard of the adage ‘work hard, play hard’?” She took a sip of her drink.

He watched the ripe fullness of her lips touch the rim of the glass. His heart pounded.

“I hear you always have your nose in a book,” she commented.

She’d *heard*? “Yeah?” He laid a twenty on the bar. “Who’s been talking about me?”

“I’m secretary to a muckety-muck officer at NAS Pensacola. I won’t say *who*,” she added with a little gleam in her eyes. “But I hear things about the candidates.”

*Great.* Like this woman already didn’t see enough with her worldly wisdom. She was in the know about personal info.

“It’s why I come here every Friday night.” She circled her cocktail glass in a gesture meant to encompass the entire room. “After workin’ with all those stuffy old boys all week, I crave some youth and exuberance.”

The bartender gave Eric five ones in change. He left three on the bar for a tip and tucked away the other two. “Not sure it’s a compliment to be called *exuberant*.” Made him and his friends sound like a bunch of rowdy high schoolers.

“Not all of you are.”

Eric slid his wallet into his back pocket. “Are you implying *I’m* not?” He wasn’t sure if that was a compliment—or not—either.

She roamed her eyes over him, lingering a beat longer than necessary below his belt.

His balls cramped.

“You work too hard.”

It was the weirdest sensation, feeling both chastised and turned on at once. “You don’t approve of hard work?”

Her husky chuckle sent a warm tentacle curling around his spine. “Course I approve.”

He was tempted to jam a hand deep into his jeans pocket and make an *adjustment*. But no way could he get away with a move like that in front of this woman.

She set down her cocktail glass. “But at some point a man has to let up on himself.”

Not a man who has his father’s voice in his head, always railing at him.

Over her shoulder, Eric saw Hammond exit the men’s room. He took one look at Eric chatting it up with the infamous DreamMaker, and cut a wide berth around the bar on his return trip to the table.

“I’m Leslie, by the way.” She swiveled on her bar stool to face Eric fully. She kept her left elbow on the bar while holding out her right hand to shake. The position caused a gap to appear between the second and third buttons on her blouse. The opening provided only the barest peek of cleavage, so the scorching heat that shot through Eric’s crotch took him by complete surprise.

He shook her hand. Her palm was warm and smooth. “Eric.”

“Well, Eric. Why don’t you and I get out of here, and I teach you how to have a li’l good old-fashioned fun?” Her eyelashes tilted a bit.

His stomach muscles knotted up. For pure flirtatiousness, nothing beat the sidelong glance a woman gave you from beneath her lashes. He grabbed the beer pitcher’s handle, laboring under the distinct, not altogether pleasant, sensation, of being reeled in—right around this woman’s little finger.

“I can’t,” he said. The night before the most important hop of his flight school career was not the best night to feel like someone else

controlled him. Nor was he in the mood to be shoved under the microscope of this woman's all-knowing wisdom. Whatever she managed to see—with what probably amounted to an inner, third eye—beneath his layers of outer bullshit, he didn't want to know. He needed to be at his best tomorrow, not questioning himself.

"I have my final solo flight in the morning," he explained, "and I plan to make an early night of it."

"How very responsible of you." She smiled archly, no doubt suspecting what a complete sack of shit his excuse was.

"But," he added, "thank you."

She inclined her head. "Another time."

He felt oddly *dismissed*. Picking up the pitcher, he walked back to his table—now full of a bunch of round-eyed pea-brains.

"Holy crap," Grant breathed. "She *talked* to you." He loosened the knot of his tie, like the mere thought of a conversation with the DreamMaker was depriving him of oxygen.

"What did she say?" Bear scrutinized Eric through squinted lids—maybe Eric had grown a second dick from his encounter with the DreamMaker.

Eric put the pitcher on the table and sat. "She asked me out," he said.

"Ah, man!" Albert whooped. "You are so—"

"I said no."

A moment of dead-faced silence.

Then Frankie G threw back his head and laughed uproariously. "Oh-ho, you just screwed your luck all to hell, O'Dwyer." His oak-dark eyes glittered, already seeing the number one slot fall right into his waiting hands. "You can eat my dust."



Milton, Florida

NAS Whiting Field

Home to Training Air Wing FIVE

Leather chairs filled the HT-8 *Eightballers* Squadron Ready Room to capacity. Some chairs came with attached desks, some didn't, but all faced front toward a podium and a huge white board with a small ledge running the length of the bottom holding three different-colored dry erase markers. Another board took up a good portion of the right-hand wall, this one for message traffic—the latest reports on weather, wind speed, field conditions, and flight warnings.

You want to slug down a cup of coffee and eat a donut? Go to the squadron gedunk.

You want to kick back and bullshit with fellow pilots? Head to the wardroom.

The Ready Room was built solely for the business of briefing.

A door aft led onto the flight line, and anytime anyone entered or exited, bursts of sound and smells flooded in—the *thumping* of spinning rotor blades and the cloying aroma of JP5 jet fuel.

A bad odor to some—not to Eric. It jacked him up with adrenaline. It meant he'd be hopping into a helo soon, and *today* he was hopping into the cockpit as lead pilot. No instructor to observe his every move. Only him and his copilot.

Kyle Hammond had followed Eric's orders at McGuire's Pub and gone home after one drink. The man looked pumped to take his very first spin in a helo, bright-eyed and dressed for business in an olive drab flight suit and black, steel-toed flight boots.

Eric wore the same.

With one elbow propped on the podium, Eric went over operational parameters first: *we're traveling from NAS Whiting Field to Eglin Air Force Base on a mission to complete an RI—or Radio*



Instrument—*solo flight*. Then he gave Hammond final instructions.

“I realize you don’t have a lot of experience in the cockpit,” he said, “so your job is to record air traffic control’s directions and clearances on your knee-board. Also keep your head on a swivel, and call out other aircraft. If we happen to have an emergency, the pilot at the controls will continue to fly while first going over the memory items to deal with the emergency. The non-flying pilot will break out the emergency checklist and make sure the memory items were done correctly, then proceed slowly and deliberately through the non-memory items. If at any point I tell you to squawk 7700 on the transponder or give a mayday call, do so, and give our bearing and location from the nearest landmark. Understood?”

“Roger that,” Hammond said, grinning.

“All right.” Eric smiled back. “Let’s rock.”

The went outside, and Eric glanced up. Nothing but a blue, sunny sky above. *Beautiful day for this*. Striding along the flight line, they made their way to the line shack to sign for the aircraft.

Eric was assigned aircraft two-three, arriving now at spot four.

Tugging his flight helmet on his head, Eric led Kyle over to where a small orange and white helo was hover-taxiing into place, the two of them waiting outside the rotor arc. The bird set down, and the student on the left hopped out. Hammond took the guy’s seat. Eric strode over to the right-hand pilot side, did a quick turnover with the instructor about the aircraft, then climbed in.

He and Kyle went over the takeoff checklist, then Eric hover-taxied the helo five feet above the ground over to runway one-four. He set down and radioed the tower.

“This is Eightball Two-Three,” Eric said into his mic. “Holding short at runway one-four, clearance on request.”

“Roger that, Eightball Two-Three, flight plan approved. You are cleared for takeoff. Contact Pensacola Approach when airborne.”

Eric pulled up on the collective, adding power, then pushed forward on the cyclic, or “stick.” From the edge of his vision, he saw Hammond’s eyes flash down to the clear chin bubble at his feet.

Eric grinned. He remembered what it felt like, his first time in a helo, watching the ground dip away through the chin bubble...a moment of absolute euphoria when three thousand pounds of steel disappeared from around you, leaving your body just...suspended airborne in the sky.

The helo rose higher, and Hammond let out a *whoop!*

Eric laughed. “Welcome to helicopter aviation.”

Fifteen minutes into the flight, Eric heard the voice of Air Traffic Control come through his earpiece. “Eightball Two-Three, you have traffic off your nose at two miles. Descend to one-five-zero-zero, maintain one-zero-zero knots, and proceed along flight plan as filed.”

Eric clicked the trigger on his stick for external communications. “Roger that. I have visual contact on my twelve o’clock. Descending to one-five-zero-zero and squawking two-two-seven-eight.” Eric changed to inner cockpit comms. “You got eyes on the aircraft, Hammond?”

“Roger that. Eyes on. We have— Birds! One o’clock level! Break left! Break left! Break—!”

*WHAM!*

Eric slammed back in his seat, glass exploding around him, his helmet banging against the headrest with a neck-jarring *whomp*. Agony pounded through his chest as a wave of gore swept over him—white feathers and guts and blood. He sputtered for breath, one hand pressed over his sternum.

*Holy fuck*. He couldn’t find a single particle of oxygen. He gawped his mouth open and closed—same as Hammond did last night at McGuire’s. Eric felt like his lungs had been rammed into his stomach, and, *Jesus Christ*, if being hit center mass by a bird going one hundred

knots per hour was anything like a blow from Bear Murdock, then Eric didn't see how Kyle arrived for this morning's brief upright and forming sentences in a coherent—

*Waaaaaaaaaaa!*

A cockpit alarm, shrieking.

Eric clawed his fingers across the carnage on his visor, smearing off bird viscera. He flicked the mess off his glove, flinging it to the chin bubble at his feet with a wet *schlop*. The hard whoosh of air coming into the cockpit pushed the red liquid remaining on his visor into psychedelic squiggles.

*A lot* of air was incoming, because... The entire windshield was gone, completely broken away by—

*Waaaaaaaaaaa!*

Eric shook his head to clear it, rechecked his grip on the cyclic and collective, and squinted at the Master Caution Panel.

The Low Rotor RPM alarm was going off.

The engine wasn't functioning properly. They must've sucked a bird through the intake. That was never good.

More lights lit up on the MCP. And more and more. Like a Christmas parade.

Low engine oil pressure...low temperature...

*Shit*. Looked like the engine wasn't functioning *at all*.

Eric's heart jumped into his throat, but he swallowed it down.

"Executing autorotation and emergency engine restart." He thumped the collective down, rolled the throttle off, and flipped the engine starter switch. "Call altitude and airspeed."

No response from his copilot.

Eric whipped his head over to check the left seat.

The entire front of Kyle's flight suit was covered with blood and bird meat—he looked like he'd just stepped out of a slaughterhouse—and he was weaving in his seat as if trying to wade through a bad drug

trip back to this side of normal.

“Hammond!” Eric yelled.

The sound of the engine didn’t change pitch.

The restart had failed.

Adrenaline flooded Eric. His initial assessment was correct.

The engine was dead. He was flying without power.



“Hammond!” Eric bellowed again, this time throwing a hammer fist against Kyle’s chest. “You can’t only be a sandbag today!”

Kyle’s head swung woozily around. His visor was broken into a crackly prism.

Eric set the transponder to squawk 7700—the universal emergency signal to Air Traffic Control—then keyed external comms. “Mayday! Mayday! Mayday! Pensacola Approach, this is Eightball Two-Three. Bird strike, engine failure, unable to restart—executing autorotation.”

“Roger, Eightball Two-Three,” Approach crackled back. “We’ve got you squawking 7700 twenty-five miles east of Whiting. Rolling with fire and rescue to your current location.”

Burning sweat seeped past the padding of Eric’s helmet and slid into his eyes. He searched through his filthy face shield for a landing zone. “Wheat field,” he barked, “off our two o’clock. Prepare for emergency landing. Call altitude and airspeed off the gauges.”

Hammond dug his fingers into the edges of his visor, then with a sharp *crack*, tore it off his helmet. His eyes immediately streamed from the wind. He ducked his head beneath the dashboard. “You’re passing through three hundred feet—now!” he shouted. “Sixty-five knots! NR at ninety percent!”

Cranking the aircraft into the wind, Eric lined up on the field. “Call the flare!”

“What’s the flare?!”

*Fucking new guy.* “One hundred feet!”

“That’s now!”

Eric’s heart took a flying leap out of his bruised chest. He angled the nose of the helo up to reduce his rate of descent... hopefully reducing it enough so he wouldn’t *splat* on touchdown.

“Forty feet!” Hammond called. “Twenty!”

Eric was coming in too fast! Teeth gritted, he yanked up on the collective at fifteen feet, trying to use whatever small amount of power remained in the blades to slow them down. A shuddery vibration quaked from the rotor blades, into the aircraft, and up Eric’s spine. The helo’s landing skids sliced through the first upright stalks of wheat.

*Whoosh!*

Eric grimaced. *Oh, this is gonna suck.* “Brace for impact!”

Planting his boots on either side of his chin bubble, Kyle gripped the ingress/egress strap with one hand and the bottom of his jumpseat with the other.

They hit the ground with a resounding *ka-thump*, and Eric exhaled a sharp breath as his tailbone rammed his seat and his head bounced forward on his sore neck. They plowed forward, jolting and jostling, tall wheat stalks slapping at the aircraft and whipping inside the cockpit through the nonexistent windshield.

Eric held onto the controls with everything he had.

A dirt clod zinged inside like a bullet.

“Shiiiiit!” Kyle yelled as they roller-coastered along.

Dust and pollen whirled up, surrounding them in their own private brownout.

The right skid hit a bump and the aircraft slewed sideways.

A farmhouse circled past.

The right skid lifted.

*No, no, no. Please, don’t tip over.* “Lean right!” Eric threw his body weight to the right side of the aircraft.

With a grunt, Kyle did the same.

The aircraft wobbled for an eternity of *holy-fucking-shit*, then the right skid dropped, hitting the earth with an *umph* that threw up more dust. The aircraft kept tilting, riding up high on the right skid, hovering there, shuddering, until it finally dropped onto the left skid and settled flat with a long, exhausted hiss.

Then...

Quiet.

Eric sat in place, focus fixed straight ahead at the field of golden wheat, his fingers frozen into claws around the controls.

A line of smoke drizzled down from the engine, and the stink of JP5 jet fuel wafted into the cockpit.

Not the best smell, at this particular moment.

Eric wet his lips. He should probably say something earthshattering to Kyle now, shouldn't he? Welcome to *real* helicopter aviation, maybe?

Coughing once, Eric peeled his fingers off the stick and collective, then wrestled his visor open. He glanced down at himself. His NATOPS Pocket Checklist had bounced off the dashboard and landed in his lap. He shoved it off and looked at Kyle.

Hammond was staring at him, several specks of plant fiber clinging to his lashes. Blood and grime smeared his face and his cheeks were streaked with tears from the wind.

As they sat there blinking in the whirling cockpit debris, a single white feather drifted between them, silently, weightlessly.

They both stared at it. Just stared.

Then Eric reached out and gently closed his gloved fist around it. "Here." He pushed his hand closer to Kyle, palm up, and spread open his fingers. "A souvenir."

Kyle's attention snapped to Eric's face. "Yeah, O'Dwyer," he drawled, "'cause I was in danger of forgetting this day."

Eric focused on the feather again. Poor damned birds. Then he laughed. It started out as a snorted breath, then grew and grew until it was whooping hilarity. He clutched his chest, because laughing fucking hurt.

Kyle gave him a cockeyed look. “Navy’s going to stick you in a padded room, you keep it up.”

*Well, shit.* He couldn’t believe they weren’t dead. Yanking open the helo’s side door, Eric unstrapped and hopped out, his boots hitting the earth with the kind of solid contact he never imagined would feel so good. He wrenched off his helmet, circled to the front of the aircraft, and surveyed the damage. *Jesus.* Maintenance was going to have a helluva time getting this bird back up and running. The front end was totaled. He jammed his helmet under his arm. Well, there went his chance at number one.

A John Deere tractor caught Eric’s attention. It was hightailing it toward them from the farmhouse.

Eric waited while the tractor lumbered to a stop a few feet away. “Dear God!” the farmer exclaimed. “Are you boys all right?”

“Yes, sir.” Eric gestured at the wheat the helo had flattened in its wake. “Sorry about your field.”

“My field?” The farmer was staring with undisguised horror at the bird soup covering Eric’s flight suit.

The left side door of the helo opened with a slap. Kyle’s booted foot reached out, found only open air, and then out tumbled Kyle himself, landing in the dirt on his knees, then, *plonk*, over onto his chest.

The farmer’s horror deepened. “That’s it. I’m calling an ambulance.”

Eric rushed over and picked Kyle off the ground. “Not necessary, sir.” He set Hammond on his feet. “He’s one hundred percent fine. Aren’t you, Hammond?”

“Yes, sir. A-okay.” Hammond tossed off a drunken-looking salute.

“Aye, aye, sir.” He tried to brush himself off, and made things worse, changing himself into a murderer’s art project.

Eric grinned at the skeptical farmer. “It’s not our blood.”

The farmer went back to staring at Eric.

He couldn’t imagine what his own face looked like. He dragged a hand over his dry lips. Damn, but he needed a drink. “You wouldn’t happen to have a Coke, would you, sir?”



Frankie G slammed down a tall drink in front of Eric.

“Coke,” Frankie G identified the contents, snickering. “Just what the doctor ordered.”

Eric peered through McGuire’s gloom at Kyle across the table, thinning his eyelids. *You told them about that?*

Hammond shrugged without remorse and grinned. He had a cut near his temple from this morning’s mishap. It was red and swollen and flecked with dried blood, but otherwise, Kyle acted like he wasn’t hurt too badly.

Eric couldn’t say the same.

He ached from nose to tailpipe.

When someone in the bustling Saturday night crowd jostled into Eric on the way by his chair, he had to work hard not to make an *ouch*-face. Eight hundred milligrams of ibuprofen was merely taking the edge off. He scooted his chair in farther to move out of the way.

“Don’t get too comfortable,” Frankie G crooned. “You’re buying the first round.”

“How does that compute?” Eric shot back. “I’m the one who almost became a smoking hole today.”

Frankie G’s eyes glinted. His own solo flight had gone off without a hitch.

Not to say that Frankie G was any kind of asshole to wish harm on



a competitor, but he was definitely the type of guy who would be happy about having edged ahead into the number one slot.

Grant Wainwright let out a *huh*. “For once someone had a worse day in the air than I did.”

“You shouldn’t have said no to the DreamMaker.” Albert sighed expansively, like why must he explain these things to Eric.

Bear looked at Kyle and shook his head, doing his Wise Man of the Mountain number again. “First time in a helo and you suffer a *bird strike*? You shoulda kissed the moose, FNG.”

“For Christ’s sake, fine.” Kyle threw his hands up. “I’ll kiss the fucking moose. I’ll tongue the damned thing. Hell, I’ll go down on it if it’ll get you to shut that lid of yours.” He paused, then shifted over to Eric. “Course I’ll need a beer first.”

Cursing under his breath, Eric hoisted himself up from his seat. His asshole friends had probably guessed he came from money. Jaw clamped, he shouldered through a crowd two-deep and bellied up to the bar, trying to catch one of the bartenders’ attention.

“You okay, Eric?”

He snapped his head around at the sound of her smoky voice, then jerked his eyebrows up. *Leslie*. She generally didn’t come into McGuire’s on both Friday and Saturday night.

“Hi,” he blurted out. Suave, the ultimate in. That was him.

Leslie inspected him with a worried gaze. “I heard about your accident.”

“Did you?” Someone bumped into him from behind, and he lurched against Leslie, his sore chest grateful to catch a vague impression of soft breast rather than bony shoulder. “What did you hear?”

Her forehead cleared and a smile toyed with the side of her mouth. “Apparently, it’s quite astonishin’ that your helicopter didn’t tip over. Landed in a farmer’s field, did you?”

“Seemed convenient at the time.” He picked a coaster out of the bar caddy. Something he did for no particular reason, other than he didn’t want to look at her when he admitted, “I came in too fast on my autorotation, and I *almost* rolled the bird.” A lot of emergency procedures had also fallen into the shitter. Of course, partly because there hadn’t been *time* to go over non-memory items. He flicked his eyes up. “But your boss doesn’t need to know that.”

She chuckled from deep in her throat. “Oh, don’t worry. The front office is rather impressed with you, Ensign.”

He wasn’t sure if he deserved *impressed*. There were a lot of things he should’ve done better. But as he peered into Leslie’s honey-colored eyes, he pushed any more self-deprecating complaints to the back of his mouth. She was gazing at him like *she* was impressed, and he’d be an idiot to dick that up. A lot of friendly warmth radiated from her expression, too, and so maybe, uh...she’d like to...

“Do you, um...” He kneaded his nape. “Do you want to go grab a drink with me, someplace else...quieter?”

Her smile broadened...which tugged at the corners of her eyes... which lowered her lashes into a sultry look that seemed *way* out of his league to deal with.

He shifted his feet, heat flooding his groin. It was the strangest sensation, to be popping a boner while simultaneously scared shitless.

“Love to.” Leslie picked her purse off the bar and slid off her stool.

Eric tucked a hand against the small of her back and vigilantly steered her through the crowd, making sure she didn’t get sloshed with a cocktail or jabbed with a rogue elbow.

As he passed the table full of his friends, he didn’t even glance at the wide-eyed pea-brains. They could think what they wanted without his help, *and* buy their own damned beers.

Outside, he faced Leslie and noted for the first time that she was of average height. If he drew her into a hug, the top of her forehead would

bump his chin. With her heels off, their fit would be perfect, with her head tucked under his chin.

He scratched his jaw with the backs of his fingers. “I actually don’t know anywhere quiet.” He and his friends hung out at party spots whenever they went out...which probably made him sound like a rowdy high schooler.

She pulled car keys out of her purse. Her keychain was a bumblebee. “I know a place.”

They took separate cars to Union Public House, a gastro pub on Reus Street, less than a five-minute drive away. One side of the room was full of tables, noisy with a dinner crowd, but the other side had a long, dark wood bar.

Leslie finagled them a couple of seats at the far end.

Eric grabbed the endmost stool, leaving his left side empty, and Leslie on his right. He glanced around a second time. The joint had a good vibe—upscale, without being stuffy.

The bartender asked them what they wanted, and Leslie ordered, “A gin and tonic. Bombay Sapphire.”

Eric almost smiled. Grant would’ve been pleased to hear her call her gin. *Pure class*. “Same,” Eric said.

The bartender went off to make their cocktails.

Leslie tilted her head at him in a curious way. “I thought you were a beer drinker.”

He actually drank wine, martinis, and neat scotch whenever he was at his father’s house, but never gin and tonic. He lifted one shoulder. “It’s a day for firsts.”

One corner of her mouth eased up. “True.” She gave him a quick once-over. “I can’t believe you don’t have a scratch on you from your accident.”

He leaned an elbow on the bar. “We say *mishap*, by the way. Sounds less ass-kicking than *accident*.”

“Does it, now?” Her eyes did a little dance.

The bartender arrived with their drinks, first placing down a couple of cocktail napkins, then setting the glasses on top.

Leslie reached for her purse.

“I’ve got it,” Eric said, and tugged out his wallet.

“I appreciate the gallantry, but I know how much a Navy ensign makes.”

“You ever hear about snobby trust fund babies?” He handed a credit card to the bartender, saying, “Run a tab.”

The bartender nodded and strode off.

“I’m one,” he added to her.

Leslie’s eyebrows inched up.

He curved his lips. “Without the snobbery.”

She chuckled. “I see.”

He tried the gin and tonic. “It’s good.”

She plucked a lime off the rim of her glass, squeezed it into her drink, then poked the entire wedge in. She took a sip and agreed with an *mmm*-sound. “So why are you jouncin’ around in a helicopter, instead of at home spendin’ the family fortune?”

He shrugged. “Adrenaline junkie.”

“Ah. Today’s...mishap must’ve been quite a fix for you.”

He caught back a snort. *One way of looking at it.*

“Your folks proud of you?”

Eric shifted off Leslie to the restaurant side of the room, tracking a hostess leading a group of four to an open table. “Mom’s passed, and Dad is...no...not a fan of the career path I chose.”

She stirred her drink with the in-house swizzle stick. “You were supposed to go into the lucrative family business?”

He flashed a smile slantways at her. “Got it on the first guess. Nice.” He copied her lime procedure and tried the drink again. *Even better.* “What about your family? You sound like you’re originally from

the south.”

Her brows slid up knowingly. “The young man doesn’t want to talk about his own family?”

“Not particularly.”

“Well.” She sighed. “My family isn’t any kind of fairy tale, either, I’m afraid. Yes, I’m from the south. Daddy owns a great many tobacco farms in Virginia, and always kept his kingdom—both family and business—under his heavy jackboot. When I was but a young woman of twenty, Daddy insisted I marry the owner of the truckin’ company in charge of transportin’ his tobacco. To this day, I’m not sure if Daddy handed me over to Jeremiah as a business transaction or a gift.”

Either way seemed creepy and wrong, but Eric kept his opinion to himself.

“I lacked the gumption to refuse Daddy.” She stirred her drink again, staring down at it. The lime wedge went ’round and ’round. “I lacked the gumption to divorce Jeremiah, even though I was colossally unhappy.” She took a sip of her drink, then used her cocktail napkin to dab at her lips.

The genteel way she did that put a soft lump in Eric’s throat. It revealed a...guarded vulnerability, somehow.

“I was colossally unhappy for seven years before I finally summoned the nerve to get a divorce.” She touched her tongue to the corner of her mouth. “Course, wouldn’t you know it—Daddy disowned me.”

“I’m sorry,” he said, and was.

“No fairy tale”—she lifted her glass—“like I said.”

He nodded. He’d suffered a similar fate. *I want to be a naval aviator, Dad*—the sentence that had banished Eric to the periphery of his own family, *nearly* disowned. “You got any advice on how to deal with being sent to sit in the corner, by the way?”

Leslie’s eyes stayed with his, the lighting in the bar changing the

gold of her irises into a darker hue—a bit like the wheat he flattened today.

He took another swallow of the drink, a big one. He could see this kind of cocktail going down fast and easy.

“You grieve it,” she answered, “like any loss.” Her gaze darkened another shade. “You’ll go through the typical stages: denial, anger, depression...all of it.”

The muscles in his face briefly locked. “Think I might be stuck on anger.” He tossed back the rest of his cocktail, ice cubes bumping against his teeth.

“Yes, well...” She gave him a sardonic look. “It might’ve taken me entirely too many yoga classes and meditation seminars to work past my own.”

The bartender meandered over to them. “You folks want another round?”

“No, thank you,” Leslie said. “Actually, might we have the bill?”

The bartender nodded and headed for the register.

“I’m sorry,” she said to Eric. “But I have to be bright-eyed for a brunch tomorrow.”

“That’s okay.” He was having a good time, but his ibuprofen was beginning to wear off.

He settled the tab, and escorted Leslie outside. They stood on the sidewalk, facing each other.

“So, would you like to...?” He stopped. Who was he kidding? The only thing he could do tonight was face plant into his pillow. He blew out his cheeks. “I would invite you back to my place, if, uh...” He trailed off.

“If you hadn’t been in a helicopter crash earlier today?” she filled in for him.

He twisted his lips. “Mishap,” he corrected.

“Oh, right.” She laughed softly.

“Not that I’m making any assumptions about what your answer would be.” He raised a palm. “I just...I don’t want you to feel insulted by, you know...by me not asking.” He paused. “If not for...um, circumstances...I would ask you. Definitely.” *And, by the way, in normal life, I’m not a blithering idiot.*

“Thank you for the clarification.” Her expression glowed. “Once again I appreciate the gallantry.” Setting a light hand on his chest, she lifted up on her tiptoes and kissed the corner of his mouth.

Just the corner. And it was fantastic.

And maybe there was some dream-maker magic to that kiss—and to her—because a week later he re-flew his RI solo flight and nailed it.



Two weeks later

McGuire’s Pub was stuffed to the rafters with recently graduated naval aviators, all of them decked out in blinding white Navy “choker” uniforms—so named because the collar buttoned up tight under the chin, and did, in fact, somewhat choke the wearer.

Like the other men, Eric now had a pair of golden wings secured to the left side of his chest. Unlike the others, he didn’t have any celebrants to share in his triumph.

Frank Gargani, Barry “Bear” Murdock, Albert Bobcheck—all his buddies had excited relatives closing ranks around them.

Not Grant Wainwright, though. He’d followed expectations and flunked his final solo pre-check, earning himself a swift kick out of the flight program.

Eric chased down a busy bartender and managed to snag himself a Corona beer. Wedging a lime slice down through the mouth of the bottle, he leaned back against the bar and observed the crowd.

Women in bright summer dresses, men in seersucker suits, smiles dazzling and plentiful. Champagne was being passed around before everyone left for dinner. A few groups were already leaving, the air alive with good cheer.

*Denial, anger, depression, all of it.*

*Think I might be stuck on anger.*

Eric drank his beer and fought hard not to feel sorry for himself.

“Hey, Eric.” Albert stopped in front of him, his Navy uniform erasing some of his typical Ward Cleaver-ness, and instead overlaying him with some hotshot. “My family and I are heading out to dinner now.” He indicated a group of similar Leave-It-To-Beaver replicants... maybe a few choir boys among them, a would-be nun or two. “You, uh...you want to join us?”

So Bobcheck had noticed that Eric was flying solo. “Thanks, man, but I have dinner plans. My family’s just running late.” Which was, Eric supposed—with a very generous interpretation—not entirely a lie. The O’Dwyer family’s lateness would just have to be counted in years, rather than minutes.

“Ah, okay, great.” Albert nodded. “Congratulations again.”

“You too.” Eric raised his beer. “To the fleet.” Next stop—real mission flying for the U.S. Navy in an H-60 Seahawk helicopter.

Albert smiled widely and slapped Eric’s shoulder. “Boo-yah!”

Behind Albert, Eric saw the Bear pick up a teenage girl by the waist and swing her around. Had to be his sister, and, *Christ*, no wonder Bear was over-protective. She was sixteen going on thirty and drop dead gorgeous. “Not going to miss your regular Saturday fucked aim at the toilet, by the way.”

Albert laughed. “Gotta blame vodka. It’s my supreme nemesis.”

“I blame it on you being a ring knocker.”

Bobcheck made a *tsk* sound. “Envy’s not a good look on you, man.”



If he *was* envious it would only be because Eric's dad would've shit even more of a brick if Eric had gone to the *Naval Academy*.

"See you in the air, O'Dwyer." Bobcheck saluted Eric and returned to his family.

Eric stayed at the bar until Albert disappeared, then he wended his way through the thinning crowd and exited through McGuire's rear door, stepping out to a short alley. Peering in the direction of the front sidewalk, he squinted at the sky.

Twilight traced fingers of rose and gold across a patchwork of low clouds. *Last Pensacola sunset for a while*. First thing tomorrow morning, he was jumping in his car and starting the cross-country drive to San—

He jerked his attention down to the end of the alley, almost startling out of his socks at her unexpected appearance.

She strode toward him.

Grip tight on his beer, he watched her long legs stretch out both gracefully and purposefully, and a poignant ache tugged at his insides. He was going to miss her Friday night McGuire's walk more than anything else in Florida.

Beyond the normal beauty of her stride, she gifted him with a first-ever sight—her in a *dress*. Turquoise, the color deepened the tone of her hair, and lightweight, the material flowed around her in a way that showed off her curves, but not so much that a man couldn't let his imagination run wild about all he couldn't see—a perfect combination of loose and form-fitting.

*Pure class.*

Leslie stopped in front of him. Alluring little creases appeared on either side of her mouth as she smiled. "You fill out your uniform mighty fine, Eric."

Funny, he was about to say the same thing about her in her dress. "What are you doing here, Leslie?"

“I came to celebrate your winging,” she said. “Your family didn’t come.” She pointed out this fact to nobody’s surprise—hers, clearly, and certainly not his.

*Dad isn’t a fan of the career path I chose.*

Eric slugged back some beer.

“Congratulations on graduatin’ first in your class. That’s quite an accomplishment.”

“Amazing,” he redefined, “considering my mishap.”

“I think it was *because* of the mishap—due to how well you handled it.”

He squinted against the lowering sun. No one died and he didn’t roll the bird, but still... He’d have to take her word for it. “My friends say it’s because of you.”

She laughed throatily. “Me?”

“You don’t know about that?”

She looked amused. “Apparently not.”

“You have a magic touch. Every flight student you’ve ever dated graduated at the top of his class.”

She only laughed some more.

“Nick Weatherton,” he threw out in challenge.

Her chin pulled in a slight inch. “I never went out with... Oh, hold on a second. Is he a fellow with a small birthmark here.” She pointed to a spot under her right eye.

Eric smiled tightly. “That’s the guy.”

“He and I never dated. I left McGuire’s one night with him, chattin’ about one thing or another, and... Lord, if you boys think I dated every man I left the bar with, then—”

“What about Shep Keddy?”

Her eyebrows flew up, then she released a drawn-out sigh. “Ah, Shep, yes.” She sighed again.

Nostalgic memories. Way too fucking pleased with them.

“He and I did step out together.”

“Did you find him”—Eric’s upper lip flexed—“*exuberant?*”

A breeze caught at the ends of Leslie’s hair, shifting the strands against her cheek. She held back one of the drifting tendrils. “Do you really want to hear about the men who’ve courted me, Eric?”

He suddenly felt small.

He glanced aside, his jaw muscles working. He didn’t need to feel like an utter shit-heel today on top of everything else. What he *needed* was not to feel at all, or to concentrate primarily on touch receptors below his waistline.

“Do you know what I want?” He brought his focus back to her with a chin-snap. “I want to take you to my apartment and...” *Make you scream... Bash you against my headboard... Pound an Eric O’Dwyer memory into your body and brain that you’ll never forget.*

He just stared at her, locked up. She deserved better than *head-bashing*, but for some reason, the right words wouldn’t come, and he sure as shit wasn’t going to admit the truth—that it’d be fucking nice if *someone* on this earth cared if he bought the farm in his new naval career. He’d already almost died once, and did anyone notice or care? He was alone at his winging, wasn’t he?

*Your folks proud of you...?*

“I believe I understand the general idea of what you’re proposin’,” she said. “And, yes.”

“Yes what?”

“Yes, I’d like to go to your apartment with you.”

He stood still. A tremor slid down his spine and his tongue went flat in his mouth. He didn’t know how to proceed. More than the right words, she deserved better than one night—which was all he had to offer.

Her eyes twinkled. “Plannin’ to play the gallant again, are you? Well, don’t fret, Ensign. I’ve been blissfully divorced for five years now,

and I have no desire for anything serious. I'm plenty happy with the thought of us enjoyin' each other, and I fully understand it's only for tonight."

Relief was a welling warmth deep within Eric. With a flick of his wrist, he hurled his empty beer bottle into a nearby dumpster. "My car's around the corner."



Eric unlocked his apartment, opened the door, and guided Leslie inside. "Do you want a drink?" he asked her. "Not that—"

He slammed to a halt.

Albert was sitting on the living room couch, the TV remote in his hand, his thumb now frozen, suspended over a button. His eyes were wide on Eric and Eric's *guest*. His jaw was steadily dropping toward the vicinity of his shoes.

"Hey." Eric kept his tone mild while edging a step behind Leslie so he could glare openly at his roommate. "Weren't you going out to dinner with your family tonight?"

"I was, but, uh...uh..." Albert evidently didn't have sufficient brain capacity to both gawk at the DreamMaker and form a sentence.

"Hello," Leslie said. "It's Albert, isn't it?"

Albert didn't move, blink, or breathe.

Eric showed Albert gritted teeth. *Get the fuck out.*

"Er...Grandma Bobcheck got tired so we decided to postpone till...um... I was just taking off for the movies." Albert rocketed off the couch and sprinted out the door.

Eric dead bolted the door behind his roommate. "Sorry about that."

"It's all right." Leslie smiled. "He's darlin'."

"He's not, actually." Eric cupped his keys in his palm and juggled their weight. "Do you want a drink?" he repeated. "Not that I can find you one." He glanced at all the moving boxes stacked in his living room.

Besides two beds and linens, plus a few odd sundries, the apartment was all packed up.

“No, thank you.” She placed her purse on the coffee table. “I’m fine.”

Eric stared at her some more and asked himself *why?*—why did he keep letting himself become an idiot around Leslie? He was a *man*, wasn’t he? Venturing into the wilds to drop torpedoes on bad guys and fire missiles at nasty shit.

“All right,” he growled. “Enough of this crap.” He chucked his car keys onto the coffee table, strode forward, and whisked Leslie into his arms.

She gasped and looped her arms around his neck.

He set off with sure strides across the room. She wore a pleasant, flowery fragrance, but he couldn’t tell what kind of flower. He *was* the guy who would soon be shooting missiles, after all. Her weight barely registered. His brain was already too focused on where he was taking her.

Into his bedroom.

More stacked moving boxes filled the space. His nightstand, desk, and dresser were empty, but his queen-sized bed was made—“made” being a relative term. Sheets and a blanket were on his mattress, but weren’t exactly tucked into military corners.

He lowered Leslie to her feet, then crossed to his attached bathroom, switched on the light, and eased the door closed until only a crack of light showed. He jogged his eyebrows at her. “How do you like the ambiance?”

“It’s perfect,” she said, and laughed.

Her laugh was so much *her*, husky with notes of her innate sensuality, but also full of genuine joy. And it hit him, then, standing here in the dim light of a room that hadn’t seen any women in it during the entire year of his flight training, how much he liked her.

Smiling, he unbuttoned his uniform top and shrugged it off, then draped it over the back of his desk chair. He kicked his shoes off, shoved his pants down, and tore his T-shirt over his head, thanking the low light for hiding the lingering bruise on his chest. It'd faded to an ugly yellow, but was still visible enough to risk being clucked over. Not exactly the mood he was going for.

Leslie watched him undress in silence—"silence" being another relative term.

He could hear her breathing deepening and quickening.

"You look mighty fine," she murmured, "out of your uniform, as well."

He stepped up to her. Her dress had its own buttons, cloth-covered ones marching down the front from the scooped collar to the waist. He set his fingers on the top button, the backs of them lightly resting on the plumpness of her breasts.

He took a moment to gaze into her eyes. The dim lighting washed the honey gold from her irises, opening the way to see what was within: uncertainty mixed with excitement—that strange blend that always seemed to go with bedding someone new—but also warmth and affection for him. And surprisingly, a touch of loneliness, the emotion hinting at some untruth underlying her cavalier okay-ness with her status as an independent divorcée.

They were two lonely souls...

Not to wax poetic—torpedoes...missiles...man—but he liked her even more for being as lonely as he was tonight. It didn't feel bad or pathetic, but like a connection...one he needed right now.

He slowly began to unbutton her dress. Inch by inch, her flesh was revealed. Inch by inch, his dick rose up against his skivvies. He pushed the top half of her dress off her shoulders, letting it slither down to her waist, then he went back to work, unhooking her bra and slipping it free of her arms.

She was a medium—mystery solved. A size B or C cup, round and creamy...and heavier than he'd expected. When he filled his palm with one of her breasts, he found an added ripeness and fullness to her flesh that he could only guess came with age, her years probably having allowed her to settle more comfortably into her body. It was...really nice. As a young man who'd single-mindedly gone for hard-bodied hotness—a *boneheaded* young man—he'd never appreciated how sexy extra softness could be.

He stroked his thumb across a rosy nipple, and watched it pebble. Heard her quick intake of breath.

She reached up and cupped a hand around the short hair on his nape, urging him closer. Stomach to stomach.

He felt his loins go thick and the muscles in his lower back pull taut.

Her lips parted, and she tugged him down to kiss her open mouth.

Their tongues swept by each other and tangled. An electric pulse shot through his veins and hit him directly beneath the balls.

She tasted good. *Naturally* good. It never worked out for him if a woman tried too hard to taste nice. Her efforts would show in fake peppermint flavor or bubblegum. But Leslie's tongue was very soft and tasted like something reminiscent of crystal clear rain.

Not that he was waxing poetic.

Their tongues kept swiping and dancing, though hers seemed to take the lead, chasing his down with an unhurried, deliberate expertise that brought his nerve endings to attention and set his hips rocking against her.

One more tongue-probing kiss, then he eased back from her and focused on fully undressing them. He tucked his thumbs into the waistline of her dress, maneuvered a bit to make sure his thumbs were also tucked into the sides of her panties, then he pushed everything down and off. As he straightened, he removed his skivvies.

Without being urged, directed, or prodded, Leslie walked toward his bed. Completely naked. He observed her progress, the unselfconscious way her body moved now on full display. Nude, she was a bit rounder than she looked clothed, but she was clearly very secure with her figure, and it was one of the most arousing things he'd ever seen.

Leslie slid onto his bed, and he didn't risk blinking and possibly missing the slinky way she accomplished the task. She lounged back.

He moved to the edge of the mattress and stood over her, staring.

And she let him stare, gazing at him from beneath partially lowered lashes. She had a midnight triangle of curls at the juncture of her thighs, and something about her private hair being darker than what was on her head streaked through his gut in a series of hot jabs. One of her hands lay near her face, the backs of her fingers resting partially on her cheek, one of her fingernails nestled between her parted lips. It was a pose of such essential wantonness it did him in.

The rounded cap of his dick throbbed, and he let out a deep groan. "Fuck." He just might be doomed here. "I...need to warn you about something."

She waited.

"You'd probably better not, uh...it might be better if you don't touch my ears." He aimed a finger at the side of his head. "If you do, this will end pretty quick."

A hint of a smile played on her lips. "Duly noted."

*Okay.* He smoothed a hand across his belly. *Okay.*

"Might you want to rustle up a condom," she suggested, "before you come to bed?"

*A...? Oh, yeah.* He yanked open the drawer on his nightstand, and —*shit.* He forgot he already packed everything in there. He found his pants and opened his wallet. *Damn.* Also empty of rubbers. Well, he hadn't screwed anyone in a year. "Just a sec." He trotted into Albert's



room and checked his roommate's nightstand.

*Yes.*

Count on Albert not to have packed all his prophylactics.

Eric snagged a square foil and unwrapped it on the way back to his room.



Arriving at the foot of his bed, Eric snapped on the condom and climbed onto the mattress, lowering himself onto Leslie a little short of face-to-face contact. He came down with his mouth over one of her breasts and closed his lips around a berry nipple, sucking it deeply into his mouth. Leslie exhaled a small noise, and he pulled harder. He felt her pulse pounding through her flesh.

Balancing on one arm, he laved and flicked and suckled as he slid his fingertips through her springy curls and traced lightly over her wet slit. Wet, and then some. *Jesus*. She was already drenched. He explored deeper into her folds as his cock leapt on a rush of—he couldn't deny it—supreme masculine triumph. Working a finger inside her, he slicked it in and out, coating it with her moisture. She clutched at his arm and moaned. Returning to her mouth, he kissed her passionately while he applied his wet thumb to her clit, first over the hood, then with more direct contact.

Hips surging, she rode his hand, hot and damp against his palm. Tension built in the pit of his stomach. Steadily stroking her, he eased back from the kiss to watch her.

Her breasts were flushed, her eyes fluttering back into the far reaches of her head. As he kept at her, her breathing spiraled into a wild tempo, then hitched up and finally caught. She arched and cried out. He slipped a finger back into the tight recess of her body in time to feel the first ripples of her climax. When she closed hard around him, he plunged in and out as far as his finger would reach.

Her sheath gripped him fiercely and rhythmically, and she made climax noises that surprised the hell out of him. They weren't husky or smoky, like her laugh and her voice, but light and high, almost carefree. He pushed a second finger inside her and kept stroking until her inner muscles stopped clenching.

He rolled on top of her, his cock in his hand. She opened her knees. He lined up on her entrance and thrust inside the trembling, liquefied warmth of her body. Her flesh stretched taut around his member, and air gusted from his nostrils.

She held him close and tilted her hips up at a perfect angle, bringing him so deeply inside her that he could hear the loud slap of his balls echoing in the room. His dick gave a couple of preemptive squeezes, and he slowed.

Before this ended, he wanted to watch her again.

He reversed their positions.

She hugged her legs around his waist for the ride. She landed in a straddle on top of his lap, keeping him balls-deep, her hair and breasts swaying.

He grabbed her hips, but she didn't need any of his guidance.

She didn't move shyly or coyly. She didn't play games. She took him with the pure abandon of owning her own pleasure...and with a perfect synchronization of hip action, leg strength, and cadenced speed that would've humbled him if it hadn't been firing him up so fucking much.

He stared at her, squeezing her hips. Her skin was impossibly silky and smooth-looking in the dusky glow of the bathroom light, the undulating movement of her hips as graceful and purposeful as everything else she did.

She was amazing.

And she'd changed him in their short time together.

Whoever his forever-woman turned out to be, she would have

Leslie to thank for educating the boneheadedness out of him. For teaching him that a woman's body brought something to the table, no matter what her age. An added suppleness here...a certain tenderness there... Leslie had opened his eyes to all of what a woman could be in her 30s... 40s... 50s... He'd be keeping his eyes open from here on out, so he wouldn't miss what lay ahead.

His heart tumbled against his ribcage, and he was on top of Leslie again, on braced arms, jolting her heavy breasts with the vigorous motion of his hips.

She held his buttocks.

A growled breath. A stuttered moan. The end was drawing near.

Leslie's hands left his rear, and she reached one past her own thigh and butt to the area between his legs.

She cupped his balls.

He lurched through his next strokes. A guttural sound spilled out of him. That felt...

Her fingers danced toward his anus, and he came to an abrupt halt and stared down at her, panting.

She gazed back at him languidly. "I'm goin' to massage your prostate while you come."

Her eyes never leaving his, she inserted her pinkie finger into her mouth, swished it around to cover it liberally with saliva, then reached between his legs again. She slid her lubricated pinkie into his anus, and his eyes popped out and hit the headboard.

*Huhuh.* A wealth of meaning was in that one exhalation. *Not-really-sure-I'm-ready-for-butt-stuff*, but also, *Am-I?* And then there was your basic man-grunt of pleasure. Because the pressure she was exerting on the ringed area in his other end sent shockwaves of ecstasy shooting through his pelvis and down his legs.

"Unless you say no." She paused, giving him the chance to call her off.

He didn't—mainly because he didn't want to look like he was pussying out—and started to move. Things happened fast from there. No need to concentrate extra hard on climaxing through the feeling of a worm in his butt—Leslie didn't wiggle her pinkie. She...he didn't know what she did, exactly, but whatever it was, the next ecstasy-wave topped the charts. It hit his diaphragm and stole his breath, and then—

She ended him.

She leaned up and kissed his earlobe.

His muscles tensed and tightened, and he let out a hoarse shout.

She eased her tongue into his ear, and in a spilling, wrenching, overflowing tide, he ejaculated everything he had to give. A year's worth of pent-up desire came charging out of his dick as he hammered his hips and heaved his body and shouted again...and then dizzily collapsed on top of her.

Breathing air in great gulps, he pressed his face against her damp throat, his heart beating at only a few RPMs short of full cardiac arrest. *Jesus...God...* Best thing at this point would be to laze on top of her for thirty, forty minutes or so. But there was a condom to consider. He forced himself to hoist his body up, holding the edges of the rubber as he pulled out of her. "Wish I didn't have to get up already," he said, still breathless.

"That's all right." She gave him a sleepy chuckle. "I appreciate your diligence."

He offered her an off-center smile as he headed into the bathroom. Peeling off the condom, he flushed it down the toilet—the trashcan was packed—then washed himself and strolled back into his bedroom.

Still lounging on the bed, Leslie peered at him from between her drooping lashes. "I wouldn't mind havin' that drink now. Water?"

"Sure." He opened a box lid and found a bathroom cup inside. He blew the box dust out of it, then started for the bathroom.

"I'll take it." She sat up. "I have to use the powder room anyway."

He helped her off the bed, and gave her the cup.

She went in the bathroom and shut the door.

Pulling on his skivvies, he flopped out on the mattress, listening to the faucet run and the toilet flush. Normal sounds of human habitation. Pleasant...homey...and then he heard a cell phone go off in the living room. It sang out a few beeps, then stopped.

The bathroom door opened and Leslie came back out, holding something in her hand. "Look what I found on the floor, hidden behind the commode." She showed him what it was.

A white bird feather.

"Hell." He sat up and took it from her. "It must've come off me two weeks ago after the bird strike, when I stripped down to take a shower."

"A souvenir for you?" she suggested.

*Yeah, O'Dwyer 'cause I was in danger of forgetting this day.*

He handed it back to her. "You keep it. And, by the way, I think I heard your phone ring."

"Oh, shoot. It's probably my sister." Leslie tugged her panties on, managed the mechanics of her bra with impressive dexterity, and ducked her head into her dress. She hurried into the living room.

He followed at a more leisurely pace, finding her standing beside the coffee table, her purse undone and her cell phone in her hand, flipped open. "Dang it," she said, reading a message. "Yes, Becky called. I'm sorry, Eric, but I have to go."

"What?" The languor left his body. "No."

Her thumbs flew over her phone's keypad as she typed a message.

"I don't want you to leave." To emphasize the point, he went up to her and drew her into a hug, and just as he knew it would, her head tucked neatly under his chin. Her flower scent was now mingled delectably with female sweat.

She said, "Mmm," snuggled against him for a too-short moment,

then stepped back. “I’ve had a girls’ night planned with Becky for a while, and I’ve already put her off twice to be with you.”

“Twice?”

“First to go to your wingin’, and then”—she gestured generally at his apartment—“for this.”

*I came to see you get winged. Your family didn’t come.*

He closed off his expression. He hadn’t realized he was such a sad fucking charity case.

“Now, don’t go gettin’ that look on your face.” She slid her phone into her purse. “This wasn’t a pity date we just had here. I’ve been wantin’ you for quite some time.”

“You’ve...?” He automatically dropped his focus to the area below her waist, remembering how drenched she’d been for him, and how quickly. Heat touched the back of his neck. “Why did you wait so long to make a move?”

She breathed out a chuckle. “I didn’t. I’ve been givin’ you signals all along. I even asked you out once, if you recall?”

He scrubbed a hand across his brow. Yeah, she had, hadn’t she?

*Why don’t you and I get out of here, and I teach you how to have a li’l good old-fashioned fun?*

She deftly buttoned her dress closed. “But you had your head down and blinders on.”

“Well...shit.”

She glanced up, giving him a warm look. “I’m just glad we finally got our chance.” She picked up her purse, then hesitated. “Do you mind if I...say a few partin’ words?”

He didn’t answer for a second. Was she about to call him on his bravado and bullshit, like he’d always dreaded? But then...hadn’t he *asked* for her to lay her wisdom on him at Union Public House over gin and tonics?

*You got any advice on how to deal with being sent to sit in the*

*corner, by the way?*

Yeah, truth was, somewhere along the way, he'd come to trust that she didn't judge whatever it was she saw in him. "Go ahead," he said.

She smoothed a few hairs back from her sweaty forehead. "When you're in San Diego, flyin' thousands of feet up in the sky, remember there's a whole world below you waitin' to be lived in. And you don't have to be number one to join the party."

He paused over that. He didn't know how to be anything other than a goal-oriented man. "If you're trying to tell me not to fight to always be the best, I can't."

Leslie's eyes crinkled with a smile. "I'm sayin' you don't have to *wait* to find out if you're the best before you act." She tucked her purse in the crook of her arm. "I don't claim to know you very well, Eric, but I get the sense that you don't like to start out on a path unless you can see a good ten miles down it. This allows you to effectively conquer obstacles—I understand your motive. But, take it from me, some of life's finest experiences begin at misty alleys."

He didn't respond. Mainly because he didn't know what to say. *She* was the one with all the worldly wisdom, so she was probably right.

He heard a car pull up.

They both glanced out the living room window.

A taxi.

"I texted for one," Leslie told him.

He frowned. "I could've driven you."

"Thank you, but I'm merely headin' to McGuire's for my car. Becky lives a bit far." Leslie opened the front door, gestured to the cab driver to wait a second, then turned back to him. "At some point in your life, an experience is goin' to come across your doorstep that's outside of your comfort zone—it'll push you beyond what you think you're capable of managin'." She held his gaze. "Do me a favor, Eric. When that experience comes knockin', don't dally. Jump in with both feet."

Taking hold of his wrist, she picked up his hand, flipped it right-side up, then placed the white bird feather in the center of his palm. “Let this remind you of everything you’re capable of doin’, even when you think you’re at your worst.” She closed his fingers around the feather and gave his fist a little squeeze.

A rush of emotions caught him broadside. Chest tight, he lifted his other hand to touch a couple of tender fingertips to her cheek. He really didn’t want her to go. And it wasn’t just about adding to the indolent pleasure still lolling in his crotch, or the unmentionable *zing!* in his butt. It wasn’t only about having another opportunity to gain more grown-up knowledge about women. It was that Leslie made him feel understood, without making him feel exposed.

She’d seen beneath his bravado and bullshit, and she’d taken him for who he was, and....he needed more.

But it wasn’t to be.

“I better skedaddle.” She leaned in and gave him a kiss on the cheek, whispering, “Go make America proud.” Then she hurried toward the taxi and climbed in.

The taxi drove away, and she waved good-bye.

He swallowed and lingered for a long moment in the doorway. Until it occurred to him that he was in his underwear.

He closed the door and looked down at the feather. “What a night,” he said out loud.

Wandering aimlessly, he touched moving boxes on his way into the kitchen. He opened the fridge. One lime. Probably a leftover from the margarita party he and Albert threw a couple of—

His cell phone rang.

He darted into his bedroom, jerked it out of his pants, and checked the screen. *Unknown caller*. He flipped it open. “Hello.”

“How was she?”

*Shit. Not Leslie*. Eric exhaled. *Hammond*. “How the hell did you



know about...? Ah. Bobcheck, right?"

"In his haste, Albert left without his wallet," Kyle said quietly, his tone lightened by amusement. "He showed up here, but I was... otherwise engaged."

"Is that why you're talking so low?"

"Yeah. My two Southern belles are in bed with me. They're feeling a mite...tuckered."

"*Both* of them?"

"What can I say...they saw the cut on my head after the mishap and went bonkers over it. They were both so sweet about their concern, I couldn't choose between them."

Eric crossed to his bed, his sheets in utter chaos, and flopped out on the mattress again. "About the mishap...I never told you, Kyle. You did good. You were shit-hot in the cockpit."

Kyle grunted. "First time in a helo, and I suffer a bird strike. Can you believe that?"

"What I can't believe is you quoting Barry 'the Bear' Murdock about it."

"I might not have a helluva lot of functioning brain cells left."

"Maybe *two* belles were too many."

"Probably." Sheets rustled on the other end of the phone. "You're not going to tell me about her?"

"No," Eric said simply.

An interested sound rumbled on the other end of the phone. "She made a man out of you, is that it?"

Eric curved his mouth into a slow smile. *Yeah. I guess she did.*

He could tell Kyle was dying to hear about it, but Eric was keeping Leslie to himself.

Kyle chuckled softly. "Okay. Fair winds and following seas, O'Dwyer. Kick butt in San Diego."

"Will do." A flash of lightning double-blinked through the cracks

of his blinds. One of Pensacola's sudden summer storms spooling up.

"Have you kissed the moose yet?"

"Only about half a dozen times."

"All right. See you on the other side."

"Definitely. Don't get shot at till I'm there to watch your six."

Eric crooked an arm under his head. "Roger that."



The next morning Eric parked in front of McGuire's Irish Pub. He was towing a jam-packed U-Haul trailer, and the back seat of his car was likewise stuffed to capacity. He'd filled his gas tank and topped off the oil. A thirty-hour drive lay ahead of him, and he planned to make the trip in as few days as possible.

Hopping out of his car, he strode inside and chin-nodded hello to one of the bartenders. The bar was fragrant with freshly brewed coffee, and Eric ordered a to-go cup. He hadn't planned to, but it smelled good. "Can I also borrow a pen?"

The bartender set a pen on the bar.

When Eric produced a one dollar bill, the guy knew what Eric was up to and gave him a thumbtack too.

Eric scrawled his name across the front of the bill, then held it up to one of the bar's wood posts and wedged the thumbtack into the center. When the tack was nearly flush with the paper, he pulled the white feather out of his pocket and tucked it under the tack. He continued to push until both the dollar and feather were held in place.

He dropped his hands and studied both.

*I was here. I left my mark.*

He took in a full breath. He damn well had.

The bartender gave him a to-go cup, but when Eric tried to pay for the coffee, the guy said, "On the house," and wished him luck.

"Thanks." Taking a backward step away from the bar, Eric scanned

his stomping grounds for the past year.

*Hey, guys, she's here...*

The words echoed through his heart as much as his mind.

He cast a last glance at the moose head, then turned and walked out.

Climbing back in his car, he drove to the onramp for Interstate 10, aiming west toward the next phase of his life.

A long stretch of road unfolded in front of him...

*At some point in your life, an experience is going to come across your doorstep that's outside of your comfort zone—it'll push you beyond what you think you're capable of managing...*

She was right.

One day in the future Eric *was* faced with an experience that pushed him beyond the normal call of duty.

He went for it, exactly like Leslie told him to do.

And it ended up giving him everything he'd always dreamed of having.

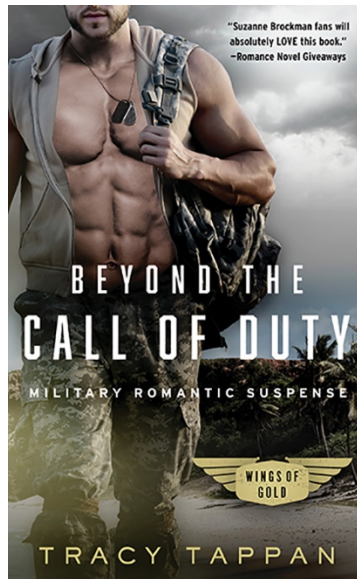
Sipping his coffee, Eric switched to the fast lane, his hand relaxed on the steering wheel. The long stretch of road suddenly didn't look so lonely anymore.

"The DreamMaker," he said out loud, and laughed. "Well, I'll be damned."

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